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Church History and Archaeology on Holy Places in the Netherlands

Gert van Klinken

Compared to the Middle East, holy places in the Netherlands tend to be comparatively young. Quite a lot of local deities and shrines are known from the Roman era, but none of these cults survived the Christian advance. Even where the plot of a *fanum* (sanctuary) was actually taken over, as in Elst (Gelderland), only the church would matter. Paganism seemed to have left the landscape. Pre-Christian cults left precious few traces, until Roman documents were retrieved during the Renaissance era.¹ Only in the 20th century would their spiritual presence (numen) in the landscape be rediscovered by the wider public, due to the efforts of archaeology. The rebuilding of Nehalennia's temple at Colijnsplaat, where it is common to find floral offerings nowadays, exemplifies the trend.²

Carolingian holy places, from the 8th century, were inspired by Middle European and Mediterranean prototypes. Popular saints, such as the Frankish St. Martin of Tours, came from abroad. Holy places that sprung up around the memory of these men and women (and not necessarily at places they would have known during their lifetime) showed that an imported religion could successfully adapt to local needs and circumstances. Local cults in the Netherlands grew in number during the later Middle Ages—and apparently also in importance. The miracle of the sacrament of Amsterdam (1345) was ruthlessly exploited by magistrates. This mingling of commerce and holiness worried the *Devotio Moderna* movement.³ A speedy abolition of holy places followed during the Reformation era. Protestants characteristically believed that any place, however humble, may become a receptacle of the light emanating from the divine word. Bible studies and homiletics in church became far more important than concepts of sacred space. Holy places, as foci for multi-religious and

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- 1 Erich Heller and Manfred Furhmann, *P. Cornelius Tacitus: Annalen: Lateinisch und Deutsch* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997).
 - 2 P. Stuart and J. Bogaers, *Nehalennia: Römische Steindenkmäler aus der Oosterschelde bei Colijnsplaat*, 2 vols. (Leiden: National Museum of Antiquities, 2001).
 - 3 Thomas a Kempis, *De imitatione Christi* 1.22. Edition in *Libri Quatuor Auctore Ven. Thoma Hemerken a Kempis* (Haarlem: Gottmer, 1949), 18.

ideological confrontation, had to await their revival until the modern era, after the separation of church and state. The Kingdom of the Netherlands (1814) elevated toponyms like Waterloo to emblems of national pride. Emancipatory movements within a modernising national state followed a similar track. The Roman Catholics were finally allowed to again have access to their former holy places, such as Heiloo.⁴ It was even possible to invent medieval traditions, as in Hasselt⁵—where a suitable placing on the map (as a well-placed meeting point of Roman Catholics from Gelderland, Overijssel and Frisia [Fryslân]) outbid any considerations of historical accuracy. An emerging Calvinist cult in Den Briel (victory of the Sea Beggars in 1572) sat uncomfortably close to the Roman Catholic cult of the clergy that had been hanged by those same Sea Beggars.

1 Secularisation

It would be a misconception to suppose that these holy places represented a distant past. Quite the contrary: most of them owed their existence to contemporary history, especially during the later decades of the 20th century. The staggering number of sites related to the memory of the Second World War surpasses any preceding presence of “holy places” not only by visual impact, but also by the number of visitors. The Netherlands went through a speedy process of secularisation. Membership of a religious community was no longer standard. Of those who still consider themselves religious in the 21st century, a substantial percentage no longer belong to the three main traditional denominations (Roman Catholicism, Protestantism or Judaism), but either to Islam or to evangelical communities from Africa or Asia.

If we define holiness as a shared experience of where we come from and where we might be going,⁶ it is clear that most of the historical churches and synagogues in the Netherlands can no longer hope to fulfil these aims, at least not at the level of the national population. If not here, where then? Where do we find places that claim to offer holiness, defined as common experience and common expectation for the future, that can be discussed by members of Dutch society, irrespective of their specific backgrounds? Monuments

4 Marijke Mijboer, Peter Louwerse, Anton Sinke, and Marius van den Berg, *Wandelen langs heilige plaatsen: Dagtochten naar bedevaartsoorden in Nederland* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2008).

5 Willem Frijhoff, “Le pèlerinage dans la vie religieuse des Pays-Bas, forme de continuité religieuse: L'exemple du Lieu-Saint de Hasselt (Ov)” (MA Thesis, Paris University, 1970).

6 Karsten Wentink, *Ceci n'est pas une hache: Neolithic Depositions in the Northern Netherlands* (Leiden: Sidestone 2006).

relating to the Second World War may shed light on this. Even more important are the extensive efforts to cultivate the pre-literary (“prehistorical”) elements in Dutch public space, and to link them to the perception of holiness in the national education system. Commemorations of the Second World War, on the evening of the 4th of May, have become a well-established feature of civil life. The celebrations are orchestrated by the secular authorities, though representatives of religious, political and ethnic subdivisions are encouraged to participate. However, whether this implies shared experience is not always clear. Archaeology offers an attractive alternative, a neutral ground for discussion about what religion is and is not. A similar trend is apparent in the United Kingdom.⁷

The extent to which holy places add to the dynamics of the social landscape in the Netherlands is not always clear. Knowledgeable appropriation of the traditions that are being represented at these sites, especially in their written forms, is limited to select (and dwindling) groups. The striking absence of major confrontations between Roman Catholics and Calvinists after 1960 may be connected to this trend. Whereas the church of the Heilige Stede (“Holy Site”) in Amsterdam prompted vitriolic confrontations between Calvinists and Roman Catholics even in the early 20th century (the Calvinists preferring to tear the medieval monument down, rather than to sell it to the episcopate⁸), no such confrontations between Roman Catholics and Protestants are known to have erupted during the era of secularisation. However, another domain exists in which an attempt has been made to connect a concept of holiness (in the sense of awareness of common descent and common identity) to specific places. It aims to cement this perception of holiness by connecting it to the curriculum of Dutch education. This specialist field is relatively young, but nonetheless a viable factor in the shaping of the perception of the Dutch landscape: archaeology.

2 The Shift towards Archaeology

Connecting archaeology to a perception of holiness seems far-fetched. Yet in the Dutch context, there are good reasons to underline its importance. As was noted above, traditional perceptions of holy places seem to be losing plausibility, at least at the level of society as a whole. On the other hand, it seems that

⁷ Ronald Huston, *Pagan Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁸ Charles Caspers and Peter Jan Margry, *Het mirakel van Amsterdam: Biografie van een betwiste devotie* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2017).

archaeology is benefitting from entrenchment in the educational system. The schools offer a set of common standards and knowledge, which is lacking at the level of separate religious and/or ethnic communities.

When it comes to the perception of holiness within the matrix of local topography, archaeology boasts some features that make this field especially attractive for a multicultural society. Archaeology lacks what, within the paradigm of *laïcité*, is perceived as a major offset of a traditional holy place. That is: the requirement that a religious commitment is presupposed for a “true” perception of what a holy place means to convey to the visitor. This would exclude major parts of the Dutch present-day population. The objection is also pertinent to WWII commemorations, though to a lesser extent: many of the people who have recently immigrated to the Netherlands may still have the feeling that the German occupation and the Holocaust belong to a history that is not theirs, even though the national education system stresses the importance of their attendance at these commemorations.⁹

Those who have left established religion behind will usually prefer a general cultural perception over commitment to in-group teachings. Migrant communities seem to perceive Dutch World War II history as not quite relevant for themselves. In contrast, the archaeological heritage of the Netherlands seems to possess many advantages. All living humans are connected to a common tree of life. Most importantly, from a perspective of *laïcité*, is the fact that it does not require mastering the written heritage of any specific religion—let alone consent to theological teachings—in order to evaluate its results. On the contrary, archaeological explanations both in museums and at the actual sites make it abundantly clear that they wish to operate from a detached and scientific view, not from a commitment to the claims of a religious faith.¹⁰

Prehistoric collections, museums and informative panels in the field offer the most widespread explanations of sacred space in the Netherlands. They aim at the general public, in the widest sense. Divisions in present-day society, such as the split between Jews, Roman Catholics, Muslims, and secularised liberals simply cease to be valid once applied to the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, or even Bronze Age and Iron Age in northern Europe. There is a common heritage for all in Africa, the continent from where modern Homo

9 See <https://www.4en5mei.nl/english/education>.

10 Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

sapiens migrated between 200,000 and 100,000 years before the common era. Archaeology can be studied as part of a “big,” non-denominational history.¹¹

Non-denominational history of this given type, focusing on archaeology and the earlier stages of human history, is manifest in the history handbooks of Dutch secondary schools, thus establishing a link between archaeology, standard patterns of knowledge, and a modern appreciation of holiness as manifested in ancient sites. Many theologians, churches, mosques, and synagogues still tend to ignore the contents of current Dutch school textbooks. This neglect is to their disadvantage, given their importance for the curriculum of the average teenager. Marije Mazereeuw’s investigation, carried out in her PThU MA thesis,¹² has led her to argue that the field of archaeology constitutes the first and perhaps most important moment at which the notions of holiness and religion are explained to the Dutch school public in general, apart from treatment of religion in its specific forms, such as Hinduism, Christianity, and so on. This introduction into the backgrounds of religion—and by extension, also into its essence—takes a dual didactic form: detached at the one level, and equally committed at another. Detached, in the sense that holiness is consistently discussed in terms of *do ut des*. Committed in the sense that people “invest” in religion, for the obvious reason that they expect to benefit from the process of exchange that religion essentially is. They connect to the ancestors, thus strengthening a communal sense of belonging, both to the group and to the place of residence. The right to inhabit that place, and to defend it against incursions of others, is derived from the ancestors and demonstrated by the presence of their tombs. Offerings are interpreted as a way of ensuring a successful hunt, fertility, faith healing. Holy places are thus connected to a magical, pre-modern worldview.

Study of this worldview requires detachment, non-commitment to any specific claim of truth, whether ethnic or religious.¹³ Unlike catechesis, or explanation by a priest at a holy place, archaeology claims scientific reliability and relevance for all citizens, irrespective of their personal background. From this starting point, it becomes possible to define commitment and to invite the general public to participate in it. First of all, the archaeological legacy refers to mankind in its entirety (as all living human populations share a descent from

11 Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

12 Marije Mazereeuw, “Donar en Wodan? ‘Germaanse religie’ in Nederland tussen 250 en 650 AD kritisch beschouwd” (MA Thesis, Protestant Theological University, 2015).

13 E. Fuller Torrey, *Evolving Brains, Emerging Gods: Early Humans and the Origins of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

Homo sapiens), potentially bridging the gap between ethnic communities. Based on recent German expositions, such as the Schöningen Neanderthal site, we find a tendency to assert the common African background.¹⁴ In other words: archaeology claims to offer a contemporary way to vindicate holiness in the sense of becoming aware of our background—irrespective of the credal and social divisions of our present-day society. And so, a new sense of holiness is on offer: no longer bound by tenets of traditional religion, but open for every individual. Even the magical element can be transformed, and so appropriated in modern contexts. The aims of ancient magic, of prayer and so on, have not become obsolete. We still need cohesion, a place under the sun, healing if necessary and an expectation of the future. All of this we share with the ancestors, ancestors of mankind instead of denominations. As such, archaeology offers a communal sense of origin and destiny for a multicultural society, and thus a very contemporary sense of holiness—embedded in the national system of education and thus accessible to the general population. Previously held conceptions are discussed within this new framework. I will offer an example: the ongoing discussion of the coming of Christianity to the Netherlands, related to the question whether the Christian worldview was preceded by a supposed Germanic cult of Wodenism.

3 Case Study: Discussing Pagan Holy Sites in the Netherlands

The historiography of the Christianisation of the Netherlands between 300 and 800 CE refers to the supposition, still present in recent literature on the subject, that a cult of Woden (Wodan) and Thor existed in this area prior to the coming of Christianity. This view is also reflected in Frank van der Pol's chapter on the conversion era in the *Handboek Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis*.¹⁵ This handbook emphasizes the importance of the *Indiculus superstitionum et pagianarum* in the Codex Palatinus 577, now kept in Rome and written in Fulda about the year 800. The Carolingian codex not only mentions a short list of forbidden pagan behaviour (such as *dadsias*, “songs for the dead”), but also contains the famous Old-Saxon baptismal vow. Here we find the famous denial

14 Thomas Terberger et al., eds., 300.000 *Jahre Spitzentechnik: Der altsteinzeitliche Fundplatz Schöningen und die frühesten Speere der Menschheit* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2018).

15 Frank van der Pol, “De Middeleeuwen tot 1200,” in *Handboek Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Kampen: Kok, 2010), 15–118.

of three specifically named non-Christian gods, to be rejected by the baptismal candidate: *ec forsacho allum diaboles uuercum and wordum, thunar ende uuoden ende saxnote* (I forswear all works and words of the devil, of Donar, Woden and Saxnot).¹⁶ A translation with comments can be found in Joris van Eijnatten and Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse Religiegeschiedenis*.¹⁷

What follows in the handbook is a series of sweeping statements, unrelated to the very short text in the *Indiculus*, and yet presented as fact. Woden is presented as the equivalent of Odin, “the Lord of the World,” after whom our Wednesday was named. Odin, who met with the bravest of the fallen in Valhalla, is also described as lord of “wisdom and poetry.” Some proof is added to support the hypothesis that a Germanic set of beliefs, centred on a family of gods relating to Woden (Odin), actually existed in the Netherlands before the Carolingian era: toponyms like Woensberg near Blaricum (Woden’s hill?), Donderberg near Rhenen (Thor’s hill?),¹⁸ a temple to the god Irmin that may have existed near Ermelo, an amulet with the runic inscription of the name Igwaz (identified with Tiwaz and Saxnot) in Wijnaldum, and finally tokens that have been interpreted as Thor (Donar)-amulets in Hogebeintum.¹⁹ The suggestion, in accordance to the juxtaposition of Christian faith and pagan cult in the *Indiculus*, is that a developed pagan cult can be assumed to have existed in the Netherlands, equipped with a full set of temples (Ermelo), sacred texts (runic), ritual and mythology. Claudia Dekkers, Gaston Dorren and Rob van Eerden sketch a similar portrait of religion before the arrival of Christianity in their introduction to the archaeology of the coastal zone of the province of North Holland: cone-shaped pendants with some geometric decoration are once again interpreted as Donar-amulets and associated to a Woden-related shamanism. However, these authors admit that there is no way to retrieve any substance concerning native perceptions about these gods.²⁰

16 Transcription after Lutz E. von Padberg, *Christianisierung im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), 76.

17 Joris van Eijnatten and Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse Religiegeschiedenis* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2005), 57.

18 For medieval links between the site and the memory of Redbad see Bert Huiskes, *Eeuwige rust op de Donderberg: Een groot vroegmiddeleeuws grafveld bij Rhenen* (Leiden: Sidestone, 2011), 13.

19 Van der Pol, “Middeleeuwen,” 43–44.

20 Claudia Dekkers, Gaston Dorren, and Rob van Eerden, *Het land van Hilde: Archeologie in het Noord-Hollandse kustgebied* (Haarlem: Matrijs, 2006), 66–67.

4 Dutch Doubts and German Insistence

Recent interest in the figure of Redbodus (Redbod or Redbad), referred to as a “king” in 7th-century Christian texts, shows that the fascination for this era is not restricted to church historians. Redbod is an example of the way in which Christian hagiographers ascribed heathen practices, including temples, to the Frisians in the Dutch coastal area:

Sed quoniam gravi ingruente paganorum impetu hostilis exorta dissensio inter Carlum principem gloriosumque ducem Franchorum et Redbodum regem Fresonum populos ex utraque parte perturbabat maximaque iam pars ecclesiarum Christi, quae Franchorum prius in Fresia subiectae erant imperio, Redbodi incumbente persecutione ac servorum Dei facta expulsione vastata erat ac destructa, idulorum quoque cultura extructis dilubrorum fanis lugubriter renovata, tum vir Dei perspecta perversitatis nequitia pervenit ad Trecht ...

As the heathens came storming in during those days, and as enmity between Charles, the glorious prince and duke of the Franks, and the Frisian king Redbod perturbed both peoples, also a major part of the churches of Christ, that previously had been subjected to Francian rule over Frisia, were plundered and destroyed by the impact of Redbod’s persecution and the repression of God’s servants, while the idolatry in re-erected heathen temples had been infamously renewed, the man of God [Boniface] moved to Utrecht, having noted this abomination ...²¹

Sven Meeder and Erik Goosmann stress the social importance of so-called warlords in Redbod’s coastal society. Any aspects of this paganism, however, are simply unknown, apart from biased Christian descriptions. It is interesting to note the absence of any reference to a cult of Woden or Thor.²² The same can be said of Luit van der Tuuk’s book on Redbod, where the Frisian religion of the time is connected to magic,²³ but again without reference to the Woden cult. It seems that Dutch historiography is moving towards caution.

21 *Vita Bonifatii auctore Willibaldo* 4.15–22. Edition and translation in M. Tangl, Ph.H. Külb and Reinhold Rau, *Briefe des Bonifatius: Willibalds Leben des Bonifatius* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2011), 476–77.

22 Sven Meeder and Erik Goosmann, *Redbad: Koning in de marge van de geschiedenis* (Houten: Unieboek Spectrum, 2018), 74.

23 Luit van der Tuuk, *Radbod: Koning in twee werelden* (Utrecht: Omniboek, 2018), 39.

On the other hand, German authors such as Arnulf Krause still defend the Woden hypothesis. In *Die Götter und Mythen der Germanen*, Krause maintains that a mythology with Odin at its centre played a vital role in Germanic religion before the advent of Christianity. We know about the contents of this mythology from Tacitus's *Germania* (2nd century) and from the Icelandic *Edda* (12th century). Krause is convinced of the plausibility of a continuous veneration of Odin/Woden and Thor/Donar during the millennium between Tacitus and Snorri Sturluson: "Die germanische Religion umfasst mit ihren Göttern und Mythen mehr als ein Jahrtausend."²⁴ In 2017, Thomas Höffgen, in a similar fashion, reflected on Iron Age masks, like the famous Middelstum example. According to Höffgen's interpretation, these masks are related to Woden in his function as a Germanic shaman's deity. "Das wichtigste Hilfsmittel bei diesen Kulte[n] war naturgemäß die Maske, wie denn Odin in den Mythen selbst mannigfach in Maskerade auftritt: Ein Beinamen des Odins ist Grímr, das heißt Maske (gríma)."²⁵

5 Explaining Woden

Despite the efforts to link sites like Wijnaldum and Hegebeintum to a mythology of this kind, the evidence for Woden in the Netherlands is meagre to say the least. Elaborating on Mazereeuw's thesis, I propose an alternative view, in which the existence of a well-developed pagan cult was a requirement for Christian literary treatment of the conversion process. During the 7th century it also offered a viable legitimating alternative to Christianity for Anglo-Saxon warlords who aimed at leadership of larger entities than mere tribes. This is not the same as saying that such a cult ever existed "on ground," in the daily life that is reflected in material evidence.

"Well-developed" is taken here in the sense of endowment with ritual, sacred spaces, mythology (all of which, taken together, may be expected to exert an influence on later developments of culture and religion). Indications for the presence of at least a few of these markers can be found in earlier stages of religious history in the Netherlands. For instance, in the dolmens of the Neolithic, the Bronze Age elite burials and their astronomical orientations, the exotic provenance of stone and metal votive offerings from both these eras. Other examples are the elaborate and well-made votive altars in the early

²⁴ Arnulf Krause, *Die Götter und Mythen der Germanen* (Wiesbaden: Marix, 2015), 63.

²⁵ Thomas Höffgen, *Schamanismus bei den Germanen: Götter, Menschen, Tiere, Pflanzen* (Remda-Teichel: Roter Drache, 2017), 31–32.

Roman era. It should be noted that many native gods are invoked (Hludlana, Nehalennia, Magusanus), but neither their names nor their iconography show any convincing resemblance to Woden and Thor and their kin. As Thor Ewing rightly remarks: “Clearly, the religion of Roman Germania cannot have been identical with the religion of Viking Scandinavia. Indeed, it is in the nature of pre-Christian religion that no definition can be narrow enough to include only a single unified expression of the religion.”²⁶

If we compare them to these examples of a “well-developed cult,” the alleged Woden amulets of Hegebeintum disappoint as rather simple artefacts. The existence of the supposed Ermelo temple (compare “Irmisul”) has never been verified. The runic texts from the Netherlands, all of them very short, are basic at best. More promising for our investigation are the gold hoards of Wijnaldum and Wiewerd, with their expensive materials, exotic inlays that may even have come from India, and sophistication of design. Johan Nicolay has written extensively on the subject.²⁷ The parallels between the treasury-troves in Frisia and the contemporary Anglo-Saxon ship burial in Sutton Hoo (Suffolk) are obvious. For a discussion of a possible connection to Woden, it seems advisable that we turn our attention to England. How can we explain the literary allusions to the presence of Woden in pre-conversion societies bordering the southern coasts of the North Sea, while—quite unlike the situation in Scandinavia after 800—clear references to Woden in the sphere of religious ritual are almost completely lacking?

6 Ancestors

A clue comes from a well-known passage in the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, where Beda Venerabilis (673/674–735) writes about the relation between Anglo-Saxon kings and Woden:

Duces fuisse perhibentur eorum primi duo fratres Hengist et Horsa ... Erant autem filii Uictgisl, cuius pater Uitta, cuius pater Uecta, cuius pater Uoden, de cuius stirpe multarum provinciarum regium genus originem duxit.

26 Thor Ewing, *Gods and Worshippers in the Viking and Germanic World* (Stroud: The History Press, 2008), 9.

27 Johan A.W. Nicolay, *The Splendour of Power: Early Medieval Kingship and the Use of Gold and Silver in the Southern North Sea Area (5th to 7th Century AD)* (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2014).

It is said that their first leaders were two brothers, Hengist and Horsa.... They were sons of Wihtgisl, whose father was Witta, whose father was Wecta, whose father was Woden; from which stock royal clans of many shires claimed their descent.²⁸

Here at last we find a clear indication of what the importance of Woden in this age and society actually meant for the people of the age. It was not his belonging to a structured and accessible world of the gods that made him important, but his belonging to the world of the ancestors. This squares well with Dutch findings at Donderberg for instance, where the importance of social structure, family bonding and the maintenance of status in a martial society are very much more in evidence than religion of the kind that is attested in the Nehalennia cult during the Roman or in an early medieval Christian church.

A remarkable result of investigations by British archaeologists and historians is that the impact of what we might call Wodenism on Anglo-Saxon society actually increased during the pre-conversion era.²⁹ This finding demonstrates how far we have come since the 19th century. A Hegelian interpretation of history tends to qualify prehistoric societies—even in the Iron Age—as both static and relying on magic for their religion,³⁰ contrasting them to the societal and intellectual impetus of later and more modern times. Wodenism, if anything, was not static. The first depictions of Woden/Odin were adapted from coin portraits of Roman emperors, just as the runic scripts were adapted from Mediterranean prototypes. Wodenism did not precede Christianity, it coincided with it. Sutton Hoo and Wijncaldum both exemplify societies in which indications for religious cult are weak, while the markers for group status and family attachment are far stronger. It may be that our present-day secularisation is not as unique as we might think. It is quite possible that even societies in the later Iron Age went through periods in which relationships between human beings and gods (or God) were less important than relationships between humans and their families and/or group stratifications. It will not come

28 Beda Venerabilis, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* 1.15. Edition and translation in Günther Spitzbart, *Beda Venerabilis: Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), 60–61.

29 Cf. Geoffrey Hindley, *A Brief History of the Anglo-Saxons: The Beginnings of the English Nation* (London: Yale, 2015), 13–19, 26–30.

30 “Volksfrömmigkeit” could be interpreted as a rudimentary legacy of this former stage of cultural entelechy. Cf. Hans-Martin Kirn: “In allen Bevölkerungsschichten blieben mythisch-magische Glaubens- und Wertevorstellungen sowie Praktiken lebendig, die sich nicht ohne weiteres konfessionskonform regulieren ließen” (*Geschichte des Christentums IV, 1: Konfessionelles Zeitalter* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2018], 82).

as a surprise that Rob Meens and others have argued that both ancestors and living kin were more important to Redbad's generation than transcendent gods.³¹ However, once it became clear that state-building on a larger scale—such as Mercia, East Anglia, or even Frisia in Redbad's dreams—would benefit from a cohesive mythology, together with a literate class of clerics, there were options to consider. Christianity was one of them, but a developing Wodenism (as exemplified by Scandinavian proto-states in the Carolingian age) could act as a potential alternative. The Sutton Hoo ship offers a vivid portrayal of these coinciding options, literally side-to-side.

Hard evidence for the existence a cult of Woden and Thor, even within the sphere of tribal leadership, remains very hard to find in the Netherlands—which is a point of concern given the thoroughness of Dutch archaeological research during the previous decades. As the written accounts are solely written by Christian clerics, and mostly after 800, it is tempting to consider the possibility that their portrayal was modelled after the most powerful pagan presence during the Carolingian era, and even later—that is to say, the Scandinavian presence, the impact of which was felt from the North and clearly appealed to the popular imagination. Whether this also implies the presence of a Woden cult in the Netherlands before the Norse incursions in the 9th century is debatable.

7 Conclusions

Ongoing discussions on holy places in the Netherlands reflect the impact of secularisation. Even in the 20th century, church historians tended to analyse the subject from a Christian angle and by using Christian written sources. The limitations of this approach have become evident in recent years. Most members of the Dutch population no longer relate to a Christian church or creed. Their perspective of holy places relies on education in general, and on a wide variety of religious and philosophical preferences. The perception of holy places shows a shift away from Christianity, and towards forms that are closer to current school programs. A growing popular interest in archaeology fits into this pattern. The trend is reflected in material and immaterial sites of memory regarding the Christianisation of the Netherlands. An interest in paganism is not new. Innovative is the insistence on a secular interpretation of

31 Rob Meens, "With One Foot in the Font: The Failed Baptism of the Frankish king Radbod and the 8th-Century Discussion about the Fate of Unbaptized Forefathers," in *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe: Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship: Festschrift for Dáibhi Ó Cróin*, ed. Pádraic Moran and Immo Warntjes (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 577–96.

the phenomenon, in which a pre-Christian “Wodenism” is not a religion in the traditional sense, but rather a by-effect of group status, social stratification and early attempts at state-building. The interpretation of related sites is moving away from a Christian interpretation of holiness and towards a vindication of secular principles of human bonding. As this trend is reflected in the curriculum of secondary schools, a traditional exposition of Christianisation becomes hard to maintain. A modern treatment of the subject requires both a careful assessment of material (archaeological) data and a willingness to explore non-religious explanations of what was formally understood as a clash between two sets of religious beliefs (Christianity and paganism).

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