

The Cult of Othin and the Pre-Christian Religions of the North

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It is now one hundred and fifteen years since Hector Munro Chadwick published his ‘essay’, as he called it in his Preface, on an important question in the study of the pre-Christian religions of Scandinavia, that is, ‘the character of one of the ancient Germanic cults’. The book’s title is *The Cult of Othin. An Essay in the Ancient Religion of the North*, and it was published by Cambridge University Press in 1899 when Chadwick was in his late twenties. In the following year, 1900, Chadwick published two more, essay-length articles on comparative Germanic religion, ‘The Oak and the Thunder-God’, presented to the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland on 9 January, and ‘The Ancient Teutonic Priesthood’, read to The Folklore Society on 16 May.¹ This cluster of three of his early works evinces a particular interest in Scandinavian mythology seen in the comparative light of Germanic, or, as he would often call it, ‘Teutonic’ religion. It provides an intellectual background to his first Cambridge University appointment, as Lecturer in Scandinavian, in 1910.

Shortly after I had decided to give the 2014 H. M. Chadwick Memorial Lecture on *The Cult of Othin*, I discovered that Cambridge University Press had coincidentally reissued the book in paperback in February 2013, as part of its ‘Cambridge Library Collection’, whose objective is to reissue books ‘of enduring scholarly value’, whether published by Cambridge University Press or some other publisher.² Several of Chadwick’s other, and better-known books, including his *Studies on Anglo-Saxon Institutions* (1905), *The Origin of the English Nation* (1907), *The Heroic Age* (1912) and *The Growth of Literature* (with Nora Kershaw Chadwick, 1932-40), have also been reissued in the Cambridge Library

¹ H. M. Chadwick, ‘The Oak and the Thunder-God’, *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 30 (1900), 22-44 and ‘The Ancient Teutonic Priesthood’, *Folklore* 11:3 (1900), 268-300.

² I am grateful to Dr Caroline Murray (email of 27 June 2013), publisher of the Cambridge Library Collection at Cambridge University Press, for information on this series and its objectives.

Collection, thus proclaiming the enduring scholarly value and the continuing availability of the writings of the second incumbent of the Elrington and Bosworth Chair of Anglo-Saxon at this university.

My main aim in this lecture in honour of H. M. Chadwick is to establish where the ‘enduring scholarly value’ of *The Cult of Othin* lies.³ I also intend to place Chadwick’s essay within its intellectual milieu of late nineteenth-century European studies of the Pre-Christian Religions of the North, to use the title of a forthcoming series of studies of that subject,⁴ and to assess the extent to which the issues that concerned Chadwick in 1899 have been productive of scholarship during the twentieth century and still concern scholars of early Scandinavian religion today. As one might expect, some of Chadwick’s key questions and assumptions have been challenged in the century or more between the publication of his monograph and the present time. I will therefore track some of the major changes that have taken place in the field of the history of Nordic religions, within which *The Cult of Othin* would now be classified.

Although evidence for the nature of the cult of Óðinn is fuller than what is available for the study of the cults of most other pre-Christian Norse gods, Chadwick’s monograph remains one of very few detailed studies of the subject. In the twentieth century, the cult has been treated by most authors of books on Old Norse religion,⁵ but as part of their general study and not as a separate analysis. A partial exception to this assessment is Otto Höfler’s treatment of Óðinn’s patronage of male secret societies in his *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen*, published in Frankfurt in 1934, although this book is not solely about Óðinn.⁶ More recently Andreas Nordberg has published an excellent and thought-provoking study of the

³ Chadwick spells the name of the god whose cult is his monograph’s focus ‘Othin’, rather than Óðinn, the Old Icelandic form of the name, which is now in general use among Old Norse scholars. When referring to non-Norse forms of the god’s name, Chadwick uses the Old English form of the name, Woden.

⁴ This project, *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, is headed by Bergur Þorgeirsson, director of the Snorrastofa, Reykhol, Iceland, and an Icelandic executive board. The project has three strands, Sources, Histories and Structures, and Research and Reception. Its aim is to present a contemporary overview of the subject of Nordic religion and mythology and to document its reception over time.

⁵ For example, J. de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 2 vols, 2nd edn (Berlin, 1956-7), II, pp. 27-106; E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London, 1964), 35-74. A good, fairly recent overview is A. Hultgård, ‘Wotan-Odin’, *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* 35 (2007), 759-85. All three of these authors list Chadwick’s book in their bibliographies, Turville-Petre describing it as ‘a readable, factual introduction’ (p. 323).

⁶ Chadwick was aware of German mythographers’ interest in this topic well before Höfler’s work; cf. *The Cult of Othin*, pp. 66-7.

myths clustering around Óðinn's chosen warriors, the *einherjar*, and their home in the god's hall, Valhalla, in his doctoral dissertation.⁷ Like Chadwick, Nordberg is concerned to connect these myths with archaeological evidence, in this case with aristocratic mortuary customs and the probable nature of Iron-Age and Viking-Age Odinic cults of the dead.

Chadwick divides his monograph into three chapters, the first dealing with the Scandinavian evidence for the cult, the second reviewing the evidence for the cult in Continental Europe and the British Isles, and the third assessing when the cult is likely to have been introduced into Scandinavia. In Chapter 1, 'The Cult of Othin in the North', Chadwick establishes the cluster of themes that mark out the god's cult in Scandinavia, while in Chapter 2, 'Traces of the Cult of Woden on the Continent and in Britain', he demonstrates, with an outstanding command of a range of Latin, Greek and vernacular sources, how these themes can also be discovered in Germanic cultures outside Scandinavia. He identifies central themes as having to do with the god's interactions with kings and elite warriors, and the sacrifice of chosen warriors to Óðinn, whether by the dedication of an enemy army to the god by hurling a javelin over them, or by various forms of sacrificial hanging and stabbing. He also investigates the concepts of Valhøll (Valhalla), as a place to which the god's chosen heroes go after death, and the complex of ideas related to the end of the world at Ragnarøk. The book's third chapter draws all this information together and attempts to place the introduction of the cult of Óðinn to Scandinavia within chronological parameters, arguing, partly on the linguistic evidence of the god's name, and partly on the basis of Tacitus's *Germania*, that this must have taken place at some time between AD 50 and 500.

Like many scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chadwick offered no direct definition of the fundamental terms of his enquiry. He probably assumed that his readers shared his views about the definition of a 'cult', especially an 'ancient Germanic cult', and where cults belonged within the whole repertoire of a particular religion with its attendant mythology. In investigating the basic assumptions of his monograph, therefore, I have had to deduce them from several sources: from the clues he gives in the book to his own thinking, from references to the works of other scholars, both contemporary and earlier, from the statements of his colleagues and students, and from omissions and silences on specific issues in the monograph itself.

⁷ A. Nordberg, *Krigarna i Odins sal. Dödsföreställningar och krigarkult i fornnordisk religion* (Stockholm, 2003).

After the rise of social anthropology in the late nineteenth century and the development of fieldwork-based studies of non-Christian religions, many of the assumptions of Western culture about the nature of religions were challenged. These assumptions were largely based on a knowledge of Greek and Roman religion and mythology and the monotheistic and text-focussed religions of Christianity and Islam. The nature of religious cult and its relationship to both ritual and myth were among the issues at the centre of discussion. In more recent times the performative dimensions of cults, in which communication between humans and divine beings is central, and the variability of the rituals or repeated actions that make up cults have been studied in great detail and their variable relationships with myths plotted. Chadwick's study shows only a limited concern for the comparative socio-cultural and anthropological dimensions of the history of religions that were beginning to interest British scholars in the years after the publication of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890). In 'The Oak and the Thunder-God', indeed, Chadwick takes critical aim at Frazer's theory in *The Golden Bough* that the oak tree 'was originally not merely the symbol or habitation of the god, but was itself the object of worship' (1900, 38) and shows it to be lacking support in primary sources relating to the Germanic world.

The memoirs of at least two individuals who knew Chadwick well, J. M. ('Toty') de Navarro and Glyn Daniel, claim that he became converted to the study of Germanic rather than classical antiquity, which was his primary discipline, through reading a book entitled *The Viking Age* (1889) by Paul du Chaillu, a man known equally for his explorations in Africa and his descriptions of gorillas as for his studies of early Scandinavia.⁸ The subtitle of *The Viking Age* points to the book's dual focus on textual studies and archaeology. Its subtitle declares that it is *Illustrated from the antiquities discovered in mounds, cairns, and bogs, as well as the ancient sagas and eddas*. Chadwick would undoubtedly have found in du Chaillu's two volumes an assemblage of information, copiously illustrated with line drawings of a variety of material objects and archaeological sites, and incorporating many Old Norse texts in English translation, as well as chapters on a range of subjects, from ship-building to specific socio-

⁸ P. B. Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age: The Early History, Manners and Customs of the Ancestors of the English-Speaking Nations*, 2 vols (London, 1889). The references to Chadwick's 'conversion moment' are in J. M. de Navarro 'Hector Munro Chadwick, 1870-1947', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 33 (1947), 307-30 at p. 310 and G. Daniel, *Some Small Harvest: The Memoirs of Glyn Daniel* (London, 1986), p. 82. The incident is also referred to by Michael Lapidge, *H. M. Chadwick: A Centennial Commemoration*, H. M. Chadwick Memorial Lecture 23 (Cambridge, 2012), p. 2, note 10.

cultural topics, such as the family and religious life. Du Chaillu's general approach to his subject is likely to have given Chadwick a vital clue to how he could fruitfully combine a study of textual and archaeological sources. This combined approach was to be the hallmark of his scholarship and his vision for his subject throughout his life.

There is no reference to du Chaillu in *The Cult of Othin* and almost no reference there to any scholar working in Scandinavian Studies in the British Isles, with the single exception of Chadwick's Cambridge colleague, the Icelander Eiríkur Magnússon, and that is not a flattering one, as Andrew Wawn noticed in his Chadwick lecture of 2001.⁹ This silence perhaps suggests that Chadwick did not much care for Eiríkur's passionate enthusiasm for his native language and culture. However, it is clear, both from his general approach to his subject in *The Cult of Othin* and from the scholarship to which he does refer, that the intellectual influences that underpinned his essay came largely from Scandinavia and, to a lesser extent, from Germany. Such a direction of influence is unsurprising: most academic work on early Scandinavia came from the Scandinavian countries and Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by contrast with the situation today, where research and scholarship on the subject is truly international. However, there was a special reason why Chadwick would have been drawn to Scandinavian, and particularly Danish, research while working on an essay on religious cult in pre-Christian Scandinavia.

Danish, and to a lesser extent Swedish, archaeologists were in the forefront of the development of the discipline of archaeology during the nineteenth century. Not only did the Danish government set up a Royal Committee for the Preservation and Collection of National Antiquities in 1807, which led to the establishment of the National Museum in Copenhagen in 1816, but several archaeologists working as curators for the growing collections of the material culture of early Denmark evolved both theory and method which allowed that material culture to be understood within a chronological framework that established time depth and relativities for periods of human history for which there were no written records. Thus the branch of archaeology that we now call prehistory was born.

Chief among these pioneering prehistorians was Christian Jürgensen Thomsen, who was appointed the first curator of the Danish National Museum in 1816, a post he held until his death in 1865. Thomsen was the proponent of the three ages theory of human prehistory, of the Stone,

⁹ A. Wawn, 'Fast er drukkið og fátt lært': Eiríkur Magnússon, *Old Northern Philology, and Victorian Cambridge*. H. M. Chadwick Memorial Lecture 11 (Cambridge, 2001), p. 1 and n. 2. The reference to Eiríkur is on p. 75, n. 1 of *The Cult of Othin*.

Bronze and Iron Ages, and the first to attribute concepts of chronological depth to the prehistoric period and to follow that up with a methodology for arranging excavation finds according to time periods in museum collections, thus providing a rational taxonomy for what had previously been a haphazard and irrational process. His guide-book to the National Museum in Copenhagen, *Ledetraad til Nordisk Oldkyndighed* (Guide to Scandinavian Antiquities), published in Copenhagen in 1836, was translated into German in the following year and into English by Lord Ellesmere in 1848.¹⁰ His younger colleague and successor as curator of the National Museum, Jens Jacob Asmussen Worsaae (1821-85), refined the three ages theory and showed how it could be applied to dirt archaeology, particularly to grave finds comprising a variety of objects. He published a book on this subject in 1843, *Danmarks oldtid oplyst ved Oldsager og Gravhøie* (The Prehistory of Denmark illuminated by Antiquities and Grave Mounds), which was translated into English by William J. Thoms and published as *The Primeval Antiquities of Denmark* in London in 1849. Worsaae visited the British Isles in 1846-7 and was able to compare objects and monuments he found there with Viking-Age antiquities in Scandinavia. Quite recently, a number of studies have recognised afresh the influence he had on British archaeologists of the nineteenth century, especially those working in Scotland and Ireland.¹¹

The general influence of Thomsen's and Worsaae's theories and practical methodology, and that of some of their younger colleagues, such as Conrad Engelhardt and the Swedish scholar Oscar Montelius (1843-1921), is clearly apparent in *The Cult of Othin*, both in the form of bibliographical references and in Chadwick's general approach to his subject. He refers on page 62 to the English version of a book by Worsaae on Scandinavian prehistory, published shortly before the latter's death, *The prehistory of the North* (1886).¹² He had also read, and discusses in some detail, the doctoral dissertation of one of Worsaae's protégés, Henry Petersen (1849-96), whose *Om Nordboernes Gudedyrkelse og Gudetrol i Hedenold* (Concerning the Scandinavians' Cults and Beliefs in Gods in the Heathen Age), published in Copenhagen in 1876, bore directly on the

¹⁰ The German translation by C. Paulsen was entitled *Leitfaden zur nordischen Alterthumskunde* (Copenhagen, Hamburg, 1837) and the English one *A Guide to Northern Antiquities* (London, 1848).

¹¹ See, for example, the Sir John Evans Centenary Project of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford at john.evans.ashmolean.org/archive/worsaae.html

¹² J. J. A. Worsaae, *Nordens Forhistorie. Efter samtidige mindesmærker* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1881), translated by H. F. Morland Simpson as *The prehistory of the North, based on contemporary memorials* (London, 1886).

question of whether the cult of Óðinn was native to Scandinavia or introduced from outside, a subject central to Chadwick's essay.

Glyn Daniel, who was Disney Professor of Archaeology at the University of Cambridge from 1974 to 1981, was a pupil of Chadwick's and it was doubtless through his experience of Chadwick's teaching, which he describes in his autobiography, that he first realised the importance of the Danish contribution to the development of the subject of European prehistory, in which he himself came to specialise. Daniel gives a lucid account of the development of the discipline in his book *The Idea of Prehistory*, first published in 1962 in London.¹³ Daniel summarises Chadwick's approach to his subject in the following words:

Chadwick was a man concerned with the antiquity of man in its entirety, or at least in post-Palaeolithic antiquity. He himself never made any break between a past based on literary sources and one based on archaeological sources. His field was the ancient history of northern and north-western Europe. He was not an archaeologist in the sense that he ever practised the main craft of the archaeologist, namely excavation, but he read excavation reports with care and discrimination and was a very keen field archaeologist in the sense that he liked visiting field monuments¹⁴

The basic framework of European, and particularly Scandinavian, prehistory that the Danish and Swedish archaeologists had established during the nineteenth century made it possible for someone like Chadwick, possessed of a sound knowledge of early Germanic culture in the form of written sources, to develop a new kind of approach to what the sources and comparative linguistic evidence could provide. This was especially valuable given Chadwick's original training as a classicist, because he was in command of most of the significant Latin, Greek and Arabic sources (the last-named at second hand) that still today provide the main non-Germanic textual evidence for the pre-Christian religions and myths of the Scandinavians.

'He himself never made any break between a past based on literary sources and one based on archaeological sources', wrote Daniel of Chadwick, and that approach is certainly on display already in *The Cult of Othin*. While he may not have made a break between these two types of evidence, he certainly did discriminate between them and saw the merits and limitations of each. For example, writing towards the end of his essay on the question of the time when cremation burial first appeared in

¹³ A fuller account of the development of the field within Scandinavia can be found in O. Klindt-Jensen's *A History of Scandinavian Archaeology* (London, 1975).

¹⁴ G. Daniel, *Some Small Harvest: The Memoirs of Glyn Daniel* (London, 1986), p. 85.

Scandinavia, he weighs the evidence of the Old Icelandic vernacular texts, such as *Ynglinga saga* and the Preface to *Heimskringla*, both usually attributed to Snorri Sturluson, against the theories of the prehistorians and the evidence provided by grave finds and bog deposits (pp. 59-62). He is even-handed, writing (p. 60):

Yet the evidence of the monuments has made it clear that howe-burial [i.e. inhumation], in one form or another, was practised from the very earliest times — before the use of any metal was known, whereas cremation first makes its appearance comparatively late in the age of bronze. The statements of the ancient writers however appear to contain a certain amount of truth. Burning, which towards the close of the bronze age, and for some time after the first appearance of iron, appears to have been practically universal, again seems to have been partially displaced by howe-burial in the course of the early iron age. The ancient writers were mistaken only in supposing that the practice was new.

There are two noteworthy characteristics of Chadwick's approach to his subject that he himself draws to the reader's attention in his short Preface. They are both of considerable significance in the light of twenty- and twenty-first century research into the pre-Christian religions of Scandinavia. The first of these is his attempt to 'answer certain questions in regard to the character of one of the ancient Germanic cults' *without* making reference to Old Norse myths. His one exception to this rule relates to a theory put forward in the 1880s by the Norwegian philologist Sophus Bugge that, as Chadwick puts it, 'affects the whole character of the Northern cult.' We will return to this theory shortly.

By wishing to eschew the evidence of myth, as he understood it, almost completely, and by concentrating on various kinds of evidence for cult in early Scandinavia, Chadwick seems to have signalled that he considered the evidence of myth either unreliable as a witness to the character of ritual (cult being expressed through ritual) or as not necessarily related to cult on a one-to-one basis. He does not define myth, either independently or as contrasted with cult, nor does he spell out his reasons for avoiding it beyond stating that 'The myths connected with Othin have been frequently discussed, but sufficient attention has hardly been paid to the cult itself and the rites with which it was associated' (p. 1).

As twentieth-century field anthropology has demonstrated beyond doubt, the relationship between myth and ritual is variable; there are riteless myths and mythless rites, though, in many cases, the two *are* related and may be studied together fruitfully if we possess the evidence to

do so.¹⁵ However, in the case of pre-Christian Norse culture the evidence is fragile for two reasons, which Chadwick clearly appreciated in the case of cult, and appreciated at least to a certain extent in the case of myth. In the case of cult, he writes that ‘the character of cult is shrouded in obscurity ... due partly to the scantiness of the evidence in England and on the Continent, partly to the fact that in the North, where the materials are much more plentiful, it is by no means unlikely that cults of essentially different character became confused even before the end of heathen times’ (p. 1). I would add a disclaimer here: the written evidence for cult in early Scandinavia is not really as plentiful as Chadwick suggests,¹⁶ and his reasoning about the confusion of cults anticipates his diffusionist treatment of ‘The introduction of the cult [of Othin] into the North’, which is the subject of the book’s third chapter and will be discussed shortly.

Chadwick’s apparent reluctance to deal with the evidence of Old Norse myth is probably largely due to a trend in studies of this subject published during the last decades of the nineteenth century, about which he was evidently sceptical. He states at the beginning of Note III, ‘The Interpretation of Hávamál 138f.’ at the end of *The Cult of Othin* (pp. 72-82) that ‘It has been customary in recent years to trace various features in the Othin-mythology to Christian sources’ (p. 72). These ideas were particularly to be attributed to Sophus Bugge’s *Studier over de nordiske Gude- og Heltesagns Oprindelse* (Studies in the Origin of the Divine and Heroic Legends of the North), published in Oslo (1881-9). Bugge’s theory saw in the myth of Óðinn’s hanging on the World Tree, as described in *Hávamál* stanzas 138-41, an assimilation of the Christian myth of Christ’s crucifixion. Chadwick must have realised that a generalised application of this theory would destroy the implicit claim of Norse mythology to be a traditional, indigenous system, a branch of Germanic myth as a wider cultural phenomenon in early Europe, itself dependent on an Indo-European substrate. Thus the representation of Óðinn and his cult in Old Norse sources would have no claim to antiquity but be merely the reflection and adaptation of Christian myths if Bugge’s theory, and others like it, were accepted.¹⁷

¹⁵ There are many twentieth-century studies on the relationship between myth and ritual; see, for example, C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York and Oxford, 1997) and R. A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge, 1999).

¹⁶ On this subject, see J. P. Schjødt, ‘Myths as Sources for Rituals – Theoretical and Practical Implications’ in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. M. Clunies Ross (Odense, 2003), pp. 261-78.

¹⁷ It seems from the bibliographical references given in *The Cult of Othin* that Chadwick’s main authority on Old Norse myth was the *Handbuch der Germanischen*

It is also possible, though I know of no evidence to support this idea, that Chadwick may have been influenced by some of the debates among contemporary British anthropologists concerning the relationship between ritual and myth. In 1889 William Robertson Smith had delivered his influential *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, published in London, in which he proposed the primacy of ritual over myth, holding that myth is always secondary to ritual and offers an explanation of the communication between the world of humans and that of the gods, which is the primary function of ritual. This view was certainly a fundamental tenet of the group often called the Cambridge ritualists,¹⁸ who wrote mainly about classical Greece, and obviously influenced one of Chadwick's students, later his colleague, Bertha Phillpotts, in her 1920 book *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*. However, I can detect no influence from this quarter in *The Cult of Othin*.

The assessment of the reliability of the textual evidence for Norse mythology is an issue that has continued to concern scholars after Chadwick's day. Since the early twentieth century, beginning with the seminal study of the learned sources of the Prologue to the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson by Andreas Heusler,¹⁹ Old Norse literary scholars have become increasingly aware that it is always necessary to recognise that the texts we know have been written down by Christians, mostly in Iceland, from the late twelfth century onwards, and that our understanding of Old Norse myth must take this filter into consideration. But, in the course of the last fifty years or so, a more sophisticated approach than Bugge's to the Christian dimension to the representation of pre-Christian Norse myth and religion has been developed, and this has implications for the textual representation of pre-Christian cults as much as for the myths that may or may not underpin them.

Mythologie (Leipzig, 1895) by Wolfgang Golther, a work that supported Bugge's views in the main but was also strongly influenced by the major German handbook of the earlier nineteenth century, Jakob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, first published in Göttingen in 1835. A lively polemic against Bugge's theories, which Chadwick probably knew, is G. Stephens, 'Professor S. Bugge's studies on Northern mythology shortly examined' (London, 1883).

¹⁸ On the Cambridge ritualists, see R. Ackermann, *The Myth and Ritual School: J. G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (New York etc., 2002).

¹⁹ A. Heusler 'Die gelehrte Urgeschichte im isländischen Schrifttum'. *Abhandlungen der Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, phil. – hist. Klasse, Abh. Nr. 3 (1908), reprinted in his *Kleine Schriften* II, ed. S. Sonderegger (Berlin, 1969), pp. 80-161.

A number of studies over the course of the twentieth century²⁰ have shown that the presence of information about Old Norse myth and cult in medieval Norse texts is likely to be attributable to a desire on the part of Scandinavians, and Icelanders in particular, to recuperate the past as a means both of understanding and celebrating their traditional culture. Thus, in this view of things, which is widely accepted, it is not necessary to throw out the baby with the bathwater, as long as the bathwater is recognised as having had its effect on the baby! A very clear illustration of the difference of approach to the representation of the god Óðinn in Old Norse texts between the late nineteenth century and the present time is the recent study by Annette Lassen, *Odin på kristent pergament* (Odin on Christian parchment), of the ways in which that god is represented in texts belonging to different genres and types. She shows how different cultural and literary expectations on the part of authors and audiences allowed Óðinn to be presented in a variety of ways, and using a variety of interpretative modes.²¹

The second issue to which Chadwick drew his readers' attention in the Preface to *The Cult of Othin* concerns the nature and reliability of a particular body of textual evidence that he used. He wrote:

Some apology is perhaps needed for the extensive use which I have made of the collection of sagas published in Rafn's *Fornaldar Sögur*. While admitting the lateness of the sagas themselves, I believe that much of the material which they contain is considerably older. At all events the more important of the stories here quoted occur also in Saxo or other early authorities.

This statement of method, which was certainly unusual for its time, and Chadwick's positive assessment of the texts we call *fornaldarsögur*, 'sagas of ancient time' or mythical-heroic sagas, resonates with much contemporary scholarship and research in Old Norse studies. In fact, it anticipates in several respects some of the most exciting developments of the last two decades both among historians of religion and literary scholars. Although *fornaldarsögur* were among the first Icelandic sagas to be published as printed books in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,

²⁰ A small selection of such studies include: L. Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies* 41 (1969), 1-29, reprinted in his *The Academy of Odin. Selected papers on Old Norse literature*. The Viking Collection 19 (Odense, 2011), pp. 45-74; G. W. Weber, 'Irreligiosität und Heldenzeitalter. Zum Mythencharakter der altisländischen Literatur', in *Specvlvm Norroenvm. Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. U. Dronke et al. (Odense, 1981), pp. 474-505; M. Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál. Snorri Sturluson's ars poetica and medieval theories of language*. The Viking Collection 4 (Odense, 1987).

²¹ A. Lassen, *Odin på kristent pergament. En teksthistorisk studie*. (Copenhagen, 2011).

when they were often regarded as reliable sources of Scandinavian history, their popularity waned after the end of the nineteenth century and remained at a very low ebb through most of the twentieth century until the late 1990s. Not only were these sagas thought of mainly as escapist fiction, generally of late date and much inferior to the realistic sagas of Icelanders, but their value as sources was strongly doubted.²² How could a narrative that typically involved the adventures of a Scandinavian hero in remote parts of Norway, Sweden, Russia or the British Isles, encountering troll women and Saami, giants and strange beasts, be useful to the student of early Scandinavian history and religion?

The answer to this last question, as Chadwick saw, was that this sub-genre of the Icelandic saga deals with the period of prehistory, the time before the reach of the first vernacular written records, with the exception of some runic inscriptions. And the prehistoric age, whether the Late Iron Age or some earlier period, was the age in which the cult of Óðinn, as Chadwick presents it, became established in Scandinavia. Thus, as he states, it is possible for some of the material in *fornaldarsögur* to preserve cultural memories of the prehistoric age and to serve as sources for the religious practices of that age, alongside such witnesses as the Old English poem *Beowulf*, the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus, the ethnographies of late classical authors and the reports of Christian missionaries and chroniclers. One of the most interesting characteristics of *The Cult of Othin* is that Chadwick makes frequent use of the evidence of sagas that represent Óðinn, especially in his first chapter, ‘The cult of Othin in the North’, and a good many of these are *fornaldarsögur*, such as *Gautreks saga*, *Völsunga saga*, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*. What he appears not to have realised is that these narratives, just as much as those found in the Poetic Edda or Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, are themselves myths, and constitute variations on a basic mythic theme of Óðinn’s engagement with his chosen heroes.²³

In the recent past literary scholars have turned again to the *fornaldarsögur* as works worth studying as literature but also to some

²² I have discussed the changing reception of *fornaldarsögur* in *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 76-80, 117-23 and 160-1 and in several articles including ‘Realism and the Fantastic in the Old Icelandic Sagas’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 74:4 (2002), 443-54.

²³ Chadwick’s apparent assumption that legendary narratives from *fornaldarsögur*, such as the story in *Gautreks saga* of Starkaðr’s sacrifice of Víkarr to Óðinn, are not myths would find little support among modern historians of religion and mythology. In my own opinion the vernacular texts that Chadwick drew on as evidence in *The Cult of Othin* are as much myths as is the passage in *Hávamál* representing Óðinn’s hanging on the World Tree.

extent as sources for cultural history and religion. The literary revival of these sagas has come about largely because scholars have been able to understand how the fantastic mode came to be used by medieval authors to explore dimensions of experience recreated as events of the prehistoric past that affected legendary characters with whom living people claimed kinship.²⁴ The use of material in *fornaldarsögur* to throw light on the nature of Old Norse myth and cult is still relatively restricted and usually requires the exercise of a comparative perspective, based on the insights of modern anthropology and the history of religions, in order to recognise features of a particular narrative that are otherwise bizarre or inexplicable. The most insightful exponent of this methodology to date is the Danish historian of religions Jens Peter Schjødt, whose study of the phenomenon of initiation in Old Norse sources, many of them *fornaldarsögur*, makes a strong case that certain themes and narratives involving the god Óðinn or his protégés are initiatory in kind and involve the god's acquisition of numinous knowledge and his bestowal of this gift upon his chosen heroes.²⁵

Two of the reasons why I decided to focus my lecture upon *The Cult of Othin*, which is not the best known of Chadwick's books, are that I was struck by its command of the primary sources as well as by its interest in ritual, a subject that has been of central concern to many historians of religion, archaeologists and anthropologists during the twentieth century. Of course, some of the questions Chadwick asked of his material would be rather more nuanced and theorised if posed today. As we have already seen, the book contains no discussion of the basic terms of debate, like 'religion', 'cult', 'ritual' or 'myth', nor of the ethnic names 'Germanic' (or 'Teutonic') and 'Scandinavian' ('the North' is more commonly used) applied to the various cultures whose religions are discussed. His desire to ascertain when the cult of Óðinn 'was introduced into the North' presumes that it came fully developed from somewhere else and he seems to agree with the Danish archaeologist Henry Petersen that it was 'not native in the North' (pp. 1, 49), though he does not mention Petersen's reasons for thinking so, some of which are based on a blatantly romantic view of the Danish national character, which Petersen sees as linked to the god Þórr

²⁴ A variety of new approaches to the *fornaldarsögur* are represented by essays in three published volumes of conference papers edited by Agneta Ney, Annette Lassen and Ármann Jakobsson; Ármann Jakobsson *et al. ed.*, *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi* (Uppsala, 2003), A. Ney *et al. ed.*, *Fornaldarsagaerne. Myter og virkelighed* (Copenhagen, 2009) and A. Lassen *et al. ed.*, *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development* (Reykjavík, 2012).

²⁵ See particularly J. P. Schjødt, *Initiation between two worlds: structure and symbolism in pre-Christian Scandinavian religion*. The Viking Collection 17 (Odense, 2008).

rather than Óðinn.²⁶ In subscribing to a diffusionist explanation for the cult of Óðinn, that it came to the Germanic world from somewhere else, Chadwick may have been following the lead of some of the most influential anthropologists of his day, especially Sir Edward Tylor, whose *Anthropology: an Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization* was published in London in 1881.²⁷

Chadwick is in impressive command of most of the available textual sources for his subject and discusses the central issues in the cult that a contemporary historian of religion would certainly see as fundamental to it. What is lacking is an analysis of the underlying connections between the various manifestations of the cult: he sees that Óðinn's character as god of the dead can explain several of its aspects (p. 27), but he does not link this with the many myths about Óðinn that represent him as always questing for knowledge. His central role in the myths of the acquisition of the mead of poetry and of runes is passed over lightly (p. 20), and no attempt is made to connect these myths with the significance of sacrificial rites, even though at one point (p. 29) Chadwick shows his recognition of 'the two chief sides of the god's character ... the crafty, magical, bardic side on the one hand, and the warlike side on the other'. The purpose of sacrifice itself engages him only briefly and he concludes that its underlying idea is that of substitution: 'King Aun sacrifices his sons to Othin in order that he may have his own life prolonged. King Heiðrekr makes a great slaughter of the Reiðgotar as a ransom to Othin for the life of his son Angantýr' (p. 27). Chadwick published *The Cult of Othin* in the same year, 1899, as two French anthropologists, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, published in Paris the first seminal work of the modern age on the role of sacrifice in human societies, *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice* (An Essay on the Nature and Function of Sacrifice). It is impossible to speculate on whether Chadwick would have availed himself of its insights had he known them, but I somehow doubt it.

Earlier in this lecture I spent time discussing the nineteenth-century advances in Scandinavian prehistory that allowed Chadwick to present textual sources relevant to his subject against the background of knowledge of the broad parameters of Scandinavian Bronze and Iron Age archaeology. He was undoubtedly in the vanguard of research in using such knowledge, although there were other kinds of data he could have drawn on and did

²⁶ H. Petersen, *Om Nordboernes Gudedyrkelse*, pp. 100-137.

²⁷ Chadwick does not expand on the question of the ultimate origin of the cult of Óðinn. He appears to agree with Petersen but takes the question of the origin of the cult no further, arguing that 'we are not yet in a position to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion' (p. 2).

not. He mentions runic inscriptions several times (pp. 50, 55, 62), drawing particularly on the work of Ludvig Wimmer, but there is no mention of other kinds of material evidence for pre-Christian cult, including various images, like rock and stone carvings, such as the picture stones of the island of Gotland, some of which are widely thought to depict pre-Christian myths involving Óðinn. Chadwick must have been aware of at least some of these, because some of them are illustrated in du Chaillu's book.²⁸ Perhaps he considered their connection with the cult of Óðinn too tenuous. Another kind of evidence that he must have known but does not use, bearing on the distribution of the cult of Othin within Scandinavia, is the evidence of theophoric place-names.²⁹ The distribution of Odinic toponyms is rather interesting, because it suggests the cult was more prominent in Southern Scandinavia than in the north, and it also shows a dearth of Odinic place-names in Western Norway and in Iceland. In the latter case, it has been assumed, probably correctly, that this confirms by its absence in kingless Iceland the association between the cult of Óðinn and the aristocracy and royal houses of mainland Scandinavia.³⁰

One of the main differences in the field of the religious history of pre-Christian Scandinavia between the late nineteenth century and the present time is the astonishing growth in the discipline of archaeology, which is hugely significant for the study of early Scandinavian religions. A great deal of archaeological evidence from the late Iron Age and Viking Age has come to light in the course of excavations of human burials and so-called central places in various parts of Scandinavia, and many of them provide ample evidence for the practice of sacrificial cults, often in separate cult houses where animal and in some cases, human, bones and traces of lipids, denoting the spilling of blood or the presence of animal fat (e.g. Götavi, Närke, Sweden), have been discovered, in some instances along with small male figurines (e.g. Gudme, south-east Fyn, Denmark), in others with gold foil figures deposited in postholes and wall trenches (Uppåkra, Skåne, Sweden). In some cases (e.g. at Uppåkra), the fields outside the presumed cult house contained intentionally destroyed

²⁸ Several illustrations of Gotland picture stones appear in du Chaillu's *The Viking Age*; e.g. in Vol. I, p. 58, figure 1 and Vol. II, p. 154, figure 933 and p. 155, figure 934.

²⁹ Henry Petersen, whose *Om Nordboernes Gudedyrkelse* he certainly knew, discusses the place-name evidence at length on pp. 45-9 of his dissertation.

³⁰ On this point, see the article by G. Turville-Petre (who does not mention Chadwick's essay), 'The Cult of Óðinn in Iceland' *Studia Islandica* 17 (1958), 5-25, reprinted in his *Nine Norse Studies* (London, 1972), pp. 1-19 and S. Brink, 'How uniform was the Old Norse Religion?', In *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World. Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. J. Quinn, K. Heslop and T. Wills (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 105-36.

weapons, like spears and javelins, that archaeologists have associated with the cult of Óðinn.³¹ Given that these central places were major farm and pre-industrial complexes belonging to a social elite, it is natural to associate the cults that took place there with the figure of Óðinn, given what we know from textual sources about his connections with the warrior and kingly classes. Yet, as in Chadwick's day, so now we can go so far and no further: we can say that it is probable that many of the cults that were practised in central places were associated with Óðinn, but we cannot be certain of this, because the sites and the artefacts found there do not speak his name. Thus we find ourselves almost as dependent on textual sources in 2014 as Chadwick was in 1899, but our knowledge of the archaeological background is very much richer and I like to think that our ability to understand the nature and function of the cult of Óðinn has improved and deepened too, in part thanks to Chadwick's pioneering work.

³¹ There is a large archaeological literature on Scandinavian central places, much of it in excavation reports, specialist archaeological journals and on web sites. For Gudme, see natmus.dk/en/historisk-viden/danmark/; for Götavi, see A. Lagerstedt, ed. *På väg genom Närke – ett landskap genom historien* (Rapporter från Arkeologikonsult 2008: 2025) and for Uppåkra, see www.uppakra.se/backup/eng/kulthuset_eng.htm.