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ODIN, LORD OF THE DEAD:
RELIGIOUS LEGITIMIZATION FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN LATE IRON AGE
AND EARLY MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA

By

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ABSTRACT

Recently, scholars of pre-Christian religions in Scandinavia have argued against a unified pantheon with Odin at its head. Instead, scholars have argued that religious beliefs in pre-Christian Scandinavia should be understood as a body of interrelated beliefs that varied by region, social class, and environmental setting. Significant cults within pre-Christian Scandinavia include those of Thor, Freyr, Odin, and a cult of the dead. Acknowledging that various religious beliefs coexisted leads to the question of how they interacted with each other. The cult of Odin has often been considered a cult of royalty and elites. Scholars have argued that Odin's various aspects were tools for legitimizing rule. Significantly, Odin was not the god of the farmers, who may have favored a cult of the dead. By using the religious ruler ideology framework outlined by Sundqvist, this thesis argues that the followers of a cult of Odin benefited from Odin's perceived power over the dead because those followers existed in a society which used the dead to establish social and political standing. Using textual and archaeological evidence, I first establish how pre-Christian Scandinavians used the dead to create social and political power through *óðal* rights. I then use Icelandic sagas to show that overpowering the dead was a theme in the transfer of inheritance and power. Finally, I show how Odin and Odinic figures were shown overpowering the dead before gaining social and political standing. This thesis concludes that Odin's power over the dead was an aspect of religious legitimization for his cult. Critically, this thesis adds to the historiography by examining how different pre-Christian religions in Scandinavia interacted with one another.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the dynamics between a cult of Odin and a cult of the dead in pre-Christian Scandinavia. Recent scholarship has continued to stress the wide variety of religious beliefs and practices within pre-Christian Scandinavia and pushed back on older scholarship which imagined a pan-Scandinavian religion in the Viking Age. Instead, it is now understood that within pre-Christian Scandinavia there existed interrelated beliefs that varied by at least region and social class. With this more recent understanding of pre-Christian religions in Scandinavia, this thesis reconsiders how various belief systems impacted the religious legitimization strategies of elites in Scandinavia between the sixth and tenth centuries.

After the sixth century, a new elite appears in Scandinavia.¹ Like most rulers of the late Iron Age and early medieval period, these new elites established their legitimacy, at least in part, through religion. Across much of Scandinavia, the dead were an important part of religious legitimization strategies. Elites established connections between themselves and the dead through monumental funerals, burials, and ritual behavior around graves. These burial mounds were symbols of social and political power. The funerals around the great burials were rituals which allowed for the transfer of power between generations. These beliefs around the dead appear to have been widespread and so central that many major deities, like Odin, Thor, and Freyr, are all in some way associated with the dead.

The cult of Odin has long been associated with kings and fatalistic warrior bands. His various aspects, from his power to grant victory, his role as the king of the gods, his role as a god

¹ Neil S. Price, *Children of Ash and Elm: A History of the Vikings*, First edition (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 181.

of magic which empowered his followers, and his role as god of poetry which allowed him to control memory, have been interpreted as religious strategies for political legitimization.

However, one aspect that should be more fully considered is Odin's role as a lord of the dead.

While scholars in the past have argued that Odin's role as the leader of Valhalla was advantageous because it allowed the cult leaders to promise a "rewarding heaven with endless food, riches, painless battle, 'boundless booze,' and 'Bond babes,'"² they have not examined how Odin's role as a lord of the dead and explicit magic powers over the dead might impact a population that established its political and social power through the dead. This thesis fills this gap in the scholarship and argues that the new elites associated with a cult of Odin found Odin's power over the dead a powerful tool in their religious legitimization strategies.

Theoretical Considerations

This thesis acknowledges that there was no single pre-Christian Scandinavian religion, no single understanding of a pantheon, and that pre-Christian Scandinavia was full of local cults of various descriptions. However, against this backdrop, this thesis aligns itself with the long-standing scholarly view that there were some deities with larger cultic bases. When speak of the broader religions which existed in pre-Christian Scandinavia, this paper will adopt the term pre-Christian religions of the North (PCRN) after *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North Project*.³

² Terry Gunnell, "From One High One to Another: The Acceptance of Odin as Preparation for the Acceptance of God," in *Conversions: Looking for Ideological Change in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Leszek Slupezki and Rudolf Simek, *Studia Medievalia Septentrionalia* (Vienna: Fassbaender, 2013), 167.

³ The project describes itself as: "This series of volumes on the subject of the pre-Christian religions of Scandinavia (broadly considered) offers a new assessment of the religion and mythology of early Scandinavia, based on the most up-to-date research in literature, art, archaeology, and the history of religions. A collaborative effort involving the input of more than thirty leading scholars around the world, the Pre-Christian Religions of the North project provides a thoroughly researched and accessible series of studies, handbooks, and resources for researchers, teachers, and students of the medieval North. These volumes will become a major reference resource and handbook

This project adopted the term PCRN in part because the religion has no native term and so instead must be described either by its geographic or linguistic area or time period. The PCRN project does not specifically deal with religions of non-Germanic language groups (such as Celtic or Sami religions) but stresses the lack of centralized belief and cultural exchange between the various peoples of Europe.⁴

When discussing PCRN, it is clear we cannot reconstruct the religions as they once existed or trust that sources that stretch from antiquity to the medieval period represent an unchanging system of beliefs, as some scholars in the past have done. This is because as new methodologies and approaches to studying religion, ranging from postmodernism, anthropological structuralism, discourse analyses, and folkloric investigations, have made it clear that religion does not have to be coherent or logical and that it is constantly changing, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly.⁵

In attempting to discuss and reconstruct PCRN, then, historian of religions Jens Peter Schjødt has argued we must understand that the beliefs we are discussing are not universal and that “most religions in the past had no watertight barriers between them” so it can be difficult to discern one religion from another.⁶ He has also argued that reconstructions of PCRN cannot be judged against a reality because no reality is accessible to us. Instead, our reconstructions must

on a subject that still excites much public interest and on which a great deal of research has been undertaken over the last century,” and is edited by John Mckinnell, John Lindow, and Margaret Clunies Ross. More info can be found at <http://www.brepols.net/Pages/BrowseBySeries.aspx?TreeSeries=PCRN>.

⁴ Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andréén, “Introduction,” in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andréén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), xxviii–xxix, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116927>.

⁵ Jens Peter Schjødt, “Theoretical Considerations,” in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andréén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 13–14, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116928>.

⁶ Schjødt, 14.

be evaluated on their ability to make the sources of PCRN understandable.⁷ This thesis acknowledges these difficulties and limitations and addresses them with the hope of presenting a reasonable interpretation of the relationship dynamics between followers of an Odinic cult and a cult of the dead.

Additionally, this thesis refers to figures like Odin as a single entity across various times. This is for the sake of simplicity and not because Odin should be viewed as an unchanging concept for over a thousand years. Rather, it takes the position that different people, at different times, understood these gods differently and had different expectations of them. This concept is explored by McKinnell in his work *Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism*, in which he analyzed various myths and argued for three versions of Loki. One can be seen as a trickster, who both gets gods into trouble and helps them get out of trouble, a figure who is untrustworthy but on the side of the gods; another Loki can be seen as a traitor, where he is evil and not on the side of the gods, exemplified in the story of Baldur's death; finally, Loki can be seen as an accuser who is more of a devil figure and is part of bringing about the end. McKinnell has also found there to be multiple versions of Thor in the surviving sources. There is an aristocratic version of Thor who is followed by servants and needs help from no one. Another version of Thor is more of a popular hero who is associated with a group of warrior figures and is a bit more comical. Finally, there is a version of Thor who is a satiric figure and the butt of jokes.⁸

Though it is clear that a god's characteristics varied group to group, story to story, region to region, and over time, Schjødt has argued that the gods do have a semantic center. This means

⁷ Schjødt, 14.

⁸ John McKinnell and Maria Elena Ruggerini, *Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism* (Il Calamo, 1994).

that while a god, such as Odin, can be characterized in many ways, he cannot be characterized in all ways. For Schjødt, who argued that the semantic center of Odin is his wisdom, it means that Odin can appear with many different characteristics but “it is not possible to portray Odin as a fool.”⁹ Portraying Odin as a fool would cause the portrayal to be rejected by the audience. Scholars like Declan Taggart have applied Schjødt’s concept to Thor and argued that Thor’s semantic center is his strength.¹⁰ This thesis accepts these arguments and understands that these gods were viewed as having semantic centers, that is, they have key characteristics they were identified by, and those key characteristics influenced beliefs about them and cultic practices around them. This allows us to discuss gods of a type. For example, a god of the Odinic type, which may be discernable over a wider geographic region or time period. For the purposes of this thesis, we can discuss the figure of Odin in a general way while recognizing it is a simplification.

Time Frame

This thesis will focus primarily on Scandinavia between the sixth and tenth centuries of the common era, the time period just before and during the Viking Age. This is because a new elite associated with Odin rose to power sometime in the late sixth century but by the late tenth century and into the eleventh, the Scandinavian kingdoms were ruled by Christian kings and the cult of Odin was replaced. However, it will be necessary to contextualize this time by looking at events from before and after this time frame. This paper will adopt the terminology used in

⁹ Schjødt, Lindow, and André, “Introduction,” 37.

¹⁰ Declan Taggart, *How Thor Lost His Thunder: The Changing Faces of an Old Norse God* (London: Routledge, 2018), 200.

Norwegian scholarship for dates. The early iron age is the time period between 500 BCE - 400 CE. This is divided into the pre-Roman Iron Age (500 - 0 BCE) and the Roman Iron Age (0 - 400 CE). The late Iron Age is the period between 400 - 1050 CE. That is divided into the migration period (400 – 550 CE), the Merovingian Period (550 – 750 CE) and the Viking Age (750 – 1050 CE).¹¹ The medieval era begins after 1050 CE in Scandinavian historiography.

Unless stated otherwise, the dates given in this paper are from the common era.

While the conversion of any region is a slow process and the beliefs and practices of an entire population do not change overnight, it is generally said that Denmark, Norway, and Iceland were Christianized around the year 1000, when the rulers adopted Christianity. In Denmark, Harald Bluetooth converted around 960. In Norway, conversion occurred primarily between Olaf I and Olaf II, between 995 and 1028. Iceland converted by decision at the Althing in the year 1000. Sweden's process of conversion was slower and it did not adopt Christianity until closer to 1260.

Sources, Criticisms, and Methods

The nature of this project is inherently interdisciplinary and it will draw upon historical, literary, and archaeological sources. While individual sources will be considered more fully as needed, what follows is a brief overview of the types of sources and some general criticisms for those sources.

Eddic poems are poems about gods and mythic heroes which are presented in a less complicated meter than skaldic poetry. Most eddic poems are found in the manuscript the *Codex*

¹¹ Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*, 66.

Regius which editors often call *The Poetic Edda*. The manuscript was created c.1270 and is believed to be a copy of a manuscript written a few decades earlier.¹² Dating individual eddic poems is incredibly difficult. However, linguistic analysis suggests most eddic poetry was likely composed sometime in the ninth century onward and survived as part of an oral tradition until it was written down in the thirteenth century. While many of these poems may have been composed in a pagan setting, they were not written down until after the conversion to Christianity. While the rhyming meter likely helped preserve some of the content, many of the poems show Christian influence and so they do not reflect a perfect pre-Christian worldview.¹³

Skaldic poems are different from eddic poems in that we have named authors for the poems and we can link the poems to specific historical events. It is therefore more possible to date composition but dates are still often debated. Skaldic poems are presented in a very formalized meter which perhaps helps to preserve the original content more. However, much skaldic poetry is found in broken apart stanzas and requires reconstruction, or we only have very few stanzas of what appears to have been a much longer work. The nature of the poetry, with its complex allusions, also makes the exact meaning behind the poems sometimes difficult to discern. The skaldic poetry that is preserved is often found within a much younger text, quoted by figures as part of a narrative, so we do not always have the original context for the poem. Most skaldic poetry was composed between the ninth and eleventh centuries.¹⁴

¹² John Lindow, “Written Sources,” in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 69, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116930>.

¹³ Overviews of Eddic Poetry can be found in Terry Gunnell, “Eddic Poetry,” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 82–100; Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North: The Gods of the Norsemen* (London ; New York: Continuum, 2011), 16–20.

¹⁴ Overviews for skaldic poetry can be found in Diana Whaley, “Skaldic Poetry,” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 479–502; Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, 11–16.

The Icelandic sagas and historical writings come primarily from the thirteenth century on. There are many different types of sagas ranging from the sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*), which depict the colonization of Iceland and the early history of the settlers, the kings' sagas (*Konungasögur*), which are accounts of Norwegian kings and the wider Scandinavian world during the Viking Age, and finally the sagas of long ago (*Fornaldarsögur*), which are stories that are about the distant past, the time before the Viking Age. These sources are written long after the events they claim to describe. While early scholars practiced limited source criticism on the sagas and took them at face value, this opinion was sharply changed in the mid-twentieth century when scholars began to doubt the usefulness of the sagas for history at all. Today, most scholars take a middle ground approach and use the sagas in conjunction with other evidence, usually archaeological, to make their arguments, and recognize that the sagas may reflect older ideologies and contain aspects of a *mentalité* under the pressure of new ones.¹⁵

Contemporary historical sources are often from outsiders and they have the problem of being written by people who either did not witness the events but are recording them through an eyewitness, are clearly biased and have an agenda (usually an agenda to benefit the Christian church and degrade the pagan's that are being encountered), or do not fully understand the events they describe. However, as Lindow argues, outsider sources, such as Ibn Fadlan's *Risālat*, an account of a Muslim diplomat's encounter with the Rus on the Volga River and Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii*, an account of missionary activity "focus on ritual activity rather than on narrative. These 'outsider' or 'eyewitness' writers often describe a process, not what motivates the process, or why the process might be successful. Or to put it another way, they sometimes allow a

¹⁵ For an overview of Icelandic sagas see Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, Cambridge Introductions to Literature (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

captivating glimpse into PCRN as a ‘primary’ religion in operation.”¹⁶ These outside sources give us some chance at reconstructing parts of PCRN.

Archaeological sources provide material remains and shed light on timeframes about which we would otherwise have less—or even no—knowledge. This makes them incredibly valuable for the study of PCRN, which spent most of its existence in prehistory. In the 1980s and 1990s, archaeological researchers within PCRN used Icelandic texts to find analogies for their archaeological finds.¹⁷ However, the material culture is often interpreted through texts, which as discussed above are problematic. Archaeological finds can present a version of a ritualized event but how that event was understood by its performers, whether it was religious or secular, or if there was a difference between the two, and whether that ritualized event reflects anything we recognize in the sources is open for interpretation.¹⁸ This does not mean that archaeological sources cannot be used, of course, as they can show patterns of activity and settlement which can help us understand the past.

This thesis will use a combination of these sources to argue that Odin’s role as a lord of the dead was advantageous to Odinic elites who used religion as a legitimization strategy. This is because Odin’s perceived power over the dead gave Odinic elites power over the symbols of authority rival groups used to legitimize themselves. When looking back at the period between the sixth and the tenth century, there is a paucity of textual sources. For this reason, medieval and archaeological sources are used in combination to reconstruct the religions. The Odin figure which appears in the medieval sources is likely an amalgamation of many Odins but his

¹⁶ Lindow, “Written Sources,” 98, 98–101.

¹⁷ Anders Andrén, “Archaeology,” in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 159, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116933>.

¹⁸ For an overview on archaeological sources see Andrén, “Archaeology.”

appearances across the poems and sagas do have some consistent characteristics and these characteristics are the focus of the investigation. This thesis argues that by finding consistent themes in the literature you can reconstruct broad understandings of parts of a worldview, believing that literature which did not fit audience expectations would have been rejected.

Outline

This thesis argues that Odin's role as a lord of the dead and his perceived power over the dead were a more significant aspect of religious legitimization than previously considered. To argue this, I first show that the historical and religious context of Scandinavia between the sixth and tenth centuries was one of political instability and diverse set of interrelated religious beliefs. Importantly, a new warrior aristocracy was gaining prominence and established their legitimacy and authority through religious strategies. These strategies are termed religious ruler ideology and include establishing connections to the mythic, controlling cultic institutions, leading and participating in cultic rituals, and controlling cultic symbols. Importantly, different cults would perform these strategies in different ways. This paper primarily focuses on how rulers in Scandinavia used the dead within their religious ruler ideology to establish their social and political power and how the elites who embraced a cult of Odin were perceived to have power and authority over symbols used by rival elites.

The second part of this thesis shows how the dead were used to establish social and political power within pre-Christian Scandinavia. This is done by exploring evidence of ancestor veneration, monumental burials, and the physical manipulation of the dead. This shows that the dead were viewed as having power and the ability to influence the world. Critically, this shows the importance of the dead in establishing óðal rights, which are not only the rights to own land

but also significantly impacted an individual's ability to participate in the thing assemblies. This chapter is critical to create the understanding that Odin's aspect as a lord of the dead and his magical powers over the dead factored into the cult's ability to legitimize rulership.

Finally, this thesis explores depictions in the sagas of people interacting with the dead and argues that a key theme found in the textual sources is that overpowering the dead leads to an increase in social and political status. This is followed by examining instances where followers of Odin or figures related to Odin are given help by Odin in overpowering the dead to establish their authority.

In doing these things, this thesis shows that Odin's role as a lord of the dead did not function just as an idealized reflection of the real-world relationship between a warlord and his retinue. Instead, as has been suggested of his other aspects, such as his wisdom and his magical abilities, his function as a lord of the dead should be understood as a cult of Odin displaying power and authority over the symbols or religious legitimization used by rivals. Therefore, Odin's power over the dead is another aspect which helped to legitimize his followers.

CHAPTER ONE:

RELIGION AND RULERS IN PRE-CHRISTIAN SCANDINAVIA

Introduction

This thesis explores the relationship between a cult of Odin, a cult of the dead, and social and political power in Scandinavia between the sixth and tenth centuries. To do this, it is necessary first to understand the historical context of this time and place. Importantly, it must be understood that this was a time of rival warlords competing with one another for power and authority. Those warlords used various strategies to secure that authority. Some of these strategies were material in nature and focused on economic prosperity and military might. Others were strategies of religious legitimization. Scandinavia was home to a complex set of interrelated religious beliefs which varied geographically and socially. Followers of a cult of Odin existed within this milieu of rival warlords and diverse religious beliefs. Importantly, beliefs associated with a cult of Odin had to interact with the beliefs of other cults. This thesis argues that followers of a cult of Odin benefited in their attempts at religious legitimization because of Odin's perceived power over the dead, which were important symbols of legitimacy and authority of rival rulers.

This chapter first provides the historical and religious context for the time period, highlighting the unstable political structure, the diversity of religious beliefs, and that the cult of Odin appears to become more prominent within pre-Christian religions of the north (PCRN) during this time. This chapter also provides an analytical framework for strategies of religious legitimization, termed "religious ruler ideology," for pre-Christian Scandinavian rulers, to set up

a more detailed exploration of the specific aspects of the cult of Odin which enabled it to become a legitimizing force for emerging elites in early medieval Scandinavia.

The Historical Context

Scandinavia underwent significant political and social change between the sixth and tenth centuries. One of those changes was a rise of a warrior elite, suggested in part by the movement toward fewer but more heavily armored warriors rather than large groups of lightly armored warriors which had been popular before.¹⁹ Additionally, during this time we see a reduction in the number of tribal names mentioned in the sources. This is likely because the sixth century was a period of amalgamation, where tribes were joining together to overcome threats, eventually leading to three dominant groups of people: the *Svíar*, the *Danir*, and the *Norðmenn*. While this period led to an increase in intertribal interactions, these ancient tribal groups were still seen as fossilized territorial units of the later kingdoms Sweden, Denmark, and Norway.²⁰ These three kingdoms slowly developed from the seventh century on under the leadership of a new warrior aristocracy which was seizing and controlling newly available land.²¹

Winroth describes the political situation in Scandinavia before the Viking Age and the creation of the medieval kingdoms as “successful warrior chieftains fighting one another for political domination. Some were more successful than others and managed to build up greater power by defeating their rivals... [And] that power might fall apart as rapidly as it came

¹⁹ Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*, 436.

²⁰ Dagfinn Skre, “Rulership and Ruler’s Sites in 1st–10th-Century Scandinavia,” in *Rulership in 1st to 14th Century Scandinavia: Royal Graves and Sites at Avaldsnes and Beyond* (De Gruyter, 2019), 206–10, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110421101-003>.

²¹ Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*, 90–91.

together.”²² This unstable political structure required warlords to attract warriors. This was done through gift-giving. Warlords, and chieftains in general, had to be generous and give out gold, silver, and other valuables. This is likely why we begin to see the development of *emporia*. Hodges argued *emporia* were urban centers developed in northwestern Europe after 600 CE by an elite who wanted to control long distance trade, so they had prestige goods to redistribute from a nodal point—the *emporia*—to rural areas.²³ Expanding on this idea, Price argued that the Viking Age saw a rise of *maritoria*, which he defines as “a form of power that combined the aspirations of petty kings with the control of territory, closely connected to a new form of market, and all linked by a relationship with the sea.”²⁴ Major examples of these new market towns are Ribe and Hedeby²⁵ in Denmark and Birka in Sweden but there were also smaller regional markets.

Near these markets, elites established massive halls, like the idealized Heorot in *Beowulf*, or the massive chieftain’s hall at Borg, in the far north of Norway. The hall at Borg was larger than any contemporary hall at 80 meters long, with a roof that covered 600 square meters and was supported by nineteen pairs of posts. It was built sometime in the eighth century as a replacement for a 64-meter-long hall located at the same site. Located near the hall were boat houses that allowed this chieftain to engage in trade and war. Sometime in the tenth century, this massive hall was demolished.²⁶

²² Anders Winroth, *The Age of the Vikings*, Fourth printing, and first paperback printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 132.

²³ Richard Hodges, *Dark Age Economics: The Origins of Towns and Trade A.D. 600 – 1000*, 1982.

²⁴ Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*, 286.

²⁵ Due to state boundary changes, Hedeby is no longer located in Denmark but is now located in Germany and called Haithabu.

²⁶ Anne Pedersen, “Power and Aristocracy,” in *Vikings: Life and Legend*, ed. Gareth Williams, Peter Pentz, and Matthias Wemhoff (United Kingdom: British Museum Press, 2014), 125–26.

Many of these locations, the halls and the associated *emporia* and *maritoria*, were also home to thing assembly sites. Thing assemblies were early legal gatherings which gave people the opportunity to publicly declare heirs, deal with disputes over theft or landownership, and allowed for social contact. These thing assembly sites were also cultic in nature. For example, in Jutland, Denmark, the most important assembly sites were “Viborg,” meaning the “sanctuary in the hills,” and Odense, “Odin’s Sanctuary,”²⁷ while in Sweden the most important thing site was the Disting “the *Dísir* assembly,” at Uppsala.²⁸ These locations were places where rulers could build and maintain their institutions because they combined political, economic, and religious functions. These locations are called “central places” by archaeologists and historians.²⁹ Still, the political structure of seventh- and eighth-century Norway “did not lie in the hands of a single ruler but was shared between a number of lords or chieftains, each with his own men or retainers.”³⁰ This power structure was likely similar across much of Scandinavia before the development of the medieval kingdoms.³¹

Specifically in Norway there seem to have been two types of powerful figures in the time just before and leading into the Viking Age. The first were chieftains who controlled large inland farms with fertile soil and the second was a coastal elite who controlled maritime traffic. Price argues these coastal elite appeared to be a new development in late Iron Age Scandinavia.³² These new coastal elites were called sea-kings and probably best reflect the stereotypical Viking.

²⁷ Birgit Sawyer and P. H. Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500*, The Nordic Series, v. 17 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 81.

²⁸ Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*, 292.

²⁹ Anders Andrén, “Historical and Social Contexts,” in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 409–18, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116946>.

³⁰ Sawyer and Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, 49.

³¹ Sawyer and Sawyer, 80.

³² Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*, 300.

Harald Finehair (c. 872-930) began as one of these petty kings, as he controlled sea trade from his manor at Avaldsnes on the island of Karmøy. Finehair is famous for claiming to be the first king of Norway and for his tyranny which drove many Norwegians to leave for Iceland. His claim as king of all Norway is almost certainly not true as he is unlikely to have unified more than a small part of Norway and whatever power he held quickly fell apart after his reign.³³

The reason that so many Norwegians left for Iceland may be because Harald Finehair attempted to change the established political structure and centralize his own power by controlling the thing assemblies and the central places. Finehair is an example of a new warrior aristocracy which separated itself from other traditional leaders within the community by claiming royalty. The most famous of these royal lineages are the *Skjoldungar* of the *Danir*, the *Skilfingar* of the *Svíar*, and eventually the *Ynglingar*, Harald Finehair's dynasty.³⁴ Because important social functions were concentrated in these central places, it was critical for aspiring royal families to control these central places and religious legitimization was one way for this new warrior aristocracy to establish control.

These new aspiring royals separated themselves from other leaders by combining religious and military functions and claiming divine descent,³⁵ as well as through new forms of monumental structures ranging from large halls, ritual buildings, stone ship settings, and large grave mounds, the latter of which have been seen as expressions of royal lineages claiming óðal rights (this idea will be addressed further below).³⁶

³³ Winroth, *The Age of the Vikings*, 152.

³⁴ Skre, "Rulership and Ruler's Sites in 1st–10th-Century Scandinavia," 210.

³⁵ Andrén, "Historical and Social," 438.

³⁶ Andrén, 438.

So, beginning in the sixth century, what we see in Scandinavia is that while the society as a whole was heavily stratified, that the elite, the chieftains, were relatively equal in power. However, some of these chieftains were able to control central places more effectively than others, meaning those chieftains controlled the political, economic, and religious structures of their regions. Some of those chieftains began to think of themselves differently than the other chieftains, and this is where we begin to see the rise of royal lineages within Scandinavia. These royal lineages existed alongside the other chieftains and came into conflict with them. However, chieftains claiming royalty did eventually assert their dominance and create the medieval kingdoms of Denmark (late eighth century), Norway, (late ninth century) and Sweden (c.the twelfth century). The establishment of royal families and kings in mainland Scandinavia is in stark contrast to Iceland, a land settled primarily by Norwegian chieftains who relocated to avoid the growing political influence of the Norwegian kings. Iceland was ruled by multiple chieftains who gathered together at the Althing assembly and maintained far more social equality until it came under the Norwegian crown in 1262.

All of these chieftains, those that remained chieftains and those that became kings, were associated with and performed important cultic functions. So why did some chieftains become kings and others did not? There are a variety of reasons and there is unlikely to be a single answer for all the medieval figures who became kings.³⁷ However, this thesis argues that one reason, though likely not the most significant reason, that this occurred is because those chieftains who became kings, like Harald Finehair, benefited from their association with a cult of Odin. The cult of Odin, which will be discussed further below, can be viewed as beneficial

³⁷ Sawyer and Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, chaps. 3 and 4.

because it helped rulers establish religious legitimacy over an earlier power structure. The idea that religion was used to establish political legitimacy is not strange or unique, and the various aspects of Odin have previously been interpreted as traits for a leader to legitimize his rule. However, I do believe that Odin's power over the dead has been thus far underappreciated when considering how the cult of Odin helped rulers legitimize their authority. We will see the modalities of this legitimization through the link between Odin and kingship, Odin and the dead, and wisdom and prophecy. Within pre-Christian Scandinavia, it seems to have been common practice to use the dead to legitimize rule and authority. Therefore, it is important to consider how Odin's characteristics may have related to this ideology. Before examining how rulers in pre-Christian Scandinavia used religion to legitimize their rule, let us first examine what the religion of pre-Christian Scandinavia looked like. The next section of this chapter examines the relationship between rulers and religion in pre-Christian Scandinavia.

Pre-Christian Religions of Northern Europe

In medieval Iceland, c. 1200, Snorri Sturluson wrote his *Prose Edda*, a treatise on poetry. His purpose in writing the book was to keep traditional poetry alive, especially the complex form of poetry known as skaldic poetry. Because skaldic poetry relied on kennings,³⁸ part of the work is a compilation of mythical narratives to explain the various references and allusions used. At the time of writing, the actual practice of PCRN had ceased and so Snorri wrote from the point of view of a Christian man who was raised in a Christian society. His goal was to keep traditional poetics alive, perhaps traditional stories alive, but not the religion. His work is full of traditional

³⁸ Kennings are compound nouns that refer to a different noun. For example, "water horse" would mean ship, "gold-breaker" could mean king, a warrior might be referred to as a "tree of weapons."

stories but does not describe religious practice. In his attempt to teach the poetry, he described a unified pre-Christian pantheon of gods who all lived in a single space under the rule of Odin the All-Father.

In that pantheon, Odin is considered the highest of the high and he rules Asgard from his high seat, Hlidskjalf, and is accompanied by his two ravens, Hugin and Munin who speak into his ear all they see every day. Within Asgard are two families of gods, the Æsir and the Vanir. Odin and his sons Thor and Baldr, as well as his wife Frigg, are Æsir gods. Gods, like Freyr, who also lives in Asgard, are Vanir gods, a family of gods who once fought the Æsir and lost. The gods are also accompanied by the half-giant and half Æsir Loki who plays a major part in beginning Ragnarök. Odin spends much of his time collecting famous warriors from Midgard, the place where people live, in order to prepare for Ragnarök. These warriors spend their afterlife in Valhalla, or the “Hall of the Slain,” and are called einherjar.

Snorri’s description of a family of gods is by far the most approachable source of Norse myths and it has heavily influenced the work of scholars who have attempted to reconstruct a pre-Christian religion. This is especially true of the seminal work in the field Jan de Vries’s *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* published in 1935 and revised and republished in 1956-1957 who defends the mythical material and source value of Snorri’s work.³⁹ Snorri’s work also helped establish the idea of a pan-Germanic pantheon that existed not only in the Viking Age but also earlier. However, this view of an unchanging pan-Germanic pantheon is heavily criticized today.⁴⁰ Today scholars stress diversity in PCRN across four main categories: chronological,

³⁹ Schjødt, Lindow, and André, “Introduction,” xxiv.

⁴⁰ For example, see McKinnell and Ruggerini, *Both One and Many*; Stefan Brink, “How Uniform Was the Old Norse Religion,” in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honor of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wells (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 105–35; Terry Gunnell,

geographical, social, and cognitive. This means that PCRN shows change over time, diversity between regions, between social classes, and also diversity between and within individuals who do not necessarily need a religious world-view free of contradictions.⁴¹

Odin, Historiography on Origin and Placement

The modern understanding of a diverse PCRN perhaps began its development when Odin's place as the head of a family of gods was first questioned by Henry Petersen in 1876 when he argued that Odin was not a native Scandinavian deity but that he originated from Germany or England and that Thor was likely the most prominent god in pagan times.⁴² Petersen's dissertation led the scholars that followed to question Odin's role in the Norse pantheon—was he really the all-father as Snorri claimed? Additionally, scholars also tried to find Odin's origins, especially because Snorri gave euhemerized accounts of Odin fleeing the destruction of Troy⁴³ and in a different work a story that he came from Asia.⁴⁴ This was seen as evidence for Odin being a late addition to the Norse pantheon.

If Odin was not a native Scandinavian deity, where then did he come from and when did he arrive in Scandinavia? Philologist H.M. Chadwick attempted to answer these questions in 1899 and argued that that the cult of Odin, while possibly foreign, had to have been known in the north no later than the beginning of the sixth century, and there was no reason to suppose that the

"Pantheon? What Pantheon? Concepts of a Family of Gods in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions," *Scripta Islandica*, no. 66 (2015): 55–76.

⁴¹ Schjødt, "Theoretical Considerations," 29–38.

⁴² Henry Petersen, "Om Nordboernes gudedyrkelse og gudetrol i hedenold," (dissertation, 1876) cited through Annette Lassen, *Odin's Ways: A Guide to Odin in Medieval Literature*, trans. Helen F. Leslie-Jacobsen and Margaret Cormack (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), chap. 2.6.5.

⁴³ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes, The Everyman Library (London: Dent, 1987), 3.

⁴⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: Volume I The Beginnings to Olaf Tryggvason*, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 2011), 6.

cult was new if, as Snorri claims, the act of cremation was an indication of the cult of Odin, because cremation burials are found in Sweden by the end of the first century.⁴⁵ Later, philologist Karl Helm in 1946 argued that the cult of Odin originated in the Rhineland and was later spread north by Herulians.⁴⁶ This idea that Odin developed in central Europe, where Germanic tribes, Celtic tribes, and the Romans were able to come together has proven very popular. In 1996, professor of medieval history Michael Enright argued that Odin is an amalgamation of the Celtic Lugh and one-eyed war band leaders like Sertorius and Julius Civilis who were closely associated with seeress figures. He argued that the leaders of these war bands used ritualized drinking and a seeress to create new kinship ties which transcended older tribal bonds and that in this confluence of events, the origin for the cult of Odin could be found. In 2006, archaeologist Anders Kaliff and historian of religions Olof Sundqvist accepted Odin as an old, or traditional, Scandinavian deity but argued that worshipers of Odin likely encountered Roman soldiers worshiping in the Mithras cult in the Rhineland and that this interaction led to religious acculturation by the cult of Odin.⁴⁷ In 2011, archaeologist Lotte Hedeager also accepted that Odin was not a foreign god to the Norse pantheon but argued that instead Odin was influenced by the Hunnic invasions in the fourth and fifth centuries and was perhaps even a mythologized version of Attila himself.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ H.M Chadwick, *The Cult of Othin: An Essay in the Ancient Religion of the North* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1899).

⁴⁶ Karl Helm, *Wodan: Ausbreitung und Wandergun seines Kultes*, 1946, cited through Lassen, *Odin's Ways*, chap. 2.6.4.

⁴⁷ Anders Kalif and Olof Sundqvist, "Odin and Mithras: Religious acculturation during the Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period" in *Old Norse Religion in Long Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, eds. Anders Andren, Kristinna Jennbert, and Catherina Raudvere (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 212-217.

⁴⁸ Lotte Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality: an Archaeology of Scandinavia AD 400 – 1000* (London: Routledge, 2011).

These scholars who have attempted to answer the question of where Odin originated must use a variety of sources from different languages and equate Odin, the Scandinavian deity, with figures across Germanic languages such *Woden*, *Wotan*, *Wodan*, and *Wuotan*, with a likely proto-Germanic name such as *Wōðanaz*, arguing that this widespread and related word for a similar figure is evidence of Odin being an early figure.⁴⁹ Scholars also associated Odin with figures described as Mercury through *interpretatio romana*. This is a strongly debated method and in 2002 philologist Philip A. Shaw argued in his dissertation that Wodan and Odin were not the same figure and that the cult of Wodan and the cult of Odin were separate. He argued that early medieval scholarship created a connection between the two and that this misunderstanding by eighth century scholars heavily influenced later medieval Scandinavian scholarship on myths, which have in turn misled modern scholarship.⁵⁰

This brief review of the scholarship shows that there is no current consensus on the origin of an Odinic cult but the search for the origin shows that scholars tend to argue that a cult of Odin is heavily influenced by contact with non-Germanic language speaking peoples and that this leads to a more influential cult. A key part of this idea is that this new cult of Odin is developing in (or expanding into) a region that already had a dominant cult which the cult of Odin at least interacts with and possibly overpowers. This is significant to my argument because it shows that conflict existed between different religious ideas. Scholars often look at the different groups of gods within PCRN, the Æsir and the Vanir, as a mythical memory of the cult of Odin overpowering the previous cult, because Snorri and the eddic poem *Voluspa* both

⁴⁹ Jens Peter Schjødt, “Mercury – Wotan – Odin: One or Many?,” in *Myth, Materiality and Lived Religion: In Merovingian and Viking Scandinavia*, ed. Klas Wikström af Edholm et al. (Stockholm University Press, 2019), 62, <https://doi.org/10.16993/bay.d>.

⁵⁰ Philip Shaw, “Uses of Wodan: The Development of His Cult and of Medieval Literary Responses to It.” (PhD, University of Leeds, 2002).

recount a war between these two families of gods, led by Odin, which ends with the Vanir and Æsir exchanging hostages.⁵¹

Diversity of Cults

Two different gods are often pointed to as being this dominant cult: Thor and Freyr. In 1972, philologist Gabriel Turville-Petre argued that there was very little evidence for the worship of Odin in Viking Age Iceland and understood Odin as a god of the royalty and not as a god of a traditional, hereditary landowner class; as such, Icelandic settlers like Thorolf Moster-beard who moved from Western Norway to Iceland and had no need for Odin as he was a “god of lawlessness, god of footpads and champions.”⁵² In making this argument, Turville-Petre used evidence from theophoric placenames and evidence provided by Icelandic historical records like *Landnámabók*, and noted that neither place-names nor personal names associated with Odin are found among the Icelandic settlers while there were a significant number of personal names and place names associated with Thor and Freyr.⁵³ Turville-Petre’s conclusions were later supported by professor of folkloristics Terry Gunnell in 2017, who further emphasized that Thor appears to have been a much more popular deity, especially among the Icelandic settlers. Gunnell furthered the argument by suggesting that the study of Old Norse religion should be reconsidered more heavily considering Snorri’s presentation of the pantheon is unlikely to have been true.⁵⁴ Both

⁵¹ For further details see John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*, First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 311–12. and Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, Repr. in paperback (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2006), 351–53.

⁵² Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Nine Norse Studies* (Viking Society for Northern Research, 1972), 17, <http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Text%20Series/Nine%20norse%20studies.pdf>.

⁵³ Turville-Petre, 8.

⁵⁴ Terry Gunnell, “How High Was the High One? The Roles of Óðinn and Þórr in Pre-Christian Icelandic Society,” in *Theorizing Old Norse Myth*, ed. Stefan Brink and Lisa Collinson (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2017), 105–29, <https://www.brepolonline.net/doi/abs/10.1484/M.AS-EB.5.109622>.

Turville-Petre and Gunnell noted as evidence in their conclusions the placement of the Thor idol presented in the account of the temple at Uppsala by Adam of Bremen which places Thor as the central figure, not Odin. Medieval studies scholar and historian of religion Gro Steinsland has suggested that Freyr was at one point in time a dominant god and that he was overshadowed by Odin sometime in the ninth century because his role as a fertility god became less important than Odin's role as a god of war and violence.⁵⁵ Finally, some scholars have suggested that a god like Tyr may have been a primary god early on, at least in a socio-legal framework and attach him to the thing assembly sites.⁵⁶

To summarize so far, the important theme seen in the above scholarship is that many scholars, across multiple disciplines, have argued for a far more complex understanding of PCRN than is presented by Snorri and early scholarship. Critical to this thesis is the idea that Odin would not have been viewed as the primary deity for most people who practiced PCRN and that he grows in importance over time. This thesis does not attempt to find an origin for Odin or take a stance on whether he was a foreign god or an older Scandinavian god. Rather, this thesis accepts that Odin was not a primary deity for all people who practiced a form of PCRN. This is significant because our later sources declare Odin as the most significant. This is important to the thesis as it tells us that Odin's position changed over time and this thesis addresses one reason that occurred.

⁵⁵ Gro Steinsland, "Origin Myths and Rulership: From the Viking Age Ruler to the Ruler of Medieval Historiography: Continuity, Transformations and Innovations," in *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages: Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes*, ed. Gro Steinsland et al. (Leiden, The Netherlands: BRILL, 2011), 35–39, <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004205062.i-408>.

⁵⁶ For an overview see John Lindow, "Týr," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 1345–61, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116975>.

While there has been much discussion about a pan-Scandinavian pantheon, even that concept is now questioned and scholars have attempted to deconstruct the idea. Philologist Stefan Brink has done detailed analysis of theophoric place names across Scandinavia and came to the conclusion in 2007 that “the existence of cults of many gods and goddesses, as suggested by Old Norse literature, is not supported by the toponymic material. According to place-name evidence, only a few gods and even fewer goddesses were the objects of an actual cult in Scandinavia;” further he concluded there was “a strong indication that the pagan ‘religion’ in early Scandinavia was never homogenous.”⁵⁷ Brink noted that cults seemed to be regional with theophoric place names finding Odin in Sweden, Denmark, and in Viken and Trøndelag in Norway but not in south-western Norway; Thor was found in Sweden, Denmark, and south-east Norway but not in Trøndelag and northern Norway; Freyr is found in Sweden, especially near Lake Mälaren, but not appearing in Denmark except for a mention in Jutland.⁵⁸ This means that the different regions had different dominant cults.

To address the idea that PCRN was not a homogenous belief, Andreas Nordberg argued that the religions should be understood in the framework of religious configurations (concurrent religious beliefs and practices which are framed and change depending on the socio-cultural or environmental setting), specifically a religious configuration for the warband, for the farmstead, and for a hunting/fishing context.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, Maths Bertell has recently introduced the

⁵⁷ Brink, “How Uniform,” 124–25.

⁵⁸ Brink, “How Uniform,” 125.

⁵⁹ Andreas Nordberg, “Configurations of Religion in Late Iron Age and Viking Age Scandinavia,” in *Myth, Materiality, and Lived Religion: In Merovingian and Viking Scandinavia*, ed. Wikstrom af Edholm, K., Jackson Rova, P., Nordberg, A., Sundqvist, O. & Zachrisson, T. (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2019), 339-373 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/bay.1.license>: CC-BY

concept of religiolects (religious belief and practice that may be linked to specific places, social situations, or ethnic groups) into the study of pre-Christian religions of the north.⁶⁰

Still others have stressed that the religions were incredibly localized or that minor deities were perhaps more important on a daily basis than the major deities found in the medieval sources.⁶¹ These minor deities often appear as part of private cults. Two of these figures, while not appearing to be contemporaries, appear to be female protective figures: the *matronae* and the *dísir*. The *matronae*, whose worship is not limited to a Germanic frame, are presented as a trinity, and do not appear in the written sources but do appear on votive stones. However, we have little evidence for their continued worship after the fourth century CE.⁶² The *dísir* are mentioned in the medieval sources and are also mentioned as the object of cultic activity. Importantly in the medieval sources death occurs when they remove their protection.⁶³ These two deities are often compared with each other and the word *matronae* has been glossed in Old English glossaries as *dísir*.⁶⁴

In addition, we have another group of minor deities called the *álfar*. Like the *matronae* and the *dísir*, the *álfar* are recorded as receiving sacrifice. In previous scholarship, it has been noted that in the written sources, the *álfar* are connected to graves and death and fertility. These scholars have suggested this indicates a cult of the dead or an ancestor cult or forefather worship. In addition, scholars have noted that the word *álfar* at times appears to be synonymous with the

⁶⁰ Maths Bertell (Forthcoming), “Into a hall, out to an island: The Iron Age hall culture religiolect as a case study of religious change and diversity.” Cited through Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*, 539.

⁶¹ See Shaw, “Uses of Wodan.”

⁶² For an overview see Rudolf Simek, “Matronae,” in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andréén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 1481–91, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116984>.

⁶³ John Lindow, “Dísir,” in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andréén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 1500, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116985>.

⁶⁴ Simek, “Matronae,” 1490.

word Vanir.⁶⁵ Further consideration of an ancestor cult will be discussed in chapter two, however it will be noted here that conceptions of an afterlife appear to be multifaceted. In addition to the álfar with a relationship to gravemounds and the dead, at least two gods are considered lords of the dead and rule over two different realms. Those are Odin over Valhalla and Hel, the goddess, who rules over Hel, the place. Textual sources suggest that Thor, Freya, and Ran all receive the dead as well. The significant variation of burial types also suggests significant variation of beliefs.

In conclusion, the idealized Norse Pantheon presented by Snorri in his *Prose Edda* with Odin at the head as the all-father has long been questioned and with increasing frequency. It is clear that a wide variety of cults and beliefs existed across pre-Christian Scandinavia. This diversity of religious expression is seen in the variety of theophoric place and personal names, the diversity of different figures receiving cultic activity, and the variety of views on an afterlife. This religious diversity can be discerned geographically and in social classes. In addition, it is also understood that any religious belief is inherently personal and that individuals all have their own conceptions of deities that do not necessarily match with another person's. This means that while two or more groups may be part of a cult of Odin that these groups do not necessarily participate in, or understand, the cult in the exact same way. However, within this incredibly complex and multifaceted set of beliefs, a cult of Odin did exist and it interacted with these various beliefs. One set of beliefs that seems to have been widespread among PCRN is the idea of an ancestor cult, with its possible relationship to the álfar. This thesis argues power over the dead was a religious legitimization tactic for followers of a cult of Odin.

⁶⁵ Terry Gunnell, "How Elvish Were the Álfar," in *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth: Essays in Honour of T.A. Shippey*, ed. Andrew Wawn, Graham Johnson, and John Walter (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols), 128–29 and 122–23, accessed March 5, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/16232734/How_Elvish_Were_the_%C3%81lfar_2_.

Religious Ruler Ideology

Within pre-Christian Scandinavia, people and rulers practiced a diverse set of religious beliefs. While there is debate over whether a specific “priestly” class existed within pre-Christian Scandinavia,⁶⁶ it is clear that rulers were expected to oversee cultic activities and that rulers did use religion as a legitimizing tactic to secure their rule and authority. This section surveys the theories concerning religious legitimization within pre-Christian Scandinavia. Doing this shows how rulers related to religion and what might be expected of rulers by people regarding their religious associations. This provides a theoretical framework to understand how the cult of Odin helped in securing social and political power.

Early scholarship on rulers and religion in Scandinavia focused on kings and applied James Frazer’s idea of “sacral kingship,” found in his 1890 work *The Golden Bough: A Study of Comparative Religion*.⁶⁷ Frazer defined a sacral king as one who was treated as a god, was responsible for the welfare of his people, was a priest, was married to a fertility goddess, and could be killed or sacrificed as part of a fertility ritual. This idea was applied to the study of Scandinavian kingship and this became a standard interpretation of kingship in pre-Christian Scandinavia.⁶⁸ Kings were understood to have been treated as gods, as priests, and they could be sacrificed as part of fertility rituals.

⁶⁶ Olof Sundqvist, “Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists,” in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andréén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 740–43, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116956>.

⁶⁷ Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (La Vergne: Neeland Media LLC, 2019), <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=5889051>.

⁶⁸ Triin Laidoner, *Ancestor Worship and the Elite in Late Iron Age Scandinavia: A Grave Matter* (London: Routledge, 2020), 70–71, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429444746>.

This concept as defined by Frazer would be challenged, most famously by Walter Baetke, who disagreed with the concept because he did not believe pre-Christian Scandinavian kings perfectly fit Frazer's definition of sacral kinship. This was in part because he did not believe that pre-Christian Scandinavian's kings were worshiped while still alive and that cultic activity around kings began at their gravemounds, meaning that the cult of kings earlier scholars had defined should be viewed instead as an ancestor cult.⁶⁹ This led to much debate on how to define sacral kingship. Working in a medieval Christian context, Bjorn Weiler argued that the term was challenging because "its meaning is defined with as much success as jelly is nailed to a wall."⁷⁰

Still, Schjødt argued for using the term "sacral kingship" more loosely, closer to how it is outlined by cultural anthropologist Henry J.M. Claessen in his research on early states. Claessen argued a kingship could be sacral when the ruler's position is based on a mythical charter; the ruler is sacral; the ruler performs rites; the ruler placates the supernatural powers with offerings; the ruler's aim is to protect against supernatural forces, enemies, poverty, and anarchy; the ruler's relationship with the people should be a reciprocal one.⁷¹ Claessen's definition of sacral kingship does appear to fit the relationship between rulers and religion within the context of PCRN. However, it may not fully address the religious power held by figures within pre-Christian Scandinavia who were not male or kings but held cultic functions.

⁶⁹ Walter Baetke *Yngvi und die Ynglinar: Eine quellenkritische Untersuchung über das nordische 'Sakralkönigtum'* 1964 cited through Jens Peter Schjødt, "Kings and Rulers," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders André (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 534–35, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116950.Schjødt.534-535>.

⁷⁰ Björn Weiler, *Paths to Kingship in Medieval Latin Europe, c. 950–1200*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 338, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009008853>.

⁷¹ J.M. H. Claessen, *The Early State: A Structural Approach*. In Claessen, H. J. M., and Skalník, P. (eds.), *The Early State*, 1978, pp. 533–596. The Hague: Mouton. The *Early State* cited in Jens Peter Schjødt, "Kings and Rulers," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders André (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 532–35, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116950>.

To address this, Sundqvist has argued for the term religious ruler ideology believing it better represents the relationship between rulers and religion within PCRN.⁷² Sundqvist advocates for the term because he calls it an open concept which contains ideas about a ruler's position in society and the strategies used for legitimization and authority. It allows scholars to investigate how figures across social, gender, and geographic spectrums performed within their society to gain legitimacy and authority through religion. Sundqvist outlines four possible categories of religious strategies for gaining legitimacy and authority: relationship to the mythic world; performing central roles in rituals; using religious symbols; and controlling cultic organizations or institutions. Not all of these strategies need to be used by every ruler, of course, but they provide a general outline of the possible strategies rulers employed. This thesis will use the term religious ruler ideology based on Sundqvist's framework as a way to articulate how different rulers within pre-Christian Scandinavia gained legitimacy and authority among their people. In many ways, this provides us an outline of a "language" of religious legitimization within pre-Christian Scandinavia. In due course, we will use it to elucidate how religious ruler ideology came to incorporate Odin's cult in some regions, and more specifically those facets of Odin's cult (authority over the dead, wisdom, prophecy, and their institutionalization under nobles and kings) that have remained under-explored in existing scholarship. Let us look at how two types of rulers, the kings and chieftains, or *goði*, fit within this religious ruler ideology framework.

The word *goði* comes from the Old Norse word *goð* (god) and this indicates that the *goði* held a cultic function, however the *goði* also served other functions, like being a lawman. It

⁷² Sundqvist, Olof, 2012, "Religious ruler ideology" in pre-Christian Scandinavia. A contextual approach', in C. Raudvere and J. P. Schjødt (eds.), *More than mythology: narratives, ritual practices and regional distribution in pre-Christian Scandinavian religions*, Nordic Academic Press, Lund, pp. 225–261.

appears that the office of goði could be inherited or gained through other means. In Western Norway and in Iceland, goði appeared to keep and own cultic buildings and the idols inside them and lived on large farms. When these goði came into conflict with Harald Finehair in the late ninth century, they took their cultic buildings and idols with them to Iceland (settled c. 870) and set up new temples within new sacred landscapes. This is because the cultic building and whatever was inside was the personal property of the goði and did not belong to the community. These cultic buildings were likely used by the community living around the goði, though, who likely held ceremonial feasts there.⁷³ These goði were cultic leaders, leading men in their districts, and were leaders of the thing assemblies and called upon to help solve disputes. However, they primarily ruled through social pressure and did not always have the power to enforce their will.

The ceremonial feasts the goði held occurred at the same time as the thing assemblies and were likely cyclical rituals that occurred throughout the calendar year and were performed for good harvests or victory in war. The reason that goði were the leaders of these rituals is because they were closely associated with specific gods. For example, Hrafnkell is an Icelandic settler who is called Freyr's Goði and he is said to "love no other god before Freyr, and to him he made offerings of all the best things he had."⁷⁴ Thorolf Moster-Beard, meanwhile, in chapter 4 of *Eyrbjgga saga (The Saga of the People of Eyri)* gives sacrifices to his dear friend Thor.⁷⁵

Goði use strategies outlined by the religious ruler ideology because they were related to the mythic world more closely than the average person by being dear friends of specific deities,

⁷³ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders," 759–61.

⁷⁴ *The Story of Hrafnkell, Frey's Priest*, trans., John Coles, Icelandic Saga Database, chap. 2, accessed June 14, 2022, https://sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda.en.

⁷⁵ *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, in *Gisli Sursson's Saga and The Saga of the People of Eyri*, ed. Ólason Vésteinn, trans. Martin Regal and Judy Quinn, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2003), 75.

they led cultic activities, and they controlled the cultic institutions because the activities occurred around their property, whether that be the physical ritual space or the idol. However, the goði's relationship to cultic activities and gods was different than the relationship described between kings and gods.

First, while goði are friends or devoted to specific gods, kings descended from the gods. Divine descent within pre-Christian Scandinavia has been most thoroughly studied by Gro Steinsland who argues that for kings there is a *hieros gamos*.⁷⁶ Steinsland argued that within the PCRN context the marriage between a god and a giantess brings about a new ruler. She based her argument on the eddic poem *Skírnismál*, which depicts the marriage between the god Freyr and the giantess Gerðr whose offspring are the Ynglingar kings, and also on the skaldic poem *Háleygjatal* which presents the first jarl of Lade, Sæmingr, as the offspring of Odin and the giantess Skaði. The ruler's right to rule is legitimized because of his divine descent. While the jarls of Lade were not kings, the poem *Háleygjatal* was written in an attempt to raise the jarls of Lade to the role of kingship.⁷⁷ Not all scholars believe that the rulers were viewed as an actual descendant of a god, though, Sundqvist has argued that terms like "Freyr's Offspring" should be viewed in a more symbolic or metaphorical way.⁷⁸ Still, it is clear that rulers who aspired to kingship were connected to gods differently than goði.

However, like goði, kings were expected to lead cultic activities. This is perhaps best represented in the story of the fictional king Dómaldi who appears in chapter 15 of *Ynglinga saga*. Dómaldi was said to be a Swedish king and ruled near the temple at Uppsala. As a king, he

⁷⁶Steinsland, "Origin Myths," 17.

⁷⁷ Steinsland, 18–25.

⁷⁸ Olof Sundqvist, *Freyr's Offspring: Rulers and Religion in Ancient Svear Society* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2002), 169.

was both the leader and director of sacrifices to the gods before becoming a sacrifice himself. When a famine struck his land, he made sacrifices to the gods to end the famine. The first year, he sacrificed oxen, but the famine did not end. Increasing his offering, the second year he sacrificed people, but the famine did not end. In the third year, the chieftains decided that Dómaldi himself needed to be sacrificed. They sacrificed him and the famine ended. Schjødt interprets this story as having three possible meanings. The first is that Dómaldi was sacrificed because he had lost his numinosity. The second is that Dómaldi was sacrificed because he could not or would not fulfil his cultic functions in an acceptable way. Or third, that Dómaldi was sacrificed because he was the king and kings were considered more valuable, or more sacred, than others. This marks a clear difference between goði and kings, as goði do not appear to have been considered suitable sacrifices.

Kings, then, also use strategies outlined in the religious ruler ideology because they used religion to legitimate their authority. By relating to the mythic world, claiming divine descent, and perhaps having more numinosity than other people. They also performed cultic activities and controlled cultic institutions, as shown by Dómaldi's directing and leading the sacrifices at Uppsala.

One additional theory of rulers using religion to establish legitimacy and authority should be considered before moving on. Recently, Laidoner has argued that there existed a cult of superior ancestors within PCRN. According to Laidoner, superior ancestors existed within an ancestor cult. However, these superior ancestors allowed the elites to create a social hierarchy because their ancestors were viewed as being more influential than common ancestors. This strengthened the social and political position of the elite. Laidoner argued this framework does not need to attach the elites to a divine being. There is not a divine descent. Instead, the elites

established authority through their superior ancestry which was accepted by the people because the ancestors were seen as once-living people and not divinities.⁷⁹ Within Sundqvist's outline of religious ruler ideology, this would mean that some rulers established their relationship to the mythic world through their ancestors and they stressed their relationship with their ancestors through symbols like monumental burials. Considering the significant number of deities, both major and minor, within PCRN related to the dead, a cult of superior ancestors is not an insignificant religious ruler ideology.

Based upon these ideas, there appears to have been a common discourse for establishing religious legitimacy and authority within pre-Christian Scandinavia. Sundqvist's outline of religious ruler ideology provides a framework for the general language of religious legitimization. Rulers were expected to be related to the mythic world, to perform cultic rituals, to control cultic symbols, and to control cultic institutions. However, our sources suggest that the diversity of cults across pre-Christian Scandinavia meant different leaders embraced different, though sometimes similar, strategies for religious legitimization, for example the *goði* are friends of gods whereas kings are descendants. This thesis argues that the elites who embraced the cult of Odin performed similar religious legitimization strategies as other cults but that some of those strategies that the followers of the cult of Odin embraced controlled the cultic activities and symbols of other rulers. Meaning that within a common discourse of religious legitimization in Scandinavia, followers of the cult of Odin were able to effectively control the cultic symbols other rulers used to establish their own authority. Specifically, followers of the cult of Odin were able to control the dead because Odin was believed to have power over the dead. The next

⁷⁹ Laidoner, *Ancestor Worship and the Elite in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, 172.

section will examine how the cult of Odin fits within the general framework of religious ruler ideology.

Cult of Odin

Odin is consistently considered a complicated figure in scholarship. This is in part because scholarship is often focused on Odin's function in society and his function within society can be hard to pin down when you consider that throughout the sources he is variously referred to as the all-father, highest of the high, a god of the dead, a god of magic, a god of poetry, a god of wisdom, and a healer among other things. In the sources, Odin seems to be a god of a lot of things. However, Lassen noted that "it is striking that in the research on Odin in the twentieth century and up to the turn of the century, the articles and monographs that concern Odin often concentrate on a single aspect of the god."⁸⁰ In response, Schjødt has attempted to synthesize the various aspects of Odin into a single inherent logic.⁸¹ Schjødt argued that Odin had two primary aspects. The first is his association with knowledge and the second is his association with kingship, war, and death; when combined, these aspects reflect the abilities a king or warlord would need to be successful. In most of the myths, Odin is seen acquiring knowledge. This is important because Odin then turns around and gives that knowledge away to kings or figures associated with kings to help them win battles. To kings he gives wisdom which leads to victory. To warriors, he is associated with magic that can make them invulnerable in battle and with fate. He is also the god of death and provides loyal and brave warriors who have

⁸⁰ Lassen, *Odin's Ways*, chap. 2.6.4.

⁸¹ Schjødt does argue that he is simply looking at a late pagan understanding of Odin, probably from the Viking Age, and not the gods of the Odinic type that existed before. The various aspects of the god certainly changed over time and came together in various ways.

served their lord well with an idealized king's hall to go to in the afterlife. He is a god of poetry so he can help remember those who have died bravely for generations.⁸² The poetry is also a key part of political propaganda.⁸³ Since Odin's aspects reflect the abilities a king or warlord needed to be successful in pre-Christian Scandinavia, let us examine at how that might have looked in the historical context of the petty kings who were accumulating power within the timeframe encompassed by this study.

Let us first determine where the cult of Odin was found. While a warrior aristocracy associated with Odin can arguably be found in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden,⁸⁴ two families are perhaps the most convincingly associated with the cult of Odin. The first is the Finehair dynasty and the second is the jarls of Lade. While the Finehair dynasty is said to have descended from Freyr, it is in the courts of Harald Finehair and his sons that we see the strongest development of skaldic poetry related to Valhalla and joining Odin in the afterlife, a topic which is discussed more thoroughly in chapter 3. As discussed above, the jarls of Lade claimed divine descent from Odin and the giantess Skadi. The jarls of Lade were closely associated with the Finehair dynasty for a time but as the Finehairs converted to Christianity, the jarls of Lade attempted to make a play for kingship. For a brief period in the late tenth century, Jarl Hákon the Powerful of Lade ruled Norway. To counter the attempts of Harald Bluetooth, King of Denmark, to control Norway, Jarl Hakon, employed more skalds than anyone before him and embraced the pagan faith to its utmost.⁸⁵ One of his skalds, Eyvindr the Plagiarist, wrote the poem *Vellekla* in

⁸² Jens Peter Schjødt, "Odin," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 1188–94, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116969>. Schjødt, Oðinn, 1188-1194

⁸³ Sundqvist, *Freyr's Offspring*, 171.

⁸⁴ Olof Sundqvist, *An Arena for Higher Powers: Ceremonial Buildings and Religious Strategies for Rulership in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 544.

⁸⁵ Winroth, *The Age of the Vikings*, 182.

praise of him and another *Háleygjatal*, to create the divine descent from Odin. In these two families, we can see the embrace of cults of Odin most clearly. Of course, the Finehairs and jarls of Lade are late examples and it is likely that other aristocrats embraced cults of Odin before the ninth and tenth centuries.

Knowing that an elite warrior aristocracy embraced the cult of Odin, we can ask why did they embrace the cult of Odin over a different god, like Thor or Freyr? How did this cult of Odin fit within the institutionalizing religious ruler ideology of pre-Christian Scandinavia? How did that ideology express the legitimacy and authority of these warrior elites to their followers and subjects?

Elites who embraced a cult of Odin expressed their relationship to the mythic world through divine descent. Odin is the ancestors of the jarls of Lade as seen in the skaldic poem *Háleygjatal* and to Jarl Hákon the Powerful, specifically, through the skaldic poem *Vellekla*. Odin is also the divine ancestor in Anglo-Saxon traditions as mentioned by Bede.⁸⁶ This divine descent relationship is not only different than the elites who embraced a god like Thor and became his dearest friend but may also be viewed as more significant. It is also interesting that Jarl Hákon the Powerful who ruled Norway c. 975-995 had his divine descent to Odin constructed when he was attempting to establish himself as a king and not a jarl as this indicates that Odin was a god of only the most elite strata of society.

Embracing the cult of Odin also gave this warrior aristocracy control of an important religious function, initiation into the warrior band. As described earlier, the political structure of Scandinavia between the sixth and tenth centuries consisted of various warlords competing with

⁸⁶ Simon Nygaard, "Sacral Rulers in Pre-Christian Scandinavia: The Possibilities of Typological Comparisons within the Paradigm of Cultural Evolution," *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 52, no. 1 (June 1, 2016): 15, <https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.49454>.

each other. How did these warlords convince warriors to follow them? Obviously, material wealth in the form of gold and silver and land was one way. However, Nygaard argues that another way was likely the initiation into the warband itself and the religious benefits that came with it.

Building off Gunnell's scholarship which argued that eddic poems in the *ljóðaháttir* meter were meant to be performed,⁸⁷ Nygaard conducted a detailed analysis of the eddic poem *Grímnismál* and interpreted the poem as an initiation meant to be performed in a hall setting. Nygaard argued that when performed, a ritual specialist would transform the hall into a mythical hall setting. The ritual specialist would then slowly transform into Odin himself, and the group of warriors who were the audience would become *einherjar*, Odin's warriors in the afterlife of Valhalla. This is significant for a few reasons. First, as Nygaard argues, this would create moral and social obligations within the group.⁸⁸ This is important considering the political structure of the time and the fact that warrior bands were not heterogenous but had to overcome older tribal loyalties and create new group identities. This new group identity, based upon oath taking and material markers (like special clothing), linked warrior groups together and associated them to the mythic world and Odin, perhaps by turning the warriors into a privileged type of warrior like the *berserkers* and *ulfheðnar*.⁸⁹ However that new group identity was also based in part on the special wisdom and knowledge granted through the poem that was shared within the group.

⁸⁷ Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1995); Terry Gunnell, "The Performance of the Poetic Edda," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 299–303.

⁸⁸ Simon Nygaard, "Being Odinn Bursson: The Creation of Social and Moral Obligation in Viking Age Warrior-Bands through the Ritualized, Oral Performance of Poetry--The Case of Grímnismál," in *Social Norms in Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. Jakub Morawiec, Aleksandra Jochymek, and Grzegorz Bartusik (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 67.

⁸⁹ Ben Raffield et al., "Ingroup Identification, Identity Fusion and the Formation of Viking War Bands," *World Archaeology* 48, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 35–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2015.1100548>.

Second, the performance of the poem gives the warlord another opportunity to perform their relationship to the mythic world. Price and Mortimer have suggested that the Sutton Hoo helmet was designed so that one eye would be less reflective in a hall setting and that this might have been so that the pagan leader could become Odin.⁹⁰ Nygaard argued a prop like the Sutton Hoo helmet would have added to the believability of the ritual and the idea that the ritual specialist was Odin.⁹¹

Within pre-Christian Scandinavia, followers who embraced the cult of Odin benefited because the cult fulfilled expectations of a religious ruler ideology. For example, followers of the cult of Odin connected themselves to the mythic world by divine descent and through performance; they performed cultic activities not only by hosting feasts but also by performing the initiation into the warband, which granted the initiate special knowledge and access to a special afterlife in Valhalla; followers of the cult of Odin controlled religious symbols because they themselves could be viewed as the religious symbol of Odin; and they controlled the cultic institutions because they controlled the hall and the warband itself.

Additionally, the elite who embraced the cult of Odin also found themselves receiving benefits based upon general ideologies regarding high-ranking rulers. When examining an ideology of rulers in Scandinavia, Sigurðsson has noted that Christian kings were considered kings because they were granted that power by God while pre-Christian kings in Scandinavia were granted kingship through personal attributions and qualities. Warlike behavior was an important factor in a king's qualities but so was wisdom. While sagas stress wisdom for both

⁹⁰ Neil Price and Paul Mortimer, "An Eye for Odin? Divine Role-Playing in the Age of Sutton Hoo," *European Journal of Archaeology* 17, no. 3 (2014): 517–38, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1461957113Y.0000000050>.

⁹¹ Nygaard, "Being Odinn," 64.

kings and chieftains only kings are described as very wise (Old Norse *stórvitr*).⁹² The idea that kings had to be very wise may be a later development, but it may also be a result of kings needing to be wiser than the chieftains they were trying to control. This is one way that embracing the cult of Odin could have benefited would be kings. Odin's access to and granting of numinous knowledge, as seen in the eddic poem *Grimnismál* and in Saxo's tale of Hading in Book I (discussed in chapter 3), would grant the kings the necessary wisdom to be very wise and establish themselves over rival chieftains.

Additionally, elites who embraced a cult of Odin and the wisdom he provided likely found that this wisdom reenforced and furthered a fatalistic heroic ethos within their warband. The concept of fate was an important part of the pre-Christian Scandinavian mentality. In the context of PCRN, fate is closely associated with the time one will die and seems to be beyond the ability for humans to change.⁹³ However, the concept of fate also appears to have created a stoic heroic ethos that is closely associated with the heroic poetry and actions in the literary sources. Warriors with this mentality would believe that the time of their death could not be changed but that the way they died could be. Knowing that one could not escape death but could only die with honor created strong impulses within the warrior band to die with honor for their lord.⁹⁴

So far, this section has established that elites who embraced the cult of Odin were able to institutionalize aspects of it to reinforce their legitimacy and authority by working within a pre-

⁹² Jon Vidar Sigurdsson, "Kings, Earls, and Chieftains. Rulers in Norway, Orkney and Iceland c. 900-1300," in *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages*, ed. Gro Steinsland et al. (Boston: Brill, 2011), 77.

⁹³ John Lindow, "Fate," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 927, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116962>.

⁹⁴ Lindow, 944.

Christian Scandinavian expectation of religious ruler ideology. It has also shown that the cult of Odin would have granted additional religious legitimacy by giving the followers access to numinous knowledge and wisdom others would not have had access to and by helping to unifying warrior bands through the creation of a group identity, something very much needed for any king hoping to establish his control over rival chieftains. In this way, the cult of Odin provided followers with a religious benefit and a very practical and corporeal benefit. Let us now briefly turn to how the cult of Odin was different from rival cults of other major gods like Thor and Freyr.

Gunnell makes a few arguments for why the cult of Odin was fundamentally different to cults of other gods, like Thor and Freyr. First, he argues that the cult of Odin was not associated with the natural landscape. Odin was therefore a god that was able to wander far from home, beneficial when you needed an army to travel for long periods of time or if you needed to control larger territories. Second, he argues Odin appears to be the only god that was performed while the other gods were more closely associated with idols and it would likely be more advantageous to be a god, even if briefly, than it would be to be a “friend” of a god. Third, Odin was far more closely associated with an afterlife. And finally, he argues Odin was able to be sold as a god that could take on the names of previous gods, as perhaps evidenced by the incredibly long list of names Odin was known by. Gunnell also acknowledges that Gro Steinsland has argued that the cult of Odin was transitioning from an ethnic religion to a universal religion.⁹⁵

I would like to address Gunnell’s third point a little more, that Odin was more closely associated with an afterlife. While others have noted before that the Valhalla “martial ideology

⁹⁵ Gunnell *From One High One to Another*, 166-170. Gunnell credits Gro Steinsland with the idea that the cult of Odin is transitioning from an ethnic religion to a universalizing religion: Gro Steinsland, *Norrøn religion: Myter, riter, samfunn*, Oslo: Pax 2005, 33, and 421-455.

and mythology, associated with the ideal warrior hall, must have been useful for the rulers in Norway and Svetjud, who probably needed to be surrounded with brave warriors,”⁹⁶ Odin’s associating with an afterlife is not unique as many gods are said to be associated with an afterlife in our sources. Thor, Freya, Hel, and Ran are all said to receive the dead, though the mythology around Valhalla is by far the most fleshed out realm of the dead in the sources. Also, something I believe to be of critical importance, is that Odin’s relationship to the dead is not limited to his warriors in Valhalla. Crucially, he is seen as having power over the dead and is often said to gain wisdom others do not have or cannot have from the dead. This specific aspect of Odin’s characteristics, his power over the dead, is the focus of the rest of this thesis, specifically how it interacts with what seems to have been an almost pan-Scandinavian practice of using the dead to establish social and political power within the community.

Conclusion

In summary, pre-Christian Scandinavia between the sixth and tenth centuries was filled with a wide variety of religious beliefs and practices. While traditional scholarship assumed a pan-Scandinavian pantheon with Odin at its head, this is now consistently being challenged by today’s scholars. This diversity of religious belief led to different religious strategies that rulers would use to legitimize their authority. This language of religious legitimization had rulers establish themselves by connecting themselves to the mythic world; by performing central roles within cultic rituals; by controlling cultic symbols; and by controlling cultic institutions. Scandinavia in this time was a place of political instability and it was important for rulers to

⁹⁶ Sundqvist, *Arena for Higher Powers*, 534.

establish themselves. One group of rulers who emerged in this time was a warrior aristocracy who embraced the cult of Odin. This emerging elite took control of central places and established themselves as royal lineages and slowly concentrated power.

The followers of the cult of Odin were not the only elites in Scandinavia at this time, of course, as there were other elites who embraced different cultic beliefs. However, theophoric place name and personal name evidence suggests the cult of Odin grew in importance after the sixth century as it became the personal cult of kings. Why did the cult of Odin become so popular? My contention is that the cult of Odin benefited the warrior aristocracy because it helped fulfil requirements of an institutionalized religious ruler ideology in the PCRN context. The cult of Odin gave its followers numinosity through divine descent and through performative initiation rituals in which the leader of the cult became Odin. These initiation rituals also helped create an identity within a heterogenous group of warriors which helped maintain control of central places. Additionally, various attributes associated with Odin like magic, wisdom, success on the battlefield, poetry, and Valhalla helped create a heroic ethos centered around honor and death. These traits seem to be unique to the cult of Odin.

Still, the question remains: how did the followers of the cult of Odin legitimize their rule and authority to subjects who did not embrace a cult of Odin and had a different religious ruler ideology? For example, why would a chieftain who embraced the cult of Thor see Odin as a legitimizing force? Across Scandinavia there appears to have been widespread participation in a cult of the dead, and such a cult might not have viewed initiation into Odin's warband and divine descent as enough to establish legitimacy. This is why this thesis argues that Odin's relationship to the dead is more significant than previously considered. Within the discourse of rival warlords who used strategies of religious legitimization, warlords who embraced a cult of Odin were

perceived to have control the dead, the cultic institutions and symbols many elites used to establish their authority. The belief that Odin gained wisdom from the dead and granted it to his followers and that Odin had spells to bind the dead was fundamentally different than the relationship described between other major deities like Thor and Freyr and the dead. This perceived power likely made the cult of Odin appealing to warlords who struggling for political and social power. Over time, the elites who embraced the cult of Odin did establish themselves at the top of the social hierarchy, in Norway especially as shown by the Fairhair Dynasty and the jarls of Lade. Because the Odinic cult occupied the top strata of the social hierarchy, Odin's cult gained in popularity over time and was later described as the highest of the high in medieval literature.

The next chapter of this thesis will first establish the religious ruler ideology of a cult of the dead and how the dead were used to establish political and social power within pre-Christian Scandinavia. The third chapter will then examine how Odin is shown overpowering the cultic symbols and institutions associated with the cult of the dead.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE DEAD IN PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS OF THE NORTH

Introduction

As has been established previously, the cult of Odin attracted kings and a specific warrior aristocracy likely because the Odin figure found in our textual sources is consistently seen granting special wisdom to his followers, especially kings. The religious beliefs around Odin were also particularly martial and the belief in Valhalla, an idealized afterlife granted to warriors who died with honor, were powerful ideas which helped warlords establish legitimacy and authority within the unstable political context of Scandinavia between the sixth and tenth centuries. Of course the cult of Odin did not exist within a vacuum, but within the broader context of pre-Christian religions of the north (PCRN). Earlier scholars have noted that the cult of Odin appears to have gained prominence over time. This is likely because the rulers who embraced the cult of Odin, most famously the Finehair dynasty and the jarls of Lade, found their religious ruler ideology beneficial within the broader political context but also the broader religious context of PCRN; and as current scholarship continues to stress the multiplicity of religious beliefs and practices within pre-Christian Scandinavia, it is important to reevaluate the dynamic between these cults. This thesis addresses this by focusing on the dynamics between a cult of Odin and a cult of the dead.

Across pre-Christian Scandinavia, there were widespread cultic activities around the dead. While there is debate on how to classify this activity related to the dead, whether it was a

cult of the dead,⁹⁷ ancestor worship,⁹⁸ or a form of sacral kingship,⁹⁹ there is significant evidence that pre-Christian Scandinavians performed offerings and apotropaic actions to the dead in the belief that this could influence the world of the living both positively and negatively.

Additionally, many pre-Christian Scandinavians used the dead and their relationship to the dead to establish political and social power. This was done through the creation of burial mounds which helped establish a person's óðal rights, that is the rights to land and their ability to participate as a freeman in the thing assemblies. This establishment of óðal rights was critical for men who aspired to be leading men in their districts.

Rulers who embraced the cult of Odin and the religious ruler ideology associated with it did so within this broader set of beliefs. Our surviving textual sources suggest that many of the major deities were associated with the dead, including Odin, Thor, and Freyr. This suggests that the dead were important across many cults and that many cults believed the dead held power. Indeed, in the myths, Odin clearly received power from the dead in the form of special wisdom, which he then granted to his followers. However, Odin was also presented with power over the dead as he had magic spells to bind them to his will. Odin is often presented as overpowering the dead. This is very different from how Thor and Freyr are presented, which may better be understood as a protector and an ancestor figure respectively. This thesis argues that the dynamic between Odin and the dead, as presented in the myths, suggests that the people who believed in a cult of the dead would have come to recognize the rulers who embraced the cult of Odin as holding authority and power because Odin held power over the dead. Followers of an Odinic cult

⁹⁷ Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson, *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (Greenwood Press, 1968), 99–120.

⁹⁸ Laidoner, *Ancestor Worship and the Elite in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, 170–73.

⁹⁹ See the section Religious Ruler Ideology above

would have benefited from this religious legitimization in the eyes of people who did not partake in a cult of Odin.

To explain why the cult of Odin was successful at legitimizing Odinic rulers, it is important to understand the beliefs and practices associated with a cult of the dead. This chapter examines the textual and archaeological evidence to show that across Scandinavia, from Gotland, mainland Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and to Iceland, there was evidence of cultic activities around gravemounds and a belief that the dead could continue to influence the lives of the living. Then it examines how the dead were used to establish social and political power through Sundqvist's religious ruler ideology framework. Finally, it examines how the dead, as symbols of legitimacy, could be defaced by rival groups in an effort to delegitimize previous political powers.

Cultic Activity Around the Dead and Gravemounds

Textual Evidence

Evidence for cultic activity around burial mounds is found in contemporary historical sources, in the medieval historical record, in medieval legal codes, and in the literary tradition. This activity, though not depicted in an identical fashion, is found in a wide variety of sources which indicates the importance and widespread nature of this activity. This section will provide an overview of the textual materials before analyzing the significance of these activities for pre-Christian Scandinavians.

An early account of cultic activity at a gravemound among the Scandinavians comes from the *Vita Anskarii*, written c. 875. The *Vita Anskarri* is a hagiography about the life of

Anskar, the Apostle of the North, who would later become the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, and his attempts to Christianize Scandinavia. Anskar did most of his missionary work in Sweden in 829 and again in 852. The work was written by Anskar's successor and associate, Rimbert. While the work is clearly a hagiography, and is likely Rimbert's attempt to show how much the pagans in Sweden needed to be converted and how successful and blessed by God Anskar was, it is still considered a valuable source about the daily life in Birka, Sweden during the Viking Age.¹⁰⁰ Chapter 26 of the *Vita Anskarri* relates how when Anskar arrives in Sweden around 852, he encounters a man actively working against his missionary attempts. This unnamed man claimed to have attended a meeting of the gods, who are the owners of the land, and had been sent to make an announcement to the king and the people. As part of the announcement, the unnamed man tells how the gods offered to "summon your former King Eric to join the gods." The residents of Birka planned on building a temple in honor of the late king and had already started making votive sacrifices to him as a god.¹⁰¹ The account suggests these sacrifices are performed to bring continued peace and prosperity.

When analyzing this account, it must first be mentioned that the temple alluded to should not be understood as a temple in the vein of a Roman religious structure. However, a mound where offerings were made, even a mound with specific architectural features for votive offerings, is supported in other sources, both textual and archaeological. Second, the gods are not named. These gods could be the traditionally understood major deities, but they are said to be owners of the land. Considering the evidence of a cult of the dead and ancestor worship, these gods might better be understood to be the dead or the *álfar*, both of which are also associated

¹⁰⁰ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 89.

¹⁰¹ Rimbert, *Life of Anskar, Apostle of the North, 801-865*, chap. 26, accessed April 24, 2022, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/anskar.asp#lifeans>.

with óðal rights (this connection will be considered more below). The former King Eric joining this group of ancestor-based deities is perhaps a more natural transition than a human joining the traditional pantheon of major deities. In summary, the *Vita Anskarri* provides an example of a dead king being given the opportunity to join the gods and receiving sacrifices at his “temple” suggesting the dead are believed to hold power and can affect the living world.

Further examples of cultic activity around the dead can be found in Snorri’s *Heimskringla* and his *Prose Edda*. *Heimskringla* is one the king’s sagas composed c. 1230. It tells the history of Swedish and Norwegian kings from a legendary time up through the 12th century. The first section, *Ynglinga saga*, covers a period of euhemerized gods and legendary Swedish kings and is based on an older skaldic poem called *Ynglingatal*, which is thought to be the work of Thjodolfr of Hvinir, a court poet for Harald Finehair in the ninth century. In *Ynglinga saga* chapter 10, the euhemerized god Freyr took over the Svíar after Odin’s death. During his reign, Freyr built a great temple at Uppsala and ruled through a time known as the Peace of Froði. Believed to be the reason for this prosperity, Freyr was given more honor than the other gods. Freyr then fell ill and died. After his death, his body was put into a great tomb with a doorway and three windows. However, Freyr’s death was kept secret because the survivors were afraid that if Freyr was dead the Peace of Froði would end. So, for three years gold, silver, and copper coins were put into Freyr’s mound as tribute. Once the general population learned of Freyr’s death, because they wanted the prosperity to continue, the Svíar decided they could not burn Freyr’s body. The people continued to sacrifice to Freyr for prosperity and peace.¹⁰² Snorri claimed that this moment changed burial practices. Before Freyr’s

¹⁰² Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: Volume I The Beginnings to Olaf Tryggvason*, 13–14.

mound he called the first age, the Age of Burning, when all the dead were burned, as ordered by Odin, and memorial stones were raised for them. After Freyr's mound, the Age of Mounds began, and rulers built mounds and memorial stones in memory of their kinsmen.¹⁰³ Snorri's account matches with Rimbart's account in two ways: the dead received offerings and the sacrifices were for continued peace and prosperity.

Also, in *Heimskringla*, in chapter 9 of *The Saga of Halfdan the Black* (*Halfdanar saga svarta*), King Halfdan is remembered as a king who brought prosperity to his realm so his reign was considered blessed. At his death, his subjects do not wish for that prosperity to end and so they wanted pieces of his body.

People thought so much of him [Halfdan the Black] that when it became known that he was dead and his body was taken to Hringaríki and was going to be buried there, then the rulers came from Raumaríki and from Vestfold and Heðmork and all asked to take the body with them and bury it in a mound in their own district, and it was considered a promise of prosperity for whoever got it. And they came to this agreement that the body was divided into four parts, and the head was laid in a mound at Steinn in Hringaríki, and they each took back with them their own share and buried it, and these were all known as Halfdan's mounds.¹⁰⁴

In this instance, the physical remains of King Halfdan the Black and their location were important for continued prosperity. This is significant because it suggests that the dead king's

¹⁰³ Snorri Sturluson, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Snorri Sturluson, 53.

perceived power was limited to a specific space. The dead did not have power everywhere but only locally.

Snorri additionally suggested cultic activity related to gravemounds in *Skaldskaparmal*, a part of his *Prose Edda*, when he wrote, “A king known as Holgi, after whom Halogaland is named, was Thorgerd Holgabrud’s father. Sacrifices were offered to them both, and Holgi’s mound was raised with alternately a layer of gold or silver—this was the money offered in sacrifice – and a layer of earth and stone.” After mentioning this, Snorri stated that the skald Skuli Thorsteinsson used the phrase Holgi’s mound-roof as a kenning for gold.¹⁰⁵ In this instance, we are not told why the sacrifices were performed only that sacrifices were made.

With Snorri and Rimbert, Saxo Grammaticus also provides evidence for a cult of the dead. Saxo was a Danish historian who wrote in Latin and authored the *Gesta Danorum* sometime in the late 12th or early 13th century, almost contemporary but just before Snorri’s work. Like Snorri, Saxo’s writing should not be taken at face value as he mixes mythical narratives with Danish history. Still, these writings likely preserve memories passed down in oral tradition that provide us glimpses of beliefs, even if poorly understood and not always with context.

Saxo writes of King Frothi III, a legendary king who is often considered equivalent to Freyr.¹⁰⁶ Like Snorri’s version of Freyr’s death, when Frothi died, his followers pretended he was still alive for three years to continue the Peace of Frothi. Frothi’s body was carried around in a royal carriage until the body was too decomposed to continue and then buried beside a bridge

¹⁰⁵ Sturluson, *Edda*, 112.

¹⁰⁶ Saxo, *The History of the Danes, Books I-IX*, ed. Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson, trans. Peter Fisher (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1998), 116.

in Sjaelland because it was pre-eminent among his realms.¹⁰⁷ This example does not provide evidence that the average person engaged in cultic activity with the dead but still indicates that Frothi's followers believed Frothi had the power to create peace after death and the movement of the corpse for three years before final burial suggest that Frothi's power was limited spatially. Both the account of Halfdan the Black by Snorri and King Frothi III by Saxo indicate that the dead had power but that this power was limited geographically. This would be in stark contrast to the wandering Odin cults Gunnell suggests.¹⁰⁸ One final example from Saxo which suggests that the dead were believed powerful and could influence the living is found in Book VII when Haldan had to pray to his brother's ghost for his wife to become fertile.¹⁰⁹

Additional saga material which supports a cult of the dead includes the version of The Saga of Saint Olaf (*Ólaf's saga Helga*) found in *Flateyjarbók*,¹¹⁰ in which Olaf Geirstaðaálfr, the brother of King Halfdan the Black, dreamed that after his death, his people placed him into a burial mound and sacrificed to him. When he woke, he condemned these actions and asked his people to not do it. Still, after Olaf Geirstaðaálfr's death, his people experienced a famine and sacrificed to him.¹¹¹ Found within the U-manuscript of *The Saga of Hervor and Heidrek* (*Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*), is the story of a King Gudmund whose men sacrificed to him and called him their god after his death.¹¹² In *The Saga of Ketil Trout* (*Ketils saga hængs*), Framar, described as king of the Vikings and a devout pagan, sacrificed at Arhaug (haugr means burial

¹⁰⁷ Saxo, 157–58.

¹⁰⁸ See Chapter 1 Cult of Odin above

¹⁰⁹ Saxo, *History of Danes*, 225.

¹¹⁰ The Saga of St. Olaf is a king's saga about Olaf Haraldsson, king of Norway from 1015-1028. *Flateyjarbók* is the largest medieval Icelandic manuscript and contains several sagas. It was commissioned in the late fourteenth century.

¹¹¹ *Flateyjarbok: Olaf's Saga Helga, II, 5, p. 6f* through Ellis *The Road to Hel*, 101.

¹¹² Gabriel Turville-Petre and Christopher Tolkien, trans., *Hervarar Saga Ok Heiðreks* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research University College London, 1997), 66.

mound in Old Norse).¹¹³ In chapter 6 of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, Bárðr disappears and men thought he went into the glaciers and lived in a cave. He became a “vow-god,” a helping spirit that could be prayed to.¹¹⁴ In *The Saga of the Gotlanders*, (*Guta saga*), it is mentioned that “prior to that time, and for a long time afterwards, people believed in groves and grave howes, holy places, and ancient sites, and in heathen idols. They sacrificed their sons and daughters, and cattle, together with food and ale. They did that in accordance with their ignorance of the true faith.”¹¹⁵

While all these sources are understood as having limitations for reconstructing religious practice, they are still writings composed mostly by Scandinavians¹¹⁶ who would have been aware of oral traditions now lost to us. They all suggest that there were widespread cultic activities around the dead, as we have examples from the island of Gotland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. Additionally, the dead were believed to have the power to influence the world of the living which is why they were the recipients of sacrifices. The dead were appealed to for peace, prosperity, fertility, and general aid.

Support that these cultic activities found in the later literary sources were not just literary tropes and that these accounts depicted actual practices comes from Scandinavian medieval law codes. Chapter four of *The Law of the Gotlanders*, which dates from c. 1220, states that “no one

¹¹³ *The Saga of Ketil Trout*, trans. Gavin Chappell, 2011, chap. 5, <http://www.germanicmythology.com/FORNALDARSAGAS/KetilsSagaChappell.html>.

¹¹⁴ *Bardar Saga Snæfellsáss: A Translation*, trans. L.O. Ewing, (Saskatchewan, 1987), 55, https://harvest.usask.ca/bitstream/handle/10388/11840/Ewing_Lynn_Olive_1987_sec.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

¹¹⁵ Christine Peel, ed., *Guta Saga: The History of the Gotlanders*, Repr. with minor corr, Text Series / Viking Society for Northern Research 12 (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 2010), 4.

¹¹⁶ Most of the authors would be Icelanders, which may create a biased understanding toward a regional understanding of this mentality that was not shared by Scandinavians in Norway, Sweden, or Denmark.

may pray to either groves or howes or heathen gods, nor to holy places or ancient sites.”¹¹⁷ This law code supports the reference in *The Saga of the Gotlanders* of the worship of gravemounds. The *Older Gulathing Law*, one of the oldest Norwegian law codes, in chapter 29 also prohibited sacrifice to heathen gods, mounds, or temples.¹¹⁸ These prohibitions are also found in the law codes of the 12th and 13th century Norwegian kings Sverrir and Magnus IV in *King Sverrers Christenret* and *Kong Magnus Haakonsöns Nyere Christenret* both of which banned worship at gravemounds or to beings who dwell in gravemounds.¹¹⁹ These law codes, which outlawed the worship of or at gravesites, supports that notion that the literary accounts are broadly accurate and that the dead and the mounds they were buried in, were significant within PCRN practices.

Also within the sagas, and in the account of the famous ship burning on the Volga river by Ibn Fadlan, we find that people were afraid of the recently deceased and performed actions to keep the dead from harming them.¹²⁰ In chapter 59 of *Egil’s Saga (Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar)*, Egil’s father died while sitting up. Egil approached his father from behind, laid him down and covered his eyes, mouth, and nostrils, before taking him out of the house through the wall.¹²¹ Similarly, in chapter 33 of *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, Arknel’s father, Thorólf, died sitting up. Arknel also approached his father from behind and wrapped clothes around his

¹¹⁷ Christine Peel, ed., *Guta Lag: The Law of the Gotlanders*, Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series, 18 [i.e.19] (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, Univ. College London, 2009), 9.

¹¹⁸ *The Earliest Norwegian Laws: Being the Gulathing Law and the Frostathing Law*, Laurence Marcellus Larson, trans., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 57, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.06010>.

¹¹⁹ Cited through Sundqvist, *Arena for Higher Powers*, 442; Laidoner, *Ancestor Worship and the Elite in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, 13.

¹²⁰ Leszek Gardela, “The Dangerous Dead? Rethinking Viking-Age Deviant Burials,” in *Conversions: Looking for Ideological Change in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Rudolf Simek and Leszek Slupecki, *Studia Medievalia Septentrionalia* 23 (Vienna: Fassbaender), 100–105, accessed June 11, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/779541/Garde%C5%82a_L_2013_The_Dangerous_Dead_Rethinking_Viking_Age_Deviant_Burials_In_L_S%C5%82upezki_and_R_Simek_eds_Conversions_Looking_for_Ideological_Change_in_the_Early_Middle_Ages_Studia_Medievalia_Septentrionalia_23_Vienna_Fassbaender_99_136.

¹²¹ *Egil’s Saga*, in *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, Jane Smiley and Robert L. Kellogg, eds., Deluxe ed., *World of the Sagas* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001), 108.

head to cover his mouth, eyes, and nose. He then broke a hole through the wall and carried Thorólfr through the wall.¹²² Finally, in the account of the ship burning on the Volga, Ibn Fadlan related how the closest male relative to the dead man was the one responsible for setting the ship afire. He walked toward the ship backward, naked, and covering his anus.¹²³ While two of these accounts are Icelandic, the account on the Volga River shows that this fear of the dead's power is widespread with PCRN. In addition, it is interesting to note that in the case of Thorólfr, he haunted the region after death and so he was disinterred and reburied, which still did not help, until he was finally cremated and scattered. The removal and reburial suggest that the dead's power to haunt was considered limited to a certain geographic region.

To summarize, the wide variety of textual sources allows the reasonable conclusion that cultic activity took place around the dead. Pre-Christian Scandinavians believed the dead could influence the world of the living beneficially as seen in the accounts of Freyr, King Halfdan the Black, Frothi III, Olaf Geirstaðaálfr, and Bárðr. The dead also could impact the world negatively, as seen in the accounts from *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, *Egil's Saga*, and Ibn Fadlan's account of the Volga River ship funeral. However, that power was geographically limited as suggested by Halfdan the Black's body needing to be divided and Frothi III's body being moved in a carriage for three years before burial, and the moving and reburial of Thorólfr in *The Saga of the People of Eyri*. Next, we consider the archaeological evidence for cultic activity related to the dead before examining how these cultic activities created social and political power within the PCRN context.

¹²² *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, 133.

¹²³ Aḥmad Ibn-al-ʿAbbās Ibn-Faḍlān, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North*, trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, 1. publ, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 53.

Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological studies provide evidence support the later literary sources which show that the dead were important actors within PCRN and that pre-Christian Scandinavians attempted to interact with the dead. Significantly, the archaeological evidence suggests that the living interacted with the dead long after the burial, indicating the dead's continued importance to the larger community. For example, at least eighty Viking Age (c. 750-1050) graves from Uppland and Södermanland in Sweden contain south-west facing portals, opened or closed stone structures that Eriksen has interpreted as "threshold spaces."¹²⁴ Eriksen argues that these spaces "made the dead approachable and created a between-place where the dead and living could communicate."¹²⁵ These same structures have also been interpreted as a place to leave food offerings for the dead.¹²⁶ These south-west facing portals may also be important in that their direction may replicate the Old Norse texts which suggest that the land of the dead is located in the North, as one would have to walk toward the north to interact with the dead.¹²⁷ Eriksen also argues that the portals may have been significant because they gave the living the ability to control the threshold spaces. The living could ensure that the dead stayed where they were supposed to.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Marianne Hem Eriksen, "Doors to the Dead. The Power of Doorways and Thresholds in Viking Age Scandinavia," *Archaeological Dialogues* 20, no. 2 (December 2013): 201, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203813000238>.

¹²⁵ Eriksen, 201.

¹²⁶ Anne-Sofee Gräslund, "Living with the Dead. Reflections on Food Offerings on Graves," in *Kontinuitäten Und Brüche in Der Religionsgeschichte*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110875973.222>.

¹²⁷ Leszek Gardela, "Worshipping the Dead. Viking Age Cemeteries as Cult Sites?" in *Germanische Kultorte: Vergleichende, Historische Und Rezeptionsgeschichtliche Zugänge*, ed. Matthias Egeler (München: Herbert Utz Verlag), 187, accessed March 5, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/17342939/Garde%C5%82a_L_2016_Worshipping_the_Dead_Viking_Age_Cemeteries_as_Cult_Sites_In_M_Egeler_ed_Germanische_Kultorte_Vergleichende_historische_und_rezeptionsgeschichtliche_Zugänge_München_169_205.

¹²⁸ Eriksen, "Doors to the Dead," 193–94.

The famous Oseberg ship burial also shows evidence that the living continued to interact with the dead. A tent-like wooden structure was originally built on top of the ship's deck with an open gable where the bodies of the two women were placed. For an extended period of time during the funerary activities, the ship was only partially covered with a burial mound and the front of the ship and the entrance to the burial chamber remained exposed. It appears the Oseberg ship was buried under the mound in stages throughout a season. The Valsgärde ship burials also may have had similar tent-like structures that allowed the dead to be accessible.¹²⁹

Another structure identified by archaeologists as allowing continued contact with the dead are the mortuary houses, which are buildings “designed for handling, displaying, or in other ways interacting with dead bodies.”¹³⁰ The mortuary houses were often simple four post constructions but are not interpreted as a temporary place to hold the dead. One mortuary house in Gulli, Vestfold, Norway from the eighth century appears to have had wooden posts constructed inside its doorways, closing the entrances, controlling who or what could come in and out, perhaps reflecting a similar belief and practice argued by Eriksen about controlling the portals in Sweden. Other Viking Age mortuary houses show additional cultic activities such as one found in Sannargård, Halland, Sweden that contained mortared human bones in the postholes so “the entire structure, including its door, was anchored in the remains of the dead.”¹³¹

¹²⁹ Neil Price, “Death Ritual and Mortuary Behaviour,” in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders André (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 885, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116960>. Price is referencing scholarship completed by Gansum, 2004, and Herschend, 1997.

¹³⁰ Marianne Hem Eriksen, *Architecture, Society, and Ritual in Viking Age Scandinavia: Doors, Dwellings, and Domestic Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 191, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108667043>.

¹³¹ Eriksen, 192–93.

Another mortuary house found in Trøndelag, Norway was found inside of a burial mound, which has led to it being interpreted as a grave itself.¹³²

The archaeological evidence so far supports the later literary material as we find Viking Age graves were constructed in such a way as to grant the living access to the dead, provide places for sacrifice, display the dead, and control the dead. Considering the literary accounts of restless dead, it is perhaps not surprising that Viking Age peoples spent considerable effort to prevent the restless dead from returning.

Some apotropaic actions against the return of the restless dead are the found in what are called deviant burials, though Gardela has called for the term to be reconsidered, especially in light of Thäte's conclusions about deviant burials.¹³³ Thäte argued "it cannot be ruled out that what has been identified as 'deviant' was a common custom for a particular society in a particular area," and that those found within deviant burials were still "perceived as part of society and not regarded as 'outcasts; who had to be buried in separate cemeteries.'"¹³⁴ Still, these burials, deviant or not, show violence toward the body which has most frequently been interpreted as apotropaic. One example is the tenth-century grave Bj. 959 from Birka, Sweden, where a well-dressed woman was found with her head decapitated and placed near her right forearm and with a pig jawbone placed across her neck.¹³⁵ Another grave which shows violence is the ninth-century grave A505 from Trekroner-Grydehøj in Denmark. In grave A505, an adult woman was placed with her body partly covered by a horse, which was faced toward the woman's feet. At

¹³² Frid Kvalpskarmo Hansen, Norwegian University of Science, and Technology, "Viking Age Mortuary House Found in Central Norway," accessed May 14, 2022, <https://phys.org/news/2019-09-viking-age-mortuary-house-central.html>.

¹³³ Gardela, "The Dangerous Dead?" 110.

¹³⁴ Eva S. Thäte, *Monuments and Minds: Monument Re-Use in Scandinavia in the Second Half of the First Millennium AD*, Acta Archaeologica Lundensia Series in 4^o 27 (Lund: Wallin & Dahlholm, 2007), 272.

¹³⁵ See for further discussion and interpretations Gardela, "The Dangerous Dead?," 112–13.

the woman's feet and beside the horse's head was a dog which had been cut in half. She was buried with a wide range of objects including a bronze and iron object which has been interpreted as a magic staff. After the woman, horse, dog, and objects had been placed in the grave, large stones were used to crush the woman, grave goods, and animals with the largest rock thrown over the woman's head.¹³⁶ When considered alongside the evidence that the living attempted to control the spaces between the land of the living and the land of the dead, these actions further support that there was a widespread belief among pre-Christian Scandinavian people that the dead were powerful.

However, not all apotropaic actions with the dead were designed to prevent the restless dead from negatively impacting the living. Robbins noted that a series of chamber graves found at Birka include seated women. These seated women were all placed so that they looked out over the town, perhaps watching over it like guardian figures.¹³⁷ This would suggest that the Viking Age people around Birka buried these women with a very specific purpose in mind and buried them in a specific way to fulfil that purpose.

In summary, there is significant evidence within the archaeological record and textual sources that the dead were important within PCRN. The living offered sacrifices to the dead and interacted with the dead throughout the process of burial and after burial. Additionally, the evidence suggests that the living believed the dead could affect the world both beneficially and negatively and the living took precautions against these negative effects and buried the dead with the express purpose of having the dead provide protection to the land of the living. Finally, the

¹³⁶ Gardela, 118.

¹³⁷ Heather Robbins, *Seated Burials at Birka: A Selected Study*, Dissertation, 2004 through Price, "Death Ritual," 882.

importance of the dead within PCRN is long lasting and deep rooted as medieval law codes throughout the thirteenth century attempted to prevent religious activities around burial sites.

Now that the textual and archaeological evidence have shown that a cult of the dead was pan-Scandinavian, though with regional variations, we can now turn to how the dead were used within pre-Christian Scandinavia to create social and political influence within the wider community. Those who did use the dead to create social and political influence followed strategies for religious legitimization as outlined by Sundqvist's religious ruler ideology. Significantly, these included connection to the mythic world (the dead), central roles in rituals (offerings at gravemounds), and control of cultic symbols (the dead and their gravemounds). Central to this religious ruler ideology is the concept of óðal rights, which is the focus of the next section.

Using the Dead: Óðal Rights

This section explores the concept of óðal rights, its relationship to social and political standing, and how the dead were used to establish óðal rights. The word óðal is widespread among Germanic languages and is linguistically related to words like like ädel and adel, noble and nobility, respectively, and allodial. The origin of the word is unclear but seems to indicate some sort of relationship between inherited land and the deceased relatives from which it derived. Its widespread nature suggests this is an old idea.¹³⁸ The concept of óðal is that the land was freely owned and not held in tenure from someone else in contrast to property held as a fief.

¹³⁸ Torun Zachrisson, "The Background of the Odal Rights: An Archaeological Discussion," *Danish Journal of Archaeology* 6, no. 2 (July 3, 2017): 119, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21662282.2017.1371440>. The idea of the relationship between inherited land and deceased relatives comes from Foote and Wilson 1970, p. 81, cited through Zachrisson.

Land became óðal during the sixth generation of ownership by a family according to the early-twelfth century *Older Gulathing Law* but during the fourth generation by the *Frostathing Law*, a late twelfth-century law. Provincial laws in Sweden and Denmark called *bördsrätt* and *lovbydelse* also attest to this concept of the óðal.¹³⁹

Crucially, owning land gave someone the status of freeman and allowed them to participate in the thing assemblies. The status of freeman was highly valued and family members had many opportunities to maintain that status of an óðal man if the current óðal man wanted to sell the property. For example, the óðal right required one to gain the consent of relatives before land could be sold. It also allowed relatives to reclaim land that had been sold without their permission within a certain time frame.

Considering that óðal rights are established through ancestry it is important to examine this concept in relationship to how the dead are used to create the right and the social and political power granted by landownership. Archaeologist Torun Zachrisson has researched óðal rights as a mentality of pre-Christian Scandinavians and argued that gravemounds were used to manifest the óðal right within the landscape. Her research and interpretations are the basis for this section.

When óðal rights were established is debated among scholars. Zachrisson provided an overview of the current scholarship in her 2017 article. In it, she argued that historians like Helle Vogt and Knut Helle tend to argue that the óðal right developed with the introduction and spread of Christianity in Scandinavia. Archaeologists, like Zachrisson herself, however, tend to argue that the concept of óðal rights, even if not fully developed, can be traced to at least the Viking

¹³⁹ Zachrisson, 118.

Age, if not older.¹⁴⁰ To support an early date for the concept of óðal rights, Zachrisson referenced two runestones. The first is from Sweden and was carved in the eleventh century, in a time when Christianity and paganism coexisted. The runestone referenced is U130 from Uppland which states “Biorn, Finnvið’s son, had this rock-slab cut in memory of Olæif, his brother. He was betrayed at Finnheiðr. May God help his spirit. This estate is the allodial land and family inheritance of Finnviðr’s sons at Ægiastaðir.” The second runestone, from Södermanland, Sweden and believed to be carved earlier, is now lost but the runic inscription is known from seventeenth century woodcuts. It stated: “Tosti and Øystæinn, they raised the stone in memory of Toki. The sons made in memory of their able father. Tóki owned half of the estate, Grímulfr owned the other half of the estate as ancestral allodial land.”¹⁴¹ These two runic inscriptions support the idea that the óðal right did exist in a pre-Christian setting, even if the pre-Christian Scandinavians understood it differently than the medieval, Christian Scandinavians.

Zachrisson also argued that in the literary sources, the concept of óðal rights were given an expanded meaning beyond the ownership of individual farms. She noted that in *Heimskringla*, Olav Tryggvason is called the óðal heir to the kingdom of Norway and that the god Heimdall¹⁴² is said to give óðal rights to jarls in the eddic poem *Rigsthula*. Perhaps most interestingly, Zachrisson proposes that Thor should be seen as the protector of the óðal. Her idea comes from the description of Thor’s death at Ragnarök. In the eddic poem *Voluspa*, Thor, the son of the earth, is killed by the Midgard serpent. His death ends man’s relationship with óðal. She translates stanza 56 from *Voluspa* as “Now every man must break up from his odal.” (Nu má alla

¹⁴⁰ Zachrisson, 119.

¹⁴¹ Zachrisson, 121–22.

¹⁴² There is much debate over whether this god is actually Heimdallr or if the god is Odin. The prose introduction to the poem says the figure is Heimdallr but the actions and behaviors of the god fit more closely with characteristics associated with Odin.

män bryta upp från sin odal)¹⁴³ This line has been translated as “all men must abandon their homesteads,” by Larrington¹⁴⁴ and as “shall all wights wander from home,” by Hollander.¹⁴⁵ These literary sources, combined with the archaeological evidence, supports the conclusion that a concept of óðal existed in the Viking Age. Though the exact nature of óðal is unclear, there are some theories concerning the óðal in the Viking Age.

Aron J. Gurevich argued that the óðal was a mentality and that both people and the Norse gods were expected to own a farm and that the farmstead was the central structure in Nordic society. Gurevich argued that the concept of óðal did not just mean inherited land but also gave the free man rights in society. The property was not free to be disposed of however as the owner could only sell the land when necessity required and only after offering the land to relatives. Because of this, the farm owned the man as much as the man owned the farm.¹⁴⁶

Building off Gurevich’s ideas, Zachrisson argued that the óðal right, and therefore the right to participate in thing assemblies, was manifested in the landscape through burial mounds and runestones. Because the óðal right required a person to belong to the dead within the burial mounds, the óðal right would manifest cultic activities around graves. “These activities probably were for the purpose of confirming and strengthening the possession of the óðal and thereby the position of the odal man in his own eyes as well as those of his neighbors.”¹⁴⁷ Zachrisson supports her argument by citing provincial laws about disputes over landownership rights such as the Östgöta Law and the Västgöta Law which use the phrases barrow-village and heathen village

¹⁴³ Torun Zachrisson, “The Odal and Its Manifestation in the Landscape,” *Current Swedish Archaeology* 2, no. 1 (December 28, 1994): 221, <https://doi.org/10.37718/CSA.1994.14>.

¹⁴⁴ *Voluspa* in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington, Revised edition, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), st 53.

¹⁴⁵ *Voluspa* in *The Poetic Edda*, trans Lee M Hollander (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2011), st 55.

¹⁴⁶ Gurevich 1985, cited through Zachrisson, “Odal and Manifestation,” 220.

¹⁴⁷ Zachrisson, 222.

to indicate that some villages have an older claim than others. Zachrisson argues that “a burial mound can represent both a deceased person and his/her and the family’s social position, and, on the other hand, that same burial mound can be the focus of an ancestral cult.”¹⁴⁸

Positioning Zachrisson’s argument that some rulers within pre-Christian Scandinavia held a religious ruler ideology that established their connection to the mythic through their dead ancestors, demonstrated this connection through the construction of large burial mounds, which then became the cultic symbol. Those burial mounds and the land and activities around them, are the cultic institutions which were necessary to control. This ideology was so important that archaeological records indicate that pre-Christian Scandinavians manipulated the landscape around them to create óðal rights more quickly than the laws would allow, likely to increase their social standing.

In several areas, Viking Age Scandinavians begin to very specifically bury their dead closer to their farms and close to, or even on top of, burials from the past, these are called re-use burials. Eva S. Thäte analyzed 162 re-use sites in Denmark, southern Sweden, and southwestern Norway where Scandinavian people in the Viking Age (750-1050) buried their dead in burial mounds from the distant past, most commonly the Roman Iron Age (0-400) and the Migration Period (400-550). This re-use showed regional variation but also some significant patterns. First, is that single graves were chosen for re-use; second, not all sites were re-used; third, the act of re-use was socially restricted to the upper class; finally, the re-use burials in old monuments did not include children or deviant burials. These patterns indicate that re-use was done by the upper class to establish their legitimacy and that specific older burial sites were more important than

¹⁴⁸ Zachrisson, 228.

others, perhaps because an idea of genealogy existed. This particular ideology was not just for men or chieftains, as Thäte found that, in Sweden especially, there were more high-status female re-use burials than high status male re-use burials; perhaps this was because in a male dominated society the women needed to demonstrate their affiliation with these monuments more.¹⁴⁹

Thäte theorized that the reason for this increase in re-use burials was that a sort of internal colonization occurred after the dramatic population loss witnessed in the sixth century and people returning to older settlement sites had to reestablish themselves by associating with the dead. This period of internal colonization was then followed by a rise of royal power and the threat of social change through the introduction of kings (and later Christianity) when óðal farmers were losing power to kings, a process most famously seen in the stories around Harald Finehair (c. 972-930) in Norway and the settlers of Iceland. Regions of political significance showed more re-use than rural areas probably because the royal power and consolidation of kingdoms threatened the land-owning class.¹⁵⁰

Her conclusions about Viking Age re-use burials are relevant for this thesis because they suggest that connections to the dead granted social and political power through óðal rights and that óðal rights were justified through the dead. It also suggests that the burial mounds, and therefore the dead associated with them, could be put under religious and political pressure and that one response was re-use burials, which indicates that it is possible for a new religious cult to have been perceived as threatening to the dead. In my argument, this would be the cult of Odin.

Perhaps related to the re-use burial phenomenon is how Scandinavians leaving Scandinavia during the Viking Age renamed the landscape of their new homes. Sveinnbjörn

¹⁴⁹ Thäte, *Monuments and Minds*, 272–80.

¹⁵⁰ Thäte, 272–80.

Rafnsson argues that younger versions of *Landnámabók* refer more often to burial mounds because as more settlers came to Iceland it became more important for these families to have burial mounds to claim óðal rights.¹⁵¹ Meanwhile some mounds in England were given Scandinavian names, declaring them *haugr*, but those mounds were either pre-Viking Age mounds or even natural mounds.¹⁵² This would indicate that the burial mounds and the ancestor inside them were so central to the right to own land, and claim the social and political power associated with it, that Scandinavians were willing to manipulate the landscape to suit their needs. We may see an example of this in *The Saga of the People of Eyri* when Thorolf Mosterbeard, a Norwegian fleeing King Harald Finehair's rule in Norway, declared a large mountain on his newly acquired land, which looks much like a burial mound, Helgafell (Holy Mountain). He declared Helgafell would be the place he and his family would go to when they died and after that declaration, he became an important chieftain of the region.¹⁵³

To summarize, owning land was the basic economic structure of Viking Age Scandinavians and it was also an important marker of social standing. Viking Age Scandinavians established their ownership to the land and their social standing through óðal rights. Óðal rights were manifested through gravemounds and the ancestors within them. These gravemounds were the markers of social standing and objects of cultic activity and were such an important part of pre-Christian Scandinavian mentality that diasporic Scandinavian communities manipulated new landscapes to represent these burial mounds.

This ideology, that burial mounds were both the focus of cultic activity and an outward display of social standing, created a need to protect these symbols of legitimacy and authority,

¹⁵¹ Rafnsson 1974 through Zachrisson, "Odal and Manifestation," 226.

¹⁵² Zachrisson, 227.

¹⁵³ *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, ch 4.

that is the burial mounds and then dead within them. Therefore, the care and preservation of these gravemounds and cultic activity around them were likely important acts of defending the social and political standing of the individual. Possible evidence of the importance of this activity is perhaps found in the mythical beings known as the *álfar*.

The Álfar and Óðal

The *álfar* are a difficult group of beings within PCRN but they do perhaps represent a combination of óðal rights and the cultic activity seen at gravemounds. The Scandinavian understanding of álfar likely changed over time but the belief in them continues past the conversion to Christianity, existing even to this day in Iceland. Though not well understood, the álfar are associated with the land spirits known as *landvættir*, though this association probably developed after the Viking Age.

Jan de Vries connected the álfar to a grave cult in 1956-7.¹⁵⁴ Terry Gunnell has also taken this position, though emphasizing that what they were changed over time. One reason for this connection to the dead is the story of King Ólafr Guðrøson from *Flateyjarbók* who, after his death and receiving devotion, gained the name Geirstaðaálfr, or ‘Álfr of Geirstaðir.’¹⁵⁵ Gunnell has argued that especially in southern Sweden, álfar were related to forefather worship and that this concept became attached to local beliefs as the Scandinavians migrated out of Scandinavia.¹⁵⁶ Additionally, the álfar have been interpreted as fertility figures and mentioned in

¹⁵⁴ Terry Gunnell, “Álfar (Elves),” in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 1579, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116990>.

¹⁵⁵ Gunnell, 1576.

¹⁵⁶ Gunnell, 1580.

relationship to gods, and to Freyr specifically, with Freyr being given the land *Alfheimr* by the Æsir gods in stanza five of the poem *Grimnismál*.¹⁵⁷ In *Voluspa* stanza 49, the gods and the álfar are mentioned back to back as if they are seen as equals. A similar line is repeated in stanza 7 of *Thrymskvida*.¹⁵⁸

In Viking Age sources, the álfar appeared as objects of worship and received sacrifice, called an *álfablót*. The most famous instance of this sacrifice appears in a skaldic poem dated to the early 11th century titled *Austrfararvísur*, where the skald Sighvatr Þórðarson encounters a farm called *Hof*, and after knocking on the door he received the following response:

“Do not come any farther in, wretched fellow,” said the woman; “I fear the wrath of Odin, 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.”¹⁵⁹

The álfar then, related to gravemounds and the Vanir gods, were the objects of cultic activity and may be a reflection of a cult of the ancestors or a cult of the dead in general, who received offerings to protect the farm.¹⁶⁰ If these figures did inhabit gravemounds and protect the farm, it is likely they would have some relationship to óðal rights. This would mean that the hints of álfablót seen in the textual sources are individuals performing a central role in the cultic rituals that maintained the symbols of their authority.

¹⁵⁷ *Grimnismál* in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington, Revised edition, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), st 5.

¹⁵⁸ *Voluspa*, st 49; *Thrymskvida* in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington, Revised edition, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), st 7.

¹⁵⁹ Sighvatr Þórðarson, “Austrfararvísur,” trans. R. D. Fulk (Skaldic Project; Brepols, 2012), v. 5, <http://skaldic.org/m.php?p=text&i=1351>.

¹⁶⁰ Gunnell, “How Elvish.”

So far, this chapter has established that there was a widespread belief in a cult of the dead across Scandinavia and that pre-Christian Scandinavians participated in religious legitimization strategies broadly outlined in Sundqvist's religious ruler ideology framework. Pre-Christian Scandinavian political and economic structures were focused on landownership and participation in thing assemblies, and these structures were closely connected to óðal rights. Individuals and/or families would establish and perform their óðal rights through a connection to the mythic, their dead ancestors or a created ancestor; they would perform cultic rituals, like the álfablót; they would control cultic symbols, the gravemounds of the ancestors; and finally, they controlled cultic institutions likely by exerting influence at the thing assemblies.

Using the Dead: Symbols of Authority

The extreme variation found in Viking Age burials is further evidence that different communities had different ideas about what proper burials entailed. Archaeologists have long attempted to classify these different types of burials, but Neil Price has argued that classifying the burials based upon their material remains does not explain the meaning of the funeral and burial to the people of the Viking Age. Instead, Price has argued that the funerals should be seen as texts themselves, as stories, that can be reconstructed. He terms this idea, funerals and burials as texts, as mortuary theater. Mortuary theater includes all of the spectacle that took place at the funeral and burial from the transportation of the body, the graveside rituals, the animal (or human) sacrifices, to the collection and placement of grave goods. Price has asked how would

the Viking Age Scandinavians have understood these performances? Did communities simply repeat funerary formulas or did the community attempt to add to existing stories?¹⁶¹

Whether we will ever be able to reconstruct and read this mortuary theater, the scale of many burials suggests the funerals were special occasions and designed to leave a lasting impact and impression upon the audience. Large funerals created cultural memories that could last generations and, for elites especially, they were moments of transition and allowed the living to recreate and reestablish social relations and alliances. Funerals were occasions for the living to legitimize future hierarchies and to transfer the social status and power of the deceased to themselves.¹⁶² It was likely important for pre-Christian Scandinavian rulers to participate in the funerary rituals, as this would have been an opportunity for them to publicly show their ability to control ritual activities and their connection to the dead.

Perhaps the most spectacular of these funerals and burials are the ship burials. Literary accounts of these ship burials are found in the Old English poem *Beowulf* and in Norse myth. In *Beowulf* Scyld Scefing, the ancestor to the Danish royal line of the Scyldings,¹⁶³ was laid upon a ship by his soldiers, his boat was then filled with far-fetched treasures and precious gear before being pushed into the ocean to sail away under a golden sail.¹⁶⁴ In Norse myth, the god Baldr, Odin's son and the brother of Thor, was also given a ship funeral when he was killed. According to Snorri's account in *Gylfaginning*, Baldr's body was put upon Hringhorni, the greatest of ships, Thor consecrated the pyre, and then gifts were given to the dead, including Baldr's horse and

¹⁶¹ Neil Price, "Passing into Poetry: Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology," *Medieval Archaeology* 54, no. 1 (November 2010): 123–56, <https://doi.org/10.1179/174581710X12790370815779>.

¹⁶² Terje Oestigaard and Joakim Goldhahn, "From the Dead to the Living: Death as Transactions and Re-negotiations," *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 39, no. 1 (June 2006): 27–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00293650600703928>.

¹⁶³ This royal line is the same as the Skjoldungs from Norse sources

¹⁶⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: a verse translation* (New York: Norton, 2001), 5.

Odin's arm-ring Draupnir. Baldr's wife Nanna, who died of grief upon seeing Baldr's body, was also added to the ship. Baldr's ship was then burned.¹⁶⁵

The two literary accounts fit well with the historical account of a ship funeral performed by the Rus¹⁶⁶ on the Volga River. The Arab traveler Ahmad Ibn Fadlan encountered a group of Rus in 922 while on a diplomatic mission to the Bulgars and while there he witnessed not only some of the daily habits of the Rus but also a ship burial for one of their leaders. Ibn Fadlan recorded that if the dead man was poor, they would build him a small boat and put him in it and then set him on fire. However, a wealthy man would have a more elaborate funeral. Ibn Fadlan says that when a wealthy man died, the Rus buried him in a temporary grave for ten days while they prepared his funeral. The wealthy man's wealth was divided into thirds, one for his family, one for his clothes, and one for drinks at the funeral. While rich clothes were made for the dead man, the family asked which of the slaves would be willing to follow the dead man into the afterlife. A slave girl volunteered to go with the dead man. On the day of the funeral, the dead man's boat was drawn up out of the river and a pyre was built around it. Also, upon the boat was built a pavilion where the dead man was placed. Inside the pavilion, silk cushions and bed coverings were arranged by a woman Ibn Fadlan calls the Angel of Death, a witch, who seemed to direct the funeral. Then, the dead man was removed from his temporary grave and brought to the boat and placed inside the pavilion and surrounded by fruit and alcohol. A dog was brought and cut in two and thrown onto the boat. Then weapons were placed around the man. Next horses were sacrificed and hacked into pieces and thrown onto the boat, then cows, and then chickens. Finally, the slave girl herself was brought onto the boat, where she drank alcohol until

¹⁶⁵ Sturluson, *Edda*, 49.

¹⁶⁶ The Rus are Scandinavians from modern day Sweden who participated in the slave trade along the Volga River. Some of them will eventually become part of the Byzantine Emperor's Varangian guard.

she became disoriented and was led into the pavilion by the Angel of Death, where she was killed. To cover the sound of the slave girl's screams, men banged on their shields with staves. Once this was all done, the closest male relative then walked backward to the pyre, naked and covering his anus, and set it on fire. Ibn Fadlan is told the Rus burn their dead so the spirit can enter paradise immediately and does not have to wait to decompose in the ground. After the pyre burned out, the Rus erected a burial mound over the ashes and put a wooden post, inscribed with the name of the dead, into the center of it.¹⁶⁷ This dramatic and vivid account of the ship funeral on the Volga River displays many commonalities with the archaeological, making the account reasonably credible.

Monumental ship burials are found throughout Scandinavia. These large ships are often located inside a mound (though sometimes the mound has been severely eroded). In Denmark, the Ladby ship was discovered at the top of a mound and was 21.5 meters long, with eleven horses found inside the grave. The Gokstad ship, found inside the Gokstadhaugen (Gokstad Mound), measures 23.8 meters long. Horses, dogs, and a peacock were all found within the grave. The Oseberg ship was also discovered within a large burial mound, one that was 44 meters in diameter and likely 6 meters high when originally constructed.¹⁶⁸ The Oseberg ship was part of one of the richest Viking age burials ever excavated and measured 21.58 meters in length and housed two women, as well as many grave goods, including the remains of up to 20 horses.¹⁶⁹ It is unclear which of the two women the burial was for and if one was a servant who was sacrificed like the slave girl from Ibn Fadlan's account. A fourth and unique ship burial is

¹⁶⁷ Ibn-Faḍlān, *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, 49–55.

¹⁶⁸ “The Excavation of the Oseberg Ship - Museum of Cultural History,” accessed April 30, 2022, <https://www.khm.uio.no/english/visit-us/viking-ship-museum/gjellestad-ship/oseberg-ship/index.html>.

¹⁶⁹ Price, “Death Ritual,” 884.

the Salme ship burial, two ships found off the coast of modern-day Estonia. At Salme, the two ships were buried under two mounds and inside the ships were placed the bodies of forty-one warriors as well as shields and weapons and game pieces. The remains of six dogs and two hawks were also found in the grave. These four ship burials are not an exhaustive list of known ship burials, they are simply some of the larger and well-known ship burials found in Scandinavia or known to be Scandinavian.

Ship burials display considerable variety. Not all ship burials were monumental as some burials include pieces of ships but not an entire ship or are of smaller ships, which is in line with Ibn Fadlan's note on funerals for poorer men. In addition, not all monumental ship burials included a real ship. Some graves, often cremation graves, are found within stone settings that are shaped like ships. At Jelling, Denmark, is the largest stone ship setting at 365 meters, and it is located under the burial mounds of King Gorm and his Queen Thyra, the parents of Harald Bluetooth. Another example of a stone ship setting is at Anundshög, Sweden. Anundshög is the location of Sweden's largest burial mound and around the burial mound are five stone ships, the largest 53 meters long. While many stone ship settings contain the remains of one or more cremated individuals, not all ship settings seem to have been graves. However, those not being used as graves are found with graves nearby and often contain the remains of fires and meals, perhaps indicating some activity relating to the funerals.¹⁷⁰

These two types of burials, the actual ship burial and the stone setting burial, are closely associated with, or covered by, a burial mound. The funeral, the mound, and the ship setting were all important aspects of the religious ruler ideology in pre-Christian Scandinavia and

¹⁷⁰ Price, 877.

allowed individuals and families the opportunity to establish their legitimacy and authority by connecting them to the deceased, giving them central roles in important rituals, and giving them control over cultic symbols. These funerals also created a transfer of power, which is perhaps why the person to light the pyre in Ibn Fadlan's account is the closest male relative.

Jan Bill, professor of archaeology and curator of the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo, has recently examined a series of monumental ship burials and argued that they were used by royal persons to connect them with the mythic world by creating a divine origin story, of which the Scyldings myth seen in *Beowulf* is an example. Bill has argued that the inhumation boat burials derived from an older tradition of much smaller boat burials and that this type of burial found a new and monumental expression in East Anglia around 600 CE with the Sutton Hoo and Snape ship burials, found within 15 km of each other. This type of ship burial then disseminated eastward and was adopted by Norwegian sea-kings who constructed monumental ship burials on the island of Karmøy somewhere between 775 and 800 CE. These monumental burials were an outward expression of political power and control of the critical seafaring lane.¹⁷¹ These monumental ship burials then continued eastward into the Oslo Fjord with the Oseberg, Gokstad, Tune, and Gellestad ship burials between 834 and 925 CE. Bill understands the creation of these ship burials as an attempt by a clan aspiring to the kingship of Norway and as harbingers of a new era of political ambition. He sees the ship burials as a way for a new ruling elite to establish itself through funerals over a region. He does not attempt to connect the burials to the Harald Finehair dynasty, though.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Jan Bill, "The Ship Graves on Kormt – and Beyond," in 5. *The Ship Graves on Kormt – and Beyond* (De Gruyter, 2019), 377, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110421101-005>.

¹⁷² Bill, 382.

Bill's argument that the ship burials were outward expressions of power by a clan aspiring to Norwegian kingship suggests that these monumental ship burials should also be understood as attempts to secure an entire kingdom as part of an óðal right. In the *Saga of Olaf Tryggvason* (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*), Snorri writes that Olaf Tryggvason is the "odal's heir to the kingdom," and as Zachrisson says the "Norwegian kings counted the kingdom as their odal and their mounds were the visible proof of this. Just like any other odal farm, the royal estate had its mounds in the yard."¹⁷³ The early kings of Norway, then, were attempting to create an óðal right that was larger than the óðal rights of the average chieftain.

However, the use of ship burials is not reserved only for the rulers history has remembered as kings. This particular strategy for legitimacy can also be found being used by chieftains history has forgotten. For example, Oestigaard has argued that at Myklebostad, in Western Norway, we can see evidence of a family attempting to reestablish their legitimacy and authority in opposition to the gradual unification of Norway and that the dead were the means and medium of combining social and religious rituals to further political ambitions which provided the platform for social change and re-establishing hierarchies.¹⁷⁴ The Myklebostad ship burial was first excavated in the nineteenth century so the exact dating of the burial is difficult to determine but a late ninth century timeframe has been suggested. The ship burial is part of a complex of five large gravemounds. Mound 2 held six different burials dating from between the 8th and 9th centuries. Those burials included cremations, inhumations, and smaller boat burials. Mound 1 is the location of the Myklebostad ship burial with an estimated size of 23 meters

¹⁷³ Zachrisson, "Odal and Manifestation," 221.

¹⁷⁴ Terje Oestigaard, "Changing Rituals and Reinventing Tradition: The Burnt Viking Ship at Myklebostad, Western Norway," in *Death and Changing Rituals: Function and Meaning in Ancient Funerary Practices*, ed. J. Rasmus Brandt, Marina Prusac, and Håkon Roland (Oxbow Books, 2014), 374, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh1dtm6>.

long.¹⁷⁵ What makes the Myklebostad ship burial different from other ship burials in Norway is that the ship was burned. This act of burning is significant, Oestigaard has argued, because it shows a deliberate change in tradition, and this change in tradition he interprets as an act of resistance.¹⁷⁶

So far, this section argued that the construction of ship burials was a strategy of religious legitimization for rulers in pre-Christian Scandinavia. The monumental burials and funerals fulfilled strategies outlined in Sundqvist's religious ruler ideology framework. The funerals gave opportunities for the living to lead important rituals, publicly declare their connection to the dead, and construct symbols of this connection. This also created public opportunities to declare the transfer of social and political power from one generation to the next. The monumentality of many of these burials might also be understood as attempts by chieftains, who aspired to royalty, as display their óðal right of an entire kingdom rather than just a specific farm.

Additionally, the construction of high mounds may be an important part of the symbol of kingship in pre-Christian Scandinavia. As Sundqvist has noted, it was common for kings to be inaugurated by being placed on a high-seat and that the high-seat was often placed outdoors, on a thing mound or a burial mound. While Sundqvist acknowledges that placing the high-seat outside might be to make the ceremony more public, he also suggests that when the high-seat was placed upon a burial mound it likely had a religious element because the new ruler would be sitting on the forefather, creating a connection between the new king and the mythic ancestor.¹⁷⁷

These grave mounds may also have been places where wisdom, or power, could be gained from the dead. In *Flateyjarbók*, from the *Tháttir Thorleifs Jarlaskálds*, there is the story of

¹⁷⁵ Oestigaard, 363.

¹⁷⁶ Oestigaard, 374.

¹⁷⁷ Sundqvist, *Arena for Higher Powers*, 492–97.

a shepherd and would-be poet who sat on the gravemound of a previous, famous poet. The shepherd would recite poetry in praise of the dead until one night he fell asleep on the grave and dreamed the grave opened and a man came out of it and granted him the ability to be a great poet.¹⁷⁸ This may be related to the practice of *útiþeta*, or sitting out, which seemed to be performed as a way to gain wisdom and inspiration, and which Price has connected with the ability to learn from the dead.¹⁷⁹

In summary, rulers in pre-Christian Scandinavia constructed monumental burials as part of their religious legitimization strategies. These monumental funerals and burials provided opportunities for the transfer of social and political power between generations and the display of *óðal* rights that encapsulated the right to a kingdom. The importance of these monuments, and the dead inside them, likely created a scenario where it was important to protect the burial mounds and those within them for a ruler to continue to benefit from them as symbols of religious authority. Their destruction or their defacement would almost certainly negatively affect the social standing of the individual/family.

Plundering of Burials

Viking Age burial mounds consistently show they were the plundered. Some of these incidents were certainly performed by grave robbers looking to get rich off the grave goods within the mounds. However, many of these mounds seem to have been opened and plundered in

¹⁷⁸ Cited through Davidson, *The Road to Hel*, 108.

¹⁷⁹ Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Philadelphia, PA: Oxbow, 2019), 126.

such a way as to be far too public to have gone unnoticed and therefore must have occurred with the knowledge of the local community who valued the mounds.

Looking at the Vendel boat-grave cemetery, using the letters and diaries of its nineteenth century excavator Hjalmar Stolpe, A.M. Klevnas has argued that nine of the fourteen graves had been reopened in antiquity for the specific purpose of removing the human remains. While unable to determine the exact purpose of the removal of the dead, she suggested that it was unlikely to have been to ransack the graves and eliminate the dead from memory. Instead, she argued that one of two things likely occurred. Either the dead were removed for some pre-Christian cultic activity or to rebury the dead in a new Christian setting, transferring the dead to a more acceptable site after conversion.¹⁸⁰ This action is, perhaps, also seen at the Jelling burials where it has been suggested that Harald Bluetooth moved his father Gorm from a pagan burial to a Christian burial after his conversion sometime around 960.¹⁸¹

The treatment of the dead at Vendel is directly contrasted by the treatment of the dead at the Oseberg and Gokstad ship burials, however. Bill and Daly have argued that the Oseberg and Gokstad ship burial were broken into between 953 and 990. To reach the burial sites, the intruders dug trenches 20 meters long, several meters wide, and up to 6 meters deep, a task impossible to carry out in secret.¹⁸² Noting the mound-breakings of not only Gokstad and Oseberg, but also those at Tune, Borre, Halvdangshaugen, and Grønhaug, Bill and Daly argued that these were all attempts to establish dominancy and claim legitimacy. They offered two possible culprits. The first, Jarl Hákon Sigurdsson (c.975-995) (Jarl Hákon the Powerful

¹⁸⁰ Alison Klevnäs, "Abandon Ship! Digging out the Dead from the Vendel Boat-Graves," *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 48, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00293652.2015.1007892>.

¹⁸¹ Harald Andersen, "The Graves of the Jelling Dynasty," *Acta Archaeologica* 66 (1995): 283.

¹⁸² Jan Bill and Aoife Daly, "The Plundering of the Ship Graves from Oseberg and Gokstad. an Example of Power Politics?," *Antiquity* 86, no. 333 (September 2012): 818.

mentioned above) broke away from the Danish kings in 975 and attempted to establish his own royal lineage. He might have defaced the burial mounds to destroy lineages not associated with himself. The other suggestion was that the mound-breakings were performed by Harald Bluetooth or his vassal Harald Greyclock around 958/9. Bill and Daly find Harald Bluetooth, who may have been part of a dynasty new to the Danish throne, the most likely culprit. His actions were likely an attempt to establish his lineage on the Danish throne and maintain his control of Norway.¹⁸³ Harald Bluetooth, who is said to have Christianized Denmark, was still raised in a pagan religion as a child and was a pagan for much of his life, as evidenced by the pagan burials of both his father and mother Gorm and Thyra. If he did relocate his father to a Christian site and he did plunder the Oseberg and Gokstad burials it would indicate that even as a Christian he understood the importance of the dead to the local community. If, however, Jarl Hakon had been the one to order the plundering of the burial mounds, he did so at a time when he was also employing more skalds in his court than anyone before himself and having those skalds proclaim his divine ancestry to Odin through their poems. Jarl Hákon may have seen the destruction of the burial mounds as one part of an important set of religious strategies for legitimizing his rule.

Conclusion

It is not particularly strange that the dead played an important role in pre-Christian Scandinavian society as many societies across the globe and throughout recorded history have used ancestors to establish social status. Even with the understanding that PCRN was not

¹⁸³ Bill and Daly, 821.

monolithic and that it showed considerable regional variation, some broad conclusion can be drawn regarding this aspect of pre-Christian Scandinavian mentality.

First, cultic activity around gravesites and with the dead shows they were religiously significant and could affect the world of the living. Second, it appears the power of the dead was geographically limited. Third, the placement of the dead was important for establishing social position and creating óðal rights which in the Scandinavian context may not have just created ancestral land but also granted rights within the community. Fourth, Scandinavians may have attempted to create relationships to the dead of the distant past by reusing older burial mounds or geographic features to create social standing. Fifth, funerals and monumental burials created mortuary theater and constructed legitimacy by transferring the social and political power of the dead to the next generation. Sixth, the dead had power to influence the living, as seen in burials where the dead appear to be guardian figures, and in the deviant burials where acts of violence committed on the dead have been interpreted as apotropaic rituals. Finally, the dead had meaning and being able to control that meaning displayed power and influenced social and political power, which is shown in the plundering of the elite burials. It is also important to remember that these cults of the dead appears to have been pan-Scandinavian and that other religious concepts, for example the major deities like Thor, Freyr, and Odin, must have interacted with these beliefs.

As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, the cult of Odin clearly existed within this broader ideological context, as Odin is seen in the literature receiving power from the dead and Odinic leaders in the real world clearly used similar strategies for legitimization as leaders who did not embrace a cult of Odin. However, the relationship between Odin and the dead presented in the myths appears to be fundamentally different than the relationship between other deities and the dead in PCRN. Odin was presented as a god of the dead who held power over the dead

and had the ability to bind the dead to his will. This thesis argues that this dynamic likely helped Odinic rulers control the symbols of religious legitimization of rival rulers. In doing so, it helped Odinic rulers establish their own authority.

CHAPTER THREE:

ODIN, LORD OF THE DEAD

Introduction

The previous chapter examined a cult of the dead across Scandinavia and argued that pre-Christian Scandinavian rulers established their political and social power through their proximity to the dead. Often, the dead were ancestors, but this is not always true. Rulers manifested this political and social power through monumental funerals and burials which would leave behind great mounds in the landscape as visible markers of their power. Importantly, these burial mounds proved and justified the óðal rights of the individual or family. These burial mounds and the dead inside them were the symbols of religious legitimization. This chapter examines the dynamic between the cult of the dead and a cult of Odin. It argues that Odin's power over the dead, his ability to wake them, make them talk, and to bind them, should be understood as an important aspect of a religious legitimization strategy. Rulers who embraced an Odinic cult, because of their association with a god who claimed power over the dead, were able to express dominance over the symbols of legitimacy used by rival rulers. With the political structure of Scandinavia at this time being one of rival warlords competing with one another, this ability to control the symbols of rival rulers likely benefited the Odinic rulers.

To argue this, this chapter shows how Odin's relationship to the dead helped fulfil important aspects of the religious ruler ideology. First, it examines Odin's role as a lord of the dead. Second, it examines how Odin was perceived as being able to gain wisdom from the dead and then grant that wisdom to his followers, which was considered an important leadership trait for

royalty. Third, it analyzes conflict with mound-dwellers as instances of transferring social and political power. Fourth, it briefly compares the relationship dynamic between Thor, Freyr, Odin, and a cult of the dead. In doing this, I show that Odin's role as a lord of the dead helped establish the political and social power of his followers.

Odin's Realm of the Dead

Odin has a long association with the dead. If we briefly consider that the Mercury of Tacitus' *Germania* can be identified as an early god of the Odinic type through interpretatio romana, then it should be noted that it has been suggested that Odin is labeled as Mercury because both gods act as psychopomps. In the later medieval period, Odin is also seen as the leader of the Wild Hunt.¹⁸⁴ If these figures are all examples of a god of the Odinic type, then Odin's association with death lasts for well over a thousand years. This may be why, in 1931 and 1934, Jan de Vries argued that Odin's earliest role was a connection to the underworld and discussed Odin as a god of death.¹⁸⁵

When examining just our medieval sources, though, Odin is still associated with guiding souls to the afterlife, specifically the afterlife he presides over, Valhalla. Valhalla is described in *Grimnismal*:

Gladshheim a fifth is called, there gold-bright Valhall

Extends out widely;

¹⁸⁴ Price, *The Viking Way*, 291–92.

¹⁸⁵ Jan De Vries *Contributions to the Study of Othin Especially in his relation to Agricultural Practices in Modern Popular Lore*, 1931 and *Odin am Baume*, 1934 cited through Lassen, *Odin's Way*, chapter 2.6.5

There Odin chooses every day

Those dead in combat

It's very easy to recognize for those who come to Odin

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 benches¹⁸⁶

Snorri describes Valhalla as a place where all the dead men who die in battle go, where they are offered meat from a special boar named Sæhrimnir and mead from a goat named Heidrun. Each day the men do battle for sport, where they appear to die before resurrecting in the evening to drink together. There is said to be a large number of *einherjar*¹⁸⁷ in Valhalla and it is noted that more are expected, however the number of *einherjar* will not be enough when the wolf comes at Ragnarok.¹⁸⁸

This depiction of Valhalla is likely a late understanding of the afterlife. However, Abram argues the concept of Valhalla comes “into fashion” during the early tenth century as seen in skaldic poetry from the courts of the Finehair dynasty such as *Hrafnsmal*, *Eiríksmal*, and *Hakonarmal*. Two of these poems relate how a fallen king enters Valhalla. In *Eiríksmál*, it says:

¹⁸⁶ *Grimnismal*, st 8-9.

¹⁸⁷ Men who have died in battle and gone to Valhalla

¹⁸⁸ Sturluson, *Edda*, 32–34.

‘What is making a din there, as if a thousand were in motion, or an exceedingly great throng? All the bench-planks creak, as if Baldr were coming back into Odin’s residence.’

‘The wise Bragi must not talk nonsense, though you know well why: the clangour is made for Eiríkr, who must be coming in here, a prince into Odin’s residence.’

‘Sigmundr and Sinfjötli, rise quickly and go to meet the prince. Invite [him] in, if it is Eiríkr; it is he I am expecting now.’

‘Why do you expect Eiríkr rather than other kings?’ ‘Because he has reddened his blade in many a land and borne a bloody sword.’

‘Why did you deprive him of victory then, when he seemed to you to be valiant?’ ‘Because it cannot be known for certain when the grey wolf will attack the home of the gods.’

‘Good fortune to you now, Eiríkr; you will be welcome here, and go, wise, into the hall. One thing I want to ask you: what princes accompany you from the edge-thunder [BATTLE]?’

“There are five kings; I shall identify for you the names of all; I am myself the sixth.”¹⁸⁹

Hákonarmál, composed by the skald Eyvindr the Plagiariſt, also describes a king entering Valhalla. Interestingly, this was a king who was raised in a Christian ſetting but likely practiced pagan beliefs to ſuit the needs of the chieftains he ruled over upon taking the Norwegian throne. This dual religious identity may be ſeen in his uneaſe when meeting Odin in Valhalla.

The ruler [Hákon] ſaid that [this] — he had come from battle, ſtood all drenched in blood —: ‘Odin appears to us [me] to be very hoſtile; we [I] fear his intentions.’

“You ſhall have quarter from all the einherjar; take ale among the Æſir. Adverſary of jarls [RULER = Hákon], you have eight brothers in this place,’ ſaid Bragi.’

“We ourſelves [I myſelf] wiſh to keep our [my] armour,’ ſaid the good king; ‘one ſhould take good care of one’s helmet and mail-ſhirt; it is good to have reſource to ready gear.’”

¹⁸⁹ *Eiríksmál*, trans., R. D. Fulk, (Skaldic Project; Brepols, 2012), <http://skaldic.org/m.php?p=text&i=1009>.

‘It was revealed then how well that king had revered the sanctuaries, when all the guiding and ruling powers bade Hákon welcome.’¹⁹⁰

Abram argues, “*Eiriksmal* is an early and particularly clear example of how Odin and Valhalla were at the heart of an ideology surrounding a warrior aristocracy that centered on their king... Odin’s cultic connections with warrior societies seems to be quite ancient, but in the tenth century poets began to stress the connections between warriors, death, and Odin in new and imaginative ways, with *Eiriksmal* being the first example of this trend, but not the last,”¹⁹¹ and that the poems “present Valhalla selectively in line with their poets’ literary and political agenda.”¹⁹² Abram’s argument that the poets stressed the connection between Odin and death and warriors in new and imaginative ways to fit their political agenda may reflect the need to present Odinic ancestors in powerful positions in the afterlife to help establish the new rulers in a society that cared deeply about the location of one’s ancestors.

Odin also selects the important dead, those who will become glorified ancestors in Valhalla, through the valkyrie, the female figures whose name means “chooser of the slain” and who appear as cup bearers in Valhalla. Price argues that we can see a change in the concept of the valkyrie by examining the poem *Darraðarljóð* where the valkyries appear as women weaving the entrails of men into a fabric. This is a very different version of the valkyries than those seen in later sources which appear as swan-maidans. The earlier version of valkyries, Price

¹⁹⁰ Eyvindr Skáldaspillir Finnsson, *Hákonarmál*, trans. R. D. Fulk (Skaldic Project; Brepols, 2012), <http://skaldic.org/m.php?p=text&i=1187>.

¹⁹¹ Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, 99.

¹⁹² Abram, 107

argues, were closely associated with battlefield magic and were more likely to do Odin's will. This is in contrast to some of the later valkyries which attach themselves to human heroes.¹⁹³

Throughout our sources, Odin is shown with power over the dead. This power comes in a variety of forms, from the ability to rule an afterlife, speak to the dead, or provide heroes with divine support to overcome the *draugar*.¹⁹⁴ While a god having the powers to do these things is not unique as many gods rule an afterlife, can speak or raise the dead, and provide divine support to the living, I argue that in pre-Christian Scandinavia, a region which shows evidence of ancestor worship, used the physical remains of the dead to establish and legitimize legal boundaries, and would alter physical remains or vandalize them to delegitimize rulers, Odin's power over the dead helped legitimize the followers of his cult, men who seemed to be associated with royal power and at odds with a traditional group of nobility. His powers over the dead and how they helped to establish legitimacy are the themes of the next few sections.

Odinic Wisdom from the Dead

Odin's quests for numinous knowledge and his granting of wisdom has been considered the god's semantic center.¹⁹⁵ One way he gained this numinous knowledge is through spells and magic he knew which wake up the dead and forced them to speak. This is seen in his relationship with Mimir as recounted in Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*. In chapter 4 Mimir is presented as a wise

¹⁹³ Price, *The Viking Way*, 274–78.

¹⁹⁴ There are a number of terms for the living dead in Old Norse including draugr, aprtanga, and haugbúar. For the most part, these figures show various abilities including shape shifting and controlling weather. Sometimes the figures reside inside a mound and waits for the saga heroes to appear and other times they are known to move around the land a drive the living away.

¹⁹⁵ Jens Peter Schjødt, "Odin," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 1123–94, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116969>. Schjødt Odin in PCRN 1123-1194

figure whose head was removed and sent to the gods. Odin used herbs to prevent the head from decaying and then imbued the head with magic so that it would tell him secret things.¹⁹⁶

In *Hávamál* (157),¹⁹⁷ Odin claimed to know a spell that if he saw a corpse in a tree, hanging from a noose,¹⁹⁸ that he could carve and color runes under the dead man and that this would make the dead man walk and talk with him.¹⁹⁹ This spell to wake the dead is also mentioned in *Ynglinga Saga* chapter 7 where Odin is said to “sometimes he awakened the dead from the earth or sat himself under hanged men. Because of this he was called *draugadróttin* (‘lord of ghosts’) or *hangadróttin* (‘lord of the hanged’).”²⁰⁰ Odin used this power in Hel²⁰¹ to discover why his son Baldr was suffering from nightmares about his death in *Baldrs draumar*.²⁰² In Hel, Odin knew where to find a seeress and brought her back to life.

Then Odin rode east of the doors,
Where he knew the seeress’s grave to be;
He began to speak a corpse-reviving spell for the magic-wise woman
Until reluctantly she rose, spoke these corpse-words²⁰³

¹⁹⁶ Snorri, *Ynglinga Saga* in *Heimskringla*, chapter 4

¹⁹⁷ An eddic poem found in the collection of poems known as the *Poetic Edda*. Translated as *Sayings of the High One*, it is a gnomic poem that collects together Odin’s wisdom.

¹⁹⁸ Hanging is a sacrificial trait associated with Odin

¹⁹⁹ *Hávamál*, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington, Revised edition, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), st 157.

²⁰⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglinga Saga*, in chap. 7.

²⁰¹ One of the various underworlds in Norse myth

²⁰² *Baldr’s Dreams* is an eddic poem not found in the Codex Regius manuscript where most of the *Poetic Edda* is found but instead is found in the early fourteenth century Icelandic manuscript AM 748 I 4to.

²⁰³ *Baldrs draumar*, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington, Revised edition, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), st 4.

As Odin questioned her, she revealed that Baldr would be killed by the blind god Hod, another of Odin's sons. Throughout the poem, after revealing a piece of information, the seeress attempts to stop speaking, saying that she has told Odin information and will now be silent. A similar refrain is also spoken by the speaking seeress in *Voluspa*, another eddic poem known in two different versions. While in *Voluspa* the seeress is not specifically mentioned as being dead, the similarities in the conversation between Odin and two seeresses and the fact that both seeresses provide wisdom suggest the seeress in *Voluspa* is also dead. For example, in *Baldrs draumar*, the seeress says "Reluctantly, I told you, now I'll be silent."²⁰⁴ In *Voluspa*, the seeress says "Do you want to know more—and what?"²⁰⁵ In all three examples, Odin is exerting pressure and forcing the dead to do things; and in the examples from *Baldrs draumar* and *Voluspa* this seems to be against the will of the dead.

Odin's two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, may also be another way for Odin to receive wisdom. Sayer has noted that the two birds do not appear in any extended mythical narrative but do show up often in iconography as they appear on miniature thrones, like the one found at Lejre, and on ornaments in graves identified as warriors, such as on the Sutton Hoo shield. One possible reason for this is that the two ravens are tools for Odin to collect knowledge from the dead. Ravens are often referred to as carrion eaters but the process of eating the carrion may be one way the ravens are interrogating the dead and receiving this chthonic wisdom. The two ravens in turn give Odin this wisdom for him to give to his followers.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ *Baldrs draumar*, st 7.

²⁰⁵ *Voluspa*, st 28

²⁰⁶ William Sayers, "The Mythological Norse Ravens Huginn and Muninn: Interrogators of the Newly Slain," *Studia Linguistica Universitatis Jagellonicae Cracoviensis* 139, no. 2 (May 30, 2022): 143–55, <https://doi.org/10.4467/20834624SL.22.008.15632>.

There might also be evidence that Odin was able to raise himself from the dead, or at least overcome death. In *Hávamál* stanzas 138-139, Odin describes how he sacrificed himself to himself.

I know that I hung on a windswept tree
nine long nights
wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
myself to myself
on that tree of which no man knows
from where its roots run

With no bread did they refresh me nor a drink from a horn,
downwards I peered;
I took up the runes, screaming I took them,
then I fell back from there.²⁰⁷

Traditionally, these stanzas have been read as Odin sacrificing himself to earn the power and wisdom of the runes. These stanzas have also been interpreted as an initiation ceremony for a new cult leader.²⁰⁸ However, it is later in the poem that Odin claims to know how to carve runes under a hanging man and allow them to walk and talk. So it is possible we are seeing the god prove he is more powerful than death and the dead, a significant power considering the

²⁰⁷ *Hávamál*, st 138-139.

²⁰⁸ Olof Sundqvist, "The Hanging, the Nine Nights and the 'Precious Knowledge' in *Hávamál* 138–145: The Cultic Context," in *Analecta Septentrionalia*, ed. Wilhelm Heizmann, Klaus Bödl, and Heinrich Beck, vol. 65, *Reallexikon Der Germanischen Altertumskunde - Ergänzungsbände* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 649–68, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110218701.2.649>.

power the dead were thought to have in PCRN. If this moment is only interpreted as him receiving numinous knowledge, it is still significant in that he claims that knowledge through proximity with death and grants that knowledge from the land of the dead to his followers. Followers who were able to incorporate this wisdom into their strategies for religious legitimization. Recalling Sigurðsson's argument that personal attributes like wisdom were considered incredibly important for the success of Norwegian kings,²⁰⁹ it is clear that Odin's ability to gain wisdom from the dead was part of an Odinic cult's strategy for securing authority.

Odin, Mound-Dwellers, and Overcoming the Dead

This section considers the significance of saga figures breaking into gravemounds and the transfer of inheritance and óðal rights to new owners. It considers the terrorizing figure of the draugr driving everyone but specific family members away from a region to be a metaphor for óðal rights. As discussed earlier, burial mounds and the ancestors inside them were a strategy of religious legitimization that established ownership of land and óðal rights. Óðal rights were the foundation of social and political power and diasporic Scandinavians created óðal rights by claiming natural features as ancestral mounds. This section will show that overpowering the dead was an important moment in transferring power from one person to the other and that in the extant sources, Odin is depicted as a figure who aids in this process.

Odin's power over the dead is specifically mentioned by Snorri who tells us in chapter 7 of *Ynglinga Saga*, that Odin could "awaken the dead from the earth," and that he knew "about all the treasure of the earth, where it was hidden, and he knew songs which would make the earth

²⁰⁹ Sigurdsson, "Kings, Earls, and Chieftains," 77.

and cliffs and rocks and grave-mounds open up before him, and with words alone he would bind those who were in them and go in and take from there whatever he wanted,”²¹⁰ While it is possible that Odin’s power over the earth, cliffs, and rocks may only be related to his ability to find treasure hoards, it is important to remember that there seems to have been a tradition that the dead would live inside cliffs and rocks, perhaps best exemplified in chapter 11 of *The Saga of the People of Eyri* when a shepherd sees the north side of Helgafell²¹¹ open and the recently deceased Thorstein Cod-biter and his men being welcomed into the mountain²¹² and in chapter 14 of *Njal’s Saga* when fishermen claim to have seen Svan go into the mountain Kaldbakshorn where he was received with joy.²¹³ Odin’s power over earth, cliffs, and rocks then may be another example of Odin having power over places where ancestors were. There is also an argument that the name Valhalla (Old Norse Valhǫll) does not derive from *hǫll* meaning ‘hall’ but is actually derived from the word *hallr* meaning ‘rock.’²¹⁴ This might indicate that Odin’s power over the dead existed before the concept of Valhalla we find developing in the skaldic poetry at the court of the Finehair dynasty in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. Crucially, Odin is said to have the power to bind the dead and to take from them whatever he wanted. This is a very clear ability to control a symbol of religious legitimization, and a deliberate and hostile action which may be a mythical reflection of the grave plundering and desecration found in the archaeological sources.

²¹⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglinga Saga*, ch 7.

²¹¹ A mountain that is claimed by Icelandic settler Thorolf Moster-beard to be the place where all his ancestors would go who they died and was also the place of power for Thorolf in Iceland and a holy site.

²¹² *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, ch. 11.

²¹³ *Njal’s Saga*, trans. Lee M Hollander and Carl F Bayerschmidt, (Ware, Hertfordshire England, 1998), chap. 14.

²¹⁴ Simek, *Northern Mythology*, 347.

We will first examine examples from the sagas of a transfer of property, and therefore social and political power, which do not involve Odin specifically. This is to establish that the theme of overpowering the dead exists even without Odin's presence and is not directly related to ideas from his cult. Our examples will come from *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, *Saga of the People of Eyri*, and *The Saga of Grettir*.

In chapter 18 of *The Saga of Grettir*, the hero Grettir found himself the guest of Thorfinn, a landed man on the island of Haramsøya. While there, Grettir saw a fire in the distance and inquired of a local man, Audun, what the fire was. While Audun told Grettir not to worry about it, Grettir persisted, believing the fire likely indicated treasure. Reluctantly, Audun told Grettir that the fire came from Kar the Old's burial mound and that Kar the Old was the father of Thorfinn. Audun also said that after Kar's death, he scared all the other farmers away and now the island is only owned by Thorfinn and that only men under Thorfinn's protection are safe. Grettir broke into burial mound, fought Kar, and then robbed the mound of treasure, including an important ancestral sword. When Grettir showed Thorfinn the treasures from the mound, Thorfinn recognized his father's sword right away. Thorfinn allowed Grettir to keep much of the treasure but not the sword as Grettir was said to not have earned it yet (this is early in Grettir's career as a warrior). Though Grettir does shortly thereafter earn the sword by defeating an attack on Thorfinn's farm. After the encounter, Thorfinn stayed on his island running his farm while Grettir continued his journey, with his new sword.

Grettir's meeting with Kar the Old shows that pre-Christian ideas are reflected even in late Icelandic stories. For example, the use of burial mounds to claim land is seen in how Kar the Old lets only Thorfinn or Thorfinn's men stay on the island. Fire marked the mound, which is a possible reflection of the way Icelandic settlers carried fire around to make a land-claim. A

settler could only claim land as large as he could carry fire around in a day with his ship while still being able to see the smoke from his morning fire. In addition, the dividing of the treasure is reminiscent of medieval laws concerning what to do with treasure found inside the grave, which required some of the treasure to go to the ancestors of the person in the grave.²¹⁵

A clearer example of overpowering the dead leading to the transfer of land ownership is found in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*. In chapter 24, it is told that Olaf the Peacock purchased the land of a man named Hrapp, who had died a few years earlier. That land, called Hrappsstadir, had been abandoned since the death of Hrapp because Hrapp had been haunting it. Upon taking over ownership of the land, Olaf found that he too became haunted by Hrapp. Eventually, Olaf confronted Hrapp with a spear and forced Hrapp back into the earth, breaking the spear in the struggle. The following morning Olaf dug up Hrapp and found him perfectly preserved with the spear blade. Olaf burned Hrapp's body to end the haunting, and in doing so fully gained control of the farm.²¹⁶ In this example then, we see a clear transfer of rights to property gained by overpowering the dead.

In *The Saga of the People of Eyri* we find another example of the restless dead and the transfer of land ownership. In one of the most fantastic scenes in any saga, we see the haunting at Froða farm. According to the saga, the hauntings began about the time that Christianity is accepted in Iceland but when "there was still a small degree of belief in heathen ways, even though people had been baptized and called themselves Christian."²¹⁷ At Froða farm, a woman named Thorgunna arrived and was on good terms with Kjartan, the farmer's son, but with no one else. Thorgunna is an interesting character because though she is described as a good Christian

²¹⁵ Zachrisson, "Odal and Manifestation," 220.

²¹⁶ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, chapter 24.

²¹⁷ *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, chapter 54.

woman, she follows many traits of a typical witch in Icelandic literature including her interest in the young boy Kjartan, her standoff nature, and also her close association with a magical seal.²¹⁸

With Thorgunna's death the hauntings at Froða began.

When Thorgunna died, she desired that her bed and bedclothes be burned after her death, but this did not happen. Soon after, a seal, which may be the restless spirit of Thorgunna, began to haunt the farm.²¹⁹ Then farmhands started to die and eventually the farmer himself, Thorodd, and his men are drowned. After this, the drowned men started returning as revenants and coming inside the hall to sit by the fire. This is followed by the recently dead farmhands, until there are some twelve dead men inside the hall covered in water or earth. It is said that the only person the revenants fear is the boy Kjartan. Kjartan's birth is important here because while he is the son of Thorodd's wife, Thurid, his actual father is most likely a man named Bjorn. So, while Kjartan is raised by Thorodd, he is not related by blood, though it is not clear if Thorodd knows this.

Kjartan is the one who fulfilled the death wishes of the woman Thorgunna and then held court over the dead revenants and sent them away from the farm. Once he did this, he controlled the farm and hired his own men to run it, fully assuming control of land which would not have been his by blood.²²⁰ So again we see in the saga literature the theme that overpowering the dead can grant control of land. Christian priests are mentioned in the account of removing the dead from Froða but it is clear that Kjartan is the one holding court and dispensing judgement on them.

²¹⁸ See Kirsi Kanerva, "The Role of the Dead in Medieval Iceland: A Case Study of Eyrbyggja Saga," *Collegium Medievale* 24 (2011), accessed May 31, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/1100231/The_Role_of_the_Dead_in_Medieval_Iceland_A_Case_Study_of_Eyrbyggja_Saga. It might also be noted that Thorgunna's clothing is considered very fine and at least one other seeress, Thorbjorg from The Saga of Erik the Red, is also described as having very fine clothing.

²¹⁹ Seals or half-seals are often present in Icelandic literature and related to ghosts and causing men to drown for example the human-eyed seal in *Laxardal Saga* which causes a shipwreck and the sellkora.

²²⁰ *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, ch. 51-55.

Additionally, if Thorgunna is viewed as a witch and not a good Christian woman as the saga claims, then she may be closely associated with Odin, considering Odin's role as a lord of magic and his connection with seeress figures. In that case, Kjartan, the only person the dead fear, is the only person whom Thorgunna grew close to.

Two additional events which occur in *The Saga of the People of Eyri* should be mentioned. The first is the death of Thorólfr Lambe-Foot (mentioned above in chapter 2) and his haunting of Alftafjord. When Thorólfr Lambe-Foot dies, he became a revenant and caused trouble. His son, Arnkel, was forced to move the body of his father and then build a large wall around the cairn. Once Arnkel did this, it was said that “Thorólfr lay there quietly as long as Arnkel lived.”²²¹ However, this peace was disturbed when Arnkel was murdered as Thorólfr began to haunt the estates soon after Arnkel's death.²²² This causes trouble for the new owner of the estates Thorodd Thorbrandsson, who was an accessory in his in the murder of Arnkel.²²³ To stop the hauntings, Thorodd Thorbrandsson dug up and burned the body of Thorólfr but the spirit moved into a bull which killed Thorodd before sinking into a swamp. This again links the idea of ownership and inheritance to the dead. In this case, Thorodd, who is responsible for the death of the inheritor, is killed by the ancestor.

Finally, in *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, it is suggested that the desecration of a grave could help a person gain political power. In the opening of the saga, a Norwegian named Thorolf Moster-beard is forced to leave Norway because of Harald Finehair. Thorolf Moster-beard was known to be a friend of the god Thor. Thorolf moved his household, the temple he ran which was dedicated to Thor, the wooden pillar which had Thor on it, and “the earth underneath the pedestal

²²¹ *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, ch 34.

²²² *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, ch 63.

²²³ A different Thorodd, not the same from the Froda encounter who dies.

on which Thor had been placed.”²²⁴ While not directly commented on by the saga author, the earth underneath where Thor had been placed might be significant because it could represent the mound that had formed Thor’s high seat, a position of power, which may be similar to the concept of mound sitting. Kings of the past are said to give decrees from the top of a high hill or rolled themselves off a mound as a symbol of vassalage. Even sitting on a mound seems to have been associated with kingship.²²⁵

Thorolf Moster-beard landed in Iceland where Thor directed him (the pillar was thrown overboard and washed up on shore). Then Thorolf carried fire around the land to make his land claim. In his new land in Iceland, he built a temple to Thor and made sacrifices to him. The headland became known as Thorsnes and Thorolf declared two things about the headland. The first is that the mountain on the headland, Helgafell, is sacred and that his family would go there when they died. The second is that nothing should be killed on it. This action appears to be Thorolf creating his óðal right. In addition, the spot where Thor landed is also sacred and should not be defiled. The spot where Thor landed, in the shadow of Helgafell, became the site of the Thorsnes thing assembly.

After Thorolf Moster-beard died, his son Thorstein Cod-biter became the new leader of the assembly and goði.²²⁶ During Thorstein’s rule, a rival to his power Thorgrim Kjallaksson, defiled ground that “Thorolf had worshiped above all other parts of his estate.”²²⁷ This led to a fight between Thorstein and Thorgrim where Thorgrim is eventually forced to flee. Men were killed on both sides and a man named Thord was asked to mediate between Thorgrim and

²²⁴ *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, ch 4.

²²⁵ Davidson, *The Road to Hel*, 106.

²²⁶ Term for an Icelandic chief but it also has religious connotations

²²⁷ *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, ch 9.

Thorstein to prevent further bloodshed. Thord's decision was that because blood had been spilt in rage on the land it was no longer more sacred than any other land and that assemblies could no longer be held there. Thord also declared that the temple to Thor would no longer be the sole responsibility of Thorstein and that Thorgrim must take part in its upkeep. Finally, Thord ordered Thorgrim to support Thorstein in establishing and keeping the next assembly site sacred. The next assembly site would be further up the headland but still within sight of Helgafell. What this event shows us is that the defiling of a sacred spot, which is closely connected to ancestors and burial, can lower the social and political authority of one family (Thorstein's) and can lead to a person gaining social and political authority because Thorgrim became a *goði* and a leading man in the district afterward.

So far, what we have seen in the examples from the three different sagas is that there is a strong association between the dead and property rights and social power, though this is not directly stated. The revenants primarily trouble people who are not members of their family, though not always. When we look at the events themselves, we find that Olaf the Peacock must destroy Hrapp before he can take over the farm at Hrappstadir and Kjartan must banish the revenant of his foster father so that he can assume control of the farm. Other examples show that Grettir, though able to defeat Kar the Old, is not able to claim land, perhaps because the son of Kar the Old is still alive and therefore Grettir cannot claim the land. Finally, Thorgrim, by defiling the sacred land closely associated with ancestors, gained social and political power. All of this suggests that at least the idea of having power over the dead was important to legitimizing rule, though it was unlikely the only factor, and that this was true even on a small and localized scale.

With these ideas in mind, let us return to Odin. Odin does help his chosen heroes overpower the dead. This is done either by the hero being related to Odin or by Odin giving explicit aid. This suggests a person's relationship to a cult of Odin could have impacted the social and political standing of an individual. We will look at specific examples from *The Saga of Hervor and Heidrek*, *The Saga of Hord*, *Báðar saga Snæfellsáss*, and at the tale of Hading as recounted by Saxo.

Perhaps the most famous example of mound-breaking is found in poem *The Waking of Angantyr* which is preserved in *The Saga of Hervor and Heidrek*. Tolkien believed the poem to be older than the saga but he was not sure exactly how much older.²²⁸ This older poem may give us a closer glimpse at pre-Christian concepts. The saga focuses on the magical and cursed sword Tyrfing, which was made by dwarves for the king Svafrlami, who is the grandson of Odin.²²⁹ The cursed sword would be passed down in the family eventually ending up in the hands of Angantyr, the oldest of twelve brothers who were all berserkers, a special class of warriors closely associated with Odin. On the Island of Samsø, the island which according to the eddic poem *Lokesanna* is where Odin practiced magic, the twelve brothers were killed and buried in a series of barrows. The sword Tyrfing is buried with Angantyr. Years later, Hervor, the daughter of Angantyr, traveled to the island disguised as a man named Hervard. Once there, she is warned the island is haunted but bravely journeyed to the burial mounds anyway. She saw the mounds from far off because they were marked by fire. Once near the burial mounds, she demanded the dead awaken, in a fashion similar to Odin. Like the seeresses who are reluctant to speak to Odin in *Voluspa and Baldrs Draummar*, Hervor's father is reluctant to speak with her and reluctant to

²²⁸ *Hervarar Saga Ok Heidreks*, xi.

²²⁹ Svafrlami is the spelling from the U manuscript. The R manuscript calls him Sigrlami and does not give his parentage.

give her the cursed sword, though he eventually does. Hervor leaves Samsø with the sword and goes on to a successful career as a viking before retiring and giving birth to Heidrek. Heidrek inherited the sword and used it to become a king by conquering a kingdom of his own. Late into his rule, Heidrek engaged in a riddle contest with Odin and drew his sword on him, which caused Odin to withdraw his blessing. Heidrek is killed by slaves shortly thereafter.

These events recounted in *The Waking of Angantyr* provide an example of a figure closely associated with Odin who wakes the dead and gains inheritance and power from them. Hervor is not only a descendant of Odin through Svafrlami but her father was a berserker and she herself resembles a shieldmaiden. The sword gives the wielder victory and this allows Hervor to become a powerful and successful viking warrior until she decides to retire and then she gives the sword to her son Heidrek, who conquers and rules a kingdom until insulting Odin.

In the *Saga of Hord*, in chapter 15, the saga hero Hord journeyed as part of a group of twelve to break into Soti's burial mound. Along the way, Hord encountered a figure in a blue cloak who identified himself as "Bjorn" and claimed to be a friend of Hord's kinsmen. Bjorn told Hord that breaking into Soti's mound would be difficult and Hord should return to him. Hord found the mound and dug at it for an entire day. At the end of the first day he had uncovered the roof of the grave.²³⁰ At dawn of the second day, Hord returned to the mound to open the roof but found the mound was undisturbed. His work from the previous day had been undone in the night. So, Hord returned to Bjorn and asked for help. Bjorn gave Hord a sword to stab into the mound. Hord did this and that kept the mound open overnight so that Hord and his companions could break into the grave the following day. When Hord and his companions did break in, they

²³⁰ The grave described fits well with chamber graves described by archaeologists.

encountered Soti, the mound dweller. Hord fought Soti with fire, defeated him, and stole Soti's grave goods. Upon Hord's return to his host, he is received with much honor. When Hord and his companions attempted to find Bjorn after breaking into the mound, they were unable to find him and everyone assumed Bjorn must have been Odin.²³¹

In this example, the saga hero is explicitly helped by Odin who gives Hord the ability to break into the mound. Hord also is travelling in a group of twelve, which is a number closely associated with berserkers.²³² In addition, we see the theme of fire. Earlier, it was noted that fire was used to mark out land acquisition and I have argued above that fire as a marker for a burial mound may be related to this idea. In this story, Soti is unwilling to give up his property, his grave goods, until he is sent away through fire. The result is that Hord gains social status among his peers.

So far, we have examined three saga stories which showed that the transfer of social and political power, through inheritance and land, is associated with figures overpowering the dead in a context primarily unrelated to the cult Odin. We then saw that in two examples, a figure closely associated with Odin experienced similar social and political gains and benefited from being associated with Odin. We will look at two additional examples in this section before moving on. The first is an example of an Odinic hero related in Saxo, which allows us to examine a similar phenomenon outside of an Icelandic setting, and then we will look at an encounter from *Báðar saga Snæfellsáss* which may reflect the religious complexity of the Viking Age and beyond.

²³¹ *The Saga of Hord*, in *Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas*, eds., Anthony Faulkes and George Johnston, (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2004), 289–92.

²³² See for example Angantyr and his brothers mentioned above and the companions of Hrolf Kraki as they go to confront King Adils in *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki*.

In book 1 of Saxo's *History of the Danes*, we find a slightly different variation of this theme of Odin helping someone overpower the dead to rise in social status in the story of Hading. Hading is an early, legendary king of Denmark who scholars have not always associated with Odin. Some scholars, like Dumézil, see a striking resemblance in some of the stories about Hading and the god Njord, specifically how Skathi chooses her husband Njord and how Hading's wife chooses Hading. However, scholars like Davidson argue for a much closer connection to Odin seeing that Hading makes an alliance with a one-eyed wanderer, is given special abilities in battle, journeys to the underworld to a place that looks very similar to Valhalla, and he ends his own life by hanging himself.²³³

Saxo tells how in Hading's youth he was fostered by a giantess who helped him wake a dead man to find out the desire of the gods. This went poorly and the dead man predicted the death of the giantess. Once the giantess was killed, Hading is saved by an old, one-eyed man who must be seen as Odin. Hading was put into the care of a pirate. This pirate lost a battle and Hading was then taken by Odin on a horse to his home, where he was revived with soothing potions. This was likely Valhalla. The return journey from Valhalla was done on horseback over the ocean. Upon his return, Hading attacked Andvan, King of Hellespont, and won so that "he advanced to a high run of fame and exchanged exile for a kingdom."²³⁴ Unlike the previous examples, Hading did not gain power and social status after defeating the dead but after defeating death, after which he was given the knowledge of special battle tactics by Odin. His relationship to Odin and the land of the dead appear to have given him the ability to claim social and political power.

²³³ Saxo, *History of Danes*, 12.

²³⁴ Saxo, 25.

Returning to saga material, *Barðar saga Snæfells* is an example of mound-breaking which incorporates beliefs in an ancestor cult, a cult of Odin, and Christianity. In the saga, the character of Barðr was said to have entered the caves and glaciers of Iceland and became an important local deity, even saving the life of a local fisherman at one point. Barðr's son is Gestr who happened to find himself in the company of King Olaf Tryggvason²³⁵ of Norway on Christmas Eve when the court was visited by the undead viking Raknarr. Gestr was given the order to take the treasure from Raknarr's burial mound and he set off to do so. On the journey, he encountered a one-eyed man wearing a blue cloak called Rauðgrani who preached heathendom, who the men believed was Odin. The priest with the group banished the figure but Gestr regarded this act poorly (Gestr was the only pagan in the group at this time).

Eventually, Gestr and the priest found Raknarr's burial mound and dug into it only to find the mound closed the next morning. They dug into it again and the priest watched over it in the night and kept the mound from closing. Gestr entered the mound in the morning and killed the undead men who were buried with Raknarr before he encountered Raknarr himself. Gestr is able to retrieve the helmet and armor Raknarr wore but when Gestr attempted to take Raknarr's sword, Raknarr attacked him. Unable to defeat the undead Raknarr, Gestr called upon his father Báðr, who appears as a deity, but is unable to overcome Raknarr. Afraid for his life, Gestr then promised to convert to Christianity and follow King Olaf Tryggvason's god if he could get out of the mound alive. In that moment, King Olaf appeared with a great light and Raknarr fell backward and Gestr had the opportunity to kill him. Gestr at that point returned to King Olaf and was baptized. His baptism is short lived, though, as his father Báðr, appeared again and killed

²³⁵ King famous for attempting to convert Norway to Christianity and known for his violent methods to do so

him for giving up the old faith. Gestr died in baptismal robes and King Olaf found his death to be a great loss.²³⁶

Bárðar saga Snæfells is considered a relatively late saga, written probably in the fourteenth century.²³⁷ The story of Gestr and his encounter with Raknarr provides a fascinating example of all these religious ideas playing together. The powerful, undead Raknarr cannot be defeated by Gestr alone. Odin's appearance and banishment suggests that perhaps an earlier version of the tale had Odin as the helpful figure, as seen in *The Saga of Hord*, but that his role was supplanted by Christianity. The fact that the Christian faith would also find it important to overpower the dead, as referenced in *The Saga of the People of Eyri* and in the real world with the possible destruction of the Oseberg and Gokstad ship burials by Harald Bluetooth, while also declaring themselves more powerful than both an ancestor cult and Odin is very suggestive of the importance of these religious ideas, especially as it is a new Christian king Olaf Tryggvason, who is shown being able to defeat the dead. This is perhaps even more significant considering Olaf Tryggvason is known for his violent attempts to Christianize Norway and for his claim that Norway is his óðal.²³⁸ This suggests that even people who had converted to Christianity understood the deep-seated and pervasive mentality among pre-Christian Scandinavians that the dead were significant in establishing social and political position, and that they felt that, too. It is also, perhaps, significant that Báðr, Gestr's father, this ancestral god-like figure who dwells within the land, is still considered powerful enough to kill him despite his baptism. And this occurs in a saga which shortly before depicted Odin being defeated by a Christian priest. This suggests how long-standing and deeply rooted these ideas were.

²³⁶ *Báðar Saga*, chaps. 17–21.

²³⁷ *Bárðar Saga*, 12.

²³⁸ Zachrisson, "Odal and Manifestation," 221.

Finally, one last example should be given by looking back to some apotropaic acts around the body of the dead, explored in chapter 2. We had two examples from the sagas where sons, Egil and Arknel, approached their recently deceased fathers from behind, covered their faces, took their fathers out of the house through a hole they had made in the wall, and buried their fathers under a mound near the edge of their property. However, it was only Arknel's father which was troublesome after death. Even before Arknel's death, his father, Thorólfr, is put behind a high wall so he will not bother the living because even though Arknel is Thorólfr's son, that does not preclude him from being haunted. As seen in *Saga of the People of Laxardal* the undead Hrapp haunted his farm and drove his son insane and to death.²³⁹ By comparison, Egil's father seems to rest peacefully. So why is Egil's father not as troublesome? It is true that not all dead come back to haunt the living in saga literature, but both fathers were sitting up when they died, which seems to be an indication that someone will be difficult after death. However, of the two figures, Egil and Arknel, Egil is the one closely associated with Odin, and that seems to fit a pattern.

From these examples, it is possible to argue that not only is there a close relationship between the dead and social power but also that Odin's ability to aid his followers in overpowering the dead, or overcoming death, is an important part of them gaining social prestige. Descendants of Odin in *The Saga of Hervor and Heidrek*, were able to wake the dead and claim a sword which granted victory and the ability to become kings. Hord gained honor and fame in *The Saga of the Hord* after he defeated Soti with Odin's explicit help. Hading was transported to the realm of the dead by Odin and was then able to conquer his enemies and

²³⁹ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, chapter 17

establish a kingdom. Finally, in the story of Gestr we saw how Christianity showed its power and legitimacy by first banishing Odin and then having King Olaf Tryggvason help Gestr overpower the dead. While all these examples are clearly fictional accounts, the themes seen in the sagas, and in Saxo who wrote before many of the sags were written, likely reflect basic ideas about how power and social standing are gained through the dead in pre-Christian Scandinavia. This concept is further supported by the additional textual archaeological evidence in chapter 2 above which supports the idea that the dead could continue to influence the land of the living. The dead's power is so deeply rooted within pre-Christian Scandinavian mentalities that when Christianity arrives, Christian kings had to address that power.

In conclusion, Odin's ability to overpower the dead and the way he granted this power to his followers should be viewed as an Odinic cult overpowering the important cultic symbols other rulers used to establish their own social and political authority. Rulers who embraced an Odinic cult had a religious reason that their authority was more legitimate than rulers who did not embrace an Odinic cult.

Odin and Rival Cults of the Dead

So far, this chapter has established that Odin was a lord of the dead and that he was believed to receive wisdom from the dead he could then pass on to his followers. This wisdom helped his followers legitimize their authority in the eyes of their subjects. This chapter has also shown that Odin had spells which allowed him to overpower the dead and has argued that these spells should be understood as Odin dominating important cultic symbols which were used to establish social and political power within the community. This section will briefly look at the dynamics between Odin and the cults of other gods associated with the dead.

As established in chapter 1, scholars of the past have generally considered that the gods Odin, Thor, and Freyr were the primary deities of PCRN. Interestingly, each of these gods is also associated with the dead.

As mentioned above, some scholars have considered Freyr to be a dominant fertility god in a time before Odin's ascendance. Importantly, Freyr, as a Vanir god, is closely associated with the *álfar* who have been interpreted as an ancestor cult. Like Odin, Freyr is associated with some aspects of rulership. First, he is the divine ancestor of the Ynglingar, an ancestral line so highly considered that the clearly Odinic family of the Finehair dynasty created a genealogy to connect them to it.²⁴⁰ Freyr is associated with a fertility cult, as seen by the ithyphallic representations which have been identified as him from both archaeological sources and from Adam of Bremen's account of the Freyr idol at Uppsala, and because of this is closely associated with times of peaceful bounty, as indicated by the accounts of the Peace of Froði found in Snorri and Saxo. Interestingly, Freyr's most extensive appearance in the mythology is found in the eddic poem *Skírnismál*. In *Skírnismál*, Freyr begins in Hliðskjálf, the high-seat of Odin before descending because he had spotted the giantess Gerðr, and high-seats were an important symbol of rule.

Freyr fulfills many of the same aspects of the religious ruler ideology as Odin. Freyr appears to have been associated with a high seat, is the divine ancestor of a royal line, is an important part of cultic activity, and seems to be related to the *álfar* both because the Vanir are sometimes considered the same and because Freyr rules *Álfheimr*. However, Freyr does not appear to have power over the dead in the same way that Odin does.

²⁴⁰ Olof Sundqvist, "Freyr," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 1200, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116970>.

Thor is another figure who is often claimed to have been a dominant god before Odin's arrival. A few reasons that Thor has been considered this are his association with figures like Jupiter and Zeus, the number of theophoric place names and personal names, the number of poems addressed to him, Adam of Bremen's account of the temple of Uppsala placing Thor as the central deity, the fact he appears to be an opponent of Christ and that his features are given to St. Olaf as part of saintly king traditions, that Thor lives on in folklore, and that Thor's hammer appears to have been used as a symbol of the faith in the late Viking Age.²⁴¹

Thor, like Freyr, also has some association with the dead. Though Odin is said to have discovered the runes, Thor is often found blessing runestones erected as memorial inscriptions. For example, the DR220 runestone from Sønder Kirkeby in Denmark reads "Sassur placed this stone in memory of Ásgautr his brother, and [he] died on Gotland. May Thor hallow [these] runes."²⁴² Taggart notes that Thor is invoked to bless transitions from one phase of life to another including from life to death and from death to life as is the case with his goats, whom he resurrects in *Gylfaginning*.²⁴³ Thor is also said to receive the dead. In the eddic poem *Hárbarðsljóð*, in stanza 24, Odin (in disguise) taunts Thor by saying "Odin owns the nobles who fall in battle and Thor owns the race of thralls."²⁴⁴ Thor's death is also supposed to break man's relationship with their land, with their óðal. Perhaps because without his protection man cannot survive? So, Thor also appears to have fulfilled important aspects of the religious ruler ideology

²⁴¹ John Lindow, "Þórr," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 1051–1121, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116968>.

²⁴² Runic inscription DR 220 in Scandinavian Runic-text Database 2020, Department of Scandinavian Languages, Uppsala University. <http://kulturarvsdata.se/uu/srdb/2b960274-ef5d-41a8-9305-7edfb25e1082>

²⁴³ Lindow, "Þórr," 1193–97, 1115.

²⁴⁴ *Hárbarðsljóð*, in *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington, Revised edition, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), st 24.

of pre-Christian Scandinavia. He helped establish óðal, he could initiate people into different phases of their lives, and he was related to cultic activities which helped create protection for individuals and communities.²⁴⁵

Interestingly, Freyr and Thor are both shown in conflict with Odin. Freyr and the Vanir gods lose a war to the Æsir gods and become hostages. Thor and Odin are part of the insult poem (a flyting) *Hábarðsljóð*, where Thor and Odin exchange insults across a river. Thor and Odin are also at odds when it comes to the hero Starkaðr. In chapter 7 of *Gautrek's Saga*, Thor and Odin take turns cursing and blessing Starkaðr, respectively.²⁴⁶ In both examples, Thor is associated with the common people and with the land. Odin is associated with the nobility.

While neither example is definitive, it is interesting to note that all three gods who have been interpreted as dominant gods, who have widespread theophoric placenames and likely widespread cults, have some association with the dead. Also, within the surviving records both Thor and Freyr come into conflict with Odin, and Odin comes out superior. Again, this thesis does not argue that Odin's power over the dead is the only reason that the cult of Odin appears more powerful in medieval sources than the cult of Thor and the cult of Freyr. However, these examples do perhaps support that the cult of Odin was more advantageous in a real world setting than the cult of Thor and the cult of Freyr and that this is partially because of the cult of the dead mentalities within PCRN.

Finally, we should also briefly consider the monumental ship burials, again. As argued above, monumental burials existed within pre-Christian Scandinavia as an outward expression of óðal rights. Kings participated in this by creating the most monumental burials in order to claim

²⁴⁵ Lindow, "Þórr," 1114.

²⁴⁶ *Gautrek's Saga*, chap. 7, accessed June 16, 2022, <https://aj69.tripod.com/ancestry/gautreksaga.html>.

the kingdoms as their óðal right. Some of the monumental ship burials are very clearly Odinic in nature, indicating that followers who embraced the cult of Odin participated in these cultic activities. For example, the two ship burials on Karmøy do not suggest Odin through their grave goods but their location does. Karmøy is the location of Avaldsnes, the capital of Harald Finehair's dynasty, and Harald Finehair and his descendants are closely associated with Odin, though the burials predate Harald Finehair by at least fifty years. The Oseberg ship has also been interpreted as Odinic as the Oseberg tapestries have suggested a connection to Odin, and even the women buried have been interpreted as seeresses and connected to Odin.²⁴⁷ The iconography found within the Sutton Hoo burial also clearly identifies it as Odinic, from the depiction of ravens, to the weapon dancer motifs, and to the reconstructed helmet being interpreted as designed to turn the wearer into an Odin figure during ritual performance.²⁴⁸ These monumental burials may not have been directly targeted against a cult of Thor or Freyr but instead could have been used as an expression of dominance over all cults which used the dead as part of their strategies for religious legitimization.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that Odin's role as lord of the dead was beneficial for his cult. It showed that in the Icelandic sagas, the transfer of social and political power could be established by overpowering the dead. Further, it showed that Odin could aid his followers in this endeavor.

²⁴⁷ Anders Andréén, "Images," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andréén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 161–93, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116934>, p 190 and Judy Quinn, "Gender," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North*, ed. Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andréén (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 509–27, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116949>, p 519.

²⁴⁸ Price and Mortimer, "An Eye for Odin?"

It also showed that Christianity felt it necessary to demonstrate it too had power over the dead. It has argued that Odin's perceived ability to overpower the dead helps us understand how followers of an Odinic cult were able to control the symbols of religious legitimization of social and political rivals.

This chapter also demonstrated that Thor and Freyr, who both have been interpreted as being dominant gods, were also associated with the dead. Both gods are also shown in the surviving record to have conflict with Odin and lose. When considered together, it appears that Odin's power over the dead was not insignificant for the people of pre-Christian Scandinavia and that it was a factor in helping the new elites associated with Odin establish their social and political power.

CONCLUSION

Scholars have long noted the disagreements found within medieval sources of Old Norse mythology. Those who have attempted to reconstruct the religious beliefs reflected in these sources have questioned the pantheon they presented. This questioning has led scholars to try and reconstruct a pre-Odin led pantheon. Over time, some scholars looked to Freyr and Thor as the original head of the pantheon. They postulated that Odin and his cult were a late development and that it overtook Freyr or Thor. However, recent scholarship on PCRN has stressed the diversity of beliefs within pre-Christian Scandinavia and has questioned the existence of a pantheon at all. This has led scholars to call for a reevaluation of the religions.

This thesis has attempted to reevaluate the dynamics between a cult of Odin and a widespread cult of the dead. It appears to have been a widespread practice to use the dead to establish social and political power throughout pre-Christian Scandinavia. The widespread and deep-rooted nature of this is perhaps seen in that Odin, Freyr, and Thor are all related to death in some way. This thesis's central argument, though, is that Odin's power over the dead, shown by his ability to wake the dead and force them to do his bidding, gave Odinic rulers religious authority over the cultic symbols of rival chieftains.

Between the sixth and tenth centuries in Scandinavia, the political structure was unstable and rival warlords competed with one another for power. In that instability, followers of the cult of Odin found themselves well suited to fit the religious ruler ideology expected within pre-Christian Scandinavia. The cult of Odin was closely associated with martial power and kings and their retinue. This show of force was, of course, an important part of establishing political dominance. However, the mentality that the dead created óðal rights and that those were central

to a person's social standing in pre-Christian Scandinavia was not necessarily something that violence alone could overcome. Followers of the cult of Odin, who were establishing themselves as a new elite, had to also meet the expectations of the people they were subjecting. In this case, they had to prove their power and óðal right over the power and the óðal right of the dead already in place.

Followers of Odin appear to have done this by constructing monumental ship burials, playing into accepted notions of how óðal rights were manifested in the landscape. In addition, the medieval stories of Odin frequently showed how he was more powerful than dead figures. He could force the dead to do things for him and he could also help his chosen heroes do the same thing. Having to overpower the dead was not something just the cult of Odin had to do. Icelanders were shown having to overpower the dead to take control of a farm from its previous owner. Christianity and Christian rulers also found it important to show that they, too, were more powerful than the dead. When looking at Odin, Thor, and Freyr, important gods found in Norse myth, Odin was the only one consistently shown overpowering the dead or in a position of authority over them. Thor and Freyr were shown to be connected to the dead, but their relationships were not ones of dominance.

With this evidence considered, I find it reasonable to conclude that Odin's role as a lord of the dead was more important to the process of legitimizing his followers than previously considered. His lordship over Valhalla likely did create a religious reason for loyalty between a lord and his retinue but it did more than that. When considering the religious context, his role as a god of the dead meant his followers had power over the social and political structure of pre-Christian Scandinavia.

Acknowledging that there was no single religion within pre-Christian Scandinavia leads us to the question of how did these different religious ideas exist side by side? By examining how one cult may have interacted with another cult in pre-Christian Scandinavia, this thesis has hopefully shown that a reevaluation of the religious interactions is a fruitful line of inquiry.

This thesis has primarily been a general study and further research into a more regional nature would be beneficial to confirm or provide additional nuance to the argument. Specifically looking at the differences in how the sea-kings along the coast of Norway used the dead in comparison to the inland farming elite may provide a clearer distinction on how the cult of Odin was used. Additionally, reevaluating the cult of Thor and Freyr and Christianity within this same milieu of a cult of the dead may also help shed more light on how these religious belief systems coexisted in late Iron Age Scandinavia and early medieval Scandinavia.

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