

ALEXANDER RUBEL, Religion und Kult der Germanen. W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2016. € 32.00. ISBN 978-3-17-029266-6. (print edition). € 28.99. ISBN 978-3-17-029267-3. (e-book). 174 pages, 12 illustrations.

Many readers, when picking up the book reviewed here, Alexander Rubel's account of Germanic religion, will think it cannot succeed against comparable introductions penned by authors such as Rudolf SIMEK (*Götter und Kulte der Germanen*² [München 2006]) or Arnulf KRAUSE (*Die Götter und Mythen der Germanen*² [Wiesbaden 2006]); indeed, how can an ancient historian who has so far not published his views on such a complex issue stand up to competition, with a book aimed at a wide readership that is a mere 130 pages long? Such misgivings would, however, be prejudiced and misplaced. A. Rubel is more than capable of presenting complex subjects; he does so impressively, basing himself on current research, in a concise, understandable and occasionally witty form. The book is not only well written and can match up to other introductions available on the market, but it also offers new insights, namely a different focus and perspective on the subject, which is what distinguishes it from similar publications.

The main emphasis of previous works frequently consisted of outlining the Old Norse, i. e. northern Germanic, mythology of later times, as has survived fragmentarily in Old Icelandic texts, primarily the poems of the *Codex regius* (the "Poetic Edda"); some of these tales of gods and heroes are barely older than that thirteenth-century manuscript, others form part of a centuries-old oral tradition – and in Snorri Sturluson's skaldic manual (the "Prose Edda"), compiled around AD 1220, there is a plethora of stories about gods which Snorri assembled for his own purposes. A. Rubel resolutely rejects the dominance of these later sources and the widely-held opinion that the Old Norse myths can and should provide the framework for and account of a "(common) Germanic mythology" and religion. He foregrounds the earlier periods, from the earliest testimonies (accounts by Classical authors and wooden idols of the pre-Christian era) to the time of Germanic empire-building on Roman soil. A. Rubel's book is therefore about the "Germanii" in the narrower sense of the term, the people writers such as Caesar and Tacitus wrote about, the Continental Germanic peoples and their descendants up to the beginning of the early Middle Ages.

The first three chapters – "Introduction" ("Einleitung", pp. 9–13), "Who were the Germanii?" ("Wer waren die Germanen?", pp. 14–22) and "The sources" ("Die Quellen", pp. 23–30) – set out the fundamentals very concisely, aptly summarising the relevant material and providing references found in the research literature, as is the case for all the chapters. The meaning and use of the term "religion" and "cult" are explained in a few pages, and this is indeed important. A. Rubel devotes nine pages to discussing the term "Germanic", a difficult undertaking since this concept carries much baggage inherited from the pseudo-science of the Nazi period, is the subject of ongoing controversy in more recent research, and is approached and understood differently by different disciplines. The origin, ethnicity and linguistic identity of "Germanic" groups, as well as the potential and limitations of archaeology, are outlined. A. Rubel also briefly presents the nature and inherent problems of the sources available, stressing the difficulties of interpreting literary texts, the prejudices of Classical authors and the late emergence of the Old Norse sources. This emphasis on a necessary source criticism is a very welcome trait in a book addressed to a wide readership.

It is unclear why gold bracteates are given their own section (on p. 25) in a short introductory overview of the source material; they could have been mentioned under "Archaeology" or in a section on "Iconographic sources" ("Bildendenkmäler") alongside other iconographic evidence. The pressing question is why A. Rubel does not consider (apart from the bracteates) the most important category of iconographic material and does not devote a single sentence to it: the picture stones on the island of Gotland in the Baltic, erected from AD 400 at the latest to the end of the

Viking period, which hold much information about early religion such as the much-discussed references to a hypothetical cult of the sun or possible representations of the Dioscuran twin gods.

“Sanctuaries and sacrificial practices” (“Heiligtümer und Opferpraxis”, pp. 31–41), as reported in written sources (particularly by Tacitus) and especially as revealed by archaeology, form the subject of the fourth chapter; here we find offerings made in springs and rivers, the “bog deposits” of northern Germany and southern Scandinavia (but also Oberdorla in Thuringia), weapon deposits (including possible sacrificial deposits on the Kalkriese battlefield), “civilian” offerings and human sacrifices (bog bodies), and the currently much-debated question of cult buildings (hall-like buildings in the context of central places). The Viking period is given just one paragraph on p. 39, even though much could be said about the sites of Old Uppsala, Old Lejre and Frösö in Jämtland (a tree sanctuary with animal sacrifices uncovered under the choir of the church).

In the fifth chapter “The world of the early Germanic gods” (“Die Götterwelt der Germanen in der Frühzeit”, pp. 42–49), the earliest mentions known on the continent of Germanic gods that appear in names of the days of the week (*interpretatio Germanica*), in Tacitus, and in dedicatory inscriptions (*interpretatio Romana*) are considered. A. Rubel further presents early images of gods, in the shape of wooden idols, as well as the frequent idea, already mentioned in Tacitus’ *Germania* of a triad of deities and the Dioscuran twin gods. Finally, the author clearly establishes that there is no such thing as a “Germanic religion” but that we should think in terms of “Germanic religions” (as, incidentally, has long been accepted in Scandinavian research).

The following chapter on mythology (pp. 50–63) deals mainly with the Old Norse tradition, but only “[...] for the sake of tradition and because of the aesthetic appeal of this unique literature [...]” (“[...] aus Gründen der Tradition und um der Ästhetik dieser eigenständigen Literatur willen [...]”, p. 54). In any case it incorporated medieval interpretations of pre-Christian Scandinavian – but not Germanic – religion and may, in part, be thought to be a pure invention by Christian authors. It is certainly possible to agree with such a position, but, to my mind, it is excessive. That the Scandinavians of the Vendel and Viking periods, whose concepts of religion find an echo in the Icelandic texts of the 13th century, cannot be considered as “(northern) Germanic peoples” (pp. 52–53 and 131) and that the Old Norse sources have nothing in common with the pagan religions of earlier periods and the beliefs of southern Germanic groups is an exaggeration. There are indeed examples that show the opposite, some of which Rubel himself mentions, for example the myth of Balder (pp. 71–72) which, on the evidence of the bracteates, was already widespread around AD 500. Some mythological poems in the Edda can be dated to the 10th or 11th century, and with the earliest heroic poems that undoubtedly rework continental material and contain information about “Germanic” religion we can go back to at least the 9th century. The earliest mythological skaldic poetry also belongs to this period.

Chapter 7 covers “Magic and runes” (“Magie und Runen”, pp. 64–75), even though, as the author rightly states, runes are not necessarily connected to magic and can certainly have served purposes that were (to modern eyes) “profane”. A. Rubel limits his remarks on runes to a brief introduction (pp. 64–65), reflections on the significance of writing (pp. 74–75) and a section devoted to gold bracteates (pp. 68–73). In the latter, however, the author concentrates on the imagery, which Karl Hauck interprets as representing deities on the basis of written sources. Apotropaic formulae, often found among the inscriptions on bracteates, are only briefly touched on. A. Rubel’s observations on the relationship between religion and magic, and on language and magic, are attractive. The “Second Merseburg Charm” serves here as an example of how magic was used in practice. Nonetheless, the chapter contains few examples; in particular, it does not include instances of inscriptions with magical content (e. g. formulae found in graves intended to prevent the return of the dead).

The eighth chapter, “Death and beyond” (“Tod und Jenseits”, pp 76–86), deals with burial rites and conceptions of the afterlife. Two different sources are used to open the chapter: the prestigious funeral of the hero in the *Beowulf* poem and the simple rituals that Tacitus describes in his *Germania*. The archaeological evidence that Rubel presents in the following passages is inconsistent as well, showing that there is no such thing as a “common Germanic” burial rite. Given the lack of early written sources concerning ideas about the afterlife, Rubel has to fall back on the testimonies found in the Old Norse literature to introduce the abode of the dead, Hel and Valhall. Iconographic sources, which seem to show that a belief in Valhall is an old belief and that the dead voyaged to the afterworld by ship, could have been included here. Ship burials and boat-shaped stone settings, which the author does not mention, could have usefully been included.

The following chapter (Chapter 9, pp. 87–96) bears the title “Roman interpretation: the Rhineland as a zone of contact between religions” (“Römische Auslegung: Die Rheinlande als Kontaktzone der Religionen”). It concerns mainly deities, whose Romanised names appear on dedicatory stones donated by Germanic tribal groups, for example Hercules Magusanus (= Donar?), Mars Thingsus and Mars Halamardus (= *Tiwaz?) or Mercurius Cimbrianus (Mercury of the Cimbri = Wodan?). Here too, a look at the iconographic material available would have been beneficial: Mars Thingsus is often represented accompanied by a water bird, including on the decorative disc from the Thorsberg Moor which is thought to be of Germanic manufacture.

The book’s quite extensive tenth chapter is dedicated to the many “Female deities” (“Weibliche Gottheiten”, pp. 97–115) of early times, who are primarily named in Romano-Germanic votive inscriptions, particularly the *matronae* of the Rhineland, the goddess of seafaring Nehalennia, and the (fertility) goddesses Tanfana and especially Nerthus mentioned by Tacitus. A. Rubel notes that early Germanic religion was characterised to a great degree by female deities and that “[...] our obsession with the great warrior gods Odin and Thor, derived from Norse mythology, [represents] an inadmissible reduction” of the actuality (“[...] die aus der nordischen Mythologie abgeleitete Fixierung auf die großen Kriegsgötter Odin und Thor als eine unstatthafte Verengung [...]”, p. 110–111). This is an important insight, which justifies the length of the chapter.

Chapter 11 considers and evaluates “Germanic echoes in the present” (“Germanische Echos in der Gegenwart”, pp. 116–120). This subject, i. e. the appropriation of Germanic religion by sub-cultures and its manipulation in popular culture (new-age paganism, neo-Nazi esotericism, fantasy novels and films, comic books, computer games), is repeatedly addressed by the author. The phenomenon is indeed a pressing problem and represents a real danger, which an introductory book for a wide readership must indeed point out. From an academic perspective, many forms of appropriation and manipulation are “[...] aggravating, because, through these agencies and their media presence, a certain image of Germanic peoples and their religion that has little in common with reliable historic information is increasingly being peddled and is becoming established in popular perception” (“[...] ärgerlich, da durch sie und ihre Medienpräsenz zunehmend ein bestimmtes Bild von den Germanen und ihrer Religion transportiert wird und sich in der populären Wahrnehmung festsetzt, das mit den belastbaren historischen Informationen wenig gemein hat”, p. 117).

The next chapter deals with “Christianisation” (“Die Christianisierung”, pp. 121–134). It is a very attractive and sensible summary account of the process of conversion among southern and northern Germanic groups. The possible reasons why Christianity managed to impose itself at a political and private level, and the importance of religion for the identity of Germanic peoples are also discussed. The fact that the name of the leading expert on the Christianisation of Europe, Lutz von Padberg, is missing from the chapter must have been an oversight.

In the concluding chapter (Chapter 13 “Schlussbetrachtung”, pp. 135–137), the author asks once again: what remains? Apart from the phenomenon discussed in Chapter 11 (the reception of Germanic religion in popular culture), hardly any real traces of Germanic religion have survived in everyday life. Aside from the days of the week, there are some instances of continuity in the location of sacred sites (but no examples are cited by A. Rubel) and of coinciding pagan and Christian feast days. A. Rubel ends his observations by pointing out that the veneration of Christian saints contains polytheistic features, the early Christians showing a persistent need for a multiplicity of godly helpers. This phenomenon has often been debated, including from examples of potential affiliations between saints and pagan divinities, whom A. Rubel could have named (e. g. Saint Olaf and Thor, the Virgin Mary and Freyja; see for example P. PAULSEN, *Axt und Kreuz in Nord- und Osteuropa* [Bonn 1956] esp. 222–320). The volume ends with a bibliography that contains many recent and relevant entries, notes with useful pointers for readers who wish to further explore the subject and better understand the debates around it, and several indexes.

For the sake of fairness, we should note that nearly all the matters that A. Rubel outlines have been treated by Arnulf Krause in his introduction published in 2006 mentioned earlier; sometimes A. Rubel’s treatment is very similar. In this respect, A. Rubel’s introductory account of “southern Germanic” religion is not entirely new; topics such as the *matronae*, the gods Wodan and Donar, Old High German charms, runes and Classical written sources can also be found in A. Krause’s volume – which is twice as long (254 pages) and costs 6 Euro. I find it inadequate that A. Krause’s book, which is also aimed at a wide readership, is not cited in A. Rubel’s bibliography.

The fact that A. Rubel needed to assimilate a complex research domain with which he was not entirely familiar (he deserves all the more respect, given the successful outcome) is occasionally noticeable. For example, he indicates (in Chapter 5, note 4) that there is no German translation of Ahmad Ibn Faḍlān’s account of his travels; such a translation exists in Zeki VALIDI TOGAN’s standard edition (*Ibn Faḍlān Reisebericht. Abhandl. für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 24,3* [Nendeln 1966]) as well as in Hans-Peter HASENFRATZ’s small book (*Die religiöse Welt der Germanen. Ritual, Magie, Kult, Mythos* [Freiburg i. Br. 1992]). Further, Scandinavian-language works are entirely absent from A. Rubel’s bibliography. Such shortcomings will, however, only be noticed by a few specialists and are of no consequence to the intended readership.

It is unfortunate that so many small errors have slipped through the net, which does not make a good impression for so slim a volume. Thorough proof reading could easily have put this right. Consulting a colleague specialising in Old Norse would also have helped, thus avoiding a series of errors that will make Old Norse philologists roll their eyes: “Freya” instead of “Freyja” (p. 111), “Balder’s Dream” instead of “Balder’s Dreams” (pp. 67; 84) (*Baldrs draumar* is in the plural), “bei der Ragnarök” (p. 85) instead of “bei den Ragnarök” (*ragnarökr* is in the plural as well) or the erroneous use of the German term “Sage” when the term “Saga” should be used, for example “Islandsage” instead of “Isländersaga” (p. 95).

It should also have been possible to avoid calling the historian Karl Hauck (whom Rubel duly acknowledges) a “Germanist” (p. 68) or to confuse the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (p. 53). The obsolete dating of an important fibula with runic inscriptions from Nordendorf in Bavaria, the first to bear the names of Germanic gods in writing, is a regrettable blunder. A. Rubel indicates a date in the 7th century (p. 42) but the artefact belongs to the 550s AD (H. ROTH, *New chronological aspects of Runic inscriptions: the archaeological evidence. Michigan Germanic Stud.* 7, 1981, 62–68, here p. 65). The volume gives the impression of having been put together in haste, even though it is a remarkably thorough piece of research and an otherwise successful short book. The frequently insufficient captions to the illustrations are a further cause for carping. For example, figure 1, a drawing of a wooden idol, is simply captioned “A wooden idol” without any indica-

tion of location (Possendorf / Weimar), date (1st century BC) or where it is kept (in the Museum of Pre- and Ancient History of Thuringia in Weimar).

I have also found the occasionally misleading titles of subchapters irritating: they often say little, are sometimes poorly related to the ensuing text, and in a few cases the titles are almost identical. In my opinion, a third level of headings should have been employed. Some sections appear in the wrong place, others are superfluous, at least to my mind – for example “Godly relationships” (“Götterbeziehungen”) on p. 63 which deals with parentage between Old Norse gods, or “The role of women in Germania” (“Die Rolle der Frau in Germanien”) on pp. 107–109, a complement to “Female deities” (“Weibliche Gottheiten”). The brevity of the book meant that the author had to be selective and inevitably some aspects were left out. It would be inappropriate to blame the author for this, even though I do not always follow the reasons behind his choices.

The shortcomings listed here are hardly relevant and do not lessen my favourable opinion of the work. A. Rubel rises to the challenge of writing a book that is a concise overview of the religions of the Germanic peoples while including all the relevant specialist disciplines – from its tangible beginnings to the end of the Migration period and the dawn of the Middle Ages; he achieves this in a succinct and engaging manner, introducing the subject to a wide readership without much previous knowledge. I warmly recommend this volume to non-specialists and students, but also as an entry into the material to colleagues who wish to familiarise themselves with the topic.

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DANIEL DÜBNER, Untersuchungen zur Entwicklung und Struktur der frühgeschichtlichen Siedlung Flögeln im Elbe-Weser-Dreieck. Studien zur Landschafts- und Siedlungsgeschichte im südlichen Nordseegebiet volume 6. Marie Leidorf, Rahden / Westf. 2015. € 49.80. ISBN 978-3-86757-336-8. 212 pages, 147 illustrations, 10 tables, 1 appendix.

Research on the settlements of the Roman Imperial period and the Migration Period has received fresh and important new impetus in recent years from various university theses – some of them not yet completed. A successfully published doctoral thesis (Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 2014) on the settlement of Flögeln has now become available. The excavations carried out at Flögeln between 1971 and 1985 are without doubt the best-known archaeological investigations of any settlement in northern Germany from the first centuries AD. Apart from those at Loxstedt (RGA² 18 [2001] 629–633 s. v. Loxstedt [W. H. ZIMMERMANN]) and Groß Meckelsen (W.-D. TEMPEL, Eine Dorfsiedlung der römischen Kaiserzeit und Völkerwanderungszeit bei Groß Meckelsen, Ldkr. Rotenburg [Wümme]. In: M. Fansa / F. Both / H. Haßmann (Hrsg.), Archäologie – Land – Niedersachsen. 25 Jahre Denkmalschutzgesetz – 400 000 Jahre Geschichte. Begleitschrift zur Ausstellung. Arch. Mitt. Nordwestdeutschland, Beiheft 42 [Oldenburg 2005] 429–435), they are also the most extensive. Although it was not possible to excavate the entire site, the numerous excavation campaigns uncovered almost all the core area of the settlement complex, and many of the peripheral features were also recorded. Because it offers such a representative picture and, not least, because