

Álfblót: The Viking Halloween

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Today is Halloween. Many of you probably celebrate it in its commercial form – trick or treating, wearing costumes and overdosing on candy. Or perhaps you prefer to recognize it as Samhain (the pagan version) instead. But what if I told you that our Scandinavian ancestors marked this holiday too, albeit in their own unique, roundabout way?

Amazingly, the celebration of Álfblót is still largely obscure within the heathen community (unless of course you were raised in Scandinavia!). Indeed, I myself only discovered it 5 years ago!

Rather than a one-day holiday like the modern Halloween, Álfblót marks the general end of autumn, therefore it can technically be celebrated on any day around this time. However, in recent years, it has been predominantly practiced on or close to 31st October (Halloween/Samhain).

Traditionally, Álfblót was intended to be a sacrifice to the elves (who's magical powers held a close connection to the ancestors, as well as fertility).

Contrary to the larger blóts (rituals) which took place throughout the year at locations such as Uppsala (Sweden), which drew great numbers of pilgrims from across Scandinavia, Álfblót was performed at the homesteads. Only local people were welcome, and strangers were not permitted to take part or even watch!

Sadly, due to this mysterious secrecy surrounding the events of Álfblót, very little is actually known about how it was performed. What we do know is mostly guesswork, derived from our broader knowledge of standard blót rites, as well as an account by the Norwegian skald Sigvatr Þórðarson in a skaldic poem titled 'Austrfaravísur'.

Here is Sigvatr's account, told after he and his companions had been sent on a diplomatic mission to Skara (Västergötland, Sweden):

They were travelling to meet Jarl Ragnvald Ulfsson, but they needed shelter for the night before continuing their journey.

Sigvatr and his friends arrived at a homestead called Hof (presumably what is now known as Stora Hov, near Edsvära, Sweden). Expecting to be greeted with warm hospitality, as was the custom at the time, they were very surprised and disgruntled when the door to the homestead remained shut. Sigvatr tried to explain their plight, but the household declined to let them in, saying the place was 'hallowed'.

Giving up, Sigvatr and his companions continued on to the next homestead. Upon their arrival, they met a woman who exclaimed: “don’t go further inside, unlucky men! We are afraid of Odin’s wrath. We are pagans!”. She chased the men away as if they were wolves, and told them that they were having an ‘elven sacrifice’.

Thrice more the men attempted to find a place to rest, but each time they were told to leave by men who called themselves ‘Ölvir’.

As a last resort, Sigvatr and his crew decided to seek out a man known as the most hospitable man in the district. The man scowled at them before leaving them out in the cold, and Sigvatr commented that “if that was the best man, the worst man must have been truly evil”.

A potential clue to the rites performed during Álfblót lies in Kormáks Saga, in which there is an account of sacrifices being made to the elves in order to heal a battle wound. Unlike the sacrifices described by Sigvatr, this one appears to have been performed at any time of year, but it may give us some insight into the rites of Álfblót:

” A hill there is”, answered she, “not far away from here, where elves have their haunt. Now get you the bull that Cormac killed, and redden the outer side of the hill with its blood, and make a feast for the elves with its flesh. Then thou wilt be healed.”

The word ‘Álfblót’ literally translates to ‘elf ritual’. Elves were associated with burial mounds (also known as barrows) as it was believed that they lived in or around them. It is now thought that elves were another incarnation of human souls, as the dead were commonly referred to as elves. For example, King Olaf of Geirstad was known as Olaf Geirstad-Alf (‘The Elf of Geirstad’) after his death. It was believed that upon being placed in his burial mound, he was then venerated as an elf.

In other pagan variations of the celebration, as well as the later Christian equivalent, what we now know as Halloween was often referred to as ‘The Day of the Dead’.

The sacrifice to elves signifies that the Norse also celebrated it in the same manner – namely, as a time for ancestor worship.

Certain gods were most likely worshipped during Álfblót too, such as Freyr (the ruler of Álfheimr, realm of the elves).

Because of the lack of evidence surrounding Álfblót, I will include a brief description of a very basic blót to give you an idea of what it probably entailed:

In days gone by, a blót would usually require an animal sacrifice (nowadays, an offering of beer or mead is the preferred method!). The blót consisted of three main parts – consecrating the offering, sharing of the offering, and libation.

After the consecration of the offering, the person performing the ritual (in the case of Álfblót, the head of the homestead, known as the Ölvir) would offer the sacrifice to the gods (certain ones being evoked/called upon depending on the occasion so in this case we shall say Freyr), and/or ancestors. The animal would be slaughtered, its blood spilled upon the ground (alternatively, beer/mead would be poured onto the ground).

The remaining flesh/liquid would be distributed amongst the congregation, before the Ölvir closed the ceremony.

Obviously there's a lot more to it than that in practice, but it was just a very brief description to give an insight into what may have occurred!

I hope you have all enjoyed learning about Álfblót, and whether you choose to celebrate it or not, I wish you all a blessed Samhain/happy Halloween!

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