On Sacrifice

Reconciling Sacrifice in The Saga of Håkon the Good with the Archaeological Record

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Sammendrag

The archaeological and literary records often appear to be at odds with oneanother when analyzed in the academic mileau. Identifying what sources are and are not reliable and accurate is one of the larger arguments in academia today. In this work, I have attempted to approach the issue of the Norse cultic practices before the arrival of Christianity. By comparing and contrasting the literary and archaeological sources on cultic structures, I hope to not only elucidate the picture of what Norse cultic practices were but also seek to analyze the relationship between the two types of sources. In order to do this, I have focused primarily on the Saga of Haakon the Good and the descriptions of Norse pre-Christian rituals within. I have contrasted this with examples of identified cultic sites primarily from Norway.

Forord

My interest in archaeology began when I was young and I have had the good fortune to pursue it in a number of ways. Beyond simply the archaeological record, it is people who interest me most, and little says more about a group than the ideological framework granted to them by their myths and how they interperet those myths within their everyday lives. To this end, the archaeology of ritual has always been of great interest to me. I feel nothing breathes life into the study of a people the same way as gaining some understanding of that which drives them. It was this interest that drew me to seek and understanding of the cultic places of the Norse.

There are too many people to thank for their continued support despite my own failings, but a special place must be reserved for my parents for their unconditional belief that I'll make something of myself one day. To my friends: I don't know if I could have done this without you all—but if I had, I'd have been done a year earlier.

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I.) Introduction

1.1) Thesis Background and Aim

Of the various aspects of life in Viking and Middle Age Scandinavia, one of the topics of greatest intrigue has been that of Norse pre-Christian cultic practices. In the last century, the study of religious history, philology, and archaeology have often focused on discovering the belief system of the ancient Northerners. In the amateur realm, as well, the myths of various gods and heroes intrigued many as translations of medieval accounts became more widely available.

However, the academic world cannot only concern itself with the machinations of the gods, but must seek to discern the deeper motives for committing these stories to parchment—such as the political and social reasons for their recordation in the Medieval Period. Furthermore, archaeologically we must concern ourselves with the facts that the material remains of the time period can provide us with. Together, these multiple data sets provide us with a vague image of the type of activities of the Viking peoples may have practiced before being converted to Christianity. They can also serve to provide us with various understandings of power centralization and centers of wealth. One feature of these activities, often playing a central role, was the temple. However, because the record often varies, it is important that we not only discern the concept of a temple from the written record, but glean an understanding through the field of archaeology as to whether or not purpose built cultic structures actually existed in the record.

Temples and worship halls are a relatively common feature of many world religions, though the exact nature of the form, development, and usage of Norse structures containing a ritual component is not universally accepted. Among the various sites found throughout Scandinavia, many building structures, now nothing more than small mounds and stains in the soil, are identified or earmarked as ritual structures. Early in the days of Icelandic archaeology, using the sagas as their guide, surveyors identified nearly a hundred sites as temples (Lucas 2009). Today, with more rigorous methods of site analysis, many of the early identifications have been discarded for a lack of evidence. Nevertheless, the search for the exact nature of the Norse temple—and by what term it should be referred—remains. The primary aim of this work is to attempt to identify and establish some of the form and

functions of ritual halls in the Viking and Middle Ages by comparing and analyzing the evidence in the written sources with that of the archaeological record. In order to do this, I will focus on the descriptions of sacrifice in the Saga of Håkon the Good and do a comparative analysis with the archaeological evidence found in Norwegian sites.

In any survey, an issue arises when we consider that there are a wide assortment of sites and texts providing details on the old ways of respecting the gods in the Viking age. Any attempt at analysis with too broad a sample can become cluttered and distracted. As such, by providing a focus of a single saga and an assortment of sites relevant to the geographical setting of the tale, I can provide a more compelling comparison. While I will be discussing evidence from other sites and literary works, because history does not occur in a geographical vacuum, these elements will be utilized primarily in a supporting function. With hope, by looking at the evidence provided by the selected sources, a piece of objective fact about Norse ritual sites can be denuded.

II.) Methodological and Theoretical Approaches

2.1 Terminology

Though the idea seems axiomatic, the study of rituals in any culture is quite important due to the prominence such actions can have on a group's worldview and the way their ideology is reflected through ritual action. Beliefs and worldviews—in particular those dealing with the supernatural—as well as the practices and rituals associated with those beliefs, are an essential part of the human experience. It is possible to evidence that man and his closest relatives have sought to understand or interact with a perceived supernatural realm since hominids first began preparing the dead for an afterlife. Later, Germanic tribes throughout Western Europe practiced a variety of rituals and sacrifices in order to breach the spiritual realm. They performed these rituals with the intention of divination through the medium of the supernatural or to placate a supernatural entity through a gift or blandishment (Insoll 2011). Europe's ancestors lived in a world where contact could be achieved with the supernatural and man could receive favors for sacrifices *quid pro quo*. In the Scandinavian North, these practices were continued throughout the centuries until the burgeoning religion of Christianity had integrated or defeated all the previous beliefs of the old ways (Andrén 2005). History is, however, written by the victors and our view of the Viking Age is based largely on interpretation from texts penned after Christianity was dominant as there are scant few contemporary sources of the dissemination of the new faith. For this reason, the use of these sources is continually limited by the persistent questions of validity and bias.

No matter if evidence is based in the material or textual record, ritual and religion are difficult subject matters to deal with in any field under the humanities. History and anthropology, both fields upon which ritual and religious studies are reliant upon, must continually deal with problems of definition and bias. Archaeology inherits the problems of both fields and gains the interpretational issues of artifacts which are incapable speaking of their own usage, purpose, or meaning; these things must be based on comparative examples and historical sources. The onus of interpreting the usage of these items becomes that of the archaeologist who may have to make a decision based on scant evidence. This responsibility can lead to overreaching the limits of material evidence (Brück 1999). Furthermore, the innate biases of the archaeologist's worldview no doubt skew impressions on the function of

objects or sites in question. These may lead the interpreter to inaccurate conclusions about the thoughts or mindset of the creators of a particular portion of a culture's material record. We cannot speak to individuals responsible for the materials observed and therefore examine everything at a distance. We must always realize that any analysis is done in the light and worldview of contemporary events. Cultural actions such as ritual are significant for intimate reasons that often require some form of initiation to understand; the meanings in specific performances may not be self-evident. In light of these various sources of doubt, it is no wonder that the ritual archaeologist finds himself struggling to speak with any definition or without perfunctory qualifications.

We are not entirely without sources to observe the possible practices of the Norse pagans, though there are many questions that remain without a suitable answer. On the one hand, we must always realize that the literary sources will be in the academic conscious due to the prevalence of Icelandic sources (Andrén 2005). However, archaeological evidence is vital and various sites have been discovered that sit at the fringe of our current understanding of Norse ritual practices. Within each there are artifacts that cannot be explained away as everyday items; unique finds that seem to hint at being something more than the mundane items in the record. What are these sites and what do they say about Norse worship practices? If there are halls or houses on these sites, did they relate to ritual practices on the site and under what parameters could this function be established? The number of Scandinavian sites with demonstrable ritual buildings identified in their artifact assemblages is relatively limited and extant remains are often significantly damaged. As such, there are many questions to answer regarding available evidence, and below I will outline what I intend to discuss from the record and the types of analysis utilized.

There are a number of elements as to the nature and function of the houses and halls that have ritual components to them which should fall under scrutiny. How were these sites tied to the Norse way of life, what kinds of rituals may have been performed there, and what significance, if any, do the sites hold? Along the path to discovery, more questions are inevitably raised. Firstly, because artifacts themselves do not speak to the meaning or details of rituals, what information can be gleaned about the rituals performed within halls and houses in the contemporary textual sources? How do we reconcile the descriptions in written sources with the material record? Furthermore, is there evidence supporting the existence of rituals identified in the texts present in the archaeological record? Are the written sources

viable for ritual identification despite their distance in time? What role should textual sources play in the interpretation of the archaeological record? Next, if ritual places can be identified, what form do they take? What is required of a structure that would allow us to identify it as serving a ritual function? What role does such a structure play in its contemporary landscape? Finally, though there are those who believe that they do not exist, is there any evidence for purpose built cultic structures (see, for instance: Olsen 1966)? Have earlier assessments about the nature of Norse worship stood the test of time?

In almost any of the humanities, the definition of ritual can be problematic both from the inherent issues of finding a definition within one's own field and the near impossibility of an adequate interdisciplinary definition. Defining which particular actions should be categorized as rituals has proven to be as difficult as identifying the features and artifacts that can be evidenced as being utilized in ritual performances. It is not the term ritual alone over which academics debate. Other specialized terminology utilized in the study of ritual, especially when applied in the Scandinavian region, has been called into question. Colloquial terms such as paganism, shamanism, heathenism have all been debated when they are utilized in academic literature (Price 2004; Andrén et. al 2006). Even terms generally not perceived as problematic, such as the common practice of placing ritual action and folklore under the umbrella term of religion as it commonly is in casual discourse, can fall apart when put under academic scrutiny. Terms such as these hold an etymology that makes them questionable for application to the discussion of early worship practices. Whereas in general, it would seem that most are comfortable with these colloquial definitions of terms, based upon their origins and technical definitions, many of these terms are considered inappropriately applied by some branch of academia. It is because of these difficulties that we are frequently left unsure of by which terms to refer to the early systems of beliefs that would solve any of the issues of the identification of ritual actions and the nomenclature used in similar studies.

As with many early cultures that lack a large body of contemporary texts with which to study them, we do not know what term the Norsemen during the Iron Age and Viking Age used to describe their rituals and their surrounding mythology. Though there exist possible terms for sacrifice, certain types of rituals, and certain terms used within the practices, there was never a word used to define any overarching structure to their set of beliefs as in the case of Christianity or Islam. One of the first mentions of the practices as a term to define the group of people was the term pagan, coming from the Latin *pagani*, a derogatory term used to

describe the worship practices of people in bucolic settings (Rhoesdal 1998). In general, despite the erroneous usage, paganism represents one of the terms most commonly applied to the Norsemen. Heathenism (ON: *heiðinn, hieðin-dómr*) is another term that arose with the introduction of Christianity. The word is used specifically in reference to individuals who were non-Christians. Based on the basic etymology, such a phrase could not arise without the existence, if not prevalence, of the Christian faith. Exclusion from a community could not exist without the community—in particular one that seeks to form a group identity in opposition to others—itself (Brück 1999). Both of these terms were obviously derogatory to the communities they described. It is relatively unlikely that the practitioners of the day would use these terms amongst one another. As such, the terms should be applied with some caution. It is also of note that both terms have been repurposed by modern practitioners of the old Germanic faiths, or a variety of other polytheistic practices, to describe themselves—thereby altering their colloquial usage today. It is for this reason, in part, that the terms find use in pseudo-academic resources and the media. Another term from the period, *forn siðr*, can be found within the sagas. This term, meaning the old way is used to describe the earlier customs. It stands in contrast to terms used to describe the new Christian faith such as *nýr siðr*, meaning new way, or *trú* (*trúa*), meaning belief (Clunies Ross 2003). It is unlikely that pre-Christian Norsemen would have used this term in reference to themselves. It appears, again, as a term utilized by Christians to identify and distance previous practices from their own.

Alternatively, the term cult can refer to various ritual practices with supernatural intent. When the term is used conversationally today, it is done so primarily to describe modern fringe religious groups. It, therefore, holds a relatively negative connotation in the popular lexicon. It is, however, a term which has been used previously in anthropological research and may best describe the early worship practices; the term is frequently used to describe more intimate and non-dogmatic types of worship that is performed on a smaller scale, but in reality holds none of the inherent negative connotation of today (Brück 1999).

Today, almost any unified set of beliefs and accompanying ritual actions is generally referred to as a religion. Despite this usage in colloquial speech, the term itself, based on its origins, is inappropriate to describe all rituals with supernatural intent. However, because of the contemporary prevalence of its usage when discussing pre-Christian times, it is almost impossible to avoid. A primary issue stems from the etymology of the term. Though now

used as a catch all for various worship practices, it is not only inappropriate when describing the more amorphous organization of pre-Christian worship but also a term that was coined by Christians to describe their own faith (DuBois 1999). The spiritual practices of most ancient peoples were unlikely to be as structured and widely distributed as the practices of such institutionalized religions as the medieval church or modern forms of faith. Furthermore, the dearth of credible texts from the time period with discussions on the pre-Christian faiths means that knowing a self-descriptive term from early faiths is very uncommon as I mentioned above. Thus, in prehistoric times, we are left without a proper term to describe the practice of faith and its public incarnations. This issue holds true to the people of the Viking era; their communal expression of faith was no doubt a regionally diverse phenomenon that did not fit into the concept of a canonized, unified religious practice.

Finally, in place of using the word religion, we also find use of the term shamanism. The term usually describes a type of worship centered on a type of healer or priest, sometimes called a medicine man or the eponymous shaman, who is in charge of the spiritual wellbeing of a community. This type of belief, ranked somewhere above animism in a somewhat archaic anthropological concept of a hierarchy of worship types, has been employed by several authors when discussing the Scandinavian field (Price 2004). Particularly in the discussions of Price, old Finnish and Sami rituals are investigated for their relevance to Scandinavian pre-Christian practices as some of these practices were contemporary with the Viking Age. For their part, Finns and Sami resisted against Christianity considerably longer than the Norse pre-Christian faiths, thus allowing for more recent documentation and ethnography; however, their relevance to the Viking faiths may be called into question. The arguments of Norse Medievalists over shamanism has been outlined in more detail by Schnurbein, (Schnurbein, 2003) and in general I subscribe to the belief that shamanism does not adequately, or appropriately, describe the practices of the Viking Age people. Though there are connections between the faiths of the Norse and Suomi, it is likely an over simplification to assume that this is also the way that Norse paganism manifested itself. More than likely this simplification came from the part of the original authors of the primary sources as some of the shamanic practices may have been observable during the time of the recordation of the sagas. The practices may have been viewed by authors, then, as having a closer connection as they were simply added to the collection of non-Christian practices with which authors in the clergy viewed all ritual outside their own. Whatever the association, the connection between Norse worship practices and shamanic practices is still somewhat unclear,

though even the medieval authors seemed to hint at the fact that there was a void between the Finnish practices and those of their Norse ancestors. Therefore, while the term has gained some popularity in anthropological communities, I will not be employing it during my description of the Norse pre-Christian practices.

Throughout the this text, I will generally use to the common term *cultic,* though the terms *religion*, *heathenism*, and *pagan* will in some cases be used to describe the various rituals and actions performed by the Norsemen which could have held some form of supernatural significance. I feel that *cultic* is most appropriate due to the definition I provided above as a non-dogmatic, small scale set of practices. However, the usage of a particular term may also be dependent on the particular primary source, site, or academic work currently being discussed. While there may not be one overarching term which adequately describes the nuances of Norse pre-Christian practices, the purpose of this work is not to redefine terminology and the various terms that have pervaded the discussion on Norse practices should remain suitable.

2.2 History of Ritual Theory

> Action or conduct indicating belief in, obedience to, and reverence for a god, gods, or similar superhuman power; the performance of religious rites or observances.
>
> -Oxford English Dictionary

Ritual is a rather loaded word in terms of the anthropological community. It is difficult to define exactly what represents a ritual and, especially in the archaeological community, it is used as a catch all to describe sites, artifacts, and features which we cannot identify in a temporal, mundane sense. However, ritual is an exceedingly important part of any culture, even in our cultures today. The vast perception of ritual is that it is some form of spiritual or religious action; but this is not the case. Nations too have their own share of rituals through which they can unify the individuals within their culture as a collective. This is the same solidarity which helped humans create the megalithic societies of the past and they are the social structures that support the world within which we live today.

Archaeologically, ritual is at times more visible than other human actions. Unlike certain spontaneous and ephemeral events, ritual is primarily concerned with repetition of a certain set of actions. Often this repetitious nature is extended to a requirement that such actions are performed in the same location as well. This is the element of ritual that promotes the link to the past and the desired group solidarity it attempts to achieve. Such repetition increases the probability of the identification of such events as repeated deposition increases the likelihood of preservation. This does, however, leave us lacking in some areas. Artifacts are incapable of revealing the thought processes of the people who utilized them, and as such, we are often left in the dark about the purpose and nature of specific rituals. For societies without a system of writing of their own nor proximal, contemporary literate cultures who may have recorded interactions, it becomes difficult to assume much more about any particular event or site than the basic interpretation of the artifacts themselves. We can look to similar ethnographic accounts, but even these are tenuous given the large lacuna of time between the contemporary culture and the ancient one. For this reason, we must always be careful in the identification and reconstruction of ritual. As Kyriakidis warns, "in archaeology, ritual activities tend to be either over-imaginatively reconstructed or avoided entirely." (Kyriakidis 2007: 2)

To complicate the discussion of ritual, especially in the archaeological realm, there is another problem of categorization that must be mentioned of ritual. This is the issue of secular rituals versus those rituals with supernatural intent. This distinction is sometimes referred to as the sacred versus the profane, though this terminology is also used in error as the term refers to Christian spirituality. The definition of ritual does not strictly limit us to a religious understanding, despite the fact that colloquially, the term is frequently connected with worship practices. Identifying this distinction is especially a problem in archaeology as generally, things are seen as ritual when they defy a temporal explanation; that is, they do not appear to be for specifically the needs of subsistence. Sites which are classified as ritual are then lumped into a single category as religious in nature. (Brück 1999) This is primarily an issue with pre-historic sites, where the written records are nonexistent, or in cases such as the Viking age, extant but authored by outside parties that are likely biased. In cases with some written sources, we may have some implication of which realm the ritual falls into; though, where there is no record it is all but impossible to identify such a distinction. Rituals can often be secular, or primarily secular in nature. Often dubbed as *ceremony*, rather than simply ritual, such actions are relatively common today in secular nations. (Merrifield, 1987) Such

things as presidential inaugurations, government holidays, or parades are non-religious functions that still take on the form of a ritual. These are evident in various events in history as well. In the Viking age alone we can look to such events as the "Thing" to find a ritual which is of primarily secular function.

This conception primarily becomes problematic because, in terms of pre-historic times and non-Christian systems, we do not know the actual division between the spiritual and the temporal world. Not all cultures have such a distinction between the spiritual world and the temporal, nor do all cultures draw the line of distinction in the same place. Enlightenment thinking is what has separated government from religion (in most nations, especially Western Europe) but even into the modern period, as a relic of primarily the Medieval period, the secular position of king was still coroneted within a church (Brück 1999). Because of this, we must be cautious about how we view ritual as it may have a foot in what we would consider both the religious and secular realms. Or, it may be a performance that is the product of a culture which does not differentiate between the Western conception of a supernatural and physical world.

For my purposes, the term ritual will be used to describe any intentional action, often repeated, in which the method of performing the action has been structured societally. The intent of the action could be both for supernatural or mundane purposes, but its performance—and the method of such performance—should hold some cultural significance. In the context of the topic of this work, it will frequently imply some form of cultic function, especially because the halls being described are at times, in both modern and medieval texts, referred to as temples. It may not always be the case, however, and determining whether or not the actions performed in these structures were in fact done with supernatural intention is part of the objective of this work.

A Note on Translation:

Throughout the text, I will be required provide a number of translations of the various texts. These will take a few forms. In many cases, only the gist of what has been said is required, in these cases, the translation—though not direct, but paraphrasing—will be mine. This is so that the reader understands what I have taken the passage to mean. In my own translations, I will be reliant primarily on *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* by Zoëga for definitions. In some cases, such as the longer passages, I have included translation by another author who will, in such a case, be noted. Where detail is required, I have provided more detailed information on the terminology and have been primarily reliant, here, upon *An Icelandic-English Dictionary,* by Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson as well as *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, a multi-volume project from the University of Copenhagen.

A Note on Spellings:

Throughout the text, I will generally use the Anglicized version of place names and names of characters. When appearing in a translation not my own, I will use the spelling provided by the original translator. In cases of certain terms, such as *blót*, I will continue to use the Old Norse spelling for clarity. Some place names and character names, particularly those with modern Norwegian spellings, I will use the modern form such as Håkon the Good.

III.) Historical Sources

3.1 Introduction

The relationship between our interpretation of the Scandinavian historical and literary sources and the material record—as well as the academic milieu's opinion toward the reliability of cross field comparisons—is a protean one. Some regions do not have a vast collection of written primary sources upon which to base interpretations of material evidence and it is left primarily to worldwide archaeological comparisons and ethnographic information. Conversely, in some regions of study, written sources are frequently trusted further than is prudent. To this end, there are times when the interpretation of the archaeological record may be bent to fit written history, rather than stand on its own. Such practices, no matter how abundant they are, undermine the accuracy of both fields. To this end, in Scandinavia, there is frequently not a critical enough eye applied to written sources, such as the sagas, when they are used as complimentary evidence by archaeologists ostensibly driven by interpretations of material culture. Written sources can, however, provide valuable insight into practices we may not be able to reconstruct simply through extant artifacts. So, using a critical eye, what corroborative evidence can we find between the written sources and the archaeological record?

In order to attempt such a comparison, I will analyze some accounts of Norse paganism in the saga record with the goal of establishing the veracity of their claims. In this section, the primary method of determination will be literary based. As I stated above, the primary written source I will focus on will be *The Saga of Håkon the Good* and the representation of Norse sacrifice it contains. However, it would be beneficial to approach some of the texts from the surrounding time period and geographical locations that may still relate to the Norsemen and their cultic practices before delving into the text of *Saga Hákonar góða*. No text exists in a vacuum and to assume so could lead to a variety of misconceptions about the events relayed by a written source. Part of the key to denuding a practical representation of the form of Norse rituals is being able to relate an author's account with his mindset, biases, and information sources. Even beyond the relative wealth of saga sources from the Middle Ages, there are a variety of accounts available written by authors in societies that interacted with the Norsemen—because they were both chronologically and

geographically proximal—that can provide corroborative accounts of various Norse rituals. In this brief overview, I will touch on a few of these alternative sources and the accounts they relay.

3.2 Early European Sources

While there are a variety of sources that touch on, to some extent, the various pagan practices of Scandinavia, it would be a task beyond the scope of this work to provide a full survey of available material. Ergo, I will touch on two of the frequently reference texts that contain accounts relevant to Germanic and Norse pre-Christian cultic practices from the period. While it may seem that Germanic practices are outside the ambit of a discussion on specifically Norse practices, the Scandinavian world owes much of its inheritance to mainland Germanic cultic rituals and myth. For instance, Pearson sums up the origins of Norse rituals by arguing that, "from a prehistoric perspective, Norse religion in the Viking period could be viewed as a final regional variant of a loosely pan-European paganism whose practices extended from the British Isles to Germania and Scandinavia (Pearson 2006: 86)."

One of the earliest sources frequently referenced in relation to the Norse pagan practices is the brief mention of Germanic cultic practices that appear in the work of Tacitus. The text in question is his work *Germania,* which was completed around 98 AD. Tacitus never reveals his motivations or intentions behind producing the work; however, it is an ostensibly ethnographic text providing a wealth of information on the various Germanic tribes of the time—at least how Tacitus and the Romans might have viewed them (Anderson 1970). The work is primarily relevant to Scandinavian rituals and belief systems as it contains brief descriptions regarding Germanic cultic practices performed by tribes related to those whom would later occupy Scandinavia during the Migration Era. One of these mentions comes in the form of Tacitus discussing the practices of the Germanic peoples wherein he states that the Germanic tribes do not worship in temples, but rather choose to worship outside in sacred groves (Thomas 2009). The statement has become relatively well referenced, especially in earlier discussions of Norse paganism like that by Olsen—who denies the Vikings had purpose built temples—when attempts to identify temple sites began (Olsen 1966). This assertion, to some degree, can be backed up in the archaeological record as many finds from the Migration Period are located in outdoor areas, especially waterlogged areas such lakes and

bogs (Rhoesdal 1998). These various outdoor ritual sites suggest that at least some portion of the practices undertaken by Germanic cultures were, as Tacitus suggests, performed outdoors.

However, Tacitus himself reneges on his statement when, in a different portion of the text, he discusses the ritual practices related to Nerthus. These rituals are said to take place on an island grove; however, upon the culmination he describes the place as a temple and even goes so far as to describe it with the Latin term *templum* (Orton 2005). It is unclear if this distinction comes as a mistake of terminology or as a reference to an actual purpose built structure that existed within the grove. It is possible that Tacitus simply did not have the terminology to describe a cultic location without associating it with that which he was already familiar with—Roman temples. Nevertheless, the ritual and the diety of Nerthus are sometimes viewed as a precursor to other Germanic traditions—particularly the Scandinavians. H. E. Davidson has suggested these practices may be a nascent form of Vanir related practices as they appear to venerate and placate earth and fertility deities. In particular, she relates Nerthus to the later Norse deity Njord (Davidson 1988). If this is the case, we could speculate that the methods of worshiping this proto-Njord would be carried through to the form that coalesced during the Viking Age.

Despite this tantalizing information for the student of Norse ritual, Tacitus, like many of his contemporaries, is not fully trusted as a source and the veracity of his account is called into question due to a variety of factors. Criticisms of the text are at times quite harsh. For instance, Syme, based on his analysis of the text, goes so far as to state, "if Cornelius Tacitus was ever on the Rhine, he discloses no sign of it in the *Germania* (Syme 1958: 126-7)." Whatever the extent to which we can rely on Tacitus' work, his *Germania* is nevertheless a frequently cited source in the study of old Germanic cultic practices that provides an early glimpse at the origins of the Norse pagan traditions.

Another text referenced *ad nauseum* in the study of Norse ritual practices is the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae Pontificum* (referred to hereafter as the *Gesta*). Penned by Adam of Bremen and completed around 1075, the *Gesta* is a hagiographical text that tells the deeds of the Archbishop Adalbert of Hamburg – particularly his successes in conversion of pagan practitioners (Tschan 2002). The text covers four volumes and it is within the fourth, titled *Descriptio insularum Aquilonis*, which we find one of the most frequently referenced early mentions of the Norse pagan practices. In relative detail, Adam describes the midwinter sacrifice said to take place at the great pagan temple in Uppsala, Sweden. He explains that the

temple is covered in gold and describes the idols of Thor, Wotan, and Frikko within. He then goes on to discuss the sacrifices performed within a grove located directly outside the primary temple structure. It is here we find the oft referenced statement, "The sacrifice is of this nature: of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads, with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple (Adam of Bremen, *Gesta*, Ch. xxvii, trans. Tschan 2002:208)." The gory description of this account is likely what draws so many to utilize it as an example of the brutal sacrifices undertaken by the Norsemen during the Viking Age—a notion likely propagated by the popular conception of Vikings as barbarians. Despite the relative detail of the description and the fact that Adam states it is a firsthand account, there are a number of issues that threaten the proposed veracity of these statements about the rituals of the Norsmen. For instance, the account was unlikely to be an actual firsthand account—which I above mentioned Adam implies—as the site at Uppsala, by the time of the *Gesta's* writing, was home to a Christian church (Gräslund 2000). Furthermore, the account resembles, to a great degree, another description of practices at Lerje by Theitmar of Merseburg. While some might use such a similar account to suggest a commonality to the Norse cultic practice of sacrifice, Tom Christensen, in the article *Lerje Beyond Legend—The Archaeological evidence,* notes it is more likely that the two authors were reliant on a mutual source to describe pagan practice (Christensen 1991). Finally, It is possible that the particular focus on idolatry comes not from an actual Norse worldview, but rather Adam's ecclesiastical background which would have painted any pagan practices as idolatry and therefore of the greatest evil. It has been suggested by Orton that Adam was, rather than reliant on valid information, obsessed with the idea of the pre-Christian religion being idolatry (Orton 2005). Whatever the veracity of the claims made by Adam of Bremen, they have become a relatively prevalent element of discussions of the pre-Christian practices in Scandinavia.

Together, Tacitus and Adam of Bremen, despite their common usage in historical studies, provide a relatively nebulous view of the practices of Germanic tribes of their respective periods. Both accounts suggest cultic activities took place both under the protection of a temple as well as under open sky, though seem to have trouble making a complete distinction between the two. Whereas Tacitus was content to state that Germanic tribes only worshipped outside, he nevertheless discussed their cultic areas in terms of a temple. Furthermore, based on Adam's account, we have Norse pagans enacting their feast both outdoors and within the confines of a finely appointed and purpose built structure. Both

are also questionable as sources for a variety of reasons. For instance, it was suggested that, "Tacitus, particularly in the first half of the Germania, is guided as much by ethnographical commonplace as by any individual or empirically derived autopsy (Thomas 2009)." Despite this, both sources stand out in the collected works of the period for their description of Norse pre-Christian practices and will likely remain prominent resources in any discussion on the old ways of Scandinavian worship. As above, there are a variety of additional sources that could be touched upon in an analysis of European discourse on Scandinavian paganism; however, to attempt a summary of such a collection is simply far beyond the ambit of this work. Rather, in this brief overview, these two popular texts will have to suffice as we move on to some sources outside of the European area.

3.3 Arab Sources

While primarily known for their influence over Western Europe and eventual sojourns to Iceland, Greenland, and even the Americas, the Vikings by no means limited themselves to the West in their exploits. They touched a wide variety of peoples in their interactions, including the early superpower that was the Arab Empire. Some of those they interacted with were learned and recorded their interactions with the Norsemen—or at least news of the Norsemen and their ways traveled to the ears of men versed in written language. In particular, three authors, Ibn Rustah, Ibrahim at-Tartushi, and Ibn Fadlan, penned various accounts of their meetings with Eastern Viking, or Russ, traders who had spread east into modern day Russia. These accounts do contain some description and reference to the Norse cultic practices, though the Arabs, as Muslims, must have held a certain amount of disdain for the worship practices of pagans. Furthermore, they are relatively limited in scope due to the fact that they were observing provincial Norsemen, thereby being men outside of their traditional elements and potentially subject to altering their beliefs. Because of their distance from the Viking homelands, they may have opted to alter or disregard certain beliefs or practices. However, the accounts do still provide mention of the ways in which the Norsemen offered boons to their gods.

Of the two accounts, Ibn Rustah's is the most brief, sparing only a few words for the Scandinavians in Russia. Of most importance is that he states that among the Rus are wizards who have control over the goods of the people in order to make offerings to the gods. He

states that they have the authority to take what they will and offer by hanging it from a pole (Simpson 1967). While we could read far too much into what we should believe of the wizards described above, what is likely of most significance is the correlation between this account and all those that are from Arab sources. For the next source, Ibn Fadlan, records a similar type of ceremony.

The account of Ibn Fadlan is significantly longer than that of Ibn Rustah and provides a wider assortment of details on the lives and cultic practices of the Rus. In particular, his account is well known for the portion describing a burial on the Volga River. While the burial segment has become the model for much of the colloquial understanding of the Norse burial procedure, it is rather the examination of sacrifice from Ibn Fadlan that is of primary importance to discuss here. This ritual, Ibn Fadlan explains, begins when the Norsemen arrive at the trading station, whereupon they will go to shore and perform a sacrifice. They go to a place where there is set up a large post with a carved face, a number of smaller figures, and then more wooden poles behind these posted in the ground. He states that the man will go and prostrate himself before the large icon—an action that sounds akin to a Muslim prayer action—and ask for favor in his trades. If his business at the trading post is unsuccessful, he may perform the ritual and give offerings again to potentially receive the deity's boon. If he is successful, he will go with some sheep and cattle to slaughter before the poles. He then throws the meat between the poles and hangs the sheep carcasses from them (Frye 2005). Again, we see the Arab sources referencing the use of poles from which the Norse suspends sacrificial material during their rituals. Here, Ibn Fadlan has also mentioned the use of icons, in that the central pole and figures likely bear the image of some type of deity—though he makes no comment nor names any.

Finally, a third author, Ibrahim at-Tartushi, a Spanish Arab, also records an account of his meeting with the Norsemen in the trading town of Hedeby on the Jutland peninsula. In his account, he speaks of the practices of the Danes and Frisians who are at the trading post and whom he recounts are mostly heathen with a few Christians. He states that they hold a feast in order to honor their god who is venerated by worshipers partaking in eating and drinking. He then continues that those among the group that kill an animal set a pole near their door upon which they can fasten the sacrificial animal (Simpson 1967). Like the previous accounts, one of the primary actions of the sacrifice is noted as the display of the carcass,

particularly by suspending it from a pole. In this case, however, the author has mentioned a feast—a portion of the sacrifice that will be seen with more frequency in other sources such as the sagas.

Obviously the most valuable take from the accounts above is that the Norsemen, at least in the understanding of the Arabs, performed ritual sacrifice which had a major component of suspension. It is also of note that only one of the accounts references, directly, that the poles used around or for suspension had any form of representation of a figure on it as representational forms of deities are mentioned in the European sources above. To this end, the accounts seem to corroborate, in some ways, the descriptions by Adam of Bremen and the great midwinter feast at Uppsala. He, too, stated that the Norsemen utilized suspension and, as above, had mentioned that the practitioners were utilizing idols. Additionally, these accounts agree with the statements of Tacitus when he suggested that Germanic tribes do not worship within the confines of temples, but rather outdoors. Both Turville-Petre and Simpson have utilized these accounts as corroborative evidence for Norse cultic practices, as well, arguing that their similarities provide the accounts with credibility (Turville-Petre 1975; Simpson 1967). These similarities appear to exist despite the provincial nature of those who were making the sacrifices in these descriptions; the accounts are often used in comparison to mainstream Norse practice but frequently the practices of individuals when outside their homeland may be adapted or altered. The greatest question to bear in mind, then, is whether or not these attributes of the Norse practices come from actual and independent observations by the Arab authors, thereby being corroborative sources, or if they are arrived at through some preconceived conception of paganism derived from other contemporary texts. This can, in part, only be revealed through the discovery of artifacts described or linking the original source of the information with the descriptions provided. Though we can have fears based on the veracity of the sources, these Arab authors have provided a corroborative source to European writers. They add a valuable element to the wider picture of Norse pre-Christian practices.

3.4 Norse Sources

There is also a variety of evidence regarding Norse pre-Christian practices to be found in sources from within Scandinavia. Beyond simply the scope of narrative texts in Latin and the vernacular, as well as the sagas, written sources from Scandinavia also include runic inscriptions and law documents. *Saga Hákonar góða*, of course, falls into the category of the

sagas, and in general I will attempt to keep a narrow focus on similar sources—ones that specifically relate to Norse cultic buildings—in order to have a manageable data set.

While I will not be using the runic inscriptions due to the majority of material falling outside the guidelines I have set for sources, it is worth giving them at least a brief mention. The written word, at least which associated with the production of large manuscripts, largely came to Scandinavia along with clergymen intending to convert the region (Larsson 2005). However, this is not to say that the region was entirely lacking for a system with which to write. Rather, there existed a system for the recordation of thought before the arrival of Latin script. This was, of course, the runic system. Runic inscriptions provide a unique, likely colloquial, look at the lives of the Norsemen. They are found on a wide range of objects and this may suggest that they were, in fact, widely used among a wider group of classes than the lettering found written on vellum with ink (Spurkland 2009). Part of the reasoning for this is the nature of the objects runic inscriptions are discovered on. Runic script is carved, rather than written, into easy to find objects such as bone, wood, stone, and metal surfaces. This common nature of mediums made the usage of runic scrip significantly more accessible to a wider assortment of individuals. Much of the runic assemblage deals primarily with rather mundane events, in some cases even Christian material. There are some references to well-known heathen deities to be found in some of the runic inscriptions as well. However, because inscriptions discussing the nature of cultic structures are exceptionally sparse, few of these mentions to older deities provide significantly relevant information to my purposes.

Despite the dearth of inscriptions referring specifically to cultic structures, we can, at least, find one example wherein a place of worship is potentially mentioned. This inscription is the Okluda inscription. This source is dated to somewhere around the ninth century. It was found in Sweden. The text of the inscription is not particularly long, but does have mention of a term which implies a cultic site. Though the mention of cultic activity is promising, it may not be representative of the same form of worship place as we might hope for. The inscription in normalized Old Norse reads:

> Gunnarr fáði rúnar þessar, en sá fló sakir. Sótti vé þetta. En sá fló inn ryp þann. En sá batt. Véfinn þetta fáði.

Essentially, this inscription states that our rune inscriber, Gunnarr, has fled to a cultic site as he was guilty, likely of murder (Brink 2002). Of primary importance here is the term utilized to describe the cultic site: *vé*. The term, in this context, is often suggested to mean a

sanctuary or cultic place. It can, however, also be used to describe a house (Zoëga 2004). This is important because it provides us with a contemporary term which was utilized to describe a cultic place rather than the terms utilized in the sagas which were written later. However, there are two issues. The term does not appear, however, in the texts utilized below so there is little basis for comparison with the text of *Saga Hákonar góða*. Secondly, and more importantly, the inscription gives us little information about the function of the site Gunnarr has fled to. There is no information on why he selected the location or if his purpose in doing so was based on the cultic nature of the site. Unfortunately, the limited nature of these type of inscriptions does not do a great deal to assist our understanding of the form and function of the type of sites that are the aim of this work. However, the inscription does show some potential for verifying the existence of some form of Norse cultic structure.

Another set of textual sources that can potentially provide information on cultic practices of the Viking Age are the recorded legal texts of the day—particularly church law. Insight into the pagan practices, in this case, comes not from direct descriptions of the practice but rather through the observation of what practices are prohibited by the church. Attempting to stamp out non-Christian practices was one of the greatest efforts of Christian missionaries in any region where the faith was attempting to gain a foothold. In Norway and Iceland, where there were already extensive legal codes, laws regarding non-believers joined the extant systems. As iterations of these codes have been recorded with the arrival of Latin script, it is still possible to locate these religious admonitions from the Middle Ages. In particular, one such abolition within the legal codes relevant to *Saga Hákonar góðar* is the general restrictions on the consumption of horseflesh. This admonition does not exist in only one text, either, as similar laws can be found in the texts of *Gulatingsloven, Grágás,* and *Frostatingsloven.* In addition, in some legal codes, particularly *Eidsivating* and *Borgartingslovene*, it was permissible to consume horseflesh, but only if the individual had not eaten for seven days. It is believed this was done to slow the practice of pagan sacrifice (Brink 2002; Kværness 1996). Despite the new reign of Christianity, paganism was not instantly made illegal, but existed in a moral grey area at times. By attempting to slowly phase out pagan traditions through legal action, there was a greater move to bolster the burgeoning power of Christianity in the Scandinavian region. This transition was not instantaneous, though. For some time there was still some ability for practitioners of the pre-Christian rituals to partake in their traditions. Ari Froði mentions in *Íslendigabók* that pagan sacrifice was still allowed so long as it was done in secret. If someone was caught performing

sacrifice, they would be exiled (ibid.). Of course, while the laws can inform us as to what practices were believed to occur, they cannot entirely speak to instances of private worship. That is to say, what was banned by law might reflect archaic fears and the information upon which those capable of changing the legal system may have been flawed. So while the existence of laws prohibiting or limiting pagan practice may suggest that the practices were still present, they cannot entirely speak to how widespread the phenomenon was.

3.5 The Sagas as Sources

Scandinavia is, in terms of textual studies, fortunate to have such an astounding assortment of near contemporary, ostensibly historiographical texts that focus more on pragmatic fact rather than the ethnographic commonplace and fantastical elements which exist prominently in many other European writings. Unlike many of the other texts of the era, a variety of the story elements of the sagas are presented as an attempt at telling objective history and explaining events through human action and logical means rather than through supernatural events. Furthermore, and partly because of this historically based tone, the sagas contain a vast wealth of information relative to the peoples they represent. The sagas exist so strongly as one of the foundational elements of the study of Nordic religions that Gabriel Turville-Petre wrote, "it must suffice to say that without the Icelandic texts, our knowledge of Norse Heathendom would be but a fragment of what it is (Turville-Petre 1975: 2)."

In the introduction, I mentioned a unique element of early Icelandic archaeology: their reliance on the sagas to determine the location, nature, and function of temple and farm sites. However, in modern times, along with the arrival and usage of processual archaeology, these sites were revisited. Using modern tools, many of the named saga sites were shown to be entirely inaccurately represented by the literary sources with farmstead features either missing or with their functions misunderstood or misrepresented. At times locations purported to have Viking Age structures based on saga evidence were shown to have no period artifacts or features at all (Lucas 2009). By this situation alone, we can see that there is a significant degree of caution required when attempting to reconcile saga history with the archaeological record. However, this does not mean the records in the sagas are entirely worth discarding as a source to be used in relation to the material record; we must simply seek to understand the potential issues with their utilization.

While the sagas and other Scandinavian texts are believed to be of monumental importance to the understanding of the early Norse ritual practices and related mythology, no source should be utilized without some form of critical review. Ergo, the exigent question in their interpretations and comparison to the material record is: to what extent can we trust the sagas as sources on Norse paganism? There are multiple arguments and propositions on the extent to which scholars should rely on the Icelandic material and to what extent it should be trusted. The question of trust for the sagas can provoke a variety of answers independent of the particular field of study. Sometimes it seems as though faith in the sagas waxes and wanes with each generation of scholars. In this section, I will deal with some of the arguments when establishing the veracity of saga texts within historical studies. This will influence their use and relevance to the archaeological evidence presented later.

One of the first issues with the usage of the sagas as a source is the fact that they were penned a considerably significant period of time after the events that propose to portray especially when we consider the dissemination of information during the period. Depending on the particular scholar dating the text, the earliest sagas generally are placed sometime around the beginning of the thirteenth century (Clunies Ross 2010). Not only this, but almost all the extant manuscripts were actually manufactured during later time periods as books wear out and works are frequently copied into a newer codex. As such, very few manuscripts can be truthfully dated to the thirteenth century or any earlier (ibid.). Because of the nature of manuscript reproduction and the discretion of new scribes, we cannot always be sure to what extent the exigent text that can be observed today reflects the content in the original. It is for this reason that multiple manuscripts and fragments are important in order to understand where a story, which may have originated from the same initial author, has been altered in later texts. In the case of a work like *Heimskringla*, we are fortunate to have multiple extant examples; however many other obscure sagas are less fortunate and there is no doubt we have lost many texts over time.

Literary Analysis of the Sagas

Within the paleographical community, there also exists a debate over the origins and structuring of the sagas. While the debate is not immediately pertinent to their uses when comparing the sagas to the archaeological material, we might concern ourselves with them for

their tangential implications of veracity. Two of the relevant debates are the discussion on how the saga format arose by comparing the relevant influence of oral and literary precursors and how they relate to the structuring of the sagas. More specifically, we can examine the way literary structures and devices are common between the sagas to extrapolate how the stories within were formulated be it through authors seeking out oral culture or creating the literature themselves. The importance of oral versus literary origins to a discussion in an archaeological context should be apparent. While the borrowings from oral culture would be, to a large degree, visible in the way that the saga authors constructed their narratives, if oral culture is relied upon as a source, this could give an indication of the accuracy of information presented if we were to attempt to use it ethnographically.

The entirety of the debate is quite a bit more complex than is necessary to present in full here, though it is worthwhile to cover at least the essential points. Particularly, the primary issue is whether the origins of sagas are of *bookprose* or *freeprose*. Proponents of bookprose believe that the sagas were literary creations alone and reject any orality in their creation. On the other hand, proponents of freeprose suggest that the sagas are instead inspired by an earlier oral tradition which was then written down and became the sagas (Byock 2001a). As I mentioned above, there is some suggestion that the origins of the sagas would have influenced the accuracy of the content within them. This assumption, though, should be made carefully, as it is possible that the whole point erroneous. There is, of course, no assurance that the oral narrative is more accurate nor is it definite that their recordation would have been entirely without alteration by the scribe. The hope would simply be that an historic story recorded from an oral tradition would be more reflective of the story as it would have been understood by the pre-Christian progenitors of the tale. In addition to bookprose and freeprose, another type of origin, *long-prose*, has been suggested as a sort of addition or expansion upon the idea of freeprose. Under this concept, the style and literary nature of the sagas arose as oral cultures did not need entire narratives to understand a story. It is assumed that people in the culture would already have known the tales and been capable of understanding new stories in their place alongside other tales (Clunies Ross 2010). If we accept this observation, in addition to the implications it would have for the origins of saga structure, it would also mean that any reconstruction of the past based upon the written sagas could potentially be lacking in a great deal of vital information which authors or storytellers simply assumed the reader would already know. We would, in this case, only have a piece of the picture—a smaller one than we believe we have based on available texts. As Clunies

Ross points out, it is likely that there was a confluence of both oral and literary tradition that gave us the sagas and that one answer may not hold true for all the available texts (ibid.).

Another area of discourse regarding the sagas is that of the structure of their narratives. It is observable that the sagas are frequently guided by some kind of pattern in their writing. This pattern is sometimes noted when invoking arguments for long-prose and freeprose as the suggestion is that tales were compartmentalized for easier recollection by the story teller (Byock 2001b). One of the first to suggest such a pattern was Theodore Andersson who proposed a six step format of conflict and resolution (Andersson 1967). There are some minor issues with the methods he utilized to come to this conclusion and, at times, he ignored sagas that did not fit into the format he had established. After his initial assessment, he has since continued to build his argument by identifying seven narrative structures he believes occur with such regularity that they are indicative of an earlier oral tradition (Andersson 2006a). His early work, however, opened the door to a variety of attempts to similarly categorize the format of the sagas as being based on a standardized format. Notably, Jesse Byock has put forth a simpler cycle which he believes to be: conflict, advocacy, and resolution (Byock 2001b). Byock argues that these patterns would have been based on the real machinations of politics at the things. If these structures are actually set up, though, as a preformed pattern for the sagas, we must ask whether or not there is a potential that other ideas would be utilized in a repeatable format as well. Is it possible that ideas and descriptions of Norse paganism could have been reused throughout various different sagas as a literary device? If so, what would this mean for the accuracy of interpretation of the material record based on the textual sources? Surely continued reproduction based on a preconceived format would damage any attempt to produce unbiased content on the Norse cultic practices before the arrival of Christianity.

A final issue when approaching the sagas, and perhaps the most pertinent to their veracity, is the problem of ethnographic commonplace, alterations for literary purposes, and Christian influence. Earlier, with the mention of Tacitus, the term *ethnographic commonplace* came up in reference to the *Germania*. This, too, occurs in the sagas and many of the works of the medieval time period. Whereas today historians and authors attempt to rely on empirically derived evidence, during the Middle Ages, there were other sources that provided authenticity and veracity to a work. Referencing the classics became part of the medieval mindset and authorship. As Clunies Ross states, "those who wrote history were

conscious of the necessity to follow rules of medieval grammar (which was a much broader discipline than modern grammar and included rhetoric) in presenting their subject and to secure the authenticity of their narratives by drawing upon the evidence of trusted authorities to back them up. Such authorities could be either eyewitness to events or written authorities whose status was universally accepted (Clunies Ross 2010: 86)." It is because of such a mindset and requirement of authoritative support that we can see the propagation of information which is demonstrably untrue, perhaps even to the knowledge of the author, but is nevertheless continued due to the requirements of sourcing material. The origin of the material that is considered authoritative varies—sometimes the classics are utilized, sometimes later Christian interpretations. Most authors of the time were not above altering stories for these, or literary, purposes. Würth, for instance, argues that, "texts could be adapted to the redactor's new intentions or the audience's different needs (Würth 2005)." Authors of the time, as in any time, created a number of issues in the texts they created through subjectivity.

Interpretatio Christiana

> Given that most texts from medieval Scandinavia date from the period after the conversion and, in many cases, from well after it, their Christian authors were perforce obligated to recuperate and discuss the pagan past largely in terms of the mentality which has been termed *interpretatio Christiana*.
>
> (Clunies Ross 2003: 280)

Furthermore, one of the above issues is beyond simply ethnographic commonplace. The issue is the bias of Christian interpretation, referred to as *interpretatio Christiana.* This phenomenon, which is not unique to texts created in Scandinavia, has to do with the way that Christian authors portrayed, utilized, and adapted pre-Christian concepts, artifacts, and sites in order to ease conversion or explain the old cultic practices. This phenomenon is displayed in the sagas in a number of ways, especially in the structure. Many of the sagas are written in a style similar to Christian hagiographical texts, showing some degree of the mindset of their clerical authors (Battista 2003). Furthermore, a Christian interpretation is given to many of the features and objects that they would believe to be part of the pre-Christian practices. In part, this must be because scholars and authors working at different time periods or who were not near pagan practices had little information and therefore relied on previous conceptions

and descriptions of heathen artifacts and buildings to formulate their own mindset. Therefore, when describing a building used for worship, they were required to fill in gaps by placing it as either a temple, a construct known to them from other pagan areas, or make associations between pagan artifacts and items used by the clergy in order to provide a description they could understand. With this in mind, a Christian author might describe a temple in terms they understood yet was not necessarily representative of any pagan structure that ever actually existed (Steinsland 1986). We can, to some extent, see this type of association, or even replacement, of artifacts and building features in the description of a temple from *Eyrbyggja Saga* which was constructed and utilized by Thorolf.

Earlier in this saga, Thorolf has left Norway and abandoned a temple (*hof*) there. As he sails to Iceland, he casts the *high-seat pillars* from his old temple into the ocean: "Þórólfr kastaði þá fyrir borð öndvegissúlum sínum, þeim er staðit höfðu í hofinu (Eb)." Now, upon landing, he has discovered the location that the pillars came aground, Thorsness (*Þórsnes*), and marks his land here. After demarcating the land he will claim, he decides to build a hall and temple at *Hofsstöðum.* This location name itself is a portmanteau of the words *hof*, meaning temple, and *stöð*, a term for *place*—here likely used with the alternate meaning of either *landing-place* or *dwelling place*. We are then provided with a passage describing the temple in question. This passage reads:

> Hann setti bæ mikinn við Hofsvág, er hann kallaði á Hofsstöðum. Þar lét hann reisa hof, ok var þat mikit hús. Váru dyrr á hliðvegginum ok nær öðrum endanum. Þar fyrir innan stóðu öndvegissúlurnar, ok áaru þar í naglar. Þeir hétu reginnaglar. Þar var allt friðarstaðr fyrir innan. Innar af hofinu var hús í þá líking sem nú er sönghús í kirkjum, ok stóð þar stalli á miðju gólfinu sem altari, ok lá þar á hringr einn mótlauss, tvítögeyringr, ok skyldi þar at sverja eiða alIa. Þann hring skyldi hofgoði hafa á hendi sér til allra mannfunda. Á stallanum skyldi ok standa hlautbolli ok þar í hlautteinn, sem stökkull væri, ok skyIdi þar stökkva með ór bollanum blóði því, er hlaut var kallat. Þat var þess konar blóð, er svrefð váru þau kvikendi, er goðunum var fórnat. Umhverfis stallann var goðunum skipat í afhúsinu. Til hofsins skyldu allir menn tolla gjalda ok vera skyldir hofgoðanum til allra ferða, sem nú eru þingmenn hofðingjum, en goði skyldi hofi upp halda af sjálfs síns kostnaði, svá at eigi rénaði, ok hafa inni blótveizlur.
>
> (Eb)

The description of this temple includes a variety of detail on the layout and objects contained within the structure. It describes that there is an entrance on the side wall, closer to an end wall (*Váru dyrr á hliðvegginum ok nær öðrum endanum*). We are informed that the *high-seat pillars,* an oft mentioned feature of the Norse cultic house, are located in the entrance of the structure (*Þar fyrir innan stóðu öndvegissúlurnar, ok áaru þar í naglar*. We are told of the location of the altar, the presence of a ring upon the altar, and of the vessel for sacrificial blood (*hlaut,* likely also a Christian concept, but a term to which we will return below). It concludes by stating that all should pay a toll to the temple, but that the temple priest (*hofgoði*) would need to maintain the temple at his own expense (a similar practice is noted in *Saga Hákonar goða* and will be discussed further below). The description, however, contains a variety of issues should we consider the possibility of many of these described artifacts having analogues in Christian churches. It is possible these descriptions are being utilized to explain pagan phenomenon despite their lack of accuracy.

Where the author has written, *Innar af hofinu var hús í þá líking sem nú er sönghús í kirkjum, ok stóð þar stalli á miðju gólfinu sem altari,* one might speculate the place described is not a pagan temple, but an interpretation from the Christian sources and structures the author is familiar with in his daily life. In this case, the author states that within the *hof,* there was a smaller house, similar to choir, *sönghús,* in a Christian church, *kirkjum*. Furthermore, it states that beneath this there is a stall, *stalli*, similar to an altar, *altari*. The word *altari* is a relatively obvious borrows from the older Latin *altus* (later *altar* or *altarium*). Beyond even this, however, the picture we are left with, a house within a house surrounded by pillars, could easily be construed as a description of the construction of a cathedral—a type of building prominant elsewhere during the time of writing. A central altar, covered by a *ciborium* that is supported by four pillars might appear as a small house like structure. This structure is also surrounded by the columns on the interior of the church. With this confusion, it is not a great leap to postulate that the author is describing not the construction of a longhouse or similar structure, despite the fact possessed aisles supported by wooden pillars or if he is conflating these similarities with a Christian church into a single, yet inaccurate, description of a pagan temple. The issue is that the author can only speak within the terminology and worldview he understands. It is probable the author may have a conception of how a structure with a primary purpose of worship should look based upon his own understanding of a church and a lexicon that does not include the proper terminology for pagan concepts. For this reason,

when he describes a structure he has never seen, he relies on the data he has available. As such, it is data that inherently has a distinctly Christian bias.

While this is just a single example of the occurrence of *interpretatio Christiana* in the sagas, it provides some insight into the ways in which the religious world view of the authors could sometimes skew their understanding of a subject. What we cannot know, generally, is the reason for the misrepresentation. In the case of *Eyrbyggja*, above, it is possible that any misrepresentations may have simply come from the author's lack of familiarity with the subject matter. Based upon the likely time of writing, the mid thirteenth century, it is possible that the author had never had any firsthand experience with practitioners of *forn siðr*, let alone the ability to study in depth the construction of their ceremonial halls (Schjødt 2003). Other authors, such as Adam of Bremen above, may have had more intent, or obsession, even, to portray pagans in a specific light—in most cases a negative one. Whatever the reasoning behind the particular decisions of the author and their portrayal of the ancient Norsemen, the interpretational issues based upon their own world view of Christianity must always be somewhere in the mind of those wishing to utilize the descriptions in modern interpretations and imaginings of the pre-Christian cultic practices of the Scandinavians.

3.6 Snorri

Above I stated that Scandinavia was fortunate to possess texts aimed at pragmatic, objective history rather than fantastical explanations, and there is no doubt that one of the greatest contributors to this trend was Snorri Sturlusson. Born 1179 to Sturla Þórðarson, a wealthy chieftain, Snorri was introduced early to the limited group that represented the cultured milieu of Iceland as he spent his younger years raised by Jón Loptsson. Graced with affluence and a modicum of political prowess, Snorri gained a good deal of power for himself and his estate at Reykholt in Borgarfjöður. He was lawspeaker twice and traveled abroad to a variety of Scandinavian courts. He was assassinated in 1241 for siding against King Hákon IV of Norway and his during a period of internecine warfare. (Kristjánsson 2007). In his life, Snorri had no aversion to gaining power and prestige across Iceland, though as we will see, he was uninterested in allowing his homeland to become the property of the Norwegian king.

While Snorri's exploits in the political realm were important during his time, he is best known for different accomplishments. Snorri's greatest contribution to history is his written

work—particularly the *Prose Edda* and *Heimskringla.* The *Prose Edda*, consisting of *Gylfaginning, Skáldskamparmál, and Háttatal*, is frequently considered one of the best sources of the pre-Christian Norse mythological figures. The latter two portions also contain a resource for guidance on Old Norse poetical language. More importantly for this work, Snorri's *Heimskringla*, stands as a prominent historiographical work detailing the early kings of Norway. Snorri likely relied on various Norwegian sources, met during his travels to foreign courts, to compile the work. It was these unknown court poets who served as his vernacular authority. Though the majority of his sources are unknown, he identifies by name Ari Þorgilsson (Clunies Ross 2010). With the basic stories of the Norse world provided from these various sources, he took a different approach than previous authors in his recordation of history. Most importantly, Snorri works with a style that is rooted, at least ostensibly, in pragmatism. While he is, at times, willing to change texts and source works to fit his needs, he nevertheless approaches the subject with an eye towards realistic history. He searches for human motivation and action as the impetus for events in the stories and omits supernatural explanation (Kristjánsson 2007). It is for the fact that he utilizes his own logic in reasoning why events came to pass and presents it as historical truth that it is easy to see why his works have had such an impact on our understanding of the Norsemen and their origins. However, as with all texts, we must ask how reliable or accurate are his works, really, in their portrayal of the pre-Christian Norse ideologies, practices, and myth set? Above, I mentioned a number of ways the sagas are critiqued in terms of relative accuracy both in terms of other literary works and in their relation to objective history. Snorri, like other saga authors, was no stranger to altering his work to fit his particular needs, outlook, or desire for a cohesive story. We must ask, can his desire for removing fantastical elements be reconciled in the material record as empirically derived observations?

The impact that Snorri has had on the realm of Norse studies is almost immeasurable. His name and prominence as a chronicler is known better than any other author of the day. However, we should not, because of his popularity, be compelled to simply trust his work at face value. As above, there are a number of times we can observe that he is willing to change a narrative to fit his desired story or even add details if he feels a tale needs to be fleshed out. He may have had political motivations, too, to present the sagas of kings in the manner he did. Each piece of his tale we must consider cautiously. With hope and careful autopsy we might cautiously seek to derive some form of historical fact from the works.

3.7 *Saga Hákonar góða*

The primary saga I will focus on, S*aga Hákonar góða*, is a portion of Snorri's larger work, *Heimskringla*. The term *Heimskringla* was not the name Snorri actually selected for this compilation of works. Rather, the term is a portmanteau of the first two words of one of the manuscripts containing the text which mean, "the circle of the world." The *Heimskgringla,* even in its day, was a well-known text and for this reason existed in a variety of manuscripts. Its popularity was such that, "*Heimskringla,* either in its entirety or in the form of individual sagas, either in their original form or with interpolations, existed in more manuscripts during the Middle Ages than any other Icelandic historical work (Kristjánsson 1993: 78)." It is, perhaps, for this reason that there are a number of surviving manuscripts, many of which are relatively complete, along with a great deal of fragments. The subject of the *Heimskringla* is the lives of the Norwegian kings. While other records exist, including accounts of Norwegian origin, Snorri's is nevertheless the best known. Like his other texts, Snorri has frequently utilized skaldic knowledge to understand and fill in lacunas of his own literary tradition—along with his use of the works of Ari as mentioned above. It has even been suggested that Snorri was not aware of nor reliant on the other chronicles of Norwegian kings to complete his work (Clunies Ross 2010). It should be of note that Snorri's portrayal and attitude towards the kings in the various sagas is frequently relatively negative. Snorri also seems to place his own interpretation onto the actions of the kings and attempt to reconcile them with his own logic, as stated above, for one of his main goals in understanding history seems to have been a desire to give events human causes.

Many of the sagas that make up the *Heimskringla* are intended to portray a moralized picture of the how the various Norwegian kings chronicled chose to rule and influence their subjects. The inhabitants of Iceland, at the time, were beginning to feel the weight of foreign powers. As a man of power and property, "Snorri knew that the political independence of his country was imperiled and that it was a matter of time before the Norwegian king would extend his rule to the economically insignificant island on the outskirts of the Scandinavian realm (Cikamini 1978: 65)." On the other hand, some have asserted that the machinations described were not of political or class struggle, but rather represent family feuds (Gaskins 1997). Still, many of the tales are intended to represent the negative influence of centralized power, and frequently it is primarily the failings of kings that are highlighted. One of the few tales within which the king is portrayed in a relatively good light is our focus: *Saga Hákonar*

góða or *The Saga of King Håkon the Good.* The story told is of King Håkon and his rise to power in Norway and his attempts to Christianize the land, especially the Northerners who are described as more set in their ways and resistant to change. The tale concludes with the death of the king—an end he met in battle. It is framed by two accounts of treachery and the description of a land in disarray (Cikamini 1978). Throughout the tale, King Håkon is represented as a king who is capable of straddling the line between playing the role of a champion of Christian conversion and a pagan sympathizer. Despite the fact that one of his primary aims is to Christianize the country, he nevertheless is eventually buried and respected in a heathen fashion. In this way, he is capable of both representing a defender of the faith for Christianity and still be a powerful warrior-king of the old ways. Snorri has presented the king, then, as an individual capable of playing the moderate leader who, it seems, has earned his title *the good*. His final epitaph, found in the form of a poem, even places his spirit's final resting place as Valhalla.

There are a number of reasons I selected *Saga Hákonar góða* as the primary focus of this work. Firstly, the dating of the *Heimskringla* is relatively early, having been potentially first penned around 1250 (Clunies Ross 2010). While this is still relatively late in relation to the Viking Age and the actual practices of Norse paganism, S*aga Hákonar góða* is at least moderately proximal to potential practices when compared to later stories. Furthermore, as discussed above, Snorri had a greater interest in presenting information in a realistic style relative to other authors of the period. At least claiming historical accuracy places his story ahead of other texts that might be burdened by a reliance on Medieval Grammar. Whatever the validity to actual Norse paganism within the account, the commentary in the text is nevertheless an important observation on what was believed at the time to represent heathenism as well. In this way, the text provides an equal potential for providing a glimpse at the culture within which it was created.

There are two passages in particular upon which I will focus my analysis. These passages are the description of the heathen sacrifice at the hall of Jarl Sigurd and the instance of the farmers insisting King Håkon share in the consumption of horseflesh which occurs a few chapters later. I choose these primarily because they are presented as accurate depictions of pagan practice that deal directly with rituals occurring within a potentially cultic structure. Below we will seek some modicum of truth about the validity of the presented rituals. For simplicity's sake, for each of the two passages, I will provide a brief introduction, the text in

Old Norse language, and a modern translation from another source. I will then break down the text and look at specific word choices and the overall meaning of the passage.

A Sacrifice at the Hall of Jarl Sigurd

The first chapter I will discuss, sometimes referred to as *fra blótum* describes the practices of a local chieftain, Jarl Sigurd, who upholds the heathen sacrifices in the Trøndelag. The chapter details a sacrificial feast held at the jarl's hall. In particular, it describes what should be brought, what is sacrificed, the method of sacrifice, and the gods that are praised during the event. We are not given a specific reason as to the purpose of the sacrificial feast in question, somewhat unlike the *blót* in other sources wherein the individual performing the sacrifice is seeking a specific boon from the supernatural. For instance, in *Eyrbyggja*, mentioned throughout the text, we find an instance of the sacrifice, when Thorolf is questioning leaving Norway, which has the stated function of seeking the advice of a deity. Despite this, it may not be out of line to postulate that this particular feast is for the midwinter sacrifice, potentially even part of the Yule celebration. This is because the previous chapter mentions the changes King Håkon has made to the Yule celebration and the sacrificial feast associated with it. During this particular chapter, King Håkon is not present, but rather the description includes only Jarl Sigurd and his followers. The chapter reads:

> Sigurðr Hlaðajarl var hinn mesti blótmaðr, ok svá var Hákon, faðir hans. Hélt Sigurðr jarl upp blótveizlum öllum af hendi konungs þar í Þrœndalögum. Þat var forn siðr, þá er blót skyldi vera, at allir bœndr skyldu þar koma sem hof var ok flytja þannug föng sín, þau er þeir skyldu hafa, meðan veizlan stóð. At veizlu þeirri skyldu allir menn öl eiga; þar var ok drepinn allskonar smali ok svá hross; en blóð þat alt, er þar kom af, þá var kallat hlaut, ok hlautbollar þat, er blóð þat stóð í, ok hlautteinar, þat var svá gert sem stöklar; með því skyldi rjóða stallana öllu saman, ok svá veggi hofsins utan ok innan, ok svá stökkva á mennina; en slátr skyldi sjóða til mannfagnaðar. Eldar skyldu vera á miðju gólfi í hofinu ok þar katlar yfir; ok skyldi full um eld bera. En sá er gerði veizluna ok höfðingi var, þá skyldi hann signa fullit ok allan blótmatinn. Skyldi fyrst Óðins full, skyldi þat drekka til sigrs ok ríkis konungi sínum, en síðan Njarðar full ok Freys full til árs ok friðar. Þá var mörgum mönnum títt at drekka þarnæst Braga full. Menn drukku ok full frænda sinna, þeirra er göfgir höfðu verit, ok váru þat minni kölluð.
>
> (SHG)

> Sigurth, earl of Hlathir, was a most ardent heathen worshipper, as had been Hákon, his father. Earl Sigurth maintained all sacrificial feasts there in Trondheim on the king's behalf. It was ancient custom that when sacrifice was to be made, all farmers were to come to the heathen temple and bring along with them the food they needed while the feast lasted. At this feast all were to take part in the drinking of ale. Also all kinds of livestock were killed in connection with it, horses also; and all the blood from them was called *hlaut*, and *hlautbolli*, the vessel holding that blood; and *hlautteinar*, the sacrificial twigs. These were fashioned like sprinklers, and with them were to be smeared all over with the blood the pedestals of the idols and also the walls of the temple within and without; and likewise the men present were to be sprinkled with blood. But the meat of the animals was to be boiled and to serve as food at the banquet. Fires were to be lighted in the middle of the temple floor, and kettles hung over them. The sacrificial beaker was to be borne around the fire, and he who made the feast and was chieftain, was to bless the beaker as well as all the sacrificial meat. Othin's toast was to be drunk first—that was for victory and power to the king—then Njorth's and Frey's, for good harvest and for peace. Following that many used to drink a beaker to the king. Men drank toasts also in memory of departed kinsfolk—that was called *minni.*
>
> (Hollander 1991: 107)

Additionally, the final statement of the passage goes on to praise Jarl Sigurd's hospitality and generosity in providing for his kinsmen:

> Sigurðr jarl var manna örvastr; hann gerði þat verk, er frægt var mjök, at hann gerði mikla blótveizlu á Hlöðum, ok hélt einn upp öllum kostnaði.
>
> (SHG)

Essentially, the Jarl is depicted as an open-handed man (*manna örvastr*) who hosted the sacrificial feasts at his own expense at his hall, Hlathir. For this he is celebrated. The chapter concludes with a poem dedicated to Jarl Sigurd that praises his generosity during the feast time. It seems that above any other feature, Jarl Sigurd was known for his generosity and magnanimity.

In some sense, the idea that Jarl Sigurd would be noted for his magnanimity speaks to his duties as a chieftain. Earlier, within the passage from *Eyrbyggja saga*, there was a mention of the duties of the *hofgoði*. As it stood above, the portion of the passage states:

> "Til hofsins skyldu allir menn tolla gjalda ok vera skyldir hofgoðanum til allra ferða, sem nú eru þingmenn hofðingjum, en goði skyldi hofi upp halda af sjálfs síns kostnaði, svá at eigi rénaði, ok hafa inni blótveizlur."
>
> (Eb)

This portion roughly states that all men should pay a toll and follow the *hofgoði*, but that the *hofgoði* was responsible for the temple upkeep and the *blótveizlur*, or sacrificial feasts. From this corroboration, we can infer that, to some degree, those who owned or managed cultic halls had some form of responsibility in terms of their upkeep and providing for those who would worship under the hall—whether this responsibility to worshipers was based solely on payment of the tax is unclear from only these two sources. Gro Steinsland also argues for this interpretation of the responsibilities of the Jarl when she states that, "the ruler would have been the guardian of the cultic places, possibly even the central figure of the cult (Steinsland 2011:3)." Jarl Sigurd has clearly provided for those who wish to worship at his hall and thereby earned their praise.

To return to the main body of the text, however, we should begin by noting with what terminology Snorri refers to the old practices. The sacrifice and feast are referred to as *forn siðr* (*Þat var forn siðr*). The term, which means, "the old tradition," is frequently used in reference to the pagan practices. It is intended to set such rituals aside compared to *nýr siðr*, which referenced the new faith. However, the most frequently used term in this passage is *blót* and the various other forms derived from this base. The term *blót* appears with a great deal of regularity in the sagas—in *Saga Hákonar góða*, reference is made to *blót*, in one form or another, almost twenty times. The definition of the word is sacrifice or a sacrificial ceremony, though may also mean general worship (Cleasby 1962). To this end, *blót* is believed to be etymologically related to the Old English term *blētsian* which is, itself, related to the Old English *blōd* or blood. The term would eventually become the modern English *bless* (Lindow 2001). *Blētsian*, because of its close relation to the Old English word for blood, implies the ritual act of covering or anointing in blood—the term *bless* would eventually be changed to its modern meaning and lose this association with the vital fluid. In this specific instance of the use of *blót*, at the Jarl's sacrificial feast, it seems we can see the connection between the two terms, *blētsian* and *blót* and their connection to blood. The Jarl and his participants, too, anoint not only themselves, but also the hall they occupy with the blood of their sacrificial victims, in this case referred to as *hlaut* (discussed further below).

However, throughout the sagas, the term is not always applied with a similarly detailed description nor even the implication of the large scale feasting in the saga above. Ergo, while it is used with significant regularity, its meaning as simply a sacrifice or generalized worship means that the exact nature of the ritual that is performed is not entirely

clear. Some of the sagas, such as *Eyrbyggja,* portray a different usage of the term unlike the great feast suggested in *Saga Hákonar góða*. For instance, this passage mentioned above and cited in *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (Knirk 2000) provides a slightly different view on sacrifice:

> Þórólfr Mostrarskegg fekk at blóti miklu ok gekk til fréttar við Þór...
>
> (Eb)

The passage roughly translates to: Thorolf Mostrarskegg made a great sacrifice and asked for news from Thor. Thorolf we have met before from the events immediately following his decision to relocate to Iceland, in the earlier passages of *Eyrbyggja saga* discussed. In this case, Thorolf, is using a sacrifice to gain council from a deity, Thor, on how he should react to King Harald—specifically whether he should make peace or leave Norway. In this situation, the sacrifice described is presented in such a way we might believe it is of a different type than the massive gathering purported at Jarl Sigurd's hall. Rather than a public display, it seems that this sacrifice was of a more personal nature. Furthermore, in this case, the sacrifice also intended a specific outcome: the boon of a god's advice. In our sacrifice with Jarl Sigurd, the purpose of the feast seems to be veneration of multiple deities for good tidings all around. It was the celebration of a holiday, essentially.

The term *blót* in the text above also appears as a portion of a number of portmanteaus which identify the purpose of individuals and objects described within the saga. The initial introduction of a character is often intended to portray a majority of information about them and Jarl Sigurd is introduced as, "hinn mesti blótmaðr." *Blótmaðr,* translates to: "Heathen worshiper, idolater (Zoëga 2004)." The term may also refer to a heathen sacrificial priest (Knirk 2000). Here, *hinn mesti,* which literally translates to, "the most," is used to suggest Jarl Sigurd's importance as one who sacrifices—just as Hákon, his father, was a practitioner. The passage continues, explaining that Sigurd held up the tradition, *blótveizlum,* for the king in the region of the Trøndelag. *Blótveizlum* is a term used to specifically refer to instances of sacrificial feasting (Zoëga 2004). This distinction may come to define the difference between simply a sacrifice and a sacrifice which included the consumption of the victim's remains.

We should probably also believe the sacrificial feast at Jarl Sigurd's hall has some degree of importance as far as regional power and it was likely an important event for the community. In part, this could be established because he is performing the rite on behalf of

the king, known as an important sacrificer, and is providing for the expenses of his own means. In this case, therefore, we might infer the term *blótmaðr* is likely a reference to Sigurd having some amount of clout due to his position in the community and his position as a sacrificer. In some sense, he is weilding the power of the king himself by upholding the feasting tradition in his honor. Another term, *blótgoði,* can be used to more specifically describe a sacrificial priest (Zoëga 2004). We saw this term above used to describe Thorolf in *Eyrbyggja saga*. In this case, the term also implies a degree of political power, not simply the implicit importance of being a sacrificial priest granted by the term.

Hlaut is also mentioned multiple times within the passage. It is also the base word for two named objects, the *hlautbolli* and *hlautteinn*. These same objects were mentioned in the passage of *Eyrbyggja saga* presented previously and were said to sit on the altar in Thorolf's temple (*Á stallanum skyldi ok standa hlautbolli ok þar í hlautteinn, sem stökkull væri, ok skyIdi þar stökkva með ór bollanum blóði því, er hlaut var kallat.*). *Hlaut,* as presented by the text, is a vital part of the Norse cultic tradition as it is blood of the sacrificial victims which takes on a primary importance in the ritual (Zoëga 2004). The *hlautbolli* is a bowl in which the blood was captured and the *hlautteinn* were utilized to spread the blood throughout the temple and on the participants of the feast (as above: *þat var svá gert sem stöklar; með því skyldi rjóða stallana öllu saman, ok svá veggi hofsins utan ok innan, ok svá stökkva á mennina; en slátr skyldi sjóða til mannfagnaðar*.). It is suggested that the term comes from an earlier term *hlutr* which was a form of pagan rite during which twigs or branches of some kind would be dipped in blood and then shaken. The belief is that blood was the important element of the sacrifice—the meat of the victim was intended for consumption (Knirk 2000). Here, then, the description of the use of *hlaut* at the feast fits the conceived notion of the Norse-Germanic heathen practices. It may, however, not be so much a corroborative source, but rather a preconception by Christians applied to the pagan practices of the time period.

Though the practice of utilizing *hlaut* as a tribute and ablution is promoted by the author as an important portion of the Germanic traditions and it seems to be a common piece of ritual performance during the time of saga authorship, the practice was not exclusive to the Norsemen. Rather, it seems to have quite old origins, as the practice can be linked to a passage in Exodus:

> And ye shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the bason, and strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that is in the bason; and none of you shall go out at the door of his house until morning.
>
> (Exod xii 22)

The practice described above, part of the sacrifice involved in the story of Passover and the Jewish flight from Egypt, appears to be the same as the practice later attributed to the heathens in the North. This leaves the question: to what extent can we believe this is coincidence versus a borrowing from the earlier texts to fill in gaps of information?

It may be a combination of both of these two potential explanations. There is suitable evidence in the archaeological record, presented below, to suggest that feasting was a primary activity at large halls like that belonging to Jarl Sigurd. Earlier passages from Exodus xii also detail God's commandment for the Jewish people to feast during the time of Passover—in particular they consume the sheep they have slaughtered in order to paint their doors. Earlier I discussed the concept of *interpretatio Christiana*, wherein Christian authors might adapt stories based upon their own understandings and worldview. Here, it is likely just such a case. To a Christian author who has been informed, through some channel, that feasting was of importance, it is possible that an association was made. In this case, the belief that blood was of primary importance to cultic practices may be an import from other Christian stories. Whereas it may have been known that part of *forn siðr* was the act of feasting, the exact details of how and why may not have been entirely clear Snorri.

The final term of particular interest to us is the term with which Snorri refers to Jarl Sigurd's hall: *hof*. The term *hof* is generally interpreted to mean a temple (Cleasby 1962; Zoëga 2004). However, it likely goes a bit beyond such a simple definition. The term *hof* can still be observed in a number of names from Iceland today. It has been suggested that the temple was the focus of political life during the time of pagans. As we can still see some of these place names extant, it is believed that we can see an expression of old political geography remaining (Knirk 2000). It is also believed that the *hof* originated from and is now distinguished from the *hörgr*, which is often suggested to represent a worship place outdoors, without a roof (Cleasby 1962). One issue that is unclear is the exact nature of the structure of a *hof*. Some seem to argue that it is of both domestic and cultic functions. Apparently, this layout is divided into two areas with a regular hall portion, *skáli*, and an areas set aside for cultic functions—the *afhús* (Jones & Pennick 1995). On the other hand, some argue that, "small wooden buildings served as shrines for the gods (Daniel 1967)," leaving the exact

appearance and function somewhat nebulous but implying that the cultic structure was not a part of the longhouse. Even the sagas appear to have some amount of disagreement on the nature of the buildings. While *Saga Hákonar góða* does not contain a description of the building within which the sacrifice takes place, we might infer from the apparent size of the feast that it would have been some form of large hall. This implication might be justified shortly after the description of sacrifice, when it is explained that King Håkon attends the sacrificial feast at Hlodum and normally sit in a separate smaller house during sacrifices (*ef hann var staddr þar er blót váru, at matast í litlu húsi með fá men*). This would appear to suggest that the main feast was occurring at the larger central hall. However, in the passage of *Eyrbyggja* above, it seems that the temple—still described as a *hof*—was not a portion of the main building of the farm, but rather a separate structure. This, to some extent, leaves our interpretation of the appearance of a *hof* yet wanting. It is possible, too, that the term was a broad one utilized to describe any structure that some form of function of ritual significance, thus canvassing a large multitude of building types from the day.

King Håkon's Refusal to Consume Horseflesh

The next portions of the text discus King Håkon's attendance at *Frostaþing* which was one of the large, Northern thing assemblies that took place in Norway during the Viking Age. Here, the king meets with the farmers and suggests that they convert to Christianity. The farmers reject this, believing that without the sacrifice, they will be unable to maintain their livelihoods believing that the fields are fertile because of the old way of worship. Here, Jarl Sigurd mediates between the farmers and the king and the parties arrive at a solution—one that still allows them to sacrifice. Shortly afterwards, we come to the next section in the texts pertinent to our discussion of Norse cultic practice. During this event, the bonders attempt to convince—or coerce—King Håkon to consume horseflesh. The event is a part of a sacrificial feast similar to that described in the previous section, while different than that described above at Jarl Sigurd's hall, is nevertheless an important contrast between the newly introduced Christian beliefs and the older beliefs yet held by the farmers. The passage reads:

> Um haustit at vetrnótuum var blótveizla á Hlöðum, ok sótti þar til konungr. Hann hafði jafnan fyrr verit vanr, ef hann var staddr þar er blót váru, at matast í litlu húsi með fá menn; en bœndr töldu at því, er hann sat eigi í hásæti sínu, þá er mestr var mannfagnaðr; sagði jarl, at hann skyldi eigi þá svá gera; var ok svá at konungr sat í hásæti sínu. En er hit fyrsta full var skenkt, þá mælti Sigurðr jarl fyrir ok signaði Óðni

ok drakk af horninu til konungs. Konungr tók við ok gerði krossmark yfir. Þá mælti Kárr af Grýtingi; hví ferr konungr nú Svá? vill hann eigi enn blóta? Sigurðr jarl svarar: konungr gerir svá, sem þeir allir, er trúa á mátt sinn ok megin, ok signa full sitt Þór; hann gerði hamarsmark yfir, áðr hann drakk. Var þá kyrt um kveldit. Eptir um daginn, er menn géngu til borða, þá þustu bœndr at konungi, sögðu at hann skyldi eta þá hrossaslátr. Konungr vildi þat fyrir engan mun. Þá báðu þeir hann drekka soðit; hann vildi þat eigi. Þá báðu þeir hann eta flotit; hann vildi þat ok eigi. Ok var þá búit við atgöngu. Sigurðr jarl vildi sætta þá, ok bað þá hætta storminum; ok bað hann konung gína yfir ketilhödduna, er soðreykinn hafði lagt upp af hrossaslátrinu, ok var smjörug haddan. Þá gékk konungr til ok brá líndúk um höddunа ok gein yfir, ok gékk síðan til hásætis, ok líkaði hvárigum vel.

(SHG)

In fall, at the beginning of winter there was a sacrificial feast at Hlathir, and the king attended it. Before that, if present at a place where heathen sacrifice was made, he was accustomed to eat in a little house apart, in the company of a few men. But the farmers remarked about it that he did not occupy his high-seat when there was the best cheer among the people. The earl told him that he should not do that; and so it came that the king occupied his high-seat [on this occasion].

But when the first beaker was served, Earl Sigurth proposed a toast, dedicating the horn to Othin, and drank to the king. The king took the horn from him and made the sign of the cross over it.

Then Kár of Grýting said, "Why does the king do that? Doesn't he want to drink of the sacrificial beaker?"

Earl Sigurth made answer, "The king does as all do who believe in their own might and strength, and dedicated his beaker to Thór. He made the sign of the hammer over it before drinking." People said no more about it that evening. Next day when people had seated themselves at the tables, the farmers thronged about the king, saying that now he must eat the horse meat. That, the king would not do under any condition. Then they asked him to drink the broth from it. He refused to do that. Then they asked him to eat the drippings from it. He would not do that, either, and they came near making an attack on him. Earl Sigurth said he would help them come to an agreement, asking them to cease their tumult; and he asked the king to gape his mouth over the handle of the kettle on which the smoke of the broth from the horse meat had settled, so that the handle was greasy from it. Then the king went up to it and put a linen cloth over the handle and gaped with his mouth over it. Then he went back to his high-seat, and neither party was satisfied with that.

(Hollander 1991: 110-111)

Earlier, I mentioned that the laws of Norway and Iceland prohibited the consumption of horseflesh. It is believed that this abolition was to stamp out pagan behavior such as the practice of sacrificial feasting (Brink 2002). It is clear from the passage above that the Christian king was unwilling to partake in the consumption of horseflesh for ethical reasons,

though the reactions of the farmers seems to speak to them being unaccepting of other faiths. To some extent, their discontent with the king's refusal lines up with Christian conceptions and portrayals of non-Christians of the time. Certainly their reaction a few chapters later, wherein they threaten violence against the king if he refuses to partake, falls in line with a general theme for pagans and any group of non-Christians. This is because pagans and other non-Christians were frequently portrayed as violent, devious, ignorant, and sometimes prone to utter stupidity (DuBois 1999). Somehow, Jarl Sigurd seems to be somewhat free of this generalization, perhaps because of his role as mediator. However, it seems the other farmers clinging to their belifs are not presented as similarly beneficent.

The use of horses in a sacrificial context is relatively wide across the Scandinavian world. In particular, horses were commonly used in mortuary practices (Davidson 1988). They were also commonly used as a food source before the outlawry discussed above. It appears, then, that from the text above, this consumption of horse flesh has become somewhat a part of the identity of pre-Christian Norsemen, to the point that they attempt to push it on their king. In some ways, this makes sense in terms of the rising of Christianity. These individuals are looking to hold on to the old ways, to *forn siðr*, and therefore hold on to traditions that make them exclusively against the new faith. By attempting to force the hand of the king into consuming, they are ensuring that he, too, is one of them. Theirs is an act of resistance against the coming change in times.

Another way we might view this understanding of the consumption of horseflesh might be as a similar state of limited information as some of the issues noted above. While there is evidence of horses being utilized for consumption at various sites throughout Scandinavia, it might also be noted that this consumption may not have specifically inferred that the animals were being used for cultic sacrifice. The use of horses in graves and farmsteads is discussed in more detail below; however, it is worth noting that many horse remains may simply indicate normal domestic consumption. If there was no taboo before the rise of Christianity that stated the consumption of horseflesh was wrong, it would be easy to see horse as just another domestic animal utilized for sustenance along with pigs and cattle. If this is the case, that horse is consumed in normal domestic activities, it might be that the interpretation of horseflesh being vital to sacrifice, as it is promoted above with the farmers attempting to force the king to consume it, may have been injected by authors who themselves looked down on the use of horse as food. Authors like Snorri may have utilized the

consumption of horse to further promote the dissociation of Christian practice from pagans and elevated or overstated the actual importance of the animal in cultic rituals.

3.8 Summary

One of the interesting elements of the texts above, in particular, that specific gods are named in the description of sacrifices. Neil Price discussed the use of the names of deities in his article *What's In a Name* (Price 2006). Here, he questioned the usage of the various commonplace names of deities when being applied to renderings of human, or potentially divine, figures in the archaeological record that are believed to be of a cultic nature. He suggests that we are often too quick to label icons a particular name out of a desire to conform to the written sources. This is a view I tend to agree with as frequently it seems that names are ascribed to figures in the archaeological record that seem to stand on tenuous assertions. It is almost as though figures which cannot be associated with a specific deity are diminished in importance. However, in the literary sources, references to specific gods occur with some regularity. It is with some difficulty that we ascribe these names from written to archaeological finds. Therefore, we should take some precautions as it should be noted that like all of the information conveyed in the texts above, which has been shown to be subject to such interpretational issues as *interpretatio Christiana,* and ethnographic commonplace, we cannot be sure that the names identified in the sources properly identify the traits of specific deities or what they were called by those who worshipped them. The portrayal of deities in the material record changed in form over time and names may have changed. Beyond this, determining the representational figure of many of these gods can be called into question when we attempt to make the leap from the textual to material realm. As such, I am choosing to primarily avoid basing analysis on the importance of particular deities, save for the following limited discussion on the particular names selected by Snorri and what they may suggest about the type of rituals that were performed in cultic halls.

It is interesting, firstly, that of the gods venerated at the initial feast, Thor, frequently seen as Odin's foil in the Norse myths, is absent. For a deity so commonly recognized in Scandinavian texts and naming traditions, he is instead referenced when the king makes the sign of the cross over his ale. He is used to obfuscate the fact that the king, being a Christian, was attempting to avoid partaking in the feast. This absence, however, might make some

sense should we be attempting to identify purpose behind the feast at the hall of Jarl Sigurd. I mentioned before that the feast was likely undertaken during the period of midwinter sacrifice based on its place in the timeline of the story. These midwinter feasts were based on a calendric cycle revolving around the moons and were utilized by farmers to estimate the season (Henriksson 2003). In the passage, there are two other primary deities listed after Odin. We can recall that Njord was, above, associated with the god Nerthus from Tacitus' description in the Germania. In this way, Njord is frequently connected with a lineage of fertility worship and is, himself, named as one of the Vanir. Snorri also states that Frey is also among the gods to be honored at the feast. This is worth noting due to Frey's relative abundance in not only the written sources, but also potentially in the archaeological record. Some of the most commonly discovered artifacts, particularly *gullgubber* (discussed in more detail in the archaeological section), present on Norse sites are believed to be linked to fertility practices. Certain human figures, be they sculpture in the round or images on certain *gullgubber*, are often suggested to represent the god Frey. Additionally, the fact that Snorri recalls, among the first deities honored, two fertility or earth deities may speak to the exact reason the farmers were gathered in the Jarl's hall and lend some credibility to his account. Despite their reputation as violent warriors, the Norsemen were primarily an agrarian culture meaning that many celebratory days would likely be focused around seasonal activities related to the farms. Is it possible, then, that the feast described is one performed for such an agrarian purpose? Is it possible that these days were still relevant in Snorri's time and, while the rituals were not entirely known, still understood to have had some significant associated ritual actions during the times that *forn siðr* was practiced?

On its own, *Saga Hákonar góða* provides us with a tale of the events of the life of the former king. Critiqued for its literary and historical merits, the question that remains is what the saga, and the supporting texts above, portray in terms of the pagan practices of the Viking Age. Above I suggested that the saga implies that the ritual taking place at the Jarl's hall was related to seasonal agrarian celebration. However, there are other concerns when considering what Snorri has portrayed in regards to Norse cultic practice. Particularly, what do these sources have to say about how the Norsemen utilized buildings in their cultic activities? This query can be approached from two perspectives. The first point of view is to look at the descriptions of the Norse cultic practices specifically with an eye turned to the portrayal of the actions of the practitioners in the texts alone. In this sense, one would look purely at what is written in the sagas and, through comparison, sift out a conception of what practices were,

where they were performed, and how they were performed. Analysis from this perspective would likely provide the most dramatic and fleshed out interpretation of the actions of the Norsemen as it would have a literary focus. This might also, however, be the most dangerous of the analyses due to artistic liberties taken. The other perspective would be an attempt to look specifically for what types of features of the written description could prove relevant to an archaeological investigation. To this end, one would primarily be searching for associated artifacts and, like the focus of this text, an identification of the type of structure would be utilized to contain ritual activities.

In terms of the literary source, we can see one main element. One of the primary actions placed in the spotlight during the accounts of the written record is that of feasting. As shown above, very often the term for sacrifice, *blót*, is connected to feasting and it would seem that most of the authors recording the Viking Age agree that the act of sacrifice also included the consumption of some of the victim. While the purpose, and possibly the performance, of this type of ritual may have varied, the action presented in the saga presented here focuses almost exclusively around the feast. While the animals are said to have been sacrificed, and their blood used for various ablutions, the actual slaughter is not detailed. However, we might assume that the event was a dramatic spectacle when we consider the various assembled practitioners drinking, eating, and spreading blood about the hall and themselves. Ergo, from the written sources, we gain a picture of the Norse sacrificial feast as one focused not just on consumption, but also revelry and reverence to the gods in order to plea for peace and prosperity in the near future.

From the descriptions above, we might also look for a variety of artifacts in the archaeological record if we are hoping to reconcile the two records. This task may be difficult, of course, given the difficulty and danger in searching for specific items. However, if we were to set about attempting to identify items that might corroborate Snorri's story, there would be a few items to select. Firstly, the entire set of artifacts that would have been involved in the use of *hlaut* could potentially be in the record, particularly the tines used to spread the blood and the bowl used to hold it. Ideally, these would be able to provide some evidence of the Norse proclivity for blood as the portion of the animal that was of sacrificial importance. Next, we should look for the remains of animals themselves, in particular, remains in large volumes and in age ranges that are indicative of sacrifice rather than those that would have been butchered for normal subsistence. Finally, and most importantly, these

artifacts would be linked to some kind of structure within which the feast might have taken place. While many buildings are easily identified in the archaeological record, not all of these can be evidenced to have cultic function. As such, a template for what might provide evidence enough to declare a site cultic would be somewhat prudent. The presence of artifacts like those described above would likely begin to help us identify a cultic hall. Additional elements, such as the *high seat* which mentioned in some of the texts though as of yet unclear in the archaeological record, would aid in identifying a cultic area. It is of particular relevance whether the halls designed for holding large feasting events were designed for specifically ritual use or if they might have also had domestic functions, as well. Were these halls part of a complex or simply stand alone? In order to find these structures, then, we must turn to the archaeological sources.

IV.) The Archaeological Record

4.1 Introduction

The field of archaeology has been steadily growing in importance during the last century. Through this time, it has also been significantly refined and reworked in terms of the methods and approaches used by archaeologists to analyze material history. The range of human action studied by archaeology encompasses both the mundane and the spiritual. In Scandinavia, this is no different, and archaeological finds have begun to contribute heavily to the understanding of the history of ritual in Scandinavia.

More than anything, archaeology excels at providing the popular history. Where textual sources before the modern era frequently represented primarily the classes that could afford their production—that is to say only the upper classes—archaeology is less influenced by the purse size of the individuals being studied. Material culture can be uncovered from any class of a society and artifacts provide a unique glimpse into the lives of people who now reside only in the distant past. It is, to some degree, more personal as well. Each item denuded exists not as a description in a text but a physical piece of history that was once handled by an individual. To this end, there is some degree of equalization in what the archaeological record can reveal.

4.2 Tempering Expectations of Preservation

In the previous chapter, I finished by discussing what type of artifacts one might look for based on the textual sources, primarily those found in *Saga Hákonar góðar*. While these are the types of things we would hope to find in Norse archaeological sites should we be looking to validate the sagas, it is important to note that it is often the case that examples of many artifacts will not be readily available due to their decay or destruction through time. It is worthwhile, therefore, to discuss breifly some of the factors that would influence archaeological deposition on Norse sites that might, primarily, influence the preservation of the type of artifacts we will be looking to analyze. Additionally, we may also consider that an inability to identify artifacts described in the sagas may also mean that particular item simply never existed.

In some sense, archaeology is a field of luck as what we discover and where those discoveries occur are not always what we might expect. The large numbers of amateur and accidental finds worldwide speak to this phenomenon. The subject of how material is deposited, moved, or destroyed over time is a relatively broad area of study under the field of archaeology. There are a variety of introductions to the broad concepts such as the recent work *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Beaudry & Hicks 2010). Most importantly we must remember that a great majority of material culture will be lost over time. Most human action is exceptionally ephemeral, and what we can observe of it is based on a number of factors. Different artifacts have different potential to remain visible after ten years, a hundred years, or a thousand years. A building, for instance, depending on material types, is likely to last for some degree of time in the ground. Even sod longhouses, constructed of a relatively easily decayed material, will leave distinct impressions still identifiable now, a thousand years later. Other artifacts, such as those made of wood or bone, are relatively vulnerable to decay if left to the elements and small enough to disappear quickly if not maintained. Many metals will corrode away to be little more than imprints, as well. It is for this reason that the majority of graves, for instance, are not archaeologically visible.

The majority of ritual, too, is an ephemeral action. Without the construction of a purpose built structure, there may be very little to observe. A small ritual, perhaps intended only for a single person, may be gone the instant that it is performed. Larger public rituals may take place in the same location annually and therefore leave a more lasting imprint. As Kyriakidis says, "Ritual, as a crystalized action, is most often a repeated action, the material remains of which may create patterns (Kyriakidis 2007: 9). In the case of the artifacts in the texts above, many of the described elements are unlikely to remain for extended periods of time. The primary feature that will likely be observable, then, is the hall within which the ritual is said to have taken place. Objects such as *hlaut teinnar*, *hlaut boller*, and the remains of animals feasted upon may not be well preserved or evident in the record.

Even the halls that may have contained the rituals may have difficulties in the record. During the transition to Christianity, many halls temple like structures were abandoned or deliberately destroyed in order to make way for the constructions of the new church. Frequently, the location and construction of longhouses would be shifted in order to expand or refresh the building. When abandoning a structure, there were frequently sacrifices made in order to complete the transition to the building from being utilized to being no longer

functional (Nielson 2006). Despite their new religion, many of the Christian converts still had either esteem or superstitious respect—or wariness—for the structures that would have been used for their ancient gods. Some studies have linked abandonment sacrifices on certain buildings on some homesteads with the arrival of Christianity or the raising of Christian churches. To this end, the building itself would be left to rot and we will find limited evidence of the remains related to its abandonment.

In other cases, the building or related artifacts may have been intentionally destroyed, not just abandoned, in order to squash out any usage of the pagan iconography and defeat the practices. Such activities are not always immediately evident in the record. Destruction of icons and similar artifacts of importance to pagans can be seen in other periods of Christian domination of indigenous cultic practice. Furthermore, another issue in the examination of structures and their destruction has to do with the location of certain church sites. It is often suggested that certain church sites for the Middle Ages are placed atop sites that at one point in time held structures that were potentially pre-Christian cultic sites. This form of triumph over earlier practice may have had multiple functions. Firstly, frequently sites of suggested pagan importance have been placed in relatively prominent places on the landscape. These locations, frequently visible from kilometers around, would have been choice real estate for Christian structures as their builders would no doubt like them to occupy similarly dominant locations in the landscape. Another element of this practice is the symbolic triumph of Christianity over the pagan practices. Sometimes linked to *interpretatio Christiana,* the practice of transforming or reinterpreting pagan stories, iconography, artifacts, or in this case, cultic centers, helped to assure that the new faith was seated strongly into the traditions of the people being converted. When this reinterpretation or reuse of a site comes in the form of a church being constructed on a previously pagan site, it is sometimes referred to as *ecclesia triumphans* (Lidén 1969). This transitional methodology on the part of Christian clergy and converts assured a closer connection between the new generation and new faith with their history and origins. To this end, a similar tradition of reclaiming pagan graves and implanting Christian iconography in order to assure the salvation of one's ancestors could be closely linked to the claiming of pre-Christian cultic places. Because laying down the foundation to a new church and the subsequent layers of additional churches due to expansion and accidental or intentional destruction, it can frequently become difficult to discern the details of potential pagan locations due to the great deal of deposition atop them. In many cases, these sites are simply destroyed and impossible to identify or examine.

4.3 Types of Sites

While the above depositional issues may leave us with a slightly pessimistic outlook as to the likelihood of uncovering artifacts similar to those described in *The Saga of Håkon the Good,* there are nevertheless a variety of sites that have been discovered throughout Scandinavia that are identified as being related to Norse pre-Christian cultic practices. Essentially, we can put these sites into a few rough categories. These categories are: Outdoor single-event finds, outdoor areas with continued usage, and structures with ritual components (Jones 1995). Single event finds comprise a variety of types of ritual actions in the Norse world. In some cases these artifacts are isolated finds—a single artifact that was potentially dropped or purposely deposited. In terms of their contribution to the archaeological record, isolated finds tend to provide limited information. Without some form of provenance, some form of understanding as to how the artifact got to its location and some form of related artifacts to place it, an isolated find can only speak so much for itself. Alternatively, finds such as hordes, which could still be considered a single event find, might have a variety of artifacts and could also provide information on practices related to Norse cultic rituals—in this case, the deposition of valuables in the earth.

Outdoor areas with continued usage would be those related to the grove practices suggested by authors like Tacitus, above. There are a variety of different ways these sites could manifest in the archaeological record. For instance, a wide variety of bog sites wherein there are multiple depositional events, in many cases including sacrifices including artifacts and remains—including human (Roesdahl 1993,1998; Daniel 1967). However, many of these types of sites are related to the Migration Era and are therefore outside the period of time depicted in *The Saga of Håkon the Good*.

The type of site I will be looking at are those structures and halls that are believed to have a cultic function of some form. The longhouse is by far the most ubiquitous and omnipresent structure related to the Viking Age. While the longhouse does not belong to the Norse archaeological record alone, with examples coming from around the world, the particulars of the Viking styles of construction make them an easily identified feature on any Norse farmstead. To this end, they are also frequently linked to ritual activity of some kind. In particular, many larger halls found on powerful farms are believed to contain ritual elements of some form. Additionally, modern methods have denuded a variety of structures at farmsteads that are believed to be of a more specific ritual function, perhaps even being

purpose built for a cultic component. Below, I will present a number of sites and their artifact assemblage in order to determine whether or not any of those artifacts described in *Saga Hákon góða* and the related texts presented in the previous chapter are evident in the record. I will focus primarily on those sites that have been found in Norway, particularly Mære, which is discussed in the text of the saga and is the hall King Håkon is said to visit. That being said, like the relevant texts, it is impossible to view an archaeological site in a vacuum and excluding other Scandinavian sites, so I will also include descriptions of a variety of other sites from the Scandinavian realm as comparative examples. In addition to attempting to corroborate the written sources presented, I will also be working to establish an idea of what we might look for, in particular, in the archaeological record to identify a cultic site.

4.4 Some Types of Artifacts Related to Norse Ritual

Gullgubber

Of the artifacts believed to relate to Norse cultic activities, the small golden foils known traditionally as *gullgubber* (alt. *guldgubber*) or "little gold men," are one of the more common. Around 2600 have been found in Denmark alone and recent discoveries in Norway have increased number of finds in the country significantly. They are generally considered to be from the Merovingian period, and have been discovered in 6th and 7th century Iron Age structures though some variations in the dating place them later. Because they are very small and are relatively flimsy, it has been agreed that they were probably not utilized as currency (DuBois 1999). Rather, this group of artifacts is often proposed to have been a type of votive worship; in particular, they are believed to be connected to the god Frey. It is because of their connection with Frey that they are often believed to relate to fertility worship of some kind. Much of the original analysis of the *gullgubber* comes from Magnus Olson's work in the early 1900's on the subject. He linked the place names where such artifacts were discovered with place names which were associated with Frey (Olsen 1909). It is because of this place name connection and the figures depicted on them that they are frequently claimed to be tied to fertility worship of some kind.

One suggestion of their purpose and meaning comes anecdotally from a saga, *Vatzdæla saga*. In the saga, the character named Ingemund was in possession of an amulet which was said to have Frey carved upon it. The prophetess who gives him a reading states

that Ingemund will discover he has lost this amulet, but was assured by the prophetess that he would find it again when he constructed his farm in Iceland. When he eventually arrived in Iceland, he erected a *hof* for his farm he discovered the amulet again as he dug the holes for the *high seat posts* (Thorsson 2000). Despite the fact the saga is relatively late and is therefore of tenuous accuracy, the relevance of the saga is its connection to the use of votive figures of Frey. While the story may not be accurate to the actual practices, "the story shows that the original story-teller must have known that small likenesses of Froy would usually lie in the soil round the *high seat posts* (Lidén 1969: 18)." As with many remnants of previous eras, in the case of this story, it may be evident that the practice of interring, or at least understanding that votive figures may be interred, images of Frey around cultic structures was known to the authors, but not well. They would have had to, again, interpret the action based on their own knowledge and thereby arrived at the actions in the story. It does seem, as well, that these artifacts were commonly associated with the ritual halls or houses, rather than being distributed in unaffiliated or sporadic loci. In such sites as Borg, Hov, and Mære below, almost all of the *gullgubber* are found in situ within the area of building features. It follows, then, that these types of foils were spread in certain places intentionally. Such intentional placement suggests purpose, and beyond that, a possible ritual purpose.

Faunal Remains

Faunal remains represent a very large spectrum of artifacts and are part of the material debitage on almost any Viking age site. The primary forms of faunal remains from the period are the unusable material from animals consumed for everyday victual. They are found in middens and spread about sites wherever the conditions happen to be good enough for preservation (Davidson 1988, 1993). While it is likely that the majority of these remains are related specifically to sustenance activities, there is also the potential that certain remains would be of a different variety. The alternative types of faunal remains sometimes discovered on Viking age sites are those which can be evidenced as being related to sacrifice. It is worth noting that there is some inherent difficulty in labeling animal remains as having been the victims of sacrifice or the victims of an empty stomach. We must look for specific signs of slaughter or unique or intentional deposition. Even then, there are few remains we could be absolutely sure were the victims of intentional sacrifice. Despite this, there are places where

the case can be made for an assemblage of animal remains to be considered the aftermath of sacrifice.

Sacrificial animals can be found in a variety of settings. One of these is graves. Though I will not discuss graves to any significant extent, they are one of the few places that an animal can be labeled almost unquestioningly sacrificial if discovered in situ. Sacrificial animals used as grave goods would generally be either horses or dogs during the Viking Age (Davidson 1988). As I stated, I mention graves only in passing as they are outside the primary type of ritual activity upon which I intend to focus. They primarily serve as an indication that ritual sacrifice is present in the Viking archaeological record and perhaps point us towards what types of animals we might expect to see. Above, I discussed the use of horse for sustenance and sacrifice as it related to the portrayal in the sagas. Based upon textual evidence, there is already a president set for horses being used for sacrificial meals. However, we cannot assume that the sacrifice of a horse for grave goods would also imply the sacrifice of horse for feasting. The two types of sacrifice represent different actions. It is in this way that even when sacrifice can be established, not all types of sacrificial action are the equal.

Another type of sacrificial animal remains, those which are more important for my purposes, are faunal materials in assemblages that are evidenced as the results of ritual activity involving feasting. This type of sacrifice is more difficult to properly evidence. Often assemblages of bones identified as ritual deviate greatly from regional dietary consumption averages, though analysis of butchery marks can also suggest specialized slaughter. This type of evidence would need to lie outside of the realm of an eclectic pallet and outside of the pragmatic production capabilities of a farmstead in order to exhibit signs of being a deliberate ritual. In the sites that follow, the assemblage at Hofstaðir is surely one of the best analyzed collections and is frequently used as the paradigm for a ritual feasting hall. The great detail and size of the ostelogical collection from the site provides some of the best evidence for the possibility of Norse sacrifices in relationship to halls. It is possible that other site assemblages might similarly hold viable faunal records, but at present no other records are as detailed in their examinations.

As I slightly alluded above, there are further ways of identifying possible sacrificial animals beyond simply the size of the assemblage. Particularly, osteological analysis can reveal a good deal about an animal's treatment, the method of slaughter, and the butchering. In the case of sacrificial animals, if we can establish the means of death, especially if it is

unique, it might suggest ritual action. While this does not provide an absolute ruling on the intention behind slaughtering an animal, whether it is victual or sacrifice, it can give some insight into the composition of an assemblage. One of the primary oddities that is believed to suggest sacrifice is evidence of decapitation violent decapitation. It is believed to suggest an intentionally grisly spectacle indicative of a ritual slaughter(Lucas 2007). In fact, in the Viking age it would seem that this was a relatively common way of sacrificing an animal, as animals in graves are often found decapitated, also. (Davidson 1993) Again, while specifically decapitation does not alone define a sacrifice, with additional context it can show that an abnormal group of remains may been the victims of ritual killing.

4.5 Central Places and Power Structures in Scandinavian Archaeology

In modern Scandinavian archaeology, there is a growing theoretical concept about how the Norsemen constructed their landscapes and economic systems. The term *central place* has become a common concept that, self-evidently, proposes that Norse communities were constructed around a single primary location. This central location was likely run by an important member of the community, particularly a chieftain. This chieftain's farm would become the center of production, the meeting place for the community, the center of economic power, and a center for ritual power (Steinsland 2011; Hedeagar 2002; Sundqvist 2011). Most of the sites listed below can be tied into this type of power structure and were likely central places for their own regions. It would also follow that the king, as he was in the saga, would likely primarily visit these locations when he was out among his subjects. Individuals like Jarl Sigurd, who commanded a good deal of power and respect, based on his portrayal in the sagas, would no doubt have had their primary domiciles and their seat of power at central places. In this way, the theory of central places comes into play quite a bit when discussing the ritual elements both of the sagas and the archaeological sites below.

While there was likely a central farmstead in a region that would have served as the center for various activities, this would make it part of a larger network wherein various productive activities would be done at the behest of the central power—the chieftain with the regional clout. By doing this, the individuals could utilize a greater amount of the resources of an area, with some focusing on dairying activities, some on gathering activities, some focusing on marine procurement, etc. In this way, there was some degree of assurance that

there would be plentiful resources for the entirety of the community, despite the distance farms likely had from one another. This would further the economic power of the central place and grow the importance of the site.

4.6 Cultic Sites Outside of Norway

Hofstaðir

While there are a continuing variety of sites to arise that have potential cultic functions, it would be difficult to discuss cultic sites in Scandinavia without first mentioning probably one of the most important sites to the study of pre-Christian religion: Hofstaðir. The site represents a relatively large hall and farmstead in the Myvatin region of Iceland. It has significant importance as it has been, for quite some time, the quintessential site when discussing the Norse temple.

Hofstaðr has a relatively storied history as far as excavations and the academic milieu's view on the interpretation of the site. In fact, it has stood as an exemplar against which to compare other sites with ritual components. It also represents the largest hall structure in Iceland. The current standard for research into the site is the large monograph, *Hofstaðir: Excavations of a Viking Age Feasting Hall in North Eastern Iceland* edited by Gavin Lucas (Lucas 2009). It focuses on all disciplines of archaeology utilized in the most recent examination of the site into an account a singular image of the site and its artifact assemblage. Of the sites discussed, the importance of Hofstaðir warrants a detailed exploration of the site's storied history and the role it has played in modern interpretations.

Hofstaðir was first mentioned in an antiquarian survey in 1817, but it would be a half century before it was first described by Kristian Kålund. This initial description was only a surface description, and no excavation took place. This would not occur until Daniel Brunn and Finnur Jónsson performed the first full excavation in 1908. This excavation, like many of the time, was a large scale and grandiose enterprise. Rather than working as laborers themselves, as is commonplace today, Bruun and Jónsson hired untrained workers to do the actual digging of the excavation while maintaining supervision over the project (Fredriksson & Vésteinsson 2012). This original dig uncovered a good deal of the structure, but missed many of the outlying additions to the main hall. It primarily focused on and denuded the

ground over the primary hall along with performing a test excavation on what was believed to be a trash pit just outside the south entrance of the hall. One of the primary criticisms of the initial excavations was the fact that the diggers worked from the outside in and focused primarily on the inside of the hall. Furthermore, because of the difference in understanding of certain elements like wall debris, the excavation did not identify the wall until it had been substantially dug into and removed. The excavation never the less uncovered a good portion of the site and confirmed the belief that it was a ritual hall, one of the few that was allowed to keep such a designation at the time.

The next excavation of the hall came in 1965 by Olaf Olsen. Olsen was primarily concerned with the nature of temples and *hof* sites, having published some of the initial research and making the statement which is still generally agreed upon today that there were no purpose built temple sites for the Vikings in Scandinavia. With this hypothesis in mind, he began to re-excavate one of the trenches dug by Bruun. During his examination of the trash pit, Olsen found a variety of burnt bones and other materials, as well as fire charred rocks. Looking at the depositional layers of the pit, he established that there was no way the pit could have been filled by the simple removal and deposition of trash from the hall. He established that, instead, the pit was likely for cooking. He based this upon the charred material as well as the generally well defined shape. To account for the size, he presumed that it must have been utilized to cook large sacrificial meals for feasts, rather than having a use as a daily cooking area. His assessment of the pit allowed him to establish the farmstead as representing a domestic form of temple. Not purpose built, but utilized for ritual feasting none the less. It was this assessment that would be used as the paradigm for other sites (Fredriksson & Vésteinsson 2010).

The most recent excavations at the site and by far the most methodologically advanced, were the excavations that took place between 1991 and 2002, those detailed by Gavin Lucas. These excavations not only desired to re-interpret the site, but also began to look at the site in a larger scope. The site was to be looked at not only for its own context, but also its influence and context within the Mývatn region as it was first settled. The new excavations also looked into other portions of the record, examining the floral and faunal record with greater depth than the previous surveys. The present 400 page report on the site stands not only as the most thorough investigations into the site, but also one of the more thorough single volume investigations of any site in the Scandinavian context.

The findings of the most recent excavation also shed a good deal of light on the usage and importance of the site. It remains that the site is the largest hall to be archaeologically examined in Iceland. Not only this, but it is quite a bit more complex that previously assumed by the first two excavations. Whereas Bruuns original excavation in 1908 revealed little in the way of artifacts despite attempting to analyze the floor level of the hall, the newest excavation has turned up quite a relatively large assemblage along with a variety of outhouses attached to the hall, an investigation into the surrounding home-field plot, and a new analysis of the supposed cooking pit south of the hall.

Of these new investigations, quite possibly the most important new determination is the fact that the pit south of the hall is not in fact a large cooking pit for sacrificial meals. Rather, it appears to have been a small dug out pit house which was abandoned, collapsed, and was eventually utilized as a trash midden. This is based primarily on the shape, size, and depositional content discovered within the pit. Originally this structure would have been covered by a small sod roof supported by timber, with walls that extended above ground level no more than a meter. That such an assessment of the feature would be made is of great importance to the previous thoughts on the site. No longer could the site be identified as a temple in the same way, and it was relatively clear that the model of a chieftain's farm by Olsen was suddenly wrong. This did not, however, entirely eliminate the idea that the hall may have played host to sacrificial feasting. It simply showed that this particular feature was not, in fact, something which had existed (Lucas 2007).

More importantly to the site was the reanalysis of the large hall, which would overall reveal a significantly larger amount of material. This main hall was roughly 45 meters by 10 meters measured from the outside. It was constructed of turf and held aloft by a timber frame. In total, four rows of posts were erected along the length of the hall. These posts were originally held within postholes dug in the ground, but a large number of slabs of stones, some lying over filled post holes, showed that the hall was repaired *ad hoc* when the inevitability of rotten bases necessitated the shortening of structural poles (Fredriksson & Vésteinsson 2010). Within the hall there was also a central hearth that ran almost the length of the building, along with a central stone lined fireplace. Gaps between the areas of floor debris and the sod walls indicated that there were likely wooden or wood and sod benches along the inner walls of the hall.

Previous excavations had largely failed to identify the outlying buildings form the main, aisled hall. While in some cases the gaps in the wall were identified, they were clearly only seen as doorways to the exterior, rather than into separate chambers set off from the hall. As the most recent excavation focused on expanding the site beyond simply the main walls of the aisled hall, an effort was made to examine these separate outhouses as well. Eventually by the second phase of occupation, there was an attached smaller hall on the southwest corner, an annex and unattached sunken floored building in the southeast corner, and a porch leading to a latrine on the northwest corner. In most of these areas, save for the latrine, their actual function is unknown. Slag and iron scraps, including nails, in both the sunken floored house and the annex suggest the possibility of usage as a smithy. While the annex seems an unlikely and relatively dangerous placement for a smithy, pieces of a ceramic mold suggest that it was possibly used for the production of precious metals. A large depression where a barrel was likely once located suggests that the room may have also served in the production of ale at one point in time (Lucas 2009).

The artifact assemblage from Hofstaðir is relatively large and varied. Of the items recovered, there were three finds of silver, including two pendants and a length of silver wire. These pendants are sometimes identified as Thor's hammers, but the identification is tenuous at best on the admission of the excavators themselves. Furthermore, finds of Thor's hammers are relatively limited in Iceland, anyway, casting some doubt on the claim (Lucas 2009). There were also a variety of copper items including pendants, keys, pins, and sheet metal. Of iron finds, there were 105 nails discovered from the Viking age, primarily from the central hall and the small pit house to the south. Additionally, a variety of tools associated with the Viking age layer were found, along with an assortment of clothing fittings and the like. A good deal of material, especially slag, related to the smelting of iron was also discovered on the site, and there was almost definitely some amount of production on site during the Viking age. There were a variety of bone and antler artifacts as well, including combs, pins, needles, spindol whirls, and handles. Finally, an assemblage of stone tools was also discovered similar to many Viking age sites. Soapstone vessels, spindle whirls, and the standard assortment of material was found; including a single piece of Icelandic spar, a type of stone possibly linked to the *sunstone* navigational aids believed to be utilized by the Vikings. Such an assemblage as that at Hofstaðir is not unlike that on many Viking Age farmsteads and shows, primarily, the general domestic activities we would expect at a large scale chieftain's hall with full time occupation (Lucas 2009).

If the above assemblage, admittedly in greatly truncated form, was the only aspect of Hofstaðir, the case would have been closed when it came to the hall as a ritual space. However, this is not the case, as an additional portion of the assemblage tells more of the story of the large chieftain hall of Mývatn. While the majority of the collections of faunal remains on the site represent that of a normal farmstead, there is a grouping which stands outside the norm. Of the faunal remains on the site:

> A minimum of twenty three individual cattle skulls recovered outside the great hall show evidence of specialized butchery and prolonged display on the outside of a structure. Butchery marks include depressed fracture of the frontals caused by a heavy and immediately fatal crushing blow between the eyes, and (where the base of the skull is preserved) a powerful shearing blow which would have beheaded the animal. Horn cores were left attached, and not removed for horn craft working (an otherwise universal use of horn and horn cores).
>
> (Lucas 2009)

Display appears to have taken one of two varieties. One set is the entire preserved skull, missing only the jaw. The other set of remains is only the rack of horns.

Not only was the butchery of the animals unique, either. The normal age composition of cattle remains on other Icelandic sites represents a dairy economy. To this end, the majority of the remains on sites come from either relatively young or relatively elderly animals. This is based upon the required resources invested into the cattle as opposed to the resources produced. Larger animals, naturally, require more fodder and are more resource intensive. Only a limited number of these can be kept, especially considering that there were limits imposed by seasonal conditions. Furthermore, in a dairy economy, the primary value lies in the female cattle as they produce a sustainable resource. The cows must also continue to produce offspring so that they continue to lactate. As such, a large number of calves are killed at a young age, especially males. Surviving cattle are maintained until they cease being productive, thus accounting for the age gap. The animals represented by the butchery at Hofstaðir, however, do not fit this model. They are not only predominantly male, but also represent animals which are adolescents or adults (Lucas 2009).

It is based primarily on this unique set of remains that Hofstaðir is yet seen as a feasting hall of some sort. The large size, for one, is indicative of important residents along with providing the ability to provide adequate space for a relatively large host of individuals.

Despite this, Hofstaðir cannot itself speak for the rituals that may have occurred within. Here we might turn to the saga sources provided above. The passage from the *Saga of Håkon the Good* does portray a feast in which the usage of blood is important to the cultic component, in the form of *hlaut*; however, it does not speak to the particular sacrificial methods of the Norsemen. It does not specify any details on the exact performance of an animal sacrifice. One would think that such a violent form of sacrifice would have been worthy of some mention. On the one hand, we might suppose that this type of sacrifice was simply so hackneyed, the author or eye witness left out the detail for the belief that any audience would already have an understanding of what a sacrifice entailed. However, this seems implausible as such information does not seem to be presented anywhere among the various sources presented above. Another option, then, is that the author was simply unsure of the exact method, be it because of a laconic source or, perhaps, the description of sacrifice being part of the ethnographic commonplace or authorial liberties discussed earlier.

Also relevant to *Saga Hákonar góða* is the consumption of horse. While it is not particularly news to state that horse was consumed by pre-Christians, the fact that all layers of the midden at Hofstaðir had horse bones which showed signs of butchery simply highlights the point. Through some periods it was more than 30% of the bone material found in the middens (Lucas 2009). Horses were undoubtedly important for labor and likely held some mortuary significance as they are found in graves, but it appears they also were a relatively common meal to the early Norsemen. The importance of assuring the king was one of the people, with the farmers, so to speak, by having him consume horse is all the more clear. Despite this, it is still not clear that these animals were consumed for sacrifice. While the cattle were examined with an eye to sacrifice, the horse remains could not be established as victims in the same fashion. As I discussed in the previous chapter, it is possible that the consumption of horse was not specifically sacrificial, but portrayed as such in the sagas due to a lack of taboo for pre-Christians.

Other Scandinavian Sites

Another important site outside of Norway is the site of Uppsala in Sweden, as discussed previously in Adam of Bremen's description. It is one of the better known temple sites because of this textual connection, though what is on the ground is significantly more

nebulous. Many reconstructions have been suggested based upon the various descriptions of the site and the evidence that remains in situ, however, the sort of grandiose heathen temple of the textual sources is rather more difficult to identify and often derived more from the minds of the excavator than the empirical evidence.

Most of the archaeological inspections of the site around Uppsala have focused primarily on attempting to find the site of the presumed temple discussed by Adam of Bremen. Already we can see that the primary assumptions of the excavators, who were attempting to reconstruct a site based on textual evidence, may have been faulty. Even Olaf Olsen, who largely influenced the idea that there were no purpose built temple structures, confesses that Old Uppsala church "lies within the area of the pagan sanctuary, possibly also on the site of the temple (Olsen 1966)." In this statement, he also conflicts with his disbelief in the idea of *Ecclesia Triumphans,* the idea that Christian places of worship were constructed atop former pagan centers of worship and in doing so confirming the victory of the church over the pagans. The exact location of the site of the temple has been debated for quite some time—just as the exact appearance of the building has been under debate. Perhaps the largest fault of many of these attempts at location and identification is that they primarily follow the description set out in the *Germania*.

Most reconstructions simply have no basis in the material record. Some have claimed placement of the construct was also linked to the church. It is said in a later record, from the mid-17th century, that the temple lay next to the church and that it was first purified with fire (Gräslund 2000). This was a conclusion arrived at by an author who himself was investigating the location of the temple building. It should be no surprise that the late date of this account makes it generally difficult to trust. However, this has not stopped certain investigations, many in the early 1900's, from basing much of their reconstruction about the location of the temple upon this source. Certain elements of the church have been judged to be constructed in one fashion or another based upon the perception that the previous pagan sanctuary must have influenced the construction. A number of post holes linked to a previous structure were discovered on site in 1923, however, the investigators at that time could not establish if they originally held posts for an undefined temple structure or scaffolding for the church which stands on the spot (ibid.). Thus, all evidence of a temple structure is relatively tenuous at this time.

The primary lesson from the Uppsala site to take for my investigation is surely that identification of sites and an attempt to reconstruct them based on historical sources often leads to a confirmation bias. The archaeologist examining the site is hoping to prove or utilize the description to an extent that it becomes detrimental to the veracity of the description. It is for this reason that we must be careful in the assumptions we make based upon the recordings of ritual activity in the sagas as providing archaeological proof is of equal importance when searching for historical fact.

There are yet another few select sites from throughout the Scandinavian world that can provide comparative examples of what a potential Norse temple structure may have looked like. One more such site, also from Sweden, is that of Lunda. Perhaps better defined than Uppsala, this site consists of a hall, believed to be cultic in nature, with a nearby grove that shows evidence of ritual activity. In his article, *Among trees, bones, and stones: The sacred grove at Lunda,* Gunnar Andersson details the site and argues that the site served as a cultic center (Andersson 2006b).

The site is believed to have a sacred significance from around the fifth century AD and through the Viking age. Nearby, there is also a cemetery dating from the Iron Age. There are already a number of monuments in the cemetery, and the hall itself, which have been identified in the national register. The most recent examination by Andersson was the first to suggest that the nearby area represented a grove. The site location holds a variety of artifacts, but primarily consists of a hall, 50m by 10m, with three aisles and an outdoor worship site nearby. Within the hall it is reported that there are various artifacts: "Traces of metalworking and bronze casting, and finds which included sherds of imported glass beakers, loom weights and three small phallic figurines – two cast in bronze and gilded, one in solid gold — [this] identifies the place as a so-called magnate farm where aristocratic ritual ceremonies most probably were held (Andersson 2006b:195)." Such a hall implies religious significance at the site, however, the surrounding area gives the site a more unique element: the area identified as a sacred grove site.

The hills nearby held a strange assortment of cultural materials. There is evidence that the people of the area were utilizing the areas stones, either attempting to crush or split them, as well as laying what is described as, "'floors' or 'carpets' of smaller sharp-edged stones (Andersson 2006b)." There are also fragments of burnt bones, along with fragments of clay and resin that are described as having been crushed. Other crafted artifacts include beads,

knives, and arrowheads. This artifact assemblage comes together to provide what is believed to be a sacred grove. There are no human remains reported on the site, however, it is not known whether the burnt bone material at the site was from humans or sacrificial animals. Because of the small size of these bone fragments, it is unlikely that this question will be answered; there is simply not enough remaining material to perform a reliable study. Whatever the nature of the material, it is obvious that there was some form of cremation going on at the site, either for human remains or sacrificial animal remains.

The suggestion that the grove was utilized for some form of outdoor ritual activity is one that must be considered. Risking conjecture, in some part from Andersson himself, we could arrive at a variety of places. Firstly, it could be suggested that this was an area for the primary action of some form of sacrificial ritual. Such a suggestion would imply that the victims of the ritual was both slain and immolated in the same area. A second assessment could be that the area was used to burn the remains created during a sacrificial action elsewhere on the site. One might suggest that the area could have served as a secondary ritual locus where these remains are disposed of in the proper fashion. If this is the case, the site would serve as an interesting example of some of the features of sacrificial feasting not well exhibited in the text of *Saga Hákonar góða*. It is almost a look behind the scenes of the workings of a feast that may not have been readily apparent to authors discussing the topic.

4.7 Norwegian Sites

Mære

Norway, throughout the course of the Viking age, and indeed until the modern era, remained a relatively impoverished area. It consisted primarily of isolated farms or agrarian communities with little contact outside of the immediate area. There were a few larger towns which were of importance to trade with mainland Europe and absolutely vital to the existence of Iceland and the Greenlandic colonies. It is perhaps for the nature of the bucolic setting that the existence of paganism in the north is generally considered to have lasted for longer than in other portions of Scandinavia and the rest of the world. This is a topic within many of the primary sources which suggests that, and one of those regions within which paganism remained was in the Trøndelag in Middle-North of Norway. The area gains mention in a

variety of sagas, and one site in particular, *Mære,* is even mentioned by name in the *Saga of Håkon the Good.*

In the chapter that immediately follows King Håkon's refusal to consume horseflesh, the king prepares to have a Yule feast (*jólaveizlu*) at Mære. However, there are eight chieftains who have conspired together to both stymie the rise of Christianity in the region and to force the king to take sacrifice. They take action when the fest begins:

> Hinn fyrsta dag at veizlunni veittu bœndr konungi atgöngu ok báðu hann blóta, en hétu honum afarkostum ella.
>
> (SHG)

The first day, the farmers attempt to force the king to sacrifice, going so far as to threaten violence should he refuse. Jarl Sigurd steps in, but the king is nevertheless forced to eat some horse liver (*hrosslifr*) and stop making the sign of the cross over ale he is given as he had in the previous chapter. His experience is so bad that the king states that the next time he came to the Trondheim region he would bring a host of men to repay his poor treatment (SHG).

Today, a stone church sits at the site of Mære—though the land may not have always served this purpose. During a 1966-67 reconstruction of the site an archaeological investigation was undertaken to delve into the history of the site and discovered more than simply church foundation. By analyzing the layers beneath the church and dating the layers of usage, is it possible we can link the site to the story of Håkon the Good from above? Is there archaeological evidence that the site was occupied by a pagan hall during the time of the saga, sometime around 950 A.D.?

The primary work to discuss the site findings at Mære is a bit dated, unfortunately, but is yet frequently cited. In his 1969 article *From pagan sanctuary to Christian church the excavation of Mære church in Trøndelag,* Hans-Emil Lidén discusses in detail the site and excavations (Lidén 1969). He argues that the site is likely an example of *ecclesia triumphans,* basing this on the multiple layers of church which overlay earlier layers that could not be instantly defined as church layers. These layers also contained artifacts that pointed to pre-Christian practices during those earlier time periods. If his evaluation is correct, it could provide validation to various claims of the importance of the site at Mære, including that of

Saga Hákonar góða. In order to understand the site, then, we should start by reviewing the evidence provided.

The church that sits on the site today, based on the stylistic elements, was likely constructed during the 12th century. It was recorded that originally there was a large stone tower on the west end of the church; however, it is within contemporary sources that the tower had collapsed by the 13th century. Below the first church layer, there lie the remains of a smaller wood church. The evidence for this is primarily some pieces of the floor, wall, and, primarily, post holes from the structure. Below the first two layers, it appears that there may also have been a third wooden church. The evidence for such a construct is largely circumstantial. The primary reasoning for its existence is the patterns of certain graves on the grounds. Whereas most graves on the site are oriented alongside the wooden or stone churches' footprints, there is a third group of graves which are similarly oriented towards one another, yet do not match with those of the top two layers (Lidén, 1969). Dating also identifies these as likely being some of the oldest on the site. In addition to this, three of the graves in this series lie beneath what would have been the wall of the wooden church on the second layer. It is for these reasons that there is suggestion that another church construct existed on the site earlier than the better preserved wooden church on the second layer of the site.

The top three layers of the site, representative of the Christian time period, are not the main focus with which we should be concerned. What are of primary importance are the two layers which lie beneath three church layers. The dating of these layers, based upon artifacts and carbon dating, extends from the time of the church construction back into the Iron Age. Based upon this dating, it is believed that the first of these layers (fourth on the site) is set firmly in the Viking Age timeframe. That the site would later be occupied by the Christian church is of note, though the idea of pre-Christian to Christian era ritual site continuity will be discussed in more detail later. The fourth layer, a Viking Age hall, is not as well defined as the second layer church. It is primarily identified by areas of blackened soil, probably a floor level, and a few postholes. The numbers of identified postholes are, however, fewer than those identified with the church layer. This lack of definition means that the measurements of this building are unknown. The segment in which the 4th and 5th layers lie has been bifurcated by a trench dug to accommodate the deep graves laid beneath the church floor in the 17th and 18th century. In order to better clarify the excavation, then, the original

excavators divided these portions into two sections, called the north and south baulk (Lidén 1969).

The north baulk contains what appears to be a segment of the floor of the Viking age building. This manifests primarily as a horizontally oriented area of black soil. Within this black soil is a variety of small animal bones, seashells, and cooking stones, debris connected with domestic activities. They were assumed by the excavation crew to be layers of occupation and the original floor level is unknown. It is notable that these occupation levels lie directly below the floor level of the church and there is no evidence of erosion or turf buildup which would be indicative of the ground being denuded for long. Thus, it is presumable that the church level was constructed directly on top of the previous construction layer–whatever such a building was.

There is also, within the north baulk, another piece of evidence for a Viking age structure. In the western portion of the north baulk, there is a 1.8 meter long trench running east to west. It is likely that it is the vestige of a palisade wall that was dug into the ground. It is unlikely; however, that this trench was a portion of the later wooden churches as it is not oriented properly to be so. This still does not give us a strong suggestion of what type of building existed there, however, and we must yet guess as to the size and construction of the hall.

On the south baulk, there is yet more of the Viking Age hall to be found and it is of relatively great importance when identifying the usage of the hall. Within the south baulk there appear to be no structural remains related to primary support. However, it was found that there were four postholes dug into the ground and lined with stones. They are arranged in a single row. The holes are roughly circular. They are unlikely to be a part of the hall's load bearing structure, however, as they are oriented poorly–both within the assumed location of the structure and to one another–to match any type of load bearing structure yet seen within other Viking Age constructions. Lidén suggests these are evidence for the idea that the area with these postholes was a so called *high seat*. This argument is furthered by the fact that is the first location that a *gullgubber*, a small piece of gold foil with an impressed image upon it, was found (Lidén 1969).

These *gullgubber* have been discussed in previous sections, and these particular artifacts resemble those of other sites. All told, the excavation crew found 19 *gullgubber* at

the site in Mære. These were all found within a small area, only a few square meters, in or next to the post holes. Of these, eight were almost entirely undamaged and a further three from this group were identified as being stamped from the same form. All of the *gullgubber* found on the site represented the second pattern for such images in that they contain two figures, a man and a woman, facing one another. The excavation crew believed, based upon older analysis by Magnus Olsen, that it was possible to identify the figures in these items as Frey. Such identification is based upon the idea that the *gullgubber* are utilized for a sort of votive function for agrarian success. Frey is seen as representing the elements which bring the rise of successful crops. The largest issue with this find, however, is the dating that is provided by their discovery. While Lidén is working under the assumption that these figures are from the Viking Age, more recent dating frequently places them in the Migration Era

The fifth layer of the site is similarly damaged as layer 4. This layer, also believed to be a hall structure, is largely undefined. Like the previous layer, the shape and dimensions of the hall are unknown. It can be primarily identified via a group of relatively small postholes on the north baulk, all of which were filled with either a black soil or a sort of clay mass with charcoal and red speckles. There were also burnt stones and concentrations of clay around the holes. When some of the clay was pieced together by the excavators, there was indication that it was part of a wattle and daub wall, with one side being smooth and the other showing signs of twigs. The nature of the clay and soil indicate the building burned down. Additional finds related to this building, believed to be of the Migration period, and were some pieces of glass and pot sherds. To this end, it is relatively clear to see that the site had a significant time span of occupation, with evidence for a building of some form on site since the Iron Age.

Thus, we come to a timeline of the site represented in the five layers. The lowest layer appears to be some form of wattle and daub construction. This was built during the Iron age and it is likely that this first structure burnt down. Upon the site was then constructed another building, the exact specifications of which is unknown. This second building, constructed during the Viking Age, possibly had a worship function as well. This is based upon the discovery of *gullgubber* and what is possibly a *high seat* known from various textual sources. With the rise of Christianity, the first wood church, whether the one evidenced in the record or an earlier one based upon indirect evidence, was constructed on the site (Lidén 1969).

While there is not exact dating to give us a definitive answer to the question of whether or not the hall at Mære would have been active during the timeframe of the saga,

based upon the estimated dating, there is certainly the possibility. More importantly, the existence if *gullguber* on the site show that there is a good potential the site was of some importance during the period. Because of their nature as items related to worship, these *gullguber* evidence that the site could have had the kind of ritual importance needed to be a home to the *blótviezlum*. Unfortunately, the destruction of the site due to the layers of construction above gives us a paucity of information on the exact nature on what types of activities went on within the halls that existed on the site before the construction of the church.

Other Norwegian Sites

Another site within Norway which may contain a ritual element is the site of Borg. Discovered accidentally during agricultural activities in 1981, the site has proved to be yet another large chieftain's hall. Carbon dating of the site suggests that there was activity at this location from between 200 AD until sometime in the 10th century AD. This places its last settlement layers in the Viking age. The hall that existed during the Viking age, constructed in the 7th century AD. At 83 meters long, it is the largest hall excavated in Scandinavia. It was a three aisled hall with sod walls.

The majority of the assemblage from the site belongs to the later of the extant halls which was from the Viking Age. Like many chieftains' halls, the items are mostly related to everyday domestic activities. Beyond what would be considered normal Viking age artifacts such as soapstone vessels, whetstones, beads, and the like, there were a number of items which are relatively rare in the record. Beyond normal pot sherds, a number of sherds from roughly 15 or 16 glass vessels were found. This included three which had a geometrical pattern–a rarity in Scandinavia and presently the only example in Norway. Furthermore, like the site at Mære, there are some artifacts which point towards the possibility of some form of cultic activity. This comes in the form of the *little gold men* mentioned above. The majority of the foils found on this particular site appear to be centered around the northern postholes of the longhouse. It was suggested that this may have represented the location of the much discussed *high seat posts* (Munch 2007).

It is relatively clear that the hall represents the domicile of a wealthy chieftain in the North. The site resembles, in some ways, the general layout of the site of Hofstaðir,

mentioned above. Like many chieftain halls of the time period, the site was undoubtedly required to take on some form of ritual function. This function, based upon the size of the hall, must have drawn a relatively large amount of people and the site shows the importance of such large halls in Scandinavia.

With halls like this, we can likely draw a connection to that of Jarl Sigurd from the saga. While with Mære, a detailed layout and analysis has been difficult, Borg provides a model for large chieftain halls, particularly those that may have acted as central places. In this sense, Hofstaðir and Borg are similar, both serving as hubs for the surrounding community. They were gathering places where the various farmers of the region would gather on special occasions to celebrate or worship. They were the centers of economic and cultic power in their respective regions. This power granted the chieftain with a good deal of wealth with which he could provide on days of importance. It would be no surprise if the hall of Jarl Sigurd of the saga was of a similar construction and formed a similar layout. His power, too, as evidenced in his wealth and general clout during his dealings, would also be indicative of his farmstead being a primary location in the landscape.

A final Norwegian site is that of Hov in Oppland. The site has not yet been published in an academic journal, though it has received some attention in the Norwegian news. This type of coverage, of course, is limited in depth due to constraints of space and public interest. Work has been going on since 1993, though it is more recent excavations that have revealed some of the most interesting aspects. The primary feature of the site was a relatively large house construction. This appears to have been around 12 meters long. The structural post holes were quite large at some 40 cm in diameter (Guhnfeldt 2008). Such large supports indicate the house was relatively tall, though details on the construction are relatively sparse. It is likely that this house represented a different type of construction than a normal longhouse, though it is unclear how the structure would have appeared above ground. At its present location, the site would have likely been highly visible from afar.

The more important find from the site is the collection of *gullgubber*. In total, 29 have been found on the site. The first 22 were found placed within and around a post-hole while the final 7 were found during a later excavation and appear to have been intentionally placed. Most of the *gullgubber* from the site were of the style with two individuals facing one another. It also appears that they were stamped from different dies, as the images are all different. This represents one of the largest finds of *gullgubber* in Norway and definitely sets

the site apart from others in the area. Project leads have deemed the site a cultic house based primarily upon these finds. This is further emphasized by the general lack of normal household debris on the site. While a number of strike-a-lights were found, there was a lack of other domestic material such as pottery or spindle whorls (Arntsen, 2011). Therefore the site would appear to have no alternate domestic function. More analysis will be possible when the site is officially published, but for now, the site has become part of the growing body of evidence for cultic houses.

This site is of importance here as it represents a type of site that is separate from those discussed in the saga and sites like Borg and Hofstaðir. This type of site, unlike the others which appear to have also been areas for domestic activities, has been implied to have a primary cultic function. If this is the case, it is important to see that the cross section offered by the sagas and other sources may be relatively limited in what it actually presents relative to the record. The question of whether or not the Norsemen constructed and utilized purpose built ritual structures remains potent in the debate of Scandinavian cultic practices as a whole; however, sites such as Hov are beginning to offer a diversified picture of the various types of ways Norsemen worshiped.

4.8 Summary

Above, I discussed what types of artifacts we might hope to see if we were trying to draw a connection between the description of ritual in the sagas and the archaeological record. I stated that some of these might be difficult to find in the record based upon deposition and the destruction of artifacts over time. Now, it would behoove us to look at what can be said about what the archaeological record specifically provides as a picture of structures from the Viking Age with a ritual component based upon the sites described above.

To some extent, one of the more important observations should be that most ritual activity took place around the domicile of a chieftain or powerful figure. These large feasting halls would have required upkeep at some expense, but would have been the primary form of building capable of housing the large ritual feasts that have both been described in the texts and the remnants of which have been observed in the record. It also speaks to the size of gatherings that such large halls would have existed. Individuals from all around the region likely traveled a good distance to attend a chieftain's feast meaning that any ritual event

would have had a considerable economic toll on not only the chieftain, but also his charges. Even in the cases of sites like Mære, Uppsala, and Hov, which have somewhat nebulous natures in terms of the actual appearance of their halls, these large structures must have attracted individuals from afar and would have required a nearby power to provide maintenance for the structure.

Another observation comes in the form of the ritual items actually discovered among the various farmsteads above. Overwhelmingly, *gullgubber* seem to imply some form of cultic function at the locations above. Their exact use is still unknown and their meaning is still not entirely clear, though as above, their potential as fertility icons would certainly suggest a ritual usage. It is somewhat strange that these items would not gain more recognition in the sagas of their usage was prevalent. Whether this is because they were already diminishing in usage by the Viking Age or they were simply unknown to the authors is unclear. Lidén suggested that their usage was vaguely alluded to in certain sagas, with some authors recognizing that ritual ground might have had icons of Frey in the dirt. Here, he cites in particular *Vatzdæla saga* where a character, when setting up the posts for his new hall, rediscovers an amulet with an image of Frey carved on it (Lidén 1966). He suggests that this implies the author understood that fertility symbols, particularly of Frey, were known to be lying among the dirt in the ground around halls used for ritual and that this should be interpreted as a recognition of the use of *gullgubber*.

Probably the most identifiable ritual feature in the archaeological record is that of feasting. Sites like Hofstaðir and Borg were likely the location of relatively large feast days for the community. Hofstaðir in particular, where the faunal remain record has been so meticulously studied for butchery and slaughter markings on the skeletons, as well as age comparisons, shows relatively clearly the type of feasting activity that was going on in the Norse farmsteads. While the initial reaction would be to draw a direct parallel to this feasting activity and that recorded in the *Saga Hákonar góða,* there is not overwhelming evidence that the ritual component of the feasting was specifically cultic in nature. As Lucas mentions *Bloody Slaughter*, an article on the sacrificial component of the archaeological record at Hofstaðir, there may be more to the feasts than simply divine revelry. Here, he directs us to *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Fued, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* by William Miller which suggest that there was a partially ceremonial and political aspect to the sacrifices performed by Medieval chieftains (Miller 1990).

Based on Lucas and Miller, the idea is that ritual sacrifice was intended to not only placate the gods, but also serve as a sort of political cooling ground and place where individuals could come together on mutual ground. In the event of hostilities between parties, which would no doubt be common in the winter months when sundries were scarce, rather than bloodshed between the parties, blood was shed by the sacrifice of cattle. To top that off, parties went home with their bellies full of ale and meat—a rare treat for the cold months. To this end, these rituals took place during a time when the separation between secular and religious life was not yet clearly established. There was not the same dichotomy between sacred and profane as later times have created, but rather the feast could serve on both cultic and political levels.

Overall, the archaeological evidence presented here does not entirely agree with the descriptions found in the historical sources above, but it does find some points of similarity. Obviously, the largest similarity between the two records is the idea of feasting. However, the exact performance of the ritual, as suggested in *Saga Hákonar góða* cannot be entirely confirmed. The paucity of artifacts from these various sites that can be identified as specifically ritual objects and the potential vulnerabilities from the types of artifacts we might expect to find from the descriptions in the sagas does not implicly disprove the innacuracy of the sagas. However, a lack of evidence against can never be presented as evidence for a particular phenomenon.

While it is not overwhelmingly unique, it should also be mentioned that the consumption of horse did seem to be a relatively large portion of the subsistence strategy of the Norsemen—at least in Hofstaðir where a detailed analysis was completed. This, too, cannot speak to the fervor with which the saga states King Håkon was pushed to consume horse flesh, but does identify it as, perhaps, part of the identity of pre-Christian Norsemen—a part they would like to see their leader partake in.

VI.) Conclusion

> "The inherent secrecy of pagan religious knowledge appears to have rendered problematic any open sharing of officious information."
>
> (DuBois 1999: 42)

6.1 Reconciling the Records

When Pearson wrote, "Viking Age paganism was, in part, constructed out of the ideological clash with Christianity (Pearson 2006: 86)," he was perhaps putting it lightly. While here he is primarily referring to the ideological clashes that may have caused pagans to alter the forms in which they expressed themselves in order to meet the burgeoning Scandinavian Christian community, sometimes we must wonder how we would understand the Norse pagans without Christian influence. It is not a unique assessment to observe that much of our understanding of the cultic practices of the Viking Age come largely from a Christian understanding. Yet it seems to frequently be put to the side during analysis of the material record. To some extent, this is required in order to construct a picture of the past—we must take some leaps of faith to fill gaps in our knowledge and create an interesting picture of history. However, to do so at risk of adding another layer of subjectivity is problematic.

Direct comparisons, such as that I have attempted with *Saga Hákonar góða* and the material record, can serve to shed some light on where the material and written record agree and disagree. Such a comparison, however, is limited by the scope and relatively small data size. While it can become unweildy to utilize an excessively large data set, there are similarly issues with comparing an alternativley limited data set. These issues are simply inherent in the comparson of the two records. Schjødt stated, "we can try to collect the information which sagas and other source afford about ritual practices, and in this way endeavor to reconstruct the process of ritual by including comparative material through which we can seek to fill lacunas… this is difficult, both because the information is so scarce and because it often has doubtful value as source material." (Schjødt 2003) To this end, comparisons of the text and material records can show us where, by their agreement, we might find the actual facts of

Norse ritual. In both sections, I have attempted to provide some examples of what the record presents as Norse cultic practices and the halls that hold them, though they have been, often sparse.

The picture that we can form of Norse cultic practices and the structures within which they were performed is hardly clear, though there are some commonalities among the records that seem to suggest a potential for a glimpse at objective history. In reality, the image of Norse cultic practice that we can glean from the combination of the records isn‘t so dissimilar from the general conception in other works. Even if we attempt to exclude the use of tenuous claims like specific deity names we are left with a reasonable tradition. In particular, we could postulate what many have said before, that large Norse farmsteads were utilized as the center of any large scale cultic activites. This suggestion simply makes sense due to the fact that in almost all cultures it is the individuals whom could amass any form of wealth. During the Viking Age, large farmsteads were likely home to a variety of manufacture, but more important to feasting, likely were a central hub for agricultural activities.

I believe it is safe to say that feasting was almost definitely one of the main ritual activities performed at large farmsteads; such an assertion does not require a great leap of faith. Despite this, I believe it is important that we consider that the actual purpose behind the feasting is as of yet unidentified. It would seem likely that many of the sites, such as Hofstaðir and Borg, which are similar to those portrayed in Saga Hákonar góða, were not of only cultic function. Rather, the feast itself may have represented a communal event with as much political importance as it did cultic. In some ways, this is not separate from any communal religious event in that they are often used for political power. Furthermore, the dichotomy between politics and the cultic practices may have been more thickly veiled than that of today, meaning that a strong differentiation was not drawn. But to at least some extent, it is likely that feasting halls served as a strong political tool. There is simply no way to reliably prove that feasts served an entirely cultic function. To this end, it also seems that horse would likely not have been the only sacrificial meal. Assemblages above show that horse was consumed with similar regularity to other livestock. Though the Saga of Håkon the Good makes prominent usage of horseflesh as a pagan tradition, it seems more likely that this was due in part to the feelings of the author himself.

While feasting is imporant, the constructions within which the feasting took place are equally imporant to this work. The longhouse was surely the primary center of

Norse cultic practices. In many cases, it seems that the structures utilized for rituals were not purpose built, either. Or, at a minimum, they were purpose built with a dual function. It is often suggested that there was not a great deal of importance put upon separating the supernatural from the temporal world in cultures such as that of the Norsemen. In some ways, this incorporation of ritual elements into the household would support such a postulation. Even the nature of a large scale sacrifice must have felt different than, for instance, going to church. Instead of arriving at a megalithic structure and feeling purely intimidated, taking part in a Norse feast would surely have been more intimate with the chieftain inviting practitioners into his own home. In disparate communities such as those in Norway at the time, this was surely also one of the rare times to interact with other humans outside the limited familial group at one's own farmstead. The events were likely greatly anticipated each year.

6.2 On the Records

There are a number of primary issues that arose when attempting to compare the records and here I will breifly explain each of these difficulties and their implicatins. Firstly, I believe that the comparison of, primarily, *Saga Hákonar góða* and the archaeological record shows that there is yet a discrepancy between the written and archaeological record that cannot be resolved. To this end, It seems that Norse literary accounts cannot be fully corroborated by the archaeological record and should therefore be used as support, rather than beginning points for the interpretation of material records. Utilizing primarily written sources when analyzing the material record is highly dangerous, especially due to the strong influence of *interpretatio Christiana* on almost all the details recorded in the sagas. Where the records agree, there is some case to postulate on an author having knowledge of the events of Norse cultic ritual, though it is difficult to promote the idea that this must be the case with most of the Medieval, and earlier, authors who write ostensibly true accounts about paganism in the Viking age.

The issues surrounding the topic of *interpretatio Christiana* truly cannot be overstated when we consider what the phenomenon means for the relationship of the archaeological and literary records. The phenomenon, after all, is likely one of the greatest obstacles in utilizing the sagas as sources for historical events. In many cases, because of the great distance in time

between the period being described and the authors who were likely active sometime within the 13th century, we would be better to use the sources to inform archaeology of this later period. Almost everything about the way that stories were promoted during the time period would have been based primarily on the mindset of the author. Even if credible information was available, it would still be up to the proclivities and interests of the author to determine what they were to write. Should their interests simply skip over certain portions of data, we would be at a loss. Ergo, when we consider utilizing written sources for archaeological means, we must always remember that we are distanced from the original material by a variety of factors. We are distanced not only by our own biases, but also those of the authors of the early source and by the length of time between events described and the first time the information was recorded—often a period of hundreds of years.

The primary take from the difficulties in the record should be that reconciling the written and archaeological records is incredibly tenuous in any scenario. With every saga, there seems to be a great deal of information that can be called into question. If archaeologists spend their time attempting to validate the stories in the sagas, they are diminishing the discoveries and potential interpretations made by the field of archaeology itself. It is natural that we might seek to, for instance, identify the figures discovered; however, in many cases it would seem to be less than prudent.

This is not to say the written sources have nothing to provide the field of archaeology. As with many things, the most important element of comparative studies must be moderation and balance. Rather than utilizing a record to identify an artifact, it should be used to provide accentuation to the image of the Viking Age we can get from examining strictly material evidence.

In many ways, any examination of the historical record is not entirely dissimilar from what the saga authors themselves were attempting. Whereas Snorri looked back into history and attempted to view the actions of his ancestors through the filter of human causation, we too look back into the past and question what drove the ancient inhabitants of Scandinavia to create the culture they did. We, too, are separated by a vast amount of time—something that is insurmountable even with modern technology. We are similarly in the dark working on hearsay and but a fraction of the evidence. If saga authors were attempting to piece together an image of their history, we must remember that even with their best efforts, they could likely only assemble a fraction of the picture. If we choose to utilized the pieces of the image

that saga authors have left, we must continue to remember that they are themselves incomplete pieces. Even the portions of history they can elucidate will be incomplete.

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