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Master's Thesis

# A Man's Best Friend, A God's Worst Enemy:

An Interdisciplinary Analysis of the Cultural Significance of the Canines in Old Germanic Culture

Nathan Campbell

MAS4091: Master's Thesis in Viking and Medieval Norse Studies  
30 Credits  
Spring Semester 2023

University of Oslo  
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### Abstract:

This thesis analyses the ways in which dogs, wolves and foxes were perceived by Old Germanic cultures. Initially, the significance of canines in Old Germanic culture was not considered to be much more than simply materialistic; elaborate burials that contained dogs within them, along with rich grave goods, were interpreted as expressions of wealth and status. It was presumed that the inclusion of dogs in burials, such as the ones at Valsgärde cemetery, were done so to emulate an ideal of elite men having fine hounds and horses for hunting. However, Old Germanic and Old Norse mythology, poetry and other textual sources indicate that dogs, as well as wolves, had spiritual and cultural significance. Furthermore the wild canine species also appear in these sources, perhaps most famously as the world ending wolves in Old Norse mythology. Using an interdisciplinary approach that utilises archaeological and textual sources, this thesis will analyse the dogs, as well as wolves and foxes, that appear in Old Germanic contexts to build upon a better understanding of their perceived place in the cosmogony of Early Medieval Europe.

### Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank my tutors for all the help and advice that has been given. I would especially like to express my gratitude to Dr Harriet Evans-Tang for her knowledge and expertise. I would like to thank my friends for their encouragement, and my family for all their unwavering support and reassurance over these last two years in times when I needed it most. But most importantly I want to dedicate this to my dad. If it was not for him I would not have embarked on this degree. Even though he didn't get to see me reach the end, every one of his lessons and lectures has stuck with me every step of the way. He will always be the best teacher I ever had.

Contents:

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2: Theory .....	4
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	5
Chapter 4: Literature Review .....	6
Chapter 5: Materials .....	11
A) The Animals in Question .....	11
B) Archaeological Material .....	15
C) Literary Material .....	17
Chapter 6: Analysis .....	20
Part 1: Literary analysis .....	20
A) Wolves .....	20
B) Dogs .....	24
C) Foxes .....	27
Part 2: Archaeological Analysis .....	28
A) Wolves .....	28
B) Foxes .....	34
C) Dogs .....	36
Part 3: Combining the Analysis .....	43
Chapter 7: Conclusion .....	48

List of Figures:

Figure 1: the canine species that will be addressed in this thesis .....	3
Figure 2: examples of <i>spitz</i> , <i>molosser</i> , <i>sight-hound</i> and <i>lap-dog</i> type dogs .....	14
Figure 3: the Trollhättan bracteate .....	16
Figure 4: a reconstruction of the Sutton Hoo purse lid .....	30
Figure 5: the Hunnestad 3 rune-stone .....	32
Figure 6: the Torslunda plates .....	33
Figure 7: the Möjbro stone, the Hunninge Stone from Gotland, and the Böksta stone .....	42

## Chapter 1 - Introduction:

In Old Germanic cultures, canines were represented with a strange dichotomy. In many instances, wolves are treated with fear and in the mythology they were associated with cataclysmic world ending events. Dogs are ascribed an uncanny liminal status in the world as being associated with death, and consequently they are often sacrificed to be included in elaborate burial rituals. However, in opposition to this there are examples where canines are ascribed positive attributes. Dogs could be loyal companions and practical working animals that were considered valuable. And certain aspects of the nature of a wolf were deemed admirable by the warrior class that is prevalent in so much of Old Germanic culture, prompting a cultural trend of young men and the elites who led them in warfare trying to associate themselves with wolves through the ornaments they wore and the names they were given.

There has been much academic discussion on the representation of canines in Old Germanic literary sources, especially in the Old Norse mythology and saga literature. Similarly, there has been much analysis of the archaeological contexts in which these animals appear, such as grave goods in elite burials, or as artistic renderings on ornaments and jewellery. Oddly enough, while the wolf and dog receive so much attention, the fox has received comparatively little. Furthermore, while the canines have received interdisciplinary analysis in the past to examine their relation to humans, so far no study has looked at how these animals might have been perceived together, or against each other, and how this may correspond to Old Germanic perceptions of the world.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the interactions between the canine species and people in Old Germanic cultures to better understand how they were perceived, and how this might affect our understanding of animal-human relations in Old Germanic contexts. This will be achieved by using an interdisciplinary investigation to analyse the ways in which canines appear in archaeological evidence and textual sources. By seeing how these two forms of evidence might authenticate or oppose each other, it will be possible to build a more accurate picture of how canines were perceived by these ancient peoples.

A range of case studies from across North-Western Europe will be used, including rich archaeological discoveries and sites, such as the Vendel and Valsgärde cemeteries, that contain an abundance of evidence that can give us a glimpse into how dogs were utilised, not just in life but in

elaborate death rituals as well. Artefacts and stone monuments provide us with evidence of how canines might be presented in artworks that express cultural beliefs and trends. Archaeological evidence for expressions of faith and belief, in the form of cult practices and rituals, can shed light on how canines fitted into the Old Germanic cosmogony. Of equal importance to this thesis, Old Germanic mythology, poetry and cultural phenomena preserved in Medieval texts will also be considered. As will be demonstrated in this thesis, archeological discoveries have been able to demonstrate that some of the information preserved in these texts seems to reflect certain aspects of Old Germanic beliefs and culture. Drawing together all this evidence, this thesis will examine the perceptions and place of dogs, wolves and foxes in Old Germanic cultures. The animals will each be given their own analysis in textual and material evidence, but ultimately this paper will analyse them together, rather than being focused on one.

At this point, it is worth outlining the semantics of what exactly is meant by the term "Old Germanic" when referring to cultural groups. In the context of Antiquity and Early Medieval history, the Germanic people were the people who lived in Central and Northern Europe; the earliest example of this distinction can be seen in Tacitus' *Germania*, a Roman account of the tribes and kingdoms that existed beyond Rome's border on the Rhine.<sup>1</sup> Germanic encompasses a range of linguistically and culturally similar yet still diversified groups of people, some of whom migrated throughout Europe after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, a time referred to as the Migration Period. The Saxons, Lombards, Geats, Jutes, Frisians and Franks are just a few examples. However alongside the term Old Germanic, the term Old Norse will also be used frequently in this thesis. Old Norse is the term used when referring to Viking Age Norwegian, Danish, Swedish and Icelandic culture and language. Additionally, the term Old Icelandic is also used to refer to post-Viking Age Icelandic literature and culture, especially with regards to the Saga literature. While Old Germanic serves as a good umbrella term to encapsulate all of these Early Medieval cultural groups, it is important to understand that the terms Norse or Icelandic are more specific to the Scandinavian and Icelandic peoples from the latter part of the time scope of this thesis.

Another crucial logistical point to address is the difference between religion and culture. In the modern age, the perception of religion and faith is a rigid one that is heavily influenced by the three prevailing Abrahamic religions; Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The word religion brings to mind

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Litchfield West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18.

the concept of organised and centralised practices conducted by a specific appointed body. However faith and belief in the divine was drastically different in Early Medieval Europe, especially in the Northern and Central parts where the Christian faith had yet to take root. The cultural and ritual practices of the Old Germanic peoples were not homogenous, and as such religion is perhaps not an adequate term to describe them. As will be demonstrated in this thesis, expressions of faith and belief in deities and supernatural entities manifested in many different practices amongst the Old Germanic peoples; while many of these practices were broadly similar, there were also instances of regional variations and traditions that changed over time. It is therefore better to refer to Old Germanic rituals and expressions of spiritual beliefs as cultural practices, or as folk religion.



Figure 1: the canines in question (photos from <https://commons.wikimedia.org>)

Top: a Eurasian Wolf (left), an Irish Wolfhound (right).

Bottom: a red fox (left), two Arctic foxes from Iceland displaying the different morphs in coat colour.



## Chapter 2 - Theory:

The theory of this thesis is that the cultural significance of canines, both wild and domesticated, to Old Germanic cultural groups can be exemplified and explained through a joint analysis of their archaeology and folklore. As shall be demonstrated in the following chapters, the poems, mythology and ethnographic accounts of Old Germanic cultural groups reveal recurring associations between canines with death, danger and destruction, but also with protection, guidance, fate and certain martial aspects that young warriors wished to emulate. Alongside this, there is a recurrent trend of canines also appearing in archaeological contexts. For example, canine figures represented in artistic renderings on a plethora of artefacts of wealth and significance, as well as stone monuments such as the ones from Gotland. Canines also appear in burial and ritual archaeology. Therefore, by looking at the wide range of contexts in which dogs, wolves and foxes appear in Old Germanic material and textual culture, it should be possible to demonstrate the position they held in the Old Germanic perceptions of the world around them.

It is my belief that the cultural significance of these animals can be interpreted as being a spectrum; at one end is human civilisation, order and safety, whilst at the other is the wild and death. The wolves, being wild animals and dangerous predators, exist on the latter end of this range. By contrast, the dog could be interpreted as being at a halfway point between humanity and the wild. The dog's position as a guard or buffer against the wild, as well as its relation and similarity in nature to the wolf could have given rise to the perception of dogs existing in a liminal space, which in turn may have given rise to dogs having connotations of death and the afterlife. At this stage it is unclear how foxes might fit into this spectrum, but that shall be explored further on in the thesis.

### Chapter 3 - Methodology:

The approach taken for the analysis will be syncretic, and organised in a case by case type format. Literary and archaeological evidence will be addressed separately; in each case the animals will be addressed one at a time. Treating the animals and contexts separately makes it easier to convey the information; at the end of the analysis, there will be a section dedicated to bringing together the relevant information to compare the animals alongside each other. By taking the two sets of data, textual and archaeological, and comparing them to each other, it can be demonstrated how and why canines came to have this significance amongst practically all of the Old Germanic cultural groups. An interdisciplinary approach is best for analysing the canine dynamic. By looking at the different mediums and contexts within which they appear, it is possible to build up a broader picture of the animals' place within the culture and see how their significance was expressed. Neil Price, who has written extensively about Viking Age religious practices, has advocated that an interdisciplinary approach can help build a clearer picture of the mindset and cultural beliefs of Old Norse people with an approach he dubs “cognitive archaeology”, which in essence aims to understand the mindset and beliefs of an ancient people by pulling together information from different kinds of sources.<sup>2</sup> This thesis will follow this approach, as it aims to analyse and understand an ancient cultural perception that was shared by a wide ranging group of people over a significant *longue durée*.

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<sup>2</sup> Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2019), 4.

## Chapter 4 - Literature Review:

Much has been said about the significance of dogs in the archaeological and textual contexts of the Old Germanic world, as this section shall demonstrate. The interpretation has changed and evolved over the years; at first the focus was predominantly on their presence in elite burials, which gave rise to the theory that the inclusion of dogs in graves was an expression of status.<sup>3</sup> But this interpretation changed when it was later advocated that their presence in the graves was symbolic of a deeper spiritual significance.<sup>4</sup> However, some argue that the analysis is still too one-dimensional, with the focus being too much upon zooarchaeological interpretations.<sup>5</sup> By contrast the significance of wolves and foxes has been explored in a completely different way to that of dogs. For the former, the interest has predominantly been upon their depictions in Old Norse mythology, especially as destructive forces, as well as the wolf's significance as a sort of totemic creature that young warriors wished to emulate.<sup>6</sup> For foxes, there is very little in the way of scholarly debate; foxes hardly appear in any archaeological contexts, and there are barely any references to foxes in literary sources compared the many mentions of wolves and dogs.

The presence of dogs in elite boat graves can be regarded as an important starting point for the study of canines in the Early Medieval period. Anne-Sofie Gräslund has comprehensively covered the prevalence of dogs in human graves in ancient Scandinavia; of particular note are the Pre-Viking Age cemeteries of Vendel and Valsgärde, where a number of high-status boat graves were found to contain multiple dogs.<sup>7</sup> The contents and nature of these graves will be expanded upon in the following chapters, so for now it will suffice to say that between these cemeteries there is a clear trend of elite figures being buried with large and impressive dogs, whose size and shape is indicative of their use in hunting and herding.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Prummel, "Early Medieval Dog Burials Among The Germanic Tribes," *Helinium* 32, no.1-2, (1992): 157.

<sup>4</sup> Anne-Sofie Gräslund, "Dogs in Graves - a Question of Symbolism?" *PECUS. Man and Animal in Antiquity*. (September 9-12, 2002), 167.

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Cousen, "Hounds of Hel: How Did the Mythological Significance of Viking Age Dogs Affect their Social Position?," *New Frontiers in Archaeology: Proceedings of the Cambridge Annual Student Archaeology Conference 2019* (2020): 153.

<sup>6</sup> Roderick Dale, *The Myths and Realities of the Viking "Berserkr"* (London, UK: Routledge, 2022), 48.

<sup>7</sup> Gräslund, "Dogs in Graves - a Question of Symbolism?" 168.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Nichols, "Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgärde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction," *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 36 (March 3, 2021): 7.

With regards to how the inclusion of these finds and others like it should be interpreted, there are essentially three schools of thought. Some advocate that the hounds are status markers; they were beasts of prowess that were used in the aristocratic sport of hunting, and their inclusion in the grave was supposed to be a reflection of deceased's social prestige.<sup>9</sup> Some, such as Sabine Sten, have cited the inclusion of horses and sometimes even birds of prey alongside the dogs as evidence for this, highlighting that the use of falconry, horses and hounds in hunting was a sport popular among Early Medieval elites.<sup>10</sup> As such the dogs found in elite burials might constitute part of a "hunting package" intended to represent the interred individuals' status as members of the elite.

Others argue that animals included in human inhumation or cremation burials, were done so under the belief that they would be following the person into the afterlife to continue to serve them in the same purpose they had fulfilled in life; this is supported by the fact that most of the dogs found in the graves were at a prime age and condition to work when they were killed.<sup>11</sup> Old Germanic beliefs in the afterlife were varied, but we do know for sure that some Old Norse people believed that the ideal places to go to were Valhøll or Fólkvangr, the paradisiacal abodes of Óðinn and Freyja.<sup>12</sup> In such an afterlife it was believed that the chosen dead would gleefully and endlessly engage in feasting, fighting and other glorious activities; therefore it might be desirable to have a dog from your old life with you as a useful and familiar companion.

Anne-Sofie Gräslund has argued that aside from being companions with purpose and markers of status, dogs were also perceived to have deeper symbolic significance as being associated with death and the afterlife.<sup>13</sup> Gräslund has written extensively on this topic, and advocates that in the Old Norse world dogs were perceived to have a liminal status of being a medium between life and death, and therefore dogs included in Early Medieval burials were believed to act as spiritual guides

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<sup>9</sup> Kristina Jennbert, "The Heroized Dead: People, animals, and materiality in Scandinavian death rituals, AD 200-1000," in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere (Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 136.

<sup>10</sup> Sabine Sten, "Sacrificed Animals in Swedish Late Iron Age Monumental Mound Burials," in *Bones, Behaviour and Belief: The Zooarchaeological Evidence as a Source for Ritual Practice in Ancient Greece and Beyond*, ed. Jenny Wallensten and Gunnel Ekroth (Stockholm: Svenska Institutet i Athen, 2013), pp. 223-231, 231.

<sup>11</sup> Nichols, "Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgårde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction," 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Grimnismal* in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. By Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962).

<sup>13</sup> Gräslund, "Dogs in Graves - a Question of Symbolism?" 173.

through to the afterlife.<sup>14</sup> Gräslund draws comparisons to other ancient pre-Christian cultures, such as Ancient Romans, Celts and even Egyptians, and highlights how in all of their mythologies dogs were associated with death, but also as warders against evil.<sup>15</sup> Gräslund highlights that this is significant, because in Old Norse mythology and religion the hound Garmr is said to stand on guard at the entrance to Hel.<sup>16</sup>

While much has been written about the significance of dogs in the archaeological context of burials, not as much has been written on the significance of wolves or foxes in the same context, primarily because they were seemingly not included in burials. There are examples of wild animals, or at least their furs, being included in graves. The presence of bear and lynx phalanges in Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period Scandinavian graves indicates that individuals were sometimes wrapped in the furs of these animals when they were buried.<sup>17</sup> However no such examples of fox or wolf phalanges have been found in graves. It is known from contemporary literary sources that the trade of fox, wolf, beaver and mustelid (pine-martens, ermine, otters, etc) furs was a popular industry of the Viking Age, with furs being exported far south to the Arabic markets, as well as being favoured by Scandinavian elites.<sup>18</sup> However, a study carried out by Luise Ørsted Brandt *et al* of 15 fur samples preserved in six different Viking Age Danish burials found no cases of people being buried with fox or wolf fur; the furs were identified as either beaver, squirrel and mustelid.<sup>19</sup>

There is one context for which there is archaeological and textual evidence for dogs, wolves and foxes all being involved: ritual practices. One prime example of this comes from an excavated cult site at Borg, Östergötland, where a plethora of animal bones were found outside what was once a

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<sup>14</sup> Gräslund, “Dogs in Graves - a Question of Symbolism?” 167.

<sup>15</sup> Gräslund, “Dogs in Graves - a Question of Symbolism?” 171.

<sup>16</sup> Gräslund, “Dogs in Graves - a Question of Symbolism?” 172.

<sup>17</sup> Karl-Johan Lindholm and John Ljungkvist “The Bear in the Grave: Exploitation of Top Predator and Herbivore Resources in First Millennium Sweden—First Trends from a Long-Term Research Project.” *European Journal of Archaeology* 19, no. 1 (February 22, 2016), 10.

<sup>18</sup> Luise Ørsted Brandt, Alberto J. Taurozzi, Meaghan Mackie, Mikkel-Holger S. Sinding, Filipe Garrett Vieira, Anne Lisbeth Schmidt, Charlotte Rimstad, Matthew J. Collins, Ulla Mannering “Palaeoproteomics Identifies Beaver Fur in Danish High-Status Viking Age Burials - Direct Evidence of Fur Trade.” *PLoS ONE*, 17:7 (July 2022): 10.

<sup>19</sup> Brandt et al, “Palaeoproteomics Identifies Beaver Fur in Danish High-Status Viking Age Burials - Direct Evidence of Fur Trade.” 8.

cult building, amongst which were the bones of dogs, wolves and foxes.<sup>20</sup> Borg is a rare occurrence of all three of the canine types appearing alongside each other in an Old Norse context, and could therefore demonstrate how they were perceived by Old Norse people. To do this requires a good understanding of the scholarly discourse on Pagan ritual and cultic beliefs and activities amongst the Early Medieval Nordic and Germanic people.

There has been much discourse on the cultic practices of pre-Christian Nordic and Germanic people. The specific details of their cultural beliefs are obscure, or lost to us completely. There are a few literary sources, such as the Icelandic Sagas or near-contemporary Chronicles, that offer us some insight. However, there has been contention over how literally these literary sources should be taken, on account of the fact that they were written by Christians, for Christians, and sometimes centuries after the obsolescence of Paganism in North-Western Europe.

As Price highlights, an interdisciplinary approach that combines archaeology with other fields of research to study the Viking Age is a relatively new development; up until the 1980s the focus of research was predominately upon how the archaeology might corroborate the historiography of textual sources, as opposed to seeing how the two could be used in tandem to build a more accurate interpretation of the past.<sup>21</sup> Conversely, some archaeologists advocated veering away from texts all together and focusing on material culture.<sup>22</sup> However, many academics such as Anders Andrén, Axel Christophersen and John Moreland endorse the view that texts are just as important as material culture when it comes to interpreting and understanding ancient cultural identities.<sup>23</sup>

Finally it is also worth addressing how animals have been perceived in the archaeology of the period, and how methods of interpretation have evolved. Kristofer Poole argues that while archaeologists have given much attention to how humans interacted with their material environment, not as much attention has been given to exploring the relationships between humans

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<sup>20</sup> Ann-Lili Nielsen, "Pagan Cultic and Votive Acts at Borg: An Expression of the Central Significance of the Farmstead in the Late Iron Age." In *Visions of the Past: Trends and Traditions in Swedish Medieval Archaeology*, ed. Hans Andersson, Peter Carelli, and Lars Ersgård (Stockholm: Central Board of National Antiquities, 1997), 385.

<sup>21</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 5.

and animals.<sup>24</sup> As Poole puts it, this object-centric approach neglects that the animal-human relationship went both ways, with their interactions influencing each other and being intrinsic to the make-up of past societies.<sup>25</sup> Poole's integrated approach to animal-human relations and animal agency in Anglo-Saxon England does well to demonstrate the importance of animals in Early Medieval society, even if it was intended to be used for cats.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kristopher Poole, "The Contextual Cat: Human-Animal Relations and Social Meaning in Anglo-Saxon England." *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 22, no. 3 (2015), 857.

<sup>25</sup> Poole, "The Contextual Cat: Human-Animal Relations and Social Meaning in Anglo-Saxon England." 877.

<sup>26</sup> Poole, "The Contextual Cat: Human-Animal Relations and Social Meaning in Anglo-Saxon England." 860.

## Chapter 5 - Materials:

### A) The Animals in question:

This thesis will investigate the canine animals that would have been known to the Old Germanic people of Early Medieval Europe. As stated before, the Eurasian wolf, the red fox and Arctic fox were the wild canine species that the Old Germanic people would have come into contact with, while there were a myriad of dog breeds available to them that were employed in different scenarios and settings.

The grey wolf (*Canis lupus*) is the largest of the canid species in the world, and is found all over the Northern hemisphere.<sup>27</sup> The wolves of Europe are specifically referred to as Eurasian Wolves (*Canis lupus lupus*) to differentiate them from other subspecies.<sup>28</sup> On average, wolves can be as tall as 76 cm at the shoulder, and weigh between 45-65 kg, and can be almost two metres long from nose to tail-end.<sup>29</sup> While they are now only found in limited populations in Central, Eastern and Northern Europe, wolves were once far more prevalent throughout all of Europe.<sup>30</sup> This prevalence is reflected in their abundant appearances in old European folklore and mythology, especially in Nordic, Germanic and Celtic cultures.<sup>31</sup> Throughout history, wolves have often come into conflict with humans; their capability to disrupt agriculture by preying on livestock, as well as the direct physical danger they can pose to humans lead to them being vigorously hunted in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period to the brink of extinction.<sup>32</sup>

Foxes belong to the canine subfamily *vulpini*, and generally grow to be 35-40 cm tall and weigh 5-7 kg.<sup>33</sup> The red fox (*Vulpes Vulpes*) is found all over Eurasia and North America, and is an extremely

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<sup>27</sup> "Gray Wolf." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Accessed March 18, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/animal/gray-wolf>.

<sup>28</sup> "Eurasian Wolf." Eurasian wolf - Facts, Diet, Habitat & Pictures on Animalia.bio. Accessed March 21, 2023. <https://animalia.bio/eurasian-wolf>.

<sup>29</sup> "Gray Wolf." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Accessed March 18, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/animal/gray-wolf>.

<sup>30</sup> "Eurasian Wolf." Eurasian wolf - Facts, Diet, Habitat & Pictures on Animalia.bio. Accessed March 21, 2023. <https://animalia.bio/eurasian-wolf>.

<sup>31</sup> "Gray Wolf." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Accessed March 18, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/animal/gray-wolf>.

<sup>32</sup> "Gray Wolf." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Accessed March 18, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/animal/gray-wolf>.

<sup>33</sup> "Red Fox." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., March 12, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/animal/red-fox-mammal>.



elusive and adaptable animal. Additionally, anyone who lives in or near rural areas can attest that you are more likely to hear a fox than see one; their loud and high pitched screeching is hard to ignore, and was undoubtedly known to Early Medieval people, although it can not be known whether a connection was made between the noises and the animal.<sup>34</sup> Foxes are opportunistic scavengers and hunters that can adapt to any environment. Their fur has long been considered a luxury, and as such foxes have been hunted and trapped for their fur throughout history.<sup>35</sup>

The Arctic fox (*Vulpes lagopus*) is found in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic regions of the Northern hemisphere, including Iceland and the northernmost parts of Scandinavia.<sup>36</sup> They are different in appearance to red foxes, as their colouration changes depending on the season, and the colours of this change varies depending on which of the two polymorphs the fox belongs to; blue morphs go from grey in summer to greyish-blue in winter, while white morphs go from brown to pure white.<sup>37</sup> Before the Viking Age, Arctic foxes in Iceland would never have come into contact with humans, therefore their initial interactions with Viking Age people may have been different to those between Arctic foxes in Norway and humans. Given their distinct nature and dissimilar appearance to red foxes, perhaps Old Norse perceptions of Arctic foxes would have been different.

Dogs are a slightly more complex case. Through selective breeding, dogs can come in all shapes and sizes with a range of distinct characteristics. In the modern day different breed names and categories are assigned to dogs, but in the Early Medieval Period there was not such a distinct concept of pedigree and most of the dog breeds in existence today did not exist in the Middle Ages.<sup>38</sup> However, Christopher Nichols does identify four types of dogs that are known to have existed as far back as antiquity, which were characterised by their different uses, as much by their different appearances.<sup>39</sup> *Spitzes* are an active kind of dog that bares a somewhat wolf-like

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<sup>34</sup> Poole, “Foxes and Badgers in Anglo-Saxon Life and Landscape”, 413.

<sup>35</sup> “Red Fox.” Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., March 12, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/animal/red-fox-mammal>.

<sup>36</sup> “Arctic Fox”, Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Accessed March 18, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/animal/Arctic-fox>.

<sup>37</sup> “Arctic Fox”, Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Accessed March 18, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/animal/Arctic-fox>.

<sup>38</sup> Nichols, “Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgårde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction,” 3.

<sup>39</sup> Nichols, “Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgårde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction,” 3.

appearance and is well disposed for hunting or herding; they are characterised by pointed ears, a curved tale and thick fur that is well suited for Northern climates.<sup>40</sup> *Sight-hounds* are particularly tall breeds of dogs with very long limbs and necks that give them an advantage for spotting and chasing down prey; a prime example of a sight-hound is the Irish Wolfhound, a breed with a long history and great popularity that predates the Viking Age.<sup>41</sup> *Mastiffs*, also sometimes referred to as *molossers*, are a large and incredibly robust type of dog with short heads and distinct jowly snouts, as well as a temperament well suited for guarding and fighting.<sup>42</sup> There are also a few examples of small dogs measuring 39 cm tall or less, which Nichols dubs *lap-dogs*, that have been found in relation to Early Medieval urban areas, such as Birka.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, *lap-dogs* were defined in Medieval Norwegian law codices; a dog was deemed to be of *lap-dog* size if a person could place their hand on the dog's neck and have all their fingers meet.<sup>44</sup> Dogs this small would have been inadequate as hunting or guard dogs; it is possible that they might have been kept as rat catchers, as some modern terriers are, but they might also have simply served as domestic pets. Larger dogs seem to be more common and popular in this time period; therefore most of the dogs discussed in this thesis will be of the larger variation.

Medieval law codices contain different categories for the types of dogs that existed in Early Medieval Northern Europe, and the laws that applied to them. For example, the *Grágás* (Grey Goose) law manuscript refers to greyhounds, cattle dogs, guard dogs and lapdogs. Additionally, the Medieval Frisian law text *Lex Frisiorum* give some details about the categories of dogs present in Frisia at the time, as well as their value; *lap-dogs* were worth four *solidi* (a latin term for coin, which in this period would have been silver), dogs that killed wolves were worth three, dogs that

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<sup>40</sup> Nichols, "Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgårde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction," 3.

<sup>41</sup> Nichols, "Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgårde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction," 3.

<sup>42</sup> Nichols - again maybe look for a more dog specific article

<sup>43</sup> Nichols, "Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgårde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction," 8.

<sup>44</sup> *The Earliest Norwegian Laws, Being the Gulathing Law and Frostathing Law*, trans. Laurence M. Larson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 369.

could wound a wolf just two, cattle dogs were worth one *solidus*, and finally a strange category for a dog that has no useful function, earning it a value of one *tremissis*.<sup>45</sup>



Figure 2: examples of dogs. *Top left*: an Irish Wolfhound, a prime example of a *sight-hound*. *Top right*: an English Mastiff, a type of *molosser* dog. *Bottom Left*: a Norwegian Elkhound, a *spitz* type dog with a long history in Scandinavia. *Bottom Right*: a Swedish Vallhund, also a *spitz* type dog as well as being of *lap-dog* proportions.

While not exact, these dogs give a rough approximation for the kinds of dogs that would have been prevalent in Early Medieval Northern Europe. Images courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

<sup>45</sup> Han Nijdam, “Law and Political Organization of the Early Medieval Frisians (c. AD 600–800)” in *Frisians of the Early Middle Ages*, eds. John Hines and Nelleke IJssennagger-van der Pluijm (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021), 147.

## B) Archaeological material:

This thesis will draw upon a wide range of archaeological data to demonstrate the complex relationship between humans and canines. Case studies will include examples of Old Germanic cultural groups from across Europe, throughout the Early Medieval Period. This will demonstrate the breadth and longevity of these cultural phenomena, extending from the Migration Period Germanic tribes all the way up to the Viking settlements of Iceland.

Artefacts and evidence preserved in burial archaeology serves as one of the best sources of information. From the Early Medieval Period there are a number of human-dog inhumations in connection to Old Germanic culture, with a significant proportion of these examples being boat-graves.<sup>46</sup> Boat-graves, such as the ones found at the Valsgärde and Vendel cemeteries, were extravagant and complex burials; they would include multiple dogs, as well as a number of other livestock animals and opulent grave goods.<sup>47</sup> There are also examples of dog remains being found in less monumental but still opulent Viking Age graves around Scandinavia, as well as cremations.<sup>48</sup>

Archaeological evidence of ritual practices will also be considered. The aforementioned site at Borg is just one example of a place where evidence for the sacrifice of canines, amongst other animals, were carried out in relation to an apparent cult site in the Viking Age.<sup>49</sup> There are other examples of sacrificial deposited and ritual sites from before and during the Viking Age which will also be addressed in this thesis. It is perhaps worth considering that rituals and burials tend to overlap with regards to pagan practices; burials themselves were often carried out in ritualistic fashions, following formulas that were intended to reflect mythology and emulate the importance of the interred individual.<sup>50</sup> The inclusion of canines in the ritualisation of burial practices is indicative of the social and cultural significance that was placed upon them, and will be given a full analysis further on.

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<sup>46</sup> Darcy F. Morey and Rujana Jeger “When Dogs and People Were Buried Together.” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 67 (June 2022): 5.

<sup>47</sup> Jennbert, “The Heroized Dead: People, animals, and materiality in Scandinavian death rituals, AD 200-1000,” 135.

<sup>48</sup> Gräslund, “Dogs in Graves - a Question of Symbolism?” 169.

<sup>49</sup> Nielsen, “Pagan Cultic and Votive Acts at Borg: An Expression of the Central Significance of the Farmstead in the Late Iron Age,” 385.

<sup>50</sup> Neil Price, “Passing into Poetry: Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology,” *Medieval Archaeology* 54, no. 1 (July 18, 2013), 23.



Figure 4: the Trollhättan bracteate, thought to represent Týr losing his hand to Fenrir.

Image courtesy of *Historiska museet*, The Swedish History Museum.

Also of great significance is the artistic representation and depiction of canines by the Old Germanic people. For example, from Gotland there are a number of picture-stones that depict canines, such as the Hunninge Stone, which dates to the 8th-9th Century AD, depicts a spearman on horseback being accompanied by a dog (see figure 7).<sup>51</sup> Gotland's picture-stones are a unique and informative source for Viking Age cultural beliefs. The stones were being erected as far back as the early Migration Period, but the biggest and most detailed ones can be dated to the 9th and 10th Centuries, around the same time that the earliest skaldic and Eddic poetry was composed; thus it can be seen that much of the iconography and imagery of the picture stones relates to scenes and motifs from skaldic and Eddic literature.<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, depictions of canines are also found on various artefacts that would have been worn as adornments. One of the earliest and most prominent examples we have of this comes in the form of a 6th Century bracteate found in Västergötland, which is believed to depict the wolf Fenrir biting Týr's hand (see figure 4).<sup>53</sup> Other examples include the numerous ornate belt buckles and brooches from the Viking Age and Migration period that depict canine figures; the style of ornamentation on these is often referred to as *Animal Style*, and it was prolific amongst Scandinavian and Germanic

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<sup>51</sup> Sigmund Oehrl, "Read Chapter No Readable Formats Available Re-Interpretations of Gotlandic Picture Stones Based on the Reflectance Transformation Imaging Method (RTI): Some Examples," in *Myth, Materiality and Lived Religion: In Merovingian and Viking Scandinavia*, ed. Wikström af Edholm Klas, Peter Jakson Rova, Andreas Nordberg, Olof Sundqvist, and Torun Zachrisson (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2019), 149.

<sup>52</sup> Oehrl, "Read Chapter No Readable Formats Available Re-Interpretations of Gotlandic Picture Stones Based on the Reflectance Transformation Imaging Method (RTI): Some Examples," 141.

<sup>53</sup> Phillip A. Bernhardt-house, "Binding the Wolf, Leashing the Hound: Canid Eschatologies in Irish and Norse Myth," in *Studia Celtica Fennica* 14 (2017), 11.

culture throughout the 5th to 12th Centuries.<sup>54</sup> Characterised by complex intertwining patterns and abstract depictions of animals, often referred to as gripping beasts, *Animal Style* was heavily associated with Old Norse and Germanic elites.<sup>55</sup>

### C) Literary Material:

Despite the disparity in time and belief, the textual sources still preserve much of the mythology and folklore of pagan Scandinavia. First and foremost of these textual sources are the two Medieval Icelandic corpuses called the Poetic Edda and the Prose Edda. Compiled in 13th Century Iceland, the Poetic and Prose Edda contain poetry and myths from Pre-Christian Iceland, and therefore are our best literary source for the gods and myths of Viking Age paganism.<sup>56</sup> Within these myths and stories there are a number of canine characters and references, that display vivid connection between canines and powerful forces.

A number of canine characters are preserved in the Poetic and Prose Edda, all are described as either wolves or particularly ferocious hounds which are sometimes interpreted as having wolflike attributes. First and foremost amongst wolves in Old Norse mythology is the destructive Fenrir, who's eschatological nature is attested to in *Gylfaginning* and *Völuspá*.<sup>57</sup> Fenrir is also said to have two offspring, the wolves Sköll and Hati, who each chase the sun and moon across the sky until they finally catch them at *Ragnarök* and darken the sky.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the Eddic literature also mentions the hound Garmr, who is leashed at the entrance to the underworld and is described as being an especially aggressive guard dog.<sup>59</sup> These particular canines thus demonstrate how in some aspects of Old Norse and Germanic folklore and culture, wolves and dogs can be associated with destruction. However this is not the case for every canine in Old Norse mythology, as Óðinn is said to have two wolves of his own, Geri and Freki, that are loyal to him and are seemingly treated as dogs.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Lotte Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality: An Archaeology of Scandinavia, AD 400-1000*, (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 61.

<sup>55</sup> Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 61.

<sup>56</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 3-6.

<sup>57</sup> John Lindow, *Old Norse Mythology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 36.

<sup>58</sup> Lindow, *Old Norse Mythology*, 36.

<sup>59</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse L. Byock (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), 73.

<sup>60</sup> Lindow, *Old Norse Mythology*, 36.

Drawing upon *Íslendingasögur* (“sagas of Icelanders”), *konungasögur* (“kings’ sagas”) and *fornaldarsögur* (“legendary sagas”) a range of canine characters and representations can be seen. One such example of a very literal canine character is *Sámr*, a dog from Ireland, and therefore most likely an Irish Wolfhound, who is gifted to the character Gunnar Hámundarson in *Njál’s Saga*.<sup>61</sup> *Sámr* is depicted as being closely bonded and incredibly loyal to Gunnar in a way that goes above and beyond what could be expected from a normal dog, to such an extreme that Gunnar’s adversaries believe that they will only be able to kill him after they have killed *Sámr*.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, there are a multitude of human characters from the saga literature who take on lupine attributes, through ways of complete transformation or shifting into an animalistic state.<sup>63</sup> The most famous example of this are the *ulfheðnar* (“wolf-coats”) and *berserkir* (“bear-shirts”), warriors that wore the pelts of wolves and bears as part of their effort to emulate their ferociousness in battle.<sup>64</sup> Not only are these wolf-warriors mentioned in the *fornaldarsögur*, but they are also attested to in the more historical *konungasögur*, such as *Heimskringla*, which suggests they were more than just literary invention.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, historical texts also provide some evidence for the significance of canines in Old Germanic cultures. For example, the 11th Century text *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, written by German medieval chronicler Adam of Bremen, contains a story about a pagan temple in Viking Age Uppsala where every nine years a mass sacrifice of animals and humans was conducted, including the canine species.<sup>66</sup> Other sources also report sacrificed animals being hung from trees, such as Thietmar of Merseburg, and this is corroborated by archaeological discoveries that indicate that sacrificed animals were hung up in sacral places, such as the cult site

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<sup>61</sup> William Sayer, “Gunnar, His Irish Wolfhound *Sámr* and the Passing of the Old Heroic Order in *Njál’s Saga*,” in *Arkiv För Nordisk Filologi* 112 (1997), 43.

<sup>62</sup> Harriet J. Evans-Tang, *Animal-Human Relationships in Medieval Iceland: From Farm-Settlement to Sagas*. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2022), 157.

<sup>63</sup> Timothy Bourns, “Becoming-Animal in the Icelandic Sagas,” in *Neophilologus* 105, no. 4 (2021), 633.

<sup>64</sup> Bourns, “Becoming-Animal in the Icelandic Sagas,” 644.

<sup>65</sup> Dale, *The Myths and Realities of the Viking “Berserkr”*, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 103.

at Frösö.<sup>67</sup> Thus, it can be demonstrated that archaeological evidence can corroborate textual evidence, and vice versa.

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<sup>67</sup> Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 103.



## Chapter 6 - Analysis:

### Part 1) Canines in Textual Sources

#### A) Wolves:

When talking about the literature and folklore of Old Germanic cultures, no corpus is more important than the Eddic material. Within the Eddic material, there is no canine character that is more prominent than the cataclysmic wolf Fenrir. Fenrir is one of three monstrous children born of the jötunn Angrboða and the half-god, half-jötunn Loki, and is described as being an incredibly ferocious wolf that grew to an enormous size, prompting the Æsir to imprison him.<sup>68</sup> Fenrir bites Týr's hand off at the onset of this imprisonment, and also is destined to swallow Óðinn whole at *Ragnarök*.<sup>69</sup> Fenrir's ability to maim and kill gods, as well as his pivotal presence at the final battle demonstrates the Old Norse perception of him as a destructive and inevitable force of nature; such beliefs could stem from, or be influenced by, humanity's long running fear of wolves. Additionally, Fenrir is regarded as the progenitor of other destructive wolves in Old Norse mythology; the wolves Sköll and Hati are said to be sons of Fenrir, and that they chase the sun and the moon across the sky until they will eventually catch them at *Ragnarök* to plunge the world into darkness.<sup>70</sup>

Elsewhere in the Eddic material, canines are associated with trolls and giants, the enemies of mankind and the gods. As mentioned before, Fenrir is the son of the jötunn Angrboða; she is said to reside in the "iron woods" where she gives birth to more wolves, earning her the moniker "mother of wolves".<sup>71</sup> There are also instances of wolves being ridden by jötnar women. In the poem *Hyndluljóð*, the goddess Freyja encounters a jötunn völva named Hyndla, a name that coincidentally means "she-dog", who rides upon a wolf.<sup>72</sup> Another example is Hyrrokinn, an incredibly strong jötunn woman that arrives at Baldr's funeral riding a huge wolf, using snakes as reins to control it.<sup>73</sup> These connections between wolves and jötunn can be seen as evidence for the exaggerated stereotype of wolves being wild and chaotic forces from an Old Germanic perspective. In the Old Norse cosmogony, the jötnar were said to live beyond human realms, and were

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<sup>68</sup> Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse L. Byock, 40.

<sup>69</sup> Lindow, *Old Norse Mythology*, 36.

<sup>70</sup> Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse L. Byock, 20.

<sup>71</sup> Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse L. Byock, 20.

<sup>72</sup> *Hyndluljóð* in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), 129.

<sup>73</sup> Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse L. Byock, 67.

associated with chaotic natural phenomena and elements that put them at odds with the gods and humanity.<sup>74</sup> Wolves being associated with jötnar gives credence to the Old Germanic perception of them being an external threat. Additionally, the connection could also stem from old shamanistic practices; in Sámi shamanism wolves are sometimes thought to be helpers for sorcerers.<sup>75</sup> It has been noted by Neil Price that the Nordic perception of the jötnar might have been influenced by their perception of the Sámi.<sup>76</sup> This would therefore reinforce the idea in Old Norse culture that wolves were associated with sorcery and shamanism.

Conversely, there are also wolves that are associated with the gods in positive ways. Óðinn had two wolves of his own called Geri and Freki, whose names each roughly translate as meaning “greedy”.<sup>77</sup> These two wolves are said to sit by Óðinn’s side in *Valhöll*, his feasting hall, as well as riding out with him when he embarks on journeys on his horse Sleipnir.<sup>78</sup> It is somewhat of a dichotomy that Óðinn, who is fated to be killed by a wolf, should own wolves of his own. It could perhaps be an indication of his skills of mastery and rulership; as the god of leaders and leader of the gods, having command over wild animals as if they were dogs further demonstrates Óðinn’s supremacy. Alternatively, he might have wolves for the same shamanistic reasons as the aforementioned jötnar, as it is a recurrent theme in Old Norse mythology that Óðinn practices *seiðr*.<sup>79</sup> In relation to this, birds and bears were also considered to be spiritual components of Eurasian shamanism, and Óðinn is associated with these animals as well, through his ravens, Hugin and Munin, and his ability to shape-shift into a bear.<sup>80</sup> This further adds to the image of Óðinn being a shaman or sorcerer, and the theory that his control of two wolves is a part of this. Either way, the crux of this is that not every wolf in Old Norse mythology was a force of evil; they are shown to be able to be controlled or tamed by the gods. This could potentially be indicative of an understanding that dogs came from wolves, and that wolves could be tamed.

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<sup>74</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 28.

<sup>75</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 215.

<sup>76</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 28.

<sup>77</sup> Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 91.

<sup>78</sup> *Grímnismál* in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Lee M. Hollander, 57.

<sup>79</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 34.

<sup>80</sup> Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 91.

Canine symbolism and significance also manifests in the Old Icelandic Saga literature. One way in which this is shown is the infamous *ulfheðnar* and *berserkir* characters that regularly appear in the Saga material. Described as vicious fighters whose strength and ferocity was often compared to wolves, dogs, or bears, the *ulfheðnar* and *berserkir* were associated with being the favoured warriors of the god Óðinn.<sup>81</sup> However, men who are identified as *ulfheðnar* or *berserkir* in the sagas sometimes have antagonistic roles. For example, in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, the lead character Grettir encounters, outwits and defeats a band of 12 *berserkir* pirates who aimed to rob the lord he was staying with.<sup>82</sup> In *Egils saga*, Egill's own father Skalla-Grímr, who himself was the son of a *berserkr* called Kveldulf ("evening wolf"), flies into an animalistic rage and almost kills his own son.<sup>83</sup>

However not all *ulfheðnar* and *berserkir* characters were antagonists. Egill, the leading character of *Egils saga*, also exhibits *berserkir* behaviour himself, making his character an anti-hero protagonist.<sup>84</sup> Egill's temperament is seemingly inherited from his father and grandfather, both of whom are directly called *berserkir*, and both of whom are shown to care about the well-being of their family despite their violent nature.<sup>85</sup> Not only does this demonstrate that being a *berserkr* was considered a familial trait, but also that such characters were not always pinned as evil.

Additionally in the 9th Century poem *Haraldskvæði*, preserved in *Heimskringla*, *ulfheðnar* and *berserkir* are mentioned as being part of the vanguard for King Harald Fair-hair at the Battle of Hafrsfjord, and in this case the language used to describe this band of wolf-warriors portrays as wild and ferocious, but also brave and loyal, being prepared to fight and die for the king.<sup>86</sup> It is also interesting to note that references to wolf-warriors are also present in other literary sources about Migration Period Germanic peoples. For example, in *Historia Langobardum*, the 8th Century Benedictine historian Paulus Diaconus wrote that the invading Lombards in Italy claimed to have cynocephali, dog-headed men, that drank blood and craved violence.<sup>87</sup> Despite the fact that the

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<sup>81</sup> Dale, *The Myths and Realities of the Viking "Berserkr"*, 3.

<sup>82</sup> *Grettir's Saga*, trans. by William Morris & Eiríkr Magnússon (*Icelandic Saga Database*, 1900), chapter 19.

<sup>83</sup> *Egil's Saga*, trans. by W. C. Green (*Icelandic Saga Database*, 1893), chapter 40.

<sup>84</sup> *Egil's Saga*, trans. by W. C. Green.

<sup>85</sup> *Egil's Saga*, trans. by W. C. Green, chapter 1.

<sup>86</sup> Dale, *The Myths and Realities of the Viking "Berserkr"*, 1-2.

<sup>87</sup> Dale, *The Myths and Realities of the Viking "Berserkr"*, 63.

events that Paulus writes about took place hundreds of years before his lifetime, these rumours of cynocephali amongst the Germanic warriors bare clear parallels to the later, and far removed in distance, Norwegian *Haraldskvæði*'s description of *ulfheðnar* fighting in King Harald's army.

It is intriguing that the representation of the *ulfheðnar* and *berserkir* can change, depending on whether or not they are a part of a war band in service to someone, or something, other than themselves. When these characters are encountered acting of their own volition, they are characterised as being dangerous and disruptive. This is demonstrated in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* where Grettir comes across a group of *berserkir* that serve no one other than themselves and have become violent pirates with malicious intent. In essence, it seems that an *ulfheðinn* or *berserkr* that is sworn in service to someone is regarded as almost tamed, but without someone holding the reigns they start to act like the wolves with which they are associated.

The reasons why wolves were associated with warriors and Óðinn, the frenzied god of warfare, most likely stems from ancient Indo-European traditions connecting wolves and bears to warrior bands. The Indo-European word *kóryos* meant "war-band" and it is present in all the languages derived from the Indo-European language; in Irish it became *cuire*, in Macedonian it was *Κόρραγος*, and in Germanic it was *harja*, which evolved into the Old Norse *herjan*, which also happens to be one of the bynames for Óðinn.<sup>88</sup> In all of these cultures, the *kóryos* was associated with roving bands of young men that became warriors and exhibited frenzied and wild behaviour in combat; these young men would form groups and go out into the wild to prove themselves as men and warriors.<sup>89</sup> In Germanic and Celtic cultures these men would sometimes fight lightly clothed or naked, or they would don animals skins such as a wolf; the former might have been a way of demonstrating their fearlessness, to go into battle completely unarmored, while the latter could be symbolic of them embracing their predatory lifestyle.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, it can be argued that the *ulfheðnar* and *berserkir* are the continuation of this ancient Indo-European tradition whereby young men would adopt an itinerant life of violence, and in doing so would embrace an identity as wolves.

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<sup>88</sup> West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 449.

<sup>89</sup> West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 448.

<sup>90</sup> West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 449-450.

One could argue that there is a demonstration of the *kóryos* warrior band tradition in *Volsunga saga*. In the early parts of the story, the two protagonists Sigmund and Sinfjötli discover two magical wolf skins that transform them into wolves; they put the skins on and proceed to spend a brief span of time literally as wolves, engaging in fights to grow their prowess and strength, before they eventually take off the skins and return to their human form.<sup>91</sup> This time spent as wolves comes across as a sort of initiation, especially for Sinfjötli; before this episode he is an untested boy, during it he kills eleven men by himself, and after this he is finally regarded by Sigmund as a man, meaning the two can finally proceed with their plan to seek vengeance for King Volsung. It would therefore seem that Sigmund and Sinfjötli's time spent as a wolf is an iteration of the *kóryos* initiation tradition.

Furthermore, it is possible that a tradition of identification with canines is partly responsible for an Old Germanic naming trend. In Proto-Norse and Old Norse, many names, especially male orientated ones, contained animal cognates.<sup>92</sup> The Proto-Norse cognates *wulf* (wolf) or *hund* (dog) are often found in Pre-Viking Age names, such as *Hariwulfaz* or *Widuhundaz*, and are thought to denote characteristics that a person should embody, like swiftness or capability.<sup>93</sup> Viking Age examples, such as Ulfr, Thorulf or Bryniolf, were thought to be different, as by then the tradition had evolved and animal names were now meant to have spiritual connotations.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, many *berserker* in the sagas have these wolf-cognate names, such as Kveldulf, which further shows the connection to the wolf-warrior identity.

#### B) Dogs:

Another important canine figure from the Eddic material who is also associated with *Ragnarök* is Garmr. Attested to in the Eddic poems *Völuspá*, *Grímnismál* and *Baldurs draumar*, Garmr is described as being a hound of monstrous proportion and temper that resides at the entrance to Hel, the underworld of Old Norse mythology, and is described in *Grímnismál* as being the best of all

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<sup>91</sup> *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. Trans. Jesse L. Byock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 43.

<sup>92</sup> Kristina Jennbert, *Animals and Humans: Recurrent Symbiosis in Archaeology and Old Norse Religion*. (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2011), 184.

<sup>93</sup> Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 184.

<sup>94</sup> Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 186.

hounds.<sup>95</sup> The choice of language when Garmr is described in the *Völuspá* is particularly telling of his appearance and purpose; a repeated strophe in the poem says that he “*bays loudly before Gnipa cave*” before he eventually “*breaks his fetters and freely runs*”.<sup>96</sup> Baying is a verb that is used primarily to describe the howling or high pitched barking of a dog, and to say he breaks his fetters implies that Garmr is, like Fenrir, leashed to one spot so as to contain and control him. Furthermore, in the Eddic poem *Baldrs Draumar*, Óðinn is said to come across a baying Garmr on his journey to Hel.<sup>97</sup> Therefore the choice of language and imagery strongly suggests that Garmr was employed as a guard dog. However once he is free of his leash Garmr becomes a destructive force that kills Týr, thus clearly defining him as an enemy of the Æsir.<sup>98</sup>

It is interesting to note that medieval Iceland had some specific laws that addressed leashed guard dogs, and in some ways reflect Garmr’s situation. The *Grágás* laws, while compiled in the 13th Century, demonstrate some of the legal precedents that would have been present in Early Medieval Iceland. One entry describes how dangerous dogs must be leashed, especially if they are guarding something, but if they get loose and harm someone then depending on the degree of harm the dog and its owner are subject to fines or full outlawry, the latter of which meaning both can be legally killed.<sup>99</sup> *Ragnarök* is regarded as a period of chaos where the norms of society fall apart and everything descends into violence and outlawry; perhaps Garmr’s escape and killing of a god is supposed to be a reflection of this, demonstrating that laws and controls have fallen apart and chaotic forces are loose to reign havoc.

Additionally, Garmr could also be a representation of the inevitability of death. Many ancient cultures had canine or dog-like figures which had chthonic connotations, with many of these examples stemming from Indo-European cultures, such as the three headed Kerberos from ancient

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<sup>95</sup> *Grímnismál* in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Lee M. Hollander, 62.

<sup>96</sup> *Völuspá* in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Lee M. Hollander, 10.

<sup>97</sup> *Baldrs Draumar* in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Lee M. Hollander, 117.

<sup>98</sup> Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse L. Byock, 73.

<sup>99</sup> *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II*, trans. by Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins (Manitoba: The University of Manitoba Press, 2000), 201.

Greek mythology who performed a similar function to Garmr.<sup>100</sup> This demonstrates that a dog being associated with death is a tradition that is well established in Indo-European cultures.<sup>101</sup> Garmr breaking loose and leaving his designated post at the underworld could be seen as symbolic of death being unleashed as the world comes to an end.

That being said, Garmr is somewhat of an outlier for dog representation in Old Norse literature, as most of the examples of dogs are presented in a positive light. For example, dogs were regarded as valuable gifts in Saga literature. The prime example of this is in *Njáls saga*, where a large dog named Sámur, possibly an Irish Wolfhound, is given as a gift by Óláfr to Gunnarr, along with a gold bracelet and fine cloak that once belonged to a king.<sup>102</sup> The fact that Sámur is included alongside such fine artefacts gives an indication to his perceived value as a gift. However what further adds to his value is that fact that Sámur is said to have the approximate intelligence of a human, as well as an uncanny ability to immediately recognise those with ill intent towards his master.<sup>103</sup> Sámur's apparently higher than usual intelligence and loyalty seemingly enables him to form a personal bond with Gunnarr that goes above and beyond what is typically expected of a man and dog, and because of this the two are able to communicate with each other.<sup>104</sup> Sámur is so important to Gunnarr that his enemies realise they have to kill the dog first before they can stand a chance of killing Gunnarr; thus, once they do kill Sámur, Gunnarr's death follows quickly afterwards, although not before Sámur's final yelp alerts Gunnarr and his household to the impending danger.

The representation of Sámur in *Njáls saga* feels almost supernatural. It is worth noting that there are other examples of dogs in the Icelandic sagas being ascribed human-like levels of intelligence.<sup>105</sup> These connotations of human-like intelligence and an uncanny ability to sense impending danger can be seen as further examples of the Old Norse perception of dogs having supernatural abilities. Furthermore, the fact that Sámur is kept outside the home could be seen as a demonstration of the

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<sup>100</sup> Anne-Sofie Gräslund, "Wolves, Serpents, and Birds: Their Symbolic Meaning in Old Norse Belief," in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions: An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere, (Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 124.

<sup>101</sup> Gräslund, "Wolves, Serpents, and Birds: Their Symbolic Meaning in Old Norse Belief", 124.

<sup>102</sup> Sayers, "Gunnarr, His Irish Wolfhound Sámur and the Passing of the Old Heroic Order in *Njáls Saga*." 43.

<sup>103</sup> *The Story of Burnt Njal*, trans. by George W. DaSent (Icelandic Saga Database, 1861), chapter 69.

<sup>104</sup> Evans Tang, *Animal-Human Relationships in Medieval Iceland: From Farm-Settlement to Sagas*. 158.

<sup>105</sup> Bourns, "Becoming-Animal in the Icelandic Sagas", 642.

dog's liminal characterisation; he is literally in-between the hearth, representing life and human civilisation, and the dark night, representing death and unknown danger.

In Medieval Icelandic law codes, there are a number of rulings that give an indication as to how dogs were treated in Medieval Iceland. As has been said before, dogs that cause harm to people or livestock usually have to be put down, lest the owner risks being made an outlaw.<sup>106</sup> In Norway there were fines put in place for killing another person's dog, which varied depending on the type of dog; the penalty for killing someone else's greyhound was six oras (one ora equates to one ounce of silver), one ora for a guard dog, one half-mark for a hunting or cattle dog and twelve ora for killing a lap-dog.<sup>107</sup> It is quite telling that the penalty for killing a lap-dog is so high, even higher than the penalty for killing a grey-hound, a dog that even to this day is valued for its great speed that makes it an ideal sight-hound; the disparity in these fines would suggest that lap-dogs were considered luxury pets that were monetarily valuable, if not practically useful. This is perhaps because creating small dogs required successive generations of selective breeding to produce the desired size, thus the effort required to make them created a higher perceived value.

Medieval laws about dogs can give us some insight into how they were treated in the earlier medieval period, before the introduction of Christianity. Something of great significance is that laws were introduced that banned the consumption of dogs, as well as horses, foxes, cats or any beast with claws, the latter of which encapsulates wolves, bears or any mustelids.<sup>108</sup> Based on the logic that if a law was needed to ban the action, people had been doing the action beforehand, it can be inferred that Early Medieval Icelanders had been eating dogs, and if that were the case it would seem likely that the practice was also present in Scandinavia.

### C) Foxes:

One instance in which dogs, wolves and foxes are all represented in the Old Icelandic literature is the case of *fylgjur*, a kind of spirit that follows an individual through their life and takes the shape of

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<sup>106</sup> *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II*, trans. by Andrew Dennis *et al*, 201-203.

<sup>107</sup> *The Earliest Norwegian Laws, Being the Gulathing Law and Frostathing Law*, trans. Laurence M. Larson, 369-370

<sup>108</sup> *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I*, trans. by Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins (Manitoba: The University of Manitoba Press, 1980), 49.



an animal.<sup>109</sup> The type of animal the *fylgja* took the appearance of was supposed to be a reflection of the person's characteristics; people of wild or dangerous temperament might be represented by wolves or bears, whereas domestic animals like pigs or cattle might represent less important and more passive characters.<sup>110</sup>

However, the reason why the *fylgja* is relevant to foxes is because it is more or less the only instance where foxes make an appearance in the Icelandic sagas that bears any real significance. In more than one saga, there are mentions of sorcerers or wizards who have a fox as their *fylgja*. In *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* the character Þorsteinn has a prophetic dream where he sees a band of twenty-two wolves, eight bears and two vixens attacking him and his brothers; soon after they are attacked by twenty-two warriors, the eight brothers of noble birth leading them and two sorcerers.<sup>111</sup> A similar series of events takes place in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, where the character Atli has a dream where he is attacked by eighteen wolves being led by a vixen; once again, this premonition soon comes true when he is attacked by eighteen men being led by a mage.<sup>112</sup> Evidently in Icelandic sagas there is a connection between foxes, specifically female ones, and practitioners of magic. The reason why it is female foxes could relate to the Old Norse *ergi* taboo, as it was believed that magic and sorcery was associated with female gender, therefore men who practiced magic were considered to be 'unmanly'.<sup>113</sup> There is no mention of the colour of the foxes and no distinction is made as to whether these are red foxes or Arctic foxes, however seeing as the events in these stories took place in Iceland, and were written in Iceland, the latter seems most likely.

## Part 2) Canines in Archaeological Contexts

### A) Wolves:

Wolves are an interesting case, because while the literature and mythology gives the impression of them being prevalent and prominent, wolf bones make up a small fraction of the animal bones found in Early Medieval archaeology, and their presence in burial archaeology from this period is

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<sup>109</sup> William Friesen, "Family Resemblances: Textual Sources of Animal Fylgjur in Icelandic Saga" in *Scandinavian Studies* 87, no. 2 (2015): 225.

<sup>110</sup> Jennebert, "The Heroized Dead: People, animals, and materiality in Scandinavian death rituals, AD 200-1000," 137.

<sup>111</sup> Friesen, "Family Resemblances: Textual Sources of Animal Fylgjur in Icelandic Saga", 267.

<sup>112</sup> Friesen, "Family Resemblances: Textual Sources of Animal Fylgjur in Icelandic Saga", 268. or *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* chapters 20-21 itself (from [https://sagadb.org/havardar\\_saga\\_isfirdings.en](https://sagadb.org/havardar_saga_isfirdings.en))

<sup>113</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 173.

limited to a few wolf-teeth amulets.<sup>114</sup> Most of these amulets come from early Anglo-Saxon burials, although it has been noted that in some of these cases it is difficult to differentiate between wolf and dog canines.<sup>115</sup> However there are definite examples of wolf's teeth amulets, such as one found in an Early Medieval woman's grave in Bilzingsleben, Germany.<sup>116</sup> So far these amulets and pendants are the main kind of evidence for wolves, or at least parts of them, being included in an Early Medieval burial of Old Germanic origin. There is one confirmed example from an Early Medieval cemetery in Bavaria where a wolf was given its own individual burial, although the significance of this singular wolf inhumation is unclear.<sup>117</sup>

Likewise, their appearance in ritual contexts is also rare; Borg, Östergötland, is the one such example of a pre-Christian cultic site where there is evidence of wolves potentially being included in ritual practices.<sup>118</sup> However, it is worth mentioning that only a few bones were identified as potentially being wolves based on their size; the osteological appearance of wolves and dogs is very similar, and in a context such as Borg where dogs are also present it can be difficult to differentiate.<sup>119</sup> Therefore there might not even be any wolf bones at Borg.

However, instead of discounting the wolf, it is worth considering what the absence of osteological evidence in burial and ritual contexts might imply. For example, it has been suggested by Gräslund that perhaps the dog's closeness to the wolf in nature and appearance meant it could have been used as a stand in for the wolf in burials.<sup>120</sup> Using a dog as a proxy wolf might have been done because procuring a wolf corpse would have been a difficult thing, on account of wolves being an elusive and dangerous animal that would take time to track down and kill, and therefore using a dog would have been easier and quicker; such pragmatism is sometimes required in life, especially with

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<sup>114</sup> Aleks Pluskowski, "Where Are the Wolves? Investigating the Scarcity of European Grey Wolf (*Canis Lupus Lupus*) Remains in Medieval Archaeological Contexts and Its Implications," in *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology* 16, no. 4 (2006): 288.

<sup>115</sup> Audrey L. Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones* (Oxford: B.A.R, 1981), 136.

<sup>116</sup> Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones*, 136.

<sup>117</sup> Prummel, "Early Medieval Dog Burials Among The Germanic Tribes," 156.

<sup>118</sup> Nielsen, "Pagan Cultic and Votive Acts at Borg: An Expression of the Central Significance of the Farmstead in the Late Iron Age," 385.

<sup>119</sup> Nielsen, "Pagan Cultic and Votive Acts at Borg: An Expression of the Central Significance of the Farmstead in the Late Iron Age," 385.

<sup>120</sup> Gräslund, "Wolves, Serpents, and Birds: Their Symbolic Meaning in Old Norse Belief", 124.

regards to organising the final rites for a family member. Additionally, it is important to remember that absence of evidence is not always evidence for absence. It is possible that the osteological remains of wolves used in Old Germanic rituals and burials has decayed. This might very well be especially relevant for ritual evidence, as it is believed that the majority of Germanic pagan cult sites were outdoor spaces, such as groves.<sup>121</sup> In some conditions, osteological and biological remains can decompose to the point where there is no visually perceivable trace of the deposit, especially in the temperate climate of North-Western Europe.<sup>122</sup> This increased rate in the decomposition of biological material may explain why there is a dearth in wolf remains in ritual contexts, as well as account for why only a handful of pagan cult sites have been discovered.



Figure 4: Reconstruction of the Sutton Hoo purse lid. Displays multiple human and bestial figures, some of which intertwine. Note the two men flanked on either side by canine looking animals. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

In contrast, there is a great abundance of depictions of wolves on the artwork and artefacts of the Early Medieval Germanic people. As mentioned before, the ubiquitous *Animal Style* of Early Medieval Scandinavia was the most popular style of ornamentation and decoration in the period.<sup>123</sup> Additionally, the style was also prominent amongst continental Germanic peoples, albeit with different influences and regional trends.<sup>124</sup> The art style was employed as surface-covering decoration, which meant it could be adapted to fit onto empty spaces on any object.<sup>125</sup> *Animal Style*

<sup>121</sup> Anders Andrén, “Behind Heathendom: Archaeological Studies of Old Norse Religion,” in *Scottish Archaeological Journal* 27, no. 2 (2005): 108.

<sup>122</sup> Federica Sulas et al., “Revealing the Invisible Dead: Integrated Bio-Geoarchaeological Profiling Exposes Human and Animal Remains in a Seemingly ‘Empty’ Viking-Age Burial,” in *Journal of Archaeological Science* 141 (2022): 2.

<sup>123</sup> Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 61.

<sup>124</sup> Karen Høilund Nielsen, “Animal Style - A Symbol Of Might And Myth: Salin's Style II In A European Context,” in *Acta Archaeologica* 69 (1998): 3.

<sup>125</sup> Nielsen, “Animal Style - A Symbol Of Might And Myth: Salin's Style II In A European Context,” 2.

was abstract in its depictions of man and beast, but the wolf is still recognisable as a popular recurring motif.<sup>126</sup> Given its abundance, and even the opulence of its representation, it has been argued by many that *Animal Style* expresses the importance of animals to Old Germanic cultures, much more so than bone assemblages can.<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, it is theorised that the Old Norse people held shamanistic beliefs, and that by displaying animals such as wolves on their war gear and equipment they might evoke their characteristics.<sup>128</sup>

As can be seen from the example provided (see figure 4) canine figures intertwine with each other and humanoid figures, creating imagery that is suggestive of a connection or closeness between the two. It has been argued by Hedeager and Nielsen that aside from being a visually aesthetic style of ornamentation, *Animal Style* is also an expression of Old Germanic cultural beliefs about the spiritual qualities of certain predatory or dangerous animals, aspects which leading figures and warriors wished to emulate or associate themselves with. In the case of the wolf, its stamina, capability to cover great distances and attack with deliberate intention to kill were regarded as favourable qualities that a warrior should embody.<sup>129</sup>

Similarly, wild animals were also depicted on standing stone monuments.<sup>130</sup> The stone referred to as Hunnestad 3 is one such example of this. Located in Skåne, Sweden, this picture-stone, along with three other rune-stones, is all that remains of what was once a monumental site consisting of eight standing stones.<sup>131</sup> What makes Hunnestad 3 particularly interesting is the scene it depicts; a person in a long tunic with a snake tongue astride a wolf, with serpents in each hand, one of which seems to loop around the wolf's jaws (see figure 5). The image of this wolf-rider has been connected to *Gylfaginning's* description of Hyrrokinn, a powerful jötunn woman who was present at Baldr's

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<sup>126</sup> Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 68.

<sup>127</sup> Julie M. Bond and Fay L. Worley, "Companions in Death: The Roles of Animals in Anglo-Saxon and Viking Cremation Rituals in Britain," in *The Social Archaeology of Funerary Remains* (2006): 89.

<sup>128</sup> Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 98.

<sup>129</sup> Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 90.

<sup>130</sup> Jennbert, "The Heroized Dead: People, animals, and materiality in Scandinavian death rituals, AD 200-1000," 137.

<sup>131</sup> Anders Hultgård, *The End of the World in Scandinavian Mythology: A Comparative Perspective on Ragnarök*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 167.

funeral and was said to have rode in on a huge wolf, using snakes as reins to control it.<sup>132</sup> The Hunnestad monument was erected around the late 10th Century, a time when power in Scandinavia was becoming more centralised and based around Christian doctrines.<sup>133</sup> The inclusion of Christian imagery alongside Pagan imagery would suggest that the monument as a whole was meant to be a hybridisation of the two cultures, possibly to promote unity between the two.<sup>134</sup> It is therefore arguable that Hunnestad 3 genuinely depicts a character from Old Germanic mythology.

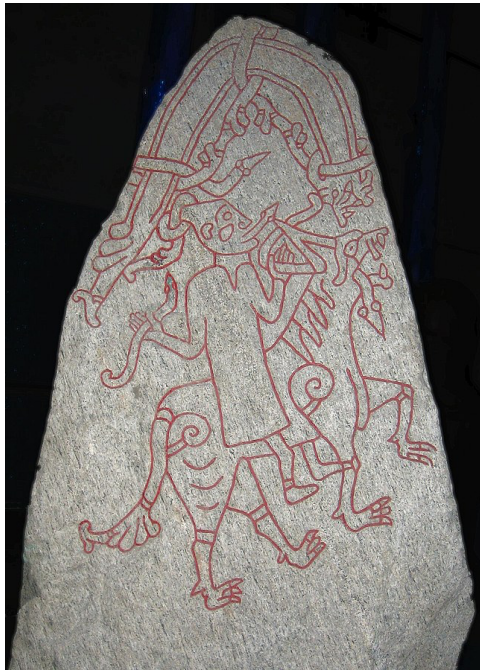


Figure 5: the Hunnestad 3 monument, thought to be depicting Hyrrokinn and her wolf. One of the few stones remaining from what was once a much larger monument. Image from Wikimedia commons.

The significance of this depiction of Hyrrokinn and her wolf is that it demonstrates a link between the material evidence and mythological content of Old Norse culture. The symbolism of Hyrrokinn and her wolf was clearly considered to be of great importance for it to have been included in the Hunnestad monument. It would be hard to prove this point, as most of the stones are now lost, but given that Hyrrokinn acts as pivotal character in Baldr's funeral, it is possible that the other stones depicted other scenes from the same story or from the build up to *Ragnarök*, as Baldr's death was said to be one of its precursors. As for the wolf Hyrrokinn rides, it is possible that the wolf acts as her *gandr*, a magical amplifier for magicians that could take the form of an animal.<sup>135</sup> In Sámi

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<sup>132</sup> Hultgård, *The End of the World in Scandinavian Mythology: A Comparative Perspective on Ragnarök*, 167.

<sup>133</sup> Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 216.

<sup>134</sup> Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 216.

<sup>135</sup> Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 215.

shamanism, wolves are especially associated with sorceresses, often acting as their helpers and companions.<sup>136</sup> Given the recurrent parallels between Old Norse *seiðr* and Sámi shamanism, as well as the associations between the Jotnar and magic that have previously been discussed, it seems that the depiction of Hyrrokin is intended to evoke the imagery of a sorceress. Therefore Hunnestad 3 is a material example that may demonstrate the cultural connection between wolves and sorcery.



Figure 6: the full set of the Torslunda plates. Note the image of the weapon-dancer and the wolf-man in the bottom left corner. Image from Wikimedia commons.

However, perhaps the best known and most intriguing example of artistic renderings of wolves in Old Germanic culture is the depictions of wolf-men; this motif has been seen on a number of significant artefacts from the Migration Period. The Torslunda Plates are a prime example of the wolf-men motif (see figure 6). The Torslunda plates are four press matrices that were found on the Swedish island of Öland; dating to the 7th Century AD, the plates were used to stamp images onto bronze sheets, which would then have been used to decorate helmets.<sup>137</sup> The plates depict a myriad of characters, including an iconic wolf-man motif (see figure 6). The Torslunda wolf-man's distinct appearance sets him apart; armed with a spear in his left hand while he unsheathes his sword with the right, the man appears to be wearing a costume made of a wolf skin, as can be seen by the

<sup>136</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 215.

<sup>137</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 308.

strangely textured tunic that comes down to his knees, with a tail still attached at the back. The wolf's head could be a part of the costume, or it could perhaps represent the man turning into a wolf.<sup>138</sup> If the latter is the case, then a comparison can be drawn between the Toroslunda wolf man and the episode in *Volsunga saga* where Sigmund and Sinfjötli find and use magical wolf pelts that enable them to transform into wolves.<sup>139</sup>

An additional important factor to consider about the Toroslunda wolf-man is the figure he is depicted alongside. Often referred to as the weapon-dancer, the motif depicts a man in motion wearing a distinct horned head-dress, with spears in his hands and a sword hanging from a baldric (see picture). There appears to have been a connection between the weapon-dancer and the wolf-man in Old Germanic artwork; for example, the two appear together on many Migration Period artefacts, such as pressed mounts found at Gutenstein and Obrigheim, Germany.<sup>140</sup> Given the aforementioned connection between Óðinn and men who act like or become wolves, as well as Óðinn's own frenetic and warlike nature, it has been argued that the horned figure is Óðinn.<sup>141</sup> In which case the Toroslunda plate could represent Óðinn leading one of his *ulfheðnar*. This further exemplifies the interweaving associations between wolves, Óðinn and warriors in Old Germanic culture.

#### B) Foxes:

As with the literature, foxes make rare appearances in Old Germanic archaeology. One of these few occurrences is the early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at Spong Hill in Norfolk, and Sancton I in Humberside, Yorkshire. Both Spong Hill and Sancton I are extensive cremation burial sites; Spong Hill contained 2384 burials, while Sancton I contained 300.<sup>142</sup> At Spong Hill, three fox jawbones, along with a potential fourth jaw and a vertebrae, were found in separate cremations.<sup>143</sup> It has been suggested that the jawbones might have been from fox pelts which had the face left intact, which

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<sup>138</sup> Dale, *The Myths and Realities of the Viking "Berserkr"*, 119.

<sup>139</sup> *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. Trans. Jesse L. Byock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 43.

<sup>140</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 308.

<sup>141</sup> Dale, *The Myths and Realities of the Viking "Berserkr"*, 138.

<sup>142</sup> Bond and Worley, "Companions in Death: The Roles of Animals in Anglo-Saxon and Viking Cremation Rituals in Britain," 90.

<sup>143</sup> Bond and Worley, "Companions in Death: The Roles of Animals in Anglo-Saxon and Viking Cremation Rituals in Britain," 95.

would mean a small number of individuals had been cremated with fox pelts.<sup>144</sup> At Sancton I, several fox bones were found in one cremation, suggesting that the whole fox had been included in the funeral pyre, rather than just the skins.<sup>145</sup> Of the five examples from Spong Hill, three were identified as being the cremation burials of young females, while the other two could not be discerned.<sup>146</sup>

It is interesting that these few graves should be the only surviving examples of foxes being involved in Old Germanic pagan burial practices. So far all the evidence suggests that it was only the Anglo-Saxons that settled in England who incorporated foxes into their funerary practices. No examples have been found in Saxony, Anglia, Jutland, or anywhere else in Scandinavia and Germany. Furthermore, the practise eventually ends in England with the advent of Christianity amongst the Anglo-Saxons, along with all cases of cremating or burying individuals with animals in Britain.<sup>147</sup> As far as I am aware, there has no prior research specifically into the significance of foxes in early Anglo-Saxon funerary practices; what follows is my own suggestion based on the evidence we have. The nature and geography of England would have been different to what the emigrating Angles, Saxons and Jutes would have known from their own homelands; entering into a new country might have given rise to new customs that were informed by its characteristics and available resources. Therefore the new incorporation of foxes into a pre-established tradition might reflect the early Anglo-Saxons' desire to find their own place within a new land and establish their own connections to the British Isles.

There is limited evidence for foxes being included in ritual activities. As has been mentioned before, the cult site at Borg, Östergötland, displayed evidence for a multitude of domestic and wild animals, including foxes.<sup>148</sup> However, like the supposed wolf bones found at Borg, the fox remains account for a small fraction of the bone assemblage; instead it seems domesticated animals and deer

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<sup>144</sup> Julie M. Bond, "Burnt Offerings: Animal Bone in Anglo-Saxon Cremations." *World Archaeology* 28, no. 1 (1996): 84.

<sup>145</sup> Bond and Worley, "Companions in Death: The Roles of Animals in Anglo-Saxon and Viking Cremation Rituals in Britain," 95.

<sup>146</sup> Bond and Worley, "Companions in Death: The Roles of Animals in Anglo-Saxon and Viking Cremation Rituals in Britain," 95.

<sup>147</sup> Bond and Worley, "Companions in Death: The Roles of Animals in Anglo-Saxon and Viking Cremation Rituals in Britain," 90.

<sup>148</sup> Nielsen, "Pagan Cultic and Votive Acts at Borg: An Expression of the Central Significance of the Farmstead in the Late Iron Age," 385.



were the ones predominantly being sacrificed.<sup>149</sup> Similar patterns are seen at other cult sites, such as at Frösö, Jämtland, where there is only one example of a canine sacrifice, a dog, and most of the sacrificed animals were either domesticated livestock or wild game, which quite incredibly included at least seven bears.<sup>150</sup> Additionally, of the sacrificed domestic animals at Frösö, most of them were livestock kept and slaughtered for meat.<sup>151</sup>

### C) Dogs:

In contrast to their wild counterparts, there is a plethora of archaeological evidence for domestic dogs being included in ritual and burial practices throughout the Early Middle Ages. A study by Wiestke Prummel in 1992 examined 108 European cemeteries dating to the 5th to 11th Century, and found a total number of 271 graves containing dogs, 185 of which were located in Northern Europe.<sup>152</sup> The other examples from the British Isles and continental Europe were connected to migrating Germanic tribes, such as the Anglo-Saxons, Franks, Lombards and Alamans.<sup>153</sup> The long duration of the practice of including dogs in graves among the various Germanic peoples that spread out across Europe gives a strong indication as to how deeply ingrained this cultural phenomena was.

Nowhere is the Old Norse affinity for hounds better demonstrated than at the Vendel and Valsgärde cemeteries. A study by Christopher Nichols found that 12 out of the 21 Vendel Period and Viking Age graves from Valsgärde cemetery contained dogs.<sup>154</sup> With some of these graves containing multiple dogs, or at least parts of dogs, the sum total comes to 20 dogs.<sup>155</sup> Ten of these dog skeletons were well enough intact that their height could still be measured, thus it was found that

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<sup>149</sup> Nielsen, "Pagan Cultic and Votive Acts at Borg: An Expression of the Central Significance of the Farmstead in the Late Iron Age," 385.

<sup>150</sup> Ola Magnell and Elisabeth Iregren, "Veitstu Hvé Blóta Skal? The Old Norse Blót in the Light of Osteological Remains from Frösö Church, Jämtland, Sweden." *Current Swedish Archaeology* 18, no. 1 (2021): 228.

<sup>151</sup> Magnell and Iregren, "Veitstu Hvé Blóta Skal? The Old Norse Blót in the Light of Osteological Remains from Frösö Church, Jämtland, Sweden," 233.

<sup>152</sup> Prummel, "Early Medieval Dog Burials Among The Germanic Tribes," 134-135.

<sup>153</sup> Prummel, "Early Medieval Dog Burials Among The Germanic Tribes," 137.

<sup>154</sup> Nichols, "Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgärde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction," 1.

<sup>155</sup> Nichols, "Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgärde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction," 5.

seven of these dogs had been large breeds standing at 60-69 cm tall at the withers, while the rest were more medium sized specimens around 50 cm tall.<sup>156</sup> Given their size, Nichols concludes that the dogs were most likely *sight-hounds* or *mastiffs*.<sup>157</sup> While Nichols has not done in-depth analysis of the size and morphology of the dogs at Vendel cemetery, he does make note of the fact that they displayed a similar range of size to the dogs at Valsgärde.<sup>158</sup> Fifteen dogs were found in seven of the Migration Period ship-burials at Vendel, alongside a myriad of other animals and impressive artefacts that testified to the status of the men interred.<sup>159</sup>

Aside from the dogs, it cannot be understated just how opulent and impressive the ship burials at Vendel and Valsgärde are. They have been considered archetypal examples of the elite ship burials, especially for men of a particular status.<sup>160</sup> Other animals in the graves included horses, cattle, goats or sheep, fowl, and even birds of prey such as goshawks and owls.<sup>161</sup> The graves also included rare glassware, cauldrons, combs, scissors, saddles, swords, and the finest and most ornate examples of pre-Viking Age helmets to be found in Scandinavia.<sup>162</sup> Given the striking similarities between the design and grave goods of Vendel and Valsgärde cemeteries, Nichols suggests that the two might have been connected.<sup>163</sup> Furthermore, Nichols also highlights their proximity to Gamla Uppsala, a place that at the time was home to a powerful magnate centre, which might indicate that the cemeteries were used as a shared site by the powerful families and clans that operated in the area.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Nichols, "Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgärde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction," 4-5.

<sup>157</sup> Nichols, "Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgärde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction," 5.

<sup>158</sup> Nichols, "Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgärde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction," 7.

<sup>159</sup> Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 158-161.

<sup>160</sup> Ing-Marie Back Danielsson. "Sense And Sensibility: Masking Practices In Late Iron Age Boat-Graves". *Making Sense Of Things: Archaeologies Of Sensory Perception* (2010): 122.

<sup>161</sup> Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 158-161

<sup>162</sup> Danielsson, "Sense And Sensibility: Masking Practices In Late Iron Age Boat-Graves," 122.

<sup>163</sup> Nichols, "Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgärde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction," 8.

<sup>164</sup> Nichols, "Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgärde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction," 8.

The trend of burying significant people and dogs in extravagant ship burials continues into the Viking Age. The famous Gokstad Ship burial contained the remains of six dogs that had been killed alongside twelve horses and included in the ship-burial of an elite Viking Age man from Vestfold, Norway.<sup>165</sup> On a smaller scale, a Viking Age cemetery at Dysnes, in northern Iceland's Eyjafjörður, a boat measuring roughly 6.5m long and 1.5m wide was found to contain the remains of a middle-aged man, along with a shield and a dog, or at least its skull, which was placed at his feet.<sup>166</sup> This burial demonstrates that the funerary trend of burying men with dogs and war gear in boats continued up to the colonisation of Iceland.

Prummel found in her study that there were many more examples of dogs being buried with men than with women, with three quarters of the Northern European examples being male graves.<sup>167</sup> As such, Prummel advocates the view that the inclusion of dogs in burials was predominantly a male orientated trend that was intended to display wealth and status.<sup>168</sup> Jennbert similarly argues that dogs in graves can be symbolic of Early Medieval masculine ideals revolving around combat and hunting.<sup>169</sup> Nichols also advocates the view that the specialised hunting hounds at Valsgärde and Vendel could have been status symbols.<sup>170</sup> However there are plenty of examples of dogs being included in the graves of women. Perhaps the most famous example of a Viking Age ship burial is the Oseberg ship; this extremely opulent 9th Century burial was dedicated to two women of apparently great status.<sup>171</sup> Alongside fifteen horses and two decapitated cattle, six dogs were included in the burial, along with the chains and collars that would have leashed them in life.<sup>172</sup> It is also worth mentioning that some of the dogs were decapitated, and their heads had been placed in places that were seemingly significant, such as right at the front of the ship.<sup>173</sup> This positioning

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<sup>165</sup> Price, "Passing into Poetry: Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology," 135.

<sup>166</sup> Hildur Gestsdóttir, Guðrún Alda Gísladóttir, Lísabet Guðmundsdóttir, Howell M Roberts, Mjöll Snæsdóttir, and Orri Vésteinsson, "New Discoveries: Dysnes.," *ResearchGate* (2017), 97.

<sup>167</sup> Prummel, "Early Medieval Dog Burials Among The Germanic Tribes," 157.

<sup>168</sup> Prummel, "Early Medieval Dog Burials Among The Germanic Tribes," 157.

<sup>169</sup> Jennbert, "The Heroized Dead: People, animals, and materiality in Scandinavian death rituals, AD 200-1000," 136.

<sup>170</sup> Nichols, "Domestic Dog Skeletons at Valsgärde Cemetery, Uppland, Sweden: Quantification and Morphological Reconstruction," 7.

<sup>171</sup> Gräslund, "Dogs in Graves - a Question of Symbolism?" 169.

<sup>172</sup> Price, "Passing into Poetry: Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology," 135.

<sup>173</sup> Gräslund, "Dogs in Graves - a Question of Symbolism?" 169.

could perhaps relate to some idea of the dog guiding or leading the ship. In any case, the Oseberg Ship burial demonstrates that it was a rite not completely reserved for men alone; therefore it would seem that grand ship burials had more to do with status and leadership, rather than gender.

A smaller example, and yet still no less intriguing, is the Kaupang boat burial. What makes Kaupang so interesting is that it was an inhumation for multiple people; a man, a middle-aged woman with an infant, and another woman placed as if she were sat at the stern of the ship next to the steering-oar.<sup>174</sup> In keeping with the grave goods that can be expected from standard Viking Age pagan burials, the burial also contained a horse and a decapitated dog, the latter of which was placed in close proximity to the woman sitting at the stern; the dog's severed head had been placed in a bronze bowl laying on her lap.<sup>175</sup> Also besides the woman was an iron staff, which was pinned beneath a stone.<sup>176</sup> The iron staff, the special bowl and the strange nature of her placement within this multi-person burial suggests that this woman could have been a *völva*, a seeress and sorcerer in Old Norse culture.<sup>177</sup> Given their special placement at the stern, it could be argued that the *völva* and the dog were meant to represent the ship being steered, or guided, towards the afterlife. A similar case that would support this is an example of a woman's boat grave from Old Uppsala, where a dog was placed at the prow of the boat and facing outwards, as if it were guiding it.<sup>178</sup>

However, there are also instances of dogs being buried without a human companion. 21% of the dog burials that Prummel analysed in her 1992 article were of dogs buried alone.<sup>179</sup> One example of this is grave 29 at Valsgårde cemetery, where two elderly dogs with elaborate bronze collars were found buried together, with no human bones or grave goods being present, which suggests these dogs were given their own dedicated burial after a long life of service and companionship.<sup>180</sup> Another example was found in Northern Sjælland, Denmark, where a dog from the Vendel Period

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<sup>174</sup> Price, "Passing into Poetry: Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology," 127-129.

<sup>175</sup> Price, "Passing into Poetry: Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology," 129.

<sup>176</sup> Price, "Passing into Poetry: Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology," 129.

<sup>177</sup> Price, "Passing into Poetry: Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology," 130.

<sup>178</sup> Cousen, "Hounds of Hel: How Did the Mythological Significance of Viking Age Dogs Affect their Social Position?" 161.

<sup>179</sup> Prummel, "Early Medieval Dog Burials Among The Germanic Tribes," 139.

<sup>180</sup> Cousen, "Hounds of Hel: How Did the Mythological Significance of Viking Age Dogs Affect their Social Position?" 159.

was buried with a pig skull and an antique pot from the Late Roman Iron Age, which gives credence to the possibility that this dog was given grave goods as part of a ritual.<sup>181</sup> However, one of the most striking examples of an Old Germanic dog burial comes from 1st Century Frisia, where a medium sized female dog was buried in a *terp*, a man-made mound that Early Medieval Frisians built their houses on.<sup>182</sup> What makes this dog burial stand out is the fact that human bones were found in her abdomen.<sup>183</sup> It has been suggested that before its death this dog was used for for human excarnation, the process by which flesh and organs are removed from a human skeleton by leaving it exposed for animals to feed upon.<sup>184</sup> The evidence for Iron Age Frisians actively using a dog for part of their death rituals demonstrates yet another instance of an Old Germanic culture associating dogs with death. Additionally, the intentional burying of the same dog in a man-made structure which would go on to be the basis of a community should not be discounted as something insignificant; perhaps the dog represented renewal and life after death, maybe it was buried in the *terp* as a way of binding ancestors or their blessings to the new living space.

Dogs also appear more often in ritual settings as well. Unlike foxes and wolves, dogs are more obviously and numerous present at the Borg cult site, and also show signs of butchery which adds credence to the theory that they were ritually sacrificed and consumed.<sup>185</sup> The aforementioned example at Frösö is another case of a dog being present at a Pagan cult site, even if it is only the one.<sup>186</sup> Another example has been found on the Danish isle of Fyn, near a place called Jyllandsvej, where a large pit containing the remains of two horses and four dogs has been excavated.<sup>187</sup> However, one particularly significant site is evidence for a cult house at Uppåkra, in Southern Sweden; there is an abundance of ritual and cultic activity surrounding this building, which saw

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<sup>181</sup> Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 108.

<sup>182</sup> Annet Nieuwhof, "Of dogs and man: Finds from the *terp* region of the northern Netherlands in the pre-Roman and Roman Iron Age," in *A Bouquet of Archaeozoological Studies: Essays in honour of Wietske Prummel* (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing & Groningen University Library, 2012): 109.

<sup>183</sup> Nieuwhof, "Of dogs and man: Finds from the *terp* region of the northern Netherlands in the pre-Roman and Roman Iron Age," 110.

<sup>184</sup> Nieuwhof, "Of dogs and man: Finds from the *terp* region of the northern Netherlands in the pre-Roman and Roman Iron Age," 112.

<sup>185</sup> Nielsen, "Pagan Cultic and Votive Acts at Borg: An Expression of the Central Significance of the Farmstead in the Late Iron Age," 385.

<sup>186</sup> Magnell and Iregren, "Veitstu Hvé Blóta Skal? The Old Norse Blót in the Light of Osteological Remains from Frösö Church, Jämtland, Sweden," 228.

<sup>187</sup> Mogens Bo Henriksen, "Kystens Kultpladser - Vikingernes Rituelle Aktiviteter Ved Havet." *Odense City Museum* (2015): 216.

continued use throughout most of the Nordic Iron Age, including the sacrificing of animals.<sup>188</sup> Most prevalent of these animals are cattle, sheep and pigs, however there are examples of dogs in the bone assemblages; seven of these dog bone fragments were dated to around AD 1-400, while another seven were from AD 400-800.<sup>189</sup> It would seem then that while dog sacrifices were a cultic practice in Early Medieval Scandinavia, their prevalence was not consistent throughout, as shown by the regional variations.

There are examples of dogs being killed and eaten outside of Scandinavia. Pre-Roman and Roman Iron Age Frisians appear to have eaten dogs for ritual purposes as well. One example of this was found at Wierum, on the Netherlands' North coast, where a dog skeleton exhibiting signs of butchery was found.<sup>190</sup> It has been interpreted that the dog had been killed and consumed by humans, then the remains were deposited in the earth with some care as part of a ritual.<sup>191</sup> Given that there is no evidence for widespread dog consumption throughout Frisia, it would seem most likely that this was a ritual practice that was not carried out on a regular basis.<sup>192</sup>

With regards to their representation in art and artefacts, the identification of dogs can be somewhat difficult; the abstract nature of Old Germanic and Nordic art forms makes it difficult to differentiate between wolves and dogs. However there is one Old Germanic art motif that clearly represents dogs: depictions of hunting scenes (see figure 7). One of the earliest examples of this is the Mjörbro stone from Uppland, Sweden.<sup>193</sup> The stone was raised around AD 500 near Uppsala, and depicts a man on horseback holding a shield in his left hand and a weapon, presumably a sword, in his right, while two dogs flank the horse and rider.<sup>194</sup> Also from Uppland, but dated to the latter half of the Viking Age, the reconstructed Böksta stone depicts a hunter bearing a spear on horseback with two

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<sup>188</sup> Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 96.

<sup>189</sup> Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 98.

<sup>190</sup> Nieuwhof, "Of dogs and man: Finds from the terp region of the northern Netherlands in the pre- Roman and Roman Iron Age," 111.

<sup>191</sup> Nieuwhof, "Of dogs and man: Finds from the terp region of the northern Netherlands in the pre- Roman and Roman Iron Age," 111.

<sup>192</sup> Nieuwhof, "Of dogs and man: Finds from the terp region of the northern Netherlands in the pre- Roman and Roman Iron Age," 111.

<sup>193</sup> Gräslund, "Dogs in Graves - a Question of Symbolism?" 169.

<sup>194</sup> Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 207.

birds and two hounds attacking a deer, or an elk.<sup>195</sup> Some of the Gotlandic picture-stones also depict similar images of a person on horseback, armed and bearing a shield, with a dog accompanying them.<sup>196</sup>



Figure 7: Left to right: the Möjbro stone, the Hunninge Stone from Gotland, and the Böksta stone. Each displays the rider and hound motif, and date from before and during the Viking Age. One could argue they show the evolution of the motif and Old Norse artistic style.

Images from Wikimedia commons.

There are a few ways in which the hunting hounds motif can be interpreted. Kristina Jennbert compares the Möjbro stone's design to continental Old Germanic artworks, such as bracteate, and the late-Roman imagery that influenced them.<sup>197</sup> Alternatively, one can draw a connection between these scenes and elite graves, such as the ones at Vendel and Valsgärde; long-legged hunting dogs, horses, weapons and even evidence of falconry were all found in the burials of elite and wealthy men, suggesting that coursing was a popular past time of theirs, and it was strongly associated with their societal status and lifestyle.<sup>198</sup> Thus the hunting scenes might be a reflection of this blood sport that only the distinguished few could enjoy, and perhaps the same men of prestige who could afford

<sup>195</sup> Gräslund, "Dogs in Graves - a Question of Symbolism?" 169.

<sup>196</sup> Gräslund, "Dogs in graves – a question of symbolism?" 169.

<sup>197</sup> Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 207.

<sup>198</sup> Jennbert, "The Heroized Dead: People, animals, and materiality in Scandinavian death rituals, AD 200-1000," 136.

fine falcons, horses and hounds were also the ones who could afford to commission monuments to demonstrate their wealth.

Alternatively the hunting hounds motif could have mythological connotations. As has been highlighted in the literary analysis, Óðinn had two wolves, Geri and Freki, that acted as if they were his dogs and accompanied him and Sleipnir on journeys. As can be seen on the Mjöbro and Böksta stones, the hunting scene sometimes depicts two dogs accompanying the rider. Additionally, Gräslund points out the two birds depicted on the Böksta stone, one of which is actually pecking at the deer's eyes, might not be falcons or hawks, but could instead represent Óðinn's raven Hugin and Munin.<sup>199</sup> It is therefore arguable that the motif represents Óðinn with his wolf-dogs

### Part 3) The Combined Analysis

Taking together all the information that has been put forward, it can be seen that there are a range of ways in which wolves, dogs and foxes were perceived in Old Germanic culture.

The wolf encapsulated a range of perceptions and emotions in Old Germanic culture. The negative aspects of the wolf as a wild predator made them monstrous in the Old Germanic imagination; they were dangerous, they were allied with sorcerers and trolls, and the foremost wolves were capable of killing gods and destroying the word. However, this fear of the wild also came with a level of respect, which prompted a cultural appropriation of the wolves predatory prowess. As can be seen by the wolf-warrior archetype, young men sought to emulate wolves, going so far as to wear wolf skins and incorporate wolf cognates into their naming system. However as the Germanic and Nordic world became more centralised, there was no room anymore for wild roving warriors that pretended to be animals in feudal society. In the instances where they were sworn in service to a king, or at least someone who could control them, they were regarded in a positive, and almost heroic, light. However, for the most part, wolf-warriors became villains in Medieval stories, as seen in Icelandic sagas where they so often juxtapose with the Christian society around them.

Well before the Early Middle Ages and the formation of the various Old Germanic cultural groups, wolves had already been given an association with warriors by early Indo-European people.<sup>200</sup> This

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<sup>199</sup> Gräslund, "Dogs in graves – a question of symbolism?" 169.

<sup>200</sup> West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, 448-449.



gave rise the concepts like the *ulfheðnar* in the mythos and warrior culture. Building upon this association, wolves became a recurrent symbol in the ornaments and war gear that warriors wore, as well as many male names having the wolf cognate (*ulf*) incorporated into their name.

However alongside this warrior connection and reverence there was also a prevalent sense of fear that manifested itself quite clearly in Old Norse literature. In these instances the wolf's destructive and disruptive predatory qualities were exaggerated to the point where they became associated with the apocalypse and the *jötnar*, who are manifestations of external natural threats that endanger society. If we are to understand that mythologies are inflated and intensified reflections of the society that produces them, then that would indicate that amongst Old Germanic cultures the fear of wolves as an external threat never went away, regardless of how they might have been glorified by warriors.

By contrast, it would appear that Old Germanic perceptions of dogs seemed to have worked in the other direction; despite being born within human environments and growing up as companions or working animals, aspects of the nature of dogs were apparently feared. Medieval laws and Old Norse poetry and mythology demonstrate that it was considered important to keep dogs under control and leashed; this is further reflected by the fact that many dog burials also contained leashes and collars. In the instances where dogs do get loose and cause harm, they are then perceived and treated like wolves, as can be seen by Garmr killing Týr and thereby becoming like Fenrir, as well as the legal precedents to kill a dangerous dog as if it were a wild animal. It would seem then that while the dog stood between humans and the wild, there was room for them to move closer to one or the other.

Burial archaeology best demonstrates how the Old Germanic perception of dogs being chthonic creatures evolved from this liminal status. We see that in early Old Germanic contexts, such as the dogs found in Frisia, that dogs sometimes scavenged on dead humans, either by opportunity or by encouragement. It is not hard to envisage that a people seeing a certain kind of animal living on the outskirts of their settlement eating the dead would ascribe connotations of death to those same animals. As time went on, a variety of mortuary rituals evolved based on this connection, including burying people with dogs to act as guides to the afterlife. This is especially significant in cases like the Vendel and Valsgärde cemeteries, or the Oseberg burial, where a ship or boat is included with horses and dogs, which invokes imagery of the deceased departing on a journey with all their world

belongings and chthonic animals to help them on their way. As has been shown, this tradition continues well into the Viking Age, and the fact that later examples are not furnished to the same level of opulence but retain the dogs and horses indicates that the inclusion of these animals went beyond mere expressions of wealth.

It should also be noted, and perhaps further explored in the future, that the dog and horse combination that appears so often could perhaps reflect that horses were also associated with journeying to the afterlife. In the Eddic poem *Baldrs draumar* the horse Sleipnir is used by Óðinn to journey to the underworld, and along the way they encounter Garmr at his post.<sup>201</sup> Similarly, Óðinn's son Hermóðr also uses Sleipnir to journey to Hel in *Gylfaginning*.<sup>202</sup> The use of the horse Sleipnir in the mythology to cross over to the afterlife, as well as using it to evade the hound at the entrance, demonstrates that horses were considered to have chthonic connotations similar to dogs, and their repeated appearance alongside each other further demonstrates this perception amongst Old Germanic culture.

By contrast, foxes seem to have no place in the interlinked dynamic of wolves and dogs. As has been demonstrated in chapter 6, foxes do not appear to have any significance in the preserved mythology or poetry, nor do they play any major roles. No warriors emulated any aspects of the fox, no significant names contained the Old Germanic word for fox as a cognate, and there are no recognisable instances of foxes being rendered in art form.

The only instance where foxes do appear with some significance is as the *fylgja* of sorcerers in Old Icelandic sagas. One could argue that this could be a parallel of wolves being associated with shamanism and *jötnar*. However there is a more likely, and unfortunately disappointing, explanation for the context in which these foxes appear. Around the same time that the Icelandic sagas were written a new literary character emerged from continental Europe; Reinaert the Fox.<sup>203</sup> Presented as a charlatan who gets himself in and out of various adventures, Reinaert was a popular character in Medieval German, Dutch and French courtly literature that created a new convention of foxes being

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<sup>201</sup> *Baldrs Draumar* in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. by Lee M. Hollander, 117.

<sup>202</sup> Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse L. Byock, 68.

<sup>203</sup> Tina Hamrin-Dahl, "What shall we do with Reinaert the Fox?" in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions: An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere, (Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 358.

cunning.<sup>204</sup> It is not beyond the realms of possibility that this character was heard of in Iceland, and influenced the saga writers who implemented the new conceptualisation of foxes being mischievous self-serving tricksters as a representation of the perceived nature of magicians. Additionally, the absence of foxes in the material culture gives further credence to the idea that Old Germanic peoples did not perceive foxes to have much significance. There is not much in the way of Old Germanic artworks that appear vulpine, their bones do not often appear in ritual contexts, and it is only in the handful of Anglo-Saxon cremation burials at Spong Hill and Sancton I that foxes appear in Old Germanic burial practices, and even then these might have just been included in the funeral pyre because fox furs were considered luxury items.

All this begs the question: was the fox even considered to be remotely related to the wolf or dog by Old Germanic people? While in modern times it is known that these three animals are all from the same mammalian family, in the past animals were most likely categorised differently. The fox's stature, as well as their elusive and almost cautious nature is a stark contrast to that of wolves and dogs, and as such to Early Medieval people they might appear to be vastly distant from each other.

Finally, it can be seen in the evidence addressed in this thesis that a pattern emerges from the Old Germanic pagan cult sites; domestic animals make up the clear majority of the animals that were sacrificed. Pigs, cattle and horses were the most common, these three being the staple meat sources for Early Medieval Germanic and Nordic peoples, while deer and wild fowl are the most commonly found examples of wild animals being sacrificed. If it is to be understood that the animals killed in sacrifices were also meant to be eaten, or at least left to be eaten by the gods, then that might explain why so many of the animals found in ritual contexts were livestock, deer or fowl; even today, these animals are a favoured source of meat. Therefore, based on the lesser prevalence of dogs in these sacrificial bone assemblages, it can be inferred that while dogs were eaten, they were not so commonly exploited as a food source. At all of the cult sites addressed in this thesis there are almost no instances of foxes or wolves appearing; Borg is the only one, and even then the presence of wolves is still unclear. It therefore could be the case that foxes and wolves were not ritually killed and consumed as they were not considered a regular or popular food source.

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<sup>204</sup> Hamrin-Dahl, "What shall we do with Reinaert the Fox?" 358.

It could be the case that the consumptions of dogs was a tradition that was born out of necessity. The previously listed examples of dog consumption were all in Scandinavia; no examples in Central Europe or the British Isles have been found. As has been noted in the previous chapters, dogs were sometimes eaten in time of scarcity. The Scandinavian climate is not always a forgiving one, and times of scarcity would have been common, therefore eating dogs would have had to become necessary for some people to survive. In such instances, the killing and eating of dogs might have been the very thing that saved peoples lives; it could therefore be considered that from these instances of dogs literally being the difference between surviving and dying, the tradition of sacrificing dogs to the gods at cult sites was born. Additionally, this would explain why it became a legal taboo to eat dogs despite the evidence suggesting it was not that common; if the consumption of dogs was ingrained in Old Norse society as a ritual practice, then there would be greater impetus for the now Christianised authorities to clamp down on such practices.

However, the recurring absence of wolves and foxes from *blót* contexts suggests that they were not eaten at all. The presence of the fox at Borg might be explained as a different kind of sacrifice; perhaps even though a fox makes for a poor meal, its fur was still considered valuable enough to be gifted to the gods. As mentioned before, the wolves at Borg might not even be wolves; if they are, then perhaps they too were meant to be a gift of fur, or perhaps the effort it takes to hunt a wolf was meant to be a demonstration of devotion to the gods.

## Chapter 7 - Conclusion:

To conclude, from the perspective of Old Germanic cultures, dogs and wolves can be understood as existing on a spectrum; the wolf stood at one end, representing the wild, while humans stood at the other, representing safety and order, and dogs were placed in between in a liminal space. However their places on this spectrum were not fixed. We see instances of dogs becoming wild, humans acting like animals, animals having a human-like level of intelligence and even wolves that are tamed, or else act as representations of people. The material and textual evidence creates a picture where wolves, dogs and humans were interlinked by deep rooted cultural traditions.

The analysis in chapter 6, part 1A, shows that the significance of wolves in Old Germanic cultures originates from ancient Indo-European warrior rites and cult conventions that evolved and continued well into the Early Middle Ages. Alongside this, the dogs in their liminal space were given an association with death and crossing over into the afterlife; this is demonstrated in Old Germanic culture not only by the mythological figure Garmr, but also by the suggested role of dogs in funerary practices. At the same time, the practical uses and significance of dogs evolved. Dogs were utilised for a number of purposes, such as herding, guarding and hunting, which gave rise to different breeds for different applications. Hunting became an elite sport, so great value was placed upon dogs with qualities that made them good hunters, such as long legs, good eyesight, endurance and strength. As seen by the elite cemeteries at Valsgärde and Vendel, dogs of this calibre were present in Scandinavia, but would be killed to be included in burials. Given the extreme opulence of the ship graves, the overriding reason why dogs were included might have been part of an effort to demonstrate the wealth and prestige of the interred individuals. However, there are plenty of other examples of lesser graves from an Old Germanic context where dogs are still included, despite not being so large and impressive. At its core, the dog in the burial trend was more of a spiritual one than a materialistic one, and while these two things can go hand in hand, the former usually trumps the other. The *longue durée* and wide scope of the trend demonstrates its significance as an integral part of Old Germanic cultural burial practices.

Strangely, foxes were apparently not included within this cultural canine model. Foxes do not have the same presence in the mythology as wolves or dogs; there is no eschatological connection, no stories where a fox plays a pivotal or important role. It is not until the High Middle Ages that foxes

begin to gain some significance as anthropomorphised representations of cunning and trickery in literature; any connection between this and Old Germanic culture and paganism is tentative.

In archaeological contexts, the fox is equally underrepresented. What few finds there are would seem to suggest that the primary significance of the fox was that its fur was considered a luxury good. The only apparent examples of foxes being incorporated into burial rituals come from the Early Anglo-Saxon England, where fox bone fragments have been found in cremation burials, indicating that fox pelts were included in funeral pyres. It could be the case that these foxes were incorporated into Anglo-Saxon burial rites as part of a new tradition for people in a new land. However, the occurrences are rare, and it could simply be that the furs were included because they were luxury items.

The reasons why foxes were not perceived to have any cultural or spiritual significance in the same way that wolves and dogs were gives rise to whole host of new questions. Why did a folk belief system that drew so much inspiration from the natural world seemingly neglect an animal that is so distinct in character and appearance? If foxes were not considered to be a part of the same animal family as wolves and dogs, what were they perceived to be? And is it possible that the inclusion of foxes in Anglo-Saxon cremation rites is indicative of a new ritual practice being developed? These are all questions that could be addressed in further papers and research.

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