

Farms with Cult Buildings in Pre-Christian Scandinavia



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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to consider a selection of recently excavated Viking Age farms and cult sites; Norse texts; and textual motifs related to pre-Christian cult buildings in the Viking Age, and to undertake a re-evaluation of some Norse texts as sources to pre-Christian religion on a comparative basis which combines philological source criticism with recent advances in archaeology. My hypothesis is that the archaeological advances of recent decades lend support to descriptions in the written sources which scholars from the 1960's onwards have generally assumed to be unreliable.

The first two chapters comprise a presentation of the archaeological and written material with source critical discussion. The third consists of a thematic analysis of some central motifs in Norse descriptions of pre-Christian cult, which considers both archaeology and text and endeavours to assess the extent of agreement between them and whether this overlap is the result of a reliable tradition.

Foreword

The topic for this thesis was first suggested by the mention, in a Scandinavian Iron Age archaeology lecture, of a specialised cult building recently discovered at Uppåkra. Having majored in philology, most scholarly literature I had previously read on the topic had indicated that such buildings were unlikely to have existed, and that pre-Christian religious practice in Scandinavia took place out of doors or in the hall. I became interested in approaching the archaeology from a philological perspective, and whether these recent archaeological discoveries would impact our assessment of the Norse primary sources.

Writing an interdisciplinary MA on pre-Christian religion has been tremendous fun and hugely challenging. Big thanks have to go to my supervisor Mikael Males for his encouragement and thorough feedback, as well as for his patience and understanding when various obstacles forced me to apply for extensions. The administration at the Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian studies have also been very helpful, especially when the University was shut down due to Covid-19.

Also, to Sofie, Max, Siren and Hanne – thank you for all the chats in the kitchen and at Café Niels, and for the D&D sessions.

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to consider a selection of recently excavated Viking Age farms and cult sites, Norse texts, and textual motifs related to pre-Christian cult buildings in the Viking Age, and to undertake a re-evaluation of some Norse texts as sources to pre-Christian religion on a comparative basis which combines philological source criticism with recent advances in archaeology. My hypothesis is that the archaeological advances of recent decades lend support to descriptions in the written sources which scholars from the 1960's onwards have generally assumed to be unreliable. The thesis will compare the two categories of sources in order to evaluate the degree of overlap between them. If there is overlap between the material record and later texts, this will generally be taken as indicative of a reliable tradition. However, alternative explanations, in particular Christian influence, will be discussed in order to safeguard against confirmation bias.

The first chapter will present a small number of magnate farms with presumed cult buildings which have been excavated in the past 30 years and briefly discuss the prevailing interpretations of the material. Some commonalities and differences will then be summarised. The next chapter presents a selection of Norse primary sources relevant to the question of Norse cult buildings and cultic inventory and comments on the philological debate about their usefulness as historical sources. The final chapter discusses prominent cultic elements and motifs known from the Norse prose texts with reference to both the written sources and the archaeological record and aims to evaluate whether their appearance in the medieval written sources plausibly represents a preserved memory of older practice. Finally, brief remarks will be made on the transmission and reproduction of certain motifs.

The scope of the thesis is such that it cannot serve as a comprehensive overview of the relevant archaeological record, nor of the Norse sources which deal with cultic sites and cult buildings. Nor will any attempt be made to discuss the production of the Norse sagas or the learned environment of twelfth and thirteenth century Iceland more broadly. While certain aspects of such a discussion would be useful for analysing the degree of authorial intervention versus transmission of traditional material, this topic could easily fill a thesis in its own right. The final remarks will be limited to a few observations about specific textual passages and what they might be able to tell us about authorial strategies.

Site and text selection

The sites under study in this thesis are the magnate farms at Tissø, Zealand, Denmark; Järrestad, Scania, Sweden; and Uppåkra, Scania, Sweden; the likely cult building at Borg, Östergötland, Sweden; and the cultic complex at Ranheim, Sør-Trøndelag, Norway. In the case of the Scanian sites, their national affiliation will be indicated as “Denmark (now Sweden)” to emphasise their association with Viking Age Denmark.

The Norse texts which will be treated specially are *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Óláfs saga Helga*, and *Hákonar saga góða* from Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*; *Eyrbyggja saga* from the sagas of Icelanders, medieval law texts from Scandinavia, and the inscription on the runic ring from Forsa, Hälsingland, Sweden. Where relevant, reference will also be made to other text types, such as *Landnámabók*, Eddic poetry, and texts from outside Scandinavia.

The archaeological sites in this thesis were chosen on the basis of four criteria. Firstly, the aim was to study sites with traces of a building that has been interpreted with relative certainty as a dedicated cult building. Secondly, I wished to include sites from (present and past) Sweden, Denmark, and Norway in order to provide a wide, Nordic scope. Thirdly, priority was given to sites which were in active use through or well into the Viking Age. Finally, I have prioritised well-elucidated sites which have a high information value.

The texts chosen are those which contain significant amounts of information about allegedly pagan practice, and especially about cult buildings and their inventories. Within this (already small) number, priority has been given to older texts, i.e. texts written before 1300. Later works will be referenced where relevant but will not be given particular emphasis.

Most of the Norse texts under study in this thesis are quite late, and the only one which in its present form dates from the Viking Age is (arguably) the inscription on the Forsa ring and some Eddic poems. Written sources from different genres, time periods, and locations have been included an attempt to mitigate this and offer a greater chance of independent testimony. The sources under study thus cover a range of datings from the tenth through the fourteenth centuries. This is intended to in some measure account for factors of regional and diachronic variation.

That said, the texts under discussion are chiefly prose texts. Eddic poetry is occasionally brought into the discussion, but skaldic poetry is largely not treated. This is mainly due to space constraints, the relative paucity of informative references to cult and cultic buildings in

skaldic poetry, and the methodological challenges involved in interpreting this poetry for use as a historical source. Also, the accounts of Adam of Bremen and Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, though famous and frequently quoted in connection with debates on pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia, will feature only tangentially, as the focus of the thesis will be on the use of the Norse prose texts as historical sources.

Naturally, some well-known magnate farm sites with probable cultic buildings have had to be omitted or else are mentioned only in passing, either because they are less well elucidated with regard to the question of dedicated cult buildings or because their *terminus ante quem* falls outside the chronological scope of this thesis. Additionally, because the focus is on farms with dedicated cult buildings, open-air cultic sites as well as more general considerations of a wider cultic landscape have largely been left out.

Potential pitfalls

Case studies of multifunctional magnate farms, individual texts, and recurring motifs in descriptions of pagan cult may allow us to pinpoint specific concordances between the material and the written record, and to evaluate saga literature as a source of information about the pagan past on a case by case basis. It is hoped that this approach may help to avoid generalisation and enable an appreciation of the heterogeneity of pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia, as well as the debt of Norse literature to the Christian environment in which it originated. Further, those points where the written record differs from the material reality may help us understand the transmission of information into the Middle Ages and how this information was received and reproduced.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that any agreement between the written and material records will only become visible upon discovery of archaeological material which can be seen to resemble something already known from a written source. This creates a potential for confirmation bias. In so far as the scope of the thesis allows for it, I therefore take care to discuss alternative interpretations in order to evaluate their potential to falsify any given hypothesis. Further, this thesis chiefly considers the archaeology of large farms belonging to an élite stratum. This means that the find material is rich and offers good opportunities for interpretation, but it also means that the observations which can be made may only be applicable to one relatively small subset of the population.

Terminology

Some brief notes should be made on terminology. For stylistic and practical reasons, the words “pagan” and “pre-Christian” will both be used, but with the acknowledgment that “pagan” carries connotations of an inherently Christian perspective. “Cult building”, “cultic building”, and “cult house” will be used interchangeably. The word “temple” will not be used, as an attempt will be made to get away from the specific connotations inherent in this analytic term, and to acknowledge that our incomplete knowledge of pre-Christian cultic buildings in Scandinavia calls for a more neutral designation (Sundqvist 2016 p. 108).

We now know that pre-Christian Scandinavian religion was not monolithic. Anders Andrén has noted that the chronological, regional, and social variation in pre-Christian religious practice in Scandinavia is such that “one can seriously question the term ‘Norse paganism’” (Andrén et al. 2006 p. 14). For practical reasons, it will nevertheless be referred to as “pre-Christian Scandinavian religion” in the singular, as this term does not necessarily imply uniformity (note, for instance, the many branches of Christian religion). In addition to the term “religion”, frequent reference will also be made to “practice”, in keeping with the Norse term *forn siðr* (“old custom”) and the scholarly consensus that Norse religion was not dogmatic but rooted in tradition and practice (*ibid.* p. 12).

Research history

In the 19th and early 20th century, scholarly assessments of the value of Norse sagas as historical sources were generally optimistic and it was widely accepted that the pre-Christian Scandinavians had performed their rituals in specially designated cultic buildings.

Archaeologists on Iceland, taking their lead from descriptions in the sagas of Icelanders, attempted to locate the large *hof* buildings of Norse literature. The discovery of a large building at Hofstaðir, Mývatnssveit, Iceland, in 1908 was seen as evidence that the medieval Icelandic descriptions of large cultic buildings on Iceland and in Scandinavia were essentially accurate (Sundqvist 2016 pp. 95-96).

This was the general consensus until 1966, when Danish archaeologist Olaf Olsen published his doctoral thesis *Hørg, hov og kirke*. The monograph was a contribution to the ongoing debate on cultic site continuity in Scandinavia and Iceland, and was to have a profound impact on the discourse around designated cult buildings as a part of Norse paganism, as well as on the perception of the written sources in which such buildings were attested.

A chapter of Olsen's thesis was dedicated to refuting the possibility that the word *hof* could have referred to a cultic building separate from the hall. He pointed out the lack of demonstrable cult buildings in the archaeological record, arguing that none of the so-called Icelandic *hovtomter* (*hof* lots) provided sufficient evidence of pre-Christian cult buildings. Consequently, he concluded that descriptions of large pagan temples in the medieval written sources were based on the authors' familiarity with Christian church buildings, and that no pre-Christian 'temples' had in fact existed in Scandinavia (Olsen 1966 pp. 110; 198).

In Olsen's view, the only cultic structure to exist aside from the hall was the *høgr*. He accounted for the few textual references to the *høgr* as a timbered structure, as well as the Old English *heargtræf*, with the assertion that at some point, a small house might have been built around the outdoor *høgr* to protect it and its associated idol/s from the elements. Faced with the reference in *Gulabingsløg* to "building a house and calling it *høgr*", he conceded that "*At der i slutningen af den hedenske tid kan have været særlige blóthuse eller offerhytter på islandske gårde, er en mulighed, som vel ikke kan afvises*". In a late, secondary development, the originally outdoor *høgr* was moved onto the farm proper in an attempt to conceal it from would-be *høgr* breakers (1966 pp. 111-112). Based on a thorough and wide-ranging survey of textual witnesses to pre-Christian cult practices, Olsen thus concluded "*at vikingetidens hedenske kult i overvejende grad har været utøvet på kultpladser i det fri samt i gårdenes gildestuer*" (1966 p. 115).

Olsen's thorough review was long considered definitive for the question of pre-Christian cult buildings in Scandinavia, and in the decades following, the scholarly consensus was that pre-Christian ritual was carried out inside the hall building or at open air cultic sites (e.g. Simek 1996; Wilson 1996; Näsström 1996; 2001). Philological work on the sagas of Icelanders and *Heimskringla* likewise became increasingly focused on the identification of borrowings from classical and Biblical literature and hagiography and skeptical to the transmission of older oral material being preserved in saga literature – a tendency which had begun some time before the publication of Olsen's book and which gained further impetus in its wake (e.g. Baetke 1951; Düwel 1985).

Since the 1990's, our perception of cultic sites in the Viking Age has been altered by the discovery of a succession of large magnate farms with clear cultic features, many of which comprise apparently dedicated cultic buildings (for a survey, see Jørgensen 2009).

Concurrently, philology has witnessed a gradual move away from the stricter source critical

approach of the mid to late 20th century, and scholars like Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, Anders Hultgård and Stefan Brink have argued for a more nuanced approach which acknowledges the place of medieval Icelandic literature in a wider European learned context while also emphasising its potential to preserve older material (e.g. Meulengracht Sørensen 2001ab, Hultgård 1993, Brink 1996).

The views of Hultgård, Meulengracht Sørensen, Brink and others are supported by the historian of religion Olof Sundqvist, whose comprehensive 2016 monograph *An Arena for Higher Powers: Ceremonial Buildings and Religious Strategies for Rulership in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* covers much of the same ground as this thesis. Though it focuses on the geographical areas of Iceland, Trøndelag, and the Mälaren region and thus has a slightly different methodology, the monograph has been of great value as a reference work.

Chapter 1: Archaeology

This chapter will present a selection of archaeological excavations of magnate farms and give an overview of their spatial organisation and the different structures on the farm, as well as the most important chronological developments. Somewhat less attention will be paid to finds, as the focus is less on ritual acts than on the long-term features of the farmsteads. Where the excavating archaeologists have made connections to Old Norse written sources, I will make some brief preliminary comments on these.

Tissø, Zealand, Denmark

Of the excavated residences, perhaps the best documented is the magnate farm at Tissø on western Zealand. The most recent round of excavations here began in 1995 and lasted until 2003. Located on the western shore of lake Tissø (*Tir's* or *Tyr's sø*) and linked to the sea by the river Halleby Å, Tissø was connected to a great deal of western Zealand (Jørgensen 2002 p. 218). With a breadth of 200-300 metres and a length of 1,5 kilometres along the shore of the lake, the total settlement area at Tissø measured about 500 000 square metres, making it one of the largest central places in Denmark.

Chronology and layout

The settlement at Tissø was founded early in the 8th century. The distribution of the finds indicates that the full settlement area was in use right from the very beginning and that the size of the settlement remained constant throughout its lifespan. The magnate farm appears to have been abandoned in the first half of the 11th century.

Just south of the farm proper, a workshop area has been excavated which runs along the entire west coast of lake Tissø for about 700 metres. In this area, archaeologists and detectorists have found more than 10 000 metal objects, two silver hoards, and a massive gold neck ring weighing 1,8 kilograms. North of the magnate farm, a market area stretched along the coast for a further 600 metres, with traces of numerous pit-houses and some workshop activities (Jørgensen 2002 p. 222-225).

The magnate farm itself played host to the very highest strata of society, as evidenced by the many finds of a typically aristocratic nature, such as high-quality riding gear and weaponry, fibulas and other objects in gilt silver and bronze, imported drinking glasses and foreign coins, and a single, ornate tuning peg, which may have belonged to a lyre (Jørgensen 2002 pp. 223-225).

Within the farm's area was a smithy, located just inside the fence on the north side, and south of this, a hall building, which had a floor area of 400 square metres. South of the hall and perpendicular to it, an area had been enclosed by yet another fence, with a single entrance in the eastern wall. Within this fence was a smaller building. It measured some 5 by 6 metres in its first phase and had what appears to have been a roofed entranceway on its western side.

In phases 1 and 2 the fence which hedged about this 'special area' ran right up to the walls of the hall, so that the western end of the hall appeared to protrude somewhat into the enclosure. For the second phase of the farm archaeologists were also able to demonstrate a south-facing door in the westernmost end of the hall, which would have given direct access to the enclosure from the hall itself.

Throughout the farm's chronology, the area encompassed by the hall and adjoining enclosure was unusually rich in pre-Christian amulets and jewellery whose motifs appeared to derive from mythology. About twenty hammers of Þórr have been found inside the dwelling house, as well as a single miniature fire steel. Also found in the same area were groups of pendants depicting riders and shield bearers, which some scholars have interpreted as Valkyries based on their female dress and hairstyle (Jørgensen 2002 pp. 234-5).

In the farm's second phase – dated to the 9th century – both the hall and the adjoining enclosure were rebuilt, but the relative positioning of these structures was carefully maintained. Likewise, the entrance to the enclosure remained in the same place. The new building within the enclosure was much larger and located towards the western wall, measuring 6 by 20 metres and with post-holes indicating a more longhouse-like appearance. The entrance to this building now presumably lined up with the entrance to the enclosure itself. Though the third phase of the complex (9th and 10th centuries) witnessed greater changes, the core of the farm remained largely unaffected. Several new buildings were built along the western fence of the farm, but the hall was rebuilt in the same size and location as before, and so were the enclosure and the smaller building, though now the enclosure fence was detached from the hall and the smaller building became smaller and square. The east-facing entrance to this area remained.

Only in the fourth and final phase of the Tissø complex, dated to the later 10th and early 11th centuries, did this finally change. The new hall, measuring some 550 square metres, showed a new construction method. The enclosure disappeared, and in its place were built a smaller house, rectangular and placed perpendicular to the hall. With regard to the end of Tissø's

chronology, it is worth noting that in 1979, the remains of two executed men were found where the lake meets Halleby Å. Their remains were carbon dated to approximately 1030-1040 AD, a date which corresponds intriguingly to the end point of the site as a whole – and to the final stages of the Conversion in Denmark (Jørgensen 2002 p. 221-223).

A stable core

This brief summary of all the ways in which the farm at Tissø changed during its lifespan should not blind us to the arguably more important fact of the remarkable degree of continuity which this site demonstrates. For 250 years, from the founding of the farm around AD 700 until at least the middle of the 10th century, the central structures at Tissø remained virtually unchanged: hall, enclosure, smaller building. Their relative positioning was never changed, even though each individual structure was torn down and rebuilt several times. This careful reconstruction indicates that the architectural continuity was a deliberate choice on the part of the people who built and maintained the structures. This same period saw a significant development in Danish farms in general, which makes Tissø a noticeable departure from the bigger picture (Jørgensen 2002 p. 234).

We may also note that this degree of stability is not found elsewhere on the farm. It therefore appears that there existed some sense of the “correct” layout which pertained only to the three central elements – the hall, the enclosure, and the second house. The stability of these elements as compared to the more transient ones on the farm indicate their greater importance: both physically and symbolically, these structures formed the “core” of the magnate complex at Tissø.

Tissø – a secondary seat?

The complex at Tissø exhibits some conspicuous absences. Excavating archaeologists found no clear evidence of large-scale agricultural production or husbandry at Tissø, and despite its size, the complex does not appear to have been a production unit (Jørgensen 2002 p. 231). Storage buildings do not appear on the farm until the 9th century. Additionally, the unusual room division in the hall has been taken to indicate that this magnate farm was not a permanent residence. This has raised several questions about the primary function of the site. If it was not an ordinary farm, it may instead have served some more specialised function.

Lars Jørgensen has proposed that the Tissø complex may have been the secondary seat of a ruling dynasty which had its primary seat elsewhere – for instance at Lejre – and that it served as a regional centre with primarily representative, mercantile and cultic functions, occupied only at certain times of the year. In this context, it is noteworthy that the hall at Tissø had an

unusual feature of construction: the great load-bearing posts which held up the ceiling had been dug a full 3 metres into the ground. This construction has led archaeologists to speculate that the building may have been unusually tall or had more than one floor (Jørgensen 2002 p. 231). The hall was where the magnates at Tissø hosted feasts, met with important guests, and made alliances. It was the arena where their power was expressed and reproduced (Herschend 1993). With its potentially great height and an internal area of 400 to 550 square metres, the hall at Tissø would have presented an imposing demonstration of the power and ambitions of the élite.

The smaller building – a cult building?

In line with this interpretation of the complex, the little building within the enclosure has been viewed as a cult house. There are several reasons to believe that this is correct, not least of which is the enclosure itself. From the early 8th until the mid-10th century, the rulers at Tissø chose to close off this area of their farmstead with an extra barrier. This area was afforded a greater degree of protection – whether practical, symbolic, or both – than any other space at Tissø. The erection of a fence is also at odds with the visibility and outward communication one might expect from a representational building. The shape and small size of the building in its earliest phase also make it unlikely that the house was intended as a free-standing hall.

Additionally, the positioning of the little house right next to the dwelling house indicates a close affiliation with the representational sphere which the hall embodies. Both the smithy and the new buildings erected in Phase 3, which may have been storage houses or sleeping quarters, were located towards the periphery of the farm area. This highly visible and accessible placement, juxtaposed with the restrictive fencing-off of the building, is perhaps the most persuasive argument for reading this enclosure as belonging to a ritual sphere.

If the magnate farm at Tissø and its ruling dynasty were associated with a pre-Christian religious centre in western Zealand, the restructuring and eventual abandonment of the farm in the late 10th and early 11th century, as well as the apparent execution of the two men, may be related to the Conversion. We have seen that both the hall and the enclosure contained an unusually large number of artefacts connected with religion and myth. It would thus appear likely that ritual activities did take place on the magnate farm, both around the cult house and inside the hall. Given this evidence as well as the size and prominence of the complex, Tissø may well have constituted a regional religious centre. This interpretation is strengthened by the etymological connection of lake Tissø itself with the god Týr (or with the Old Norse word *týr*, “god”), as well as the evidence of votive offerings at the shore of the lake.

Religious life at Tissø – some remarks on the farm's layout

Proceeding from the assumption that the enclosed building was a cult house, it is possible that a brief analysis of access patterns and chronology may tell us something about its use and its significance to the people who built it. As we have seen, the cult area is at the same time accessible and inaccessible. From its positioning it is natural to assume that the cultic area as a whole was meant to be immediately visible and perhaps to make an impression on visitors to Tissø. It is also likely that the area was not always open, or not open to all.

The building within the enclosure was originally quite small. In the first phase of the farm, it had an internal area of about 30 square metres and does not appear to have had any internal posts. Though this is large enough to accommodate a small crowd, a comparison with the size of the hall – and, for that matter, the later cult buildings – makes it clear that the modest size of the edifice must have been a deliberate choice. Therefore, it is possible that its use was restricted to a limited number of people or that ritual activities may have taken place outside. Here we may recall that in order to enter the building in its earliest phase, one was obliged to walk across the yard, through the enclosure gate, around the cult house from east to west, and through the roofed entryway. Though this is pure conjecture, this complicated route might be ceremonial or indicate a processional way.

By contrast, the building which replaced this had an internal area of 120 square metres, and its entrance was presumably in the eastern wall facing the enclosure gate. This eliminates the complicated route from hall to cult building. Given the size of the building in Phase 2, it may appear more probable that ritual activities took place inside the building itself, or that the audience present for such activities encompassed a greater number of people. The new and more imposing structure may also indicate a wish to reassert the authority of the Tissø élite in religious affairs.

Finally, we should draw attention to the close connection between the hall and the cult area which is established by their respective positioning. The physical proximity probably corresponded to a metaphorical and ideological link. For over 200 years, the enclosure which hedged round the sacred sphere was built into the walls of the hall; joined with it in the most concrete sense. This implies that the functions of the hall and the functions of the cult building were intimately connected. In both locations, power was articulated and reproduced by the ruling élite based at Tissø. Their worldly power, as represented by the hall, derived from and was supported by their religious power, represented by the cult house – and vice versa. The

farmstead layout and architecture served as vehicles for the expression of their perceptions of religion and of power.

Tissø and text

The restriction of access demonstrated by the cult building at Tissø (and others) will be discussed in light of a passage from *Njáls saga*. The saga relates how the *hof* of Dala-Guðbrandr and the earl at Hlaðir was kept locked at all times and only ever opened during visits from the earl (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954 p. 214). For most days of the year, the *hof* remained locked, its three idols stored safely inside. It is easy to imagine how a similar practice may have prevailed at Tissø: the entire complex coming to life at certain times of the year with the arrival of the itinerant regional elite, at which point the cultic enclosure was opened and the *hof* unlocked.

Summary

In conclusion, it appears probable that the complex at Tissø has a designated cult building, and that access to this building and the area immediately around it was restricted. There is some evidence to suggest that the magnate farm at Tissø served as a regional cultic centre for western Zealand, which may explain why the cult house was at one point considerably enlarged. Access patterns suggest that processions may have taken place in connection with the cult building. It is also probable that some rituals took place inside the hall, as this is where the greatest number of Þórr's hammer amulets were found.

Þórr's hammers have been interpreted as symbolic of pagan resistance to Christianity. It is possible that the pre-Christian cultic practices at Tissø held out until the late 900's, but that the disappearance of the enclosed house and the rearrangement of the farm's central elements in the later 10th century signals the end of pagan worship on the magnate farm.

There has been some debate as to whether pre-Christian ritual practices in Scandinavia took place in the hall or in their own building. The case of Tissø, where the hall and cult area are literally conjoined, indicates that we should not view the location of cult *inside* the hall and the location of cult *adjacent to* the hall as opposing phenomena, but rather as different ways to express a connection. The architectural compromise at Tissø – a halfway point between fusion and separation – is eloquent of how closely linked the inhabitants considered these domains to be. This question of the physical and the symbolic relationship between the hall and the *hof* is one which will be kept in mind when analysing the other central places. If similar links can be found, this more flexible view of connection may suggest an answer to the question of why some sites can be shown to have had designated cult buildings, while others did not.

Uppåkra, Scania, Denmark (now Sweden)

Fieldwork began at Uppåkra in 1996, and test excavations in 1999. The main round of excavations on the site ran from 2001 to 2004. In total the site covers 40 hectares, making the complex almost as large as the one at Tissø, and consists of several different elements and structures. The house at Uppåkra offers several intriguing implications, especially in terms of building technique and with regard to the functions of doors and door rings in connection with cult and ritual spaces.

Layout and chronology

The house whose traces were discovered at Uppåkra was not a very large building, measuring 13,5 by 6 metres, with slightly convex walls and straight gables. The internal area was 81 square metres, and there were four post-holes in the interior of the building. Depressions in the wall trenches showed that the house, which appeared to have had a high ceiling and high doors, had been built and repaired using stave-wall technique (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004 p. 13). The house had three entrances; two in the south wall and one in the north wall. The south-west doorway appears to have been accentuated by a small entranceway or portico (Larsson 2006 p. 249). It is also possible that the house may have been surrounded by an enclosure (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004 p. 21).

Excavations revealed a complex stratigraphy and a full seven different phases in the building's lifespan, beginning in the Roman Iron Age and continuing into the early Viking Age. There were also traces of an even older structure built in ordinary longhouse technique, but the floor of this house was no longer intact. Though the Uppåkra house had been rebuilt several times, its size and layout were carefully maintained. Only in the southwest corner and in the eastern gables were there minor shifts in the location of the wall trench. The number and positioning of the entrances never varied. In most stages of the house, there was a fireplace in the central room between the internal posts, but some double fireplaces were documented (Larsson 2006 p. 249).

In addition to the interior posts, the house had also had a set of outer posts, one in each corner. These post-holes were about 2 metres deep and contained stones which had been packed around the posts as additional support. Both inner and outer posts had a diameter of about 70 centimetres. Lars Larsson characterises the posts and roof supports of the house as “oversized” for the building and notes that in this regard, the house sequence at Uppåkra is “unique” (2006 p. 249). It is possible that the outsized walls and posts were intended to provide support for a building which was taller than was customary (Larsson 2006 p. 250). If

this was the case, we find here an intriguing parallel to the hall at Tissø. (We will have some occasion below to discuss the distinction between ‘hall’ and ‘cult building’ as categories, as the house at Uppåkra has raised some questions in this regard.) With regard to the internal post-holes, however, it has been suggested that they may not represent additional roof supports, but the foundations for wooden idols (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004 p. 32).

Less than five metres east of the stave house, the remnants of a sequence of at least five longhouses could be made out. The size of this area (35 by 15 metres) allows for the possibility of a large longhouse. If this area represents the main dwelling house on the site, the sequence of potential cult houses was built and maintained immediately adjacent to the dwelling. The longhouse, as the dwelling house, likely had representative and economic functions. Room divisions cannot be made out, but the longhouse may have contained a central hall. Alternatively, it is possible that the stave-built house functioned as a free-standing hall (Herschend 1993 p. 182), in which case it would have played host to feasts and other alliance-building activities in addition to the ritual functions indicated by the material remains.

The site at Uppåkra is complex, and only a brief overview will be provided of its other features and their relation to the stave house sequence. To the west and north of it were remnants of at least four older burial mounds, which had been respected by the foundation of the Uppåkra complex (Larsson 2006 p. 251). Depositions of weapons were found north and south of the house. A few metres southwest of the building was a stone pavement possibly dating to the 6th to 8th century, in which a Þórr’s hammer was found (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004 pp. 40-41). Between this and the house wall was a collection of fire-cracked stones and animal bones. To the south there appears to have been a smithy or manufacture area, as evidenced by fragments of crucibles containing traces of gold (Larsson 2006 p. 250). In other words, the élite at Uppåkra were able to directly control the manufacture of prestige objects.

The picture which emerges is of a large, multifunctional, and remarkably long-lived central place. Prominently situated on a hill, the Uppåkra complex would have been visible from afar and commanded a good view of the surrounding landscape. The stave-built house was in use from approximately the third to the ninth century AD (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004 pp. 16; 20). In this time, the longhouse was rebuilt five times and the so-called ceremonial building seven times. While the positioning and size of the longhouse appears to have varied slightly over time, the outline of the ceremonial building remained unusually consistent, and the spatial relation between the two buildings was maintained. Such continuity indicates the importance

of these houses to the inhabitants at Uppåkra – and, arguably, the resources and stability of the élite which maintained them. After the demolition of the stave house, another building was erected in its place. The remains of this house were difficult to interpret, but it was clearly built in a different technique (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004 pp. 20-21).

Finds on the site

The yard around the building was rich in finds and yielded large amounts of fire-cracked stone and artefacts. Inside the building was found a cache containing a glass bowl and a high-status beaker, along with the sherds of approximately ten more glass vessels. These items were intentionally buried beneath the clay floor of the house sometime in the Migration Period (Larsson 2006 pp. 249-250; Larsson and Lenntorp 2004 p. 14). Many more artefacts were found in the wall trenches and post-holes, including beads, fibulae, potsherds, and fragments of crucibles, as well as objects of gold and fragments of raw gold.

Strikingly, the north-western posthole inside the house contained a cow skull and a large, ring-shaped iron door handle. The ring measured 15 centimetres in diameter and had four iron knobs distributed evenly around the circumference. Another, larger door ring was discovered about ten metres from the building itself, presumably also belonging to it. Larsson argues that the door handle and cow skull were likely deposited during demolition (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004 p. 14). The deposition of the door handle – perhaps as a *pars pro toto* representation of the house itself – may be interpreted as a formal act of closure.

Also found on the site was the second-largest accumulation of gold-foil figures ever found in Scandinavia. Excavations turned up 122 figures in total, mainly from post-holes and wall trenches. The gold foils had come from over 50 different dies and represented men, women, and couples, though solitary male figures made up a majority (Larsson 2006 p. 250). It is likely that the many gold-foil figures were produced at the complex (Watt 2004 p. 214). An especially dense concentration of gold foils was found near the north-western post, nearest the entrance, where the door ring and skull were also found. It has been suggested that this post may have been accorded special significance and that some of the gold foils may have been fastened to the post itself as decoration (Larsson 2006 pp. 251-252).

The tall house at Uppåkra: a *hof* or a hall?

It is clear that the stave house at Uppåkra was a special building. Its atypical construction and outsized posts set it apart. The placement close to the dwelling house, the extraordinary continuity of these structures, and the constant spatial relationship between them reveal its importance. They also highlight the connection between this house and the domains of the

ruling elite, namely representation, reproduction of power, and ritual. Gold-foil figures are often linked with ruler ideology and cult and may support the association of hall-like functions with the Uppåkra house (Sundqvist 2016 p. 413). The sheer abundance of figures at Uppåkra is striking. Equally notable are the closing depositions of the door ring and cow skull. In general, the depositions in the building are abundant and unusual – indicative of a house cult centred on this structure. While this is not proof of a cult building in and of itself, it does identify the house as a building of special significance.

The function of the stone pavement is unknown and only deeply tentative conclusions can be drawn on this point. A similar structure uncovered at Ranheim, Norway was interpreted as a *hqrgr*. Though the exact reference of the words *hof* and *hqrgr* have not been conclusively established, there is some evidence in the written sources to indicate that the *hof* was a wooden structure and the *hqrgr* was stone-built. Such an interpretation is also supported by the etymology of the word (de Vries 2000 p. 281). The frequent co-occurrence of the words *hof* and *hqrgr* in the sources may be attributable to alliteration, or to the fact that such structures in fact co-occurred in material reality. If we allow ourselves to interpret the stone pavement at Uppåkra as a *hqrgr*, it is tempting to see the tall stave-built house as a *hof*. The use of these terms will be further discussed in Chapter 3, however.

As Lars Larsson has pointed out, however, it is possible that the house at Uppåkra also had hall functions. The cache near the hearth is reminiscent of building cult depositions which were often made in dwelling houses in the early Iron Age, though by the Migration Period such rituals could also be performed in “buildings with special functions,” especially in times of unrest (Carlie 2006 p. 209). The access pattern of the house is fitting of a representative building. Its placement closely perpendicular to the dwelling house means that it would have been accessible, visible, and imposing – even from afar, thanks to its height. There are no unequivocal traces of an enclosure, and the central hearth is also reminiscent of a hall.

For his part, Lars Larsson has argued that we may not be able to tell whether the house at Uppåkra was a hall or a cult building and that the distinction might not matter:

Whether the house at Uppåkra should be regarded as a cult house or a hall might be a semantic detail. From a holistic perspective, it is rather a question of whether there are any real differences between these two hypothetical structures in terms of the role they would have played for the Iron Age societies at Uppåkra.

(Larsson 2006 pp. 250-251)

This might be underestimating the significance of the distinction. If one defines “the role [the house] would have played for the Iron Age societies at Uppåkra” – i.e., its function – simply as a place for the observance of religious ceremony and/or ritual, one can certainly argue for a great deal of overlap between a hall and a cult house. But this is a very broad definition of function. It appears to rely solely on the smallest common denominator, namely, that *some* form of ritual took place in both structures. It also does not take into account other distinguishing features such buildings may have had and which may have differentiated between them, such as construction method, decoration, etc. The unusual construction of the Uppåkra house is thus not addressed, for instance.

Perhaps more importantly, the argument that the identification of a given structure may be a “semantic detail” appears to rest on the assumption that to the Iron Age inhabitants of Southern Sweden themselves, a cult house and a hall were not regarded as belonging to different kinds. It implies that these conceptual categories may not have existed. One might argue that if they did not, there would be very little reason for anyone already in possession of a hall to erect a cult house – but some clearly did.

The case of Uppåkra raises the very real possibility that the functions of cult building and free-standing representative space may have been occasionally embodied by the same structure. We may not be able to classify this house as either ‘hall’ or ‘hof’. In this analysis, it will be treated as a *likely* cult building. But such a structure should nevertheless be regarded as encompassing two separate domains, that of secular power and representation and that of religious life. The main actors in both domains are the same – the élite – and in both domains, ritual is likely to be present. But this does not mean that they are conceptually identical. I view the Uppåkra stave house and its potentially dual function as another architectural strategy for expressing the close connection between religious and secular power – but it is connection, not synonymy.

Uppåkra and the written sources

Connections have already been made between the Uppåkra house and the written sources: Larsson (2006 pp. 248-250) states that *Völuspá* and *Grímnismál* designate similar “tall wooden buildings” as “*harg*”, and he interprets the Uppåkra house accordingly. In fact, the mention of high-timbered buildings in *Völuspá* refers to both *høgr* and *hof*: “*Hittuz æsir á Iðavelli, / þeir er hørg oc hof há timbroðo*” (Neckel-Kuhn 1983 p. 2). This identification appears to be inspired by the work of Olaf Olsen and will be discussed in Chapter 3. Also interesting due to the references to similar objects in the written sources are the deposited

door rings. Different types of rings are connected with cult houses in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Landnámabók*, and their role at Uppåkra will be analysed in light of these texts as well as the great inscribed iron ring from Forsa, Hälsingland, Sweden. Finally, Larsson's interpretation of the north-eastern post as significant (2006 pp. 251-252) will be more fully discussed in light of *Eyrbyggja saga*, and specifically the high seat post in the *hof* of Þórolfr Mostrarskegg, which was decorated with *reginnaglar* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þorðarson 1935 p. 8).

Summary

The unusual construction of the Uppåkra house clearly indicates a special building. Its long continuity and prominent placement signal its importance and status. Located right next to it is a potential *høgrgr*. Numerous and unusual depositions have been made in the house, including over a hundred gold foil figures, a cow skull, and at least one iron door ring. The house may thus very likely be termed cult building, albeit one that may also have served hall-like functions, as evidenced by the presence of a hearth and hearth deposits, gold-foil figures, and the possible absence of an enclosure. It is possible that the decorated post may have had a particular ritual significance, which would strengthen the likelihood of a cult house. The presence of large door rings also serves as an argument in favour of a *hof*-like building, as these appear frequently in cultic connections in the written sources.

Järrestad, Scania, Denmark (now Sweden)

Excavations at Järrestad took place in 1999 and 2000 in connection with the planned building of a new motorway between Östra Tommarp and Simrishamn. The trajectory of the planned motorway happened to cut straight through a complex of ancient monuments at Järrestad, and excavations uncovered traces of human activity which included Bronze Age settlements and Neolithic tombs. Of interest here, however, is a large Iron Age complex with an imposingly sized hall, which presents fascinating parallels with the magnate farm at Tissø.

Chronology and layout

There were three main areas of excavation at Järrestad: Torekullarna, Hestebier and Ååkrarne. The latter revealed a large settlement, comprising hall buildings, a large number of houses, and other traces of activity. Attention will here be devoted entirely to this site, whose chronology spans five centuries, from around 550 to 1050 AD. It is important to note that parts of this settlement were outside the area of the planned road project, and thus could not be excavated. Preservation was also uneven due to the lightness of the soil, which had led to erosion in certain areas.

At Ååkrarne, archaeologists identified a large late Iron Age hall. This building was preserved in three phases, proving that it had been torn down twice and fully rebuilt in more or less the same location. Extensive repairs could be seen to have been carried out in each phase, as evidenced by the post holes, which indicated that posts had been taken out and replaced while the building was in use. The extensive maintenance and repairs were consistent with the relatively long use-life of each hall building, which appeared to have been 100 to 200 years, much higher than the averages projected for regular houses (Söderberg 2003 p. 122-3). The relative chronologies of the hall buildings could be established with some certainty. The first hall was in use from about 550 to 700, the second from about 700 to 950, and the last from about 950 to 1050. Over the course of these five centuries, the size of the hall increased dramatically, from 210 square metres when it was first erected to 580 square metres in its final iteration (*ibid.* pp. 125; 136).

It has been suggested that the hall served primarily representative functions and the actual living space on the farm is represented by another large house, House 16, which was erected around year 800 in what had until then been a craft area (*ibid.* p. 134). It measured some 42 metres in length. As the excavation at Järrestad did not cover the entire area of the magnate farm, we must assume that some elements remain outside the investigated areas, such as the

potential precursors to House 16. When the hall was rebuilt for the last time, it is possible that the functions previously filled by this separate dwelling house became integrated.

The palisaded area

Immediately south-west of the hall, and most relevant for our purposes, was a rectangular area fenced off by a palisade and containing a smaller building. Just like at Tissø, the positioning of the palisaded area was perpendicular to the hall, and it had an entrance along its eastern side. In the second phase of the hall, it could be proven that the western gable-end of the hall building had protruded into the north-east corner of the palisaded area, and that the palisade had been built right up to the walls of the hall. The excavating archaeologists have argued that the palisade and the hall were built like this intentionally and were intended to be conceived as an architectural unit (*ibid.* p. 131). There is some evidence that the demolition and rebuilding of the hall in each phase was accompanied by a simultaneous demolition and rebuilding of the palisade (*ibid.* p. 138).

It was also noted that the eastern wall of the palisade intersected with the hall at exactly the place where the dividing wall between the hall room and the private area of the house was placed. This is also where archaeologists have theorised, based on interior post holes representing benches around three sides of the hall, that the high seat would have stood (*ibid.* p. 129). Whether a similar palisade existed in the earliest phase of the farm could not be conclusively determined, but based on the positioning of the surrounding buildings, Söderberg considers it possible (2003 pp. 125-126).

The house inside the palisade was oriented perpendicular to the hall. It was 21 metres long and was built like a longhouse, with four pairs of posts. No wall outlines were preserved, but based on the posts, it appears to have been 7 to 8 metres wide. It had double entrances facing east and probably also entrances in the gables. The varying degree of preservation shown by the remains of the palisade indicates that in this area the erosion of the soil had been extensive (Söderberg 2003 p. 121). In each post-hole, iron slag was found, and in one post-hole were found a hammer head and an axe head, as well as an iron ring which was interpreted as a door ring. Other finds in the post-holes included beads of glass and amethyst, animal bones, and fragments of glass and ceramics (Söderberg 2003 p. 131; 2005 p. 233).

The fenced-in house

As has been argued for Tissø, the complexities and contradictions of access imply that the house belonged to the ritual sphere. Its central placement and physical connection to the hall signal that it was closely connected with power and representation. Yet its enclosure indicates

that in some measure, it was also exclusive and secretive – more so than the hall itself, which was left open; its representational functions being better served by unimpeded visual communication.

There also appears to have been a conceptual connection between the high seat of the ruler and the palisaded area outside, which has been intentionally signalled through architecture. To those aware of the spatial relationships on the farm, the palisade wall functioned as an external marker of the high seat's location. In other words, in the minds of those who first conceived of this building plan, the ruling power, exemplified and symbolised through the high seat, was intimately connected with the activities which took place inside the palisaded area. The proposed door connecting the private areas of the hall building with this space further strengthens this connection with the lord in the hall.

This placement and access pattern rule out most other possible uses. Storage houses on the farm are seen to have an entirely different placement. The find situation inside the house might allow for the possibility that the house was used for various crafts, particularly the finds of iron slag, but it is the opinion of the excavating archaeologists that the slag represents intentional depositions and thus may not reflect the actual crafts practiced in the house. The find of a door ring is reminiscent of the depositions at Uppåkra, another house believed to have a cultic function. Furthermore, an apparent craft area containing multiple pit houses was discovered west of the hall area, indicating a general location for craft-related houses on the magnate farm.

It is possible that we should consider some connection between metalwork and the magico-religious sphere in the Scandinavian iron age, especially in exclusive contexts such as this (Pedersen 2009 p. 135). Along with a stray find of a small anvil in the same area which may have come from the house, the finds of iron slag and tools have led archaeologists to compare the Järrestad house with the cult house at Borg, and it has been argued that it should be seen as a representation of the 'mythical smithy' in Ásgarðr (Söderberg 2003 p. 131). Whether or not this is accurate, it is clear from the depositions and its well-protected status that the house was special, and a cultic interpretation would appear to be the most convincing – possibly one connected in some way with metalworking.

A wider context

As we have seen, the central portion of the Järrestad complex, comprising the hall and the cultic area, exhibits close parallels to that at Tissø. The size of halls in their final phases is

almost the same, with Järrestad's hall being some 1,5 metres wider and 2 metres longer. The layout is identical. There also appears to be a chronological correspondence: at both sites, this joining of hall and cult area only reached its final form in the middle phase of the farm, around the 8th century. Even the size and placement of the cult house at Järrestad (7-8 by 21 metres) corresponds well with the second phase of the cult house at Tissø (6 by 20 metres). It has been proposed that these similarities may be due to a supra-regional connection between these two central places and the élites which ruled them.

Like its 'twin' in the Tissø complex, the cult area at Järrestad is particularly interesting in light of the closing-off of sacred or protected spaces, a motif which appears frequently in the written sources, and the presence of a ring-shaped door handle. Also, naturally, the cult building resonates with the image of the timbered *hof* in sagas and Eddic poetry and will form part of the analysis of the *hof*.

Summary

Excavated in 1999 and 2000, the Järrestad complex was a large central place in Scania in continuous use from approximately the mid-6th until the mid-10th century, whose most prominent feature was a large hall building in connection with a cult house inside an enclosure. The complex exhibits far-reaching similarities with the magnate farm at Tissø; however, where Tissø has been interpreted as a secondary seat with intermittent occupancy, Järrestad was a permanent residence.

The cult house appears to have been built like a longhouse, but the structure was relatively poorly preserved, and walls could not be made out. Its access pattern is similar to that at Tissø and indicates the same juxtaposition of accessibility and restrictions of access, which point toward the cultic sphere. The finds inside the house indicate intentional depositions and a possible connection with metalworking. Further, the way the enclosure itself was joined with the hall building implies a conscious wish to associate the cultic area with the élite sphere of the hall, and specifically with the high seat.

Borg, Östergötland, Sweden

Chronology and layout

In 1993, excavations began at Borg in Östergötland, not far from Norrköping. The farmstead at Borg was founded sometime in the seventh century and continued to be used through the Middle Ages and right up to the present day, becoming a royal manor under King Magnus Eriksson in the fourteenth century. The excavations, which did not encompass the entire farmstead, were completed in 1994. Several structures were discovered, their datings ranging from the latter half of the seventh century until approximately the year 1000 AD. The ritual finds on the site indicate that ritual activities began in the eighth century (Nielsen 1997 pp. 375-376; 2006 p. 243). Based on the farmstead's location near, but not quite at, the highest point in the landscape, Nielsen theorises that this spot may have been occupied by an earlier burial ground, adjacent to which the farm was built (1997 p. 378).

The area in which ritual activities are believed to have taken place was separated from the dwelling area of the farm by two trenches filled with animal bones and cracked stone. East of these was the dwelling house, dating to the 9th to 10th century and containing a small number of ordinary household finds (Nielsen 1997 p. 379). West of the trenches was a large yard, about 1000 square metres, which had been paved with more cracked stones. In this yard were found the remnants of five buildings, of which four were interpreted as smithies based on the presence of manufacture tools, bronze objects, tuyères and iron slag. These houses all had sand floors and hearths. There were also two furnaces in the yard, showing that the élite based at Borg were producing their own metal. The building assumed to have had specifically cultic functions, House 5, was the last to be erected and was built in the late Viking Age (Nielsen 1997 pp. 378-379; 2006 p. 243). As at Uppåkra, we see that the so-called 'ritual zone' of the farm was located to the west of the dwelling house.

House 5 and its surroundings

The presumed cultic building at Borg was a small house with a north-south orientation and an entrance in its western side. Eschewing the typical earlier Iron Age construction with load-bearing posts dug into the ground, this house, like the other four on the pavement, stood on sills and was most likely log-built. It had two rooms, a large southern room and a smaller northern room. In the southern room, located along the eastern wall, was found a foundation or low dais built of large, flat stones, which archaeologists suggest may be the base of a *stallr* (Nielsen 2006 p. 244). The house was almost empty of finds, with only two amulet rings found in the southern section. By contrast, the yard around it yielded a multitude of objects.

West of the small house stood a slightly elevated rock, and near this, archaeologists found a hoard of almost 100 iron amulet rings. Nielsen links their shape with fire-steel amulets and sickles and notes that as some of the deposited rings were unfinished, they were likely forged in the smithies on-site (*ibid.* pp. 244-245).

In the paved yard was also found an unusual quantity of animal bone – nearly 80 kg in total. Analysis showed a disproportionate number of jaw bones and skulls compared to other bone material, and this was taken as an indication that the bones were not household refuse but had some connection to ritual. This theory was strengthened by the sheer variety of animal species represented at the site, which comprised wild as well as domesticated animals. The full complement of species is worth listing: pig, horse, cow, sheep or goat, dog, cat, hen, goose, wolf, eagle, elk, red deer, roe deer, fox, beaver, badger, and two breeds of duck. With regard to the distribution of the animal bones, archaeologists were able to classify the remains of the pigs by gender and so to make out one pattern. Nearly uniformly, the sow remains were located close to the amulet rings, and boar bones were generally located near the furnaces. This has led archaeologists to suggest a potential link with Freyr and Freyja (*ibid.*).

A cult house in a ritual zone?

House 5 does not appear to have been connected with manufacture. It lacks the sanded floor and the hearth of the other smithies, and as we have seen, the only finds inside the building were two amulet rings. It is possible that this barren character is due to the floor having been intentionally cleared at some point, perhaps in connection with its demolition. The presence of the low dais in the southern room, though we cannot ascertain its exact function, also argues in favour of a cultic reading. Perhaps the best arguments for House 5 having been a cultic building, however, are its placement and spatial relations to the rest of the complex, as well as the extraordinary finds surrounding it. The intentional deposition and segregation of the animal bones in relation to the surrounding structures and the depositions of amulet rings on what is likely to have been several different occasions strongly indicate that rituals of some kind, took place in the yard. The variety of animal species killed at Borg and deposited inside the ritual zone clearly shows that these animals were not slaughtered for food (*ibid.*).

House 5 is located immediately adjacent to the four manufacture houses, and this group of houses are connected by their placement in the paved yard. This cluster of houses was located near, but clearly separated from, the dwelling house: the area was demarcated by the pavement and cut off by trenches. They were also distinguished from the dwelling house through a different construction method – the five houses in the yard were built on sills, while

the dwelling house was built in the usual manner with posts sunk into holes in the ground (Nielsen 1997 pp. 379-380). These features should be regarded as deliberate architectural choices, intended to physically manifest a conceptual difference. Their presence further strengthens the impression that the yard with its cluster of houses belonged to a sphere that was separate from the daily running of the farm.

With regard to the furnaces and associated houses, Pedersen in particular has urged scholars to be wary of assuming that all Iron Age smiths must have been regarded as magico-religious specialists by virtue of their profession (2009 p. 135). Metalworking took place in many different contexts, of which many were likely mundane. The fact that the amulet rings at Borg were most likely produced on-site, however, as well as the location of the smithies, would seem to involve the metal production on the farm in a wider ritual context which encompassed the entire use-life of these objects, from manufacture to deposition. Again, the localisation of the smithies inside the ritual zone does not appear to be accidental.

Borg and the written sources – *hǫrgr hátimbraðr*?

Discussing the house itself, Nielsen proposes, with reference to the *Vǫluspá*, that it should be interpreted as a *hǫrgr* (Nielsen 2006 p. 243). This identification of wooden cult buildings as *hǫrgr* supported by reference to the Poetic *Edda* (i.e. Larsson 2006 pp. 248-250) follows a practice established by Olaf Olsen in his 1966 thesis *Hørg, hov og kirke* (p. 110). This argument will be discussed in Chapter 3, but we may note that the texts which identify the *hǫrgr* explicitly or implicitly as a timbered structure are greatly outnumbered by the sources which refer to such buildings as *hof*, and some scholars today are more inclined to identify wooden structures as *hof* and stone constructions as *hǫrgr* (e.g. Sundqvist 2016 p. 104).

Additionally, in this context there is also a stone standing upright and surrounded by depositions of amulet rings, as well as a yard paved with fire-cracked stones, the same material used in the building of other proposed *hǫrgrar*. This constellation of elements is an equally likely candidate for a *hǫrgr*, just as the little building might be termed a *hof*. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, however, we cannot be wholly certain as to the reference of these terms, and it is not clear that their use as descriptive labels necessarily clarifies our discussion.

Summary

On an Iron Age farm at Borg, Sweden, archaeologists uncovered the remains of a probable cult house surrounded by smithies in a paved yard. The deposition of nearly 100 amulet rings by a rock and the systematic deposition of animal bones indicate ritual activities beginning around the early eighth century and continuing until the abandonment of the farm around the

end of the tenth. The construction method of the houses in the yard differs from that of the main dwelling house, suggesting that these buildings were conceptualised as belonging to a fundamentally different category. Their location made them easily accessible and central to the farm, but care was nevertheless taken to create a physical boundary by means of trenches between the dwelling and ritual zones – one which was not intended primarily to limit access, but to signal separation. Inside the house, which was divided into two rooms, was a foundation which might be viewed as a *stallr*.

The site layout at Borg is different from the ones investigated so far, with its dividing trenches and its unusual paved yard. On a more general level, however, we may still speak of a chieftain's farm with an intentionally demarcated ritual space, distinct from but clearly connected with the dwelling houses and containing a building with cultic functions.

Ranheim, Sør-Trøndelag, Norway

The final site to be discussed in this thesis is also the most recently discovered, and so far, the only one of its kind in Norway. Ranheim lies by the coast of the Trondheim fjord, about 9 km from Trondheim. An inspection survey in connection with the construction of new housing revealed what appeared to be a solitary cairn, and the area was excavated in 2010.

Construction has since gone ahead, and as such the site is no longer available to us.

Chronology and layout

The complex excavated at Ranheim consisted of the remains of a house, a stone heap, and the remains of a smaller wooden structure, as well as two stone walls which may have once marked a processional way. There appears to have been only one long phase of occupation. Compared with the other sites under discussion, the finds at Ranheim were few and humble. There were no prestige items nor gold-foil figures found (Rønne 2011 p. 80).

The first structure to be excavated was an almost circular heap of stone, measuring some 15 metres in diameter and just under 1 metre high. In terms of chronology, this was by far the most complex structure on the site. Thanks to a thick layer of topsoil and plough soil, the stone heap had not been disturbed by later ploughing. Beneath the topsoil was a layer of clay and cobbles, covering the cairn proper. Spread over the surface of the cairn were significant quantities of white quartz. Two concentric circles of hewn stones formed the outer border. On the surface of the cairn, two beads were found which could be dated to 400-1000 AD. Also near the surface were a concentration of burnt bones dating to 400-380 BC and another bead from the early centuries AD. It has been suggested that these represent depositions (Rønne 2011 p. 83).

At the centre of the stone pile were traces of a wooden crate which had been filled with burnt bone fragments and fire-cracked stones. Among the bone fragments were found human teeth and a piece of a cranium. The remains, which were dated to the early 4th century BC, were those of an adult and a child. Below this were found the traces of yet another cremation, suggesting that the crate and the cairn which was built over it had been placed on top of an earlier cremation grave from the 5th to 8th century BC (Rønne 2011 p. 84).

Some ways northeast of the cairn had stood a small wooden structure, perhaps a building or a platform, which had had four corner posts spaced 2,5 metres apart and supported by stone packing. Its function is not clear. Immediately northeast of this was a small, rectangular building, measuring 5,3 by 4,5 metres and with a southwest-northeast orientation. The walls of the small building were supported by twelve posts, evenly spaced 1,8 metres apart and

supported by stone packing. Based on radiocarbon dating of charcoal from a post-hole, it was determined that the building was likely torn down sometime between 895 and 995 AD – assuming that the charcoal had found its way into the post-hole during demolition (Rønne 2011 p. 88).

Inside the house were holes for an additional four posts, whose function is unclear. It is unlikely that further posts were needed to support the roof, especially as archaeologists believe that the house was stave-built. Additionally, these posts were not as thick nor dug as deeply into the ground as the others. It has been suggested that they may have supported idols (Rønne 2011 p. 85). The sole other feature inside the house was a stone lodged deeply into the ground, whose flat surface protruded into the floor of the house approximately in the centre of the room.

To the west of the house were the remnants of two stone walls, which the excavating archaeologists believed to be traces of a processional way. Radiocarbon dating of charcoal found beneath the stones indicated that the putative processional way cannot be older than approximately 400 AD (Rønne 2011 p. 87). The size and weight of the stones indicate that some considerable amount of manpower would have been involved in its construction.

The elements of the complex were all oriented along a southwest-northeast line, with the potential processional way coming from the west and leading towards the cult house and the smaller wooden structure. The oldest structure on the site is the cairn, followed most likely by the two rows of stones, and lastly the house. If the beads found in the cairn truly signal depositions from as early as the first centuries AD, the continuity of the site at Ranheim is rivalled only by the ceremonial building at Uppåkra. It need not, however, have been in continuous use since the 6th century BC, as suggested by Rønne (2011 p. 88). Between the last burials in the cairn in the early 4th century BC and the deposition of the oldest bead sometime after 1AD, there might logically be a gap of as much as four hundred years. At the end of the site's use-life, in the late 10th century AD, the house was dismantled and its posts pulled up. The cairn and the two stone walls were covered with soil. This would appear to indicate a careful and deliberate discontinuation, and there were no signs of violence.

The cultic reading

The excavating archaeologists interpreted the complex at Ranheim as cultic, going so far as to state that in their judgement they had uncovered a *vé*, containing a *hof* and a *høgr* (Rønne 2011 p. 87). As we have already seen, the site has features which have no obvious parallel in

the archaeology of regular farmsteads. The house at Ranheim is obviously no dwelling house, and as it does not appear to be attached to a farm it can hardly be intended for storage, nor does it have features associated with manufacture houses. Its unusual construction method also defies any attempt at such interpretations. The posts inside it and the smaller house or possibly platform outside it are equally puzzling, and a cultic reading would appear the most reasonable. The inner posts may have a parallel in the ceremonial building at Uppåkra, which would appear to strengthen the interpretation that they are in some fashion connected with the special functions of the house – these functions likely being cultic.

The fact that the site apparently went out of use and was then subject to a formal act of closure towards the end of the 10th century is interesting in this connection. Closing rituals need not in and of themselves indicate a cultic structure, but the dating puts this at a time when the conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity was at least underway, if yet far from complete.

The interpretation of the cairn at Ranheim as an ancient *høgr* is perhaps problematic. Judging by the cremation burials at its centre, it appears to have originally been a burial cairn. Rønne theorises that as the origin of the *høgr* was a burial, the rituals surrounding it likely centred on ancestor worship. There are signs of later ritual activities involving the cairn – the potential depositions on its surface, the construction of a ritual complex directly adjacent to it, and the fact that it was subject to a deliberate act of closure. But none of these necessitate interpreting it as a *høgr*. However, as will be noted in the next section, this site conforms to an organisational pattern which we also find at several other sites with cult buildings, many of which contain similar heaps of fire-cracked stones.

Ranheim and the written sources – a *hof*, a *høgr* and a *vé*?

The finds at Ranheim have been connected with Old Norse written sources, and these have provided the interpretive framework for the site's general layout and individual elements. The stave-built house and the cairn were interpreted respectively as a *hof* and a *høgr* on the basis of *Hyndluljóð* and *Völuspá*. Similarly, the site as a whole was interpreted as a *vé*. Due to the way the site at Ranheim was closed up towards the end of its chronology, the excavating archaeologists concluded, following the Icelandic saga tradition and *Landnámabók*, that the pagan inhabitants at Ranheim had likely departed for Iceland in the 10th century due to pressure from the king and had brought the timber from the *hof* with them (Rønne 2011 p. 89). These texts are not unproblematic as sources to pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia, and

any interpretation of material culture based on them must take into account the complications of source criticism involved in using them.

One of the most interesting aspects of the house at Ranheim are its interior posts, and especially their potential connection with idols. Idols carved in the likeness of human figures are mentioned in several sources (e.g. Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, and *Njáls saga*). In *Eyrbyggja saga* we also find a reference to a post (*súla*) being carved in the likeness of Þórr. These will be discussed in Chapter 3. There is also the possibility that the four post-holes outside the house at Ranheim represent a platform, which places it in connection with the debate about the nature and functions of the mysterious *stallr* from the sagas and skaldic poetry.

Summary

Various elements of the complex at Ranheim were in use from the 7th century BC until the 10th century AD. A break in continuity may have occurred between the 4th century BC and the first century AD. The stave-built house was likely constructed sometime before the 10th century. Inside the house were four posts of unknown function and a stone slab. The unusual construction method of the house and its relation to the other constructions on the site indicate a cultic function. The presence of the smaller building or platform directly outside the house strengthens this impression. West of these wooden constructions were two low walls which may have once been a processional way. The oldest element on the site was a large circular cairn, which was used for burials between the 7th and 4th centuries BC and which may have functioned as an element in the cultic activities on the site.

The discontinuation of the site appears to have been deliberate and non-violent. The house was dismantled and its posts pulled up, and the stone constructions on the site were covered with soil. It is possible that this discontinuation happened in connection with the Conversion or that the inhabitants relocated.

Sites with cult buildings: comparison and analysis

The selection of case studies presented above is, of course, small. Though I will attempt a degree of representativity through comparison with other sites where relevant, it must be kept in mind that any general tendencies or commonalities – or exceptions from these – which are pointed out here will necessarily be partial. It is nevertheless possible to indicate some recurring features and to make a few tentative generalisations, which will aid the eventual discussion of the written sources in light of the archaeological record.

Site layout and constituent elements

The sites under discussion are multifunctional complexes or magnate farms, comprising several elements. Though they vary greatly in many respects, some generalisations can be made, as certain elements recur at most sites, as do some spatial relations. For instance, on sites where remains of both hall and cult building are preserved, the cult area is often located to the west of the hall. This applies to Tissø, Järrestad, and Uppåkra in this analysis, as well as Gudme (Jørgensen 2009 p. 333). This constellation of dwelling and/or representational space and cultic area constitutes the centre of these magnate farms.

Further, we may note that there is often a conscious demarcation of the ritual area as separate from the rest of the farm, despite this area being centrally located. At Tissø and Järrestad, this demarcation takes the shape of nearly identical palisade structures. At Borg, it is represented by trenches filled with stone, while the borders of cultic area are outlined by a pavement. There is some evidence that the house at Uppåkra may also have been fenced in, but it is not conclusive. At Ranheim, no dwelling house has been found, and it is thus possible that this cultic area does not belong to a magnate farm.

Each site which has been analysed also featured either a heap of stones or other stone structure with ritual activities related to it. These are all associated with fire-cracked stones. At Ranheim, we find a circular stone heap; at Uppåkra, there was a stone pavement plus a pit filled with fire-cracked stones and animal bone; there is the large paved yard with an elevated rock associated with depositions at Borg, and heaps of fire-cracked stones at Tissø. It is worth mentioning that such stone heaps have also been found at Lejre (Jørgensen 2009 p. 344). Here, some caution is necessary. This is a broad category – broad enough to potentially encompass structures which belonged to functionally different categories when they were in use. As we are not yet able to satisfactorily categorise these however, and as living religion tends to be varied and in some measure defy rigid classification, no attempts at a more detailed division will be made here.

Though it does not appear to have been a general feature, it is possible that some pre-Christian cult sites also included a processional way as an element in the cultic practices on the site. This possibility is suggested by the twin rows of stones found at the complex at Ranheim. It has also been tentatively suggested that processions may have taken place across the yard at Tissø, based on the complicated access pattern of the cult house in its earliest phase, which appears to have been deliberate.

Finally, several sites show indications of metalwork located close to or inside the cult area and indications that metalwork or the products thereof played a role in the rituals enacted on the site. With regard to the connection between metalworking and cult, I have argued that such assumptions should be made cautiously, as mundane metalworking also occurred. One might expect a magnate farm, a multifunctional site directly related to the élite sphere with its emphasis on display and gift giving, to contain a manufacture area. In some cases, however, as at Borg, the metal production does appear to have served ritual functions.

Chronology

Listed in order from the earliest to the latest, the approximate lifespans of the sites under analysis are as follows:

1. Uppåkra: 200 – 800*
2. Ranheim: 400** – 950
3. Järrestad: 550 – 1050
4. Borg: 650 – 1000
5. Tissø: 700 – 1050

Note: The site at Uppåkra may have been in use throughout the Viking Age if the successor to the stave-house served similar functions, but this is difficult to determine. The chronology for Ranheim proposed here attempts to account for the possibility of a break in continuity between the activities on the site in the 4th century BC and those of the 5th century AD. As a starting point for the complex I have chosen the proposed construction date for the two stone rows, which roughly coincides with the 4th century depositions in the cairn.

The end dates for most sites, with the possible exception of Uppåkra, fall in the late 10th and early 11th centuries. Again, with the exception of Uppåkra and possibly Ranheim, they were all established in the 5th through 7th centuries. Similar chronologies are displayed by other similar complexes, such as Lejre (5th – late 10th century) (Christensen 2008 pp. 121-123). Most of these foundation dates thus agree with the theory proposed by Charlotte Fabech (1994 pp. 169-171) that the 6th century saw an increased stratification and consolidation of power in fewer hands, which allowed the élite to, in a sense, institutionalise the cult –

meaning that where the cult had previously been practiced at communally accessible locations like lakes, groves and outdoor shrines, it now moved indoors. It is here, she proposes, and not in the decades around AD 1000, that we find the biggest discontinuity in religious practice (Fabech 1994 p. 174). Faced with a pattern of abandonment of great regional complexes in the 10th and 11th centuries, however, there may be good reasons for regarding the introduction of Christianity as equally disruptive to the established order. The case of Uppåkra also makes clear that ‘institutionalised’ cult was already in existence in some regions long before the 6th century.

The hall and the cult house

It has been assumed in this thesis that the close spatial relation between the cult building and the hall is a physical expression of a conceptual connection between these two structures. That this closeness only applies to the hall can be seen more clearly by looking to the Järrestad complex, where a separate dwelling house has been discovered – a good 50 m. from the hall and the cult building. In architectural terms, the strategies chosen for the expression of this connection vary. It may be, as at Borg, simple proximity. It may be through allowing one building to serve both functions, as may have been done at Uppåkra. Or it may be through more elaborate means, as at Tissø and Järrestad, where hall and cult area were joined together in virtually identical fashion. Integrating the palisade surrounding the cult building with the walls of the hall effectively transformed the two structures into one architectural unit, while maintaining their distinctive material characteristics. A potential connection between the cultic area and the high seat in the hall is also expressed at Järrestad in Phase 2, when the eastern wall of the palisade intersected with the hall at exactly the spot where the high seat was located. We will have cause to discuss the relationship between the high seat and the cult house in Chapter 3.

The cult house: building techniques and house types

In every instance where both a hall and/or dwelling house and a cult building could be clearly observed, the two structures were built according to different methods. At Tissø, the hall was stave-built while the cult building was not; at Järrestad, this was also the case, and at Borg, the cult buildings were built on sills, while the dwelling house was not. At Ranheim, a dwelling house could not be documented, whereas the cult house was stave-built. Stave construction was also used for the cult house at Uppåkra, while the dwelling house was poorly preserved but appears to have been an ordinary longhouse.

The building styles chosen for cult buildings also appear to have been designed to set them apart. We have observed that several such houses featured unusually sturdy wall constructions, either due to an overabundance of posts or posts of an unusual size. This was the case at Uppåkra, at Ranheim, and in the hall building at Tissø. A similar house has also been found at Lejre. It was aligned in parallel with the hall, and its roof-bearing posts appear to have been of the same size as the ones in the hall (Christensen 2010 pp. 249-253). It is further clear that stave technique is a recurring feature at complexes associated with regional cult centres. In some cases (Uppåkra and Ranheim), it is the cult building which is stave-built, and in some cases (Tissø and Järrestad), it is the hall. The technique is not associated with ordinary dwelling houses in any of the sites under study – we will recall that the hall at Tissø is believed to have had primarily representative functions and was likely not a permanent residence, and that the hall at Järrestad may have existed alongside a separate dwelling house.

The idea that the architectural precursors of the stave churches are to be found in the pre-Christian cult buildings is an old one, which was first proposed by Lorenz Dietrichson in 1884 and hotly debated in the early 20th century (for an overview, see e.g. Olsen 1966 p. 209-212). More recently, architectural connections have been suggested between the cult buildings at Ranheim and Uppåkra and stave churches (Andrén 2002 pp. 301-302; Larssen and Lenntorp 2004 pp. 35-37; Rønne 2011 p. 85). While the discoveries of the past three decades no doubt justify a reopening of this debate, the picture would appear to be somewhat more complex than a simple one-to-one correspondence between “temple and church”, as we now know that halls, too, could be stave-built. That there is a link between this architectural expression and cult, however, does not appear implausible.

The cult house: internal and external features

With regard to the inventory of the Viking Age cult house, the archaeological record presented here does not present any general pattern, but we may make a few observations. The small cult house at Ranheim (4,5 x 5,3 m) contained, in addition to its twelve outer posts, two pairs of inner posts of uncertain function. A similar group of internal posts were found in the house at Uppåkra (13,5 x 6 m). It is possible that these posts were intended as roof supports, but Rønne (2011 p. 85) argues that in a stave construction, the walls and corner posts should be sufficient to carry the roof. At Ranheim, furthermore, the square outlined by these posts was not centred, but shifted towards the edge of the room. If these internal posts were not needed for roof support, Rønne argues, they may have supported idols. While there is nothing intrinsically about the posts themselves which suggests such a function, and this is

an inference based on absence – in this case the absence of any real need for an additional four posts – such a possibility is intriguing in light of the great concentration of gold-foil figures around these posts in the house at Uppåkra, and the possibility that the gold was used to decorate the posts.

A few of the houses were also associated with what we may term foundations, platforms, and plinths. Into this category we may admit the little stone foundation at the end of the passageway in the house at Borg; the wooden structure outside the cult house at Ranheim, which may represent a scaffolding or raised platform; and potentially also the stone slab naturally embedded in the floor at Ranheim, though in this case we cannot rule out coincidence. The obvious question, again, is whether we are dealing here with a base for an idol. Such bases or platforms appear in several saga texts and have sometimes been connected with the word *stallr*, which appears in early law texts and in the skaldic poetry of the Viking Age, as well as in prose texts. This word thus appears to have genuinely pre-Christian origins, but its original referent is, as with the other Old Norse cultic terms, unclear, and there has been some debate as to whether it should be regarded as an outdoor platform or table for sacrifices, an altar for sacred objects, or a base for idols. This will be discussed further in Chapter 3, but the discovery of such smaller structures at pre-Christian cult sites indicates that this feature likely did exist.

Finds at cult sites

A find category commonly associated with buildings in which rituals took place (and commonly taken to *signify* that rituals took place there) are the gold foil figures, or *gullgubber*. The exact relations between gold foils and ritual cannot be deduced from this small selection of case studies, but we may observe that among the sites under discussion here, gold foils were attested at two. In both cases, the finds indicate that such figures were likely produced on the farm. At Järrestad archaeologists uncovered a die for casting gold foils, and at Uppåkra a staggering 122 foils cast from over fifty different dies were found inside the cult house, while crucibles containing traces of gold were found in the nearby manufacture area.

At every site with the exception of Ranheim we see depositions in connection with the cult building itself or immediately surrounding it. In some cases, these are probably depositions made in connection with construction or demolition and should thus be regarded as expressions of building cult (*huskult*). While not direct evidence that the structure was associated with religious worship, they are an indicator that the building was accorded

particular significance and the phases of its life were marked through ritual (Carlie 2006 p. 209).

The finds from these cult houses and their immediate surroundings are heterogeneous and there are no obvious commonalities. Only one item – an iron ring – occurs at more than one site. It may be that the rituals performed and the depositions made varied according to local practice or the needs of the community. In each case, however, the depositions were of an unusual character, and as material traces of past practice they may permit us to glimpse some of the activities which took place at such places. The depositions of animal bones at Uppåkra and Borg speak clearly of animal sacrifice; depositions of iron slag and locally forged amulets at Järrestad and Borg relate metalwork and its products to the ritual sphere; and at Tissø and Uppåkra the depositions of intentionally destroyed weapons have been seen as indications of a warrior ideology (Helgesson 2004 p. 223).

Concluding remarks – a wider perspective

Taken as a whole, the general impression afforded by these Scandinavian cult sites is not one of uniformity, but one of variety (Jørgensen 2009 p. 331). This is perhaps not surprising – the religion of pre-Christian Scandinavia was not a dogmatic religion; rather, it was a system of practice, subject to chronological and geographical variation (Andrén 2006 pp. 12-14).

Though unequivocal sources to pre-Christian religious practice are scarce, this same variation is clearly attested in what is perhaps the most valuable archaeological source to past practice which we possess, namely pre-Christian burials. Neil Price has argued that although the archaeological record displays great and sometimes surprising variation even within regions and single farms, it is nevertheless variation across specific parameters (2008 pp. 257-259).

The same argument might be applied to the differing layouts and features of cult sites.

These large multifunctional complexes with attached cult houses on their property are widely regarded as expressions of the ambitions of rulers to exert their influence over a whole region and to control central functions like trade and cult. Their ordering no doubt reflected the needs of the local community and of the rulers on whose property they were located. The variation between the different cult house/hall constellations is here framed in terms of different architectural strategies, the choice of which was at the discretion of the individual ruler or dynasty, but which all express the same thing: the joining of the sacred sphere with that of the élite. This is not to say, however, that rituals could not be practiced outside the central places: the ‘institutionalisation’ of cult in pre-Christian Scandinavia was not a Church-like monopoly. Rather, it seems probable that we may speak of a partial centralisation, whereby the great

sacrificial feasts took place on the magnate farms at certain times of the year, while smaller rituals, perhaps directed at other, minor powers, took place on ordinary farms (Andrén 2002 p. 332).

Though there is variation, what this review tells us is that in the Viking Age and the centuries preceding it, some farms did have cult buildings which greatly resembled the *hof* of the saga. Further, many of these farms also had other cultic structures associated with them which call to mind concepts like idols, *stallr* and *høgrgr*. The textual analysis will focus on motifs such as these, specifically the *hof*, the *høgrgr*, the ring, the idol, *stafr* and *stallr*, and the high seat posts. As we shall see, however, much of the religious life of these localities is not reflected in the written sources – most notably, we know little of the exact character of the rituals performed there. Those aspects of pre-Christian practice or belief which may be reflected in later texts are often preserved as mere glimpses, half-obscured through the passage of time or coloured by Christian notions.

Chapter 2: Written sources

This chapter will present the written sources which will form the foundation for our analysis. Some are sagas, some are laws, and one is a runic text. I will address some previous arguments in the scholarly debate on the reliability of these texts as historical sources. Many of these arguments are concerned with the original authors' sources and the degree to which they employed borrowed material versus native traditions in the production of the text. It will be argued that some previous analyses of the texts have perhaps applied their criteria too strictly and that the testimonies of the Norse sources are in fact supported on certain points by archaeology.

Straddling the divide between artefact and text: the rune ring from Forsa

Due to the primarily oral nature of Scandinavian society prior to the Conversion, the vast majority of descriptive sources which might tell us anything about pre-Christian cult are not contemporary. Rather, they are written two or three centuries after the demise of the old religion. For this reason, the testimony provided by the few contemporary sources we do possess becomes all the more important. One such contemporary written source, it will be argued, is the inscription on the Forsa rune ring, designated Hälsingland 7 or HS7.

The iron ring, which measures 43 cm in diameter and bears an inscription containing nearly 250 runes, hung for centuries on the door of the parish church of Forsa in the province of Hälsingland in northern Sweden. The iron ring is decorated with three evenly spaced knobs of which two have tightly coiled wire spirals attached, and a cramp for attaching the ring to a door, which appears to be a later addition (Brink 1996 p. 40). The bottom (or top) of the ring is flattened and decorated with a small charm that has been variously interpreted as a cross and a Þórr's hammer (Eriksen 2015 p. 76). A description of the ring exists from as early as 1599, and around the year 1700, its inscription was translated and published by Olof Celsius. Despite contributions by numerous scholars, many parts of the text remain obscure (Källström 2010 p. 28; Brink 1996 pp. 36-38). The currently accepted reading of the runes is as follows:

: uksatuiskilanaukauratuąstafatfurstalaki :

uksatuąaukaurafiurataþrulaki :

: inatþriþialakiuksafiuraukauratastaf :

aukaltaikuiuarRifanhafskakiritfuriR

: suapliuþiRakuatliuþritisuauasintfuraukhalkat :

inþaRkirþusikþitanunrątarstapum :

: aukufakRahiurtstapum :

inuibiurnfapi :

(Brink 1996 p. 28)

Because the inscription does not demarcate word boundaries, the analysis of the text has occasioned much debate. Among the most recent interpretations is Stefan Brink's:

*Oxa at vis gil[d]an ok aura tvá staf at fyrsta lagi,
oxa tvá ok aura fjóra at oðru lagi,
en at þriðja lagi oxa fjóra ok aura átta staf,
ok allt eigu í verr, ef hann hafsk ekki rétt fyrir,
sváð lýðir eigu at lýðrétti, svá var innt fyrr ok helgat.
En þeir gerðu sik þetta, Qnundr á Társtøðum ok Ófeigr á Hjortstøðum.
En Vébjorn fáði.*

(Brink 1996 p. 39. Brink's text has here been rendered into normalised West Norse.)

One ox and two *aura* [in fine] [to?] *staf*, [or] *aura staf* [in fine] for the restoration of a cult site (*vi*) in a valid state for the first time; two oxen and four *aura* for the second time; but for the third time four oxen and eight *aura*; and all property in suspension, if he doesn't make right. That, the people are entitled to demand, according to the law of the people that was decreed and ratified before.

But they made [the ring, the statement?], Anund from Tåsta and Ofeg from Hjortsta.
But Vibjörn carved.

(Brink 2008a p. 28)

The age of the inscription

Since the Forsa inscription was published by Sophus Bugge in 1877, it has been widely regarded as the earliest known legal document from Scandinavia. Bugge interpreted the inscription as describing church law. This reading was based on the presence of two words. The first was **lirþir**, normalised Old Norse *lærðir* (m. pl.) – “the book-learned,” i.e., men of the Church. The second was **staf**, normalised Old Norse *stafr* (m.), which Bugge read as a dative form *stafi* with the inflectional ending omitted. This interpretation was based on expressions such as *til biskops stafs ok stols* in medieval laws, whose meaning was “to the Bishop(’s office)” (Brink 1996 p. 31). Early scholarship on the rune ring acknowledged the obvious conflict between the linguistic and runological aspects of the inscription – which

would place it unequivocally in the Viking Age – and its apparently medieval content. Due to its ostensibly Christian vocabulary, however, the ring was assumed to have a medieval origin (Brink 1996 pp. 31-33). Regarding the offense for which the fines were to be paid, suggestions have included failure to keep mass, failure to pay tithes, and violation of the sanctity of the church (Ruthström 1990 p. 43).

Such interpretations largely prevailed until 1979, when Aslak Liestøl undertook a re-examination of the inscription. Liestøl proposed a reinterpretation of one ambiguous rune, with the result that the word **lirþir** became **liuþir**, normalised Old Norse *lyðr*; ‘people’. This drastically changed the reading of the text: with the most overt reference to Christian learning eliminated, there was no longer any compelling argument for placing the inscription in a post-Conversion context, and scholars following Liestøl have argued instead that it should be regarded on linguistic and runological grounds as belonging to the 9th or 10th century.

Presently, there is wide agreement that the Forsa inscription cannot be medieval (Källström 2010 p. 228). Because this position remains contested, however (see e.g. Löfving 2010), it is worth briefly summarising the most important arguments. The inscription is written in a variation on the short-twig runic row, common to the 9th and 10th centuries. Pure short-twig inscriptions do not appear to have been written after this time, and the variant seen on the ring is attested only in two other inscriptions, which makes it unlikely that an archaising scholar in the 12th or 13th century would have been able to imitate it (Källström 2010 p. 230).

Comparing the runic orthography of the Forsa inscription with other, dateable inscriptions from the Viking Age, runologist Magnus Källström has argued that the Forsa rune carver’s usage of the **R** and **o** runes allow the inscription to be dated to the 10th century.

Additionally, scholars have pointed to the presence of forms like *sváð* and *fáði*, which appear on older rune stones like the Rök stone, but are not attested in the Swedish language of the Middle Ages (*sváð* appears in later texts as *svát*, while the verb *fá* appears to have died out) (Källström 2010 p. 229). Stefan Brink has thoroughly refuted the argument that these archaisms could be attributed to the linguistically backward nature of the province (1996 pp. 33-35).

The contents of the inscription: a pre-Christian cult site?

Many scholars now consider the Forsa ring to be a Viking Age legal document. As such, it represents the oldest existing Scandinavian law text and the only existing law text preserved from the pre-Christian era. Stefan Brink has proposed that the ring may have originally

belonged to the regional *þing* site at Hög, where it served as an oath-ring (1996 pp. 36; 42). Rather than regulating tithes, he has argued that the Forsa inscription in fact pertains to the upkeep of a pre-Christian cult site. This interpretation of the text was originally suggested by Bo Ruthström, who found it implausible that a law text which set out escalating punishments for a given offense should omit to specify the offense. Recognising that the prevailing reading of the beginning of the inscription was problematic, he proposed a new word division for this section and argued that the text refers to the upkeep of a fence or enclosure around a sanctuary, a *vé* (Old Swedish *vi*) (Ruthström 1990 pp. 44-46).

Following Bugge, earlier scholars like Gerhard Hafström had generally read **uksa tuiskilan** – *oxa tvisgil[d]an*. Ruthström argued that it might instead be read *uks[a] at vis kil[t]an*; in normalised Old Norse *oxa at vis gil[d]an* – “one ox for the restoration of the *vi*” (*ibid.*). In addition to an omitted **t** rune, the new reading assumed that the rune carver had doubled another **a** rune. With these changes, Ruthström’s new interpretation of the law text reads,

*Oxa at vis gil[d]an ok aura tvá staf at fyrsta lagi,
oxa tvá ok aura fjóra at þöru lagi,
en at þriðja lagi oxa fjóra ok aura átta staf,
ok allt eigu í verr, ef hann hafsk ekki rétt fyrir,
sváð lyðir eigu at lyðrétti, svá var innt fyrr ok helgat.*

*En oxen och två örar (i böter) för återställande av (stängsel kring) vi i lagenligt skick
för varje stav första gången den fallit;
två oxar och fyra örar (för varje stav) andra gången den fallit;
men för tredje gången fyra oxar och åtta örar;
och all egendom i kvarstad, om han icke gör rätt för sig.
Det som folket (d.v.s. kultsamfälligheten) äger kräva enligt allmän lag, det blev förr
stadgat och stadfäst.*

(Ruthström 1990 p. 54)

One argument immediately in favour of such a reading is that the alternative reading *oxa tvisgildan* presupposed the existence in the local dialect of a prefix *tvis-* (“two”) which is not attested in any other Norse text, nor in any Nordic language, but can instead be found in Gothic. This, like other ‘old-fashioned’ aspects of the text, was generally attributed to the linguistically conservative nature of the region (Ruthström 1990 p. 44; Brink 1996 pp. 33-34).

Like the previously prevailing reading, Ruthström’s interpretation presupposes the omission of an expected **t**-rune in **kil[t]an**. From a phonological perspective, the rune carver at Forsa is fairly consistent. Aside from the <i> in *eigu*, which appears to have been left off by mistake (**suapliuþiRaku**), he omits runes where two identical sounds occur at a word boundary.

Word-final, unstressed <a> is omitted in several places, for instance in **aurafiurat**, *aura ffor[a] at*, and he has omitted the <h> in *han*, with *ef han hafsk* being rendered **ifanhafsk**. This can likely also be explained by phonological assimilation. The phonological assimilation by which <ld> became <ll> belongs to a later linguistic stage, and as such a **t** rune is expected (Ruthström 1990 p. 49). From a runological point of view, however, it is easy to see how such an omission could have occurred: in the particular variant of the short-twig alphabet used on the Forsa ring, all bi-staves are placed on the right. Therefore, the **t** and **l** runes look identical, and one of them might have been omitted through haplography.

Perhaps more problematic is the fact that Ruthström's reading proposes a verbal noun *gildan* formed from the weak verb *gilda* (in the sense “återställa i lagligt skick”), with a derivational suffix *-an* (Ruthström 1990 pp. 47; 52). Though the formation of verbal nouns in *-an* from weak verbs is unproblematic, this formation generally applies to verbs of the first weak conjugation, to which *gilda* does not belong (Cleasby & Vigfusson 1874 p. xxxi). Further, in the phrase *at vis gildan*, the preposition *at* preceding *gildan* ought properly to have resulted in the oblique form *gildun*, though Ruthström notes that the predominance of U umlaut is stronger in the west Norse languages and that our knowledge of Viking Age Old Swedish is limited (1990 p. 48).

The part of Ruthström's argument which invites the closest scrutiny is his reading of *staf*. Taking the accusative form at face value, he reads *staf* as the thing for which payment is exacted rather than the thing to which it is paid. Thereby he avoids the somewhat *ad hoc* explanation that it is a dative form *stafi* which throughout the inscription is written without its final *-i*. In order to explain such a reading of the accusative, Ruthström proposes an adverbial accusative along the lines of modern Swedish formations like “*fem kronor påsen*”. Ruthström states that he regards this construction as “*syntaktiskt likvärdig med fyrir staf hvarn*,” but makes no attempt to justify projecting a modern construction back into Old Swedish (1990 p. 49).

In support of his reading of the Forsa inscription as pertaining to the staves in a fence, Ruthström presents several lexical and structural parallels to the Forsa text in Swedish law texts from the Middle Ages as well as in *Gulabingslög* which pertain to the upkeep of fences around churchyards. Most notable is their use of the verb *gilda* or the adjective *gildr* and the escalating fines for neglect, the degree of which is measured by the length of fence which has fallen (Ruthström 1990 pp. 50-52). However, each law quoted by Ruthström contains some form of the word *hverr*, and none of them display a syntax like the one he proposes. The lack

of compelling arguments in favour of an adverbial accusative casts doubt upon this part of Ruthström's interpretation.

Stefan Brink offers both the older reading “[in fine] [to?] *staf*” and “*aura staf* [in fine]” – reading *staf* either as the recipient of the payment, or as part of the payment itself (2008 p. 28). The latter would seem to give a reading *aura tvá staf* = “staff weighing two *aurar*”, but if this were the case one would expect the genitive *tveggja*, or even a form of the word *tvíeyringr*. He proposes that *staf* may refer to a pre-Christian sacred object, perhaps of the kind referred to in the *Eiðsifapingslög* ban on keeping *staf eða stalla. vit eða blot* (Keyser & Munch 1846 p. 383). Other possibilities are a local ruler's symbol of power, or the staves connected by *véþond* which hedged about a cultic and/or *þing* site (Brink 1996 pp. 36-37). Finally, there are paragraphs in *Gulapingslög* where *staf* refers to a post in a building. The section which regulates the building of boat houses imposes fines for missing *stafir*¹, while the *þolkr* on Christianity in the same law contains provisions for when a church is so derelict that the corner posts (*hornstafir*) fall². Ultimately, however, it is unclear what kind of object *staf* could refer to, and none of the proposed readings are able to present a wholly satisfactory syntax.

The ring and its context

Although an explicit textual reference to a *vi* cannot be conclusively proven, there are reasons to believe that the Forsa ring might nevertheless have belonged in a cultic context. The dating of the inscription on runological and linguistic grounds, as well as the ring's decoration, speak against placing the object and its inscription in a medieval Christian context. Secondly, though it is not yet clear what the Forsa law text was intended to protect, it appears to have been something which was in communal use and for which the *lyðir* – likely the local community – could demand reparations according to local law.

Lastly, as we have seen, similar door handles have been found at two probable cult buildings located at magnate farms; sites which would have been unquestionably important in their region and which likely fit the criteria outlined above. Recent scholarship has suggested that wealthy men in pre-Christian Scandinavia built and maintained cult houses and other cultic structures on their own land, and that the custom of privately-owned churches in the early

¹ *En þeim liggja við 3 aurar við staf hvern ok svá fyrir staflægju hverja* (“And they [should] pay 3 *aurar* for every stave”) (Keyser and Munch 1846 I p. 101).

² *En ef su kirkia brotnar oc falla hornstaver. þa eigum vér timbri a tuft at koma firi .xii. manaðr* (“And if the church collapses and the corner posts fall, we have a duty to bring timber to the place within twelve months”) (Keyser and Munch 1846 I p. 7).

days of the Church was a continuation of this practice (Fabech 1991 p. 174). Several written sources also attest to the presence of rings in legal and religious contexts.

The Forsa ring therefore raises the possibility that the paragraphs in the early Christian laws regulating church upkeep in fact had their origin in older laws. Whether the ring was originally a door ring or an oath ring, and whether it originally belonged at a *þing* or a cult site, is not crucial. We are once again reminded of the close connection between secular and religious power, with secular leaders responsible for facilitating communal cult in the local community. At the point where these two spheres meet, we find the crucial mediating element – the ring. As we have seen in previous chapters, both written sources and material culture attest to a close connection between rings and places of power like halls, *hof* and *þing* sites. This theme will be further developed in the thematic analysis in Chapter 3.

Law Texts

Another valuable category of written sources is early medieval Scandinavian law texts, many of which contain provisions relating to religious practice. Some of these are closer in time to the Viking Age than the sagas and other narrative sources, as laws were among the earliest texts to be put into writing in the vernacular. Many also contain textual material which is older than their earliest written manifestation (Brink 2017 pp. 326-328). The text of *Gulabingslög* may have been committed to parchment as in the reign of Óláfr kyrri, in the second half of the 11th century. The Swedish provincial laws were written down in the 13th century (Robberstad 1976 pp. 155-157). Though historical works like *Historia de antiquitate regum Norvagiensium* and *Heimskringla* claim that both St. Óláfr and Magnús góði Ólafsson had laws written down before 1050, many scholars are inclined to place the writing of the Norwegian laws in the 12th century (Jørgensen 2013 p. 264).

A legal code is not a literary work and is not written with an eye to narrative or thematic effect. This, to the historian, is the major advantage of the early Scandinavian laws over literary genres like the saga. We may assume that they reflect the practical concerns of the legislating authorities at the time when they were written down, and that they target actual behaviours (Sundqvist 2016 p. 268). Additionally, because prohibitions are specific, they identify concrete practices and items which legislators in the first decades after the Conversion regarded as pagan. That said, the information value of the legal texts varies. Each paragraph is generally brief and offers little description, relying on its audience to be familiar with the concepts alluded to.

In the *Kristinn rétr hinn forni* section of *Eiðsifabingslög*, paragraph 24, we find the following prohibition:

Engi maðr skal hafa i husi sinu staf eða stalla. vit eða blot. eða þat er til hæiðins siðar uæit. (Keyser & Munch 1846, p. 383)

No man shall have in his house a *staf* or *stallar*, a *vé* or a *blót*, or any thing which is dedicated to heathen custom.

The *Kristinn rétr hinn forni* in *Gulabingslög*, paragraph 29, bans pagan sacrifices and veneration of pagan outdoor sites:

Blot er oss oc kviðiat at vér scolom eigi blota heiðit guð. ne hauga. ne horga.

(Keyser & Munch 1846, p. 18)

Sacrifice is also forbidden to us; that we shall not revere a heathen god, nor mounds, nor *hørgar*.

A longer version of this prohibition is also found in the *Kristinn réttir Sverris*, paragraph 79:

Blott [sic] er os kviðiat at ver skulum æigi blota hæiðnar vetter. oc æigi hæiðin guð ne hauga ne horga. En ef maðr værðr at þui kunnr eða sannar at han læðr hauga eða gerer hus ok kallar horgh. eða ræisir stong oc kallar skaldzstong huern lut er han gerer þæirra þa hæfir han firergort huerium pæningi fear sins. (Keyser & Munch 1846, p. 430)

Sacrifice is forbidden to us(?), that we shall not revere heathen beings, and neither heathen gods nor mounds nor *hørgar*. And if it is proven about a man or he admits(?) that he makes a mound or builds a house and calls it *høgr* or raises a pole and calls it *skaldzstong* (?); whichever of these things he does, then he has forfeited every penny of his wealth.

Gutalagen, the provincial law of Gotland, was likely written down in the early 13th century. At this time, the pre-Christian religion was still alive on Gotland (Peel 2009 p. xxxix; Sundqvist 2016 p. 348). It also bans pagan acts of worship, both of natural and man-made features:

Engin ma haita a huatci a hult eða hauga eða haþin guþ huatki a vi eða stafgarþa
(Pipping 1905-07 p. 7, reproduced in Olsen 1966 p. 84)

None may worship either glades or mounds or heathen gods, neither sanctuaries nor stave-yards. (my trans.)

We also find a very similar prohibition in the early 11th century Law of the Northumbrian Priests, which, while not Scandinavian, applied within the Danelaw, an area with significant Scandinavian presence:

Gif frið-geard sí on hwær lande ábuton stán oþþe tréow oþþe wille oþþe swilces ánige fleard [...]

If there be a *frið-geard* [peace-yard] on any one's land, about a stone, or a tree, or a well, or any folly of such kind [...] (Thorpe 1840 pp. 297-299)

These passages are particularly interesting in light of the traces of cultic enclosures which have been discovered at Tissø, Järrestad, and possibly Uppåkra, as well as at several other sites (Jørgensen 2009 p. 331). The ritual delineation of a sacred or inviolable space is also described in several laws and sagas, which mention the practice of marking the circumference of the *þing* with *vébönd*, “the bonds of the *vē*” or “sacred bands”. In *Egils saga*, these are said to be stretched between rods of hazel which are set into the ground (Sigurður Nordal 1933 p. 154). Further, as we will see in Chapter 3, several sagas feature *hof* which are kept locked or fenced in.

The testimony of the early laws strengthens the impression that sacred enclosures were common in pre-Christian Scandinavia and that such fenced-off areas could be found not only on magnate farms, in the form of large ritual zones containing dedicated cult buildings, but likely on ordinary farms as well. Olaf Olsen took *stafgarða* and *frið-geard* to mean spaces that had been fenced about with staves or poles, or else cult sites with idols, where *stafr* is taken to refer to the idols themselves (1966 p. 84). The second element *garða/geard* indicates that these would likely also have been fenced in. In this view, the word *stafr* in the paragraph from *Eiðsifabingslög* might be read as denoting idols.

An obvious problem with the paragraphs quoted above, from a source-critical point of view, is that we cannot determine with any certainty the nature of the rituals and objects they refer to. As the aim here is not to reconstruct pagan ritual, this obstacle is not fatal. More relevant in this context are their implications for contemporary conditions. Though the presence of these bans in the medieval law codes does not prove that people were still performing pagan rituals, it indicates that the crown felt it had cause to be worried about it for a significant amount of time after the official conversion. This should not be surprising. Achieving a popular conversion would have presented several undeniable logistical challenges – geographical distance, challenging terrain, a lack of churches, and a lack of clergy being just a few. Here, it may be worthwhile to compare briefly with the English conversion. The venerable Bede, writing to Bishop Egbert of York in 734 – more than a century after the arrival of the Gregorian mission in Kent – lamented that,

multae uillae ac uiculi nostrae gentis in montibus sint inaccessis ac saltibus dumosis positi, ubi nunquam multis transeuntibus annis sit uisus antistes, qui ibidem aliquid

ministerii aut gratiae caelestis exhibuerit [...] uerum etiam omnis doctor, qui eos [...] fidei ueritatem [...] edoceat, absit (Plummer 1896 p. 410).

there are many country-houses and hamlets of our nation situated on inaccessible mountains and thick forests, where, for many years, no bishop comes to perform any of the duties of holy ministry or Divine grace [...] they have not even any teacher to instruct them in the truth of the faith [...] (Giles 1845 p. 143).

Naturally, the political situation in 8th century England looked different from that of 11th century Scandinavia. For instance, the English were not yet united under one king, and the various kingdoms had reverted to paganism on several occasions in the seventh century (e.g. Stevenson 1992 p. 82). Nevertheless, the comparison may serve as a reminder that the conversion would have been a gradual and complex process (Brink 2008b p. 621; Sundqvist 2016 p. 21). The different regions of Scandinavia were also not converted simultaneously, and the pre-Christian religion maintained strongholds in Sweden longer than in Norway: for instance, evidence from pre-Christian cemeteries has shown that non-Christian burial practices persisted in the Uppsala region through the 11th century (Sundqvist 2016 pp. 118-120). The religious organisation of Scandinavia by the Church through the formation of parishes and the institution of tithes did not take place until the 12th and 13th centuries (Brink 2008b p. 627).

It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that syncretistic, mixed, or pagan religious practice may have persisted in parts of Scandinavia for several decades after the process of converting the populace had begun, and the focus on non-Christian ritual in the early medieval laws strengthens this impression. Of course, it is possible that the authors of the laws were not infallibly informed about the character of pagan practice in those places where it may have lingered on. What is more important in this context is that knowledge about certain pre-Christian practices and ideas did not become inaccessible when the Conversion of a given region began, but perhaps as late as several decades or even a century afterward. This has an impact on our assessment of the narrative sources.

Hákonar saga góða

Another central text is Snorri Sturluson's *Hákonar saga góða*, which appears in Snorri's great historical work *Heimskringla*, likely written around 1230. Chapters 14 to 18 of the saga deal with the great sacrificial feasts held by the pagan earls at Hlaðir in Þrændalög during the reign of Hákon, in the second quarter of the 10th century. Snorri's description of earl Sigurðr's *hof* follows below:

Sigurðr Hlaðjarl var inn mesti blótmaðr, ok svá var Hákon, faðir hans. Helt Sigurðr jarl upp blótveizlum öllum af hendi konungs þar í Þrændalögum. Þat var forn siðr, þá er blót skyldi vera, at allir bændr skyldu þar koma, sem hof var, ok flytja þannug fõng sín, þau er þeir skyldu hafa, meðan veizlan stóð. At veizlu þeiri skyldu allir menn öl eiga. Þar var ok drepinn alls konar smali ok svá hross, en blóð þat allt, er þar kom af, þá var kallat hlaut, ok hlautbollar þat, er blóð þat stóð í, ok hlautteinar, þat var svá gort sem stökklar, með því skyldi rjóða stallana öllu saman ok svá veggj hofsins útan ok innan ok svá stökkva á mennina, en slátr skyldi sjóða til mannfagnaðar. Eldar skyldu vera á miðju gólfi í hofinu ok þar katlar yfir.

Sigurðr, earl of Hlaðir, was a great one for sacrifices, and so was Hákon, his father. Earl Sigurðr stood for all the sacrificial feasts on behalf of the king there in Þrændalög. It was ancient custom, when a sacrifice was held, that all the farmers should come to where the *hof* was and bring with them such provisions as they would need while the feast lasted. At these feasts, all men would have ale. All kinds of livestock were also slaughtered there, including horse. All the blood which resulted from this was called *hlaut*, and the containers which the blood was kept in, *hlautbollar*. There were *hlautteinar* fashioned like aspergillums, and with these the altars were all to be reddened, and also the walls of the *hof* both inside and out, and likewise the people were to be sprinkled, and the meat was to be cooked for the feast. In the middle of the floor of the *hof* there should be fires, and kettles over them.

(Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941 pp. 167-168. Translations are mine.)

Snorri goes on to describe how a drinking vessel was then passed around the fire in the ritual practice of drinking toasts to the gods – to Óðinn for victory, and to Njörðr and Freyr for good harvest and peace (*til árs ok friðar*). A toast called the *Braga full* and toasts to departed kin (*minni*) were also drunk. The drink would be blessed by the host, as would the sacrificial meat. Later chapters relate how, at a sacrificial feast (*blótveizla*) at Hlaðir, the king managed by trickery to avoid eating any of the horsemeat or drinking any ale that had not been dedicated to the Christian God:

En er it 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 konungrinn nú svá? Vill hann enn eigi blóta?" Sigurðr jarl svarar:

"Konungr gerir svá sem þeir allir, er trúá á mátt sinn ok megin ok signa full sitt Þór. Hann gerði hamarsmark yfir, áðr hann drakk." Var þá kyrrt um kveldit.

And when the first toast had been poured, earl Sigurðr spoke over it and dedicated it to Óðinn and drank the king's toast. The king accepted the horn and made the sign of the cross over it. Then Kárr of Grýtingr asked: "Why is the king doing this, now? Does he still not want to sacrifice?" Earl Sigurðr replies: "The king does as all those who believe in their own strength and ability and dedicate their toasts to Þórr. He made the hammer sign over it before he drank." Then there was peace that evening.

(Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941 p. 171)

The following winter, however, at the *jól* celebrations at Mæri, he was forced by the farmers to eat a few pieces of horse's liver and drink every toast exactly as it was served. This is the end of Snorri's account of Hákon's attempts to convert the farmers of Þrændalög.

Snorri's description of the *hof* at Hlaðir is one of the most extensive and detailed descriptions of a ceremonial building in any Old Norse text. As a source, however, it is not unproblematic, and since the mid-20th century it has come under increasing scrutiny. Among the critics were Olaf Olsen. He accepted that pre-Christian sacrificial feasts took place in the hall, to which each man contributed food, and at which drinking rituals and toasts played a part. But he questioned the authenticity of the details in Snorri's description, especially with regard to the cultic objects used and the toasts being drunk (Sundqvist 2016 p. 135-136; Olsen 1966 pp. 60-61).

Around the same time, Ernst Walter and Walter Baetke argued that the drinking scene in chapter 17 was not convincing as a portrayal of genuine pre-Christian ritual. Pointing to the use of the verb *signa*, a loan word imported into Old Norse from Latin to denote a fundamentally Christian act, they argued that the so-called *hamarsmark* did not exist in pre-Christian Norwegian culture, but was invented by Snorri on the pattern of *krossmark*, i.e., the sign of the Cross. They further argued that the belief "in one's own strength", in addition to being a classical *topos* often employed in descriptions of pagans, was by definition irreconcilable with the glorification of Þórr (Hultgård 1993 p. 228-229; Baetke 1951 p. 28; Walter 1966 pp. 363-367).

This line of argument was continued by Klaus Düwel in *Das Opferfest von Lade* (1985), which focused on identifying Snorri's sources of inspiration, and on his use of religious terminology. Düwel pointed out that the words *hlaut* and *hlautteinn*, though genuine in themselves, could not be securely attested in the meaning ascribed to them by Snorri, and

were likely reinterpreted by Snorri and transplanted from their original semantic sphere: that of divination and the casting of lots. By the same token, he concluded that the *hlautbolli* was likely an invention of Snorri's (Düwel 1985 pp. 21-33; Hultgård 1993 p. 230).

In Düwel's view, the ritual actions described by Snorri had no origin in local pre-Christian customs. He argued that the alleged custom of collecting the sacrificial blood and then bloodying the altar and the attendees was inspired by descriptions of pre-Christian (and therefore 'pagan') rituals in Exodus 24. This would have been available in the form of the Vulgate or possibly in Norse translation in *Stjórn II*, which may date from the early 13th century (Düwel 1985 pp. 35-36; Sundqvist 2016 p. 136). The drinking of *minni*, according to Düwel, was a custom practiced in medieval guilds, and had never taken place in pre-Christian times. In fact, he argued, there was no evidence that sacrificial feasts had ever taken place. Düwel's conclusion, following his predecessors, was that the saga could not be used as a source to pre-Christian ritual (1985 p. 119).

As we have seen, the close similarities between the passage cited above and the description of the *hof* in *Eyrbyggja saga* have led some scholars to suppose that the latter was in some measure directly derived from the former (Hultgård 1993 p. 228). If Snorri's account of the *blót* and the *hof* at Hlaðir were to be rejected as spurious, this would in turn cast doubt on the credibility of the corresponding passage in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

It is no doubt accurate to say that there are parts of Snorri's account which do not reflect genuine pre-Christian custom. By comparison with, for instance, *Fagrskinna*, which contains another version of the same anecdote, Snorri's version of the tale contains considerably more detail, which he likely did not find in Norse written or poetic sources (Hultgård 1993 p. 228). But in recent decades some scholars have begun to question the categorical dismissal of sources such as *Hákonar saga* and to search for a more nuanced approach. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has pointed out that Snorri need not have lifted practices and *topoi* wholesale from Biblical and hagiographical sources but may have attempted to express pre-Christian concepts in Christian terms – mapping, as it were, pre-Christian practices onto frameworks familiar to the erudite Christians who constituted his audience. Additionally, though some of the cultic terms presented by Snorri may not be genuine, this does not prove that the concepts they express cannot be pre-Christian (Meulengracht Sørensen 2001b p. 158).

Snorri drew upon a variety of sources for significant portions of his account. 10th century works of skaldic poetry such as *Sigurðardrápa*, *Vellekla*, and *Hákonarmál* make references to

earls and kings as the protectors, patrons and builders of cult sites, supporting the idea of a cult organised around secular leaders. Many texts also refer to Hlaðir and Mæri as important cult sites, and as stated above, the older historical works *Ágrip* and *Fagrskinna* both relate some of the events in Snorri's account. It is possible that he also made use of oral traditions which have since been lost (Hultgård 1993 p. 228; Sundqvist 2016 pp. 139-140). Anders Hultgård has pointed to this evidence for the role of chieftains as banquet-givers and religious leaders to argue that the existence of sacrificial feasts is highly probable, and points to their prevalence in sacrificial rites more generally (1993 pp. 237-238).

Hultgård draws attention to the fact that according to *Íslendingabók*, the eating of horsemeat was initially tolerated for a few years after the Conversion, suggesting that it was too ingrained to be immediately rooted out. He argues that its incompatibility with Christianity must derive from its connection with sacrificial meals (*ibid.*). Further, given the symbolic value of mead in Norse mythology, it would not be strange if drinking rituals did take place at such feasts. This is also supported by, among other things, the many archaeological finds of high-quality drinking vessels in elite contexts, depictions of figures carrying drinking horns, and skaldic poetry (Sundqvist 2016 pp. 350-355).

Based on a careful reading of Old Norse and medieval Christian sources, Hultgård has further proposed that the formula *til árs ok friðar* may be of genuine pre-Christian origin, and not, as some earlier scholars believed, derived from Christian notions of *pax* and *prosperitas* (1993 pp. 244-254). With regard to the practice of drinking toasts in honour of the gods, we may also note that the 13th-century *Gutalagen* contains a prohibition against invoking *hæðin guð* ("pagan gods") or *nequara þa mið mati eða mið dryckiu senni sum ai fylgir cristnum siði* ("such a thing with his food or his drink which does not follow Christian practice") (Pipping 1905-07 pp. 6-7, reproduced in Sundqvist 2016 p. 355).

One may question Düwel's argument that Snorri was modelling his account entirely on Exodus. Aside from the fact that both texts refer to sacrificial blood being collected and used to anoint altars (and, in one case, people), the similarities between the two passages are not striking. The relevant passage in *Stjórn* is as follows: *Moses tok halft fornarblodit ok hellti þvui i kerit. en halft blod hellti hann yfir alltarann* ("Moses took half of the sacrificial blood and poured it into a bowl, and half the blood he poured over the altar"), while in the Vulgate it reads, *Tulit itaque Moses dimidiam partem sanguinis, et misit in crateras: partem autem residuam fudit super altare* (Exodus 24.9; Unger 1862 p. 305). If one assumes that Snorri was using *Stjórn*, he was making no effort to echo it: both semantically and syntactically, this

description and Snorri's differ quite widely. Where *Hákonar saga* has (*hlaut*)*bolli*, *Stjórn* refers to a *ker* (and the Vulgate to a krater). The act of pouring or smearing the blood onto the altar is described with *hellti* in *Stjórn* and *fudit* in the Vulgate (both meaning “poured”), and with the far more poetic *rjóða* in *Hákonar saga*.

We may perhaps assume that Snorri, as an educated man and a Christian, was familiar with the passage in question, and further that it may have been familiar to his audience. But he made no deliberate effort to invoke the Exodus passage, aside – perhaps – from the introduction of a bowl for the blood, which would either way be necessitated by the demands of logistics, and to which he refers by a different noun. Therefore, it is striking that his choice of words *does* apparently invoke the Eddic poem *Hyndluljóð* through the use of *rjóða* (see below). We know that Snorri knew this poem, as he quotes it in *Gylfaginning* under the name *Vǫluspá in skamma* (Faulkes 2005 p. 10). While one may read this as an attempt to ‘disguise’ a Biblical motif as something thoroughly Norse, several scholars have argued that we ought not to exclude the possibility of genuine antiquarian interest on the part of Snorri (e.g. Hultgård 1993 p. 227; Meulengracht Sørensen 2001b p. 159).

Rather than attempting to trace each element to the source from which it was allegedly lifted wholesale, we ought then to consider the possibility that Biblical and Norse traditions converged on this point, and that Snorri – as a Christian and as a historian – was content to allow his own text to stand in an intertextual dialogue with both of them. Such a convergence would allow him to easily map existing Old Norse matter onto a Christian framework. It is likely in this context we should see the *hlautteinn* – as a prop intended to invoke the medieval *aspergillum*. However, there is little compelling evidence to suggest that the practice itself was invented by Snorri. Further, his apparent harkening back to *Hyndluljóð* indicates that Snorri himself judged the practice to have native roots.

One may ask whether the ritual sprinkling of sacrificial blood was ever a historical reality in pre-Christian Scandinavia. Based on comparison with Mediterranean and Middle Eastern pre-Christian religions, Anders Hultgård has argued that the staining of walls, altars, or other objects with blood is a cross-culturally common phenomenon in sacrificial rites, and that a similar practice may have existed in the Germanic area. There is some support for this in Norse texts. We have already mentioned the Eddic poem *Hyndluljóð*, in which a *hǫrgr* dedicated to the goddess Freyja is said to be reddened with the blood of sacrificed animals (*Hǫrg hann mér gerði, hlaðinn steinom, [...] rauð hann í nýio nauta blóði*) (Neckel-Kuhn 1983 p. 289). A similar instance also appears in *Hervarar saga*, which, though only preserved

in manuscripts from the 14th century and later, has been thought to preserve older elements (Hultgård 1993 pp. 236-237; Näsström 1996 p. 69; Mitchell 1991 p. 153).

Certain elements of Snorri's account have been convincingly proven to be influenced by Snorri's own cultural context or by established *topoi* from older literature. This is true especially of the *hlautteinn* and the idea that worshippers of Þórr believed *á mátt sinn ok megin*, and possibly also of the term *minni*. The same can likely be said of the so-called *hamarsmark* – though in this case one should perhaps at least consider the possibility of early Christian influence on pagan customs, especially as Beard (2019 p. 139) has shown a development whereby Þórr's hammer pendants gradually became more cross-like. In the face of this, the study of the sagas as sources to pre-Christian Norse religion might benefit from a perspective which is better able to accommodate a plurality of influences – admitting the possibility of genuine scholarly interest in the past on the part of medieval Icelandic writers, while acknowledging their use of narrative models and motifs which derive from a wider European learned tradition. One may see these works as permitting a dual reading; linking back to both Norse and foreign traditions. This strategy will also be discussed in connection with *Eyrbyggja saga* below.

Thus, while it must be conceded that the account of the *blót* at Hlaðir is not an authentic representation of pre-Christian cult, elements of it may nevertheless be genuine. The existence of designated ritual buildings has gained strong support from archaeology, as has the practice of ritual feasting inside the hall. It is likely that the local ruler was responsible for hosting such feasts and for presiding over the ritual aspect. There was likely some form of communal drinking ritual, though its exact nature is not known to us, and the concept of *ár ok friðr* may have played a part in the Norse ritual consciousness. It is possible that the blood of the slaughtered animals was indeed used ritually, while the meat was prepared and eaten.

Eyrbyggja saga

The Icelandic family saga *Eyrbyggja saga* contains one of only three actual descriptions of a *blót* and a *hof* in the Old Norse literary corpus, the other two being in Snorri's *Hákonar saga goða* and in *Kjalnesinga saga* (Hultgård 1993 p. 224). As the latter description closely resembles that in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and the saga is generally considered to be a younger work dating to the early fourteenth century (*ibid.* pp. 227-228), it will not be given special attention here.

The aspects of the saga which are most relevant to the present discussion are the description of the *hof* itself and its contents, such as idols and high seat posts, and the descriptions of cultic practices in connection with the *landnám* which relate to the *hof* and to the farm itself as a cultic centre. These are the practice of bringing the *hof* timbers and some of the *hof* soil to Iceland and the role of the high seat posts in divination. These latter practices are also mentioned in *Landnámabok*, as we shall see.

Eyrbyggja saga itself dates to the thirteenth century and is, like most sagas of Icelanders, a work by an anonymous author. Beginning with the settlement of Snæfellsnes in the late ninth century, its plot takes place in the decades around the conversion of Iceland (around year 1000), and especially follows the life of Snorri *goði*. While earlier scholarship was inclined to ascribe a relatively high age to this saga, dating it to the first quarter of the thirteenth century, the current consensus is that the extant version of the saga was committed to parchment sometime around 1250. Some scholars, among them Klaus Bödl, believe *Eyrbyggja* was written by Sturla Þórðarson (Bödl 2005 pp. 25-26), while others incline toward the belief that its writer was someone associated with the Helgafell monastery (Wanner 2009 p. 234).

The opening chapters of the saga introduce Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, the first settler of Snæfellsnes, and in the fourth chapter, we hear of his decision to relocate to Iceland after being advised to do so by his “beloved friend” (*ástvinr*), Þórr (Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935 p. 7). His preparations for the voyage and his actions upon arrival are given in some detail:

Hann tók ofan hofit ok hafði með sér flesta viðu, þá er þar höfðu í verit, ok svá moldina undan stallanum, þar er Þórr hafði á setit. [...] Þórólfr kastaði þá fyrir borð ǫndvegissúlum sínum, þeim er staðit höfðu í hofinu; þar var Þórr skorinn á annarri. Hann mælti svá fyrir, at hann skyldi þar byggja á Íslandi, sem Þórr léti þær á land

koma. En þegar þær hóf frá skipinu, sveif þeim til ins vestra fjarðarins, ok þótti þeim fara eigi vánum seinna. [...] Eptir þat kǫnnuðu þeir landit ok fundu á nesi framanverðu, er var fyrir norðan váginn, at Þórr var á land kominn með súlurnar; þat var síðan kallat Þórsnes. Eptir þat fór Þórólfr eldi um landnám sitt [...].

He took down the *hof* and brought with him most of the timber which had been in it, and likewise the earth from beneath the *stalli* which Þórr had sat on. [...] Þórólfr then threw overboard his high seat posts, those which had stood in the *hof*. Þórr was carved upon one of them. He declared that he would build in that spot in Iceland where Þórr caused them to land. And as soon as they floated away from the ship, they drifted into the western fjord, and they seemed to go no more slowly than one might expect. [...] After this, they searched the land and found that Þórr had come ashore with the posts on a headland which protruded to the north of the bay; that was later named Þórsnes. After this, Þórólfr carried fire about his claim [...].

(Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935 pp. 7-8. Translations are mine.)

Then follows the now famous description of Þórólfr's *hof*, which he built at his farm at Hofstaðir. The passage is rich in cultic inventory – there are *ǫndvegissulur*, a *stallr*, mysterious *reginnaglar*, idols, and an oath ring, besides the *hlautbolli* and *hlautteinn* which we know from *Hákonar saga*.

Hann setti bæ mikinn við Hofsvág, er han kallaði á Hofsstoðum. Þar lét hann reisa hof, ok var þat mikit hús; váru dyrr á hliðvegginum ok nær ǫðrum endanum; þar fyrir innan stóðu ǫndvegissúlurnar, ok váru þar í naglar; þeir hétu reginnaglar; þar var allt friðarstaðr fyrir innan. Innar af hofinu var hús í þá líking, sem nú er sǫnghús í kirkjum, ok stóð þar stalli á miðju gólfinu sem altari, ok lá þar á hringr einn mótlauss, tvítǫgeyringr, ok skyldi þar at sverja eiða alla; þann hring skyldi hofgoði hafa á hendi sér til allra mannfunda. Á stallanum skyldi ok standa hlautbolli, ok þar í hlautteinn sem stoðkull væri, ok skyldi þar stoðkva með ór bollanum blóði því, er hlaut var kallat; þat var þess konar blóð, er svæfð váru þau kvikendi, er goðunum var fórnat. Umhverfis stallann var goðunum skipat í afhúsinu.

He built a great farm at Hofsvág, which he named Hofstaðir. There he had a *hof* raised, and that was a great house. There was a door in the side wall near one end, and within this stood the high seat posts, and there were nails in them. These were called

reginnaglar. The space inside the *hof* was sacred and inviolate. Further into the *hof* there was a house of the same kind as is now the choir in a church, and there in the middle of the floor stood a *stalli* like an altar, and on it lay a seamless ring weighing 20 *aurar*, and on this all oaths were to be sworn. This ring, the *hofgoði* was to wear at all gatherings of men. On the *stalli* there should also stand a bowl for sacrificial blood and in it a blood-twigg like an aspergillum, and with this one should sprinkle from the bowl that blood which was called *hlaut*. This was the blood from the killing of those animals which were sacrificed to the gods. Around the *stalli* the gods were arranged in the annex.

(*ibid.* pp. 8-9)

Because this saga is, at first glance, so unusually informative with regard to pre-Christian religious practice, its usefulness as a historical document has been hotly debated. Its similarity in some particulars to *Hákonar saga* has led many scholars to suggest that *Hákonar saga* provided the direct inspiration for the *hof* of Þórólfr (e.g. Bödl 2005 p. 18). This has far-reaching implications for the use of *Eyrbyggja saga* as a source to medieval knowledge about the pagan past, because as we have seen, the corresponding passages in *Hákonar saga* have been subjected to close scrutiny in previous decades, and – in the eyes of some scholars – thoroughly discredited as historical sources. In this view, the saga represents a purely fictional account whose component parts have been stitched together from sources available to a learned Christian in thirteenth century Iceland, such as hagiographic literature and the Bible, and which derives nothing from an older, native tradition (e.g. Baetke 1951; Olsen 1966; Andersson 1988). For a discussion of those elements of *Eyrbyggja saga* which we also find in *Hákonar saga*, like the *hlaut*, *hlautteinn*, and *hlautbolli*, see the previous section.

An approach which places equally great emphasis on the continental learning tradition, but which credits the authors of the sagas with rather more creative power, seeks to interpret events, motifs and persons in Icelandic saga allegorically. For example, Kevin Wanner has analysed the Dritsker episode in *Eyrbyggja saga* as part of a foundation myth for Iceland which focuses on purity and taboo. Although historicity is not Wanner's main concern, he notes that the prohibition against looking towards Helgafell unwashed instituted by the pagan patriarch Þórólfr, as well as the restrictions on excrement and violent bloodshed in the sacred sphere of the *þing* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935 pp. 9-10), have parallels in the Old Testament, which the learned author would no doubt be familiar with. He

emphasises that “all of the salient ingredients for [*Eyrbyggja saga*’s] account of Þórólfr’s institution of a sacred landscape and associated purity rules were available to its producers in [the Bible],” as well as in Norwegian and Icelandic medieval law (Wanner 2009 pp. 239-240;240-243).

Wanner proposes that these parallels may have been intended to be read typologically: as the Gospel transcended the Mosaic law for the Christians, so it also replaced the “similarly outmoded beliefs and practices of the pre-Christian Icelanders” (*ibid.* p. 240). Further, “attitudes towards bodily excretions and rules pertaining to purity” expressed in the Bible and in medieval legislation may have informed the opening chapters of *Eyrbyggja saga* (*ibid.* p. 243). There are nevertheless issues with this argument. While the law texts quoted by Wanner do indicate a growing preoccupation with pollution from excrement in the Middle Ages, they do not show a similar medieval preoccupation with blood *qua* blood. In fact, they mostly declare it harmless when not accompanied by violence, whereas bloodless violence does have a desecrating effect (*ibid.* pp. 241-242). In other words, this preoccupation with the desecrating effects of violence need not be influenced by medieval thought, but may go back to pre-Christian times, just like the social institution of the *þing*. The text likely contains elements of pre-Christian thought and custom which were utilised by the Christian author of *Eyrbyggja saga* precisely because they lent themselves to a dual reading.

This very point has been made by Mikael Males (2013 p. 115), who has proposed a more nuanced approach to allegorical interpretation. He suggests that a mode of allegory may have prevailed in Old Norse secular literature which was rather more free than that of religious literature, and where the fragmented reception common in medieval literature “was a useful tool for arriving at a desirable interpretation” (Males 2013 pp. 100; 106). This flexible approach mitigates the obligation to fit everything into a strictly cohesive interpretational scheme. It also does not preclude the inclusion of genuinely pre-Christian matter. In his analysis of the description of Þórólfr’s *hof* in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Males thus notes that though the tendency clearly is to understand paganism by means of Christianity, the use of allegory in this passage is not programmatic, and the text evinces a mix of antiquarian interest and Christian adaptation (*ibid.* pp. 120-121).

The significance of the high seat posts is widely attested and may well derive from an older tradition. Likewise, the existence of *reginnaglar* or the presence of an oath ring are unlikely to derive from any Christian source (*ibid.* pp. 116-117). The likely historicity of oath rings and

reginnaglar will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis. Conversely, much of the layout of the *hof* is (as, indeed, the saga author makes explicit) that of a medieval church. Likewise, while the word *hlaut* may be an older word meaning “sacrificial blood”, the context in which it appears – in connection with an ‘altar’ which corresponds closely to those found in Christianity and classical paganism – is likely an example of Christian reinterpretation. That the high seat post which had “mighty nails” driven into it happened to bear the likeness of Þórr, a god often used to parallel Christ, may also signal a desire to present Þórólfr as a devout monotheist and proto-Christian (*ibid.* p. 120-121). As will be argued in Chapter 3, the arguments proposed for seeing high seat posts as generally connected with Þórr are not compelling.

Like Wanner, Males has argued that Þórólfr prefigures the coming of Christianity and may have been regarded as a parallel to Moses (forthcoming; 2013 pp. 118-120; Wanner 2009 pp. 239-240). This is based on the fact that Þórólfr’s voyage links two highly significant locations for the conversion of Iceland and Norway: Helgafell, the eventual site of a prominent monastery, and Moster, where Óláfr Tryggvason would later erect Norway’s first church and begin the conversion of Norway. In a forthcoming article, the parallels Þórólfr/Moses and Helgafell/Mt. Sinai are expanded into a wider referential scheme and the opening chapters of *Eyrbyggja saga* are viewed as the saga author’s attempt to transpose the landscape of Jerusalem and the Holy Land onto Icelandic soil (Males forthcoming). Most relevant in the present context is the suggestion that the motif of bringing soil from underneath the idol may be influenced by the medieval practice of bringing home soil from the Holy Land, *terra sancta*, to sanctify churchyards and the like. In the context of *Eyrbyggja*, *terra sancta* is Þórólfr’s birthplace, Moster. Similarly, the practice of bringing timber from the *hof* to Iceland is proposed to be influenced by the Biblical exile of the Israelites, who brought with them the Ark of the Covenant and rebuilt the temple in the Promised Land (*ibid.*).

That houses were dismantled and their posts pulled up upon abandonment has been confirmed by archaeology, and these motifs may not be fully pagan *or* Christian. This argument has been made by Jonas Wellendorf with regard to high seat post divination (2010 pp. 14-15). He presents hagiographic parallels which were probably known in Iceland in the 13th century (when the *Sturlubók* redaction of *Landnáma* and many of the sagas were written) and also points to local Icelandic variants where the motif appears in a Christian context. Notable among these is the story of Ørlygr Hrappsson, a Christian who had been raised on the Hebrides by a Bishop Patrekr. The Bishop gives him church timbers and a portion of

consecrated soil and tells him to place the soil beneath the corner posts of the church he builds in order to bless it. He then instructs him to settle where he sees three mountains rising from the sea with fjords in between. On approaching Iceland, an iron bell which the Bishop gave Ørlygr falls overboard, but when Ørlygr finds the place described to him by the Bishop, he miraculously finds the bell on the shore (*ibid.* pp. 11-15; Jakob Benediktsson 1968 pp. 52-55). Wellendorf argues that whatever the age or original meaning of the divinatory motif, its function in *Landnáma* is to create a foundation myth for the Icelandic state which emphasises the importance of personal piety and man's need for divine assistance (*ibid.* p. 18).

There is some evidence that the soil motif need not be Christian. A variant of the high seat post divination motif is found in Skalla-Grímr's *landnám* (Jakob Benediktsson 1968 pp. 68-71). Kveld-Úlfr, who is old, orders that if he should die during the voyage, Skalla-Grímr is to throw his body overboard as he approaches Iceland. He does so and finds a farm near the spot where Kveld-Úlfr's coffin drifts ashore, raising a mound over him on the nearest headland. As Wellendorf notes, this allows Skalla-Grímr to instantly point to a buried ancestor on his land (2010 pp. 10-11). A 1316 royal decree by king Hákon Magnússon stated that men wishing to claim a piece of land should be able to enumerate their forefathers, *greinande skilluislægha langfædga tall. till haughs ok till heidni* ("reliably accounting for the line of their male ancestors back to the mound and to the heathen time") (Keyser & Munch 1849 p. 121). In other words, this act strengthens Skalla-Grímr's connection to the land he has just claimed in a way that is both concrete and intangible: that soil is now where his ancestor is buried. This shows the importance of a connection to one's own ancestral soil.

The connection to the land would have been strong on a farm where generations of ancestors had lived and died, and where burial mounds were a part of the landscape, perhaps going back to the founder of the farm. On newly claimed land, this loss of connection with the earth might be keenly felt and might perhaps be mitigated by bringing some of the ancestral land to Iceland. Skalla-Grímr's *landnám* shows an intimate connection between the head of the household, the high seat, and the land. That Kveld-Úlfr himself can stand in for the high seat (which would otherwise be metonymically represented by its posts) strengthens the impression that the role of the high seat posts in divination is to represent the farmstead *pars pro toto* and thereby also the power of its ruler. Upon his death, he becomes an ancestor, and thereby establishes the connection with the land. It does not seem a stretch to posit that this localised attachment also encompassed the gods who 'lived' on the farm, and who – perhaps – needed to be brought to a new land (Wanner 2010 p. 216). As the soil motif may have been

congenial to non-Christian thought, it may be appropriate to view both this and the divination motif as independently conceived, but similar enough to be easily pressed into service by a Christian author.

It is clear that the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* was well-read. If he was associated with the monastery at Helgafell, he had access to a large library (Bödl 2005 p. 18). Bödl estimates that he had access to *Hákonar saga*, possibly *Laxdæla saga*, potentially *Eiríks saga rauða* and other existing sagas in older versions, as well as several sagas now lost to us. If he did not himself contribute to *Landnáma*, he likely employed it. He displays a scholarly interest in the past and a sensibility of his work having a historiographical dimension. In addition to being “*unterhaltsame, wenn möglich spannende Erzählungen*” (Baetke 1951 p. 22), the sagas of Icelanders often have an unmistakably historical air. By tracing the lines of prominent families back to their illustrious forefathers’ arrival in Iceland, sagas could serve an identity-building function which was, at its core, historical (Bödl 2005 pp. 46-48). Through references to reigns of Norwegian kings and, more importantly, through genealogy and references to very specific regions of the Icelandic landscape, the events of *Eyrbyggja saga* are painstakingly situated in time and in geographical and social space. This historiographical sensibility can also be seen in the *Eyrbyggja* author’s use of skaldic stanzas, which is extensive, and resembles Snorri Sturluson’s use of poetry as historiographical citation (Jesch 2000 p. 15).

However, several episodes in the saga cannot be shown to derive from any known textual source, and we should assume that at least some of these were circulating in oral form (Bödl 2005 p. 20). Scholars have noted that the supernatural is a central component of *Eyrbyggja saga*, featuring more prominently in this work than in many others (Wanner 2009 p. 229; Heller 1984 p. 100). The great number of supernatural motifs in the saga seem to indicate an interest in the social and mental world of pre-Christian Iceland. Following the death of Þorgunna at Fróðá, the people on the farm see the death omen known as *urðarmáni* and a ghostly seal, followed by the haunting of the drowned Þoroddr and his men and a group of revenants that spread disease. There is also a severed head speaking warnings, an episode involving a sorceress, the malevolent haunting of Þórólfr bægifót and the troll bull, and the vision of the shepherd in which Þorsteinn þorskabítr is seen to enter and be welcomed into Helgafell (Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935 ch. 20; 34; 43; 52-54; 63). Rolf Heller, though generally sceptical to older oral material in Icelandic sagas, has suggested that the tale of the hauntings at Fróðá represents a local tradition (“*eine alte Überlieferung*”),

possibly originating with a real-life epidemic on the farm, which was known to the author and incorporated into the saga. He also considered the motif of the drowned dead appearing to their relatives “*heidnischer Vorstellungswelt entstammend*” (Heller 1984 pp. 100-101).

Eyrbyggja saga contains a mix of influences, and it is likely that no all-encompassing analogical or allegorical framework can be found. Likewise, it would be a stretch to try to ascribe every allegedly pagan detail in it to borrowings from continental tradition. It has been convincingly argued that *Eyrbyggja*'s author adapted existing traditions according to his own Christian mode of understanding. Part of this mode of understanding was no doubt a teleological view of history and an allegorical mindset, keenly aware of the twofold significance of certain motifs. In this light we may see the Biblical and Christological parallels in Helgafell and the nail-riddled image of Þórr. Nevertheless, genuine antiquarian interest in earlier times should not be discounted as a driving force behind the inclusion of so much allegedly pagan material in the saga, and some pagan practices mentioned in *Eyrbyggja saga* may have pre-Christian roots. The materiality of pre-Christian religion as it appears in *Eyrbyggja saga*, especially the *hof* and the high seat posts, will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3.

Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar and Óláfs saga helga

The kings' sagas do not contain very full descriptions of pre-Christian cult or cultic buildings compared to those which we find in *Eyrbyggja* and *Hákonar saga*. They are primarily of interest here because of the description of a large ring belonging to the cult building in chapter 59 of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, and of *hof* and idols in chapter 69 of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and chapters 112 and 113 of *Óláfs saga helga*. In both sagas, the passages in question relate to the King's attempts to convert the Norwegians to Christianity.

The first description of a *hof* from Óláfr Tryggvason's saga comes when the King strikes a blow against paganism in Hlaðir, seat of the powerful earl dynasty and a stronghold of pre-Christian religion.

En Óláfr konungr ferr þá með liði sínu á Norð-Mæri, ok kristnar hann þat fylki. Síðan siglir hann inn á Hlaðir ok lætr brjóta ofan hofit ok taka allt fé ok allt skraut ór hofinu ok af goðinu. Hann tók gullhring mikinn ór hofshurðunni, er Hákon jarl hafði látit gera. Síðan lét Óláfr konungr brenna hofit.

And king Óláfr then goes with his army to Norð-Mæri, and he converts all that county. Then he sails into Hlaðir and has the *hof* torn down and all the wealth and ornamentation taken out of the *hof* and off of the god. He took a great gold ring from the door of the *hof*, which earl Hákon had had made. Then king Óláfr had the *hof* burned.

(Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941 pp. 308-309; my trans.)

Several chapters later, the King returns to Þrændalög, and calls a *þing*. Here, the wealthy Járnskeggi declares that the farmers will not take Christianity, but instead want Óláfr to participate in *blót* like king Hákon did. Finding himself outnumbered, Óláfr agrees to visit the *hof* at Mæri for the midsummer *blót*, so that they may come to a peaceful agreement (*ibid.* p. 314):

Óláfr konungr gengr nú í hofit ok fáir menn með honum ok nokkurir av bóndum. En er konungr kom þar, sem goðin váru, þá sat þar Þórr ok var mest tígnaðr av öllum goðum, búinn með gulli ok silfri. Óláfr konungr hóf upp refði gullbúit, er hann hafði í hendi, ok laust Þór, svá at hann fell af stallinum. Síðan hljópu at konungsmenn ok skýfðu ofan öllum goðum af stöllum. En meðan konungr var inni í hofinu, þá var drepinn Járnskeggi úti fyrir hofsdurunum, ok gerðu þat konungsmenn.

King Óláfr now enters the *hof* with a few men and some of the farmers. And when the King came to where the gods were, there Þórr sat, and he was the most honoured of all the gods, adorned with gold and silver. King Óláfr raised the gold-adorned axe which he had in his hand and struck Þórr so that he fell off his pedestal. Then the king's men

ran to and knocked all the gods off their pedestals. And while the king was in the *hof*, Járnскеggi was killed outside the door of the *hof*, and this was done by the king's men. (*ibid.* pp. 317-318)

A similar episode takes place in *Óláfs saga helga*. Confronted in Guðbrandsdalr by locals who do not wish to convert, led by the powerful Guðbrandr, king Óláfr eventually convinces the farmers of the true God through the destruction of their wooden idol. It is chiefly the descriptions of this object which are of interest here. Upon the king's arrival, a *þing* is held, where Guðbrandr derides Óláfr for believing in a God whom none can see:

“[...] *en vér eigum þann guð, er hvern dag má sjá, ok er því eigi úti í dag, at veðr er vátt. [...]*”

“[...] but we have such a god as we may see every day, though he is not out today, because the weather is wet. [...]

(Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1945 p. 187; my trans.)

Um kveldit þá spyr konungr son Guðbrands, hvernug goð þeira væri gort. Hann segir, at hann var merkðr eptir Þórr – «ok hefir hann hamar í hendi ok mikill vexti ok holr innan ok gorr undir honum sem hjallr sé, ok stendr hann þar á ofan, er hann er úti. Eigi skortir hann gull ok silfr á sér. Fjórir hleifar brauðs eru honum færðir hvern dag ok þar slátr við.»

That night the king asks Guðbrandr's son how their god is fashioned. He says that he is modeled after Þórr – “and he has a hammer in his hand and is great of stature and hollow within, and fashioned under him is a platform, and on that he stands when he is outside. He is not lacking gold and silver on him. Four loaves of bread are brought to him every day, and meat besides.”

(*ibid.*)

Þá sá þeir mikinn fjölda búanda fara till þings ok báru í milli sín mannlíkan mikit, glæst allt með gulli ok silfri.

Then they saw a great crowd of farmers going to the *þing*, and they carried between them a great image of a man, adorned all over with gold and silver.

(*ibid.* p. 188)

It is worth mentioning that Dala-Guðbrandr also appears in *Njáls saga*, where a description of his *hof* is given which greatly resembles that in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. Here, too, the idols are life-size statues decorated with silver and gold. Þórr's idol is placed atop a wagon or cart. We are further provided with the information that Dala-Guðbrandr *var inn mesti vin Hákonar jarls; þeir áttu hof báðir saman, ok var því aldri upp lokit, nema þá er jarl kom þangat* (“Dala-Guðbrandr was the greatest friend of earl Hákon. The two of them owned the *hof*

together; and it was never opened up save when the earl came thither”) (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954 p. 214).

Naturally, the criticisms which have been leveled against *Hákonar saga* and against Snorri as a historian also affect our perception of the Óláfr sagas. Further, Theodore Andersson (1988) has subjected the episode where St Óláfr confronts Dala-Guðbrandr to closer scrutiny. He is able to show that this episode displays a large number of parallels to biblical, patristic and hagiographic literature. Conceding that the author of the now-lost **Kristni þáttr* (which he believes to have been borrowed more or less unchanged into Snorri’s *Óláfs saga* and the *Legendary Saga* of St. Óláfr) may not have been familiar with patristic literature, he emphasises several motifs which would have been familiar to Norse readers through hagiography and the Bible. One of these is the trope of pagans taunting Christians about the invisibility and intangibility of their God, who is nevertheless all-powerful, while pagan idols have no power (Andersson 1988 pp. 276-278).

What Andersson calls the “dramatic frame” of the Dala-Guðbrandr episode – a competition between Christians and idolaters to see whose god is the true God, usually culminating in the destruction of the idol through the power of God – is also shown to be a hagiographic commonplace. A particularly close parallel to the Dala-Guðbrandr episode can be found in *Erasmus saga*, where the Saint is led into a temple of Jupiter. In the Norse translation of this *vita* (as in several others), Jupiter is rendered as Þórr. This visit to the temple takes place after a verbal confrontation between the Saint and the Emperor Maximian, in which the Saint tells the Emperor, “If the god is as mighty as you deem, then we will go and worship it, if it is worthy” (“*Ef goðin ero sua mattog, sem þer þvckir, þa forom við oc dvrkom þau, ef þess er vert*”). Entering the temple, St. Erasmus calls upon God to destroy the great idol of Þórr, and it immediately collapses into nothing, leaving in its place a fearsome dragon which attacks the worshippers (Andersson 1988 p. 277-278; Unger 1877 pp. 366-367).

There is no doubt that the account has a clear hagiographic air. In addition to the many textual parallels, Andersson emphasises the consistent use of narrative irony, which is achieved through the pagans’ excessive and naïve faith in the powers of their perishable wooden statue. He points out how the author presents Dala-Guðbrandr as full of ignorant bluster, going so far as to have him urge the Christians to “shed their superstition” and believe in Þórr (“*Nu fellid niðr hindrvitni yðra ok trúid á goð vart [...]*”), in a “parody of a Christian conversion speech” (Andersson 1988 p. 282; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1945 pp. 188-189).

Similarly, Lars Lönnroth has called the confrontation between the king and Járnskeggi in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* “*sen, påverkad av utländsk legendlitteratur och mycket otillförlitlig*” (1963 p. 62). He, too, notes that the contest between the two follows a template common in hagiographic literature: “*den kristna Gudskraften segrar mirakulöst över den hedniska magin*” (*ibid.*, p. 68). It is worth noting that the sarcastic or false compliance with pagan worship which is attributed to Óláfr Tryggvason exactly parallels that in *Erasmus saga*, which was mentioned above. Because both Saint Óláfr and Óláfr Tryggvason are said to have converted the population of Þrændalög, Lönnroth has proposed that the story about Óláfr Tryggvason’s conversion of the *þrændir* may have been even borrowed from the legend of Saint Óláfr – and, at any rate, both episodes must have been inspired by hagiography and cannot be used as sources for information about pre-Christian religion (1963 pp. 61; 70-71).

That one finds connections to hagiographic literature in these sagas should not be surprising. While the saga of St. Óláfr is not a work of hagiography in the strictest sense, it is nevertheless an account of the life of a saint who was associated with several miracles, especially after his death, and who was credited with the ultimate victory of Christianity over paganism in Norway. The standoff between the holy conversion king, Óláfr, and wealthy farmers like Dala-Guðbrandr represents the confrontation between Christianity and the power of the pre-Christian religion. Thus, though Óláfr was not yet a saint nor the victory of his faith assured by the time of the Dala-Guðbrandr episode, these future facts could be easily foreshadowed and anticipated through the literary modes of hagiography. The same is true of Óláfr Tryggvason, the other great missionary king (Lönnroth 1963 p. 57).

After his thorough survey of parallels in biblical, hagiographic, and patristic literature, Andersson concludes that the account of Dala-Guðbrandr’s conversion is “an entirely fictional piece of writing devised *in toto* from foreign prototypes”, and that “nothing in the account belongs to native tradition” (1988 pp. 284; 280). While many elements of both of these anecdotes can undoubtedly be ascribed to hagiographic influence, it is not immediately clear that the arguments which Andersson adduces support such a conclusion. For instance, Andersson is not able to provide a clear inspiration for the information that the idol of Þórr is customarily kept indoors, beyond noting that this “could be suggested” by Wisdom 13.15, which describes placing an idol in the wall (*in pariete ponens illud*, probably in a niche) and fastening it there with iron so that it may not fall (Andersson 1988 pp. 267-269). This parallel is considerably less close than the others which Andersson is able to demonstrate and is not dwelled on.

Later, he makes brief note of Guðbrandr's comment that Þórr is indoors because of the inclement weather. Andersson notes that this should probably be seen as part of the *þáttur* author's sarcastic treatment of the pagan idol, which is so fragile that it cannot even withstand rain, but that "the idea is not well developed" (Andersson 1988 p. 280). The information that the idol is carved from wood, and the possible connection between this fact and the practice of keeping the idol indoors, is thus not afforded much notice. It should perhaps be, as this is a typical feature of Norse sources about idols, and one which is echoed by Ibn Fadlan (Montgomery 2000 p. 9). Further, wooden idols are not prominent in the Latin sources which Andersson proposes as the inspirations for the Dala-Guðbrandr episode. Most of them refer to idols of brass, stone, gold and silver. Only two mention wooden idols, and then respectively as "gods of silver and gold, stone and wood" and "gods (...) of wood and stone" (Andersson 1988 pp. 269-270, my trans.). If this information is not a loan, it appears reasonable to argue that it must, in fact, be derived from a native tradition.

In response to Andersson and Düwel's treatment of the historical sagas, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has pointed out that an author, in the act of transforming historical fact into a text, has no choice but to make use of those narrative and literary models which are available within his frame of cultural reference (2001a p. 120). He cautions against taking the source-critical method too far, and especially against the argument that if a text can be proven to display intertextuality and outside influence, it must be essentially a 'forgery'. There are obvious hagiographic parallels in the two Óláfr sagas, and 'borrowed' material does appear to constitute a large portion of the episodes in question. However, it may not be entirely fair or accurate to say that nothing in the accounts can derive from native tradition, as certain details regarding the idols and the *hof* do not appear to have any obvious correspondences in hagiographic literature or the Bible, and as we have seen, Norse traditions about cult buildings as a whole have recently received strong support from archaeology. The accuracy of this Norse tradition with regard to idols will be discussed below in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Thematic analysis

At the end of Chapter 1, a summary was provided of the archaeological record of the sites under study, which emphasised a few common constituent elements and traits. The previous chapter has provided an overview and discussion of a variety of Norse texts in different genres which have been used as sources to pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia. From these texts we will extract a selection of central motifs which relate to pre-Christian cult and cult buildings. These are the *hof* itself, the *høgrgr*, the high seat – and especially the high seat posts, the large ring, the *stallr*, the *stafr*, and the idols. This section of the thesis will consider each of these in turn and attempt to evaluate to what extent there can be seen to be corroboration between the material record of pre-Christian religion and the descriptions of it in the written sources.

The *hof*

We will begin by discussing the cult building itself. This is a broad topic, so for the sake of clarity, this section will be divided into subsections to address the various aspects of the cult building: size, layout, construction, accessibility, maintenance, and finds. The focus will here be on the cult building *qua* building, and elements of cultic inventory (such as *stallar*, *stafar* and idols) will be discussed separately.

Size

Several texts describe pre-Christian cult buildings as large edifices. Both *Eyrbyggja*, *Vatnsdæla*, and *Njáls saga* use the word *mikit* to describe the *hof*. However, archaeological excavations have shown that the size of cult buildings varied greatly, as even the handful of sites described here demonstrates. Further, this variation notwithstanding, cult houses were always much smaller than the main dwelling house, or hall (Jørgensen 2009 p. 349). Some buildings uncovered by archaeology and originally believed to be *hof* have since been reinterpreted and deemed likely to be dwelling houses or halls. This was the case with the large house uncovered at Gamla Uppsala (Sundqvist 2016 pp. 125-127), as well as at Hofstaðir, Iceland. Such halls might nevertheless have served cultic functions, and the one at Hofstaðir certainly did (Lucas and McGovern 2007 p. 8). The possibility of smaller houses serving *both* functions, as free-standing representative space and cult building, has also been intriguingly raised by the ceremonial building at Uppåkra.

These different potential *loci* for cult actions – specialised cult buildings, multifunctional buildings, and the dwelling houses themselves – may in some measure account for the

insistence of medieval authors upon large cult buildings in places where none can be found. The flexibility of pre-Christian religion in terms of ritual location would have presented a strong contrast to the veritable ritual monopoly enjoyed by Christian churches and may have prompted some authors to interpret every building in which religious ritual could be performed as a “temple”. Alternatively, the impressive religious structures of Icelandic saga may be due to a desire on the part of medieval Icelandic writers to portray their ancestors (though pagan) as devout men and women, in anticipation of their eventual conversion, as has been argued for *Eyrbyggja saga*.

Layout

The Norse sources are similarly unhelpful in regard to the layout of cult buildings and do not provide much detail which might enable us to judge their veracity. The description in *Eyrbyggja saga* indicates a rectangular building, i.e. a longhouse construction, with a door in one of the long walls, near the gable end. This does partially tally with, for instance, the floor plan of the house at Uppåkra. However, this house had not just one door, but three, of which two were placed across from each other near the gable. Again, the cult houses excavated in recent decades differ widely in this respect, including as regards the number and placement of their entrances. Any one building’s correspondence with saga descriptions must therefore be assumed to be coincidental. That said, the model – if any – for the floor plan outlined in *Eyrbyggja* is not immediately obvious. Norwegian stone churches from the Middle Ages generally had their main entrance in the gable wall, though they did also typically have entrances in the southern and, sometimes, in the northern wall (Ekroll and Stige 2000 p. 21).

Eyrbyggja saga places the high seat posts immediately inside the door, marking the beginning of the protected or sacred space (*þar var allt friðarstaðr fyrir innan*) (Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þorðarson 1935 p. 8). There is little reason to treat this information as accurate. Assuming that the identification of the *þndvegi* as the high seat and the *þndvegissúlur* as the high seat posts is not erroneous, these should properly be situated in the hall (see e.g. Herschend 1996). In order to rule out the possibility of a dual-function building, we may note that the *hof* as described in *Eyrbyggja saga* has no hall-like characteristics – in addition to the explicit comparisons to a church, there is no mention of benches or any kind of seating, and there is no mention of a hearth. As will be elaborated below, the high seat posts here appear to be misplaced.

All the sagas which were discussed above assert that the *hof* contained idols and one or several *stallar*, but they mention little else about their interiors. The function of the *stallr* or *stalli* is also not uniform across the sagas, referring to an altar-like structure in *Eyrbyggja saga* and to the bases or plinths of idols in the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Óláfs saga helga* and *Hákonar saga*. This situation generally also prevails in other sagas. The description of the *hof* in *Kjalnesinga saga* closely resembles those of several other sagas, most notably *Eyrbyggja* (Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959 p. 7). Unusually, the *hof* in *Hákonar saga* has a central hearth at which the ceremonial meal is prepared and around which there appears to be seating. This arrangement is typically found in the hall. This is in stark contrast to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Óláfs saga helga*. Here, the focus is on the victory of the conversion kings over paganism, and so the *hof* appears first and foremost as the place where idols are kept, and no further description is provided. Given the evidence from Uppåkra, it is tempting to suggest that the possibility of multifunctional buildings was in some degree remembered in medieval Iceland. It is equally possible, however, that Snorri's decision to locate the sacrificial meal inside the 'temple' was a matter of narrative streamlining.

Construction method

One point upon which the written sources do not preserve much information, but where archaeology has been more informative, is the construction methods used to build cult buildings. If only a few texts provide information on the internal features of a *hof*, description of the outside is even more sparse. Adam of Bremen relates in his *Gesta* that a golden chain hanging from the gables decorated the outside of the temple at Uppsala, whose glitter made the building visible to travellers even at a distance (*Catena aurea templum circumdat pendens supra domus fastigia lateque rutilans advenientibus*) (Tschan 1959 p. 208). More immediately interesting for our purposes, *Völuspá* 7 and *Grímnismál* 16 both associate cult with tall buildings. They relate how the gods *hǫrg oc hof há timbroðo*; ([they] high-timbered *hǫrg* and *hof*) and that Njǫrðr *hátimbroðom hǫrgi ræðr* ([he] rules over a high-timbered *hǫgr*) (Neckel-Kuhn 1983 pp. 2; 59).

The recurrence of *hátimbroðr* ('high-timbered') in an alliterative construction with either *hof*, *hǫgr* or both is especially intriguing, as it indicates a poetic convention. It is tempting to see this as evidence that the association was based on historical fact, as there are many other ways to produce alliterative constructions with *hof* and *hǫgr* – one such is found in *Vafþrúðnismál* 38, where Njǫrðr is said to rule over *hofom oc hǫrgom* [...] *hunnmǫrgom* (*hof* and *hǫrgar* numbering in the hundreds) (Neckel-Kuhn 1983 pp. 52). A potential problem with this

interpretation, of course, is that a *hǫrgr* very likely was not timbered, even if it could perhaps be tall. The association of *hǫrgr* with concepts like (*há*)*timbraðr* in poetry and prose may perhaps have come about secondarily because of the persistent alliterative linking of *hof* and *hǫrgr*. (The character of the *hǫrgr* will be more fully discussed below.)

In this area as in all others, pre-Christian cult buildings in Scandinavia were deeply heterogeneous: some were stave-built, some log-built, some stood on sills, and some had posts dug into the ground (see Chapter 1). A recurring trait, however, appears to be that where both a dwelling house and a cult building can be identified on a farm, they were often constructed differently. Thus, though there is no one-to-one correlation between a given construction method and cultic buildings, their construction could nevertheless set them apart. There may also be a connection between stave construction and buildings with cultic or special status. The ceremonial building at Uppåkra, the hall at Tissø, and the cult house at Ranheim were all stave-built, as well as the hall at Järrestad. As we have seen, several cult houses also featured unusually sturdy wall constructions, either in the form of very thick posts or an unusual number of posts. These sturdy foundations may have sometimes served an architectural purpose, as both the hall at Tissø and the ceremonial building at Uppåkra are believed to have been unusually tall structures. This construction method may also have had a symbolic or ideological significance.

Access

In addition to having a special construction, the cult building also appears to have been set apart from the main dwelling house on the farm through stricter access regulation. On many farms where a cult building could be traced, it was surrounded by a stout fence or palisade. This was the case at both Tissø and Järrestad and possibly at Uppåkra, and similar fenced-in houses have been found at Toftegård, Lisbjerg, and Erritsø (Jørgensen 2009 p. 331). We may imagine that these fences served a symbolic as well as a practical purpose. In addition to keeping the cult building and the surrounding cultic area safe, they established the limits of a sacred space on the farm, an inviolate sphere to which perhaps only select people were admitted at specific times.

This is a point on which the archaeological record and our written sources show a surprising degree of agreement. As we have seen, *Njáls saga* claims that the *hof* of Dala-Guðbrandr and the earl at Hlaðir was kept closed at all times, save when the earl came to visit. Why the presence of the earl was required is not made clear. Perhaps he was regarded as the chief *goði*

among the two, or perhaps the opening of a jointly owned *hof* required both *goðar* to be present. The locked *hof* is something of a commonplace in Norse sources, and appears in other sagas as well, such as *Droplaugarsona saga* and the very late *Fljótsdæla saga*. In both sagas the same anecdote is related, where the sons of Droplaugr, lost in a storm, come upon the *hof* of a man named Spak-Bersi. In the former saga, the *hof* is only locked, while in the latter it is also surrounded by a tall fence with a gate (Jón Jóhannesson 1950 pp. 146; 295). Both sagas also relate that the *hof* contains significant riches, which appears to be the reason for the security measures. It is possible, however, that this pragmatic explanation is secondary and exists to explain a pre-existing tradition of locked cult buildings.

As e.g. Theodore Andersson (1988 pp. 276-280) has shown, learned Icelanders had access to a variety of biblical and hagiographical sources which described lavish pagan temples and idols of silver and gold. The closed *hof*, however, does not appear to have an exact parallel in any of these. Nor would it have been familiar from the medieval church, which – in its capacity of a sanctuary – kept its doors open. This is not to say that the idea of protecting or restricting access to the holy spaces would not have been familiar to medieval Christian writers. The Temple in Jerusalem was closed to gentiles, and the Holy of Holies was accessible only to the priest. Likewise, in a Christian church, the choir was reserved for the clergy. However, neither of these are a satisfying fit for the arrangement described in, for instance, *Njáls saga*, where the cult building as a whole is kept closed except for those occasions when both of its owners are present to preside. The Norse *hof* is also typically located on an individual's property and privately owned, as indeed many of the recently excavated cult buildings also appear to have been. It is quite possible, therefore, that these sources, though late (in the case of *Fljótsdæla*, extremely late) do in fact preserve a memory of genuine pre-Christian customs.

The related concept of the sanctity of the sacred space is also expressed in several sagas. In the aforementioned *Fljótsdæla saga*, the sons of Droplaugr break into the *hof* and trash it, after which violation it is reported that the storm did not abate for two weeks. (In *Droplaugarsona saga*, this punishment is triggered by the men walking around the building in the wrong direction – with the sun rather than against it. While we should hesitate to uncritically link isolated phenomena in archaeology and literature, we may remember that the oldest phase of the farm at Tissø offered indications that movement in the sacred space and around the cult building may have been ritually regulated.) *Landnámabók* relates that weapons are not permitted inside the *hof*, and in *Víga-Glúms saga*, Freyr is said to not permit

guilty men to stay where his *hof* is (Jakob Bendiktsson 1968 p. 102; Jón Jóhannesson 1950 pp. 146, 295)

As we have seen, the *Northumbrian Priests' Law* bans the veneration of sacred enclosures around natural features like trees, rocks and springs, while *Gutalagen* prohibits the building of *stafgarþer*. The nature of these is not fully clear, owing to the uncertainty around the word *staf*. Olsen (1966 p. 84) read it as enclosures made up of staves or poles surrounding a sacred area. In conjunction with the ban on *staf eða stalla* in *Eiðsifabingslög*, Olof Sundqvist has suggested that *staf* may refer to a pole carved with the image of a god, such as the one described by Ibn Fadlan (2016 p. 280). If this reading were applied to *Gutalagen*, *stafgarþer* may indicate fences surrounding such idols. Finally, to complete the list, we may again mention the *véþond* of *Egils saga*, which are also attested in *Frostaþingslög* and delineate the inviolable or sacred space of the *þing* (Sundqvist 2016 p. 299).

Thanks to the testimony of archaeology and the early medieval laws, then, we may likely conclude that enclosed sacred spaces were a historical reality. The appearance of such enclosures in the prose texts, if one can rule out Biblical or hagiographic influence, should therefore be viewed as an example of the ability of these texts to preserve echoes of historical practice. This realisation ought to have an impact on our evaluation of the prose material.

Maintenance

Certain organisational aspects of pre-Christian cult which are known to us from the textual sources, such as the maintenance of cult buildings, cannot in and of themselves be identified in the archaeological record. However, regulation of maintenance formed part of a larger social structure surrounding cult buildings, several aspects of which have been corroborated by archaeology. Keeping in mind that pre-Christian cult was by no means homogeneous, we may now state that cultic structures in the form of wooden houses were built on the land of the local ruling élite and likely presided over by this élite. They were often enclosed or surrounded by a carefully demarcated sacred space, within which sacrifices could take place, and may have been kept locked when not in use. These are all aspects of cult organisation which are reflected in medieval Norse sources, although no single source has preserved every aspect.

As regards maintenance, we are told in *Landnámabók* and *Eyrbyggja saga* that the owner of the *hof* was responsible for its upkeep. In the case of joint ownership, the financial responsibilities would be split evenly between the owners. This arrangement was purportedly

agreed on by Þorsteinn Þorskabátr and Þorgrímr Kjallaksson and by the *Geitlendingar* and Tungu-Oddr (Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935 p. 17; Jakob Benediktsson 1968 p. 78). Their testimony may be corroborated by the runic ring from Forsa, which has been proposed to outline the fines which the responsible party must pay if the upkeep of the *vé* is neglected. Thus, it is possible that this reference might also reflect a real practice. It will be argued below that the great oath ring weighing either two or 20 *aurar* referred to in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Ulfljótslög* might in fact be the distorted echo of several different rings. Given the specification of a required weight, it is possible that this ring was separate from the oath ring and was in fact intended as payment, perhaps towards the upkeep of the *hof*. Most of the cult buildings discovered in recent decades were not built on sills but with posts dug into the earth, which would necessitate regular replacements (Söderberg 2003 p. 123).

Finds

As we have seen in our review of sites, the find material in excavated cult buildings is varied and often of an unusual character, involving objects as disparate as door handles, smithing equipment, animal skulls, and gold foils in the hundreds. This latter category of object is the most immediately interesting for the present purpose, as it is the only one of which an echo may have been preserved in writing. *Vatnsdæla saga* relates the story of a *landnámsmaðr* named Ingimundr and how he was ultimately persuaded to settle in Iceland. Initially reluctant to leave Norway, Ingimundr is told by a Sámi seeress that he will settle in Iceland. Furthermore, she tells him that an object which was given to him by King Haraldr and which is precious to him has vanished from his purse and that he will find it again when he builds his house in Iceland. This is a small silver image (*hlutr*, a word which otherwise means “lot for divination” or “part of a whole”) of Freyr, the god to whom Ingimundr is most devoted. When Ingimundr eventually relents and goes to Iceland, he finds the image of Freyr when he begins digging the post-holes for his high seat posts – arguably the most powerful place in the building (Einar Ól. Sveinson 1939 pp. 26-33, 42; Males 2013 p. 123).

Gold foils – little squares of gold stamped with images – have been found in connection with a series of high-status buildings interpreted as halls or cultic buildings. Examples include at Helgö in Mälaren, Slöinge in Halland, Borg in Lofoten, and as we have seen, Uppåkra in Scania. Occasionally, gold foil figures will be found near the presumed location of the high seat. Because of their connection with buildings which enjoyed a special status and because their motifs have been interpreted mythologically, the presence of gold foils has often been interpreted as indicating a building with cultic significance. Their presence could also be

viewed as an indicator that building-cult rituals have taken place, which would likely still imply that the building enjoyed a special status but need not signify that it belongs to a specific type.

One of the most influential interpretations of gold foil figures is that they depict mythical motifs, and especially that the figures which show a man and a woman may represent the mythical marriage (*hieros gamos*) of Freyr and Gerðr. Because ruling dynasties like the Ynglinga dynasty and the earls at Hlaðir reckoned their line back to a mythical union between a god and a giantess – Freyr and Gerðr and Óðinn and Skaði, respectively – the depositions of gold foil figures were interpreted as part of a ritual strategy on the part of the ruling élite to legitimise their position by invoking this mythic origin (Sundqvist 2016 pp. 408-414). It is just possible that the very specific reference to an image of Freyr in a post-hole in *Vatnsdæla saga* represents a distorted memory of post-hole depositions of mythic images in precious metals.

Conclusion

There are few detailed descriptions of *hof* in the saga literature, either of their exterior or their interior. As we have seen, those full descriptions which do exist (most notably *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Hákonar saga*) show considerable Christian influence, both in terms of the individual elements of the description itself and the narrative models into which it is embedded. The grounds for comparison with other source types is therefore quite poor when it comes to aspects like the physical appearance of the *hof*. Some details which are provided by the sagas can be confirmed through archaeology, however. One of these is that *hof* were often situated on wealthy farms and presided over by the local élite. Another is the existence of sanctified enclosures, which could surround the *hof* itself or other sacred spaces, and the likely closure of the *hof* when not in use. There is a possible echo of tall cult buildings in the Eddic poetry, which would seem to be corroborated by archaeology, and *Vatnsdæla saga* may preserve a memory of gold foil depositions in connection with building cult rituals. The possibility that the *hof* housed idols will be discussed below.

The idols

Though not much is said in most Old Norse written sources about the interiors of *hof*, they generally contain idols. It is common in the saga literature to encounter several idols inside a *hof*. Among these gods, Þórr is usually present. Sometimes, as in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, only Þórr is named among a plurality of gods. Adam of Bremen provides a trinity of sorts consisting of Þórr, Freyr and Óðinn (Tschan 1959 p. 208). In *Njáls saga* we meet Þórr alongside the obscure goddesses Irpa and Þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr.

Some saga literature gives us an impression that the gods are instantly recognisable to an outsider. Hrápr of *Njáls saga*, breaking into a *hof* he has never entered before, has no trouble identifying Þórr, Irpa, and Þorgerðr. The implication is that, like Þórr with his hammer, other gods also had conventional and recognisable attributes. Such iconographic convention is also hinted at by Adam of Bremen, but the fact that the gods are presented in Adam's account with the attributes of their Classical equivalents – a blunt weapon for “Jupiter”, an *ingens priapus* for the fertility god, and weapons for “Mars” – raises the possibility that Adam was working here from his knowledge of classical paganism (Schmeidler 1917 p. 257). In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Óláfs saga helga* and *Njáls saga* we are informed that the idols are as large as a grown man. They wear rings on their arms, and Þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr is dressed in a headscarf or wimple given to her by her worshippers. This creates an impression of lifelike and detailed wooden statues.

As we have seen, the gods are frequently described as resting on plinths or bases or seated. The great Þórr of the Guðbrandsdalr farmers stands on a platform (*hjallr*) on which he is carried when he is outside, and the various gods in Jarnskeggi's *hof* in Þrændaløg were placed on *stallar* around the walls. In Adam of Bremen's account, the gods are all depicted as seated on thrones, and in *Njáls saga*, Þorgerðr is said to be seated, while Þórr is placed in a cart or wagon. By contrast to these lavish *hof*, what little information we are given about Þórólfr Mostrarskegg's idol in *Eyrbyggja saga* seems to indicate less opulent circumstances. Though virtually nothing is said of the idol itself, the saga makes reference to a *stalli* upon which it had stood but makes no mention of offerings of precious metals. Of Þórólfr's high seat posts it is later said that one of them had a likeness of Þórr carved into it. It is possible, as will be argued, that this piece of information should properly refer to his idol.

References in law texts and contemporary sources may indicate idols of a similarly simple design. The famous 921 AD travel account of Ibn Fadlan, envoy from the Abbasid Caliph to the Khazars, describes the customs of the Rusiyyah, or Rūs, whom Ibn Fadlan encountered

near the Volga and who have been tentatively supposed to be of Scandinavian extraction. The account includes a description of a pre-Christian idol, before which the Rūs are said to make sacrifices for good fortune in trade. This idol is not figurative but consists simply of a tall wooden pole on which is carved the face of a man (Montgomery 2000 p. 9). As we have seen, it has been proposed that the *staf* of the early medieval Scandinavian laws may have referred to a similar cultic object. Post-holes with no apparent roof-supporting function inside cultic buildings at Uppåkra, Ranheim, and Lunda have been proposed to relate to high seat posts or to such images of gods (Sundqvist 2016 pp. 237-238).

Some likely depictions of gods from the Viking Age do exist. Three small figurines depicting standing men have been found at Lunda, Södermanland, Sweden. Two of the miniatures have clearly defined arms, legs, torso, and head, as well as in one case a phallus. The third is more impressionistic and has no arms. The excavating archaeologists have argued that these may represent miniatures of larger statues. If this is the case, the larger versions may have functioned as idols. Other likely cultic miniatures have been discovered in other parts of the Norse area. A bearded figure with a phallus sitting cross-legged and wearing a conical hat has been found at Rällinge, also in Lunda. A figure seated on a chair from Eyrarland, Iceland, wears a similar a conical helmet and is shown holding onto his forked beard, which terminates in a shape like an inverted cross. From Lejre comes another seated figure flanked by two birds which has been dubbed “Odin from Lejre”, but whose female attire may indicate a depiction of a goddess (Sundqvist 2016 pp. 266-272).

Olof Sundqvist has argued that such miniatures may provide us with an idea of what pre-Christian idols in Scandinavia may have looked like and emphasises the detail that some texts describe the gods as seated (2016 p. 285). Given the level of technical skill attained by some Viking Age woodcarvers (the contents of the Oseberg ship grave alone could attest to this), it is certainly possible that at least some idols may have been fairly elaborate. However, the connection between miniatures and larger idols remains hypothetical, and we do not yet have access to any conclusively identified pre-Christian idols. These may well have had different stylistic features. It seems plausible, however, that idols existed and that they were carved into the likeness of gods, perhaps with varying degrees of realism and elaboration, and that the post-holes of uncertain function discovered in some pre-Christian cultic buildings are related to idols.

The high seat and its posts

What were high seat posts?

Despite the prominence which it is accorded in Norse literature, we have no detailed description of a high seat. It is generally thought of as the chieftain's seat of honour inside the hall building, but scholarly opinion has been divided as to how exactly it looked and where in the hall it was located. While the high seat posts appear to form part of an architectural feature, uncertainty remains as to their function and whether they should be regarded as one of the many pairs of load-bearing posts which held up the ceiling in a Viking Age hall. There has also been some debate regarding the relationship between the two terms *hásæti* and *ϕndvegi*, which are frequently taken to be synonymous, both meaning "high seat".

Herschend considers that the original placement of the high seat was in the side aisle of the hall, along the long wall, and that its "royal" placement ("*den konungsliga placeringen*") on the short wall was a later development (Herschend 1997 pp. 50-51). The same was argued by Hjalmar Falk, who posited that the word *hásæti* along with the move away from the northern long wall dated to the reign of Óláfr kyrri and were modeled after the English *héahsetl*, a raised seat with a footrest and room for two to three persons, situated at the innermost gable wall. Before this shift, as attested by "*den ältesten Liedern*", the dominant term was *ϕndvegi* (Falk 1973 p. 538). The *ϕndvegi*, by contrast, was found on every farm and was not a high seat in the strictest sense, but only a seat of honour for the head of the household ("*ein Ehrensitz des Hausherrn*") (*ibid.* p. 539).

This chronology agrees with the etymology of *ϕndvegi*, which is "seat across from" ("*sitz gegenüber*"; de Vries 2000 p. 687). If *ϕndvegi* is the older term, it might preserve more of the religious connotations of the high seat. This might explain why it is only *ϕndvegi* which combines with *súla*, and nearly exclusively *ϕndvegi* which is used in connection with high seat post divination (ONP, *s.v.*) Against this reading, the objection has been made that it relies too heavily on literary sources and does not sufficiently account for architectural variation (Bödl 2005 p. 165).

In his recent treatment of the high seat posts, Klaus Bödl appears to follow Hans Kuhn's assertion that the word refers to the middlemost load-bearing posts in a three-aisled hall, and the posts need not be part of the high seat at all. Because to bring load-bearing posts to Iceland would necessitate the demolition of the house, he further considers that the commonplace saga motif of divination using the high seat posts could not have been common practice in reality (2005 p. 165-166).

While the percentage of settlers who in fact demolished their previous houses before making the voyage cannot be assessed, it is clear from the archaeological record that Iron Age houses were in fact dismantled and the posts pulled up when farmsteads were abandoned. The second argument adduced by Bödl against a historical practice of high seat post divination – that it would not be feasible to locate the posts once they had been thrown overboard – can be addressed with reference to *Landnáma*, as the accounts of several settlers in fact mention that it took them months, or even years, to locate their posts (Bödl 2005 p. 166; Jakob Benediktsson 1968 pp. 42; 302; 312; 317).

The sheer number of attestations of the practice would also seem to speak against pure authorial imagination: besides Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, *Landnámabók* contains accounts of six other settlers who are said to have done the same (Jakob Benediktsson 1968 pp. 42; 232; 302; 312; 317; 371). It is of course possible, as has been suggested by Wellendorf, that the motif served to portray the earliest Icelandic settlers as devout men and that this may in some measure account for its frequency in *Landnámabók* (2010 p. 18). The historicity of the motif cannot be conclusively determined, and it is not of crucial importance in this context. However, the importance of the high seat appears to be corroborated by the archaeology of sites like Järrestad, and this would seem to lend some support to the notion of the high seat posts having a cultic function (Söderberg 2003 p. 129; Larsson 2006 p. 251).

High seat posts as world pillars

Bödl, echoing earlier scholarship, has argued that the high seat posts should be viewed as the long-searched-for Northern representation of the concept of the world pillar, the *Weltsäule* (2005 pp. 166-176). This argument is largely based on 18th century descriptions of Saami religious practices in northern Norway and the belief that these had incorporated significant loans from pre-Christian Germanic religion, thus preserving aspects of that religion into the early modern period. The sources in question depict an upright pillar associated with the god Veralden radien or Veralden olmai, whose name scholars have associated with the epithet *veraldargoð* (“world god”), denoting Freyr.

The identification of the Norse high seat posts as world pillars hinges on the fact that the Saami conception of the *Weltsäule* incorporated the idea of a “pole nail”. This was an iron nail driven into the top of the post, which symbolised the North Star and thus the point at which the firmament was thought to be affixed. Linking this nail with the as-yet unexplained Norse phenomenon of *reginnaglar*, Bödl, following Axel Olrik, sees this as corroboration of

the theory that the Saami world pillar and the Norse high seat posts shared similar religious and cosmological functions (2005 pp. 171-172).

There are weaknesses in this argument, perhaps primary of which is that the world pillar, by its very nature, ought to appear in the singular. There cannot be more than one centre of the universe, and to posit otherwise is to fundamentally break the metaphor. High seat posts (*ǫndvegissúlur*), conversely, exclusively appear in pairs. When the word is, occasionally, attested in the singular, the context makes it clear that the *súla* in question has been separated from its twin. Further, while the placement and nature of *reginnaglar* are never made entirely clear, they too appear in the plural in the *Eyrbyggja* example (on which Bödl bases most of his argument). As such, they do not appear to correspond well to the single deliberately placed pole nail of Saami tradition.

It is also unlikely that *reginnaglar* were driven into the top of the post – given their number and visibility, it is more likely that they decorated its sides. While this may seem a trivial detail, matters of directionality and placement in cosmological metaphor are unlikely to be arbitrary. What we are then left with are two motifs involving nails in posts. This is a combination of objects which is natural enough that the two motifs may well have arisen independently, and the similarity between them is likely to be coincidental. It is of course possible that the *Eyrbyggja* author was ignorant of the proper function of *reginnaglar*, but this does not strengthen the argument.

Bödl's approach to the singular/plural dilemma with regard to the Weltsäule is equally problematic. He observes that when the dwelling of “'archaischer' Menschen” is perceived as an *imago mundi* and this architecture changes, one of two things happen: either the cosmology changes with it, or the house is no longer perceived as a microcosm of the universe, and the two are uncoupled (2005 p. 174). Presumably, this is what he considers to have occurred in Scandinavia. This still leaves questions, however, as the three-aisled longhouse had been the dominant form of dwelling house in Scandinavia since the late Bronze Age, so it is difficult to imagine an architecturally inspired cosmology featuring a central pillar in Iron Age Scandinavia (Webley 2008 pp. 49-51). Perhaps the argument is that the saga authors' use of the plural is in error – but this usage is widely attested, in fact universal, and would seem to have a better claim to credibility than a hypothetical lone *ǫndvegissúla* whose function and relation to the high seat we do not know. (This is not to say that there may not be potential candidates for a Nordic representation of a world pillar – allegedly pagan objects in the form of upright poles will be discussed below in connection with the *stafr*.)

High seat posts as idol-like objects

While most written sources agree that the place of idols was in the *hof* and that of the high seat posts was in the hall, *Eyrbyggja saga* raises some questions about the relationship between these two categories. Before Þórólfr Mostrarskegg's departure from Norway, a wooden idol of Þórr is introduced, standing upon a *stalli*. This idol is seemingly brought to Iceland, along with some of the soil on which it stood, but it is never mentioned again after Þórólfr's arrival. Upon Þórólfr's arrival, the likeness of Þórr is said to be carved on one of the high seat posts, with no mention of any carving on the other of the pair. Finally, the high seat posts are stated to stand in the *hof*, while the *stalli* on which Þórólfr had kept his idol of Þórr now serves as an altar, bearing an oath ring and sacrificial equipment. Around this – despite the apparently almost monotheistic beliefs of Þórólfr in the early part of the saga – “the gods” are arrayed against the walls (Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þorðarson 1935 pp. 7-9).

It is possible that the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* – the only source in which this curious arrangement is attested – was attempting to combine material from conflicting traditions. The description of a multitude of gods arrayed around the *hof* calls to mind Snorri's descriptions of *hof* in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Hákonar saga* (and, as we have seen, the appearance of a *hlautbolli* with a *hlauttein* suggests that the *Eyrbyggja* author was familiar with Snorri's work). In other words, the general layout of Þórólfr's *hof* appears to be greatly influenced by that of a medieval church and also by Snorri's descriptions of two different *hof*. This may account for the sudden appearance of a multitude of gods and the changing role of the *stalli*.

Arguably, the disappearance of the idol and its reappearance in the form of a carved high seat post may have come about in a similar way. An Icelander writing in the thirteenth century would likely no longer have intimate knowledge of the precise functions of high seat posts. The motif of the carved post may have come down to the author as part of a tradition about Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, and he may have wanted to relegate all apparently cultic items to the *hof*, thereby maintaining the expected separation between the sacred *hof* and the profane dwelling house, as in a Christian context and as in hagiographic descriptions of pagan temples. Alternatively, it is possible that the likeness of Þórr on the post was adduced by the author in order to make sense of the divinatory role of the high seat posts, which would otherwise leave them in a kind of limbo between sacred and profane. As we have seen, it has also been argued that the *Eyrbyggja* author may have wished to strengthen the impression of Þórólfr's unique bond with Þórr and may have associated this act of divination with him for this reason.

Thus, while the exact process behind the saga's creation cannot be ascertained, a close examination shows that the descriptions of Þórólfr's pagan practice in the early chapters of *Eyrbyggja*, especially as they relate to the high seat posts and the idols, do not constitute a coherent whole. Therefore, the unusual positioning of the high seat posts inside the *hof* in *Eyrbyggja saga* should likely be regarded as dubious, and the high seat posts should not be regarded as idols, nor as belonging to the *hof*.

Another question which must be considered with regard to the high seat posts is their relationship to the worship of the pre-Christian pantheon. Bödl and Clunies Ross, following Turville-Petre, sees the high seat posts as connected with the cult of Þórr (Bödl 2005 p. 176; Clunies Ross 2012 pp. 16-17). This interpretation is closely connected with the reading of the high seat posts as world pillars, and the argument relies heavily on *Eyrbyggja saga* (Turville-Petre 1972 pp. 24-27). Because of its apparent confusion over pre-Christian cult inventory and its uses, *Eyrbyggja* does not provide compelling evidence for the veneration of Þórr through the posts of the high seat, and as we have seen, the case for seeing the posts as world pillars is tenuous. In this instance, it would appear that scholars face the choice of either accepting a degree of uncertainty regarding the function of the posts or of risking to project notions of questionable relevance onto them. For lack of further indications, I refrain from attributing to the posts any specific connections to individual gods or to cosmological perceptions.

The high seat and archaeology

No high seat posts have been securely identified in the archaeological record. This may not be altogether surprising as they were quite likely not movable property, but part of the wooden structure of the house itself, in much the same way as the benches in the hall. This makes it likely that they would have been pulled up along with the other posts when a house containing a high seat was torn down, or – in case of a house fire – would have burned along with the rest of the building.

One attempt to identify a load-bearing post in an Iron Age structure as a high seat post has been made by Lars Larsson at Uppåkra. As we have seen, there is some uncertainty surrounding whether the ceremonial building at Uppåkra should be regarded as a hall or a cult building, or perhaps a multifunctional building which at different times served both functions. Around the post-hole nearest the north-western entrance of this building was found a large number of gold foils. It has been suggested that the post was originally decorated with these foils, and – in line with Bödl's argument about *Weltsäulen* – that it represented the world tree, Yggdrasill, and was decorated with *reginnaglar* (Larsson 2006 p. 251).

The identification of this post as a high seat post would seem to be corroborated by the assertion that Þórólfr's high seat posts were placed close by the entrance to his *hof*, which was positioned near the end of the side wall. However, *Eyrbyggja's* clear paralleling of Þórólfr's *hof* with a church lends little credence to the layout details presented in the saga. There is also some difficulty involved in conceiving of the gold foils as *naglar*, as they have nothing resembling a spike, and the word *nagli* is elsewhere consistently used for actual nails (Clunies Ross 2012 p. 17).

Other possibilities have been suggested, however. Mikael Males (2013) has pointed out that several of the artefacts recovered from the Oseberg ship grave, dated to the first half of the 9th century, prominently feature decorative nails. He especially focuses on the five posts carved into the shape of dragon heads with long necks. We do not yet know what they were used for, but two of the five are decorated with a large number of flower-shaped silver nails. The heads all have open slots in the base, below the necks of the beasts, where handles were originally attached, which would have allowed them to be carried, but also to be fastened to a larger wooden construction – such as a house, or a seat (Males 2013 p. 117).

Though there may not have been a connection between the high seat posts and the Norse pantheon, it appears that they were nevertheless considered to have power. Their use in divination to guide the founding of a new farm indicates that they were thought of as linked, probably in a *pars pro toto* relationship, with the farm itself, and with the power of the head of the household. As “divinely authorized symbols of chieftainly authority” they helped to legitimise the claim of the *landnámsmaðr* to his chosen plot of land (Clunies Ross 2012 p. 16).

Such a prominent role for the high seat is consistent with the theory proposed for the magnate farm at Järrestad, namely that the enclosure surrounding the *hof* outside the hall was deliberately aligned with the placement of the high seat inside the hall, thus connecting the two spheres of the ruler's power – the sacred and the profane. Anders Hultgård has argued in his analysis of *Hákonar saga* that for a ruler or king to sit in his high seat during a *blót* thus has a clear cultic significance, beyond simply fulfilling the customary representative duties of the lord towards his subjects (1993 p. 226). Like drinking the toasts to the gods and eating the sacrificial meal, it is a cultic act, which the King refuses to perform.

The ring

Having shown that the ring is one cultic element which co-occurs in the archaeological material and in the written sources, we must consider whether the ring-shaped objects in the archaeological record are in fact comparable with the rings of the sagas and *Eddas*.

The symbolism of the ring

The ring was an object with great symbolic power in medieval and pre-Christian Scandinavia and appears in different contexts with different functions (Brink 1996; Eriksen 2015 p. 73; Simek 1996 p. 312). In the *Eddas*, priceless and magical rings function as symbols of wealth and rulership. Snorri's *Edda* presents the story of how the dwarf Brokkr fashioned for Óðinn a gold arm ring from which eight identical rings would drip every ninth night. Such objects in Norse story are often named, and from the very moment of its forging, this ring is called Draupnir, "the dripper" (Faulkes 2005 p. 42). At Baldr's funeral, Óðinn is said to have laid Draupnir on Baldr's funeral pyre as part of his grave goods (Faulkes 2005 p. 47). *Reginismál* in the Poetic *Edda* relates how the gods Óðinn, Loki and Hœnir capture the wealthy dwarf Andvari and rob him of all his gold in order to pay the wergild for their inadvertent murder of Otr, the son of Hreiðmarr. Andvari gives up all his gold save one thing: the ring Andvaranaut, "Andvari's treasure". When Loki takes it from him by force, Andvari places a curse on his whole treasure – a curse which ultimately leads the Völsungar and Gjúkungar to eradicate themselves through blood feud and treachery (Neckel-Kuhn 1983, pp. 173-174).

When rings appear in the skaldic poetry, either as part of kennings or alone, they are also part of the range of motifs which are connected with wealth and with power. The golden ring is a frequent symbol of the generosity of a ruler in praise poetry; a virtue which was essential in a good leader. Golden rings were given by rulers to their men, and thereby also symbolise fealty. When neck and arm rings are found by archaeologists, they are generally interpreted as indicators of rank and status (Eriksen 2015 p. 74). Rings on swords from the Migration and Merovingian periods are likewise interpreted as signs of the relationship between a lord and his retainers. These were thought by earlier scholars to be swords on which oaths could be sworn (Brink 1996 p. 43).

Depictions of human figures with rings in their hands are also found on Gotlandic picture stones such as the Tängelgård stone, which shows a whole procession of people, apparently warriors, holding rings aloft as they follow a mounted warrior. On Stora Hammars IV, a person can also be seen holding a ring (Brink 1996 p. 44). Similarly, a small bronze figurine from the Viking Age fortress in Daugmale in Latvia depicts a man in Scandinavian dress

holding a wreath or a ring in his hand. This figure has been tentatively interpreted as the dwarf Andvari with Andvaranaut or, in light of the picture stones, as a travelling companion for the journey to the afterlife (Brink 1996 p. 44; Roesdahl 1992 pp. 294-295). The former theory is perhaps lent some weight by the fact that a figure in a similar posture also appears on several of the so-called “Sigurðr” runestones (U 1163, possibly Gs 2, Gs 9, Gs 19). Like the figurine from Daugmale, these figures are often depicted facing to one side and holding the ring in the hand behind their back. The Hunninge picture stone shows a prone man holding a ring, which has been interpreted as the death of Sigurðr (Staecker 2006 pp. 365-367).

The symbol of the ring is also frequently found at intersection between the legal and religious domains and may appear in connection with the *þing* – for instance as an oath ring (Brink 1996 pp. 42-48). The cultic and judicial domains appear to have been closely connected in the pre-Christian period: legally binding oaths may have been made to the gods, as in *Atlakviða* and *Víga-Glúms saga*, among others (Neckel-Kuhn 1983 p. 245; Jónas Kristjánsson 1956 p. 85). Further, the *Landslög* and the *Frostþingslög* stipulate that the *þing* site be hedged about with *véþond* (“sacred bands”), whose name indicates an association with the sacred space (Keyser & Munch 1848 p. 10; Storm 1885 p. 26). A description of *véþond* is found in *Egils saga*, where they are said to be ropes drawn between poles of hazel: *En þar er dómurinn var settr, var vøllr slétt ok settar niðr heslistengr í vøllinn í hring, en lögð um útan snæri umhverfis* (“And where the court was convened there was level ground, and hazel poles stuck into the ground in a ring, and rope twined round the circumference”) (Sigurður Nordal 1933 p. 154). Inside this circle was the seat of the judges. The sanctity of this space is attested in several sagas. Also potentially of relevance for the present discussion, though more abstractly, *Guláþingslög* also specifies that the *þing* site has to be circular (*þinghringr*) (Keyser & Munch 1846 p. 80).

Rings on doors

In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, a large golden ring is said to hang on the door of the *hof* at Hlaðir. It is taken down by the king and gifted to Sigríðr, queen of Svíþjóð, whom he is courting. On the advice of her smiths, the queen has the ring broken up, and is furious to find that it is bronze in the middle (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941 p. 309). While such an extravagant door handle seems unlikely to be historical, even for the wealthy earl of Hlaðir, the association between ring-shaped handles and cult buildings apparently was. Two such door handles were found deposited in post-holes at the excavation of the hall-like cultic building in

Uppåkra, and another ring was found in a post-hole at the excavation of the cult house at Järrestad (Söderberg 2005, p. 233). The rings had likely hung on doors in the cult buildings and appeared to have been deliberately deposited in post-holes during the building's demolition.

Further, a stave-built house with a large ring-shaped door handle is depicted on the early 9th century Sparlösa rune stone. Eriksen (2015 p. 79) interprets this building as either a *hof* or a hall, and as has been shown, the stave building technique appears indeed to have had some connection with these house types. The great size of the ring on the Sparlösa stone, which Eriksen compares with the size of the Forsa ring, may reflect artistic convenience rather than real-life circumstances. But it nevertheless strengthens the impression that ring shaped door handles were a familiar feature on buildings of some note (Eriksen 2015 pp. 78-79). In fact, Eriksen notes that large iron rings and ring-shaped door handles have *exclusively* been found in connection with pre-Christian cult buildings or halls – that is, with buildings which enjoyed a special status and were associated to a greater degree with ritual behaviour (*ibid.*). Although this observation was made with regard to the ring handles from Uppåkra and Järrestad and the ring from Forsa, it can arguably be extended to also include the iron ring from Häckelsäng (see below). A stray find, the Häckelsäng ring was discovered near Vi in Hamrånge and was associated with several amulets as well as a miniature hammer, which points towards a cultic origin (Sundqvist 2016 pp. 396-397).

Rings and cultic buildings – one category?

It has been proposed that the rings from Uppåkra, Järrestad and Forsa all belong to the same category, namely that of door rings. Eriksen connects this special type of door handle with the ritual functions of doors, seeing doors as boundaries with legal and religious significance. Drawing on evidence from the sagas, she points to rituals like the *duradómr* (“door trial”), through which unwelcome revenants could be expelled from a dwelling (Eriksen 2015 p. 81). By contrast, Stefan Brink believes that the Forsa rune ring was not originally a door ring. He emphasises that the inscription covers the entire surface of the ring, and that the iron cramp used to fasten the ring to the door therefore always obscures some part of the writing. Due to this, he believes the cramp to be a later addition (Brink 1996 p. 40). It could be added that the ring also has writing on both sides – and it would be quite difficult to read the back once it was hung up. This does not preclude that the ring may have hung on a door at some point before the Christian period, but it does not seem to have been its original purpose.

Rather than serving as a door handle, then, Brink believes that the ring originally belonged to the local assembly place and *þing* site in nearby Hög parish (*ibid.*). To explore this theory, it may be relevant to compare Forsa more closely with the Häckelsäng ring, which is reminiscent of Forsa in appearance and find context. The Häckelsäng ring was discovered during road construction in 1887 in Hamrånge parish in Gästrikland – the province neighbouring Hälsingland, where the Forsa ring was found. It is made of iron, weighs 800 grams and measures 30 cm in diameter. Like the Forsa ring, it has been hammered flat towards the middle, giving it a sickle shape. The tapered ends of the ring hook around each other, forming a closure. Toward the middle, the metal has been shaped to form inward-facing hooks opening alternately to left and right. Viewed in pairs, they are reminiscent of fire steel amulets, or Viking ships (Sundström 2006 p. 10; Sundqvist 2016 pp. 396-397).

One smaller iron ring is still attached to the Häckelsäng ring, and several other small rings as well as an iron hammer (now lost) were recorded near it during discovery. Like the Forsa ring, it may belong in geographical proximity to a *vé* – in the case of Forsa this is the *vi* possibly described on the ring itself, and in the case of Häckelsäng the local place name Vi, where the parish church of Hamrånge is located today (*ibid.*). The presence of amulet rings attached to the Häckelsäng ring, and particularly the presence of a hammer, calls to mind the small hammer-shaped symbol which also decorates the Forsa ring. The fire-steel, which is arguably invoked by the shape of the Forsa ring as a whole, as well as by the hooks inside the Häckelsäng ring, has occasionally been associated with the god Þórr (Sundqvist 2016 pp. 383-386). All this taken together would seem to indicate that the iron ring from Forsa may have originally been a cultic or religious object, and that it should be viewed in connection with the Häckelsäng ring, rather than the door handles from Uppåkra and Järrestad.

Oath rings in *Eyrbyggja* and *Landnáma*

If the rings from Forsa and Häckelsäng originally served ritual purposes, the obvious question is: what ritual purposes? How were they used? Perhaps the most obvious answer indicated by the written sources is that they were oath rings (Brink 1996 p. 42). As we have seen, a large oath ring belonging to the *hof* of Þórólfr Mostrarskegg is described in *Eyrbyggja saga*. An almost identical passage appears in the so-called *Úlfjótsslög* (Law of Ulfjótr), which is preserved in the *Hauksbók* redaction of *Landnámabók*, in *Þórðar saga hreðu*, and in *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts* in *Flateyjarbók* (Jacob Benediktsson 1968 pp. 313-315; Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959 pp. 231–232; Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991 p. 342). All sources are late, dating to respectively the early, mid, and late 14th century. Purporting to be the

earliest law introduced on Iceland, it famously bids all seafarers to take the snarling dragon's heads off their ships when approaching Iceland, lest they frighten the *landvættir*. It describes the duties of the *hofgoði* and the system of *hofpollr*, then sets out a ranking system of *hof*, whereby each *ffjórðungr* is to have three *þing* and each *þing*'s jurisdiction three *hofuðhof* (greater or main *hof*). According to *Úlfjótsslög*, a silver ring is to lie in the *hof* at all times which must weigh at minimum two *aurar*. It is to be worn by the *hofgoði* at all gatherings, and oaths are to be made upon it to Freyr and Njörðr and *hinn allmáttki áss* ("the allmighty god") (Jacob Benediktsson 1968 p. 315).

This supposed pagan law has been hotly debated, with several scholars questioning the authenticity of the oath formula and arguing that the well-established religious organisation described in *Úlfjótsslög* likely does not reflect the historical reality of pre-Christian Iceland (Olsen 1966 pp. 34-49; Sundqvist 2016 p. 506). An explicit comparison of the institution of *hofpollr* with the system of tithes reinforces the impression of Christian influence. There is little reason, however, to assume that the passage in its entirety must be pure invention, "*et lærd forsøg på at rekonstruere hedensk lovgivning*" (Olsen 1966 p. 49). Some echoes of authentic practice should not be ruled out – for instance, the practice of swearing oaths on rings. There is some indication that the information contained in this passage has come down to us in a jumbled form, but that its disparate elements may perhaps still be discerned.

While *Eyrbyggja saga* records the presence of a ring weighing twenty *aurar*, *Úlfjótsslög* presents the injunction that there should always be a ring in the *hof* weighing at least two *aurar*. Given the similarities between the two passages, this disparity in weight is puzzling. The size and weight of the ring in *Eyrbyggja saga* – somewhere between 520 and 580 grams, depending on the reckoning of one *eyrir* (Kilger 2007 pp. 283; 291) – would make it plainly impossible to wear. Assuming for the moment, then, that this is not a peculiar scribal error, the ring referred to in *Eyrbyggja saga* could not be an arm ring. A weight of twenty *aurar* or more is a far better fit with rings like those from Forsa and Häckelsäng. Perhaps, rather than wearing such a ring, the *goði* was simply meant to hold it or place his hands on it. It is possible that on this point, the version of the text preserved in *Eyrbyggja* may be the more accurate representation of circumstances. A later editor, correctly surmising that an arm ring weighing 500 grams would be impossible to wear, may have made the correction from *tvítøgeyringr* to *tvíeyringr*, never considering the possibility that the ring was not intended to be worn.

Besides arm rings and oath rings, we may finally mention a third type of ring which may be relevant to this passage: rings of silver, typically known as *baugr*, whose weight was calibrated to correspond to a given number of *aurar* and which were used primarily in the payment of *wergild* and other fines (Kilger 2007 p. 297). The fact that *Úlfjótsslög* specifies a minimum permissible weight appears to indicate that a designation of value was intended. Thus it is just possible that this portion of the text, particularly in *Úlfjótsslög*, in fact conceals a memory of yet another ring; a silver ring intended as payment – perhaps a sum to be paid towards the upkeep of the *hof*, or even an offering. Ultimately, we cannot yet say for certain whether the *hof* rings in *Eyrbyggja* and *Úlfjótsslög* are based on remembrance of historical objects, and if so, what the exact nature of these objects may have been. Nevertheless, we are now in a position to state that ritual rings may very well have been kept in cult buildings or at cult sites.

Oath rings in other written sources

Oath-taking on rings as a motif appears in several sagas, for instance in *Víga-Glúms saga*. As part of legal procedure, Glúmr declares his innocence of a murder by swearing an oath on a ring. The oath is taken outside the *hof* at Glúmr’s farm, in the presence of witnesses, with Glúmr holding the oath ring which is normally kept in the *hof* – a great silver ring weighing 3 *aurar*. The ring has been reddened with animal blood from a sacrifice before the oath is taken, and the oath is addressed to the god himself, in this case Freyr (Jónas Kristjánsson 1956 p. 85). These details make this passage reminiscent of *Eyrbyggja* and *Úlfjótsslög*. Mentions of ring oaths also appear in the *hof* passage in *Kjalnesinga saga*, which is very similar to the one in *Eyrbyggja saga* and likely derived from it, and in *Droplaugarsona saga*, where it is said that a magnate named Sveinungr *vann eið at stallahring* (“swore an oath on the ring of the *stallr/stalli*”) in the presence of two others who may have been witnesses (Jón Jóhannesson 1950 p. 153; Sundqvist 2016 p. 389).

Some older sources also attest to the practice among pre-Christian Scandinavians of swearing oaths on rings and other significant objects. In *Atlakviða* 30 an oath is sworn on *Sigtýs bergi* (“Óðinn’s hill”) and *at hringi Ullar* (“on Ullr’s ring”), and *Hávamál* 110 mentions a *baugeiðr* (Neckel-Kuhn 1983 pp. 245; 34). *Völundarkviða* mentions oaths sworn on other objects, and the *Annales Fuldenses* entry for 873 mentions Danish envoys swearing oaths on weapons to Emperor Leo (Sundqvist 2016 pp. 390; 399). Likewise, the entry for the year 876 or 877 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle relates that the leaders of the invading Viking army swore oaths to king Alfred on a “holy ring”: *Her hiene bestæl se here into Werham Wesseaxna fierde . and*

wið þone here se cyning friþ nam . and him þa aþas sworon on þam halgan beage . þe hie ær nanre þeode noldon (“Here the raiding-army stole away from the West Saxon army into Wareham. And afterwards the king made peace with the raiding-army, [...] and they swore him oaths on the sacred ring, which earlier they would not do to any nation”) (Thorpe 1861 I p. 144, A manuscript; tr. Swanton 1998 p. 75).

The entries of the original Chronicle were all written by the same scribe and cover the period up to and including the year 891, with subsequent material added by different scribes. It is therefore likely that this Chronicle was completed in the late 9th century (Swanton 1998 p. xviii). Assuming that this manuscript contained the ring anecdote, this puts the entry in question – at most – at a 15 year remove from the events. It is worth noting that Asser’s *Life of King Alfred*, written in 893, omits any mention of an oath ring, and has instead the more Christian formulation “all the relics in which the king trusted most, after God” (Whitelock 1979 p. 199), but Whitelock considers this a conscious choice by Asser; perhaps to avoid the pagan nature of the oath-swearing ritual.

Summing up

A wealth of evidence from written sources, iconography, and archaeology attests to the important symbolic value of the ring in Norse culture. Many of the written sources which discuss the role of rings in pre-Christian Scandinavia are quite late, and their value as historical documents has been hotly debated. However, the rings from Forsa and Häckelsäng provide support for the idea that ritual rings existed in pre-Christian Scandinavia, while the ring-shaped door handles from Uppåkra and Järrestad suggest that rings generally may have been associated with cult sites.

Based on their size and unique appearance, the Forsa ring and the Häckelsäng ring may profitably be regarded as ritual objects, and it has been suggested that they may have been oath rings and kept at *þing* or cult sites. Though this cannot be determined with certainty, there is enough accumulated evidence from sagas, poetry, contemporary written sources, and archaeology to argue that oath-taking on rings was in fact practiced in pre-Christian Scandinavia, and these artefacts furnish good candidates for such objects. Not all oath rings need have resembled these – it is quite possible that oath rings could also have been arm or neck rings consecrated to a god or belonging to a cult house. Both types of rings are referred to as *baugr* or *hringr*, and little description is provided in the written sources aside from their weight. However, in light of the Häckelsäng and Forsa rings, we ought to consider the

possibility that oath rings could be a unique category of object. We may also want to distinguish between these and ring-shaped door handles.

With that said, the unique design of such handles is no doubt linked to their placement on cultic buildings. Further, it is clear that the door handles at Uppåkra and Järrestad were intentionally deposited upon the building's demolition. At Uppåkra this ceremony appears to have included the decapitation of a bull, whose head was then deposited with one of the door-rings. Whether or not they were used for oath takings, it is clear that these objects served ritual functions. In considering this, it is good to keep in mind the ring as a symbolic object more generally. The various contexts in which we find it may be viewed as a spectrum of connected, if not synonymous, positions. Within this spectrum we may also place the symbolic meanings expressed by other types of rings, for instance the motif of the loyal retainer being rewarded for his fealty through the giving of a golden ring, familiar from Norse poetry. Although arguably a different category of ring from an oath ring, they both carry connotations of the demonstration and reproduction of honour through fidelity and the keeping of one's word.

The *hǫrgr*

The *hǫrgr* in the written sources

The attestations of the word *hǫrgr* in Norse literature span a range of genres, but they are not numerous. Some of them have already been mentioned, but a brief overview will be given here. Many of the attestations are found in Eddic poems, and the *hǫrgr* often appears as the home or domain of the gods. *Vǫluspá* stanza 7, which describes the early days of creation, relates how the gods *hǫrg oc hof há timbroðo* (“high-timbered *hǫrg* and *hof*”) (Neckel-Kuhn 1983 p. 2).

Vafprúðnismál stanza 38 describes Njǫrðr’s domain thus: *hofom oc hǫrgom hann ræðr hunnmǫrgom* (“he governs *hof* and *hǫrgar*, as many as a hundred”). Similarly, *Grímnismál* stanza 16 relates that Njǫrðr *hátimbroðom hǫrgi ræðr* (“rules over the high-timbered *hǫrg*”) (*ibid.* pp. 52; 59). In Snorri’s *Edda*, the home of the goddesses, Vingólf, is referred to as a *hǫrgr* (Faulkes 2005 p. 8). In *Hyndluljóð* stanza 10, Freyja recounts the worship of her favoured Óttarr thus: *Hǫrg hann mér gerði, hlaðinn steinom*, (“A *hǫrg* he made me, piled up of stones”). She goes on, *rauð hann í nýio nauta blóði*, (“he reddened it with the fresh blood of cattle”) (Neckel-Kuhn 1983 p. 289).

The *hǫrgr* does not make many appearances in saga literature. The description of Óttarr’s sacrifice from *Hyndluljóð* is echoed in a version of *Heiðreks saga*, where Álfhildr is stolen away by Starkaðr *um nottina, er hun raud horgin* (“during the night, as she was reddening the *hǫrg*”) (Jón Helgason 1924 p. 91). The *Flateyjarbók* version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* shows the Christian king to *brenna hof en briota horga* (“burn *hof* and break *hǫrg*”) (Guðbrandur Vigfússon & Unger 1860 p. 285). There are also a couple of skaldic kennings which make use of the image of a *hǫrgr*: the kenning *gunnhǫrgr* has been related to the similar *gunnrann* (“war house”), both meaning “shield”, while *brúna hǫrgr* has been interpreted as “the mound / rise of the brows”, meaning “forehead” (Finnur Jónsson 1931 p. 313). Finally, as we have seen, some law texts make reference to a *hǫrgr*. *Gulapingslög*, paragraph 29, forbids the worship of mounds and *hǫrgar (eigi blota [...] hauga. ne horga)* (Keyser & Munch 1846 p. 18). The *Kristinn rétr Sverris*, paragraph 79, contains the same prohibition, and also stipulates that “if it is proven about a man or he confirms(?) that he makes a mound or builds a house and calls it a *hǫrgr*” (*ef maðr værðr at þui kunnr eða sannar at han læðr hauga eða gerer hus ok kallar horgh*), he shall forfeit all his possessions (Keyser & Munch 1846 p. 430).

The character of the *hǫrgr*

There is some evidence that the *hǫrgr*, linguistically and physically, is an older phenomenon than the *hof*. The word *hǫrgr* is of common Germanic origin and has cognates in Old High German (*harug*) and Old English (*hearg*) (Olsen 1966 p. 109; Simek 1996 p. 156).

Etymologically, it is related to the Norwegian and Swedish dialectal word *horg* (“*hob, flok, mængde*”), and its original meaning is believed to have been “*stendynge, hob af sammenlagte stene*”, or “*steinhaufe*” (“stone heap”) (Falk and Torp 1991 p. 298; de Vries 2000 p. 281). As the farms under study in this thesis were chosen for the presence of a cult house, this age relationship cannot be corroborated by the archaeology of these sites. However, we may note that in every case where a farm complex comprises both a cult house and a circular stone pile or mound, the stone construction is as old as the cult house, and in the case of Ranheim appears to be considerably older.

Scholarly opinion has been divided on the question of what type of structure the word *hǫrgr* refers to. The Norse sources appear to use the word sometimes in reference to an edifice, and sometimes a pile of rocks. In poems like *Vǫluspá*, *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* it is referred to as “high-timbered” and as the domain of a god, which some scholars have interpreted as a reference to a building; the homes of the gods (e.g. Olsen 1966 p. 106). This impression is also conveyed by Snorri’s description of Víngólf. Conversely, in *Hyndluljóð* the *hǫrgr* is unequivocally a mound of stone. *Heiðreks saga* and *Óláfsdrápa* also convey the impression that the *hǫrgr* is not a house, as do the references to “breaking” the *hǫrgr* in the Óláfr sagas, especially where they appear alongside a burning of the *hof*. The skaldic kennings appear to make use of the word in both of these possible meanings; both as a parallel word to *rann* (“house”) and to denote something domed and mound-like.

In the laws quoted above, it is also unclear what type of construction is meant. The *Kristinn réttir Sverris* appears to indicate that the word *hǫrgr* may be used of a house, or possibly that it may be applied to either a house *or* a mound. In *Gulapingslög*, too, the reference is not clear but the conjunction with *hauga* might indicate a mound-like shape. The word is also used in a different paragraph in *Gulapingslög* (AM 146 4^{9x}) to refer to a cairn, stone pile, or natural rise in terrain which might interfere with a witness’ view of a murder: *ef madur er veginn innan akragardes, og ma cona henda syn til fra husum [...], og gange þa hvorke fyrer horgur nie haugur [...]* (“if a man is killed within his own fields, and if a woman can see it from the house, and if no *hǫrgar* or mounds are in the way”) (Storm 1885 p. 7).

Phrases like *hǫrg oc hof há timbroðo* present the possibility that the *hǫrgr* was occasionally imagined as a building. But as mentioned before, one ought also to consider the possibility that alliterative concerns may have factored in. *Hǫrgr* and *hof* are a frequent alliterating pair in Norse literature. It is possible that the association of *hǫrgr* with concepts like (*há*)*timbraðr* in poetry and prose may have come about secondarily because of the persistent alliterative linking of *hof* and *hǫrgr*. Further, it should perhaps be considered that given the frequent use of metaphor in poetry, and skaldic poetry especially, it is not obligatory to interpret the references in the Eddic poems as denoting a house. The gods might conceivably be imagined to have a ‘home’ in any kind of cultic structure where they were worshipped.

This question is relevant in part because it is relatively common practice among archaeologists working on pre-Christian cult in Scandinavia to refer to a recently discovered cultic building as a *hǫrgr* (e.g. Nielsen 2006; Larsson and Lenntorp 2004; Larsson 2006; Jørgensen 2009, etc); a practice which follows the conclusions of Olaf Olsen in *Hǫrg, hov og kirke*. Based on his review of the relevant written sources, Olsen argued that the word *hof* had never referred to a “temple,” and should instead be taken to mean the main dwelling house of the farm (1966 pp. 100-101). The *hǫrgr*, in Olsen’s view, had originally been an open-air cultic feature consisting of a pile of rocks, as its etymology suggests. In time, Olsen conjectured, this cairn or heap of stones was supplied with an image of a deity, and in some cases with sheltering walls and a roof, thus permitting the identification of houses as *hǫrgr*. Its place was not on the farm, but in the landscape. Towards the end of the pre-Christian era, it might conceivably have been moved onto the farm and placed inside a small house construction in order to protect it from Christian persecution (*ibid.* pp. 106; 109-112). This *hǫrgr*-turned-house was, in Olsen’s view, the only plausible pre-Christian cult building in Scandinavia.

Even the brief review of the material record of a handful of sites provided in this thesis has shown that Olsen’s conclusions with regard to the *hǫrgr* and to cultic buildings in pre-Christian Scandinavia in general are no longer tenable. The presumed cult buildings discovered in southern Scandinavia do not agree with Olsen’s description of a *hǫrgr* either in size, layout, or placement. The ages of the excavated cult buildings should further discourage us from following Olsen here. The *hǫrgr* located on the farm was postulated as a late development, appearing only towards the end of the pre-Christian era, while many Scandinavian cult buildings far predate the Viking Age. Finally, Olsen’s review did not consider saga literature at all, as he considered it too unreliable to be admitted to the

discussion. As this thesis has attempted to show, some saga descriptions can be partly corroborated by archaeological evidence, and the most fruitful approach is therefore rather one of caution than of dismissal.

Because the usage of *hǫrgr* in the written sources is variable – sometimes referring to a stone construction of some sort, and sometimes to a building – we cannot claim that *hǫrgr* always referred to a stone heap, while *hof* always referred to a house. It is possible that the word *hǫrgr* originally had a different meaning (as per its etymology), but that it had come to refer to a house construction by the Viking Age, or else that usage varied between different regions and local communities. It is even possible that both usages could exist simultaneously within the same region. Probably neither usage can be proven to be ‘correct’. However, if we do wish to use the Norse words, Olsen’s arguments for preferring *hǫrgr* to *hof* for cult buildings are not by any means compelling. We may be on firmer ground if we follow etymology and a majority of the written sources and describe wooden houses as *hof*, reserving *hǫrgr* for stone constructions.

The *hǫrgr* in archaeology and text

Though recent excavations of central places have drastically altered our perspective on pre-Christian cult houses in Scandinavia, it is not as clear whether we may say anything about the accuracy of the Norse written sources as regards the *hǫrgr*. Even if we assume that they were stone-built, *hǫrgar* are not easily identified in the archaeological record. While multifunctional magnate farms often contain stone constructions with likely cultic associations, the picture is heterogeneous. Some sites, like Tissø, Ranheim and Lejre, feature large heaps of stones. Others feature many smaller ones. They are generally quite flat and consist of fire-cracked stones, and they may represent, for instance, the gathered cooking or brewing stones from ritual feasts (Jørgensen 2009 p. 351). It is not clear whether these different features should be considered to belong to the same functional category.

The large, circular stone heaps in particular have occasionally been interpreted by archaeologists as *hǫrgar* (e.g. Rønne 2011 p. 87; Christensen 2007 p. 122), but this identification, while logical, is not always uncomplicated. Some stone heaps, like those found at Tissø and Lejre, consisted entirely of fire-brittle stones and contained no finds, soot, or charcoal. The feature interpreted as a *hǫrgr* at Ranheim, however, appeared to have originally been a cremation grave, and thus at least initially may have simply been a cairn. Centuries later, an apparently cultic complex was built around it. We cannot rule out that the function of

the heap in this period may have corresponded to that of the stone heaps at Tissø and Lejre, nor can we prove that it did.

Even with these uncertainties remaining, however, the similarities between the structure glimpsed through the written sources and those uncovered at these large magnate farms are hard to deny. Whatever its role in pre-Christian ritual, etymology indicates that a cultic construction existed which was shaped like a pile of stones, an impression which is corroborated by some of the later sources. We may now state that at least some Viking Age and older magnate farms, which appear to have doubled as cultic centres within their respective regions, contained large piles of rocks with apparent ritual functions. The least convoluted argument – if one wishes to take an ‘Occam’s razor’ approach – is that the *høgr* of the texts and the stone heaps on magnate farms likely represent the same phenomenon, albeit one whose memory is likely to have been distorted by the passage of time.

If they do, the attestations of the word *høgr* in the Norse sources give the impression that this feature may not have captured the imaginations of the saga authors of the Middle Ages in the same way as the *hof*. It appears in a much smaller number of the late, narrative texts than the *hof*. This is perhaps understandable: the parallels (superficial though they may have been) between a pagan cult house and a Christian church no doubt made it easier for a Christian writer to visualise. Further, the image of a pagan house of worship provides a perfect antithesis to (or prefiguration of) a Christian church, and it is easily paralleled with classical and Old Testament pagan temples.

It is possible that stone constructions like those at Tissø and Lejre were more widespread in earlier centuries and were becoming less common by the Viking Age. It is also possible that the reference changed over time. Tom Christensen (2007 p. 124) has suggested a role for Lejre as the “guardian of tradition” and emphasises, among other things, the presence of a stone heap – a feature which was widespread in the late Bronze Age, but declined in prominence in the earliest Iron Age, before once again being placed “on the map” by central places like Lejre, which has its roots in the 6th century. By founding Lejre next to a monumental Bronze Age mound and re-introducing an ancient cultic feature, it is suggested that the rulers of Lejre created a spectacle of their connection with the past, thereby legitimising their claim to the land and to power.

Such an explanation might equally be applied to the cultic site at Ranheim, which appears to have been built around a burial from the pre-Roman Iron Age, and whose other elements date

from the 5th to 10th centuries. More generally, the “guardians of tradition” is a fitting role in which to see magnate farms like Lejre, Tissø, Uppåkra, etc., which display an exceptional continuity of use and of spatial organisation, with dwelling houses and cultic areas being maintained and rebuilt in the same pattern over several centuries. It is possible to imagine that such places may represent a more conservative picture of pre-Christian religion, more inclined to hark back to the past, than that found at smaller and less centralised farmsteads.

“Staf eða stalla”

Finally, we will briefly discuss two objects with cultic associations which are frequently associated with the farm and the *hof*, namely the *staf* and the *stallr* or *stalli*. As we have seen, *stallar* appear in several sagas. In *Hákonar saga*, the *stallar* appear to be arrayed around the interior of the *hof* and are ritually reddened with the blood of the sacrificed animals, but their function beyond this is never made clear. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, there is only one *stallr*, and it appears to serve as a pagan equivalent to a Christian altar, centrally placed in the *hof* and bearing the oath ring and the bowl for the sacrificial blood. In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, there are again multiple *stallar*, which function as bases for idols.

Stallr denotes an unspecified cultic object in the *Berudrápa* attributed to Egill Skallagrímsson, where Óðinn is identified by the kenning *stalla vinr*, “friend of the *stallar*”. Similarly, the compound *véstallr* (“holy *stallr*” or “*stallr* of a holy place”) in *Ynglingatal* 12 and the phrase *blóta á stallhelgom stað* (“to sacrifice at the place of the *stallr*”) in *Fjolsvinnsmál* 40 reinforce the clear cultic implications of the word (Finnur Jónsson 1931 p. 532). The basic meaning of the word appears to be “‘noget som står’ og hvorpå noget (skal) hvile(r)” (*ibid.*). It has often been taken to denote a ‘pagan altar’ (*ibid.*; Simek 1996), or else a platform on which an idol may be placed or a cult officiant may stand/sit (e.g. Näsström 1996 p. 69; Sundqvist 2016 p. 280).

That such items existed and were perceived by early medieval Scandinavians to be connected with pagan religion is made clear by early law texts such as the *Kristinn réttir hinn forni* section of *Eiðsifabingslög*, which forbids any man from having *staf eða stalla* in his house, or any thing which is dedicated to heathen customs (*eða þat er til hœiðins siðar uæit*) (Keyser & Munch 1846 p. 383). Similarly, perhaps, *Kristinn réttir Sverris* stipulates that a man is to lose every penny of his wealth if he *ræisir stong oc kallar skaldzstong* – that is, if he raises a pole and calls it a *skáld*-pole (Keyser & Munch 1846 p. 430). However, this latter object and the variant *flannstong* (Storm 1885 p. 6) should perhaps properly be viewed in connection with words like *niðstong* (“libel pole”), and so, while probably ritual, serve a social function rather than a religious.

The Arab scholar and diplomat Ibn Fadlan relates that the Rūs people of Scandinavian descent whom he encountered at a trading station on the Volga made sacrifices before a tall piece of wood which was set into the ground and which had been carved with the face of a man, around which were placed several smaller figurines (Montgomery 2000 p. 9). It is possible

that this pole ought properly to be viewed as an idol, though Sundqvist has posited that such objects might also be regarded as aniconic representations of gods, and that it is this type of cultic image which is intended by the *stafr* of *Eiðsifabingslög* (2016 p. 280).

The *stafr* may also be considered as a potential candidate for the Northern representation of the *Weltsaule* or ‘world pillar’, an *axis mundi* represented by a tall upright pillar, which is known from other parts of the Germanic world and is frequently associated with deities (Simek 1996 pp. 175-176). Several scholars (most recently Klaus Bödl) have argued in favour of seeing the high seat posts as representing this motif in Scandinavia, the evidence for which is not compelling (Bödl 2005 pp. 166-176). In this regard, the advantage of the *stafr* (and possibly the *skáldstøng*, if these objects may be considered related) over the high seat posts is chiefly that it appears in the singular and thus is better suited to the metaphor of the centre of the world, and further that unlike the high seat posts, it does not serve an obvious indoor function as part of the house construction or furniture. Ultimately, however, our knowledge of the function and appearance of the *stafr* is not sufficient to posit any such connection with any degree of certainty.

The uncertainty around the precise nature of the *stafr* and the *stallr/stalli* also makes it difficult to identify evidence of these cultic elements in the archaeological record, but some features at sites with cult buildings have been tentatively proposed to present such evidence. In the southern room of the cultic building at Borg, located along the eastern wall, was found a foundation or low dais built of large, flat stones, which archaeologists suggest may be the base of a *stallr* (Nielsen 2006 p. 244). Some ways northeast of the cairn at Ranheim stood a small wooden structure which had four corner posts, spaced 2,5 metres apart and supported by stone packing. Its function is not clear, but it has been suggested that it may have been a small building or a platform (Rønne 2011 p. 84).

Some features which have chiefly been raised as possibly representing *stallar* may also be worth considering in light of the possibility that the *stafr* was an idol-like object. The house at Uppåkra had four internal post-holes in addition to those representing the load-bearing posts, which have been tentatively proposed to represent the foundations for wooden idols (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004 p. 32). A similar grouping of four posts was found inside the assumed cult building at Ranheim, which were likely not intended as roof supports, especially as the posts were not symmetrically placed in the middle of the building (Rønne 2011 p. 85). It is certainly possible that these post-holes may have once held cultic posts. It should be remembered,

however, that unusually strong foundations, either in the form of oversized or numerous load-bearing posts, appear to be a characteristic of buildings with cultic functions.

As both the *stafr* and likely the *stallr/stalli* appear to have been made of wood, the difficulty in tracing them archaeologically may be exacerbated by factors of preservation and need not be due to an intrinsic dishonesty in the written sources. Furthermore, the distinctive features of such remains are often not sufficient for archaeologists to categorise them correctly. The probable historical reality of these objects is attested by their appearance in the early laws and in skaldic poetry. As it stands, however, we are not presently in a position to say what the nature of either of these cultic objects was, nor to securely identify them in the archaeological record. On this point, we must wait for future excavations to hopefully provide us with more data from which a pattern may emerge.

Final remarks

Pre-Christian cult sites: a synthesis

Based on the discussion of the past chapters, we may briefly summarise those points on which it has been argued that the written sources and the archaeological record agree, and which thus may be considered at least plausible as historical facts. This may help to illustrate the scope of the factual information about pre-Christian cult places which medieval authors had at their disposal, while also emphasising the ways in which a frequently vague, distorted and incomplete record was utilised and altered by medieval authors according to their needs. The obvious discrepancy between the bare bones of a picture presented here, and that which meets us in the elaborate descriptions of *hof* in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Hákonar saga*, clearly demonstrates the artistic agency of medieval saga authors. It will be clear from this recapitulation that many iconic features known to us from the cult houses of the sagas – the controversial *hlautbolli* and *hlautteinn*, the great carven idols decorated with silver and gold, the altar-like *stallr/stalli* – are not to be found here. At the same time, it is clear that a surprising number of fundamental characteristics of pre-Christian cult sites as they appear to us in the archaeological record are corroborated by saga literature, and thus may have been known, in some form, to the Christian men who produced it.

1. We may state that dedicated cultic buildings existed at certain large farms in pre-Christian Scandinavia.
2. The magnate farms of Tissø, Järrestad and possibly Uppåkra as well as references to fences in laws and sagas show that the cult house might be surrounded by a gated fence, or the cultic area of the farm was delineated in some other way.
3. From this material we may also suppose that the building or the sacred space may have been kept locked when it was not in use.
4. Sacrifice likely happened in connection with these buildings, and ritual meals may have been prepared nearby, as evidenced by several sagas and archaeological discoveries of animal bones and fire pits.
5. From Eddic poetry and *Hervarar saga* we know that the *hqrgr* was sometimes imagined as a pile of stones, and many cult sites display large stone piles which likely served ritual purposes and were associated with ritual meals.

6. The Forsa and Häckelsäng rings and the general association between ring shapes and cult sites indicates that in some cases, a ritual ring was associated with the cult site. In several sagas, *Landnámabók*, and continental written sources we hear of such rings being used by the pre-Christian Scandinavians, especially for oath taking rituals.
7. The excavated magnate farms show that building cult rituals involving post-hole depositions, sometimes of gold foils depicting what may be interpreted as gods, took place at different phases in the use life of important buildings, such as construction, rebuilding and demolition. The importance of posts, specifically the high seat posts, is known from several sagas and *Landnámabók*, and in *Vatnsdæla saga* these post-holes are associated with a silver image of Freyr.
8. Additional post-holes and stone constructions within cult houses provide possible evidence for plinths or idols, and an outdoor wooden structure at Ranheim has been tentatively interpreted as a *stallr* or a *seiðhjallr*, constructions which are known from sagas and law texts.

Form and content

The extent of learned medieval Icelanders' knowledge about the pagan past is difficult to assess. It is probable that medieval saga authors had access to a number of texts which are now lost. Likewise, many of the works of the saga authors themselves are lost (e.g. Bödl 2005 p. 18). The amount of information possessed by the saga authors is frequently taken to be very similar to the amount of information that has come down to us, which may be something of a logical fallacy. We cannot fully assess the limits of learned medieval Icelanders' knowledge about the pagan past, because we do not know how much of that knowledge is currently invisible to us. It has also been argued that despite their Christianity, comparatively well-informed historians living in medieval Scandinavia may have been better placed to understand the material at their disposal than we are (Meulengracht Sørensen 2001b p. 167).

Against this view, one may raise the objection that modern scholars have a wider range of sources available at our fingertips – ranging from artefacts to prose texts in several languages, via rune stones and poetry – than any one medieval Icelandic scholar, who would have been limited to the contents of his personal or monastic library. Further, we may likely infer from the texts we have something of the nature of those which have been lost. The types of text which were committed to parchment in the early phase of writing in Scandinavia were not

numerous. Thus, though much in writing has been lost, it is fairly likely that it was comparable with those sources which we do possess, which may have mitigated the loss of information. However, we may profitably distinguish between oral and written here. It is likely that much oral material (such as poetry) which medieval authors had access to has been lost. This material may perhaps have maintained a continuity from the pre-Christian era which we cannot now access. This is conjecture, however.

As we have seen, all the narrative texts under discussion in this thesis bear witness to a wide range of Christian modes of interpretation employed by medieval Norse writers. Several scholars have argued convincingly for an allegorical understanding on the part of the author of *Eyrbyggja saga*; pagan institutions like the *hof* are ‘translated’ into the language of the Church in this and *Hákonar saga*, and the *Óláfr sagas* show influence from hagiography and patristic literature (e.g. Males 2013, Wanner 2010, Meulengracht Sørensen 2001a, Andersson 1988). Christian scholars writing in the Middle Ages worked within an intellectual culture which valued clarity and cohesion in matters of creed. Faced with the heterogeneous nature of pre-Christian religion, it is almost inevitable that omissions, conflation, and simplifications would occur. The extensive variation evinced by the archaeological record from the Viking Age suggests that any neat schematisation of pre-Christian cult practices and religious beliefs would risk doing violence to the source material.

Attempts have nonetheless been made to show that the form need not invalidate the content. The fact that a work composed in a Christian learned context employs narrative models derived from other works within the same learned context need not imply that all the component parts of said work must be borrowed, and those which cannot be shown to be borrowed, invented. Nor is there reason to suppose that the purpose of the saga writers was to mislead their audience, or that e.g. Snorri was not engaged in an earnest attempt to transmit what he considered reliable knowledge about the pagan past (Meulengracht Sørensen 2001b pp. 158-159). As this thesis has endeavoured to show, there are elements of the medieval descriptions of pre-Christian cult which do appear to reflect historical reality, although it is a distorted reflection.

This thesis has focused primarily on cultic buildings and other man-made structures on the farm itself. Natural features such as mountains and lakes near the farm which formed part of a wider sacred landscape have been left out. A more comprehensive overview of sites like Tissø and Gudme (e.g. Jørgensen 2009) would show that the cultic landscape around Viking Age

central places in Scandinavia could comprise a great range of features, manmade and natural, which all played a part in the religious and ritual life of the inhabitants on the farm – and, likely, in the region. While providing us with a wealth of new knowledge, the image of pre-Christian Scandinavian cult which has emerged through archaeological excavations over the past three decades also impresses upon us how little we know about the mentalities, religious beliefs, and ritual practices of pre-Christian Scandinavians (Price 2002 pp. 26; 46). The written sources, even when taken together, allow us to glimpse only a fraction of this multifaceted historical reality.

Reception and reproduction: some proposed authorial strategies

An in-depth treatment of learned Icelandic culture in the 13th century is outside the scope of this thesis, and these questions might be more fruitfully approached by working from a smaller to a larger scale than vice versa. By considering motifs in specific sagas and their possible historical counterparts, we may attempt to evaluate the processes of reception and reproduction which lie behind the finished works – that is, what information did the saga authors have, and what did they do with it? A few motifs which have been discussed above allow us (at least seemingly) to hazard guesses as to their transmission history.

For instance, there is the curious case of the high seat posts and idols in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Þórólfr's idol of Þórr, which is mentioned in connection with his travel preparations, is gone from the text by the time he reaches Iceland, replaced by a plurality of idols of unnamed gods. Instead, his high seat posts are reported to stand inside the *hof*, rather than in the hall, which surely is their proper place, and one of them is said to be carved with the likeness of Þórr. I have suggested that this may be due to the author's attempt to synthesise and merge diverging traditions. By attempting to tease them apart, we may imagine, for instance, that a tradition about the carved high seat post and a tradition about an idol both had come down to the author, and that he, viewing any carving of a god as a religious item, relegated them both to the *hof*, as the only overtly religious building. Conversely, it is also possible that the carving of Þórr on the high seat post was adduced by the author, in an attempt to reinforce Þórólfr's bond with the god and give his *landnám* a more pious and divinely ordained aspect.

A similar situation prevails in the description of the great oath ring in the *hof*, which we also find in *Úlfjótsslög*. This description contains obvious contradictions, and I have suggested that it may conceivably be based upon disparate traditions referring to multiple different rings. For instance, the specification of a minimum weight of two *aurar* in *Úlfjótsslög* is reminiscent of

those rings (*baugr*) which were used as measuring units of value in silver and used for *wergild* and other fines. An arm ring weighing two *aurar* (c. 50-60 grams) would be a relatively unimpressive item, and an unlikely choice for an oath ring. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, the reported weight of the oath ring is twenty *aurar*, well over 500 grams. Further, both texts claim that the ring was to be worn. This is plainly impossible with an arm ring weighing half a kilogram.

While neck rings such as the heaviest ring in the hoard from Vulu in Trøndelag could weigh as much as 22 *aurar* (Kilger 2007 p. 288), even such an impressive piece of jewellery seems a curiously profane item to keep in a cult building and to swear oaths on. This is especially so when we consider that the impressive size of the ring indicated in *Eyrbyggja saga* would also fit well with a ritual ring similar to Häckelsäng or Forsa. Here, then, we may be dealing with as much as three different motifs: a large ritual ring kept in the *hof* and used for oath takings, a silver ring of two or 20 *aurar* whose chief characteristic was its value, and which may have been due the *hof* for some reason, and an arm or neck ring meant to be worn by the *goði*. If detailed knowledge of these objects and their uses were lost, one may imagine that this divergence in the transmitted traditions might have been perceived as a fault and the three different versions merged into one. The merger may not have been complete however, as the authors of *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Hauksbók* appear to have selected different versions of the text to reproduce.

The episode in which Ingimundr finds his long-lost image of Freyr in the post-hole in *Vatnsdæla saga* appears in the text as merely a post-hole divination motif. The discovery of the connection between gold foils and post-holes and the proposal by Gro Steinsland that certain gold foils may represent the *hieros gamos* of Freyr and Gerðr has led to this motif in *Vatnsdæla saga* being viewed instead as a possible distorted memory of post-hole depositions, where the order of events has become inverted (Males 2013 p. 118). Though the past practice of building-cult rituals may not have been remembered by medieval authors, the trope of high seat post divination appears to have been well known. The Freyr motif, which originally may have been no more than a vague notion of an image of a favoured god in a post-hole, was thus interpreted according to the author's ideas about the pagan mindset. Just like a modern scholar, he was forced to attempt to reconstruct the past, and appears to have done so by analogy with another well-established *topos*.

The story of King Hákon's heathen sacrifice from Snorri's *Hákonar saga* is also preserved in *Ágrip* and *Fagrskinna*, where it is recounted briefly and without detail. The factual information transmitted to Snorri may thus have been a kernel only – the King went to Mæri and was there forced to participate in a *blót* – around which Snorri was forced to reconstruct a historical event; that is, to transform fact into literary text. In doing so, he drew upon words such as *hlaut*, which he may have transposed from the realm of divination, or which may always have had sacrificial connotations, along with his knowledge of the sacred houses of his own day and of the Old Testament, and terms like *rjóða* (“to redden [with blood]”), which appears in the Eddic poetry. As a result, the *blót* at Mæri is cast into a shape that appears partly defined by Snorri's Christian frame of reference and partly by an antiquarian desire to produce an authentic description of a pagan feast.

Final remarks

Recent scholarship combining written sources and archaeology has tended to reach more favourable conclusions regarding the merits of medieval Norse literature as sources to pre-Christian practice than the scholars of the mid to late twentieth century. This thesis also conforms to this position and argues that the observable signs of Christian influence in medieval Norse literature are not incompatible with these texts having preserved some echo, however faint, of the religious practices of earlier times. At the same time, it is clear that we cannot take the sagas' descriptions of pre-Christian religion at face value: we must have support from other source types, such as independent or contemporary written sources, archaeology, and iconography, to name a few.

Case studies of multifunctional magnate farms, individual texts, and recurring motifs in later descriptions of pagan cult allow us to pinpoint specific concordances between the material and the written record. We may thereby evaluate – and, occasionally, strengthen – the case for saga literature as a source of information about the pagan past on a case by case basis. Such an approach acknowledges the stylistic debt of Norse literature to the Christian environment in which it originated and does not preclude an appreciation of the heterogeneity of pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia. Likewise, a comparison of the ways in which the written record *differs* from the material reality by which it may have been inspired can help us to understand the state in which the saga authors received their material, and what they did with it.

The immaterial aspects of cult – mentalities, beliefs, and the contents of rituals which cannot be traced archaeologically – have not been the focus of this thesis. However, the gaps in our knowledge of these aspects serve as a reminder that most, if not all conclusions we may draw about the historical reality of cultic practice in pre-Christian Scandinavia should be considered provisional. It is only through further archaeological excavation that we will form a more comprehensive picture of pre-Christian cult sites and practices in Scandinavia and their relationship to the written sources.

Equally, it is important to acknowledge that much of what has been argued in this thesis to be older material preserved in medieval Norse literature could only be identified retrospectively, through the discovery of archaeological material which corroborated the testimonies of the written sources. A consequence of this is that it is essentially unpredictable which elements in a given text will perhaps, in the future, turn out to contain a memory of past practice. We may find in coming years that many more things which we had discounted as unlikely to have a historical basis can in fact be traced, in some form, to the Viking Age – but we are just as likely to discover a plethora of aspects to the Viking Age of which the written sources have given us no inkling.

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