

Hof, Halls, *Goðar* and Dwarves: An Examination of the Ritual Space in the Pagan Icelandic Hall¹

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Two of the most frequently recurring questions in the field of studies into the pagan Old Norse religion are those of where and how people worshipped. This applies specially to the newly-settled Iceland, where *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements)² and the Icelandic sagas commonly talk of *hof*, a word generally translated as “temples”, which is found in numerous placenames around Iceland, Norway, and Sweden (see for example Orri Vésteinsson 2003; Magnus Olsen 1915:10-25, and 1926: 226-56; de Vries 1957: 2.53, 116, 155, and 194-5; and Olaf Olsen 1966: 89-104). It is generally accepted that the placename, both alone and in compounds like Hofstaðir (*Hof* place) and Hofvin (*Hof* field), must have cultic significance, and should thus be placed alongside other related placename elements like *lundr* (*leah* in Old English) meaning grove; *vé* (OE *wēoh*) meaning a shrine of some kind; *hörgr* (OE *heargh*), meaning a shrine or altar, *vangr* and *vin* often referring to sacred grounds, and perhaps also the element **al* (OE *ealh*) (see, for example, Magnus Olsen 1926: 226-56; Brink 1996: 260-6; Olaf Olsen 1966: 68-115; and Wilson 1992: 5-21). Unlike most of these other words, however, the *hof* is generally interpreted in Old Norse and Icelandic as meaning a building (as in the expression from the Eddic poem *Völuspá*, st. 7: “hörög og hof/ hátimbroðo” (“they constructed high-timbered hörög and hof”), referring to the first buildings made by the gods after their creation of the earth; see also *Grímnismál*, st.16, and *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 38).³ For this reason, backed up by both placenames and Old Icelandic texts and laws, most scholars up to the middle of the last century felt assured that temples or “cult houses” of some kind must have existed at those sites which had *hof* placenames (see for example Finnur Jónsson 1898). The problem was that almost all of the Viking-Age buildings found by archaeologists at these particular sites in mainland

Scandinavia and Iceland turned out to be simply farmhouses (albeit sometimes relatively large ones, as at Hofstaðir in Northern Iceland; see Bruun and Finnur Jónsson 1909; Lucas 1999; and most recently Orri Vésteinsson 2003). No purely cult buildings came to light. For a time, this encouraged some scholars to argue that the old temples, at least those in Norway and mainland Scandinavia, must be hidden beneath the later churches found in the area, and even that the Norwegian temples must have been transformed into stave churches (on the basis of advice like that meted out by Pope Gregory to Abbot Mellitus who was about to visit England in AD 601; see Bede 1969: 106-9). However, even this seemed to be somewhat unlikely, since few potential cult buildings have come to light beneath those churches that have been examined.⁴ A turning point in the discussion came in 1966 when the Danish scholar Olav Olsen carefully re-reviewed all the proposed evidence for the existence of temple buildings, and concluded that the *hof* must simply have been central farmhouses where sacrificial and other banquets took place. This idea has most recently been underlined by Orri Vésteinsson partly on the basis of the findings at the supposed “temple” site at Hofstaðir in northern Iceland (Orri Vésteinsson 2003), and I see no reason to dispute his main conclusion. What I would like to do here though is go a little further. The idea that these buildings were multifunctional implies that the meaning of their daily space was “transformed” in some way at certain points in time. I would thus like to examine the evidence which might support such a potential transformation. To what degree were these particular farmhouses or *skálar* viewed as having a dual function? Were they actually regarded in Iceland as holy places, or cult or cosmological centres? My argument is based in part on the recent discussions by archaeologists and placename experts about the nature, role and spatial organisation of so-called “central places” in Scandinavia during the pre-Christian early Middle Ages.

Before discussing the Icelandic situation, however, it is necessary to summarise the background or roots of the Icelandic understanding of pagan religious worship, and the main information available about religious cult centres in Scandinavia from the Bronze Age to the later Iron Age, a space of no less than two thousand five hundred years. One of the most commonly quoted passages in this regard is Tacitus'

statement in *Germania*, ch. 9, about the religion of the Germanic tribes in about 100 AD that

they do not ... deem it consistent with the divine majesty to imprison their gods within walls or represent them with anything like human features. Their holy places are the woods and groves, and they call by the name of god that hidden presence which is seen only by the eye of reverence. (Tacitus 1948: 108)

This idea, along with talk of worship and sacrifice of animals, humans and various objects of worth on islands, in lakes and in marshes, is backed up by numerous other references alongside those of Tacitus⁵ by other later commentators such as Orosius, Jordanes and Procopius in the sixth century (see Turville-Petre 1964: 46, 292; and de Vries 1956-1957: 1.409); Alcuin in the eighth century (see Wilson 1992: 40); Ibn Rastah in the tenth century (Jones 1984: 425-30) and Adam of Bremen (1917: 258-60; and 1959: 207-8) in the eleventh century. It finds visual support on the eighth-century Gotland stones, and the tapestry found on the Oseberg ship (c. 835 AD) (see, for example, Nylén and Lamm 1988: 63, and Krafft 1956: 35). The Latin sources tell of the bodies of humans and animals being hung from trees in sacred groves, and human beings, animals and whole armies of weapons being consigned after their destruction to marshes, pools and lakes. New archaeological finds are continuing to give solid support to this, stressing that the tradition of bog and lake offerings in Scandinavia has roots in the Bronze Age, and that there seems to have been a great deal of conservatism in these matters, some places being used continuously for offerings for over five hundred years, often in close vicinity to wooden idols (see, for example Glob 1969: 180-7, Ström 1985: 30 and 33-8, and Todd 1975: 182-208). These outdoor offerings then start decreasing relatively rapidly in the fifth-sixth centuries during the Age of Migrations (Fabeck 1998: 151-4, 1999a: 459, and 1999b: 38, and Andren 2002: 304 and 316-17).

The Stone Age and Bronze Age petroglyphs of southern and northern Scandinavia underline still further the regular use of certain sites for outdoor worship from a very early stage (see for example Helskog 1988 on the Alta petroglyphs; and Hygen and Bengtsson

2000; and Müller-Wille 2002 on the Bronze Age petroglyphs from Sweden and Norway). Recent archaeological examination has shown that many of these sites, like the Iron Age marsh sites, were often marked off by stones or even a fence, underlining the concept of an “inner” and an “outer”, the former being a space that was regarded as being more sacred, or at least “off bounds” (see for example, Hygen and Bengtsson 2000: 156, Müller-Wille 2002: 157-61, and Todd 1972: 133-4).⁶

Further support for the existence of recognised sites for outdoor worship throughout Scandinavia is naturally seen in the placename evidence where words for natural features like those mentioned earlier often appear alone (as in placenames like Lund meaning “grove”) or connected with the names of a god, thus stressing their religious import, as in placenames like Frösakur (Freyr’s field); Torslunda (Þór’s grove); Fresvik (Freyr’s bay); or Nærø (Njörður’s Island) (see Magnus Olsen 1915, and 1926: 226-56; de Vries 1957: 2.53, 116, 155, and 194-5; Olaf Olsen 1966: 89-104; and Brink 1990, 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999). In recent years, a number of archaeologists, historians and onomatologists have suggested that there seems to be a clear pattern to these sites, the cultic importance of which is regularly being supported by archaeological finds.⁷ In short, the sites seem to be so-called “central places” in a well-understood local settlement or region, often in borderline areas, but in close vicinity to key settlements and meeting sites (cf. Figure 1). They were religious centres for a particular group of people; places where the people came into contact with their gods, and gave them gifts. Prior to the fifth century, at least, these sites tend to form part of a “central place complex” (Brink 1999: 425). At that point, there was still no one main centre for the community.

Returning to the placename *hof* (the so-called “temple”): according to Magnus Olsen, the use of the word seems to be a relatively late phenomenon, occurring, it would seem, from the fifth century onwards, especially in Sweden, Norway and Iceland.⁸ Like the other cult-related placenames, these sites, probably related to buildings of some kind, play a key role in the central place complexes.

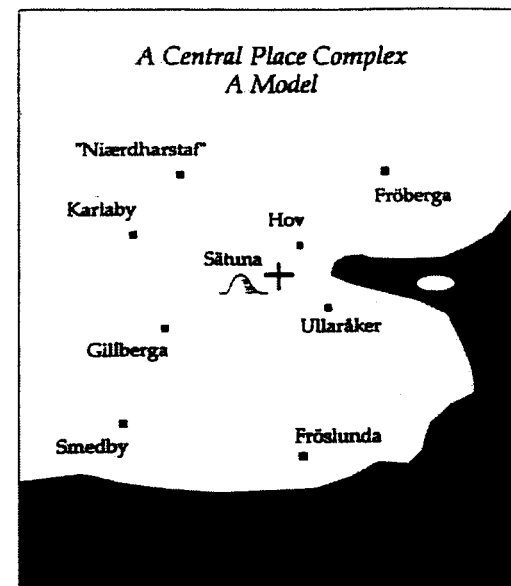


Figure 1, taken with permission from Brink 1996: 242. A model of a (particularly Middle East Swedish) central place complex, indicating typical place names. Niærdharstaf: Njörður’s staff; Sätuna: a central meeting field; Fröberga: Freyja’s rock; Karlaby: Karl’s farm; Smedby: smith’s farm; Fröslunda: Freyr’s grove; Ullaråker: Ullur’s field; Gillberga: meaning uncertain, but a common placename in such complexes.

As other scholars have noted (see for example Brink 1990: 460-74, and 1996: 260-1, and Orri Vésteinsson 2003), the word *hof* probably originally had close connections, if not roots, in another meaning of the word found in western Norwegian dialect and Icelandic, that is to say in the meaning a small hill. However, it is clear that many of the *hof* placename sites in Iceland and elsewhere have no obvious connection to any natural feature of this kind.⁹ In all likelihood, many of the placenames and also the saga version of the word must have a closer relationship to the meaning of the word as it appears in the other Germanic languages, in the sense of a building. Certainly, in recent years, since Olaf Olsen’s book questioning the existence of temple buildings appeared in 1966, new archaeological

evidence has started to appear supporting the probable existence of cult buildings of some kind, usually in the form of smallish constructions closely associated with the halls of important chieftains in the late Iron Age. These buildings show few if any signs of daily habitation but contain – or are found in the context of – remains that point to the religious occurrence of offerings, statues, or sacrifices: one can mention in this context the recent finds at Lunda, near Strängnäs and at Uppåkra in southern Sweden; at Säby, Sanda and Borg in East-Central Sweden; at Dejbjerg, Lejre and Tissø in Jylland, and at Gudme on Fyn, all in Denmark; and at Yeavinger in Northumberland, the latter giving some support to Bede's suggestions in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (c.731 AD) that pagan temples existed in England (on this material, see for example Olaf Olsen 1966: 91-6; and Wilson 1992: 28-36).¹⁰ Interestingly enough, most of these constructions come from the fifth-seventh centuries – the Age of Migrations. It would thus seem that in spite of what Olsen said, “cult houses” of some kind did exist in certain central sites, even if they were not beneath churches and they were not all called “hof”. Furthermore, as Andrén notes, there is all reason to believe that some continuation of worship must have existed around central sites such as these into the time of Christianity (Andrén 2002: 300-5).

There is a vague possibility that these buildings used wholly for a cult purpose represent a development of those buildings that seem to have been often constructed over the dead – or the ashes of the dead – in Iron-Age Scandinavia before the eventual grave mounds were built (see for example Ibn Fablan's account in Jones 1984: 164-5, Wilson 1992: 44-66, and even the symbolic Bronze-Age house-urns shown in Hygen and Bengtsson 2000: 76). A good example of such a construction is that made to house the dead on the ninth-century Gokstad ship from Norway. Indeed, in this context, it is also worth remembering the comments made by Rimbert in ch. 26 of his *History of the Life of St. Ansgar* (late ninth century) about dead human beings in Sweden being worshipped as gods (Rimbert 1986: 52-4), an idea to which Snorri Sturluson also gives some support in his *Ynglinga Saga* when describing how the “human” god Freyr continued to receive gifts after he had been placed in his grave mound, in order to ensure good luck and fertility (Snorri Sturluson 1941-1951: 1.23-5). Similar

activities seem to have taken place after the death of a small king in southern Norway named Ólafur Geirstaðaálfr (Flateyjarbók 1944-1945: 2.75-76). All three accounts can be understood in the context of the grave offerings that we know many Scandinavians gave some of their dead from the Stone Age up until early last century when people in the Norwegian countryside were still placing bread and beer on the local farm grave mound at certain times of the year in order to ensure the well-being of the farm (see references in Gunnell 1995: 140). While the later farmers may not have understood the origin of this activity, it certainly has roots in the Middle Ages (as is implied by *Gulapingslög*, art. 29, quoted above) at the time of the sagas, and must originate with gifts to the dead inhabitant of these particular grave mounds, a figure who was often seen as the first farmer on the site, the superman who first cleared the land for the farm.

The evidence for “cult houses” in mainland Scandinavia, however, does not detract from the fact that this kind of building has yet to be found beside the halls at the *hof* sites in Iceland, at the places where the archaeologists of the past expected to find them. In Iceland it must therefore be assumed that most worship must have taken place inside the hall rather than outside (indeed it is interesting to note how the saga accounts of worship in Norway and Iceland differ in this regard).¹¹

The key accounts of pagan worship as the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century writers believed it took place in pagan times are well known, but worth noting again in the present context. The most famous accounts in this regard are those from the thirteenth-century saga *Eyrbyggja saga* (see below), and the early Icelandic laws known as *Ulfjótislög*, the latter of which are believed to come, in part, from the pagan era (see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998: 44-50). The former account, which is largely repeated in *Kjalnesinga saga* (fourteenth century; see *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959: 7), runs as follows:

Hann setti bæ mikinn við Hofsvág, er hann kallaði á Hofsstöðum. Þar lét hann reisa hof, ok var þat mikit hús; váru dyrr á hliðvegginum ok nær öðrum endanum; þar fyrir innan stóðu öndvegissúlurnar, ok váru þar í naglar; þeir hétu reginnnaglar; þar var allt friðarstaðr fyrir innan. Innar af

hofinu var hús í þá líking, sem nú er sönghús í kirkjum, ok stóð þar stalli á miðju gólfinu sem altari, ok lá þar á hringr einn mótlauss, tvitögeyringr, ok skyldi þar at sverja eiða alla; þann hring skyldi hofgoði hafa á hendi sér til allra mannfunda. Á stallanum skyldi ok standa hlautbolli, ok þar í hlauttein sem stökull væri, ok skyldi þar stökkva með ór bollanum blóði því, er hlaut var kallat; þat var þess konar blóð, er svæfð váru kvikendi, er goðanum var fórnat. Umhverfis stallan var goðanum skipat í afhúsinu. Til hofsins skyldu allir menn tolla gjalda ok vera skyldir hofgoðanum til allra ferða, sem nú eru þingmenn höfðingum, en goði skyldi hofi upp halda af sjálfs síns kostnaði, svá at eigi rénaði, ok hafa inni blótveizlur. (Eyrbyggja saga 1935: 8-9)

Þórólfur ... set up a large farm by the cove, Hofsvogur, which he called Hofstaðir (the *hof* place). There he had a *hof* built, and it was a sizeable building, with a door on the side-wall near the gable. The *öndvegissúlur* (high seat pillars) were placed inside the door, and nails, that were called holy nails, were in these. Beyond that point, the *hof* was a sanctuary. At the inner end there was a structure similar to the choir in churches nowadays and there was a raised platform in the middle of the floor like an altar, where a ring weighing twenty ounces and fashioned without a join was placed, and all oaths had to be sworn on this ring. It also had to be worn by the *hof* priest at all public gatherings. A *hlautbolli* (sacrificial bowl) was placed on the platform and in it a *hlauttein* (sacrificial twig) – like a priest's *apergillum* – which was used to sprinkle blood from the bowl. This blood, which was called *hlaut* (sacrificial blood), was the blood of live animals offered to the *goð* (gods). The *goð* were placed around the platform in the choir-like structure within the *hof*. All the men had to pay a toll to the *hof* and they were obliged to support the *hofgoði* (*hof* chieftain) in all his movements, just as *þingmenn* (parliament members) are now obliged to do for their *goði*. The *hofgoði* was responsible for the upkeep of the temple and ensuring it was maintained properly, as well as for holding

sacrificial feasts in it. (Based on the translation by Judy Quinn in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* 1997: 5. 133-4.)

One of three articles from *Ulfjótsslög*, believed by many to be the earliest Icelandic law from c. 930 (quoted in *Landnámabók – Hauksbók*, early fourteenth century, and *Þorsteins þátr uxafóts* [see *Flateyjarbók* 1944-1945: I.274-5]; and *Brot af Þórðar sögu hreðu* in the *Vatnshyrna* MS [*Íslendingasögur og þættir* 1998, 2004], both late fourteenth century) states the following, adding more about the actual proceedings:

Baugr tvieyringr eða meiri skyldi liggja í hverju höfuðhofi á stalla; þann baug skyldi hverr goði hafa á hendi sér til lögþinga allra, þeira er hann skildi sjálfr heyja, ok rjóða hann þar áðr í roðru nautsblóts þess, er hann blótaði þar sjálfr. Hverr sá maðr, er þar þurfti lögskil af hendi at leysa at domi, skyldi áðr eið vinna at þeim baugi ok nefna sér váttu tvá eða fleiri. “Nefni ek í þat vætti,” skyldi hann segja, “at ek vinn eið at baugi, lögeið; hjálpi mér svá Freyr ok Njörðr ok hinn ámáttki áss, sem ek mun svá sök þessa sækja eða verja eða vitni bera eða kviðu eða dóma, sem ek veit réttast ok sannast ok helzt at lögum, ok öll lögmæt skil af hendi leysa, þau er undir mik koma, meðan ek em á þessu þingi. (Landnamabók 1986: 312-15)

A ring of two ounces in weight or more should lie in on the platform in each main *hof*; the priest should have this ring on his arm at all legal assemblies which he himself was responsible for, and he himself should redden it beforehand with the red blood of an ox which he himself had sacrificed there. Every man who needed to perform any legal business at the court should first swear an oath on that ring and name two or more witnesses. He should say, “I name witnesses that I swear an oath on the ring, a lawful oath; so help me Freyr and Njörðr and the almighty god insofar as I shall prosecute this case or defend it or bear witness or give verdicts or pass sentences, as I know to be most right and true and closest to the law; and perform all lawful acts that fall upon me while I am at

the assembly. (Based on the translation of Jón Hanneðsson, in Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999: 34-5.)

The act of sacrifice itself is further outlined in *Hákonar saga goða* in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* (c.1230) which gives another similar account of sacrifice as Snorri believed it to have occurred in a *hof* in Trøndelag in Norway:

Þat var forn siðr, þá er blót skylði vera, at allir bændr skyldu þar koma, sem hof var, ok flytja þannug fōng sín, þau er þeir skyldu hafa, meðan veizlan stóð. At veizlu þeiri skyldu allir menn öl eiga. Þar var ok drepinn alls konar smali ok hross, en blóð þat allt, er þar kom af, þá var kallat hlaut, ok hlautbollar þat, er blóð þat stóð í, ok hlautteinar, þat var svá gört sem stökkklar, með því skylði rjóða stalla öllu saman ok svá veggi hofsins útan ok innan ok svá stökkva á mennina, en slátr skylði sjóða til mannfagnaðar. Eldar skyldu vera á miðju gólfi í hofinu ok þar katlar yfir. Skylði full um eld bera, en sá, er gerði veizluna ok höfðingi var, þá skylði hann signa fullit ok allan blótmatinn, skylði fyrst Óðins full – skylði þat drekka til sigrs ok ríkis konungi sínum – en síðan Njarðar full ok Freys full til árs ok friðar. Þá var mörgum mönnum tit at drekka þar næst bragafull. Menn drukku ok full frænda sinna, þeira er heygðir höfðu verit, ok váru þat minni kölluð. (Snorri Sturluson 1941-1951: 1.167-8)

It was an ancient custom that when a sacrifice was to be held, that all farmers should come to the site of the temple and bring all the food that they would need for the duration of the feast. Everyone should have ale at that feast. They also slew all kinds of cattle and horses there, and the blood that came from them was called *hlaut*, and the bowls which contained the blood were called *hlautbollar* (sacrificial bowls), and *hlauttein* (sacrificial twigs), those objects made like sprinklers; the platforms should be reddened with these and also the walls of the *hof* both inside and out, and the people should also be sprinkled; while the meat should be boiled for the gathering. There should be fires in the middle of the floor and kettles over these. The drinks for the

toasts (*full*) should be carried over the fire and chieftain who was organising the feast should bless the drinks and all the sacrificial meal, first of all Óðinn's toast (which should be drunk to his king for his victory and state) and then the toasts for Njörður and Freyr for good seasons and peace. Many people would then next drink Bragi's toast; and they also drank toasts to their kinsmen who had been laid to rest in grave mounds. That was called *minni* (a memorial toast). (My translation.)

The accounts above have been included here essentially for the images they give of the activities that people believed took place in the Icelandic *hof* (see further Hultgård 1996 on the early accounts of cult activities). One notes that all of these accounts suggest the existence of a purely sacred building of the kind so far only found outside of Iceland. The key features in the first account are the *öndvegissúlur* (high seat pillars), the *reginnaglar* (holy nails) attached to these, the *stallar* (platform), the *goð* (idols?), the armring which the *hofgoði* (*hof* chieftain-priest) is supposed to wear when officiating, the *hlauttein* (sacrificial twig), the *bolli* (bowl) and the blood that is scattered. *Ulfjótsslög*, meanwhile, says nothing about idols, the *hlauttein*, the *súlur*, or the *reginnaglar* but underlines again the importance of the ring, and the oaths to Freyr, Njörður and "hinn ámatki áss" ("the almighty god"). The *blót* or act of sacrifice has been covered effectively earlier by my predecessor, Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1997, 1998, and 1999: 16-22), and nothing more will be said about it here. Worth noting, however, is the emphasis on the sacrificial feast, and the way the arm ring is seen as a key means of temporarily transforming the *goði* into something more powerful as part of religious activities.

As has been noted above, most scholars (see for example Roussell 1943: 220, Olaf Olsen 1966 and 1969, Brink 1996: 260; and most recently Orri Vésteinsson 2003) believe that the real Icelandic *hof* at least must have been essentially a large central hall (like that in Hofstaðir, in northern Iceland) in which people lived, but where also politically and alcoholically charged sacrificial banquets were held for large numbers of people at particular times of year, for example during the *veturnætur* (winter nights) in late October, at midwinter, and at other religious festivals.¹² But is there any evidence that the

building was seen as being anything more than a good restaurant in the lead-up to Christmas: that it, like the *goði*, could have been temporarily transformed into a sacred building of the kind described in the above saga accounts?

As part of this discussion, it is worth bearing in mind certain differences that existed between the pagan religious situation as it existed in Iceland, and that which people had known in mainland Scandinavia, something underlined by the fact that the belief in the deeply rooted guardian spirit on Scandinavian farms (known in later times as the *gardvord*, *rudningskarl*, *tomte* or *nisse*) does not seem to have come to Iceland with the settlers alongside the enduring beliefs in other environmentally related Scandinavian spirits such as *álfar* or *náttúruvættir* (elves), the *mara* (or nightmare), the *marbendill* (or merman), the *nykrar* (the *nøkker* or kelpies) and the *selfólk* (seal people). This is related to the fact that the guardian spirit, or *nisse*, had very close links to the environment, more precisely the main farm gravemound (often stemming from the Bronze or early Iron Age). As noted earlier, later practices stress that these guardian spirits commonly received nutritional offerings at certain times of the year to guarantee their help in coming times. Interestingly enough, those Scandinavians who settled in Shetland and Orkney (islands already rich in ancient gravemounds) in the early Middle Ages seem to have continued this belief in the form of the protective *brownies* or *haugbuar*. Iceland and the Faroes, on the other hand, were virgin territory; they had no such ancient mounds with a long history of worship behind them, and there was thus no basis for the beliefs in the *nisse* or *brownie* to develop (see further Sigrún Gylfadóttir 2003). The family-worshipped mounds however, were not the only thing that the settlers left behind. They were also departing from their culturally mapped out central place complex, and the old but deeply rooted outdoor (and by this time maybe also indoor) cult sites. They were coming to a place that had no geographically related oral history, no religious, inherited past; and no family tradition. It was quite different from the “old” country.

It is interesting to note the accounts of the first settlers given in the Icelandic *Landnámabók* (*The Book of Settlements*) from the eleventh-twelfth centuries which mentions a number of place names containing the word *hof*.¹³ The account quoted above from *Eyrbyggja saga* states

that the *hof* at Hofstaðir in Þórsnes contained *goð*, or idols of the gods like those accounts given in the sagas of the Norwegian kings describing the Norwegian *hof* in Trøndelag and Gudbrandsdal (see for example Snorri Sturluson 1941-1951: 1.317-18, and 2.188-9, trans. in Snorri Sturluson 1932: 170, and 331-3, on the idols of Þórr). One notes, however, the total absence of any accounts in *Landnámabók* telling of settlers bringing large religious idols with them (the only possible exception being Þórólfur Mostrarskegg's *öndvegissúlur* carved with the image of the god Þórr, mentioned in *Landnámabók* 1986: 124), even if they were said to be *hofgoðar* or “hof-priests”. The same applies to the accounts given above about *hof* from *Ulfjótsslög* and *Hákons saga goða* neither of which mentions idols. This raises the question of exactly where the focus of the worship of the god is placed in these accounts. If anywhere, it is on the revered man who donned the arm ring.

So why are no idols mentioned? The answer is probably that if they existed (and there is good reason to believe that they did in Norway, just as they certainly existed in Iron Age Denmark; see for example Todd 1975: 196, and Glob 1969: 180-7), then they, like the farm guardian's gravemound, were seen as being part of the old home environment, part of the rooted religious surroundings of the local central place, be it inside or outside. It would have been impossible to remove them without causing deep trouble. At least six of the settlers, however, probably those with a prior position of responsibility at home, seem to have found another way of bringing the “holiness” of their central place with them. According to the accounts in *Landnámabók* (1986: 42-5, 124-5, 232, 302, 312, 317, and 371; see also 307 and 163-4), they came accompanied by their so-called *öndvegissúlur* or “high seat pillars”, and used these objects, whatever they were, as a means of guiding them to the places in which they felt fated to settle, by throwing them overboard as they approached land. They then set up home near where they found them.¹⁴

There has been much discussion about the actual nature of these *öndvegissúlur*. Most people, however, agree that the *öndvegi* or high seat must have been the place in the hall where the chieftain or *goði* sat, a place which in later times in mainland Scandinavia was on a platform at the shorter inner end of the hall, but in earlier times seems to have been in the centre of the long wall or in the corner of the

room (see Herschend 1995, and 1997: 29-52). The *öndvegissúlur* or high seat pillars are thus reckoned to have been the pillars on either side of this “high seat”, possibly simultaneously key pillars holding up the building (see for example Valtýr Guðmundsson 1889: 184-6, Arnheiður Sigurðardóttir 1966: 32, Simek 1993: 288, and Herschend 1995, 1997a and 1997b). Their religious importance is underlined, amongst others, by the account in *Eyrbyggja saga* (1935: 7; see also *Landnámabók* 1986: 124-5) telling of Þórólfur Móstrarskegg’s pillars which were supposedly adorned with images of Þórr, and how these had a key role in Þórólfur’s *hof*. The same religious importance is reflected in the account of another chieftain by the name of Ingimundur *gamli* (“the Old”) in *Vatnsdæla saga* (1939: 42; see also *Landnámabók* 1968: 219) who finds an image of the god Freyr in the ground at precisely the site where he intends to place the *öndvegissúlur* in his *hof*. The importance of the earth beneath the pillars is also stressed in the account about how Þórólfur Móstrarskegg in *Eyrbyggja saga* (1935: 7) also brought along to Iceland with him the soil that his pillars had originally stood in. The same idea is echoed by another account in *Landnámabók* (1986: 307) about a *hof*-priest called Þórhaddur, who supposedly took both the high seat pillars and the earth beneath them from the central *hof* in Mæri (Mære), near Trondheim in Norway when he came to Iceland.

The stress on the earth in these latter accounts brings to mind the fact that several archaeological excavations of Scandinavian central halls and cult houses over the last thirty years or so have discovered shards of valuable glass and tiny gold foils with pictures stamped on them (so-called *gullgubber*) when excavating the earth beneath certain of the pillars in these buildings (see Herschend 1995: 225-7, Stamsö Munch 1991: 328-9, Hansen 1996, and Hansen 1990 on finds at Helgö, Borg, Dejbjerg and Dankirke). All of these objects are seen as having particular religious or cultic significance (see for example Watt 2002). Obviously, then, the soil beneath certain pillars in these buildings was charged in some way (see further below).

Another point to bear in mind when considering the *öndvegissúlur* is that wherever they originally stood, they were once rooted in the earth of the central homeland. Further back they were rooted in a homeland forest or grove. Arguably, they brought an element of the old central home and its protective “power” with them. In many

ways, this parallels the nostalgic interest in remembering other family roots abroad that is regularly displayed in the sagas. In essence, the earth and the pillars in the *hof* were all of the old nature-based religion that could be brought with the settlers. At the same time, one sees in the central siting of the pillars in the *hof* the old cultically charged landscape being symbolically transferred into a man-made building.

In many ways, this development echoes another movement that was already under way for other reasons back in Scandinavia several centuries before, as local chieftains were beginning to be taken over by local kings, and eventually national kings (see Näsmann 1998). As noted earlier, in the fifth and sixth centuries, the old bog sacrifices seem to be dying out. As Charlotte Fabech argues, this “change in cult coincides with the introduction of the hall at the magnates’ farms ...” as “during the sixth century, the cult leaders, local magnates or kings were able to move religious ceremonies into their residence” (Fabech 1999a: 459). Herschend (1999: 334), particularly intrigued by the changing nature of the hall as a centre for religious and political activities at this time, notes that the new central farms “give rise to a new layer of religious landscape expressed as a social and economic landscape characterised by a number of halls of a certain sacred character. These halls are ... kind of man-made points of gravity in the landscape and they are loaded with ritual presence ...” To Herschend’s mind, the halls and their landscape are “the late Iron Age contribution to cosmology.”

The new settlers of Iceland came from countless different old political regions and, to start with, often tended to be independent units, operating essentially “for themselves” around their own personal centres (indeed, the old centre was arguably now symbolically enshrined in the new house if they brought their pillars with them). However, as Orri Vésteinsson has recently argued (2003), working along similar lines to Brink, Fabech, and Herschend, it was not long before exactly the same process as that which had earlier taken place in mainland Scandinavia began taking place in Iceland. Those regions or areas of settlement that had not already got obvious leaders at the time of settlement needed to gain them, first and foremost as a means of representing the area in the developing system of *þing* meetings, and secondly to organise the local settlement as a

form of regional body. As Orri notes, those placenames in Iceland involving the element *hof* are rarely the sites of the most powerful original settlement in the area. They seem to have come later, either as a challenge to the existing ruling figures or as a new essential part of the local central landscape, in many places very close to the site of the local meeting place, something that also applies to the siting of many of the old cult sites around the central areas in mainland Scandinavia. According to Orri, the *hof* were essentially places where a chieftain, or prospective chieftain, wined and dined those he represented or wanted to represent (Orri Vésteinsson 2003).

However, in the pagan community of ninth- and tenth-century Iceland, political and legislative power appears to have been sanctioned by religious power. The Icelandic *goði* was both a chieftain *and* a priest, and, if we follow the arguments mentioned above, his worldly hall was also a form of religious “temple”. If the description in *Eyrbyggja saga* given earlier has any basis in fact, the hall would also have been the place where the platform (*stallur*) and the empowering arm ring resided, and where the *öndvegissúlur* from the old religious home area stood. Moving on from this, I think that there is also good reason to believe that like most places of worship in other religions (see Eliade 1958: 379; and Hedeager 2002: 10), the central *hof* was seen by people simultaneously as being both a farm, and a symbolic pagan microcosmos (somewhat like a theatre stage which has the gift of being two places at once in the minds of the audience, at least during the duration of the performance¹⁵).

As Fabech argues (1999a: 458; see also Herschend 1999: 334), echoing to some extent the structural view of the Icelandic farmer’s world as suggested by Hastrup (1985: 136-54), Gurevich (1985: 47) and Hedeager (2002), in the worldview of pre-Christian Scandinavian society, the farmstead formed a central point in the cosmos, similar to the way that *Miðgarður* (our world) and *Ásgarður* (the home of the gods) formed a centre surrounded by a dangerous outer world of wild natural and supernatural forces. Herschend (1999: 334) has a slightly different, but no less relevant picture of *Ásgarður*, *Miðgarður* and *Útgarður* all representing different centres in a similar landscape rather than different worlds. He goes on to draw comparisons with the way medieval Christianity regularly viewed the world and its holy buildings in a cosmological sense, whereby the church represented

not only a ship, or an ark, but also a visual three-dimensional cosmological map of the Christian universe, past and present, designed to educate and initiate the medieval congregation. To Herschend’s mind (1999: 334), “the congregation in the church must be paralleled with the guest in the hall, and the hall owner replaced by Christ”.

Certainly, it is important to be wary of going too far with Christian comparisons when analysing Old Norse religion. There is no doubt that the wording of many of the descriptions of pagan “temples” both in sagas such as *Eyrbyggja saga* and even in near contemporary accounts like parts of Adam of Bremen’s description of the famous pagan temple in Uppsala are strongly coloured by the writers’ knowledge of Christian churches. However, there is just as little doubt that the pagan Scandinavians, like the native Americans and the Sami bear hunters, must have had a sense of symbolic landscapes, even within a hall, in which some areas were seen as being more charged, more sacred, than others. This has recently been demonstrated by the earlier-mentioned distribution of finds in some of the large chieftains’ halls that have been excavated in mainland Scandinavia, especially those from Borg in Lofoten, Norway, and in Helgö in Sweden. In both places, as in other key halls, multiple finds of the tiny gold foils (*gullgubber*) mentioned earlier have been made. The general belief today is that these objects, which are being found ever more regularly in recent years, represent a form of religious offering (see, for example, Watt 1999 and 2002), similar perhaps to the stamped copper foils offered by visitors to Greek monasteries in our own time. As noted above, one particularly interesting feature about them is that in some places the foils have been found beneath certain pillars of the main living halls of central halls. At Borg and Helgö, they were found scattered around a particular corner of the room (see Herschend 1995: 225-7; and Stamsö Munch 1991: 328-9). Clear parallels are seen in the positioning of coin finds in an early Christian church that was dug up in Överkyrke, in Västergötland, Sweden (see Andrén 1998: 386-7), concentrated just around the site of the main crucifix at the entrance to the chancel, where most offerings were made to the church. There is every reason to believe that the same applied to the positioning of the gold foils in the hall.

So what was in this corner where the gold foils were found? Herschend argues that this must have been the site of the high seat, in other words near where the high seat pillars stood, and where the *goði* (chieftain-priest), the earthly representative of the *goð* (god) sat (see Herschend 1997a: 49-55).¹⁶ Whether this was so or not, it again underlines the fact that some places in the hall were seen as being more charged or “sacred” than others. Herschend (1997a: 53-5) goes on to argue that the same sense of different symbolic areas existing within a hall can be seen in the careful placement of grave goods around certain bodies during the Age of Migrations, apparently echoing the positioning of objects in a house. Herschend’s argument is that the grave was a symbolic house, an idea supported by the earlier-mentioned construction of houses on cremation sites, or on ships, and the common saga accounts of dead warriors living on in their graves ready to defend their goods against grave robbers.

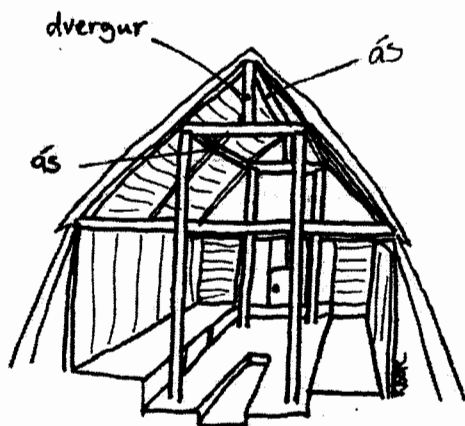


Figure 2. The position of the *dvergar* (pl.) in the hall (drawn by Karen Bek-Pedersen).

There is, however, yet another feature of the hall which has so far not been discussed, but underlines still further the idea implied above that

the Icelanders, Norwegians and Danes, at least, saw a comparison between the concrete structure of the hall and the pagan cosmological world. The feature in question comes in the form of the name, *dvergar* (pl.; singular: *dvergur*) which is used for the small blocks of wood which stood on the rafters of the twelfth-century farmhouse (and almost certainly those in earlier times), and held up the *ás*, or main beam of the roof (see Figure 2).

The earliest reference to the use of *dvergar* (dwarves) in this sense is in the twelfth-century work *Íslensk hómiliubók* (The Icelandic Book of Homilies), in an example sermon which ironically explains the symbolic message that the church building as a whole offers to the congregation:

Dvertré, er skorða staflægur og upphalda dvergum, er ás styðja, merkja þá menn í kristinni, er efla veraldarhöfðingja í ráðum, en heilög munklif í auðæfum. (Íslensk hómiliubók 1993: 150; see also Homiliu-bók 1872: 100-1)

The rafter which strengthens the lower beams (*staflægur*) and holds up the dwarves, which support the main beam (*ás*), means those people in Christianity who strengthen worldly chieftains with advice, and the holy life of monks in riches. (My translation.)

There can be no doubt that this name was regularly used in later times for these objects in farm buildings, not only in Iceland, but also in Norway and Denmark (see Aasen 1983: 120 and 923; Norsk ordbok 1966-: 2.279, Torp 1919, and Feilberg 1886-1914: 1.220; and Orðabók háskólans: <http://lexis.is>). It was obviously deeply rooted. There is no doubt either that its use is a direct reference to the statement in Snorri Sturluson’s early thirteenth-century *Prose Edda*, that the sky – or rather the skull of the primal giant Ymir – is held up by four dwarves: Norðri, Suðri, Austri and Vestri (North, South, East and West; see Snorri Sturluson 1926: 14 and 90, where the sky is literally referred to as “byrði dverganna”, or “the burden of the dwarves”).¹⁷ This in turn demonstrates that people saw symbolic parallels between the roof of the hall (centring around the high *ás* beam) and the the sky or heavens (similar to the ceilings of Icelandic churches which in later times were often painted with stars). It is

worth noting that the word *ás* (main roof beam) also means god, although the plurals are different, the first being “*ásar*”, the latter being “*Æsir*”.

This encourages further consideration of other potential symbolic parallels that people may also have had in mind in the buildings, and not least the already weightily significant carved *öndvegissúlur* which reached up to the rafters below the *dvergar*. In this new context, it is hard to avoid placing them alongside the image of the enormous strangely flowering central oak tree that is said to have grown up to the rafters in the hall of Óðinn’s supposed royal grandson, the legendary king *Völsungur*, in *Völsunga saga*.

Svá er sagt, at Völsungr konungr lét gera höll eina ágæta ok með þeim hætti, at ein eik mikil stóð i höllinni ok límar trésins með fögrum blómum stóðu út um ræfr hallarinnar, en leggrinn stóð niður i höllina, ok kölluðu þeir þat barnstokk ... (Völsunga saga 1943: 6-7)

It is said that King *Völsungur* had a magnificent hall made, in such a way that there was a huge oak in the hall and the branches of the tree, with beautiful flowers, spread out amidst the rafters of the hall, and the trunk stood in the hall, and they called that “*barnstokk*” (childtrunk?). (My translation.)¹⁸

Casting the mind’s eye further down to the foot of the pillars there is the *öndvegi*, or high seat, itself (see Figure 3) and the *god(i)* (god/priest-chieftain) seated before the flickering long fire, and in front of the pool-like cauldron that one can expect to have hung close by. If the two high seat pillars were carved with images of the gods (as *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Landnámabók* suggest) one faces a potential trinity of “sacred” figures (like the gods in Adam of Bremen’s image of the “temple” in Uppsala, and those in the oaths and toasts of *Ulfjótsslög* and *Hákonar saga góða*). Furthermore, considering the evidence of the skaldic poem *Húsdrápa* in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, *Gísla saga* (1943: 42), and the pictorial tapestry found in the Oseberg ship burial in Norway (see Krafft 1956), one can assume that the hall/*hof* might also have had other wooden carvings and/or hangings depicting mythological subjects around the walls, especially at the

times of key festivals or when other people of lower status visited to share in a sacrificial banquet (cf. the accounts of the *Disarblót* given in *Þiðrandi þáttur* and *Víga-Glúms saga*, for example; see further Gunnell 2003).

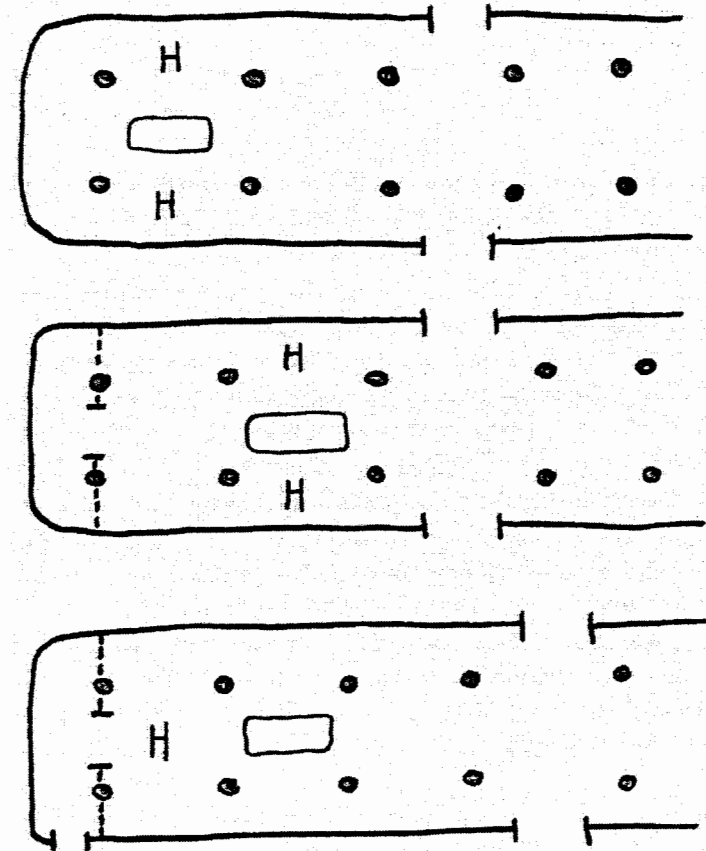


Figure 3. Possible positions of the high seat (H). The oblong indicates the fire and the circles indicate the pillars. Drawn by Karen Bek-Pedersen after Herschend 1997a: 51.

This might appear to be a little neat, but all the evidence suggests that the potential microcosmos is there for the taking, just as it is in

the Christian church, the Navajo *hogan*, the Cree tent, the Hopi Pueblo or the Siberian Ob-Ugrian house. But have we any solid evidence beyond the linguistic suggestions and *Ulfjótsslög* to support the idea of the *goði* himself taking on the role of the god; that at times, he might have formed part of this secular and religious double world? In this connection, it is worth noting two things. First of all, there are the recurring images of the dancing, horn-helmeted man with two sticks in the seventh-century helmet-plate matrix from Torslunda, Sweden, on the Finglesham bracelet from England, and on the ninth-century Oseberg tapestry from Norway, just to mention three examples found over a wide area of territory over a space of about two hundred years (see Gunnell 1995: 36-80). The common interpretation of this figure is that he represents a priest in the role of the god Óðinn (with two bird heads on the ends of the horns on the helmet, and possibly one eye, at least in the Torslunda example), dancing with spears or sticks in his hands alongside an animal-skinned *berserker* warrior. Certainly, full-sized helmet masks from the Bronze and Iron Age have been found in bogs in Viksö, Denmark and at Sutton Hoo in England, and animal masks have come to light in Hedeby in Denmark (see Gunnell 1995: 44 and 73). If the horned figure here is a priest, then the evidence from Torslunda and Oseberg implies the basic element of role-taking by two figures – perhaps a priest initiating a warrior. The key point is that the horned figure would then seem to be both a priest and Óðinn at once; the other both a man and an animal, a literal shape-changer.

I have argued elsewhere that such dramatic activities involving the role-taking of gods (over and above the suggestion implied by the official titles *goði* and *gyðja*) are backed up still further by the evidence of the direct speech *ljóðaháttur*-metre monologues and dialogues contained in the collection of Eddic poetry, which was recorded in the thirteenth century, but almost certainly in many cases has roots in pagan times. Many believe that the form of these poems might well have roots in earlier initiation and seasonal rituals (see further Gunnell 1995). Whatever performance context these works had in the thirteenth century, they still involve the earlier “gods” speaking directly to the listeners of a later time, in some cases enumerating mystical, cosmological and ritually-based wisdom, as in works like *Grimnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Skírnismál*, *Sigurdrífumál*

and *Rúnatal Hávamála*, the last three of which involve detailed descriptions of the enactment of rune magic. Dramatic monologues and dialogues like these, even when recited or chanted in a thirteenth-century hall, create their own symbolic setting. The same would have applied in a *hof*-hall before the arrival of Christianity. The presenter of *Grimnismál*, “Óðinn”, visually stands simultaneously in both the mythological hall of King Geirröður and in the later hall of the listeners. As noted earlier, up above him are the *dvergjar*, both wooden and mythological, holding up both the solid roof and the mythological heavens, above the wooden pillars which came from the old Norwegian central place, both practical and symbolic of the world tree Yggdrasil (cf. *Irmunsul*: see note 18). The day after such a performance, with the return of daylight and the fading of the alcoholic haze that would have added to the liminality of the moment, the *hof* would be a hall again, and the priest an ordinary farmer. But the visual moment of the presentation in the high seat (whether we refer to it as the *öndvegi*, Óðinn’s high seat *Hlíðskjálf*, or simply as the *þularstóll* [reciter’s seat] referred to in the poem *Hávamál*, st. 111) would be indelible, and underlined the political standing of the speaker in the eyes of the local inhabitants of his central area. That was one of the gains of moving religion from nature into the hall.

In short, then, even considering the fragmentary evidence presented here, there was no direct need for separate “temple” buildings to have existed in pagan Iceland. The archetypal *hof* and old natural cultic place was already implicit in the structure of the hall.

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Notes

- 1 A shortened version of this article was presented at the International Saga Conference in Bonn in July 2003. In its original form, it was presented as a lecture at the Traditional Cosmology Society conference on “Structure and Belief in Northern Europe” at the University of Edinburgh in February 2003.
- 2 See *Landnámabók* 1986; trans. in *The Book of Settlements* 1972.

- 3 It is interesting that the gods construct *hörgar* and *hof* rather than halls. This might lend further support to the *hof* being essentially a gathering place (cf. the so-called *leikskálar*, or games halls, which seem to have been buildings specially constructed to house visitors at public games gatherings; see Gunnell 1995: 31) for the sharing of food and drink, rather than simply places of prayer and worship. Indeed, one wonders whom the gods were expected to worship in these buildings. On the other hand, as *Völuspá* shows, the gods are clearly aware of the need for meetings and cooperation at times of difficulty. For the Eddic poems, see *Eddadigte* 1964 and 1971; translations are available in *The Poetic Edda* 1996.
- 4 As Olaf Olsen (1966: 245-75, and 1969) noted, the cases of Mære near Trondheim and Uppsala in Sweden might be exceptions. See more recently, Andrén 2002: 320-9, which includes details about recent findings at the church in Frösö in Jämtland, Sweden; and Nordahl 1996 on the recent discoveries in Gamla Uppsala.
- 5 For the references from Tacitus, see *Germania*, chs. 7, 9-12, 12, 40 and 43; and *The Annals*, ch. 3, for example in Tacitus 1970, 1948 and 1925-1937.
- 6 In this context, note the use of the word *stafgarður* for a fenced off area of worship in the early *Gutasaga* (“troðu menn a hult ok a hauga, vi ok stafgarða ok a haiþin guð”; i.e. “people believed in groves and mounds, shrines and *stafgarðar* and pagan gods”: *Guta saga* 1999: 4-5, and Hultgård 1996: 33); and the *Gutalög* law (see *Guterlov og Gutersaga* 1910: 31-2). Note also the similar expression “friðgeard” referring to a fenced area containing a rock, tree or spring, in an early Northumbrian law; see Olaf Olsen 1966: 84.
- 7 See for example Brink 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999, Andrén 1998, 1999 and 2002, Fabeck 1998, 1999a and 1999b, Näsman 1998, and Herschend 1997a, 1997b and 1999. See recently on the finds at Lunda near Strängnäs: <http://www.raa.se/uv/lunda2002> (last viewed in April 2004).
- 8 There are five examples in Shetland, and only one in the Færoes, as opposed to over eighty farms in Norway named simply *Hof* and twenty-three in Iceland. Compounds such as Torshof and Hofstaðir increase this number considerably; see Orri Vésteinsson 2003, Olafur Briem 1985: 151-2, Jakobsen 1901, and Magnus Olsen 1926: 227-56.

- 9 In this context, it is interesting to note the fact that the early *Gulatingslög* (ch. 29) states that “blot er oss oc kviðiat at ver skulum eigi blota heiðit guð ne hauga ne horga”, in other words “sacrifices must not be made to pagan gods, *haugar* or *hörgar*”: see *Den eldre Gulatingslova* 1994: 52. The word *hof* in the similar alliterating couplet from the poems *Völuspá* and *Vafbrúðnismal* (see above) is thus replaced by another word for a small hill or mound, but now a mound containing a dead person. As will be noted later, there is every reason to believe that small buildings were also often constructed around the dead before they were interred in a grave mound.
- 10 See Larsson 2001a and 2002 on Uppåkra, Nielsen 1996, Nielsen and Lindeblad 1999 on Borg, Hansen 1993 and 1996 on Dejbjerg, Christensen 1991: 48-50 on Lejre, Jørgensen 1998, 2001 and 2002 on Tissø, Åqvist 1996 on Säby and Sanda, Sørensen 1994, Thrane 1998 on Gudme, and Hope-Taylor 1977: 97-102, 277-80, and Wilson 1992: 45-7 on Yeavering. See also <http://www.raa.se/uv/lunda2002> last viewed in April 2004 on the recent Lunda finds.
- 11 Certainly *Landnámabók* (1986: 358) refers to offerings to waterfalls, *Kristni saga* (see *Biskupa sögur* 1858-1878: 1.5) has a reference to a helpful spirit known as an *ármaður* living in a rock, *Kormáks saga* (1939: 288-9) refers directly to sacrifices to elves also living in a rock, and *Kjalnesinga saga* (1959: 7) contains an intriguing reference to a sacrificial pool. Furthermore, there are several placenames showing that parts of nature were dedicated to gods as occurred elsewhere, but the key cult activities referred to in accounts from the sagas do not seem to have taken place at these sites. These all seem to be private places of worship rather than public sites.
- 12 See further Orri Vésteinsson 2001: 332-3, and Lucas 1999: 24 on the animal remains and animal skulls found at Hofstaðir which point to the fact that the cattle were ritually beheaded, their skulls later being used to decorate the walls of the building. As Orri points out, this would appear to support the idea that ritual activities also took place in the vicinity of this otherwise normal, if large, hall. These activities would seem to be connected to a sacrificial feast.
- 13 Orri Vésteinsson (2003) notes forty-one examples of Hof placenames in Iceland: twenty-four Hof, thirteen Hofstaðir, and six placenames with Hof in other compounds such as Hofakur, Hofdæli, Hofgarðar, Hofteigur, Hoffell, and Hofströnd.

- 14 See further Strömbäck 1928. There is no reason for doubting that this practice occurred. Studies of folk customs show that people in many parts of Sweden believed that similar approaches had been used for deciding the local sites for their farms and churches; see Nyman and Campbell 1976: 1.12-16, 2.37-42.
- 15 Also worth noting in this context is the way medieval churches became the world as an effective symbolic setting for the liturgical drama of France, England and Germany; see, for example, Ogden 2002: 35-121. See also Árni Einarsson 1997, and the reference to *Íslensk hómiliubók* below on the symbolic meaning of houses in Christian works.
- 16 It can be no coincidence that the priest-chieftain was referred to as a *goði*, and the priestess as a *gyðja*. The latter word is also used for a goddess, and there can be little question that the former is also drawn from the word *goð*. See further Jakob Benediktsson 1974: 172, and Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989: 265. The term *goði* was clearly more widespread than was previously thought. In addition to Iceland, it was used in at least both Sweden and Denmark in this religious meaning; see the Swedish evidence from both placenames and rune stones in Brink 1997: 428, 1998: 308 and 316-17, and 1999: 424-7 and 430-1, and in Fabech 1999a: 462-3 and 1998: 158-9.
- 17 For a translation of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* in this connection, see Snorri Sturluson 1987: 12 and 88.
- 18 Further comparisons might be made to the image of the enormous sacred tree of the Saxons, *Irmunsul*, which was destroyed by Charlemagne; see Turville-Petre 1972, and the references in Grimm 1882: 115-19.

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Opposites and Mediators in Old Norse Mythology

KAREN BEK-PEDERSEN

The paper concerns the number three. It seeks an explanation for the number three often being considered special, even magical, by looking at ways of dividing into three, using Old Norse mythology as an example. As a starting point for this exploration, the attempt was made to identify what may be referred to as "the nature of threefold divisions", and this was done by writing out a list of various divisions into three with a view to seeing if any pattern might be discernible. This list included such entries as: past-present-future; inside-outside-threshold; day-night-dawn and father-son-husband / mother-daughter-wife. The entry day-night-dawn seemed troublesome because it necessitated the inclusion of a fourth component, namely dusk (see below). Initially, it was the entries concerning family relationships which provided an opening into the field.

THE MEDIATOR

On first sight the two entries looked entirely parallel: father-son-husband; mother-daughter-wife, but, on second thoughts, Old Norse society was patriarchal rather than matriarchal, which means that greater emphasis was put on the father's bloodline than on the mother's. Where the masculine entry on the list runs in a straight line, the feminine entry does not.

father		mother
		/
husband	~	wife
son		daughter

At the point of marriage the woman moves from her parents' household to that of her husband,¹ and in this way the woman – as

Cosmos: The Journal of the Traditional Cosmology Society is published twice a year, in June and December. It is concerned with exploring myth, religion and cosmology across cultural and disciplinary boundaries and with increasing understanding of world-views in the past and present.

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Books for review and reviews should be sent to the review editor, Dr Aude Le Borgne, at Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, 27 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LD, Scotland, UK. Enquiries may be made by email to audelb7@hotmail.com. Reviews may be submitted by email or on disc (preferably formatted for Word for Windows, PC) or as clear unmarked typescript suitable for scanning. All relevant books received will be listed and as many as possible will be reviewed.

(continued on inside back cover)

COSMOS

The Journal of the Traditional Cosmology Society

Volume 17 Number 1

June 2001

Editor: Emily Lyle

Review Editor: Aude Le Borgne

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