



Master's Thesis Projects

## The Retrospective Methods Network

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### Newsletter

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### The God on the Windy Tree: Christian Origins of the Figure of Wodan in the Cross-Cultural Relations of Northern Europe

B.O.B. van Strijen, University of Oslo

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Supervisor: Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (University of Oslo).*

The parallels between Óðinn hanging from the tree in the eddic poem *Hávamál* and Christ hanging from the cross in Christian mythology may have been best summarized in Annette Lassen's article "The God on the Tree": "Óðinn and Christ are both 1) hung on wood or a tree; 2) wounded by a spear; 3) sacrificed to themselves [...]; 4) they got no food or drink; 5) Óðinn hung for nine nights, while Christ died in the ninth hour; and 6) they both look down at the end of their hanging" (Lassen 2009: 232). Mikael Males added "7): they both willed their crucifixion" and suggested that both *rísa upp* ['rise up'] (Males 2013: 108). In this thesis, I discuss the two camps in the interpretation of the myth of Óðinn's self-hanging: (a) similarities between Óðinn and Christ are coincidental and that Óðinn is a fully original, Germanic pagan deity; and (b) Óðinn's hanging has, somewhere between 8<sup>th</sup>-century Britain and 13<sup>th</sup>-century Iceland, been coloured by the image of Christ on the Cross. I proceed to investigate a thus-far overlooked third option, namely that (c) the 'original' Germanic pagan deity had been coloured by Christianity very early on, before arriving in the British Isles. In chapter two and three of the thesis, I evaluate the earliest evidence – runic inscriptions, bracteates and, to some extent,

Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies and place-names – for Wodan, a continental cognate of Óðinn, as well as the equation with the Roman god Mercury. In chapter four, I assess the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire and the spread of Roman influences to northern Europe. The resulting picture is two-fold: evidence for a cult of Wodan does not predate the 5<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest, whereas Christendom was firmly established on the *limites* of the Empire at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The concept of seepage further leads me to conclude that Christian notions must have been present in the minds of the Germanic peoples in the border regions with Roman influence reaching much further north along trade routes, and that it is possible, if not probable, that the figure of Wodan may have been influenced by, if not originated from, the concept of Christ in pre-missionary northern Europe.

#### Works Cited

- Lassen, Annette. 2009. "The God on the Tree". In *Greppaminni: Rit til heiðurs Vésteini Ólasyni sjötugum*. Ed. Margrét Eggertsdóttir. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Bókmenntafélag. Pp. 231–246.
- Males, Mikael. 2013. "Allegory in Old Norse Secular Literature: Theoretical Methodological Challenges". *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 9: 99–132.