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Olof Sundqvist

THE DEMISE OF NORSE RELIGION

DISMANTLING AND DEFENDING THE OLD ORDER IN
VIKING AGE SCANDINAVIA



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To Ofelia, Vejde, Rosa, Tussilago and Björn

Preface

The background to the present study is a project called “The Demise of Religion” which was led by Professor Michael Stausberg (Bergen) and the late Professor James Lewis at the *Centre for Advanced Study* (CAS) in Oslo (2018–2019). The results of this project were partly published in a thematic issue of the journal *Numen* 2021, where I myself wrote an article called “The Role of Rulers in the Winding Up of the Old Norse Religion.” I soon realized that there was an opportunity to expand this study into a monograph and it is the result of that work that is published in the present book. There are many people who have encouraged me and been helpful in completing the manuscript. First and foremost I would like to thank my friend and colleague Michael Stausberg, partly for inviting me to the project in Oslo, partly for reading several drafts of my text and having many fruitful conversations with me. Michael has been standing by my side from the first manuscript of this work to the final production. Some of my colleagues and friends have read the entire manuscript and given me many valuable comments. Thus, I must express my gratitude to Professor Anders Andrén (Stockholm), Professor Stefan Brink (Uppsala), Professors Bo and Anne-Sofie Gräslund (Uppsala), Associate Professor Per Vikstrand (Kalmar) and Associate Professor Torun Zachrisson (Lidingö). During my stays in Bergen and Aarhus in 2022 and 2023, I have been welcomed by and had many fruitful conversations with Professor Eldar Heide (Bergen), Professor Pernille Hermann (Aarhus), Doctor Simon Nygaard (Aarhus), Professor Jens Peter Schjødt (Aarhus) and Michael Stausberg. I also want to thank the small group that regularly met and discussed the god Freyr for further stimulation and inspiration: Stefan Brink, Professor Terry Gunnell (Reykjavík), Doctor Tommy Kuusela (Uppsala), Jens Peter Schjødt, Professor Rudolf Simek (Vienna) and Torun Zachrisson. The higher seminar in the history of religion at the Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies, Stockholm University, led by Professor Peter Jackson Rova (Stockholm) has also been very stimulating, as well as the Old Norse colloquium that we run together at the department. There I would like to especially thank, in addition to Peter Jackson Rova, Associate Professor Andreas Nordberg (Stockholm), Doctor Sophie Bønding (Stockholm), Associate Professor Marja-Liisa Keinänen (Stockholm), Doctor Sten Skånby (Stockholm), Doctor Frederik Wallenstein (Stockholm), Doctoral Student Emma Cecilie Sørлие Jørgensen (Aarhus) Doctor Klas Wikström af Edholm (Nyköping), Doctoral Student Kristoffer af Edholm (Stockholm) and Associate Professor Erik af Edholm (Stockholm). I am also grateful to Professor Susanne Olsson (Stockholm), who supported and encouraged me in many different ways, and also to Professor Emeritus Anders Hultgård (Uppsala), who has been a role model as a researcher and a never-ending source of inspiration ever since my doctoral days. Finally, I would also like to thank Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt,

Magnus Källström and Henrik Williams for patiently answering my questions about the runic inscriptions. For all shortcomings and faults that still remain in the text, I am alone responsible.

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Olof Sundqvist

Fårösund, July 2023

A note on personal names

As a rule, Old Norse personal name forms are used for the Nordic names in the present study. Some East Norse names that appear mainly in Latin texts are rendered in modern reduced name forms, but with the Old Swedish or Old Danish names in parentheses the first time they are mentioned. Sometimes, only the Old Swedish or Old Danish name forms are used. Greek, Latin and Germanic names from Continental Europe and the British Isles are generally rendered in modern established forms.

Contents

Preface — VII

Part I: Prolegomena

1 Introduction — 3

- 1.1 Theoretical and methodological perspectives — 13
- 1.2 The terms Old Norse religion and Old Order — 26
- 1.3 Sources — 33
- 1.4 Outline and hypotheses — 41

2 Previous theories and research: A critical assessment — 46

- 2.1 The theory of decay — 47
- 2.2 The theory of clash — 52
- 2.3 The theory of adaptation — 56
- 2.4 An alternative approach — 59

Part II: The role of rulers as agents in the winding up of the native religion

3 Rulers and conversions — 63

- 3.1 Official conversion(s) and native rulers — 63
- 3.2 Why did the Scandinavian rulers change religion and adopt Christianity? — 68

4 The rulers' strategies for doing away with former religious practice and beliefs — 75

- 4.1 The erasure of king's ritual role at pagan feasts — 76
- 4.2 The erasure of local cult leadership and the pagan cultic organization — 93
- 4.3 The material erasure of the old cult — 121
- 4.4 The elimination of pagan animal sacrifices and other traditional customs — 152
- 4.5 Redefining the status of the gods — 170

5 Replacements and displacements of pagan religion — 184

- 5.1 The replacement of the pagan royal rites — 184
- 5.2 The Christian replacement of cult leadership — 191

- 5.3 The replacement of the old sanctuary — **194**
- 5.4 The replacement of pagan funeral rituals and eschatological beliefs — **205**
- 5.5 The replacement of pagan libation sacrifices — **217**
- 5.6 The displacements of animal sacrifices, worship of pagan gods and cult images — **220**

- 6 King Óláfr Tryggvason's missions – a contextual approach — 222**
 - 6.1 Violent religious change in Trøndelag — **223**
 - 6.2 Non-violent transition in Iceland — **233**

- 7 Why pagan rituals and religious leadership? — 247**

- Part III: Pagans fight back**

- 8 Blótsveinn and the pagan revolt in Svetjud — 259**
 - 8.1 The religio-political background of Blótsveinn — **259**
 - 8.2 The historicity of Blótsveinn — **265**
 - 8.3 Why did the pagans dethrone King Ingi and what did Blótsveinn represent? — **273**
 - 8.4 Rebellions of pagans in late Viking Ages Svetjud — **276**
 - 8.5 Defending the old order — **289**

- 9 Pagan defenders and rebellions against Christian kings in Trøndelag — 293**
 - 9.1 Snorri as a historian — **293**
 - 9.2 The pagans' opposition against Hákon góði — **297**
 - 9.3 Jarl Hákon and the sons of Eiríkr — **303**
 - 9.4 Óláfr Tryggvason confrontations with the pagan farmers — **313**
 - 9.5 Óláfr Haraldsson's encounter with the pagan Þrændir — **316**

- 10 The resistance of pagans in Iceland — 321**
 - 10.1 The confrontation between Christian missionaries and the pagans — **322**
 - 10.2 The pagan party at Alþingi 999/1000 — **329**

- 11 The resilience of pagans: A comparative perspective — 337**
 - 11.1 Similarities and differences — 337
 - 11.2 Why did the pagans' resistances finally collapse? — 339
 - 11.3 Religions of the status quo, resistance and revolution — 342

Part IV: **Epilegomena**

- 12 The Demise of Old Norse Religion: A Synthesis — 351**
 - 12.1 A protracted process that took place at different times in different places — 351
 - 12.2 The early Christian kings — 354
 - 12.3 The pagans' resistance — 356
 - 12.4 The establishment of Christian kingdoms — 358

Sources — 361

Bibliography — 369

Abbreviations — 403

Index — 405



Part I: **Prolegomena**

1 Introduction

In *Óláfs saga helga* chapters 112–113, a part of *Heimskringla* (c. 1230), the Icelandic writer and chieftain Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) narrates the story about the Christian king Óláfr Haraldsson (St Óláfr) (r. 1015–1028, 30) and the pagan chieftain (*hersir*) Guðbrandr.¹

When Guðbrandr learned the news, that King Óláfr had come to Lóar in Guðbrandsdalar, in Norway, and was forcing people to accept Christianity, he sent out a war summons and called all the Dœlir to the farm called Hundþorp, to a meeting with him.² When they had all gathered there, Guðbrandr stood up and stated that a man called Óláfr had come to Lóar and he wanted to preach to them a faith different from what they have had previously. This man also suggested that they must break all their gods to bits (*brjóta goð . . . ǫll í sundr*), since his god was much greater and mightier than their deities. When the farmers heard this they suggested that Þórr should be taken out from the sanctuary (*berum út Þór ór hofi*) in order to scare the king when he was approaching. The farmers then went to Breiða and prepared for battle against the king. As the king arrived in Breiða, he saw a large army, ready for battle. The king's men then ran forward shooting their spears, but the farmers immediately turned in flight, while Guðbrandr's son was captured. After the failure of this pagan insurgency,³ King Óláfr and the farmers planned for a court meeting. Before that assembly, the king asked Guðbrandr's son how their god was constructed. He answered that he was patterned on Þórr:

And he has a hammer in his hand and is of great size and hollow inside, and under him there is made something like a scaffold, and he stands up on top of it when he is outside.

1 See *Óláfs saga helga* chs 112–113, in *Heimskringla* 2, Ísl. Fornr. 27: 183–190; this account is rendered in different versions in several texts: *The Legendary Saga of St Olaf (Óláfs saga hins helga)* in ed. Heinrichs et al. 1982: 90–92 and in ed. Johnsen 1922: 33–35; *The Separate Saga of St Óláfr (Den store saga om Olav den hellige)*, chs 99–100 in ed. Johnsen & Jón Helgason 1941: 271–282; and *Flateyjarbók* 2: 188–192.

2 All translations to English from Snorri's *Heimskringla* 1–3 are taken from Finley & Faulkes 2014–2017 [2011] in the present book. Also, the following paraphrase of *Heimskringla* 2, chs 112–113, is based on Finley & Faulkes 2014.

3 The Latin term *paganus* (*pagani* pl.) was used early in Christian contexts with negative connotations. The English concepts “pagan” and “paganism” have sometimes also been used in ideological contexts as pejorative terms as well as in evolutionary typologies of religion. See Hultgård 1991; Berend 2007: 11, note 41. In the present work, these terms are applied as neutral synonyms for non-Christian persons and Old Norse religion. For definitions, see further below.

There is no lack of gold and silver on him. Four loaves of bread are brought him every day and meat with it.⁴

When the king got to the assembly the next day, he and his men saw a great multitude of farmers coming to this place carrying between them a huge image of a person, adorned with gold and silver. The farmers that were already at the assembly, all leapt up and bowed down to this monstrosity. The statue was placed in the middle of the assembly field. On one side sat the farmers, on the other the king and his men. Guðbrandr then stood up and said:

Where is your God now, king? I think that now he is carrying the beard on his chin rather low, and it looks to me as if your bragging and that of the horned chap that you call bishop and sits there next to you is less than yesterday, for now our god is come, who rules all things, and is looking at you with keen eyes, and I see that you are now frightened and scarcely dare raise your eyes. Now put aside your superstition and believe in our god, who has you entirely at his mercy.⁵

The king spoke with his allied Kolbeinn so that the farmers did not notice: “If it happens during my speech that they look away from their god, then strike him a blow the hardest you can with your cudgel.”⁶ After that the king stood up and spoke:

Much have you spoken to us this morning. You express yourself strangely about your not being able to see our God, but we are expecting that he will soon come to us. You threaten us with your god, who is blind and deaf and can neither save himself nor anyone else and cannot get away anywhere from where he is unless he is carried, and I am thinking that now he is not far from disaster. So see now there, and look to the east, there comes our God now with a great light.⁷

4 ‘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.’ Óláfs saga helga, in *Heimskringla* 2, Ísl. Fornr. 27: 187. Trans. Finley & Faulkes 2014.

5 ‘Hvar er nú guð þinn, konungr? pat ætla ek nú, at hann beri heldr lágt hokuskegg; ok svá sýnisk mér sem minna sé karp þitt nú ok þess hyrnings, er þér kallið byskup ok þar sitr í hjá þér, heldr en fyrra dag, fyrir því at nú er guð várr kominn, er öllu ræðr, ok sér á yðr með hvössum augum, ok sé ek, at þér eruð nú felmsfullir ok þorið varla augum upp at sjá. Nú fellid niðr hindr-vitni yðra ok trúid á goð várt, er allt hefir ráð yðart í hendi.’ Ísl. Fornr. 27: 188. Trans. Finley & Faulkes 2014.

6 ‘Ef svá berr at í órendi mínu, at þeir sjá frá goði sínum, þá slá þú hann þat hogg, sem þú mátt mest, með ruddunni.’ Ísl. Fornr. 27: 189. Trans. Finley & Faulkes 2014.

7 ‘Mart hefir þú mælt í morgun til vár. Lætr þú kynliga yfir því, er þú mátt eigi sjá guð várn, en vér vættum, at hann mun koma brátt til vár. Þú ógnar oss guði þínu, er blint er ok dauft ok má hvárki bjarga sér né öðrum ok kœmsk engan veg ór stað, nema borinn sé, ok vænti ek nú, at honum sé skamt til ills. Ok lítið þér nú til ok séð í austr, þar ferr nú guð várr með ljósi miklu.’ Ísl. Fornr. 27: 189. Trans. Finley & Faulkes 2014.

Then the sun rose, and all the farmers looked towards the sun. At that moment Kolbeinn struck their god so that it broke all to pieces, and out of it ran mice, as big as if they were cats, and adders and snakes. The farmers got so frightened that they fled, some to ships, but when they pushed out their ships water ran in and filled them up, and they could not board them, while those that ran to horses, found none. After this the king had the farmers called, saying that he wished to have a discussion with them, and the farmers turned back and the assembly went into session. The king stood up and spoke:

‘I do not know,’ he says, ‘what is the reason for this noise and dashing about that you are carrying on. But now you can see what power your god had, on whom you lavished gold and silver, food and provisions, and you have seen now what creatures have consumed it, mice and snakes, adders and toads. And they are worse off who believe in such and will not put aside their folly. Take your gold and jewels, that is scattered here now across the field, and take it home to your wives and never again put it on stocks or stones. But now there are two alternatives here before us, the one, that you now accept Christianity, otherwise fight a battle with me today, and let whoever the God in whom we believe will be victorious over the others today.’⁸

Then Guðbrandr stood up and said: “Great harm have we suffered for our god. And yet since he was unable to help us, we will now believe in the God in whom you believe.”⁹ Then they all accepted Christianity. The bishop baptized Guðbrandr and his son and put in place clergy and they parted friends. Guðbrandr had a church built there in the dales.

This story of St Óláfr and Guðbrandr is one of the most classic and iconic depictions in the Old Norse literature of the meeting between representatives of the ancient Scandinavian religion and Christianity during the period of conversion. St Óláfr was, according to it, obviously not impressed by the Þórr statue. He had it struck so it fell in pieces, and out jumped mice as big as cats, and adders, and snakes. This trope is recurrent in the hagiography and the mission literature, that is, the idea that the devil and his animals have their dwelling inside the images of

8 ‘Eigi veit ek,’ segir hann, ‘hví sætir hark þetta ok hlaup, er þér gerið. En nú meguð þér sjá, hvat guð yðarr mátti, er þér báruð á gull ok silfr, mat ok vistir, ok sá nú, hverjar véttir þess höfðu neytt, mýss ok ormar, eðtur ok þöddur. Ok hafa þeir verr, er á slíkt trúa ok eigi vilja láta af heimsku sinni. Takið þér gull yðart ok gørsimar, er hér ferr nú um völlu, ok hafði heim til kvinna yðarra ok berið aldri síðan á stokka eða á steina. En hér eru nú kostir tveir á með oss, annat tveggja, at þér takið nú við kristni eða haldið bardaga við mik í dag, ok beri þeir sigr af öðrum í dag, er sá guð vill, er vér trúum á.’ Ísl. Fornr. 27: 189–190. Trans. Finley & Faulkes 2014.

9 ‘Skada mikinn höfum vér farit um guð vart. Ok þó með því, at hann mátti ekki oss við hjálpa, þá viljum vér nú trúa á þann guð, sem þú trúir.’ Ísl. Fornr. 27: 190. Trans. Finley & Faulkes 2014.

pagan gods.¹⁰ It appears, for instance, in an account written by Theodoretos in the fifth century about Bishop Theophilus' treatment of a Serapis image in Alexandria in the end of fourth century. The bishop ordered one of his men to hew down the cult image whereupon hordes of mice rush out of it.¹¹ Such accounts can be related to the demonology and literary clichés or *topoi* applied by missionaries and early Christian kings in sermons, speeches at assemblies, or didactical texts when teaching the pagans that they lacked real gods. Their images of gods were nothing but figures made of wood. According to Snorri's account, the king's negotiations and preaching to the pagan peasants did not seem to be enough to convince them to give up their old faith; concrete action was also required. That is why he had Kolbeinn chop up the image of Þórr. In Snorri's text, King Óláfr threatened the peasants with weapons if they did not allow themselves to be baptized. The story also ends with the conversion of the recalcitrant farmers at Hundþorp and King Óláfr's admonition that they must not decorate logs and stones with gold and jewels.

There are many similar accounts on the early Christian royalties and their conversion methods in *Heimskringla*, however, the historical value of them has been much debated in research (see 1.3 and 9.1 below). On the one hand they are shaped according to a common pattern in hagiography, indicating that they lack a historical background. On the other hand, they are sometimes based on older and more reliable sources suggesting that these early Christian kings really had pagan cult images and sanctuaries smashed during the conversion process.¹² When telling the story about the violent missionary attempts of the Christian sons of King Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr during the 960s in Norway¹³ for instance, Snorri had both contemporary skaldic poems as well as older prose traditions as support.¹⁴ According to Snorri, these sons had accepted Christianity in England before they assumed kingship in Norway. But when they came to power in Nor-

10 See e.g., Strömbäck 1975: 104–106.; Näsström 2001: 199–200; Bagge 2005: 75; Lassen 2011: 215–217; Wellendorf 2018: *passim*.

11 Strömbäck (1975: 105, note 1) refers to Theodoretos' *Ecclesiastical History* 5,22. This *topos* and similar motifs were common in Christian accounts during the Middle Ages. Dillmann (2022: 746–747) refers to an Old English text called *De falsis diis*, written by Ælfric in the late tenth century. *Homilies of Ælfric. A Supplementary Collection* II, ed. J. C. Pope 1968: 667–724.

12 We may see this type of violent conversion not only in Scandinavia, but in all Europe. See Brown 2013: xxxvii–viii.

13 *Haralds saga gráfeldar* ch. 2, *Heimskringla* I, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 203–204. This text will be analysed in more detail in ch. 4.

14 See the contemporary poem *Vellekla* sts 14 and 15 which clearly indicate that the sons of Eiríkr damaged sanctuaries. They were sources for Snorri's account. See also *Fagrskinna* ch. 14, (Ísl. Fornr. 29: 98), which most likely also constituted an important source for Snorri's narrative.

way, these Christian kings made no progress in converting people; everywhere they could, they demolished temples and destroyed rituals (*brutu þeir niðr hof ok spilltu blótum*) and because of this became very unpopular.¹⁵ This information is partly indicated in Einarr skálaglamm Helgason's contemporary poem *Hákonardrápa*,¹⁶ where the poet states that when the Eiríkssynir ruled the country they "dared to destroy [pagan] sanctuaries" (*þorði granda véum*). According to a *lausavísa* (21), attributed to the Icelandic hero and poet Egill Skalla-Grímsson and quoted in *Egils saga* chapter 56, their father, the Christian King Eiríkr, is described as "the one who does injury to the [pagan] sanctuaries [or sanctuary]" (*þanns vé grandar*).¹⁷ When Egill in *lausavísa* 22 calls Eiríkr *loðbrigðir* "lawbreaker," after being sentenced as an outlaw, it may also refer to the desecration the king had done to the cult and assembly places. Egill's, Einarr's and Snorri's texts thus suggest that these early Christian kings really tried to eradicate the pagan traditions by destroying sanctuaries and abolishing the sacrificial cult. In this case the violent actions of these kings alone do not seem to have influenced the peasants to give up their old faith; no traditions indicate that they were successful in converting people. As we will see later in the present book, such attempts probably also required preaching, negotiations and verbal pressure for a more successful result.

When Jarl Hákon took power over Norway c. 970, and Eiríkr's sons were defeated, the jarl ordered over his whole realm that people should maintain temples and rituals, and this was done.¹⁸ This historical process is witnessed in reliable sources, such as the poem *Vellekla*. They suggest that some pagan rulers and chieftains offered resistance when the old religion was threatened. They also indicate a conflict-filled conversion process in parts of Viking Age Norway. Elsewhere, the dismantling of the native religion and the old society seems to have been a quite peaceful and smooth process, as in the case of Iceland. But before we go into analyzing this story and other similar accounts from the transition period, a brief background overview of the present study is required, as well as a presentation of its purpose, the central questions it intends to answer, and its theoretical and methodological framework.

¹⁵ *Heimskringla* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 203–204.

¹⁶ This stanza is not attested in *Heimskringla* but only in *Fagrskinna* manuscript B, see further 4.3 below.

¹⁷ On this *lausavísa*, see further 4.3 below.

¹⁸ See *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 16, *Heimskringla* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 241.

It is a common opinion in research that the Scandinavians changed religion on an official level during the second half of the Viking Age, that is, c. AD 950–1050/1100 (Fig. 1a/b).¹⁹ During this period, Christianity replaced the Old Norse religion. However, Christian impulses may have come to Scandinavia perhaps as early as the late Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period (c. AD 300–550), indicating a long process, including gradual cultural and religious changes and adoptions of new ideas.²⁰ The first known Christian mission in Denmark and Sweden was organized by the Frankish-German Church during the reign of Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious (r. 814–840).²¹ Later, around AD 1000, a mission also came to the Nordic countries from England, which was especially important for the Christianization of Norway.²² It was thus the Roman Catholic Christianity that mainly influenced the Nordic countries during the Viking Age.²³ According to a common view, the Christianization process was completed when the Church provinces were established in Scandinavia during the twelfth century.²⁴

The conversion of the ancient Scandinavians was indeed not an incident that took place overnight. Rather, it should be described as a long and complicated process, including several phases of adjustments, adaptations and changes.²⁵ The disintegration of the indigenous religion further took place at different times in

19 These dates relate to certain political events which later historiography has “considered as important dates or decisive moments” (Brink 2008b: 621) for the official conversion, for instance, when a ruler proclaims in public that his people have changed religion. See for instance King Harald's proclamation on the Jelling runestone DR 42. *Official religion* is a religion officially endorsed by a sovereign state. Whether the concept state can be applied to the Viking societies is somewhat debated. See e.g. Lindkvist & Sjöberg 2009: 122–123. As a variant to the concept official religion, I will sometimes use the concept *public religion*. According to José Casanova (2003: 111), “[a] public religion is one that has, assumes, or tries to assume a public character, function, or role.” Casanova states however that both the concepts public and religion are problematic, see further below.

20 See e.g., A.-S. Gräslund 1996 and 2001; Fabeck & Näsman 2013. The chronological system used in this study is as follows: The Roman Iron Age (c. AD 0–375), the Migration Period (c. AD 375–550), the Merovingian Period (in Sweden called the Vendel Period; c. AD 550–750), and the Viking Period (c. AD 750–1050/1100) which is followed by the Medieval era. The Roman Iron Age and the Migration represent in present study the Middle Iron Age, while the Merovingian Period and the Viking Age represent the Late Iron Age.

21 See Staecker 1999: 346–348; Brown 2013: 464–466; B. Nilsson 2020: 1706–1708.

22 See Adam 2,36–37; 2,55 and 2,57. Cf. B. Nilsson 2010: 14–15. Whether a Byzantine mission existed in Scandinavia has been discussed in previous research. However, such a mission is difficult to substantiate. See e.g., B. Nilsson 1998: 61–64; A.-S. Gräslund 2001: 149–150.

23 That type of Christianity which arrived in Viking Age Scandinavia, however, had been affected by Germanic culture and religion on the Continent and in England and was thus Germanized (cf. Russell 1994).

24 See e.g., B. Nilsson 2010: 9.

25 E.g., Birkeli 1973; A.-S. Gräslund 2001; Berend (ed.) 2007.



Fig. 1a: Map of Viking Age and early medieval Scandinavia. Image in its original state by Sven Rosborn, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>.

different places in Scandinavia.²⁶ The first areas to convert were probably in Denmark.²⁷ King Haraldr Klakk (Old Danish *Harald*) was baptized as early as 826 in Mainz, however, usually the official conversion of Denmark is related to King Haraldr blátǫnn Gormsson's political decision c. 963 and his own baptism. This

²⁶ E.g., Brink 1996a/b; Berend 2007: 24–25; Nordeide 2011; Ljung 2016 and 2019.

²⁷ It is possible that occasional missionary attempts were made in Denmark as early as the eighth century. Staecker 1999: 346; cf. B. Nilsson 2010: 9.

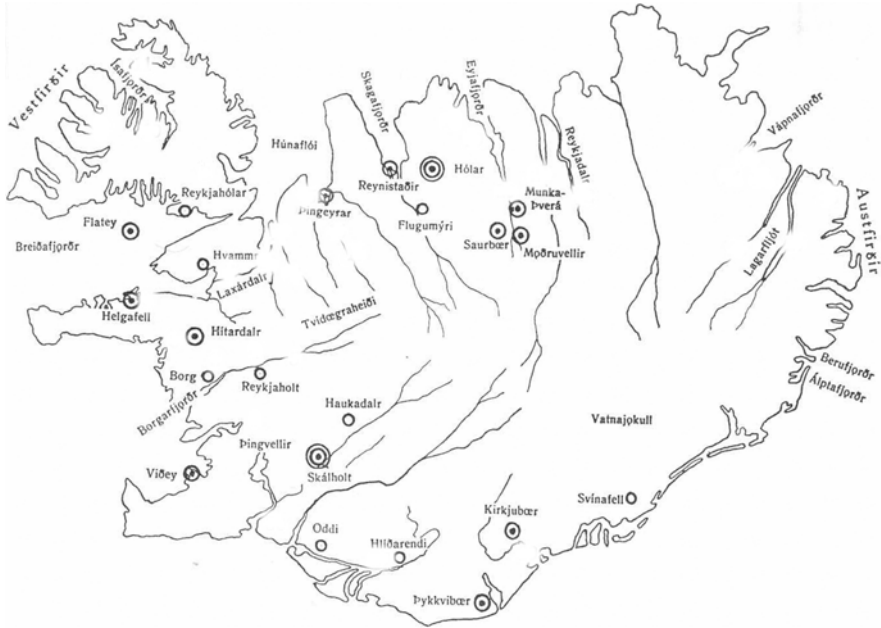


Fig. 1b: Map of Viking Age Iceland. Original source: Jón Helgason, *Norrøn Litteraturhistorie*. Licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>.

conversion is even indicated in one contemporary runestone at the royal site of Jelling, between Aarhus and Ribe in Jylland (Fig. 2).²⁸ In ecclesiastical organizational terms, the church province with the archbishop's seat in Lund was established first in 1103/1104. Old Norse sources report that Norway and Iceland were officially converted around the year 1000, but the Old Norse religion demised with some local variations.²⁹ It has often been argued that the coast areas of Norway, for instance, converted before the inland, however, recently it has been stated that archaeological investigations indicate a more complex picture.³⁰ Niðar-

²⁸ Cf. Gelting 2020: 1586–1589.

²⁹ Cf. Nordeide 2011; 2020: 1633–1635 and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1664–1668. The first native bishop for Iceland was Ísleifr, who was consecrated in Bremen c. 1056. See Adam 4,36. Cf. Gustafsson 2011.

³⁰ Bagge & Nordeide 2007: 133. Nordeide (2011: 322) states thus “It is not possible to say that Christianity was established earlier along the west coast [of Norway] than inland, or in the south before the north. Instead, Christianity was probably established with help of kings as strategic places, as stepping stones along the landscape. These places were either founded as towns, or else the towns emerged soon after.”

óss (today called Trondheim) became an archbishop's seat in 1152/1153 with a church province that covered Norway, Iceland and other Atlantic islands. The end of the old religion in Sweden is often related to the dismantling of the sanctuary in Uppsala, in the second half of the eleventh century. It is mentioned as still existing in Adam of Bremen's account in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (4,26–30) dated to c. 1075.³¹ However, also in Sweden the old religion declined at different times in different places. Recent studies focusing on traditional burial fields, early Christian grave monuments and the runestone tradition indicate that Västergötland was the earliest province to change religion, including an incipient Church organization, that is, the early eleventh century.³² Western parts of Östergötland converted around 1000–1050, while it seems to be a temporal delay of this process in the Lake Mälaren area, that is, Svetjud,³³ but with some regional variations. It is in general agreed that the “Christianization process” was completed in Sweden 1164 when the episcopal see of Uppsala was revised to an archiepiscopal rank.³⁴

When describing this transition in recent studies, the concept of “Christianization” is often applied.³⁵ These studies discuss transformations of religious beliefs and rituals, the introduction and adoption of Christianity, the emergence of different types of royal institutions and organizations, and new economic and social structures. Due to these processes, it is argued that the Scandinavian kingdoms became “integrated into the wider cultural and political community of western Christianity.”³⁶ To a large extent this historiography focuses on the outcome of the encounter, namely the description of early Medieval Christianity and the new Christian society. The concept of Christianization highlights thus the success and “victory” of the winning part in this encounter.

The *purpose* of the present study is to concentrate more exclusively on the Old Norse religion during this period of change and to analyze the processes behind its disappearance on an official level of the society.³⁷ While previous studies

31 E.g., Sundqvist 2016a: 110–127.

32 See Ljung 2016 and 2019; cf. Theliander 2005.

33 Svetjud (Old Norse *Sviþjóð*) was a kingdom of somewhat uncertain geographical extent (cf. Sawyer 1991: 16–19; Th. Andersson 2000 and 2004; Brink 2008c). According to the ninth century sources “the Svear formed some kind of multi-regional polity, stretching from their core area around Lake Mälaren (which was then a gulf open to the Baltic) towards Denmark in the south, and towards the east Baltic territory in the east” (Blomkvist et al. 2007: 173–174). In the present study, Svetjud refers mostly to the area around the Lake Mälaren.

34 B. Nilsson 2020: 1697.

35 See, e.g., B. Nilsson 1996a and 2020; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2003 and 2020; Sanmark 2004; Berend (ed.) 2007; Nordeide 2011 and 2020; Haki Antonsson 2014; Gelting 2020.

36 Lindkvist 2008: 669.

37 The terms *religious change*, *conversion* and *official level* will be discussed below in 1.1.



Fig. 2: Runestone at the royal site of Jelling, Denmark. Image of Christ on the cross. The runic inscription on the stone ends as follows: “That Haraldr who won for himself all Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian” (see below). Image in its original state by Roberto Fortuna, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

also mention such aspects,³⁸ few of them are interested specifically in the vanishing religion. To generalize, there are a lack of studies that investigate *how* and *why* religious “traditions, practices, or indeed entire systems disappear,”³⁹ as well as the question of *who* caused these extinctions. This study intends to bring find-

³⁸ See e.g., Sanmark’s investigation (2004), which includes relevant aspects also for the present study on the demise of Old Norse religion. Similar intentions appear also in the articles of Berend (ed.) (2007) and Schjødt et al. (eds.) (2020, vol. 4), even if most of them mainly focus on the outcome of the conversion process. Historians of religions, such as Steinsland (1991; 2000; 2005) and Schjødt (2013) have also discussed the disappearance of the old religion more recently. See also chs 2 and 7 below. It can truly be said that the present study is largely inspired by all of them.

³⁹ de Jong 2016: 647.

ings from the field of Old Norse religion into this nascent research,⁴⁰ with particular focus on the role of Viking kings and indigenous agency in the winding up of the native religion.⁴¹ An actor-oriented approach will thus be established, that starts with individual agents rather than ideological systems.⁴² In this approach focus is placed on the intentions, actions, methods and strategies applied by the early Christian Viking kings when dismantling the religious tradition that had previously been fundamental to their lives. In addition, the resistance that some of the pagan chieftains offered against these Christian kings is discussed as well as the question *why* they defended the old religious tradition. Hence, by means of focusing on the demise of the Norse religion, including both the attempts to dismantle and defend it, the question on religious change in the Late Viking Age Scandinavia will be reframed and reconceptualized.⁴³

1.1 Theoretical and methodological perspectives

In what follows, the theoretical and methodological perspectives and limitations that will be applied in the present study are discussed. In addition, some analytical concepts used in the survey are defined. First however, the focus of the study and its context in the history of religions are presented.

1.1.1 Focusing on the demising religion

In a project called “The Demise of Religion” at the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo (2018–2019) a group of scholars led by the historians of religions Michael Stausberg and the late James T. Lewis wished to provide a comparative analysis

⁴⁰ See Robbins 2014; de Jong 2016; Stausberg 2021.

⁴¹ The importance of the kings with support from local rulers in the “Christianization process” is often stressed in recent research, see, e.g., Sanmark 2004: 34–39, 75–83; Berend 2007: 13–15, 38; Barlett 2007: 47; Brink 2008b: 622; Nordeide 2020: 1645–1646. Few of these studies concentrate specifically on *how* these kings dismantled the old religion and *why* they used these particular means. The word Viking, Old Norse *vikingr*, was a man who had left Scandinavia on a journey together with other men. These journeys were raids and military expeditions, conducted by a group of warriors (Old Norse *lið*, *drótt*) under leadership of a king or a chieftain. Brink 2008d.

⁴² See e.g., Florén & Ågren 2006 [1998]: 137–138; Long 2001. On actor-oriented perspective, see below.

⁴³ On previous research, see notes above and ch. 2 below.

of the *why* and *how* of the decline and death of religions.⁴⁴ The results of the project were partly published in a thematic issue of the journal *Numen* 2021, where the demise of, for example, Egypt, Graeco-Roman and Scandinavian religions was treated, including a more theoretical introduction, written by Michael Stausberg.⁴⁵ The present book will give a systematic presentation from the study of Old Norse religion to this research field and provide new insights to the comparative study of religion, such as the significance and use of violence, negotiation, the giving of gifts, decrees, legislative measures and other actions, methods, strategies and/or tactics used by native rulers when dismantling the indigenous religion. This book discusses the reactions that arose among the pagan chieftains who wanted to preserve the old religion, society and culture as well as the conflicts this gave rise to. There is a research gap related to these issues,⁴⁶ which should be closed with the support of a thorough and detailed investigation.

1.1.2 The actor-oriented perspective and indigenous agency

The theoretical perspective of the present study is mainly inspired by anthropologist Joel Robbins' article "How Do Religions End? Theorizing Religious Traditions from the Point of View of How They Disappear." Robbins based his study on an extensive fieldwork carried out among the Urapmin, a group of 390 people living in the West Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea, where he particularly paid attention to the ways people actively dismantled the religious tradition that previously formed their life.⁴⁷ Robbins emphasized that the disappearance and persistence of

⁴⁴ The group included Janne Arp-Neumann, Erica Baffelli, Jan Bremmer, Christian Bull, Carole Cusack, Laura Feldt, Albert de Jong, the late James T. Lewis, Richard Lim, Joel Robbins, Jörg Rüpke, Michael Stausberg, Olof Sundqvist, and Stuart Wright. The late Liselotte Frisk joined the team as a visiting guest and Jens Braarvig was a permanent guest.

⁴⁵ Michael Stausberg surveyed research related to the topic demise of religion from the 1920s until today (2021: 106–108). An early contribution was Pratt 1921.

⁴⁶ In the volume *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy* aspects of the declining religions are indeed taken into consideration. The editor Nora Berend (2007: 10) expresses anyhow the hope that "further research may shed light on issues of pagan religion" in this process. Haki Antonsson (2014: 50) has in a review article noted some fundamental factors, which need to be addressed in future research on the conversion and Christianization of Scandinavia, for instance, "the nature of pre-Christian customs prior to the official adoption of the new religion," and "the role of rulers in introducing or even imposing the new religion." In different ways, the present study engages these aspects.

⁴⁷ Robbins 2014. See also Mikael Rothstein's (2016) interesting discussion about the dismantling of the indigenous religion of the Penan people in Borneo, when encountered with Christianity.

a religious tradition could be seen as “something people actively do, rather than something that simply happens.”⁴⁸ His focus was placed on *how* members of this group concretely proceeded when they dismantled their old religion. One approach included “the material erasure of the traditional religion,” that is “the careful, frequently almost ritualized, abandonment of the material supports of traditional religious practice.”⁴⁹ This erasure was not performed by “foreign missionaries” but by the converted Urapmin themselves. They were thus both subjects and objects of this religious change.⁵⁰

Joel Robbins also introduced the analytic concepts *replacements* and *displacements* when analyzing *how* the indigenous religious ideas and rituals were dismantled.⁵¹ According to Robbins, Urapmin replaced some traditional notions and practices with Christian ideas and rituals, which aimed to realize the same goals.⁵² One of the most obvious examples of replacement in the history of the fall of Urapmin traditional religion was the “people’s use of prayer to entreat God to help them succeed in many of the tasks for which the ancestors once provided assistance.”⁵³ Some indigenous religious ideas were, however, delegated to less important roles or reinterpreted in the process:

In displacement, aspects of Christian thought and practice do not simply slot in where traditional thought and practice had once been but rather provide a clear rationale for why former practices and the goals they set need to be abandoned. One straightforward example is the way Urapmin will now tell you that they have come to realize that Afek and their other important ancestors really existed, but they were simply normal human beings, not supernaturally powerful figures that deserve ritual attention.⁵⁴

Although it is not possible to generalize from Robbins’ study of the small group of Urapmin, it still has a theoretical value as it presents an important terminology and also emphasizes the role of the indigenous group and actors in dismantling their own tradition rather than seeing this, for example, as the work of conquerors or missionaries, or foreign kings.

Robbins’ focus on the indigenous agency in the process of dismantling the native religious tradition is crucial for the present study, and will be applied to the newly converted rulers in late Viking Age Scandinavia. These royalties also acted as

⁴⁸ Robbins 2014: 13.

⁴⁹ Robbins 2014: 7. Colpe 1986: 16–17.

⁵⁰ Cf. Stausberg 2021: 107.

⁵¹ Robbins 2014: 9–10.

⁵² Robbins 2014: 9.

⁵³ Robbins 2014: 9.

⁵⁴ Robbins 2014: 10.

a kind of cult leader before conversion.⁵⁵ It is thus no surprise that they, together with allied or subordinated chieftains, also played a most active role when the old cult was to be dismantled. That the native kings played an important role during the conversion in the Nordic countries has indeed been observed in previous research,⁵⁶ however, few have more exclusively studied their role in this process including the resistance they faced. In addition, it will be argued that the material erasure of old religion was one of many crucial methods for these early Christian rulers.⁵⁷ The analytic concepts *replacements* and *displacements* will also be applied in the present investigation, since they can be used when discussing *how* the Christian rulers proceeded when they would break down the old traditions.

An agent-based, action-oriented approach will be applied in the present study.⁵⁸ In Part II, designated “The role of rulers as agents in the winding up of the native religion,” the actors are the native Christian kings, their advisors and clericals working for them, that is, the royal power and the Church, while the pagan chieftains and farmers are the major agents in Part III, which is entitled “Pagans fight back.” Focus in Part II, will thus be placed on *how* the early Christian rulers acted to achieve their goals, for instance, *how* they dismantled cult

55 Sundqvist 2002; 2016a; 2021. See also 1.1.3 below and 4.1.

56 For instance, Bertil Nilsson (2020: 1721) states thus: “From the beginning of the eleventh century, the kings played an important role with regard to the establishment of the Church.” Many scholars have noticed that the early Christian kings collaborated closely with the Church and had a reciprocal relationship. Ecclesiastical organization and administration were essential to the state-formation process. Laws were written down by the royal power with the help of the clergy. The king supported and protected the Church in compensation for the ecclesiastical support. That these kings also played a most active role when dismantling the Old Norse religion is less observed. But some have taken such perspectives into considerations. They have all inspired me in what follows. See e.g., B. Nilsson 2020: 1721–1723; cf. Hellström 1971: 143–148; Lindkvist 1996; Sanmark 2004: 34–53, 75–106; Berend 2007: 2–10, 13–15, 19; Blomkvist et al. 2007: 204–205; Brink 2008b: 622.

57 Carsten Colpe (1986) stated that the most obvious form of disappearance is the physical extermination, when sanctuaries, images of gods and ritual objects are smashed.

58 When focusing on an actor perspective in historical studies, emphasize is placed on certain agents, i.e., individuals or groups who have been significant for historical developments and changes. Focus is often placed on the agents’ intentions with actions in specific contexts. Opposite to this is structural approaches, which focuses on the structures within which these individuals operate. My purpose is primarily to understand the intention of the action, where also the limitations that ideologies, institutions or the actions of other individuals and groups create for the acting subject are taken into consideration. It is the relation between different actions and specific intentions to dismantle and defend the old order that I am looking for, where also some structural aspects are taken into consideration, such as the impact of religious ideology on the actors etc. Therefore, I use the term actor-oriented. See Florén & Ågren 2006 [1998]: 137–138; cf. Long 2001: 1–5. On the problems between actor and structure, see Berger & Luckman 1998 [1966].

buildings and images of gods, and wiped out pagan cult leadership and cult organization, as well as *why* they aimed at erasing these areas of the Norse religion. Focus in Part III, will be placed on the pagan chieftains' actions and motives when defending the old tradition as well as the conflicts that their actions gave rise to. Some structural aspects are also taken into consideration, such as the religious and ideological impact on the actors as well as the agents' influence on structures. In both parts, a contextual and situational approach is applied, however, recurrent patterns in actions and intentions will also be observed.

1.1.3 The top-down perspective

Historiography on religious change in the Viking Age Scandinavia has for many centuries been focused on the activities of missionaries, and their ability to attract and convert people.⁵⁹ Countries, regions and locals in Scandinavia had their own apostle; Iceland had Þangbrandr, Vestlandet in Norway had St Sunnifa, Södermanland in Sweden had St Eskil (Old Swedish *Askel*, *Æskil*) and St Botvid (Old Swedish *Botvidh*). In Skövde, Småland, there was a local saint who was called St Elin (Old Swedish *Ælin(a)*) or St Helena (from Latin *Helena*).⁶⁰ In the hagiography over these men and women we meet the history of their struggle for spreading the Christian faith to the pagans, which often resulted in their death. Eventually a local cult was founded at the place they were said to have been killed and sometimes they were officially canonized.

This traditional view of Christianization of Scandinavia, which can be traced back to the Middle Age historiography, is often described “as a process which starts at the bottom of society and eventually climbs up on the societal ladder.”⁶¹ The missionaries were assumed to have been wandering around among common people in the Scandinavian countries, where they preached, converted pagans to the Christian faith and then baptized them. In the end the entire society, including the elite, was permeated by Christianity. There are researchers still today who defend a bottom-up perspective on the Christianization process. They argue that the change of religion can be seen as a popularly initiated movement from below, where the rulers eventually had to be baptized to maintain their power, because so many of their subjects were already Christians.⁶² Based on the archaeological investigation of an early Christian cemetery and a church in Veøy, a little island in the Romsdal

⁵⁹ See overview in Brink 2008b: 622–625.

⁶⁰ B. Nilsson 1998: 59–61; Brink 2008b: 622.

⁶¹ Brink 2008b: 622.

⁶² Cf. Theliander 2005; 2010.

fjord, archaeologist Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide, argued that “the embryonic phase of Christianity in Norway did not embrace the entire polity but remained a local initiative [. . .]. No king can be identified from written sources as being associated with this event, and consequently there is no support for any argument insisting that a royal initiative was decisive for the very first establishment of Christianity in Norway.”⁶³ She admits that the first Christian community in Veøy indeed was a rather isolated phenomenon. The next phase of Christianization in Norway around AD 1000 “was very much a top-down process, initiated by the king and the Latin Church.”⁶⁴

In the present study, the importance of kings and rulers (e.g., the jarls) in the process of dismantling the old religion will be stressed. Hence, a top-down perspective will be applied. Since the pagan rulership in Sweden, Norway, and probably also in Denmark, included a religious ruler ideology for gaining legitimacy as well as important cultic roles, it is no surprise that they also played significant roles when the old tradition was to be dismantled and devastated. There was a common ideology attached to some noble dynasties, which could be seen in their relationship with the gods.⁶⁵ Skaldic poetry, such as *Ynglingatal*, indicates that the royal kin of the Svear in the Lake Mälaren region, called the Ynglingar, claimed divine descent for their family and the individual members of it. They were, for instance, designated *Freys afspringr* “offspring of Freyr,” *Freys óttungr* “descendant of Freyr,” *týs óttungr* “descendant of god,” and *goðkynningr* “descendant of gods.”⁶⁶ This family had developed a ruler ideology which included the monumentalization of the political power. The poem *Háleygjatal* uses similar kennings and expressions as designations for the jarls of Lade, in Trøndelag, Norway.⁶⁷ In the decentralized society of Iceland, the power structures and ruler ideology were different. The society there was deliberately organized without kings and jarls. It was ruled by many chieftains (*goðar*) jointly. A concentration of power in Iceland did not take place until the end of the Viking Age. Chieftain families, such as the Þórsnesingar in Western Iceland, asserted also a different kind of ruler ideology and relation to the gods compared to the Ynglingar and the Lade-jarls, which was not phrased in terms of kinship. In the sources, the chieftains from Þórsnes were described as “dearest friend” (*ástvinr* and *mikill vinr*) of the god

⁶³ Nordeide 2020: 1629.

⁶⁴ Nordeide 2020: 1633.

⁶⁵ See particularly Sundqvist 2012 and 2016a.

⁶⁶ *Ynglingatal*, SkP 1: 25, 31, 36 and 44.

⁶⁷ *Háleygjatal*, SkP 1: 205 and 208.

(i.e., Þórr), and they took care of the cult to the deity at the local sanctuary.⁶⁸ Their relation to the gods should primarily be described not as genealogic, but as cultic. The social-political and ideological differences in various regions of Viking Age Scandinavia likely had consequences for the way the Old Norse religion was disassembled. The findings indicate that regions with a distinct rulership including kings and jarls—such as Denmark, Norway and Sweden—resembled each other, but diverged from conditions in Iceland, and probably also Gotland, where local chieftains jointly ruled the islands.⁶⁹ These differences will be discussed more closely in Part III and IV below.

1.1.4 Concepts describing religious change

In Old Norse medieval writings, the religious change process in Scandinavia was described by using the emic term *siðaskipti*, that is, a concept with the literally meaning “change of customs.” The Old Norse religion, including all beliefs, rituals and customs related to it, was called *inn forni siðr* “the old custom,” while the new religion of Christianity was called *inn nýi siðr* “the new custom” (see further below).⁷⁰ In what follows, I will discuss the etic terms and comparative concepts used in research when describing this process and also investigate their relevance for the present study.

Christianization

As noted above, there are plenty of recent books which include the concept *Christianization* in their titles when describing the religious change in Viking Age Scandinavia.⁷¹ This concept has been defined in various ways in previous research, where

⁶⁸ See e.g., *Eyrbyggja saga* chs 3–4, Ísl. Fornr. 4: 6–7. See Sundqvist 2012 and 2016a. It should be mentioned that Ari inn fróði’s genealogical list called *nofn langfæðga Ynglinga ok Breiðfirðinga* (“names of the forefathers of the Ynglinga-kin and the Breiðafjörður-people”) in *Íslendingabók*, traces his family from the euhemerized gods Yngvi Tyrkjakonungr – Njörðr Sviakonungr – Freyr – Fjölfnir – Sveigðir etc. See 4.5.1 below.

⁶⁹ Andrésen 2012.

⁷⁰ Clunies Ross 2018b: 119; cf. Sundqvist 2005a; Nordberg 2017; 2018, and 2022: 262.

⁷¹ E.g., B. Nilsson (ed.) 1996; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2003; Berend (ed.) 2007; Sanmark 2004; and above. A recent example is the new handbook *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: History and Structures, Volume IV: The Christianization Process, Bibliography, and Index*, where all chapters use the term Christianization in their titles: “The Christianization of Denmark,” “The Christianization of Norway,” “The Christianization of the North Atlantic” and “The Christianization of Sweden” etc., Schjødt et al., (eds.) 2020. Gelting 2020; Nordeide 2020; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020 and B. Nilsson 2020.

aspects of the process—not only the outcome—have also been taken into consideration. According to historian Nora Berend, for instance, this concept refers to “the process of the penetration of Christianity into society and accompanying societal change,”⁷² while Haki Antonsson states that Christianization denotes “the process through which behaviour and beliefs were moulded according to the precepts of the Christian community and the Church.”⁷³ Church historian Bertil Nilsson makes a useful distinction when discussing the concept; one concerns the official sphere, and the other, the private sphere. He states that it is easiest to deal with the official Christianization

implying that the Church and Christianity were publicly accepted by the society, either as a consequence of decrees issued by persons who had the power to decide in matters of religious affiliation and practice, or through establishment of ecclesiastic structures [. . .]. It is considerably more difficult to survey the private sphere. In this regard, it is reasonable to maintain that Christianization had come to an end when the majority of the population took part in the Church’s different services, had acquired knowledge of at least the fundamental parts of the Christian faith, and also embraced basic Christian values in moral and ethical respects.⁷⁴

These previous studies on Christianization have indeed taken into consideration the transformation of the beliefs, attitudes, values, and actions, but most of all the outcome of this process has been emphasized, that is, the description of the early medieval Christianity and Christian society. Processes related to the demising religion and culture are less observed or even ignored. It has sometimes been argued that some elements of the old religion survived and appeared in the early medieval Christianity. Key terms in these discussions are adaptation, syncretism, acculturation and cult continuation.⁷⁵ However, few, if any, of these studies concentrate exclusively on what elements were lost of the declining religion during the transition, *how* and *why* they were lost, or what the reactions were in the old religion.

In his survey concerning the disintegration and death of religions, Albert de Jong has identified a similar trend in the historiography related to the Christianization of the people in southern Europe, that is, the process where the old religions of Europe—Greek and Roman religions—were replaced by Christianity. He

⁷² Berend 2007: 2; cf. Sanmark 2004: 14. Nordeide (2011: 3) states that the term covers “religious transformations but also social, cultural, and even technological developments,” while Russell (1994: 31) argues that the term “societal Christianization” denotes “the transformation of the beliefs, attitudes, values, and behavior (BAVB) of the society.”

⁷³ Haki Antonsson 2014: 51. For a critical assessment of the term Christianization, see Haki Antonsson 2014: 73.

⁷⁴ B. Nilsson 2020: 1695.

⁷⁵ Hultgård 1992; A.-S. Gräslund 2001; Haki Antonsson 2014; see also ch. 2 below.

states that the focus in both documentations and previous research is shockingly one-sided and biased:

The focus is so heavily tilted toward the eventual outcome (conversion), that the mechanisms of religious change run the risk of being lost from sight. This has resulted in the widespread conviction that the traditional religions that were (to be) replaced by Christianity were somehow doomed to fail, ossified beyond repair, or that they had never been genuinely borne by conviction, but “merely” by tradition or social pressure.⁷⁶

In some senses, de Jong’s statement is quite accurate in relation to the historiography on religious change in Germanic Europe as well, but perhaps not always. Some scholars have argued that the Old Norse religion was strong, creative, and vibrant to the very end of its existence.⁷⁷

Albert de Jong states also that the historiography on Christianization of Europe has been loaded by “ideological convictions.” It has unfortunately developed into a generic model, also applied in other parts of the world when describing processes of conversion:

The problem is that these observations are not carried by any recognizable theoretical orientation or interest. Instead, they are largely carried by ideological convictions—the superiority of Christianity on the one hand, its fundamental intolerance on the other—and these convictions govern much of the interpretation. What makes matters worse is that it is likely that the narrative of the Christianization of Europe, in view of its foundational importance for the construction of Western culture, has been the (implicit or explicit) model applied to most other historical processes of the spread and conquest of religious systems [. . .]⁷⁸

In order to avoid this model, where “focus is so heavily tilted toward the outcome” and “observations are largely carried by ideological convictions,” the concept of Christianization will not be applied in the present study. The intention of the present investigation is to focus on the Old Norse religion during the transition and discuss the actions performed by Christian agents and their strategies causing its disappearance.

Religious change on a public/official level

When describing this process, the comparative concept religious change will be used. It was, for instance, applied by historian of religions Håkan Rydving in his dissertation, *The End of Drum-Time. Religious Change among the Lule Saami, 1670s–1740s*, which studied changes in the indigenous religion during its early en-

⁷⁶ de Jong 2016: 653. On the demise of Greek and Roman religions, see also Bremmer 2021 and Rüpke 2021.

⁷⁷ Steinsland 1991; 2000. See 2.2 below.

⁷⁸ de Jong 2016: 653.

counter with Christianity. Rydving made a distinction between two different meanings of the concept “religious change.” One is close to the German word “Religionswandel,” and is called religious change₁ = RC₁. It is described as “the continuous process which due to internal and external causes involves changes within a religion (despite the changes, the religion is regarded as the same).”⁷⁹ The other meaning is close to the term “Religionswechsel” and is called religious change₂ = RC₂. It is defined as “the process by which one religion is exchanged for another.”⁸⁰ In the present study, it is mostly the latter meaning of the concept that will be applied, that is, when the Old Norse religion was replaced by Christianity, where the former also was exterminated, at least as a cohesive, coherent and integrated system on a public or official level. Rydving also defines in his study concepts relating to two contrasting processes of religious change: (1) a process of religious enculturation, which includes an adhesion of elements from the missionary religion; (2) a process of religious deculturation, which implies a weakening of the indigenous religion.⁸¹ It is the process of deculturation which is the main focus for the present study.

The concept “religious change on an official level” refers to political events where the new religion is publicly accepted by the society, either as a consequence of decrees issued by persons who had the power to decide in matters of religious affiliation and practice, or through establishment of the new religion and its organizational structures.⁸² The concepts “public religion” and “official religion” refer to the cult that took place during gatherings of people at central places and common sanctuaries.⁸³ Scholars have often construed a dichotomy of “official” (“public”) and “private religion,” however this binary model includes some problems when applied to the Viking source material. Probably, these spheres were much more intertwined, and some activities that took place at an individual and private farm, especially in the magnate’s hall, belonged also to public life. There was a sliding scale between the private and public in Viking society. Historian of religions, Andreas Nordberg, who applies the concept of lived religion in an Old Norse context, has criticized this dichotomy and states that it should be dissolved: “As individuals and social beings, people are religious actors in all day-to-day matters, large and small, in everyday life and on feast days.”⁸⁴ Nordberg’s perspective is sound, however, in order to delimit the present study,

79 Rydving 1993: 9–10.

80 Rydving 1993: 10.

81 Rydving 1993: 11–12.

82 This definition is partly borrowed from B. Nilsson 2020: 1695.

83 On the concept central places, see Brink 1996a and André 2020c: 409–418.

84 Nordberg 2022: 263. On the concept lived religion, see McGuire 2008.

focus is placed on the official and public level of religion and conversion. Parts of the private or household religion probably continued way after the Viking Age and are thus also beyond the scope of the limits of the present investigation. If one applies the perspective of lived religion, indeed, the religiosity of individuals during the early Middle Ages probably included both new Christian elements in the more public religious life, while older religious traditions could live on in the more private sphere, that is, in the household religion.⁸⁵

Conversion

Rydving criticizes the term *conversion* when used to describe religious change processes, since it has sometimes been applied in ideological contexts. According to Rydving, this concept has often been used when describing the process he calls RC₂ “from the point of view of missionary religion and the individual level.”⁸⁶ In his classical treatment, A. D. Nock described the concept conversion as “the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.”⁸⁷ Even if I agree with Rydving’s criticism that such definition probably implies individual, ideological and ethnocentric missionary dimensions, I will still use the term conversion occasionally, but in these cases more neutrally defined as “shifts across religious traditions.”⁸⁸ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke applied a sociological perspective to the concept and challenged the common theory that spontaneous mass conversion was the most common form of religious change. This type of conversion was often related to Christian stories: “crowds gathered, listened, marveled and were saved.”⁸⁹ They stated that such theory of doctrinal appeal and the stories of spontaneous, mass conversion are very troublesome, since some of them probably are “mythical.” According to Stark and Finke, conversion processes are often slow and gradual, and based on rational choices. The desire to belong to a group may be the main reason for conversion: “In effect, conversion is seldom about seeking or embracing an ideology; it is about bringing one’s religious behaviour into alignment with that of one’s friends and family members.”⁹⁰ Attachments to a group of people, thus, lie at the heart of conversion.⁹¹ When dis-

⁸⁵ On private or household religion in Old Norse contexts, see particularly Murphy 2018.

⁸⁶ Rydving 1993: 12.

⁸⁷ Nock 1933: 7.

⁸⁸ See Stark & Finke 2000: 114.

⁸⁹ Stark & Finke 2000: 126.

⁹⁰ Stark & Finke 2000: 117.

⁹¹ Cf. Berend 2007: 27.

cussing *why* the Viking kings changed religion in chapter three, I will bring in Stark's and Finke's way of conceptualizing conversion. I will also discuss Stark's and Finke's reasoning on conversion as a substantial investment in new social relationships in chapter three. The Viking kings made such investments, including donations to representatives of the church and marriages with Christian princesses. It will also be argued that the social dimension on the conversion process in general was crucial on all levels of the society.

Continuation, syncretism and religious acculturation

In the previous research of religious change in Scandinavia, ideas about cultural and religious continuation into medieval Christianity have frequently been focused on.⁹² When a new religion replaces an old tradition, the rupture is not total. Some items of the old tradition may survive and also be incorporated in the new religion. When describing such processes, concepts such as syncretism and acculturation have been applied frequently. The historian of religions, Anders Hultgård, who discussed religious change and continuity in the Viking Age and medieval Scandinavia, used the terms "syncretism" and "syncretic" to "characterize the more profound changes of a religion or of phenomena within that religion which result from the encounter with another religion," while the term "religious acculturation," according to him, referred to "influences or modifications that do not touch the central elements of a religion."⁹³ The processes of designated continuation, syncretism and religious acculturation have also been problematized by scholars working with the demise of religions. When an item of the old religion has been transmitted and incorporated into the new religion its former meanings often are lost or reinterpreted. De Jong states thus:

Religions that disappear become silent: the voices of believers are lost, and most often lost forever. This is true even for modern cases of religion death, from both possible ends of a very large continuum: when a religion has died with the death of all (or the last) of its believers, sources of information immediately disappear. When a religion has died because its believers have moved on to another religious identity (or claim to have abandoned religion

⁹² See e.g., B. Nilsson (ed.) 1992; Haki Antonsson 2014 and also 2.3 below.

⁹³ Hultgård 1992: 50, 100. Rydving (1993: 11), however, preferred to only apply the term "religious acculturation." He referred to the historian of religions, Åke Hultkrantz, who introduced this concept when discussing theoretical and methodological problems related to religious encounters in a more general sense. Hultkrantz defined "religious acculturation" as "the part of the process of acculturation which falls within the religious sphere," while "acculturation," in turn, was described as "the process by which two cultures are brought into close contact with one another and as a result of this show increasing similarities." Hultkrantz 1960: 19; 1973: 210. On these terms see also Colpe 1987.

altogether), or in a process of integrating their religion into a larger whole, it is their current frame of reference that clearly informs their representation of the former.⁹⁴

Since the present study does not concentrate on the outcome of the encounter, the terms of syncretism and (religious) acculturation will only be applied sporadically, and mostly when making assessments of previous theories (see 2.3 below) and when discussing examples of the phenomena called replacements, which may have facilitated the dismantling of the old religion (see ch. 5). In the present study, the opposite of continuation is focused on, namely the identification of religious elements, which were abandoned when Christianity was founded in Scandinavia, and the reason why they were lost. It could thus be described as an investigation of the discontinuities of the ancient Scandinavian religion during the period of religious change,⁹⁵ where much focus is placed on what was lost and the processes that led to the extinction.

1.1.5 Methodological steps

In his article “The Disintegration and Death of Religions,” de Jong discussed some necessary methodological steps that have to be taken when explaining patterns of attrition and extinction of religion.⁹⁶ The first step requires the courage to claim (heuristic) distinctiveness of the vanishing religious tradition: “in order to explain disappearance, presence needs to be established first.”⁹⁷ Without such distinctiveness for a particular formation, statements related to “existence,” “continuity” and “disappearance” cannot be made.⁹⁸ A heuristic presentation of some aspects of the Old Norse religion will be outlined in chapter four, before discussing what was lost. Such presentations of the Old Norse religion are quite rare in previous

⁹⁴ de Jong 2016: 654; cf. Robbins 2011. Michael Stausberg (2021: 118) argues in the same vein: “In the case of religion death, even if single items of a religion are transmitted to later generations, they are no longer part of an interlinked cluster (not to speak of an integrated system). In this sense, rather than a ‘survival,’ it has become a fragment.”

⁹⁵ B. Nilsson (2020: 1715) summarizes some of these discontinuities: “A totally new form of cult practice was initiated, completely new forms of professional cult practitioners were introduced, an entirely new form of cult buildings was erected, a new faith with regard to the divine replaced the old one, and during times to come a wholly new way of juridical reasoning was established.”

⁹⁶ de Jong 2016.

⁹⁷ de Jong 2016: 646. Åke Hultrantz (1960: 21) makes a similar statement when discussing the method for study of acculturation (as well as religious acculturation): “the first step is to reconstruct the picture of the old culture(s) before contact; the second step is to study the circumstances affected by and causing a[cculturation]—the course events, the motives and interests, the personalities—and the third step is to give explanations of the changes.”

⁹⁸ Cf. Colpe 1986 and above.

treatments on religious change in the Viking Age Scandinavia, but certainly necessary when discussing this issue.

The next methodological step is to accept that changing religion implies a rupture and a moment of disconnection.⁹⁹ Some essential aspects or elements of the demising religion are at this moment lost, which must be identified by the researcher. In the present study, a focus will in chapters four to six be placed on *how* the rulers proceeded when they dismantled the royal rites in pagan cult, exterminated the traditional religious leadership, and extinct the staff that controlled and operated pagan cult organization etc.

The third methodological step in de Jong's model, is closely related to the second step. In this phase the circumstances causing these casualties are investigated, that is, the factors which lead to religious demise. The aim here is to produce relevant and valid explanations of these processes. When discussing the *why*-question in chapter seven of the present investigation, some typologies of religions applied by other scholars in similar contexts will be discussed, such as the categories "folk (ethnic)-religions" and "universal religions" as well as "primary" and "secondary religions." These scholars argue that the missionaries identified certain vulnerable areas in the Old Norse religion (classified as a folk religion/primary religion) when encountering Christianity (that is, a universal religion/secondary religion), such as the lack of a canonical writing and an institutional priesthood protecting the preservation of the tradition. As a complement to their suggestions, the present writer will argue that foremost pragmatics were at stake when choosing strategies and tactics for winding up the old religion.

When studying the concept of the downfall of religion ("Untergang einer Religion"), the German historian of religions Carsten Colpe proposed that we must take into consideration aspects of stability and persistence of the religion in question, its resilience, recurrence or ability to regenerate, as well as its fragility, weaknesses or vulnerabilities.¹⁰⁰ The possible fragility that the Christians identified in the old religion is discussed in chapter seven. In Part III, chapters eight to eleven, the resistance of the pagan chieftains will be analyzed as a fourth methodological step, as well as the collapse of this resilience.

1.2 The terms Old Norse religion and Old Order

In the present study the concept "Old Norse religion" will be applied. It refers to three aspects; a time interval, a geographic area; and the object of study, that is,

⁹⁹ de Jong 2016: 661; Robbins 2007: 11.

¹⁰⁰ Colpe 1986: 11–12. Cf. Stausberg 2021: 107.

“religion.” The concept “Old Norse” could also be defined as a cultural category, which could be related to language, time and space.¹⁰¹

1.2.1 The concept religion

The concept of religion is perhaps the most debated analytic term in the history of religions.¹⁰² Some scholars even think that this term should be abolished as a comparative concept in this field of study. The historian of religions, Timothy Fitzgerald, for instance, argues that the concept of religion as used in religious studies—especially in the phenomenology of religion—is characterized by Western and Christian thinking. When scholars apply it to other cultures, they perform a kind of conceptual or cognitive imperialism.¹⁰³ They thus transfer Christian ideas to other cultures through this ethnocentric concept. His suggestion is that historians of religions should replace “the study of religion” with “the study of culture.” A radical step, in the same direction is Benson Saler’s suggestion, to make use of indigenous concepts from a given context “as transcultural tools” in analyzing different religions.¹⁰⁴ This method, he suggests, can help us transcend the biases inherent in the concepts applied.¹⁰⁵ In connection to the discussion about the term of religion, Benson Saler also suggests that we should apply “an open concept” based on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s term of “family resemblances.”¹⁰⁶ Using a bounded category and a substantial definition always cause the problem that the definition takes priority over the sources and the historical contexts.¹⁰⁷ In such definition, Westernized ideas of religion are often emphasized, such as the belief in God, while other aspects are overlooked. Most of these critical views on the concept of religion had their roots in post-modern and post-colonial theories, where religion was seen as something “culturally bounded, historically recent and discursively loaded.”¹⁰⁸

Some researchers focusing on Old Norse religion have been inspired by Fitzgerald and Saler. The historian of religions, Torsten Blomkvist,¹⁰⁹ for instance, believes that we should remove the concept of religion when making investigation in non-

101 Cf. Nordberg 2012: 119–124.

102 For a more complete account, see Stausberg & Gardiner 2016.

103 Fitzgerald 1997.

104 Saler 2000 [1993]: 263.

105 Saler 2000 [1993]: 261.

106 Saler 2000 [1993]: 158–160.

107 Cf. Nordberg 2012: 120.

108 Lincoln 2003: 2.

109 Blomkvist 2002: 9–27.

Christian contexts, such as the ancient Scandinavian one. Instead, we should apply the indigenous categories that correspond to the Western concept of religion, so-called emic concepts, such as Arabic *dīn* or Old Norse *siðr*. This suggestion has not been uncontested. The Swedish historian of religions, Anette Lindberg, for instance, rejects Blomkvist's proposal and points to a number of problems in his reasoning.¹¹⁰ If we only rely on this type of concept, we completely lose the comparative perspective on religion and the discipline goes under. She believes that we should continue to apply the concept of religion in comparative studies, but then clearly define what we mean by it. Lindberg's criticism is primarily directed at Blomkvist, but also towards some archaeologists who have made themselves critical of a general and Western-based concept of religion and who adopted the application of the native concept *siðr*.¹¹¹

In the present study, I will not contribute much to this discussion. I will only state that we need some kind of heuristic instrument when studying religion in a comparative perspective, and quite obviously when the topic is dismantling and defending Old Norse religion. The most simple and comfortable solution is to use the term "religion." In order to narrow down and pinpoint what "religion" is in the present study, I will discuss a couple of definitions suggested by influential writers. One often quoted definition was given by the anthropologist Melford E. Spiro, where religion is "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings."¹¹² This definition assumes a broad theory about culture ("culturally patterned" and "culturally postulated") and places religion as a subordinated taxon to it.¹¹³ Bruce Lincoln's definition of religion includes four characteristics.¹¹⁴ His definition could be categorized as a "bounded category" since Lincoln argues that "[a]ll four domains—discourse, practice, community, and institution—are necessary parts of anything that can properly be called 'religion.'"¹¹⁵ He states indeed that a proper definition must "be polythetic and flexible, allowing for wide variations" but adds that it must attend, "at a minimum, to these four domains"¹¹⁶

- (1) A discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status.

110 Lindberg 2009. Cf. Nordberg 2017: 193–195; 2022: 257–258.

111 E.g., Nordanskog 2006.

112 Spiro 1966: 96.

113 Cf. J. Z. Smith 2004: 193.

114 Lincoln 2003: 5–8.

115 Lincoln 2003: 7.

116 Lincoln 2003: 5.

- (2) A set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected.
- (3) A community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices.
- (4) An institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value.

The first three domains are unproblematic in the context of the present investigation. They can easily be identified in the Old Norse sources and applied to this study. More problematic is the fourth domain. As has been noticed in previous research,¹¹⁷ there was no priesthood or priestly institution in Viking Age Scandinavia comparable to the *sacerdotes* of the Roman Church, which constituted a closed, centralized and hierarchical organization with professional and well-trained priests. It is very uncertain if the cult leaders ever appeared as an independent and well-defined social stratum in the old Scandinavian society. The division of labor and specific functions were weak in certain areas there. Neither was there a priestly institution standardizing worldviews or ritual practices for all Scandinavia and wider areas. In most cases the rulers and local chieftains, themselves, functioned as cult leaders on a public level. Most likely preservation of religious traditions, interpretations of them, and supervision of rituals were related to knowledge and skills transmitted in certain chieftain families, which had their base at certain farms. Therefore, we must count variations in worldviews, mythic traditions and ritual practices, geographically, socially and over time, in the ancient Scandinavian religion. Some rulers and chieftains who included religious functions probably ambulated between different cult sites on different levels of society. In such manner, more specific mythic traditions and religious customs may have been distributed to wider areas. Mythic motifs appearing in Old Norse traditions from Iceland can thus be seen in Gotlandic picture stones and iconography from Sweden and Denmark. Even if our knowledge about these cult leaders is limited, there is clear evidence of them in the preserved native terminology. These cult leaders had often other societal duties beside their religious tasks. The institution that regulated the religious discourse in ancient Scandinavia, was mostly an integrated part of the general institution of rulership (see 4.2). It is likely that local chieftains and the local assembly

¹¹⁷ See e.g., Sundqvist 1998; 2003a; 2003b; 2007; 2016a and 2020a; 2022c. If following Lincoln's definition, the Old Norse religion could thus not be considered as a "proper" religion since it lacks a priestly institution. Cf. Stausberg & Gardiner 2016: 18–19.

also had supervisory roles regarding the preservation of religious tradition. The lack of an independent priestly institution that regulated and reproduced religious discourses over time and modified them is explained in chapter seven as a weakness of the Old Norse religion during the conversion process. Even if some minor objections could be made when applying Bruce Lincoln's definition of religion to Old Norse sources, it may function as a heuristic tool in the following study.

1.2.2 The term Old Norse: Language, space and time

The concept *Old Norse* is a philological term which has been given a general meaning of early (medieval) Scandinavia, referring to a geographic area, including Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland. In this area people spoke Nordic languages during the Viking Age. The concept *Old Norse* derives thus from linguistic terminology and refers to the languages used in Old Norse literature.¹¹⁸ The early philologists Rasmus Rask and Jakob Grimm used terms such as Danish *oldnordisk* and German *altnordisch* when describing the language of Viking and medieval Scandinavia. These concepts were translated to English *Old Norse*. In fact, the Scandinavian languages sprung from a proto-Nordic language, which around AD 600–800 was divided into a West Nordic language, called Old Norse (ON), and East Nordic languages, called Old Danish (ODa) and Old Swedish (OSw). Most scholars use the term *Old Norse* today (often in the plural form *Old Norse languages*) as a linguistic concept for all the Germanic languages spoken in Scandinavia. The emic concept for Old Norse was *dǫnsk tunga* “the Danish tongue” and it was used by late Viking Age skalds and medieval Icelandic authors for “something like ‘Scandinavian,’ that is, for a linguistic commonality.”¹¹⁹

The term *Old Norse* has also developed into a cultural category, which is related to a geographic area, however, “the term does not coincide with the geographic boundaries of the Nordic countries, but rather to that part of the Nordic area whose population, during Viking Age, spoke Old Norse languages.”¹²⁰ Hence, the religions of the Finnish or the Saami people will not be taken into consideration when using the term *Old Norse religion* even if they lived in the same areas as those who spoke Old Norse languages. The Saami and the Finnish people spoke other (non-Germanic/ non-Indo-European) languages and their religions were different compared to the Old Norse religion. There were cultural contacts between

¹¹⁸ Cf. Clunies Ross 2010: 13–15; Nordberg 2012: 122–124; Lindow 2020c: 215.

¹¹⁹ Lindow 2020c: 218.

¹²⁰ Nordberg 2012: 122–123.

the “Germanic” Scandinavians, the Finns and the Saami people.¹²¹ Anyhow, the present study will be restricted to the *Old Norse religion*.

The concept *Old Norse* is indirectly related to time. It refers to the time people in Scandinavia spoke Old Norse languages, that is, the Viking Age and the early Middle Ages. A proto-Nordic language was spoken in all Scandinavia until around AD 500. The linguistic development into the Old Norse languages lasted between AD 600 and 800 when several deep linguistic changes took place.¹²² In the present investigation, the term *Old Norse religion* refers to the religion, which was used by the people who spoke Old Norse languages during the Late Iron Age in Scandinavia and the early Middle Ages (c. 550–1100).

The border AD 550 has come into renewed light through the climate catastrophe of global proportions that took place in the year 536, with subsequent impact on the following ten years. It has been described and discussed by archaeologists Bo Gräslund and Neil Price.¹²³ It coincides approximately with the changes in material culture around AD 550 that were previously observed by archaeologists – changes that are especially obvious in the prehistory of Sweden and Norway. There was not a new religion emerging around 550, with new gods. Most likely the religious tradition went far back, beyond that date. But the religion adjusted most likely to the material culture which was developed after 550, for example, the hall culture and religious ideas related to the warrior lords.¹²⁴ During this period, we also have more sources, which make it possible to describe the religion the Scandinavians were devoted to, and which demised on an official level around 1100.¹²⁵ As an alternative to the concept of Old Norse religion I will sometimes use terms such as “ancient Scandinavian religion,” “the old religion,” “the pre-Christian religion,” or “the indigenous religion.”

1.2.3 The Old Norse religion and the Old Order

From a typological point of view the Old Norse religion has been classified as a “non-doctrinal community,” “ethnic” or “folk” religion in contrast to, for instance Christianity, which may be regarded as “doctrinal transnational” or “universal” religion.¹²⁶ In this context it should be noted that the speakers of Old Norse did

121 See e.g., Drobin & Keinänen 2001; Callmer et al. 2017; I. Zachrisson 1997 and 2022MS.

122 Cf. Wessén 1975 [1965]: 29–31, 34–36.

123 See Gräslund & Price 2012; Price 2020: 64–106; cf. Holmberg et al. 2021; Williams 2021.

124 Cf. Nordberg 2004 [2003]; Zachrisson & Andrén 2020: 672.

125 On the historical and social context of the Old Norse religion, see Andrén 2020c.

126 E.g., Hultgård 2008: 212; Steinsland 2005: 31–34. Critically by e.g., J. Z. Smith 2004; Cox 2013; Nordberg 2022.

not have a word equivalent for the concept “religion,” when described as a well-defined object, absolutely unique, and separate, that is, an ontological *sui generis* category.¹²⁷ When describing sacrifices, rites, ethics and other types of culturally circumscribed activities and notions (such as custom, manner, conduct etc.) the sources apply the Old Norse term *siðr* as an umbrella concept. This concept indicates that religious beliefs and rituals were strongly integrated with social life, warfare and subsistence activities etc. Religious elements could appear in almost all areas of ancient Scandinavian culture. The Old Norse religion was one of those religions that was “grounded in other social formations,” while Christianity was a religion that had transformed (itself) into “a separate social formation” that in principle denied “the importance of previously existing social forms for the maintenance of relations with postulated beings, realities, and processes.”¹²⁸

The term “old order” includes the concept Old Norse religion in the present study, and specifically its cultic system. As in all religions, there was a liturgical order in the ceremonies and rituals of the ancient Scandinavian religion, which was of great importance for the maintenance of the indigenous religion.¹²⁹ By means of repeating these more or less invariant sequences of rituals and ceremonies, the old religious tradition was remembered.¹³⁰ Since the old religion lacked a priestly institution that supervised the ritual order, the local chieftains and *þing* assemblies had that task. As will be seen in what follows, this old order (or *inn forni siðr* “the old custom”) was attacked by the early Christian kings when dismantling the Old Norse religion, and it was this order that the pagan chieftains defended in this process. The concept of old order includes in the present study all types of culturally circumscribed activities and notions, such as manners and conducts related to social life, as well as warfare, feasting, judicial customs, law and subsistence activities. When the early Christian rulers were fighting the old order, it included all these spheres of life, while some pagan chieftains at the same time seem to have defended this order. The opposite was the “new order” (*inn nýi siðr* “the new custom”) which included the Christian religion as well as Christian culture and customs. The present

127 On definitions of religion, see Stausberg & Gardiner 2016 and above.

128 de Jong 2016: 654.

129 According to Rappaport (2000 [1999]: 169), the term liturgical order refers to “the more or less invariant sequences of rituals that make up cycles and other series as well . . . Further, inasmuch as liturgical orders are more or less invariant sequences encoded by persons others than the performers their performance entails conformity. This is to say that, although their words are not usually cast in the imperative mood, they constitute orders in the sense of directives. Finally and most obviously, they are orders in that they are more or less fixed sequences of acts and utterances, following each other ‘in order.’” Rappaport (2000 [1999]: 24) described ritual as “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers.”

130 Schjødt 2013. On preservation of primary or cult religions, see Assmann 2006 and ch. 7 below.

study will mostly focus on the religious dimension of the old order, however, sometimes other aspects of social life will be taken into consideration.

1.3 Sources

Since this study has a thematic outline, some repetitions of source instances are inevitable. As far as possible, however, such disturbing reiterations will be avoided. Old Norse poetry, Icelandic and Kings' Sagas, medieval laws, as well as Latin texts will be an important part of the material, but methodologically several approaches are necessary to inform the research questions. Archeological findings and analyses will be important for the case studies, not least when discussing the dismantling of the "pagan" cult places and ritual objects by Christian power during the transition period. The results from archaeology during the last decades have changed the view of the transition period completely.¹³¹ They implicate that the conversion process must be studied contextually, since the religious change took place at different times and different places. The achievements from place-name research are also important when identifying location and character of the old cult sites and their relation to early churches.¹³² Runestones may also inform about different aspects of the conversion.¹³³

By using a comparative method, which combines source criticism and philology, reliable information about the transition period may be detected in the written materials—information which can be interpreted by setting them in a wider context of sources—and developed alongside knowledge which we have from the auxiliary disciplines, that is, archaeology, runology and toponomastics.¹³⁴ There are methodological issues, however, considering the relation between various

¹³¹ Cf. A.-S. Gräslund 2001; Nordeide 2011; Ljung 2016 and 2019; Zachrisson & Andrén 2020.

¹³² See e.g., Vikstrand 1996; Brink 1992; 1996a/b.

¹³³ See e.g., Williams 1996a/b/c; A.-S. Gräslund 2001; Lager 2002; Ljung 2016 and 2019.

¹³⁴ It should be admitted that comparative methods in the discipline history of religions have been a hot topic during the last decades. See e.g., Smith 2000; 2004 and Lincoln 2018. In the most recent discussion, however, scholars often defend such comparative perspectives, even if they argue that such approaches should rather be described as a research design and not a single method e.g., Stausberg 2014 [2011]. Hence, not only one single type of comparative approach has been involved in the present study, but different types of comparative methods. One method is linked to terminology and the comparative categories, such as "religion," "conversion," and "cult leadership." These concepts establish some general structures, which may be seen over the borders of cultures. When discussing the general dismantling strategies used by the recently converted kings, another type of comparative approach is applied, which aims at identifying religious and cultural regularities and characteristics within the late Norse period. See further Schjødt 2012a: 275–280.

source categories.¹³⁵ The collected sources will illuminate various aspects of the religious changes in the case studies. However, even though they correlate to common phenomenon in one case they reflect different discourses. Texts and archeological finds do not have identical situations of origin, and they reflect different social circumstances.¹³⁶ There may also be chronological gaps between them. However, they may still be complementary and inform each other, if analyzed contextually. Through archeological findings we can find chronological layers, which are difficult to find in texts. Texts can contribute to the analysis through creating more concrete hypotheses or ideas about *how* and *why* the leaders disentangled the old religion. Using only texts, however, we risk creating reconstructions that remain “outside time and space.”¹³⁷

One problem when describing religious change in Viking Age Scandinavia is the lack of contemporary sources written by adherents of the old religion during the transition period.¹³⁸ Most sources are written from the Christians’ point of view and some of them are composed more than 150–200 years after the change of religion took place. The authors of these texts—especially ecclesiastical literature in Latin—have a biased attitude against people representing the old religion, often describing them as primitive or evil. The old religion is also described as “inferior to Christianity.” Previous studies have sometimes been affected by this tendency in the written sources (see ch. 2). There are, however, some sources which were produced by indigenous people who took part in the conversion process.

1.3.1 Archaeology, runestones and place-names

Archaeological sources are, by definition, remains from people who themselves were part of the late Viking Age society and culture. These materials inform us about the Viking Age religion and the conversion from a contemporary perspective and have not been as distorted by tradition and ideology as the medieval written sources. However, source criticism and other disciplines beside archaeology, such as anthropology, toponymastics, philology, history of religions must

135 On the benefits and pitfalls with interdisciplinary methods in the study of Old Norse religion, see the book *Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries in Studies of the Viking Age* (ed. Sävborg 2022) and especially Sävborg 2022 and Janson 2022.

136 See Andrén et al., 2006; Andrén 2014: 17–19.

137 Andrén 2014: 18.

138 For good and more detailed overviews of the sources related to the Old Norse and medieval religion and culture, see e.g., Clunies Ross 1994: 11–41; Hultgård 1996; Steinsland 2005: 35–66; Schjødt 2008: 85–107; Abram 2011: 2–51; Lindow 2020a: 63–102. Cf. Sundqvist 2002: 39–62.

help to interpret and give meaning to them. Post-holes, for instance, are mute and must be interpreted by the archaeologist.¹³⁹ A pre-Christian ceremonial building is thus an interpretation argued for with all kinds of source-critical aspects undertaken “along the road” and information from auxiliary disciplines.

By means of archaeological finds, such as gold foil figures, figurines, statuettes, gold bracteates and other images from the Late Iron Age, we may identify pre-Christian ritual objects, sanctuaries and cult places as well as some of the rituals taken place there.¹⁴⁰ Traces of ritual cooking and ceremonial drinking have sometimes been observed at such places. Recently, several procession roads have been identified by means of post-holes, sometimes located at ancient sanctuaries, such as Old Uppsala.¹⁴¹ Some objects may also be related to specific deities. The small statue from Rällinge, Södermanland, is often interpreted as representing Freyr (see Fig. 4 below). Thor-hammer-amulets from the Viking Age indicate that the deity Þórr was worshipped as a protector for individuals during that time.¹⁴² Archaeological finds may also inform us about pagan burial practice.¹⁴³ Other findings may indicate that religious change processes were going on. Christian artefacts, such as the pendant crosses and the famous silver crucifix from Birka are examples of this.¹⁴⁴ Graves and burials constitute important material when studying the transition from Old Norse religion to Christianity.¹⁴⁵

Grave monuments, runestones and traces of early churches are also important materials when discussing regional and contextual aspects of the conversion process.¹⁴⁶ Erected runestones from the eleventh century, including inscriptions with the younger runic alphabet, have had a prominent position when studying the religious change process. Almost all of them were erected by Christians and some have Christian crosses depicted on them.¹⁴⁷ These inscriptions have often a Christian content, with, for instance, Christian terms and prayers.¹⁴⁸

Some place-names derive directly from the Late Iron Age society. They give information about the old cult sites, ritual specialists, and the distribution of the worship of the pagan gods. Together with archaeological finds they sometimes also inform about the conversion process from a contemporary perspective. Early

139 Cf. Andrén 2020a: 135–160.

140 Zachrisson & Andrén 2020; Andrén 2020a; Pesch & Helmbrecht eds. 2019.

141 See e.g., Sanmark 2015 and 2019; Nygaard and Murphy 2017; Sundqvist 2017a and 2018.

142 E.g., Stæcker 1999; Nordeide 2011; Lindow 2020e.

143 Price 2010; 2012 and 2020: 225–268; 2020b and see 5.4 below.

144 E.g., Stæcker 1999: 491–493.

145 E.g., A.-S. Gräslund 2001.

146 See Ljung 2016 and 2019.

147 Lager 2002.

148 Williams 1996a/b/c; A.-S. Gräslund 2001. See 5.4 below.

churches, such as the one at Frösö “the island dedicated to the god Frö [Freyr],” Jämtland, was located on the very same spot as the old sanctuary, for instance.¹⁴⁹ It seems as if pre-Christian sacrificial rituals have been performed at this site in connection with a cult tree.¹⁵⁰ Scholars working with place-names must also face some serious source critical problems.¹⁵¹ Anyhow, these sources contain linguistic materials that sometimes have escaped distortion by secondary traditions.

1.3.2 Latin texts

Rimbert’s *Vita Anskarii*, and Adam of Bremen’s *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* are the most important ecclesiastical sources for answering the questions of the present study. Rimbert wrote the biography of Ansgar, his predecessor as archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, soon after Ansgar’s death sometime between 865 and 876. It deals with the mission to Denmark and Sweden and has information on the rulership, mission, geographic and ethnographic matters. His description of Ansgar’s two journeys to Birka and staying there is often quoted in research. Excavations on the island called Björkö in Mälaren c. 30 km west of Stockholm, show that during the eighth to the tenth centuries Birka was a town and trading center in the realm of the Svear.¹⁵² Rimbert’s description has a consciously theological perspective in which Ansgar and his mission to Birka are placed within the salvation history. The theological framework has apparently affected Rimbert’s narratives. It seems, for instance, as if Rimbert was anxious to show that the Scandinavians did not have real gods and thus, he occasionally used a euhemerized approach when describing them (see 4.5 below). The purpose with this book was not only to demonize the old religion, but also to encourage further missionary works and to offer a manual for such undertakings.¹⁵³ Another ambition was of course also to glorify Ansgar and the past of the archdiocese Hamburg-Bremen.

Adam of Bremen wrote his *Gesta* around 1075.¹⁵⁴ It is regarded as the main historical source for eleventh century Sweden,¹⁵⁵ and contains also important information about contemporary Denmark and Norway. It was written in the genre called

149 Vikstrand 1993; 1996; 2001.

150 E.g., Magnell & Iregren 2010. Cf. Andrén 2014.

151 See e.g., Vikstrand 2001; Brink 2007 and 2014.

152 See e.g., Ambrosiani 1992; Clarke & Ambrosiani 1993 [1991]: 67–71.

153 See e.g., Wood 1987; Hallencreutz 1993b: 23; see also Haki Antonsson 2014: 51–53; cf. Janson 2018.

154 See e.g., Schmeidler 1917; Svenberg et al. 1985 [1984]; Tschan 2002 [1959].

155 Sawyer 1991: 16–19.

gesta episcoporum “the deeds of bishops.” Thus, it recorded the campaign made by the Hamburg-Bremen archbishopric to convert Slavic and Scandinavian peoples. This chronicle is preserved in several medieval manuscripts; however, the relationship between them is very complex.¹⁵⁶ Bernhard Schmeidler divided them into three classes in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*: class A, class B, and class C.¹⁵⁷ The oldest manuscript, dated to c. AD 1100, is commonly called A2, or the “Leiden manuscript” (Cod. Voss. Lat. 4^o 123). Although the first three books in this manuscript are fragmentary, Book four, where Adam’s famous description of the Uppsala sanctuary appears, is complete. All additional notes (*scholia*) relating to the chapters about the sanctuary are present in this manuscript; however, the relationship between *scholia* and the main text is quite complicated.¹⁵⁸ Book four, *Descriptio insularum aquilonis*, consists of, as the title suggests, an ethno-geographical description of the Nordic world. Adam details the successes of the Hamburg-Bremen diocese’s missionary activities in this region as well as the missionary work remaining to be done. In his estimation, the sanctuary at Uppsala is the final obstacle standing in the way of the victory of Christianity in the land of the Svear.¹⁵⁹

Adam’s text on Uppsala must be treated with great care (see below). Adam had a specific purpose for it. He wanted to legitimize the German mission in Sweden. Influences from the Bible are also present there. The description of the gold-decorated temple, for instance, reminds us of the portrayal of Solomon’s temple in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁶⁰ There are thus elements in Adam’s text which may be regarded as unreliable. Theology, mission strategies and rhetorical aspects have affected his description.¹⁶¹ Since some of Adam’s information about a cult in Uppsala harmonizes with independent Old Norse written sources, it should not be completely disregarded. Archaeology indicates that at least one feasting hall was erected in Uppsala during the Merovingian Period and Early Viking Age. It is unclear, however, whether any archaeological evidence can be connected with Adam’s “temple,” but pagan burial customs can be attested in Old Uppsala, at least up until c. 1050.¹⁶² The royal burial mounds and the recently found post-monument dating back to the Merovingian Period indicate an important cult site.

Other Latin texts which also will be consulted when answering the questions in the present study are, for instance, Widukind’s *Rerum Gestarum Saxonicarum*

¹⁵⁶ Nyberg 1985 [1984]: 302–307.

¹⁵⁷ Schmeidler 1917.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Hultgård 1997: 15.

¹⁵⁹ Hallencreutz 1997.

¹⁶⁰ 1Kings 7,47–50; see Hultgård 1997: 17.

¹⁶¹ Cf. Janson 1998; 2018.

¹⁶² See Gräslund 2013; Zachrisson 2013 and Sundqvist 2016a: 120–127.

(c. 968), *Passio et miracula beati Olavi* (c. 1160), *Historia Norwegie* (c. 1160–1175), Theodoricus monachus' *Historia de antiquitate regum norwagiensium* (c. 1170) and Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* (c. 1200).

1.3.3 Old Norse poetry

Some surviving skaldic and Eddic poetry as composed in vernacular during the Viking Age, is contemporary in the conversion process, although it was not written down until the Middle Ages. The world view and ethics in this poetry are often not Christian.¹⁶³ They can thus be considered as oral art forms from the past. The formalistic language in these poems, rhymes, kennings, and their meters could have allowed them to retain their original shapes for centuries. Skaldic poems especially can be regarded as based on a firm oral tradition before they were written down.¹⁶⁴ Some of these poems, such as the ones composed by Hallfrøðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson (c. 990s), must therefore be treated as very important sources when describing the demise of the Old Norse religion, even if they appear in medieval manuscripts of the Icelandic sagas. Hallfrøðr accepted Christianity under influence of King Óláfr Tryggvasson. The difficulty for him to switch religion is a theme in some of his productions.¹⁶⁵ The skaldic poems are in general often complicated in a linguistic sense, and some of the kennings make them hard to understand and/or interpret. In many cases we would not be able to interpret them without Snorri Sturluson's texts and other medieval sources.¹⁶⁶ In this study they will nevertheless be considered to have a high source value.

Most of the Eddic poetry must also be considered as valuable sources when reconstructing the Old Norse religion in the present study, even if there are some exceptions. It must essentially be seen as memorized oral literature, "although it must have been more open for improvisation and changes than skaldic poetry."¹⁶⁷ Individual Eddic poems may have a medieval background, but many of them were probably composed during the Viking Age.¹⁶⁸ All Eddic lays must thus be evaluated from an individual point of view.¹⁶⁹ Most of these poems are preserved in the fa-

¹⁶³ E.g., Meulengracht Sørensen 1991a: 225.

¹⁶⁴ Mundal 2008: 1.

¹⁶⁵ Whaley in SkP 1: 386.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Clunies Ross 1994: 29.

¹⁶⁷ Mundal 2008: 2. Cf. Clunies Ross 1994: 20–33.

¹⁶⁸ Mundal 2004: 222.

¹⁶⁹ Lindow (2020a: 72) states thus: "Each Eddic poem is presumed to have been an independent entity, with its own textual history." Individual Eddic poems may have a medieval background, but many of them were probably composed during the Viking Age. See Mundal 2004: 222. Cf. Ney 2017: 29–30.

mous manuscript called Codex Regius, GkS 2365 4to (c. 1270). In addition to this manuscript there is a second witness to some of the Eddic poems called AM 748 1a 4to (c. 1300). The poem *Völuspá* also appears beside the Codex Regius manuscript in the later manuscript called Hauksbók, and in the manuscripts to Snorri's *Edda*.

1.3.4 Medieval Old Norse prose texts

Most written sources were made up of medieval Old Norse prose narratives and descriptions transmitted by Christians. Their authors were thus not adherents of the ancient religion. They lived outside the Viking Age society and their writings give only indirect information about the ancient Scandinavian cult system and the conversion process. Traditions appearing in these sources have sometimes been orally transmitted, but they have probably often been reworked by embellishment, artistic inspiration, ideology, clichés, and subjectivity when being performed or when written down.¹⁷⁰ There is sometimes a Christian bias or perspective in these sources, where the old culture and religion are more or less demonized or interpreted by means of medieval models such as euhemerism.¹⁷¹ They comprise the Sagas of Icelanders from the Middle Ages, Kings' Sagas and Bishops' Sagas. Very important in the context of the present study is Ari inn fróði Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, Oddr munkr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, the anonymous written *Ágrip*, *Fagrskinna*, *Kristni saga*, *Kristni þættir* in the compilation *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, and *Landnámabók*. Some fornaldarsögur will also be taken into consideration, such as the *Hervarar saga*.¹⁷² Source critical aspects related to the individual prose texts will be studied in Parts II and III below.

1.3.5 Snorri Sturluson

The mythical and historical writings of the Icelander Snorri Sturluson (c. 1179–1241) will be referred to quite frequently when discussing the research questions in the present study, that is, Snorri's *Edda* (c. 1220) and especially his *Heimskringla* 1–3 (c. 1230). They were written more than two hundred years after the official conversion of Iceland and Norway. Snorri's texts have therefore been felt to be al-

¹⁷⁰ On the problem of Icelandic sagas, orality, performance and historicity, see Clunies Ross 2010: 39, 40–42, 125. See also the interesting discussion on oral traditions, sagas and cultural memory in Wallenstein 2023.

¹⁷¹ E.g., Weber 1994; Clunies Ross 2010 and 2018b; Malm 2018; Wellendorf 2018.

¹⁷² On the genre designated fornaldarsögur, see Ney 2017: 54–64.

most useless when discussing Viking Age religion and society.¹⁷³ This type of source-critical approach has deep roots in the study of Old Norse philology and religion as well as in the general study of history.¹⁷⁴ The philologist and historian of religions, Walter Baetke, for instance, argued that Snorri revised the mythical traditions in accordance with learned medieval models and his own imagination. For example, Snorri frequently used medieval euhemerism when describing ancient myths and history in, for instance, *Ynglinga saga*, which introduces *Heimskringla*.¹⁷⁵ This method was a common feature of ecclesiastic apologetics, where the pagan deities were considered as ancient human rulers and thus not “real gods.” Because of this approach and other rewritings of the traditions, Baetke considered Snorri’s descriptions of myth to be unreliable when reconstructing pagan religion.¹⁷⁶ The historian of literature Margaret Clunies Ross has more recently also emphasized the euhemeristic explanations used by Snorri when dealing with pre-Christian myths and religion. Opposite to, for instance, Saxo Grammaticus’ interpretations, where paganism was explained as the work of Satan,¹⁷⁷ Snorri linked Old Norse religion, myth and poetry to the culture of the classical world as well as Western European societies with his euhemerism.¹⁷⁸ In a sense, the euhemeristic approach used by Ari, Snorri and their contemporaries, could be seen as a literary strategy to dismantle the old religion when describing the old gods as human kings with no divine status. A critical attitude against Snorri is also reflected in research concerning his historical writing in *Heimskringla* (c. 1230).¹⁷⁹ Even if Snorri’s writings have not satisfied the stern criteria of source criticism, they should not be completely discarded as sources of knowledge for Viking Age religion and the conversion process. Some of them incorporate written, and perhaps even oral traditions,¹⁸⁰ which have been re-

173 E.g., Baetke 1964.

174 See e.g., Bugge 1881–89; Mogk 1923; 1932; Lauritz Weibull 1948; Curt Weibull 1964; Baetke 1950; 1951; 1964; Holtmark 1964; Olsen 1966; Düwel 1985; von See 1988; Weber 1981 and 1987.

175 The Christian tradition of euhemerism is by Jonas Wellendorf (2018: 17) described as “the doctrine that the pagan gods were originally outstanding humans who came to be venerated as gods.” According to him, this doctrine was sometimes combined with the notion of demonization in Old Norse medieval prose on pagan gods. See Wellendorf 2018: 43–70.

176 See e.g., Baetke 1950; 1951; 1964; cf. Holtmark 1964; Weber 1987 and 1994.

177 Saxo also applied euhemerism when interpreting the pagan gods. See Lindow 2021: 104–109. Clunies Ross (2008: 233) states that Saxo followed a different path compared to Snorri “by completely historicizing, and possibly also allegorizing . . . Old Norse myths in the first part of his *Gesta Danorum*, . . .”.

178 Clunies Ross 2006: 412–413.

179 See overviews in e.g., Jónas Kristjánsson 1988: 175. Cf. Vésteinn Ólason 1998: 59.

180 On the general transition process from oral tradition to literacy in Old Norse society, see e.g., Clunies Ross 1994: 20–34; Mundal 2008; Lindow 2020a: 63–101. See also Bagge’s (2019: 24) somewhat skeptical position to an oral tradition behind Snorri’s texts.

worked by Snorri and other medieval writers. This reworking is no reason to dismiss them altogether. Snorri and the medieval writers probably had access to more direct sources than the modern historian has, and most likely they were better suited to interpret them.¹⁸¹ I will return to Snorri as a “historian” in chapter nine.

1.3.6 Medieval laws

The earliest laws, written in vernacular, contain important information about the strategies applied by rulers and clergies when dismantling the old religion. They are roughly dated to the period between the eleventh and fourteenth century and normally they are linked to a province (*land*), for instance Uppland, Gotland or Jylland, or in Norway to regions such as the Gulaping and Frostaping areas.¹⁸² Hence, they are called *Upplandslagen*, *Gutalagen* and *Frostapingslog*. Some of them report about bans on ancient customs and pagan cult practice.¹⁸³ It has been debated whether these laws are based on Continental laws, or if they emanate from oral traditions from Scandinavia. Recent research states that they are in fact a combination of both.¹⁸⁴ Whether the prohibitions against pre-Christian cult practices found in the laws were relevant when they were written down or should be conceived as obsolete relicts is debated.

1.4 Outline and hypotheses

In what follows, I will present the outline and the general hypotheses as well as some sub-hypotheses. Framed by “Part I. Prolegomena” and “Part IV. Epilegomena,” the present study includes two major sections, “Part II. The role of rulers as agents in the winding up of the native religion,” and “Part III. Pagans fight back.” Chapter two (in “Part I. Prolegomena”) is a critical assessment of previous theories on religious change and the demise of the Old Norse religion in Scandinavia during the late Viking Age. These processes have been described in different ways.¹⁸⁵ Some have argued that the process was long, gradual and peaceful,

¹⁸¹ Meulengracht Sørensen 1991b: 244.

¹⁸² Brink 2020: 462.

¹⁸³ See e.g., B. Nilsson 1992 and Brink 2020: 463–476.

¹⁸⁴ Brink 2020: 462.

¹⁸⁵ See e.g., the research survey in Haki Antonsson 2014 related to the Christianization and conversion of Scandinavia. Good overviews are also presented by e.g., Nordeide 2011: 3–33 and 2020: 1639–1645 and B. Nilsson 2020: 1724–1728.

while others have held that the ending was violent and abrupt. Archaeologists tend to support the former position,¹⁸⁶ while some historians of religions argue in favor of the latter.¹⁸⁷ It seems as if these differences have their grounding in the methods and sources used.¹⁸⁸ These accounts, which often include generalizations, will be critically examined in chapter two.¹⁸⁹ It will be argued that a more contextual and agent-based approach is needed, as well as an interdisciplinary approach, where various source types are applied. Such local and regional approaches, including interdisciplinary methods have indeed been made recently by scholars investigating the Christianization Sweden in particular, however few of them concentrate on the demising religion.¹⁹⁰

In Part II, the role of rulers in the winding up of the native religion will be investigated. Chapter three focuses on the central agents in this process, that is, the indigenous rulers and chieftains as well as advisors and clergies. They played a crucial role for the official conversion in Viking Age Scandinavia, when the Old Norse religion was replaced by Roman Catholic Christianity. One major question in this chapter is related to *why* the Scandinavian rulers changed religion. Several motives were probably involved, however the social dimension of conversion was one of the most crucial factors besides religious reasons. These rulers wanted to build up social networks and political alliances in Europe, by means of marriages with Christian princesses, but also by exchanging precious objects and gifts with Christian magnates. It seems as if Christianity provided the Viking kings with prestige at home in Scandinavia as well. In addition to religious and social motives, there were certainly also economic and political reasons to convert.

In chapter four the rulers' actions, tactics and strategies for doing away with former religious practice and beliefs are discussed. Hence, the question of *how* these rulers proceeded will be analyzed. Five important areas seem to have been the focus of their efforts (but I do not rule out that there may have been other areas that they

186 See e.g., Engelstad 1927; Hernæs 1995; A.-S.Gräslund 1996; 2001; Orri Vésteinsson 2000; Hed Jakobsson & Runar 2017.

187 See particularly Steinsland 1989; 1991; 2000. Cf. Bagge 2005. Some Norwegian archaeologists argue in the same vein as Steinsland, e.g., Solli 1996, Gellein 1997: 92–93 and Nordeide 2011: 321.

188 A.-S. Gräslund (1996: 20): “Som arkeolog uppfattar man det som otvetydigt att kristnandet utgör en långdragen process. Detta kan ses i kontrast till att vissa religionshistoriker [Steinsland] är mer benägna att betrakta religionsskiftet som ett tvärt brott. En sådan skillnad är med all sannolikhet beroende av de olika källmaterial man stöder sig på, arkeologen på de materiella lämningarna och religionshistorikern på det litterära materialet.” Cf. A.-S. Gräslund 2001: 25.

189 These two theories have recently also been regarded as “somewhat oversimplified” (Nordeide 2020: 1641).

190 See overview in Haki Antonsson 2014: 58–59. See also 2.4 below.

worked on as well). They have been identified by a close reading of the sources and an inductive approach, where some recurrent patterns are observed and discussed:

- (1) The erasure of the king's ritual role and royal rites at pagan feasts
- (2) The erasure of local cult leadership and the pagan cultic organization
- (3) The material erasure of the old cult
- (4) The elimination of pagan animal sacrifices and other traditional customs
- (5) By redefining the status of the gods.

In order to achieve their aims, the early Christian rulers used different means, such as sermons of missionary priests and bishops, negotiations, decrees, assembly decisions, gifts and violence. In a later phase the kings together with the Church also used legislative measures where pagan practices were forbidden. They also used literary strategies in accounts on pagan gods, such as euhemerism, demonology, and idol parody, in order to deprive these gods of their divine status. After conversion, stories about the gods were not completely rejected, however, the divine nature of these divinities was redefined and neutralized when telling them. It should be emphasized that the Christian rulers' actions also implied a rupture and a moment of disconnection.¹⁹¹ Some essential aspects or elements of the old religion were thus lost at a certain moment or gradually extinguished over time.¹⁹²

It seems as if the recently converted kings sometimes deliberately replaced pagan understandings and practices with Christian notions, which aimed to realize the same goals. Pagan feasts with drinking ceremonies, for instance, were replaced by Christian holidays which included similar rites. Both the pagan and the Christian rites aimed to guarantee a good year and peace. The purpose of these replacements was probably to facilitate the conversion process for individuals and groups. Examples of such replacements are discussed in chapter five.

To avoid problematic generalizations of previous research (see ch. 2), I will also apply a more historical, situational and contextual approach. Hence two case studies will be made in chapter six, which are both related to the Norwegian king, Óláfr Tryggvasson. These case studies indicate that a contextual approach is needed, since this king was a pragmatic ruler who varied his methods and strategies depending on the situation he was in. He used violence as a method as long as he had the power to do that. In other contexts he applied negotiations, when, for instance, a military operation was impossible to carry out. It is likely that most of the early Christian kings discussed in this study were pragmatists who varied their strategies based on the situation before them.

¹⁹¹ Cf. de Jong 2016: 661; Robbins 2007: 11.

¹⁹² Cf. Berend 2007: 5–6.

The methods in chapters four to six are thus mainly empirical and inductive. When turning to the *why*-question in chapter seven, some theories and typologies of religion used by for instance Gro Steinsland and Jens Peter Schjødt in similar contexts will be discussed.¹⁹³ They claim that the missionaries identified certain areas where the old religion was vulnerable, which they later also attacked. As an alternative or rather complement to their suggestions, this study argues that foremost pragmatics were at stake when choosing strategies and tactics for winding up the old religion. Since the recently converted Christian kings could not change the worldview of the people, they did what was in their power to do, such as abandon their own traditional cultic roles, or persuade the local chieftains to give up their cultic assignments. When their power position was strengthened, they could also destroy the old sanctuaries and in a later phase prohibit traditional customs by means of laws, such as animal sacrifices and the consumption of horse-meat. These methods and strategies also indicate where the fragility of the disappearing religion was when confronted with Christians, that is, those weaknesses that also explain *why* the Old Norse religion perished on a public level in society.

The public rituals of the old religion, the sanctuaries and the cult organization included a kind of order, which the Christian rulers tried to dismantle, while some pagans endeavored to defend it. These contrary aspirations resulted in conflicts. In Part III, which includes chapters eight to eleven, the theme of resistance and fight against the Christian power will be investigated. Christianization in, for instance, Sweden is often described as a long conflict free process, with “no forced conversions.”¹⁹⁴ Chapter eight will contribute to nuancing this claim. Sources indicate that some groups in Sweden remained as “pagans” and that they also opposed the Christian power. The intention is to discuss these resistances and revolts against the Christians. They are visible in some sources, such as the rebellion supported by King Blótsveinn in Central Sweden (Svetjud) around 1080, that is, the final phase of the old religion.¹⁹⁵ It seems as if the external threat from the Christians stimulated an internal group cohesion among the pagan rebels, a strengthening of the indigenous religious heritage and also a revitalization of it.¹⁹⁶ The conflict between pagans and the Christian rulers did not only concern religion, it had social and political dimensions as well. It was feared, for instance, that the social community

193 Steinsland 1991; 2000; 2005 and Jens Peter Schjødt 2013.

194 B. Nilsson (ed.) 1996: 431. In a recent study Bertil Nilsson (2020: 1723) states thus: “A great deal of uncertainty pertains to this case due to the lack of sources, but perhaps the silence indicates that the Christianization was predominantly a relative peaceful process. At the same time, no momentous conversions by force are known.”

195 On the value of these sources, see Sävborg 2017; Charpentier Ljungqvist 2018.

196 Haki Antonsson 2014: 60–62.

would dissolve if the old customs and sacrificial feasts were abolished. There was also a fear that the old law would end and that the king together with the church would gain too much power. According to the old law, the king was only a *primus inter pares*, “the foremost among equals.” The power was in the local assembly, where all free men had influence and could express themselves. A king could even be deposed at the court if he did not fulfill his duties. It was probably also feared that the Christian festival calendar would have a negative impact on, for example, agriculture and other industries, as one must fast and rest on Sundays and holidays. Christianity thus came to involve changes in society and culture that were not solely to do with faith. A combined comparative and contextual perspective will be used in chapters eight to eleven where reactions from pagan resistant groups in Trøndelag in the second half of the tenth century and the resistance of “the pagan party” appearing in Iceland in the 990s will be studied in relation to Blótsveinn. Questions focused on in chapter eleven are: Is it possible to find differences between the resistance and revolts in the three regions, and in that case, why did these differences occur? Are there similarities? Why did the resistance finally collapse in these areas? When discussing the resistance of the pagans, a theoretical model developed by Bruce Lincoln will be applied, including the concepts of religions of the status quo, resistance, and revolution.¹⁹⁷

The core of the present study is to investigate the “demise” of the indigenous religion rather than the “rise” of Christianity. It takes as its starting point a close, critical and contextual reading of the evidence. The central hypothesis of the investigation, that indigenous rulers and local chieftains were the prime movers behind the transformation processes, is not an entirely novel concept, but the study’s emphasis on possible methods and strategies used by them when dismantling the old religion provides a slightly different approach. Incorporating a cultural-historical aspect and an actor-oriented perspective in the analysis and applying new theoretical models developed in the history of religions, the survey aims at providing new insights pertinent to the conceptual understanding of religious change within the specific context of the investigation.

¹⁹⁷ Lincoln 2003: 77–92.

2 Previous theories and research: A critical assessment

As noted in chapter one, there have been plenty of scholarly contributions to the conversion and Christianization of Scandinavia during the last decades. The historian Haki Antonsson has written a critical review of recent writings related to this topic.¹ Although this research has been extensive, there are still some factors, Haki states, that need to be addressed in future research on this process, “such as the nature of pre-Christian customs prior to the official adoption of the new religion in the way that paganism was practiced and how these may have affected the reception of Christianity, the role of rulers in introducing or even imposing the new religion – and how any and all of these factors may have related to the work of missionaries.”² The present study will not, as argued in chapter one, concentrate on the outcome of the conversion process. Focus is placed on *how* the early Christian rulers dismantled the Old Norse religion, and *why* they used the chosen methods. In addition, the pagan chieftains’ defense of the old religion is also discussed. The survey that follows thus concentrates mainly on previous theories and insights related to the demise of the old religion. A few selected scholarly works will in this survey represent these theories and research positions, and are only a limited sample of the many relevant studies which have been produced since the second half of the nineteenth century. In this critical survey, I will concentrate on those aspects that may be useful and relevant for the present study, but also mention those aspects that have to be dismissed.

Previous scholars have described the processes related to the demise of the Old Norse religion in different ways. Roughly speaking, three theories can be distinguished, however, there are no watertight bulkheads between them; sometimes they overlap with each other: (1) the theory of decay, (2) the theory of clash, and (3) the theory of adaptation.³ Some of these theories emphasize internal factors as the cause of the disappearance of the old religion, while others stress external aspects in this process. Some speak of a peaceful, temporally extended and successive process, while others underline a violent and abrupt course. Some researchers base their studies almost exclusively on written sources, while others work exclusively with archaeological material. The research positions have previ-

1 Haki Antonsson 2014: 50.

2 Haki Antonsson 2014: 50–51.

3 See research overviews of the conversion process in Ljungberg 1938: 1–16; Steinsland 1989: 203–207; 1991: 335–338; 2000: 82–84; Myking 2001; and Nordeide 2011: 3–33; Haki Antonsson 2014; Sundqvist 2021: 275–277.

ously been polarized, while a more contextual perspective is advocated by researchers today, regardless of subject residence.

2.1 The theory of decay

Scholars applying “the theory of decay” (Norwegian *forfallsteorin*) argue that the old religion was in a process of decline during the Viking Age, due mostly to internal causes. There was a “crisis in belief system,” since the Scandinavians themselves perceived the old religion as archaic and even ridiculous. It had outlived itself and was in a process of “resolution” (Norwegian *oppløsning*). The internal crisis led to a “religious and spiritual vacuity,” which opened the way for Christianity. The shift of religion was therefore a smooth, peaceful, and painless process and it was not caused by external pressure.

The historian Johan Ernst Welhaven Sars (1835–1917) held this view in his *Udsigt over den norske Historie* (4 volumes).⁴ Even if the missionaries in Norway came from England, their mission was not carried out by force and conquests. The reason why the “pagan religion” (Norwegian *hedenske Religion*) collapsed in Norway, he argued, was that it no longer created any enthusiasm among the inhabitants, it was considered to have outlived itself. This view among the Norwegians was eventually nourished by the new and more reasonable Christian ideas, which had reached the country.⁵ Sars’ interpretation was to a great degree affected by different versions of contemporary evolutionism and evaluative Christian positions,⁶ but mostly he was effected by Konrad Maurer’s impressive study, *Die Bekehrung des Norwegischen Stammes zum Christentum* (1–2).⁷ In his section titled “Der innere Verfall des Heidenthums,” Maurer argued that the old religion had survived itself and that the Scandinavians themselves had problems with their anthropomorphic concepts of god, superstition and idolatry.⁸ This led to a spread of a kind of irreligiosity in Scandinavia, which was expressed in the belief in trusting solely in one’s own might and strength (*trúa á mátt sinn ok megin*) visible in the Old Norse sources. Religious conditions in Scandinavia were thus in

4 Sars 1873–1891.

5 “Nordmændenes hedenske Religion var efter sit hele Væsen kun lidet skikket til at indgyde nogen særdeles brændende Iver, allermindst kunde den være det paa en Tid, da den maatte siges at have overlevet sig selv og var undergravet paa alle Puncter af en ved fremmede religiøse Forestillinger fremkaldt og næret Reflexion.” Sars 1873: 220. Cf. Nordeide 2011: 6.

6 Cf. Myking 2001.

7 Maurer 1855–1856.

8 Maurer 1855–1856 2: 238–260 and 390–391.

an internal crisis already before Christianity arrived.⁹ Maurer's and Sars' interpretations came to be "Stand der Forschung" for many decades to come. E. S. Engelstad, for instance, argued in the same vein as them, more than fifty years later, regarding the internal decay of the old religion. He stated that the belief in old gods "were on retreat" during the Viking Age in Scandinavia. Worshipping all of them must have been perceived as outdated, since it was easier to believe in just one god. Compared to the new "more intellectual" religion (that is, Christianity) the indigenous polytheism was conceived as "ridiculous" ("latterlig"). These conditions became, according to Engelstad, obvious for the Vikings on their voyages in Europe. When they returned to their homeland their views were successively taking over by others, who were a bit impressed with these new ideas.¹⁰

The famous Icelandic philologist Sigurður Nordal included a similar view on the conversion process, in his important monograph on *Vöðuspá*. He stated that the pagan faith had weakened in the Nordic countries, because it survived itself. The Scandinavians were under spiritual growth and their outlook had widened, since they had been in contact with Christianity in neighboring countries.¹¹ Sigurður Nordal and many other early scholars argued that the change of official religion was a conflict-free process, with no dramatic breach in the social, political and ideological spheres.¹²

The historian of religions and Bishop, Helge Ljungberg,¹³ discussed the question of whether "the irreligious people" mentioned in the Old Norse sources as *goðlausir* (derived from the adjective *goðlauss*, "godless"), and trusting solely in their own might and strength (*trúa á mátt sinn ok megin*), were a sign of an inter-

9 It should be noticed that Maurer (1855–1856 2: 339–391) also stated, in addition to this, that conversion in Scandinavia was caused by external pressure.

10 "Det at skifte tro, i og for sig, har vel neppe voldt særlig vanskelighet, de gamle guder var saa smaat begynt at bli upopulære, at tro paa én gud indestedfor paa en hel guddefamilie voldt ikke særlig besvær. . . . Troen paa de gamle guder var paa retur, de av nordboene som hadde været med paa vikingetogene hadde ute i større forhold lært den nye tro at kjende, ved tilbakekomsten fandt de meget av det hjemlige latterlig, ikke mindst den hele serie av guder. Denne deres opfatning spredte sig uten tvil til de hjemmeværende som vel gjerne var litt imponert av disse som hade været ute i fremmede forhold. Dette resulterte efterhvert i at flere og flere faldt fra, meget almindelig var det den gang at forkaste al tro paa enhver guddom, bare tro paa sin egen 'mátt ok megin.'" Engelstad 1927: 77–79.

11 "Men den hedenske tro var svækket og havde overlevet sig selv. De nordiske folk var i åndelig væxt. Deres synkreds var ved at udvide sig. Fra kristne nabolande sivede påvirkning ind." Sigurður Nordal 1927: 145.

12 Also Olrik (1927: 92) argued that the conversion was free from conflicts and made as something voluntary.

13 Ljungberg 1938: 141–149, 312–313.

nal decay of the old religion during the Viking Age.¹⁴ Ljungberg rejected this suggestion, since all societies, including those with a stable religion, have sceptics who can be classified as irreligious.¹⁵ When discussing the causes for religious change in more general terms, Ljungberg accepted the interpretation of an incipient slowdown in religious life in certain social classes, especially the dominant fractions. In these groups he could find a tendency to secularism (Swedish *seku-larisering*) and opposition to the existing religion, which might have prepared the way for Christianity there. The sources did not, in his opinion, indicate a more general decline of the worship of the old gods in the broad population layers.¹⁶

Although scholars supporting “the theory of decay” often included evaluative implications, it managed to survive surprisingly well into historical accounts as late as during the 1970s. The historian and specialist on the Middle Ages, Erik Gunnes, for instance, made such an interpretation, by means of focusing on the Norse people’s spiritual development. He argued that the old polytheism had become a burden for the spiritual life of the indigenous people. The notion of the only, omnipotent god was perceived as “a liberating simplification” and more intellectually acceptable. When monotheism broke through in Scandinavia, it became the obvious choice.¹⁷ As late as 1999, archaeologist Jörn Stæcker maintained the idea of an internal crises in the indigenous religion between ninth and eleventh centuries where also a valuing attitude emerged. The occurrence of Thor-hammer-symbols in Denmark, he argued, was a clear expression of a crisis reaction in the pagan religion in the ninth to eleventh centuries, when attacked by Christian missionaries, who carried crosses. It was difficult for the pagans to defend themselves against the powerful Christianization with adequate means.¹⁸

14 As suggested by Maurer 1855–56 2: 247–249; cf. F. Ström 1948: 5.

15 Ljungberg 1938: 149. In a later article Ljungberg (1947: 152) stated that people who had been in contact with Christianity in Europe could have developed a negative attitude to their own faith and thus been considered as *godlausir*.

16 In the end, Ljungberg (who also became bishop), made a normative explanation when saying that the old religion was deemed to go under (Ljungberg 1938: 313). He also argued that Christianity was superior to other religions (1938: 209).

17 “Det er neppe tvil om at den nye forkynnelsen inneholdt mangt og meget som kunne virke tillokkende – og overbevisende. Som før nevt må de mange guder ha begynt å bli en belastning for nordboenes tenkeevne. Forestillingen om den ene, allmechtige Gud har betydd en mektig og befriende forenkling, rent intellektuelt. Engang fattet, har den forekommet selvvinnlysende.” Gunnes 1976: 226.

18 “Die Thorhammer-anhänger sind der deutliche Ausdruck für die Krise der heidnischen Religion im 9 bis 11. Jahrhundert, da es ihr schwer fällt, sich mit adäquaten Mitteln gegen die machtvolle Christianisierung zur Wehr zu setzen” (Stæcker 1999: 243–244). Critically considered by e.g., Nordeide 2011.

A serious problem with “the theory of decay” is that its representatives often imply derogatory, evolutionistic, and biased attitudes towards the old religion when describing it as “primitive,” “archaic,” and “dying.” Historian of religions, Gro Steinsland, has in several studies pointed out the flaws and weaknesses in this thinking.¹⁹ When commenting on Gunnes’ view, Steinsland identified several old evolutionistic ideas. The transition from paganism to Christianity was described by Gunnes as a mental and spiritual development from more primitive to advanced religious thoughts. The incomprehensible polytheism, for instance, was, according to Gunnes, exchanged with a more conceivable monotheism.²⁰ It is easy to agree with Steinsland’s criticism on this point. What the Norse speaking people actually understood by the Christian monotheism, which paradoxically also included the doctrine of trinity, is impossible to grasp by means of the surviving sources. One thing is obvious, however; the early Christian skalds rarely made a clear distinction between God and Christ in their poetry.²¹ Sigurður Nordal’s interpretation also includes condescending and evaluative aspects, when stating that the Nordic people were mature to grow “spiritually,” that is, to change from the “primitive” Norse religion to the more developed Christian belief. A similar criticism may also be directed towards Engelstad, when stating that the Vikings who had met Christianity on their voyages afterwards perceived their own religion as “ridiculous,” or “laughable” (Norwegian *latterlig*). In this type of explication, Christianity is implicitly seen as a “higher” and more intellectual religion than the Norse religion.²²

It is, of course, not necessary to describe all attempts of finding internal causes behind the demise of Old Norse religion as “evolutionistic.” “The theory of decay” does not have to be interpreted as “old evolutionism” in itself. It appears only when scholars add derogative and evaluative aspects into their interpretations. The historian, Per Sveaas Andersen, for instance, proceeded from this theory when describing the conversion of Norway in a very popular handbook on history. Accord-

19 Steinsland 1989: 204–205; 1991: 337–338; 2000: 82–84.

20 Steinsland (1991: 337) states: “Det er ikke vanskelig å gjenkjenne rester av evolusjonistiske ideer i Gunnes’ fremstilling. Hedendommens mangfold av guder fremstilles som mer belastende for tanken enn kristendommens tro på den ene gud, overgangen fra hedendom til kristendom betraktes dermed som et sprang fra et primitivt til et høyerstående religiøst stadium.”

21 See e.g., Bønding 2021a: 118–119. Cf. Tveito 2002: 23–25. See however Strömbäck (1975: 56–57) who refers to Hallfrøðr vandræðaskáld. In a *lausavísa* this skald is “aware that Christ is God’s son.” In the early Christian poetry, moreover, the image of God/Christ is described as a strong and powerful Viking ruler. Usually God/Christ was modelled as a pagan god, like Óðinn or Þórr. See e.g., Lange 1958; Mundal 1995; Tveito 2002; Bønding 2020 and 2021a. On the concept *guð* in runic inscription, see Williams 1996c: 304–307.

22 Cf. Steinsland 1991: 338; 2000: 82.

ing to Andersen, people started to forget the old religion in tenth century Norway, without accepting a new one, for themselves. A religious indifference was also visible in sources referring to Viking Age Iceland.²³ When explaining the dissolution of the old religion in Scandinavia, Andersen never used disparaging statements or expressions. His account should thus not be described as old evolutionism. On the other hand, Per Sveaas Andersen's arguments and empirical evidence for his theory were not completely convincing. He referred, for instance, to bynames in the Old Norse prose, such as *Hallr goðlauss*, as empirical evidence for his theory.²⁴ According to Andersen, these people were without gods and religion, because their traditional customs were in dissolution. It should be noticed, however, that this epithet, including the formula *trúa á mátt sinn ok megin*, could be interpreted as a literary trick of the medieval and Christian authors, in order to illustrate the way in which their noble ancestors and heathen heroes renounced the old gods.²⁵ It is also possible that the epithet *goðlauss* and the formula *trúa á mátt sinn ok megin* referred to a person's social status, that is, those individuals who were outlawed and excluded from society and the common cult community. They had to trust solely in their own might and strength.²⁶ Hence, the reference to this motif in the medieval sagas is not complete reliable evidence for the notion that the ancient Scandinavian religion was in a process of dissolution during the tenth century. It should also be added that some early scholars who created evaluative interpretations of the religious transition in Scandinavia were not guided by nineteenth century theories of evolutionism. They lived with a deep Christian conviction where their interpretations were colored by their own values, world view and theology.

There are a few aspects of the theory of decay that are of value to and useful in the present study. Although it is difficult to prove that the old religion was in a state of crisis during the Viking Age, it must be considered possible that some internal factors may have contributed to its competitive disadvantage when native groups encountered Christian rulers. Such vulnerable areas will be discussed in chapter seven. The notion that conversion occasionally can be described as a peaceful and successive process can also be supported by for instance archaeological sources (see below), but this did not take place always. Several sources indicate a conflict

²³ Andersen 1977: 189.

²⁴ See *Landnámabók*, ch. S12, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 48. Cf. Ljungberg 1938: 141–149; 1947; Ström 1948; Dillmann 2019.

²⁵ Cf. Baetke 1950; Lönnroth 1969. Weber (1981), for instance, stated that the formula *trúa á mátt sinn ok megin* was built on a Christian theological *topos* and the notion of *vir fortis*. Critically considered by von See 1988: 89–96.

²⁶ Ström 1948: 26; 1985: 246–248; Steinsland 1989: 205.

between representatives from the old and the new religion. Scholars who support the theory of decay are, moreover, often too influenced by old evolutionism and/or ethnocentric Christian notions and values in their reasoning. The hypotheses that the epithet *goðlauss* and the formula *trúa á mátt sinn ok megin* would testify to a religious indifference, or inner decay does not convince either. Today, few scholars advocate these notions.

2.2 The theory of clash

Contrary to “the theory of decay,” some scholars have argued that the old religion was strong, creative, and vibrant to the very end of its existence.²⁷ However, it was perceived as a quite different type of religion compared to Christianity. Scholars have claimed that this meeting must have caused a dramatic clash between the actors.²⁸ Proceeding mainly from written evidence, they state that people were conscious that they lived in a time of profound and dramatic change, and in many cases the ending of the old religion was abrupt.²⁹ By means of exter-

27 Archaeologist Haakon Shetelig argued, polemically against his contemporaries in the 1930s, and stated that the pagan religion in Norway was strong during the entire Viking Age, at least in their homelands. “Den hedenske religion i Norge hadde uten tvil enda i vikingetiden hele den styrke og fasthet som all overlevering får i et gammelt bondesamfund. Det är ganske misforstått, om en her vil trekke slutninger om norske forhold, fordi troen var vaklende hos vikinger i Skottland og Irland. I hjemlandet, i hver bygd, var alt knyttet til fortidens skikk, også i religionen . . .” Shetelig 1930: 259–260. More recently, Brit Solli (2002: 237–238) stated that archaeological evidence does not indicate a crisis in the Old Norse religion of Norway. To the contrary, the graves and burials from the Viking Age demonstrate that the Old Norse religion and the worship of the old gods was vital, as evidenced by the ship graves of Oseberg and Gokstad.

28 See e.g., Steinsland 1991: 336–340; 2000: 28–31, 82–89; 2005: 434–444. The historian Sverre Bagge (2005: 80–83) accepts the idea that the encounter between the religions may have caused a confrontation, but states at the same time that the conversion implied a gradual, and long process.

29 Based mainly on archaeological finds in Norway, Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide more recently came to a similar conclusion: “Non-Christian cult activity seems to have ended abruptly . . . No gradual changes in Norse cult in favor of Christian cult have been perceived; rather, the opposite tendency has been observed” (2011: 321). See also Nordeide (2020: 1630) who states that “the general picture indicates that the most normal process was a forced conversion, top-down, as exemplified by the legislation above. As the kings were responsible lawmakers and menders, they were the ones who forced people to convert to Christianity.” Cf. Solli 1996; Gellein 1997: 92–93. Bagge & Nordeide (2007: 163) had previously shown that written and archaeological sources display different results: “Whereas the late narrative sources regard the Christianization as a brief process, mostly the result of the missionary activity of Olav Tryggvason and St Olav during 995–1030, the archaeological material suggests a longer period of Christian influence and considerable regional differences.” For a discussion on similar methodological problems in connection

nal causes, such as constraint and force, people were made to give up their native beliefs, because of religious intolerance. The missionaries were supported by a new type of Christian royal power, which had social and political interests in changing religion. According to this model, conversion should be described as a fast top-down process.³⁰

The historian of religions, Gro Steinsland, for instance, has been a main supporter of this theory.³¹ She focused mainly on the religious change in Iceland and Norway, and argued that the old religion was well preserved, strong and integrated in these societies during most of the tenth century. Information in *Íslendingabók* (c. 1120–1132) indicates that the old cult in Iceland was stable and persistent up until the famous decision at Alþingi of Þingvellir, in the year of 999/1000.³² “The heathen party” had, for instance, the previous summer banished and condemned a Christian chieftain, when he was blaspheming the old gods at the Law-rock, that is, the center of this assembly (see chs 6 and 10 below). The “heathens,” who were supported by local chieftains, formed thus an important and wide social group in the Icelandic society, even in the last part of the tenth century. Although the two religions were strong when they clashed, the conversion was quite fast and abrupt, due to the compromise and rational decision at the General Assembly of Þingvellir.³³ Steinsland argued that a similar pattern could be seen in Norway. She stated that the old religion there was vital, vigorous and serious during most parts of the tenth century and perceived as an integrated element of the society. The process of religious change in Norway was also in a temporal sense a fast and abrupt process, at least in the area around Viken and in Vestlandet, where the old religion eclipsed during the second half of the tenth century. In Trøndelag, where the old religion was protected by magnates and the powerful

to the archaeology of religious change in Scandinavia, see Svanberg 2003; Theliander 2005; Arтелиус 2010.

30 The external motives for changing religion were mentioned already by Maurer (1855–1856 2: 340) such as lure, violence, or coercion. In his conclusion, Helge Ljungberg also mentioned external causes for changing religion in Scandinavia, including violent means. The conversion was interpreted as a top-down-process (Swedish *uppifrån och nedåt*), a term he used especially when describing the more collective mass conversion (Swedish *massomvändelse*), such as the one that, according to certain traditions, took place in Norway (Ljungberg 1938: 151–156, 161, 173–177; see below). This interpretation of a top-down-process has later been a dominant explanation in research.

31 Steinsland 1989; 1991; 2000: 83; 2011a: 2–3.

32 For a discussion of precisely which year Christianity became the official religion in Iceland, see Ólafía Einarsdóttir 1964. Cf. Strömbäck 1975: 2, note 1; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1649.

33 This view has been contested. Most modern scholars think that the conversion process in Iceland was quite slow and gradual. See Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 17–19 and Clunies Ross 2018a: 94.

jarls of Lade, the process was somewhat longer, but it disappeared during the first decades of the eleventh century. The reasons why the process was quite short in Norway was due to external causes, often violence and suppression. These forceful conversions included, apart from military force, strict laws and rigorous control systems.³⁴ The Christian missionaries were namely supported by the new royal power in Norway, as represented by, for example, King Óláfr Tryggvason (r. 995–1000) and King Óláfr Haraldsson (r. 1015–1028, 30). According to Steinsland, the old religion did thus not successively decay in Western Scandinavia, due to internal causes. It was actively opposed by those who stood on top of the social pyramid, by means of violence, laws and force. Steinsland's interpretation indicated a conflict perspective and a competition between ideologies, but also a resistance among groups who were loyal to the old society and culture.

To substantiate the theory of clash, Steinsland drew on general typologies of religion, where the old religion and Christianity represented two opposite types of religion. The former religion represented an “ethnic” and local “folk-religion” with base in cult, including a diversity of beliefs and rites, while the latter represented a “universal, salvation religion” with a normative dogma, including a centralized and hierarchical priestly organization. The differences between the Old Norse religion and Christianity caused, according to Steinsland, serious problems for the individuals who converted. It was a clash between an “internationally oriented royal power” and a resident peasant population.³⁵

One objection against Steinsland's “theory of clash” is that it relies too much on Old Norse sources reflecting the triumph of Christianity and overlooks the information from archaeological sources, which indicate a more peaceful and smooth process.³⁶ To a certain degree, Steinsland also disregards the possibility that Roman Christianity was already Germanized when it arrived in Scandinavia and that it had gone through a long process of acculturation, while passing Germanic areas in Europe from AD 400 to 800. The Church and the Christian missionaries probably adjusted themselves to Germanic conditions upon entering Central and Western Europe in the sixth century. This process is often called “the Germanization of Christianity” or “the Christo-Germanic syncretism.”³⁷ The sharp contradictions be-

³⁴ Cf. Sanmark 2004: 288.

³⁵ Steinsland 1991: 338–340; 2000: 85–89. This theory will be discussed more thoroughly in ch. 7 below.

³⁶ See A.-S. Gräslund 1996: 20 and 1.1 above. It should be mentioned that some Norwegian archaeologists have supported Steinsland's theory. See note 29 above.

³⁷ Even if Steinsland (2000: 89–92) is aware of this process, she does not factor in that it has consequences for her conflict theory. She argues that the Germanization of Christianity mainly

tween the old and the new religion can thus have been abraded when Christianity and the missionaries appeared in the Nordic countries around AD 800.

The Church historian James C. Russell, for instance, argued that the religious transformation in Europe not only implied Germanic influence on early medieval Church, but also included a Germanic reinterpretation of Christianity. He did not reject the idea that there were essential differences originally between the worldviews of German and Christian religions and cultures. The worldview of the Indo-European, Greek, Roman, and Germanic religions was essentially ethnic, folk-centered and “world-accepting” whereas Christianity as other eastern mystery cults, was essentially soteriological and eschatological, that is, “world-rejecting.” Opposite to the Germanic “ethnic” religion Christianity was also universal in its aims.³⁸ The disparity between Germanic and early Christian social structures and worldviews, however

led Christian missionaries to employ a policy of initial accommodation [. . .] the decline of the catechumenate, combined with the vitality of Germanic folk-religiosity, resulted in the adherence of the Germanic peoples to a Germanic folk-religious reinterpretation of Christianity. As a consequence of the religiopolitical influence of the Ottonian emperors in Rome during the tenth and eleventh centuries, this Germanic reinterpretation eventually became normative throughout western Christendom.³⁹

Examples of such German-Christian developments were, according to Russell, the growth of *Eigenkirchensystem* (-wesen) (“proprietary church system”). The development of *Adelsheilige* hagiographic canons was also part of these syncretistic phenomena, which included a Germanic ethos as well as military virtues and noble origins attributed to the saints. The notion of an inherited sacral character of the medieval rulers (*Geblütsheiligkeit*), was also believed to have emanated from Germanic ruler ideology.⁴⁰ Crucial in this transformation process was thus the Germanic ruler, his power and his sacred position, which even had an impact on the Christian image of God. According to the Germanic warrior ideals, Christ was now depicted as a “warrior-lord” or a victorious hero, *Christus victor*, and his cult image was sometimes called “the victory-granting cross.”⁴¹ In accordance with Russell’s theory, Steinsland discussed in her later studies how a Christian royal ideology may have emerged in the Nordic region, which had its background,

had an impact on the formation of rulership. On the Germanization of Christianity, see e.g., Baetke 1937; Strömbäck 1975; Russell 1994; Winroth 2012: 128–130.

³⁸ Russell 1994: 4, 45–80; 131–133.

³⁹ Russell 1994: 209.

⁴⁰ Russell 1994: 154–156; cf. Steinsland 2000: 89–91.

⁴¹ Russell 1994: 170.

not only in the Middle-Eastern, Jewish and Roman traditions but also in a domestic Germanic tradition. According to Steinsland, the pre-Christian ruler ideology—where the king played a leading role in religious matters—was also instrumental in the Christianization process, bridging the differences between the old and new religions.⁴²

Even if the theory of clash is based to a certain degree on Old Norse prose sources that are influenced by hagiographic and ecclesiastic traditions, it has high relevance for the present study. In some contexts, such as Óláfr Tryggvasson's mission in Trøndelag, conflicts and violence are also present in more reliable sources. In Part III, it will be emphasized that pagan chieftains and farmers defended the old religion and order, which occasionally also led to armed conflicts. However, this did not happen in all parts of Scandinavia, nor in all parts of society. It is possible that conflicts occurred sometimes which also led to a rapid conversion process, but probably not always.⁴³ Many people saw the benefits of Christianity and therefore they were baptized voluntarily. For some people it was also necessary to change religion since they needed or wanted to be in the same community as their Christian leaders.

2.3 The theory of adaptation

“The theory of adaptation,” including the ideas of syncretism and continuation, could be seen as a variant of the first theory, since it emphasizes a gradual, smooth, slow and conflict-free process, but it does not emphasize internal dissolution to the extent of the former theory. Instead, scholars state that the practitioners of the old religion were tolerant and had a great ability to adopt new religious elements. Scholars working with this theory have thus argued that Christian ideas and practices slowly seeped into the Old Norse religion.⁴⁴ These ideas and rites slowly rubbed on and exhausted the vitality of the old tradition. Archeologist Anne-Sofie Gräslund, for instance, argued that the burial customs in Sweden indicate that Christian burial practice was gradually adopted at the same time as it slowly rubbed on and pushed away the old customs.⁴⁵ In the beginning

⁴² Steinsland 2000: 92–97. Cf. Bønding 2020.

⁴³ See, e.g., Sanmark 2004; Berend 2007; Nordeide 2020: 1641; B. Nilsson 2020: 1723.

⁴⁴ E.g., Hernæs 1995; A.-S. Gräslund 1996; 2001; Orri Vésteinsson 2000; Brink 2008b; Winroth 2012; B. Nilsson 2020; Bønding 2020; 2021a.

⁴⁵ A.-S. Gräslund 2001: 9–10, 29–64. In an article “Religionsskiftet speglat i gravskicket” Gräslund states that there are “många exempel på senvikingatida/tidigmedeltida jordfästningsgravar på gravfält, som av allt att döma har använts med varierande grad av kristna bruk ännu sedan en

of the conversion process cremation graves were abundantly equipped with animals and other objects, while they were a bit later still equipped with animals and rich grave goods, however now inhumation had been the most common way to bury the dead. In the next phase we may see inhumation graves, but now only containing dresses and jewelry. These graves are still located at the old burial fields close to the settlements. Finally, the graves are emptied of their contents, and moved from the old burial fields to the new established churchyards. This process of adaptation, including the phenomenon of syncretism, describes the slow and smooth transition from the old religion to Christianity. Gräslund also presented other evidence of syncretism in Sweden. She referred, for example, to a Viking Age amulet made of silver from Lugnås in Västergötland, which on the one side has a Thor-hammer depicted, and on the other side a Christian cross. Gräslund argued that either the owner of the amulet wanted protection and power from both religions, that is, from both Christ and Þórr, or that he/she kept it secret that he/she had embraced the new religion.⁴⁶ It could also be the opposite situation; it was the heathen practice that was kept secret. The phenomenon called “crypto-religion” is known in many places, where people adopt the politically dominant religion, but privately are true to the old religion.⁴⁷ Gräslund also suggested that Christ, in an early stage was interpreted as just one more god, who was now included in the already existing pantheon.⁴⁸ This indicates that the pagans were tolerant and were able to adopt Christian ideas and symbols. Conflicts were not visible, according to Gräslund, neither in the archaeological materials nor in the runic inscriptions.⁴⁹

Gräslund described the process of changing religion as a top-down process, where the Scandinavian rulers first converted, since they were affected by the conditions in Continental Europe where Church and worldly power were united. Magnates and rich farmers in their homelands converted later as an act of loyalty to the rulers and perhaps since this also brought benefits to them.⁵⁰ In this context, Gräslund also adopted the model of Fridtjov Birkeli, which was applied to

kyrka och en kyrkogård hade tillkommit i trakten. Detta bekräftar den gamla tanken på religionsskiftet som en långdragen process. Enligt min mening är det något djupt allmänmänskligt, man accepterar långsamt det nya och undviker skarpa brott.” Gräslund 2010: 159.

⁴⁶ “Den tolkning som ligger närmast till hands är att man ville ha tillgång till båda religionernas symboler och därmed deras kraft. Ett annat alternativ till tolkning kunde vara att amulettens ägare i hemlighet hade anammat den nya tron men inte ville visa det offentligt; i så fall bars sidan med korset inåt.” A.-S. Gräslund 1983–1984; 2001: 17, 57. Cf. Berend 2007: 23.

⁴⁷ See de Jong 2016: 659; cf. Colpe 1986 and Robbins 2011.

⁴⁸ A.-S. Gräslund 2001: 127.

⁴⁹ Cf. B. Nilsson 2020: 1723.

⁵⁰ A.-S. Gräslund 2001: 144.

the Christianization of Norway.⁵¹ According to him, Christianization was a long process, which can be divided into three phases: a phase of infiltration, a phase of mission and a phase of organization. Although some objections can be raised against the use of this model,⁵² it could, according to Gräslund, also be applied to certain areas in Sweden and Denmark.⁵³

It has also been argued that the rupture was not total when Christianity was established in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The sources indicate, for instance, a strong continuity of the old beliefs and practices during this period, including several religious acculturation processes, where native Norse and Christian elements were mingled, especially in popular beliefs, but also in the official Christian religion.⁵⁴ The phenomenon “cult-continuity” during the Christianization process of Sweden (c. 800–1200) was, for instance, treated in the first volume of the project “Sveriges Kristnande” (“The Christianization of Sweden”).⁵⁵ After discussing concepts such as “syncretism,” “syncretic,” “religious acculturation,” Anders Hultgård, presented a phenomenological analysis of the concept of cult continuity, where he made a distinction between *continuity in cultic actions* and *cult-place continuity* (see also ch. 1 above). The clearest evidence of the former—continuity in cultic actions—was the replacement and transformation of some pre-Christian customs and feasts into Christian rites and holydays. In the Norwegian medieval law, called the *Old Gulaping Law*, it is prescribed that three farmers should join in brewing a special beer and in drinking together at special occasions, where also the pre-Christian ritual formula *til års ok friðar* was applied in the ceremonies; that is, drinking for a good year and peace. This is an old custom in Christian disguise and Hultgård described it as a “syncretic phenomenon.” Previously, this formula was applied in drinking rituals at the sacrificial feasts, particularly in connection to the cult of the god Freyr (see 4.1.1). After conversion, the early Christians prayed to Christ or God for a good year and peace (*til års ok friðar*). A clear example of cult-place continuity is the transformation of the old cult site of Uppsala.⁵⁶ The fane of pre-Christian deities was transformed into the sanctuary of St Eiríkr (Old Swedish *Erik*). This took place in the twelfth century. The first archbishop church of Sweden was also erected in Uppsala in c. 1164. This aspect of cult-place

51 Birkeli 1973.

52 See e.g. Nordeide 2020: 1640.

53 A.-S. Gräslund 2001: 19–20.

54 E.g. Hultgård 1992; Raudvere 1993; A.-S. Gräslund 1996: 20; Sanmark 2004; Berend 2007; Mitchell 2011; Lindow 2019 [2014]; Bønding 2020 and 2021a; Wallenstein 2023.

55 B. Nilsson (ed.) 1992.

56 Hultgård 1992: 49–103.

continuity, that churches after switching religion to Christianity were erected on old pagan cult-places, was observed early in research.⁵⁷

Aspects of the theory of adaptation will be applied quite frequently in the present study. The notion that conversion in many cases reflects a gradual, slow, smooth and conflict-free process is quite evident when examining the material. However, some written sources show that representatives of the old religion sometimes offered resistance against the Christian kings with violence, and even deposed these Christian rulers from the throne. The theory of cult continuity also has some validity in the present study. Christian kings replaced pagan ceremonies with similar Christian rituals which aimed to realize the same goals as the old customs in order to facilitate and promote the religious change. Certain formulae and ritual practices from the old religion were thus maintained, however, they were always adapted to their new context by the Christians.

2.4 An alternative approach

As noted in the present chapter, all previous theories reviewed above are to a certain extent of value to and useful when discussing the questions of the present study. However, some of them also involve problematic aspects. The theory of decay includes evolutionist, evaluative and derogatory elements and has in recent decades been considered obsolete in research due to these features. The two latter theories—the theory of clash and the theory of adaptation—are still advocated by scholars today. It seems as if the differences between them have to a certain extent their basis in the methods and sources that the researchers use. Historians often emphasize the conflict and violent shift supported by Old Norse sources, while archaeologists often emphasize the gradual adaptation and peaceful shift supported by archaeological finds. Just a couple of decades ago, these theories included gross generalizations. In order to achieve a more reasonable result, a more contextual approach is required where several types of source material are also taken into consideration.

A contextual perspective, including interdisciplinary methods, to the study of conversion in Scandinavia, is not an entirely novel approach. In the most recent

⁵⁷ Stefan Brink (1992) and Anne-Sofie Gräslund (1992), using both place-names and archaeological evidence, have shown that this theory is well-founded, for instance at Mære in Trøndelag, and Frösö in Jämtland (cf. Sanmark 2004). This was also noted in early research, see e.g., Maurer 1855–1856; M. Olsen 1926: 231–232; Wessén 1921: 110; 1923: 3; Engelstad 1927: 65.

research on Christianization there is a tendency to place focus primarily on particular regions and their development from the pagan era up to (and sometimes beyond) the establishment of the Church.⁵⁸ As noticed in chapter one, most of these studies focus on the outcome of the religious encounter, that is, the description of the early Christianity and the rise of Christian polities. The intention of the present study is to concentrate on the old religion during the transition. The questions *how* and *why* it disintegrated will be discussed, where special attention will be paid to the native kings and indigenous agency in this process. An agent based and actor-oriented perspective will thus be applied, where focus is placed on the actions, methods and strategies applied by the early Christian kings when they intended to terminate the old religion. *How* did they proceed when dismantling, for instance, the public sacrificial cult, the old sanctuaries, and the pagan cult leadership? *What* parts of the old traditions did they focus on? *Why* did they concentrate on these areas? In addition to these questions, the resistance and defense of the representatives of the Old Norse religion will be analyzed as well as the reasons *why* they first rejected the new religion. Did the resistance of the pagans look the same in all parts of Scandinavia? Were there regional differences, and in such cases, why did they occur? When discussing these issues, it will be argued that a more contextual approach is needed, in order to avoid the problematic generalizations noticed in the previous research.⁵⁹ In chapter six, two case studies will meet this request as well as in chapters eight to eleven where a regional approach will be combined with a comparative perspective. Other parts of this study intend to identify general patterns in this process, such as the recurrent methods, strategies and tactics used by the recently converted rulers when they wanted to break down and eradicate the pagan society as well as the old way of life, culture and religion, that is the old order.

58 Haki Antonsson 2014: 50. In the publication of the project “Sveriges kristnande,” one volume was, for instance, called *Möres kristnande* (Williams, ed. 1993) and another *Jämtlands kristnande* (Brink, ed. 1996). See also Brink 1996b: 290; Bagge & Nordeide 2007: 133; Nordeide 2011. A very important and impressive study related to temporal, regional and contextual aspects of the Christianization of Sweden is Cecilia Ljung’s doctoral thesis. The conclusion is that the establishment of the church and Christian kingship was earlier in Västergötland and Östergötland than in Uppland and Öland. See Ljung 2016 and 2019 and 5.4 below.

59 Cf. Berend 2007: 24.

Part II: The role of rulers as agents in the winding up of the native religion

3 Rulers and conversions

One major focus of the present study is thus to investigate the role of the indigenous rulers as agents in the winding up of the native religion. Focus is placed on the early Christian kings and their actions, tactics and strategies in dismantling the religious tradition that previously formed their lives. This process is actually twofold: (1) In the present chapter the role of these kings in the official conversion of the Scandinavian countries will be discussed, as well as their motives for changing religion. Unlike many people in Europe, the Norse rulers seem to have *chosen* to convert and accept Christianity as well as Continental and British culture voluntarily.¹ It seems as if these rulers supported the construction of the Christian infrastructure there, such as the establishment of ecclesiastic organization, the sees, and the erection of churches. (2) In chapters four to six, the rulers' role as agents in the deconstruction of pagan cult will be focused on.

3.1 Official conversion(s) and native rulers

Native rulers played a most active role in the conversion process in Scandinavia.² In her synthesis of the Christianization of Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus', Nora Berend states that "[t]he real impact of Christianity in most cases was linked to the decision of rulers to convert."³ Literary sources support this assumption. The baptism of King Haraldr blátǫnn Gormsson (Old Danish *Harald*) (d. 986/987) and the official conversion of Denmark c. 963, for instance, played a crucial role for the change of religion among the broader population of Denmark.⁴ His baptism is believed to have taken place around 960s, but it could have been earlier.

1 Winroth 2012: 6.

2 It is quite clear that European rulers also exercised some influence in connection with the mission in Scandinavia. Rimbart mentions, for instance, that the Frankish Emperor Louis the Pious was engaged in the mission performed by Ansgar in Denmark and Sweden (VA 7, 9, 13–14). Whether the Anglo-Saxon missionaries were supported by rulers in England is not clear (cf. Sanmark 2004: 75).

3 Berend 2007: 13. Cf. Sanmark 2004: 84–85; Bagge 2005; Bagge & Nordeide 2007: 135–137, 141–143; Brown 2013: 340–354, 475.

4 Gelting 2020: 1586–1589, 1621–1622. Danish kings converted even before Haraldr. Rimbart and *Vita Hludovici* (written soon after AD 840 by an anonymous author conventionally called Astronomus) report the baptism of the Danish King Haraldr Klakk in the Church of St Alban, Mainz as early as 826 (VA 7). Haraldr Klakk's baptism did not play a greater role for conversion in Denmark (see further below). King Hárekr (Old Danish *Harek*) I of Denmark also supported the mission of Ansgar and erected a church in Hedeby/Schleswig, even if he himself never was baptized. VA 24.

The earliest account on King Haraldr's conversion is that of Widukind of Corvey (c. 968). This ecclesiastic text describes how the German clerk Poppo (Old Norse *Poppó*), who later became bishop, convinced the pagan king of the superiority of Christ by means of an ordeal during a banquet. In front of the king, the priest carried a glowing iron without damaging his hands:

When morning came, the king ordered that a very heavy piece of iron be heated in the fire. He then ordered the cleric [Poppo] to carry this glowing iron for his Catholic faith. The confessor of Christ seized the iron without any fear at all, and carried it far as the king had ordered. The priest then showed everyone his unharmed hand, and gave proof to everyone there of his Catholic faith. As a result, the king became a Christian and decreed that God alone was to be worshipped. He ordered all of his subjects to reject idols, and gave all due honor to the priests and servants of Gods.⁵

According to this account, it seems that neither sermons nor negotiations were enough to persuade Haraldr to be baptized. A concrete act by the clerk was required as proof that Christian God was stronger than the old gods. This is obviously a Christian wonder tale with fictional details.⁶ The information that Haraldr “became Christian and decreed that God alone was to be worshipped” can, on the other hand, be partly supported with other independent sources, such as the inscription on the Jelling runestone II (c. 960s), on Jylland (see Fig. 2).

haraltr : kunukr : baþ : kaurua
 kubl : þausi : aft : kurmfapursin
 aukaft : þaurui : muþur : sina : sa
 haraltr [:] ias : saꝛ : uan : tanmaurk
 ala : auk nuruiak
 : auk t[ǰ]ni [:] (karþi) kristna

⁵ *Mane facto ingentis ponderis ferrum igne succendi iubet, clericumque ob fidem catholicam candens ferrum portare iussit. Confessor Christi indubitanter ferrum rapit tamdiuque deportat, quo ipse rex decernit; manum incolumem cunctis ostendit, fidem catholicam omnibus probabilem reddit. Ad haec rex conversus, Christum deum solum colendum decrevit, idola respuenda subiectis gentibus imperat, Dei sacerdotibus et ministris honorem debitum deinde prestitit.* Widukind 3,65. Text Waitz. All translations to English of Widukund's text are taken from Bachrach.

⁶ Similar information appears in Adam scholion 20, which appears in an uncertain manuscript tradition (cf. Svenberg et al. 1985 [1984]: 119). In Adam 2,3 Haraldr's baptism is related to a peace-treaty made with Emperor Otto. According to Adam, Haraldr submitted to Otto, where the emperor also stood as sponsor at the baptism of the king's son Sveinn. In Adam 2,35 the ordeal of Poppo appears again, but in this context King Haraldr is not mentioned. Poppo's ordeal is also mentioned in Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. A15, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 173–174; Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 27, *Heimskringla*, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 259; and *Jómsvíkinga saga* ch. 7, Ísl. Fornr. 33: 36–37. Critically considered by Gelting 2020: 1586–1589, 1595–1596. Cf. Winroth 2012: 113. There is not much of archaeological evidence of Christian cult in Denmark before 963, except an early cemetery in Ribe (ninth century).

Haraldr konungr bað gǫrva kumbl þausi aft Gorm faður sinn auk aft Þórví mōður sína. Sā Haraldr es sēx vann Danmǫrk alla auk Norveg auk dani gærði kristna.

King Haraldr ordered these memorials to be made after Gormr, his father, and after Þórví, his mother. That Haraldr who won for himself all Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian.⁷

The meaning of this text has indeed also been debated.⁸ Did Haraldr himself convert all Danes? What territory is meant by Denmark? Stefan Brink shouts out after quoting the inscription: “is it a lie, bragging, a political ‘statement’ or has it some historical bearing?”⁹ It is quite certain that the king could not have converted all the Danes, even if he himself had that opinion. Nor did he win the whole of Norway. It is likely, however, that he had overlordship over his Christian nephews, the so-called Eiríkssynir, who ruled over parts of Norway, together with their mother, Queen Gunnhildr, that is, King Gormr’s daughter.¹⁰ It is also possible that this statement of King Haraldr was situated in a socio-political context, alluding to a political event, when Denmark was officially proclaimed to have changed religion, perhaps at an assembly.¹¹ The words inscribed on this impressive monument are of course made for praising the powerful king,¹² but they support nevertheless that Haraldr was the catalyst for the wider spread of Christian faith in Denmark and thus also for the deletion of native traditions. Archaeological evidence of pre-Christian religion, such as pagan burials, seems to disappear in Denmark by the end of the tenth century.¹³ Recently, it has been suggested that Haraldr only ruled Jylland in the 960s, or perhaps even only the southern parts of it. By the end of his reign, he probably had control of the whole of Denmark (as it was in the Middle Ages, except Bornholm and Blekinge) as well as Viken and the Oslo fjord in Norway.¹⁴

It seems as if the native kings were also instrumental for the official conversion in Norway.¹⁵ The first Norwegian king to receive baptism was according to the Old Norse prose sources Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri Haraldsson (also called *Hákon góði* “Hákon the Good”) (d. 961). He was sent to England as a child by his pagan father

7 DR 42. Barnes 2008: 277.

8 Moltke 1985: 202–223; Düwel 2008: 105–111; Gelting 2020: 1589–1560.

9 Brink 2008b: 625.

10 Krag 2000: 55; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2006 [1999]: 70.

11 Cf. Brink 2008b: 625.

12 Cf. Pedersen 2016: 68.

13 Gelting 2007: 84.

14 Gelting 2020: 1595. One of the latest graves in Denmark with a pagan impression appears at Mammen, Jylland. It has been dated dendrochronologically to 971.

15 This general view has been problematized by Nordeide (2020: 1629–1633). Cf. Solli 1996; Bagge & Nordeide 2007: 132.

Haraldr hárfagri, and had a Christian upbringing at King Æpelstan's (Old Norse *Aðalsteinn*) court. This Norwegian prince was thus a foster child of King Æpelstan, a custom that was common in elite environments when aristocrats wanted to create alliances and build up social-political networks. When Hákon returned to Norway as a king he tried to spread Christianity, but with little success. The skaldic poem *Hákonarmál* (c. 961) indicates that Hákon even relapsed into paganism towards the end of his life, or that he took a more tolerant attitude towards the old religion in Norway (see further chs 4 and 10).¹⁶ More important for the “official conversion” of Norway were King Óláfr Tryggvason (r. 995–1000) and King Óláfr Haraldsson (r. 1015–1028, 1030).¹⁷ Both of them converted abroad during their young age on Viking expeditions. Óláfr Tryggvason was baptized in Andover, England, at King Æpelred's (Old Norse *Aðalráðr*) court in 994. This was probably part of a peace settlement between the Viking raiders and the Anglo-Saxon king. The king offered to pay the raiders sixteen thousand pounds of pure silver to stop fighting. This information, including Óláfr's baptism, is confirmed by *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.¹⁸ It is also mentioned there that Æpelred was godfather or sponsor at baptism.¹⁹ Godfatherhood could be seen as a precious gift from Æpelred to Óláfr (see 4.2.3 below). Óláfr Haraldsson is said to have been baptized in Rouen, France, during the winter 1013–1014. Theodericus Monachus, states thus:

There [in Upplönd] he [King Óláfr Tryggvason] came upon Óláfr [St Óláfr Haraldsson], who was then a little boy of three, but who later became a faithful martyr of Christ. He was staying with his mother Ásta, for his father Haraldr was then already dead. (Haraldr was the son of Guðrøðr sýr, whose father was Bjørn, who was nicknamed “the trader” and was the son of Haraldr hárfagri.) That Óláfr was the future propitious hope and glory of the Norwegian people. According to some, the king had him and his mother baptized then and there; others maintain that he was baptized in England. But I, for my part, have read in the “History of the Normans” that he was baptized in Normandy by Robert, archbishop of Rouen.²⁰

16 Ninety-three stone crosses, mostly found along the western coast of Norway indicate a Christian impact from 950 to 1030. They also indicate that King Hákon played a certain role for the conversion of Norway. See Birkeli 1973; Bagge & Nordeide 2007: 130.

17 See e.g., Birkeli 1973: 7–8; Gunnes 1976: 211–261; Andersen 1977: 102–142; Myking 2001; Krag 2000: 56–66, 218–222; Sanmark 2004; Bagge & Nordeide 2007: 138–140; Nordeide 2011: 5–15 and 2020: 1631–1633; Winroth 2012: 121–128.

18 “. . . and the king received him [Óláfr] at the bishop's hands . . .” *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, (The Canterbury manuscript F 994 and The Peterborough manuscript E 994), ed. Swanton 1997: 126–129.

19 Bagge & Nordeide 2007: 135.

20 *Ibique tunc puerulum Olavum trium annorum, qui postea devotus Christi martyr factus est, invenit cum matre Asta, patre jam defuncto Haraldo (hie fuit filius Goðroðar syr, cui extitit pater Berno, qui cognominatus est mercator et fuit filius Haraldi bene-comati), felicem spem et decus Norwagiensium futurum. Tunc et eum una cum matre ibidem secundum quosdam baptizari fecit; alii contendunt eom in Anglia baptizatum; sed et ego legi in Historia Normannorum, quod a Rob-*

Obviously, Theodericus Monachus does not believe in the tradition that Óláfr Tryggvasson baptized St Óláfr and his mother in Norway. With support from the *Historia Normannorum* (c. 1015), he thinks it was the archbishop of Rouen, Robert, who baptized the saint. When returning to Norway, these Christian kings, Óláfr Tryggvasson and Óláfr Haraldsson, used foreign clergies from England as support for their mission “at home.”²¹

In an indirect way, royal power in Norway played an important role also for the conversion of Iceland, that is, a society which lacked kings. Ari reports in his *Íslendingabók* in chapter seven that Óláfr Tryggvasson Christianized both Norway and Iceland.²² According to *Historia Norwegie* (c. 1160–1175) and *Ágrip* (c. 1190), King Óláfr Christianized five countries: Norway, Iceland, Shetland, Orkney and the fifth, the Faeroes.²³ This must be considered as an exaggeration made in order to glorify the king. Ari states that Óláfr sent the missionary priest Þangbrandr to Iceland, to teach Christianity to men and baptize all those who accepted the faith. Among them he converted some influential chieftains who later played an important role when Iceland decided to change religion at Alþingi c. 999/1000 (see further 6.2 and ch. 10).

Whether royal power had a great impact on conversion in Sweden is not completely clear due to the lack of reliable sources. According to *Vita Ansgarii* (chs 9–11), both foreign and native rulers were involved in the first missions in Central Sweden. Rimbart states that some envoys, sent out by the Svear, arrived at Louis the Pious’ court. They said that many people (*gentes*) among them wished to receive baptism and that their king would be glad if priests could be sent to their land and convert them. When Ansgar with his followers and the merchants arrived at the Swedish port called Birka (c. AD 829/830), they were kindly received by the king, called Björn (Old Swedish *Biorn*, *Biørn*). He granted them permission to remain there and to preach the gospel of Christ, and offered liberty to any who desired it to accept their teaching. This information is not completely convincing, but must be conceived as an elaboration, typical for the *vita* genre.²⁴ The missions of Ansgar in Birka did not imply a breakthrough for Christianity in Sweden and

erto in Normandia Rothomagensi metropolitano baptizatus fuerit. *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* 13. Text Storm 1880: 21–22, trans. D. & I. McDougall 1998: 17.

21 Bagge & Nordeide 2007: 135. See 4.2 below.

22 Óláfr rex Tryggvasons . . . kom kristni í Norveg ok á Ísland . . . Ísl. Fornr. 1:14.

23 *Historia Norwegie* (ch. 17) states thus: *Sicue factum est, ut infra quinquennium omnes tributarios, id est Hatlendenses, Orchadenses, Fereyngenses ac Tilenses, fide preclaros, spe gaudentes, caritate feruentes redderet Christo*. According to *Ágrip*, the king: . . . *kristnaði hann fimm lönd: Nöreg ok Ísland ok Hjaltland, Orkneyjar ok it fimmta Færeyjar*. Ísl. Fornr. 29: 22. This is also mentioned in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd munk Snorrason*, chs S44, A54, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 271.

24 Cf. Brink 2008b: 623.

no kings were, as far as we know, converted during the ninth century.²⁵ The first Christian kings of Sweden were probably King Eiríkr inn sigrsæli (Old Swedish *Erik*) (d. c. 995) and his son King Óláfr Eiríksson skautkonungr (Old Swedish *Olaf, Olof*) (r. 995–1022) who reigned parts of the country in the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century. Eiríkr converted to Christianity in Denmark but relapsed into paganism.²⁶ Óláfr Eiríksson was baptized “at home” in Sweden, sometime in the end of the tenth century.²⁷ Adam of Bremen describes him as a very pious king (*rex christianissimus*). Óláfr Eiríksson supported the mission work of Hamburg-Bremen by sending many gifts to the metropolitan Unwan.²⁸ When he had the desire to convert the people subject to him to Christianity in Sweden, he made a great endeavor to destroy the temple of Uppsala but was not very successful. On the other hand, he established a Church and an episcopal see in Västergötland, at Skara c. 1015.²⁹ His conversion was thus important for the religious change in Götaland. But he never managed to convert all of the people in Sweden. The first see in Uppland was founded in Sigtuna c. 1060, that is, long after Óláfr’s death in 1022. The pagan sanctuary in Uppsala seems to have disappeared even later.³⁰

3.2 Why did the Scandinavian rulers change religion and adopt Christianity?

The question of why Scandinavian rulers wanted to change religion has been addressed in previous research. What did they gain by converting? The standard answer is that the rulers aimed to build strong power at home and avoid external threats, especially by the conquest of the Frankish-Germanic Empire.³¹ This motive has, for instance, been applied to the official conversion of Denmark c. 963,

25 B. Nilsson 2020: 1707. A group of possibly Christian burials have been found in Birka from the ninth century, which probably represent the missionary activities in the town. See A.-S. Gräslund 1980: 83–85.

26 Adam 2,38.

27 As to who baptized King Óláfr Eiríksson, as well as where and when this took place is debated. See N. Blomkvist et al. 2007: 182.

28 Adam 2,58.

29 Adam 2,58.

30 Sundqvist 2013: 76–77 and 2016a: 110–132. For a more extensive survey of the religiopolitical situation in Central Sweden (Svetjud) and Uppsala during the eleventh century, see chapter eight below.

31 Berend 2007: 13–14.

which was made as a political decision by Haraldr Gormsson.³² Most likely, he wanted to avoid a conflict with the Ottonians, that is, Emperor Otto the Great. If Denmark was under a Christian rule the empire had lost their legitimate right to attack Denmark and start war against King Haraldr.³³ Even if this reason can be applied in this context it is far from general. Sometimes kings converted because they were threatened internally from groups in their homelands. The Danish king Haraldr Klakk (r. 826–827), for instance, who ruled over some areas in Denmark, was met with hate and enmity from kings in his own country. He asked for support from the emperor, Louis the Pious, according to *Vita Anskarii* (ch. 7). Louis demanded that Haraldr Klakk must convert and finally he was willing to be baptized together with his wife, his son, and warriors; this took place in St Albans' church, in Mainz 826. The emperor acted himself as Haraldr's godfather.³⁴ When Haraldr returned to Denmark with the missionaries Ansgar and Autbert, he was quickly overthrown. He retreated to the county of Rūstringen in East Frisia, which was previously granted to him by Emperor Louis.³⁵

Christianity seems to have been attractive to Scandinavian elite groups. It brought various kinds of benefits to the newly converted kings and nobles, such as new political alliances, trade relations, and a possible rise in the status of the princes in the Christian diaspora of Norsemen that existed in Europe and the British Isles, and eventually also at home in the Scandinavian countries.³⁶ Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson had as young adults on their Viking journeys abroad watched and understood how to be and act as a Christian king. They had also recognized how important it could be to ally with the church for ruling the kingdom, and that the document-based church administration was a most useful tool to rule an administration of a kingdom.³⁷ By means of Christianity, the Scandinavian rulers also built up their social and religiopolitical networks in Europe. Marriage was important in forming such alliances.³⁸ According to Adam of Bre-

³² Gelting (2020: 1601–1602) argues that King Haraldr could have been baptized before 963 and that Christian beliefs had gained ground among the population well before the Danish kingdom's official conversion in 963, especially the elite groups.

³³ E.g., Wood 1987: 42–43, 51; Sanmark 2004: 81; cf. Gelting 2007: 80–87. See Gelting (2020) for a more complex and convincing reasoning related to the official conversion of Denmark 963.

³⁴ Brown 2013: 470.

³⁵ Haraldr Klakk's impact on conversion of Denmark played thus no role at all. Odelman 1986: 85; Sanmark 2004: 81; Gelting 2007: 77 and 2020: 1583; Brink 2008b: 623; Brown 2013: 471.

³⁶ Berend 2007: 14–19.

³⁷ Brink 2008b: 623; Gelting 2007: 93, 110.

³⁸ Óláfr Tryggvason was married to Þyri (Old Danish *Thorwe*, *Thyrwi*), the sister of Sveinn tjúguskegg and King Haraldr's daughter. Óláfr Haraldsson was married to Óláfr Eiríksson's daughter, Ástríðr (Old Swedish *Astridh*). Bagge & Nordeide 2007: 143–144.

men, King Óláfr Eiríksson (skautkonungr), let his daughter Ingigerðr (Old Swedish *Ingegærðh*) marry the saintly King Yaroslav of Russia, and he himself (Óláfr) was married to a West-Slavic maiden called Estrid, from the tribe of the Abodrites.³⁹ He was also in contact with Archbishop Unwan of Bremen and together they established the see of Skara with Thurgot as bishop.⁴⁰ When building up these social networks, exchanges of gifts were crucial. The Viking kings piled up gold, silks, and precious objects of all kinds in their hall buildings. Different kinds of exotic objects impressed visitors and were thus used when recruiting Christians and constructing power. Recently it has been argued that Christianity itself could be regarded as such an exotic gift in these gift-giving relationships.⁴¹

On the Viking journeys abroad Scandinavian rulers and princes as well as traders and raiders stayed for long periods at places where Christianity was well established in, for instance, England, Scotland, Ireland, Normandy as well as in Rus' in Eastern Europe. Most likely many of them were baptized or prime-signed on their journeys,⁴² and thus constituted a Christian diaspora of Northmen in these countries. They were probably related to families that still lived in the Nordic countries. It has been suggested that it is this Christian diaspora that is behind the many Christians who settled in Iceland during the colonization period.⁴³ One example is the Norwegian noblewoman and female settler Auðr djúpauðga, who before moving to Iceland, lived in the British Isles as a Christian. She was married to the warlord (*herkonungr*) Óleifr enn hvíti. Óleifr went on a Viking expedition to the British Isles where he conquered Dublin, Ireland and the region around it. He proclaimed himself king over it. Auðr lived with him in this Christian area. He was later killed fighting in Ireland after which Auðr went to the Hebrides and then to Orkney and Faeroes, before she set out for Iceland where she finally settled at Hvammr in the Breiðafjörðr area (see Fig. 1b). *Landnámabók* thus states: "She used to say prayers at Krosshólar (*á Krosshólum*); she had crosses erected there for she had been baptized and was a devout Christian (*þar lét hon reisa krossa, því at hon var skírð ok vel trúuð*)."⁴⁴ Many Scandinavian nobles, men and women, who traveled abroad underwent the same religious transformation as Auðr before returning home.

39 Adam 2,39.

40 Adam 2,58.

41 Brown 2013: 29–31., 341–343; 350–352; Winroth 2012; see 4.2.2.

42 Berend 2007: 11–12.

43 See e.g., Egeler (2015: 84) and his discussion on stereotypification in the accounts about Auðr djúpauðga in the two versions rendered in *Landnámabók* and *Laxdæla saga*.

44 *Landnámabók* ch. S97, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 139. On *Landnámabók* chs S95–110; H82–84, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 136–147. Trans. Hermann Pálsson & P. Edwards. Egeler (2015: 85) argues that the *Landnámabók* account may have historical precedence over the account presented by *Laxdæla saga*.

One important reason for converting was probably also the relative novelty of Christianity, especially for the young rulers who had been out on Viking voyages in Christian Europe. Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson had probably adopted Christian culture early and established networks in many places in Europe, where Christianity was well established. It was therefore socially difficult for them to maintain practicing traditional religion and take part in indigenous cultural customs when returning to their homeland.⁴⁵ The novelties related to Christianity included Christian objects, such as clerical dresses and processional crosses.⁴⁶ The young Scandinavian royalties had probably observed impressive buildings of stone in Continental Europe and England, such as churches and monasteries. Haraldr Klakk visited the St Alban's Abbey in Mainz and probably also the Imperial palace in Ingelheim, Germany. Such constructions did not exist in contemporary Scandinavia. In Central Sweden (*Svetjud*), for instance, the first Romanesque churches were erected first in the very end of the eleventh century, and the first half of twelfth century.⁴⁷ In Norway, many churches were built in the period between 1150 and 1250.⁴⁸ Christian learning and education were probably also attractive for these young indigenous kings.⁴⁹ In addition, they were probably convinced of the advantages of Christianity, its usefulness and, perhaps, also its possibility of expressing emotions.⁵⁰ Whether the Old Norse religion included a form of individual piety is debated. It has been suggested that, for instance, the concept of *fulltrúi* "confidant, true or completely trustworthy friend," which sometimes expresses an individual devotion and personal piety to a pagan deity in Old Norse prose, is based on Christian ideas.⁵¹ This position has however been contradicted.⁵² Anyhow, we may assume that Christianity introduced a new type of devotion, faith and closeness to Christ and God for their believers which might have been appealing.⁵³ Christianity also brought a new form of ideological legitimacy for kingship, which was adapted to the ancient Germanic ruler ideology.⁵⁴ This type of ideology was accepted not only in Scandinavia, but also in other parts of Northern Europe. It seems thus, as if in Denmark, Norway and Swe-

45 Cf. Robbins 2014: 6–7.

46 Sanmark 2004: 104–105.

47 B. Nilsson 2020: 1715.

48 Nordeide 2020: 1638.

49 Sanmark 2004: 105.

50 Cf. de Jong 2016: 658.

51 Zernack 1998.

52 Egill's poem *Sonatorrek*, for instance, indicates a kind of pre-Christian personal piety. See e.g., Sundqvist 2016a: 87–90. See e.g., Hultgård 2008: 213; cf. Å.V. Ström 1990.

53 Cf. Bremmer (2021: 249), who discusses the encounter between Greek pagans and Christians.

54 See, e.g., Russell 1994; Steinsland 2000; Sundqvist 2002; Bønding 2020.

den, the introduction of Christianity was partly politically motivated, with rulers using the new religion to legitimize power.

As mentioned in chapter one, the sociologists of religions, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke emphasized the social dimension of conversions and the need to belong to a certain religious group.⁵⁵ Indeed, they downplayed the common assumption that converts were primarily attracted to new doctrines or ideologies, and in an often irrational way, were saved by the new religion, not rarely in connection to mass conversions. According to Stark and Finke, conversion processes are often slow and gradual, and based on rational choices. The desire to belong to a group may be the main reason for conversion.⁵⁶ Attachments to a group of people, thus, lie at the heart of conversion.⁵⁷ The concepts of social network and social capital are important when Stark and Finke describe conversion processes. When people change religion, they make substantial investments in a new social relationship, by means of time, energy, emotion and material. New social networks of relationship are thus established and maintained by means of such investments. “When people base their religious choices on the preferences of those to whom they are attached, they conserve (maximize) their social capital—they do not risk their attachments by failure to conform, and therefore they do not face the potential need to replace their attachments.”⁵⁸ Under normal circumstances, hence, people will not convert. However, social crises can alter social networks so that people are deficient in social ties, as well as marriages and migrations. Such situations tend to produce shifts in attachments and may open the door for conversion. Conversion is thus “more prevalent among the geographically mobile, teenagers and young adults, at marriage and following a divorce.”⁵⁹ Stark and Finke stated further, that converts are often recruited from “ranks of those lacking a prior religious commitment or having only a nominal connection to a religious group.”⁶⁰ They argued that converts are seldom religious seekers; converts seldom “find a new faith as the new faith finds them.”⁶¹ Kings such as Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson were young adults and on voyages when converting and they had probably only loose connections to their old social and cultic networks in their homelands. Both politically and religiously they were attached to Christian people outside Norway, and they were in exile when changing religion. Stark and Finke also stated that

55 Stark & Finke 2000: 117.

56 Stark & Finke 2000: 117.

57 Cf. Berend 2007: 27.

58 Stark & Finke 2000: 118–119.

59 Stark & Finke 2000: 119.

60 Stark & Finke 2000: 121.

61 Stark & Finke 2000: 122.

when people change religion, they make substantial investments in new social relationships, by means of time, energy, emotion and material, and they do not risk their attachments by failure to conform. New social networks of relationship are thus established and maintained by means of such investments.⁶² The aim is often to conserve and maximize the social capital, and to strengthen the social status. This type of reasoning suits well to King Óláfr Eiríksson of Sweden, who let his daughter marry King Yaroslav of Russia, and he himself married a West-Slavic maiden from the tribe of the Abodrites. He also established a relationship with members of the archdiocese of Bremen. When building up these social networks, we can assume that substantial investments were made by means of time, energy, emotions and gifts. It is explicitly mentioned by Adam of Bremen that Óláfr Eiríksson sent many gifts to Bishop Unwan for his missionary work in Sweden.⁶³ According to Adam, Óláfr Haraldsson also established contacts with archbishopric Hamburg-Bremen and asked for missionaries to be sent to Norway (see 4.2 below). Adam states that “he [Óláfr Haraldsson] also sent messengers with gifts to our archbishop [that is, archbishop Unwan of Bremen], entreating him graciously to receive these bishops and to send his bishops to him, that they might strengthen the rude Norwegian people in Christianity.”⁶⁴ The Swedish and Norwegian kings thus gave gifts to the Church, probably since they wanted to maintain relations with or establish new networks within Christian groups in Continental Europe and in England. Stark and Finke argued that not only was the social capital important when building alliances to a religious group, but also “religious capital.” It consists of “the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture.”⁶⁵ As we have seen above, the newly converted kings were surrounded by Christian priests and bishops who taught them to live a Christian life and perform the Christian rituals in an impeccable way. Adam of Bremen described, for instance Óláfr Eiríksson as a very pious king (*rex christianissimus*).⁶⁶ This quality was probably important for maintaining good relations with the clerics in Bremen.

Hence, maintaining social relations, or building up new alliances, were important reasons for these kings when converting to Christianity. It is also possible that Adam exaggerated, or made up some of these stories, to showcase Óláfr Eir-

⁶² Stark & Finke 2000: 118–120.

⁶³ Adam 2,58.

⁶⁴ *Misit etiam nuntios ad archiepiscopum nostrum cum muneribus. petens, ut eos episcopos benigne reciperet suosque ad eum mitteret, qui rudem populum Nortmannorum in christianitate confortarent.* Adam 2,57.

⁶⁵ Stark & Finke 2000: 120.

⁶⁶ Adam 2,58.

íksson and Óláfr Haraldsson as pious royal models. In any case, it was important for the early Christian kings to surround themselves with an entourage of advisers, bishops and priests when they would begin their missionary activities with the aim of dismantling the old religion and replacing it with Christianity. A strong social network both at home and abroad was a prerequisite for the success of this project.

4 The rulers' strategies for doing away with former religious practice and beliefs

There were many aims and motives at stake when changing religion in Scandinavia. Some might have played a more important role for the kings and the rulers of the society, while the local chieftains, the lower elite and other groups had other aims. In what follows, I will focus on some actions, or rather strategies, actively used by the ruling power when winding up the old religion. These strategies, and accompanying methods, which are visible in sources of various historical value and relevance, involve the erasing of the king's own ritual role and the old royal rites at the pagan sacrificial feasts, the dismantling of the local cult leadership and the pagan cultic organization, the extinction of pagan sacrifices and old religious customs, and the material erasure of the old religion. In addition, the new Christian power also used literary strategies in order to eliminate the divine status of the pagan gods. Some methods were used in all Scandinavian countries according to the sources, while others were applied in certain contexts. Some are mentioned only in Old Norse texts, while others are evidenced in many types of sources.

The present systematic examination of the methods and strategies used by the early Christian monarchy and the church in their desire to dismantle the old religion is not claimed to be completely comprehensive and exhaustive. However, it is argued that the methods demonstrated in the present chapter are representative of the early Christian kings and well documented in the source material. There are probably chronological aspects related to these strategies. Not all of them were used simultaneously. The strategy of erasing the king's royal rites at pagan sacrificial feasts and the erasure of local cult leadership by means of sermons, Christian teaching, negotiations and assembly decisions reflect a king in the early phase, while legislative measures, for erasing animal sacrifices, for instance, were used when Christian kingship was more powerful and well established. Sometimes it was enough to apply a single method such as sermons and negotiations at the *þing* and meeting places, but sometimes a combination of approaches was used, which included both words and actions.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, there are some necessary methodological steps that have to be taken when studying the demise of the Old Norse religion. In order to explain patterns of attrition and extinction of this religion, a heuristic presentation of what was there from the beginning must be presented

first.¹ Since my hypothesis is mainly related to the erasure of the pagan sacrificial cult and the worship of gods, I will focus on these aspects of the Old Norse religion in these heuristic presentations. Aspects of the old religion will thus introduce the respective hypothesis about *how* the early Christian kings acted when dismantling the old religion, that is, in the beginning of each theme in the sections 4.1 to 4.5.

4.1 The erasure of king's ritual role at pagan feasts

The annual sacrificial feasts and calendric rituals were of great importance in the Viking Age society. These rituals occurred periodically and were thus predictable, and they were accompanied with seasonal changes related to light, weather, agriculture work, and other social activities.² These activities gave meaningful definitions to time socially as well as to the cycle of days, months and years. During these feasts, animal sacrifices were performed, where the pagan ruler had some important ritual tasks. It seems as if he was perceived as the most central and necessary ritual actor in the communication with the divine world at these feasts. The pagan king was obliged “to play the part of the prime representative of the sacrificial community by performing some ritual act.”³ In what follows, I will discuss the winding up of these royal rituals, where the early Christian kings wilfully deviated from their traditional ritual duties and thus disturbed the liturgical order for the entire sacrificial ceremony. This refusal to perform the royal rituals was a hard blow for pagan farmers and for the old society in general. It ruined the whole ceremony and also the expected effects of it. In what follows these conditions will be examined, and an account of the early Christian king, Hákon góði and his encounter with the pagan farmers of Trøndelag, will be discussed. It is preserved in several sources, however, the most detailed version appears in a section of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* 1 (c. AD 1230) titled *Hákonar saga góða*.⁴ Even if its historical source value has been debated (see below), this text includes: (1) one of the best preserved more extensive descriptions of pagan sacrificial

1 Albert de Jong (2016: 654) writes thus in his important article about death of religions: “Knowing what disappears obviously demands knowledge of what was there to begin with.”

2 Bell 1997: 102. On annual feasts and time reckoning in Old Scandinavia, see Schjødt 2020a; Nordberg 2006 and 2020.

3 Hultgård 2022a: 604.

4 Snorri's *Heimskringla* is preserved in several witnesses. Two of them are later copies of the medieval parchment codices *Kringla* and *Jöfraskinna*. A third one, *Codex Frisianus*, was written by an Icelander c. 1325.

feasts, including the royal rites; (2) a detailed description of how King Hákon went about dismantling the old religion by means of preaching and negotiating at the assembly place first and then by refusing to perform his ritual duties at the public sacrificial feast. Since Snorri's text on Hákon góði plays a crucial role for most parts of the present study, it will be quoted and presented in detail, where also the frame story is taken into consideration.

4.1.1 King Hákon góði's failed attempts to dismantle the old religion

Snorri describes how King Haraldr sent a ship to King Aðalsteinn (Old English *Apelstan*) in London with his young son Hákon. Haukr hábrók was captain on the ship and when they arrived he told Aðalsteinn that Haraldr bade him foster the boy. King Aðalsteinn had Hákon baptized, and he was much loved by the king. They called him Aðalsteinsfostri.⁵ It is narrated that Hákon was in England when he heard that his father was dead.⁶ When he returned to Norway he sailed north to Trøndelag and went to see Jarl Sigurðr, who was the local ruler of the region, where he was also given a good reception. Sigurðr proposed him to the farmers as king and they accepted that since he entitled all farmers to their patrimony and gave them back their inherited land (*óðal*) that Hákon's father King Haraldr had taken from them. Then the new king travelled to different parts of Norway and everywhere he was taken as king. King Hákon was a good Christian when he came to Norway, but because the country was still pagan and there was a great deal of heathen worship he decided to practice his Christianity in secret, observing Sunday and Friday fasts. The king's intention was that when he was established in Norway and had subjected the whole country to himself without opposition, he would then put forward Christianity and convert the people gently. What he did first was attract the closest to him to Christianity and many had themselves baptized. He sent to England for a bishop and some other clerics. When they arrived in Norway, the king announced publicly that he intended to preach Christianity throughout the country. He then had some churches consecrated and put priests in them. When he arrived at Trøndelag, he gathered the farmers to an assembly and preached Christianity to them. They answered that they would refer this matter to Frostaping and request that people should go there from all districts within Trøndelag, saying that then they would respond to this difficult business. In chapter 14 of *Hákonar saga*

⁵ See *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* chs 39–40.

⁶ The following text is a summarized version of *Hákonar saga góða* chs 1–32, based on the translation of Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011].

góða, Snorri states that “Sigurðr Hlaðajarl, was very keen on heathen worship, and so was his father Hákon. Jarl Sigurðr maintained all the ritual banquets on behalf of the king there in Þrændalög.”⁷ Then Snorri describes the ceremonial feasts and the religious situation in tenth century Trøndelag from a general perspective:

It was an ancient custom, when a ritual feast was to take place, that all the farmers should attend where the temple was and bring there their own supplies for them to use while the banquet lasted. At this banquet everyone had to take part in the ale-drinking. All kinds of domestic animals were slaughtered there, including horses, and all the blood that came from them was then called *hlaut* (“lot”), and what the blood was contained in, was called *hlaut*-bowls, and *hlaut*-twigs, these were fashioned like holy water sprinklers; with these the altars were to be reddened all over, and also the walls of the temple, outside and inside, the people also were sprinkled, while the meat was to be cocked for a feast. There would be fires down the middle of the floor in the temple with cauldrons over them. The toasts were handed across the fire, and the one who holding the banquet and who was the chief person there, he had to dedicate the toast and all ritual food; first would be Óðinn’s toast – that was drunk to victory and to the power of the king – and then Niðrðr’s toast and Freyr’s toast for prosperity and peace. Then after that it was common for many people to drink the *bragafull* (“chieftain’s toast”). People also drank toasts to their kinsmen, those who had been buried in mounds, and these were called *minni* (“memorial toasts”).⁸

Snorri also states that Jarl Sigurðr was very generous and a most liberal of men. He once made a great sacrificial feast at Lade, defraying all expenses himself. Snorri supports his narrative with a stanza brought from Kórmakr Ögmundarson’s *Sigurðardrápa* (AD 960; see the text below) where Jarl Sigurðr is praised for his generosity.

In chapters 15 to 16, Snorri describes how King Hákon góði came to Frostþing where he preached the faith to the pagan farmers and invited them to abandon all heathen worship and pagan gods. The chieftains and farmers of Trøndelag opposed

7 *Sigurðr Hlaðajarl var inn mesti blótmaðr, ok svá var Hákon, faðir hans. Helt Sigurðr jarl upp blótveizlum öllum af hendi konungs þar í Þrændalögum.* Ísl. Fornr. 26: 167.

8 *Þat var forn siðr, þá er blót skyldi vera, at allir bændr skyldu þar koma, sem hof var, ok flytja þannug fong 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. Skyldi full um eld bera, en sá, er gerði veizluna ok höfðingi var, þá skyldi hann signa fullit ok allan blótmatinn, skyldi fyrst Óðins full – skyldi þat drekka til sigrs ok ríkis konungi sínum – en síðan Njarðar full ok Freys full til árs ok friðar. Þá var mǫrgum mǫnnum titt at drekka þar næst braga-full. Menn drukku ok full frænda sinna, þeira er heygðir höfðu verit, ok váru þat minni kǫlluð. Ísl. Fornr. 26: 167–168. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011].*

him however and required the king to take part in the traditional rituals as his father King Haraldr had done:

The farmers say that they want the king to sacrifice for their prosperity and peace as his father had done.⁹

Later, during the fall, the king came to the annual sacrificial feast at Lade. Snorri continues in chapter 17:

In the autumn towards winter there was a sacrificial feast at Hlaðir, and the king attended. Previously, he had always been accustomed, if he was present where sacrifices were being offered, to take his food in a small building with a few of his men. But the farmers objected to him not sitting on his throne when the principal entertainment was taking place. The jarl said that he should not do that then. So it was, that the king sat on his throne. And when the first toast was served, Jarl Sigurðr announced it and dedicated it to Óðinn and drank from the horn to the king. The king took it and made the sign of the Cross over it. Then Kárr of Grýtingr spoke: 'Why does the king do that now? Does he not want to worship?' Jarl Sigurðr replied: 'The king is doing what all those do who trust in their might and main and dedicate their toast to Þórr. He made the sign of the hammer over it before he drank.' It then stayed peaceful for that evening. The next day, when people went to table, the farmers rushed up to the king, saying that he must now eat horseflesh. The king wanted on no account to do that. Then they bade him drink some of the gravy. He would not do that. Then they bade him eat some of the fat. He would not do that either, and he was on the point of being attacked. Jarl Sigurðr says that he will settle the matter between them, and told them to stop the disturbance, and told the king to lean with his mouth open over the handle of the pot where the steam from the cooking of the horseflesh had risen up, and the handle was covered with fat. Then the king went up and wrapped a linen cloth round the handle and opened his mouth over it and then went to his throne, and neither side was well pleased.¹⁰

⁹ *Bœndr segja, at þeir vilja, at konungr blóti til árs þeim ok friðar, svá sem faðir hans gerði.* Ísl. Fornr. 26: 170. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011].

¹⁰ *Um haustit at vetrni var blótveizla á Hlōðum, ok sótti þar til konungr. Hann hafði jafnan fyrr verit vanr, ef hann var staddr þar, er blót váru, at matask í litlu húsi með fá menn. En bœndr tōldu at því, er hann sat eigi í háseti sínu, þá er mestr var mannfagnaðr. Sagði jarl, at hann skyldi eigi þá svá gera. Var ok svá, at konungr sat í háseti sínu. 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 trúa á mátt sinn ok megin ok signa full sitt Þór. Hann gerði hamarsmark yfir, áðr hann drakk.' Var þá kyrrt um kveldit. Eptir um daginn, er menn gengu til borða, þá þustu bœndr at konungi, sögðu, at hann skyldi eta þá hrossaslátr. Konungr vildi þat fyrir engan mun. Þá báðu þeir hann drekka soðit. Hann vildi þat eigi. Þá báðu þeir Hann eta flotit. Hann vildi þat ok eigi, ok var þá við atgöngu. Sigurðr jarl segir, at hann vill sætta þá, ok bað þá hætta storminum, ok bað hann konung gina yfir ketilhödduna, er soðreykinn hafði lagt upp af hrossaslátrinu, ok var smjör haddan. Þá gekk konungr til ok brá línúkk um hödduna ok gein yfir ok gékk síðan til hásetis, ok líkaði hvárigum vel. Ísl. Fornr. 26: 171–172. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011], but somewhat modified.*

Later, at Yule, chapter 18 narrates, the king visited Mære, where the pagan chieftains and farmers more or less forced him eat a few pieces of horse liver during the ceremonial meals. He also drank all the toasts that the farmers poured for him without the sign of the cross.

It seems as if King Hákon then lived like a heathen the rest of his life. Hákon fell at the battle of Fitjar against King Haraldr gráfeldr and the other sons of King Eiríkr. Just before his death the king spoke: "And even if it be granted me to live," he said, "I will still go from this country to be among Christian people and atone for what I have done to offend God, but if I die here in a heathen place, then give me whatever burial you think best."¹¹ Soon after this the king died on the slab of rock called Hákonarhella where he was born. His body was moved north to Sæheimr in Norðr-Hörðaland, where he was placed in a great mound with all his arms and his best attire. They spoke over his burial as was the custom of heathen people, and directed him to Valhöll. The skald Eyvindr Skáldaspillir honored the king with a pagan poem called *Hákonarmál*, which is quoted in Snorri's text.

The discussion of the historical source value of Snorri's text

The historical source value of Snorri's description of King Hákon and the pagan sacrificial feasts in Trøndelag has indeed been debated during the last decades (the wider source critical problems related to Snorri's account and the violent reaction of the pagan farmers are dealt with in ch. 9 below). Some scholars have accepted Snorri's statement that pre-Christian ceremonial meals and drinking feasts were celebrated indoors at Lade, however, details in Snorri's account, such as the description of the *hof*-building, the cult objects, and the ritual actions that took place there, were regarded as uncertain.¹² Especially parts of the ceremonial drinking ceremonies described in chapter 17 have been debated, since Snorri used Latin-Christian loan words and expressions when describing these rituals, which indicate that the text was influenced by Christian ideas.¹³ In his learned and impressive study *Das Opferfest von Lade*,¹⁴ Klaus Düwel claimed that the actions connected with the sacrifices at Lade had no Germanic origin, that is, that Snorri had no pre-Christian sources for these rituals. This description was built on narratives of old sacrifices mentioned in the Old Testament. Some other schol-

¹¹ 'En þótt mér verði lífs auðit,' segir hann, 'þá mun ek af landi fara ok til kristinna manna ok bæta þat, er ek hefí brotit við guð, en ef ek dey hér í heiðni, þá veiti mér hér gropt þann, er yðr sýnisk.' Ísl. Fornr. 26: 192. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011].

¹² See e.g., Olsen 1966: 59–61.

¹³ See e.g., Walter 1966 and below.

¹⁴ Düwel 1985.

ars have argued that Snorri even invented this description.¹⁵ In a general sense this source criticism has been well-founded and good for the research on ancient Scandinavian religion. However, sometimes it has been somewhat simplified and without nuances, especially when stating that Snorri had no access to ancient sources on these rituals. Several scholars, including the present writer,¹⁶ have endeavored to create a more constructive interpretation. They agreed with for instance Düwel that some of the details in Snorri's reconstruction cannot be verified and thus do not produce a trustful image of the pagan cult, as previous historians of religions sometimes claimed. They also agreed with him that this text must be related to Snorri's Christian view of history (see further ch. 9 below). However, this does not mean that Snorri was not at pains to make a trustful image of the pre-Christian sacrificial cult in a general sense. That some essential religious terms not with certainty can be deduced to heathen times is not a sufficient argument for concluding that the phenomena they designated did not exist in the old religion.¹⁷ There are elements in Snorri's description which may be ancient, for instance some aspects which concerns the ritual role of the rulers.

The ritual role of the pagan rulers at the sacrificial feasts

There are certain expectations from the cultic community regarding the king's ritual role in Snorri's text. In connection to the assembly at Frosta, Snorri mentions that the farmers want the king to sacrifice for their annual harvest and peace (*at konungr blóti til árs þeim ok friðar*) as his father had done. According to Snorri, the king should thus sacrifice on behalf of the farmers and community, when he was present at these feasts in Trøndelag. He was expected to be in the ceremonial building and sit in his high-seat while the principal entertainment of the feast was going on. Along with the jarl, the king must also consecrate (*signa*) the ritual beverage to the gods (see 4.1.2 below). In addition, he must drink the ritual toasts dedicated to the pagan gods in a traditional way and eat the sacrificial meat according to the old customs. The king was, according to Snorri, thus perceived as the ritual link in the communication with the Other World. He was in fact only legitimate as ruler as long as he performed these rituals.

It also seems that the king's rites at the annual sacrificial feasts of Snorri's *Hákonar saga góða* were intimately woven into the ceremonies performed at the communion meals. In a previous critical study of Snorri's description of the sacrifices,

¹⁵ Sverre Bagge, for instance, stated that this description was Snorri's own invention ("oppfinnelse"). Bagge 2019: 68–69.

¹⁶ Meulengracht Sørensen 1991b; Hultgård 1993, Dillmann 1997, Sundqvist 2002; 2016a; 2017c; cf. Schjødt 2020a.

¹⁷ Meulengracht Sørensen 1991b: 239; Dillmann 1997: 57–58.

the present writer tested the historical source value of this text by means of a comparative method.¹⁸ It was concluded there, that Snorri was probably right when he pointed out that blood played a central role in animal sacrifices. Based on an interpretation previously made by Hugo Gering, it was argued that the sacrificial blood (described as *hlaut* in Snorri's account) was considered as the "gods part" during the communion meal.¹⁹ The king on the other hand was supposed to consume parts of the sacrificial meat, that is, the horse liver (*hrosslifr*), during this feast. The consumption of horsemeat at pre-Christian sacrificial feasts is attested by both archaeological and more reliable written sources (see further below). These rituals, including the hierarchical distribution of the sacrificial meat, seem to be important and synonymous with old customs/laws and traditional sacrifice in the Late Iron Age society.²⁰

Through these annual offerings where the ruler was supposed to take part, the congregation expected a gift in return, such as a good harvest. This purpose is emphasized in Snorri's account but also in other Norse texts by means of the formula *til árs ok friðar*, which was recited in connection to the bloody sacrifices and the libation rituals, where often the ruler was involved. This formula connects peace with the power of production and fertility, also reflecting a notion of social happiness, security and safety in conjunction with material well-being, growth and prosperity. Most likely this ritual expression has a historical background in the Old Norse religion.²¹

The presence of the rulers—the king, the jarl or perhaps even the chieftain—at some major seasonal sacrifices was thus fundamental and necessary for a legitimate and efficacious ritual act.²² When Snorri describes these communion sacrifices, ritual meals, and rites, he uses the expression "it was ancient custom" (*þat var forn siðr*). This concept indicates that Snorri believed that there was an old tradition

18 Sundqvist 2017c. Cf. Sundqvist 2002; 2013; 2016a.

19 In his *Vollständiges Wörterbuch zu den Liedern der Edda* (1903), Gering gives the following explanation to *hlaut* (f.): "der Anteil der Götter an dem Opfer, daher Opferblut." Cf. Noreen 1923: §166, who interpreted *hlaut* f. "anteil (der götter): *hlutr* los, teil." On the problem of the unstable gender of *hlaut* (n. or f.), see Düwel 1985: 24–25. See Sundqvist (2017c) for a thorough argumentation. On communion meals in Greek traditions, see Burkert 1983.

20 See Sundqvist 2017c: 299–300.

21 See F. Ström 1985: 74, 81–82. In past decades, the expression *til árs ok friðar* "for a good year and peace" received much attention in research. For a long time it was regarded as a genuine pre-Christian formula. See e.g., Wessén 1924: 177–179. More recently, however, some distinguished German scholars have argued that it has no pre-Christian background. See e.g., Düwel 1985: 61–69; von See 1988: 84–87. Anders Hultgård (1993; 2003a) has considered whether the expression is rooted in medieval Christian literature and concluded that there are no prototypes for this formula there. Hultgård, who suggested that the medieval Church adopted the expression from pre-Christian religion, has gained support from other scholars. See e.g., Dillmann 1997: 58–59; Sundqvist 2002: 194–196; Wellendorf 2018: 109–110.

22 See Sundqvist 2002; 2013; 2016a; cf. Hultgård 2022a: 603–604.

and liturgical order attached to these ancient actions including the royal rituals.²³ The pagan king's role in these rituals was part of this order. If this ritual script was not maintained or intentionally broken, it seems according to Snorri's description, as if the local chieftains and cult community felt anxiety that the ritual was ineffective. Sources indicate that this situation would then also affect people's view of other aspects of social life in a negative way, such as ethics, laws, manners, conducts, subsistence activities, and other types of culturally circumscribed activities (see further Part III below). We may assume that the annual feasts including the communion sacrifices and the participation of the ruler, really were important for the Viking society, for the group cohesion, collective identity and for keeping the society together.²⁴

Not only the king but also the jarl had a connection to the public cult in *Hákonar saga góða*. Snorri explicitly states that Jarl Sigurðr was a most ardent worshipper (*var inn mesti blótmaðr*) and that he “maintained all the ritual banquets on behalf of the king there in Þrændalög.” Snorri also states that Sigurðr jarl sometimes defrayed all expenses himself for them. The idea that the jarl played important roles in the religious sphere, organized and commissioned the sacrifices may, for instance, be supported by the contemporary skaldic poem *Sigurðardrápa* (AD 960), which was quoted by Snorri and thus must be regarded as one of his major sources for the current passage:

*Hafit maðr ask né eskis
afspring með sér þingat
fésæranda at færa
fats; véltu goð Þjaza.
Hverr myni vés við valdi,
vægja kind, of bægjask,
þvít fúr-Rogni fagnar
fens; vá Gramr til menja.*

A man will not have to bring either bowl or the offspring of ash vat [BOWL] with him to meeting with the wealth-wounder [GENEROUS MAN]; the gods deceived Þjazi. Who would fight against the owner of the sanctuary [RULER], since Rognir <=Óðinn> of the fire of the fen [(lit. ‘fire- Rognir of the fen’) GOLD > GENEROUS RULER] rejoices in the descendant of swords [SWORD]; Gramr <legendary sword> fought for neck-rings.²⁵

The first half-stanza mentions that nobody must bring food and drink to the banquets which were arranged by Sigurðr, because of his generosity (*fésærandi*). Since the other half-stanza indicates that the jarl was regarded as a ruler (owner,

²³ On the concept liturgical order, see Rappaport (2000 [1999]: 169) and above.

²⁴ Meulengracht Sørensen 1991b; Hultgård 1993, Dillmann 1997, Steinsland 2000; Bagge 2005; Sundqvist 2002; 2016a; 2017c; Bønding 2020; 2021b.

²⁵ Text and trans. by Edith Marold et al. in SkP 3: 283.

keeper) of the sanctuary (*vés valdr*), we may suppose that the first half referred to a religious feast, that is, a *blótveizla*. The manager and agent of this feast was thus the jarl himself. It seems therefore as if Snorri at least had some support in *Sigurðardrápa* for his account.²⁶ The jarl appeared as a cult leader, who sponsored the feast and took care of and ruled over the cult site.

In the general presentation of the sacrificial feasts in *Hákonar saga góða* chapter 14, it is stated that the toasts were handed across the fire, and the one who was holding the banquet and who was the chieftain there (*en sá, er gerði veizluna ok höfðingi var*), had to dedicate the toast and all ritual food (*signa fullit ok allan blótmatinn*). Whether the term *höfðingi* refers to the jarl at Lade or someone else is not quite clear.²⁷ Since the first toast, which was dedicated to Óðinn, and was drunk “to victory and to the power of their king” (*til sigrs ok ríkis konungi sínum*), the concept (*höfðingi*) cannot possibly refer to the king. Most likely *höfðingi* refers to the one who organized and commissioned the sacrifices in a general sense, that is, he or she, who owned the ceremonial building, where the rituals were performed. The formula *til árs ok friðar* seems to be related to the king's sacrifice since it was supposed to be made by him “for their [that is, the farmers'] annual harvest and peace”.

Other Viking Age skaldic poems may also support Snorri's information that rulers (the king or the jarl) cared for public cult in Trøndelag. Contemporary stanzas from Einarr skálaglamm's *Vellekla* (AD 990), which was quoted by Snorri in *Heimskringla*,²⁸ report that also Sigurð's son, Jarl Hákon, maintained similar cultic duties as his father. According to stanzas 14 and 15 (quoted in 9.3 below), Hákon restored the sanctuaries, which had been destroyed by the Christian sons of King Eiríkr (see also chs 1 and 9).²⁹ In this poem the jarl has the guidance and support of the gods (*heim stýra goð*). It is stated that Jarl Hákon allowed the warriors to uphold the shrines of the gods. By means of these actions and the cult, which was re-established by Jarl Hákon, prosperity returned to the country. A similar cultic role of the ruler as described in *Vellekla* is also applied to King Hákon góði in *Hákonarmál* stanza 18 (c. 960). When the king died the skald praised him as follows: “It was revealed then how well that king had revered the sanctuaries, when all the guiding

26 Dillmann 1997: 57; 2000: 481.

27 Cf. Meylan 2022: 56–59.

28 *Heimskringla* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 241–242.

29 According to several sources, the Christian sons of Eiríkr dismantled sanctuaries in Norway during the second half of the tenth century. See Snorri's *Haralds saga gráfeldar* 2, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 203. Cf. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 1, 1958: 50–51. See also the important stanza called *Hákonardrápa* (editorial name) made by Einarr skálaglamm in SkP 1: 279 and quoted below in 4.3.2.

and ruling powers bade Hákon welcome.³⁰ The skald praises thus the Christian king (!) in a traditional way, as a pagan ruler who assumed his duties in the cultic sphere, as a protector of public cult and sanctuaries. Perhaps the king returned to paganism gradually during his reign or took a more tolerant attitude to it. Also, this poem was quoted by Snorri.³¹ Snorri also had other sources, besides Kormákr's stanza, when writing about the ritual role of the pagan ruler. Some of his sources also consisted of older prose traditions, such as *Ágrip* (c. 1190) and *Fagrskinna* (c. 1220). According to them, King Hákon was expected to perform the sacrifice on behalf of the people at Mære, that is, to eat the sacrificial meat. By means of this, he ratified ancient law and governed prosperity and peace (see below).

Similar ideas are attested to in other parts of Late Viking Age Scandinavia and in other types of sources. Scholion 140 of Adam of Bremen's text indicates that the people who gathered at the assembly of the Svear (perhaps in Uppsala) during the second half of the eleventh century still expected that the ruler would perform the great sacrifices, on their behalf (see 4.1.3 below). Parts of this notion are expressed in a Proto-Nordic runic inscription from Blekinge. The Stentoftenstone from the seventh century refers to a chieftain called Hąþuwulfr in a sacrificial context. Lillemor Santesson has given an interpretation of the inscription's introductory lines, which has also received support from authorities like Klaus Düwel, Henrik Williams, and Michael Schulte:³²

niuhAborumr niuhagestumr hąþuwolAfrgAfj

With nine bucks, with nine stallions Hąþuwulfr gave good growth.³³

Hąþuwulfr performed a sacrifice, where he offered nine bucks and nine stallions. In that way he gave the people a good crop. Perhaps he also arranged a great sacrificial feast at his hall building or at an outdoor sanctuary, with plenty of horse (and goat) meat for all people. Santesson's interpretation can be supported on several grounds. For instance, the number of nine victims corresponds with the sacrifices at Uppsala and Lejre mentioned by Adam of Bremen and Thietmar of Merseburg.³⁴ As in Uppsala, Lejre and Lade, the runestone indicates that horses were also sacrificed in Blekinge. It should also be noted that the Proto-Nordic word *jāra* in this inscription is probably equivalent to Old Norse *ár* appearing in

³⁰ *Þá þat kynndisk, hvé sá konungr hafði/ vel of þyrmt véum./ es Hókon bóðu heilan koma/ rǫð ǫll ok regin.* Text and trans. by R. D. Fulk in SkP 1: 191.

³¹ *Heimskringla* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 193–197. We will return to King Hákon in 4.2.1 and 5.2.2 below.

³² Düwel 2008, Williams 2001, and Schulte 2006 and 2015. See also Sundqvist 1997 and 2015b.

³³ DR 357. Text and trans. Santesson 1989.

³⁴ Adam 4,27 and Thietmar, *Chronicon* 1,17. See Sundqvist 2009a; 2010; 2022b.

Snorri's text in connection to the sacrifices, meaning "a good year."³⁵ The runic stone from Stentofthen thus supports the idea that a ruler was performing sacrifice, or at least that he commissioned it.

It seems thus, according to these sources, as if the Late Iron Age cult community in Scandinavia expected and even required that the ruler performed some ritual acts in the common sacrifice. There is no reason to doubt this information. Perhaps the annual sacrifice was only valid when the ruler took part in the rituals at certain places. A plausible interpretation is that the ruler was the most important mediator between the human and the divine world during the sacrifices at this sanctuary. His ritual role in the cult was thus necessary for the society, and per se it also legitimated his high position in other social contexts. The notion that the rulers' agency was embedded in the religious world view of the Viking society, and that sources of the rulers' legitimacy were widely shared by different groups as common values and qualities, can be supported by several sources.³⁶

4.1.2 King Hákon góði's refusal of performing royal rites

Snorri mentions that King Hákon was already a Christian when he arrived to Norway from England, however, he practiced his Christianity in secret, since the country was dominated by pagans. First, he attracted the people closest to him to Christianity and many had themselves baptized. When Hákon felt that he had gained the support of some of the ruling class in upholding Christianity, then he sent to England for a bishop and some other clerics. He also erected churches. And when they came to Norway, then King Hákon revealed publicly that he intended to preach Christianity throughout the country. He had then some churches consecrated and put priests in them.³⁷ When Hákon arrived at Frostþing he said "that everyone should have themselves baptized and believe in one God, Christ son of Mary, and abandon all heathen worship and pagan gods."³⁸ This speech was however disliked by the pagan farmers and none was baptized (see further 4.2 and 9.2 below).

³⁵ Hultgård 1993; 2003a; 2007 and below.

³⁶ See e.g., Sundqvist 2002; 2012: 233–234; 2016a: 16–17. These aspects have recently been elaborated theoretically by the historian of religions Sophie Bønding in her doctoral thesis *Visions of Unity*. She emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between the rulers and their subjects as well as a bottom-up perspective. Such views must be taken into consideration when discussing the dismantling of Old Norse sacrificial cult. Bønding 2020; 2021b.

³⁷ *Hákonar saga góða* ch. 13, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 167.

³⁸ . . . at allir menn skyldu kristnask láta ok trúa á einn guð, *Krist Móriuson, en hafna blótum ǫllum ok heiðnum goðum* . . . *Hákonar saga góða* ch. 15, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 169.

Hence, sermons, speeches and negotiations at the assembly of Frosta did not work for King Hákon, according to Snorri, so instead the king had to challenge the pagan chieftains with actions during their annual sacrificial feast at Lade. By deliberately refusing to follow the old law and ritual order, the king thus challenged the local chieftains and those *Þrændir* who clung to the religion of their ancestors. According to *Hákonar saga góða* chapter 17, the king had previously been accustomed—if he was present where sacrifices were offered—to take his food in small buildings with few men. When he arrived to Lade with the same intentions, the farmers objected that he did not sit in his high seat (*hann sat eigi í háseti*), “when the principal entertainment was taking place” (*þá er mestr var mannfagnaðr*). The term *mannfagnaðr* “the fare at a banquet, great entertainment” in this context refers to the consumption of the sacrificial (horse-)meat and the drinking of ceremonial toasts, that is, a sequence of the sacrificial feast (*blótveizla*), that probably was strictly ritualized, and which followed a liturgical order. It seems thus as if King Hákon góði intentionally departed from the old laws and ritual order at Lade. Snorri probably composes himself and elaborates on this event in the following passage. When the first toast was served, Jarl Sigurðr announced it and dedicated it to Óðinn and drank from the horn to the king (*signaði Óðni ok drakk af horninu til konungs*), however, the king took it and made the sign of the cross over it. Even in this ritual, the king departed from the liturgical order, when making the sign of the cross over the horn (*gerði krossmark yfir*). The next day, when people went to table, the king refused to eat horseflesh, that is, the sacrificial meat, or drink some of the gravy. In order to stop the disturbance, the king leant with his mouth open over the handle of the pot where the steam from the cooking of the horseflesh had risen up, and the handle was covered with fat, however he wrapped a linen cloth round the handle and opened his mouth over it and then went to his high-seat, and neither side was well pleased. The king deviated thus from the old customs and ritual order as he did not eat the sacrificial horseflesh and refused to perform the ritual toasts dedicated to the old gods in a traditional way. Later, at Mære, the king was met with a strong resistance from the pagan chieftains, and he was forced by them to eat the sacrificial meat and perform the toasts in a traditional way (see further ch. 9 below).

Snorri probably made some elaborations when narrating this account. He also used Latin-Christian loan words and expressions, such as *signa* (Latin *signo*, *signare*), *gera krossmark yfir* (Latin *signum crucis facere*) and *gera hamarsmark yfir* when describing these rituals, which indicate that some details were influenced by Christian ideas.³⁹ Even if this account has been elaborated with literary embellish-

³⁹ Walter (1966) pointed out that the Old Norse word *signa* meaning “dedicate, bless” is a loan word from the Christian-Latin concept, *signare* (*signo*), that is, “to make a sign.” This Old Norse

ments by Snorri, its basic plot is built on older historically and probably more reliable sources. There, too, it emerges that King Hákon was a Christian when he came to Norway and that because of his good behavior he succeeded in attracting his friends to Christianity. These older traditions also mention that the king deliberately refused to perform his ritual duties at the annual sacrificial festival in Mære. *Ágrip*, for instance, which is dated towards the end of twelfth century, mentions that Hákon was fostered by Aðalsteinn in England.⁴⁰ This text deviates a bit from *Hákonar saga góða* when it tells that Hákon's wife was heathen (*átti konu heiðna*). It is stated that Hákon departed much from Christian ways for her sake and in order to please people who stood against Christianity, although he kept the holiness of Sunday and the Friday fasts. *Ágrip* also mentions that many men turned to Christianity in his days as a result of his popularity, while others although they did not become Christians, ceased the practice of pagan rites (*hofnuðu blótum*). According to *Ágrip*, he built some churches and set clerics in them.⁴¹ This version also includes the king's meeting with the Þrændir in Mære, where they required King Hákon to sacrifice as other kings used to do in Norway:

And later the Þrændir rose against him at Mærin and asked him to worship the gods as other kings in Norway had done. 'We will drive you out of the kingdom,' they said, 'if you do not act in some way in accordance with our wishes.' Because he saw their zeal against him, and following the advice of the chieftains, he responded in such a way that he refused nothing, so as to appear to appease them. It is said that he bit horse-liver, but wrapped it in

verb appears here in connection with the drinking rituals dedicated to the gods: *signaði Óðni* and *signa full sitt Þór*. The Old Norse *krossmark* is derived from the Latin-Christian expression *signum crucis*, while *hamarsmark* appears for the first time in *Hákonar saga góða*. The expressions *gerði krossmark yfir* and *gerði hamarsmark yfir* seem to be derived from the Christian *signum crucis facere*. With no doubt Walter's argument seems plausible. The expression *hamarsmark* may very well be a construction made by Snorri or some other medieval writers. Whether the loan-word *signa* indicates that the content of the text is late and not built on pre-Christian terminology and notions, is uncertain. This term appears in Eddic and skaldic poetry, such as *Sigdrífumál* st. 9 (*full skall signa*), as well as in an eleventh century runic inscription from Uppland: "*signa* '(vål)signa': pres. konj. (sg.) 3 *signi sikni* U942" (Peterson 1994 [1989]: 55). Henrik Williams (1996b: 79) therefore argues that it is possible that this word was borrowed already before conversion and thus may have been incorporated into the pagan religious terminology (cf. Ahlsson 1992: 9). Even if the term *signa* is late and borrowed from Latin, the ritual action that it designates may be old. For a more thorough discussion, see Sundqvist 2016a: 135–140, 317–319.

⁴⁰ See *Ágrip* ch. 5, Ísl. Fornr. 29: 5, 7–9. The paraphrase is based on Driscoll's translation.

⁴¹ *Fagrskinna* chs 5 and 6 narrates that Hákon was fostered by Aðalsteinn in England and that he was baptized there as a child. In ch. 9 it is stated that King Hákon succeeded to the kingdom of Norway two years after his father died. He was blessed with both popularity and prosperity, but nothing is said about his preaching and erection of churches.

cloth so that he should not bite it directly. He would worship in no other way, and thereafter, it is said, his troubles were greater than before.⁴²

In this text, the king's consumption of the horse liver is perceived as the old order at traditional sacrifices. The king is forced to conform to the will of the local chieftains, but he refuses to perform the sacrifice in a traditional way. This leads to further problems with the people remaining. *Ágrip's* account of the event differs somewhat from Snorri's version when it comes to the handling of the sanctified sacrificial meat, however, the core of the story is quite similar to the one in *Hákonar saga góða. Fagrskinna*, written sometime between *Ágrip* and *Heimskringla*, also mentions this tradition. At the assembly in Mære, the farmers gave the king an option to choose between two things:

In the sixteenth year of his reign he [King Hákon] held a well-attended assembly at Mærin in Þrándheimr, and at that assembly the Þrændir gave the king two choices, that he should sacrifice according to the custom of the earlier kings, and so observe what was laid down of old to bring prosperity and peace, or else they would drive him out of the kingdom, if he was not willing to lead them in this as in governing or in the receiving of taxes. The king was certainly not willing to do this. The king's friends and a great company mediated between the parties and asked the *bændr* to show forbearance to the king, and they said how beneficial their lord was for his followers and a great leader where law and customs were concerned. On the other side they urged the king to ameliorate the complaints and accept just a little piece (*hlutr*) for the sake of concord, so that the heathen worshippers would not consider him responsible for the downfall of the law. Out of the goodness of his heart and for the love of his friends he did as they asked and partook of the sacrifice.⁴³

This depiction largely agrees with the other versions. Just as in Snorri's text, it is mentioned that according to custom and old law the king would make sacrifices on be-

42 *Ok þar eptir gerðu Þrændir fõr at hõnum á Mærinu ok báðu hann blóta sem aðra konunga í Nõregi, 'ella rekum vér þik af ríki, nema þú gerir nekkvern hlut í samþykki eptir oss.' En fyr því at hann sá ákafa þeira á hønd hõnum at høfðingja ráði, þá snõri hann svá, at hann fyrkvað eigi í nekkverum hlut í yfirbragði til vingunar við þá. Svá er sagt, at hann biti á hrosslífr, ok svá, at hann brá dúki umb ok beit eigi bera, en blótaði eigi øðruvís. En svá er sagt, at síðan gekk hõnum allt þyngra en áðr. Ísl. Fornr. 29: 8. All translations to English from *Ágrip* are taken from Driscoll.*

43 *Á enu sextánda ári ríkis átti hann fjõlmennt þing inn í Þrándheimi á Mærinu, ok á því þingi gørdu Þrændir konunginum tvá kosti, at hann skyldi blóta eptir vanða enna fyrri konunga ok fylla svá en fornu lög til árs ok friðar, elligar mundu þeir reka hann af ríkinu, ef hann vildi <eigi> í þessu vera svá fyrir þeim sem um ríki eða skatttõku. Konungr vildi þetta víst eigi gøra. Ástvinir konungs ok mikit fõlk genu í millum ok biðja bændr þyrmask við konung, ok tala þeir, hversu nyttsamligr þeira høfðingi var sínum þegnum ok mikill ráðsmaðr til laga ok síða. Í annan stað biðja þeir konung munnka þenna kurr ok taka einn lítinn hlut í samþykkt, svá at blótmenn kalli eigi at af hõnum verði niðrfall laganna. Fyrir huggøðis sakar ok ástar við vini sína, þá gørdi hann eptir bõen þeira ok blótaði. Fagrskinna, Ísl. Fornr. 29: 80. All translations to English from *Fagrskinna* are taken from Finlay 2004.*

half of the farmers for a good year and peace (*til árs ok friðar*). However, it is not mentioned here that the king departed from the traditional sacrificial ritual when he yielded to the will of the peasants. It is only pointed out that he took part in the sacrificial rituals. *Historia Norwegie* chapter 13 just indicate that King Hákon failed as a Christian king when he “fell into serious delusion that he underwent a wretched change and valued his temporal monarchy before the eternal kingdom; and in his concern to hold on to royal grandeur, sad to say, he turned apostate and submitted himself to the bondage of idolatry, serving gods instead of God (... *apostata factus, ydolorum seruiotuti subactus, diis et non Deo deseruiret*).”

The basic story about King Hákon góði could hardly be interpreted as a hagiographic account about a pious Christian king, risking his life, by refusing to perform his traditional ritual obligations. On the contrary, the king gives in to the wishes of the pagans and performs the sacrifice on their behalf. Nor is King Hákon drawn as a cautionary example of a royal apostate in the preserved sources. He is rather sympathetically portrayed, at least in Snorri's description of the event, that is, a leader who listens to his people. All this indicates that some vague memories of this story were passed on by oral tradition into later centuries when it was written down in, for instance, *Ágrip*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* (see 9.2).

Hákon góði's refusal to perform the rites in accordance with ancient customs in these Kings' sagas, could be interpreted as an intentional approach to breaking down the old religion. In a way he destroyed the ritual when refusing to eat the horse liver in a traditional way. The preserved traditions suggest, however, that the king failed with his intentions. Since the *Þrændir* were too strong and too many, he had to compromise. Thus, in this case, Hákon's approach could be considered as a strategical failure. The local chieftains and the assembly forced him to follow the old order and the law.

4.1.3 Other early Christian kings rejecting the old ritual order

Several other medieval sources indicate that the early Christian kings refused to play their part at the sacrificial feasts. Some of these descriptions may have been influenced by hagiography and clergy's “historical writings” about pious royal martyrs. In some cases, however, there are reasons to believe that these sources are built on historical records. The rulers' refusals to perform their cultic duties are also attested in other parts of Viking Age Scandinavia, outside Norway. Scholion 140 of Adam of Bremen's text mentions that the people of the Svear in the second half of the eleventh century, still expected that their king, called An-

under (Old Swedish *Anund*), would perform the great sacrifices on their behalf, perhaps at the sanctuary of Uppsala.⁴⁴

When not long ago the most Christian king of the Svear, Anunder, would not offer the demons the prescribed sacrifice of the people, he is said, on being deposed, to have departed 'from the presence of the council, rejoicing' that he had been 'accounted worthy to suffer reproach for the name of Jesus.'⁴⁵

On the one hand, parts of this passage seem to be built on a *topos* related to the hagiographic literature with Biblical references.⁴⁶ On the other hand, we cannot rule out that the author of the scholion had information about a Christian king who refused to perform customary rites when visiting the famous pagan sanctuary. The writer states, for instance, that this event took place "not long ago" (*nuper*), that is information that several other contemporary scholars could validate or reject. If this information is correct,⁴⁷ it is possible to interpret Anunder's refusal to sacrifice on behalf of the people as a deliberate strategy for disturbing traditional liturgical order of the feast, even if the scholion reflects a clear Christian tendency. Anunder's refusal is probably also indicated in Adam's chronical, scholion 84 (see ch. 8 below).

Another possible independent source for similar notions from the conversion period in Svetjud is the tradition about King Ingi Steinkelsson and Blótsveinn, preserved in the U-version of *Hervarar saga* (c. 1300). Ingi was king for a long period (c. 1080–1110) and according to the text he was very pious. He exterminated pagan sacrifices in Svetjud and commanded that all people should be Christians. As Anunder, Ingi also refused to perform the sacrifice on behalf of the people. The Svear thought that King Ingi had insulted them when he broke the old land-law and changed things that his father Steinkell had respected. He was therefore replaced

⁴⁴ This scholion appears in the oldest manuscript of Adam's text, namely A2, which usually is dated to about 1100 (Hultgård 1997: 9–15). It was thus made only 25 years after Adam wrote his text on contemporary conditions in Uppsala, where this scholion is inserted. Most likely the term *concilium* refers to the cultic assembly of Uppsala.

⁴⁵ *Nuper autem cum rex Sueonum christianissimus Anunder sacrificium gentis statutum nollet demonibus offerre, depulsus a regno dicitur a conspectu concilii gaudens abisse, quoniam dignus habebatur pro nomine Iesu contumeliam pati.* All translations to English from Adam are taken from Tschan 1959.

⁴⁶ See e.g., Acts 5:41.

⁴⁷ Hultgård (2022a: 603–604) has recently stated that this is a historical source, which can be relied upon. Scholars have suggested that Anunder mentioned by Adam could have been confused with Ingi Steinkelsson, cf. e.g., Tschan 1959: 208. Källström (2020 and 2023) has recently argued that Adam's information about Anunder as a king in Svetjud around 1060–1070 harmonizes with information about a possible king called Anund mentioned on runestones in the Lake Mälaren area.

by the king's brother-in-law, Blótsveinn, who performed the traditional horse sacrifice on the Svear's behalf. All Svear now abandoned Christianity, and re-introduced the pagan sacrifice. Blótsveinn was then king over the Svear for three winters.

Significant aspects of this tradition are preserved in the older text *Orkneyinga saga* (c. 1190), which tells of the Christian King Ingi of Sweden who fought against paganism in Svetjud. The farmers, however, chose another king, called Blótsveinn who retained pagan sacrifices.⁴⁸ Blótsveinn (Old Swedish *Blodhsven*) is also mentioned in Swedish royal lists and in "The Legend of St Eskil,"⁴⁹ which are independent of Icelandic traditions. The traditions about Blótsveinn will be analysed in detail and discussed from a critical point of view in chapter eight below. We may anyhow conclude that Ingi used a similar strategy as Hákon góði and Anunder, when he refused to perform the royal rites at the sacrificial feast.

Such *modus operandi* was most likely applied also by early Christian kings in Denmark. When Widukind stated that King Haraldr "ordered all people subject to him to reject idols" it also included, of course, the king's own royal rites. In Ruotger's (d. c. 969) *Vita Brunonis* chapter 40 it is explicitly stated that Haraldr, personally, rejected the idols.⁵⁰ Similar information is repeated in the somewhat uncertain scholion 20 appearing in one manuscript-tradition (C) of Adam of Bremen's text: "When king Haraldr beheld this wonder [that is, Poppo's ordeal], he renounced idolatry and with all his people turned to worship of the true god."⁵¹ This event probably took place in a situation when Haraldr did not control all Denmark, but only parts of Jylland.⁵² Hence, the text states that he did what was in his power to do, that is, to give up his own royal rites as part of the old cult and also recommend his subjects at that time to stop worshipping pagan gods with sacrifices.

It seems thus, according to these texts, as if the pagan king was considered among the heathens as a necessary ritual link to the gods during these sacrificial feasts.⁵³ The king was held as the prime representative of the community in the dealings with the gods. From the perspective of the society, he was only perceived as legiti-

48 See Ísl. Fornr. 34: 90. Snorri was acquainted with this tradition and mentioned Blót-Sveinn, see Ísl Fornr 28: 263.

49 See *Legenda sancti Eskilli*, SRS 2, 1: 391–399.

50 *Siquidem eodem tempore et rex eorum Haroldus cum magna sue multi tudine gentis regi regum Christo colla submittens vanitatem respuit idolorum.* *Vita Brunonis* ed. Ott 1951: 43.

51 [. . .] *quod videns rex Haraldus abiecta ydolatria cum toto populo ad colendum verum Deum se convertit*, [. . .] Trans. Tschan.

52 Gelting 2020: 1595.

53 Cf. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998; Dillmann 1997; Hultgård 1993; 2003; 2022a; Sundqvist 2002; 2013; 2016a; 2017c.

mate, as long as he performed these ritual duties.⁵⁴ He was thus both expected and obliged to take part in these ritual actions in order to ratify the ancient law, otherwise the sacrifice was regarded as damaged and failed. If such ritual mediator abandoned his duties in cultic contexts, it must have implied a killing blow for the old religion. Few could replace a traditionally inaugurated king in this context without disturbing the ritual order, and the cultic community. We cannot rule out, thus, that the refusal of the early Christian kings to take part in the traditional rites developed into a kind of deliberate method, or rather strategy, used when dismantling the old cult. Perhaps the early Christian kings also replaced these pagan rites with ceremonies in the Church, in order to promote the conversion. I will develop this hypothesis in chapter five below. Anyhow we must also emphasize that the pagan royal rites were gradually eradicated, which contributed essentially to the death of the old religion.

4.2 The erasure of local cult leadership and the pagan cultic organization

According to the sources, the newly converted rulers tried to win over the local chieftains and the magnates to their program of a new religion. In this way, the new royal power could also effectively eliminate the most important and driving actors in the old cult. The local chieftains watched over the religious traditions as well as organized and led the public cult at the sanctuaries in the settlement districts, since a well-trained, professional and independent priesthood similar to the Roman Catholic priest institution (*sacerdotes*) was lacking.⁵⁵ The religious institution that regulated religious discourse, practices, and community in Scandinavia was actually an integrated aspect of the general office of rulership and chieftain-

54 I completely agree with Sophie Bønding (2020: 213) when she argues that a “top-down perspective” produces a one-sided account of the power structures at play and that it must be supplemented with a “bottom-up perspective” in order to produce a more dynamic and adequate understanding of the sacral aspects of rulership (cf Bønding 2021b). She states “that the relationship between ruler and subjects can adequately be conceptualized in terms of a community centered in the ruler . . . that a ruler’s power was legitimized through collective processes of legitimation, rooted in shared background assumptions about rulership as inscribed in the order of society and cosmos. Thus, while power was exercised from the top down, it was ascribed from the bottom up through communal processes. Top-down strategies only worked because they reflected bottom-up, communal concerns.” It should be mentioned that the present writer is one of the targets of Bønding’s criticism. I must humbly admit that some of my previous formulations on or interpretations of rulership sometimes have been too one-sided.

55 Hultgård 1997: 19–20; Sundqvist 2016a: 163–198; 2020a and 2022c.

ship.⁵⁶ Many shrines were thus erected on the rulers' or local chieftains' farms and they were probably regarded as their own properties. The religious specialists who sometimes might have officiated at the chief sanctuaries such as Uppsala, Lejre and at Lade were probably subordinated by the rulers, and they officiated together with them at the great sacrificial festivals. In some more socially restricted contexts, the local chieftains (e.g., the *goðar*) themselves, and their family members watched over the religious tradition, and performed all cultic functions, including the handling of sacrificial rites. Sources indicate thus that the newly converted kings, and the missionaries working for them, seem to have concentrated their attention particularly on these chieftains. These sources report that in order to persuade them to give up their ancestral religion, the Christian rulers sent out missionary bishops and priests who preached the faith for them, but they also used several other actions or strategies, such as negotiations and assembly decisions, the giving of gifts, or even violence. According to some sources, the local chieftains who continued to organize and perform the old cult were to be killed by the ruler's retinue. Those chieftains who accepted Christianity contributed in their turn to the dismantling of the indigenous religion on a local level by refusing to perform their traditional roles there; instead of building, administrating or managing *hof*-sanctuaries with pagan cult images they erected churches on their farms. Many people who were dependent on them probably saw it as socially necessary to follow their leaders and were baptized. The support from these local actors was necessary for a successful replacement.⁵⁷ Some of the chieftains were also ordained as Christian priests. In what follows, I will first present the pagan system of local chieftains as cult leaders and religious specialists. Then I will discuss the strategies used by the early Christian kings when erasing local cult leadership and the pagan cultic organization.

56 Meulengracht Sørensen states in his English summary thus: "The cult activities seem to have been organized by those in power on different social levels, yeomen and chieftains. The king had no exceptional authority in terms of religion, since he had no exceptional power. He had a particularly important relationship to the gods, and a particular responsibility, but he had no indispensable function in the cult. The landowners were in charge of the cult, and the king took part in their local cult-feasts. The religious leadership was in the hands of the yeomen as long as the power belonged to them [. . .]" (Meulengracht Sørensen 1991b: 244; cf. Olsen 1966: 55–56). I agree with Meulengracht Sørensen that the written sources indicate that the secular and religious leadership was one and the same, however, the king and the jarl as well as the chieftains cared for the public cult and played important ritual roles during the sacrificial feasts. See 4.1 above and below.

57 Berend 2007: 38.

4.2.1 The pagan system of local chieftains as cult leaders and religious specialists

In *Hákonar saga góða* it seems as if Jarl Sigurðr on behalf of the king was expected to organize the sacrificial feasts in Trøndelag. When the king himself participated in these feasts in Trøndelag, he was expected to perform certain ritual actions in order to maintain old law. When reading Snorri's text, a crucial question arises: did the Scandinavians have trained priests or professional clergies who took care of the religious traditions and activities? Snorri's account on the sacrificial feasts in Trøndelag is silent regarding these matters. The only leaders mentioned there are the king, and the jarl. It is stated in the general description of sacrificial feasts that "the one who holding the banquet and who was the chief person (*hofðingi*) there he had to dedicate the toast and all ritual food (*signa fullit ok allan blótmatinn*)." Whether this *hofðingi* refers to the jarl at Lade or someone else is not quite clear.⁵⁸ In a following chapter, Jarl Sigurðr dedicated the toast to Óðinn and drank from the horn to the king (*signaði Óðni ok drakk af horninu til konungs*). Also, the king dedicated his horn, but made the sign of the cross over it (*gerði krossmark yfir*). In other sources, it seems as if the local chieftains organized the public cult at their farms, and also performed certain rites.

The discussion of cult leadership in Old Norse religion has been polarized; two lines of interpretation can be discerned, each represented by scholars from two different fields of study; namely, philology (onomastics) and the history of religions. Some historians of religions argued that the ancient Scandinavians lacked a professional priesthood: according to them, there were no priests whose duties consisted exclusively of serving the deities.⁵⁹ Instead, the political leader, the king or chieftain, made contact with the deities at the public sanctuaries on behalf of the people at the sacrificial feasts and in other rituals taking place at cult sites. Other scholars think that the Scandinavians did have specialized priests. This opinion is represented mainly by philologists,⁶⁰ especially specialists on onomastics. They have observed terms in the place-name material which could refer to religious specialists:

⁵⁸ Cf. Meylan 2022: 56–59.

⁵⁹ Ström 1985: 72; 1983: 71. Cf. Hultgård 1997: 19–20; Phillpotts 1912–1913; Dumézil 1973; and Davidson 1994 [1993]. The archaeologist Olaf Olsen (1966: 55) has a similar point of view; see also Kuhn 1978. For the early discussion on this topic, see Phillpotts (1912–1913: 264–265). More recently Bagge & Nordeide (2007: 124) states: "There is no evidence of a professional priestly class; most probably chieftains and prominent men or women acted as cultic leaders."

⁶⁰ Klaus von See (1964), for instance, argued that the Old Norse term *godi* refers to an exclusively priestly office.

for example, equivalents to Old Norse *goði*, **vífill*, and **lytir*.⁶¹ In general, they apply designations such as “priests,” “priesthood,” or “pagan priests” to ancient Scandinavia.

In a previous article, the present author discussed this terminology.⁶² On the basis of comparative religion, analytic definitions of the categories “priest” and “priesthood” were proposed and tested on the Scandinavian materials. It was argued that common features of priests or priesthood were vague or completely lacked in early Scandinavia. Because of these circumstances and in consideration of the information provided by the literary sources that the rulers and chieftains on different levels of society were the people who performed important cultic functions at the sanctuaries, it was argued that the concept “priest” could be misleading in treatments on Old Norse religion. Since the concept of “priest” (from Greek *presbúteros* “the older,” *présbus* “aged, elder”) was, moreover, formed and developed within a Christian tradition, it was suggested that it is better to use more neutral terms in Scandinavian contexts, in order to avoid serious misinterpretations.⁶³ In the present study, the description “cult leader” is used. It refers here to a person who was temporarily responsible for certain religious functions in society at different types of cult sites, both communal sanctuaries and those located at the ruler’s farm. The cult leader had other societal duties besides his/her religious tasks. He/She also functioned as a general political leader. The term “religious specialist” designates an exclusive religious office in the present overview, that is, it describes that a more intensified and permanent specialization has taken place and that the religious leader has become well-trained and more or less professional.⁶⁴ To get more information on these actors we must first turn to the sources relating to Icelandic conditions.

The local chieftains as cult leaders

During the Viking Age and Early Middle Ages there were no kings in Iceland. Instead, leadership functions appeared in an office related to local chieftains called *goðar* (pl). The *goði*’s authority or dignity was called *goðorð* “god-dignity,” “dignity

61 Cf. Hellberg 1986; Kousgråd Sørensen 1989; Andersson 1992a/b/c; Brink 1996c; Vikstrand 2001; Elmevik 2003.

62 Sundqvist 1998. Cf. Sundqvist 2003a; 2003b; 2007; 2016a and 2020a; 2022c.

63 Sundqvist 2003a, 2007; cf. Hewitt 1996: 16; Rüpke 1996: 241. This type of criticism has its limitation, since the concept of a “priest” could be used as an etic construction and an operational concept, completely defined by the analyst (cf. Sinding Jensen 2014: 7) and thus more or less freed from its ordinary emic use and associations in, for instance, Christian contexts.

64 Cf. Rüpke 1996; Turner 2010; Bell 1992: 130–141.

of a *goði*,” (cf. *mannaforráð* “power, rule over people,” *ríki* “might, power”).⁶⁵ A holder of such office was called *goðorðsmaðr*. The term *goði* (sg.) is derived from Old Norse (n. pl) *goð* “gods,” thus indicating an original cultic function of these leaders.⁶⁶ Sometimes their close relationship with a deity could be emphasized by their titles, for instance, Þórðr Freysgoði Özurason.⁶⁷ Cognomens also indicate that such chieftains could be related to a place or a family, for example Hallsteinn Þorskafjarðargoði and Snorri Hlíðarmannagoði.⁶⁸ There are also several instances in the Old Norse prose describing the close relationship between *goðar*, cultic actions and the *hof*-sanctuaries in Viking Age Iceland. They could therefore sometimes be described as *hofgoðar*, since these buildings were erected on their farms. The *hofgoðar* watched over the religious tradition, protected and maintained the places of worship, and organized and performed the sacrificial cult for the local district.

In the late and historically uncertain medieval text, *Eyrbyggja saga*, chapters three to twelve, the mighty chieftain Þórólfr Mostrarskegg appears with cultic assignments.⁶⁹ However, he is never referred to as *goði* in the sources, but as a great chieftain (*hofðingi mikill*) who had charge of a sanctuary dedicated to the god Þórr (*hann varðveitti . . . Þórshof*).⁷⁰ On the other hand, his descendants bore the title of *goði* and *hofgoði*, which indicates that he also had that dignity.⁷¹ Similar information about Þórólfr and his sons can be found in the brief, but probably

65 On *goðar*, see Strömbäck 1975: 38–67; Ebel 1998; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999; Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 7, 288–290; Dillmann 2006: 312–314.; Vésteinn Ólason 1998: 26–28; Byock 2001; Sundqvist 2003a; 2003b; 2007; 2016a; 2020a, and 2022c.

66 The word has equivalents in the Gothic *gudja* and Proto-Nordic *gudija*. While the Old Norse term is an *an*-stem, the Gothic and Proto-Nordic words are *jan*-stems. There is also an Old High German word *gotinc*, which is a glossed *tribunus* “chieftain, commander.” Cf. Wesche 1937: 6–8; de Vries 1956–1957: §278; Green 1998: 33–34; critically considered by Kuhn in 1978: 235–236 and Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 76. The concept of *goði*, should according to de Vries (1956–1957: §278) be understood “[ein Mann], der zu einem Gott gehört, oder in dessen Dienst steht.”

67 See *Landnámabók* chs S316, 325, 330, 398, H276, 286, 355, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 320–321, 328–329, 333, 396, *Heimskringla* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 328, 349, and *Kristni saga* Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 6, 27, 29. The family name *Freysgyðlingar* appears in *Landnámabók* chs S335 and H397, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 336 and 397. This information may well be based on a historical tradition.

68 See *Landnámabók* chs M25, S85 and S228, H194. The cognomens *aur-* and *eyrgoði* are enigmatic. Kuhn 1978: 236–238.

69 *Eyrbyggja saga* exists in a large number of manuscripts, but no definitive edition has yet appeared. In the present study I follow the text produced in *Íslenzk Fornrit*, i.e., the edition of Einar Ól. Sveinsson. The following paraphrase is based on the translation of Pálsson & Edwards. For a source-critical reflection on this text, see Sundqvist 2016a and 2022c.

70 See Ísl. Forn. 4: 6–22; *Íslendingabók* Ísl. Forn. 1: 10; *Landnámabók* chs S85 M25, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 124–126.

71 See Sundqvist 2016a: 176–180.

more reliable story about them in *Landnámabók*, which is older than *Eyrbyggja saga*. It is stated there that Þórolfr was “a great sacrificer and worshipped Þórr” (*var blótmaðr mikill ok trúði á Þór*). He fled to Iceland because of the oppression of King Haraldr. When he arrived in Iceland “he built a farm there and a big temple which he dedicated to Þórr.”⁷² It is also mentioned that his sons and grandsons were *goðar*. Although much information in these texts is historically unreliable, we can state that these sources indicate the existence of local chieftains (*goðar*), who acted as cult leaders in shrines erected on their own farms.

The Sagas of the Icelanders report that local chieftains designated *goðar* also performed other societal functions beside their religious assignments. They appeared as lawmen, but they also acted as general political leaders.⁷³ A *goði* exercised power in society and had authority over men or territory.⁷⁴ Individual men of sufficient means sometimes entered into a personal contact with a single *goði* “for protection and support for themselves and their households, a contract that either side could change if he wished.”⁷⁵ The *goði* was accompanied by *þingmenn*, who followed him to assemblies and gave him support there, or when having private feuds. At the same time the *goði* was supposed to represent the interests of their *þingmenn*, at local assemblies (*þing*) and at the annual general assembly of the whole country (Alþingi). One such judicial-religious leader was the Lawspeaker (*logsögumaðr*) Þorgeirr Þorkelsson Ljósvetningagoði (see 6.2 below).

A problem in the research has been whether the *goðar* included a new role in Iceland, or if this office had a similar structure in the old Scandinavian countries, Norway, Denmark and Sweden, before the colonization of the island. Equivalents to Old Norse *goði* are namely attested in runic inscriptions and place-names in these countries.⁷⁶ Some researchers argue that the office of *goðar* there reminded of the one we see in Iceland,⁷⁷ while others believe that the worldly elements of the office came to develop after emigration to the island.⁷⁸ In this discussion, the runic inscription on the Glavendrup Stone from Fyn has played an important role.⁷⁹ In a recent study, the present writer argued that the evidence of

72 . . . þar reisti hann bæ sinn ok gerði þar hof mikitt ok helgaði Þór. S85, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 124–125. Trans. Pálsson & Edwards.

73 Sundqvist 2016a: 56–57, 167–186.

74 Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 288–289.

75 Clunies Ross 2010: 9.

76 See overview in Sundqvist 2020a.

77 See e.g., Phillpotts 1912–1913; Olsen 1966.

78 See e.g., Maurer 1873; de Vries 1956–1957: §§274–281; and von See 1964.

79 DR 209. See Lerche Nielsen 1998.

Glavendrup runestone itself supports the conclusion that the *goðar* in Denmark, at least sometimes, resembled their Icelandic colleagues and thus could be interpreted as “cult leaders.”⁸⁰ The *goði* mentioned there, called Alli, carries the denomination *dróttinn* (m.); that is, “warlord” or “king.”⁸¹ Most likely he was a warlord, who also completed religious leadership functions.

Religious specialists

The pagan rulers, who appeared in the role of “cult leaders” as Jarl Sigurðr in Snorri’s text, may in certain cultic contexts, have needed the assistance of more specialized cult functionaries. In connection with the large seasonal sacrificial festivals, which were carried out, for example, at the chief sanctuary in Uppsala, the ruler himself could hardly have performed all kinds of ritual roles. It has been argued that “religious specialists” may have served and been protected by rulers at these sanctuaries in the same way as skalds, craftsmen or warriors seem to have been related to the leaders of society.⁸² This kind of reciprocal dependency between a superior and a servant is sometimes referred to as a patron-and-client relationship, which could be of benefit to both parties.⁸³

Adam of Bremen reports that the temple called Uppsala was considered among Svear as the most eminent in the cult of their gods (*in cultu deorum*).⁸⁴ He states that it is “customary also to solemnize in Uppsala, at nine-year intervals, a general feast of all provinces of Svetjud.”⁸⁵ If Adam’s statement is correct, many people gathered in Uppsala during this religious festival. Most likely the ruler of such feast needed assistance for individual rites, for example in the management of the ritual objects, the preparation of the sacrificial food and the organization of the feast. Others may have been occupied by divination rituals, such as casting lots, and some may have recited the mythical and poetic traditions in the banqueting hall.⁸⁶ These rites may have been very complex and performed in different places, making it impossible for one and the same person to perform all individual actions alone. Since the sacrificial festivals of certain chief cult places appear to have been extensive, it is thus highly likely that several specialized reli-

⁸⁰ See Sundqvist 2022c.

⁸¹ Jan de Vries (1977 [1961]: 84–85) stated that *dróttinn* (m.) is a derivation of the Old Norse noun *drótt* (f.) “Kriegsschar, Gefolge” and can be translated to the German “Gefolgsherr, Fürst.”

⁸² Vikstrand 2001: 396. Cf. Sundqvist 2016a.

⁸³ Cf. Brink 2003: 112. Cf. Jackson 2014: 36.

⁸⁴ Adam 1,60.

⁸⁵ *Solet quoque post novem annos communis omnium Sueoniae provinciarum sollempnitas in Ubsola celebrari.* Adam 4,27.

⁸⁶ Cf. Nygaard 2019.

gious experts attended such events. Another passage in Adam of Bremen's text about the sanctuary of Uppsala, seems to support such an assumption: "For all their gods there are appointed priests to offer sacrifices for the people."⁸⁷ Adam may have interpreted the conditions in Uppsala through an *interpretatio romana/christiana*. The Latin term *sacerdotes* leads the thoughts of the ancient Rome or the Roman Catholic Church's hierarchical and differentiated clergy.⁸⁸ It is most likely that he got the idea that each deity had an appointed priest from descriptions of the ancient Roman religion, where there was special priesthood for each god. This type of clergy cannot be attested in the Old Norse religion.⁸⁹ On the other hand, Adam may have heard of various types of cult leaders or religious specialists who officiated at the great cult feasts in Uppsala, for example, a *goði*, a *Freysgoði* (!), a **lytir*, a **vivil* or a *pulr*.

There is also a female candidate in Old Norse sources which could be related to the concept of religious specialists, namely the one called *vǫlva* (cf. *galdrakona*, *spákona*, *seiðkona*, *trollkona* and *gýgr*).⁹⁰ These females (*vǫlur* pl) appear mostly in the medieval prose texts. One *vǫlva* is, however, attested in Kormákr's *lausavísa* 48 (tenth century), and one appears in Hofgarda-Refr Gestsson's poem *Ferðavísur* stanza two (eleventh century).⁹¹ The word *vǫlva* is linked with the term *vǫlr* meaning "staff" referring to a ritual object.⁹² The most detailed description of a *vǫlva* appears in *Eiríks saga rauða*, where the female Þorbjörg appears as a ritual specialist, that is, a person who occupied a more exclusive and professional religious function.⁹³ The *vǫlur* ambulated often with an entourage from farm to farm, and according to some texts they were paid for their performances, above the bed and board they received.⁹⁴ In the Sagas, the *vǫlur* are wise and often engaged in divina-

⁸⁷ *Omnibus itaque diis suis attributos habent sacerdotes, qui sacrificia populi offerant.* Adam 4,27.

⁸⁸ Cf. Hultgård 1997: 19–20; 2022b: 112–113.

⁸⁹ In Rome, for instance, the clergy called the *flamines* was associated with Jupiter. Hultgård 2022b: 113, 117.

⁹⁰ Cf. Strömbäck 1935; Meulengracht Sørensen 1983; DuBois 1999; Raudvere 2003; Dillmann 2006; Price 2019. While working on the proofreading of the present book, I became aware of a newly published book *The Norse Sorceress: Mind and Materiality in the Viking World*, published by Sophie Bønding, Leszek Gardela and Peter Pertz. I never had time to incorporate this work into the present study, even though it was highly relevant to this.

⁹¹ Kormákr's *lausavísa* 48 appears in SkP 5: 1151, while Hofgarda-Refr's *Ferðavísur* st. 2 appears in SkP 3: 245.

⁹² On these staffs, see e.g., Tolley 2009 1: 536–544 and Gardela 2016. Eldar Heide (2006a/b) made an interesting interpretation, where he suggested that these staffs were in fact distaffs, however, they included a symbolic meaning.

⁹³ *Eiríks saga rauða* 4, Ísl. Fornr. 4: 206–209.

⁹⁴ See e.g., Price 2019: 72–75; Dillmann 2006: 367–369.

tions. They gain knowledge by performing a ceremony called *seiðr*, which could be of benefit to individuals or society.⁹⁵ The archaeological evidence indicates that they not only performed rites in a social periphery, but also played important roles in aristocratic milieus.⁹⁶ It should be mentioned that males also performed *seiðr* and similar divination rituals, such as the *seiðmenn*.⁹⁷

We can readily conclude that cult leaders existed in old Scandinavia, that is, local chieftains who besides their other social functions, also included religious tasks. They organized cults in sanctuaries erected at their own farms, where they also performed sacrifices and most likely they watched over the religious tradition. It is also possible that they sometimes appeared in the role of “religious specialists,” that is, a situation where their ritual specialization had been intensified and professionalized. These specialists may have appeared at the chief cult sites, and they may have acted in the protection of a king or a jarl. There was, however, no independent or professional priesthood beside the ruler and chieftain institutions. As will be shown in the following discussion, the early Christian kings, and the missionaries working for them, seem to have concentrated their efforts particularly on the local chieftains.

4.2.2 Using missionary priests and assembly decisions to the erasure of local cult leadership

In order to reach out to the local chieftains and pagan people, the native Christian kings used bishops, missionary priests and other types of church officials, who preached the faith to them, for instance, at the assembly sites of different social levels. The sources mention that these kings sometimes had delegates at these

95 For thorough investigations of *vǫlur* and *seiðr*, see Strömbäck 1935; Enright 1996; Dillmann 2006 and Price 2019.

96 Archaeological finds from the Late Iron Age in Sweden and Norway indicate that the *vǫlur* and *seiðr* appeared in aristocratic environments. In a rich double grave (a male and a female) from Klinta, on Öland, a powerful pole was found crowned with a small house. It has been interpreted as a *vǫlr*-staff (Price 2019: 136–139). In three chamber graves from Birka, objects have been detected that can be interpreted in a similar way (Price 2019: 139–141). As the Klinta-staff they also testify to the highest social level. It has been argued that also the wooden staff found in the rich ship grave of Oseberg, in Norway was a *vǫlr*. This tomb is dated to AD 800 and it is considered to belong to a queen and her servant. Myhre 1992a/b; Ingstad 1992. One of these females was probably a *vǫlva*. See Price 2019: 161; cf. Gardela 2016: 66–68.

97 See mainly Dillmann 2006: 143–167.

councils who worked for Christianity. It has been argued in the previous research, that our knowledge of what the Christian missionaries, bishops and priests decreed to the native people during the end of the Viking Age is limited, since there are no preserved ecclesiastical records of a legal nature from Scandinavia at that time. However, runologist Henrik Williams has recently shown that we have an ecclesiastic norm and creed preserved on runic memorial stones.⁹⁸ On these Viking Age runestones a thousand Christian symbols, such as crosses and pictorial Christian images appear, as well as many hundreds of prayers. In previous research, the faith revealed by the runic inscriptions have been considered to be of a rather primitive kind. Williams' investigation of the runic prayers shows, however, this conclusion to be wrong. By comparing their contents, Williams concludes that almost all of the established tenets of faith included in the two main creeds, the Apostles' and the Nicene, were known to runestone-time Christians in Scandinavia. For example, he finds evidence on the runestones for the belief in the one God, Christ and the Mother of God, as well as the belief in Christ's crucifixion, Christ's resurrection and ascension. Williams also finds attestations in the runic inscriptions for the belief in the Holy Spirit and the church, as well as the belief in baptism and the forgiveness of sins, resurrection and the afterlife (see 5.4 below). Hence, we may assume that these parts of the creed were preached by the early Christian kings and their clergies at assembly places in the Viking Age.

Rimbert mentions several missionaries by name who were active in Denmark and Sweden during the ninth century, for example Ansgar from the monastery of Corvey (and later Corbie), as well as Autbert and Witmar, both from Corbie.⁹⁹ The first mission journey to Svetjud, which was undertaken by Ansgar and Witmar, was initiated by both the king of the Svear and the Emperor Louis.¹⁰⁰ Adam of Bremen reports on several clergies active in Scandinavia during the Viking Age, such as the elder Oðinkar, carrying an Old Danish name.¹⁰¹ He was consecrated by Archbishop Adaldag for Sweden (*in Sueoniam ordinatum*) in the late tenth century, and carried on his mission among the heathen energetically.¹⁰² Adam also narrates about the successful episcopal mission in the provinces of Götaland in the early eleventh century, which was based on a royal initiative (see below). King Óláfr Haraldsson had with him "many bishops

⁹⁸ Williams 2016.

⁹⁹ See VA 7 and 10. See B. Nilsson 2010: 11–12.

¹⁰⁰ See VA 9–10.

¹⁰¹ Old Danish *Othinkar*, Runic Swedish *Öðinkärr*, Old Swedish *Odhenkarl*, Old Norse *Öðinkärr*. Peterson 2007: 171. Cf. Lind 1905–15: col. 806 and ed. Janzén 1947: 258.

¹⁰² Adam 2,26.

and priests from England . . . Sigfrid, Grimkil, Rudolf and Bernhard,¹⁰³ while King Knut of Denmark brought many bishops from England to his country, such as Bernhard, Gerbrand and Reginbert.¹⁰⁴ When these Christian kings and their clergies had preached the faith to the native chieftains, negotiated with them and finally convinced them to convert, they could also via these local leaders reach out with the Christian message to larger crowds. The official and collective conversion was then sometimes presented as a court decision at the *þing*-assemblies. This was most likely important, since it followed the traditional way of decision making and had thus great legitimacy in the Viking society. It is possible that such decisions often resulted in a peaceful conversion process.

Sources report that the missionary king, himself, sometimes took part in these negotiations at the assemblies. According to a historically uncertain tradition in *Hákonar saga góða* chapter 13, this method was first applied by King Hákon góði. When Hákon arrived at Frostaping in Trøndelag, he was met by a very large number of local chieftains and farmers:

And when the assembly had been inaugurated, then King Hákon spoke, begining first of all with this, that it was his proposal and entreaty to the farmers and husbandmen, rich and poor, together with all ordinary people, young and old, wealthy and not well off, women as well as men, that everyone should have themselves baptised and believe in one God, Christ son of Mary, and abandon all heathen worship and pagan gods, keeping holy every seventh day, abstaining from all work, also fasting every seventh day.¹⁰⁵

This speech made by King Hákon was not very successful, since the local chieftain Ásbjörn of Meðalhús stood up and spoke against the king.¹⁰⁶ He stated that the *Þrændir* could not abandon the beliefs of their forefathers. This attempt to dismantle the Old Norse religion was thus a failure, since talk was not enough for the pagans, they needed also actions in order to be convinced about the power of the new god. Hákon then refused to perform the royal rites at the seasonal sacrificial

103 *Habitque secum multos episcopos et presbyteros ab Anglia . . . Sigafrið, Grimkil, Rudolf et Bernhard.* Adam 2,57. Trans. Tschan. Cf. *Historia Norwegie* ch. 18,33.

104 *Quo tempore episcopos ab Anglia multos adduxit in Daniam. De quibus Bernardum posuit in Scotiam, Gerbrandum in Seland, Reginbertum in Fune.* Adam 2,55. See further B. Nilsson 2010: 14–15.

105 *En er þing var sett, þá talaði Hákon konungr, hóf þar fyrst, at þat væri boð hans ok bæn við bændr ok búþegna, ríka ok óríka, ok þar með við alla alþýðu, unga menn ok gamla, sælan ok ósælan, konur sem karla, at allir menn skyldu kristnask láta ok trúa á einn guð, Krist Máriuson, en hafna blótum öllum ok heiðnum goðum, halda heilagt inn sjauunda hvern dag við vinnum öllum, fasta ok inn sjauunda hvern dag.* Ísl. Fornr. 26: 169. Trans. Finley & Faulkes.

106 Snorri's information about Hákon' talk at the assembly of Frosta lacks support from older sources. Indeed, *Ágrip* ch. 5 reports that many men turned to Christianity in Hákon's days as a result of his popularity, while others although they did not become Christians, ceased the practice of pagan rites.

feast, but also this was a failure (for a critical discussion on this tradition, see 4.1 above).

The strategy of using Christian delegates at the assembly places was used successfully by King Óláfr Tryggvason. It seems as if this king turned his attention above all to chieftains and other influential men, when he attempted to convert the people in Iceland.¹⁰⁷ According to Ari inn fróði Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* chapter seven, King Óláfr sent to Iceland a priest called Þangbrandr, who preached Christianity to the people, and soon baptized three important chieftains. Ari reports further that these chieftains played a most crucial role as the king's delegates when the Icelanders in the year 999/1000 at Alþingi decided to switch from pagan to Christian law. Sources state that some of the most important pagan chieftains also converted there, or on their way home from Alþingi. They were leaders who previously had cared for public cult. It should be mentioned that King Óláfr put pressure on the Icelandic elite, "not least when he held hostage the sons of some of the country's most powerful chieftains in order to force their fathers and families to convert to the new religion."¹⁰⁸ Whether this conversion should be described as a peaceful process can thus be discussed. I will return to this event in chapters six and ten below, but at this point will just conclude that the conversion of Iceland is probably the best example of a native king using priests, delegates and assembly decisions as a strategy for dismantling the Norse religion.

According to other types of sources, the method of using missionary bishops seems to have been quite successful in other parts of Scandinavia. Adam of Bremen mentions that King Óláfr Eiríksson had a good relationship with the metropolitan Unwan of Hamburg-Bremen. Óláfr and Unwan established the see of Skara together with Thurgot as bishop around 1015. Adam states that Thurgot conducted his mission to the heathens energetically and by his efforts gained for Christ the two noble people of the Götar. It is also mentioned that Óláfr sent many gifts to Unwan for this work.¹⁰⁹ If we can rely on Adam, which I think we must do in this particular case, the king's method of using missionary bishops in order to dismantle old religion in Götaland was a success. Whether King Óláfr Eiríksson and Thurgot concentrated their efforts on chieftains and local cult leaders is not possible to see in this text. On the other hand, archaeological sources support the assumption that the chieftains and magnates converted early there. The custom of placing ex-

¹⁰⁷ Strömbäck (1975: 34) states thus: "In his mission Óláfr Tryggvason turned his attention above all to chieftains and other influential men. This is stressed over and over again in the sources, and it was precisely because of this policy that he tried to win over the Icelandic chieftains at any price."

¹⁰⁸ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1665; cf. Strömbäck 1975: 36.

¹⁰⁹ Adam 2,58.

pensive Christian grave monuments at churchyards, for instance, was, according to Cecilia Ljung, introduced in Västergötland during the early eleventh century and somewhat later in Östergötland. She emphasizes that there is a connection between these monuments, Christian cemeteries and the emergence of an early church landscape and an ecclesiastical organization. Some of her best examples come from Östergötland, for example Skänninge, Heda and Klosterstad. At these places there are certain recurring patterns. Many of the monuments are located at family graves and they are often situated adjacent to elite settlements and magnate farms.¹¹⁰ There is also evidence of early wooden churches close to them. Sometimes the early Christian grave monuments also testify to the presence of a professional clergy using Latin as liturgical language.¹¹¹ On a gable slab with an inscription found in Linköping Cathedral, dated to the early eleventh century, it is stated thus:

[Domine] memento · me[um] cum ueneris in [reg]num · tuum ·
Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.¹¹²

This inscription shows that Christian clergies operated in Götaland, most likely in aristocratic milieus. The conversion of elite groups and the establishment of the Church seems to be related to each other there at an early date, that is, the first half of the eleventh century. Perhaps the impact of early Christian kings was crucial for this development in the elite networks of this region. The strong power of the Christian elite, emanated also from large-scale landholdings there. This power is reflected in the early Christian grave monuments.¹¹³

A passage later in Adam of Bremen's text, indicates that the elite of the Svear—most likely including the people called Götar—declared their official conversion as a joint decision at an assembly. In connection to his discussion about the power balance between the king and the public assembly in Sweden, Adam mentions thus:

By common consent, however, they [the Svear] now declare that the God of the Christians is the most powerful of all. Other gods fail them, but He always stands by, a surest 'helper in due time in tribulation.'¹¹⁴

The Latin expression *communi sententia* may according to the textual context refer to a general assembly. In scholion 133 it is also added thus:

¹¹⁰ Ljung 2019: 179.

¹¹¹ Ljung 2019: 181.

¹¹² Quoted from Ljung 2019: 181.

¹¹³ Ljung 2019: 184.

¹¹⁴ *Deum autem christianorum iam communi sententia fortiolem clamant omnibus esse, alios deos sepe fallere, illum porro semper astare certissimum adiutorem in oportunitatibus.* Adam 4,22. Trans. Tschan.

Everything of private nature that the barbarians do is decided by taking lots; in public matters, however, they are even in the habit of seeking the responses of the demons, as can be learned from the *Gesta* of Saint Anskar.¹¹⁵

This statement refers to a passage in *Vita Anskarii* chapter 26, where divination rituals were used at the assembly in order to decide whether Christian mission should be accepted or not in Birka (see further below).

In Norway, Óláfr Haraldsson consorted with Bishop Grímkell when negotiating with the pagan chieftains at the assemblies. They declared together the first Christian law at the assembly of Moster c. 1022 and introduced “officially” Christianity in Norway there. This is laconically mentioned in the *Old Gulaping Law*,¹¹⁶ while Snorri in *Óláfs saga helga* chapter 58 states that “the Christian law he [St Óláfr] established with the guidance of Bishop Grímkell and other clerics and devoted all his mind to getting rid of heathendom and ancient practices that he thought injurious to Christianity.”¹¹⁷ Most likely it was the local chieftains and free farmers the king wanted to affect at the meeting of Moster in his attempts to dismantle pagan cult in Norway in a peaceful way. This event is possibly also indirectly mentioned in a contemporary runic inscription of the Kuli stone (N449) (line B) from Kuløya, near Smøla, on the border between Nordmøre and Trøndelag:

tualf-uintr-ha[f]þi:[k]ri[ti-n-t]umr:uiri[t]-inurki

Tólf vetr hafði kristindómr verit i Noregi

Twelve winters had Christianity been in Norway.¹¹⁸

The Kuli runic stone was situated beside an old bridge. By means of dendrochronological analysis the bridge has been dated to 1034. If the runestone was raised at the same time as the bridge was built, the inscription points back to an incident taking place c. 1022.¹¹⁹

Perhaps also King Haraldr used an assembly in Denmark when he “ordered all people subject to him to reject idols.”¹²⁰ This assumption can possibly also be

115 *Omnia quae aguntur inter barbaros, sortiendo faciunt in privatus rebus, in publicis autem causis etiam demonum responsa peti solent, sicut in Gestis sancti Ansgarii potest agnoscere.*

116 *Þat er nu þvi nest at ver skolom kirkium þeim ollom upphallda. oc kristnum dome er Olafur hinn helge oc Grimkell biscop sette a Monstrar þingi. oc þeim ollom er siðan varo gorvar. Den ældre Gulathing-Lov ch. 10. NGL 1: 7.*

117 *En kristinn rétt setti hann með umráði Grímkels byskups ok annarra kennimanna ok lagði á þat allan hug at taka af heiðni ok fornar venjur, þær er honum þótti kristnisþell í. Ísl. Fornr. 27: 73.*

118 Text and trans. Spurkland 2005: 109–110.

119 See A.-S. Gräslund 2001: 23–24; Brink 2008b: 625. Critically considered by Nordeide 2020: 1634.

120 See Widukind 3,65.

supported by the runestone of Jelling II (see above). It is also possible that Haraldr used missionary bishops at assemblies in order to erase the old cult in Denmark. In Adam of Bremen's scholion 20, it is mentioned that Poppo was promoted to episcopate after converting Haraldr to Christian faith. It is also stated there that the Danes were converted to the faith through Poppo. This information is somewhat uncertain, since it only appears in one of the younger manuscripts of Adam's text.¹²¹ In another version, Oddr reports in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* that Emperor Otto had Poppo as company when they met King Haraldr at an assembly (*á þinginu*).¹²² According to this saga, Poppo was already a bishop at that time, that is, when he made his ordeal in front of King Haraldr at the assembly: "Then the bishop walked with the iron, and it did not burn him."¹²³

A runestone with a possible similar background as the General Assembly (Alþingi) at Þingvellir 999/1000 and King Haraldr's official proclamation on the runestone of Jelling II is found on Frösö, Jämtland, in North-Western Sweden (c. 1050):

**austmoþ[᚛]kupfastarsun ¹ litra[ʃ] . . . [ᚱ]þinoaukiruabrupisaukh[onli]tkristnoeotalont
oþsiurnkírþibru þriunraísta uktþsainrunorþisar**

Austmaðr Guðfastar sun lét ræisa stæin þenna auk gærva brö þessa, auk han lét kristna Jamtaland. Ásþjörn gærði brö. Triönn ræist auk Stæinn rúnar þessar.

Austmaðr, the son of Guðfastr, caused this stone to be erected and this bridge to be built, and he caused Jämtland to become Christian. Ásþjörn made the bridge. Trjónn and Stæinn inscribed these runes.¹²⁴

It is most plausible that the statement "he caused Jämtland to become Christian" refers to a political event where the elite of the Jämtar were more or less forced to "officially" accept Christian faith under the direction of Austmaðr. Most likely it took place at the assembly called Old Norse *Jamtamót*. According to Per Vikstrand, Austmaðr may have acted as a delegate for a Christian royal power, located in Svetjud. His name *Austmaðr Guðfastar sun* is Old Swedish and the runic stone has a clear Swedish design, even if the rune carver Trjónn may have originated from Jämtland.¹²⁵ Vikstrand states that the runestone on Frösö gives

121 Schmeidler 1917: 83.

122 Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* manuscript ch. A15, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 173–174.

123 *Síðan gengr byskup með járnit, ok brann hann eigi . . .* ch. A15, Ísl Fornr. 25: 174. All translations from Oddr's saga are taken from T. M. Andersson, *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*. Cf. Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 27, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 259 and *Jómsvíkinga saga* ch. 7, Ísl. Fornr. 33: 36. 124 Text and trans. Williams 1996a: 46, 62. See also <https://www.raa.se/app/uploads/2014/11/03.Runstenen-Fr%C3%B6s%C3%B6n.pdf> 2023–05–29.

125 Williams 1996a: 53–54. Cf. Källström 2007: 213.

no support what so ever for the popular idea of Christianity being accepted by a majority decision of the *Jamtamot*—the common *ting* of the province. On the contrary, it points to force being involved in the process. Östman claims personal credit for his achievement, something which he could hardly have done if there had been a peaceful majority decision or if his social position in Jämtland had not been an extraordinary one.¹²⁶

There is clear evidence from Jämtland that the local chieftains during the Viking Age took care of the pagan cult in a similar way as the Icelandic *goðar*. There are eight possible chieftain residences in this province from this period, which have feasible cultic place-names, including the terms *vi*, *sal* and *hov*. The former term, Old Swedish *vi*, means “(pagan) sacred site,” while the latter terms *sal* and *hov* include polysemy and may in certain contexts refer to cult buildings, that is, places which were superintended by the chieftains.¹²⁷ At these eight residences with these place-names, early medieval churches were erected at six instances, indicating not only a continuity of cult-places, but also a continuity of power.¹²⁸ A possible hypothesis is that a royal delegate from Svetjud called Austmaðr, officially proclaimed in front of the pagan chieftains at Jamtamót that from now on Christian law must be accepted.¹²⁹ It is also likely he ordered the bridge to be built between the island of Frösö and the mainland. These important events were then documented in the runic stone by Austmaðr, maybe on behalf of the Svea-king. Hence the strategy to take down the pagan cult by means of an assembly-proclamation by a royal delegate, could possibly also be found in Jämtland. Most likely the pagan chieftains were indeed forced to convert by means of royal supremacy, but perhaps violence was avoided.¹³⁰

4.2.3 Lot-castings and conversions at assemblies: A *topos*?

In *Vita Anskarii* there are references to assemblies where lot-casting rituals were performed by the pagan kings and the chieftains of the Svear jointly when making decisions about accepting the Christian faith after meeting the missionaries. Chapter 26 relates how Ansgar, on his second journey to Birka, invited King Óláfr (Old Swedish *Olaf*, *Olof*) to dinner. He gave the king gifts so that he would accept the mission. But the king said that he would not dare to accept it, unless he first

126 Vikstrand 1996: 106.

127 Vikstrand 1993; 1996; Brink 1996a: 156–159.

128 Vikstrand 1996: 87–106.

129 Cf. Williams 1996a: 49.

130 According to another interpretation, there was no external political or royal power involved in the process. The chieftain and the people took a decision under the leadership of the law-speaker Austmaðr to Christianize themselves. See e.g., Brink 1990: 43; 1996a; and 2008b: 625. Critically considered by Williams 1996a: 48; Vikstrand 1996: 94–97; Holm 2000.

by lot asked the gods, and also the people.¹³¹ According to Rimbert's text it seems as if the lot-casting was to take place at the next assembly. The next chapter says that the king (*rex*) gathered his chieftains (*principes* pl) to discuss Ansgar's proposal. They decided to explore the gods' wishes by augury.¹³² They went out to the field, as they were accustomed to do, and threw lots.¹³³ The lot fell in such a way that they concluded it was God's wish to establish Christianity in their land:

When the day for the assembly which was held in the town of Birka drew near, in accordance with their national custom the king caused a proclamation to be made to the people by the voice of a herald, in order that they might be informed concerning the object of their mission.¹³⁴

It appears that it was the king together with his chieftains who initiated the casting of lots. As the result was proclaimed to the people at the assembly, presumably only the king and the nobles, and perhaps a diviner, had participated in the ritual. No Christians were involved in the ritual performance, according to the text.

Rimbert reports in chapter 30 that King Óláfr and the Svear plundered in Courland, Baltic area. When they came to a town called Apulia they met an army of 15,000 men. They tried to capture the city, but their attacks failed. On the ninth day, the army was exhausted, and some retainers wanted to abandon the enterprise:

As they were greatly disturbed and knew not what they should do, they resolved to enquire by casting lots whether their gods were willing to aid them either to obtain a victory or to get away from the place where they were. Having cast lots they failed to discover any god who was willing to aid them. And when this was announced to the people there arose much outcry and lamentation in their camp, and all their courage left them. . . . Accordingly, at their unanimous request, lots were cast and it was found that Christ was willing to help them.¹³⁵

131 "On this account I have not the power, nor do I dare, to approve the objects of your mission until I can consult our gods by the casting of lots and until I can enquire the will of the people in regard to this matter." *Quapropter et ego hanc legationem vestram confirmare nec possum nec audeo, priusquam sortibus deos nostros consulam et populi quoque super hoc voluntatem interrogem.* VA 26. All translations from *Vita Anskarii* are made by Robinson 1921.

132 "They determined that enquiry should be made by the casting of lots in order to discover what was the will of the gods." *Qui sortibus quaerendum statuerunt, quae super hoc deorum esset voluntas.* VA 27.

133 *Exeuntes igitur more ipsorum in campum, miserunt sortes; . . .* VA 27.

134 *Deinde cum dies placiti advenisset, quod in praedicto vico Byrca habitum est, sicut ipsorum est consuetudo, praeconis voce rex, quae esset eorum legatio, intimari fecit populo.* VA 27. Trans. Robinson 1921.

135 *Cum ergo, quid sibi esset agendum, nimium turbati omnimodis nescirent, quaerendum sortibus statuerunt, utrum dii eorum eis vellent auxiliari, ut vel victoriam caperent vel vivi inde evader-*

This passage also seems to show that the rituals were performed by the chieftains and cult leaders, as the results of divination were later announced in public at an assembly.

Rimbert thus mentions several occasions when augury rituals were performed in connection to public assemblies by the leaders of the society.¹³⁶ In these passages the rituals were related to the Christian mission and in all cases the lot turned out in favor of Christianity. This might make the reader suspicious—the text probably reflects a rhetorical strategy common in missionary literature.¹³⁷ The *Annals of Xanten* describe the outbreak of plague among the Vikings in 845 after they had attacked a monastery at Hamburg. They state that lots were cast to discover which god would provide protection and safety, but none were willing to do so. On the advice of a Christian captive, however, the Viking raiders resorted to divination to ascertain whether the Christian god was able to provide help. He was willing, and so their king Roric (sic, that is, Old Norse *Hárekr*, Old Danish *Harek*) undertook a fortnight's fast with his people and then returned the Christian captives.¹³⁸ This augury story is very similar to Rimbert's account of King Óláfr in Courland. According to Rimbert, after turning to Christianity at Apulia the Svear were advised to fast in Christ's honor. This may be nothing more than a literary *topos*.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, it is interesting that the acceptance of Christian faith in these sources often is related to assemblies where decisions related to conversion were made by the rulers and chieftains jointly.

4.2.4 Using the traditional gift-giving-system and build friendships

It seems as if also the old gift-giving-system was strategically used by the new Christian rulers also in conversion contexts.¹⁴⁰ Distributing gifts and holding

ent. Missis itaque sortibus, neminem deorum, qui eis subsidio esse vellet, repperire potuerunt. Quod cum denunciaretur in populo, ululatus et gemitus immensus exortus est in castris, omnisque virtus ab eis recessit. . . . Omnium itaque rogatu supplicii missa est sors, et inventum, quod Christus eis vellet auxiliari. VA 30. Trans. Robinson 1921.

¹³⁶ See VA 19.

¹³⁷ Hallencreutz 1986: 174; Wood 1987: 55–56; Brown 2013: 472.

¹³⁸ See *Annales Xantenses* in Wood 1987: 47.

¹³⁹ VA 30. Cf. Wood 1987: 56. A variation of this *topos* may occur in the *Vita Willibrordi*, which describes how the Christian hero had committed sacrilege against the god Fosite. The saint and his companions were saved from death after the Frisians had cast lots. See Wood 1987: 56.

¹⁴⁰ The classical study of gift-giving systems in archaic societies was written by Marcel Mauss (1997 [1924]). For ancient Europe and Scandinavia, see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999; Brown 2013: 29–31; Sundqvist 2016a: 359–363.

great banquets were important means for rulers to make loyal friends and tie subjects to themselves all over Viking Age Scandinavia, because of the strong obligation to reciprocate. A warrior who had received gifts from a warrior-lord was “honour bound” to reciprocate with loyalty and fighting prowess. These gifts sometimes included valuable exotic objects, which were rare and prestigious. Most likely this system was also used by missionary kings during the transition period. People belonging to the lower elite were socially and materially benefiting from following the example of the king when he converted. It is no coincidence that such gifts were given to local chieftains and important farmers, since they were key persons in the pagan cult system. Snorri reports in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, for instance, that King Óláfr Tryggvason spoke in Niðaróss with kind words to the pagan chieftain of Hálogaland, Eyvindr kinnrifa, that he should accept Christianity and he even offered him gifts and revenues (*Þá bauð konungr honum gjafar ok veizlur stórar*) in order to do that. But Eyvindr refused all this, and he was brutally killed by the king.¹⁴¹ Snorri probably took this tradition from Oddr’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, where the account appears in both manuscripts S (= Stockh. Perg. 4to nr. 18) and A (= AM 310 4to), but in different versions. In manuscript A, it is mentioned that the king tried to convert Eyvindr away from pagan sacrifices (*at snúa honum frá blótum*). He proclaimed God’s message to him, but Eyvindr refused to be converted. The king spoke kind words and then offered him great and worldly honour if he could leave his delusion, and even offered him authority over five *fylki*-provinces if he allowed himself to be Christianized (*ríki yfir fimm fylkjum, ef hann vildi kristnask*). But Eyvindr refused obstinately. After Eyvindr told of his sorcery King Óláfr had him killed.¹⁴²

Royal gifts appear in the context of conversion in another famous tradition attested in several Old Norse prose texts. *Kristni saga* narrates that the young and noble Kjartan Ólafsson came to Niðaróss, together with the most distinguished sons of Icelandic chieftains. These pagan youngsters took part in a swimming competition. Kjartan held a man under water for so long that he was on the point of drowning:

Then they headed for shore, and this man asked Kjartan whether he knew with whom he had competed at swimming. He said that he did not know. The man gave Kjartan a scarlet cloak, and said that he must know now with whom he had competed at swimming. Kjartan realised that this man was King Óláfr. He thanked him for the gift in a fitting manner. The heathens were displeased that Kjartan had accepted gifts from the king. . . . Kjartan was then baptised and was entertained at the king’s table while he was in white robes.¹⁴³

141 *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar, Heimskringla 1, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 323.*

142 Oddr’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. A47, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 256–257.

143 *Þá lögðusk þeir til lands, ok spurði þessi maðr Kjartan ef hann vissi við hvern hann hafði þreytt sundit. Hann kvazk þat eigi vita. Han gaf Kjartani skarlatsskikkju ok kvað hann þá vita*

It seems as if King Óláfr's gift was important for Kjartan's conversion. The oldest version of this episode appears in the A-text of Oddr Snorrason's saga. According to this version the pagan Icelanders said that the gods were angry, since Kjartan had accepted the gift from the Christian king, and thus they sent bad weather on them: "The weather was so bad that people could hardly remember anything like it. They mostly attributed to Kjartan's having accepted the cloak from the king and having aroused the anger of the gods."¹⁴⁴ Even if these traditions bear the imprint of the hagiographic genre, the task of giving royal gifts to tie important subjects to the Christian king and his faith, can be based on historical traditions.

According to *Óláfs saga helga*, King Óláfr Haraldsson distributed estates to men "he liked" when he settled down in Niðaróss: "He [Óláfr] marked out sites for dwellings and gave them to householders and merchants or to others as he thought fit and who wanted to set up houses."¹⁴⁵ It has been suggested by archaeologist Sten Tesch that a similar type of gift-giving also was applied by Christian royalties in Sigtuna, Sweden. Excavations have shown that Sigtuna was probably founded deliberately, with a predetermined town plan in the end of the tenth century. Most likely the founder was attached to the new Christian royal power with interests in both Götaland and Svealand, possibly King Eiríkr (inn sigrsæli) or his son Óláfr Eiríksson.¹⁴⁶ It was thus created as a powerful political stronghold for the early Christian royal power in the Lake Mälaren, but later it developed to an administrative node, a trade center and bishopric see.¹⁴⁷ A mint was set up there as early as about 995. Six or seven stone churches were later erected in Sigtuna, from which the process of Christianizing Uppland was launched.¹⁴⁸ They were built before 1150. Sigtuna became a point of support for the early Christian kingship, and from there alliances were made with local rulers in the Lake Mälaren

mundu við hvern hann hafði þreytt sundit. Kjartan varð viss at þessi maðr var Óláfr konungr. Hann þakkaði honum sæmiliga gjöfina. Heiðnir menn létu illa yfir því er Kjartan hafði gjafir þegit af konungi. . . . Kjartan var þá skírðr ok var í boði konungs meðan hann var í hvítaváðum. Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 27–28. Trans. Grønlie.

144 *Veðrattu gerir illa, svá at sjaldan munðu menn þvilka, ok kenndu þeir því mest um er Kjartan hafði þegit skikkjuna af konungi, ok guðin myndu reizk hafa fyrir þat. Ch. A42, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 242. Trans. T. M. Anderson. In Snorri's Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar chs 81–82 the king promises him his perfect friendship (Konungr heitr honum vináttu sinni fullkominni, . . .). Ísl. Fornr. 26: 328–330.*

145 *Hann markaði toptir til garða ok gaf bóndum ok kaupmönnum eða þeim qðrum, er honum sýndisk ok húsa vildu. Ísl. Fornr. 27: 70. This information appears also in the Separate Saga of St Óláfr (Den store saga om Olav den hellige), ed. Johnsen & Jón Helgason 1941: 100. Cf. Tesch 1990: 36–37; Zachrisson 1998: 127–129.*

146 Tesch 1990: 30; 2005: 405; Kjellström et al. 2005: 87.

147 Cf. Lindkvist 1989; Tesch, 1990: 23–37; Kjellström et al. 2005: 87–88.

148 Bonnier 1989.

region. Both the royal power and the Church had major interests in Sigtuna. There were 140 plots on both sides of the main street with a large plot in the center of the town. It has been interpreted as the king's yard.¹⁴⁹ Sten Tesch argued that the Christian king gave these plots or estates to his retainers, rich farmers and local chieftains in the Lake Mälaren region, that is, to those who supported Christianity.¹⁵⁰ Then they could bask in the glance of the king in Sigtuna, trade in luxurious products and gather for important meetings. The estates might thus be seen as some kind of beneficiary grant. Loyal individuals, who had converted to Christianity, could have been rewarded with these sites and maybe also with coins and other high-status objects. The inscriptions and iconographic symbols of the Sigtuna coins (c. 1000) present King Óláfr Eiríksson as a Christian king in Sigtuna (*Olaf rex an Situn*), but also as a king of the Svear (*Olaf rex Svevorum*).¹⁵¹

The magnets in Sigtuna were also invited to the king's banquets. Evidence of this system may be seen in a runic inscription on a bone discovered in the block called Trädgårdsmästaren in Sigtuna (Fig. 3 a–b, picture):

mari * selti * rif a fe mest * | aff | asa

On the back the inscription says:

kunukr: iar: matr: bestr: han: a f mest: han iar þekili

Marri(?) sældi rif. (Hann) ā fē mæst. . . . Konungr iar mandr(?) bæstr. Hann ā fē mæst. Hann iar þækkili(Gr).

(Mari (?) gave the rib. He is the richest . . . The king is the best among men. He is the richest [man]. He is full of favor.¹⁵²

On the one hand, this runic inscription follows a literary theme or trope, visible on many Viking Age runestones from the Mälaren area where chieftains and rulers are praised for their generosity.¹⁵³ In the inscription on the Våppeby stone (U 703), at Veckholm, for instance, the dead man is praised for being generous with food and eloquent (*mandr matar goðr ok malsrisinn*). Also, the famous phrase in the Eddic poem *Hávamál* stanza 39 refers to this trope: *Fannka ek mildan mann eða svá matar góðan . . .* “I never found a generous man, nor one so unstingy

¹⁴⁹ Kjällström et al. 2005: 88–90.

¹⁵⁰ Tesch 1990; 2005; Kjällström et al. 2005: 88–90.

¹⁵¹ Malmer 1996.

¹⁵² Sl 34 Sigtuna, Kv. Trädgårdsmästaren 9–10 <https://www.raa.se/app/uploads/2014/02/Sl-34-Sigtuna-Kv.-Tr%C3%A4dg%C3%A5rdsm%C3%A4staren-9-10.pdf> 2023–05–26 My translation based on Gustavson. Cf. Gustavson et al. 1992: 166.

¹⁵³ Gustavson et al. 1992: 166.



a)



b)

Fig. 3a and 3b: The runic inscription on a bone discovered in the block called Trädgårdsmästaren in Sigtuna. Images in their original state by Bengt A. Lundberg, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

with food, . . .” as well as the Old English poem *Beowulf*'s last stanza (3180) where the warrior prince's entourage stands mourning at the hero's burial mound and praises him as “most generous of men” (*manna mildust*).¹⁵⁴ On the other hand, the runic inscription on the bone may have been carved by coincidence when the magnate Mari took part in a banquet organized by the Christian king in Sig-

¹⁵⁴ See e.g., B. Gräslund 2022: 146.

tuna.¹⁵⁵ Since the bone was found in a cultural deposit dated to around 1200,¹⁵⁶ it is possible that the term *kunungr* refers to a medieval royalty, such as King Knútr Eiríksson (Old Swedish *Knut*) (d. 1195/96), who favored a monastery called Viby, near Sigtuna.¹⁵⁷ On the other hand, the runes and the content of the inscription indicate that it could have been made by an early Christian king around 1100 who held great banquets during the transition period for those whom he could attract to the new faith, or those who had already converted to Christianity.¹⁵⁸

The historian Anders Winroth argues that Christianity, could also in itself, be seen as an exotic gift to the subjects: “Christianity was a particularly desirable religion for a chieftain to share out among his followers for it was the prestigious religion of the most powerful people in Europe at the time: the English king and the Byzantine and Frankish emperors.”¹⁵⁹ In Winroth’s argument the concept godparenthood plays a crucial role. If a Christian king let his clergies baptize one of his subjects, and also offered himself to be godparent for him, this was considered as a gift which must be reciprocated by loyalty. The institution of godparenthood created bonds between the baptized and his godparent, which were as strong as a blood relationship. It definitely increased the social capital of the receiver when the king was the donator.¹⁶⁰ The high-ranked retainer and skald (*hirðskáld*) Sigvatr Þórðarson (c. 995–1045) praises King Óláfr Haraldsson in several contemporary poems for the gifts he has received from him, such as a gold wound sword mentioned in *Erfídrápa Óláfs helga* stanza 27.¹⁶¹ In *lausavísa* 19, composed after Óláfr’s death, he also praises the king for being the godfather for his daughter Tófa, and also for baptizing her:

Dróttinn, hjalp, þeims dóttur
 — dýrrs þinn vili — mína
 heim ór heiðnum dómi
 hóf ok nafn gaf Tófu.
 Helt und vatn inn vitri
 — varðk þeim feginn harða
 morni — mínu barni
 móðrakkr Haralds bróðir.

155 Cf. Tesch 2001: 28.

156 <https://www.raa.se/app/uploads/2014/02/Sl-34-Sigtuna-Kv.-Tr%C3%A4dg%C3%A5rdsrn%C3%A4staren-9-10.pdf> 2023–05–26.

157 Lindkvist 1996: 232.

158 Gustavson et al. (1992) dated the bone first to 1100.

159 Winroth 2012: 11.

160 Cf. Stark & Finke 2000: 118–119.

161 SkP 1: 696.

Lord, help him who lifted my daughter home out of heathendom and gave [her] the name Tófa; worthy is your will. The wise, mind-bold brother of Haraldr [= Óláfr] held my child under the water; I grew exceedingly glad about that morning.¹⁶²

King Óláfr did thus not only use precious gifts, such as estates, gold and weapons, to tie his subjects to him, but also spiritual donations, such as baptism, godfatherhood, and other Christian rituals. His purpose was to build up a spiritual network around himself.¹⁶³ The same skald felt that King Óláfr's son Magnús was not as generous as his father. In the poem *Bersöglisvísur* stanza 17, quoted in *Morkinskinna*,¹⁶⁴ he threatened King Magnús to transfer his allegiance to King Hǫrðaknútr of Denmark, who was more generous:

*Sighvats es hugr hizig
Hǫrðaknúts í garði,
míldr nema mjök vel skaldi
Magnús konungr fagni.
Fórk með feðrum þeira
— fekk ungum mér tunga
golls; vask enn með ǫllu
óskeggjaðr þá — beggja.*

Sigvatr's heart will be there in Hǫrðaknútr's hall unless generous King Magnús welcomes the skald very well. I followed the fathers of them both; then I was still altogether beardless; my tongue brought me gold as a youth.¹⁶⁵

This contemporary verse also indicates that Danish kings used a similar gift-system in order to tie Christian chieftains and skalds to them during the transition period.

As mentioned above, sources report that Óláfr Tryggvason also used royal gifts when converting influential people and gaining followers. These gifts included both spiritual donations, such as godparenthood, and precious gifts, such as exclusive weapons. According to Snorri, King Óláfr Tryggvason asked the famous skald Hallfrøðr if he wanted to receive Christianity and afterwards be one of his followers.¹⁶⁶ The skald answered the king: "There is a condition to this, my being baptized: if you, king, will yourself be my godfather (*ef þú, konungr, veitir mér sjálf*

162 Text and trans. R.D. Fulk, in SkP 1: 724.

163 Winroth 2012: 142.

164 *Morkinskinna* Ísl. Fornr. 23: 31–41.

165 Text and trans. Kari Ellen Gade, in SkP 2: 29 based on manuscripts AM 325 XI 3 4to and GKS 1005 fol. After quoting this stanza, *Morkinskinna* (F = GKS 1005 fol.) reports thus: *Þvílík kenningarorð váru í kvæðinu við konung at hann skyldi halda lög þau er faðir hans setti, ok hann sjálf hét mǫnnum þá er hann kom í land, . . . Morkinskinna 1, Ísl. Fornr. 23: 41–42.*

166 *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 83 in *Heimskringla*, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 330–331.

guðsifjar). I will have no else.” The king replied that he was willing to do that. Later the skald asked the king: “what will you give me, king, as a naming gift if I am to be called *vandræðaskáld* (‘Problem-poet’)?” The king gave him a sword, but it had no scabbard. The king said: “Now compose a verse about the sword and let there be ‘sword’ in every line.” Hallfrøðr spoke a *lausavísa* (11):

*Eitt es sverð, þats sverða,
sverðauðgan mik gerði
fyr svip-Njörðum sverða;
sverðótt mun nú verða.
Muna vansverðat verða,
— verðr emk þriggja sverða
jarðarmens — ef yrði
umbgerð at því sverði.*

There is one sword among swords that has made me sword-rich before brandishing-Nirðir <gods> of swords [WARRIORS]; there will be sword-plenty now. There would be no sword-problem if there were a sheath on that sword; I am worthy of a turf-strip [sheath (?)] for three swords.¹⁶⁷

The king then gave him a scabbard. Snorri adds: “From Hallfrøðr’s poems we shall take information and confirmation of what is told about King Óláfr Tryggvason.”¹⁶⁸ This tradition appears also in Oddr’s version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, but in much more condensed form.¹⁶⁹ As mentioned above, Óláfr Tryggvason himself had King Æpelred as godfather and sponsor at baptism. This information is confirmed by *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Other early Christian kings from Scandinavia had royalties as godfathers. Louis the Pious was godfather for Haraldr Klakk at his baptism in Mainz 826, for instance (see 3.1 above).

It is thus possible that the old custom of distributing gifts to the chieftains was used as an intentional method by the missionary kings when dismantling the old religion. People belonging to the lower elite were benefitting in different ways if they abandoned their ancestral religion. It is no coincidence that such gifts were given also to skalds, since they were also key-persons in the old cult system.¹⁷⁰ The skaldic recitations including ritual performances took place in the ceremonial halls of the warrior-elite during the Viking Age. The warlords and the

¹⁶⁷ Text and trans. Whaley in SkP 5: 890. The stanza is quoted in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* Ísl. Fornr. 26: 331 and *Hallfræðar saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 8: 161–162.

¹⁶⁸ *Af Hallfræðar kvæðum tókum vér vísendi ok sannendi, þat er þar er sagt frá Óláfi konungi Tryggvasyni*. Ísl. Fornr. 26: 330–332.

¹⁶⁹ Ch. S35, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 244; see also *Kristni saga* ch. 11, Ísl. Fornr. 15: 27–29.

¹⁷⁰ This is clearly indicated by the historian of religions, Simon Nygaard, in his dissertation *Poetry as Ritual in Pre-Christian Nordic Religion*. Nygaard argues there that the skalds performed in

skalds had a reciprocal relationship, which could be described as a patron-and-client-relationship. In such contexts the skalds could be classified as religious specialists. By donating valuable gifts to influential and popular skalds, the early Christian kings succeeded in converting them to Christianity and away from the pagan sacrificial banquets where they had previously practiced their art. In a social sense they became close friends with their leaders and included in their networks.

4.2.5 Using violence and threats in Norway

According to medieval prose texts, the most common strategy used by Christian rulers in Norway, such as King Óláfr Tryggvason, was the method of using violence and threats for wiping out the traditional religion.¹⁷¹ According to Oddr's *Óláfs saga* (MS A), for instance, King Óláfr Tryggvason tried to baptize Hróaldr of Moldafjörðr. Oddr describes Hróaldr as an ardent sacrificer and a wizard (*blótmaðr mikill . . . var mjök fjölkunnigr*) and narrates: "Hróaldr was captured, and the king preached the true faith to him, but he rejected God's name and affirmed his own gods. After that, as was fitting, the king ordered that he be killed, and he lost his life as he deserved."¹⁷² Also *Fagrskinna* reports that "King Óláfr [Tryggvason] had great chieftains who would rise against Christianity put to death."¹⁷³ In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, Snorri Sturluson describes the violent missions of King Óláfr in Trøndelag, where a pagan chieftain and cult leader, called Járn-Skeggi, was killed by the Christian ruler's retinues at Mære (c. 995).¹⁷⁴ There is a similar account told by Snorri about King Óláfr Haraldsson, and his violent mass conversion at Mære (c. 1020). In *Óláfs saga helga* chapter 109, he reports that King Óláfr was informed that the *Þrændir* in Inn-Trøndelag still performed heathen sacrifices. As the king heard this, he summoned his troops. When he arrived at Mære he let them kill the organizer of the feast, that is, the old chieftain Qlvir. He con-

different types of transformative rituals when reciting Old Norse *ljóðaháttr* poems, such as *Grímnismál*, *Hávamál*, *Eiríksmál*, *Hákonarmál*, and *Hrafnsmál*. Nygaard 2019.

171 See several examples in e.g., *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chs 53–81, *Heimskringla* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 302–329.

172 *Ok var Hróaldr tekinn høndum, ok boðaði konungr honum trú rétta, en hann neitaði Guðs nafni, en játaði guðum sínum. Ok eptir þat, sem makligt var, bauð konungr at drepa hann, ok týndi hann makliga lífu sínu.* Ch. A57, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 282. Trans. T. M. Andersson.

173 *Óláfr konungr lét drepa stóra høfðingja, er í móti vildu rísa kristninni.* Ísl. Fornr. 29: 145. Trans. Finlay. Cf. Meylan 2022: 130.

174 Ísl. Fornr. 26: 315–318. Cf. Oddr's saga, chs S46, A56, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 280. This mission will be discussed in 6.1 below.

verted all people to the right faith, placing priests there and erected churches.¹⁷⁵ When King Óláfr later arrived at Breiða in Guðbrandsdalar his men attacked the pagan army shooting their spears, while the farmers immediately turned in flight. He also let them destroy their cult image at the assembly, before he had all of them converted to Christianity (see ch. 1 above).

It has been argued that these accounts made by Oddr, Snorri and other medieval writers cannot be regarded as historical sources, since they follow certain literary topoi often found in hagiography and Christian literature. They describe in a triumphalist manner how the Norwegian kingdom was united under Christian power. Fictional elements are applied in order to display these Christian kings as heroic warlords. The description of the violent missionary kings in the Kings' Sagas and hagiographic texts tell us probably more “about the imagination of the authors of the narratives than about history.”¹⁷⁶ It should be noticed, however, that in the contemporary skaldic poems from the end of the tenth century and early eleventh century, the violent actions of these Christian rulers are also displayed. These poems do not include hagiographic stereotypes or clichés (see 6.1 below). We cannot exclude thus that King Óláfr Tryggvason, King Óláfr Haraldsson and some other early Christian rulers, sometimes used violence, power and coercive force when converting the local chieftains and great farmers in their countries.

Latin sources, which are older than the Old Norse prose texts, mention that King Óláfr Tryggvason and King Óláfr Haraldsson took a hard line against those who practiced paganism. These texts also encompass elements typical for the hagiographic genre, where the kings are described in a triumphalist manner as victors. Most likely, however, these traditions also include a core of historical truth, when describing the violence used by these kings when converting the Norwegians. Striking is a passage related to King Óláfr Tryggvason in *Historia Norwegie* (c. 1160–1175):

In the meantime Olav brought all those of his compatriots who lived along seaboard into union with the King of Kings, and if the bishop was unable to achieve this with his spiritual sword, the king, applying his earthly weapon, led captive into Christ's empire the noble and ignoble, the babe at the breast and the greybeard.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Ísl. Fornr. 27: 179–181. See further in 9.5 on this tradition.

¹⁷⁶ Winroth 2012: 151.

¹⁷⁷ *Interim Olauus Regi regum reconsilians omnes compatriotos suos in maritimis, et si quos ipse episcopus spiritali gladio nequiuit, rex adhibito materiali nobilem cum ignobili, lactentem cum homine sene Christi subiugauit imperio. Historia Norwegie* ch. 17.

That Óláfr Tryggvason used weapons for achieving his goals is hardly controversial among scholars. Early traditions mentioning King Óláfr Haraldsson's mission also include violence. Adam of Bremen, for instance, described King Óláfr Haraldsson as a Christian hero and warlord, only c. 50 years after the saint's death. Just like his predecessor in the royal office, this king also used weapons when dismantling pagan practices and thoughts:

They say that among other virtuous characteristics of his [King Óláfr's] was a great zeal for God, so that he routed out the magicians from the land. Although barbarism overflows with their number, the Norwegian land in particular was full of these monsters. For soothsayers and augurs and sorcerers and enchanters and other satellites of Antichrist where by their depictions and wonders they may hold unhappy souls up for mockery by demons. All these and others of their kind the most blessed king Olaf decreed must be pursued in order that, with their scandals removed, the Christian religion might take a firmer root in his kingdom.¹⁷⁸

Adam continues describing St Óláfr's violent fight against heathen people and sorcery. Since pagan chieftains were still powerful in Norway, according to Adam, he was even dethroned and driven out of the country c. 1028 by his enemies:

At length, they say, the most blessed King Olaf was driven from the throne of Norway by a rebellion of the nobles whose wives he had apprehended for sorcery . . . Now Olaf, placing all his trust in God, a second time resumed his war for the suppression of idolatry . . . The most Christian king, noted for firmness toward his enemies and justice toward his own people, believed that God had restored him to his kingdom in order that henceforth no one should be spared who either would persist in sorcery or would not become a Christian.¹⁷⁹

Some of these expressions have obviously the character of general hagiographic clichés, with no historical background,¹⁸⁰ such as the formulation that “the Norwegian land in particular was full of monsters.” It is also somewhat unclear what Adam means with terms such as *malefici* and *magi*. It has been suggested that they refer

178 *Dicunt eum inter cetera virtutum opera magnum zelum Dei huisse, ut maleficos de terra disperderet, quorum numero cum tota barbaries exundet, precipue vero Norvegia regio monstris talibus plena est. Nam et divini et augures et magi et incantatores ceterique satellites Anticristi habitant ibi, quorum prestigiis et miraculis infelices animae ludibrio demonibus habentur. Hos omnes et huiusmodi beatissimus rex Olaph persequi decrevit, ut sublatis scandalis firmiter coalesceret in regno suo christiana religio.* Adam 2,57. Trans. Tschan.

179 *Tandemque ferunt beatissimum regem Olaph seditione principum, quorum mulieres ipse propter maleficia sustulit, a regno depulsum Norvegiae. . . . Olaph vero totam spem suam in Deo ponens, ad comprimendos ydololatrias denuo bellum instaurat . . . Rex igitur christianissimus fortitudine in hostes, et iusticia in suos celebris ad hoc se credit in regnum a Deo restitutum, ut iam tunc nemini parcere debuisset, qui vel magus permanere vellet, aut christianus fieri nollet.* Adam 2,61. Trans. Tschan.

180 Cf. Bagge & Nordeide 2007: 137.

to Saami rituals.¹⁸¹ It is more likely that at least the expression “the nobles whose wives he had apprehended for sorcery” refers to female cult performers in the Old Norse religion, such as the *gyðjur* or *vǫlur*, that is, possible wives or relatives of chieftains (4.2.1 above and 10.1 below). To talk about “nobles” (*principes*) in the relatively egalitarian and non-hierarchical Saami-society seems odd. We should probably also understand the expression “his war for suppression of idolatry,” as referring to the saint’s struggle against those who organized and performed the Old Norse cult to the old pagan deities. Adam’s references above indicate that St Óláfr’s mission was sometimes violent against the pagan elite, especially when they organized the old cult feasts or performed traditional rituals (see *Passio et miracula beati Olavi* below).

Most likely Óláfr Tryggvasson’s Christian delegates and missionaries used violence and mockery in their confrontations with the Icelanders. Ari reports in his *Íslendingabók* chapter seven that a Christian chieftain had been convicted as a lesser outlaw at the General Assembly for blasphemy, while Þangbrandr killed two or three men who had libeled him (see 6.2). According to *Kristni saga* chapter four and *Þorvaldr þáttr víðforla* chapter six, Þorvaldr killed two men during the missions, because they had libeled him and the bishop with a verse (see 10.1).

The Christian rulers’ violence against chieftains was part of a strategy, which aimed at disassembling the Old Norse religion by means of wiping out the religious leadership in some regions, that is, those who organized the pagan sacrificial cult and watched over the religious tradition (see also 6.1 below). However, this was only one method among many other more peaceful plans used for persuading the pagan cult leaders to abandon their old religion, such as giving gifts, establish friendships or making decisions at assemblies after negotiations. These peaceful methods are attested, or at least indicated in many types of sources, including those which have a more contemporary character. In order to achieve a successful outcome, the Christian rulers used both words and deeds at times, a strategy that we can also see in the next section.

4.3 The material erasure of the old cult

It seems as if the rulers also employed strategies for the “material erasure” of the indigenous religion. Both Carsten Colpe and Joel Robbins argued that such methods, in general, are the most obvious and visual form of exterminating old religious tra-

¹⁸¹ See e.g., Svenberg et al. 1985 [1984]: 270.

ditions.¹⁸² Most likely this strategy was important also in Scandinavia. Sources prove that most acts of destruction were carefully focused. “They were driven by local needs to create a Christian identity.”¹⁸³ It seems as if the farmers sometimes accepted Christianity voluntarily and dismantled their own cult houses. Occasionally this was done in a ritualized and peaceful way. Sometimes violence was used by the early Christian rulers. Some scholars have also suggested that these kings desacralized burial monuments over their own pagan ancestors by means of performing performative rituals in order to have their dead forefathers “Christianized” and buried in consecrated ground.¹⁸⁴ Such actions can be interpreted as deliberate methods for demounting the ancestral traditions. However, there are some severe source critical aspects related to these interpretations (see below). But before discussing these methods applied by the rulers, the pagan cult buildings, cult images and other ritual paraphernalia will be discussed. We will thus return to *Hákonar saga góða* again.

4.3.1 Pagan cult buildings and cult images

Snorri's description of the pagan cult buildings in *Hákonar saga góða*, where the cultic feasts took place, was probably not taken from the thin air. When describing these buildings Snorri used the concept *hof* (n.) “house of worship, court, temple.”¹⁸⁵ Beside Old Norse texts this term *hof* (*hov*) also appears in place-names, which sometimes have theophoric first elements, such as *Torshov* (Old Norse *Þórshof*) close to Oslo, indicating a cult place.¹⁸⁶ According to Snorri, such buildings were erected at both Lade and Mære.¹⁸⁷ In these buildings there were images of the gods situated on the podiums (*stallar*). These ideas can today partly be attested by archaeology. Underneath the church of Mære, in Inn-Trøndelag, traits of an assumed cult building from the Viking Age were discovered (see Fig. 14).¹⁸⁸ Nineteen (or twenty-three) gold foil figures were found in relation to some post-holes, which

182 Colpe 1986 and Robbins 2014. See 1.3 above.

183 Brown 2013: xxxvii.

184 Performative rituals imply that an actual change takes place for the participants of the action. It is related to performative speech acts. A classic example of a performative speech act is when the judge states “I sentence you to life imprisonment.” The words mean an actual change for the receiver of this act. See e.g., Austin 1962; Bell 1997: 68–69; Rappaport 2000 [1999]: 124–126; Grimes 2006: 390–391; Aspren 2021.

185 See ONP and Heggstad et al. 2012: 280.

186 Sandnes & Stemshaug 2007: 225, 458. Cf. Vikstrand 2001: 253–272.

187 Sundqvist 2016a: 132–147.

188 Lidén 1969; 1996; 1999; Nordeide 2011. On Mære, see further 6.1.

were first considered to be the place of the high-seat.¹⁸⁹ These figures were probably regarded as sacred objects and undoubtedly indicative of rituals performed in the context of the political power of Mære. They were probably produced during the Merovingian period, but it has been argued that they were still in use during the Early Viking Age.¹⁹⁰ At this site other finds were also made which may be associated to ancient ceremonial feasting, such as pieces of pottery and glass, quantities of animal bones and some characteristic cooking stones (see further 6.1 below).

The most impressive example of a more exclusive cult building is found at the central place of Uppåkra in Skåne and located beside a large Iron Age hall.¹⁹¹ This cult house had first been built during the Roman Iron Age, and was rebuilt at the same spot in several phases up until the Viking Age. It was 13 meters long and probably very high. The size of the posts-holes indicates that. The peculiar finds, for instance, the many gold foil figures, a glass bowl and a gilded silver beaker, also indicate that rituals have taken place there, including drinking ceremonies. To some extent these finds resemble the finding context at Mære.

Beside these more exclusive cult houses, religious rituals were also performed in multifunctional and aristocratic halls erected at central places of different social levels during Late Iron Age, such as Uppsala (see below), Slöinge in Halland,¹⁹² and Borg in Lofoten.¹⁹³ It seems as if the hall buildings occupied a prominent position in the landscape. The sovereignty of them was reinforced by their magnificent size and architecture. Central locality, elevated position, size and architecture were probably associated with ideological aspects and a deliberate strategy of being observed and associated with the divine world. In such buildings, ceremonial banquets were celebrated, including ritual drinking and communion meals. Expensive glass fragments have for instance been discovered in connection to the elevated banqueting hall at *Helgö* (OSw. *Hælgþø*) “the holy (protected) island,”¹⁹⁴ in the Lake Mälaren.¹⁹⁵ Interestingly, there was a particular concentration of them at the place interpreted as the “high-seat,” that is, the place where 26 gold foil figures were discovered. The glass was clearly high-status and comprised fragments of cone beakers. It has been estimated that these glass frag-

189 See however Lidén 1999: 47. On the religious implications of the high-seat, see Birkeli 1932; Sundqvist 2014b; 2016a.

190 See e.g., Carlie 2004: 174–176; Watt 2007: 133.

191 See e.g., Larsson & Lenntorp 2004; Larsson 2011; Kaliff & Mattes 2017: 145–148; Zachrisson & Andrén 2020: 697–700; Roslund (ed.) 2021.

192 Lundqvist 1996; 1997; 2003. Zachrisson & Andrén 2020: 697–706.

193 Munch 2003a and 2003b.

194 See Vikstrand 2001, 239–252. Cf. Clunies Ross 2020.

195 See Herschend 1995; 1998. See also K. Lamm 1999. See also Vikstrand 2001; Zachrisson 2004a; 2004b; 2010.

ments belonged to at least 50 beakers and bowls of different types dating to the period between the Roman Iron Age and the Viking Age. It cannot be excluded that these beakers were used for ceremonial purposes, for instance in connection with ritual banquets.¹⁹⁶ Written sources indicate, moreover, that the high-seat (Old Norse *hásæti*, *öndvegí*) was the ideological and ritual center of the hall interior.¹⁹⁷

The cult of the three statues at the sanctuary of Uppsala

Adam of Bremen produces a vivid view of a temple including the statues of Óðinn, Þórr and Freyr at Uppsala, Sweden in his book four chapter 26:

That folk [the Svear] has a very famous temple called Uppsala, situated not far from the city of Sigtuna [and Birka]. In this temple, entirely decked out in gold, the people worship the statues of three gods, in such wise that the mightiest of them, Thor (Þórr), occupies a throne in the middle of the room intended for ceremonial banquets. Wodan (Óðinn) and Fricco (Freyr)¹⁹⁸ have places on either side. The significance of these gods is as follows: Thor, they say, presides over the air, which governs the thunder and lightning, the winds and rains, fair weather and crops. The other, Wodan—that is, the Furious—carries on war and imparts to man strength against his enemies. The third is Fricco, who bestows peace and pleasure on mortals. His likeness, too, they fashion with an immense phallus. But Wodan they chisel armed, as our people are wont to represent Mars. Thor with his sceptre apparently resembles Jove . . .¹⁹⁹

In examining Adam's account of the Uppsala sanctuary,²⁰⁰ one readily forms the impression that the cultic site was comprised of several ritual places and cultic elements. In addition to the temple building itself, a holy grove is mentioned,

¹⁹⁶ Holmqvist 1980: 56–65; Zachrisson 2004a; 2004b; 2010; Lund Hansen 2011.

¹⁹⁷ See e.g., Sundqvist 2014b and 2016a: 219–249.

¹⁹⁸ Most scholars agree that behind the name Fricco is Freyr (see e.g., Gunnell 2018: 425). The expected form of the name Freyr in a German-Latin text would be *Frō*, meaning “Lord.” Since Old High German *Frō* also was a name on the Christian god and Christ, Adam probably avoided this name. For a Christian clergy it would certainly have been offensive to call the pagan god *Frō*, especially since his cult included disgraceful and sexual aspects. See discussion in Wessén 1924: 177–187; Green 1965: 30–38; Hultgård 1997; Janson 2018: 19–20.

¹⁹⁹ *Nobilissimum illa gens templum habet, quod Ubsola dicitur, non longe positum ab Sictona civitate [vel Birka]. In hoc templo, quod totum ex auro paratum est, statuas trium deorum veneratur populus, ita ut potentissimus eorum Thor in medio solium habeat triclinio; hinc et inde locum possident Wodan et Fricco. Quorum significationes eiusmodi sunt: “Thor”, inquit, presidet in aere, qui tonitrus et fulmina, ventos ymbresque, serena et fruges gubernat. Alter Wodan; id est furor, bella gerit hominique ministrat virtutem contra inimicos. Tercius est Fricco, pacem voluptatemque largiens mortalibus. Cuius etiam simulacrum fungunt cum ingenti priapo. Wodanem vero sculpunt armatum, sicut nostri Martem solent; Thor autem cum sceptro Iovem simulare videtur. . . .* Text Schmeidler 1917. Trans. Tschan 2002 [1959], somewhat modified.

²⁰⁰ See Adam 4,26–27, including the scholia 138–141.

where the sacrificial objects were hung, as well as a specific holy tree and a spring.

Some decades ago, historians of religions argued that Adam's description of the sanctuary at Uppsala, and the cult activities carried out there, was reliable since it was contemporary with the events it described.²⁰¹ Indeed, Adam built his narrative on second-hand information, but his informants were eyewitnesses. One of them was the Danish King Sveinn Ástriðarson. He had lived among the Svear for a long period—perhaps around the 1030s and 1040s—and was probably most familiar with their customs, at least at that time. Recent research is more skeptical.²⁰² Scholars now argue that Adam's description of Uppsala is permeated with rhetorical adornments and missionary strategies. According to Anders Hultgård, the text is a result of a literary process in which the informants' reports have been reworked by rhetorical embellishment, ethnographic and polemic clichés such as euhemerism as well as subjectivity.²⁰³ There are, for instance, two classical narrative genres present in Adam's account, called *evidentia* and *ekphrasis* (*descriptio*). Both aimed at sharpening his description. Elements from Adam's own imagination were added to make the narrative vivid and clear, for instance in the description of the temple as entirely decked out in gold. In addition, Adam re-interpreted information from his informants by means of an *interpretatio romana*.²⁰⁴

Adam's description of the Uppsala sanctuary is without doubt a highly controversial resource in today's research environment.²⁰⁵ Many details in Adam's account

201 See e.g., de Vries 1956–1957: §290; Lid 1942: 86; Ström 1985: 79; Holtmark 1992: 17.

202 See e.g., Hallencreutz 1997; Hultgård 1997; Janson 1998; 2018; Göthberg et al., 2010; Sundqvist 2013 and 2016a.

203 Hultgård 1997 and 2022a.

204 In a recent investigation Hultgård (2022a: 601) continues his attempt “by reconsidering some of Adam's statement and by adding comparative aspects taken mainly from Roman, Greek and Iranian religion.” He concludes: “Besides polemical commonplaces and rhetorical elaborations, Adam's description of the sacrificial feast at Uppsala also conveys genuine information. The comparative perspective supports what Adam says on a sacred grove and a building for worship, the sending of sacrificial gifts from people and provinces, the prominence of the number ‘nine’ in the ritual, and the importance attributed to the ruler in the public sacrifices” (Hultgård 2022a: 616). On numeral nine in rituals, see also Sundqvist 2009a; 2010; 2022b; Hultgård 2017.

205 The most radical criticism of Adam's text has been formulated by the historian Henrik Janson 1998; but more moderate in 2018; cf. Tesch 2017 and Simek 2022 who both have a sound critical approach to Adam's text. The present author has discussed Janson's arguments elsewhere and will not repeat this discussion here. See Sundqvist 2002; 2013 and 2016a. See also Göthberg, Lovén & Dahlbäck who state: “Jansons omtolkning har svagheter. Viktigt är att han inte pekar på några paralleller till att Adam skulle ha anklagat konkurrerande kyrkliga organisationer för att bedriva människooffer. Vidare är det oförklarad varför kung Steinkell skulle ha haft en så svag

lack a historical background and must be interpreted according to the churchman's aims and intentions, the genre and other source critical aspects. There are however also essential elements of Adam's description of the Uppsala sanctuary, which may be supported by information found in independent sources, indicating that it cannot be completely dismissed. According to Adam of Bremen, the Svear honored the statues of the three gods in the "Uppsala temple." Thor (Þórr), occupied a throne in the middle of the banqueting room while Wodan (Óðinn) and Fricco (Freyr) had places on either side. Place-names such as *Odenslund(a)*, *Torslunda* and *Fröslunda* support a cult of these gods in the pre-Christian area of Lake Mälaren. There are at least seventeen place-names containing the equivalent, genitive form of the name Þórr (Tors-) there, sixteen with Freyr (Frös-) and twelve with Óðinn (Odens-).²⁰⁶ It is no coincidence that Adam mentions these particular gods, since they were the most worshipped ones in the surroundings of Uppsala.

It is reasonable to suggest that Adam used the Latin expressions *statua*, *idolum* and *simulacrum* to refer to some kind of cult images.²⁰⁷ In other contexts of his book these terms seem to denote pagan images made of wood, since ambitious missionaries used axes when smashing them, so that they were cut into pieces (see below). Uncertain Old Norse sources refer to pagan cult figures made of wood (*trémaðr*, *skurgoð*, *líkneski*) among the Svear.²⁰⁸ Even if the cult images in these accounts appear in a clear polemic conversion context, there are several reasons to assume that the ancient Scandinavians, like many other peoples, had such cult images of gods.²⁰⁹ The place-name *Nälsta* (attested (*in*) *nærthastaff* 1354) in Spånga parish, Uppland, has an appellative Old Swedish *staver* (Old Norse *stafr*; cf. Lithuanian *stābas*, and Latvian *stabs* "image of a god, idol") as second element and the name of the deity *Njård* as first element. This name means thus "the cult image of the deity Njård."²¹⁰ This meaning could be related to the meet-

ställning att han inte kunde låta Adalvard d.y. få Uppsala till biskopssäte efter att biskop Osmund lämnat landet." Göthberg, Lovén & Dahlbäck 2010: 34. Critical arguments against Janson's ideas are raised by e.g., B. Nilsson 2000; Gahrn 2000; Hultgård 2001b.

206 See Vikstrand 2001; Brink 2007. It has been argued that the god Ullr belonged to a more ancient stratum of deities in this area. See e.g., Th. Andersson 1992c: 256.

207 See e.g., Adam 2,58; 4,26–27. Hultgård (1997: 22) suggests that the concepts of *idolum* and *simulacrum* belonged to Adam's polemic and anti-pagan terminology.

208 According to the *Þáttr af Ögmundi dytt ok Gunnari helminga* a cultic image (*skurgoð*, *líkneski*) of Freyr is said to have been in a sanctuary among the Svear. Flateyjarbók 1: 337–339 and 579–580. Cf. *Ögmundar þáttr dytt*, Ísl. Fornr. 9: 109–115. and *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*, Ísl. Fornr. 33: 206. See also 4.5 below.

209 For a thorough account of cult images in pagan Scandinavia, see de Vries 1956–1957: §270; Sundqvist 2016a: 264–289.

210 Vikstrand 2001: 292–295.

ing the Arab Ibn Faḡlān had with the people called Rūs (usually interpreted as East Scandinavians, that is, the Svear) 922 at Volga:

They disembark as soon as their boats dock. Each carries bread, meat, onions, milk and alcohol to a large block of wood set in the ground. The piece of wood has a face on it, like the face of a man. It is surrounded by small figures placed in front of large blocks of wood set in the ground. He prostrates himself before the large figure . . .²¹¹

The existence of anthropomorphic cult images or symbols representing the gods is also well documented in the archaeological materials from the Lake Mälaren area. A small Viking Age bronze figurine discovered in Rällinge, Södermanland, for instance, has a phallic shape and might represent Freyr (Fig. 4). The phallic shape resembles Adam's description of Freyr in the "temple": "His likeness, too, they fashion with an immense phallus." At Lunda, also in Södermanland, three small images were discovered close to one of the largest Iron Age halls (house 52) in the Lake Mälaren area.²¹² These figurines are small, 2–3 cm high, and they vary in appearance, however, all three are phallic and their "gesture language" seems to be identical (Fig. 5 a–c). The downturned arms with palms placed on the stomach and the phallus exposed frontwards may be an expression of dignity and respect.²¹³ These figurines may primarily be related to Freyr although other deities are also possible.²¹⁴ Since we have the important information from Adam of Bremen that the image of Freyr in "the Uppsala temple" was phallic, it seems most plausible to interpret these figurines as representations of the deity Freyr. A small, gilded figurine from the late seventh or early eighth century has recently been found in a female burial situated at an aristocratic farm near Old Uppsala (Fig. 6). The figurine relates in posture, gesture and attributes to the phallic figurines found at Lunda. Archaeologist Torun Zachrisson states thus: "When comparing the Old Uppsala miniature with related figurines and gold foil figures, the posture and gesture of the former possibly represent aspects of the god of fertility, Freyr."²¹⁵

Adam says that Thor (Þórr) has as his attribute a sceptre and thus he resembles Jove.²¹⁶ Þórr's attribute was probably not a sceptre in the Mälaren region during the Viking Age. In this passage Adam has applied an *interpretatio romana*

²¹¹ Ibn Faḡlān ch. 77, ed. Montgomery 2014: 33–34; cf. Wikander 1978: 64–65.

²¹² G. Andersson et al. 2004; Skyllberg 2008; cf. Sundqvist 2016a.

²¹³ Watt 2007: 141; cf. Zachrisson 2019: 110–111.

²¹⁴ These phallic images have been interpreted as representations of the god Freyr by e.g., Hultgård 2003b; Zachrisson 2019. Andersson and Fritsch present alternative interpretations (G. Andersson et al. 2004: 136–139).

²¹⁵ Zachrisson 2019: 117.

²¹⁶ Adam 4,26.



Fig. 4: A small Viking Age bronze figurine discovered in Rällinge, Södermanland, Sweden. The god Freyr? Image in its original state by Ola Myrin, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

when comparing Þórr with Jove. The most important symbol of Þórr was his hammer. On the Altuna stone, eleventh century, Uppland, the mythical scene when Þórr with his hammer tries to catch the Miðgarðsormr are described (Fig. 7). On this image the deity's feet are pushed down through the bottom of the boat, in exactly the same manner as Snorri describes in *Gylfaginning* chapter 48: "Then Þórr got angry and summoned up his *ás*-strength, pushed down so hard that he forced both feet through the boat, . . ." ²¹⁷ There are plenty of Þórr's hammer symbols in Uppland. Some of them are also found in Old Uppsala, for instance a Viking

²¹⁷ *Gylfaginning* 48: *Þá varð Þórr reiðr ok færðisk í ásmegin, spyndi við svá fast at hann hljóp báðum fótum gognum skipit . . .* Trans. Faulkes. Cf. Meulengracht Sørensen 1986; Abram 2011: 31–50; Lindow 2021: 65–102.



Fig. 5a and 5b: At Lunda, Södermanland, three small images (2–3 cm high) were discovered close to one of the largest Iron Age halls (house 52) in the Lake Mälaren area. Images in their original state by Gabriel Hildebrandt, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/se/>.

Age Þórr's hammer.²¹⁸ Thus, we have good evidence that Þórr was worshipped with symbolic representations there.

Recent research discusses whether the term *templum* in Adam's text really refers to an exclusive religious building. Evidence indicates that Adam was referring to a multifunctional hall building when using this term in this context. This building was not only intended for religious rituals and symbols, but also for other purposes, such as a dining room at banquets, a room for political-judicial meetings and a gathering place for the retinues. The room inside the "temple," where the idols were placed, is called *triclinium* by Adam. It has both the meaning of "dining-room," and "room for ceremonial banquets."²¹⁹ It should also be noted that the Latin term used for designating the sacrificial rituals in the ceremonial

²¹⁸ Seiler & Magnell 2017: 189–191.

²¹⁹ Dillmann 1997: 65–69, 72. Cf. Hultgård 2022a: 606–607.



c)

Fig. 5c: Image in its original state by Gabriel Hildebrandt, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Fig. 6: A small, gilded figurine from the late seventh or early eighth century has recently been found in a female burial situated in Old Uppsala, Uppland, Sweden. Source: Beronius Jörpeland, L., Göthberg, H., Seiler, A. & Wikborg, J. 2017. (red.) at Upsalum – människor och landskapande. Utbyggnad av Ostkustbanan genom Gamla Uppsala. Arkeologerna, Statens historiska museer, Societas Archaeologica Upsaliensis och Upplandsmuseet. Rapport 2017:1_1. Stockholm. Photo oby Acta Konserveringscentrum AB, with friendly permission.



Fig. 7: On the Altuna stone, eleventh century, Uppland, the mythical scene when Þórr with his hammer tries to catch the Miðgarðsormr is described. Image in its original state by Gunnar Creutz, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>.

building, *libare*, refers to drinking ceremonies. It thus seems as if Adam’s “temple” resembles the banqueting halls described in the Old Norse texts.²²⁰

There is archaeological evidence for at least one banqueting hall in prehistoric Uppsala. On Södra Kungsgårdsplatån, just north of the church, post-holes and a stone-construction belonging to a Merovingian Period hall (50 x 12 m) were found.²²¹ This large hall, which was located on a raised artificial plateau, was probably embellished with spiral decorations, made of iron.²²² It seems further that these iron spirals were deposited in the post-holes of the house after the

²²⁰ In *Hauks þáttur hábrókar*, for instance, a hall (*høll*) located in Uppsala is mentioned. In this hall King Eiríkr Ónundarson made libation sacrifices to the image of the god called Lýtir. Ísl. Fornr. 33: 206. See also Flateyjarbók 1: 579–580.

²²¹ Nordahl 1996; A.-S.Gräslund 1997; Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015; Kaliff & Mattes 2017. Scholars have also argued that the last element in the name *Uppsala* refers to “banqueting halls” (pl.). E.g., Brink 1999: 38–39, 48–49, note 15. New excavations at Old Uppsala in the summer of 2011 indicate that the hall was 50 metres in length. Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015.

²²² Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015.

building was burned down in ritual forms c. 800. These decorations and the ritual deposits indicate that the house had a special function. Even the discovery that the interior of the house was whitewashed shows that it was special. These aspects indicate that this house was used in ceremonial or feasting contexts. Since the large hall building at Kungsgården is dated to the Merovingian Period and was abandoned in the Early Viking Age, it cannot be identical with the cult building (*templum*) mentioned by Adam. It nevertheless indicates that the monumentalization process of power in Uppsala took place in the Merovingian Period.²²³ The traits of the great hall and the recently discovered three ailed “workshop hall” on Norra Kungsgårdsplatån are located to the area of the old royal demesne, Kungsgården.²²⁴ These facts indicate that the ruling power had some kind of influ-



Fig. 8a: On this artificial plateau in Old Uppsala a large banqueting hall was erected between AD 600 and 800. Photo: Olof Sundqvist.

²²³ Ljungkvist 2013.

²²⁴ Rahmqvist 1986; 2000; Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015.



Fig. 8b: Not far from the royal demesne are also the famous royal grave mounds, dating back to the seventh century. Photo: Olof Sundqvist.

ence on these houses and also the activities which took place there.²²⁵ Recently, archaeologists have found additional parts of the manor area that extend into the current churchyard. Significant features there are stone-paved areas that seem related to both roads and courtyards. A gold pendant from the late sixth century was found between the stones of the pavement. Not far from the royal demesne are also the famous royal grave mounds, dating back to the seventh century.²²⁶ They were thus situated in an immediate context of the Merovingian Period halls at Uppsala and must thus be considered as an element in the sanctuary complex as well as the recently found Merovingian Period post monument (Fig. 8 a–b).

Adam of Bremen's text is a result of a literary process whereby the information from his informants has been reworked. The text has clearly been influenced by Christian polemics and rhetorical embellishments and therefore cannot be relied upon in every detail. Nevertheless, since some of his information about the sanctu-

²²⁵ It has been suggested that the Viking Age post holes under the church can possibly be linked to a visible terrace formation in the Christian cemetery. These traces could possibly correspond to a Viking Age hall building that lay across the church, from northwest to southeast. Andrén 2002: 326–328.

²²⁶ Ljungkvist 2005; 2006; 2008a. Cf. Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015. Traces of a fourth royal burial mound, called “Norrhögen”, has recently been discovered not far from the church. Oral information from John Ljungkvist, June, 2023.

ary of Uppsala harmonizes with independent sources, it should not be completely disregarded. It is quite plausible that the statues of the divine triad Óðinn, Þórr and Freyr were worshipped in the Late Iron Age shrine of Uppsala. Most likely similar ceremonial buildings with cult images existed at several sanctuaries in other places of ancient Scandinavia as well, since they seem to have been crucial elements of the Old Norse religion.

4.3.2 Using violence when dismantling pagan cult buildings and cult images

In Old Norse texts referring to the conversion period it is quite clear that violence and the destruction of sanctuaries, ceremonial buildings and ritual objects were symbolic and strategic actions made by Christian kings intended to exterminate the values and cultic activities of the pagans. According to contemporary and reliable sources, this strategy was applied by newly converted Norwegian kings and princes. There are several sources reporting that the Christian sons of King Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr destroyed sanctuaries in Norway c. 950–970 (see ch. 1). This is clearly expressed in a contemporary stanza, usually called *Hákonardrápa* stanza 1 (editorial name), made by the pagan skald Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, and only preserved in *Fagrskinna* manuscript B.²²⁷ Einarr praises Jarl Hákon for fighting a battle against the Christian kings, who had destroyed and desecrated old sanctuaries in Norway:

*Byggði lönd, en lunda
lék orð á því, forðum
Gamla kind, sús granda,
gunnborðs, véum þorði.
Nús afrendra jofra
Ullr geirvaðils þeira
sóknar hvatr at setri
settr hverjum gram betri.*

The kin of Gamli [= Eiríkssynir], who dared to destroy sanctuaries, once occupied the lands, and the talk of the trees of the battle-board [SHIELD > WARRIORS] was about that. Now the Ullr <god> of the spear-ford [SHIELD > WARRIOR = Hákon jarl], bold in battle, better than any ruler, is established upon the seat of those powerful princes.²²⁸

It is stated that these Christian kings “dared to destroy sanctuaries” (*þorði granda véum*), where the noun *vé* (sg.) is a more general term for shrine. The kenning *kind*

227 *Fagrskinna* B, Ísl. Fornr. 29: 112.

228 SkP 1: 279. Text and trans. Marold.

Gamla “the kin of Gamli” seems to denote the Eiríkssynir. Gamli died at the battle of Rastarkálfr 995. He was the oldest of Eiríkr’s sons. Since the term *kind* usually refers to “sons” and not to “brothers” it is possible that the expression could denote King Gormr (Old Danish *Gorm*) inn gamli of Denmark, who was maternal grandfather of the Eiríkssynir.²²⁹ This stanza thus produces reliable evidence that early Christian kings destroyed pagan cult places in Norway, when fighting the old order.

The Christian king Eiríkr and his sons are often blamed for violating or destroying pagan sanctuaries in Norway in Old Norse sources.²³⁰ In Egill’s *lausavísa* 21, which is quoted in *Egils saga* chapter 56, the skald cries out his disgust against King Eiríkr’s [and Queen Gunnhildr’s] crime when violating the law and the sacred ground at Gula assembly:

Svá skyldu goð gjalda
 — gram reki bōnd af lōndum —
 — reið sé rōgn ok Óðinn —
 rōn míns féar hōnum.
Folkmygi lát flæja
Freyr ok Njōrðr, af jōrðum;
leiðisk lofða stríði
landóss, þanns vé grandar.

May the deities drive the ruler from his lands, may the divine powers and Óðinn be angry; so should the gods repay him from the plunder of my property. Freyr and Njörðr, make the people-oppressor [UNJUST RULER = Eiríkr blóðøx] flee from his estates; may the land-god [= Þórr²³¹] hate the tormentor of warriors [UNJUST RULER = Eiríkr blóðøx], the one who damages sanctuaries.²³²

In this stanza the protagonist invokes the gods (using the old terms *goð*, *bōnd* and *rōgn*) and asks them to avenge the deeds of the king. King Eiríkr is here called “he who does injury to the sanctuaries [or sanctuary]” (*þanns vé grandar*). According to the *lausavísa*’s context in the saga, this expression probably refers to the violation of his retinues against the sacred bonds (*vēbōnd*) at the Gulaþing, but it could also refer to any evil deed the king had done against the pagan sanctuaries in Norway. The expression *granda vé* means plainly “to harm or injure a sanctuary [or sanctuaries].” The verb *granda* “to damage” should take a dative object that would entail that the following noun, *vé* “cult place, sanctuary,” should be *véi* (sin-

²²⁹ Marold in SkP 1: 280.

²³⁰ Fulk in SkP 1: 1003.

²³¹ For this interpretation, see Finnur Jónsson in *Egils saga* 1894; Sigurður Nordal in *Egils saga* Ísl. Fornr. 2: 163, note 1b; Dumézil 1973: 5.

²³² Clunies Ross in SkP 5: 222. Cf. Turville-Petre 1976: 22. Skj. B1: 46–47; A1: 53. For a recent investigation of the stanza, see also Taggart 2022.

gular) or *véum* (plural), both of which would spoil the meter.²³³ In any case, the verse and the prose together give strong indications of how pagan sacred space at both sanctuaries and *þing*-places were conceived and treated by King Eiríkr and his sons during the transition period. In *lausavísa* 22, after being sentenced as an outlaw in Norway, Egill describes the king as a *logbrigðir* “lawbreaker.”²³⁴ This designation may implicitly refer to one who desecrates holy ground.²³⁵ This theme is often repeated in Old Norse prose. In *Haralds saga gráfeldar* chapter two, for instance, Snorri states thus:

Gunnhildr's sons had accepted Christianity in England, as was related above. But when they came to power in Norway, they made no progress in converting people in the country to Christianity, but everywhere they could, they demolished temples and destroyed rituals and because of this became very unpopular.²³⁶

It seems as if Snorri disliked the behavior of these kings, as he pointed out that they became unpopular. This information appears also in older prose sources in slightly different versions. According to *Fagrskinna*, the Eiríkssynir were baptized in their youth in England. When they came to Norway, these princes all took the title of king and “they demolished temples and abolished sacrifice, but did not compel anyone to Christianity, and nothing is said about their observance of the faith other than that he who wished was Christian and he who wished was heathen.”²³⁷ The text reports thus that the Eiríkssynir were only nominal Christians and that their mission strategy of smashing sanctuaries had no deep impact on the pagan Norwegian farmers and must be considered as a failure.²³⁸ As noticed above, the violent actions against the sanctuaries were not always enough for

233 See Clunies Ross in SkP 5: 222–223. See also Taggart (2022) who prefers the singular form.

234 Clunies Ross in SkP 5: 224.

235 Bo Almqvist (1965: 93) states thus: “Man kan ej heller taga miste på att de bägge hätska stroferna [sts 21 and 22] *Svá skyldi goð gjalda och Logbrigðir hefr lagði* med sina invokationer till olika gudaväsen är av religiös-magisk natur.”

236 *Gunnhildarsynir tóku kristni á Englandi, sem fyrr var ritit. En er þeir kómu til forráða í Nóregi, þá fengu þeir ekki áleiðis komit at kristna menn í landi, en allt þar, er þeir kómu því við, þá brutu þeir niðr hof ok spilltu blótum, ok fengu af því mikla óvináttu.* Ísl. Fornr. 26: 203. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011]. Cf. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 1, 1958: 50–51.

237 . . . *þá brutu þeir niðr hof ok blótskap, en nauðguðu engan mann til kristni, ok ekki er sagt frá trúarhaldi þeira annat en sá var kristinn, er þat vildi, en heidinn, er þat vildi.* *Fagrskinna*, Ísl. Fornr. 29: 98. Trans. Finlay 2004.

238 See further chapter 1 above and also below. Meylan (2022: 92) states thus in his discursive investigation of these source passages. “It seems that they [the Eiríkssynir] focused exclusively on the destruction of temples and sacrifices, to the exclusion of all other missionary methods, an approach they admittedly pursued with some vigour.” Meylan suggests that the intention of the sons of Gunnhildr in these texts, was to deprive the power of the local chieftains, when destroy-

convincing the pagans that they must change religion. In the contemporary poem *Vellekla* stanzas 14–15, it is stated that Jarl Hákon restored the pagan sanctuaries and reestablished the traditional sacrificial cult, which had been destroyed by the Eiríkssynir.²³⁹ Sources indicate that it was important for him to show that the old cult places and the sacrificial feasts from now on must be protected as well as the old society (see 9.3 below). There are no doubts thus, that destructions of pagan sanctuaries really were part of the early Christian kings' strategies when dismantling the old religion, since both contemporary poems and other reliable texts indicate such actions. The sources also testify that pagan groups opposed these actions. According to Oddr's *Óláfs saga* (MS A) chapter 15, two Saxon jarls called Urguþriotr and Brimisskiarr made a mission in Viken. They smashed pagan sanctuaries and Christianized the pagan farmers, while Jarl Hákon was away. Oddr also states that the jarl had them repaired: "and the *jarl* had as many temples built as had been broken ([*o*]k *jarl*inn lét *jafnmörg hof reisa sem brotin hofðu verit*)" (see 9.3 below).²⁴⁰

The Kings' Sagas have plenty of references to how *hof*-sanctuaries in late tenth century Trøndelag were destroyed by King Óláfr Tryggvason when he embarked on his mission work after Jarl Hákon's death. It seems as if he followed the same program as the Christian Eiríkssynir by means of subduing local chieftains, destroying temples and disrupting the traditional political system. But opposite to the sons of Gunnhildr, he is often described as a wholehearted Christian in these texts.²⁴¹ He is depicted as a king who also used words in his mission, beside actions. According to Snorri Sturluson's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chapter 59, King Óláfr had Jarl Hákon's *hof*-sanctuary broken down (*lætr brjóta ofan hofit*) at Lade. He also had all the wealth taken away, and all the finery from the temple and off the idol of the god (*ór hofinu ok af goðinu*). He took off the temple door a great gold ring that Jarl Hákon had had made. After that King Óláfr had the temple burned (*lét . . . brenna*

ing their *hof*-buildings and to establish a more centralized kingdom, i.e., a kingship that resembled Haraldr hárfagri.

239 Historian of religions Nicolas Meylan (2022: 81) states strikingly in his study on Jarl Hákon: "Buildings, whether cathedrals, mosques, or stupas, in fact provide some of the most visible and enduring markers of a group's religious affiliation." It comes thus as no surprise that Jarl Hákon repaired the old pagan sanctuaries, when taking power over Norway after the Christian rulers' ravages.

240 Ch. A15, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 175. Trans. T. M. Andersson. This mission and destruction of temples of the Saxon *jaralar* is also mentioned in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* ch. 72; "they had broken *hof*-buildings and Christianized all people" (*þeir hófðu brotit hof en kristnat folk alt*) (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 1, 1958: 147).

241 Cf. Meylan 2022: 95.

hofit).²⁴² *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (a compilation from around 1300),²⁴³ mentions in more general terms that King Óláfr Tryggvason had the *hof*-buildings burnt down and the *hørg* sanctuaries broken and had churches erected instead. He also devastated, burned or destroyed the cult images.²⁴⁴ *Kristni saga* chapter six reports that the same king also sent Stefnir to Iceland in order to convert his compatriots. When he arrived there “he began to destroy temples and places of worship and to break up idols.”²⁴⁵ We cannot rule out that some of these medieval accounts are based on some historical records. Information in the medieval laws indicates that worshipping cult images representing pagan deities were strictly forbidden. By means of these symbolic destructions and performative actions, the missionary kings and their supporters probably hoped that the pagans would lose their old religion and instead turn to the Christian God.

Christian-Latin sources report that the Christians also smashed idols and sanctuaries during St Óláfr Haraldsson's reign. These narratives include a strong Christian tendency, which is common in hagiographic literature. *Passio et miracula beati Olavi* (c. 1160) is introduced as thus:

242 Snorri also mentioned that King Óláfr had this great gold ring sent to Queen Sigríðr of Svetjud, as an expensive gift. It was discovered that the ring was not made out of gold and the queen felt that she had been fooled. It has been argued that this ring story was a late addition to the tradition, since it does not appear in Oddr's version of Óláfr's mission (see e.g., Kabell 1975: 35). The tradition Snorri used, however, appears in a slightly different version also in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* ch. 142, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 1, 1958: 328: *Ólafr . . . let briota ofan hofit ok taka brottu fe alt þat er þar var ok alt skraut af goðonum. Han tok gull hring mikinn or hofs hurðinni er Hakon j(arl) hafði gera latit.*

243 *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* is preserved in a number of manuscripts which can be divided into two groups; an earlier redaction preserved in the manuscripts AM 53 fol., AM 54 fol., AM 61 fol., Bergsbók (Stock. Perg. fol. no. 1) and Húsafellsbók. The second group is a later redaction preserved in AM 62 fol. and Flateyjarbók (GKS 1005 fol.). The compiler of this saga took many passages from Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*. See Ólafur Halldórsson 2001.

244 *þa let Olafur konungur briota ok breNa hof ok hørga. en ræisa i staðinn kirkjur . . . let han ok eyða ollum skurðgodvm. breNa þau e(ðr) briota. Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 142, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 1, 1958: 308. Cf. *Predican Óláfs konung vid bændr*, Flateyjarbók 1: 285. Similar information is reported several times in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 142, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 1, 1958: 374: *ek [King Óláfr] hefir gvðin imarga staði suiuirðt . . . brotit likneskiur þeira. brent hof ok hørga ok alla uega eyðt þeira ætrunaði.* One late tradition mentions that King Óláfr stated that he and his men would destroy the images of the gods (and among them an image of Freyr) if the Þrændir did not forbid it (*ek mun briota ok minir menn skurgodit þo at þer bannit . . .*) Flateyjarbók 1: 401.

245 . . . *þá tók hann at meida hof ok hørga en brjóta skurðguð.* Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 16. Trans. Grønlie. See 5.3.1 below.

When the illustrious King Óláfr ruled in Norway, a vast country located towards the north and having Denmark to the south, there entered into that land the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace and bring glad tidings of good things. The peoples of that country, previously subject to the ungodly rites of idolatry and deluded by superstitious error, now heard of the worship and faith of the true God—heard indeed, but many scorned to accept. . . . He [Óláfr] accomplished much in a short time and won a countless multitude for the Lord. People flocked eagerly to baptism and the number of believers grew day by day. Idols were smashed, sacred groves felled, temples overthrown. Priests were ordained and churches built. The people made offerings with devotion and zeal. The worshippers of idols were put to shame and those who put their trust in graven images were confounded. In many parts of that land the host of unbelievers were silenced, not daring to murmur, and all iniquity stopped her mouth.²⁴⁶

It was not only the pagan images and ceremonial buildings which were destroyed, but also other cultic structures and objects appearing at the sanctuaries were torn down. Old Norse sources also report that King Óláfr Haraldsson abolished the worship of the old gods, sanctuaries, altars, including rocks, woods, water, and trees when doing mission work in Norway.²⁴⁷

Destroying the temple of idols

The elimination of sanctuaries and pagan cult images was crucial when Christian power dismantled the old cult. It seems as if the very first Christian kings and their clergies in Sweden had such intentions, but failed to realize them. Adam of Bremen describes how ambitious King Óláfr Eiríksson was after his conversion:

²⁴⁶ *Regnante illustrissimo rege Olavo apud Norwegiam, quæ est terra prægrandis, versus aquilonem locata, a meridie Daciam habens, eandem ingressi sunt terram pedes euangelizantium pacem, euangelizantium bona. Hactenus sacrilegis idolorum mancipatæ ritibus et superstitiosis erroribus delusæ nationes illæ veri dei fidem et cultum audierant quidem, sed multi suscipere conteroperant . . . Plurimum profecit in breui, et innumerabilem domino multitudinem adquisiuit. Confluebant ad baptismum certatim populi, et numerus credentium augebatur indes. Effringebantur statue, succidebantur luci, euertebantur delubra. Ordinabantur sacerdotes, et fabricabantur ecclesie. Offerebant donaria populi cum deuotione et alacritate. Erubescabant ydolorum cultores, confundebantur qui confidebant in scultili, et in multis illius regionis partibus, fidelium ‘depressa multitudine, mutire non audiens, omnis iniquitas opilabat os suum.* Ed. Storm 1880: 127 and 129. Trans. Kunin 2001.

²⁴⁷ See *Separate Saga of St Óláfr (Den store saga om Olav den hellige)*, ed. Johnsen & Jón Helgason (1941: 694): *Olafur konungr cristnadi þetta ríki allt aull blot braut hann nidr ok aull god. Sem þor Engilsmanna god ok Odin Saxa god ok Skiold Skanunga god ok Frey Suia god ok godom Dana god ok morg onnur blotskapar skrimsl bædi hamra ok horga skoga votn ok tre ok oll onnr blot bædi meiri ok minni.* See also parallel text in *Separate Saga of St Óláfr (Den store saga om Olav den hellige)*, ed. Johnsen & Jón Helgason 1941: 711. Cf. *Viðbætur við Óláfs sögu hins Helga* ch. 11, *Flateyjarbók* 3: 246.

The other Óláfr in Sweden is said to have been filled with like devotion to religion. In his desire to convert the people subject to him to Christianity he made great endeavor to destroy the temple of idols situated at Uppsala in Central Sweden.²⁴⁸

However, he was not very successful with these endeavors. The pagans entered into an agreement with the king. If he himself wished to be Christian he could take under his jurisdiction the part of Sweden he liked best. It was also said that he should not force any of the people to give up the worship of their gods unless they of their own accord wished to convert to Christ.

Adam of Bremen also mentions that Bishop Adalvard the Younger came to Sweden in the 1060s, avid to preach the Gospel and in a short time led the people in Sigtuna and Uppland to the Christian faith. He and Bishop Eginone agreed that they should go to the pagan temple of Uppsala and offer Christ some fruit of their labors there, for they would willingly undergo every kind of torture for the sake of destroying that house which was the seat of pagan superstition. For if it was torn down, or preferably burned, the conversion of all the people might follow.²⁴⁹ These plans were never put into action, however. When the pious King Steinkell heard about them, he kept the bishops from any such undertaking, and declared that they would immediately be punished with death and he would be driven from the kingdom. Probably everyone in Sweden would also relapse into paganism. This text indicates thus, that the Christian king acted opposite to the mentioned strategy. It is possible that Adam's intention with this passage was to glorify the brave bishops (see 8.4).

Adam also mentioned the violation of the pagan images elsewhere in Sweden. In one passage he says that an "idol" (*idolum*) of Thor (Þórr) was placed at the assembly place of the Svear.²⁵⁰ Wolfred, from England, smashed it with an axe, but was killed by the pagans for that deed. This cultic image was most likely made of wood, since Wolfred used an axe when destroying it. In connection to this information, Adam states thus: "I wanted to mention this, which I have

248 *Simili religionis amore alter Olaph in Suedia dicitur floruisse. Is subditos sibi populos ad christianitatem convertere volens magno laboravit studio, ut templum ydolorum, quod in medio Sueviae situm est, Ubsola destrueretur.* Adam 2,58. Trans. Tschan.

249 He [Bishop Adalvard] also secretly agreed with Eginone, the most saintly bishop of Skåne, that they should go together to the pagan temple called Uppsala to see if they could perhaps offer Christ some fruit of their labors there, for they would willingly undergo every kind of torture for the sake of destroying that house which was the seat of barbarous superstition. *Conspiravit etiam cum Sconiensis episcopo, sanctissimo Eginone, ut pariter adirent illud templum paganorum, quod Ubsola dicitur, si forte aliquem Christo laboris sui fructum ibi possent offerre, omnia tormentorum genera libenter suscepturi, ut destrueretur illa domus, quae caput est superstitionis barbaricae.* Adam 4,30. Trans. Tschan.

250 . . . *ydolum gentis nomine Thor stans in concilio paganorum.* Adam 2,62. Trans. Tschan.

learned from a reliable informant”. He also mentioned that a well-known “idol of Fricco (Freyr)” (*Fricconis simulacrum*) was located in Västergötland, not far from the church of Skara. When Bishop Eginó visited this place, he smashed this image into pieces.²⁵¹ It seems as if this statue too was made out of wood, since it was cut “into pieces” (*in frusta*). Most likely King Steinkell collaborated with Eginó in some way. Adam states namely that the bishops Adalvard and Eginó travelled around in the communities of the Götár and smashed pagan “idols” and thereafter won many thousands of pagans to Christianity.²⁵² King Steinkell probably ruled over a “Sweden” which even included the society of the Götár, because the cutting down of images of gods would not have been possible if the missionaries had not had the king’s authority as support.²⁵³ Christianity was probably also more established among elite groups in Götaland during the 1060s than in Svetjud.

4.3.3 Charlemagne and the cosmic pillar called Irminsúl

As in many other cultures,²⁵⁴ there were representations of cosmic pillars among Germanic tribes and the ancient Scandinavians, including the notion often referred to as the “World Tree.”²⁵⁵ Anders Andrén describes it strikingly as “the tree between idea and reality,” since it had both mythical and cultic expressions. He states thus: “A distinct figure of thought in Old Norse cosmology is a world tree standing in the middle of the world, with a huge crown reaching up to heaven and with roots going into different parts of the world.”²⁵⁶ In this context, it is interesting to note that missionaries in Continental Europe cut down trees and cosmic posts, which were objects of pagan worship.²⁵⁷ These objects may very well have been expressions or symbols of the pagan world view and cosmos. The act of cutting

251 . . . [Eginó] Ibi [sc. In Scaramensi] etiam opinatissimum Fricconis simulacrum in frusta concidit. Adam 4,9.

252 . . . ydola confringentes et multa paganorum milia deinceps lucrantes ad christianitatem. Adam 4,30.

253 Nyberg & Hallencreutz 1985 [1984]: 288.

254 See, e.g., Eliade 1974: 3, 296–300, 367–387.

255 Drobin & Keinänen 2001; Andrén 2004 and 2014; Sundqvist 2016a: 252–257.

256 Andrén 2014: 27.

257 There is evidence indicating that the Church deliberately desecrated holy trees devoted to the pagan gods. Willibald described in *Vita Bonifatii* (c. 768) how the holy oak of Jupiter (. . . *appellatur robor Iobis* . . .) in Geismar, Hessen, was cut down by the Christians (*Fontes*, 1928:45). Jupiter was here probably an *interpretatio romana* for Donar (Þórr) (e.g., Simek 2006: 63–64; von Padberg 1995: 148; Brown 2013: 420–421; critically considered by Palm 1948: 49–74). The motive was probably to show that the pagan god Jupiter/Donar was without power and that nothing hap-

down these trees were means for dismantling the old religion. Several sources indicate that during the transition period newly converted kings and chieftains deliberately offended traditional customs all over Europe in order to dismantle pagan cult. In medieval laws and the ecclesiastical polemics against pagan customs in Continental Europe the expression *arbor et fons* seems to announce a pagan cult place, including a holy tree and a sacred well. It appears in texts from the Council of Tours in AD 567 to the *capitularia* in the age of Charlemagne.²⁵⁸ In England too, the Church struggled against the pagan worship of trees and wells.²⁵⁹ There is also extensive material indicating that people living in northern Europe had cult trees or trunks, symbolically representing the world-tree or cosmic pillar.²⁶⁰

The most famous world-pillar in Germanic contexts is probably the great tree trunk called Irminsül, which was worshipped among the Saxons at the stronghold called Eresburg (present-day Obermarsberg).²⁶¹ Rudolf of Fulda (c. 865), writes thus:

pened when his tree was cut down. For the pagan population this act must have been wretched and execrable.

258 A document from the Council of Tours in 567 describes how converted people who still perform pagan rituals should be treated. Some of them worshipped mountains, trees and wells. *Concilium Turonense*, MGH, Legum, Sectio III, Concilia, Tomus I: 133. In a letter from Gregory I to Queen Brunhilde 597 it is stated that the cult of tree does not exist any longer. Gregorii I. Papae, MGH, Epistolarum, Tomi II, Pars III: 7. See also Clemen, *Fontes* 1928: 30. A Langobardic law, compiled during King Liutprand's reign in 727, stipulates the fines for those who worshipped trees and wells. *Liutprandi Leges*, Anni XV, Cap. 84. *Leges Langobardorum* 643–866, F. Beyerle (ed.) 1962 (1947): 139. See also Clemen, *Fontes* 1928: 38. At *Concilium Germanicarum*, led by Bonifatius in the year 743, the grounds for the Carolingian mission strategies were worked out. For instance, regulations against pagan customs were formulated. Some of these regulations were presented in the text *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*. In this text we read in ch. 6 *De sacris silvarum, quae nimidas vocant* "About sacred woods, which are invoked as sanctuaries" and ch. 11 *De fontibus sacrificiorum* "About sacrifices in wells." MGH, Legum Sectio II, *Capitularia Regum Francorum*, Tomus I: 222–223. See also Clemen, *Fontes*, 1928: 42–43. In *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae* (769) the cult of wells and trees was forbidden. Sacrifices at groves in a heathen fashion and the custom of making meals in honour of the demons were also rejected. MGH, Legum, Sectio II, *Capitularia Regum Francorum*, Tomus I: 69. See also Boudriot 1928: 34–35, 38–40; Homann 1976: 107–109; B. Nilsson 1992: 27–30.

259 In ecclesiastic regulations formulated during the reign of King Edgar 959–975 it is stated that every priest (*preosta*) must encourage Christianity and fight against heathen practice (*hæðendōm*) and condemn cult at wells, trees and stones (*forbeode wil-weorðunga . . . treowum & on stānum*). ALIE 1840: 248.

260 About tree cult and cosmic pillars in Eurasia, see Holmberg (Harva) 1922; Drobin & Keinänen 2001; Andrén 2014.

261 See in particular Palm 1948 and Andrén 2014: 43–45. Cf. Springer 2000; Drobin & Keinänen 2001; Sundqvist 2004; 2007; 2016a; Tolley 2009; Brown 2013: 431.

They [the Saxons] worship green trees and wells. They also worship a large tree trunk, erected under the naked sky; in native language they call it Irminsül, which in Latin means world-pillar, since it supports everything [in the world].²⁶²

According to Rudolf, the tree trunk called Irminsül was a symbol of the pagan world. In a way this pillar was believed to support everything [in this world] (*quasi sustinens omnia*), including the old order. Rudolf's text is not a direct source, since it is built on older accounts and there seem to be secondary elements in it. However, his information that Irminsül was a big tree-trunk or pillar seems to be reliable, since the Germanic name *Irmin-sül* (*Ermin-sül*) means "the large pillar."²⁶³ It is thus possible that the pillar or tree trunk Irminsül was an important cult object at the chief sanctuary of the Saxons. Most likely it referred to some cosmic symbolism.²⁶⁴ In a Frankish chronicle, called *Annales Einhardi* (c. 820), it is mentioned that Charlemagne destroyed the cult image (*idolum*) called Irminsül after the conquest of the stronghold in the year 772:

After King Charlemagne held a synod in Worms, he decided to attack the Saxons with war, and invaded them without delay, destroyed everything with swords and fire, took the stronghold of Eresburg and destroyed the cult image (*idolum*), which the Saxons called Irminsül. . . .²⁶⁵

Einhard's and Rudolf's statements made an impression on Widukind, who was a monk in Corvey, and influenced his thinking. He records in his chronicle *Rerum Gestarum Saxoniarum* (c. 968) a cult image made as a pillar which was devoted to the god Irmin/Hirmin: . . . *effigie columpnarum . . . Hirmin . . . dicitur*.²⁶⁶ The information that Irmin/Hirmin was a god or forefather is, however, usually considered uncertain.²⁶⁷ We may conclude that Charlemagne destroyed some kind of cosmic pillar, which was named Irminsül, and replaced it with a church. This Car-

²⁶² *Fronodos arboribus fontibusque venerationem exhibebant. Truncum quoque ligni non parvae magnitudinis in altum erectum sub divo colebant, patria eum lingua Irminsul appellantes, quod latine dicitur universalis columna, quasi sustinens omnia. Translatio S. Alexandri, MGH, Scriptorum, Tomus II: 676. See also Clemen Fontes, 1928: 60–61. My trans.*

²⁶³ Cf. ON *jǫrmun-*, OE *eormen-* "large," "enormous," "elevated," "wide"; in *jǫrmungandr*, "the big [enormous] stave," i.e., the *Miðgarðsormr*; in OE *eormengrund* "wide world"; and in a *heiti* of Óðinn, *Jǫrmunr*. See e.g., Fritzner 1954, 2: 244; Clark Hall 1916: 93; Palm 1948: 92–93; Maier 2000; Drobin & Keinänen 2001: 141. The second element in *Irminsül* contains a word equivalent to ON *sül* f. "Säule" (cf. OE *syl*, OHG *sül*). De Vries 1977 [1961]: 560.

²⁶⁴ E.g., Simek 2006: 175–176; Maier 2000.

²⁶⁵ *Rex vero Karlus congregato apud Wormaciam generali convent Saxoniam hello adgredi statuit eamque sine mora ingressus ferro et igni cuncta depopulatus Eresburgum castrum cepit, idolum, quod Irminsul a Saxonibus vocabatur, everit. . . . Annales Einhardi, in Annales Regni Francorum, MGH, SS I: 34–35. My trans.*

²⁶⁶ *Rerum Gestarum Saxoniarum*, ed. Waitz, 1882: 13.

²⁶⁷ E.g., Palm 1948: 89–91; Simek 2006: 175–176; Maier 2000; Drobin & Keinänen 2001: 140–141.

olingian church was later replaced by a Gothic church, which is still situated at the highest point of Obermarsberg, that is, the same location as the Saxon hillfort (Fig. 9). Most likely Irminsül was located at this high hill.²⁶⁸



Fig. 9: A cosmic pillar named Irminsül was probably erected at the highest point of Eresburg (today Obermarsberg), Germany, that is, the same location as the Saxon hillfort. It was replaced with a Carolingian church by Charlemagne. This church was later replaced by a Gothic church, which is still situated there. Image in its original state by Harald W. Platta, licensed under <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>.

Even if it is quite clear that stories about early Christian rulers destroying ceremonial buildings, cult images and pagan symbols appear as *topoi* in medieval literature, including Old Norse texts, it is most reasonable to acknowledge some of these traditions as based on historical records, where symbolic and strategic actions were used by newly converted kings in order to exterminate the values and cultic activities of the pagans. The material extinction of indigenous religion seems to be crucial when dismantling religious traditions throughout the world.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ See Andrén 2014: 44. Cf. de Vries 1956–1957: §§586–587; Lindow 2020e: 1106; Nordvig 2020: 1015.

²⁶⁹ See Colpe 1986 and Robbins 2014.

4.3.4 The respectful and ritualized dismantling of the old sanctuaries

Joel Robbins argued that the material erasure of the traditional religion of Urapmin was made carefully, frequently in a ritualized way.²⁷⁰ This erasure was performed by the converted Urapmin themselves in a peaceful manner. Hence, the Urapmin were thus both subjects and objects when dismantling their own tradition.²⁷¹ There are indications that this also took place in Scandinavia. Medieval prose texts report that the pagan chieftains (*goðar*) in Norway had close relations to their pre-Christian public sanctuaries and organized cults there.²⁷² According to these sources, they totally controlled the ceremonial buildings or even regarded them as their own property. It seems as if they could do whatever they wanted with them. When they moved, for instance, they dismantled these buildings in a ritual way and brought the most essential parts of them with them to the new land where they planned to settle. *Landnámabók*, for instance, states thus:

Þórhaddr the old was a *hofgoði* in Trondheim at Mære. He had a great desire to go to Iceland, but before he set off, he dismantled the *hof* and brought all the soil of the sanctuary and the high-seat pillars. He put in at Stöðvarfjörðr and declared the Mære Peace (*Mærina-helgi*) over the entire fjord area, forbidding people to take any life there, except for domestic animals.²⁷³

This short passage gives us some important and probably reliable information.²⁷⁴ It reports that Þórhaddr had control over his *hof* sanctuary, and it seems as if he dismantled it ritually. He brought the soil of the shrine and the high-seat posts to Iceland, where he probably built a new sanctuary with them. The close relation between him and his sanctuary is indicated by his title *hofgoði* “sanctuary chieftain.” He also proclaimed the Mære Peace (*Mærina-helgi*) over the entire fjord area in his new land.

It is most likely that this respectful treatment of the *hof* sanctuaries also took place when chieftains and cult leaders (*goðar*) converted to Christianity.²⁷⁵ There

²⁷⁰ Robbins 2014: 7.

²⁷¹ Cf. Stausberg 2021: 107.

²⁷² Most likely the chieftains of Norway combined religious and other societal leadership functions. Phillpotts 1912–1913: 267–269; Sundqvist 2016a: 167–174.

²⁷³ *Þórhaddr enn gamli var hofgoði í Þrándheimi á Mæri-ni>. Hann fjstisk til Íslands ok tók áðr ofan hofit ok hafði með sér hofsmoldina ok sülurnar; en hann kom í Stöðvarfjörð ok lagði Mærina-helgi á allan fjörðinn ok lét øngu tortíma þar nema kvikfé heimilu.* *Landnámabók* chs S297, H258, Ísl. Fornr. 1, 307–308. Based on Hermann Pálsson’s and Edward’s trans. but revised by me.

²⁷⁴ This laconic information may have quite a high historical source value. Cf. Dillmann 1997: 64.

²⁷⁵ Most likely Þórhaddr combined his official assignments. He was both a cult leader and a political-judicial chieftain. The Skarðsárþók and Þórðarþók versions of *Landnámabók* report that he was described as a (great) chieftain (*hofðingi [mikill]*). Ísl. Fornr. 1, 307, note 12.

is slight evidence of this in the medieval Norse prose texts. According to *Kristni saga*, for instance, it is stated that Þorvaldr and the Bishop Friðrekr were quite successful with their mission in the Northern Quarter of Iceland, where many men left off sacrifices (*hofnuðu margir menn blótum*) and broke up their idols (*brutu skurðguð sín*), and some refused to pay the temple tax (*vildu eigi gjalda hofþolla*).²⁷⁶ This took place in the late tenth century.

Some of the early missionary kings, such as Óláfr Haraldsson, had missionary bishops and priests with them in their entourage when visiting assemblies in Norway, as in the case of Moster c. 1022. Together with the king and his men, these clergies may have persuaded some Norwegian chieftains to give up their ancestral religion, and also to dismantle their sanctuaries voluntarily. Snorri reports in *Óláfs saga helga* chapter 112, for instance, that St Óláfr and his clergies held an assembly at Liðstaðir, with the farmers, where also Guðbrandr took part (see ch. 1 above). The king stood up and said that the people at Læsir, Lóar (Lom), and Vági had accepted Christianity and “broken down their heathen temples” (*brotit niðr blóthús sín*). They believe now in the true God who created heaven and earth and knows all things. It was thus high time also for the people of Liðstaðir to do as other peasants did in Guðbrandsdalar, that is, to embrace Christianity. In the *Legendary saga*, composed around 1200,²⁷⁷ which is believed to be closely related to *The Oldest saga of St Óláfr* (c. 1180) (which is only preserved in six fragments from about 1225), this episode is mentioned.²⁷⁸ In this version King Óláfr spoke thus: “The people of Læsir, Lóar (Lom), and Vági have again taken up that Christianity, which they had [previously] given up. They broke all their idols and now believe in the one God who created heaven and earth. . . .”²⁷⁹ According to these sources, it seems as if the dismantling of the old cult buildings and the pagan images were made by the farmers themselves. These texts do not reflect historical events. The key-passage here is a fictional utterance made by the saintly king in a clear legendary conversion context. It should also be mentioned that the context neither indicates a peaceful or a voluntary baptism. On the contrary, the people at Læsir, Lóar (Lom), and Vági seem to have been forced by the king to convert. Anyhow, these texts suggest that the saga writers had access to information that

276 *Kristni saga* ch. 2, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 9–10. See 10.1 below.

277 The manuscript manuscript DG 8^H, 4to, is dated to c. 1250.

278 Jónas Kristjánsson 1988: 159. Cf. Simek & Pálsson 2007: 291.

279 “*Leser oc a Lom oc a Vaga hava tækit við kristni þærri sem þeir hafðu niðr kastat, oc brotet niðr oll skurguð sin oc trua nu a æinn guð, þann er skop himin oc iorð. . . .*” “Die Leute in Lesja, Lom und Vågá haben das Christentum wieder angenommen, das sie aufgegeben hatte. Sie haben alle ihre Götterbilder zerbrochen und glauben nun an den einen Gott, der Himmel und Erde geschaffen hat. . . .” Text and trans. from Heinrichs et al. 1982: 86–87. Cf. ed. Johnsen 1922: 31.

converted Scandinavians sometimes might have dismantled their own old sanctuaries and cult images. Such actions appear to be reasonable when comparing with information from conversion contexts in other parts of the world.²⁸⁰ Several other Old Norse traditions include similar information. In *Óláfs saga Odds* it is narrated that King Óláfr Tryggvasson travelled to the Orkney Islands and met Jarl Sigurðr Hlōðvesson and his followers. He preached to the pagan jarl about the pains of hell and the torments unless “they destroyed their idols (*nema þeir bryti skurðguð sín*) and worshipped their Creator, Almighty God.”²⁸¹ According to this text, the king thus appealed to the jarl and his men to destroy their cult images themselves. It should be noted that this story also has a violent context, where the king threatens to behead the jarl’s son if he does not allow himself to become a Christian.

Hallfrøðr vandræðaskald’s five contemporary *lausavísur* (6–10),²⁸² often called the “Conversion verses,” provide a more credible historical picture of an individual reluctantly abandoning his old faith around 995 after joining the Christian king Óláfr Tryggvasson. Unfortunately, he does not describe whether he dismantled the shrine he used to sacrifice at by himself, or how he handled the old cult images of gods after his conversion. He just states in *lausavísa* six:

*Fyrr vas hitt, es harra
Hliðskjalftar gatk sjalfan,
— skipts á gumna giptu —
geðskjótan vel blóta.*

In former times it was different, when I could sacrifice well to the mind-swift lord of Hliðskjalft <Óðinn’s high-seat> himself [= Óðinn]; there has been a change in the fortunes of men.

This stanza reports nostalgically that in the good old days, Hallfrøðr was free to sacrifice to Óðinn (*Hliðskjalftar harri* = Hliðskjalft’s lord = Óðinn). The expression *skipt es á gumna giptu* “there is a change in fortunes of men” indicates his awareness of the inevitability of change, but he “does not reveal any joy at having observed it.”²⁸³ According to *lausavísa* seven, he expresses his hatred for Óðinn, but not in a convincing way:

*Øll hefr ætt til hylli
Óðins skipat ljóðum,
(algilda mank) aldar
(iðju várra niðja).*

²⁸⁰ Cf. Colpe 1986; Robins 2014.

²⁸¹ See *Óláfs saga Odds* ch. A26, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 211. Trans. T. M. Andersson.

²⁸² The following stanzas are quoted from the text and translation of Whaley SkP 5: 883–889.

²⁸³ Clunies Ross 2011 [2005]: 120.

*En trauðr, þvít vel Viðrir
vald hugnaðisk skaldi,
leggk á frumver Friggjar
fjón, þvít Kristi þjónum.*

The whole family of mankind has composed poems to [win] Óðinn's favour; I remember the most excellent work of our [my] forbears. But it is reluctantly, for the power of Viðrir <= Óðinn> pleased the poet [me] well, that I direct hate towards the first husband of Frigg <goddess> [=Óðinn], since we [I] serve Christ.

In *lausavísa* eight he rejects “the name of the pagan priest of the raven sacrifice,” that is, Óðinn (*hrafnblóts goða nafn* = Óðinn):

*Hæfum hólða reiftr,
hrafnblóts goða nafni,
þess's ól við lof lýða
lóm ór heiðnum dómi.*

Patron of heroes [RULER = Óláfr], we are [I am] neutral towards the name of the priest of the raven-sacrifice [= Óðinn], of him who nurtured treachery from heathen times in exchange for men's praise.

Hallfrøðr emphasizes the fraudulence and tricky character of Óðinn towards those who praise him. He also states in the last line that the time of paganism is over and gone (*ór heiðnum dómi*). In the *lausavísur* nine and ten he is even more hostile towards the old gods, but at the same time he fears of their fury when they discover that he had abandoned their cults:²⁸⁴

*Mér skyli Freyr ok Freyja
— fjorð létk af dul Njarðar;
líknisk grøm við Grímnir —
gramr ok Þórr inn ramni.
Krist vilk allrar ástar
— erum leið sonar reiði;
vald á frægt und foldar
feðr — einn ok goð kveðja.*

Freyr <god> should be furious with me, and Freyja <goddess> and the mighty Þórr <god>; last year I left off the delusion of Njarðr <god>; let the fierce ones ask mercy from Grímnir <= Óðinn>. I want to ask Christ alone and God for all love; the Son's anger is hateful to me; [he] holds famous power under the father of earth [= God].

*Sás með Sygna ræsi
siðr, at blót eru kviðjuð;*

284 Clunies Ross 2011 [2005]: 121.

*verðum flest at forðask
 fornhalðin sköpp norða.
 Láta allir ýtar
 Óðins ætt fyr róða;
 verðk ok neyðdr frá Njarðar
 niðjum Krist at biðja.*

It is the custom with the ruler of the Sygnir [NORWEGIAN KING], that sacrifices are forbidden; we have mostly to renounce the decree of norms, held from ancient times. All men cast the race of Óðinn <god> [GODS] to the winds; I am also forced from the kin of Njorðr <god> [GODS], [forced] to pray to Christ.

Hallfrøðr states in the last stanza that King Óláfr had forbidden heathen sacrifices (*at blót eru kviðjuð*). Now people must set aside the ancient cult. Even if we cannot prove it, we may assume that men like Hallfrøðr after conversion, dismantled their old sanctuaries in a respectful and ritual way, since their feelings for the old traditions were still strong.

Archaeological evidence indicates that such ritual actions actually took place when converts abandoned their sanctuaries. Archaeologist Anne Carlie has noted that some sacred objects were occasionally placed in the post-holes intentionally when the cult house had already been demolished.²⁸⁵ Such practice could be interpreted as a ritualized dismantling of a cult building. Sometimes the pre-Christian ceremonial buildings were “buried” in connection with the conversion, as in the case of the cult house at Borg, Norrköping.²⁸⁶ During the eleventh century the walls were knocked down and the foundation was covered with gravel. Perhaps these actions could be interpreted as a ritualized dismantling of the old sanctuary. About 100 metres to the east, the church was then erected. A hall including gold foil figures, located at *Hov* in Vingom by Lake Mjøsa in eastern Norway, was covered with fire-cracked brewing stones. It has been assumed that this was done during the conversion process.²⁸⁷ Such actions could possibly also have a symbolic meaning for those people involved. At Ranheim in Trøndelag, acts were performed when the cult site was ended. The posts belonging to the assumed *hof* were pulled out and all of the wood removed. The assumed *høgr* was carefully covered with stones and clay. The entire cult site was then entirely covered with earth. These actions took place during the transition period in the tenth century.²⁸⁸ Some rituals were probably also performed at Hofstaðir, Northern Iceland, when the great ceremonial hall was dismantled (c. 1030–1070). Several acts of closure were performed, such as the ritual

²⁸⁵ Carlie 2004: 193–194.

²⁸⁶ Nielsen 1996: 102 and 2006.

²⁸⁷ Zachrisson & Andrén 2020: 719.

²⁸⁸ Rønne 2011.

depositions of the skulls. A new settlement was established in the south-western area of the levelled farm mound, where a church was also erected around 1000.²⁸⁹ This ritual abandonment of the feasting hall should probably be related to the conversion of Iceland.²⁹⁰ Wetland cult sites were often left untouched during the transition period. This can be seen at Götavi in Närke where rituals with meat and blood took place during the Late Iron Age.²⁹¹ At Uppåkra a decrease of pagan ritual activities has been noticed: “When the ritual building went out of use around 950, another site was used as a final ritual place at Uppåkra. West of the former cult building, a small stone paved gable room of a former hall was used . . . This gradual diminishing of the ritual site coincided with Christianization of Skåne.”²⁹² Perhaps this could be interpreted as a respectful and ritualized dismantling of the old sanctuary.

4.3.5 Using performative rituals at Jelling?

As noted above, there is an impressive runestone monument at Jelling, Jylland, which was erected by King Haraldr over his parents Gormr and Þórví (Runic Danish *Þýrvī, Þōrvī*, Old Danish *Thorwe, Thyrvī*) (see above). This monument is decorated with large pictures of an animal, interlaced with a snake, and an image of Christ (see Fig. 2 above).²⁹³ Beside this monument is another runestone erected by his pagan father, King Gormr, over his wife, Queen Þórví:

A: **kurm̥ : kunukr :**
 : **kaꝛþi : kubl : þusi**
 : **aft : þurui : kunu**
 B: **sina : tanmarkar : but**

A: *Gormr kunungr gaerþi kumbl þøsi æft Þōrvī, kunu* | B: *sina, Danmarkar bot.*
 Gormr made these monuments in memory of Þórví, his wife, Denmark's adornment.²⁹⁴

It has been noticed that both inscriptions include the Runic Danish noun *kumbl* in plural, which according to Erik Moltke refers to a monument with multiple component parts.²⁹⁵ There is, for instance, a large stone alignment, c. 170 m long, usually interpreted as a pagan ship setting at this site.²⁹⁶ Most likely it was built by

289 Orri Vésteinsson 2014.

290 Lucas 2009: 407–408; see further 4.4.2 below.

291 Zachrisson & Andrén 2020: 720.

292 Zachrisson & Andrén 2020: 720.

293 Roesdahl 2008: 657–659.

294 DR 41. (Jelling I) Read and interpreted by Düwel 2008: 105. English trans. by me.

295 Moltke 1985: 206–216.

296 Roesdahl 2008: 658.

King Gormr in the 940s. Around 950 this site was enlarged by a royal burial mound, called the “North Mound,” which is Denmark’s largest barrow. The burial chamber is dated to c. 958/9, and most likely it belonged to King Gormr. This burial mound was thus raised for a pagan king, when Denmark still had their old ancestral religion, by his son Haraldr, who at the time was still pagan. The place was enlarged by another burial mound, the “South Mound,” around 970. Simultaneously, a great wooden church was erected (under the present stone church) and also the large runestone Jelling II. Recently new monumental expressions and large-scale building-works attributed to King Haraldr have been detected at Jelling, for instance, a palisade surrounding the site.²⁹⁷ Remains of four buildings, each about 24 meters long, with an annex, and at one end a gable and porch at the entrance, have been identified in the north-east quadrant.²⁹⁸ The four-sided palisade complex, with an estimated length of about 360 meters, covering about 12.5 hectares, with no evidence of crafts, trading activities or indeed daily life, indicates a symbolic significance. This impressive tenth century royal manor included most likely an immense ritual and ceremonial space.²⁹⁹

Archaeologists have investigated the “North Mound” and opened the burial chamber. No human remains were found there, but parts of gold-thread textiles with costly mounts were discovered. These finds have been associated to a chamber grave at the present church, where bones of a man, dated to mid-tenth-century, were discovered. The standard interpretation is that King Haraldr Christianized his dead father Gormr by means of a *translatio*-ritual, where he transferred his father’s remains from the pagan burial mound to the chamber grave, where a wooden church was erected on its top.³⁰⁰ It is possible that King Haraldr used rituals in order to desacralize his father’s pagan burial mound. The finds at Jelling could thus indicate that performative rituals were used by the newly converted ruler as strategies when dismantling pagan cult places, reinterpreting them, or adapting them to Christian symbolic expressions. New archaeological analyses have, however, questioned the traditional interpretation,³⁰¹ which make this suggestion uncertain. This example related to the burial mound is also quite unique in the context of Scandinavia. The finds from Jelling still need a convincing interpretation.³⁰²

²⁹⁷ Pedersen 2016: 75–79.

²⁹⁸ Pedersen 2016: 77; Pedersen et al. 2022MS.

²⁹⁹ Pedersen et al. 2022MS.

³⁰⁰ Krogh 1983: 205–210 and 1993: 245–247; Roesdahl 2008: 660; critically considered by Gelting 2007: 86 and 2020: 1600–1601; Pedersen et al. 2022MS.

³⁰¹ Pedersen et al. 2022MS.

³⁰² A new approach has been offered by Sophie Bønding (2020), who suggests that the Jelling construction emerged from the fusion of traditional and Christian elements. Haraldr rooted the

4.4 The elimination of pagan animal sacrifices and other traditional customs

When dismantling the Old Norse religion, the removal of animal sacrifices and some other traditional customs were very important, both on a public and private level. Medieval laws, which were formulated by royal power and church jointly, report that legislation was used as a strategy for erasing indigenous customs, such as the traditional sacrifices.³⁰³ The worship of the native gods at different types of sanctuaries including idols were forbidden there as well as pagan burial practices. Violations could according to these rules lead to severe penalties. The consumption of horsemeat was also prohibited, since it was considered as pagan sacrificial food. These regulations appear in the so-called provincial laws, which emanate from the high or late Middle Ages (eleventh to fourteenth century).³⁰⁴ They were written down in the vernacular, opposite to the Continental Germanic laws, which were written in Latin. Most of the Scandinavian provincial laws were written down quite late, however some of them were probably based on oral law traditions, which go back to the late Viking Age.³⁰⁵ These laws must have played a crucial role as a strategy for the royal power and the church when exterminating the pagan cult. The intention behind them was probably to get rid of popular religious beliefs and customs, which still flourished in the twelfth and thirteenth century. It is possible, however, that the prohibitions against pre-Christian cult practices found in these laws were conceived as obsolete relicts dating back to the transition period, that is, the second half of the Viking Age (see above). Anyhow, they reflect a kind of legislative strategy used by the ruling power when dismantling Old Norse religion. Since many of these restrictions are related to pagan sacrificial rituals and communal meals, a short survey of these customs is needed, where the light is also placed on some details. Hence, we must return to Snorri's text again.

4.4.1 Pagan seasonal sacrifices

When Snorri describes the specific sacrificial feast (*blótveizla*) at Lade in *Hákonar saga góða* chapter 17, he explicitly states, that it took place “in the autumn, to-

community in a collective past, represented in monument form, and, thus, he seems to have been concerned with creating and cultivating a collective identity among the Danes.

303 For good overviews, see e.g., B. Nilsson 1992; Sanmark 2004; Brink 2020.

304 Brink 2008a: 24.

305 For a discussion on the background of these laws, see Brink 2008a: 23–31.

wards the winter” (*um haustit at vetri*).³⁰⁶ Annual rites with social gatherings are universal and known from many religions and cultures. The liturgy of these ceremonies usually aims at strengthening the cosmic process, that is the seasonal return, which guarantee the comeback of vegetation, good crops, good preys in hunting, and luck in other activities which belong to the upcoming season.³⁰⁷ There is some empirical support for such interpretation of the Old Norse sources. In Snorri’s description of the bloody rituals performed at the winter feast at Lade, it was noted that a ceremonial drinking was made, for a good year and peace. This was indicated by the old liturgical formula *til árs ok friðar*. The formula includes hopes for a good prosperity, good harvest, fertility and peace in the upcoming season. In Snorri’s text it is related to the beaker which was dedicated by the chieftain to the vanir, Njörðr and Freyr. These deities were regarded as fertility gods, worshipped to ensure good harvests, rain and favorable winds, as well as fecundity (see 4.5). Many annual feasts, including bloody sacrifices, in Old Norse sources aim of providing good harvest and contain similar liturgical formulae. In *Óláfs saga helga* chapter 107 it is said that the Þrændir killed the cattle and horses, and that they reddened the ritual platforms and sacrificed in order to improve the annual growth and the harvest.³⁰⁸ This desire appears also in the runic inscription of Stentofte. The term *jāra* or *ár* occurs there in a sacrificial context, meaning “a good year” or “prosperity” (see 4.1 above)

Sacrificial blood and ritual objects

Snorri states in *Hákonar saga góða* that all kinds of domestic animals were slaughtered in connection with the sacrificial feasts (*blótveizlur*), horses also; “and all the blood that came from them was then called *hlaut*, and what the blood was contained in, was called *hlaut*-bowls, and *hlaut*-twigs, these were fashioned like holy water sprinklers; with these the altars were to be reddened all over, and also the walls of the temple, outside and inside, the people also were sprinkled, while the meat was to be cooked for a feast.” Klaus Düwel made a thorough analysis of the terms that Snorri applied for sacrificial blood and the ritual objects related to it. He looked specifically at the semantic evolution of the words *hlaut*, *hlautteinar*, and *hlautbolli* and stated that Snorri either misunderstood these concepts or mixed them up with Christian ideas, which had no basis in the pre-

³⁰⁶ So manuscript Kringla! The manuscripts of Frisianus and Jøfraskinna have: *Um hausit at vetrnóttum* . . . Ísl. Fornr. 26: 171.

³⁰⁷ See e.g., Eliade 1991 [1949]; Lincoln 1986 and Sundqvist 2017c.

³⁰⁸ . . . *at þar væri drepit naut ok hross ok roðnir stallar af blóði ok framit blót ok veittr sá formáli, at þat skyldi vera til árbótar* . . . Ísl. Fornr. 27: 177. On this tradition, see 9.5 below.

Christian culture.³⁰⁹ Düwel may be partly right on this point. Everything indicates that the word *hlaut* in pre-Christian language refers to a “lot” or “share” and *hlautteinn* to “lot twig” as used in divination rituals.

Even if Snorri used a confused terminology, he may have been right when he stated that ritual paraphernalia and the walls of the cult buildings were smeared with sacrificial blood.³¹⁰ Independent sources indicate that ritual objects were reddened with sacrificial blood in pre-Christian Scandinavia. In the Eddic poem *Hyndluljóð* a place called *hǫrgr* is mentioned, which was reddened with ox blood. The goddess Freyja states thus in the poem:

*Hǫrg hann mér gerði
hlaðinn steinum,
nú er grjót þat
at gleri orðit;
rauð hann í nýju
nauta blóði,
æ trúði Óttarr
á asyniur.*

He's made a sanctuary for me, faced with stone, now that stone has turned to glass; he's reddened it with fresh ox blood, Óttarr has always trusted in the goddesses.³¹¹

Admittedly *Hyndluljóð* is attested in a late manuscript from the second half of the fourteenth century, and usually the poem is regarded as young and dated to the twelfth century.³¹² Yet the content indicates that the poet had good information about ancient customs and rituals.³¹³ It seems quite unlikely that a medieval Christian skald would have created from his own imagination the idea that the stones of the *hǫrgr* dedicated to Freyja had been reddened by the blood from the ox. Moreover, the Old English and Old Germanic cognates *hearg* and *harug* respectively, are exclusively used in the sense of “sacred place, sacred grove” as well as the meaning “altar” and “idol.”³¹⁴ According to the medieval laws it was forbidden to perform rituals at places designated *hǫrgr* (see below). Similar information to that in *Hyndluljóð* also appears in other texts, such as *Hervarar saga ok*

309 Düwel 1985: 32–34.

310 Cf. Å.V. Ström 1966: 231–234; Hultgård 1993: 236–237; 1996: 44–45; Sundqvist 2017c.

311 Text *Eddukvæði* 1: 461–462, trans. Larrington based on Neckel/Kuhn. On the relationship between Freyja and Óttarr, see McKinnell 2005: 85–89.

312 Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason in *Eddukvæði* 1: 283–287.

313 Hultgård 1993: 236–237; 1996: 32.

314 Th. Andersson 1992b: 83–84; Hultgård 2022a: 606.

Heiðreks konungs.³¹⁵ A holy tree called *blóttré*, situated in Svetjud, was reddened with the blood from a sacrificial horse.³¹⁶ Whether the word *blóttré* in this text really refers to a sacred tree is somewhat uncertain. Perhaps it designates the wood of “the ritual platform,” “altar” or “podium for images” called *véstallr* or *stallr* (*stalli*).³¹⁷ According to *Ynglinga saga* chapter 15, the Svear sacrificed their king called Dómaldi for better crops (*blóta til árs*), and they attacked and killed him and reddened the ritual platforms (*rjóða stalla*) with his blood.³¹⁸ This story has no historical background, but it is built on the ninth-century poem *Ynglingatal* stanza five, which definitely renders a pagan world view. The poem reports that the Svear carried swords against their own ruler and stained the earth red (*at fold ruðu*) with his blood. They sacrificed him, eager for crops (. . . *árgiørn . . . of sóa skyldi*).³¹⁹ When the *goði* performs the sacrifice at a *stallr/stalli* in a *hof*-building, according to the Hauksbók-redaction of *Landnámabók*, he reddened the oath-ring in the blood of a cattle which he himself had sacrificed there (. . . *ok rjóða hann þar áðr í roðru nautsblóðs þess, er hann blótaði þar sjálf*).³²⁰ If we add together all the evidence it is rather likely that Snorri based his text on old traditions when he described blood as something essential in the ancient Scandinavian sacrifice, even if he probably did not use very ancient terms for designating it. It is also possible that Snorri relied on an older tradition when he stated that sacrificial blood was smeared on the *hof*-walls, or red-colored the ritual structures (*rjóða stallana*).³²¹ Since the concept *stallr* also appears in the *Older Eidsivaping Law* as a forbidden ritual object there are no doubts that this term is authentic pre-Christian (see below).

Communal meals

Snorri describes in *Hákonar saga góða* the pre-Christian drinking rites (*full*) connected with the sacrificial feasts at the *hof* of Lade. There is no doubt that such rituals were crucial during the pagan banquets. That certain religious terms con-

315 See e.g., *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs: Eitt haust var gjort dísablot mikit hjá Álfí konungi, ok gekk Alfhilð at blótinu . . . En um nóttina, er hun [Álfhildr] rauð hørjinn . . .* (ed. Jón Helgason 1924: 91).

316 Ed. Turville-Petre 2006 [1956]: 71.

317 Hultgård 1993: 237.

318 *Ynglinga saga* ch. 15, *Heimskringla 1*, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 32.

319 Marold in SkP 1: 16.

320 *Landnámabók* ch. H268, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 313–315. This paragraph claims to originate from the very old and orally transmitted Úlfjótsslog which is mentioned in *Íslendingabók* ch. 2, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 6–7.

321 For a more complete documentation on sacrificial blood, including comparative materials, see Sundqvist 2017c.

nected to such rituals, such as *minni*, may not be traced back to pre-Christian times is not a sufficient argument for rejecting the idea that the phenomenon itself is ancient. Sources of different types clearly indicate that ceremonial drinking and meals were important in the aristocratic halls and pagan cult buildings. A compound word attested in *Ágrip*, *blótdrykkja*: “drinking bout at pagan sacrifice” seems to refer to ancient drinking rituals in Norway.³²² The expression *drekka jól*: “celebrate Yule with drinking-ceremonies” appears in a praise poem to King Haraldr, *Haraldskvæði*, composed by Þorbjörn hornklofi (c. 900).³²³ The source value here is high, but the kenning *Freys leikr* is debated.³²⁴ Nevertheless, the expression *drekka jól* in this stanza produces a reliable evidence of pre-Christian libation rites.

Ágrip, *Fagrskinna* and *Hákonar saga góða*, report that ceremonial meals, including the consumption of horsemeat,³²⁵ were crucial during the sacrificial feasts in Trøndelag. According to trustworthy traditions, horses were sacrificed and consumed during ceremonial meals in Iceland during the tenth century: Ari inn fróði mentions in *Íslendingabók* that during the transition period people were allowed to follow the ancient law about consuming horse meat (*hrossakiptz át*). People would also be allowed to sacrifice in secret if they wished to, but hit by the “lesser outlawry” if this was made known by witnesses.³²⁶ This information about consuming horse flesh is probably directed at customs which occurred in connection with pagan sacrifices. Most likely this information is reliable, since Ari said that he personally retrieved it from “old intelligent people.” These people may have lived with one foot in paganism and one in Christianity.³²⁷

In Oddr munkr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chapter S63, King Óláfr describes contemptuously the Svear at the battle of Svölðr as *hrossætur* (f. nom. pl), that is, persons who consumed (pagan sacrificial) horsemeat.³²⁸ This scorn is repeated in a tradition preserved in *Fagrskinna* chapter 24, where the king shouts out in the bat-

322 *Ágrip*, Ísl. Fornr. 29: 22.

323 Fulk in SkP 1: 99–100.

324 See e.g., Fulk in SkP 1: 100.

325 The ritual function of the horse penis in the late and burlesque account called *Volsa þáttur* also indicates the religious importance of stallions. It is also stated in this text that pagan people had horsemeat as food (*at heiðnir men höfðu hrossakjot sér til fæðu*). Ísl. Fornr. 33: 272.

326 *Íslendingabók* Ísl. Fornr. 1: 17; see below.

327 Dillmann 1997: 70, note 28.

328 See the king's words in Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*: “Auðveldra mun þeim þykkja, Svíum, at sleikja blótbolla sína en ganga upp á Orminn undir vápn yður, ok ekki hræðumsk vér hrossætur.” S63. In ch. A72 it says thus: “Auðveldra mun Svíum verða ok blíðara at sleikja innan blótkoppa sína en ganga upp á Orminn langa undir vápn vár ok hrjóða skipin undir oss.” Ísl. Fornr. 25: 328.

tle: “We need not fear the Swedes, the horse-eaters. They would be happier licking out their sacrificial bowls than coming aboard Ormr inn langi in the face of your weapons.”³²⁹ As been noticed in previous research, these are “conventional gibes at the stereotypically pagan Swedes.”³³⁰ These texts probably mention a ritual object that was used at the ceremonial meals, namely Old Norse *blótbolli* “sacrificial bowl” or *blóttrygill* “small sacrificial trough” (see also *hlautbolli* above).

Adam of Bremen intimates that sacrificial meals, including libation rituals, were celebrated at Uppsala during the Viking Age. The term *commessiones* (sg. *commesatio*) probably refers to such meals,³³¹ while the Latin verb *libo* (*libare*) used by Adam must be interpreted in its more precise meaning; that is, “to perform a libation sacrifice to the deity.”³³² It thus seems as if the worship of the three gods in the banqueting room (*triclinium*) was intimately associated with the drinking rituals. It is also interesting to note that Adam mentions that horses were sacrificed in Uppsala. When describing the sacrificial grove, he states thus: “even dogs and horses hang there with men.”³³³ We cannot rule out, thus, that horse meat was also consumed during the sacrificial feasts at Uppsala. Recent excavations at Old Uppsala and its surroundings have namely uncovered traces of ceremonial practices involving horses. Traces of two rows of posts have been found there and dated to c. AD 500–600, which included the depositions of animal bones, probably related to sacrificial meals. In the post holes in the south, horse bone and teeth were overwhelmingly found in 83 percent of all the identified bone and dental fragments. Horses also dominated in all the post foundations, with almost half (46 percent) of all bones and dental finds. From the horse bones that have currently been DNA tested, they are all from stallions.³³⁴ Adam of Bremen states that the sacrifices at Uppsala (including horses) “that is of the male sex” (*quod masculinum est*) they offer nine heads. As a large proportion of the bone depositions from Old Uppsala come from horse, cattle, sheep/goat and pig, we must consider that the meat from these could have been consumed during

329 “Ekki þurfum vér at óttask Svía, hrossæturnar. Þeim mun vera blíðara at sleikja blótbolla sína en ganga upp á Orm enn langa undir vápn yður.” Ísl. Fornr. 29: 153. Trans. Finlay 2004.

330 See *Fagrskinna* in trans. Finlay 2004: 123, note 322. A verse in *Hallfreðar saga* includes a similar taunt (*at sleikja sinn blóttrygil innan*), see Ísl. Fornr. 8: 188.

331 Adam 4,27 and scholion 141.

332 “If plague or famine is nigh, a libation is made to the idol of Thor, if war, to Wodan, if marriage is to be solemnized, to Fricco.” (*Si pestis et fames imminet, Thor ydolo lybatur, si bellum, Wodani si nuptiae celebrandae sunt, Fricconi*) Adam 4,27. See Dillmann 1997: 66; Hultgård 2022a: 604.

333 *Ibi etiam canes et equi pendent cum hominibus*, Adam 4,27.

334 Wikborg 2017; Wikborg & Magnell 2017; Wikborg & Göthberg 2017.

annual sacrificial feasts.³³⁵ Adam also states that “[t]he bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple.”³³⁶ As will be seen in what follows, sacred groves seem to have been important among the ancient Scandinavians.

Since the Old Norse religion lacked a canonical writing and a priestly institution which could protect the maintenances of the tradition and stability of the liturgical order, the repetitive performance of these seasonal sacrifices was most crucial for the persistence of the old cult.³³⁷ During these annual gatherings the old mythic traditions of the community were recited and enacted by skalds.³³⁸ Since the purpose of these calendric feasts were to ensure and improve the annual growth and the harvest, these rituals were very important for the Viking society. It was of great importance for the early Christian kings to dismantle these pagan sacrificial rituals by means of laws and prohibitions.

4.4.2 Prohibitions against sacrifices at different types of sanctuaries including ritual objects

Several medieval laws, from all Scandinavia, mention that sacrifices and worshipping pagan (images of) gods, mounds, groves and sanctuaries are not allowed.³³⁹ In these laws it seems as if the ritual objects or structures related to the old cult were forbidden to use with pagan rituals. In addition, rituals performed in connection to food and drink are also forbidden. *The Guta Law, Gutalagen*, from Gotland, states thus in section 4 *aff blotan* (“concerning sacrifice”):³⁴⁰

Now the next thing is that sacrifice is strictly forbidden to all men, together with all those old customs that belong to paganism. No one may pray to either groves or howes or heathen gods, nor to holy places or ancient sites. If someone is found guilty of this, and it is proved against him and confirmed with witnesses that he has invoked something of this sort with

335 Wikborg & Magnell 2017. Perhaps horses also had other ritual functions. The link between horses and divinations has several attestations in Sweden and ancient Europe, see e.g., Barlett 2007: 64; cf. Sundqvist 2002: 233–235.

336 *Corpora autem suspenduntur in lucum, qui proximus est templo.* Adam 4,27.

337 Cf. Schjødt 2013: 316–318.

338 See e.g., Gunnell 1995; 2001; 2006; 2012 and Nygaard 2019.

339 See e.g., B. Nilsson 1992: 10–39; Sanmark 2004: 158–159; Nordberg 2013: 283–284; Brink 2020.

340 The oldest manuscript (MS A) is dated to c. 1350. It goes back to an original dated to c. 1220. Holmbäck & Wessén 1979 (1933–1946) Vol. 4: lxiv–lxvi.

his food or drink, contrary to Christian practice, then he is to be fined three marks to the parishioners, if they win the case.³⁴¹

The law intimates that sacrifices (*blotan* f. sg.) and the worshipping of ancient gods (actually *haita* “to invoke” or “to pray”) at the traditional cult places was not permitted. It is forbidden to pray or invoke groves (*a hult*) (Old Gutnish **hult* n. sg. “grove”).³⁴² *The Guta Law* also states that it is forbidden to pray or invoke grave howes (*a hauga*) (Old Gutnish **haugr* m. sg. “grave howe”), which seems to reflect some kind of ancestor cult performed at the burial mounds.³⁴³ No man should neither pray to heathen gods (Old Gutnish *gub* n. sg. “idol, (heathen) god”). Most likely the term Old Gutnish *gub* (here attested in plural) refers to images representing pagan gods, since they in this context are related to other ritual objects/places, such as the sacred groves and the grave howes etc.³⁴⁴ The law also states that it is forbidden to *huatki a vi* “to invoke holy places.”³⁴⁵ More problematic is the concept Old Gutnish **stafgarþr* (m. sg.) in the *Guta Law*, which also is attested in the addition to the text called *Guta Saga*: “Prior to that time, and for a long time afterwards, people believed in groves and grave howes, holy places and *stafgarþar* and in hea-

341 *Þet ier nu þy nest et blotir iru mannum mier firj buþni oc fyrnsca all þaun sum haiþnu fylgir. Engin ma haita a huathci a hult eþa hauga. eþa haþin guþ. huatki a vi eþa stafgarþa. Þa en nequar verþr at þi sandr oc laiþas hanum so vitni a hand et hann haþi haizl nequara þa miþ mati eþa miþ dryckiu senni sum ai fylgir cristnum siþi þa ir hann sacr at þrim marcum viþr kirchiu menn. En þair syct vinna. Gotalagen, Af blotan.* GL I: 4, SSSL 7: 14. Trans. Peel 2009: 9.

342 Cults in sacred groves occur in early and reliable sources referring to other parts of northern Europe (cf. Palm 1942; 1948. Hultgård 1997: 38–39). See e.g., *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae: Si quis ad fontes aut arbores vel lucos votum fecerit aut aliquid more gentiliū obtulerit et ad honorem daemonum commederit* . . . Ed. Boretius: 69. Cf. B. Nilsson 1992: 33 Such cult is also attested in Adam of Bremen’s account on the Uppsala shrine. See above and Adam 4,27.

343 Such worship could be described as a hero cult and is perhaps attested in medieval texts, such as *Óláfs þáttir Geirstaðaálfs* in Flateyjarbók (see Sundqvist 2015a and 2016a; cf. Brink 2020: 468). See also the eighth century text called *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum*, ch. 1 *De sacrilegio ad sepulchra mortuorum* (“sacrilege to the graves of the dead”), which probably refers to the cultic actions performed to (prominent) dead people in burial mounds (Totemkult) (see e.g., Homann 2000; B. Nilsson 2010: 41–43).

344 Cultic images are well-attested in the Old Norse prose texts, where the concepts *tréguð* and *skurðgoð* were applied to such objects, but also terms such as *trémaðr*, *líkneski* (probably a translation loan of Latin *simulacrum*) as well as *stafr* and *hlutr*. The authors who described the ancient Scandinavian religion in Latin used polemic concepts such as *idolum* “idol” and *simulacrum* “image, idol” (see Hultgård 1997: 22 and Sundqvist 2016a: 264–289).

345 Old Gutnish *vi* (n. sg.) “holy place”; cf. *vi* in Swedish place-names and *vé* in Old Norse texts, see Vikstrand 2001; Sundqvist 2016b.

then idols.”³⁴⁶ The appellative **stafgarþr* is included in c. 50 proper place-names (Swedish *ägonamn*) in Gotland.³⁴⁷ The last element in the compound (*garþer*) is unproblematic. It means “fence, enclosure; farm, estate; yard.”³⁴⁸ The first element *staf-* is enigmatic, however, and it has not yet found a satisfactory solution (see also ON *stafr* in the *Older Eidsiváping Law* below). Ingemar Olsson pointed at a relation between place-names including *stafgarþar* and Iron Age house foundations.³⁴⁹ Archaeologist Anders Andrén has developed this suggestion which was originally proposed by Olsson. Andrén states that **stafgarþr* can be interpreted in two different ways, “either as a place enclosed with a fence of staves, emphasizing the construction of the fence or as one or several staves in an enclosed place, pinpointing the center of the enclosed area.”³⁵⁰ He argues that the latter explanation is most reasonable since it does not make sense that prohibitions were directed against enclosures made by staves. “Prohibitions against enclosures with one or several staves, however, make sense, because staves and wooden posts are known in several ritual contexts before Christianity.”³⁵¹ Andrén also suggests that the house foundations described by Olsson may have been reused as enclosures, within which one or more ritual posts were erected. He connects the concept *stafgarþar* with places designated with a last element *-vi*, such as *Lilla Ullevi* in Uppland and *Götavi* in Närke. These places have been investigated archaeologically and include enclosures with one or several staves, possibly in cultic contexts. Stefan Brink argues in the same vein as Andrén and states that the *stafgarþar* probably “had some sort of function in the pagan belief system.”³⁵² *The Guta Law* obviously aims at eradicate the old religion by means of prohibiting sacrifices and the worship of ancient gods at different types of traditional cult sites, which were used in Viking Age Gotland, or still were in used when the law was written down. If someone is found guilty of this, and confirmed with witnesses that he has invoked something of this sort with food or drink, contrary to Christian practice, then he is to be punished.

Norwegian medieval laws produce similar evidence of such prohibitions. In the paragraph called *Um blot* in the *Older Guláping Law* it is thus mentioned:

It is also admonished for us that we should not sacrifice to pagan gods, nor mounds nor *hørgar*. But if a man is a believer and sacrifices, then he has fortified all his property (in

346 *Firi þan tima oc lengi eptir siþan troþu menn a hult oc a hauga, wi oc stafgarþa oc a haiþin guþ . . .* Ed. Peel 1999: 5.

347 Olsson 1976 and 1996: 139–141.

348 See Schlyter 1887; Söderwall 1884–1918.

349 Olsson 1996: 139–147; cf. 1976: 95–97, 104–106.

350 Andrén 2020b: 110; cf. Olsson 1976: 11–17; 1996: 139.

351 Andrén 2020b: 116.

352 Brink 2020: 475.

money), and shall confess and do penance before Christ. But if he refuses, then he shall be outlawed (e.g., leave our king's realm).³⁵³

It is thus forbidden to sacrifice at or worship (*blóta*) different types of pagan cult places. The Old Norse concept *goð* (n. pl) “gods” refers most likely to images of gods in this context (see above). The expression *blota . . . hauga* designates probably the worship of ancestors or the hero cult mentioned above, where sacrifices were performed at the burial mounds. The Old Norse concept *hǫrgr* (sg.), in this law is debated. Some scholars have argued that it in pre-Christian contexts, designated a house or a kind of simple building. The Codex Regius manuscript of *Snorra Edda* states that the gods built a hall (*salr*). This was the *hǫrgr* that belonged to the goddesses. This building (*hús*) was called *Vingólf*.³⁵⁴ However, if we go to the manuscript called Codex Upsaliensis, the *hǫrgr* in the same passage designates a structure inside the hall, not the building itself.³⁵⁵ The other instance where *hǫrgr* refers to a house is in the Norwegian *Kristinrétt* (Church law), which has incorrectly been related to King Sverrir and which in fact is a compilation, or a redaction of paragraphs from the *Guláping* and *Frostáping laws*.³⁵⁶ According to this text, it is forbidden to build a house and call it a *hǫrgr*.³⁵⁷ The interpretation of this reference has also been regarded as problematic in previous research.³⁵⁸ In religious contexts, the term *hǫrgr* is mostly given the meaning “outdoor sanctuary” or “stone altar” (see 4.4.1 above), but it should be noticed that the term could also possibly refer to a building or a wooden cultic construction, which is apparently tall (*hátimbraðr*) as in *Völuspá* stanza seven and *Grímnismál* stanza sixteen, but also something else.³⁵⁹

353 *Blot er oss oc kviðiat at vér scolom eigi blota heiðit guð. ne hauga. ne horga. En ef maðr verðr at því kunnr oc sannr. þa hever hann firi gort hveríum penníngi fiar síns. han scal ganga til skripta oc bota við Crist. En ef hann vill þat eigi. þa scal han fara ór landeign konongs várs.* NGL 1: 18. Trans. Brink 2020: 468.

354 *Annan sal gerðu þeir, þat var hǫrgr er gyðjurnar áttu, ok var hann allfagr. Þat hús kalla men Vingólf.* *Gylfaginning* (Cod. Reg. Edda). Ed. Faulkes 1988: 15.

355 *Annan sal gerðu þeir er hǫrgr var í . . .*, *Gylfaginning* (Cod. Ups. Edda). Ed. Heimir Pálsson 2012: 24.

356 It is thus called *Kong Sverrers Christenret*. Cf. Bøe 1981 [1956–1978] and Brink 2020: 470.

357 *ef maðr . . . læðr hauga eða gerer hus oc kallar horgh.* Here quoted from *Kong Sverrers Christenret* ch. 79. NGL 1: 430.

358 See e.g., O. Olsen 1966: 106.

359 See La Farge & Tucker 1992: 133. Cf. Vikstrand 2001; Sundqvist 2005b; 2007; 2009b and 2016a. See also Brink's careful reasoning (2020: 468) and Eldar Heidi's (2015) alternative etymology of *hǫrgr*. Instead of the basic meaning “rocky ground” or “heap of stones,” Heide argues that *hǫrgr* has a connection with Latin *carcer* “an enclosed place, prison, barrier or starting-place in the racecourse,” a proposal which was previously suggested by Adolf Noreen. “The essential or original meaning of horg seems to be ‘a barrier, enclosure’, which are two sides of the same coin if a

The *Older Gulaping Law* states that if a man is a believer and sacrifices, he has fortified all his property (in money), and shall confess and do penance before Christ, but if he refuses, then he shall be outlawed. This must have been an effective action in order to dismantle the Old Norse religion in Western Norway in the Early Middle Ages. Similar regulations appear also in the earliest Icelandic law collection, called *Grágás*:

If man worships heathen beings, the penalty is lesser outlawry, . . .³⁶⁰

The concept used here, *fjorbaugsgarðr*, refers to lesser outlawry, by which was meant a fine or the loss of some property.³⁶¹ The full outlawry was called *skóg-gangr* which meant that “the person forfeited all his property and all his rights and could be killed by anyone.”³⁶²

In the *Uppland Law (Upplandslagen)* (1296) (including the dependent *Hälsinge Law*), Sweden, we have similar expressions as the ones mentioned above. They appear in the first paragraph of the Church law:

All must believe in Christ, that he is God, and that there are no other gods than he alone. No one shall sacrifice to idols, and no one shall believe in groves and stones. All must worship the church.³⁶³

In this law the concept Old Swedish *afgub* “pagan god, pagan idol” most likely refers to an image representing a pagan god, since it is related here to other cult objects, such as the sacred groves and the stones. The Old Swedish *lunder* “grove” can be compared with Old Gutnish **hult* (n. sg.) “grove” in the *Guta Law*. The expression *ok ængin a . . . stenæ troæ* has a parallel in the Icelandic law *Grágás*: “People are not to do things with stones or fill them with magic power with the idea of tying them on people or livestock. If a man puts trust in stones for his own

cultic enclosure is seen as first and foremost separating areas of different symbolic status.” (Heide 2015: 44).

360 Konungsbók: *Ef maðr blotar heiðnar vættir, oc uarþar þat fjorbauqs Garþ*. *Kristinna Laga Þáttir* ch. 7. Ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974 [1852]: 22. Staðarhólsbók: *Ef maðr blotar heiðnar vættir oc uarðar þat Fiðr Bauqs Garþ . . . Kristinna Laga Þáttir* ch. 18. Ed. Vilhjálmur-Finsen 1974 [1879]: 27.

361 The penalty called *fjorbaugsgarðr* refers to “a fine, the loss of some property, perhaps also an ox or cow, and the banishment from Iceland for three years (but, noteworthy, that, while abroad, the excommunicated person enjoyed normal immunity)” (Brink 2020: 464).

362 Cf. Brink 2020: 464.

363 *A krist skulu allir kristnir troæ at han ær guþ. ok æi æru guþær flere. æn han æn. ængin skal affguþum blotæ. ok ængin a lundi ællr stenæ troæ. allir skulu kirkiu dyrkæ.* UL Kk 1 pr, SSGL 3: 11–12. Trans. Brink 2020: 474.

health or that of his livestock, the penalty is lesser outlawry.”³⁶⁴ There are several interesting examples of ancient rituals performed in connection to (sacred) stones in the sources of different types.³⁶⁵ According to these laws such practices must be eradicated.

Other types of ritual paraphernalia related to the old customs are forbidden in other medieval laws. In the *Older Eidsivåping Law*, which was used in south-eastern Norway, it says thus:

No man shall keep in his house staff or podiums, a sorcerer’s tool or sacrifice, or things connected to pagan customs or anything else belonging to the pagan customs. But if he does, and is found guilty of this, he is [to be] outlawed and excommunicated, and will also [lose] every coin of [i.e., all of] his property.³⁶⁶

The word *stafr* (m.) is translated by Johan Fritzner as “noget som benyttedes ved afgudernes dyrkelse” (see also *stafgarðar* above), and *stallr* or *stalli* (m.) as “Stil-lads hvorpaa Afgubbilleder ere oppstillede, Alter.” The staff (ON *stafr*) and the podium (*stallr/stalli*) may thus very well refer to the custom of having a cult image of the god placed on a sacrificial altar/platform in the house. This information harmonizes well with Snorri’s description of the interior of the *hof* in Mære, which says that Þórr sat on a podium (*stallr/stalli*).³⁶⁷ The basic meaning of the word *stallr/stalli* must be “a stand upon which something could be placed.”³⁶⁸

364 Konungsbók: *Menn scolo eigi fara með steina. eða magna þa til þess at binda á menn eða a fé manna. Ef meN trva a steina til heilindis ser. eða fé. oc varþar fiorbaugs Garþ. Grágás, Kristinna Laga Þátttr* ch. 7. (Konungsbók) Ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974 [1852]: 23. Staðarhólsbók: *Menn scolo eigi fara með steina eða magna þa til þes at binda a menn eða fenað. Ef maðr trvir a steina til heilindis ser eða fe sino oc varðar þat Fiör Baugs Garð. Grágás, Kristinna Laga Þátttr* ch. 18. Ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974 [1879]: 27. *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum* includes a heading indicating that some native customs and deeds performed on stones would be banned. “*De his quae faciunt super petras*” (Fontes: 43).

365 In the Eddic lay called *Guðrúnarkviða III*, Guðrún, Atli’s wife, is accused of having slept with Þjóðrekr by one of Atli’s serving-maids called Herkia. Atli was very upset and turned to Guðrún with this accusation. Guðrún responded that she was not unfaithful to Atli: “*ek . . . eiða vinna at inum hvíta helga steini*” (I’ll swear you oaths about all this, by the sacred, white stone) (st. 3) (trans. Larrington 2014: 197). Interpreters have associated *inn hvíti helgi steinn* with marble, but also other white rocks (von See et al. 2009: 804). It has been stated that this poem reflects very old customs, such as the punishment of Herkia, where she was drowned in a foul bog (*i mýri fíla*) (st. 11). The drowning of criminals in a bog is a well-attested Germanic death penalty. See further ch. 8 below and note 82.

366 *Engi maðr skal hafa i husi sinu staf eða stalla. vit eða blot. eða þat er til heiðins siðar uæit. En ef hefer oc uærðr hann at þui kunnr eða sannr. Þa er hann utlægr oc uhæiligr. oc huær pæningr fear hans. Den ældre Eidsivathing's Kristenret* NGL 1: 383. Trans. based on Brink 2020: 471.

367 See *Óláf's saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 69; see the text in 6.1.

368 Heggstad et al. 2012: 591.

Since we have the compound *véstillr* “sacred stand/alter” in the early poetic language,³⁶⁹ we may assume that some type of altars or ritual platforms really existed inside cult buildings during the Viking Age. The kenning probably referring to Óðinn, *fúrr stalla vinr* “the friend of the fire of the altars/podiums” in Egill Skalla-Grímsson’s *Berudrápa* stanza one (c. 970) indicates also the same.³⁷⁰ That the term was associated early on with some kind of altar may be supported by *Fjölsvinnsmál* stanza 40, where we have the expression “to sacrifice at the altar-holy place” (*blóta . . . á stallhelgum stað*). In this case the word **stallheilagr* is an adjective with the meaning “altar-holy” or “hallowed by an altar.”³⁷¹

The *Older Eidsivaping Law* indicates thus clearly how important it was for the Christians rulers and the Church in general to exterminate the ritual materials used in the old cult.³⁷² It seems as if these actors during the high Middle Ages employed legal strategies for these achievements.

4.4.3 Regulations against the consumption of sacrificial food

Old Norse texts as well as archaeological evidence, indicate that the consumption of sacrificial food, especially horsemeat was crucial in the old cult. In Snorri’s *Hákonar saga góða*, but also in other medieval prose texts, the actual eating of the sacrificial meat was synonymous with sacrificing. In addition, the king’s consumption of horse liver seemed to be important. When the early Christian power in Scandinavia wanted to dismantle the old religion, these kinds of customs were abolished. It is thus no surprise that we meet regulations related to the consumption of traditional sacrificial food in the medieval laws. In the *Guta Law* (in the section “*aff blotan*”) invocations with food and drinking were prohibited in medieval Gotland when they did not follow Christian customs: “If someone is found guilty of this [pagan practices such as sacrifices at pagan cult places of different kinds], and it is proved against him and confirmed with witnesses that he has invoked something of this sort with food or drink, contrary to Christian practice, then he is to be find three marks to parishioners” (see the Gutnish text above). In *Guta Saga*, it is mentioned that sacrifices (Old Gutnish *blotan*) were performed in

369 See *Ynglingatal*, Marold in SkP 1: 26.

370 See Clunies Ross in SkP 5: 380–381. and especially Clunies Ross 2022 detailed investigation of the kenning.

371 La Farge & Tucker 1992: 247.

372 The term *vit* mentioned in the *Older Eidsivaping Law* is enigmatic. It has been related to the verb **vitta* “conjure” (cf. *vitti*). Perhaps it refers to a ritual object which was used when conducting sorcery or creating ecstasy (cf. Brink 2020: 473).

more ancient periods there. The whole island held the highest sacrifice on its own account:

But smaller assemblies held a lesser sacrifice with cattle, food, and drink. Those involved were called “boiling companions,” because they all cooked their sacrificial meals together.³⁷³

The Old Gutnish appellation *subnautr* “comrade-in-sacrifice” and the verb *siauþa* “cook, boil” belong to an ancient Germanic sacrificial terminology and should be related to the Gothic word *sauþs* “sacrifice” (cf. Old Norse *seyðir* m. “cooking-fire,” “cooking-place,” “cooking-pit”).³⁷⁴ The word *fileþi* is usually translated “cattle, beast,” but perhaps this term also connoted “horse.”³⁷⁵ The description of sacrifices in the *Guta Saga* thus constitutes a close parallel to the rituals mentioned in *Hákonar saga góða*. The composition of *Guta Saga* is usually dated to sometime between 1220 and 1275.³⁷⁶ It is possible that pagan customs related to food and drink were performed in Gotland up until the thirteenth century, since the *Guta Law* points out that such rituals are strictly forbidden and criminalized.³⁷⁷

Almost all early Norwegian laws prohibited the custom of eating horseflesh.³⁷⁸ This was probably connected to the association of horsemeat with pagan sacrificial rituals. According to the *Older Gulaping Law*, eating of horsemeat was to be punished by a fine of three marks, unless it took place during Lent in which case the punishment was permanent outlawry.³⁷⁹ A similar punishment also appears in the *Borgarþing Law*. Anyone eating horse, dog or cat was punished with permanent outlawry. The law made an exception for people who were lost in the wilderness, without food for seven days. The prescriptions stipulated in the *Borgarþing Law* are interesting, since they clearly indicate that eating these animals was regarded as pagan practice. The law states thus: “. . . when someone eats one

373 . . . *En smeri þing hafðu mindri blotan miþ fileþi, mati ok mungati, sum haita subnautar, þy et þair suþu allir saman. Guta Saga* text and trans. Peel 1999: 4–5.

374 According to *Hymiskviða* 15, the gods bore the bulls off to the cooking-pit (*á seyði*), which probably reflex a ritual cooking. See Kaliff & Mattes 2017: 152.

375 *Guta Saga*, ed. Peel 1999: 29.

376 *Guta Saga*, ed. Peel 1999: xlix–liii.

377 Thunmark-Nylén 1989: 232.

378 Sanmark 2004: 222.

379 *En ef maðr etr rossakiot. þa böte hann firi þat morcom .iij. biscope. aller menn a vara tungu. oc gange til scripta oc böte við Crist. . . . En ef maðr etr rossakiot i langa fostu. þa hever hann firigort hverium penningi fear sins. oc fare or landeign konongs várs.* NGL 1: 11–12. The prohibition on eating horseflesh in *Old Gulaping Law* ch. 20. appeared in a chapter that forbade the eating of meat during the seasonal fast. Anders Hultgård (1996: 42) has argued that the fact that horsemeat was forbidden at all times of year suggests that horses previously were consumed in ritual contexts. Cf. Sanmark 2004: 222.

of these [animals] without necessity then he has forfeited fortune and peace, land and property, and must leave for a heathen land and never return to where Christians are.”³⁸⁰ The phrase *at fare a land hœiðit* is significant, since it states that the custom of eating horse, dog or cat was associated to pagan practice. It also appears in the outlawry clauses regarding those who refused to baptize a child, neglected to pay tithe, or performed illegal marriages and divorces. The regulations prescribed in the *Frostaping Law* indicate that similar rules related to horse-meat, including dog and cat, also existed in Trøndelag,³⁸¹ and for south-eastern Norway, according to the *Eidsivaping Law*.³⁸² This latter law informs us just before this passage about forbidden (pagan) food sacrifices:

Now, if sacrifice is found in an unlocked house, food offerings or clay offerings, shaped like human body, of clay or dough, then he must free himself from this with a *lýrétr* oath,³⁸³ [and he is] guilty [and must pay a fine] of 3 marker if he fails the oath.³⁸⁴

All these practices were thus not in keeping with Christian customs.³⁸⁵ These prescriptions against the consumption of (assumed) sacrificial food were crucial when wiping out the Old Norse religion in both Norway and Sweden.

380 *Ef ræið lystr þa skall vnyta. Nv skall alt þæt eta er i bui er föðt uttan hund oc katt oc ros. En ef maðr etr æinhuern þænn lut nauðsynia laust þa hæfir han furegort fe oc friði lande oc lausum öyri. fare a land hœiðit oc kome aldri þær sem krisnir menn ero.* NGL 1: 342.

381 *Ef maðr er staðen a fiillum eða i vttöyum vm langa fastu oc heiptir hann ueðr. þa skal hann eta huetuitna hælldr en döya nema mann ein. En þa er hann kömr til bygða þa segi þeim preste til er hann ma fyrst hitta eða seckizt hann .vj. aurum uid biskup. en aðrum .vj. aurum ef hann fer vm annan prest. En ef hann fer þegiande vm hin þriðia þa er hann vtlægr en biskup hafe fe hans allt.* NGL 1: 145.

382 *En ef maðr gengr a uillator í mork uti. Ef hann hefer genget .vij. daga oc .vij. netr. En ef hunndr fylgir honum. þa skal han fyrr eta hunnden. en hunndren ete hann. En ef hann hittir ros. þa skal hann fyr eta þat en hann suellti længr. En þegar hann kömr i bygðir. þa skal hann sægia til misætes sins. mannum. oc ganga til scrifta. þa liggr ængi sækt uið. En ef hann löynir oc kömr up siðan oc ucerðr hann sannr at. þa er hann utlægr oc fe hans allt.* NGL 1: 384.

383 The term *lýrétr*, *lýrittr* is translated by Heggstad et al (2012: 404) as “full lovleg rett, land-srett”; “lovleg forbod som in bruker mot noko.”

384 *Nu ef blot er funnit i husi laslausu matblot. eða læirblot gort i mannzliki. af læiri. eða af dægi. þa skal hann þeðan løyssa i brot. mæð lyrittar æiði. sæckr.ij. markum ef eiðr fællz.* NGL 1: 383. Trans. Brink 2020: 472. In sacrificial contexts, iconic images made of dough could represent the material of the oblation. Comparative materials indicate that this occurs at communal sacrifices, where the recipient and the sacrificial gift are regarded as being of the same divine nature. In this type of sacrifice, the gift, identified with the divinity, is sometimes also consumed in connection to a communal meal by the cultic group. This type of ritual is best known from the Christian Eucharist. But it is also covered in many other religions. Sundqvist 2019: 359–360.

385 Sanmark 2004: 222–223.

4.4.4 Regulations against witchcraft, divination rituals and *galdr*

In the medieval laws we also meet regulations against witchcraft. There is a section in the *Older Guláping Law* called “Concerning Prophecy and Witchcraft” (*Um spár oc um galldra*). It is stated there that people should believe in neither “sooth-saying, witchcraft nor maleficence.” But if he does, and is found guilty of this, he is to be outlawed and excommunicated.³⁸⁶ The law then goes on to enumerate other penalties for those who harbor or perform such beliefs and practices.³⁸⁷ The Old Norse terms related to witchcraft in this section are nouns with wide semantics, such as *spá* (f.) with the meaning “divination, prophecy, prediction,” *galdr* (m.) “sorcerous incantation, magic spell, sorcery, witchcraft, magic,” and *gerning* (f.) “sorcery, witchcraft.”³⁸⁸ Similar restrictions also appear in the Icelandic law codex called *Grágás*:

If someone uses spells or witchcraft or magic – he uses magic if he utters or teaches someone else or gets someone else to utter words of magic over himself or his property – the penalty is lesser outlawry, and he is to be summoned locally and prosecuted with a panel of twelve. If man practices black sorcery, the penalty for that is full outlawry. It is black sorcery if through his words or his magic a man brings about the sickness or death of livestock or people. That is to be prosecuted with a panel of twelve.³⁸⁹

The penalty for practice of sorcery is lesser outlawry (*fjorbaugsgarðr*). But if sorcery was used to effect man or livestock so they became sick or even died; in other words, black magic, the penalty was *skóggangr*; that is, full outlawry. The terms used in this law for witchcraft are *galdr* “spell,” *gerning* “sorcery, witch-

386 *Ðat er nu því nest at ver scolom eigi lyda spám ne golldrum ne gerningum. illum. En sa er kunnr oc sannr verðr at því. at hann segir spar. æða ferr með spám. þa er hann maðr utlagr oc uheilagr.* NGL 1: 17.

387 Cf. Mitchell 2011: 21.

388 See ONP.

389 Konungsbók: *Ef maþr ferr með galldra eþa gørningar. eþa fiolkyngi. Þa ferr hann með fiolkyngi ef hann queðr þat eþa kennir. eþa lætr queða. at ser eþa at fe sinv. þat varþar honum fiorbaugs Garþ. oc scal honum heima stefna. oc sækia við .xij. qvið. Ef maþr ferr með fordæs skap. þat varþar scoGang. þat ero fordæs skapir. ef maþr gérir i orðum sinvm. eþa fiolkyngi sott eþa bana. fe eþa mavnvm. þat scal sækia við .xij. qvið. Kristinna Laga Þáttr ch. 7. Ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974 [1852]: 22–23. Staðarhólsbók: *Ef maðr fer með galldra. eða fiolkyngi. oc varðar honum þat Fiör Baugs Garð oc scal stefna heiman. oc sækia við .xij. quið. . . . Ef maþr fer með fordöðo scap. þat varðar sco Gang. þat ero fordöðo scapir. ef maþr gørir i orðum sinum. eða fiolkyngi sótt eða bana mönnom eða fe. þat scal sækia við .xij. quið. Grágás, Kristinna Laga Þáttr ch. 18. Ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974 [1879]: 27. Trans. by Brink 2020: 463.**

craft,” but also the nouns *ffolkynngi* (f.) “the black art, witchcraft, wizardry, sorcery” and *fordæðuskapr* (m.) “witchcraft, sorcery.”³⁹⁰ The negative attitude held by the elite society in medieval Scandinavia toward the practice of witchcraft and sorcery, appears also in the *Borgarþing Law*, which was used around Viken in southern Norway:

But if a woman bites off a finger or toe from her child and does that [in order to secure] long life, she is fined 3 marks. The worst witch is she who destroys a man or a woman or child or cow or calf. And if sorcery is found in bedding or bolster, the hair of a man, or nails or frog feet or other talismans which are thought wont in witchcraft, then a charge may be made [. . .] That is felony if one sits out and rouses trolls thereby. That is felony if one kills oneself. That is also felony if one journeys to Finnmark for soothsaying.³⁹¹

In this law the charges enumerated are also penalties connected to the practice of *fordæðuskapr*, *spá* and *gerving*. Interesting also is the practice called *sitja úti* or *útiseta*, literally meaning “to sit out” or “sitting out,” that is, a divination ritual connected with the practice of witchcraft.³⁹² The Old Norse word used for “felony” in this context is *úbót* (f.), sometimes referred to as *úbótaboł* (n.), *úbótamál* (n.), *úbótaverk* (n.) or *úbótasøk* (f.); that is, “deeds which cannot be atoned for money.”³⁹³

There are plenty of regulations related to witchcraft in the medieval law-codexes.³⁹⁴ Some of them may have been performed by professional religious specialists, such as the *völur*, *spákonur* or *spámenn*. They indicate that royal power together with the church tried to dismantle old practices related to folk-beliefs in the early Middle Ages.

390 Zoëga 2004 [1910]: 140, 144.

391 *En ef kona bitr fingr af barne sinu eda to ok gerer þat til langlifis hon er sæck .iij. morkum. Su er fordæda vest en fúir gerer manne eda kono eda barne. ku eda kalfe. En ef fordædoskapr verdr funnín i bædiúm eda bulstrum manna har eda nægl eda frauda fötr. eda adrer þeir lutir en uenir þickia til gærninga. þa ma sok gefa . [. . .] Þat er vbota verk ef madr sitr vti ok væckir troll vp. Þat er vbota verk ef madr tynir ser sialfr. Þat er ok vbota verk ef madr fær a fin merkr at spyria spa.* NGL 1: 362. Trans. Mitchell 2011: 21.

392 Price 2019: 126.

393 Mitchell 2011: 161–162.

394 For a thorough investigation I will just refer to Stephen A. Mitchell's book *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*, specifically ch. 5, “Witchcraft, Magic, and the Law” (2011: 146–174).

4.4.5 Burial mounds and the treatment of dead people

Regulations were not only related to the old worship of the pagan gods at different types of sanctuaries or witchcraft performed by sorceresses, but also to the pagan treatment of dead people.³⁹⁵ Such restrictions are visible early in Germanic laws from Continental Europe. In a Frankish law, from the period of Charlemagne (c. 782–785), under the heading *De minoribus capitulis*, pagan practices related to burials were strongly forbidden.³⁹⁶ The dead people should be buried at the churchyard and not in the pagan burial mounds.³⁹⁷ Violations were punishable by death.³⁹⁸ There were also laws related to burial customs in Scandinavia. When a person lived as a Christian, it is stated, that he or she must be buried in the churchyard.³⁹⁹ Legislation regarding Christian burial practice is however scarce in the Scandinavian laws.⁴⁰⁰ According to Norwegian laws, there are a few attestations. It was, for instance, not tolerated to bury a dead relative in a mound or a cairn. The *Older Gulaping Law* states that if anybody buries a body in a mound or a cairn, it should be unearthed and fines shall be paid to the bishop. The dead body must be brought to the church and buried in sacred ground.⁴⁰¹ Similar regulations appear in the *Frostaping Law*, where it is stated that all dead bodies should be brought to churchyard within five days.⁴⁰² There were exceptions made for people who lived far away from church. There are similar regulations in the Icelandic law called *Grágás* in the section called “Christian Law”: “Corpse with the right to church burial is to be taken to

395 On early Christian death liturgy and burial rituals, see B. Nilsson 2010. See also 5.4 below.

396 *Si quis corpus defuncti hominis secundum ritum paganorum flamma consume fecerit et ossa eius ad cinerem redierit, capite punietur. Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, MGH Legum II: 1 c 7: 69. See further B. Nilsson 1992: 24 and 2010: 43.

397 *Iubemus ut corpora christianorum Saxanorum ad cimiteria ecclesiae deferantur et non ad tumulos paganorum. Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, MGH Legum II: 1 c 22: 69. See further B. Nilsson 1992: 24 and 2010: 43.

398 See B. Nilsson 1992: 22–26.

399 On the medieval funeral customs in the West Church, as well as its funeral liturgy, see B. Nilsson 2010.

400 See B. Nilsson 1992: 25–26; Sanmark 2004: 265.

401 *En ef maðr grefr lic i hauga æða reysar. þa scal hann þat upp grava. oc böta firi þat aurum. ij. biscope. oc föra lic til kirkiu. oc grava i iorð helga.* NGL 1: 14. See Nordeide 2020: 1630.

402 *Kristin mann huern skal at kirkiu grafa oc til kirkiu hafa fört lik innan fim natta nauðsynia laust.* NGL 1: 135.

church as soon as men can get ready to do so.”⁴⁰³ Most likely these regulations contributed to the demise of Old Norse religion in Iceland and Norway.⁴⁰⁴

4.5 Redefining the status of the gods

The early Christian kings and the medieval church did everything to denigrate the pagan gods and the people worshipping them. They even had various literary strategies to rob the gods of their divine status or devalue them, such as euhemerism, demonology, and idol parody. Some of these strategies were thus applied by authors, for example, in the early chronicles and hagiographical texts written in Latin, but also in the medieval Kings' Sagas and other texts written in Old Norse. These strategies were probably also used in oral performances, for example in sermons or in other gatherings at, for example, assembly meetings or in the chieftain's hall. Although the early Christian kings and church wanted to eradicate the cult of the polytheistic gods and their myths, it seems that they did not completely succeed in this. The memory of the old gods lived on long after the official conversion was made. People continued to tell stories about them. In texts, but probably also in oral performances, it was then important that these deities were redefined, belittled in various ways or portrayed as evil. These strategies aimed to dissolve the public cult of the old gods, but also to influence people's perception of these deities as well.⁴⁰⁵

403 Konungsbók: *Lik hvert scal til kirkio færa þat er at kirkio a lægt sva sem menn verþa bvnir fyrst til. Grágás, Kristinna Laga Þáttr* ch. 2. Ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974 [1852]: 7. Staðarhólsbók: *Lik huert scal til kirkio færa. þat er at kirkio a lægt sva sem menn verþa fyrst búnr til. Grágás, Kristinna Laga Þáttr* ch. 6. Ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974 [1879]: 7.

404 Historian Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (2020: 1680) argues: “For the Church in Iceland, it was essential to introduce new rituals in order to draw a demarcation line separating Christianity from pre-Christian religion. It can therefore be claimed that the focus on baptism and on changing burial practices were considered to be the most efficient ways of steering the population in the ‘right’ direction.”

405 Historian of literature Jonas Wellendorf (2018) has dealt with the medieval reception and reinterpretation of the pre-Christian religion and the old deities in a recent monograph. There he shows how these gods became integrated into the medieval Christian worldview, with the support of the above-mentioned strategies. In what follows, I will briefly address some strategies that we can see in the sources, that contributed to the dismantling of the Old Norse religion. In this overview, I am indebted to Wellendorf's important work.

4.5.1 The pagan gods

It seems as if the early Christian kings and their councillors primarily focused on the cultic activities when dismantling the Old Norse religion. As a consequence of this strategy, some Old Norse mythic traditions about the pagan gods survived into the Middle Ages.⁴⁰⁶ These traditions are described in the *Poetic Edda* and the *Edda* of the Icelander Snorri Sturluson. We do not know whether the descriptions in them concur with the world view of Viking Age people. From the Viking Age to the Middle Ages, various additions were incorporated into these mythic traditions. Snorri himself arranged his material in accordance with literary models and rhetorical devices that were common among learned writers in the Middle Ages. He framed his mythical narratives in, for instance, *Ynglinga saga* with the “The Learned Prehistory,” where the gods were euhemeristically converted into earthly rulers.⁴⁰⁷ These narratives were based on a pattern provided by Virgil’s *Aeneid*, where it is described how Aeneas left Troy and founded the empire of Rome. Similar to Aeneas, Óðinn left Ásgarðr, the capital of Ásaland in Asia, and travelled to Sigtuna in Svetjud, where he settled and founded the royal Ynglinga-family who descended from euhemeristically interpreted gods. In *Ynglinga saga* the genealogical list begins with Njǫrðr – Yngvi-Freyr – Fjǫlnir – Sveigðir etc., down to possibly historical Norwegian kings, that is, the forefathers of Haraldr hárfagri. Hence, this narrative about the Ynglinga-kings was also a kind of foundation myth for the state of Norway.⁴⁰⁸ Snorri probably took this model of combining “The Learned Prehis-

406 Lindow (2021: 124–126) lists some reasons *why* Old Norse mythology was preserved after the conversion to Christianity. One reason might be simple entertainment values of the myths. A second reason could be related to the fact that myths explained remains of the old religion, such as theophoric place-names, images that had survived from the Viking Age on runestones or Gotlandic picture stones or other artifacts, such as Þórr’s hammers or phallic figures. A third reason was that the myths were “good to think with.” A fourth reason, finally, was its role in poetry, in preserving native wisdom or as lore encoded in native system of memory, transmission and performance. See e.g., the poetics of *Snorra Edda*. McKinnell (2007) discusses why Christians found pagan myths useful. Outside the Old Norse context in Germanic area, he finds three categories: practical magic, Christian condemnations of heathenism, and claims of noble and impressive ancestry. In the Old Norse context, he mentions that the myths were necessary for young poets to learn since they were occasionally used in twelfth and thirteenth century poetry. He also mentions entertainment as one reason for Christians learning myths.

407 The Learned Prehistory is also attested in the Prologue of Snorri’s *Edda* and the final lines in *Gylfaginning*. The account about Troy was translated from Latin to Old Norse possibly in the early thirteenth century. See e.g., *Trójumanna saga*, which was a translation of *De excidio Troiae* and (falsely) attributed to Dares Phrygius. See also *Veraldar saga*. Cf. Jónas Kristjánsson 1988: 132, 332; Weber 1985 and 1994; Malm 2018: 99–101; Lindow 2021.

408 See Lincoln 2014.

tory” with euhemeristically interpreted gods from Ari inn fróði’s genealogical list called *nofn langfeðga Ynglinga ok Breiðfirðinga* (“names of the forefathers of the Ynglinga-kin and the Breiðafjörður-people”) in *Íslendingabók*, which introduces with Yngvi Tyrkjakonungr – Njorðr Sviakonungr – Freyr – Fjölunir – Sveigðir etc. There are no traces of this learned construction in the royal list of Ynglingar appearing in the late ninth century poem *Ynglingatal*.⁴⁰⁹ In a sense, the medieval writers thus dismantled the Old Norse religion by means of transforming the gods into earthly rulers and thereby destroying their divine nature.⁴¹⁰ Occasionally, however, Snorri composed his texts with the aid of old traditions. He cited, for example, mythical poems from the *Poetic Edda* in *Gylfaginning*,⁴¹¹ and from the skaldic poems in *Skáldskaparmál*.⁴¹² From them he elaborated the mythical prose accounts, which are preserved in his *Edda*. Some of the Eddic lays may have been composed during the Viking Age, but it is likely that many of them were reworked by medieval authors. These texts are therefore literary presentations of the myths, mixing old and new.

In contrast to monotheistic Christianity, the ancient Scandinavian religion was polytheistic. In the sources, several individual gods are mentioned by names, such as Óðinn, Þórr, Freyr and the goddess Freyja.⁴¹³ Collectively, they are described by the Old Norse neuter plural forms *goð*, “the gods,” *regin*, “(divine) powers,” *høpt*, “(divine) fetters” and *bønd*, “(divine) bonds.”⁴¹⁴ It has been argued that the Old Norse gods were divinities of a very different kind than the Christian god. Jonas Wellendorf states thus: “One remarkable difference is that the Norse gods were mortal rather than eternal. They existed in time rather than outside time, had been born, and were expected to die as well.”⁴¹⁵ The Christian belief in an abstract, eternal and almighty God with a message about universal redemption to all people and nations was probably something new and problematic for the Scandinavians during the transition period. The pagan polytheistic pantheon concerned several deities, sometimes with a relation to specific groups of people.

409 Sundqvist 2002; 2016a.

410 Cf. Wellendorf 2018: 3 and below.

411 Lassen 2018: 139–141.

412 Clunies Ross 2018c: 150–152.

413 Laidoner (2020) has recently argued that, for instance Freyr, rather should be described as a “superior ancestor” than a god. Supernatural beings, such as Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyr, who are connected to the cosmic events, either via the cosmogony or the eschatology, should rather be described as gods. See Sundqvist 2020c.

414 Wellendorf 2018: 18–22; Lindow 2020b: 107–108.

415 Wellendorf 2018: 2.

Freyr, for instance, was called *blótgoð Svía*, “the sacrificial god of the Svear.”⁴¹⁶ These gods also had their home at specific places in the human landscape. Cult sites could, for instance, be called *Gudhem*; that is, “home of the divine powers.” We have one *Gudhem* in Västergötland and one well known *Gudme* (<*Gudhem*) in Fyn, Denmark.⁴¹⁷ The divine powers had in a concrete sense settled among the people on earth.⁴¹⁸

Snorri’s *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* report that the Old Norse gods are divided into two groups, the *æsir* (sg. *áss*) and the *vanir* (sg. *vanr*).⁴¹⁹ According to a common interpretation, the individual gods included different characteristics and functions, and together they constituted an ideal society.⁴²⁰ The *æsir* deities of warlike character, were concerned with protecting and ordering society. They included gods like Óðinn, Þórr, Baldr and Týr and the *ásynjur* “goddesses,” for instance Frigg. The *vanir*, on the other hand, were fertility gods, worshipped to ensure good harvests, rain and favourable winds, as well as fecundity. They were associated with agriculture, animal husbandry, sailing and fishing. We know the names of only three of them with certainty: Njörðr, and his children Freyr and Freyja.⁴²¹ Snorri mentions in *Ynglinga saga* chapter four that the *æsir* and the *vanir* had been in war but had made peace after an exchange of hostages and had become assimilated.

It is not possible in a limited space to go into a detailed discussion of the historical development of the individual gods. I will therefore present a heuristic model of the most important deities elaborated by Jens Peter Schjødt.⁴²² He argues that some of the greater gods, Óðinn, Þórr and Freyr, do have semantic centers related to their individualities, which creates some boundaries for what can be said about them, and for which purposes they can be venerated. He also states that these semantic centers are likely to have been rather stable. One of the most important gods in Viking Age Scandinavia was Óðinn. His semantic center was related to war and magic in the preserved traditions.⁴²³ With Jörð (Earth), Óðinn

416 *Qgmundar þáttur dytts*, Ísl. Fornr. 9: 114. See also Gunnell 2015; cf. Sundqvist 2020b.

417 SOL; Kousgård Sørensen 1985; problematized by Brink 2011.

418 The present writer has in previous studies argued that the topography of Uppsala as described by Adam of Bremen, with a hall, a specific tree and a well, was deliberately arranged as a reflection of a mythical landscape and dwelling place of the gods. Sundqvist 2004; 2011b; 2017d.

419 On the issue whether the *vanir* should be conceived as a specific group of gods, see Simek 2010; Frog & Roper 2011; Tolley 2011; Schjødt 2014 and Lindow 2020d: 1033–1050.

420 Dumézil 1959; 1973; cf. Lindow 2020d: 1033–1050; critically considered by e.g., Gunnell 2015.

421 On Freyja, see Näsström 1995.

422 Schjødt 2012b; 2014; 2021.

423 See e.g., Schjødt 2020b.

had a son called Þórr.⁴²⁴ According to Schjødt, Þórr's semantic center is related to protection in the sources. It seems as if Njörðr belongs to the oldest generation of the vanir.⁴²⁵ His son was Freyr.⁴²⁶ According to Schjødt, Freyr's semantic center in the sources is related fertility. It seems as if these gods were worshipped at cult places all over Scandinavia. Adam of Bremen describes the cult of Óðinn, Þórr and Freyr in Uppsala. Place-names such as *Frösåker*, *Odensvi* and *Torslunda* in the Lake Mälaren area produce similar evidence (see above).⁴²⁷

4.5.2 Euhemerism and demonology in early Latin texts

The strategy of demonizing pagan gods was early applied by the Church. It is even evidenced in the Latin Bible (*Vulgata*), where it is stated that “all the gods of the pagans are demons.”⁴²⁸ In early Latin sources referring to the ancient Scandinavia we may see that the pagan gods were demonized and sometimes identified with the Devil.⁴²⁹ When describing the three major gods in the Uppsala temple in Book 4,28, Adam of Bremen simply labeled them as “demons” (*daemones* pl), for example.⁴³⁰ Scholion 140 of Adam of Bremen's text mention that their Christian King Anunder was not willing to “offer the demons the prescribed sacrifice of the people” (. . . *sacrificium gentis statutum nollet demonibus offerre . . .*).⁴³¹ When expressing the terrible religious state of Norway during the early eleventh century, Adam states in Book 2,57: “For soothsayers and augurs and sorcerers and enchanters and other satellites of Antichrist live where by their depictions and wonders they may hold unhappy souls up for mockery by demons (*daemones*).” According to Theodoricus Monachus, Jarl Hákon “became the most eager slave of demons (*daemones*) once he had a tight grip on the kingdom.”⁴³² Hence, the

424 See Lindow 2020e and Taggart 2018.

425 Lindow 2020f.

426 See Sundqvist 2014a; 2017b; 2020b.

427 Vikstrand 2001.

428 *[O]mnes dii gentium daemonia* (PS 95.5 iuxta LXX, *Vulgata*, eds. Gryson et al. 1994: 890). Wellendorf 2018: 4, 123.

429 Wellendorf 2018: 4–5.

430 *Quidam e sacerdotibus, qui ad Ubsolam demonibus astare solebat*. Adam 4,28. However, Adam is not consistent with this polemical vocabulary. In 4,26 he mentions the statues of three gods (*statuas trium deorum*). Hultgård 1997: 22. Cf. Wellendorf 2018: 5, 124.

431 See also scholion 133 of Adam's text.

432 *Comfirmatus igitur Hocon in regno coepit daemonum esse precipuus servus. Historia de antiqutate regum norwagiensium*, ed. Storm 1880: 13.

pagan gods were according to these accounts identical to demons and people worshipping them were caught in a delusion.

Scholars argue that Rimbert in his *Vita Anskarii* often applied a dualistic view of history where God fights against the Devil.⁴³³ In chapter 17 it is stated, for instance, that the pagans in Birka were inflamed with zeal and fury, and began by insidious means to persecute Bishop Gautbert. This was done by the instigation of the Devil (*diabolus*).⁴³⁴ Whether the Devil here is interpreted as a representation of the pagan gods by Rimbert is not quite clear. He usually uses the term *dei* (pl. and *deus* sg.) for the pagan gods, indicating a quite neutral terminology. The counsellor of the king (*consiliarius regis*) and Christian man, Hergeirr (Old Swedish *Hærgær*), however, urged the Svear to renounce their superstitious worship, and stop placating their idols by useless sacrifices (*inani sacrificio idola vobis placare*).⁴³⁵ According to Adam, too, the aim of the sacrifices is to appease the gods: “with the blood of which it is customary to placate the gods of this sort” (*quorum sanguine deos [tales] placari mos est*).⁴³⁶ This appears to be a polemic *topos*.

It seems however as if Rimbert, Adam and other clerical authors were anxious to show that the Scandinavians did not have real gods. Their gods were actually human kings who died a long time ago. This strategy or approach is usually interpreted as euhemerism. Adam of Bremen states in his *Gesta* when describing the Svear and the cultic site of Uppsala: “They also pay reverence to gods derived from men, to whom they ascribe immortality because of their heroic deeds.”⁴³⁷ It is quite obvious that Adam took this information from Rimbert’s *Vita Anskarii*, since he adds: “as one reads in the *Vita* of Saint Ansgar they did in the case of King Hericus [Erik].”⁴³⁸ *Vita Anskarii* chapter 26 thus mentions that when Ansgar arrived in Birka on his second tour the people of the Svear had fallen victim to delusions. One man at this place claimed that he had participated in a council of the gods:

It happened, at the instigation of the devil, who knew beforehand of the coming of this good man, that someone had come thither and said that he had been present at a meeting of the gods, who were believed to be the owners of this land, and had been sent by them to make

⁴³³ Odelman 1986: 92; cf. B. Nilsson 1998: 48.

⁴³⁴ . . . *contigit etiam diabolico instinctu, ut populus Sueonum furore zeli accensus praefatum Gauzbertum* episcopum insidiosae persequi coeperit* . . . VA 17. See also VA 26 below.

⁴³⁵ VA 19. Hultgård 2022a: 605.

⁴³⁶ Adam 4,27. Hultgård 2022a: 605.

⁴³⁷ *Colunt et deos ex hominibus factos, quos pro ingentibus factis immortalitate donant, . . .* Adam 4,26.

⁴³⁸ *sicut in Vita sancti Ansgarii legitur Hericum [Erik] regem fecisse*. Adam 4,26.

this announcement to the king and the people: 'You, I say, have long enjoyed our goodwill, and under our protection the land in which you dwell has long been fertile and has had peace and prosperity. You have also duly sacrificed and performed the vows made to us, and your worship has been well pleasing to us. But now you are keeping back the usual sacrifices and are slothful in paying your freewill offerings; you are, moreover, displeasing us greatly by introducing a foreign god in order to supplant us. If you desire to enjoy our goodwill, offer the sacrifices that have been omitted and pay greater vows. And do not receive the worship of any other god, who teaches that which is opposed to our teaching, nor pay any attention to his service. Furthermore, if you desire to have more gods and we do not suffice, we will agree to summon your former King Eric to join us so that he may be one of the gods.' This devilish announcement, which was publicly made on the arrival of the bishop, disturbed the minds of all, and their hearts were deceived and disquieted. For they had resolved to have a temple in honour of the late king, and had begun to render votive offerings and sacrifices to him as to a god.⁴³⁹

According to this "announcement," the old gods were skeptical about the new Christian god. They stated that if the Svear desired to have more gods, they would agree to summon the former King Eiríkr (Old Swedish *Erik*) to join them so that he may take his place among these gods. The consequence of this was great activity and a "temple" (*templum*) was erected for King Eiríkr.

It is likely that Rimbert applied a euhemeristic method when stating that the Svear worshipped deities derived from human beings. This kind of reasoning was very common in the Judaeo-Christian polemics against pagan polytheism. Rimbert's and Adam's information could be compared with some sequences in the apocryphal text *Epistula Jeremiae* — which was included in both *Septuaginta* and *Vulgata* — where similar polemic aspects and wording appear.⁴⁴⁰ The gods are

439 *Instigante enim diabolo, adventum beati viri omnimodis praesciente, contigit eo ipso tempore, ut quidam illo adveniens diceret, se in conventu deorum, qui ipsam terram possidere credebantur, affuisse, et ab eis missum, ut haec regi et populis nunciaret: 'Vos', inquam, 'nos vobis propitios diu habuistis et terram incolatus vestri cum multa abundantia nostro adiutorio in pace et prosperitate longo tempore tenuistis. Vos quoque nobis sacrificia et vota debita persolvistis, grataque nobis vestra fuerunt obsequia. At nunc et sacrificia solita subtrahitis et vota spontanea segnius offertis et, quod magis nobis displicet, alienum deum super nos introducitis. Si itaque nos vobis propitios habere vultis, sacrificia omissa augete et vota maiora persolvite. Alterius quoque dei culturam, qui contraria nobis docet, ne apud vos recipiatis et eius servicio ne intendatis. Porro, si etiam plures deos habere desideratis, et nos vobis non sufficimus, Ericum quondam regem vestrum nos unanimes in collegium nostrum asciscimus, ut sit unus de numero deorum'. Hoc ergo diabolicum mandatum publice denunciatum in adventu domni episcopi mentes cunctorum perturbabat, et error nimius ac perturbatio corda hominum confuderat. Nam et templum in honore supra dicti regis dudum defuncti statuerunt et ipsi tanquam deo vota et sacrificia offerre coeperunt. VA 26. Trans. Robinson 1921.*

440 Hultgård 1997: 21.

nothing but human constructions (*quia non sunt dii sed opera manum hominum*).⁴⁴¹ Thietmar uses the same ethnographic cliché or *topos* when he writes about the Slavic sanctuary in Riedegost. In this sanctuary there are gods made by human hands (*dii manu facti*).⁴⁴²

Latin hagiographic traditions on saints, that were translated into Old Norse, also used similar strategies to dismantle the old gods. According to one of the oldest manuscripts of translated hagiography, *Clemens saga*,⁴⁴³ the protagonist and saint, St Clemens, described the pagan god Óðinn as thus: “But that Clemens does such a disgrace and dishonour to Óðinn, our help and refuge, that he calls him a fiend and an unclean spirit.”⁴⁴⁴ The noun *fiandi* (m.) could be interpreted as “the Devil” here.

Christian power applied similar strategies early in Continental Europe. The *Old Saxon Baptismal Vow*, (Latin *abrenuntiatio*) which is written in a mix of West Germanic dialects (Old High German, Old Saxon, Old Frisian, Old English) and Latin, indicates that the strategy of demonization of the old gods was applied early among the Saxons. This baptismal vow is quoted in Cod. Pal. 577 of the Vatican Library dated to the ninth century, but it may be older. It includes a specific list of renunciations:

ec forsacho allum dioboles uuercum and uuordum, Thunaer ende Uuôden ende Saxnôte ende allum thêmh holdum thê hira genôtas sint

I forsake all the Devil’s works and words: Thunor, Woden and Saxnote and all the uncanny beings who are their companions.⁴⁴⁵

Saxnôte was a Saxon tribal god, who followed the Saxons to England, where he appeared under the name Seaxnēat or Saxnēat. Thunaer and Wōden are equivalent Saxon name forms of Old Norse Þórr and Óðinn. The Church was thus eager to demonize these pagan gods.

441 *Epistula Jeremiae* sts 50–51, 72. Quoted from Hultgård 1997.

442 Thietmar, *Chronicon* 6,23. For another interpretation of these texts, see Sundqvist 2016a: 254–262.

443 The only manuscript AM 645 4to was written in the first half of the thirteenth century. See ed. Carron 2005: xxiii.

444 *En þá ósæmþ ok óvirþing veitir hann Óþni órlausnafullum ok hvarfsemi at síá Clemens kallar hann fjánda ok óhreinan anda*. *Clemens saga*, ed. Carron 2005: 44. Wellendorf 2018: 4, 123.

445 Text de Vries 1956–1957: §353 and English translation Brown 2013: 451. Cf. Simek 2006: 276.

4.5.3 Euhemerism, idol parody and demonology in medieval Old Norse texts

Old Norse prose texts include similar hagiographic and ethnographic clichés as the ones observed in Rimbert's, Adam of Bremen's and others Latin texts, that is, euhemerism and demonology. The intention was also in these texts to reduce or more likely deprive the old gods their divine status. The stories about the pagan gods were not completely rejected, but the character and nature of the pagan divinities were redefined and altered when narrating them. When the conversion process was over there was also a desire to preserve these stories, but adapted to their Christian contexts.⁴⁴⁶ As noticed above, Snorri, for instance, introduced his *Heimskringla* (*Ynglinga saga*) by presenting the euhemerized pagan gods as ancient kings who settled in Svētjud and also died there. This was an adaptation and adjustment to a Christian way of historical writing.

Another common feature in some of these medieval stories is that those pagans who worshipped these gods as cult images were mocked and ridiculed. The pagan cult images are often designated with Old Norse terms such as *tréguð*, *skurðgoð*, *trémaðr* or *líkneski* in these texts. The subtext in these medieval sources was often that the pagans had no real gods but worshiped wooden images that completely lacked divine status, as in the tradition on St Óláfr an Guðbrandr mention above. That kind of ridiculed cult had to be banned. It is no surprise that many of these accounts take place in conversion contexts. In a story preserved in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, King Óláfr Tryggvason seized an idol of Freyr at an assembly, whom the people of Trøndelag worshipped:

Then he [Óláfr] took a great axe. He then moved closer to Freyr and spoke to him: 'I will now put you to a rest, Freyr. If you can speak, then answer me.' But Freyr did not answer. The king said: 'If you are unable or unwilling to answer me, Freyr, then he who dwells in you, and who has dwelled in you for a long time, should answer. But if neither of you nor the demon is capable of responding, then it seems to me that the true God . . . has forced the two of you out. For the reason, I will by his mercy and my own might destroy and demolish, shatter and forcibly smash all your power.' Still, Freyr did not answer. The king spoke again: 'I am talking to you, Freyr, if you have the ability to strengthen or help people, now help yourself . . .' Then the king raised his axe, and hewed the arm of Freyr, but Freyr did not move. The king gave one blow after the other until he had dismembered the idol completely.⁴⁴⁷

446 Wellendorf (2018: 110) describe this development strikingly: "Once the time was ripe and the danger of relapse into paganism had receded from view, scholars and skalds sought ways to secure the future of the old gods by tying them into the now dominant Christian worldview."

447 *Hann tók þá øxi mikla. Hann gekk þá at Frey ok mælti til hans: "Nu skal prófa þig, Freyr, ef þú mátt mæla, þá svara mér." En Freyr þagði. 'Ef þú, Freyr,' segir konungr, 'mátt eigi eðr vill eigi svara mér, svari sá er í þér er ok þik hefir lengi magnat. En ef hvárgi ykkar má nú nokkut at ha-*

When the *Þrændir* realized that a demon had taken up residence in the idol and witnessed the rough treatment of it, they were willing to accept the Christian faith. In this story, Freyr is not a real god but a human being who lived long ago as a king of *Svetjud*. When he died none of his subjects were willing to follow him into the mound as was custom among the *Svear*. The *Svear* found a pragmatic solution and fashioned two wooden effigies and had them buried with the king. Later the two “men of wood” (*trémenn*) were dug up by grave robbers. They were venerated as cultic images representing Freyr. One of them resided in *Trøndelag* and one in *Svetjud*.⁴⁴⁸ It is the conversion context that “has led to the emphasis on demonological understanding of pre-Christian religion” in this story. It includes not only euhemeristic features, but also “elements of mockery, idol parody and demonology.”⁴⁴⁹

Another late and fantastic story in *Ögmundar þáttur dytts* and preserved in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, is related to the animated idol of Freyr in Sweden.⁴⁵⁰ It is said there that Gunnarr helmingr fled from the Christian court of King Óláfr Tryggvason in Norway to *Svetjud* where he met a pagan female cult leader, called *kona Freys* “Freyr’s wife.” Freyr himself appeared as a statue. This statue was so full of magic that the Devil spoke directly to people from it (*at fjándinn mælti við menn ór skurðgoðinu*). People believed that the statue was alive and that it must have sex with Freyr’s wife. Freyr’s wife ruled over the statue and the place called *hofstaðr*, that is, the sanctuary. Gunnarr took refuge there, although the god did not like him. When he had stayed there for three nights, the woman said to Gunnarr that he must remain with them for the winter and go with them to banquet since the god must improve the crops for the people (*gera monnum um árbót*). When the time came for the festivals, Freyr and his wife must sit in a cart and their servant (Gunnarr) was supposed to walk ahead of them. After a long journey, a storm broke out and Gunnarr was so tired that he had to sit down in the cart. Since Freyr did not like this, the animated idol attacked Gunnarr. During a hard struggle where Gunnarr became very exhausted, he promised to turn to the right faith and to King

fask, þú né fjándinn þá skilisk mér at sannr Guð, sá er vér trúum á kristnir menn, hafi fyrirdrift ykkar báða, ok því skal ek með hans miskunn ok mínu megni eyða ok afmá ok at nauðgum yðr niðrbrjóta allan yðvarn krapt.’ Freyr þagði þá enn. Konungr mælti: ‘En er til þín at tala, Freyr, ef þú hefir megn at gefa monnum afl eða orku, hlífðu þér nú.’ . . . Konungr hóf þá upp øxina ok hjó hönd af Frey, en Freyr brá ekki við. Konungr hjó þá högg hvert at oðru þar til hann hafði likneskju þessa límat alla í sundr.’ Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 3, 2000: 3–4. Trans. Wellendorf 2018: 39.

448 *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 3, 2000: 5–6.

449 Wellendorf 2018: 38–39. Cf. Clunies Ross 2018b.

450 This story appears in *Flateyjarbók* 1: 337–339. See also *Ögmundar þáttur dytts*. *Ísl. Fornr.* 9, 111–115. This *þáttur* is preserved in several manuscripts.

Óláfr Tryggvason if he could get help to defeat the statue. The Devil, who inhabited the statue, now escaped and only an empty block of wood was left. Gunnarr cut it into pieces and returned to the chariot. He put on the statue's outfit and met the delighted people in the villages as "Freyr" where he was eating and drinking with them. Soon, his "wife" was visibly pregnant. The Svear spoke about Freyr's ability to secure good weather and crops for them. The news about the Svea-god's power (*hversu blótgud Svía er máttigr*) reached King Óláfr who invited the couple to Norway. As soon as they arrived at his court, both were baptized.

This story includes several Christian *topoi*, which probably aimed at depriving the pagan god Freyr his divine status. The talk of the Devil (*fjándi*) direct from the statue could be described as demonology,⁴⁵¹ while Gunnarr's violent fight against the Devil in the statue could perhaps be interpreted as idol parody. The motif when Freyr turns into a man (Gunnarr) and marries Freyr's wife is perhaps affected by a kind of euhemerism. There could indeed also be some genuine features in this account, which may be rooted in old religious tradition and cult.⁴⁵² Certain burlesque features are however dominant in this account, which could be related to the negative view Icelanders had on the Svear, in general, and their long-standing paganism.⁴⁵³ Even if authors in post-conversion time first effectively demonized the old gods, such as Freyr, the stories of these divinities were not forgotten.

There are other medieval saga accounts where the pagans worship cultic images which seem to have been animated. There is a story in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* called *Rognvalds þátr ok Rauðs*, which illustrates this well.⁴⁵⁴ On an

451 Oddr uses the same demonology when he puts in the mouth of King Óláfr thus: "*Þat hygg ek at sjá djofull hafí verit með ásjónu Óðins.*" Ch. A45, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 252. The terms *fjándi* and *djofull* appear in such contexts.

452 As part of the cult of Freyr, a wooden image of the god may have travelled ceremonially by chariot in order to promote crops. Other texts report that divine beings were ceremonially carried in a cart during some kind of procession. Tacitus, for instance, mentions in *Germania* ch. 40 that the image of Nerthus was taken on a ceremonial procession in a chariot (*vehiculum*), perhaps somewhere in Denmark. It has been argued that Nerthus was a fertility-goddess, since she is described as *Terra mater*. Her name is etymologically identical with the name of Freyr's father, the fertility-god Njörðr (Much 1967: 450–452). According to Saxo (5.16.3), King Frotho III (perhaps Freyr) was conveyed ceremoniously in a chariot. After his death, he was embalmed and carried in the cart (*vehiculum*) for three years before he was finally buried. In *The Old English Runic Poem*, the divine being called Ing is associated with a chariot, which followed him ("wæn æfter ran"). As seen above, this being could be related to Freyr or Yngvi-Freyr. Whether the medieval processions in the fields outside Uppsala involving the relics and banner of St Eiríkr were related to the pre-Christian Freyr-cult is, however, very uncertain. Cf. Lid 1942; de Vries 1956–1957: §322; Hultgård 1992 and 2001a and Sundqvist 2002: 354–356 and 2020b; McKinnell 2005.

453 Cf. Foote 1993.

454 This text has also been preserved independently. See Perkins 2001: 27–29.

island located just off Hálogaland, north of Trøndelag, there was a man called Rauðr, who kept a sanctuary (*hof*) with a cultic image representing Þórr.⁴⁵⁵ Rauðr was a chieftain and great sacrificer (*en mesti blót maðr*), and he performed a great sacrifice upon the image of Þórr to give it strength there in its sanctuary (*at hann magnaði með miclum blót skap líkneski Þórs þar i hofinu*), so that a demon spoke out of the image (*at fiandin mælti við hann or skurð goðinu*). The image could also move, and was seen to walk outdoors in the daytime with Rauðr, who often took it with him about the island. At the end of this story the pagan god lost a contest with King Óláfr Tryggvason and his wooden image burned to ashes in a fire. Rauðr converted then to the new faith in the presence of the king.⁴⁵⁶

It seems as if this late tradition had something of a literary function and illustrates the demonic aspects of the pre-Christian religion and the pagan gods. Most likely the Christian writer wanted to demonstrate that the wooden image (*líkneski, skurðgoð*) representing Þórr included no real god since it burned to ashes. Perhaps it could be interpreted as an idol parody, as Rauðr walked outdoors in the daytime with the animated image as his company around his island. Most likely this story aimed at mocking the pagans who believed in idols made of wood as if they were real gods with agency.⁴⁵⁷ The stories about Óláfr Tryggvason's "mission actions" in Norway are often influenced by hagiography, and they have several parallels in the genre of legendary sagas of the saints and the so called "conversion þættir."⁴⁵⁸

A similar fictional conversion account appears in *Kristni saga* chapter two, when the Bishop Friðrekr and Þorvaldr arrived at Giljá in Iceland, where Þorvaldr's pagan father Koðrán lived. At Giljá there was a stone to which Koðrán and his kinsmen used to sacrifice, and they claimed that their guardian spirit lived in it (*[a]t Giljá stóð steinn sá er þeir frændr höfðu blótat ok kolluðu þar búa í ármann sinn*).⁴⁵⁹ The bishop went to the stone and chanted over it until the stone broke apart. Since the spirit, perhaps perceived as a demon in this account, had been overcome, Koðrán had himself and his whole household baptized. The concept

455 See Flateyjarbók 1: 291–299. Cf. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 1, 1958: 320–333. On this tradition see Perkins 2001: 27–29.

456 *Þor let fyrir. drap hann fotum I elld stockana. ok steyptiz aa elldinn framm. bran hann þar aa litilli stundu at auska. en konung skaðaði ecki.* *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 1, 1958: 332. Flateyjarbók 1: 298.

457 Even if the narrative in *Rognvalds þáttur ok Rauðs* has a literary and Christian tendency, the terminology and expressions may sometimes be old, such as *magna með miklum blótskap* "to strengthen (with supernatural power) by means of much sacrifice and/or pagan worship" (cf. Perkins 2001: 58).

458 Cf. E. O. G. Turville-Petre 1964: 247; Perkins 2001: 33, Lassen 2011.

459 Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 7–8.

ármaðr refers usually to “steward,” and “perhaps we are meant to understand that the spirit is a steward to Koðrán’s goods.”⁴⁶⁰ Place-names, such as *Ármannsfell*, suggests that *ármaðr* also could refer to a *landvætr*. Also, this story is a Christian wonder tale. Anyhow we may assume, that it was widely known among high medieval scholars and Christian authors, that the missionary kings and their bishops either physically destroyed pagan cult images of gods or they redefined the status of them when narrating or writing fantastic stories about them.

We may conclude thus; when medieval scholars and Christian authors wrote stories about the old gods they applied euhemerism, idol parody and demonology as literary strategies in order to deprive these divinities their godly nature, and to show that they were no real gods. In some accounts, people worshipping the pagan gods and their images were mocked. These strategies, which most likely were applied also at oral performances during the conversion period, were ultimately aimed at dismantling the indigenous religion.

In this chapter, five tentative strategies used by the new Christian kings when dismantling the Old Norse religion have been outlined. They involve (1) the erasing of the king’s own ritual role and the royal rites in the pagan sacrificial feasts, (2) the dismantling of the pagan cult leadership and the old cultic organization, (3) the material erasure of the old religion, (4) the extinction of pagan sacrifices and old religious customs and (5) the removal of the divine status of the pagan gods in accounts. To achieve these aims, the recently converted rulers sent missionary priests and bishops, made speeches and negotiations, used decrees, laws, and assembly decisions, but they also donated gifts and used threats and violence. According to some sources, it was necessary to use both words and actions. Simply smashing cult images as the *Eiríksynir* seem to have done rarely yielded a successful result. There are also examples where exclusively words, negotiations and sermons did not work.

Furthermore, it seems as if these five strategies applied by the rulers can be related to chronological developments, which also reflect the increasing power of the Christian kings. Those applied in (1) and (2) reflect a Christian king in an early phase of the religious change process, sometimes unable to compete with the pagan power in question. These Christian kings seem to challenge the pagan chieftains as they refused to perform their ritual duties. It can be interpreted as a sign of hagiography and martyrdom. But some of these stories do not follow the pattern of hagiography, since the Christian kings, as King Hákon góði, occasion-

⁴⁶⁰ Grønlie 2006: 58. Murphy (2018: 69) states that “[t]his figure clearly represents some form of prosperity spirit.”

ally yield to the will of the pagans. The strategies used in (3) and especially (4) and (5) indicate a Christian ruler in a later phase, on the same level as the pagan power or even stronger (see further below). The survey of strategies and methods above indicates also that the recently converted Christian kings did what was in their power to do, such as abandon their own traditional cultic roles, or persuade the local chieftains to give up their cult assignments. When their power position increased, they could also destroy the old sanctuaries and in a later phase prohibit traditional customs by means of regulations in the medieval laws. Together with clerics and Christian writers, they could also redefine the nature of the pagan gods, by means of literary strategies, such as euhemerism, demonology and idol parody.

One reason why the kings attacked the old sacrificial cult was probably also that they wanted to break down the old religious community. The pagan annual festivals were important to the local groups and contributed to social cohesion. As we shall see in the next chapter, the missionary kings replaced the pagan sacrificial festivals with Christian feasts with rites aimed at realizing the same goals as the old customs. The purpose was, among other things, to build a new social community and identity with Christian signs.

5 Replacements and displacements of pagan religion

When discussing how religions disappear, anthropologist Joel Robbins also concentrated on an aspect of the process, which he calls the “replacement” of the indigenous religious ideas and rituals: “Replacement refers to those cases in which Christian understandings and practices substitute for traditional ones but aim to realize the same goals.”¹ That kind of replacement and renegotiation of religious matters could possibly also facilitate the dismantling of the old religion and the change of religious identity on both individual and collective levels. It is quite obvious that the Christian cult and belief system in medieval Scandinavia replaced some religious practices, roles and ideas related to the Old Norse religion during the transition period. Sometimes such replacements were acts initiated by the converted native kings. In what follows I will give a few examples of such possible replacements and religious renegotiations of (1) the royal rites; (2) the cult leadership; (3) the sanctuaries; (4) funeral rituals and eschatological beliefs; and (5) the libation ceremonies at religious feasts. In connection to these replacements aspects of cultic continuation, and syncretism will be discussed. We must remember, however, that even if some elements from the old religion are maintained in the new belief, “it is their current frame of reference that clearly informs their representation of the former.”² Hence, if a religious idea or practice from the old tradition survived the transition and appeared in the victorious religion it was adapted to its new context. Finally, a few examples of displacements will also be mentioned, that is, acts which were also initiated by the early Christian kings and Church jointly.³

5.1 The replacement of the pagan royal rites

The present writer has previously presented a hypothesis, that the early medieval Swedish kings and magnates performed ritual roles in connection with Christian service, ceremonies and at episcopal investitures, which in some senses replaced the pagan royal rites.⁴ The evidence is weak and non-written sources and analogies from Continental Europe must therefore be used. Several Romanesque churches in

1 Robbins 2014: 9.

2 de Jong 2016: 654.

3 Robbins 2014: 10, and 1.2 and 1.3.

4 See Sundqvist 2002: 344–346; see also Sundqvist 2006 and 2011a.

Scandinavia from early medieval period have stone towers, a westwork, with a gallery. It seems as if they were intended for the church builder (*patronus*) or the ruler when attending the church and perhaps they also had a ritual function.⁵ Information from Continental Europe may give some ideas as to their functions. In liturgical texts from outside Scandinavia we find ceremonies called *laudes regiae*, that is, liturgical acclamations of the ruler.⁶ They had roots in the Roman imperial cult and spread from the Byzantine Empire over Continental Europe to England, and may have existed also in Scandinavia.⁷ In Byzantine times the imperial style of these ritual acclamations was remolded by specific Christian terminology and they were imbued with the ecclesiastical spirit instead. Soon this new rite echoed the Christian liturgical language. Under Carolingian and Ottonian rulers, it was developed into an established ecclesiastical ceremony, performed on the ruler's birthday, his wedding day, but also in the context of synods and at general services, and so forth; that is, at every official appearance of the monarch. It was even performed when the ruler was absent.⁸ The content of the liturgically-modelled texts of the *laudes regiae* varied from place to place and time to time. In a manuscript from Metz, dated to the ninth century, which probably refers to Charles the Bald, the following acclamation is introduced:

Ave sacer et alme, Imperator Carole
[Ave sacer et alme, Imperator] excelse.
Deus rex coeli Te conservet.

Hail sacred and gracious, Emperor Charles.
 [Hail sacred and gracious, Emperor], Your
 Excellency. May God, the king of heaven, protect you.⁹

These acclamations thus functioned as recognition of the ruler's legitimacy, both from heaven and earth, and were manifestations of politico-ecclesiastical power. They were occasionally connected with a ritual where the coronation ceremony (*coronamentum*) was repeated for the already crowned king. Frankish rulers went to their "coronation church," for instance at Christmas, Easter and Ascen-

5 For the discussion of early Swedish Romanesque churches with stone towers and westworks, see e.g., Redelius 1972; Nilsson 1998: 105–106; I.-M. Nilsson 2009: 64–76 and for the Danish churches, see Wienberg 1993. See also more recently Kristina Krüger (2012), who argues that the west towers were not used for ruler rituals mainly. They had other functions.

6 Kantorowicz 1946; Palme 1959: 115–120; Nelson 1987.

7 In pre-Christian Rome the hail to the emperor was performed by the priests on the emperor's birthday, his day of accession, his triumphal return from victorious campaigns etc. Occasionally the Arvalian Brotherhood (*fratres Arvales*) gathered and sang songs to the emperor and performed acclamations. Often these acclaiming songs took place at the liturgical banquets which were granted to the brothers at least once a year by the emperor. Kantorowicz 1946: 66–68.

8 Kantorowicz 1946: 76–84; Nelson 1987.

9 Quoted from Kantorowicz 1946: 73. My trans. The entire chant is rendered in Kantorowicz 1946: 73–75.

sion Day. The king appeared with his crown and insignia, and received the homage of the people (*vox populi*).¹⁰

It has been suggested that many of these royal and liturgical ceremonies, such as *laudes regiae*, were associated with churches comprising western towers, for instance at St Denis, Lorsch, Centula and Corvey.¹¹ These towers resembled the exterior of royal palaces. They were often a symbol of the king's power. In these towers there were floors above ground level with private chapels, opening towards the nave, where the emperor could sit and look down towards the altar during the church feasts. The ruler was thus on his throne in a gallery facing the nave, when the *laudes*-rituals were performed. Charlemagne let build a palace complex in Aachen c. 800, appropriate for an emperor, including a "Pfalzkapelle" called the Aix-la-Chapelle, "the Waters of the Chapel" (Fig. 10). In this chapel "Charles sat on his throne on a high gallery, halfway between Christ, his Lord and the model of his own kingship, and the 'Christian people' gathered below him. In the eyes of contemporary admirers, he had been raised up by God 'to rule and protect the Christian people at this last dangerous period of history.'"¹² This chapel has been understood as a model for later churches with a west tower, and which has been attributed symbolic meaning of power.¹³

Early churches in Denmark and Sweden had arrangements connected to western towers similar to the churches of Germany, France and England, which made it possible for the ruler or church builder (*patronus*) to look down on the other participators during the ceremonies.¹⁴ The floor above the ground level in these towers was often used as an *emporium*. These rooms had openings to the east, with galleries turning towards the nave. The functions of these rooms and their symbolism have been discussed.¹⁵ Most likely they had ideological implica-

10 Kantorowicz 1946: 85–101; Nelson 1987.

11 E.g., E. B. Smith 1956: 74–106. Cf. Lundberg 1940; Palme 1959: 116–117; Nelson 1987.

12 Brown 2013: 435.

13 I.-M. Nilsson 2009: 68–69.

14 Cf. Lundberg 1940: 303–310; Palme 1959: 117–119; Blomkvist et al. 2007: 190–191; I.-M. Nilsson 2009: 64–76.

15 See e.g., I.-M. Nilsson 2003. Ing-Marie Nilsson (2009: 70) states that there is much evidence that early medieval churches with towers often had a connection with aristocratic establishments. She points out, however, that there is a problem when this is raised to a general level and that the west tower is regarded as a sign of elite influence over the church. This often occurs when the foundation for the tower's symbolic connotations of power is not sought in a contextually anchored connection or functionally motivated uses, but rather the tower itself is seen as evidence of aristocratic influence.



Fig. 10: Charlemagne let build a palace complex in Aachen c. 800, Germany, appropriate for an emperor, including a “Pfalzkapelle” called the Aix-la-Chapelle, “the Waters of the Chapel”. Charlemagne’s throne is found in the west gallery of the upper level of the palatine chapel. Image in its original state by Berthold Werner, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>.

tions.¹⁶ From the tower and the elevated position, the elite could look over the common people, but could also, at the same time, be seen by them.¹⁷ It has been suggested that the ruler appeared on the gallery at baptismal and marriage cere-

¹⁶ Cf. e.g., Lindgren 1995; I.-M. Nilsson 2003 and 2009; Mats Anglert 2006.

¹⁷ See e.g., I.-M. Nilsson 2009: 70–76.

monies, Holy Communion and in connection with Church Law judgements. During mass he sat there in majesty and looked towards the altar, separated from the congregation.¹⁸ Romanesque churches with tower galleries for the nobles (Danish *herskabsgalleri*), following the imperial example, occur quite frequently in Denmark. In the Old Danish landscapes in Sweden, we meet these arrangements at churches in Skåne, for example, in Dalby, Bjäresjö, Vä and Fjellie. Similar tower churches with galleries are also found in Sjælland at Fjenneslev and Tveje Merløse as well as in Veng, Midtjylland.¹⁹ In Dalby, archaeological investigations have found remains of a royal palace complex just west of the church tower, and in Bjäresjö, also in Skåne, remains of a nobleman's farm dating back to the Viking Age have been found right next to the church.²⁰

The best preserved examples of such early churches with royal connections in Sweden are in Götaland. On the floor above the ground level in the western tower of Husaby (early twelfth century) there was an opening towards the nave (Fig. 11). Next to it were holes for beams which carried a balcony facing east towards the altar. In the upper tower chamber of Örberga church, dated to c. 1120, there are remains of a round arch portal facing towards the nave. In the opening there is a gap into the masonry. Inside the tower there is a room for devotion. Also in the church of Hagebyhöga there is an opening in the *emporium* facing towards the nave. Inside the nave there are remains of a wooden balcony. It was accessible via a door in the eastern part of the *emporium*.²¹

Similar arrangements may be seen in western tower churches in the lake Mälaren region. In Vaksala, close to Old Uppsala, a stone church with a western tower was erected during the twelfth century. In the first level of the tower there were two openings facing towards the nave and a gallery. Perhaps the *patronus* of the church, or the king was sitting in this elevated place during divine service.²² Also the church of Husby-Lyhundra probably had similar arrangements.²³ However, the access to it has not been discovered. In the church of Tillinge, to the west of Enköp-

18 The tower may have had several functions beside ceremonial significance, such as protection against enemies, warehouse space or as a mausoleum. In the western tower of Västerhus, Frösö, Jämtland, the remains of a female body were discovered. Perhaps she was the *patrona* of the church. Palme 1959: 119–120; Wienberg 1993: 101–106; B. Nilsson 1996b: 140–141; 1998: 106; I.-M. Nilsson 2009: 65–70.

19 For the discussion of these Danish churches, see Wienberg 1993.

20 Wienberg 1993: 58–64; I.-M. Nilsson 2009: 21, 68–69.

21 Lundberg 1940: 374–375; I.-M. Nilsson 2003: 33. In this context also the churches of Bjälbo, Hov and Vreta, all in Östergötland, should be mentioned, as well as Götene's, Skälvum's and Forshem's churches in Västergötland all dated to the 1120s.

22 Ehn 1977: 4; DMS 1.2: 205.

23 Wilcke-Lindqvist 1961: 518.



Fig. 11: Husaby Church (early twelfth century), Västergötland, Sweden. On the floor above the ground level in the western tower there was an opening towards the nave. Next to it were holes for beams which carried a balcony facing east towards the altar. Image in its original state by Fred J., licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/1.0/>.

ing, there was a gallery. In the east wall of the tower there is a door opening which still is visible.²⁴ A gallery may also have been situated at the western part of the church in Old Uppsala, at St Gertrud in Sigtuna, and in Håtuna church.²⁵

At St Per, in the royal town of Sigtuna, a tower was added to the western part of the church at the beginning of the thirteenth century. The two stairs flanking the tower probably lead to a level with a gallery facing the church room, intended

²⁴ Rosell 1968.

²⁵ Lundberg 1940: 323; DMS 1.2: 174; Tesch 2001: 18; Tuulse 1962: 223; Bonnier 1987: 221.

for the king or the magnates.²⁶ Gunnar Redelius has discussed whether St Per also originally included constructions with ideological significance.²⁷ He focused particularly on the impressive round arch portal (1.5 × 3.7 meters) in the central tower. It has an opening facing the “nave” in the west. Today this portal leads to nowhere. According to Redelius there had been a balcony in front of it, where the king and other prominent individuals could perform public acts. This kind of construction may have been connected with the *coronamentum* of the king at the great church festivals. In the “coronation portal” the king appeared and received the homage from the people.²⁸ While there is no evidence for Redelius’ hypothesis, in the absence of any better suggestions it at least merits consideration.²⁹

The political elite thus seems to have physically taken up an elevated position inside the cult buildings, both before and after the conversion, that is, in the pagan high-seat (see 4.3), and then in the *emporium* with gallery. The pagan halls and magnate churches themselves, in turn, also occupied a prominent position in the landscape. The display of sovereignty of these buildings was reinforced by their magnificent size and architecture. Central locality, elevated position, size and architecture were probably associated with ideological aspects and a deliberate strategy of being observed and associated with the divine world. Thus these buildings were important symbols of power for the elite. In this sense there is continuity from pre-Christian to Christian era.³⁰

There is no evidence of *laudes regiae* in, for instance, the medieval Swedish liturgical materials. But some of the early churches there have balconies connected to western towers similar to the churches of Germany, France and England. We cannot rule out that such ceremonies were also known in early medieval Scandinavia. If such rites were performed in connection with the balcony at the western tower, they doubtless followed Christianity to Scandinavia.³¹ In a way they can be compared with pagan customs. Pagan panegyrics were recited by the skalds for both dead and living rulers during the ceremonial banquets in the hall.³² In connection with libation sacrifices the formulae *til sigrs ok rikis konungi* “to victory and to the power of the king” and *til árs ok friðar* “for a good year and peace” occur

26 See Redelius 2006: 45–49.

27 Redelius 1975; 2006: 40–49.

28 Redelius 2006: 42–43. Cf. Tesch 2001: 31; Ros 2001: 158.

29 See however Krüger’s (2012) general criticism of this theory.

30 See Sundqvist 2006; 2011a and 2016a: 199–263. Most likely also small private chapels existed during the eleventh century which did not have a great public ideological significance for the political power.

31 Cf. Lundberg 1940: 303–310. For this theory, see particularly Palme 1959: 115–120.

32 Nygaard 2019.

in, for example, *Hákonar saga góða* chapter 14. These words were probably de-claimed by the chieftains and/or the cultic congregation during the feasts when the king was in his high-seat and perhaps also when he was not present. The pagan high-seat played a ritual role as an interface to the other world. The ruler was a necessary bridge to the divinities and a mediator between this world and the other world. The community even required that the ruler took part in the feast by means of his ritual eating and drinking (see 4.1 above). The ceremonial actions centered around the Viking ruler in the public cult and doing him homage, and in a typological and functional sense, therefore, harmonize with the Carolingian and Ottonian royal rites. As the assumed medieval acclamations may have been associated with pre-Christian customs, we can in a general sense talk about a replacement of cult practice, since they also aimed to realize the same goals. These assumed new Christian rites magnified the rulers and sanctioned their power, and in the same time met the people's desire for the king as a link to Heaven. As will be seen below, royal saints in Scandinavia, such as St Óláfr, were regarded as such mediators between the two worlds (see 5.5.2 below). Like the old rites, these Christian ceremonies continued to be performed in public, that is, in the church. It is thus possible that the early Christian kings replaced the old royal rites performed in the hall with these ceremonies carried out in the church. It must be admitted that this theory is not fully supported in the source material and can be perceived as somewhat bold or even speculative. We may at least conclude that the medieval prince, like the pre-Christian ruler, was sometimes placed high in the ceremonial building where the public cult was performed, that is, in the church by the west tower gallery respectively in the high-seat of the pagan hall.

5.2 The Christian replacement of cult leadership

During the conversion period the pagan cult leadership was replaced by a well-trained and professional priesthood (*sacerdotes*).³³ The priests in medieval Scandinavia received an education in Latin, which mainly concerned the liturgy. They were thus well educated and schooled for their task.³⁴ The priest's ordination was performed by the bishop in the cathedral. Through the consecration, the priest entered a special spiritual state that also included a number of obligations. After the ordination, he received his own service (*beneficium*), often as a priest at a parish church, or the like. The role of the parish priest in medieval society was

³³ Cf. B. Nilsson 2020: 1715.

³⁴ B. Nilsson 2010.

advanced, and religiously, it was outstanding.³⁵ The head of the priest was the bishop (*episcopus*). He was the leader of the church in a territorial area, in Latin first called *parochia*, but from c. 1100 designated *ecclesia* or *diocesis*, “diocese.” The diocese was connected to a church, or rather a cathedral, called for instance *ecclesia Lundensis*, *ecclesia Nidrosiensis*, or *ecclesia Upsaliensis*. These dioceses were later developed into archdioceses.³⁶

It is true that the missionary kings wiped out the pagan cult leaders and their offices (see 4.2). In a sense, however, there may have been some kind of continuity of religious leadership during the transition period from the Viking Age to the Early Middle Age.³⁷ The same mighty families and social elite-groups that controlled the leading positions in the public cults in the old religion continued as religious leaders after conversion. Since these social groups could still use the benefits of public cult, it was probably quite easy for them to be loyal to the new Christian king and abandon their ancestral religious traditions without great trouble. The congregation probably also expected that their chieftain maintained public cult, though it was now performed in the church under Christian regime.

The first native priests in Iceland were mostly recruited from the chieftain families.³⁸ According to *Kristni saga*, several Icelanders combined the assignments of being both chieftains and priests: “At that time, most men of high rank were educated and ordained priests, even though they were chieftains.”³⁹ This text also produces examples of such combined chieftain-priests, for instance Hallr Teitsson, Sæmundr inn fróði, Magnús Þórðarson, Símon Jörundarson, Guðmundr sonr Brands, Ari inn fróði, Ingimundr Einarsson, Ketill Þorsteinsson, Ketill Guðmundarson and Jón Þorvarðsson.⁴⁰ There was, however, a shortage of priests in Iceland before 1100, and only a few had a native background.⁴¹ During this early phase of Christianity in Iceland the bishops had great problems with how to control their priests, since the same priests were also powerful chieftains who had backed their initial appointments as bishops.⁴²

Ísleifr (born 1006) was the first native bishop in Iceland. He was son of the chieftain Gizurr the White, who was one of Óláfr Tryggvason’s Christian delegates

35 Johansson 1981 [1956–78]: col. 573–576.

36 Pirinen 1981 [1956–78]: col. 610–625.

37 Hultgård 1992: 54–55.

38 Bagge 2019: 19; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1677.

39 *Þá váru flestir virðingamenn lærðir ok vígðir ok lærðir til presta þó at hefðingjar væri*, . . . Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 42. Trans. Grønlie.

40 *Kristni saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 42–43.

41 Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 24–37.

42 Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1678.

during the transition process 999/1000.⁴³ His grandfather's father Ketilbjörn gamli Ketilsson had a pagan sanctuary erected at Mosfell (see 6.2 below). According to *Ísleifr þáttr*, Ísleifr owned a *goðorð* as his father no doubt owned one.⁴⁴ Ísleifr's mother Þórdís was daughter of Þóroddr goði. Sources report thus that Ísleifr was born into chieftain families on both his mother's and father's sides. His ancestors were probably involved in pagan public worship as cult leaders. Ísleifr was consecrated missionary bishop in Bremen 1056.⁴⁵

Clergies were thus closely related to political power in the early medieval Scandinavia. In the earliest phase of the official conversion in Norway there were foreign bishops, who were directly attached to the Norwegian kings and warlords. Some of them were even included in the ruler's retinues or *hirð*, and therefore designated *hirðbiskupar* in the Old Norse texts.⁴⁶ St Óláfr had, according to Snorri, the English bishop Grímkell as *hirðbiskup*.⁴⁷ Adam of Bremen states that the saint also brought several bishops and priests from England to Norway, including Grímkell.⁴⁸ As soon as Church was established, the bishops were ordained to a diocese at a bishopric site with a cathedral.⁴⁹ They were often mighty persons in society, involved in politics and appeared in the public assemblies.⁵⁰

The first native bishops in Sweden were recruited from the aristocracy. Indeed, they seemed to be a kind of local chieftain.⁵¹ Bishop Gisl in Linköping, for instance, must have belonged to the very elite of twelfth century Östergötland. He collaborated closely with King Sverker (Old Swedish *Sværker*); together they organized the diocese of Linköping.⁵² Still in the thirteenth century the connection between royal power and bishops is observable. Jarl Birger (Old Swedish *Birgher*) appointed his brothers Karl and Bengt (from Latin *Benedictus*) to the sees of Linköping and also his son Bengt.⁵³ He also had allies in the chapter of Uppsala archdiocese.⁵⁴ The connection between the Church and power also appeared on lower

43 See *Íslendingabók* ch. 9, *Ísl Fornr.* 1: 20f.; *Kristni saga* ch. 14, *Ísl Fornr.* 15₂: 38–40. See also Strömbäck 1975: 90–91.

44 *Hann [Ísleifr] var maðr félitill, en átti staðfestu góða í Skálaholti ok goðorð. Ísleifs þáttr byskups*, *Ísl. Fornr.* 16: 336. See also Flateyjarbók 2: 141. Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 21.

45 See Adam 4,36. Cf. Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 20–24.

46 See e.g., *Hirðskrá*, NGL 2: 393, 409.

47 See e.g., *Óláfs saga helga* ch. 57, *Ísl. Fornr.* 27: 72.

48 Adam 2,57.

49 Hellström 1971: 19–21, 83–84, 171–172.

50 Hellström 1971: 138–142; Bagge & Nordeide 2007: 151, 156.

51 Hultgård 1992: 55.

52 See Herman Schüick 1959: 47–51; Blomkvist et al. 2007: 193.

53 See Herman Schüick 1959: 54–56; B. Nilsson 1998: 135.

54 Lindkvist 1996: 228–229.

levels in society. As noticed above, in for instance Jämtland, possible pagan cultic place-names appear at chieftain farms with early medieval churches, which indicates a continuity of both cult and power.⁵⁵

The connection between political power and cultic activities was thus loosely maintained during the transition period. It was essential for the ruling power, which had previously controlled the public cult and the sanctuaries, to retain its central role in official religion even after conversion. By controlling official activities in Church and the clergies, the rulers and the mighty chieftains gained a favorable position in public matters in general. This kind of replacement of cult leadership, which probably was initiated by Christian rulers during the period of conversion, promoted the dismantling of the old religion. People were used to following their leaders in religious matters. When the local chieftain became a Christian priest or a bishop, his subjects often followed him and converted.

5.3 The replacement of the old sanctuary

It is quite clear that the native rulers together with their allied chieftains were the driving force when dismantling the pre-Christian sanctuaries in most parts of Scandinavia.⁵⁶ These elite groups also seem to have been a crucial agency when it comes to financing and building the earliest churches there, which also replaced the old sanctuaries. Parallel to this development chieftains ceased to erect traditional sanctuaries on their farms and they stopped taking care of the Old Norse cult buildings, ritual constructions and paraphernalia. Perhaps these sanctuaries sometimes were deconstructed in a ritual and careful way (see 4.3 above). This process thus facilitated the dismantling of the old religion. In what follows, I will give examples of this development from the central parts of Sweden (Svetjud), which indicate the important role the elite played when changing religion and wiping out the Old Norse religion there, by means of replacing the pagan sanctuaries with churches.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Vikstrand 1996: 106.

⁵⁶ What follows is a revised section from Sundqvist 2011a.

⁵⁷ Stefan Brink (1990: 80–87; 1996b; 2016) and later Bertil Nilsson (2020: 1714–1715) have shown that the persons involved in the process of church building in Sweden can be divided into four categories: “the king and the royal power; the Church’s ordained persons, especially the bishops; individual men or women from the social and financial elite; and corporations, that is communities consisting of landowners and peasants of the *þing* and the local districts.” Cf. I.-M. Nilsson 2009: 39–48.

During the early Middle Ages the so-called proprietary church system (*Eigenkirchenwesen*) was developed in Europe.⁵⁸ Individual magnates erected churches on their own farms. The church builder (*patronus*) had a great influence on the spiritual activities of the church (*spiritualia*). He/she could for instance appoint priests to his/her church, who might even be his/her slaves. There were great economic interests behind this system. The land-owner disposed entirely over the temporalia of the church: he/she could use the church just as any other property. It could be bought or sold, inherited, substituted, divided, put in pawn, or even leased out. The church owner also disposed over the income of the church. We know from England that the owner had the right to collect parish tithes during the eleventh century.⁵⁹ Probably he/she also charged for baptisms, marriages, and funerals. A similar system is evidenced at several places in Continental Europe.⁶⁰

It has been discussed in research whether this proprietary church system also existed in Sweden. According to Gunnar Smedberg, who has mainly studied this system from the perspective of the medieval provincial laws, the practice of proprietary churches existed in Sweden. However, the scope for it was considerably smaller there than in other places, since the position of the peasant congregation was very strong in eastern Scandinavia.⁶¹ Smedberg's hypothesis has been contradicted by Olle Ferm and Sigurd Rahmqvist.⁶² Using other sources and methods, they have been able to show that such system was widely spread in the province of Uppland. Ferm and Rahmqvist proceeded from those cases when the nobles can be attested to have owned an entire church village, indicating that the parish church was erected by the land-owner rather than by the tenants who were leasing his land. Seen from a settlement perspective, the parish churches in Uppland were located beyond the center of the parish, often in connection with the manorial estates. In these cases, it is probable that the magnates themselves erected the churches, according to Ferm and Rahmqvist. Ann Catherine Bonnier argued in the same vein.⁶³ She stated that almost all Romanesque churches in Upp-

58 E.g., Stutz & Feine 1989; Smedberg 1973; Skre 1995; Magnús Stefánsson 1995; Wood 2006; Brendalmo 2006; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1670–1671.

59 Smedberg 1973: 89.

60 The Roman Church reacted early against this system. In the synod at Braga 572 it was stated that none should erect churches for pure profit, church building should only be motivated by religious reasons. Later the Gregorian reform opposed private churches and layman influence in ecclesiastic activities, by claiming *libertas ecclesiae*. The conflict was solved on an official level in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when *ius patronus* was introduced. It reduced the church owner's possibility to exert influence on ecclesiastic matters. See Smedberg 1973: 89–97. Cf. Wood 2006.

61 Smedberg 1973: 175, 184–186. Cf. Hellström 1971: 346–348.

62 Ferm & Rahmqvist 1985.

63 Bonnier 1987: 219–221; 1996: 193–194.

land were built by private proprietors. Several of them were so exclusive that one must assume that the proprietor was rich. More than half of them have, or have had, towers, apparently reserved for the king or his men. Moreover, some of these churches had galleries for the nobles, which also indicate the presence of magnates (see above). Bonnier has also observed that more than one third of the Romanesque churches in Uppland show architectural details in sandstone. Such stone was rare in this area and probably expensive. Also this indicates that the proprietor was a rich magnate. There is thus clear evidence indicating that proprietary churches existed in the Mälars region. During the missionary period these type of churches must have been common.

The first church mentioned in the Lake Mälaren area in Svetjud was built in the surroundings of Birka, in the mid-ninth century. According to Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii* chapter 11, it was erected by Hergeirr, the prefect of Birka, on his own hereditary estate (*hereditas*).⁶⁴ This church was undoubtedly a proprietary church. When the building of churches intensified later in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, it seems as if several sanctuaries were erected by magnates in the Mälars region. One of the best examples of such a church is probably the one discovered at Viby, Uppland.⁶⁵ It was detected during archaeological excavations in 1997–2000. This apse church (made partly of wood, partly of stone) pre-dates the Cistercian “monastery” at the same site, which is believed to have been founded in the 1160s. It was transferred to Julita in Södermanland c. 1185.⁶⁶ Architectural aspects connected to the choir and a *patronus*-grave, placed strategically under the opening of the triumphal arch, indicate that the early sanctuary was a proprietary church. The most important evidence is however a letter of conciliation written by Archbishop Stefan (c. 1164–1167), mentioning that the female magnate Doter had donated the manorial estate at Viby (where the private apse church was erected), meadows, forests, and fishing waters to the monks.⁶⁷ Place-names may also inform us about proprietary churches in the Mälars region. According to Thorsten Andersson the old name *Fastakirkia* (1317), “Faste’s church” in Uppland, clearly indicates that a magnate or a settlement chieftain in the neighborhood had played a decisive role in connec-

⁶⁴ B. Nilsson 2020: 1712. Sven Kalmring and his colleagues have recently found a magnate’s residence at Korshamn on Birka, where there was a large Viking Age hall with an enclosure connected to it. This may well be Hergeirr’s farm and *hereditas* with roots in the Merovingian period. The enclosure by the hall may have originally been intended for pre-Christian worship, but after Hergeirr’s baptism that site may have been converted into a church. Kalmring et al. 2017a; Kalmring et al. 2017b; Kalmring 2020.

⁶⁵ J.O. Karlsson 2006.

⁶⁶ Blomkvist et al. 2007: 197.

⁶⁷ DS I: 51.

tion with the building of the church.⁶⁸ It has been stated that the name *Karlungskirkia* in Roslagen also evidences a proprietary church. The name *Karlung* has been interpreted as “the owner of Karlösa.”⁶⁹ Some of these churches were also erected by females. In Södermanland there are two churches, which in former times were designated *Ulfhildakirkia* and *Sighridakirkia*; probably two noble women called Ulfhild and Sighrid built these churches.⁷⁰ During the excavation inside the church of Botkyrka, in the same province, a grave was found in the oldest floor layer in the western tower, containing remains of a female.⁷¹ Perhaps she was the founder of the church. The name Botkyrka is derived from Old Swedish *Bothvidhakirkia* “Botvid’s church.” Botvid (Old Swedish *Botvidh*) was the apostle of Södermanland and according to his *Vita* he was killed by a freed slave in 1120 and soon regarded as a martyr and saint.⁷² It says that he was first buried in a church at Säby (present Salem), which was erected by an honorable man called Hermund on his own hereditary estate (*in proprio patrimonio*). Later, Botvid’s brother took his remains to another church at their hereditary estate (*in patrimonio ipsorum*) at Hammarby in 1129. In 1176 the stone church was built there. Most likely some of these churches could be regarded as proprietary churches.⁷³

Apart from the magnates, it seems as if also the king built churches in the Lake Mälaren region. These churches were sometimes erected at the royal demesnes.⁷⁴ Both the wooden and stone churches in Old Uppsala were erected at “Kungsgården.”⁷⁵ Also, the churches of St Gertrud’s and St Per’s in Sigtuna were probably raised at royal estates, as well as the church of Adelsö.⁷⁶ Many early churches appear at places called Husby/Husaby; for instance Husby kyrka in Bro parish, Uppland.⁷⁷ In this case the name indicates that these churches were built on crown lands. In the early Middle Ages, the king had access to crown lands called *Uppsala auðr*. It consisted of several estates (*husabyar*) scattered out in the

68 Th. Andersson 1991.

69 See Brink 1996b: 280.

70 Wahlberg 1975.

71 Bonnier 1987: 221, note 118.

72 *Vita sancti Botvidi*, SRS II: 377–382.

73 Also, the church in Västeråker, Uppland, has demonstrably been built by a private person. Bonnier 1987: 206–208; DMS 1.6: 155–156. Most likely the churches of Ängsö in Västmanland and Granhammar in Närke were built by private persons. Nisbeth 1982: 173–174.

74 Brink 1996b: 276–284.

75 Rahmqvist 1986; Tesch 2017: 21, 29.

76 On Sigtuna, see Tesch 2001 and 2017: 20–22, 29; Zachrisson 2013. On Adelsö, see DMS 1.7: 218–236.

77 Ferm & Rahmqvist 1985: 82; DMS 1.7: 44–113; Brink 1996b: 278–279.



Fig. 12: Runestone at Hovgården, Adelsö (U11). Image in its original state by Bengt A. Lundberg, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Mälars region. There was one *husaby* in each hundred (*hundare*). When the ambulating king and his retinues (*hirð*) arrived at the *husaby* the *bryti* “bailiff, steward” arranged a feast.⁷⁸ At Hovgården, Adelsö, there is a famous runic inscription (U11) that runs as thus (Fig. 12):

raþ | þu : runar : ret : lit : rista : toliṛ : bry[t]l : i roþ : kunuki : toliṛ : a(u)k : gyla : litu : ris - : þaun : hion : eftir . . . k : merki srni . . haku(n) · (b)añ : rista

Rað þu runar. Rett let rista Toliṛ bryti i roði kunungi. Toliṛ ok Gylla letu ris[ta] . . . , þaun hion æftir [si]k(?) mærki . . . Hakon bað rista.

⁷⁸ Brink 2000a/b.

Interpret the runes! Tólrir the steward of Roðr had them rightly carved for the King. Tólrir and Gylla had [the runes] carved . . . this married couple as a landmark in memory of themselves(?) . . . Hákon ordered (it) be carved.⁷⁹

According to the inscription, Tólrir was a *bryti* for the king in *rōðr* (carved **roþ**). This latter term has an uncertain meaning.⁸⁰ Perhaps this king (called Hákon) used a wooden church there under his visitations in the 1070s or early 1080s, that is, a presumed precursor to the Romanesque church that stands there now, which has its roots in the twelfth century. We may thus assume that the system of proprietary churches had existed in the Målar region during the early Middle Ages and perhaps also later. Kings and magnates there owned, controlled and managed many churches. Perhaps they themselves also appointed the priests at these churches.

It seems as if the local chieftains sometimes replaced the pagan sanctuaries on their farms with proprietary churches during the transition process. Kings replaced halls at royal estates with cathedrals as in Old Uppsala (see below). This process also no doubt promoted the dismantling of pagan religion, since the churches aimed to realize the same goals as the old sanctuaries, that is, to be places for public cult.

5.3.1 Is cult-site-continuity reflecting a peaceful or violent replacement?

Cult-site-continuity is the phenomenon when a sanctuary related to the new religion replaces a fane of the vanishing religion on the same location as the old cult place. Usually such continuity is interpreted as a sign of a peaceful conversion. But it could well be understood as a result of a rivalry between representatives of the encountering religions, where the new Christian sanctuary is placed on the ruins of the old pagan shrine.⁸¹ At Hørning in Jylland a wooden church dated to c. 1060 was erected immediately on a burial mound, containing a chamber grave from c. AD 950–1000.⁸² In this chamber was a female together with large amounts of grave-goods. This phenomenon has been regarded as a “reconsecrated’ pre-Christian cult site” intended for Christian usage, reflecting a peaceful and posthumous conversion process.⁸³ But it could also have been made in a triumphalist manner as a symbolic

⁷⁹ <https://app.raa.se/open/runor/inscription?id=b8e43534-18e4-4d58-91ab-90cf0dc95a77> 2023-05-26.

⁸⁰ See most recently Källström 2023. Cf. Källström 2007: 125, 251–252.

⁸¹ See Nordeide 2020: 1643.

⁸² Gelting 2007: 86; 2020: 1599–1600.

⁸³ Sanmark 2004: 102; critically considered by Gelting 2020: 1599–1600.

and performative ritual by the Christians with the intention that the pagans living in this area would lose their old religion and instead turn to Christianity.⁸⁴

Archaeological evidence from Viking Age Jämtland includes similar interpretation problems as Hørning. Under the medieval church at *Frösö* “the island dedicated to the god Freyr,”⁸⁵ numerous animal bones were discovered at a mouldered birch stump in 1984. Sixty percent of the bones belonged to wild animals, mostly bears, and forty percent were domestic animals. The bones and the stump were dated to the tenth century.⁸⁶ It should be noted that the church was called *Hoffs kirkio* in a document from 1408. Still today, a place south-east of the church is called *Hov*. It has been argued that the *Hov* names in Jämtland refer to buildings where pagan cult practices were carried out.⁸⁷ The remains of the sacrifices discovered under Frösö church, have been re-analysed. Radiocarbon analyses of the bones indicate that pagan sacrifices were maintained there during the Late Viking Age. Seasonal analyses indicate that the sacrificial rituals took place in late autumn, early spring, and possibly around the summer solstice. These results harmonize quite well with the information about calendrical sacrificial feasts mentioned in the written sources.⁸⁸ Most of the bones belonged to the heads of the animals. Perhaps these heads were given to the gods at a sacred tree or a holy grove. The ceremonial meal may have taken place in the Viking Age ceremonial building beside this outdoor cult site, indicated by the place-name *Hov*. Whether the finds under the church at Frösö and their further contexts should be regarded as a peaceful dismantling of the pagan cult site made by the converted people of Jämtland themselves, or a triumphalist action made by Christian power coming from abroad, is hard to tell. Since the official conversion of Jämtland possibly had been proclaimed by the royal delegate *Austmaðr* at the *Jamtamót*-assembly (see above), the transition process might have been forced. By means of erecting a church on the ruins of the old cult place the old religion was symbolically dismantled.

It has been argued that a cult-site-continuity probably existed in several places in late Viking Age Scandinavia.⁸⁹ One of the most famous examples can be seen in Old Uppsala, where the Romanesque archdiocese Church was erected

⁸⁴ Other options are also possible when it comes to Hørning. Gelting (2020: 1600), for instance, suggests that the “function of building a church on the site of a pagan grave would look like the neutralization of demonic power of the pagan grave.”

⁸⁵ Vikstrand 1993; 1996.

⁸⁶ Iregren 1989; Magnell & Iregren 2010. Cf. Hultgård 1997: 33; Andrén 2004 and 2014.

⁸⁷ Vikstrand 1993 and 1996; Brink 1996a.

⁸⁸ Magnell & Iregren 2010; cf. Nordberg 2006; 2020.

⁸⁹ Magnus Olsen (1926) argued that the medieval churches often were raised at old cult sites. Ljungberg (1938) and Olaf Olsen (1966) criticized these ideas. More recent works accept the idea

very close to the place where a large hall was previously located (see above). Some churches in early medieval Scandinavia were also built in connection with pre-Christian graves.⁹⁰ In Uppland, Sweden, continuity may be seen in Vendel, Lena, Estuna, and Husby-Ärtinghundra.⁹¹ Moreover, the study of place-names confirms this picture; there is often a correlation between early medieval church sites and pagan theophoric or cult place-names.⁹² Some of the first churches were the private property of rulers and rich farmers, in the same manner as the cult buildings of the old religion had been connected with rulers' residences.⁹³

Sources indicate that pagan cult sites were conceived by recent converts as still holy and therefore also regarded as protected places. This could be one reason why churches were erected at the same locals where the pagan sanctuaries had previously been. An account from *Guta Saga* may support this idea: Botair of Akeböck had a church in Kulstade built, but it was soon burnt down by the islanders. He therefore built a new church at *Vi* (presently Visby) which was an old cult place in Gotland. When the people of the island also wanted to burn it down, Botair's father-in-law, Likkair Snielli from Stenkyrka, said as follows: "Do not persist in burning the man and his church, since it stands at *Vi*, below the cliff."⁹⁴ The church was left unburned, since the place was considered sacred since old time and still was. With no doubt, the name *Vi* in this account refers to "a pre-Christian cult site."⁹⁵

of cult-site-continuity. See e.g., Hultgård 1992; Brink 1992; Schjødt 1989; Steinsland 1989; 2000; A.-S. Gräslund 1992 and 2001; B. Nilsson 1992.

⁹⁰ O. Olsen 1966: 267–275, 288.

⁹¹ A.-S. Gräslund 1991: 46.

⁹² In Valbo, Gästrikland, for instance, the church was raised at Torsvallen, i.e., a former cult site. This locale was an assembly place (*vall*) and considered as an administrative center. Brink 1992: 116.

⁹³ Hellström 1971: 346–386 and see above.

⁹⁴ "*Herþin ai brenna mann ella kirkiu hanns þy et han standr i Vi, firir niþan klintu*". Ed. Peel 1999: 8–9.

⁹⁵ On *vi* in place-names, Th. Andersson 1992a/b/c; Brink 1996c: 261; Vikstrand 2001: 298–365; Blomkvist et al 2007: 184. Margaret Clunies Ross (2020: 38–39) has recently done a semantic analysis of the concept of *heilagr* in the oldest Old Norse poetry. Her conclusion is that there is no support for a notion of an impersonal holy power in pre-Christian times related to this term. She also points out that there is no indication that the adjective *heilagr* itself would relate to something inviolable. According to Clunies Ross, there is also nothing in connection with the concept of ON *vé* that speaks for the existence of a pagan notion of an impersonal force that made the places designated by this term inviolable. It was the presence of divine powers that made the *vi/vé* sites sacred and therefore people protected them with symbolic boundaries. If we follow Clunies Ross's argument, the situation in *Guta saga* could imply a syncretistic context, where the respect for the old gods still lingered on when Botair's church in Visby was erected.

According to *Kristni saga*, Gizurr and Hjalti returned to Iceland after consulting with King Óláfr Tryggvason. When they reached Vestmannaeyjar they moored their ship by Hørgaeýrr. There they carried their baggage ashore, along with the wood King Óláfr had had cut for a church. He had stipulated that the church should be built at the place where they put up the gangplanks to land. “Before the church was erected, lots were cast for which side of the bay it should stand on and the lots indicated the north. There had previously been sacrifices and heathen places of worship there.”⁹⁶ The cult place in this story is described with the designation *høgrgr*. The first element in the place-name *Hørgaeýrr*, moreover, indicates a cult place, that is, a *høgrgr*. This account indicates thus a cult-place-continuity. Grønlie states, however, that “the building of churches on the ruins of pagan temples is not uncommon in hagiography.”⁹⁷ Thus, this account may be built on a common *topos*.

The issue of cult-site-continuity has previously been hotly debated. Olaf Olsen rejected this phenomenon and claimed that we only have one sure example of this, namely in Old Uppsala.⁹⁸ In recent times, Anders Andrén has also problematized this question.⁹⁹ He has pointed to a fundamental difference between the rites of Christianity and the pre-Christian religion. In the former case, basically all rites were tied to the church and the church yard, while the pre-Christian religion, in a spatial sense, was performed in a more varied way in many places.¹⁰⁰ The question of whether the churches were built on the site of the “pagan temple” is thus misplaced because the ritual sites before Christianity varied more than later. Andrén believes indeed that there is reason to talk about cult-place-continuity in connection with certain premises, for example at Old Uppsala and Frösö in Jämtland.¹⁰¹

Cult-site-continuity is due to the fact that the public cult was performed at the general assembly place of the settlement or land. It was therefore natural to raise the churches at these places when the Christian cult was accepted.¹⁰² Economic interests and social prestige probably played important roles when deciding the location of the early churches. Many churches were erected by the Christians at their farms, where the pagan sanctuaries were previously located. As noted

96 *Áðr kirkjan var reist var hlutat um hvárum megin vágins standa skyldi ok hlauzk fyrir norðan. Þar váru áðr blót ok hørgar.* Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 30. Trans. Grønlie.

97 Grønlie 2006: 68.

98 Olsen 1966: 237. For an overview of this discussion, see Andrén 2002: 300–305.

99 Andrén 2002 and 2013.

100 It should be mentioned that the medieval Roman Church included many processions, which took place outside the churches and their churchyards. On an individual level, prayers were also performed privately at home, for instance.

101 Andrén 2002: 326–327.

102 Hellström 1971: 262.

above, it could be difficult to determine whether such phenomena should be interpreted as a peaceful and ritualized dismantling of the pagan cult site, or if it should be regarded as a violent and triumphalist action made by the recently converted Christian kings and local chieftains in order to show how victorious Christianity has been in the battle against pagans. In both cases we can interpret them as performative rituals performed by Christians, with the intention to show the pagans that the Old Norse religion was dead and now replaced with the Christian religion. The rituals implied that an actual change had taken place for the indigenous participants or observers of the actions. Such rituals must be considered as a strategy used by rulers when erasing the material dimension of the Old Norse religion and replacing it with Christian religion and churches.

5.3.2 Replacing pagan cult with Christian mass in old halls and heathen sanctuaries

It is possible that not all ceremonial halls and cult buildings, which were previously used as scenes for pagan cult and drinking ceremonies were dismantled after the conversion. Some of them could have been transformed by Christians into Christian cult places by means of consecration, that is, a performative ritual. Hence, Christian mass replaced pagan feasts in the old hall or sanctuary. Such cult-building-continuity is attested in Germanic areas, through two letters written by Pope Gregory the Great, in c. 601, preserved in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*.¹⁰³ In the first letter the pope exhorts King Ethelbert to destroy the pagan cult buildings and sanctuaries.¹⁰⁴ In the second letter Gregory reconsidered this strategy and suggested that the cult buildings should be preserved:

that is, to wit, that the temples of the idols in the said country ought not to be broken; but the idols alone which be in them; that holy water be made and sprinkled about the same temples, altars built, relics placed: for if the said temples be well built, it is needful that they be altered from the worshipping of devils into the service of the true God,¹⁰⁵

103 Bede, 1,30 and 1,32. See discussion in e.g., Strömbäck 1975: 59–60. Schäferdiek 1976; B. Nilsson 1992: 10–11; Brink 1992: 106. A.-S. Gräslund 1992: 129. The order of the letters has been confused by Bede. The letter in 1,32 was sent first and then the letter in 1,30.

104 Bede 1,32.

105 . . . *videlicet quia fana idolorum destrui in eadem gente minime debeant; sed ipsa quae in eis sunt idola destruantur; aqua benedicta fiat, in eisdem fanis aspergatur, altaria construuntur, reliquiae ponantur: quia si fana eadem bene constructa sunt, necesse est ut a cultu daemonum in obsequio veri Dei debeant commutari; . . .* Bede I: 30. Trans. King.

It has been suggested, that Christian cult, in a similar way, could have taken place in old banqueting halls in Denmark, which previously were intended for pre-Christian cult. Historian Michael E. Gelting states thus: “If Christian services were celebrated at all outside of the early urban centers [in Denmark] that were provided with sizeable churches, it is possible that they took place in the residential halls of the aristocracy, which had probably previously been the scene of important parts of the pagan cult.”¹⁰⁶ At Lisbjerg, near Aarhus, excavations indicate that the medieval church has been located on the very same site as a Viking Age hall. It formed the center of a large compound that may have constituted a royal residence. It has also been suggested that Christian cult was performed in the old hall building before the church was erected there.¹⁰⁷ Also at Jelling, the early church seems to have been erected on the site where the old banqueting hall was located.¹⁰⁸ Whether that hall was used for early Christian rituals is an open question. Dagfinn Skre has argued that during the mission period the church showed a high degree of flexibility, in that masses could be held in the hall buildings of the larger farms in Norway at the same time as the burials took place in the older burial fields. The church thus utilized existing places for its rituals during the transitional period.¹⁰⁹

It should be mentioned that a *lausavísa* by Runólfr Ketilsson (twelfth century) describes the inauguration of a new church at Skálholt in Iceland. It was built by Klæingr Þorsteinsson, who in 1152 became bishop of Skálholt. In this *vísa* the church is described as a hall (*høll*): “Strong is the hall that the powerful ruler [bishop] raised to the gentle Christ; such a plan springs from a good root.” (*Hraust es høll, sús Kristi hugblíðum lét smíða, góð es rót und róðum, ríkr stjórnaði, slíkum; ...*).¹¹⁰ It is clear that the poet associated the church with a hall by his choice of words.

According to Sten Tesch, the first Christian cult in Sigtuna was carried out in the hall buildings discovered there.¹¹¹ In the center of these halls, hearths were

106 Gelting 2020: 1605.

107 Cf. Gelting 2007: 86 and 2020: 1605.

108 Pedersen et al. 2022MS.

109 Skre 1988 and 1995.

110 Skj A1: 533; B1: 513. Thanks to Professor Maria Cristina Lombardi who brought this to my attention.

111 Tesch (2007: 61) writes thus: “Hallén i staden [Sigtuna], huset som låg längst bak på varje stadsgård (zon 4), fungerade som en slags filial till gårdsägarnas betydligt mer imponerande hallar på landsbygden, på den storgård där de hade sitt huvudsakliga viste. Det är sannolikt i dessa hus som den kristna eliten utövade sin andakt och i den mån man hade tillgång till en präst också firade mässan.” Cf. Tesch 2001: 28; 2017: 16–18; Kjellström et al. 2005: 88. For Christian cult in halls, see also Holmqvist 1980: 60; Herschend 1998: 13; B. Nilsson 2020: 1707.

found, and there are remains of long benches along the walls. Thus, in these Christian hall buildings very similar activities took place to the ones performed in the pre-Christian halls found in Fornsigstuna, for instance, banquets, distributions of gifts, and religious activities. Tesch supports his statements by pointing at the eight “sepulchral-stones” found in Sigtuna.¹¹² These stones were consecrated covers of reliquaries often placed directly on the altar.¹¹³ These stones could also have functioned as moveable altars and used in the halls of Sigtuna. It is, however, unlikely that some kind of pre-Christian cult ever took place in them. Most likely these halls were built by Christians from the beginning. The old halls intended for pagan banquets were erected at Fornsigstuna, just across Skarven (a part of Mälaren) from present Sigtuna. Anyhow, such old hall buildings were at other places used when replacing the old cult with new Christian ceremonies. It probably promoted the transition for those convert people who had not erected a church yet. Magnates and rich peasants gathered in the chieftain’s hall to celebrate mass under the direction of Christian priests.

5.4 The replacement of pagan funeral rituals and eschatological beliefs

In section 4.4.5 it was mentioned that the king and the church formulated regulations and laws related to pagan treatment of dead people. It was stated that the dead people should be buried at the churchyard and not in the pagan burial mounds or cairns. Violations were punishable by fines paid to the bishop. Since the royal power and the church propagated Christian burial customs, they probably came to influence the religious identity of groups and individuals in a radical and thorough manner. Parallel to these changing funeral customs, the traditional eschatological beliefs were also replaced by Christian thoughts about the afterlife.¹¹⁴ It is possible that these new beliefs were not only propagated by the Christian king and the Church, but were considered attractive to certain social groups

¹¹² See Tesch 2017: 18. Tesch (2007: 61) comments: “Det är här som sepulkralstenarna kommer in i bilden. Med ett resealtare kunde mässan firas utan tillgång till en speciell kyrkobyggnad och oavsett om gårdsägaren befann sig i staden eller hemma på gården på landet. Alla stenar är dock inte påträffade i eller i anslutning till hallen.”

¹¹³ Cecilia Ljung (2016: 219; 2019: 181) assumes that the sepulchral-stones found in Sweden indicate where priests lived.

¹¹⁴ Aspects of the pagan soul conception maintained in later folk belief. Cf. Wallenstein 2023: 208–298. The concept of eschatology refers to both the afterlife of individual man (individual eschatology) and the end and renewal of the world (universal eschatology). Widengren 1969: 440–455.

and also contributed to a voluntary and conflict-free transition to Christianity. Since the pagan mortuary customs and beliefs have not been treated thoroughly yet in this study, a short survey of them is needed.

Pagan mortuary customs and beliefs

The burial customs of the Late Iron Age Scandinavia exhibit a “marked degree of social, regional and chronological variation.”¹¹⁵ A characteristic type of burial tradition appears, for instance, in the area around the Lake Mälaren, with one or several burial grounds attached to every settlement.¹¹⁶ These burials include both cremation and inhumation graves, and quite often a small mound is placed right over the burial. In addition, more exceptional graves appear in this area, such as chamber graves with rich grave goods. Some of them have been found in connection to the trade town of Birka, on Björkö in the Lake Mälaren, and they reflect funeral customs of the upper stratum of society. Boat graves display another extraordinary type of inhumation burial. They often include rich grave goods and appear at places such as Valsgärde, Vendel, Alsike and Old Uppsala. They are quite often located at central places of settlement districts (*tuna*-places) or royal farms (*husabyar*) and they thus reflect customs and rituals of aristocratic groups and royalties.¹¹⁷ In Norway, both cremation and inhumation were practiced during the Late Iron Age.¹¹⁸ They appear side by side during the same periods and sometimes they occur in one and the same burial mound. The orientation of bodies also varies in the pagan funeral customs there. In the cremation burials the gifts are often arranged in neat patterns and they are burnt at the same time as the body. Sometimes a mound covers the grave. During the Viking Age the amount of the burial gifts increased, with rich cremations particularly from the tenth century. The burial mounds and monuments are often quite visible, however some graves lack superstructure. As in Sweden, many burial fields in Norway appear close to settlements.

In Sweden and Norway great burial mounds (more than 20 meters in diameter) from the Late Iron Age appear frequently with rich grave goods, reflecting members of the social elite. The ideological dimensions of them have often been emphasized.¹¹⁹ According to available records there are at least 268 great burial

115 Price 2020b: 854.

116 N. Blomkvist et al. 2007: 167; cf. A.-S. Gräslund 2001.

117 N. Blomkvist et al. 2007: 167. Cf. Gräslund 1980.

118 See e.g. Bagge & Nordeide 2007.

119 See Ringstad 1991; T. Zachrisson 1994; Bratt 2008.

mounds in the Lake Mälaren region alone.¹²⁰ The largest mounds are located in the central part of the Late Iron Age settlements, for instance, Uppsa kulle and Norsborgshögen in Södermanland, Uppsala högar (see Fig. 8b) and Nordians hög in Uppland, and Anundshög, Ströbohög and Östens hög, Västmanland.¹²¹ In Norway the great and royal burial mounds are spread in the area from the southernmost parts of the country up to Trøndelag in the north, and they can be dated to the period from the Pre-Roman Iron Age until the Viking Age.¹²² In Inn-Trøndelag alone there are at least 143 registered Iron Age great burial mounds, which are mostly situated at farms.¹²³ Most significant are the great burial mounds in Vestlandet and in Vestfold.¹²⁴ The Oseberg ship burial in Vestfold, dated to the ninth century, contains two females with very rich finds (Fig. 13). Late Iron Age great burial mounds appear at a few places in Denmark, for instance at the monumental royal sites of Jelling in Jylland and Lejre in Sjælland. No great burial mounds have been found in Iceland,¹²⁵ but small burial mounds occur in the western part of the country.¹²⁶



Fig. 13: Oseberghaugen, Vestfold, Norway. Image in its original state by Eirik Irgens Johnsen, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

¹²⁰ See Bratt 2008. Cf. Lindqvist 1936; Ljungkvist 2006.

¹²¹ On the datings, see Bratt 2008.

¹²² On the Norwegian great burial mounds, see mainly Ringstad 1991; Stenvik 1996.

¹²³ Stenvik 1996: 85.

¹²⁴ Ringstad 1991.

¹²⁵ Shetelig 1937: 208.

¹²⁶ Kristján Eldjárn 1956: 206.

While the graves reflect traces of ritual practices concerning death and burial, we must turn to popular beliefs and mythic-eschatological traditions in order to grasp notions about the worlds of the dead and the conditions for afterlife.¹²⁷ According to *Landnámabók*, a group of pagan settlers in Iceland believed that when they died they would go into the mountain (*at þeir dæi allir í fjallit*) called *Helgafell* or into the hills (*at þeir dæi í hólana*) called *Krosshólar*.¹²⁸ In *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 11), a shepherd saw Þórólfr's son Þorsteinn Þorskabítr enter this mountain as he drowned out fishing. The mountain was lit up and festive with drink (... *heyrði þangat mikinn glaum ok hornaskvöl*), and Þorsteinn was sitting in the seat of honor opposite his father (*sitja í öndvegi gegnt feðr sínum*) in social community.

Another home of the dead was called Old Norse *Hel*, a name which can be related to the verb *hylja* “conceal”, indicating that this realm was hidden from the world of the living people. Perhaps the designation has some kind of connection to the actual construction of graves, since they often were covered with a mound, a cairn or a stone setting.¹²⁹ Most likely *Hel* has a pre-Christian background, however, it does not appear often in skaldic poems.¹³⁰ The Christian skald Sigvatr states in his *Erfídrápa Óláfs helga* stanza one thus (c. 1030s): “I saw the men of the battle-hard king of the Swedes [= Óláfr *sœnski*] ride the horse of Sigarr <legendary king> [GALLOWS] to *Hel*; the greatest harm was quickly prepared for the men.”¹³¹ Whether *Hel* in this stanza refers to a pagan or Christian notion is uncertain. A similar uncertainty appears in a *lausavísa* (9) made by Þjóðólfr Árnórsson (late eleventh century), where the dead men mentioned there are members of King Steinkell's army: “Steinkell's men have been handed over to death's realm [*gefín helju*].”¹³² Hence, *Hel* seems to play a marginal role as a designation for the world of the dead in skaldic poems. In Eddic poems, however, the expressions *fara helju* “travel to *Hel*” or *ganga helju* “go on foot to *Hel*” occur quite frequently.¹³³ Compounds such as *helreið* “ride to *Hel*” also occur sometimes. *Baldur's draumar* stanzas two and three describe how Óðinn rode down on Sleipnir to Niflhel (*reið hann niðr . . . Niflheljar til*) where he met a dog who was bloody on its chest barking when the deity was approaching the high hall of *Hel* (*at hávu Heljar ranni*). *Völuspá* (R) stanza 42 also describes *Hel* as a

127 On Old Norse notions of afterlife, see e.g. Ellis 1943; de Vries 1956–1957; Nordberg 2004 [2003]; Nedkvitne 2004; Lindow and Andrén 2020.

128 *Landnámabók* chs S85, S97 and H84, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 125, 140 and *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 4, Ísl. Fornr. 4: 6–10.

129 Lindow and Andrén 2020: 905.

130 Lindow and Andrén 2020: 899.

131 *Svíá tyggja leitk seggi sóknstríðs (firum) riða (þol vas brátt) til Heljar (búit mest) Sigars hesti*. SkP 1: 665.

132 SkP 2: 173–174.

133 Lindow and Andrén 2020: 900.

place underneath the earth. Gullinkambi crows in order to awaken the *einherjar* for the final battle at Ragnarök, while another rooster crows *fyr jorð neðan sótrauðr hani at solum Heljar* “below the earth, a sooty-red cock in the halls of Hel.” In this stanza Hel may refer to a mythical being who has her abode down below the earth.¹³⁴ The connection between the female being Hel and the abode called Hel is not clear. According to *Grímnismál* stanza 31, Hel probably refers to a mythical being who lives under one of Yggdrasil’s three roots: *Hel býr undir einni* “Hel lives under one [of the roots].” It seems that the poet is referring to a being called Hel as he/she uses the verb *búa* “live.” According to *Gylfaginning* chapter 34, Hel is regarded as one of Loki’s female children and thus a chaotic being. Snorri reports there that only those people come to Hel who die of illness or old age (*en þat eru sótt dauðir menn ok ellidauðir*). He describes Hel’s abode as a scary place with high walls and great gates. Her hall is called Eliudnir, her dish Hunger, her knife Famine and her bed is called Sick-bed. Hel, herself, “is half black and half flesh-covered—thus she is easily recognizable—and rather downcast and fierce-looking.”¹³⁵

It seems as if Snorri wanted to separate the realm of Hel from Óðinn’s Valhöll, which was the noble abode of the warriors who were slain in battle. The reports from *Grímnismál* stanzas 8–10, 18–26, and *Gylfaginning* chapters 37–40 suggest that Valhöll refers to a large aristocratic banqueting hall which is located in the central part of Ásgarðr at a place called Glaðsheimr. *Grímnismál* stanza nine describes the hall further thus:

*Miðk er auðkennt,
þeim er til Óðins koma
salkynni at síá;
skoptom er rann rept,
skjöldum er salr þakiðr,
brynium um bekki strát.*

It is very easy to recognize for those who come to Óðinn, to see how his hall’s arranged; spear-shafts the building has for rafters, it’s roofed with shields, mail-coats are strewn on the benches.¹³⁶

It is said that the hall has “spear-shafts for rafters” and is thatched “with shields.” Essential structures of the house are thus made of weapons. When the skald states that “mail-coats are strewn on the benches” the audience understands quite clearly

¹³⁴ von See et al. 2018: 335–336.

¹³⁵ . . . *er blá hálf en hálf með hǫrunðar lit – því er hon auðkend – ok heldr gnúpleit ok grimlig.*

¹³⁶ Text Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, translation Larrington based on Neckel/Kuhn.

that this house was intended for warriors, that is, Valhøll. It is also stated in this poem that Hroprtr (i.e. Óðinn) “chooses every day those dead in combat” (st. 8), that is, the *einherjar* (*einheri* sg.). It seems as if these *einherjar* were brought to *Valhøll* “the hall of the slain”¹³⁷ by the *valkyrjur* “those who choose the slain.”¹³⁸ In Valhøll these warriors had a paradise-like life, where they spent their days in the battlefield, but in the evening they were alive again.¹³⁹ In Valhøll the *valkyrjur* offer the *einherjar* mead from the goat Heiðrun’s horn,¹⁴⁰ and they eat the meat from the constantly renewed boar Sæhrímnir each day. This boar meat is prepared for the warriors in the cauldron called Eldhrímnir by the cook Andhrímnir.¹⁴¹

These mythical descriptions have many affinities with the structure of real ceremonial halls appearing in Scandinavia from the late Roman Iron Age into the Viking Age.¹⁴² The concept of Valhøll has its historical setting (*Sitz im Leben*) in these hall milieus, where warlords with warrior bands appeared. The culture developed in these halls has been described by German scholars as a “Gefolgschaftswesen.” Among these groups there was an eschatological belief that those warriors who were killed in battle were consecrated or sacrificed to Óðinn. After death they were taken to his residence, Valhøll. There they resided in lustre, light, and warmth, with their divine warlord Óðinn, the *valkyrjur* and other warriors slain in battle (*einherjar*). At Ragnarøk these warriors will march out and fight on the gods’ side against the *jotnar*.

In pre-Christian society, honour and a good reputation were important aspects of afterlife in general. The tenth-century poems *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* refer to these aspects as well as the theme of Valhøll and a cosmic eschatology, that is, that the Norwegian warrior lords after their brave and valiant death on the battle field will be in “the ranks of the good forces at the side of the gods during the great battle at the end of time.”¹⁴³ This was probably a glorious task awaiting brave kings and warriors in the upper classes in Viking Age Norway.

137 The term *Valhøll* probably derives from the ON words *valr* “the corpses lying on the battle-field” and *høll* “hall.” Simek 2006: 346–348; Hultgård 2011: 301.

138 The term *valkyrjur* (pl) derives from *valr* and the verb *kjósa* “to choose.” See Simek 2006: 349.

139 *Vafþrúðnismál* st. 41.

140 *Grímnismál* sts 25, 36; *Gylfaginning* ch. 39.

141 *Grímnismál* st. 18; *Gylfaginning* ch. 38.

142 Nordberg (2004 [2003]: 85–92, 299) argues convincingly that the social context of the Valhøll motif is found in the band of the warrior aristocracy and the culture developed in halls. Cf. Sundqvist 2016a: 523–527; Hultgård 2017: 50–55.

143 Hultgård 2011: 322. Cf. Jackson 2014.

From pagan mortuary behavior to Christian customs

Archaeology shows that the burial customs changed during the Viking Age in Scandinavia.¹⁴⁴ Generally speaking, there is a transition from cremation to inhumation and graves in an east-west direction without actual grave goods and with superstructures of simpler stone frames. This is usually thought to reflect a Christian influence on the burial tradition. Inhumation does occur sporadically throughout the Iron Age, but it is only during the Viking Age that there is a gradual transition from cremation to skeletal graves with an east-west orientation that sometimes also include a simpler wooden coffin, especially of trapezoidal type. Previously the graves were equipped with jewelry, clothes, food, weapons, tools, caskets and buckets as well as domestic animals. Eventually the dead are buried with only their clothes and a few belongings.

Anne-Sofie Gräslund has construed a model that can overall distinguish differences between pagan and Christian burial conditions: (1) *Burial method* – cremation in Iron Age Scandinavia is only a pagan custom, while inhumation occurs sporadically during this period, in some parts such as Öland, Gotland and in parts of Norway it is the dominant tradition. During the late Viking Age, there was a complete change from cremation to skeleton graves where the dead people were often placed in a coffin. (2) *Orientation* – east-west orientation reflects in general a Christian burial tradition; however, some pagan graves also have this orientation in both Sweden and Norway (see above). (3) *Equipment in the graves* – rich equipment in the burials reflect in general a pagan tradition. Property appears to have belonged to the deceased. After Christianization, this property was transferred as payment for soul masses. However, costumes, costume details and sometimes jewelry can appear in Christian graves. (4) *Traces of funeral ceremonies* – certain rites such as sticking a weapon through the fire layer or equipping the grave with spikes (so-called “Hel-shoes”) may testify to a pagan ceremony in connection with the burial. In Christian graves, on the other hand, wax candles can sometimes be placed. (5) *The location of the grave* – during the transitional period, the Christians may have been buried in the old burial field next to the village or in graveyards surrounded by, for example, standing limestone stones without a church being erected on the site. The Christians often lie on the edge of the old burial ground. It is possible that a cross-marked rune stone was sometimes erected in connection with such a burial field. Eventually, Christians are expected to be buried in the cemetery next to a church. (6) *The external shape of the graves* – during the Viking Age, the dead were often buried under small mounds,

144 A.-S. Gräslund 1996: 28–31; 2001: 43–55.

round stone embankments and in connection with ship embankments and trident stone settings. The tradition of burial mounds ends at the end of the Viking Age, which indicates a Christian influence on burial conditions. Cross-marked runestones adjacent to graves that have a more traditional external form may testify to Christian consecration of a grave. By weighing the above-mentioned criteria together, one can identify the transition from a pagan grave tradition to Christian burial customs.¹⁴⁵

Regional variations: An example from Sweden

A very important and impressive study related to temporal, regional and contextual aspects of the Christianization of Sweden and changes in burial traditions was published by Cecilia Ljung.¹⁴⁶ She focuses on the background of the early Christian grave monuments (previously called *Eskilstunakistor*) in Sweden and their relation to Christian cemeteries as well as the new religious and socio-political landscape during the transition period. In the concluding chapter, Ljung investigates regional and chronological connections between changes in the old burial fields, the erection of runestones and their cessation, as well as the construction of early Christian grave monuments including their design and location at churchyards. In areas where the Christian kingship and the church organization became established early, the commemorative practice also changed soon: (1) The early Christian grave monuments in the form of cists and recumbent slabs with ornamental designs located at churchyards testify to a radical process of change including an early church establishment and organization starting already around 1000, which accelerates towards c. 1050. These changes can be observed mainly in Västergötland and to some extent in the western part of Östergötland, and later in Närke and Södermanland. The early Christian grave monuments can be perceived as a manifestation of an elitist identity. In Västergötland and Östergötland traditional burial grounds were abandoned early followed by a more uniform Christian burial praxis. (2) The varied burial customs where the traditional burial grounds continue to be used throughout the 1000s and sometimes well into the twelfth century (including cremation burials) contemporaneously with newly established churchyards, and where runestones are erected in different spatial settings testify to a more “wild Christian landscape.”¹⁴⁷ This is consistent with the situation on Öland

145 Gräslund 2001: 43–55.

146 Ljung 2016: 229–247 and 2019: 154–190.

147 Cf. Tesch 2017: 40–42.

and in Uppland. (3) In the churchyards of Västergötland and Östergötland we can see cist monuments and recumbent slabs, while Öland and Uppland lack cists but have upright runestones and sandstone runestones in Christian cemeteries, and runestones in a traditional landscape setting. (4) In Uppland, the erection of sandstone runestones in ecclesiastic contexts and traditional runestones in a landscape setting continues into the twelfth century, while in the two Götaland-landscapes the erection of runestones ends in the eleventh century. There are thus some clear regional and chronological differences in terms of material conditions, where coffins and recumbent slabs at churchyards in Götaland correspond to erected stones in Uppland and on Öland. Ljung states that this indicates a variation regarding church organization and central government in the provinces, rather than a varied degree of Christianity in terms of faith and personal convictions. The conclusion is that the establishment of the church and Christian kingship was earlier in Västergötland and Östergötland than in Uppland and Öland. In Götaland royal power, aristocracy and the church succeeded in replacing the old burial traditions early with new Christian customs and burial customs, which were probably important when it came to creating a new Christian identity among the population, and a new social community.

From Valhöll to Paradise

During the Viking Age the pagan eschatological beliefs were replaced by Christian notions and concepts of the afterlife. These notions were important in the early Christian kings' and clergies' teaching. If man had Christian morals and ethics, performed good deeds and thought good thoughts, there was a possibility of eternal life in the presence of God and Christ in Heaven and in Paradise. But God could also punish those who did not follow his commandments on the judgment day with an existence in Hell. Christianity brought thus with it the belief in the life of the soul after death. For instance *The Old Norwegian Homily Book* reflects the church's proclamation of life after death with the possibility of an existence in Heaven with Christ or eternal damnation in burning Hell with the Devil.¹⁴⁸

Scholars have argued that these Christian beliefs could have been perceived as appealing to at least certain social groups in Viking Age society. Anne-Sofie Gräslund has stated that particularly the Christian message about the afterlife in Heaven could be attractive to women. They could not hope to end up in Valhöll.

148 See e.g. *The Old Norwegian Homily Book (Gamal norsk homiliebok)* and the sermon called *De ammonitione bona*, ed. Indrebø 1931: 65–66. Cf. Nedkvitne 2004: 69–101.

Instead of coming to the dark, cold and gloomy Hel where the terrible creature Hel ruled, the talk of “light and Paradise” by the Christian kings and missionaries must have been an important argument and motive for converting to Christianity.¹⁴⁹ It is quite likely that the idea of Christian Paradise also was attractive for men.

A very important source material for the meaning of Christian eschatology and its content is found in the nearly 2,500 runestones in Sweden from the eleventh century.¹⁵⁰ They very often include prayers for the deceased relatives after whom the runic monuments were erected. On a Viking Age runestone (U 160) in Risbyle, by Skålhamra west of Vallentunasjön in Täby parish, Uppland, it is stated thus:

ulfkætill · uk · kui uk + uni + þir × litu · rhisa × stin þina · iftir · ulf · faþur · sin · kuþan on · buki · i skul(o)þri · kuþ · ilbi · ons · at · uk · salu · uk · kusþ muþir · li anum lus · uk baratis

Ulfkætill ok Gyi ok Unni þæir letu ræisa stæin þenna æftir Ulf, faður sinn goðan. Hann byggi i Skulhambri. Guð hialpi hans and ok salu ok Guðs móðir, le hanum lius ok paradís.

Ulfkætill and Gyi and Unni they let erect this stone for Ulf, their good father. He lived in Skålhamra. God and God’s Mother help his spirit and soul, grant him light and Paradise.¹⁵¹

Ulf was the head of the Skålhamra-family around the beginning of the millennium and the text testifies to an inheritance document for his three sons after his death. His sons wished that their father’s soul would experience light and Paradise in the next life. The prayer for the gift of heavenly light and Paradise to the soul of the dead man appears on two other runestones, one in Uppland and one on Bornholm.¹⁵² The one from Uppland is erected at Folsberga in Vallby parish (U 719) and ends with the following prayer:

istr + lati kumo + ot + tumo + i lus yk baratísi + yk i þon em + besta + kristnum +

[K]rístur lati koma and Tuma/Tumma i lius ok paradísi ok i þann hæim bæzta kristnum.

May Christ let Tumme’s soul come into light and Paradise and into the world best for Christians.¹⁵³

The runestone from Bornholm (Klemensker 1) (DR 399) in Denmark has the prayer twice. It can be read and interpreted as thus:

149 A.-S. Gräslund 1996b: 331–332.

150 See Williams 1996b: 65–70. See also Zilmer 2012 and 2013.

151 Samnordisk runtextdatabas; Jansson 1987: 113; Williams 1996b: 66.

152 Jansson 1987: 113.

153 Samnordisk runtextdatabas; Jansson 1987: 113; Williams 1996b: 67.

(k)(u)(n)iltr : l(e) t : r(e)isa : st(e) n : þ(e)n(s)(a) : eftir : auþbiarn : bonta : sin : kristr : hialbi : siolu : auþbiarnar : i lus : auk : bratis kristr : hialbi : siolu : (a)(u)(þ)biarnar : auk : ku(n)(i)(l)(t) (a)(r) : auk : santa mikel : i lius : auk : baratis

Gunnhildr had this stone raised in memory of Auðbjǫrn, her husbandman. May Christ help Auðbjǫrn's soul into light and Paradise. May Christ and Saint Michael help the souls of Auðbjǫrn and Gunnhildr into light and paradise.¹⁵⁴

On a runestone from Östergötland at Kimstad (Ög 161) the celestial light also occurs. It was erected by three brothers in honor of their father. It ends: **kup × h . . .]lbi × aut × has × auk × kus × muþ[-r × i × lius ×]** (God and God's mother help his soul into light).¹⁵⁵

Most likely all these runestones were erected in honor of great men and local chieftains who all were baptized. These inscriptions also indicate that this particular message of light and Paradise in the next life may have been attractive even to powerful men, as a substitute for Hel and Valhöll. Sven B. F. Jansson writes in connection with these texts:

We may have a suspicion that the task of the missionary in Sweden was an arduous one: Valhall had to be exchanged for *paradis*, Thor and mysterious magic charms had to be replaced by God and God's mother, Christ and Saint Michael. It was a change of old currency for a new Christian coinage.¹⁵⁶

However, it is more likely that particularly Christian eschatology constituted a trump card for the Christian kings and the church, as it seems very likely to have been attractive to many people who lived with the old notions of Hel and Valhöll, also for great men and chieftains. The testimony of the rune stones confirms this.

Church historian Per Beskow believes that the theological content of these runic prayers comes from church circles on the continent and the British Isles.¹⁵⁷ The formula of "light" and "Paradise" are taken from the Christian death liturgy.¹⁵⁸ In the beginning of the requiem mass, the word *lux* "light" appears: *Requiem æternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis*, "Eternal rest give them, O Lord, and let the eternal light shine for them."¹⁵⁹ When the dead person was taken to the grave after the requiem mass, they sang the antiphon: *In paradi-*

¹⁵⁴ Text and translation Kitzler Åhfeldt & Imer 2019: 8. Cf. Samnordisk runtextdatabas.

¹⁵⁵ Samnordisk runtextdatabas; Jansson 1987: 113.

¹⁵⁶ Jansson 1987: 113.

¹⁵⁷ Beskow 1994: 18, 27–30.

¹⁵⁸ Several early Christian skaldic poems associate Christ with sun and light. See e.g., *Sólarljóð* sts 39–45. SkP 7: 322–326.

¹⁵⁹ Text and my translation, based on Beskow 1994: 27.

sum deducant te angeli, “May the angels take you to paradise.”¹⁶⁰ St Michael’s role as soul guide or psychopomp that brings it to beatitude also appears in the Christian death liturgy.¹⁶¹ A missal found in Hamburg from the eleventh century includes a prayer, *Delicta iuventutis* which is still included in the *Ordo Commendationis animæ* in the *Rituale Romanum*. There are listed the angels and saints who will bring the deceased to bliss: *Suscipiat te sanctus Michael archangelus dei qui regni cælestis milicie meruit principatum*, “May the holy angel of honor Michael receive you, he who is counted worthy to be the leader of the rulers of the heavenly kingdom.”¹⁶² Beskow believes that the Christian imaginary world has quickly supplanted the Old Norse religion.¹⁶³ The knowledge of the faith, such as the eschatological message, was communicated through oral preaching, and the liturgy obviously played an important pedagogical role. He points out that liturgical explanation rather than biblical exposition has been the basis for the transmission of faith.¹⁶⁴ Other scholars have also argued that Christian eschatology has had a decisive impact on missionary history.¹⁶⁵

The Christian royalties’ and missionaries’ preaching eventually led to the pagan eschatology being replaced by Christian concepts. As these new beliefs may have been perceived as attractive to certain groups in Scandinavia, they contributed to many people more easily abandoning their old beliefs. For the church in Scandinavia, further, it was important to introduce new ceremonies to make a demarcation line between the old religion and Christianity. Baptism and Christian funeral rituals were probably considered the most efficient ways of steering the native people in the “right direction” (see 4.4.5 above). But there are also examples where apparently pagan rites and cult practices lived on in Christian culture and religion, as can be seen in the next section.

160 Text and my translation, based on Beskow 1994: 28.

161 Cf. Steinsland 2004: IX.

162 Text and my translation, based on Beskow 1994: 29.

163 Beskow 1994: 34.

164 However, it should be pointed out that in both the Norwegian and Icelandic homily books there are sermons and pedagogical explanations of biblical texts.

165 Staats 1994: 13.

5.5 The replacement of pagan libation sacrifices

The oldest Kings' Saga in vernacular, *Ágrip* (c. 1190), describes how King Óláfr Tryggvason abolished the old pagan custom called *blótdrykkjur*, and replaced it with drinking ceremonies at Christian holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, St John's Mass, and St Michael's Mass:

He [King Óláfr] first raised churches on his own estates and he abolished pagan feasts and *blótdrykkjur*, in place of which, as a favor to the people, he ordained the holiday feasts Yule and Easter, St John's Mass ale and an autumn-ale at Michaelmas.¹⁶⁶

The concept *blótdrykkjur* (f. pl) should literally be translated to "(pagan) libation sacrifices," but in a transferred meaning it implied "sacrificial banquets." It has been argued that the transformation of these pagan customs and feasts into Christian rites were thorough modifications, which should best be "described as a syncretic phenomenon."¹⁶⁷ The king abolished the pagan animal sacrifices, as well as other pagan rituals applied at the sacrificial feasts, but preserved the drinking ceremonies as long as they appeared in a Christian setting. As noticed above, in the medieval *Guta Law* regulations against invocations with food and drinking were prohibited as long as they did not follow Christian customs. This statement also implies that in Gotland such drinking ceremonies were transformed after conversion to Christian rituals. Some obvious pagan elements of the ritual banquets were probably prohibited, such as the invocations to groves, howes, and the heathen (images of) gods, as mentioned in *The Guta Law* (see above).

5.5.1 For a good year and peace (*til árs ok friðar*)

In some sources we may see that not only the libation rituals, but also a formula related to them was retained. In the *Older Gulaping Law*, it is prescribed that three farmers should join in brewing a special beer and in drinking together at special occasions, where also the pre-Christian ritual formula *til árs ok friðar* was applied in the ceremonies, that is, drinking for a good year and peace (see above). When celebrating All Saints' Day and Christmas, the beer should be consecrated "in order to thank Christ and St Mary, for a good year and peace" (*til Krist þakka*.

166 . . . ok reisti fyrst kirkjur á sjálf<s> síns höfuðbólum ok fellði blót ok blótdrykkjur ok lét í stað koma í vild við lýðinn hátíðadrykkjur jól ok páskar, Jóansmessu mungát ok haustöl at Míkjálmessu. Ísl. Fornr. 29: 22. Trans. Driscoll. See e.g., Bagge & Nordeide 2007: 124.

167 Hultgård 1992: 61–62, 101.

oc sancta Mariu. til árs. oc til friðar).¹⁶⁸ The formula *til árs ok friðar* appears also in other contexts in the medieval laws, beside the drinking ceremonies. In these contexts, conditions of “a good year and peace” are related to prayers addressed to Holy Christ. The *Old Gulaping Law*, for instance, is introduced in the following words:

This is the beginning of our Law, we shall turn to the east and pray to the Holy Christ [that he may procure] a good year and peace (*til hins helga Krist árs ok friðar*).¹⁶⁹

The expression *til árs ok friðar* was taken over by the Church from the pagan religion in medieval Scandinavia (see above). It was somewhat adjusted in its new Christian context, but the intention of it aimed to realize the same goals as before the conversion.

It seems as if this formula *ár ok friðr* was spread widely over Scandinavia. In the *Frostaping Law*, fast days during St Mary’s mass are dedicated “for a good year and peace and for good health to all men.”¹⁷⁰ This instance produces solid evidence that the formula was used in Trøndelag during the transition period. The expression *ár ok friðr* also appears in independent medieval sources that derive from eastern Scandinavia: *The Guta Law*, which was barely influenced by Old Norse tradition, says: “and all believe in one almighty God, and pray to him that he grants us a good year and peace, victory and health.”¹⁷¹ In this context “a good year and peace” appears as a result of prayers to the Almighty God.

5.5.2 Ruler ideology: The king as mediator of divine blessings

Other evidence from the transition period in Norway indicates that the expression *ár ok friðr* was ancient and taken over by the Church also in the context of rulership. The skaldic poem *Glælognskviða*, composed by Þórarinn loftunga in the first decades of the eleventh century, says of St Óláfr:

*Bið Óleif,
at unni þér*

168 *Older Gulaping Law*, NGL 1: 6.

169 *Þat er upphaf laga varra at ver skolom luta austr ok biðia til hins helga Krist árs ok friðar*. NGL I: 5.

170 *Sva er oc mællt at Marie messo æptan hin fyrra oc alra heilagra messo æptan þa skolu aller mænn fasta uiðr sallt oc brauð er.xij. vettra [eru gamler eða ællri til ars ok friðar oc til heillsu allum monnum . . .* NGL I: 141. My trans.

171 *Oc troa allir aann guþ alzval danda. Oc hann [hial]þar biþia þet hann unni os ar oc friþ sigr oc hailsu*, ed. Pipping: 3; trans. Peel.

— *hanns goðs maðr* —
grundar sinnar
 — *hann of getr*
af goði sjalfum
ár ok frið
qllum mǫnnum —,
þás þú rekr
fyr reginnagla
bóka máls
bænr þínar.

Pray to Óláfr that he grant you his ground [Norway], — he is God’s man; he obtains from God himself prosperity and peace for all people — when you present your prayers before the sacred nail of the language of books [LATIN > SAINT = Óláfr].¹⁷²

The old formal expression *ár ok friðr* has thus been transferred to its new Christian context by the skald, when relating it to St Óláfr. There are signs of continuation from ancient traditions, since this formula previously appeared in connection to pagan kings and pre-Christian ruler ideology.¹⁷³ As the pagan ruler, the saintly king was also expected to bring “a good year and peace” from the divine sphere to the farmers in the new Christian cult. In both contexts, the king is the mediator between the people and the god(s)/God. St Óláfr is associated with this notion in other contemporary texts too. The priest and skald, Sighvatr Þórðarson, designates St Óláfr *jofurr ársæll* “the season-blessed prince” in the poem *Knútsdrápa* stanza 3 (c. 1035):

Knútr vas und himnum.
Hykk ætt at frétt
Haralds í her
hug vel duga.
Lét lýrgotu
lið suðr ór Nið
Óláfr jofurr
ársæll fara.

Knútr was under the heavens . . . I believe, according to reports, [his] courage served the descendant of Haraldr [= Óláfr] well in battle. Óláfr, the season-blessed prince, let his fleet travel the pollack-path [SEA] south from Nidelven.¹⁷⁴

172 Text and trans. Matthew Townend in SkP 1: 875.

173 Hultgård 2003a and above. Cf. Sundqvist 2002: 194–196; 2014a; 2020b; Wellendorf 2018: 110.

174 Text and trans. Matthew Townend in SkP 1: 653.

This stanza is quoted in *Ágrip*. The scribe noted there that when King Sveinn and his mother Alfífa took over the reign of Trondheim, famine and misery prevailed, “because the seasons were never good in their time” (*fyr því at aldregi var ár á þeira dögum*). The text intimates that this was a contrast to the glorious days, when King Óláfr reigned the country.¹⁷⁵

In all these medieval instances, the formula (*ár ok friðr*) could be seen as “an old religious custom in Christian disguise.”¹⁷⁶ It is an example of replacement, where the necessary conditions of “a good year and peace” has been adjusted to Christianity. In order to achieve these states of affairs prayers to God, Christ, St Mary or St Óláfr must be made, and not pagan libation rituals dedicated to the old deities Njörðr and Freyr. Sometimes these conditions were believed to be mediated by the Christian king in a similar way as blessings were ritually supplied from the divine power by the pagan ruler at public sacrifices. This desire for a good year and peace was probably expressed in the context of the Christian drinking ceremonies in halls and thus contributed, together with the mass in churches and other ritual activities, to the establishment of the new religious community and the Christian identity.

5.6 The displacements of animal sacrifices, worship of pagan gods and cult images

When the Christian drinking ceremonies replaced the pagan drinking rituals, there were also elements of displacements. The necessary conditions of “a good year and peace” for the farmers could not after conversion come as an outcome of worshiping pagan idols, animal sacrifices, and communal meals where horse meat was consumed, but only from prayers addressed to God, Christ, St Mary and St Óláfr. We have already seen how important it was for the ruling power and Church to abolish everything that was associated with pagan animal sacrifices, blood rituals, pagan idols and paraphernalia, as well as the custom of eating horse meat. Various strategies and methods for making such displacements made by the Christian kings have already been presented in chapter four. The Christian kings and the Church often explained these activities as the Devil’s work or superstition, while the pagan gods were described as demons. In addition, the pagan cult images were often designated with pejorative terms such as *tréguð*, *trémaðr*,

175 *Ágrip*, Ísl. Fornr. 29: 31. On the problem of the pagan King’s luck (*Königsheil*), see e.g., Ström 1968; Bagge 1991: 218–224; Sundqvist 2002: 241–258.

176 Hultgård 1992: 102.

skurðgoð, or *líkneski*. With these terms the Christian writers wanted to show that the pagans had no real gods, but worshiped wooden images that completely lacked a divine nature. As noticed above, there were elements of euhemerism, mockery, idol parody and demonology related the accounts where the old gods appeared.¹⁷⁷ Whether these anti pagan polemics against the traditional worship of cult images should be regarded as displacements of pagan practice is a bit uncertain. In a sense the pagan cult images were sometimes replaced by images of Christ and saints etc.

*

In the present chapter, it has been argued that replacements were implemented by rulers and chieftains, partly in order to promote the dismantling of the old religion. The replacement of the pagan drinking ceremonies (*blótdrykkjur*) with ritual drinking at Christian holidays is one example of this strategy. The formula *ár ok friðr* was transferred from the old sacrificial feasts to Christian prayers addressed to God, Christ and St Mary. Christian understandings and practices replaced traditional customs, ones with the same goals as the former, such as a good year and peace for the farmers. Sometimes these blessings were believed to be mediated by the kings also after conversion as in the case of St Óláfr. Other elements were displaced by the Christian rulers and the Church, such as animal sacrifices, and the consumption of horsemeat. These pagan activities, including the worship of the pagan images of gods, were explained by the Christian power as evil superstition and must therefore be forbidden and displaced.

¹⁷⁷ Wellendorf 2018: 23–25. See also 4.5.

6 King Óláfr Tryggvason's missions – a contextual approach

As noted in chapter two, there are two competing theories in the research about the religious change in Scandinavia; one emphasizes that it took place under peaceful conditions with a slow and gradual process, and the other accentuates conflicts and violent encounters with an abrupt ending.¹ A problem with scholars applying these theories is that they sometimes tend to overgeneralize and fail to take regional and contextual aspects into consideration. The present investigation indicates that the newly converted rulers sometimes used militant methods in some contexts, but not in all situations. In many cases, they also used nonviolent means, such as the refusal to perform the “royal rites” at the pagan sacrificial feasts. These kings were thus pragmatists. Another problem related to the aforementioned theories is that they possibly reflect two research fields, where scholars applying them use different methods and sources. Archaeologists, using archaeological materials, tend to emphasize that the religious change should be seen as a long, gradual, and peaceful process,² while some historians of religions, working with Old Norse texts, describe it as violent and abrupt.³ Hence, a more contextual approach is needed when discussing these strategies as well as the use of an interdisciplinary approach where various source types are applied. When investigating a particular case, the evidence in the written sources must thus be compared with the information found from archaeological excavations and their analysis. In what follows, two well known, but illustrative, examples will be presented, showing that a contextual approach is necessary where also all types of sources are investigated and compared.⁴ Focus is thus placed on Óláfr Tryggvason and his actions, tactics and strategies in the two different contexts.

1 I certainly agree with Nordeide (2020: 1641) when she states thus: “After many years of interdisciplinary influences from fields such as social anthropology, both perspectives today appear somewhat oversimplified.” Cf. Berend 2007: 24–25.

2 E.g., A.-S. Gräslund 1996: 42–44; 2001: 127–128, 149. See also ch. 2 above, note 44.

3 E.g., Steinsland 1991: 336–340; 2000 28–31, 82–89; 2005: 434–444. See also ch. 2 above and notes 28–29.

4 Such a contextual and interdisciplinary approach has been more common the last three or four decades when studying Christianization in Scandinavia. Berend (2007: 24) states that “neither the stereotype of quick conversion due to a ruler’s decision nor that of gradual slow penetration of the new religion fits; the variety of the process must be emphasized.”

6.1 Violent religious change in Trøndelag

Some texts referring to the transition period in Norway attest that newly converted kings sometimes used violence and the destruction of ceremonial buildings. The Kings' Sagas have plenty of references to how sanctuaries and pagan cult images in late-tenth century were destroyed by King Óláfr Tryggvason when he embarked on his mission work.

6.1.1 King Óláfr Tryggvason dismantles pagan cult at Mære

According to Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chapters 65–71, the king assembled a great force from the east of the country and took it to Trøndelag and made first of all for Niðaróss.⁵ When it was coming very close to the time for holding the annual festival at Mære, King Óláfr prepared a great banquet at Lade inviting to him leading men and other important farmers. There was a splendid feast and people got very drunk. The next morning, the king summoned all the people for a meeting. The king stood up and spoke:

'We had an assembly in at Frosta. I then proposed to me that I should turn to heathen sacrifice with them, as King Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri had done. Agreement was reached between us that we should meet in Mære and there hold a great festival. But if I must turn to heathen sacrifices with you, then I will have the greatest sacrifice that is known made, and offer men in sacrifice. I do not want to choose for this slaves or evil-doers. For this I shall choose to offer the gods the most distinguished people. I am naming for this Ormr lygra of Meðalhús, Styrkár of Gimsar, Kárr of Grýtingr, Ásbjörn Þorberg of Ornes, Ormr of Lyxa, Halldórr of Skerðingssteðja.'⁶

In addition, the king named some other distinguished people that he wanted to sacrifice for a good year and peace (*blóta til árs ok friðar*) and he also attacked them with his men. The farmers then beg for quarter and put all their futures at the king's disposal. It was then agreed between them that all farmers who had

5 The following account is a paraphrased text of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chs 65–71, based on the translation of Finlay & Faulkes.

6 'Vér áttum þing inn á Frostu. Bauð ek þá búndum, at þeir skyldu láta skírask, en þeir buðu mér þar í mót, at ek skylda hverfa til blóta með þeim, svá sem gort hafði Hákon konungr Aðalsteinsfóstri. Kom þat ásamt með oss, at vér skyldim finnask inn á Mærini ok gera þar blót mikit. En ef ek skal til blóta hverfa með yðr, þá vil ek gera láta it mesta blót, þat sem títt er, ok blóta monnum. Vil ek eigi til þess velja þræla eða illmenni. Skal til þess velja at fá goðunum ina ágætustu menn. Nefni ek til þess Orm lygru af Meðalhúsum, Styrkár af Gímsum, Kár af Grýtingi, Ásbjörn Þorberg af Ornesi, Orm af Lyxu, Halldór af Skerðingsteðju.' Ísl. Fornr. 26: 316. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes.

come there should have themselves baptized. And swear oaths to the king to keep the true faith, and give up all heathen rituals. The king then kept all these men as guests right until they had handed over their sons or brothers or other close kinsmen as hostage to the king.

When King Óláfr came to Mære, all the leaders of the Þrændir were there, that is, those who were most opposed to Christianity. At the assembly Járn-Skeggi Ásbjarnarson from Upphaugr in Yrjar was the leader of the pagan Þrændir. “We desire, king,” he said, “that you should offer sacrifices, as other kings have done here before you.” The king then entered the *hof*:

King Óláfr now goes into the temple (*hof*) and a small number of men with him and some farmers. And when the king came to where the gods were, there sat Þórr, and was most dignified of all the gods, adorned with gold and silver. King Óláfr raised up a gold-adorned ceremonial halberd that he had in his hand and struck Þórr, so that he fell off his pedestal. Then the king's men leaped forward and shoved down all the gods from their pedestals.⁷

Járn-Skeggi was killed outside before the *hof*-building's entrance, and it was the king's men who did this. After this event no leaders among the farmers dared to oppose the king.

Snorri had good sources when he described the missions of King Óláfr Tryggvason.⁸ His most important source for this episode was probably *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, written in Latin by the twelfth-century Icelandic monk Oddr Snorrason at the monastery in Þingey (see Fig. 1b). The Latin version is lost, but an Old Norse translation of it is preserved. This text is full of miracles and wonder tales. Oddr narrates there that King Óláfr was the first Christian king in Norway.⁹ With the support of God's power, he was always successful in speaking about Christianity even among people who were eloquent and opposed to the Christian faith. There are also some passages which have a more historical character. One such passage is Oddr's statement that the major sacrifice of the Þrændir was held at Mære (*[o]k á Mærini i Þrándheimi var hofuðblót*).¹⁰ Other written sources and archaeological evidence support that Mære was an important cult place (see

7 Óláfr konungur gengr nú í hofit ok fáir menn með honum ok nokkurir af bóndum. En er konungur kom þar, sem goðin váru, þá sat þar Þórr ok var mest tígaðr af öllum goðum, búinn með gulli ok silfri. Óláfr konungur 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. Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar ch. 69, in *Heimskringla* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 317. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011].

8 Steinsland 2000: 113–115. Cf. Sundqvist 2016a: 421–424.

9 Oddr's *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, chs A56 and S46, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 276–281.

10 Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd munk Snorrason, ch. S46. Cf. ch. A56: . . . á Mærini, . . . var hofuðhof ok skyldi þar blóta, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 279. See also Flateyjarbók 1: 320. Cf. Meulengracht Sørensen 1991b: 239–241; Steinsland 2000: 114–116.

below).¹¹ Another historical aspect in Oddr's narrative may be his description of the chieftains, who together organized and protected the pagan cult in Trøndelag and at Mære.¹² In order to eradicate the sacrificial cult there, the Christian king had to kill a representative of these pagan chieftains and desecrate the *hof*-sanctuary. As in Snorri's version, Oddr mentions that it was Járn-Skeggi of Yrjar who was killed beside the sanctuary.¹³ Oddr also tells that King Óláfr threatened the leaders of Þrændir, that if he must return to the pagan religion, he would arrange human sacrifices, in which the foremost in society, the chieftains and the noble females would be sacrificed.

6.1.2 Contemporary verses about King Óláfr's violent missions

Even if some information in these sagas can be partly supported by archaeology, they must be treated with caution when applied as historical sources. They were both written down c. 200 years after the actual events took place and often modelled in a stereotyped way. It is obvious that, for instance, Snorri's descriptions of King Óláfr's missions in Norway follows a recurrent pattern; first the king meets the farmers at an assembly, where he tells them about Christ, then he asks them to convert or else they must fight the king.¹⁴ In these stories the king is always successful. These types of conversion descriptions may be related to Christian fictional stories about mass conversions.¹⁵ In Snorri's narratives about King Óláfr's mission, there is, in addition, always an element of physical violence present, which may reflect a heroic, or rather an ideal Viking king. Both Oddr's and Snorri's versions are written in a kind of triumphalist manner and literary strategies

¹¹ Mære in Inn-Trøndelag is mentioned as a pre-Christian cult site several times in Old Norse sources. *Landnámabók*, for instance, which may have been composed as early as the twelfth century, describes a Viking Age cult leader (*hofgoði*) and his ceremonial building (*hof*) situated in Mære (chs S297, H258, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 307–308). See also e.g., *Ágrip*, Ísl. Fornr. 29: 8; *Fagrskinna*, Ísl. Fornr. 29: 80.

¹² See *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd munk Snorrason*, MSS S and A, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 278–281. and Sundqvist 2016a: 510–513.

¹³ “Járn-Skeggi was killed outside alongside the temple among the king's men” . . . *var Járn-Skeggi drepinn hjá hof milli manna konungsins* . . . in ch. S46 and . . . *var Járn-Skeggi drepinn úti hjá hofinu á milli konungsmanna* . . . in ch. A56, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd munk Snorrason*, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 280.

¹⁴ See several examples of this strategy in e.g., *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chs 53–81, *Heimskringla* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 302–329.

¹⁵ Cf. Stark & Finke 2000: 126.

have been used in order to create a Christian hero.¹⁶ In these sagas on Óláfr Tryggvason, heroic legendary materials about the king merged with ecclesiastic traditions.¹⁷ It is thus the victor's "history" that is presented.

Since King Óláfr is portrayed as a militant missionary also in the contemporary poems, we cannot dismiss the information of these prose texts completely.¹⁸ In Hallfrøðr vandræðaskald's *Óláfsdrápa* stanza one (c. AD 995), for instance, King Óláfr is depicted as a violent opponent against paganism and a purger of heathendom:¹⁹

*Svá frá k hitt, at hóva
høgrbjótr í stað mǫrgum
(opt kom hrafn at heipta)
hlóð valkøstu (blóði).
Endr lét Jamta kindir
allvaldr í styr falla
(vanðisk hann) ok Vinða
végrimmr (á þat snimma).*

Thus I have learned this, that the shrine-destroyer piled up high corpse-heaps in many a place; the raven often came to the blood of strife. The mighty ruler, fierce against heathen temples, formerly caused the kin of the Jamtr and Wends to fall in the mêlée; he became accustomed to that early.²⁰

Óláfr is here described as "cruel against heathen temples" (*végrimmr*) and a "shrine-destroyer" (*høgrbjótr*). In order to perform his mission, the king must kill a lot of pagans. He piles up high corpse-heaps in many places, and the ravens come to the blood of strife—that is, the corpses—in order to eat them. One of Hallfrøðr's *lausavísur* (10) of conversion, quoted above, indicates that King Óláfr used power and force when converting the Norwegians and Icelanders. It tells that the prince of the men of Sogn (*Sygna ræsir*), King Óláfr, had forbidden hea-

¹⁶ Jónas Kristjánsson 1988: 157–160; Steinsland 2000: 113–129; Sanmark 2004: 82; Winroth 2012: 6–7, 115–118, 151.

¹⁷ Vésteinn Ólason 1998: 50.

¹⁸ Cf. Whaley in SkP 1: 393.

¹⁹ This stanza is only preserved completely (1–8) in *Fagrskinna*, Ísl. Fornr. 29: 141–142. The second half (5–8) is also preserved in Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* Ísl. Fornr. 26: 255. The contextual prose to this stanza indicates that the king harried in the areas around the Baltic Sea, such as the still pagan country Wendland. On Gotland he also met heathen people from Jämtland, according to Snorri. Whaley (in SkP 1: 389 and 393) argues that this context, which takes place before the king's conversion, is uncertain. Most likely the skald is portraying Óláfr in his Christian role as militant missionary.

²⁰ Text and trans. Whaley in SkP 1: 392.

then sacrifices (*at blót eru kviðjuð*). Now people must set aside the ancient belief in destiny controlled by the Norns and abandon the worship of Óðinn's kin. Hallfrøðr, himself, is compelled to turn away from the descendants of Njǫrðr in order to pray to Christ.²¹ It is a bit complicated to estimate the historical source value of Hallfrøðr's poems on King Óláfr, since they are all composed as praise poems. The expression that the king “piled up high corpse-heaps in many a place” is obviously an exaggeration and a way to flatter the king. If there had been no reality behind this expression, however, the audience would have perceived this statement as an insult, rather than flattery. This way of reasoning and attitude to the old praise poems is expressed in the *Prologue* to Snorri's *Heimskringla*.²² For Hallfrøðr, King Óláfr was a heroic man as well as his godfather (see above). In his *Erfidrápa* stanza 26a, the skald praises King Óláfr for the fame he won at the battle of Svøldr, even though he was defeated:

*Hefk, þanns hverjum jofri
heiptfíknum varð ríkri
und niðbyrði Norðra
norðr, goðföður orðinn.
Bíða munk, þess's breiðan
barðmána vann skarðan,
margaukanda mækis
móts aldrigi bótir.*

I have lost a godfather who was mightier than every strife-greedy prince in the north under the burden of the kin of Norðri <dwarf> [(lit. “kin-burden of Norðri”) DWARFS > SKY]. I will never experience compensation for the much-increaser of the meeting of the sword [BATTLE > WARRIOR] who hacked the broad prow-moon [SHIELD].²³

Hallfrøðr had previously praised pagan warlords, such as Jarl Hákon (see 9.3 below). After meeting the Christian king Óláfr, however, he was more or less forced to change religion.²⁴

²¹ Strömbäck 1975: 72; Clunies Ross 2011 [2005]: 120–121.

²² Snorri states in the *Prologue* to *Heimskringla*: “We regard as true everything that is found in those poems about their expeditions and battles. It is indeed the habit of poets to praise most highly the one in whose presence they are at the time, but no one would dare to tell him to his face about deeds of his which all who listened, as well as the man himself, knew were falsehoods and fictions. That would be mockery and not praise (*Þat væri þá háð en eigi lof*).” Ísl. Fornr. 26: 5. Cf. Clunies Ross 2011 [2005]: 72–82.

²³ Text and trans. Kate Heslop in SkP 1: 437–439, where also the complicated transmission of the stanza is discussed.

²⁴ Strömbäck 1975: 81.

King Óláfr Tryggvason is also described as a militant missionary in an anonymous poem called *Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar* stanza nine transmitted in the manuscript *Bergsbók* (c. 1400–1450). This poem was probably composed in the twelfth century. It describes how the bellicose and Christian hero made the pagan Jarl Hákon flee from the country:

*Austr þingat kom yngvi;
áðr frá kjarl af hjarli
— kœnn með krapti hreinum
Kriustr tæði gram — flæðu.
Ógnmildr lét þá pldum
ϑðlingr, sás gaf hringa,
— þjóð tók gløð við góðum
goðs ór — trúu boðna.*

The ruler [Óláfr] came east to there; I heard the jarl [Hákon] fled from [his] territory before; wise Christ helped the prince with pure power. The battle-liberal prince, who gave rings, then had the faith proclaimed to men; glad, the people received the good emissary of God [MISSIONARY].²⁵

In the skaldic tradition, the image of King Óláfr as a militant missionary was preserved. In twelfth century poem *Reksteffja* stanza nine made by Hallar-Steinn it is stated thus.

*Fémildr fylkir vildi
firna mǫrg ok hǫrga
blóthús brenna láta;
bað heiðin goð meißa.
Siðvandr síðan kenndi
sannhróðiðgr trú góða
herlundr hǫlða kindum.
Hann vas ríkstr konungmanna.*

The generous ruler wanted to have very many temples and sacrificial buildings burned; he ordered the heathen gods to be harmed. The devout, truly famous war-tree [WARRIOR = Óláfr] then taught the good faith to the offspring of men. He was the mightiest of royal men.²⁶

King Óláfr is praised since he condemned the many *hǫrggr*-sanctuaries and had cult houses (*blóthús*) burned. He also ordered the pagan cult images to be harmed, that is, to be destroyed, probably. Hence, King Óláfr converted the Norwegians with firm hand, as he burned down the pagan sanctuaries and destroyed the old sacrifi-

²⁵ Text and trans. Kate Heslop in SkP 1: 1040.

²⁶ Text and trans. Rolf Stavnem in SkP 1: 906.

cial sites and replaced them with churches and priests. Snorri reports in *Heimskringla* that he also rejected a marriage with the pagan queen Sigríðr of Svetjud since she refused to abandon her old faith: “Then King Óláfr got very angry and spoke hastily: ‘Why would I want to marry you, heathen as a dog as you are?’ And he struck her in the face with his glove which he had in his hand.”²⁷ This episode appears also in a slightly different version in Oddr’s saga.²⁸

6.1.3 Archaeological evidence at Mære

Not only written sources, but also archaeological finds in Trøndelag indicate that pre-Christian cult sites were dismantled or destroyed around 1000–1050. In 1966–1967 archaeological excavations were conducted under the floor of Mære church (Fig. 14). These excavations were led by archaeologist Hans-Emil Lidén.²⁹ The church, which is dated to the last part of the twelfth century, is placed on the top of a hill, east of the Borgenfjord, called Mæreshaugen. In the prehistoric period Mæreshaugen was an island in the fjord (northeast of the town Trondheim, see Fig. 1a), which completely surrounded Inderøya.³⁰ Under the stone church, vestiges of an early wooden church were discovered. It was surrounded by a churchyard, with about sixty graves. At the church the excavators also found remains of two pre-Christian buildings. The oldest one was a building with wattle-and-daub walls and dated to the Migration Period. The function and character of this building is uncertain. The later one was a Viking Age building with huge post-holes. The form of this house, its dimensions and orientation are unknown, however. The only traces of it were remains of an assumed “palisade wall,” lumps of burnt clay with twigs and branches, fire-cracked stones and post-holes with remains of timber. The post-holes formed irregular circles with diameters varying from 80 to 100 cm. In the post-holes some 19 (or 23) gold foil figures were found,³¹ which probably should be dated to the Merovingian Period or less likely Early Viking Age.³² Most of them were related to a structure which was interpreted as the place of the high-seat.³³ On these figures a

27 *Dá varð Óláfr konungr reiðr mjök ok mælti brálliga: ‘Hví mun ek vilja eiga þik hundheiðna?’ — ok laust í andlit henni með glófa sínum, er hann hélt á.* Ísl. Fornr. 26: 310.

28 *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd munk Snorrason*, chs S34, A41, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 239–240.

29 Lidén 1969; 1996; 1999. What follows is a compressed version of Sundqvist 2016a: 132–147.

30 Røskaft 2003: 140.

31 Lidén 1999: 47, note 17.

32 Most scholars argue today that the gold foil figures should be dated to the Merovingian Period. See e.g., Watt 2019: 37–39.

33 This interpretation was later reconsidered by Lidén (1999: 2, 38–39). He rejected the high-seat interpretation.

couple was depicted, standing against each other, a man and a woman. Whether these symbols shall be regarded as sacrificial objects or some kind of mythical insignia for aristocratic families is uncertain.³⁴ At this site other finds were made which may likewise be associated with pre-Christian ceremonial feasts, such as pieces of pottery and glass, quantities of animal bones and some characteristic cooking stones.

It may therefore be suggested that the Viking Age house at Mære was some type of pre-Christian ceremonial building. Whether this house was a multifunctional hall or a more specific cult house is almost impossible to say. Lidén suggested that the Viking Age building should be related to the ceremonial buildings called *hof* in the written sources. The finds at Mære indicate that we have a clear example of cult-place continuity, that is to say, the early Christian church was erected on the pagan cult site. Lidén suggested that the Viking Age building where the gold foil figures were found was turned into a church after the conversion. Christian graves were found associated with this building, which could not be related to the wooden church.

Lidén's interpretation has been questioned. According to archaeologist Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide, two possible conclusions can be drawn from the existing evidence:

- (1) The burnt layer sealed the six oldest graves. Either (a) the burnt layer was a result of the burning of a Norse cult construction, in which case the burials were performed at a Norse cult site and may in fact have been Norse, or (b) the Norse cult construction was converted into a church, and the graves were Christian. If this second scenario was true, then Lidén's theory would be correct, and it is only the structure of the building which is not clear.
- (2) The burnt layer was cut into when the six earliest graves were dug. This would imply that there was probably a very short interval between the time when the Norse cult was stopped and the time when the construction of the wooden church began, but during this time a few Christian burials were performed. The burning of the Norse cult buildings was probably carried out by Christians, although no church has yet been recorded in associations with the graves.³⁵

Nordeide considers the second alternative as the most likely. According to Nordeide, Lidén failed "to note the stratigraphic relation between the Christian graves and the layer revealing the fire; on paying close attention to this detail, it

34 Cf. Sundqvist 2016a: 407–417 and 2019: 359–388.

35 Nordeide 2011: 113, 123; 2020: 1643–1644.



Fig. 14: Photo of Mære church in Trøndelag, Norway. In connection with archaeological investigations, traces of a pre-Christian cult building were discovered under the church. Image in its original state by Per Gjærder, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

becomes clear that there is no reliable evidence for this theory. What is just as likely is that the graves were constructed after the non-Christian building was destroyed by fire and before a church was built.”³⁶ The pre-Christian cult-building preceding the church at Mære in Trøndelag was thus deliberately erased by fire, probably started by Christians. Exactly when this took place is impossible to say, but it is possible that the cult continued to c. 1050 there, according to Nordeide, that is, 50 years after King Óláfr Tryggvason’s death. Regardless, the Christians placed their church on the ruins of the pagan cult building perhaps in a trium-

³⁶ Nordeide 2020: 1643–1644.

phalist manner, according to Nordeide. By such symbolic and performative actions, the missionary kings and their supporters probably hoped that the pagans would lose their old religion and instead turn to Christianity.

At Hove in Åsen, in Strindafylke, Trøndelag, a long existing pre-Christian cult place has also been discovered.³⁷ Hove is surrounded by old farms such as Husby and Vang and perhaps they originally constituted one farm unit. All three sites have Viking Age burial fields and at Vang a royal burial mound was erected. The place-name *Vang* has been interpreted as cultic.³⁸ This name may refer to a special kind of cult meadows, which often was located beside the *hof*-sanctuaries in pre-Christian Norway (cf. *Hovsvangen* (Oppl.) and *Gudvangen* (SogF)). The name *Hove* includes the neutral dative of the noun *hof* “heidensk tempel eller heilagstad.”³⁹ During excavation at Hove in 1981–1984 several finds were made indicating pre-Christian cultic activities.⁴⁰ Several pits with charcoal and burned stone suggest that ritual cooking took place there, from 100 BC to AD 1000. In connection to these pits post-holes were also discovered which were not related to house foundations. Perhaps they could be related to ritual constructions. According to archaeologist Oddmund Farbrege, the pagan worshippers there left the place not too willingly around the year 1000. A few contemporary stone crosses nearby may have been vandalized suggesting some kind of uprising against the Christians in this area at that time.⁴¹

The archaeological evidence at some places in Trøndelag has thus been interpreted as some kind of clash between the pagan chieftains/farmers and the new Christian power took place around 1000 to 1050, that is, information that harmonizes with some narratives in the Saga accounts. Nordeide states that no gradual change in the Old Norse cult adjusting to Christian rituals is possible to see in Trøndelag.⁴² At Mære the religious change was abrupt and probably violent. She states that we here have an example of the *Ecclesia Triumphans*-theory, whereby the Christians placed their church on the ruins of the pagan cult building.⁴³ At Hove, however, the place was abandoned which signalizes a clear break in cult activity. No church was established there. Nordeide argues that the people

37 Farbrege 1986; Røskaft 2003: 66–68.

38 M. Olsen 1926: 218. Cf. Sandnes 1987; 1992: 15–16; Sandnes & Stemshaug 2007: 479.

39 Sandnes & Stemshaug 2007: 226.

40 Farbrege 1986; Bagge & Nordeide 2007: 124; Nordeide 2011: 104–107; 2020: 1644.

41 Farbrege 1986; cf. Nordeide 2012.

42 Nordeide 2011: 123.

43 Cf. Olsen 1969. In a later self-critical comment on his view of Mære, Olaf Olsen (1995: 127) stated thus: “Jeg ville være mere åben over for muligheden af, at man på centrale hedenske kultpladser har rejst kirker som udtryk for *ecclesia triumphans* . . . Jeg ville have brugt ordet ‘magt-kontinuitet’ om stormændenes kirkebyggeri på deres gårde. Her er det magten og ikke kulten, der er det centrale element.”

there were forced to leave because of the Christian dominance in the area. The postholes were filled in marking perhaps a ritualized dismantling of the old cult site, possibly made by the those who previously used it as a sanctuary. Nordeide finally states, in “light of the character and timing of the end of the Norse cult, it seems reasonable to assume that the conversion to Christianity was not completed too willingly in Trøndelag during the eleventh century.”⁴⁴

Written sources indicate clearly that the religious change was abrupt and violent in Trøndelag around 995–1030. Since the archaeological records from this region and period at least do not “speak” against this view, it seems plausible to interpret Óláfr Tryggvason’s and perhaps also Óláfr Haraldsson’s missions in Trøndelag as violent. It is not mentioned in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* whether King Óláfr Tryggvason and his men destroyed the sanctuary in Mære. Snorri just ends chapter 69 in a way that harmonizes with the hagiographic genre: “Then all the people in Þrændalög were baptized.”⁴⁵ Snorri is a bit inconsistent on this point. In *Óláfs saga helga* chapter 109, it is mentioned that the Þrændir in Inn-Trøndelag during King Óláfr Haraldsson’s reign still performed heathen sacrifices at Mære c. 1020 (see 9.5).

6.2 Non-violent transition in Iceland

Different source types indicate thus that violence was sometimes used by Óláfr Tryggvason when erasing the old religion. Other sources report that the same king applied other strategies in other contexts, for instance, when he was not in command of directly violent means. When King Óláfr attempted to convert the people in Iceland, he concentrated his attention on the local chieftains.⁴⁶ This was a deliberate method, since these leaders were those who organized the old religion in Iceland, and also led public rituals; no well-trained and professional priesthood existed there. In order to reach all of them, he used the General Assembly (Old Norse *Alþingi*) at Þingvellir (Fig. 15), where all the chieftains gathered every summer. Since he did not have access to this assembly himself, he used some Icelandic chieftains as his delegates. It is well known that Iceland lacked kings during the so called “Free State Period.” It was ruled jointly by all chieftains called *goðar* (pl). This office included cultic assignments, at least originally (see overview in 4.2 above).

⁴⁴ Nordeide 2011: 123.

⁴⁵ *Var þá skirt allt fólk í Þrændalögum*. Ísl. Fornr. 26: 318.

⁴⁶ Many scholars have dealt with the conversion at the General Assembly 999/1000. For an overview, see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1664, note 7.



Fig. 15: Photo of the place where the General Assembly (Old Norse *Alþingi*) was held at Þingvellir, Iceland (see Fig. 1b). Image in its original state by Diego Delso, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

6.2.1 The conversion decision at Alþingi 999/1000

Our main source for the processes related to religious change in Iceland is Ari inn fróði Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* (c. 1120–1132), which is usually considered as having a quite high historical source value. It has often been stated that Ari (1067/68–1148) built his text on a strong oral tradition and that he frequently supported his information with references to his sources. One of his sagesmen was Hallr Þórarinnsson, who was born 995 and died in his ninety-fifth year. He remembered his own baptism when he was only three years old. This baptism was made by one of King Óláfr Tryggvason's first missionaries to Iceland.⁴⁷ Another source for Ari was also Teitr (d. 1110), son of Bishop Ísleifr Gizzuraron. Teitr's grandfather Gizzurr was one of King Óláfr's delegates at Alþingi 999/1000.⁴⁸

Even if *Íslendingabók* sometimes has been regarded as a “myth of origins for the Icelanders,”⁴⁹ some of Ari's information is usually regarded as accurate.⁵⁰ Ari reports in chapter seven that King Óláfr sent to Iceland a priest called Þangbrandr.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Strömbäck 1975: 5, 19.

⁴⁸ Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 17–18. and see also below.

⁴⁹ Grønlie 2006: xxiv–xxx. See also Lindow 1997, Hermann 2007 and Gustafsson 2011. The latter scholar states thus in his conclusion about Ari's information about the conversion of Iceland: “[I]n terms of radical source criticism, we can only conclude that we know nothing about the possible conversion of Iceland at that time.” Gustafsson 2011: 34.

⁵⁰ Cf. Jónas Kristjánsson 1988: 120–124; Vésteinn Ólason 1998: 44–45; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 55–57; Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 18; Grønlie 2006: ix, xvi–xxii; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1652. Other sources to this event are Theodoricus monachus' *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd munk Snorrason*, *Kristni saga*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and *Njáls saga*.

⁵¹ This information is also mentioned in e.g., *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd munk Snorrason*, chs S35, A43, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 244–245 and Snorri's *Heimskringla 1*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 328–329.

King Óláfr, son of Tryggvi, son of Óláfr, son of Haraldr the Fine-Haired, brought Christianity to Norway and to Iceland. He sent to this country a priest called Þangbrandr, who preached Christianity to people here and baptized all those who accepted the faith. And Hallr Þorsteins-son on Síða had himself baptized early on, as did Hjalti Skeggjason from Þjórsárdalr and Gizurr the White, son of Teitr, son of Ketilbjörn from Mosfell, and many other chieftains; but those who spoke against Christianity and rejected it were, even so, in the majority. And when he had been here for one or two years, Þangbrandr left, and had killed two or three men here who had libeled him. And when he arrived in the east, he told King Óláfr everything that had happened to him here, and said that it was beyond all expectation that Christianity might yet be accepted here. And Óláfr became very angry at this, and determined to have those of our countrymen who were there in the east maimed or killed for it.⁵²

The king's method of using a priest for his mission in Iceland had obviously failed, but indirectly it would bear fruit in the longer run. The chieftains who Þangbrandr converted came from wealthy and influential families.⁵³ Their families had in one or another sense, been involved in pagan public cult. *Landnámabók* reports that, for instance, Hallr's grandfather Þoðvarr enn hvíti Þorleifsson made his home at *Hof* in South Alftafjord and that "he erected a great cult building there" (*hann reisti þar hof mikit*) (see Fig. 1b).⁵⁴ Also Gizurr's grandfather Ketilbjörn had, according to *Landnámabók* a *hof*-building erected at Mosfell. He was so wealthy that "he told his sons to forge a cross beam of silver for the temple they built, but they wouldn't do that."⁵⁵ By baptizing Hallr and Gizurr, two potential organizers of the indigenous religion in Iceland were removed from the scene, and at the same time, two influential advocates for Christianity were won over.

Ari reports further in chapter seven of his *Íslendingabók* that the chieftains Gizurr and Hjalti went to a meeting with King Óláfr in order to pursue him to

52 Óláfr rex Tryggvasonr, Ólafssonar, Haraldssonar ens hárfagra, kom kristni í Norveg ok á Ísland. Hann sendi hingat til lands prest þann, es hét Þangbrandr ok hér kenndi monnum kristni ok skírði þá alla, es við trú tóku. En Hallr á Síðu Þorsteinssonr lét skírast snimhendis ok Hjalti Skeggjasonr yr Þjórsárdali ok Gizurr enn hvíti Teitsson, Ketilbjarnarsonar frá Mosfelli, ok margir höfðingjar aðrir; en þeir váru þó fleiri, es í gegn mæltu ok neittu. En þá es hann hafði hér verit einn vetr eða tvá, þá fór hann á braut ok hafði vegit hér tvá menn eða þrjá, þá es hann höfðu nítt. En hann sagði konunginum Óláfi, es hann kom austr, allt þat es hér hafði yfir hann gingit, ok lét ørvænt, at hér myndi kristni enn takast. En hann varð við þat reiðr mjök ok ætlaði at láta meiða eða drepa ossa landa fyrir, þá es þar váru austr. Ísl. Fornr. 1: 14–15. Trans. by Grønlie 2006.

53 Strömbäck 1975: 25; cf. Hjalti Hugason 2000: 83–85, 126–143; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1664.

54 *Landnámabók* chs S305, H266, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 310–311.

55 . . . at hann bauð sonum sínum at slá þvertré af silfri í hofit, þat er þeir létu gera; þeir vildu þat eigi . . . (chs S385, H338, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 385).

release the Icelanders.⁵⁶ They travelled to Norway and got the king to release them, and promised him their help afresh so that Christianity might yet be accepted in Iceland. Hence, these chieftains travelled with a priest Þormóðr back to their homeland with the mission to convert the Icelanders. They arrived in the Vestmannaeyjar when ten weeks of the summer had passed. They crossed to the mainland at once and then proceeded to the Alþingi, and managed to persuade Hjalti to stay behind at Laugardalr with eleven men, because the previous summer he had been convicted as a lesser outlaw at the assembly for blasphemy. The reason given for this was that he had uttered this little verse at the Law-Rock:

*Vil ek eigi goð geyja;
 grey þykki mér Freyja.
 I don't wish to bark at the gods:
 It seems to me Freyja's a bitch.*

Gizurr and his men travelled on until they came to a place beside Qlfossvatn called Vellankatla; and from there they sent word to the assembly that all their supporters should come to meet them, because they had heard that their adversaries intended to keep them from the assembly field by force. But before they set off from there, Hjalti came riding there together with those who had stayed behind with him. And then they rode to the assembly, and their kinsmen and friends had come to meet them beforehand as they had requested. The heathens thronged together fully armed, and it came so close to them fighting that no one could foresee which way it would go. The next day, Gizurr and Hjalti went to the Law-Rock, and announced their mission. But what happened as a result was that one man after another named witnesses, and each side, the Christians and the heathens, declared itself under separate laws from the other, and they then left the Law-Rock. Then the Christians asked Hallr to speak the law, the one that was to go with Christianity. But he freed himself from this responsibility towards them by agreeing with the lawspeaker, Þorgeirr, that he should speak it, although he was still heathen at the time. Later, when everyone had returned to their booths, Þorgeirr lay down and spread his cloak over himself, and rested all that day and the following night, and did not speak a word. The next morning, he got up and sent word that people should go to the Law-Rock. And once people had arrived there, he began his speech, and said that he thought people's affairs had come to a bad pass, if they were not all to have the same law in this country, and tried to persuade them in many ways that they should not let this happen, and said it would give rise to such discord that it was certainly to be expected

⁵⁶ The following text and paraphrase of *Íslendingabók* ch. 7 is based on Grønlie's translation 2006.

that fights would take place between people by which the land would be laid waste. He spoke about how the kings of Norway and Denmark had kept up warfare and battles against each other for a long time, until the people of those countries had made peace between them, even though they did not wish it. And that policy had worked out in such a way that they were soon sending gifts to each other and, moreover, this peace lasted for as long as they lived. The Lawspeaker Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði Þorkelsson spoke finally thus:

‘And it now seems advisable to me,’ he said, ‘that we too do not let those who most wish to oppose each other prevail, and let us arbitrate between them, so that each side has its own way in something, and let us all have the same law and the same religion. It will prove true that if we tear apart the law, we will also tear apart the peace.’ And he brought his speech to a close in such a way that both sides agreed that everyone should have the same law, the one he decided to proclaim. It was then proclaimed in the laws that all people should be Christian, and that those in this country who had not yet been baptised should receive baptism; but the old laws should stand as regards the exposure of children and the eating of horse-flesh. People had the right to sacrifice in secret, if they wished, but it would be punishable by the lesser outlawry if witnesses were produced. And a few years later, these heathen provisions were abolished, like the others.⁵⁷

This text has been hotly debated, especially why the pagan chieftain Þorgeirr accepted the Christian law, and what he actually did under the cloak.

6.2.2 Why did the pagan goði accept Christianity?

The pagan chieftain Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði was an acknowledged lawspeaker at Alþingi. According to *Íslendingabók*, he stayed in this office for 17 years (985–1002), which indicates that he was highly estimated.⁵⁸ Most likely he was also the leader of the pagan party.⁵⁹ His lineage is traced in *Landnámabók*, and it is mentioned there that he had three wives.⁶⁰ In these marriages he had nine sons and

57 ‘En nú þykkir mér þat ráð’ kvað hann, ‘at vér látim ok eigi þá ráða, es mest vilja í gegn gangask, ok miðlum svá mál á miðli þeira, at hváirtveggju hafí nakkvat síns máls, ok höfum allir ein lög ok einn sið. Þat mon verða satt, es vér slítum í sundr lögín, at vér monum slíta ok friðinn.’ En hann lauk svá máli sínu, at hváirtveggju játtu því, at allir skyldi ein lög hafa, þau sem hann réði upp at segja. Þá vas þat mælt í lögum, at allir menn skyldi kristnir vesa ok skírn taka, þeir es áðr váru óskírðir á landi hér; en of barnaútburð skyldu standa en fornu lög ok of hrossakjotsát. Skyldu menn blóta á laun, ef vildu, en varða fjörbaugsgarðr, ef vátum of kvæmi við. En síðarr fám vetrum vas sú heiðni af numin sem önnur. Ísl. Fornr. 1: 17. Trans. by Grønlie 2006.

58 *Íslendingabók*, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 13.

59 Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 17.

60 *Landnámabók* S and H, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 275. Cf. *Íslendingabók*, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 13.

one daughter. According to uncertain sources, one of his sons Høskuldr, once slaughtered a ram and smeared his hands with the blood and uttered: “Let smear *goði*-blood on us as of old.”⁶¹ It has been suggested that this was some kind of *goði*-inauguration among the *Ljósvetningar*.⁶² Most likely Þorgeirr lived in a pagan world of ideas. His great-uncle was Þorsteinn rauðnefr, who was a great-sacrificer. He made the waterfall the object of his sacrifice and had all left-overs carried to it.⁶³

But why did the pagan *goði* Þorgeirr agree to Hallr's proposal of conversion? What did he do under the cloak? These two questions have led to a heated research debate that has been going on for more than 150 years. Konrad Maurer discussed these questions, and stated that Þorgeirr stayed under the cloak, since he pondered over the substance of the law he had been asked to decide. This behavior was thus a pure political-legal action.⁶⁴ According to Maurer, the decision to change religion at the *Alþingi* was made by Þorgeirr on plain political grounds and as a compromise between the Christians and the pagans.⁶⁵ He also added that the Icelanders seem to have been indifferent regarding issues related to religious life. Religion was subordinated to political questions on Iceland. This political explanation for changing religion was maintained by scholars during the twentieth century.⁶⁶ Orri Vésteinsson, for instance, stated that “the conversion was not so much a matter of salvation as political unity; the drama of the tale [that is, Ari's] revolves not around the eternal well-being of Icelandic souls but about whether they were capable of taking momentous decisions like these without the fragile political system disintegrating.”⁶⁷ Some scholars have felt that religion in the late tenth century Iceland was well integrated in social and political life.⁶⁸ Religion was perceived as an integrated part of the community and common law.⁶⁹ If the Icelanders had two religions the cohesion and community of the society was threatened. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson opposed Maurer's political explanation in a more thorough way. He neither downplayed, nor rejected the religious aspect of Þorgeirr's decision. Contrary he stated that the joint renunciation of the commu-

61 *Vér skulum rjóða oss í goðablóð at fornum sið. Ljósvetninga saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 10: 14.

62 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 101.

63 *Þorsteinn rauðnefr var blótmaðr mikill; hann blotaði forsinn, ok skyldi bera leifar allar á forsinn. Landnámabók* chs S355, H313, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 358.

64 Maurer 1855–1856 1: 443.

65 Maurer 1855–1856 1: 439.

66 Cf. e.g., Björn M. Ólsen 1900: 65–67; Jón Helgason 1925: 31; Gehl 1937: 143; de Vries 1956–1957: §614.

67 Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 18.

68 Cf. Ljungberg 1938: 156–158; Bagge 2005: 77–80; Steinsland 2000: 83.

69 Steinsland 2000: 83.

nity of law was due to religious reasons.⁷⁰ He concluded that we “must therefore reject the opinion that political considerations decided the issue.”⁷¹ According to him, Þorgeirr’s decision was based on the oracle which he sought through a divination rite under the cloak: “under the cloak Þorgeir carried out an ancient action well known all over Northern Europe in his day, an action which people often restored to when faced with pressing or insoluble problems . . . If this theory is correct, it also explains why the pagans accepted Þorgeirr’s decision.”⁷²

Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson’s theory is not completely acceptable. I agree with him that the action under the cloak could reflect an ancient crisis rite, however, we cannot completely exclude a social-political background to the assembly 999/1000. This is indicated in Ari’s text, since he also mentioned that the two powerful chieftains who advocated Christianity at this assembly 999/1000, Gizurr and Hjalti, acted with support of royal power. The *erindi* (“errand, message”) of Gizurr and Hjalti at the assembly was not only that they were spokesmen for Christianity, but also to inform that their mission was sanctioned by the king.⁷³ The noble and powerful chieftains Gizurr and Hjalti thus acted as Óláfr Tryggvason’s envoy. There was a pragmatic political event at stake when Þorgeirr made his decision, which was probably staged by the king. The king put pressure on the pagan chieftains, not least by imprisoning all Icelanders in Norway. Some of these prisoners were also the sons of the country’s most powerful chieftains. In order to force their fathers to change religion, *Kristni saga* reports, the king held as hostage: Kjartan Ólafsson, Halldórr, son of Guðmundr, Kolbeinn, son of Þórðr Freysgoði, and Svertingr, son of Runólfr goði.⁷⁴

It is possible that the Christian chieftain Síðu-Hallr and the pagan Law-speaker Þorgeirr played a major part for the solution and the reconciliation between the two parties even before the rite under the cloak.⁷⁵ One expression in Ari’s text, *keypti at Þorgeiri*, indicates that Síðu-Hallr gave money to Þorgeirr to persuade him to make the decision in the right direction. It is mentioned in Oddr’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* that when Gizurr and Hjalti left Norway on their journey back home to Iceland they got much money from King Óláfr, “in order to

70 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 103–123.

71 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 143.

72 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 144.

73 Cf. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 86–87.

74 *Kristni saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 29. Cf. Strömbäck 1975: 36; Vésteinn Ólason 1998: 32; Hjalti Hugason 2000: 84–89; Gunnarr Karlsson 2000: 109; Orri Vésteinnsson 2000: 17–18; Torfi Stefánsson Hjalatalín 2012: 26–30; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1665.

75 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 98.

make friends of the chieftains” (*at vingask við höfðingja*).⁷⁶ Perhaps some of them were intended for the old *goði* and lawspeaker, Þorgeirr, “who was without doubt rightly regarded as the most important single person in the affair.”⁷⁷

In the end the “pagan party” accepted this decision in order to avoid chaos in society and perhaps due to the compromises of accepting some old customs. The old law was still applied to the exposure of infants and the eating of horse-meat, and sacrifices could be offered in secret. Perhaps this compromise also was accepted in order to avoid royal involvement from Norway, and maintaining the independence of the Icelandic Commonwealth. In addition, Þorgeirr realized that the religious identity had a great importance for the social community. In order to keep society together in Iceland, everyone must have the same religion and the same law.⁷⁸ Accepting two religions and two laws would lead to widespread social tensions. It can also be concluded, that Þorgeirr’s decision at the General Assembly had a great legitimacy among the chieftains, since it followed the traditional decision-making process. The conversion decision was actually built on the old law, where the equality of all free men was respected, and made at the traditional arena, the old assembly place at Þingvellir.⁷⁹

6.2.3 The aftermath

Thus, it is most likely that the resolution proclaimed by Þorgeirr led to a conversion among the chieftains, that is, exactly what King Óláfr wanted. Ari also states explicitly that King Óláfr was the one who brought Christianity to Iceland.⁸⁰ It seems as if the decision made by Þorgeirr had great legitimacy and was of most crucial significance. Indeed, Þorgeirr wanted to dismantle the ancestral cult in a gentle way when he formulated the compromise concerning the right to follow the old law. But the consequence was a quite fast process of religious change. Archaeological sources indicate that heathen burial practices ceased quite abruptly and rapidly after the assembly in the year 1000,⁸¹ and also the eating of horse-meat discontinued, although the Icelandic archaeological records do not allow us

⁷⁶ Oddr’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. A43, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 246.

⁷⁷ Strömbäck 1975: 31.

⁷⁸ Cf. Stausberg 2021: 123–124.

⁷⁹ Cf. Meylan 2022: 89.

⁸⁰ *Íslendingabók*, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 14.

⁸¹ Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 45, 56.

to state exactly when.⁸² It should be mentioned, however, that it took almost 100 years after conversion for ecclesiastic structures (fixed sees, schools, literacy, tithes) to begin to emerge.⁸³

If we can rely on the basic plot of Ari's account, we have first-class evidence of a situation whereby the king, with the assistance of his delegates, intentionally focused on the pagan chieftains of Iceland in order to dismantle the indigenous religion there. In order to achieve this, he initially used missionary priests and later Christian delegates at the assembly institution, where all chieftains were acquired to attend. All decisions made there were binding and had a great legitimacy. The chieftains were the most powerful men in Iceland and people followed them when they made decisions, including when it came to religious matters.⁸⁴ The process at Alþingi 999/1000 seems to have been a peaceful one; no contentions are reported.⁸⁵ Sources state that some of the most important pagan chieftains also converted there, or soon after. According to *Kristni saga*, Hjalti, on his way home from the assembly, baptized the old heathen goði Runólfur Úlfsson: "When Runólfur was baptized, Hjalti said: 'Now we are teaching the old chieftain to nibble on the salt.'⁸⁶ This expression refers to the salt which traditionally was placed "on the tongue of the catechumen during initiation rites as a symbol of divine wisdom."⁸⁷ Runólfur was earlier one of the most prominent defenders of the old religion in Iceland (see ch. 10 below). His transition was an important step for the extinction of the indige-

82 Orri Vésteinsson 2001: 337; 2014: 78–79; cf. Haki Antonsson 2014: 61–63; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1669. In a recent article Orri and his colleagues discuss whether mortuary practice provide the principal archaeological evidence for religious identity. Usually, such customs are seen as direct reflections of religious change. However, evidence indicates that this relationship is not so straight forward. The consequence is that a clear-cut transition from pagan to Christian burial rites as evidence for conversion in Iceland may be questioned. See Orri Vésteinsson et al. 2019.

83 Orri Vésteinsson 2001: 328.

84 Historian Jón Viðarr Sigurðsson, has in a plausible way explained the role of these chieftains (i.e., the *goðar*) when the Icelanders converted. In a recent study he states that "it was precisely because the chieftains retained such a tight control over the old religion that they [the Icelanders] were able to accept the new one. The chieftains were the most powerful men in society, and between them and the householders there existed strong bonds of mutual friendship. Nonetheless, in this relationship the chieftains were dominant, and the householders had to accept their decisions." Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1666; cf. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999.

85 Strömbäck 1975: 26.

86 *Hjalti mælti er Runólfur var skírðr 'Gömlum kennu vér nú goðanum at geifla á saltinu.'* Ísl. Fornr. 152: 36. Trans. Grønlie. This expression refers to "the salt traditionally placed on the tongue of the catechumen during initiation rites as a symbol of divine wisdom." Grønlie 2006: 69.

87 Grønlie 2006: 69.

nous public cult there.⁸⁸ This saga reports that other important chieftains also converted after the decision:

That summer the whole assembly was baptized when people rode home. Most of the West-erners were baptized in Reykjalaug in southern Reykjardalr. Snorri goði had most success with people of the Western Fjords.⁸⁹

Snorri goði came from one of the most famous *goði*-families in Iceland, where all his forefathers had been pagan cult leaders. They were all descendants of the landnámsmaðr, Þórólfr Mostrarskegg (see above). Snorri inherited his father's farm and the sanctuary at Helgafell. *Eyrbyggja saga* tells that he erected a church on his farm soon after the assembly decision 999/1000.⁹⁰ According to this saga, Snorri also built another church later.⁹¹

6.2.4 Archaeological evidence from Hofstaðir, Mývatnssveit

Written sources show therefore, that the transition of these chieftains was done in a nonviolent way. According to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, it is stated that the Lawspeaker Þorgeirr prompted the chieftains at the General Assembly 999/1000, to dismantle their own sanctuaries and the cult images since it would be a sacrilege to keep them.⁹² This text intimates that the chieftains disassembled their sanctuaries by themselves.⁹³ Those who did not were accordingly punished with lesser outlawry (*fjörbaugsgarðr*). It seems as if conversion in Iceland must be described as a top-down-process in which the chieftains converted first and were then followed by other people and householders.⁹⁴ When coming home from the general assembly, these local chieftains actively dismantled their own sanctuaries most likely in a ritual and respectful way. Archaeologists have recently argued that this occasionally happened. Excavations indicate that some closing-rituals were, for instance, performed at the chieftain farm of Hofstaðir, in

⁸⁸ Strömbäck (1975: 24–25) regarded this episode about Runólfr's baptism as a quite reliable historical tradition.

⁸⁹ *Þat sumar var skírðr allr þingheimr er menn riðu heim. Flestir Vestanmenn váru skírðir í Reykjalaugu. Snorri goði kom mestu á leið við Vestfirðinga. Kristni saga* ch. 12, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 36. Trans. Grønlie 2006.

⁹⁰ Ísl. Fornr. 4: 136. Cf. Strömbäck 1975: 59. On the reliability of this account, see Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 42–43.

⁹¹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 4: 183.

⁹² *hof öll ok skvrð goð skulu vera vheilög ok niðr brotín*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 2, 1961: 196.

⁹³ See also *Kristni saga* ch. 2 quoted in 4.3 above.

⁹⁴ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1666.

the district of Lake Mývatn (just south-east of Eyjafjörður, Fig. 1b), Northern Iceland, when changing religion in the early eleventh century. A Viking Age hall building was found there in 1908 by the archaeologist Daniel Bruun.⁹⁵ It measured 36 meters long and it was 8 meters wide. Since this large building was located at the place called *Hofstaðir* “the *hof* place” it was interpreted as a *hof*, that is, a “ceremonial building.”⁹⁶ It was argued that this house resembled the large ceremonial buildings called *hof* in the Sagas of the Icelanders, for example, Þórólfr’s *hof* mentioned in *Eyrbyggja saga* (see 4.3 above). Not only the name but also the large size and the structure of the house indicated that it was a *hof*, that is, a “pagan temple.” For several decades there was a general consensus in research that the building at Hofstaðir should be interpreted as a pre-Christian Scandinavian “temple.”⁹⁷ In the middle of the twentieth century, however, some doubts were expressed about this interpretation. It was argued that this settlement differed little in form from other Iron Age dwelling houses and farmsteads in Scandinavia.⁹⁸ These doubts were even more emphasized by Olaf Olsen, when he re-excavated the site in 1965.⁹⁹ He argued that Hofstaðir was a quite ordinary chieftain farm. The hall there was sometimes used as a place for ceremonial banquets, but mostly it was employed for other more ordinary and profane activities.

Results from the new excavations, conducted between 1991 and 2002,¹⁰⁰ and new archaeological analysis of the Hofstaðir bone material has generated some sensational results, which also have relevance for a cultic interpretation of the place. At least 23 cattle skulls were retrieved in two clusters from outside the walls of the hall at structure A2 and D (a minor hall).¹⁰¹ These skulls show evidence of specialized butchery and prolonged display on the outside of a structure. Differential weathering indicates that these specimens were displayed facing outwards, and that they remained exposed to weathering for months or years after the soft tissue had decayed. Two skulls were found in the wall demolition deposits along the exterior walls of the great hall (AB). They were found lying face down, approximately 75–80 cm apart. Their location and wear suggest that the skulls were originally placed at short intervals on the turf walls or roof along the entire

95 Bruun & Finnur Jónsson 1909.

96 Cf. Orri Vésteinsson 2007.

97 See e.g., Thümmel 1909; M. Olsen 1926; Ohlmarks 1936; Gehl 1941; de Vries 1956–1957: §269.

98 Rousell 1943: 220–221.

99 Olsen 1966.

100 On the new excavations, see e.g., Adolf Friðriksson & Orri Vésteinsson 1997; Orri Vésteinsson 2001; 2007; Lucas & McGovern 2008; Lucas 2009. The following passage is a slight revised and compressed version taken from Sundqvist 2016a: 150–155.

101 See Lucas 2009: 236–238.

length of the big hall. Here they were exposed and visible to people approaching the hall at least during certain periods of the year, most likely spring and summer. Another was recovered from the wall demolition in area E, perhaps indicating the same original setting. The two “skull dumps” or clusters at A2 and D appear to be the deposit of skulls collected when the demolition of the great hall took place (in phase III, that is, AD 1030–1070), and thus probably do not provide direct evidence for their original placement. Most likely this collection and deposition of skulls reflect some kind of ritual of abandonment or closure in connection with the Christianization of Iceland (see below). Investigations of the skulls indicate that the latest deaths occurred near the year AD 1000, and that the animals were ritually killed and beheaded in a dramatic context. The investigation indicates that ritual slaughter of cattle in prime age, on a seasonal basis, took place at Hofstaðir, just before or during the conversion of Iceland.¹⁰² At about the same time, a complete female sheep was killed by a blow between the eyes and its unbutchered body was left beside the cattle skulls at A2. The unusual deposit is best understood as ritual, rather than in a strictly agricultural context. Perhaps this ritual slaughter of the sheep should be related to the abandonment of the aisled hall during phase III, that is, contemporary with the gathering and deposit of the skulls at this structure.

According to the archaeologists, the farmstead and the hall of Hofstaðir had many functions. Most likely it had a political significance, since its central location and the monumental size of the house (according to the recent excavation 38 metres long) probably functioned as manifestations of power.¹⁰³ Perhaps the bloody slaughter, the ritual decapitation and display of the cattle (bull) heads had a similar function. Thus, we can interpret it as a chieftain settlement which also had public cultic functions, as for example, at Helgö in Svetjúd (see 4.3). Activities of an everyday character were also carried out at Hofstaðir. The household economy was based on the production of piglets, goat-milk products, and young sheep used for their wool. It also appears that desirable food was produced there, while forging and other crafts also took place. Most likely, it was only in connection with the seasonal ritual feasts that the hall was transformed into a sanctuary and perhaps also occasional dwelling space for the people who gathered at Hofstaðir to take part in the religious ceremonies.¹⁰⁴

Several acts of closure were performed in phase III (1030–1070) at the settlement of Hofstaðir, such as the ritual depositions of the slaughtered and sacrificed

¹⁰² See mainly Lucas & McGovern 2008.

¹⁰³ Cf. Lucas 2009: 252. The normal house size in Iceland was 12 to 16 meters. See Lucas 2009: 376.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Gunnell 2001; 2006 and 2011.

skulls, which previously had decorated the old sanctuary. A new settlement was established in the south-western area of the leveled farm mound, where a church was built around 1000.¹⁰⁵ This careful and ritual abandonment of the feasting hall should, according to the excavator Lucas Gavin, be related to the official conversion of Iceland. The archaeological finds there suggest that the transition process at Hofstaðir was negotiated peacefully and reconciled with pre-Christian practices. Gavin Lucas states thus when concluding his investigation at Hofstaðir:

The fact that the whole settlement [at Hofstaðir] was abandoned and possibly relocated might suggest a need by the occupants to distance themselves from the old ways. On the other hand, it is interesting that although abandoned, neither the site nor the skulls were destroyed. Indeed, the very gathering and concealment of the skulls, contemporary with the termination ritual of sacrifice of a female sheep, indicates that the abandonment of the site was performed with a clear sense of non-Christian ritual. . . . It suggests that the conversion process [at Hofstaðir] could be negotiated and reconciled with pre-Christian practices without overt resistance.¹⁰⁶

It seems as if the strategies used by the native kings varied depending on the specific contexts. The sources related to King Óláfr's mission in Trøndelag show that violent actions were sometimes applied. The king even killed the chieftain who organized the non-Christian cult. He also destroyed the old sanctuaries and the ritual paraphernalia by means of violence and fire, which sometimes led to a fast and abrupt transition of religion. Most likely, he had the power and resources to use such methods. In other contexts, however, the same king used other strategies. In the case of Iceland, he employed negotiations in order to have the pagan chieftains converted. The reasons why he used such means in this context are most likely due to the distance between Norway and Iceland and the fact that he had no power to use violence in this country.¹⁰⁷ After winning over the Icelandic chieftains for Christianity, many of these leaders seem to have dismantled their own sanctuaries in a respectful manner. A few written sources mention that some of Óláfr's missionary priests used violence when converting the Icelanders. According to these texts they also killed pagans and smashed sanctuaries and ritual objects (see further 10.1 below). However, these methods must have been exceptions in Iceland. Changes in burial practice were quite rapid after the famous decision at Alþingi. Archaeological investigations show, however, that these changes had already started before

¹⁰⁵ Orri Vésteinsson 2014: 80–81.

¹⁰⁶ Lucas 2009: 407–408.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Orri Vésteinsson 2001: 329.

Þorgeirr gave his verdict, thus indicating a longer and more gradual process.¹⁰⁸ There is a general agreement among scholars that some churches were erected during the eleventh century, and perhaps a few even before the year 1000.¹⁰⁹ Churches are mentioned in some Sagas of Icelanders, such as *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstunga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*.¹¹⁰ In general, it was chieftains who erected the first churches on their own farm or they donated their land to these churches.¹¹¹ The Christian institutions developed slowly in eleventh century Iceland and the tithe law was first established in 1097.¹¹²

108 Cf. e.g., Kristján Eldjárn & Adolf Friðriksson 2000 [1956]: 360–361; Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 2, 17–19 and 2014: 78–82; Clunies Ross 2018a: 94; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1669.

109 See e.g., Hjalti Hugason 2000: 172–174; Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 37–57, 288; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1669.

110 *Egils saga* ch. 86 (Ísl. Fornr. 2: 298), *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstunga* ch. 13 (Ísl. Fornr. 3: 105) and *Eyrbyggja saga* chs 49 and 65 (Ísl. Fornr. 4: 136, 183). On the reliability of these accounts, see Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 37–57; cf. Strömbäck 1975: 59.

111 Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1670.

112 See Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 67–92.

7 Why pagan rituals and religious leadership?

Part II of the present study has shown that the Christian rulers often focused on pagan rituals, religious leadership, and cult objects/buildings when dismantling the old religion in Scandinavia. Why did they do that? They could also have concentrated their attention on the traditional world view and the belief system. The preserved mythic traditions in the Eddic and Skaldic poetry, as well as in the Snorri's *Edda*, indicate that such ideas were well elaborated in the indigenous religion. Was there an inherent vulnerability of the traditional cultic system when confronted with Christianity, which the Christian rulers had identified and therefore attacked? In order to answer this question, some ideas developed by scholars who have used typologies of religion when investigating religious change in Scandinavia will be discussed. I will then present my own explanation.

Historian of religions Gro Steinsland,¹ for instance, states that the Old Norse religion and Christianity represent two different types of religion. The former religion can be classified as an “ethnic” and local “folk-religion,” while the latter can be classified as a “universal, salvation religion.” She presents a simple analytic model and typology:

Old Norse Religion

“Ethnic religion”

Turns to:

its own ethnic group
non-missionary
this-worldly
seeking peace in this world (*fríðr*)

oriented towards cult
exclusive regarding cult
tolerant regarding belief
non-dogmatic
tradition
polytheistic
male and female cult leaders
no cult buildings

Turns to:

honor and shame
collective

Christianity

“Universal religion”

all people on earth
missionary
other-worldly
seeking salvation and eternal life
in the other world

oriented towards belief
tolerant regarding cult (?)
exclusive regarding belief
dogmatic
doctrine
monotheistic
male cult leaders
sacred buildings/churches

sin, grace, salvation and loss
individual

1 Steinsland 1991: 338–340; 1995: 9–27; 2000: 85–89; 2005: 31–34, 434–444; 2011a: 2–3.

According to Steinsland, an important feature of the former type of religion is that it belongs to a certain group of people and that it merges with the culture of this group. If anyone belongs to this group, he or she is at the same time a part of the religious community. Religion is not something the individual decides to belong to, or something one seeks membership in. The individual is thus born into the cult community in the same way that he or she is born into an ethnic group and naturally belongs to it. In comparison with this orientation toward “the collective,” the universal religions are in principle “individual,” because the religious belief is no longer part of the social community.² The members of the universal religion could be recruited from the whole world.

Steinsland argues further that folk religions have their base in the cult, not in the faith. Although they often develop an extensive mythology and cosmology in which gods and powers play important roles, the beliefs are not expressed in the form of dogmas or doctrinal systems. Such religions have their roots in the common cult. The cult is also often conservative in these religions. The goal of the rites is to secure life on earth, ensure that humans and animals have food, achieve fertility and good health. The folk religions strive, in their deepest sense, to preserve their own ethnic group. These religions are therefore world-oriented, they are world- and life-affirming. Opposite to the folk religions, the universal religions have their core in faith, doctrine and dogmas. These religions have often been established by a founder. The universal religions often have an anchor in a prophet or savior figure who has intervened in history and laid the foundation for the new religion and its teachings. As a type of religion, it is usually world-denying or transcendent, that is, the goal of each individual’s life journey lies in that which is beyond death. Real life is lived on a different plane than the earthly, and the meaning of existence becomes apparent only after death. Doctrine of salvation and redemption are concepts that are central to universal religions.³

Steinsland states that this model and typology can also explain why the “ethnic” Old Norse religion ended up in strong conflict with Christianity, which was a typical universal religion. The fundamental typological differences between the religions helped to intensify the conflicts (see 2.2 above). According to Steinsland, this model also explains why Christianity ultimately stood as a victor when encountering the Old Norse religion. As with other “folk religions,” the traditional religion in Scandinavia was vulnerable when confronted with Christianity since it lacked a priestly organization supported by a strong institution in society,

² See also Schjødt 2013: 309–310.

³ Steinsland 2005: 31–34.

which in turn was held up by a power apparatus.⁴ Contrary to this situation, Christianity had a priesthood, with educated and professional priests. Both the fact that the service was to be held in special sacred buildings (churches) and that it was to be held by a special clergy led to the removal of gods and rites from people's everyday lives and works. With Christianity, religion became something exclusive and a separate phenomenon.⁵

Even if Steinsland's model is, in several senses, useful for understanding the encountering between religions of different types, several objections can be made. James L. Cox, for instance, has stated that this type of typology often has been done rather uncritically.⁶ He points out several general problems with such classification: Being non-missionary, for instance, "is not a characteristic exclusive to indigenous religion".⁷ Some of the opposites Steinsland construes can also be questioned when applied to the transition in Viking Age Scandinavia.⁸ One of them is her description of the Old Norse religion as characterized by its focus on tradition, customs, and cult activities, as something different to the Christian religion of the Middle Ages, which is distinguished by its individual, personal religiosity, with a focus on belief system. Traditions, customs, and rituals are crucial parts of most religions and cultures around the world, certainly including Medieval Christianity. The assumption that belief was more important than cult activities in Medieval Christianity, can also be questioned. It is a well-known fact that Roman Christianity and medieval folk-religiosity emphasized religious practice and custom.⁹ The dichotomy that Christianity was oriented to-

4 "Men folkereligionen er samtidig en sårbar størrelse fordi den ikke er organisert som en sterk institusjon i samfunnet med et maktapparat i ryggen" (Steinsland 2005: 34).

5 Cf. Steinsland 2005: 436.

6 Cox 2013. See also the general criticism against the dichotomy universal/folk religions in Nordberg 2022: 262–263. Nordberg applies here the concept *lived religion*, when criticizing these categories as well as the dichotomy between public/private religions.

7 Cox 2013: 18. Jonathan Z. Smith (2004: 191–192) is also somewhat critical to the division of "universalistic," "universal" or "world religions" on the one hand and "ethic," "natural" or "traditional" religions, and the other hand, especially when being contrasted to each other: "It is impossible to escape the suspicion that a world religion is simply a religion like ours, and that it is, above all, a tradition that has achieved sufficient power and numbers to enter our history to form it, interact with it, or thwart it. We recognize both the unity within and the diversity among the world religions because they correspond to important geopolitical entities with which we must deal. All 'primitives,' by way of contrast, may be lumped together, as may the 'minor religions,' because they do not confront our history in any direct fashion. From the point of view of power, they are invisible."

8 Cf. Schjødt 2013: 309.

9 E.g., Pernler 2005 [1999]: 82–91; cf. Lindberg 2009: 98. The popular belief and piety during the Middle Ages included many rites. See Gurevich 1993 [1988]: 78–175.

wards “the beyond” and after life, while the Old Norse religion is “this-worldly” could also be questioned. As seen above, Christian people continued after conversion to pray to God, Christ, and St Mary “in order to ensure the growth of their crops, avoid sicknesses, and in general, optimize their life on earth.”¹⁰ Most likely Christians still today turn to God for similar mundane purposes. It should be mentioned, however, that Steinsland was aware that the historical reality was not as simple as the static model described above. The model represents an ideal situation, which can be discussed in all details.

Historian of religions Jens Peter Schjødt, has developed Steinsland’s phenomenological ideas further by following Jan Assmann’s cultural memory theory and the taxonomic division between primary and secondary religions (also called cult religions and book-based religions), where the former religions can be distinguished from the latter ones based on the fact that they do not include canonical writing.¹¹ This division also has implications for the cultural memory. In primary religions the memory of tradition is related to the repetition of ritual, while the memory of tradition in secondary religions, is based on the textual canon. There is also an evolutionary scheme included in Assmann’s model, where primary religions began earlier than the secondary religions.¹² Schjødt argues that

10 Schjødt 2013: 309.

11 Schjødt 2013; Assmann 2006.

12 Assmann (2006: 122–123) states thus: “In the relationship between text and ritual, the history of religion marks a turning point that amounts to a complete reversal. Where, previously, the text was embedded in the ritual and subordinated to it, now the text, in the shape of a body of canonic writings, becomes the pivotal factor, and ritual is left with only a framing and accompanying function. This turning point is a watershed, and separates two types of religion. We may differentiate these as cult religions and book-based religions. Cult religions are the primary phenomenon everywhere. They arise seamlessly from tribal religions, branch out into the complex and complicated polytheism of the early high cultures, and can still be found in the Asiatic world down to the present day, frequently in a state of peaceful coexistence with religions that stand on a very different footing. Book-based religions, on the other hand, all arise from a radical rupture with tradition. We may follow Theo Sundermeier in characterizing religions at this stage as ‘secondary religions.’ This concept includes all religions that do not trace their origins back to the mists of time, but claim to be the product of historical acts of revelation and creation. They include the three Western monotheisms, . . . All secondary religions are book-based religions. They are founded on a canon of sacred writings . . . The change of medium that formed our point of departure has its corollary in a structural change in the nature of religion. On the side of the secondary religions we find writing and transcendence, while on that of primary religion we find ritual and immanence. This transformation is accompanied by a transformation of ‘cultural memory.’ In cult religions, the ‘connective structures’ that ensured the identical reproduction of the culture down through the generations were based primarily on the principal of ritual repetition. In the case of book-based religions, they are founded on the principle of interpreting the canonical texts.”

the Old Norse religion, which was based on a diversity of oral traditions and lacked canonical writings, can definitely be classified as a primary religion. He argues, further, that cultures without writings, such as the Scandinavian one, remember their religion through their rituals, and the continuous performance of them.¹³ When performing rituals, the “grand narratives” are brought into play. Some of them deal with creation or the end of the world, others with the relationship between the gods and the humans, and the role of gods in human life. When writing appears, these traditions are remembered without ritual performances. It was no coincidence then when the Christian missionaries formulated their methods, Schjødt argues, that they aimed on forbidding the performance of pagan rituals. He concludes thus: “Sacrifices, yearly rituals and the like, related to the pagan gods were therefore forbidden when political power allowed, something that meant that paganism was doomed to disappear from memory as the basis of life.”¹⁴ Also Schjødt’s (including Assmann’s) model could be discussed.¹⁵ It is true in theory that traditions are remembered without ritual performances when canonical writing appears. In reality, most Christians remember the rituals and myths related to Christmas, for instance, because they have listened to these narratives and performed these rituals during Christmas Mass, not because they have read the Gospels.

Jens Peter Schjødt also mentions another reason why Christianity was victorious, an explanation which he also shares with Steinsland (see above): “Furthermore, in relation to belief, Christianity was exclusive, whereas pagan notion of the gods was inclusive: in practice, you could venerate as many gods as you liked. This structural difference was definitely one of the reasons why Christianity was victori-

13 Margaret Clunies Ross (2002: 17–18) argued that ritual knowledge has to be maintained through action. The knowledge of the rituals is forgotten when the rituals are no longer performed. Wellendorf (2018: 10) states that the “ban on the most easily identifiable non-Christian cultic practices led in time to a loss of the knowledge of how the rituals were carried out.” This explains the relative paucity of information about pagan cult and rituals in the Old Norse sources.

14 Schjødt is aware of the paradox that we still have many mythic traditions preserved, which all tell us about pre-Christian world view. He states: “it is important to understand that the narratives that have survived up until present time should be seen, first and foremost, as expressions of either the need for entertainment or an antiquarian interest which was already becoming apparent in the Middle Ages, in the work of people like Snorri Sturluson and the anonymous compiler(s) of the Eddic poems.” Schjødt 2013: 317.

15 See also the criticism presented by Frederik Wallenstein (2023) against the cultural memory theory as formulated by Jan and Aleida Assmann. Wallenstein argues that scholars who have applied this theory have undervalued oral tradition when it comes to oral prose such as the Old Norse traditions. He considers this as a “blind spot” in the theory of cultural memory.

ous in the end.”¹⁶ This view echoes Helge Ljungberg’s thesis, that one reason for the victory of Christianity was the nature of the old religion as tolerant in beliefs, but exclusive in cultic matters.¹⁷ Ljungberg states: “Faith did not have the same importance in paganism as in Christianity, which psychologically must have facilitated the conversion.”¹⁸ The tolerant nature of the old religion regarding matters of faith meant that the Christian god was easily included in the existing pantheon. Ljungberg referred to Helgi enn magri Eyvindarson, who is mentioned in *Landnámabók*: “Helgi’s faith was very much mixed: he believed in Christ but invoked Þórr when it came to voyages and difficult times.”¹⁹ We also recognize this explanation in the theoretical model of religious change, as formulated by Håkan Rydving, and applied to conversion among the Lule Saami (1670s–1740s), where he also discusses the causes of this change.²⁰ Some explanations could be found in connection to characteristics of the indigenous religions, which become weaknesses in a situation of religious encounter with universal religions such as Christianity. The first hypothesis in Rydving’s theory says thus: “RC₂ is due to the tolerant nature of indigenous religion.” Even if Rydving applied his model to the religious change among the Saami, this explanation could with no doubt have validity also for the religious change in the Late Viking Age Scandinavia, when the Old Norse religion was replaced by Christianity. Rydving’s second hypothesis harmonizes well with Steinsland’s theoretical assumptions about the weak cult organization and leadership of the folk religions: “RC₂ is due to the structural and organizational characteristics of the indigenous religion, with no common leadership, no common authority structure and no missionaries to advance its cause.”²¹ Because the Old Norse religion lacked an institution that formulated rules of faith and a dogma, it acquired a tolerant nature that could easily incorporate new religious elements and gods into the existing belief system (see 2.3 above).

By means of these phenomenological analyzes, Rydving, Steinsland and Schjødt identify some vulnerable areas of folk religions, respectively primary religions (such as the Old Norse religion), when encountered with universal religions, respec-

16 Schjødt 2013: 310–311.

17 “Under hela missionstidevarvet var den nordiska hedendomen, med undantag av Island, tolerant i trosfrågor, medan kulten i alla former var till ytterlighet exklusiv. Denna trostolerans och kultexklusivitet illustrerar på ett förträffligt sätt hedendomens väsen.” Ljungberg 1938: 211.

18 “Tron hade icke samma betydelse i hedendomen som i kristendomen, vilket psykologiskt torde ha underlättat omvändelsen.” Ljungberg 1938: 211.

19 *Helgi var blandinn mjök í trú; hann trúði á Krist, en hét á Þór til sjófara ok harðræða. Landnámabók* ch. S218, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 250. See Ljungberg 1938: 132.

20 Rydving 1993: 15.

21 Rydving 1993: 15.

tively secondary religions (such as Christianity). It seems as if these fragilities of the folk religions/primary religions in such situations are related to three aspects:

- (1) The lack of an independent priestly institution or authority, which regulated religious discourse, practices, and community.
- (2) The lack of canonical or religious writings, which support the cultural memory and persistence of the tradition.
- (3) The tolerant nature of indigenous religion.

Present empirical investigation, which has a more inductive approach and is based on an actor-oriented perspective, indicates that the new Christian rulers and their missionaries identified similar areas of vulnerability in the Old Norse religion when replacing it with the new faith. When designing their strategies, they focused on the weak religious leadership as well as the ritual system, which seems to have been very important for the persistence of the indigenous religion. As other ethnic or primary religions, the Old Norse religion was remembered through rituals as long as they were performed. When a ritual ceased to be performed, it disappeared from memory within a few generations.²² The lack of a priestly institution that could protect the old traditions facilitated this process. By means of erasing the rituals, the liturgic order and the ritual organization, including cult leaders, sanctuaries and ritual objects, the old religion was wiped out.

The most important reason why the rulers focused on these matters is, however, related to pragmatics. The recently converted kings did what was in their power to do. While it was not in their power to change the worldview and thoughts of people, and perhaps not desirable either, they could abandon their own traditional roles in sacrificial cult, and in that way disrupt the old ceremonial order. As time passed and their political position became more stable and powerful, they could also persuade, or even force the local chieftains, who organized the old cultic activities at the sanctuaries and watched over pagan traditions, to abandon their roles. They could even kill those who were reluctant to desert these assignments, in order to support Christianity. In some contexts, they destroyed the old cult sites and the ritual paraphernalia. By means of such strategies they dismantled the indigenous religion, including the cultic communities, on a local level. Finally, during the High Middle Ages, when the Christian rulers together with representatives from the Church had an even stronger position of power and support through an efficient administration, they prohibited animal sacrifices and traditional customs by means of written law, which had consequences on a regional, or even an inter-regional level.

²² Schjødt 2013: 317; cf. Clunies Ross 2002: 17–18; Andrén 2002.

During the Middle Ages scholars and representatives of Church together with the royal power also tried to affect the traditional world view among (educated) people, by transforming the indigenous gods into humans or demons in Kings' Sagas, chronicles and historical writings. As noticed above, this could be perceived as a literary strategy for dismantling the old religion. Since people maintained narration of the old myths including the stories about the pagan gods in post-conversion time, these divine powers needed to be redefined and neutralized. Methods such as euhemerism and demonology were applied in this project. Eventually, mockery and idol parody became more common as methods for extinct the beliefs in the pagan gods.²³ It is likely that these strategies were also used earlier in the missionary process during speeches, negotiations and sermons at assemblies. Part of the preaching is preserved in the two Norse homily books, which belong to the oldest examples of Norse prose literature, and in the runic inscriptions (see above).²⁴

In sum, the recently converted Viking kings played a most active role when winding up the indigenous tradition that previously formed their lives. It seems as if they used some deliberate methods in this project and that they worked on some important areas of the old religion more than on others. When designing their strategies, they focused on the religious leadership, the cultic organization and the traditional sacrifices, which seem to have been the aspects of the indigenous religion that were more under their control and at the same time central for the *modus operandi* of the pre-Christian religion. Most of all, it seems as if these Christian kings were pragmatists. Since they could not affect much the traditional world view and prevent people from telling the mythical narratives about the old gods, Óðinn, Þórr, Freyr, and Freyja, they turned mainly to such aims that they were able to achieve. It was easier to control what people did than what they thought. By attacking the old sacrificial feasts and the pagan cultic organization, the new Christian kingship and church also affected the old religious and social community in a fundamental way. Gradually, the pagan society and the old order dissolved, for example the collective power previously exercised by the assembly

23 Wellendorf 2018.

24 *The Old Icelandic Homily Book* (Stock. Perg. 4to no. 15), includes 62 texts or parts of texts, 50 of which are homilies, that is, a commentary that follows an authoritative reading of the Holy Scripture, giving the public explanation of the Christian doctrine. It shares eleven texts with *The Old Norwegian Homily Book* (AM 619 4to). Two of these texts, the "Stave-Church Homily" and a "St Michael's Day" sermon, are also found in one of the oldest Icelandic manuscript fragments, AM 237a fol., which was written around 1150. See Knudsen 1981 [1956–1978]: col. 657–666.

was reduced while the power of the king and the church was strengthened (see further below).

Due to the specific contexts, these early Christian rulers used violent means sometimes, but usually nonviolent strategies or tactics were applied when dismantling the old religion. Sometimes both words and deeds were needed to persuade the pagans to abandon their old customs. Occasionally they also replaced some pagan practices, roles and ideas with Christian cult and belief systems. These kind of replacements favored the dismantling of the old religion and promoted the rise of Christianity. These replacements aimed at realizing the same goals as the pagan rituals, for instance a good year and peace (*ár ok friðr*) for the farmers. Those kinds of blessings could also be conveyed, or rather ritually mediated, via the medieval king. Skaldic poems attest to the notion that kings like St Óláfr were considered to have this ability, even after his demise through the saint cult that arose. It is likely that this type of belief was expressed during the Christian drinking ceremonies that replaced the pagan ritual drinking. Through these more popular ritual practices and the mass held in the churches, a new Christian identity gradually emerged, both individually and collectively. A new social community arose with Christian signs. This process probably began among the native kings who actively ensured that it spread to local chieftains and wider populations.



Part III: **Pagans fight back**

8 Blótsveinn and the pagan revolt in Svetjud

The intention of Part III, that is, chapters eight to eleven, is to investigate and discuss the pagans' resistance against the Christians and revolts visible in some sources from Svetjud, Trøndelag and Iceland. It will take its point of departure from riots that took place in the area around the Lake Mälaren in Svetjud. Conversion in Sweden is often described as a long conflict free process, with no forced conversions.¹ The present chapter intends to nuance this claim. The most famous revolt is connected to a king called Blótsveinn. These actions took place around 1080–1100, that is, the final phase of the old religion in this area. It seems thus as if the demising religion was still strong in certain groups there. It is argued that the retention of paganism among these groups was connected to the preservation of the old society, where power was concentrated in the assembly institution. Some of the central actors in these reactions were the pagan elite, who organized the cult at the sanctuary in Uppsala. When the sacrificial cult ceased at this cult place, there were still remnants of the old society preserved in connection with the customs applied at royal inaugurations at Mora.² Hence, the pagans' resistance was also connected to social-political motives.

8.1 The religio-political background of Blótsveinn

Pagan cult was deeply rooted in Svetjud and it seems as if it was one of the last areas to change religion in Scandinavia. This is a bit surprising since mission started early in this region. Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii* (c. 870) reports that the first missionaries led by Ansgar at Birka, in the Lake Mälaren, during the first half of the ninth century, were initially welcomed by the inhabitants living there and around this town, however later these Christians were persecuted and suffered violence and death. Gautbert, who had been consecrated as bishop for the Svear in Reims 832, was attacked in his home at Birka where the people also plundered the house. They killed the bishop's cousin Nithard, who became a martyr. It is stated that this was done because of their "hatred of Christianity." It is also mentioned that "after plundering everything that they could find in their house, they drove them [the missionaries] from their territory with insults and abuse."³

1 B. Nilsson (ed.) 1996: 431; B. Nilsson 2020: 1723 and 2.3 above.

2 See a survey in Sundqvist 2002: 306–333 and 2022a.

3 . . . *et diripientes omnia quae apud eos invenire potuerunt, contumelia et opprobriis affectos a finibus suis expulerunt.* VA 17. Trans. Robinson 1921.

This did not happen on the king's command but was a conspiracy among the people, who, according to Rimbert, were inspired by the Devil. It has been suggested that this pagan reaction took place at the same time as the Svear celebrated their great sacrificial feast in Uppsala.⁴ There is actually no support for such assumption.⁵ The actual date for Nithard's death and his *martyrium* has been suggested to a time around 840.⁶ Rimbert also states that Birka did not have a Christian priest for the next seven years.⁷ Adam repeats this information with a reference to Rimbert, but adds nothing new to the account himself.⁸ Rimbert's account, on the other hand, is with no doubt a possible authentic description of a violent conflict in the process of religious change in Sweden.⁹

Thus, the first mission in Birka seems to have been a kind of failure. We do not know what happened after Ansgar's second travel to Birka in 852, with the Christian community there, however, we must assume that at least some Christians, such as foreign traders stayed there.¹⁰ It seems, however, that no stable native Christian congregation was established in Sweden during the ninth century, and most likely the king's relation to the empire did not endure long.¹¹ Gradually, however, Christianity was rooted in Götaland, where we can see a tendency towards Europeanization of the institutions and organizations earlier than in Svealand.¹² Cecilia Ljung has shown that the custom of placing early Christian grave monuments as cists and recumbent stones in churchyards started as early as 1000 in Västergötland and went on to around 1050. In this province the use of traditional burial fields expired between 900 and 950, while the tradition of raising runestones with memorial inscriptions was in progress between 990 and 1020.¹³ This indicates that the indigenous religion there was in a process of waning during the middle and the end of the tenth century.

4 Cf. Ljungberg 1938: 178–190, 233–235, 255–257; Hallencreutz 1986: 169. According to Adam (4,27 and below) these feasts took place every ninth year.

5 See B. Nilsson 1998: 47.

6 Odelman 1986: 92–93.

7 VA 19.

8 Adam 1,21.

9 Cf. B. Nilsson 1998: 47.

10 Adam (1,61) states that no signs of Christians in Birka could be seen when archbishop Unni arrived there in the tenth century. Brink 2008b: 624.

11 Archaeological evidence indicates, however, that a Christian congregation may have maintained in Birka also after Ansgar. Birka may have served as a center of innovation from where Christianity slowly was spread in the Lake Mälaren area. See e.g. A.-S. Gräslund 2001: 130.

12 Lindkvist 2008: 671.

13 Ljung 2016; cf. Theliander 2005.

Contemporary native sources indicate antipathies and clashes between pagans and Christians in the early eleventh century Västergötland. The skaldic poem *Austrfararvísur*, preserved in *Óláfs saga helga* chapter 91,¹⁴ describes how the Christian skald Sigvatr Þorðarson, with some companions, made a journey from Norway eastwards to Svetjud (*til Svíþjóðar*) c. 1019 during autumn, as the pagans were celebrating the annual sacrifices designated *alfablót*, which were devoted to the mythical beings called *álfar*. According to Snorri, they went through Eiðaskógr and first arrived at Gautland (Götaland). The poem narrates that one evening, they came to a farm called Hof (st. 4).¹⁵ Whether *Hof* in this case refers to a place-name is uncertain. It is possible that it could be interpreted as an appellation *hof*, that is, a building where cultic activities took place.¹⁶ The poem says: “the door was barred” (*hurð vas apr*). It also says that Sigvatr and his fellows were sent away, since the pagans there declared that it was “holy” (*heilagr*). Whether we here should follow Snorri’s interpretation of this expression, that is, that the place was “holy” is uncertain. It could possibly also refer to time, that is, that it was a holy day.¹⁷ The expression “the heathen men drove me off” (*heiðnir rekkar hnekkdumk*) indicates anyhow an unfriendly reception and a kind of confrontation between the pagans of the place and the Christian travelers.

Snorri’s text mentions that the Christians went to another farm (*at oðrum garði*). There was a housewife (*húsfreyja*) in the doorway, who told him thus in stanza five:

*‘Gakkat inn,’ kvað ekkja,
‘armi drengr, en lengra;
hræðumk ek við Óðins
– erum heiðin vér – reiði.’
Rýgr kvazk inni eiga óþekk,
sús mér hnekkði, alfablót,
sem ulfi ótvín, í bæ sínum.*

‘Do not come any farther in, wretched fellow,’ said the woman; ‘I fear the wrath of Óðinn; we are heathen.’ The disagreeable female, who drove me away like a wolf without hesitation, said they were holding a sacrifice to the elves inside her farmhouse.¹⁸

When the Christian skald comes to the house, this female tells Sigvatr he cannot enter because of the sacrifice. Rather than seeing the rejection of the Christian

¹⁴ Ísl. Fornr. 27: 134–146.

¹⁵ On the location of the places mentioned in *Austrfararvísur*; see Fulk in SkP 1: 578–583.

¹⁶ Fulk in SkP 1: 578–614; cf. Sundqvist 2016a: 95–110.

¹⁷ See discussion in Murphy 2018: 59–60; Wellendorf 2022: 475–476.

¹⁸ Fulk SkP 1, 590–591.

skald as caused by the private nature of the *álfablót*,¹⁹ it should probably be seen in the context of the encounter (or clash) between pagans and Christians.²⁰ The female also states that she fears the wrath of Óðinn and that the people of the farm were heathen. The concept *heiðinn*, “heathen,” as a self-designation, can be perceived as somewhat odd in this context. Perhaps it indicates a Christian polemic discourse. But it also appears in the skaldic poem *Hákonarmál* stanza 21: *með heiðin goð*, “with the heathen gods.” This poem is usually accepted as a pre-Christian lay, describing the native gods from a pagan perspective. Thus, the adjective *heiðinn* could be used as an attribute to oneself in designations, such as *heiðnir menn* “heathens” and often as a contrast to Christian men.

The housewife in stanza five seems to be involved in the pagan cult of the *álfar*, or at least she protects the sacred space where this cult took place in a way. It can be compared to the *hofgyðja* called Steinvör, who according to *Vápnfirðinga saga* chapter five took care of and protected the major *hof*-building (*varðveitti hofuðhofit*) at the farm called Hof in Vápnfirðr, Iceland.²¹ The Old Norse verb *varðveit(t)a* means “to keep, to preserve,” “to observe.”²² Most likely the stanza in *Austrfararvísur* indicates that the mistress in the door protected the sacred space. The skald burst out that she “drove me away like a wolf (*sem ulfi*),” which may allude to the sacrilege called *vargr í véum* “a wolf in sanctuaries.” According to Oddr’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, this expression refers to a person “who has desecrated the property of a god by breaking it down and carrying away its valuables.”²³ Perhaps the housewife had some connection to Óðinn since she feared his wrath. In the runic inscription, dated to the eleventh century, from Hassmyra, in Västmanland (Vs 24), a housewife (Runic Swedish *hifroyja*) called *Öðin-Disa* is praised. It has been argued that her name was probably originally *Disa* and that the name of the god *Öðin-* has been added to her secondarily, as a byname prefix.²⁴ The name *Öðin-Disa* indicates that she had a specific relation to the god Óðinn and perhaps that she was faithful to him also after the conversion. Perhaps this housewife had a similar cultic role as the female in Snorri’s text.

Snorri tells that the next evening Sigvatr and his companions came to a house of three farmers, each of them called Qlvir. The quoted stanza (6) there narrates that the three namesakes (*þrír samnafnar*) drove him away and turned their backs on him. The first element in this compound name *Qlvir* has sometimes been interpreted as a word equivalent to Gothic *alhs* “temple,” indicating that the name originally was

19 Murphy 2018.

20 Wellendorf 2022.

21 *Vápnfirðinga saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 11: 33.

22 Zoëga 2004 [1910]: 472. See further Sundqvist 2016a: 188–189, 290–315.

23 Oddr’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* Ísl. Fornr. 24: 174. See Wellendorf 2022: 479.

24 See Sundqvist 2016a: 368–369 and the literature quoted therein.

a designation for a “cult leader,” or “religious specialist.”²⁵ Perhaps these three men protected a pagan shrine. Nevertheless, the poet once again describes a confrontation between the pagan locals of Götaland and the Christian skald and the travelers.

It seems thus as if there still existed pagan groups in Västergötland around the 1020s, who were quite hostile against Christians. Adam of Bremen mentions that a well-known “idol of Fricco (Freyr)” was still located in Västergötland in the 1060s, close to the church of Skara. When Bishop Egino of Dalby and Lund (d. 1072) visited this place, he smashed this image into pieces.²⁶ For these manifestations of virtue he was held in high honor by the king of Danes. This information is usually regarded as quite reliable.

Early Christian kings in Sweden

Narrative sources suggest that the first Christian king of Sweden was Óláfr Eiríksson skautkonungr (r. 995–1022). In Adam of Bremen’s descriptions, Óláfr was a very pious Christian, and hostile to paganism. For instance, he was eager to destroy the pagan temple at Uppsala, but he did not have the power to do that. Adam states that the pagan Svear let him take under his jurisdiction the part of Sweden he liked best. Delighted with this agreement he decided to establish for God a church and an episcopal in Västergötland, that is, in Skara. He let Unwan consecrate Thurgot as the first bishop there.²⁷ Óláfr also promised that he would not force any to give up the worship of their gods unless anyone of his own accord wished to be converted to Christ. It has been argued that this passage shows that Óláfr lost power in Svealand and moved to Västergötland.²⁸ On the other hand, Óláfr may have affected a diplomatic compromise.²⁹ He could continue to be the king of the Svear although he had cut his connections with Uppsala and the pagan cult. His influence in Uppland remained. It is quite evident that Óláfr was also the king of the Christian Svear living in the southern parts of the Mälaren area. Numismatic evidence supports this and even connects him with Sigtuna. It seems as if King Óláfr had a royal mint there, in as early as the late tenth century. On the coins produced in Sigtuna, Óláfr Eiríksson is called *rex svevorum* “the king of the Svear” and *rex Situm* “king in Sigtuna.”³⁰ The foundation of the

²⁵ See de Vries 1932; Kousgård Sørensen 1989: 8, 11–12; Peterson 2007: 21; Sundqvist 2020a.

²⁶ Adam 4,9. See above.

²⁷ Adam 2,58.

²⁸ Cf. Sawyer 1991: 32.

²⁹ Hallencreutz 1997: 125–127.

³⁰ Malmer 1996: 99–111.

diocese of Sigtuna first took place, however, during King Steinkell's reign in the 1060s.

According to Icelandic traditions the Uppsala lineage ended when King Steinkell ascended the throne (c. 1060); Óláfr's baptized sons Qnundr (Old Swedish *Anund* (Jacob)) (r. 1022–1050) and Eymundr (Old Swedish *Emund*) (r. 1050–1060) were the last kings of this family. These kings were all Christians. Adam is somewhat uncertain regarding Steinkell's relationship to Eymundr.³¹ According to *Hervarar saga* he was the son-in-law of him.³² This text says that Steinkell's father was Rognvaldr the Old (Old Swedish *Ragnvald*), perhaps a jarl from Götaland.³³ Recently, however, it has been argued that he originated from Uppland.³⁴ Sources indicate that the Christian king Steinkell had interests there; according to Adam he supported the foundation of the diocese of Sigtuna, with Adalvard the Younger as bishop.³⁵ Adam's information suggests that Steinkell ruled over both Svealand and Götaland.³⁶ He died c. 1066, and according to scholion 84, he was replaced by two Christian throne pretenders called Eiríkr and Eiríkr (Old Swedish *Erik and Erik*), who died fighting each other c. 1067:

After the two Erics were killed in battle, Alstan, the son of Stenkil, was raised to the throne. When he was presently deposed Anunder was summoned from Russia, and when he too was removed, the Swedes elected a certain Haakon. He married the young Olaf's mother.³⁷

Eiríkr and Eiríkr were thus replaced by Hallsteinn (Old Swedish *Halsten*) c. 1067, however, he was deposed after a broken reign in about 1070. Anunder was then called home from Russia, but was deposed almost immediately. After that King Hákon ruled for a ten-year period. Magnus Källström has recently argued convincingly that the kings who bore the names Eiríkr, Anunder and Hákon are found on contemporary runestones in Uppland.³⁸ King Ingi Steinkelsson (r. 1080–1110) co-ruled for a period with Hallsteinn or Hákon. Apart from an interruption in the 1080s, Ingi ruled for thirty years. He was, according to several sources, a devoted Christian.

³¹ Adam 3,15–16.

³² *Hann átti dóttur Eymundar konungs*, ed. Turville-Petre 2006 [1956]: 70.

³³ Cf. *Óláfs saga helga*, Ísl. Fornr. 27: 28, 85, 88–90.

³⁴ See discussion on Rognvaldr as Steinkell's father in Runer 2006: 138–139. Runer argues that Rognvaldr rather was a jarl in Uppland with connections to Eds kyrka.

³⁵ Adam 4,29. Cf. P. H. Sawyer 1991: 34–35. Hallencreutz interpreted this passage as an expression of Adam's historico-theological dualism. Hallencreutz 1993b: 56.

³⁶ Nyberg & Hallencreutz 1985 [1984]: 288, note 701 and above.

³⁷ *Duobus Hericis in prelio interfectis Halzstein filius regis Stenkel, in regnum levatus est. Quo mox depulso accersitus Anunder a Ruzzia, et illo nihilominus amoto Sueones elegerunt Haquinum. Iste accepit matrem Olaph iuvenis matrimonio*. Schol. 84.

³⁸ Källström 2020.

8.2 The historicity of Blótsveinn

It seems thus as though some native kings in Sweden converted at the end of the tenth century and for almost a hundred years there were only Christian rulers in Sweden. Sources report, however, that pagan groups still appeared at the ancient sanctuary of Old Uppsala during Steinkell's reign as well as in the areas around Northern and Northwestern Uppland. The famous revolt of Blótsveinn and the pagans in Svetjud took place around 1080–1100, according to available sources, that is, during the reign of the Christian king, Ingi Steinkelsson. However, the value of these sources has been debated. In what follows, I will present the empirical basis for the existence of Blótsveinn and the revolt related to him as well as the source critical discussion concerning this, before analysing the causes of this pagan resistance and how it was expressed.

8.2.1 *Hervarar saga*

The most extensive tradition regarding King Ingi Steinkelsson and the king's brother-in-law, Blótsveinn, is preserved in one version of *Hervarar saga*, called redaction U which is mainly based on the manuscript called R:715 of Uppsala University Library. It is a small paper manuscript written around the mid-seventeenth century. According to Christopher Tolkien, it is "ill-written and extremely corrupt."³⁹ In his edition of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, E. O. G. Turville-Petre prefers to follow redaction R (= Gl.kgl.sml. 2845, 4to of the Royal Library in Copenhagen) and the first lacuna in it is made up from redaction H (= Hauksbók, AM 544, 4to), however, the final chapters (R's second lacuna), including *Frá konungaættum Dana ok Svía*, are based on U. The earliest edition of *Hervarar saga* was published by Olof Verelius 1664 in Uppsala. The passage about Blótsveinn in the U-version has been debated. Henrik Schück argued that the chronicle of the kings of Svear (*Frá konungaættum Dana ok Svía*) has been added to the original version of *Hervarar saga*.⁴⁰ It may be part of a lost historical tradition molded by legendary and mythical elements. Lauritz Weibull rejected Schück's argumentation and stated that the chronicle of Swedish royalties is well motivated in the saga, as it is about Angantyr's royal descendants, where King Philippus and King Ingi the

³⁹ Tolkien in Turville-Petre 2006 [1956]: xvii.

⁴⁰ Schück (1910: 11 and 15) writes thus: "Detta tillägg finnes ej i de gamla manuskripten till sagan, utan endast i unga papperhandskrifter, och i dem i ett på flera ställen ganska korrumpierade skick . . . Krönikan är troligen skriven mellan åren 1118 och 1135." Cf. Schück 1914: 7–9; supported by Ljungberg 1938: 235, note 1; Reifegerste 1989: 196–200; cf. Lönnroth 1996: 148.

younger must be considered relevant to such a genealogy.⁴¹ In what follows, I will proceed from Turville-Petre's edition.

In this account it is mentioned that Steinkell came from a rich and powerful family in Svetjud. Steinkell was first a jarl, but after Eymundr's death he was raised to kingship. He was married to a daughter of King Eymundr. King Steinkell died of sickness about the same time as King Haraldr harðráði fell in England (that is, 1066). Ingi the elder was Steinkell's son and he was made king for the Svear after King Hákon (c. 1080). *Hervarar saga* states thus in chapter 16:

Ingi was the name of Steinkell's son, whom the Svear made king next after Hákon. Ingi was a king for a long time, a man blessed with friends and a good Christian. He forbade pagan sacrifice in Svíþjóð and ordered that all the people there should be Christianized, but the Svear believed too much in the pagan gods and stuck to their old customs. King Ingi married a woman named Mær. Her brother's name was Sveinn. No one was loved by King Ingi like him, and therefore Sveinn became a very powerful man in Svíþjóð. The Svear thought that King Ingi had wronged them by breaking the ancient land-law, when he wanted to change a lot that his father Steinkell had respected. At the assembly that the Svear held with King Ingi, they gave him two choices. Either he would maintain the ancient law or he had to give up the kingdom. King Ingi said that he was not ready to give up that faith, which was the right one. The Svear shouted and threw stones at him and drove him off the assembly place. Sveinn, the king's brother-in-law, remained at the assembly (*þing*). He told the Svear that he would make sacrifice on their behalf if they would give him the kingdom. All assented to that proposal. Sveinn was taken as king over all Svíþjóð. A horse was led to the meeting place, dismembered and distributed for eating, and the sacrificial tree was reddened with the blood. All Svear thus abandoned Christianity, re-introduced the sacrifice and drove Ingi off and he travelled to Västergötland. Blótsveinn was king over the Svear for three winters.⁴²

41 Weibull 1911: 172–174. This position is supported by Sävborg 2017: 57–58.

42 *Ingi hét sonr Steinkels, er Svíar tóku til konungs næst eftir Hákon. Ingi var þar lengi konungur ok vinsæll ok vel kristinn. Hann eyddi blótum í Svíþjóð ok bað fólk allt þar kristnast, en Svíar höfðu of mikinn átrúnað á heidum goðum ok heldu fornur siðum. Ingi konungur gekk at eiga konu þá, er Mær hét. Bróðir hennar hét Sveinn. Inga konungi þokknaðist enginn maðr svá vel, ok varð hann í Svíþjóð inn ríkasti maðr. Svíum þótti Ingi konungur brjóta forn landslög á sér, er hann vandaði um þá hluti, er Steinkell hafði standa látit. Á þingi nokkuru, er Svíar áttu við Inga konung, gerðu þeir honum tvá kosti, hvárt hann vildi heldr halda við þá forn lög eða láta af konungdómi. Þá mælti Ingi konungur ok kveðst eigi mundu kasta þeiri trú, sem rétt væri. Þá æptu Svíar ok þröngdu honum með grjóti ok ráku hann af löghinginu. Sveinn, mágr konungs, var eftir á þinginu. Hann bauð Svíum at efla blót fyrir þeim, ef þeir gæfi honum konungdóm. Því játa þeir allir; var Sveinn þá til konungs tekinn yfir alla Svíþjóð; Þá var fram leitt hross eitt á þingit ok höggvit í sundr ok skipt til áts, enn roðit blóðinu blóttre. Köstuðu þá allir Svíar kristni, ok hófust blót, en þeir ráku Inga kong á brott, ok fór hann í vestra Gautland. Blót-Sveinn var þrjár vetr konungur yfir Svíum.* My trans.

As mentioned in the quote, King Ingi stayed in Västergötland for about three years. Then he travelled with his escort and retinue eastwards to Småland and then into Östergötland and further into Svetjud. He rode day and night and surprised Sveinn one early morning. They seized the houses, lit them and burned all people who were in them. Blótsveinn came out of the house, but was killed. Ingi took then power over the Svear, re-established Christianity and ruled the country until he died from sickness.

8.2.2 The source critical discussion

It has been argued up until quite recently that this description reflects a real historical conflict between King Ingi and those people who remained as pagans in Central Sweden.⁴³ This rebellion against Christian power was for a long time an accepted part of Swedish history, representing the final struggle between pagans and Christians. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, a more skeptical and uncertain view regarding Blótsveinn and the pagan revolt against the Christian king appeared among several historians and archaeologists. They questioned the reliability of the account in *Hervarar saga*, as well as the existence of Blótsveinn. The notion that Ingi had to flee from Uppland because of non-Christian rebellion, they argued, cannot be confirmed by other sources.⁴⁴ It was also stated that the account about this pagan insurrection appears in very late sources, like the fourteenth century *Hervarar saga*.⁴⁵ Most likely this new opinion about Blótsveinn emanated from a programmatic article “En fjärran spegel. Västnordiska berättande källor om svensk hedendom och om kristningsprocessen på svenskt område” written by the famous historian of literature, Lars Lönnroth, and published in the final “conclusion volume” of the project called *Sveriges kristnande*. He argued that this account should not be interpreted literally, since it is written down in a late text, that is, *Hervarar saga*. Some details about Blótsveinn, for instance, are not historically reliable. There are actually no old and independent sources that corroborate his existence, according to Lönnroth.⁴⁶ He admitted that we cannot rule out that the story reflects a real conflict between King Ingi and those people who still remained at and defended the “Uppsala temple,” however the ex-

⁴³ E.g., Ljungberg 1938: 233–235; Ström 1985: 83; Rosén 1992 [1966–1968]: 204; Harrison 2009: 210, 456; see a more thorough overview in Sävborg 2017: 51, note 1.

⁴⁴ Sanmark 2004: 114.

⁴⁵ Duczko 1998: 411.

⁴⁶ Lönnroth 1996: 149–150.

istence of Blótsveinn must be questioned.⁴⁷ Lönnroth also argued that the narrative in *Hervarar saga* was in fact a medieval *exemplum* and moralizing account, that is, as a homiletic story.⁴⁸ As support for this assumption, he referred to the names Mær and Sveinn, which in his opinion were allegoric characters. Since Lönnroth's article was published as a conclusion of what we know about the Christianization of Sweden as evidenced in the Old Norse sources his view developed to a state of research.

This assumption has, however, been contested. The historian of literature, Daniel Sävborg has recently commented on the source situation related to Blótsveinn and stated “that the source evidence for a short pagan restoration under a king called Sven is stronger than the recent scholars have claimed.”⁴⁹ The main arguments for rejecting the existence of Blótsveinn and the pagan revolt, Sävborg argues, “have been that the sources are claimed to be late and Icelandic and that the story must be a literary construct based on allegorical figures and literary clichés.” Sävborg demonstrates that “there are more and older sources than most recent scholars are aware of and that there are several Swedish sources in addition to the Icelandic ones.” He states that the absence of contemporary mention is something Blótsveinn shares with all Swedish royalties in late eleventh and early twelfth century whose existence has never been questioned. Those features which have been pointed out as allegories and literary clichés by, for instance Lönnroth, appear only in the latest and least relevant source, namely *Hervarar saga*. Hence, our knowledge about Blótsveinn is not bound to these features. Actually, independent medieval sources, both Icelandic and Swedish traditions, describe Blótsveinn and his rebellion against King Ingi c. 1080.⁵⁰

8.2.3 Sources supporting the historicity of Blótsveinn and the rebellion

The most extensive and main source for the tradition attributed to Ingi Steinkelson and his brother-in-law, Blótsveinn, is *Hervarar saga*. It is dated to the end of

47 “Blotsven har förmodligen aldrig regerat vårt land, åtminstone inte under de omständigheter som här skildras, och möjligtvis har han aldrig ens existerat. Däremot är det inte alls omöjligt att berättelsen om honom trots allt bygger på minnen av någon autentisk konflikt mellan den kristne kung Inge och de hedniska krafter som ännu höll fast vid Uppsalatemplet.” Lönnroth 1996: 151.

48 Lönnroth 1996: 150–151.

49 Sävborg 2017: 97.

50 Cf. Sundqvist 2013: 79.

the thirteenth century or the beginning of the fourteenth century.⁵¹ As Sävborg has shown, many scholars believe that this is the only source for this tradition.⁵² However, the main parts of it are also preserved in *Orkneyinga saga*:

In Sweden, Christianity was in its infancy, so there were still a good many people practising paganism in the belief that by it they would gain wisdom and knowledge of many things yet to happen. King Ingi was a devout Christian and every heathen was abhorred by him. He made great efforts to put down the evil practices which had been for long a part of heathen worship, but other leading men and landowners grew so resentful when their barbarism was criticized that they installed another King who still adhered to the pagan rites, the Queen's brother Svein, nicknamed the Sacrificer (*Blót-Sveinn*). On account of him, Ingi was forced into exile and went to West Gotaland (Västergötland), but eventually managed to trap Svein inside a house and burn him there. After that he brought the whole country under his control and put an end to many of the barbaric practices.⁵³

Although some details are missing in this account, such as the horse sacrifice, the blood rituals and the consumption of the horse meat, it corresponds in its content with the story preserved in the chronicle of *Hervarar saga*. *Orkneyinga saga* is however much older than *Hervarar saga*. Some scholars have dated it to c. 1190 or 1200.⁵⁴ Both the author of *Morkinskinna* (c. 1220) and Snorri Sturluson in *Heimskringla* (c. 1230) refer to it as one of their sources called “Jarla sögur.” In connection to the tradition reporting about a crusade made by King Sigurðr Jórsalafari against pagans in Småland, and rendered in *Magnússona saga* chapter 24, Snorri explicitly refers to Blótsveinn and the maintained paganism of Svetjud:

At this time widely in Svíaveldi many people were heathen and many poorly Christian, since now there were some of the kings that had abandoned Christianity and maintained heathen worship, as did Blót-Sveinn and later Eiríkr inn ársæli.⁵⁵

51 See discussion in Sävborg 2017: 57–62.

52 Sävborg 2017: 58–59.

53 *Þá var í Svíþjóð ung kristni; váru þá margir menn, þeir er fóru með forneskju ok þóttusk af því verða fróðir ok vísir margra hluta, þeira er eigi váru fram komnir. Ingi konungr var vel kristinn maðr, ok váru honum leiðir allir forneskjumenn. Lagði hann mikla stund á at eyða óvenjum þeim, er lengi höfðu fylgt heiðninni, en landshöfðingjar ok stórbændr kurruðu illa, er um var vandat ósiðu þeira. Kom því svá, at bændr tóku sér annan konung, þann er þá helt til blóta, Sveinn, bróðir drotningar, ok var kallaðr Blót-Sveinn. Fyrir honum varð Ingi konungr landflótta í Vestra-Gautland, en svá lauk þeira skiptum, at Ingi konungr tók hús á Sveini ok brenndi hann inni. Eptir þat tók hann allt land undir sik; eyddi hann þá enn ósiðum mǫrgum. Orkneyinga saga, Ísl. Fornr 34: 89–90. Trans. Hermann Pálsson & Paul Edward.*

54 See Sävborg 2017: 60 and the literature cited therein.

55 *Var þann tíma víða í Svíaveldi mart fólk heiðit ok mart illa kristit, því at þá váru nokkurir þeir konungar, er kristni kǫstuðu ok heldu upp blótum, svá sem gerði Blót-Sveinn eða síðan Eiríkr inn ársæli. Magnússona saga, Heimskringla 3, Ísl Fornr 28: 263. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2015.*

In a general sense this text also harmonizes with the information in *Hervarar saga* and *Orkneyinga saga*. A pagan king called Blótsveinn appears shortly on the throne sometime around c. 1080, even though most kings long ago had converted to Christianity in Svetjud.

There is another Old Norse source related to Blótsveinn, called *Langfeðgatal*. It is a collection of royal lists from the royal houses of Sweden, Norway and Denmark. The oldest manuscript is explicitly dated to 1254 by the writer himself. The Swedish register starts with Ragnarr Loðbrók and ends with Eiríkr Eiríksson (Old Swedish *Erik*) (r. 1222–1250).⁵⁶ It harmonizes with the chronicle in *Hervarar saga* up to Ingi (“the younger”). After King Hákon it has “Ingi Steinkells.s. oc hallstein oc blot Svein.”⁵⁷ Blótsveinn’s name appears in another part of this manuscript, between Rognvaldr (Old Swedish *Ragnvald*) and Sørkvir (Old Swedish *Sværker*) the older: “Kolr blotsveins.s. hann kolloðu Sviar Eiric arsæla.” The connection between Blótsveinn and Eiríkr inn ársæli suggests that *Heimskringla* was the source for *Langfeðgatal*. What we may conclude is that *Hervarar saga* is the youngest Old Norse source rendering the tradition about Blótsveinn.

Blótsveinn (in Old Swedish *Blodhsven*) is also mentioned in traditions from Sweden, independent of Icelandic sources. This fact has rarely been taken into consideration by recent scholars working with this revolt against Christianity in the late eleventh century.⁵⁸ The most extensive account on King Ingi and Blótsveinn appears in “The Legend of St Eskil” (*Legenda sancti Eskilli*).⁵⁹ This legend is preserved in three versions, two in Latin and one in Old Swedish. The oldest Latin version is printed in *Breviarium Strengnense* (1495). The legend narrates that Bishop Eskil (*Eskillus*) came from Britain to Tuna in Södermanland, Sweden, around 1080, during King Ingi’s (*Yngo*) reign.⁶⁰ It also mentions that many Svear had fallen away from Christianity and that Christian King Ingi was dethroned. The legend then explicitly mentions that Blótsveinn (*Blodhsven*) reverted to idolatry with sacrifices to idols:

After expelling their Christian prince [Ingi], they [the Svear] chose an idolater. They took to their king an unfaithful man named Sven, an unworthy royal name and rightly called Blodhsven, since he allowed them to drink sacrificial blood, which was sacrificed to the idols, and to eat sacrificial meat.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Sävborg 2017: 61.

⁵⁷ Quoted from Sävborg 2017: 61.

⁵⁸ Sävborg 2017: 62–63. See however Janson 2000: 190–191. and Sundqvist 2002: 182–183. and 2013: 79.

⁵⁹ *Legenda sancti Eskilli*, SRS 2,1: 391–399.

⁶⁰ Lundén 1981 [1956–1978]: col. 47.

⁶¹ *Sic isti, abjecto principe Christiano, idolatram elegerunt, præficientes sibi in Regem, Svenonem quendam, impium et indignum decore regio, dictum Blodhsven, et merito sic vocatum quia*

In this account the sacrifices are said to occur in Strängnäs, c. 60 km south-west of Uppsala. The Svear slaughtered oxen and sheep, and dedicated them as sacrifices to their gods. They also celebrated a grand banquet in honor of the new king and the pagan gods. The people ate and drank, danced and shouted, and there was a great commotion and noise. Eskil arrived at the sacrificial feast there and managed through a miracle to provoke a storm that destroyed the pagan altars and sacrificial animals. The bishop was beaten by the magician called Spabodde and then brought before Blótsveinn, who sentenced him to death. After Eskil was stoned to death, several miracles took place in connection with his body. The information that King Ingi was dethroned and replaced by Blótsveinn corresponds with the Icelandic traditions. Also, the indication that Sveinn reverted to idolatry is in agreement with the Old Norse accounts. Parts of the tradition about Eskil, who was martyred during a pagan reaction, are also related by the Englishman Ælnoth in his *Vita et Passio S. Canuti*, written in Sankt Knut's monastery in Odense, in the beginning of the twelfth century.

Sources report that soon after his death Eskil was considered a martyred saint, and the place where he had worked was called Eskilstuna. At this place a monastery of the order of St John was founded, not later than 1185. Tuna (later Eskilstuna) is mentioned in the Florence list (early twelfth century) as a bishopric, however Strängnäs replaced Tuna as the permanent bishopric of Södermanland. The legend solved the problem of legitimization by localizing Eskil's martyrdom at Strängnäs.⁶²

Five Swedish royal lists from thirteenth and fourteenth century mention Blótsveinn. These lists are usually called "register of Uppsala-type" ("kungalängd av Uppsalatyp") in Swedish research.⁶³ The oldest list appears in a manuscript called C 70 and it dates back to c. 1260. Four of these are written in Latin, while one is in Old Swedish. In the Latin versions Blótsveinn is called *Sveno ydolatra*, "Sven, the idolater," while he in the Old Swedish one is called *swen blodhkarl*, "Sven, the bloodman."⁶⁴ In manuscript C 92 (c. 1290) Blótsveinn's son Kol is also mentioned, as *blothswens filius*. There is also one source called "Uppsala-annalerna" (or *Incerti scriptoris chronicon*), written down c. 1300, which introduces the death of St Eiríkr. In this text the saints' relatives are enumerated: *Mater ejus fuit Cecilia filia Swenonis Regis quæ fuit soror Ulps Ducis Galla & Chols*. The only known king called Sven/Sveinn (*Sweno*) during this period is Blótsveinn. Scholars have therefore assumed

permisit eos bibere sanguinem animalium simulachris libatum, et vesci idoloticis. SRS 2,1: 396. My trans.

⁶² Blomkvist et al. 2007: 183, 188, 193–195.

⁶³ Sävborg 2017: 64.

⁶⁴ Sävborg 2017: 64, note 51.

that this text refers to him.⁶⁵ Hence, Blótsveinn is also well-attested in Swedish traditions, dating back to the thirteenth century. The earliest evidence of him appears, however, in Old Norse sources, such as *Orkneyinga saga* (c. 1190–1200).

It seems, further, as if the Swedish and Icelandic sources are independent of each other.⁶⁶ The information about Blótsveinn in *Orkneyinga saga* and *Langfeðgatal* is built on a domestic Icelandic tradition.⁶⁷ It has not been influenced by Swedish royal lists. Neither were the Swedish traditions about Blótsveinn under Icelandic influence.⁶⁸ The Swedish royal lists are based on domestic traditions. The information about *blothswens filius* (Kol) in manuscript C 92, however, is probably borrowed from *Langfeðgatal*.⁶⁹ The Old Norse name-form with *blot-* as first element and the Old Scandinavian genitive form *-s* in this Latin context support this assumption. *Langfeðgatal* has “Kolr blotsveins.s[onr].”

Scholars have suggested that an oral tradition about Blótsveinn and his revolt was transferred early to Iceland by Markús Skeggjason, who was King Ingi’s skald before being made Lawman at Þingvellir in the period 1084–1107. This theory was first proposed by Henrik Schück.⁷⁰ It has been repeated by several other scholars more recently.⁷¹ Markús Skeggjason is mentioned in *Skáldatal* of Uppsala Edda as a skald to Ingi Steinkelsson.⁷² He also appears in *Logsofumannatal* as a law-speaker: “Markús Skeggjason took on office of lawspeaker the summer that Bishop Gizurr had been one winter here in this country, and held the office of lawspeaker for four and twenty summers.”⁷³ He was also the poet of the Danish king Knútr inn helgi. Schück’s theory must, however, remain open.

As a conclusion, we may state that the source situation for Blótsveinn is quite good. Independent sources from both Sweden and Iceland confirm this picture. Some sources can be dated back as far as c. 1190 or 1200. These sources reflect most likely a pagan reaction relating to Blótsveinn somewhere in Svetjud during King Ingi Steinkelsson’s reign 1080–1110. That pagan groups still existed in Svetjud

65 See Sävborg 2017: 64–65.

66 Sävborg 2017: 97.

67 Sävborg 2017: 68.

68 Sävborg 2017: 70.

69 Sävborg 2017: 72.

70 Schück 1910: 17.

71 Cf. Reifegerste 1989: 198–199; Sawyer 1991: 37; Foote 1993: 24.

72 *Uppsala Edda*, ed. Heimir Pálsson 2012: 100.

73 *Markús Skeggjason tók logsofn þat sumar er Gizurr biskup hafði verit einn vetr hér á landi ok hafði logsofu tuttugu ok fjögur sumur*. *Uppsala Edda* ed. Heimir Pálsson 2012: 120–121.

during the second half of the eleventh century and the beginning of the twelfth century can also be supported by contemporary sources (see 8.4 below).

8.3 Why did the pagans dethrone King Ingi and what did Blótsveinn represent?

8.3.1 King Ingi's crimes

It seems as if Ingi committed two crimes in relation to the old law and order in the sources.⁷⁴ According to *Hervarar saga*, King Ingi, first, forbade pagan sacrifice and worship (*eyddi blótum*) in Svetjud and explicitly urged everyone to be baptized. It seems that he, according to this text, was deliberately campaigning against the old religion and propagated Christianity. However, the Svear believed too much in the pagan gods and maintained old customs (*mikinn átrúnað á heiðum goðum ok heldu fornum siðum*). They did not want to give up these traditions, since they were firmly rooted in their culture. Because of this campaign, *Hervarar saga* narrates, the Svear thought that King Ingi had wronged them by breaking the ancient land-law (*brjóta forn landslög*), when he wanted to change things that his father Steinkell had respected, that is, pagan cult. That King Steinkell did not want to challenge the pagan chieftains who presided over the temple in Uppsala is indicated in Adam of Bremen's text. When the two bishops Adalvard the Younger and Eginó wanted to destroy the temple, Steinkell prevented this.⁷⁵ It seems that this king, despite being a very Christian person, respected the old religion of the Svear.

Ingi's second crime against the old order of the Svear comes out implicitly in a subsequent passage of *Hervarar saga*. At the assembly that the Svear held with King Ingi, they gave him two choices: either he would maintain the ancient law or he had to give up the kingdom (*halda við þá forn lög eða láta af konungdómi*). The concept *lög* "law" has in this context roughly the same meaning as the term "old order" has in the present study, that is, the ritual order at sacrificial feasts, where the king fulfils his cultic obligations and sacrifices on behalf of the Svear and thereby is the head of the community. However, in a wider sense it also refers to the traditional social systems of the Svear where the king is only *primus inter pares* "the foremost among equals" and submits to the will of the people at the assemblies (see further below). The text does not explicitly state that the

⁷⁴ Cf. Ljungberg 1938: 236.

⁷⁵ Adam 4,30.

Svear expected the king to make sacrifices on their behalf. But that this pretence is there is implicitly revealed when Blótsveinn is elected king instead of Ingi and as the first act in his new office performs the traditional sacrifice on behalf of the people (*at efla blót fyrir þeim*).

In the oldest text preserving the tradition about Blótsveinn and the revolt, *Orkneyinga saga*, King Ingi's crime is related to his efforts to put down the pagan practices which for a long time had been part of heathen worship (*at eyða óvenjum þeim, er lengi hefðu fylgt heiðninn*). According to this text, it was the local chieftains who cared and watched over the old religious tradition. The text states namely that the landowners (*landshofðingjar*) grew so resentful when their barbarism was criticized that they installed another king who still adhered to the pagan rites (*helt til blóta*), namely the Queen's brother, Sveinn, nicknamed *Blót-Sveinn*. The expression *helt til blóta* and his byname *Blót-Sveinn* "the sacrificer" indicate thus that he personally performed sacrifices, implicitly, on behalf of the Svear.

According to "The Legend of St Eskil," Satan kindled a fierce malice in some of the infidels against King Ingi because of his refusal to "perform what was improper," that is, to commit the sacrifice on behalf of the Swedes.⁷⁶ After expelling their Christian king, Ingi, the Svear chose an idolater, called Blótsveinn (Blodhsven), since he allowed them to perform pagan rites. This text is independent from the Icelandic tradition on King Ingi.

Hence, King Ingi's two crimes feature quite strongly in the preserved sources, namely, his explicit campaign against the traditional religion and his refusal to perform the public sacrifice on behalf of the Svear; that is, one of the common strategies used by several early Christian kings (see 4.1 above). That Christian kings could be dethroned by the people at the assembly can be attested by historically reliable information in scholion 140 of Adam of Bremen's text. The author states there that King Anunder was deposed at the assembly of the Svear, since he would not offer the demons the prescribed sacrifice of the people. We cannot rule out that the information about King Ingi's crimes and dismissal at an assembly, in some way also reflects a historical background.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ljungberg 1938: 236.

⁷⁷ Cf. Hultgård 2022a/b; see also above.

8.3.2 King Blótsveinn's merits

According to *Hervarar saga*, King Ingi was married to a lady named Mær. Her brother was called Sveinn. No one was loved by Ingi like his brother-in-law and therefore he became a powerful man in Svetjud. Sveinn, according to this saga, offered to perform the sacrifice himself on behalf of the Svear, after Ingi's dismissal, an act that would be considered a betrayal and a breach of family peace. Sveinn thus told the Svear that he would make sacrifice on their behalf if they would give him the kingdom (*baud Svium at efla blót fyrir þeim, ef þeir gæfi honum konungdóm*) and all assented to that proposal, according to *Hervarar saga*. He was then taken as king all over Svetjud. The action in the text testifies that a kind of contract was drawn up between the local assembly and Sveinn. He may become their king if he followed the will of the congregation and sacrificed to the gods on behalf of the Swedes in a traditional way. According to this text, a horse was led into the assembly place (*fram leitt hross eitt á þingit*). It was slaughtered, dismembered and distributed for eating (*höggvit í sundr ok skipt til áts*). Finally, the sacrificial tree was reddened with the blood (*roðit blóðinu blóttre*). All Svear thus abandoned Christianity, and re-introduced the pagan sacrifice (*hofust blót*).

Blótsveinn is related to several pagan rituals and symbols in this account. As noticed in chapter four, horse sacrifices are well attested in pre-Christian Scandinavia, both by written sources and archaeological materials and investigations. The consumption of horsemeat at annual sacrificial feasts is also well-attested in different types of sources. In connection to the recent found post-monument in Old Uppsala, horse bones interpreted as traces of sacrificial meals have been found. Adam of Bremen mentions that horses were sacrificed in the sacred grove of the Uppsala sanctuary. The present author has previously argued that blood rituals were performed during the pagan sacrifices.⁷⁸ Different ritual objects such as the *stalli/stallr* was reddened with the sacrificial blood. The sacrificial meal was a communion where the blood was the gods' part and the horse-liver the king's part. All participants in the cultic community took part in these meals and also performed drinking rituals and ceremonial toasts. All these rituals must be considered clear symbols of the pagan society and the old order of life, that is, aspects which Blótsveinn represented and also defended. Blótsveinn also followed the will of the assembly community when he sacrificed.

Orkneyinga saga mentions that the leading men of the pagan society grew so resentful when their old customs and religion were criticized that they installed

⁷⁸ Sundqvist 2017c.

another King, who still adhered to the pagan rites (*er þá helt til blóta*) and therefore was nicknamed “the Sacrificer” (Old Norse *Blót-Sveinn*). This text also testifies that one of Blótsveinn’s merits was that he followed the will of the leading pagan elite, that is, that he performed the sacrifice in a traditional way. In that sense he defended the old order.

The independent Swedish tradition of this account, “The Legend of St Eskil,” also describes the rituals performed when Blótsveinn (*Blodhsven*) was taken as king. It explicitly mentions that Blótsveinn reverted to worshipping pagan cult images. He “allowed them to drink sacrificial blood, which was sacrificed to the idols, and to eat sacrificial meat” (*quia permisit eos bibere sanguinem animalium simulachris libatum, et vesci idoloticis*). It is also narrated that the Svear slaughtered oxen and sheep, and dedicated them as sacrifices to their gods. They also celebrated a grand banquet in honor of the new king and the pagan gods. The people ate and drank, danced and shouted, and there was a great commotion and noise. When Eskil arrived he destroyed the pagan altars. The author thus seems to mean that the feast was celebrated in connection to some kind of sanctuary.

The information that sacrificial blood was drunk is of course a misconception or secondary contribution that has had a theological-polemical purpose to demonize the pre-Christian religion.⁷⁹ The importance of drinking ceremonies, on the other hand, and the significance of consuming the sacrificial meat at public sacrifices, harmonize better with old customs in pre-Christian Scandinavia. Even in this text, Sveinn seems to adhere to the old customs and religious rites that are also compatible with traditional pagan society. His merit was that he also followed the will of the collective.

8.4 Rebellions of pagans in late Viking Ages Svetjud

The tradition of Blótsveinn and the pagan rebellion against King Ingi does not appear as an isolated event in the sources referring to Lake Mälaren area during the last half of the eleventh century. Several sources testify that pagan groups lived together with the Christians and also defended the old order of society against Christianity and the new culture that came with it.

⁷⁹ Ljungberg 1938: 236, note 2. It is interesting that Blótsveinn’s name in the Swedish tradition is misinterpreted as *Blodhsven*, that is, “blood-man”. It is explained by the fact that he let the people drink sacrificial blood. This is quite obviously a naming legend, arising at a time when the verb *blota* was no longer known in Old Swedish (it is weakly supported there). The name thus shows that the story of Blótsveinn had a long history on Swedish soil. Oral information from Per Vikstrand, July, 2022.

8.4.1 Pagan cult in the late eleventh century Uppsala

The most important written source supporting a pagan cult in Central Sweden (Svetjud) during the eleventh century is Adam of Bremen's famous chronicle. He reports about violent reactions from the pagans against the Christian missionaries. Adam reports that Wolfred, from England, for instance,

preached the Word of God to the pagans. And as by his preaching he converted many to the Christian faith, he proceeded to anathematize a popular idol named Thor [Þórr] which stood in the *þing*-place of the pagans, and at the same time he seized it with a battle axe and broke the image to pieces. And forthwith he was pierced with thousand wounds for such daring, and his soul passed into heaven, earning a martyr's laurels.⁸⁰

This passage seems to be built on a conventional hagiographic pattern about a Christian hero and martyr, who offers his life in the name of Christ, however, Adam states that he had this information from a reliable informant, perhaps Adalvard the Younger of Sigtuna (c. 1060–64).⁸¹ If this information is based on historical records this incident could have taken place in the 1030s, perhaps at the combined pagan *þing*-place and sanctuary of Old Uppsala.⁸²

As noted in chapter four, Adam presents the divine triad at the sanctuary called Uppsala in his Book 4,26–27 and the cultic activities which took place there. There is no doubt that Adam's descriptions were sometimes influenced by tendencies, clichés and stereotypes, as assumed by recent scholars. However, it seems as if Adam's intention was to describe the pagan cult place of Uppsala as it appeared in the middle and second half of the eleventh century. Adam had first-hand information regarding Svetjud, from several people who had lived there. The Danish king Sveinn Ástriðsson (r. 1047–1076), for instance, was exiled from Denmark and stayed

80 . . . *verbum Dei paganis cum magna fiducia praedicasse. Qui dum sua praedicatione multos ad christianam fidem convertisset, ydolum gentis nomine Thor, stans in concilio paganorum cepit anathematizare; simulque arrepta bipenni simulacrum in frusta concidit. Et ille quidem pro talibus ausis statim mille vulneribus confossus, animam laurea dignam martyrii transmisit in celum.* Adam 2,62.

81 Nyberg & Hallencreutz 1985 [1984]: 271.

82 Tschan 2002 [1959]: 98. Adam states that Wolfred's "body was mangled by the barbarians and, after being subjected to much mockery, was plunged into a swamp" (*Corpus eius barbari laniatum post multa ludibria merserunt in paludem*). As support for the historical background of this statement, references in reliable sources to Germanic death-penalties can be cited. In Tacitus' *Germania*, ch. 12 (c. AD 97), it is reported that "cowards and poor fighters and sexual perverts are plunged in the mud and marshes with a hurdle on their heads" (*ignavos et imbelles et corpore infames caeno ac palude, iniecta insuper crate, mergunt*). Ch. 11 of *Ágrip*, which relates the death of Gunnhildr states thus: "then she was taken and sunk in a bog" (*þá var hón tekín ok sökkt í mýri einni*). See also *Guðrúnarkviða III*, where Herkia, as punishment, was drowned in a foul bog (*í mýri fúla*) (st. 11).

in Sweden sometime during Qnundr's (Anund Jacob's) reign (r. 1022–1050).⁸³ Adam explicitly states that Sveinn informed him about conditions there.⁸⁴ Adam is specifically influenced by Sveinn's perspective on the political relationship between Denmark and Sweden.⁸⁵ He also had information from King Sveinn concerning geographical and religious matters in Sweden.⁸⁶ Most likely Sveinn was also one of the most important informants regarding the eleventh century Uppsala cult.⁸⁷ Bishop Adalvard the Younger of Sigtuna was also an important informant for Adam concerning conditions in Svetjud. Most likely they knew each other well from the Chapter of Bremen.⁸⁸ Adam refers explicitly to his information, for instance, regarding a failed colonization of Svear in "Kvänland."⁸⁹ It has been suggested that Adalvard is Adam's main informant on the pagan sanctuary of Uppsala. When Adam states that "a certain Christian informed him" that "he had seen seventy-two miscellaneous bodies suspended there [in the sacrificial grove of Uppsala]" it may very well have been Adalvard.⁹⁰ Adam was informed that Bishop Egin of Skåne together with Adalvard the Younger planned to visit the temple of Uppsala in the 1060s, in order to do missionary work there. They even wanted to burn it down. King Steinkell (r. 1060–1066) stopped them because they would have been killed and he himself would have been dethroned.⁹¹ Most likely this information came directly from Adalvard to Adam. It thus seems that the pagans in Uppsala offered strong resistance to the Christians. Even the Christian king had to respect the pagan cult and not actively prevent it.

It thus seems as if Adam had several informants beside King Sveinn. Some of them were active in Svetjud during the second half of the eleventh century, especially in Sigtuna, and had, according to Adam, seen with their own eyes the pagan rituals performed in Uppsala. Adam had probably met in person the two bishops who wanted to burn the "Uppsala temple." It is unlikely that the information about Adalvard's and Egin's plans reflect Adam's rhetoric, ecclesiastical strategy or are based solely on hearsay and have nothing to do with real conditions.⁹² If

83 Adam 2,73–74.

84 Adam 1,61 and 2,30, 35, 38.

85 Adam 1,48 and 52; 2,30, 38–39, 73, 78.

86 Adam 1,61; 2,30, 35, 38, 73; and 4,21.

87 Hallencreutz 1985 [1984]: 359–360.

88 Hallencreutz 1985 [1984]: 360. It should be noted that Adam also had information from some of Adalvard's companions in Sigtuna. See Adam, scholion 142. See also Tesch 2017: 30, 35.

89 Adam, scholion 123.

90 . . . *quorum corpora mixtim suspensa narravit mihi aliquis christianorum LXXII vidisse* . . . Adam 4,27; cf. Hallencreutz 1985 [1984]: 360.

91 Adam 4,30.

92 For another view, see A.-S. Gräslund 2013.

Adam had fabricated this point, there should have been people in Hamburg and Bremen who could contradict him.⁹³ Scholion 136 states that when Adalvard the younger was driven out by pagans (*...repulsus esset a paganis*) from Sigtuna around 1064 and headed to Skara, the archbishop was not pleased and for that reason he recalled him to Bremen and accused him of being a violator of canons (*...violatorem canonum*). The information that Adalvard violated the canonical rule when he fled his diocese is based on historical records and indicates a strong resistance against Christians among the pagan groups in the Lake Mälaren area during the 1060s.⁹⁴

It seems thus as if some of Adam's information about a pagan cult center in Old Uppsala also refers to the second half of the eleventh century. Scholion 140, for instance, indicates this. It refers to "the most Christian king of the Svear, Anunder" who refused to perform the sacrifice on the behalf of the Svear (quoted in 4.1 above). Most likely this text describes Anunder (Steinkelsson), who did not succeed in being recognized as king over the Svear, because he did not fulfill his cultic duties. Scholion 84 indicates that this Anunder was summoned from Russia after Steinkell's son Hallsteinn was dethroned sometimes before 1070. It has been suggested that this Anunder could be identical to Ingi Steinkelsson, but this is far from certain.⁹⁵

Adam thus had several informants who gave him information about the Uppsala passage. According to Adam's text, some of them were eyewitnesses to the pre-Christian cult that took place at the "Uppsala temple." Some information that Adam received from King Sveinn may refer to a situation relevant for the first half of the 1000s. But quite obviously Adam's statements show that the "temple" was there even during the period 1060–1075. This is indicated by the passages in Book 4,30 and scholion 140 as well as scholion 84. We may therefore assume that pagan cult still took place in Old Uppsala between 1060 and 1075.⁹⁶

8.4.2 The papal letters and late Christianization of Svetjud

Papal letters indicate that both pagans and Christians lived in Svetjud in the late eleventh century. Pope Gregory VII (1073–1085) wrote two letters to Sweden around 1080, indicating that the country was still in a conversion process. The first letter written by the pope was dated 4 October 1080.⁹⁷ According to its head-

⁹³ See Sundqvist 2013: 77; cf. Charpentier Ljungqvist 2018: 206.

⁹⁴ See Nyberg & Hallencreutz 1985 [1984]: 251; Hallencreutz 1985 [1984]: 375.

⁹⁵ Cf. Nyberg & Hallencreutz 1985 [1984]: 195.

⁹⁶ Sundqvist 2013 and 2016a: 120–127; Charpentier Ljungqvist 2018.

⁹⁷ DS 24; cf. ST I: 61–62; Hallencreutz 1993b: 71–73; 1996: 126–127.; Janson 1998: 106–107.

ing, it was dispatched *ad regem Sueciae* and it was addressed to *I., glorioso Suetonum regi*. The capital letter “I.” refers most likely to King Ingi Steinkelsson.⁹⁸ In this letter, the pope writes that he is very happy that God’s servants entered Ingi’s kingdom. There is thus hope for “the restoration of your salvation” (...*de salutis vestrae reparatione*). The Gallic Church has not spread heresies but has carried on the teachings of the Roman Church. Gregory asks if the king could send a bishop or a competent cleric to the apostolic see, who can inform about the customs in his country, and be able to report to King I. more certainty around the apostolic commandments concerning all, in order to benefit the development of the Church in Sweden.

The second letter was written to the *Visigothorum gloriosis regibus* I. (Ingi) and A. (Hallsteinn or Hákon) in c. 1080.⁹⁹ Gregory refers most likely to the Gothic legend about the host that sacked Rome in 410 when using the Latin designation *Visigothi* (*Visigothae* pl.) for the people of the Götar.¹⁰⁰ According to the letter, Gregory was glad, as he had recently heard from Bishop R. that their people had converted to the truth of the Christian faith.¹⁰¹ The pope states that Bishop R. has not, however, concealed that Christianity still meets with opposition in Sweden. He also urges them to despise the temporal and to constantly direct their thoughts toward the eternal truth, to live in unity and love with one another, to honour the churches, to have compassion on the poor and needy, to revere and obey priests and bishops, and to let tithes benefit clergies, churches and the poor. Since the Svear have not yet been consolidated in the Christian faith, he wants them to send to the pope the clergy and other suitable persons for further teaching and enlightenment.

It should be noted that the *Visigothorum gloriosis regibus* may refer only to the rulers of Götaland, and thus that only these areas were converted.¹⁰² The first letter was addressed to *I., glorioso Suetonum regi*, that is, King Ingi of Svetjud. In the second letter the pope may have been better informed about conditions in Sweden, that is, that the Svear were not completely converted and even that King Ingi must flee from Uppsala to Götaland, due to an uprising in his country (see above). When he arrived at Västergötland, he had to share the kingdom with a co-

98 Cf. Hallencreutz 1993b: 70–72; Charpentier Ljungqvist 2018: 208.

99 DS 25; cf. ST I: 63. Hallencreutz (1993b: 73) argued that the pope in this letter was only addressing Ingi but used the plural as a pun referring also to future kings.

100 Blomkvist et al. 2007: 185.

101 *Frater noster R.* [the Swedish bishop deligate], *episcopus vester, ad apostolorum limina veniens, suggestit nobis de nova gentis vestrae conversione; scilicet qualiter, relicto gentilitatis errore, ad christianae fidei veritatem pervenerit.* DS 25; ST I: 63. Cf. Ljungberg 1938: 253. Westman 1954: 34.

102 Hellström 1996: 243.

regent (Hallsteinn or Hákon). Most likely Bishop R. is identical to Bishop Raduvald of Skara.¹⁰³ Hence, this bishop referred mostly to conditions in Västergötland when visiting Rome.

We must, of course, be careful with these letters, which were obviously formulated on a conventional rhetorical pattern. At the end of the second letter sent to King I. and King A., Gregory says more specifically that “as we think that you, who recently have converted to Christ (...*noviter ad Christum conversos*), and have not sufficiently received the Christian faith, we want you often to send your clergy to us.”¹⁰⁴ The Pope obviously considers Sweden as a mission area where the conversion process is still ongoing.¹⁰⁵ As historian Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist has noted, the image that the papal letters give of the religious conditions in Sweden differs from the depiction that papal letters preserved from the same time give of the Nordic neighboring countries. In these letters, the pope addresses Christian kings in the same way he does other European princes, who rule over countries that are fully Christian.¹⁰⁶ In Ælnoth’s description, Danes, Norwegians and Icelanders are portrayed as all Christians, while Swedes deviate from the other Nordic peoples.¹⁰⁷ Ælnoth believes that both Götar and Svear are indeed Christians, however, pagan groups still persecute them. He exemplifies here with Bishop Eskil’s death (see above).

8.4.3 Botvid and the pagan rebellion in Södermanland

We also have information in the legend of St Botvid (*Vita sancti Botvidi*) about a pagan revolt as late as the 1120s in the Mälaren area.¹⁰⁸ This *vita* is preserved in a thirteenth-century manuscript, but most likely it was formulated as early as the twelfth century.¹⁰⁹ The wealthy farmer Botvid (Old Swedish *Botvidh*) was born on a farm in Södermanland. He was baptized on a voyage to England, but was later

103 Cf. Hallencreutz 1993b: 73; Charpentier Ljungqvist 2018: 208, note 35.

104 DS 25; cf. ST I: 63–64.

105 The Church historian Carl Fredrik Hallencreutz (1996: 126–127) states that Gregory’s letters (DS 24 and DS 25) to Ingi (and Hallsteinn) were attempts by the pope to encourage Church formation in Svetjud independently of Hamburg-Bremen and the German Emperor. During this period, Rome and the Hamburg-Bremen see had namely a major conflict (see Janson 1998). In these letters the pope also taught King Ingi (and perhaps Halsten) about the distinction between *sacerdotium et regnum*, their different functions and responsibilities (Hallencreutz 1993b: 72).

106 Charpentier Ljungqvist 2018: 208.

107 Ælnoth, ed. Gertz: 77–136.

108 *Vita sancti Botvidi*, SRS II: 377–382.

109 See e.g., Schmid 1931: 109; N. Blomkvist et al. 2007: 186.

slain by a Wendic slave. Botvid was, according to this *Vita*, buried in connection to a proprietary church in Säby (nowadays Salem) dedicated to St Alban. There his body was to rest “for about nine years,” during which the Lord performed a number of miracles due to the Christian merits of Botvid’s deeds.

The *Vita* informs that paganism then prevailed in almost all of Svetjud, and the few Christians hitherto remained hidden from fear. Yes, so great was the persecution against the Christians, the *Vita* tells, that in one assembly in Flottsund (just south of Uppsala) a monk named Eiríkr (Old Swedish *Erik*) was killed by pagans. His body was moved to Tälje (today Södertälje) and buried there. Moreover, the holy bishop Eskil was stoned by the pagans in the town of Strängnäs (see above). While the body of St Botvid lay in the grave, a great fear and trembling came over all the pagans throughout Svetjud. It penetrated especially into their banqueting halls, so that those who cut each other with knives during the dances could not be cured by anyone, unless they were baptized and invoked the name of St Botvid. After this, pagan sacrificial groves and temples were cut down and destroyed.

During these years, churches of God were built, where the superstitious worship of idols had previously flourished. Botvid’s brother erected a wooden church on their inherited land, and two bishops – Henry of Uppsala and Gerhard of Strängnäs – consecrated it to the honour of God and St Botvid. This happened in 1129. At this place a stone church was erected in 1176, that is, Botkyrka church.¹¹⁰

It seems thus as if contemporary sources written in Latin, such as Adam of Bremen’s account, the two papal letters and Ælnoth’s *Vita et Passio S. Canuti*, as well as the *Vita* of Botvid, all indicate that Svetjud was in a process of conversion still in the late eleventh and early twelfth century, where violent pagan reactions continued to occur.¹¹¹ The last bishop of Sigtuna, Henrik,¹¹² who was also a suffragan in Lund, died on the battlefield at Fotevik in Skåne 1134. According to *Chronicon Roskildense* (ch. 15), written c. 1143, he was “expelled from Sweden” (*Henricus expulsus de Swethia*). Historians Blomkvist, Brink and Lindkvist state thus regarding this information: “These circumstances suggest that the last struggle for the values of paganism was raging in Sweden at that time.”¹¹³ These sources support a historical background of the traditions about the rebellion related to Blótsveinn.

110 Cf. N. Blomkvist et al. 2007: 186–187.

111 Cf. Berend 2007: 24.

112 The *Necrologium Lundense* refers to Henrik as *Henricus Sictunensis*.

113 Blomkvist et al. 2007: 186.

8.4.4 Sigurðr Jerosalamfari's crusade in Småland: *Kalmarna leiðangr*

Old Norse sources report that the Svear converted late. A very uncertain tradition reproduced in *Ágrip* and *Magnússona saga* in *Heimskringla* 3 describes Sigurðr Jerosalamfari's so called crusade (*Kalmarna leiðangr*) to convert the people of Småland in the 1120s. In *Ágrip* chapter 55 (c. 1190) it is narrated that Sigurðr

levied a food-tax of fifteen-hundred cattle on Smálönd; and the people accepted Christianity. King Sigurðr then returned home with much treasures and booty gathered on that expedition. It was called the Kalmarnar expedition and took place the summer before the great darkness.¹¹⁴

There was an eclipse of the sun in Trøndelag on 11 August 1124, indicating that this conversion (*tóku við kristni*) took place in the early 1120s.¹¹⁵ The name *Kalmarna leiðangr* refers to an expedition that probably ended up in a place called *Kalmar* in Småland. The name cannot refer to the market town, as Snorri states (*til kaupþéjar þess, er heitir Kalmarnar*) (see below), since it was only founded around 1200. It is mentioned in a contemporary document as *Calmarna oppidum*. The name Kalmarsund (*i Kalmarna sundum*) is mentioned on a runestone in Södermanland (Sö 333) from the eleventh century. The name *Kalmarnar* has as its first element the word *kalm* “stone pile.” The latter element is a plural form of the Old Swedish word *arin* “gravel island, gravelly ground.”¹¹⁶ The name may have referred to the current place called Stensö, two kilometers south of the Old Town in Kalmar.¹¹⁷ It may also have denoted the Kalmar promontory where there was an ancient castle in the twelfth century.¹¹⁸

Snorri's description of *Kalmarna leiðangr* in *Magnússona saga* chapter 24 (c. 1230) is somewhat more extensive than the *Ágrip*'s account, and adds some further details. Most likely Snorri used *Ágrip* as one of his major sources for it:

King Níkolás sent word to King Sigurðr Jórsalafari and asked him to give him troops and every kind of support from his kingdom and go with King Níkolás east past Svíaveldi to Smálönd to Christianise people there, as those that lived there did not observe Christianity, though some had accepted Christianity. At this time widely in Svíaveldi many people were heathen and many poorly Christian, since now there were some of the kings that had aban-

114 . . . ok loððu vistagjald á Smálönd, fimmtán hundruð nauta, ok tóku við kristni. Ok vendi síðan Sigurðr konungr heim með mörpum stórum gørsimum ok fjárhlutum, er hann hafði aftat í þeiri, ok var sjá leiðangr kallaðr Kalmarna leiðangr. Sjá leiðangr var sumri fyrr en myrkr et mikla. Ísl. Fornr. 29: 49. Trans. Driscoll 2008.

115 Cf. Driscoll 2008: 106.

116 SOL: 159–160.

117 SOL: 159.

118 Letter from Anders Andrén in April, 2023.

doned Christianity and maintained heathen worship, as did Blót-Sveinn and later Eiríkr inn ársæli. King Sigurðr promised to go, and the kings arranged an appointment for meeting up in Eyrarsund. After that King Sigurðr called out a full levy from the whole [of] Norway, both troops and ships. . . . They plundered a village that is called Tumaporp and lies a short way from Lund and made their way after that east to the market town that is called Kalmarnar, and raided there and also on Smálönd, fifteen hundred cattle, and the Smálendingar accepted Christianity. After that King Sigurðr turned his army back and came into his kingdom with many very costly things and items of value that he had gained on this journey, and this expedition was known as the Kalmarnar expedition. This was the summer before the great darkness. This was the only warlike expedition by sea that King Sigurðr undertook while he was a king.¹¹⁹

The information that many people in Svíaveldi were heathen and others poorly Christian is interesting. The evidence that kings, such as Blót-Sveinn and later Eiríkr inn ársæli,¹²⁰ maintained heathen worship, harmonizes with other sources. Whether *Kalmarna leiðangr* should be described as a crusade or an outright looting is somewhat uncertain, however. In the early 1120s most people of Smáland were already Christians, at least along the coast to the Baltic Sea. Most likely this expedition (if it ever took place) did not only concern non-Christians. The province had further at least one stone church at that time, namely Hossmo church, which is dated to 1120. In addition, some wooden churches were already erected in the area around present day Kalmar at this date.¹²¹ It is possible that the description of *Kalmarna leiðangr* reflects certain *topoi* in Old Norse traditions related to crusades and an ideal Christian kingship more than historical information about Smáland's and Öland's conversion.¹²² Lars Lönnroth suggests that some information in the skaldic

119 *Nikólás konungr sendi orð Sigurði konungi Jórsalafara ok bað hann veita sér lið ok styrk allan af sínu ríki ok fara með Nikólási konungi austr fyrir Svíaveldi til Smálönda at kristna þar fólk, því at þeir, er þar byggðu, heldu ekki kristni, þótt sumir hefði við kristni tekit. Var þann tíma víða í Svíaveldi mart fólk heidit ok mart illa kristit, því at þá váru nokkurir þeir konungar, er kristni köstuðu ok heldu upp blótum, svá sem gerði Blót-Sveinn eða síðan Eiríkr inn ársæli. Sigurðr konungr hét ferð sinni, ok gerðu konungar stefnulag sitt í Eyrarsundi. Síðan bauð Sigurðr konungr almenníngi út af öllum Noregi, bæði at liði ok at skipum. . . . Þeir tóku upp þorp þat, er heitir Tumaporp ok skammt liggir frá Lundi, ok heldu síðan austr til kaupþéjar þess, er heitir Kalmarnar, ok herjuðu þar ok svá á Smálöndum ok lögðu vistagjald á Smálönd, fimmtán hundruð nauta, ok tóku Smálendingar við kristni. Síðan vendi Sigurðr konungr apr herinum ok kom í sitt ríki með mörpum stórum gorsimum ok fjárhlutum, er hann hafði aflat í þeirri ferð, ok var þessi leiðangr kallaðr Kalmarnaleiðangr. Þat var sumri fyrr en myrkr hit mikla. Þenna einn leiðangr ræri Sigurðr konungr, meðan hann var konungr. Ísl. Fornr. 28: 263–264. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2015.*

120 Whether Eiríkr inn ársæli ever ruled Sweden is uncertain. See Lagerquist 1997: 45.

121 Williams 1993: 100–102; Hallencreutz 1993a: 181–182.

122 Hallencreutz 1993a: 174–175; L. Lönnroth 1996: 151–154; Williams 1993: 190.

poem *Sigurðarbálkr* (c. 1140) may have led to the confused description of a crusade to Småland in *Ágrip*, that is, a story that Snorri later took over.¹²³

Icelandic writings were thus tainted with prejudices against the Svear as barbaric.¹²⁴ However, the Icelandic saga-writers' condescending attitude may be a result of a factual late official conversion of Sweden. Snorri's information that many people in Svíaveldi around 1120 were heathen and maintained heathen worship harmonizes well with the Latin sources mentioned above.

8.4.5 The Christian runic inscriptions and the pagan burial fields

There are about 3,500 runic texts from Viking Age Scandinavia (c. 725–1125), written in the Younger Futhork, of these are c. 3,000 from Sweden.¹²⁵ About 1300 can be found in the province of Uppland. Runologist Henrik Williams has proposed that almost all Swedish runestones from the Viking Age had a Christian purpose. Christian personal names and prayers appear often on them, as well as new Christian expressions and terms.¹²⁶ Pictures with Christian references, ornamentation with the cross, and statements with church-related buildings and organization occur frequently. It seems, however, as if Viking Age runestones from Sweden never mention a conflict between paganism and Christianity,¹²⁷ and there are no inter-religious polemics in these inscriptions.¹²⁸ This fact has often been taken as an attestation of a peaceful conversion in Svealand. A distribution map reflecting the Viking Age runestones carved in the Younger Futhork shows, however, a clear concentration to the southeastern parts of the Lake Mälaren region (Fig. 16).¹²⁹ When a cross-marked runestone was erected in connection with the old burial field at the settlement, it may well have served as a Christian dedication of this burial ground or a part of it. This phenomenon appears more frequently in northern Uppland, than in the southern parts of the province. Hence, this indicates that pagan burial fields were used longer in the northern parts. This harmonizes well with the notion that Christianity gradually spread towards north-western Uppland.¹³⁰ The archaeologist Anders Broberg argues that the conversion did

123 Lönnroth 1996: 153–154.

124 Foote 1993; L. Lönnroth 1996.

125 Letters from Magnus Källström and Henrik Williams in May 2023. Cf. Williams 2016: 27.

126 Williams 1996b/c.

127 According to Williams (1996b: 298), representatives of the pre-Christian religion did not use runic inscriptions as an instrument of “the old custom”.

128 Cf. Hultgård 1998: 734.

129 Jansson 1987: 187. Cf. Källström 2007: 26.

130 A.-S. Gräslund 1987: 258–259.

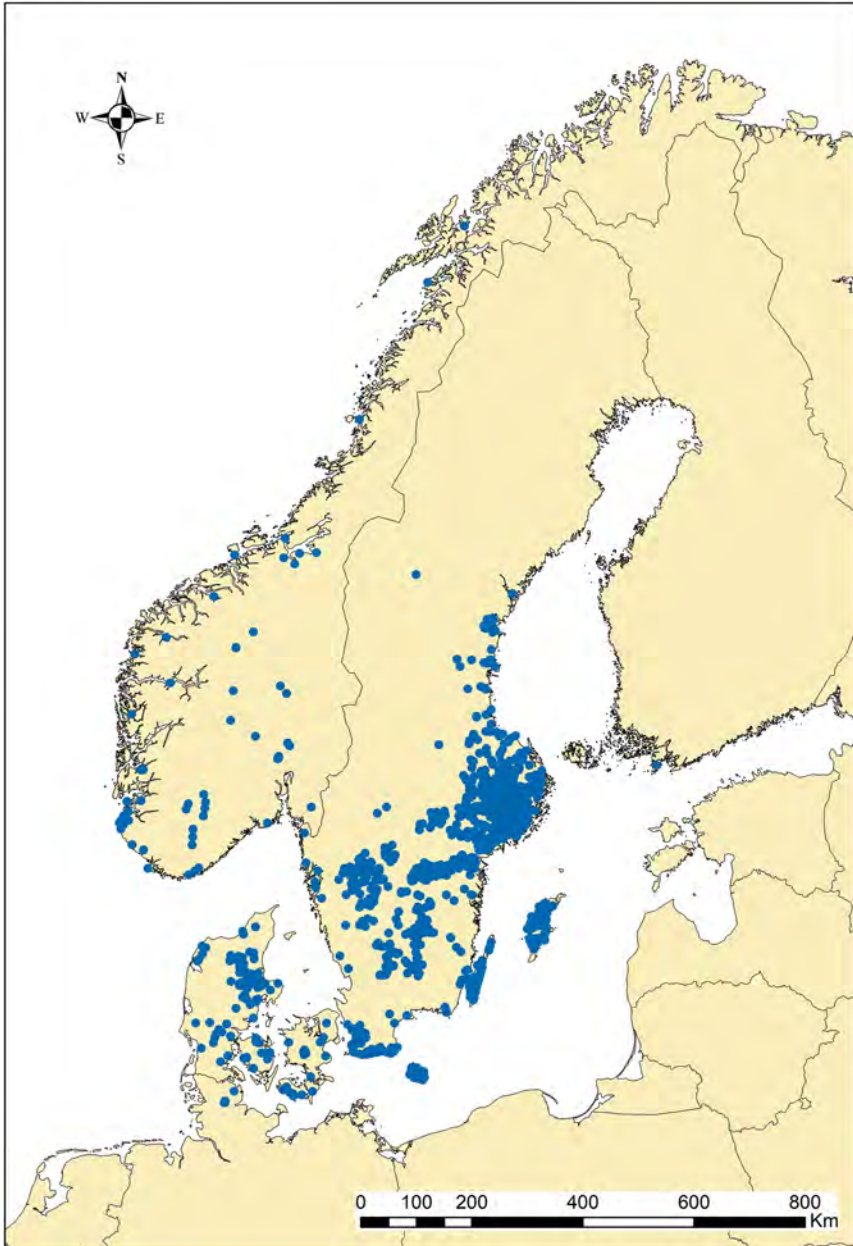


Fig. 16: This map contains runestone inscriptions from the eighth century to the early twelfth century. It includes only those runestones which are marked with “V” (= Viking Age) in the Samnordisk runetextdatabas. (The map is made by Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt, Riksantikvarieämbetet).

not take place until c. 1150 in the northern parts of Uppland and that traditional cemeteries were still in use there in the late twelfth century.¹³¹ The formation of parishes was not completed until the end of the thirteenth century. It should also be noted that the burial site at Valsgårde, situated a couple of kilometers north of Old Uppsala, for instance, shows continuity in burial customs from the fifth century up to the end of the eleventh century.¹³² There are, for instance, boat graves and chamber graves (graves 25 and 28, and perhaps grave 26) located in the north-western part of the cemetery, which seem to belong to the late eleventh century or even the early twelfth century. It is possible that some people living at Valsgårde were still pagans during this period, or that after conversion they only nominally defined themselves as Christians. Thus, they maintained some traditional and indigenous customs and beliefs.¹³³ Cremation burials from the Late Iron Age were found east of the Old Uppsala historical site during excavations in summer 2012. In one of the tombs, one Saxon coin dated to the period between 1015 and 1060 was discovered. The coin had a pierced hole, suggesting that it was worn for a time as a pendant or a symbol.¹³⁴ The coin must have been placed in the grave at least one or two decades later than the date of issue. This tomb reveals that people in Old Uppsala at least until the middle of the eleventh century were buried in accordance with the ancient practice. Likewise, cremation graves in five smaller piles “in the cemetery beside the Kings’ Mounds” indicate pre-Christian burial customs.¹³⁵ They were examined by Greta Arwidsson and Gunnar Ekholm in 1944. In two of these cremation tombs double combs were found, suggesting that the graves could be from the Late Viking Age.¹³⁶

That Christian runic stones were erected in the surroundings of Uppsala in the eleventh century,¹³⁷ harmonizes with Adam of Bremen’s account. Adam states thus in Book four, chapter 27:

131 Broberg 1991.

132 Arwidsson 1980: 45; Schönback & Thunmark-Nylén 2002; Ljungkvist 2008b.

133 Ljungkvist 2008b: 45–46.

134 The coin was decorated with a Christian cross and thus may have acted as a Christian symbol. What speaks against this interpretation is that the coin appears in a cremation grave, that is, a form of burial which undoubtedly perceived as a pre-Christian custom. But we cannot rule out that a syncretistic situation existed in Old Uppsala during the mid-eleventh century. See Sundqvist 2013 and 2016a.

135 SHM 23316.

136 A.-S. Gräslund 2013.

137 According to Torun Zachrisson (1998: 126–164, 224–225), the early Christian runestones were erected during the first decades of the eleventh century. When the professional rune carvers appeared, there was a targeted mission from Sigtuna out to parts of Uppland such as Tiundaland, which constitutes the second wave of runestone erection. On Christian rune stones in Old Uppsala, see Lerche-Nielsen 2003.

It is customary also to solemnize in Uppsala, at nine-year intervals, a general feast of all the provinces of Sweden. From attendance at this [pagan] festival no one is exempted. Kings and people all and singly send their gifts to Uppsala and, what is more distressing than any kind of punishment, those who have already adopted Christianity redeem themselves through these ceremonies.¹³⁸

It seems thus as if Christians and pagans lived side by side in Svetjud and Uppsala during that period. Adam's statement perhaps suggests that the cult leaders of the old religion may have had a far-reaching religious-political tolerance. In place of coercion, there was a legal opportunity for Christians to be exempted from the old cult.¹³⁹ Perhaps Christians could visit or even stay at the old cultic place in Uppsala and its surroundings. As the runic stones show, there were many Christian people in the neighborhood of Old Uppsala during the eleventh century.¹⁴⁰

8.4.6 Evidence of pagan rebellions from Continental Europe

In a recent article, historian Fredrik Charpentier Ljungkvist carefully examined all available sources related to Blótsveinn and his rebellion as well as other pagan revolts in the late eleventh century in the Svealand region of Sweden as well as Continental Europe.¹⁴¹ He arrived at some historical conclusions. According to him, there had been Christian kings in Svealand for several generations when a revolt occurred in the end of the eleventh century. A rudimentary church organization was established at that time. A pagan king replaced a Christian king for a period and he was regarded as a custodian of the old religion. Therefore he was perceived as a just king. After a short period, the Christian kings returned to the throne of the Svear. In his analysis, Charpentier Ljungkvist also brought in comparative materials from Continental Europe. He stated that the pagan revolts in Svealand in the late eleventh century should not be considered surprising in light of the fact that several other recently Christianized countries in northern and eastern Europe lived through such rebellions and revolts around that time. Pagan reactions occurred well after Christian kingship and ecclesiastic organization had been estab-

¹³⁸ *Solet quoque post novem annos communis omnium Sueoniae provinciarum sollempnitas in Ubsola celebrari. Ad quam videlicet sollempnitatem nulli prestatur immunitas. Reges et populi, omnes et singuli sua dona transmittunt ad Ubsolam, et, quod omni pena crudelius est, illi, qui iam induerunt christianitatem, ab illis se redimunt cerimoniais.*

¹³⁹ Cf. Hultgård 1997: 29; Göthberg, Lovén & Dahlbäck 2010: 34.

¹⁴⁰ A.-S. Gräslund 2013.

¹⁴¹ Charpentier Ljungkvist 2018.

lished among the Wends and in Hungary and Poland. In addition, several elements found in these pagan revolts are similar to those appearing in the sources that describe the pagan revolts said to have occurred in Svealand.¹⁴² He states thus:

The conclusion must therefore be that such religious conditions existed in Svealand at the end of the eleventh century that a pagan revolt could plausibly have occurred such as is described in medieval written sources. The arguments against the historical existence of the pagan revolt, in contrast, are not well founded. There is every reason to consider the occurrence of a pagan revolt in the late eleventh century as an actual event in Swedish history, although the details in the written sources regarding the event are not necessarily to be trusted.¹⁴³

The present writer can just agree with Charpentier Ljungkvist's conclusion.

8.5 Defending the old order

Sources indicate that the assembly community could depose a king who refused to perform his ritual duties in the public sacrificial cult or if he did not follow the will of the community, as in the cases of Anunder and King Ingi. The pagans' resistance in Svetjud was thus intertwined with old political structures, where the pre-Christian king's power was restricted by the assembly. This can be supported by quite reliable source information. The ninth-century "Svea kings" mentioned by Rimbert in *Vita Anskarii* (c. 870), for instance, were dependent on the *þing*-assembly. According to Rimbert the Svea king Óláfr told Ansgar: "It is our custom that the control of public business of every kind should rest with the whole people and not with the king."¹⁴⁴ Before the assembly, they summoned the foremost men of their realm to hear their advice.¹⁴⁵ The Latin term *princeps* "first, foremost, principal man of the ruler" corresponds perhaps to Old Norse *hofðingi* "chieftain." These chieftains were probably regarded as members of the ruler's council. One of them was called Hergeirr. He was a counsellor of the king (*consiliarius regis*), and he was also called prefect (*praefectus*) of Birka, perhaps equivalent to Old Norse *jarl*.¹⁴⁶ This information from Rimbert may thus be seen as an indication of overlordship in early Viking Age Svetjud. The king's power seems, however, to have been restricted by the will of the assembly, as well as the will of council, that is, the petty kings, jarls or chieftains. In Book 4,22 Adam

¹⁴² Charpentier Ljungkvist 2018: 226.

¹⁴³ Charpentier Ljungkvist 2018: 226.

¹⁴⁴ *Sic quippe apud eos moris est, ut quodcumque negotium publicum magis in populi unanimi voluntate quam in regia constet potestate.* VA 26.

¹⁴⁵ VA 27.

¹⁴⁶ VA 11. Cf. Norr 1998: 159–160, 165; Zachrisson 2011: 100–101.

makes the following interesting observation, which could be related to Rimbert's report: "They [the Svear] have kings of ancient lineage; nevertheless, the power of these kings depends upon the will of the people; . . ." ¹⁴⁷ Adam might of course have taken this information from Rimbert's text. But his account also includes the important fact, not mentioned by Rimbert, that the rulers were taken from an ancient lineage. This idea harmonizes well with information from Old Norse skaldic poetry. ¹⁴⁸ In the same section, Adam also states that the Svear by "common consent" (*communi sententia*) "now declare that the God of the Christians is the most powerful of all [gods]." As noted above, the expression *communi sententia* probably refers to a general assembly, where all free people could express their opinions about conversion, not only the king. In the context of the political structure among the Svear, Snorri also makes an interesting observation in *Óláfs saga helga* chapter 80. In his dispute with the Lawspeaker Þorgnýr, King Óláfr Eriríksson stated thus: "that is what all kings of Svíar have done, let the farmers have their way with them in everything they wanted."¹⁴⁹

The Viking king was thus considered as a *primus inter pares*. The fractions of society, which protected and maintained the pagan sacrificial cult in Uppsala and elsewhere in Svetjud, also defended the old pagan society, where power was related to the local and regional assemblies. Perhaps they also defended the old óðal-system and laws related to inherited landed property. ¹⁵⁰ The Christian kingship with strong roots in Götaland opposed this decentralized system and advocated a more centralized state and association with the papal Church. The new Christian kingdom included an administration that had the opportunity to centralize power to the king and the church. After the pagan sacrificial cult ceased in Uppsala around 1080–1100, the old political system was maintained in one way, namely through ancient royal elections. Just south of present-day Uppsala, there is an old *þing* place (assembly site) called *Mora*, where such rituals took place. Medieval provincial laws report that a ceremony called "taking king" (Osw *taka konong*) was performed at *Mora Þing* by representatives from the three *folkland*-units of Uppland around AD 1300. ¹⁵¹ Several medieval sources mention that this

¹⁴⁷ *Reges habent ex genere antiquo, quorum tamen vis pendet in populi sententia; . . .* Adam, 4, 22. Cf. Hallencreutz 1985 [1984]: 357.

¹⁴⁸ See Sundqvist 2002: 149–175; 2016a: 63–83.

¹⁴⁹ . . . *at svá hafsa gørt allir Svíakonungar, at láta bændr ráða með sér öllu því, er þeir vildu*. Ísl. Fornr. 27: 116.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Tesch (2017: 39–43), who argues that the conservative fraction actually included Christians.

¹⁵¹ The Old Swedish *folkland* constituted an administrative district with its own lawman and a *folklandsting*. See Liedgren 1981 [1956–1978]; Lindkvist and Sjöberg 2009: 36, and below. The Svear also had the right to depose a king according to the medieval laws.

inauguration ritual took place at a specific rock, on which the candidate was lifted. After this rite, the future king embarked on a ritual journey or procession in his kingdom, called *Eriksgata*, in order to be “deemed as king” (OSw *til kununx dōmæ*) by the lawmakers at the *þing* places in the various provinces.¹⁵² According to the oldest sources, such as *The Older Västgöta Law (Den Äldre Västgötalagen)* (1225) and *Uppland Law* (1296), this journey or procession went all the way down to Västergötland and “the *þing* of all Götar.”¹⁵³ This procedure probably reflects a relatively late stage in the development of the royal investment route, namely when a more stable kingship began to take shape, which had a foothold in both the provinces of the Götar and the Svear.¹⁵⁴ Anyhow, it mirrors a decentralized political structure, where power was related to the provincial assemblies.

Since the ancient system was challenged by the new Christian power during twelfth and thirteenth centuries, these old rites gained a political significance and functioned as sanctions of a traditional society.¹⁵⁵ These rituals implied a provincial ideology, where political power was concentrated in the assemblies. The conservative fractions of the society may have wanted to preserve this old order. The Christian elite could not in the long run accept the ideological grounds of the native legitimation of extraction and inauguration. They introduced the new ecclesiastical coronation in church in 1210,¹⁵⁶ and the doctrine “by the grace of God” (*rex Dei gratia*), where the king was placed on the throne directly by God. By these means the traditional investiture at Mora was ignored, and succession could be secured to the sons of the ruling king. Sources indicate, however, that inauguration rituals were performed at Mora until the sixteenth century.

The sources report in concise form; thus, there had been Christian kings in Central Sweden for several generations when a revolt occurred c. 1080–1100. A rudimentary church organization was established at that time for the revolt,¹⁵⁷ and the Christian King Ingi was rejected because of religious reasons. According to the basic narrative in the different sources, he committed two crimes; first, he had devastated pagan sacrifices, and second, he had broken the old law of the

¹⁵² On the rituals related to the taking and giving of hostages in the inauguration ceremony, see S. Olsson 2019: 251–320.

¹⁵³ Brink 2000c; Hultgård 2001a; Sanmark 2019: 105.

¹⁵⁴ Sundqvist 2002: 293–305 and 2022a; cf. Lindkvist & Sjöberg 2009: 31–158.

¹⁵⁵ Sundqvist 2002: 306–333 and 2022a; cf. Charpentier Ljungqvist 2014: 251–253.

¹⁵⁶ Blomkvist et al. 2007: 191–192.

¹⁵⁷ The so-called document of Florens (Florensdokumentet) from c. 1100 states that Sweden had six bishoprics at that time: Skara, Lindköping, Eskilstuna, Strängnäs, Sigtuna, and Västerås. See B. Nilsson 1998: 79.

country, that is, he had not performed in his required ritual role at the sacrifice. A pagan king called Blótsveinn replaced the Christian king and he was regarded as a custodian of the old religion. He was perceived as a just king since he also sacrificed on behalf of the Svear in the public cult, most likely in Uppsala. He also followed the will of the community. Meanwhile, King Ingi went to Västergötaland, where Christianity had established itself better than in Svealand. After a short period, the Christian king returned to the throne of the Svear. Most likely the pagan elite related to the ancient sanctuary in Uppsala were defeated by the army that King Ingi brought with him to the Lake Mälaren area when he regained the throne.

It is argued that the pagans' resistance in Svetjud was connected to political structures in society, where the king's power was restricted by the assembly. The pagan party opposed the Christian monarchy, which had "more extensive objectives of political control."¹⁵⁸ It is also suggested that conservative segments in society maintained a provincial ideology in the early Middle Ages, by means of supporting the old inauguration rituals of kings. They defended the old order against the attacks from the Christians including their old traditional identity.

158 Blomkvist et al. 2007: 204.

9 Pagan defenders and rebellions against Christian kings in Trøndelag

In this chapter we will turn to the resistance of the pagans in Norway. A special focus will be placed on the people in Trøndelag and their fight against Christianity as well as their opposition to Christian royal power. This condition has already been noticed in previous chapters, since many descriptions of pre-Christian cult in Old Norse texts take place in Trøndelag and are also connected to the historical breaking point when paganism was replaced by Christianity. The perspective will be somewhat different in the present chapter, where we will concentrate on the opposition of the pagan farmers against Christianity as represented by the new Christian royal power coming from abroad into Norway heading North. Hence, we will return to the story about King Hákon góði and his meeting with the farmers in Trøndelag, Jarl Hákon of Lade's resistance against the Christian sons of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, King Óláfr Tryggvasson's encounter with the Þrændir in Mære and finally we will also discuss the narrative about Óláfr Haraldsson's confrontation with the pagan chieftains also in Mære. All these stories occur in *Heimskringla* (c. 1230), however, Snorri brought the material for some of these accounts from older sources, such as the Kings' Sagas, for instance *Ágrip* (c. 1190) and *Faerskinna* (c. 1220), as well as Christian legendary texts such as *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd Munk Snorrason* (c. 1190). Some information was also taken from contemporary skaldic verses, which Snorri described as reliable sources.¹ Beside the great value he placed on skaldic poetry, he also pointed out the importance of oral traditions, and referred in this context specifically to the oral sources used by Ari in *Íslendingabók*.² Snorri's description of the pagan reactions against Christianity is probably affected by his general view on history. Hence, we must first turn to the issue of Snorri as a historian.

9.1 Snorri as a historian

Snorri's description of conversion in *Heimskringla* is usually classified as worldly historiography as opposed to clerical historical writings.³ Snorri downplays miracle stories and wonders. Opposite to the clerical writings, as for instance

¹ *Heimskringla* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 3–4.

² See *Heimskringla* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 3–7; cf. Lindow 2020a: 89. Critical considered Bagge 2019: 20, 23–24, 40.

³ See e.g., Bagge 1991: 15, 197–198, 249–251; 2019: 137.

Odr Snorrason's narratives, where we may find Christian wonder tales and a divine governing hand in the description of historical development, Snorri's texts in general lack such a ubiquitous and overarching conductor.⁴ In many ways, Snorri was a representative of European medieval historiographers.⁵ We have already seen that he, like Ari, applied medieval models and strategies, such as the euhemeristic approach, when treating the Old Norse deities in, for instance, *Ynglinga saga* (see 1.3 and 4.5). The Germanist Gerd Wolfgang Weber has, moreover, argued that Snorri's historical writings resemble contemporary European historiography with a linear God-directed development of history, where events in the past are seen as precursors to what comes later.⁶ According to Weber, Snorri applied a so-called *interpretatio christiana typologica*, a model which he found in European theological-historical writings. What happens in the Old Testament is seen as a precursor to events in the New Testament. Characters of the Old Testament constitute types or role models in the history of Christian salvation. The pattern was that Adam prefigures Christ, Eve prefigures Mary, who is the antitype to Eve. This theological history model was according to Weber transferred to the secular historiography by Snorri and others. The pagan period of the noble forefathers was admittedly incomplete, but acceptable as a natural precursor to Christianity.⁷ The pagan religion was by the medieval historians thus seen as a *naturalis gentium religio*.⁸ The introduction of Christianity was a turning point in history.⁹ Weber argued, thus, that Snorri's historiography was placed within a European Christian framework. The periodization he used was based on a Christian typology, where the purpose was to link the Scandinavian people to the general history of the world, which was governed by God.¹⁰

Klaus Düwel argued in the same vein as Weber when analysing *Hákonar saga góða*.¹¹ He stated that the actions connected with the sacrifices at Lade had no Germanic origin, that is, that Snorri had no pre-Christian sources for these rituals. Rather, when describing how blood was sprinkled on the altar in the *hof*-building there, Snorri modelled his account on ancient Semitic rituals described

4 Cf. Jónas Kristjánsson 1988: 157–159, 169–171; Steinsland 2000: 101–129; Bagge 2019: 62, 137.

5 Cf. Lönnroth 1964; 1965; 1969; Weber 1981; 1987; Malm 2018: 97–99; Lindow 2020a: 90–91; 2021: 103–132.

6 Weber 1981 and 1987.

7 Cf. Lönnroth 1969. In some of these accounts these noble forefathers even refused to worship the pagan gods. They believed in their own might and strength (*mátt ok megin*). See Weber 1981.

8 Cf. Malm 2018: 100–102.

9 See Weber 1981 and 1987; cf. Steinsland 2000: 103; Bagge 2019: 118.

10 Weber 1987.

11 Düwel 1985.

in *Exodus* chapter 24. In Snorri's time, parts of the Old Testament were probably translated into Old Norse in some form of model for the translation that later came to be called *Stjórn* (c. 1300).¹² Düwel also argued that during the early Middle Ages, sacrificial rites and other religious practices in the Old Testament were perceived as (pagan) precursors to the true divine revelation. Hence, medieval authors, such as Snorri, applied "the principle of prefiguration" (*interpretatio christiana typologica*) in their historiographies. Paganism, that is, the religious development stage that preceded Christianity, was considered by them as a universal *religio naturalis*. It had similar forms of expression regardless of whether it appeared in the Middle East or in the Scandinavian countries. Therefore, according to Düwel, Snorri could use the Biblical material as a source for his description of the old cult in Trøndelag. With the support of this basically "Christian" interpretation, the religion of the ancestors was also idealized and the step from it over to Christianity somewhat shorter:

Darin schildert Snorri die heidnische Religionsübung und Opferpraxis deshalb so ins Einzelne gehend und nach dem Prinzip der typologischen interpretatio christiana strukturiert, um zu verdeutlichen, wie sehr sich die Norweger aufgrund ihrer *religio naturalis* bereits dem Christentum genährt hatten und wie klein im Grunde der Schritt war, den Übergang zu vollziehen.¹³

In the last parts of his dissertation, Düwel also stated that Snorri's purpose was not to describe the pagan cult, but to show how violent the missions of the Norwegian royal power had been in contrast to the situation in Iceland. Düwel concluded therefore that the description of sacrificial rituals in *Hákonar saga góða* is not reliable and thus cannot be used as a source for pre-Christian religion.

Historian Sverre Bagge opposed such Christian philosophic and theological interpretations of Snorri's historical writings.¹⁴ Snorri's description of the historical development in Norway was not governed by a divine intervention, according to Bagge; it followed the Old Norse saga style. The conversion of Norway was indeed a crucial theme in the context of *Heimskringla* as a whole; in Snorri's eyes Christianity was, on the one hand, something good, but, on the other hand, he did not condemn the old religion.¹⁵ Only when it comes to Jarl Hákon's death

¹² Cf. Düwel 1985: 141.

¹³ Düwel 1985: 127.

¹⁴ Bagge 1991: 15, 197–198; 2019: 29–38, 52, 137.

¹⁵ "Den førkristne religionen er ikke en sammensvergelse av onde mennesker mot Gud og den rette tro, men et famlende forsøk fra mennesker som ikke har adgang til Guds åpenbaring, på å danne seg et bilde av det hinsidige. For Snorre er den gamle religionen del av en kulturell arv som går tilbake til Troja, og som er likeverdig med de mange grunnleggingsmytene i en rekke europeiske land." Bagge 2019: 118.

does Snorri provide explanation which may be based on a theological interpretation of history, according to Bagge.¹⁶ Snorri wrote thus in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chapter 50: “And the chief cause of it happening like this was, that then the time had come for heathen worship and heathen worshippers to be condemned, and be replaced by the holy Faith and proper morals.”¹⁷ Bagge comments on this quotation thus: “There is no reason to doubt that Snorri here accepts a Christian interpretation of history and divides his chronology accordingly. . . . In *Heimskringla*, however, this statement stands fairly isolated and cannot be used as evidence for Snorri’s general principles of periodization or interpretation of history.”¹⁸ Gro Steinsland accepted Bagge’s way of reasoning, but she argued that the quoted passage at the same time was a key to understand Snorri’s interpretation of the conversion of Norway.¹⁹ I agree with Steinsland that such perspectives and interpretations of history may be present in Snorri’s accounts, and thus must be taken into consideration in what follows.

In some recently published contributions to the research on Snorri’s historiography, Viking Age religion and rulership, a new tendency can be discerned, namely that the Norse written sources are studied from a discursive and ideological contemporary perspective. The focus of these studies is thus not on reconstructing the Viking Age and pre-Christian religion and ideology mentioned in these texts, but on the medieval reception and the contemporary political message that may be subtly hidden in them.²⁰ Studying these texts from this point of view is nothing new in Scandinavian studies in general, but has previously been done by historians, literary scholars, and philologists (see above). The new thing is that even historians of religions now adopt this perspective. These new contributions are highly relevant and significant even for historians of religions who work more traditionally with *Heimskringla* and other Norse prose texts, because they provide knowledge about their character, what hidden intentions are there

16 Bagge 1991: 198; 2019: 69–71, 118.

17 *En þat bar mest til, er svá varð, at þá var sú tíð komin, at fyrirdæmask skyldi blótskaprinn ok blótmenninir, en ístað kom heilög trúa ok réttir siðir.* Ísl. Fornr. 26: 299. See also Bagge 2019: 71.

18 Bagge 1991: 198.

19 Steinsland 2000: 103–104.

20 In a new book, Nicolas Meylan (2022), investigates the meaning of contexts and discourses of the individual Kings’ Sagas concerning Jarl Hákon. According to Meylan, the various themes related to the jarl indicate how authors and redactors put concepts of rulers and religion to ideological service for contemporary usage. The scientific tradition he stands in seems to be influenced by Bruce Lincoln (1996) and his famous article “Theses on method.” In a monograph, Lincoln (2014) applies a similar discourse analysis as Meylan to the sources that describe Haraldr hárfagri and the founding of the state in Norway. Lincoln regards these traditions as a kind of “histories of foundation” or “myths of origin.”

and to whom they were originally addressed when they were produced. These studies simply provide new knowledge about the source value of the texts and also establish some limits to what we can learn from these sources as historians of religions.

In what follows, the confrontations between the pagan chieftains and the Christian kings will especially be observed, where not only religious reasons but also wider cultural aspects will be taken into consideration.

9.2 The pagans' opposition against Hákon góði

According to *Hákonar saga góða*, Hákon góði was a Christian when he arrived to Norway and went to Trøndelag. His early career as king we have already discussed in 4.1 above. As mentioned there, he first met strong resistance, when he arrived at Frostaping. A very large number of farmers were there. The king stated that “everyone should have themselves baptised and believe in one God, Christ son of Mary, and abandon all heathen worship and pagan gods (*en hafna blótum ollum ok heiðnum goðum*)”:

But when the king had put this to all the people, there was immediately a great murmuring. The farmers grumbled that the king wanted to deprive them of labour, and also that the land could not be cultivated like that. And the labourers and slaves declared that they could not work if they were not to get food, and also said that it was a defect in the character of King Hákon and his father and their whole family that they were mean with food, even though they were generous with gold.²¹

The pagan chieftain Ásbjörn of Meðalhús stood up and replied to the king's proposal:

‘What we farmers thought, King Hákon, when you held the first assembly here in Þrándheimr and we had accepted you as king and received from you our ancestral rights, was that we then had heaven in our grasp, but now we are not sure which is more the case, that we will have received freedom or that you will have had us enslaved anew in an amazing way, that we should abandon the beliefs that our fathers held before us, and all our forefathers, first about the age of burning, and now about the age of mound-burial, and they have been far more noble than we, and yet these beliefs have served us well. We have become so

²¹ *En þegar er konungr hafði þetta upp borit fyrir alþýðu, þá var þegar kurr mikill. Kurruðu bændr um þat, er konungr vildi vinnur taka af þeim ok svá, at við þat mátti landit eigi byggva. En verkalýðr ok þrælár kǫlluðu þat, at þeir mætti eigi vinna, ef þeir skyldi eigi mat hafa, sögðu ok, at þat var skapløstr Hákonar konungs ok föður hans ok þeira frænda, at þeir vǫru illir af mat, svá þótt þeir væri mildir af gulli. Ísl. Fornr. 26: 169. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011].*

fond of you that we have let you decide all our laws and privileges. Now this is what we desire and the farmers have agreed on, that we keep the laws which you established for us here at the Frostaping and we consented to with you. We will all follow you and keep you as king, as long as any of the farmers who are now present at this assembly is alive, if you, king will exercise some moderation in asking of us only what we can grant you and what is not impossible for us. But if you try to pursue this business with such great rigour as to treat us with physical force and tyranny, then we farmers have made our decision, all of us to part company with you and find ourselves another ruler who will carry on towards us so that we can hold to that belief which we wish in freedom. Now you, king, must choose from these alternatives before the assembly is broken up.²²

The peasants gave a great applause to this speech. Then Jarl Sigurðr spoke: “It is King Hákon’s desire to reach an agreement with you and never to bring about the loss of your friendship.”²³ The farmers said that they want the king to sacrifice for their prosperity and peace as his father had done (*at konungr blóti til árs þeim ok friðar, svá sem faðir hans gerði*). Then the grumbling stopped, and they broke up the assembly.

In chapter 17 the king attended the sacrificial feast at Lade in the autumn, where he refused to perform his required ritual duties. The king was now on the point of being attacked by the farmers, but Jarl Sigurðr settled the matter between them (the text is quoted in 4.1). In chapter 18 Snorri narrates thus:

The following winter, preparations were made for the king to celebrate Yule inland at Mærin. And when Yule approached, eight of the rulers who had most to do with the sacrificial feasts all over Þrændalög arranged to meet together. . . . These eight men bound themselves as follows, that the four of the coastal Þrændir should root out Christianity, and the four of the inland Þrændir should force the king to offer sacrifice. The coastal Þrændir

22 ‘þat hugðu vér bændr, Hákon konungr,’ segir hann, ‘at þá er þú hafðir it fyrsta þing haft hér í Þrándheimi ok höfðum þik til konungs tekinn ok þegit af þér óðol vár, at vér hefðim þá höndum himin tekinn, en nú vitum vér eigi, hvárt heldr er, at vér munum frelsi þegit hafa eða muntu nú láta þrælka oss af nýju með undarligum hætti, at vér mynim hafna átrúnaði þeim, er feðr várir hafa haft fyrir oss ok allt forellri, fyrst um brunaöld, en nú um haugsöld, ok hafa þeir verit miklu gofgari en vér, ok hefir oss þó dugat þessi átrúnaðr. Vér höfum lagt til yðar svá mikla ástúð, at vér höfum þik ráða látit með oss öllum lofum ok landsrétt. Nú er þat vilí várr ok samþykki bóndanna at halda þau lof, sem þú settir oss hér á Frostapingi ok vér játuðum þér. Viljum vér allir þér fylgja ok þik til konungs halda, meðan einn hvern er lífs bóndanna, þeira er hér eru nú á þinginu, ef þú, konungr, vill nokkut hóf við hafa at beiða oss þess eins, er vér megum veita þér ok oss sé eigi ógeranda. En ef þér vilíð þetta mál taka með svá mikilli freku at deila afli ok ofríki við oss, þá höfum vér bændr gort ráð várt, at skiljask allir við þik ok taka oss annan höfðingja, þann er oss haldi til þess, at vér megim í frelsi hafa þann átrúnað, sem vér viljum. Nú skaltu, konungr, kjósa um kosti þessa, áðr þing sé slítt.’ Ísl. Fornr. 26: 169–170. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011].

23 ‘þat er vilí Hákonar konungs at samþykkja við yðr, bændr, ok láta aldri skilja yðra vináttu’. Ísl. Fornr. 26: 170. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011].

sailed four ships south to Mœrr and there slew three priests and burned three churches, afterwards returning home.²⁴

And when King Hákon and Jarl Sigurðr came to Mære with their army, the farmers had arrived there in great numbers:

The first day at the feast the farmers attacked him and told him to offer sacrifice, promising him trouble if he didn't. Jarl Sigurðr mediated between them. The outcome was that King Hákon ate a few pieces of horse-liver. He then drank all the toasts that the farmers poured for him without the sign of the Cross. And when this feast was finished, the king and the jarl immediately went out to Hlaðir.²⁵

The king was not at all cheerful and immediately got ready to go away from Trøndelag with all his troops, saying this, that the next he would come to there with more men and then repay the Þrændir for the hostility they had shown towards him. Jarl Sigurðr recommended the king not to make an issue out of this with the Þrændir.

We have already touched upon the sources Snorri used for this passage in *Hákonar saga góða*. Except the skaldic stanzas he quoted there,²⁶ Snorri probably took information from *Ágrip* chapters five to six and *Fagrskinna* chapters six to thirteen, when describing the confrontation between King Hákon and the pagans in Trøndelag.

9.2.1 Motives for the pagans' resistance

The most obvious motive of the pagan Þrændir according to these sources is King Hákon's reluctance to sacrifice in the traditional way, that is, he did not perform in his ritual role as his father and other kings had previously done on behalf of

²⁴ *Um vetrinn eptir var biúit til jóla konungi inn á Mærini. En er at leið jólonum, þá lögðu þeir stefnu með sér átta hofðingjar, er mest réðu fyrir blótum í öllum Þrændalogum. . . . Þessir áttu menn bundusk í því, at þeir fjórir af Útþrændum skyldu eyða kristninni, en þeir fjórir af Innþrændum skyldu neyða konung til blóta. Útþrændir fóru fjórum skipum suðr á Mæri ok drápu þar presta þrjá ok brenndu kirkjur þrjár, fóru apt síðan.* Ísl. Fornr. 26: 172. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011].

²⁵ *Inn fyrsta dag at veizlunni veittu bændr honum atgöngu ok báðu hann blóta, en hétu honum afarkostum ella. Sigurðr jarl bar þá mál í millum þeira. Kæmr þá svá, at Hákon konungr át nokkura bita af hrosslifr. Drakk hann þá öll minni krossalaust, þau er bændr skenktu honum. En er veizlu þeiri var lokit, fór konungr ok jarl þegar út á Hlaðir.* Ísl. Fornr. 26: 172–173. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011].

²⁶ In *Hákonar saga góða*, Snorri quoted verses from Glúmr Geirason, Guthormr sindri, Kormákr Ögmundarson, Eyvindr skáldaspillir and Þórðr Sjáreksson. They refer to battles and do not say much about the historical development of religion. Eyvindr's *Hákonarmál* includes, however, important information about the eschatology of pre-Christian religion.

the people of Trøndelag. As we have already seen in chapter four the Viking king was in general a necessary ritual mediator between the gods and the people during the sacrifices. In the eyes of the farmers, the ruler was only legitimate as long as he fulfilled his ritual role. According to Snorri, the farmers said that they wanted the king “to sacrifice for their prosperity and peace as his father had done.” *Fagrskinna* has a similar formulation and states that the pagan farmers wanted “that he [King Hákon] should sacrifice according to the custom of the earlier kings, and so observe what was laid down of old to bring prosperity and peace.” A similar message was given the king in *Ágrip*: “‘We will drive you from the kingdom,’ they said ‘if you not act in accordance with our wishes.’”²⁷ According to these sources, the *Þrændir* thus reacted strongly when the king did not perform his obligations and ritual roles in accordance to the old tradition.

According to Snorri, the negative response among the farmers of the king’s speech at Frostaping also concerned economic and social-political motives. For the farmers, the new religion seems to have threatened their basic way of social life and subsistence activities, with no farming work on Sundays as well as fasts on holidays.²⁸ The king wanted “to deprive them of labor, and also that the land could not be cultivated like that. And the laborers and slaves declared that they could not work if they were not to get food.” It is even stated that the king and his father were stingy with food, that is, opposite to the ideal of Viking rulers. Kings and chieftains were expected to be generous with food (see 4.2 above). This information can only be found in Snorri’s text and has no support in *Ágrip* and *Fagrskinna*.

According to *Heimskringla*, further, the chieftain Ásbjörn of Meðalhús’ speech included several motives against the king’s command that all should be let to self-converted. The farmers feared that the king wanted to enslave them by forcing them to abandon their old religion. If the king pursued this business with such great rigor as to treat them with physical force and tyranny, then the farmers had made their decision to find another ruler for themselves. The central concept in Ásbjörn’s speech “is a political one, freedom (*frælsi*), and the thrust of his argument is the marking off of the respective powers of the king and of the assembly.”²⁹ The importance of the assembly for the balance of power between the king and the people seems to be central to Ásbjörn’s speech. In addition, to preserve the old laws seems to be as important as maintaining the old religion and customs.³⁰ Ásbjörn’s speech is not mentioned in *Ágrip* or *Fagrskinna*. In *Ágrip*,

27 Ísl. Fornr. 29: 8.

28 Cf. Meylan 2022: 60.

29 Meylan 2022: 61.

30 Meylan 2022: 133–142.

however, it is stated that King Hákon must follow the advice of the chieftains (*at höfðingja ráða*) (see 4.1 above).

Similar to the king of Svear, it seems as if the Norwegian king at this time was regarded as a *primus inter pares*, that is, a ruler who had to follow the decisions made by chieftains and free farmers together at the assembly. The power of society was strongly related to the assembly. Ásbjörn's speech intimates that the farmers wanted to be protected against physical force and tyranny. This information comes also only from Snorri's text but it harmonizes with the situation in, for instance, Svetjud. In both Snorri's text and in *Ágrip*, the Þrændir's reaction against King Hákon's wishes was partly violent. They killed the Christian priests that Hákon had brought from England, and they burned down their churches. And when the king met them at Mære, all three texts intimate that the farmers forced him by means of threats and aggressions to participate and play his cultic role in the traditional pagan sacrifices.

All three texts, including *Hákonarmál*, also imply that King Hákon's strategy to dismantle the old religion in Trøndelag was a failure. It seems as if he lacked the physical power and his Christian message was not sufficiently entrenched with the local chieftains in the area. The pagan Þrændir were strong enough to maintain the old social system, where power was concentrated at the assembly. Even the king must obey the farmers and perform his ritual roles at public sacrifice in order to maintain old law and custom for good crops and peace. The texts indicate nevertheless that a great political-religious conflict really took place.

9.2.2 The role of the pagan jarl Sigurðr

According to *Ágrip* and *Fagrskinna* versions of the account, Hákon did not immediately demand kingship when arriving to Norway. Instead, he first constructed friendly relations with important men and exchanged gifts in order to make a good position for kingship. Due to his strength of personality and accomplishments he eventually ascended the throne.³¹ *Hákonar saga góða* differs from these descriptions and states that the first thing Hákon did when arriving to Norway was to sail to Trøndelag and meet Jarl Sigurðr at Lade. In this story Jarl Sigurðr has an important role for Hákon's accession to the throne. He has therefore been described as a "kingmaker" ("Königsmacher") by some scholars.³² It seems thus as if Snorri had a very positive view of Jarl Sigurðr. The pagan jarl's relation

³¹ Meylan 2022: 52.

³² Düwel 1985: 13; Winroth 2012: 2.

to the Norwegian royal power is also described as excellent. Snorri states, for instance, that Jarl Sigurðr was “very keen on heathen worship, and so was his father Hákon. Jarl Sigurðr maintained all the ritual banquets on behalf of the king there in Þrændalög.”³³ In Snorri’s description of the conflict between King Hákon and the Þrændir, Jarl Sigurðr appears as a mediating party between the combatants. Snorri’s image of the jarl as a diplomat and politician who sees the danger in case the king breaks completely with the peasant chieftains has weak support in the older texts.³⁴ Jarl Sigurðr is not even mentioned in *Ágrip*’s and *Fagrskinna*’s renditions of this episode.³⁵ Indeed, the author of *Fagrskinna* states that “the king’s friends and a great company mediated between the parties,”³⁶ however, no specific mediator is singled out in the same way as Sigurðr is in Snorri’s version of the account.

Snorri’s view that Jarl Sigurðr cared so much for the Christian king is a bit odd. No other sources indicate that the early jarls of Lade defended Christians. They report rather that these rulers protected the old religion and used myths as political propaganda. Sigurðr’s son Jarl Hákon had nine named pagan poets in his entourage, who all used Old Norse myths to strengthen the political position of the jarl in his fight against the Christian kings.³⁷ Sigurðr and Hákon appear as pagan rulers in contemporary poems such as *Sigurðardrápa* and *Vellekla*. We must thus accept that Snorri’s description of individual actors, such as Jarl Sigurðr, includes tendentious and probably non-historical elements.

In Snorri’s text, Jarl Sigurðr is thus described very sympathetically. The pagan farmers are also portrayed as sensible. They are prepared to follow the law that the king put together for the Frostafing. They are also very loyal to the old religious tradition and customs that their parents and ancestors followed. The peasants’ representative Ásbjörn of Meðalhús gives an excellent speech against Christianity. Snorri’s account is thus probably affected by the medieval *topoi* he applied, such as the notion of the pagan ancestors as noble heathens.³⁸ The king appears to be a benevolent person who gives in to the demands of the peasants regarding religion, but at the same time regrets his religious choices on the deathbed. His method of Christianizing the pagan peasants through public speaking at

33 *Hákonar saga góða*, *Heimskringla* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 26 167; see above.

34 Cf. Steinsland 2000: 109.

35 In *Ágrip* Jarl Sigurðr ens gamla is only mentioned as father of Jarl Hákon (Ísl. Fornr. 29: 14–15). In *Fagrskinna* King Haraldr gives Sigurðr the title jarl. His death is also mentioned there (Ísl. Fornr. 29: 66, 101–103).

36 *Fagrskinna*, Ísl. Fornr 29: 80; cf. *Ágrip* Ísl. Fornr 29: 8 and see above.

37 Ström 1981 and 1983; Steinsland 2000: 109; Meylan 2022.

38 Cf. Lönnroth 1969; Weber 1981.

assembly meetings and his strategy to dismantle the pagan religion by not performing the royal rites are also a great failure. Anyhow, King Hákon is a kind of ideal ruler for Snorri, that is, a leader who rules in consultation with his chieftains and the farmers, opposite to King Haraldr and the sons of Eiríkr who could be described as tyrants, who deviated from ancient laws.³⁹

We may conclude that all sources indicate that King Hákon really met a great opposition in Trøndelag, when he presented his proposal that all Þrændir should convert to Christianity. The king was later forced to perform his ritual duties at the ancient pagan sacrificial cult, that is, to eat the horse-liver from the victim, and to take part in the ceremonial toasts to the old gods. Most likely the Þrændir, not only felt that their old religion was threatened by the king's proposal to convert, but also other aspects of life were put under pressure, such as the customary role of the assembly, where the king was only a *primus inter pares*.

9.3 Jarl Hákon and the sons of Eiríkr

Snorri Sturluson narrates in *Haralds saga gráfeldar* the story about the Christian sons of King Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, who took power over Norway after Hákon's death. Opposite to the popular King Hákon, they are described in very negative terms by Snorri as cruel with no respect for ancient laws. Snorri reports that they made no progress in converting people in Norway to Christianity, “but everywhere they could, they demolished temples and destroyed rituals” (see 4.3 above). During the reign of the Eiríkssynir seasons failed and thus the crops were terrible. This is also mentioned in *Fagrskinna* where it is stated that these royal sons “caused great famine in those times, because herring fishing and all kinds of sea catch ceased, and the grain was spoiled. The country people attributed it to the anger of their gods and the fact that the kings had had their sacrificial sites destroyed.”⁴⁰ In both *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna* a stanza by Eyvindr skáldaspillir is quoted in connection to this information, where it is stated that nature and the seasons rebelled:

³⁹ Cf. Bagge 2019: 51, 65–67, 72. In his discursive investigation of Jarl Hákon in medieval Norse literature, historian of religions Nicolas Meylan states that Snorri did not make a critique of Norwegian kingship itself during conversion, but rather a type of kingship represented by tyrants using violence and coercion to get their way through. The ideal king should “let traditional mechanisms – law, local chieftains, assembly – run their course.” Meylan 2022: 48–51, 75–77, 131–142.

⁴⁰ [G]ørði hallæri mikít um þeira daga, fyrir því at af tók síldfiski ok allt sjófang, korn spilltisk. Þetta kenndi landsfólkit guða sinna reiði ok því, er konungarnir létu spilla blótstöðum þeira. Ísl. Fornr. 29: 98.

Snýr á Svǫlnis vǫru
 — svá höfum inn sem Finnar
birkihind of bundit
brums — at miðju sumri.

It is snowing on the spouse of Svǫlnir [= Óðinn] [= Jǫrð (jǫrð “earth”)] in the middle of summer; we have tied up the bark-stripping hind of the bud [GOAT] inside just like the Saami.⁴¹

It seems as if these Christian kings themselves were unhappy with the political situation they inherited from their predecessors. In *Haralds saga gráfeldar* Snorri describes how Norway was divided among a number of rulers and chieftains. Tryggvi Ólafsson reigned in the east, Guðrøðer Bjarnarson in Vestfold, Jarl Sigurðr in Trøndelag and the sons of Gunnhildr had the middle of the country in the first winter.⁴² King Haraldr gráfeldr – the nominal leader of the Eiríkssynir – had thus to negotiate with other rulers and allies such as Jarl Sigurðr of Lade. But soon Gunnhildr and her sons succeeded in persuading Sigurðr’s brother Grjótgarðr to turn against the jarl in order to take over his title. Grjótgarðr thus lets his brother Sigurðr burn inside at the farm called Qgló. This leads to Sigurðr’s son Hákon getting a legitimate reason to avenge his father’s murderer, that is, the Eiríkssynir and Grjótgarðr. Jarl Hákon first kills Grjótgarðr, his father’s killer, in addition, he does not pay tributes and taxes to Gunnhildr and her sons. With the support of the Danish king Haraldr Gormsson and his nephew Gull-Haraldr, Jarl Hákon succeeds in taking over power in Norway after the killing of Haraldr gráfeldr at Limafjörðr in Denmark. Jarl Hákon thereby defeats the early Christian kings of Norway by force.

During the reign of Jarl Hákon Sigurðarson, the Hlaðajarlar controlled almost all of coastal Norway and it seems as if they competed for power with the kings descending from Haraldr hárfagri.⁴³ The contemporary poem *Vellekla*, for instance, says that Jarl Hákon ruled over the land of sixteen jarls. According to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chapter 16, Jarl Hákon subjected the whole country to himself, but he stayed often at Lade in Trøndelag, where he had support of the pagan chieftains. When he travelled from the south along the coast the people of the country submitted to him. Then he ordered over his whole realm that people should maintain the old sanctuaries and pagan rituals, opposite to what Gunnhildr’s sons had done. Snorri tells how the jarl and his son, Jarl Eiríkr, destroyed

⁴¹ Poole, *SKP* 1: 231. The stanza appears in *Heimskringla* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 221; *Fagrskinna*, Ísl. Fornr. 29: 98.

⁴² *Haralds saga gráfeldar*, Ísl. Fornr. 26: 198.

⁴³ Steinsland 2011a/b.

the attempt of the Danish kingdom to regain sovereignty over Norway in the battle of Hjørungavágr. In this battle Jarl Sigvaldi and the Jómsvíkingar were defeated.⁴⁴ Hákon's victory over a Danish invasion fleet and the Jómsvíkingar provided also the stimulus for several contemporary praise poems composed in honour of Jarl Hákon, such as *Háleygjatal* (c. 985), *Hákonardrápa* (c. 990), and *Vellekla* (c. 990). They were thus created within this specific historical context where a conflict and a war between pagans and Christians were raging.

9.3.1 The praising of the last pagan defender of Norway

In contrast to the Christian son of Gunnhildr, the pagan ruler Jarl Hákon is described rather positively by Snorri. His reign seems, according to Snorri, to have implied a prosper period for Norway. Snorri relates these good years to Hákon's religious policy where the jarl urged chieftains to repair the old places of worship destroyed by the Eiríkssynir. As support for this information Snorri quoted Einarr skálaglamm's poem *Vellekla*, stanzas 14 and 15 (c. 990) in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chapter 16. In these contemporary stanzas Hákon is praised thus:

*Öll lét senn inn svinni
sonn Einriða mǫnnum
herjum kunn of herjuð
hofs lönd ok vé banda,
áðr veg jǫtna vitni
valfalls of sæ allan
— þeim stýra goð —
geira garðs Hlórriði farði.*

The wise one soon made all the harried lands of the temple of Einriði <= Þórr> and the sanctuaries of the gods, famous among the peoples, lawful for men, before the Hlórriði <= Þórr> of the fence of spears [SHIELD > WARRIOR = Hákon jarl] ferried evidence of slaughter to the path of the giants [MOUNTAINS = Norway?] across all the sea; the gods guide him.

*Ok herþarfir hverfa
(Hlakkar móts) til blóta
(rauðbríkar fremsk rækir
ríkr) ásmegir (slíku).
Nú grær jǫrð sem áðan;*

⁴⁴ This battle is narrated in Oddr's *Óláfs saga* (AM 310 4to) ch. 18; Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* 10.4.2–10.4.6; *Fagrskinna* ch. 22; *Heimskringla* (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 40–42); *Jómsvíkinga saga*; *Jómsvíkingadrápa* and *Búadrápa*.

*aptr geirbrúar hapta
auðrýrir lætr óru
óhryggva vé byggva.*

And the sons of the Æsir, beneficial to the people, turn to the sacrifices; the powerful keeper of the red board of the meeting of Hlökk <valkyrie> [BATTLE > SHIELD > WARRIOR = Hákon jarl] prospers from this. Now the earth flourishes as before; the wealth-diminisher [GENEROUS MAN] lets the messengers of the spear-bridge [SHIELD > WARRIORS] once again inhabit the sanctuaries of the gods without sorrow.⁴⁵

The jarl is praised in the poem for reconstructing and protecting the indigenous shrines as well as for maintaining the old religious traditions, including the pagan sacrifices, which were damaged by the sons of Eiríkr. The sanctuaries are designated *Einriða hofs lǫnd* “lands of the temple of Þórr,” indicating some land areas which were connected to sanctuaries dedicated to Þórr, here called *Einriði*.⁴⁶ These shrines are also called *vé banda* “sanctuary of the gods.” The old term *þond* “gods” (n. pl) indicates that the expression refers to pagan cult places. The gods who have been denied offerings during the reign of the Eiríkssynir return to sacrifices (*hverfa til blóta*) after Hákon’s restoration. He lets the warriors once again inhabit the sanctuaries of gods (*byggva vé hapta*). The pagan gods are designated *hopt* (n. pl), which signals that the old cult system is restored. By means of these cultic actions Hákon produced prosperity in Norway. *Vellekla* also states that “the gods guide him” (*þeim stýra goð*). Later in the poem (st. 17) the jarl is hailed for the peace he created, after defeating the Danish princes at Hjørungavágr. The poem then interestingly compares this peace with what it calls “the Fróði-peace”:

*Engi varð á jǫrðu
ættum góðr nema Fróði
gæti-Njǫrðr, sás gerði,
geirbrikar, frið slíkan.*

{No well-descended guarding-Njǫrðr <god> {of the spear-board}} [SHIELD > WARRIOR] lived on earth who made such peace, except Fróði.⁴⁷

In short, Einarr praises Jarl Hákon for bringing about a good year and peace (cf. *ár ok friðr* above) by means of maintaining sacrificial cult with the help of military means. These stanzas of *Vellekla* thus reflect a strong pagan reaction against the early Christian power and display a representative of the traditional ruler ideal. Snorri comments on them thus:

⁴⁵ Text and trans. by Edith Marold et al. in SkP 1: 301–303.

⁴⁶ Vikstrand 2001: 265.

⁴⁷ Marold et al. in SkP 1: 305.

The first winter that Hákon ruled over the country, herring came in all over the country, and the previous autumn corn had grown wherever it had been sown. And in the spring people got seedcorn, so that most farmers could sow their land, and there was soon prospect of a good harvest.⁴⁸

Snorri had support for this information, not only from Einarr's poem, but also from *Fagrskinna* stating that Hákon restored or performed sacrifices with more harshness (or rigor) (*með meiri freku*).⁴⁹ Snorri and some of his sources thus construe a deep contrast between the sons of Gunnhildr and Jarl Hákon, where the sympathy is placed on the latter one, although he was a pagan. These sources indicate a pagan movement in Norway during the reign of Jarl Hákon. It seems as if his reign was remembered as a happy period.

As per the information in *Vellekla*, many prose traditions relate Jarl Hákon to sanctuaries where images of pagan gods were placed. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (MS AM 310 4to), of Oddr munk, reports that Jarl Hákon had a great sanctuary (*mikla hof*) at Lade, with plenty of divine images.⁵⁰ *Njáls saga* chapter 87 says that the biggest *hof* in Norway was located there.⁵¹ In this passage it is also mentioned that Jarl Hákon owned a *hof* in Guðbrandsdalar, together with the hersir Guðbrandr. They kept a triad of cult images representing the deities Þórr, Þorgerðr and Irpa. In chapter 88 the outlaw Víga-Hrappr entered this sanctuary: "Then he saw Þórr's carriage (*sér hann kerru Þórs*)."⁵² This implies an image of Þórr sitting in a carriage in the sanctuary. This idea is probably based on old traditions. We may see that one of the mythological tags used by the tenth-century skald Kor-mákr Ögmundarson in his *Sigurðardrápa* stanza 5 (c. 960) was "Þórr is sitting in his carriage" (*sitr Þórr í reiðu*):

*Hróðr gerk of mǫg mæran
meirr Sigrøðar fleira;
haptænis galk hǫnum
heið; sitr Þórr í reiðu.*

48 *Inn fyrsta vetr, er Hákon réð fyrir landi, þá gékk síld upp um alt land, ok áðr um haustit hafði korn vaxit, hvar sem sáit hafði verit. En um várit ofluðu menn sér frækorna, svá at flestir bæendr søru jarðir sínar, ok varð þat brátt árvænt.* Ísl. Fornr. 26: 243.

49 Ísl. Fornr. 29: 111; cf. Meylan 2022: 72.

50 *Ok þat hit mikla hof er þar stóð hafði hann eignat ótalligum guðum.* Ch. A20, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 193.

51 *Hann [Guðbrandr í Dala] var inn mesti vin Hákonar jarls; þeir áttu hof báðir saman, ok var því aldri upp lokit, nema þá er jarl kom þangat; þat var annat mest hof í Nóregi, en annat á Hlǫðum.* *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 12: 210.

52 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 12: 214. On the relation between Þorgerðr and Jarl Hákon, see McKinnell 2005: 81–85.

I compose even more praise about the famous son of Sigrøðr [= Hákon jarl]; I paid him the honor of the gods' reconciliation [POEM]; Þórr <god> sits in his chariot.⁵³

This stanza and other traditions indicate that Jarl Hákon had a sanctuary with an image of Þórr sitting in his carriage. *Vellekla's* information about *Einriða hofs lǫnd* "lands of the temple of Þórr" do the same. Several other sources report that Hákon worshipped Þorgerðr Hǫlgabrúðr in his sanctuaries. A sanctuary of Þorgerðr is for instance scribed in *Færeyinga saga* chapter 23, which is preserved in, for instance, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*.⁵⁴

Snorri never wrote a separate saga for Jarl Hákon. However, he frequently referred to him in *Haralds saga gráfeldar* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. Jarl Hákon's pagan background and his heathen identity is often emphasized there. He is also praised in several contemporary poems, which Snorri quoted in both *Heimskringla* and *Snorra Edda*. In these poems, the jarl is often related to Óðinn. In the genealogical poem *Háleygjatal*, composed by Eyvindr Finnsson (skáldaspillir) and quoted by Snorri,⁵⁵ the forefathers of the jarl are counted back to the divine generations and Óðinn. The poem states in stanza 2 thus:

*Þann skjaldblætr
skattfæri gat
Ása niðr
við járnviðju,
þás þau mætr
í manheimum
skatna vinnr
ok Skaði byggðu,
sævar beins,
ok sunu marga
öndurdís
við Óðni gat.*

The shield-worshipped kinsman of the Æsir <gods> [= Óðinn] begat that tribute-bringer [JARL = Sæmingr] with the female from Járnviðr, when those renowned ones, the friend of warriors [= Óðinn] and Skaði [giantess], lived in the lands of the maiden of the bone of the

53 SkP 3: 281.

54 This sanctuary is described as having glass windows in *Færeyinga saga*: *Þar var fjöldi goða. Glergluggar váru margir á húsinu, svá at hvergi bar skugga á. Kona var þar innar húsit um þvert, ok var hon vegliga búin. Jarl kastaði sér niðr fyrir fætr henni ok lá lengi; ok síðan stendr hann upp ok segir Sigmundi at þeir skulu færa henni fórn nokkura ok koma silfri því á stólinn fyrir hana; . . .* See *Færeyinga saga*, ch. F23, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 50–51. We may see a similar description of Hákon jarl and Þorgerðr's sanctuary in *Jómsvíkingasaga* ch. 34, Ísl. Fornr. 33: 120–125.

55 The introduction is only quoted in his *Edda*, while the other stanzas quoted here also appears in *Heimskringla*.

sea [(lit. “maiden-lands of the bone of the sea”) ROCK > GIANTESS => Jǫtunheimar “Giant-lands”], and the ski-goddess [= Skaði] bore many sons with Óðinn.⁵⁶

Snorri comments on this stanza in *Ynglinga saga* chapter eight thus:

Njǫrðr married a woman called Skaði. She would not have relations with him and later married Óðinn. They had many sons. One of them was called Sæmingr . . . Jarl Hákon inn ríki traced back his paternal ancestry to Sæmingr.⁵⁷

According to these passages, Jarl Hákon was thus praised for having Óðinn as his divine forefather via Sæmingr. Some jarls in *Háleygjatal* are, however, said to be descended from Freyr or Yngvi. Jarl Hákon Grjótgarðsson, for instance, is called *Freyrs óttungr* “Freyr’s descendant.” Snorri also stated in other passages that the Lade jarls descended from Yngvifreyr or Ingunarfreyr. Some scholars have therefore argued that Óðinn’s position at the top of the genealogical list is a sign of western European influence, that is, the Anglo-Saxon royal lists.⁵⁸ It has also been argued that Eyvindr applied a learned euhemeristic approach since he stated that Óðinn and Skaði lived in *Mannheimar*, “lands of men” (as read in MSS K and J2), instead of *Goðheimar*, “lands of gods”, which would have been their natural home.⁵⁹ Like the Anglo-Saxon authors, they argued, Eyvindr also interpreted the old deities as human beings. This has likewise been regarded as a sign of Western and Christian impact on the poem. However, it is not necessary to see any Anglo-Saxon influence on *Háleygjatal*. Even if Snorri made a euhemeristic interpretation of the Óðinn-Skaði myth, it is far from certain that Eyvindr also had this perspective. Admittedly Eyvindr stated that Óðinn and Skaði lived in *Mannheimar* according to two manuscripts. But we do not know how Eyvindr conceived the mythological topography and how he designated the different places located there.⁶⁰ In the recent Skaldic Poetry edition, further, Russell Poole read the name as *Manheimar*. Hence, he followed the reading of the manuscript Frisianus, meaning “the lands of the maiden (lit. ‘maiden-lands’)”. This interpretation solves the problem, since this name could be an element in a kenning meaning Jǫtunheimar. This place suits well as a residence for Skaði. The idea that Óðinn was regarded

⁵⁶ Poole in SkP 1: 199. Only nine whole and seven half stanzas of the poem are preserved. They appear in the manuscripts of *Fagrskinna*, *Snorra Edda* and *Heimskringla*.

⁵⁷ *Njǫrðr fekk konu þeirar, er Skaði hét. Hon vildi ekki við hann samfarar ok giptisk síðan Óðni. Áttu þau marga sonu. Einn þeira hét Sæmingr. . . . Til Sæmings talði Hákon jarl inn ríki langfeðgagyn sitt. Ynglinga saga*, in Ísl. Fornr. 26: 21–22.

⁵⁸ Bede, for instance, made Woden (Óðinn) into an ancestor of ancient British kings in genealogies. See Bede, 1,15. See also J. Turville-Petre 1978–1979: 63; Faulkes 1978–1979: 96.

⁵⁹ Cf. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson in *Heimskringla* I, Ísl. Fornr. 26, xxxii. Faulkes 1978–1979: 97–98.

⁶⁰ On *Man(n)heimar* in this context, see Steinsland 2011b: 30.

as the divine ancestor of the Lade jarls may very well be based on old native traditions from Trøndelag or Hálogaland.⁶¹ The skaldic poem *Vellekla*, for instance, reports that Jarl Hákon was called *Yggs niðr*, “Óðinn’s relative.”

In stanza 2 of *Háleygjatal*, Óðinn is designated with the kennings *skjaldblætr niðr ása* “the shield-worshipped kinsman of the æsir” and *vinr skatna* “the friend of warriors.” It is stated that he begat Sæmingr (*skattfæri* “tribute bringer” = jarl), that is, the mythical father of the Lade-jarls, on Skaði, who is designated *járnviðja* “the female from Járnviðr” and *øndurdís* “ski-goddess.” According to Gro Steinsland, this foundation myth resembles the one found in *Ynglingatal* and *Ynglinga saga*. The ruling families described in these poems both derived from a peculiar marriage between a god and a giantess.⁶² I agree with Steinsland that this type of marriage is probably evident in the genealogy of the Lade jarls. However, it is not completely safe to place the giantess Gerðr as a mythical mother at the upper end of the “Ynglinga genealogy.”⁶³ Anyhow, there is no doubt that both *Ynglingatal* and *Háleygjatal* clearly indicate that both the “Ynglinga kings” and the Lade jarls claimed that their families were of divine descent on the male side.

The connection between Jarl Hákon, Óðinn and this pagan ruler ideology is expressed elsewhere in Snorri’s texts. Sometimes it is applied to accounts about Hákon’s resistance against the Christian rulers coming from Denmark and the battle at Hjørungavágr. In *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri recounts illustrating kennings and *heiti* for Óðinn. After this he also gives examples where earth is called the wife of Óðinn in poetry. In this context, he quotes some stanzas of Hallfrøðr Ótarrsson’s *Hákonardrápa*, where Jarl Hákon’s victory at Hjørungavágr is expressed in metaphorical terms with a mythical symbolism which includes Óðinn and other pagan-mythical beings:

*Sannyrðum spenr sverða
snarr þiggjandi viggjar
barrhaddaða byrjar
biðkvón und sik Þriðja.*

The swift receiver of the horse of the breeze [SHIP > SEAFARER] draws under himself the foliage-haired waiting wife of Þriði <= Óðinn> [= Jörð (*jörð* “earth”)] by means of true words of swords [BATTLE].

61 Cf. Wessén 1924: 34–35; F. Ström 1981: 447; Steinsland 2011b: 32–33, 39.

62 See Steinsland 1991. It is somewhat uncertain whether we should classify Skaði as a giantess. See Näsström 1995: 51–52; Simek 2006: 286–287. In a genealogical sense she is undoubtedly a giantess, since she is the daughter of Þjazi. The denomination of her in *Háleygjatal*, *járnviðja*, also indicates that she was a giantess. Steinsland 2011b: 29.

63 See Clunies Ross 2014; Sundqvist 2002: 35–38, 166–168; 2016a: 63–94.

*Því hykk fleygjanda frægjan
— ferr Jǫrð und menþverri
útran — eina at láta
Auðs systur mjök traudan.*

Because of that I think the renowned flinger [of riches] [GENEROUS MAN] is very reluctant to let Auðr's <giant's> sister [= Jǫrð (jǫrð "earth")] alone; Jǫrð <goddess> submits to the glorious ring-diminisher [GENEROUS MAN].

*Rǫð lukusk, at sá síðan
snjallráðr konungs spjalli
átti eingadóttur
Ónars viði gróna.*

The marriage was concluded, so that shrewdly-advising king's intimate [RULER] afterward possessed the only daughter of Ónarr <giant> [= Jǫrð (jǫrð "earth")], grown with forest.⁶⁴

In this poem the jarl's conquest of Norway is described symbolically as a marriage between the earthly ruler and the wild land, here represented as a mythical female. The ruler must tame his land/bride with the sword. The historical event at Hjørungavágr is transposed to a mythical scene creating a cosmic symbolism.⁶⁵ It seems as if Hákon here is identified with Óðinn. He celebrates a wedding with this mythical woman, that is, the personification of the country. Óðinn is here called by his *heiti* name Þriði.⁶⁶ The land/mythical female is invoked with the kenning "Þriði's beloved, whose hair is the foliage of pine trees," emphasizing the correspondence between earthly and mythical levels. A similar symbolism appears in the kennings "Ónarr's forest-grown only daughter" and "Báleygr's (Óðinn's) broad-faced bride" also referring to the land of Norway as a mythical female.⁶⁷ This symbolism also occurs in other ancient skaldic poems.⁶⁸ In *Háleygjatal* stanza 12 we find a metaphor reflecting how Jarl Hákon takes possession of the land:

⁶⁴ Heslop in SkP 3: 219–224.

⁶⁵ F. Ström 1981; 1983; Steinsland 1991; 2011b: 30–32; Sundqvist 2016a. See also Kate Heslop's carefully treatment in SkP 3: 212–215, 219–224. John McKinnell (2022) discusses the symbolic connection between earth and body in Old Norse Poetry, including *Hákonardrápa*.

⁶⁶ Falk 1924: 30.

⁶⁷ Ónarr, according to *Skáldskaparmál*, is a mythical being of the giant race. He is Nátt's second husband and the father of Jǫrð. Báleygr is a *heiti* of Óðinn. Falk 1924: 4.

⁶⁸ Fragments of this symbolism appear in some of the most ancient skaldic poems. In Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa* st. 5 the earth (land) is depicted as *Hergauts vina* "Óðinn's mistress, lady-friend." The land is called *Svǫltnis ekkja* "Óðinn's woman, wife" in Þjóðólfr's *Haustlǫng* (st. 15) and in a *lausavísa* (23) by Egill it is designated *Bors niðjar beðja* "Óðinn's bedfellow."

*Þeims allt austr
til Egða býs
brúðr valtyís
und bægi liggj.*

Under whose arm the bride of the slaughter-god [= Óðinn => Jorð (*jorð* “land”)] lies all the way east to the territory of the Egðir.⁶⁹

The erotic undertones in this stanza are also quite obvious.⁷⁰

There have been some objections to the idea that this mythical marriage was part of a genuine Scandinavian and pagan ideology. Dag Strömbäck has shown that the symbolism in *Hákonardrápa* has similarities to the Christian notions of Jerusalem as the bride of God seen in the Old Testament and “the idea of Christian bishop’s ‘marriage’ with his church, in which his episcopal ring is usually regarded as symbolic.”⁷¹ Folke Ström, on the other hand, has referred to pre-Christian Irish traditions which mention that the king celebrated a symbolic wedding feast (Old Irish *banais ríghí*) with his country at the inauguration ceremony.⁷² In Ireland, the land was represented by a goddess, sometimes called Medb (Medhbh). According to Ström a similar kind of *hieros gamos* appears in *Hákonardrápa* where Jarl Hákon (identified as Óðinn) ritually married a local fertility goddess called Þórgerðr Hǫlgabrúðr.⁷³ This *hieros gamos* was part of an old local ruler ideology used by the conservative jarls of Lade in Trøndelag and Hålogaland.

There are thus reasons to believe that *Hákonardrápa* reflects structures of an ancient mythic-cosmic ruler ideology in Trøndelag. By transferring the historical event of Hákon’s conquering of Norway to a mythical scene, and by identifying the ruler with Óðinn and the land with a female mythical being, the perspective is moved from the microcosmos to the macrocosmos. The local perspective thus fades and the ruler’s activity acquires a cosmic dimension. Placing the jarl in a mythical context was an effective means in homage poetry and was an instrument of political propaganda for Jarl Hákon.⁷⁴ Norway, whose cult places were ravaged by the Christian sons of Gunnhildr and were also under Danish influ-

69 Poole SkP 1: 211.

70 Sundqvist 2016a: 83–85.

71 Strömbäck 1975: 70, note 1.

72 Ström 1954; 1981 and 1983. On the Irish traditions, see e.g., F. J. Byrne 1973: 16–17; MacCana 1970: 117–121. Critically considered by Maier 1994: 163–164.

73 Roberta Frank (1978: 62–64) has suggested that the *hieros gamos* myth behind *Hákonardrápa* concerns Freyr and Gerðr. This idea is rejected by F. Ström (1983: 72) since the poem obviously refers to Óðinn. In a later study Frank (2007) is skeptical of the *hieros gamos* theory when applied to Old Norse skaldic traditions. See also McKinnell 2022.

74 Cf. F. Ström 1981; 1983. See also Steinsland 1991.

ence, has now turned into a kind of pagan paradise, where ancient laws and customs still rule.⁷⁵

In Snorri's text the pagan jarl Hákon is described as a representative of the old society and an ancient ruler ideology, who opposed a Christian power as represented by the sons of Gunnhildr. Jarl Hákon protected the old religion as well as the traditional political order where power was concentrated to the assemblies and local chieftains. Christian royal power implied in Snorri's view a more centralized kingship marked by coercion and oppression, while paganism was related to an autochthonous and more limited rulership.⁷⁶ As noticed above, in connection to Jarl Hákon's death Snorri made an interpretation which may have been influenced on a theological view of history, that is, that pagan worship and heathen worshippers had now played out their roles and thus must be condemned, and that paganism must be replaced by Christianity. In the following narratives of *Heimskringla*, it seems as if Snorri also has less sympathy for the pagans in Trøndelag or treats them more neutrally.

9.4 Óláfr Tryggvason confrontations with the pagan farmers

Snorri narrates in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* that King Óláfr Tryggvason first landed on Moster in Sunn-Horðaland and went north along the coast.⁷⁷ Snorri does not describe any religious conflicts in Western Norway. He reconciled with the peasants at Gulaping. King Óláfr first met with strong opposition when he came to Trøndelag. According to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chapters 65–71, King Óláfr had assembled a great force as he arrived there. He summoned an assembly and announced all eight *fylki*-districts at Frosta. The farmers changed the assembly summons into a call to arms and called out both free men and bondmen all over Trøndelag. When the king arrived at Frosta, the mob of farmers came there fully armed. When the assembly was opened the king spoke to the people and asked them to accept Christianity. But when he had been talking a little while, the farmers shouted and told him to shut up, saying that otherwise they would attack him and drive him away. “We did this,” they said, “to Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri

⁷⁵ Sundqvist 2016a: 83–85.

⁷⁶ Cf. Meylan 2022: 76, 91, 141.

⁷⁷ The following paraphrase is based on the translation of Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011].

when he made the same request for us, and we pay no more regard to you than to him.⁷⁸ And when the king saw the frenzy of the farmers, and also that they had a great army he changed his tack and entered into an agreement with the farmers. The king spoke:

‘I want to agree together, as we have previously settled things between us. I want to go to where you hold your greatest worship and see your practices there. Then we shall hold discussions about the practices, which ones we want to have, and then all come to an agreement about it.’⁷⁹

After this mild speech, the farmers attitude was softened. It was decided that there should be a midsummer festival in Mære, and all the leaders would attend, as was the custom. And the king would also be there. Járn-Skeggi from Upphaugr in Yrjar had spoken first at the assembly against the king. He was the foremost of the farmers in opposing Christianity.

The development of this account has already been paraphrased in 6.2 so it will not be repeated here, except the end of the story. When Óláfr came to Mære, Járn-Skeggi said that the farmers wanted the same as before, that the king should not break their law (*at konungr bryti ekki lög*). They wished that Óláfr offered sacrifices, as other kings had done before him. The king went into the temple and struck Þórr off his pedestal, while the king’s men outside before the *hof*-building killed Járn-Skeggi. After Járn-Skeggi’s death no leaders among the farmers dared to oppose the king. All people in Trøndelag were then baptized.

Snorri’s most important source for the episode in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* was *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd Munk Snorrason*.⁸⁰ Oddr’s account on King Óláfr meeting with the pagan chieftains of the Þrændir at Frosta and Mære is much more compressed compared to Snorri’s narrative. But it seems as if the basic plot is the same in both texts though Snorri’s account lacks references to God’s interventions. The king becomes less of a miracle worker with Snorri, but more of a skilled strategist and politician.⁸¹

78 ‘Gerðu vér svá,’ *sögðu þeir*, ‘við Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstra, þá er hann bauð oss þvílík boð, ok virðu vér þik eigi meira en hann.’ Ísl. Fornr. 26: 314. Trans. and the following paraphrased text is built on Finlay & Faulkes 2017 [2011].

79 ‘Ek vil, at vér gerim sætt vára, svá sem vér hofum áðr lagt með oss. Vil ek fara þar til, er þér hafði it mesta blót yðvart ok sjá þar siðu yðra. Tökum þá ráð várt um siðu, hverja vér viljum hafa, ok samþykkjum þá þat allir.’ Ísl. Fornr. 26: 314.

80 On Oddr’s version of this account, see 6.1.1 above, that is, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd munk Snorrason*, chs S46, A56, Ísl. Fornr. 25: 279. Cf. Flateyjarbók 1: 320. Snorri did not quote any skaldic verses in this passage. See Meulengracht Sørensen 1991b: 239–241; Steinsland 2000: 114–116.

81 Cf. Steinsland 2000: 115; Bagge 2019: 62.

9.4.1 Motives for the pagan opposition against King Óláfr Tryggvason

The pagan peasants in Trøndelag expressed their opposition to the king's Christian mission in connection with the assembly at Frosta in both Snorri's and Oddr's versions. According to Snorri, the king must not break the old law (*at konungr bryti ekki lög*); he must perform his traditional duties in the pagan cult, and sacrifice on their behalf at the public worship as previous kings had done. There is also another motive in Snorri's text, which is related to the fare of tyranny. The peasants did not want to be forced into conversion by the king. They feared that the transition meant that the chieftains ended up in a subordinate position to the king.⁸² It seems as if the chieftains and the powerful farmers wanted local independence and that their voices were still counted at the assembly.⁸³ Just like previous kings' authority, this ruler's power should also be restricted by their will. Therefore, the farmers seem hostile towards the king when he summoned them to an assembly at Frosta with his force. They changed the assembly summons into a call to arms. The mob of farmers was thus fully armed when meeting the king.

It has been noticed that Oddr described King Óláfr positively, while Jarl Hákon and the pagans are depicted with negative terms. Opposite to Snorri, Oddr defended a centralized Christian kingship as manifested by King Óláfr. Snorri wrote in favor of a more traditional society and rulership, where the local chieftains could exercise power by means of the assemblies.⁸⁴ When the king announced Christianity in a mild way, according to Oddr, the pagan chieftain Járn-Skeggi replied threateningly: "If you do not refrain from this preaching, you will have the same fate as Jarl Hákon,"⁸⁵ that is, he would be killed in an ignoble way by a servant. The text intimates that the pagan peasants were reluctant to embrace Christianity. The motives that Snorri demonstrates are however not explicitly found in Oddr's version. The reason why King Óláfr finally defeated the pagan resistance of the Þrændir was his superior military power apparatus, according to both Oddr and Snorri. In both versions the pagan cult leader Járn-Skeggi was killed by the king's retinue.

⁸² Cf. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2008: 71.

⁸³ Cf. Meylan 2022: 130–131.

⁸⁴ Meylan 2022: 168–172.

⁸⁵ *Ef þú lætr eigi af þessum boðum, þá munt þú hafa farar Hákonar jarls.* Ch. A56 in Ísl. Fornr. 25: 278.

9.5 Óláfr Haraldsson's encounter with the pagan Þrændir

Snorri reports in *Óláfs saga helga* that after King Óláfr Haraldsson was made king 1015 he travelled to Niðaróss.⁸⁶ The king was then told the news from inland Trøndelag that the farmers had held well attended banquets at the winter nights. There were great drinking feasts and all the toasts were dedicated to the æsir in accordance with ancient custom. Cattle and horses were slaughtered and the altars were stained with blood and worship performed and the prayer offered for a better harvest. It was added that everyone thought it obvious that the gods had been angry that the Háleygir had turned to Christianity. When the king had learned of these events, he sent men inland into Trøndelag summoning to him the farmers that he chose to name.

There was a man named Qlvir at Egg. He was a powerful man and of a noble family. He was the leader of a group of men travelling to the king on behalf of the farmers. When they met the king, he challenged them with these accusations. Qlvir replied on behalf of the farmers, denying that these banquets had taken place. They celebrated only neighborhood feasts or social drinking and in some cases gatherings of friends. Qlvir was skillful and bold with his speech and rebutted the accusations against the farmers. The farmers were given leave to return home.

Later that winter the king was told that the Inn-Þrændir were gathering in large number at Mære and there were great sacrificial banquets there at midwinter. They were worshipping for peace and good winter. The king then sent a message inland summoning the farmers out to Niðaróss. Qlvir undertook this journey as a representant of the farmers and went straight away to the king. When they met, the king accused the farmers of celebrating midwinter sacrificial feasts. Qlvir replied that they were not guilty of this offence. He stated that they had celebrated *jól* banquets and drinking parties in many districts. At Mære there is a large center and many buildings, and extensive settlements round about. People find it good to drink together there. The king answered little and looked rather displeased, but he told Qlvir to turn back home.

Later, after Easter, King Óláfr asked one of his stewards (*ármaðr* sg.) in Verdælir, named Þóraldi, if it was true that the Inn-Þrændir still performed heathen sacrifices. Þóraldi answered that nearly all the people in the interior of the Trondheim district were pure heathens in their belief, and that only a few were baptized:

⁸⁶ The following account is a summarized text of *Óláfs saga helga* chs 107–110, based on the translation made by Finlay & Faulkes 2014. According to Bjarni Aðalbjarnarsson (1979: lxxxix) the events in Trøndelag took place around 1020–1021.

And it is their custom to hold a sacrificial feast in the autumn to welcome the winter, another at midwinter, and a third in the summer to welcome the summer. Involved in this are some Eynir and Sparbyggvar, Verdæliir, Skeynir. There are twelve of them that are leaders in the sacrificial feasts; and now this spring Qlvir has to conduct the feast. He is now hard at work at Mære, and all the supplies that are needed for the feast are being brought there.⁸⁷

As the king heard this he summoned his troops and ordered them to board the ships:

The king came during the night to Mære. Then a house there was straightly surrounded. Qlvir was captured in it, and the king had him and many others killed. But the king confiscated all the provisions for the feast and had them carried off to his ships, and all the property there too, both house furnishing and clothes and valuables that people had brought there, and shared it out to his men like spoils of war. The king also had the homes of the farmers that he thought had been most involved in these doings attacked. Some were captured and put in irons, though some managed to run away, and the property of many was confiscated.⁸⁸

Then the king summoned the farmers to a meeting. Since the king had many men they decided to swear obedience to the king and no resistance was made to him at that time. He converted all people to the right faith, placing priests there and consecrated churches.

Snorri's sources for *Óláfs saga helga* and the particular passage in chapters 107–110 are not quite clear.⁸⁹ Snorri may well have known the *Oldest saga of St Óláfr* (c. 1180) or a text similar to it when writing his *Separate Saga of St Óláfr*.⁹⁰ The *Oldest saga of St Óláfr* is only preserved in six fragments from about 1225, but it is believed to be closely related to the *Legendary saga of St Óláfr* (c. 1200). The story about Qlvir at Egg does not appear in the *Legendary saga*, however. Nor is it

87 ' . . . En þat er siðr þeira at hafa blót á haust ok fagna þá vetri, annat at miðjum vetri, en it þriðja at sumri, þá fagna þeir sumri. Eru at þessu ráði Eynir ok Sparbyggvar, Verdæliir, Skeynir. Tólf eru þeir, er fyrir beitask um blótveizlunnar, ok á nú Qlvir í vár at halda upp veizlunni. Er hann nú í starfi miklu á Mærini, ok þangat eru til flutt ǫll fǫng, þau er til þarf at hafa veizlunnar.' Ísl. Fornr. 27: 180. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2014.

88 *Konungr kom um nóttina inn á Mærina. Var þar þegar sleginn mannhringr um hús. Þar var Qlvir hǫndum tekinn, ok lét konungr drepa hann ok mjök marga menn aðra. En konungr tók upp veizla þá alla ok lét flytja til skipa sinna ok svá fé þat allt, bæði húsbúnað ok kleðnað ok gripi, er menn hǫfðu þangat flutt, ok skipta sem herfangi með mǫnnum sínum. Konungr lét ok veita heimferð at bóndum þeim, er honum þóttu mestan hluta hafa at átt þeim ráðum. Váru sumir hǫndum teknir ok járnsettir, en sumir kómusk á hlaupi undan, en fyrir mǫrgum var féit upp tekít. Ísl. Fornr. 27: 180–181. Trans. Finlay & Faulkes 2014.*

89 Snorri did not quote any skaldic verses in this passage. On Snorri's sources for *Óláfs saga helga* in general, see e.g., Bagge 1991: 14–21; 2019: 39–44.

90 Finlay & Faulkes 2014: x. Cf. Dillmann 2022: 19–30, 727–729.

mentioned in *Ágrip* or *Fagrskinna*. But it is attested to in the *Separate Saga of St Óláfr*.⁹¹ The *Separate Saga of St Óláfr* was written by Snorri before he wrote *Heimskringla* (1230) where *Óláfs saga helga* was incorporated. About 1220 the priest Styrmir Kárason wrote a *Lífssaga Óláfs hins helga*, which is mostly lost. Some fragments of it are preserved in the compilation *Flateyjarbók*. In *Flateyjarbók*, the tradition about Ólvir is mentioned.⁹² Styrmir's text was probably Snorri's main source for *Óláfs saga helga*.⁹³ It is possible that Snorri also used this text for the passage about Ólvir, but we cannot be sure. Perhaps Snorri used an oral tradition,⁹⁴ or less likely invented it as a background for the more extensive account on Kálfr Árnason, who married Ólvir's widow. Snorri's account thereby explains how Kálfr became the new leader at the farm Egg(e), close to Steinkjer.

9.5.1 The negative description of the pagan Þrændir

If we compare the description of the pagan Þrændir in *Óláfs saga helga* with the image of them in *Hákonar saga góða* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* there are quite big differences. In *Óláfs saga helga* the reason why the Þrændir stick to their pagan traditions are not explained. They are presented as almost stupid and gullible, and they completely lack a strategic thinking regarding the secrecy of the pagan cult. The farmers act like disobedient children who deny their mischief for their father, that is, King Óláfr, with lies. The king is wise and strict and he sees through the lies of his subjects. He is also godly and severely punishes those who do not adhere to Christianity. King Óláfr is strategic and systematic in his missionary work as he travels from district to district and preaches about Christianity. The sympathy that Snorri showed for the pagan farmers in *Hákonar saga góða* is totally gone in *Óláfs saga helga*. In *Óláfs saga helga* the differences between the pagan actors and the Christians are more stereotypical and polarized as bad and good, wrong and right etc. Snorri's view of history may have influenced his depictions. It seems as if something happened when Jarl Hákon died in *Heimskringla*.⁹⁵ Gro Steinsland argued that the passage about his death was a key to understanding Snorri's interpretation of the conversion of Norway.⁹⁶ This is also in line with Gerd Wolfgang Weber's

91 *Den store saga om Olav den hellige*, ed. Johnsen & Jón Helgason 1941: 261–269.

92 *Óláfs saga hins helga* chs 136–137, *Flateyjarbók* 2: 184–187.

93 Cf. Aðalbjarnarsson 1979: viii–x; Holtmark 1981 [1956–1978]: col. 546–550; Finlay & Faulkes 2014: x.

94 Magnus Olsen (1926: 267–268) regards Ólvir at Egg as a historical person. Cf. Dillmann 2022: 728.

95 See quotation from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 50 above.

96 Steinsland 2000: 103–104, 120–121; cf. Bagge 1991: 198; 2019: 69–71, 118.

and Klaus Düwel's view of Snorri as a historian, that is, an author who applies models such as the "principle of prefiguration" (*interpretatio christiana typologica*) and the notion of a *religio naturalis* in his writings. During King Hákon's reign the farmers of Trøndelag were not yet mature Christians but lived in a state as precursor to the true religion. Therefore, the pagan Þrændir could be described with respect and sympathy, that is, as "noble heathens."⁹⁷ When St Óláfr appeared on the stage, Christianity had already had its breakthrough and the pagan faith had played its role. Only foolish ethnic groups remained in the old faith. Therefore, Snorri described the pagan people of Inn-Trøndelag at that time as simple and primitive.⁹⁸

What kind of historical conclusions can we draw from these narratives about the resistance of the pagans against Christianity in Trøndelag between c. 950 and 1020? Snorri's *Heimskringla* (c. 1230) is our main source, however, he based his stories on older sources, some prose texts, which may stem from the end of the twelfth century but also contemporary skaldic poems from the tenth century. When composing these narratives, Snorri probably applied historical models such as the "principle of prefiguration" and the notion of a universal *religio naturalis*. These models may have affected Snorri's description of the pagan farmers. That the Þrændir are described with more sympathy in *Hákonar saga góða* compared to the depiction of them in *Óláfs saga helga* is probably a result of these models.

Despite these fictional elements, the confrontation between the pagan Þrændir and royal power in these accounts may include some historical aspects. The oral tradition may have passed on the information that the Christian priests whom King Hákon had called to Norway were killed by the pagan chieftains and that churches in the country were burned down by them, just as *Ágrip* and *Heimskringla* recount. The negative attitude among the chieftains and farmers against Christianity in Trøndelag is thus probably part of a historical tradition. This attitude was most likely based on an aversion to the social and cultural changes that the new religion brought with it, in social life, justice, warfare, subsistence activities, fasting-days, and holidays when work was forbidden. Jarl Hákon and the pagan chieftains wanted to preserve the old law and the old religion, which together seem to reflect important values and desires, not only as discourses of those who wrote these texts during the thirteenth century,⁹⁹ but also as significant historical aspects of the Viking society. *Hákonar saga góða* and *Óláfs saga*

97 Cf. Lönnroth 1969.

98 Steinsland 2000: 120–121.

99 Meylan 2022: 136.

Tryggvasonar intimate that the traditional king was a necessary ritual intermediary between the people and the gods at the sacrifices. If the king did not perform his required ritual roles during sacrifices the Þrændir feared that the ritual was unsuccessful. In order to be a legitimate ruler and stay in office, the king must follow the old law and sacrifice to the gods on behalf of the pagan farmers and in such way produce *ár ok friðr* “a good year and peace” for them. It is possible that they also feared that conversion would imply a weakening of the collective power of the local and regional assemblies in favor of a more centralized Christian royal power. It seems as if the farmers at the assemblies wished that the king followed their will, at least in Snorri’s texts.¹⁰⁰

The resistance of the pagans ceased in Trøndelag, when the two military strong Christian kings Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson appeared on the scene. They brought military troops to this area which more or less forced the native peasants to give up their old religion. There are many indications thus that this took place around 995–1030. Archaeology can to a certain degree support that information (see 6.1).

100 Cf. Bagge 1991: 131; 2019: 51, 72, 82; Meylan 2022: 132–142.

10 The resistance of pagans in Iceland

Fredrik Paasche argued in his classical study *Møtet mellom hedendom och kristendom i Norden*, that a recurrent pattern could be seen in the sources referring to the conversion in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Northern Europe.¹ When the missionaries first arrived there, they were first kindly welcomed by the native groups, however, as soon as they preached Christianity at assembly places and attacked the Old Norse cult sites and ritual objects, they were met with active hostility and animosity. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson argued that a similar pattern can be seen in the encounter between pagans and Christians in Iceland.²

There are several sources on the early confrontations between pagans and Christians in Iceland.³ The most important and reliable source is Ari's *Íslendingabók* which was written c. 1122–1132 (see 6.2 above). Theodoricus monachus wrote in Latin his *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* shortly before 1180, but no later than 1187. It contributes occasionally with trustworthy stories on the conversion process in Iceland, however it is also marinated with a Christian tendency. The same tendency is also apparent in Oddr munkr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (c. 1190). It adds some information to the encounter between pagans and Christians in Iceland. *Kristni saga* (c. 1250) and the *Kristni þættir* in the compilation *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* report extensively about the first missionaries in Iceland. The relationship between these texts is complicated. Most likely *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* was based on *Kristni saga* unless both of them go back to a now lost common source, Gunnlaugr Leifsson's **Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* first written in Latin.⁴ *Kristni saga*, which appears in *Hauksbók*, is probably based on *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* was compiled soon after 1300. In addition to these texts, *Njáls saga* must also be mentioned.⁵ It was written around 1280 and resembles the accounts in *Kristni saga* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*.

1 Paasche 1958: 91–95.

2 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 74–76. Many scholars have discussed the conversion process in Iceland, see overview in Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2020: 1664, note 7; see also 6.2 above.

3 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 55–62.

4 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 12, 59–60; cf. Grønlie 2006: xxxii–xxxvii.

5 *Njáls saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 12: 255–272.

10.1 The confrontation between Christian missionaries and the pagans

10.1.1 Þorvaldr víðförlí and the gyðja Friðgerðr

According to the saga record, the Icelander Þorvaldr víðförlí Koðránsson undertook a mission in Iceland with a Saxon bishop called Friðrekr in the 980s. Sources indicate that they were not badly received when they started their activities. In *Kristni saga* it is stated “that the bishop and Þorvaldr travelled around the Northern Quarter, and Þorvaldr preached the faith to people because the bishop did not at the time understand Norse. And Þorvaldr preached God’s message boldly, but most people made little response to their words.”⁶ According to *Kristni saga* and the *Kristni þættir*, their activities took place between 981 and 986.⁷ It seems thus as if the pagans in the northern parts of Iceland were quite tolerant, since they could stay there for such long periods with their mission work.⁸ When Þorvaldr and the bishop started to preach the faith at the old assemblies and cult sites the confrontation with the pagans became harsh. In chapter two of *Kristni saga* it is stated thus:

Þorvaldr and the bishop went to the Western Quarter to preach the faith. They came to Hvammr during the Althing, to the home of Þórarinn fylsenni, and he was then at the assembly, but his wife Friðgerðr was at home with their son Skeggi. Þorvaldr preached the faith to people there, but meanwhile Friðgerðr was in the temple and sacrificed and each of them heard the other’s words, and the boy Skeggi laughed at them. Then Þorvaldr uttered this verse:

*Fór ek með dóm inn dýra,
drengr hlýddi mér engi;
gátum háð at hreyti
hlautteins, goða sveini.
En við enga svinnu
aldin rýgr við skaldi,
þá kreppi Guð gyðju,
gall um heiðnum stalla.*

6 Svá er sagt er þeir byskup ok Þorvaldr fóru um Norðlendingafjórðung, ok talaði Þorvaldr trú fyrir monnum því at byskup undirstóð þá eigi norrænu. En Þorvaldr flutti djarfliga Guðs erendi, en flestir men vikusk lítt undir af orðum þeira. Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 6. Trans. Grønlie.

7 *Kristni saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 3–48. There is a close relationship between *Kristni saga* chs 1–13 and the so called *Kristni þættir* (Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 149–172). On these texts, see e.g., Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 69–70. and Grønlie 2006: xxxiv.

8 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 75.

I preached the precious faith, no man paid heed to me; we got scorn from the sprinkler – priest’s son – of blood-dipped branch. And without any sense, old troll-wife against poet – may God crush the priestess – shrilled at the heathen altar.⁹

No one had themselves baptized as a result of their words in the Western Quarter, as far as is known, but in the Northern Quarter many people left off sacrifices and broke up their idols, and some refused to pay the temple tax.¹⁰

We can note that two textual timelines appear in the composition of this passage, one is related to the scribe who writes the prose tale in the middle of the thirteenth century, and another one which is connected to Þorvaldr’s contemporary *lausavísa*, that we can date to the end of the tenth century.

Similar versions of the saga text appear in the so called *Kristni þættir*, that is, short Christian stories on the conversion of Iceland. *Þorvaldr þáttur Víðförla I*, presents Friðgerðr with some details not mentioned in *Kristni saga*.¹¹ It is stated that she is Þórarinn bóndi’s *húsfreyja* and the daughter of Þorðr Bjarnarson from Höfði.¹² Þórarinn fylsenni was son of the powerful man Þorðr gellir, who is well-attested in reliable sources.¹³ The *þáttur* reports that Friðgerðr first received Þorvaldr and the bishop well at Hvammr. However when Þorvaldr started to preach to the people there, Friðgerðr sacrificed while she was indoors (*blótaði meðan inni*). It is also mentioned that no one had themselves baptized as a result of their words in the Western Quarter, but in the Northern Quarter many people left the worshipping of idols, pagan customs (*fyrir létu skurðgöðavillu ok allan heiðinn sið*) and some refused to pay the temple tax (*vildu eigi gjalda hofolla*). This *þáttur* also quotes Þorvaldr’s *lausavísa* with a few minor variations compared to the ver-

9 See *Kristni saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 9–10. Trans. Grønlie. This stanza is also attested in *Þorvaldr þáttur Víðförla I*, and *Þorvaldr þáttur Víðförla II*, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 73–74, 95. See also *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 3, 2000: 91. Cf. Skj. B1: 105, A1: 110.

10 *Þeir Þorvaldr ok byskup fóru í Vestfirðingafjórðung at boða trú. Þeir kómu í Hvamm um alþingi til Þórarins fylsennis, ok var hann þá á þingi, en Friðgerðr kona hans var heima ok sonr þeira Skeggi. Þorvaldr talaði þar trú fyrir monnum, en Friðgerðr var meðan í hofinu ok blótaði ok heyrði hvárt þeira orð annars, en sveinninn Skeggi hló at þeim. Þá kvað Þorvaldr þetta: . . . Ekki létu menn skirask af þeira orðum í Vestfirðingafjórðungi svá at menn viti þat, en Norðlendingafjórðungi höfnuðu margir men blótum ok brutu skurðguð sín, en sumir vildi eigi gjalda hofolla.* *Kristni saga* ch. 2, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 9–10. Trans. Grønlie.

11 *Þorvaldr þáttur Víðförla I*, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 73–74.

12 *Þorvaldr þáttur Víðförla I*, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 73–74 Þórarinn fylsenni was son of the powerful man Þorðr gellir, who is well-attested in reliable sources. *Kristni saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 9–10. See also e.g., *Íslendingabók* ch. 5, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 11–13; *Landnámabók* ch. S116, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 158.

13 *Kristni saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 9–10; *Íslendingabók* ch. 5, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 11–13; *Landnámabók* ch. S 116, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 158.

sion quoted in *Kristni saga*. Friðgerðr is also called *húsfreyja* in *Þorvaldr þátr Víðforla* II,¹⁴ which renders a text closely to *Þorvaldr þátr Víðforla* I. It also includes Þorvaldr's *lausavísa*.¹⁵

Þorvaldr's *lausavísa* informs us about two or perhaps even three pagan cult leaders at the local sanctuary of Hvammr, one female and perhaps two male cultic actors. In this *vísa* the concept *gyðja* is explicitly mentioned. This term designates a female equivalent of a *goði*. The term *goði* (sg.) is derived from Old Norse (n. pl) *goð*, "gods," thus indicating an original cultic function of these leaders.¹⁶ The etymology of the term *gyðja* thus also indicates an original relation to the gods, that is, a female cult leader or religious specialist.

Friðgerðr is not mentioned by name in the stanza, however the prose context indicates that she is the female designated *gyðja* in Þorvaldr's *vísa*. This stanza also states that Friðgerðr was shouting from the heathen "altars" or "platforms" (*gall um heiðnum stalla*). Even if the ritual context is not fully clear in the stanza, it seems as if the *gyðja* was performing sacrifices or some other type of religious ceremony at a ritual structure (*stallr/stalli*) of a sanctuary. This is also attested in the contextual prose: "Friðgerðr was in the *hof*-sanctuary and sacrificed (*blótaði*)."

It is highly likely that this pagan woman Friðgerðr mistreated the missionaries in some way and that she perhaps demonstratively performed the traditional rituals at the "platform," while the two Christian men preached about God to the pagans at Hvammr. The poet's expression "may God crush the priestess" (*þá kreppi Guð gyðju*) indicates this. She is also described as a *gýgr*. This term means "giantess, ogress, hag, sorceress" or "(large) female troll, grotesque female person from the underworld" in dictionaries and it has probably a pejorative connotation and a polemic discourse, when referring to Friðgerðr in the verse.¹⁷

According to Þorvaldr's *lausavísa*, Friðgerðr's and Þórarinn fylsenni's son, Skeggi—whose name is not mentioned in the verse—is called *hlautteins hreytir* and *goða sveinn*. Grønlie interprets the former kenning as "the sprinkler of blood-dipped branch," but I prefer to follow Jan de Vries and Klaus Düwel who interpreted it as "the one who cast lots," which indicates a divination context.¹⁸ The latter kenning referring to Skeggi is interpreted by Grønlie as "the priest's son." If

14 *Þorvaldr þátr Víðforla* II, Ísl Fornr. 15₂: 95.

15 *Þorvaldr þátr Víðforla* I, both MSS A (AM61 fol.) and B (AM53 fol.), Ísl Fornr. 15₂: 73–75.

16 On the etymology of *goði*, see above.

17 See e.g., ONP; Zoëga 2004 [1910]: 176.

18 Jan de Vries (1956–1957: §288) interprets the kenning: ". . . damit ist nicht gemeint "Spritzer des Opferblutes," sondern "Schüttler der Losstäbe." Düwel (1985: 31) translates it "Werfer, Zerstreuer, Austeiler des Losweiges."

this interpretation is correct Þórarinn was designated *goði* in this stanza.¹⁹ However, *goða sveinn* could also be interpreted “the servant of the gods.”

Þorvaldr states in the *lausavísa* that “we [the two missionaries] got scorn” by Skeggi. It seems thus that even Skeggi treated the missionaries badly during their visit. He probably also performed pagan rites in connection with the sanctuary that is indirectly mentioned in the verse through the term *stalli/stallr*. In the prose texts it is pointed out that he “laughed (*hló*) at them,” which probably means that he acted mockingly towards the Christian visitors.

The attempt to preach in this region (Western Quarter) seems to have been fruitless according to these sources. These Christians were met with mockery and scorn by the pagans. *Kristni saga* chapter four and *Þorvaldr þátrr víðforla* I, chapter six report that Þorvaldr also killed two men during the missions, because they had libelled him and the bishop with a verse:²⁰

*Hefir þörn borit
Byskup níu,
þeira er allra
Þorvaldr faðir.*

The bishop has borne nine children; Þorvaldr’s father of them all.

Kristni saga chapter four states thus after quoting the stanza:

And when Þorvaldr and the bishop wished to ride to the assembly at Hegranes, the heathens came to meet them and pelted them with stones so that they did not manage to get any further. After that they were made outlaws according to heathen laws.²¹

These missionaries’ activity was thus opposed and stopped both by the pagans on a local level by means of violence, but also by the heathen law that existed in Iceland according to these texts (see below).

10.1.2 Stefnir Þorgilsson’s mission and the law called *frændaskömm*

The Icelander Stefnir Þorgilsson’s mission, which took place c. 995 or 996, is described in *Kristni saga* and *Stefnis þátrr Þorgilsson*. According to *Kristni saga*

¹⁹ See Murphy 2018: 80.

²⁰ See also *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 3, 2000: 93.

²¹ *En er þeir Þorvaldr ok byskup vildu ríða á Hegranessþing, en heiðnir men fóru í móti þeim ok börðu þá grjóti svá at þeir náðu eigi fram at fara. Þar eptir gerðu men þá seka at heiðnum lögum.* Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 12. The libel (*nið*) above is also quoted in *Þorvaldr þátrr víðforla* I, ch. 6, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 79.

chapter six, King Óláfr Tryggvason sent Stefnir to his countrymen in Iceland, however he was not well-received by them: “But when he got to Iceland, then the people received him badly, and his kinsmen worst of all, because all people were then heathen in this country.”²² He preached the faith both in North and South. Eventually he desecrated pagan sanctuaries:

And he travelled boldly both north and south, and taught people the true faith, but they were not much moved by his teaching. And when he saw that it was not making headway, then he began to destroy temples and places of worship and to break up idols.²³

Then the Icelanders assembled a company of men, and Stefnir had to escape to Kjallarnes where he had his relatives. One of the pagans made a scornful verse about his ship, which was destroyed at Gufáróss by a storm:

*Nú hefir stafnvali[nn] Stefnis,
straumr ferr um hol knerri,
felliveðr af fjalli
fjallrænt brotit allan.
Heldr getu vér at valdi,
vera munu þond í lǫndum,
geisar á með ísl,
ásríki gny slíkum.*

Now Stefnir’s prow-falcon (sea streams through the hollow ship) is by fierce mountain flurry—fell weather—entirely destroyed. But we believe that—bonds must be in our land—such roaring (the river rages with ice) is ruled by the Æsir’s power.²⁴

In this stanza it is stated that the damage was caused by the divine powers of the Æsir (*ásríki*). The old gods (*þond*) are still in the Icelanders’ land. Whether this verse is inspired by Steinunn’s stanzas on Þangbrandr is uncertain.²⁵ According to Bo Almqvist these stanzas refer to separate events.²⁶ Anyhow, it seems as if

22 *En er hann kom til Íslands þá tóku menn illa við honum ok frændr hans verst, því at allr lýðr var þá heiðinn á landi hér.* Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 15. See also *Stefnis þátr Þorgilsson* ch. 2, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 105 and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 1, 1958: 310.

23 *En hann fór djarfliga bæði norðr ok suðr ok kenndi monnum rétta trú, en menn skipuðusk líttr við hans kenningar. Ok er hann sá at þat hafði engan framgang, þá tók hann at meiða hof ok hǫrga en brjóta skurðguð.* Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 16. Trans. Grønlie. See also *Stefnis þátr Þorgilsson* ch. 2, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 105.

24 Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 16. Trans. Grønlie. See further below. See also *Stefnis þátr Þorgilsson* ch. 2, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 106–107.

25 See below and Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 71.

26 Almqvist 1974: 20–22.

Stefnir's mission was met with fierce opposition from the pagans, who also taunted the missionary with a derogatory verse.

In the account on Stefnir it is mentioned that a specific law was applied by the pagans at the Alþingi, which was directed against Christians called *frændaskomm*.²⁷ In *Kristni saga* chapter six it says thus:

That summer at the Althing, it was made law that kinsmen of Christians who were closer than fourth and more distantly related than second cousins must prosecute them for blasphemy. That summer Stefnir was prosecuted for being a Christian. His kinsmen conducted the suit, because Christianity was then called a disgrace to one's family. The sons of Ósvífr the Wise, Þórólfr and Áskell, Vandráðr and Torráðr, prosecuted him, but Óspakr wanted no part in it.²⁸

Stefnir was thus prosecuted by his pagan relatives in accordance with the law. After that he left the country. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson thinks that the accounts in *Kristni saga* and *Stefnis þáttur Þorgilsson* on this legislation are based on historical information.²⁹ The reason why the family should prosecute their Christian relatives is probably to ensure that the property of the convict is kept in the family.³⁰ It is also possible that other people (that is, non-relatives) could bring charges of blasphemy if the relatives themselves did not act legally. Ari describes in *Íslendingabók* how Hjalti Skeggjason was made an outlaw on charges of blasphemy (see 6.2 above). It is not mentioned in Ari's text who brought charges against Hjalti, but other texts, such as *Kristni saga* chapter ten states that it was Runólfr Úlfsson goði.³¹ There is no evidence that Hjalti and Runólfr were relatives.³²

10.1.3 Þangbrandr and the pagan poetess Steinunn

Þangbrandr's mission in Iceland is perhaps the most well-known one (see 6.2 above). Ari states in *Íslendingabók* chapter seven that King Óláfr sent him to Ice-

²⁷ See e.g., Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 72–74.

²⁸ *Þat sumar á alþingi var þat í lög tekit at frændr inna kristnu manna skyldu sækja um þá guðlofstun, nánari en þriðja bræðra ok firnari en næsta bræðra. Þat sumar var Stefnir sóttur um kristni. Þá sök sóttu þeir frændr hans því at kristnin var þá kolluð frænda skomm. Synir Ósvífrs ins spaka, Þórólfr ok Áskell, Vandráðr ok Torráðr, sóttu hann, en Óspakr vildi engan hlut at eiga.* Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 16–17. Trans. Grønlie. See also *Stefnis þáttur Þorgilsson* ch. 2, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 105.

²⁹ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1999 [1978]: 74).

³⁰ Cf. Almqvist 1974: 15, note 10.

³¹ “Runólfr goði, son of Úlfr, son of Jøfrundr goði, took up that verse and prosecuted Hjalti for blasphemy” (*Undir þann kviðling tók Runólfr goði, sonr Úlfs Jørundarsonar goða, ok sótti Hjalta um goðgá*) Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 26. Trans. Grønlie. Cf. *Landnámabók* chs S367, H322, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 368; see also *Kristniðöð Þangbrands* ch. 2, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 141–142.

³² See Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 73.

land, where he preached Christianity to the people and baptized all those who accepted the faith. According to Ari, Þangbrandr's preaching and mission, were met with strong opposition among the pagan Icelanders. Ari also mentions that those who converted to Christianity were fewer than the pagans in Iceland. Þangbrandr's mission is also mentioned in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd Munk Snorrason*, *Kristni saga*, *Kristniboð Þangbrands* (in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*) and *Njáls saga*.³³ Some of these texts quote a couple of contemporary and scornful stanzas that the pagan poetess Steinunn made on Þangbrandr. She pointed out the weakness of Christ when Þangbrandr's ship drove out to sea and was wrecked:

*Þórr brá Þvinnils dýri
Þangbrands ór stað löngu,
hristi blakk ok beysti
brands ok laust við sandi.
Muna skið of sjá síðan
sundfært Atals grundar,
hregg því at hart tók leggja
hónum kennt í spónu.*

Þórr drew Þvinnill's animal, Þangbrandr's long ship, from land, shook the prow's horse and hit it, and hurled it against the sand. On sea the ski of Atall's land will not swim henceforth, for a harsh tempest sent by him has hewn it into splinters.

*Braut fyrir bjöllu gæti,
bønd meiddu val Strandar,
møgfellandi mellu
møstalls visund allan.
Hlífði ei Krístr þá er kneyfði
kólgu hrafn með stofnum,
lítt hykk ek at Guð gætti
Gylfa hreins it eina.*

Before the bell's keeper (bonds destroyed the beach's falcon) the slayer of giantess-son broke the ox of seagull's place. Christ was not watching, when the wave-raven drank at the prows. Small guard I think God held—if any—over Gylfi's reindeer.³⁴

³³ *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd Munk Snorrason* ch. A43 Ísl. Fornr. 25: 244–245; *Kristni saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 13–29; *Kristniboð Þangbrands* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 129–145 (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 2, 1961: 150–161). and *Njáls saga*, Ísl. Fornr. 12: 256–269.

³⁴ Text Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 24. Trans. Grønlie. See also *Kristniboð Þangbrands* 1, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 138–139.

In the former verse it is stated that Þórr moved Þangbrandr's ship from its place. He shook it and smashed it and struck it against the land. The ship after that will not be fit to sail. The latter stanza mentions that Þórr wrecked the ship of "the keeper of bell," that is, Þangbrandr. The gods (*bond*) moved the ship, while Christ was unable to protect it from disaster. These verses reflect a clear negative attitude to Christianity including Þangbrandr's mission work. *Kristni saga*, *Kristniboð Þangbrands* and *Njáls saga* mention also two libellous poets by name in connection to Þangbrandr, Vetrliði and Þorvaldr veili.³⁵

Lamponing was thus used as a weapon by the pagan poets when confronted by the Christian missionaries.³⁶ *Kristni saga* reports that Þangbrandr and Guðleifr killed both Vetrliði and Þorvaldr.³⁷ These records indicate that the confrontation between the Christians and the pagans in Iceland was sometimes harsh and resulted in violence and skirmishes.

10.2 The pagan party at Alþingi 999/1000

We have already investigated the conversion of Iceland in 6.2. Our main source for that process is Ari's *Íslendingabók*. It has already been quoted and paraphrased and will not be repeated here. In this section, I will mainly concentrate on "the pagan party" and their confrontation with the Christians at this important event.

10.2.1 The confrontation between pagans and Christians

There are some unclear factors in Ari's account on the Alþingi 999/1000, which need some kind of interpretation.³⁸ One such factor is how a battle was avoided when the Christians rode to Þingvellir. It is stated thus in *Íslendingabók* chapter seven: "And the heathens thronged together fully armed, and it came so close to them fighting that no one could foresee which way it would go." Ari does not tell any further on this event, however, other sources provide some information. The-

³⁵ Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 21; Ísl. Fornr. 12: 260–264; see also *Kristniboð Þangbrands* ch. 1, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 134–140. On these texts, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 66. See Þorvaldr's *lausavísa* below.

³⁶ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 65–66.

³⁷ See e.g., *Kristni saga* ch. 9, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 21–22. Also, *Njáls saga* ch. 102 (Ísl. Fornr. 12: 260 and 264) reports that they killed both skalds, Vetrliði and Þorvaldr.

³⁸ Cf. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 81–83.

odoricus monachus writes in his *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* (c. 1180) thus:

And when the host of heathens became aware of their arrival, the whole populace ran to arms, because they were of one mind in wishing to take their lives. However, by divine intervention they were so restrained that although it was only a tiny band of Christians who opposed them, they neither could nor dared do them any harm.³⁹

According to this text, the parties were prevented from colliding by a divine intervention, which was in favor of the Christians. Similar information appears in *Kristnitakan* chapter one “But by the grace of God the heathens took fright and dared not to attack.”⁴⁰ Both these texts are deeply marked by a Christian attitude and the notion of God’s miraculous intervention when the Christians in their mission were exposed to danger from the heathens. *Kristni saga* chapter 12 has an observation which is not as marked by the same ecclesiastical rhetoric as the texts just mentioned:

Then the heathens thronged together fully armed and it came very close to them fighting, and yet there were some who wished to prevent trouble, even though they were not Christians.⁴¹

It seems as if both Christians and pagans were keen to avoid violence. This information seems to be more reliable on this point than the information rendered in *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* and *Kristnitakan* about this, even if the information is not sufficient. It harmonizes with *Íslendingabók* chapter seven, where the Christian chieftain Síðu-Hallr and the pagan Lawspeaker Þorgeirr played a major part in the solution and the reconciliation between the two parties. It is likely that there were strong men in both parties that wanted a compromise, since they strived to maintain the peace on Iceland. Perhaps the pagans had

39 *Cernens igitur multitudo paganorum illos advenisse, occurrit plebs universa ad arma, volentes eos unanimiter vita privare; sed ita sunt divinitus coerciti, ut minima manu christianorum eis assistente nec possent nec auderent quicquam eis adversi inferre.* Ed. Storm 1880: 21. Trans. David and Ian Mcdougall.

40 *En með Guðs miskunn skaut heiðingjum skelk í bringu, ok þorðu þeir eigi á at ráða.* *Kristnitakan* ch. 1, Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 164. Trans. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 83. See also *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 2, 1961: 189.

41 *Þá hljópu inir heiðnu menn saman með alvæpni, ok hafði stórnærat þeir mundi berjask, en þó váru þeir sumir er skirra vildu vandræðum þó at eigi væri kristnir.* Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 31. Trans. Grønlie.

also received the information that King Óláfr had taken their relatives as prisoners, which motivated them to not attack the Christians.⁴²

10.2.2 Human sacrifices at Þingvellir?

In the second edition of his thesis *Under the Cloak*, Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson added a chapter designated “Human sacrifices at Þingvellir.” In this chapter he discussed the performance of human sacrifices which possibly took place during the critical period just before the conversion decision was made in 999/1000. These crisis rituals are indicated in *Kristni saga* and *Kristnitakan* in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, where it is mentioned that the pagans sacrificed humans in order to counteract the religio-political crisis, which arose when the Christians at the General Assembly claimed that Iceland must be converted officially. Since our major source *Íslendingabók* does not mention that these human sacrifices occurred during this assembly, it has occasionally been considered that these sacrifices constitute a fictional or literary motif with no historical background which was added at a late stage in the tradition.⁴³ Still some scholars have also accepted that the tradition on these human sacrifices is based on a historical background.⁴⁴ Before we enter the discussion on the reliability of these sources we must first describe how this motif is rendered in the texts.

The texts

Kristni saga (ch. 12) narrates that while the Lawspeaker Þorgeirr was under his cloak, the pagan party gathered to an assembly. Meanwhile the Christian party also held a meeting led by Gizurr and Hjalti:

The heathens then held a well-attended meeting and made a decision to sacrifice two people from each Quarter, and called on the heathen gods not to let Christianity spread throughout the country. Gizurr and Hjalti held another meeting with the Christians, and they said that they also wished to hold a sacrifice of as many people as the heathens. They said this: ‘Heathens sacrifice the worst people, and push them over cliffs and crags, but we shall make our selection on the basis of people’s virtues and call it a victory offering to our Lord Jesus Christ. We must therefore live better lives and be more careful to avoid sin than before, and Gizurr and I will come forward as the victory offering for our Quarter.’⁴⁵

⁴² Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 84.

⁴³ Cf. Ström 1942: 93–94; Hultgård 2002: 540–541; 2022a: 610.

⁴⁴ See e.g., Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 184–186. Critical to this interpretation is Wikström af Edholm 2020: 357–363.

⁴⁵ *Inir heiðnu menn höfðu þá stefnu fjölmenna ok tóku þat ráð at blóta tveimr mǫnnum ór hverjum fjórðungi ok hétu á heiðin guð til þess at þau léti eigi kristni ganga yfir landit. Þeir Hjalti ok*

The text mentions then those who wanted to offer themselves up for Christianity from the other Quarters.

The account in *Kristnitakan* is quite similar to *Kristni saga*, which indicates a connection between them. However, the victims of the pagan representatives are here referred to more briefly through Hjalti's speech. Indeed, the text also adds some details, which are not found in *Kristni saga*. Most of these additional elements resemble clearly descriptions often found in the hagiographic literature.⁴⁶ The text in *Kristnitakan* runs thus:

At that time, the heathens held a crowded meeting to decide what to do, how they should stand up against the opposition, and destroy this new Christian mission. They agreed that they would call on the gods, and choose two men from each quarter to be given the gods in the form of sacrifice so that they would prevent Christianity from taking over the country. But Gizurr and Hjalti became aware of this and called together all of the Christian people. Hjalti stood up and began speaking: 'We have heard from the meeting of our opponents that the heathens have promised to offer their gods as a sacrifice two men from each quarter in order that with the help of their false gods they will manage to destroy Christian morality. But in actual fact they give us an advantage with their devilish plan, an encouragement for the aid and health of their souls. In answer to this, we think it not unfitting that we Christians should choose an equal number of men on our behalf to give and worship our living true and blissful God. Not that we will give them physical death, but rather that they themselves are intended as a victory offering, bringing to death their physical lust and wrongful desires of the flesh. By fleeing the desires of the world, they will live calmly in this world in correct fashion and with temperance, regularly offering themselves in holy sacrifice to our Lord Jesus Christ with their good deeds, and will in this time join Him in eternal life in Heaven, because all those who prefer good will earn bliss. The heathens choose the worst people to give to their gods, and offer them in sacrifice with a horrible death which is just retribution for their ill deeds, pushing them off rocks or into gorges. But we, on the other hand, will choose those men that we think are the best in our land, and this choice group will undertake living sacrifice to sanctify, cleanse, and please God, in order that through their value all-controlling God in His mercy will allow none of His evil, envious enemies to gain strength against His followers of the one true faith, but rather destroy and wipe out all the devilish idols that have been worshipped . . .'⁴⁷

Gizurr áttu aðra stefnu við kristna menn, ok létusk þeir vilja hafa ok mannblót jafn fjölmenn sem inir heiðnu. Þeir mæltu svá: 'Heiðingjar blóta inum verstum mönnum ok hrinda þeim fyrir björg eða hamra, en vér skulum velja at mannkostum ok kalla sigrgjöf við Dróttinn várn, Jesum Christum. Skulu vér lifa því betr ok syndvarligarr en áðr, ok munu vit Gizurr ganga til fyrir várn fjórðung sigrgjafarinnar.' Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 34. Trans. Grønlie.

⁴⁶ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 189.

⁴⁷ *Á þeirri stundu áttu heiðingjar fjölmenna stefnu ok réðu ráðum sínum hversu þeir skyldi fá i móti staðit ok geta eytt þessu inu nýja kristniboði. Kom þat ásamt með þeim at þeir skyldi fast heita á goðin ok velja tvá menn ór hverjum fjórðungi landsins at fórnfæra goðunum til þess at þau léti eigi kristni ganga yfir landit. En er þeir Gizurr ok Hjalti urðu varir þessa, þá stefndu þeir þegar saman öllum kristnum mönnum. Stóð Hjalti upp ok tók sva til máls: 'Þat er oss flutt af stefnu várra motstöðumanna at heiðingjar hafa heitit at gefa guðum sínum til blóts tvá menn ór hverjum*

After Hjalti's speech, the people from the different Quarters, who wanted to offer themselves up for Christ were enumerated. Some pagan chieftains were also baptized after this speech.

Human sacrifices and the Christian polemic discourse

It seems as if these texts reflect some kind of crisis ritual performed in a problematic situation by the pagans, when their old religion and general way of life were threatened by the Christians at the General Assembly. The offering can be classified as votive sacrifice since the heathen assembly promises to give a magnificent sacrifice to their gods if they could stop the Christians from spreading their faith throughout the country. According to *Kristni saga*, “the pagans sacrifice the worst people” (*heiðningjar blóta inum verstum mǫnnum*), while *Kristnitakan* states that they “choose the worst people to give their gods” (*velja til ina verstu menn at gefa guðum sínum*). Perhaps the texts here refer to criminals or thralls when mentioning “the worst people.” The Christian reply is to express distancing from these human sacrifices and at the same time perform a kind of Christian reinterpretation of these rituals where representatives of the Christians are expected to follow a lifestyle that will fulfil God's will as a self-sacrifice.⁴⁸

Both texts are embossed by elements from the hagiographic genre, such as the dualistic perspective which displays the evil paganism, which includes brutal human sacrifices, in contrast to the good Christian faith. The pagans, further, sacrifice “the worst people,” while the Christian's “victory sacrifice” (*sigrgjöf*) are said to be chosen from the “best of men” (*at mannkostum*). These texts are thus

fjórðungi lands þessa, at þeir megi með fultingi sinna falsaðra guða eyða ok niðr brjóta kristiligt siðferði. En heldr satt at segja kostgæfa þeir með slíku fjándans ráði ok áeggjan at fyrirkoma hjálp ok heilsu sinna sálna. Þar í mót sýnisk oss eigi óviðrkvæmiligt at vér kristnir menn velim til jafn-marga menn af várri hálfu at gefa ok helga várum lifanda Guði, sonnum ok sælum, eigi til þess at vér veitim þeim líkamligan dauða, heldr at þeir sjálfir er til þessar sigrgjafar eru nefndir deyði með sér líkamliga löstu ok rangar girnðir holdsins. Flyjandi fjóstir heimsins lífi þeir mildliga með réttvísu ok hófsemi í þessi veröld, jafnan sik offrandi í helga forn várum herra, Jesú Kristó, með sínum góðum verkum, at þeir óðlisk um siðir með honum eilíft líf í himinríki, því öllu þar sælli sem þeir eru hér góðfúsari. Heiðningjar velja til ina verstu menn at gefa guðum sínum ok fórnfæra þá með herfiligum dauða ok þeim makligum fyrir illgørðir sínar, hrinda þeim fyrir björg eða í gjár. En vér skulum þar í mót velja þá menn er vér fám líkasta til góðs á váru landi, at þeira mannkostir geri þá lifandi fórn, helga, hreina ok Guði þægja, svá at fyrir þeira verðleika láti allsvaldandi Guð með sinni miskunn enga illsku ofundarfullra sinna óvina oflgask í gegn sínum rétttruðum mǫnnum, heldr at eyddri ok afmáðri allri dýrkan djöfulliga skurðgoða . . .’ *Kristnitakan* ch. 1 (15): 166–167). Trans. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson. See also *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 2, 1961: 191–193.

⁴⁸ Cf. Wikström af Edholm 2020: 359.

framed by a polemic discourse against the pagans which makes the reader suspicious. There is much to suggest that they are adorned with literary *topoi* and fictional elements that lack a real historical background. The function of human sacrifice in these stories could have been polemic and included in order to stigmatize the pagans.⁴⁹ Despite the awareness of these elements, some researchers have nevertheless considered that there might be a historical background to the human sacrifices mentioned in these texts. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, for instance, argued that the description of human sacrifices in both texts “is unbiased and almost wholly lacking in prejudice. It does not appear to have been written in order to condemn the heathens.”⁵⁰ He stated that it is likely that the author of *Kristni saga* really believed that human sacrifices took place at Þingvellir. This statement is however problematic since the information of human sacrifices is lacking in *Íslendingabók*, which the author of *Kristni saga* used as source. Both Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson and Klas Wikström af Edholm argued that the depiction of the human sacrifices in these accounts resemble other descriptions of such sacrifices in Iceland where pagans intensify their offerings as the crisis becomes more pronounced.⁵¹ According to *Skarðsárbók* and *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu* the pagans intended to sacrifice children and old people when times were hard. The late manuscript *Skarðsárbók* (seventeenth century), which includes a version of *Landnámabók*, mentions that “. . . some had old people killed and others incapable of looking after themselves, [they were] pushed off cliffs.”⁵² In this text it is not explicitly expressed that the actions were related to sacrifices to the gods. But it is mentioned that these actions were made when the people wanted remedy from the hard winter. According to *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu* chapter seven (thirteenth century), the people had a hard winter and they wanted to remedy the damage that had occurred with the help of promises to the gods. Ljótr hofgoði at Þverá made thus a promise that he “wanted the sacrifice to be given to the temple, and thought that children should be exposed and old people killed.”⁵³ There is also a *lausavísa* composed by Þorvaldr inn veili around the year 999 or 1000, perhaps concerning human sacrifice, whereby a sacrificial vic-

49 Cf. Hultgård 2002: 539–540; 2022a: 610.

50 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 191–193, 198.

51 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 192–194; Wikström af Edholm 2020: 359–363.

52 “. . . *sumir letu drepa gamalmenni oc omaga, oc hrinda fyrir hamra*. Text and translation quoted from Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 195.

53 *Vill Ljótr því láta heita, at gefa til hofs, en bera út börn ok drepa gamalmenni*. Ísl. Fornr. 10: 169. Trans. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 [1978]: 195. Jón Hnefill (1999 [1978]: 196–198) states that human sacrifices are mentioned in early Latin sources referring to Germanic religion. He also mentions that human sacrifices were carried out by the descendants of Þórólfr Mostrarskeggi in Western Iceland. See *Landnámabók* ch. S85, Ísl. Fornr. 1: 126 and *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 10, Ísl. Fornr. 4: 18.

tim, that is, the priest Þangbrandr, was supposed to have been pushed off cliffs in a similar way as the sacrifices described in *Kristni saga* and *Kristnitakan*:

*Úskelfum skal ek Úlfi
 einhendis boð senda,
 mér er við stála stýri
 stygglaust, syni Ugga,
 at geirhríðar gæðir
 Guðs varg fyrir argan,
 svá at við rogn of rigni,
 reki hann, en vér annan.*

To the unshakable Úlfr, Uggi's son (I have no hate for the wielder of steel), I send, straight out of hand, a message, that the spear-storm's strengthener drives out the spineless wolf of God to appease the divine powers, and we repulse the other.⁵⁴

The meaning of this stanza is far from clear. Some scholars have argued from the variant readings that Þorvaldr is urging Úlfr to push Þangbrandr off a cliff, perhaps as a sacrifice to the gods, while others have stated that he is to drive him from the land, either by outright violence or through verbal abuse.⁵⁵ In skaldic poetry the verb *reka* has usually the meaning “drive away, drive out,” which indicates that the latter interpretation is more likely.⁵⁶ Hence, we cannot say that Þorvaldr's stanza produces a clear support for the question about the ritual procedure for human sacrifices (pushing the victims off a cliff) in *Kristni saga* and *Kristnitakan*.⁵⁷ Whether these two latter texts reflect a historical event where human sacrifice was performed cannot be confirmed and the question must remain open. Anyhow, we may state that traditions and memories from the conversion in the year 999 or 1000 indicate quite clearly that it was not easy for the pagans to give up their old religion.

We may conclude that the available sources indicate a resistance among the pagans against Christianity in Iceland around the year of conversion. After being first well-received in the northern part of the country, the missionaries were met with resistance when they started to preach the faith at the old assemblies and cult sites. Mockery, but also minor violence appeared as weapons against the

⁵⁴ Text Ísl. Fornr. 15₂: 20. Trans. Grønlie. See also *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, vol. 2, 1961: 158.

⁵⁵ See overview in Grønlie 2006: 64.

⁵⁶ Cf. Weber 1968.

⁵⁷ Cf. Wikström af Edholm 2020: 363.

Christians, while the pagan poets used lampooning. Sources report that a specific law for blasphemy was applied at the Alþingi, which was directed against Christians called *frændaskómm*. This information may be built on a historical tradition, since it is intimated in Ari's *Íslendingabók*, which is probably reliable.

Ari's account about the process at the General Assembly 999/1000 reports that when the Christians approached Þingvellir the heathens thronged together, and it came so close to them fighting. The fight was, however, avoided. Some ecclesiastic sources mention that this was an intervention by God when the heathens took fright and dared not to attack. Other sources indicate that both Christians and pagans were keen to avoid violence, since they strived to maintain the peace in Iceland. Perhaps the pagans had also received the information that King Óláfr had taken their relatives as prisoners, which motivated them to not attack the Christians. This information may also be built on historical grounds.

Whether the representatives of the pagan party turned to human sacrifices when put under pressure by the Christians at the General Assembly has been debated. Two late sources report on such rituals. Since this information is characterized by a hagiographic tendency and it is lacking in the oldest text describing the assembly process 999/1000 (*Íslendingabók*), it must be regarded as most uncertain that these rituals really took place. The mere emergence of this tradition testifies, however, that the memory of conversion in Iceland was perceived as difficult among the pagan groups.

Since the important decision regarding the transition to Christianity was made at the General Assembly (Alþingi), that is, at the institution that was traditionally used to decide important issues, it met with almost no opposition from the pagan party. Due to these circumstances, the transition seems to have been a quite peaceful process there.

11 The resilience of pagans: A comparative perspective

In this chapter the pagan resilience against Christians in Sweden, Norway and Iceland will first be compared. The following questions will be focused on in this part of the investigation: Is it possible to find differences between the resistances and revolts of pagans in the three different regions, and in such cases, why do these differences occur? Are there similarities? Why did the resistances finally collapse in these areas? When discussing these rebellions, resistances, and the religious ideology used by the actors, a theoretical model developed by Bruce Lincoln will then be applied, including the concepts of religions of the status quo, resistance and revolution.

11.1 Similarities and differences

It seems as if the resistances of pagans in Sweden and Norway have some similarities. In both countries these oppositions were related to groups appearing in certain geographic areas which also included important public sanctuaries. These cult places had a regional or even over-regional significance. In Sweden the resistance was strong in the central and northern parts of the Lake Mälaren area, that is, the core of old Svetjud. The most significant pagan sanctuary there was located in Uppsala, which seems to have existed until c. 1060–1080. In Norway the resistance of pagans was strong in Trøndelag, where two important sanctuaries were located at Lade and Mære. The written sources attest to a struggle between Christian kings and the pagan peasants in this area from the time of Hákon góði until the reign of Óláfr Haraldsson, when the old religion gradually disappeared, around 1020–1030.

It is further probable that certain elite groups or dominant social fractions lived close to these important sanctuaries in both Svetjud and Trøndelag. These elite groups were eager to maintain pagan cult at these chief sanctuaries. Most likely King Blótsveinn belonged to this elite in Svetjud. It is most probable that he and the social groups that supported him had connections to the important cult place in Uppsala. These groups may have controlled the pagan sanctuary there and also used it for political reasons. In Trøndelag the jarls Hákon and his father Sigurðr protected the old cult at the ruler site of Lade. A cooperation of local chieftains from both Inn- and Ut-Trøndelag, controlled the communal public cult

site in Mære.¹ Most likely they were also supported by the Lade-jarls during the second half of the tenth century for doing that.

The Old Norse religion in Svetjud and Trøndelag was most likely related to old political structures, where the pagan royal power was restricted by the assembly community. As noted above, the king was probably in both countries considered as a *primus inter pares*. The social fractions, which protected and maintained the pagan sacrificial cult in Uppsala, Lade and Mære actually defended the old pagan society, where power was related to the local and regional assemblies. Most likely the pagan groups in Svetjud and Trøndelag wanted to maintain the old way of living, concerning, for instance, social life, festival calendar, justice, ownership, warfare, subsistence activities and farming customs. They wanted to work on the fields as usual in the weeks and not celebrate Christian holidays and Sundays with mandatory rest and observing feasts. The pagan peasants also wanted the king to sacrifice on their behalf at the great calendarian feasts for a good year and peace. He was a necessary ritual link who mediated between the worlds of humans and gods. In genealogical lists both the Swedish and Norwegian rulers were regarded as descendants from the gods (see 1.1.3 above). The resistance was not only about religion, but stemmed from the fear that the old social community would dissolve if the old sacrificial festivals and the worship of Óðinn, Þórr, Freyr and Freyja were abolished. Nora Berend is quite right when she states that “[p]agan rebellions combined political and religious opposition: to a new form of rule or the person of ruler, and to a change in cult practices.”²

The reason why these similarities appear in Svetjud and Trøndelag is probably due to the fact that both Sweden and Norway in most parts of the Late Iron Age had societies ruled by many local rulers and lacked a central state. Neither Sweden, nor Norway formed a political unit in the early Viking Age.³ They can rather be described as segmentary lineage or tribe/chieftain societies. Power was divided between many hands and local chieftains could be quite powerful and independent from other rulers. Only occasionally, these chieftains had high kings or overlords ruling over them in a kind of tribe federation. Over-regional sanctuaries, such as Uppsala, played an important, symbolic role in these old federation systems. The power of the “federation-kings” was, however, often unstable and temporary. Hence, the local chieftains were quite independent and could act as they wanted. They were only restricted by the local assemblies. The deep roots of the social-political structure in Sweden and Norway, which included decentral-

1 Cf. Sundqvist 2016a: 510–513.

2 Berend 2007: 23.

3 Lindkvist 2008: 668; Krag 2008: 645.

ized societies, provided fertile ground for regional contradictions regarding the conversion. Some parts of these countries were in a process of developing more central state under Christian royal power, while other parts strived to maintain the traditional society, including the old religion.⁴

Compared to the situation in Sweden and Norway, the pagans' resistance against the Christians in Iceland was not restricted to a specific geographic area. Those who supported the pagan party had their farms in different areas of the country, such as the pagan chieftains Runólfr goði from Dal in the South and Þorgeirr goði from Ljós-vatn in the North. These pagan chieftains were not connected to old regional or over-regional sanctuaries. Most likely they performed sacrifices at their local cult sites and *hof*-buildings situated at their farms. These chieftains' religious ruler ideology was thus not primarily genealogic, but cultic. The pagans initially used mockery, lampooning, but also minor violence and legislation (*frændaskomm*) as weapons against the Christians and their mission activities. This type of resistance increased when the missionaries started preaching at the assembly and cult places.

The reason why these representatives of the pagan party in Iceland wanted to preserve the Old Norse religion is not quite clear. But perhaps the compromise made by the Lawspeaker Þorgeirr indicates some motives. In his speech Þorgeirr stated that “the old laws should stand as regards the exposure of children and the eating of horse-flesh. People had the right to sacrifice in secret, if they wished, but it would be punishable by the lesser outlawry if witnesses were produced.” The custom of eating horse-flesh and performing sacrifices belong to the religious sphere, but the right to exposure of children indicates that the pagans felt that their life-style was threatened by the Christians. This resembles the fear the pagans felt for wider social-political changes in the wake of conversion in Norway and possibly also in Svetjud, that is, changes in social life, justice, ownership, warfare, labor and cultivation customs, mandatory rests on Sundays and observing feasts etc. Perhaps the pagan chieftains in Iceland also feared that power would be transferred from them to the Norwegian king with Christianity and that the local independence of the chieftains was menaced as in Norway and Svetjud.

11.2 Why did the pagans' resistances finally collapse?

It is not easy to find one explanation why the pagan resistance finally collapsed in the three countries. The Christian religion and culture had likely for a long time seeped into and influenced the societies that existed in Sweden, Norway and

⁴ Berend 2007: 6–10; Tesch 2017.

Iceland. It is probably correct to view conversion in many places of Scandinavia as a long, gradual process. It is possible, however, that certain political events or decisive factors caused the pagan resistance to finally give way for the Christians in each country on a public level. On an individual level several factors were most likely involved.

In Iceland, representatives of the Christian party, such as Hallr Þorsteinsson, Hjalti Skeggjason and Gizurr Teitsson converted during Þangbrandr's mission in c. 998. Most likely they were impressed by this priest and his customs. In *Kristni saga* chapter seven it is stated that when Hallr and his household heard the sounds of the bells, and smelled the scent of incense, and saw men clothed in costly material and fine cloth they all wanted to be baptized. It is likely there was also a social incentive to convert, that is, to raise one's status by belonging to the same group as the Christian royal power in Norway. But this was probably not the only reason why they converted and why they wanted Iceland to be Christianized on a more public level. These chieftains later had direct connections and dealings with King Óláfr Tryggvason, who they visited in Norway. As I have argued in 6.2 and above, it is probable that King Óláfr played a crucial role for them and the official conversion of Iceland, as he put pressure on them and other chieftains in Iceland, not least by imprisoning their sons and friends in Norway. It was probably important for the Icelanders that the significant decision to convert to Christianity was made at the General Assembly, that is, a place where, according to tradition, important decisions had been made. Perhaps this decision was the basic cause for a peaceful process. It was also important to maintain the social community in Iceland. It was done most easily by everyone having the same religion and law. Conversion in Iceland can thus be described as a top-down-process, where the chieftains were the first to incorporate the new Christian faith, identity and religious affiliation after the famous decision. Their farm people and subjects in the settlements followed them and converted later. Since they were dependent on their chieftain, there was probably a need for them to belong to the same religious group as their leader. This was probably a strong motive for the wider population to convert. Conversion was thus not so much about faith and belief as it was about religious and social belonging. People simply wanted to conform and belong to the religious group of the Icelandic chieftains.

Viking Age Iceland was as a society more coherent and uniformly welded together, compared to the societies in Sweden and Norway. It was a constitutional entity including an assembly for the whole country as early as the tenth century.⁵ By means of the General Assembly (ON *Alþingi*) it was also more centralized when it came to religio-political decisions compared to the other Scandinavian countries

5 Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 4–5.

in south-east. Power was concentrated in this assembly, where all chieftains' voices counted. When the conversion decision was taken at Þingvellir 999/1000 it was accepted by most chieftains. Since the chieftains were the most powerful men in Iceland, common people followed them when they made decisions, including when it came to religious matters. Hence, the pagan resistance ceased quite rapidly after Þorgeirr pronounced his famous words at the assembly. The power of the General Assembly as well as the threats from King Óláfr Tryggvasson were probably important in undermining the resilience of the heathen groups in Iceland.

The increasing military power of the Christian kings in Norway became absolutely decisive for the collapse of paganism in Trøndelag. King Hákon góði lacked the military force when he tried to convert the chieftains and the farmers in this region. It is also likely that the chieftains there were not ready for the change of religion in this early phase of the process. They were not convinced that Christian culture would bring about any improvements over the old order. However, both Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson had sufficient military means to quell the pagans' resistance there. The written sources report that several attacks were required, both verbally at the pagan assembly of Frosta, but also with military force at the cult places of Lade and Mære. It seems as if military power of the Christian kings also played a decisive role for the final blow against the pagan resistance in Sweden. The sacrificial cult at the ancient sanctuary in Uppsala was maintained until c. 1060–1080. Most likely the pagans related to this sanctuary and perhaps led by Blótsveinn were finally defeated by the army that King Ingi brought with him from Götaland to the Lake Mälaren area. It seems thus as if pagan revolts lasted much longer in Svetjud than elsewhere in Scandinavia. Nora Berend has produced a plausible suggestion why Sweden's Christianization was late: "The answer to the Swedish difference lies in power structures. What took longer in Sweden than elsewhere was the consolidation of power: the end of pagan rebellions and of the possibility to turn away from Christianity were linked to the establishment of the Sverker dynasty in the 1130s."⁶ At that time the Christian kingdom was more settled and recognized, as well as the ecclesiastical organization. During the reign of King Sverker I (r. 1130–1156) the interdependence between the king and church was also more evident.⁷

⁶ Berend 2007: 25.

⁷ Blomkvist et al. 2007: 205.

11.3 Religions of the status quo, resistance and revolution

Present investigation deals with the situation, where the Old Norse religion had first served as a tool for stability in society or even been an instrument for the ruling power, but when encountered with Christianity, it had for a period been a religion of resistance for certain groups. Later in its last phase, and at certain places, it almost had revolutionary features, since groups opposing the Christian faith and power, rejected and displaced the Christian kings with violent means. In order to describe this process more clearly and deeply, some theoretical frames and concepts are needed as well as some further methodological reflections. The theoretical frames and concepts are here brought from some classifications and categories defined by Bruce Lincoln.⁸ In this section, focus is placed on the religious ideology used by pagans and Christians in their struggle for power and influence in the societies of Viking Age Scandinavia.

In one quite dominant research tradition of history of religions, represented by scholars such as Mircea Eliade, religious expressions have sometimes been described as ahistorical and apolitical phenomena. The “sacred” has been conceived as “sui generis, absolutely unique, separate, and thereby its own cause.”⁹ According to these theorists, religion is thus divorced from the social, political and historical contexts. Lincoln has suggested that those research traditions in the history of religions that remain beside such interpretations of religion, can be divided into two broad classes called “the romantic” and “the materialistic” positions.¹⁰ Those scholars working in the former position have shown in multiple ways how religion may serve the society as a whole in a positive sense. Religion may, for instance, affect social integration, provide a coherent set of ethical values and behavior norms, and furnish a sense of meaning for everyone in life. The theorists working in “the materialistic” position argue, on the other hand, that religion only serves the interest of certain privileged strata, by preserving their wealth, power and sovereign position in society. Religion contributes to the perception of considering the prevailing social relationships as eternal truths. Injustice affecting the oppressed groups are by means of religious expressions said to be compensated in a future and otherworldly life. When conflicts are inevitable, the rebellion of the subaltern groups are canalized into ritual forms, which are harmless for the privileged groups. Both positions, “the romantic” and “the materialistic,” have in common that they fulfill the function of providing solace

⁸ Lincoln 2003.

⁹ McCutcheon 1997: 52; cf. Lincoln 2018: 18–19. This way of presenting religion as a *Ding an sich* could also be related to some traditions of the structuralist school of cultural anthropology. See Lincoln 2003: 77, 127.

¹⁰ Lincoln 2003: 77–92.

for suffering and stability for society. Lincoln argues that both positions are problematic, since there are also religious forms and movements, which could be termed as “religions of the oppressed,” such as African Independent Churches and Native American Ghost Dance. They do not fit into the two classes described above. This type of religious discourse provides an ideology which opposes the imposed religion or ideology of the colonial power. In such contexts, religion cannot be reduced to stability for society or solace for suffering. Neither can religion be described as a tool for only one fraction in society, that is, the ruling strata. Therefore, Lincoln argues, we need some more flexible concepts, which may be suitable when describing the religion of different fractions in society, at different moments of their struggle.

Lincoln’s classification includes the division in social fields due to tension between the dominant class and all other groups in society. The dominant group, or fraction, needs an ideology that serves the interest of those who hold power, that is, themselves. Such ideology could be provided by a religious discourse which, Lincoln has labeled “religion of the status quo.” Except providing legitimation for those that hold wealth, power and prestige, such type of religion endows the social order with a sacred or mythic sanction and rituals, and claims that suffering in this world will be compensated with gifts in the other world. The institutions, cult leaders and ritual specialists of such religion watch over these religious notions, mythical ideas and rituals and they are all supported economically by the dominant fraction in society. The relationship between the religious professionals and the dominant elite is however reciprocal, since the former group are propagating the ideology of the latter group for the masses. This is the reason why the elite is willing to support these institutions financially. Lincoln states that the role of Confucianism in traditional China could be an example of a “religion of the status quo,”¹¹ but he might as well have exemplified with the Old Norse religion in the Viking societies of Norway or Sweden, where myths and rituals supported rulership in different ways. The pagan ruler, that is, the king or the jarl, was the ultimate leader and organizer of the public sacrificial feasts. The local cult leaders, religious specialists and skalds may to some extent be regarded as professional practitioners of the public cult even if it is misleading to regard them as well-trained and fulltime “priests.” It is possible that they also had other functions in society, beside their religious duties. Some of them executed the sacrifice rituals, while others recited poems including religious traditions, which in several senses were in favor of the leading stratum. The “great men” rewarded them for their assignments during the sacrificial feasts, for instance, by means of precious gifts and protection etc. This could perhaps be described as a patron-and-client

¹¹ Lincoln 2003: 80.

relationship based on a redistribution or an exchange system which was favorable for both sides, that is, “clientelism.”¹² After the switch of religion, Christianity became the new “religion of the status quo,” which supported the privileged groups of Scandinavia. The ideology propagated by the missionaries and priests included the notion that salvation can only be won through the faith in the Christian god as revealed in the Bible. “Salvation is thus presented as an exclusive club,” admission to which is Christian controlled, non-Christians “being accepted only insofar as they become appropriately reformed and submissive.”¹³ Such ideology thus served the interest of the Christian kings and the elite.

In societies where the dominant fraction is supported by a “religion of the status quo,” the goal is “ideological hegemony” throughout the state. Such full hegemony is however in reality impossible to reach. There are always groups who are dissatisfied with the conditions created by the ideology of the leading strata. These groups need an ideology which is quite different from the one propagated by the “religion of the status quo.” When this ideology is formulated in a religious way, Lincoln calls these expressions “religions of resistance.” The groups which include such ideology do not usually proselytize widely beyond the geographic locus or beyond the social setting where they grow out from. Their aim is mainly to preserve their own tradition, survive and defend their communities. It is hard to grasp the general features of these groups, and the historical examples display a great variety. They could have quite opposite expressions: some groups are militant, while others are pacifists; some are ascetic while others are orgiastic.¹⁴ These groups are best described by their negative features, that is, that they refuse to accept the ideology of the “religion of the status quo.” By means of this refusal they are a constant threat to the dominant fractions of society. Lincoln exemplifies here with Buddhists and Taoists in China as well as independent churches and possession spirit cults of Africa. He also mentions Islamic reformers such as the movements including the ideology called Wahhabism. These “religions of resistance” include a set of values which differ in a substantial way from the values of “the religions of the status quo.” They also perform actions, and rituals which to some degree deviates from the common practices which are advocated by the dominant fractions. These customs are often related to older traditions of these groups and can sometimes result in a “more rigidly disciplinarian or ascetic ethical stance.”¹⁵ Even if the members of the “religions of resistance” in general are recruited from the lower strata of society, their leaders as a rule are not. Usually, the leaders belong to a marginalized

¹² See further 4.2 above and Sundqvist 2016a: 189–192.

¹³ Lincoln 2003: 82.

¹⁴ See further characteristics and opposites in Lincoln 2003: 83.

¹⁵ Lincoln 2003: 84.

elite or “intelligentsia.” It has been argued that these leaders include “charismatic features” and usually their authority rests on revelations or visions; the source of legitimacy is thus “the sacred itself.” Rituals that promote group solidarity are crucial in the “religions of resistance” such as communion meals and sacrifices. Quite often these rituals are also somewhat “spectacular” and include ecstatic or violent public performance. They are modelled in a way that they deviate the performers in a clear way from the members of “the religions of the status quo.” Ritual healing is also a common feature of these resistance movements.

The “religions of resistance” may, according to Lincoln, eventually develop into the “religions of revolution.” Even if these two categories of religions are quite similar in terms of values, ethics, membership, leadership, and rituals, there are also some crucial differences. The “religions of resistance” define themselves by including and applying religious ideas, values and practices, which are in contrast to those religious forms used by “the religions of the status quo,” while “religions of revolution” define themselves by opposing the ruling elite itself not only its religious forms and expressions. These movements promote direct violent actions against the leading fractions of society. Thus they are more militant in their ideology than the “religions of resistance,” and they are more active regarding societal issues. Quite often they include strong eschatological and millenarian beliefs and doctrines. Social, political and economic dysfunctions in society may be seen as signs of disintegration of the former unjust era and suggest that a new and more righteous era will take over.

Lincoln argues that certain aspects must prevail for transforming a “religion of resistance” to a “religion of revolution”:

- (1) Objective conditions within society (e.g., fiscal, economic, political, medical, nutritional, military, etc.) must worsen.
- (2) The religion of resistance must successfully articulate a new theory of political legitimacy, which denies the right of the dominant fraction to occupy its privileged position and the right of the religion of the status quo to dictate normative values.
- (3) The religion of resistance must overcome its insularity and begin to recruit actively, incorporating new adherents from segments of society previously absent from its membership.¹⁶

It is, however, not unusual that a “religion of resistance” in this process towards becoming a “religion of revolution” collapses and disappears completely due to the two last aspects of this scheme. It must become the new “religion of the status quo”

¹⁶ Lincoln 2003: 86.

in order to survive, where it serves the fraction that it helped to advance into power. If it manages to complete this development, several of the radical elements, such as the strong eschatological orientation and militant aspects, are more or less suppressed.¹⁷ Due to their insular and defensive character and organization however, these resistance movements do not succeed in recruiting sufficient numbers of members of all sections of society. Therefore, they often demise or totally collapse.¹⁸

Lincoln's theoretical model may to a certain extent shed light on the empirical material of the transition process in Scandinavia. As soon as the new Christian royal power encountered representatives of the Old Norse religion, the ideology of the former was more or less established as a type of "religion of the status quo," while the ideology of the latter could be categorized as a "religion of resistance" with some features related to the class labeled "religion of revolution." Sources indicate that even Christian kings and political power were physically or verbally attacked by the members of the old religion at the assemblies. The new political (Christian) leaders were, for instance, replaced by chieftains, who were willing to perform the old customs and rituals, as in the case of Blótsveinn. He took up the role as a traditional king and sacrificed on the behalf of the Svear, probably at the old cultic site of Uppsala. In Norway, Hákon góði gave up his Christian mission and accepted the traditional role of a pagan king and sacrificed on behalf of the farmers.

With no doubt eschatological motifs, including militant aspects, also were crucial among these resistance groups during the process of religious change. Some poets in the circle around Jarl Hákon used such motifs in their praise poems directed to him, when he fought against the Christian sons of King Eiríkr, who had damaged the old cult sites. In for instance, *Vellekla's* stanzas 14 and 15, Einarr Helgasson's description of the paradise-like conditions in Norway under Jarl Hákon's reign and the restoration of the old sanctuaries strikingly resembles the mythical world after Ragnarøk as described in *Völuspá*.¹⁹ In *Vellekla*, thus, Jarl Hákon's deeds gained cosmic dimensions. By re-establishing the pagan cult and restoring the sanctuaries which had been damaged by the Christians, Jarl Hákon transformed the misery in Norway to a mythical scene identified as the "perfect new world" after Ragnarøk, where "soil flourishes as before" and "the gods inhabit the sanctuaries." Jarl Hákon is seen in this context as a savior and a creator of prosperity and wealth. These mythical allusions in the poem are clearly used to create authority and legitimacy. As long as the ruler maintains the sacrificial cult and protects the cultic sites and the sanctified grounds, the divine powers

¹⁷ Lincoln 2003: 90–91.

¹⁸ Cf. Lincoln 2003: 88.

¹⁹ Cf. de Boor 1930; Schier 1981: 415–420; Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1999: 36–38.

and ideal condition of the mythical world may be manifested among humans. Jarl Hákon's restoration of the pagan cultic sites may therefore in these stanzas be seen as an act of restoring Ásgarðr on earth, that is, a restoration of the old, and traditional society.²⁰

Those people who rejected Christianity and maintained the Old Norse religion also performed spectacular and orgiastic rituals that promoted group solidarity, such as communal meals where horsemeat was consumed, that is, food forbidden among the Christians. The accounts related to Blótsveinn and Hákon góði produce good examples of such bloody rituals, where the meat of the victims, such as the horse liver, was consumed in a communal meal by the participants. According to some sources, blood was smeared on the ritual objects and the walls of the sanctuary. There is also slight evidence of human sacrifices performed among these groups, and other bloody sacrifices, which clearly deviated the members of the old customs from the new Christian community. The traditions related to human sacrifices performed by the pagan party at the General Assembly 999/1000 in Iceland are however very uncertain. Whether they are based on a historical background must remain an open question.

The pagan religion of the Swedish insurgents related to Blótsveinn during the late eleventh century resembles thus in many ways Lincoln's description of "religions of resistance." Since violence seems to have played a certain role when de-throning King Ingi, their ideology and actions could also be labeled "religion of revolution." This religion deviated clearly from the common practices of "the status quo religion," that is, Christianity, which from now on was advocated by the rulers of Sweden (at least in Götaland). The external threat created an internal group cohesion among the pagans, a strengthening of the indigenous religious heritage and also a revitalization of the old traditions. Sources report that the rebels returned to bloody horse-sacrifices, including the custom of eating horsemeat, that is, customs that the church hated. Their ambition to hold on to the old religion was probably integrated with socio-political motives. They wanted to stick to the ideology, where power was concentrated in the assembly where all (leading) men's votes were counted. They defended the old community, pagan identity and traditional way of life, that is, the old order. As in the "religions of resistance and revolution" the leaders of the revolt belonged to a marginalized elite. Blótsveinn, who seems to have organized the revolt, came from the royal family, but he was never offered the throne. The rioters, who supported him, also faced some problems which are typical for "religions of resistance and revolution." Due to their insular and defensive character and organization, this movement did not succeed in recruiting sufficient

²⁰ See Sundqvist 2016a: 311–315.

numbers of members of all sections of society. They were also militarily inferior to the Christian king's troops in the final clash. Therefore, the old religion collapsed.

The religion of the pagan chieftains in Trøndelag can mainly be described as a "religion of resistance," although, according to the sources, the resisters also burned churches and killed the priests King Hákon had brought to Norway from England. Their religion differed clearly from the common beliefs and practices of "the status quo religion," that is, Christianity in Norway. It was important for them that the king maintained his cultic roles and sacrificed on behalf of them "for a good year and peace." In addition, the king must participate in the ritual meals and ceremonial drinking. He must eat the horse-liver and drink toasts in a traditional way. The Christians clearly disliked these customs. The pagan resistance of the *Þrændir* also had an insular character. Except Jarl Hákon, who recruited followers from all over Norway, the pagan chieftains in Trøndelag did not proselytize outside their own groups or geographic areas. Their aim was only to preserve the traditional way of life and religion at home. In a military sense they were inferior to the force of King Óláfr Tryggvasson and King Óláfr Haraldsson. The chieftains of the farmers in Trøndelag, who opposed these kings, may be described as a marginalized lower elite with little power. Thus, the old religion in Trøndelag was eventually exterminated.

The development of paganism in Iceland differs from the situation in Sweden and Norway. For a short period in the 980s and the 990s it could also be labeled a "religion of resistance," when Christianity was on the threshold of becoming the dominant religion in the country. Since Christianity was supported by the powerful Norwegian king, it could be classified as "the status quo religion." The pagan movement collapsed after the famous decision at the assembly meeting, and with it the Old Norse religion disappeared on an official level. Since the conversion decision followed the traditional way of making decisions in Iceland, it had great legitimacy among the chieftains, and among the pagan leaders. The chieftains who supported the "religion of resistance" belonged to an elite that was increasingly marginalized, most likely since they lacked royal support from Norway. Thus, they resemble in a sense the insurgents in Norway and Sweden, since they were opponents to Christian kings.



Part IV: **Epilegomena**

12 The Demise of Old Norse Religion: A Synthesis

In the opening of this book, it was noticed that Christianity replaced the Old Norse religion on an official level in Scandinavia during the second half of the Viking Age. When describing this transition in recent research, the term “Christianization” is often applied. This historiography mostly discusses the outcome of the encounter, that is, the early Medieval Christianity and the new Christian society. The intentions of the present study have been to put focus on the Old Norse religion during this period of change and to analyze the processes behind its extinction. There is a lack of knowledge in religious studies with regard to investigating *how* and *why* religious traditions disappear in general. The present study has intended to give a systematic presentation from the study of Old Norse religion with a specific focus on the role of native rulers when dismantling the old religion and society, as well as the pagan chieftains’ defense of this old order. Focus has thus been placed on the actions performed by these agents and their intentions.

12.1 A protracted process that took place at different times in different places

There is a given synthesis among all the results of the present study, namely the recurring pattern from the first Christian kings’ efforts to dismantle the Norse religion—via the resistance of the pagans and its collapse—to the establishment of Christian kingdoms in Scandinavia. In the countries with powerful kings this process took place at different times in different places. In Denmark the process started with Haraldr Klakk’s baptism in 826 and it ended up at Haraldr Gormsson’s conversion around the 960s, that is, a time span of 140 years. King Haraldr Klakk and his brothers conquered parts of Jylland c. 810 after the killing of King Godfred (Old Danish *Guthfrith*). However, he was attacked on several occasions by the sons of King Godfred. It has been argued that Haraldr had been in contact with Christianity before his baptism in 826.¹ Haraldr sought support from Emperor Louis the Pious to strengthen his position in Denmark as early as 814. He publicly paid tribute to the pious emperor, which made him less credible among the pagan groups at home. In 819, he recognized southern Jylland as his sphere of power in a settlement with the sons of Godfred. But already in 823 and later in 826, he felt threatened by them and their allies. Thus, Haraldr finally decided to accept baptism in order to gain protection from the Frankish Empire. He had

1 On Haraldr’s contacts with Christianity, see Hallencreutz 1986b: 84.

probably also been touched by Archbishop Ebo's Danish mission around 823. Haraldr's unpopularity with the Danish elite in Jylland is likely connected with his religio-political position and his attempts at missions among the pagan Danes.

Rimbert reports in *Vita Anskarii* chapter seven that King Haraldr was assailed by hatred and malignity from his kingdom by other kings of the same province and he was even driven out from Denmark by them. Thus, he went to Emperor Louis the Pious and asked for help so that he might be able to regain his kingdom. The emperor then urged him to accept the Christian faith, since there would then be a more intimate friendship between them. King Haraldr then accepted his conversion, and when he was sprinkled with the holy water of baptism the emperor himself received him from the sacred font as a godfather and adopted him as his son. According to *Vita Hludovici* chapter 33, the emperor also gave him the county of Rüstringen in East Frisia after his baptism at St Alban's Church in Mainz. Rimbert continues in *Vita Anskarii* chapter seven, that when the emperor desired to send Haraldr back to his country so that he could recover his dominions, Louis made an enquiry in order to find a holy and devoted man who could go on and strengthen the king's Christian faith and also convert his people. The monks Ansgar and Autbert were chosen for this mission. They sailed with the king on a ship via Dorestadt and the territory of the Frisian to the Danish border. Rimbert mentions that the king could not for the time being obtain peaceful possession of his kingdom, and therefore had a place beyond the River Elbe so that he could halt if it was necessary. Rimbert continues in *Vita Anskarii* chapter eight, that Ansgar and Autbert eventually started their mission among pagans and initially they were quite successful. Despite the Frankish support, Haraldr's reign in the southern areas of Jylland was short and it ended in 827. He never recovered his kingdom in Denmark and Ansgar's and Autbert's mission interrupted, since the latter got sick and died.² In the early 830s Ansgar returned to the Frankish Empire. Paganism was at that time still strong in Denmark. The Christian mission did not make any progress until the second half of the 840s when Godfred's son, Hárekr (Old Danish *Harek*) I, gained power over the country. He conducted a cautious policy towards the Frankish Empire. In 845, however, a large Danish fleet with pagan warriors attacked Hamburg with Ansgar's church and monastery. Most likely, it was the same army of Vikings that had previously attacked Paris. These severe attacks on Hamburg and Paris led to a crisis in the relationship between the Danish king and the empire. King Hárekr had to act and ordered the fleet's leader, Ragnarr (Latin *Reginherus*),³ to be executed. He also al-

² VA 8 and Gelting 2020: 1583.

³ He is perhaps identical to Ragnarr loðbrók in the Old Norse traditions.

lowed Ansgar to build a church in Hedeby.⁴ His successor King Hárekr II was persuaded by his entourage to close this church and expel the priests. Ansgar managed to stop these actions and he also convinced the king to allow the erection of another church in Ribe. It was also permitted to use bells in connection to the mass.⁵ Since sources lack for the period after Ansgar's activity, we do not know much about the religious-political development until 934. Widukind reports that the German ruler Henry attacked the pagan Danish king Knuba (Old Danish *Gnupa*), who had been raiding among the Frisians. King Knuba was then forced to pay tributes and to receive baptism.⁶ In 948 three Danish bishops took part in a synod of Ingelheim arranged by Archbishop Adaldag of Bremen: Liopdag of Ribe, Ored of Schleswig, and Reginbert of Aarhus.⁷ This indicates a nascent church organization in Denmark, however, the king of Denmark, Gormr, was still a pagan in the 950s. The baptism of his son Haraldr, under influence of Emperor Otto, finally lead to the official conversion c. 963 (for this event, see ch. 3 above).

The demise of the Old Norse religion in Norway and Sweden has already been treated extensively above, and does not need any further comments. In Norway the space of time was somewhat shorter than the development in Denmark. The dismantling process started there with King Hákon góði's first attempts to convert the Norwegians around the 930s and ended up at the assembly at Møster 1022 when St Óláfr and Grímkell founded the Christian law, that is a period of 90 years. During that period the resistance of pagans occurred mostly in Trøndelag, however, after 1022, it was seemingly broken. In Sweden the disintegration of the indigenous religion on a public level had a certain temporal delay and later shift compared to Denmark and Norway. It started quite early with King Óláfr Eiríksson's conversion in 995 but ended first with King Ingi's campaign against the pagans' customs. The last known heathen reaction against the church in Sweden was as late as Bishop Henrik of Sigtuna's expulsion in the 1130s. Hence, the demise process in Sweden continued for over 130 years.

The downfall of the old religion in Iceland, and probably also in Gotland,⁸ seems to have been somewhat different compared to Denmark, Norway and Sweden. On these islands powerful rulers were lacking, that is, kings who claimed that they descended from the gods. The population was ruled by quite egalitarian chieftains, who were rather "friends" of the gods, instead of "descendants" of them. In the case of Iceland, there were also Christians on the island from the

4 VA ch. 24.

5 VA chs 31 and 32. See also Gelting 2020: 1584.

6 Widukind 1,40.

7 Gelting 2020: 1585.

8 See Andrén 2012.

initial colonization. The dismantling of the old religion there seems to have taken place in a relatively peaceful and smooth manner at the end of the tenth century and the beginning of the eleventh century. Only a few pagan reactions against the Christians can be documented in the sources. There, the decision about official Christianity was made in connection with a council meeting where the chieftains gathered and made a joint decision under the guidance of Lawman Þorgeirr. It is quite likely, however, that the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason played an important role when dismantling the old cult there.

In ecclesiastical organizational terms, the establishment of the church provinces with the archbishop's seats indicates an absolute end point for the dismantling process of the indigenous tradition as official religion in Scandinavia: Lund for Denmark, 1103/1104, Niðaróss for Norway and Iceland, 1152/1153 and Uppsala for Sweden, 1164. Hence, the disintegration of the Old Norse religion in the Scandinavian countries was a quite extended process.

12.2 The early Christian kings

The reasons and motives of the Scandinavian rulers for abandoning their traditional religion are complex. Christianity brought many types of benefits for rulers and chieftains, for example new trade relations, the development of social-political networks, and attachments to Christian elite groups in Continental Europe and the British Isles. If a Christian king there let his clergies baptize a pagan ruler or chieftain from Scandinavia, and offered himself to be godparent for him, this increased the social capital and status of the receiver, both at home and among Scandinavian diaspora groups outside the Nordic countries. In these milieus Christianity developed to an exclusive religion, which included a lot of prestige for the new Christian adherents. Hence, the social and political dimensions of conversion were very crucial in these elite groups. As Cecilia Ljung states: "Personal beliefs of individuals were probably not essential in this context."⁹ It seems, moreover, as if people were baptized often on social and political grounds, while their Christian identity and beliefs were developed later. There was probably also a strong social need for individuals in the wider population to belong to the same religious group as their leaders. Many scholars have described conversion strikingly as a top-down-process.

The early Christian kings played a most active role when winding up the indigenous tradition that previously formed their lives. They concentrated their efforts on the cultic aspects of the indigenous religion that were more under their

⁹ Ljung 2019: 183. Cf. Gelting 2020.

control and at the same time crucial for the *modus operandi* of the Old Norse religion. The early Christian kings were pragmatists. Since they could not affect the traditional worldview and prevent people from telling the mythical narratives about the old gods they turned to such aims that they were able to achieve. It was easier to control what people did than what they thought. Initially, when their political power was no greater than that of the local chieftains, they adapted their strategies to what was in their power to do, such as abandoning their own traditional roles in sacrificial cult, and in that way disrupting the old liturgical order. This strategy was used by the Christian kings Anunder and Ingi in Sweden and by King Hákon góði in Norway. The latter king's approach was a failure, however. When the Christian rulers' political position became more powerful, they could also persuade, or even force the local chieftains, who organized the old cultic activities at the local pagan sanctuaries, to abandon their roles, as in the cases of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson in the end of the tenth and early eleventh century Trøndelag. In some cases, they also destroyed these local sanctuaries including the pagan idols and ritual objects. By means of such strategies they dismantled the indigenous religion on a local level, including the local cult communities. Finally, when the Christian kings together with the clergy of the Church had an even stronger position of power and support through an efficient administration, they prohibited animal sacrifices and other traditional customs by means of written laws, also in such contexts where the old customs continued as a so-called "crypto-religion" also after the more official conversion. These methods had consequences on both a private and a public level. At this point, Christian power could also more systematically affect the world of ideas, at least among educated groups and for those who could read. Scholars and representatives of the ruling elite used euhemerism, idol parody and demonology as literary strategies in chronicles and historical writings, in order to deprive the old gods their power and thus also as means for dismantling the indigenous religion. Such strategies were probably also used at oral performances from the very beginning of the Christian mission in Scandinavia. It is interesting that the mythical accounts about pagan deities were maintained as part of a collective memory and cultural heritage even when Christianity was established, although the divine nature of these gods was removed from them. The Christian kings and the missionaries also preached about the faith, for example they made explanations for the Christian death liturgy, as part of the educational work. The Christian ideas about death, such as the theme of light and paradise, may well have attracted some individuals and groups to abandon their old ideas about Valhöll and Hel. Sometimes the early Christian kings also used gifts to get the pagan chieftains to give up the faith of their ancestors.

Due to the specific contexts, the native Christian kings sometimes used violent means, but usually nonviolent strategies or tactics were applied. King Óláfr

Tryggvason, for instance, used violence in Norway when dismantling the old religion, since he had the power to do that in such contexts. When removing the Old Norse religion in Iceland, the same king applied negotiations, since this island was so remote from Norway that a military operation was impossible to carry out. Hence, King Óláfr was a pragmatist when choosing methods and strategies for converting people in different regions and countries that were under his influence. Sources report that Óláfr also replaced the old pagan custom called *blót-drykkjur*, with new drinking ceremonies at Christian holidays, “as a favor to the people.” The formula *ár ok friðr* was transferred from the old sacrificial feasts as well as the worship of Njörðr and Freyr, to Christian feasts and prayers addressed to God, Christ and St Mary. These Christian feasts replaced the old drinking rituals and in addition aimed to realize the same goals in their new Christian setting, that is, hopes for a good year, prosperity, good harvest as well as peace in the upcoming season. This type of cult continuation and replacements promoted the transition of religion in several senses.

When designing their missionary methods, the new Christian power and their clergy focused on the weak religious leadership in the Old Norse religion as well as the ritual system, which seems to have been very important for the persistence of the indigenous religion. As with other ethnic, folk or primary religions, the Old Norse religion was remembered through rituals as long as they were performed. When a traditional ritual ceased to be performed, it disappeared from memory within a few generations. The lack of canonical texts and a well-organized priestly institution that could protect the old religious traditions was a competitive disadvantage in this context and most likely facilitated this process. By means of erasing the rituals and the cult organization, cult leaders, sanctuaries and ritual objects, the old religion was extinct from public life.

12.3 The pagans’ resistance

It is quite clear that a pagan opposition appeared against the new Christian power in, for instance, Sweden, Norway and Iceland c. 950–1100 and somewhat earlier in Denmark. The resistances of pagans in Sweden and Norway resembled each other. In both countries these oppositions were related to groups of people appearing in geographic areas which also included important pagan sanctuaries with a regional or even over-regional significance. In Sweden the resistance groups were strong in the central and northern parts of the Lake Mälaren area (that is, Svetjud), where the famous sanctuary Uppsala was located, while the strongest resistance of the pagans in Norway appeared in Trøndelag, where significant cult places were situated, such as Lade and Mære. In connection with

these famous places of worship various elite groups appeared who probably felt marginalized by the new Christian kingship. These groups were eager to maintain pagan cult at these chief sanctuaries.

The pagan groups, which protected and maintained the traditional sacrificial cult in Uppsala, Lade and Mære actually defended the old society and life-style, where power was related to the local and regional assemblies, that is, the old order. The pagan kings were in both Svetjud and Trøndelag considered as a *primi inter pares* and their power was restricted by the assemblies. The Christian kings opposed this decentralized system and advocated a more centralized state including a relation with the papal church. The resistance among pagans was also related to their fear that the new religion could destroy the old cult community, and thereby also the unity of the traditional society. The old pagan feasts were crucial for the cohesion of the group and the relation to the divine powers. If the farmers abandoned the faith and religious practice of their ancestors, they feared that various activities related to social life could be disturbed, such as justice, ownership, warfare, subsistence, farming customs, and so forth. The Christian calendar implied fasting and resting on Sundays and holidays, for example. The heathen peasants also wanted the king to sacrifice on their behalf at the great yearly feasts for a good year and peace (*blóta til árs ok friðar*) in a traditional way. The pagan king was considered as a necessary ritual link and mediator between the worlds of humans and gods and he was perceived as the guarantor of good harvests from the fields. He was considered as the prime representative of the community at these religious feasts and thus only considered legitimate as long as he performed sacrifices on the chieftains and farmers behalf.

The reason why these similarities occur is connected to social structures in the Late Iron Age societies of both Sweden and Norway. None of them formed a political unit in the early Viking Age. Rather, they were ruled by many local rulers and lacked a central state. In these tribe societies, power was divided between many hands and local chieftains could be quite powerful and independent from other rulers. Only occasionally, these chieftains had High-Kings ruling over them in a kind of tribe federation. Such kings could be quite powerful and sometimes they claimed to be descendants of the gods. The deep roots of the social-political structures in Sweden and Norway, which included decentralized societies, provided fertile ground for regional contradictions regarding common decisions, such as the conversion. Some parts of these countries were in a process of developing more central state under Christian royal power, while other parts strived to maintain the traditional society and local independence, including the old religion and order.

The pagans' resistance against Christians in Iceland was not restricted to specific geographic areas or to an old over-regional sanctuary as in Norway and Sweden. Those who supported the pagan party had their farms in all areas of Iceland.

The pagans applied lampooning and mockery, as well as minor violence and legislation (*frændaskömm*) as weapons against the Christians. The reason why these representatives of the pagan party in Iceland wanted to preserve the Old Norse religion is probably related to the fear that conversion would imply wider social-political changes, such as transformation in community life, feasting calendar, labor, ownership, cultivation customs and so on. Perhaps the pagan chieftains in Iceland also feared that power would be transferred from them to the Norwegian king with Christianity and that the local independence of the chieftains was menaced.

The early Christian kings in Scandinavia also used their faith as a political-religious ideology when Christian kingship was more settled, in order to establish and maintain the new social and political order, that is, *inn nýi siðr*. This ideology can be termed as the religion of status quo. It supported the privileged groups of society and was propagated by the clergies. The pagan chieftains who opposed these kings and the new Christian system and culture used their ancestral religion as an ideology in order to preserve the old society and order, that is, *inn forni siðr*. Previously, this religious ideology could be categorized as a religion of status quo, however, as the new Christian power increased, it was developed into a religion of resistance, with a few features of a religion of revolution. That ideology served as a driving force and motivation for these pagan actors to offer resistance.

The bishops, who were closely allied with the kings, became a new power factor in society, often at the expense of the local chieftains. The royal power and the church gradually became more and more powerful, which was probably perceived as a threat to the significance of the *þing* for political decisions. However, the assembly institution seems to have been important for public interests throughout the Middle Ages.

12.4 The establishment of Christian kingdoms

The reason why the pagans' resistance finally collapsed in the Scandinavian countries had multiple grounds. As has been stated by many scholars in the previous research, Christian religion and culture slowly seeped into and gradually influenced the societies that existed in Scandinavia for quite an extensive period. Conversion was thus in many places of Scandinavia and Iceland a long, gradual and slow process. It is argued, however, that certain decisive events caused the pagans' resistance to finally give way for Christianity in each country. In Iceland, King Óláfr Tryggvason played a crucial role for the official conversion, as he put pressure on some important Icelandic chieftains, not least by imprisoning their sons in Norway. It is also concluded, that certain social-political structures in Ice-

land were crucial for the extinction of the official pagan religion there. Power was concentrated to the General Assembly, where all chieftains' voices counted. When the conversion decision was taken at Alþingi 999/1000 it was accepted by most chieftains. Hence, the pagan resistance ceased quite rapidly among elite groups after the Lawspeaker Þorgeirr declared his famous words at the assembly. It was probably important for the Icelanders that this decision was made at the General Assembly, that is, a place where, according to tradition, important decisions had been made. Most likely this decision was the basic cause for a peaceful process in Iceland. King Óláfr had an impact on this decision by means of using Icelandic chieftains as Christian delegates at the assembly. The establishment of the Church organization, including the erection of churches, fixed sees, schools, literacy and the introduction of tithes, began to emerge first around 1100 and must be described as a slower and more gradual process.

The increasing military power of the Christian kings in Norway became absolutely decisive for the final collapse of paganism in Trøndelag. King Óláfr Trygvason and King Óláfr Haraldsson had sufficient military means to stop the pagan resistance there between 995 and 1030. The early formation of state in Norway, in Norwegian called *rikssamlingen*, which began in the ninth century under King Haraldr, was more or less completed after these kings, that is, between 1030 and 1150. During that period, the church and the royal power created the Norwegian kingdom, with an ecclesiastical organization, a royal administration and laws.

It seems as if the royal power including a military apparatus played a decisive role in the final blow against the pagans' resistance in Sweden also. Most likely the pagan king Blótsveinn and the social fraction defending the old sanctuary of Uppsala were finally defeated by the army of King Ingi in the late eleventh century. The pagan revolts lasted much longer in Sweden than elsewhere in Scandinavia. The reason for this probably lies in the lack of consolidated power structures there. Royal power in Sweden was weak compared to Norway and Denmark. The Christian kingdom was more settled and recognized in Sweden around 1150. The interdependence between the king and Church was also more evident there at that time.

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Abbreviations

ATA	Antikvarisk-topografiska arkivet, Riksantikvarieämbetet, Historiska museet och Kungl. myntkabinettet
DMS	Det medeltida Sverige
DR	Danmarks runeindskrifter
DS	Diplomatarium Suecanum
HMS	Historiska Museet Stockholm
Ísl. Fornr.	Íslenzk Fornrit
KVAAH	Kungl. Vitterhets-, historie-, och antikvitetsakademiens handlingar
KVHAA	Kungl. Vitterhets-, historie-, och antikvitetsakademien
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
MS/MSS	Manuscript/Manuscripts
NGL	Norges Gamle Love No Norwegian
ODa	Old Danish
OE	Old English
Ög	Östergötlands runinskrifter
OHG	Old High German
ON	Old Norse
ONP	Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog
OSw	Old Swedish
SkP	Skaldic Proetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages
Sö	Södermanlands runinskrifter
SOL	Svenskt ortnamnslexikon
SRD	Scriptores Rerum Danicarum Medii Ævi
SRS	Scriptores rerum Suecicarum medii aevi
SSGL	Samling af Sweriges Gamla Lagar
ST	Sverges traktater med främmande makter
U	Upplands runinskrifter
VA	Vita Anskarii
Vs	Västmanlands runinskrifter

Index

- Aachen, Germany 186–187
álfr (m.sg.), *álfar* (pl) 261–262
ár ok friðr, til árs ok friðar 58, 78, 82–84, 89–90, 153, 190, 217–221, 223, 255, 306, 320, 356–357
Aarhus, Jylland 10, 204, 353
ármaðr 182, 316–317
Ármannsfell, Western Iceland 182
ársæll 219
Ásbjörn of Meðalhús 103, 297–302
Ásgarðr 171, 209, 347
ásynja, (f.sg.) *ásynjur* (pl) 173
Abodrites, confederation of West-Slavic tribes 70, 73
Adaldag of Bremen (archbishop, d. 988) 102, 353
Adalvard the Younger (bishop, d. 1072) 125–126, 140–141, 264, 273, 277–279
Adam of Bremen 8, 10–11, 36–37, 64, 68–70, 73, 85, 90–92, 99–107, 120–121, 124–133, 139–141, 157–159, 173–178, 193, 260–264, 273–279, 282, 287–290, 294
Adelsö, Uppland 197–198
Æpelred (Old Norse *Aðalráðr*) (King of England) 66, 117
Æpelstan (Old Norse *Aðalsteinn*) (King of England) 65–66, 77, 88
Aeneid 171
African Independent Churches 343
Ágrip 39, 67, 85, 88–90, 103, 156, 217, 220, 225, 277, 283, 285, 293, 299–302, 318–319
Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen), Germany 186–187
Alexandria, Egypt 6
Alsike, Uppland 206
Altuna runestone (U 1161), Uppland 128, 131
Alþingi (General Assembly of Þingvellir, Iceland) 53, 67, 98, 104, 107, 234–238, 241, 245, 323, 327–336, 340–341, 359
amulet 57
Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 66, 117
animal sacrifice 43–44, 75–76, 82, 152–169, 217, 220–221
Annales Einhardi 143
Annales Xantenses, Annals of Xanten 110
Ansgar (archbishop, d. 865) 36, 63, 67–69, 102, 106–109, 175, 259–260, 289, 352–353
Anund Jacob see Qnundur Óláfsson 264, 278
Anunder (Old Swedish *Anund*), (Swedish king, r. c. 1080) 90–92, 174, 264, 274, 279, 289, 355
Anundshög, Västmanland 207
Ari inn fróði Þorgilsson 19, 39–40, 67, 104, 121, 156, 172, 192, 234–241, 293–294, 327–329
Auðr djúpauðga (also called Unnr, queen and landnámskona) 70
Austmaðr (Old Swedish *Østman*) 107–108, 200
Austrfararvísur 261–262
Autbert (monk and missionary) 69, 102, 352
Baldr 173
Baltic Sea 226, 284
baptism 9, 63–67, 102, 116–117, 139, 146, 170, 177, 187, 195–196, 216, 234, 237, 242, 351–353
baptize 5–6, 9, 17, 56, 63–7, 77, 86, 88, 94, 104, 115–116, 118, 136, 166, 180–181, 215, 224, 233, 235, 241–242, 264, 273, 281–282, 314, 316, 323, 328, 333, 340, 354
Bede 203–204, 309
Beowulf 114
Bernhard (missionary bishop in Norway, eleventh century) 103
Bernhard (missionary bishop in Denmark (Skåne), eleventh century) 103
Bersöglisvísur 116
Beudrápa 164
Bible 37, 174, 344
Birger, Jarl (Old Swedish *Birgher*) (Jarl of Sweden, r. 1248–1256) 193
Birka (Björkö), Uppland 35–36, 67–68, 101, 106, 108–109, 124, 175, 196, 206, 259–260, 289
Bishops' Sagas 39
Bjäresjö, (church of) 188
Björn (Old Swedish *Biorn, Biørn*) (Swedish king, ninth century) 67
blót (n.) 7, 78–79, 86, 88, 111, 136, 139, 146, 148–149, 153, 158–166, 181, 202, 217, 223, 227, 266, 269–275, 284, 297, 299, 314, 317, 323, 332

- *blóta* (verb) 79, 81, 89, 147, 155, 161–162, 164, 181, 223–225, 237–238, 269, 274, 276, 298–299, 305–306, 323–324, 331–333, 357
- *blótbolli* (m.) 157
- *blótdrykkja*, *blótdrykkjur* (f. pl) 156, 217, 221, 356
- *blótguð Svía* 180
- *blótmaðr*, *blótmenn* (m.pl) 78, 83, 89, 98, 118, 238, 296
- Blótsveinn (Old Swedish *Blodhsven*), (Swedish king, r. c. 1080s) 44–45, 91–92, 259, 265–276, 282, 288, 292, 337, 341, 346–347, 359
- *blóttre* (n.) 155, 266, 275
- *blótttrygill* (m.) 157
- *blótveizla* (f.) 79, 84, 87, 152
- boat grave, boat burial 206, 287
- Botair of Akebäck, Gotland 201
- Borg in Lofoten, Norway 123
- Borg, Östergötland 149
- Botkyrka (Old Swedish *Bothvidhakirkia*), Södermanland 197, 282
- Botvid (Old Swedish *Botvidh*) (Swedish missionary and saint, d. 1120) 17, 197, 281–282
- Breiða, Guðbrandsdalar 3, 119
- Breiðafjörðr, Western Iceland 70
- Bremen see also Hamburg-Bremen (archbishop's seat from AD 848) 10, 36–37, 68, 73, 193, 278–281
- Breviarium Strengnense* 270
- British Isles 69–70, 215, 354
- Buddhists 344
- burial customs 37, 56, 169, 205–216, 287
- burial mounds 37, 159, 161, 169–170, 205–212
- Boðvarr enn hvíti Þorleifsson 235
- bond* (n.) 135, 172, 306, 326–328
- capitularia* 142
- Centula (Centulum) (church of), today Saint-Riquier, France 186
- ceremony 32, 43, 58–59, 76, 80–81, 93, 101, 123, 131, 153, 156, 184–186, 190–191, 203, 205, 211, 216–218, 220–221, 244, 255, 276, 288, 290–291, 312, 324, 356
- Charlemagne, (Charles I, Carolingian emperor, r. 768–814) 8, 141–144, 169, 186–187
- Charles the Bald (Charles II, Carolingian emperor, r. 875–877) 185
- China 343–344
- Christ 12, 50, 55–58, 64, 66–67, 71, 86, 92, 102–104, 109–110, 119, 124, 140, 148–150, 161–162, 186, 204, 213–221, 225–228, 250, 252, 263, 277, 281, 294, 297, 328–333, 356
- Christian baptism see baptism
- Christian cross 12, 35, 49, 55, 57, 66, 70–71, 79–80, 87, 95, 102, 210–212, 232, 285, 287, 299, 305
- Christian death liturgy, death Mass (*requiem*) 169, 213–216, 355
- Christian festival calendar, holidays 43, 45, 217, 221, 300, 319, 338, 356–357
- Christian grave monuments 11, 105, 212–213, 260
- Christian holidays see Christian festival calendar
- Chronicon* (Thietmari Merseburgensis Episcopi Chronicon) 85, 177
- Chronicon Roskildense* 282
- Clemens saga* 177
- Codex Regius, GkS 2365 4to 39, 161
- Codex Upsaliensis of Snorri's *Edda* 161
- commessiones* (*commessatio* sg.) 157
- Confucianism 343
- coronamentum* 185, 190
- Corbie (church and monastery/abbey of), France 102
- Corvey (church and monastery/abbey of), Germany 64, 102, 143, 186
- Courland (Kurland), Western Latvia 109–110
- cross see Christian cross
- crypto-religion 57, 355
- cult building 25, 108, 122–134, 146, 149–150, 156, 164, 190, 194, 201, 203–205, 229–233, 236, 248
- cult continuity, cult-place-continuity, cult-site-continuity 58–59, 199–203
- cult image (pagan) 6, 12, 55, 94, 119, 122–134, 138–144, 147, 163, 178–183, 220–221, 223, 228, 242, 276, 307
- cult leader, cult leadership (pagan) 16–17, 29, 33, 43, 60, 75, 84, 93–121, 142, 145, 179, 182, 184, 192–194, 225, 242, 247, 253, 262–263, 288, 315, 324, 343, 356

- cult place (pagan) 33, 35, 58–59, 99, 108, 122, 135, 137, 142, 151, 159, 161, 164, 174, 199–203, 224, 230, 232, 259, 277, 306, 312, 337, 339, 341, 356
- cultic organization (pagan) 43, 75, 93–121, 182, 254
- daemones* 174
- Dalby (church of), Skåne 188, 263
- dei* (*deus* sg.) 139, 175–176, 185, 216, 277, 291
- De minoribus capitulis* 169
- demonology 6, 43, 170, 174–183, 221, 254, 355
- Denmark 8–12, 18–19, 29–30, 36, 49, 58, 63–65, 68–71, 92, 98–99, 102–103, 106–107, 116, 135, 139, 150–151, 173, 180, 186, 188, 204, 207, 214, 237, 270, 277–278, 304, 310, 351–354, 356, 359
- diabolus* 175
- Dómaldi (legendary king of Sweden) 155
- Dorestadt, Frisia 352
- drekkja jól* (phrase) 156
- drinking ceremony, drinking ritual 35, 43, 58, 78, 80, 87–88, 123, 131, 153, 155–157, 164, 180, 191, 203, 217–221, 255, 275–276, 316, 348, 356
- Dublin, Ireland 70
- Ebo (archbishop of Reims, d. 851) 352
- ecclesia Lundensis* 192
- ecclesia Nidrosiensis* 192
- Ecclesia Triumphans* 232
- ecclesia Upsaliensis* 192
- Edda*, Snorri's 39–41, 161, 171–173, 247, 272, 308–309
- Egill Skalla-Grímsson 7, 71, 135–136, 164, 311
- Egils saga* 7, 135, 246
- Egino (bishop of Dalby and Lund, d. 1072) 140–141, 263, 273, 278
- Eigenkirchensystem* (-wesen) see also “proprietary church system” 55, 194–199
- Einarr skálaglamm Helgason (Icelandic skald, tenth century) 7, 84, 134–135, 305–307, 346
- Einhard (Frankish scholar, d. c. 840) 143
- einherjar* (*einheri* m.sg.) 209–210
- Einriði = Þórr 305–306
- Eiríkr (Old Swedish *Erik*) (king of the Svear, ninth century) 176
- Eiríkr and Eiríkr (Old Swedish *Erik* and *Erik*) (kings of Sweden, r. c. 1066–1067) 264
- Eiríkr blóðøx Haraldsson (Norwegian king, r. c. 929–934) 6–7, 80, 84, 134–136, 293, 303–313, 346
- Eiríkr Eiríksson (Old Swedish *Erik*) (Swedish king, r. 1222–1250) 270
- Eiríkr inn ársæli (Old Swedish *Erik*) (Swedish king (?), early twelfth century) 269–270, 284
- Eiríkr inn sigrsæli Bjarnarson (Old Swedish *Erik*) (Swedish king, r. c. 935–995,) 68, 112, 270
- Eiríkr Játvarðarson (Old Swedish *Erik*) (Swedish king and saint, d. 1160) 58, 180, 271
- Eiríkr Hákonsson, (Hlaðajarl, d. c. 1020) 304
- Eiríksmál* 118, 210
- Eiríks saga rauða* 100
- Eiríkssynir (royal sons of King Eiríkr blóðøx, tenth century) 7, 65, 134–137, 303–307
- emporium* 186–190
- Elbe River 352
- England 6, 8, 47, 63, 65–67, 70–71, 73, 77, 86, 88, 103, 136, 140, 142, 177, 185–186, 190, 193, 195, 266, 277, 281, 301
- Epistula Jeremiae* 176–177
- Eresburg (present-day Obermarsberg), Germany 142–144
- Erfdrápa Óláfs helga* 115, 208
- Erfdrápa Óláfs Tryggvasonar* 227
- eschatology 172, 205, 210, 214–216, 299
- Eskil (Anglo-Saxon bishop and martyr, d. c. 1080–1100) 17, 92, 270–271, 274, 276, 281–282
- Eskilstuna, Södermanland 212, 271, 291
- Estrid, (Old Swedish *Astridh*, *Æstridh*) (Swedish queen, r. c. 1000–1022) 70
- Estuna, (church of), Uppland 201
- ethnic (folk) religion 26, 31, 54–55, 247–255, 356
- euhemerism, euhemeristic 39–40, 43, 125, 170–183, 221, 254, 294, 309, 355
- evolutionism and evolutionistic ideas 47, 50–52
- Exodus* 295
- Eymundr Ólafsson (Old Swedish *Emund*) (Swedish king, r. 1050–1060) 264, 266
- Eyrbyggja saga* 19, 97–98, 208, 242–243, 246, 334

- Eyvindr kinnrifa (Norwegian chieftain, late tenth century) 111
- Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson (Icelandic skald, late tenth century) 80, 299, 303, 308–309,
- Faeroes 67
- Fagrskinna* 6–7, 39, 85, 88–90, 118, 134, 136, 156–157, 225–226, 299–309, 318
- Fasterna (Faste's) church (Old Swedish *Fastakirkia*), Uppland 196–197
- Ferðavísur* 100
- figurine 35, 127–128, 130
- Fitjar, South Hordaland 80
- Fjellie (church of), Skåne 188
- Fjenneslev, (church of), Sjælland 188
- Fjölfnir (Swedish legendary king) 19, 171–172
- Fjölsvinnsmál* 164
- fjolkynngi* (f.) 168
- fjorbaugsgarðr* (m.) 162, 167, 237, 242
- Flateyjarbók 3, 126, 131, 138–139, 159, 179, 181, 193, 224, 314, 318
- folk religion see ethnic religion
- Folsberga runestone (U 719) Uppland 214
- fordæðuskapr* (m.) 168
- Fornsigtuna, Uppland 205
- France 66, 186, 190
- Frankish(-Germanic) Empire 68–69, 260, 351–352
- Freyja 148, 154, 172–173, 236, 254, 338
- Freyr 18–19, 35–36, 58, 78, 124–128, 134–135, 138, 141, 148, 153, 171–174, 178–180, 200, 220, 254, 263, 309, 312, 338, 356
- Freys afspringr* 18
- Freys óttungr* 18
- Fricco see also Freyr 124–126, 141, 157, 263
- Friðgerðr gyðja Höfða-Þórðardóttir (female Icelander, late tenth century) 322–324
- Friðrekr, (Saxon bishop in Iceland, late tenth century) 146, 181, 322
- Frigg 148, 173
- Frosta, Trøndelag 81, 87, 103, 223, 313–315, 341
- Frostaþing 41, 77–78, 86, 103, 161, 297–298, 300, 302
- Frostaþingslög* (*The Frostaþing Law*) 41, 161, 166, 169, 218
- frændaskomm* (f.) 325–327, 336, 339, 358
- Fröslanda, Uppland 126
- Frösåker, Västmanland 174
- Frösö, Jämtland 36, 59, 107–108, 188, 200, 202
- Frösö runestone, Jämtland 107
- galdr* (m.) 167
- galdrakona* (f.) 100
- Gamli (oldest son of King Eiríkr blóðøx (?) or King Gormr of Denmark (?) 134–135
- Gautbert (missionary in Birka, ninth century) 175, 259
- Gerbrand (bishop of Roskilde, d. 1030) 103
- German Empire see Frankish(-German) Empire
- Germanization of Christianity, “the Christo-Germanic syncretism” 54–55
- gerning* (f.) 167–168
- Gesta Danorum* 38, 40, 305
- Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (= Adam) 8, 10–11, 36–37, 64, 68–70, 73, 85, 90–92, 99–107, 120–121, 124–134, 139–141, 157–159, 173–176, 178, 193, 260, 263–264, 273–275, 277–279, 282, 287–290, 294
- Giljá, Western Iceland 181
- Gisl (bishop in Linköping, d. c. 1160–1170) 193
- Gizurr inn hvíti Teitsson (Icelandic chieftain around AD 1000) 192, 202, 235–236, 239–240, 272, 331–332, 340
- Glavendrup runestone (DR 209), Fyn 98–99
- Glælognskviða* 218–219
- goð, guð* (n.pl and m.sg) 3–5, 83–84, 86, 97, 103, 135–138, 148, 161, 172, 181, 219, 223–224, 228, 236, 241–242, 262, 266, 273, 297, 305–306, 308, 322, 324–325, 332
- *goðkynningr* (m.) 18
- *goðlausir* (m.) and *goðlauss* (adj.) 48–52
- goði* (m.sg.) (*hofgoði*), *goðar* (pl) 18, 94–100, 108, 145, 148, 155, 193, 218, 225, 233, 236, 238–242, 322, 324–325, 327, 334, 339
- *goðorð* (n.) 96–97, 193
- *goðorðsmáðr* (m.) 97
- goða sveinn* 324–325
- godfather, godfatherhood (godparent, godparenthood) 66, 69, 115–117, 227–228, 352, 354
- Godfred (Old Danish *Guthfrith*) (Danish king, ninth century) 351–352
- Goðheimar 309

- gold bracteate 35
- gold foil figures (Swedish *guldgubber*) 35, 122–123, 127, 149, 229–230
- Gotland, Sweden 19, 41, 158, 160, 164–165, 201, 211, 217, 226, 353
- Gormr inn gamli (Old Danish *Gorm*) (Danish king, r. c. 936–958) 65, 135, 150–151, 353
- Grágás* 162–163, 167, 169–170
- Gregory I (papacy 590–604,) 142, 203
- Gregory VII (papacy 1073–1085) 279–281
- Grimkil (Old Norse *Grimkell*) (bishop in Norway, d. 1047) 103, 106, 193, 353
- Grímnismál* 118, 161, 209–210
- Grjótgarðr (Hlaðajarl, tenth century) 304
- Guðbrandr (chieftain in Guðbrandsdalar, early eleventh century) 3–5, 146, 178, 307
- Guðbrandsdalar, Norway 3, 119, 146, 307
- Gudhem, Västergötland 173
- Gudme, Fyn 173
- Guðrøðer Bjarnarson (king in Vestfold, tenth century) 304
- Gudvangen, Sogn og Fjordane 232
- Guðmundr sonr Brands (chieftain-priest in Iceland) 192
- Gulapíng 41, 135, 313
- Gulapíngsloð* (see also *Old Gulapíng Law*) 58, 106, 160–162, 165, 167, 169, 217–218
- Gullinkambi 209
- Gunnhildr (Norwegian queen, tenth century) 6, 65, 134–137, 277, 293, 303–307, 312–313
- Gunnlaugr Leifsson (Icelandic author/scribe) 321
- Gutalagen* see *The Guta Law* 41, 158–162, 164–165, 217–218
- Guta saga* 159, 164–165, 201
- gyðja*, *gyðjur* (f.pl) 121, 161, 322–325
- gýgr* (f.) 100, 324
- Gylfaginning* 128, 161, 171–172, 209–210
- Götar, (people of the) 104–105, 141, 280–281, 291
- Götavi, Närke 150, 160
- Hagebyhöga (church of), Östergötland 188
- hagiography, hagiographic traditions 5–6, 17, 90, 119, 177, 181–182, 202
- Hákon (the red) (Swedish king c. r. 1070–1080), 198–199, 264, 266, 270, 280–281
- Hákonardrápa* (by Einarr Helgason) 7, 84, 134–135
- Hákonardrápa* (by Hallfrøðr Óttarsson) 305, 310–312
- Hákonarhella, Vestlandet 80
- Hákonarmál* 66, 80, 84, 118, 210, 262, 299, 301
- Hákonar saga góða* 76–90, 95, 103, 122, 152–153, 155–156, 164–165, 191, 294–295, 297, 299, 301–302, 318–319
- Hákon inn góði Haraldsson (Aðalsteinsfóstri) (Norwegian king, r. c. 934–961) 65–66, 76–80, 84–90, 92, 103, 182, 223, 293, 296–303, 313–314, 319, 337, 341, 346–348, 353, 355
- Hákon jarl Sigurðarson (Norwegian jarl, r. c. 970–995) 7, 84, 134, 137–138, 174, 227–228, 293, 295–296, 303–313, 315, 318–319, 337, 346–348
- hall(s) 22, 31, 37, 70, 85, 99, 116–117, 123–124, 127, 129, 131–133, 149–150, 156, 161, 170, 173, 190–191, 196, 199, 201, 203–205, 208–210, 220, 230, 243–245, 282
- Hallfrøðr vandræðaskald Óttarsson (Icelandic skald, late tenth century) 38, 50, 116–117, 147–149, 226–228, 310
- Hallr Teitsson (Icelandic chieftain) 192
- Hallr Þórarinnsson (Icelander eleventh century) 234
- Hallr Þorsteinsson (Síðu-Hallr) (Icelandic chieftain, around AD 1000) 235–240, 330, 340
- Hallsteinn (Old Swedish *Halsten*) (Swedish king, r. c. 1070) 264, 279–281
- Hálogaland, Norway 111, 181, 310, 312
- Háleygir 316
- Háleygjatal* 18, 305, 308–311
- Hamburg (archbishop's seat, called Hamburg-Bremen, archbishop's seat from AD 848) 36–37, 68, 73, 104, 110, 216, 279, 281, 352
- Haraldr blátönn Gormsson (Old Danish *Harald*) (Danish king, r. c. 958/59–985/986) 9–12, 63–65, 69, 92, 106–107, 150–151, 304, 351, 353
- Haraldr gráfeldr Eiríksson (Norwegian king, r. c. 961–970) 80, 303–304

- Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson (Norwegian king, r. 1046–1066) 266
- Haraldr hárfagri Hálfðanarson (Norwegian king, r. c. 860–932) 65–66, 69, 77, 79, 98, 137, 156, 171, 219, 235, 296, 302–304, 359
- Haraldr Klakk (Old Danish *Harald*) (Danish king, r. c. 812–827) 9, 63, 69, 71, 117, 351–352
- Haraldskvæði* (*Hrafnsmál*) 118, 156
- Haralds saga gráfeldar* 6, 84, 136, 303–304, 308
- Hárekr I (Old Danish *Harek* I) (Danish king, d. 854) 63, 110, 352
- Hárekr II (Old Danish *Harek* II) (Danish king, d. c. 870) 353
- Hassmyra runestone (Vs 24), Västmanland 262
- Haukr hábrók (housecarl of King Haraldr, early tenth century) 77
- Hauksbók 39, 155, 265, 321
- Hávamál* 113–114, 118
- Haþuwulfr, (chieftain in Blekinge, seventh century) 85
- Hebrides 70
- Heda, Östergötland 105
- Hedeby, Denmark (today Germany) 63, 353
- heiðinn* (adj.) 136, 262, 323, 326
- heilagr* (adj.) 201, 218, 261
- Heimskringla* 3–7, 39–41, 64, 76, 84–90, 97, 111, 116, 118, 138, 155, 178, 224–229, 234, 269–270, 283, 293–320
- Hel 208–209, 211, 213–215, 355
- Helgafell, Western Iceland 208, 242
- Helgi enn magri Eyvindarson (landnámsmaðr) 252
- Helgö, Uppland 123, 244
- Henrik, (bishop of Sigtuna, d. 1134) 282, 353
- Hergeirr (Old Swedish *Hærger*) (prefect of Birka, ninth century) 175, 196, 289
- Hericus (Old Swedish *Erik*) (King of the Svear, ninth century) 175–176
- Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* 39, 91, 154–155, 265–275
- high-seat (Old Norse *háseti*, *öndvegí*) 81, 87, 123–124, 145, 147, 190–191, 229
- hirðbiskupar* (m.pl) 193
- Historia de antiquitate regum norwagiensium* 38, 67, 174, 234, 321, 330
- Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* 203
- Historia Norwegie* 38, 67, 90, 103, 119
- Hjalti Skeggjason (Icelandic chieftain) 202, 235–237, 239–241, 327, 331–333, 340
- Hjørungavágr, coast of Sunnmøre 305–306, 310–311
- Hlaðajarlar (jarls of Lade, Trøndelag) 18, 54, 302, 304, 312
- hlaut* (n.) 78, 82, 153–154
- *hlautbolli* (m.) 153, 157
- *hlautteinn* (m.) 154
- *hlautteins hreytir* 324
- hof* (n.), also *hof*-sanctuary, (Old Swedish *hov*) 3, 7, 78, 80, 94, 97–98, 108, 122, 136–138, 145, 149, 155, 163, 181, 188, 200, 224–225, 230, 232, 235–236, 242–243, 261–262, 305–308, 314, 323–326, 334, 339
- Hof, South Alftafjord (Old Norse *Alftafjörðr*), Iceland 235
- Hof, Vápnfjörðr, Iceland 262
- Hofgarda-Refr Gestsson (Icelandic skald, eleventh century) 100
- hofgoði* (m.sg.), *hofgoðar* (pl) see also *goði* and *goðar* 97, 145, 225, 334
- hofgyðja* (f.) see also *gyðja* and *gyðjur* 262
- Hofstaðir, Mývatnssveit, Northern Iceland 149, 242–245
- household religion 23
- Hov, Jämtland 200
- Hov, Vingom 149
- Hove in Åsen, Strindafylke, Trøndelag 232–233
- Hovgården, Adelsö, Uppland 198–199
- Hovgården runestone (U11) 198–199
- Hovsvangen, Oppland 232
- Hroptr (Óðinn) 210
- hrossætur* (f.pl), *hrossæta* (sg.) 156
- human sacrifice 225, 331–336, 347
- Hundþorp, Guðbrandsdalar 3, 6
- Hungary 289
- husaby*, *husby* 197–198, 206, 232
- Husaby, Västergötland (church of) 188–189
- Husby church, Bro parish, Uppland 197
- Husby-Lyhundra (church of), Uppland 188
- Husby, Åsen, in Strindafylke 232
- Husby-Árlinghundra (church of), Uppland 201
- húsfreyja*, *húsfjú* (f.) 261, 323–324
- Hvammr, Western Iceland 70, 322–324
- Hyndluljóð* 154
- Håtuna (church of), Uppland 189

- höpt* (n.pl) 172, 306
 Hørgaeyrr, Vestmannaeyjar 202
hørgbrjótr 226
høgr (m.sg.) *høgar* (pl) 138, 149, 154, 160–161, 202, 228
 Hørning, Jylland 199–200
- Iceland 7, 10–11, 17–19, 29–30, 39, 45, 51, 53, 67, 70, 96–98, 104, 138, 145–146, 149–150, 156, 162, 170, 181, 192, 202, 204, 207–208, 233–246, 259, 262, 272, 295, 321–337, 339–341, 347–348, 353–359
- Ireland 70, 312
- idol(s) 64, 92, 106, 126, 129, 137–141, 146–147, 152, 154, 157, 159–160, 162, 175, 178–179, 181, 203, 220, 263, 270, 276–277, 282, 323, 326, 332, 355
 – idolater 270–271, 274
 – idolatry 47, 90, 92, 120–121, 139, 270–271
 – idol parody 43, 170, 178–183, 221, 254, 355
idolum see also idol(s) 64, 126, 140, 143, 159, 175, 203
- inauguration 204, 238, 291–292, 312
- initiation (ritual), rite de passage (see also inauguration) 241
- Ingigerðr (Old Swedish *Ingegærðh*) (princess of Novogorod and Kiev, c. 1019–1050) 70
- Ingelheim, Germany 71, 353
- Ingimundr Einarsson (Icelandic chieftain-priest) 192
- Ingvi Steinkelsson (Swedish king, r. c. 1080–1110) 91–92, 264–276, 279–281, 289, 291–292, 341, 347, 353, 355, 359
- Ingunarfreyr 309
- inn forni siðr* 19, 32, 358
- inn nýi siðr* 19, 32, 358
- interpretatio christiana* 100
- interpretatio christiana typological* 294–295, 319
- interpretatio romana* 100, 125, 127, 141
- Irminsül 141–144
- Islamic reformers 344
- Ísleifr Gizurarson (bishop in Iceland, d. 1080) 10, 192–193, 234
- Íslendingabók* 19, 39, 53, 67, 97, 104, 121, 155–156, 172, 193, 234–242, 293, 321, 323, 327, 329–331, 334, 336
- Jämtar 107
- Jamtamót 107–108, 200
- Jarl Hákon see Hákon Sigurðarson
- Jarl Sigurðr see Sigurðr Hákonarson
- Jarls of Lade see Hlaðajarlar
- Járn-Skeggi Ásbjarnarson 118, 224–225, 314–315
- Jelling 10, 150–151, 204, 207
 – Jelling runestone I, (DR 41), Jylland 150
 – Jelling runestone II, (DR 42), Jylland 8, 12, 64–65, 107, 150–151
- jól* (n.pl) 156, 217, 316
- Jómsvíkingar 305
- Jón Þorvarðsson (Icelandic chieftain-priest) 192
- Julita, Södermanland 196
- Jylland 10, 41, 64–65, 92, 150, 188, 199, 207, 351–352
- Jørð 173, 304–305, 310–312
- jötunn* (m.sg.) *jötnar* (pl) 210
- Kalmar, Småland 283–284
- Kalmarna leiðangr* 283–285
- Karlung (church of) (*Karlungskirkia*), Uppland 197
- Kálfr Árnason, (Norwegian chieftain, eleventh century) 318
- Ketilbjörn Ketilsson á Mosfelli (chieftain and grandfather's father of bishop Ísleifr) 193, 235
- Ketill Guðmundarson (Icelandic chieftain-priest) 192
- Ketill Þorsteinsson (Icelandic chieftain-priest) 192
- Kimstad runestone (Ög 161), Östergötland 215
- Kings' Sagas 33, 39, 90, 119, 137, 170, 223, 254, 293, 296
- kingship 6, 60, 71, 75, 112, 137, 186, 212–213, 254, 266, 284, 288, 290–291, 301, 303, 313, 315, 357–358
- Kjartan Óláfsson (young Icelandic magnate) 111–112, 239
- Klemensker 1 runestone (DR 399), Bornholm 214–215
- Klosterstad, Östergötland 105
- Knuba (Old Danish *Gnupa*) (Danish king, tenth century) 353
- Knútr Eiríksson (Old Swedish *Knut*) (Swedish king, r. 1167–1195/96) 115

- Knútr inn helgi Sveinsson (Old Danish *Knut*)
(Danish king, r. 1080–186) 272
- Knútr Sveinsson, or Cnut the Great (Old Danish *Knut*), (Danish king, r. 1018–1035) 219
- Knútsdrápa* 219
- Koðrán (Icelander, tenth century) 181–182
- Kórmakr Ögmundarson (Icelandic skald, tenth century) 78, 85, 100, 299, 307
- Kristniboð Þangbrands* 327–329
- Kristni saga* 39, 97, 111, 117, 121, 138, 146, 181, 192–193, 202, 234, 239, 241–242, 321–335, 340
- Kristnitakan* 330–335
- Kristni þættir* 39, 321–323
- Krosshólar, Western Iceland 70, 208
- Kuli runestone, Kuløy in Smøla 106
- Lade (Old Norse *Hlaðir*), Trøndelag 18, 54, 78–80, 84–85, 87, 94–95, 122, 137, 152–153, 155, 223, 293–294, 298, 301–302, 304, 307, 309–310, 312, 337–338, 341, 356–357
- Læsir, Guðbrandsdalar 146
- Lake Mälaren, Sweden 11, 18, 36, 91, 112–113, 123, 126–127, 129, 174, 188, 196–197, 205–207, 259–260, 263, 276, 279, 281, 285, 292, 337, 341, 356
- Landnámabók* 39, 51, 70, 97–98, 145, 155, 208, 225, 235, 237–238, 252, 321, 323, 327, 334
- Langfeðgatal* 270, 272
- laudes regiae* 185–186, 190
- Laugardalr, Western Iceland 236
- Legenda sancti Eskilli*, or “The Legend of St Eskil” 92, 270, 274, 276
- Lejre, Sjælland 85, 94, 207
- Lena (church of), Uppland 201
- libo*, *libare* 157
- Lífssaga Óláfs hins helga* 318
- líkneski* (n.) 126, 138, 159, 178, 181, 220, 221
- Lilla Ullevi, Uppland 160
- Limafjörðr, Denmark 304
- Linköping, Östergötland 105, 193
- Liopdag of Ribe (bishop tenth century) 353
- Likkair Snielli (Gotlandic magnate) 201
- Lisbjerg, Jylland 204
- lived religion (concept of) 22–23, 249
- Ljósvetningar 238
- Ljótr hofgoði at Þverá (Icelandic chieftain) 334
- Lóar, Guðbrandsdalar 3, 146
- Lorsch (church of), Germany 186
- Louis the Pious (Frankish-German Emperor, r. 814–840) 8, 63, 67, 69, 102, 117, 351–352
- Lule Saami 21, 252
- Lund (church of), Skåne 10, 263, 282, 284, 354
- Lunda, Södermanland 127, 129
- **lytir* (m.) 96, 100
- Lytir 131
- logbrigðir* (m.) 7, 136
- Magnússona saga* 269, 283
- Mainz, Germany 9, 63, 69, 71, 117, 352
- Mammen, Jylland 65
- Man(n)heimar 309
- Markús Skeggjason (Icelandic lawman and skald, d. 1107) 272
- Mary, Mother of God 86, 103, 217–218, 220–221, 250, 294, 297, 356
- Medb (Medhbh) 312
- Metz, France 185
- mission 5, 8, 36–37, 47, 56, 58, 63, 67–68, 102–110, 118, 120–121, 136–139, 142, 146, 181, 204, 222–246, 259–260, 281, 287, 295, 315, 322–330, 332, 339–340, 346, 352, 355
- missionary 6, 9, 15, 17, 22–23, 26, 37–38, 44, 46–47, 49, 52–55, 63, 68–69, 73–74, 94, 101–102, 108–110, 121, 125–126, 136, 141, 196, 214–216, 226, 228, 234, 247, 249, 251–254, 259, 277–278, 318, 321–329, 335, 339, 344, 355–356
- missionary bishop 43, 94, 104, 107, 146, 182, 193
- missionary king 103, 111, 117, 119, 138, 146, 182–183, 192, 232
- missionary priest 43, 67, 94, 146, 182, 241, 245
- Mora assembly site, Uppland 259, 290–291
- Morkinskinn*a 116, 269
- Moster (Old Norse *Mostr*), assembly of, and island of, Vestlandet 106, 146, 313, 353
- Mære (Old Norse *Mærin*), Trøndelag 59, 80, 85, 87–89, 118, 122–123, 145, 153, 223–233, 293, 299, 301, 314–317, 337–338
- Mære church 229, 231
- Mæreshaugen, Trøndelag 229
- Mære Peace (Old Norse *Mærina-helgi*) 145

- naturalis gentium religio* see *religio naturalis*
- Native American Ghost Dance 343
- Niðaróss (today the city of Trondheim), Trøndelag 10–11, 111–112, 223, 316, 354
- Niflhel 208
- Nithard (clerk, ninth century) 259
- Njáls saga* 234, 307, 321, 328–329
- Njård 126
- Njörðr 19, 135, 148–149, 153, 171–174, 180, 220, 227, 306, 309, 356
- Normandy 66, 70
- Norsborgshögen, Södermanland 207
- Norway 3–12, 17–19, 30–31, 36, 39, 41, 47, 50–54, 58, 65–67, 71–73, 77–90, 98, 101, 106, 118–120, 134–139, 145–146, 149, 156, 162–163, 166, 168, 170–171, 174, 179–181, 193, 204–207, 210–211, 218–219, 223–233, 235–240, 261, 270, 284, 293–320, 337–343, 346, 348, 353–359
- Nälsta, Uppland 126
- Närke, Sweden 150, 160, 197, 212
- Oddr munkr Snorrason 39, 64, 107, 111–112, 117–119, 137–138, 156, 180, 224–225, 229, 239–240, 262, 294, 305, 307, 314–315, 321
- Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 39, 64, 107, 111–112, 117–118, 137, 156, 180, 224–225, 229, 239–240, 262, 305, 307, 314–315
- Odenslund(a), Uppland 126
- Odensvi, Västmanland 174
- Odinkar, the elder (Danish bishop in Sweden, late tenth century) 102
- Old Testament, Hebrew Bible 37, 80, 294–295, 312
- Old Uppsala, Uppsala 11, 35, 37, 58, 68, 85, 91, 94, 99–100, 123–134, 140, 157, 159, 173–175, 180, 188–189, 193, 197, 199–202, 206–207, 259–260, 263–265, 267–268, 271–282, 287–288, 290, 292, 337–338, 341, 346, 354, 356–357, 359
- Old Uppsala church 131, 197, 199–202
- óðal* 77, 290
- Öðin-Dīsa (Swedish lady, eleventh century) 262
- Óðinn, Wodan 50, 78–79, 83–84, 87, 95, 124, 126, 134–135, 143, 147–149, 164, 171–174, 177, 208–210, 254, 261–262, 304, 308–312, 338
- Óláfr (Old Swedish *Olaf, Olof*) (King of the Svear, ninth century) 108–110, 289
- Óláfr inn helgi Haraldsson (St. Óláfr) (Norwegian king and saint, r. 1015–1028, 30) 3–6, 54, 66–67, 69, 71–74, 102, 106, 112, 115–116, 118–121, 138–139, 146, 178, 191, 193, 218–221, 233, 255, 293, 316–320, 337, 341, 348, 353, 355, 359
- Óláfr Tryggvason (Norwegian king, r. 995–1000) 38, 43, 54, 56, 66–67, 69, 71–72, 104, 111–112, 116–121, 137–138, 147–149, 156, 178–181, 192, 202, 217, 222–246, 293, 313–315, 320, 326–327, 331, 336, 340–341, 348, 354–356, 358–359
- Óláfr sænski (skautkonungr) Eiríksson (Old Swedish *Olaf, Olof*) (Swedish king, r. c. 995–1022) 68–70, 73, 104, 112–113, 139–140, 208, 263–264, 290, 353
- Óláfsdrápa* 226
- Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar* 228
- Óláfs saga helga* 3–4, 106, 112, 118, 146, 153, 193, 233, 261, 264, 290, 316–319
- Óláfr saga Tryggvasonar* (in *Heimskringla*) 296, 305, 318
- Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 308
- Óleifr enn hvíti, (king of Dublin and Ireland, ninth century) 70
- Ored of Schleswig (Danish bishop, tenth century) 353
- Orkney 67, 70, 147
- Orkneyinga saga* 92, 269–270, 272, 274–275
- Oseberghaugen, Vestfold 207
- Otto the Great (German King and Emperor, r. 936–973) 64, 69, 107, 353
- Ottonian dynasty 55, 185, 191
- Paradise 210, 213–216, 313, 346, 355
- Paris 352
- Passio et miracula beati Olavi* (c. 1160) 38, 121, 138
- Pfalzkapelle (palace chapel) 186–187
- Poland 289
- Poppo (Old Norse *Poppó*) (priest and bishop, tenth century) 64, 92, 107
- Possession spirit cults of Africa 344
- prefect (Latin *praefectus*) 196, 289
- présbus* 96

- presbíteros* 96
- priest 29–30, 43, 64, 67, 73–74, 77, 86, 93–96, 100–104, 119, 139, 142, 148, 182, 185, 191–195, 199, 205, 219, 229, 234–236, 241, 245, 249, 260, 280, 299, 301, 317–319, 323–324, 335, 340, 343–344, 348, 353
- priesthood (priestly institution) 26, 29–30, 32, 54, 93, 95–96, 100–101, 158, 191, 233, 248–249, 253, 356
- primary religion 26, 250–253, 356
- primus inter pares* 45, 273, 290, 301, 303, 338, 357
- princeps* 109, 289
- private religion 22, 249
- proprietary church system see *Eigenkirchenwesen*
- Raduvald (bishop of Skara, eleventh century) 281
- Ragnarr (Latin *Reginherus*) (chieftain, perhaps identical with Old Norse Ragnarr loðbrók) 270, 352
- Ragnarøk 209–210, 346
- Ranheim, Trøndelag 149
- Rastarkálfr, Møre/Romsdal 135
- Rauðr (Þórr worshipper in Hálogaland, late tenth century) 181
- Reginbert (bishop of Aarhus, tenth century) 103, 353
- Reims, France 259
- Rekstefja* 228
- religio naturalis* 295, 319
- religions of the status quo, resistance, and revolution 45, 337, 342–348, 358
- religious acculturation (concept of) 20, 24–25, 54, 58
- religious change (concept of) 8, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19–26, 33–35, 41, 45, 49, 53, 59, 68, 182, 222–241, 247, 252, 260, 346
- religious continuation (concept of) 20, 24–25, 56, 184, 219, 356
- Rerum Gestarum Saxoniarum* (c. 968) 37, 143
- Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu* 334
- Reykjaleug, Western Iceland 242
- Reykjardalr, Iceland 242
- Ribe, Jylland 10, 64, 353
- Rimbart (archbishop and author, ninth century) 36, 63, 67, 102, 109–110, 175–176, 178, 196, 259–260, 289–290, 352
- Risbyle, runestone (U 160), Uppland 214
- ritual, rite 7, 11, 15–16, 19, 26, 29, 32–33, 35–36, 43–44, 54, 56, 58–59, 73, 75–95, 99–101, 103, 106, 108–110, 116–118, 121–125, 129, 132, 134, 136, 139, 142, 145, 149–170, 182–186, 190–191, 194–195, 200, 202–206, 208, 211, 216–217, 220–222, 224, 232–233, 239–251, 253, 255, 269, 273–276, 278, 289–292, 294–295, 298–304, 312, 320–321, 324–325, 331, 333, 335–336, 338, 342–348, 355–357
- Rituale Romanum 216
- Roman Catholic Christianity 8, 42, 54, 64, 93, 100, 249
- Roman religion 100
- romanesque churches 71, 184–185, 188, 195–196, 199–200
- Rome 55, 100, 171, 185, 280–281
- Romsdal fjord, Norway 17–18
- Rudolf (English clerk and missionary, early eleventh century) 103
- Rudolf of Fulda (monk and author) (d. 862) 142–143
- rulership (see also kingship) 18–19, 29, 36, 55, 93, 218, 296, 313, 315, 343
- runestones 8, 10–12, 33–35, 64, 85, 91, 99, 102, 106–107, 113, 150–151, 171, 198, 212–215, 260, 264, 283, 285–287
- Runólfur goði Úlfsson (Icelandic chieftain, late tenth century) 204, 239, 241–242, 327, 339
- Ruotger 92
- Rus’ 63, 70
- Russia 70, 73, 264, 279
- Rüstringen, East Frisia 69, 352
- Rällinge, Södermanland 35, 127–128
- rögn* (n.pl) 135, 335
- Rögnvaldr the Old (Old Swedish *Ragnvald*) (Swedish jarl, eleventh century) 264, 270
- Rögnvalds þáttur ok Rauðs* 180–181
- Saami religion 21, 30–31, 121, 252
- sacerdotes* (*sacerdos*, sg.) 29, 93, 100, 139, 191
- sacrifice 32, 43–44, 75–76, 79–93, 98, 100–101, 111, 118, 125, 131, 136, 142, 146–149,

- 152–153, 155–166, 174–176, 181–182, 190, 200, 202, 210, 217, 220–221, 223–225, 227, 233, 237–238, 240, 244–245, 251, 253–254, 261, 266, 269–271, 273–276, 279, 291–292, 294, 298–301, 306–307, 314–316, 320, 322–324, 331–336, 338–339, 343, 345–348, 355, 357
- Sagas of Icelanders 39, 246
- salr* (m.) (Old Swedish *sal*) 108, 161, 209
- sanctuary 3, 7, 11, 19, 36–37, 58, 68, 83–86, 91, 97, 99–100, 124–126, 133, 135, 137, 143, 145, 149–150, 154, 161, 177, 179, 181, 193–203, 225, 233, 242, 244–245, 259, 265, 275–278, 292, 306–308, 324–325, 337, 341, 347, 356–357, 359
- Saxo Grammaticus 38, 40, 180, 305
- Saxon(s) 137, 142–144, 177, 287, 322
- Scotland 70
- Schleswig, Germany 63, 353
- secondary religions 26, 250, 253
- seiðkona* (f.) 100
- seiðr* (m.) 101
- Septuaginta* 176
- sepulchral-stones 205
- Serapis 6
- Shetland 67
- ship burial 207
- siðaskipti* (n.) 19
- signa* (verb) 78–81, 84, 87–88, 95
- Sigfrid (bishop from England, eleventh century) 103
- Sighridakirkia* (today (Yttre) Hölö kyrka), Södermanland 197
- Sigríðr (Old Swedish *Sighfridh*, *Sighridh*) (queen of the Svear, late tenth century) 138, 229
- Sigtuna, Uppland 68, 112–115, 124, 140, 171, 189, 197, 204–205, 263–264, 277–279, 282, 287, 291, 353
- Sigtuna, runic inscription on a bone, (SI 34) 113–115
- Sigurðarbálkr* 285
- Sigurðardrápa* 78, 83–84, 302, 307
- Sigurðr Hákonarson, (Hlaðajarl, d. 962) 77–79, 83–84, 87, 95, 99, 298–304, 337
- Sigurðr Hlǫðviðsson, (jarl of Orkney, d. 1014) 147
- Sigurðr Jórslafari Magnússon (king of Norway, r. 1103–1130) 269, 283–285
- Sigvaldi Strut-Haraldsson (jarl of the Jómsvíkingar, d. c.1000) 305
- Sigvatr Þórðarson (Icelandic skald, c. 995–1045) 115–116, 208, 261–262
- siþja úti* (phrase), *útiþeta* (f.) 168
- Skáldatal* of Uppsala Edda 272
- skaldic poetry 18, 38, 88, 247, 290, 293, 309, 335
- Skáldskaparmál* 172, 310–311
- Skarðsárþók 145, 334
- Skara, Västergötland 68, 70, 104, 141, 263, 279, 281, 291
- skóggangr* (m.) 162, 167
- Skänninge, Östergötland 105
- skurgoð*, *skurðgoð* (n.) 126, 159, 178–179, 181, 221, 323, 333
- Sleipnir 208
- Slöinge, Halland 123
- Småland 17, 267, 269, 383–385
- Snorri goði Þorgrímsson (Icelandic chieftain, late tenth century) 242
- Snorri Sturluson 3, 6–7, 38–41, 64, 76–90, 92, 95, 99, 103, 106–107, 111–112, 116–119, 122, 128, 136–138, 146, 152–155, 163–164, 171–173, 178, 193, 209, 223–227, 229, 233–234, 247, 251, 261–262, 269, 283–285, 290, 293–310, 313–320
- Snorri's *Edda* 39–40, 161, 171–173, 247, 272, 308–309
- Snorri's *Heimskringla* 3–7, 39–40, 64, 76–90, 97, 111, 116, 118, 138, 155, 178, 224–227, 229, 234, 269–270, 283, 293–296, 300, 302–305, 308–309, 313, 318–319
- spá* (verb) 167–168
- *spá* (f.) 167–168
- *spákona* (f.sg.), *spákonur* (pl) 100, 168
- *spámaðr*, *spámenn* (m.pl) 168
- stafgarpar* (Old Gutnic **stafgarpr* m. sg.) 159–160, 163
- stafr* (m.) (Old Swedish *staver*) 126, 159–160, 163
- stallr* (*stalli*), *stallar* (m.pl) 155, 163, 275, 324–325
- statue(s) (of the gods) (see also *idol(s)* and *idolum*) 4–5, 35, 43, 64, 92, 106, 124–134, 137–141, 146–147, 152, 154, 157, 159–160, 162, 170, 175, 178–183, 203, 220–221, 254, 263, 270, 276–277, 282, 323, 326, 332, 355
- statuettes 35

- Stefnir Þorgilsson (Icelandic missionary, late tenth century) 138, 325–327
- Stefnis þáttur Þorgilsson* 325–327
- Steinkell (Old Swedish *Stenkil*) (Swedish king, r. 1060–1066) 91, 125, 140–141, 208, 264–266, 270, 273, 278–279
- Steinunn skáldkóna (Icelandic poetess, late tenth century) 326–328
- St Alban's Church (Abbey), Mainz 63, 69, 71, 282, 352
- St Botvid (Old Swedish *Botvidh*) (Swedish saint, early twelfth century) 17, 197, 281–282
- St Denis (Basilica of) 186
- St Elin of Skövde (Old Swedish *Ælin(a)*) or St Helena (from Latin *Helena*) (d. 1160) 17
- Stefan (Archbishop of Sweden, c. 1164–1167) 196
- St Eskil (Old Swedish *Askel*, *Æskil*) (Anglo-Saxon monk, d. c. 1090) 17, 92, 270–271, 274, 276, 281–282
- Stentofen runestone, Blekinge 85–86, 153
- St Gertrud church ruin, Sigtuna 189, 197
- Stjörn* 295
- St Mary 86, 103, 217–218, 220–221, 250, 294, 297, 356
- St Michael 215–217, 254
- St Per church ruin, Sigtuna 189–190, 197
- Strängnäs, Södermanland 271, 282, 291
- Ströbohögen, Västmanland 207
- St Sunnifa 17
- Styrmir Kárason 318
- syncretism (syncretic phenomenon) 20, 24–25, 54, 56–58, 184, 217
- Svear, people of the 11, 18, 36–37, 67, 85, 90–92, 99, 102, 105, 108–110, 113, 124–127, 140, 155–156, 173, 175–176, 179–180, 259–260, 263, 265–267, 270–271, 273–276, 278–281, 283, 285, 288, 290–292, 301, 346
- Sveigðir (Swedish legendary king) 19, 171–172
- Sveinn Ástriðarson (Old Danish *Swen* II) (King of Denmark, r. 1047–1076) 220, 277–279
- Sveinn Knútsson (Norwegian king, c. r. 1030–1035) 220
- Sveinn tjúguskegg Haraldsson (Old Danish *Swen* I) (King of Denmark, r. 986–1014) 69
- Sverker (Old Swedish *Sværker*) (Swedish king, r. 1130–1156) 193, 341
- Svetjud (Old Norse *Svíbjóð*) (= the Lake Mälaren area) 11, 44, 68, 71, 91–92, 99, 102, 107–108, 138, 155, 171, 178–179, 194, 196, 229, 244, 259–292, 301, 337–341, 356–357
- Svöldr 227
- Sweden 8, 11, 17–19, 29–31, 36–37, 42, 44, 56–58, 60, 63, 67–68, 71, 73, 92, 98, 101–102, 105–107, 112, 124, 128, 130, 139–141, 158, 162, 166, 179, 186, 188–189, 193–195, 201, 205–206, 211–212, 214–215, 259–292, 337–341, 343, 347–348, 353–359
- Södermanland 17, 35, 127–129, 196–197, 207, 212, 270–271, 281–283
- “taking king” (Old Swedish *taka konong*) 290
- Taoists in China 344
- Teitr Ketilbjarnarson (Icelandic chieftain, tenth century) 235
- Teitr Ísleifsson (Icelandic chieftain, d. 1111) 234
- temple, Latin *templum* 7, 37, 68, 78, 98–99, 122, 124–134, 136–141, 146, 153, 158, 174, 176, 202–203, 224–226, 228, 235, 243, 262–263, 267–268, 273, 278–279, 282, 303, 305–308, 314, 322–323, 326, 334
- The Apostles' creed 102
- The Legendary Saga of St Olaf (Óláfs saga hins Helga)* 3, 146, 317
- The Nicene creed 102
- The Borgarþing Law* 165, 168
- The Florence list* 271
- The Frostaping Law* 41, 161, 166, 169, 218
- The Guta Law, Gutalagen* 41, 158–160, 162, 164–165, 217–218
- The Law-Rock, Þingvellir, Western Iceland 236
- The Old Icelandic Homily Book* 254
- The Old Norwegian Homily Book* 213, 254
- The Old Saxon Baptismal Vow* 177
- The Older Eidsivating Law* 155, 160, 163–166
- The Older Gulaping Law* 58, 106, 160, 162, 165, 167, 169, 217–218
- The Oldest Saga of St Óláfr* 146, 317
- The Poetic Edda* 171–172
- The Separate Saga of St Óláfr* 3, 112, 139, 317–318
- The Uppland Law (Upplandslagen)* 162, 291
- The Older Västgöta Law (Den Äldre Västgötalagen)* 291

- Theodoricus monachus (Norwegian monk and author, twelfth century) 38, 174, 234, 321, 329–330
- Theophilus (Patriarch of Alexandria, in the fourth and early fifth century) 6
- Thietmar of Merseburg (bishop and author, d. 1018) 85, 177
- Thor see Þórr
- Thor-hammer(s) 35, 49, 57, 128–129, 171
- Thurgot (bishop of Skara, in the early eleventh century) 70, 104, 263
- til árs ok friðar (ár ok friðr)* 58, 78, 82, 84, 89–90, 153, 190, 217–221, 223, 255, 306, 320, 357
- Tillinge (church of), Uppland 188
- til sigrs ok ríkis konungi* 78, 84, 190
- Torshov (Old Norse *Þórshof*), Eastern Norway 122
- Torslunda, Uppland 126, 174
- trémaðr* (m.sg.), *trémenn* (pl) 126, 159, 178–179, 220
- tricinium* 129, 157
- trollkona* (f.) 100
- trúa á mátt sinn ok megin* (phrase) 47–48, 51–52, 79
- Tryggvi Ólafsson (king in East Norway, tenth century) 235, 304
- Trøndelag, Norway 18, 45, 53, 56, 59, 76–78, 80–81, 84, 95, 103, 106, 118, 122, 137, 149, 156, 166, 178–179, 181, 207, 218, 223–233, 245, 259, 283, 292–320, 337–338, 341, 348, 353, 355–357, 359
- Tuna (today Eskilstuna), Södermanland 270–271, 291
- Tveje Merløse, Sjælland 188
- Týr 173
- týs óttungr* 18
- úbót* (f.) (see also *úbótaból* (n.), *úbótamál* (n.), *úbótaverk* (n.) or *úbótasök* (f.)) 168
- Ulfhild's church (Old Swedish *Ulfhildakirkia*, today Överselö kyrka) 197
- Úlfr Uggason (Icelandic skald, end of the tenth century) 335
- Uppland 41, 60, 68, 88, 112, 126, 128, 130–131, 140, 160, 162, 195–197, 201, 207, 213–214, 263–265, 267, 285–287, 290–291
- Uppsala kulle, Södermanland 207
- Uppsala (see Old Uppsala)
- Uppsala auðr* 197
- Uppsala högar (mounds), Uppland 133, 207
- Uppåkra, Skåne 123, 150
- Urapmin, a local group in West Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea 14–15, 145
- Unwan (Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, d. 1029) 68, 70, 73, 104, 263
- Vaksala (church of), Uppland 188
- Valhöll 80, 209–210, 213, 215, 355
- valkyrja* (*valkyrjur* pl.) 210
- Valsgårde, Uppland 206, 287
- Vang, Trøndelag 232
- vanir* (*vanr* sg.) 153, 173–174
- vargr í véum* 262
- Vági, Guðbrandsdalar 146
- Vápnfirðinga saga* 262
- veizla* see also *blótveizla* 78–79, 84, 87, 152, 317
- Vellankatla, Western Iceland 236
- Vellekla* 6–7, 84, 137, 302, 304–308, 310, 346
- Vendel, Uppland 8, 201, 206
- Vendel (church of), Uppland 201
- Veng (church of), Midtjylland 188
- Verdælir, Trøndelag 316–317
- Vestfold, Norway 207, 219, 304
- Vestlandet, Norway 17, 53, 207
- Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland 202, 236
- Vetrliði skáld Sumarliðason (Icelandic skald, late tenth century) 329
- Veøy, Romsdal fjord 17–18
- vé* (Old Swedish *vī*) 7, 108, 134–136, 159–160, 201, 305–306
- *vébønd* 135
- *végrimmr* 226–227
- *véstallr* 155, 164
- Viby, Uppland 115, 196
- Viken, Southern Norway 53, 65, 137, 168
- Virgil 171
- Vita Anskarii* (= VA) 36, 63, 69, 102, 106, 108–110, 175–176, 196, 259–260, 289, 352–353
- Vita sancti Botvidi* 197, 281–282
- Vita Brunonis* 92
- Vita Hludovici* 63, 352
- Vita et Passio S. Canuti* 271, 282
- **vjfill* (m.) 96
- Vulgata* 174, 176

- Väppeby runestone (U 703), Uppland 113
 Västergötland, Sweden 11, 57, 60, 68, 105, 141, 173, 188–189, 212–213, 260–261, 263, 266–267, 269, 280–281, 291
Völuspá 39, 48, 161, 208–209, 346
vǫlva, *vǫlur* (f.pl) 100–101, 121, 168
- Wahhabism 344
 Wends 227, 289
 West Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea 14
 Widukind of Corvey (Saxon Chronicler, d. c. 973) 37, 64, 92, 106–107, 143, 353
 Witmar (missionary in ninth century) 102
 Wodan see Óðinn
 Wolfred (missionary from England, eleventh century) 140, 277
- Yaroslav (prince of Novgorod and Kiev, d. 1054) 70, 73
Ynglinga saga 40, 155, 171, 173, 178, 294, 309
Ynglingatal 18, 155, 164, 172, 310
 Yngvi 19, 172, 228, 309
 Yngvi-Freyr 171, 180
 Yngvifreyr 309
- Ælnoth (Anglo-Saxon author and monk in Odense, d. 1086) 271, 281–282
æsir (sg. *ás*) 173, 306, 308, 310, 316, 326 æ
- Þangbrandr (priest and missionary in Iceland, late tenth century) 17, 235, 328, 335, 340
þing 32, 75, 89, 98, 103, 106–107, 136, 165, 194, 223, 266, 275, 277, 289–291, 298, 323, 327, 358
þingmenn (m.pl) 98
 Þingvellir, Western Iceland 53, 233–234
 Þjóðólfr Árnasson (Icelandic skald, eleventh century) 208
 Þjóðólfr ór Hvini (Norwegian skald, ninth and tenth centuries) 311
 Þórarinn fylsenni Þórðarson (Icelandic chieftain, end of the tenth century) 322–325
 Þórarinn loftunga (skald, eleventh century) 218
 Þorbjörn hornklofi (Norwegian skald, ninth and tenth centuries) 156
 Þórdís Þóroddsdóttir (Icelandic lady, d. c. 1001) 193
 Þórgerðr Hølgabrúðr 307–308, 312
- Þóroddr goði (Icelandic chieftain) 193
 Þórhaddr goði (Icelandic chieftain, landnámsmaðr) 145
 Þórólfr Mostrarskegg Örnólfsson (landnámsmaðr) 97–98, 208, 242–343, 334
 Þórr 3–6, 19, 35, 50, 57, 79, 97–98, 124, 126–131, 134–135, 140–141, 148, 163, 171, 174, 177, 181, 224, 252, 277, 305–308, 314, 328–329, 338
 Þórví (Old Danish *Thorwe*, *Thyrwi*) (Queen of Denmark, tenth century) 65, 150
 Þorgeirr Ljósvefningagoði Þorkelsson (Lawspeaker of Iceland, late tenth century) 98, 237–242, 246, 331, 339, 341, 354, 359
 Þorsteinn rauðnefr (second generation Icelander) 238
 Þorsteinn Þorskaþitr (second generation Icelander) 208
 Þorvaldr inn veili (Icelandic skald, late tenth century) 329, 334–335
 Þorvaldr víðförli Koðráns­son (Icelandic missionary, late tenth century) 121, 146, 181, 322–325
Þorvaldr þáttur víðförla (I and II) 121, 323–325
 Þrándheimr (the province Trondheim see also Trøndelag) 11, 89, 145, 220, 229, 297, 316
 Þriði = Óðinn 310–311
 Þrændalög see Trøndelag 78, 83, 233, 298–299, 302
 Þrændir 87–90, 103, 118, 138, 179, 224–225, 233, 293, 298–303, 314–320, 348
þulr (m.) 100
 Þverá, South-Western Iceland 334
- Öland, Sweden 60, 101, 211–213, 284
 Örberga (church of), Östergötland 188
 Östens hög, Västmanland 207
 Östergötland 11, 60, 105, 188, 193, 212–213, 215, 267
- Qgló, Norway 304
 Qlfossvatn, Iceland 236
 Qlvir (name of three men in Västergötland) 262–263
 Qlvir at Egg, Trøndelag 118, 316–318
 Qnundr Óláfsson (Old Swedish *Anund* (Jacob)) (Swedish king, r. 1022–1050) 264, 278