Oswald’s Tree


Cum ergo Deus omnipotens vos ad reverentissimum virum fraternum Augustinum episcopum perduxerit, dicite ei, quid diu mecum de causa Anglorum cogitans tractavi: videlicet quia fana idolorum destrui in eadem gente minime debeant; sed ipsa quae in eis sunt idola destruantur; aqua benedicta fiat, in eisdem fatis aspergatur, altaria construantur, reliquiae ponantur: quia si fana eadem bene constructa sunt, necesse est ut a cultu daemonum in obsequio veri Dei debeat commutari; ut dum gens ipsa cadem fana sua non videt destrui, de corde errorem deponat, et Deum verum cognoscens ac adorans, ad loca quae consuet, familiaribus concurrat.

So when almighty God has led you to the most reverend man our brother Bishop Augustine, tell him what I have long gone over in my mind concerning the matter of the English: that is, that the shrines of idols amongst that people should be destroyed as little as possible, but that the idols themselves that are inside them should be destroyed. Let blessed water be made and sprinkled in these shrines, let altars be constructed and relics placed there: since if the shrines are well built it is necessary that they should be converted from the worship of demons to the service of the true God, so that as long as that people do not see their very shrines being destroyed they may put out error from their hearts and in knowledge and adoration of the true God they may gather at their accustomed places more readily.

Pope Gregory to Mellitus

Oswald’s victory

Scarcely had Christianity arrived in Northumbria when King Edwin was slain, the missionary Paulinus fled back to Kent, and the kingdom disintegrated into its two parts, Deira ruled by Osric, and Bernicia by Eanfrid, both of whom apostatised on taking their thrones. These kings in their turn were destroyed by the British Cadwallon, who occupied Northumbria for a year, ruling it like a tyrant. At this point Eanfrid’s brother Oswald led a small force against the Britons at Deniseshburna, and defeated them.

Bede makes much of the apostasy of Osric and Eanfrid, and the just vengeance of Cadwallon upon them for it, contrasted with the faith of Oswald, victoriously overthrowing the foreign tyrant. This faith is illustrated graphically in what Oswald does before the battle:

Ostenditur autem usque hodie et in magna veneratione habetur locus ille, ubi venturus ad hanc pugnam Osuald signum sanctae crucis erexit, ac flexis genibus Dominum deprecatus est, ut in tanta rerum necessitate suis cultoribus caelesti succurreret auxilio. Denique fertur quia facta citato opere crucis, ac fovea praeparata in qua statui deberet, ipse fide fervens hanc arripuerit, ac foveae imposuerit, atque utraque manu erectam tenuerit, donec adgesto a militibus pulvere terrae figeretur.

That place is shown even today and is held in great reverence where, when about to enter this battle, Oswald erected the sign of the holy cross, and on bended knees besought God to succour his worshippers with heavenly aid in such a straight. Then, it is said, once the cross was made by hurried labour, and a hole made ready to stand it in, Oswald with ea-

1 Cited by Bede, p. 106.
2 The following three citations are from Bede, pp. 214–16.
The prince then calls upon his men to genuflect and beseech God to protect them from the savage enemy, 

scit enim ipse quia iusta pro salute gentis nostrae bella suscepimus (“for he knows that we have undertaken a just war for the salvation of our people”). The victory is won, and ever since, as a sign and memorial of the king’s faith, innumerable miracles have been worked with the wood of the cross, which, dipped in water, will restore both man and beast.

Bede tells us a little about the place itself:

Vocatur locus ille lingua Anglorum Hefenfelth, quod dici potest Latinè Caelistis Campus, quod certo utique praesagio futurorum antiquitus nomen accepit significans nimirum quod ibidem caeleste erigendum tropæum, caelestis inchoanda victoria, caelestia usque hodie forent [151] miracula celebranda. Est autem locus iuxta merum illum, ad aquilonem, quo Romani quondam ob arrendos barbarorum impetus, totam a mari ad mare praecinxerent Brittaniam.

That place is called in English Hefenfelth, which could be expressed in Latin as Caelistis Campus (heavenly field), a name it received in ancient times as a sure presaging of future events, signifying that in that same place a heavenly memorial would be raised, a heavenly victory would begin, and heavenly miracles would be celebrated to this day. The place is beside that wall, to its north, where once the Romans sealed off the whole of Britain from sea to sea against the attacks of the barbarians.

The monks of Hexham celebrate the anniversary of Oswald’s death by coming every year to this spot, and celebrating a vigil and mass. No doubt echoing his Hexham informants, Bede declares that the custom is

Nec immerto, quia nullum, ut comperimus, fidei Christianae signum, nulla ecclesia, nullum altare in tota Berniciorum gente erectum est, priusquam hoc sacrae crucis vexillum novus militae ductor, dictante fidei devotione, contra hostem immanissimum puggnatum est.

Not without good cause, since, as we have learnt, no sign of the Christian faith, no church, no altar had been raised in the whole of Bernicia before the new leader of the army, egged on by devotion to his faith, set up this standard of the holy cross on the eve of battle against the monstrous enemy.

The purposes of the account

At least three layers of manipulation of the events are evident: in the first place, Bede has his particular reasons for including the story; behind this lie the intentions of the Hexham monks, who are undoubtedly Bede’s main informants; and there is the question of what Oswald himself was attempting to do.

A necessary assumption on which to base any investigation — given the absence of any independent evidence — is that Bede’s account is, in its essentials, reliably accurate. At the same time, it is clear that Bede is selective in what he recounts: it must not be forgotten that he is writing an ecclesiastical history.

As Wallace-Hadrill (1988, 89) comments, Bede’s account places Oswald’s success in a historical tradition of royal victories beginning with [152] Constantine and including Clovis. Bede may well have been inspired by the cross at his own church of Jarrow (and still to be seen there), inscribed with the words taken from Rufinus’s version of Eusebius, commemorating Constantine’s victory: in hoc singuli signo vita redditur mundo (“in this unique sign life is returned to the world”). Oswald’s victory represents for Bede a victory over resurgent paganism (and heresy, Cadwallon being a British Christian), and the associated disorder of society (marked for example in the disintegration of the kingdom). All the miracles associated with Oswald are, ultimately, confirmation that God is working through his chosen English subjects to establish an ecclesiastical imperium Romanum here. More specifically, Wallace-Hadrill (1971, 86–7) points out that “the personal virtues that Bede emphasises are more technical than they look; they correspond to the requirements of the Church: protection, endowment, largesse, the prosecution of Christian warfare, and, above all, obedience to its teaching.”
In essence the aims of the Hexham community may have been similar, if perhaps less lofty. The monks’ cult, as reported by Bede, is markedly local and personal in character: they are not concerned with the history of the Church in Deira, for example. For them, Oswald’s victory marks the beginning of Christianity in their land.

My main concern is to consider what Oswald himself may have been aiming at by his actions. His Christian credentials are beyond doubt; he may even have seen himself as a new Constantine (rather than this being merely Bede’s emphasis). What of his followers? Some of these would have come with him from Scotland, and thus have been Christian — though how deeply is open to question, in view of Oswald’s brother Eanfrid’s immediate apostasy on reaching his homeland: we are left with an impression of Christianity assumed at the Scottish court, at least by some, for expediency. Such of his army as came from Bernicia (presumably most of it) are even less likely to have had a firm commitment to the new faith. In setting up a cross and praying for victory in front of it before the battle, Oswald is performing an act of Christian propaganda with a great risk attached, in terms of its all-important reception by his followers. Is it not likely that Oswald shared Pope Gregory’s wisdom, and adapted a pagan rite to Christian use? Was the troops’ enthusiasm fired not so much by pure Christian devotion focused on the novelty of seeing a cross of victory raised before battle, as by beholding a familiar pagan rite imbued with new spiritual power through the ingenuity of their leader?

Any motivation in Oswald’s actions that would link him with paganism is eschewed by Bede. As Wallace-Hadrill notes (1988, xx–xxi), Bede the ecclesiastical historian conceived of the content of paganism unseriously: yet it is right that we should know at least that Germanic paganism were warband-religions and kin-religions, whereas Christianity was neither; and moreover, that pagan cultus as practised by warriors shared ethical concepts with the warrior’s fighting-creed, from which indeed the Church borrowed some meaning-laden words when it faced the task of expressing Christian doctrine in the vernacular. Coifi’s naïve equation of pagan honour and success with Christian salvation was the reaction of a high priest whose congregation was a royal court of warriors.

This observation makes it all the more probable that Oswald would exploit any warrior-based cultus his followers are likely to have adhered to, no doubt diverting it into serving his Christian purpose. At this point it is worth bearing in mind that paganism never existed as a codified set of beliefs among any of the Germanic peoples. It was there to be used, for poetical purposes (as, for example, in many of the poems of the Norse Edda), or for political (as in the tenth-century Norwegian þórsdrápa, a political allegory using a myth of Þórr to map the conquests of regions of Norway). It was open to Oswald to adapt a traditional myth to his particular situation and purpose.

[154]Heavenfield

It may or may not have been chance that Oswald found himself in a place named, uniquely, “Heavenfield”: but he made use of the fact. Bede reveals that the name was ancient. It was therefore pagan, unconnected with the Christian heaven in its origins. The heavenly field is suggestive of several mythological plains, both in Old English and Old Norse; several words designating, broadly, “plain” may be mentioned: in OE there is feld, “open country”, and wang “meadowland, an open field”; in ON there is vangr “meadow, homefield” (cognate with OE wang), vøllr (pl. vellir) “meadow, paddock, plain”, and akr (OE æcer) “cultivated field”.

3 On þórsdrápa as a political allegory, see Davidson 1983, 555–61.
4 According to Leland (1906–10, V:61) “There is a fame that Oswald wan the batelle at Halydene a 2. myles est from S. Oswaldes Asche. And that Haliden is it that Bede caliith Hevenfeld. And men there aboute yet finde smaule wod crossis in the grounde”. The village is now called Hallington; the meaning is “holy vale”, perpetuating the sacred associations. Hallington is a couple of miles north of the Wall. It is not clear precisely how Leland’s account is to be accommodated to Bede’s, since Bede says the battle took place at Denisesburna, not at Heavenfield itself.
5 I make use of Smith 1970 for the meaning of the English terms as they occur in place names. See Straubergs 1957, esp. 71–2, on plains as part of the topography of the Otherworld.
Paradise was referred to by Ulfilas in Gothic as waggs, and by the Anglo-Saxons as neornuawang, a word of obscure, but not ostensibly Christian, origin; in Beowulf 93 God created the world as a white-beorhtne wang “beautiful meadow”; the Phoenix refers to the paradise in which the phoenix lived as a wang; the bird dwelt on a tree on this plain.9

In the Edda is mentioned Himinvangar “Heaven Meadows” (Hélögakviða Hundingsbuna I:15).10 adding a piece of mythological scenery to a heroic poem; in Lokasenna 51 Skaði mentions her vé “sanctuaries” and vangar “meadows” together in an alliterating phrase suggesting a traditional association between plains and the dwellings of the gods.

Glasisvellir (or Gleysisvellir) is the name of a paradise in Norse;7 the name apparently means “the plains of Glasir”: the glowing buds (glóbarr) of Glasir, “the Gleaming”, are mentioned in the (possibly) 10th century Bjarkamál (Skjaldedigtning B:1:170) as a kenning for “gold”, and Snorri says Glasir is a golden-leaved lundr (which could mean either grove or tree) growing before Valhõll.8

The concept of a völfr that renews itself may have been made specific in Vpluspí in the form of Iðavöllr “Plain of Industry/Perpetual Return”,9 where at the beginning of the world the gods meet and engage in forging wealth, and where at the start of the new world (at the end of the poem) the gods meet again to dœma, discuss, pass judgement on the old world. The poet seems to have adapted a tradition of a divine plain to serve his literary purpose — a main theme of the poem is the end and renewal of the world. If Iðavöllr is the poet’s invention then this confirms the conventionality of the belief in the “plain” for living beings.

Among men the þing “assembly” was conventionally held on a plain, commemorated in names such as Pingvellir (Iceland), Tyne (Man) and Tingwall (Shetland).

In Grimmismål 30 the place where the gods dœma (meet for council) — most naturally conceived as taking place on a völfr like the þing [194] among men — is said to be at the world-tree Yggdrasill;9 it appears the world-tree, judgement and plain may well have formed a traditional association.

The concept of fertile renewal is expressed through the use of akr “corn-field” in mythological names. Thus the home of the goddess Iðunn, who renews the gods’ youth, is Brunnakr “spring/well corn-field” (Skjaldedigtning B:1:16). Óðinsakr “the corn-field of the undead” is found in two thirteenth century Icelandic sagas as a name of a paradise;11 it is also found in place names from the pagan period, though it is not possible to specify how it was conceived at that time.12

Evidence from non-Germanic sources confirms the (sometimes tenuous) indications that in Germanic paganism there was a concept of a heavenly plain, associated with one or more trees. Thus the world tree is often stated to grow in the midst of a great meadow, e.g. a Modrin poem (recorded in recent years) begins “A very great, a great meadow! In the meadow a great hillock, on the hillock an apple tree. Its roots fill the whole earth, its branches fill all heaven, it has covered the sun with its leaves” (Paasonen

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9 The poem is based on a Latin work of Lactantius, De A xe Phoenice; the Latin mentions the plain only twice (as planities, then as campi), whereas the wang or feld is frequently brought to the reader’s attention by the Old English poet, perhaps indicating a preoccupation with (originally pagan) connotations of the supernatural plain.

10 See Tolkien 1960, 84–6, for a survey of sources; Saxo gives the most information.

11 See Tolkien 1960, 84–6, for a survey of sources; Saxo gives the most information.

12 De Vries 1956–7, §519. In Saxo, the form of the name is Undensakre “the underworld field”; Much (1904, 70–1) compares this with the German folk tradition, traceable to the fourteenth century, of the Untersberg.
1938, 31). Likewise the Yakut tree of life, which heals and rejuvenates man and beast, grows in a meadow beside the dwelling of the first man; the goddess of the tree reveals his fate to him, paralleling the Norse connexion of the tree with judgement and fate (Böhtlingk 1964, 82).

The tree of victory

The physical emphasis is noticeable in Oswald’s deed of raising the cross: he does not act on a dream, like Constantine, but sets up a tangible cross, made of wood, for all to see and touch. Oswald is concurring with — if not in fact appealing to — the pagan understanding of things as having power in themselves.14

In 772, Charlemagne undertook a campaign in Germany and razed a Saxon sanctuary; the event is recorded in several chronicles, which recount that Charlemagne attacked the fortified site of Eresburg, and destroyed the idol called Irminsul.15

Rudolph of Fulda talks of the worship of Irminsul:16

Frodonis arboribus fontibusque venerationem exhibebant. Truncum quoque ligni non parvae magnitudinis in altum erectum sub divo colebant, patria eum lingua Irminsul appellantes, quod latine dicitur universalis columna, quasi sustinens omnia.

They gave veneration to leafy trees and to springs. Also they worshipped a trunk of wood of no small size raised up high under the sky, calling it Irminsul in their own tongue, which in Latin is “universalis columna” (universal column), as if sustaining everything.

The growth of the world tree in a meadow does not preclude it from growing on a hill, as the Mordvin text cited above shows: it is also possible that variant traditions of the site of the tree could exist within one area. That the vacillation between field and mountain may reflect an ancient tradition is perhaps suggested by the occurrence of the Norse Undersakre beside the German Untersberg (see note 12). The rarity of “heaven” in Germanic names may suggest a connexion between Heavenfield and the “Heaven Mountains” of Norse myth (with the variation of field/mountain as noted); given the association of the Heaven Mountains with the world tree, this would confirm the connexion too between Heavenfield and the world tree.

13 In Norse, the god Heimdallr, whose name apparently means “world tree” (heimr can mean either “home” or “world” — Heimdallr shares characteristics of guardianship with the Scandinavian “guardian tree” of the home, and is also the guardian of the realm of the gods: see Pipping 1925, 7-9, and Tolley 1993, 326-9) and who may be identified as the world tree (in a personal form: see Pipping 1925, 7-49 and 1926, 24-64, 107-24, and Tolley 1993, ch. 4 §5), lives at Himinbjörg “Heaven Mountains” (Grimnismál 13). The world mountain, which Himinbjörg probably represents, is a well-recognised feature of many mythologies (though the idea is not traceable in Old English), where it is often stated to be the place where the world tree grows; for example, the Abakan Tatars believed a seven-branched birch (representing the shaman’s tree of ascent through the worlds) to stand on an iron mountain in the middle of the world (Harva 1922, 33). There is some indication of a similar concept in Norse: apart from Heimdallr’s living at Heaven Mountains, it may be noted that the Saxon world pillar Irminsul, which has much in common with the world tree (see below), was set up on a hill, Eresburg, The evergreen ash (cf. the world ash tree Yggdrasill) growing on a mountain reported by Strelow (see below) exemplifies a tradition, surviving into Christian times, of a great sacred tree on a mountain, suggesting an origin in a concept of the world tree (Yggdrasill or an equivalent) growing in a similar position.

14 In an interesting essay, Murphy (1992, 205-20) traces the evidence for this idea in the Old Saxon Heliand, noting for example how the word mahtig “mighty” must be understood as “magic, having innate power”, a concept derived from paganism, yet applied by the poet to the most Christian of objects, the bread at the Last Supper.


16 Rudolph of Fulda, Translatio Sancti Alexandri, MGH SS II:676.
Hic arripiens signum, quod apud eos habebatur sacrum, leonis atque draconis et desuper aquilae volantis insignitum effigie, quo ostentaret fortitudinis atque prudentiae et earum rerum efficaciam, et motu corporis animi constantiam declarans ait . . .

Seizing a standard, which was held sacred among them, marked with an image of a lion and a dragon and of an eagle flying down from above to show the effect of strength and wisdom and such matters, and demonstrating by the movement of his body the constancy of his mind, he said . . .

He then gives a speech which stirs the Saxons into action, and after a bloody night battle they celebrate:

Mane autem facto ad orientalem portam ponunt aquilam, aramque victoriae construentes secundum errorem paternum sacra sua propria veneratione venerati sunt: nomine Martem, effigie columnarum imitantes Herculem, loco Solem, quem Graeci appellant Apollinem. Ex hoc appareat aetatem illorum utcumque probabilem, qui Saxones originem duxisse putant de Graecis, quia Hirmin vel Hermis Graece Mars dicitur; quod vocabulo ad laudem vel ad vituperationem usque hodie etiam ignorantes utimur.

When morning came they placed the eagle-standard at the eastern gate, and constructing an altar to victory they worshipped their own holy things with due veneration, following the error of their fathers: they imitate Mars by the name they give it, Hercules by the pillar form it has, and the sun, whom the Greeks call Apollo, by its location. From this it is clear that the supposition is likely of those who trace the origin of the Saxons to the Greeks, since Hirmin or Hermes is the name of Mars in Greek; in our ignorance we use this word to this day for praising or cursing.

From these accounts I would conclude that *Irminsul* was the name of a sacred column, in the form of a large trunk of wood; the only locatable *Irminsul* was worshipped on a hilltop (Eresburg), but an *ad hoc* *Irminsul* might be raised after a battle.

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17 Leaving aside weaknesses in Widukind’s language, the account may be described as garbled in that it is not clear what *sacra sua* refers to exactly — I take it to be the Irminsul itself, which Widukind immediately goes on to describe, without however naming it directly: the name is to be inferred from the incorrect identification of Hirmin with Hermes (which is followed by the further incorrect identification of Hermes with Mars — an identification which however probably indicates that a Germanic war god was worshipped in this case). Widukind also fails to clarify the relationship between the eagle-standard and the Irminsul.

18 The name has two possible interpretations, both of which would have been apparent to contemporaries:
   a. “Great column” — “universalis columna”, as Rudolph puts it, which in view of the Lappish analogues (see below) implies a world-sustaining column. No association with any specific god is implied.
   b. “Column of Irmin”. *Irmin* — or an earlier form of the word — was one of the three sons of “Man” (*Mannus*), the ancestral founders of the Germanic peoples: this is to be inferred from Tacitus’ name of the *Hermiones* as one of these three divisions (*Germania* ch. 2).

The Saxons may have looked upon the *Irminsul* not merely as the “universal column”, but also as the embodiment of their demi-god ancestor; compare how the first man in Norse is called *Ask* “Ash”, probably to identify him as a branch/twig of the world ash tree, with which Irminsul, as a representative “world pillar”, is to be associated. Compare also Jordanes’ statement (76:13) that the Goths worshipped their ancestors and called them *Anses* (cognate with ON *asir* “gods”: it is possible that “god” (Germanic *ansaz*) may be derived from “beam” (Germanic *ansaz*: Lorenz 1964, 95, see de Vries 1977, s.v. *áss* for the etymologies). The implication is that of house pillars hypostatised (see de Vries 1956–57, §499); de Vries suggests that *ansaz* derives from the Indo-European root meaning “breath” (de Vries 1977, s.v. *áss* 1). Coomaraswamy (1940, 58–9) notes how in Indian belief breath is equated with the “kingpost”, i.e. the main post of a house which represented the *axis mundi*: this suggests that the Germanic evidence relates to an ancient Indo-European heritage of belief.

19 Suggesting a linked concept of the world mountain. The site of this *Irminsul* is known relatively accurately: Löwe (1941, 3) locates it at Peterskirche on the Obermansberg. Müller (1975, 93 n. 14) adduces evidence that there was once an *Irminsul* near Hildesheim at the village Irmenseul.
The aquila seized by the warrior before battle, and set up in the east afterwards, parallels in the animals depicted on it (with the exception of the lion) the Norse world tree as described in Grímnismál 32, where an eagle sits on its top, and a dragon Níðhöggr lurks at its base. The Anglo-Saxon standard from Sutton Hoo is endowed with a stag at its top, another animal associated in Grímnismál with the world tree. The representations of the world tree from Siberia, e.g. the Dolgan “pillars”, adorned with eagles on their top (Harva 1922, 16), are sometimes staffs rather than full-scale trees. In view of the features of the aquila which link it with the world support represented also by the Irminsul, it is conceivable that the standard was set up as part of the column itself, and that it constitutes one of the sacra worshipped on this occasion (it is described as sacrum on its first appearance).

The tree as universal sustainer

In that Irminsul “sustained everything” it clearly represented the world support; we may compare the pillars of the Lapps, described in the eighteenth century, for example in the following account by Jens Kildal:

> Der offeres af agudiske lapper, aarlig, hvert höst, en ox af reyn, eller andet fæe, til Maylmenraden fordj, at saasom hand er lappernes överste gud, hand da ikke skal lode verden nedefalde, og at hand skal give dem lykke ved verden nedfalde, og at hand skal et opstytte verden med, hvilken stytte skal være over-smurt med den oxes blod, som bliver ham ofret.

Annually, every autumn, there is sacrificed by pagan Lapps a reindeer ox, or another animal, to Maylmenraden [World Ruler], so that, since he is the Lapps’ highest god, he should not let the world collapse, and so that he should give them luck with the reindeer; and at the sacrificial altar was set up in his honour a stick with a cleft in the end, called Maylmen stytto [world prop], with which he is to support the world. This stick is to be smeared over with the ox’s blood that is sacrificed to him.

Other accounts speak of a tree rather than a pillar as being involved in the sacrifice to the same world-supporting god (for example, S. Kildal 1807, 473) indicating that world pillar and world tree were largely interchangeable manifestations of the mythological world support. This is clear too from the way the world support is represented: e.g. the Altaic shaman ascends to heaven via a notched birch tree whose lower branches have been removed, making it resemble a pillar (Harva 1922, 31); the Dolgans used a pillar in their rituals, but this pillar was sometimes represented by a branched tree (Harva 1922, 33; 1933, 30–2); the cosmic aspects of the pillar are clear — it is called tüspät turū “the never collapsing pillar”, [163] and its prototype stands before the dwelling of the High God; it culminated in a covering, representing the sky (Harva 1922, 15), and on the covering sits an eagle.

The Ostyaks set up a pillar, representative of the world pillar, in their villages, and prayed to it thus:

Also to be linked with the Irminsul are the Jupiter pillars, erected in the first couple of centuries AD in the Roman occupied area of Germany. Hertlein (1910, 70) considered these to represent Germanic beliefs in their carvings, but Müller (1975, esp. 49) has shown that they are in fact Gallic, and are to regarded as honouring the god Tarannis, the god of thunder (cf. the association of Þórr, the god of thunder, with the “high-seat pillars”, see below. Whilst a Germanic origin is not now accepted, the Germanic tribes living in this border area between Celts and Germans are likely to have been influenced by these cult objects. The Jupiter pillars were all demolished by the fifth century, as a result of Christian reaction against pagan worship; the Irminsul is destroyed three centuries later, but was doubtless of ancient origin.

20 Reuterskiöld 1910, 94. Compare how Heimdallr is known as Hallinskíði, the meaning of which is probably “leaning stick”, in reference to the world pillar, representations of which sometimes leant (to the east, i.e. towards the sun, or to the north, i.e. towards the North Star: Pipping 1926, 121).

21 Harva 1933, 30. Text and German translation Karjalainen 1975, 127–8. My translation is from the German: Siebenkerbiger erhabener Mann, höchster Gott, mein Vater, mein drei Seiten schützender Mann-Vater, mein drei Seiten bewachender Mann-[lieber-]-Vater; auf die von meinem Eisensäulen-Vater bewohnte heilige Erde, auf die unbe-
Seven notched elevated man, highest god, my father, my three sides protecting man-father, my three sides watching man-[dear]-father; on the earth inhabited by my iron pillar father, on the unsullied earth, at the foot of the holy tree I place a bloody animal as an animal sacrifice, I place a bloody animal [as] an animal sacrifice...

Another aspect of the pillar, as a watchful guardian, is apparent here: it assumes the same role as the guardian tree (vårdträd) of Scandinavian folk tradition, which protected the welfare of the farm or house where it grew (Olrik and Ellekilde 1926, 229–41); in some areas nearly every house had its vårdträd, usually ash, elm or linden. It was regarded as animate and in control of the welfare of the household, and offerings of milk or ale would be made to it (ibid. 231):


“O God’s spirit” they said on the farm Helle in Undalen, Vestagder, when they held out a bowl of ale to the farm’s guardian tree. “I grant you this, I give you this, my sister” they said in Sætesdalen, when they held out the cow’s first drops of milk to the guardian tree after calving.

To fell the tree brought calamity; thus a man who did so heard the tree sing one night how he too would suffer, and his whole establishment burnt down.

The temple complex at Uppsala in Sweden, overlooked by a great tree which no doubt symbolised the world tree, provides perhaps the most striking instance in Germanic paganism of sacrifice focused on a tree. Adam of Bremen (pp. 257–60) in the eleventh century describes how in the course of a nine-day festival seventy-two animals and nine men were hanged as sacrifices in the trees of the grove at the site.

As a world vårdträd guarding the life of the cosmos, the world tree is associated with fate: as mentioned above, it was at the ash tree Yggdrasill that the gods gathered each day to døma, to adjudicate on the affairs of the world. Bede (p. 135) tells how the meeting between Augustine and the British bishops took place at Augustinæs ac “Augustine’s oak”, suggesting that the idea of counsel, judgement being associated with trees was familiar to the English of Oswald’s time.² Fat is associated with the Norse tree in particular through the presence of the spring (brunnr) of the maiden [165] Urðr “Fate”, responsible for assigning men’s fates, at its foot (Völuspá 19–20). Near to Heavenfield was Denisesburna, where the battle actually took place; burna in English place names generally means “stream”, but it is cognate with, and originally of the same meaning, as Norse brunnr. Bede makes much of the fatefulness of the name Heavenfield, as presaging events that were fulfilled in the battle there; is it possible that Bede is here christianising a (to a pagan understanding) natural association of fate with a place of such a name?

In the seventeenth century Strelow recorded traditions of an evergreen ash (cf. the world ash tree Yggdrasill), purportedly historical, in his edition of Gotlandish Chronicles (Strelow 1633, 215):

Aar 1452, lod Herr I fuer Axelsen flytte it Esketrae, som stod paa Bahreiberg grønt, saa vel om Vinter som om Sommer, kaldis endnu denne Dag Bare Asken, at det skulde staa paa Viszborrig Slot, men er strax efter visznet. Oc paa samme sted formeentis stor Helligdom

² The site of this was on the border of the land of the Hwicce: hence the tree is associated with boundaries, a feature noted also with reference to Heavenfield, set beside the Wall. Wallace-Hadrill (1988, 218–19) shows that Bede’s information on the meeting derived from early-seventh-century Canterbury written sources.

De Vries (1956–7, §249) gives some instances of tree-worship among Germanic peoples, notably the oak of the Saxons of Geismar; Palm’s treatment (1948) remains the most detailed study of Germanic tree-worship written in (relatively) recent years.
at være, bleff opreist et stort Ege Kors paa Bierget, til huilcket de gjorde deris Offer, naar
deris Faær eller Fæ var bortkommen, oc strax skulde være kommet dennem tilhænde
igien.

The year 1452: Lord Ivar Axelsøn had the ash tree moved which stood on Bahребierg,23 green
just as well in winter as in summer, called to this day the Needle Ash, so that it should stand
at Visborg castle, but it withered straight after. And in the same place where there is deemed
to be great sanctity, a great oak cross was raised on the hill, to which they made their sacri-
fices when their sheep or cattle got lost, and they would come straight back to them again.

This account illustrates how a pagan cult around what appears to have been a representative world tree
can be replaced by one centring on the cross — as appears to have been engineered at Heavenfield. The
tree appears as a guardian (of flocks), and is thus to be compared with the vårdträd. The cross clearly re-
places the tree as the object of offerings. This is comparable with the offerings made to the guardian tree,
and (166) perhaps alluded to in the complex punning epithet heidvanr “used to honour” applied to Yggdra-
sill in Völsespí 27.24

The imagery of Cross as Tree (in particular Tree of Life — through Christ’s death vita redditur mundo, as
the Jarrow cross proclaims) has been a commonplace in Christian tradition from the earliest days:25 it is
certainly one that Oswald could have exploited, revealing the cross as a victorious new form of the traditional Tree of Life, known both from pagan and biblical tradition.26

Hints of an emphasis on Oswald’s association with the cross as a tree are found in place names inde-
pendent of Bede: the last battle the king fought in was at Maserfelth, traditionally identified as Oswestry,
which is to say “Oswald’s tree”, but in Welsh called Croes Oswallt “Oswald’s cross”. Leland records that
Oswald’s victory at Heavenfield took place two miles from “S. Oswaldes Asche”, which probably com-
memorates the cross raised before battle, and associates Oswald not only with a tree, but with the same
sort of tree as the Norse world ash tree Yggdrasill.

When Oswald raised his cross, I suggest he was drawing upon concepts comparable with those associ-
ated with the Irminsul (including aspects of the world tree, as discussed) — a pillar of victory, which re-
presented the sustaining axis of the world, and was a guardian of its worshippers. Just as Hathagat stirs
his fellow warriors into a frenzied and victorious attack by the use of a standard representing (it seems)
the world tree/pillar, so Oswald does the same, but using the cross, the new Tree of Life; and just as the
Saxons raised the Irminsul and worshipped at it after battle as a memorial of their victory, so Oswald’s
cross became a symbol of his victory, and a focus of a cult.

It may be inferred from Widukind’s account that an Irminsul (or a sacred symbol of it) would be raised
after a victory. In raising the cross before battle and venerating its sanctity propria veneratione, Oswald pro-
claims his faith in victory (through the power of the cross) even when it looked least likely, being accom-
panied, as Bede says, with only a small force of men: in other words, he is deliberately instilling his men
with confidence by anticipating an act that their pagan understanding would lead them to expect only
after victory.

23 That is “Needle Hill”, presumably named after the Bare Aske.
24 The word also appears to bear the meanings “used to the bright sky” and “used to the bright mead” (with reference
to the spring of mead at its foot).
25 See for example Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum vol. 2 (1954), s.v. Baum.
26 In the centuries following Oswald’s victory Northumbria burgeoned with carved crosses, many stone examples of
which survive; one of them, the Ruthwell Cross, is inscribed with a version of the great poem The Dream of the Rood,
in which a personified Cross tells its biography — and clearly identifies itself as a tree. Cramp (1965, 9) comments on
the limited iconography of the Northumbrian crosses: the mostpart by far of the decoration shows a propensity to
present the cross as the Tree of Life (see Collingwood 1927, ch. 6 on the development of the Tree of Life motif in the
carved crosses). The Christian background is undeniable: and yet the particular focus surely illustrates a predisposi-
tion derived from the pagan past.
The níðstöng

Oswald seems to have been content to confine his offering to a bloodless sacrifice of prayer before battle: not so the obdurate pagan Penda. As Penda had been in alliance with Cadwallon, whom Oswald defeated at Heavenfield, he may be assumed to have known of Oswald’s act of raising a cross. At Oswestry, Penda celebrated his victory over the Christian king by excising his hands and head, and raising them on poles (in stipitibus: Bede, pp. 250–2). This appears to be an act of the most spiteful contumely on the part of the pagan king: in Norse tradition, raising a pole with someone’s features on it — a níðstöng “pole of disgrace” — was about the greatest insult it was possible to give.27 Penda here raises a pole with not merely Oswald’s features but his actual head on it, signifying the disgrace in which he wished to cast his memory. But Penda exceeds himself: he mocks Oswald’s Christian cross by making a human sacrifice of him, offered (if we may compare the sacrifices at Uppsala) on something that would recall representations of the sustaining world tree, which the Christian king had tried to convert into the life-giving cross of Christ.

The house pillar

One of the miracles following Oswald’s death stands out as unusual, for it is not a person or an animal which is saved, but a post: a house catches fire, and is almost entirely burnt down (Bede, pp. 242–4):

Eodem tempore venit alius quidam de natione Brettonum, ut ferunt, iter faciens iuxta ipsum locum in quo praeferat erat pugna completa; et vidit unius loci spatium cetero campo viridius ac venustius: coepitque sagaci animo conicer e quod nulla esset alia causa insolitae illo loco viriditatis, nisi quia ibidem sanctior cetero exercitu vir aliquis fuisse interfectus. Tulit itaque de pulvere terrae illius secum inligans in linteo, cogitans quod futurum erat, quia ad medelam infirmantium idem pulvis proficeret; et pergens itinere suo susceps ad dominis domus, resedit et ipse cum eis ad convivium, adpendens linteolum cum pulvere quem adtulerat, et perquirentes subtilius, invenerunt quia de illo loco adsumptus erat pulvis ubi regis Osualdi sanguis fuerat effusus.

At that time there came someone else, a Briton, so they say, making his way near the very place where the foresaid battle had been brought to an end; and he saw an area in one place more green and pleasant than the rest of the field. His sharp mind began to figure out that the reason for the exceptional greenness of the place was none other than that some man, holier than the rest of the army, had been killed on that spot. Hence he took up some of the dust of that earth with him, and tied it up in a linen cloth, thinking that the dust would be an effective cure for the sick (as was to happen). Continuing his journey he came to a village at dusk, and entered a house where the villagers were dining at a feast. He was received by the masters of the house, and sat down with them at the feast: the cloth with the dust he had taken up he hung on a post of the dividing wall. As they continued to relax in feasting and drinking, and a great fire was lit in the midst, the sparks flew up aloft, and the roof of the house, which

27 Two notable examples of the raising of the níðstöng are found in Egils saga, p. 171, and Vatnsdœla saga, p. 91, which reads: Jökull skar karlshöfuð á súluendanum ok reist á rínar með öllum þeim formála, sem fyrir var sagðr. Síðan drap Jökull meri eina, ok opnuðu hana hía brjóstun á forðu á súluna ok létu hofra heim á Borg ("Jökull carved a man’s head on the end of the pole and inscribed it with runes with all the spell spoken of before. Then Jökull killed a mare, and they opened it at the breast and placed it on the post and had it turned towards home at Borg").
was built of twigs and covered in thatch, came to be filled with sudden flames. When the diners, confused with sudden panic, caught sight of this, they fled outside, not having the wherewithal to be of any use to the burning house, which was about to perish at any moment. When the house had been consumed with flames, only the post on which the wrapped up dust hung remained safe from the fire and untouched. They were much amazed when they observed this powerful effect, and upon more detailed enquiry they discovered that the dust had been taken up from the very place where the blood of King Oswald had been poured out.

The earth hung upon the post is reminiscent of a feature of the cult of the tree in Norse: Völságá 19 states that the world tree Yggdrasill is “spattered [ritually] with white mud” (ausinn hvíta auri), which no doubt reflects cult practice: it finds parallels in the rite of offering milk to the guardian tree (see above). It appears that behind Bede’s account may lie an originally pagan rite of blessing the house-post with sacred earth.

The house-post constitutes a microcosm of the world tree/pillar. Thus Hertlein links the Irminsul to the house-post found in ancient German houses:


I believe the architecture of the Germanic house has had an influence on the concept of the Irminsul. Just as the house commonly had one central column, called firstsul (“roof column”) in the Lex Baiuvariorum 10:6–7[30], and by Notker, Boethius 5 called magansul (“powerful column”), so too one imagined a similar column in the middle of the world [seen as a] home, supporting the roof of heaven.

Similarly, among the Eskimo the house pillar symbolised the world axis, as it did among the Indians (called by them the “kingpost”). A coincidence of house pillars and pillars dedicated to the thunder god occurs in Norse in the form of the ondegissúlur “high seat posts”.

The ondegissúlur were carved wooden posts forming the supports of the high seats; tradition relating to the time of the Icelandic settlement asserts that the Norsemen took them from their homes when they moved, and, as they neared the land they were to settle, they threw the posts overboard. The new house would be built where the pillars were found. The most extensive account occurs in Eyrbyggja saga pp. 7–8, which claims that the posts were also used in temples: on one of the posts an image of Þórr was carved, and reginnaglar “god nails” were also found in the posts. The area of the temple marked by the posts was sanctuary, indicating a protective role of the god manifested through the pillars.[30] [171]

28 The stress upon the piling up of the earth about the base of the cross at Heavenfield in Bede’s account is also notable — but of course may be solely Bede’s colouring, rather than a reflection of pagan practice.
29 Hertlein 1910, 75. Graff (1834–42, s.vv.) glosses first- or firstsul as “Hauptsäule” and magansul as “Kraftsäule”; first is “culmen, summitas montis”, the top, ridge, roof, ceiling of a chamber.
30 MGH Leges III:308.
31 Eliade 1972, 261; Coomaraswamy 1940, 58–9. Also comparable is the Norse barnstokkr “child stock”, a tree growing in the midst of (and it seems supporting) the hall of the Völsungar (Völsungasaga ch. 2).
32 The reginnaglar (mentioned also in Þórarinn loftunga’s Glælognskviða st. 10, c. 1032: Skjaldedigtning B:I:300–1) are remembered as an ancient part of the pagan hall-pillar traditions, but the saga writer gives no indication that he understands their purpose, other than conceiving them to be in some sense “divine”. They are most convincingly to be connected with the sliver of whetstone which Þórr bore in his forehead, a chip from the weapon of the giant Hrungrnir, which shattered in combat with the god (Haustlõng 19–20: Skjaldedigtning B:I:18, where the whetstone is described as “red”, suggesting a link with fire; the myth is also recounted in Snorra Edda 103). Schefferus (1673, 105), quoting the words of an anonymous authority, describes an image of “Thor” among the Lapps: this refers to the Lappish god of thunder Horagalles, whose name — and no doubt characteristics — derives from ON Þórr karl: afgudabelætens hufrud [sic] sla to en slaonagel eller spic och ett styke flintsten, thermed Tor skall sla slao eld (“they strike into the idol’s head a striking nail or spike and a piece of flint, so that Thor shall strike fire with it”). Striking fire from the
The mythological landscape

It appears that — whether by chance or (more likely) by design — the setting of Oswald’s victorious battle mirrors a mythological landscape focused on the world tree/pillar, a symbol of support, sustenance and guardianship which he deliberately replaces with the cross. The site named Heavenfield recalls the plain (or perhaps, in varying traditions, the mountain) where the great tree grew; the Wall places the battle on a boundary, just as Heimdallr, the personal realisation of the tree, lives at Heavenfells “at the edge of heaven”, and guards the realm of the gods against the giants who will attack as the world draws to an end.

head of “Thor” may be compared with the Finnish belief that fire originated on the summit of the world mountain (a variant of the world pillar) (cited in Harva 1922, 43):

| Miss' on tulla tuuteitutu | Where was fire rocked, |
| vaapitetut valkeata? | the white one cradled? |
| Tuolla taivahan navalla, | There at the navel of heaven, |
| kuulan vuoren kukkulaalla. | on the peak of the famous mountain. |

Fire — connected with lightning (and hence with the god of thunder) — originating in a spike in the head of the Lappish Thor, and in Finnish belief at the summit of the world mountain, suggests that the spike in Þórr’s forehead may be identifiable mythologically with the North Star at the tip of the world pillar, itself hypostatised in the god Þórr. (The north star is called in Lappish bohinael “north nail”; other names include veraldin tšuold “world pillar” or almetsuolda “heaven pillar”; tšuold is defined by Lindahl and Öhring (1780, s.v. tjuold) thus: “tjuold, tjuolda, pole, pole. Polar star, cynosura, North Star. So called, because it remains immobile and fixed. Wäralden tjuold, pole or axis of the world.” Similarly, in Estonian, the north star is called “nail of the north” (põhja nael); Harva (1922, 10) notes that the same nomenclature must previously have existed among the Finns, since Lappish bohinael is borrowed from Finnish; he also notes the Lappish belief that if this nail gave way the sky would collapse. A similar concept is revealed in the names of the North Star found elsewhere in Siberia. The Samoyeds called it “nail of heaven” ; the Koryak call it “nail star”; the Chukchi “nail star” or “pole stuck star”).

Given on the one hand the parallels between the ondgvegissúlur and the house-post in Bede’s account, and on the other Þórr’s mastery of fire, it is possible that the conflagration of the house in Bede reflects a supposed act of the world-pillar guardian of the post, though the motivation for the deed would remain obscure (in other Þórr’s mastery of fire, it is possible that the conflagration of the house in Bede reflects a supposed act of the “nail star”; the Chukchi “nail star” or “pole stuck star”).

The couple are said in Vaffríðningsmál 45 to conceal themselves in “Hoddmímir’s holt (tree/wood)”, and live there on morning dew. On the identification of Hoddmímir, see Dronke 1992, 668 and 670 n. 53, and Tolley 1990, 331-3: he appears to overlap with, or be identical to, Heimdallr, the god who is the world tree. The survival in the tree takes place, according to Vaffríðningsmál, over the fimbulvetr “mighty winter” at the end of the world, but the poem goes on to mention Surtr’s fire as marking the end of the world (cf. Völuspa 50, where Surtr comes from the south with fire, and 54 leikr hár hitt við himin síðan “heat tosses high against heaven itself”); the couple must therefore survive this conflagration too in their tree. Of the world tree Mimameiðr in Fjölsvinsmal it is said that fire will not be its downfall.
the site of Heavenfield is associated — by Bede, but also probably in pagan tradition — with *praesagia*, fateful foretellings, which find their fulfilment in this divinely ordained victory; in Norse tradition fate is associated specifically with a spring of Urðr, and Oswald won his battle at the stream of Denis (Denisesburna) nearby Heavenfield.

I have attempted to illustrate some of the possible interplay between traditional pagan ideas and the Christianity that Oswald and some of his followers were committed to. Bede writes a hundred years after the events, at a time when Christianity was far more deeply established and when, it seems, paganism could more readily simply be ignored. But the interweaving of paganism and Christianity in the early days of the conversion must have been more complex than Bede indicates; I have tried to trace some of the ways of thought of those brought up in paganism that Oswald may have exploited in his moves to bring Christianity into the hearts of his people.

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It is possible — but there is little supporting evidence — that Oswald exploited these apocalyptic overtones of the mythological landscape (we might also compare the battle, as a fulfilment of *praesagia*, with the contest at the end of the world which forms the fulfilment of the ዊጽ ለተጠራ ዋጋት ከጠር ("unravelling fate" of the gods in Norse); as noted, an apocalyptic theme is apparent in the miracle of the house-post.

The siting of Himinbjorg "at the end of heaven" is stated only by Snorri, but the motif of boundaries recurs in connexion with Heimdallr, and Snorri's detail may be accepted as a genuine tradition (see Tolley 1993, 334–6).
Bibliography

Abbreviations

MGH SS: Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores


Annales Einhardi: in MGH SS I.

Annales Fuldenses: in MGH SS I.

Annales Laurissenses Maiores: in MGH SS I.

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Tolkien, C.: see Hervarar Saga.


