



# RELIGION, CULTS & RITUALS

## IN THE MEDIEVAL RURAL ENVIRONMENT

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*Religion, Kulte und Rituale in der mittelalterlichen bäuerlichen Umgebung*  
*Réligion, cultes et rituels au milieu rural médiéval*

edited by CHRISTIANE BIS-WORCH & CLAUDIA THEUNE

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# Votive offerings in buildings from rural settlements

Folk beliefs with deeper roots

*Morten Søvsø* \*

## ABSTRACT

The deposition of votive objects in buildings as an expression of folk belief is a well-known phenomenon in Danish ethnological research. A growing body of archaeological data has provided the opportunity to research these practices. This article presents the different types of votive offerings that have been identified in the archaeological record from Jutland and compares them with those documented by ethnographers in the 19th and early 20th century. It is argued that most ethnographically documented practices have their roots in the past, with some originating in the Iron Age or earlier, while others emerged during the Christian period.

**Keywords:** *Votive offerings in buildings, folk belief, rural archaeology, magic.*

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

*Bauopfer in Höfen auf dem Land – Ein Volksglaube mit tiefen Wurzeln*

Bauopfer als Ausdruck eines Volksglaubens sind ein wohlbekanntes Phänomen innerhalb des ethnologischen Materials aus Dänemark. Eine ständig wachsende Menge an archäologischen Funden bietet die Möglichkeit diese Tradition in der Zeit zurückzuerfolgen. Der Artikel präsentiert verschiedene Bauopfergruppen, die aus dem archäologischen Material aus Jütland heraus identifiziert werden konnten und verbindet sie mit ethnologisch dokumentierten Vorstellungen. Es wird argumentiert, dass die meisten dieser Traditionen weit in der Zeit zurückverfolgt werden können. Einige davon gehen bis in die pagane Eisenzeit oder sogar noch weiter zurück, während man andere so deuten kann, dass sie erst mit der Verbreitung des Christentums entstanden sind.

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**Schlagwörter:** *Bauopfer, Volksglauben, rurale Archäologie, Magie.*



## RÉSUMÉ

*Dépôts votifs domestiques en contexte rural, témoins de croyances populaires aux racines profondes*

Les dépôts votifs domestiques sont des phénomènes bien documentés par l'ethnologie au Danemark et témoignent de diverses croyances populaires. L'accroissement constant des découvertes archéologiques permet d'étudier ces pratiques et leur évolution dans le temps. Cet article présente différents groupes de dépôts votifs identifiés dans le matériel archéologique retrouvé dans la péninsule

du Jutland et les associe avec des croyances décrites par des sources ethnologiques plus récentes. Il cherche à démontrer que certaines de ces pratiques peuvent être retracées sur plusieurs siècles, parfois même jusqu'à l'Âge du Fer scandinave et au-delà, tandis que d'autres sont considérées comme étant liées à l'introduction du Christianisme.

**Mots-clés :** *dépôts votifs domestique, croyances populaires, archéologie rurale, magie.*

## Introduction

In Denmark, there are no surviving medieval rural buildings and in many regions the oldest standing structures are from the 19th century. Much of our knowledge of early rural farms is based on map-studies, written sources and archaeological excavations. Every year archaeological excavations are providing an ever-growing body of data and in some cases include unusual or enigmatic finds that seem to be traces of various forms of folk belief. More often than not, these finds are difficult to interpret because the intentions behind them are unknown. Some can be understood through documented folklore from the 19th and early 20th centuries, while others remain enigmatic. The

problem is further compounded by the fact that in recent decades this field of study has not received much attention in Denmark.

In this article the following types of votive object found in buildings will be presented and discussed:

- Pointed or sharp iron objects like knives and axes
- Pottery vessels, placed either upright or inverted
- Fossils or stone axes
- Animal skulls

The different types of votive objects in buildings have various meanings and it is intended to demonstrate that several of these practices can be traced back to



Fig. 1. Sites mentioned in the text (© Morten Søvsø).

the Iron Age and in some cases still exist in parts of Denmark today. These practices reflect a rich but more or less lost world of folk belief.

### **Votive objects in buildings**

In 2015, a young father from the village of Nørre Farup, located near Ribe in southwest Jutland, informed the local museum that there was a dead calf, naturally mummified, in his attic that had many years ago been killed by a lightning strike. As you know, lightning never strikes twice – at least not within folk belief, thus he believed it could protect his house against lightning strikes. A visit to the village revealed that another resident had buried iron objects in his yard, as it would stop witches from flying over his farm. His father who had learned it from his father had passed the tradition down to him.

Despite centuries-long opposition from different parts of society – from the church in the early modern period and later on from science – it is still possible in today's high-tech world to find traces of alternative beliefs. Many would even argue that these kinds of practices constitute a growing phenomenon in our modern society that fill a religious or spiritual gap created by the decline of traditional Christian beliefs (*Højsgaard 2011*).

Research into apotropaic offerings in buildings has not attracted much attention in Danish archaeology and has been ignored by those who work in the field of medieval and renaissance archaeology. There are a few scattered works by folklore researchers, local historians and archaeologists (*Falk 2008; Carelli 1997; Kristensen 1968; Jensen 1984*). On the other hand, this subject has received far more attention by researchers outside of Denmark in recent years (*Herva 2010; Merrifield 1987; Jones 2002*).

In Scandinavia, research in folk beliefs has traditionally belonged to ethnology, which has for many years been a slowly dying discipline in line with the decline of traditional agricultural society during the 20th century. The collecting and research of folksongs, music and stories had its heyday in the 19th century and early 20th century. In particular, two individuals stand out in the Danish research history: Evald Tang Kristensen, who collected and published an enormous amount of material, mostly from Jutland, and Svend Grundtvig, who collected and documented musical tradition in the form of traditional folksongs (*Christiansen 2011* with references). They both worked in a period where folk belief was still a living part of rural agricultural society.

There has not been much development in the field since this initial collecting phase. However, over the last decade, as a result of developer financed excavations, a whole range of new archaeological observations has come to light. By its very nature, this new material is scattered and incomplete, and has not been systematically collated.

Despite this, there seems to be a series of interesting commonalities that will be discussed below.

Some types of apotropaic practices seem to be part of a continuous tradition that can be traced back to the Iron Age, and have thus survived the conversion to Christianity at the end of the Viking Age, the Reformation's harsh actions against superstitions, and the enlightenment. Other types of practice seem to have disappeared due to a Christian tradition where sound played a prominent role.

The arrival of Christianity brought with it writing, administration and long lived institutions that guaranteed that a large body of written theological material has survived to the present day. Therefore, the history of Christianity and its theology can be studied in detail. Among more ordinary people, there was another world of popular beliefs handed down through generations without being written down. During some periods, the Church fought against these superstitions, while in other periods they were more tolerant. We know a great deal about changing theological discussions within the Church, but except for a few exceptions, there was no tradition of documenting what people actually thought and did, and a wide range of aspects concerning their view of the world is more or less lost to us. Perhaps the analysis of unusual finds that occasionally occur in archaeological contexts could shed some light on this lost folk cosmology?

The following presentation is based upon material from the southern and western parts of Jutland, and it is far from complete. There is little doubt that many more examples could be found in other parts of the country or more intensive study of the grey literature. The following presentation is not intended as a complete overview of the subject, but rather aims to demonstrate that the subject is an important source for understanding life in rural society. It is also a field of study that deserves more attention in the future.

### **Source criticism**

Archaeological field-methods define the framework for creating the dataset that archaeological research is based upon. Since the 1970's Danish excavations have been carried out following two main methodological approaches.

- Area excavations on ploughed sites
- Stratigraphic excavation of sites with intact culture layers

Area excavations represent by far the most common type of archaeological excavation and are carried out with techniques and methodology that developed through the Vorbasse-excavations carried out in 1974-87 (*Hvass 1986*). Here the plough layer is machine stripped to the subsoil where features such as postholes, pits, wells and burials

are revealed. Since the vast majority of archaeological sites in open land have been ploughed for hundreds or even thousands of years, the original occupation layers have long since been transformed into a uniform, un-stratified plough layer. Machine removal of this layer is thus an affordable and methodologically sound approach, despite the fact that, as metal detecting has demonstrated, the vast majority of the artefacts from these sites are found in this plough layer (Feveile 2014).

Since only the structural features that have been dug into the subsoil are preserved, there will often be some doubt about which features relate to each other, particularly if they do not fall within known patterns such as well-known house types. With one or two phased sites, it is normally easy to interpret and unravel the relations between well-known structural features in houses, but when dealing with features that fall outside the norm, for example, votive objects in buildings, the situation is more complicated. This problem is greater the more complex the excavation is. Often the correlation between a potential offering and a building can only be made if the object is placed in direct relationship with the building, for example in a posthole.

The second type of archaeological excavation is a stratigraphic excavation, which is primarily undertaken upon the cultural layers in medieval towns. This costly form of excavation is typically restricted to small areas within towns but can still provide a wealth of information that creates just as many questions as it answers. Since features and structures are often only partially uncovered, there can be uncertainty about their interpretation.

In some fortunate cases, stratigraphic excavations can provide exceptional examples of relationships between archaeological remains. One such example comes from the excavation of a smithy, dated to 1020, that was built on the shores of Lake Sønderø in Viborg, Jutland (Christensen *et al.* 2006). In a shallow pit inside the workshop, which was stratigraphically demonstrated to be contemporary with the building, a box-wood bowl had been placed upright on the bottom of the pit. Although there were no preserved food remains in the bowl it was may have been a food offering. However, the bowl was only preserved by virtue of the waterlogged conditions in this area. Organic finds on most archaeological sites have rotted or have been ploughed away. This example shows what can be preserved in exceptional circumstances. Consequently, many forms of offering are likely to have disappeared without trace.

### Pre-Christian votive offerings

Votive offerings are a common occurrence on Iron Age sites and are often found at settlements and particularly on high-status farms. Numerous types of votive object

from high-status sites have been recorded, such as Gudme on Funen, Lejre and Tissø on Zealand, Sorte Muld on Bornholm and Uppåkra in Scania (Jørgensen 2014). These include human and/or animal remains, food, precious metals, gold-foil figures, weapons, copper-alloy jewelry and glass beads.

These wealthy high-status sites were probably religious centres for pagan cults and at several sites traces of temple buildings have been found. One such example from southwest Jutland is Dankirke located 8 km south of Ribe that was excavated by the National Museum in 1965-70 (Hansen 1990). A significant amount of deposited jewellery and weapons were excavated that, together with a cult-wagon and burned down halls, presents a picture of systematic offering and sacrifice during the 1st – 6th centuries AD.

Apparently, Christianity ended many of these practices with the possible exception of precious metals. Buried coin hoards from the 11th and 12th centuries have been found in several churches (Olsen 1961, 11; Cinthio 2002, 142), and other late Viking hoards show clear Christian traces. A sacred Christian vessel, the Ribe-chalice is a Carolingian Pyxis of silver from around AD 800, which was buried in the late Viking period near where a road splits to the north north-east of Ribe (Wamers 1991). It also contained six smaller silver drinking vessels. In Danish archaeology, these hoards have traditionally been interpreted as deposited wealth that was meant to be retrieved, but one could ask whether the Ribe-Chalice could also be an offering? There can be many different interpretations. It could be a Christian protective offering, placed by the road leading to the town, or the drinking set might have played a special role in the Christian mission that originated from the town.

### Types of apotropaic offering in buildings

#### 1. Pointed or sharp iron objects deposited in postholes

In 2006, during excavations at Gredstedbro, 8 km north of Ribe, an axe was found that had been buried in a posthole placed with its edge facing upward. The posthole was from a house dated to the Early Germanic Iron Age (4th – 6th centuries AD). There are other examples of axes being deposited in this manner from other Iron Age houses. In 2015, parts of a large farmstead were excavated in Lustrup, 2 km southeast of Ribe. The farmstead was dated to the 12th and 13th centuries and belonged to the Bishop of Ribe (Søvsø 2013a). From written sources, we know that a cellarius, a cellar master, managed the farm and may have resided in a brick tower on the site that was built around the year 1200. Although the Bishop did not live on the

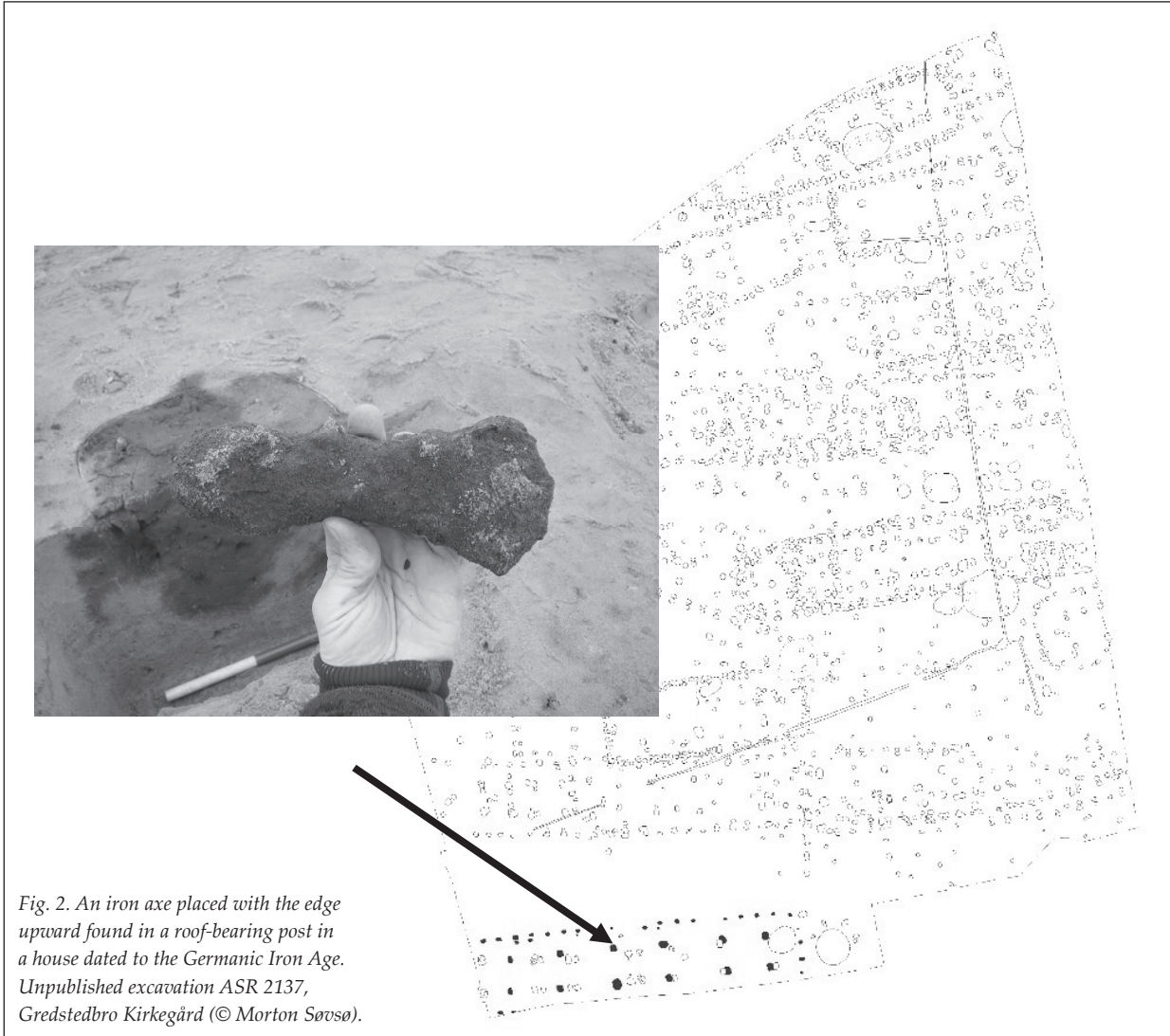


Fig. 2. An iron axe placed with the edge upward found in a roof-bearing post in a house dated to the Germanic Iron Age. Unpublished excavation ASR 2137, Gredstedbro Kirkegård (© Morton Søvsø).

farm, the brick tower and artefacts indicate that the site was high-status. The 2015 excavation uncovered the farm's main building dating from the middle of 12th century. In one of the house's roof-bearing posts a meat fork was found with the fork ends pointing upwards.

Despite the long time span between these pre-Christian and medieval examples and those from recent times, there are some similarities, such as the case of the farmer from Nørre Farup who had buried iron objects in his yard to protect himself against witches. In early modern times it was common to place a sharp knife in the cradle next to newborns in order to protect the child against evil (Troels-Lund 1914; Kristensen 1968, 15f). Iron's apotropaic properties is well documented and presumably the practice of using pointed or sharp iron objects as protection against evil has had a long history that is reflected in the archaeological examples from Gredstedbro and Lustrup.

## 2. Fossils and other unusual stones

Fossilized sea urchins and squid are sometimes found in archaeological contexts and are often explained as a random occurrence or the result of being collected in the past because of their unusual appearance. Fossil squids, belemnites, are called either *vattelys* (Wight's candle) or thunderstones. Wights are known from both folklore and Old Norse and were protective spirits residing under houses or among people. The name thunderstone is due to the idea that fossils were created through lightning. Fossilised squids were associated both with the underworld, wights, and lightning. Fossilised sea urchins were known as thunderstones, but in the Jutland dialect they were also called *sebedejesten* after Zebedaus, the father of apostles James and John who were also known as the thunder sons. The name *sebedejesten* is thus a Christian version of the same idea that fossilised sea urchins were created by thunder or lightning.

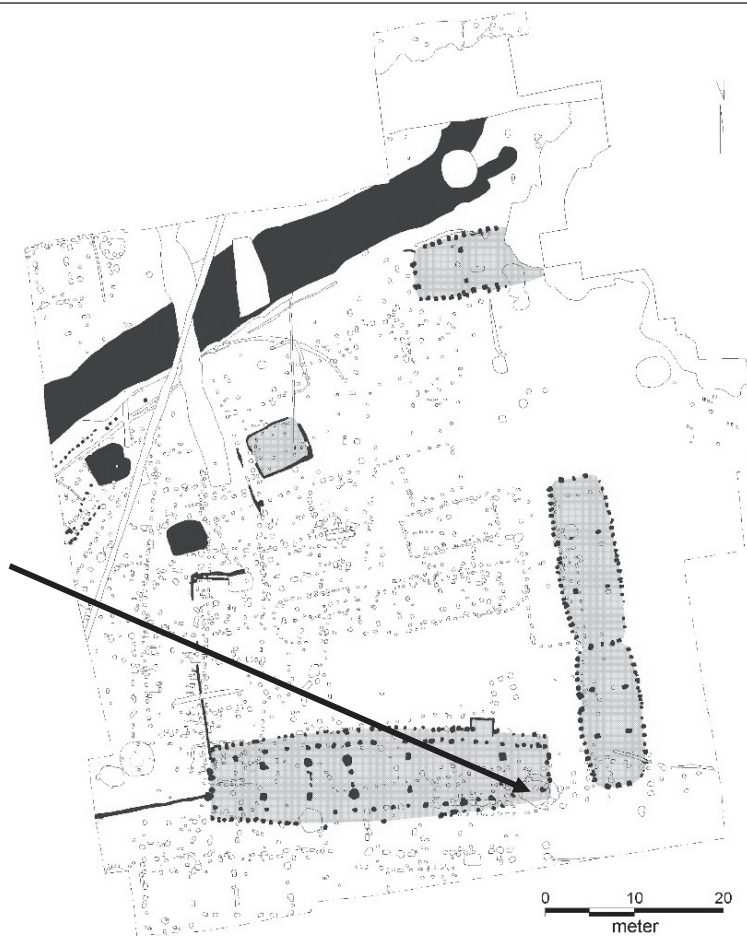
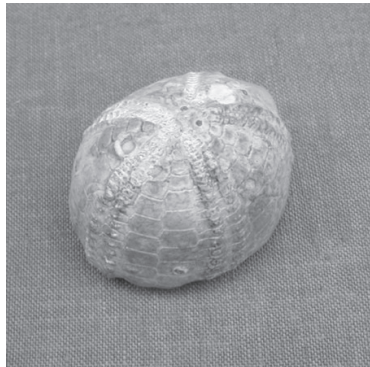


Fig. 3. Fossilized sea urchin found within the main building of late Viking farmstead, ca. AD 1000. Excavation ASR 1906 Kaloslund Kirkebakke (© Morton Søvsø).

Since according to folk belief lightning never strikes the same place twice, thunderstones could be used as protection against lightning strikes. Ethnology and philology can document this belief some centuries back in time, but what has the archaeological record to offer on this topic?

In the collections of the Museum of South West Jutland 75 fossils from archaeological sites, 56 sea urchins and 19 belemnites are registered. They can of course occur naturally in the morains that characterise the area surrounding Esbjerg, but not on the plains of sandy heath around Ribe where the most fossils have been found, and therefore must have been brought in from elsewhere. Most are found in villages, but there are also a number of examples from the Ribe, where they are found in stratigraphic contexts ranging from the 8th to the 15<sup>th</sup> century in date. Their use in the town during this time is thus securely dated. Most are small but complete and beautiful examples.

The use of sea urchins as amulets is well known in a variety of Viking period contexts (*Schietzel 2014*), but

whether the examples in the Museum's collections were originally kept in houses as protection against lightning or rather, judging by their size, as personal amulets cannot be determined. Nevertheless, their significant presence in the archaeological record gives little reason to doubt that they were thought to possess symbolic powers. In eastern England, fossilized sea urchins were also known as thunderstones, a name linguists consider to originate from Old Norse during the Viking period. This is another strong indication that they were thought to be created by thunder and lightning during the Viking Age.

Other kinds of unusual stones were also considered to be created by lightning and therefore able to be used as protection. The 16th century manor at Lynderupgaard, located by the Limfjord in northern Jutland, belonged to the Bishop of Viborg during the Middle Ages and excavations have uncovered the remains of a medieval stone building on the site. Under the threshold a thin-necked flint-axe from the Funnel Beaker Culture was found. It had no traces of wear and was therefore already a votive offering 5500 years ago, only to be reused again

Fig. 4. 16th-17th century farmstead excavated in Kærbøl consisting of a central building with living quarters and byre (Wohnstallhaus). To the north a barn building was situated. In the byre the central dot marks the position of a buried horse skull. Excavation ASR 2147, Præstegårdstøften (© Morton Søvsø).



for this purpose in the Middle Ages. And it must be remembered that a well-educated Christian, the Bishop of Viborg, had the house built.

### 3. Animal votive offerings

During the pre-Christian period, personal animals such as horses or dogs occasionally were buried with their owners. Food offerings were also very common. The conversion to Christianity seems to have brought to an end to the first of these practices, but burials of animals in various symbolic contexts continued.

A large barn was built in the 13th century at the previously mentioned Bishopric farm in Lustrup. In the stables a skull of a cow was deposited in a pit, which did not have room for much else other than the skull (Søvsø 2013a).

A similar type of offering was uncovered in 2006 during the excavation of a well preserved farmhouse from the 16th and 17th centuries at village of Kærbøl 4 km northwest of Ribe. (Søvsø 2008). The main building was constructed with robust wooden posts and was probably of timber-framed construction. The living area was located in the east while the stables were located in the western part of the building. There was a deep pit centrally located in the stables where a horse skull was deposited. Only the teeth were preserved, but teeth from both the upper and lower jaw were present indicating that an entire skull had been buried in the pit. The pit seems to have been purposely dug for depositing the horse skull.

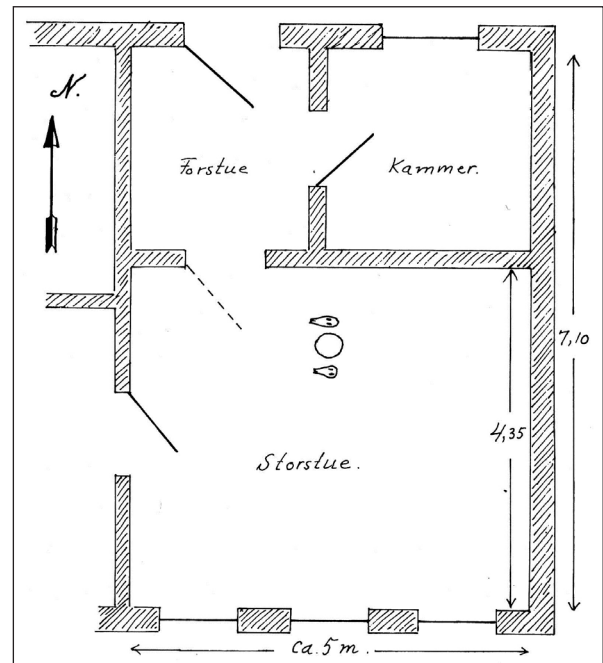


Fig. 5. Horse skulls found under the floors of a 19th century farmstead (© Knud Jensen 1984).

Folklore research has documented many examples of the practice of offering animal or animal parts due to their protective qualities against evil, disease or witchcraft (Jensen 1962; Hansen 1971; Falk 2008).

#### 4. Apotropaic sounds

From several parts of Denmark and in particular western Jutland there are many documented examples of buried horse skulls deposited under floors with their foreheads facing upwards (*Jensen 1984*). Folklore research has suggested that the intention behind this practice was to ward off evil through sound. The act of depositing horse skulls under floors was thought to give the floor just the right sound when for example dancing was going on in the living room or threshing on the threshing floor. This sound was thought to be able to keep evil at bay and it is characteristic that it was in connection with dancing, threshing and other physical activities where participants could lose themselves allowing evil easy access. Horse skulls also appear in a host of stories where it was common that by stepping on it would produce the right sound allowing the main character to cross a river or other symbolic narratives.

The same idea of protective sounds lies behind the many examples of local greyware pots buried beneath the floors of old farms (*Jensen 1962*). Most of the finds originate from farms dating from the late 18th century to the mid-19th century that represent the oldest intact farms when recording was undertaken. Most of the pots were found inverted forming a cavity beneath the floor. Folklore research suggests that the intention behind this was to give the overlying plank floor just the right sound. Whether there were any real acoustic effects is probably doubtful, but it is also irrelevant because the practice was about belief.

The question is, is it possible to trace this practice further backward in time? There are a number of examples of inverted pottery vessels from excavated medieval houses (*Hartwig 2015*). The practice can be traced back to around the year 1200 but it is unknown whether the same meanings or intentions lay behind this practice as with those from the late 18th and mid-19th centuries. Yet, if we turn our attention towards religious architecture there are some suggestions that it might.

Acoustic jars are sometimes found built into the walls of Romanesque and later church buildings in Denmark and other countries. Their openings face the inside of the room thereby creating cavities within the stone walls of the buildings. Acoustic jars are mentioned as far back as classical antiquity, as in the writings of Vitruvius from the 1st century BC, and continue through to the end of the Middle Ages (*Merrifield 1987*). Although the real acoustic effect of these jars is questionable, their presence seems to have added a special quality to the churches acoustics. They are found bricked in into walls or placed in brick-built underground sound boxes under choir stalls. Again, one may doubt their real effect, but just note that they must have been imbued with an important function, presumably as symbolic amplifiers

of prayers and perhaps facilitators of holiness to those buried under church floors?

Sacred protective sounds are a guiding principle in Christian liturgy and are represented in church bells, singing, music and architecture. Presumably, this mindset is manifested through deposition of pottery vessels under farmyard floors. A second group of pottery vessels is found standing upright and could have been containers for offerings of food or vipers (*Jensen 1984*).

#### Conclusion

The purpose of this brief, and far from complete, presentation of the various types of votive practices in rural contexts is to draw attention to a neglected field of research. In recent decades, archaeological discoveries have been able to supplement folklore research with an entirely new dataset that seems to demonstrate that a number of the so-called superstitious practices, remains of which still exist today, have their origins in the Iron Age and perhaps even earlier. Other practices, such as protective sounds, played a central role and were likely to have been a Christian inspiration.

Evidence of superstitious practices is difficult to identify archaeologically as the remains are often not preserved and are easily misunderstood. There is a high risk that the traces are either overlooked or simply not documented sufficiently if the excavator is not aware of the possibilities.

As presented above votive offerings are far from limited to just the pre-Christian period, these practices continued throughout the Christian period and to a certain extent still exist today. As they appear in the archaeological record they reflect the general population's beliefs in the pre-industrial world, where evil, in the form of death, disease or crop failures, was close to all, as was the intimate world populated by a cosmology of supernatural beings.

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# RELIGION, CULTS & RITUALS IN THE MEDIEVAL RURAL ENVIRONMENT

The study of belief, faith and religious practices can provide a deep insight into historical societies, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish or pagan. They form a constant of human behaviour. Through religion, cult and rituals, multi-layered and complex cultural norms are expressed, demonstrating group affiliation. However, popular devotion and belief in a rural environment can include practices that are out with those of the official religion.

Some of these practices discussed in this book can be investigated through archaeology. Important religious sites like churches, monasteries, mosques and synagogues as well as caves, holy wells and hermitages are discussed. Furthermore burials of children, revenants and the condemned are analysed, as they often deviate from normal practice and shed light on particular communities and their beliefs. Rituals concerning the protection of buildings and persons which focus on objects attributed with religious qualities are another area explored. Through archaeological research it is possible to gain an understanding of popular religion of medieval and early modern times and also to draw conclusions about religious ideas that are not written in documents. By bringing together these topics this book is of particular interest to scholars working in the field of archaeology, history and cultural anthropology.

*The addressed subjects were the theme of an international conference of the RURALIA association held in Clervaux, Luxemburg, in September 2015. Ruralia promotes the archaeology of medieval settlement and rural life. Current research questions in rural archaeology are discussed in an European wide context. The aim is to strengthen the exchange of knowledge in, and the development of, archaeologically comparable studies, and to make archaeological results available to other disciplines.*

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