

The Ship in the Field

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The Vanir have been a topic addressed in previous issues of RMN Newsletter. The present article will carry this discussion into the field of archaeology, asking whether there is a connection between the Vanir and the stone ships and boat burials that dot the landscape of the pre-Christian North Germanic cultural sphere.

Literature and Archaeology

When we use retrospective methods, we are making use of evidence from one period to throw light on an earlier period. One area in which the use of such methods has a long history is when literary evidence preserved in 13th and 14th century Icelandic manuscripts is used to throw light on Scandinavian archaeological data from the pagan period.

Sometimes the success of this method is hard to argue with. Pictures of eight-legged horses on image stones in Gotland find a parallel in the Prose Edda's account of Óðinn's horse Sleipnir. Pictures of figures in a boat near a serpent are readily explained by the account of Þórr's fishing expedition in Hymiskviða and the Prose Edda – even down to the detail, present in some of the images, that Þórr spyndi við svá fast at hann hljóp *báðum fótum gognum skipit* [‘braced himself with such force that he pushed both feet through the boat’] (Faulkes 2005: 44–45).¹

Boats and Burials

One very widespread phenomenon in the archaeological record of the Northern Germanic peoples is the ship motif. There are numerous ship images on rune stones, ornamental stones and coins, but most intriguing is the connection of boats with burials. Not only are there hundreds of burials with real boats deposited in graves, but also many stone ships: burial sites with lines of stones erected in the shape of a boat.

Naturally enough, scholars have sought to throw light on the ship burial custom by

referring to Icelandic literary records of Norse paganism. It is tempting to think of the buried boats as vehicles for the voyage of dead warriors to the afterlife in Valhøll with Óðinn. However, the mythological record does not contain any tales of the dead travelling to Valhøll by boat.² Nor is Óðinn strongly associated with boats or the sea.³

Boats and the Vanir

Another, perhaps more promising, idea is to connect the ship motif with the Vanir gods, who certainly do have associations with seafaring. The Prose Edda tells us that the god Njorðr lives in Nóatún [‘Enclosure of Ships’],⁴ and that he *ræðr fyrir gøngu vinds ok stillir sjá ok eld. Á hann skal heita til sæfara ok til veiða* [‘rules over the course of the wind and calms sea and fire. He is to be called upon for seafaring and fishing’] (Faulkes 2005: 23). This association carries on to his children; Freyja bears the name *Mardöll* (the first element of which is ‘sea’), and Freyr owns *Skíðblaðnir* – *beztr skipa* [‘the best of ships’] (Faulkes 2005:36).

The identification of ship burials with a Vanir cult has enjoyed some prominence in contemporary research. Archaeologist Ole Crumlin-Pedersen writes that “in recent discussions the association between a boat in a grave and Freyr's ship icon has not been challenged” (Crumlin-Pedersen 2010: 157). While there is certainly a case to be made for associating the Vanir with boat graves (see Crumlin-Pedersen 2010: 145–163), the connection with *Skíðblaðnir* in particular seems somewhat tenuous. It is worth quoting the Prose Edda's description of *Skíðblaðnir*:

Dvergar nokkvorir, synir Ívalda, gerðu Skíðblaðni ok gáfu Frey skipit. Hann er svá mikill at allir Æsir megu skipa hann með vápnum ok herbúnaði, ok hefir hann byr þegar er segl er dregit, hvert er fara skal. En þá er eigi skal fara með hann á sæ þá er hann gørr af svá mǫrgum hlutum ok með svá

mikilli list at hann má vefja saman sem dúk ok hafa í pung sínum. (Faulkes 2005: 68)

Certain dwarves, the sons of Ívaldi, made Skíðblaðnir and gave the ship to Freyr. It is so large that all the Æsir can man it with weapons and war gear and it has a favorable wind to sail wherever it should go as soon as the sail is hoisted. But when it is not to be taken to sea it is made of so many parts and with such great art that it can be wrapped up like a cloth and kept in one's pouch.

This is a fairly extensive description, but it notably lacks any connection to death, burial or the afterlife. The only Vanir god who is described in the written record as having a relation with death and the afterlife is Freyja. The Prose Edda tells us, citing Grímnismál 14:

En Freyja er ágætust af Ásynjum. Hon á þann bæ á himni er Fólkvangar heita, ok hvar sem hon ríðr til vígs þá á hon hálfan val, en hálfan Óðinn, svá sem hér segir:

Fólkvangr heitir,
en þar Freyja ræðr
sessa kostum í sal.
Hálfan val
hon kýss á hverjan dag,
en hálfan Óðinn á.

Salr hennar Sessrúmnir, hann er mikill ok fagr. (Faulkes 2005: 24–25)

And Freyja is the most excellent of the Ásynjur, she has that homestead in heaven which is called Fólkvangar, and wherever she rides to battle she has half of the slain, but the other half belongs to Óðinn, as is said here:

Fólkvangr is called where Freyja decides the seat choices in the hall. Every day she chooses half the slain but half belongs to Óðinn.

Her hall Sessrúmnir is large and beautiful.

It would seem, then, that Freyja gathers dead warriors to her hall Sessrúmnir, located in Fólkvangr. In Old Norse, the word vangr [‘field’] is mostly used in place names, poetry and compounds. Especially noteworthy is the

compound himinvangar [‘the fields of heaven/the sky’], which occurs in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I 8.6, 15.6 (cited according to Neckel & Kuhn 1962). It has an exact parallel in hebanwang [‘Heaven’], which occurs in the Heliand 3925 (cited according to Sievers 1878). Also worth noting are the Old English neorxnawang and Gothic waggs, both meaning ‘paradise’.⁵ From this comparative data, it seems plausible that the Norse word vangr had some sacral connotations or connection to the afterlife at an early stage, carried forward in the idea of Fólkvangr.

The description of Fólkvangr and Sessrúmnir is certainly valid evidence connecting the Vanir with death and the afterlife but unfortunately, for our purposes here, it lacks any mention of boats. However, this thread of inquiry should not be abandoned right away. There is another source that mentions Sessrúmnir and that is worth considering on its own.

Sessrúmnir in the Þulur

The Þulur (plural of þula) or Nafnaþulur [‘Þulur of Names’] are a collection of versified lists of names and synonyms for various creatures and objects, mythological and mundane. The Þulur are preserved in five of the seven principal manuscripts of the Prose Edda. It is not impossible that they were a part of Snorri's original composition, but it seems more likely that they were added to the work shortly afterwards. The Þulur are conventionally dated to the 12th century, though some strophes might originate in the 11th century or even earlier. On the other hand, some might be as young as the 13th century. (For discussion see e.g. Faulkes 1998: xv–xviii; Finnur Jónsson 1923: 174–184). It is possible that some of the Þulur are so young that they postdate the Prose Edda and thus might even be based on Skáldskaparmál and so have no independent value as a source. There is, however, no reason to assume this of any particular part of the collection. The general opinion has been that the bulk of the Þulur is most likely to be

earlier than Snorri's work, so we would expect any given strophe to be a valid, independent source of information.

As an example of the curious way in which the *Þulur* can serve as sources, take the occurrence of the names *Harðgreipr ok Vagnhofði* ['Harðgreipr and Vagnhofði'] in a list of *jötunar*. No other Icelandic source mentions either of these figures. However, the *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus contains an extensive story involving the giantess *Harthgrepa*, daughter of *Wagnhoftus* (see Dumézil 1973 for an analysis). The occurrence of these two names in the *Þulur* makes us inclined to think that some similar legend existed in Iceland. This instance serves to show that the *Þulur* contain potentially interesting information that is clearly not derived from *Skáldskaparmál*.

We now turn to a strophe from the *Þulur* containing the name *Sessrúmnir*. The strophe is in a group of three strophes containing names for ships and nautical objects.

Nú mun ek skýra
of skipa heiti:
Ork, árákló
askr, Sessrúmnir,
skeið, skúta, skip,
ok Skíðblaðnir,
nór, Naglfari,
nökkvi, snekkja.

(Finnur Jónsson 1931: 208)

Now I will set forth the names of ships: Ark, oar-claw, bark, *Sessrúmnir*, longship, cutter, ship and *Skíðblaðnir*, vessel, *Naglfari*, rowboat, smack.

As demonstrated by Elizabeth Jackson (1998), Old Norse and Old English verse lists can be analyzed as using certain typical devices or recurring features. In Jackson's terminology, the first two verses of our stanza – 'Now I will set forth / the names of ships' – constitute a list signal, indicating that a list is about to begin, and an organizing principle, telling the audience what the list consists of. The next six verses can be divided into three list sections, each section consisting of two verses and containing four items (see Jackson

1998: 343). Each of these sections contains the name of a mythological ship, in each case a trisyllabic compound noun. These distinctive names can be said to punctuate the stanza, as already observed by William Sayers:

While names of legendary ships seem to punctuate the stanza, the initial *ork* may be a purposefully Christian term, the Ark, here intended to take precedence over the heathen ships *Sessrúmnir*, *Skidblaðnir* and *Naglfari*. (Sayers 1998:53.)

Sayers is clearly right here, and perhaps a bit overly cautious. The word *Ork* is never used in Old Norse texts to refer to ships other than the Ark.⁶ That the great ship of the Bible is mentioned before the great ships of pagan mythology demonstrates that this is a carefully crafted strophe and not a product of happenstance. As a result, the inclusion of *Sessrúmnir* is particularly notable.

Can the Sources Be Reconciled?

What are we to make of the difference between the sources? One obvious possibility is that one of the interpretations arose by a misunderstanding. Perhaps *Sessrúmnir* is originally a hall but someone who heard the name without sufficient context assumed it referred to a ship. Or perhaps the opposite is true, and the 'hall' understanding arose by a misinterpretation. Neither of those possibilities can be dismissed and we can see no strong reasons to prefer the *Gylfaginning* testimony over that of the *Þulur* strophe or vice versa.

There is, however, a further possibility. Perhaps each source has preserved a part of the same truth and *Sessrúmnir* was conceived of as both a ship and an afterlife location in *Fólkvangr*. 'A ship in a field' is a somewhat unexpected idea, but it is strongly reminiscent of the stone ships in Scandinavian burial sites. 'A ship in the field' in the mythical realm may have been conceived as a reflection of actual burial customs and vice versa. It is possible that the symbolic ship was thought of as providing some sort of beneficial property

to the land, such as the good seasons and peace brought on by Freyr's mound burial in *Ynglinga saga*.

Evidence involving ships from the pre-Christian period and from folklore may be similarly re-examined with this potential in mind. For example, if Freyja is taken as possessor of a ship, then this ship iconography may lend support to positions arguing for a connection between a Vanir goddess and the “Isis” of the Suebi, who is associated with ship symbolism in Tacitus's *Germania*.

Afterlife beliefs involving strong nautical elements and, separately, afterlife fields, have been identified in numerous Indo-European cultures (Mallory 1997: 153). Comparative research may contribute to a better understanding of the Vanir and their potential relation to the afterlife beliefs of other Indo-European peoples.⁷

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Notes

1. For a recent treatment of the verbal and iconographic representations of this myth, see Frog 2011.
2. The incident with *Sinfjötli* in *Völsunga saga* is the closest candidate but it is too vague to be convincing.
3. An alternative interpretation, suggested to us by Frog, is that the ships could be buried in anticipation of a great flood at *Ragnarök*. See further Frog 2010: 175–176.
4. *Njörðr*'s association with seafaring appears evident in sources both much later and much earlier than the Old Norse period; Tacitus's 1st century description of Nerthus (from Germanic *Nerthuz, precursor to Old Norse *Njörðr*) in *Germania* strongly connects her with bodies of water, and folklore collected in the early 20th century records what appears to be a family tradition of thanking *Njör* for a bountiful catch of fish in Odda, Norway (Dumézil 1973: 220).
5. *Neorxnawang* and *Fólkvangr* may have a relation besides cognate second elements. While the root of *Njörðr* and the apparent first root of *Neorxnawang* are both elusive subjects, it has been theorized that the two may be one and the same, perhaps rendering *Neorxnawang* as an Old English ‘*Njörðr*'s field’ or as the field of a deity sharing this root (de

Vries 1957: 410–411). This approach has difficulties, but if the roots are connected, a father-daughter relation may be demonstrated between the afterlife fields of *Njörðr* and Freyja.

6. The late medieval rímur sometimes use *ork* as a generic synonym for ‘ship’ in their kennings (Finnur Jónsson 1926–1928: 419; Björn Karel Þórólfsson 1934: 152). The rímur poets relied heavily on the Prose Edda and may well have got the idea of using the word in this way from the *Pulur* strophe we are discussing.
7. Perhaps to be included within this Indo-European framework are the so-called Tarim Mummies from the Tarim Basin. Strikingly, recent analysis has identified cow-skin covered ship burials among a “forest” of “phallic” poles at the once-riverside “Small River Cemetery No. 5”, which reportedly features around 200 of the oldest graves yet discovered in the Tarim Basin. These ship burials have led Victor Mair to compare them to Norse ship burials and other elements of Bronze Age Northern European society (Wade 2010). The employment of phallic poles and ships may parallel the death, seafaring, and fertility aspects of the Vanir cult.

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Re: Distinguishing Continuities: The Case of Discontinuities in Conceptual Schemas

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The question of continuities – and their implied discontinuities – is something we have all addressed at one time or another, but frankly tend to forget in the details of specific research. However, the question of the continuity of "textual entities, extra-textual entities, and conceptual schemas" (Frog 2011) can have a great deal of impact on any research, especially if we dip our toes into the deep and murky waters of interpretation. I am not talking about personal interpretation – when every person has a slightly different understanding of any text, performance, or depiction, based not only on their cultural background, but also on their unique and personal experience – but about the cultural consensus of the significance of any 'textual entity', a common attribution of meaning without which communication and social interaction is impossible. Because any symbol, any entity has to be understood and an individual in a culture must "appropriately interpret and apply" (Frog 2011: 12) such symbols, the cultural competence required to correctly interpret a sign is often overlooked: the appropriate interpretation is often automatic, and the ability, even facility, to make the correct reading is taken for granted.

Context of Interpretation

However, symbols – and here I include words, iconographic and textual themes and elements – are often poly-interpretable and dependent on the context. To take a very simple and basic case – two lines crossing

each other at right angles can have a multiplicity of meanings within one culture. Such a shape can 'mark the spot' – the buried treasure or my hotel room; on a map it denotes a (Christian) religious building, clustered together with a cemetery, in a line, a border or frontier. It can stand for Christianity in general, and all which that implies; after someone's name, it tells the reader that that person has died. We put it on the sides of ambulances, and designate a pharmacy by its use. Turn it on its side and it is the 'unknown' – or a kiss at the bottom of a letter. These are just a few of the meanings given in modern western culture to a cross. Nevertheless we navigate all these meanings effortlessly, even though many are related and overlap to some extent. We do so because we have the cultural knowledge to understand what applies in which context, and once past childhood never really stop to think about it.

The question then arises as to what happens when this is not our own cultural context, or the context changes. While I am primarily concerned with the visual and the visual as a means of communication, I do not intend here to go into what is meant by visual semiotics or even if such is possible (for discussions on these matters see for example Greimas, Collins & Perron 1989 and/or Hasenmueller's "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics" [1978]). Valuable though their insights can be, such discussions pay lip service to the idea of differing cultural contexts but really fail to take them into