Sacrifice Without Drama:

A critical evaluation of interpretative frameworks on human sacrifice in the Viking Age.

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Foreword

First, I want to thank Oslo University for being so understanding towards my personal situation, not in the least my supervisor Thora Pettursdottir, Anne Løken, and Ynvild Sotrli. Their support has made it possible to complete this work. Life does not always go the way you expect it to, and sometimes that means adjusting plans and planning on short notice with lasting effects. My MA trajectory has been one of many such adjustments. It is with heavy heart, for example, that I have been regrettably few times on campus and have not thrived in the physical student life which I know Oslo University has to offer, largely due to COVID. Nevertheless, it has been an extremely enriching learning experience and I hope that my thesis will suffice to demonstrate that I understand the ever changing and fascinating field of Viking Age scholarship. In my professional life I now have the privilege of working with the Vikings in their own habitat, meaning out in the field, and thesis represents the latest stage of my baggage to continue that line of work for many years to come. Lastly, but certainly not least, I wish to thank my wife with whom I have spent many hours debating, laughing, and a bit of crying from time to time. I made it in the end.

Summary

The last years have seen a strong rise in the use of the performative ritual framework, in combination with texts from the Norse Corpus, to explain Viking Age archaeological sites, especially burial complexes. Though this new methodology has given shape to very tangible and immersive scenes from the past, the scientific validity of this approach is far from certain. When the performative/textual turn is deconstructed to its individual components, and those are subjected to close examination and criticism, the inherent flaws residing therein become apparent. Even more so when the subject of human sacrifice is concerned. The approach tends to play into tropes, traditions, and trends which post-colonial and critical research has shown are frequent in Viking Age research. Most importantly in this case it contributes to creating a hyperbolized uniqueness of the Viking Age, setting up a synthetic framework which disconnects Scandinavia from developments on the continent in a holistic sense, but instead through multidisciplinary conjecture and myth postulates a Scandinavia of mythicist order. Moreover, the performative ritual approach might work if divorced from its own discipline, Ritual Studies, and placed in an archaeological setting, but Viking Scholarship does not consider the criticism levied against its fundamental assumptions by scholars from that field. When mirrored against Catherine Bells reflections, the performative approach is shown to be a flawed method for holistically appreciating ritual. These issues are most visible in the study when it comes to the study of human sacrifice. Here the performative and textual approach strongly stimulate narratives of indeed cinematic excitement and bloodshed that fundamentally do not really explain the human condition in Viking Age Scandinavia but rather obscure our lack of understanding with storytelling. These issues tend to be exacerbated by the heavy reliance on textual sources which, despite their well-known and often discussed fundamental issues, are ubiquitously used by archaeologists to interpret artefacts and sites. Together these observations lay bare the fundamental problems of the performative/textual approach. There are potentially other ways to appreciate archaeological material more evenly. By taking for example at a practical approach to ritual theory and archaeology the dialogue can be shifted to a more objective sort. When placed within the broad framework of research into human sacrifice, Viking Age burial rites, and ritual theory, one can clear the field of human surficial studies from the need for performance and texts as to have a more balance discussion about topics which inherently are in no need of even more drama.

1. Introduction

The following pages treat one of the most intriguing, morbid, and yet human phenomenon imaginable, human sacrifice. The idea of killing another human is, rightly so, one which the vast majority of people regard with deep founded disapproval or recoil from altogether. The notion of killing a human to achieve some supranatural goal is very alien, especially to modern audiences. In the 21st century the idea of human sacrifice conjures up horribly vivid scenes of slaughter, pumping hearts being ripped out of bodies, screams, and more such gory scenes. A lot of that imagery has its roots firmly planted in the reality created by the likes of Hollywood, popular novels, and comic books. Damsels in distress scream their lungs out whilst evil and ominous figures take to the stage to fulfill their horrible deeds. Especially movies like Indiana Jones and the temple of doom must have instilled a sense of familiarity with the subject in generations of people, including a visual framework within which human sacrifice can be placed. In recent year the resurgence of Vikings in popular culture has ensured that human sacrifice has once again taken to the big screen, now specifically in context of the Early Medieval Scandinavians, with beards and all. So how much is fact, and how much fiction?

Human sacrifice has for a very long time been part of the academic Viking Age discourse. From its earliest days many primary sources, from bog bodies to Arabic descriptions, have inserted the practice in one way or another in ongoing academic dialogues. However, for all its longevity as a point of discussion, it has ever been an elusive topic too. From being rejected, ignored, or overemphasized, human sacrifice seems to carry along heated debates and a lot of uncertainty.

In recent years, through the lens of ritual performance theory and written sources, human sacrifice in the Viking Age has been brought to life as never before. As it turns out, when one examines the state of that discourse on human sacrifice is in the Viking Age today, the narratives and scenes to be found sometimes differ surprisingly little from the ones on the silver screen. Angels of Death, violent gods, and obscure rites are at the order of the day. Some of the descriptions and hypothesized rituals emerging from this performative turn, give Indiana Jones and the temple of Doom a run for its money. One is quite literally encouraged to smell

and see the blood and guts dripping of the side of a ship ready to be set on fire. As it turns out, human sacrifice is often a very dramatic affair, both in the popular imagination and Academica

However, the following pages would like to reach behind the screams, slaughter, and smells. By doing so a possibly even more frighting vision of human sacrifice in the Viking Age emerges. It is a vision of mundanity and practicality rather than performativity. The aim of this work is to examine the popular performative/textual approach to ritual human sacrifice in Viking Age scholarship and determine its validity as a methodology, whilst postulating alternative approaches to understand this vibrant subject matter. All methodologies which rise in popularity need to be subjected to continuous scrutiny, and this performative approach is no exception. The inevitable results this pursuit is that some parts of this thesis might come across as somewhat polemic in nature. Nevertheless, this is necessary for it to improve and stay relevant in an ever-changing academic field, constructive criticism is the key to furthering our knowledge.

Throughout this thesis I will try to show that the performative/textual approach runs the risk to connect to and support well-known paradigmatic problems that can be found throughout Viking Age scholarship. Furthermore, I will aim to shift the dialogue surrounding ritual and archaeology from a performance oriented one to a dressed down practically ritual one in line with Catherine Bell's observations and post-colonial criticism. Via this process I will finally propose a step-by-step plan which may be used as a tool to examine human sacrifice not only as an exciting, visually stimulant, and divergent practice, but rather as something humans have always done and despite all its morbidity is as normal as death itself.

Before I do so, however, I will carefully go over the concurrent state Viking scholarship to place my work into perspective. I will draw on post-colonial criticism to form a backdrop for the conclusions. That chapter will also deal with the combination of using text to interpret archaeology and the inherent risks in doing so. Next up I present an in-depth examination of the philosophical implications of the performative theory, so popularized in recent years. I will closely examine what it actually implies by placing its observations within the framework of a performance. Then it is time to look at the historical background and previous scholarship which has significance for my conclusions. That means in chapter 3 I discuss Viking Age burial practices, human sacrifice in global perspective, and humans sacrifice in the Viking proper. In chapter 4 I combine all the previous to make a final critique of the performative/textual

approach. That is then followed by the presentation of another methodological framework which relies on the notion of ritual practice and the redemptive hegemony. In the final chapter, that new framework is then used to examine a Viking Age burial complex from the 1953 excavations of Kaupang in order to demonstrate how an alternative dialogue surrounding human sacrifice might be formulated.

1.2 Methodology

This thesis is examining methodological approaches for understanding human sacrifice in the Viking Age. That is a broad topic and therefore I have broken down the leading research questions into two separate ones, all aimed at providing the basis of a unified conclusion. The two leading questions are:

- What are the risks of using the popular performative/textual approach to ritual?
- What might an alternative method for examining human sacrifice look like?

A note on multidisciplinary approaches

To answer these questions this thesis utilizes a multidisciplinary approach. This is necessary because the performative theory is inherently a multidisciplinary method. To examine it therefore, one needs to break down all its components and treat them independently before stating a final critique. However, since the performance theory is mostly applied to archaeological interpretation, I write this thesis from a perspective with that field in mind. Therefore, archaeology will ever have the focus, but disciplinary cross pollination, or comparison, will occur when needed. I will use archaeological, historical, ritual theoretical, and post-colonial approaches. The main focus will be mortuary practices and their archaeological remains. The different approaches I will now briefly explain by explaining the different chapters.

Creating a critical Framework

In contemporary discussion about the Viking Age, it is necessary to consider the long and multicomplex history of the topic itself. This means that I found it necessary to frame my research within the context of post-colonial considerations, especially since the ritual subject matter is often easily linked to the paradigmatic troubles permeating in Viking Age research.

To create this framework, I have relied on reviewing secondary literature, critical heritage theory, and Fredrik Svanberg's book Decolonizing the Viking Age (Swanberg 2003).

Reviewing text and archaeology

The discussion surrounding the interplay between textual sources and archaeology in Viking Age scholarship is one with a long history. It is often a crucial component of performative approaches to ritual. Therefore, I have critically examined this method in some detail. This I did by taking a close look at articles written by two well established and prominent researchers, namely Neil Price and Margaret Clunie Ross, which represents in a sense a microcosm of the debate. Furthermore, I have added critical reviews from secondary works to bolster my observations.

Reviewing performance theory

The increasing usage of the performance theory in Viking Age scholarship is at the core of this work. To examine the performance theory separately I have made use of works stemming from ritual studies. It is crucial to appreciate such theories not only from a Viking Age historiographical or archaeological perspective, but from a perspective stemming from the field which originated it. The works used to do so come chiefly from Catherine Bell and her practical approach to ritual.

Historical and archaeological background

After having broken down the theoretical components of my two main questions I will end the thesis with a case study for which it is necessary to understand in broad outlines the field of Viking Age burial practices and Human sacrifice. Therefore, I present in this chapter an overview of existing scholarship on a variety of topics, explicating both archaeological and historiographical standpoints.

Formulating a final critique and presenting alternative framework

In this chapter I will combine all the information of previous chapters and formulate my final critique from which I will move on to the presentation of an alternative methodology for approaching human sacrifice in the Viking Age. The critiquing is based on all the aforementioned observations. The alternative approach is likewise derived from all the previous chapters, as well as rooted in a practical approach to ritual theory.

Reviewing the grave at Kaupang:

To test the usefulness and showcase my new framework I will look at primary sources in the form of burials excavated as part of the Kaupung excavation between 1950-157. Specifically, graves belonging to the Bikjholbergene gravesite will be closely examined as they carry associations with human sacrifice. This will result in a final conclusion that highlights the difference my approach has to the performative ones and draws conclusions from these differences. It will highlight how one may shift the tone in dialogue and create space for an honest acknowledgement of the gaps in our knowledge.

2. State of research - Decolonization, Interpretation, and ritual theory

2.1 Breaking snow globes, defining a Viking Age (diaspora).

Before anyone writes about the Viking Age, it has become increasingly important that they define what is meant by using this definition. The necessity of such an elaboration becomes clear when, for example, the depth and breadth of the discussion surrounding the term ‘’Viking’’ is considered, for there are a myriad of explanations readily available. First appearing in the 9th century in English writings it is sometimes regarded as literally meaning something akin to pirate, a man’s name, or indicating a group of people who come from a specific Fjord region, or many more interpretations (Brink 20114-5). Nevertheless, scholars generally seem to agree that the Viking Age is a construct designed by historians and archeologists to indicate a period in between roughly 800 – 1050 CE. during which people from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, ventured forth from the Scandinavian peninsula in at that time unknown numbers to trade, plunder, colonize, explore, and discover vast parts of the known (and unknown) world (Ashby 2015; Barret 2008; Brink 2011; Roesdahl 1987).

This perspective is often further supplemented with traditional dates and events such as the raid on Lindisfarne in 793 or the Battle of Hastings in 1066, marking the earliest and latest instigations of perceived Viking activity in England (Brink 2011). Additionally, one will find a narrative of gradual conversion underpinning contemporary and past Viking research (Winroth 2012, 145-160). By conversion I do not only here refer to an all-encompassing shift in religious dimensions only, going from paganism to dogmatic Christianity, but also the conversion from a ‘’tribal’’ society to what Stefan Brink calls the ‘’Europeanisation of Scandinavia’’ in the seminal work The Viking World (Brink 2011, 4-7). He does still explicitly mention that ‘’the introduction of Christianity into Scandinavia is an obvious end to the Viking Age, a disposition traditionally shared by many Viking Age historians. Often large emphasis is put on the colonizing aspects of the Viking Age. Especially the contemporary British and French regions as Viking diaspora are discussed frequently in this context, from the Carolingian power struggles to the well-known histories of Viking Ireland, York, Danelaw. Of course, one cannot forget Iceland which has enjoyed a heavy focus, not least due to its psotions as “the library of Viking Scandinavia”. Most of the mythical and profane writing with any Viking Age links stems from there (Lönnroth 2011, 304-311).

Despite the apparent disagreements, there thus exists a relatively unified vision of the Viking Age consisting of a broad diaspora instigated by people stemming from Scandinavia who either eventually settled or raided and generally conducted typical Viking behavior until they come to act more like the rest of ‘’Christian’’ Europe. In this standardized approach there is admittedly some room left for earlier dates from 700 CE. onwards, often referring to the vibrant North Sea trading networks of early medieval Europe, but mostly as a staging area for the eventual Viking Age proper (Hansen 2018, 7-15). Broadly speaking, this approach is accepted and utilized by most Viking Age scholars today, either consciously or unconsciously, albeit with perhaps added nuances regarding their own specialties or detailed alteration of the narrative. Usually these hardly change its overall structure. This thesis too does not reject all such common assumptions, outlines, and foundations, of course. However, it does join the rising chorus of voices who critically examine this rather restricted framework in which the Viking Age is studied and placed. It follows in line with the many scholars which are challenging traditional dates, definitions, origins, narratives, social and economic perspectives on the Viking Age itself, as well as the accompanying corpus of scholarly writing (Ashby, S., Coutu, A., & Sindbæk, S. 2015; Croix, S., Neiß, M. & Sindbæk, S. M. 2019; Barret 2007; Gräslund 2008; Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017; IJssennagger-Van Der Pluijm 2019; Price et al. 2019). This is especially salient when considering the topic of this thesis, namely ritual and (human) sacrifice, an area of investigation which naturally possesses a particularly potent grip on the imagination.

These discussions examining traditional perceptions of the Viking Age are of late again growing in number. Gender and identity are a very tangible example of this process as many come to understand and acknowledge that we cannot take our preset conceptions on these matters for granted, for it turns out our interpretations of these fluid and inherently fluctuating concepts are not always rooted in the scientific evidence available but rather the social pre-conditions of our own time and upbringing (Fredriksdottir 2019; Price et all 2019;). Regardless of where one may stand on the ‘’Shieldmaiden debate’’ for example, at the very least we can take away from the discussion that a more flexible perspective on social and psychological complexity during the Viking Age can contribute to a more complete image of the past.

Similarly, the topic of conversion is subjected to frequent debate as it becomes increasingly clear that this was by no means a straight-forward process but one with many

exceptions, binarily fluid syncretism, osmosis, and alterations, then direct dogmatic adaptation and conversion in the classic understanding of those definitions (Garipzanov 2014).

The influence and presence of Viking activity in the east, meaning modern Russia and the Baltics, is also likely to be far greater than is often acknowledged in Western traditions dealing with the Viking Age due to our cultural biases, lack of geographic and nationally determined interest, or simply access to translated research (Hraundal 2013, 12-19). The most relevant to the approach this thesis takes on the Viking Age however are those voices who opt for a broader understanding of the dating of the Viking Age and re-center it into a broader and more pan-European setting, void of romantic or disruptive narratives. A good example of the status quo is the above-mentioned statement by Brink concerning the ‘’Europeanisation’’ of Scandinavia is a good place to start. It implicitly suggests that Scandinavia was no part of this Europe to begin with and something unique entirely, a point to which I will return later. Keeping a broad and flexible perspective on the synthetic constructs such as the Viking Age is important, lest we take them too seriously and they might end up taking the lead, bridling conclusions drawn by scholars. For example, the concept of Viking Age runs the risk of not serving solemnly as an abstract framework for understanding the past but acting as an active narrative agent influencing interpretation due to its self-referential nature. In it rests a recipe for a creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of uniqueness going like this: *Any phenomenon in the Viking Age is unique because it happened in the Viking Age, a time in which only unique phenomena happened.* Instead of starting research with an objective mind, one starts with a host presumptions and expectations

This is to a certain extend inevitable of course, and in some case desirable for a better understanding when evaluating isolated phenomenon. However, one always needs to be very critical of those pre-existing assumptions. That the concept of Viking Age is rather perceptible to faulty foundations is effectively summed up and contextualized by Fredrik Svanberg who argues in his work ‘’Decolonizing the Viking Age’’ that the Scandinavian Viking Age often practically represents a system of knowledge rooted in 19th century assumptions and romanticism (Svanberg 2003). He specifically identifies 5 persistent ideas that are woven through the history of Viking Age research. First the notion of a homogeneous Viking Age culture in Scandinavia, which places it as an “Age among ages” in a greater evolutionary conceptualization of historical progression. Second, that Viking Age history is often, despite the absence of any nation state, about Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians, giving a strong national

character to the historical narratives. Third, that historical agency was mainly embodied by kings and those individuals who laid claim to processes of unification. Fourth, that the main narrative was that of the unification of the three Scandinavian kingdoms, Viking voyages and Christianization. The Viking Age comes to represent Scandinavia's entrance on the wider theater of (civilized) European history, entering the stage of civilization slowly but surely (Svanberg 2003, 97). And fifth, that in general the historically written Old Norse sources (in all their great variety and validity) are the main guidelines in which archaeological results are continuously placed (Svanberg 2003, 97). This system makes Viking Age Scandinavia into something very special and unique indeed, different from all other places. It can be seen as emerging from the isolationist mists of time on the European stage of history.

Such visions of the past are fueled by much more contemporary sentiments of nationalism or, in more recent times, a desire for an archaically coated form of postmodern individuality found for example in ''neopagan'' movements. These contemporary desires for self-realization seem often to bleed over into the academic and can be observed as driving academic inquiry as opposed to meticulous objective pursuit, both from a lay perspective as a professional one (Calico 2018). Due to great potential to interact with the present inherent to popular research topics from the Viking Age, be it gender related, religious debates, or geopolitical, it is always important to remember that history, and the heritage produced by its narrative suggestions, is not a product of the past, but of the present. All works which reflect upon the human past are ultimately a building block for the present. History and heritage are inseparable from socioeconomic and sociopolitical formations, and this thesis is written with that post-colonial realization in mind which has been highlighted by many who engage in critical heritage studies (Apaydin 2018; Bahrani 2009; Bonacchi, Chiara, Mark Altaweel, and Mara Kryzanska 2018). A practical example may help to further understand this phenomenon.

"What the Vedas are for India, and the Homeric Poems for the Greek World, that the Edda signifies for the Teutonic race: it is a repository, in poetic form, of their mythology and much of their heroic lore, bodying forth both the ethical views and the cultural life of the North during late heathen and early Christian times', as Lee M. Hollander succinctly states in the introduction to the Poetic Edda (1994)." (Hollander 1994, page in Hedeager 2020, 112). This is the opening quotation with which Lotte Hedeager starts her analysis of the poetic Edda in her 2020 contribution to the book Re-imagining Periphery, Archaeology and Text in Northern Europe from Iron Age to Viking and Early Medieval Periods. It must first be clarified that she

seems to regard this Vedda comparison as a valid and exemplary one. This ‘’deep time’’ and enhanced predisposition shines through many of her observations in the chapter, such as her main suggestion that the Scandinavian and Germanic animal styles are a new symbolical language arising in the 5th century, unaltered by Christian influences until the 12th century, encapsulating Norse beliefs about shape-shifting and cosmological conceptions of ontological human-animal relations which would reverberate as far back as the Bronze Age (Hedeager 2020, 112). Moreover, she manifests and image of a fluid and eco-centric conscious state of being in which Viking Age society thrived, coming to a relatively abrupt end when Christianity makes its entrance, due to its vastly different (read modern) worldview. This is all presented in the context of a deep-time inspired framework with leapfrogs from 1700 B.C.E., via interpretations of Bronze Age artefacts and Late Medieval literature, to the 13th century C.E. and back. Besides a brief mention of some Roman disruption, another “bad other”, we are invited to see the continuation of spiritual practice and cultural life, with Norse written corpus functioning as a sedimented form of this ancient, and indeed unique, worldview (Hedeager 2020). Some objections to this approach can be made, which highlight how this narrative can create both lay and professional complications for understanding the Viking Age. The criticisms by Svanberg server as a guideline to explore this.

At no point do Hedeager’s observations seem to take in account the infamously troubled nature of the Medieval Norse written corpus, neglecting the risks of overinterpretation, on which more later (Abrams 2011, 1-30). The texts are almost taken at face value and implemented into reality via an interpretive framework whose foundation are widely distanced and spread out over time and space from the phenomena they are meant to imbue with value. As for the absence of Christian artistic motives until the 12th century, the abundance of Christian Viking Age art (including animals) on runestones, crosses, turtle brooches, swords and more (sometimes in combination of runic inscriptions) seem to tell a rather different story (Franco Valle, forthcoming 2023; Sindbæk 2014). The influence of continental art styles and ideas has a long traction in both archaeological materials as well as historiographical works (Fuglesang 1980. 118-124). Christianity is also presented by Headeger as a rather unified force where rites and liturgies are well established and stable. This is an anachronistic take on a church which during this time was (and still is) a diverse religion, whose central dogmas and rites were highly variable. The strict adherence to dogmas does not always represent the best vantage point from which the Christianization process can be analyzed (Garipzanov 2010).

Through the lines of Hedeagers chapter emanates a vision of pre-Christian Scandinavia which is a unique world with lost ancient traditions. Such an approach runs the risk of making more overtures to contemporary ideas than reflect the cosmogenic, political, and social reality of Early Medieval Scandinavia. The article by Hedeager represents a certain trend in scholarship occupied with analyzing the religiosity of Pre-Christian Scandinavia where many increasingly argue for rather elaborate, eclectic, and divergent cosmogonical set of believes which prevailed in Scandinavia before the coming of Christianity, based on interpretations of Medieval written and comparative conjecture (Eriksen 2013; Gräslund 2008; Magnel 2019; Price 2008; Price 2010; Price 2019; Raudvere 2008; Steinsland 2008; Williams 2013). The most important observation here is the meta narrative of Scandinavian uniqueness, which is taken for granted throughout these articles, harkening back to the earlier explained self-fulfilling prophecy. Hedeager's paints a picture reminiscent of romantic 19th century narrative tropes of places and people lost in time, but rich and tranquil through ancient and noble traditions, being forced into the world of modernity, kingdoms, and Christianity. This semi-silent assumption is found throughout Viking scholarship. One is often invited to see a clear distinction between the Scandinavian Viking diaspora and the "rest" of the world. This is not to say that Scandinavia during (and before) the Viking Age is completely without its own set of culturally specific phenomena and it differed significantly in social, financial, and spiritual practice from (some) European areas in the Early Medieval period, most notably the modern regions of France, England, and Germany of course. However, to sever its ties so definitively as is often done and isolate it creates a Viking Age sized snow globe.

To sever Scandinavia harshly from the wider continent is to obscure millennia of bilateral cross-cultural exchange between the Scandinavian diaspora and wider Europe (as well as beyond), which surely took place and risks misinterpretation due to isolation (all the sources). Doing so would greatly impoverish any attempt at understanding what the human condition was like during the Viking Age, whether dating is taken strictly or loosely. A good example may be the recently heightened focus on exchanges between the Spanish kingdoms and Scandinavia. For a long time, this part of the world was, in context of Viking history, regarded as a mere ''hunting ground'' for Vikings of sorts, a notion strengthened by such mythical figures as Bjorn Ironside, being at best of times the place of origin for some Islamic chroniclers (Price 2008, 462-469) Yet recent research shows the outlines of a very complex culture of gift exchange, possible settlement, military alliance, and European power politics which does not fit with older orientalist approaches (Franco Valle, forthcoming 2023).

Although these observations are important it is of course unfair, and erroneous, to simply denounce the entirety of Viking Age scholarship as being only static, unsalvageable, and forever fettered by the unescapable chains of colonial, romantic, and nationalistic thought. As said, recent scholarship confronts rusted and outdated visions of the past by actively breaking open parts of Svanberg's "systematized Viking Age" and challenging long standing assumptions (Ashby, Coutu, and Sindbæk 2015; Garipzanov 2014; Croix 2015; Gardella 2013; Lund 2013; Price 2020; Price 2019; Neil Price et al. 2019). Nevertheless, I tend to agree with a great many of Svanberg's observations. Having all this in mind, this thesis attempts to consciously contribute to constructing a perspective rejecting methods prone to promoting traditional, romantic, or nationalist narratives which restrict our understanding of the Viking Age, whilst respecting the great research and evidence previous decades of scholarship have produced.

2.2 On text and Archaeology

Central to this thesis are burial practices and the way people dealt with death generally during the Viking Age. This is, in simple terms, a rather ''hot topic'' since it is the field of archaeological investigation yielding arguable the most spectacular findings and tantalizing contexts. In the second half of the 20th century up until now a very large number of excavations have taken place which have shone new light upon at least the material world of Early Medieval Scandinavians. Especially cultic sites have illuminated and altered our understanding of spiritual practice at that time, moving for example from the solely outdoor practice to include more indoor settings. As Margaret Clunies Ross puts it, the last three decades have also stimulated a necessity for creating new intellectual frameworks in which these findings can be placed and interpreted (Ross 2020, 117-119). She notes that to interpret archaeological remains, and construct such frameworks, scholars of the Viking Age have since day and age on a large scale referred to Norse written sources to explain the found material. This scholarly trend deserves a history of its own, and indeed this has been written, with various periods in time relying less or more on a very diverse and dispersed corpus of written material (Berg 2015). The Deep History perspectives of Headeger discussed above can be seen as a good example of an interpretative frame which relies heavily on very specific written content to explain of a wide variety of material spanning some 3500 years. However, working with Old Norse texts and accounting for their fallibility and all discrepancies is a very difficult task on itself. Even

those who completely dedicate their professional focus to the topic disagree and point out many issues and interpretation, and the techniques used for determining the validity and construction of texts is a very complex one (Quinn and Letherbridge 2010, 87-90; Maas 1958, 1-24). There are those that caution for doing so, with some hardliners rejecting the written sources all-together as interpretive evidence for material remains and others finding a more nuanced route (Abrams 2011, 1-51).

However, the written word has made a comeback. Recently the tendency to utilize a multidisciplinary approach and draw heavily on the contents of the Old Norse corpus has reemerged and given rise to spectacular visions of the past which, in the words of Neil Price, allows one to ‘’smell the blood on the edge of the ship etc.’’ and generally provide a very vivid version of the past steeped in mythological lusture (Price 2010, 136). Terry Gunnell's work too plays an important part in constructing frameworks of narrative interpretation for archaeological material through the Norse Sources (Gunnel 1995; Gunnel 2009; Gunnel 2012). In both cases part of the methodological framework for inserting textual explanations is performance theory, taken in this case from the field of ritual studies. This approach is the recent driving engine animating Viking Age mortuary behavior and ritual through a dramaturgical view.

Yet, though Price and Gunnel be two of the most recognizable forces in this renewed wave of written source credibility and animation through performance, they are far from the only ones utilizing the approach. Archaeologists in the past two decades have in large numbers released the written corpus from its relative late 20th century banishment and once more rely on Icelandic Sagas, Edda's, and other Norse writings to explain their findings and perspectives on Viking Age life and death through performance theory and archaeological material (Eriksen 2013; Gräslund 2008; Magnel 2019; Price 2008; Price 2010; Price 2019; Raudvere 2008; Steinsland 2008; Williams 2013). The fields concerned with Viking Age cosmogony, magic, shamanism, and witchcraft have thus been raised to new intensity, not least due to an overwhelming increase in popular interest surrounding these topics through bands like Wardruna, Heilung, and others, as well as television shows like History Channel's Vikings and social media (Brown 2014, 107-19; Roe 2019, 15; Zerkle 2007). However, there are many arguments to be made for a weary approach to fusing text and archaeology. These risks are, in my opinion, not always acknowledged and dealt with adequately. The most well-known and relevant criticism one can levy against the unscrupulous use of written material from the Old

Norse corpus is the fact that they on average are hundreds of years removed from the events their materials is used to imbue with meaning and significance (Ross 2020, 118). Though there are indeed sources with earlier dates, they too should not be taken at face value for they possess plenty narrative tropes, biases, mistakes, and outright fantasies. Moreover, Ross also argues that archaeologists, or generally scholars who use an interdisciplinary approach, may not always poses the knowledge to do justice to all the complexities and risks of the field they are borrowing from, leading perhaps to misguided conclusions based on selective material (Ross 2020). Entire methodologies have been constructed to deal with the content of the Old Norse Corpus or historical writings in general since that corpus is fraught with biases, politics, personal motivations, and lies of every kind (Berg 2015). This huge body of work certainly is not always considered in its entirety when conclusions are drawn regarding archaeological material. A very good example of the discussion about text and archaeology may be found in a recent series of articles be Neil Price and Margeret Clunie Ross (Price 2022; Ross 2020). Now I will present the core of these two articles as they very clearly emphasize the point I am trying to make in this chapter.

In a recent article by Price, Performing the Vikings, which seems to have been triggered by criticism raised against the performative approach and the interplay of archaeology and text, Price makes an explicit counter argument for the validity of said approach (Price 2022). Rosse's 2020 article seems to be one of the main motivations for his retortion, since she is quoted by Price often in the article, and Ross in turn mentions his work specifically as well (Ross 2020). Ross in her 2020 article examines, for example, the interpretation Price places on the occurrence of 9 postholes in the enigmatic cult site of Götavi in Närke. Price interprets these as evidencing ''shamanic'' practices involving journeys between worlds, amongst which may be a realm of the dead. This is based largely on linking the number of 9 postholes to the number of worlds existent in Norse cosmogony, and the recurrence of the number generally withing the Norse corpus, which he puts at 16 times total. Furthermore, Price presents it in a performative ritual context (Price 2022, 71-73). Clearly such an interpretation fits very well with his approach to shamanism and spiritual practices he specializes in, he states as much (Price 2022, 71; Price 2019; Price 2001). From the performance theory point of view, this site could thus be seen as a potent Stage on which shamanic rituals where conducted, rituals whose narrative and performative remnants may yet be found sedimented in the written sources i.e., the recurring number 9 and the 9 worlds.

Ross, in response, notes that the idea of 9 worlds itself only occurs 2 times in the Old Norse corpus, once in the Voluspa and once in Vafþrúðnismál. She simultaneously emphasizes the uncertainty and inconsistency of the mythological world presented to us by Old Norse sources, as well as the other considerations when dealing with old texts, like biases, mistakes, and alterations (Ross 2020, 122-125). This observation greatly undermines the ‘’overwhelming’’ nature of any interpretation surrounding numerical claims about world traveling. The supposed script behind the rituals, which Price seems to make off the Norse sources, is presenting a play of another age. Price retorts that Ross has misunderstood him as he does not take the written sources literally as script but uses them as a sort of general, and consciously vague, source for contextualizing the archaeological material and Norse cosmogony. A sort of thematic approach then. Here the fusion of a dramatic perspective and the artefactual material is important, as he tantalizingly sums up his observations by stating that through its synergy ‘’we can hear the voices and see the movements of the play but can’t hear what they are saying’’.

What is so telling about this response is that it does not actually counter the criticisms levied by Ross, namely the lack of a holistic understanding of the historiographical discipline and the Norse sources in their historical context. Price through his retortion shows that his reflections stay within the boundaries of his own conceptualized performative world and answers only in accordance with the rules of the framework he himself made. By denying the one-on-one script approach he deprives the contextualization of artefacts through texts of any meaning. Through this discourse we can see that the performative approach makes archeological artefacts and sites into metaphorical walls on which any (textual) Norse shaped shadow can be projected.

Price’s observations are a good example of observations being only plausible when staying within the boundaries of meta-narratives of Scandinavian uniqueness. As soon as one steps beyond the borders of Scandinavia and takes a wide perspective these observations do not hold up. Take the number 9 for example. It is indeed mentioned 16 times throughout much of the Norse corpus; however, it is also mentioned 49 times in old and New Testament texts. By this time trade networks and power consolidation had certainly brought such writings to to Sweden and would have likely been available to the 11th century audience in Götavi in Närke (Winroth 2012, 102-120). Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Voluspa, the most tantalizing source mentioning the 9 worlds and has other references of 9, might very well

be a partialliay, if not entirely, Christian work though with elements of pre-Christian narratives (North 2005, 410-412). The Christian nature and influence on Old Norse written corpus in general are well-known and acknowledged by historians dealing with these sources. As Price himself stated the date for the site is exceptionally late for pagan rites (Price 2022,). So even if the number 9 is drawn from the written corpus and placed on the archeological site of Götavi in Närke, as vaguely and carefully as Price means, is assuming a pagan and semi shamanistic interpretation really the most reasonable conclusion?

The number 9 generally carries an ancient, diverse, and multiculturally known symbolical legacy which was widespread. Price seems to credit the tenacity of Pagan rites to maintain a hyperbolic reading of diverging Scandinavian spiritual traditions. That interpretation however only works if you accept the conditions of Price's general performative and shamanistic frameworks which are detached from proper historiographic source criticism and a denial of the interconnectivity of the post Roman Early Medieval world. Perhaps deriving the significance of a number and interpretation of an archaeological context out of a combination of shamanism, Medieval mythological literature, and Viking Age archaeological material is not the most scrupulous approach to understand 9 post holes.

From the meta-narrative perspective of a unique Viking Age Scandinavia, it would of course be a perfect fit, as the outcome is sure to be tantalizing and ads to the Viking Ages exceptionality. It keeps in line with the mysterious ''otherness'' trope. However, from a pan-European perspective which includes comparative analysis through careful source criticism, syncretic sensibilities, and political awareness, quickly this theory shows its flaws. Price in his retortion displays one of the problematic aspects of using the texts in archaeological excavations, namely that using the textual narratives without reviewing them in their full literary, religious, and political context becomes prone to overinterpretation. As we shall see, the performative theoretical framework often employed further enhances such risks.

2.3 Ritual Theory, performance, and practice

The next part of this thesis will look at another paradigm in Viking Age studies, namely the tendency to use performance theory when dealing with ritual, already briefly mentioned above. In the 2022 article Price acknowledges that archaeologists, folklorists, and historians alike, have utilized the ritual performance theory, drawn from ritual studies (Price 2022). In

general, one can conclude, after a brief overview of the available material, that this approach has become a popular one as its use is widespread and even included in some standard works on Viking Age history and slowly becoming a paradigm. It is indeed a very powerful tool for reviving the Viking Age vividly. Through the performative lens static burial complexes become like the final scene in a vibrant play full of colors, smells, emotions, violence, sex, and significance. In the seminal article ‘’Passing into Poetry’’ by Price, the standard for a new and mythopoetic understanding of the Viking Age was set (Price 2010). This theory proposes the notion of an incorporeal world made up by fluctuating mythological, historical, and social narratives held together and propagated by the collective imagination of communities who access it via ritual performances to imbue physical realm with meaning. The theory relies heavily on the idea that sediments of these performances and can be discovered, or as we have seen “vaguely hinted at”, via a study of the Old Norse Corpus, for example.

It is a somewhat nebulous proposition, but very tangible at the same time. The approach avoids definitive answers, offering many avenues for speculative interpretations with a mythological flavor, but is careful to not dig its heels in and make set statements. It is led to the trend that with a solid “maybe” included any small talisman with a vague humanoid shape taken from the ground can be a visage of Odin or a Valkery. The result is though that a reader is often left with a large amount of inspiration and impressions, but preciously few objective conclusions. When the performative approach is applied to ritual contexts this already theatrical and potent technique essentially grants a very open space to exercise one’s imagination fueled by various narrative, archaeological, and historiographical elements. Perhaps completely coincidentally, but noteworthy, the popularization of the performative/ritual scholarly approach has coincided with contemporary explosion of ‘’Viking and Germanic’’ inspired pop cultural phenomena like self-professed pagan inspired bands such as Heilung and Wardruna. These have never been bigger, not to mention the explosive rise of Vikings as a subcultural identity thriving on social media. They all feature supposed elements of ancient rituals, instruments, aesthetics, and ideas (Roe 2019, 18-22; Zerkle 2019). The key element binding all these movements is an interest in perceived heritage, which is used with the aim of reclaiming, reinventing, or inspiring performances. These acts are in turn generating to liminal and countercultural movements (Roe 2019, 29-31).

Importantly, no matter their intellectual legitimacy, truthfulness, and authenticity of their intentions, such contemporary movements are following closely the academical Viking

Age related developments, especially those dealing with ritual and mythological topics (Calico 2018, 50-109). It may be purely coincidental, but it is tempting to observe a symbiotic relationship between popular culture and academia which, both consciously and unconsciously, motivates one another. Speculation aside, the performative approach is ubiquitous, popular, and thriving. Since the main question of this thesis is whether a textually inspired performative approach to ritual is the most constructive and appropriate lens to examine human sacrifice during the Viking Age, I will now explore the matter of performative ritual theory in depth.

Ritual theory

The scholarly attention towards ritual is long and has been subjected to a wide variety of interpretations and approaches (Bell 1997, 3-90). In her 1992 book Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice Catherine Bell not only provides us with a new framework, or rather departure point, for approaching ritual, but also analyses a variety of existing strategies, amongst which is the performance theory (Bell 1992, 37-46). Bell notes that there are a couple of significant risks in using the performance analogy. In part I of her book she goes to great lengths to explain the tendency of analytical strategies to dichotomize the relation between action and thought during their analyzation of ritual. She continues to explain that as a consequence ritual is often regarded as the arena within which the fusion of these two supposed opposites takes place. The implication of this assumption is not only the polarization of a singular complex reality into purely theoretical concepts, but also the implicit preference for the thought part of the dichotomy as opposed to the action (Bell 1992, 48-49).

The creation of such a dichotomy and subordination of action is prevalent in a dramaturgical, or performance, approach to ritual too, as essentially the actions of the ritual agents are assumed to be acting out static and monolithic mythologies, concepts, or other cognitive narrative structures belonging to the society performing them (Bell 1992, 13-54). Such a subordinance of physicality to inflexible has subtle but far-reaching implications. A good example is the birth, life, and death of the mythological ‘’God king’’ which was a constant feature of early ritual theorists. This theory has long since been abandoned as it suggests eternal truths about human behavior too essentialist in nature to fit dynamism of reality. Due to the assumption of ritualization as an arena for dichotomic fusion, a metaphysical realm, one theoretically sustained by the common imagination of ritual participants and an underlying narrative for the performed actions, is necessarily created. This realm is however simply an

‘’unknown’’ filled in by those doing the analysis based on their observations of bodily movements, dress, song, words, and actions. This approach then turns ritual into a synthetic conceptual realm open to the most subjective interpretations and explanations. The observer is not the objective bystander, but in some way an active participant in the ritual, imbuing otherwise abstract physical phenomenon with their own (bias) contextual understanding. One can quickly see the interpretative risks, especially in the case of archaeology where nothing but a selective silent material record is left to interpret.

The meaning, narratives, and aesthetics of this subjective conceptual ritual realm created by performance theorists is in the case of Viking Age research often filled via the Old Norse sources. There are further problems with the dramaturgical framework. For example, that is assumes performance is essential to the nature for the ritualized activities it describes to function. This way the analytical framework for interpreting ritual contexts becomes a prerequisite for the functioning of ritual itself, revealing another circularity in the approach (Bell 1992, 42). When you translate this to Viking Age ritual burial contexts the argument would sound something like this; material remains of a ritual burial must be the result of a performance, because for it to be a ritual it must have been performed. It reminds of the issues in Price’s reasoning for the number 9 in Sweden.

Another argument against performance theory is a purely classificatory one. The theatrical analogy blurs the lines between what can be said to be ritual as opposed to, say, actual performance or ceremony. does this to such an extent that ritual as a definitional tool becomes all but unfunctional for asserting any difference between any set of activities (Bell 1992, 42-43). Would the official brokering of peace between two Jarls be considered a performance? Or is the performance of Skaldic poetry a ritual? The few lines we do have become hard to draw. Interestingly, Price argues that wider terms such as “burial practice” generalizes to broadly, however adding the terms “performance” and “narrative” does not truly make that much of a difference, except when those narratives can be identified which, as we shall see, is problematic (Price 2010, 148).

Lastly the assumption of Viking Age burial rituals as performances implies a physical as well as metaphorical distance between ritual specialists and audience, contradicting the communal significance such events are meant to have. It implies the construction of barriers between its attendees, active agents, practice, and material. These tangible and intangible

barriers prevent humans from thoroughly establishing, on a cognitive level, individual, symbolical, and meaningful relations to the event, since they are not holistically a part of it. Imbedded in the approach to Viking Age ritual through performance theory there hides a Cartesian worldview which projects a post enlightenment view on ancient people that may not be applicable to their experience of ritual reality. It is a separation which demolishes the socioeconomic functions of ritualization that Price and others refer to. As Bell says, "Ritualization will not work as social control if it is perceived as not amenable to some degree of individual appropriation" (Bell 1992, 222). And social control may very well be at the essence of the matter, on which more later.

2.4 Conclusion

In the 2022 article where Price makes the explicit case for the performance paradigm, he says the following:

''Moreover, it is not hard at all to link the frightening funerary scenes witnessed on the Volga by Ibn Faḍlān with the comparable end products that we see in the Oseberg burial, and in many other complex graves (whether in ships, chambers, or taking other forms).''

Indeed, I agree, it is not hard to do so. However, just because something is not hard to do, it does not mean it automatically carries great validity, or that it should be done at all. It is often the case that a combination of text and archaeology may yield spectacular results which speak to the imagination and vivify the Viking Age past like few other methodologies are able to do. Another statement may be considered as a telling summary of this part of the thesis:

''The new work on the Oseberg tapestries is a gift indeed, but one that essentially reinforces and confirms what scholars already suspected. It should by now be obvious that all this is nothing if not 'performance', and its ritual nature seems undeniable.''

It is in my experience the case that whenever the word *obvious* is used, one should be extra careful, as that is seldom a definition applicable to scientific inquiry. Especially in case of the performance paradigm. With this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate that when one dives below the surface of the implied obviousness of the Performa-Textual approach it is not so bullet proof as it might appear. Its greatest risk lies in the fact that it systematically does not

consider the nuances of the disciplines it borrows from for the sake of tangible, and spectacular, results fitting pre-existing expectations formed by metanarratives of romantic and traditional nature.

By virtue of its own assumptions, it creates a hypothetical framework in which the paradigm controls the source conditions as well as the conclusions that can be drawn from it. If one then considers the underlying current of Viking Age Uniqueness, as explored through the criticisms of Swan, the performative approach comes forth as the perfect tool for supporting and generating colonial narratives. By making the Viking Age past seem so clear and accessible through text and performance, perhaps spurred on by contemporary pop-culture, the illusion of a well understood past is formed, one with voices, smells, and sights like no other. The performative textual approach allows for a fusion of shamanism, mythology, and mystery. In combination with the metanarrative of uniqueness the Viking Age even runs the risk of turning into a mystically superior time, as vaguely seen in Hedeager's article, reminiscing how Asiatic cultures have been stereotyped in the West for having a more spiritual approach to life in the. Besides a colonizing there is thus the risk of Orientalizing the Viking Age. Now I will shift focus and examine how this methodological framework has affected our understanding of human sacrifice.

3. Historical & Archaeological background – Burial, Human Sacrifice, and the Viking Age

After presenting the decolonized macro framework in which the discussion regarding ritual and human sacrifice in the Viking Age will be placed, it is now necessary to zoom in and explore the building blocks for an alternative approach to human sacrifice in the Viking Age, a different tool to deal with such phenomenon in archaeological context. The available evidence surrounding human Sacrifice, both archaeologically and historically, is indeed often related to burials. Therefore, there are plenty of primary sources to look at. Burials with associations of human Sacrifice have in this large corpus a somewhat special place, they are now commonly put in the category of ‘’deviant burials’’ (Taylor 2014, 1). As explained such complexes are prone to be overinterpreted via the discussed textual-performative approaches and/or produce romantic meta-narratives. The following pages will therefore focus on the presentation of common and uncommon mortuary trends in archaeological burial contexts, noticeable changes in those patterns over time, geographic patterns, and how graves have been interpreted by scholars as fitting in within Viking Age society at large. Then the deviant mortuary traditions need to be set apart from the implied non-deviant burial traditions. Lastly, I will present a brief overview of the written evidence which concerns burial practices which have been related to Viking Age customs to better understand how it has influenced scholars’ perceptions today.

3.1 Viking Age Burial practice

3.1.1 Archaeological remains of Viking Age burial practice

Before examining the known variations of Viking Age burial practices, I would like to explicitly mention the bias of the archaeological record. It is entirely possible that the dead were handled in ways which leave no trace at all or any that signifies beyond reasonable doubt the presence of conscious burial rites. Examples might be (infant) exposure, aquatic deposits, or non-ceremonial abandonment (Price 2008, 257-259). Having that discrepancy in mind, I will present a quick and practical overview of the most recognized forms of Viking Age mortuary practices. When Viking burial customs and funerary rites are concerned there appears to be at the same time a huge variety as well as overarching trends (Price 2008, 259). Depending on the specific area under investigation there might be a peculiar tradition of cremation, inhumation, or potentially other forms of postmortem disposal which are hard to verify

archaeologically (like exposure rites). These traditions can indeed appear to be very localized with little to no precedence in other places nearby and I will return to the implications thereof later. An example of such variation can be found in the balance between cremation and inhumation graves, both of which appear throughout the Viking diaspora and are ubiquitous, though in varying levels of intensity. Iceland for example counts almost no cremation graves, Denmark also has relatively few, whilst Sweden and Norway have many (Price 2008, 259-263). Now I will look at these practices individually.

3.1.1.1 Cremation

Cremation thus seems not to have practically, symbolically, or spiritually kept contemporaries from depositing large amounts of personal goods with the deceased suggesting that the potency of interaction with the deceased was not lessened by flames (Nielsen 2009; Jennbert 2004). Insofar as that engagement with the deceased is concerned, the same amount of creative space seems to have been available for crematory mortuary behavior as with inhumation, based on the amount of grave goods distributed with the deceased and the variety in which this practice appears. If one considers the discussions regarding the re-opening and reusing of burial mounts and grave goods, the cremation process can even be viewed as possessing an added level of economic and prestigious significance since the material with which the grave is furnished is often made largely unusable (Klevnäs 2016).

One can again observe a large variety in its manifestations, as well as some trends. For example, cremation appears both as singular burial rite but may also contain multiple individuals (Ratican 2019). The burned ashes of the deceased can often have been placed solitarily in an urn or added to an existing grave mound without much splendor or regalia. On the other end of the spectrum there is the evidence for entire ships being put to the flames, containing a vast collection of valuables in the form of furniture, jewelry, clothing, weaponry, animals, and potentially human sacrifices. In some instances, opting for cremation may have indeed reflected culturally specific preferences, whilst in others merely represent a practical solution or necessity due to, for example, frozen soils or space considerations, or both (Price 2008, 261-267).

Just like inhumation graves cremation burials have left their mark on the landscape too. Burial mounds were erected over the in-situ locations of the fires, megalithic formations

constructed, poles placed, and stones raised (Price 2008). Large burial grounds with urns are known, as well as more striking ship-shaped stone circles which contain multiple burials. This puts their significances in terms of territorial and communicational potential on par with inhumation graves, provided they do leave tangible traces in the landscape. Cremation burials become less frequent as the Viking Age progresses, most likely due to the steady Christianization of Scandinavia and introduction of more ‘’appropriate’’ Christian burial practices (Klein 2011). Yet, it is important to not view that process as binary or crystal clear, but rather fluid as there seems to have been a large period of syncretism and osmosis where Christian burial practices were mixed with those of non-Christian ones, at least in inhumation graves (Klein, 2011; Garipzanov 2014). That cremation was frowned upon or outright condemned by one of the many forms of Early Medieval dogmatic thought should not always convince us that Early Medieval Scandinavians did not combine those two practices anyway.

3.1.1.2 Inhumation

Besides cremation graves the Scandinavians of the Early Medieval period practiced inhumation style burial. These too come in many shapes and forms, ranging from the spectacular such as the famous Oseberg burial to the relatively mundane such as modest graves containing just a silhouette and some basic utensils as grave goods, or none. It is fair to say that inhumation graves do tend to receive more attention than cremation graves, as they are simply richer in material remains and offer greater narrative potential (Price 2008, 261). There is thus some risk of representational bias, as it may seem inhumations are more common due to a larger amount of attention directed to this type of context.

Logically the spectacularly furnished graves receive most attention, but most seem to in fact have been modestly furnished singular burials supplied with simple items such as knives and household tools. Grave goods appear to generally be distributed gender specifically, meaning that most male graves are furnished with utensils commonly associated with male positions in Early Medieval society and vice versa for the woman. However, recent scholarship has challenged our gendered expectations by queering graves, or simply establishing that the grave good distribution does not always follow a universally fixed pattern in terms of gender (Leszek 2013, 304-307). Though there are trends, grave good preferences and traditions differ from place to place too. For example, swords in grave are far less common in Denmark then they are in Norway or Sweden (Klein 2011). Moreover, burial fashion seems to move and

change with the passing of time. The 10th century generally produces on average the richest and wealthiest graves, comparatively, depending on the geographical location of course. This trend subsides with by the early 11th century. The dead are most often placed on their back or on their side, which has been interpreted by some as a position mimicking sleep (Price 2011). Yet, many shapes, stages, and forms of the body occur which may be due to *rigor mortis* or, relevant for this thesis, may a have more deliberate causation (Klein 2011). Graves containing multiple individuals are less common than single burials, but due to the pervasive nature of the phenomenon all over Scandinavia might still very well have been seen as a recognizable and commonly understood practice, albeit of rarer occurrence. Various forms are recognized, such as kinship burials where the whole grave reflects a context of mortuary composition where both occupants are either equal in disposition or otherwise tangibly connected without ‘’suspicious’’ or ‘’deviant’’ elements.

Chamber graves are some of the most spectacular ones from the Viking Age, appearing in various levels of artefact density. They are most common in Sweden, then Denmark, but rather uncommon in Norway (Price 2008, 265). These graves are literally small chambers build into the ground, and often are amongst the most spectacular in terms of grave good or context (The dead can be laid out in beds, they might be seated upright in chairs, interred with horse, games, people, and much more. Sometimes the entire chamber might even be furnished to the extend where one can imagine the burial representing a summarized version of longhouses, or generally places where the living dwelled during the Viking Age (Price 2008).

Boat burials are no doubt some of the most famous form of mortuary practice from the Viking Age in scholarly circles and in popular culture alike (Price 2008). The most spectacular boat burial is arguably the Oseberg burial which, despite intrusions and the likely removal of valuables (soon) after interment, remains the most complete and well-furnished Viking Grave ever excavated, partially due to the amazing state of preservation. However, such massive displays of wealth and dedication are not the standard, and ship burials appear in many shapes and sizes and are found all over the Viking diaspora. Moreover, they are amongst those types of graves which frequently contain multiple occupants and display complex periods of construction, post-interment alterations to composition and occupancy, and/or disturbances. Striking are such suggestions as that Gotlandic picture stones might display the symbolical equivalent of inhumation ship burials (Skoglund 2008). This theory fits neatly with the

traditions of mentioned large ship shaped structures found with cremation graves, most notably from Denmark.

As mentioned before, inhumation graves were the ones promoted by Christianity during the Viking Age, and there is a clear reduction in cremation versus inhumation in accordance with the Christian principles of resurrection (Garipzanov 2014). However, it is very important to repeat the point about the viewing burial rites as dichotically pagan or Christian, a border which during the Viking Age was not as well defined as now. It is thus entirely possible to find burials with very ‘’Pagan’’ characteristics that may still have been intended as reflecting a Christian conviction in life (Lund 2013, 58-63). Debates still abound concerning the significance of grave goods and the religious affiliation they might indicate, if religion is indeed the right word for whatever describing the source of value it’s owner or depositor contributed to it. One should of course recognize trends but not let them (over)rule expectations or more complex explanations. All things considered the coming of Judeo-Christian mortuary traditions does clearly alter the material burial customs away from dramatic ship burials to more streamlined burial practices, but to what extend it immediately alters human perception of death, or on what timescale, is a different matter.

3.1.1.3 Deviant burials

The term deviant burial has risen in popularity in the past decades withing Viking Age scholarship. It has become a rather wide and flexible denomination for those types of graves which display, as the name suggests, deviant elements as opposed to the ‘’standard’’ depositional elements found in within the context of the burial. The first time it the term was used in such a fashion was by Helen Geake in 1992, but it has since gotten traction and became applicable to the archaeological discipline at large (Geake 1992; Murphy 2008, 12-18). It initially specifically referred to unusual positioning of bodies, evidence of (ritual) abuse and mutilation, an absence of grave goods, in context of seventh to ninth century England. However, the term has become much more flexible and adaptive. Leszek Gardela in his article The Dangerous Dead makes the case for Eva S. Thäte being the first who uses the term specifically in Viking Age context (Gardela 2013, 109-110). To understand better the nature of this application it is useful to look at Thäte’s relatively specific list of elements which may be indicative of deviancy in a burial complex:

- Divergent variations of special location, orientation, and placement relative to larger burial complex.
- Unusual body postures and or deposition methods of the body.
- Multiple burials, re-used graves
- Disparities “abnormalities” in the skeletal or bodily evidence.
- Unique treatment of the body such as mutilation, excessive and or creative forms of violence, mimicked activity from daily life, and obstruction and bondage.
- Grave goods that are out of the ordinary and no common or societally understood value from a contemporary perspective.

The divergent checklist and the term generally are not bulletproof and offers up its own set of issues. What may be divergent for one community might have been a very common practice in another. The checklist above still allows for a great amount of interpretation and in the end, there is no one explanation for deviancy. This criticism has not been lost on those who have worked with the term a lot. Gardella further argues for a reconsideration of the term entirely and encourages us to embrace the innate diversity in burial practice during the Viking Age (Gardela 2013, 99-100). It may be worth noting also that a ‘’divergent’’ grave to us did not represent a break with any funerary tradition when it was constructed. The term is thus misleading as it inherently carries some level of interpretations though it may have been not diverted at all from local practices, simply less common. Divergence represents, in my opinion, in the first place not a significant break of Viking Age customs, but a break with, or rather deviancy from, the categories of our own expectations. In combination with the mentioned diversity of Viking Age burial practices in general the definition loses even more of its usefulness.

3.1.2 Historical references to Viking Age burial practice

3.1.2.1 The Old Norse Corpus

Besides archaeological remains there are a relatively large number of historical sources from the Old Norse corpus that in one way or another deal with death, burial, and the afterlife. Whether it is the Sagas of the Icelanders, the Edda’s, Bishop Sagas or later Medieval Folklore, many contain the subject in one way or another (Taylor 2014, 82-96). Many of the scenes can seemingly be connected to the archaeological remains available to us. However, in line with the criticisms from chapter 2, rarely are these descriptions without some type of narrative

agency or specificity which makes those interpretations of silent material troubling for all the reasons so far discussed. The people who wrote these sources lived in a landscape dotted by traces of their ancestors, remnants of folklore and myth, but with Christianity as a set worldview. That combination may have resulted in very specific thoughts and expressions concerning burial practices from times long gone which more closely reflect contemporary imaginings than the actual traditions which inspire them. However, despite the many criticisms and risks these texts have certainly influenced the interpretations of the past and thus deserve to be briefly mentioned.

The Icelandic corpus is overflowing with interactions with the dead. In Snorri's Heimskringla we are presented with a rather detailed description of how a chieftain should be buried, *Gisla saga Surssonar* describes the famous ship burial, *Sigrdrifumal* mentions coffins and the list goes on (Taylor 2014, 11-117). In *Njal's* saga stones are placed on the graves of crime victims to perhaps prevent them from rising again (Ellis 1977, 50-59). There are generally many examples of people entering graves after which interaction takes place between the disturber and the grave occupant (Price 2019). Moreover, the dead rarely come to rest in the Saga's as with the example of *Eyrbyggja Saga* where Torolfr Bægifotr haunts local communities, his unpleasant character having been too much even for death to put a stop to (Taylor 2014, 111-117). There are also plenty of examples where sacrifice, capital punishment, or vigilante style judgement is the causation or main theme of a burial, some of those examples will be considered below. Interestingly Christian burials are mentioned too, with a shift in language which replaces heygja (to bury in a howe) and brenna (to cremate), to grafa or jarda (to bury), seemingly consciously separating them as a burial practice. It is noteworthy to explicitly mention the scarcity of cremation as a common burial practice in the Old Norse corpus. It does happen on occasion though predominantly in the Eddas (Taylor 2014, 82-96). Whenever fire is used in Icelandic Sagas, for example, it is often of a utilitarian nature, meaning that it serves a particular purpose to deal with a specific situation concerning the nature of the deceased or the matter in which they died (Ellis 1977, 50-59). Since Iceland has far fewer cremation burials than inhumation this trend might be used as an argument to showcase the geographic and cultral specificity of the written sources.

Without getting lost in enumerating all examples, it is fair to state that there are thus plenty of Old Norse literary sources from which one can draw inspiration for interpreting the narrative and significance behind archaeological complexes. And indeed, in many cases

sections from the Sagas, Eddas, and other writings are offered up as primary evidence for the way burial complexes are to be (or often tentatively poised as ‘’could be’’) interpreted. A couple prominent examples are explanations and examples for why individuals are seated upright in chamber graves, re-killing revenant grave occupants as an explanation for reentering burial mounts, and the general principal of the dead habituating their graves in a very active manner (Gardela 2013, 28).

3.1.2.2 Other sources

Besides written sources stemming from the Old Norse corpus there are non-Norse sources which feature supposedly Viking burial practices. Though the credibility of these sources may be greater since they are supposedly eyewitness accounts, contemporary, or legislative in nature, they still present modern scholars with a plethora of pitfalls and topics for debate. Few have gathered around them such a body of work and interest as the writings by Ibn Fadlan, the 10th century Arab traveler who happened upon a burial in process (Montgomory 2000, 1). His account has been glorified, critiqued, dismissed, revitalized, and extensively utilized at the same time. A major point of disputation is whether the ‘’Rus’’ in his account can be linked Scandinavians, or to be representative of Scandinavian culture at all, something James E. Montgomery seems not entirely clear on due to a lack of evidence (Montgomory 2000, 5). Nevertheless, many scholars seem to accept the validity of his account in relation to understanding Scandinavian funerary customs. His description is extensive, vivid, and leaves little to the imagination. Ibn describes a funeral feast lasting for no less then 10 days complete with rituals and ceremonies of every kind, be they sexual, violent, social, musical, or economic in nature. This source is very relevant to this thesis and will be dealt with separately in following chapters. Ibn’s account is but one of a multitude of Arabic sources, a category of sources underutilized in its fullest extend (Hraundal 2013). Some of these contain explicit mentions of funerary rites such as the accounts of Ibn Rustah and Ibn Miskaweih who describe, amongst other practices, alive burials (Price 2008, 267).

Another way to approach burial practice is not via eyewitness accounts, reports, or other enticing narratives, but via ecclesiastical as well as secular legislation. In the Gulating, Frostating, Eidsivating, and Borgating mention is made of Christian burial practices and how they should be conducted (Hamre 2011, 17-24). The technique of using legislation to deduce practices and customs during the Viking Age is a well attested and often regarded as reliable

due to its absence of narrative. The specifics drawn from these laws and how they dictate the deposition of the deceased are perhaps less utilized in performative approaches, perhaps due to their lack of characteristic spectacle, but they represent a valuable body of evidence with which one can understand archaeological remains. However, ecclesiastical representatives have not shied away from describing Scandinavian funerary customs, or general dealings with the dead, in vivid and gruesome detail. Adam of Bremen is one of the most exemplary of these writers with his description of the celebratory proceedings at Uppsala (Dutton, 2015). His description of the mass sacrifice off animals, including humans, rivals Ibn Fadlan in explicitness. The way Adam describes the dead were dealt with, by hanging them in trees, would have left very little to no archaeological evidence but can still be considered a funerary custom indeed. Controversy abounds concerning the validity of his account, the consequences of which will be considered in more depth later.

3.1.3 The living (and the) dead

Now I will give a quick overview of some common paradigmatic interpretations contemporary scholarship holds regarding the way burial practices impacted Viking Age society. Aside from being a purely practical way to dispose of the body burials are, just like in today's world, funerary events are potentially high mnemonic, social, religious, and perhaps even economic significance (Price 2022, 64-65). Therefore, regardless of whether one agrees with the performance paradigm used by Price I can wholeheartedly agree with his following statement related to burial practices in the Viking Age from his 2022 article:

> '*'It is unlikely that all of this means absolutely nothing''*

Burial customs in the Viking Age where clearly highly meticulous affairs for which the participants, the dead included, gave great concern and a considerable amount of planning must have gone into them (Price 2022, 64-70). Even the sheer economic value in material terms of some of the graves is testimonial for the value the living placed on the treatment of the dead. The dead thus played a very active part in the lives of the living in various ways. It has been postulated that grave mounds and places of deposition where active agents in the socio-political realities of the living (Klevnäs 2016). They may have indicated the boundaries of communities, functioned as places of active worship, or served as sights for legal events. The presence of the dead seems to generally have had the capacity to elevate and influence actions and borders

made by the living. Legal procedures are implied to have taken place around grave mounds, perhaps granting ancestors a sort of presence in court, adding to the legitimacy of whatever law might have been spoken (Moen 2020, 42-45).

This phenomenon may be reflected or observed in the practice of raising memorial like runestones bearing not only the commemoration of the dead, but also explicit references to legal claims or land ownership disputes (Zangenfeind 2021, 19-21). Another approach to the sociopolitical dimension of graves comes to us in the form of deliberate destruction and exhumation. Alison Margaret Klevnäs argues that some destructions of grave mounds may have been deliberate actions by ‘’powerful figures’’ (sometimes much more specifically defined by name) to demolish old power structures and level the playing field as it were. An example might be the famous instance of king Harald Bluetooth moving his parents from a decidedly non-Christian context to a new grave site properly consecrated in accordance with contemporary ecclesiastical custom. Graves are thus interactive complexes of varying supernatural potency, no matter its theological orientation. The variations in graves customs are primarily reflective of local expression, behavior, and significance, that contribute to the solidification of a specific local theocratic and socio-economic power structures, be they Christian or not.

Archaeological evidence suggests that burials could be protracted events which could potentially have a whole community involved. During that process there may have been feasting, sacrifice, mourning, specific ceremonies, spiritual practices of different kinds, political meetings, and occasions, and much more (Price 2010). Graves may have been opened and reopened over time, either for the addition of a new individual in the complex or other interactions with the site that may have involved extractions of human remains and material rather than interments. The fact that most of the funeral practices which took place during the Viking Age would have left very little trace, like small scale cremations or exposure practice, gives us to think about the massive gap in our understanding of dealing with the dead during that time. The deposition of a slave may not have been as spectacular as that of a Chieftain, but one can postulate that perhaps due to its frequency it played a much more common role in people’s awareness of death. That is if the death of slaves was to be considered of the same nature or order as that of chieftains.

This diversity in burial practice is a key to appreciating the irregularity and localized human behavior during the Viking Age. Embracing this de-essentialized approach helps countering the erroneous homogeneous visions of a united Viking Age, a vision which can only flourish comfortably in the borders of narrative colonial Anglocentric scholarship. An argument like ‘’unison in diversity’’ does much to gloss over the true variability and yet again produces a synthetic unified version of the past. Concluding, like Price says, it thus seems unlikely that death and the way to deal with it had no greater significance than corporeal consequences. It most likely was filled with spiritual, political, and economic significance, and could represent an occasion of heightened material and immaterial dynamism. The way in which this took place seems very specific, localized, and varied, which needs to be considered whenever grave rites are brought up as evidence for any interpretive framework for approaching the Viking Age.

3.2 Human Sacrifice

It is now time to divert our attention to the main topic of this thesis: Human sacrifice. This topic is one laden with controversy and the phenomenon has both fascinated scholars (and non-scholars) for generations (Recht 2014, 2-8). Human sacrifice itself has a broad work of scholarship related to it with many attempting to explain this often seemingly senseless loss of human live. However, here I agree with Laerke Recht in that whatever one may think of it from a modern perspective to those who practiced human sacrifice was never meaningless (Recht 2014, 3-4). The phenomenon of human sacrifice has been studied since the 19th century and onwards, generating hypotheses containing everything from obvious disgust and disdain to fascination and excitement. As will become clear, Viking Age scholarship is no exception and has its fair share of opinions. The trouble with defining human sacrifice usually begins by defining what Sacrifice itself means. In chapter 3.2.1 I will therefore give an overview of some common interpretations for Sacrifice and a (very) short history of relevant scholarship. Afterwards I will look at the archaeological evidence of Human Sacrifice and how one can identify it. The global perspective of human sacrifice will then show its great ubiquity, and there I shall also explore some of the most reoccurring interpretations of its use within a community that practices it.

3.2.1 The question of Sacrifice

One of the precious few certain things which can be said about human sacrifice is that it involves the killing of a human being. However, even such a basic statement may be challenged by those who would take a more metaphysical approach to ritual killing (Carrasco 2013, 210-215). Nevertheless, for the purposes of limiting the scope of this thesis we shall work from the assumption that a physical human indeed dies during a specific process. This process is then naturally the sacrifice. The definition of sacrifice is contested, and a great body of literature exists which offers up different explanations. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the following explanation for the term: "Primarily, the slaughter of an animal (often including the subsequent consumption of it by fire) as an offering to God or a deity." (Carrasco 2013, 210-215). However, besides humans and material not being explicitly mentioned, this definition is a much too narrow one and does not do justice to the complexity of the topic and the almost infinite forms which sacrifice can take (Walsh et al. 2020. 157-160). The chief issue is that it requires a God or deity to be involved, which is not always the case (Recht 2014). It might do to explore the definition a bit further. Perhaps the most often thought of essential purpose of sacrifice is in accordance with Ed Sir Edward Burnett Tylor's approach which views sacrifice as a type of gift exchange, which develops into homage, potentially furthering into self-sacrifice (Booth 2023, 1-5). This is not entirely in conflict with the Oxford Dictionary approach. Another foundational interpretation comes from William Robertson Smith who perceived it as a type of a communion between the physical and metaphysical realm of the divine (Booth 2023, 1-5). Here objects of sacrifice, often animals, may be the literal fusion of two worlds, which via Freudian totemism connects back to a community of human beings consuming or dealing with said sacrificial object.

The totemistic approach is eschewed by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, two big figures in laying foundations for understanding sacrifice. Their ideas revolve around the notion that a sacrificial ''victim'' is treated in such a way that their essence is altered, a type of consecration, and they become a buffer, or rod through which the bridge between the sacred and profane can be gapped (Allen 2013). It is then the mediation of the sacrificial object that establishes the relationship between human beings and the supranatural. From the late 19th and early 20th school of thought stems the German school of thought which alludes to specific cultural phases through which humanity steadily progresses. Within this context scholars such as Leo Frobenius explained human sacrifice as a form of ritual reenactment enacting the death of God kings. This in turn was then connected to religious associations of fertility and

cyclicality (Streck 2018). In the 1960's sacrifice was approached through an economical lens when Raymond Firth wrote about the economic considerations of sacrifice, for example lightening the pressure on available resources in a community (Firth 1963).

With this summary I am only scratching the surface of what is a very broad field of studies. Some important trend can be discerned though. These theories often make active distinctions between animals and people when sacrifice is concerned, as if those two always represented separate beings. As Glenn M. Schwartz mentions in her 2017 article, that is a syncretic assumption reflecting modern ideals but by no means representative for all those cultures who practiced sacrifice (Schwartz 2017, 224-226). Personally, I would add inanimate objects to that list too. From the bogs of Denmark to the disposition of Jewelry in the Andes, inanimate materials are quite clearly also capable of representing sacrifices (Aldhouse-Green 2015). In Viking Age context, one only needs to think about the personality ascribed to certain objects and the idea that a sword can have the same value (or greater) or classification as a human sacrifice is not so alien. A good example might be the ritual destruction of swords to empty them of their "spirit" (Aannestad 2018). Moreover, every single theory mentioned above has in its own way spawned associated schools of thought and resurface every so often in different shapes. They are usually flexible enough to fit explanations of human sacrifice since in their variety they cover many elements.

However, for the purposes of constructing a new interpretive framework, a working definition is needed. For this thesis, I have chosen to formulate my own workable definition based heavily on the definition used by Recht in 2014, but reliant on the scholarly work of the field:

''A Sacrifice refers to the process of killing a living entity deliberately for the purposes of the event to engage and/or negotiate with perceived supranatural forces.''

Clearly this is a broad definition and far from perfect. Inanimate objects are left aside for now, though I would argue that the process of sacrifice transforms them to living entities of a kind. At least it emphasizes the practical aspects of sacrifice I wish to pursue and develop throughout these pages. The words religion and deity have been carefully left out as those are reflections of our contemporary concepts of the supranatural.

The word perceived is important too. One can assume beyond any reasonable doubt that killing a human being or disemboweling a cow does in fact not influence natural or supranatural phenomena such as rainfall or divine blessings. It does affect human psychology and therefore behavior, but that is as far as it goes. The perceived supranatural is therefore one of the few approaches to believe that truly encompasses all religious and spiritual phenomenon. It emphasizes the one element they all have in common, namely that in most cased they cannot exist in accordance with natural laws and do therefore not impact the world outside of the context of human imagination and psychophysical agency. Above mentioned definition is thus a suitable one to classify human sacrificial behavior, both with respect to its interaction with real and imagined realities. It is not all encompassing but may harbor any specific type of practice whilst leaving room to understand it within its specific context.

3.2.2. Archaeological paradigms of human Sacrifice

The discussion concerned with the definition of sacrifice is important in determining what constitutes human sacrifice. However, equally important is the identification of this practice in materials, or archaeological, context. The difference between a discarded pile of (animal) bones around a fireplace and a purposeful deposition of sacrificial human remains can be very difficult to tell apart and may lead to many a discussion (Recht 2014). Even if human remains are found in ‘’suspicious’’ or extraordinary circumstances it can still be very hard to archaeologically verify beyond any reasonable doubt that human sacrifice has been practiced. Killings in supposed sacrificial contexts may as well have been a murder, lawful execution, suicide (Recht 2014, 5-6). Furthermore, those forms of death may still all be contexts for a human sacrifice.

In Viking Age contexts there are similar problems. Graves and sites are often open to multiple interpretations. Nevertheless scholars, and archaeologists particularly, have looked at this issue from a global perspective and tried to counter the issues by providing interpretive outlines. Human Sacrifice is after all a worldwide phenomenon and has thus left traces in numerable contexts around the world which are open to comparative studies. From it one can distill a set of guidelines which if encountered in an archaeological context might be an indication of Human Sacrifice (Recht 2014, 5-6). Those guidelines have been summed up in a list by Recht which looks something like this:

- Human remains in contexts identifiable as intendedly sacred/supranatural
- Clear patterns in human remains suggesting a selective process, based on, e.g., age, sex, or bodily deformities.
- The simultaneous burial of several people, especially with either overall equal status or with one individual apparently treated differently.
- Signs of careful curation of the interred remains, reflecting for example scenes of daily life.
- Evidence of violence (cause of death, binding, other types of submission).
- Human remains associate with the construction of structures (especially foundations or later additions).
- Similarity in treatment of animal and human skeletal remains, especially where sacrifice is suspected of the animal remains.
- Abnormal context/treatment of body in relation to the area and period

Individually these elements are not bulletproof indications of human sacrifice in archaeological contexts, but when several of these appear in any given site, they may add to the strength of such an argument. Though these guidelines are derived from human sacrifice as a global practice, it is crucial to always review any potentially sacrificial sites in the context of the culture, time, and place where it has been found, appreciating the great diversity (Carrasco 2013, 210-215). Striking a balance between universal traces of human practice whilst appreciating diversity is indeed one of the main challenges when it comes to so explicit a practice. That is exactly the issue I will examine. To do so I will start by presenting the broadest subcategories of human sacrifice which are identified around the world, and later present specific examples of how they might differ from place to place.

Human Sacrifice and Mortuary practices

By far the most common type of sacrifice worldwide is mortuary sacrifice (Recht 2014, 6-7). This type of sacrifice refers to all cases of presumed human sacrifice which are directly placed in, linked to, or very close by a burial complex. An important subcategory here is the master-retainer sacrifice where the archaeological material seems to indicate that one individual may have been accompanied by other into death. Recht uses the word ‘’subordinate’’ to differentiate between the occupants of a grave site, however, I want to explicitly cast this out from the definition as it presumes a social relationship between the dead

which we cannot be certain off. The relationship they may have had whilst still alive may have varied greatly from actual master-slave relationships to husband and wife or have spiritual connotations which overwrite secular social hierarchies (Recht 2014, 6-7). The mortuary subcategory is most relevant in Viking Age context also.

Human Sacrifice and construction

Finding traces of human sacrifice in relation to construction is also a relatively common subcategory of the practice (Recht 2014, 5-7). Here one can think of bodies clearly and purposefully deposited below the foundations of structures such as temples, public works, or even private spaces. It seems like especially doorways, gates, and portals are ubiquitously considered to be potent places for deposition, which can be imagined perhaps in a similar fashion as postulated by Marianne Eriksen in Viking Age context. (Eriksen 2015). Bodies may also be found not exactly in the building but in very close vicinity to them, marking an area around the completed construction which hints at their sacrifice taking place during construction phases.

Spiritual spaces, places, and specific venues

Besides these above-mentioned contexts in which one can encounter Human Sacrifice has also been practiced in ways which leave preciously little archeological traces. The bog bodies of Northern Europe might be a good example. The fact that we still have this material to refer to is a combination of luck and unique natural preservation. If this is in fact human sacrifice we are witnessing, it is by sheer coincidence that we can find the relative space and place where the act has been carried out. From Mesoamerica to Europe and Asia we know that human sacrifice was carried out in the context of war and battle, meaning that places with capable of ‘’carrying’’ the potency of a human sacrifice could be designated at will and outside the boundaries of communities too. There are also the great sacrifices in Mesoamerica taking place on the pyramids and other constructions which disposed of sacrificed remains in intangible ways materially speaking (Carassco 2013, 212-215). Places of outside worship, like sacred groves, may have been sites of sacrifice and it would be very hard to ever discover them if not for very specific and lucky find. This last category therefore represents the broad range of occasions in which human sacrifice may have taken place in specified rituals which are archaeologically very intangible. In opposition to the above-mentioned categories which by virtue of their context seem to hint at the significance of the sacrifices, the motivations behind

these widespread sacrifices might be almost endless and hard to unravel without the help of additional sources such as iconography or writing.

3.2.3 Human Sacrifice in a global perspective

The practice of human sacrifice is found nearly worldwide throughout space and time (Recht 2014). Now follow some primary examples of human sacrifice globally to provide a backdrop against which to place the phenomenon in the Viking Age. It is not an extensive investigation into those specific cases for the sake of their better understanding, but rather to illustrate that the practices encountered in Scandinavia are far from unique in their construction, composition, and even applied violence.

The ancient Near East

Some of the oldest sites indicating large scale human sacrifice are those of the ancient cities of Ur, Jericho, and Tell Um ell-Marra, the oldest of which was founded roughly 3800 BCE. They are some of the earliest sites with relatively clear evidence of the practice, in a variety of different manifestations. The association has been around since the excavations done by Leonard Wooley in 1922 in Ur, when 16 tombs found have been indicated as being "Royal Tombs" precisely because they contained so many human bodies interpretably as sacrificial entities (Recht 2014, 8-26).

The site of Ur contains some examples of construction sacrifices, particularly the bodies of children appear often in this context. However, mortuary sacrifice is by far the most common form. There are many tombs which contain so called death pits, where the human victims are to be found. Most striking of all is the Great Death Pit of Ur which holds no less than 74 supposedly sacrificed humans, of which 68 woman and 6 males. Many of them were adorned with jewelry, interred with items such as musical instruments or weaponry, and in post-mortem stage moved meticulously into specific positions (Recht 2014, 8-14). Interpretating this almost overwhelming variety of sources is alluring but does come with some risk. For example, the gender classification for example comes mainly from associative finds. As Massimo Vidale has shown that associated gender does not always relate to biological sex in these sites (Vidale 2011, 444-448). Clearly, similar caution is not misplaced in Viking Age contexts. Their deaths too have been subject of debate. Initially the notion of mass suicide via poisoning was suggested, but recent evidence points towards the direction of violent trauma (Recht 2014, 16).

Though the city of Ur is by far the most massive collection of graves and human sacrificial victims in the area, it is not the only one. The practice seems to have been drawn out geographically, seemingly part of the local culture for a substantial period (Swarch 2006). Whilst the mortuary sacrifices in Ur and Jericho are largely mortuary related, the sacrifice in Tell Umm ell-Marra are more complex in nature and seem to allude to different types of rituals, ones without direct funerary connotation. There is however generally a certain inscrutable element to those contexts which are not mortuary in nature as it becomes much harder to determine whether deliberate sacrifice took place, or something else was going on. The human sacrifices in mortuary context are belonging firmly to the master retainer category, to the extent that occasionally entire courts seem to have been interred with the main occupant off the grave. Whether or not this is the case, those individuals buried have their roles in life reflected in death, and what the metaphysical aim of this practice was to be remains uncertain. In the cases of the ancient Near East practice of human sacrifice is in some senses out of reach from the general populace due to its overwhelming association with the ruling elite. It is the construction sacrifices which might indicate a more diffused understanding of the power which the dedicated dead had over the living, considering that common knowledge of the placement and intention needed to be widely available for people to be affected by it. All in all, one may observe that in the earliest form of humans sacrifice its most characteristic manifestations are all present.

Ancient China

Some of the largest recorded finds containing human sacrifices are to be found in China. Especially at the site of Yinxu, in the modern city of Anyang which lies in the Henan region, vast mortuary complexes have been uncovered which house massive tombs (Recht 2014). These are estimated to date to around 1250 – 1040 BCE and belonged to what is known as the rulership period during which the so-called Shang state was in power. There is one cemetery, the Xibeigang cemetery, which houses vast numbers of sacrificial victims (Tang 2004, 124).

The tombs at this site all have a very similar shape. They consist of a central square or rectangular burial chamber which can be reached via a long and narrow corridor connected at one of the sides. The other three sides of the burial chamber have smaller narrow corridors extending from them, giving the tombs a star like appearance (Recht 2014, 46-47). Most tombs

have long since been plundered, but in the rare occasion when an undisturbed tomb has indeed been discovered the affluence in terms of material, and potentially supernatural, capital is enormous. The numbers of suspected sacrificial victims are amongst the highest known in any archeological site. Numbers vary from single sacrificed individuals (though this is relatively rare) to dozens in the ryal tombs, some numbering over a hundred supposedly sacrificed individual per tomb. Jigen Tang puts the rough number of sacrificial pits in Xibeigang at 2200, each containing on average 2-3 sacrificed individuals (Tang 2004 120-124).

The identification of the bodies as being the victim of sacrifice is largely due to their causes of death, which in most cases is explicitly violent, their position within the burial chamber or pit, and any other evident signs of struggle and restraint. By far the preferred and most common method of execution seems to have been decapitation, further evidenced by the large number of skulls found that are carefully stacked or placed. The victims are typically placed in three locations in the tomb: a pit below the coffin, on ledges surrounding the main chamber, and in the layers covering the tombs, as well as the side corridors (Recht 2014, 44-47). Interestingly human remains are also found to be mixed with animal remains, especially in the last location. Demographics differ with all layers of society represented in the victims, though young males seem to have been especially frequent.

Though the excavations of Xibeigang represent the most concentrated evidence of human sacrifice there is a lot of evidence suggesting that the practice was widespread, both geographically as demographically, not only the elites practiced it but other segments of the population too (Tang 2004, 53). Scholars hypothesize that human sacrifice was mostly brought into relation with ancestor worship. This assumption is based on written material from the era as well as what is known from their spiritual views (Recht 2014). Though the exact relationship and purpose between the victims and their final resting place remains elusive, great care was obviously put in constructing, placing, and executing the practices accompanying the executions. The interment of new willing and unwilling victims (there is likely to have been both) could have taken place over a protracted period. Therefore, these tombs were not stagnant and single use constructions, but active ritual spaces which continued to emanate and confirm the complex web of believes and practices with which they were associated (Tang 2004).

Northern Europe

The bog bodies of Northern Europe are perhaps most well-known by Viking Scholars when it comes to tracing Human Sacrifice outside of the confines of the traditional dates of the Viking Age. Moreover, it is not uncommon for these finds to be referred to as being part of a perceived long line of sacrificial traditions which can be traced from 500 BCE to the Viking Age (Dutton 2015, 201). Though the credibility of that view can, and will be, debated, the bog bodies represent a fascinating glimpse into what might be traces of a human sacrificial tradition within Northern Europe and it is worth to expand upon it. Especially so due to their frequent guest appearances in Viking scholarship.

The bog bodies are exactly that, bodies which come from bogs all over Northern Europe, mainly Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, England, and Ireland. Specific chemical processes present in bogs makes for a unique condition which can encourage unparalleled states of preservation, which has resulted in some of the most good-looking corpses ever found (Aldhouse-Green 2015). True estimates of the total number of bog bodies are difficult, but between 650 and 700 is a number often quoted, though the methodology of the initial proposer is often questioned. Moreover, not all those bog bodies come from a singular period. Dating bog bodies is surprisingly difficult due to a myriad of circumstantial factors such as contaminated carbon dating, organic deterioration, destruction, and a lack of excavational context (Recht 2014, 59-65). The pendulum of dating can easily swing between 600 BCE and modern times. Still, the bodies that are found, preserved, and dated provide a wealth of knowledge which is hard to equal.

The bodies most relevant to the discussion of human sacrifice are those commonly dated to the bracket 500 BCE – 50 CE. Since cremation was in those times the most common way of dealing with the death, bog deposits deviate from the trend, which might say something about their significance. Moreover, many of the bodies from this time show signs of deliberate violence, mutilation, bondage, and abuse (Recht 2014, 63-65). These combinations of circumstance have convinced many that human sacrifice is at work. However, in practice it is very difficult to discern between a sacrifice, ritual killing without sacrificial intend, execution, or any of the other myriad of socioeconomic or religious reasons a person may have been deposited outside of local funerary customs (Recht 2014). Some of the more famous bog bodies though, like the Tollund Man, Grauballe Man, the Girl of Yde, and the Kayhausen Boy, all

show very deliberate and ‘’delicate’’ treatment in relation to their death which one would not be expect from a mere execution (van der Sanden 1995, 93).

Interpretations vary widely. It is very tempting to designate bogs a liminal space which represent both water and land, a space via which interaction with imagined metaphysical realities are more potent (Recht 2014). There is merit to this approach, not least due to the large number of sacrificial objects found in bogs which are not human, such as jewelry, weaponry, and in some cases, what seem to be entire armies (van der Sanden 1995). In Ireland the discovery of bog bodies belonging to high status individuals placed on ancient borders have spawned theories about sacral kingship and the relationship between power arbitrations, geographical awareness, liminal spaces, and the deposition of human remains (Kelly 2012). One can be excused for looking at historical sources like Tacitus, who writes near contemporaneous with some of the bog finds and does claim that the Germanic tribes sacrifice humans for their gods but also judicial purposes, and sometimes both (Rives 2012, 55-58). Nevertheless, Tacitus is a source who most likely had no first-hand experience with the Germanic tribes and wrote from a very biased Roman perspective, mostly to endorse its actions or reflect them against the “other”. It is also a text which has been one of the most fundamental ones in providing a 20th century and contemporary Germanic identity, sometimes to disastrous effect (Rives 2012, 58-59). As an interpretive framework it should therefore be regarded with professional suspicion at all times.

Despite reoccurring themes and similarities in their contexts there are many differences also. Due to a lack of local written traditions scholars lack contexts, unlike the unified and historically embellished contexts such as the above treated Chinese examples. The bodies are both men and woman, seemingly wealthy individuals as well as poor, both physically divergent and completely usual, very old and very young (Recht 2014, 63-64). A great diversity seems once again the only thing that unifies the phenomenon. That has not stopped scholars from gathering the Northern European bog body phenomenon under the umbrella of the medieval Norse and Viking Age related sources. Especially Odin, hanging, Ibn Fadlan, and Adam of Bremen are frequently brought forward to construct an interpretative framework which allows one to comfortably leapfrog through time and see the bodies as part of a long traditions. It is tempting to identify large and homogeneous traditions by connecting the dots between bog body depositions, Medieval, and Classic texts, as well as speculation. Such splendid and personal finds scream for a story. Yet, the most essential take away from the Northern European

bog bodies is simply that there seemingly is a long-stretched tradition of bog depositions, and that human sacrifice are very plausibly part of that, but that any such deposits should be evaluated on an individual bases in accordance with their context, if this is at all possible.

Mesoamerica

Out of all places in the world Mesoamerica is perhaps most (in)famous for Human Sacrifices. In modern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador, the archaeological and historical legacy of human Sacrifice has for decades fueled and dominated popular imagination through Hollywood, novels, videogames, and art. In these reasons many cultural groups coexisted in both harmony and conflict, all borrowing traditions and traits from one another, including the practice of Human Sacrifice. More is known about the practice of human sacrifice in Mesoamerica then anywhere in the world due to an abundance in pictographic, historical, and archaeological evidence (Recht 2014, 77-81). The variety of practices and settings in which human sacrifice occurred is vast, from sporting events to private occasions, to elaborate city spanning rituals. It is not possible to elaborate upon all these manifestations, but some examples will be given below.

Construction sacrifices appear to have been a widespread phenomenon. The site of Teotihuacan is a good example of this practice. It is located roughly 40 km away from Mexico City and contains some of the most important sites from the Mayan period, which flourished between 300 CE and 900 CE (Recht 2014, 81). A great variety of bigger and smaller pyramids is found there, many of which contain construction related sacrifices. Some of these sacrifices are related to initiate construction phases. The so-called Pyramid of the Great Feathered serpent has, for example, 137 killed individuals interred at its base and several in every new construction phase since its erection in 200 CE (Sugiyama 2005, 7). Sabura Sugiyama carried out extensive excavations of the site and carefully described all the human victims throughout the constructions, some 200 in total. His conclusion is that the depositions and treatment of these individuals is hyper specific. Their placement is in line with specific architectural elements of the pyramid, heads are always pointed towards the center, and celestial configurations or calendrical patterns appear in their lay out (Sugiyama 2005, 50–52, 220–223). All the individuals are moreover gifted items and material, decorated, and sometimes treated with postmortem processes. Their numerical distribution is further evidence of this specificity, as the number 14 and 20 appear very frequently which alludes to the Mayan words

for underworld and warrior. When the demographic distribution is considered, mostly male between the ages 16-35, any gets a sense of a hyper symbolic area which is ‘’guarded’’ by the dead (Sugiyama 2005, 104– 105).

Though the pyramid of the Feathered Serpent is but one example, these specific treatments and practices are prevalent in construction sites dating between 200 CE and 1000 CE all over Mesoamerica, and even beyond that (Recht 2014, 80-90). Aside from the construction sacrifices human sacrifice also took place in the context of religious and political rituals (though those two were often indistinguishable) with an even greater variety and specificity. For example, in the site of Teotihuacan it seems like the so-called Moon Pyramid was the location where predominantly middle-aged men met their end, and The Temple of the Feathered serpent was the location where women were killed (Recht 2014, 88). Human sacrifice could be specifically dedicated to rites which connected to agricultural phenomenon, war, construction, kingship, weather, and so on. Throughout these motivations, deities played a very clear role as focal points, if not arbitrators, for an interaction with the metaphysical or divine. Some spaces seem to have been specifically dedicated to generating or displaying certain types of effects, like excessive bloodletting, bodily perforations, decapitations, strangulations, or preparations for the inevitable end (Recht 2014). The most emblematic of these specifications is the very ubiquitous practice of removing the heart from a living victim. This practice was widespread, and evidence suggests that it had developed in a highly refined craft executed by experts with specific tools and spaces created solemnly for this purpose. All these variations carrying symbolic connotations of their own.

Importantly, the purposes and forms in which human sacrifice manifested was not singular and straightforward, but flexible, staggeringly diverse, and morbidly creative. Perhaps the example of this is the somewhat famous ‘’ball game’’. This game featured two teams who needed to shoot a rubber ball through hoops spread out over a rectangular court to score points, using their hips (Wilkerson 1984, 119–125). The most famous archaeological ball court is in Chichen Itza. What makes the game so infamous is the fact that evidence suggest that, at least in some cases, the losing team would be sacrificed (Wilkerson 1984). This is evidently an extreme potent arena for symbolical warfare and communal ritual negotiations and shows the extend of sacrificial diversity. Mesoamerica does not stay behind when it comes to master retainer type sacrifices. These too are abundantly found, though they do not stand out as much due to the large amount of other more unique and striking examples to be found. The patterns

in these burials are like those in the aforementioned Chinese and Near Eastern examples, however, they show a diversity in terms of placement, dressing, and execution (Recht 2014).

3.3 Human Sacrifice in the Viking Age

After the brief overview discussing human sacrifice from a global perspective, it is now time to focus our gaze back on the Viking Age. The topic of human sacrifice is one that conjures up many strong opinions within the field. Though the global overview, which is far from complete, should give the reader some sense of the ubiquity of the practice, as well as the many reasons and forms it appears in, there are surprisingly two pretty dichotomic schools of thought when it comes to human sacrifice in Northern Europe; those that see evidence for the practice everywhere, and those that are very hesitant to confirm its existence (Ratican 2019, 41-53; Walsh 2020, 156-157). This we have already observed with the bog bodies, where some observe accidents and judicial executions, while others recognize the patterns of a long-standing human sacrificial tradition. In Viking Age scholarship specifically, the term deviant burial has conveniently appeared to satisfy both camps, since it allows one to interpret such graves in both manners.

Considering the available evidence however, it seems more than plausible that the practice did in fact take place, and there have been voices that advocate for a more ‘’normalized’’ view on the practice when dealing with deviant burials. So, to better understand this process and prepare for the final chapter, now follows an overview of the archaeological evidence, as well as historical ones, most often utilized when researching human sacrifice in Viking Age. As before I will mostly limit my discussion to burials. However, some sources are too prominent to ignore, even though they may be stretching outside the scope of mortuary contexts, and I shall include them for the sake of completeness. This overview serves as an exemplary one which gives the reader an impression what constitutes the foundations of the human sacrifice discourse in the Viking Age.

3.3.1 Archaeological evidence for Human Sacrifice Viking Age burials

As we I have discussed, it is difficult to identify any grave, or site, as containing human sacrifice. This is partially due to such theoretical discrepancies as the hinted at problematic dichotomic divisions between the sacred and profane, which may indeed significantly influence

the number of eligible grave complexes. There are also the typological and definitional complications like the classification of divergent graves. Nevertheless, some burial complexes contain so many unique traits, or harken to well established expectations, that they are often referred to in context of human sacrifice. To create a comprehensible overview, I will once again differentiate between inhumation, cremation, and historical sources.

Inhumation

Th type of human sacrifice identifiable in inhumation context seems to predominantly be that of the master and retainer type, where one occupant of the grave appears to have been joined by a victim, for whatever purpose that may have originally been. Generally, many double burials have over the years been labeled with the sacrifice definition (Ratican 2019, 41-53). Good examples of these are the ten individuals found in Flakstad which is in Norway on the Lofoten archipelago. Of those ten individuals, 7 can be brought into relation with human sacrifice. Graves 5863 and 5865 are double burials and even a triple burial in grave 5684 (Naumann et al. 2014, 533-539). In those graves a consistent pattern arises where only one skull is present, one individual being ‘’complete’’, and the other interred were most likely separated from their heads, though it remains uncertain whether that occurred before or after death. Stable isotope analysis had furthermore shown that in each of the graves one individual was clearly enjoying a better quality of life, indicating a higher status as supposed to the other individuals. This has led to the likely assumption that these graves might represent human sacrifices in the mast retainer form, in this case perhaps slaves being sacrificed with their masters (Naumann et al. 2014, 536-539).

Other alleged sites where for human sacrifice took place in Norway are for example the three-grave found at Bikjholberg. The three-inhumation excavated there were found amongst a large scattering of cremated animal bones. Especially the skeleton 1/1953, which has been identified as biologically female, showed signs of sacrificial behavior as she was closely connected to large concentrations of animal bones, most likely bound, and without any grave goods whatsoever (Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995, 129-131). The other two show similar signs of mutilations, including decapitation, and an absence of grave goods. This complex has led many to speculate a potential executions site, and others have more strongly designated it a sacrificial or ritual arena (Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen 199, 129-1315). Further speculations exist in Norway, such as the designation of a human sacrifice in a boat

grave found on Donnes, Hov, Nordland. Here a female is buried right outside of the ship wherein is buried a male (Taylor 2014, 70-73). The female has been interpreted as being a sacrifice accompanying her master. Lastly it is worthy to mention the Oseberg burial, a site which has often been brought into connection with human sacrifice (Price 2008).

Denmark too is home to a selection of graves which are brought into connection with human sacrifice. In Bogovej, Langeland, a graveyard of 49 graves were excavated, dating roughly from the 10th to early 11th century. The site contained several ''deviant'' burials of which one, grave D, has been brought into connection with human sacrifice since the woman buried on top of the male occupant of the grave was found in a disarticulated position (Taylor 2014, 34-40). Such compositions have been more often deemed indicative of sacrificial contexts, such as with grave 6 and 80 excavated in Trelleborg (Norlund 1948). Dråby in Sjæland has 12 graves from the late 9th century, of which three are double ones, and they too have been interpreted as master retainer type sacrifices, though evidence for this is not overwhelming. Another spot for sacrificial sites in Denmark is found at Lejre, a known power center, where in 1953 a collection of 49 graves were excavated. Grave 55 contained two individuals buried on top of one another. The bottom individuals have been interpreted as a slave on account of their bodily deformities and poor grave goods, though options vary (Taylor 2014, 32-42).

Moving over to Sweden one also finds several graves which have been hypothesized to contain human sacrifices. Starting at the famous site of Birka there are at least 4 different graves carrying this label; Bj516, 632, 703, and A129 (Taylor 2014, 52). There are also the cremation/inhumation burials with such associations, but they are discussed below. Bj 516 is a high-status female chamber grave above which another burial, Bj632, was placed. This second individual has been interpreted as a sacrifice, and due to the position, the cause of death has been suggested to be live burial, though this has also been disputed (Gräslund 1981). Bj703 is very much similar, with a chamber grave and a second individual buried roughly 30 cm on top, again with Gräslund disputing the identification of human sacrifice (Gräslund 1981). Grave A129 represents another ''classic'' double grave with one individual buried atop another. The bottom man, known as the Elk man due to an interred set of antlers found next to him, was between 30 and 45 years of aged and accompanied by a relatively rich set of grave goods indicative of a hunter or warrior, possibly indicative of his occupancy during life. The top buried individual was between 20 and 25, most likely had his hands bound behind his back,

and his decapitated head was placed next to him (Holmquist-Olausson 1990, 176-181; Ratican 2019, 41-53). Moving to a place called Gällo in Jämtland, Sweden, we find a gave which has been compared to that of the Elk man, insofar as that off the 4 individuals buried there two were placed on top and received a similar sort of treatment (Holmquist-Olausson 1990, 178-181).

It is likely that the practice of human sacrifice was carried along with Scandinavians throughout the Viking Age diaspora. In the British Isles this is attested by one allegedly very likely and two plausible sites of the practice. The most likely, or in the words of Shane Mcleod *certain*, example occurs in Britain is on the Isle of Man at Ballateare (Mcleod 2018, 75-76). Here a burial mount, from the first half of the tenth century, contained the remains of a man in the age bracket 18-30. The man was interred in a coffin and accompanied by a variety of grave goods amongst which appears full warrior regalia like swords spears and shields. In the mount covering the grave was buried a woman, aged 25 to 30, who had been evidently killed by a blow to the back of her head and added to the construction of the burial mound. Significant here is that her remains were mixed in between those of animal remains, strengthening the sacrificial context (Mcleod 2018, 75-76). A boat grave also found on the Isle of Man, in Balladoole, disturbed a Christian burial site and contained three skulls, which has also raised the arguments for sacrifice. In his article Mcleod goes on to mention several more plausible occasions of human sacrifice in Britain and Ireland. First at Repton Monastery where he interprets the remains of several minors in a sacrificial context, whilst belonging to the mass burials associated with the great Heathen arm (Mcleod 2018, 77-79). Another mention is made of a site excavated in 1879 in Ireland where two women were found to be belonging to a material deposition after the slaughter of the local populous (Mcleod 20218, 80-83). This, however, is very hard to prove for certain.

Cremation

As has been explained before, inhumation graves are rather the exception than the norm. That obviously leads to complications when it comes to representing the accurate frequency and form of human sacrifice in burial contexts. Even the most elaborate, morbid, and numerically impressive killing ceremonies may be reduced to a relatively unnoticeable residue of ashes and bones which seems nothing out of the ordinary. There is thus an inevitable discrepancy in the available material, as most human sacrifices which have been established

with any semblance of certainty are inhumations. Still, there are some cases in which the potential symbiosis between cremation, inhumation, and sacrifice may be identified.

A boat burial known as grave K/XD, found in Kaupang Norway, which has been thought to date from the 10th century, is an example of this. What is striking about this burial is that it has been completely covered in a mixture of burned animal and human bones (Burials). This may be indicative of ritual sacrifice which was executed elsewhere, then burned, and added to the inhumation in that form later. Similarly, Birke offers some instances where the tentative link between inhumation and cremation has been made via human sacrifice. An example of this is grave Bj 1135. Here was found a coffin-less inhumation grave of a man who, much in line with the previous inhumation examples, was also supplied with a cremation urn that was buried on top of the grave at about 30 cm distance (Taylor 2014, 52). Mcleod also alludes to a possible human sacrifice burial in the shape of a cremation at Heath Wood, Ingleby, Derbyshire, in the cremation layer at Whithorn. Striking is that the burial complex is in an area closely associated with the ecclesiastic presence in the area, and still is clearly Scandinavian in origin. The surrounding graves are, much like the boat burials, covered in a layer of ashes and bones, also containing humans (Mcleod 2018. 80-86). He draws here an important parallel between the similar distribution of burned animal remains bones over inhumation graves throughout Scandinavia. However, these are the precious few examples where cremation has been brought into connection with human sacrifice. Considering the preference for this mortuary process during the Viking Age, it is likely that it happened more often than the examples allude to. However, it is archaeologically hard to establish this for certain.

3.3.2. Historical sources on human sacrifice

There are quite some written sources containing direct or indirect references to human sacrifice stemming from the Norse corpus, and even some contemporary eyewitness accounts, as well as other types of writings from before and after the Viking Age which mention the subject. Some of these sources have already been mentioned, like the account of Ibn Fadlan, without a doubt the most famous of all sources and likely to be the most influential on shaping our image of human sacrifice during the Viking Age (Moen and Walsh 2021, 598). In this overview I will outline some of the most striking examples of these sources since they are fundamental for understanding contemporary approaches to human sacrifice.

Not all sources which are utilized for the understanding of human sacrifice in the Viking Age stem from the Viking Age itself or after, some were first composed a considerable amount of time before that in late antiquity or before. Despite the problems inherent in using these sources, they are ubiquitous in many a scholar's work, seemingly irresistible as a solid foundation for the sacrificial tradition of Scandinavia. The first and foremost of these is the already mentioned Tacitus's Germania. He mentions on several occasions that individuals may be sacrificed to Mercury and Mars, his Romanized version of local deities which have been in turn identified as Wodan and Tiwaz, which in turn have often been transformed by contemporary audiences into Odin and Tyr respectively (Dutton 2015. 69). Tacitus states that they, the Germanic tribes, *''make vows which consigns horses, men, everything indeed on the vanquished side to destruction.''*. This line has been of great influence in the explanation of bog bodies too. Later in the 5th century Orosius writes of similar practices by the Cimbri, a steppingstone for some in terms of continued traditions (Dutton 2015, 157-164). Procopius's Gothic Wars also makes mention of human sacrifice, specifically in the form of hanging, a method which finds great resonance amongst those who are inclined to follow the guidelines of the Norse material. This reference to hanging is found again in a compiled set of classical works from the 10th century known as the Commenta Bernensia (Dutton 2015, 162-164).

From there we can Segway into the Norse corpus, as the method of hanging plays a very significant role within the textual approach to understanding human sacrifice in the Viking Age. Long has been the perceived connections between Odinn and death by hanging. His many names and kennings associated with him often involve a reference to the practice (Dutton 2015, 67-69). This has led many to use the texts featuring Odin as emblematic for sacrificial practices during the actual Viking Age (Dutton 2015; Price 2019). His self-immolation here is seen as a key to understanding motivations behind the sacrifice, as well as his constant relation to the execution of criminals, kings, warriors, and generally death all around. The stories where Odin is somehow involved in sacrifice, hanging, spears, and death are indeed plentiful, and the association is not unwarranted. Examples are the famous stanza of the Poetic Edda where Odin hangs from the great tree Yggdrasil, the sacrifice of King Vikar, and the many references to Odin when the topic of hanging comes up, including a large variety of kennings (Dutton 2015, 164-184).

Mythological stories relating to some forms of human sacrifice are identified in other places too. The story of Baldur's death has been interpreted in this context, specifically the

death of his wife as representing a form of suttee, the practice of a wife following their husband into death (Dutton 2015, 156). This trope of the wife accompanying her husband, or lover, in death occurs frequently throughout written material such as *Sörla Saga Sterka, Fornaldar Sögur,* and *Sigurðarkviða bin Skamma.* It is further noteworthy that the concept of hanging and accompaniment in graves appears in more examples from the Norse corpus, such as in Ynglinga saga, Grettis saga, Jómsvíkinga saga, Sverris saga, Eyrbyggja saga, and famous tales such as the sacrifice of King Aun (Ellis 1968, 50-59).

Potentially more insightful and direct sources are those that are not (entirely) of mythological nature, and sometimes even contemporary in composition. Continuing for example the discussion of humans sacrifices in the form of suttee, there are sources such as Flateyjarbók which allude to the practice still being around in the early 11th century. Saxo Grammaticus too mentions it the connection between Kings and sacrifice, and it is also mentioned by Snorri in his pseudohistorical work Heimskringla, where he mentioned warriors accompanying their King Herlaugr into the grave, alive, rather than submitting to King Harald Harfagr (Ellis 1968, 50-59). This motive of Kingly burial is mentioned more often in the cases of Bárðar Saga, Þorskfirðinga Saga, and Hrómundar Saga Greipssonar (Ellis 1968, 50-59). Though it does not specifically indicate human sacrifice these themes have played significant part in constructing an understanding of the practice in the Viking Age none the less.

Moving towards more contemporary sources which fall outside of the Norse corpus, things get vivid and perhaps even more interesting. The famous text written by Adam of Bremen describing the Pagan celebration taking place in Upsala is a source very often quoted in relation human sacrifice and perhaps only rivalled by Ibn Fadlan in terms of its popularity. Adam describes a festival taking place with 9-year intervals at which people from far and wide are present to celebrate pagan gods and make sacrifices. They supposedly sacrifice nine of each creature, including humans, and hang them in the trees around, whilst uttering and doing supposedly vile and unspeakable things (Dutton 2015, 178):

The sacrifice is of this nature: of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads [Schol.141: Feasts and sacrifices of this kind are solemnised for nine days. On each day they offer a man along with other living beings in such a number that in the course of nine days they will have made an offering of seventy-two creatures. This sacrifice takes place about the time

of the vernal equinox] with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple

Striking as these descriptions may be, Adam's political and religious biases are well-known, much debated and have almost certainly heavily colored them. It is now well understood that his motivations may have been to create a platform for establishing a Hamburg based Bishopric in those areas he accuses of committing pagan debaucheries. It does not mean his claims are completely unwarranted. At the very least the notion of sacrificial groves, hangings, and human sacrifice in and of itself is not unlikely to have existed. What is particularly difficult though is using small, and exciting, details from his account to explain very specific archaeological sites, artefacts, and depositions. As for the most important written source for human sacrifice in the Viking Age, we turn once again to Ibn Fadlan. The Arabic traveler who happened upon the Rus and witnessed their burial proceedings. The problems surrounding this text have already been mentioned, so now it suffices to make a quick description of the explicit moment of human sacrifice which takes place in the narrative, as it has been potentially the single most important source of interpretation for Viking Age burial practices.

The following summary is based on Montgomory's 2000 translation. In short, during the burial of a Chieftain on the move, one of the servant girls is asked to accompany her master into the grave. Most importantly for the underpinnings of our conceptualization of Viking Age human sacrifice, one of the girls' ''volunteers'', seemingly deeming it an honor. What follows is a 10-day lasting series of events preparing for the funeral, full of strange and bewildering practices. During this time the slave girl is treated like royalty and seems in a constant state of ecstasy and delight, singing and drinking. Meanwhile the preparations continue. Then an ominous figure appears on the scene called the Angel of Death, whom has been likened to a funeral director of sorts (or even a Valkery), and from there on out things change for the servant woman. During the final stages of the funeral practices, she passes all the tents and seems to be consecutively raped by at least 10 men who they do so for the love of their master. Whilst under the influence of intoxicated substances she is ''lifted'' over a portal, or doorway, of sorts. Here she several times over has visions of a world beyond life in which her master now dwells, as well as her family. When the final stage of the ceremony arrives, she is further intoxicated, made to say farewell, and sing a lengthy song. Bewildered she enters the tent placed on the boat, under guidance of the Angel of Death. This is when the deafening sounds of banging

shields starts, to hide the girl's death screams lest they should dissuade potential future victims. In the tent she is again raped by 6 men, then strangled, and finally stabbed to death. She then burns together with the corpse of her master as well as those of horses and other animals killed for the occasion (Montgomory 2000, 5-23).

Though I am abbreviating, this impressive and unsettling account has been the reason for a lot of ink to flow. It has colored our impression of Viking Age human sacrifice from Hollywood to lecture halls. It is the single most influential literary source on the topic of Viking burial practice. It has also overshadowed some other Arabic sources which also mention human sacrifice of some kind. An example is the life burials from the Rus mentioned by Iban Miskawei (Price 2008, 269). In all these cases again, one needs to be careful with blindly extracting detailed information, as in the end this account too is not free from biases and alterations. Still, the argument has been made that the Arabic perspective offers more nuance and bias free descriptions, more akin to sort of primitive ancient anthropological approach. Nevertheless, it is still very clear that these sources too contain strict literary, political, and religious tropes and biases influencing their content and should still be treated as risky (Farrugia 2020, 1-6). These are some of the most striking examples of written evidence for human sacrifice in the Viking Age, a list far from complete. Though enticing and exciting, they must be approached with extreme caution since they are so vivid that deriving conclusions from them is usually no problem, confirmation bias lurking nearby.

3.3.3 Other evidence

Some other evidence and artefacts which have been brought in relation to human sacrifice from the Viking Age are worth mentioning as they often return in debates on the subject. The first is pictographic evidence for the practice. There are only few artefacts belonging to this category, but they are not insignificant. Most prominent in this category are the Gotlandic Picture stones which have been used to argue for the existence of human sacrifice in the Viking age (Holck 1997). Some scholars have suggested it portrays a sacrifice in process as character is bend over on an altar-like construction, whilst an Odinic Valknut symbol hovers above, and a hanged character from dangles silently from a tree. Similarly, on the famous Oseberg tapestry a large tree is portrayed which seemingly contains 6 figures hanging from it (Price 2022, 75-78). Both images seem to reference to the theme of hanging and sacrifice, common throughout all the discussed written materials. Lastly there are examples of

placenames which have been interpreted as alluding to either hanging, sacrifice, or both, furthering the idea of sacred space in which these types of practices were carried out (Taylor 2014, 79-80).

3.3.4 Interpreting human sacrifice

Thus far I have presented an overview of the primary sources, both archaeological and otherwise, on which much of the discussions surrounding human sacrifice in the Viking Age are based. To give a complete overview of this topic I will now present some of the most common interpretive frameworks and explanations given for the practice. First and foremost, it is important to note that the vast majority of any interpretations regarding human sacrifice appears to have their roots firmly planted in the written material, potentially emboldened by a multidisciplinary cross-cultural approach. Whether it is the mythological, semi historical, hagiographical, or traveling accounts, these texts are often in the foundations upon which interpretation is based.

Broadly speaking there are two major frameworks which appear most often in explanations for the practice. The first one follows the Oxford Dictionary appropriate explanation of sacrifice, namely sacrifice to a deity, and the second is heavily focused on the idea of human sacrifice as being essentially a very special grave gift of some kind. These two broad outlines come each with their own subcategories but do represent broadly the two types of umbrellas beneath which all further interpretations can be placed. It is often acknowledged though that these two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and crossovers do in fact occur. No such division is ever perfect. Now I shall present some examples for each branch. When it comes to the dedication to deities one name rises above all in terms of frequent mention namely Odinn, Wodan, or any of the many other names this character is known and referred to. It is hard to identify one all encapsulating instigation of this character, as scholars draw large parallels between various names and deities through space and time, often from late antiquity all the way up to the Late Middle Ages, like linking Odin to the classical diety Mithras (Sundqvist 2004, 212-215). For simplicities sake I will refer to this multi diverse character simply as Odin from now, keeping the implied widespread nature of his appearance in mind. Summarized, it is often argued or presumed that all the qualities and power which Odin possesses (wisdom, victory, necromancy, prophecy, fate, shapeshifting, or any of the many other qualities attributed to him) can be negotiated over via the practice of human sacrifice to

him. There are indeed plentiful examples victims, slaves, prisoners, criminals, kings, warriors, apparently being sacrificed to the god directly or in association with him as part of a human/supernatural dialogue in written texts (Dutton 2015, 231-232).

Due to the prevalence of Odin in human sacrifice related stories the whole process has become infused with characteristics belonging to narrative tropes associated with the deity in all his manifestations. A good example of this is comes from Douglas Robert Dutton writings who frames human sacrifice through hanging in Odinic contexts as a martyrdom associated with the upper strata of society, with shamanic elements being present in the supposed execution of the associated rituals (Dutton 2015, 231-232). This conclusion is reached through a rather literal interpretation, extraction, and understanding of Odin from the diverse written records, roman sources, archaeological finds spanning centuries, art, and mythology. Though this work is specifically focused on the hanging aspect of sacrifice to Odin, it is far from the only instance of Odin being the pivotal axis for interpreting burial contexts and sacrifice (Price 2019, 91-100). It is no exaggeration to state that Odin is a leading red thread in discussions on human sacrifice in the Viking Age, as well as burial practices.

Scholars have in their observations been sensitive to the fact that judicial killings, crimes, and other seemingly more profane slayings may not need to necessarily be excluded from the category of sacrifice, since they could well have gone hand in hand (Recht 2014, 3-7). Here Tacitus appears often as a source since he implies that after the Germanic victory in the Teutoberg forest, during the year 9 CE respectively, prisoners of war were sacrificed to Mercury (read Odin). The worship of the Odinic figure throughout the ages is often brought into connection with the societal elite, thus has the practice of human sacrifice by implication (or explicitly) been allocated to activities performed for and by the higher strata of society (Karnitz 2022). In this context the idea of human sacrifices having the capacity to imbue spaces, events, and constructions of many kinds, (such as houses and groves) with significance, is widely accepted amongst scholars too (Karnitz 2022). This would allocate the practice of human sacrifice associated with Odin within the spheres of the social elite.

The second common framework views sacrificial victims more as grave goods. Of course, this does not mean rituals are therefore cannot be associated with specific deities. Here the sacrifices simply have different emphasis. In this burial context the most common perspective is to interpret human sacrifice victims as accompanying the main occupant of the

grave into the next life (Price 2008, 260-270). This is a very common way to interpret at the practice, as I have shown in a global perspective as well as from a literary point of view. The archaeological material does seem to at least not exclude such an understanding. There are some further distinctions to be made. One is that the master retainer setting is not only regarded as an archaeological typology but is also reflecting a social reality where the interred victim serves or is otherwise is bound to the main deceased. Another is making link with the mentioned practice of Suttee, a practice where women are thought join their husbands into the next world by jumping on funeral pyre's, being buried alive, or otherwise interred with the dead husband (Ellis 1968, 52-59). Another interpretation is more related to the notion of burial complexes as true ''living spaces'' where the dead were living on in a way resembling their everyday life. Here the living would join the dead in their graves to presumably ''live'' on (Price 2008, 263-266).

All these forms are again not mutually exclusive to one another. A woman joining her husband into the grave may have had any number of religious motivations for doing so, as would a slave girl. They furthermore both may have joined as servants, or as companions, something else, or all the above. The grave good approach is in a way both a very specific and vague interpretation of the practice, since accurate depictions of what this ''afterlife'' looked like to Viking Age individuals are actually very hard to clearly define and understand (that is, if proper source criticism is applied) (Ellis 1968, 7-16). It may also have varied greatly from place to place. The grave good approach does continue the line of associating human sacrifice with the elite, as archaeologically high-status graves are seen as a contributing factor to the plausibility of it, and textually speaking it is again the elites which feature most prominently in relation to the practice.

Lastly, I want to draw attention to the role played by the ritual performance theory and poetic approaches as discussed earlier in this thesis. Without going too much into detail here, for that I refer to chapter 4, this interpretative framework has been very important in creating a foundation for the fusion of textual and narrative approaches to Viking Age human sacrifice. Within Price's passing into poetry approach a vehicle is created with which sacrificial victims can be directly transported from ambiguous archaeological contexts into the pages of Myths, Sagas, and legends. This technique has been adopted widely and has resulted in the textually heavy approach to the subject. Indeed, Price is a strong advocate for explaining burial contexts via Fadlan's work (Price 2022). One can observe that performative approach is one of the most

effective components in constructing the narrative and textual framework surrounding human sacrifice as it so easily inserts elements from text into materiality. The following chapter will, keeping all the so far discussed in mind, propose an alternative structure through which potential sacrificial archaeological contexts can be approach and evaluated.

4. A (new) framework for analyzing Viking Age human Sacrifice in burial context

In this chapter all the above-mentioned information will be distilled into answering the primary questions this thesis asks. First will follow a concise critique of the performative/textual turn in the concurrent scholarly landscape. Secondly an alternative methodology will be presented. This methodology is rooted in a practical derived from a conscious departure of the performative perspective. It is the goal to offer a different toolset, or pathway, for examining human sacrifice.

4.1 Critiquing the textual performative take on human sacrifice in the Viking Age

So far, I have shown that human sacrifice is both a very present but also elusive topic and practice, especially in relation to the Viking Age. Though there is certainly evidence hinting at the practice, it remains very difficult to make sweeping claims or say anything for certain. A quick comparison between the evidence for human sacrifice in Northern Europe and other places globally, like Mesoamerica, makes it clear how little solid evidence we truly possess. No contemporary Viking Age texts, art, or archeological contexts are clear of any doubt seem to address the practice directly. The method to bridge this lack of evidence has thus far been through the consultation of and heavy reliance on the written sources applied to archaeological material. The methodological framework which has been used to do so is very often that of the performative approach, or at least heavily inspired by it. From this background arises a view of human sacrifice which his highly dramatized, involves willing victims, shamanic practices, and gods. It makes the past very tangible and vivid, but there are several problems with this methodology.

The main critique which can be levied against this approach to human sacrifice comes in the form of a question. Namely: what are we truly trying to discover and understand about the Viking past? It is indeed exciting to embellish the already fascinating Norse corpus with archeological evidence, it creates a similar effect as starting a horror movie with the sentence ‘’based on a true story’’. Especially the vivid topic of blood, sex, and death together applied to the already poignant context of Viking history makes for good reading. However, it does not go a long way in answering what actual practical function human sacrifice may have played in a socioeconomic and or spiritual worldview of the Vikings. Sure, one may refer to a specific power granted by Odin after the performance of certain actions, but any such explanation does

essentially not exceed the conclusion that sacrifice is some type of negotiation. The so strikingly worded smells, sounds, and screams from a burial may stimulate the imagination, but does it also do the same for the understanding? The sources can in a worst-case scenario function as a smoke screen generating a feeling of understanding which obscures the gaps in our knowledge.

This way the vast amount of available Norse sources for explanations of human sacrifice might act as a tunnel vision, or straight jacket, for understanding the phenomenon rather than explaining it. It sets expectations and blinds to alternative explanations which do not resonate with the material. Added to that, there are the many reasons why the specific sources used cannot be taken as departure points for careful reflections of Viking Age society as explained in chapter 2. Even in the best-case scenario they are very far from representative for explaining phenomena taking place during the Viking Age and its diaspora. Most erroneously, a heavy textual approach compresses a widely dispersed body of evidence, spread-out all-over Europe and beyond, through a single mold constructed out off a handful of written sources. It then produces a synthetic uniformity which is belying of the actual localized and diversified practices. Coupled with the mentioned lack of specific disciplinary caution it is a potent mixture for supporting hyperbolic conjecture.

This push towards synthetic uniformity and the infusion of specific narrative tropes matches the colonized trend of metanarratives of uniqueness as discussed in chapter 2. Over emphasizing the importance of sources may implicitly bar the way from doing proper comparative research beyond the confines of Scandinavian spheres, giving unreasonable significance to a very select set of written sources to construct an entire field of scholarship. Take for example Ibn Fadlan's account. Though the legitimacy of his narrative for representing Scandinavians has often been debated, in practice there is no question that it is omnipresent as a reference point for all sites and opinions connected to human sacrifice in Viking Age Scandinavia, or it's diaspora. It is a paradigmatic piece whose fundamental issues are often acknowledged, but seldom evaluated properly. At first glance his account does seem to fit perfectly over many phenomena found at archaeological sites throughout Scandinavia (Price 2008). However, the same goes for a wide variety of other cultures and their archaeological remains (Hraundal 2013).

The similarity of Fadlan's account to mortuary practices of Turkic Altaic people is a good example of this, but it is only very seldom acknowledged (Hraundal 2013). The way Fadlans account unfolds is extremely like to the composition of many well-known archeological and written accounts of funeral complexes from Turkic people in the region of (Hraunda 2013). Moreover, its geographical proximity, as well as linguistic implications, go a long way to place it even more firmly beyond the confines of Scandinavia and into multiple regions and culture. It in the very least invites larger discussions about the value of Fadlan's account as a source for explaining the entirety of Scandinavian burial practices throughout the Viking Age. This observation has already been made by Judith Jesch in her 1991 work *Woman in the Viking Age* (Jesch 1991,123). However, due to the performative ritual approach in combination with Norse sources and cherrypicked archaeological remains, Fadlans account is systematically transformed to fit a proper Scandinavian context, taking away the incentive for any comparative research which places it beyond usability of Viking Age research. It is simply too potent a script to be denied to the interpretative approach of ritual performance.

The heavy textual approach can also bring with it the risk of interring faulty narratives and expectations into paradigms of the Viking Age scholarship, both archaeologically and historically. A good example here is the trope of the willing slave girl. Though there are certainly discussions about the freedom of choice sacrificial victims, there is no denying that the Fadlan's account has established paradigms, like the willing slave girl victim, that color our expectations of human agency (Moen and Walsh 2021, 600 – 602). As Marianne Moen and Matthew J. Walsh point out, the male centric focus on Fadlan's (and his own) account has shaped expectations of scholars for generations on the gender aspects of sacrifice (Moen and Walsh 2021). Woman are seen as more submissive agents, divorced from their own agency, a trope which can by linked to the suttee like accounts which are prevalent in other sources. This trope represents a similar meta narrative as the meta narrative of uniqueness insofar that it unconsciously creates the paradigms for how the Viking Age is understood. The reality of sacrifice may have been far more complex, both in terms of individual agency, gender identification, or purpose (Moen and Walsh 2021, 606 – 607).

That these tropes can have direct consequences on interpretations is particularly tangible in the mentioned case of the ''certain'' human sacrifice in Isle of Man at Balladoole. Here there, in Mcleods words, seemed to be no question about the human sacrificial nature of the complex, with the whole composition of the grave mound and interred girl seemingly

emerging straight from lines of Fadlans pages. Indeed, Ibn Fadlan is again mentioned as the most important evidence due to the similarities in circumstances, meaning essentially a dead girl with a rich man (Mcleod 2018). However, as recent research has pointed out, the woman in question might stem from a much later date, making the hypothesis which sees the only certain case of human sacrifice in Great Britain suddenly very implausible (Moen and Walsh 2021, 604- 607). One may wonder to what extend the spectacular visions conjured up Fadlan may have guided expectations for what a human sacrificial context *must* look like, namely containing a young girl sacrificed with a strong man, and how many conclusions have been made relaying predominantly on these expectations. This instead of an understanding of the practice in its social, religious, economical, and political context.

This leads me back to critique of the performative approach to ritual human sacrifice. The flaws behind this approach have been mentioned in chapter 2, so I will refer to that chapter for an extensive and in-depth critique. What can be stated here is that the risks inherent in its methodological mechanisms are amplified when it attempts to explain phenomena which are already perceived as exciting, morbid, spectacular, and popular. The performative approach is seldom applied to understanding any ritualistic context that is not easily connected to mythological and folkloristic topics. This might because the performative method cannot function without the existence of a script, even if it acknowledges the flexible nature and changeability thereof. In its application it automatically gives written sources an unreasonable amount of importance, because if it did not, it would not function.

As chapter 2 has shown, the cognitive and philosophical foundations for ritual performance theory have long since disputed and largely put aside by those studying the topic. Of course, I do not wish to dispute the existence of a commonly understood narrative framework during the Viking Age (though be it highly diverse in nature) which was closely connected to power relations, status, and societal cohesion. The question is rather whether the idea of performance is the best way to understand access to and interaction with it. Much like the way historical sources are selectively used by archaeologists divorced from contextual criticism, so elements of the performance theory have allowed researchers to transform into the de-facto funeral directors themselves and write their own plays. After my observations I have concluded that the performative theory is often simply a vehicle for thematization. It is very well to call different elements from a ritual context by performative terminology, like calling participants ‘’players’’ or ‘’directors’’ and a ritual site a staging area. Yet, if it was not for the

interpretation of problematic sources, it is left standing empty. Lastly, as Bell points out, performance theorists become active participants in the ritual they are describing. In the case of the Viking Age, it is neigh impossible to stay away from the abundance of scripts ready for the taking to form them. By so doing it is not the pursuit of an objective understanding of the human condition which is leading in the examination of human sacrifice in the Viking Age, but rather whoever tells the best story.

Considering all of the above, it is my conclusions that the textual performative approach is not suited for the examination human sacrifice in the Viking Age. Instead of contributing to an understanding of the human condition in economic, social, supernatural, and physical dimensions, it creates a stage upon which can be performed the stories from Medieval sources, indiscriminately selected religious practices from far away, and more. Furthermore, by so doing it contributes to a long line of romanticized and colonial trends which are inherent in Viking Age scholarship as pointed out in chapter 2, sustaining a hyperbolic view of Scandinavia's uniqueness and isolation from broader European developments. Moreover, the performative approach shows many similarities in its behavior to how contemporary popular subcultural movements utilize the Viking Age as a chief source of inspiration to theme modern ideas. Epistemologically speaking, and in terms of time, embellishing modern political rallies with Viking Age rituals based on an interpretation of the Norse texts is little different then explaining Viking Age archaeological sites with Roman texts and supposed Bronze Age believes born from conjecture. After this rather polemic episode it is now time to turn explore the foundations of a constructive alternative for the performative approach.

4.2 From ritual performance to practice

In order to create a new framework for examining human sacrifice, explicitly in opposition to a performative approach, there is a need to review ritual through a different analytical lens. The goal is to transform the concept of ritual as a performance with implications for the community into a concept which better reflects its true purpose, namely its role as arbitrator of human relations to each other and perceived supernatural goals to achieve effects in the real world. It is in essence the goal to approach ritual as human tool. Within the confines of this metaphor ritualization is a kind of multi-tool with which a very large variety of results can be achieved in relation to the shaping of human behavior. Ritual sacrifice is so doing a practice which can be seen as belonging to a wide variety of other available tools to achieve a

desirable outcome of human interaction, such as the threat of violence, carnal persuasion, economic incentivizing, and many more. This is admittedly an abstract approach to human behavior but considering the relatively abstract nature of the majority of the archaeological records it might be fitting, if not simply safe, departure point for interpretations.

To understand Ritual sacrifice as a tool it is first necessary to explain the inner workings of the tool. My observations here are largely based on Catherine Bell's which states that "At a more complex level, ritualization is a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful. Such privileged distinctions may be drawn in a variety of culturally specific ways that render the ritualized acts as dominant in status" (Bell 1992, 90). Important to Bell's *ritual practice* approach is the notion of *redemptive hegemony*, a synthesis of the separate concepts of *hegemony* and the *redemptive process* that represents the manners by which persons fulfil, or discharge, their perceived obligations in relation to the social (power) hegemony which they consider themselves a part of.

Significantly, such a hegemony is not monolithic or singular, but in a state of constant creation and is ultimately an experienced structuring of power largely depended on the cognitive processes of an individual and their actions (Bell 1992, 83). Ritualization is thus not only the repetition and affirming of static cognitive cultural structures, like monolithic myths, but the process of actively creating and shaping them (albeit unconsciously) via the participation and consent of all those present. It achieves this by employing culturally and contextually specific strategies of behaving, which imbues said behaviour with authority and meaning. Unintentionally, the by-product of a ritual is always the creation of something new, which is often experienced as a continuation of their sense of reality by participants, thanks to culturally specific strategies, but it is in fact a perpetual novelty (Bell 1992, 69-118).

Important to this perspective is that it provides us with a way of understanding how all attendees of a ritual become individually attached to the ritual proceedings without having to rely on narrative sources only. It creates a potent environment for cultural dialectics in which participants can redeem their positions in relation to the power hegemony through ritualized death. Important to note is that this approach does not disregard the presence of mythological themes, ritual specialists, magic, or striking, indeed imagistic, elements. All these may still be present, but can be best regarded as the cultural, or practical, semantics of strategies which the process of *practical ritualization* employs to affirm the privileged status of certain moments

and elements and imbue them with cognitive potential. For those that were participating in the ritual these would have certainly mattered greatly, as they are the prerequisite for creating a mental space in which the redemptive processes can develop. The same may have been true for the ritual specialists, though a more real-political view could persuade one to take a more sinical stance to this assumption. The specific forms of believes are however not regarded as prerequisites of what is and is not ritual or the function thereof, as is the case with performance theory which relies on the internal logic of myth to explain ritual. It is the difference between trying to understand the role of cinema in society by trying to read a random script of a movie which is missing 80% of its pages or asking why people go to the movies in the first place and how it might affect their lives and behaviour.

To bring it back to the metaphor of tools, like the threat of violence might be seen as a tool to get person X to do Y based on fear for physical harm, in the same manner does ritualization through redemptive hegemonic application create spaces which incentivize individuals to behave a certain way, or accept certain behaviour from others, like overlordship. Ritualization is the tool par excellence with which otherwise mundane (or not so mundane) environments and actions can be transformed into powerful, indeed privileged, mnemonic occasions which provide strong cognitive foundations for the structuration of power hegemonies and human action, both in past and present. Every ritual in a small or large scale (re)formulates new definitions or sociocultural boundaries through the process of this *practical ritualization*. Ritual is thus not only the negotiator of sociocultural practise, or the exerciser of narratives and believes, but also the active the creator thereof within the context it takes place.

If ritual is a multitool made for the purpose of creating spaces of significance and redemptive hegemonic potency, the types of rituals which can be conducted are represented in this metaphor by the different utensils present on the multitool. Instead of knives, corkscrews, files, and tongs, think of sacrifices, dance, sex, and gender as the various implements which the ritual multitool can employ to achieve its goal. Of this human sacrifice might be one of the most striking ones. However, in its essence it is but a means to an end. There are infinite narratives that might colour it and give it shape, but the specificity thereof, whilst fascinating, is to be evaluated independently in every situation and contexts, since it is highly dependent thereof. Especially in the case of a period so diverse as the Viking Age.

4.3 Viking Age human sacrifice in a global perspective

In chapter 3 human sacrifice was considered in a global perspective, as well as the evidence for human sacrifice in the Viking Age only. When those two are compared it becomes clear quite quickly that, though there is evidence to suggest human sacrifice was likely practiced in Scandinavia at various points in time, this evidence pales in comparison to other sites around the globe. Especially in places like China and Mesoamerica we find undeniable traces of human sacrifice which are not only striking from an archaeological point of view but are joined by contemporary sources sometimes very specifically explaining the meaning, stories, and purpose underpinning the practice (Recht 2014, 80-83). Though the graves in Flakstad are impressive traces of human sacrifice in the past, they are not off the same order of magnitude as the temple of the serpent for example. When comparing these kinds of sites to understand the mechanics and purpose of human sacrifice in a society, I suggest therefore not to look to what mythology and narrative is applied to the context of human sacrifice, i.e., which type of deity requires what kind of dedication and song, but to the abstract manifestations of the practice. We must acknowledge that in Viking scholarship we in most cases simply lack the same kind of symbioses between different source materials like text and archaeology. Basing our understanding of human sacrifice on story and myth will therefore inevitably result in hyperboles.

A quick and simple comparative exercise between Mesoamerican human sacrifice and alternative Fadlan's account may clarify this point. Take Ibn Fadlan account and the grooming of the servant girl before her eventual death. Explaining that occasion with elements from the Norse corpus is easily and quickly done. From Valkyries to Odinic tropes, divine feasts, and prophecies, Draugr and portals. Just like a priest may find in the bible a verse for every occasion, so too can a good performative scholar find in the Norse corpus a story for every ritual. Before you know it a whole cosmological explanation for this grooming practice is in place where not the application and purpose, but apparition of the ritual has given shape to its interpretation.

Such observations may however be just shadows on the wall, reflections of Medieval literature and other contexts. It does little to explain the purpose of pre-ritual grooming. Let us now look at Mesoamerica. In a famous ritual description, a young man is selected to become, literally, the manifested incarnation of a god on earth. For a year he is paraded around, treated

like the highest of royalty, provided with all the luxuries and pleasure imaginable. During the course of the year, however, things start to turn rather ominous. The individual is placed in a cage every evening, so he does not flee, for the ultimate end of this year is a crescendo with the individual in question being ritually slaughtered to appease the imagined complex and colorful cosmological balance between man and the divine (Carrasco 2013). Thanks to the interplay of archaeology and text, as well as art, we are allowed a holistic glimpse of the mythology, purpose, and effect behind this sacrifice.

In Viking Age contexts, we do not have the same luxury of abundance of sources. What then can this episode of heightened grooming tell us about Viking Age human sacrifice, or Ibn Fadlans account? It can be observed that it generally seems to have been common practice that victims of sacrifice were carefully prepared for their ritual over long stretches of times so as to systematically strip them of their humanity, turning ritualistically into appropriate vessels for sacrifice. These victims could be of very high status, even kings, or low, like prisoners and slaves, and everything in between. Now comes the observation that human sacrifice rituals, in line with Bell's theory, could be used by the elite to maintain their control over the society they ruled. This is suggestion is strengthened by the fact human sacrifice seems to have exponentially grown in scale with the expanding of the civilizations carrying it out (Carrasco 2013). Then, looking at the grooming examples above, both the Mesoamerican one and Fadlan's account, and stripping away all the gods, cosmic believes, magic, and spirits, one is left with a simpler observation. Namely, that to execute a ritual human sacrifice, re-establishing the redemptive hegemony and utilizing its full potency, it is apparently beneficial to instigate a protracted period of "dehumanization" of the victim so that local believes me be projected onto them and transform them into a vehicle for effective social negotiation.

Such a bare bone observation, stripped of narrative fancy, can then be used to appreciate the function of human sacrifice in the Viking Age society. Since there are reasons to believe burials were protracted events, so too may have been the preparation of victims to accompany someone into the grave. This may in turn have given surrounding communities the chance to become aware of the impending sacrifice. That awareness could then influence, for example, the socioeconomic standing in the larger political field of the community conducting the sacrifice. The economically beneficial underpinnings of human sacrifice, as a form of self-infliction and property preservation, have been explored by Peter T. Leeson (Leeson 2014). He postulates that in tribal societies human sacrifice might have functioned as a deterrent for being

regarded as a pillaging target (Leeson 2014). There are many more such practical reasons why a sacrifice may have been useful for establishing hegemony, like maintaining power through the threat of violence, display abundance of wealth by deposing of possessions (in the case of slaves) or demonstrate one's family's dedication to prevailing social norms and ethic by adding people to the retinue of the deceased. Indeed, that may have then been explained via the medium of myth and story, but ultimately it is human action which transforms human observance into behavior.

Similarly, a wider appreciation for the ubiquity of grooming rites might also affect our expectations for the that archaeological remains of human sacrifice in the Viking Age. It is now, as we have seen, common practice to identify master retainer type sacrifices by indicating a clear master and slave scenario in the grave. The expectation is that at least one individual if of higher status. These ideas are often still based on the aforementioned tropes stemming from a direct interpretation of Fadlans work. However, when one steps outside the Scandinavian bubble such dichotomic views may be rather misplaced. The grooming stages of sacrificial victims may lead individuals being treated with the same dignity, or more, as the individuals they accompanied. Much like specific funerary clothes could have been made for the deceased, this too may have been the case for sacrificial victims. This can in turn be reflected in the archaeological record.

Naturally the above mentioned is largely conjecture and further research is required to confirm such speculations. However, my main goal has been to demonstrate that by holding Viking Age human sacrifice against the light of human sacrificial behavior and a practical approach to ritual, instead of performance and myth, the discourse surrounding the practice changes dramatically. The Valkyries and fireworks leave the stage and instead a dialogue emerges which consists of practical questions and endeavors to understand the function of sacrifice, without the drama. The following and last chapter will take all these considerations and, in line with a practical approach, suggest a simple step by step methodology for dealing with sacrifice.

4.4 A new ritual framework - Death by Negotiation

The last step of this thesis is the presentation of an alternative interpretive framework with which human sacrifice in the Viking Age can be approached and evaluated. This

framework is supposed to be a tool to create a platform for identifying human sacrifice in burial contexts and stimulating discourse on the subject which is not overly saturated by or reliant on textual sources and myth. Moreover, by following a structured approach to human sacrifice it aims to provide insert and explicit stage into the research to examine if there is room for faulty narratives to flourish which are in essence romantic, overly traditional, or even colonial in the sense that Svanberg suggests. The framework below is in the simplest terms much like a checklist. This list functions as red threat for the researcher to follow. I do not claim that this is a perfect and waterproof method for explaining or recognizing human sacrifice in every setting, rather its function is as a departure point with the aim of directing further investigation into a less nebulous direction then would, for example, a performative framework. In this thesis I have mainly dealt with burial practices, and this checklist is made predominantly with the intention to use it in that context. The checklist is based on all the data presented above and this is elaborated where needed.

4.4.1 A new framework: The theoretical paradigms

The new framework will like any method rely on a set of theoretical paradigms which underpin any conclusions reached with it. In this case those relate to what ritual human sacrifice is, since to recognize something, one must first agree upon what is sought. To do that I present the following three definitions:

Sacrifice = ''A Sacrifice refers to the process of killing a living entity deliberately for the purposes of the event to engage and/or negotiate with perceived supranatural forces.''

That those supernatural forces are reflections of human behavior and imaginations with the goal to arbitrate a redemptive hegemony encapsulated by the practical approach to ritual as suggested by Bell and discussed in chapter 4.2. The following quote will suffice to sum up this practical paradigm:

Ritual = "At a more complex level, ritualization is a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful. Such privileged distinctions may be drawn in a variety of culturally specific ways that render the ritualized acts as dominant in status"

Through this practice ritualization allows the process of redemptive hegemony to take place. Human sacrifice is thus, in my framework, primarily a tool to negotiate human relations with one another, and only secondly a reflection of supernatural believes

4.4.2 A new framework: Recognizing human sacrifice archaeologically

Imagine now that one is presented with an archaeological burial complex from the Viking Age. The goal is to determine if one is dealing with human sacrifice. To do so first we need to examine the complex using a set of indicators which might point to the most common practice of human sacrifice. The first step is thus to reflect on the most common occurrences. For this purpose, the list as presented in chapter 3, inspired by Recht, will do:

- Human remains in contexts identifiable as intendedly sacred/supranatural
- Clear patterns in human remains suggesting a selective process, based on, e.g., age, sex, or bodily deformities.
- The simultaneous burial of several people, especially with either overall equal status or with one individual apparently treated differently.
- Signs of careful curation of the interred remains, reflecting for example scens of daily life.
- Evidence of violence (cause of death, binding, other types of submission).
- Human remains associate with the construction of structures (especially foundations or later additions).
- Similarity in treatment of animal and human skeletal remains, especially where sacrifice is suspected of the animal remains.
- Abnormal context/treatment of body in relation to the area and period

4.4.2 A new framework: Recognizing human sacrifice in comparative context

Besides archaeological methods to recognize human sacrifice there are other ways to determine whether or not one may encounter remnants of the practice. These are based on comparative research of archaeological remains on a micro and macro level. Note that due to the great diversity and regionality of Viking Age burial practices, the more localized a comparative material is in relation to the burial site under examination, the more importance should be given to comparative materials and vice versa. For example, cross comparing local traces of human sacrifice may tell you more about the local manifestation of the practice then

cross comparing Lofoten with China as they are further removed and from a very different archaeological context. Through this method the term "divergent" may be somewhat avoided, since this is a definition mostly arising from comparing graves over vast amounts of space and time with pre-set expectations of normality which may not be applicable in the original context of the burial.

1. Maximum significance: Micro level:

How do the finds compare to confirmed sites containing human sacrifice in the same region and relative time frame? Example: *Several burials in one restricted region of Denmark, all dating between 800 and 950.*

2. Lesser significance: Macro level:

How do the finds compare to confirmed sites containing human sacrifice in the wider world and an expanded time frame? Example*: What are the similarities between human sacrifices in Lofoten in 900 CE. and in Germany in 50 CE*?

4.4.3 A new framework: Identifying human sacrifice

When the practice of human sacrifice has potentially been identified archaeologically in a burial complex the hypothesis can be strengthened by broadening through an interpretive framework. As I discussed in chapter 3.1 burials are thought to have played a very significant role in Viking Age society from political landmarks to potent environments for interaction with the perceived supranatural. The killing of a human being within this context is likely to have been a significant event with significant impact on those present to witness it, and potentially the location where it took place. To risk overinterpretation by reaching directly for sources and specifics, one can first make some broad distinction, and gradually narrow those down. The first can be the type of human sacrifice which are:

- Mortuary specific

This category can be used when the human sacrifice is evidently part of the burial complex and cannot be viewed outside of its context. This category contains for example the master/retainer type sacrifice which is often encountered.

- Construction related

This category can be used when the human sacrifice seems to evidently relate to a construction. This may still include burials, as potentially an individual may have been killed and carefully interred in relationship with a construction.

- Separated spaces, places, or specific venues

This category can be used when the human sacrifice seems to not relate to any burial site or construction and but still shows clear signs of potential sacrifice. Though difficult to establish, this category may be reserved for sacrificial groves and impromptu sacrifices, for example.

When this division is made one needs to try and perceive the potential purpose a human sacrifice might have played. To do so, the societal context in which the sacrifice has taken place must be understood as much as possible. There are some main dimensions of the contemporary society which could be investigated:

- The political dimension

This category concerns all things political. It can contain such questions as: Is the society tribal, autocratic, feudal, or otherwise? And how would human sacrifice facilitate that perpetuation of said power structure?

- The social dimension

This category concerns all things social. It can contain such questions as: What are the potential social implications of the gender(s) of the killed individual? Or what status position in society do the remains of this person reflect?

- The economic dimension

This category concerns all things economic. It can contain such questions as: What manner of capital exchange prevails in the region and how rich is archaeological context in relation thereto?

- The demographic dimension

This category concerns all things demographic. It can contain such questions as: What can be said about the demographic dimension within the society and how do the individuals in the archeological context relate thereto?

These are just some examples, but the point is to frame the find in a larger existing agenda of understanding. Important with all these dimensions is to ask oneself how human sacrifice might have practically influenced their development, both for good and ill.

Afterwards one can turn to written and artistic sources, as their total exclusion will not always be relevant. However, especially within Viking Age contexts this should be done with great appreciations for context, biases, and flaws. They should always first be separately historically investigated before applied to any archaeological context. relevant sources can be:

1. Contemporary eyewitness accounts.
2. Contemporary secondhand accounts.
3. Contemporary accounts further removed.
4. Contemporary writing concerning cosmogonical believes belonging to the direct same cultural and temporal context as the archaeological remains.
5. Artistic impressions unequivocally dealing with human sacrifice.

Sources from outside the direct cultural and temporal context of archaeological finds, such as lates Medieval myth and legends, should in principle be excluded for direct interpretation. There are clearly exceptions to this, like when classic texts are used in a medieval setting as is the case with Plinny the Elder's and Aristoteles's work in the Carolingian spheres. However, if one's interpretation of an archaeological context relies almost entirely on the interpretation of a single written source far removed from the burial context, it is safer to accept that there is simply no written sources, lest one hyperbolizes its significance and thus create flawed paradigms.

4.4.4 A new framework: Critical reflection

Lastly one should gather all information and reflect upon it through a specifically decolonized lens. Here it may be good to take Samberg's 5 observation and use them as a light against which your own findings can be held to critically examine them.

His 5 main observations are:

1. The omnipresent prevalence of a synthetic homogeneous Viking Age.
2. The overtly and overly nationalistic narratives permeating Viking Age history.
3. The omnipresence of "big figure history" where historical agency is often erroneously reserved for kings and elites.

4. The tunnel vision like presentation of the Viking Age as only about the unification of the three Scandinavian kingdoms, Viking plunder and voyages, and Christianization.
5. That the historically written Old Norse despite their obvious flaw and problems are the main guidelines in which archaeological material is interpreted

Of course, it is possible to use other postcolonial and critical methods, but Samberg's 5 main points are very relevant for this particular field. The point is to take time in every evaluation of human sacrifice to ask and evaluate how contemporary scholarly perceptions might have impacted your own conclusions and sources. Following these steps, it might be possible to at least recognize the practice and potentially generate a platform for further research and discussion which, in a best-case scenario, allows one to understand the function of human sacrifice in society. To demonstrate this, I will now apply my analytic framework to an archaeological burial complex in Kaupang.

5. Analysis – Kaupung burial 1953/I, II,III

In chapter 3.3.1 I have already mentioned the 1950-1957 excavation which took place on the farm of N. Kaupang, Tjølling, in the county of Vestfold, Norway. The excavations where chiefly lead by Charlotte Blindheim and Birgit Heyerdahl-Larsen (Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995). Specifically, the burial area of Bikjholberg and Lamøye. To put my new methodological framework to the test I will examine the graves I, II, and III which I have already mentioned are considered as possible examples of human sacrifice. The excavations had the explicit purpose of establishing whether or not the location matched the old description of Ohthere's Sciringsheal (Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995, 135). For the purpose of this thesis, we will zoom in on the Bikjholberg site, which was divided into two zones: a northern and southern one.

The excavated area measured roughly 300m2 and contained between 33-36 burials in which between 40 and 50 individuals had been buried. They were in this instance all inhumation burials though they were related to a cremation field closely which was in use around the same time as the burial field. This burial area's period of use is between the late 8th and early 10th century, with a heavy focus on the 9th. The field contains a significant amount of boat burials, some chamber graves, and also coffin burials. The graves we will be looking at fit neither of these categories. With the exception of one the graves are all flat graves and graves seem to have been reused over time, with indiscretion between man women. The determination

of sex has been done based on grave goods and where possible on osteological evidence. This resulted in a conclusion which found considerably higher number of men present then woman (Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995, 130-133). Though there are many rather spectacular inhumations spread out over the burial fields it has been concluded that to a certain extend most of this display similar and to be expected tracers of rites and magic, with one notable exception.

That exception concerns the two graves containing three burials I, II, and III (II and III are here buried together) located in the southern zone; they have already been briefly mentioned in chapter 3.3.1. The graves were excavated between 1953 and 1954 and are some of the most elusive graves found during the excavations. What sets them apart is that they are somewhat removed from the other graves, and they have no grave goods whatsoever. Grave II is confirmed the body of a man whilst the sex of graves I and III are being disputed (Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995, 131-132). They have been tentatively interpreted in connection with human sacrifices based on Gotlandic stone pictography and, of course, Ibn Fadlan (Holck 1987). However, the authors make it clear that any definitive interpretations are hard to do. Now I will again examine the raw archaeological data of these three graves in accordance with my methodology from chapter 4.

5.1 Archaeological identification

To examine the graves archaeologically I will one by one compare the data in accordance with the checklist I presented in chapter 4.

Human remains in contexts identifiable as intendedly sacred/supranatural

Graves II and III are not presented in a context of evidently and unquestionable sacred or supranatural circumstances. There are no clear amulets, implements, or other traces which can be exclusively identified thusly. Grave I however is found with the remains of (burned) animals akin in composition to sites which have been identified as sacrificial spaces.

Clear patterns in human remains suggesting a selective process, based on, e.g., age, sex, or bodily deformities.

Unfortunately, due to preservation conditions sex is hard to determine. However, the information which is available does not seem to suggest a pattern.

The simultaneous burial of several people, especially with either overall equal status or with one individual apparently treated differently.

Grave II and III area simultaneous burial. In this case it may be noted that individual II, a man, is missing his cranium and had his hands bound. Off individual III it is only possible to state that they are somewhat smaller than individual II.

Signs of careful curation of the interred remains, reflecting for example scenes of daily life.

There are no traces of this.

Evidence of violence (cause of death, binding, other types of submission).

There is clear evidence of violence in both graves. The body of grave I seems to have been mutilated quite extensively, to the point where excavators thought the body may have been moved at a later stage. This individual also had their hands bound, furthering the case for submission, and applied violence. The is carefully treated and dismembered. The same goes for individual II who seems to have had their hands bound and cranium removed.

Human remains associate with the construction of structures (especially foundations or later additions).

There are no constructions nearby, but the bones have been brought into connection with a boat grave from a nearby part of the grave field.

Similarity in treatment of animal and human skeletal remains, especially where sacrifice is suspected of the animal remains.

Especially individual I can be brought in close association with animal remains to the extend where it was suggested they were covered by a large animal, potentially a horse. Moreover, there is a great number of skeletal materials all spread out over the grave field though it is hard to confirm whether or not this is animal or human in nature.

Abnormal context/treatment of body in relation to the area and period

The graves contain no grave goods, in contrast with the other graves in Bikjholberg, and seem to be rather removed from the many other graves in the area. It does give the suggestion of a different treatment.

5.2 Comparative identification

After examining the archaeological markers of human sacrifice, it is now time to compare these with similar sites and contexts on a micro and macro level.

Micro level:

For a comparative identification based on Micro level we can have a look at the other graves in the Bikjholberg area or beyond in the Kaupang area. There appears to be no other confirmed graves in the burial are which carry any similar association of human sacrifice (Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995, 131-132). There are however very intricate graves with burials that certainly stand out in sheer complexity, containing multiple individuals, boats, animals, and are constructed over protracted periods of time. Furthermore, large amount of burned animal remains are found across the site which can be brought into relation with the grave field as a remnant of sacrifice of some sort (Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995, 131-133). Double and single burials are not uncommon in the area, though cremation seems to have been the standard. Christian burials often appear without grave goods, but the individuals I, II, and III are not positioned in and east/west position and generally the circumstances of their interment do not harken to those of known Christian practices in the area.

Macro Level:

Looking at a slightly larger scale we can compare the graves with other suspects of human sacrifice in modern Norway. The site which bears most resemblance with the three burials is the one excavated between 1980-1982 in Flakstad, Norway. These graves have already been mentioned above and are commonly viewed as examples of human sacrifice in Norway, especially after the 2014 paper by Naumann et al. (Naumann et al. 2014, 533-540). The graves contain individuals whose hands, like the individuals I and II from Kaupang, were bound. Another similarity is the removal of the cranium, which occurs often in Flakstad but here only with individual II. Other examples of human sacrifice from the same temporal frame in Norway are scare. Though the Oseberg burial is often cited as such, there is little evidence to actually make such claims beyond relating it to Ibn Fadlan and referring to the vastness of the burials. Having bound hands and being interred with another person has also been observed in Sweden, with the aforementioned Elkman being the most high-profile examples of the practice. The Kaupang burial differ from all these examples due to the absence of any grave goods. Whereas the other graves seem to have some material markers and identification points, these are absent in Kaupang, leaving only the bodies themselves. Comparatively burial I seems in its composition most similar to cremation pits surrounding burial fields and other sacrificial depositions in Scandinavia which may or may not always be related to burials (Holck 1997). It also bears some resemblance to the cremation layers at Whithorn mentioned by Mcleod, as

well as the addition ash layers over graves which have been brought into relation with human sacrifice. Similarly, the human remains are mixed in with animal remains in a context which does not adhere to the customary burial practices of the area.

5.3 Contextual Interpretations

When all the above is considered and an argument for human sacrifice is to be made, one can determine that two most likely categories here are

- #### Grave I - Separated spaces, places, or specific venues

This grave when interpreted as a human sacrifice does not adhere to a construction sacrifice, since it lacks a construction, or a master retainer format, since it lacks another individual. It is therefore a sacrifice taking place in a separate ritual space.

- #### Grave II/III – Master retainer sacrifice

These individuals do come closest to the master retainer form, though one needs to be careful to call any of a master. There is a specific difference in treatment between one body and the other, but drawing conclusion based on that is risky as the preservation of the bodies is far less than ideal. They have also not been subjected to such detailed examination as, for example, the graves in Flakstad. Nevertheless, the classic form of a master retainer setting is distinguishable.

The Viking Age context

Kaupang was a vibrant and important trading hub between the late 9th and early 10th century. Here about 400-600 people dwelled and yearly markets came and went with the season. There were strong trading relations with southern Scandinavia, the Baltics, and the Irish sea. Craftsmen were able to work there and do their business whilst maintaining international trading network (Skre 2008, 112-118). It would have been an international place with people coming from all over, each of which may have brought their own customs. It has been postulated that those travelers who died there may have been buried in Kaupang, making potentially for a diverse mix of practices. Moreover, there seems to be a high seasonal component to the habitation of Kaupung with a heavy emphasis on economic incentives. It is perhaps important to remind ourselves of the common practice of slavery in the Viking Age, meaning that humans can from an analytical point of view be regarded as economical asset. Uncomfortable as it may feel, in a trading town such as Kaupung a human in a grave can

potentially be regarded as a grave good, not a person in the humanistic sense. Kaupung waxes and wanes as a settlement in terms of permanency and importance. It was a slightly different community than others, like Hedeby and Birka, in Scandinavia. For example, very little to no evidence has been found of soil working (Skre 2008, 112-118). However, based on archaeological data there seems to have definitely been close connection to major powerbrokers and elite landlords in the Viking Age, making the location a politically potent one. In terms of supranatural practices in Kaupang it is safe to say that there is evidence of both Christian and non-Christian practices. Those are not always so clearly separated, however. The biggest distinction may be found in cremation, both of humans and animals, a practice not followed by most Christians of that time (Skre 2008, 112-118).

Historical sources

To my knowledge there are no written sources with contemporary accounts describing human sacrifice in the area. Based on the discussions in this thesis I deem that any other historical sources dealing with the topic, like Adam of Bremen and Ibn Fadlan, are too far removed in time and space to be reflective of Kaupang burial rites.

5.4 Conclusion:

The graves at Kaupang are complexes which deviate from the burial norm in the field of Bikjholberg. There are multiple clear signs which might frame them as containing human sacrifice. Both the archaeological evidence and comparative material supports this. Grave I can be viewed as a separated space type sacrifice based especially on the close relation to animal bones and burial II and III, a combined grave, display the hallmarks of a classic master retainer setting. Since sacrifice was indeed part of supranatural practices in the Viking Age this may be part of the explanation, though the narrative behind the sacrifices is impossible to state. Based on the unique composition of the graves in the archaeological site of Kaupang such an event would have likely been exceptional and had a considerable impact on the local society, potentially utilized by local powerbrokers to add to their status for economic, social, and or political gain, a not uncommon application of human sacrifice in small societies. It is questionable though whether these graves represent a widespread tradition of human sacrifice in Early Medieval Scandinavia. Relatively speaking there are very few sites which are comparable, like the graves in Flakstad, and any textual sources are absent completely. One may therefore postulate that insofar as human sacrifice in the Viking Age goes the graves at

Kaupang do represent the most common elements, but that the understanding of the practice as a whole deserves closer attention.

If my final analysis of the graves in Kaupang seems to have yielded a rather limited result, that is very much the point. It is always a strong conclusion to classify any grave as human sacrifices at all, considering the plethora of other circumstances which may have led to those specific interments. However, I do observe the available evidence pointing into that direction, and I also believe that with much further and in-depth research into the practice it is all which can be said. It would have been very tempting to take the mutilation of the primordial Ymir as a basis for explaining why the individual in grave I was dismembered and sacrificed, or perhaps use a performative setting to implant Fadlan onto the context. Though that sounds far-fetched, the point is that this would have all been possible, but it is not needed to reach similar results as a more dressed down approach gives you. Via a more practical approach of the archaeological remains one may state that human sacrifice might have occurred and that it had an impact on the realities of those who practiced it. It would have served a very practical function which in turn was depended on the contextual realities of those who participated in the ritual. That this ritual was filled with the colors, themes, and visuals which would have resonated with the participants is clear, but their manifestation unknowable.

Critical reflections

For the critical reflections of this particular analysis, I will refer to chapter (X) and (X). Those have been followed in the construction of this conclusion also.

6. Final Conclusion & further research

In this thesis it has been my aim to examine the performative textual approach to ritual and I have found it flawed. It contains much space for hyperbolic conjecture and storytelling which though exciting does not explain the phenomenon it focusses on adequately. Moreover, there is a real risk of playing into colonial, romantic, and traditional paradigms which unfortunately permeate Viking Age scholarship. This may in turn result in obscuring gaps in our knowledge and creating a false sense of understanding. Alternatively, one can maintain a more practical approach to ritual which does not bear the same fruits in terms of visual and imagined spectacle but does allow you to review human sacrifice without all the drama. All the narrative conjecture does not add to understanding but rather distracts. Hopefully this thesis will contribute to laying the foundations for a new and expanded inquiry into the topic which will depart from the performative approach and instead looks the practice of human sacrifice straight in the eye, not flinching in the face of its implications and issues. The only way we will further our knowledge is if we continue researching without all the drama.

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