

ABSTRACT

Prevailing scholarly consensus is that the symbols, themes, and presentation of dreams in the Old Norse sagas are derived from medieval Christian culture in general and from the *Somniale Danielis*, a medieval symbolic dreambook, in particular. My thesis is that Norse dreams are not derivative from this work, but are reflective of a separate oneirocritic tradition that is rooted in pre-Christian Scandinavian pagan mythological imagery.

Setting the historical context of my study, I discuss issues in Scandinavian paganism and the conversion and early Church history of Iceland. Setting the textual context, I discuss issues in the use of the sagas for literary anthropology and their historical reliability. Setting the theoretical context, I discuss the various ways that dreams were used, understood, and interpreted in the Middle Ages.

My main focus is on the classic family sagas of the Icelanders, thirteenth-century accounts of tenth-century ancestors in pre-conversion times. I endeavor to give the dreams in this corpus a comprehensive and systematic treatment. Categories I discuss include: dreams in which separable souls appear in the form of animal doubles, dreams of pagan goddesses and gods, Christian dreams, and methods of dream incubation. I try to extract a Norse dream theory from this representation of dreaming, and make a listing in dreambook form of all the general dream symbols found in these texts.

I compare this list with a recently discovered Old Norse version of the *Somniale Danielis* and find that they have almost nothing in common. Neither do elements of general medieval dream theory appear in these dreams, which do in fact reflect a different oneirocritic system. Comparing these classic saga dreams with those in other classes of sagas, I find that elements of the separate Norse dream theory are reflected in the contemporary and legendary sagas as well, but that the dreams in the kings', bishops', and knights' sagas are indeed derived from continental Christian culture.

Concluding, I position the study of dreams within the history of religions and suggest ways in which such study can broaden a general understanding of the basic human phenomenon of dreaming.