

THE PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS  
OF THE NORTH

# THE PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS OF THE NORTH

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## VOLUME I

# THE PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS OF THE NORTH

Research and Reception, Volume I:  
From the Middle Ages to *c.* 1830

Edited by

Margaret Clunies Ross



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## CONTENTS

|   |      |
|---|------|
| List of Illustrations                             | ix   |
| Acknowledgements                                  | xv   |
| Abbreviations for Volume I                        | xvii |
| Introduction to Volume I<br>MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS | xxi  |

### Part 1. Looking In: The Non-Scandinavian Perspective

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>1.0</b> Introduction to Part 1<br>MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS  | 3  |
| <b>1.1</b> Pictured by the Other: Classical and Early Medieval<br>Perspectives on Religions in the North<br>HENRIK JANSON | 7  |
| <b>1.2</b> Anglo-Saxon Responses to Scandinavian Myth and Religion<br>PHILIP A. SHAW                                      | 41 |
| <b>1.3</b> Finno-Ugric Neighbours<br>THOMAS A. DUBOIS   | 57 |
| <b>1.4</b> Celtic-Scandinavian Contacts<br>BERNHARD MAIER   | 61 |
| <b>1.5</b> The Reception of Early Nordic Religions and Myths in Old Rus'<br>VLADIMIR JA. PETRUKHIN and TATJANA N. JACKSON | 69 |
| <b>1.6</b> The Reception in Early Arabic Writings<br>JAN RETSÖ  | 81 |

## Part 2. The View from Inside: Medieval Scandinavian Reception

|              |   |     |
|--------------|---|-----|
| <b>2.0</b>   | Introduction to Part 2  |     |
|              | MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS   | 93  |
| <b>2.1.1</b> | The Learned Prehistory and Natural Religions                                    |     |
|              | MATS MALM   | 97  |
| <b>2.1.2</b> | The Tower of Babel and the Diffusion of<br>World Languages and Religions        |     |
|              | ANNETTE LASSEN  | 105 |
| <b>2.1.3</b> | Demonism and the Pre-Christian Gods of Scandinavia                              |     |
|              | MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS   | 119 |
| <b>2.1.4</b> | Remnants of Indigenous Beliefs in the Other World<br>in Saga Literature         |     |
|              | ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON  | 127 |
| <b>2.2.1</b> | The Medieval Reception of Eddic Poetry<br>with Mythological Subjects            |     |
|              | ANNETTE LASSEN  | 137 |
| <b>2.2.2</b> | The Reception in Skaldic Poetry and<br>Snorri Sturluson's <i>Skáldskaparmál</i> |     |
|              | MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS   | 149 |
| <b>2.2.3</b> | The Reception in Medieval Historiography  |     |
|              | ANNETTE LASSEN  | 159 |
| <b>2.2.4</b> | The Reception in Saga Literature  |     |
|              | MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS   | 171 |

## Part 3. The Humanist Reception

|            |                                       |     |
|------------|---------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>3.1</b> | The Humanist Reception in Scandinavia |     |
|            | MATS MALM                             | 187 |
| <b>3.2</b> | Icelandic Humanism                    |     |
|            | ANNETTE LASSEN                        | 219 |

## Part 4. From Humanism to the Romantics

- 4.1** Myth and Religion in the Enlightenment  
and Pre-Romantic Period  
MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS 249
- 4.2** Pre-Christian Religions of the North  
and the Political Idea of Liberty  
JULIA ZERNACK 255
- 4.3** The New Aesthetics and the Concept of the Sublime  
MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS 267
- 4.4** Dalin, Ramsay and the Enlightened Reaction to Rudbeckianism  
LARS LÖNNROTH 273
- 4.5** A Key Work for the Reception History of Norse Mythology  
and Poetry: Paul Henri Mallet's *History of the Danish Empire*  
and its European Impact  
JULIA ZERNACK 281

## Part 5. The Romantics

- 5.1** Images and Imageries of Norse Mythology in German  
Sentimentalism and Romanticism: From Herder to Heine  
SERGEJ LIAMIN 317
- 5.2** Ewald's and Oehlenschläger's Poetry Inspired by Old Norse Myth  
LISE PRÆSTGAARD ANDERSEN 331
- 5.3** Swedish Romanticism and Gothicism: Aesthetic Synergies  
MATS MALM 351
- 5.4** The Norwegian Reception during the Late Eighteenth  
and Early Nineteenth Centuries  
JAN RAGNAR HAGLAND 357
- 5.5** Old Norse Myths and Icelandic Romanticism  
SVEINN YNGVI EGILSSON 365
- 5.6** English Romanticism and Norse Mythology  
HEATHER O'DONOGHUE 383

- 5.7** The 'Nordic Renaissance' in Russia and Poland  
JULIA ZERNACK 391
- 5.8** The International Reception of a Seminal Work: *Baldurs draumar*  
JULIA ZERNACK 405

## Part 6. The Reception in Drama and the Visual Arts from c. 1750

- 6.1.1** Early Representations of Old Nordic Religions in Drama  
TERRY GUNNELL 421
- 6.2.1** Painting and Sculpture in Denmark  
BO GRANDIEN 447
- 6.2.2** Painting and Sculpture in Sweden  
BO GRANDIEN 469
- 6.2.3** Painting and Sculpture in Norway  
BO GRANDIEN 503
- 6.2.4** Painting and Sculpture in Germany,  
c. 1750 to the Early Twentieth Century  
SARAH TIMME 521
- 6.2.5** The Visual Arts in Britain  
MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS 557

## Part 7. Enabling Philology

- 7.1** Enabling Philology: Essential Preconditions for a Scholarly  
Reception of the Pre-Christian Religions of the North  
MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS 581

## Part 8. The Early Grundtvig

- 8.1** N. F. S. Grundtvig: The Æsir Intoxication  
and *Nordens Mytologi* (1808)  
FLEMMING LUNDGREEN-NIELSEN 595
- Index of Authors, Artists and Works 623
- Index of Concepts 633



## 1.5 – THE RECEPTION OF EARLY NORDIC RELIGIONS AND MYTHS IN OLD RUS'

Vladimir Ja. Petrukhin and Tatjana N. Jackson

**T**races of early Nordic religions and myths in the East Slavic milieu are quite sparse. Still, it seems quite natural to investigate the impact of Scandinavian traditions on the emerging culture of Old Rus' from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, as the very name *Rus'* — a designation of a Scandinavian retinue travelling in rowing boats — was given by the Baltic Finns (and through their agency by the Slavs) to these retinues that started moving along the rivers of Eastern Europe from the turn of the eighth and ninth centuries (Noonan 1986; Melnikova and Petrukhin 1990–91). It is evident that contacts between Scandinavians and eastern Slavs that could enable the penetration of religious beliefs and myths could not have started earlier than this time: 'It was in the tenth century that Norse culture was at its height in Eastern Europe and interacted intensively with local cultural traditions. The immediate result was the formation of a mixed multi-ethnic culture of Old Russian warrior elite, the so-called retinue culture' (Melnikova 2003: 66). Old Russian book culture developed about a hundred years after the adoption of Christianity in 988. Accordingly, written sources that could reflect pagan motifs are rather limited and are coloured by standard Christian approaches to pagan religions.

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However, a good number of archaeological materials have been excavated in the last hundred years or so that throw light on the reception of Scandinavian religious ideas and practices in Eastern Europe. This chapter examines both the textual tradition and the archaeological record.

### *The Textual Tradition*

*The Russian Primary Chronicle*, compiled in Kiev at the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, includes several narratives about Rus' rulers that have analogues in medieval Icelandic sources. They employ similar strategies of historicizing ruling dynasties that we also find in Norse sources like Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* and the *Heimskringla* attributed to Snorri Sturluson (see Chapter 2.1.1 'The Learned Prehistory and Natural Religions', below). A legend of the calling-in to Novgorod of the three Varangian (Scandinavian) princes, the brothers Rjurik, Sineus and Truvor, has been preserved (s.a. 862) in *The Russian Primary Chronicle* (Likhachev *et al.* 1996: 13; Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 59). They were invited to rule and reign after a special *rjad* ('agreement') and brought with them from overseas the Varangian armed force, 'all the Rus', the name of which spread over the lands of Eastern Europe subordinate to the Russian princes in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Rjurik became a founder of the dynasty, the descendants of which ruled in ancient and medieval Rus' until the end of the sixteenth century. There are numerous parallels to the motif of three brothers being the rulers of a people, but in the *Primary Chronicle* this motif is incorporated into the universal scheme of acts of three culture heroes: the chronicle begins (in its cosmographic introduction) with the biblical story of how the sons of Noah (Shem, Ham and Japhet) divided the earth; continues with a narration concerning the foundation of the future capital of Christian Rus', Kiev, by three brothers Kij, Shchek and Khoriv; and in its historical part there follows (s.a. 862) the legend of the three Varangian princes. Scandinavian names of invited rulers preserved in the archaic Slavonic transmission — Rjurik (<Old Norse *Hrærekr*), Sineus (<Old Norse *Signjótr*) and Truvor (<Old Norse *Þórvar[ð]r*) — point to the Scandinavian component of the legend that we find in the chronicle. However, unlike the euhemerized heathen deities that are found in Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon dynastic ruler lists, there is no mention of heathen deities, and this is probably to be accounted for as a suppression on the part of the Russian monastic chronicler. The similarity of early state symbols (as well as that of burial monuments, namely, the big mounds, to be discussed below) in both Old Rus' and Scandinavia gives ground for the supposition that there existed in Rus' the same genealogical traditions as in Scandinavia.

As has been implied above, the tradition of chronicle writing originated in a monastic milieu after the Christianization of the Rus', and thus pagan motifs are extremely rare in Old Russian written texts, especially motifs to do with non-Christian religious beliefs or practices. One legend with a probable Scandinavian basis shows an awareness of identifiably Scandinavian practices of prophecy and magic. These occur in a detailed story in the *Primary Chronicle* dealing with the death of Rjurik's heir, Oleg the Prophetic (or, 'the Sage'), in Kiev, which had been seized by Oleg in 912 according to a conventional chronicle dating. The prince received his nickname after a successful campaign against Tsar'grad (Constantinople). It has been proposed that the nickname was a perception of the sacred meaning of the Scandinavian personal name Helgi ('Holy') (Melnikova 2005). The story ran that in the autumn the prince called his horse to mind: some wonder-working magician had prophesied that he would meet his death from his steed, so he gave a command that the horse should never be led into his presence. Asking for the whereabouts of the horse, Oleg learnt that it was dead. He laughed and mocked the magician, rode to the place where the bare bones lay and stamped upon the skull with his foot. A serpent that crawled forth from it bit him on the foot, and he died (Likhachev *et al.* 1996: 69). Scholars have long ago pointed to the similarity of the two plots, the death of Oleg and that of the hero of the Icelandic *Qrvar-Odds saga* from the end of the thirteenth or even the beginning of the fourteenth century, as well as to universal parallels to the motif 'a horse causes (or foretells) its master's death'.

Another chronicle motif that is traditionally associated in scholarly literature with Scandinavian traditions of death and burial refers to the death of Oleg's heir, who also had a name of Scandinavian origin, Igor' (<Old Norse *Yngvarr*). This prince of Kiev tried to collect from his subjects, the Slavic tribe of Drevljanians (living on the right-hand shore of the Middle Dnieper), a tribute larger than the one laid down by the *rjad* ('agreement'), and was killed by the rebel Drevljanians in the autumn of 945 like 'a wolf'. Igor's widow, Olga, pretended that she would graciously welcome the 'matchmakers' from the Drevljanians, so that they would give her a new husband, their 'good' prince Mal. But then she started to take her revenge on the embassies arriving from the Drevljanians: in the case of the first one, she commanded them to be buried alive in a deep ditch, together with their boat; the second one was ordered to be burned to death in a bathhouse; finally, she commanded her retinue to fall upon those Drevljanians who had got drunk at a funeral feast near her husband's mound (Likhachev *et al.* 1996: 27–28; Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 78–80). These three ways of executing the Drevljanians can be associated with Scandinavian rituals (ritualized violence): burning enemies in a house is

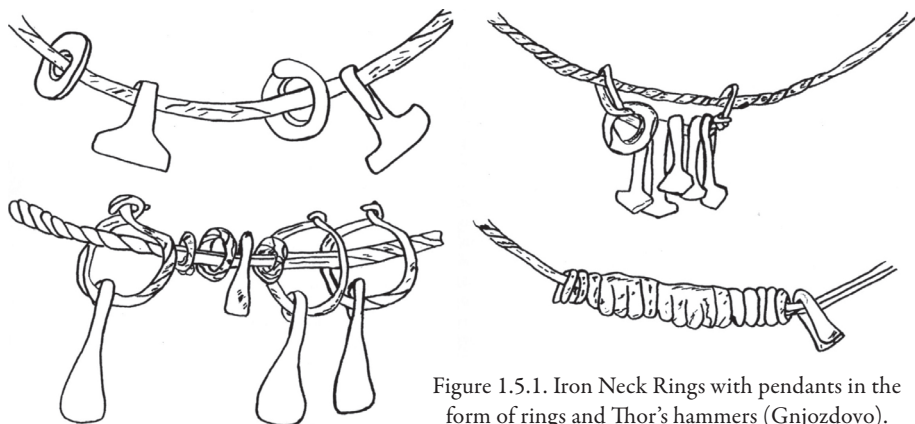


Figure 1.5.1. Iron Neck Rings with pendants in the form of rings and Thor's hammers (Gnjozdovo).

Image courtesy of Galina Novikova.



Figure 1.5.2. Bronze pocket idol from Černaya Mogila. Ancient Russia, GIM 76990 on. 1539/77. Černigov, Černaya Mogila.

Tenth century. Photograph courtesy of the State Historical Museum, Moscow.

a common motif in Icelandic sagas, and interment alive (in a boat) and a sacrifice at the funeral are characteristic features of the Scandinavian funeral cult and penal system (Ström 1942: 189–209). Olga, organizing the punishment of the Drevljanians, acts like a valkyrie choosing her victim.

### *The Archaeological Record*

It is remarkable that Scandinavians in Rus' preserved the cult of Þórr as their *private cult* throughout the tenth century, judging by numerous amulets in the form of Þórr's hammers (cf. Lindow 2002: 288–90) found in Scandinavian burial complexes in Eastern Europe (Figure 1.5.1) (Novikova 1992).

Tenth-century miniature figurines of 'pocket' idols also correlate with the cult of Þórr: a bronze one from a mound Chernaja Mogila 'Black Grave' in Chernigov with a typical gesture



Figure 1.5.3. Lead pocket idol from Černaya Mogila. Ancient Russia, GIM 111421 on. 2778/254. Černigov, Černaya Mogila. Tenth century. Photograph courtesy of the State Historical Museum, Moscow.

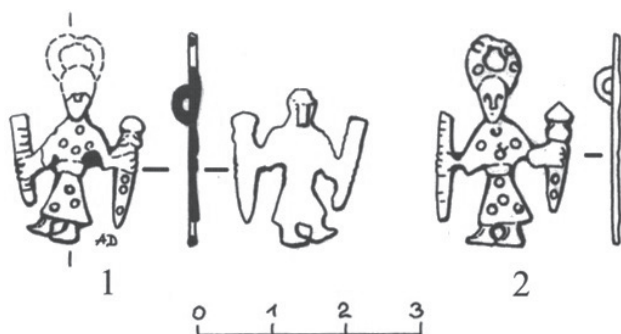


Figure 1.5.4. Amulet pendants of soldiers wearing helmets with horns like bird heads found in Gnjozdovo (1) and Birka (2). Image courtesy of Tamara Pushkina.

of the thunder god holding his beard with his hands (Figure 1.5.2) (Pushkina 1984; Petrukhin 2007: 64, fig. 38); less definitely, a lead figure from Gnjozdovo that has a belt, which is identified in Snorri’s *Edda* (SnE 2005: 23) as one of the three attributes of the god Þórr, his *megingjörð* (‘power-belt’) (Figure 1.5.3) (Melnikova 1996: 73–89).

Notice should also be taken of Þórr’s hammers scratched on Islamic coins from tenth-century hoards in Eastern and Northern Europe (cf. Melnikova 1996: 73–89), as well as of finds of remains of goats in rich burials from Gnjozdovo and Chernigov (Rybakov 1949; Petrukhin 1975), which may also indicate the cult of Þórr as *hafra dróttinn* (‘the lord of goats’). It is not easy to give a mythological attribution to the amulets and images of warriors wearing helmets with horns like

bird heads, except to say that they have been found both in Sweden at Birka and at Gnjozdovo in Rus’ territory (Figure 1.5.4).

Clay paws and rings are considered to have been a typically East European set of amulets produced especially for burial rites: several dozen complexes have been excavated in the mounds of the Upper Volga region among Scandinavian finds. Clay paws are an imitation of bear paws, and they are known all over Northern Eurasia wherever there is a bear cult: a full analogy to the Upper Volga amulets has been found in the Åland Islands colonized in the Viking



Age by Swedish migrants who reached the Upper Volga region (Callmer 1994; Sedykh 2012). The bear cult is universally associated with the cult of fertility, and in the Old Rus' context with the cult of Volos, 'god of cattle' (Sedykh 2012); clay rings, unknown in Scandinavia, might possibly imitate bracelets, that is, they may have functioned as amulet-rings.

Metal rings, found both in Scandinavia and in Old Rus', are another kind of amulet. They could be used both as separate fetishes and as 'key rings' for amulets, Þórr's hammers among them (Price 2002: 203–04). Also known are rings with ring-amulets, like those found in Gnjozdovo and at Rjurikovo Gorodishche near Novgorod (Eniosova 2012). A set of such amulets from Gnjozdovo settlement includes not only an amulet in the form of an iron *kresalo* (fire steel), traditional for both Scandinavia and Rus', but also temporal rings, to be hung around the forehead, typical of the local culture of long barrows (Eniosova 2012: 258–60). The most impressive of the recent finds is a hoard of trade supplies in the 'port' zone of Gnjozdovo (excavations of V. V. Murasheva and S. A. Avdusina in 2013): in a wooden container, scales were kept with different weights and a set of amulets — fire steels and a Þórr's hammer on a ring; the container itself was locked by means of an iron chain; as extra protective amulets, a fire steel and iron ring were dug into the earth, together with the container. A special category of miniature amulets in the form of staffs has been discussed (Dorofeeva 2010); a staff is a widespread cult attribute also known from Scandinavia. Joachim Werner (1964) pointed long ago to a possible connection between European amulets of this type with Hercules's clubs and Þórr's hammers.

Amulets are found in the cultural layer of those settlements where Scandinavians used to live permanently (and they might even have been produced there), namely, in Ladoga, where moulds for casting Þórr's hammers were excavated, and pendants in the form of a valkyrie at Rjurikovo Gorodishche and in Novgorod, as well as in Gnjozdovo. In Novgorod Scandinavian finds are met in smaller numbers than at Gorodishche, the oldest district of Novgorod; however, amulets, pendants and runic inscriptions indicate the presence of Scandinavians in Novgorod as well. Moreover, the pendant in the form of a Þórr's hammer and some decorations were made by local artisans, which indicates the introduction of Scandinavian traditions to Novgorodian everyday life (Rybina and Khvoshchinskaja 2010: 66–78). Amulet-pendants from Ladoga and two from Gorodishche bear runic inscriptions: the latter two are invoked to protect their owner's virility, while the former includes a spell from an incantation to protect the owner from evil creatures (Figure 1.5.5) (Melnikova 1997: 31–33, 38).

Numerous runic graffiti are found on coins that have been discovered separately and in hoards: the commonest group of runes forms just one word, *god*, a noun that can mean both the Christian God and a pagan deity. Among the graffiti drawings on coins, one comes across images of crosses as well as of Þórr's hammers. Combinations of symbols on one coin are quite possible and characterize the 'double faith' of merchants and warriors who accepted new beliefs while travelling international routes (Mikkelsen 2002; Sedykh 2005). A widespread motif among graffiti in Eastern Europe is the triquetra (a three-cornered shape), which may be connected with the cult of Óðinn, judging from images of a hero's arrival in Valhalla on Gotlandic picture stones. A triquetra is scratched, in particular, on a silver mount on a drinking horn from Gnjozdovo mound (Eniosova 2009: 262–64), which may be connected with the notion of warriors feasting in Valhalla. Among unique finds is a walrus tusk from Rjurikovo Gorodishche with a triquetra scratched on it and a triangle formed by three feet (Eniosova 2012: 62–63), possibly designed to assist its owner in travel.

The most numerous monuments connected with Scandinavian religious cults in Rus' are burial mounds of the tenth and early eleventh centuries, among them hundreds of complexes on the Upper Dnieper (Gnjozdovo), the Upper Volga, the Desna (Shestovitsa and Chernigov) and in Kiev. Burial rites seem to have synthesized all characteristics of Scandinavian cults in



Figure 1.5.5. Amulet pendant from Ladoga with a runic inscription, no. SAZ-75 LP-1/1303. Photograph courtesy of the Staroladozhsky Historical, Architectural and Archaeological museum, Ladoga.

Eastern Europe, and the majority of amulets come from burial complexes. The most impressive type of Scandinavian burial ritual is, of course, cremation in a boat, described in detail by a tenth-century Arabian traveller and diplomat Aḥmad Ibn Faḍlān, who saw such a ritual in Bulgar on the Volga in 921/22 (see the analysis of this description in Chapter 1.6 below). This description most fully correlates with the ceremony traced in the largest Old Russian tenth-century mound Chernaja Mogila (in Chernigov): on a pyre there may have been placed (judging by sets of weapons) two warriors and a woman; boat rivets indicate that they were burned in a boat. Similar large mounds, from two to ten metres high, were investigated in the late nineteenth century in Chernigov and Gnjozdovo.

Typical features of the burial rites attested by the large mounds of both Rus' and Scandinavia are as follows: 'pagan' inhumation or cremation (in Rus'), often in a boat; the use of weapons and banquet vessels, sometimes placed on a fire site in a special way (weapons as a 'trophy'); as well as sacrifice (including human sacrifice). A sacrificial cauldron with the skin and bones of a goat (or sheep) eaten during the funeral feast was located in the centre of the fire site in the mounds of Gnjozdovo and Chernigov (in the Chernaja Mogila — on a primary embankment, near the figurine of Þórr). We may compare the situation discovered in the mound Skopintul at the royal estate Hovgårdén near Birka, the main Scandinavian town on the way 'from the Varangians to the Greeks', where a cauldron contained human hair (that might have belonged to a victim, like the girl described by Ibn Faḍlān), and that in the biggest mound of the cemetery at Kvarnbacken in the Åland Islands, from where a group of Scandinavians moved to the Upper Volga region in the mid-ninth to tenth centuries.

In both Russian and Scandinavian scholarly literature the mounds are traditionally called princely or royal. Scandinavian tradition has preserved legends concerning the kinship of those buried in the big mounds. Gamla Uppsala was an ancient capital of the dynasty of Ynglingar, kings of Svealand, whose progenitor, via Yngvi-Freyr, is presented in Old Norse texts like *Heimskringla* as Óðinn himself. To understand the origins of the princely cult in Rus', it is important to note that the names of the first princes — Rjurik, Oleg (Helgi) Igor' (Yngvarr, an anthroponym connected to the name of the deity Yngvi-Freyr) — are princely names both in Scandinavian and in Old Russian traditions: this allows us to suppose not only the ethnic and cultural, but also possibly the early genealogical connections of the princely families that used to bury their members under the big mounds (Roesdahl 1996: 67–68, 164; Petrukhin 2013: 120–27).



The introduction of Christianity in Rus' and the Scandinavian countries led to similar transformations of burial rites: the remains of many rulers who had died in pre-Christian times — Gormr in Denmark, the princes Yaropolk and Oleg in Rus' — were translated from big mounds into the churches. After the mid-tenth century the grave goods of the elite representatives include crosses, along with traditional decorations, mostly in female burials in the chamber tombs of Birka, Kiev, Gnjozdovo, Timerjovo, Pskov and other sites (Petrukhin and Pushkina 1997; Melnikova 2011). Pagan amulets lose their specifically non-Christian semantic value in Christian everyday life and become simple decorations: a striking example is a necklace from the Kievan hoard of the twelfth or early thirteenth century found in the territory of Mikhajlov monastery in 1903, where silver pendants, usually referred to as cross-shaped, are amulets in the form of Þórr's hammers (the so-called Hiddensee type), while the central object is a cross (Petrukhin 2013: 354, fig. 72).

The penetration and development of elements of pre-Christian Nordic religion and myths in Rus' (and in Eastern Europe more generally) was obviously due to the penetration of Scandinavian communities into the area (in the first place, the *Rus'* itself, i.e., the princely retinue) and their life in the emerging urban centres and surrounding territories. Their cults and myths were to a small degree accepted by the culture of Old Rus', which was, however, based on another language and, moreover, characterized by Christian literacy, but was transformed under local influence, while not losing its essentially Scandinavian character. There appeared new forms of cult objects, like clay rings and other amulets produced out of local materials, while Eastern coins served for making crosses and amulet-pendants. The area of the most commonly occurring amulets, Þórr's hammers and other objects, unites Eastern Europe with central and eastern Sweden, from where the majority of Scandinavian Viking Age objects come; similar burial complexes are also found, like burials in a boat, chamber graves and large princely mounds. Scandinavian motifs, both religious and related to arts and crafts, are typically deprived of their religious (mythological) content in the process of Christianization as perceived in Old Rus' literature, and in this respect Old Rus' texts conform to one of the commonest types of medieval Christian reception of the pre-Christian religions of the North, in which myths are treated as faded histories or legends.

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