

AN ENCAPSULATION OF ÓÐINN:  
RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND RITUAL PRACTICE AMONG  
THE VIKING AGE ELITE WITH PARTICULAR FOCUS  
UPON THE PRACTICE OF RITUAL HANGING  
500 -1050 AD

A thesis presented in 2015 for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
Scandinavian Studies at the University of Aberdeen by

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## Summary

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The cult surrounding the complex and core Old Norse deity Óðinn encompasses a barely known group who are further disappearing into the folds of time. This thesis seeks to shed light upon and attempt to understand a motif that appears to be well recognised as central to the worship of this deity but one rarely examined in any depth: the motivations for, the act of and the resulting image surrounding the act of human sacrifice or more specifically, hanging and the hanged body. The cult of Óðinn and its more violent aspects has, with sufficient cause, been a topic carefully set aside for many years after the Second World War. Yet with the ever present march of time, we appear to have reached a point where it has become possible to discuss such topics in the light of modernity. To do so, I adhere largely to a literary studies model, focussing primarily upon eddic and skaldic poetry and the consistent underlying motifs expressed in conjunction with descriptions of this seemingly ritualistic act. To these, I add the study of legal and historical texts, linguistics and contemporary chronicles. I further include the results of modern archaeology and toponymy, with additional examples drawn from directly related and comparative time periods and cultures.

The following chapters first assess Óðinn in connection with men and specifically, trees. These three elements can be seen to link into the overarching motif and practice of hanging, as observed in theophoric places-names of Scandinavia. It then follows to link the deity and the motif and practice of hanging more specifically, through close analysis of the gods' own hanging and how that related to, or created, ritual practice. It is also essential to understand how methods of execution were understood in the Viking Age and as such, evaluate hanging's social reputation in order to bring the effects of cultic practice into Viking reality.

Through contemporary poetic and historical examples, I examine the method and academically suggested motivations for this practice and by highlighting the specific factors of proper death, reputation, personal honour and essentially, lasting memory, find that the two do not match. Lastly, I examine the social response to death and the importance of entering the afterlife *correctly* and additionally, being left to rest peacefully. With hanging lying in direct opposition to this belief, it is possible to show that the practice of hanging, dedicated to Óðinn, is not a sacrifice of an individual to a war deity, but a multipurpose wartime sacrifice of *knowledge* as well as performing the role of highly destructive and dangerous political and social weapon.

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## Foreword

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The backbone of this study began when a friend, knowing of my background in Viking history and Óðinnic myth (and having read some eddic and skaldic poetry themselves) simply asked, ‘Why?’ in relation to the occasional hanging events. Able to outline the general consensus on the matter, the friend took my explanation on board but as it turned out, the crux of the matter lay elsewhere with a deeper, more elusive, query: ‘What does the god get out of it?’

Presuming to know the answer, but soon finding that I was unable to answer with much clarity, the idea niggled, growing arms and legs in the back of my mind. In an age defined by war, travel and especially *trade*, what value indeed did believers confer to a hanged victim, dedicated to their god, when the destruction of war could offer so much more, especially in terms of human life? Further, why sacrifice in this way to one particular god and how did the role of the god and the general beliefs regarding death factor into all of this? Unable to find answers among current academic consensus and with a growing personal interest in Óðinnic mythology, religion, ritual and its role in society, this study of religion and death - with specific focus upon the famed hanging ritual - was born.

As common courtesy, it should be noted that this thesis includes some images that some may find unpleasant featuring as part of the analysis of bog body finds in Chapter Six.

## Acknowledgements

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I will start as many Historians do or at least try to do: chronologically.

My parents, Paul and Lesley Dutton - amateur (only in the professional sense) historians all my life and active encouragers of participation, despite *intense* resistance from we three children for many years. Osmosis works, I guess. Beyond this, unquestionable support in my ten years at University has not gone unappreciated and will continue to be for many years to come.

Julie Bilsland *nee* Allan - my History teacher at school as a young (and not so diligent) man who opened the joys of the subject to me in the only class I actually enjoyed. I've been consuming it ever since. Thanks for the inspiration to ditch science once and for all at University, Julie.

Lisa Collinson - for an unendingly positive outlook, teaching a cracking undergraduate Celtic course and then subverting me to the dark side of Nordic studies by paving the way to the Centre.

Tarrin Wills and Karen Bek-Pederson - my first (and patient) teachers of Old Norse, Scandinavian history and its glorious literary tradition. This would not have been possible without the solid foundations laid. Sorry about all those essays on Óðinn Karen, but it panned out in the end.

Stefan Brink - for opening the Centre, for conveniently returning after research leave the day I started my thesis, for sticking in Aberdeen despite Sweden being far away and for refusing to close the doors between us all on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor. Oh. All the advice, proofing and support was greatly appreciated too.

Hannah Burrows - a late comer to the advisory team and Centre after Tarrin's departure at the end of 2014 but an incredibly welcome one. Many thanks for all of your efforts, sound advice and sunny disposition.

Lurking inhabitants of the Centre (and its associates) - this PhD is the result of each and every person who continues to operate or once operated within our hallowed halls during my three (with my two previous dissertations, five) years. For advice, resources, blank faces to bounce

insane ideas off of, people tolerant of an insatiable need to not sit still, emergency tea and an all-round pleasant atmosphere of like-minded people, prospective academics should look no further. No seriously, stop. Stefan will find you a desk.

Véronique Heijnsbroek - the primary reason I survived all of this and the one who had to listen to weird, impossible and generally gross things about Óðinn and the Viking world for three years (at all hours of the day and night) and *still* managed to smile all the way through.

I eagerly await our wedding in August 2016.

Academic and personal individuals aside, I'd also like to thank Colin Morgan of *Golden Square Wealth Management* for being the most flexible employer *ever* as well as various funding bodies such as the *Robert Nicol Trust* and *The Scottish International Education Trust* that have allowed me to feed myself and fund research trips that became core to the completion of this thesis. Final thanks go to the *College of Arts and Social Sciences* at the University of Aberdeen for the initial grant to cover my fees.

## List of Abbreviations

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### Languages or Ethnic Denominations

IE - Indo-European

ON - Old (West) Norse-Icelandic

OEN - Old East Norse

OSw - Old Swedish

OD - Old Danish

OE - Old English

OS - Old Saxon

OHG - Old High German

PGmc - Proto-Germanic

PIE - Proto Indo-European

### Texts

SSGL - *Samling af Sweriges gamla lagar*

OED - *Oxford English Dictionary*

### Editions

ÍF - *Íslensk fornrit*

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Fig. 25: Tollund Man on discovery.

## Note on Primary Source Editions Used

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For the use of eddic poetry in this thesis, I take all **stanza** numbers and citations from the 2014 editions of *Eddukvæði I* and *II*, edited by Jónas Kristjánson and Vésteinn Ólason, unless stated otherwise. The entries appear in the format, for example, *Hávamál* 1.

For the use of *Snorra Edda*, I take all **chapter** numbers and citations from Anthony Faulkes' 1998 edition *Skáldskaparmál Vol. I* and his 2005 edition *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, unless stated otherwise. The entries appear in the format, for example, *Gylfaginning* 1.

The same format applies to all skaldic poetic citations – *title* stanza number – and saga citations – *title* chapter number.

Historical chronicle citations follow the format *title*, book number (Roman numeral), chapter number (Arabic numeral).

As for which individual edition is being referred to, this information has been contained to the Bibliography under the heading 'Primary Sources' to reduce visual clutter and the word count in this limited environment.

As for the use of *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* for the purposes of definition and etymology, all citations are taken from the online service (for the sake of most current) and can be accessed at <http://www.oed.com>.

## **Note on Translation**

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Concerning ON, each stanza or section of prose quoted shall have the original text facing to provide proficient readers with a version from which a full sense of meaning may be derived without subtle losses in translation. With respect to individual translations, these have all been rendered by my own hand so any factual errors and resulting conclusions drawn from them are my mistake alone. The same is true for any instances of OE. In the case of particular ON terms or words, they shall remain in this form to avoid any preconceptions of a word that may be attached in the use of modern English.

Any source quoted in which the original language is not ON (i.e. Latin), shall appear only in translation and will be taken from secondary sources unless the text itself is linguistically significant or if no English translation could be found.

Throughout this thesis, personal names, titles of literary works and the like shall be used in their non-Anglicised, non-translated forms.

## Introduction and Method

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A surface evaluation of the mythology, literature, poetry and landscape of Viking Age Scandinavia would have us recognise a people preoccupied with religion and death. With the addition of the divine figure Óðinn to the picture, mainstream conceptions are unsurprising when it comes to the images and rituals renowned of the Age. If we imagine Óðinn's position with regard to religion and death, we conjure images of his self-immolation upon Yggdrasil, his looming view over battlefields with dedicantes promising the slain in his name, and the sending out of the *valkyrjur* to recruit for his army, his *einherjar*, in Valhøll. Yet through examination of the mythology, related medieval literature and physical landscape of the Viking Age it is apparent that Óðinn performed a far more varied and complex function within Viking society than one would first presume. The god can even be noted to have performed an intimately familial role as both literal ancestor and deity to particular groups and sole individuals during the Viking Age thus forming a close relationship between the divine and worshipper. Óðinn was not simply the lofty god of war and death but of knowledge, wisdom, poetry, wealth, fame, memory and an immortality of sorts, as will be shown throughout this thesis. Yet if we flip the coin, Óðinn was also the god of societal outcasts, magic and deception with intrinsic transgender qualities that would surely shame any Viking warrior. The contradictions do not end there. As Haugen (1983: 19) put it, Óðinn is also “an immortal who is also mortal, a moralist who cultivates immorality and a warrior who avoids war. He is all-knowing, but he is forever seeking knowledge.” It is difficult to comprehend how any one figure could embody each of these features at once despite the glaring contradictions.

As a result, a tremendous amount has been written about Óðinn, his believed origins and aspects of the cult that surrounded him yet very little has been put forth with specific focus upon the inner workings of the cult in a wider societal and geographical context. The Viking Age was one often marked by brutality, fear and unsavoury practice often simply in the name of wealth and fame masked by lofty ideal but the darker aspects should not and cannot be shied away from. As a result of this avoidance, little progress has been made beyond general, repetitive and somewhat archaic conclusions with regards to the ritual reverence of Óðinn (see Chapter Two). It is not enough to examine the highlighted cases of Óðinnic ritual without also considering the social, political, familial and even individual factors. Furthermore, the coming

of Christianity must be recognised as a significant catalyst for the practice of particular elements of pagan religion (see §6.5.4 to §6.6).

In order to achieve this, an interdisciplinary approach will be taken as is often necessary in all modern research. Historical investigation is no longer bound by its discipline and is able to incorporate the skills and knowledge base from the associated schools of archaeology, anthropology, philology, linguistics, literary studies and so on, something which has proved exceptionally fruitful both empirically and theoretically. To arrive at the resulting conclusions, the primary focus nonetheless falls upon medieval literature, linguistics and the material record with assistance from the fields of cultural anthropology and toponomastics. Only by combining each of the above areas of study can we arrive at more accurate conclusions concerning Viking Age religious belief. As Brink (2002: 317) states:

For a culture with practically no written sources, as in early Scandinavia, interdisciplinary studies are vital for delving as deeply as possible into our few and scattered sources in order to extract the small amount of information they conceal.

Through an investigation of Óðinn's place in historical societies and their landscape as well as his development in myth, ritual and religious practices in relation to death, it is possible to show that the linking factors between each of these were the concepts of knowledge, conflict and lasting memory. As such, this study asks the following core questions: Who is Óðinn: when and where was he worshipped and by whom? Can we identify which ritual practices may have been associated with Óðinn and can we piece together how they may have functioned? If so, what societal purpose did these rituals hold and why? Combining each of these aspects leads to the ultimate purpose of questioning whether or not hanging as a ritual act can be said to have been ever performed in relation to the cult of Óðinn and whether it was supposed to be seen as a positive offering, a destructive event or synthesis of the two.

The chosen areas of geographical study incorporate mainland Scandinavia and South-East England preceding and during the Viking Age, which displayed particular connections with the cult of Óðinn. Iceland, noticeably absent, has been excluded due to the sheer lack of evidence for Óðinnic worship in both the landscape and its native literary sources (see §1.5.1).

Chapter Two analyses the creation and use of myth in relation to ritual practice and the groups which may have performed it. This in turn requires an analysis of myth as a concept and the societal role it performs. In Chapter Three I first investigate the creation and

development of both the theonym and the mythology for the god Óðinn through the use of linguistic development and the literature of the Norse and comparative cultures to gain an understanding of why he may have been seen as a god of multiple spheres and particularly the dead. Furthermore, through detailed place name analysis, I will highlight examples of where Óðinnic cult practice could have taken place. This will further include an analysis of possible hanging locations highlighted by topological identifiers and surviving/historic names. The physical landscape forms an essential aspect of this analysis as the practice of naming or even imagining the land can tell us a great deal of how people saw their world and tried to make sense of it. Reference will be made to preceding time periods (i.e. the (European) Iron Age, Vendel Period and the Migration Age) when analysing any possible development and continuity of practice in Chapter Three. Óðinn's specific roles in the mythology will also be examined there in order to provide a foundation for our view of Óðinn's complex nature and as such, particularly core elements rise to the fore. It falls naturally, in Chapters Four and Five, to then highlight elements of the mythology understood to represent prototypes for Óðinnic ritual, in this case hanging, and why a worshipper would undertake these practices in order to intercede with their god. Furthermore, the literary evidence also suggests that the hanged body could be used to mark the presence (or expected presence) of Óðinn. Skaldic poetry will become central in displaying that a proper death and resulting memorial was key and that its denial would be an immense blow. With memory intertwined with the concepts of familial and personal honour and in an almost exclusively oral culture, there were few lasting ways to remember one's own. Therefore, a negative experience could be devastating for both the living and the deceased. As a result, as shown in Chapters Six and Seven, in an examination of the overwhelming material culture which has been left for archaeologists to gradually uncover, it will prove possible to show that the often discussed hanging ritual held far more depth than has been previously accredited. However, the issues arising from this material record and the discovered instances of hanging are often immensely difficult to interpret as well

## Chapter One

### Source Evaluation and their Societal Context

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#### 1.0 Primary Source Material

To understand pagan belief and worship such as that relative to Óðinn and his self-immolation on the tree, multiple obstacles stand between us and comprehensive answers. First and foremost, one must remember that mythology is created by people for people and that it rarely represents historical individuals. As Chapter Three will show, myth is instead used fluidly to pass on information, knowledge or stories to instruct, teach or explain. When dealing with mythology, it is not vital to strive too hard to divide the myth and legend from ‘real’ history as in the mindset of the sixth to eleventh centuries in question, no such division existed. The two were instead interwoven to create a contemporary world view. In order to understand the world as they did, one must view it as they did: one of turmoil and opportunity.

Yet in order to trace myth in a society such as this, one must consider the practice of orality. During the pagan period of Scandinavian history, literacy was virtually non-existent beyond the little that was inscribed upon stones or small items in the form of runic inscription. Viking Scandinavia was instead dominated by an oral culture akin to many other European (and beyond) nations of this period. Hence there is no record of pagan belief systems in a formal contemporary manner. The somewhat limited body of Scandinavian literary records regarding religion and ritual - be they myth, poetry, saga or chronicle - arrive with the introduction of formal learning to the North and the arrival of Western Christianity. Earlier attestations of comparable practices to Viking Age hanging are widespread across the literature of learned Europe but are again separated from the Viking Age by both time and geography and often relate to practices prior to the author’s own time. Yet with the overlap in chronology, Christianity makes the final stages of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian pagan religion ‘known’. The difficulties that arise from a source base regarding pagan culture emerging from a society that was both Christian and two to three hundred years removed from the pagan period are vast. Therefore it is necessary to analyse a variety of the different genres of literary source material used in this thesis in order to better understand its content, context and short-comings.

## 1.1 Literary Sources

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this study to evaluate the literary corpus surrounding Óðinnic worship in full, our core source base regarding Norse mythology and religious systems is particularly limited. Consequently, these sources often require cross-referencing to multiple other genres of medieval literature in order to more fully understand the surviving content. However, even these cross-references must be treated carefully for motive, bias and so on. In simple terms, there were effectively two phases of Norse ‘literature’, spanning five hundred years. In the first phase of c.800-1000 our evidence is predominantly that of eddic and skaldic poetry, created as ‘hall performances’ for kings, chieftains and their retinues that is then written down in the latter phase. Between c.1000-1150, the Scandinavian peninsula was undergoing its shift towards Christendom and as such, pagan and epic themes begin to lose their place of prominence. The second phase of c.1150-1350 encompasses the saga period in which one sees the creation of the far longer, developed and structured tales. These issue from among the Christian Scandinavians with saga manuscript production curiously occurring almost exclusively in Iceland. With these differing periods, one would expect a dilution of mythic themes, traces of detailed mythological knowledge and specific elements of ritual practice. Therefore, cross-referencing of material with the other literary genres outlined below is essential in tandem with identifying and then keeping in mind their own drawbacks.

### 1.1.1 Myth

In terms of the core mythology considered today, there are two particular storehouses: *The Poetic Edda* and *Snorra (Prose) Edda*. The oldest extant manuscripts were both created in medieval Christian Iceland and are dated to the end of the thirteenth century or the early decades of the fourteenth (Lindblad 1954: vii-xvi, Faulkes 2005a: xxvii). With regard to these manuscripts, the arrival of Christianity in Scandinavia was both a blessing and a curse: without it, scholars would likely have no written sources detailing the beliefs of this period, but with it, one has the added difficulty of separating the confused or obscure accounts of pagan belief and practice from Christian authors, each with their own motivations, writing centuries later. Where multiple extant manuscripts exist featuring the same content, one finds that few agree entirely or are even complete. Scholarship is fortunate to have the *fornaldarsögur*, *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur* to flesh out our information but again, these are finite and also written centuries after the pagan period (see Clunies Ross 2010).

However woeful the circumstances of our mythological source base appears, these manuscripts and later allusions toward mythological knowledge are accompanied by a complex material record and iconographic examples, further bolstering the remains of Viking myth. Whilst it is evident that more existed, due to references to now lost poems in sagas or suggestive manuscript glosses, these traditions are lost to time. The largest issue with the mythological source base is that scholars, in the majority of cases, now possess only one version of what was once an oral tale and hence, have to ‘take its word for it’.<sup>1</sup> During the Viking Age it is safe to assume that there would have been no one version of a popular eddic poem in circulation. Multiple poets would no doubt have taken the core themes and moulded them per audience or per their own influences or intended design. Yet once written down, the poem became static, leaving scholars unable to confirm or deny its content’s accuracy regarding popular thought or belief.<sup>2</sup> With these difficulties, scholars are increasingly being forced ‘to think outside of the box’ in what appears to be a speculative manner. Yet, some recent leaps of faith, particularly within archaeology (cf. Chapter Two), have proved fruitful in multiple forms, expanding our knowledge in ways that could not be achieved by simply re-examining our extant sources, hoping for new answers.<sup>3</sup>

#### 1.1.1.1 *The Poetic Edda*

*The Poetic Edda* is an unattributed collection of heroic and mythological Norse poetry, presumed to contain examples of the oldest surviving pagan oral tradition; a work combining both history and fiction blended together. The text is found primarily within two thirteenth century manuscripts, which both go by the same name: *Codex Regius* (*Konungsbók*, GKS 2365 4to and AM 748 I 4to). Additional poems (as well as scribal comparisons) have been drawn from *Flateyjarbók* (GKS 1005 fol) and these are used to make up modern editions of a ‘complete’ (whilst illusory) *Edda*. As to the anonymity of the poems, Klaus von See (1971: 109) suggests “although it [eddic poetry] may preserve a very honourable tradition, it was not regarded as an ‘art’ by the standards of that time.” If one considers that eddic poetry was an

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<sup>1</sup> The issues with working from once purely oral sources never designed to be written down are vast. See the ‘Oral-Formulaic Theory/Parry-Lord Theory’, Parry (1971) and Lord (1960).

<sup>2</sup> Gunnell, Terry. “The Uses of the Performance Studies Approach for the Study of Old Norse Religion” The University of Aberdeen (21/02/13).

<sup>3</sup> As Einstein reportedly put it, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

exponent of the epic genre, unlike skaldic poetry, it was not designed to praise, mock or scorn but simply to *tell*. This is not to deny the individual poet's skill in constructing or performing the tale but if it was not considered to be truly the poets' own and instead a product of common tradition, then von See's suggestion has merit. This suggestion finds support with Gunnell (2013) highlighting the circulation of multiple versions of any given poem at any one time.

Whilst the exact age of these poems is a long lasting and ongoing scholarly debate, they are largely attributed to the late tenth century, thus predating conversion to Christianity (Lindblad 1954). The presence of *The Poetic Edda* can be seen in multitudes of later Norse works, primarily within Snorri Sturluson's prose works and *Íslendingasögur*, quoted in stanzas to support medieval rationalisation of pagan material or to draw upon mythological motifs, flavouring the prose. It could be said that the most striking aspect of *The Poetic Edda* is that in its creation of vast and evocative imagery, incorporating numerous themes and evoking a range of emotion and humour, the language used is strikingly simple and direct, as is commonplace with the eddic metre of *fornyrðislag* 'the metre of ancient deeds'. This style and use of language nonetheless creates one supplementary problem: these stanzas do not elaborate upon their meaning and often rely upon some background knowledge to understand events or particular references.

Despite the vast range of content, the main events of the deity-orientated part of the eddic corpus largely revolve around Óðinn and his varied roles: his creation of the world and man (*Völuspá*); his acquisition of magic, poetry and runes (*Hávamál*); wisdom contests (*Vafþrúðnismál*); his self-immolation (*Hávamál*); his favouring mortals with fame and victory (*Hyndluljóð*), and choosing the battle dead for his hall and the creation of an army housed in Valhøll in order to combat the forces of the coming apocalypse (*Völuspá*, *Grímnismál*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I-II*). As Lindow (2001: 250) states, "To understand Óðinn is to understand the mythology, and vice versa." It is for this very reason that a vast volume of scholarship features Óðinn and will continue to do so.

#### 1.1.1.1.1 *Hávamál*

Due to the extensive use of *Hávamál*, its exclusivity in retelling Óðinn's self-immolation, its possible role in creating a method of ritual practice and the large body of scholarship surrounding its construction, motif, authorship and date, some discussion of these factors must

be entered into. *Hávamál* survives in its longest form only within *Codex Regius* (GKS 2365 4to) and the poem as a whole appears to have been designed in order to exemplify human social wisdom, culminating in the poet, through the voice of Óðinn, recounting his own quest for knowledge (cf. Evans 1986, McKinnell 2007a). However, due to the disjointed nature of its content, Karl Müllenhoff (1891) concluded that *Hávamál* comprised of various poems that had been compiled into one. As a result of this, Müllenhoff (1891: 250-288) divided the poem into six stanzaic sections:<sup>4</sup>

1. sts 1-79 ‘The Gnostic Poem’
2. sts ~95-102 ‘Óðinn’s adventure with *Billings mæð*’
3. sts 103-110 ‘Óðinn’s adventure with Gunnlōð’
4. sts 111-137 ‘*Loddfáfnismál*’
5. sts 138-145 ‘*Rúnatal*’
6. sts 146-163 ‘*Ljóðatal*’

Since this rough division, scholarship has largely adhered to these sections and discussed them by reference to their segmented names but it is evident that Müllenhoff could not account for all of the stanzas and some that he had classified fit uncomfortably (Evans 1986: 8). Furthermore, it is evident that the thirteenth-century compiler of our surviving version intended his audience to read the piece as one due to the lack of division (McKinnell 2007b: 96). With lengthy discussion of metre and comparative constructions, McKinnell (2007b) is forced to return to the concept of three distinct sections, marked by scribal capitalisation, as proposed by Bjarne Fidjestøl (1999: 218):<sup>5</sup>

1. sts 1-110 ‘*Hávamál* I’
2. sts 111-137 ‘*Hávamál* II’
3. sts 138-163 ‘*Hávamál* III’

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<sup>4</sup> These stanza divisions are of Müllenhoff’s own devising in working from the manuscript GKS 2365 4to directly.

<sup>5</sup> The same is true for Fidjestøl’s stanza divisions.

Yet the discussion does not end there. Further metrical analysis shows these divisions also to be unsatisfactory on the basis of ‘encyclopaedic’ or largely ‘unnecessary’ stanzas, those which break the metrical flow or contribute little to the poem and their immediate surrounds (McKinnell 2007b: 100-106). McKinnell suggests that by (theoretically) removing these stanzas (81-83, 85-90, 137, 142-145) one instead sees four poems emerge (2007b: 106):<sup>6</sup>

1. sts The Gnostic Poem (roughly 1–79)
2. sts The Poem of Sexual Intrigue (84, 91–110)
3. sts *Loddfáfnismál* (111/4–8 and 11, 112–36)
4. sts *Ljóðatal* (138–141, 146–161, 162 lines 1–3, 163)

As one can see, this roughly matches Müllenhoff’s original distinctions, except that the thematically linked sections of 2-3 and 5-6 have been combined into single pieces and logical attempts have been made to explain his unattributed/attributionable and questionable stanzas. Therefore, the section featuring Óðinn’s own hanging (sts 138-141), it shall be collectively referred to in this thesis as *Ljóðatal*, rather than the historical name of *Rúnatal* as the content makes it evident that 146-161 result directly from Óðinn’s self-immolation.

As to the poem’s age, if it can be regarded as a complete work, both Grønvik (1999: 9) and Sundqvist (2009: 649-650) have presumed that Eyvindr skáldaspillir quoted, or at least used some of its lines in his *Hákonarmál* (cf. *Hávamál* 21), and therefore suggest that *Hávamál* (or at least the *Ljóðatal* section) was known in Norway in the tenth century. Nevertheless, any attempt to firmly date the entire piece has become almost superfluous due to the modern concept of multiple poems and their potentially differing dates of construction. One thing is known, however. Through the efforts of Gustaf Lindblad (1954) and his palaeographical study of *Codex Regius*, *Hávamál* has been shown to have been added to the manuscript somewhat later than its surrounding eddic fellows.<sup>7</sup> This in turn perhaps explains some of its ‘oddities’ when compared to the surrounding mythological material.

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<sup>6</sup> The same is true for McKinnell’s stanza divisions.

<sup>7</sup> See Lindblad (1954: 263-265) for conclusions regarding *Hávamál* specifically.

### 1.1.1.2 *Snorra (Prose) Edda*

The *Snorra Edda* was written in the thirteenth century, probably by the famous Icelandic chieftain, historian and poet, Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241). Featuring a vast collection of pre-Christian tales, the work can be seen to build and expand upon the eddic poems found within *The Poetic Edda*, told in the words of a medieval Christian author. *Snorra Edda* reveals a great deal of information concerning the Norse gods and their surrounding tales, as Snorri (again, presuming he is the author) understood them. Snorri begins his *Prologue* in the Christian literary style by stating that God created the world and then euhemerises the Æsir by presenting them as powerful human beings who convinced others of their divinity. He names the second chapter *Gylfaginning* ‘The Tricking of Gylfi’. It tells the tale of a Swedish king going to visit the home of the Æsir to ask them about their ancient knowledge of the world, how it was created and so on. Arriving in Valhöll, when asked his name, Gylfi gives it as Gangleri - an *Óðinsheiti*<sup>8</sup> - and is introduced to three figures said to be in charge: *Hár* ‘High’, *Jafnhár* ‘Just-as-High’ and *Priðji* ‘Third’ (again, each of these is listed as an *Óðinsheiti*), who answer his questions concerning their gods, the deeds they perform and the mythology that surrounds them. However since Gylfi attempts to trick the Æsir by arriving in disguise, the Æsir, expecting his arrival, decide to trick him in turn. Snorri is therefore suggesting that the knowledge imparted to Gylfi was erroneous, but he does not condemn the pagan past or individuals.

Throughout each section of *Snorra Edda*, it can be observed that there are portions Snorri evidently did not understand, resulting in rather bizarre explanations or sections interpreted in a way which conflict with other pieces of (even his own) information. Particularly relevant examples of this will be discussed in Chapter Three in connection with Óðinn and his creation of the world, men and a mutual link with the tree. Furthermore, Chapter Four will examine the names ascribed to Óðinn by Snorri and their explicit hanging connections. Yet as is noted in Chapter Four, it is curious that Snorri makes no mention of Óðinn’s hanging or anything that could be understood as pagan ritual. Nevertheless, with an awareness of the inherent textual

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<sup>8</sup> A *heiti* is simply another, often descriptive, name for an individual. For an expansive list and discussion of *Óðinsheiti*, cf. Falk (1924) and Price (2002: 100-107). I cannot ascribe agreement with each and every one of these authors’ translations or classifications but they are nevertheless extensive compilations of the original *heiti* themselves. Particular *Óðinsheiti* will be drawn upon predominantly in Chapter Four. In placing Óðinn in this position, Snorri appears to be suggesting that Óðinn was believed to be the highest god and/or was ultimately responsible for the tricking of pagan followers.

issues, *Snorra Edda* remains invaluable when studying Norse mythology due to Snorri's inclusion of original content (and often the explanation of it) coupled with an extensive list of kennings and their origins that has survived in no other medium.

#### 1.1.1.3 Skaldic Poetry

Said to have come from Óðinn himself (*Skáldskaparmál* 5), it may be only through skaldic verse that scholarship has some form of contemporary record regarding pagan belief in the late Viking period.<sup>9</sup> The content of the skaldic poems later analysed in the various chapters of this thesis (Chapters Four and Seven) is predominantly historical or eulogic and was designed to be performed as praise for highly ranking members of society such as chieftains, kings and their courts (Clunies Ross 2005: 28). The metre used - most commonly *dróttkvætt* 'lordly metre' - is significantly different from that of the eddic corpus, being both more complex and rule-bound, particularly regarding syntax and alliteration (Clunies Ross 2005: 21). This can often lead to examples in which comprehension is nigh impossible (this was sometimes considered a desirable feature) or necessitates interpretive analysis due to the extensive use of kennings.

More significantly for historical study, due to skaldic verse being viewed principally as an individual creation and courtly feature designed to demonstrate skill and/or individual ability, the poems frequently have authors ascribed to them and known patrons that can be traced by the use of court record or *Skáldatal*.<sup>10</sup> Knowing both whom they were composed by and for whom they were composed is often equally as important as the content, given that this ascription can tell us something of the poets' influences, patron(s), prospective audience, as well as that which an audience wanted to hear, was popular or even in circulation at a given time. The verse itself is full of pre-Christian imagery (even into the Christian period<sup>11</sup>) that has been preserved by the complex syntax and structure required in order to formulate kennings and through living memory as the way to best remember and immortalise (often dead) individuals (Jesch 2005: 188). It is in this content that one sees the dominant figure of Óðinn

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<sup>9</sup> The story of Óðinn, his theft of the Mead of Poetry and its gift to mankind can be found in *Hávamál* 104-110 and *Skáldskaparmál* 5.

<sup>10</sup> Written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, *Skáldatal* is a relatively short piece that lists the skalds attached to particular courts in Scandinavia and the associated ruler at the time. It is also generally associated with Snorri Sturluson (see Jón Sigurðsson 1848-57: 251-286).

<sup>11</sup> It can be noted however that into the Christian period of Scandinavia, pagan imagery was being used to represent Christian figures or motifs (Faulkes 1998: xxxix).

and Óðinnic imagery: that of battle, his avataric animals of the wolf and raven, death and the afterlife.

When one speaks of familial belief, worship and memory being intimately related among the upper ranks of Viking society, even the titles of particular skaldic poems reveal a great deal. One can take *Eiríksmál*, *Hákonarmál* and *Hrafnsmál* (*Haraldskvæði*) for example, in which each poem describes the fall of the named king and their acceptance by Óðinn into Valhöll. One may note that Haraldr Hálfðanarson of *Haraldskvæði* was the father of both Eiríkr and Hákon, who are half-brothers, suggesting a continued belief in Óðinn among the leading males of the family. *Skáldatal* tells us first that the practice of having court poets was common and continuous in the Norwegian court, and that pagan content was still in vogue among that dynasty as a way in which to appropriately remember the royal dead and the above examples highlight a connection between Óðinn and the ruling elite of the Viking Age, at least in Norway. Furthermore, it can be observed that in recording and praising the great deeds or victories of particular rulers or chieftains, poets hint towards their own understanding of mythology as well as seemingly Óðinnic ritual disguised within challenging kennings and one may observe consistent themes surrounding Óðinn. *Sonatorrek* and *Eiríksmál* are the foremost instances of acolytes reflecting upon their time as a worshipper of Óðinn. These poems allow us a glimpse of Óðinn as believers saw him in contrast to later Christian depictions and this distinction will be discussed further in Chapter Seven. Furthermore, as examined in Chapter Four, skaldic poetry contains the few references that suggest a recognised link between Óðinn and the gallows, coupled with hints of hanging's use as ritual and/or punishment.

#### 1.1.1.4 Scandinavian Saga

The tradition of long form, yet spoken, narratives seem to have featured strongly throughout Viking Age Scandinavia, first in orality and then literarily into the Medieval Norse period.<sup>12</sup> Modern scholarship is fortunate for the tolerance of early medieval Icelanders as there is reduced conscious Christian tendency within the sagas than can be observed within the medieval chronicles. As DuBois (1999: 32) states:

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<sup>12</sup> Certain tales appear to have been known across Western Europe in this period, such as the tale of the Völsungs or that of Völundr/Wayland the Smith (see Byock 1999: 1-5 and Larrington 1996: 102 respectively).

Time and time again in these works of thirteenth-century Iceland, authors depict non-Christian religious experiences - rituals, prophecies, acts of piety - as intense, highly personal, and valid, even though the characters in question subscribe to religions that could not be condoned.

This however does not suggest that one should disregard a critical approach. There is obviously a piling of factual evidence due to the time lapse between event and record. Regarding the varying genres of saga, the *fornaldarsögur* and *konungasögur* are of most value with regard to identifying Óðinn and his association with hanging. Their benefits lie in their inclusion of societal information and pseudo-historical record as well as their allusions to mythological and pagan content regarding practice and belief. Despite their uses, these *fornaldarsögur* and *konungasögur* of course embody all of the problems connected with using oral myth as a source for fact, causing us to seek the elusive ‘kernels of truth’. Consequently, another vast genre of saga literature, the *Íslendingasögur*, will not widely feature due to the fact that despite nearly all of our Óðinnic information originating from the Icelandic scribal tradition, the Icelandic or family sagas (other than *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*) feature little to no mention of this particular god. They instead favour the worshippers of Þórr and the events leading up to the conversion period (see §1.5.1).<sup>13</sup>

As to their authorship, the sagas are generally anonymous but with regard to the kings’ sagas, several in addition to this have been ascribed to the efforts of Snorri, for example *Heimskringla* as well as other anonymous works such as *Egils saga*.<sup>14</sup> Snorri’s work makes up a large proportion of the content scholarship has regarding the mythological past and historical ‘present’ (of predominantly Norway in this case). However, it also includes information regarding the rest of Scandinavia and the wider world, proving an invaluable source once again in a period in which information for is scarce.

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<sup>13</sup> This is perhaps largely the result of Þórr being considered a more acceptable figure by the Medieval Christian Scandinavian population who saw parallels between him and the taking of personal Christian Saints (Þórr’s hammer pendants etc.). This could be encompassed by his more moral spheres of influence e.g. law, justice, protection, righteous strength and so on (Schjødt 2007a: 138).

<sup>14</sup> The case for Snorri’s authorship regarding *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* began with Sigurður Nordal (1933) but faced opposition from multiple scholars such as Hallberg (1962), Vesteinn Ólason (1968) and West (1980). *Heimskringla* has come under more recent examination regarding its now doubtful attribution to Snorri versus a collection of anonymous scribes (cf. Boulhosa 2005: 6-21).

### 1.1.2 Contemporary Literature

It would be logical to next investigate native contemporary historical record for examples that could connect Óðinn and the gallows but as discussed above, Scandinavia possesses no concrete example from the Viking Age that is not carved in stone upon monuments in the landscape. Instead, one is forced to turn to various non-native, whilst contemporary, chronicles.

#### 1.1.2.1 Ibn Fadlan's *Risala*

No discussion on Óðinnic ritual practices would be complete without an analysis of Ibn Fadlan's Arabic text, the *Risala* and its account of the funeral of an unnamed Rus chieftain at the Bulgar capital.<sup>15</sup> Ibn Fadlan himself was originally recognised as a *faqih* (expert in Islamic jurisprudence and faith), traveller and theologian but James Montgomery (2000, 2004a-b, 2006, 2008) has convincingly put forward that it is instead more likely that he was a soldier “albeit an educated one” attached to the caliph's court rather than holding a specific religious or judicial role. The *Risala* itself was composed during Ibn Fadlan's travels in Russia in the 920s and it has generally been recognised as the only contemporary account of funerary practice in an area associated with Scandinavian warriors/traders. As a result of its content – human sacrifice, centrality of alcohol, the burning of a boat for a chieftain and associations with a warrior band – it has been long associated with the cult of Óðinn and examined with a fine-tooth comb repeatedly for decades, with scholars hoping each time to tease out new meaning or understanding (Turville-Petre 1964: 272-273, Davidson 1972: 24-25, Schjødt 2007b, Price 2010: 131-137). Yet this simple geographical fact creates our foremost difficulty: the *Risala* does not depict the Vikings in their homelands but records practices of individuals living/operating among a foreign society. Furthermore, despite the continuous use of the *Risala* as a source for Viking practice, a heated discussion as to whether or not the Rus described are even Scandinavians or a native band of Slavic warriors/traders began in 1749 and continues to this day.<sup>16</sup> The opinions for both the Normanist/anti-Normanists stances are succinctly

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<sup>15</sup> The works of other Arabic authors and their depictions of hanging within Scandinavia will also be investigated but due to their ‘throw-away comment’ nature, Ibn Fadlan dominates this category.

<sup>16</sup> The Normanist/anti-Normanist argument began in 1749 with the performance of Gerhard Müller's ‘*Origines gentis et nominis Russorum*’. At the time of writing, the favoured opinion

summarised by Pritsak (1981: 5-6). It is sufficient to say that political and nationalistic ideals have hindered the study and further conclusions down immensely but modern assertions will be addressed in Chapter Six.

As a text on its own terms, the primary issue with the *Risala* was the scribal language itself. As an Arabic source, the process of accurate translation has proved the first and arguably largest stumbling block for Western scholarship. Reprieve was found in recent years when the closest and most accurate translation of the funerary events into English to date was completed by James Montgomery (2000: 1-25) which allowed for clearer understanding and the final dismissal of the somewhat wilder theories based upon misunderstood text. After the stumbling block of the language itself, Schjødt (2007b: 133) highlights our next hurdle: the issue of a comparing a chronicle written by an Arab in Russia to Viking material largely recorded in the Christianised period. Consequently, Schjødt questions how much Ibn Fadlan's account represents anything about the Viking Age. In a similar vein, Simpson (1967: 192) asserted:

these customs can never have been so common in the Scandinavian homelands as the Arabs say they were in Russia, or they would have left more traces in the archaeological record; probably the fact that the Rus slave-traders had so many women readily available made it cheap for them to indulge in practices which were rare luxuries elsewhere.

Whilst this concept of ready wealth making these extravagances – particularly human sacrifice – more available is intriguing, archaeologists have uncovered further examples of Viking opulence within Scandinavia in more recent years, muting this opposition somewhat (cf. Oseberg burial, §6.4.3).

#### 1.1.2.2 *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*

One of the earliest records after the *Risala* of possibly Óðinnic worship or at least ritual hanging is found within the Latin work of the German author Adam von Bremen and his much discussed eleventh century chronicle (late 1070s), *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*. As another exponent of the contemporary texts of the pagan Norse period, and with its focus upon

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appears to be the Normanist one (cf. Price 2010: 132-133). However, cf. Dolukhanov (1995) for arguably the most sophisticated anti-Normanist argument.

the Scandinavian homelands, it has garnered a great deal of attention. This attention has particularly fallen upon the depiction of Gamla Uppsala, Sweden and its supposed temple site, the large scale rituals undertaken (most notably the mass hangings here) and their connections with particular gods. Intended as a history of the Archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen in the North, Adam's chronicle begins in the ancient past, tracking the movements and developments of the surrounding nations up until his own time. Composed over decades, the manuscript has undergone revision even during Adam's lifetime (not always in his own hand) in the form of additional *scholia* added in order to either expand or temper the text when others saw that which he had written (Bolton 2006: 63). It is particularly (although not solely) these *scholia* that have given rise to the discussion regarding this ritual site. Despite the sheer volume of scholarship regarding this text, archaeological investigations that were undertaken in an attempt to corroborate or challenge the content have been and often continue to be excluded from evaluations of Adam's work and this must be redressed. As a source cited frequently in the scholarship on Óðinn and his associated ritual or cult, Adam's *Gesta* has, in the past, rarely been scrutinised closely enough in the context of modern findings, the language used or the author himself. Instead this account is often used as a 'stand-alone' piece of evidence to corroborate possible events or 'prove' that particular rituals were practised in the first place with little critical analysis (cf. Pluskowski 2000: 57, 61-62). Nevertheless, in more recent years, scholarship has swung toward a more stringent treatment of this text, placing it under a far more critical eye in the light of modern research, and primarily archaeological advancements (cf. Nordahl (1996: 58-59), Janson (1998, 2000), Gräslund (1999), Sundqvist (2002: 112-134) and Abram (2011: 69-70)).

There are a number of factors that one must take into account when considering both Adam's source base and his own personal knowledge. For example, prior to describing the temple at Uppsala, Adam first depicts the overall geography of Sweden when describing the "superstition of the Swedes". The narrative and geographical features make little sense in comparison with reality, and this alerts us to the fact that Sweden is clearly a place to which Adam has never been, nor gathered particularly accurate information about (cf. IV: 21-2 and Bolton 2006: 64-66).<sup>17</sup> Adam is relying initially upon late Roman geographers such as Tacitus and Orosius to create his worldview and as Bolton (2006: 64-66) comments, these authors are mostly silent on Sweden, despite Adam's (cf. IV: 21) claims to the contrary. Consequently,

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<sup>17</sup> Regarding Adam's Latin terminology for the Swedes and the possible case of mistaken/falsely attributed characteristics, see §6.2.6.2.

Adam mostly invents the geography of the country. Yet this practice of amalgamation reveals the range of works that Adam knew of and had access to, beyond those generally stated throughout his text. One may also notice that Adam has also supplemented his work with choice yet unattributed pieces of these Classic texts. For example, in Book I, Adam reproduces verbatim Tacitus' depiction of pagan groves.<sup>18</sup> He also acknowledges his debt to these Roman men in parts of his text, and it is without doubt that he possessed a copy or transcript of Tacitus' *Germania* in particular, or had committed it to memory. This is not to say that Adam had never left the confines of his own residence. Despite not having visited Sweden, Book II relates that Adam did spend a brief period at the court of King Sveinn Ástriðarson II (son of Ástrið Sveinsdóttir, sister of Knútr inn ríki), king of Denmark 1047-1074, in order to gather geographies, oral tales and histories from the court and king himself. In contrast to Adam's other eye witnesses, Sveinn appears to be among his most credible, being of status, coming from a long line of pagan Norse and possessing the means to have actually visited or campaigned in Sweden, where he may have seen or become aware of ritualistic practices. Whether he did or not is a wholly different question. It is also worth entertaining the notion that Svein was attempting to make his rival nations appear more barbaric in nature for political reasons (cf. Adam of Bremen IV: 25)

As to Adam's own motives, there is a great deal to be wary of. Whilst his record is invaluable and it is without doubt the site at Uppsala was of great import to the pagan Swedes, one should be very cautious of taking Adam at his word. This is particularly true when considering the vague nature in which he describes his source material for the temple and its activities, despite his more usual, unequivocal practice. Adam was a chronicler for the German church on the frontlines of missionary activity north into pagan Scandinavia. His agenda is clearly to make the role of Hamburg-Bremen seem pivotal in the Christianisation of Scandinavia and it would be imperative to make the northern people appear deeply pagan and 'in need' of Christianity. Furthermore, unlike Snorri he was not Nordic and thus felt no connection to the pagan Norse. Instead, as a Christian outsider, Adam finds record of pagan gods (who to his mind were undoubtedly false) and their practices base and repulsive; something he makes clear throughout his prose. A product of its time, there should be no doubt that Adam's *Gesta* would include twisted elements in line with his own beliefs and furthermore

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<sup>18</sup> Compare Tacitus (Mattingly 1960: 109) and Adam of Bremen (Tschan 2002: 206-207). Nevertheless, one must remember that the concept of plagiarism during the medieval period was non-existent.

to suit his own (and his patron's) needs. Consequently, the case for dismissing Adam's literal description of pagan ritual sacrifice/hanging has been growing in very recent years, particularly in the light of extensive archaeological examination, as will be discussed comprehensively in Chapter Six.

### 1.1.3 Medieval Chronicle

Having exhausted our contemporary sources, one is left with no choice but to turn to a later example that can often be categorised as one of the most difficult to analyse and by its more aggressive nature toward pre-Christian practices. There is also no doubt that the literature of the Church and Classical writers influenced the author as will be shown extensively in Chapter Six. Yet despite the challenging text and its hostility to the pagan period muddying the waters somewhat, scholars should remain grateful for the individual chronicler's efforts and that these events were considered peculiar or shocking enough to be worthy of note.

#### 1.1.3.1 *Gesta Danorum*

The only other source of explicit information (with many of the same issues as Adma above) for the myths and rituals linked with Óðinn, at least in the medieval mind, comes in Saxo Grammaticus' delightfully ingenious and often scholarly thirteenth-century chronicle of *Gesta Danorum*. Saxo himself (c.1150-1220) was connected with Absalon, Archbishop of Lund who in turn was advisor to Valdemar I of Denmark (Davidson and Fisher 1996: i). Whatever his position in the court, be it secular or religious, Saxo was evidently well educated with extensive learning in Latin. Saxo was from a warrior family and aligns himself with his ancestors in stating that he will follow hereditary service, "to soldier for you like those loyal fighters my father and grandfather, who were recognised frequenters of your renowned sire's war camp" (Davidson and Fisher 1996: 6). Despite this, Saxo begins by outlining his reluctance and unworthiness to undertake this task of chronicling (and glorifying) the Danish royalty, people and their history and states that he did so only at the insistence of Absalon. That his patron placed this task upon him suggests that Absalon or even Valdemar had something specific in mind. Consequently, it should be of no surprise that these factors would colour how the history was compiled, particularly compounded by Saxo's own statement "to follow the statements of

Absalon concerning his own actions and others which he learned about” (Davidson and Fisher 1996: 6).

Saxo was evidently aware of the tradition of Latin national histories, mentioning chroniclers such as Bede and Dudo by name (Davidson and Fisher 1996: 14).<sup>19</sup> As for his source material for the history of the North, Saxo credits two main parties: Absalon himself and the efforts of “diligent Icelanders” in composing material that preserved much of the North’s culture (Davidson and Fisher 1996: 5-6, cf. Bjarni Guðnason 1981). This Nordic material is ultimately, however divergently, used to draw forth his historical figures of the mythic past and to flavour the text with odd and fantastical events and this provides us with a source of corroboration and/or comparison for a whole host of pre-Christian material. Therefore, like Adam of Bremen before him, one sees that whilst Saxo wrote from the North of the North, he also did so with a Southern culture in mind.

Regarding the text itself, source material aside, Saxo is often combative in his language. Whilst Saxo uses the *Æsir* frequently, when dealing with Óðinn, Saxo creates a powerfully negative stereotype: that of a god who does little but underhandedly deceives his worshippers by causing their deaths, primarily in battle. This rests oddly in contrast to his glorification of martial heroes who make their name in battle whilst simultaneously being critical of the periods of peace brought on by figures such as King Fróði (Davidson and Fisher 1996: 119). Ultimately, Saxo’s attempts to separate the successes of Denmark from the Viking tradition of being granted victory in battle by Óðinn in a now-converted Denmark are often heavy-handed. Yet in his efforts to bolster this negative image, *Gesta Danorum* contains one of the few explicit instances of sacrifice by hanging dedicated to Óðinn in the death of King Víkarr of Norway at the hand of the Óðinnic hero, Starkaðr.<sup>20</sup> This example, along with its textual parallel, as observed in *Gautreks saga*, will be discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

## 1.2 Material Sources

Whilst archaeology has become a vital tool in furthering our knowledge about ritual practice, it is vital to first ask ourselves how much use it can be in an attempt to understand or develop

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<sup>19</sup> Davidson and Fisher (1996: 1) suggest that Saxo may also have been aware of Gregory of Tours, Paul the Deacon, Geoffrey of Monmouth and others.

<sup>20</sup> For an extensive study of Starkaðr and his links to Óðinn, see Ciklamini (1971: 169-188).

our ideas regarding ritual hanging, beyond the identification of said practice. This is not to belittle the field in any way: one may simply note that identifying an individual who has been hanged is challenging enough and it is almost impossible to conclude whether there are any ritualistic factors in the remains themselves. At the time of writing, there has been only one grave identified from Viking Age Scandinavia that has been concluded to be a victim of hanging and this case will be evaluated in Chapter Six (Christensen 1981). Prior to the Viking Age, the only other unquestionable examples of ritual hanging within Scandinavia have all been recovered from Danish bogs, dated to the early Iron Age (see Chapter Six). Whilst it is very possible that other excavated graves have contained examples of hanged individuals, without a surviving noose or very clear hallmarks of hanging, identifying factors may have been missed when archaeologists worked without the technology available today.

In focussing upon the problems in identifying both method of death and possible ritual activity, Price (2010: 131) relates the general state of twentieth-century archaeological reports:

They [goods] are usually catalogued and described in detail, but often left simply as a list [...] in the study of Viking-Age burials there has undoubtedly been an emphasis on description over analysis. Many cemetery reports stop at the presentation of the data without attempting to understand what it might mean across a sliding scale of social context.

Whilst the past practice of a purely descriptive record, without interpretation, especially in the absence of photography or digital technology has of course been beneficial to future generations of scholars in preserving the state of what was found exactly, it has meant that little progress in ritual understanding has been made. There is also the problem that descriptions can be sparse at best, particularly regarding the discovery, location and relation to the rest of the site of peculiar objects that the archaeologists chose not to describe, based on presumed significance (Price 2010: 131). Presuming that items had been placed at random seems inconsiderate of the conscious choice and care in the act of burial that could have been used to uncover patterns in sacrificial graves. This lack of context in descriptions has had further consequences, leading Hines (2003: 377) – among others – to fall upon the old divide between historians and archaeologists and state that “it is much better [...] to seek to work strictly from the known - and this means working totally under the direction of written sources which can explicitly identify religious implications.” Whilst highlighting the dangers of creating a distorted view of material items (or excluding them), exacerbated by bias in source and severely

limiting source material, Hines (2003: 377) believes this practice would at least limit the invention of reasons unsubstantiated by any other source.

Various scholars (Hines 2003: 381, Schjødt 2007b: 123, Tolley 2009: 12) are therefore critical of employing archaeological evidence for ritual explanation due to their belief that the material record cannot definitely tell us anything about nor successfully explain features of religious practice or belief systems.<sup>21</sup> Whilst this is true, what the grave *does* show are those practices which people actually observed, versus those which they were ‘supposed to’, or were believed to as a result of literary example and model case. Furthermore, unknown material objects unearthed and observed collectively can be used to infer consistent symbolism or motif, whether one understands their exact purpose or not. When seeking solely material evidence for hanging and no particular method of burial, archaeology is remarkably fruitful in uncovering examples of this rare sacrificial practice (by the number of literary and thus-far archaeological finds), the particular method of death and for revealing places in the landscape where this practice may have taken place. Instead of working solely from literary evidence, it should be remembered that it is both possible and necessary to include archaeological evidence in order to highlight commonalities that can be shown to be consistent with the act of hanging.

Thus one arrives again at the thorny question of interpretation. As a product of the early twentieth century, explaining the discussed methods of archaeological reports above, Davidson (1943: 7) suggests that interpretation results in the “sure standards” of archaeology giving way. True as this may be, these objects and buried individuals require interpretation as they tell little about themselves and the people who placed them. Davidson’s line of thought would render all items and discovered action nigh useless and most significantly, remove the human connection. In order to make sense of them, these items and graves must be interpreted and thus written material must be used in order to provide potential context that the grave itself cannot. Furthermore, it is without question that the psychological impact of a hanging/sacrificial event, as well as the items used, could be just as significant as the event itself. As will be shown, the more extreme examples of ritual – extreme in the expense, manpower and occasional brutality involved – were more likely to be remembered (Lucas and McGovern 2007). When examining that which one finds in the grave, one must always be aware of the overarching performance that preceeded it and not focus solely upon the individual

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<sup>21</sup> Gardeła (2011a) has written a paper protesting at this method of thought but not totally convincingly.

props. Yet the grave is not the last place one may seek thematic parallels between Óðinn and the gallows in material evidence and therefore an analysis of the pictorial evidence detailing this ritual must be included as well.

### 1.3 Pictorial Evidence

The contemporary pictorial evidence for the practice of hanging and its association with Óðinn is not prolific but from the surviving examples detailed in Chapter Six, it is without question that a link between the two was made by the Viking Norse across Scandinavia and perhaps within areas of England. Whilst focus will largely fall upon the Gotlandic picture stones, this classification and investigation also includes one particular rune stone and other smaller items, such as figurines, uncovered through archaeology.

#### 1.3.1 Rune and Picture Stones

Almost exclusive to Gotland, the raising of picture stones reached a highpoint during the Viking Age but these objects had been erected in Gotland since the fifth century AD.<sup>22</sup> As a result of the monumental task of collection, identification and preservation initially performed by Sune Lundqvist, one is able to observe that from their inception, these stones increased in size (up to 4m tall) and are all carved upon local limestone (Lundqvist (1941-42) and Nylén and Lamm (1988)). The stones usually stand (alone or in localised groups) atop or alongside burial mounds, or alongside roads or land boundaries, within both Viking Age and Christian cemeteries (Nylén and Lamm 1988: 9-10). Runic inscription is not prevalent upon these stones but some do display smatterings of runic text, usually following a formulaic memorial script evidenced across runic Scandinavia (McKinnell *et al.* 2004: 162-189). As for the motivations behind the raising of these stones, they are much akin to the rune stones of Scandinavia and were generally raised to be visible in order to memorialise the death of a family member, to mark family land and ultimately to display one's heritage (Andrén 1992, 2014; Price 2010: 140-142).

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<sup>22</sup> The exclusions can be found in Uppland (Sweden), Grobin (Latvia) and Öland (Sweden) and all are thought to commemorate Gotlanders who died in these places. See Nylén and Lamm (1988).

In terms of the preservation of the Gotlandic picture stones, whilst weathering, time and vandalism have all played their part, many of the stones are largely preserved intact but the same cannot be said for the imagery. When attempting to understand the extant images and their motifs (those which display any), one must often work from later painted interpretations undertaken as acts of preservation, which are occasionally puzzling. Yet one should not judge the individuals who painted the stones in order to preserve the image displayed, such as Sune Lundqvist in particular, too harshly. Lundqvist's attempts were not without success and with both improved and modern technology Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt (2013) has largely confirmed the majority of the reconstructed images through the medium of 3D image scanning.<sup>23</sup> These results have allowed modern scholars to continue their attempts to interpret and contextualise the stones without the fear of working from reconstructions and possible visual prejudice. Furthermore the new images also mean that any furthering weathering or vandalism to the stones will not affect future study.

As for the stones themselves, some context to their place of origin is required. Despite its small size and population density today, Gotland was by far one of the most densely affluent areas of Scandinavia during the Viking Age and where there is wealth, extravagant ritual usually follows (see §6.2.3 and §6.4.3). Uncovered silver hoards on the island are often large and plentiful (cf. Fig. 1) and traces of their remnants are so common that Swedish law prevents metal detecting across the entire island (Hóven 1972).

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.raa.se/kulturarvet/arkeologi-fornlamningar-och-fynd/runstenar/runristandets-dynamik/3d-data-for-gotlandska-bildstenar/>, accessed 01/02/16.



Fig. 1 Selection of the Spilling Hoard, Gotlands Museum, Sweden (photographed by author).

By means of its location, Gotland became an essential hub through which Baltic trade (and of course, news) flowed. Furthermore it provided a springboard for raids in every direction (Carlsson 1991). With a literal wealth of materials, power and elite warrior, traveller and trader associations, one finds oneself in a presumably prime location for seeking the cult of Óðinn. However, as Andrén (2012) shows through both linguistic and place-name evidence, it appears that the Gotlanders were more likely to have associated themselves with Þórr than Óðinn.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, pictorial examples make apparent that the Gotlanders were well-versed in mythological and/or legendary tales and a limited number display apparent Óðinnic connections or allusions. For example, *Stora Hammars III* (Fig. 2) is understood to feature Óðinn in his bird form having stolen the Mead of Poetry from the *jǫtnar* (Davidson 1993: 72-73):

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<sup>24</sup> As will be discussed throughout later chapters, this is becoming apparent for a variety of locations and elite peoples in Scandinavia.



Fig. 2 Stora Hammars III, Lärbro, Gotland (photographed by author)

One example in particular, Stora Hammars I, is noted for its apparent ritual hanging scene and will be discussed in Chapter Six.

#### 1.4 Toponymy

Through the combined study of both place-name evidence and archaeological investigation, a great deal has been uncovered about the cultic landscape of Scandinavia (Brink 2005, 2007). This can be used in order to seek parallels between Óðinn, hanging and the places in which it may have taken place. Topographical features figure heavily into many of the locations connected with the Æsir, emphasising their link to the land and nature and thus providing further depth for the modern definition of a pagan worshipper. As a general introduction to the use of place-names, Bühnen (1992: 65-66) sums up the practice rather concisely:

Wherever we understand the original meaning of a place-name we learn about its former location, inhabitants, or other characteristics. Of particular interest to the historian are those names that tell us about the ritual, political, or other *function* of the place at the time of naming.

With Scandinavia having never been invaded, nor settled, by a foreign people speaking a foreign tongue, this is particularly helpful when assessing this region. As a result, one may

observe a case of uninterrupted settlement of people speaking languages (albeit in differing dialects) of the same family.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the place-names created go largely uncorrupted by non-Nordic languages (for exceptions, cf. *hof*, Chapter Three). Just as significantly, particularly within this time period, the surviving place-names form an unbiased source as there can be no negative or pejorative agenda placed upon a name in the landscape. When seeking religious motivation and practice within a period of history recorded only by Christian scribes centuries later, this lack of agenda is exceedingly rare. In dealing with individual place-names, Brink (2008b: 63) surmises their multifaceted use:

The contribution of theophoric place names (containing a god or goddess) are twofold in this respect, they show us: (1) which of the gods or goddesses were actually worshipped, and also (2) where the cult was executed, hence giving us a geographical dimension to the analysis.

Through detailed mapping of these theophoric names, a sense of regionality for worship can be observed during the Viking Age creating a ‘sacral landscape’ (cf. Brink 2007). These mapped areas also suggest that not all of the Æsir were actively worshipped and that most individuals in Viking society only felt the need to honour a handful of the Æsir personally. Despite these favourable factors, place-names still have their drawbacks. To start with, only a fraction of these place-names remain today or were ever recorded – many have evolved over time or changed completely. Farms and plots of land are the most likely to have undergone this transition, for example, when a new family moved in and took control of an area. In conjunction, the meaning itself could also have been lost when the new inhabitants did not understand the significance of the existing name. Establishing the meaning of a place-name can be highly subjective in some cases and left to personal interpretation. Pinning down an exact meaning that the majority can agree upon is challenging as it is difficult to perceive where social or political undercurrents and significance once lay. Nonetheless, in many cases these names have been understood in safe conditions and have yielded significant rewards (see Chapter Three).

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<sup>25</sup> Despite extensive travel and integration into foreign society, the Old Norse language was incredibly resilient and possesses fewer loan words than one might expect for a language so travelled. It appears that the Vikings instead impressed their own culture and language upon the areas of settlement and expansion (i.e. Irish, Scottish Gaelic and English).

Reaching the end of the collected source material for Óðinn, hanging and sacrifice, one can see that the evidence base is far wider than simply the written mythology within the pages of manuscripts. This diversity, particularly geographically among the pictorial and material examples, also gives credence to connection of these three elements, taking Óðinn and hanging out of the pages of mythology and into ritual practice and the Scandinavian landscape. Consequently, it is prudent to understand the time period in which this association may have been created: its people and the resulting social structure.

### 1.5 The Historical Landscape of Viking Age Scandinavia

In order to establish the time-frame imposed in the thesis title, one is required to evaluate the activity of the people history has come to know as the Vikings. Whilst the definition of any historical period is often the later construction of historians, well known events are often used to mark beginnings and ends. It is generally accepted that the Viking Age began with the raid upon Lindisfarne, England in 793 and ended with the Norman invasion of England and the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The “Viking Age” is the general term used to encapsulate these three centuries. However, these events are not the only way one may define the beginnings and end of the Viking Age. Scholars concur that a primary factor contributing to the beginning of the Viking Age was the Scandinavian expansion from the mainland in order to raid, travel and trade. Previously unknown evidence of these activities has been discovered archaeologically in recent years and from the results, the argument could be made to move the date back anywhere between forty and a hundred years.<sup>26</sup> As to the end, on a localised scale, the Viking Age could be said to have ended with the conversion to Western Christianity of the individual Scandinavian nations and the establishment of the church hierarchy. With this “Europeanisation” (Brink 2008a: 5), a strong case can be made for these events marking the end of the age. It is evident that there had been and continued to be Scandinavian contact with the lands south of the peninsula both before and after the generally ascribed period, but it is

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<sup>26</sup> Two Viking warships and associated mass burials were discovered in 2008 on a small Baltic island, Estonian Saaremaa and have been dated to 700-750AD. Visually, they are reminiscent of the ships that scholarship generally associates with the Viking Age. See <http://www.archaeology.org/issues/95-1307/features/941-vikings-saaremaa-estonia-salme-vendel-oseberg>, accessed 01/02/16.

helpful to have a general approximation to work within. Since this estimation of 793-1066 is simply to aid our understanding, setting or disputing exact dates is not wholly necessary.

*Viking* itself has, in the modern mind, become a term synonymous with the image of a Scandinavian male, one who is both raider and trader. Modern perceptions of this term, aided by modern media, envisage a barbaric but clever man, a follower of curious gods, weapon-laden, bloodthirsty and violent. Yet the term *viking* itself sees very limited use during the respective time period. Brink (2008a: 5-6) highlights that during the first stages of the raids upon England the Vikings were described as ‘Northmen’ or ‘Danes’ whereas in Ireland they were simply known as ‘pagans’ until a distinction between Norwegians and Danes was made. In Russia, Scandinavians travelling the rivers for trade were known as ‘Rus’ to Arabic chroniclers.<sup>27</sup> It is only in England during the ninth century (note, outside Scandinavia) that one finds the word *viking* for the invading Scandinavians. Throughout this study the term *viking* will nonetheless be used to represent any individual, male or female, originating from the society found upon mainland Scandinavia during the Viking Age, including Iceland but excluding Finland. This definition will also apply to any use of ‘Scandinavian’ or ‘Norse’.

In keeping with the above statement about historical context, it is imperative that one keeps in mind the numerous factors that would have affected particularly religious practices. Individual motivations and familial concerns as well as the geographical, socio-political and economic factors are of equal weight when considering the often extremely personal acts of worship and commemoration. In terms of the Viking Age, one should be aware that a great deal of change was taking place at the time and that the Scandinavian mind was in contact with an increasingly wide variety of cultures and religious denominations. As such, one should absolutely expect this contact to have had a lasting effect, however subtle. This observation becomes vital when analysing the examples for examining Óðinn’s own hanging and connecting Óðinn with the practice of hanging. One is forced to recognise that with each and every one of these factors, one should not expect consistent, matching examples of ritual practice across such a geographically widespread society. Instead, one must seek repeated motifs or thematic parallels. Contrary to this widespread notion, however, is Iceland. Despite its strong associations with the literature detailing Óðinn, the island seems to show little to no other trace of this deity.

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<sup>27</sup> As above, the discussion of this term and its connection to the Vikings or in particular, the Swedes, is a lengthy one and will be addressed in Chapter Six.

### 1.5.1 Iceland

As was stated above, Iceland has been excluded from the geographical study of the Óðinn cult and ritual practice. Compared to the other Scandinavian nations during the Viking Age, Iceland is an odd case with regards to political and social factors as well as Óðinn and his cult. Ari *fróði*'s settlement history in *Íslendingabók* 1 (Jakob Benediktsson 1969) records that Iceland was first settled in 870 by primarily Norwegians and other Nordic men hailing from the British Isles (with their retinues of Irish/Scots slaves). Remarkably, each of these factors has been confirmed by archaeological investigation and analysis of genetic study (cf. Vilhjálmur Vihjálmsson 1991 and Gísli Sigurðsson 2000 respectively). Furthermore, the volcanic ash layer that allowed us to confirm Ari's date for settlement also allows us to conclude that before this date, there are no traces of previous settlement (Arný Sveinbjörnsdóttir *et al.* 2004).<sup>28</sup> The sagas regarding Iceland's settlement tell us that the first settlers were often men fleeing Norway from royal tyranny (Haraldr *hárfagri*) or landless men seeking a plot of their own and Icelandic settlement was thus centred on individual farms (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2008: 572). With this desire to be untroubled by the problems of the mainland, the Icelandic settlers established a commonwealth governed by selected chieftains rather than an overarching ruler and saw no form of prescribed conflict or warfare until the troubles surrounding the conversion event in 999/1000 and then again during the civil war in the thirteenth century (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2008: 572-574). As a result, it seems that there was little to no use for or desire to revere the traditional god of war and the ruling classes (Gunnell forthcoming). As Turville-Petre (1972) shows through predominantly saga evidence and extensive place-name evidence for Þórr (and the complete dearth for Óðinn), Icelanders instead held Þórr as their predominant deity. Therefore, despite most of our extant mythological source material regarding Óðinn having been recorded in Iceland, traces of actual Óðinnic belief and worship simply cannot be observed in the society or landscape.

It is also very possible that some religious practice simply could not survive the upheaval with the cult and its practices intimately connected with the land and landscape in which the worshippers had lived (Gunnell 2001: 15-16).<sup>29</sup> For example, with family burial grounds and

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<sup>28</sup> *Landnámabók* 1 (Jakob Benediktsson 1969) nonetheless claims that Irish priests or *papar* were found upon the isle by the first Norse explorers who had arrived there having come there through *peregrinatio* (self-imposed exile or wandering, for the love of God).

<sup>29</sup> Compare the early settler of Iceland, Þórólfur Mostrarskegg who imported the earth from beneath his hall in Norway to ensure that the pillars of his to-be-reconstructed hall could rest in home soil, already consecrated to Þórr (*Eyrbyggja saga* 4 and *Landnámabók* 85).

the shift towards centralised power on the mainland, it is likely that Óðinn was simply too firmly rooted in the Scandinavian homelands.

### 1.6 Social Structure in Viking Age Scandinavia

It is acknowledged that religion, despite its many forms and ritual customs, is indelibly linked with the structure of society in which it is practised (Redmond 2007: 6).

Before delving into the possibly Óðinnic beliefs and practices identified as religious during the Viking Age, it is imperative that one first looks more closely at the society that created them. It is well established that Viking Age Scandinavia was largely a hierarchical agricultural society, based in a familial or clan ‘governed’ landscape where loyalties first lay with the kin group and then the local community as a whole (Fallgren 2008: 67-76). This kin group would contain parents, siblings, children, cousins, servants and slaves. Regarding the general family unit, both the male and female lines are given equal preference and whilst men were ultimately responsible for women the laws often functioned differently for women and differed from region to region (Foote and Wilson 1970: 109). As a result of this close-quarter society, maintaining the family image was of utmost importance as honour and shame would be shared among all family members:

Honour was a kind of equilibrium which a man could not allow to be disturbed. It was intolerable if you were not on even terms with society at large, if you and your family could be spoken of with scorn (Foote and Wilson 1970: 428).

This concept is vital to this study as it will be shown that ones’ sense of public honour was highly significant with regard to capital punishment (see Chapter Five). This sentiment is clear throughout the Viking Age from historical events to the various genres of poetry and *Íslendingasögur*. As a result, feuding was common between kin and neighbours and when differences could not be settled amicably between individuals, they would instead be settled by local *þing* (Brink 2008c: 23-31). This is not to say that matters were not frequently taken into individual hands and this element of social behaviour also forms a significant factor of the practice of hanging: using penal practices for personal revenge (see Chapter Five).

Rank was determined by birth and Viking Scandinavia displays the common historical social levels of nobility, freemen and slaves as displayed throughout contemporary law codes, saga, myth, legend and material record. The nobility consisted of kings, chieftains and *jarlar* who operated primarily within the warrior caste. Freemen could be warriors, land owners, farmers, traders, professionals and so on, owning or renting property and made up the largest proportion of the Viking Age population. Freemen were also responsible for upholding and maintaining the law and furthermore for the selection and support of chieftains who would be landowners like themselves (Brink 2008c: 24). Slaves held no legal rights whatsoever and people could be reduced to slaves through capture, voluntary submission or punishment. The children of slaves were also automatically slaves themselves but it was possible for both the parents and progeny to become free by the will of their owner, personal redemption or an act deserving such a reward (Dennis *et al.* 1980: 173-174). The point here is to highlight that when human life has a definable value (i.e. *wergild*), occasionally brutal results were not considered all that shocking (cf. *Grágás - Baugatal*, Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974). Furthermore, the ownership of slaves features predominantly in the possible selection of hanging victims (see Chapter Five and Six).

### 1.7 Conclusions

In the outset it was stated that the motif of hanging in connection with Óðinn was infrequently attested. This does not mean that it did not arise on numerous occasions across a variety of source bases. With attestations within poetry, saga literature, historical chronicle, iconography and archaeology across Scandinavia, whilst perhaps underplayed (particularly by Snorri, see Chapter Three), the connection between the gallows and Óðinn appears to be a significant one. The society from which these sources arise also plays a significant role in how Óðinn and his surrounding mythos came to be constructed, and as will be shown in the following chapters, may have made Óðinn and the related ritual practice into a political and social weapon of the elite classes. Consequently, following numerous definitions of myth, its function and cult activity in the Viking Age, the following chapter will look into the social systems of ritual practice in general and then move into a more focussed examination of practice associated with the figure of Óðinn.

## Chapter Two

### Definitions and Past Work on Óðinnic Myth, Religion and Ritual Practice

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When dealing with Viking ritual and the gods involved, one is faced with what seems an insurmountable task in attempting to understand how these systems – practice and belief – both functioned and related to one another. The case is made all the more difficult by challenging source material and a late 20<sup>th</sup> century stance of avoiding interrogation of the more violent aspects of the Viking Age. Yet one cannot be too critical as this body of scholarship is a product of its time. After the Second World War and the Nazi appropriation of numerous Viking motifs, few scholars went out of their way to highlight the more severe aspects of said mythology, rituals and glorified warfare of the Viking Age in a time of hard won peace. Political sensitivity had pervaded scholarship, particularly in Britain and this continued until the 1970s when scholars began to question the ‘accepted facts’ of the time. This chapter first makes an overview of the core secondary scholarship on the topics of Óðinn, hanging and ritual. Following this, an overview of the fields of myth, ritual and religion pertaining to this topic is also undertaken, in order to provide working theories for dealing with these three overlapping fields of study as well as, due to the inter-disciplinary nature of the thesis, my definitions of particular terms for use in the chapters ahead.

#### 2.0 General Overview

It is true to say that identifying the beginnings of modern scholarship regarding Óðinn and hanging is impossible and with such a small core source base, each scholar has had to tramp over the old ground of *The Poetic Edda*, *Snorra Edda*, Adam of Bremen and so on. Óðinn has been and remains the focus of a great deal of scholarly work and even when other Norse scholarship has not intended to evaluate this figure, it has found it often necessary to do so as a result of Óðinn’s central role. This deity’s importance to studies of myth and the resulting studies of society and religion cannot be underplayed and understandably has given rise to a great mass of literature. Yet few extensive works in the English language have concerned

themselves solely with Óðinn since the Second World War (see Kershaw 2000)<sup>30</sup>, and hanging/ritual theory outside of a purely mythological discussion has seen a similar lack of interest with only Stephan Grundy (2014) recently publishing his 1995 PhD thesis. Consequently, the topics of Óðinn, ritual and war have been long discussed but the linking elements between Óðinn, hanging, death and memory have not been properly investigated. Prior to the War, a trend of Germanic scholarship attempting to discern the penal and sacral origins of various death penalties had been active from the late nineteenth century. This field came to be known as *sakraltheorie* (a link between penal action and sacrificial rituals, see Gade 1985: 159). An influential exponent of this school was Karl von Amira (1922) with his *Die germanischen Todesstrafen: Untersuchungen zur Rechts- und Religionsgeschichte*. One may take this study as a convenient starting place in a modern scholarly sense. However, due to von Amira's exclusion of a variety of evidence (among other critiques), his theories came under fire over the next few decades (cf. Gædeken 1934, Goelbel 1937, Rehfeldt 1942, Ström 1942). The discussion appeared again in the expanded work by Folke Ström (1942) and the case for hanging made up a predominant portion of his PhD thesis, *The Sacral Origins of the Germanic Death Penalty*.<sup>31</sup> Expansive and encapsulating as this work may have been and despite its efforts to expunge perceived errors made in the past, there are various flaws in its argument (see Chapter Five). The primary issue is a bias towards one particular theory (i.e. that any inference of a gallows means only the constructed form thereof, see Chapter Five) to the point of an (ironic, for his detractors of the above) exclusion of evidence. Furthermore, in the advancement of modern scholarship and technology, there now exist materials that Ström could never have known and as such, opinions that need to be revised. However, we cannot forget the debt owed to the scope of his study. Therefore, with the lack of a more modern example examining this field, his work shall be referred to frequently.

The literature surrounding *sakraltheorie* then falls quiet for a period of decades: presumably due to the timing of these publications and their links as far-right or Nazi

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<sup>30</sup> Annette Lassen (2005, 2006, 2009) and Kevin Wanner (2007) have also contributed more brief investigations into Óðinn specifically. As an example of works not in English and prior to the war, Rolf Pipping published the Swedish work, *Oden i Galgen* in 1928 where he introduced the idea of connecting Óðinn's hanging with shamanistic practices (see Chapter Four).

<sup>31</sup> Whilst the original work is in German, this title appears in translation due to the existence of a translated edition that shall be referred to throughout this thesis.

sympathisers<sup>32</sup> and social feeling surrounding particular Germanic topics after the Second World War. In the period following, particularly from the mid-1970s, the question of hanging and Óðinn returned but with a general avoidance of the penal/sacral conundrum that has persisted until the modern day, with, as shall be shown, even large works addressing the topic of Óðinn's hanging purposefully choosing not to address the penal/sacral issue. A rare example of a work focussed wholly on the topic of hanging in the Viking Age and the early medieval period was written by Kari Gade (1985) where she outlines the legal position and social role of hanging in Scandinavia in the early Medieval period. As for the various roles and representations of Óðinn in mythology and society, our scholarly options are almost endless, but Stephan Grundy (2014) recently published his in-depth Óðinn focussed 1995 thesis entitled *The Cult of Óðinn: God of Death?* Expansive and engaging, Grundy does address the question of hanging but mostly with regard to shamanism and does not approach the subject from a penal/sacral angle as previous German scholars had. Regarding Óðinn and hanging specifically, Jens Peter Schjødt (2008) produced a lengthy work entitled *Initiation Between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion* that examined possible initiatory acts within Viking society (with Óðinn's hanging made up a large portion of the text) and this will be examined below. However, both Schjødt (2008: 199, n.46) and Gade (1985: 177, n.14) declared that they too would not investigate or further the discussion between penal and sacral hanging.

Consequently, one is left with a niche in modern Viking scholarship that merits exploitation. Yet with the difficulties in approaching this subject being as multitudinous as they are (see below and Chapter Five for the issue between penal and sacral), many scholars are of the opinion that we shall never establish definitive conclusions regarding Old Norse religion. This difficulty has been compounded by past methods of research and conflict between fields of expertise. Simpson (1967: 190), for example, states:

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<sup>32</sup> Karl von Amira was a member of the German First World War "Fatherland Party" from which remaining members went on to found the Nazi Party (<http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118644998.html>, accessed 01/02/16). von Amira's (1922) work on *sakraltheorie* heavily emphasises the antiquity of the German people and their practices. He also authored *Das Endinger Judenspiel* (1883), a play focussing on the trial of an apparently ritualised murder of Christians at the hand of Jews, providing him a platform for their condemnation.

To draw general conclusions on Viking beliefs about death and their treatment of the dead is a very complex task, whether one approaches the matter through archaeological or literary evidence.

This situation is exacerbated when others, in this case Roesdahl (1998: 156) state that:

The old religion contained several concepts of the afterlife and archaeological finds confirm that burial customs were tremendously varied. Written sources tell of several realms of the dead, but these fragments are partly contradictory, so they give a very incomplete picture of pre-Christian concepts.

Simpson, amongst others, sought to use the associated methods of literary studies and archaeology independently of each other, to draw a line of best fit (as one would through various, roughly similar, numerical data on a chart) through the hugely varied evidence, so that general conclusions could be reached that neatly tie both sources of evidence together. It would however instead be more serviceable to see the two fields and their material as *resembling* one another.

In a more positive vein, particular works have done a great deal for the study of Viking Age ritual practices and belief in death, expanding thought and pooling the masses of physical data. Scholars such as Neil Price (2002) and his studies on Viking archaeology, in combination with myth, opened eyes to the possible depths of religious significance behind particular Viking burials and associated rituals. With regard to the locations of where religious practices could be performed, a tremendous amount of research from the field of toponymy and the rising field of performance studies have greatly expanded our knowledge of Scandinavia's theophoric landscape, predominantly through scholars such as Stefan Brink (1996, 1997, 2007, 2008) and Terry Gunnell (1995, 2001) respectively. Particularly Brink's studies could only be undertaken with the aid of extensive mapping works from scholars such as Johan Callmer (1991, 1992).

Yet before entering into the source material, keeping the issues of source material outlined above in mind, the first task in dealing with myth, ritual and religion is to demonstrate what one means in the use of these terms. In doing so, one seeks to have a more secure foundation when working with a topic and sources that predominantly revolve around *belief*.

## 2.1 Myth

Whilst there are a great many scholars involved in the field of Norse myth, there are particular scholars who have contributed and developed the field through a lifetime of work. Among the most prominent scholars are Hilda Ellis Davidson, Margaret Clunies Ross, Gabriel Turville-Petre, Anthony Faulkes and John Lindow, to name but a few. At some point, each of these scholars has had to deal with the main problem *vis-à-vis* myth: its fragmented and often contradictory form. Yet it is important to define what we mean by *myth*. Shaw (2002: i) has argued for more specific terms when describing myth and proposes dividing the term into *mythology* for oral myth and *mythography* for written myth. However, when discussing pre-literary cultures, it makes little sense to divide the two. In the absence of living oral tales and with Norse myth recorded largely in the early Christian period, it is nigh impossible to discern changes that occurred during the time lapse, changes that were created consciously, or errors created in misunderstanding by the scribes and authors themselves. At its most basic, myth is *invented* and performs the role of both legitimising (in terms of social norms) and explaining the many questions posed about the surrounding world (Schjødtt 2008: 67). It must also be noted that myths are often used in order to explain other myths (Schjødtt 2008: 67). There is some further difficulty with regards to defining what one means by myth in light of the associated genre of legend as they are often conflated and difficult to separate. However, it has been pointed out to me that this distinction, or need for one, is somewhat superfluous with the Latin reading of the term, *legenda* ‘things to be read, story’. In this case, myth and legend would simply be one in the same and presumably compiled as such (pers. comms. Lawrence Butler Perks).

As a result, the dangers of using often later material in order to extrapolate past religious material and practices have long been discussed. Nevertheless, the source material sees continued examination as it represents all that remains of the pre-Christian Viking period and cannot be ignored, whatever the inherent bias or inaccuracies. Davidson (1943: 4-5) goes to great lengths to highlight the caution that one must employ when trying to draw comparisons between surviving records. As mentioned above, her observation is still relevant today and as such deserves reproduction in full:

There may be close verbal echoes, parallel statements and repetitions of the same motif, such as are likely to indicate literary borrowings by one source from another, or a deliberate use of a certain set of fashions in style. When on the

other hand we find a number of sources differing widely in style, content, detail and treatment, which seem nevertheless to be drawing on the same body of traditions, memories and ideas, then we have some right to claim an agreement which is stronger than mere imitation, and which may be held to reflect in some degree the thought of an earlier time recorded, perhaps unconsciously, in later literature.

It is clear that scholars should expect contradictions, inconsistencies and general misunderstanding across our entire source base for myth in the Viking Age but being prepared for it is half the battle. The prominent feature in the occurrence of these factors, as discussed above, is the time gap between these pre-Christian tales circulating within oral tradition before being written down 200-300 years later by a collection of Christian scribes. One may presume that a great deal of Viking Age mythic material has been lost in this time gap, either forgotten or half remembered resulting in invention to fill the space left behind. It follows then that one must seek thematic parallels on a deeper level rather than surface connections and exact matches. It is also crucial that despite the desire for sources to corroborate one another, one must avoid twisting the material to fit these purposes. This is not to say that unconventional methods should not be undertaken in order to expand our parameters but they must be grounded in hard evidence. In addition, one must also be aware of 'chain theories' with one premise built upon another for, if one link can be broken, no matter how wide-ranging the conclusions may be, the entire premise becomes redundant.

To combat these shortcomings, it has been put forward that owing to the limited and confused source base for myth and, particularly in the case of Óðinn, the resulting ritual, we are required to turn to other fields and even other past cultures for comparison (Davidson 1943: 6). One may for example cautiously compare the religious practices of the pagan Norse with those of other nations within a similar or influential time period. Furthermore, through anthropology, one may gather information about other cultures and nations that display strikingly similar practices with the pagan Norse but as a source of comparison only, not as confirmation (Davidson 1943: 6). This practice can be dangerous if applied freely and uncritically, allowing parallels to be drawn across geographical boundaries that may in no way be connected. Yet before moving on to the question of ritual, the concept of mythic time must first be examined. Due to the complicated nature of Óðinn's role in the mythology, his hanging and the far-reaching results thereof, it begs the question of an identifiable time-line, however loose, within the myth itself, rather than one imposed by later scholars.

### 2.1.1 Mythic Time

Loose as myth may appear as source for belief and ritual practice, this does not mean that all of the surviving record is entirely contradictory or displays events at random. Even within mythology, some loose frame of time has to exist. Some things must take place before others, even though precise chronology in myth is largely irrelevant or impossible to construct. In this case, Lindow (2001: 40-45), working from the theory proposed by Clunies-Ross (1994: 229-242), provides some useful distinctions:

1. A period of *distant past*, before the gods walked and when Ymir was alone.
2. A period of *near past*, when both the cosmos and the beings that inhabit it were created.
3. The *mythological present*, when most of the myths take place. However, this period features events that must be early (e.g. the acquisition of the Mead of Poetry) and things that happen late (e.g. the death of Baldr).

Therefore, even within the mythological present, some things must have come before others. For Óðinn to question the *völva* of *Völuspá* about the future of the world, the Æsir/Vanir war has likely passed (as her description of the war comes in the past tense), Baldr must be yet to die and Óðinn must have already traded his eye as the *völva* is able to speak of it. Therefore, it is not entirely false to speak of a chronology of myth. This supposition will become important when discussing Óðinn's own hanging but on the whole it is generally unnecessary to try and arrange mythology into a progressive and linear time-frame.

## 2.2 Ritual

All religious ritual must be understood as an attempt to communicate with The Other World (Schjødtt 2008: 60).

In order to speak of the potential connections between myth and ritual, as this thesis seeks to do (see Chapter Four), it is vital to understand how the two relate to one another. Immense volumes of work have been dedicated to this purpose (particularly James Frazer's 1890 work, *The Golden Bough*), encompassing any and all cultures past and present. Despite its complexity and the volume of study, the discussion was at some point somewhat anticlimactically

summarised with the supposition that ritual created myth or vice-versa.<sup>33</sup> Kluckhohn (1958: 151) underpins a large proportion of later research (despite not examining the ‘chicken or the egg’ debate) by suggesting that myth came to be the rationalisation of ritual practices and that both myth and ritual had their roots in common psychological grounds. Some have even gone as far to highlight myths that are in no way connected to ritual and suggest that they cannot be classified as myth in the first place (e.g. Stanner 1996: 81-106).

In modern terms, as Schjødt (2007b: 135) notes, older theories, particularly those that hold that “myth speaks what ritual acts”, now have little place in the scholarship of religion and instead a more subtle relationship is understood. Moreover, one should recognise that a multitude of myths would have been used to create a model for ritual; as Schjødt (2007b: 135) puts it, “[ritual] gains its rationale from the ideology by which a certain culture lives and by which it ascribes significance to the world.” Consequently, Schjødt (2008: 68) has arrived at a fine distinction between myth and ritual, describing ritual within a separate religious category from myth, one he describes as “communication phenomena”. As for myth, Schjødt (2008: 69) points out that whether spoken or not, its *ideology* is still active, whereas ritual requires actual performance. As he succinctly surmises, “Myth’s function is to ‘explain’, ritual’s to ‘obtain’.” As a result of this distinction, particularly in this study, one must be aware that ritual is as much to do with the individual(s) involved as it is for those who witness the act and to paraphrase Svanberg (2003: 148), death rituals in particular were generally performed by collectives of people on collectively privileged sites and were *made to be seen*.

These theories surrounding the relationship between myth and ritual gained importance in the 1990s, particularly among archaeologists, and scholarly focus fell on one particular aspect: that rituals could be seen as reflections of mythology. This concept was highlighted by Anders Andrén in a seminal article (1992: 33-56) through his analysis of Gotlandic picture stones and “graves as metaphors”. This convinced some scholars (e.g. Price 2010) that burial customs could be interpreted as expressions of Norse mythology.

Yet the term ‘ritual’ is not only applied in religious or belief situations and one would be in danger of misrepresenting the term’s significance if it were to be only understood in this light. Ritual is also attached to common and formalised societal, traditional or individual

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<sup>33</sup> For an overview of the myth/ritual discussion, see examples such as Fontenrose (1966), de Waal Malefijt (1968: 172-195), Kirk (1970: 8-31), Doty (1986: 72-106), Ackerman (1991), Bell (1997: 3-22) and Segal (1998: 1-13).

practices. In religion, it is the method of “communication” with the Other, an attempt to contact or manipulate some deity or force by creating a place or space in which mortals and gods can co-exist (Schjødt 2008: 68-69). Whether in the religious realm or everyday life, ritual is a tool, one of repetition, addressing the needs of society on multiple levels: for some it allows the observation of particular traditions and for others, it allows individuals or groups to simply remember particular actions that must take place if only for the sake of efficiency e.g. burial, craft professions and so on. Formulaic or repetitive as rituals may be, mankind is quickest to disregard the tiresome or pointless and as Svanberg (2003: 146) puts it, “Ritual is never simply or solely a matter of routine, habit or the “dead weight of tradition”; it is situational, strategic, and a way of dealing with some specific circumstances.” Consequently, in modern scholarship, one should not presume that generations of Viking Age families undertook the same ritual practices simply because it was done by generations prior. Whilst the props may remain the same, one cannot presume that the motives or expected result were as static.

Muddy as the waters on this topic already are, they are made muddier still by both scholarship and historical literary sources using the term ritual to represent a great many abstract things. Archaeologist Colin Renfrew (2005: 46) describes ritual as the following:

[Ritual is] both sacred and secular in intent, but this distinction is often blurred and the term is used to describe anything which is not fully understood. Thus ritual becomes a synonym for the “odd”, the unexplained or the otherwise unexplainable, when in fact it can only really be understood on a case-by-case basis, and forms merely an element of religion rather than being a descriptor for religion itself...

Consequently, throughout this study, *ritual* shall be used to denote any and all practices relating to or in connection with the attempts to intercede with a particular deity that can be shown to have a repeatable or formulaic element whilst retaining Renfrew’s distinction of an act being part of a religion rather than its descriptor.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, when investigating ritual, the concept of magic and its performers cannot be ignored. Despite occasional cases of archaeologists (e.g. Insol 2004: 5) attempting this separation due to magic’s “invocation of superstition”, it remains an inseparable companion to ritual as it is often nigh impossible to tell where ritual ends and the concept of magical practice begins.

### 2.2.1 Enacting Ritual

As noted above, despite the volume of material dedicated to understanding the creation of Viking mythology and its role in society, few have arrived at comprehensive conclusions regarding its ritual, and this applies especially when considering the cult surrounding Óðinn. Due to the orthopractic nature of pagan religion, one must be aware that the weight of tradition or regionality as well ‘good practice’, as such, ritual, would have held far more importance and significance than an encompassing doctrine (see §2.3.1). Furthermore, the importance of ritual to memorial studies cannot be understated: in order to remember something, you give it form and order, and repeat it over and over. This also aids in teaching, in passing down the memory of an event or particular skill. Conversely, ritual can also provide a sense of security in the face of change in its repetitive, unchanging forms, and this factor will prove crucial in Chapter Six particularly.

Yet when seeking examples of ritual behaviour to Óðinn, one must consider the context of our sources. It has been commonly observed that, for example, the *Íslendingasögur* exclude the commonplace and tend to revolve around the exceptional or fantastical but there is no mention of noteworthy Óðinnic practice. This is not to suggest that everyone on Iceland worshipped Óðinn but instead quite the opposite: as discussed in Chapter One, there is little to no evidence of any such practice. Whilst each of the highlighted genre of sources detailed in Chapter One contains examples of what has come to be understood as Óðinnic reverence, the events are extraordinary or even threatening and dangerous and one could claim that they were largely recorded for these facts alone. This suggests a variety of options: a) these practices were commonly ‘hidden’ from the general populace; b) they were very occasional and only for particular events; c) they are examples of individual zealous exponents of a religious system taking their beliefs to an extreme; d) writers chose to exclude examples purposefully; e) all of the above. Despite remaining aware that these ritual instances were recorded because they were out of the ordinary, the geographical spread of the sources, from Icelandic to Arabic examples, makes them appear more secure as an example of core practice versus examples of zealotry but again, the latter possibility cannot be disregarded. Consequently, one is left with two more viable options: reclusive practice and/or infrequent need.

Medieval Christian material is often condemning or judgemental of pagan practice but this is often not the case in Icelandic or Arabic sources. Similarly, modern scholarship has attempted to understand these practices with as few imposed preconceptions as possible, but

has not always been successful. Óðinnic ritual is often pictured as blood fuelled, extreme and violent; that is, as violence for the sake of violence. Perhaps, as noted in Chapter Six particularly, until the twenty-first century scholarship can be said to have neglected detailed analysis of ritual events, focussing instead upon the described practice and its supposed purpose. It is very likely that this was due to a lack of the now more advanced archaeological technology and concentration on literary texts rather than the *performance* but to understand the full effect of a ritual, for example, animal or even human sacrifice, one must consider what it would have been like to physically stand witness to the event. As stated, the accompanying performance is also key (cf. Gunnell 1995, 2001, 2008; Andrén 1992, Price 2002, 2010).<sup>35</sup> As a result, it is important that one considers the human element of these rituals, from the possible leaders and witnesses to how it was supposed to involve or affect one individually and as a member of a social group. Whilst it is most unlikely that direct attestations of formulated ritual practice will ever be recovered, there have arguably been successful attempts to try and recreate the place, people and situation of pagan worship (e.g. Gunnell 2001). It can also be observed that there has been a change in the focus of research and that there is an evident lessening of interest or speculation upon the supernatural elements of pagan belief and ritual reflected in a move to bring these elements of the Viking Age to a more practical, societal level.

### 2.3 Old Norse Religion

In attempts to recreate, or at least understand, aspects of pagan religion once practiced during the Viking Age there are still many who declare the task impossible. As Redmond (2007: 6) notes:

Where the understanding of religion becomes difficult is in the dissemination of the rituals themselves, the perfect appreciation of which must derive from fundamental belief. Unfortunately fundamental belief does not include the scope for unbiased comparative evaluation; so complete understanding of ritual and religion can never be achieved.

Whilst it cannot be denied that religion is mostly in the mind of the ‘doer’, the above is overly critical. Through continued evaluation of our sources with a wider contextual scope via

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<sup>35</sup> The term *performance* is key as these rituals were not simply words and actions but also manipulations of physical objects.

improving technology and the results of other disciplines, one is able to reach some definitive conclusions that were previously believed to be impossible. Consequently scholarship creeps ever closer to the people who did fundamentally believe in these practices and their reasons for doing so. Nonetheless, when Schjødt (2007b: 136) asks scholars to admit that they are on “the tip of the religious iceberg” of Viking religion and that comparative reconstructions with other Indo-European systems are likely to be our only way forward, it is impossible not to agree.<sup>36</sup> Yet as Nordberg (2012: 119-152) clearly shows, as soon as one tries to define the term, Old Norse religion, it splits into two questions: what is *religion* and what is *Old Norse* religion? A definition for *religion* has been sought for centuries and has resulted in almost infinite opinions, scholarly or otherwise, and as such this study does not seek to provide one. Yet it is necessary to have some form of working parameter for without one we are unable to identify or classify religious activity in the surviving media. Despite raising issues between the concepts of personal ethical codes and their similarities with religious behaviour, Hines (2003: 377) provides a very close approximation of a concept most would regard as acceptable and which, in order to dispense with endless philosophical and anthropological discussion, shall be employed here: “[religion is] the human response to a perceived but intangible spirit world that coexists with the real human world.”

In terms of understanding the general role or rise of religion in society, one cannot neglect the lifetime works of French scholar, Émile Durkheim (1912) who first proposed and espoused the idea of a ‘collective consciousness’ (i.e. that no religions were false *per se* but simply social constructions), rules for interacting with objects or beings declared sacred and that these sacred things reflected social and cultural reality. In more modern terms two anthropological theories can be applied in order to inform our study as to how particular religions come to be and how ritual and symbols come to hold places of prominence. Bowie (2000: 26) established remarkably effective (whilst purposefully general) categories in order to identify overarching themes within religious systems that in turn allowed them to either be identified as a ‘world’ or ‘traditional/primal’ religion:<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This does not mean that one should simply accept or superimpose similar practice on the Viking Age. One should instead take these possible markers and return to the Viking Age material for correlation in places passed over or unconsidered rather than allowing these similarities to create Viking Age religion.

<sup>37</sup> Conflict with these divisions is of course immediately identifiable. Islam or Buddhism could be said to incorporate point 5 from the ‘traditional’ table and modern African tribal beliefs do not fit within point 3, but in general, the distinctions are quite accurate.

## World Religion

1. Based on written scripture
2. Notion of salvation, often from the outside
3. Universal or potentially universal
4. Able to subsume or supplant primal religion
5. Often forms separate sphere of activity

## Traditional/Primal Religion

1. Oral, or if literate, lacking written or formal scripture or creed
2. 'this worldly'
3. Confined to a single language or group
4. Form basis for world religion to develop
5. Religious and social life inseparable

These categories comfortably allow one to categorise Old Norse religion among the traditional or primal religions and thus provide the working parameters and helps guide scholars towards that which one should and should not expect regarding religious life. From the outset it should be expected, as noted below, that there was widespread variation with regard to belief or practical worship, and a focus upon or association with the natural world and an individual's interaction with it. Most interestingly, it appears, hypothetically, that religious and daily life should be seen as two sides of the same coin.

### 2.3.1 Religion in Practice

With this division of religions by nature and structure, some may possibly infer, in line with other historical tribal religions like the Native American, Siberian or African people, that the dominant practice would have been shamanistic. Consequently, with the rough classification of Old Norse religion, we see the discussion regarding the possible practice of shamanism in the Viking Age arise. Beginning in the early twentieth century in opposition to the question of magical practice, a theory of initiation – particularly with regard to Óðinn and his hanging – first appeared in Rolf Pipping's *Oden i Galgen* (1928) and this theory has risen to prominence in the succeeding decades. With such limited information within the literary sources regarding possible acts of shamanism in the Viking Age, great efforts have been made in order to tease out any possible reference to shamanistic practices in the poetic and saga sources, with focus falling heavily upon the role of *seiðr*, the *vǫlvur*, Óðinn's self-immolation and other possible actions of his that could be interpreted as the actions of a shaman (cf. *Grímnismál* Prologue,

*Lokasenna* 24). Additionally, a great deal of comparative studies, both for and against the Viking practice of shamanism, have been undertaken, comparing the magical inferences (particularly the practice of *seiðr*) in literature and archaeology with surviving, modern practice and historical Sámi shamanism seeking possible parallel or outside influence (cf. Strömbäck 1935, Price 2002, Soli 2002, Heide 2006, Tolley 2009). As for the conclusions of these efforts, those for and against the practice remain firmly divided.

Turville-Petre (1975), Clunies Ross (1994), Price (2002), Schjødt (2008) and most recently Tolley's (2009) encyclopaedic two volumes have been the most prominent in recent years with respect to the question of whether, as evidenced by literary sources, shamanism was practiced in the Viking Age. These scholars are split in their opinions with Clunies Ross and Schjødt in favour of the shamanistic interpretation and its associated initiations, and Turville-Petre and Tolley very much unconvinced. Regarding *seiðr*, Strömbäck's classic *Sejd* (1935) is still the gold standard of the genre which almost all subsequent scholars of the subject have referenced, been influenced by or advanced their own theories from. In addition to these literary studies, the archaeological element of this investigation into shamanism cannot be ignored. Price (2001, 2002, 2010) has led a course for the identification and interpretation of shamanistic elements particularly in female graves that he has identified as those of the *vǫlvur*. With the theory of shamanism and particularly initiation in vogue, it places one among the minority if one seriously questions the validity of these conclusions in application to the Viking Age. It is also curious that despite the volume of scholarship on sacrifice, offerings and initiation, focus has fallen off on the practice itself and very little work has ever been undertaken as to what these sacrifices are actually *for*. Nonetheless, each of these approaches will be explored in greater detail when analysing Óðinn's ritual hanging in Chapter Four and the role of the *vǫlva* with regard to Óðinn in Chapter Seven.

With regard to the role of shamanism one may turn to Geertz's (1966) model of religious interaction in order to encapsulate ritual and symbolism. It should first be noted that when dealing with 'sacred' items or symbols, *sacred* should be taken to mean a thing or act consecrated to a divinity (*OED*). Geertz (1966: 28) suggests that religion is self-substantiating and as such, shapes the behaviour of its followers as a meaning-making enterprise; a system of understanding and symbolism that imposes order on the chaos of the natural world. Geertz unquestioningly concludes that religion in tandem with its rituals and symbols provided society with the ability to apply a sense of coherence and order to a world in which there is none. As a result, the symbols or practices that were created in order to form this coherence must 'prove

themselves' and as such, become self-substantiating. Consequently, it can be observed that myth and religion thus become unavoidably intertwined and this hypothesis will be examined in greater detail below.

With a rudimentary handle on the most basic functions of religion in society and advancing to the Viking Age, one finds that *Old Norse religion* is in fact no simpler. The discussion of how Old Norse religion may have functioned, if such a concept ever existed, can largely be summarised with scholars in recent years questioning the proposed cohesion and meaningfully structured pre-Christian religion despite the increasing volume of evidence for exactly the opposite (cf. Callmer 2006). It has naturally followed for many scholars that this is clear evidence of simple non-organisation. As a result, Nordanskog (2006: 15) has argued that one cannot even call the beliefs of Viking Scandinavia 'religion' due to its non-homogenous state, unorganised system with no formal teaching or record. Yet, as Nordberg (2012: 120) points out, this argument for or against the term religion is laden with modern Western conceptions of what a religion should be: "to imply that ethnic religions are not 'real' religions because they lack some elements essential to Christianity [...] is of course in itself Christiocentric." This back and forth argument may lead one to presume that one cannot use the term religion at all, as it evidently carries bias towards formalised 'book' systems and could result in our carrying modern perceptions to Viking material.

Yet who decides what is and is not to be considered a religion? If one were to base our criteria upon Western Christianity or Islam, it is clear to any individual that neither of these faiths were homogenous in the past and they remain divided today. With regard to Old Norse religion, one cannot disregard the concept of religion simply due to the varied, fractured, incomplete and lost source material. If one were to put aside modern Western preconceptions of how a religion should function, a simple question emerges: was Old Norse belief ever *supposed* to be organised? That it was not supposed to be organised would fall in line with the concept of religion and life being inseparable, where by simply living in the culture and operating within its norms may have been regarded as what would be identified as religious practice. If this were to be the case, there would be no need for religious administration. As Insoll (2004: 18) states, "the possibility exists that religious beliefs/thoughts can structure all activity, regardless of the social systems being considered". This could give context, for example, to the brevity of background information in particularly, the *Íslendingasögur*. Life, death and religion simply 'were'. Consequently when the term 'religion' is used within this

thesis it is used to describe the Old Norse pagan beliefs and interactions with the Other but without any presumption of and the need for organisation or homogenous practice.

### 2.3.2 Structures of Belief in Viking Age Scandinavia

With a working definition for the meaning of religion in the Viking Age, it now falls to observe how religion was perpetrated in Scandinavia. As has been illustrated through both the history of Scandinavia and its social structure, it is clear that one is not dealing with homogeneously organised communities, states or religious dogmatic structure. As Redmond (2007: 6) states, “In farming communities religion is perpetrated by the people: in nations it is perpetrated by the state.” It was only with the development of large-scale societies living in cities and towns that it became possible for fixed religious practices to be developed, places of worship constructed and written dogma to be recorded (Parkes *et al.* 1997: 16). As to how religious instruction was received in the period there can be no doubt that the oral culture was the driving factor during the Viking Age. With no widespread use of formal writing, nor the real means to do so, information would have been communicated almost exclusively by word of mouth. Therefore skills, knowledge and belief would have passed through visual aid and verbal instruction from generation to generation. As to who maintained, taught and enforced these beliefs in particular (as well as the associated practices), Parkes *et al.* (2007: 16) succinctly outline the situation by showing that the farming group revolved around the older members of the community and that it would have been their responsibility to communicate these aspects to younger generations.

With regard to worship on a macro scale, it is significant to note that during the early Viking Age no one fixed building for worship can be seen to exist. Studies of both place-names and material remains have shown that worship was instead connected to the land and over time was brought inside the farmstead, hall or *hof* (cf. Brink 1996, Gunnell 2001). Now settled (for the most part), individual communities evidently felt no need nor had the financial means to support or go about creating a hierarchal and structured system akin to the contemporary Church. Yet scholarship is largely at a loss as to how specific religious practice took place. In the case of Óðinn especially, only basic premises can be assumed (i.e. that knowledge would have passed primarily from father to son(s), or at least older male relatives to younger male relatives), as it appears that the belief system was tightly bound to the principles of war, honour

and as a result, a memorable life and favourable death.<sup>38</sup> With the theoretical links between Óðinnic belief and nobility intertwined with ancestral respect (at the very least<sup>39</sup>), pedigree and the eventual joining with one's ancestors, one's background and position in society would be of upmost importance for elite families. Consequently, retaining familial honour and living up to ancestral example or memory would have been central to this. This collection of concepts and form of practice gives rise to the concept of cult or cultic activity and therefore – in an inter-disciplinary environment – an examination of this term is also required due to its negative implications outwith the study of Old Norse religion (see §2.3.3).

Yet with this heterogeneous and 'non-organised' society, one should also expect differing beliefs, methods and spheres of significance. Changes or even minor shifts in 'standard practice' would occur due to a number of factors on societal, regional and national levels. This change not only begins with modifications to or alterations within local religious practice, but also because of a variety of other factors: an assimilation of rites practiced elsewhere (be it a neighbouring region or overseas), a physical shift away from the cultural homeland and even perhaps proportionately fewer members of the older generation who were generally more observant of rituals and practice (Rosenblatt 1997: 36). Consequently, one returns to Davidson's (1943: 4-5) age-old advice when turning to investigate the practice of ritual hanging and human sacrifice: that one should seek thematic parallels and motifs without the need to discover or impress symmetrical examples.

### 2.3.3 Cult

As noted above, religious behaviour that is closed off and encapsulates tradition, regionality and familial ties attracts the concept of cult. The term 'cult' for the practice of Óðinnic religion also has historically troublesome connotations. Sociologically speaking 'cult' has been defined as a section of a religious group that can be formed without breaking away from the main body

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<sup>38</sup> There has been a growing trend in scholarship for a system of initiation into the cult of the warrior and ultimately, Óðinn (see Schjødt 1990, 1993, 1999, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> One may suggest that in following the importance of unity that had been created by these social rules, it is in these societies that one finds leanings towards a form of ancestor worship, which could in turn provide additional social stability by cementing relationships within those communities (see Badou 1989, Artelius 2000, Gräslund 2001 and Laidoner 2015). It seems simple prudence to observe your ancestors in a society that believed the dead could still influence the lives of the living.

of a religion (Richardson 1993: 349). Cults thus tend to be individual sections of an overarching belief or religious system that have risen to prominence among the main body of worshippers or via a select portion of the body (e.g. the elite, those with higher social standing). It is also recognised that cults tend to be led by charismatic individuals who bring/orate particular knowledge to their followers or the initiated (Richardson 1993: 349). Unlike sects, they do not protest against elements within a belief system but choose to emphasise particular aspects of it. Nonetheless, contemporary use of the word carries the generally negative connotations of cult as representative of a secretive group practicing odd mystical ritual within strict tradition. Insoll (2004: 5) declares ‘cult’ a weak term due to its connotations of marginality and “freakish” nature. Sociology has thus pressed for a renaming of the term to ‘new religious groups’ in order to dissociate ‘cult’ from the general pejorative and derogatory meanings attached to the word to allow “dispassionate discussion and research” (Richardson 1993: 355).

Yet within the study of Old Norse culture, religion and its diversities, the term ‘cult’ is used without pejorative understanding or modern negative preconceptions. As noted, worship of all the gods among the Æsir does not seem to have been required or performed and some could be seen to emphasise individual gods, most prominently Óðinn and Þórr (for Óðinn see *Egils saga* and *Sonatorrek*). Each of these gods had their own spheres of influence, geographical prominence and related ritual (Brink 2007: 105-136). When one then addresses the concept of an Óðinnic cult, one runs an ongoing academic discussion: worshippers of Óðinn in Viking Age Scandinavia, despite the apparent prominence of this god and the extensive mythology and stories surrounding him, appear to have been quite select and rare (see Chapter Six). Furthermore, worship of Óðinn seems to have typically remained in the hands of the elite: kings, chieftains and their warriors. In contrast to the discussed saga records regarding the practical worship of Þórr, we have no such record for Óðinn. If any kind of organisation existed in forming the cult of Óðinn, as has been discussed, scholarship has little to no idea of its structure or organisation and research is still ongoing, particularly with the rise of focus upon sacral kingship.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> For a good introduction to both the literature and archaeology of the subject, see de Maret (2011: 1059-1067).

#### 2.3.4 Pre-Christian or Pagan?

As a final note to cultic practice and pre-Christian belief in general, one is left to decide how to refer to these groups. This process has become difficult as a result of the preconceptions and bias attached to the usual terms for practitioners of non-central religions (i.e. pagan or heathen). The *OED* first defines a pagan as “a person not subscribing to any major or recognized religion, esp. the dominant religion of a particular society; *spec.* a heathen, a non-Christian, esp. considered as savage, uncivilized, etc.” The word’s first use in the English language is recorded in 1440 and has little but negative connotations. It is clear from this definition that the Western bias of Christiocentric thinking has endured, continuing past views of non-centralised belief systems. Returning to the *OED*, heathen is hardly a better term, having identical sentiments attached: “Of an individual or people: holding religious beliefs of a sort that are considered unenlightened, now esp. ones of a primitive or polytheistic nature; *spec.* not of the Christian, Jewish, or Muslim faiths”. The pejorative nature of these terms is evident and it is only in the light of that which one considers organised, modern religion to state that all pre-Christian religion was ‘primitive’. Old Norse religion may have appeared so in contrast to Christianity; on account of its lack of grand buildings and established hierarchy for example. However through surviving literature and poetry one may observe that it was far from primitive. With regard to the ‘barbaric’ connotations, one cannot judge too harshly those in the past who used the term this way. Viking religion, particularly regarding Óðinn, is often portrayed – even by Viking worshippers – as violent and blood filled and would certainly have shocked an individual familiar only with Christianity.

In more recent times, both of these terms, particularly *pagan*, have shed some of their historically judgemental tones and have come to be understood as representative of an individual or society that practises a non-centralised religion with particular reverence for the natural world. For example, the *OED* defines the modern use (twentieth century onwards) as “a follower of a pantheistic or nature-worshipping religion”. This last definition is the closest to an accurate portrayal of the overarching themes that may be observed within the Old Norse system. Despite historical bias and subconscious attachment to past views, in this thesis the term *pagan* shall relate to the non-Christian religious practice operating within Viking Age Scandinavia and related societies in order to emphasise its detachment from centralised religion and its links to the natural world.

## 2.4 Conclusions

As with all societies, past and present, society in the Viking period homelands was indelibly linked to religion (Redmond 2007: 11).

If this thesis is to evaluate the Old Norse religion of Scandinavia, there is no way to separate life and religion within Viking culture. As a result, one must be aware that if societal changes occur, religious ones will follow and vice-versa. This is not to say that the same cannot be said for political, environmental and economic factors as well. As a result of the non-organised, non-homogenised religious society outlined above, it seems unlikely that one should expect to find examples of religious belief or ritual, especially among the higher echelons of society, to display identical expression or methods. It instead seems prudent to seek thematic similarity or crossover in motif. It was ultimately the family, the most basic of societal features, which determined an individual's conception of religion. No matter what one's rank in society, from birth an individual would have been raised in a society deeply saturated by religion and as a result would then have been instructed by both their immediate family and surrounding community in the ways of the Old Norse faiths. To a mind not based in Western modernity and science, the distinction between belief, ritual and practical religious behaviour is impossible.<sup>41</sup>

## Chapter Three

### The Multiple Names, Spheres and Places of Óðinn

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If we wish to establish the real significance of a heathen Teutonic deity and the way in which it has developed in the course of the ages, we cannot restrict ourselves to the study of literary documents, such as the Icelandic poems of the Edda or the sagas (de Vries 1931: 1).

The initial goal of this chapter is to scour the extant literary corpus of Scandinavia and beyond, incorporated with linguistic evidence in order to gather a sense of Óðinn's development, character, spheres of influence and overarching motifs. This is undertaken in order to uncover

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<sup>41</sup> Hines (2003: 377) provides a simple and effective example of the inability to divide religious belief, ritual behaviour and daily life: a farmer manures his field, which in turn represents feeding the earth, and this same farmer later makes sacrificial offerings for fertility. Thus we have practical and ritual behaviour encapsulated into everyday activity, inseparable from one another.

particular aspects that could have then linked the god with the social practice of hanging: knowledge, men, trees and personal/social honour. After this has been achieved, place-names and how they might relate to a god will be examined in order to ascertain where cultic activity pertaining to the identified spheres may have been present. Finally, this chapter will analysis the most recognised form of ritual practice during the Viking Age: sacrifice. In the outset it is vital to note that as the chapter title suggests, Óðinn is far from the tidy, ‘together’ god that a modern popular view would suggest. Óðinn is by far the most versatile god among the Norse deities. His name(s) and function varied vastly across regions, borders, literary texts and this has remained true from the early medieval period up until modern scholarship where the figure appears to incorporate each and all of these roles at once. Consequently, it is naive to assume that contemporary worshippers across Viking Scandinavia would have viewed a god like Óðinn in the same way, being outside doctrinal or ‘organised’ religion as they were. Furthermore, one should also avoid the assumption that each group or even individual worshipper would also call upon or perform ritual to Óðinn for the same purpose.

### 3.0 What’s in a Name?

Before delving into the source material for the role and purpose of the god Óðinn, it is imperative to start with the theonym itself. It should first be noted that the name itself, akin to the deity, has received a great deal of scholarly attention, of which little is conclusive (cf. Helm 1913-1953: 260-264). Within Europe, the theonym began its development approximately one thousand years prior to the Viking Age among the Germanic peoples as *\*Wōðanaz* (PGmc) (de Vries 1962: 416, 1956-57: 27). It has been long connected with the PGmc adjective *\*wōþaz* ‘mad, excited’ and the PIE *\*wāt* ‘raging, mad, inspired’ and as such, gave rise to the image of a barbaric deity connected with mantic states, death and violence. The *OED* displays a further connection with the now obsolete English adj. *wood* ‘insane, violent, lunatic’ that arose from the OE *wōð* ‘mad, frenzied’ which itself developed from PGmc as *\*woda-*. As Orel (2003: 469) shows, cognates appear as the Gothic *wop̥s* ‘possessed, mad’, OHG *wuot* ‘mad, madness’ and akin to the German *wut* ‘rage, fury’ which are all suggested to have arisen from the PIE *\*wet-* ‘to blow, inspire, spiritually arouse’. It should also be noted that linguistically aside, the only explicit connection between *\*Wōðanaz* and the commonly associated characteristic of *fury* comes from Adam of Bremen (IV: 26) who records *Wodan, ed est furor* ‘Wodan, which means fury’ (Tschan 2002: 207). These various, yet oddly consistent terms have also been equated

with the PGmc \**wōð* and its cognates, OE *wōþ* ‘song, sound’ and ON *óðr* ‘poetry’ (Shaw 2002: 38) and one comes full circle back to *Óðinn* and his previously discussed links as the originator of poetry and his gathering of knowledge.

As PGmc split into its separate dialects, cognates for the theonym can be shown among each of the West Germanic languages (bar Gothic): OE *Woden* (*Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, see Whitelock: 9-10), OS *Uuoden* (*Abrenuntiatio Diaboli*, see Wadstein 1899: 1), OHG *Wodan* (Nordendorf Brooch, see Krause 1966: 292) and Langobardic *Guodan* (*Origo Gentis Langobardorum*, see Waitz 1878: 2-3) and this proves equally true for the Northern Germanic dialects: OEN *Uþin* (Ribe Inscription, see Spurkland 2005: 73) and OWN *Óðinn*. Shaw (2002: 39) suggests that each of these languages would only possess these cognates if developed from a common base denominator (i.e. the proto languages of the West and North Germanic dialects). If this were to be the case, one may conclude that Wodan-Óðinn existed within the timeframe of Proto-Germanic and its eventual split into the dialects or at least before significant dialectal shifts. As such, this would provide considerable antiquity for the cult of these deities.<sup>42</sup> North (1997: 78-79) counters this argument and suggests that the Germanic Wodan-Óðinn was instead a result of the trade and warfare between Gaul, Germany and Rome and originated in the cult of Mercury. In face of the linguistic evidence, Shaw’s original hypothesis that antiquity may be shown through widespread cognates appears the most valid. Nevertheless, the spread and resulting influence of the Roman Empire can hardly be denied.

Further linguistic complications arise in ON itself and interpretation has been controversial. ON features both adjectival and noun forms of *óðr* and consequently some have gone to great length to challenge this consensus of antiquity (cf. Shaw 2002: 35-42). This is further complicated by the occasional occurrence of the name *Óðr* on its own terms.<sup>43</sup> Through back construction of separate PGmc terms and then a specific focus on OE, Shaw attempts to

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<sup>42</sup> Shaw (2002: 40-41) chooses to argue against this antiquity but uses an argument based upon similarities between modern English and French, as well as modern British dialects to prove his point regarding the abilities of dialects to absorb a current word active in one area and shift its sound significantly. As such, his rhetoric is unconvincing.

<sup>43</sup> This name appears to represent a member of the *Æsir* who is primarily associated with Freyja as Snorri, in both *Ynglinga saga* 13 and *Gylfaginning* 29, presents the two as husband and wife with their two daughters, Hnoss and Gersemi. However, this name has most often been concluded to be a hypostasis of Óðinn (his wife is the goddess, Frigg) due to the similarities and crossover of their mythologies and the ongoing debate regarding the duality of the goddesses Freyja and Frigg (see Näsström 1995, 1996a, Grundy 1996: 55-67, Davidson 1998: 10).

show that Woden and Óðinn developed into two distinct and separate figures, one from the OE adj. *wōð* ‘angry, furious, frantic’ and the other from the n. *wōð* ‘mind, wit, spirit, poetry’, which eventually lead each to the homophone in ON. As an explanation for these phonetically identical words, Shaw’s theory is problematic for a number of reasons. Whilst there are a great many sources for Óðinn, even the earliest come from the Christian period and there is not enough ‘early’ evidence (i.e. poetic or even runic) to determine whether or not Óðinn derived from ‘poetry’ or ‘furious, mad’. On the other hand, Cleasby and Vigfússon (1957: 471) note that the noun form is only used poetically in the extant sources which Grundy (2014: 206) uses more convincingly to explain the two different derivations in ON. With most of our information regarding Óðinn originating in the poetry and with him being believed as the original source of poetry for mankind, this use or even title seems appropriate in this particular context. Grundy consequently concludes that the older adjectival form depicts the generally perceived figure, the Germanic god of anger and that the later noun only survives due to its preservation in the strophes of the skalds. Subsequently it seems reasonable to conclude, from a linguistic background at least, that the earliest understanding of Óðinn was one connected with fury or madness. Whilst an exact meaning remains unresolved, it appears that at this point, no such thing is actually required. This conclusion, with regards to connecting Óðinn and his associated spheres of belief, does however suggest that warfare was indeed the deity’s primary function and consequently, one may expect to find examples of ritual practice primarily associated with warfare and consequently carry socio-political ramifications (see Chapters Five and Seven).

### 3.1 The Evolution of Óðinn

As important as it is to understand Óðinn’s name, it is equally important to understand where Óðinn came from. In seeking a general baseline from which the characteristics of Óðinn may have developed, Dumézil’s complex models of IE religious systems can be employed to positive effect. Developed from the base theory of Durkheim’s IE ‘collective consciousness’, Dumézil put forth a tripartite religious system first in 1929 which he claimed was uniquely Indo-European and could be found in nigh all religious systems that had developed out of IE culture. Littlejohn (1973: xi-xii) best summarises his model by highlighting that IE ideology appears to have been composed of three fundamental principles: 1) maintenance of cosmic and judicial order 2) the exercise of physical prowess 3) the promotion of physical well-being.

Littlejohn (1973: x-xi) further summarises Dumézil's various works by stating that the first function was to be collectively represented by a priesthood and a pair of sovereign gods. The second function was reflected in the presence of a warrior-ruler class as well as the divine collective representation of this class. The third function was reflected by the mass of society, the herders and cultivators upon whom the elite relied upon for sustenance. In the majority of cases, the principal divine occupants of these sovereign gods were conceived as a pair of closely related kinsmen. It is apparent that the general hallmarks of the Æsir can be observed within this framework and using the above categories, it may be presumed that Óðinn would figure somewhere between the first two. Yet without presuming homogenous use of this deity, the third category is nonetheless also possible (cf. de Vries 1931, *Hyndluljóð* sts 2-3). Consequently, whilst this system has proved very fruitful theoretically, as mentioned above, this practice of 'pushing' non-homogenous belief and practice into firm boxes cannot be held to beyond their use as a prospective model (cf. Taggart 2015). This gives further credence to the hypothesis that the beliefs and ritual practices associated with Óðinn should not be expected to be homogenous and that consistent motifs will prove more fruitful.

In terms of seeking Óðinn's very beginnings, scholars have reached as far back as the Hindi god of wind Vata 'blown, blower of life' (cf. Fleck 1971a) on the basis of the PIE *\*wet-* 'blow, inspire'; the Celtic/Gaulish deity Lugh (cf. Stokes 1891); interaction with the Roman cult of mystery surrounding the figure of Mithras (cf. Davidson 1978, Kaliff and Sundqvist 2004: 212-217), and they have also delved the depths of Germanic and Anglo-Saxon accounts in Classical geographies and medieval hagiographies for any sliver of information that may refer to a developing god of war, death and poetry. Consequently, it seems apparent that a figure approximating Óðinn, part of a fundamentally IE structure had existed for centuries, ranging across wide geographic boundaries (Dumézil 1988). Yet it should be noted that scholarship has generally concluded that Wodan-Óðinn only held the position of a minor god for a lengthy period of time and only gained 'ascendancy' somewhat before or towards the beginning of the Viking Age (Patton 2009: 214, 219).

In context of the Classical accounts of the Germanic people, one must note that each of the deities have undergone *interpretatio romana* with Wodan, Tiwaz and Thunor appearing as Mercury, Mars and Hercules respectively. As *De Bello Gallico* (V: 17-18) put it (and was henceforth adopted by Tacitus, cf. North 1997: 79):

Most of all they worshipped Mercury. There are many images of him and they say that he is the discoverer of all arts, the ruler of roads and journeys, and they believe that he has the power in getting wealth, and for merchants.

To save repeating the work of various scholars, one can refer to Grundy (2014: 128-141) who provides an in depth analysis of the scholarship regarding the transition from the Germanic Wodan to the Norse Óðinn and his ‘conflict’ with Tiwaz-Týr. In short, scholarship has concluded that as Wodan spread out from the Germanic heartlands and north, a new figure simultaneously ousted Tiwaz (sky god of war, victory and judgement) whilst retaining many of Wodan’s properties (psychopomp, mantic poet) and the Norse Óðinn was formed, encompassing the characteristics and perhaps ritual elements of both.<sup>44</sup> This resulting deity went on to become the god of magic and a divine leader pursuing the intellectual arts. As the summary by Grundy (2014: 128-141) shows, through this process of ‘civilization’, Óðinn came to be worshipped ultimately by the aristocratic classes but despite this social ‘step up’ remained the god of war, frenzy, subversion, mantic states and the dead. Yet as Puhvel (1987: 193) points out, Óðinn is not the embodiment of this fury and martial frenzy but the dispenser thereof: “a magician rather than a champion, an orchestrator of conflict rather than a combatant.”

With a linguistic approach to Wodan-Óðinn’s evolution into the god of war, de Vries (1962: 416) connects the Germanic concept of *\*wōþa* ‘mad, excited’ with the dead army from the widely spread European legend of the Wild Hunt: German *das Wütende Heer* ‘the Furious Army’ and Swedish *Odensjakt* ‘Óðinn’s Hunt’. With Wodan-Óðinn being the predominantly ascribed leader of this event within Scandinavia and Germany, de Vries then suggests that Óðinn’s position as psychopomp and leader of the dead (i.e. the *einherjar* and *Totenheer*) should be regarded as the oldest function of the god(s). Yet due to the sheer number of allusions to ‘fury, anger’ and the question of *óðr*, de Vries (1957: 87-104) cannot dismiss the possibility that the fury element may in fact be equally as old. Furthermore, Grundy (2014: 186) points out that the *einherjar* would have no need for a psychopomp as they are chosen and ferried to the afterlife by the *valkyrjur* unlike the lost souls of the *Totenheer*. As further possible correlation for anger, Price (2002: 107) lists each of the *Óðinsheiti* (204) and distributes them according to the (subjective) aspect they represent, arriving at a 25% representation for war

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<sup>44</sup> It should not be forgotten that Týr lived on among the Æsir but is now recognisable for little other than his role in the binding of the wolf, Fenrir.

and/or aggression and 10.5% relating to frenzy, trance and anger and these ultimately form Óðinn's 'character' as given by names.

### 3.1.1 A Constructed Psychology of Óðinn

Stepping out of the obscured mists of the Germanic and Migration periods from Wodan and into the Viking Age as Óðinn, Óðinn's own mythological lineage is highlighted throughout both *Edda* and is brought into a more coherent, whilst conflicting form by Snorri. This lineage proves a core element of the mythological material as Óðinn's relationship of conflict with the *jötnar*, perhaps arising from these bonds of kinship, plays a role in his hanging, the acquisitions that follow (see Chapter Four). Furthermore, the *jötnar* also feature predominantly between Óðinn and his goal of collecting knowledge (see §3.1.2.2 and Chapter Seven). It is through these means that we come to see the psychology created for Óðinn by either the medieval or remembered from Viking Age society. Despite his ever present conflict with the *jötnar*, the eddic source material suggests that Óðinn would have been considered of *jötunn* and primordial stock himself. His father is Borr, the *jötunn* son of the presumably non-*jötunn* Búri,<sup>45</sup> whereas his mother is Bestla, the *jötunn* daughter of Bǫlþor/Bǫlþorn (*Völuspá* 4, *Hávamál* 140, *Gylfaginning* 6). Furthermore, *Hávamál* 140 alerts us to a further unnamed maternal uncle from among the *jötnar*.

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<sup>45</sup> On this individual's race or origin, see Clunies-Ross (1994: 157).

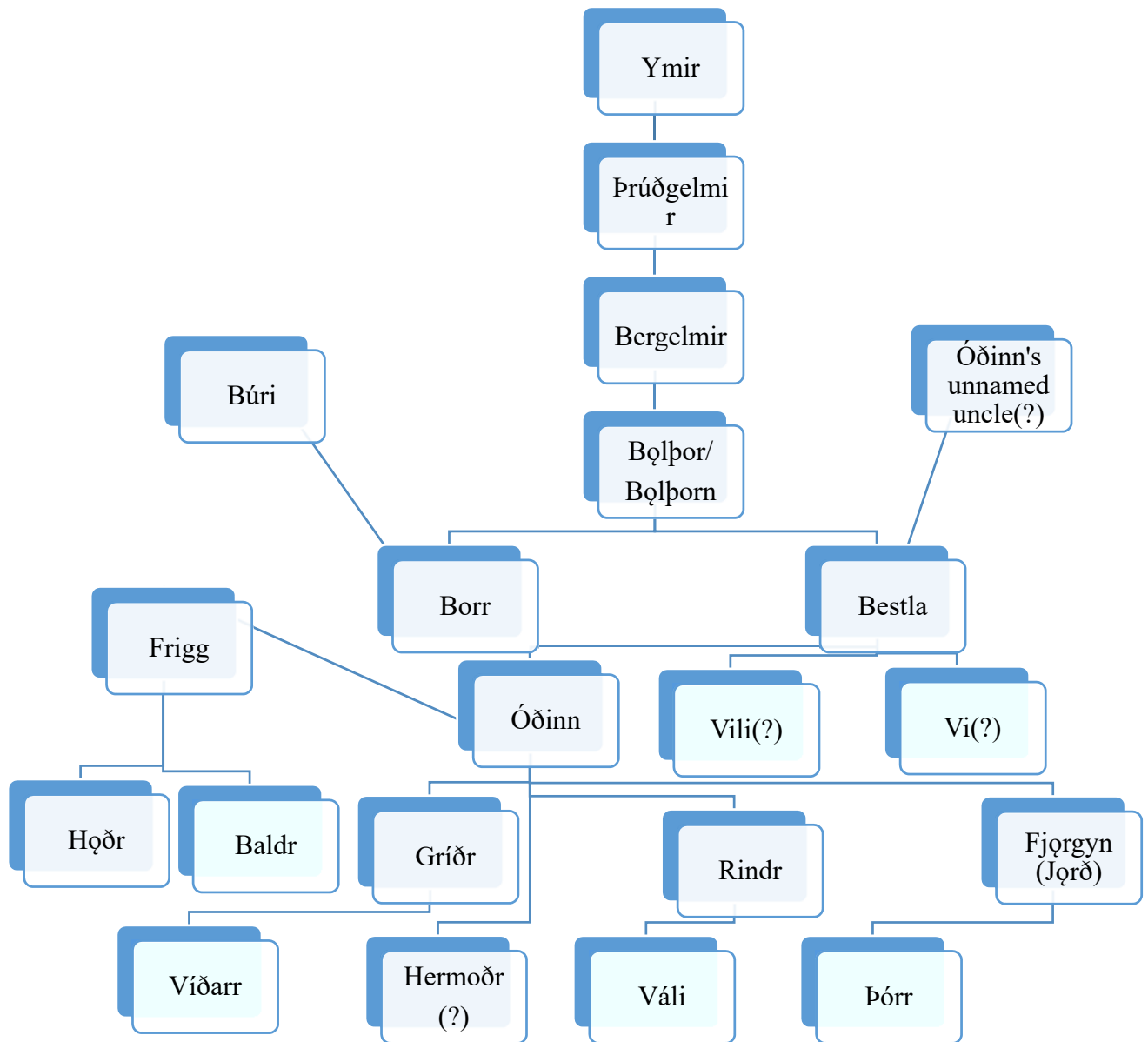


Fig. 3 Óðinn's 'Family Tree' (as understood from the *The Poetic Edda* and *Snorra Edda*)

As Fig. 3 shows, it is hard to understand Óðinn as anything but a *jötunn* himself but denoted as an *Æsir*, and one is left wondering exactly what these divine figures are or were believed to be.<sup>46</sup> Snorri appears to have come to similar conclusions regarding this heritage in *Gylfaginning* 3 when Gangleri asks the obvious question of where Óðinn was before the world was made and Hár replies, *Þá var hann með hrímþursum* 'He was among the frost-giants'. This should

<sup>46</sup> Clunies Ross (1994-98) has attempted to make headway in this arena following in the footsteps of Lévi-Strauss' (1969a+b, 1995) cultural models of nature and culture and suggests that the *jötnar* represented the more primordial elements of nature whereas the *Æsir* are the first who are able to manipulate nature and as such, the *jötnar* become their natural enemies.

first alert one to the fact that myth, even by its own parameters, is not always required to make logical sense. Yet with this lineage, mythologically, the ‘beginnings’ as it were of the conflict between the *Æsir* and the *jǫtnar* are not hard to understand: we are witnessing a clash of nature and society with the additional incident regarding the killing and destruction of the *jǫtunn* progenitor Ymir (*Vǫluspá* 9, *Vafþrúðnismál* 21, *Grimnismál* sts 40-41, *Gylfaginning* 8).<sup>47</sup> Yet it is never Óðinn who faces the *jǫtnar* in combat. He leaves this to his son, Þórr. If Óðinn is to be found on the field, it is a human one. Yet these instances are rare and instead, his sparring sessions are most often fought with words, in wisdom contests in the dwellings of old and wise *jǫtunn*. Here he proves his intellectual mettle from behind one mask or another and often tricks them into revealing some desired knowledge.<sup>48</sup> It is therefore safe to conclude that Óðinn’s personal conflict with the *jǫtnar* revolved around their inherent knowledge. Yet as one of their stock, it is curious that Óðinn had no access to such on his own terms. One wonders if the deity was considered to have been *denied* some aspect of his heritage either for his role in the killing of Ymir or his cultural ‘evolution’ and has to acquire the wisdom and inherent magical talents from another source. Consequently, one wonders if this ‘physiological profile’ could explain his base hunger, the hunger to *know*.

### 3.1.2 Primary Mythological Events and Roles

With Óðinn’s ‘foundations’ laid in order to display the deity’s antiquity, likely spheres for ritual behaviour and his primary driving factors, it falls to next explore the mythological events most strongly associated with his character as is understood today. Ultimately, Óðinn’s most recognisable mythological achievements/characteristics are as follows (in no chronological or purposeful order):

1. Creator of *Miðgarðr* and Humankind
2. Instigator of the first war

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<sup>47</sup> Clunies Ross (1994: 158) regards this act as a crime that could only be regarded by the contemporary society as an act of kinslaying that goes uncompensated. Yet one wonders if gods were considered subject to human law (i.e. Þórr dressing as a woman in *Þrymskviða* and breaking gender bounds) and how much it would be considered a crime *per se* since the result was the creation of the world itself.

<sup>48</sup> These masks, names or literal, would serve as a way to avoid physical confrontation. As *Harbarðsljóð* 11 states *Hvat scaltu of nafn hylia, nema þu sacar eigir?* ‘Why would you conceal your name, unless you have a quarrel with someone?’

3. Theft and gift of the Mead/poetry
4. Self-Immolation and discovery of the *rúnar*
5. Possessor of Mímir's enchanted head
6. Wisdom acquisition through contests
7. Sacrifice of an eye
8. Master of Huginn and Muninn
9. Master of Valhøll and the *einherjar*
10. Death at *ragnarøk*

For this thesis, the creation of humankind and the gathering of knowledge and men will become the primary focus below as the evaluation of Óðinn's self-immolation and the connected motifs will be examined at great length in the following chapters. Despite seeming unconnected with the act of hanging, even a surface glance at the events surrounding Óðinn's acts of creation with regard to humankind in particular show a predominant link between deity, trees and humans. This in turn feeds into ritual behaviour. When one examines hanging in connection with ritual sacrifice, one finds Óðinn, trees and humans to be closely intertwined with the tree providing a link between humankind and Óðinn (see Chapters Four and Five).

### 3.1.2.1 Creator of Humankind

Regarding the creation of humankind, one finds the eddic source material somewhat in conflict with Snorri's later work. For instance, *Gylfaginning* 3 placed this act of creation in solely Óðinn's hands and declared it his "greatest accomplishment":

*hann gerði maninn ok gaf honum þá er lifa skal ok aldri tynask, þótt líkamin  
fúni at moldu eða brenni at qsku.*

'he made humankind and gave to him a soul that will live and never perish, though the body decays or burns to ashes'.

(Faulkes (2005: 8-9) and author's translation)

*Völuspá* sts 17-18 however, displays a conflicting account to this particular statement<sup>49</sup> and one may observe a fundamental link between the Óðinn, trees and men:

<i>Unz þrír kvómu</i>	Until three Æsir came
<i>ór því liði,</i>	out of that retinue,
<i>qfligr oc ástkir</i>	powerful and benevolent, <sup>50</sup>
<i>æsir at húsi,</i>	to the world,
<i>fundu á landi</i>	on the ground they found
<i>litt megandi,</i>	Ash and Embla,
<i>Ask ok Emblu,</i>	they had little strength
<i>ørløglausa.</i>	(and were) without Fate.
<i>Qnd þau né áttu</i>	Breath they had not,
<i>óð þau né hqfðu,</i>	mental faculties they had not,
<i>lá né læti</i>	vital warmth nor voice
<i>né litu góða;</i>	nor good colouring;
<i>qnd gaf Óðinn,</i>	breath gave Óðinn,
<i>óð gaf Hænir,</i>	mental faculties gave Hænir,
<i>lá gaf Lóðurr</i>	vital warmth and good colour
<i>ok litu góða.</i>	gave Lóðurr.

(*ÍF Eddukvæði I* (2014: 295) and author's translation)

From this small example it is apparent that Snorri is working within medieval bounds and was attempting to organise Norse belief with a single god responsible for the creation of the world, humankind and the eternal soul.

<sup>49</sup> Yet Snorri actually paraphrases this poem in *Gylfaginning* 9 (see below), therefore conflicting himself.

<sup>50</sup> AM 544 4to has *þursa meyjar* 'giant maidens' in place of *ór því liði* 'out of that retinue' and therefore is presumably including the norns (by reference of *Völuspá* 20) in the creation of mankind (*ÍF Eddukvæði* (2014: 310)). For the role of the norns and their connection to fate, cf. Bek-Pederson (2011).

One may further observe Snorri's continued struggle to reconcile the myth and his systemisation when he contradicts himself in relating how humankind was first created in *Gylfaginning* 9:

*Þá er þeir Bors synir gengu með sævar ströndu, fundu þeir tré tvau, ok tóku upp tréin ok sköpuðu af menn. Gaf hinn fyrsti and ok líf, annarr vit ok hræring, þriðji ásjónu, málit ok heyrn ok sjón; gáfu þeim klæði ok nöfn. Hét karlmaðrinn Askr, en konan Embla, ok ólusk flaðan af mankindin fleim er bygðin var gefin undir Miðgarði.*

Then as Bor's sons walked along the sea shore, they found two pieces of wood, took up the pieces of wood and created people from them. The first gave breath and life, another wit and movement, third a face, speech and hearing and sight; they gave them clothes and names. The man was called Ash, the woman Elm, and from them was humankind produced to whom the settlement under Miðgarðr was given.

(Faulkes (2005: 13) and author's translation)

When read in tandem with *Völuspá* sts 17-18, whilst two other individuals are consistently involved, they are not synonymous and barely feature in Snorri's prose beyond their names and almost no elaboration is made upon their person.<sup>51</sup> Evidently, which three gods one should credit for this act of creation differs in the telling. As Faulkes (2005: 60) notes, this 'vagueness' was most likely the result of Snorri knowing that *Völuspá* sts 17-18 had different figures. Furthermore, as Turville-Peter (1972: 1) comments, 'Óðinn had grown even more powerful in [Snorri's] eyes than he had ever been in the eyes of the heathens.' Nevertheless, in both the poetic and prose forms, three gods wandering *Miðgarðr* come across those who become the first humans – *Askr* 'ash' and *Embla* 'elm/vine'<sup>52</sup> – and one gains another glimpse into the interlinked connection between trees, humankind and the one deity to feature each time, Óðinn. Further connections between these three can be made, foremost with the term *askr Yggdrasill* (*Völuspá* 19, 47 and *Grímnismál* sts 29-31) that brings all three elements even more closely together. It is also worth mention that this tree lineage could also be applied to Óðinn himself.

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<sup>51</sup> It is reasonable to conclude that Snorri may not have possessed any more information about them and it would not be the first example of imaginative elaboration, as shall be shown below.

<sup>52</sup> The etymology and interpretation of *Embla* is still in question. See de Vries (1962: 101-102).

With his mother's name *Bestla* 'little tree-bark' and his grandfather referred to as *Bölþorn* 'tree trunk thorn' in *Gylfaginning* 5 (*Hávamál* 140 has *Bölþors*), his own *jötunn* origins can be seen to go back to trees as well (Dronke 2011: 62). This closely-knit link between god, tree and humans gives a great deal more credence to the centrality of the tree in terms of ritual practice surrounding Óðinn and that the tree is not as irrelevant as numerous other scholars, particularly Ström (1942: 118), have inferred (see Chapter Four).

### 3.1.2.2 The Acquisition of Knowledge

In addition to the above, Óðinn can frequently be recognised in pursuing knowledge endlessly at any cost and through any means, whatever the consequences to others or himself. As Foote and Wilson (1970: 390) put it, "He appears as the experimenter and adventurer: there is nothing he will not dare to explore." Yet this did not mean that his knowledge was infinite or even infallible as evidenced by his never-ending quest for more. As the above list displays (§3.1.2), this was made quite apparent through particular major mythological events. In no particular order (but retaining that of above): Óðinn challenged *jötunn* to wisdom contests (*Vafþrúðnismál*), sacrificed an eye at *Mímisbrunnr* 'Mimir's well' for a drink of wisdom (*Völuspá* 28, *Gylfaginning* 15), stole the Mead of Poetry from the *jötunn* Suttungr and gifted it to humankind (*Hávamál* 104-110, *Skáldskaparmál* 5, Stora Hammars III), tortured himself (see Chapter Four) upon Yggdrasill in order to acquire the *rúnar* (*Hávamál* sts 138-141), is the master of the two ravens Huginn and Muninn who fly the world daily and bring news to Óðinn each morning (*Grímnismál* 20, *Gylfaginning* 38) and possesses the decapitated enchanted head of Mimir that is questioned for its hidden knowledge (*Völuspá* 46, *Sigrdrífumál* 14, *Ynglinga saga* 4, 7).

It is significant to note that the mythological elements surrounding Óðinn credited with associated social worship or ritual are primarily knowledge based (i.e. the theft/gift of poetry to humankind and his self-immolation).<sup>53</sup> Yet with regards to the Mead of Poetry, despite being

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<sup>53</sup> The exception to his rule is obviously the aspect of warfare-based worship. With a plethora of examples surrounding dedicating Óðinn the slain and/or even themselves for victory in battle (*Eirík inn sigrsæli*), including the emulation of Óðinn's act of spear-throwing over an enemy host (*Styrbjarnar þátr Svíakappa*, see Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1860-68), and boundless eddic and skaldic references coupled with the lengthy list of *heiti* encompassing warfare (see Price 2002: 102-103), the active worship of Óðinn as a god of war and victory is without question and will not be discussed further.

credited with stealing the drink from the *jotnar* and gifting it to humankind, it seems – particularly among the Icelandic skaldic tradition – that Óðinn was credited for the act but may not have been actively worshipped because of it (Turville-Petre 1972). This then leaves us with hanging. Since Óðinn’s self-immolation forms the primary thrust of this thesis, its connection with knowledge acquisition will not be expanded here (see Chapters Four and Seven). It is enough to say at this point that whilst the hanging of men in sacrifice has been accepted to represent a wartime event and to the war aspect of Óðinn, more is at work than first appears.

### 3.1.2.3 The Acquisition of Men

As an eternal collector of knowledge, Óðinn is in a position to apportion divine information to humans and turn the tables in battle, be it through the gift of a weapon (*Völsunga saga* 3, *Hyndluljóð* 2), tactical knowledge (*Reginsmál* sts 19-25, *Völsunga saga* 17, *Sögubrot* 8, *Gesta Danorum* I, VII) or favourable weather (*Hyndluljóð* 3, *Hávamál* 154, *Reginsmál* sts 16-18, *Gautreks saga* 7). Until his death, Óðinn goes to great lengths to acquire knowledge, power, and a retinue in preparation for *ragnarök*. Yet if one is to then question the result of being hanged as a sacrifice to Óðinn, it is essential to understand how and why people are accepted into Valhøll. Throughout eddic and skaldic poetry, along with legendary saga, Óðinn is seen to champion mortal causes by granting chosen warriors boons or allocating them protection and victory in battle, as is largely encapsulated by *Hyndluljóð* sts 2-3:

*Biðjum Herjaföðr  
í hugum sitja,  
hann geldr ok gefr  
gull verðungu;  
gaf hann Hermóði  
hjálm ok brynju  
en Sigmundi  
sverð at þiggja.*

Ask the lord of armies [Óðinn],  
for his favour,  
he gives and  
he grants gold to the worthy;  
he gave Hermodr  
a helmet and coat of mail  
and Sigmundr  
a sword to keep.

*Gefr hann sigr sumum  
en sumum aura,*

He gives victory to some  
and wealth to some,

<i>mælsku mǫrgum</i>	eloquence to many,
<i>ok manvit fírum;</i>	and wisdom to man;
<i>byri gefr hann brögnum,</i>	he gives breeze to people,
<i>en brag skáldum,</i>	and the best [i.e poetry itself] to
<i>gefr hann mannsemi</i>	poets,
<i>mǫrgum rekki.</i>	he gives honour
	to many a warrior.

(*ÍF Eddukvæði I* (2014: 460) and author's translation)

In these stanzas, Óðinn is portrayed as a king or a chieftain, gifting wealth, skills and weapons to his followers and chosen champions.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, one may conclude that the men Óðinn was believed to honour in life and then again in death would be those which reflected these motifs (i.e. those victorious in war, wealthy, powerful and/or eloquent and wise in words). Whereas a great deal more could be said, as was noted above, this is neither the time nor place. As to how these men were believed to arrive in Óðinn's hall, various eddic (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 15, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 7) and prose (*Gylfaginning* 36) examples tell us that the *valkyrjur* would be sent on Óðinn's word to collect those among the battle-dead deemed worthy of acquisition. Resultantly, as Snorri relates in *Gylfaginning* 20:

*Hann heitir ok Valföðr, því at hans óskasynir eru allir þeir er í val falla. Þeim skipar hann Valhöll ok Vingólf, ok heita þeir þá einherjar.*

He [Óðinn] is also called Valföðr ['father of the slain'], because all those who fall in battle are his adopted sons. He commands them in Valhöll and Vingólf, and they are then called the *einherjar*.

(Faulkes (2005: 21) and author's translation)

Yet as Schjødt (2007a: 141) highlights, not all such warriors go to Óðinn. Baldr could be argued as a first example – he is a warrior slain by an arrow (whilst by accident) but arrives in the halls of Hel (*Völuspá* 32, *Gylfaginning* 49). Dagr (*Ynglinga saga* 18), despite being killed by a pitchfork in anger, is said specifically go to have gone to Hel. Even those that did appropriately

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<sup>54</sup> It is also worth noting the allusion towards Óðinn granting favourable weather and therefore his possible role as a weather god.

make the cut for the *einherjar* were not always killed in battle nor died a ‘manly’ death. Some, like Sinfjötli (*Volsunga saga* 10) instead die of sickness but was called to Valhøll nonetheless.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, Schjødt has made numerous and lengthy arguments for some form of initiation ritual to be undertaken by male warriors, performing the role of ‘safety net’ (Schjødt 1990, 1993, 1999, 2007a, 2008). Ultimately, one must conclude that whilst there were general factors for one afterlife or the other, there were no fixed rules (unless the said theorised initiation circumvented convention). When speaking of Óðinn’s acquisition of certain men and the sometimes curious methods and timing of the said acquisition, the usual explanation for this sudden or untimely death often falls upon *Eiríksmál* 7 and “*Því at óvíst es at vita, nær inn hqsvi ulfr soekir á sjqt goða*” “‘Because no man knows when the grey wolf will attack the home of the gods’”.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, this statement does not provide *carte blanche* for scholars to simply abandon the identifiable social norms, conventions and associations with certain manners of death, particularly, with regard to this thesis, the often ignored social stigma attached to hanging (see Chapter Five).

Yet before moving on, it is worthwhile to spend a little more time on the practice of initiation. In *Ynglinga saga* 8, Snorri tells us that upon his deathbed, as one last factor in conferring his divine status, Óðinn had himself marked in a particular manner:<sup>57</sup>

*lét hann marka sik geirsoddi ok eignaði sér alla vápndauða menn, sagði hann sik mundu fara í Goðheima ok fagna þar vinum sínum.*

‘he had himself marked with a spear and assigned to himself the weapon-dead men, and said he would go to *Goðheimar* and be reunited with his friends there.’

(*ÍF Heimskringla I* (2002: 22) and author’s translation)

Initially, one may note that Snorri makes no mention of the association between Óðinn’s hanging and spear-marking (see Chapter Four) here or anywhere else in his associated works (McKinnell 2005: 44). Instead, in this example, we are led to understand that identical marking

<sup>55</sup> This falls in opposition to *Gyfginning* 34 where Snorri states: *Hel kastaði hann í Niflheim ok gaf henni vald yfir níu heimum at hon skipti qllum vistum með fleim er til hennar váru sendir, en flat eru sótt dauðir menn ok ellidauðir.* ‘[Óðinn] threw Hel into Niflheim and gave her command over nine [under]worlds and that she should house and provide food to all who were sent to her, and those are people who die of sickness and old age.’

<sup>56</sup> One may note the similarity with Matthew 24:36 and Mark 13:32, “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

<sup>57</sup> *Ynglinga saga* 9 states that Njörðr also had himself marked in this way, dedicated to Óðinn.

upon subsequent individuals was a) practiced b) believed to be a literal ‘marking’ for Óðinn’s attention or initiation into his cult, resulting in being granted later access to Óðinn’s hall.<sup>58</sup> As a result, much has been discussed on this act of spear marking, particularly in connection with Óðinn’s own hanging where it appears to feature. This aspect will therefore be discussed in Chapter Four and other possibilities of interpretation surrounding this process will also be put forth.

### 3.3 Reverence and the Landscape

Harking back to the creation of humankind, the places in which Óðinn may have been worshipped displays a further connection between the deity, trees and humans. Unlike episodes relating to Þórr found among, for example, the *Íslendingasögur* discussed above (§1.5.1), there exists no explicit reference as to where people went to formally revere Óðinn. Such questions are an eternally recurring topic in studies of pagan practice. Despite our modern predilection for indoor worship, the practice of pagan outdoor, landscape orientated worship can be seen to stretch across both geographical boundaries and time throughout areas of Germanic influence. As such, the commonly cited *Germania* provides an often used base line for early Viking Age Scandinavia:

The Germans do not think it in keeping with the divine majesty to confine gods within walls or portray them in the likeness of any human countenance. Their holy places are woods and groves, and they apply the names of deities to that hidden presence which is seen only by the eye of reverence.

(Mattingly 1960: 109)

Swiftly encapsulating as this is and however tempting it may be to project it onto the Viking Age, this example is far from proof alone. Fortunately, *Germania* is far from the only reference to outdoor worship regarding the Germanic people and Viking Age Scandinavians. Worship and sacrifice is often said to have taken place in these open natural spaces, often beside water, marshes or on islands and can be attested to in literature spanning the millennial gap between extant Classical and medieval sources: Orosius, Jordanes and Procopius in the sixth century

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<sup>58</sup> It is interesting to note that Snorri has again been evasive in his naming of particular places, individuals or acts to suit, as it is without doubt that he was familiar with the name of Óðinn’s hall.

(Fear 2010, Mierow 1908 and Dewing 1919 respectively), Alcuin of York in the eighth (Talbot 1954: 10), Ibn Rustah in the tenth (Lunde and Stone 2012: 26-127) and Adam of Bremen in the eleventh (Tschan 2002: 207-208). For the purposes of this thesis, it is significant that Orosius, Ibn Rustah and Adam all include ritual hanging to a deity in their descriptions of sacrifice in these outdoor locations (see Chapter Six). Pictorial evidence relating sacrifice, trees and hanging is also provided on the Gotlandic picture stones (particularly Stora Hammars I) and the surviving remnants of the Oseberg tapestry, as will be discussed in Chapter Six. Furthermore, archaeological finds have been found to correlate with our literary material in uncovering remains of grove, bog and lake sacrifices of both weapons and men from the small sacrifice to those of incredible scale.<sup>59</sup> As to how one identifies these sites in Scandinavia prior to archaeological investigation, one could say that our only remaining sources (outside of literary record) are the surviving place names that evidence elements encompassing natural sites, religious significance or sacred import.

### 3.3.1 Theophoric Place-Names

The most common elements with regard to the above in Scandinavia are as follows: *-vé* ‘sacred, holy space’, *-lundr* ‘grove’ (commonly associated with theophoric names but can be found alone, e.g. Lund), *-salr/hof* ‘temple, hall, building of cultic significance’, *-vagr/vin* ‘sacred grounds’, and *-høgr* ‘shrine, altar’ (Brink 2007: 125-135).<sup>60</sup> As to their arrangement in the landscape, multiple scholars of various fields have come to the conclusion that there is a pattern to these sites and how they related to one another. Foremost in this modern discussion, and of the discussion encompassing ‘central place’ and this concept of a ‘sacral landscape’ are the works of Stefan Brink (1996, 1997, 2007). Brink suggests that these sites were well understood and sat in close proximity to key settlement and meeting places. Of examples particular to Óðinn, these are identified by the first element *Ons-* and *Odens-* and Brink (2007: 111-113)

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<sup>59</sup> For examples of established sites in long-term continual use, see Ström (1947: 30, 33-38), Glob (1971: 180-187) and the site of Uppåkra (see Chapter Six). For an example of a mass sacrificial event, see the recent Danish discovery at Alken Enge, Jutland uncovered in 2009. <http://sciencenordic.com/entire-army-sacrificed-bog>, accessed 01/02/16. It should be noted however that this style of sacrifice enters rapid decline during the Migration Age, irrespective of continued outdoor worship (Andrén 2002: 304, 316-317).

<sup>60</sup> As Brink (2007) shows throughout his paper, these elements are not attached to Óðinn alone (bar *-salr/hof*, see §3.3.1.1). Yet for the purposes of this thesis, the examples of others gods will not be addressed.

highlights a total of seventy-one examples with forty-nine from Sweden (chiefly in the area surrounding Lake Mälaren, see Brink 2007: 13) and eleven in both Norway and Denmark. As to their geographical distribution Brink produced an annotated map by which to orientate ourselves:

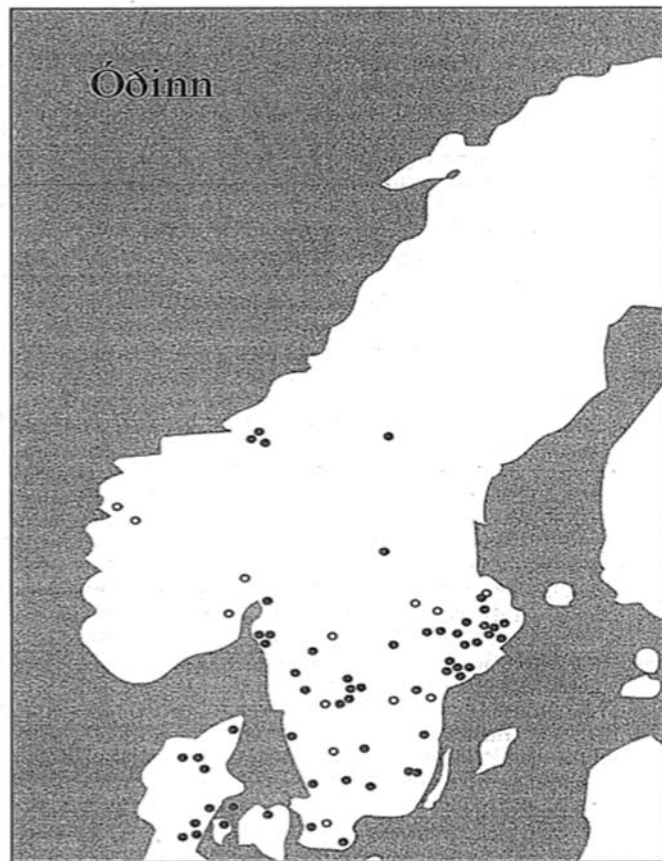


Figure 2. The distribution of theophoric place names in Scandinavia containing the name of the god Óðinn (open circles are uncertain).

Fig. 4 Map of Óðinnic place-names, Brink (2007: 112)

As Fig. 4 demonstrates, Óðinnic place-names stretch across the peninsula with uniformity in both Denmark and Sweden but feature a curious gap blanketing almost all of Norway (and as has been discussed in §1.5.1, Iceland. As for Sweden's dominance name-wise, there are too many factors for one to consider. Whilst one may be tempted to conclude that Óðinn attracted greater reverence in Denmark and Sweden than the other Scandinavian nations, it is equally possible that names simply went unchanged when new hands took control of the land whereas other nations' examples did not. It is however possible to identify an association between these theophoric names and their positions, clustered as they are around traditional seats of power

during the Viking Age: Lejre, Jelling, Uppsala and so on. As a result, one is able to theorise that the cult surrounding Óðinn was perhaps smaller than we are generally led to believe, was kept ‘close to home’, and that it rested firmly among particular families of aristocratic power. Furthermore, we would thus expect the acts surrounding Óðinn or the associated ritual in the extant literature to be identified with this social strata if this could be shown in other source material (see below and Chapter Six).

### 3.3.1.1 Óðinn in the Landscape

From the macro to the micro, one may shift from the national view to the local and specific sites connected with Óðinn. Of the compound elements highlighting places of worship or religious activity, the most commonly associated with Óðinn are *vé/vi/væ*, *lund(a)* and *salr/hof* which create the surviving theophoric names (Brink 2007: 129-131). It should be noted that most of these names come to us as farm names and as such hint towards a sense of centrality (Foote and Wilson 1970: 393). Of *vé*, Brink (1996: 261) states that these are the safest signs of pagan activity in Scandinavia and the most common example is *Odinsvi* (of which there are five in Sweden, Brink 2007: 113, 129-130) ‘the cult site dedicated to Óðinn’. Brink (1996: 261) additionally suggests that *vé* would most likely have denoted a structure of some sort, but without archaeological evidence concedes that there “may have been an older connotation of a natural site of importance in the pagan cult.”

*Lund(a)*, an example attested to in a variety of theophoric names, is primarily recognised as ‘grove’ (cf. Brink 2007: 126-135). These theophoric place-names, when coupled with Classical, Norse poetical and medieval chronicle examples, allow one to assume that specific trees or groves were significant to the cult of Óðinn in some way (see Chapter Four).<sup>61</sup> The most common examples are from Sweden (~6-8) and appear as *Odenslund(a)* ‘the grove dedicated to Óðinn’ (Brink 2007: 129-130). As for any attestation of a particular type of tree, we have the single name *Onsike* (OSw *Opens-eke*) ‘Óðinn’s oak grove’ (Brink 2008b: 65) and this along with further possible links between Óðinn and the oak will be evaluated in the Chapter Five. With respect to the grove’s general use, Foote and Wilson (1970: 396) suggested

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<sup>61</sup> The same could be said of Þórr when one takes into account the Latin connections between Jupiter and certain trees (see §5.3.1.1 and §5.3.1.2). However, as stated above other gods will not be discussed here. Furthermore, unlike Óðinn, the Norse material makes no mythological or poetic connection between Þórr and the tree.

that it was likely “an object of veneration to the local society as a whole.” If one were to place particular deities aside momentarily, it is also impossible to ignore the importance and role of trees itself in Norse myth. The world tree was believed to support the cosmos and was considered the holy tree/grove of the Æsir (*Grímnismál* sts 29-30, *Gylfaginning* 15), Óðinn apparently tortures himself upon it (*Hávamál* 138). Furthermore, mankind was ultimately born of inert ash and elm/vine found upon the land, given life by three wandering gods (*Völuspá* 17-18, *Gylfaginning* 9). That tree worship was a common theme across Iron Age (and earlier) society in Europe and beyond is without question and it too will play a role in the analysis of sacrificial hanging (see Chapters Four and Five).

In a continuation of the natural theme, many other theophoric names related to Óðinn can be observed to display links to the surrounding topography. With names such as *Odensholmen*, *Onsjö*, *Onsberga*, *Odenskälla* and *Odenskülle* one may observe that the natural connection went beyond that of the trees and out to lakes, wells, islands, hills and mountains (Brink 2007: 113). It can therefore be concluded that the gods were often considered to be ‘out there’, just beyond sight of civilisation but surrounding their believers even so. The cultic significance of these natural and wooded sites, their proximity to ‘central places’ and that some were connected with Óðinn is subsequently without question. Contrary to this, some scholars have attempted to suggest that the forest was considered ‘the beyond’, a place of danger out-with society (cf. Bonnetain 2007: 143). Whilst this may seem the case to one raised in a town or city, to one raised within or the proximity of the forests of northern Sweden or Finland, or any forest for that matter, the forest is a place of security and normality. As to what specifically went on within them, beyond the end results as can be drawn from archaeology, it seems unlikely we shall ever know.<sup>62</sup>

With the instances of *hof/salr*, it seems apparent that the focus on natural sites of worship was to slowly lose favour and in approach of the Viking Age, worship began to move towards a more indoor affair with the gradual centralisation of power toward chieftains and their halls. However, it is possible to hypothesise, with the aid of recent archaeological discoveries that the motif of hanging followed as well (see §6.5.1). Yet this does not mean that ritual hanging could not still have taken place within groves during the Viking Age. The noun *hof* (occurring primarily in Norway, Brink 2007: 126-135) has historically been considered originally to mean

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<sup>62</sup> For an Anglo-Saxon comparative analysis of this movement from remote outdoor to an indoor/outdoor affair, see Wilson (1990: 28-43).

‘hillock’ and as a hall is considered a “relatively late phenomenon, occurring from the fifth century onwards” (Gunnell 2001: 6). Evidently, from the fifth century onwards, *hof* appears to have undergone a gradual transformation and developed an entirely different meaning. By means of Icelandic early law and saga literature, de Vries (1962: 246) shows that *hof* was instead used to denote a powerful political site as well as cultic building. Foote and Wilson (1970: 398) consequently surmised that “this decisive linking of the word with the pagan cult-places cannot be entirely without foundation.” Brink (1996, 1997, 2008b) goes on to suggest (2008b: 63-64):

In the cases where *hof* obviously denoted a cultic building or hall, one cannot disregard the possibility that the Scandinavian word, ON *hof*, has been semantically influenced by the German *hof* ‘mansion, court’, whereby a new meaning ‘(banqueting) hall’ has emerged.

If one then compounds this with the name of a deity, one theoretically arrives at a ‘hall, communal building (also used for cultic sacrifices related to a deity).<sup>63</sup> A similar transformational and aristocratic case has also been made for *salr*. Where it has generally been concluded to have originally meant ‘shieling’ or ‘space enclosed by a fence’, it too has seen a similar shift towards ‘hall, house’ (de Vries 1962: 461). Brink (2008b: 65) goes as far to state:

Today there is no doubt that the *salr* in place-names must be seen in a much more ‘aristocratic’ context. It was the old Scandinavian word for a king’s or chieftain’s banqueting hall.

With examples such as *Odensala*, *Onsala* (Sweden) and the curious *Onsrud* and its elder form *Odenshofue* (Norway, 1331), the addition of a theophoric element to an already aristocratic concept appears to place the deity in the aristocratic strata of this ‘sacral’ landscape and it is of little surprise that Óðinn is the only god to feature among the theophoric names with the *-salr* element, of which there are six examples (Brink 2007: 129-130). Yet it is also curious to note the distinct lack (with the one possible exception, above) of *-hof* names with regard to Óðinn. However, one may surmise that with the continued centralisation and theorised innate privacy of the cult, the names would be few and far between.

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<sup>63</sup> For an examination of what went on within these buildings with respect to early Iceland, see Gunnell (2001).

In attempts to find these *hof/salr* structures, archaeological dig after dig has provided evidence of large farmhouses on those sites. By re-reviewing all of the proposed archaeological evidence for *hof* sites, Olsen (1966) concluded that the *hof* were simply central farmhouses that played multiple roles as a home, feasting location and ritual space. Furthermore, there is also growing evidence (Sweden: Lunda, Uppåkra, Sâby, Sanda, Borg; Denmark: Dejbjerg, Lejre, Tissø, Gudme and Iceland: Hofstaðir) for the existence of some form of cult building in the form of small constructions “closely associated with the halls of important chieftains in the late Iron Age” (Gunnell 2001: 8).<sup>64</sup> Yet it must be stated explicitly that these examples are not to say that hanging took place within a farmhouse or hall, for sheer practicality of this act rules this possibility out completely. Instead, as above, it will be suggested that the motif shifted indoors to these specific cult buildings or indoor events.

Lastly, there remains one example that does not fit within the boundaries of the *Ons-/Odens-* rule but retains both a possibly Óðinnic and natural link: the town of Sigtuna, Sweden. This place-name conceivably utilises one of Óðinn’s *heiti* as a descriptor (i.e. *sig(r)*- ‘victory’, cf. *Oðins nofn*, *Völuspá*, *Grimnismál*, *Gylfaginning*, *Skáldskaparmál*) combined with the element *-túnir* ‘meadow’. Whilst this could simply denote the place of a victorious battle for whomever was responsible for the name, this example has suggestive features. With possible connections to its historically rumoured founder *Eiríkr inn sigrsæli* and his own Óðinnic reverence (cf. *Styrbjarnar þáttir Svíakappa*, see Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1860-68), Sigtuna suggests a link to a place of worship. This suggestion of Óðinnic reverence is a link to ritual practice, which it appears Snorri had also made (*Ynglinga saga* 5):

*Óðinn tók sér bústað við Löginn, þar sem nú eru kallaðar fornu Sigtúnir, ok gerði þar mikit hof ok blót eptir siðvenju Ásanna.*

“Óðinn settled by Lake Logrin, at a place which is now known as Sigtúnir and there he built a great *hof* and sacrificed in accordance with the *Æsir*”.

As a result, one may theorise that either worship may have sprung up in a place understood as Óðinn’s once-home or that the account is instead the medieval rationalisation of why it came

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<sup>64</sup> The most promising of these examples thus far appears to be the sites of Hofstaðir, Iceland and Tissø and Borg, Denmark. See Orri Vésteinsson (2007: 53-91), Munch (2003: 253-264) and Jørgensen (2008: 77-82) respectively.

to exist there. Furthermore its relative proximity to the nearby cult site of Uppsala is worthy of note.

### 3.3.2 Hanging in the Landscape

As for place-names not specifically linked with worship but specifically denoting sites of hanging, Scandinavia has a multitude of extant examples. Surviving place-name evidence, interestingly almost exclusively from Norway, can be seen to show a wide variety of sites once connected with the practice of hanging: *Galgehaugen* ‘gallows hill/mound’, *Galgeodden* ‘gallows promontory’, *Galgeholmen* (3) ‘gallows islet’, *Hangholmen* (2) ‘hanging islet’, and *Hengenestjørna* ‘hanging-nes lake’ and *Hengdytjøn* ‘hanging still-water’.<sup>65</sup> One peculiar example, as shown in Fig. 5, can be found just off the on the most northerly tip of the region of Gisløya, Norway with two thematically linked islets directly opposite one another, *Galgeholmen* and *Tjuvsundøra* ‘thieves island’<sup>66</sup>:

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<sup>65</sup> These examples have been derived from Google Earth as the typical source for place-names in Norway, Oluf Rygh and his volumes, record farms and not topographical names nor these oddities of the landscape. It is also very unlikely one would name their farm after such a practice. For further studies of thief and execution-site names, see Ström (1942: 127, n.199).

<sup>66</sup> The particular link between gallows and thieves will be examined in Chapter Five.

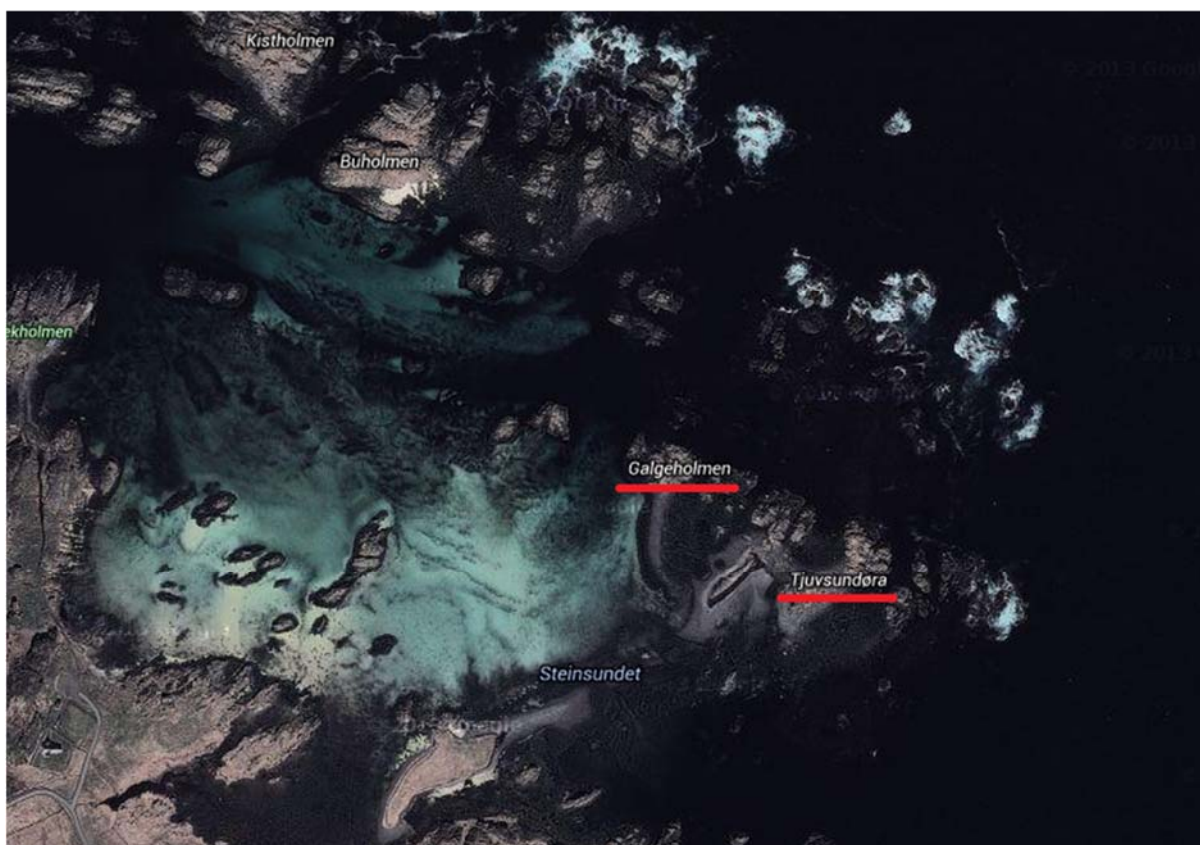


Fig. 5 Location of associated hanging place-names (Image retrieved from Google Earth, accessed 01/02/16)

Tempting examples such as *Hengjandvatnet* ‘hanging lake’, *Hengiandeviga* ‘the hanging bay’ and *Hengjande* ‘they hang’ are all found in the area of Forsand, Norway. Other Norwegian sites featuring similar names, *Galgaklettr* ‘hanging cliff/rock’ and *Galgahamar* ‘hanging cliff’, as were suggested by Gade (1985: 161), have been disregarded as these names are more likely to have been geographical/geological descriptors for the vast, overhanging cliffs found throughout these fjords that arc over the water rather than any reference to execution sites. As for the antiquity of these hanging names, one can never be certain, but as shall be shown in both Chapters Four and Five, prose and poetic attestations to the practice of hanging and its locations can be seen to match these surviving place-names topographically (public access ways, promontories, headlands, small islands, groves and hills), giving further credence to our written sources. This is not to say that these particular sites are confirmation of ritual practice but are to show that the practice of hanging can be recognised in the names given to the land and that hanging held a consistent location in the Scandinavian landscape with the additional possibility of preserving ritual sites. With the identification of some motivating factors (i.e.

trees, warfare and knowledge) and possible ritual sites attached to both Óðinn and hanging, it serves to examine who may have lead ritual practice and how it may have functioned in the Scandinavian landscape.

### 3.4 Practicalities of Worship

As has been discussed in Chapter Two, it is generally acknowledged that the pagan Norse had no rigid religious structure regarding worship practices or an overarching administrative body. This is not to say that Viking Scandinavia lacked ‘ritual specialists’ (cf. Price 2002, 2010, 2014) or even religious leaders (i.e. the *goðar* (cf. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998: 35-56) or perhaps even the *skáld* (Gunnell 2001: 24-25)). It has also been remarked that the *pulr* ‘wise man, sage’ or perhaps ‘cult orator, priest, reciter, poet’, men whose title of office appears upon a few rune stones in Scandinavia (DR 248 and perhaps Sö 82, U 519) and within eddic poetry may have held some form of official, memorial or religious function (cf. de Vries 1962: 626, Sundqvist 2009). Certainly Óðinn can be found to be described as *fimbulpulr* ‘mighty, greatest *pulr*’ (*Hávamál* sts 80, 142) but very little is known that cannot be extrapolated from the title and comparison with the OE variant, *pyle* (cf. Brink 2005: 86-88).

As for how worshippers went about specifically ritualising to their god(s), the academic world remains largely undecided. With over a century of scholarly discussion and investigation as to how pagan worship actually functioned in the late Iron Age and Viking Scandinavia through the mediums of literary analysis, archaeology, anthropology, comparative cultures and so on, more and more has been teased out over the decades but on the whole, scholarship remains largely at a loss. Nonetheless, before delving deeply into the role and function of the hanging ritual in the following chapter, it is prudent to first outline the development and context of general sacrificial practice during the Viking Age.

#### 3.4.1 Sacrifice

It has been stated that sacrifice was often historically identified as the “essence of religion” and hence, it has risen to a subject of prominence when questioning the origin and motivations of religion (Carter 2003: 8) Despite our generally negative connotations of the term, be it associations with slaughter or simply giving something up, we must recognise this is a modern

understanding of the practice. The *OED* suggests that the sense of loss or destruction attached to sacrifice was first attested to (in English at least) in the 1590s, and therefore one should stay this modern negative sense versus the historic mindset. Featuring an original connotation of ‘to make holy’ from the Latin *sacrificium*, Henninger (2005: 7997) describes sacrifice as “carrying the connotation of the religious act in the highest, or fullest sense.” This practice is neither to be taken lightly, nor to be expected as a purely negative. As Green (2002: 19) put it, “if sacrifice, in origin, is not necessarily connected with giving [...] it is mistaken to view sacrifice in other than positive, celebratory terms.”

As will be outlined below, sacrifice in most religions tended to follow a seasonal calendar and was primarily connected with times of festival, celebration and holy days. The literary corpus and its multitude of examples show that the practice was usually undertaken in order to acquire, maintain or acknowledge something: be it good harvest, a cordial relationship with the divine or to mark a human rite of passage. As a result, one should be aware that benefit and reciprocity lay at the core of such events. Yet this is far from the whole picture: sacrifice also appears to have been undertaken during the worst of times in order to stave off famine, poor weather and plague as an offering to the apparently furious gods. It should also be obvious that celebration was generally not the case when considering the act of human sacrifice, an act of ritual murder. Throughout time from the Classical to medieval accounts any inference to human sacrifice is surrounded by fright, anxiety and solemnity. Whilst the prose has perhaps been flavoured in order to increase the dramatic feel, it is a mistake to presume that human sacrifice was always undertaken joyously.

The term *sacrifice* itself has caused considerable discussion, particularly when associated with Óðinn, the social use of hanging and his self-immolation. Whilst the discussion has generally centered on the issue of definition (i.e. to destroy versus consecrate (cf. Schjødt 2008: 184, Clunies Ross 1994: 224)), the consensus of destruction is in current academic favour. This is a result of the connections and similarities highlighted between both literary accounts and physical remains of individuals killed in order to be offered to a deity in return for divine assistance; as Schjødt (2008: 189) puts it, a perceived *do-ut-des* ‘I give that you may give’ event. Yet as shall be shown in Chapter Four for the case of Óðinn, and in Chapter Six for human victims, the blanket conclusion of ‘sacrifice’ is far from closed. Yet, for now, having examined the general sense of sacrifice, one may turn to sacrifice in the Viking Age.

#### 3.4.1.1 *Blót* in Viking Age Scandinavia

Linguistically, *blót* significantly predates the Viking Age and is derived from *PIE* *\*bhlād* ‘bubble forth, murmur, blather’ (Bammesberger 1990: 87, Orel 2003: 50-51) but within our period the term features in both OE and ON as the representative of the PGmc *\*blōtan* ‘sacrifice, worship’. Furthermore, the PGmc verb *\*blōtan* appears in Gothic as *blotan*, ON *blóta*, OE *blōtan* and OHG *bluozan*, each with the meaning ‘to sacrifice, offer, worship’ (de Vries 1962: 45). With such prolonged attestation and historic continuity it is evident that we are dealing with a long established practice that had continued, changed, and developed, in this case, for millennia. As such one should expect and seek any possible continuity of theme and motif rather than any notion of exact parallel of physical act or formula upon which we can foist our Viking examples.

The Viking Age sacrifices or *blót* were generally seasonal and conformed to the yearly solstice/equinox events. Yet they could also be performed for special occasions and troubled times, as discussed below. A description from *Ynglinga saga* 8 provides a quick overview of the annual sacrifices:

*Þá skyldi blóta í móti vetri til árs, en at miðjum vetri blóta til gróðrar, hit þriðja at sumri, þat var sigrblót.*

They shall sacrifice in the outset of winter for a good season, sacrifice at mid-winter for fertility and the third in summer, that sacrifice was for victory.

(*IF Heimskringla I* (2002: 20) and author’s translation)

Whilst this description does not specifically name most of the annual sacrifices, they are attested to throughout saga literature. The *disablót* ‘*disr* sacrifice’ that took place in spring and autumn (Gunnell 2000: 121-126) were held in honour of the *disr* and were considered vital for the year’s harvest and fertility (see de Vries 1957: 297-299, 1962: 77). Regionally, sacrifices akin to the *disablót* have been recorded as taking place in Uppsala (Sweden), Lejre (Denmark) and Mære (Norway), that is, noted locations of national religious significance often connected with and centred around kingship (cf. *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, *Chronicon Thietmari* and *Hákonar saga góða* respectively). One Swedish of seasonal sacrifice is said to have taken place during the month of *gói* (15<sup>th</sup> Feb-15<sup>th</sup> Mar) where law-courts and markets were held, as well as sacrifices made for “peace and victory” for the king (*Óláfs saga helga* 77). *Hervarar saga* 8 refers to a similar event, naming it *sonarblót* ‘boar sacrifice’ (cf.

Tolkien 1960: 31, de Vries 1962: 530). The sacrifices in Lejre, Denmark, as described by Thietmar of Merseberg, also took place shortly after mid-winter (I: 17). The Norwegian example at Mære is an example of the autumnal *haustblót* ‘autumn sacrifice’, which took place after the harvest season during *í móti vetri* ‘onset of winter’ to usher in a good season (*Hákonar saga góða* 17). The *sigrblót* ‘victory sacrifice’ or summer sacrifice has no further explanation beyond *Ynglinga saga* and the victory element of this sacrifice is presumed to have been dedicated to Óðinn in offering for victory in the upcoming summer raids and battles due to an element of a multitude of his *heiti*, *Sig-* (*Oðins nofn* 4, *Völuspá* 53, *Grímnismál* 48, *Gylfaginning*, *Skáldskaparmál*). The most widely recognised event of the pagan calendar was *jól* ‘Yule’ that took place around the winter solstice and featured the *jólablót/vetrblót* ‘Yule/winter sacrifices’ (e.g. *Hákonar saga góða* 14). It should also be noted that sacrifice was not just a feature of events of religious importance but as Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1997) points out, *Landnámabók* records *blót* as a ‘regular and natural element of assemblies or meetings’.<sup>67</sup>

As to what was sacrificed at these events, the accounts above and throughout the Norse corpus are largely unanimous in their inclusion of livestock: be it cow, sheep, pig, boar or horse and this has been verified archaeologically across Scandinavian and Iceland (cf. Lucan and McGovern 2008: 16-19). It has also been suggested that the blood could have been of more significance than the object of sacrifice itself, perhaps by mysterious efficacy, volume or quantity provided (Simpson 1967, Bradley 1995: 9-10, Lucas and McGovern 2008). The very occasional attestations to human victims, noted in the following chapters, are largely in association with war, funeral or crime and cannot be said to be a regular element of this strictly observed calendar of events.

#### 3.4.1.2 Human Sacrifice

The debate surrounding human sacrifice in Old Norse sacrificial practice general is long, complex and heated, not just on the basis of its method, motive and means but when speaking of the Viking Age, whether or not this practice ever existed. Some would argue that one issue

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<sup>67</sup> Whilst the discussion and transition regarding the *where* of worship has already taken place, it should be noted in context with *blót* there does exist a specifically related term (i.e. *blót-hús* ‘sacrificial temple’ (Johnston and Faulkes 2004: 323)). The longest account of such a building is found in *Eyrbyggja saga* 4 and can also be found referenced in *Landnámabók* 85.

is a question of terminology and our understanding of it. For example, Timothy Bolton (2006 and pers. comms.) argues that those who appear to be sacrificed should not be considered ‘people’ as they were primarily slaves and therefore were first and foremost considered to be property akin to a sword or cattle.<sup>68</sup> This is perhaps a somewhat narrow view of the world of slavery during the Viking Age as one can observe that slaves were effectively ‘graded’ from the working individual to those that served in royal households, thus evidently holding different social, whilst not legal, status (Brink 2012). Whilst the slaves may have possessed no legal rights, this is very different from stating that slaves were not considered individuals as they evidently had a place in the household and were generally treated ‘fairly’ with food, clothing and shelter. In the case of sacrifice, the difference was the sense of *availability* as no legal case would or could be brought forth for their deaths and no compensation would be required for their death. Therefore, going forward, it shall be understood that in the discussion of ‘human’ sacrifice, I consider the slave or criminal to have retained their human status but to have forfeited all *legal* rights.

Examples of purposeful sacrifice of humans (by hanging or otherwise) are far from common in the surviving Viking poetry and literature. In a brief encapsulation, the mythological examples from a poetic stance are almost non-existent but those that do exist are entirely associated with Óðinn. Medieval accounts of sacrificial hanging can be found in *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, *Gesta Danorum*, Ibn Fadlan’s *Risala* and Ibn Rustah’s *Kitāb al-A’lāk an-Nafīsa* but rarely with any overt divine association. Saga examples are more varied and include human offerings to the dead and even Þórr in *Landnámabók* 72 and 85 respectively. Whilst it seems that the possible motives for human sacrifice are varied, those connected with hanging or directly associated with Óðinn are discussed extensively in the later chapters.

As Chapter Six demonstrates, the archaeological case is even briefer with only a handful of examples of bodies that can be declared as sacrificial victims. Furthermore, when they are found, it seems that most have been dispatched in association with funeral or crime (see Chapters Four and Five). The most famous historical example was for many years the Oseberg ship burial (see Chapter Six) and its additional human remains with apparent signs of extreme trauma but this opinion, that this was an example of human sacrifice, has been

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<sup>68</sup> This discussion encompassed the specific case surrounding Adam of Bremen and Ibn Fadlan but was extended to the practice in general.

overturned in recent years (Christensen *et al.* 1992 and Holck 2006: 194). Other examples still concluded to be of sacrifice result have been found upon the Isle of Man, again in the context of burial (Bersu and Wilson 1966). As for those by hanging, there exists but one from the Viking Age: the Gerdrup burial and its widely discussed context (Christensen 1981). Other examples of intact victims, often with the noose still around their necks can be found across the Iron Age bog body finds of Europe and the Anglo-Saxon site of Sutton Hoo and these instances will be discussed in Chapter Six. It must be noted that no site has ever been found that displays a mass grave of human sacrifices (as one might expect to find in the light of some literary examples) dated to the Viking Age. However, as has been shown above, mass sacrificial events are known from earlier periods in the form of lake sacrifices (see §3.3). Consequently, whilst the concept of human sacrifice is not unknown, it seems (by current archaeological findings) not to apply *en masse* in this case nor by the method of hanging.

#### 3.4.1.3 Hanging versus Strangulation

When looking more specifically at the remains of hanged individuals, there is the tendency to have this method of sacrifice and its association with Óðinn extended to include those who have been strangled. These two methods of death are often categorised together due to the similar marks left behind on the body and ultimately the same result: asphyxiation or perhaps a breaking of the neck. However, these two techniques, especially in the context of ritual practice, should not be conflated together. Yet in order to evaluate these differences, one must look more closely at the less pleasant details.

First and foremost, as Pluskowski (2000: 64-65) highlights, the primary difference between the two methods lies in the associated method, psychology and imagery. To hang a body from a tree or constructed gallows displays the punished or sacrificed individual and makes the act public. The method employed in hanging an individual also features physical restraint, being led to the place of execution, presumably gathered witnesses, the placing of the noose and the pulling of the rope until elevated. This whole ceremony can and would have been very public and prescribed events with the to-be-executed individual made vulnerable to a group of people with little to no opportunity to fight back. Strangulation on the other hand is something that carries connotations of deceit or surprise, perhaps something done in stealth, seclusion or haste and is arguably the more disturbing of the two. Strangulation also leaves the victim vulnerable to a single individual that could perhaps be fought, however futile. Whilst

there are of course exceptions, strangulation also seems to be the general practice of ‘non-professional’ executioners, as will be shown in the discussion regarding bog body executions in Chapter Six.

Furthermore, the imagery consistently associated with hanging (i.e. the hanged body in the tree or gallows, exposed to the elements) could suggest that Óðinn’s own hanging and his hanging body (see Chapter Four) created a final image to be reproduced in order to honour, acknowledge or approach the deity in question. Whilst suspension is of course a natural effect of hanging, this division between receiving an earthen burial and the lack of one has caused some speculation (Ström 1942: 155-161), but is not relevant here.<sup>69</sup> In response to this motif of the hanged body, this thesis will also question whether or not this hanged body could be used to represent the presence (or expected presence) of Óðinn (cf. *Hávamál* 157), thus sanctifying, declaring allegiance and/or warning others to be wary or stay away. Consequently, again, is also possible to hypothesise that in such cases hanging an individual was only the beginning of further ritual practice, but with little to no evidence for events after the execution, we are left largely with speculation (Ström 1942: 145, Grundy 2014: 12, 31-34). Nevertheless, these factors allow us to consider that hanging itself was not always the desired result in some sacrifices but simply a factor in providing the next ‘step’. When the motivating factor can be seen to be something other than hanging (e.g. the collection of blood), this in turn allows one to suggest the removal of certain examples from our supposed corpus of Óðinnic sacrifices.

Ultimately, strangulation cannot be seen to fit within this motif, nor to carry any of these further societal or even psychological uses after death was achieved. Consequently, one should not conflate these incidents as they cannot be said to be the same thing, linked largely only by the end result: the cause of death. As Pluskowski (2000: 64) put it, “the specific sacrificial rite associated with the northern hanging god places emphasis on the image of the hanging body. Death by strangulation is incidental.”

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<sup>69</sup> Whilst Ström evaluates possible reasons for this separation between earth and ground from a medieval superstitious point of view, one wonders if, when speaking of sky gods such as Wodan-Óðinn in first half of the first millennium, the practice of hanging was initially to separate those dedicated to the sky from the ground, prior to the introduction of more complex social associations with hanging.

### 3.5 Conclusions

This chapter shows that during the Viking Age there existed links between the deity Óðinn, humankind and trees (in both creation and possible location of ritual practice) in addition to those more commonly expounded upon: knowledge, war and death. These additional factors will be examined in closer detail in Chapters Five and Six when seeking thematic parallels in ritual practice. The study of place-name evidence appears to show that hanging can be evidenced historically in the landscape of Scandinavia and that common localities arise: that of promotaries, islands or public highways. This in turn reveals that, as supposed, the act of hanging, whether ritualistic in nature or not, was made to be seen and not hidden away from the public view. This conclusion will become a central factor of the argument put forth in Chapter Seven. For now, before analysing the individual cases of hanging in the Viking Age, it is essential to begin with the supposed origin (see §2.2 for myth-ritual distinctions) for this ritual act: Óðinn's own hanging.

## Chapter Four

### The Self-Immolation of Óðinn

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#### 4.0 Óðinnic Mythology and its Ritualistic Undertones

Chapter Three highlighted that the most common motifs surrounding Óðinn were as follows: war, creation, death, knowledge, hanging and trees. As will be discussed below, specific names attached to Óðinn surrounding the gallows are but few and pictorial evidence hardly relates any publically declared association to the practice of hanging. It is therefore curious that of all Óðinn's spheres, hanging (as far as our remaining information allows) would be chosen as his method of death and as reproducible ritual. This calls for an in-depth analysis of Óðinn's hanging on its own terms.

#### 4.1 Óðinn's Self-Immolation

Even with the more publically recognised motifs surrounding Óðinn, hanging is found remarkably frequently within the mythological corpus in connection with or is used by way of referencing Óðinn and none is more famous or more widely cited than his ritual self-immolation. As a result of this motif and its related brethren, a tremendous amount has been written on the existence or non-existence of this ritual within Viking society and beyond. Yet very little convincing or in-depth work has been done as to *why* a worshipper of Óðinn would hang a body from a tree, beyond the assumed context of warfare offerings (cf. Davidson 1992: 337). *Hávamál* sts 138-141 contains the only explicit source of Óðinn's ritual hanging:

*Veit ek at ek hekk  
vindga meiði á*

I know that I hanged  
on a windy tree<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> I have rendered *vindga meiði* as windy *tree* instead of gallows, or a branch, beam or pole contextually from the other poetical uses of *meiðr*, both in this stanza and particularly *Grimnismál* 34 which discusses Yggdrasill explicitly and describes it as *meiðs*. A strong connection between the motif of wind and the gallows tree can also be observed in *Hamðismál* 17. The term *vindga meiði* also arises twice within the skaldic corpus (*Háleygjatal* 5, *Fourth Grammatical Treatise* 17) in connection with hanging although the latter presumably represents a constructed gallows by virtue of being situated in a *torgi* 'market place' (but this is by no means certain). Despite the literal understanding being 'pole' or 'horizontal beam' (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874: 422), leading particularly Ström (1942: 118) to argue for a

*nætr allar níu,  
geiri undaðr  
ok gefinn Óðni,  
sjálfr sjálfum mér,  
á þeim meiði  
er manngi veit  
hvers hann af rótum renn.*

all nine nights,  
spear wounded  
and given to Óðinn,  
myself to myself,  
on that tree  
which no man knows  
where each root runs.<sup>71</sup>

*Við hleifi mic sældu  
né við hornigi;  
nýsta ek niðr,  
nam ek upp rúnar,  
æpandi nam,  
fell ek aptr þaðan.*

No bread was I given  
nor drink from horn;  
downwards I peered,  
I took up the runes,  
took (them) shouting,<sup>72</sup>  
I fell from there after.

*Fimbulljóð níu  
nam ek af inum frægja syni  
Bólþórs, Bestlu fǫður,  
ok ek drykk of gat  
ins dýra mjaðar  
ausinn Óðreri.  
Þá nam ek frævask*

Nine mighty songs  
I took from the famous son  
of Bolþor[n], Bestla's father,<sup>73</sup>  
and I drank from an opening  
in the precious mead  
poured [by/from/of] Óðrerir.  
Then I took fruitfulness

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constructed gallows in all cases, the poetical sense displayed by Cleasby and Vigfusson, *Lexicon Poeticum* (1931: 400) and the Skaldic Database (*meiðr*) appears to be predominantly in the favour of a tree and thus in this case, representative of a hanging site.

<sup>71</sup> Echoes of this stanza can be seen in *Fjölsvinnsmál* 20: *af hveriom rótom renn* when discussing *Mímameiðr*, a presumed by-name of the world tree and the *vingameiðr* of the sacrificial gallows in *Ynglingatal/Háleygjatal* (cf. Evans 1986: 134, Dronke 2011: 61-62).

<sup>60</sup> The general rendering of *æpandi* here is 'screaming, shrieking', presumably derived from the pain experienced during this ritual (cf. Thorpe 1906, Bellows 1936, Hollander 1962, Larrington 1999). One should consider, however, how possible it would be to do this whilst strung from a noose. I have chosen 'shouting' in the sense of triumph upon the event of great success or progress in the out of body sense (i.e. upon his discovery), prior to his "falling back", in line with Dronke (2011: 30). This could be compared to an individual being taken to Valhöll whilst their physical body lay on the battlefield.

<sup>73</sup> I have interpolated *Bólþorn*, again in line with Dronke (2011: 62), on the grounds of this being in keeping with the name of Óðinn's mother and as Lindow (2001: 82) highlights, having a distinct meaning versus the questionable *Bólþor*.

<i>ok fróðr vera</i>	and became wise
<i>ok vaxa ok vel hafask;</i>	and grew and prospered; <sup>74</sup>
<i>orð mér af orði</i>	one word sought another
<i>orðs leitaði,</i>	word for me,
<i>verk mér af verki</i>	one deed sought another
<i>verks leitaði.</i>	deed for me.

(*ÍF Eddukvæði I* (2014: 350-351) and author's translation)

The stanzas above require little explanation in order to understand them on a base level yet this also reflects one of the greatest problems with eddic poetry: these stanzas do not elaborate upon their meaning and readers often rely upon some background knowledge in order to be understood in terms of events or particular references. As a result, there is a correspondingly large volume of literature dedicated to these four stanzas (cf. Simek 1993: 249 for extensive references). Furthermore, it can be observed that scholarly citations of *Hávamál* in this context (particularly within archaeological discussions) only tend to include sts 138-139 and the focus on the poem has often been only to outline that through this imagery a prototypical method of sacrifice to Óðinn could have been created (cf. Sauvé 1970, Schjødt 1993, Pluskowski 2001) - yet this is only the beginning of what is being said. Ultimately it is clear that whatever the context, the purpose of this particular ritual was to acquire *rúnar*. Yet the question of what these *rúnar* actually represent is far from clear-cut. *Hávamál* as a whole greatly emphasises the importance of knowledge and wisdom to the god and therefore also to the society in which he was revered. This numinous knowledge was evidently so highly regarded and influential that one of the most powerful Æsir was considered willing to risk his divine life for its acquisition. Consequently, as to why Óðinn would perform this act upon himself, *Vafþrúðismál* 43 reveals how Vafþrúðnir came to possess his hidden knowledge:

<i>Frá jotna rúnum</i>	Of all <i>jotnar</i>
<i>ok allra goða</i>	and gods secrets

<sup>74</sup> The first two lines of this stanza are far from straightforward to translate as inferred connotations are lost in the translation to English. For example, *frævask* and *fróðr* have fertility and development connotations that are difficult to render in a readable manner (cf. McKinnell 2007a: 101). North (1997: 84-85) suggests that *fróðr* has been applied to Óðinn by appropriating an element of the Ingvi-Freyr cult.

*ek kann segja satt,  
þvíat hvern hefi ek heim um  
komit;  
níu kom ek heima  
fyr Niflhel neðan,  
hinig deya ór helju halir.*

I can truthfully tell,  
because I have visited every  
world;  
nine worlds I have travelled  
through, to Niflhel below,  
there the dead come from Hel's  
hall.

*(ÍF Eddukvæði I (2014: 363) and author's translation)*

In connection with this ritual, Turville-Petre (1964: 49-50) suggests that:

Óðinn, swinging on the tree of the world, was in the company of the dead, sharing the wisdom which only they possess. But this is nearly the same as to say that the god himself was dead. If wisdom could be won from a dead delinquent swinging on the gallows, how much more could be gained from Óðinn after he had passed through the world of death. [...] The myth of Óðinn seems to represent a real rather than symbolic death. There is no way to master all the wisdom of the dead but to die.

Evans (1986: 33), adhering to the theory of a shamanistic quest, takes this further whilst toning down some of Turville-Petre's more extreme views:

The underlying notion is that self-imposed privations or torments will, if continued long enough, induce and exalted visionary state in which the seer [...] is granted a revelation of the hidden secrets of the universe. It is probable that such mortifications were thought to bring the seer to the critical border between life and death, or perhaps take him, by means of his own symbolic death, right into the world of the dead.

Whether one agrees with the proposed theory of shamanism or not (see §2.3.1), Evans, in this citation, chose to describe the process relying upon the "critical border between life and death" and as such the importance of some sort of induced state, or even place, could be inferred as necessary in this particular act. As to Óðinn's death, it has been bandied back and forth for many years whether or not death was actually reached during this act, whether the death was symbolic or if he had enacted some form of shamanistic rite in order to receive hidden

knowledge (cf. de Vries 1934, Turville-Petre 1964, Fleck 1971c, Schjødt 1993, 2008, McKinnell 2007a, Grundy 2014). Yet Turville-Petre's comment above is quite telling: truly, the only way to fully master this knowledge was to die but despite Turville-Petre and McKinnell attesting that Óðinn suffered a true death, it should be clear from both the eddic poetry and general mythology that Óðinn had far from mastered all knowledge and continued in his quest right up until *ragnarøk* struck. Furthermore, it is apparent that the Æsir are *mortal*, whatever their longevity, due to the belief that *ragnarøk* would strike and then that the Æsir would fall.<sup>75</sup> This nullifies attestations of death and resurrection that would, by their reasoning, have led to ultimate mastery. It can also be noted that the statement *við hlefi mik sældu / né við hornigi* 'no bread was I given / nor drink from horn' not only highlights a possible method of deprivation but may also highlight Óðinn's liminal state of 'non-arrival'. It can be observed that drink was generally offered upon arrival into Valhöll (*Eiríksmál*, *Hákonarmál*, Tjängvide picture stone (G110)), possibly Hel (*Baldrs draumar* 7), and was of course a fundamental element of social hospitality (*Grímnismál*) as well (Grundy 2014: 195).<sup>76</sup>

Yet McKinnell (2007a: 93-94) does ask a pertinent question in a counter-argument to possible dismissals of his suggestion: to what extent can one call Óðinn a sacrifice if he does not die? This is reminiscent of Abraham being asked to sacrifice his son in order to prove his faith in God; one wonders if it is not the actual act but the *intent* that is important. McKinnell (2007a: 95) refutes such a hypothesis with the example of King Víkarr's death (see Chapter Six) and Óðinn's evident refusal to accept a mock sacrifice but one may note that Óðinn often had one standard for himself and another for everyone else (cf. Haugen 1983).<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, this question of definition highlights a significant caveat of scholarship on this subject that shall be addressed below – whether or not this event qualified as a *sacrifice* at all.

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<sup>75</sup> One may also recall that Iðunn's apples are, by Snorri's record, the only thing holding back the natural processes of time and the bestower of 'immortality' upon the Æsir (*Gylfaginning* 26, *Skáldskaparmál* 56).

<sup>76</sup> The latter seems less than secure. It is possible the brewing of ale for the arrival of Baldr (*Baldrs draumar* 7) is a special case as he is far from the 'regular' inhabitant and furthermore, Snorri names Hel's dish *Hungr* 'Hunger' and her knife *Sultr* 'Famine' suggesting a general lack of fare (*Gylfaginning* 34). One may also question mythic time and whether or not Hel had yet been cast in to the underworld by Óðinn (*Gylfaginning* 34) but little can be said in this regard.

<sup>77</sup> McKinnell (2007a: 99) does contradict himself somewhat in his concluding remarks suggesting that "in its present form, the myth does look as if Óðinn gained access to the wisdom of the dead as a result of suffering [...]".

Referring back to Evans and his placing importance upon the border between life and death, the world tree can be understood to divide the lands of the living and the dead with *Grímnismál* 31 stating that the underworld was said to be located beneath Yggdrasill's many roots, separated away, along with both the world of humans and *jötnar* (*ÍF Eddukvæði I* 2014: 374). The first visual interpretation in modern scholarship comes from Finnur Magnússon and as Andrén notes (2014: 29), this visualisation (Fig. 6) has had a long-lasting effect on both scholarship and popular culture:

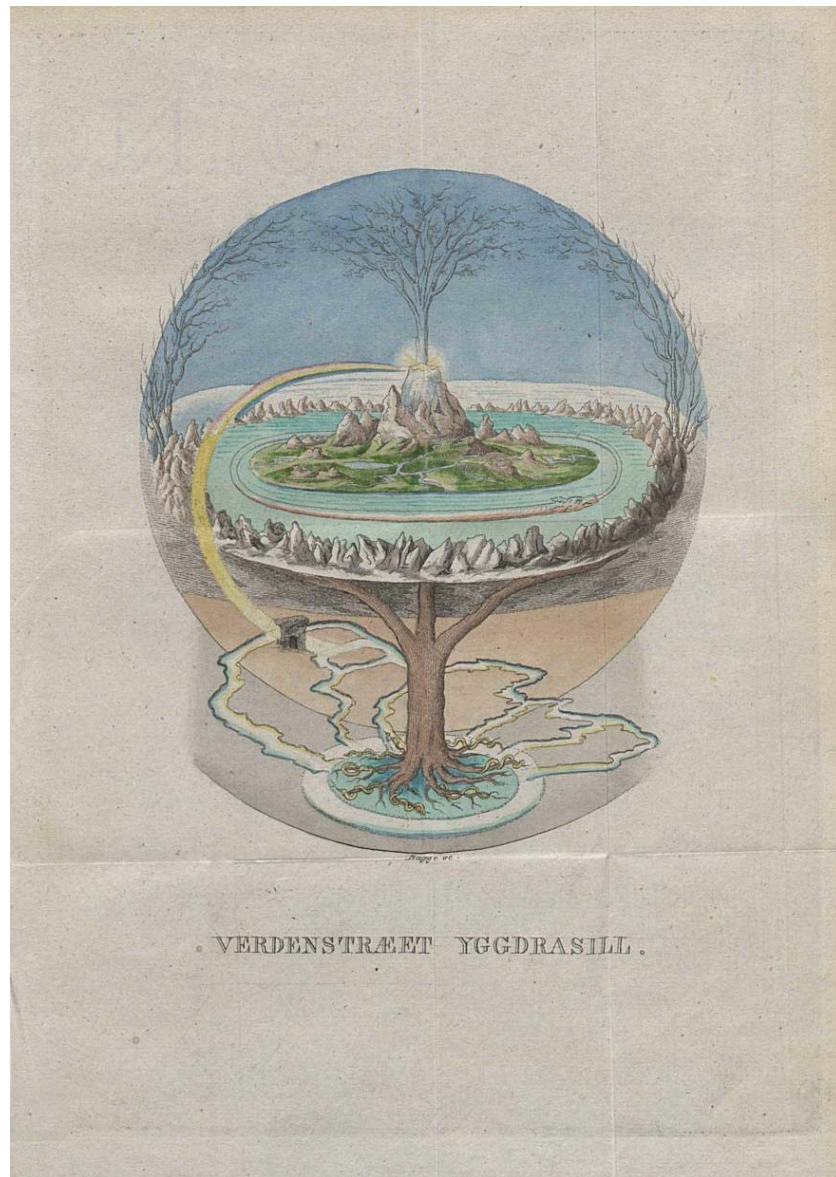


Fig. 6 First modern visual interpretation of Yggdrasill, Magnússon (1825: 339).

The Sanda Kyrka IV Gotlandic picture stone (Figs. 7-9) from fifth-sixth century depicts a similar image. The stone features a tree and horizontal dividing line splitting the stone and

perhaps the cosmos in two and thus the tree performing the role of *axis mundi*. The top half displays what I would interpret as the phases of the sun (and its attendant animals) whilst the lower displays a monstrous shape that could be interpreted as Niðhöggr, the dragon who gnaws at the roots of Yggdrasill, as well as a possible ship of the dead, a common theme of the Gotlandic picture stones (cf. Davidson 1998: 169, Andrén 2014: 136-139).<sup>78</sup>



Fig. 7 Sanda Kyrka IV - Gotlands Museum, Sweden (photographed by author).

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<sup>78</sup> The encircling animal is reminiscent of *Jormungandr* surrounding Miðgarð but this creature carries no known connection with heavenly bodies.



Fig. 8 Heavenly bodies or phases of the sun/moon, Sanda Kyrka IV - Gotlands Museum, Sweden (photographed by author).

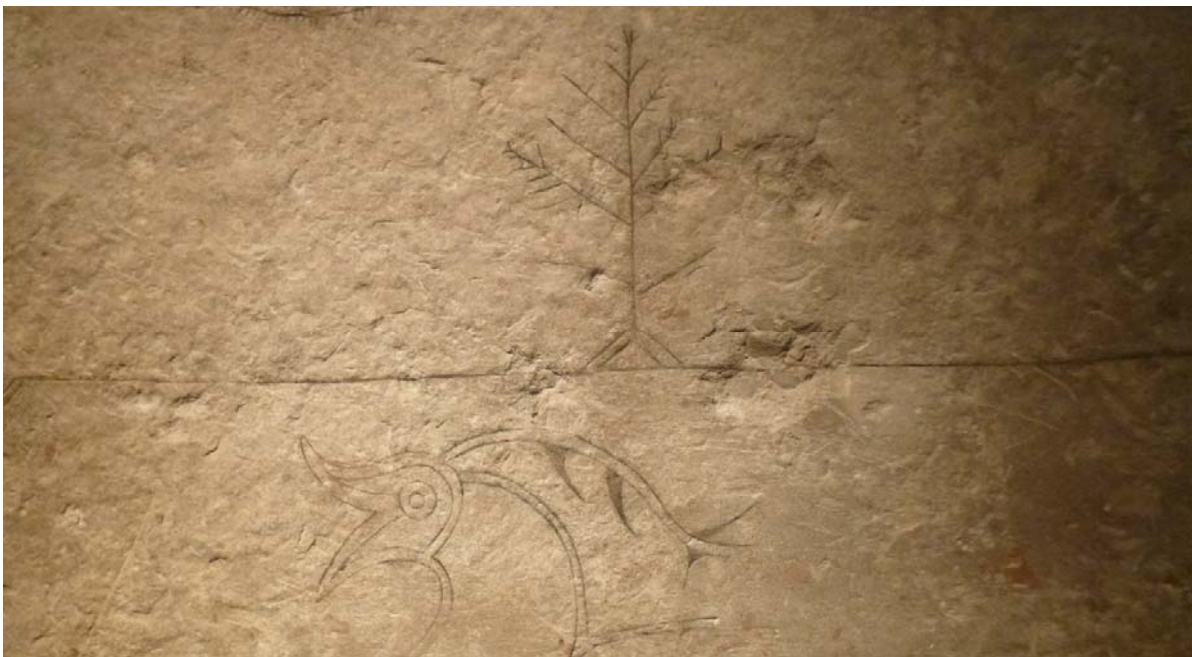


Fig. 9 Close-up of the dividing line, tree and beast, Sanda Kyrka IV - Gotlands Museum, Sweden (photographed by author).

With the importance of motivation and place for Óðinn's hanging noted, by examining *Hávamál* sts 140-141 does one see that it is not the runes themselves that grant ultimate knowledge but are the tool from which particular pieces of secret knowledge can be acquired,

as displayed by sts 146-163. The wording of *Hávamál* 141 suggests that from the nine initial words, nine other followed, totalling the 18 runes listed by the remainder of the poem (cf. McKinnell 2007a). Furthermore, *Hávamál* 143 suggests that the runes are not exclusively owned and that Óðinn was not the only one to master the runes; he was simply the first from among the Æsir:

Óðinn með ásum,	Óðinn among the gods,
en fyr álfum Dáinn,	and for the <i>álfar</i> Dáinn,
Dvalinn dvergum fyrir,	Dvalinn for the <i>dvergar</i> ,
Ásviðr jötnum fyrir,	Ásviðr for the <i>jötnar</i> ,
ek reist sjálf sumar.	I carved some myself.

(*ÍF Eddukvæði I* (2014: 351) and author's translation)

This term *rúnar* also gives us some further grounds on which to possibly date this motif: if we were to understand that *rúnar* represents the physical invention or carving of *fupark* then the account could hardly be taken to be older than the first century. Yet if the meaning was contrived to be 'secret or significant speech' (de Vries 1962: 453) then this acquisition could, theoretically, be "as old as the god himself" (Grundy 2014: 188). Thus it seems safe to conclude that as presented in this part of *Hávamál* the *rúnar* are not in fact just the physical *fupark* but additionally, the representation of secret knowledge or even speech (cf. *Vafþrúðnismál* 1, *Sigrdrífumál* 14): ultimately, numinous knowledge (Clunies Ross 1994: 222-224, Schjødt 2008: 202). Furthermore, the poem displays these events in a pseudo-chronological order. Therefore, *Hávamál* 140 suggests that we are supposed to understand that Óðinn's acquisition of songs and mead followed the act of hanging and the acquisition of the *rúnar*. Moreover, we are to understand that the runes facilitate or even inspire these later acquisitions, which Schjødt (2008: 205) also concludes.<sup>79</sup>

If the subsequent stanzas of *Hávamál* can be read together, as McKinnell suggests (see 1.1.1.1.1), then *Hávamál* 141 appears to have Óðinn boasting of his successes in obtaining further knowledge after his hanging: he learns/takes "nine mighty songs" from his maternal uncle and takes a drink of "the precious mead" (which infers his method of theft as outlined in

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<sup>79</sup> As Lindow (2001: 41) points out, the creation and acquisition of the Mead should be considered as one of the earliest events in the *mythological present* and as such, Óðinn's own hanging also appears to have taken place remarkably early in the mythological chronology.

*Skáldskaparmál* 5,<sup>80</sup> by swallowing it). Therefore, and despite claims to the contrary, it does not follow that Óðinn also instantly gained the songs and the Mead of Poetry as a result of this hanging (cf. Sundqvist 2009a: 658). One object instead led to the other as is suggested in the elusive wording of the stanza itself and only by a combination of each of the three tools – *rúnar*, *fimbulljóð níu* and the Mead of Poetry – does Óðinn facilitate his increase in wisdom and mental quickening. This understanding would further fit the nature of the poem, one designed to make a point of how much the poet, by way of Óðinn himself, knows.

Lastly, when the voice of Óðinn said that he *nám upp rúnar*, this was not meant to be understood literally. The verb *nema* can be seen to have a variety of understandings, ‘to learn’, ‘to take’ or even ‘to hear’ (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1957: 452-453). This variety of understandings is significant, especially in reference to Óðinn’s methods of acquiring knowledge. Whilst the choice of translation is in the hands of each translator, from context it should be clear that said poet chose the word *nám* carefully in order to reflect Óðinn both learning these spells and the forcible nature by which they could be gathered. More shall be made of this interplay in Chapter Seven. Nonetheless, it should be understood that this act represented his taking up of both himself and knowledge (i.e. from beneath the world, to the one above (Clunies Ross 1994: 226, Raudvere 2002: 115, Kure 2006a: 69)), rather than having been physically lifted or picked up as some have suggested (Fleck 1971a/b).

#### 4.1.1 Óðinn and the Gallows

When connecting Óðinn and the gallows, one must first address the argument surrounding the translation and understanding of the word *hekk*. The verb is the preterite form of *hanga* ‘to hang’ and was used contextually in eddic, skaldic and saga sources to denote being suspended or executed by the noose when in reference to an individual (cf. *hanga* Skaldic Database, Finnur Jónsson 1931: 226-227). A similar context can also be derived from legal texts as is discussed below. Despite this and due to the lack of explicit mention of a noose, Reichardt (1957) encapsulates the argument in favour of Óðinn being hung (i.e. impaled) upon the world tree by a/his spear, basing their conclusion upon the spear wound of *Hávamál* 139 and a conflation of imagery as a result of contact with Christianity. Whilst names describing Óðinn

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<sup>80</sup> It is difficult to ascertain from *Hávamál* whether or not *Óðrerir* should be understood as the vessel that contained the Mead of Poetry or the Mead itself. In skaldic poetry, the name only refers to the drink itself and thus this interpretation is usually preferred (Simik 1993: 250).

in relation to hanging will be outlined in detail below (§4.1.1.3), it serves to highlight two particular instances at this point: *Geiguðr* ‘the swaying one’ (*Óðins nofn* 3) and *Vingnir* ‘Swinger’ (*Óðins nofn* 5).<sup>81</sup> Neither of these names particularly allude to impaling as one would neither sway nor swing from a tree or post used for impaling and certainly could not do so if impaled by a spear into a tree. Moreover, *Hávamál* 138 conjures a sense of exposure constructed in tandem with the image of the gallows, which can be seen to match both other mythological examples and legal precedent (see §4.1.2 and Chapter Five). Further implications between the gallows and Óðinn’s relationship with those hanged will be discussed further on in this chapter in great detail and therefore, no more will be said at this point.

On the basis of these stanzas alone, there has been and continues to be discussion whether or not this self-immolation was ever widely recognised, if it even represents a once genuinely held belief and whether there are possible Christian influences when compared to Christ on the Cross (Bugge 1889, Reichardt 1957: 15-28, Turville-Petre 1964: 43, Lassen 2009). As to the latter, Davidson (1969: 111) declares it to be in no way Christian due to the shamanic similarities found in other cultures and Schjødt (2008: 177) highlights that similar though they may be, hanging is not crucifixion, a tree is not a cross and that Germanic societies had their own reason for including a noose and a tree. Yet the literal understanding of this image requires some deeper analysis as evidence of a synthesis of themes is remarkably strong. As for the question of the comparable spear wound, there exists a thus-far unexplored option that could suggest that this commonly highlighted comparison is not so similar after all.

#### 4.1.1.1 Spear Marked

Numerous scholars (Turville-Petre 1964: 46-50, Beck 1967: 134-177, Fleck 1968: 103-104) have questioned this process of spear marking in connection with hanging but only Snorri’s account in *Ynglinga saga* 8 contains any reference to Óðinn himself being physically marked by the spear before his death to ensure his (and those who follow in his wake, such as Njǫrðr) arrival in Valhǫll. Whilst this seems rather straightforward and has been used as a clear sign of initiation to some (cf. Schjødt 2008: 179-180), it is very possible that Snorri himself was unsure as to the origins of being ‘spear marked’ and thus created an incidence in which Óðinn was

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<sup>81</sup> It must be noted that *Vingnir* is also used to refer to a *jǫtunn*, an ox and perhaps Þórr (Faulkes 1998a: 519).

physically marked. This conclusion of purposeful marking seems to ignore a more practical possibility that may be more fitting for a society arguably more practical in outlook and furthermore, a cult surrounding the warrior class, ones who fight again and again to earn wealth and fame in this life and glory in death. Scars received in battle – or at least conceding the possibility of initiatory combat or training – could serve as a more encompassing symbol of being dedicated to Óðinn and evidencing some prowess or at least survival in real combat. With the spear as the most common Viking Age weapon, it was not designed to be specific but simply denoting ‘weapon’ marked (i.e. a warrior). This would allow for dedictees to die by other means or weapons and still arrive in Valhøll (as is evidenced by mythological or heroic figures dying curious deaths). The same could also apply to Óðinn’s hanging and does not require firstly, a conflation as to the presence of an open spear wound and perhaps weakens the comparison with Christ and the spear of Longinus.

As for spear marking in general, the most overt account of someone being physically marked for Óðinn by a fresh spear wound is that of Starkaðr and the sacrifice of King Víkarr. As will be discussed in Chapter Six, the tale was evidently well known across Scandinavia but the details in the two surviving tellings do not match up. As noted in Chapter One, this is of course to be expected in any well-known oral myth. The vital difference however is the discrepancy between the *geirr* ‘spear’ being used to (perhaps) finish Víkarr in *Gautreks saga* and the *ferrei* ‘sword’ in *Gesta Danorum* (see §6.2.7). With Saxo’s motives and his attempts to dissociate Óðinn from Danish history and its kings, it is not impossible that he purposefully removed that which he understood or even believed personally to be the most overt connection to Óðinn and replaced it with a non-specific weapon. If this were to be the case, this would certainly provide strength for the argument that sacrifices would have been or were at least believed to have been spear marked and that it was so intrinsic, someone explicitly against pagan beliefs would purposefully avoid mentioning it. Perhaps as Hines (2003: 377) suggests, with the impossibility of ever finding archaeological evidence for the practice and purpose marking of dedictees or sacrifices, one can only take the weight of literary evidence as truth. Nevertheless, it should at least be noted that this purposeful, ritualised marking, is not the only possibility and that the spear itself might not be necessary.

#### 4.1.1.2 The Crux of Cross and Gallows

The abovementioned Óðinn/Christ comparison is clearly far from straightforward. With some question as to whether or not Christ was himself crucified on a cross, an upright pole or a tree (cf. the Koine Greek *σταυρός*, *ξύλον* ‘a tree, upright pole or stake, a cross’ and Latin *crux* ‘a tree or wooden instrument of execution on which criminals were impaled or hanged, a cross’; Liddell and Scott 1940: 648, Lewis 1879: 485-486 respectively) the similarities between the executed deified figures seems quite strong. It can nonetheless be argued that whilst Christ’s sacrifice was intended to benefit others, Óðinn’s was entirely selfish. In spite of this, as some highlight (Bugge 1889, Turville-Petre 1964: 50, McKinnell 2007a: 90), the possibility of a synthesis of themes (without need for conversion) as a result of the long term contact between the religions cannot be ignored.<sup>82</sup> For example, Kure (2006a: 69-70) interprets the image of Christ upon the Jelling rune stones as being supported by branches or a tree and thus representing Christ’s ‘replacement’ of Óðinn but others are not so convinced (cf. Lassen 2009: 240). With the origins of a world pillar, a tree of knowledge or a world tree being unquestionably ancient – and arising separately – among IE cultures (cf. Tolley 2009: 272-291, 304-316) and the construction and antiquity of *Hávamál* eternally in question, it is currently impossible to say unequivocally whether this motif is wholly Germanic or conflated once in contact with Christianised nations or individuals. The possibility of a synthesis seems the most likely conclusion with a wholly Germanic motif influenced by or made to align with Christian symbolism as time progressed.<sup>83</sup> Hence Lassen’s (2009: 240) comment that the image of a god sacrificed on a tree “must first and foremost have been Christian” goes unsupported by comparative evidence.

In spite of this, the societal conventions surrounding hanging in the Nordic and Germanic world simply have not been addressed properly as a major factor of this event. Kure (2006a:

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<sup>82</sup> Some have highlighted Jesus’ trip into Hell ‘the Harrowing of Hell’ as a similar journey but again, the motivations behind these events are vastly different – one is for the redemption of others whilst the other is acquisition for personal gain (cf. McKinnell 2007a: 93). As to hanging not being a crucifixion, OE poetic descriptions of Christ describe him as *wearh* ‘warg’ (i.e. a criminal punished and shamed by hanging). Furthermore, *The Dream of Rood* describes the cross as a “gallows-tree” on numerous occasions (cf. Swanton 1970). These therefore show that some first millennium poets aligned crucifixion with the act of hanging (cf. Gerstein 1974: 140-143).

<sup>83</sup> It has been pointed out to me that it was not until the 12<sup>th</sup> century that the Christian church developed a supra-national identity versus vernacular and regional forms. Pers. comms. Ralph O’Connor.

69) even goes as far to insist that the hanging element was inconsequential, that only the role of the world tree was vital, and that any method representing death would have been sufficient. As will be shown, this stands in blatant disregard to centuries of wide-ranging and older (up to and including the Viking Age) perceptions of hanging.

Nonetheless, as noted above (see §1.1.1.1.1 and 4.1), *Hávamál* retains the only explicit telling of Óðinn's self-immolation and it is interesting that despite his attempts to encapsulate the greatest deeds of the Æsir and particularly Óðinn, one may recall (see §3.1.2.3) that Snorri makes no mention whatsoever of this event in *Ynglinga saga* or *Snorra Edda* (McKinnell 2005: 44). That Snorri was aware of the association is without question (cf. his use of the names *Hangadróttin*, *Hangaguð*, *Hangatýr* and *Váfuðr/Váfþór* noted below) but it is curious that he never offered a more in depth origin tale. Nonetheless, any attempt to understand the motives behind this decision would be entirely speculative.

Despite the lack of any other source explicitly mentioning this event, as has been noted, there is substantial evidence from the Norse literary corpus connecting Óðinn with the gallows. It appears that knowledge of the event was thus often implied without need for physical recreation. Again one returns to the premise that an absence of direct corroborating evidence is not evidence of absence of the phenomenon – the poetical allusions make it quite clear that the connection between deity and the noose was understood.

#### 4.1.1.3 *Heiti* and the Gallows

Within eddic, skaldic and saga sources, particular *Óðinsheiti* regularly hint towards his surrounding mythos regarding hanging. These display a recognition of the overarching themes and indicate an understanding of Óðinn as a hanged god:<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> It might be noted that one of the two kennings for tree (cf. Skaldic Database) connects Óðinn and his hanging: *ró Sviðris* 'of the yard-arm of Sviðrir = Óðinn' (cf. Rognvakdr jarl Kali Kolsson, *Lausavísur* 22). This example supports the argument that despite describing a constructed object, in this case the yard-arm of a boat, the inference of a tree always lies beneath when in reference to Óðinn.

<i>Alda gautr/aldinn gautr</i>	‘ancient one/sacrifice(?)’	<i>Baldurs draumar</i> 2, 13 <sup>85</sup>
<i>Fjallgeiguðr</i>	‘mountain dangler’	<i>Óðins nqfn</i> 2 <sup>86</sup>
<i>Galga farmr</i>	‘burden of the gallows’	Eyvindr skáldaspillir, <i>Háleygjatal</i> 1
<i>Galga valdr</i>	‘lord of the gallows’	Helgi trausti Ólafsson, <i>Lausavísa</i> 1
<i>Geiguðr</i>	‘swaying one’ (?)	<i>Óðins nqfn</i> 3 <sup>87</sup>
<i>Hangadróttin</i>	‘lord of the hanged’	<i>Ynglinga saga</i> 7
<i>Hangaguð</i>	‘Hanged god/god of the hanged’	<i>Gylfaginning</i> 20
<i>Hangatýr</i>	‘Hanged god/god of the hanged’	<i>Skáldskaparmál</i> 1
<i>Hangi</i>	‘the hanged one’	Tindr Hallkelsson, <i>drápa</i> on Hákon jarl 1
<i>Váfuðr, Váføðr</i>	‘Dangler’	<i>Grímnismál</i> 54, <i>Gylfaginning</i> 20
<i>Vingnir</i>	‘Swinger’	<i>Óðins nqfn</i> 5

#### 4.1.1.4 Yggdrasill

As for Óðinn’s hanging itself, it should be noted that its location, Yggdrasill, appears to be vitally significant, particularly if one considers that it was this act that seems to have given the

<sup>85</sup> *Gautr* is commonly understood as ‘man’ (de Vries 1962: 159, Simek 1993: 100-101) and Price (2002: 106-107) eventually settles on Götalander, but Kuhn (1954) argues for a sacrificial understanding and, therefore, I have included it as one worth consideration in this context.

<sup>86</sup> At first glance, the connection between Óðinn and this name seems untenable but it can be observed that in his *De falsis diis* ‘On False Gods’, Ælfric notes that mountain sacrifices were offered to Mercury, who he denotes as Óðinn (Pope 1968: 667-724). Also, cf. *Atlakviða* 30 and the use of *Sigtýs berg* ‘victory-Týrs mountain’.

<sup>87</sup> This may be derived from the verb *geiga* ‘to sway’ (Evans 1986: 32).

world tree of the Norse cosmos its most common name. It has been long accepted that this name can be understood as ‘the horse/steed of [Yggr = ‘the terrible one’ =] Óðinn’ (de Vries 1962: 676-677). This has then gone on to be generally understood as a *heiti*, ‘the gallows of Óðinn’ as a result of an association with *hestr* commonly being used to indicate a gallows in skaldic poetry as discussed below (cf. Finnur Jónsson and Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1931: 632). It is also well known that Óðinn’s horse is Sleipnir, the eight-legged child of Loki, capable of crossing the many boundaries of the nine worlds and most famously into the realm of the dead (cf. *Hyndluljóð* 40, *Gylfaginning* 42 and *Baldurs draumar*, *Gylfaginning* 49 respectively). This interplay of terms between horse and tree has alerted some to a possible understanding of Yggdrasill’s role in the cosmos: it is the tree whose branches and roots encompass each aspect of the nine worlds and through the apparent ability to traverse its lengths, the tree appears as much as a method of transport – particularly between the worlds of the living and the dead – as Óðinn’s realm crossing steed (Bonnetain 2006: 140-148, Tolley 2009: 336). If accurate, this supposition carries significant ritualistic overtones and thus it is imperative to understand how this connection between hanging, travel and Óðinn came to be understood. More recently however, a new etymology (or more accurately, a return to an older one) has arisen, challenging this perception. As such, it will be evaluated below.

The case for Yggdrasill being the gallows is far from simple. Disagreement has raged for over a century and arguments have been made in the past against this interpretation as the compound term does not take the genitive form – as can be observed in many theophoric place names regarding Óðinn – of *ygg* (i.e. *ygg*s) and thus *ygg*- could simply mean ‘terrifying, horror’ giving us ‘the terrifying tree’ (Detter 1897, Hagen 1903). This argument had been largely dismissed in favour of the now general understanding but scholars such as Kure (2006a) and Elmevik (2008) have returned to this problem with revised interpretations. Kure suggests that *ygg*- ‘the terrible/terrifying one’ is secure in its interpretation and provides *-drasill* as ‘the one who walks/saunters’ which has been attributed as a *heiti* for a horse (cf. Finnur Jónsson 1931: 84). He goes on to state that we cannot understand the name as ‘Óðinn’s horse’ but should instead read the adjective form, ‘the terrifying walker’. Kure ultimately suggests that Yggdrasill is a previously unrecognised and otherwise, unattested *heiti* for Óðinn, on the basis of his other travelling names and recognised characteristics (2006a: 70). As one may note, *Skáldskaparmál* 31 shows that representing men as trees is nonetheless hardly a new convention among Norse poets and ultimately, Kure’s argument has merit. With regard to the lack of a genitive ending, it is worth noting that both personal names (e.g. Þórir) and place

names which exhibit a primary theophoric element regarding Þórr can also be seen to lack the gen. -s (Elmevik 2008: 80-81) but they are far from the mean example (Brink 2007: 131-133).

Elmevik (2008) also attempted to give the compound further depth by seeking the origins of the base word which became a *heiti* for horse. Like Kure, he agrees that *ygg-* should be understood in its ON adjectival form but proposes a new background for *-drasill* by unearthing and suggesting a compound formed from the OEN term, *-drassil* ‘shapelessly large, unwieldy, colossus’, forming the name ‘fearsome colossus’. Elmevik (2008: 79-80) believes that would both describe the nature of a world tree and also carry connotations of a horse. Elmevik (2008: 81) then suggests that when *ygg* was used separately as a noun, it became possible to associate this tree with the myth of Óðinn’s hanging. With these two arguments, we still have the connection between Óðinn, the gallows and horses, but it appears that *Yggdrasill* cannot be said to simply be ‘Óðinn’s horse’.

One final point worth making at this juncture is that a variety of scholars have also gone on to question whether or not this lone *Yggdrasill* (*Völuspá* 19) refers simply to any tree connected with Óðinn or if only *askr Yggdrasill* (*Völuspá* 47, *Grímnismál* sts 29, 30, 34, 35, 44) was designed to encompass the world tree but this discussion seems overly pedantic (cf. Simek 1993: 375-376 for a comprehensive overview of scholars). Whatever the literal meaning of the word it appears that the tree and its connection with Óðinn along with at least some allusion towards a horse was understood, which ultimately came to be connected with the myth of Óðinn’s hanging. Designed this way or no, this appears to be how it came to be recognised during the Viking Age. In the corpus of skaldic poetry one may also observe a strong association between the imagery of the noose and the horse and this connection also appears to have been recognised outwith the Viking world. Since this will be addressed below (§4.1.2), let us set that aside for now.

When discussing the location of the tree, clearly more should be taken into context than simply the name and *Yggdrasill*’s metaphysical properties. If one considers the descriptors of *Valhöll*, *Grímnismál* sts 25-26 tells of two beasts that dwell around the hall of Óðinn:

*Heiðrún heitir geit*

*er stendr hollu á Herjafoðrs*

*ok bítr af Læraðs limum;*

Heiðrún is the goat’s name

who stands on the Father of

Host’s hall

*skapker fylla  
hon skal ins skíra mjaðar,  
knáat sú veig vanask.*

and bites Læraðr's branches;  
she will fill a large vessel of  
clear mead, that strong drink  
cannot diminish.

*Eikþyrnir heitir hjörtr,  
er stendr á hóllo Herjafoðrs  
ok bítr af Læraðs limum;  
en af hans hornum  
drýpr í Hvergelmi,  
þaðan eigu vötn öll vega.*

Eikþyrnir is the deer's name,  
who stands on the Father of  
Host's hall and bites Læraðr's  
branches; and from his horns  
drips liquid into Hvergelmi,  
from which all waters flow.

(*ÍF Eddukvæði I* (2014: 373) and author's translation)

The important elements of the above are the location of where these two beasts stand (i.e. the roof of Valhøll) and that which they feed upon. Whilst the source of their food, *Læraðr* seems like an easy conclusion as being a synonym for Yggdrasill, the name has been the focus of some discussion as its etymology is somewhat complicated due to its varying forms *Læraðr* (*Grímnismál* sts 25-26) and *Léraðr* (*Gylfaginning* 39). If one follows the vowel shift cases of *é* versus *æ* in ON (Sturtevant 1952: 1150-1151) and does not alter the manuscripts in question, one may simply take *Læ-* 'harm, betrayal' as the first element with *-raðr* 'power over, causing'. Consequently, the name could be seen as 'the arranger of betrayal', ultimately deriving as a 'tree of harm' which Lindow argues would fit with the world tree if we consider the harm to be Óðinn's as he hangs (Sturtevant 1952, de Vries 1962: 372, Simek 1993: 185, Lindow 2001: 207). Thus in returning to the beasts atop Valhøll one is left to conclude that either a) one of Yggdrasill's many branches reaches above Valhøll allowing them to feed or b) by the dripping of Eikþyrnir's horns into Hvergelmir<sup>88</sup> the hall is located at the foot of Yggdrasill and the centre of the cosmos or that c) akin to the tree *barnstokkr* in *Völsunga saga* 2-3, Yggdrasill grew through the roof of Valhøll itself (cf. Fleck 1971a+b).

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<sup>88</sup> One of the wells that lies beneath one of Yggdrasill's roots (*Gylfaginning* 4). It is also said to be the home of Niðhöggr and the location of the destined afterlife for murders and oathbreakers.

Tolley (2009: 324) argues for a separation of Valhøll and Yggdrasill by suggesting that seeing the world tree as a gallows would mean that it would be situated away from any form of settlement. It is evident however that the world tree is far from a regular site of execution or sacrifice which makes Tolley's suggestion somewhat redundant. It has been nonetheless suggested that a 'gallows-wood' did exist within the realm of the gods, that is *gálgviði* as is found in the *Hauksbók* (AM 544 4to, 20v) version of *Völuspá* 42 (Tolley 2009: 345-346, Steinsland (1979: 131). However, here the *Codex Regius* (GKS 2365 4to, 2r) has *gaglviði* 'bird-wood' which seems more fitting in its surrounding context of describing the places in which the cocks that crow the end of the world are said to reside.<sup>89</sup> As such I would conclude the version found in *Hauksbók* to be a simple spelling error and not representative of a mythological hanging site. One could also say that Tolley is falling foul of creating a separate narrative from the poem itself in attempting to create 'divine geography' in a corpus that commonly contradicts itself. The important factor here is the sense of isolation and deprivation and less the physical location and its surrounds.

Yet these are not the end of the problems surrounding the names for the world tree. With the appearance of *Mímameiðr* in *Fjölsvinnsmál* 20 as another apparent byname for the world tree (see Chapter Seven for a discussion of Mímir), Grundy (2014: 90) has suggested that Yggdrasill was "not necessarily a firmly fixed primary name", particularly considering the limited use the name sees in the eddic corpus. Furthermore, with the skaldic practice of using a legendary horse or king in a kenning to describe the gallows, it is possible that this name followed in the wake of this common motif, and thus Óðinn came to be associated with it (see §4.1.2). If this were to be the case the literary evidence would suggest a late construction for the motif of Óðinn's hanging. This is not to suggest that hanging as a method of sacrifice was exclusively a Viking Age practice, as overwhelming evidence would firmly suggest otherwise, but does bring into question the antiquity of this divine hanging. Either way, the names of the world tree, *heiti* for Óðinn and allusions toward the gallows do suggest a generally understood connection between the tree (whatever its name), and Óðinn. The question of antiquity continues below in the context of initiation.

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<sup>89</sup> It must be noted that neither word can be explained satisfactorily as no meaning can be unquestionably understood. Whilst de Vries (1962) explains *galgi* as 'gallows' and *gagl* as 'small goose, gosling', he provides no meaning for *gaglviðr*. Thus, interpretation is currently in the hands of the individual translator.

#### 4.1.1.5 *ok gefinn Óðni, sjálfr sjálfum mér*

Within the context of the world tree, the question surrounding *Hávamál* 138 and ‘given, myself to myself’ has plagued scholars for over a century. The most curious element of this statement is the element of self-dedication, especially when the knowledge that Óðinn is said to seek in this event is that of the dead and perhaps even that of his dead ancestors. Turville-Petre (1970: 48) considered Óðinn’s hanging as “the highest conceivable form of sacrifice” and therefore “surpasses our comprehension”, but a great deal more has been made of this simple statement and attempts to understand them. Yet before delving into the complex discussion, it is worth noting Schjødts (2008: 197) comment that this event is essentially a myth, and therefore a model for and explanation of the human condition, perhaps including particular rituals. Thus with any conclusion scholarship attempts to make, one must keep in mind the society from which it features.<sup>90</sup>

With the theory of a shamanistic rite currently the preferred understanding, having overcome the suggestion of a personal unlocking of latent magical ability, Rehfeldt (1942), Clunies Ross (1994: 225), Sundqvist (2006) and Schjødts (2008: 191-193) in particular have been caught up in pointing out the similarities between shamanistic initiation and the ritual context of *sender, object, receiver* and *reciprocation*. Consequently, they have concluded that this event cannot be exclusively a *sacrifice*, or *do-ut-des* event as here sender, receiver and object have merged into one figure.<sup>91</sup> If one was to also consider Insoll’s (2011: 151) point that the term *sacrifice* carries connotations of destruction whereas an offering (or in this case ‘given’) lacks this vitally differentiating element, one should be aware that we are not necessarily dealing with the same thing, particularly if Óðinn cannot be said to die.

Consequently, each of the above have suggested that it is more likely that this act is one of *initiation* in which both sender and object would be the to-be-inducted individual. They also highlight a situation in which symbolic deaths are common and that Óðinn has, as a result of

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<sup>90</sup> Schjødts goes on to state that a myth has to be able to be imitated in order to become ritual, thus inferring that, if it did become a ritual, either individuals were practicing hanging upon themselves or other people. Schjødts (2008: 199, n.45) does explicitly state that he does not advocate this was practiced among warrior bands but does not rule out other options.

<sup>91</sup> Patton (2009: 229) disagrees with this dismissal by highlighting *Hávamál*’s own internal logic in citing stanza 145 and “better not to offer at all than over-sacrifice; a gift always looks for its return”. In his in-depth analysis of *Hávamál*, McKinnell (2007b) dismisses this stanza as an unnecessary linking section, but it is possible that this particular example can be shown to be thematically linked.

this trip into the underworld, been initiated into a higher role, or state of enlightened wisdom. Yet, as will be shown, it is in this context of shamanism (that is, the generally assumed Siberian individual and the pejorative image this word/role often conjures in the West (cf. von Schnurbein 2003)) that the term initiation becomes difficult to apply. It appears that external systems (i.e. non-Scandinavian, note not Nordic) are being applied to an internal system that thus far cannot be shown to support or adhere to them. One wonders if we should not let Viking society and culture speak for itself and create a model based on those factors.

Whereas Rehfeldt (1942: 145-155) concluded that this initiation was for Óðinn's followers and was irreversibly into the armies of the dead, Clunies Ross (1994), Solli (2002) and Schjødt (2008) among many others suggest a 'wisdom-initiation' of the god himself to either himself or some other power. As will be shown below and in the following chapters, Rehfeldt was the furthest from the mark with hanging resulting in anything but the individual being "sent to Óðinn" (i.e. in the sense of the *einherjar*). Whilst the initiation hypothesis put forward by particularly Clunies Ross and Schjødt seems the more appropriate (and that Óðinn gathers wisdom beyond himself is without question), one may ask what higher position a god or even this figurehead of the gods could be elevated to. This concept has not been explained nor investigated satisfactorily.<sup>92</sup> If, as Schjødt (2008: 206) concludes, the result is 'simply' an initiation into a higher status as a result of increased wisdom, then the use of initiation in comparison with shamanism is being used rather loosely, having already discussed the act of initiation changing the individual, status-wise, forever (2008: 72). For example, within practicing cultures the shaman is elevated from a 'normal' individual to the role of knowledgeable spiritual leader and mediator, gaining an entirely new aspect, whereas Óðinn is arguably not affected thusly (cf. Sundqvist 2009a). It is unclear what status is being gained here and if it is simply the status of a 'wiser man', then this feels rather anticlimactic when applied to Óðinn as this pursuit of knowledge could be said to encompass his entire mythological purpose.

One also wonders why the need to make the comparison with shamanism at all. The mythological accounts of Óðinn feature him almost exclusively gathering additional wisdom

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<sup>92</sup> There also remains the question of the *regin* 'powers' as a group who are mentioned frequently throughout eddic poetry, and in *Völuspá* especially. *Völuspá* 23 is suggestive of a gathering of a variety of powerful supernatural beings rather than beings above the *Æsir*. However, one cannot ignore *Völuspá* 7 where the *Æsir* are described as building altars and temples: one wonders if these were to themselves, for their mortal followers or to some higher power.

at increasing levels of personal danger: skirting death does not seem particularly extraordinary. Therefore this hypothesis of elevation status-wise could only be true within the bounds of the argument for this hanging bestowing Óðinn's divinity at an earlier stage. Buchholz (1968: 77) had previously suggested that this act of initiation was what granted Óðinn his godhood but this should be disregarded as it is not the acquisition of the *rúnar* that was considered to have bestowed his godhood: they are instead tools from which further wisdom was gained as is exemplified by the stanzas within *Ljóðatal* (see §1.1.1.1.1) that follow Óðinn's hanging, particularly when one recalls that *Hávamál* 143 states that the *rúnar* were also in the hands of the *jötnar*, *dvergar*, *álfar* and even men.

Schjødt (2008: 199, n.46) muddies his argument for initiation further by stating that, presumably, for reasons of space, he will not enter into the discussion surrounding hanging as either a sacral or penal practice within Germanic society. Yet with his statement noted above (see §2.2) that myth must feature repeatable elements in order to possibly become ritual, a decisive answer one way or another would be sure to have a significant impact upon his hypothesis; a conclusion in favour of sacral practice would have strengthened his argument considerably. On the other hand, if the act could instead be understood as an exclusively penal one, this would have the opposite result as there is no way to infer such a practice for the judicially sentenced. The discussion must be entered into if we are to declare the nature of Óðinn's act and will form the basis for Chapter Five. These factors give Sundqvist (2009a: 656) little grounds to suggest that initiation is the only sensible conclusion due to the "serious problems" inherent in the sacrificial theory. However, it can be noted that Schjødt (1993: 272) himself confesses that whilst the myth may in his opinion be best explained as an initiation, it could just as well have been used as a model for sacrificial practices and this statement highlights the important factor of differentiating what this act meant for the deity and then any mortal made to suffer it.

The pro-initiation discussion does not end there. Fleck (1971a+b) proposes an initiation which carries heavily sexual connotations that result from a stretch of the imagination with little to no support from the associated tradition. Despite these curious theories, Fleck (1971c: 55-57) does make a variety of valid points: firstly he argues that despite the resemblance to shamanism, Óðinn's act of self-immolation is in order to acquire numinous knowledge and that this trial is an example of the widely spread practice in many religions that feature self-mortification for the sake of envisioning the unknown. He further shows that shamanistic cultures instead experience "dismemberment and reconstruction" in order to be initiated and

that the recognised practice of tree-climbing in shamanistic cultures is not an initiation but a journey into the otherworld.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, this incident is apparently not Óðinn's sole method of entering the underworld, despite Buchholz's (1968: 77) attestations otherwise, as he can be seen to travel there by his own means (upon Sleipnir) in *Baldrs draumar*.

Whereas one cannot disregard the research of anthropologists and the comparative theory, it is difficult to accept conclusions based on modern tribal practices in locations far dissociated in geography from Scandinavia never mind in time beyond their intrinsic elements (cf. Clunies Ross 1994: 225-226). Clunies Ross' (1994: 227) theory regarding Óðinn's hanging representing a spiritual birth, culminating in a pre-Christian 'baptism' (on the basis of *ausinn Óðreri* 'sprayed with mead') and the gift of a name befitting his new station is not without grounds but is a stretch too far within the context of the remaining source material.<sup>94</sup> In this case scholarship is reaching too far within the boundaries of the term initiation, especially when in comparison with shamanism. Ultimately, if this act of hanging was instead to be argued outwith a shamanistic model, the act of Óðinn initiating himself into more knowledge has its merits.

The theories of initiation noted above suggest that there are *initiators*. From a mythological point of view, Schjødt (2008: 191-199) understands Óðinn to be his own initiator whereas Clunies Ross (1994: 227) presumes that these were to be "of course the giants" by means of the further acquisition of the *fimbulljóð níu* and the Mead of Poetry from the *jotnar* as outlined in *Hávamál* 140. The latter staunch stance is to be questioned as this theory seems very much 'back constructed' onto the hanging ritual as *Hávamál* 140 suggests a facilitation of further sources of knowledge and wisdom rather than an initiation into their use via dead ancestors. One may also question why the *jotnar* would have any interest in performing such an initiation whilst eternally at loggerheads with the Æsir, or even Óðinn alone, especially after Clunies Ross (1994: 158) concluded that the killing of Ymir could be seen only as an act of kin-slaying. Yet the recognised special relationship between maternal uncle and nephew in

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<sup>93</sup> Holberg (1992: 31-32) argued that the nine worlds should be equated with the nine heavens, which in turn correspond with the notches on a tree that the shaman climbs in order to journey to other worlds. This theory goes unsubstantiated by the Norse literary corpus.

<sup>94</sup> *Grimnismál* has also been seen by some as an initiation (Schröder 1929, 1958; Buchholz 1968, Klingenberg 1983, Steinsland 2002). It features Óðinn sitting between two fires for nine days before beginning to contest in wisdom but others, despite being supporters of shamanism, do not see this as an initiation due to the prescribed purpose in which Óðinn went to this contest (Schjødt 1988: 40-43, Price 2002: 97). As this thesis concerns itself primarily with hanging, this discussion will not be entered into here.

Germanic society (cf. *Germania* 20) has resulted in the suggestion that aid may have been offered on these grounds (cf. Lindow 2001: 82, Larrington 1999: 268). Nonetheless, that the Mead was stolen rather than gifted is without question (cf. *Hávamál* 104-110, *Skáldskaparmál* 5) and regarding the *fimbulljóð* – as will be shown in Chapter Seven – there arguably exists an under-played play on words within *Hávamál* 140 which suggest a deeper understanding. As for the proposed link with Mímir, his instruction of Óðinn, his well and his head, each will be tackled in Chapter Seven.

Sundqvist (2009a) tackles the question of initiators from the mortal side of the equation by first suggesting that the question of nine nights could shed some light. Sundqvist (2009: 656-657) first links instances of nine with passages between this life and the next (i.e. Hermoðr's nine day ride to Hel, Þórr's final nine steps, Óðinn's nine days by the fire) and then goes on to extrapolate that this period of nine was believed to produce "a radical change" for the individual involved in ritual practice. He further concludes that mortal adherents would have undergone similar privations in order to be initiated into the ranks of the wisdom initiated or as he concludes, the *pulr* (Sundqvist 2009a: 659-664). This is then expanded to suggest that the *pulr* and even possibly the largely unknown group of the *erilar* (*erilaz*) would have undergone and directed the method of initiation apparently displayed in *Hávamál* sts 138-139, thus suggesting that shamans or cult leaders were raised to their position by this nine-day agonising and prolonged act.<sup>95</sup> Ultimately, Sundqvist has tried to create cohesion between the role of the shaman and native magical example by way of the *pulr* and he is not alone in this supposition (cf. Haugen 1983: 20). Whilst this attempt to keep sorcerous practise within the native culture and time period is commendable and proposing this initiation in context of the *pulr* is a reasonable conclusion (especially within the context of Óðinn being named *fimbulpulr*), suggesting that an individual would hang themselves for nine days in order to achieve this remains unreasonable.

Grønvik (2000) and Solli (2002: 164-167) have argued in a very similar vein with the notion that this hanging initiation was instead for the occasionally-mentioned *seiðmenn* (*Bárðar saga* 18, *Laxdæla saga* 35, *Haralds saga hárfagra* 36, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 62-63, *Ynglinga saga* 22), the male counterpart to the *vǫlvur*, and their resulting acquisition of

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<sup>95</sup> Sundqvist then concludes that the questions asked in *Hávamál* 144 could have been representative of questions asked of the initiate by his imitators once the act was complete in order for the said individual to become a cult leader. As for the *erilar*, it has been presumed that this represented some cult position or 'rune-master' (de Vries 1962: 104), but Mees (2003) and Orel (2003: 85) showed that the term relates instead to an older Germanic military title, cognate with the ON *jarl*.

*seiðr*. Myhren (2001) attempted to further this and suggested that the mortal initiand could attempt to survive the ordeal by bracing their feet against a branch. Solli (1998, 2002, 2008) further includes the element of sexual stimulus occasionally associated with hanging as part of the initiation as well as suggesting that hanging sacrifices may simply have been those that did not survive the said initiation but these hypotheses have no supporting evidence. McKinnell (2007a: 94) rightly questions why anyone would allow a leading member of society or family to attempt such an ordeal with the most likely outcome being death. Consequently, each of these arguments has been subjected to rather widespread criticism and often complete dismissal (cf. Mundal 2003).

Contrary to the theory of knowledge through initiation, Ström (1942: 244-245, 1947: 23-28) highlights examples throughout the Norse corpus of dying individuals growing in power as death approached and having sudden outbursts of unknown knowledge and in turn suggests that Óðinn would have suffered a similar fate as he approached death. These however in no way represent any form of initiation. As Grundy (2014: 195) comments after his analysis of the evidence for shamanistic rites across various cultures, “shamans are not hanged” and there is no additional evidence to suggest that this was the case in Viking society.<sup>96</sup>

As a final comment on this discussion, I would say I agree with Schjødt (2008) concluding that no outside hand was required and that Óðinn was to be his own initiator (so to speak), based upon the statement of “given, myself to myself” but only when using the term devoid of shamanism. In context of the mythology surrounding Óðinn, it is preferable to conclude that Óðinn was believed to have gathered some sort of knowledge prior to his hanging, perhaps the self-sacrifice of his eye in order to drink from *Mímisbrunnr*, and was therefore able to lead himself through this ritual. One could then conclude that the poet was not suggesting a literal offering of Óðinn to himself but highlighting the Æsir’s own power and ability to work alone in realms few others could fathom (hence the obscure wording).<sup>97</sup> This

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<sup>96</sup> Again, some would question the meaning behind ‘hanged’. Some will no doubt be familiar with the Native American Sun Dance, in which an initiate has two leather thongs attached to piercings on his chest from which he is then attached, or even raised, into a tree and left suspended for an extended period of time in the sun without food or water. This act of pain, exposure and hunger is used to push the initiate into the land of the dead and once the ordeal is over, he returns to his people a shaman (cf. Jorgensen 1972). Interpretation is again in the hands of the individual but it is my opinion that whilst the parallels here are undeniable, in context of Óðinnic motifs, hanging bodily and by the neck are far from the same thing.

<sup>97</sup> It could be suggested that a shaman operates in a similar way but a shaman does not work alone: he was first initiated by other shamans and is said to communicate with the Other/dead for power or information (see Jorgenson 1972). As has been discussed, Óðinn leads himself

chronological conclusion has a simplistic appeal and would be in context of the poem's overarching themes. With regards to the mortal realm, I advocate that no individual was ever hanged in order to be initiated into the cult of Óðinn or to be elevated to the position of shaman due to firstly, the complete lack of evidence for such a practice, and secondly, the simple practicality of attempting to do so. As to how this ritual was then applied in society (or why this myth was created in order to explain the said act), it is my opinion that a large portion of this back and forth discussion has been a result of scholars trying to match the motivations behind Óðinn's hanging with that of his sacrificial victims (cf. Sauv   1970). It is without question that human sacrifices will not return and therefore cannot represent the acquisition of knowledge for the individual or those sacrificing the individual.<sup>98</sup> The idea that the act of hanging was not meant to function identically when enacted by a god or a mortal, despite identical methods, has crossed few minds and another possibility will be advocated below.

If these instances of ritual practice were to be called 'shamanism', scholarship must define shamanism itself in a very different manner from the, generally, Siberian traditions as the traditional sense of a shaman cannot be said to fit the understanding of Óðinn created from our extant sources (cf. Fleck 1971c, Glosecki 1989: 7-8). As von Schnurbein (2003: 124-126) highlights, the main problem in this discussion appears to be exactly this issue of *definition* with the primary exponents of this discussion using the same basis to arrive at opposite findings; limiting their comparison and concept of shamanism to its 'birthplace' in Siberia and holding to what has come to be considered Western bias regarding the original formulation of the practice based on eighteenth century ethnographies (cf. Vajda 1964, Flaherty 1992, Hutton 2001). Furthermore, the cultures from which the term 'shamanism' originated (Siberian and Native American) have spoken out against this appropriation and equating of name and practices they consider unrelated and have requested that scholars look to their own respective cultures for the origins of these magical practices (Kehoe 2000, von Schnurbein 2003: 133).

Hence when Grundy (2014: 178) suggests that it is more likely that the Germanic tribes and eventual nations had their own form of practice, shamanistic in nature or otherwise, which then later came into contact with other non-related societies and their magical practices, his argument stands on stronger ground. It seems pejorative to presume that Germanic or even Continental culture had no form of magic or witchcraft of its own that then developed in the

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and in communicating with the Other/dead, has no initiators on the 'otherside' and rarely seems to work with the intended source of information but against it or forcefully (see Chapter Seven).

<sup>98</sup> Divination may be inferred here and is addressed below in §5.3.2.

more widely recognised Medieval practice.<sup>99</sup> If one returns to the conclusion that Óðinn did not die, two conclusions present themselves: firstly, that Óðinn was believed to have tortured himself to a non-lethal limit in order to travel within the outer limits of the Underworld and thus acquired *rúnar* instead of mastering the knowledge of the dead or secondly, that this process allowed him to ‘unlock’ his own latent power or *ásmegin* – perhaps that of his *jotnar* heritage – which allowed access to ancestral knowledge as a form of enlightenment without having to take it from anywhere external to himself (van Hamel 1932-33).<sup>100</sup> In either case, this would instead suggest the process of martyrdom, in the sense of prolonged torment or suffering, in order to overcome some outer resistance or internal barrier. The evidence suggests that the former is the more likely of the two, particularly with the addition of Óðinn seeking out his uncle in order to gather the *fimbuljóð níu*. Therefore I would conclude that this event was not a *sacrifice* but a *martyrdom* (despite Sauv  s (1970: 180) overly critical and narrow protestations) and that this reading has its support among earlier scholars despite current vogue. Whilst imperfect, it leaves fewer questions unanswered and requires less superimposition of outside practices for which we have little evidence in the Viking Age (cf. Str  m 1942: 143-144). Thus the question remains: why perform this particular act upon the world tree and particularly, why by hanging, if the sole purpose of this ritual was only to bring oneself to the edge of life and death?

#### 4.1.1.6 A Consistent Central Axis

As to why the world tree was to be considered so central to this act, one may first examine a noteworthy parallel that exists within Germanic mythology in the shape of the Saxon world tree/pillar *Irmensul*. Accounts of this object are recorded in a somewhat confused fashion among Frankish and Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. According to *Annales Regni Francorum*, it is at least clear that Charlemagne famously destroyed/burned an object named Irmensul in 772 in his wars against the pagan Saxons (Kurze 1895: 33-35). However, due to the differing constructions of the name and its associated adjectives, it is difficult to tell if it was a structure, pillar or tree (Tolley 2009: 276-277). From further evidence, such as Widukind of Corvey’s

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<sup>99</sup> However, those arguments which dismiss shamanism on the basis of its ‘primitive’ nature in comparison with the so called ‘superior’ IE culture should themselves be dismissed in turn (see Ohlmarks 1939, Fleck 1971c: 57-58).

<sup>100</sup> This is not to say that the *rúnar* could not have been considered part of the knowledge of the dead but that the *rúnar* did not represent mastery.

*Res Gestae Saxonicae*, it can be shown that Irminsul, in this case some sort of tree or pillar, represented a focal point of Saxon worship that was linked with worship of the god of war (Waitz and Kehr 1935: 20-21). The important feature for our purposes is the name, its eventual derivation into ON and its application. *Irmin-* arises from the PGmc *\*erminaz*, which becomes the OS *irmin* ‘strong, tall, exalted, highest’, OE *eormen* ‘colossal’ and from *\*ermunaz* arises the ON *jǫrmun* ‘huge, vast, superhuman’ (Orel 2003: 85).<sup>101</sup> *Óðins nǫfn* 8 even names Óðinn *Jǫrmunr* ‘mighty one’.<sup>102</sup> As for the secondary element of *-sul*, derivation is far simpler as the term arises identically in OS/OHG *sūl*, OE *syl* and ON *súl* with the meaning ‘column, pillar’, which, according to de Vries (1962: 560), carries connotations of being a tree or at least being made of wood. Whilst the name may have been attached to a deity later as a result of the general sacral import, this gives us further evidence that brings together the deity, its historical development and most importantly an object that holds up the world. It also adds weight to Elmevik’s (2008) conclusion that the term *Yggdrasill* originated from a ‘colossal’ object.

In addition to the continuous and individual systems of belief (or at least the attachment of a deity, cf. Tolley (2009: 278)) as displayed between Irminsul and Yggdrasill, there are two further factors in the Norse context that one must consider: that the tree is thought to reach all aspects of the known universe and that it is fed by one if not three wells of knowledge, that reach into the Underworld (*Vǫluspá* sts 19-20, *Grímnismál* 31). Therefore, it is not impossible to suggest that Óðinn was “given” to Yggdrasill (or the life force that it represents) and that his torture upon it allowed him access to his eventual reward. As Price (2002: 109) concludes, “Yggdrasill is clearly alive, almost sentient, at the centre of the universe.”<sup>103</sup> Consequently, it is possible to conclude that an aspect of tree worship is at play in both names. Tree worship is far from a new or Norse idea and ranges across human society as a whole, regardless of time and geography and it seems a quintessentially human trait to revere that which may be ancient, protective and encompassing which mankind could not have progressed without: be it for food,

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<sup>101</sup> *Irminsul* has also been put forward as the pillar or focal point of a now unknown god Irmin, resulting in ‘the column/pillar of Irmin’, which has found a place in Germanic neopaganism (Tolley 2009: 278).

<sup>102</sup> MSS AM 757 a 4<sup>o</sup> (B) 8r, has *jǫrundr* ‘battle’ which Snorri uses as the name of a son of Yngvi who is sacrificed to Óðinn by hanging (*Ynglinga saga* 24). *Jǫrmuni* ‘mighty one’ is also used as a *heiti* for a horse within the poetic list *Pul hesta* 3. One could say that whichever name is used, the underlying sentiment shows a connection between Óðinn, horses and hanging.

<sup>103</sup> *Grímnismál* 35 describes Yggdrasill as *drýgir erfði, meira en men viti* ‘suffers agony, more than men know’ as the serpents below gnaw on its roots. The language suggests that mankind should feel sympathy for the tree, resisting on our behalf, of which only Óðinn knows its plight.

fuel or building material. The largest volume of work in this regard was undertaken by James Frazer in his volumetric series, *The Golden Bough* (1890) and more recently, John Taylor (1979) produced a detailed analysis comprising a wide range of cultures and more modern thought.

In general, tree worship is connected with ‘primitive’ or developing cultures and is separated into two categories: worshipping (or mythologising) the tree as a symbol of life or fertility through repeated and prolonged cycles of growth and decay and worshipping the tree as a cosmic pillar, the *axis mundi* around which the universe revolved (cf. Eliade 1964: 120). However, with respect to the Viking understanding, it is impractical to attempt a separation of the world tree/tree of life conceits due to the “rapid merging” that took place, suggesting that individuals could not see any difference between these once distinct concepts of world tree/tree of life and considered them synonymous (Tolley 2009: 304). The links between the origin of man and trees in the Viking mind has been discussed in Chapter Three with respect to Óðinn and it appears that Yggdrasill was seen as playing both a role in mankind’s creation and as the venerated object that centered the universe. It is also possible that the tree itself was therefore also considered to be an embodiment of their divine ancestor (Tolley 2009: 278). With regards to tree worship actually being practiced in the Germanic area, there is some, whilst scant, surviving evidence. Prior to examining the practicalities of tree worship, it serves to first examine why the tree came to hold a place of such importance in the mind of developing humankind.

To very briefly highlight the history of tree worship in Europe, it can be observed that in the period of post-glacial warming, as the continents changed in size and temperament, the oak came to dominate those areas of pine that had previously sprung up following the end of the glacial period c.7200-5500 BC, leaving the species to thrive as temperatures continued to increase c.5500-3000 BC (Taylor 1979: 80). As for its appearance in northern Scandinavia, higher temperatures than today allowed the oak to spread further north than one would generally presume (Taylor 1979: 80-81). Taylor (1979: 82) further suggests that it was during this period of change (i.e. the forest swallowing herding lands, population reduction and the ability to live within forested areas), humankind was forced to adapt and through prolonged contact with this heavily expanded species, came to revere the oak over the previously revered pine.<sup>104</sup> The specie of tree, their connection to particular divinity and eventual use in ritual will

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<sup>104</sup> For Scandinavian examples of the reverence of the pine/evergreen, cf. Lødøen and Mandt (2010) and examples of pre-historic rock art.

be discussed further and in Chapter Five regarding possible ritualism in legal punishment. With regard to general (i.e. non-specific deity) tree worship of the Viking Age, it can be noted that when the Æsir gathered for their *þing* meetings they met beneath Yggdrasill (*Grímnismál* sts 29-30), perhaps where one expects to find the *rvostóla* ‘seats of Fate’ (*Völuspá* sts 6, 9, 23, 25). One could therefore conclude that the world tree was seen as the Æsir’s place of power and most venerated object (Brink 2001: 98).

When discussing tree worship and Óðinn in particular, North (1997: 90-103) enters into a lengthy discussion regarding the term *trémenn* ‘tree/wooden men’ and their role in reverence. He (1997: 90-93) first suggests that the *tveim tremönnum* ‘two wooden men’ of *Hávamál* 49 are representative of idols and, whilst avoiding the implications for the cult of Óðinn, suggests that these idols or perhaps trees were carved in a man’s likeness.<sup>105</sup> North then makes further argument for the occurrence and the form of these *trémenn* by highlighting an example from *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* 20. Some men lay anchor at Sámsey and upon going ashore and entering the trees come across a 40 ells (18m) tall *trémann fornan* ‘ancient tree/wooden man’. When questioning aloud who could have worshipped such a thing, the being speaks:

<i>Ok því settumk &lt;settu mik&gt;</i>	For this they set me up
<i>svarðmerðlingar</i>	mighty warriors <sup>106</sup>
<i>suðr hjá salti,</i>	south by the sea
<i>synir Loðbrókar;</i>	sons of Loðbrók;
<i>þá var ek blótinn</i>	I was then sacrificed to
<i>til bana mönnum</i>	with the deaths of men
<i>í Sámseyju</i>	on the southern part
<i>sunnanverðri.</i>	of Sámsey.
<i>Þar báðu standa,</i>	There they bade
<i>meðan strönd þolir,</i>	the (wooden) man to stand,
<i>mann hjá þyrni</i>	covered in moss,
<i>ok mosa vaxinn;</i>	while the strand resists;
<i>nú skýtr á mik</i>	now the clouds weep

<sup>105</sup> The most common image to spring to mind is that of a two scarecrows but this is by no means the only option.

<sup>106</sup> I have followed Rydberg (1906: 560-561) in his understanding of this term, derived in context of the saga itself, in opposition to McTurk (1991: 19-22) suggesting that it should be understood as “head-dress wearers”.

*skýja gráti,*

*hlýr hvárki mér*

*hold né klæði.*

upon me,

neither flesh or clothes

warm me.

(*Fornaldarsögur* I (1950: 284-285) and author's translation)

The sacrificial example is obscure but does suggest a form of sacrifice to the tree itself. Whilst there is arguably no reference in this instance to a particular individual to whom the figure was erected, some have gone to great lengths to infer a female fertility deity on the basis of the MSS expansion of *Loðbrók*<sup>r/v</sup> (cf. McTurk 1991: 23-39).<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, this does give further basis for concluding that tree worship, or at least an understanding of it had indeed persisted into the Viking Age and beyond. A similar (whilst obviously less fantastical) case was recorded by Ibn Fadlan (Lunde and Stone 2012: 47-48) when he relates that the Rus (see Chapter Six) make offerings to a wooden post stuck in the ground with a carved, man-like face, surrounded by smaller wooden idols when they arrive at port. It is also worthy of note that each of these descriptions reminds one of the creation of humans as exemplified in Chapter Three by both poetic and prose sources, particularly when recalling Snorri's addition of a gift of clothes.

A more concrete link between martial families, trees and Óðinn can be observed in *Völsunga saga* 2:

*Svá er sagt at Völsungr konungr lét gera holl eina ágæta, ok með þeim hætti at ein eik mikill stoð í hollinni, ok limar trésins með fögnum blómum stóðu út um ræfr hallarinnar, en leggrinn stóð niðr í hollina, ok kolluðu þat barnstokk.*

The tale goes that King Volsungr had a magnificent hall built, and in such a way that there was a great tree standing inside, its branches with their colourful flowers spreading out through the roof, while its trunk stretched down into the hall, and they called it Barnstock.

(Finch (1965: 3) and author's translation)

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<sup>107</sup> The word *Loðbrók* in this case has been the focus of a great deal of scholarly discussion primarily on the grounds of the MSS expansion of *Loðbrók*<sup>r/v</sup>. If the abbreviating letter is understood to be a *v* instead of the generally presumed *r*, this would not equate the standard -*ar* ending and instead provide a *u*, leading to *loðbróka* (McTurk 1991: 22-23). It is my opinion that the MSS (NKS 1824 b 4°, 76v) displays an *r* (whilst irregular) due to a flourish that appears consistent with the scribe's *k*.

*Barnstokkr* means literally ‘child-trunk’ but it is not clear whether or not this was the original meaning (de Vries 1954: 95-106). In this passage the tree is an *eik* ‘oak’ but as has been highlighted above, and again in this instance by Byock (1990: 113), *eik* was commonly used in Icelandic terms to represent ‘tree’. The same has been said of the tree also being described as *apaldr* ‘apple tree’ in the same chapter but contextually, another interpretation seems more appropriate: it has been suggested that *apaldr* ‘apple tree’ may be in reference to the goddess Iðunn and her immortality-inducing apples as Óðinn offers the king and his wife an apple in order for them to be able to conceive (cf. *Skáldskaparmál*, Byock 1990: 113). This in turn may represent the potency and longevity of the family under its branches, as well as its divine sanction. In a further connection to this paternal god, Sigmundr is chosen as the champion of Óðinn when he succeeds in drawing a sword driven into the trunk by the god on a disguised visit to the hall (*Völsunga saga* 3).<sup>108</sup> One could then suggest that the tree in the hall was itself synonymous with the reverence of Óðinn, acting as representative of the god, his protection over the family and their ongoing expansion and fortitude. Furthermore, the parallel with Yggdrasill cannot be ignored: the holding of the roof and the divine elements of the hall’s construction in comparison with the holding of the universe (cf. Gunnell 2001: 20-22).<sup>109</sup>

This representation of a family tree can still be observed today upon farms in Norway and Sweden in both the terms and persistence of *tuntre* and *vårdträd* respectively. As Brink (2001: 99) highlights, these trees were planted in the courtyard of a farm and were deciduous in nature (oak, ash, rowan, lime, maple and birch) and represent “the symbolic centre of the farm and a mimesis of the life and growth of the farm and family”. With the tree linked to the families’ ancestors, luck and prosperity one may observe a direct parallel between the tree of the hall in *Völsunga saga* and its very real counterpart. It cannot be said that these farm trees were ever connected with Óðinn as in the example above but does highlight the continued reverence of trees in the Scandinavian mainland.

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<sup>108</sup> For an analysis of the sword in the marriage ceremony, cf. Davidson (1960).

<sup>109</sup> One may wonder if this sheds light on the proximity of Yggdrasill to Valhøll if its branches are said to spread above its roof for the two beasts to consume. Further comparisons between particular trees and Óðinn have focussed on Glasir, which, according to *Skáldskaparmál* 34, stands outside Valhøll with red gold foliage and is described as the finest tree amongst gods and men. Also cf. *Glasislundr* ‘Glasir’s grove’ in *Helgakviða Hjörvarðsonar* 1. This in turn has connections with the term *Glasisvellir* ‘glittering plains’ (*Hervarar saga* 4, *Gesta Danorum* VIII) which is said to contain Ódáinsakr/Údáinsakr ‘deathless acre’ (*Hervarar saga* H and U (not R), *Gesta Danorum* IV). Whatever may be made of the individual instances, a connection between Óðinn and trees seems apparent.

Ultimately, in taking one's starting point from Óðinn's hanging, his self-immolation serves to suggest elements of a strong association between the deity and trees, if not specifically the world tree. Furthermore, it appears this association between Óðinn and the tree is an old one, arising identically among the pagan Saxons. This continued connection infers a whisper of the, by the Viking Age, lost or dying practice of tree worship and suggests that the act of ritual hanging may once have been an element of that practice.

Consequently, in closing and returning to the hypothesis posited at the beginning of this section and Óðinn's martyrdom as representing an offering of to the *tree*, from the above I would suggest that we are not meant to understand *Yggdrasill* literally, just as we should not take *siálfir siálfom mér* or *nám ec upp rúnar* literally. They are all poetic devices used in order for the poet to create a sense of mystery, of understanding beyond our ken. It has become evident that in the pursuit of order and understanding, scholarship may have forgotten that this poem was not and is not a statement of dogma: the religious activity of the Viking period has thus far shown itself to possess no such thing. The language used and the manipulation of it in order to elucidate these points suggests that it was not designed to be taken as gospel. Therefore one should not expect the language or concepts suggested to be straight-forward as these poems were also designed purposefully in order to make people think or suggest a hidden purpose or agenda. Whilst one should remember that this is ultimately a poem and be aware of its pit-falls, this should not detract from its seriousness: it is evident that the educational elements and the advice given were voiced in a style which was supposed to be taken both seriously and literally.

#### 4.1.2 Riding the Gallows

It is without question that the element of travel has become the crux of understanding behind the myth of Óðinn's hanging. However, with Elmevik's (2008) 'fearsome colossus' etymology appearing to dismiss the overt connotations of 'steed' as an element of *Yggdrasill*, one should perhaps understand that the tree was not the method of transport but the focal point of the ritual. Consequently, in order to understand the persistent horse and travel connections that appear in connection with hanging in skaldic poetry, one must seek the elsewhere.<sup>110</sup> For example, one notes that within skaldic poetry it is not so much the tree that represents the horse (and therefore

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<sup>110</sup> Elmevik (2008:78-80) does admit that 'fearsome colossus' could carry the connotation of a horse as a powerful, large and occasionally dangerous animal.

travel), but the gallows itself: in the wider skaldic world various kennings were formed in order to link Óðinn, riding and the gallows. *Ynglinga saga* 23-24 (cf. *Háleygjatal* sts 4-5, *Ynglingatal* 12) contains three continuous references to the gallows tree by making use of Óðinnic and riding imagery based upon the frequently used Hárbarðr and Sigarr motif<sup>111</sup>:

*En Guðlaugr  
grimman tamði  
við ofrkapp  
austrkonunga  
Sigars jó,  
es synir Yngva  
menglotuð  
við meið reiddu.*

*Ok náreiðr  
á nesi drúpir  
vingameiðr,  
þars víkr deilir;  
þars, fjólkunnt  
um fylkis hrør,  
steini merkt  
Straumeyrarnes.*

*Varð Jörundr  
hinns endr of dó,  
lífs of lattr  
í Limafirði,  
þás hábrojóstr  
hqrva sleipnir  
bana Guðlaugs  
of bera skyldi.*

But Guðlaug  
tamed the [grim steed of Sigarr]  
gallows because of the  
stubbornness of eastern kings,  
when Yngvi's sons  
had the [ring-destroyer]  
generous man  
ride the tree.

And the corpse bearing  
windy tree,  
droops on the headland  
where it separates the bays;  
there, the well-known  
Straumeyrarnes  
is stone marked,  
over the leader's corpse.

Jörundr,  
he who died long ago,  
was deprived of life  
in Limfjorden,  
when the [[high-breasted  
Sleipnir] horse of linen] gallows,  
had to bear  
Guðlaug's slayer.

<sup>111</sup> For the seduction of his daughter Signy, Sigarr sentences Hárbarðr to death by hanging. The legend of these characters was widely recognised during the Viking Age as is evidenced by the sheer volume of attestations in skaldic poetry as well as its featuring within *Völsunga saga*, *Ynglinga saga*, *Skáldskaparmál* with *Gesta Danorum* preserving the tale most fully (cf. Whaley 2012: 24-25).

*Ok Hagbarðs  
hersa valdi  
hǫðnu leif  
at halsi gekk.*

And [the remnant of the kid]  
noose  
of Hagbarðr  
was wound about  
the [lord of chieftains] king's  
neck.

(*ÍF Heimskringla I* (2002: 44-47) and author's translation)

In this example the gallows itself is described as a horse whereas the act of hanging is represented by the individual riding the horse of a previously hanged man or even Óðinn's own horse. This in turn creates a 'horse of death' motif. Whilst *Háleygjatal* 5 (directly above) cannot be directly understood as either a riding or Óðinn-related kenning, it acts as a direct continuation of the preceding stanza and the motif connecting hanged corpses swaying from a tree and Óðinn should be inferred. The same could also be said regarding *Ynglingatal* 9 when King Agni is hanged on the tree shielding his tent from the elements. The poet similarly uses the motif of riding a horse to infer the act of hanging, thus comparing the event to the hanging of Hárbarðr (see below).

One may also note that this public exposure and prolonged display should be considered key in the use of ritual hanging in comparison with example of hanging in legal practice (see Chapter Five). Displayed in public areas or upon highly visible landmarks from both the land and waterway, these hangings could have created a very visible sign of contract between adherent and god and furthermore, a sign of power and divine backing (Gade 1985: 167).

Nevertheless, it is evident that there was a strong correlation between these themes and the concept of 'riding the gallows' was well founded with the only kennings for the gallows being exclusively exemplified in both the above and the following expressions: *grimman grandmeið Sigars fjanda* 'the grim harm-tree of Sigarr's enemy', *hesti Sigars* 'the horse of Sigarr' and *svalan hest vers Signýjar* 'the cool horse of the lover of Signý' (Halldórr skvaldri *Haraldsdrápa* 3, *Erfidrápa Óláfs Helga* 1 and *Ynglingatal* 9 respectively; cf. Skaldic Database). The connection was not limited to the Nordic world. The composer of *Beowulf* (2444-2449) displays a comparable construction in the case of a young man being executed at the gallows:

*Swa bið geomorlic gomelum ceorle to gebidanne, þæt his byrne ride giong on galgan.*

A painful thing for an old man to live to see, that his son should ride, young, on the gallows.

(Swanton (1978: 150-151) and author's translation)

Keller (1853: 428) also relates an early modern German phrase *ir müst den galgen raiten* 'you must ride the gallows'. Evidently this motif of the gallows being equated to a horse was both widespread and understood during the Viking period, even outwith its borders and appears to instead feed into a common Germanic link, even until recent periods.

## 4.2 Conclusions

The most significant elements of the argument of this chapter are thus: Óðinn cannot be said to have been killed outright in the act of his hanging; that knowledge from the Underworld was the ultimate driving force of this act; that we cannot wholly understand Yggdrasill as 'Óðinn's steed' as scholarship has long sustained; Óðinn cannot be said to be the sole-possessor of the *rúnar*; and that the conclusion for Óðinn's hanging representing an act of shamanism is far from secure. It has also been shown that the connection between Odinn and the tree (not necessarily the world tree) was well established and that this act of hanging may also include older elements of tree worship. Nevertheless, evidence also suggests that a connection between Óðinn and the gallows/noose was well established during the Viking Age and that the motif of hanging/the hanged body was well understood, particularly poetically, as representative of the deity. Yet is it without doubt that the sole reason to do this in Óðinn's case was the acquisition of the *rúnar* and one must ask why the choice of hanging above all other forms of self-immolation. In order to understand this motive, the following chapter will investigate the wider social responses to and understanding of the practice of hanging (as well as its outcomes) in the Viking Age. Chapter Six will then analyse various historical examples of sacrificial hanging (literarily and materially), which leads finally to Chapter Seven and questioning why Óðinn would inflict this particular method upon himself and why others would choose to emulate it.

## Chapter Five

### Hangin in the Viking and Germanic World

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Rituals to Óðinn almost certainly take a variety of forms and one should not preclude the variable possibilities associated with the regionalised cult practices. Since the cult was controlled by the aristocracy; their own traditions, ancestral backgrounds and tendencies might alter ritual patterns accordingly (Pluskowski 2000: 61).

The above statement could not be more accurate but it could have been more forthright: rather than possibly altering patterns, it is without question that various factors did so. Furthermore, with Óðinn's acquisition of further spheres of influence throughout history, this surely only served to alter the associated ritual(s). As will be made clear, the concept of hanging was so intrinsically linked to social disgrace and considered such a shameful death that the scholarly accepted view of hanging as a sacrifice to the war god, often based on conclusions from early Germanic records and Anglo-Saxon archaeology, produces an inaccurate picture. The following analysis will initially be exclusively text-based, from mythological poetry to Medieval Scandinavian law, the aim being to piece together the motives for and expected results of this punishment or ritual. Societal understanding is also key in understanding how this event was perceived by those that may have witnessed it and it is the element of public display that will prove crucial to our understanding of hanging during the Viking Age.

#### 5.0 The Penal Role of Hanging

Historically speaking, the terminology for this punishment has remained largely consistent within the Germanic languages despite the various migrations of both people and language: OS *hón*, *ahón*; OFris. *hua*; OHG *hangjan*; ON *hengja*; OSw *hængia*, *uphængia* (Ström 1942: 115-116). Ström (1942: 115-116) uses these consistent names to suggest that hanging as a punishment for criminality is an old and established practice in Western Europe. In seeking the Germanic method of punishment for criminality, our examples are vast. Stretching from Roman accounts of the Germanic people to the corpus of the Viking Age, we find the act of hanging corroborated throughout the first millennium within historical chronicle, as images upon picture stones, and eventually appearing as common features of countless saga and poetic

examples in both eddic and skaldic form. The practice can also be seen to be continuous in the historical periods following the Viking Age with various examples within medieval Swedish law in particular (*Upplandslagen* M 38, *Vådamålsbalken* 26§3, King Magnus Eriksson's Law I). Yet before the rise of capital punishment as a commonplace event in the medieval period, pre-Christian societies also practised legal *self-help* through exile and blood vengeance permissible by law. Therefore one must wonder exactly how widespread capital punishment would have originally been in an earlier period and when it was practised, if it was something that carried a particularly heinous overtone, as has been suggested.

This begs the question as to which crimes would have been worthy of this particular sentence. Interestingly, the source material records overlapping criteria across a millennium: *De Bello Gallico* (6:16) states that the Gauls preferred that their sacrifices had been caught in the act of theft and armed robbery, while *Germania* (6, 12) suggests cowards, adulterers and thieves were the targets of hanging for the German tribes. Legendary Norse accounts echoed the idea of hanging for adultery and seduction (*Gesta Danorum* VII, *Völsunga saga* 42, *Hamðismál* 17) whereas Boberg's (1966: 222-223) *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature* lists hanging as the most common punishment in the sagas, now doled out for treason, murder, fratricide, theft, cowardice, abduction and adultery, prisoners of war, impudence and impersonating a bishop. As for the sudden increase in applicable crimes, especially when hanging is so rare a punishment in legal texts, Heusler (1911: 215) suggests that the discrepancies between saga examples and legal texts could be a case of actual function versus legal theory and model case. Despite this range of examples, it still appears that this kind of judicial capital punishment and the need for an appointed office or executioner would have been relatively rare in a society featuring legal maiming, blood vengeance and exile. By the medieval period however, had become a punishment for criminals of all kinds and with this purely criminal association, had begun to feature other means of execution such as beheading as a means of avoiding the associated disgrace of hanging (Ström 1942: 122). Furthermore, it appears that hanging had undergone some moral changes with the coming of Christianity. As the *Upplandslagen* (49§2) states:

*hvar staþ þær konæ stíæl. fylghi swa þem þiuffnæpi sum, allum andrum. ok konæ taki slik giæld sum man þær til a líff gangær. gangær dombær a líff hænnaer þa skal hanæ .i. iorþ grawæ. æi ma kono stæghlæ ællr hængiæ.*

If a woman steals, everything shall be done in connection with this theft that is performed on the occasion of any other, and a woman shall take the same fine as a man unless her life is forfeit. If she is condemned to death she shall be buried alive in the earth; a woman must not be broken on the wheel or hanged.

(SSGL Vol. III and author's translation)

The same law is also found in the *Hälsingelagen* (32§1) and the *Äldre Västgötalagen* (Tjuvabalken) which prescribes hanging for women as the punishment exclusively for the crime of witchcraft. It must be noted that these medieval laws have been questioned with regards to their representation of Germanic or Norse practices in the face of Christianisation but no definitive answers have as of yet been forthcoming (cf. Heusler 1911, Gade 1985). Gade (1985) provides a modern analysis of medieval Scandinavian law and the treatment of thieves showing that hanging was unquestionably the prescribed and even original punishment for their crimes throughout the Germanic nations, despite Ström's (1942) strong attestations to the contrary based on his assessment of saga and Classical literature. With the above laws being of a medieval origin, it is interesting to note that women are wholly missing from the Viking Age depictions of hanging (except in the case of suicide, see §5.3.3) and thus it is not just with the coming of Christianity that women were spared from the noose (Ekholst 2014: 68-75).

Returning to the question of the connection between hanging and shame, the particular elements of social humiliation have remained consistent and the reputation of hanging as a criminal's death is one that has persisted to the modern day. As Ström (1942: 123) notes however, that throughout the periods preceding and including the Viking Age, hanging was used primarily to terrorise, humiliate and shame rather than to punish by law – hanging had become the choice of executoin for personal revenge. In these contexts, the practice of hanging was used to exemplify superiority in battle with both vengeful and religious overtones that clearly fall outwith the penal sphere. Evidently hanging was no simple practice and this leads us to question the multifaceted role that hanging could play during the Viking Age. This in turn feeds into the discussion of its ritualistic role in connection with the cult of Óðinn.

### 5.1 Hanging and its Societal Reputation

It is important to understand why the association of shame and disgrace was so strongly attached to the act of hanging. If one looks to the poetic sources as our earliest point of Viking

reference, one sees hanging being treated as a miserable death and the evident shame and/or discomfort felt is apparent. For example, *Hamðismál* 17 relates its protagonists Hamðir and Sqrli encountering a family member who has been hanged on their path to the court of King Jǫrmunrekkr:<sup>112</sup>

<i>Fram lágu brautir,</i>	The path lay ahead,
<i>fundu vástigu</i>	they found the path of woe
<i>ok systur son</i>	and their sister's son
<i>sáran á meiði,</i>	wounded on the gallows tree,
<i>vargtré vindkǫld</i>	the wolf-tree exposed to the elements
<i>vestan bæjar,</i>	west of the settlement,
<i>trýtti æ trǫnu hvot,</i>	the crane's bait swayed continuously
<i>títt varat bíða.</i>	and warded against tarrying.

(*ÍF Eddukvæði II* (2014: 410) and author's translation)

This particular stanza is enlightening on both societal and ritual grounds. It is clear that Randvér (i.e. Svanhildr's (step) son (cf. *Vǫlsunga saga* 42)) has been executed in line with poetic Óðinnic motifs, wounded and hanged in a tree, left swaying and exposed to the elements. The motif of exposure in relation to the hanged is a common one, both poetically and historically and remains consistent with Óðinn's own hanging through the use of the terms *meiði* and *vindkǫld*. Here it must be noted that in poetic examples surrounding hanging, *meiði* can also be understood as 'gallows tree' by context – particularly in this example by reference of the Óðinnic motifs – rather than simply 'tree' or even 'gallows' as Ström (1942: 118) argues rather weakly.<sup>113</sup> If this example can be understood as representing sacrificial practice, an identical motif of sacrifice and exposure is highlighted in Ibn Fadlān's (Montgomery 2000: 12) record

<sup>112</sup> The fourth century Gothic king (Lat. H/Ermanaric, Goth. \*Aírmanareiks and ON Jǫrmunrekkr) is attested to frequently in Jordanes' *Getica* (Mierow 1908) and can also be found in *Beowulf* 1201.

<sup>113</sup> Ström argues that the poetical *meiði* should be understood as 'gallows', particularly a constructed gallows (which he expands in reference to *galgi*, cf. *Atlamál* sts 22, 39) rather than a natural site in his attempt to separate the penal and sacral elements of hanging in Germanic society despite its (likely purposeful) ambiguity. Ström chooses to largely ignore poetical context due to its ambiguous nature, favouring later prose examples to explain the older practice. He also decides that the OE equivalent, *galgtreow* 'gallows tree', should also only be read as gallows, simply ignoring the direct meaning as it does not suit his argument.

of a sacrificial hanging which states: “And they take him and put a rope around his neck and hang him in a tree until he falls to pieces.”<sup>114</sup>

*Vargtré* ‘wolf-tree’ from *Hamðismál* 17 is also a curious term as it is by no means common (*hapax legomenon*, Finnur Jónsson 1931: 594). It is further inconsistent with the general Germanic terms for gallows: OE *galgan*; OS *gealga*; OHG *galgo*; OSw *galghe*; ON *galgi* (Ström 1942: 116). The association between the wolf and the outlaw, criminal or thief is nonetheless well established in various human cultures and is equally evident within Scandinavian law as well as mythological and *Íslendingasögur* sources (cf. Gerstein 1974, Jacoby 1974). By use of *vargtré* we are to understand that the cousin has been hanged as a criminal, in this case as a falsely-accused adulterer. Yet I would suggest that this is not the end of Randvér’s punishment or simply judicial practice (see Chapter Seven). It is interesting to note that Randvér’s crime (and its punishment) aligns itself with OS law noted in the section above and numerous other prose Viking examples (e.g. Hárbarðr/Signy, see §4.1.2). Through multiple examples in *Gesta Danorum*, one may also observe that wolves in the literal sense may also have been hanged alongside the offender. Saxo, who records Fróði’s laws<sup>115</sup> (c.5-6<sup>th</sup> C) for criminal activity and the punishment for the crime of theft states:

A hanged thief should have a sword thrust through his sinews and a wolf fastened up at his side, so that the vicious man’s likeness to the fierce animal might be demonstrated through their similar treatment.

(Davidson and Fisher 1996: 152)

From the above discription, one may suggest that this was evidently not a crime to be tolerated. Yet the motif of the wolf and the gallows does not end here. Ström (1942: 128-130, particularly n.136) notes that legal precedent for the hanging of wolves with thieves was an extensive Germanic practice and still in effect up until the seventeenth century within Danish provincial law. Furthermore, the etymology of the word *vargr* (OE *wyrgan*; OFris. *wergia*; OHG *wurgen*) carries Germanic connotations of ‘strangler, choker’ as well as ‘outlaw’, combining the motifs

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<sup>114</sup> This example will be further discussed in Chapter Six.

<sup>115</sup> Ström (1942: 129) insists that this legal tradition cannot be disregarded simply because it is recorded in a legendary context but is however comfortable with the notion that the traditional association with Fróði may be false.

of wolf and criminal firmly together (de Vries 1962: 645-646).<sup>116</sup> Therefore, as Ström also elucidates, it is difficult to refute this practice as poetic invention and it appears that one may assume that wolves were indeed hanged alongside criminals. As for the possibility of ritual behaviour attached or lying beneath this legal practice, significance may lie in the motif of the hanging wolf. In following Jacoby's (1974) display of the ON *varg* carrying connotations of both wolf and thief, it is vital to note the description of Valhöll given in *Grímnismál* 10:

<i>Mjök er auðkennt</i>	It is very easy to recognise,
<i>þiem er til Óðins koma</i>	for those who come to Óðinn's
<i>salkynni at sía:</i>	hall, to see how it is organised:
<i>vargr hangir</i>	a wolf hangs
<i>fyr vestan dyrr,</i>	above the western door
<i>ok drúpir qrn yfir.</i>	and an eagle hovers above.

(*ÍF Eddukvæði I* (2014: 370) and author's translation)

Therefore, one may conclude, as Gerstein (1974: 143) does, that the rotting corpse of the *vargr* alongside the criminal could be considered the "emblem of Óðinn's power and the sign of his presence". Consequently, one may not need not infer that the ritually hanged body on the headland or roadside was only suggestive of Óðinn's presence or allegiance.<sup>117</sup>

Returning to the legal punishment of hanging, the element of public display in these examples of punishment is core to our understanding of how shameful this punishment was believed to be in early Scandinavia. A further example of this practice arises in Saxo's prose telling of King Jormunrekkr, his conquest of Sweden and war with and execution of the Slavs.<sup>118</sup> Yet a significant difference lies in Jormunrekkr's motivations for choosing death by hanging:

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<sup>116</sup> von Amira (1922: 105) advocated that this idea of hanged wolves existed in only fairy tales and discussed documented hangings of dogs. With regards to symbolism, a dog is not a wolf and with the context surrounding wolves specifically, these examples should not be conflated.

<sup>117</sup> When discussing hanging as a display of power, it will be argued in Chapters Six and Seven that hanging came with a very real possibility of severe consequence for the enactor of said punishment and was therefore a bold statement to issue.

<sup>118</sup> A similar account is given in Jordanes 48 but he cites the practice as crucifixion, bringing us back to the problem of definition as identified in §4.1.1.2 (see Ström 1942: 122-123, particularly n.96).

After capturing forty prisoners he hanged them, each with a wolf tied to their body. He wished to inflict on his enemies a method of punishment at one time reserved for murderers of kinfolk, to make it clear to observers [...]

(Davidson and Fisher 1996: 255)

In contrast to Fróði's law, the victims here are not criminals but political enemies and the punishment is instead driven by personal vengeance and a display of power over and against an enemy group.

Other kings can be seen to continue in this trend, threatening people who have insulted them with, in their own opinion, the extreme dishonour of hanging in order to display their power (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 49-50, *Óláfs saga helga* 93, 172; *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* 23). Consequently one may observe that hanging held socially destructive overtones in situations that did not, lawfully, warrant the punishment. Furthermore, its use frequently fell outside the penal sphere and into the personal, with hanging used to settle scores in what was considered the most socially destructive of ways.

From the Classical and Scandinavian examples noted above, it seems that the crimes considered the most offensive to society were worthy of hanging in pre-Christian Scandinavia in order for a public example of disgrace to be made. Medieval saga sources show that the same sentiment of disgrace was still held in the late Viking and early medieval period. For example, when Grettir had plundered Ísafjörð once too often, the farming community constructed a gallows in a nearby wood and upon capturing him, planned to hang him. Grettir is only saved from this fate by the nature of his lineage (his saviour suggests to the farmers that he was from too powerful a background to suffer such a disgraceful death), however much he may have deserved it (*Grettis saga* 52).<sup>119</sup>

Returning to late thirteenth century Swedish law, the *Östgötalagen* (Drapa balkær 13§2) makes the same sentiment about public disgrace very clear:

*Nu dræpær þræll frælsan [...] Nu uill egh bondin böta firi han i þingum ok fæmptum. þa skal dom a þingi taka til þæs at taka eki uþiu ok binda um hals*

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<sup>119</sup> It can also be noted that instances of hanging in *Íslendingasögur* are very 'matter of fact' and include little to no elaboration on the process. One may assume that either the act was commonplace and therefore needed little elaboration or that any associated 'ritualism' or idiosyncrasies had been lost.

*þrælinum ok up hængia uip liþstolpa bondans. huggær för niþær æn uipian rutnar.  
hætte uip fiuratighi markum.*

Now a slave kills a free man [...] Now if the farmer will not pay a fine for him at the thing and on the fifth [day after the thing]; then sentence shall be passed at the thing to take an oak-withe and tie it around the neck of the slave and hang him on the wicket-post of the farmer. If [someone] cut down before the withe rots, he is liable (for a fine of) forty marks.

(*Östgötalagen*, SSGL Vol. II and author's translation)

The purpose behind this judicial punishment is clear – long term public display with the felon left to the ravages of the elements with fines against shortening the prolonged period created by the oak-withe that would deteriorate more slowly than a noose of linen or leather. It is interesting to note that this use of twisted fibres, be they tree or linen, is also mentioned in *Háleygjatal* 5 (*hōrva*, see §4.1.2) and as von Amira (1913: 241, 1922: 95-96) comments, was most likely the predecessor to the use of rope. Furthermore, the master of the slave is also disgraced with the rotting body of his misbehaving slave pinned to his property and the potential threat of an immense fine.<sup>120</sup> It is clear that the slave killing his master was considered a heinous crime and that an example should be made: less by the method of execution but through prolonged public shame heaped upon the felon. As Gade (1986: 167) decisively put it:

*Hanging must have been an intended outrage and a symbol of ultimate degradation* [italics in the original]. Not only did the criminal forfeit his life by his action, but his post mortem honor and the honor of his descendants were effectively destroyed as he hung on the gallows or in a tree exposed to public scorn.

It is this key factor of exposure that has led scholars (Ström 1942, Simpson 1967b) to question whether or not elements of penal hanging were a result of the practice of sacrificial hanging. When considering the centuries of disgrace heaped upon the hanged individual, it seems surprising that scholars would then conclude that the pagan Norse held the act of hanging as something to revere and emulate. It is of particular note that this method of execution was not the 'quick-drop' process: hanging was performed by suspension, lasting anywhere between ten

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<sup>120</sup> As Ekholst (2014: 40) remarks, in the fourteenth century three marks was the equivalent cost of an ox. Therefore forty marks was a very hefty sum and strongly emphasises the need to make a criminal fully accountable.

and thirty minutes, so death by prolonged strangulation could only have been extremely painful and lacking in any dignity (Matsuyama *et al.* 2004: 207). As such, the possibility that sacrificing an individual in this fashion was a princely gift to Óðinn's retinue in Valhøll makes little sense. One may ask why, after already dedicating the battle slain to Óðinn and defeating the leader, chieftain or king would the victor then reward his opponent with any kind of swift passage to his ancestors and god?<sup>121</sup> Instead, he is to be denied his warrior's death and will never see the halls of his ancestors; he is to be hanged and disgraced as any other criminal. Thus when defeated and stripped of his reputation of renowned warrior, he is simply a man in the eyes of the ritual and one vital question remains: what use does the god have for him? This question forms the exclusive focus of Chapter Seven, so for now, one must continue with the analysis of the social role of hanging.

## 5.2 Beheading and its Societal Reputation

As a brief comparison with hanging, it is useful to examine the attitudes held towards other methods of execution, particularly beheading. Offered in opposition to the shame-heaped and gendered punishment of the noose (cf. Ekholst 2014: 74-75, 177), one may question why it was not considered so heinous to die in this manner. Ström (1942: 162) shows that beheading was a no less widespread practice than hanging among the Indo-European cultures and was also the prescribed punishment of male offenders but carried none of its "infamizing import". This is particularly exemplified by *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* 29: *er þat hraustra manna dauði at vera hálshogginnir* "it is a brave man's death to be beheaded". This sentiment of bravery can also be observed in *Jómsvíkinga saga* 36-37 where 70 men are prescribed to be beheaded after defeat and in receiving their punishment fearlessly with statements of courage, the executioners decided that this courageous attitude was worthy of reprieve and granted freedom to the remaining men.

A curious example, mixing both beheading and hanging, can be observed in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 49-50 (*Heimskringla I*) where Jarl Hákon is murdered by his slave, Karkr. Whilst on the run from Óláfr, Hákon had been in hiding with his slave, but he was decapitated with his head returned to Óláfr. On arrival, Óláfr orders his men to decapitate Karkr and have both

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<sup>121</sup> Whilst it should be noted that defeated leaders in war were often shown respect, this cannot be said to be such an example. If one was to be executed in defeat, as has been noted in §5.0 and furthered in §5.2, beheading would have been the 'gracious' choice during this period.

heads taken to Niðarhólm: *Sá hólmr var þá hafðr til þess at drepa þar þjófa ok illmenni, ok stóð þar gálgi* “This islet was used then for the execution of thieves and criminals, and a gallows stood there.” Once the two heads had been taken to Niðarhólm, Óláfr had them hanged on the gallows and his men threw rocks at them. Whereas Gardela (2013: 101) ponders a “three-fold death”, a simpler conclusion to this curious use of hanging is evident. Hákon is an enemy of the king and it is far from out of the ordinary for a king to hang such an individual in a display of personal power or a settling of scores, as was noted above. In the case of Karkr, he is a slave, guilty of the murder of his master and as was shown above, the *Östgötalagen* decrees that the only punishment is death by hanging. In this case, in death by beheading at the hands of another, Hákon has avoided the shame and disgrace that Óláfr wished to bestow upon him for opposing him and Óláfr has to settle for the symbolic act after his death.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, it is these key themes: shame, personal power and disgrace that separate the cases of execution by beheading and hanging.<sup>123</sup> As for why beheading was considered devoid of this stigma, one is left to assume that the crimes associated with this punishment (i.e. murder) can be seen considered less heinous than theft (Ekholst 2014: 57-62) and that death was instantaneous. Consequently, this death was considered symbolically ‘cleaner’ than that of hanging.

### 5.3 Ritual and Sacral Suggestions in Penal Hanging

The difference between sacrificial and judicial hanging is the nature of the associated ritualism (Pluskowski 2000: 58).

There are a variety of factors within Classical to Medieval literary sources that surround the practice of hanging with which to seek possible archaisms of ritual practice. A subsequent analysis of these sources may in turn aid the identification of and separation between judicial and ritual hanging within material finds. Patrick (2000: 35) suggests looking at the following four elements: location, number and type of victims, number and type of witnesses

<sup>122</sup> The question of why Óláfr beheads the slave, who was presumably insignificant to him, beforehand remains problematic. One may theorise that the slave was decapitated in a punishment role-reversal for enacting the beheading upon his master and then symbolically hanged as the law would decree.

<sup>123</sup> Gardela (2013: 104-105) suggests that beheading also carries equally shameful elements due to the manner in which the head is often treated post-mortem but this is not the same – the physical cause of death is not considered shameful whereas in hanging, it most certainly is. The treatment post-mortem is irrelevant in this comparison.

and the attached scenery and paraphernalia. Location has already been addressed but consequently, one may look to the specific types of tree mentioned as sites for hangings, the material from which the noose was crafted and how people referred to the noose itself. Furthermore, through this method of legal *self-help*, one may question whether or not the executioners are attempting to balance digressions made against a higher power.

### 5.3.1 Specific Species of Tree

As was noted above (see §4.1.1.6), there appears to be some element of significance attached to the tree in the use of hanging. Consequently, one wonders if the species of tree used in the hanging ritual was significant and therefore could be used to point to examples of ritual practice or divine association. If the type of tree used for hangings is specified at all, one might expect, in the mythological Óðinnic vein to find *askr* ‘ash’, but this is not the case. Outside Yggdrasill itself, *askr* (in the sense of a tree) is not mentioned in the eddic corpus (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 16-17). Foremost, there is some discussion surrounding a possible confusion of species surrounding Yggdrasill (i.e. *askr* ‘ash’ and *barraskr* ‘needle ash, yew’). For instance, when describing Yggdrasill, Snorri incorrectly speaks of the *barr* of the ash (*Gylfaginning* 16, 39) and it has been presumed that this error was made on account of Iceland lacking this species of tree and therefore the *-askr* element of *barraskr* simply becomes the non-specific ‘tree’ (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1957: 53). Faulkes (2005: 62) suggests that Snorri was not necessarily ignorant of the difference between the species and that *barr* could have been carried into poetry as an alliterative term (i.e. from *bíta barr*, *Gylfaginning* 16). Whilst possible, Faulkes’ further suggestion that Yggdrasill may have been imagined akin to a conifer due to being evergreen seems an overgeneralisation since the world tree is most commonly referred to as *askr Yggdrasill* (see §4.1.1.4). Ultimately it seems most appropriate to conclude that Snorri was simply mistaken.

In terms of other possible species choice for Yggdrasill (and hence a ritualistic association when practicing hanging), the yew has an observably longer life span than ash (upwards of 1000 years, with a Scottish example between 2000-3000 years old, compared with 200 years for European ash; Bevan-Jones 2004: 38), perhaps more fitting of a world tree. Ecological mapping shows that despite being common across most of Europe, neither the common ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) nor yew (*Taxus baccata*) are or were prolific in Scandinavia

beyond localised wet central and costal locations (primarily in western Norway, southern Sweden and Denmark), so it would be difficult to determine which species Yggdrasill was more likely to be conceived as being based on availability in the respective countries (Marigo *et al.* 2000: 1-2 and Linares 2012: 1-2 respectively). Some scholars (Hellquist 1948: 398, Ohlmarks 1983: 372) have speculated that the sacrificial tree/grove at Gamla Uppsala (see Chapter Six) may have been a yew, primarily based upon its aforementioned apparent evergreen status (see above). Ultimately, mythological poetry makes no reference to any specific type of hanging tree (cf. *askr*, *eik* Finnur Jónsson 1931: 16-17 and 101 respectively) that was or could have been used for hangings, particularly since there are so few examples (cf. *galgi*, *hanga* Finnur Jónsson 1931: 169 and 226-227 respectively). The same appears to be true for the instances of executions by hanging within saga literature (Boberg 1966: 222-223). From this lack of specificity it seems prudent to conclude that during the Viking Age either the type of tree was not relevant or that the specifics have been lost in time.

Therefore it makes for a peculiar case when the *Östgötalagen* prescribes the very specific use of *eki uipiu* ‘oak-withe’ in order to hang the criminal (see §5.1). Whilst it is clear that these withes would last longer than traditional noose materials (see §4.1.2) and thus extend the prescribed period of exposure, it is curious that this one material be specifically mentioned here. The only tangible link remaining between Óðinn and the oak is found in the place-name outlined in Chapter Three, *Onsike*, but this could simply be a particular grove dedicated to the deity and until more evidence can be found to connect the two, only speculation remains. In a general sense, *eik* is no more prolific than *askr* in the mythological corpus, mentioned only as a treatment for constipation (*Hávamál* 138). Thus one is forced to turn our view to the wider Celtic-Germanic and even the Roman world in order to seek possible parallels between gods and particular trees despite some believing that trees were instead worshipped purely for their growth/death cycle rather than individual associations (cf. Simek 1993: 335).

#### 5.3.1.1 Roman Sources

The Roman world featured a prominent link between trees and the divine, having trees that carried both good and bad omens as well as being associated with hanging and particular divine figures. *Saturnalia* (III: 2-3) distinguishes between *felices abores* ‘beneficial tree’ and *arbores infelices* ‘inauspicious trees’ (in Roman tree divination) and states that “the beneficial trees are

thought to be oak, the forest oak, holm oak, cork, beech, hazel [...]”. The *arbores infelices* were dedicated to the *Di inferi* ‘the gods below’ and were to be avoided, exemplified by either black branches or fruits. Ström (1942: 87) highlights examples within Roman law in which hanging is the prescribed death penalty for criminals and notes that they took place upon these *arbores infelices*, performed in order to offer the individual to the angered underworld gods. *Natural History* (XVIII: 3) states this act was deemed the only way to cleanse the site and placate the now wrathful gods before their anger spilled over into the general populace.<sup>124</sup> When it comes to the reverence or perhaps the worship of trees, the Roman case is not so dissimilar to that of the Germanic or Celtic world since *Natural History* (XII: 2) records that groves formed the first Roman temples to the gods and that specific trees were in turn dedicated to particular gods, (the oak being dedicated to Jupiter, the head of the Roman pantheon). Whilst this association between the oak, leader of the gods and the Óðinn is tempting, instead Mercury rather than Jupiter (Pórr) was strongly associated with the Germanic Wodan from the Roman perspective and therefore one cannot comparatively connect the oak with this deity (see §3.1). It is worthy of note however that *Natural History* (XII: 2) goes on to note that the *numen* ‘a gods’ divinity, presence’ could be held in particular trees and that when one fashioned everyday items from that material, the god would follow the objects.

#### 5.3.1.2 Celtic Sources

Whilst this is not the place for a lengthy discussion surrounding the immense body of scholarship regarding the role and status of the Celtic druid, their widespread connection with and reverence of particular trees does serve purpose. It is prudent to begin with the title of these individuals itself, with the English word druid (deriving from the Latin pl. *druidae*) containing the possible PIE root element *\*dorw* -> *dru-* ‘oak’ (Taylor 1979: 112-113).<sup>125</sup> This in turn has been used to conclude that the druids worshipped the oak in some form of ‘oak cult’ (Friedrich 1970: 144). Furthermore, *The Civil War* III relates that the meeting place and scared grove of the Galician Celts was a grove and *The Geography of Strabo* (XII: 5) furthers this by providing its name, *Drunemeton* ‘oak grove’. The often-cited passage of *Natural History* (XVI: 95) further relates druids gathering mistletoe when it grew on the oak, their most sacred of tree, for

<sup>124</sup> This concept of sacral punishment will be examined more closely in §5.3.3.

<sup>125</sup> This PIE root theorised as the etymology of *dru-* appears to be a ‘dead-end’ in Hellenistic Greek, providing no further historical link (see Taylor 1979: 113).

use in fertility rites. Whilst this certainly tells us that the Celtic druid held oak in high regard, it tells little of any association between the tree and a particular deity. Instead, MacKillop (1998: 309) shows that the association instead appears to be non-native, imported from Roman beliefs, attaching the oak tree to the Gaulish form of Jupiter. Consequently, as has been exemplified by the last two sections and despite promising leads, one would expect both the Celtic druid and Roman worshipper to connect their respective deity with the oak and thus display no link to Mercury/Wodan/Óðinn.

### 5.3.2 Naming the Noose

In seeking further possible examples of ritualism in penal practice, and with the naming of the gallows discussed above in relation to trees, it falls to investigate the terms used for the noose itself. Interestingly, the noose itself is almost never recognised as a separate entity and is only ever referred to as part of the encompassing gallows. To my knowledge, only two explicit references to the noose exist (both exemplified §4.1.2) in the example from *Ynglingatal* 12. Whilst the first, *hábrjóstr Sleipnir hq̄rva* ‘the high-breasted Sleipnir of linen’ is commonly interpreted to as the gallows, the inference of materials imply that the poet is speaking more specifically of a noose, constructed of natural fibres. The second example, *leifhq̄ðnu Hagbarðs* ‘the remnant of the kid of Hagbarðr’ refers both to the frequently related tale of Hárbarðr as well as to a leather strap that is being used as a noose to hang Jq̄rundr. Again, despite a promising suggestion, in neither case can associated ritualism be inferred and it can be assumed that the materials varied. As such the process of naming the noose itself tells us virtually nothing in this regard.

### 5.3.3 Avoiding Divine Wrath?

Scholars have also questioned whether or not execution was used in order to remove an individual that had been deemed as having offended the divine and to beseech the gods to pardon the community (cf. Ström 1942: 69-90). Whilst Ström shows that this concept was in practice among Christianised areas in regard to God’s wrath, due to a paucity of examples, it is difficult to determine if the same can be said of pre-Christian people. *Ynglinga saga* 15 contains an example commonly cited when addressing the notion of divine kings that suggests a belief in divine wrath may have been held by the pagan Swedes. According to the text, during

a period of famine, the Swedish people made large sacrifices to the gods at Uppsala, escalating from cattle to men, for reprieve from their suffering. When no change came, a gathering of Swedish chieftains decided that fault lay with their king, Dómalði, and resolved to sacrifice him. In doing so, fertility and peace returned to the land.<sup>126</sup> This event carries the hallmark of ‘rightful kings’ (i.e. those the land itself has chosen), something which features heavily in the Irish mythological material, in which a variety of figures are killed by divine circumstance when they are deemed to no longer fulfil the criteria to be wedded to the land and the earth goddess, evidenced by the land falling into famine and war (cf. *Destruction of Dá Derga’s Hostel* and *The Testament of Morainn* in Gantz 1981: 60-106 and Kelley 1976 respectively).<sup>127</sup>

Comparative as these examples may be for the case of both divine kingship and the use of sacrifice to circumnavigate divine punishment, these examples are a step too removed from the consideration of a criminal as an offender against both the people and their gods. That the king was not disposed of as the first response to this suffering suggests that society had little problem with the individual and it was solely divine opinion that thought otherwise. Executed criminals are punished by man and his laws; killed for trespassing against them. Therefore, there is a case for sacrificing criminals to avoid divine wrath when that crime is, as Ström (1942: 72) states, “directly antagonistic to divine interests”. In order to observe hanging as a punishment for these transgressions, investigation falls upon the rules governing the *vé* ‘holy site’ (see §3.3.1). Featuring in place-names across the Scandinavian peninsula, *vé* was often an element of theophoric naming practice, primarily in Sweden and with all Danish examples combined with Óðinn (Simek 1993: 355). Weapons could not be carried within these *vé*, blood was not to be spilled and nor was one to relive themselves within its bounds (*Landnámabók* 80, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* 49, *Eyrbyggja saga* 4). *Víga-Glúms saga* 19 even goes as far to state that Freyr would not allow outlaws in the vicinity of these areas.

Despite the *Íslendingasögur* outlining various examples of legal punishment for breaking the laws above, there is no trace of any sacral element or divine wrath suffered by society until resolved: they are trespasses against man’s law but not that of the gods (Ström 1942: 73-79).

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<sup>126</sup> A similar event can be found in *Hervarar saga* 6.

<sup>127</sup> The concept of Nordic divine kings has progressively gained steam among scholars over the last century and has become interwoven with the royal cult of Óðinn but no further discussion will be entered into here as it is not directly relevant to, nor an example of, hanging. Its main issues appear to be hinged on the difficulty of understanding the associated concept of ancestor worship. For an introduction to the subject, see Laidoner (2015), Sundqvist (2008: 223-226), Maret (2011: 1059-1067), Gräslund (2001: 222-235) and Ström (1954).

This aside, there are, however, two female examples of a hanging suicide within the bounds of the *vé*. The wife of king *Heiðrekr*, *Helga*, who was a leader of a *disarsalr* ‘*disar* hall, temple’, hangs herself in the *salr* when her husband kills her father in battle (*Hervarar saga* 7). A similar event takes place in *Lanánámabók* 41 where *Sigríðr* is said to have also hanged herself in a *hof* as a protest at her husband, *Illugi rauði*, marrying another woman. These particular acts have several effects: it desecrates the holy site, forms a grievous insult to the husband and the divine and brings immense shame upon her and her husband.

The first element regarding desecration reminds one of the Roman example above (see §5.3.1.1) of a hanging tree being thought polluted by the act. This leaves one to speculate whether or not an act of desecration would have been true of hanging sites in Scandinavia and if the tree used would have been considered unrecoverable. By inference of the legal provisions surrounding the bodies of the hanged, it is tempting to presume that a sense of desecration would be the case and if the hanged body was sacral in nature, Óðinn’s presence would have been long-lasting: a publically visible and powerful statement.

In drawing together our conclusions of the possible sacral elements within penal hanging it seems to be the case from the evidence above that one cannot conclusively show ritualistic elements in the practice of penal hanging. Whilst the evidence discussed above suggests that these practices of hanging wolves and use of oak trees and withes could have been connected to an older, sacral or ritualistic function, Ström (1942: 151) confidently concluded that “Germanic penal hanging is entirely without religious connections”. He furthermore declared that if our understanding of penal hanging cannot be found devoid of “irrational or superstitious factors” then we have not found the original motives. Yet this declaration is perhaps a bit extreme, particularly if one recalls Ström’s decision to understand *meiðr* only as ‘gallows’ and not ‘tree’ (see §4.1). This push for scientific rationalism is a product of its time. Modern scholarship recognises that staunch rationalism had little place in the Viking Age and its precursor periods, where life and religion were one in the same. Furthermore, the conclusion by Gade (1985: 167) that hanging, penal or otherwise, was “well suited” as a sacrificial method due to both the prolonged public display of the victim and visible contract between worshiper and deity cannot be ignored.

#### 5.4 “For those who are about to die”

With the concept of hanging, its societal perceptions and possible sacral features in hand, it is vitally important to also analyse *who* could have been selected for sacrifice and why. As the evidence presented below suggests, the general historical consensus appears to display a process reliant on social standing with regards to its lower ends (i.e. criminality, marginality (foreigner, slave, disabled)) and then cleromancy (i.e. lot casting by a ruling individual, magical or elemental figure, priest or priestess). Yet this was not always the case with some victims apparently being chosen purposefully for the societal degradation attached.

##### 5.4.1 Sacrificial Selection

In the Viking world, the argument for the sacrifice of slaves is a difficult case. Despite the heavy reliance upon this caste for trade, labour and other menial services, the opportunity for their owners to make use of these individuals as sacrificial victims, due to the freedom from legal or social recompense, cannot be disregarded. Pope Gregory II in a letter to St. Boniface (732AD) complains that Christians are selling slaves to the northern Germanic pagan tribes in order to be used as sacrifices (and that those merchants should make penance akin to that for murder) but it is not known to which god they would eventually be dedicated (Tangl 1912: 129-132). Adam of Bremen (IV: 17) also describes an instance of traders buying slaves for sacrifice and inspecting them for defects that would result in them being rejected by the deity in question. Archaeological examples suspected as sacrificial victims from across Iron Age Europe do display a tendency towards those with disabilities or physical ‘imperfections’ (Green 2002: 139, 157-160) but these individuals are far from the only examples.

As to how the individuals for sacrifice were then selected, numerous sources appear to suggest the process of divination (see §5.4.2). Yet before examining the practice of divination, one wonders why divination would be required for the choice of sacrifice at all rather than a certain individual simply choosing a victim. Davidson (1992: 337-338) states, “It was evidently felt that the gods themselves should select their desired victims. This would prevent individuals from feeling responsibility for a killing and protect them from vengeance from kinsmen.” It appears that common sense was to prevail. Whilst I may question a sense of guilt if ridding society of criminals or if performing sacred ritual, the latter comment about revenge killing seems quite sensible, particularly with the inherent feud element in Norse society; it was simply safer for all involved to use a slave, prisoner of war or criminal. Various medieval laws such

as *Gulapingslög* 32, 133; *Frostapingslög* V: 45; *Járnsiða* (Treatment of Personal Rights 6); *Äldre Västgötalagen* (Orbotæmal §2) even go as far as to declare it a crime to revenge a punished thief, thus protecting the legally appointed executioner against the vengeance of the executed person's family (see also Gade 1985: 165, 181 n.54).<sup>128</sup> One may nevertheless conclude as Ström (1942: 99, 270) did that criminals were also chosen for sacrifice on account of their resulting relatively weak legal position.<sup>129</sup> These social and legal factors only emphasise the danger of choosing to sacrifice someone better positioned in both the eyes of the law and society. Yet it is not as simple as black and white in an age of feud: reconciliation (i.e. the non-persual of the called-for or expected revenge) could no doubt be sought if each party had something to gain from the death, as was the case between Haraldr Gormsson, Hákon jarl Sigurðson and the hanging of Gull-Haraldr (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 9-15).

There also appears to be an element of inferiority at play that may play into the hands of selecting criminals or slaves for the role of human sacrifice. As Green (2002: 143) highlights: “It is possible that the captive state of the sacrificial victims was in itself loaded with symbolic meaning [...] linked additionally with restraint and fettering”. *Germania* 39 provides an example from among the Suebi that begs some thought:

all the tribes of the same stock gather in a wood hallowed by the auguries of their ancestors [...] The sacrifice in public of a human victim marks the grisly opening of their savage ritual. Another observance shows their reverence for this grove. No one may enter it unless he is bound with a cord, by which he acknowledges his own inferiority and the power of the deity.

(Mattingly 1960: 134)

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<sup>128</sup> Yet the executioner could only stand behind the law if the crime was publicly announced. Gade (1985: 165) cleverly ties together the need for display and the eventual protection of the executioner: hanging becomes the most convenient way of publicly displaying and preserving the offender's body.

<sup>129</sup> This may also suggest, as Ström proceeds to argue, a predilection towards selecting an executioner who was also of this weaker legal position (i.e. a slave or bondsman (cf. *Óláfs saga helga* 119, *Magnúss saga berfætts* 6 and *Magnúss saga blinda* 8)). However it seems unlikely that these individuals would have been instructed in aristocratic ritual and it seems even more unlikely that they would have held such an important and active role such as sacrificer/executioner. I believe Ström is correct in stating that slaves would have made the ‘ideal’ legal executioner but do not agree that this could have carried over into ritual practice.

Here one may observe further elements of the disgrace attached to being sacrificed, as binding a free individual in the Viking world was considered a serious matter (Gade 1985:172). This in turn suggests that such an act would be very dangerous if one were to force it upon an individual even if backed by the law and therefore begs the question of careful selection, which shall be addressed below. The *Fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur* certainly display a connection between binding and hanging (cf. Gade 1986: 174-175) and furthermore, this act of binding can be seen to correlate with existing archaeology for the practice of human sacrifice (see Chapter Six). However, it is important to note that if the victim is a criminal, they are likely to be bound before execution anyway (cf. *Äldre Västgötalagen*, Tjuvabalken 3) and if not a criminal, it may be a simple case of practicality for handling prior to execution.

#### 5.4.2 Divination

With both a social and legal difficulty in safely selecting a sacrificial victim, one may return to the prospect of divination as a method of circumnavigation: placing the decision in the hands of the divine. The literary evidence for cleromancy among Biblical, Germanic and Celtic pagan societies is almost overwhelming with literary attestations too many to include spanning a millennium. There also exists archaeological evidence for this practice, in connection with sacrifice, with the discovery of numerous four-inch long sticks which had been stripped of their bark found beneath a sacrificed bog body in the Borre Fen, Denmark (Glob 1971: 113). The particularly well-known passage of *Germania* 10, however, has thrown up some lengthy debate as to how the lots functioned:

They cut off a branch of a nut-bearing tree and slice it into strips; these they mark with different signs and throw them completely at random onto a white cloth.

(Mattingly 1960: 109)

This example of marking has led many to argue for the presence of runic carvings and their magical role in this process (de Vries 1956, I: 315; Raudvere 2012: 106). Whilst the use of lots here is without question, the presumption that these marks are in fact runes is quite a leap. Recent research would suggest that, beyond the personal names of blacksmiths or craftsmen or the names of the runes themselves for luck or protection, runes in a general sense were not prolific before 500AD (Spurkland 2005). Furthermore, the magical connotations of the

symbols themselves versus the word they represented was not prescribed to them until the late Viking Age (pers. comms. Irene Garcia Losquiño). There are various native literary examples that include lot casting with no mention of runes. The Danes and Svear of *Vita Anskarii* (18, 19, 26, 30) cast unmarked lots in order to determine the will of the gods or to discover which god had been offended by their actions and how to appease them. One may also observe a specific term relating to lot casting and sacrifice in ON (i.e. *blótspánn* ‘sacrificial (divining) chip’ (*Hervarar saga* 7, *Landnámabók* 62, *Fagrskinna* 15)) which is never directly associated with runes. This is not to say that runes did not have a magical function in the Viking Age but the very early connection of runes to the practise of lot casting in examples like *Germania* is probably a stretch too far. Furthermore, growing evidence for runes in use on a daily basis (e.g. Bryggen inscriptions, Spurkland 2005: 194-196) has further accelerated this decline in considering the runes as wholly magical marks.

Lastly, there is also the suggestion that hanging itself could be a method of divination. Necromancy (in its original sense of the world, namely to divine by the fluids or entrails of a corpse, rather than the modern sense of raising the dead) is attested in numerous Latin texts (*Diodorus of Sicily* V: 31, 32; *The Geography of Strabo* IV: 5, VII: 2; *The Civil War* III; *The Annals of Tacitus* XIV: 30), but in the case of hanging this is far less certain. Davidson (1972: 10) suggests that the act of hanging was to re-enact the ordeal undergone by Óðinn and as a result, knowledge from the divine would be imparted to humans. Whilst this is not unimaginable, it would still require the inclusion of some element of interpretation (i.e. the casting of some form of lot), or even the arrival of the animals considered to be Óðinn’s avataric representatives (ravens and wolves, general carrion feeders) in order to interpret the gods’ supposed will or acceptance. Therefore, it seems unlikely that hanging itself should not be classified as a method of divination: it may have formed the offering of ‘trade’ for knowledge but it was not the *method*.

## 5.5 Conclusions

Throughout this chapter it has been shown, particularly in comparison with the punishment of beheading, that hanging held a powerfully negative reputation and carried considerable social stigma. Hanging seems to have been reserved for criminals who had committed among societies’ worst crimes, and during the Viking Age (as well as before and after), this included the act of theft. Consequently, death by hanging was regarded as the least honourable way to

die. Furthermore, hanging was the ascribed method of execution for criminal slaves and as has been shown, was used *specifically* for the degradation the act carried. Hanging was designed to destroy one's reputation and even that of the associated family or, in the case of the slave, its owner. Consequently it continues to be a curiosity as to why the figure of Óðinn would have been believed to undertake this act of his own volition or why acolytes would emulate such an act as part of ritual practice. Evidently some deeper significance had been attached to the act and these possible motives will be examined in Chapter Seven.

In seeking possible elements of ritual within the practice of judicial hanging, one may observe few consistent hallmarks that could be extracted and declared to be sign of older ritual. The legal use of an oak-withe for a noose appears to be one of practicality, meant to prolong the degradation by display, and there appears to be no significance applied to any particular type or species of tree. Nevertheless, poetic sources appear to imply that the image of the hanged body left to rot in exposure to the elements can be connected with the image of and motifs surrounding Óðinn and was specifically used for a representation of the deity; we do not have to rely solely upon *Hávamál*. Consequently, in order to further seek ritualistic factors in the act of hanging, Chapter Six will fall into two sections: the first will focus upon how hanging in a specifically sacrificial context has been performed across the ages, as recorded in Classical to Medieval literary accounts. The second section will focus entirely upon material evidence for instances of hanging, with comparison drawn from historically connected and influencing cultures.

## Chapter Six

### Sources for Human Sacrifice by Ritual Hanging

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The consistency of the motifs and imagery suggest that ritual hanging was not simply a poetic invention (Pluskowski 2000: 56).

With extensive evidence for the use of public spaces, legal obligation for prolonged exposure and societal recognition of disgrace associated with the punishment, one begins to see a very different picture of hanging in the Viking world than is usually portrayed. It now falls to scrutinize identified cases of ritual hanging in order to view the practice in its societal setting. As was discussed regarding the differences between the legal texts and the sagas, we may expect to observe a discrepancy between model examples of behaviour and practical application. The following chapter will examine all cases extant within the Norse corpus that I have been able to identify as displaying evidence of ritual hanging. Our source base for the societal and ritual purpose in connection with Óðinnic worship is quite broad, both geographically and in genre, ranging from native poetic and saga references, to non-native contemporary historical accounts with minor cases of pictorial evidence. Due to the large number of examples and various media, this chapter has been split into two sections: one focussing on literary evidence and the other focussing upon material and iconographic evidence. Yet in culmination, despite this breadth, one may observe varying scenarios for human sacrifice (warfare, funeral and regular/crisis events) and are left to conclude which of these can be seen to apply to Óðinn through the method of hanging (cf. Patrick 2000: 44). As a final note, we should also remain aware that whilst the technique of dispatch may be the same, not all hangings are created equal.

#### Section One: Literary Evidence

##### 6.0 Mythological Evidence

The mythological evidence for hanging as a ritual practice, closely connected with Óðinn, has already been discussed in detail above in Chapter Four particularly and therefore will not be furthered here except to highlight once more its location within *The Poetic Edda* (*Hávamál* 138, *Hamðismál* 17) for reference purposes. The examples within skaldic poetry are also

classed within this category as a result of their mythological references/individuals and the overarching skaldic motifs being of a mythological/eddic style. The locations of these examples will simply be re-listed here (*Háleygjatal* sts 4-5, *Ynglingatal* 12) since their detailed analysis was given above in Chapter Four. Furthermore, whilst the example from *Gesta Danorum* noted in §6.2.6 could technically be classed as mythology, I have chosen to place it at the end of this list in accordance with the chronological order of the sources themselves rather than on the basis of the mythological nature of the material documented within.

## 6.1 Roman Chronicles

In discussing human sacrifice in the Germanic and Celtic world, continual reference has been made to Roman chronicles and geographies and their examples. Nevertheless these sources are far removed both in time and geography and consequently it is impossible to presume that the motivations for and use of hanging would have continued unaltered across nearly a millennium when differences in victim and intent can be observed in the Viking Age alone. As such, it seems wise not to use Tacitus and his ilk as proof for ritualistic hanging in the Viking Age but nonetheless important to observe that similar motifs were, according to Tacitus *et al.*, in circulation among the Germanic peoples early in the first millennium. Again, with a variety of examples having already been included up to this point a more detailed discussion about their content will not be included here. Examples can be found in the following, listed chronologically:

### 6.1.1 *Germania* (6, 9, 12, 39)

Whilst the pertinent examples with regards to hanging have already been addressed, it is worth noting that *Germania* 9 records that Mercury (that is Wodan) was the highest of the Suebi gods and as such, was offered human sacrifices.<sup>130</sup> It goes on to mention that the other gods Hercules (Thunor) and Mars (Tiwaz) were also sacrificed to but were, instead, offered sacrifices of animals. No mention of any particular method is made in either case. Thus one could conclude that human sacrifice was held to be the exclusive privilege of the highest god but it is interesting

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<sup>130</sup> This fact had already been noted in *De Bello Gallico* (VI: 17), verbatim, stating that the highest Gaulish god was Mercury and one may wonder if this identification has been transposed to the Germanic tribes by Tacitus.

to note that the position held by Mercury in the Roman mind was not comparable in this regard (Birley 1999: 106-107). Consequently, this suggests that the spheres encompassed by this deity were comparable but the author did not intend to infer the associated lower rank held by Mercury as well (Simek 1993: 244). This allows us to observe that Roman chroniclers were aware of their *interpretatio romana* as being a system of ‘close enough’ and that they were unable to rationalise wholly these figures with deities that they recognised. As such, one should not hold too tightly to the identification of deities by Roman authors due to their understood inconsistencies, as shall be observed below.

One could presume that in Viking society the figure of Óðinn had retained the highest position as the recipient of human sacrifice as opposed to those to the other Æsir, who were, according to narrative sources, generally offered animals such as cattle and boars instead (*Gísla saga Súrssonar* 15, *Kjalnesinga saga* 2, *Óláfs saga helga* 107). Yet this case is far from clear-cut, as Hultgård (2001: 535) discusses. Whilst Mercury is indeed cited in *Germania* as receiving human sacrifice as the highest god, Hultgård considers further examples of human sacrifice as related by Tacitus and shows these to be too vague from which to draw any firm conclusions. *Germania* 39 for example states that when the communities gather *en masse* for some unrecorded purpose, they gather in a wood and first make a human sacrifice to the residing deity. In this case both the deity and method of sacrifice are unknown, and whilst some may be tempted to suggest tenuously a Wodan-Óðinn link, surviving Viking Age place-names show that a variety of gods were revered in groves thus making any such suggestion untenable (Brink 2007). Hultgård (2001: 535) brings light to the vagueness of making such comparisons by using *The Annals of Tacitus* (VIII: 57), in which a Germanic people (the Hermunduri) is described as dedicating their enemy to both Mars and Mercury for victory, “a vow which consigns horses, men, everything indeed on the vanquished side to destruction.” One may observe Tacitus continue to struggle to align the unknown Germanic deity, evidently unable to find a Roman umbrella under which to place this figure (cf. MacCulloch 1911: 22-30). If anything, this sentiment of confusion suggests we are already dealing with the general shift right across the Germanic area towards a multifaceted deity (or two remarkably similar) in the first century or that individual groups had different motifs attached to their gods.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Yet with Tacitus’ motives of romanticising the Germanic people versus the corrupt Rome, placing a war god at their head may have been counter-intuitive. This may help explain his “borrowing” of Caesar’s Gaulish description and making use of a deity associated with more intellectual pursuits such as trade, financial gain and cultural expression. Whilst Mercury’s other traits (those of travel, divination, thievery and the role of psychopomp combined with the

Additionally, this account also highlights a more common form of sacrifice as recorded in the Classical accounts: purposeful weapon destruction.

#### 6.1.2 *Historiarum adversum paganos* (V: 16)

After capturing two Roman camps and a vast amount of booty [...] Clothing was ripped up and discarded, gold and silver thrown into the river, the men's armour was torn apart, the horses' harnesses scattered and the horses themselves drowned in the river, while the men had nooses tied around their necks and were hanged from trees.

(Fear 2010: 235)

Moving on from the examples of war sacrifice in *The Annals of Tacitus* and into the fifth century, Orosius wrote of similar practices to those found within earlier records of the wars against the Germanic people, in this case the Cimbri.<sup>132</sup> Whilst textual influence is an obvious concern, it is interesting to note that Orosius considered this an event that his audience would not dismiss entirely. Therefore, the practice of sacrificing both physical goods and men seems to be continuous approximately four centuries after the records of Tacitus. Furthermore, in this example the method of human sacrifice is more explicit but lacks any particular divine association. One could then question whether or not this example was considered to be for divine purpose at all. Yet the excerpt above appears to cover a variety of 'elemental' bases (and thus deities) with differing sacrificial methods, (i.e. the tearing/discarding of clothing and harnesses to the earth, physical wealth and animals given to the water, and with men perhaps offered to the sky (by means of their suspension)). Nevertheless, in the context of fellow Classical accounts, despite the lack of explicitly denoted divine association, it appears more consistent that this sacrifice was wholly dedicated to a deity of war.

To compare this example of sacrificial practice with the practices in Scandinavia, one may consider the practice of *krigsbytesoffer* 'spoils of war offering, booty sacrifice'. Instances

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former) are remarkably Óðinn-like, Germanic culture at this point retains a separation between Tiwaz-Týr and Wodan-Óðinn unlike the eventual synergy between the two (see §3.1).

<sup>132</sup> *De Bello Gallico* (VI: 17) also notes this practice regarding the Gauls but with them only items taken in war are dedicated for victory. Horses are the only sacrifices whereas these same items are left lying in heaps at "consecrated spots".

of this practice have been evaluated extensively in recent years particularly by archaeologist Charlotte Fabech (1991, 1992, 1994, 2006 etc.). Fabech displays evidence that suggests that bog and lake sacrifices started fading out during the sixth century (suggesting a large shift in ideology and religious practice) which resulted in the later earthen or dry sacrifices we find in the following periods, and her theories have had a far-reaching effect. Fabech (1992) bolsters her argument by displaying that sacral place-names were rarely associated with booty-sacrifices and bog finds. Consequently, Fabech believes that this change was a result of the centralisation of power and a removal of the publicly accessible (natural) cult place in favour of one controlled (constructed) by powerful chiefs who, through this control, went on to become Scandinavia's first kings (1994: 133-134).

A significant Scandinavian example in this vein, which has been extensively examined by historians and archaeologists alike, is the continued excavation surrounding Uppåkra, Sweden. Whilst a seemingly minor village today (5km south of Lund) and unmentioned in the historical record until 1085 (Hårdh 2008: 145), archaeological excavation has shown it to have been one of the most important sites for both power and religion in Scandinavia over the entirety of the first millennium. Uppåkra is one of our most plentiful sites with regards to material finds (both societal and sacral) and, furthermore, appears to evidence a building that was constructed and maintained in one form for almost 1000 years (Hårdh 2008: 146). Whilst initial scholarship was wary of giving this building (that appears to feature both social and cultic activity) a specific title, after the investigations of 2001-2004 many have begun labelling it a *hof* 'temple' due to the volume and category of finds (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004, Larsson 2006, Carlie 2006: 209). Whilst a great deal could be said about this site, the significant element with respect to this thesis is the cultic connection compounded by the discovery of a mass weapon deposit. With approximately 300 items purposefully destroyed (or 'killed') and consistently deposited between the Roman Iron Age and the early Viking Age, these examples have been regarded as weapon sacrifices (Helgesson 2004: 233, Larsson and Lenntorp 2004: 40-41). The irregularity here is the practice of placing these items in the earth, rather than in water or bogs as has been uncovered almost exclusively in Denmark (cf. Ilkjær 1990).<sup>133</sup> The continuity of practice is of the utmost importance here, further displaying that chroniclers such as Tacitus and Orosius are not as farfetched as they sometimes appear. Furthermore, it gives

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<sup>133</sup> Helgesson (2004: 233-234) questions whether the items were deposited in batches over time or were collectively pooled and then deposited *en masse*. The former seems more logical but the latter is not impossible.

some credence to the continuation of sacrificial practices, which is not to say hanging explicitly, which remained largely unchanged in both method and location across a millennium.

### 6.1.3 *Gothic War* (XV)

The noblest of sacrifices, in their eyes, is the first human being whom they have taken captive in war; for they sacrifice him to Ares, whom they regard as the greatest god. And the manner in which they offer up the captive is not by sacrificing him on an altar only, but also by hanging him on a tree [...]

(Dewing 1919: 421)

Whilst the citation above unquestionably relates the actions of a sixth century Germanic warband thanking some higher power for their victory over their enemies, there are also societal undertones surrounding said ritual to be noted. It is also worthy of note that this conclusion of ‘victory-sacrifice’ is where the discussion surrounding ritual hanging as practiced in the Viking Age appears to stop without any consideration of contemporary social perceptions of it (i.e. its suitability as a victory-sacrifice, cf. Davidson 1992: 337). In this example it is significant that the sacrifice is a captive of war and therefore, a potential slave. Furthermore, the association with Ares (the Roman Mars) is noteworthy as, being the Greek god of war, he was regarded as dangerous, representing the uncontrollable elements of war (destruction, violence and bloodshed) versus the more intellectual roles of generalship and tactics (Burkert 1985: 169). This association seems quite accurate and these overtones bring us more in line with Wodan-Óðinn spheres and particularly his warfare *heiti* associations (see §3.1). Significantly, this shows further possible evidence for the developing status of the Wodan-Óðinn figure as, through *interpretatio romana*, Mars was previously equated with Tiwaz-Týr (Belier 1991: 143). This nevertheless also allows for the possibility that Tiwaz-Týr, as the sky god, and not Wodan-Óðinn the chthonic god, was the first receiver of hanged sacrifices, but one should remain wary of conclusions based upon Roman interpretative practices.

As discussed above (see §5.0), early Germanic law holds the punishment of hanging for thieves, rape and cowardice and therefore executing someone and then displaying them in this manner implies not only a connection to the sky/war god but a statement of social disgrace. Whilst the example directly above details the sacrifice of captives, they are worthy of similar

condemnation.<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, it is unquestionable that this sacrificial method also functioned as a warning to the cost of defeat. It is unlikely that only the Viking Age featured a method of proclaiming alignment with the divine and that those performing the sacrifices were in divine favour. Whilst it is possible that the men noted in *Gothic War* were sacrificed simply to placate the perceived needs of a pre-Óðinnic bloodthirsty god, this is a rather simplistic conclusion. It accords no depth to a society simply on the basis of its state of presumed development and would still leave the question of why one would execute prisoners in such a specific method, publicly viewable, instead of simply murdering them.

#### 6.1.4 *Commenta Bernensia*

*Hesus Mars sic placatur: Homo in arbore suspenditur usque donec per cruorem membra digesserit [...]*

Mars Esus is appealed thus: a man is hanged in a tree until his limbs fall apart in bloody sacrifice [...]

(Usener 1869: 32 and author's translation)

This description is courtesy of an anonymous tenth century author who added a variety of *scholia* to the compiled works of various Classical authors. In this case the individual has expanded Lucan's *The Civil War* I, in which the gods that received sacrifice from the Gauls are described (Duff 1928). When discussing the Gaulish Esus, whom this anonymous author has identified with Mars, we are provided a further link between the practice of hanging and war deities within a sacrificial context. Whilst both the source and *scholia* give little context and offer no reason for this practice (Stuttgart (1997: 36) reporting that "the exact significance of the wording is unclear"), the evidence presented thus far sheds light on the supposed grey areas here. Given the date of these additions, it is possible that contemporary assumptions surrounding pagan practice had coloured the additional comments, but the common practice of adding *scholia*, when compared with other Classical or medieval texts, appears to suggest that

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<sup>134</sup> Ström (1942: 161) suggests that hanging was also to keep the individual off the ground to prevent them finding peace in the earth and simultaneously to keep the populace safe from the possibility of revenants.

they supplement texts with “missing” or alternative information in circulation or memory.<sup>135</sup> Therefore, in avoidance of pure speculation and backwards construction, this example at the very least demonstrates hanging with prolonged exposure as a method of sacrifice to a war god and visible threat to one’s enemies, while including the further possibility of inferring social disgrace with regard to the individual.

This example requires a longer comment with regard to Roman records and interpretation on the whole. This anonymous commentator equates the Gaulish Toutatis/Teutates (another deity that Lucan highlights in this passage) with Mercury and expands upon Teutates’ sacrificial practice as the recipient of drowned human sacrifices (Usener 1869: 32).<sup>136</sup> This, coupled with the examples above, suggests (while remembering that the author is speaking of the Celts) that hanging sacrifices were not associated with Mercury, whom Tacitus had identified with Wodan-Óðinn. This separation is furthered by *Magnae Derivationes*, a twelfth century work by Huguccio of Pisa (unpublished facsimile), which states: *Theutates, tis, deus mortis sic dictus est Mercurius* [...] “Theutates, that is Mercury, the so-called god of death [...].” One may also note that the Irish Celtic Lugh (spear carrying, poetic and multi-skilled deity) was also identified with Mercury and is recognised today as a parallel of Óðinn (MacKillop 1998: 270).<sup>137</sup> It is therefore possible that Tacitus’ sacrificial association of hanging with Mercury may not have been particularly accurate and that Mars (presumably Tiwaz-Týr, as is hedged in *The Annals of Tacitus*) may have been the more appropriate choice during these periods. Ultimately, however, these examples make it quite apparent that foreign chroniclers, contemporary or otherwise, had difficulty placing these Germanic and Celtic deities in the more comfortable ‘boxes’ of the Roman pantheon. Therefore, we should not place too much significance on the names attached, instead observing the motifs in use and their development. It should also be noted that *Gesta Danorum* (which is paraphrasing the tenth century Ælfric of Eynsham, cf. McKinnell 1994: 19) comes to a similar conclusion:

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<sup>135</sup> They can also be used to temper more extreme accounts (in the *scholia* author’s opinion) as can be shown with Adam’s *Gesta*, below.

<sup>136</sup> This of course calls to mind the images displayed on the Gundestrup caldron but the lengthy discussion surrounding its iconography will not be addressed here.

<sup>137</sup> This association appears to be the better fit, as whilst Lugh is understood as a war god, he was more predominantly recognised for his mastery of many/all skills (hence the common by-name, *Samhildánach* ‘equally skilled in many/all arts’), which encompassed both the physical and intellectual realms (MacKillop 1998: 270).

One gathers plainly from this very nomenclature of days that the persons who were honoured by our people were not the same as those the early Romans called Jupiter and Mercury, or those whom Greece and Italy accorded all the homage of superstition.

(Davidson and Fisher 1996: 171)

Whilst Saxo's conclusion may be somewhat simplistic and does not allow for the transformation or adaptation of deities, it is noteworthy that his tenth century source (an English chronicler and contemporary of the Viking Age) did not feel that these Roman-equated names were particularly accurate. Furthermore, this bolsters the suggestions above that through the Roman depictions we may be witness to pagan belief systems in the lead-up to Wodan-Óðinn ousting Tiwaz-Týr as the god of war prior to the Viking Age and their imagery and ritual practice becoming blurred with Óðinn emerging as the encapsulation of both (see §3.1).

## 6.2 Contemporary Evidence

In the following analysis of possible examples for ritual hanging in the Viking Age, examples have been compiled from across a body of sources that ranges widely across time and geography, in order to compare the collective examples as one corpus. It is surprising to find that most of the examples of or associated with hanging are found in non-native, largely Arabic, accounts and chronicles from travellers of the day. Criticism of particular examples below has seen both hypercritical and occasionally loose scholarship, leaving a great deal of uncertainty and the individual to come to their preferred conclusion. Due to the number of Arabic examples, a further bone of contention is found with the ethnic designation of the individuals often described by these Arabic authors and the people known as the Rus.

### 6.2.1 A Question of the Rus

One finds oneself in a quagmire when one begins to operate with terms derived from *rus* or *ros* (Mošin 1931: 285).

Before examining the literature focussing upon the Rus, one must first examine the ethnic designation itself, as the terminology of the ethnic group known as the Rus has caused

longstanding and continuous disagreement among scholars. At its most basic level, the primary concern has surrounded the Rus' ethnic origins and the discussion has been bogged down by modern politics and nationalism (Pritsak 1981: 5-6). If we were to sidestep this back and forth discussion between the Normanist/anti-Normanists (that is to say the question of Viking/non-Viking ethnicity), the Nordic source material (that is both literary and runic) suggests a stronger case for Nordic origins than some would care to admit (cf. Pritsak 1981). The terminology used within the written records is generally far from consistent with varying terms used by Arab authors (Montgomery 2000: 3). Price (2010: 132) shows that the term almost always carried the sense of a "northern foreigner" with hybridised identity akin to the Hiberno-Norse but also that individual authors probably had little idea where these men were originally from. Simply put, they were just 'not from around here'.<sup>138</sup> Nonetheless, it has never been doubted that a large element of those described as Rus were Scandinavian and Russia was far from unknown to the Vikings. As Franklin and Shepard (1996: 44-45) describe:

Their activities did not require long-term settlement and so did not, for the most part, leave remains of the sort associated with strongholds or burial-grounds [...] they were birds of passage, acquiring silver and homing back to the Baltic area, especially central Sweden. [The Rus] emerge as a loose association of ruthless entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, Ibn Fadlan's (Lunde and Stone 2012: 45) description of the Rus physically is a near Scandinavian stereotype: tall, broad, strong, blonde/red haired with pale skin. Additionally, despite the ever-hotly contested account of the ten-day funeral (see §6.2.3), a variety of ritual elements and material aspects can be concretely linked to archaeological record of Nordic practice (Price 2010: 133). Nevertheless, as Montgomery (2000: 1-2) stresses, we should not leap to label the Rus as being Viking or Slav. In this instance we are dealing with individuals that have travelled extensively, living away from the homelands for lengthy periods, and may have picked up local Slavonic traditions (Schjødt 2007b: 133). If we are to identify them with Swedes, we should also keep in mind that ways of life and religious outlooks

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<sup>138</sup> For an overview of the Arabic sources and their context in the medieval world pertaining to the Vikings, see Montgomery (2008: 550-561).

differed between the Scandinavian homelands. As Montgomery (2000: 5, n.12) puts it, “The Vikings owe much of their success to their malleability and readiness to adapt.”<sup>139</sup>

#### 6.2.2 Ibn Rustah c.900

##### *Kitāb al-A'lāk an-Nafīsa*

In their lands they have medicine men who have power comparable to the gods, for they can order the sacrifice of women, men or horses to their creator. Anything ordered by these medicine men must be faithfully executed. Any medicine man can seize a man or animal, put a rope around his neck and hang him until he dies, saying that he is a sacrifice to God.

(Lunde and Stone 2012: 127)

In this instance, Lunde and Stone (2012: 234, n.28) suggest that Ibn Rustah is describing the Rus of Garðaríki and the town of Holmgarðr, the Old Norse terms for the Khazar-dominated area of Russia surrounding Lake Ilmen and today’s Novgorod. Ibn Rustah is not suggesting that he observed this practice but instead that he has heard that such a practice is undertaken in the native lands of the men he has encountered. Whilst we could then doubt the veracity of this account and note the possibility of aggrandisement on the part of the Rus, the method and receiver (i.e. “their creator”) is certainly reminiscent of Óðinn. It is also interesting to note that the ritual leader is male, unlike the generally understood ritual specialists of the Viking Age, the *vǫlur*. This in turn could perhaps support the case for male cult (and sacrificial) leaders (cf. Sundqvist 2009a).

#### 6.2.3 Ibn Fadlan c.920

The following evaluation of Ibn Fadlan’s *Risala* will primarily address the text only for instances of hanging/strangulation and their surrounding rituals, considering as a secondary element the burial context in which they take place. As was highlighted in Chapter One and the general discussion regarding funeral, the immediate kin group was ultimately responsible

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<sup>139</sup> For a concise list of the ethnic possibilities, see Montgomery (2000: 23). Montgomery himself concludes that we are dealing with a Scandinavian people in the process of “ethnic, social and cultural adaptation”.

for the dead. Therefore, when those individuals were lacking, it is without question that one's warrior brethren could substitute for the role of the family or local community, in participating within the required rituals.

#### 6.2.3.1 Hanging Criminals on Poles

If they catch a thief or a bandit, they bring him to a large tree and tie a string rope around his neck. They tie it to the tree and leave him hanging there until <the rope> breaks, <rotted away> by exposure to the rain and the wind.

(Montgomery 2000: 12)<sup>140</sup>

This passage bears striking resemblance to Óðinnic examples from eddic and skaldic poetry, particularly the treatment of the falsely-accused Randver in *Hamðismál* 17. Furthermore, an almost exact parallel can be found in the *Östgötalagen* (see §5.1) for the treatment of murderers. Whilst there is no explicit mention of a sacral element in this description, the overlapping similarities of prolonged exposure and the command to leave the victim in place are remarkably strong and cannot be dismissed. It is unsurprising that Montgomery (2000: 12, n. 38) then ponders whether Ibn Fadlan had actually witnessed a hanging sacrifice to Óðinn in this act due to the motifs at play in this example.

#### 6.2.3.2 Angel of Death

Of all the curious elements surrounding the burial of the Rus chieftain, few have been so widely discussed as the female figure leading the sacrificial ceremony, the so-called “Angel of Death”. This woman and her “daughters” follow a strict ritualistic regime during the ten-day funeral proceedings that is both deliberate and precise.<sup>141</sup> Before delving into the actual act of ritual

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<sup>140</sup> A more modern translation is available by Lunde and Stone (2012) but Montgomery's remains the more consistent, scholarly and, arguably, reliable instance.

<sup>141</sup> It is unclear whether or not these women are biological daughters or helpers/apprentices. Montgomery (2000: 15, n. 48 and 18) settles for the latter and this seems the more logical conclusion.

sacrifice, it is worth spending some time on the name of this leading figure first. As Price (2010: 133) states:

The ‘Angel of Death’ has a suggestive title, considering that Ibn Fadlan must have been translating something he was told in a different language into a term he would understand. He decided to use the Arabic *Malad al-Maut*, which in Islam is the name of the angel that separates the soul from the body at death, and who is responsible for taking the dead at their fated time. It is quite a close approximation of ‘chooser of the dead’, or *valkyrja*.

Due to Ibn Fadlan’s specialised use of terms, this requires a closer look at the figure as understood in the Islamic (and Hebrew) faith and, therefore, the *Qur’an*. *Malad al-Maut* is a reference to the figure of Azrael (lit. ‘One whom God helps’, the archangel of death), though only the name *Malad al-Maut* is ever written in the *Qur’an*. On closer examination of the *Qur’an*, Ibn Fadlan’s “Angel of Death” may in fact be a direct equivalent and encompassment of the *valkyrja*, or at least as close as an outsider could understand:

- 31:34: “Indeed, Allah [alone] has knowledge of the Hour and sends down the rain and knows what is in the wombs. And no soul perceives what it will earn tomorrow, and no soul perceives in what land it will die. Indeed, Allah is all knowing and Acquainted.”
- 32:11: “Say, ‘the Angel of Death will take you who has been entrusted with you. Then to your Lord will you be returned’.”

Consequently, it is possible that Ibn Fadlan, using his own religious understanding, has passably equated the two roles, that of *Malad al-Maut* and the *valkyrja*, thus bringing the possibility of Óðinnic association into play (with his sending out of the *valkyrjur* to collect the selected dead, cf. *Gylfaginning* 36). Ultimately, it is very possible that this “Angel of Death” is a ritual specialist for the cult of Óðinn. However, it is vital to analyse both her victim and her methods before drawing any substantial conclusions.

### 6.2.3.3 The Slave-Girl

A great deal of scholarship from a variety of fields and subjects has focussed on nearly all aspects of the chosen slave in this ritual description. Yet when focussing on the possible

representation of the cult of Óðinn and allusion toward hanging (since she is strangled to death by the “Angel of Death”, cf. Montgomery 2000: 19)<sup>142</sup>, it better serves to focus on a more limited range of questions. In trying to ascertain information surrounding her physical person, Price (2010: 136) states that the slave is aged between 14 or 15 years old based upon an implication in the Arabic nouns. Whilst such a conclusion may be possible, no citation, evidence or argument accompanies this statement and therefore must be discarded until shown otherwise. In terms of her ethnic origins, the source material remains silent and we are left with only speculation when investigating the life of an almost nomadic trading group. Any other supposed information about her person or ethnic origin will remain unknown and as such, no conclusions can be sought here. In terms of her role as a slave, again numerous questions could be posed (i.e. is she a house-hold (that is, trusted) or stock slave) but we can never know.

It falls to next analyse the slave’s role in the proceedings. As Schjødt (2007b: 138) shows, upon volunteering the slave girl becomes waited upon, quite literally hand and foot, and thus has been elevated to the status of the dead chieftain’s wife who is to accompany him into the afterlife.<sup>143</sup> Consequently, we could conclude that this individual did in fact volunteer (cf. Montgomery 2000: 14) and that it was seen as a credible way to advance socially, even in death. This detail also takes us beyond the issue of a slave not being welcome in Valhøll or its like.

#### 6.2.3.4 The Slave-Girl and the Doorway

Prior to her execution, the slave-girl decapitates a hen and casts its head through a doorway that has been erected on the side of the ship. She is then lifted three times over the mantle where she claims to see into the Otherworld and to observe her father and mother, her deceased relatives and then her master surrounded by his men and male slaves (Montgomery 2000: 17-18). In this instance, Schjødt (2007b: 240) believes that the slave is now speaking as the

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<sup>142</sup> Whilst I have noted the difference between strangulation and hanging (see §3.4.1.3), this example still bears examination due to the other Óðinnic motifs that are associated with this event (i.e. the “Angel of Death”, the use of ritual human sacrifice by a warrior-band at the funeral of their chieftain and mention of a warrior’s paradise) and with Montgomery (2000: 12, n.38) declaring this example an unquestionable account of Óðinnic sacrifice.

<sup>143</sup> That slaves were sacrificed in order to follow their master in death during the Viking Age is evidenced in some burials, such as the boat burial from the Isle of Man (cf. Wilson 2008: 29). Ibn Rustah highlights a similar example concerning another Rus chief in which “his favourite woman” was buried alive within the tomb of her master in order to accompany him to the afterlife (cf. Lunde and Stone 2012: 127).

chieftain's wife and is witnessing the chieftain's family, as one would not expect the relatives of a slave to be waiting in this particular afterlife. In analysing the description given of the supposed Valhøll, Schjødt (2007b: 142) accords Ibn Fadlan more credit than most and states that, when her master is seen surrounded by his men, this resembles the Valhøll we are familiar with (i.e. as presented by eddic poetry and Snorri's prose). Schjødt then takes this further and suggests that if Valhøll were to be described to an Arab, Paradise would be the most understandable term. Moreover, he comments that it is also unlikely that the 'ins-and-outs' of Valhøll would have been explained to Ibn Fadlan at such an event and as such, we should expect little detail in this regard. On the whole this seems to be a reasoned argument but there are gaps in need of redress. Price (2010: 133) is more critical of the account and comments that the slave-girl's description of a verdant green Paradise (as Ibn Fadlan describes it) and awaiting family members is more accurately that of the Khazar afterlife and remarkably unlike Valhøll or its ilk.

Price also questions whether or not this slave would even understand Scandinavian (if that is what is being described) concepts of the afterlife. Whilst the description of verdant green space is particularly jarring with Snorri's accounts of Valhøll, this area could nonetheless be representative of the spaces where the *einherjar* fight each day (cf. *Vafþrúðnismál* 41) and the place in which the golden tree Glasir stands outside the hall (*Skáldskaparmál* 34). As to the concerns raised by Price surrounding the girl's ritual knowledge, Schjødt (2007b: 143-144) compares, as he puts it, an "inversion" account from Saxo (Book I). This account features the underworld, a barrier to the living and cock sacrifice (in counter to the door and hen sacrifice above) and, despite doubts, Price (2010: 133) highlights another parallel from *Völsa þáttr*. As such, both Schjødt and Price conclude that whilst the ritual contexts and themes in these accounts are different, the actions are thematically identical and thus the Rus (in this example) and their rituals were grounded in Scandinavian lore. With these stances in mind, it seems prudent to conclude that we may be looking at Valhøll in this instance but that we do so through the looking-glass of perhaps two outsiders, the slave and Ibn Fadlan, as well as an Arabic mind.

#### 6.2.3.5 Sacrifice of the Slave-Girl

A great deal more of the ritual elements surrounding this slave in the lead up to her death could and have been analysed by others but, since this thesis is an investigation into ritual hanging, I will move on to focus upon the method of sacrifice and its implications instead. Prior to her

death, the slave-girl is made to drink alcohol (some of which is likely to have been drugged (Montgomery 2000: 19, n.62)) for an extensive period, and has sex with multiple members of the chieftain's retinue; after her death, the ship is set alight. With regards to the sacrificial method, Ibn Fadlan states that the following occurred once the girl had entered a tent erected upon the deck of the chieftain's beached ship:<sup>144</sup>

Two seized her feet, two her hands. The crone called the "Angel of Death" placed a rope around her neck in such a way that the ends crossed one another and handed it to two <of the men> to pull on it. She advanced with a broad-bladed dagger and began to thrust it in and out of her ribs, now here, now there, while the two men throttled her with the rope until she died.

(Montgomery 2000: 19)

Montgomery (2000: 12, n.38) states that "the use of a rope to throttle the slave-girl below is surely of this category: human sacrifice in the honour of Odin." Whilst he is not without grounds to make this statement, we must first be wary of such statements *a priori*. In this instance, one should again highlight the psychological and contextual differences between strangulation and hanging: they are not the same thing (see §3.4.1.3). Whereas the cause of death in both cases is suffocation, the method and associated context are remarkably different. In this case, the victim would have had some opportunity to fight her executioners but is physically restrained. Further, due to her drugged or heavily inebriated state, she was presumably not aware of when the rope would come whereas this would not have been the case in hanging an individual.<sup>145</sup> As has been shown in the previous chapter and general examples above, ritual hanging usually took place in publicly accessible spaces and was often meant to be seen in order make various social and political statements whereas here, the whole ritual takes place behind closed doors. Furthermore, besides Óðinn's own hanging, there is no

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<sup>144</sup> It is clear that someone on the outside, perhaps his interpreter, is informing Ibn Fadlan of the inner goings-on.

<sup>145</sup> One could argue that we cannot know if hanged sacrifices were drugged in any way, but due to their often war-based motivations, it seems unlikely one would go to the effort of easing the victim's sufferings.

surviving instance of the said ritual taking place in a funerary or even outside a warfare context.<sup>146</sup>

This hidden act thus has more of the hallmarks of a swift execution by garrotting (particularly when coupled with stabbing) than it does of a public display and thus carries few of the characteristics of hanging. Moreover, Schjødt (2007b: 140-141) mentions that, whilst Óðinn's self-immolation and this event do bear similarities (i.e. strangulation and wounding), the two events should be seen as occurring under very different circumstances. Price (2010: 136) states that the slave should be seen essentially as a ritual component, akin to the sacrificed animals, as she is "not really seen to be 'given' to anyone or anything through her death". These points are vital: the sacrifice takes place at a funeral,<sup>147</sup> and the slave is neither hanged nor offered to Óðinn (nor any other deity) but is killed exclusively in order to accompany her master into the afterlife. Therefore, this instance of sacrifice should not be considered an example of ritual hanging nor sacrifice to Óðinn but as an element of the funerary acts surrounding the individualised elite, who appear to be working within the parameters of a Scandinavian or even Óðinnic cult base (cf. Schjødt 2007b: 144).<sup>148</sup>

#### 6.2.4 Ibrahim Al-Tartushi c.965

This Arabic chronicler also records an incident of a hanging sacrifice performed by Scandinavians as witnessed at the trading port of Schleswig:

They gather together for a religious festival to honour the gods, at which they eat and drink. Those that intend to sacrifice an animal set up a pole in front of their

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<sup>146</sup> One may question where the sacrifice of King Víkarr fits in this statement but since his sacrifice was required in order to continue upon a military campaign or raid, the general rule still holds.

<sup>147</sup> The use of hanging in a funerary sense does not fit the observed pattern but is instanced in the Oseberg tapestry and the royal site of Sutton Hoo, as is discussed below.

<sup>148</sup> Schjødt's theory of ritual practice (2007b, 2008) does allow for this act to be symbolically similar to the act of hanging when he argues that ritual is not copied verbatim from myth but is instead adapted or inspired once mixed in the social milieu. Therefore, one could argue that this sacrifice is representative of hanging to Óðinn but in a local, adapted guise. Nevertheless, from the evidence analysed and presented, it seems that this hidden, individual and funerary context does not fit the general picture.

house from which they suspend a piece of the animal whose sacrifice they are offering [...] In this way everyone can see how they plan to honour the gods.

(Lunde and Stone 2012: 163)

Whilst this example of hanging is not an execution and has far stronger connotations of fertility/harvest worship and ritual (cf. Price 2002: 61-62, Andersson 2006: 197), the element of public display for impending ritual is particularly noteworthy. If one is able to display the animal that is due for sacrifice, one wonders if the same could be applied to humans.

#### 6.2.5 *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* c.1070



Fig. 10 Chain of 14 burial mounds constructed at Gamla Uppsala, Sweden (photographed by author).

It is almost impossible to relate how much scholarship (for a variety of purposes) has focussed upon the brief descriptions of Swedish pagan ritual said to have taken place during the Viking Age at Gamla Uppsala within Adam's *Gesta* (IV: 26-27). Yet as the single example of a contemporary, if non-native, account of religion and ritual practice from the Viking Age, its attraction is not surprising. Moreover, we may return to the model proposed by Patrick (2000:

35) for judicial/sacrificial execution and conclude without question that this is no judicial event. Nonetheless Adam's text is a complicated one, mired by various inaccuracies, contradictions, exaggerations and the resulting source criticism. Whilst the general issues were outlined in Chapter One, more complex issues regarding linguistics, textual construction and the influence of its sources on the text will be evaluated below. An equally pressing concern is the continual assumption that these rituals must be, as Davidson ('Notes on Text' 1996: 55) put it, "generally associated with Óðinn" where, on closer inspection, this is far from a simple conclusion.

In IV: 26, Adam speaks only momentarily of those he understands (or has heard to be) representative of the three most pivotal gods: Þórr, Wodan (presumably Óðinn) and Fricco (presumably Freyr<sup>149</sup>), whose idols are placed in a grand temple. Þórr is placed at the top of his hierarchy as the chief god of importance at this event, and is said to govern the skies, the weather and the crops. Wodan is said to be exclusively for war and martial might whereas Fricco apparently represents peace. Adam tells us that libations were poured to the gods depending upon the intercession that was required: Þórr for plague and famine, Wodan for war and Fricco for marriage. It is nonetheless significant to note that Wodan-Óðinn, in line with his role in preceding Germanic societies (see §3.1), does not take a place of prominence but instead gives way to his son as the most significant deity. There is also mention of ancestor worship and the deification of mortal heroes at the end of this passage but in this case, Adam is quoting *Vita Anskarii* 26 and it seems to have been added as an addendum on the beliefs of the Swedes in general rather than as a descriptor of events at this particular temple.

When it comes to the (in)famous novennial festival in IV: 27, it would be no leap into the dark to say that the ritual sacrifice Adam describes appears to be, whilst gruesome, rather general and could be said to appeal to a variety of pagan deities. It is possible that this was the point: to perform a general ritual that would appeal to each of the gods in question at a festival at which the best part of the (eligible, i.e. free male) nation was said to have attended. However, some elements do not fit if we are to question Óðinn's role in the proceedings, as was noted in the outset of this section.

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<sup>149</sup> The association of Freyr with Adam's Frikko is neither straightforward nor uncontested. See Simek (1993: 93).

#### 6.2.5.1 Adam's Pagan Temple

To begin with the temple itself, most of the information is found in the additional *scholia* rather than the main body of prose (IV: 26):

That folk has a very famous temple called Uppsala [Schol.138: Near this temple stands a very large tree with wide-spreading branches...There is also a spring at which pagans are accustomed to make their sacrifices, and into it they plunge a live man.] situated not far from the city of Sigtuna and Bjorko. [Schol.139: A golden chain goes round the temple. It hangs over the gable of the building and sends its glitter far off to those who approach, because the shrine stands on level ground with mountains all about it like a theater.]

(Tschan 2002: 207)

Various scholars have been critical of this account, suggesting that Adam created his description of the temple, its tree and well from mythological material (cf. Alkarp 1998: 155-161, Janson 1998, Gräslund 1999: 59, Hultgård 1997: 24-27), whereas Schjødt (1993: 265, 2008: 126-127) sees little reason to doubt at least parallelism between cult activity and myth. Tschan himself (2002: 207, n.84) notes that the description is “doubtless exaggerated” and bears striking resemblance to a Slavic temple referred to by Adam previously in his text, which perhaps suggests some form of literary template that is being employed. Whilst there is no doubt Gamla Uppsala was a place of pagan significance, a seat of royal power and trade hub (Brink 1996: 269-271), modern archaeological attempts (of which there have been many) have overturned Lindqvist's (1927) theory that the temple site lay beneath the current church (cf. Gräslund 2000: 63-64) and are yet to find trace evidence of a structure to rival Adam's description or any signs of a well in the proposed vicinity. Overall, the archaeological and rune-stone evidence suggests that some form of a Christian church could have already appeared nearby the supposedly pagan temple even in Adam's time, but this is not to say that the cult site no longer existed and that any rituals had ended (Sundqvist 2016: 115-120). As Sundqvist shows (2002: 112-115), it is more likely that the two religions existed side by side in the eleventh century in Uppsala.<sup>150</sup> Price and Alkarp (2005: 261-272) have published a paper on their re-interpretation of post-hole evidence from Gamla Uppsala. They conclude that whilst there remains no evidence for a structure of a size described by Adam, there is instead evidence

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<sup>150</sup> Adam notes in IV: 27 that Christians in the area are forced to buy their way out of participating in this apparently mandatory sacrificial event.

for a large wooden structure (i.e. a Viking hall) in Gamla Uppsala, to the rear of the current church. If anything, this large hall is currently the best possibility for Adam's inspiration for his temple.

Most recently, in 2013, whilst a nearby ground surface was being prepared for a new railway system to the north-east of the Iron Age site, an archaeological team found what they have labelled either an enormous boundary marker akin to that discovered at Jelling in Denmark or a processional road leading towards the cult site (Fig. 11). Another had been found in the years prior to the south of the site, running east to west (Fig. 11). With a post approximately every 6 metres, the two tracks have been found (at the time of writing) to run at distances of a kilometre and 500m respectively. The former exhibited 144 post-holes of a great width and estimated height of approximately 8-10m with deep post-holes strengthened with stone. Some of the holes had surviving posts and others evidenced traces of animal sacrifice (horse, cow, pig and dog) at the bottom. It is clear that the economic cost involved here would have been tremendous, including the man hours involved, and, as such, the construction could only have been undertaken by a very powerful leader of the *Svear*.<sup>151</sup> So, whilst the question of Adam's 'temple of gold' remains, it is without question that Uppsala was Sweden's hub for royalty and pagan activity.

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<sup>151</sup> This discovery is too recent to have been detailed in any published literature. See <http://www.arkeologigamlauppsala.se/Sv/nyheter/2013/Pages/monument-discovered-in-old-uppsala.aspx> for an analysis of the find and accompanying maps (accessed 01/02/16).



Fig. 11 Map of the Iron Age and Viking Site, Gamla Uppsala

(<http://www.arkeologigamlauppsala.se/Sv/nyheter/2013/Pages/monument-discovered-in-old-uppsala.aspx>, accessed 01/02/16).

#### 6.2.5.2 Sacrificial Context and Method

As to the recorded methods of sacrifice, due to the discussion that follows, it serves to quote the passage in full (IV: 27):



Fig. 12 Possible location of the ‘holy grove’ and its proximity to the burial mounds (photographed by author).

It is customary also to solemnize in Uppsala, at nine-year intervals, a general feast of all the provinces of Sweden. From attendance at this festival no one is exempted. Kings and people all and singly send their gifts to Uppsala and, what is more distressing than any kind of punishment, those who have already adopted Christianity redeem themselves through these ceremonies. The sacrifice is of this nature: of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads [Schol.141: Feasts and sacrifices of this kind are solemnised for nine days. On each day they offer a man along with other living beings in such a number that in the course of nine days they will have made an offering of seventy-two creatures. This sacrifice takes place about the time of the vernal equinox] with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple. Now this grove is so sacred in the eyes of the heathen that each and every tree in it is believed divine because of the death or putrefaction of the victims. Even dogs and horses hang there with men. A Christian seventy-two years old told me that he had seen their bodies suspended promiscuously. Furthermore, the incantations customarily chanted in the ritual of sacrifice of this kind are manifold and unseemly; therefore, it is better to keep silent about them.

(Tschan 2002: 208)



Fig. 13 Artistic interpretation of hanging ritual, Gamla Uppsala Museum (photographed by author).

Whilst this appears a comprehensive description of what Adam's eyewitness saw, a glaring but simple problem arises – the numbers do not add up. Davidson (1988: 59) suggests this explanation: "It might be expected that the total of victims would be nine times nine, or eighty-one, but perhaps Adam's informant was counting only the animal victims when he gave a total of eight times nine." This is one of the cases in which it can be said scholarship has been too kind to medieval sources. It is far more likely that these numbers were based upon Thietmar's earlier description of Lejre (cf. Sundqvist 2002: 134) or that, when his informant was unsure, Adam reached for a significant number among Norse mythology.<sup>152</sup> Additionally, we see the

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<sup>152</sup> The Norse (and many others') affinity for nine is and was well known, be it the nine worlds the cosmos is said to house, the nine days Óðinn hung from Yggdrasill and so on.

*scholia* reining in the primary text and making “nine males of all species” into one man and seven animals.

Further problems arise if we look to *scholium* 138. When compared with the main text, one may observe that they differ on a significant level: Adam describes a grove of trees whereas this addition only makes note of a singular tree with a well at its base. Based upon linguistic evidence, Bolton (2006: 71) first concludes that the author of this particular addition is not Adam. Secondly, continuing the singular/plural issue, Bolton also concludes that Adam’s use of the Latin *lucus* ‘grove’ was a linguistic mistake carried over from Tacitus’ description of Germanic examples (due to the high volume of Adam’s textual borrowings), resulting in a multiplication of the number of trees. Nevertheless, that the grove may in fact have been but a single tree should be no cause for alarm as examples of single trees being used for sacrificial ritual are far from unrecognised during the Viking Age (cf. Lunde and Stone 2012: 163, Näsström 1996b). As a result, numerous comparisons to Óðinn’s hanging, Yggdrasill and its well(s) have been made, amid suggestions of this event as a “prototypical sacrifice” that was enacted at Gamla Uppsala (cf. Sundqvist 2002: 130-132, Schjødt 2008: 188). Other scholars have instead likened the *scholium*’s content to mythical conceptions of Yggdrasill and concluded that the description has little basis in fact (cf. Hultgård 1997: 25). Overall, the scholarly consensus appears to be a state of uncertainty and division regarding the tree or trees in the absence of any corroborating physical data though the overarching connection between Óðinn and trees persists.

As to the ritual of sacrifice described by Adam’s main text, as Sundqvist (2002: 128) and Chapter Three notes, it is without doubt that sacrificial events in the general sense took place in groves. Yet our primary goal in this instance is the analysis of hanging and not sacrificial practices overall. In this case, it is not hanging that jumps out. Instead it is the *novem capita offeruntur* ‘offering of nine heads’. Whilst this passage is usually understood as a simple act of counting, it can instead be rendered literally from the Latin and may imply that victims first suffered decapitation (Simpson 1967: 194).<sup>153</sup> Moreover, the continual reference to the blood that could be acquired from these practices stands foremost from the prose. The inclusion of hanging seems an almost inconsequential way of ensuring ‘one last drop’ from the victims in

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<sup>153</sup> Offerings of decapitated animals including cocks, hens, dogs and horses are found frequently in both textual and archaeological contexts. Cf. Oseberg and Kaupang ship burials; Price (2010: 142-145) further highlights a series of burials featuring the consistent placing of a horse’s head with the deceased.

a hallowed location. With decapitation first employed, the bodies would then presumably be hanged by the feet in order to further ‘feed’ and sanctify the ground. It is curious to note that despite almost endless connections made between this example, Óðinnic sacrifice and *Hávamál*, no scholar but Simpson (1967: 194) has thought to suggest that possible decapitation would make it rather difficult to be seen as comparable with Óðinn’s self-immolation (cf. Schjødt 1993: 264, 2008: 186-188).<sup>154</sup> Hanging this may be but it is not the primary means of execution or sacrifice. This scene may seem like something out of a horror novel but as the previous chapter shows, blood offerings to groves or particular trees were far from unknown.<sup>155</sup> One may also note an example from the Norse world in *Hervarar saga* 11:

*Var þá fram leitt hross eitt á þingit ok hoggvit í sundr ok skipt til áts, en roðit blóðinu blottre.*

Then a horse was led to the assembly and it was hewn in pieces, divided for eating, and the sacrificial tree was reddened with its blood.

(Tolkien (1960: 63) and author’s translation)

The premise of a live horse being sacrificed by hanging, as Adam suggests took place in his account above, is unreasonable at best. It is quite evident, if only from the perspective of common sense, that suspension would have been performed post-mortem and that the animals were used for their blood as well. Yet with a rising body of scholarship regarding the concept of a Viking cult of the horse and Gamla Uppsala’s place as a seat of kings, the presence of the horse should not be ignored (cf. Gjessing 1943, Hagberg 1967, Davidson 1982, Ingstad 1992, Østmo 1997). As to the role of the horse in each of these accounts, the discussion has culminated in two camps: one concluding that these horse sacrifices were to be seen in connection with fertility cults and the other concluding that they were instead an expression of elite social and political power. Nevertheless, we should remain aware of modern archaeological results. Despite repeated discussion surrounding the likelihood of sacrifice

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<sup>154</sup> Schjødt (2008: 188) does agree that Óðinn’s own hanging may have comparable elements with Adam’s description but stresses that the vague nature of dedication and overall differences are too large to allow the drawing of parallels. Nevertheless, one cannot reject some degree of semantic affinity.

<sup>155</sup> One may also note that Bolton (2006: 65-66) argues that Adam has foisted a mistaken identity upon the Swedes and has confused “the inhabitants of Sweden (variously referred to as *Sueonia*, *Suevonia*, *Suigia*, or *Suedia* in his account) with the onomastically similar, but actually unrelated continental Germanic people of the *Suebi/Suevi*.” He thus argues that this description is almost entirely false and should be disregarded as a source on human sacrifice.

coupled with numerous archaeological investigations, no trace of bone (animal or human) or of burning (as commonly accompanies ritual sites: cf. Andersson 2006) has ever been found at the supposed temple site of Gamla Uppsala.<sup>156</sup> With the volume of sacrifice apparently offered, we would surely expect to find some trace of material. Sundqvist (2002: 129) mentions that high phosphate levels (i.e. possible signs of decomposition) have been found in nearby rivers and between the large burial mounds that cannot be connected with settlements but is aware of methodological problems in basing conclusions for sacrifice upon this data.

Ultimately, despite the case being tentative at best, if these ‘hanged’ sacrifices did indeed take place and as regularly as implied, then they had little to do with the motifs connecting Óðinn and hanging. This conclusion is based upon numerous factors: the over-general nature of the description; Adam’s personal and source bias (i.e. his animosity towards pagan cultures and verbatim use of Tacitus, Orosius and so on); the possibilities eliminated by participants’ decapitation; and the overall focus on blood rather than the image of the hanging body, which has been shown to be consistently important with other instances of Óðinnic sacrifice. Furthermore, this sacrificial event is on a national scale: all are invited from across the society’s strata in order to solemnize to the gods for another nine years. This mass attendance is hardly fitting with the nature of the other examples of Óðinnic sacrifice, and in addition, if the hanging ritual held the power and association that the examined sources suggest, it would be remarkably dangerous to practice such a ritual in the presence of those who may enact similar revenge upon you.

It is certainly possible that Adam erroneously focussed on the wrong details but the proposed upside-down victim hanging in the tree has no basis in the source material related to Óðinn in our possession today, despite Fleck’s (1971b) attempts to argue the contrary. Turville-Petre (1975: 46) stated that it was his belief that not all sacrificial hangings were solely dedicated to Óðinn. Further to this, whilst it is no source of gospel truth, *Gesta Danorum* (Book III) records that it was Freyr who began these human sacrifices and that they were continued in his name (Davidson and Fisher 1996: 73). Consequently, as Simpson (1967: 194) concluded, it is apparent that this was no simple hanging but more a *suspension* of victims: the post mortem treatment of the body was more important than the hanging itself and blood was instead the

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<sup>156</sup> One may note the above point concerning the recent post-hole finds and the animal remains discovered but these are not evidence for practices as described by Adam and nor were they performed at the temple itself. It has however been pointed out to me that the animal remains have been hypothesised as hanging from the posts in question (pers. comms. Terry Gunnell).

main focus of these rituals at Uppsala, whatever their purpose.<sup>157</sup> If decapitation is not accepted, I would conclude that the resulting description of ritual human sacrifice (and the supplementary *scholium*) are based on Scandinavian mythological interpretations, coupled with Roman accounts, and have little basis in reality until archaeological results prove otherwise. This is not to take any import from the site of Gamla Uppsala, which continues to prove itself as a vital historical site of sacral and political power.

#### 6.2.6 *Gesta Danorum* c.1210 and *Gautreks saga* c.13<sup>th</sup> C

Contrary to Adam's troublesome depictions, both *Gesta Danorum* VI and *Gautreks saga* 7 display something far more in the realms of Óðinnic sacrifice with their accounts of the sacrifice of King Víkarr at the hands of the Óðinnic figure of Starkatherus. Despite the difference in source material and treatment of Starkaðr, the two accounts remain unanimous in their description of the rite used to claim Víkarr's life. In each case Óðinn wishes for a human sacrifice in exchange for giving the men fair wind for their raiding journey. By a casting of lots, Víkarr is chosen to die. In order to presumably circumnavigate actually killing the king, a mock or symbolic sacrifice is prepared with a willow branch for a noose and a reed for a spear. Yet when Starkaðr enacts the sham, the noose becomes iron tight and the reed a *geirr* 'spear' (*Gautreks saga*) or Starkaðr simply finishes him with a *ferrei* 'sword'<sup>158</sup> (*Gesta Danorum*). In this case, the comparative elements with *Hávamál* are unquestionable: we have the tree, noose and wound. *Gautreks saga* even features a line uttered just before the killing stroke, which has become famous in scholarship surrounding this form of sacrifice, *nú gef ek þik Óðni* 'now I give you to Óðinn'. Consequently, as Schjødt (2008: 189) concludes, there is no doubt that we are dealing with a representation of an Óðinnic sacrifice.

This event is very much a trade, *do-ut-des* sacrifice, which again fits in a much firmer context when compared to the skaldic examples surrounding warfare. However there is no

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<sup>157</sup> Dedication to Óðinn in another form however is not impossible. As has been noted previously (see §3.1), Óðinn may have functioned as a fertility god to some, particularly in Sweden, and there is also the case for a connection with sacral kingship. As Schjødt (2008) argues for ritual in general, the "appropriation" of motifs is not unheard of. For now, falling back on Hines' (2003: 377), it is better to work from the known until more is known and it is sufficient to say that this 'hanging' is at least similar to any other highlighted example.

<sup>158</sup> See *Gesta Danorum*, VI: 5.7, <http://wayback-01.kb.dk/wayback/20100504153356/http://www2.kb.dk/elib/lit/dan/saxo/lat/or.dsr/6/5/index.htm> (accessed 01/02/16).

sense of initiation here. Besides the immediate fulfilments of the required wind, *Gesta Danorum* relates that in return for this sacrifice Starkaðr personally gains extended life, inhuman strength and enlightened wit. Yet the case is far from unproblematic, and in other ways than those which Schjødt (2008: 190) considers: hanging remains a criminal's and coward's death, one heaped with shame and social disgrace. Whatever Óðinn's wishes, it seems unlikely that a king, so burdened with the weight of ancestry (and perhaps demigod status), would willingly walk to the executioner's noose, even in the case of a sham or symbolic event.

#### 6.2.7 *Íslendingasögur* and *Konungasögur*

As the (chronologically) final source base for examples of hanging in the Viking Age, it best serves to list the occurrences in which hanging features in order to further show the consistency of the motif; that is, the isolated body, the chosen sites of execution and the element of purposefully observable public display: *Ynglinga saga* 23-24, *Grettis saga* 52, *Jómsvíkinga saga* 36-37, *Sverris saga* 60, 155; *Eyrbyggja saga* 20. This set of examples with their repeating content makes it clear that the motifs surrounding hanging were widely acknowledged.

### 6.3 Conclusions

Having analysed various literary examples from the Classical to the Viking period available for the practice of ritual hanging, a number of factors have made themselves apparent. Firstly, there is the question of to whom these sacrifices were originally intended. The Roman accounts, by their own admission, are unsure and generally attempt to prescribe some overarching war-based sky deity, Wodan-Óðinn or Tiwaz-Týr. There is then the question of continuity, and hanging and its associated motif appear to have been carried over to the Norse Óðinn once the process of amalgamation/ousting of Tiwaz-Týr (as the primary/war god) reaches completion in the Viking Age (see §3.1). The Arabic scribal examples for the practice of hanging within Scandinavia, bar Ibdn Fadlan, are particularly enlightening, as they show contemporary record of a practice that the scribes found strange enough to be worthy of note. Most surprisingly, the recorded methods can even be seen to align with later thirteenth century Swedish law, showing both the ritual aspect of hanging's use in the Viking Age as well as providing grounds for a display of continued practice (for different means) into the early medieval period. Looking to the most commonly used literary source for ritual hanging dedicated to Óðinn, Adam of

Bremen and his *Gesta*, it cannot be shown to be particularly encompassing of the deity or his associations to the noose. Ibn Fadlan's description of the sacrifice of the slave girl is private, enclosed, and more violently fuelled, mixing death, sex and religion and a strangulation is not a hanging sacrifice to Óðinn, despite the similar cause of death. As for Adam of Bremen, his record is at best an example of seasonal sacrifice with blood and fertility as the motivating factors and not a ritualised offering to Óðinn by hanged sacrifices since it again lacks the motif of creating the image or symbol of a hanged body, particularly when accompanied by initial decapitation. Even if one were to allow for (mass) variation in practice, in the light of modern textual, linguistic and particularly archaeological investigation, the case for dismissing this portion of Adam's text as an example of Óðinnic hanging ritual is becoming ever stronger.

## Section Two: Material Evidence

### 6.4 Iconography

There are very few iconographic examples depicting hanging. Despite this dearth, Pluskowski (2002: 62) suggests that there is nevertheless “enough to substantiate the existence of such a sacrifice as described by literary sources”. At first glance, his statement seems somewhat far-fetched considering the seriously limited resources. However after considering the examples below in their full historical contexts, rather than as stand-alone statements, his statement and resulting conclusions are in fact somewhat less reaching than they could have been.

#### 6.4.1 Stora Hammars I, Lärbro, Gotland 8th Century



Fig. 14 Stora Hammars I (photographed by author).

As was outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the raising of these stones was nigh exclusive to the island of Gotland and evidently carried connotations of the elite, wealth and mythological knowledge. Whilst it is possible to be sceptical about particular examples and their relation to Óðinn, the image displayed in Fig. 14 rather shouts ‘Óðinn’. Lindqvist (1942: 83-88) classified this example within his C category, and thus dates it to the turn of the eighth century. The panel above appears to be in no way connected to the rest of the images displayed as each seems to show a snippet of a (presumably) different story. However, this does not mean that the events portrayed are immediately understandable.

To briefly encapsulate modern scholarship on this image, the general consensus is that the stone displays a ‘typical form’ of sacrificial hanging (Pluskowski 2000: 63, Grundy 2014: 12), but Schjødt’s analysis is curiously absent (cf. Schjødt 2008). Two figures are apparently being sacrificed: one warrior hanged on the tree (which appears to be supported by the Y-shaped tree alongside it) and the second a diminutive figure (child, dwarf or poorly scaled man) on some kind of platform/altar with a spear carrying warrior standing above. The *valknut* hovers above the ‘altar’ scene with a bird above. Four martial figures approach or witness the scene with another bird seemingly being brought to the event. Despite there only being three iconographic representations of hanging, no solid archaeological evidence and only literary material to go on, Pluskowski (2002: 63) states that the stone “seems to show the typical form of sacrificial hanging”. This is nonetheless plausible within the realms of what we can piece together from comparable literary instances. Pluskowski thus does not step too far out onto the ice when he extends his conclusion to suggest that the stone may simply display King Víkarr’s death. Concluding that this is a typical form of physical sacrifice beyond the absolute building blocks of noose, tree and a hanged figure seems untenable. However, if we consider this image in context of the extant textual sources, then these three factors do indeed appear in keeping and be consistent with the surviving motifs of sacrifice to Óðinn. As such, we may also assume that aspects of the mythology we recognise upon the pictures stones today were evidently known far outside the eddic ‘centre’ of Iceland.

It does seem equally plausible that the hanged man could be the sacrifice *for* the ceremony that is taking place upon the platform/altar, overseen by Óðinnic avatars and a retinue of warriors. McKinnell (2007: 91, 95) wonders if this scene depicts Óðinn’s own hanging, whereas Sundqvist (2009: 655) suggests that we are seeing the much discussed marking and ritualising to/for Óðinn, akin to ceremonies that we find recorded to/for Þórr within *Íslendingasögur* (see §1.5.1). Tempting as these may be, these interpretations remain conjecture until evidence suggests otherwise and it is vitally important to remember that like the rest of the images upon this stone, the image may be an excerpt from a now lost story and its context unrecoverable.

#### 6.4.2 Garda Bote, Gotland late 8th Century



Fig. 15 Garda Bote, Gotland, Helmbrecht (2012: 87)

On the basis of the central panel of Fig. 15, Lindqvist (1941: 121) first classified this stone as an example of his D category (i.e. the stone depicted in the Viking Age), but declined interpretation beyond stating that seven women were depicted (1941: 81, 1942: 47; this note on gender was significant enough at the time). In more recent years, Price (2002: 95) and Helmbrecht (2012: 87) have interpreted the image as seven hanged females, with Price further suggesting (whilst admitting this to be a shot in the dark) that these may represent the seven women from *Hárbarðsljóð* 18. Nylén and Lamm (1988: 183) agree that these individuals have been hanged but seem to be alone in suggesting that the figures are male. Yet beyond questions of gender, there is very little to go on here with no known connection between the images or really what the central motif is supposed to be representative of. Therefore we are left simply with another pictorial instance (whilst intriguing because of its apparently female victims) featuring the motif of hanged individuals.

#### 6.4.3 Oseberg Tapestry c.834

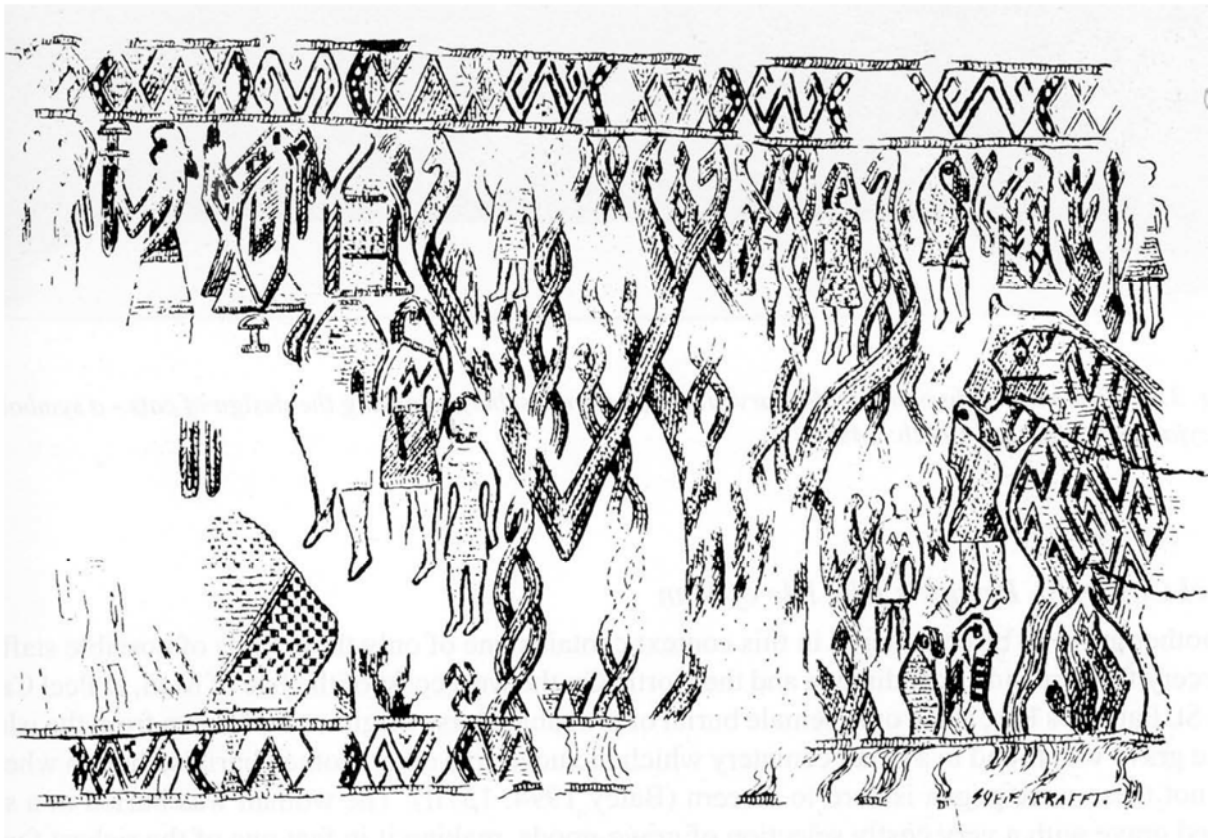


Fig. 16 Sketch of Oseberg Tapestry Fragment 242, Ingstad (1992: 242).

The ninth century Oseberg tapestry was found among the burial goods of the Oseberg ship burial, and whilst time has rendered the surviving material largely undecipherable, that fragments of it survive at all 1200 years later is remarkable. The immensely rich tomb of the Oseberg ship was discovered within the boundaries of the Oseberg farm burial mound near Tønsberg in Norway. The tapestry was found in a pile of other textiles and has been hypothesised to have been hung in order to decorate the walls of the interior. Despite its fragmented and severely damaged state, nine pictorial sections remain (see Ingstad 1992). As a whole, the tapestry appears to show a funerary procession, led by various carts that are accompanied by many followers and horses, all in the presence of a tree filled with what appear to be hanged individuals (Ingstad 1992: 242-245). This interpretation has gone unquestioned due to the location of the tapestry's discovery and the opulence of the burial itself.

This 'sacred grove' fragment, as shown in Fig. 16, has oft been placed alongside the supposed events at Gamla Uppsala, as representative of a hanging ritual, here presumably accompanying the supposed funerary event, which the procession is passing by or through

(Ingstad 1992: 243). In context of the whole surviving piece, both its physical and artistic location, this hanging scene should naturally be considered within the confines of its funerary role, which it evidently holds. This factor is remarkable due to the fact that no other extant Scandinavian example of sacrifice by hanging (besides the highly questionable events of both Ibn Fadlan and Adam of Bremen) takes place outside of a warfare environment.<sup>159</sup> If we simply look at the image of the ‘grove’, it displays the following features:

1. a number of trees constructed of interwoven trunks or branches akin to cords/cables
2. a number of hanged individuals
3. horse-like heads at the uppermost tips of said branches
4. small swastika-like symbol beneath the left hand victims

Stylistically, the only real discussion has focussed upon the horse and swastika-like shapes at the top and bottom of the tree. The swastika in the bottom left has been linked with both the triskelion and the *valknut* found upon rune stones and therefore a sacral function connected either with Óðinn or Þórr (Davidson 1964: 83, 147). Whilst this conclusion is rather loose due to the extensive symbolism surrounding the swastika in other cultures, if it were to be the case we may presume that Óðinn was the intended connection. With regard to the horses, Bonnetain (2007: 143) concludes that the transition (artistically) between tree and horse should be considered fluid and draws further parallels between Yggdrasill being both represented here and synonymous with a horse, thus intrinsically linking this image with Óðinn. However, with Elmevik’s (2008) recent etymology (see §4.1.1.4), this conclusion becomes less secure than it once was.<sup>160</sup>

The connection of the sacrificial tree and with Óðinn here nevertheless remains an oddity as the grave as a whole and this funerary scene has been strongly connected with the cult of Freyja (Ingstad 1992, Gansum 2002). As to its meaning or role in the overall context, few theories have been put forward but the Óðinnic suggestion remains almost unanimous in spite

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<sup>159</sup> As was noted above (see §6.2.3.5), one may question where the sacrifice of King Víkarr fits in this statement but since his sacrifice was required in order to continue upon a military campaign or raid, the general rule still holds.

<sup>160</sup> For the generally presumed role of the horse in funeral, see Bonnetain (2007), Jesch (1991: 12). On the other hand, Lucan and McGovern (2007) show that the placing of horses in graves tends to be after decapitation with random placement and literary examples (Ibn Fadlan, *Hervarar saga* 11) record them first being hacked to death, which one would presume makes them rather useless for transport in the afterlife. Again, the blood available from sacrifice seems more significant than the vessel.

of the above. Ingstad (1992: 243-245) steps furthest from this association by instead suggesting that the unanimously male victims (inferred from Adam of Bremen and stylistic comparison) are not being sacrificed to Óðinn but are instead being used akin to Tacitus' recording of the Nerthus cult (cf. *Germania* 40) in a "death wedding" with Freyja as the intended recipient. Again, whilst the burial may be strongly associated with Freyja, there is no need to extend the association this far and it seems safe to presume that Óðinn was to be inferred here. It is quite possible that multiple deities could be involved in a grand ceremony such as this.<sup>161</sup> From an archaeological perspective, no trace of multiple sacrificial human victims has been discovered (cf. Holck 2006: 194). Therefore, we are left to presume, again until archaeology proves otherwise, that the link displayed upon this tapestry was intended to be symbolic and not an actual recording of events. This does at least tell us that perhaps it was believed that the tree, hanged body and Óðinn were intrinsically linked, allowing one to infer the specific deity to a knowledgeable audience.

Consequently, a hanged sacrifice, particularly at a funeral, displays an interesting situation: that this particular mode of sacrifice was not solely understood in or associated with warfare scenarios. In this instance, symbolic or no, it must be in order to seek something else other than victory despite the identical offering. This suggests that acolytes believed that these sacrifices, if one may consider them so, could also be offered for a variety of things. These hanged individuals could be used to ask for a blessing of some kind or perhaps even a symbolic presence, to make a statement of affinity or perhaps to display a sanctification of ground and therefore, a ritual in attendance by the divine. This in turn weakens the suggestion of hanging sacrificed individuals to the war god as, yet again, they would serve little purpose. If this practice were to be genuine and not simply symbolic, one could even hypothesise that these individuals were sacrificed after the funeral proceedings in tandem with the belief that Óðinn could resurrect the hanged dead and question them (see Chapter Seven) about the event and function as a form of 'immortal' memorial. Yet, for now, these options remain conjecture. As a final note, the location of this tapestry is also intriguing. If this link between the event and Óðinn was indeed only symbolic, it was made in a rather secretive manner, upon a tapestry meant to be placed under the earth forever and suggests a more guarded association with the deity. However, as Gansum (2004) has shown, the burial mound was left open for an extensive

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<sup>161</sup> Ingstad (1992: 243) does however backtrack somewhat and further connects the depiction with Óðinn by suggesting that the cord/cable-like trunks and branches could be linked to Óðinn's associated aspect of binding.

period of years, allowing individuals to view the burial and its trappings and thus it may have been quite the opposite.

#### 6.4.4 The Gosforth Cross, Cumbria (once Northumbria) England c.10<sup>th</sup> Century

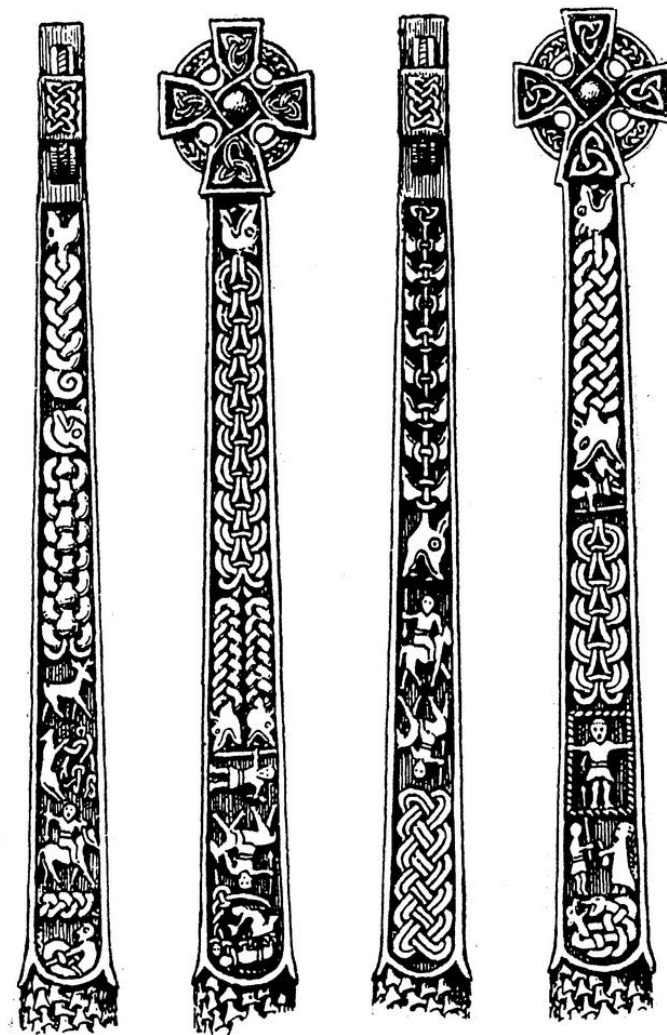


Fig. 17 Gosforth Cross (<http://viking.archeurope.info/index.php?page=gosforth-cross-collingwood-s-drawing>, accessed 01/02/16).



Fig. 18 Gosforth Cross (<http://www.britainexpress.com/attractions.htm?attraction=4324>, accessed 01/02/16).

Accompanied on all four sides by what appears to be various Eddic or associated *ragnarøk* scenes, the Gosforth Cross is one of the most impressive Anglo-Scandinavian carvings. Yet the image of a perhaps hanged or crucified figure (see the bottom right of Fig. 17, enlarged in Fig. 18) suspended by a pole has received remarkably little attention. Whilst this particular scene was originally concluded to have no sign of Óðinn and represent only Christ (Hines 1987: 312, Bailey 2000: 20-21), some opinion has shifted and questions regarding connections to Óðinn's hanging have arisen (cf. Grundy 2014: 191-193). From the immediate context of the cross as a whole, the hypothesis of an image of Christ alone surrounded by *ragnarøk* scenes seems unlikely, particularly with the similarity between the female figure and the possible horn below this hanged/crucified figure and those featured on the Gotlandic picture stones, motifs which Bailey (2000) chose to overlook in his evaluation. Furthermore, the figure standing above a pit of serpents is again reminiscent of the beasts that dwell beneath Yggdrasil (*Grímnismál* 34-35, *Gylfaginning* 16).

Yet one cannot forget that these images, taking the cross as a whole, were carved on a stone cross situated in a church graveyard. Bailey (2000: 17) argues that these particular images represent wholly Christian ideals and interprets them as having no connection to Viking mythology. Yet despite his staunch stance, Bailey (2000: 19-23) then reverses his argument and concludes that these images represent a dual-narrative resulting from a synthesis of religions, espousing from a conversion-period or event. Ultimately, it is this conclusion of synthesis that has the most worth and his earlier stance should be dismissed. As Grundy (2014: 192) suggests, this particularly ambiguous cross would further support Bugge's (1889) theory of a degree of synthesis between Christian and Norse myth in the British Isles. If so, the cross displays remarkable conceptual and artistic ability to neither emphasise one motif or the other too strongly, and to align the two belief systems and their associated imagery.

#### 6.4.5 Altuna Stone, Uppland, Sweden (U 1161) c.11<sup>th</sup> Century

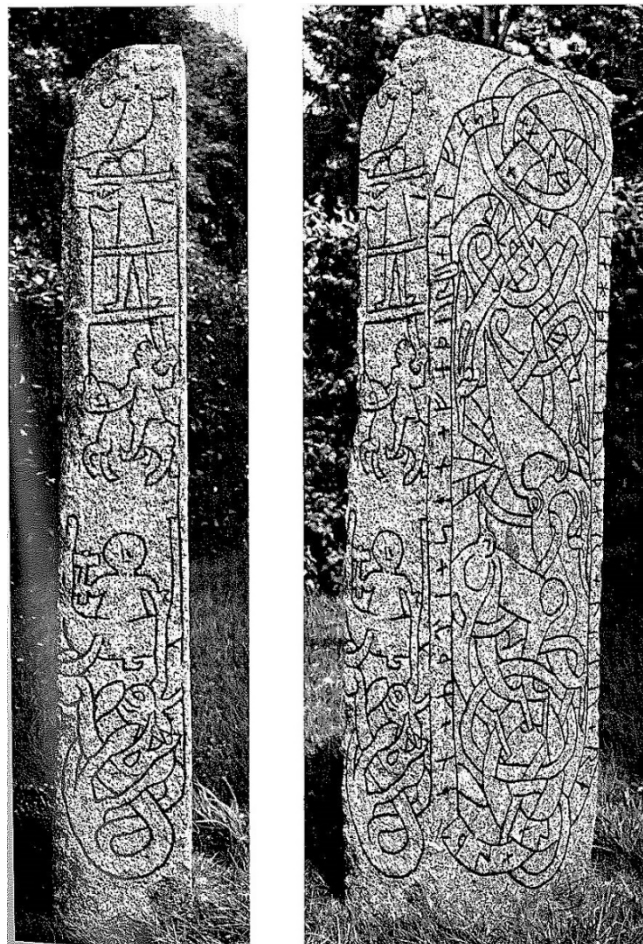


Fig. 19 Altuna stone, Weber (1972: fig.1-2)

The images upon this stone appear to show a variety of mythological tales as understood from both the poetic and prose eddas. At the top left (from both angles) as shown in Fig. 19, a male figure stands upon a ladder or other structure with two bird-like forms (cf. Weber 1972: fig.3a-4b) and a mounted warrior beneath. The image beneath these pictures has long been understood to represent Þórr and his fishing misadventure with Jǫrmungandr (Fuglesang 2002, 2007). In her interpretation of the ladder-based figure as displayed in the top left of Fig. 19, Fuglesang (2007: 198) makes no interpretation of the figure itself and instead cites Price (2002: 168). His discussion focusses on doorframes and predominantly the slave sacrifice within Ibn Fadlan's *Risala*, where he suggests that ladder-like images (that is, in general without inference to the Altuna stone) may represent "a doorway and refer to the liminal state of transition to death." Weber (1972: 328) begins an interpretive discussion for the representation of Óðinn by stating that this ladder is in fact Óðinn's *hliðskálf* 'scaffold/door opening, observation point, tower' (Simek 1993: 152) upon which he sits and is able to view the whole world (prose introductions to *Grímnismál* and *Skírnismál*, *Gylfaginning* 9). Weber also states that these birds are Huginn and Muninn, with one of them speaking directly into Óðinn's ear, as they would when reporting the day's news to their master (Weber 1972: 329-330).

On the basis of a potential association with Óðinn, it is worth theorising whether or not this image could represent Óðinn's hanging as depicted in *Hávamál*. One may suggest that the limb-like object passing through the neck of the individual could be representative of the bough Óðinn was hanged from and that the similar lines below represent other branches of a tree. Whilst the interpretation of a ladder appears more reasonable and the figure does appear to be standing upon a horizontal line and holding on either side, the stone shows no trace of nor attempt on the part of the carver to include the right-hand side of the ladder. Furthermore, the horizontal lines have no connecting edge, with the 'trunk' appearing to be freestanding. The line that is present instead forms the outline of the runic inscription opposite. Whilst one cannot disregard the lack of space, or duality of function as a factor, it is worth questioning nonetheless. Furthermore, the outstretched arms are curiously similar in motif to the Gosforth stone (cf. Fig. 17-18). Yet, as has been seen in the hanging imagery of the Oseberg tapestry and as will be shown below in material examples, one would expect to see the arms hanging by the individual's side, with feet pointed down. Consequently, it does not appear that we may interpret this as hanged Óðinn. Yet if we were to consider the rider beneath this image (who appears to be holding some object), one could instead interpret this figure as Óðinn. In this role, the deity could have come to revive and question the hanged as was discussed briefly in

Chapter Four, in keeping with Snorri's description and the titles *Hangaguð* and *Hangatýr* (see Chapter Seven). This concept is furthered by a fragmented stanza from the *The Third Grammatical Treatise*, where Óðinn's birds of knowledge are described to fly to the dead:

*Flugo hrafnar tvier,  
af Hnicars oxlum,  
Huginn til hanga,  
en a hræ Muninn.*

Two ravens flew,  
from [Hnikarr's] Óðinn's  
shoulders,  
Huginn to the hanged,  
and Muninn to a corpse.

(*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar II* (1841-57: 142) and author's translation)

This possible collection of knowledge from the hanged dead will be furthered in the following chapter, but whichever reading one may take here, it is possible to at least suggest that this image may represent some aspect of Óðinn and the mythology or motifs surrounding the deity. Nevertheless, the reality of some lost and now unexplainable tale is also a possibility.

#### 6.4.6 Stave Church, Hegge, Norway c.13<sup>th</sup> Century



Fig. 20 Possible example of Óðinn as *Hangaguð*

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hegge\\_stave\\_church#/media/File:Hegge\\_stavkirke,\\_maske\\_p%C3%A5\\_stav\\_-\\_1.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hegge_stave_church#/media/File:Hegge_stavkirke,_maske_p%C3%A5_stav_-_1.jpg), accessed 01/02/16).

Found at the top of a single stave within the early thirteenth century church in Hegge, Davidson (1969: 112, 1971: 12) argues that Fig. 20 is representative of a hanged Óðinn. She notes both the missing eye and protruding tongue and states these motifs as “in keeping” with Óðinn and his role as a representative of hanged men. Consequently, there is little ground on which to disagree. The questions of why this image was created, and then placed within a thirteenth century church, have seen little attention. Davidson provides no suggestions in either publication and it can be noted that no other scholar does either. One may nonetheless turn to the theories surrounding the carvings that adorn stave-church portals, which display pagan motifs and recognisable myth. Whilst the place and content of these carvings within a transitional period between systems of belief has been discussed, Staecker (2006: 366) refutes that these pagan images represent such a phase, but were instead to remind visitors of the king’s (that is, as patron) power and extensive lineage. Therefore we could conclude that this image of Óðinn was not representative of a transitional pagan to Christian period. It may have instead been to remind parishioners that royal power extended into the depths of history and that it had not been forgotten, despite conversion, and that royalty was still in keeping with Scandinavian kings of old.

In conclusion to the discussion of these pictorial allusions to Óðinn’s hanging or potential inference, it is evident that a handful of motifs operated throughout these images: the hanged body, martial acts, and birds. Furthermore, it is evident that the objects above were associated with death or funerary events, with one never expected to see the light of day again. Therefore, we could conclude that these images were designed to be obscure, shifting or even hidden and only understandable to the few. Pluskowski (2002: 72-74) suggests that the Wodan-Óðinn ritual or cults may have been both exclusive and reclusive, only making very public display of their beliefs upon the death of a family member. Presumably this conclusion would then explain the rarity of these items but Pluskowski does not consider this. With this factor in mind, we are very fortunate that a number of these examples survived and have come to light. If this were to be the case, we should not expect to find a great many more and are made aware that we are entirely in the hands of archaeologists for further examples.

## 6.5 Archaeological Evidence

Pluskowski (2000: 62) suggests that when seeking physical signs in the grave of potential Óðinnic sacrifice, “we should expect to find disarticulated bodies in graves, associated within a sacrificial context.” This supposition is rather broad to say the least and will inevitably encapsulate the so-called ‘deviant’ burials that have been uncovered and examined extensively in recent years (Price 2002, 2010; Gardela 2008, 2011b, 2014). As such this becomes a definition of little use, with the voices of various scholars, and their warning about the material record again ringing true (Hines 2003: 381, Schjødt 2007b: 123, Tolley 2009: 12). In fact there is but one archaeological case found in Scandinavia (as of writing) that could be determined as involving death by hanging from the Viking Age. Nevertheless, similar ritualistic examples are more frequently found from periods preceding (up to 1000 years earlier), or from among other contemporary Germanic people.<sup>162</sup> This alone has led to the conclusion that the practice no longer existed by the Viking Age but this seems dismissive in the face of the sheer volume of literary evidence. With evidence for a geographical spread of hanging among other Germanic societies, one cannot dismiss a premise on the basis of local non-evidence, particularly in Scandinavia, where a great deal of archaeological excavation remains to be done.

### 6.5.1 Cultic Objects

As was noted above, materially, very little has ever been found that could be linked as representative of or connected with hanging or Óðinn. There are in fact, to my knowledge, only two examples of such an object that have been interpreted as being related to hanging within a cultic context. During an excavation from 2002 at the Iron Age site of Lunda, Södermanland in Sweden (one already recognised for its cultic associations on the basis of both previous archaeological excavations and name alone), a minute (2cm) figure made of gold was uncovered within the remains of a small building attached to the main hall, tentatively labelled a *hof* ‘cult house, temple’ by its excavators (Andersson *et al.* 2004):

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<sup>162</sup> It is worthy of note that all of the Scandinavian examples of hanged bodies have been found in Denmark. See below for an examination of these examples.



Fig. 21 Figurine C from Lunda, Gräslund (2008: 252).

On the basis of the position of the pointed-down feet, shown in Fig. 21, it has been suggested that this figurine was meant to represent a hanged individual (Gräslund 2008: 251). This figure and its motif has been further grounded within a cultic context by its macro-location (i.e. Lunda), its micro-location (i.e. within a *hof*) and its proximity of ~100m from a hilltop sacrificial site (Gräslund 2008: 251-252). It is also possible that the diagonal markings across the hands are representations of being bound, as suggested by human remains (below), but this is a matter of interpretation. With regard to this figurine's function, the excavators have suggested that it should be seen in a similar context of the *guldgubber* occasionally found among the foundations of buildings like halls and concluded temples. Furthermore, the excavators have suggested that this particular piece should be understood within the context of sacrificial objects, created in order to be placed in the ground (Andersson *et al.* 2004: 164-165).

In comparison to the two other figurines taken from the site, both made of bronze (cf. Gräslund 2008: 251), less has been written and concluded about this figurine, presumably due to its size and generally unfinished appearance. Nonetheless, the interpretation of a hanged man is quite tempting. Without leaping to any grandiose conclusions, this find tells us, in the very least, that the motif was understood, and possibly even used, in locations of cultic significance.

A similarly related find of a miniscule *guldgubber* was found at the affluent Iron Age site of Sorte Muld, Bornholm in Denmark (Watt 1992). One of the now thousands of gold finds from this site, this particular example has been interpreted as a hanged man from a set of ‘dancer figures’, on the basis of a similar stance of pointed down feet and noose-like object around the neck. Again, interpretation is with the individual but it is interesting to consider that the motif may have had an active role in cult practice (cf. Watt 1992).

#### 6.5.2 Grave from Gerdrup, Sjælland, Denmark

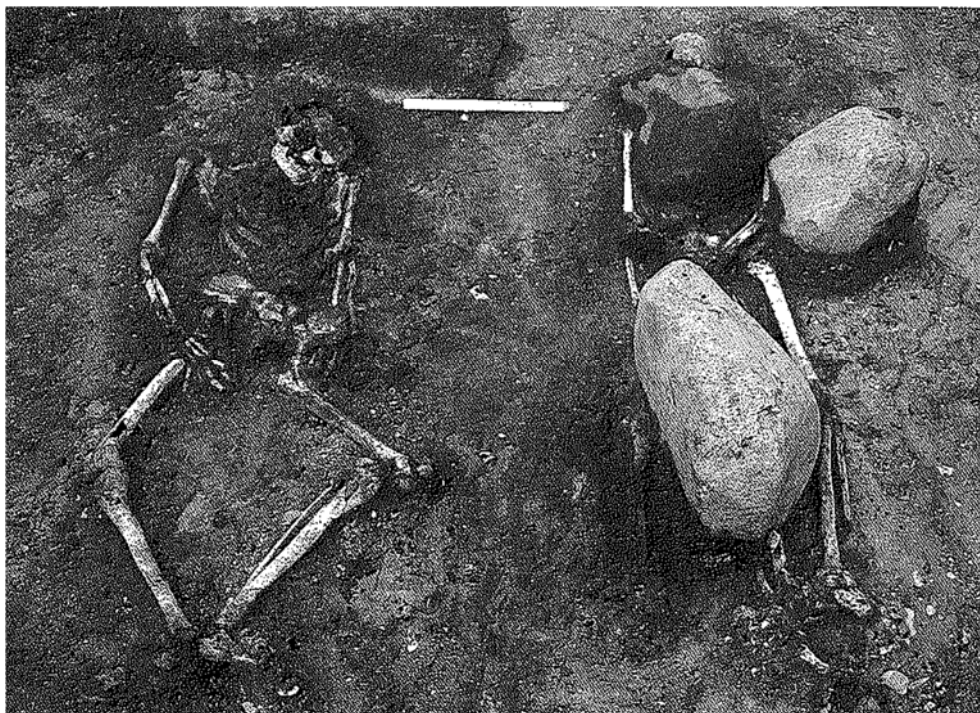


Fig. 22 Gerdrup double burial, Brink (2012: 231)

First discovered and analysed by archaeologist Tom Christensen (1981), the grave at Gerdrup features the remains of two individuals, male and female, found upon the ridge of a beach. The man was apparently hanged (featuring a twisted cervical vertebrae), as displayed in Fig. 22, with bound limbs and the woman had been, rather curiously, covered by large stones (Christensen 1981: 21). As a result, various theories as to what this grave shows have been put forward, but the consensus appears to be that the executed man was buried with his victim, executed for murder or perhaps rape (Wilson 2008: 34). Decapitation has been suggested to be the more regular form of capital punishment by archaeological example and legal precedent (cf. Ekholst 2014: 74-75) but hanging would have been more fitting, on the basis of the laws

outlined in the previous chapter, if murder or rape had indeed been the crime. As for the curious condition of the female remains, it has also been suggested that the grave of this woman could be a possible example of the grave of a *völva* (Price 2002: 169, Gardela 2011b). As Gardela (2009: 289-290) notes, this instance is curiously similar to an event in *Eyrbyggja saga* 20, in which Oddr is sentenced to death by hanging. His sorcerous mother Katla attempts to hide him and in the end, both are executed and buried near the sea. Whilst this grave without any further context of ritualistic activity (such as burning and so on) cannot be said to be an example of sacrificial hanging (and perhaps instead tells us more about how magical individuals were treated, even in death; Gardela 2011a+b), it is advantageous to observe that the punishment of hanging can be seen to have been practiced during the Viking Age. Furthermore, the location of this grave can be seen to align with poetic and saga episodes as well as later law codes (see Chapters Four, Five and Six).

### 6.5.3 Scandinavian Bog Bodies

As is evident from the Gerdrup example, in the search for archaeological evidence for a hanged sacrifice, we are highly unlikely to ever discover an extant noose; to be able to definitively tell that an individual died from hanging; or that any form of ritualistic behaviour was associated with this, unless the context of the soil displays almost perfect conditions for the preservation of organic material. The case for material evidence seems even more unlikely, when following on from the legal and poetic examples (see Chapter Four and Five) of leaving hanged victims to face the elements with long-term exposure. Hence, we are fortunate (to use the term lightly) that it seems to have been reasonably widespread, in both Celtic and Germanic cultures, that sacrificial victims were disposed of in or offered to watery environs such as peat bogs. A number of these finds, found (thus far) exclusively in Denmark, have been discovered with evidence of death by asphyxiation. The majority have been concluded to have died by either stabbing, blunt trauma or garroting, and then were pinned down in the bog, rather than by the much rarer hanging (cf. Glob 1971: 50-51). As has been discussed, these acts are by no means identical with hanging, and as such will not be included. This is not to say that the hanged examples detailed below are proof of the Viking Norse practice, or motivations behind the hanging ritual (especially with the extreme gap of time). They will nonetheless be used instead to illustrate proof of a continuous practice, with some startling similarities, from the Scandinavian Bronze Age into the latter years of the Iron Age (cf. van der Sanden 1995,

Fig.70). Yet perhaps with the example of millennia-long continued sacrifice in Uppåkra (see §6.1.2), we should not be so surprised by such lengthy continuity.

#### 6.5.3.1 Borremose Man, Himmerland, Denmark c.400 BC



Fig. 23 Borremose Man, Glob (1971: 89).

The Borremose Man, found in 1946, was as is frequently the case with bog bodies, presumed to be a murder victim. The body had visibly suffered considerable violence, but it has been generally concluded that this could be an example of a hanged sacrifice rather than strangulation, primarily due to the particular construction of the noose - a rope of three twisted hemp strands, bound and stitched with hide to prevent unravelling and fixed with a slipknot (Glob 1971: 69-70). The violence suffered by the body has led some to suggest that the man was hanged as a criminal and this seems equally plausible (McKinnell 2007: 92). Subject to a battery of tests, it was revealed that the man's last meal was one of seeds and grains (corn and knotweed), but little else was made of this find at the time or afterwards, unlike the conclusions reached from the examination of the Tollund Man (below).

#### 6.5.3.2 Elling Woman, Silkeborg, Denmark c.280 BC



Fig. 24 Elling Woman, Asingh and Lynnerup (2007: 295).

The Elling Woman was discovered in 1938 only 80m away from where the Tollund Man would be discovered 12 years later. The body had originally been concluded to be a man of small stature and it was only under further testing in 1978 that it was revealed the individual was in fact female (van der Sanden 1995: 146). It was also concluded that this woman had been in her 30's before being hanged, as was denoted by the visible furrow around the neck. The hide noose itself was later discovered as part of the ongoing archaeological investigations.

#### 6.5.3.3 Tollund Man, Silkeborg, Denmark c.280 BC

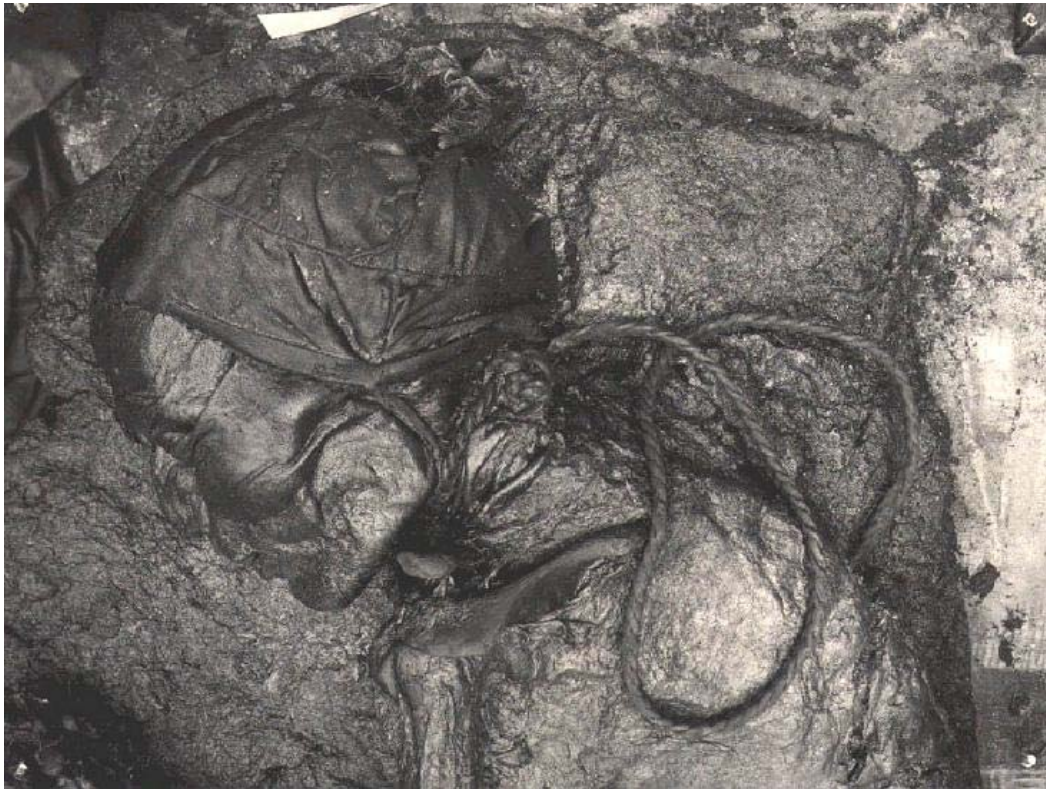


Fig. 25 Tollund Man on discovery, Glob (1971: 21)

Arguably the most famous of the bog body corpus, the Tollund Man was also presumed to be a recent murder upon his discovery in 1950. Unlike the Borremose Man, this body looked almost serene in the pit, with only the rope around the neck as sign of violent death. It was first presumed that the man had been strangled due to the lack of breaks in the vertebra but the placement of the hide noose and distended tongue convinced the forensic examiners of hanging (Glob 1971: 28-29). It has been argued that this was a suicide, as it was presumed that an executioner would have cut the victim down and retrieved the noose, rather than waste it (van der Sanden 1996: 155, Fischer 1999: 93-97). Yet the ritualistic nature of his death, the almost peaceful façade of the individual and with evidence that both the eyes and mouth were closed after death, suggest a more careful treatment of the individual. Furthermore, with the recognised fear regarding the object of dispatch (be it noose, axe or sword, cf. Ström 1942: 259), suicide seems highly unlikely. A very close examination was undertaken of this man with the same procedure as if he had been murdered in the modern period. The remains underwent autopsies, CT-scans, x-rays, fingerprint examination and C<sup>14</sup> dating. These tests provided his age at time of death to be between 40 and 50, and went as far to reveal his last meal, eaten within 12-24 hours of his death: porridge. Mundane as this may appear, it was noted that the

porridge was made of a mixture of cultivated and wild vegetables and seeds, some of which must have been collected specifically and were available only near the spring where the body was found, suggesting some deeper reasoning (Glob 1971: 30-31). One may also note the similarity in time of death with that of the Elling Woman, but due to the margin of error that must be allowed for in the C<sup>14</sup> test, this does not mean they were killed at the same time.

If one were to take these three examples together, one observes some overarching features: the location of the body, their method of death, their state of nudity and their final meals. For example, each of these last meals contained no trace of summer or autumn fruits or greenstuffs. Consequently, Glob (1971: 43) suggests that these victims were killed in winter or early spring, in time with the “midwinter celebrations”. Green (2002: 124) adds to this case by stating that hazel, the choice of material for the noose of numerous strangulation victims, is easier to work in the colder months as during summer it is too stiff and brittle. As for why these bodies were treated in such a manner and placed in a bog rather than being left to rot, tossed aside or even cremated, it is not outlandish to suggest that the related community, making use of the peat from the bog, may have placed a sacrifice within it to thank their gods, particularly those of fertility, for the peat’s provision (Glob 1971: 115-132, Fischer 1979: 43). Other options have been proffered, suggesting that the state of some of the bodies (i.e. their presumed nudity<sup>163</sup> and shaved heads) instead suggests the punishment of criminals (Glob 1971: 113-114, Munksgaard 1984), but the associated ritualism is unconvincing of a simple execution. Any suggestion of drowning, akin to the examples of sacrifice surrounding lakes, rivers, streams and wells would not be appropriate, with the cause of death more than evident. The suggestion of fertility rite brings us more in line with the cult of Nerthus (*Germania* 40) and, as such, suggests that these cases should not be taken as sacrifices to a god of war or wisdom. Conversely, it would not be the first time that it has been suggested that Wodan-Óðinn once functioned as a fertility god and these examples could instead be used to further that discussion (cf. de Vries 1931).

Looking back to the noose itself, we primarily see examples of hemp and hide that do correlate with skaldic examples (see §4.1.2) but could simply be said to be convenient, standard materials. For examples of those hanged with tree fibres, as we find outlined in the *Östgötalagen* above, we have to turn to the bog finds of Germany and Ireland, but again it is significant to note the continuity of practice across the two cultures. To name but a few, the

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<sup>163</sup> It is possible to presume that any clothing the victims may have had rotted away.

male bog body Windeby II (Windeby, Germany) was hanged with a hazel rod or branch twisted in order to form a noose and the Gallagh Man (Galway, Ireland) had his noose formed of interwoven bands of hazel or willow (Green 2002: 124). Oak these are not, but the use of particular trees with their own geographical significance and attached mythology cannot be overlooked, especially when the hazel is strongly connected with divination, wisdom and poetic inspiration in the Irish Celtic world (cf. *Echtra Chorbmaic Uí Chuinn, The Boyhood Deeds of Finn*).<sup>164</sup>

Some however, have doubted hanging or even ritualised death as the fate prescribed to these individuals. Briggs (1995: 177-178) suggests that if one were to attempt to save or later recover a body from a bog, strong rope or withe would be required to drag the individual free and proposes that the only visible part of the body or one of secure anchor would be the head, if the hands were already beneath the surface. This is a rather weak hypothesis, relying on one too many chain elements (i.e. the victim is discovered once the hands are no longer available to hold a rope or without strength remaining to do so). Furthermore, in trying to save someone from a viscous terrain, few would fashion a “lasso”, as Briggs puts it, around the neck in order to drag an individual to safety as this would, in most instances, become their accidental halter. If it were to be a later rescue operation (i.e. many years or centuries later), it seems unlikely, upon the discovery of a head, that people would cease digging and opt for dragging. In addendum to this theory of emergency recovery, Briggs (1995: 177-178) further doubts the veracity of the items declared as nooses, due to the haphazard knotting skill displayed, or the simplistic construction of the material (cf. Budworth 1986: 39-40). Whilst the noose and knots may be basic and perhaps not best suited for purpose, these individuals are not working to the skill level of a practised executioner, in what appears to be a practice enacted rarely. As a final protestation, akin to van der Sanden (1996: 155) and Fischer (1999: 93-97), Briggs (1995: 178) further declares it “difficult to understand” why a peasant society would not recover something

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<sup>164</sup> “Then he saw a bright well within the enclosure, and five streams flowing from it, and multitudes taking turns drinking the water of the streams. Nine everlasting hazels stood above the well. The purple hazels drop their nuts into the well, and the five salmon which are in the well crack them open, and their bubbles are set upon the streams.” (Carney 2003: 185)  
 “The salmon was caught, and was entrusted to Deimne to cook; and the poet told him not to eat any of it [...] ‘Finn is your name [...] and it is you who were destined to eat the salmon.’ The lad ate the salmon after that. That is what gave the knowledge to Finn: whenever he put his thumb in his mouth and chanted [...] what he did not know would be revealed to him. He learned three things which qualify a poet: *teinm lade* [divination through chewing flesh], and *imbais forosnai* [‘the light of illumination’], and *dichetal di chennaib* [‘incantation over heads’].” (Carney 2003: 198)

as valuable as rope before depositing a victim within the bog. In this regard, Ström (1942: 259) has provided the solution by showing that, across a variety of cultures and times, the item of dispatch had a feared character of its own and was not to be interfered with. Consequently, one sees the importance of considering the emotional or psychological effects of ritual rather than just analysing the ‘ins and outs’ of the material evidence.

#### 6.5.4 Sutton Hoo

Despite the mass of scholarship that surrounds the royal burial at Sutton Hoo, it is not the famous mound and its ship that concerns us here. Instead, it is two sites within the burial complex that were discovered to feature extensive remains of ritually executed individuals, including hanging (cf. Carver 1998: 137, fig. 87). Yet prior to delving into the relevant examples evidenced at this royal site, it should be noted that among the Anglo-Saxons, hanging seems to have been an atypical practice, with capital punishment of any sort being rare in Anglo-Saxon law (Meaney 1964). Therefore, we are dealing with an extraordinary case for a variety of reasons and must verse ourselves in both the site-specific conditions (historically and socially), as well consider the outside influences and implications. As Pluskowski (2000: 72) summarises, shortly before the final conversion of East Anglia, the ruling populace discards Christianity and briefly reverts to its pagan roots. Pluskowski also declares that these acts should be seen as a declaration of war against, as he puts it, “the Christian incursion”. Whilst one may ask ‘why react now?’, this question cannot be treated by this thesis. Instead, it is the final comment that is most intriguing: it is curious that ritual sacrifice, particularly by hanging, would form an element of the ritual toolkit in this resistance endeavour.

Yet before delving into the sacrificial remains, we must examine the context surrounding the sacrifices of Sutton Hoo and find their relevance, if any, for comparison with the Viking Age. In his PhD thesis, *The Scandinavian Character of Anglian England in the pre-Viking Period*, John Hines (1984) outlined artefacts from the fifth- to sixth-centuries that already seemed to bear Anglo-Scandinavian parallels and through a comparison of motifs, appears to have been successful. Furthermore, examples that have come to light in the intervening period appear to further bolster this conclusion, rather than dismiss it (Hines 1992: 315-316). As for how this exchange began prior to the Viking Age, Hines (1992: 315) states that in his 1984 publication, migration and commercial links were best received by fellow academics whereas the theory of exchange/gift-giving was generally rejected. Yet in the later

publication, Hines (1992: 326-327) uses both new finds and the accumulation of modern research to show that gift-giving was also an important factor in the period approaching and encompassing Sutton Hoo. As such, with examples of English glassware appearing in predominantly Sweden and then Norway, it seems that both trading and cultural affiliation seems to have occurred between Scandinavians and Anglian people and importantly, “deliberately and assertively maintained” (Hines 1992: 328- 329). As for cultic similarities, Pluskowski (2000: 74) highlights that Gamla Uppsala bore “similar trappings” to that of Sutton Hoo, in that both were centres of worship featuring “monumental complexes associated with burial mounds”. However, his further need to compare the supposed pagan temple mentioned at Uppsala and the lack thereof at Sutton Hoo is an unnecessary endeavour, particularly with the results of extensive modern archaeological investigation.

Having established a connective context between Scandinavia (predominantly Sweden) and Anglia, one may move to include the sacrificial examples from Sutton Hoo in comparison with Viking Age practice. As the lead archaeologist on the site in the most recent period (1983-2005), Martin Carver has produced a career’s worth of work surrounding this site and without this, much of our current understanding and later interpretation would be impossible. Therefore, his work will be used as the primary source base for this case study. There are two sets of execution burials on this site: Group 1 encompasses an area east of Mound 1 and the execution site features 23 graves. Group 2 is associated with Mound 5 (which they surround) and this exhibits 17 graves of executed individuals, of which some include multiple victims (Carver 1998: 137-141). It is highly significant to note that these executions were not all performed at the same time and took place continuously at various periods throughout the seventh to eleventh centuries (Carver 1998: 139).

The remains of Group 1 show little to no consistency and feature double graves, a headless body, two with tied limbs, a decapitated kneeling body, a body with twisted and broken neck, one with arms raised above the head, a “spread-eagled” position body (the so-called ‘plough man’, burial 27) accompanied by what has been interpreted as an instrument of execution or even a gallows (Carver 1998: 139-140). As for the dating of these victims, C<sup>14</sup> suggest between the seventh to eleventh centuries and Carver favours a date of the ninth to tenth centuries (Carver 1998: 139-141). Of Group 2, a more consistent method of execution can be observed (that of decapitation) but the site features oddities like a triple burial (burial 42/43) and one set of remains (burial 49) was found to feature a rope still attached to the wrenched neck: the remains from a hanged execution (Carver 1998: 137-139). Overall, there

are at least two definite cases for hanging with a variety of others showing injuries that may fit this method of execution. It is also worthy of note that some remains feature mass mutilation, that Carver (1998: 140) suggests was either from a form of ritualised killing or from the suspension of the corpse and its subsequent decomposition, before eventual burial. It is not an unsupported leap, in the face of the evidence presented thus far to suggest the latter as a fitting and suitable explanation. It is unnecessary to attempt to add to this number and theorise whether or not the decapitated individuals may have been hanged first, especially with decapitation as the more widely practiced form of execution in the Anglo-Saxon period (Meaney 1964). Furthermore, the case for the prolonged practice of hanging at this site is furthered by evidence of a tree discovered centrally, within the burial site, in proximity to Mound 1 and in connection with the object discovered lying within burial 27 (Carver 1992: 353-354). With one body featuring an organic noose and burials 19, 25, 2 and 33 featuring tied limbs, there are grounds for a larger number of hanged victims. Whilst the tree could simply be a tree, its central position among the executions of Group 1 and later post-holes surrounding its remains suggest a continuity of site and shift over this prolonged period from natural to constructed gallows (Pluskowski 2000: 70).

#### 6.5.4.1 Punishment or Human Sacrifice?

Carver (1998: 140) raises the recurring issue of comparing penal and sacral motivations for hanging, but shrewdly points out that the distinction is not overly necessary in this example. Firstly, the site of execution itself is organised in a circular manner around the central tree, suggesting a ritual pattern (Carver 1992: 353). He further suggests that *punishment* in this context is rather superfluous as the dead individual cannot repent or offer recompense. Much like Viking Scandinavia, Anglo-Saxon laws allowed for the payment of *wergild* for killing another and thus execution was rarely required (Wolfgang 1965: 225). As Carver (1998: 140) states, “Public killing, whether sanctioned by judicial or religious belief, must always be seen as sacrificial, in the sense that the act mitigated the threat.” Therefore, we should instead be seeking the *threat* that leads to the use of hanging, rather than the distinction between penal and sacrificial practice. As to how we identify this threat, one must first look at the sacrificial context, which is to say the victims’ relation to the burial site which they centre within. Carver (2002: 133) states that:

The Sutton Hoo barrows are interpreted as the monuments of ‘status-seeking parvenus’, the creation of new leaders and their heirs attempting to achieve kingship without Christianity, enacting an extravagant series of Scandinavian-style burials in order to oppose the imperialism of the Christian Franks, proclaiming the rhetoric of independence and individual enterprise in a ‘theatre of death’.

Carver (1998: 140) had taken this further in an earlier work when he stated that the most likely conclusion to the question of threat is that these individuals were “ideological or political deviants” and public execution was to be the only way in which to state pagan independence, therefore mitigating any potential challenge or dissent. As the royal burials were to announce a new era of kingship, the execution of those who did not agree swiftly followed. However, this is not the end of these curious discoveries. The C<sup>14</sup> process dates the execution of these victims surrounding Mound 5 to the same time as the construction of Mounds 1 and 2. Therefore, as Carver (1998: 140) concludes, if this were to be the case, the funeral(s) would have taken place “beneath the stench and horror of the gallows” and that in the seventh century, these hangings may have been seen as a sign of stability and the presence of divinity, rather than inspiring revulsion. Whilst Carver believes the more logical answer lies in the executions taking place after Sutton Hoo had ‘had its time’, the case for contemporary execution in tandem with burial and a show of power is quite reasonable, particularly when compared to the Scandinavian motivations for hanging in the Viking Age. Pluskowski (2000: 70) additionally questions why anyone would bury common criminals in the remains/surrounds of a royal site and concludes that sacrifice is the more likely motivation in this context. Whilst Carver (1998: 142-143) disagrees with the argument for the re-use of the burial site, in the face of political, social and religious unrest, coupled with very real belief and purposeful defiance, it is not unreasonable that a pagan people would beseech a god of wisdom and war for both mental and martial strength.

#### 6.5.4.2 Development of Practice?

If one wished to seek the development of hanging as a ritual practice in the site of Sutton Hoo, we are unable to see any such trace. This ostentatious show of ritual practice is nigh un-evidenced, before or after this period, in Anglo-Saxon England and following Carver, suggests a new or at least increased level of perceived threat. Sutton Hoo represents a sudden burst of pagan resurgence and then a rapid return to the English norm of Christianity. Furthermore, as

was shown by the C<sup>14</sup> dating of the executions, there is no regularity of practice but sporadic use, nor consistent upkeep of ritual. Instead, these executions were performed for a perceived need, as and when the situation arose. Considering the argument for a psychological need for sacrifice, as well as a political one, Pluskowski (2000: 73) suggests that these were in part “desperate measures which would be psychologically comforting as well as restarting what might have been a weak pagan identity.” This is not to forget however, that kings could and no doubt would have taken advantage of religious belief and its motifs in order to gain control and bolster their claim. The motif of the prolonged hanged body has been shown to be strongly representative of a connection with Wodan-Óðinn and this message would not have gone unheeded. Consequently, the executions at Sutton Hoo could be seen as both quelling ideological dangers and one of two things: a cry for help from the divine in a time when the people felt threatened or a bold reassertion of the old ways, a realignment with old gods, establishing a firm statement in the face of rising Christian power. The answer likely falls somewhere in between.

## 6.6 Public versus Private

Taking the executions at Sutton Hoo in tandem with the Viking examples, one is left with the question of who was in attendance at these particular executions and whether these were large events or held away from habitation, open only to the ‘initiated’. Furthermore, with the suggested multifaceted power of the hanging ritual, one would presume that only a small, privileged group would be in attendance and is left wondering whether or not an ordinary person in attendance would understand the significance. Nonetheless, this exclusionary practice does not seem to be the case. The evidence instead appears to suggest overt practice, publicly visible to any and all in a deliberate statement of justice, power and divine backing. This is not to say that the means, or intricate ideological knowledge were available to all, as both literary and archaeological evidence suggests that the Óðinn cult was an exclusive affair. Whether the general populace understood or not appears to be insignificant. The real purpose seems to lie in those individuals who *would* recognise what was being stated and it was exactly for those people that the sacrifice was performed. As for those who would not understand the nuances, the act of ritually executing individuals would still have been a grotesque event, showcasing the social power and/or wealth (i.e. to display such extremes) held by the executioners. If one were to compare the reported sacrifices at Uppsala to those at Sutton Hoo,

one would presume that the former was designed to be far more restrictive than the latter, but there is no way for us to tell whether Sutton Hoo would have been restricted in any way.

## 6.7 Conclusions

We should be aware that this practice, minus Roman exaggeration, would have been on an infrequent basis, making up a small but important factor in a religious system (Patrick 2000: 51).

As a result of this examination of the literary record and physical remains from the Viking Age and its surrounding or precursory cultures, the heavy leanings in the extant mythological and historical literature, ritual hanging was most certainly performed. Furthermore, it appears that the motif of the hanged body as representative of Óðinn was more prolific than poetic inference and even the hanged body itself suggests. Yet it cannot be emphasised enough: ritual hanging would have been a rare and extreme practice, only undertaken in times of crisis or perceived threat. Nevertheless, it has also become apparent that the ritual of hanging, with a victim dedicated to Óðinn, was far from a simple event. The ritual could be complex, playing multiple roles and during the Viking period, should be considered as extremely dangerous. As a result, one might expect the particular ins-and-outs to have been guarded closely by individual families, but it is evident that the results were made for all to see.

As a final note, it is worth relating these examples back to the argued case in favour of shamanism or even simply initiation (Clunies Ross 1994: 225, Solli 2002, Sundqvist 2006, Schjødt 2008: 173-224). It is quite clear that none of these incidents, archaeological or literary, could be described as shamanistic or initiatory and in no instance does or could the sacrifice survive and return to the world. Consequently, if the discussion for hanging is to continue within the realms of shamanism, it should be limited to discussion of Óðinn's hanging exclusively, and not as the motivation for ritualistic practices undertaken during the Viking Age. Therefore, the specific use of hanging in order to gain a reward over other methods of execution (and why Óðinn would inflict it upon himself) must be for another purpose. Furthermore, one must also examine the further social and ultimately spiritual ramifications of being killed and killing in this way. This culmination of factors will be brought together in the final chapter.

## Chapter Seven

### Motivations, Aftermath and Understanding

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Having examined the evidence for the actual practice of human sacrifice and ritual hanging, it remains to question the historically understood aftermath. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to examine the beliefs surrounding what happens to the person after death and the social ramifications of death by hanging. It will be argued that a hanged sacrifice was not bound for Óðinn, the *einherjar* or his hall but for the Underworld, Hel, in the far lesser role of a *tool*. As a result, it will also be shown that this act was understood to have serious social implications for said individual beyond death in an echelon of society that functioned on the basis of personal honour and proper memorial.

#### 7.0 The Hanged Body - A Worthy Gift?

We may wonder what kind of wisdom it was that Óðinn acquired from the dead, and especially from the hanged. (Turville-Petre 1964: 45)

The motivations behind sacrificing to Óðinn have been generally accepted among scholars and have been derived from the multitude of instances within mythological and historical sources. They are: divination, beneficial circumstances (natural phenomena) and victory in battle. Conversely, with the volume of sacrifice Óðinn was believed able to gather through warfare, for example from the dedications of the forthcoming battle-slain (e.g. *Eiríkr hinn sigrsæli*), it appears that hanging a few captured individuals after the battle had been won would have been superfluous.<sup>165</sup> Yet as has been shown there are multiple mythological and historical examples of captured and defeated men being hanged after a battle, dedicated to Óðinn. Davidson (1992: 337) holds to the theory of facilitating further victory when she states: ‘The majority of these sacrifices were probably associated with warfare, since there are many references to captives offered to the god to whom men turned for victory in battle.’ It is curious that despite Óðinn’s many spheres of influence, the discussion rarely goes past this point which leads one to the

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<sup>165</sup> A similar example can be seen in Spillan’s (1864) translation of Livy, *The History of Rome* (VIII: 9), where a Roman general performed *devotio*, an extreme *votum* in which he vowed to sacrifice his life in battle along with the enemy to chthonic gods in exchange for victory.

rarely asked question of worth (i.e. why is this sacrifice worthy of further victory) and to examine the possibility of a trade between mortal and god.<sup>166</sup>

If one were to recall *Gylfaginning* 20 and consider Óðinn's spheres of influence and reputation for favouring the greatest of mortal warriors, it should be evident that in contrast to the generally accepted motives for hanging, *Valfǫðr* had little use for the warriors who did not die in battle and were instead defeated, imprisoned and disgraced. Thus, if dedications were to offer a defeated man to Óðinn in the aftermath of battle, this surely displays both a method of viciously removing a mortal rival and of thanking their god. We must remember that hanging in the Viking Age was not the quick death we commonly imagine. As was highlighted in Chapter Five, hanging was still performed by suspension, lasting between 15 and 30 minutes, and, one imagines, could have only been agonising.

Returning to §6.5.4.1, the sacrifice of an individual and Carver's sacrificial theory (1998: 140), the *threat* in one's political or military rival and hanging forms the ultimate form of defeat and destruction. Thus if these sacrifices are not to be considered offerings to make up the *einherjar*, evidently these individuals were believed to possess or have access to something else of great worth that would be a valuable gift to Óðinn. Furthermore it should be noted that akin to the slave girl sacrificed at the Rus chieftain's funeral, the hanged individual could be said to represent a ritual component rather than a person. Price (2002: 96), in the footsteps of Ström (1947), suggests that men were evidently able to provide Óðinn with something that he could not glean for himself and ponders if this circumstance meant that humans could enter realms closed even to the divine. It is argued here that the case is simpler and that it is not that men can enter a realm closed to Óðinn but simply one he cannot enter without being dead and dead by particular means (thus recalling *Vafþrúðnismál* 43 and the mortal status of the *Æsir*). For example, this theorised shift in afterlife can be discerned both in Hagbarðr's hanging when his final words were said to be "I do not go miserably to the nether gods" (Saxo 2008: 217) and further exemplified in the kenning-dense opening stanza of *Erfidrápa Óláfs Helga* 1:

*Tolf frá tekna elfar*

I heard without deceit that

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<sup>166</sup> This is not to say that these sacrifices were common in periods or areas of peace. As has been discussed, the required individuals would either be prisoners of war or criminals due to their weak legal position and furthermore, as has again been shown, this ritual did not have an 'everyday' use.

<i>tálaust við þá bál;</i>	twelve [trees of (the river's fires)
<i>olli Óleifr falli,</i>	= gold =] men we captured;
<i>eirsamr konungr þeira.</i>	Óláfr, the merciful king
<i>Svíá tyggja leik seggi</i>	brought about their death.
<i>sóknstriðs (firum) riða</i>	I saw the men of [the battle-hard
<i>(böl vas brátt) til Heljar</i>	king of the Swedes =] Óláfr
<i>(búið mest) Sigars hesti.</i>	scænski
	ride the [horse of Sigarr =]
	gallows to Hel.
	The greatest harm was quickly
	prepared for the men.

(Jesch (2012: 665) and author's translation)

We must be aware of the Christian context and that Óláfr Haraldsson was a Christian king but he was arguably a recent convert engaged in the killing of heathen men. Hanging is an insult that both he and his enemies understand and the poet has cleverly covered both worlds in poetry and exemplified that whilst the king may now be Christian, he still understood the old ways. Furthermore it is also worthy of note that these men were captured (which the poet did not see) and then hanged, for which the poet appears to have been present. Thus from this stanza it could be surmised that it was believed that victims of sacrifice or execution in this manner travelled into the Underworld and the halls of Hel. With the skaldic connection between the gallows, horses for the dead and the Underworld in evidence, one may further infer said location via the social stigma attached to this 'unmanly' and disgraceful death.<sup>167</sup> Ultimately it is vital to consider that the hanged individual is no longer bound for Valhøll, his comrades and ancestors but rather for Hel and the underworld and as such carries significant memorial and ritual connotations.

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<sup>167</sup> It is interesting to note that throughout the extant literary corpus, Óðinn can be seen to avoid Hel's realm by sending others in his stead, even upon the death of his son or only entering its periphery in disguise (*Gylfaginning* 69 and *Baldur's draumar* respectively). That this means Óðinn cannot enter the realm of Hel proper is of course speculation as we possess far from all tales or poems in circulation from the Viking Age.

## 7.1 Conversations with the Dead

As to how Óðinn was then believed to coerce information from these dead men, *Hávamál* 157 gives the modern scholar something to go on. After the incident of Óðinn's hanging, *Hávamál* continues by listing each acquired *rún* in turn in the section denoted as *Ljóðatal* (see §1.1.1.1.1). McKinnell (2007a: 98-103) discusses the fact that after the first nine songs (i.e. those of *jötunn* origin which he is taught), Óðinn discovers a further nine more suited to his own characteristic purposes giving depth to the phrase *orð mér af orði / orðs leitaði, / verk mér af verki / verks leitaði* 'one word sought the next, one deed sought the next' (see §4.1). In the context of Óðinn's search for the knowledge of the dead, the twelfth rune of *Hávamál* 157 appears telling and as such has been cited by nearly all scholars in regards to this topic:

*Þat kan ek it tólpta,  
ef ek sé á tré uppi  
váfa virgílná,  
svá ek ríst  
ok í rúnum fák <fá ek>  
at sá gengr gumi  
ok mælir við mik.*

I know a twelfth one that,  
if I see up in a tree  
a swinging corpse in a noose,  
so I cut  
and I colour the runes  
so that man is able to walk  
and talk with me.

(*ÍF Eddukvæði I* (2014: 354) and author's translation)

This stanza makes it rather clear that, to some, Óðinn was securely connected with the gallows and hanged individuals. This in turn provides good grounds for Snorri naming Óðinn both *Hangaguð* and *Hangatýr* in relation to the noose, particularly when coupled with Þórbjörn Brúnason's *heimþingaðar hanga* 'visitor of the hanged' (*Lausavísur* 3) and Bjarni byskup Kolbeinsson's declaring *qllungis namk eigi / Yggjar feng und hanga* 'I did not at all learn poetry under the hanged one' (*Jómsvíkingadrápa* 4). One may also recall the stanza from the previous chapter, which described Óðinn's ravens flying from their master to the bodies of the hanged dead, presumably as part of their daily information gathering task. In relation to the discussion of shamanism, in these cases it is evident that these dead men are in no way shamanistic and instead Óðinn simply derives something from his interaction with them. Price (2002: 169) highlights this action of sitting beneath the hanged dead as a method of *útiseta* 'sitting out',

where a person could interact with the supernatural (cf. *Völuspá* 28). In this instance, the bishop is denying any such interaction whilst legitimising modern speculation surrounding its practice (cf. Raudvere 2002: 115, Tolley 2009: 136). Ultimately, it is tempting to conclude that *Hávamál* 157 provides a simple and comprehensive reason as to why one would hang an individual in sacrifice to Óðinn: a source of knowledge to he who is seeking all he can learn before *ragnarök*. As such, sacrificing a warrior was not to the aspect of war but *wisdom*; it simply performed a convenient role (for the victor) within society as well. Yet tempting as this interpretation may be, the case for Óðinn and his dealings with the dead can hardly be seen as straightforward and this example is far from Óðinn's sole act of necromancy with regards to knowledge acquisition. As Snorri outlines in *Ynglinga saga* 7:

*Óðinn hafði með sér höfuð Mímis, ok sagði þat honum mǫrg tíðendi ór qðrum heimum, en studum vakði hann upp dauða menn ór jörðu eða settisk undir hanga.*

Óðinn had Mímir's head with him, and it said to him many tidings from other worlds and sometimes he would raise dead men out of the earth or sit under the hanged.

(*ÍF Heimskringla I* (2002: 18) and author's translation)

Whilst one may presume Snorri arrived at his closing statement in this example from *Hávamál* 157 (at least from our extant material), the discussion surrounding the figure Mímir, his infamous head and its role in Óðinn's quest is a long and much debated one. Appearing occasionally and often indirectly in connection with Óðinn (*Völuspá* sts 28, 46; *Sigdrífumál* sts 13, 14; *Fjölsvinnsmál* sts 20, 24; *Gylfaginning* 15, 51; *Ynglinga saga* 4, 7) by three names *Mímir*, *Mímr* and *Mími* the individual fills the role of keeper of the well of knowledge, a knowledgeable decapitated head and responsible for the name of a tree (*Mímameiðr*, which by context, appears to represent the world tree). The name Mímir is understood to mean 'memory, the rememberer, the wise one' (Simek 1993: 216) and despite the uncertainty of etymology, the name quite comfortably fits the role in which he is cast. Many have highlighted that the name only takes the form Mímir when describing the head, rather than the whole individual (cf. Lindow 2001: 230), and the occurrence of alternate spellings has caused disagreement as to the figure's origins and role in the mythology (cf. Schjødtt 2008: 113, Lindow 2001: 231, Simek 1993: 216, Fleck 1971a: 393-398, de Vries 1962: 387; 1956: 245-248 and Simpson 1960), suggesting two distinct figures with different myths attached. Snorri however concluded them to be identical (*Ynglinga saga* 4, 7 and *Gylfaginning* 14, 51) and attestations to the name

can also be found within the skaldic corpus (*Qgmundardrápa* 1) and in a *heiti* for Óðinn (*Sonatorrek* 23) proving its use beyond the eddic corpus and Snorri's 'mythography' (Simek 1993: 216). It is also worth noting in context of the conflict surrounding knowledge with the *jötnar* that Snorri included Mímir in his list of giant names thus, in contradiction to Lindow's hypothesis (2001: 231), indicating he may be of *jötunn* stock (*Skáldskaparmál* 23, 75; *Þórdrápa* 9, *Völuspá* 46). Nonetheless, discussion continues as to his questionable origins yet whatever his full role and origin, it is clear an association between Óðinn and Mímir was understood (see Schjødt 2008: 120-121).

In the single account expanding the context surrounding Mímir's head, *Ynglinga saga* 7 tells us that Óðinn received the decapitated head of Mímir when the Vanir felt they had been defrauded in a trade of hostages and murdered him (*Ynglinga saga* 4). Upon receiving it:

*Óðinn tók hofuðit ok smurði urtum þeim, er eigi mátti fúna, ok kvað þar yfir galdra ok magnaði svá, at þat mælti við hann ok sagð honum marga leynda hluti.*

Óðinn took the head and smeared it with herbs which do not rot, and spoke charms over it and empowered it so that it spoke with him and shared with him a great many secrets.

(*ÍF Heimskringla I* (2002: 13) and author's translation)

This account goes to further Óðinn's necromantic reputation for and skills in receiving hidden knowledge. It has also been suggested that Mímir's head (i.e. a magical tool) was once a shamanistic mask and that by the time it arrives in medieval literature, the head had become a pagan 'relic' akin to those of the saints (Lindow 2000).<sup>168</sup> However, this conclusion remains little but conjecture. The discussion surrounding the figure of Mímir remains unresolved but there is one theory that has been neither dismissed nor corroborated: that Mímir hides behind the line of *Hávamál* 140, *nám ek inom frægia syni / Bólþors, Bestlu föður* 'I took from the famous son of Bólþór, Bestla's father' (see §4.1) and fills the role of this unnamed *jötunn* maternal uncle (below). As a final codicil, the discussion as to the nature of Mímir's well serves to point out the origins of the well's apparent source of expansive or, in fact all, knowledge: the well lies beneath the root of Yggdrasill that reaches toward the frost giants and as some

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<sup>168</sup> See Gunnell (2007) for the use of masks in Nordic cultures.

have concluded forms a link between the lands of the living and the dead (Clunies Ross 1994: 215, Kure 2006b: 3).

The final and arguably most famous acts of Óðinn's necromancy arise when he resurrects and forcibly questions the dead *vǫlvur* 'prophetesses' in order to learn about the clouded future (*Vǫluspá*, *Baldrs draumar*). However, due to the complexity of these events, a line of investigation specifically focussed on the *vǫlvur* cannot be undertaken within the confines of this thesis. For now, it shall be concluded that from the above literary examples it is reasonably evident that Óðinn's ability to coerce the dead was well known during the Viking Age. Therefore, in returning to the hanging events, evidently the sacrificed individuals were believed to carry or have access to knowledge that Óðinn was willing to reward his acolytes for. Therefore it is informative to investigate the literary tradition for resurrecting the dead purely in order to relieve them of their hidden knowledge to show that Óðinn's practice was far from extraordinary.

#### 7.1.1 Resurrections for Knowledge

Despite the rarity, or limited nature of both participants and examples regarding Óðinn and the resurrection of the dead, eddic poetry appears to display a recognised motif of unearthing the dead in order to receive information and often magical spells or items otherwise unavailable to the living. Furthermore, these were considered dangerous but valuable commodities and very powerful in practice once extracted from the often unwilling participant.<sup>169</sup>

##### 7.1.1.1 *Vǫluspá*

*Vǫluspá* contains the most discussed example of the conflict between Óðinn and the dead, which begins with Óðinn having somehow located and resurrected a deceased primordial *vǫlva* and asks/tells her to speak of the times before the world, how it was created and prophesy how it shall end. Here both gods and men learn of *ragnarøk* and Óðinn must prepare for the coming

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<sup>169</sup> This unwillingness was not always in the face of force or coercion but also to protect the living from things they could not or would not understand in the future (see §7.1.1.5).

invasion of the frost giants and the apocalypse.<sup>170</sup> In contrast to most examples of Óðinn's dealings with the dead, the *völva* under question is afforded respect, payment and even shows herself as equal to Óðinn's rank by questioning his knowledge and proving hers to be on par (or in fact better) despite, or as a result of, being dead (cf. *Völuspá* sts 27-29). As Dronke (1997: 100) states, "she is a link between gods and men, telling them of their past, as Óðinn asks her to. She speaks as his equal."

#### 7.1.1.2 *Baldrs Draumar*

In opposition to the position of power held, even in death, by the *völva* of *Völuspá*, *Baldrs draumar* displays a more forceful extraction of information. Disguised and travelling to the boundaries of Hel's realm in order to discover the fate of his son, Óðinn resurrects another dead *völva* and forces her to reveal how and when his son would die.<sup>171</sup> As *Baldrs draumar* 4 states:

<i>Þá reið Óðinn</i>	Then Óðinn rode
<i>fyr austan dyrr,</i>	by the eastern doors,
<i>þar er hann vissi</i>	there where he knew
<i>völu leiði;</i>	the seeress' grave to be;
<i>nam hann vittugri</i>	skilled in sorcery, he took
<i>valgaldr kveða,</i>	a spell to raise the dead and
<i>unz nauðig reis,</i>	spoke,
<i>nás orð um qvað:</i>	until reluctantly she rose,
	speaking corpse words to
	demand:

(*ÍF Eddukvæði I* (2014: 446) and author's translation)

The resulting conflict between the two figures is core to the poem as the *völva* on three separate occasions states *Nauðug sagðak / nú mun ek pegja* "Unwillingly I spoke, now I must be

<sup>170</sup> One may note the literal translation of the Greek term *ἀποκάλυψις*, 'a disclosure of knowledge, a revelation esp. of divine mysteries' (Liddell and Scott 1925: 201).

<sup>171</sup> A back and forth discussion has taken place over the identity of this figure ranging from Loki to his mother, the giantess Angrboða 'the one who brings grief' (cf. Lindow 1997: 46-47).

silent”” whereas Óðinn replies each time, *Þegjattu, vǫlva! / þik vil ek fregna, / unz alkunna, / vil ek enn vita*. ““Don’t be silent *vǫlva!* I will question you until I know everything, I will know more.”” (*ÍF Eddukvæði I* 2014: 447-448). This tone suggests that Óðinn has come close to the information he needs and will not relent. Furthermore, it should be noted that whilst under questioning, the *vǫlva* acts as both a resident of Hel’s realm and as a seeress, answering questions about the realm itself as well as the future. Despite her evident reluctance and efforts to resist, Óðinn continues to draw out her knowledge until a particular question dispels his disguise and the spell breaks. This incident could be seen akin to the ‘taking’ outlined in *Hávamál* 140 but as has been highlighted above, one question has continually dogged this stanza: just whom the knowledge is being taken *from*.

Therefore, one returns once more to the question of Óðinn’s unknown maternal uncle. Many scholars (Rydberg 1886: 122, 481-483, Sijmons and Gering 1901: 38-40, Bellows 1923: 61, Puhvel 1987: 218, Clunies Ross 1994: 214-215, 227, Schjødt 2008: 182-183) have suggested that Mímir should or could fill the role. Yet despite the multiple theories put forward by these scholars, few but Rydberg has ever included *why* they might conclude Mímir to fill this role and simply acknowledge the possibility. The case is largely based upon *Sigrdrífumál* sts 13-14 in which it is stated that Óðinn discovered the runes by means of a liquid acquired from Heiðdraupnir’s skull and Hoðdrofnir’s horn.<sup>172</sup> This is then followed by the description of Mímir’s (here Míms) head speaking *fróðligt it fyrsta orð / ok sagði sanna staði* ‘wisely the first word and told true letters’ (*ÍF Eddukvæði II* 2014: 316), which is then followed by a list of runes and their uses. At first glance, rather than implying that Mímir taught Óðinn the runes, this description of fluid from a skull, presumably blood, and fluid from a horn, perhaps mead, instead brings the figure of Kvasir immediately to mind, and therefore the Mead of Poetry.<sup>173</sup>

Yet it is not Óðinn that speaks the runes: whilst the Mead may have allowed him to fathom them, it appears that he still learns of their physical use from the head of Mímir when it speaks in *Sigrdrífumál* sts 15-17. *Sigrdrífumál* 18 suggests that these runes were later scraped off their original surfaces and then stirred into mead. Therefore it appears that the Mead was gained after Óðinn’s hanging and was a necessary tool, along with the knowledge of the dead, for Óðinn to fathom and use that which he had already acquired. This seems equally fitting

<sup>172</sup> The identities of the figures behind the names Heiðdraupnir ‘bright-dropper’ and Hoðdrofnir ‘hoard-tearer’ are entirely unknown.

<sup>173</sup> Kvasir, supposedly the wisest being in the Norse universe, was murdered by dwarves in order to create the Mead of Poetry from his blood once mixed with honey (*Skáldskaparmál* 5).

with the content of *Hávamál* in that Óðinn acquires the runes, the songs and then drinks of the Mead to facilitate his ‘quickenings’. Yet the possibility that the poet of *Sigrdrífumál* simply had no knowledge of Óðinn’s own hanging or did not wish to reference the event is equally plausible. Interpretation of individual words, especially in translation, lies in the hands of the translator but it appears that the Mead is a facilitating item for using the runes rather than discovering them. What this poem does not suggest is that Mímir can therefore be identified with Óðinn’s unknown uncle from whom the *fimbulkjóð níu* ‘nine mighty songs’ are learned. In this example, he instead speaks the runes and the method of their use.

In contrast to this discussion and in line with this dismissal, McKinnell (2005: 206-210, 2007a: 99-105) has a remarkably different and engaging hypothesis. McKinnell suggests that the poet of *Hávamál* modified the “traditional pattern” of a protagonist awakening a dead female relative or *völva* to Óðinn travelling to the realm of the dead in person (so to speak) through marked suffering in order to receive this knowledge from an unnamed uncle rather than, as one might expect from the highlighted pattern, his mother. He disregards Mímir by suggesting that the unknown uncle of *Hávamál* 140 goes unnamed as he is invented purely for this occasion. It is argued that the poet did alter the gender of the informant in order to first clear Óðinn of the disgrace attached to men seeking sorcerous power (cf. Ström 1974, Sørensen 1983, Tolley 2009: 155-164) and second, to promote his own power and inherent manliness in suffering and obtaining wisdom on his own terms. Whilst this theory may be simple speculation on behalf of the poet’s intentions and respect/belief in the deity, McKinnell’s theory is rather tempting. Since the Viking Age opinion on the male use of what was considered female magic was far from kind, this event could have been seen to further dent Óðinn’s patriarchal image and this poet may have stepped in to deflect the impact. Nonetheless, despite this temptation, Clunies Ross (1994: 227) may be correct in simply dismissing both arguments surrounding this uncle as entirely unanswerable and stating that either conclusion would fit the narrative, providing the required storehouse of *jötunn* knowledge for Óðinn to exploit.

### 7.1.1.3 *Grógaldr*

Controversial as the dating of eddic poetry may be, *Grógaldr* is considered to be a rather late addition to the eddic corpus, perhaps as late as the thirteenth century (McKinnell 2005: 202). In this instance, Svipdagr consults his dead mother by resurrecting her temporarily from the grave. Svipdagr, or the name itself, represents a strong Óðinnic figure and appears to be heavily

connected with the deity throughout the mythological corpus. *Snorra Edda (Prologue)* lists a Svipdagr as a direct descendant of Óðinn himself and the same appears to be true for the Svipdagr of *Hrólfs saga kraka* (14-32). *Ynglinga saga* (34-38) portrays Svipdagr as the blind foster-father, akin to the role played by Óðinn in *Gautreks saga*. The Svipdagr of *Grógaldr* later enters into a wisdom contest with a man named Fjølsviðr (*Fjølsvinnsmál*) as part of his quest, which we recognise as an *Óðinsheiti* (*Grímnismál* 47). Returning to the resurrection, *Grógaldr* 1 states:

<p>“<i>Vaki þú Gróa, vaki þú, góð kona! Vek ek þik dauðra dura, ef þú þat mant at þú þinn mög bæðir til kumbl dysjar koma.</i>”</p>	<p>“Wake up Gróa, wake up, good woman! I wake you at death's door, if you recall that you bade your son to come to your grave mound.”</p>
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(*ÍF Eddukvæði II* (2014: 437) and author's translation)

It should be first noted that as McKinnell (2005: 202-203) shows, Gróa appears to be a common *völva* name and therefore this example sits among the more likely examples of said magical women. Gróa does not appear to be recalled from somewhere within the land of the dead as is the *völva* in *Baldrs draumar* and instead simply rises from where she lies within her mound.<sup>174</sup> Svipdagr requests her help in advance of a perilous quest and she sings nine spells (*Grógaldr* sts 6-14) designed to keep him safe from physical and magical harm. This is curiously reminiscent of the *fimbulljóð níu* ‘nine mighty songs’ acquired by Óðinn in *Hávamál*. It is also significant to note that his mother first asks what peril Svipdagr must be in to warrant waking the dead, further exemplifying the dangerous forces believed to be involved. Consequently, this example displays a strong connection with Óðinn, the quest for hidden knowledge of the dead and the means of its retrieval.

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<sup>174</sup> Yet, with the possibility of both dwelling in a mound and some form of afterlife, this is not a firm conclusion (cf. *Helgakviða Hundingbana II*).

#### 7.1.1.4 *Hyndluljóð*

In this example, the opening of *Hyndluljóð* 1 is curiously similar to that of *Grógaldur*:

<i>Vaki, mæðr meýja!</i>	Wake up, virginal maiden
<i>Vaki, mín vina,</i>	Wake up, my friend,
<i>Hyndla systir</i>	sister Hyndla
<i>er í helli býr!</i>	who dwells in the slab of rock!
<i>Nú er rökkr rökkra,</i>	Now it's the darkest darkness,
<i>riða vit skulum</i>	lets both ride
<i>til Valhallar</i>	to Valhøll,
<i>ok til vés heilags.</i>	to the sacred temple.

(*ÍF Eddukvæði II* (2014: 460) and author's translation)

Consequently, it could be argued that the opening of *Hyndluljóð* shows Freyja similarly resurrecting a *jötunn vølva* who can answer the questions required. *Hyndluljóð* sts 6-7 states that the two women are travelling along *valsinni* 'road of the slain', which various translations have glossed as Valhøll (cf. Larrington 1999: 254). However it seems curious that a *jötunn* would be resident, alive or dead, upon the road to Valhøll. Thus it does not seem impossible to conclude that these two women were initially travelling along a similar path as Óðinn had taken in his travels to Hel and the questioning of a *vølva* to then proceed in the direction of Valhøll. The inference of Hyndla's *vølva* status can be derived from the formulaic refrain that appears in *Hyndluljóð* sts 18, 31, 34 and 39: *viltu enn lengra?* 'do you want even more?' These can be seen to be in common with the statements of the *vølva* throughout *Vølusþá*. That Hyndla ends the discourse by wishing to return to sleep is also reminiscent of the behaviour of the *vølva* in the closing stanzas *Baldur's draumar* and the end of her 'discussion' with Óðinn.

#### 7.1.1.5 *Gesta Danorum*

In this instance, Saxo records the tale of Hading (the brother-in-law of Svipdagr) and Harthgrepa (female *jötunn*) coming across a funeral/wake of a recently dead man. Seizing the opportunity for hidden information, Harthgrepa makes use of the dead man for divination:

Desiring to probe the will of the gods by magic, she inscribed most gruesome spells on wood and made Hading insert them under the corpse's tongue, which then, in a voice terrible to the ear, uttered these lines:

(Davidson and Fisher 1996: 23-24)

This dead spirit first curses at length the individual that called him from the underworld and fights being “forced to disclose bitter information”. A great deal of this incident is reminiscent of the events displayed in *Baldrs draumar* (i.e. the forcible extraction of information) with the dead individual predicting the death of their offender. As a result, this further displays an apparently generally understood motif of being able to coerce the resurrected dead (if skilled) into speaking of hidden information against their will and the likely retribution for disturbing the natural order.

This danger of upsetting the natural order can be best exemplified in the stanzas of *Hervarar saga*. When Hervor wakes her dead father (note the style, *vaki þú*, see Turville-Petre 1976: 17) in order to claim the cursed sword Tyrfang, he suggests she must be *ær ertu orðin ok orviti, vill hyggjandi, vegr upp dauða men* ‘mad, witless and lost to wisdom to rouse dead men’ (Turville-Petre 1976: 17). Ignoring her father's warnings, the sword eventually provides victory and vengeance but ultimately leads to her death. This motif surrounding the reluctance of the dead is intriguing and it seems that their protests must be ignored, whatever the cost, in order to be successful. It is almost as if the dead are reluctant to inform the living of the suffering they face and of the suffering to come in the afterlife. Yet this suffering is not physical: it appears to instead be based on gaining knowledge that becomes painful or difficult to bear.

From these particular examples it is evident that the dead are thought to possess knowledge beyond the ken of mortals or even the Æsir and that Óðinn in particular was considered to hold this knowledge in the highest regard. It is also evident that the dead possessors of this knowledge were considered mindful of giving it away as it was purchased with their death, hence the often forceful nature of its extraction. Yet this is not the only factor. It is also true that this knowledge could bring suffering to the living, further discouraging the dead to speak. As observed in *Hávamál*, *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*, there is no situation in which Óðinn would have been able to coerce these individuals into revealing their carefully guarded secrets in life. Instead in death, heedless of the possible dangers, they are akin to an

open book and were believed to be a valuable asset in the face of Óðinn's sorcery and runic knowledge.

## 7.2 Walking a Dangerous Line

It is evident from the mythology surrounding Óðinn's quest for the knowledge of the dead, the lengths he would go to and the difficulties of its acquisition was recognised among poets and saga writers alike. If this represents genuine belief during the Viking Age, one begins to formulate a possible understanding of the motives behind and beliefs associated with, the hanging ritual. If acolytes considered the knowledge of the dead as one of the most valuable assets to their god, by hanging an individual in a tree and perhaps even 'marking' them for Óðinn, they could offer the individual as a source of information from within the realm of the dead, a form of unwilling scout who Óðinn could resurrect and question. Despite Schjødtt (1993: 266) concluding that there was no way to tell if the sacrifice was said to gain knowledge from being hanged, he was speaking from the stance of hanging as an initiation. Without this imposed boundary of the initiatory model, the dead individual can be seen to have gained knowledge but at the expense of their life and as a result of their residence in the world of the dead. There was to be no shamanistic return involved.

Consequently, acolytes would surely hope for Óðinn to accept this significant gift and in return remain on good terms with the god as well as securing further victory in war. However this does not mean that belief functioned solely in this way. It is equally possible that this sacrifice simply meant that those offering it could continue to operate within the realms dominated by Óðinn akin to Nordic hunters offering the overseeing spirit or deity of the forest or water a portion of their catch (cf. Honko *et al.* 1994: 118). It is proposed here however that the dedicated battle dead would fulfil this role, leaving sacrificial hanging as a special case. After the fact one would expect some form of divination, some way to ensure that the sacrifice had been accepted and the signs were now favourable. Here we return, presumably, to the practice of lot casting but again, this is not the only means. Honko *et al.* (1994: 119) suggest that in hunting rituals, an offering could be judged worthy or not on the basis of the next hunt or catch with no other visible sign expected. One could comment that in war, this is particularly risky but would not be out of place when treating with Óðinn.

Thus the ritual by hanging should not be seen as simply an offering of a particular individual to the war god for victory but rather through use of a human being, an offering of the information they may acquire as residents in the realm of the dead. As Ström (1942: 147) puts it “they are the communicators of the dark secrets whose possession creates Odin’s magical power [...] they are the media of knowledge”. Consequently, it has been shown thus far that sacrificial hanging was a multifaceted ritual. Yet with this combination of function, one final factor becomes apparent: the consequences of this ritual do not end in the death of the sacrifice. It can be observed that performing this ritual carried significant danger and for the hanged individual, represented an incredible loss far beyond that of their own death.

### 7.2.1 A Proper Death

When we speak of death as an expected element of life, as with many historical periods prior to our modern age of medicine, death was far closer and ‘real’ to the individuals of those societies. Individuals across all communities would be lost in battle, on foreign raids or simply from illness, accident or famine. As *Hávamál* 16 puts it:

<i>Ósnjallr maðr</i>	The foolish man
<i>hyggsk munu ey lifa,</i>	thinks he will live forever,
<i>ef hann við víg varask,</i>	if he keeps away from battle,
<i>en elli gefr</i>	but old age
<i>honum engi frið,</i>	will not grant him a truce,
<i>þótt honum geirar gefi.</i>	though the spears might do.

(*ÍF Eddukvæði II* (2014: 460) and author’s translation)

With death so close at hand and the importance placed upon attaining the correct afterlife, it is clear that the concept of *memory* becomes a core ideal and thus should be considered as one of the most highly regarded aspects of particularly elite culture. As numerous scholars have shown, this factor can be seen to pervade orality, literature and archaeology (Price 2010: 149-151, Andrén 1992).

*Sonatorrek*, composed by Egill Skallagrímnasson, is most enlightening in regards to the idea of it being ‘proper’ to die. Despite his anger and sorrow, stanza 21 shows that whilst Egill mourns for himself and his loss, he does not mourn for the ultimate fate of his sons:

<i>Þat man ek enn</i>	I remember when he,
<i>er upp um hóf</i>	the friend of the Gauts [Óðinn],
<i>í goðheim,</i>	raised up
<i>Gauta spjalli</i>	into the home of the gods,
<i>ættar ask</i>	the ash-tree of my family
<i>þann er óx af mér</i>	which sprouted from me
<i>ok kynvið</i>	and the kin-branch
<i>kvánar minnar.</i>	of my wife.

(Bjarni Einarsson (2003:153) and author’s translation)

Upset as he may be, the main sense of this stanza is proud, yet sad reflection as Egill considers a time in which Óðinn claimed a son and took him to Valhøll. Mourn he may, but he is content that his son has been taken into the hands of his god to be among his ancestors. He makes his faith clear in his clever choice of words that describe both his literal family tree by way of the common kenning for humans (i.e. trees) and the mythological ties between trees, mankind and Óðinn (see §3.1.2.1). The sentiment that death is proper and unavoidable can further be seen in *Hamðismál* 31 when two warriors reflect on their lives, concluding that they had achieved great things until this point and that their luck had finally run out. Yet this sentiment is hardly exclusive to the Viking Norse. An example from the Irish mythological corpus, *The Ulster Cycle* (featuring arguably Ireland’s greatest mythological figure, Cú Chulainn), reflects these thoughts. When the young Cú Chulainn chooses to become a warrior, he does so on a day when it was prophesied whoever took up arms on that day would become great but live only a brief life. In response he replied: ““Wonderful news that...for if I am famous, I will be happy even to live just one day.”” (Gantz 1981: 141). It is evident that for those striving for recognition and renown, death was inevitable but proper memorial was essential. It simply depended on how long you were to be allotted.

*Sonatorrek* is but one example of an entire genre of memorial and glorification poetry and it is vital to remember that poets, by nature of their profession, were attached to the noble houses and courts of Viking Age Scandinavia. Their work was used to entertain, exemplify and

praise their patrons and as such the content would no doubt reflect the themes or ideas held in that environment. With the importance placed upon living reputation, a warrior's death and the resulting reunion with the ancestors, a final danger with regards to the practice of ritual hanging becomes apparent. Elite families throughout the Viking Age held to the traditions of their forebears preserving them in both poetry and legend, held honour in the highest esteem (with reputation interwoven with this ideal), placed great import on lineage and could even be said to worship their ancestors.<sup>175</sup> Whilst death was natural and to be expected (as it was the only way to enter Valhøll), if defeated in battle and captured, a leader, chieftain or king ran the risk of being ritually hanged as an offering to Óðinn. If this were to occur, the individual would be stripped from their living family and their dead ancestors waiting in the afterlife and instead ride the 'horse of death' (i.e. the gallows, see §4.1.2) to Hel's realm and become a resident of the Underworld. In the face of memorial culture, this punishment seems a most deliberate and extreme thing to inflict upon an individual and would no doubt have been seen as a grievous insult and great loss by surviving kinsmen. This in turn carries further risk in the feuding society that so dominated the Viking Age: revenge (in this case, by remaining family or comrades), was commonplace. As *Ynglingatal* exemplifies, hanging a personal foe was not the same as execution through the legal system but one motivated by individual action. Vengeance is more than permitted; it was expected.

### 7.3 Conclusions

Through various genres of literature, it has been shown that the resurrection of dead individuals as a storehouse of hidden information was far from a niche, Óðinnic concept. Therefore, it becomes plausible to conclude that *knowledge* and the enactment of a trade was to be the driving factor behind ritually hanged men when coupled with Óðinn's believed ability to resurrect them. Yet faith aside, this ritual had a further, and arguably tremendously, destructive social role. Thus it can be concluded that defeat in combat and suffering capture and hanging rather than death in battle was not an option to be preferred, making the dangers of failure far

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<sup>175</sup> Yet as was mentioned in the outset of this thesis, it is interesting to note that little specific scholarship has addressed the question of ancestor worship during Viking Age society. The most extensive book was published in 1938 by Emil Birkeli entitled *Fedrekult i Norge: et forsøk på en systematisk-deskriptiv fremstilling*. Yet this trend has begun to change with the 2015 PhD thesis focussed on this subject by Triin Laidoner entitled *Ancestors, their Worship and the Elite in the Viking Age and Early Medieval Scandinavia*.

too great. In this case hanging fulfilled the role of ritual practice, summary justice and a most extreme threat, thus combining penal and sacral roles.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that this situation would presumably only have concerned the warrior castes of Viking society and these lofty ideals and ritual practices would have been limited to a small, closed off and possibly secretive group. Consequently, with the possible power of this ritual, we would expect that the particulars of the process were tightly guarded among the upper echelons of Viking Age society and the religious cult. This makes it clear that, as has been evidenced numerous times, it should not be expected that any real depth of material or further literary evidence for this ritual can be found.

## Chapter Eight

### Collective Conclusions and Future Study

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#### 8.0 Collective Conclusions

It has been argued by various scholars that Óðinn's own hanging created a prototype for the limited and exclusive practice of human sacrifice during the Viking Age and I have argued in favour of Óðinn's self-immolation being regarded as such. I further suggest that the sources reveal this event to be a martyrdom rather than a sacrifice to himself in order to reach an enlightened state through the prolonged mortification allowed by hanging (rather than more immediate methods). Consequently, I propose that this event should not be understood within the realms of what Chapter Four denotes as 'classical shamanism' based on non-native practices (a practice that the Vikings were at best, familiar with, in this period), but that it cannot be denied that similarities do remain. On the other hand, when this ritual was applied to mortal individuals, there is no inference from the source material, literary or physical, of shamanistic practices whatsoever and I have concluded this largely on the basis of its sheer impractical nature. No person could be put through the real, unadulterated, ordeal of hanging by the neck from a tree for prolonged periods without the certainty of death. That human sacrifice by hanging was practised in the Viking Age has been shown to be a very real factor in the light of the widespread and interconnected place-name evidence, literary reference (native, foreign, contemporary and later) and archaeological material. Yet it is without doubt that this practice was incredibly rare and only undertaken in times of dire need or perceived threat and concerned only the upper strata of society.

Ritual hanging itself was not simply a method of worship and gratitude but also a method of punishment, revenge and social destruction that ultimately created the grounds for a trade between mortal and god. Furthermore, the image of the hanged body, publicly displayed, made a clear statement of authority and divine association. In this instance, the individual was believed to have been sent to Hel where his hanged body would await resurrection by Óðinn for later questioning, forcible or otherwise. This trade was undertaken in order to facilitate further victory and opportunity for glory in return for providing Óðinn with further hidden knowledge from the realm of the dead. Ultimately, the overarching theme here is memory and as Lindow (2001: 232) put it, "Memory is something especially understood by Odin [...] It stands at the very centre of the Odinnic universe."

## 8.1 Future Work and Further Study

As with most subjects of study, an undertaking such as this reveals further associated topics and influences that cannot be discussed or investigated at any length due to the restrictions placed upon both time and space. Therefore, areas of study that I believe that would be of future benefit to this topic follow below.

### 8.1.1. Social Consequences

As was highlighted by the possible events surrounding the Oseberg ship (see §6.4.3) burial and the very real executions at Sutton Hoo (see §6.5.4), it is feasible that ritual hanging may have played a further or even greater funerary role, particularly in the destruction of social memory. It is also evident that hanging may have played a role in periods of socio-religious strife concerning the pagan Germanic people in the face of Christianity but hints towards this practice are all that can be discussed here. Ultimately, I believe these roles would have been centred on memorialisation and propaganda, coupled with divine presence/consecration. Consequently, these interlinked fields require further investigation, but this must be left for another project or for future scholars to pursue.

### 8.1.2 Literary Consequences

I believe that the discussion surrounding Óðinn's own hanging will never see decisive conclusions but advocate that the discussion surrounding motivation and result should at least be taken back into the surrounds of Viking-based practice exclusively, seeking answers from within its own respective culture. Yet Óðinn's hanging and its motivations shed further light on other mythological material. For example, if Óðinn's hanging and the resulting sacrifices were indeed performed in order to infiltrate Hel and undertaken in order to pass knowledge on to Óðinn, this highlights a further facet of the conflict between Óðinn and female figures, as well as possibly gender based concepts of the unknown, unseen and the dead. This is exemplified, especially when considering the examples of Óðinn resurrecting dead *vǫlvur*. Further research in developing the vengeance tale that can be argued to underline the events of *ragnarøk* and the revenge of Loki's children (of which Hel's (arguably gendered, passive but vital) role remains underplayed) would also be beneficial to this study.

Óðinn's shameful death and acquisition of further supernatural powers has also been shown to highlight the social difficulties that surrounded men acting in female domains and in this case, the gender consequences of a man seeking sorcerous power and knowledge from the realm of the female. With gender studies and a focus on societal shame currently experiencing a resurgence in connection with the Viking world and its ritual, these fields will no doubt influence and expand this topic in time.

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