
The Private Life of the Old Northmen

Keyser Rudolph

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Author: Keyser Rudolph

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THE
PRIVATE LIFE
OF
THE OLD NORTHMEN.

TRANSLATED FROM THE POSTHUMOUS WORKS OF

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BY THE

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THORVALDSEN," ETC. ETC.

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OLD NORSE PRONUNCIATION.

á is pronounced like *ow*.
ú " " *u* in full.
ð " " soft *d*.
þ " " *th*.

PRIVATE LIFE

or

THE OLD NORTHMEN.

INTRODUCTORY.

As a natural consequence of the force of circumstances, the private as well as the public life of a people must needs undergo many visible changes in the course of ages; and if those in the former case do not occur so suddenly as is often the case in the latter, not the less are they frequently very conspicuous, and instrumental in operating upon the character and constitution of an entire nation. The Northmen form no exception to this general rule. It was, undoubtedly, the transition from paganism to Christianity that caused the greatest revolutions in their domestic life, not only because their ideas of religion were thereby completely subverted, but also because their peaceful intercourse with foreign nations, owing to the same cause, then for the first time assumed much more important dimensions than heretofore.

These changes, however, were, as is universally the

case, of gradual growth, and did not at once, visibly at least, succeed the causes of their origin. Indeed, it was only towards the close of the eleventh century, under the reign of Olaf Kyrre, that any apparent alterations in morals or in customs took place at court: alterations, however, which, little by little, made their influence felt upon the people at large. With a hankering after pomp and pageantry—from which the old Northmen, even from the very earliest ages, had not been entirely free—there was now united a desire to imitate the more comfortable manner of life adopted by southern nations; and thus the domestic habits of the people either underwent a sudden and radical change, or gradually adapted themselves to the pattern from which they were copied.

It is our purpose, in the following pages, to draw the attention of the reader to the habits and customs of the old Northmen during the period when the Scandinavian peninsula had not as yet emerged from the darkness of Paganism; while at the same time the changes that resulted from the introduction of Christianity into the country shall not be passed by unnoticed.

CHAPTER I.

EDUCATION AND BRINGING UP OF YOUTH.

It was the custom with the old Northmen in the Pagan ages for the father to decide, directly a child was born, whether it should be exposed, or be brought up. If the father were not present himself, or if he had made no previous arrangement about the child, it then devolved upon the nearest male relative, who happened to be present at the birth, to decide on the life or death of the infant in question. The newly born child was laid down on the ground by the woman who had assisted at the birth, and there it remained, untouched by any one, till the momentous decision had been arrived at.

It has been supposed by some that the exposure of a child only took place when it was found to be either deformed, or more than usually weakly, and that the object of this custom, therefore, was to prevent the physical deterioration of the people. And it does not appear to be improbable that this might have been the case with a race of people who laid such great stress on manly strength and courage as did the old Northmen, especially as the most ancient Christian laws have permitted the exposure of infants which were deformed in a high degree. Still no mention is ever made, in any place in the old Sagas where the exposure of infants is referred

to, leading one to suppose that such had been the object in view.

Other causes are, however, expressly alluded to as sanctioning exposure, namely, a "difference between man and wife;" "displeasure on the part of the wife's father, or nearest relative, at the union of which the child was the fruit;" "the persuasions of the wife, in the case that an illegitimate child was born to her husband;" "superstitious beliefs, in the case where evil omens were thought to presage misfortunes which could be averted through the child;" and finally, "the inability of the parents through poverty to bring up their offspring." It is only in the last-named case that exposure is spoken of as being excusable; in the others, though a perfectly legitimate deed, it was considered to be highly culpable. Many places in the Sagas exemplify this.

Hövdling (chieftain) Asbjörn Dettiaas, of Iceland, was exasperated against his wife Thorgerd, because without his consent or knowledge she had given their daughter away to a Northman. Some few years after this Thorgerd became in the family way, and her husband ordered that if a child should be born during his absence from home, it was to be exposed, whether it proved to be a boy or a girl. His wife remonstrated with him, urging that "such a proceeding ill suited a man who was so powerful and wise as he was, and that even had he been a poor man it would be a highly blamable deed; how much more blamable, therefore, would it be in his case, who possessed such great wealth?" But Asbjörn paid no heed to her remonstrances,