



Kjetil Loftsgarden

Skeid – uncovering a fleeting meeting site

Although scarcely represented in archaeological or historical sources, place names reveal how widespread assemblies of the skeid-type were held throughout Norway, at least from the Viking Age/Early Middle Ages. These bottom-up organized types of gatherings were important centres of society, as hubs for communication and trade, and arenas for íþrótt (sport) and establishing and maintaining social ties.

This paper presents the spatial distribution of 564 skeid-names. Of these, 320 skeid-names are closer than two kilometres from a medieval church site, or one or more of the following place names: hov/hof, ting, or leik/lek. Through an examination of the landscape, archaeological finds and place names, 37 sites are highlighted as most likely to have hosted a skeid-type assembly. From these three sites are discussed more in detail.

The quantitative approach to place name data, in combination with archaeological and historical sources allows for an intriguing glimpse into the role and extent of a fleeting meeting site – the skeid.

Introduction

In late prehistoric and early historic times, the skeid (*skeið* n.), and other loosely organized recurring gatherings, were one of few places to meet people outside one's immediate family circle or closest neighbours. This was among the highlights of the year, a welcome break from the monotonous toil of everyday life. These places also served an important economic function, as a place for barter and trade (Loftsgarden 2017). Yet, we still know little about these informal yearly gatherings.

It is likely that skeids were widespread in the Viking Age – High Middle Ages (C. 800–1350 AD) (Vikstrand 2001, p. 360). The witness accounts and depictions of skeids, still a living tradition in some regions of Norway in the late 18th century, emphasize the more curious aspects – the horse fights and other carnivalesque features (Solheim 1956). Following recent archaeological research (Loftsgarden *et al.* 2017, Ødegaard 2021), this study has a quantitative approach. By using place names as well as archaeological and historical sources, I want to shed light on the distribution and prevalence of the skeid – where were skeids located, and how common was this type of gathering? I also want to explore the function of the skeids and how they relate to other types of assemblies.



Figure 1. An artist's rendition of a skeid. Source: © Centre for Educational Texts, University College of Southeast-Norway.

The archaeological and historical sources of the skeids are few and fragmented. However, place names hint at the widespread nature of this kind of assembly. Thus, my point of departure in this paper is place names. As early as 1898, Oluf Rygh argued that the element *skeid* in Norwegian place names referred to tracks for race and/or horse racing (NG vol. 1, p. 75). Still, a *skeid*-name will not necessarily point to an assembly site. The name element had a fundamental topographical meaning that is widely discussed and further, the names are probably not etymologically homogenous (Vikstrand 2001, p. 351-357, Christensen 2010, p. 89-90, see below). To increase the probability of identifying skeids that functioned as gathering sites, I will therefore focus on *skeid*-names that are in proximity to medieval church sites. These became important points of assembly from the Middle Ages. I will also seek out *skeid*-names that occur close to other place name elements that indicate gatherings, such as *hov/hof*, *ting* and *leik*. This is in line with the so-called name environment theory, of which the main hypothesis is that certain name elements relate to social functions in Iron Age society connected with the organisation of central places (see the Introduction, Maixner and Vikstrand this volume). These name elements are in themselves elusive and subjects to discussions: The element *hov/hof* had a fundamental meaning, 'hill, elevated place', but came to designate a magnate's residence, a hall or some sort of temple or sanctuary and are considered as dating from the 7th century, possibly earlier (Olsen 1926, p. 240-242, Stemshaug and Sandnes 1997, p. 225, Christensen 2010, p. 65-66). The element *ting* often points out places where the thing-meetings were held (Stemshaug and Sandnes 1997, p. 451, Semple *et al.* 2020). *Leik*, 'game, play' as in *Leikvollr* or *Leikvin* reflects more informal gathering places where competitions

were central (Buanes 1975, p. 178, Sandnes 1975, p. 52). Although the church sites and these place name elements indicate assemblies with different contents and may have changed over time, there is evidence to suggest that the location of assembly sites endured across long time periods (Ødegaard 2018).

The outlined method will give an initial indication of rural gathering places, which in turn should be the subject of further investigation in order to determine whether there in fact was gathering place – a skeid. As the evidence is connected with uncertainties, each name and its local environment must be evaluated to assess its individual status (see also Vikstrand, this volume). In this paper, I have chosen three sites as case studies, using available archaeological and historical sources. Still, this paper only scratches the surface of the significance and prevalence of this kind of site.

The skeids functioned as recurring hubs, connecting people across valleys and districts. They were of regional importance for communication and social interaction, as such, they may have been vital in the development of cultural norms (Loftsgarden et al 2017). Still, most skeid-sites were very different from the large central places of Scandinavia (e.g. Brink 1996, 1999, Christensen 2010), and seems to have been a bottom-up organized type of gathering.

The skeid

Through the descriptions of skeids held in the inland regions of Setesdalen and Telemark in the 18th century, we gain insight into the last remnants of a once widespread event (Gjellebøl 1800, p. 55–58). The skeid gatherings lasted a couple days each year, and were held in late summer, after the harvest. People from surrounding areas and hamlets met, gossiped and bartered. Competitions were an important part of skeids, especially horse fights and horse racing, where the contests followed well-established rules. The horse fights, as they are described as part of skeids in the 18th century, are remarkably similar to the way horse fights are described in the medieval laws and in saga literature.

Provisions regulating horse fights and horse races are stated in the regional Frostathing law (F ch. X 48) from the 12th–13th century and in the national law from 1274 (L ch. VII 36). Horse fights or horse races are also described in the following sagas: *Víga-Glúms saga*, ch. 13 and 18; *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ch. 29; *Njáls saga*, ch. 58 and 59; *Reykjela saga ok Víga-Skútu*, ch. 23; *Víglundar saga*, ch. 8 og 9; *Áróns saga Hjörleifssonar*, ch. 18; *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, ch. 4 and *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs*.

Medieval law texts, place names and Icelandic saga material indicate that horse fights, races and other contests (íþrótt) such as wrestling (*glíma*), feats of strength or ball games such as *knattleikr* have been part of the activities in places where people met, at least from Viking Age (Wessén 1921, Gunnell 1995, p. 24–35, Martin 2003, Gardela 2012, p. 240).

In the sagas, horse fights are referred to as *hestavíg* and are often described as part of larger gatherings where people met for contests (*leik*), barter (*kaup*), as well as for political discussions and resolution of conflicts (or the establishment of new ones) (Gogosz 1999, p. 27). Such gatherings are also referred to as *hestaþing*, *leikmót* or *leikstefna* (Wessén 1921, p.111, Gogosz 1999, p.17–18). Horse races or -fights were held on flat grassy plains, in valley bottoms or by riverbanks, where the spectators had a good panorama of the goings-on (Guðmundsson 1903, p. 35, Gogosz 1999, p. 30). This corresponds well with the landscape in which many *skeid*-names appear.

Although the geographical focus of this study is modern-day Norway, there are place names referring to gatherings with horse fights or -races in both Sweden and Iceland, while place names containing *skeid(e)/skeið* n. relating to cultic aspects or racing are not known in Denmark (Christensen 2010, p. 90). Some English place names suggest that horse fights were introduced to northern England with the Norse expansion. There was also a tradition of horse racing in Scotland (Macaulay 1764, p. 81–82, Whitaker 1958, p. 89). However, there are no indications that horse fighting was a widespread form of competition outside the regions with Norse influence (Smith 1955, p. 105–106).

The place name

Variations of the word *skeid* (ON *skeið* n.) in place names include Skei(d), Skeie, Skee, Skee- or Skede-. This list is not exhaustive. The etymological origin of *skeid*-names is hardly uniform however, its origin may be terrain descriptive and refer to a topographic divide (ON *skil*) (Norrby 1905, Pellijeff 1967, 1991, Stenvik 2001). It should be noted that *skeid* as describing a terrain formation, a divide, could also be a place well suited for a meeting place, for instance where two communication routes meet.

Ulf Erik Hagberg (1967) has proposed that the name derives from collecting and separating horses for sacrifice. Hagberg led the excavation of a sacrificial bog at Skedemosse at the island of Öland. Although only a part of the bog has been excavated, they found the remains of over a hundred horses and at least 38 humans being sacrificed during the Iron Age (Hagberg 1967, Hagberg and Pellijeff 1967, Fallgren 2020).

The explanation of *skeid* as being a place for meetings and activities of a communal and/or ritualistic nature, including horse-racing or -fighting, is most often put forth in Norwegian research (Olsen 1929, p. 69–71, Hovda 1970). Not least because of *skeids* of this kind being a living tradition in Norway until the 19th century. A similar conclusion has also been proposed in Sweden, where the *skeid*-names have been discussed by Per Vikstrand (2001). He studied the *Skædhvi*-names in particular and argues, based on analysis of the place name and the central location they have, that *skeid*-names can refer to a fenced-in, cult-ritual place or an ancient horse-racing and horse-fighting tradition with sacred and ritual connotations (Vikstrand 2001, p. 361).

Data and methods

Recent decades have seen an explosion in the amount of data available for archaeological and historical research. This, and rapidly increasing data capacity and more user-friendly software, have enabled us to systematize and analyse archaeological data on an unprecedented scale and speed. In this paper, I will triangulate place name data and archaeological and historical sources to initially identify possible *skeid*-sites. More than a million place names are part of the Central place name register (NO: Sentralt stedsnavnsregister (SSR)). Archaeological collections as well as almost all surveyed archaeological sites are digitized and available online (unimus.no and askeladden.ra.no). In addition, I have used spatial and topographical data available at The Norwegian Mapping Authority.

I have included farm names, but also other categories such as topographical names or names of shieling sites. For the 37 areas highlighted as most likely to have been the site of a *skeid*-

type assembly I have included the earliest recording of the farm name as stated in Oluf Rygh's 'Norske Gaardnamne' (1897–1936), see table 1.

The aggregated data used in this paper is available at the open-access repository Zenodo (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5566712>).



Figure 2. Spatial overview of 564 possible skeid-names. Base map: GIoLandPublic DEM from the European Environment Agency.

To provide an overview of possible skeid-sites, I searched SSR using the following terms: 'skei-', '-skeid', '-ski', '-skje', 'ski-', 'sked-', '-skid' and 'skjåk-'. I excluded place names that were obviously modern or otherwise did not fit. This left me 564 place names, including 154 farm names, see figure 2. In some places, there are several place names that likely point to the same skeid.

Using SSR to extract *skeid*-names makes the data prone to some uncertainties regarding name interpretations, because SSR is made up of today's forms of the names. To be on firmer ground regarding the interpretation of the *skeid*-names as alluding to assembly sites, the next step was to analyse the *skeid*-names in relation to medieval church sites, as well as place names associated with *ting*, *hov*/*hof* and *leik*.

I ran an overlay analysis using the geospatial processing program ArcGis and included only *skeid*-names that were closer than 2 km from a medieval church site, see figure 3. I used the same overlay analyses for a selection of place names from SSR, specifically '-hov', 'hov-', '-hof' and 'hof', as well as '-ting', and lastly '-lek', '-leik'.

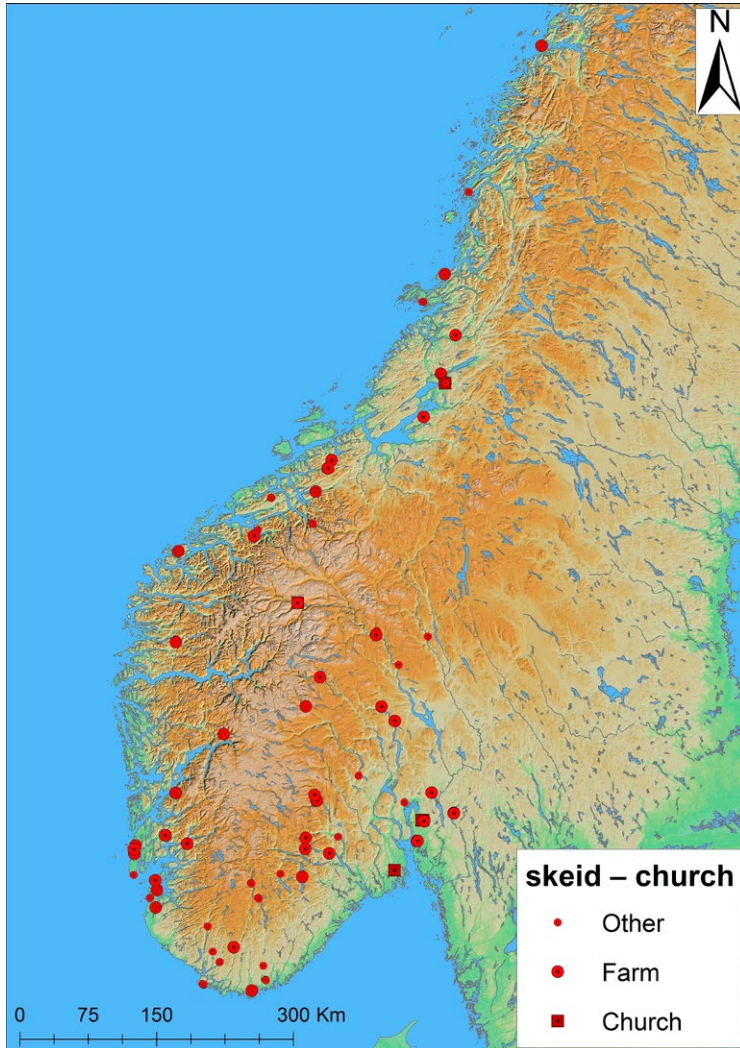


Figure 3. *Skeid*-names closer than 2 km to a medieval church site. Base map: *GioLandPublic DEM* from the European Environment Agency.

There are obvious flaws to this the method. When extracting large numbers of place names from SSR, the starting point is the modern spellings of the place names. I have compared this with archaeological and historical source material. There is therefore a risk that I end up with some sites that are archaeologically and historically interesting as potential meeting places, but where the place name is absent from older sources, or has a different etymological origin.

Results

Using the methods outlined above I found 184 *skeid*-names that were closer than two km from a medieval church site, 72 *skeid*-names closer than two km from a *hov/hof*-name, 24 *skeid*-names that were closer than two km from a *ting*-name and 41 *skeid*-names that were less than two km from a *-leik/lek* name. At several localities, the *skeid*-name was close to several of the mentioned place names.

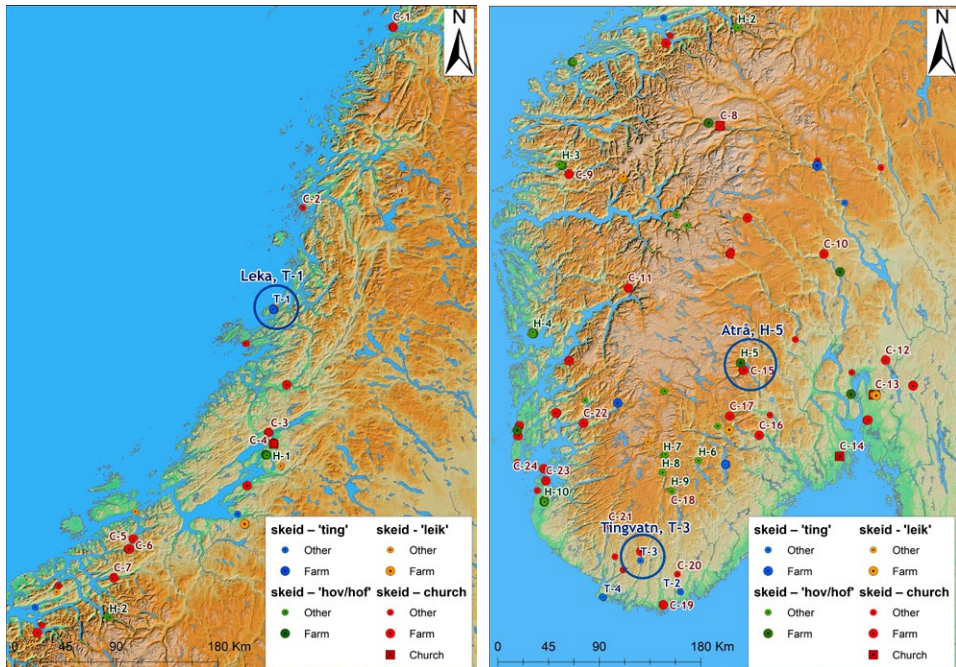


Figure 4. *Skeid*-names that are closer than two kilometres from a medieval church site, or one or more of the following place names: *hov/hof*, *ting*, or *leik/lek*. The case studies are highlighted with a blue ring. Base map: *GioLandPublic DEM* from the European Environment Agency.

There is a total of 320 *skeid*-names that are closer than two kilometres from a medieval church site, or one or more of the following place names: *hov/hof*, *ting*, or *leik/lek*, see appendix (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5566712>). Based on the landscape, archaeological finds and place names, I have chosen to highlight 37 areas that I find most likely to have hosted a *skeid*-type assembly, see figure 4 and table 1. This does not, however, rule out the possibility that some of the remaining sites may also have been *skeids*.

The site numbering in table 1 and the symbols used in figure 4 is applies through the paper. All points are *skeid*-names, however blue indicates that the *skeid*-name is closer than 2 km

from a *ting*-name, red indicates that the *skeid*-name is closer than 2 km from a medieval church site, and so on.

Table 1. 37 of the most promising sites to have hosted an assembly of the *skeid*-type.

No	SSR_name type	Place name	Municipality
C-1	Farm, topography	<i>Skei</i> (NG, vol. 16, p. 90: Skee 1567), <i>Skeiddalen</i> , <i>Skeidhaug</i> , and more	Bodø
C-2	Topography	<i>Skeisvika</i>	Alstahaug
C-3	Farm, topography	<i>Skei</i> (NG, vol. 15, p. 269: Skedt 1559), <i>Skeismyra</i> , <i>Skeisplassen</i> , and more	Steinkjer
C-4	Church, farm, topography	<i>Skei</i> kirke, <i>Kjerkskei</i> , <i>Skei</i> (NG, vol. 15, p. 211: Skedt 1559), and more	Steinkjer
C-5	Farm	<i>Skeiet</i> (NG, vol. 14, p. 96: Schie 1667)	Hemne
C-6	Farm	<i>Skeiet</i> (not listed in NG), <i>Skeisbakkan</i>	Hemne
C-7	Farm, topography	<i>Skei</i> (NG, vol. 13, p. 415: Skeide DN. V 702, 1497), <i>Skeisøya</i>	Surnadal
C-8	Church, farm	<i>Skjåk</i> kyrkje, <i>Nigard Skjåk</i> (NG, vol. 4, p. 33: Skidakrum DN. III 137, 1326. Skedaukrum DN. III 145, 1330. Skedakr DN. I 228, 1343) <i>Uppigard Skjåk</i> , and more	Skjåk
C-9	Farm, shieling	<i>Skei</i> (NG, vol. 12, p. 325: Skey 1723), Skeistølen	Førde
C-10	Farm	<i>Skjak</i> (NG, vol. 4, p. 213: Scheagger 1520)	Nordre Land
C-11	Farm, topography	<i>Skeie</i> (NG, vol. 11, p. 481: Skeidh DN. III 571, 1446), <i>Skeiesflaten</i>	Ulvik
C-12	Farm	<i>Skedsmovollen</i> , <i>Skedsmo prestegård</i> (NG, vol. 2, p. 269: «Præstegaarden er den gamle Gaard Skeiðsmór eller Skeiðsmór, hvorefter Sognet har faaet Navn»)	Skedsmo
C-13	Church, farm	<i>Ski</i> kirke (NG, vol. 2, p. 38: «... den gamle Navneform er Skeiði». Skæidesbygd DN. II 72, 1306. Skeiðsbygd DN. IV 374, 1370) <i>Nordre Ski</i> , <i>Søndre Ski</i>	Ski
C-14	Church	<i>Skjee</i> kirke (NG, vol. 10, p. 190–191: Skæidaughum DN. IV 169, 1330)	Sandefjord
C-15	Farm	<i>Krosskei</i> , <i>Grønskei</i> (NG, vol. 7, p. 272: Grenaskææd DN. IX 294 c. 1430)	Tinn
C-16	Farm	<i>Løvskeid</i> (cotter's holding, NO: husmannsplass)	Bø
C-17	Farm	<i>Skeie</i> (NG, vol. 7, p. 332: Skier 1585, Skee 1602)	Seljord
C-19	Farm, topography	<i>Skeie</i> (NG, vol. 9, p. 65: Schede DN. XIII 670 671, 1534), <i>Skeiebukta</i> , and more	Mandal
C-20	Topography	<i>Skeia</i>	Vennsla
C-21	Topography	<i>Skeihaugen</i>	Sirdal
C-22	Farm	<i>Skeide</i> (NG, vol. 10, p. 352: Skee 1563)	Suldal
C-23	Farm, topography	<i>Skeie</i> (NG, vol. 10, p. 196, Skeidhe i Hunduoku DN. IV 387, 1379), <i>Skeisvika</i> , and more	Stavanger
C-24	Farm	<i>Hauskje</i> (NG, vol. 10, p.260: Hauskeim DN. IV 159, 1328, Hauskeidh DN. II 525, 1429)	Rennesøy
H-1	Farm	<i>Skei</i> , (NG, vol. 15, p. 211: Skedhe NRJ. II 214., 1520) <i>Nedre Skei</i>	Steinkjer
H-2	Topography	<i>Skeihammaren</i>	Sunnal

No	SSR_name type	Place name	Municipality
H-3	Farm, topography	<i>Skei</i> (NG, vo. 12, p.336: Skiede 1603), <i>Skeislona</i> , and more	Naustdal
H-4	Farm, topography	<i>Skeie</i> , <i>Skeisosen</i> , and more	Os
H-5	Farm, topography	<i>Skeie</i> (NG, vol. 7, p. 269: <i>Sckiee</i> 1723), <i>Hånåskei</i>	Tinn
H-6	Archaeological site	<i>Skeisteinen</i>	Fyresdal
H-7	Topography, shieling	<i>Skeid</i> , <i>Skeidet</i> , <i>Skeidstøylen</i> , and more	Valle
H-8	Topography	<i>Skeidet</i>	Valle
H-9	Topography	<i>Skeie</i> , <i>Skeievja</i>	Bygland
H-10	Farm	<i>Skei</i> (NG, vol. 10, p. 172: Skie 1616)	Sandnes
T-1	Farm, topography	<i>Skei</i> (NG, vol. 15, p. 371: Skede NRJ. III 215, 1521), <i>Skeishamna</i> , <i>Skeismyrå</i> , and more	Leka
T-2	Topography	<i>Skeivollen</i> , <i>Skeibekke</i> , <i>Skeihommeren</i>	Songdalen
T-3	Topography	<i>Skeiæggra</i>	Hægebostad
T-4	Hamlet, topography	<i>Skeime</i> , <i>Skeimejordet</i> , and more	Farsund

The highlighted sites are all located close to the settlement areas; in addition, there are several *skeid*-names that are found in the outland and mountainous areas. Myths and legends are often associated with the outland assembly-sites, and archaeological finds show that these can have an equal time depth as skeid-sites closer to the farms (Loftsgarden *et al.* 2017). My overview shows that *skeid*-names are found in mountains and woodland areas from most of South Norway, see figure 5.

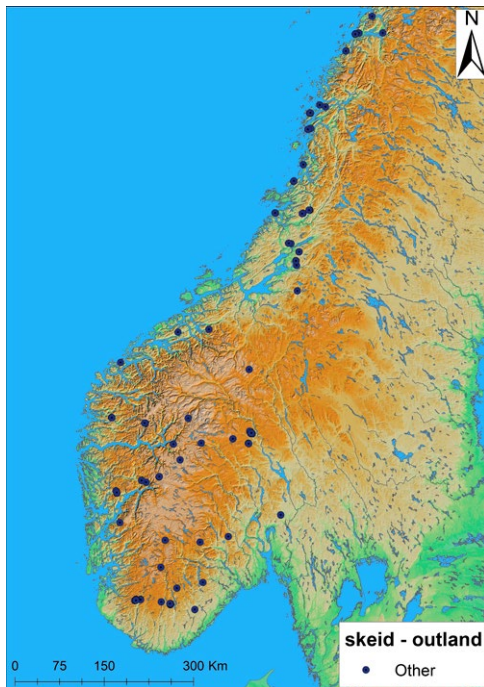


Figure 5. *Skeid*-names in mountainous and woodland areas. Base map: GioLandPublic DEM from the European Environment Agency.

Case studies

The spatial distribution of *skeid*-names indicates that this was a widespread type of gathering. The ideal next step would be a thorough assessment of each site and the *skeid*-names in context. Unfortunately, this goes beyond the scope of this paper, and I will settle on examining three sites in more detail.

Leka, T-1

On the island of Leka, northwest in Trøndelag, we find a central farm called *Skei* (NG, vol. 15, p. 371: *Skede* NRJ. III 215, 1521). The farm is located on the eastern part of the Island, close to the Lekafjord where the main sailing route runs.

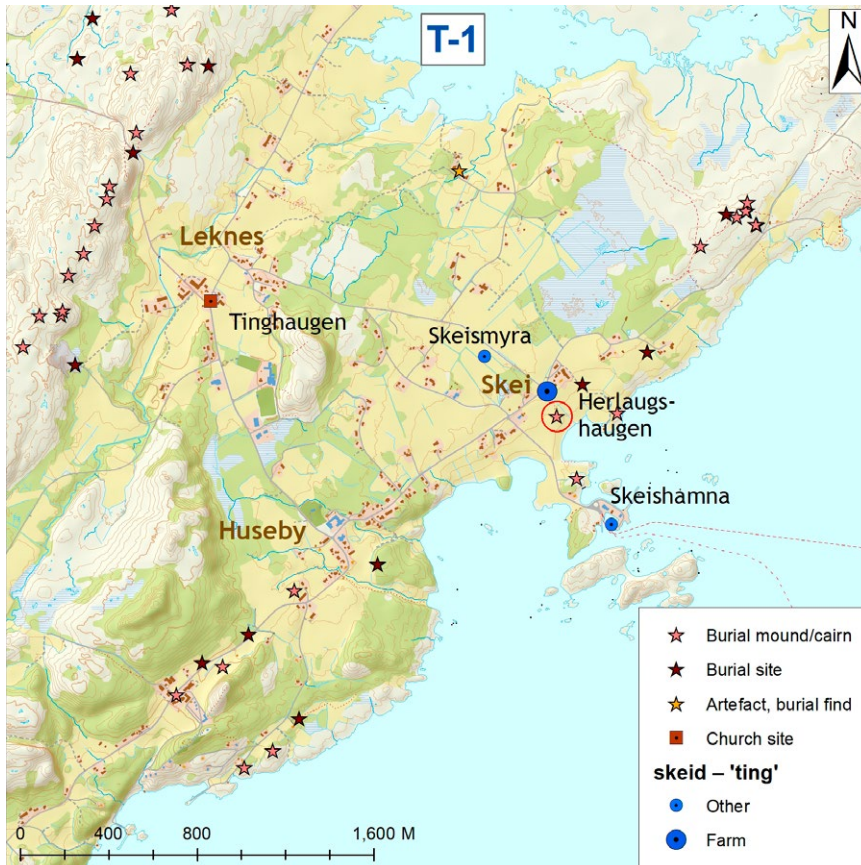


Figure 6. The central farm *Skei*, on the island of Leka, showing relevant place names, archaeological finds and sites. See Fig. 4. for location on an overview map. Base map: The Norwegian Mapping Authority.

A burial mound, Herlaugshaugen, is situated close to the farm *Skei*, marked with a red circle in figure 6. This is among the largest burial mounds from the Viking Age and has possibly been part of a larger burial ground (Rygh 1879–1880, p. 5–6). The mound had a diameter of up to 60 metres and has been as high as 12.5 metres seen from the seaside (Stamnes 2015). Three excavations have been made in the burial mound; unfortunately, this was done in the

period 1755–1780. A number of finds were made, including well-preserved human skeletons. Sadly, none of the finds from the 18th century excavations have been preserved. Based on reports and drawings, it is likely that the mound contained a buried ship. Judging from the size of the mound, one can speculate that the ship was as large, or larger, than the Oseberg and Gokstad ships (Petersen 1917, Alsaker 1996).

Herlaugshaugen is part of a rich natural and cultural landscape along Skeisneset, which extends from Skei to the northeast of the island. Here along the headland there are a number of cultural monuments such as burial mounds and house remains. At Leka the *skei*-name appears close to a ting-name, *Tinghaug*, and a church site. The church was moved in 1634, previously the church was located at *Leknes* (NG, vol. 15, p. 371: Leknes, DN. V 423, 1431, Jæger-Leirvik 1967). In the early Middle Ages, however, the church may have been situated close to the farm Skei (Munch 1849, p. 70).

Although it is tempting to interpret the farm name Leknes as a *leik*-name, this is not applicable in this case (Stemshaug and Sandnes 1997, p. 286–287). Even so, other place names, archaeological finds and sites reveals a place of regional importance and power, and likely a place for different kinds of gatherings, including a skeid close to the farm Skei.

Atrå, H-5

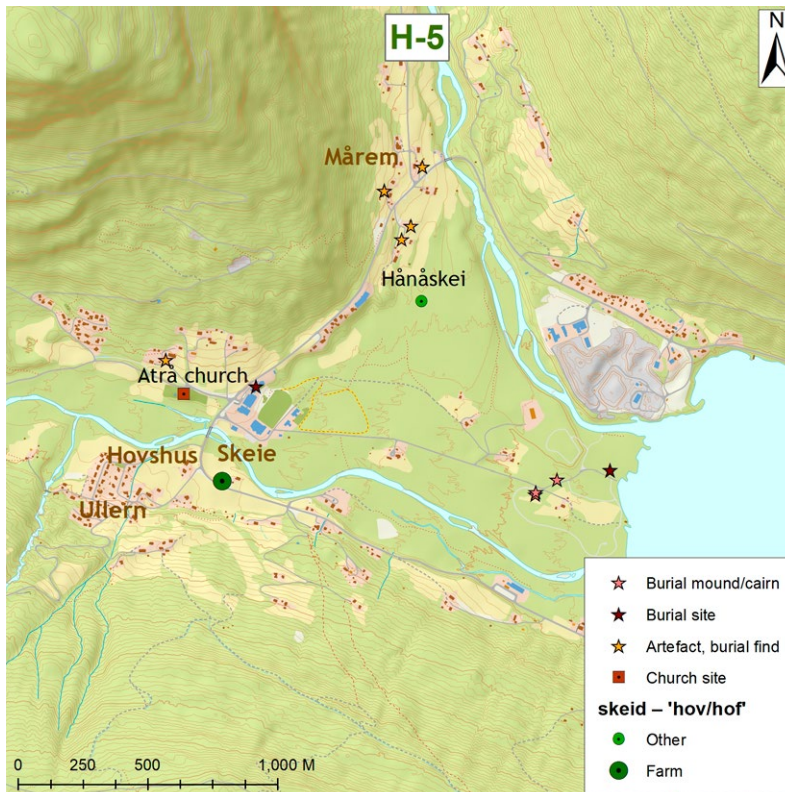


Figure 7. The central church site of Atrå, the nearby farms Skeie, Hovshus and Ullern. See Fig. 4. for location on an overview map. Base map: The Norwegian Mapping Authority.

The farm *Skeie* (NG, vo. 7, p. 269: Sckiee 1723) is located on a wide and open valley floor where the rivers Gøyst and Mår flow into lake Tinnsjø, in northern Telemark. The hamlet's name is Atrå and central to the settlement area is a church site. Atrå was a church of regional importance in the early Middle Ages and was consecrated around 1180 AD by Bishop Ragnar of Hamar, an event which is documented in a contemporary runic inscription on an exterior wall plank of the church (Iversen and Brendalsmo 2020, p. 153). Atrå was the centre of all public life in this region in the Middle Ages and early modern period (Einung 1942, p. 343).

Three farms are situated just south of the river Gøyst – the aforementioned Skeie, along with Ullern and Hovshus, see figure 7.

Ullern/Ullaren (NG, vol. 7, p. 268: Vlleren DN. I 744, 1511) may relate to the Norse god Ullr (Bugge 1918, p. 128, Olsen 1923, p. 24), but other more mundane explanations may apply. As is the case for *Hovshus* (NG, vol. 7, p. 269, Hofshus 1665), which Rygh relates to an elevation/high ground. However, this does not correspond well with the flat topography of the farm (Einung 1926, p. 24), thus a connection to the Old Norse *hof* cannot be ruled out.

The three farm names, and the church site attests to the importance of the area as a place for gatherings of various kinds, including a skeid, and they may also serve as a reminder of the futility of operating with strictly fixed distinctions between different types meeting places.

Tingvatn, T-3

Among the many *skeid*-names, one of the most interesting sites is located south of the lake Lygne in Agder. In the middle of a quite large field, there is an area called *Skeiægra* (transl. 'skeid field'), see figure 8. Framing Skeiægra to the south is *Tinghaugen* (transl. 'thing/assembly mound'), a natural feature sloping gently towards the lake. Just east of the field is the farm of *Tingvatn* (NG, vol. 9, p. 263: Tingvatnn 1594). This was the site of a thing in the early modern period (Stylegar 2006). The last thing gathering took place here in the late 17th century (id 61643, State archive in Kristiansand). The place name Galgebakken (transl. 'Gallows hill') also adds the distinction that the area was a regional judicial centre, and at least one execution took place here in 1691 (Gysland 1998).

Between Skeiægra and the lake, there is a large burial mound, although not much remains of the mound today. The mound is called *Vehaugen*, which indicates something along the lines of 'holy mound' (Stemshaug and Sandnes 1997, p. 484).

The topographical place names are not documented before the early modern period; however, there are archaeological sites and finds that point to a long time depth. About 500 m southeast of Skeiægra there is a burial field with several mounds and three stone circles. The largest consists of seven stones, each about 1–1.5 m tall. In the middle of this stone circle, there is a low mound, which contained charcoal and a clay pot (Gjessing 1925, p. 52–53).

Tingvatn is located about 6.5 km north of Snartemo, home to one of the most spectacular burial finds in Norway. Dated to the early 6th century, it contained a complete set of weapons, a silver-plated glass goblet, a bronze cauldron, a gold ring, textiles and bear claws (Hougen 1935). A parallel to the Snartemo find is the Bjærum find, located about a kilometre southeast of Tingvatn. Here lies the largest burial mound in the region (Askeladden id 80841). Unfortunately, the mound was 'excavated' in 1776 and the finds have been lost. However, the 18th-century sources describe a rich find, including a sword with a gold-plated handle, similar to the Snartemo find (Stylegar 2007).

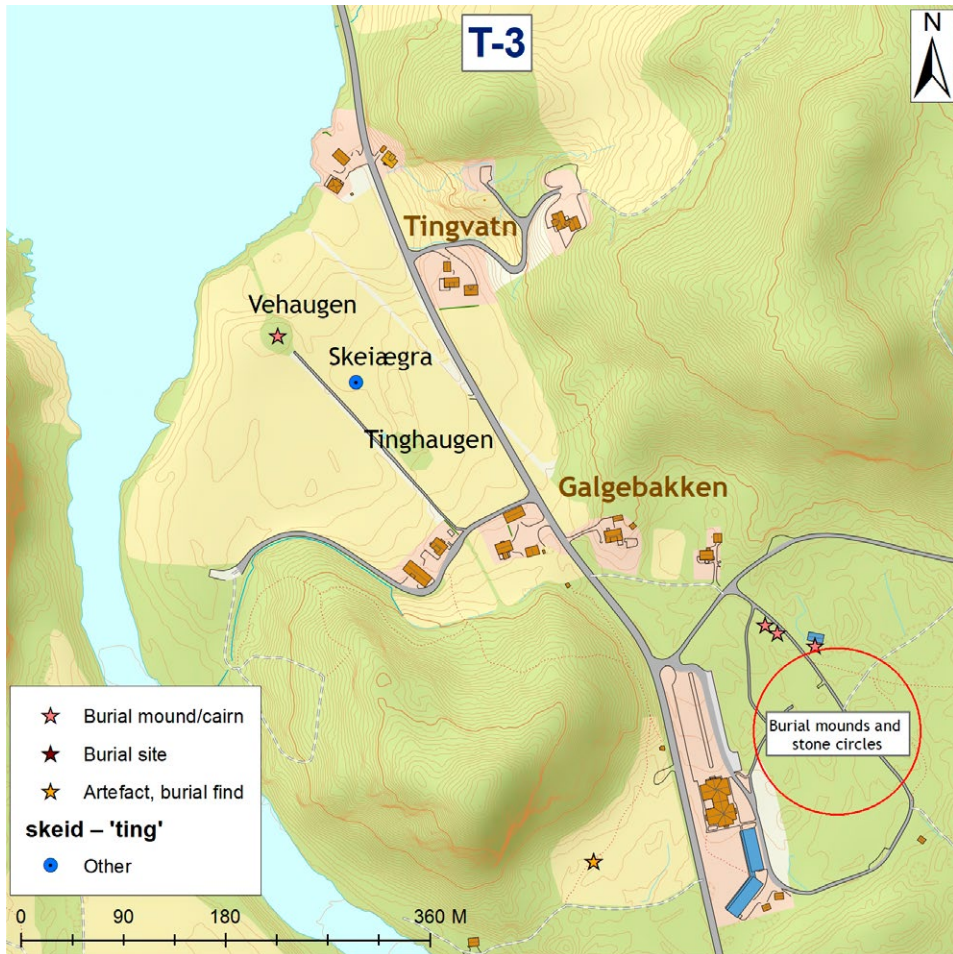


Figure 8. Skeiægra, framed by Vehaugen and Tinghaugen. Also showing the nearby field containing burial mounds and stone circles. See Fig. 4. for location on an overview map. Base map: The Norwegian Mapping Authority.

In sum, this indicates a place of regional importance that held different kinds of assemblies, with contents changing over time. The place name Skeiægra and the location of this name suggest that also an assembly of the skeid-type was held here.

Discussion

The chosen three sites are from different regions, but also singled out based on the available archaeological and historical data. This means that the case studies likely represents skeids held at regional central places, and will not necessarily be the most representative of the skeids in general.

Although not all of the 564 possible *skeid*-names will point to a gathering place, it is reasonable to assume that skeids were fairly common. Nevertheless, we are dealing with a kind of assembly that is difficult to categorize. In addition, the activities and the function of the sites is likely

to have changed over time and we must assume that many, perhaps most sites did not leave a lasting impression in the form of an enduring place name.

In Norway, there are 1188 medieval church sites (Askeladden.ra.no). At 69 of these church sites there is a possible *skeid*-name found closer than two kilometres away; this amounts to nearly six percent of the church sites. Regarding *hov/hof*-names, the corresponding number is around 15 percent (186 of 1188 church sites). The relation between *hov/hof*-names and later church sites have long been acknowledged (Olsen 1915).

However, if we flip the perspective, we see that the percentage of *skeid*-names and *hov/hof*-names that are closer than two kilometres away from a church site, the numbers are respectively 32 percent (182 of 565 *skeid*-names) and 24 percent (347 of 1462 *hov/hof*-names).

The correlation between skeids and church sites may indicate that the cultic aspect of the skeids should be further emphasized. On the other hand, we can apply a more pragmatic view regarding the location of the church sites and acknowledge that churches may have been established close to already established assembly sites.

The societal role of the skeid

The sagas, myths and legends, as well as descriptions from the 18–19th centuries are important in filling in the blanks about the skeid and its societal role. Although the reliability of these individual sources must be scrutinized, they allow us to look behind the veil of time and help uncover how the days of the skeid unfolded for the people gathering in these places.

The skeids were loosely organised. Nevertheless, there are a number of ritualized activities – the horse fights and horse races follow strict rules, as well as myths and beliefs guiding the activities at the skeid (Solheim 1952, 1956, Loftsgarden *et al.* 2017). The concurrence of *skeid*-names, Medieval church sites, *hov*-, *leik*- and *ting*-names reflects the meeting places in a region, and it attests to how indistinct (to us, at least) the boundaries were between various realms.

The skeids should be considered multifunctional, including activities such as trade, establishing and maintaining social relations, competitions and consumption. It was also an important venue for meeting peers, particularly, perhaps, those of the opposite sex. Aspects of religion were also present at these small and loosely organized gatherings. In early modern times, there are several examples of seasonal meeting- and marketplaces that were arranged at the same time as Christian holidays (Loftsgarden 2017, p. 245–247).

It is sensible to seize the opportunity provided by such meetings to exchange goods, conduct thing meetings and celebrate holidays. This was all the more important in societies with difficult communication routes and dispersed settlements, which was the case for many parts of Norway. Assemblies, like skeids, served as centres for communication and were regular and vital places to maintain and strengthen social and economic relations. This was one of the few times per year for gatherings and was thus significant in creating and maintaining a sense of community and social affiliation beyond the members of one's kin and the closest neighbours' (McMillan *et al.* 1986, p. 9).

The horse was an essential part of the skeid. Horses were among the most important domestic animals in the Viking Age and Middle Ages, but also the most expensive (Øye 1976, p. 95).

Ownership of a strong and well-built horse garnered respect, and winning contests with horses earned honour for the owner. Conversely, however, being humiliated in competition could bring shame, and in the sagas, horse fights often end with malice and strife (e.g. *Víga-Glúms saga*, ch. 13) although hostility was not necessarily an outcome outside the social framework of a competition. The saga writers may also have over-represented competitions as an arena for conflict designed to perpetuate a feud or to establish and justify enmity (Martin 2003, p. 30–32).

It is likely that seasonal assemblies, such as the skeids, also were important venues for resolving conflicts and relieving social tension, for instance to gain access to and use of common land (Oosthuizen 2016). In a recent paper, Marie Ødegaard (2021) argues that the skeids were linked with local communities' organization of common areas and marked the end of the summer grazing – the shieling season.

Conclusion

From the study presented here, it seems evident that skeids were widespread throughout Norway, at least from the Late Iron Age/Early Middle Ages. From sagas and descriptions from early modern times, we get an insight into a multifunctional gathering place, where horse fights and -races are central and subject to established rules as well as accompanied by myths, superstitions and ritual overtones. The concurrence of *skeid*-names with medieval church sites, and *hov*-, *leik*-, and *ting*-names underscores this point.

The skeid appears as a bottom-up organized type of gathering. The skeids that were located in the outland and mountain areas outside of the settlements may have been loosely organized, perhaps little more than an agreed time and place, whereas the skeids in the settlement areas, near church sites, *hov*- or *ting*-names, may have been somewhat more organized assemblies. This is graded on a curve, and in any case, the skeid represents a more informal type of gathering than, for instance, the thing meetings. As such, the skeids were of little importance for the king and church, explaining the minor footprint of skeids in written sources. Since the skeids only lasted for a couple of days each year, the archaeological data is almost equally minimal.

However, the place names reveal how widespread this type of gathering was. Through the place names we can discern the importance of the skeids in a society with dispersed settlements and few central places. As regular gatherings, the skeid was a hub for communication and trade, and a place where friendships could be established and maintained. Thus, although being a fleeting meeting site, the skeids constituted important centres of society.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Kjetil Ringen at The Norwegian Mapping Authority for kindly explaining the method of extracting place names with coordinates from SSR (Sentralt stedsnavnsregister). I am also grateful for the constructive and helpful remarks from the reviewer, and not least from the editor, Sofie Laurine Albris and from Krister Sande Kristoffersen Vasshus.

References

- Alsaker, S., 1996. *Herlaugshaugen*. Nord-Trøndelag fylkeskommune: Nye Hojem Trykkeri
- Brink, S., 1996. Political and Social Structures in Early Scandinavia: A Settlement-historical Pre-study of the Central Place. *Tor*, 28, 235–281.
- Brink, S., 1999. Social order in the early Scandinavian landscape. In: C. Fabech and J. Ringtved, eds. *Settlement and Landscape*. Aarhus: Aarhus university press, 17–33.
- Buanes, E., 1975. Hva heter det her? Om innsamling og arkivering av stedsnavn. In: B. Helleland, ed. *Norske stedsnavn/stadnamn*. Oslo: Grøndahl. 175–186.
- Bugge, A., 1918. *Tingsteder, gilder og andre gamle mittpunkter i de norske bygder*. Kristiania: Grøndahl and Søn.
- Einung, H.H., 1926. *Tinn saga*. vol. I. Rjukan.
- Einung, H.H., 1942: *Tinn saga*. vol. II. Rjukan.
- F: Den ældste Frostathingsslov, In: R. Keyser and P.A. Munch, eds. *Norges gamle Love indtil 1387*. Volume I. 1846. Christiania: Grøndahl, 119–258.
- Fallgren, J.-H., 2020. Ritual Places, Sacral Place-Names, and Wetlands: Some Spatial and Archaeological Contexts from the Baltic Island of Öland. In: I.G. Losquiño, O. Sundqvist, D. Taggart and S. Brink, eds. *Making the profane sacred in the Viking age: essays in honour of Stefan Brink*. Medieval texts and cultures of Northern Europe, vol. 32. Turnhout: Brepols, 63–83.
- Gardela, L., 2012. What the Vikings did for fun? Sports and pastimes in medieval northern Europe. *World Archaeology*, 44(2), 234–247.
- Gjellebøl, R., 1800. Beskrivelse over Sætersdalen i Christiansands Stift. *Topographisk Journal For Norge*, 26, 1–177.
- Gjessing, H., 1925. Vest-Agder i forhistorisk tid. In: H. Aall, A.W. Brøgger, E. Bull, K. Liestøl and G. Midttun, eds. *Norske bygder - Vest-Agder 1*. Bergen: John Grieg. 33–75.
- Glostrup, N. and H.J. Huitfeldt-Kaas 1895: *Biskop Nils Glostrups Visitatser i Oslo og Hamar Stifter 1617-1637*. Christiania: Thronsen.
- Gogosz, R., 1999. Horse-fights: The brutal entertainment of the Saga Age Icelanders. *Średniowiecze polskie i powszechne*, 5(9), 17–32.
- Guðmundsson, V., 1903. Hestapjng fornmannna. *Eimreiðin*, 9, 33–44.
- Gunnell, T., 1995. *The origins of drama in Scandinavia*. Cambridge: Brewer.
- Gysland, S., 1998. *Soga om Salve*. Snartemo: S. Gysland.
- Hagberg, U.E., ed., 1967. *The Archaeology of Skedemosse*, vol. 1. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell.
- Hagberg, U.E. and Pellijeff G., 1967. The votive deposits in the Skedemosse fen and their relation to the Iron-Age settlement on Öland, Sweden. In: U.E. Hagberg, ed. *The Archaeology of Skedemosse*, vol. 2. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 9–130.
- Hougen, B., 1935. *Snartemofunnene*. Norske Oldfunn, vol. 7. Oslo: Universitetets oldsaksamling.
- Hovda, P., 1970. Skeid. In: F. Hødnebo, ed. *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingetid til reformasjonstid XV*, Oslo: Gyldendal. 459–462.
- Iversen, F., 2017. Tinget i Trøndelag i yngre jernalder og middelalder. In: O. Risbøl, ed. *Frostatinget i et historisk lys*. Gunneria, vol. 81, Trondheim: NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet. 71–108.

- Iversen, F. and Brendalsmo J., 2020. Den tidlige kirkeorganisasjonen i Eidsivatingslagen. *Collegium Medievale*, 33, 113–162.
- Jæger-Leirvik, P., 1967. Kyrkja og kristendom i Leka i den eldste tid. In: *Leka kirke 100 år 1867-1967*, Leka: Leka menighetsråd. 5–6.
- L: Den nyere Lands-Lov, udgiven af Kong Magnus Haakonssøn, In: R. Keyser and P.A. Munch, eds. *Norges gamle Love indtil 1387*. Volume II. 1848. Christiania: Grøndahl, 1–178.
- Loftsgarden, K., 2017. *Marknadsplassar omkring Hardangervidda - ein arkeologisk og historisk analyse av innlandets økonomi og nettverk i vikingtid og mellomalder*. Thesis (PhD). University of Bergen.
- Loftsgarden, K., Ramstad M. and Stylegar F.-A., 2017. The skeid and other assemblies in the Norwegian 'Mountain Land'. In: Z.T. Glørstad and K. Loftsgarden, eds. *Viking Age Transformations: Trade, Craft and Resources in Western Scandinavia*. Oxford: Routledge. 232–249.
- Macaulay, K., 1764. *The history of St. Kilda. Containing a description of this remarkable island; the manners and customs of the inhabitants; the religious and pagan antiquities there found; with many other curious and interesting particulars. By the Rev. Mr. Kenneth Macaulay, Minister of Ardnamurchan. Missionary to the Island, from the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge*. London: T. Becket and P.A. de Hondt.
- Martin, J.D., 2003. 'Svá lýkr hér hverju hestaðingi': Sports and Games in Icelandic Saga Literature. *Scandinavian Studies*, 75(1), 25–44.
- Munch, P.A., 1849. *Historisk-geographisk Beskrivelse over Kongeriget Norge (Noregsveldi) i Middelalderen*. Christiania: Wilhelm Grams Forlag.
- NG = *Norske Gaardnavne. Ophysninger samlede til brug ved matrikelens revision efter offentlig foranstaltning udg. med tilføiede forklaringer*. vol. 1–19. O. Rygh. 1897–1936. Kristiania (Oslo): Cammermeyer.
- Norrby, R., 1905. *Ydre härads gårdnamn*. Stockholm: Kungl. Boktryckeriet. P.A. Norstedt and Söner.
- Olsen, M., 1915. *Hedenske kultminder i norske stedsnavne*. Kristiania: Jacob Dybwad.
- Olsen, M., 1923. *Minner om guderne og deres dyrkelse i norske stedsnavn - særtrykk*. Kristiania: Steensballe.
- Olsen, M., 1926. *Ættegård og helligdom*. Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Olsen, M., 1929. *Ættegård og helligdom. Norske stedsnavn sosialt og religionshistorisk belyst*. Institutt for sammenlignende kulturforskning. Serie A: Forelesninger IXa, Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Oosthuizen, S., 2016. Beyond hierarchy: archaeology, common rights and social identity. *World Archaeology*, 48(3), 381–394.
- Pellijeff, G., 1967. Archaeology and place-names. Exkurs. In: U.E. Hagberg ed. *The Archaeology of Skedemosse 1*, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksel. 131–137.
- Pellijeff, G., 1991. Ortnamnselementet skede. *Namn och Bygd*, 78, 61–68.
- Øverland, O.A., 1898. Hestekampe i Norden. In: O. A. Øverland, ed. *Norske historiske Fortællinger*. Kristiania: Cammermeyer. 1–30.
- Øye, I., 1976. *Driftsmåter i vestnorsk jordbruk ca. 600-1350*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget.
- Petersen, T., 1917. En kongegrav i det nordenfjeldske Norge. Festskrift til Haakon Schetelig på 40-årsdagen. *Oldtiden. Tidsskrift for norsk forhistorie*, 6, 41–50.

- Rygh, K.D., 1879–1880. *Faste fornlevninger og oldsagfund i Nordre og Søndre Trondhjems amter*. Sætrykk av Det kgl. Norske Videnskabers selskabs skrifter. Trondheim: Det kgl. Norske Videnskabers selskab.
- Sandnes, J., 1975. Fra gudehov til kirkested. In: B. Helleland, ed. *Norske stedsnavn/stadnamn*. Oslo: Grøndahl. 48–62.
- Simple, S.J., Sanmark A., Iversen F. and Mehler N., 2020. *Negotiating the North Meeting-Places in the Middle Ages in the North Sea Zone*. The society for medieval archaeology Monograph 41. London: Routledge.
- Smith, A.H., 1955. Horse-Fighting in Viking England. *Arv. Nordic Yearbook of Folklore*, 11, 104–108.
- Solheim, S., 1952. *Norsk sætertradisjon*. Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning, Serie B, Skrifter XLVII, Oslo: Sverre Kildahls boktrykkeri.
- Solheim, S., 1956. Horse-fight and horse-race in Norse tradition. In: *Studia Norvegica Ethnologia and Folkloristica*, 3, Oslo: Aschehoug. 1–173.
- Stamnes, A.A., 2015. *Geofysiske undersøkelser av Herlaugshaugen, Leka kommune, Nord-Trøndelag*. NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet.
- Stemshaug, O. and Sandnes J., eds., 1997. *Norsk stadnamnleksikon*. Oslo: Samlaget.
- Stenvik, L.F., 2001. Skei - et maktsenter fram fra skyggen. *Vitark 2*, 63–74.
- Stylegar, F.-A., 2006. Tingvatn - gravplass og tingsted [online]. Available from: <http://arkeologi.blogspot.com/2006/07/tingvatn-gravplass-og-tingsted.html> [Accessed 13 October 2021]
- Stylegar, F.-A., 2007. Bjærumfunnet. [online]. Available from: <http://arkeologi.blogspot.com/2007/10/bjrumfunnet.html> [Accessed 13 October 2021]
- Stylegar, F.-A., 2014. Horse-fights and cow-fights in Norwegian folk tradition. In: M. Teichert, ed. *Sport und Spiel bei den Germanen Nordeuropa von der römischen Kaiserzeit bis zum Mittelalter. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, Berlin: De Gruyter. 457–466.
- Vikstrand, P., 2001. *Gudarnas platser: förkristna sakrala ortnamn i Mälardalskapen*. Acta Academiae Regiae Gustavi Adolphi, Kungliga Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur. Uppsala: Swedish Science Press
- Wessén, E., 1921. Hästskede och Lekslätt. *Namn och bygd*, 9, 103–131.
- Whitaker, I., 1958. Traditional horse-races in Scotland. *Arv. Nordic Yearbook of Folklore*, 14, 83–94.
- Ødegaard, M., 2018. Thing sites, cult, churches, games and markets in Viking and medieval southeast Norway, AD c.800–1600. *World Archaeology*, 50(1), 150–64.
- Ødegaard, M., 2021. Markets and horse fighting sites in southern Norway—their socioeconomic significance, origin and demise (CE 1300–1800). In: ed. P. Dixon and C. Theune. *Ruralia*, vol. XIII. Leiden: Sidestone press. 229–242.