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Yggdrasil and the Stave Church

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Abstract

In this excerpt from his book, *Tree of Salvation*, Murphy explores how those who introduced Christianity to Scandinavia deliberately adapted and “translated” Norse religious motifs and practices in two parallel ways—through literary works, especially as seen in the *Heliand*, but also through church art and architecture. In this illustrated essay, we can see how beliefs about Yggdrasil and Ragnarok are incorporated and transformed in the design and ornamentation of the unusual stave churches of Norway. Scholar GOH speech, Mythcon 2012.

Additional Keywords

Christianity in Scandinavia; Church architecture; Heliand; Norse mythology; Stave churches; Yggdrasil



CCORASIL AND THE STAVE CHURCH

C. Ronald Murphy, S.J.

The *Heliand*, with appropriate alliteration, calls the cross on Calvary a *Cbôm an berege*, a 'tree on a mountain,' an appropriate designation with which to begin this study of the relationship between a tree and a church. The stave church has been the subject of much research and appreciation, the majority of which has focused on the stave church's remarkable and long-lasting wooden construction. The debate continues to this day on how much of the stave church's style is an import from the continental south, the basilica translated into wood, how much is from the Celtic, Anglo-Saxon church of the British Isles, and how much is from the north. The focus of this paper is on the north, the role of Germanic religion and myth in the style, with the aim of attempting to interpret the overall meaning of the design of the stave church.

Peter Anker's wide-ranging study of the question accepts Andreas Bugge's rejection of the view that the portals of the stave church, for example, normally had no specific Christian content and that the portals were purely decorative in intention. He also looks positively on Bugge's suggestion that the portal ornamentation might be allegorical pagan iconography of Christian ideas. He adds, however, "[i]n fact this question has never been subject to serious scholarly investigation, and Bugge never did discuss the matter in detail" (I.416). To which one could add: unfortunately. This I would like to address in some small way.

It is my theory that a good model for attempting an approach to understanding the religious meaning and style of the stave church is the *Heliand*. In the *Heliand*, the story of salvation by Christ is told in the language and poetry of the north, transforming the gospel story into an epic, often while also retaining the original form as well. One of my favorite examples is the scene of the Annunciation where the term "grace" is both translated and also repeated literally, a poetic technique of creating rhyming concepts through analogy or parallelism. Instead of "Hail Mary, full of grace," the angel Gabriel is made to speak two languages: first he says to Mary, "Your Lord is very fond of you," thus touchingly interpreting grace as God's fondness, and then he adds literally from the Latin text as well, "woman full of grace." (*Heliand* 12). Even the fate of Judas is given in both languages. Judas hangs himself, as in the Bible, but the *Heliand* author also adds, "[c]ruel things started going into his body, horrible little

creatures, Satan wrapped himself tightly around his heart" (152). A sad echo of the fate of Gunnar, who betrayed Siegfried and who for his disloyalty was thrown into a snake pit.

Perhaps more important for us here is the analogy in the *Heliand* drawn between the cross and the tree, the cross as *bôm an berege*, a tree on a mountain.⁴ In the *Heliand's* crucifixion scene, Mary under the cross is described as standing under the tree, Christ is described both as being nailed to the cross and also as hanging by a rope from the tree, and when he is stabbed with the lance, the size and power of the lance and its thrust are made so impressive that an echo of Woden's stabbing on the tree Yggdrasil is hard to miss.⁵

I would like to suggest that this particular style of creative (and retentive) transformation of the gospel story into Germanic story images and events is the poetic key to the transformation of the church building into the stave church. The church is the holy place, the site of the protective presence of Christ, and above all the place of the act of salvation in the mystery of the Mass and the sacraments. How does one express "holy place," "site of rescue from annihilation," in the nordic world? Does nordic myth have any appropriate analogy—even one that may have already been influenced by Christian story? Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) gives the familiar answer in the *Gylfaginning* that the chief holy place is at the tree Yggdrasil:

"Then spoke Gangleri: 'Where is the chief centre or holy place of the gods?'

High replied: 'It is at the ash Yggdrasil. There the gods hold their courts each day.'

Then spoke Gangleri: 'What is there to tell about that place?'

Then said Just-as-High: 'The ash is of all trees the biggest and best. Its branches spread out over all the world and extend across the sky.'
(Sturluson 17)

In the *Poetic (Elder) Edda*, the seeress adds in the *Voluspa* that this unusual tree, which is called an ash, is evergreen.

I know that an ash-tree stands called Yggdrasill,
a high tree, soaked with shining loam;

⁴ See especially Songs 65 and 66: the cross as "a new gallows, the wooden tree," hewn with battleaxes "out of a hardwood tree," Pilate's inscription is "wisely cut into the wood," Christ hangs from a "criminal tree" (*Heliand* 182-88).

⁵ The name Yggdrasil alludes to this event. Ygg: 'Awesome One' [Odin] + drasil: 'horse, mount, steed.' The tree acting as a gallows for his death is thus the horse that he 'rode' in dying. "Odin's horse" is a kenning for that mythic evergreen ash, just as "whale road" is for the sea.

from there come the dews which fall in the valley,
ever green, it stands over the well of fate. (*Poetic Edda* 6)
(*stendr á of gróenn Urþar brunn*) (*Elder or Poetic Edda* 282)

The ecclesiastical holy place in the south is the basilica. The basilica shape so common and appropriate in Mediterranean Christianity suggests an analogy of the church to the Roman magistrate's court, a long, horizontally extended, rectangular building embodying the law-administering authority of the king, the *basileus*, with the magistrate seated separately at the far end in an apse as judge to protect the innocent and punish the guilty. The stave church retains some of the basilica in often having a choir and apse, the sanctuary, separated from the main body, the nave, but there is also an additional transformation of "holy place" and "site of rescue" into the tree language of the north as well, with a shorter more square nave and powerful staves to facilitate a vertical extension. The Christian language of salvation in the north seems to have been aware of the Germanic story of ultimate salvation, one not based on a story tradition of the protective power of law and authority, but based on a story tradition long known and familiar in Norse and Germanic society: that the protection and salvation of the last boy and girl, Lif and Lifthrasir, at the end of time was accomplished by the Tree of Universal Life, Yggdrasil, by hiding and protecting them throughout the calamity and by feeding them with the tree's dew. My suggestion is that the stave church is a Christian Yggdrasil, based on the poetic insight that there is an appropriate analogue in the north by which to express the concept of the place of salvation: it is to translate salvation as the inner space of Yggdrasil, the holy wooden place of protection at doomsday, and that at the heart of the evergreen tree's space is Christ on his wooden tree, the cross.

I will try to substantiate this interpretation by looking at three aspects of the stave church: the shape, the portals and door, and the interior; and by interpreting several of the allusions and symbols found in the poetic form of stave churches, principally in that of Borgund in connection with shape, Urnes in connection with the portal, and Uvdal from the point of view of the interior. Finally we will take a look at the famous Swedish tapestry from Skog, which actually shows a functioning stave church. I visited many of these churches in order to get a first-hand feel for them, and also because, though all have some, no one of them has all the tree aspects to the same degree. And I wanted to know what it was like to walk into them. There were some surprises.

First, Peter Anker's definition of a stave church:

The Norwegian word *stav*,⁹ which means a pole, applies to the corner posts and columns which are essential for upholding the entire structure, and for joining the fundament chassis to the upper braces. The *stav* or pole is the most obvious characteristic of these buildings. [...] [T]he stave church can be defined as a wooden building constructed with timber balks and posts linked to frames, the frames being put together into three-dimensional, cubic structures, with the covering materials—the wall planks—fitted into the frames where convenient. In addition to this, the stave system implies a number of advanced technical solutions—bracing, joining shoring, etc.—which are necessary for [...] its final architectural expression. [Anker goes on to say what a stave building is not: a building with horizontal logs like a log cabin.] (l.377-8) [Fig.1, p.9]

This is a good technical definition of the wooden construction of the churches. It is significant that no attempt is made at the defining the church part of the "building." From this the reader can see an indication that the greatest fascination has been with the amazing survival of 800 year old wooden buildings, and with their truly fascinating manner of construction. The interpretation of their meaning has been neglected in comparison. The building of stave churches is dated from about the middle to late 11th century, with the twenty-eight that are still in existence dating from about 1130 until 1350—about the time of the black plague. There is evidence of earlier structures on the sites of several churches whose current building dates to the 12th century. In one case, at Urnes, excavators found a coin under a post hole dating from the time of Harald Hardrada, who died in 1066 AD. Since the official date for Norway's conversion to Christianity is 1000 AD, these unique churches and their predecessors stem from early stages of conversion and Christian-Germanic accommodation, and continued to be built for almost 300 years.

I am sure there is some question as to whether the Anglo-Saxon missionaries from the British Isles would have felt at home using pre-Christian, pagan ideas of a holy site for a Christian church in Norway. In this connection it is useful to recall the famous letter of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) to the Abbot Mellitus to establish policy for the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons themselves. He says he has been thinking about the issue of the conversion of the English for a long time, then:

⁹ The English word stave, as in barrel stave, is related, as is the word staff, a pole held in the hand.



Figure 1. Stave church at Borgund.



Figure 2. Portal at Urnes in Sognefjord.

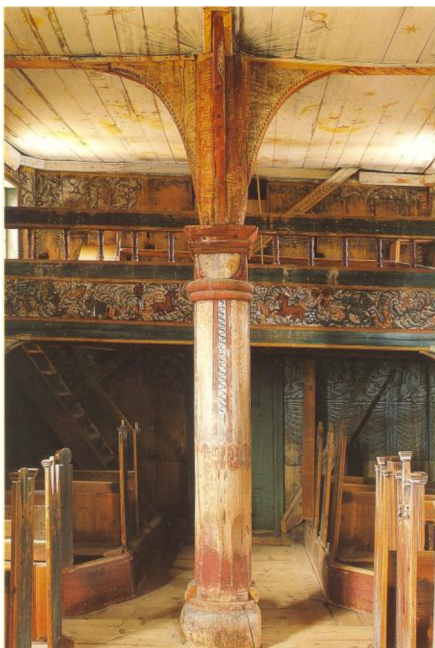


Figure 3. Interior, the church at Uvdal.

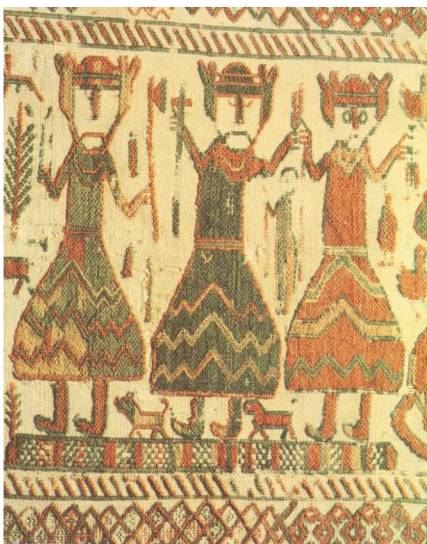


Figure 4. Altar tapestry from the church at Skog

Tell Augustine [St. Augustine of Canterbury] that he should by no means destroy the temples of the gods but rather the idols within them. [...] For, if those temples are well built, they should be converted from the worship of demons to the service of the true God. [*Nam, si fana eadem bene constructa sunt, necesse est, ut a cultu daemonum in obsequio veri Dei debeant commutari.*] Thus, seeing that their places of worship are not destroyed, the people will banish error from their hearts and come to places familiar and dear to them in acknowledgment and worship of the true God.

Further, since it has been their custom to slaughter oxen in sacrifice, they should receive some solemnity in exchange. Let them therefore, on the day of the dedication of their churches [...] build themselves huts around their one-time temples and celebrate the occasion with religious feasting. [...] [I]f they are not deprived of all exterior joys, they will more easily taste the interior ones. For, surely it is impossible to efface all at once everything from their strong minds, just as when one wishes to reach the top of a mountain, he must climb by stages and step by step, not by leaps and bounds . . . (Bede)

Gregory's approach to the conversion of the north was that of moderation and cultural accommodation. The word he used above to express his idea that the pagan temples, *fana*, should not be destroyed but be converted: *com-mutari* [lit. 'co-' + 'changed'] is far closer to a notion of fair or appropriate exchange, in the respectful style of the *Heliland*, than to that of the tree-felling St. Boniface and the Irminsul destruction of Charlemagne. Though the idols must go, the temples, if well-built and based on beautiful tales, well, that is another story, a tradition well practiced in Rome itself.

Few wooden structures are as well-built as the stave churches, as time has shown. Because of their closeness to the end of the Viking period, and because of the use of several ship-building techniques, the Norwegian stave churches have been associated with the Vikings. There is evidence for this. There are truly remarkable support arches in the church which, despite appearing to be a perfect arch, are actually composed of two "knees" joined by being "fished" together. Both knees and fishing are techniques used by the Vikings in wooden boat building. Knees are naturally curved wood taken from the part of the tree where the roots turn on an angle to become the tree trunk. Knees are much stronger than wood sawn into a curve. Fishing is a technique of joining two pieces of wood together on an angle, a bit similar to that used in botanical grafting, in which, for example, one piece of a mast is joined to another. The arches in the stave churches are so well made, the two halves so well joined, or fished, by a diagonal juncture at the center of the arch, that at first glance the arch does not look like two knees but like one sawn arch. However, this having been said, the joining of the main staves themselves to one another by in-let bracing

and high sills, with tongue-and-groove joining of the vertical wall planks to one another and to the corner staves, says to me that landsmen, professional carpenters, were also at work. Sailors will know of the Norwegian lapstrake or clinker-built¹² technique of planking the hulls of Viking ships—there is no trace of that method of joining and waterproofing that I have seen in the stave churches, only the tongue-and-groove method with vertical planks, not strakes. It seems that those Vikings who stayed at home and built temples and halls passed on their brilliant techniques every bit as well as those who sailed the sea did.

“Norway spruce (*P[icea] abies*) and Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) provided most of the construction timber” for the stave churches, notes a lumber expert (Farjon 208) speaking of the church at Borgund, and that is not surprising since a drive through southern and central Norway shows that the conifers, rising exceptionally straight, and as high as giant lodgepole pines, seem like an unending carpet for the country. It seems at first, however, that ash would be the preferred wood for a stave church that is an allusion to Yggdrasil. However there must have been some considerations. The first is poetic: the Northern ash is deciduous; the leaves fall with the coming of winter. The pine as candidate for Yggdrasil, Tree of Life, has the distinct advantage, comforting in the long winter, of displaying that it is alive by remaining ever green. There may also have been two more practical considerations: abundance and flexibility. The evergreen conifer is extremely abundant, straight-trunked, resinous, and strong in Norway, ideal for building. I do not believe that the ash is as abundant, as resinous, or as straight and strong. Ash-wood in short lengths combines toughness with a high degree of flexibility that makes ash ideal wood for oars and hand weapons associated with Odin like spear shafts and axe handles, as well as gallows for hanging.¹⁴ This might make ash less than suitable for tall church construction where flexibility might not be thought of as a virtue by the congregation under the high roof. The mysterious ever-green tree was the most suitable wood for creating a wooden building to parallel Yggdrasil, the tree that is, in any case, so holy and mysterious and its roots so deep that no one really knows where they come from, keeping its profound and enduring nature beyond human ken.

The abundant pine tree provided not only the wood for the church, but also the pine tar or pitch to act as a sealant with which to paint and waterproof it, and, I would like to suggest, to be the very model for the shape of the stave church. The matter and form of the edifice, in good Aristotelian style, are in

¹² A Viking shipbuilding technique in which the horizontal strakes, planks, of the hull are made to overlap each other, not to join edge to edge. The Oseberg ship and the two others in the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo are examples. The hull itself is thus such a strong, integral unit that it does not need the extensive internal bracing that a carvel-built [edge to edge planking] boat must have.

¹⁴ And in the U.S., of course, for baseball bats.

harmony. No attempt is made to twist the roof to resemble the ash. A surprise for me was that a tarred stave church can actually be smelled as you approach it—it has a distinct smokey pine odor. The church betrays in many ways the tree from which it is made.

The Shape

The resemblance of the roof structure to the cascading branches of an evergreen is unmistakable as one approaches the church at Borgund. This church is so well preserved, and has been so little altered over the intervening eight centuries to our time, that it has become the most accepted archetype of the stave church and is most worth studying. Since we are dealing with the perception of form, it is worth contemplating the shape that the roof structure gives the church: that of an evergreen. As one approaches the church from a distance it looks like a dark pine tree in a forest, with the familiar conical, Christmas tree shape as it stands on the lower part of what becomes a steep wooded slope. With other trees around it, it looks different from them by its darkness caused by the coating of pine tar.¹⁵ As you get closer it looms up higher and higher, with the ascending gables and roofs creating the illusion of layers of pine branches. Finally, as one stands at the western entrance and looks up, the pine tree effect is enhanced by looking at seven roofs, one on top of the other. In ascending order, the lowest and broadest roof covers the walkway or ambulatory that surrounds the whole church; it has a shingled gable over the entrance. This is topped by a second roof, slightly smaller in diameter, also with gables parallel to the lower roof, which covers the side aisles inside the wall staves. A bit higher there is another quite small gabled roof above the west window. A fourth roof covers the nave of the church, and a fifth peaked roof covers the small bell tower or turret that rides saddleback on the nave roof below it. Above the bell turret there are two more roof structures, functionally unnecessary, but contributing mightily to a vertical succession of diminishing roofs and gables, two small peaks with a terminal spire that give the clear impression of the peak of a pine tree. This is an impression that is curiously and effectively strengthened by the almost dominating presence of shingles that completely cover every roof, the external round staves, and the outer walls of the church except for the sides of the ambulatory and of the bell turret. Anders Bugge noticed this as well when he wrote:

¹⁵ The current approach lane to the Borgund church is from the north; thus the church appears dark for two reasons: the sun is on the opposite side of the building casting the north side in shadow, and the tar coating lasts much longer on the side not exposed to sunlight.

The wooden shingles which covered the six roofs [he is most likely not counting the small roof over the west window as a seventh] and most of the side walls beneath them, provide a surface effect similar in appearance to a pine cone. In the same way the tall, slender pyramid-shaped building reminds us of the fir [...]. The many roofs of the church, decreasing in size with height, are a striking parallel to the clustered branches which narrow towards the top of the tree. (13)

And I might add, the flat, lozenge shape and regularity of the shingles with their sawn off tips immediately suggest the cones of the Norway spruce. Unfortunately, Bugge did not use this very accurate observation to go any further toward an interpretation of its significance in signaling the identity to the stave church.

But we are neglecting the most obvious and most striking element of all. On the upper roofs of the church there are large serpent heads projecting from the gables, heads erect and alert, tongues extended, jaws partly open, ready to bite. Then, placed parallel to the snakes on the two lower roofs, there are wooden crosses above the peaks of the gables. The combination is the most striking feature of the roof profile—striking, but like a striking contradiction. What religious evergreen could there be that is associated with snakes? And how could it be associated with Christianity? Though many think that the snake heads and the crosses are there to repel evil spirits from a holy building, I think they serve another purpose that is more important. They serve to give a holy identification to the building.

Three roots there grow in three directions
under the ash of Yggdrasil;
Hel lives under one, under the second, the frost-giants,
the third, humankind.
[...]
More serpents lie under the ash of Yggdrasil
than any fool can imagine:
Goin and Moin, they are Grafvitnir's sons,
Grabak and Grafvollud,
Ofnir and Svafnir I think for ever will
bite on the tree's branches [*meiþs kwistu*].

The ash of Yggdrasil suffers agony
more than men know:
a hart bites it from above, and it decays at the sides,
and Nidhogg [the serpent] rends it beneath. (*The Poetic Edda* 56-7)

There is not only the Nidhogg serpent devouring corpses and the roots of the tree beneath, there are also countless snakes in the tree itself, in the branches. In other words, the *Grimmsmal's* depiction shows that snakes should be in and on the gables of the stave church if it is a representation of the suffering and holy tree Yggdrasil.

In the rhyming, double-concept style of the *Heliand*, the roof shape and snake ornaments address the observer of the church in Germanic, the cross ornaments address the observer in Christian, both saying in alternate languages: *this site is holy*; you are near the place of the well of life and threat of doom and death; you are standing under the tree; realize that you are here standing under the cross. This is the place and here is the mysterious wood where the ancestral, predictive *Edda* stories tell of the hanging sacrifice, the offering of Odin to himself, god to god. This is the sacred wood where it came to pass, where God the Son hung, offering Himself as a sacrifice to God the Father "once, and for all." In the *Poetic Edda* Odin speaks about his death on this tree whose origin and nature no one knows:

I know that I hung on a windy¹⁸ tree
nine long nights,
wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
myself to myself,¹⁹
on that tree of which no man knows
from where its roots run. (*Poetic Edda* 34)

Parallels were present. In the Gospel stories of Jesus's death, Jesus also complains that he is thirsty and bemoans his abandonment by the Father, and at the end commends his spirit into the Father's hands. There is also the spear. "When the soldiers came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water" (Jn 19: 33-34). Alluding to the death of Odin by the shape of a Christian church building—the church in Hegge, at the top of a stave, actually has a depiction of Odin's head as he is being strangled by the rope—makes the Germanic religion serve as a re-contextualization for the Christian mystery. In the New Testament, events from the Old Testament are used to explain and prophesy, to contextualize, those of the New. Christ's death

¹⁸ "Windy" helps identify the tree as the one on top of which the great eagle fans his wings creating the winds, Yggdrasil.

¹⁹ This line seems to echo the formula of sacrifice used of Christ in the Eastern (Byzantine) Eucharist. Addressing God the Father the priest says: we offer you yours of your own. This formula could have reached the north perhaps by way of the Rus or possibly by way of Christian Vikings returning from mercenary service for Constantinople.

is an “Exodus,” he is the new “Passover Lamb.” He will bring a new and better “Exodus”: not from Egypt to Palestine but from death to life. In the stave churches, as in the *Heliand*, local religious tradition is made instead to serve this purpose. Christ’s death was, like Odin’s, a death on a Tree. It is therefore a mysterious death—whose roots no one knows. Stabbed with the spear, Odin in his death reached down and seized the powerful runes and gave them and their magic to mankind; Christ, stabbed with the spear, poured out his blood and water, giving them, his sacred runes, to mankind in baptism and holy communion. To use the Germanic religion as an interpretive context for the Crucifixion only adds another layer of meaning to the richness which comes from using the Hebrew torah and prophets for this purpose.

The Portals

The western portals of the great stone cathedrals in continental Europe depict the Last Judgment. Christ is enthroned in the place of judgment above, the scales are under him weighing the souls of the just and the unjust, and the angels are leading the good to paradise on his right and the devils are busy leading the bad off to the jaws of hell. The scene above the main door to the cathedral urges the Christian to hurry inside so as to be one of those on the right. In the North this is doomsday, Ragnarok. After the succession of three mighty winters without spring or summer, the unmitigated violence among animals, the elements of heat and cold, and human beings will begin:

Brother will fight brother and be his slayer,
brother and sister will violate the bond of kinship;
hard it is in the world, there is much adultery,
axe-age, sword-age, shields are cleft asunder,
wind-age [winter], wolf-age, before the world plunges headlong;
no man will spare another.

[...]

Heimdall blows loudly, his horn is in the air.

[...]

Yggdrasil shudders, the tree standing upright,
the ancient tree groans and the giant is loose;
all are terrified on the roads to hell,
before Surt’s kin [flames] swallows it up.

[...]

Surt comes from the south with the harm of branches²²

[...]

men tread the road to hell and the sky splits apart.

²² ‘The harm of branches’ is a kenning for fire, forest fire. Surt is the leader of the fire-giants.

[Odin is swallowed by the cosmic wolf; Thor by the earth-encircling serpent]

Then the powerful, mighty one, he who rules over everything,
will come from above, to the judgment- place of the gods.²³

There comes the dark dragon flying,
the shining serpent, up from Dark-of-moon hills;
Nidhogg flies over the plain, in his wings
he carries corpses [...]. (*Poetic Edda* 10-13)

The portals of the stave churches depict doomsday as conspecific violence even with the winged serpent Nidhogg present. Many of the portals have winged serpents at the top of the arch, blowing an evil wind across the nine worlds. In a few cases the violent judgment of evil takes place. In the Hylestad portal, now a part of the antiquities collection of the University museum in Oslo, Siegfried is shown stabbing the dragon from below, and then running his sword through the heart of the treacherous Regin so that blood is spurting from his chest, back, and mouth. Just above on the left side of the same portal, the traitorous Gunnar is in the snake pit. The great majority of the magnificently carved portals, however, depict writhing snakes, and dragons, griffins and even bears²⁵ intertwined in violent conflict with one another, twisting and turning in and out of the entangling vines, leaves and branches. In some cases the snake and dragon tails become vegetation, their tails turning into lilies, letting the observer know that the carver was aware that he was telling a story: a violent myth of life at the end as mortal conflict with the mutual eating, biting and destroying of one another.

Perhaps the most famous of these portals, and seemingly the oldest, is at Urnes in Sognefjord [fig.2, p.9]. I took the journey to the little church on the hill side through some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. Norway's fjords, especially the Sognefjord, are breathtaking. As I crossed the ice cold blueish-green water I looked up at the walls of stone on both sides, and up and down the immense stretch of mountain on both sides, awestruck at the beauty of the canyon-like walls and the snow-covered peaks in the distance. To get to Urnes, it is necessary to take a second ferry across a smaller fjord, since there is no real

²³ These two stanzas sound like a Christian insertion, saying that God will come to the sacred place of the tree Yggdrasil, the well, and the norms. This would fit with the stave church.

²⁵ Bears fighting, with one attempting to bite the tongue out of the mouth of the other, are at the top of the right door jamb at the western portal of the stave church in Heddal in Telemark.

roadway to the stave church except by circling around the entire length of the fjord. When you reach the landing on the far side, you realize there is now a hillside to climb in the heat, and the locals told us that pilgrims had made this route uncomplaining even in their times, and probably in medieval times as well. The view from the church, as with many of the stave churches, is spectacular. One of the reasons that the churches truly have to make an impression is to counterbalance the overpowering sight, vision, created by the mountains and the fjord right at their front door.

And the doorway makes an impression. Using the language of the *Elder Edda* the visitor is told how important and holy is the door he or she is about to open. The door is simply surrounded with whorls of writhing snakes and vines. The tangle is so perfectly executed in a welter of animal elongation and plant reduction to vines, that it is difficult to identify where a head begins or where a tail finally ends, if at all, or to trace what seems like a joint to a neck or a leg or a vine. The main point seems to be the inter-twined-ness itself of all living things, animal or vegetable, in one huge tangle. On the right hand side, about one-third of the way from the bottom a serpent is even emitting a fleur-de-lis from its mouth. So well done is this doorway that it and its imitators are referred to by art historians as exemplifying the Urnes style.

Now as one looks at the left side of the doorway there is one animal standing on four legs that is simply startling in the clarity of its depiction. It has been called a lion and explained as the Lion of Judah (Christ) fighting with evil. I think that such an interpretation makes the mistake of using an inappropriately biblical explanation when the artist, by his very Viking-like pictorial style as well as his tangle of animal and plants, tells you he is here using a Germanic one.

If you look at the animal you can see that he is eating at the vine or branch which in turn is a serpent biting at him in the neck. Look at the animal's head and you can see two small horns protruding—that animal is a young male deer, a hart. Now it becomes clear it is not the Old Testament that is giving the context here for the meaning of the portal: this is an allusion to the *Elder Edda* and its description of Yggdrasil as the suffering tree with many serpents forever biting on its twigs and branches, as those twigs and branches are also being devoured by a hart. The tradition of the single deer may also come from a previous stanza in the *Grimnismal* where the hart is named:

Eikthyrnir [Oak-thorn] is the hart's name, who stands on Father
of Hosts' hall
and grazes Lærad's [kenning for Yggdrasil] branches;

and from his horns liquid drips into Hvergelmir [seething cauldron],
from thence all waters have their flowing. (*Poetic Edda* 55 and 270n)²⁶

In any case, the carver has simply drawn the inference that the branches/snakes would defend themselves as well as they could by biting back at the deer. All of this serves quite deliberately to identify the portal as Yggdrasil. But if this is so of the doorway, what of the door?

The artist has associated the door with the portal by the sparest and most ingenious of means. At the top of the door a section of vine-serpents overhangs the door itself: not just a feat of carving, but it also makes the door belong to the life tangle on both sides of it. Then, he has changed the door from a flat nondescript surface, to a surface carrying low relief whorls of vine and animal. The low-relief serves both to make the door different and yet to keep it closely associated with the door jambs' vines and serpents. If the door jambs depict the branches and the deer then the door between them must be the tree trunk: the tree trunk of Yggdrasil being gnawed at by the deer with the short horns. The two hinges can just be seen on the right side; the larger is about one-fifth of the way from the bottom. To enter the door of the Urnes stave church is to enter Yggdrasil.

That this theme or insight may have been commonly understood can be seen not just in Norway, but also on the famous door of the stone church at Roglösa in Sweden. This door is interpreted often as being a saint's legend or as a pastoral hunting scene above with a Garden of Eden or Last Judgment scene below (Andersson, illustration plate II.235 and interpretation II.348; an online search for "Roglösa kyrka" will turn up many photos). In my opinion the door could just as easily be seen as representing the Last Days in Germanic form. Such a reading of the wrought iron on the door accounts for more of the figures present. Examining the bottom left we see the first clue: a large serpent is slithering toward a tree, his eye on its roots. This must be the Nidhogg. (If it were Satan, by tradition it would be higher up in the tree and have the customary apple in its mouth, Lucifer having no known taste for roots.) The tree whose roots are about to be gnawed is unusual in that all its branches, which are writhing rather than straight, end in serpents' heads. To the right of the tree a naked monster with flames for hair and claws on its feet is stabbing (and melting!) a woman with a fire stick—the monster Surt, the black, fire-giant leader from the South. To his right the observer sees a winged soldier being attacked by a two-headed dragon that is biting his shield with one mouth while the mouth at the other end is spitting out poison over the warrior's head. This could be Thor,

²⁶ In the stanza preceding the serpent stanza, it is also mentioned that there are four deer gnawing at the branches. This would give the artist the choice of using one or four deer to identify the doorway as Yggdrasil.

with his Viking braid, fighting the Midgard serpent which killed him with its spewed poison. Thor seems conflated somewhat with Michael, the fighter of Lucifer, by having wings, but not Michael's iconic spear. He appears to be holding a weapon in his hand but it is small, perhaps a hammer.

Changing to the top panel in the arch we see someone blowing a long horn, as well he should be, if the double-headed Midgard serpent is attacking and Surt and the fire-giants are advancing. If this is Heimdall blowing his warning horn for the gods, then this depiction is of Ragnarok, the Day of Doom, with the unleashing of the wolf Fenrir, and Garm, guard dog of Hel. To the right in the arch the deer, a hart, is tearing bark off the tree and unhurriedly eating—another evidence that Yggdrasil is not far away. The Eagle descending may well be Woden himself in disguise, claws extended to attack. In the left lower panel there are two representations of trees—mistakenly, I believe, said to be the two main trees from the Garden of Eden—the lower one, just mentioned, with roots and serpent, and another one above, with no roots. Between the two, a female figure is pushing away the serpent head of one of the branches, and her other hand is holding up a branch, a sign of plenty. This would suggest that she is Freya, goddess of happiness, prosperous crops, and plenty. The branch she is holding up is of the same shape as the large “tree” in the upper left corner—it is simply an expanded version of the leaf pattern in her hand which she is showing the person about to enter the door. Like her branch, it has six leaves arranged in parallel and one at the tip—the leaf pattern of the ash: Yggdrasil. She is holding up the identity of the door in her hand, the ash, and serving her appropriate function as identifying the way to survival and prosperity.

The whole wrought iron outer framework of the composition contains, despite its almost geometric regularity, little fiddlehead plant shoots that emerge irregularly out of the frame onto the composition it edges and contains. The door thus has two representations of the tree of life in the lower panel, with serpents and with the ash leaves, as well as the iron door framework itself which is subtly revealed as the organic frame for all that happens: it is Yggdrasil, and the time is Ragnarok. Time to open the Yggdrasil's door, let the little bells on the door-ring chime, and enter into the saving tree. (Which just happens to be the church.)

Looking at the 11th century south (side) portal of the Vågå church, Bugge comments:

A large dragon has coiled its body down the semi-column on the right side of the doorway, and driven its fangs into the threshold. [...] Lions and dragons wind their necks about the round arch, where, supported by columns, it seems to terminate a free standing arcade in the middle of the welter of animals. Around the left half-column grows a tree with cunningly interlaced branches and leaves, possibly the Tree of Life, *Yggdrasil*, surrounded by the din and clamour of the world. (19)

There is more here, I think, than the clamor of the world, especially since the carving is on a church entrance. Bugge however did recognize the presence of Yggdrasil, and goes on to suggest more when he writes of the Hoprekstad portal:

Here we meet the classical stave church portal, fully developed in a doomsday picture on a par with the west front of contemporary Continental cathedrals. It is a native Norwegian translation of the latter. By means of a powerful 'kenning', as in a scaldic poem, the destruction of the powers of Hell is shown in a self-destructive *Ragnarok*, outside the door of the very shrine they had come to destroy. (24)

I fully agree with the connections made regarding Yggdrasil and Ragnarok, but believe Bugge missed the implication of the nature of a doorway and the church. As I mentioned before in connection with the roof line, Bugge's instincts point in the right direction; I suggest only that he should have gone an important step further. It is not enough to consider the jambs of the doorway with their vines and violence. If this doorway depicts the branches and brutality of Ragnarok so famously described in *Voluspa*, then what is the door itself, positioned between the portal carvings, but the tree trunk, entrance into Yggdrasil itself. An entrance into the suffering tree that is the rescue and salvation from the chaos and apocalyptic violence of the end of the world.

Odin said:

Much I have travelled, much have I tried out,
much have I tested the Powers;
which among men will live when the famous
Mighty Winter [fimbulvetr] comes among men?

Vafthrudnir said:

Life and Lifthrasir, and they will hide
in Hoddmimir's wood,
they will have the morning dew for food;
from them the generations will spring. (47)³¹

³¹ Larrington adds: "From the connection between Mimir and Yggdrasil noted in the *Seeress's Prophecy* [*Voluspa*] it is possible that Hoddmimir [Rememberer of the Treasure/Place] is another name for Mimir [Rememberer], and that the two survivors hide in Yggdrasil" (269n47). I would add that the repeated connection between the source of dew and the tree Yggdrasil under several names is also evidence. It seems that this unexplained figure, Hoddmimir, was the personification of 'the memory of the hoard,' the sacred place where the treasure: the Tree of Life, the well of fate (*[w]urd*), and the passing of time (the norms) were to be found.

But the only way to escape the annihilating violence in the real world is to open the church door and go in. To open the wooden door is to repeat in reality the story of Lif and Lifthrasir in the only way it can be repeated and actually done, the only way that exists by which to enter the mythic tree trunk. Once inside, the rescued will be fed the real dew that falls from the Christ crucified on the tree and given the real runes of the scriptures and communion.

The Interior

Standing inside the church, or standing inside the wood, there is a complete absence of the snakes and violence of the portal. Looking up to the front the first thing that meets your eye in the gentle darkness and candlelight is the Crucified on his cross, immediately over the arches between the main staves supporting the eastern end of the church.³² The crucifix fits in perfectly with the x-shaped supports, the St. Andrew's crosses, that tie the main staves to one another. The rood screen is the statement that the entry into heaven is through the cross. It is impossible to say how poets might have imagined what Lif and Lifthrasir would have seen once they entered the protection of Yggdrasil, but the crucifix is an image of security and suffering that invites the visitor to come in farther. The x-cross stave supports on both sides of the crucifix are carved, at Borgund and at many of the churches, with vegetation motifs so that they extend the notion of leaves and branches inward and provide an appropriate accompaniment to the cross. The image of Christ, after crossing the twelve-inch high sill at the door, seems to reassure that Ragnarok and violence have been left outside. The fact that weapons had to be left outside in the ambulatory may have contributed as well to the atmosphere of peace and sanctuary pervading the interior.

At the church in Torpo and at the church once in Ål, now at the Oldsaksamling of the University museum in Oslo, there are enormous baldachins at the eastern end of the apse with life size images of Christ. Smiling at Torpo, head bowed in death at Ål, they are masterpieces of personal presence. This is what, or who, lies at the heart of the tree that shelters life, even when life is in extremis. In the University museum it is worth looking up and studying the whole baldachin from the Crucifixion at one end to the Last Supper at the other.

The word translated here as "wood" is *holt*. It can mean trees, wood, woods, and as here used in connection with Mimir, it functions as a familiar kenning for the wood, whether imagined as single tree or grove, that Hoddmimir minds, ie., Yggdrasil.

³² The crucifix has not survived in all the stave churches and in some has unfortunately been displaced to the left of center to balance an oversize pulpit. The ones that have survived, as at Urnes with Mary and St. John on either side of Christ, are quite large in proportion to the western end of the church. Done with feeling, they focus the attention on the sanctuary and altar.

As you look up and go through the days of creation and scenes from Christ's life, there is one depiction that may startle you, Christ carrying his cross on the way to Calvary. The cross he has shouldered is not made of the usual planed boards—instead, there are outsized stumps visible all over it from sawn off branches—it is a tree, and the color of the tree he is carrying is revealed at the crucifixion scene—it is green. The old Vikings need not fear that their deepest hope, expressed in the idea of an ultimately protective evergreen tree, will have been disappointed; Christ will carry it.

There is a cross in Oldsaksammling of the University museum that goes even further in describing the cross as related to Yggdrasil. This cross is depicted with live and growing vegetation. It no longer has a corpus on it, perhaps appropriately, for down at the bottom of the cross, where one would normally expect to see the skull and bones of Adam being touched by the blood of Christ, there is a scene even more appropriate, the harrowing of hell. In the medieval Roman south this scene would be borrowed more from Virgil, with Christ, descended into hell, standing at the door of the underworld's the dark cave, leading the souls of the dead through the rectangular doorway out into the light. The Oslo cross has the same scene but the depiction is northern. Hell's gate is not a cave but the mouth of an enormous snake whose jaws are being forced open by Christ whose feet are standing on the monster's lower jaw in a posture reminiscent of Vidar's tearing open of the jaws of Fenrir. One by one the dead are climbing out of the serpent's enormous mouth, amazement in their eyes, with Christ reaching in to take one by the hand who is stumbling on his way out. The artist sees Christ's cross as an Yggdrasil that can save more than the last two of the living, Líf and Lífþrasir. Christ's tree is depicted as an Yggdrasil that can rescue those whose corpses have been devoured by the Nidhogg—the harrowing of hell, the Nidhogg releasing the dead.

Walking into the church at Uvdal, I had another surprise. At Borgund, one is surrounded by tall staves, pillars that could easily suggest a grove in the candlelight, as if the interior were like being in a forest. The same is true in the sanctuary at Kaupanger, but at Uvdal and at Nore the visitor in medieval times would have seen no pews and no ceiling and not too many staves, for, there in the middle of the room is a huge pillar rising up to support all the spreading branches of rafters, braces and roof wood, turret and shingles [fig.3, p.10]. There the congregation would have been grouped around the shelter and strength of the tree trunk, another way to depict the entrance into the sheltering protection of the true Yggdrasil. Looking up at the staves and the carved heads at their tops, whether just a pun on 'capital, *caput*, head,' or embodiments of the ancestors, or the spirits of the felled trees, or even representations of the masked god, Odin, or even of the carvers of the capitals, it seems a good way to express that "we're all in this together," regardless of the time in which we lived. As the writer of the

old Norse sermon on the consecration of a church remarked: when he said that a church building signifies the whole congregation, the part of the congregation which is in heaven, and the part of it that is still on earth (see Anker, I.378-9). The vertical distance that suggests these two parts are separate, but still connected, may be the carved heads in the semi-dark distance atop the staves in Germanic, and in the horizontal it is the altar rail with its archway, the rood screen, or the chancel rail, as it is variously called, that suggests the separation and connection of those in heaven and those on earth.

As I walked into the vestibule of the Uvdal church, there was something that made my heart jump. A discarded screen, a portal carving just like the ones I had seen, but completely different. It had been carved all the way through, open lattice work, permitting light and sound to come through. It was protected by two sheets of very heavy plastic and I could see why, as opposed to the portal carvings I had seen, this one was only about an inch and a half or so thick. It had been mistakenly used and abused by being placed outside as part of a new south entrance centuries ago and was now weather beaten, but still remarkably whole. When I looked I knew from the openwork carving, and the complete absence of snakes and of any other animals, and a total absence of violence, just intertwined foliage and the slender lines of vines, that this had been the portal to the sanctuary.³⁴ Under this portal, which had been part of the chancel rail, the rood screen, had been the ritual, inner doorway between the heavenly and earthly sections of the stave church. And it depicted nothing but a pure vine. Since it was an open carving, the lights, the movements, glimpses of gold and white vestments and vessels, chalice and paten, could be seen. The chanting of the choir could be heard as well, through the open sanctuary doorway and its surrounding open, latticework portal with the leaves and tendrils of the vine. This entrance way to "heaven" goes far beyond the portal of the entrance and leads the Norse Christian to the treasure place of peace and protection. It says, "I am the vine, you are the branches." Through this doorway comes Communion with the Vine and with the rune-staves of the Gospel, Christ himself speaking in the language of the storytellers of Yggdrasil.

What would Mass have been like in a stave church 800 years ago? There is a Swedish altar tapestry³⁵ that gives a hint. We can imagine a congregation that comes to the church on horseback, bringing cattle with them for a feast as Pope Gregory suggests, bells from the church sounding down the valley, perhaps with

³⁴ See also *Uvdal Staokirke Forteller*, ed. Nils Friis (Uvdal: Nore og Uvdal kommune, 1992), p. 8, 13. The lead article by Håkon Christie, "Kirkebygningens historie" to which this refers, agrees with this assessment and also contains a fine schematic of the church's earliest appearance, with diagrams showing the massive central post rising through the apse and ceiling to support the bell tower structure.

³⁵ This can be found in Andersson, illus. p. II.334, 248-9; interp. II.391.

the bifrost glowing over the mountains reminding that there is a road to Asgard. Some may be rowing their way across an icy fjord. They are well bundled up, not just for the journey, for in the church they have to provide their own heat. They gather in the covered ambulatory before the door is opened, since to open and close it frequently during the service would be hard on those trying to be warm inside. In the greyish light and torches they can see flickering images of the deer and the fighting serpents on the doorway. Then they go inside together, perhaps some with distant and comfortable thoughts of Lif and Lifthrasir, and stand among the tall tree trunks, women on one side, men on the other. In the midst of the people stands an enormous pillar, a reinforcing tree trunk spreading up into the branching rafters and darkness.

The altar piece at Uvdal suggests that many a priest or minister must have used this situation to preach about Adam and Eve with the tree of Eden between them. All around the upper staves the x-forms with their leaf decorations suggest live branches in the candlelight. The dim faces of long ago and of other stories look down from the stave tops. The very high sills and thresholds, the tightly joined wall staves, tongue and groove, keep the warmth of people in, and snow, rain and cold out. The splendid gold vestments, the chant and the incense would assure everyone that they who had been baptized with water were in as magic a place as they had been before Christ came, when it was the norms who splashed water and mud on the tree.

And then at length when the moment of the consecration of the bread and wine came, the priest visible in the light of many candles, through the sanctuary doorway and screen, chanting the words of Christ from beyond the rood screen, "Take this all of you and eat it, this is my body which will be given up for you," a small bell begins ringing in the sanctuary, pealing out through the spaces in the vine-carvings to the congregation, its sound is taken up by the men surrounding the tree trunk in the middle of the church as they begin pulling on the ropes to set the two small bells up in the bell turret on the roof clanging. This is then taken up by the huge bells outside the church in the bell tower whose notes resound in deep-toned harmony with those on the roof, and as the congregation prays, with differing tempos the sounds of all the bells reverberate through the church and its staves and echo up and down the valley.

The twelfth-century altar tapestry from the church at Skog is unique in that it shows all this, a stave church in x-ray form, and perhaps a little bit more. In the center of the tapestry is a stave church, depicted with the snake heads projecting left and right from the roof, the congregation inside in the nave. To the right, in the sanctuary part of the church barred off by the sanctuary rail, the priest is pointing to a partially covered chalice with one hand and is ringing a small sanctuary bell with the other. Inside the congregation, the second person from the right is pulling the rope to ring the small bell in the roof tower. Outside

is the large bell tower, also equipped with the snake heads on the roof ends and with a cross on the roof, and inside are two very large bells one of them so large that it takes two men to pull the bell rope.

The church is surrounded by crowds of people and animals coming to it. On the right end of the tapestry, men are arriving and dismounting from their horses. One has brought an ox. To the left of the church three more are about to enter the church, many animals are approaching, and some sort of three-headed monster with dogs barking at it, is heading away. The artist uses feet significantly to indicate direction. The most fascinating part of the tapestry is the left end; nowadays it is often used for book illustrations on Norse topics [fig.5, p.10]. It depicts three very large figures, who have been identified variously as the three fates, as Woden, Thor and Frey, and most recently as three king saints: St. Olaf, St. Erik, and St. Canute. The recent identification of the three as saints is again an attempt to avoid seeing Christian artists speaking in “pagan” language. Aron Andersson, mentioned above, does recognize some of the difficulties with seeing the three figures as saints, but throws up his hands at interpreting the scene. It is only necessary to recall Pope St. Gregory’s letter on the use of pagan temples, as well as the spiritual manner of speaking of the stave churches, and I think we can say the three are not saints. The absence of halos is one thing; even more important is their feet. They are all walking away from the church.

As the three large figures walk away from the church on a special carpet or dais, their dogs trotting below express their attitudes—they are leaving with perfect composure. The figure on the left has only one eye, and is carrying a battle weapon, the figure in the middle is holding a hammer, and the figure on the right is holding what looks like a sheaf of wheat. Woden, Thor and Frey or Freya. (There does not seem to be a thread, or a well, present, and so I do not think they can be the norms.) Then there is the curious matter of the shape of the crowns. In each case they look like twigs from a tree. Are Woden, Thor and Frey spirits of the forest who are now returning to the woods whence they came? Next to Woden there is a tree, looking rather like an evergreen. The Awesome One’s Horse? The three gods are leaving peacefully, and quite contentedly, in this artist’s representation, perhaps because they are leaving Yggdrasil’s temple in the hands of Christians and Christ, for whom they prepared the way by embodying ancient stories of wisdom, strength, and happiness—and by helping all to remember the deep roots of Mimir’s old and hopeful story that salvation would come in the form of a tree. It did. And then they left, graciously leaving their stave house to Him.

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