

Reincarnation among the Norse: Sifting through the Evidence

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Abstract

This short article looks at the possibility of reincarnation as a common alternative concept of life after death among Germanic heathens and then as a possible non-standard alternative belief. References in the Old Norse literary record are reviewed and compared to data from the non-Norse literary and historical record and finally the archaeological record. The evidence is then sorted to propose a model to explain the existence of the belief in the Eddas.

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1 Introduction

Germanic heathenry is known as a modern 'alternative religion' which stands in singular position that it espouses variety of afterlives. Certainly, by the end of the Viking Age, there were at least four afterlife concepts which are documented in various manuscripts. There are several others which may have actually developed *after* the Scandinavia's conversion to Christianity. However, this article deals only with one specific form of afterlife — reincarnation.

Reincarnation is very popular these days probably because it adds symmetry and harmony to an otherwise confusing life. The current direction in developing scientific fields has undermined the dominant Christian concept of an afterlife, and the idea of a complete transmigration of souls feels comfortable and can thrive in spite of scientific advances. At the present time, there are a large number of belief systems espousing a belief in reincarnation, most notably, wicca, which, due to its nature, comes in a variety of cultural flavors. The general modern belief at least in the USA states that 'after a person dies, his soul will be transferred to a holding area¹ where the soul awaits, the conception of a child. The soul is then injected into the fetus at some point prior to birth.' This particular version of reincarnation owed its existence to the religions and worldviews of the Orient, but it has been modified significantly so that being reincarnated as an animal is generally considered a low probability.

The American version differs from the oriental forerunner in that there is more control placed in the hands of the individual. First, the modern soul, conceptually, is comprised of ego + subconscious + 'a form of transpersonal self so that when a person is 'reincarnated' or *born again* the entire self is just as if he had never died. Some versions talk of a more advanced self, improved through experience, but the idea remains the same: the *personality* will be reborn in a cosmic game to gain more experience.

2 The Literary Evidence

Review of the literary references to reincarnation come in essentially two flavors:

1. direct references where it is explicitly stated that an individual is born again;
2. indirect references where the belief in reincarnation is alluded to.

Here we utilize Hollander's translation of the Eddas. There is no real reason for a choice for Hollander specifically other than his translations of the Eddas are the most readily available in the American English language.

¹Among wiccans, especially those who trace their lineage back to Gerald Gardner or Alex Sanders, this 'holding area' is called *the Summerland*.

2.0.1 Case #1:

Translated line: "*Of Helgi and Sváva, it is said that they were born again.*"²

Related text: "King Helgi was a mighty warrior. He fared to King Eylimi and asked for the hand of his daughter. Helgi and Sváva swore oaths to each other, and their love was great. Sváva stayed at home with her father, but Helgi was in the wars; yet was Sváva a valkyrie as before. Hethin was at home with his father, King Hjordvarth, in Norway. One time Hethin was coming home alone from the forest on Yule eve. He met a troll woman riding on a wolf, with snakes as reins. She asked his leave to keep him company, but he would not. She said: 'That shalt thou rue when drinking from the hallowed cup.' In the evening the vows were made: the sacrificial boar was led in, men laid their hands on him and swore dear oaths as they drank from the hallowed cup. Hethin made a vow that he would have Sváva, Eylimi's daughter, the maiden beloved by Helgi, his brother; but he forthwith rued it so greatly that he hastened South on wild ways until he found his brother, Helgi."³

2.0.2 Case #2:

Translated line: "*Helgi was the name of a king whose daughter was Sigrún. She became a valkyrie and rode the air and over the sea. She was Sváva born again.*"⁴

2.0.3 Case #3:

Translated line: "*Sigrún lived but a short while longer, for grief and sorrow. It was the belief in olden times that men were born again, but that is now called an old woman's superstition. Helgi and Sigrún are said to have been born again as Helgi Haddingjaskati and Kara, the daughter of Hálfðan, as told in 'The Lay of Kara.' She was a valkyrie.*"⁵

2.0.4 Case #4:

Translated lines:

*"To him hardy Hogni answered
'Hinder her not Helward to fare,
whence back never she be born again!
Wicked left she her mother's womb,
to the world was she but woe to bring, sadness and sorrow
to sons of men."*⁶

²Hollander, Lee, trans. *The Poetic Edda*, 1962 (The University of Texas Press; Austin, TX), p. 179.

³Hollander, p. 177.

⁴Hollander, p. 192.

⁵Hollander, p.202.

⁶Hollander, 259-260.

Cases #1-3 use the Old Norse word *endrborinn* and Case #4 uses *ap-trborinn*, and both words literally translate as 'born again' with the possibility of any other translation being highly improbable. The literary evidence here is very clear as to what was intended by the compilers of the poems.⁷

Supporting literary evidence is primarily in the form of anecdotal information which alludes to the possibility of an Old Norse Doctrine of Reincarnation.

2.0.5 Case #5:

The following is from a translation of the *Flateyjarbók* by Turville-Petre.

*"It is told that once when King Ólaf (the Saint) was riding with his bodyguard (hirdh past the howe of Ólaf the Elf of Geirstadhir, one of his followers (hirdmadhr, who is not named, questioned him: 'tell me, Lord, were you buried here?' The King answered: 'Never did my soul have two bodies and it will never have, neither now nor on the day of resurrection, and if I say anything else, then the common faith is not truly implanted in me.' Then the courtier said: 'people have said that when you came to this place before you exclaimed: "here we are and here we go."' The King answered: 'I never said that and never will.' The King was deeply disturbed at heart; he pricked his horse and sped from the place as fast as he could. It was easy to see that Ólaf wished to uproot and blot out this heretical superstition."*⁸

There are a couple of other examples such as the tale of Thórólf Twist-foot which have been used by authors as supportive of a concept of reincarnation other examples.

There is no other documentation to date either outside historical records, Christian writings against heathen practice such as sermons or church regulations which would place an accepted doctrine of reincarnation in the pre-conversion era. inclusive of the writings regarding the heathen Germans, Vandals, Visigoths, Normans, Anglo-Saxons, etc. The only documents existing are mentioned above.

3 The Archaeological Record

By far, the archaeological record is more difficult to interpret than the literary record especially when it comes down to what the people of the time actually believed. This is a fact often cited by those looking to find reincarnation. While this is true to a large degree, there are things which can be said about burial practice which can impact how the literary record is interpreted.

⁷Thanks goes to Hrafnkell of Indiana for his research into the meanings of these words.

⁸Turville-Petre, E. O. G. *Myth and Religion of the North*, 1964, reprinted 1975 (Greenwood Press; Westport, CN), p. 194.

3.1 The Germanic Archeological Record

There is a consistency within burial practice which remained stable from the Migration Period to the point of conversion ca. 1000 CE: corpses were outfitted to 'continue life within the gravemound.' Objects common to daily life like scissors, eating utensils, combs, drinking vessels jars of food, pets, jewelry, money for spending, etc. are among the most common everyday items. Weapons for men and sewing kits were also common for women as well as men. Even though styles of graves changed over relatively short periods of time and varied from region to region even within the same time frame, the existence of grave goods and the types of grave goods remains the same as one of the singular trademarks of a Germanic heathen's burial. Additionally, the Church of the late Viking Age frowned on the practice of grave goods and highly discouraged them prior to the conversion and by 200 years post-conversion, burial was done under the strict eye of the Church. Because of the difference in eschatology, it is usually fairly easy to discern the difference between Christian graves and heathen ones except when the person buried was obviously of mixed belief.

Styles of graves varied throughout the Viking Age significantly. Rudolf Simek in *Der Glaube der Germanen* lists the following known grave styles:

1. single grave
2. cremation and interment
3. mound-graves
4. horse graves
5. wagon graves
6. ship graves

There were two types funerary practice: cremation and interment. Interment remained the more important of the two and, generally, when an individual was cremated the remains or certain parts of the remains⁹ There are recorded incidents of a body or bodies being set afire on a ship and set adrift; however, this appears to fall outside the general worldview, an anomaly as it were, and this type of burial is only recorded for the late Viking Age which leaves it subject to much outside influence. The fact that these burials are recorded for men on campaign in foreign regions suggests that it probably should be handled separately with investigation into the possibility of outside or foreign influence and the possible rationale for need.¹⁰

⁹The skull, hips and long bones were occasionally buried with grave goods. It is presumed that these parts functioned as representative of the individual. Simek

¹⁰It is suspected that cremation may have been a way for warriors to most easily return a body home for burial by reducing size, shape and weight of the corpse. This has never been 'proven' and possibly never can be, but such a process makes logical sense. In the case of a hundred or more dead, it may have been more expedient to 'bury the dead' within their 'home' (the ship) outfitted for battle where they could still protect themselves as needed. This, however, is merely speculation.

Much has been written regarding the archaeological record, but the results scanty as they may be, reveal the dead to be consistently outfitted for continued life in the grave.

3.2 Possible Baltic/ Finno-Ugric Influence

There have been studies regarding the borderzone regions of Sweden, particularly between the Sámi and the Germanics. The difference noted are that in the pre-Christian Era, the Sámi, who regarded reincarnation as part of their worldview to some degree, buried their dead traditionally out in the wilderness wrapped lightly in bark and covered with rocks to decay easily but also to be protected from hungry scavengers. Grave goods in the few graves that have been recovered are essentially non-existent. Germanic graves are typically close to the community or within it reflecting ongoing ancestor veneration. Grave goods are common in these graves. It has also been noted that Samí graves within the mixed communities show a degree of acceptance for the Germanic worldview on the part of the Sámi but Germanics buried with Samí produced grave goods are still interred in the typical Germanic manner.

Their religious practice underlying the burial practices of the Samí and other Finno-Ugric peoples have been extensively surveyed by Uno Holmberg in his *Finno-Ugric Mythology*¹¹ and his work is summarized by another by F. Guirand in *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*:

"The soul is, however, indissolubly linked to the body with which it forms an indivisible whole. Having no independent existence it dies with the body. That is why the Ingrians went to weep over the grave of the deceased and placed offerings there during a period roughly equivalent to the time of the body's decomposition. Afterwards, the grave was no longer visited for, they said, 'there is no longer anything left of the soul.'

"For the Voguls the heart and the lungs were the seat of the soul. Thus their warriors would eat the heart and the lungs of the vanquished in order to absorb their vital force, that is, their soul. Other tribes attributed an importance to the skeleton, the framework of the soul as well as the body. The Lapps, for example, would avoid breaking and destroying the skeleton of a sacrificed animal, believing that the gods used it again to make a new animal.

"The belief that the soul lasts as long as the skeleton exists is also clear from the ceremonies of the 'Bear's Festival' of which the *Kalevala* gives us a curious description. After the bear had been hunted and its flesh was eaten; then its bones were put in a tomb with skis, a knife and other objects. The slain animal was treated as a friend and asked to tell the other bears about all the honours men had paid

¹¹Holmberg, Uno *Finno-Ugric Mythology*, 1928, in the series *Mythology of All Races* edited by J. A. MacCulloch

to it. . . .^{12,13}

A form of reincarnation existed among these peoples, but only insofar that the basic components of life, i.e. the skeleton and the soul that was attached to it, were reused to build a new being of the same species. Presumably, this included humans as well.

The archaeological record is silent, then, regarding any indicators of a belief in reincarnation or rebirth. This alone, however, cannot be regarded as either proof for or against such a belief. Corroborating evidence is necessary.

4 Reincarnation as Christian Heresy

The only true heretic according to the findings of the First Nicene Council in 385 CE is defined as follows:

"In the early church, heresies were sometimes determined by a selected council of bishops, or ecumenical council, such as the First Council of Nicaea. The orthodox position was established at the council, and all who failed to adhere to it would thereafter be considered heretics."¹⁴

So heathens in Germanic northern Europe would not necessarily be regarded, at least by the Church, as heretics, but rather as 'pagans.' However, it is clear that heathen belief was considered false and worthy of derision. Writings from the late heathen period in Anglo-Saxon England, ca. 1014, by Wulfstan, Archbishop of York (1002 CE – 1023 CE), is probably representative of the sentiment of Christians towards the remaining heathens in northern Europe. In his 'Sermon on False Gods' he lists

1. Heathenry is promoted by the Devil
2. Idolatry is the Devil's works
3. Heathens are those who strayed from God, lead by Satan
4. They worship the sun and moon as gods
5. The worshipped also fire, water, and earth
6. Heathens act out of the free will that God had given them
7. Heathens eventually took to worshipping giants and men of violence (specifically mentions Saturn and Jove)
8. Heathens (the Danish) love more the the son of Jove (Tyr) who is called Thor and who brings only strife and contention
9. The Danes then fashioned a god out of Mercury (Ódhinn) and made sacrifices to him

¹²A good, contemporary description of the 'bear songs' among the Khanty along with articles pertaining to the relationships between the dead and the living can be found at <http://haldjas.folklore.ee/folklore/ksisu.htm>

¹³Guirand, F. in Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, 1959, edited by Felix Guirand (Prometheus Press; New York, NY), p. 317.

¹⁴http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heresy#Catholic_response_to_heresy

10. All was taught to the heathens by the Devil
11. Venus copulated with Jove and became a great goddess (probably Freya)
12. Thereafter the heathens devised other gods and goddesses
13. So therefore the Devil has rightfully claimed their unrepentant souls.¹⁵

What is most interesting and telling is that although the prior existence of a soul to birth was declared heretical during the First Nicene Council of 385 CE and finalized at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 CE¹⁶, there are no mentions of such a belief among heathens in the Germanic north anywhere in these documents generated during the late heathen period. Not until the writing of the *Heimskringla* and some of the eddic poems, that is.

From the time that Christians first entered the realm of the Germanic north to the time of the Conversion, roughly 700 years later, Christians, often coming from the ranks of heathens converted, write anti-heathen sermons, letters to the pope, canonical law and even civil laws, yet not once is there mention of a blatant heretical belief in reincarnation. As stated above, the archaeological record reveals nothing. Seven hundred years of simply 'missing something' is highly improbable.

4.1 Historical Timing

Often overlooked is the historical timing or historical framing. For this exercise, we summarized the evidence so far:

There is no overt evidence in the archaeological record from the time of the Bronze Age through the end of the Viking Age which would indicate the possible existence of a belief in reincarnation although there is evidence of the belief among neighboring peoples. There is no evidence of such a practice or belief noted by Christians who since 553 CE held to the idea that reincarnation was considered anathema, i.e. completely banned from Christianity; their writings, laws, rules, regulations and sermons do not mention reincarnation. Not until roughly 200 years after the official conversion of Iceland to Christianity is there mention of 'Sváva reborn.' It

¹⁵ *Anglo-Saxon Prose* translated and edited by Michael Swanton, 1993 (J. M. Dent-Orion Publishing House; London, UK), pp. 185-187.

¹⁶The council declared the following:

"If anyone does not anathematize Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, Apollinaris, Nestorius, Eutyches and Origen, as well as their impious writings, as also all other heretics already condemned and anathematized by the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and by the aforesaid four Holy Synods and [if anyone does not equally anathematize] all those who have held and hold or who in their impiety persist in holding to the end the same opinion as those heretics just mentioned: let him be anathema."

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origen#Origen.27s_influence_on_the_later_Church).

appears unprovoked, unheralded and unannounced in four manuscripts, three of which are obviously being linked together as being the same family of heroic poetry eventually being sewn together in their final form, Die Niebelungenlied. One is placed in the words of St. 'Olaáf often praised as Scandinavia's greatest champion of Christianity. These facts, then, beg the question:

"What was happening at the time these scribes were writing that would lead them to believe that 'reincarnation might be a somewhat important issue?'"

It is known that scribes copying, editing, glossing and, possibly, authoring some of the Icelandic manuscripts. Jónas Kristjánsson, one of the world's foremost experts on Icelandic manuscripts describes the training and education of the early manuscript writers.

"Elsewhere men of learning were a class apart, enclosed within the walls of their churches and monasteries. There literary language was mainly Latin and their writings mostly of a Christian and devotional flavour. But in Iceland men of learning had their feet firmly planted in the secular world and were informed with both knowledge and love of the national, Icelandic, lore. Thus the art of writing was soon taken into the service of native culture. Almost all Icelandic authors wrote in their native tongue and not in Latin. Religious works were both translated, and composed in Icelandic, and other foreign studies accorded the same treatment. Most important of all, though—in Iceland a completely native literature of considerable volume and outstanding quality was created. The production of books was not confined to centres of learning, but was carried on in farmhouses all over the country. The most famous Icelandic author was Snorri Sturluson, a layman, and the most famous manuscript, *Flateyjarbók*, was written in a farmhouse in the north. From the earliest times literacy was general, and continued to be so down to the present day. Even the monasteries were more secular in tone than elsewhere, being recruited to some extent from the ranks of elderly farmer-chieftains who sought in them a haven after the storms of life.

"Icelandic scholars of this period were in direct contact with the principal centres of learning throughout Christendom. At the beginning, the main source of Christian lore was England, a country with which there long and various links. The first bishops of Skalholt, Isleif and his son Gizur, both studied in Germany, while Sæmund the Learned, Gizur's closest collaborator, spent years of study in France. The two Icelandic sees were at first subject to the archdiocese of Bremen; later to Lund in Scania, and finally from 1153, to Trondheim in Norway. But although the scholarly links were strongest with Scandinavia in the

years of its Christian culture, direct ties between Icelanders, both students and other travellers, and the British Isles and the Continent were never broken. This helps to explain the great variety and fertility of the old Icelandic literature.”¹⁷

What we have, then, is Christian Icelanders with ties to the “greatest centres of learning in Christendom” writing native Icelandic literature. It is at this connection, this vector of communication, that we now turn to.

Continental Europe by 1000 CE with the exception of a few outlying areas was essentially Catholic and the great cities of Europe, especially in France and Germany, had very close ties to the Holy Roman Church. Something very interesting begins to happen beginning ca 1095 CE: the strength of the Church had grown such that, like any other empire, it began to ‘colonize.’ Unlike other empires, the goal wasn’t land but to lay claim to the alleged birthplace of its great champion, Jesus of Nazareth. The Crusade failed, but another came close on its heels; and then another so that the timeline continental Europe through the period during which the earliest of manuscripts was written up to the 14th century looked like the following:

”First Crusade = 1095 CE, 1099 CE, and 1101 CE
 Second Crusade = 1147 CE
 Third Crusade = 1187 CE
 Fourth Crusade = 1202 CE
 Albigensian Crusade = 1209 CE (against the Cathars in France)
 Children’s Crusade = 1212 CE (possibly fictitious)
 Fifth Crusade = 1215 CE
 Sixth Crusade = 1228 CE
 Seventh Crusade = 1243 CE
 Eighth Crusade = 1270 CE
 Ninth Crusade = 1271 CE
 Crusades in the Baltic and Central Europe = 12th - 16th centuries”¹⁸

The close ties between the large city-states of Europe, the political seats of power and the movement to capture and Christianize Jerusalem are evident and need no special emphasis here. However, one thing that is not clear or clear yet is the relationship of the Crusades to the topic of reincarnation and its appearance 200 years post-conversion in Icelandic manuscripts.

4.2 The Cathar Heresies

The Crusades themselves spawned religio-military forces some of the most noted being the Knights Templar, the Hospitalers, and the peculiar Gnostic sect called the Cathars. Although most of the sects caught the suspicious almost paranoid eye of the Church and were persecuted

¹⁷Kristjánsson, Jónas *Icelandic Sagas and Manuscripts*, 1980 (Iceland Review; Reykjavík, Iceland), pp. 29-33.

¹⁸<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crusades>

to various degrees, generally for accusation of spreading heretical doctrines, only the Cathars sometimes known as the Albigensians were deemed heretical enough to result in the Crusade of 1209 being lodged against them:

”The war ended in the Treaty of Paris (1229), by which the king of France dispossessed the house of Toulouse of the greater part of its fiefs, and that of Bziers of the whole of its fiefs. The independence of the princes of the south was at an end. But in spite of the wholesale massacre of Cathars during the war, Catharism was not extinguished.”¹⁹

Their beginning and their practices/ beliefs are still shrouded in much mystery as they were a secretive sect, but they moved into France and their numbers grew at a rate enough to alarm both the King of France and Pope Innocent III.

”The first French Cathars appeared in Limousin between 1012 and 1020. Several were discovered and put to death at Toulouse in 1022. The synods of Charroux (Vienne) (1028) and Toulouse (1056) condemned the growing sect. Preachers were summoned to the districts of the Agenais and the Toulousain to combat the Cathar doctrine in the 1100s. The Cathars, however, gained ground in the south thanks to the protection given by William, Duke of Aquitaine, and a significant proportion of the southern nobility. The people were impressed by the *bons hommes*, and the anti-sacerdotal preaching of Peter of Bruys and Henry of Lausanne in Prigord.”²⁰

The heresies that they were accused of are many, but one stands out among them: the belief in reincarnation.

”Catharism was a religious movement with Gnostic elements that originated around the middle of the 10th century, branded by the contemporary Roman Catholic Church as heretical. It existed throughout much of Western Europe, but its home was in Languedoc and surrounding areas in southern France.”²¹

Their beliefs completely ignored the declaration from the Second Council of Constantinople of 553 CE and as such they had been deemed anathema.

”The goal of Cathar eschatology was liberation from the realm of limitation and corruption identified with material existence. The path to liberation first required an awakening to the intrinsic corruption of the medieval ‘consensus reality,’ including its ecclesiastical, dogmatic, and social structures. Once cognizant of the grim existential reality of human existence (the ‘prison’ of matter), the path to spiritual liberation became obvious: matter’s enslaving

¹⁹<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathars>

²⁰<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathar#Origins>

²¹<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathars>

bonds must be broken. This was a step by step process, accomplished in different measures by each individual. The Cathars apparently recognized the potential of reincarnation. Those who were unable to achieve liberation during their current mortal journey would return later to continue the struggle. Thus it should be understood that reincarnation was neither a necessary nor a desirable event, but resultant of the fact that not all humans could break the enthralling chains of matter within a single lifetime.”²²

A second crusade of interest to our discussion is the fact that after 1000 CE, Baltic grave finds begin to undergo an alteration in the archaeological record in that their graves no longer resemble that of their distant cousins the Germanic branches, but start resembling more the graves of the tribes to the far east which had slowly been migrating westward both in battle and in trade. By the 13th century, Baltic heathens had completely incorporated a form of reincarnation into their native eschatology and from the 12th century onwards they became the focus of what are now called the Northern Crusades.

”The Crusades in the Baltic Sea area and in Central Europe were efforts by (mostly German) Christians to subjugate and convert the peoples of these areas to Christianity. These Crusades ranged from the 12th century, contemporaneous with the Second Crusade, to the 16th century.”²³

Between Christendom’s dealings with the Cathars and the Balto-Finns, heresy had become a serious problem for the Holy Mother Church and the Christian kingdoms of Europe. Extermination was the chosen course of action which required ferreting out enclaves and sending in military forces to eliminate the enemy.

”Hunted down by the Inquisition and abandoned by the nobles of the district, the Albigenses became more and more scattered, hiding in the forests and mountains, and only meeting surreptitiously. The people made some attempts to overthrow the Inquisition and the French, and insurrections broke out under the leadership of Bernard of Foix, Aimerv of Narbonne and Bernard Dlicieux at the beginning of the 14th century. But at this point vast inquests were set on foot by the Inquisition, which increased its efforts in the district. Precise indications of these are found in the registers of the Inquisitors, Bernard of Caux, Jean de St Pierre, Geoffroy d’Ablis, and others. The sect was exhausted and could find no more adepts, and after 1330 the records of the Inquisition contain few proceedings against Cathars. The last Cathar Perfect, Guillaume Bélibaste, was executed in 1321. Other movements, such as the Waldensians and the pantheistic Brethren of the Free Spirit survived into the 14th and 15th century, until they were gradually replaced

²²<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathars#Origins>

²³<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crusades>

by, or absorbed into, early Protestant sects, such as the Hussites.”²⁴

4.3 Other Possibilities

The Cathars was not the only group who was being accused of the heresy of reincarnation, of course. The Inquisition was just getting started seeing as their primary job to identify Christians who may have picked up false beliefs from pagans and to set them on a proper course of penitence as a form of spiritual vaccine to suppress the spread of the disease of heresy. At one point Jews, local cults, and of course the the heathens resisting conversion in the north and east including Germanic, Finno-Ugric and Baltic peoples.

Looking over Wulfstan’s accusations against the heathens, it can be easily determined that Christian bishops were not above applying standard techniques of propaganda to sway the opinion of the Christians even to the point of justifying inhumane methods of conversion. It is difficult at times to determine whether misrepresentations of heathen practice/ belief were completely intentional or if they were were simply gross misunderstandings of the heathen worldview, but it is clear that Christians *did not* understand the heathen mindset nor did they have any desire to do so. There are virtually no Christian writers who were completely sympathetic to the heathen resistance. Even Snorri, proud as he was of his own culture, still regarded the heathen as living in ignorance much like the romantic writers like Hawthorne, Tennyson, and Wordsworth viewed the ‘noble savage’ of the Americas 200 years ago. Given the evidence from archeology and the literary record, there is no compelling reason to accept the isolated cases above as anything more than a continuation of the overall propagandistic effort being enforced at the time the poems were committed to manuscript.

4.4 Putting Together the Pieces

First, there is no record of reincarnation among any of the branches of the Germanic tribes either in the literary or archaeological records. The evidence pretty much indicates that it simply did not exist and may in fact have even been resisted in the borderzone regions of Sweden where the shamanistic Sámi and the Balto-Finns held to such a doctrine at least partially. There is no record of reincarnation until 200 years post-conversion.

Looking at only the time frame when reincarnation appears in Icelandic manuscripts is well into the same time frame of several Crusades one of which was leveled against the Cathars in France who among other heretical doctrines held tightly to a belief in the transmigration of souls through a series of incarnations. The time frame and the fact that the belief had become a concern in Europe, particularly France, appears to be of significance.

Iceland in the meanwhile has been converted completely to Christianity and had not only taken up producing manuscripts with a fervor

²⁴<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathars#Origins>

but has taken up the auxiliary activity of the generating native literature loosely based on an ongoing oral tradition. Their primary seats of learning the the Christian centers of Continental Europe. Although there is no direct correlation for the Christian Icelandic scribes and authors to have picked up the idea that reincarnation was an 'old heathen belief now considered a wives tale' in the learning centers of France and Germany, the chance of any of them encountering a person concerned about the growing heresy of Europe is both reasonable and timely, far more probable than one of the scribes having accidentally discovered a secreted sect of adherents to reincarnation in Iceland or the rest of Scandinavia. And, had such a group been discovered it could have just as easily been a band of Cathars running before the military.

The existing evidence left by heathens themselves would indicate that the heathen worldview supported a belief of life continuing on in the gravemound and that the placement of graves in relationship to communities and the record of traditions revolving around dealing with the dead indicates that for Germanic peoples the relationship between the living and the dead continued for very long periods of time in comparison to the neighboring Baltic and Finno-Ugric peoples. Thomas DuBois has speculated that this extended relationship, lasting in many cases over several generations, between the Germanic peoples and their ancestors and the close proximity of graveyards to Germanic communities was of concern to some of the Finno-Ugric peoples and may possibly have been a source of the *Stallo* and *Hiisi* tales where a revenant of Germanic extraction could and would attack, maim, or kill those who were viewed as enemies of the Germanic way of life. These demons from the heathen gravemounds were armed with iron teeth, a desire for human flesh and resided in the the gravemounds (which only the Germanic folk were prone to erect).²⁵

The interplay between Christianity and heathenry began long before the actual Conversion, dated 1000 CE in Iceland.

"Christian notions of burial—stikingly divergent [from the heathen] in a number of ways—began to make inroads into the practices of Nordic pagans long before Christianization per se, altering age-old but variable traditions of the the disposal of the dead. Concepts of afterlife underwent transformations as well, with pagan communities adjusting their beliefs in line with Christian doctrines prior to the real conversion to the new faith. It is likely that Christian rites and beliefs affected traditions like the ship burial and Ragnarök, which rise in prominence during the late pagan era. Later, Christians of the thirteenth century still retained cultural memories of pre-Christian burial rites and beliefs, casting these in a light of continental demonology and saints' legends. This complex set of transformations underscores the interrelation of pagan and Christian ideas during the Viking Age and the immense complexity of the process of

²⁵DuBois, Thomas *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*, 1999, (University of Pennsylvania Press; Philadelphia, PA), pp. 84-85.

conversion in Nordic cultures.”²⁶

It is possible, that some cult practices during the heathen era *may* have sprung up and disappeared leaving behind no archeological or literary evidence. Without any such evidence, however, we are left with the conclusion that 'reincarnation' is hardly consistent with what is actually known about the worldview of the time, which was that the the soul was an inextricable part of the body residing with the individual in the gravemound, and that 'reincarnation' as an afterlife concept was imposed on the body of heathen belief, post-conversion by several hundred years, by Christian *interpreters* of heathen belief, and that these interpreters had an agenda which included making sure that Germanic heathenry could never and would never be revived especially since Christendom was engaged in a physical battle to gain and hold the spiritual highground against the remaining pagans of the Baltic areas of eastern Europe.

²⁶DuBois, Thomas *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*, 1999, (University of Pennsylvania Press; Philadelphia, PA), p. 91.