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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS STUDENT CONFERENCE ON THE MEDIEVAL NORTH

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Warriors of Odin: Fighting for A God Before *Militia Christi* in Medieval Scandinavia

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Did Scandinavian warriors of the Middle Ages perceive themselves as servants of the pagan gods the way Christian crusaders saw themselves as *milites Christi*? On this poster, I wish to present results of my research on the evolution of the warrior-god relationship at the turn of Christianization in Scandinavia (10th-13th c.). The paper focuses on the main pagan god associated with war, i.e. Odin, and explores three main aspects of his relationship with pagan warriors.

I will first study the figure of Odin as a war chieftain who gives orders to attack, advises warriors with military tactics and has his own specific war strategies. I will then show how Odin helps warriors on the battlefield, providing strength and a longer life to them, as well as military support and even victory. Lastly, I will consider the hypothesis of pagan Scandinavian warriors as Odin's servants. In fact, libations to Odin before combat are common practice and some elite warriors, such as *berserkers* and *einherjar*, seem to be the "warriors of Odin" *par excellence*, among humans and in Valhalla.

Using evidence from the narrative sources, as well as some runic inscriptions and skaldic poetry, I hope to show that before and after Christianization, fighting was considered both a military and spiritual activity that implied service to the gods and a specific relationship with them, while underlying crucial differences between serving Odin and serving Christ.

Warlike God or Supernatural War Chieftain?

Odin is sometimes described as the "god of war" in popular imagination and was deemed the "lord of hosts" by scholars until well in the middle of the twentieth century (Ellis-Davidson 1964, 48). But even though Odin is indeed a warlike god, his status as the quintessential god of battle is questionable. At the beginning of the *Ynglinga saga* (Laing 1961, 7-43), Snorri Sturluson depicted Odin not as a god but as an extraordinary war chieftain who was victorious in all his battles thanks to magic (incantations, sacrifices, use of herbs). This is confirmed in other sources such as Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, where Odin gave strategical advice to Danish king Harald against Ingi, king of Sweden (Elton 1905, 226-7). Some military tactics, e.g., concerning the disposition of troops on the battlefield, are even specifically associated with Odin, who is called "the inventor and teacher of these tactics" further in the *Gesta Danorum* (Elton 1905, 242-3).

Odin's Help on The Battlefield: A God Amongst Warriors

Serving Odin meant being rewarded with various advantages at war. According to Saxo, Odin embodied a "divine patronage" for warriors as he gave them "the privilege of insuperability" on the battlefield (Elton 1905, 110). In skaldic poems from the tenth century by Einarr Helgason Skálaglamm, Odin even granted victory to king Håkon the Good because of his loyalty to pagan gods (Turville-Petre 1976, 59-63). However, because of conversion, allegiance to the ancient gods was progressively forbidden and replaced by *militia Christi*. Thus, in the thirteenth century, when Scandinavian kingdoms were completely Christianised, the Lord replaced Odin in the warrior-god relationship. As a matter of fact, Magnus VI's *Law of the Hird* (*Hirðskrá*, c. 1263) was perhaps the first text to convey the concept of a war in the name of God in Scandinavia.

Servants of Odin: Elite Warriors Only?

Warriors were sometimes described as Odin's own men, fighting under his command. Such was the case of the Berserkers, a type of elite "bear" or "wolf" warriors who are mentioned in some myths and sagas, but whose historical existence has not yet been proven (Samson 2011). This link between elite warriors, Odin and fury (*berserkrsgang*) is ancient in Scandinavian war culture, as some runestones show, for example the funerary inscription of Tune which reads <*Woduride*> (Marez 2007, 197-233) thus referring literally to a "horseman of Odin" (**Wotan*) or a "horseman of fury" (**Wut*). In the times of conversion, this association was also present in skaldic poetry, for example in a poem by Kormákr Ögmundarson (Turville-Petre 1976, 45-50), where warriors are called "Odins of the sword" (*hjarar Þundar*). Even after conversion, references to ancient mythology remained important when praising the merits of warriors and warlords. For example, in the poem *Eiriksmál* (Jónsson 1929), Odin and the warriors who sit at his table, the *Einherjar*, welcomed king Erik Bloodaxe in Valhalla, though the king was Christian in his lifetime.

Reproduction of Torslunda plate D, 6th-8th c.: the one-eyed warrior recalls Odin and the wolfman accompanying him is interpreted as a Berserker.

Before and after Christianisation, fighting was considered both a military and spiritual activity that implied service to the gods and a specific relationship with them. However, crucial differences between serving Odin and serving Christ must be stressed. In pagan times, warriors held a more personal relationship with the gods, whose attitudes and attributes were closer to those of humans: such was the case of Odin, who was seen as a war chieftain and a god who gave direct help to warriors on the battlefield, rather than a divine entity whose commands should be obeyed in the name of a specific religious doctrine. This idea, along with the concept of the "just war", would later develop in Christian times with the diffusion of *militia Christi* in Scandinavia.

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FURTHER INFORMATION:

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