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Editorial

EMILY LYLE

The stimulus for this issue of *Cosmos* came from a rich international day conference organised by Karen Bek-Pedersen on 22 February 2003 on the theme of “Structure and Belief in Northern Europe”. The papers by Terry Gunnell, Karen Bek-Pedersen, Stephen A. Mitchell and Stephan Grundy published in it were delivered at that conference. They are supplemented by two other papers on the same topic by Britt-Mari Näsström and Aleks G. Pluskowski. A double issue of *Cosmos* on the ritual year, deriving from the conference on this theme organised by Aude Le Borgne in July 2004, is scheduled for publication in the near future.

Hof, Halls, *Goðar* and Dwarves: An Examination of the Ritual Space in the Pagan Icelandic Hall¹

TERRY GUNNELL

Two of the most frequently recurring questions in the field of studies into the pagan Old Norse religion are those of where and how people worshipped. This applies specially to the newly-settled Iceland, where *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements)² and the Icelandic sagas commonly talk of *hof*, a word generally translated as “temples”, which is found in numerous placenames around Iceland, Norway, and Sweden (see for example Orri Vésteinsson 2003; Magnus Olsen 1915:10-25, and 1926: 226-56; de Vries 1957: 2.53, 116, 155, and 194-5; and Olaf Olsen 1966: 89-104). It is generally accepted that the placename, both alone and in compounds like Hofstaðir (*Hof* place) and Hofvin (*Hof* field), must have cultic significance, and should thus be placed alongside other related placename elements like *lundr* (*leah* in Old English) meaning grove; *vé* (OE *wēoh*) meaning a shrine of some kind; *hörgr* (OE *heargh*), meaning a shrine or altar, *vangr* and *vin* often referring to sacred grounds, and perhaps also the element **al* (OE *ealh*) (see, for example, Magnus Olsen 1926: 226-56; Brink 1996: 260-6; Olaf Olsen 1966: 68-115; and Wilson 1992: 5-21). Unlike most of these other words, however, the *hof* is generally interpreted in Old Norse and Icelandic as meaning a building (as in the expression from the Eddic poem *Völuspá*, st. 7: “hörgr og hof/hátimbroðo” (“they constructed high-timbered hörgr and hof”), referring to the first buildings made by the gods after their creation of the earth; see also *Grímnismál*, st.16, and *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 38).³ For this reason, backed up by both placenames and Old Icelandic texts and laws, most scholars up to the middle of the last century felt assured that temples or “cult houses” of some kind must have existed at those sites which had *hof* placenames (see for example Finnur Jónsson 1898). The problem was that almost all of the Viking-Age buildings found by archaeologists at these particular sites in mainland

Scandinavia and Iceland turned out to be simply farmhouses (albeit sometimes relatively large ones, as at Hofstaðir in Northern Iceland; see Bruun and Finnur Jónsson 1909; Lucas 1999; and most recently Orri Vésteinsson 2003). No purely cult buildings came to light. For a time, this encouraged some scholars to argue that the old temples, at least those in Norway and mainland Scandinavia, must be hidden beneath the later churches found in the area, and even that the Norwegian temples must have been transformed into stave churches (on the basis of advice like that meted out by Pope Gregory to Abbot Mellitus who was about to visit England in AD 601; see Bede 1969: 106-9). However, even this seemed to be somewhat unlikely, since few potential cult buildings have come to light beneath those churches that have been examined.⁴ A turning point in the discussion came in 1966 when the Danish scholar Olav Olsen carefully re-reviewed all the proposed evidence for the existence of temple buildings, and concluded that the *hof* must simply have been central farmhouses where sacrificial and other banquets took place. This idea has most recently been underlined by Orri Vésteinsson partly on the basis of the findings at the supposed “temple” site at Hofstaðir in northern Iceland (Orri Vésteinsson 2003), and I see no reason to dispute his main conclusion. What I would like to do here though is go a little further. The idea that these buildings were multifunctional implies that the meaning of their daily space was “transformed” in some way at certain points in time. I would thus like to examine the evidence which might support such a potential transformation. To what degree were these particular farmhouses or *skálar* viewed as having a dual function? Were they actually regarded in Iceland as holy places, or cult or cosmological centres? My argument is based in part on the recent discussions by archaeologists and placename experts about the nature, role and spatial organisation of so-called “central places” in Scandinavia during the pre-Christian early Middle Ages.

Before discussing the Icelandic situation, however, it is necessary to summarise the background or roots of the Icelandic understanding of pagan religious worship, and the main information available about religious cult centres in Scandinavia from the Bronze Age to the later Iron Age, a space of no less than two thousand five hundred years. One of the most commonly quoted passages in this regard is Tacitus’

statement in *Germania*, ch. 9, about the religion of the Germanic tribes in about 100 AD that

they do not ... deem it consistent with the divine majesty to imprison their gods within walls or represent them with anything like human features. Their holy places are the woods and groves, and they call by the name of god that hidden presence which is seen only by the eye of reverence. (Tacitus 1948: 108)

This idea, along with talk of worship and sacrifice of animals, humans and various objects of worth on islands, in lakes and in marshes, is backed up by numerous other references alongside those of Tacitus⁵ by other later commentators such as Orosius, Jordanes and Procopius in the sixth century (see Turville-Petre 1964: 46, 292; and de Vries 1956-1957: 1.409); Alcuin in the eighth century (see Wilson 1992: 40); Ibn Rastah in the tenth century (Jones 1984: 425-30) and Adam of Bremen (1917: 258-60; and 1959: 207-8) in the eleventh century. It finds visual support on the eighth-century Gotland stones, and the tapestry found on the Oseberg ship (c. 835 AD) (see, for example, Nylén and Lamm 1988: 63, and Krafft 1956: 35). The Latin sources tell of the bodies of humans and animals being hung from trees in sacred groves, and human beings, animals and whole armies of weapons being consigned after their destruction to marshes, pools and lakes. New archaeological finds are continuing to give solid support to this, stressing that the tradition of bog and lake offerings in Scandinavia has roots in the Bronze Age, and that there seems to have been a great deal of conservatism in these matters, some places being used continuously for offerings for over five hundred years, often in close vicinity to wooden idols (see, for example Glob 1969: 180-7, Ström 1985: 30 and 33-8, and Todd 1975: 182-208). These outdoor offerings then start decreasing relatively rapidly in the fifth-sixth centuries during the Age of Migrations (Fabech 1998: 151-4, 1999a: 459, and 1999b: 38, and Andrén 2002: 304 and 316-17).

The Stone Age and Bronze Age petroglyphs of southern and northern Scandinavia underline still further the regular use of certain sites for outdoor worship from a very early stage (see for example Helskog 1988 on the Alta petroglyphs; and Hygen and Bengtsson

2000; and Müller-Wille 2002 on the Bronze Age petroglyphs from Sweden and Norway). Recent archaeological examination has shown that many of these sites, like the Iron Age marsh sites, were often marked off by stones or even a fence, underlining the concept of an “inner” and an “outer”, the former being a space that was regarded as being more sacred, or at least “off bounds” (see for example, Hygen and Bengtsson 2000: 156, Müller-Wille 2002: 157-61, and Todd 1972: 133-4).⁶

Further support for the existence of recognised sites for outdoor worship throughout Scandinavia is naturally seen in the placename evidence where words for natural features like those mentioned earlier often appear alone (as in placenames like Lund meaning “grove”) or connected with the names of a god, thus stressing their religious import, as in placenames like Frösakur (Freyr’s field); Torslunda (Þór’s grove); Fresvik (Freyr’s bay); or Nærø (Njörður’s Island) (see Magnus Olsen 1915, and 1926: 226-56; de Vries 1957: 2.53, 116, 155, and 194-5; Olaf Olsen 1966: 89-104; and Brink 1990, 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999). In recent years, a number of archaeologists, historians and onomatologists have suggested that there seems to be a clear pattern to these sites, the cultic importance of which is regularly being supported by archaeological finds.⁷ In short, the sites seem to be so-called “central places” in a well-understood local settlement or region, often in borderline areas, but in close vicinity to key settlements and meeting sites (cf. Figure 1). They were religious centres for a particular group of people; places where the people came into contact with their gods, and gave them gifts. Prior to the fifth century, at least, these sites tend to form part of a “central place complex” (Brink 1999: 425). At that point, there was still no one main centre for the community.

Returning to the placename *hof* (the so-called “temple”): according to Magnus Olsen, the use of the word seems to be a relatively late phenomenon, occurring, it would seem, from the fifth century onwards, especially in Sweden, Norway and Iceland.⁸ Like the other cult-related placenames, these sites, probably related to buildings of some kind, play a key role in the central place complexes.

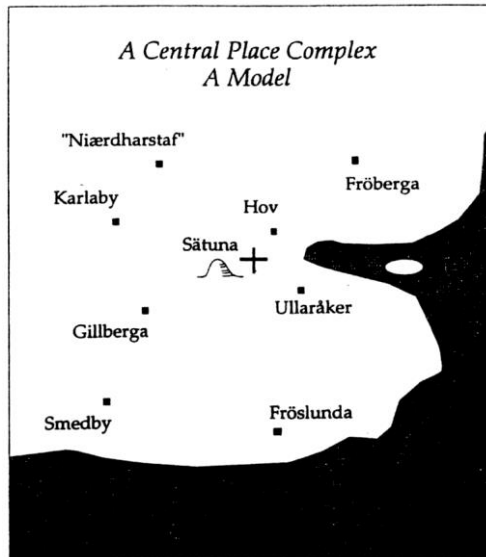


Figure 1, taken with permission from Brink 1996: 242. A model of a (particularly Middle East Swedish) central place complex, indicating typical place names. Niærdharstaf: Njörður's staff; Sätuna: a central meeting field; Fröberga: Freyja's rock; Karlaby: Karl's farm; Smedby: smith's farm; Fröslunda: Freyr's grove; Ullaråker: Ullur's field; Gillberga: meaning uncertain, but a common placename in such complexes.

As other scholars have noted (see for example Brink 1990: 460-74, and 1996: 260-1, and Orri Vésteinsson 2003), the word *hof* probably originally had close connections, if not roots, in another meaning of the word found in western Norwegian dialect and Icelandic, that is to say in the meaning a small hill. However, it is clear that many of the *hof* placename sites in Iceland and elsewhere have no obvious connection to any natural feature of this kind.⁹ In all likelihood, many of the placenames and also the saga version of the word must have a closer relationship to the meaning of the word as it appears in the other Germanic languages, in the sense of a building. Certainly, in recent years, since Olaf Olsen's book questioning the existence of temple buildings appeared in 1966, new archaeological

evidence has started to appear supporting the probable existence of cult buildings of some kind, usually in the form of smallish constructions closely associated with the halls of important chieftains in the late Iron Age. These buildings show few if any signs of daily habitation but contain – or are found in the context of – remains that point to the religious occurrence of offerings, statues, or sacrifices: one can mention in this context the recent finds at Lunda, near Strängnäs and at Uppåkra in southern Sweden; at Säby, Sanda and Borg in East-Central Sweden; at Dejbjerg, Lejre and Tissø in Jylland, and at Gudme on Fyn, all in Denmark; and at Yeavinger in Northumberland, the latter giving some support to Bede’s suggestions in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (c.731 AD) that pagan temples existed in England (on this material, see for example Olaf Olsen 1966: 91-6; and Wilson 1992: 28-36).¹⁰ Interestingly enough, most of these constructions come from the fifth-seventh centuries – the Age of Migrations. It would thus seem that in spite of what Olsen said, “cult houses” of some kind did exist in certain central sites, even if they were not beneath churches and they were not all called “hof”. Furthermore, as Andréén notes, there is all reason to believe that some continuation of worship must have existed around central sites such as these into the time of Christianity (Andréén 2002: 300-5).

There is a vague possibility that these buildings used wholly for a cult purpose represent a development of those buildings that seem to have been often constructed over the dead – or the ashes of the dead – in Iron-Age Scandinavia before the eventual grave mounds were built (see for example Ibn Fablan’s account in Jones 1984: 164-5, Wilson 1992: 44-66, and even the symbolic Bronze-Age house-urns shown in Hygen and Bengtsson 2000: 76). A good example of such a construction is that made to house the dead on the ninth-century Gokstad ship from Norway. Indeed, in this context, it is also worth remembering the comments made by Rimbert in ch. 26 of his *History of the Life of St. Ansgar* (late ninth century) about dead human beings in Sweden being worshipped as gods (Rimbert 1986: 52-4), an idea to which Snorri Sturluson also gives some support in his *Ynglinga Saga* when describing how the “human” god Freyr continued to receive gifts after he had been placed in his grave mound, in order to ensure good luck and fertility (Snorri Sturluson 1941-1951: 1.23-5). Similar

activities seem to have taken place after the death of a small king in southern Norway named Ólafur Geirstaðaálfur (*Flateyjarbók* 1944-1945: 2.75-76). All three accounts can be understood in the context of the grave offerings that we know many Scandinavians gave some of their dead from the Stone Age up until early last century when people in the Norwegian countryside were still placing bread and beer on the local farm grave mound at certain times of the year in order to ensure the well-being of the farm (see references in Gunnell 1995: 140). While the later farmers may not have understood the origin of this activity, it certainly has roots in the Middle Ages (as is implied by *Gulapingslög*, art. 29, quoted above) at the time of the sagas, and must originate with gifts to the dead inhabitant of these particular grave mounds, a figure who was often seen as the first farmer on the site, the superman who first cleared the land for the farm.

The evidence for “cult houses” in mainland Scandinavia, however, does not detract from the fact that this kind of building has yet to be found beside the halls at the *hof* sites in Iceland, at the places where the archaeologists of the past expected to find them. In Iceland it must therefore be assumed that most worship must have taken place inside the hall rather than outside (indeed it is interesting to note how the saga accounts of worship in Norway and Iceland differ in this regard).¹¹

The key accounts of pagan worship as the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century writers believed it took place in pagan times are well known, but worth noting again in the present context. The most famous accounts in this regard are those from the thirteenth-century saga *Eyrbyggja saga* (see below), and the early Icelandic laws known as *Ulfjótsslög*, the latter of which are believed to come, in part, from the pagan era (see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998: 44-50). The former account, which is largely repeated in *Kjalnesinga saga* (fourteenth century; see *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959: 7), runs as follows:

Hann setti bæ mikinn við Hofsvág, er hann kallaði á Hofsstöðum. Þar lét hann reisa hof, ok var þat mikit hús; váru dyrr á hliðvegginum ok nær öðrum endanum; þar fyrir innan stóðu öndvegissúlurnar, ok váru þar í naglar; þeir hétu reginnnaglar; þar var allt friðarstaðr fyrir innan. Innar af

hofinu var hús í þá liking, sem nú er sönghús í kirkjum, ok stóð þar stalli á miðju gólfinu sem altari, ok lá þar á hringr einn mótlauss, tvítögeyringr, ok skyldi þar at sverja eiða alla; þann hring skyldi hofgoði hafa á hendi sér til allra mannfunda. Á stallanum skyldi ok standa hlautbolli, ok þar í hlauttein sem stökull væri, ok skyldi þar stökkva með ór bollanum blóði því, er hlaut var kallat; þat var þess konar blóð, er svæfð váru kvikendi, er goðanum var fórnat. Umhverfis stallan var goðanum skipat í afhúsinu. Til hofsins skyldu allir menn tolla gjalda ok vera skyldir hofgoðanum til allra ferða, sem nú eru þingmenn höfðingum, en goði skyldi hofi upp halda af sjálfs síns kostnaði, svá at eigi rénaði, ok hafa inni blótveizlur. (Eyrbyggja saga 1935: 8-9)

Pórolfur ... set up a large farm by the cove, Hofsvogur, which he called Hofstaðir (the *hof* place). There he had a *hof* built, and it was a sizeable building, with a door on the side-wall near the gable. The *öndvegissúlur* (high seat pillars) were placed inside the door, and nails, that were called holy nails, were in these. Beyond that point, the *hof* was a sanctuary. At the inner end there was a structure similar to the choir in churches nowadays and there was a raised platform in the middle of the floor like an altar, where a ring weighing twenty ounces and fashioned without a join was placed, and all oaths had to be sworn on this ring. It also had to be worn by the *hof* priest at all public gatherings. A *hlautbolli* (sacrificial bowl) was placed on the platform and in it a *hlauttein* (sacrificial twig) – like a priest's *apergillum* – which was used to sprinkle blood from the bowl. This blood, which was called *hlaut* (sacrificial blood), was the blood of live animals offered to the *goð* (gods). The *goð* were placed around the platform in the choir-like structure within the *hof*. All the men had to pay a toll to the *hof* and they were obliged to support the *hofgoði* (*hof* chieftain) in all his movements, just as *þingmenn* (parliament members) are now obliged to do for their *goði*. The *hofgoði* was responsible for the upkeep of the temple and ensuring it was maintained properly, as well as for holding

sacrificial feasts in it. (Based on the translation by Judy Quinn in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* 1997: 5. 133-4.)

One of three articles from *Ulfjótsslög*, believed by many to be the earliest Icelandic law from c. 930 (quoted in *Landnámabók – Hauksbók*, early fourteenth century, and *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts* [see *Flateyjarbók* 1944-1945: I.274-5]; and *Brot af Þórðar sögu hreðu* in the *Vatnshyrna MS [Íslendingasögur og þættir* 1998, 2004], both late fourteenth century) states the following, adding more about the actual proceedings:

Baugr tvieyringr eða meiri skyldi liggja í hverju höfuðhofi á stalla; þann baug skyldi hverr goði hafa á hendi sér til lögþinga allra, þeira er hann skildi sjálfr heyrja, ok rjóða hann þar áðr í roðru nautsblóts þess, er hann blótaði þar sjálfr. Hverr sá maðr, er þar þurfti lögskil af hendi at leysa at domi, skyldi áðr eið vinna at þeim baugi ok nefna sér váttu tvá eða fleiri. “Nefni ek í þat vætti,” skyldi hann segja, “at ek vinn eið at baugi, lögeið; hjálpi mér svá Freyr ok Njörðr ok hinn ámáttki áss, sem ek mun svá sök þessa sækja eða verja eða vitni bera eða kviðu eða dóma, sem ek veit réttast ok sannast ok helzt at lögum, ok öll lögmæt skil af hendi leysa, þau er undir mik koma, meðan ek em á þessu þingi. (Landnamabók 1986: 312-15)

A ring of two ounces in weight or more should lie in on the platform in each main *hof*; the priest should have this ring on his arm at all legal assemblies which he himself was responsible for, and he himself should redden it beforehand with the red blood of an ox which he himself had sacrificed there. Every man who needed to perform any legal business at the court should first swear an oath on that ring and name two or more witnesses. He should say, “I name witnesses that I swear an oath on the ring, a lawful oath; so help me Freyr and Njörðr and the almighty god insofar as I shall prosecute this case or defend it or bear witness or give verdicts or pass sentences, as I know to be most right and true and closest to the law; and perform all lawful acts that fall upon me while I am at

the assembly. (Based on the translation of Jón Hannesson, in Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999: 34-5.)

The act of sacrifice itself is further outlined in *Hákonar saga goða* in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* (c.1230) which gives another similar account of sacrifice as Snorri believed it to have occurred in a *hof* in Trøndelag in Norway:

Þat var forn siðr, þá er blót skyldi vera, at allir bændr skyldu þar koma, sem hof var, ok flytja þannug föng sín, þau er þeir skyldu hafa, meðan veizlan stóð. At veizlu þeiri skyldu allir menn öl eiga. Þar var ok drepinn alls konar smali ok hross, en blóð þat allt, er þar kom af, þá var kallat hlaut, ok hlautbollar þat, er blóð þat stóð í, ok hlautteinar, þat var svá gört sem stökklar, með því skyldi rjóða stalla öllu saman ok svá veggj hofsins útan ok innan ok svá stökkva á mennina, en slátr skyldi sjóða til mannfagnaðar. Eldar skyldu vera á miðju gólfi í hofinu ok þar katlar yfir. Skyldi full um eld bera, en sá, er gerði veizluna ok höfðingi var, þá skyldi hann signa fullit ok allan blótmatinn, skyldi fyrst Óðins full – skyldi þat drekka til sigrs ok ríkis konungi sínum – en síðan Njarðar full ok Freys full til árs ok friðar. Þá var mörgum mönnum títt at drekka þar næst bragafull. Menn drukku ok full frænda sinna, þeira er heygðir höfðu verit, ok váru þat minni kölluð. (Snorri Sturluson 1941-1951: 1.167-8)

It was an ancient custom that when a sacrifice was to be held, that all farmers should come to the site of the temple and bring all the food that they would need for the duration of the feast. Everyone should have ale at that feast. They also slew all kinds of cattle and horses there, and the blood that came from them was called *hlaut*, and the bowls which contained the blood were called *hlautbollar* (sacrificial bowls), and *hlauttein* (sacrificial twigs), those objects made like sprinklers; the platforms should be reddened with these and also the walls of the *hof* both inside and out, and the people should also be sprinkled; while the meat should be boiled for the gathering. There should be fires in the middle of the floor and kettles over these. The drinks for the

toasts (*full*) should be carried over the fire and chieftain who was organising the feast should bless the drinks and all the sacrificial meal, first of all Óðinn's toast (which should be drunk to his king for his victory and state) and then the toasts for Njörður and Freyr for good seasons and peace. Many people would then next drink Bragi's toast; and they also drank toasts to their kinsmen who had been laid to rest in grave mounds. That was called *minni* (a memorial toast). (My translation.)

The accounts above have been included here essentially for the images they give of the activities that people believed took place in the Icelandic *hof* (see further Hultgård 1996 on the early accounts of cult activities). One notes that all of these accounts suggest the existence of a purely sacred building of the kind so far only found outside of Iceland. The key features in the first account are the *öndvegissúlur* (high seat pillars), the *reginnaglar* (holy nails) attached to these, the *stallur* (platform), the *goð* (idols?), the armring which the *hofgoði* (*hof* chieftain-priest) is supposed to wear when officiating, the *hlauttein* (sacrificial twig), the *bolli* (bowl) and the blood that is scattered. *Ulfjótsslög*, meanwhile, says nothing about idols, the *hlauttein*, the *súlur*, or the *reginnaglar* but underlines again the importance of the ring, and the oaths to Freyr, Njörður and “*hinn ámátteki áss*” (“the almighty god”). The *blót* or act of sacrifice has been covered effectively earlier by my predecessor, Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1997, 1998, and 1999: 16-22), and nothing more will be said about it here. Worth noting, however, is the emphasis on the sacrificial feast, and the way the arm ring is seen as a key means of temporarily transforming the *goði* into something more powerful as part of religious activities.

As has been noted above, most scholars (see for example Rousell 1943: 220, Olaf Olsen 1966 and 1969, Brink 1996: 260; and most recently Orri Vésteinsson 2003) believe that the real Icelandic *hof* at least must have been essentially a large central hall (like that in Hofstaðir, in northern Iceland) in which people lived, but where also politically and alcoholically charged sacrificial banquets were held for large numbers of people at particular times of year, for example during the *veturnætur* (winter nights) in late October, at midwinter, and at other religious festivals.¹² But is there any evidence that the

building was seen as being anything more than a good restaurant in the lead-up to Christmas: that it, like the *goði*, could have been temporarily transformed into a sacred building of the kind described in the above saga accounts?

As part of this discussion, it is worth bearing in mind certain differences that existed between the pagan religious situation as it existed in Iceland, and that which people had known in mainland Scandinavia, something underlined by the fact that the belief in the deeply rooted guardian spirit on Scandinavian farms (known in later times as the *gardvord*, *rudningskarl*, *tomte* or *nisse*) does not seem to have come to Iceland with the settlers alongside the enduring beliefs in other environmentally related Scandinavian spirits such as *álfar* or *náttúruvættir* (elves), the *mara* (or nightmare), the *marbendill* (or merman), the *nykrar* (the *nøkker* or kelpies) and the *selfólk* (seal people). This is related to the fact that the guardian spirit, or *nisse*, had very close links to the environment, more precisely the main farm gravemound (often stemming from the Bronze or early Iron Age). As noted earlier, later practices stress that these guardian spirits commonly received nutritional offerings at certain times of the year to guarantee their help in coming times. Interestingly enough, those Scandinavians who settled in Shetland and Orkney (islands already rich in ancient gravemounds) in the early Middle Ages seem to have continued this belief in the form of the protective *brownies* or *haugbuar*. Iceland and the Faroes, on the other hand, were virgin territory; they had no such ancient mounds with a long history of worship behind them, and there was thus no basis for the beliefs in the *nisse* or *brownie* to develop (see further Sigrún Gylfadóttir 2003). The family-worshipped mounds however, were not the only thing that the settlers left behind. They were also departing from their culturally mapped out central place complex, and the old but deeply rooted outdoor (and by this time maybe also indoor) cult sites. They were coming to a place that had no geographically related oral history, no religious, inherited past; and no family tradition. It was quite different from the “old” country.

It is interesting to note the accounts of the first settlers given in the Icelandic *Landnámabók* (*The Book of Settlements*) from the eleventh-twelfth centuries which mentions a number of place names containing the word *hof*.¹³ The account quoted above from *Eyrbyggja saga* states

that the *hof* at Hofstaðir in Þórsnes contained *goð*, or idols of the gods like those accounts given in the sagas of the Norwegian kings describing the Norwegian *hof* in Trøndelag and Gudbrandsdal (see for example Snorri Sturluson 1941-1951: 1.317-18, and 2.188-9, trans. in Snorri Sturluson 1932: 170, and 331-3, on the idols of Þórr). One notes, however, the total absence of any accounts in *Landnámabók* telling of settlers bringing large religious idols with them (the only possible exception being Þórólfur Mostrarskegg's *öndvegissúlur* carved with the image of the god Þórr, mentioned in *Landnámabók* 1986: 124), even if they were said to be *hofgoðar* or "hof-priests". The same applies to the accounts given above about *hof* from *Ulfjótslög* and *Hákons saga goða* neither of which mentions idols. This raises the question of exactly where the focus of the worship of the god is placed in these accounts. If anywhere, it is on the revered man who donned the arm ring.

So why are no idols mentioned? The answer is probably that if they existed (and there is good reason to believe that they did in Norway, just as they certainly existed in Iron Age Denmark; see for example Todd 1975: 196, and Glob 1969: 180-7), then they, like the farm guardian's gravemound, were seen as being part of the old home environment, part of the rooted religious surroundings of the local central place, be it inside or outside. It would have been impossible to remove them without causing deep trouble. At least six of the settlers, however, probably those with a prior position of responsibility at home, seem to have found another way of bringing the "holiness" of their central place with them. According to the accounts in *Landnámabók* (1986: 42-5, 124-5, 232, 302, 312, 317, and 371; see also 307 and 163-4), they came accompanied by their so-called *öndvegissúlur* or "high seat pillars", and used these objects, whatever they were, as a means of guiding them to the places in which they felt fated to settle, by throwing them overboard as they approached land. They then set up home near where they found them.¹⁴

There has been much discussion about the actual nature of these *öndvegissúlur*. Most people, however, agree that the *öndvegi* or high seat must have been the place in the hall where the chieftain or *goði* sat, a place which in later times in mainland Scandinavia was on a platform at the shorter inner end of the hall, but in earlier times seems to have been in the centre of the long wall or in the corner of the

room (see Herschend 1995, and 1997: 29-52). The *öndvegissúlur* or high seat pillars are thus reckoned to have been the pillars on either side of this “high seat”, possibly simultaneously key pillars holding up the building (see for example Valtýr Guðmundsson 1889: 184-6, Arnheiður Sigurðardóttir 1966: 32, Simek 1993: 288, and Herschend 1995, 1997a and 1997b). Their religious importance is underlined, amongst others, by the account in *Eyrbyggja saga* (1935: 7; see also *Landnámabók* 1986: 124-5) telling of Þórólfur Móstrarskegg’s pillars which were supposedly adorned with images of Þórr, and how these had a key rôle in Þórólfur’s *hof*. The same religious importance is reflected in the account of another chieftain by the name of Ingimundur *gamli* (“the Old”) in *Vatnsdæla saga* (1939: 42; see also *Landnámabók* 1968: 219) who finds an image of the god Freyr in the ground at precisely the site where he intends to place the *öndvegissúlur* in his *hof*. The importance of the earth beneath the pillars is also stressed in the account about how Þórólfur Móstrarskegg in *Eyrbyggja saga* (1935: 7) also brought along to Iceland with him the soil that his pillars had originally stood in. The same idea is echoed by another account in *Landnámabók* (1986: 307) about a *hof*-priest called Þórhaddur, who supposedly took both the high seat pillars and the earth beneath them from the central *hof* in Mæri (Mære), near Trondheim in Norway when he came to Iceland.

The stress on the earth in these latter accounts brings to mind the fact that several archaeological excavations of Scandinavian central halls and cult houses over the last thirty years or so have discovered shards of valuable glass and tiny gold foils with pictures stamped on them (so-called *gullgubber*) when excavating the earth beneath certain of the pillars in these buildings (see Herschend 1995: 225-7, Stamsö Munch 1991: 328-9, Hansen 1996, and Hansen 1990 on finds at Helgö, Borg, Dejbjerg and Dankirke). All of these objects are seen as having particular religious or cultic significance (see for example Watt 2002). Obviously, then, the soil beneath certain pillars in these buildings was charged in some way (see further below).

Another point to bear in mind when considering the *öndvegissúlur* is that wherever they originally stood, they were once rooted in the earth of the central homeland. Further back they were rooted in a homeland forest or grove. Arguably, they brought an element of the old central home and its protective “power” with them. In many

ways, this parallels the nostalgic interest in remembering other family roots abroad that is regularly displayed in the sagas. In essence, the earth and the pillars in the *hof* were all of the old nature-based religion that could be brought with the settlers. At the same time, one sees in the central siting of the pillars in the *hof* the old cultically charged landscape being symbolically transferred into a man-made building.

In many ways, this development echoes another movement that was already under way for other reasons back in Scandinavia several centuries before, as local chieftains were beginning to be taken over by local kings, and eventually national kings (see Näsman 1998). As noted earlier, in the fifth and sixth centuries, the old bog sacrifices seem to be dying out. As Charlotte Fabech argues, this “change in cult coincides with the introduction of the hall at the magnates’ farms ...” as “during the sixth century, the cult leaders, local magnates or kings were able to move religious ceremonies into their residence” (Fabech 1999a: 459). Herschend (1999: 334), particularly intrigued by the changing nature of the hall as a centre for religious and political activities at this time, notes that the new central farms “give rise to a new layer of religious landscape expressed as a social and economic landscape characterised by a number of halls of a certain sacred character. These halls are ... kind of man-made points of gravity in the landscape and they are loaded with ritual presence ...” To Herschend’s mind, the halls and their landscape are “the late Iron Age contribution to cosmology.”

The new settlers of Iceland came from countless different old political regions and, to start with, often tended to be independent units, operating essentially “for themselves” around their own personal centres (indeed, the old centre was arguably now symbolically enshrined in the new house if they brought their pillars with them). However, as Orri Vésteinsson has recently argued (2003), working along similar lines to Brink, Fabech, and Herschend, it was not long before exactly the same process as that which had earlier taken place in mainland Scandinavia began taking place in Iceland. Those regions or areas of settlement that had not already got obvious leaders at the time of settlement needed to gain them, first and foremost as a means of representing the area in the developing system of *þing* meetings, and secondly to organise the local settlement as a

form of regional body. As Orri notes, those placenames in Iceland involving the element *hof* are rarely the sites of the most powerful original settlement in the area. They seem to have come later, either as a challenge to the existing ruling figures or as a new essential part of the local central landscape, in many places very close to the site of the local meeting place, something that also applies to the siting of many of the old cult sites around the central areas in mainland Scandinavia. According to Orri, the *hof* were essentially places where a chieftain, or prospective chieftain, wined and dined those he represented or wanted to represent (Orri Vésteinsson 2003).

However, in the pagan community of ninth- and tenth-century Iceland, political and legislative power appears to have been sanctioned by religious power. The Icelandic *goði* was both a chieftain *and* a priest, and, if we follow the arguments mentioned above, his worldly hall was also a form of religious “temple”. If the description in *Eyrbyggja saga* given earlier has any basis in fact, the hall would also have been the place where the platform (*stallur*) and the empowering arm ring resided, and where the *öndvegissúlur* from the old religious home area stood. Moving on from this, I think that there is also good reason to believe that like most places of worship in other religions (see Eliade 1958: 379; and Hedeager 2002: 10), the central *hof* was seen by people simultaneously as being both a farm, and a symbolic pagan microcosmos (somewhat like a theatre stage which has the gift of being two places at once in the minds of the audience, at least during the duration of the performance¹⁵).

As Fabeck argues (1999a: 458; see also Herschend 1999: 334), echoing to some extent the structural view of the Icelandic farmer’s world as suggested by Hastrup (1985: 136-54), Gurevich (1985: 47) and Hedeager (2002), in the worldview of pre-Christian Scandinavian society, the farmstead formed a central point in the cosmos, similar to the way that *Miðgarður* (our world) and *Ásgarður* (the home of the gods) formed a centre surrounded by a dangerous outer world of wild natural and supernatural forces. Herschend (1999: 334) has a slightly different, but no less relevant picture of *Ásgarður*, *Miðgarður* and *Útgarður* all representing different centres in a similar landscape rather than different worlds. He goes on to draw comparisons with the way medieval Christianity regularly viewed the world and its holy buildings in a cosmological sense, whereby the church represented

not only a ship, or an ark, but also a visual three-dimensional cosmological map of the Christian universe, past and present, designed to educate and initiate the medieval congregation. To Herschend's mind (1999: 334), "the congregation in the church must be paralleled with the guest in the hall, and the hall owner replaced by Christ".

Certainly, it is important to be wary of going too far with Christian comparisons when analysing Old Norse religion. There is no doubt that the wording of many of the descriptions of pagan "temples" both in sagas such as *Eyrbyggja saga* and even in near contemporary accounts like parts of Adam of Bremen's description of the famous pagan temple in Uppsala are strongly coloured by the writers' knowledge of Christian churches. However, there is just as little doubt that the pagan Scandinavians, like the native Americans and the Sami bear hunters, must have had a sense of symbolic landscapes, even within a hall, in which some areas were seen as being more charged, more sacred, than others. This has recently been demonstrated by the earlier-mentioned distribution of finds in some of the large chieftains' halls that have been excavated in mainland Scandinavia, especially those from Borg in Lofoten, Norway, and in Helgö in Sweden. In both places, as in other key halls, multiple finds of the tiny gold foils (*gullgubber*) mentioned earlier have been made. The general belief today is that these objects, which are being found ever more regularly in recent years, represent a form of religious offering (see, for example, Watt 1999 and 2002), similar perhaps to the stamped copper foils offered by visitors to Greek monasteries in our own time. As noted above, one particularly interesting feature about them is that in some places the foils have been found beneath certain pillars of the main living halls of central halls. At Borg and Helgö, they were found scattered around a particular corner of the room (see Herschend 1995: 225-7; and Stamsö Munch 1991: 328-9). Clear parallels are seen in the positioning of coin finds in an early Christian church that was dug up in Överkyrke, in Västergötland, Sweden (see Andrén 1998: 386-7), concentrated just around the site of the main crucifix at the entrance to the chancel, where most offerings were made to the church. There is every reason to believe that the same applied to the positioning of the gold foils in the hall.

So what was in this corner where the gold foils were found? Herschend argues that this must have been the site of the high seat, in other words near where the high seat pillars stood, and where the *goði* (chieftain-priest), the earthly representative of the *goð* (god) sat (see Herschend 1997a: 49-55).¹⁶ Whether this was so or not, it again underlines the fact that some places in the hall were seen as being more charged or “sacred” than others. Herschend (1997a: 53-5) goes on to argue that the same sense of different symbolic areas existing within a hall can be seen in the careful placement of grave goods around certain bodies during the Age of Migrations, apparently echoing the positioning of objects in a house. Herschend’s argument is that the grave was a symbolic house, an idea supported by the earlier-mentioned construction of houses on cremation sites, or on ships, and the common saga accounts of dead warriors living on in their graves ready to defend their goods against grave robbers.



Figure 2. The position of the *dvergur* (pl.) in the hall (drawn by Karen Bek-Pedersen).

There is, however, yet another feature of the hall which has so far not been discussed, but underlines still further the idea implied above that

the Icelanders, Norwegians and Danes, at least, saw a comparison between the concrete structure of the hall and the pagan cosmological world. The feature in question comes in the form of the name, *dvergar* (pl.; singular: *dvergur*) which is used for the small blocks of wood which stood on the rafters of the twelfth-century farmhouse (and almost certainly those in earlier times), and held up the *ás*, or main beam of the roof (see Figure 2).

The earliest reference to the use of *dvergar* (dwarves) in this sense is in the twelfth-century work *Íslensk hómiliúbók* (The Icelandic Book of Homilies), in an example sermon which ironically explains the symbolic message that the church building as a whole offers to the congregation:

Dvertré, er skorða staflægur og upphalda dvergum, er ás styðja, merkja þá menn í kristinni, er efla veraldarhöfðingja í ráðum, en heilög munklíf í auðæfum. (Íslensk hómiliúbók 1993: 150; see also Homiliu-bók 1872: 100-1)

The rafter which strengthens the lower beams (*staflægur*) and holds up the dwarves, which support the main beam (*ás*), means those people in Christianity who strengthen worldly chieftains with advice, and the holy life of monks in riches. (My translation.)

There can be no doubt that this name was regularly used in later times for these objects in farm buildings, not only in Iceland, but also in Norway and Denmark (see Aasen 1983: 120 and 923; Norsk ordbok 1966-: 2.279, Torp 1919, and Feilberg 1886-1914: 1.220; and Orðabók háskólans: <http://lexis.is>). It was obviously deeply rooted. There is no doubt either that its use is a direct reference to the statement in Snorri Sturluson's early thirteenth-century *Prose Edda*, that the sky – or rather the skull of the primal giant Ymir – is held up by four dwarves: Norðri, Suðri, Austri and Vestri (North, South, East and West; see Snorri Sturluson 1926: 14 and 90, where the sky is literally referred to as “byrði dverganna”, or “the burden of the dwarves”).¹⁷ This in turn demonstrates that people saw symbolic parallels between the roof of the hall (centring around the high *ás* beam) and the the sky or heavens (similar to the ceilings of Icelandic churches which in later times were often painted with stars). It is

worth noting that the word *ás* (main roof beam) also means god, although the plurals are different, the first being “*ásar*”, the latter being “*Æsir*”.

This encourages further consideration of other potential symbolic parallels that people may also have had in mind in the buildings, and not least the already weightily significant carved *öndvegissúlur* which reached up to the rafters below the *dvergar*. In this new context, it is hard to avoid placing them alongside the image of the enormous strangely flowering central oak tree that is said to have grown up to the rafters in the hall of Óðinn’s supposed royal grandson, the legendary king *Völsungur*, in *Völsunga saga*.

Svá er sagt, at Völsungr konungr lét gera höll eina ágæta ok með þeim hætti, at ein eik mikil stóð í höllinni ok límar trésins með fögrum blómum stóðu út um ræfr hallarinnar, en leggrinn stóð niður í höllina, ok kölluðu þeir þat barnstokk ... (Völsunga saga 1943: 6-7)

It is said that King *Völsungur* had a magnificent hall made, in such a way that there was a huge oak in the hall and the branches of the tree, with beautiful flowers, spread out amidst the rafters of the hall, and the trunk stood in the hall, and they called that “*barnstokk*” (childtrunk?). (My translation.)¹⁸

Casting the mind’s eye further down to the foot of the pillars there is the *öndvegi*, or high seat, itself (see Figure 3) and the *goð(i)* (god/priest-chieftain) seated before the flickering long fire, and in front of the pool-like cauldron that one can expect to have hung close by. If the two high seat pillars were carved with images of the gods (as *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Landnámabók* suggest) one faces a potential trinity of “sacred” figures (like the gods in Adam of Bremen’s image of the “temple” in Uppsala, and those in the oaths and toasts of *Ulfjótstög* and *Hákonar saga góða*). Furthermore, considering the evidence of the skaldic poem *Húsdrápa* in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, *Gísla saga* (1943: 42), and the pictorial tapestry found in the Oseberg ship burial in Norway (see Krafft 1956), one can assume that the hall/*hof* might also have had other wooden carvings and/or hangings depicting mythological subjects around the walls, especially at the

times of key festivals or when other people of lower status visited to share in a sacrificial banquet (cf. the accounts of the *Disarblót* given in *Piðrandi þáttur* and *Víga-Glúms* saga, for example; see further Gunnell 2003).

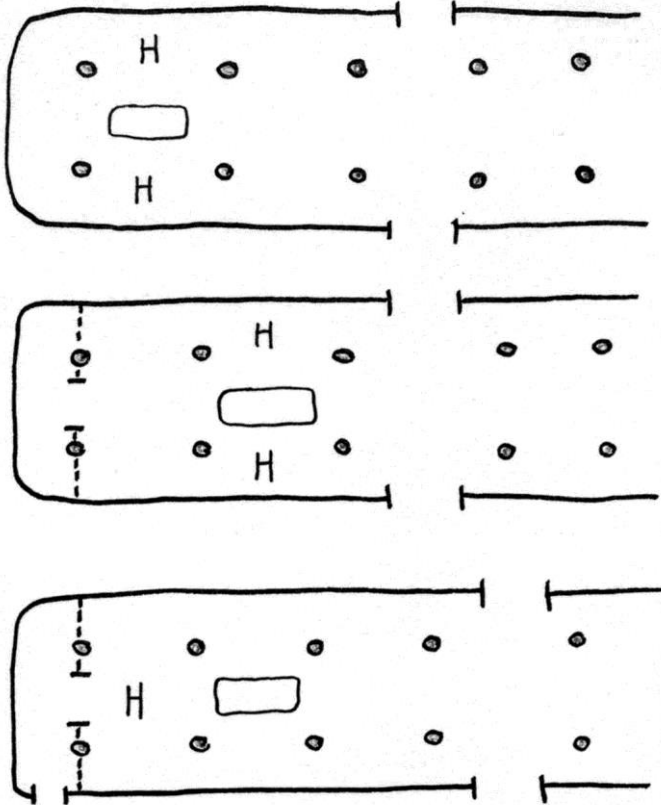


Figure 3. Possible positions of the high seat (H). The oblong indicates the fire and the circles indicate the pillars. Drawn by Karen Bek-Pedersen after Herschend 1997a: 51.

This might appear to be a little neat, but all the evidence suggests that the potential microcosmos is there for the taking, just as it is in

the Christian church, the Navajo *hogan*, the Cree tent, the Hopi Pueblo or the Siberian Ob-Ugrian house. But have we any solid evidence beyond the linguistic suggestions and *Ulfjótsslög* to support the idea of the *goði* himself taking on the role of the god; that at times, he might have formed part of this secular and religious double world? In this connection, it is worth noting two things. First of all, there are the recurring images of the dancing, horn-helmeted man with two sticks in the seventh-century helmet-plate matrix from Torslunda, Sweden, on the Finglesham bracelet from England, and on the ninth-century Oseberg tapestry from Norway, just to mention three examples found over a wide area of territory over a space of about two hundred years (see Gunnell 1995: 36-80). The common interpretation of this figure is that he represents a priest in the role of the god Óðinn (with two bird heads on the ends of the horns on the helmet, and possibly one eye, at least in the Torslunda example), dancing with spears or sticks in his hands alongside an animal-skinned *berserker* warrior. Certainly, full-sized helmet masks from the Bronze and Iron Age have been found in bogs in Viksö, Denmark and at Sutton Hoo in England, and animal masks have come to light in Hedeby in Denmark (see Gunnell 1995: 44 and 73). If the horned figure here is a priest, then the evidence from Torslunda and Oseberg implies the basic element of role-taking by two figures – perhaps a priest initiating a warrior. The key point is that the horned figure would then seem to be both a priest and Óðinn at once; the other both a man and an animal, a literal shape-changer.

I have argued elsewhere that such dramatic activities involving the role-taking of gods (over and above the suggestion implied by the official titles *goði* and *gyðja*) are backed up still further by the evidence of the direct speech *ljóðaháttur*-metre monologues and dialogues contained in the collection of Eddic poetry, which was recorded in the thirteenth century, but almost certainly in many cases has roots in pagan times. Many believe that the form of these poems might well have roots in earlier initiation and seasonal rituals (see further Gunnell 1995). Whatever performance context these works had in the thirteenth century, they still involve the earlier “gods” speaking directly to the listeners of a later time, in some cases enumerating mystical, cosmological and ritually-based wisdom, as in works like *Grímnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Skírnismál*, *Sigrdrífumál*

and *Rúnatal Hávamála*, the last three of which involve detailed descriptions of the enaction of rune magic. Dramatic monologues and dialogues like these, even when recited or chanted in a thirteenth-century hall, create their own symbolic setting. The same would have applied in a *hof*-hall before the arrival of Christianity. The presenter of *Grímnismál*, “Óðinn”, visually stands simultaneously in both the mythological hall of King Geirröður and in the later hall of the listeners. As noted earlier, up above him are the *dvergar*, both wooden and mythological, holding up both the solid roof and the mythological heavens, above the wooden pillars which came from the old Norwegian central place, both practical and symbolic of the world tree Yggdrasil (cf. Irmunsul: see note 18). The day after such a performance, with the return of daylight and the fading of the alcoholic haze that would have added to the liminality of the moment, the *hof* would be a hall again, and the priest an ordinary farmer. But the visual moment of the presentation in the high seat (whether we refer to it as the *öndvegi*, Óðinn’s high seat Hlíðskjálf, or simply as the *þularstóll* [reciter’s seat] referred to in the poem *Hávamál*, st. 111) would be indelible, and underlined the political standing of the speaker in the eyes of the local inhabitants of his central area. That was one of the gains of moving religion from nature into the hall.

In short, then, even considering the fragmentary evidence presented here, there was no direct need for separate “temple” buildings to have existed in pagan Iceland. The archetypal *hof* and old natural cultic place was already implicit in the structure of the hall.

University of Iceland

Notes

- 1 A shortened version of this article was presented at the International Saga Conference in Bonn in July 2003. In its original form, it was presented as a lecture at the Traditional Cosmology Society conference on “Structure and Belief in Northern Europe” at the University of Edinburgh in February 2003.
- 2 See *Landnámabók* 1986; trans. in *The Book of Settlements* 1972.

- 3 It is interesting that the gods construct *hörgar* and *hof* rather than halls. This might lend further support to the *hof* being essentially a gathering place (cf. the so-called *leikskálar*, or games halls, which seem to have been buildings specially constructed to house visitors at public games gatherings; see Gunnell 1995: 31) for the sharing of food and drink, rather than simply places of prayer and worship. Indeed, one wonders whom the gods were expected to worship in these buildings. On the other hand, as *Völuspá* shows, the gods are clearly aware of the need for meetings and cooperation at times of difficulty. For the Eddic poems, see *Eddadigte* 1964 and 1971; translations are available in *The Poetic Edda* 1996.
- 4 As Olaf Olsen (1966: 245-75, and 1969) noted, the cases of Mære near Trondheim and Uppsala in Sweden might be exceptions. See more recently, Andrén 2002: 320-9, which includes details about recent findings at the church in Frösö in Jämtland, Sweden; and Nordahl 1996 on the recent discoveries in Gamla Uppsala.
- 5 For the references from Tacitus, see *Germania*, chs. 7, 9-12, 12, 40 and 43; and *The Annals*, ch. 3, for example in Tacitus 1970, 1948 and 1925-1937.
- 6 In this context, note the use of the word *stafgarður* for a fenced off area of worship in the early *Gutasaga* (“troðu menn a hult ok a hauga, vi ok stafgarða ok a haiþin guð”; i.e. “people believed in groves and mounds, shrines and *stafgarðar* and pagan gods”: *Guta saga* 1999: 4-5, and Hultgård 1996: 33); and the *Gutalög* law (see *Guterlov og Gutersaga* 1910: 31-2). Note also the similar expression “friðgeard” referring to a fenced area containing a rock, tree or spring, in an early Northumbrian law; see Olaf Olsen 1966: 84.
- 7 See for example Brink 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999, Andrén 1998, 1999 and 2002, Fabeck 1998, 1999a and 1999b, Näsman 1998, and Herschend 1997a, 1997b and 1999. See recently on the finds at Lunda near Strängnäs: <http://www.raa.se/uv/lunda2002> (last viewed in April 2004).
- 8 There are five examples in Shetland, and only one in the Færoes, as opposed to over eighty farms in Norway named simply *Hof* and twenty-three in Iceland. Compounds such as Torshof and Hofstaðir increase this number considerably; see Orri Vésteinsson 2003, Olafur Briem 1985: 151-2, Jakobsen 1901, and Magnus Olsen 1926: 227-56.

- 9 In this context, it is interesting to note the fact that the early *Gulapingslög* (ch. 29) states that “blot er oss oc kviðiat at ver skulum eigi blota heiðit guð ne hauga ne horga”, in other words “sacrifices must not be made to pagan gods, *haugar* or *hörgar*”: see *Den eldre Gulatingslova* 1994: 52. The word *hof* in the similar alliterating couplet from the poems *Völuspá* and *Vafþrúðnismál* (see above) is thus replaced by another word for a small hill or mound, but now a mound containing a dead person. As will be noted later, there is every reason to believe that small buildings were also often constructed around the dead before they were interred in a grave mound.
- 10 See Larsson 2001a and 2002 on Uppåkra, Nielsen 1996, Nielsen and Lindeblad 1999 on Borg, Hansen 1993 and 1996 on Dejbjerg, Christensen 1991: 48-50 on Lejre, Jørgensen 1998, 2001 and 2002 on Tissø, Åqvist 1996 on Säby and Sanda, Sørensen 1994, Thrane 1998 on Gudme, and Hope-Taylor 1977: 97-102, 277-80, and Wilson 1992: 45-7 on Yeavinger. See also <http://www.raa.se/uv/lunda2002> last viewed in April 2004 on the recent Lunda finds.
- 11 Certainly *Landnámabók* (1986: 358) refers to offerings to waterfalls, *Kristni saga* (see *Biskupa sögur* 1858-1878: 1.5) has a reference to a helpful spirit known as an *ármaður* living in a rock, *Kormáks saga* (1939: 288-9) refers directly to sacrifices to elves also living in a rock, and *Kjalnesinga saga* (1959: 7) contains an intriguing reference to a sacrificial pool. Furthermore, there are several placenames showing that parts of nature were dedicated to gods as occurred elsewhere, but the key cult activities referred to in accounts from the sagas do not seem to have taken place at these sites. These all seem to be private places of worship rather than public sites.
- 12 See further Orri Vésteinsson 2001: 332-3, and Lucas 1999: 24 on the animal remains and animal skulls found at Hofstaðir which point to the fact that the cattle were ritually beheaded, their skulls later being used to decorate the walls of the building. As Orri points out, this would appear to support the idea that ritual activities also took place in the vicinity of this otherwise normal, if large, hall. These activities would seem to be connected to a sacrificial feast.
- 13 Orri Vésteinsson (2003) notes forty-one examples of Hof placenames in Iceland: twenty-four Hof, thirteen Hofstaðir, and six placenames with Hof in other compounds such as Hofakur, Hofdæli, Hofgarðar, Hofteigur, Hoffell, and Hofströnd.

- 14 See further Strömbäck 1928. There is no reason for doubting that this practice occurred. Studies of folk customs show that people in many parts of Sweden believed that similar approaches had been used for deciding the local sites for their farms and churches; see Nyman and Campbell 1976: 1.12-16, 2.37-42.
- 15 Also worth noting in this context is the way medieval churches became the world as an effective symbolic setting for the liturgical drama of France, England and Germany; see, for example, Ogden 2002: 35-121. See also Árni Einarsson 1997, and the reference to *Íslensk hómilíubók* below on the symbolic meaning of houses in Christian works.
- 16 It can be no coincidence that the priest-chieftain was referred to as a *goði*, and the priestess as a *gyðja*. The latter word is also used for a goddess, and there can be little question that the former is also drawn from the word *goð*. See further Jakob Benediktsson 1974: 172, and Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989: 265. The term *goði* was clearly more widespread than was previously thought. In addition to Iceland, it was used in at least both Sweden and Denmark in this religious meaning; see the Swedish evidence from both placenames and rune stones in Brink 1997: 428, 1998: 308 and 316-17, and 1999: 424-7 and 430-1, and in Fabech 1999a: 462-3 and 1998: 158-9.
- 17 For a translation of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* in this connection, see Snorri Sturluson 1987: 12 and 88.
- 18 Further comparisons might be made to the image of the enormous sacred tree of the Saxons, *Irmunsul*, which was destroyed by Charlemagne; see Turville-Petre 1972, and the references in Grimm 1882: 115-19.

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Opposites and Mediators in Old Norse Mythology

KAREN BEK-PEDERSEN

The paper concerns the number three. It seeks an explanation for the number three often being considered special, even magical, by looking at ways of dividing into three, using Old Norse mythology as an example. As a starting point for this exploration, the attempt was made to identify what may be referred to as “the nature of threefold divisions”, and this was done by writing out a list of various divisions into three with a view to seeing if any pattern might be discernible. This list included such entries as: past-present-future; inside-outside-threshold; day-night-dawn and father-son-husband / mother-daughter-wife. The entry day-night-dawn seemed troublesome because it necessitated the inclusion of a fourth component, namely dusk (see below). Initially, it was the entries concerning family relationships which provided an opening into the field.

THE MEDIATOR

On first sight the two entries looked entirely parallel: father-son-husband; mother-daughter-wife, but, on second thoughts, Old Norse society was patriarchal rather than matriarchal, which means that greater emphasis was put on the father’s bloodline than on the mother’s. Where the masculine entry on the list runs in a straight line, the feminine entry does not.

father		mother
		/
husband	~	wife
son		daughter

At the point of marriage the woman moves from her parents’ household to that of her husband,¹ and in this way the woman – as

bride – may be seen to act as a sort of mediator between two separate families, moving between and belonging to both (Roesdahl 1996: 71-3, Mitchell 1983: 117, Enright 1996: 34-5²) (see also below).

The pattern which did emerge from the list of triple divisions consists of two opposites with a mediator between them (e.g. threshold between inside and outside or present between past and future). In this set-up the mediator embodies both of the opposing two sides, being *both* one *and* the other. At the same time it is *neither* one *nor* the other, because it appears as a third independent entity. The condition for the emergence of such a pattern seems to be a mode of thinking which produces sets of dualities or opposites; the “nature of threefold divisions”, as discussed here, could arise from the coming together of such opposites.

This structure, two opposites plus one mediator, seems a plausible explanation for the number three being special. There may well be other ways of explaining its significance, but this is the idea which will be explored here.

The most comprehensible example of this structure is perhaps that of mother-father-child. The father and mother act as the two opposites, while the child is *both* a combination of them *and* a completely separate entity. One might express this notion with the abstract sentence $1+1=3$. What is meant by this is that when there is 1 and another 1 there are two potential ways of counting them. They may be counted as separate units in which case there are two. But if they are counted *not only* as separate units *but also* as a whole then we have two separate 1s *and* two 1s together, that is three units. One plus one – plus both of them together, like the yin/yang symbol.

This system – as explored here – operates with a high degree of fluidity. The triads should not be seen as locking the three units involved into boxes or preventing them from entering into other triads; the child may grow up and later act as a parent and/or a bride. The system is not a rigid structure; it includes the factor of time which means that it takes into account the notion that relationships change through time and that there is a continuous need for mediation. Once is never enough. (Mitchell 1983: 113³).

AN OLD IDEA

Although this threefold structure emerged as a result of my own speculation, it will be noted that the idea is by no means new. It may, however, be seen as a strength that several people have come to the same conclusions, independently of one another. Here a brief account will be given of some of the ways in which this theory has been used in conjunction with Old Norse mythology and society.

In his article “Scandinavian Mythology as a System” (1973), Meletinskij makes use of the notion of opposites with emphasis on the bringing of cultural goods of various kinds from one to the other (see also Mitchell 1983: 116-7 on gift-giving). He operates with both a horizontal and a vertical spatial system:

The “horizontal” system is anthropocentric and is built up primarily on the opposition between the middle enclosed part of the earth inhabited by people (Midgard) and the world beyond the confines and outside of this enclosure (Utgard) which is a hostile and culturally unassimilated sphere ... Since heaven is practically not opposed to the earth in the “horizontal” model, the abode of the gods on Asgard is topologically inseparable from Midgard... (Meletinskij: 1973a: 46-7).

The basis of the “vertical” cosmic model is made up of the World Ash Yggdrasil, connecting heaven and earth, the earth and the underworld and in this way making for a trichotomic vertical division of the universe by way of a double opposition of above and below (Meletinskij 1973a: 48).

as well as dual time scales:

In the dimension of time the cosmic model as it were breaks down into cosmogonic and eschatological subsystems, between which there exists a certain asymmetry as a result of the fact that Scandinavian mythology is on the whole permeated by an eschatological inspiration (Meletinskij 1973a:52).

These dual systems of space and time all have cross-over points between them, and the rather fluid, organic structure thus conjured up by Meletinskij comes across as a coherent theory.

At the centre of the argument is the transfer of goods between opposing realms – an example being the myths concerning the mead of poetry which is transported between Miðgarðr and Útgarðr (horizontally) (*Skáldskaparmál* 5), and from inside Hnitbjörg to Ásgarðr (vertically, by means of Óðinn in eagle shape) (*Skáldskaparmál* 6). The existence of such parallel variants of the same myth is argued to be caused by the parallel orientation systems.

Meletinskij's structure accounts well for the very dynamic nature of Old Norse mythology, and the model seems useful.

Einar Haugen, in an article from 1967, "The Mythical Structure of the Ancient Scandinavians", operates with an idea similar to the one presented here: the process of mediation between two opposites. Haugen, however, uses the linguistics terminology of "distinctive features". What is meant by this is that the two opposites are essentially the same, except for a "distinctive feature" which is attributed to one side. An example of this is the opposition of Óðinn vs Þórr; both are Æsir, the distinctive feature selected by Haugen being "force", marking Þórr as different from Óðinn (Haugen 1967:861).

What Haugen does not take into account is that the mythological characters concerned have greater complexity than can be summed up in one distinctive feature; Þórr is not simply "force" and, additionally, one may just as well see the distinctive feature on the part of Óðinn, for example "guile". In the present paper the opposition will be regarded more as a version of sibling rivalry wherein the two "opposing siblings" spring from the same "parents"; sometimes they will fight as rivals, sometimes they will support each other as members of the same family. Depending on the situation one of these two options is chosen.

Kirsten Hastrup in *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland* (1985) exploits the idea of opposition and mediation very elegantly in order to tie the conceptual and physical dimensions of the relevant culture together:

In social anthropology, structure and process have usually been seen as antithetical concepts. Or, perhaps more accurately, they have been seen as concepts covering separate dimensions of social reality: “structure” denoting an abstract and largely synchronic dimension, and “process” referring to the empirical dynamics of social life. When conceived along these lines, it seems that structure and process never coalesce, neither in reality nor in theory. Part of the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the inadequacy of this view. It is through the processes of social life that we are able to generalize about the structural patterns; conversely, processes take place within a semantic space, the properties of which define the meaning of the social processes. Far from being separate realities, structure and process lend reality to each other. (Hastrup 1985: 178)

Hastrup’s study is an anthropological one and deals with human rather than mythological society, but it shows that two viewpoints which may seem opposite to each other – even mutually exclusive (she uses structure vs process, or synchronic vs diachronic perspective) can be brought together and seen as differing dimensions of the same thing. The mythological level, although not an exact mirror-image, is an expression of the same mechanisms as those which shape human society (Schjødt 1990: 304).

Claude Lévi-Strauss in “The Structural Study of Myth” (1955) explores the double-sided nature of myth. He argues that it is the nature of myth to attempt to bring together conflicting sides, and thus that the structure of opposites and mediators is at the root of mythical thought. He also finds that myth simultaneously provides historical and ahistorical dimensions; that is, at the same time as myth pretends to take place “long ago”, but in real time, it is also everlasting. It combines two different time operation systems, something which he refers to as “the synchro-diachronical structure of the myth” (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 443). Lévi-Strauss’ theory, although both relevant and useful, is not the only key for unlocking myth, even if it is presented as such.

BRIDES AND HOSTAGES

In Old Norse mythology there are good examples of brides acting as mediators (see note 1). If we regard the gods (Æsir and Vanir) and the giants (Jötnar) as the two opposed families, then Skaði and Gerðr act as the third, mediating party – they are daughters of giants who marry gods. In this way they occupy exactly that in-between position (Ross 1994: 233; Mitchell 1983: 113).

family vs other family
bride

This attempt at mediation between gods and giants does, however, appear to be unsuccessful. Although Gerðr's marriage to Freyr seems to work out in a satisfactory manner it is not enough to end the opposition between their respective families for good. On top of this, their son, Fjölfnir (*Ynglingasaga* 10), arguably takes his place among the legendary kings, rather than the gods, leaving their union essentially childless.

Skaði's marriage to Njörðr is not entirely successful either in that she cannot reconcile herself with her husband's home by the sea, and he cannot reconcile himself with her home in the mountains, and therefore they split up (see note 1). No children result from the marriage, although Skaði is said to have several sons by Óðinn (*Ynglingasaga* 8)⁴, but these again figure as earthly kings, rather than gods. In fact, they probably belong in an altogether different triad as mediators between gods and humans:⁵

gods vs humans
kings

If Skaði's behaviour is anything to judge by, then a woman's loyalties are ultimately to her own family, not that of her husband, and we see that Skaði returns to her father's home in the mountains on the break-up of her marriage to Njörðr.

There is another side to this particular situation, because both Skaði and Gerðr are married to male Vanir, not Æsir (Grundy 1996: 65). If we see the relationship between gods and giants from a slightly

different angle then the Vanir can be seen as the mediating party. They are gods but, unlike the Æsir, they appear not to be directly opposed to the giants. The group of gods is internally divided into two families: Æsir, who continuously fight against the giants; and Vanir, who marry the daughters of giants. (Freyja's position as a female Vanadís here seems to exclude her participation in this particular triad; she does not marry a male giant.⁶)

Æsir vs Jötnar
Vanir

In this set-up we can construct two separate triads, one centring on female, the other on male mediators. It is also possible to see this apparent splitting of the mediator as extending the triad into a foursome :

brides
Æsir vs Jötnar
Vanir

The idea of “double-mediators” will be discussed further below.

As stated above, the group of gods is divided into two families, and this situation provides another triad. The story is told that the Æsir and the Vanir were originally enemies who fought against each other, but later made peace. In one version of the story (*Ynglingasaga* 4) peace is made by exchanging hostages.⁷ The small group of Vanir whom we know from the mythology – Njörðr and his two children, Freyr and Freyja – are the hostages who have been incorporated into the Æsir group. Another foursome can be deduced from this triad in that hostages were exchanged in both directions. Mímir and Hænir are Æsir who went to live with the Vanir, although they later returned.

Æsir vs Vanir
hostages
→
←

In the other version of the story (*Skáldskaparmál* 5) peace is made by means of creating a separate character – Kvasir – from the spittle of all Æsir and all Vanir mixed together.⁸ Kvasir, therefore, is very much both Ás and Van, and thus, having equal loyalties to both sides (he is not tied more closely to his father's side because he really has neither father nor mother), he is the perfect mediator.⁹

Æsir vs Vanir
Kvasir

Both versions of the Æsir/Vanir war and subsequent peace seem to throw up a problem: in the hostage-solution one side returns their hostages while the other side retains theirs; in the Kvasir-solution the perfect mediator is later killed. Neither of these imbalances, however, disturbs the peace in the long run, and the Æsir/Vanir peace appears to be successful.

The status of the hostage may be compared to that of the bride, mediating between two groups or families. (This recalls the practice of fostering children as a means of creating bonds and alliances between families in human society; Hastrup 1985:89.) In this connection it is interesting to observe that, just as Skaði returns to her original home when her marriage to Njörðr fails, Njörðr himself returns to Vanaheim when the battle of Ragnarök begins.¹⁰ Both the bride and the hostage return to their former home when the situation becomes critical, and their ties to their own families remain stronger than those they have to their adopted families.

LIFE-GIVING MEDIATION

Mediation between Æsir and Jötnar perhaps also takes place at an altogether different stage, namely in the creation myth. In the creation myth – as told by Snorri in *Gylfaginning* 4-7¹¹ – we can see a triad formed by the first three beings; Ymir, ancestor of the giants, and Búri, ancestor of the Æsir, form the two opposing sides. But while we are still at the very beginning, we also encounter Auðhumla, the primeval cow. Auðhumla feeds Ymir with milk, keeping him alive, and she licks Búri out of the salty rimestone, bringing him to life. By

thus sustaining them she acts in the same manner towards the ancestors of both Jötnar and Æsir. Auðhumla takes the place of the bride¹², she is a female mediator, albeit a bovine one, between two male lines:

Ymir vs Búri
Auðhumla

Auðhumla plays a role similar to the one taken by the Vanir later on.

Another feature of the creation myth which is relevant here is the notion that life is created where opposites meet. Snorri (*Gylfaginning* 5) describes how the fire of Muspell in the south and the ice of Niflheimr in the north meet¹³, and exactly this is the place where our three primeval characters appear, Ymir and Auðhumla from rime melted by sparks, and Búri, locked up in the ice, later released by Auðhumla.

ice vs fire
life

THE MEDIATOR IN LIMBO

In the opposition Æsir vs Jötnar, the mediating Vanir may be said to be *neither one nor the other*; that is, although they are gods, they are not Æsir. They seem to have a different relationship to the Jötnar simply because they are not Æsir (see above). Arguably, the mere fact that they have a different name, Vanir, singles them out as somehow different – even if they are also counted as Æsir. The reverse situation never happens, Æsir are never referred to as Vanir. Whereas the Vanir thus may be said to be neither Æsir nor Jötnar, the mythology also features another mediator – Loki – who appears to be *both* Ás and Jötunn (giant):

Æsir vs Jötnar
Loki

Loki fluctuates somewhat back and forth between the two groups; he seems not to have made up his mind as to where to plant his loyalties. Only at the very end, when Ragnarök approaches, does he make a decision as to which side to join, and he fights *with* the giants *against* the gods (see also below).

Loki's position is different from that of a hostage in that he is of mixed blood (*Gylfaginning* 33)¹⁴. He seems to be accepted among the gods by necessity, but he is never fully (or willingly?) incorporated into the Æsir group. He remains very much an ambiguous character.

I shall return to Loki's position between gods and giants below, but here he is also interesting because he appears as mediator in other triads as well. True to his trickster nature Loki is the shape-shifter *par excellence*, and on a number of occasions he appears in animal form, as a bird (*Þrymskviða* 5)¹⁵ and a horse (*Gylfaginning* 42)¹⁶. This places him between humans and animals:

humans vs animals
Loki

But this is not all, for Loki is capable of changing not only his shape but also his sex. In the master-builder tale (*Gylfaginning* 42) he changes not just into a horse but, indeed, a mare, and becomes the mother of Sleipnir (see note 16).

man vs woman
Loki

A milder form of Loki's transvestism occurs when he dresses up as a woman but does not actually change into one (*Gylfaginning* 49; *Þrymskviða* 20).¹⁷

Loki's situation seems to be a complex one; no matter which relationship we see him in, he is never only one thing, but always both/and. Loki, if anyone among the gods, is also a very productive character in the sense that most of his adventures result in some form of gain for the gods. It is through Loki's deeds – although he himself only ever seems to have his own personal gain in mind – that the gods obtain numerous valuable objects (e.g. the ring Draupnir, the horse Sleipnir, Þórr's hammer Mjöllnir). In this respect he has something in

common with the life-giving mediation situations mentioned above. Loki may be likened to a battery of some standard size which can fit into all different types of mechanisms; it always has minus in one end and plus in the other, embodying within itself the concept of opposition. As an analogy of Loki's position in the mythology – instigator of action – the battery provides the power and energy which brings the mechanisms to life.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE MEDIATORS

To return now to the “double-mediators” mentioned above; this idea consists of a splitting of the third, mediating figure which creates two separate characters who nevertheless belong closely together. I call them positive and negative, but these are merely labels and may be substituted with any set of oppositional terms (there are situations where the words positive/negative are too loaded, but this terminology will serve the purpose in the present context).

The idea of positive and negative mediators extends the triad into a foursome; there are still two opposites but instead of just one mediator there are two. If night and day are the opposites, then dawn and dusk (those periods which are light but when the sun is not yet, or no longer, in the sky) are the two mediators – and this is one case in which I find it hard to apply the terms positive and negative in any sensible way. Dusk and dawn provide a directional mediation rather than a value-laden one; dawn leading *from* night *to* day, whereas dusk leads in the opposite direction. The situation compares to the equally directional hostage mediation between Æsir and Vanir.

Night	vs	Day
	→	
	dawn	
	←	
	dusk	

This notion of double-mediation is clearly exemplified in a story from Celtic mythology, *Cath Maige Tuired* (The Second Battle of Moytura). The characters concerned here are Bres and Lug. Both are

of mixed blood, Fomoire (equivalent of the Norse Jöttnar) and Túatha Dé Danann (equivalent of the Norse Æsir), where there is a similar sort of relationship between the Túatha and Fomoire as there is between Æsir and Jöttnar. Both Bres and Lug become leaders of the Túatha, but where Bres fails miserably in his leadership, Lug succeeds. In this way they appear as, respectively, negative and positive mediator. The reason for this difference may be found in their ancestry (Gray 1982: 7). Bres has a Fomorian father and a Túatha mother; for Lug the opposite is the case, he has a Túatha father and a Fomorian mother. The pattern seems to be that the father's bloodline is given preference over the mother's (or that the male line has a positive value and the female a negative), and that the character concerned will always end up siding with his father's line. Thus, Bres ends up with the Fomoire, fighting against Lug and the Túatha:

Lug +
Túatha vs Fomoire
Bres –

Returning now to the Norse side, we can transfer this situation onto the characters Loki and Þórr. Loki has a Jötunn father, Fárbauti, whereas his mother, Laufey, may appear with the Ásynjur (see note 14), so he corresponds to Bres as a negative mediator (it may be significant that Loki is known by his mother's name, Loki Laufeyarson, not his father's). Þórr, on the other hand, has an Ás father, Óðinn, and a giant mother, Jörðr, so he corresponds to Lug as a positive mediator:

Þórr +
Æsir vs Jöttnar
Loki –

The patriarchal societies – true to their name – attach more importance to the father's than to the mother's line; having an Ás/Túatha father gives a positive mediator, whereas a Jötunn/Fomoire father gives a negative mediator.

Although there can be two mediators, the threefold structure remains; there are still two opposites with one cross-over point between them, and the duplication of mediator only means that mediation happens in both directions. It is not a duplication of the actual cross-over point. In a sense this stabilises the structure, balancing one side equally against the other, because both sides contribute to the mediation.

one vs other
mediation
→
←

TRINITY AND UNITY

Although the mediation process is often embodied in a separate character, the mediator, it may equally well take place without one, if one is willing to see the threefold divisions from a different perspective. One example of this is the spatial terms *Útgarðr* and *Miðgarðr*, which translate as, respectively, “the Outer World” and “the Middle World”. These two places are not to be seen as altogether separate worlds, but rather as two opposing centres of the same one world (Gunnell 2001: 18). Instead of two opposites coming together in one mediator, it can also be seen as one whole being divided into two:

world
Útgarðr vs *Miðgarðr*

In this case there is no third, separate place or figure which acts as a mediator, and mediation happens rather by necessity via a relationship of belonging together. There is an obvious opposition, as well as a mutual dependency, implied in these two names; they seem to define themselves against each other – *Miðgarðr* is a meaningless term without *Útgarðr* to act as its opposite, some sort of outer realm is needed in order for there to be a middle and vice versa (one half is not a “half” without the other half). In this context, *Miðgarðr* is regarded

as the realm of both humans and gods, the gods being the supernatural representatives of humans; Ásgarðr (“Realm of the Æsir”) seems best interpreted as the divine aspect of Miðgarðr. The name may rather function as an opposition to Jötunheimr (“Giant Land”), so that the Miðgarðr/Útgarðr dichotomy may be echoed by the Ásgarðr/Jötunheimr dichotomy, giving a locational version of the Æsir/Jötnar opposition.

The idea can be applied to all the triads. What seems to happen is that the opposites, from certain angles, come very close to each other so that we may see them as one (as does Haugen; see above). For example: Æsir + Vanir = gods; gods + giants = supernatural beings; man + woman = humans (Haugen 1967: 860; Hastrup 1985: 147-8). This is where linguistics employs distinctive features and where this paper employs the names of the characters concerned; the two opposing sides are siblings (that is, they share exactly the same roots) who are distinguished from one another by their different names and separate identities.

The example man + woman = humans is easy to work with because it is immediately understandable. On one level we have one species, humanity as a whole; simultaneously we have, on another level, two opposites, man and woman. The key notion here is that of mutual dependency, that is, the two halves need each other to make a whole. One half all by itself is meaningless unless there is another half to match it with, like the famous two sides of the same coin.

The picture can be transferred back to the mythology where an intriguing feature is revealed in that the giants do not seem to have any sons (Skaði, who is the *daughter* of a giant, is the only one to seek revenge for giants and giantesses killed by Þórr), and at the same time the gods do not appear to have any daughters¹⁸. In this respect there seems to be a relationship of mutual dependency between the gods and giants. Some degree of cooperation seems necessary as regards the survival of the whole (gods *and* giants), and as the two sides are sexually compatible, the problem between their families is not of a biological nature¹⁹.

The situation is like that of two siblings; in some situations they acts as rivals, fighting for supremacy, in other situations they support each other as two members of the same one family.

CONCLUSION

Although this is by no means an exhaustive study, there seem to be examples enough to justify the existence of a pattern, within the Old Norse mythological universe, which says that wherever there are two entities appearing in opposition to each other, it is likely there is also a third entity, caught one way or another between those two, or the two opposites may be seen to form a whole in conjunction with one another.

It should be stressed that what is proposed here is not a rigid system of categorical boxes; it is, indeed, an organic view of a dynamic whole. The Old Norse mythology is not a static universe, opposites are never allowed to just be opposites, because mediation between them is constantly blurring the lines between what is what (Holtsmark 1990:75)²⁰. The mythology operates within the same four dimensions of space-time as does the “real” world in which we live, and the characters whom we encounter in the mythological world are not one-sided cardboard cut-outs but multifaceted personalities who engage with each other and the world around them on several different levels.

In this way, mythology mirrors the human world where the reality we perceive depends on the perspective which we adopt, and where things change through time. As the child, mediating between its father and mother, who later grows up and takes on different roles in other triads, the mythological characters are not tied to one particular role permanently because they appear in it once, as shown for example by the Vanir who act as mediators in one triad, but as one of the opposites in other triads. In this way some of the fuzziness and relativity of reality is mirrored in the mythology.

There is some mythological truth in this pattern of threefold divisions; perhaps not the one, absolute truth capable of explaining everything – one would indeed doubt that such a thing exists – but a truth nevertheless.

University of Edinburgh

Notes

- 1 The mythology shows some examples of this. In *Skírnismál* Gerðr's marriage to Freyr means that she leaves her father's house, and she later appears among the ásynjur; *Skáldskaparmál* 1. In *Þrymskviða* the implication of Freyja's hypothesised marriage to Þrymr is that she would leave Ásgarðr and move to Jötunheimr; in st. 12 Þórr says to her: "*Bittu þig, Freyja, brúðar líni, við skulum aka tvö í Jötunheima*". (Sigurðsson 1999: 134) ("Dress yourself, Freyia, in a bride's head-dress! We two shall drive to the land of the giants". Larrington 1996: 98). The marriage of Njörðr and Skaði, described in *Gylfaginning* 23: "*Skaði vill hafa bústað þann er átt hafði faðir hennar. Það er á fjöllum nokkurum, þar sem heitir Þrymheimur. En Njörður vill vera nær sæ. Þau sættust á það að skyldu vera nú nætur í Þrymheimi en þá aðrar nú að Nóatúnum.*" (Pálsson 2003: 37-8) ("Skaði wants to have the home her father had had – this is in some mountains, a place called Thrymheim – but Niord wants to be near the sea. They agreed on this, that they should stay nine nights in Thrymheim and then alternate nines at Noatun." Faulkes 1987: 23) is an atypical situation of moving back and forth between either partner's home brought on by the fact that the marriage is not working. After the breakdown of the marriage, however, Skaði, although now living in her father's home, continues, like Gerðr, to appear among the gods.
- 2 Enright (1996: 34), discussing the role of queen Wealhtheow in *Beowulf*, states that: "[the queen] functions as women do in society where they act as binders between families who create and embody alliances in order to fashion friendships or restore peace between feuding groups."
- 3 Mitchell (1983: 113) points to the same time factor: "This conflict had been resolved, and a state of relative equilibrium brought about, in the previous generation through the marriage of Niörðr and Skaði. The same dichotomy must be mediated for the current generation by the union of Freyr and Gerðr"
- 4 Jónsson (1911: 8): "*Njörðr fekk konu þeirar, er Skaði hét; hon vildi ekki við hann samfarar ok giptisk síðan Óðni; ttu þau marga sonu ...*" ("Niord took a wife called Skadi; she would not live with him and afterwards gave herself to Odin. They got many sons ..."; Mosen 1932: 6).

- 5 What is meant by the king acting as mediator between gods and humans leads into the field of sacral kingship, which will not be discussed in this paper. Suffice it to say here that the king may be seen as occupying this mediating role because he, although himself human, rules over other humans, as the gods rule over mankind.
- 6 Freyja is, nevertheless, constantly sought after by male giants, as can be seen in for example *Prymskviða* where the giant Þrymr will only return Þórr's hammer to the gods if they give him Freyja for his wife, and also in *Skáldskaparmál* 24: “[Hrungnir] lést skyldu taka upp Valhöll og færa í Jötunheima en sökkva Ásgarði en drepa guð öll, nema Freyju og Sif vill hann heim færa með sér.” (Pálsson 2003: 113). (“[Hrungnir] said he was going to remove Val-hall and take it to Giantland, but bury Asgard and kill all the gods, except that he was going to take Freyia and Sif home with him ...”; Faulkes 1987: 77).
- 7 Jónsson (1911: 5): “Óðinn fór með her á hendr Vönum, en þeir urðu vel við ok vorðu land sitt, ok hötðu ýmsir sig; herjuðu hvárir land annarra ok gerðu skaða. En er þat leiddisk hvárum tveggjum, lögðu þeir milli sín sættarstefnu ok gerðu frið ok seldusk gíslar...” (“Odin went with his army against the Vanes, but they withstood him well and defended their land. Each of them was in turn winner; both sides harried the other one's land, and did each other great scathe. And when they both became weary of it, they arranged a meeting to make peace and gave each other hostages...”; Monsen 1932: 2).
- 8 Pálsson (2003: 89): “það voru upphöf til þess að guðin höfðu ósætt við það fólk er vanir heita, en þeir lögðu með sér friðstefnu og settu grið á þá lund að þeir gengu hvoritveggju til eins kers og spýttu í hráka sínum. En að skilnaði þá tóku goðin og vildu eigi láta týnast það griðamark og sköpuðu þar úr mann. Sá heitir Kvasir.” (“The origin of it [poetry] was that the gods had a dispute with the people called Vanir, and they appointed a peace-conference and made a truce by this procedure, that both sides went up to a vat and spat their spittle into it. But when they dispersed, the gods kept this symbol of truce and decided not to let it be wasted, and out of it made a man. His name was Kvasir.” Faulkes 1987: 61-2)
- 9 Kvasir is, however, in *Ynglingasaga* 4 referred to as being of the Vanir: “en Vanir fengu þar í mót þann, er spakastr var í þeira flokki; sá hét Kvasir.” (Jónsson 1911: 5) (“the Vanes in return gave the wisest of their men called Kvasir.”; Monsen 1932: 3)

- 10 This is referred to in *Vafþrúðnismál* st. 39: “*Í Vanaheimi skópu hann [Njörðr] vís regin og seldu að gíslingu goðum. Í aldar rök hann mun aftur koma heim með vísun vönnum.*” (Sigurðsson 1999: 69) (“In Vanaheim the wise Powers made him and gave him as hostage to the gods; at the doom of men he will come back home among the wise Vanir.”; Larrington 1996: 46)
- 11 In the following summary of the creation story, according to *Gylfaginning* 4-8, the focus is on what is considered most relevant to the present argument. Before the earth existed, Niflheim was made. To the south was the hot place of Muspell where Surtr lived. Between these two regions was an area called Ginnugagap, and where the flames of Muspell and the ice of Niflheim met, some of the rime melted and shaped itself into a man, who was called Ymir. The frost-giants called him Aurgelmir, and he is the ancestor of the race of giants. The rime also shaped itself into the cow Auðhumla from whose teats four rivers of milk flowed, and Ymir lived off her milk. The cow got nourishment from licking the salty rime-stones. On the first day a man’s hair came, on the second a man’s head and on the third day a man emerged from where Auðhumla licked. His name was Búri and he was both beautiful and powerful. His son, Bor, married Bestla, daughter of the giant Bölton, and they had three sons: Óðinn, Vili and Vé. The sons of Bor killed Ymir and from his body they created the earth.
- 12 Auðhumla may also be seen here as a nurturing mother figure, which arguably embodies some of the same symbolism as does the bride. Enright (1996: 35) seems to refer to both roles when he mentions: “the domestic activity of the wife in the early Germanic household, the mediatrix between father, son and the dependent *familia*”.
- 13 Pálsson (2003: 16): “*Svo sem kalt stóð af Niflheimi og allir hlutir grimmir, svo var það er vissi námunda Múspelli heitt og ljóst. En Ginnungagap var svo hlætt sem loft vindlaust. Og þá er mættust hrímin og blær hitans, svo að bráðnaði og draup, og af þeim kvikdropum kviknaði með krafti þess er til sendi hitann og varð manns líkandi og var sá nefndur Ymir ...*”. (“Just as from Niflheim there arose coldness and all things grim, so what was facing close to Muspell was hot and bright, but Ginnungagap was as mild as a windless sky. And when the rime and the blowing of the warmth met so that it thawed and dripped, there was a quickening from these flowing drops due to the power of the source of the heat, and it became the form of a man, and he was given the name Ymir ...”; Faulkes 1987: 10)

- 14 Pálsson (2003: 42-3): “*Sá er nefndur Loki eða Loftur, sonur Fárbauti jötuns. Móðir hans er Laufey eða Nál...*” (“His name is Loki or Loft, son of the giant Farbauti. Laufey or Nal is his mother...”; Faulkes 1987: 26). Loki’s mother, Laufey, has been presumed at times to be a goddess (Ross 1994: 101), at times to be a giantess (Orchard 2002: 238), and in this respect I follow Ross’s reading.
- 15 Sigurðsson (1999: 133): “*Fló þá Loki, fjaðurhamur dundi, uns fyr utan kom ása garða og fyr innan kom jötna heima.*” (“Then Loki flew off, the feathercloak whistled, until he came beyond the courts of the Æsir and he came within the land of the giants.” Larrington 1996: 97)
- 16 Pálsson (2003: 56): “*En Loki hafði þá ferð haft til Svadilfara að nokkuru síðar bar han fyl.*” (“But Loki had had such dealings with Svadilfæri that somewhat later he gave birth to a foal.” Faulkes 1987: 36)
- 17 Pálsson (2003: 71): “*Hann gekk til Fensalar till Friggjar og brá sér í konu líki.*” (“He went to Fensalir to Frigg and changed his appearance to that of a woman.” Faulkes 1987: 48) Sigurðsson (1999: 136): “*Þá kvað Loki Laufeyjar sonur: ‘Mun eg og með þér ambótt vera, við skulum aka tvö í Jötunheima.’*” (“Then said Loki, son of Laufey: ‘I’ll go with you to be your maid, we two shall drive to the land of the giants.’” Larrington 1996: 99)
- 18 Þórr’s daughter, Þrúðr (mentioned in *Gylfaginning* 4), does not have much of an independent existence and is probably best interpreted as a hypostasis of Þórr’s strength (the same may be argued for Freyja’s daughter Hnoss (“beauty”), mentioned in *Gylfaginning* 35). Similarly, the unnamed daughter of Þórr in *Alvíssmál* may have been invented for the setting of the poem (Simek 1996: 12-3). The sons of Muspell, referred to in *Gylfaginning* 12, 36 and 50, seem to be followers rather than biological sons of Muspell insofar as Muspell is used by Snorri in reference to both a place (*Gylfaginning* 3 and 4) and a giant inhabiting that place (*Gylfaginning* 42). It therefore seems to me that these characters should not be understood as actual sons and daughters.
- 19 Ross (1994: 66), discussing hierarchy, says: “it is clear that the giants are not essentially ‘other’ ... but are defined as other and hostile by the gods who are their own biological kin as part of a strategy to keep the giants in a subordinate social position.”
- 20 Holtsmark (1990: 75) says that: “*Det er vanskelig å skilje skarpt mellom æser og jotnar, for den strøste av æsene, Odin, var sjølv av jotunætt.*”

Vanen Njord vart gjeven som gissel til æsene og fekk jotundottera Skade til kone. Det viser kor uklare grenselinene er.” (“It is difficult to distinguish sharply between Æsir and Jötunar, for the greatest of the Æsir, Óðinn, was himself of Jötunn descent. The Van Njörðr was given as a hostage to the Æsir and had the giant daughter Skaði to wife. This shows how indistinct the dividing lines are.”; my translation.)

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Warlocks, Valkyries and Varlets: A Prolegomenon to the Study of North Sea Witchcraft Terminology

STEPHEN A. MITCHELL

Despite centuries of commercial and cultural contacts between the British Isles and Scandinavia – the codfish, ballads, and oil rigs that contribute to the idea of a “North Sea community” – until recently, little has been written about the transfers of witchcraft ideology between those areas. Now, however, scholars have begun to turn their gaze in this direction (e.g., Hagen 2001) but there remain important shared aspects of witchcraft from the medieval and early modern northern climes as yet unexplored. One problematic issue in this regard is the nomenclature of witchcraft in English and the Nordic tongues, especially with respect to some of the more archaic terms whose semantic similarities (and possible etymological ties) project an impression of overlapping and shared backgrounds. Some are obvious (e.g., English *spae*; Old Norse *spá*); others less so (e.g., English *valkyrie*; Old Norse *valkyrja*); and some are especially thorny (e.g., English *warlock*; Old Norse *varðlokkur*). This essay looks to introduce a discussion of exactly these witchcraft-related dyads.

The *locus classicus* for such a discussion – and one of the most celebrated accounts of magic in Nordic sources – is the section of *Eiríks saga rauða* (“The Saga of Erik the Red”) which describes in detail the performance of a prophesying ceremony. The saga was written in the 13th century and preserved in 14th-century manuscripts, but purports to tell of events from around the millennium in the then-most-recently established West Norse outpost, the fledgling Greenlandic colony:

At that time there was a great famine in Greenland. Men who went out hunting for food had little success, and some never came back. There was a woman in the settlement named Þorbjörg; she was a seeress [*spákona* “spawife”] and was

called the Little Sibyl [*lítil-völva*]. She had had nine sisters, all of whom were seeresses, but she was the only one still alive. It was Þorbjörg's habit during the winters to attend feasts, and she was invited most by people who wanted to know their futures, or about the coming season; and since Þorkell was the chief farmer thereabouts, it was thought to be his responsibility to discover when these hard times would come to an end. Þorkell invited the seeress to his home [...] And the next day as it got late, she was supplied with the outfit she needed to perform the witchcraft [*seiðr*]. She asked for the aid of women who had that knowledge which was necessary to the witchcraft called *varðlokur* [MS variants *uardlokr*; *varðlokkvur*]. But no such women were found. Then an inquiry was made among the household to see if anyone knew [it].

Guðríðr says then, "I am neither a sorceress nor a witch, but in Iceland my foster-mother Halldís taught me that song [*þat kvæði*] which she called *varðlokur* [MS variants *vard lokr*; *vardlokkvr*]."

Þorkell says, "Then you are wise at just the right moment."

She says, "This is the sort of affair I want no part of, for I am a Christian woman."

Þorbjörg says, "It might happen that you could be of help to others in this and yet not be a worse woman than before. But I must depend on Þorkell to get what is needed."

Þorkell now pressures Guðríðr, and she says that she will do as he asks. The women now formed a circle around the scaffold upon which Þorbjörg sat. Guðríðr sang the song [*kvað...kvæðit*] so beautifully and well, that no one who was there believed they had heard sung a song [...*kvæði kveðit*] more beautifully. The seeress thanked her for the song [*kvæðit*] and said "many spirits have come here and think it beautiful to hear the song [*kvæðit*] so well delivered [*flutt*], spirits who previously stayed away and would not grant us obedience. And many are now apparent to me which earlier had been hidden from me and many others. And I can say this to you, Þorkell, that this famine will not last longer than this winter and things will improve with the spring. The epidemic which has been on us will improve more quickly than expected. And as for you,

Guðríður, I will reward you right away for your help, for your future is laid out before me. You will make a most distinguished match here in Greenland, although it will not last long, for your paths lead to Iceland [...] And now farewell, my daughter.”

Then men went to the prophetess and each asked what he was most eager to know. She was free with her information and few things did not turn out as she said. Then she was sent for from other farms; then she departed for them. Þorbjörn was sent for, for he had not wanted to be home while such idolatry had been practiced.¹

Guðríður’s fascinating if enigmatic comment that her foster-mother had once taught her something called *varðlokkur* has occasioned much debate. Hermann Pálsson and Magnus Magnusson, for example, with their incomparable style of turning medieval Icelandic texts into natural-sounding modern English, manage to incorporate into their translation of this passage two centuries of scholarly debate: “Then Gudrid said, ‘I am neither a sorceress nor a witch, but when I was in Iceland my foster-mother Halldis taught me spells which she called Warlock-songs’” (Pálsson and Magnusson 1983: 82).² Indeed, the tricky phrase *varðlokkur* and its apparent similarity to English *warlock* has been the subject of much discussion, notwithstanding the rarity of the term in Icelandic literature. In fact, this passage provides a useful fulcrum for prying apart the largely shuttered medieval North Sea world and shedding light on its magical idiom, specifically such problematic dyads as *varðlokkur-warlock*. This essay looks to demonstrate how a range of materials relating to witchcraft beliefs, revealed as much through a pragmatic application of chaos theory as through traditional philology, may be made available to us through an examination of these terms in their historical, cross-cultural contexts.

WARLOCK

The association by lexicographers of Icelandic *varðlokkur* with English *warlock* dates back at least to the 18th century, when Dr

Johnson notes in his *Dictionary of the English Language* (Johnson 1785):

“War’lock War’luck n.s. [vardlookr, Islandick, a charm; Saxon, an evil spirit. This etymology was communicated by Mr. *Wise*] A male witch; a wizzard.

Warluck in Scotland is applied to a man whom the vulgar suppose to be conversant with spirits, as a woman who carried on the same commerce is called a witch...”

In contrast to Johnson’s certainty about the gender of warlocks, the entry in *The Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* underscores that there may be some doubt: “A person (chiefly or only a man) in league with the Devil; one possessed of occult powers; a sorcerer or wizard. Freq. in collocation with WI(T)CH *n.*” (Craigie 1937-2002: XII. 31-2). One important element to consider is the nature of this gender-based distinction between female witches and male warlocks – to anticipate already at this juncture some of this essay’s conclusions, this sex-linked conceptualisation may have been imposed by scholarship or a revitalised early modern use of the term by demonologists and poets and not, in fact, represent an evolution from the earliest evidence. This gendered view is, for example, present already in Robert Burns’s “Warlocks and witches in a dance” in *Tam o’ Shanter* (and in precisely the sort of alliterating collocation with *witch* Craigie notes), and can be seen in such hallmarks of popular culture as the television series, *Charmed*, where “female witches” are equated with all that is good, while “male warlocks” (or demons, since there is little distinction in the show’s scripts) are equated with all that is bad.

This Modern English *warlock*, marked by word-final *-k*, is not in evidence before the 16th century and occurs at that point solely in Scottish sources. As the *warlock* form spreads more broadly throughout English, it always appears in the sense of “wizard” and so on (Simpson and Weiner 1993). The earlier forms associated with the term – *wárloza*, *warlau* – are in evidence already in very early English sources, but here a high, although familiar, degree of polysemy prevails, with the word designating devils, reprobates, traitors and monsters. This earlier *wárloza*, etc. *appears* to be easily

etymologised from Old English *wær* “covenant” (cognate with Old Norse *várar* “vow”) and a form related to Old English *léogan* “to lie, deny”. Thus, *wærloza* – both etymologically and in Old English usage – refers to (cf. Bosworth, Toller, and Campbell 1972):

- 1) “oath-breaker” and the like. It is in this sense that we see the word in the earliest poetry, such as *Widsið* 9, where Eormannic, king of the Ostrogoths, is said to be *wraþes wærlogan* “hostile to traitors” (Krapp and Dobbie 1936: 149).

Other uses attested in Old English include:

- 2) “A wicked person; a scoundrel, reprobate; a general term of reproach or abuse”,
- 3) “The Devil; Satan”, and
- 4) “A savage or monstrous creature (hostile to men).”

It is not difficult to imagine that these terms were seen to be close to the sense we encounter in the early modern period, although none of them fits exactly.

wærloza and similar forms are used in these four senses throughout much of the Middle Ages. The now familiar “fifth” meaning of, as the *Middle English Dictionary* (Kurath and Kuhn 1952-2001) states it, “one who is possessed of occult knowledge or clairvoyance, a soothsayer; one who practices occult arts, a sorcerer, warlock”, appears in contexts that affirm the connection with magic and witchcraft only near the close of the Middle Ages, such as in the 15th-century *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (“*weches and warlaws*”; Krishna 1976: 57, l. 613) and the 15th-century Towneley play (“*yond warlow with his wand*”; Towneley. *VIII. Pharoah*, l. 232 [England and Pollard 1966: 71]). In other words, there is no evidence for the term being directly associated with witchcraft or magic in the Anglo-Saxon period, nor is there any until the 15th century, or perhaps the very late 14th century, when it appears in *Cleanness* (or *Purity*), the first extant evidence of the word in the sense of wizard or witch:

Penne þe bolde Baltazar bred ner wode,
 And [b]ede þe cete to seche segges þurȝout
 Þat wer wyse of wyhecrafte, and warlazes oþer
 Þat con dele wyth demerlayk and devine lettres.
 (*Cleanness* 1558-61 [Menner 1920: 58])

Then bold Belshazzar nearly became mad,
 And sent men searching the whole city round
 For men wise in witchcraft, or warlocks perhaps,
 Who dealt in demonology and could decipher dark lettering.
 (Stone 1971: 142)

Alongside this important semantic testimony, we need to place the corresponding phonological evidence for *warlock* with *-k/-ch* referred to earlier. As we see, not a single one of the extant Middle English forms reflects, even when the term is used in the apparent sense of “wizard”, anything other than what one would expect, namely, the development of Old English word final *-oza* to *-ow* or *-au* (cp. OE *boga* > ME *bow*), nowhere showing a sharpening to *-k*. The first evidence for this semantic and phonological combination (i.e., modern *warlock* in the sense of “wizard”) comes only in the late 16th century in Alexander Montgomerie’s *Ane Invectione against Fortun*: “That witch, that warlok, that vnworthie wic[ht]” (Cranstoun 1887: 129, l. 25). Here is our modern warlock, fully developed phonologically and semantically, and in collocation with both witch and wicht. This phonological saltation event has been at the heart of the *varðlokkur/ warlock* discussion ever since. The treatment of this peculiar word history by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson and Weiner 1993; emphasis added) is worth quoting at length:

This [i.e., an oath-breaker, etc.] seems to have been the original sense of the present word, but the special application to the Devil (either as a rebel, or a deceiver) was already in OE. the leading sense. The applications to sorcerers, with especial reference to the power of assuming inhuman shapes, and to monsters (esp. serpents), appear to be developments, partly due to Scriptural language, of the sense “devil”.

The modern forms with final -(c)k are of obscure origin, for they appear first in Sc. of 16th c., and owe their spread to Sc. writers, and so cannot represent, as has been assumed, a Southern sound-substitution of (k) for the -ch (x) of some of the rarer North. and Sc. forms. From the first they have been used exclusively in the sense “wizard”. *Some other word, lost or not discovered, has perh. influenced both form and sense.*

The editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* notably go on to add, “ON. *varðlokkur* wk. fem. pl. (cf. also *urðar lo(k)kur*) ? incantation, suggested already in Johnson, is too rare (? occurring once), with regard to the late appearance of the -k forms, to be considered.” Although the Old Norse term is indeed rare, it is less clear that a possible relationship between *varðlokkur* and warlock does not warrant consideration.

VARÐLOKKUR

Turning to the “rare” Icelandic form, preserved in two 14th-century manuscripts of *Eiríks saga rauða*, even this seemingly meagre codicological testimony exhibits considerable diversity: the word is used twice in the saga, but appears in different forms in the two manuscript traditions: *Skálholtsbók* (AM 557, 4^{vo}) shows *uardlokr* and *vard lokr*, whereas *Hauksbók* (AM 544, 4^{vo}) has *varðlokkvur* and *vardlokkvr*.³ In addition to these 14th-century manuscripts, the eddic-style poem, *Grógaldr*, preserved only in post-Reformation manuscripts, is also relevant to our discussion. In this recitation of spells, Gróa tells her son that *Urðar lokkor* (manuscript variants: *lokor*, *lokr*) will protect him from all sides (*haldipér öllom megom*) if he finds himself in a humiliating position (*erþú á smán sér*).

Finnur Jónsson associates the second element with the verb *lokka* “to entice or attract to oneself” (*að laða að sjer*; Jónsson 1892) but remains uncertain about how *varð-* should be understood. He asserts unambiguously, however, that the form *Urðar lokur* of *Grógaldr* is unconnected with the term found in *Eiríks saga rauða*. The principal study of *varðlokkur* was presented by Magnus Olsen (Olsen 1916). His is a detailed treatment, the bulk of which is devoted to arguing for

an etymology connecting the first element to *vörðr*, “ward, warder; guard, watch” as a kind of guardian spirit, for which there is significant dialect and ethnographic documentation. The second element, he argues, must derive either from *lúka*, “to lock, shut” or *lokka*, “to entice, allure”. Drawing on this semiotic background and on *comparanda* from the sagas presenting images of rituals apparently similar to those in *Eiríks saga rauða*, Olsen concludes that *lúka* “lock” is the actual etymon and that *varðlokkur* indicates songs “that enclose spirits” (*som indeslutter aanderne*) for the purpose of the ritual. Some years later, in his major study of the forms of Nordic magic called *seiðr*, Dag Strömbäck argues that *varðlokkur* may be best explained by comparison of the scene described in *Eiríks saga rauða* with various ethnographic observations of shamanic practices among the Sámi, which similarly require the assistance of a young, unmarried woman’s songs in order to return the soul (= *vörðr*) of the shaman.⁴ The scholarly record trails off at this juncture: subsequent discussion has endorsed now one, now the other view, but has been muted at best with respect to suggesting other possible interpretations. The 1935 standard edition of the saga, for example, notes that through the *Varðlokkur*, guardian spirits are locked in around the singer, who may also come to be called a *varðlokkur*.⁵

An alternative etymology does suggest itself, one that differs from these earlier theories, although its effect is in the end to support aspects of Strömbäck’s important observation concerning Sámi practices. First of all, I accept Finnur Jónsson’s and Dag Strömbäck’s view (*contra* Magnus Olsen) that the older *Hauksbók* form *-lokkur* is correct and that ultimately the phrase is connected with enticing or beckoning something to oneself (rather than locking or closing something) not only because of the logic of such an etymology (cp. Old Norse *lokka* “to allure, entice”), but because it fits neatly with other evidence. Specifically, ethnologists and ethnomusicologists have long studied a song genre, usually performed by women in pastoral settings in Scandinavia proper, known as the *lokk* or *lock*.⁶ These tunes are typically used to gather animals together for milking, feeding, and so on, especially in the context of the warm weather use of the shieling. Within the framework of farm life, those who sing this “herding call” need not be women, that is, the singers are by no means necessarily gender-defined; but given the division of labour

that prevailed in Scandinavia's traditional Alpine-style shieling arrangements, these calls were far more frequently intoned by women. The calls themselves consist of singing in a very high register and although words are employed, lexical morphs are only sometimes clearly articulated and discernible. At least one scholar argues that the words used in existing examples suggest that the genre dates back to what he calls "the oldest times".⁷ In his 19th-century dictionary of Norwegian, Ivar Åsen defines the *lokk* as a "song or call with which one allures animals" ("*song eller kalling som ein lokkar krøteri med*"). The variations on this fundamental concept of attracting animals are manifold: in Swedish, for example, they are called *locklåt* "call-song", *lockton* "call-tune", or simply, *lock* (cp. German *Lockruf*). The term can also describe an imitative call used in hunting wild game, documented already in the 16th century (cf. Magnus 1976: 19,2; 19,41), giving rise to such usages as *lockfågel* "decoy" and *lockbete* "lure" (cf. Svenska akademien. 1893-). A number of other terms are also applied to these and similar calls in Swedish and Norwegian, such as: *kulning*, *kuökning*, *lockrop*, and *vallåt*. The nature of these herding calls varies widely, although the following example (Carlheim-Gyllenskiöld 1892: 162) may be seen as illustrative:



With respect to the West Norse settlements in the North Atlantic, although it is clear the tradition of summer pastorage and shielings accompanied the immigrants (e.g., Reinton 1955: 33-4, 73 *et passim*), the term generally used in Modern Icelandic for such herding songs is *smalavísur* (lit., "sheep songs"). Of our term in the insular Nordic languages, there exists at least one possible manifestation. In Faroese ethnological lore, folk beliefs about the crane fly hold that its appearance betokens the arrival of a pod of pilot-whales, the *grindur* – hence, this creature is known as the *grindalokkur* (cf. Faroese

lokkan “allurement”), perhaps suggesting “enticer of whales” (?). Similarly, it should be noted that such herding melodies are associated in Norway and Sweden with magical abilities that give the singer power over wild animals, such as wolves and bears, *as well as* supernatural creatures, such as trolls and giants.⁸ As to the question of what cultural context might explain the use of *varðlokkvur* in *Eiríks saga rauða*, surely the image of women singing songs (and it is specially *women* [*konur*] the seeress in *Eiríks saga rauða* asks for), songs which the text later maintains draw a number of spirits or powers to the area (*náttúrur*), is well, and perhaps even best, explained as just such a *lokk*, if of a highly specialised sort. Moreover, although one might easily regard Guðríðr as intoning a spell or charm, the text reminds us through its reference to Guðríðr’s beautiful voice that she likely sings a song.⁹

On the other hand, this very expression of the song’s intent – namely, to entice spirits, *náttúrur*, to a place – may have misguided earlier scholars into certain interpretations. Keen to see in the etymology of *varðlokkur* a direct connection with the apparent desired goal of the singing, earlier scholars have perhaps, been overeager to assume that the first element of *varðlokkur* necessarily suggests “ward, warder; guard, watch” or “soul”. Exception must be made here for Finnur Jónsson, who freely admits his uncertainty (“*En hvað varð- merki þá, get jeg eigi skýrt*”; Jónsson 1892: 19). First of all, with respect to linguistic forms, no one seriously disputes that the original form must have been < *varð(a)lokkur* “the *lokk* ‘song’ of the *vörð*”. Earlier commentators have largely been unified by seeing in this term, *vörðr*, a masculine u-stem noun with an underlying stem -a- that reappears in such forms as the genitive plural, *varða*, and cognate with English *ward*, *warder*. There is, of course, no reason why this cannot be the proper etymon, but there is at least one other possibility, one which has been regularly overlooked in such discussions: the feminine i-stem *vörð* “(young) woman” (also cognate with English *ward*, in the sense of a young person under the guardianship of an adult). This word likewise shows an original underlying stem -a- in such forms as the genitive plural, also *varða*. So, in addition to a meaning of “the calling of the warders” as one possible interpretation, **varðalokkur* could alternatively be understood as “women’s calling song”, as I suggest here. Such a term

would be by no means unusual and would parallel similarly structured phrases for various sorts of Old Norse genres in evidence in medieval manuscripts, such as *stjúpmæðra-sögur* “stepmother sagas”; *stjúpmæðra-sköp* “stepmother curses”; *konuvisur* “songs about a woman”; *kerlingabók* “an old woman’s tale, nonsense”; and *kerlingavilla* “an old woman’s tale, nonsense, superstition”. Importantly, it would also directly parallel other known terms connected with calling songs, such as Norwegian *huldrelökk* “elf call”, i.e. a herding call made by a spirit.

The etymology I am suggesting, “women’s calling song”, or perhaps more narrowly, “women’s spirit calling song”, appears rather unexciting when set against such notions as Olsen’s idea of a ritually enclosed area guarded by spirits, but such an understanding would fit neatly with Strömbäck’s view that *varðlokkur* can be explained by comparison of the scene in *Eiríks saga rauða* to Sámi shamanic practices, which require the singing by young women of songs in order to return the soul of the shaman (Strömbäck 1935: 139). “Women’s calling song” is not only a philological possibility but would also fit other aspects of what we know or believe possible about the scene in *Eiríks saga*, especially the emphasis on female singers, female teachers, and the Sámi *comparanda*.¹⁰ Moreover, another argument favouring this interpretation is the fact that it assists us in understanding and addressing the problematic *Urðar lokkor* of *Grógaldr*. The language of the text and the context of Gróa’s statement suggest to most observers that there is a connection between these phrases. *Urðar lokkor* is generally translated as “Urth’s magic songs”, “the spells of Urðr” and other attempts to tie the phrase to the Norn Urðr, and many observers (although not Jónsson 1892 or Strömbäck 1935: 139) have believed that *Urðar lokkor* is ultimately linked with *varðlokkur*. Indeed, Vígfússon and Powell even go so far as to emend the text to *varðlokkor* in their *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (Vigfússon and Powell 1883). One advantage of the reading of *varðlokkur* proposed here is that the phenomenon referred to in *Eiríks saga* and in *Grógaldr* may be understood as one and the same, without necessitating changes in the manuscript readings. The resolution of this seeming paradox depends on a commonplace in Norse tradition, i.e., the simple device of substituting a female mythological name for all females. Thus, for

example, *Hlín bauga* = Hlín (a goddess) of rings = woman. Thus, *Urðar lokkor* can be understood as an incantation connected with the Norn Urðr representing women in general but looking like a corruption of our *varðlokkor*. This wide-spread Nordic poetic convention thus allows us to interpret the phenomena referred to in *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grógaldr* as being one and the same type of song, while at the same time, necessitating no codicological gymnastics to explain the relationship between the two sources.

WÆLCYRIE

A dyad shared throughout much of the North Sea world with apparent overlooked relevance in this discussion is that relating to the valkyries – Old English *wælcyrrie*, Old Norse *valkyrja*. Etymologically, the two are identical and long-established scholarship derives them from “chooser of the slain” (< *valr-/wæl-* “dead, slain” and *kjósa* “choose”). Although the details of this figure’s evolution in Nordic mythology has been the subject of a long debate, we can safely say that they represent supernatural figures who frequently carry out the designs of Óðinn and are clearly connected with fate on the battle-field. But for as generally clear as the broad outlines of the valkyrie role is in Scandinavian mythology, the situation in Anglo-Saxon England is less certain. To be sure, roughly comparable understandings can be – and are – *read into* much of the Old English materials: typically when *wælcyrge* (*walcyrge*, *walcrigge*) is used as a gloss on the Roman goddess of war, Bellona, or on the Furies. As one noted scholar remarks, “*Wælcyrge* ‘chooser of the slain’, the Old English equivalent of Old Norse *valkyrja*, consistently refers to creatures that were malevolent, destructive, corrupt, and associated with slaughter” (Damico 1984: 48). Apparently, however, a secondary meaning of *wælcyrrie* develops by early 11th-century England, according to which *wælcyrrie* comes to be associated with magical practices and means “witch” or “sorceress”. But this gloss on late Anglo-Saxon uses is debatable, as there is no information other than the association with witch (i.e., the collocation itself) to imply that the word means “sorceress” or anything like it. Helen Damico, for example, rejects the assumption that we should

understand the term in these later contexts as necessarily meaning “sorceress”: “Although *wælcýrean* is usually translated as ‘sorceresses’, there is no indication [...] that the creatures being referred to are not the baleful war-spirits” (Damico 1984: 44).¹¹ The most significant challenge to this view comes when, in the early 11th century, Wulfstan refers to *wyccan and wælcýran* “witches and valkyries” in his catalogue of sinners (Napier 1883: 298). Such usage hardly seems likely to have been random, and lexicographers have no doubt been led to tie this figure to the witch image by virtue of the fact that the list of sinners in which the word appears would seem to demand reference to a fallen, all-too-human moral agent rather than a semi-divine figure. On the other hand, Wulfstan’s fondness for alliterative word-pairs has perhaps here overwhelmed the strict sense of the word. My insistence on dragging up the question of the valkyries is connected with our treatment of *wárloza*, *warlaw* and its peculiar odyssey in Old and Middle English, which I believe may parallel the question of the valkyries. One stunning fact about virtually every case of *wælcýrie*, i.e., those believed to be meant in the sense of “witch” and so on, is that, like the example from Wulfstan, it is routinely paired with a form of the word *wiccian* itself, as in “...7 *mansworan*, 7 *wiccean*, 7 *wælcýrian*, 7 *æbreacan*...” (from an 11th-century land charter; Earle 1888: 231) and “*Ne wiche ne walkirie*...” (from a 13th-century manuscript of *Body and Soul*; cited in Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis 1952-1999).

In his commentary to the Middle English *Cleanness*, Gollancz notes that apart from the various mythological glosses, valkyrie only appears in the apparently supportive context of one specific lexeme, “witch”, and remarks, “I am inclined to think that the whole phrase ‘wychez & walkyries’ maintained itself as an OE alliterative formula” (Gollancz 1921: 103). This is an interesting possibility, but we might reasonably tie to Gollancz’s suggestion the northerly connections of several of the texts, especially the oft-noted Scandinavianisms identified in several of them. The collocation of witch and valkyrie is itself a matter for some considerable eye-brow raising, but there is a further concatenation at work, and one at the heart of our discussion here: witch, valkyrie and *wárloza* in the sense of “warlock = male witch”, appear together in several texts, as in the following case from Wulfstan’s 11th-century *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*:

... her syndan *wiccan and wælcerjan*, and her syndan ryperas and reaferas and woruldstruderas and ðeofas and þeodscaðan, and *wedlogan and wærlogan* (Napier 1883: 165; emphasis added).

Similarly in *Cleanness, Þat wer wyse of wycecrafte, and warlazes...* (ll.1558-61) is followed a few lines later by:

As þe sage sathrapas þat sorsory coupe,
Wychez and walkyries wonnen to þat sale,
 Devinores of demorlaykes þat dremes cowþe rede,
 Sorsers, and exorcismus, and fele such clerkes;

(ll. 1576-9; Menner 1920:58)

Sage old satraps, steeped in sorcery,
 And wizards and witches went to the palace,
 Diviners of dreams, demonologers,
 Sorcerers, spirit-charmers, and many sorts of magician.

(Stone 1971: 143)

CONCLUSION

How then do we understand these various terms in English and the Nordic languages and the relationship, if any, between them? Is it possible that Norse *varðlokkur* was much more wide-spread and influential than its sparse tracks in the literature suggest, and that in some fashion, it helped shape the character of first Scots and later English *warlock*? Of course, of all the possible conduits in and around the 16th century between the Nordic dialects and Scots, the most obvious are the northern islands, Orkney and Shetland, especially as the period during which Montgomerie's first recorded use of modern *warlock* corresponds well to increased Scottish interest in and contact with these areas. A significant debate rages concerning the character, and especially the longevity, of Norn in post-impignoration Shetland (e.g., Barnes 1996, 1998; Rendboe 1987;

Smith 1996). Still, the discussion has mostly concerned itself with consideration of Norn as a living language – the date at which it ceases to exist in this sense, the nature of its demise, and whether one is to envision Scots-influenced Norn turning into Norn-influenced Scots or, more simply, that by the 19th century, we witness the emergence of a particular form of Scots with a Norn sub-stratum. No one, however, as far as I can see, doubts that Norn still existed in the later Middle Ages and in the early Reformation era. But as Norway’s influence waned in the islands and Scotland’s role increased on many fronts – economic, political and cultural – there arose a number of multilingual islanders, and not just in Norn and Scots, as Smith notes (Smith 1996), but perhaps also in German, Dutch and other important mercantile languages. Our interests here have less to do with Norn as a system of communication, of course, than with the possibility of individual lexemes influencing English usage, and here even what Low, Marwick and Jakobsen were able to preserve in the last two centuries (Low 1879; Marwick 1929; Jakobsen 1985), whatever their motivations and interpretations, is enormously useful. Toward that end, existing wordlists of the Shetland and Orkney dialects exhibit a substantial number of probable Norn-derived terms relating to witchcraft and magic. Although I do not attempt to present all terms relating to the supernatural (e.g., *trow*) from the published vocabularies of Jakobsen and Lamb (Jakobsen 1985; Lamb 1988), a significant number of recognisable terms are distinguishable:

ORKNEY

carlin(e) “witch” (< *kerling* “an old woman”)
frootery, freutery, feuterics “superstition” (< *fróðr* “knowing, learned, well-instructed”; cf. *fróðleikr* “knowledge, with a notion of sorcery; witchcraft”)
spo “to foretell” (< *spá* “to prophesy, foretell”)

SHETLAND

fordøñ “bewitched, cursed, burdensome, heavy” (a combination of *fyrirgerðr* and Eng. *done*, perf. part.)
frolik “an old, magic rigmarole or formula” (< *fróðleikr* “knowledge, with a notion of sorcery; witchcraft”)

fron “superstition; superstitious ceremony; magic formula” (< **fróð-* cf. *fróðr* “knowing, learned, well-instructed” and *fræði* “knowledge, learning, lore”)
gandaguster “a strong, sudden gust of wind” (< *gandr*; cf. *gandrekr* “gale brought about by witchcraft”)
gander “1) sudden feeling of powerlessness, sickness at heart. Orig. prob. ‘sickness caused by witchcraft’; 2) the fish will not bite, poss. ‘the fish are bewitched’”
ganfer “a crackling sound in the atmosphere” (< **gand-fer*; Nwg. *gandferd*; cf. *gandreið* “the witches’ ride”)
spo “to forebode, foretell” (< *spá* “to prophesy, foretell”)
trullascud “witch, witch-like woman” (< **tröllskottinn* “troll shot” cf. No. *trollskot*, Sw. *trollskott* “elf-shot”)
trolleman “wizard, sorcerer” (< **trollmaðr*; cf. *trollmenni* “giantlike man”; *trollkarl* “wizard, sorcerer, male witch”)

As a group, these terms represent useful testimony to the apparent resilience and vitality of Nordic witchcraft terms as aspects of the Norn substratum of English in the northern isles, and to them, one must add the following terms, to the best of my knowledge, never before noted in discussions of this problem:

SHETLAND

varl “by witchcraft to take away the profit of a piece of land” (“to varl de land”) (“Abbrev. form of an older *varlek*? Cf. O.N. *varðlok(k)a*, f. “a kind of magic song”)
varlet “warlock or wizard” (The same word as Eng. warlock, sb., but the initial *v* is ON. See prec.)

Jakobsen’s collecting techniques, as Michael Barnes frequently notes (e.g., Barnes 1996), are anything but transparent. We know, however, that the case of *varlet* he plucked from an early 18th-century traveller’s description: “There is a House called Kebister, where a Varlet or Wizard lived.” (Brand 1703: 110) Jakobsen’s suggestion that both *varl* and *varlet* are reflexes of *varðlokkur* is far from certain. The derivation for *varlet*, at least, strikes me as opaque, and is complicated by the appearance of the “parallel” French-derived word

varlet in the sense “rogue” or “rascal” already in the 16th century. What, one might reasonably wonder, are the odds for two historically unrelated but semantically conjoined *varlets* emerging in roughly the same period? Already in this era the term – as *varlot* – is associated with witchcraft and magic by no less than Reginald Scot in his *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584): “...a notable cousening varlot, who professed Alcumystrie, juggling, witchcraft, and conjuration...” (Scot 1972: 206). *varl*, on the other hand, as a verb meaning “to deprive through witchcraft a land of its value” seems plausible at least, and if correct would, together with the *Grógaldr* references, rescue *varðlokkur* from the relative obscurity of the two 14th-century manuscripts of *Eiríks saga rauða* – the term and its referent may indeed have been more widespread in the insular West Norse world than generally acknowledged.

Our consideration of these important pairs of witchcraft terms in the North sea area have allowed us to come to the following conclusions:

1) *wárloza*, *warlau*, the apparent etymon of “warlock”, can be understood as a semantically sensible source for modern “warlock” by the later medieval period and the same phonological development is paralleled elsewhere (i.e. *elbo/elbok*, *wyndo/wyndok* in Craigie 1937-2002);

2) Old Icelandic *varðlokkur* appears of obvious relevance but has been deemed irrelevant because of its uncertain meaning and relative rarity; I suggest that it derives from terms meaning “women’s call” or “women’s herding song”, specialised to mean this kind of ceremonial song, a view that complements, rather than competes with, the understanding that the term implies the beckoning of spirits in a ritual context; moreover, this reading allows us to understand the connection between *varðlokkur* and *Urðar lokkor*, but does not force us to argue that they are literally the “same” phrase;

3) a related – perhaps even parallel – case is that of Old English *walcyrie*, a word that reflects important aspects of Teutonic mythology and may evolve into the image of a witch or sorceress;

4) many of the sources of information about these terms derive from manuscripts reflecting Nordicisms and other suggestions of Scandinavian influence; the terms themselves appear in close

proximity to one another and are frequently used in alliterating pairs of the sort, *wycheecraftē and warlaze* and *Wychez and walkyries*; and

5) the oldest evidence for *warlock* in that form and with its modern meaning is from the late 16th century in a Scottish poem.

One imagines that competing (if indeed that is the right word) in the late medieval and early modern period for the niche meaning “male witch, wizard, scoundrel” were the various forms of *wérloza*, *varlet*, and perhaps some evolved form of *varðlokkur* (*varl-*). Returning to the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s comments about *warlock* that “Some other word, lost or not discovered, has perh. influenced both form and sense” (Simpson and Weiner 1993), my suspicion is that in this linguistic stew from the 15th- and 16th-centuries, *warlock*’s “form and sense” have been shaped by knowledge of these other terms. But even if this conclusion is on the right track, there is much left unanswered: What, for example, should we make of the gender aspects of the terms? How does a term I suggest was once associated specifically with women and the magico-religious world of medieval Scandinavia come to mean “A person (chiefly or only a man) in league with the Devil”? Clearly many answers remain wanting, but in the important terminological exchange centring on magic and witchcraft one envisions taking place between Norn and Scots in the 15th and 16th centuries, the enigmatic *varðlokkur* may yet have a key, if still elusive, role to play.

Harvard University

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Notes

- 1 Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1957: 206-9; my translation. It should be noted that the term I translate here as “song”, *kvæði*, can also be glossed as “poem”.
- 2 “*Hvárki em ek fjölkunnig né vísindakona, en þó kenndi Halldís, fóstura mín, mér á Íslandi þat kvæði, er hon kallaði Varðlokur*” (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1957: 207-8).
- 3 Jansson 1944: 44. Jansson’s ground-breaking investigation of the manuscripts of *Eiríks saga rauða* remains the seminal study of this problem.
- 4 “*Varðlokkur syftar på den speciella sång, som användes för att återkalla den schamanerandes själ till den i extatisk utmattning liggande kroppen*” (Strömbäck 1935: 139).
- 5 “*Með Varðlokum varð vörðurinn, verndarandinn [sagnarandinn, einn eða fleiri] lokaður inni í hring þeirra, er sungu [og sem voru ef til vill einnig nefndar varðlokur]*” (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1957: 207).
- 6 Early anthologies and studies of this genre include: Dybeck 1846; Carlheim-Gyllenskiöld 1892; and Reinton 1955. Considerable recent attention has also focussed on the genre, including Johnson 1986 and Tellenbach 1999. For a technical consideration of the unusual register in which these tunes are produced, see Uttman 2002.
- 7 “*I sume av dei kallingsorda som er bruka på sætrane enno, er det truleg leivningar av ordelag frå dei eldste tider*” (Reinton 1955: 303).
- 8 “*Det ansågs nämligen besitta magisk kraft som kunde besegra de vilda djuren, men även de hemlighetsfulla väsen, vittror, jättar eller troll, som ansågs befolka skogarna.*” Ling 1971: 22; cf. Reinton 1955: 312-3.
- 9 “*Kvað Guðríðr þá kvæðit svá fagrt ok vel, at engi þóttisk heyrt hafa með fegri rödd kvæði kveðit, sá er þar var hjá...*” (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1957: 208)
- 10 I note too that a recently completed study of the term *gandr* (Mitchell 2003) further supports this view.
- 11 Gollancz writes that there is an Anglo-Saxon gloss on *venefica* using *wælcyrrie* (Gollancz 1921: 103). I have not located this instance in any available catalogue, dictionary or word list, including the *Concordance*

of *Old English*. (Healey and Venezky 1980-83). Still, I suppose we must hold out the possibility that there is evidence to prove the valkyrie/witch relationship.

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Óðinn and His Heroes: A Social Analysis

STEPHAN GRUNDY

In a polytheistic religion, the worship of individual deities is usually related to their fulfilment of necessary social and practical functions. Similarly, legendary heroes also become memorable through the functions they fulfil: usually either defending their people against enemies – either humans or supernatural creatures which may be interpreted as forces of disruption – or by bringing vital knowledge, lifting curses, etc., all of which make it possible for normal life to occur. In the native Scandinavian literature, the overlap between gods and heroes is very close: it is frequently possible to identify a hero as belonging to Óðinn, Þórr, or Freyr, either by the direct intervention of that deity in his life or by the activities and associations which liken the hero to the god. The purpose of my investigation is to determine what social function Óðinn's heroes fulfilled in the Scandinavian mind, and the way in which that shapes the relationships between the god and his chosen ones.

The three saga-heroes who spring most immediately to mind as Óðinnic figures are Starkaðr, Sigmundr the Völsung, and Egill Skalla-Grímsson – the first two legendary and the last historical, or at least historically based. Naturally they share the usual heroic characteristics of exceptional size, strength, and battle-skill; the characteristics which mark them as Óðinn-heroes go beyond this. Two (Starkaðr and Egill) are exceptionally ugly, actively frightening in appearance; the same two are also notable poets. All three have a strong element of the anti-social supernatural in their background or makeup: Starkaðr is descended from giants, Sigmundr becomes a werewolf, and Egill is the son of a berserk and grandson of a man who is *mjök hamrammr* (“greatly skin-strong”¹), a sort of werewolf. And all three of them are alike in their relationships with society: they are figures whose presence generally heralds disruption and war, from the national scale down to the most personal level – a disruption which, in turn, mirrors the effect of their god upon their own lives.

Starkaðr's story begins with the peculiar tale of the gifts and curses which define his life, a tale existing in two versions. *Gautreks saga* (*Fornaldar sögur*, vol. 3) has Óðinn, in one of his many disguises, presenting his fosterling to a gathering of gods which

includes Þórr; a by-tale is told explaining Þórr's ancestral enmity to Starkaðr's line, which accounts for the god's next actions. For every blessing Óðinn gives, Þórr, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of the evil fairy in *Sleeping Beauty*, offers a matching curse: Starkaðr shall live three hundred years, but commit an evil deed in each of them, and shall be the last of his line; he shall always be victorious in battle, but always grievously wounded; he shall have great wealth in gold, but never own land; he shall be loved by nobles and kings, but the common folk shall hate him; he shall make poetry as fast as he can speak, but never be able to remember it. The character of these blessings and curses is quite typical for the two deities, and bears a certain resemblance to the substance of the dialogue between Óðinn and Þórr in the Eddic poem *Hárbarðsljóð*, in which Þórr's blunt honesty is placed in stark relief against Óðinn's occasionally malicious subtlety. In particular, the social differentiation of worshippers described, albeit in an unkindly exaggerated fashion by Óðinn in *Hárbarðsljóð* 24 – his statement that he receives earls, while Þórr gets the thralls – is emphasised by some of the fates laid on Starkaðr: Óðinn's blessings of gold and the love of the highborn against Þórr's curses banning him from land and the affection of common folk. It is also possible to point out that several of the curses Þórr sets upon Starkaðr are almost the natural results of Óðinn's blessings more than they are active maledictions in themselves, and one may wonder if Óðinn, in this rendition, has deliberately set his protégé up. The suspicion becomes stronger when contrasting *Gautreks saga* to the same tale as told by Saxo Grammaticus. In the latter, there is no mention of Þórr: Óðinn deliberately prepares Starkaðr for bringing about King Víkarr's death, and "To this end he also gave him three times the span of mortal life, in order that he might perpetrate a proportionate number of damnable deeds, and crime accompany his prolonged existence" (Saxo I, vi: 152-3, tr. Davidson and Fisher 1.171). Certainly, in both renditions, the first evil deed perpetrated by Starkaðr – the mock sacrifice of Víkarr which becomes a real one (*Fornaldar sögur*, vol. 3: 24) – is not only desired, but carefully planned, by Óðinn, so that Þórr's hostile intervention, at the very least, plays into Óðinn's intentions for his hero. It is certain that, as the result of Óðinn's intrusion into his life, Starkaðr's fate as a wandering force of disruption – killer of kings, stirrer of strife, catalyst of hostility in the face of peace – is set and

sealed: he has, in fact, become the battle-loving god's representative in the world of humans.

Sigmundr the Völsung, while given a more positive portrayal in *Völsunga saga* than Starkaðr in his own tales, likewise retains the Óðinnic elements fundamental to his character; and, as with Starkaðr, his god contrives both his heroism and his separation from society in a single appearance. By coming to the wedding of Sigmundr's sister Signý and stabbing a sword into the Barnstokkr – the family tree of the Völsungs – Óðinn both acts as an ill omen for the wedding and clan and also brings about that omen's fulfilment: the destruction of all the Völsungs save Sigmundr and Signý, and ultimately the deaths of Signý and her husband Siggeir as well, result from Sigmundr's ability, alone of the men in the hall, to draw the sword and his refusal to give it up to Siggeir. The lengthy process of Sigmundr's revenge makes him into a figure of terror, a breaker of the most fundamental human laws: he murders his sister's two children, to whom, as maternal uncle, he ought to have been mentor and protector; he commits incest with her; and finally, he becomes not only a *vargr* in the legal sense, as outlaw, but in the metaphorical sense, as a werewolf, so separated from social conscience as to attack even his son and nephew. As Roberta Frank observes, to the Anglo-Saxon audience of *Beowulf*, "the incestuous Sigemund is ... infamous for his feuds and crimes", and she suggests that *Beowulf* himself, who never fomented strife, swore empty oaths, or murdered his kin, was quite deliberately presented as "the anti-Odinic, anti-Volsung pagan champion" (1981: 131-2). Appropriately for the man described in *Beowulf* as "most wide-famed of exiles" (898), Sigmundr does not do well in peace-time. After he has settled down, he is – through fatal advice for which the motivation is not clarified in either *Völsunga saga* or the Eddic fragment *Frá dauða Sinfjötla* ("On the death of Sinfjötli") – the final agent of his son's death, delivering the body directly to Óðinn afterwards (*Völsunga saga* x; *Frá dauða Sinfjötla*). Óðinn's third appearance in Sigmundr's life is to end it, preparing the way for the birth of his posthumous son Sigurðr – himself conceived in strife and due to cause a great deal of trouble, some of it with Óðinn's aid.

While Egill Skalla-Grímsson, whose story belongs to a more realistic genre than the *fornaldarsögur* (which deal chiefly with legendary heroes in an atmosphere of the highly fantastic), does not himself meet directly with Óðinn, the god's influence permeates his

saga throughout. From the beginning of his genealogy, a distinction is drawn between the dark-haired, ugly, berserker strain in the family, mistrustful of authority and prone to violence – the Óðinnic strain – and their fair-haired, handsome brothers who prefer to support their kings, get along with almost everyone, and actually bear Þórr-compounded names. According to the saga, Egill kills his first man at seven as revenge for his father’s berserk murder of his nursemaid. While the constraints of relative believability in the family sagas keep Egill’s social disruption down to a dull roar – as Byock observes, the protagonists of this genre are distinguished from the earlier heroes precisely by the small-scale and prosaic nature of the majority of their conflicts (1981: 2) – the Óðinnic element of his character is always influential. While not, like his grandfather, a shape-shifter, he appears as a dangerous and ugly beast in the court of the English king Aðalsteinn, glaring at the king and making horrible one-eyed faces so that Aðalsteinn only dares to offer him a gold ring on the point of his sword. Although Egill is not, like Starkaðr, a killer of great kings, the saga author does, in fact, give him implied credit for magically causing the exile of Eiríkr blóðøx and his queen Gunnhildr from Norway, in revenge for a law-case that has gone badly. The verses attributed to the *niðstöng* (pole of hate, a stave carved with runes) which Egill erects against the rulers of Norway state explicitly that the spirits of the land will know no rest until they have driven Eiríkr and Gunnhildr out of the country; and so it comes to pass. Egill’s violent temper makes him in general a disruptive guest, who on occasion requires his more moderate brother or his friend Arinbjörn to mediate between himself and the rest of society. Nevertheless, and significantly, in his own poem *Sonatorrek* Egill mentions that temper “which makes foes from false friends” as one of the two great gifts Óðinn has given him, the second being his poetry. In his great old age and decrepitude, Egill’s final thought is to take his hoard of silver to the Althing with the intention of scattering it about to raise fighting and discord; thwarted in this intention, he ends his career by taking the hoard into hiding and murdering the thrall who helped him carry it. Nevertheless, even in his very rudest behaviour, his copious drinking bout in Ármóðr’s house which ends with him vomiting into his host’s face, Egill may, as Dronke suggests, be imitating in small the action of his god spewing the mead of poetry. (Having swallowed all of the mead to achieve its theft, Óðinn, fleeing in the shape of an eagle, then vomits it again as soon as he reaches the gods’ home;

Egill himself refers to this when he calls poetry the “crop of the eagle’s beak” in his poem *Berudrápa*.) Dronke comments (1996: 56) that “Egill is made to repeat the actions of Óðinn ... as if dedicating them to the god to express and strengthen his bond with him and acknowledge that it was the god who gave him the geð [temperament] to make sure enemies out of deceiving friends”. In spite of his physical ugliness, violent nature, and anti-social behaviour, Egill is also one of the greatest poets of his age, his unquestionable ability being a fundamental part of his dubious personality.

When the careers of these three heroic figures are compared, it emerges that their most positive function is the accomplishment or incitement of revenge. Granted that revenge itself was frequently seen as the restoration of order rather than its destruction, in the case of Starkaðr’s incitement to Ingeld (in Saxo, and accepting the common reading of the “old warrior” in *Beowulf* 2041 ff. as Starkaðr himself), it disrupts the resolution already created by more peaceful means; Sigmundr’s triumph is one of scorched earth; and Egill’s vengeance against Eiríkr blóðøx and his wife is an act of pure spite. Moreover, if Snorri’s remarks in *Heimskringla* I on the unmanliness of magic of the type Egill uses (i.e. the description of *seiðr* as effeminate in *Ynglinga saga* vii: 19 and the slaughter of the magician Rögnvaldr réttilbeini in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* xxxiv: 139) are to be believed, Egill’s revenge is not even within the socially acceptable forms for masculine vengeance. The only comparable use in the sagas of a rune-carved stave to bring misfortune, even if justified, on a victim who is too strong to assail directly is in *Grettis saga*, where the woman who avenges her son by this means is presented as a wicked witch doing something shameful.

Most of the activities of Starkaðr, Sigmundr, and Egill are even less constructive than their revenges. This stands in marked contrast to monster-slayer heroes such as Beowulf and his troll- and undead-vanquishing counterpart in the more realistic family sagas, Grettir (whether the texts of *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga* are actually related or not – cf. Fjalldal 1998 – the two heroes are similar in their most notable deeds), or to the demi-mythological heroic figures who bring prosperity and good order, such as the legendary Danish peace-king Froði, and Scyld Scefing, father of the Danish royal dynasty. One might, from a modern perspective, in fact question whether Óðinn’s men should properly be described as heroes or as anti-heroes, acting,

as they do, for and after the example of a bloodthirsty, trouble-making deity.

At this point, it may be useful to compare Óðinn's possible function to the social function of his much-maligned oath-brother Loki. Loki is overtly a figure of disruption and antagonism; most of the myths in which he plays a part begin with his causing or threatening an injury to the society of the gods. However, they normally end with his personal, if enforced under threat of Þórr's anger, restoration of the original order, plus some element to strengthen it. Loki jeopardises Freyja, the sun, and the moon by promising them to a giant as payment for building the walls of Ásgarðr; his trick to get out of the contract leads to the begetting of Óðinn's horse Sleipnir. He shears the goddess Sif's hair, but makes recompense by arranging the forging of the weapons and treasures of the gods; he tricks Þórr into going unarmed to visit the giants, which leads to the friendly giantess Gríðr's gift of Þórr's iron gloves, belt of strength, and staff; he steals Iðunn for another giant, Þjazi, and must steal her back, which ultimately results in the assumption of Skaði into the godly ranks. Although he is not responsible for the theft of Þórr's hammer, he is responsible for its regaining by means of dressing Þórr as a woman for a mock bridal, a disruptive activity in itself. In fact, most of the improvements in the power of the gods are benefits gained from Loki's temporary disruption. Gurevich has interpreted the *Locasenna*, where the less noble past actions of the gods are laid out for mockery, as a deliberate inversion of the sacred which "is only temporarily standing the serious on its head so as to return later to the normal state of affairs" (Gurevich 1992: 169), and which requires an antagonistic Loki in order to play up the actual strength of the gods.

In contrast, when Óðinn acts to disrupt order, either directly or through his heroes, it remains disrupted. Here, in particular, his function as death-god comes to the fore: one of his most common aspects in the literature is, either directly or indirectly, to cause the death of kings. His more mythological victims – Haraldr hilditönn (Saxo, *Gesta Danorum*, I, viii: 220), Geirroðr (*Grímnismál*), Sigmundr (*Völsunga saga*, xii), Guðrún's sons by Jörmunrekkr (*Völsunga saga*, xliv), Hrólfkr kraki (*Hrólf's saga kraka*: 105) – perceive him directly, while he is merely given credit for ordering the deaths of Hákon inn góði (*Hákonarmál* 1) and Eiríkr blóðøx (*Eiríksmál* 7). His presence is almost inevitably ominous: his

appearance to the smith of Nesjar (*Saga Hákonar Sverrissonar, Fornmanna sögur*, vol. 9: 55-56) as a battle-foreboding spook may be a diminishment of his godly nature, but is in no way an alteration of it.

It is also worth noting that – with the one exception of Baldr – Loki’s disruptive activities are never fatal to the gods, and the more unfortunate giants that get involved in them are usually killed not by Loki, but by Þórr, whose duty it is to do so. As for Baldr’s death, Turville-Petre (1964: 115) observes several significant points.

Höð need not, in the first place, have been the pathetic, blind instrument of evil. His name means “warlike”, and appears also to have been used in kennings for “warrior”. In fact, it may be suggested that Höð was not, in the first place, a separate god, but that his name was one of the many used for Óðinn. From this could arise the myth that he was blind. One of Óðinn’s names was Tvíblindi (Blind in Both Eyes) ... It may not be extravagant to suppose that there was yet another version of the story, in which the blind or half-blind Óðinn contrived the death of his own son.

The slaying of Baldr in the middle of a game, by a supposedly harmless twig which becomes a deadly shaft, is also markedly reminiscent of the reed that becomes a spear in the mock sacrifice of Víkarr, and the similar transformation of the reed cast over the host in *Styrbjarnar þattr* (*Flateyjarbók*, vol. 2: 70-73). Furthermore, Baldr is referred to as a sacrifice in two separate sources: the skaldic poem *Húsdrápa* 9 (“holy sacrifice”, *heilagr tafn*) and the Eddic poem *Völuspá* 31 (“bloody sacrifice”, *blóðgom tívor*). The whole – particularly the irreversible character of Baldr’s death – would seem to point more directly to Óðinn than to the genre of Loki-adventures, the more so since, despite Óðinn’s complex effort to avenge Baldr (a rape achieved by magic and trickery to engender the son who would kill Höðr), Loki is never punished for his part in the event, and indeed is not involved at all in Saxo’s version of the story. Rather than a crime laid at Loki’s door, Baldr’s death may reasonably be viewed as an Óðinnic process: in the Eddic poem *Baldrs draumr*, Óðinn even seeks and achieves the knowledge of who will kill his son, but takes no action to prevent the slaying (the hopeless struggle against fate is left to Baldr’s mother Frigg).

This, however, leads to the question: if Óðinn was generally seen in such a negative light – as a reasonable amount of evidence suggests – why, then, was he worshipped as a major god? And how did it come about that not only were the humans who followed his example considered heroes, but at least one of them, Sigmundr, was one of the most popular heroes of early Scandinavia? While it is true that Óðinn is a particularly complex deity, whose cult in practice probably extended far past the literary descriptions of the god, it is also clear that, at least in the literature, his most frequently and strongly perceived aspects, and those aspects which are most marked in his heroes, were those related to his love of strife and sowing of disruption.

The immediate answer in Óðinn's case is that, despite his name for treachery, he offered ambitious warleaders a sort of proto-Faustian bargain: victory now in exchange for a bloody death later, with the latter glossed further by the expectation of living on in heroic poetry – likewise the gift of the god. This assuredly accounts for some of his veneration; there is also the point that, as giver of poetry, Óðinn loomed particularly large in the verses of the skalds on which much of such knowledge of early Scandinavian religion as we have is based, and therefore may have achieved more of a prominence in poetry than he held in general religious activity. While these answers may seem superficially satisfactory, the consistency of Óðinn's cult and his overwhelmingly pervasive character in literature suggest that he had more to offer in these respects than the aggrandisement of a few power-hungry rulers.

We may ask, then, what function Óðinn's disruptive activities could have played in early Scandinavian society. It is my opinion that the answer can be found in three things: to some degree, in the political opportunities offered to warring rulers; more importantly, in the Scandinavian awareness of the necessity of death, in a religion in which even the gods were not perceived as immortal; and, inextricably intertwined with that awareness, death's single mitigating factor, the poetry and tales in which a man's name and deeds might live after him – poetry and tales which were, by and large, born out of conflict and blood.

There is a reasonable amount of evidence that, as Turville-Petre observes (1972: 15-7), Óðinn was more favoured by warlike leaders such as Haraldr inn hárfagri and the Norwegian kings descended from him than by the common farmers – those who had the least to gain

from battle, and whose names were unlikely to be immortalised by the skalds after their deaths. In the former case, death in battle was a normal occupational hazard; as for the destruction of kings and dynasties – Óðinn observed himself in *Hárbarðsljóð* 22, “One oak gets what falls from another”. One may suggest that a god known as a stirrer of strife would easily be seen as a helper by would-be conquering kings; as *Valkjósandi* (the Chooser of the Slain – one of the god’s names, a masculine form of his female helpers’ title *valkyrja*), determining the survivor’s victory by default, he was certainly the right god for a warleader to pray to. Even the Sparlösa runestone (Sweden, c. 750-850), which is generally interpreted as commemorating a dynasty of kings who were associated with Freyr and noted for providing good harvest (side II, line 2), appears to include an Óðinn-byname as part of a kenning for a renowned warrior and conqueror: the king Øyuls, called “Victorious” (side III, line 1) is also named “Þundr [Óðinn] of great battles” (side III, 2-3; Norr 1998: 190 ff., 206-7), which suggests the overwhelming prevalence of the god in regards to matters of war.

It is also important to note that the constant awareness of death, mitigated only by the bravery with which an individual faced it and hence the opportunity to be remembered for heroic deeds, may well have served to bring about an acceptance of the deity whose powers encompassed both death and, through the means of poetry, posthumous memory. As Óðinn says in *Hávamál* 76-77: “Cattle die, kinsmen die, you yourself shall likewise die. But word-glory never dies, for him that gets it well. Cattle die, kinsmen die, you yourself shall likewise die. I know one thing that never dies: the judgement on each dead man.” While Óðinn’s work as death-god, particularly as the stirrer of strife bringing death by violence, may not always have been welcome, it was inevitable. In fact, few men would have been willing to admit out loud that they were reluctant to see strife occur and take part in combat, and every man, at least in theory and literature, wanted to have his name and life remembered after his death. It is entirely appropriate to the nature of Óðinn that the most obvious means for this to occur was through violent conflict: while the family sagas record lawsuits and alliances, even the Icelandic legal system was buttressed by the ever-present possibility – and occasionally responsibility – of violence; and the surviving body of skaldic poetry is largely skewed towards recording battles, conquests, and heroic deaths.

Further, since death was inescapable, it was of vital importance to accept it and meet it without fear or shying away. This ideal is put into words, among others, by Skarp-Heðinn: to the prophecy of his imminent death, he simply replies, “That is well enough, for that debt (death) we must all pay” (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, 119: 300). In fact, for a man, death in battle at a reasonable age may have been seen as better than the alternative, that of dwindling strength and respect as the infirmities of old age overtook him: we may compare Sigmundur’s heroic fall to Starkaðr’s shame at his aged feebleness and desire to find a man who would slay him, and Egill’s diminishment from the feared warrior to the old blind man grumbling by the hearth and scorned by the female servants. Archaeological evidence suggests that this loss of a man’s power and place with advancing age was more than a fictional theme: in Denmark, for instance, “the quantity and quality of the furnishing in men’s graves decreased with the age of the dead man, but some of the richest burials were of women who were fifty years old or more” (Sawyer, 1993: 192). In this context, Óðinn’s work of determining death in battle – even the source of death for his chosen kings and heroes – may be seen as giving a blessing, providing a fitting end to a worthy life. Nevertheless, Óðinn’s final appearance as fatal antagonist is not always appreciated: Böðvar-Bjarki, for instance, though he does not fear his death, goes down fighting and cursing the god in both *Hrólf’s saga kraka* and Saxo’s rendition, and the bitter image of Óðinn as the final betrayer of his heroes survives beside Sigmundur’s calm speech of acceptance, “Óðinn does not will that I wield the sword, since it is now broken. I have fought battles while it pleased him” (*Völsunga saga*, xii).

The converse of accepting the necessity of death is the willingness, for the sake of pride and one’s name, to put oneself into the circumstances of violence which cause it. In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, for instance, “courage and manhood” are twice explicitly linked with the willingness to seek bloody revenge and its concurrent risk (chs. 116, 117). In contrast, the most notably pacific character in the saga, Njáll himself, is also notable for his lack of a beard, and his violent sons more than once find themselves roused to defend their father’s manhood on that account. Although Njáll is presented as a thoroughly admirable character, particularly in the afterview of the christian ideal, the suspicion nevertheless lingers that his beardlessness and his peaceful nature are in some way identified. Real men in the sagas,

while displaying a degree of rationality corresponding to the level of realism in their particular saga's genre, are always, when good sense no longer serves their situation, at least prepared, if not necessarily berserk-eager, to hazard themselves in battle. If they triumphed, well and good; if not, at least they had died memorably. While Óðinn himself, given his personal predilection for achieving his aims by cunning and magic rather than by straightforward combat, may not always be a perfect model of Norse masculinity – in *Locasenna* 24, Loki taunts him directly for unmanly behaviour in practising the feminine magic of *seiðr* – his heroes are generally, by the standards of the sagas, hyper-masculine; and much of the glorification of battle-courage which leads to either victory or heroic death as the primary manly virtue can be traced to the cult of Óðinn, either directly through his role as battle-god and ruler of Valhöll or indirectly through his role as inspirer of battle-glorifying poetry.

In answer to the desire of those facing death to be remembered, and of their survivors to remember the dead, Óðinn's gift of poetry provided at least a satisfactory resolution, if not always a happy one. The two tenth-century skaldic poems *Hákonarmál* and *Eiríksmál*, both describing the reception of a newly slain king in Valhöll as a valued reinforcement to Óðinn's army for the future battle of Ragnarök (in which Óðinn's heroic dead shall fight beside the gods against the destruction of the world), are particularly notable for the genre, offering, as well as a memorial, an extended rationalisation for Óðinn's willingness to take the best of men untimely. Such poems not only preserved the memory of their subjects' greatness, but also transformed their deaths into a form of ultimate victory. This is particularly underscored in *Hákonarmál*, with what may be the most poignant lines in the Old Norse poetic corpus. Hákon, bloody and cold on the field, says to the valkyrie whom Óðinn has sent for him, "Why did you rule the battle thus, Geir-Skögull? Did we not deserve better from the gods?" To which she replies, "We ruled it thus: you held the field, and your foes fled." A Norse hero could not reasonably have asked for more.

The same Óðinnic reconciliation between the recognition of the inevitability of death and the acceptance of death, particularly battle-death, might be expected to appear in burial rites and physical memorials, in which the living complete the process of surrendering the dead to the Otherworld. The most prominent examples of this are the Gotlandic picture stones, many of which show explicitly Óðinnic

imagery such as various combinations of battle-death (Tängelgårda, Hammars I, Tjängvide, Ardre), the eight-legged horse and the apparent reception in Valhöll (Tjängvide, Ardre), sacrifice with noose and spear (Hammars I), funeral procession (Alskog, Tängelgårda), and perhaps the ship-voyage to the Otherworld (Hammars I and III, Tjängvide, Tängelgårda, and most of the others; see Ellmers 1980); and the active use of spears, particularly down-pointing spears, in burial ritual. Creutz notes the rarity of downwards-pointing spears in Migration and Viking Age art (she found only six examples from this period altogether, of which one, shown on a Finnish finger-ring, is uncertain and has been interpreted variously as a spear, an arrow, or a Saami drumstick), compared to their relative frequency in graves (2003: 262 ff.). Of the pictorial depictions, four (the Vendel, Valsgårde, and Sutton Hoo helm-plates, and the Torslunda wolf-dancer matrix) are often, especially the Torslunda matrix, interpreted as showing Óðinnic ritual; and the fifth is a woman on the Oseberg tapestry procession who carries the sole down-turned spear among a number of upward-pointing ones, again suggesting a ritual significance. Aside from graves, a circle of spear-heads driven downwards into the ground was also found on the Viking Age sacrificial site at Gudingsåkrarna (Vallstena parish, Gotland). Lindqvist suggests that this circle may have surrounded a holy tree (1945: 31 ff.); if so, the down-pointing spears here could have emphasised the purpose of the tree as a place for sacrificing living creatures. The burial rites involving spears include spears thrust into the walls of the burial chambers, which was quite common in the Birka chamber-graves (Gräslund 1980: 30) and thrust down into cremation deposits at Birka and Kvarnbacken (Gräslund 1980: 76). Andreas Nordberg reads this activity as a specific dedication of the dead to Óðinn (2002): the casting of the god's spear was not a blessing to be compared, for instance, to Þórr's hallowing with his hammer (which brings his goats back to life and, in the Eddic poem *Thrymskviða*, is cited as a customary blessing for a new bride), but rather, an indicator of whom Óðinn had chosen for death. The use of the spear either imbedded horizontally in a chamber-grave's wall or stabbed down suggests that the funeral rites incorporated the symbolic end of the flight of Óðinn's spear (also shown flying horizontally over the dying man on the Ardre and Tjängvide stones); by ritually manifesting what had already taken place, the persons performing the burial indicated their acceptance of the event and the

god's role in it. It can be argued that the Valhöll picture stones achieved the same effect by portraying the process visually: the death in battle, the journey to Valhöll, and the reception there. In addition, like at least some of the Óðinnic memorial poetry, the picture stones formed a remembrance of heroic death that would last more than a thousand years: if the thought of having a carved memorial was not actually a motivation to die in battle, at least it provided assurance of the worth of such a death. It may also be the case that the use of the Óðinnic spear in memorial and burial ritual served as a compliment to the dead man, showing that he was worthy of Óðinn's choice, and hence reinforcing the ideal of dying courageously.

Taking these things into account, we can say that, at least in the ideology of early Scandinavia if not always in practice, to be a man was to be ready to welcome Óðinn's presence bravely, whether it portended doom for one's foes or oneself, or both. His heroes are the characters, in legend or real life (or at least realistic fiction) who took that welcome a step farther: who were able to accept the disruption of their own lives by the god to a degree that made them, if not precisely his avatars, at least his agents of violent change, the embodiments and catalysts of life's final test. As heroes, they hold up through the constant challenges and strife that acceptance brought them; and die, to the best of their ability, as true to the nature of their god as they had lived; they provide larger-than-life exemplars of the Norse code of manhood in its most extreme form. As the god's unflinching helpers – and victims – they serve to bring Óðinn's force into the world, providing the conflict and death necessary for enduring deeds to occur, and themselves, as the men who heard and were inspired by their tales hoped to be, are rewarded by Óðinn's blessing of poetry, whether as subjects or as creators. Egill's insight in the wake of his son's death, identifying his violent temper and his skill as a poet as the two great gifts of Óðinn, is precisely accurate, and defines both his own function in the world and that of his god.

Shinrone, Co. Offaly, Ireland

Note

- 1 All translations from Old Norse are my own.

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The Sacrifices at Uppsala: Christian Polemic or Ceremonies of the Old Norse Religion?

BRITT-MARI NÄSSTRÖM

ADAM'S ACCOUNT OF THE SACRIFICES

The sacrifice is of this nature: of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads,* with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple. Now this grove is so sacred in the eyes of the heathen that each and every tree in it is believed divine because of the death or putrefaction of the victims. Even dogs and horses hang there with men. A Christian seventy-two years old told me that he had seen their bodies suspended promiscuously. Furthermore, the incantations customarily chanted in the ritual of a sacrifice of this kind are manifold and unseemly; therefore it is better to keep silence about them.

*Feasts and sacrifices of this kind are solemnized for nine days. On each day they offer a man along with other living beings in such a number that in the course of the nine days they will have made offerings of seventy-two creatures. This sacrifice takes place about the time of the vernal equinox. (Adam of Bremen, IV, ch. 27 with scholion 141, tr. Tschan 2002: 208)

This account of Bishop Adam has served as an illustration of the Old Norse religion and its cruel rites, especially the sacrificial cult of Uppsala. These few lines are perhaps the most well-known in his great work concerning the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen and its history. It was composed in 1075-76 after his visit to the court of Lejre in Denmark, where the king, Sven Estridson, was his informant. Adam never visited Uppsala and his account of the temple was based on hearsay and is not reliable in detail, but it should not be dismissed

as pure fantasy (Sawyer 1982: 134). It could be seen as a kind of polemical stereotype about pagan worship and its bloody sacrifices used by Christian missionaries and informants, but there exists independent evidence about these rites. The most famous of them, Snorri Sturluson, the Icelandic historian, speaks about the great sacrifice that was held at Uppsala in the springtime, where all the people in Svearíke gathered and performed religious rites (*Saga ins helga Ólofs konung*: ch. 77).

Snorri says nothing about human sacrifices or the wish to placate the gods. The aim of the sacrifice was *blóta sigr and fríðs konung*, “the victory and the peace of the king”. The gathering was also a *gemot* and a market, probably the famous *Disting*, which survived several centuries after Christianisation. The scholion mentions that the sacrifices took place in nine days, which could be compared with a runic inscription from Blekinge in Sweden, saying, “with nine bucks and with nine horses HraðuwolfR gave a good year” (Santesson 1989: passim). The number nine was holy and recurs in mythology, but the inscription also hints at the common purpose of the sacrifices – to establish a connection between the worlds of gods and men and an exchange of bounty and a guarantee of the fertility of the beasts and the soil. The ritual in Adam’s account should be regarded as an annual event to promote fertility, not as an atonement for the gods.

Adam’s informant was the king, who in his youth had served at the court of Uppsala and experienced the festival in the springtime and its purpose to give *árs og friðar* “good year and peace”. The word *frið* literally implies “the time of fertility”, cf. *friá* “make love”, and it is possible that Adam perceived this connotation and used it in his description of Frey when he says that this god was depicted with a huge phallus and was supposed to give sensual pleasures, *pax et voluptas* “peace and voluptuousness”.

UNDERNEATH THE CHURCH OF FRÖSÖN

Some archaeological finds seem to confirm Adam’s account of sacrificial groves in Old Norse religion. In 1984 a restoration of the church of Frösön, “Frey’s island”, took place in Jämtland in the north

of Sweden. Frösön was during the Viking ages the place of gemots called *jamtamot*, where also a market for the fur trade and the great meeting took place at the vernal equinox during pre-Christian time (Ahnlund 1948: 499f). We may also suppose that these gemots also comprised sacrifices as the archaeologists discovered the remains of a sacrificial grove right under the altar of the church together with some bones of animals, among them six young bears. The other animals were different species of bigger quarry, birds and fish. They were dated to a period between 920 and 1060, just before the Christianisation of Jämtland. An investigation of the bones proved that the animals had been hanging from the tree and were not in a *kökkingmödding*, a place for garbage (Hildebrandt 1984: 3; Iregren 1989: 119ff).

This excavation in 1984 produced the first evidence of a sacrificial grove from pre-Christian times and it was followed by other finds connected with holy places called *hov* related to the chieftain's homes. One example of these buildings has been excavated in Borg in the county of Östergötland in Sweden. It is the remains of a small house, where a low bench or shelf was situated on the east wall, probably a place of the idols. A great number of bones of horses and dogs were found outside this building. Similar buildings have also been found recently in Uppland in Sweden and in Tissø on Sjælland in Denmark (Vikstrand 1992: 123-4). In 2002-2003 a sacrificial grove was excavated at Lunda, "the grove", near the town of Strängnäs in Sweden.¹ At least three figurines were found, one of them obviously a hanged man.

The circumstance that the church of Frösön, and especially the altar, was placed over the felled grove could be related to religious and political events in the region. The people of Jämtland feared crusades coming from Norway on the one hand and Sweden on the other. It is possible that they chose in the years around 1060 to become Christians by their own decision (Sandnes 1996: 107-15). A rune stone on Frösön, still standing close to the narrow sound of Östersund, bears witness of this process: "Austmaðr, the son of Guðfastr, caused this stone to be erected ... he caused Jämtland to become Christian ..." (Williams 1996: 63). This was probably the reason why the Jämtar felled the sacrificial grove on Frösön and immediately built the oldest wooden church around 1060. The stump

of a sacrificial tree and the skulls of the animals were preserved in the soil under the altar for more than nine hundred years (Nilsson 1996: 127). The finds confirmed Adam's account of the sacrificial grove and the hanged creatures as well as other descriptions of special trees, called *blótrré* (Hultgård 1993: 237). The excavated stump of Frösön had probably this function, especially as the altar of the medieval church was placed just above it. The altar was, in Christian tradition, a representation of the Holy Grave in Jerusalem and the centre of the world. It seems likely that those who built the oldest church were aware of the remains of the tree and what it symbolised, i.e. Yggdrasil, the *axis mundi* of the ancient belief. They thus placed the symbol of their new cosmos above the old one (Andrén 2004: 220). The tapestry found on the ship of Oseberg, dated from the ninth century and now in Oslo University Museum of National Antiquities, also depicts a sacrificial grove, with hanged men and animals (Krafft 1956: 35, fr. 6). The sacrificial scene of Hammars at Lärbro in the island of Gotland (Figure 1) depicts a man hanging from a tree while another man seems to be being sacrificed on a table or drowned in a well.

The tree appears as an intermediary object between this world and the other, the world of the gods. The sacrifice usually expresses strong symbols involving the creation of the cosmos, described as the evergreen tree of Yggdrasil. Yggdrasil contains many different worlds of gods, of men and of giants and its three roots stretch down into the Netherworld. This symbol is used in the first couple of human beings, whom the gods find as lifeless logs and whom they furnish with life and intelligence. They are called Ask, "ash", and Embla, "elm", and their place in Yggdrasil was the part called Midgård, "the house in the Middle". The tree thus carries strong symbols of the world and of contact with the divine sphere and therefore it seems natural that this was the place for sacrifice to the gods. Tacitus' description of the Germanic tribes says that they worship their gods in groves and forests (Tacitus, *Germania*, ch. 9, tr. Hutton 1932: 276-7). The provincial laws of Sweden many centuries later state that any kind of worship in holy groves and similar places is forbidden (Olsen 1966: 85).



Fig. 2. Sacrificial scene on the picture stone of Hammars, Lärbro parish, Gotland (the third field from the top). After Lindqvist 1941-42.

STABBED AND HANGED: A RITUAL PATTERN?

In *Ephesiaca*, a novel probably written in the second century AD, a robber called Hippothous and his band plan to perform a sacrifice in a peculiar way:

[They] prepared to go through their usual ceremony, which was to hang up the victim, whether animal or human, on a tree and then stand some way off and throw spears at it. Those who hit it were thought to have found favour with [the god] ... (Xenophon of Ephesus, 2.13, tr. Turner 1957: 30)

A novel is a dubious source, but still it is possible that this example may point at a foreign kind of sacrifice. The author was known for colouring his novel with exotic backgrounds and was not without what we could call expert knowledge of other cultures. This brutal robber, living in the forest, may have his prototype in the wild Germanic tribes, who ravaged in the forests and mountains north of the Balkans.

Some centuries later the historian Procopius gave a similar description of these tribes and their ways of sacrificing which included hanging a man on a tree (Procopius, *History of the Wars* VI.xv. 23-6). Other historians bear witness to similar hangings of the victims, but they also mention other ways of killing people such as both stabbing and hanging (Näsström 1997: 78). In the literary sources of the medieval North the examples of stabbing and hanging are so conspicuous that we could not possibly ignore them. They seem to belong to a ritual pattern, which is repeated and varied in different connections. In *Beowulf* the hero Ongenþeow mentions his enemies before the battle and vows that “he ... would cut them to pieces with blade’s edge – some on the gallows as sport for the birds” (*Beowulf*, 2939-41). In *Hamdismál* belonging to the Volsunga cycle a young prince was found hanging on a gallows, stabbed by a spear or a knife (*Hd.* 17) and in *Atlamál* a woman prophesies about the hero Gunnar’s death (*Am.* 21): “I saw a gallows, in that gallows you will hang and snakes will bite in your side.” This twofold death returns in the different stories of the tragic hero Starkaðr and the sacrifice of king Vikar. A sign from the gods tells that a mock sacrifice of the

king would be favourable and Starkaðr performs it. He lays intestines from a calf as a noose around the king's neck and stabs him in his side with a withy. In the very moment when he does this, the intestines are changed into a real rope and the withy becomes a sword. Vikar dies, stabbed and hanged, at the hands of Starkaðr. All the different versions point at Oðin as the instigator of this deed and some scholars have drawn the conclusion that stabbing and hanging was a special sacrifice to this god.² There is also one example when Oðin himself appears as victim. In the stanzas of *Hávamál* which tell about the knowledge of the runes, we find the god in a dramatic situation:

I know that I hung
on the windswept tree
for nine full nights,
wounded with a spear
and given to Oðinn,
myself to myself;
on that tree
of which none know
from what roots it rises.
(*Hvm.* 138, tr. Turville-Petre 1964: 42)

This is, however, not a sacrifice, but most likely an initiation, since “the victim” obviously survives and comes down from the tree. Additionally he receives the knowledge of the runes and how to pray and sacrifice. He also learns mighty charms and is eventually allowed to drink of “the precious mead”, Oðröre, the poets' mead.

Then I began to be fruitful
and to be fertile,
to grow and to prosper;
one word sought
another word from me;
one deed sought
another deed from me.
(*Hvm.* 141, tr. Turville-Petre 1964: 42)

Stabbing and hanging thus provides a ritual pattern which appears in various religious situations, like that of the slave-girl in Ibn Fadlān's account of a Viking burial in the country of the Bulgars on the Volga. She voluntarily suffered a twofold death on a burial ship together with her master:

... the old woman known as the Angel of Death re-entered and looped a cord around her neck and gave the crossed ends to the two men for them to pull. Then she approached her with a broad-bladed dagger, which she plunged between her ribs repeatedly, and the men strangled her with the cord until she was dead. (Ibn Fadlān, tr. Smyser 1965: 100)

The cases of twofold death by hanging and stabbing are sometimes – although not always – connected with sacrifice, when people hanged the victims in the sacrificial grove as Adam of Bremen tells us and as the archaeological finds of Frösön indicate.

THE DEATH IN THE VAT OF BEER

One note to Adam's account tells about another kind of sacrifice.

Near this temple [in Uppsala] stands a very large tree with wide-spreading branches, always green winter and summer. What kind it is nobody knows. There is also a spring at which the pagans are accustomed to make their sacrifices, and into it to plunge a live man. And if he is not found, the people's wish will be granted. (Adam of Bremen, IV, scholion 138, tr. Tschan 2002: 207).

Ritual drowning is known from Tacitus, *Germania*, chapter 40, where he speaks about the goddess Nerthus:

After this the chariot and the robes, and, if you are willing to credit it, the deity in person, are washed in a sequestered lake: slaves are the ministrants and are straightway swallowed by the same lake: hence a mysterious terror and an ignorance full of

piety as to what that may be which men only behold to die.
(Tacitus, *Germania*, tr. Hutton, 1932: 320-1)

Archaeological finds of strangled and drowned corpses in bogs seem to verify Tacitus' description. These bogs were probably "holy lakes" in the centuries before and after the time of Christ and are also reflected in Old Norse mythology, where several goddesses have their abodes in water. Frigg resides in Fensalir, "The houses in the Swamp", Urd in the well of Urd, Saga in Sökkvabäcken, "the sunken rill" and Nerthus in a holy lake.

Like stabbing and hanging, drowning seems to constitute a ritual pattern, especially for the kings of Uppsala. Snorri Sturluson relates a scandalous history, where Fjolner, the first king of the Ynglinga dynasty and son to the god Frey, visited his Danish neighbour in Lejre on Sjælland. In the middle of the night the king had to leave his room in order to relieve himself. But as he was dead drunk (*dauðadrukkin*) he lost his foothold and fell down into a huge vat of beer and drowned. As Snorri preferred to depict an unworthy death of the kings of Uppsala, and especially a death in intoxication, we must leave this report aside as a literary *topos* and concentrate on the meaning of drowning in a vat of beer.

Saxo Grammaticus describes a very similar picture concerning Hunding, a king of Sweden, but without belittling terms:

[H]e gathered together his nobles. Filling an enormous jar to the brim with beer, he ordered it to be placed amid the guests for their pleasure and, to give a sense of occasion, did not hesitate to adopt a servant's role and play the butler. As he was traversing the palace hall in fulfilment of these duties, he missed his footing, toppled into the jar and, choked by the liquid, gave up his ghost. (Saxo Book 1, sections 34-5, tr. Fisher, 1996: 1.35)

Even the god Frey himself met the same fate according to a Faeroese ballad, *Oðinn in Ásgærðum* in *Færøya Kvæði*, where Frey bore the name Veraldur.

Veraldur, son of Óðin,
 went to present himself to his father:
 “I wish to go to the south lands
 to find myself a wife.”

“Listen, Veraldur, my son,
 such a thing will not end happily.
 If you go into the south lands,
 you won’t come back.” (Dumézil 1973: 135)

Veraldur-Frey did not listen to his father, but built a seaworthy ship and sailed south to Sjælland and to the king’s hall. The king received him with the words:

“Be welcome, Veraldur, Óðin’s son,
 you are a noble champion.
 Enter our stone hall,
 drink mead and wine!”

Veraldur entered the hall of stone
 that was full of deceit:
 it was open beneath his feet,
 he fell into the brewing vat.

Fjölner and Veraldur, names denoting Frey, drown in a vat of beer, as did Hundingus. The story may seem unintelligible, even nonsensical, if we do not unveil its origin. The vat of beer is in some stories a vat of mead, which probably is the original meaning. Mead, the sacrificial drink, was made of honey and appears in other Indo-European myths. According to one Greek myth a son of king Minos drowned when he fell into a vat of honey and another says that the god Pan drowned in a vat of wine. Both were recalled to life as were several Celtic heroes who like them had fallen into vats of beer (Näsström 2002: 70).

In many of these myths about drowning the victims seem to become assimilated with the liquid and disappear into a distant realm of happiness. They are also connected with the fertility of men, beasts and soil. In my opinion these obscure tales about drowning in vats of beer and mead relate to the fertility gods, who descend into the Netherworld in order to return in other forms. This may have been

performed as a sacrifice, where the victim was supposed to disappear in a well for the welfare of society. We cannot explain exactly how this sacrifice was performed in practice, but this might be the meaning of Adam's notice about the well of Uppsala.

THE THREEFOLD DEATH

In his article "The Threefold Death: an Indo-European Trifunctional Sacrifice?" Donald Ward explains the pattern of hanging, stabbing (or decapitation), and drowning as belonging to the tripartite functions, which characterised Indo-European society. He suggests that kings and priests belonging to the first function were hanged, warriors were stabbed or decapitated and yeomen were drowned (Ward 1970: 131). However, nothing in the source material supports this theory; the modes of sacrifice have nothing to do with the social functions. Ward also supposes that the sacrificial rites continued into the death penalties of the Middle Ages, something that has no relevance, since these were varied in different countries and do not form a common pattern (Ström 1942: 48 f.).

Still, Ward has observed the peculiar threefold death that some of the Irish kings have suffered. Some of the bog-corpses of Denmark as well as the Lindow man, found in a bog close to Manchester in 1954, also seem to have been killed three times: a blow on the head followed by strangulation and finally drowning in a shallow lake (Stead 1986: 177). The meaning of this overkill of the victims of remote ages cannot be reached yet – we can only notice the similarities.

It is obvious that the ritual pattern of hanging and drowning still survived in myth as well as in ceremonies at the pagan Uppsala in the eleventh century. The great sacrifices were accompanied by other rites, like the songs connected to fertility rites and the abundance of food and drink, which belonged to the ceremony. There are, indeed, exaggerations and polemic in Adam's account of the temple of Uppsala and the rites, but it also contains elements of Old Norse religion, that can be confirmed from other sources.

Notes

- 1 See <http://www.raa.se/uv/lunda2002/loggbok.htm>
- 2 It was Otto Höfler who put this thesis forward in his *Kultische Geheimbunde der Germanen* (1934: 236-7) as it fitted well with his theory about the myth and the rites of the secret army of the dead. For Höfler this army in reality was a real *Männerbund* who maintained law and order. Their special patron was Oðin who in his demonic appearance received his sacrifice. Although most of Höfler's thoughts are rejected nowadays, the special sacrifice to Oðin still appears in the literature of Old Norse religion.

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Lupine Apocalypse: The Wolf in Pagan and Christian Cosmology in Medieval Britain and Scandinavia

ALEKS G. PLUSKOWSKI

INTRODUCTION

The acceptance of Christianity by northern European societies resulted in changes in local cosmologies – beliefs concerning the construction, maintenance and ultimate destruction (or renewal) of the universe. This cosmological restructuring was closely associated with shifting perceptions of the ecological status of humans – in relation to other organisms and their shared environments. Although our understanding of pre-Christian cosmology is extremely limited and fragmentary, the discontinuation of animal burials, changes in the use of animals in ornamentation and hints from later written sources indicate a broad shift from contrasting zoocentric to anthropocentric world-views (Jennbert 2003). This paper will focus on one aspect of this transformation – the changing cosmological role of the wolf in Britain and southern Scandinavia from the eighth to fourteenth centuries AD (see Pluskowski 2003a). The wolf acted as an intermediary between the contrasting religious paradigms although its role was specific and limited. This paper offers a long-term perspective on the cosmological role of the wolf, tracking its decline and changing function within the wider context of religious transformation in medieval northern Europe.

THE WOLF IN PRE-CHRISTIAN SCANDINAVIAN COSMOLOGY

Although we cannot reconstruct animal value systems in pre-Christian Scandinavia – or northern Europe for that matter – to the extent we can for medieval Christian societies, it is relatively clear that predation as a fundamental ecological relationship was

recognised, expressed and cosmologically appropriated, particularly through the wolf. Elements of contemporary material culture combined with later written sources suggest that in pre-Christian Scandinavia, those (at least) subscribing to beliefs associated with the god Óðinn (Grundy 1995), the socio-religious role of warfare (Price 2002) and the concept of Ragnarök (which appears to have become increasingly important in the late tenth century, Grundy 1995: 30, Martin 1972), assigned cosmological roles to a number of wolves. The god Óðinn is an extremely complex figure but his association with wolves (and other predators such as eagles) can be linked to his wider function as god of death and battles. The link between Óðinn and wolves has been extended to interpretations and reconstructions of the early or proto- “wild hunt” which became increasingly standardised from the eleventh century. The early importance of wolves rather than dogs in the hunt has been linked to lupine motifs in Indo-European warrior cults (Lindow 2000: 1036), and in Anglo-Scandinavian culture a more specific link between Óðinn and the hunt has been suggested with wolves as the god’s companions, hunting for the fallen (Grundy 1995: 51). Óðinn was also accompanied by two wolves bearing the descriptive names Geri and Freki (meaning “greedy ones” – their function as proper names was relatively late, *ibid*: 45), and as divine lupine prototypes they were emblematic of the god’s functions on the battlefield as well as resonating with his closer and seemingly older association with the monstrous wolf Fenrir or Fenrisúlf. Noted in two tenth-century kennings as the opponent of Óðinn, the most detailed narratives relating to this creature were compiled by Snorri Sturluson in the early thirteenth century, and can be summarised as follows (Faulkes 1995).

The great wolf was born from a union between Loki and the giantess Angrboda (or possibly just Loki) in Járnsviðr, together with his monstrous brother the Midgard-serpent (interestingly called “sea-wolf” in *Hymiskvida*, Larrington 1996: 81) and his sister, Hel. Initially the gods accepted the cub and played with him. When he began to grow into a monstrous beast they became perturbed and decided to bind him. The binding of Fenrir is a recurring motif associated with this creature, and with the character of the god Týr. Having failed to bind the wolf in a number of ways, the gods had the dwarfs forge the magical fetter Gleipnir. Fenrir was suspicious and only allowed himself to be bound if one of the gods placed their hand

into his mouth. Týr volunteered, the magical binding held and Fenrir snapped off the god's hand – in the Eddic poem Lokasenna (ibid: 91) Loki taunts Týr for losing his hand to the wolf. A sword blade was forced into the wolf's mouth and he remains bound on an island until Ragnarök (ibid: 11). At this time, following an era described amongst other things as “wolf age”, he will break his fetter and face the gods on the field of the last battle. Here, the wolf will confront and swallow Óðinn, only to be killed by his son Víðarr who will plant his shoe in the wolf's mouth and, pulling both parts of the jaw back, rend him in two. Snorri was careful to distinguish Fenrir from the other lupines in the Ragnarök narrative, pitting Víðarr against Fenrir and Týr against (“the dog”) Garm (Faulkes 1995: 54). However the impression given in the literature is of a mighty animal that embodies all wolves; he is referred to as “the wolf” more often than as Fenrir, the name also occurs as a common noun for “wolf”, whilst the Eddic poem *Völuspá* states that all wolves are descended from this individual – indeed the various lupines described by Snorri may have been aspects of a conflated super-predator. It has even been suggested that Óðinn, Loki and Fenrir were different facets of an amalgamated outlaw deity: a “binder wolf god” (Gerstein 1974: 144). The antiquity of a close association between the battle gods and a super-predator is underlined by a skull fragment from Ribe dated to the first decades of the eighth century and inscribed with the runic invocation “ulfur/auk/uþin/auk/hutiur – the wolf and Óðinn and High Týr” (Grønvik 1999). Some have pushed a date for the origin of the wolf as the opponent of the gods as far back as the fifth and sixth centuries, citing in particular the evidence of bracteates (Hauck 1978; Hedeager 1999: 154; see also Motz 1994). Whether opponent or servant, conflated or splintered, there appears to have been a consistent and infusive association between predatory animals – particularly wolves – battle gods and their followers in pre-Christian Scandinavia, and the conceptualisation of the wolf as a force of cosmic opposition and instability (Pluskowski forthcoming). Outside Scandinavia Christians also recognised opposing cosmic forces, but their roles were considerably more polarised.

THE WOLF AS COSMOLOGICAL INTERFACE BETWEEN PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN

Untangling facets of Scandinavian pagan and British/Continental Christian cosmology is not as easy as it may seem – neither is a completely enclosed, pristine paradigm and there is evidence for contact between the two from the early centuries of the first millennium AD. Alongside the broader iconographic influence of Roman art, Christian influence has been attributed to some of the earliest predatory depictions in Scandinavia, such as a motif on B-Bracteates interpreted as “Óðinn being devoured by a serpent” influenced by late Antique depictions of Jonah (Hauck 1976). However, even if early Germanic art derived some of its motifs from Roman models, its cosmological context – as suggested by later literature – was very different. Moreover, given the rejection of figural art in Scandinavia and subsequent developments, these motifs cannot be read as Christian narratives (Wicker 2003) and missionaries had to “re-introduce” such stories in the tenth century. During the era of religious conversion, motifs expressed in both pagan and Christian material culture have frequently been interpreted as “syncretic” – catering simultaneously for both pagans and Christians. This is emphasised by a fresh cosmological interface, initiated by Scandinavians, revolving around cosmic predation expressed in lupine form.

In this context, some have drawn comparisons between Fenrir, the beast in the Book of Revelation, Behemoth and lupine incarnations of the Devil. Of course, much of our detailed information comes from Snorri who may have incorporated elements of the Christian apocalypse, however Bugge (1899: 6-7) has gone further by suggesting that Fenrir was a Christian conception – the name itself being related to the Latin *infernus lupus*, and transformed etymologically in Old Norse to refer to fen, swamp or mire. More specifically, Bugge maintained that the episode of the fight between Víðarr and Fenrir was shaped under Christian influence in the British Isles – in turn, indirectly influenced by apocryphal Byzantine tradition. However, conceptualising an apocalyptic force in the form of a wolf was distinctly northern and pagan – the recurring lupine theme of Ragnarök sets it apart from the monsters of Revelation

ultimately derived from Middle Eastern traditions. A number of motifs relating to the pagan lupine apocalypse have been identified on tenth-century sculpture in certain areas of Scandinavian settlement in northern England and these can be subdivided as follows (McKinnell 2001: 329):

- Óðinn swallowed by Fenrir (Skipwith, Sockburn, Kirk Andreas),
- Víðarr tearing apart the jaws of Fenrir (Gosforth, Ovingham),
- Týr sacrificing his hand at the binding of Fenrir (Sockburn, Skipwith).

These monuments have been extensively studied, so there is no need to repeat the range of arguments associated with their identification (Martin 1972; Bailey 1980: 133-5, 2000). They depict aspects of the climactic point in the Ragnarök story, or related character associations, although each one is unique in its composition (Bailey 2000: 18). Fenrir cannot be positively identified in a non-apocalyptic context, hence Calverley's (1899: 11, 107, 115) suggestions that "Fenrir's progeny" appear on the shaft from Cross-Canonby church (a series of biting quadrupeds) and at the base of the Aspatria cross (a quadruped, possibly "bound" turning in on itself) are difficult to support. A more likely identification can be found on a tenth-century relief from Chester-le-Street (Durham), interpreted (out of a number of less likely possibilities) as a syncretic depiction of the crucifixion with the bound Fenrir in the bottom of the panel (Cramp 1984: 58). An equally plausible identification can be found in a "devouring" scene on the Skipwith stone (Hicks 1993: 209), whilst sun-swallowing lupines – which feature in the early stages of the Ragnarök narrative – have been tentatively identified on a cross-shaft from Ovingham (Bailey 1980) and on a hogback from Tynningham in East Lothian, Scotland (Stevenson 1958-9: 49; Hicks 1993: 220-1).

These monuments were created in areas of Scandinavian settlement, commissioned by local aristocracies, within an explosion of sculptural activity driven by lay, rather than monastic, patronage (Bailey 1996: 79). Moreover they were created within a non-confrontational climate; established native artisans were employed and Christian iconography remained in usage. Interestingly, the monastic revival in England in the latter half of the tenth century was

closely associated with the development of the visual expression of the mouth of hell as an animal head (Schmidt 1995: 19-31, 61-83). At this time the hell-mouth functioned as a devotional aid, appearing predominantly in manuscripts produced in Winchester and Canterbury. The use of predatory motifs resembling the bestial hell-mouth in Anglo-Scandinavian monuments may indicate their possible function as statements of conversion. But, whereas the Anglo-Saxon hell-mouth was a relatively straightforward image, some of the more complex Anglo-Scandinavian compositions would have required the ability to interpret intricate, juxtaposed meanings – whether the monastic skill of *ruminatio* suggested by Bailey (2000: 20) for the Gosforth Cross, or the levels of understanding required for interpreting runestones suggested by Andrén (2000: 26). Moreover, these were public monuments and their interpretation may well have been a collective act, whether pagan or Christian.

With the exception of an ivory panel, probably constructed in Canterbury in the tenth century, there is no evidence for the use of hell-mouths in a public context until the mid-eleventh century (Schmidt 1995: 82). In contrast, Anglo-Scandinavian predatory motifs were intended for public display – most probably as expressions of religious conversion. This notion is supported by their associated iconography. Óðinn is depicted as the prey of the wolf – completely consistently with his multi-faceted cosmological role, but where Christ is represented in the same context, he is in a triumphant pose – his crucifixion at Gosforth (a crossless variant derived from a metal openwork variant circulating in Cumbria at the time, Bailey 2000: 20) alludes to resurrection, and the presence of snakes beneath reinforcing Christ's power can be compared with the triumphant Víðarr overcoming Fenrir above. Likewise at Kirk Andreas, the figure on the other side of the slab to Óðinn bearing a staff and a book and crushing snakes under his feet is likely to be a variant on the popular motif of the victorious Christ (or bishop or saint) (Margeson 1983). The general impression is of juxtaposed continuation; the inevitable destruction at Ragnarök is followed by continuation through the victorious Christ – the hopeful ending to the Ragnarök story was probably added to the cycle of tales under Christian influence in the eleventh century (Price 2002: 52), probably at a time when the narrative was organised into a coherent eschatology not inconsistent with the Christian apocalypse (Christiansen 2002: 299). Moreover, it is also possible to view this as a transition from

comparatively ambiguous opposing forces to ones with more clearly defined, polarised roles (Russell 1990: 64). These expressions should not be seen as confrontational but rather as opportunistic bridges between the different paradigms, and in the climate of religious conversion enabling a smooth transition from one to the other.

In Scandinavia, the only clear depiction on a public monument of Óðinn being consumed by Fenrir has been identified on a runestone from Ledberg (Östergötland), which bears a striking resemblance to the composition at Kirk Andreas. One side depicts a human figure stepping on the mouth of a quadruped – the relationship between the two suggests the former is Óðinn and the latter is Fenrir and there is also a second human figure reaching for the wolf's back leg. The other side, depicting two warriors, two smaller quadrupeds and a ship lined with shields, is more difficult to interpret but may be related to the Ragnarök theme. Nonetheless its role in the religious conversion is statistically insignificant – there are more carvings and pendants of Thor's hammer although these have been demonstrated to have played an extremely limited role in the conversion process (Staecker 1999: 98). The combined evidence suggests that visual expressions of a lupine apocalypse were limited and short-lived, presumably reflecting specific socio-cosmological needs. After all, Christians had relatively little use for the wolf in their established cosmology.

THE WOLF IN CHRISTIAN COSMOLOGY

The specificity of the wolf's cosmological role in pre-Christian Scandinavia is only a partial explanation for its diminished role with the acceptance of Christianity. The new religion introduced an established symbolic menagerie dominated by animals such as lions and dragons, emphasised by the popularity of these animals in the many variants of the hellmouth. But this does not mean that the wolf was excluded from Christian cosmology. On the contrary, wolves had already been used to represent both the Devil and more generic representations of "evil" in the Christian paradigm. Demons, who could take any form, were sometimes referred to as wolves in the earliest Christian texts, as in the vision of St Anthony (Schaff and Wace 1974), whilst in Anglo-Saxon sources they display wolfish behaviour – for example Guthlac heard the howling of wolves and

the croaking of ravens in the fens (Swanton 1975: 50) and the Blickling homilist likens devils clutching at souls to ravenous wolves (*BH* 16, Bradley 1995: 75). In a detailed survey of Middle English literature, Wilson (1977: 232) demonstrated that, with a couple of unusual exceptions, the wolf always signified the Devil. Indeed, the Aberdeen Bestiary (c. 1200-10) states:

Quid enim per lupum nisi diabolum?

For what do we mean by the wolf if not the Devil?

(Aberdeen University Library MS 24, f. 17v, Arnott et al. 2002)

The body of manuscripts known collectively as “Bestiaries” were written mainly in Britain and France, but were found throughout Europe from the twelfth century. They seem to have functioned as selective accounts of the “natural” world incorporating a range of composite creatures and, as moralising texts, demonstrating good and evil behaviour through faunal analogues with a likely mnemonic function (Rowland 1989). The early Bestiaries were loosely based on the Greek *Physiologus*, also translated into Old English (Squires 1988) and, whilst this did not include the wolf amongst its entries, it was an obvious addition for north European Bestiary makers (George and Yapp 1991: 50). The sources for this animal seem to have come from a combination of classical literature (Aristotle, Pliny, Solinus) elements echoed by early Christian authorities (Ambrose, Isidore) and local beliefs, as well as more widespread European motifs such as the association between wolves and sheep, also found in the Bible. Bestiaries are not found in Scandinavia, although there is an extant Icelandic *Physiologus* (c. 1200, Hermannsson 1938), which, unsurprisingly perhaps, does not include wolves. Whilst the material featured in Bestiaries was known in southern Scandinavia, the wolf rarely appears in associated iconography; one tentatively identified example is of the animal biting its hind paw on the north eaves board at Dädesjö church (Smaland) although this could have derived as much from circulating fables and folklore which were themselves sources for the Bestiary *lupus*. Here, within a Christian context, the wolf is juxtaposed against its prey – sheep. This association is common in medieval Christian writings, predominantly because of its biblical use as an allegory for false prophets (Matthew 7:15). In this

context it became associated with heresy, and allusions to heretics as wolves are found in numerous sources, e.g. the sermons of Caesar of Heisterbach (c. 1180-1250, *Dist.* III, Cap. XVII; *Dist.* V, Cap. XVIII). However, the wolf was not a popular symbol of heresy in northern Europe until the thirteenth century, and is found relatively less frequently in such contexts (both written and iconographic) than the fox (Mandonnet 1948). Regionally, the allegory is associated with major centres of heresy, such as southern France where both inquisitors (Burr 1996: 5) and heretics referred to each other as wolves:

A confession made to a priest has no value because priests keep mistresses, and to confess to priests is as if a sheep made confession to a wolf. The wolf would devour the sheep; likewise priests want to eat us up, either alive or dead (T.III.766, Duvernoy 1978: T.I.269).

The use of the wolf as an allusion for the Roman Church in both a positive and negative light exemplifies its symbolic plasticity – outside the context of heresy, the vignette of the she-wolf and twins was employed for both positive and negative effect (Pluskowski 2003a). Britain and southern Scandinavia were relatively free of heresy until the fourteenth century, so there are no specific wolfish allusions to local heretics (see Mitchell 1997). In these regions, lupine allusions to criminal status and behaviour have been extensively discussed in relation to outlawry (Gerstein 1974; Jacoby 1974; Pluskowski 2003a), however wolves were a common metaphor for a wider range of treacherous activity. In his history of the Kings of Denmark, Sven Aggesen described the attempted murder of King Knut in these terms:

And the fearless champion of Christ, conscious of his own good faith alone, did not hesitate to meet them. Marked out only by the banner of the Holy Cross protected by neither shield nor helmet and escorted by no more than two guards, the lamb stood there ready for the furious wolves. The criminals arrive later, wolves in sheep's clothing with hoods and cloaks concealing coats of mail and helmets. (Christiansen 1992: 69)

But there is no evidence that the lupine form was particularly popular or exclusive; after all, the pard, ape, bear, fox, boar and onager were all likened to the Devil alongside the wolf in Bestiaries, whilst the most popular forms assumed by medieval demons were dogs, snakes/dragons and goats (Russell 1984: 67). And although the wolf was used to signify a number of vices in medieval art and literature ranging from wrath to rapacity, along with the lion and wild boar it was one of many ambivalent signifiers (O'Reilly 1988: 70). Artisans had an extensive menagerie at their disposal and in Britain and southern Scandinavia they chose to employ the wolf relatively infrequently. Other bestial devourers, notably lions and dragons adorning wooden and stone Scandinavian churches from the twelfth century were more popular – perhaps wolves were too ordinary or familiar to inspire the type of horror envisaged for visual expressions of the hellish otherworld (Pluskowski 2003b). After all, the other impressive predators prowling the landscapes of medieval Scandinavia such as lynx and bears are, with very few exceptions, generally absent in religious art. In the British Isles, and particularly in late medieval England, the situation is different – a common indigenous predator, the fox, appears frequently in both secular and religious art. However, whilst this popularity may in part reflect common experiences of foxes, it must also be attributed to the central role played by this animal in the Beast Epic as well as its symbolic association with the Devil (Varty 1999). When comparing the two regions it seems that ecological realities were only partially and even superficially reflected in cosmological expressions and that artisans were influenced by a host of cultural factors. However sermons certainly made use of lupines (together with foxes and lions) as exemplars of evil, for example Thomas de Chobham (1160-1236) referred to the wolf as the symbol of rapaciousness (Morenzoni 1993). The relatively ambiguous iconography of devouring within the church may have aided references in such sermons – after all the composite hell-mouth could be lion, fish, dragon or wolf depending on citation, and even audience. The variable use of a “generic”, even anonymous, wolf as a relatively flexible symbol in cosmological contexts was complemented by examples of specific wolves, individualised by their association with saints.

GOD, SAINTS AND WOLVES

Animals were not regarded as inherently “good” within the Christian paradigm although they could serve as allegories of holiness and moral behaviour, whilst their actions could be interpreted as guided by divine or demonic forces, at least from an intellectual perspective. All instances of “good” wolves associated with saints can be interpreted as demonstrations of divine power – inciting wolves to behave, from a typical moralising perspective, out of character. When faced with an established tradition of shifting shape from human to wolf, Gerald of Wales interpreted it in terms of divine omnipotence:

... We find that at God’s bidding, to exhibit his power and righteous judgement, human nature assumed that of a wolf.
(*TH*, 19, Forester and Wright 2000: 46)

Whilst the responsibility for enabling humans to transform into wolves was reassigned from God to the Devil in the fourteenth century, theologians continued to attribute the behaviour of ordinary wolves to the influence of both good and evil forces. The “good” wolf representing or highlighting the power of God, more often than not through a particular saint, had already been established in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 5: 6) and the Early Desert Fathers frequently shared their living space with wolves and lions (Bratton 1993). Associations between lupines and saints are found from the earliest Christian contexts in northern Europe, particularly in Celtic hagiography, where the wolf and deer appear more frequently than other animals. They encompass a range of themes, for example in Jonas the Monk’s *Life of Columba* the power of God is demonstrated by the unusual behaviour of the wolves in leaving the saint alone in the woods (Waddell 1995: 46-8). A more popular theme in early medieval hagiography is inducing wolves to provide services, usually contrary to their nature; Abban ordered wolves to tend his sheep (Plummer 1968: 2:5) and Coemgen commanded a wolf to take the place of a fawn it killed so that the doe would continue to provide milk (ibid: 125). Sometimes, saints were sympathetic to wolves and established relatively amiable relations; St Maedoc of Ferns fed starving wolves several times (and also rescued a stag from hunters,

Bratton 1989: 11), whilst St Brigit tamed a wild wolf (MacNickle 1934: 149). These actions may have had a theological function, reflecting the fulfilment of the prophecies of Isaiah (the “good” wolf in 11: 6-9) and bringing the saint closer to the original “natural” harmony of the Garden of Eden and to God. The popularity of the motif of taming a wild animal such as a wolf in northern Europe has been linked to pre-existing pagan sentiments associated with these animals (Armstrong 1973: 210) but, perhaps more importantly, the link between woods, marshes, wolves and saints reflected a northern adaptation of the experiences of the Desert Fathers. The early monastic experience in the north was, in one form or another, associated with wilderness. In late Anglo-Saxon England, monasteries can be equated with wealth and productivity; however the element of contemplation (associated with either a physical or conceptual wilderness, or both) remained and appeared throughout later monastic movements in the high medieval period. Monasteries were not established in Scandinavia until the high medieval period, and their association with the wilderness was to a limited extent comparable although this was by no means the sole, or even the most important, factor determining their location. Nonetheless within this landscape setting, the wolf continued to be seen as reflecting the power of God and as a harbinger of the prophecies of Isaiah.

Interestingly the establishment of Franciscan houses in major urban centres – rather than the wilderness – in Britain and southern Scandinavia in the thirteenth century (Roelvink 1998: 9-10) continued the dissemination of saint and wolf stories. The popular tale of the wolf of Gubbio (representing an exemplary tale of St Francis and the power of God) appears to have been a fourteenth-century elaboration of an earlier story of St Francis and wolves recorded in the *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli sociorum S. Francisci* with even earlier precedents in the 1240s (Brooke 1970: 148-51). Its popularity in the north may have been facilitated by established hagiographic motifs discussed above, and perhaps even older pagan sentiments (Armstrong 1974: 210). Such international *exempla* were complemented by local variants. In *Magnúss Saga Iengri* (late thirteenth/early fourteenth century), St Magnús revived a man consumed and regurgitated by wolves in Norway (Collinson 2000). This has been interpreted as a genuine example of a localised tradition creeping into the saga – a comparable wolf miracle is attributed to St Oláfr in a number of sources (ibid: 40). The theme of

devouring and regurgitation/rebirth occurs throughout the sagas (and was important in Christian concepts of resurrection from the third to at least the thirteenth century, Bynum 1995) and in this particular context the wolves can be interpreted as conventional representations of evil or as the saint's allies "creating" life through their act of regurgitation. Perhaps more importantly, this example offers a glimpse into what may have been a common protective and redemptive function of saints in the wilderness. In England, the most popular and widely recognised example of the wolf as an instrument of God can be found from the tenth century in association with St Edmund.

St Edmund, the last king of East Anglia, was documented as being martyred by the Danes in 869, although the earliest documentary reference is Abbo of Fleury's *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* written in the tenth century (Cutler 1961: 81-7). It was subsequently described by Ælfric in the *Passion of St. Edmund, King and Martyr* (written before 1002 in Old English and based on Abbo's work; Treharne 2000: 132-9). In these versions, St Edmund is killed and beheaded but his head is protected by a wolf (in the woods) until his followers can recover it. Both Abbo and Ælfric ascribe the wolf's actions to God's guidance and Ælfric states that, although the wolf was ravenous, under the watchful eye of God, it dared not eat the head. The wolf's unusual behaviour echoes its more typically described character, as in Ælfric's description of the Dane Hinguar, who "like a wolf" invaded East Anglia shortly before Edmund's martyrdom (ibid: 133). The cult of St Edmund was popular in late Anglo-Saxon England, particularly in East Anglia and, whilst a hymn for the saint refers to the "grim wolf" (Milfull 1996: 459), the bulk of material culture associated with his early cult is generally lacking lupine elements. The cult of St Edmund grew in popularity in England (particularly in East Anglia) throughout the medieval period as indicated by fifty-five pre-reformation dedications (Arnold-Forster 1899, vol. 3: 13), relics in a number of ecclesiastical and royal contexts (Thomas 1974: 390), and expansion onto the continent to St Denis and Toulouse. The hub of St Edmund's cult was the priory of St Edmund at Bury St Edmunds. Aside from the foundations and parts of the walls and gates, nothing survives today and one can only speculate on the potential wealth of wolf imagery within its walls, particularly inside the church. In all likelihood the wolf was an important motif in the abbey. One depiction of a wolf is referred to in a manuscript documenting paintings and hangings at Bury (c. 1300, see Tristram 1950: I, 516) whilst a

surviving Romanesque capital from the abbey may depict the wolf and the saint's head (Zarnecki 1992: 362, Plate 1). Several surviving seals from the priory also depict the motif (Ellis 1986: 15, nos M140 and 16; nos M142-4), which continued in usage into the late medieval era as demonstrated by the seals of William Curteys and Clement Denston (dated to the reign of Henry VI; 1422-61). A number of pilgrim badges excavated in London show the wolf at the feet of St Edmund (Spencer 1998: 182) and indicate the popularity of the motif associated with the national cult surviving into the high and late medieval period. Thirteenth- to fifteenth-century representations of the martyrdom tend to focus on the slaying of St Edmund and the wolf only appears in a limited number of surviving contexts, such as spandrels from St Mary's Church in Bury, church bench-ends in Hoxne and Hadleigh (Suffolk), a porch moulding at Southwold (Suffolk), a beam carving in Greensted (Essex), wall paintings at Fritton (Norfolk), Padbury (Buckinghamshire) and Cliffe-at-Hoo (Kent) and a roof boss in the chapel of St Edmund, Tewkesbury Abbey. The wolf of St Edmund is the most striking and popular example of the broader cosmological role of predatory animals in medieval Christianity – as fragmentary representations of God's omnipotence.

CONCLUSION

The wolf represented the top terrestrial predator – competing at times with humans – in the landscapes of medieval northern Europe. This ecological status was interpreted differently in contrasting world-views. In pre-Christian cosmology the wolf was conceptualised as a force of destruction in battle, closely associated with the predatory identities assigned to select members of the fighting elite and their gods. With the acceptance of Christianity, the wolf – in all its various representations – was subordinated to God and its cosmological role was remodelled within the boundaries of the new religious paradigm. Whilst this generalised conceptual transformation cannot be isolated from the broader range of responses to the wolf and its environment, in one respect, it represents an exemplar of the broad shifts from

zoocentric to anthropocentric worldviews characterising the religious conversion of the north.

University of Cambridge

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Reviews

John A. Grim (ed.) *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (for the Center for the Study of World Religions. Harvard Divinity School), 2001. ISBN 0-945454-28-7. lxiii; 754 pp. £19.50.

This is a very hefty collected volume arising from a series of conferences on the religions of the world and ecology, with supervision by Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions. As it would not be possible to summarise all of the twenty-six chapters, I will focus on some of the key themes that are developed in the collection.

The book is organised in 5 separate sections: Fragmented Communities; Complex Cosmologies; Embedded Worldviews; Resistance and Regeneration; and Liberating Ecologies. The arrangement is both from less positive to (at least potentially) more positive encounters between indigenous peoples and dominant societies, and from somewhat more theoretical articles to more pragmatic case studies. The articles are from a broad range of contributors, including academics, environmental-rights activists, educators, and religious practitioners. This arrangement works well and aids to present a persuasive argument for the necessity of dominant (i.e. capitalist consumer) societies to engage *with* the knowledge of indigenous peoples, not just pirate that knowledge, and engage with the indigenous peoples themselves. The overarching aim of the collection is to demonstrate how the religious, social and ecological practices of indigenous peoples form an integrated approach to their environments. The editors argue that an inclusion of "religion" (rethinking of our status vis-à-vis the world we live in, and making space for a more sacred approach to other life forms) into our dealings with the planet is crucial if we are to undo the ecological damage that has been done to our planet.

The argument put forward in this collection is that indigenous peoples have a conception of and interaction with the world that is

“holistic”. The holistic cosmology of indigenous peoples is illustrated very clearly in the individual chapters of the collection. In fact, it is upon these grounds that there is any basis for lumping such diverse groups into a catch all term such as “indigenous peoples.” The crucial inter-relationship between ecology, society (including religious beliefs and practices), and human actors that indigenous peoples engender is made eloquently in this collection. As one of the contributors puts it: “For indigenous peoples the environment and the supernatural realm are interconnected. This holistic perspective of human collective destiny with other living creatures on earth has a religious expression among indigenous peoples” (Montejo: 176-7). The importance of this holistic idea of and relation to their different environments is emphasised by the various contributors, both for the peoples themselves and as a new model for “our” engagement with the environment.

However, there was one aspect of this collection that left me less enthusiastic, namely the highly romanticised discourse of “tradition” and “traditional” societies, and the implicit discourse of unchanging “timelessness” that is communicated. Generally, and ironically, this is more of a feature within the preface/introductory material than in the chapters themselves. This romanticising aspect occurs to such an extent that the message of the collection is almost lost. The editors may have done this deliberately, as there is an advocacy agenda to the collection, or this may be an artefact of trying to make general comments about a range of peoples, places and experiences. However, this form of discourse is also alienating and exclusive. Although there are instances within the collection itself of this romanticising language, typically the chapters do not carry through with this discourse. In several chapters, those by Prabhu, Sponsel, Kalu, Feit, and Bell in particular, the danger that romantic ideas hold to indigenous communities and indigenous knowledge is made quite forcibly.

One of the strongest messages that I took from this collection is that resistance by indigenous peoples tends to be successful when they either appropriate elements of the dominant discourse to use towards their own agendas (such as fighting land claims), or when indigenous groups are able to engage dominant discourses on their own terms. A point made throughout the book is that a balanced

reciprocal exchange of knowledge has much to offer both dominant and indigenous societies. Sadly, this is not often attempted, nor are these aforementioned techniques always successful. As the articles by Trevorrow and Trevorrow and Fienup-Riordan illustrate, any exchange *must* involve some degree of goodwill, or at least a willingness to initiate dialogue on the basis of goodwill. The less auspicious message to be taken from this collection is how seldom this happens. (Gordon Gray)

Silvia Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2000. ISBN 0-691-00472-2. xi, 313 pp.

Silence is an intriguing subject to speak about because it does not speak for itself. We have to interpret it and so give it a voice. In fact, the meaningfulness of silence challenges the idea of a language that is co-terminous with speech. In a broader definition, a language of signs includes the zero quantity – the absence of articulation. But an interesting point is that this zero is plural in form and so it could be relevant to speak of zeros, each with its own meaning. As such an absence does not define itself, it seems that each separate zero must be distinguishable by context, which will be subject to cultural definition. This book looks specifically at the meanings of silence in Ancient Greece. As the author points out, most of the evidence is literary, and much of her book is devoted to studies of the epics and tragedies, although it opens with a more general chapter on the religious meaning of silence.

The title draws attention to the fact that the Greeks placed a high value on words and it seems that there was a real abhorrence of a vacuum; there is more talking about silence than silence itself. The author opposes the idea found in some modern interpretations of Greek plays that they include silent pauses laden with meaning, and argues instead that the words call for silence in order to invite special attention but that the flow of speech is continuous (pp. 167-76). In epic contexts of formal assemblies the expected response to a speech is not silence but an immediately following speech (pp. 54-62). When someone is silent, there is uneasiness and agitation that may lead to questioning to draw out an answer to bring this state to an end (p. 192).

Writing has been called visible speech but the Greeks had a way of rendering even silence visible. The figure who is staged as veiled and seated is also silent (pp. 176-80), but, although visible to the audience, the figure who is immured in silence in this way may be unseen by the other characters in the play (pp. 189-91). The whole idea of silence (something that cannot be heard) being equatable with something that either can or cannot be seen seems to move us away from an outer perception towards an inner psychological state.

In four cases where the author explores the exact sense of words relating to silence, it turns out that the conceptual line drawn is not so much between the absence of speech and the presence of any speech at all as between normal speech on the one hand and silence and speech of a special kind on the other. In the *Mysteries*, the author argues that the initiates lose their usual speech and become silent or able to speak in a special way. On ritual occasions fraught with anxiety, such as the offering of sacrifice, the contrast is between speech which might unguardedly include inauspicious words and the concept of *euphēmein* which means either to speak only auspicious words or to be silent. The avoidance of utterance of inauspicious words acts as a shield and this protection can be obtained either through silence or through appropriately restricted speech. The person who is *aglossos* (literally “tongueless”) is either incapable of speech at all or an inadequate speaker; the contrast is between a person with full speech skills on the one hand and a person who lacks full speech skills on the other. Prayer is normally offered aloud in a fully audible voice but in special circumstances it may be uttered quietly or simply be thought without external articulation (pp. 10-11, 44), and one word covers the latter two ideas so that a passage in Homer can be taken to mean either. Although the author speaks of “degrees of silence” (pp. 12-13) it does seem in many of her instances that it is not so much a matter of a continuum as of unmarked normal speech versus a marked state consisting of either abnormal speech or silence. Such a consistent pattern invites comparison with other cultures which may well draw the line between speech and silence differently and place a different weight on non-speech as opposed quite simply to speech.

Sylvia Montiglio’s book, while concentrating on Ancient Greece, offers food for thought in connection with silence in any culture, and may lead to fuller discussion of the state of speechlessness which,

though often touched on briefly, has not often been the focus of as full study as it is here. (Emily Lyle)

Catharina Raudvere, *Kunskap och insikt i norrön tradition. Mytologi, ritualer och trolldomsanklagelser*. Vägar till Midgård Series 3. Nordic Academic Press, Lund, 2003. ISBN 91-89116-36-4. 226 pp.

Volume 3 of “Roads to Midgård”, the only book in this series written by a single author, deals with traditions of “magic” (for lack of a better English word) in Old Norse society, roughly defined as 800-1300 AD and covering the geographical area of Scandinavia. It is about reports of a special kind of knowledge and insight reaching beyond the everyday, and the aim of the book is to achieve an understanding of the role played by such knowledge and by the people who possessed it

Raudvere’s interest is not in discovering what people actually did during rituals of magic but in why, when and with what authority they did it. This is not a handbook in witchcraft but an exploration of its context, of the social and religious function of special insight – and a very enlightening exploration at that.

Drawing on the Icelandic sagas and Old Norse law texts, Raudvere discusses the people and situations surrounding magic in early medieval Scandinavia. As the terminology employed in the source material with regard to magic is loose and problematic, finding unequivocal meaning in any of the terms used for magic is close to impossible. Whether the magical skills people have and the way in which they use them is seen in a positive or negative light depends entirely on the context; the words used to describe them do not sway one way or the other. In spite of the obstacles of loose terminology, Raudvere’s argument is lucid and clear.

The author points out the importance of the words *forn*, “ancient” or “of the olden times”, and *siðr*, “traditions”, “customs” or “the way things have always been”. People skilled in magic are often said to possess *forn siðr*, “ancient lore” or “knowledge of long ago”, the notion being that age carries a lot of authority with regard to magic and ritual. The person carrying out the ritual was in touch with this *forn siðr*, thereby having access to knowledge which others had long

since forgotten, and is always described as somehow marginal, even if no common pattern of marginality can be established.

Raudvere also explores the importance of speech. She points out that the equipment used in magical rituals seems to play a much lesser role than the power and consequences of the spoken word, and that the ritualistic combination of physical action with spoken words, be they of a destructive or a benign nature, is a recurring theme in narratives about magic.

The author discusses the close association of secular with religious law, arguing that if a broad definition of “ritual” is adopted, the division between religious and profane actions is obliterated. For example, a court of justice with its formulaic speech and patterns of behaviour is as ritualistic as are performances of magic. By this, Raudvere wants to avoid the separation of society into secular and sacred aspects, a division which she regards as foreign to the world view of Old Norse society, and magic, ritual and religion are explored not as separate institutions but as integrated components of the greater whole which is society.

Forn siðr was highly esteemed in Old Norse society but it was also somehow marginal, something which not everyone had access to, and those who did were themselves regarded as marginal to society because of it. Thus, the atmosphere surrounding “magic” was a mixture of admiration and apprehension.

The book, which is in Swedish, is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the thought-mode of Old Norse society, and it should be praised for its clarity in thought as well as its precision in language. Raudvere’s interpretations are as exciting to read as they are also easy to follow. The book is a major achievement.

A somewhat shorter version in English, also by Raudvere, bearing the title “Trolldóm in Early Medieval Scandinavia”, can be found in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, ed. B. Ankarloo and S. Clark, vol. 3, London 2002. (Karen Bek-Pedersen)