***Herjans dísir*:**

Valkyrjur, Supernatural Femininities, and Elite Warrior Culture in the Late Pre-Christian Iron Age

Luke John Murphy

Lokaverkefni til MA–gráðu í Norrænni trú

Félagsvísindasvið

HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Herjans dísir: *Valkyrjur*, Supernatural Femininities, and Elite Warrior Culture in the Late Pre-Christian Iron Age

Luke John Murphy

Lokaverkefni til MA–gráðu í Norrænni trú

Leiðbeinandi: Terry Gunnell

Félags- og mannvísindadeild

Félagsvísindasvið Háskóla Íslands

2013

Reykjavík, Ísland 2013

ABSTRACT

Herjans dísir: *Valkyrjur*, Supernatural Feminities, and Elite Warrior Culture in the Late Pre-Christian Iron Age

This thesis is a study of the *valkyrjur* ('valkyries') during the late Iron Age, specifically of the various uses to which the myths of these beings were put by the hall-based warrior elite of the society which created and propagated these religious phenomena. It seeks to establish the relationship of the various *valkyrja* reflexes of the culture under study with other supernatural females (particularly the *dísir*) through the close and careful examination of primary source material, thereby proposing a new model of base supernatural femininity for the late Iron Age. The study then goes on to examine how the *valkyrjur* themselves deviate from this ground state, interrogating various aspects and features associated with them in skaldic, Eddic, prose and iconographic source material as seen through the lens of the hall-based warrior elite, before presenting a new understanding of *valkyrja* phenomena in this social context: that *valkyrjur* were used as instruments to propagate the pre-existing social structures of the culture that created and maintained them throughout the late Iron Age.

ÚTDRÁTTUR

Herjans dísir: *Valkyrjur*, yfirnáttúrulegar kvenverur og vígamannamenning höfðingja á síðari hluta járnaldar

Þessi ritgerð er athugun á valkyrjunum á seinni tímum járn aldar, með sérstöku tilliti til þeirrar notkunar sem stríðshöfðingjar þjóðfélagsins sóttu í, sköpuðu og ýttu undir slík trúarleg fyrirbrigði. Sóst er eftir að staðsetja tengsl milli mismunandi gerða valkyrja og annarra yfirnáttúrulegra kvenvera (þá sérstaklega dísirnar), gegnum nána og varkfærnislega skoðun á heimildum. Þaðan af verður dregin tillaga að nýrri skipan að grunni yfirnáttúrulegra kvenvera á seinni tímum járnaldar. Ritgerðin mun þá ransaka frávik valkyrjanna frá grunn stigi, með grannskoðun á hinum ýmsu einkennum þeim tengdum í skáldlegu, óbundnu máli, og sjónrænum heimildum, með tilliti til sjónarmiðs þeirrar menningar sem stríðshöfðingja þessa tíma bjuggu við. Að lokum er borin fram nýr skilningur á valkyrjunum í þessu félagslega samhengi: að valkyrjur þjónuðu sem áhöld til þess að útbreiða fyrirliggjandi félagsskipan þess þjóðfélags sem skapaði og viðhélt þeim í gegnum síðari hluta járn aldar.[1]

[1] My thanks to Árni K. Guðmundsson, Embla Þórsdóttir and Haukur Þorgeirsson for their invaluable linguistic assistance with the drafting of this Icelandic text.

CONTENTS

Word Count (excluding Critical Apparatus): 44,914 words, 146 pages

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Valkyries and *Valkyrjur*

The *valkyrjur*, those armed and armoured psychopomps of Óðinn's hall, lovers of human heroes, and teachers of numinous knowledge, might at first seem an odd choice for the subject of an academic study, not because they are so obscure or poorly attested – quite the opposite – but rather because they are so well-established in western culture, and have been especially so since Richard Wagner's operas of the 1860s and 70s.[2] Popularised since then by media as diverse as Arthur Rackham's illustrations (figure 1.A),[3] American comic books (figure 1.B),[4] and numerous computer games,[5] the stereotypical valkyrie remains an easily recognisable figure: a statuesque woman with blonde braids in a horned or winged helmet, typically carrying a spear, clad in a flowing dress and gleaming breastplate, with Bronze-Age sun-discs on her belt.

Yet, as prevalent as this image of the *valkyrjur* might be in modern culture, I am confident that – perhaps due to the very extremities to which the *valkyrja* motif has been driven by modern media in recent decades – the scholarly community is well aware of the difference between the modern 'valkyrie' and the Iron-Age *valkyrja*. As such, I am not as despairing as Karen Bek-Pedersen, who, in the introduction to her 2011 volume on the *nornir*, briefly summarised prevailing attitudes to her subject matter, before writing that:

---

2 For an introduction to Wagner's operatic works based on the Old Norse Völsung cycle and the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, see Barry Millington, '*Der Ring des Nibelungen*: Conception and Interpretation', *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 74-84.

3 See Rackham's illustrations to Richard Wagner, *The Rhinegold & the Valkyrie*, trans. Margaret Armour (London and New York: William Heinmann and Doubleday Pace & Co., 1910), esp. pp. 138 and 148.

4 There are many figures based on *valkyrjur* motifs in graphic novels and comic books, the best known – and most archetypical – being a character called 'Valkyrie,' a female superhero in the Marvel Comics universe created by Roy Thomas and John Buscema, who debuted in *The Avengers* vol. 1 #83, December 1970.

5 The highest-profile '*valkyrjur*' in electronic media are perhaps the protagonists of the ongoing Japanese *Valkyrie Profile* series (Tokyo: Square Enix, 1999-) and the jetpack-equipped medics of the 2008 science-fiction title *Too Human* (St. Catharines: Silicon Knights, 2008).

> That, at least, is what you have probably always thought. Nothing as mundane as the facts of the matter is likely to quash the stereotypes, I suppose, but I have set myself the task of attempting to quash them nonetheless. This book is here to change your mind.[6]

Unlike Bek-Pedersen, I am unconvinced that the stereotype itself deserves quashing: it seems to me that the modern valkyrie has evolved from her Iron-Age *valkyrja* ancestress and taken on a life of her own, spreading to a wide range of media, genres, and cultures. I would argue that the modern valkyrie is a valid cultural phenomenon in her own right, and I wish to avoid any tacit implications that such modern conceptions are somehow incorrect or of inferior value to their Iron-Age and medieval predecessors. (Indeed, depictions of the valkyrie in modern media would make for a fascinating study, albeit one that is beyond the scope of this thesis.) These ideas are perfectly valid in their own, modern, contexts, representing as they do how modern people think about the idea of 'the valkyrie', but the difference in semantic values attached to the valkyries by the people of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, and those attached to the *valkyrjur* of the late Iron Age (and subsequent High Middle Ages), makes the use of another term for the pre-Christian mythological beings highly desirable. As such, I will refer to the modern concept of statuesque blondes in armour and winged helmets with the modern English term 'valkyrie', but will use the standardised Classical Old Norse/Icelandic word '*valkyrja*' (pl. '*valkyrjur*') to refer to the pre-Christian mythological figures.[7]

This is admittedly both somewhat anachronistic – as many of textual sources written in the Old West Norse language that refer to the *valkyrjur* were recorded after the conversion of northern Europe to Christianity (in some cases hundreds of years after the decline of paganism) – and somewhat arbitrary, as the *valkyrja* and valkyrie have

---

6 Karen Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology* (Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2011), p. xiii.

7 This decision is, in some ways, the result of a debate at the 'Gods and Goddesses on the Edge: Myth and Liminality in the North' conference that was held in Reykjavík December 2010, where participants discussed the appropriateness of translating the Old Norse/Icelandic word '*jötunn*' with the modern English 'giant'. Although many of the conference delegates were unconvinced of the need to differentiate between modern and Iron-Age understandings of mythological beings, in some cases – including that of the *valkyrjur* and the *jötnar* – I believe it is appropriate. *cf.* also Terry Gunnell, 'How Elvish were the *Álfar*?', *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth: Essays in Honour of T.A. Shippey*, ed. Andrew Wawn, Graham Johnson and John Walter (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 111-130.

Left: Figure 1.A , Arthur Rackham, "Brünnhilde", illustration to Richard Wagner, *The Rhinegold & the Valkyrie*, trans. Margaret Armour (London and New York: William Heinmann and Doubleday Pace & Co., 1910), p. 102.

Right: Figure 1.B, Valkyrie, a superheroine from the Marvel Universe. Image Source: The Comic Book Database.

had and will continue to have tremendous effects on each other's semantic content, as modern consumers of the valkyrie consult source material and scholarship on the *valkyrja*, and the valkyrie influences the cultural milieu which produces many (if not most) of the students and scholars interested in the *valkyrja*. It may also prove that some pre-Christian sources on the *valkyrjur* record evidence in other languages entirely, making this decision still more arbitrary. However, I believe that the distinction between the *valkyrjur* and the valkyries – the pre-Christian mythological beings recorded in medieval manuscripts and archaeological material on the one hand, and the statuesque warrior-blondes appearing on our film screens, comic-book pages, and video-game box art on the other – is an important one.

For students and scholars of pre-Christian Nordic culture, history, and myth, however, what we call these beings is almost certainly not as important as the ways in which we seek to understand how they were conceived and made use of by the society

that sustained them in the late Iron Age. Surely these ever-popular beings are well understood, thoroughly debated and discussed, their every idiosyncrasy the subject of numerous scholarly articles? Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Although there is undoubtedly a respectable body of scholarship in which *valkyrjur* receive mention – John Lindow's *Scandinavian Mythology: An Annotated Bibliography* lists 28 relevant publications published before 1988, although many are only tangentially related[8] – the brevity with which they are examined by many of the major reference works on pre-Christian Nordic religions is worthy of note. Jan de Vries' *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* devotes less than two pages to them;[9] Gabriel Turville-Petre's *Myth and Religion of the North* lacks even an index entry;[10] Folke Ström's *Nordisk Hedendom* splits four pages between "Diser, valkyrjur" and "fylgjor";[11] and Lindow's *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs* relegates them to passing mentions in entries on other phenomena.[12] Even the all-encompassing structuralism of Margaret Clunies Ross' *Prolonged Echoes* considers *valkyrjur* only in passing, despite her interest in sex and gender roles.[13] There are, of course, some exceptions: Rudolf Simek's *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* contains a sizeable entry;[14] scholarship on the *valkyrjur* in relation to specific texts (particularly *Darraðarljóð*[15]) and other mythological entities (particularly the *dísir*[16]) has enjoyed sporadic production since the establishment of modern scholarship;[17] and, in 2011, a substantial German-language volume on the

8 John Lindow, *Scandinavian Mythology: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1988), p. 586.

9 Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 3rd edn., 2 vols. (Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1970), §193, pp. 273-274.

10 E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964).

11 Folke Ström, *Nordisk Hedendom*, 2nd edn. (Lund: Berlingska Boktryckeriet, 1967), pp. 192-196.

12 John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

13 Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes I: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), pp. 255-256.

14 Rudolf Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, 2nd edn. (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1995), pp. 471-2.

15 See, for example, Alexander Haggerty Krappe, 'The Valkyrie Episode in the Njals Saga', *Modern Language Notes* 43 (1928), pp. 471-474.

16 See in particular Folke Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor: Fruktbarhetskult och sakralt kungadöme in Norden* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1954), pp. 70-79.

17 See Lindow, *Scandinavian Mythology*, p. 586, for references to (primarily German-language) nineteenth-century scholarship on the *valkyrjur*. Some individual works will be discussed later in this study, where appropriate.

valkyrjur and their Celtic, Etruscan and Classical analogues was published by Matthias Egeler.[18]

Despite these works, however, many questions regarding the *valkyrjur* remain unanswered, and this thesis is intended to address at least some of them. It will offer a thorough examination of the late-Iron Age *valkyrja* and her essential relationship with the masculine, hall-based culture of the warrior aristocracy of the period, and, in doing so, seek to move away from the received view of the *valkyrjur*, based to a large extent upon late-Romantic concepts and Victorian scholarship, which has been so influential and remained largely unquestioned in academic discourse. A prime example of this Romanticised conception of the *valkyrjur* propagated by early scholarship is the description given by John Haywood, who in 2000 still 'defines' them as "[m]aiden warriors who dwelt with the high god ODIN in VALHALLA [...] at Odin's bidding, the valkyries rode into battle to carry the chosen warriors to Valhalla to give them their welcoming cups of mead,"[19] a description highly reminiscent of the illustrated plate entitled 'The Ride of the Valkyrs' by Dollmann (figure 1.C), reproduced in H. A. Guerber's 1908 *Myths of the Norsemen*,[20] where spear-wielding women in flowing cloaks and winged helmets ride flying horses against the backdrop of a storm-wracked sky. In attempting to leave behind such outdated modes of thought, different aspects of *valkyrja* phenomena – including their relationship with other female spirits (particularly the *dísir*), their cosmological mansion in Valhöll, and the function of their psychopompic activities – will be considered, and sources interrogated for evidence of these and other phenomena via twenty-first century methodologies and paradigms, as laid out in the remainder of this introductory chapter.

---

18 Matthias Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen: Gedanken zur religionsgeschichtlichen Anbindung Nordwesteuropas an den mediterranen Raum*, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 71 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).

19 John Haywood, *Encyclopaedia of the Viking Age* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 196.

20 H. A. Guerber, *Myths of the Norsemen: From the Eddas and Sagas* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1908), p. 176.

1.2 Sources

Any scientific methodology should, of course, attempt to find the best way to make sense of the available evidence – no mean feat, in the case of pre-Christian religious phenomena. The source situation regarding the *valkyrjur* as a religious phenomenon (or multiple religious phenomena) in the late Iron Age is a case in point, and could probably be described as 'confused' at best, with direct evidence preserved primarily in a small number of medieval Icelandic manuscripts, notably the *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda* and the variant manuscripts of *Snorra Edda*.[21] Yet, as has often been remarked upon, the pre-Christian religious systems of late-Iron Age northern Europe – the so-called "Viking World"[22] – are complex, tightly interwoven, and sometimes even self-contradictory.[23] Given the dense network of relationships between the *valkyrjur* and other concepts and beings in pre-Christian worldviews (see further below, Chapter 2), a consideration of the source material relevant to the *valkyrjur* reads much like a consideration of the source material relevant to the study of pre-Christian religions in northern Europe in general. The sources in question may be broken down into a small number of artificial categories by type and temporal and cultural origin in order to help us identify key issues to be aware of when making use of them. Such groupings are, of course, entirely arbitrary, particularly given the

21 The major manuscript of the Poetic Edda is GKS 2365 4to (also called *Codex Regius* and *Konungsbók*), although poems in Eddic metres are preserved in other manuscripts (notably AM 748 I 4to). *Snorra Edda* is preserved primarily in four medieval manuscripts: GKS 2367 4to (also called *Codex Regius* and *Konungsbók*); AM 242 fol (*Codex Wormianus*); MSS 1374 (*Codex Trajectinus*) and DG 11 (*Codex Upsaliensis*); see Faulkes' introduction for a thorough discussion of these and later variants (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 4 vols., 2nd edn. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), esp. *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, pp. xxviii-xxxi). On the state of medieval Icelandic manuscript culture more generally, see Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson, 'Manuscripts and Palaeography', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 245-264; and the articles in Gísli Sigurðsson and Vésteinn Ólason, eds., *The Manuscripts of Iceland* (Reykjavík: Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland, 2004).

22 The phrase "Viking World" is frequently used, and is the title of two recent scholarly works on late-Iron Age culture and society: James Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, 3rd edn. (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd., 2001) is an introductory textbook frequently used by archaeology students in the United Kingdom, and Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price, eds., *The Viking World* (London: Routledge, 2008) is a more extensive scholarly handbook aimed at both students and academics.

23 See, for example, Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Reflections on Aims and Methods in the Study of Old Norse Religion', *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*, ed. Catharina Raudvere and Jens Peter Schjødt (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012), pp. 263-287, p. 267.

The Ride of the Valkyrs 176
J. C. Dollman
By arrangement with the Artist

Figure 1.C, Dollmann, "The Ride of the Valkyrs", reprinted in H. A. Guerber, *Myths of the Norsemen: From the Eddas and Sagas* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1908), p. 176.

gradual arrival of Christianity in the Nordic region[24] and the permeable linguistic and cultural borders of the area in question,[25] and are useful only is so far as they allow us to consider the various advantages and pitfalls each type of evidence exhibits. Such divisions are very common in scholarship, but rather than following a simple chronological partition – which even proponents, such as Jens Peter Schjødt, must admit, represent the situation as "more simple than it actually is"[26] – I believe a more

24 See, for example, Fridtjov Birkeli, *Norske steinkors i tidlig middelalder: Et bidrag til belysning av overgangen fra norrøn religion til kristendom*, *Skrifter utgitt av det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo. 2. Historisk-Filosofisk Klasse. Ny Serie* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1973), p. 14, which proposes a scheme breaking the Christianisation of the Nordic region up into three stages: "infiltrasjonstid" ('period of infiltration), "misjonstid" ('period of mission'), and "organisasjonstid og fortstatt misjonstid" ('period organisation and ongoing mission'), the whole process lasting centuries; rather than a nominal 'conversion' occurring on a specific date, such as the 999/1000 AD typically assigned to Iceland.

25 On the permeability of cultural borders in the magico-religious sphere within the Nordic region, see Thomas DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); for a case study of mutual intelligibility between Old West Norse and Old English, see Matthew Townend, *Language and History in Viking Age England: Linguistic Relations between Speakers of Old Norse and Old English*, *Studies in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002).

26 Schjødt, 'Reflections on Aims and Methods' (2012), p. 263.

useful separation is to be achieved by modifying that used by Robert Bartlett, who states that:

> Sources of information on the non-Christian indigenous religions of northern and central Europe [...] fall into three basic categories: the writings of contemporary Christian observers, the material remains (whether uncovered by archaeological excavation or in the form of standing monuments) and, especially for the Scandinavian world, post-conversion indigenous literature.[27]

It is notable, however, that Bartlett's partition makes no allowance for the texts produced by the cultural in-group – that is, within 'Old Norse' culture – before the official adoption of Christianity. (For a more detailed discussion of the cultural, geographic and temporal limits of this study, see below, Chapter 1.3.1.)

As such, before moving on to consider the various methodologies proposed to the study of pre-Christian religious and mythological phenomena and explaining my own methods in more detail, the following pages will briefly consider the nature of the following categories of source material: contemporary textual sources produced by cultural insiders; contemporary textual sources produced by cultural outsiders; post-Christianisation textual sources (typically produced by cultural insiders); and archaeological material, which is available from sites across the region and time periods throughout the late Iron Age, although temporal and geographic coverage is far from uniform.

It seems logical to begin with the oldest source material available: the ever-growing corpus of archaeological evidence. With the gradual abandonment of New Archaeology and the advent of Post-Processualism in the 1980s and 90s, interest among archaeologists in less tangible phenomena – including pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia,[28] shamanism,[29] and the phenomenology of landscape[30] – increased

---

27 Robert Bartlett, 'From Paganism to Christianity in Medieval Europe', in *Christianization and the Rise of the Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900-1200*, ed. Nora Berend, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 47-72, p. 48.

28 Contrast, for example, the processualist viewpoint of Øystein Johansen, 'Religion and Archaeology: Revelation or Empirical Research?', *Words and Objects: Towards a Dialogue between Archaeology and History of Religion*, ed. Gro Steinsland (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1986), pp. 67-77; with Anders Andrén, 'Behind *Heathendom*: Archaeological Studies of Old Norse Religion', *Scottish Archaeological Journal* 27 (2005), pp. 105-138.

29 See, for example, Neil S. Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala: The Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University, 2002).

30 See, for example, Christopher Y. Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

dramatically, as have both the quantity and methodological quality of the data available as the result of archaeological investigation, to the point where Detlev Ellmers feels able to pronounce that:

> Im Gegensatz zu der komplizierten Definition der Anfänge Germanen hat der Archäologe für seine Quellen zur Religion eine sehr einfache, d.h. eine ganz pragmatische Definition: Mit Religion zu tun hat alles, was sich rein profan nicht oder nicht vollständig erklären läßt.[31]
>
> In contrast to the complicated definition of the amateur student of the Germanic peoples, for his sources on religion the archaeologist has a very simple – that is, pragmatic – definition: everything that cannot be definitely or completely explained as profane is relevant to religion.

Despite Ellmers' bombastic certainty, in a study like this one, concerned with mythological figures such as the *valkyrjur*, many forms of archaeological investigation – monumental, buildings, and landscape archaeology, for example – seem less than immediately relevant. What these sub-disciplines do provide, however, is extensive contextual information regarding the society that created and made use of the *valkyrja* phenomenon (or phenomena): archaeological excavations concerned with apparent ritual activities conducted in or in the immediate environment of aristocratic halls – such as at Lejre[32] or Uppåkra[33] – may prove of vital importance when attempting to set the *valkyrjur* in their proper social and cultural milieu.

The advantages of archaeological evidence are many. Where produced during the period and in the region under study, archaeological source material can be highly relevant – provided sensible choices are made regarding what evidence is considered. However, it suffers from highly uneven distribution: only a tiny percentage of the Nordic landscape has undergone archaeological examination of any sort, and an even

---

31 Detlev Ellmers, 'Die archäologischen Quellen zur germanischen Religionsgeschichte', *Germanische Religionsgeschichte: Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, ed. Heinrich Beck, Detlev Ellmers and Kurt Schier (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 95-117, trans. mine. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

32 Tom Christensen, 'Lejre Beyond Legend: The Archaeological Evidence', *Journal of Danish Archaeology* 10 (1991), pp. 163-185; Holger Schmidt, 'Reconstruction of Lejre Hall', *Journal of Danish Archaeology* 10 (1991), pp. 186-190; and Tom Christensen, 'Lejre and Roskilde', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 121-125.

33 Lars Larsson, ed., *Continuity for Centuries: A Ceremonial Building and Its Context at Uppåkra, Southern Sweden* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 2004); and Birgitta Hårdh, 'Viking Age Uppåkra and Lund', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 145-149.

smaller fraction detailed excavation, with digs concentrated on sites believed – or hoped – to present high yield returns or interesting results, rather than representative data. In addition, the archaeological sources most often discussed in the context of pre-Christian religions – from "cult houses"[34] to iconographic representations interpreted as pagan gods such as the Eyrarland image[35] – cannot *definitively* be assigned the religious, cultic or mythological subjective values allocated to them by the scholarly community. Such readings are, after all, merely subjective, and highly interpretative at that. Admittedly, while it may indeed be almost certain that, for example, the figure holding a hammer with his foot through the hull of the boat on the eleventh-century Altuna runestone (figure 1.D) represents Þórr on his fishing expedition,[36] identifications such as that of the bronze figurine excavated at Rällinge (Södermanland, Sweden) as Freyr, largely on the basis of his erect phallus, seem much less secure, yet remain widespread.[37] This must be borne in mind when considering the *valkyrjur*, given that a distinct grouping of late Iron-Age pendants, many of them of silver, are now commonly identified as "valkyries"[38] – a topic which will be dealt with in more detail below (see Chapter 3.5).

Contemporarily to this archaeological material, pre-Christian society also produced textual sources – runic inscriptions (largely preserved on standing stones, but occasionally on artefacts) and apparently pre-Christian poetry (in both Eddic and skaldic metres) – some of which remain extant today. In the case of poetry, however, this 'preservation' is due to the survival of the verse in the oral tradition for

---

34 See, for example, Larsson, ed., *Continuity for Centuries*; and Luke John Murphy, 'Continuity and Change in the Sacred Social Spaces of the Pre-Christian Nordic World', *Religion and Science in the Nordic Middle Ages*, ed. Arngrímur Vídalín, Christian Etheridge and Gerður Sigurðardóttir (forthcoming).

35 Richard Perkins, *Thor the Wind-Raiser and the Eyrarland Image* (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 2001).

36 U1161, Altuna, Uppland, Sweden, *Rundata 2.5*, <http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>, accessed 30/04/2013; *cf. Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, pp. 43-45.

37 Neil S. Price, 'What's in a Name? An Archaeological Identity Crisis for the Norse Gods (and Some of Their Friends)', *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions. An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 179-183, pp. 179-180.

38 Price, 'What's in a Name?', p. 180.

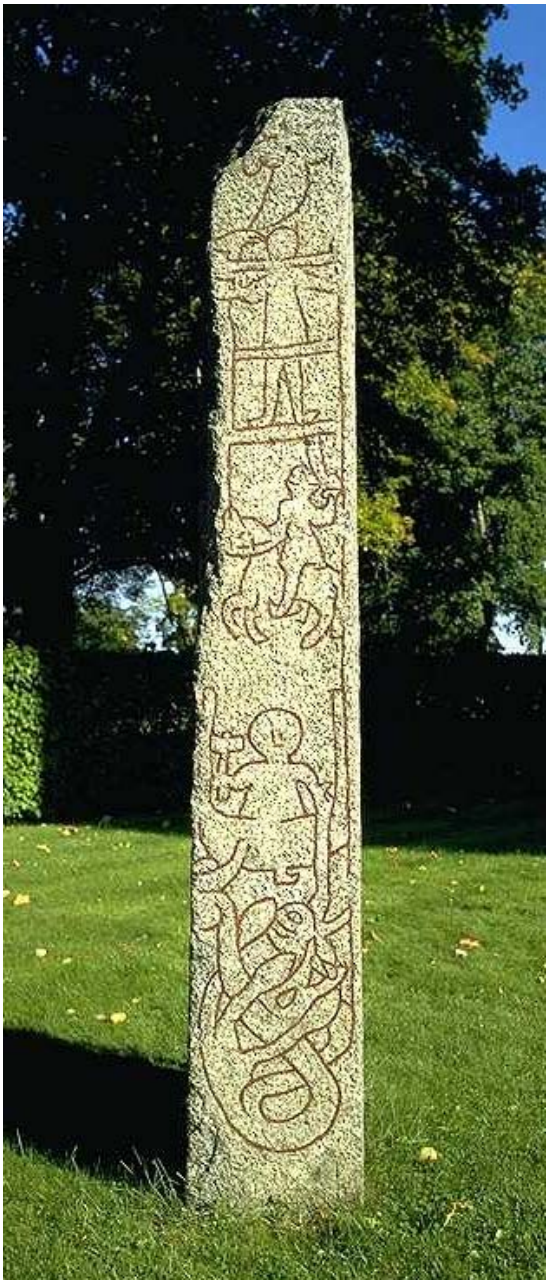


Figure 1.D, Altuna Runestone, U 1161, Rundata.

generations – with all of the inherent variation and variability a living oral tradition, which may have lasted as long as four centuries for some poems, implies[39] – before

[39] Diana Whaley, 'Skaldic Poetry', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 479-502, p. 488; on the oral tradition, see Bjarne Fidjestøl, 'Norse-Icelandic Composition in the Oral Period', *Selected Papers*, ed. Odd Einar Haugen and Else Mundal (Odense: Odense University Press, 1997), pp. 303-332 and references therein; and Gísli Sigurðsson, 'Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 285-301 and references therein.

the establishment of literacy with the arrival of the Church in Scandinavia.[40] After this point, these works begin long and complex manuscript histories and begin to suffer the same difficulties as the "post-conversion indigenous literature" they are preserved alongside and within. Such texts were copied from one manuscript to another by hand, a long, painstaking process[41] that could – and did – introduce a huge range of variations to their exemplars, in some cases resulting in hugely divergent extant traditions – and it must also be remembered that it is estimated that only a tenth of the original Old Norse/Icelandic manuscripts produced have survived to this day.[42] While this figure no doubt disguises some redundancy as the same text was often copied into multiple manuscripts, we must be aware that even when reading a single 'complete' text in an edition or translation, our potentially-contemporary poetic evidence remains fragmentary, and in need of critical interpretation and/or (re)construction.

The major difficulty with poetry and runic inscriptions as sources for religious or mythological phenomenon is their highly allusive nature: clearly their intended audiences were operating within a culture with a rich knowledge of certain narratives and motifs, to which mere reference was enough to conjure up the entire scene or tale in question. Only rarely do such sources explicitly record mythological material – the four skaldic poems *Ragnarsdrápa*, *Húsdrápa*, *Haustlöng* and *Þórsdrápa* are notable exceptions, although more recent work on the political and social context in which *Þórsdrápa* was probably composed and performed sheds interesting light on the nature of its representation of the Þórr and Geirrǫðr myth[43] – being concerned primarily with property ownership and commemoration (in the case of runic

---

40 See Judy Quinn, 'From Orality to Literacy in Medieval Iceland', *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 30-60, esp. pp. 41-46; and Stefan Brink, '*Verba Volant, Scripta Manent*? Aspects of Early Scandinavian Oral Society', *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. Pernille Hermann (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), pp. 77-135, esp. pp.107-108.

41 Soffía Guðný Guðmundsdóttir and Laufey Guðnadóttir, 'Book Production in the Middle Ages', *The Manuscripts of Iceland*, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland, 2004), pp. 45-61.

42 Jónas Kristjánsson, *Icelandic Sagas and Manuscripts*, trans. Alan Boucher, 2nd edn. (Reykjavík: Iceland Review, 1980), p. 42.

43 Edith Marold, 'Die Skaldendichtung als Quelle der Religionsgeschicte', *Germanische Religionsgeschichte: Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, ed. Heinrich Beck, Detlev Ellmers and Kurt Schier (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 685-719; and Luke John Murphy, 'Politicising Pagan Mythology in Tenth-Century Norway? An Experimental Rereading of *Þórsdrápa*', The *Power and the Sacred in the Medieval World (5th-15th centuries)* Conference, University of Leicester, 26th of November 2011.

inscriptions)[44] and "grandiloquent descriptions of heroic battles and voyages" (in the case of skaldic verse).[45]

Despite this, however, there are distinct advantages to be gained from engaging with this source matter: as material (supposedly) produced contemporarily to the phenomena we are trying to reconstruct, by members of the cultural in-group – those who, we can reasonably assume, had a good understanding of the religious traditions we are interested in – these sources can, as Edith Marold has argued, "als eigenständige Quelle sowie als Korrektiv für die Quellen des 13. Jh.s dienen" ('serve as an independent source, as well as a correction to the sources of the thirteenth century').[46] This is particularly the case given our ability to locate much of the extant skaldic verse associated with aristocratic warbands both geographically and temporally, and the specificity with which skaldic verse records individual names and relationships in its *heiti* and *kenningar*. For a study of the *valkyrjur*, pre-Christianisation skaldic verse must be considered particularly high-value source material, not least because it was (allegedly) produced in the same cultural milieu – the hall-society of the aristocratic *männerbünde* – in which this thesis seeks to set the *valkyrjur* themselves. The situation with runic inscriptions is similar, in that they can be situated to small geographic areas with some accuracy (although there is typically some uncertainty as to their exact location in the Iron Age, as many commemorative stones were later reincorporated into churches during the process of Christianisation), although dating within general statements regarding the form of futhark used is based on stylistic typologies, and is thus much less secure.[47] Runic evidence bears much less relevance for a study of the *valkyrjur*, however, and so will not feature heavily in this thesis.

---

44 Henrik Williams, 'Runes', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 281-290, pp. 285-287.

45 Whaley, 'Skaldic Poetry', p. 480.

46 Marold, 'Die Skaldendichtung als Quelle der Religionsgeschicte', p. 685; see also Bjarne Fidjestøl, 'Pagan Beliefs and Christian Impact: The Contribution of Scaldic Studies', *Viking Revaluations: Viking Society Centenary Symposium, 14th-15th May 1992*, ed. Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1993), pp. 100-119.

47 On the dating of runestones, see Birgit Sawyer, *The Viking Age Rune-Stones: Custom and Commemoration in Early Medieval Scandinavia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 28-36; and Anne-Sofie Gräslund and Linn Lager, 'Runestones and the Christian Missions', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 629-638, pp. 629-630.

Eddic poetry is difficult to classify as either a 'contemporary textual source' or a 'post-Christianisation textual source' due to the intense controversy surrounding its dating: some scholars maintain that the poems are largely pre-Christian in origin, and survived mostly unchanged in the oral tradition until they were recorded in thirteenth-century manuscripts, while others contend that the poems as extant today should be considered principally the creations of the scribes responsible for the writing of those manuscripts.[48] All that can be said with any certainty is that the main manuscript – the *Codex Regius* – has been dated to *c*. 1270, providing a *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the poems preserved within its leaves,[49] and that the poems quoted in *Snorra Edda* (composed in the early 1220s) are treated as genuinely archaic. However, even if the poetry somehow be proven definitively post-Christianisation in origin, I believe Clunies-Ross' assertion that the "truth-value" of post-conversion texts remains undiminished would apply just as well to Eddic poetry as it does to medieval Icelandic prose[50] – hence my inclusion of it alongside runic inscriptions and skaldic poetry.

Commonly distinguished from skaldic verse by its (comparative) metrical simplicity and more straightforward narrative modes – although there are poems, such as *Þórsdrápa* and *Eiríksmál*, which blend the two styles – Eddic poetry conveys both mythological and legendary material, both of which are relevant to a study of the *valkyrjur*: the former, preserved mostly in the first half of the *Codex Regius*, include myths of the creation and end of the world, stories of Óðinn and the other gods, and other useful cosmological information, while the legendary material in the second half of the *Codex Regius*, including episodes from the Völsung cycle, features *valkyrjur* interacting with (semi-) human heroes. Clearly, there is a great deal of relevant information preserved in this single small manuscript, but the clear links between the Eddic poems and other material – the Sigurðr and Guðrún poems and *Völsunga saga*, for example – and the preservation of poems such as *Baldrs dramar* and *Rígsþula* elsewhere (the early fourteenth-century AM 748 I 4to, and AM 242 fol, *Codex Wormianus*, respectively) speak against Ursula Dronke's description of the *Codex Regius* as a "tiny corpus" in its own right, although I agree with her that "the value of

48 See, for example, Kari Ellen Gade, 'Poetry and its Changing Importance in Medieval Icelandic Culture', *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 61-95, and references therein.

49 Gade, 'Poetry and Its Changing Importance', p. 66.

50 Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes I*, p. 18.

these poems for giving us an insight into the history and development of German religion is [...] enormous."[51]

The second group of textual sources, those produced by cultural outsiders during the period of study, are quite different from those already examined. This group is comprised largely – but not solely – of what Bartlett calls "the writings of contemporary Christian observers",[52] such as Adam of Bremen's famous eleventh-century *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*[53] and the ninth-century *Vita Ansgari*,[54] a hagiographical account of the missionary archbishop written by Rimbert, his successor in the post. The small number of exceptions to this main body of texts are both chronological and cultural: the writings of Tacitus, a first-century Roman politician and historian – particularly his *Germania* – record details of the social and religious practices of the Germanic tribes known to the Romans;[55] and a well-known section of the *Risāla* (lit. 'report') of Ibn Fadlān, a tenth-century Arabic writer, recounts the traveller's encounters with the inhabitants of the Volga region, including a group of waterborne traders frequently identified as "Rūs" – an East-Norse people settled in what is now modern Russia.[56]

These accounts have distinct advantages when compared to texts produced by the cultural in-group. They are essentially the ethnographic descriptions of outside observers, with all of the difficulties that such entails, but this also ensures that there are little of the difficult allusions and cryptic references that plague skaldic verse in particular. Instead, the texts' descriptions are set out with detailed descriptions and explanations in terms familiar to their intended audiences, and are as such accessible

---

51 Ursula Dronke, 'Eddic Poetry as a Source for the History of Germanic Religion', *Germanische Religionsgeschichte: Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, ed. Heinrich Beck, Detlev Ellmers and Kurt Schier (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 656-684, p. 683.

52 Bartlett, 'From Paganism to Christianity in Medieval Europe', p. 48.

53 Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, ed. Bernhard Schmeidler, 3rd edn. (Hannover & Leipzig: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1917).

54 Rimbert, *Vita Anskarri*, ed. Georg Waitz (Hannoverae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1884).

55 Tacitus, *De origine et situ Germanorum*, ed. Niels W. Bruun and Allan A. Lund, 2 vols. (Århus: Wormianum, 1974).

56 James E. Montgomery, 'Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsiyyah', *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3 (2000), pp. 12-21. See also H. M. Smyser, 'Ibn Fadlān's Account of the Rūs with Some Commentary and Some Allusions to *Beowulf*', in *Franciplegus: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honour of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr.*, ed. Bessinger Jr., Jess B. and Creed, Robert P. (New York: New York University Press, 1965), pp. 92-119; and Jonathan Shepard, 'Rus'', *Christianization and the Rise of the Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900-1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 369-416, esp. pp. 374-380.

to modern readers, provided we take the time to familiarise ourselves with the terminology and culture of the observers. Of course, ethnographic accounts also suffer from difficulties stemming from their origin outside the culture under observation: they may accidentally or deliberately misunderstand or misrepresent their subject matter, for a variety of reasons ranging from simple lack of comprehension – the *Risāla* repeatedly foregrounds Ibn Fadlān's reliance on an interpreter for both linguistic communication and cultural explanation,[57] for example – to political or religious imperialism or Orientalism – as has been repeatedly observed in the case of Adam of Bremen's account of the cultic activities at Gamla Uppsala[58] – or even to serve political ends on the 'home front', such as when hagiographical accounts of missionary bishops seek lay claim to 'pagan' areas in the face of opposition from neighbouring bishoprics.[59]

It must be noted that relatively few contemporary-outsider texts record material specifically suited to the main focus of this study, the *valkyrjur*. Having said that, due to the 'top-down' missionary approach of the Church,[60] many of the Christian missionary texts do provide significant insight into the general worldview of the aristocratic warrior culture associated with the hall, the cult of Óðinn, and therefore the *valkyrjur*.

The final group of textual sources, those produced following the Christianisation – Bartlett's "post-conversion indigenous literature"[61] – also have their advantages and disadvantages. Their greatest advantage, is, of course, their numbers: while many medieval sagas make only passing reference to pre-Christian religious

---

57 The "interpreter" is mentioned three times in Montgomery's translation of the "Rūs" section of the *Risāla* (twice on p. 18, once on p. 20), and the implication is clearly that he constantly accompanies Ibn Fadlān during his interaction with the Volga-river 'Rūs'.

58 As Olof Sundqvist observes, "[Adam] wanted to show that the Swedes were barbaric and needed to be turned into Christians [... they] had to be redeemed and civilized. Adam deliberately denigrates the pagan cult." Sundqvist 'The Uppsala Cult', *Myth, Might, and Man: Ten Essays on Gamla Uppsala*, ed. Gunnel Friberg (Emmaboda: Åkessons Tryckeri, 2000), pp. 37-39, p. 37. Rives makes similar remarks, albeit of a milder tone, in his introduction to Tacitus', *Germania*. trans. J. B. Rives, *Clarendon Ancient History Series* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 61.

59 Nora Berend, 'Introduction', *Christianization and the Rise of the Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900-1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1-48, p. 20.

60 On royal support for missionary activity, see Berend, 'Introduction', pp. 24-26; and Olof Sundqvist, *Freyr's Offspring: Rulers and Religion in Ancient Svea Society*, *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Historia Religionum 21* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2002), pp. 270-332, esp. pp. 270-281.

61 Bartlett, 'From Paganism to Christianity in Medieval Europe', p. 48.

beliefs and practices, the sheer amount of such texts extant means that we have a reasonable dataset with which to work, albeit one of dubious quality. These texts also seem to display a generally greater cultural understanding of the pre-Christian Norse world than their continental counterparts produced several centuries earlier, presumably due to the survival of traditions and social institutions, and their authors shared a common language with their ancestors. However, the distribution of these texts is uneven: the majority are of West-Norse (Icelandic-Norwegian, primarily Icelandic) origin, and the representation of different regions in the textual sources is therefore distinctly unbalanced, with a heavy western skew (see further below, Chapter 1.3.1).

Another potential advantage is that there is also a wide range of genres from this period preserving evidence of what might be termed 'the supernatural' – and thus potentially the magico-religious – ranging from the extremely naturalistic (the *Samtíðarsögur*, or 'Contemporary Sagas') to the highly fanciful (the *Fornaldarsögur*, or 'Sagas of Ancient Times') – requiring that each source be carefully considered as a whole, bearing in mind its generic context, rather than just in terms of its depiction of pre-Christian religious beliefs or practices. Some of these texts, or their oral sources, were probably produced relatively soon after the official adoption of Christianity in the region (although their extant forms are considerably younger), while others were not composed until centuries later. Regardless, all of these texts (in their present form) necessarily view the pre-Christian past of the region through the lens of Christianity, albeit in varying degrees, and must be approached with appropriate caution. However, it is generally accepted that, in the earlier-noted words of Clunies Ross, "[t]here is no reason [...] to think that this change of religion deprived traditional myths of all their truth-value",[62] and the same might apply to other accounts concerned with religious beliefs.

In addition to the various genres of sagas (and, to a lesser extent, historical texts such as *Kristni saga* and *Íslendingabók*) preserving potential evidence of pre-Christian religious belief and practice, this group of sources also includes what might perhaps be seen as the most highly idiosyncratic – and highly troubled – source for our understanding of pagan mythology, and a vital source for any study of the *valkyrjur*: *Snorra Edda*. Composed not as a guide to mythology but as an *ars poetica*

62 Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes I*, p. 18.

in the early 1220s, either by or under the direction of the Icelandic scholar-statesman Snorri Sturluson, *Snorra Edda* collects a huge number of apparently traditional mythological narratives that formed the basis of the extensive and allusive system of poetic language used in skaldic poetry, providing literary exegesis and commentary on sample verses. Today, this makes it hugely useful not only to scholars of mythology and religion, but also to philologists, linguistics, metricists, and students of poetry in general. Many mythic scenes, narratives, and names are recorded only in *Snorra Edda*, and the prose explanations of Snorri's work provide context for many references in skaldic verse that would otherwise be barely (or completely in-) comprehensible.

There are, however, pitfalls to be aware of when making use of Snorri's text. In addition to the typical issues of textual transmission and manuscript history already discussed above, Snorri (and his scribes) appear to have had a distinct agenda when creating the *Edda*, and it was not one that was focused on the preservation of myth for its own sake: clearly, mythological material with high relevance to or frequent usage in skaldic verse – such as the myth of Kvasir,[63] or *kenningar* for gold[64] – was prioritised over other material – including the (apparent) deity names Ullr/Ullinn and *Fillinn preserved in complex sacral toponyms, but receiving (respectively) little and no mention in Old Norse/Iceland textual sources[65] – and we should therefore be wary of treating the *Edda* as representative. Additionally, *Snorra Edda* was not only composed more than two centuries after the official adoption of Christianity in Iceland, but also seems to make special efforts to rationalise conflicting traditions exhibited in its sources,[66] going so far as to create the artificial impression of a single functioning polytheistic system – what Turville-Petre termed "the Norse Olympus".[67] In contrast to this, recent scholarship has been at pains to highlight the intense

63 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, pp. 3-5.

64 *Skáldskaparmál, Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, pp. 40-47, 51-58, 60-62.

65 Stefan Brink, 'How Uniform Was the Old Norse Religion?', *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 105-136, pp. 116-118, 120.

66 Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, p. 82; on Snorri's sources, see Anthony Faulkes, 'The Sources of *Skáldskaparmál*: Snorri's Intellectual Background', *Snorri Sturluson. Kolloquium Anläßlich Der 750. Wiederkehr Seines Todestages*, ed. Alois Wolf (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1993), pp. 59-76, also available online at <http://vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/>, accessed 30/04/2013; and Margaret Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál: Snorri Sturluson's Ars Poetica and Medieval Theories of Language* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987), esp. pp. 39-79.

67 Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 23.

variation on all levels of Iron-Age culture across the Nordic area, including the religious and mythological: Stefan Brink has used toponymic evidence to cast doubt the uniformity of cultic worship (although this might represent variation in regional naming practices rather than variation in religious practice);[68] Lotte Motz and Simek have questioned the notion of the Vanir as separate 'families' of gods;[69] and at the 2012 Saga Conference Terry Gunnell argued that the even very notion of a coexisting 'pantheon' of pre-Christian gods in the Nordic region should be considered doubtful.[70] (The vexed question of regional variation and temporal change within pre-Christian religious traditions will be returned to below, under the discussion of methodologies: see Chapter 1.3.1)

Such then, are the sources relevant to the study of pre-Christian religious and mythological phenomena in northern Europe, particularly the *valkyrjur*. It seems appropriate to conclude this overview of the source material on a note of caution: despite arguments to the contrary,[71] and the tremendous possibilities available in doing so, it seems methodologically sound to attempt to avoid reading more difficult sources, such as allusive skaldic verse or archaeological material in need of extensive subjective interpretation,[72] purely in the light of more accessible – that is, more coherent by twenty-first-century standards – material, particularly *Snorra Edda*, which, in many ways, could be considered "unsere erste germanische

68 Brink, 'How Uniform Was the Old Norse Religion?'.

69 Lotte Motz, *The King, the Champion and the Sorcerer: A Study in Germanic Myth*, *Studia Medievalia Septentrionalia* (Wien: Fassaender, 1996), pp. 103-124; and Rudolf Simek, 'The Vanir – An Obituary', *Herzort Island. Zum 65. Geburtstag von Gerd Kreutzer*, ed. Thomas Seiler (Lüdenscheid: Seltmann, 2005), pp. 140-155.

70 Terry Gunnell, 'Pantheon? What Pantheon? Concepts of a Family of Gods in Pre-Christian Nordic Religions', *The 15th International Saga Conference: Sagas and the Use of the Past*, Århus Universitet, 6th of August 2012. See also Andreas Nordberg, 'Continuity, Change and Regional Variation in Old Norse Religion', *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*, ed. Catharina Raudvere and Jens Peter Schjødt (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012), pp. 119-151.

71 Christopher Hawkes, 'Archaeological Theory and Method: Some Suggestions from the Old World', *American Anthropologist,* 56 (1957), pp. 155-168; and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Religions Old and New', *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. Peter Sawyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 202-224.

72 On the vexed relationship between textual sources and archaeology in particular, see John Moreland, *Archaeology and Text*, *Duckworth Debates in Archaeology* (London: Duckworth, 2001).

Religionsgeschichte" ('our first history of Germanic religion'),[73] rather than as a primary source in and of itself. Instead, in this study I will attempt to value all sources with the significance that careful critical analysis, based on their individual merits (or lack thereof) suggests, bearing in mind the general points discussed in this subchapter.

1.3 Methodology

Having discussed the available source material in some detail, it is now time to consider how best to approach the difficult topic at hand. As has already been hinted at by the above mentions of New Archaeology and Post-Processualism, academic schools of thought and methodologies are constantly changing and – in theory, at least – evolving, bringing us closer to a better understanding of the late Iron Age than that enjoyed by our predecessors.[74] All the same, today there are almost as many approaches to pre-Christian religions, mythology and culture as there are scholars working in the field, many of which have their roots in the methods employed by older works.

Although it may be argued that the systematic study of pre-Christian religious beliefs began in the early thirteenth century with the composition of *Snorra Edda*,[75] or with early nineteenth-century works by writers such as Jacob Grimm[76] and N. F. S. Grundtvig,[77] the earliest scholarship methodologically relevant to this study began appearing towards the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries.

---

73 Heinrich Beck, 'Die religionsgeschichtlichen Quellen der Gylfaginning', *Germanische Religionsgeschichte: Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, ed. Heinrich Beck, Detlev Ellmers and Kurt Schier (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 608-617, p. 608.

74 For an excellent overview of the Early-Modern reception of Old Norse/Icelandic literature and the culture that produced it, see Andrew Wawn, 'The Post-Medieval Reception of Old Norse and Old Iceland Literature', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 320-337.

75 Beck, 'Die religionsgeschichtlichen Quellen der Gylfaginning', p. 608.

76 Grimm's most important work on pre-Christian religions is undoubtedly his *Deutsche Mythologie*, 4th edn. (Berlin: 1875-78; repr. Wiesbaden: Marixverlag GmbH, 2003). The first edition was published Göttingen: Dieterich, 1835.

77 Grundtvig's preeminent contribution to the study of pre-Christian Nordic religions is his *Nordens Mythologi eller Sindbilled-Sprog, historisk-poetisk udviklet og oplyst*, 3rd edn. (Copenhagen: J. H. Schubothes Boghandel, 1870); although he also produced many other works on the subject. (The first edition of *Nordens Mythologi* was published in 1832.) For an English-language overview of Grundtvig's life and bibliography, see Sid A. J. Bradley, ed., *N.F.S Grundtvig: A Life Recalled*, *Grundtvig in English Series* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008), esp. pp. 39-56.

Following the "discovery of Indo-European" accredited to William Jones in the 1780s,[78] and the establishment of comparative linguistics as a modern scholarly discipline with works such as Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik*,[79] nineteenth- and early-twentieth century scholars began trying to set extant mythological data from across western Eurasian into a single comparative system,[80] essentially applying comparative linguistic methods to mythological sources. Such comparative approaches followed linguistic methods very closely indeed, even to the point at which some have sought to reconstruct not only the 'truth' behind multiple instances of mythic narrative – as linguists reconstruct lost linguistic forms from extant evidence – but even the *ur*-form of the mythic narrative itself.[81]

Wide-ranging comparative methods were not the only things early scholars of Old Norse religions and mythology took from their linguistic colleagues – many of whom, like Jacob Grimm, were the same individuals working simultaneously in both fields. Philology and comparative linguistics were key tools of nineteenth-century scholars of religion and mythology, and were still heavily used in the early twentieth century when two Dutch scholars, Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye and Jan de Vries, wrote their extensive studies: de la Saussaye's *Geschiedenis van den godsdienst der Germanen voor hun overgang tot het Christendom*, first published in 1900 and translated into English as *The Religion of the Teutons* in 1902,[82] and de Vries' *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, which first appeared in 1934, although a revised edition was brought out in 1957, reprinted in 1970, and continues to be in use today.[83]

However, although hugely influential in their time, such works are methodologically outdated by modern standards: they attempt to rationalise a huge range of evidence from diverse temporal, geographic and social contexts into a single

78 Eric Csapo, *Theories of Mythology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 14-16.

79 See in particular, Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Grammatik* (Göttingen, 1819).

80 Prime amongst these early comparative mythologists was Max Müller; see his *Chips from a German Workshop*, 4 vols (New York: Charles Scribner and Company, 1867-1875).

81 The trend of seeking to reconstruct the urmyth reached what may have been its height (at least in modern times) in Joseph Campbell's concept of "monomyth"; see Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949; repr. London: Fontanta Press, 1993), esp. pp. 3-46. See also Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, pp. 57-67, for a critical exercise based on the concept of the urmyth.

82 Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Geschiedenis van den godsdienst der Germanen voor hun overgang tot het Christendom* (Haarlem: F. Bohn, 1900); de la Saussaye, *The Religion of the Teutons*, trans. Bert John Vos (Boston: The Athenæum Press, 1902).

83 de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*.

mythological system along the lines of classical pantheons – Turville-Petre's "Olympus"[84] – and rely heavily on reconstructed Indo-European particles for the "meaning" of mythological names. For example, de la Saussaye's chapter on "Wodan-Odhin" opens with the claim that the various Germanic forms of this moniker are derived from the IE "*wâ* (to blow) and [each] *therefore designates the wind god*",[85] a position he seeks to support by noting that the classical deity Mercury, with whom Wodan-Odhin is often associated by Latin writers such as Paul the Deacon in *interpretatio romana*,[86] was also a god linked to the wind. Recent concerns with such claims are not necessarily based on the rejection of Wodan-Odhin as associated with wind, but with the assumption that philologically-based attributes of religious phenomena should be regarded as central despite only patchy attestation in other source material – although it must be admitted that, as has already been established above (see Chapter 1.2), our source situation is so complex that it is possible that corroborative, non-philological evidence for associations implied by the etymology of names and words have simply not survived.

For example, very little evidence beyond the etymology set forth by de la Saussaye links the Norse Óðinn with the wind. One source that does is Chapter 7 of *Ynglinga saga*, which states that he could "*gera með orðum einum at sløkkva eld ok kyrra enn sjá ok snúa vindum hverja leið, er hann vildi*" ('douse fire and calm the sea and turn the winds in any direction he wished with a few words'),[87] although this sounds not so much like a list of deific powers as it does a repertoire of shamanistic or sorcerous abilities of the sort outlined by Price in his study of *seiðr*.[88] Regardless, we must remember that there is very little evidence for the association of Óðinn with the wind from within the Germanic cultural sphere itself, whereas other portfolios such as war, poetry, (numinous) knowledge, seduction, magic and shamanism, and the afterlife *are* extensively represented in Óðinnic material.[89] This is just a single example of the philological bias and privileging of comparative material found in

84 Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 23.

85 de la Saussaye, *The Religion of the Teutons*, p. 221 (italics mine). More recent scholarship is more cautious, Simek testifying only to etymological relations to ON "*óðr*" ('frantic, mad'), German "*Wut*" ('rage, anger'), and Gothic "*wods*" ('possessed'); Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, p. 308.

86 Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. Ludwig Konrad Bethmann and Georg Waitz (Hannoverae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1878), p. 59.

87 *Ynglinga saga*, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI, p. 18, trans mine.

88 Price, *The Viking Way*, pp. 227-232, esp. pp. 230-231.

89 See Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, pp. 302-310, and references therein.

early scholarship. While de Vries follows a very similar pattern, opening his chapter on "Donar-Thor" with a discussion of "des römischen Lagers" ('the Roman camps'') cult of Hercules,[90] but such methods are particularly inherent in a great deal of nineteenth- and early-twentieth century academia.

This is not to say, however, that either comparativism or philological-based enquiry have been or should be abandoned as methods of investigation: both have a great deal to offer when employed critically, and the recent upsurge in theoretical debate – described as "a general theoretical interest [...] apparent to a much larger extent than was the case only a decade ago"[91] – has included discussion of how best to integrate these long-standing tools into a more comprehensive set of investigative instruments.[92] The following subchapter is designed to give an overview of the methodological works that have influenced my pwn thinking, and set out the methods to be used in this thesis.

1.3.1 Comparativism, Change and Variety

One of the necessary prerequisites for the effective comparison of two phenomena is at least a basic understanding of the contexts which surround them – the frameworks of reference within which they exist and which makes them potentially comparable – and it would uncontroversial to say that the last few decades have seen a number of shifts in attitude regarding the fundamental structures of pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices, some of which remain unresolved. In particular, recent scholarship has come to reject earlier assumptions of the singular, monolithic nature of pre-Christian religions even within relatively defined regions of study, resulting in more focused studies concentrating on, for example, Scandinavian/Nordic, Anglo-Saxon, or continental Germanic religious cultures,[93] rather on than the eponymous

90 de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2, pp. 107-108.

91 Catharina Raudvere and Jens Peter Schjødt, 'The Study of Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions: Trends and Perspectives', *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*, ed. Catharina Raudvere and Jens Peter Schjødt (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012), pp. 7-12, p. 11.

92 See in particular Schjødt, 'Reflections on Aims and Methods' (2012), and references therein.

93 See, for example, DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* on "Nordic" religions (both Germanic and non-Germanic influences on the former); Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007)

"Teutonic" or "Altgermanisch" subjects of de la Saussaye and de Vries.[94] What is more, in the 1990s, works such as John McKinnell's *Both One and Many* and Thomas DuBois' *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* reflected a growing understanding of the plurality of religious belief systems in the pre-Christian Nordic region,[95] a trend increasingly support by evidence from toponymic and archaeological studies, such as Brink's aforementioned article on sacral place names (see above, Chapter 1.2) and Fredrik Svanberg's research on the diversity of burial rituals in south-eastern Scandinavia.[96]

There remains, however, a considerable diversity of opinion between scholars on the level of variation present in Iron-Age religious culture. Svanberg, for example, argues that "[t]here was no homogenous and coherent "culture" conforming to a unilinear pattern of evolutionary change" in Viking-Age Scandinavia,[97] and that arguments to the contrary spring from "nationalistic politics of the present, with its endeavour for unification, integration, conformism to reified unicultures (chosen invented traditions)",[98] offering, in the second volume of his series *Decolonizing the Viking Age*, the evidence of what he calls the "ritual systems" of burial as evidence of this fundamental cultural variety (figure 1.E).[99]

In general terms, I see no reason to dispute Svanberg's main point: the culture of Viking-Age Jämtland would indeed vary – in some aspects at least – from that of Viking-Age Trondheim/Niðarós, which would in turn differ to that of the Icelandic West Fjords during the same timeframe.[100] Here, however, is where comparativism comes into its own. Relative only to each other, the religious culture and practices of

---

on Anglo-Saxon culture; and Philip A. Shaw, *Pagan Goddesses in the Early Germanic World: Eostre, Hreda and the Cult of Matrons*, *Studies in Early Medieval History* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011) on both early Anglo-Saxon and continental Germanic religious phenomena.

94 de la Saussaye, *The Religion of the Teutons*; and de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*.

95 John McKinnell, *Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism* (Rome: Il Calamo, 1994); and DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*.

96 Fredrik Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age 1*, *Acta Archaeologica Lundensia in 8°* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003); and *Death Rituals in South-East Scandinavia ad 800-1000: Decolonizing the Viking Age 2*, *Acta Archaeologica Lundensia in 4°* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003).

97 Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age 1*, p. 102.

98 Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age 1*, p. 100.

99 See Svanberg, *Death Rituals in South-East Scandinavia AD 800-1000*, p. 142-147 for a summary of Svanberg's findings, and a presentation of the regional "ritual systems" he proposes.

100 On Jämtland, see Stig Welinder, 'Christianity, Politics and Ethnicity in Early Medieval Jämtland, Mid Sweden', *The Cross Goes North*, ed. Martin Carver (York: York Medieval Press, 2003), pp. 509-530, and Stefan Brink, ed., *Jämtlands Kristnande: Projektet Sveriges Kristnandet*

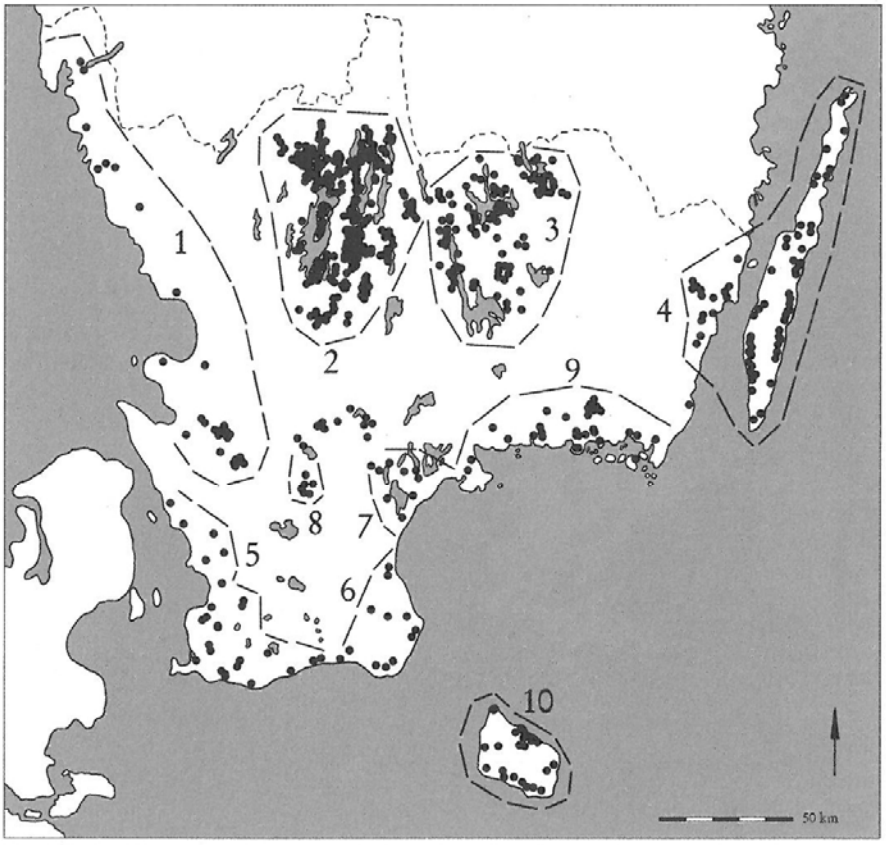


Fig. 59. An illustration of the interpretations of which burial sites belong to which ritual system. 1 Halland and north-west Scania. 2 Finnveden. 3 Värend. 4 Öland and Möre. 5 South-west Scania. 6 South-east Scania. 7 North-east Scania. 8 The interior of north Scania. 9 Blekinge and Lister. 10 Bornholm.

Figure 1.E, Svanberg's model of ritual systems in southern Scandinavia. After Fredrik Svanberg, *Death Rituals in South-East Scandinavia* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003), figure 59, p. 144.

these regions in any given period might well be distinct, but relative to each other and another region such as, for example, tenth-century Anglo-Saxon Wessex – which spoke not only a different language (Old English rather than a dialect of Old Norse) and demonstrated a very different religious culture[101] (state-sponsored universal

Publikationer 4 (Uppsala: Lunne Böcker, 1996); on Viking-Age Norway see Claus Krag, 'The Early Unification of Norway', *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, Volume I: Prehistory to 1520*, ed. Knut Helle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 184-201, and Sverre Bagge and Sæbjörg Walaker Nordeide, 'The Kingdom of Norway', *Christianization and the Rise of the Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900-1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 121-166; on pre-Christianisation Iceland, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak: A Pagan Ritual Turning Point in the Conversion of Iceland*, 2nd edn. (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1999), pp. 11-54.

101 For a highly readable (if slightly dated) overview of Anglo-Saxon society, see Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956); on role of the organised Church in late Anglo-Saxon culture, see John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 291-504; and on Anglo-Saxon

Christianity as opposed to the 'ethnic' or 'folk' syncretic practices of what Bek-Pedersen calls the "Old Norse cultural area"[102]) – the differences within the Scandinavian/Nordic regions are much less striking. Thus, in the face of an outlier, these regional cultures may be seen as local variations of an overarching 'umbrella' culture.

Seen in this light, late-Iron Age north-Germanic culture – particularly religious culture – has been analogised with the Old Norse language, first by Schjødt, and then later in more depth by Nordberg.[103] The argument goes that the North Germanic language family may, from some time after *c*. 750 AD (the end of the so-called "syncope period"), be divided into a small number of languages,[104] including Old West Norse (further divisible into the regional dialects Old Icelandic, Old Norwegian, Old Faroese, and Norn), Old East Norse (further divisible into Runic Swedish and Runic Danish), and Old Gutnish.[105] These languages were all mutually comprehensible, existing within a language continuum that was spoken in the area of several modern-day nations (Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, not including the primarily Sámi and Lapp areas in the north and interior of the Scandinavian peninsula, which probably exhibited a more mixed cultural heritage), areas of settlement in many more (including North America, Greenland, the British Isles, France, northern Germany, southern Finland, and western Russia), and by travelling groups and individuals farther afield. So much is uncontroversial. What Schjødt and Nordberg argue is that a similar continuum, filling the same geographic and temporal boundaries, existed pertaining to religious culture, complete with common central features and structures at its core, but featuring regional variations akin to dialectal

---

statehood see James Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxon State* (Hambledon and London: London and New York, 2000).

102 Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, p. 10. On the differences between Christianity and pre-Christian religions, and for their identification as "universalreigion" and "folkereligion" ('universal' and 'folk' religions) respectively, see Gro Steinsland, *Norrøn Religion: Myter, Riter, Samfunn* (Oslo: Pax Forlag A/S, 2005), pp. 31-34.

103 Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Diversity and its Consequences for the Study of Old Norse Religion: What is it We Are Trying to Reconstruct?', *Between Paganism and Christianity in the North*, ed. Leszek P. Słupecki and Jakob Morawiec (Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2009), pp. 9-22, p. 14; and Nordberg, 'Continuity, Change and Regional Variation in Old Norse Religion', pp. 124-130.

104 Michael Barnes, 'Languages and Ethnic Groups', *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, Volume I: Prehistory to 1520*, ed. Knut Helle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 94-102, pp.100-101.

105 Nordberg, 'Continuity, Change and Regional Variation in Old Norse Religion', p. 125.

forms increasingly present around a nominal periphery; Schjødt, however, however, adds the note that:

> [W]e often see that, from some fictitious centre, we move farther and farther away so that we may no longer recognise this centre and then the variations of the 'same' have suddenly changed into something different.[106]

All the same, it seems taht for all the evidence of local variation gathered in empirical studies of specific features, pan-Scandinavian language, social structures, and other "culturally-determined ideas"[107] seem to tie the regions of this 'Old Norse' cultural continuum more tightly together than the differences demonstrated by Svanberg and Brink drive them apart. As such, it would seem sensible to make use of comparisons between data drawn from within this cultural continuum, rather than insisting that each region had its own 'microculture' and attempting to study them in isolation. Whether these regional cultures are viewed as mere 'variations' of a larger whole (*à la* Schjødt and Nordberg) or as independent but related entities in their own right (as Svanberg would have it) becomes something of a semantic distinction in the face of pragmatic requirements, particularly given the difficult nature of our source material generally, and the heavy Icelandic bias of the extant written sources.

In a methodological article from 2012, Schjødt terms comparisons between local expressions of a feature within a single culture "genetic" – that is, conducted on data that is inherently related and which stems from the "same origin" (even where that origin is as distantly removed as Indo-European culture is from the Old Norse cultural continuum) – and proposes that, while comparisons based on data from within the original cultural sphere should be prioritised, they are not the only appropriate application of comparativism as a methodology.[108] He proposes four "levels" at which "genetic" comparisons may be conducted:

1. within in the 'Old Norse' cultural continuum;
2. between Old Norse data and that drawn from "neighbouring cultures" (Schjødt specifies the Sámi and Saxon cultures, to which I would add the Anglo-Saxons

106 Schjødt, 'Diversity and its Consequences for the Study of Old Norse Religion', p. 14.

107 Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Reflections on Aims and Methods in the Study of Old Norse Religion', *The Viking Society for Northern Research General Meeting*, University College London, 13th of March 2009.

108 Schjødt, 'Reflections on Aims and Methods' (2012), p. 275.

and Celts, with whom late-Iron Age Scandinavians had a great deal of interaction[109]);

3. between Old Norse data and that drawn from "Indo-European" sources;
4. between Old Norse data and that drawn from the "phenomenology of religion" worldwide.[110]

The final level overlaps with what Schjødt elsewhere describes as "typological" comparisons between cultures which "are not necessarily connected in any historical way,"[111] which are more likely to offer conceptual tools for engaging with a study's principal focus than supplementary data. An example of this in practice may be found when Nordberg provides the example of the African Nuer peoples, who regularly sacrificed cucumber in place of oxen due to economic constraints, as an illustration of the dangers of relying purely on archaeological data when studying religious beliefs and practices, suggesting a similar reasoning might lie behind the otherwise unexplained resin balls deposited at Lunda in Södermanland, Sweden.[112] This study will focus primarily on the first level of Schjødt's genetic comparativism – that is, seeking evidence from within the Old Norse cultural sphere – although reference will also be made to phenomena from other regions, where appropriate.[113]

Of course, geographic variation is not the only axis along which religious culture – or language – may vary. Even following the limits of Schjødt and Nordberg's analogy and looking no earlier than the development of the Old Norse

---

109 See, for example, D. M. Hadley, '"And They Proceeded to Plough and to Support Themselves": The Scandinavian Settlement of England', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 19 (1996), pp. 69-96; D. M. Hadley and Julian D. Richards, eds., *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000); James H. Barrett, 'Culture Contact in Viking Age Scotland', *Contact, Continuity and Collapse: The Norse Colonisation of the North Atlantic*, ed. James H. Barrett (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), pp. 73-111; Clare Downham, *Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland: The Dynasty of Ívarr to AD 1014* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2008); and, ''Hiberno-Norwegians' and 'Anglo-Danes': Anachronistic Ethnicities and Viking-Age England', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 19 (2009), pp. 139-69; and Gísli Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland: Historical and Literary Contacts – A Survery of Research*, 2nd edn. (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2000).

110 Schjødt, 'Reflections on Aims and Methods' (2012), pp. 275-80.

111 Schjødt, 'Reflections on Aims and Methods' (2012), p. 275.

112 Nordberg, 'Continuity, Change and Regional Variation in Old Norse Religion', pp. 131-2 and references therein.

113 For an examination of the *valkyrjur* and their parallels in Celtic, Etruscan and Classical cultures – which would conform to Schjødt's third "level" of comparativism – see Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*.

language, the pre-Christian Old Norse cultural continuum may be said to span around four centuries, in other words from the end of the syncope period in the middle of the eighth century until the firm establishment of Christianisation in Sweden in the twelfth century.[114] It must nonetheless be borne in mind that such a temporal delineation is particularly arbitrary in the case of pre-Christian religious culture, with texts such as the *Germania* explicitly describing first-century phenomena which may be directly compared to their Viking-Age counterparts, as with the cult of Nerthus (*cf.* ON Njörðr) located on an island in the sea beyond the lands of the Langobardi (seemingly somewhere along the North Atlantic or Baltic coasts), the idol at the centre of which is conveyed in a "*vehiculum*"[115] – presumably a wagon ("*vagn*") similar to that described in texts like the second half of the late fourteenth-century *Ǫgmundar þáttr dytts ok Gunnars helmings*, in which the idol of Freyr is conveyed on a round of ritual *veizlur* feasts.[116]

Even within such a temporally-restricted continuum, intense disparity would inevitably have occurred around the 'core' depending upon the social status of those individuals making use of the subject phenomenon, with potential variables of economic standing, gender, ethnicity and social class producing widely-divergent religious beliefs and practices.[117] To take perhaps the most oft-quoted example, the Óðinnic cult – with its focus on the aristocratic pursuits of warfare and poetry – seems to have been largely pursued by the upper echelons of society (or those with pretentions to such status like the Icelander Egill Skallagrímsson), whereas other gods – particularly Þórr – have been traditionally regarded as patrons of lower-class farmers.[118] The Eddic poem *Hárbarðsljóð* is typically quoted in affirmation of this dichotomy, with strophe 24 neatly encapsulating the poem's presentation of a cultured, silver-tongued, seductive Óðinn and the crude, brutish, cuckolded Þórr:

Óðinn á iarla, *þá er í val falla,*

114 Berend, 'Introduction', p. 25.

115 Tacitus, *De origine et situ germanorum*, p. 72.

116 *Ǫgmundar þáttr dytts*, ÍF X, p. 113; *cf.* Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1995), pp. 53-60.

117 For a key study on 'class' in pre-Christian Nordic religion, see Georges Dumézil, 'The Rígsþula and Indo-European Social Structure', *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. Einar Haugen, trans. John Lindow (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 118-125.

118 See, for example, the entry on "Thor" in Haywood, *Encyclopaedia of the Viking Age*, pp. 187-188.

enn Þórr á þræla kyn.[119]

Óðinn has those nobles who fall in battle,
but Þórr gets the slaves' kin.

Regardless of whether or not *Hárbarðsljóð* should be considered a genuine expression of pre-Christian belief or a post-Christianisation parody of earlier heathenism – the latter position made particularly tenable by the way in which Þórr was set up in opposition to Christianity by the pagan Icelanders[120] – the class basis of the two deities' worshippers would appear to be clear, at least to some degree. As Schjødt has argued, it seems likely that different social groups' worship of different deities did not mean that "there were no similarities between the rituals performed by the upper and the lower classes, but that the different classes had different needs and different priorities dependant on the position in the social hierarchy from which the world was viewed."[121]

Yet as reasonable as the assumption that professional aristocrat-warriors and farmers would have different requirements of their religions is, however, Catharina Raudvere has argued that "one must also mention the fact that most Viking settlements were close-knit communities comprised of individuals who were wholly dependent upon one another for the maintenance of social accord and the attainment of life's basic needs."[122] While I believe Raudvere is right to call for caution in dealing with class-based divisions in religious belief and practice – we cannot generalise that every noble worshipped Óðinn, nor every farmer Þórr – and while her description of late Iron-Age settlements might hold true in general terms, I find her statement something of an oversimplification of the aristocratic situation: Icelandic *konungasögur* such as *Hákonar saga góða* make it clear that the upper nobility at least rotated their presence between the farms of their supporters – presumably out of economic necessity – although they were also required as part of the religious aspect of their royal duties to perform rituals specifically aimed at securing "*árs þeim ok*

---

119 *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Edda, die Lieder des Codex Regius,* ed. Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn, 5th edn. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1983), st. 24, p. 82, trans. mine.

120 See, for example, the verses composed by Steinnun in Chapter 9 of *Kristni saga* when the missionary Þangbrandr's ship was wrecked in a storm, ÍF XV, vol. 2, p. 24; see also Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak*, pp. 63-78.

121 Schjødt, 'Diversity and its Consequences for the Study of Old Norse Religion', p. 15.

122 Catharina Raudvere, 'Popular Religion in the Viking Age', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 235-242, p. 242.

friðar" ('good harvests and peace for them [the farmers of the region]').[123] Arguments have also been made, on the basis of runic evidence, that the uppermost echelons of Germanic and early-Scandinavian nobility spoke "a dialectally smoothed-out *koiné* language different from the other, more varied German dialects",[124] which, if accurate, might further differentiate the upper aristocracy from the lower classes. This social milieu, being the setting within which the *valkyrjur* originate, will be examined in more detail below (see Chapter 3.2).

Beyond the potential religious variety exhibited at the level of social groupings, we must also contend with the potential variation inherent in the religious beliefs and practices of any given individual: any given facet of subjective identity – such as ethnicity or religious beliefs – may be considered "negotiable and dependent upon context and situation."[125] Examples of this from the Viking Age might include Helgi *enn magri*'s famous syncretic worship "*á Krist, en hét á Þór til sjófara ok harðræða*" ('of Christ, but he called on Þórr for sea voyages and in difficult situations'),[126] and Jarl Hákon Sigurðarson's baptism in Denmark when faced with the victorious Saxon invaders: the fiercely pagan ruler of Norway is provided with clerics to bring back to his territory with him in order to begin the baptism of the Norwegian populace (and also, presumably, to prevent any backsliding on behalf of Hákon himself), only for him to forcibly evict "*ǫllum lærðum mǫnnum*" ('all [the] learned men') from his ships as soon as he was out of reach of the Saxons and Danes, and then conduct "*blót mikit*" ('a great sacrifice') as soon as he made land.[127] Hákon's political power in Norway was very much bound up in his pagan identity,[128] but clearly his religious affiliation was negotiable in extreme circumstances – as it seems reasonable to assume most individuals' would have been.

This leads neatly on to what Schjødt terms "cognitive diversity": the argument that, no matter how much we might desire it to be so, we will never be able to resolve the evidence for pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices into a totally unified

123 *Hákonar saga góða*, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI, p. 170, trans. mine.

124 Nordberg, 'Continuity, Change and Regional Variation in Old Norse Religion', p. 128; see Ènver Achmedovič Makaev, *The Language of the Oldest Runic Inscriptions: A Linguistic and Historical-Philological Analysis*, trans. John Meredig and Elmer Antonsen, *Filologisk-filosofika serien* 21 (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 1996), pp. 23-48 and references therein.

125 Nordberg, 'Continuity, Change and Regional Variation in Old Norse Religion', p. 136.

126 *Landnámabók*, ÍF I, p. 250.

127 *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI, p. 260.

128 Murphy, 'Politicising Pagan Mythology in Tenth-Century Norway?'.

coherent system, not due to flaws in the extant source material, but because no such system ever existed in the first place on any scale whatsoever – even within the mind of a single individual. In his words:

> [...] it seems as if most people are quite content, even if their religious view points are often completely incoherent. Their gods are in the temple as well as in heaven, they are both conceived as anthropomorphic and not anthropomorphic. The dead are in some far away abode, and yet they get presents in the mound.[129]

Clearly, attempting to reach any conclusions regarding pre-Christian religious culture in Iron-Age northern Europe will not be an easy process.

1.3.2 Modelling the Past

Given the huge range of variation in religious culture discussed in this chapter – ranging from geographic and temporal to social and cognitive – it is clear that no individual source can be considered representative of pre-Christian attitudes to a given cultural phenomenon. It must also be remembered that any given source can in no way be considered coherent in and of itself: narrative sources represent an amalgam of the individual teller's own worldview with that of his source material's, all of which is now seen through the lens of the twenty-first century scholar's own cultural preconceptions (what is a 'religion'? what are 'gods'?); and non-narrative sources – be they philological, iconographic, or archaeological in nature – require interpretation blending twenty-first century approximations of Iron-Age modes of thought.

Such uncertainty precludes the establishment of definitive answers regarding the nature of historical reality, requiring instead that a study of any given phenomenon accept that the multiplicity of evidence harvested from numerous sources must be synthesised to produce a simplified, 'average' reading of the available data – what Schjødt calls a "model of certain aspects of a delimited part of reality [... which] does not cover the real reality."[130] Any paradigms created in this manner, focused as they are on specific subjects – in the context of this thesis, the *valkyrjur* in their Iron-Age

[129] Schjødt, 'Diversity and its Consequences for the Study of Old Norse Religion', p. 16.
[130] Schjødt, 'Reflections on Aims and Methods' (2012), p. 270.

social context – must be acknowledged to be partial and arbitrarily delimited, and to only reflect current understandings of historical reality, rather than historical reality itself:[131] they are 'constructions' rather than 'reconstructions'.

In delineating the boundaries of such a model, necessary pragmatic decisions must be taken, particularly regarding the axes of variability outlined above: geographic regions, temporal periods, social classes, and so on. Yet whatever limits are imposed on the model to be constructed, it is bound to be the case that some related phenomena will always fall outside its borders, given that human culture may be likened to a densely-woven "intellectual fabric".[132] To some scholars, the aforementioned arbitrary nature of modern scholarly paradigms offers no problems, in principle at least: Nordberg, for example, has called for the use of Max Weber's 'Ideal Types' – which Nordberg himself describes as "hypothetical and academically constructed categories" – when studying "ever-changing heterogeneous reality."[133] Others, however, are much more cautious. In his study of Anglo-Saxon *ælfe*, gender-identity and medicine, Alaric Hall argues that "[t]o reconstruct early-medieval concepts and conceptual categories, we should build our reconstructions up from our primary evidence, rather than positing categories and then seeking evidence for them [...] one system of categorisation, providing valid insights into world-view, is a culture's vernacular language", offering an analysis of the shortcomings of the *Thesaurus of Old English* in support of his position.[134] There are undoubtedly advantages to Hall's approach: language and culture are mutually constitutive phenomena, and the lexicon of a language may indeed be expected to reflect the needs of its speakers in differentiating between different semantic fields.

On the other hand, an interpretation based entirely on linguistic evidence would still consist of twenty-first century judgements regarding the signifieds of Iron-Age signifiers, no matter how much the scholar might attempt to remain neutral, as even Hall himself admits: "for historians to try to abandon their own belief-systems is a hopeless endeavour, leaving them and their audiences to impose their preconceptions unconsciously on the material studied."[135] Nonetheless, this linguistic

131 Schjødt, 'Diversity and its Consequences for the Study of Old Norse Religion', p. 19.
132 Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Creation of Old Norse Mythology', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 231-234, p. 231.
133 Nordberg, 'Continuity, Change and Regional Variation in Old Norse Religion', p. 121-122.
134 Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 9-11.
135 Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 8.

methodology may indeed be valid when, as in the case of Anglo-Saxon *ælfe*, the signifieds under examination are not the subjects of descriptive or narrative textual sources which would preserve contemporary attitudes concerning their associations, functions, origins, and so on. In the case of this thesis, however, things are different. Not only are the *valkyrjur* the subject of numerous narrative accounts – the validity of which must, admittedly, be subject to critical enquiry due to their preservation in medieval, rather than contemporary Iron-Age sources – there are also a great number of sources extant which describe other contemporary female spirits and figures which may have occupied the same discursive space as the *valkyrjur*, but are not explicitly labelled as such. Consider, for example, the description of the supernatural assistance rendered to King Sigmundr in *Völsunga saga* by supernatural females who accompany him into battle: "*Margt spjót var þar á lopti ok örvar. En svá hlífðu honum hans spádísir, at hann varð ekki sárr, ok engi kunni töl, hversu margr maðr fell fyrir honum*" ('Many spears and arrows were in the air, but he was so well protected by his *spádísir* that he was not wounded, and no-one could count how many men he felled').[136] Not only are these spirits present on the battlefield, actively altering the course of events by protecting Sigmundr, but their defence is also conspicuously absent against the attack of the one-eyed, cloaked man in a broad-brimmed hat who runs the king through with a spear, thereby granting victory to Sigmundr's enemies. The Óðinnic connotations of the scene are clear, but the word "*valkyrjur*" is carefully – perhaps deliberately – not employed by the author of the saga-text in its present state, and they are described only as "*spádísir*". An overly-literal interpretation of Hall's methodology would require that we treat these *spádísir* as an entirely separate phenomenon to the *valkyrjur*, despite the apparent similarities between the two (see below, Chapter 2, for a discussion of *dísir*, *nornir*, *fylgjur* and other female spirits potentially related to the *valkyrjur*).

A similar situation arises in the Eddic poem *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, where, following his successful battle against Hundingr's sons, the resting Helgi is approached by a group of blood-drenched figures:

Þá brá lióma af Logafiollom,
enn af þeim liómom leiptrir qvómo;

136 *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 3 vols. (Reykjavík: Bókútgáfan forni, 1943-44), vol. 1, pp. 25-26, trans. mine.

þá var und hiálmom á Himinvanga
Brynior vóro þeira blóði stocnar.
Enn af geirom geislar stóðo.[137]

Then light burst from Logafjall,
And from those lights bolts of lightning flashed;
Then was [a troop] helmed on Himinvanga;
Their armour was soaked in blood,
Rays of light shone from their spears then.

The nature of these figures is not made explicit in the poem, and it is left to the audience to infer – either from their knowledge of the Völsung cycle as a whole, or the rest of poem as it unfolds – that they are Helgi's eventual bride, Sigrún, and her *valkyrjur* companions. This is not only an excellent example of Clunies Ross' assertion that many "texts reveal only the tips of narrative icebergs [...] and assume the audience's knowledge of the main part of the story below the surface"[138] – leaving modern translations of the poem such as Caroline Larrington's to supply this knowledge for the twenty-first century reader ("wearing helmets at Himinvangi [came the valkyries]"[139]) – it also highlights the difficulties of relying too closely on individual lexical terms as the key factor in attempting to construct models of what Hall calls "past cultural categorisations":[140] sometimes our sources simply do not label the phenomena they describe, which *must* therefore be categorised on the basis of modern academic understanding.

As Hall himself admits, language is an imperfect system for approximate communication: "[a] prelinguistic child can have a concept of a house; people perceive the difference between red and pink when their language uses one word of both; I may say that I am angry, while acknowledging that no word precisely denotes my experience."[141] Given this, and the non-representative nature of the lexicon available from the pre-Christian era of the Old Norse cultural continuum – originating, as most of it does, in Christian medieval Iceland – the best methodology would seem to be to seek to construct a model of the subject of study which

137 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, *Edda, die Lieder des Codex Regius,* ed. Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn, 5th edn. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1983), st. 15, p. 132, trans. mine.

138 Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes I*, p. 25.

139 *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 116.

140 Alaric Hall, '"Þur Sarriþu Þursa Trutin": Monster-Fighting and Medicine in Early Medieval Scandinavia', *Asclepio: Revista de Historia de la Medicina y de la Ciencia* LXI (2009), pp. 195-218, p. 197.

141 Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 12.

incorporates the widest possible range of relevant, applicable evidence from within the designated area of study. This will necessarily risk the creation of generalised and potentially-false supra-regional paradigm, as no such general model will ever necessarily represent the historical reality at any given temporal or geographic point in the area, nor explain each idiosyncrasy of every extant source. Nonetheless, provided proper critical analysis is exercised in the reading of the source material and the model is acknowledged to be no more than a tool to help us understand the evidence available, the exercise should allow the establishment of what Schjødt calls the "semantic centre" of the phenomenon under study,[142] a key concept that will help, in Schjødt's words, to "enlighten reality."[143]

As such, it is the aim of this thesis to investigate and produce a model of the way – or ways – in which the *valkyrjur* were used and understood by late-Iron Age aristocratic hall culture, particularly the roles these spirits might have played in beliefs regarding the afterlife, battle, sexual identity, and the promulgation of the social order. The nature of this society will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters (see below, Chapter 3.2), but for the purpose of outlining the field of study, the focus of this thesis can be assumed to coincide with the Old Norse cultural continuum discussed above, covering the time period *c*. 750-1150 AD, and the geographic regions where the Old Norse language was spoken, although reference will also be made to textual sources from outside these limits, where appropriate. In doing so, this study will undoubtedly produce an overarching paradigm of a *valkyrja* few – if any – of the aristocratic warriors of the *männerbände* of the period would have recognised – but as a Digital-Age model of an Iron-Age phenomenon, this is only to be expected, and should not invalidate the results of this thesis.

1.4 The Structure of this Thesis

Following this introductory chapter, the analytical body of the thesis begins in Chapter 2 with a consideration of how best to locate the *valkyrjur* in a complicated spectrum of supernatural female beings. It then seeks to present a study of the closely-related *dísir*, examining evidence for both a distinct sub-grouping of this type of being

142 Schjødt, 'Diversity and its Consequences for the Study of Old Norse Religion', p. 17.
143 Schjødt, 'Reflections on Aims and Methods' (2012), p. 270.

and data that suggests that the term was freely applied to a wide range of supernatural females. Chapter 2 is concluded with a discussion of the results of these analyses, and their potential influence on our understanding of the *valkyrjur* in the late Iron Age.

Chapter 3 is a study of evidence directly concerned with valkyric phenomena, and opens with a short introduction that includes some brief comments on recent scholarship on the *valkyrjur*. The body of Chapter 3 then examines a number of different features, associations and characteristics linked to various *valkyrja* reflexes throughout the late Iron Age, including their place in divine/afterlife society, their familial and conjugal relations, their activities on the battlefield, and their psychopompic function. A small number of iconographic representations of female figures commonly interpreted as *valkyrjur* are also examined, before a tentative conclusion regarding the social function played by the *valkyrja* myth is proposed. Finally, Chapter 4 concludes this study with a very brief summary of the key results produced.

CHAPTER 2: *VALKYRJUR* IN THE OLD-NORSE CULTURAL CONTINUUM

2.1 Distinguishing the *Valkyrjur*

Having considered the available source material and appropriate methodologies with which to engage with this material, the next step in this attempt to set the *valkyrjur* in the context of the masculine, hall-based culture of the late Iron Age which made use of and propagated them is to define – or at least seek to more closely examine and better understand – exactly what we mean by each of those terms: '*valkyrjur*' on the one hand, and 'masculine, hall-based culture of the late Iron Age' on the other. The latter will be dealt with below (see Chapter 3.2), while the former is the focus of this chapter.

As was first discussed above (see Chapter 1.3.2), it is not always a simple matter to distinguish the *valkyrjur* from other female spirits. There are descriptions of armed and armoured supernatural women that sound (at least on the basis of our twenty-first century preconceptions) like archetypical *valkyrjur*,[144] but which are instead explicitly labelled as something else – "*spádísir*", in the case of King Sigmundr's aforementioned protectoresses in *Völsunga saga*, for example.[145] At the same time, other instances of probable *valkyrjur* do not explicitly label them as anything at all, as in the famous 'ride' of Sigrún and her companions from Logafjall in st. 15 of *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*,[146] so we cannot rely solely on the presence (or absence) of the signifier '*valkyrjur*' itself as a sole criteria for identifying these beings, a method which would, in any case, not have been applicable to visual sources.

While there are, of course, some very clear descriptions of *valkyrjur* – which will be examined in more detail as they become relevant – it would appear that in at least some instances the lines dividing *valkyrjur* from other female spirits such as

144 Beings that are not explicitly labelled as *valkyrjur* in the texts that preserve mention of them may nonetheless be interpreted as such on the basis of attributes held in common with beings that are called *valkyrjur*. Such 'valkyric' attributes and associations may include, among others, a female gendering, a presence on the battlefield, links with fate and/or death, links with Óðinn and/or individual warriors, the wearing of armour, and the carrying of weapons.

145 *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, pp. 25-6.

146 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, *Edda*, st. 15, p. 132.

(*spá*)*dísir*, *nornir*, *fylgjur*, *draumkonur*, and potentially even anthropomorphic *hamingjur* were blurred, permeable, or even nonexistent. As Bek-Pedersen puts it, "they do tend to merge more or less into each other, yet without ever becoming entirely synonymous with one another."[147] There are many potential explanations for such confusion, if confusion it truly is: it may be that the extant sources are insufficient to provide us with enough data to understand the ways in which Iron-Age people distinguished between these categories (if indeed they ever did); or that our sources – many of which are late, or have complicated textual histories – have confused the issue, with time and scribal intervention (deliberate or otherwise) making it difficult or impossible to tell where the divisions between these beings lay; or it may be that we have only fractions of worldviews from different temporal, geographic and social regions which imperfectly preserve widely different ways of thinking about these beings, which modern scholars are now erroneously attempting to rationalise into a single coherent picture. While the over-rationalisation of this available source material is necessarily to be avoided if the resulting readings are to have any sensitivity or regional applicability at all, some level of rationalisation is required in order to produce useable models of any sort (see above, Chapter 1.3.2), and even if our sources do ultimately prove insufficient for such an exercise, some attempt must be made to prove this before the effort is abandoned.

So, given this confusion of female beings – who may have coexisted, overlapped, merged and separated from one another in a welter of concurrent processes barely recorded by our extant sources – we must acknowledge the accuracy of Bek-Pederson's statement that "[d]isentangling *dísir*, *valkyrjur*, *nornir* and all the others from one another by the means of logic would be not only impossible but probably outright wrong."[148] Having said this, it may well be possible to isolate a single strand from this tangle for further study without seeking to undo the Gordian knot in its entirety, and simply establishing the extent to which the *valkyrjur* seem to be bound up in this complex of supernatural females – or the degree to which some may have stood apart – would not only prove illuminating in its own right, but should also form the basis of any further study of Iron-Age valkyric phenomena.

147 Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, p. 64.

148 Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, p. 64; see also her chapter differentiating the *nornir* from other female supernatural spirits, which heavily informs Chapter 2 of this thesis, Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, pp. 13-72.

As such, let us now examine Alaric Hall's passing, almost throwaway comment that "*valkyrja* is most likely a kenning ('chooser of the slain') for *dís* ('(supernatural) lady')".[149] Brief as it is, this statement bears some unpacking. The suggestion that the term *valkyrja* is, or at least originated as, a *kenning* is well established in scholarship,[150] with the term breaking down into two components, "*val-* and "*-kyrja*". The latter is an agent noun derived from the verb "*kjósa*" ('choose, select'), the semantic range of which exhibits a range of usage focused primarily around the making of a decision between two or more options, as in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, when Njörfi declares that "*Mun ek heldr kjósa at verja fé mitt ok falla með drengskap*" ('I would rather choose to defend my property and die with courage') rather than submit to the authority of Víkingr and Hálfdan,[151] or when *Hákonar saga góða* records the men of the Frostaþing forcing Hákon *inn góði* to choose between acceding to their demands or being displaced.[152] "*Kjósa*" also appears occasionally in the sense of 'select', or possibly even 'elect', when individuals are being invited to occupy specific social positions or roles, as when the people of Trondheim are said to have '(s)elected' the dog Saurr as their king in Chapter 12 of *Hákonar saga góða*.[153] Here again, however, there is the sense of choosing between a number of available options, as the text of the saga claims that the Þrændir were thoroughly defeated by Eysteinn *Upplendingakonungr*, who, it is implied, imposed the humiliating choice of ruler – between the dog and a slave called Þórir *faxi* – on the people of the Norwegian district as revenge for the overthrow and killing of his nameless son. Clearly then, the "choosing" the *valkyrjur* participate in is the selection of the "*valr*" from amongst a fixed set of options, as is described in the opening strophe of *Hákonarmál*, a poem that has been dated to the mid-tenth century:[154]

Gǫndul ok Skǫgul

149 Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 22.

150 The etymology of "*valkyrja*" as 'chooser of the slain' (or some variant thereof) appears in a great many scholarly works of different types, including reference works (e.g. Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, p. 471), introductory handbooks (e.g. Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964], p. 61) and scholarship specific to the *valkyrjur* themselves (e.g. Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, p. 38).

151 *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 2, p. 199, trans. mine.

152 *Hákonar saga góða*, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI, pp. 169-70.

153 *Hákonar saga góða*, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI, p. 164.

154 *Hákonarmál, Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 4 vols. (København: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1967-1973; hereafter *Skj*), B1, p. 57.

> *sendi Gauta-týr*
> *at kjósa of konunga,*
> *hverr Yngva ættar*
> *skyldi með Óðni fara*
> *ok í Valhǫll vesa.*[155]
>
> Gauta-týr [Óðinn] sends
> Gǫndul ok Skǫgul [*valkyrjur*]
> to choose between kings,
> which of Yngvi's kin
> should go with Óðinn
> and be in Valhöll.

Given that *Hákonarmál* is preserved in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, it should come as no surprise that Snorri's *Gylfaginning* also emphasises the 'choice' of the *valkyrjur*:

> *Þessar heita valkyrjur. Þær sendir Óðinn til hverrar orrostu. Þær kjósa feigð á menn ok ráða sigri. Guðr ok Rota ok norn in yngsta er Skuld heitir ríða jafnan at kjósa val ok ráða vígum.*[156]
>
> These are called *valkyrjur*. Óðinn sends them to every battle. They allot approaching death to men and govern victory. Guðr and Rota and the youngest *norn*, who is called Skuld, always ride to choose the *valr* and govern the slayings.

Both of these texts will be returned examined in more detail when we consider the psychopompic and battlefield activities of the *valkyrjur* (see Chapter 3.6-3.7), but in the present context it is also worth considering strophe 14 of *Grímnismál*, which would appear to confirm that "*kjósa*" implies a decision between two options, even when used of the *valr* in a context where the *valkyrjur* themselves are absent. This strophe opens by describing how Freyja arranges the benches in her hall Fólkvangr – which may be broken down into "*folk-*" (one meaning of which is 'army, host') and "*vangr*" ('homefield, garden'),[157] thus 'home/field/space of warriors'(?) – and continues with the claim that "*hálfan val hon kýss hverian dag, enn hálfan Óðinn á*"

---

155 *Hákonarmál, Skj*, B1, st. 1, p. 57, trans. and emphasis mine.

156 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 30, trans. and emphasis mine.

157 Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), pp. 167 and 678.

('she chooses half the *valr* every day, but Óðinn has the other half').[158] That the two deities are said to divide the *valr* between them (with Freyja, interestingly, getting first choice), implies a belief that they were choosing from among those warriors who were already dead – presumably as a result of higher functions of fate, such as the *nornir*[159] – rather than exercising their own agency in bringing about the death of individuals themselves. (The question of agency in the death of warriors will be returned to below in Chapter 3.3)

The second element of *valkyrja*, "*val-*", is derived from "*valr*", a masculine collective noun translated by Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon as simply "the slain".[160] This is apparently a prosaic term for 'those killed violently, in battle', and finds use not only in mythological and legendary texts connected with gods, afterlives and the *valkyrjur* themselves – as in the *Sögubrot af Fornkonungum* when the Danish King Haraldr declares "*allan þann val, sem fellr á þeima velli, gef ek Óðni*" ('all those slain, who fall on this [battle]field, I give to Óðinn')[161] – but also in more naturalistic settings, such as when the Möðruvallabók text of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* has King Haraldr order Ǫlvir to bury his kinsmen Þórólfr and "*ryðið val allra þeira*" ('clear away all their bodies/dead'),[162] and in §178 of *Den elder Gulatingslova*, which prohibits "*valrof*" ('despoiling/robbing the slain').[163] I would suggest, however, that Gustav Neckel's early suggestion that "*valr*" can also include the semantic field of "das Schlachtfeld nach der Schalcht (mit Toten, Verwunden und Kriegsgerät)" ('the battlefield after the battle [with dead, wounded and war-gear]'),[164] uncorroborated as it is with specific references to primary material, needlessly overcomplicates matters.

158 *Grímnismál*, *Edda*, st. 14, p. 60, trans. mine.

159 *cf*. Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*; and Gerd Wolfgang Weber, *Wyrd. Studien Zum Schicksalsbegriff Der Altenglischen Und Altnordischen Literatur*, *Frankfurter Beiträge Zur Germanistik* 8 (Bad Homburg: Verlag Gehlen, 1969), pp. 149-154.

160 Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 676.

161 *Sögubrot af Fornkonungum*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 2, p. 127, trans. mine. This scene is replete with Óðinnic imagery, including tactical secrets granted only to Haraldr's champions, the betrayal of these champions, the 'sacrifice' of warriors on the battlefield, and multiple *skjaldmær* ('shield maidens') who may represent another *valkyrjur* reflex. *cf*. Annette Lassen, 'Den prosaiske Odin: Fortidssagaerne som mytografi', *Fornaldarsagornas Struktur och Ideologi: Handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8-2.9 2001*, ed. Ármann Jackobsson, Annette Lassen and Agneta Ney (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2003), pp. 205-219.

162 *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ÍF II, p. 54, trans. mine

163 *Den eldre Gulatingslova*, ed. Bjørn Eithun, Magnus Rindal and Tor Ulset, *Norrøne Tekster* 6 (Oslo: Riksarkivet, 1994), p. 117, trans mine.

164 Gustav Neckel, *Walhall. Studien über germanischen Jenseitsglauben* (Dortmund: Fr. Wilh. Ruhfus, 1913), p. 4, trans. mine.

Phrases such as "[*þeir*] *koma nú í valinn*"[165] and "*gekk í valinn*",[166] which may indeed be said to describe the arrival of an individual on a battlefield after combat, need not suggest a wider meaning to "*valr*", as their sense can be sufficiently represented by 'those slain in battle' in translations such as '[they] come to the slain' and 'went amongst the slain', respectively. Similarly, the apparently poetic construction "*í val falla*" – found in strophe 24 of *Hárbarðsljóð*,[167] a *lausavísa* preserved in *Harðar saga Grímkelssonar*, one of the *Íslendingasögur*,[168] and *Gylfaginning*[169] – may indeed be understood as "die in battle" as Faulkes renders it,[170] but only through the oversimplification of the original sense 'fall amongst the slain [on the battlefield]'.

As such, the "*valr*" that the *valkyrjur* are in some sense choosing or selecting would appear, at least on the basis of philological investigation, to be those warriors who die in battle, although such analysis has thus far offered no indication as to whether the *valkyrjur* were choosing which of the living warriors should become *valr* (i.e. who should die in battle), or which of the *valr* should be taken on to Valhöll after death (perhaps as opposed to other afterlife destinations) – or even some combination of the two. Regardless, the traditional reading of "*valkyrja*" as *kenning* for 'chooser of the slain (in battle)' clearly bears up under a more thorough examination than it is typically accorded.

Before moving on, the possibility must be acknowledged that at least some speakers of Old Norse dialects in the late Iron Age – particularly those who were familiar with the antiquated vocabulary and complex constructions of skaldic poetry – would almost certainly have been able to decode "*val-kyrja*" as 'chooser of the slain (in battle)' rather than simply as a proper noun denoting a specific type of female spirit. However, it seems likely that the numbers of those capable of doing so would have decreased as the Iron Age drew to a close and archaic strong-form agent nouns still in use in Viking-Age Old Norse – including "*valkyrja*" and other constructions such as "*grönduðr*" ('destroyer'), derived from the verb "*granda*" ('hurt, damage')[171] – became increasingly restricted to poetic language, their function typically replaced by weak masculine nouns constructed following the "*-andi*" paradigm – "*dómandi*"

165 *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, p. 27.
166 *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, pp. 26, 52.
167 *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Edda,* st. 24, p. 84.
168 *Harðar saga Grímkelssonar*, ÍF XIII, p. 32.
169 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 28.
170 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 151.
171 Cleasby and Guðbrandr Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, pp. xxxi, 211.

('judge', from the verb "*dæma*" ['to judge']) and "*eigandi*" ('owner', from the verb "*eiga*" ['to own']), for example. This even appears to have happened with the verb "*kjósa*" itself in the case of the Óðinn *heiti* "Valkjósandi" – also translatable as 'Chooser of the Slain' – which is attested as "*valkjósanda*" in a kenning for poetry as Óðinn's drink in a *lausavísa* attributed to the eponymous hero of *Kormáks saga*, an *Íslendingasaga* typically dated to the twelfth-century.[172]

However, let us return to Hall's abovementioned assertion of a taxonomic relationship between the *dísir* and the *valkyrjur*: such an allegation requires further examination. It implies not only that "*dís*" occupies a higher level than "*valkyrja*" in a proposed hierarchical "(supernatural) females" taxon, but also casually questions the assumption that the *dísir* themselves fulfilled a specific religious role or function, or occupied a specific cosmological mansion during the late Iron Age. If true, and *valkyrjur* may genuinely be seen as a merely a 'type' of *dís* – albeit one with a specific function – this has serious implications for the way we view the relationship between what have typically been regarded as two separate (groups of) phenomena, as well as the selection of evidence to be used in any study of *valkyrjur*. Hall is not the only scholar to have observed the complicated relationship between these two types of female spirit, with Mathias Egeler noting that the term "*valkyrja*" itself is relatively rarely deployed in our textual sources and asserting that "[s]tattdessen wird häufig der Begriff *dís* verwendet; dieser wiederum hat jedoch eine weitere Bedeutung als *valkyrja*" ('instead, the term *dís* is used; this, in contrast, has a wider meaning than *valkyrja*'),[173] yet he offers no analysis to back up the second half of this claim. The next logical step in this investigation is therefore to examine the evidence for the *dísir* directly, in order to see if they can truly be determined to have occupied a higher level of taxonomy than other supernatural females – or, at least, the *valkyrjur*. Once this has been established, we may then consider what characteristics distinguished the

[172] *Kormáks saga*, ÍF VIII, p. 228. In the introduction to his Islenzk fornrit edition of the saga, Einar Ól. Sveinsson argues that at least some of the verses attributed to Kormákr may indeed have been composed by the poet himself in the early tenth century (see ÍF VIII, pp. lxxxvi-xci, cx-cxiv and references therein), a theme he examines further in a later article, declaring that it is an "inescapable conclusion that a considerable number of the verses are old, e.g. from the tenth century" (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 'Kormakr the Poet and His Verses', *The Saga Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* XVII [1966-69], pp. 18-60, p. 51). However, this view is not universally accepted; *cf.* Heather O'Donoghue, *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in Kormaks Saga* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), esp. pp. 11-16 and references therein.

[173] Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, pp. 33-4.

valkyrjur from the *dísir* and other female spirits, and what can truly be regarded as 'defining' the Iron-Age *valkyrja*.

2.2 The *Dísir*: a 'Base State' for Supernatural Femininity in the Late Iron Age?

2.2.1 The *Dísablót*: Cult and Ritual

While there is certainly extensive evidence that a wide range of figures and beings may have been described as *dísir*, at least in specific sources or circumstances (as discussed below, Chapter 2.2.2), some readings of the data propose more coherent interpretations of the *dísir* as a specific type of supernatural female in their own right, most notably by Folke Ström in his 1954 book *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*.[174] Such interpretations tend to focus on the relatively small core of evidence for cultic practice and belief directed at a group of *dísir* never identified by individual names, which Ström terms the "diskollektiv",[175] who are the apparent recipients of the *dísablót* (literally 'sacrifice of the *dísir*'). One major factor in favour of such readings is that the *dísir* are the only group of supernatural females recorded as the recipients of cult – there is no evidence that the *valkyrjur*, for example, were worshiped with *blót*.

The term *dísablót* itself is attested only rarely. Chapter 6 of *Víga-Glúms saga* claims that "[*þ*]*ar var veizla búin at vetrnóttum ok gǫrt dísablót, ok allir skulu þessa minning gera*" ('a sacral feast was held there during the Winter Nights, and the sacrifice of the *dísir* was conducted, and everyone was supposed to take part in this tradition'),[176] setting the ritual on a prosperous farmstead in Norway at the end of the summer and emphasising its importance to those living there. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* also places the *dísablót* in Norway, on the royal farm of Atley (mod. Atløy, Sogn og Fjordane) apparently at an unspecified point during the autumn.[177] Neither of these accounts provide any further details as to the conduct of the *blót* ritual itself, nor any comment on the nature of the beings who were the intended

174 Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*.
175 Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, p. 56.
176 *Víga-Glúms saga*, ÍF IX, p. 17, trans. mine.
177 *Egils saga*, ÍF II, pp. 106-111, esp. p. 107.

recipients of the offerings, although in the case of *Egils saga* it seems likely that the actual *dísablót* either occurs offstage while Egill is being hunted – having fled Atley after killing the steward Bárðr following a long night of drinking – or was called off entirely to facilitate the hunt for the wayward Icelander. Given that both texts make use of the *dísablót* as little more than background settings for social gatherings at which their Icelandic heroes reveal something of their characters (Glúmr transforming from *kolbítr* to promising young man,[178] and Egill confirming his status as a troublemaker by crossing King Eiríkr), it may be possible to argue that these medieval *Íslendingasögur* are not reliable sources for the cult of or beliefs in the *dísir*, deploying the term "*dísablót*" only to lend a certain archaic colour to their narratives. However, even if this was indeed the intention of the sagas' composers, I find the coherence of the two accounts – the location at a prosperous farmstead in Norway, the timing at the end of the year,[179] and the implied social importance of the ceremony as people gathered for the ritual – suggestive of genuine pre-Christian tradition, and it must be noted that events are referred to casually, as if the thirteenth-century audiences of the texts that preserve mention of them were expected to be familiar with the concept.[180]

Also extant are a number of less straightforward sources which may preserve information relevant to the cult of the *dísir*. First among these is Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglingasaga*, which, on the basis of the skaldic poem *Ynglingatal*, records the lives and sometimes bizarre deaths of the Ynglingar kings of the Svea and their descendants who later became kings of Norway. Snorri's prose expansion of his poetic source has the legendary King Aðils thrown from his horse at the *dísablót*

178 *cf*. the initial unpromising description of Glúmr in Chapter 5 of *Víga-Glúms saga*; ÍF IX, p. 15.

179 Gunnell has proposed that the traditional Nordic year may have been divided into two seasons, starting with the winter (which was regarded as being under female influence from both supernatural and mundane beings, while the summer was seen as being under male authority), with the two periods divided by liminal periods lasting several days during which major feasts would be held. See Terry Gunnell, 'Ritual Space, Ritual Year, Ritual Gender: A View of the Old Norse and New Icelandic Ritual Year', *First International Conference of the Sief Working Group on the Ritual Year (Malta 20-24, 2005): Proceedings*, ed. George Mifsud-Chircop (Malta: Publishers Enterprises Group [PEG] Ltd., 2006), pp. 285-302; *cf*. Gunnell, 'The Season of the *Dísir*: The Winter Nights and the *Dísarblót* in Early Scandinavian Belief', *Cosmos* 16 (2005), pp. 117-149, pp. 121-129 on winter festivals.

180 Gunnell has made this observation regarding the *dísir* themselves (Gunnell, 'The Season of the *Dísir*', p. 130), although in both cases it should be borne in mind that thirteenth-century understandings based on book-learning and tradition might rationalise a variety of different pre-Christian concepts.

celebrated at Uppsala when he "*reið hesti um dísarsalinn*" ('rode a horse around the hall of the *dís*').[181] Snorri's text bears witness to some of the same associations attached to the *dísablót* found in *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Egils saga*: the ritual took place at a significant settlement and was attended by royalty, and would therefore, in my opinion, appear to have been of significant social importance.

Admittedly, no information is provided by either *Ynglingasaga* or *Ynglingatal* about the time of year at which Aðils died, unlike the two *Íslendingasögur*, which of both set the *dísablót* in the autumn – perhaps indicating a link with large harvest gatherings or animal slaughter and the turning of the seasons, associations which may be reinforced by the survival of place names such as Disin in Norway (from *Dísavin, 'Meadow of the *dísir*') which link a "*dís*-" element with arable land.[182] However, it may be that other texts may yet shed some light on when the *dísablót* was conducted in Uppland: scholarly tradition has assumed that Snorri's assertion in Chapter 77 of *Óláfs saga helga* that the "*høfuðblót*" ('main sacrifice(s)') at Uppsala was or were conducted in early spring applies to not only the famous hangings and drownings described by Adam of Bremen[183] – which are clearly directed to three male gods, and thus may mark a change of season[184] – but also to the *dísablót*, as is clear from a reading of, for example, the series of linked entries in Simek's *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*.[185] There may be reason to question this immediate assumption, as I find it highly unlikely, to say the least, that no other sacrifices or rituals were conducted at Uppsala at any other time of the year, particularly given the site's local and wider regional political prominence as recorded in both the archaeological and historical records.[186] I think it not unreasonable to argue (despite the understandable fascination of historians and other scholars throughout the ages

181 *Ynglinga saga*, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI, p. 58, trans. mine.

182 de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2, pp. 157-158, 298-299, 475, and references therein. Ström declares such toponyms to "peka på ett klart samband mellan diserna och manliga fruktbarhetsgudar" ('point to a clear connection between *dísir* and male fertility gods'), and while I agree they are certainly indicative of a link with the landscape and crops – and thus in all probability with fertility more generally – the research on which Ström relies to link *dísir* and male deities, particularly Ullr, does not seem particularly compelling, and may simply be a result of local naming customs. See Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, p. 20, trans. mine.

183 *Óláfs saga helga*, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVII, pp. 111-112; Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, IV.27, pp. 259-260.

184 Gunnell, 'Ritual Space, Ritual Year, Ritual Gender', pp. 293-299.

185 Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, pp. 70-72.

186 On the importance of Uppsala as a central place to the Svea people, see Sundqvist, *Freyr's Offspring*, pp. 59-128.

with the dramatic pictures of pre-Christian cultic practice painted by Adam) that not every written account of religious and/or sacrificial activity, nor every archaeological find interpreted as cultic in nature, must be assumed to have taken place as part of the same ritual complex conducted at the same time of year. After all, the very fact that Snorri felt it necessary to stress that the "*hǫfuðblót*" took place in spring, implies that there were other *blót* at other times.

As a result of this, it might be possible to cast doubt on the traditional spring timing of the pre-Christian Swedish *dísablót*, and its attendant "*disting*" ('þing of the *dís*[*ir*]'),[187] and argue that they were held in the autumn, as these rituals (but not the þing) are attested to have occurred in Norway in both thirteenth-century *Íslendingasögur*. This would also match the time of year – the "*vétrnætur*" ('winter nights') – at which another "*veizla*" ('[sacrificial] feast') is held in pre-Christian Iceland in *Þáttr Þiðranda ok Þórhalls*,[188] although, as dedicated as these spirits are to the "*átrúnaði*" (literally 'belief', but in this context, 'pre-Christian religion') there is no firm suggestion that this *veizla* in the *þáttr* was dedicated to the *dísir* themselves – nor that the *dísir* which appear in this text were in fact *dísir* in the sense currently under discussion, as they are referred to as "*konur*" and "*fylgjur*" as well as "*dísir*" in the text of the *þáttr*.[189] (See further below, Chapter 2.2.2.) Certainly if, as Ström has suggested, other sacrifices and rituals also conducted in the autumn "*til árs ok til friðar*" ('for good harvests and for peace') and "*til friðar*" ('for peace') as recorded in texts such as, respectively, *Gulatingslagen* and *Óláfs saga helga* (even if, by the medieval period, the former is dedicated to Jesus and the Virgin Mary rather than the *dísir*) may also be read as reflexes of the *dísir* cult, then the link between the *dísir* and an autumn (harvest?) ritual appear appears even stronger, at least in Norway.[190] (The celebration of the *álfablót* ['sacrifice of the *álfar*'] in Gautaland, southern Sweden, "*Ǫndurðan vetr*" ['in the early part of winter'] also sounds like it could be a related phenomenon, but I am reluctant to conflate the two on the basis of timing alone.[191]) However, the inclusion of "*Distingsfriden*" ('the holiday of the þing of the *dís*[*ir*]') in

187 Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, p. 72

188 *Þáttr Þiðranda ok Þórhalls*, *Flateyjarbók*, ed. Vilhjalmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson and Sigurður Nordal, 4 vols (Akraness: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944-5), vol. 1, pp. 465-468.

189 *Þáttr Þiðranda ok Þórhalls*, *Flateyjarbók*, pp. 467-468.

190 Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, p. 20; *Gulatingslagen*, *Noregs gamle Love*, ed. Rudolf Keyser, Peter Andreas Munch, Gustav Strom and Ebbe Hertzberg, 5 vols (Christiania: Chr. Gröndahl, 1846-95), vol. 1, p. 6; *Óláfs saga helga*, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVII, p. 109.

191 *Óláfs saga helga*, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVII, pp. 136-137.

a chronological catalogue of holidays in the text of *Upplandslagen*, a medieval law code from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries,[192] makes the proposal of reassigning the Swedish *dísablót* to the autumn untenable. Not only does this instance appear to provide an independent, East-Norse verification of Snorri's claims that the *dísir* were worshipped in pre-Christian Uppland, it also lists the "*distingsdagen*" ('days of the þing of the *dís*[*ir*]') as occurring between Christmas and "*Helga torsdag*" ('Holy Thursday, The Feast of the Ascension') which is part of the festival of Easter, and thus occurs in spring[193] – very much in line with Snorri's *Óláfs saga helga* description of the major *blót* and attendant þing held in the spring month of Góa, later moved to Candlemas,[194] but in contrast to the evidence of *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Egils saga*, which places the *dísablót* in the autumn.

The possibility that Snorri Sturluson actively contributed to the propagation of this division is an intriguing one: that Snorri himself was the author (in as much as this modern term may be used of thirteenth-century writers) of *Heimskringla* is undoubted, but it has also been argued "often and persuasively, if not conclusively" that he also composed *Egils saga*.[195] If he did indeed compose the *Íslendingasaga*, then Snorri himself may be behind the associations linked to the *dísablót* in some of our extant texts: while King Aðils' ignoble death is well in keeping with the bizarre and sometimes supernatural ends suffered by the other Ynglingar in both *Ynglingatal* and the prose saga,[196] the being responsible for his death is not identified as a *dís* in the text of *Ynglingatal* itself – typically but not uncontroversially dated to the ninth

---

192 *Upplandslagen*, *Svenska landskapslagar: tolkade och förklarade för nutidens svenskar*, ed. Åke Holmbäck and Elias Wessén, 5 vols. (Stockholm: Hugo Gebers Förlag, 1993), vol. 1, p. 205.

193 *Upplandslagen*, *Svenska landskapslagar*, vol. 1, p. 205.

194 *Óláfs saga helga*, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVII, pp. 111-112.

195 Diana Whaley, 'Snorri Sturluson', *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 602-603, p. 603; for a key article on the authorship of *Egils saga*, see Vésteinn Ólason, 'Er Snorri Höfundur *Egils Sögu*?', *Skírnir* 142 (1968), pp. 48-67 and references therein.

196 The many and unusual deaths of the legendary Svea kings in *Ynglingatal* have been interpreted as evidence of a dimly-remembered practice of royal sacrifice. See, for example, de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2, pp. 455-456; *cf.* also Sundvist, *Freyr's Offspring*, pp. 129-269, esp. pp. 129-135; Gro Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi: en analyse av hierogami-myten i Skírnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal og Hyndluljóð* (Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo, 1989), pp. 322-390; Rory McTurk, 'Sacral Kingship in Ancient Scandinavia: A Review of Some Recent Writings', *The Saga Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 19 (1975), pp. 139-69; and 'Scandinavian Sacral Kingship Revisited', *The Saga Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 24 (1994), pp. 19-32.

century[197] – which only refers to the agent responsible as a "*véttr*" ('supernatural being, wight').[198] As such, it is possible that addition of the *dísir* to Aðils' story is Snorri's entirely own innovation, potentially on the basis of name of the gathering – "*disting*" – he knew to take place in Uppland each spring. Before engaging in speculation on Snorri's possible motives for such an act, the survival of a Latin account of Aðils' fall in *Historia Norwegiae* – a history of Norwegian royalty preserved in a Scottish paper manuscript from the first decade of the sixteenth century – should be considered, as it may offer some support to the idea that Snorri recorded a tradition that predated his own period.

The text of *Historia Norwegiae*, like *Ynglinga saga*, also appears to know the genealogical tradition embodied by *Ynglingatal*, stating that: "*Cuius filius Adils ante edem Diane, dum ydolorum sacrificia faceret, equo lapsus expirauit*" ('His son Adils gave up the ghost after falling from his horse before the temple of Diana, while he was performing the sacrifices made to idols');[199] although different interpretations of the only extant manuscript have produced subtly different readings of the text, as in Carl Phelpstead and Devra Kunin's translation "His son Aðils, or Aðísl, fleeing from idolatrous sacrifice, fell from his horse in front of the temple of Diana and died."[200] Admittedly, *Historia Norwegiae* does not explicitly record Aðils as having been participating in a *dísablót* ritual when he died, but it is significant that the indigenous deity (or deities?) behind the *interpretation romana* of the text is distinctly female, unlike the male deities typically associated with the Svea by writers including Adam of Bremen, Saxo Grammaticus, and, elsewhere, Snorri himself.[201] Indeed, considering the detailed knowledge that he elsewhere displays of pre-Christian Upplandic culture – including the detailed description in Chapter 77 of *Óláfs saga helga*[202] – I believe it

197 See Christopher Sapp, 'Dating *Ynglingatal*: Chronological Metrical Developments in *Kviðuháttr*', *Skandinavistik* 30 (2000), pp. 85-98 and references therein; *cf.* also Svante Norr, *To Rede and to Rown. Expressions of Early Scandinavian Kingship in Written Sources*, *Occasional Papers in Archaeology* 17 (Uppsala: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University, 1998), pp. 102-110.

198 *Ynglinga saga*, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI, p. 59.

199 *Historia Norwegie*, ed. Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, trans. Peter Fisher (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2003), pp. 76-79.

200 *A History of Norway and the Passion and Miracles of the Blessed Óláfr*, ed. Carl Phelpstead, trans. Devra Kunin (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 2001), p. 13.

201 Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, IV.26-27, pp. 257-260; Saxo Grammaticus, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorvm*, ed. Alfred Holder (Strassburg: Verlang von Karl J. Trübner, 1886), bk. III, pp. 74-75; *Ynglinga saga*, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI, pp. 23-5.

202 *Óláfs saga helga*, *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVII, pp. 111-112.

unlikely that Snorri would record the worship of the *dísir* as part of this religious culture unless he had either a specific source he considered credible, or he felt a *dís* was the most likely figure to be standing behind *Ynglingatal*'s "*véttr*" and, if Snorri knew of her, *Historia Norwegiae*'s "*Diane*". This would mean that the mention of the *dísir* and the *dísablót* would not conflict with the religious culture of the Svea as he understood it. In this context it is also worth noting that Snorri himself is believed to have met Eskil Magnusson, a Swedish lawspeaker, during his time in Norway in AD 1218-19,[203] and it is quite possible that much of Snorri's understanding of historical Swedish culture is based on his discussions with Eskil. Regardless of the provenance of Snorri's sources, however, internal evidence provides *Historia Norwegiae* with a *terminus ante quem* of AD 1266 and "the majority of scholars in favour of dates [of composition] between 1170 and 1220",[204] largely before the late 1220s-30s composition traditionally assigned to *Heimskringla*,[205] so it seems unlikely that Snorri himself was the source of the motif of Aðils dying while worshiping a female goddess similar to the *dísir*. Admittedly, *Ynglingatal*, the oldest extant source on the cult of the *dísir* – and arguably the only one to pre-date the Christianisation of the Nordic region – does not itself use the signifier "*dísir*", and indeed it remains a possibility that the earliest accounts of Aðils' death, no longer extant, did not specify the deity or deities whom he was worshipping when died, and that all subsequent references to specific beings – *dísir* or otherwise – in this context were added later by subsequent editors such as Snorri.

Snorri's use of the term "*dísarsalinn*" is nonetheless echoed by a fourteenth-century Icelandic source, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, a *fornaldarsaga* which makes no mention of any *blót* or ritual connected with the *dísir*. Rather, when Heiðrekr defeats and kills his father-in-law Haraldr in battle, the saga claims that "*Kona has var*

---

203 Th. Westrin, *et al.* ed., *Nordisk familjebok. Konversationslexikon och realencyklopedi*, 2nd edn., 38 vols. (Stockholm: Nordisk familjeboks tryckeri 1876-1926), vol. 7, p. 892; for a more dated work on Snorri that focuses more on his literary output, see Sigurður Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson* (Reykjavík: Þór. B. Þorláksson, 1920).

204 Phelpstead and Kunin, *A History of Norway*, p. xvi; but on the dating and sources of *Historia Norwegiae* see also the table of datings surveyed by Ekrem (Inger Ekrem, *Nytt lys over Historia Norwegie. Mot en løsning i debatten om dens alder?* [Bergen: IKKR, Seksjon for gresk, latin og egyptologi, 1998], p. 88), which range from AD 1150 to *c.* 1300; see also Ekrem and Mortensen, *Historia Norwegie*, pp. 11-23 and references therein; and Phelpstead and Kunin, *A History of Norway*, pp. ix-xxv.

205 In his introduction to the Íslenzk fornrit edition of *Heimskringla*, Bjarni Aðalbjarson dates the composition of *Historia Norwegiae* to "nær 1220", and regards it as an important source of Snorri's. See ÍF XXVI, p. xv; *cf*. table on p. xviii.

svá reið eptir fall föður síns, at hún hengdi sik sjálf í dísarsal" ('His [Heiðrekr's] wife was so angry at the death of her father, that she hanged herself in the hall of the *dís*').[206] This brief episode of Helga's death is mentioned almost as an afterthought following a more extensive description of Heiðrekr's cunning quibbling with the terms of the Óðinnic sacrifice of his son in return for victory in battle, after which he decides to retain the young Angatýr and offer instead "*þetta lið allt, er drepit var, ok gaf hann nú þenna val Óðni*" ('all the host who had been killed, and he then gave those slain to Óðinn').[207] Given the Óðinnic nature of Helga's suicide,[208] and the way in which she becomes superfluous to the requirements of the text once her father has been killed – Heiðrekr promptly acquires another wife, apparently in an effort to violate all of the good counsels his own father had given him before his exile[209] – I would argue that the use of "*dísarsalinn*" is semantically isolated in this context, unless the audience of the saga was intended to understand Helga's suicide (self-sacrifice?) in opposition to the warlike, Óðinnic practices of her husband, which might imply a domestic nature to the cult of the *dísir*. On the basis of the text of *Hervarar saga* alone, however, this is highly a speculative suggestion, and the gatherings and presence of visiting royalty recorded in other texts, while not necessarily undermining it, do little to support the idea.

It is also worth noting that, as Christopher Tolkien has observed,[210] the form of "*dísarsalinn*" differs from "*dísablót*" in that the *dís* referenced by the former is singular. Given that this is the case in both *Ynglinga saga* and *Hervarar saga*, it is possible that the fourteenth-century text is reliant on Snorri's work, particularly given the lack of engagement with the *dísir* more generally in the *fornaldarsaga*. However,

---

206 *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, p. 209, trans. mine. This scene parallels another of a woman's suicide by hanging in a temple as a result of dissatisfaction with her husband's behaviour found in *Landnámabók*, when Sigríðr, daughter of Þórarinn *enn illr*, commits suicide rather than participate in some sort of wife-swapping arrangement: "*Sigríðr hengði sik í hofinu, því at hon vildi eigi mannakaupit*" ('Sigríðr hanged herself in the temple, because she did not want to participate in the exchange of husbands'; *Landnámabók*, ÍF I, pp. 78-80, trans. mine.) The *Landnámabók* account is told only very briefly and no mention is made of the beings to whom the "*hof*" ('temple') was dedicated – if indeed there were any – so it seems more likely that this is a motif of feminine frustration and protest than one linked explicitly to worship of the *dísir*. Nonetheless, the possibility is intriguing.

207 *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, p. 209, trans. mine.

208 On "Hängeöpfer", see de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 1, pp. 408-412.

209 On the motif of the 'good counsels' in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, see, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1960), pp. xiv-xviii.

210 Tolkien, ed. *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, pp. 26.

the *Íslendingasögur* of the thirteenth centuries discussed above also show very little interest in the cult of the *dísir*, so we should be cautious about assuming too much on the basis of negative evidence. Clearly though, assuming that there was not a scribal error very early on in the transmission of *Heimskringla* which was transmitted into not only each subsequent manuscript of *Ynglinga saga* still extant but also into those of *Hervarar saga*, while the *dísablót* ritual was directed to a plural group of *dísir*, the *dísarsalr* structure would appear to have been dedicated to a single *dís*. This might suggest that there was both (in Ström's terminology) a 'diskollektiva' and a single, preeminent *dís* that coexisted in the same worldview(s), or perhaps that the *dísarsalr* is linked less with the specific, coherent interpretations of *dísir* of the type currently under discussion, but is drawn instead from tradition(s) where "*dís*" is a synonym for 'supernatural female' – as Olof Sundqvist has argued, nominating Freyja as the addressee[211] – as will be discussed in the next subchapter.

A similarly inconclusive piece of evidence which could potentially bear on the cult of the *dísir* is the epithet of the late-tenth century poet Þorbjǫrn *dísarskáld*. As with *dísarsalr*, it is impossible to tell whether the first element of his cognomen refers to a supernatural female with a focus on fertility (of the type proposed by Ström), another (specific?) supernatural female such as Freyja, or a more mundane 'lady'. Only two strophes of Þorbjǫrn's poetry survive, both preserved in *Skáldskaparmál*, the first clearly recounting the deeds of Þórr,[212] and the second describing a baptism.[213] As such, it has been suggested that Þorbjǫrn converted to Christianity,[214] which I would argue opens up another possible set of referents for the *dís* of his epithet – the Virgin Mary and female saints[215] – as well as the possibility that the skald's byname came about through some form of syncretism, like that dramatised in *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*.[216] All in all, Þorbjǫrn can offer little to our present discussion of the *dísir*, but it is certainly interesting to note that some form of *dís* was associated with individuals (as opposed to places or rituals) to the point that at least one man was distinguished from others of the same name through reference to his

211 Sundqvist, *Freyr's Offspring*, p. 210.
212 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, pp. 16-17.
213 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 76.
214 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 3, p. 523.
215 On the cult of saints in early-Christian Iceland, see Margaret Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland: Their Veneration from the Conversion to 1400*, *Subsidia Hagiogaphica* 78 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1994), esp. pp. 71-165.
216 *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, ÍF VIII.

devotion to one specific *dís* in tenth- (or, if the conversion theory is correct, early-eleventh) century Iceland.

The youngest evidence to be considered in this chapter is the Icelandic phenomenon of "*landdísasteinar*" ('stones of the land-*dísir*'), specific boulders or stones in the West Fjords, the most isolated part of Iceland, which were recorded as subject to specific prohibitions in the early nineteenth century.[217] Turville-Petre's summary of the 1818 report sounds very much like a list of the taboos associated with specific hillocks and mounds in Norway and Sweden associated with spirits such as the Tusse and Nisse:[218]

> These stones were held in deep veneration. There must be no joking near them, children must not play, and no grass must be torn up or mown. If any of these things were done, a calamity would befall.[219]

The implication carried by the name of these "*steinar*" is that they serve as the homes of local spirits, just as large rocks, boulders and cliffs around Iceland have been reported to do since the tenth century, when the missionary Bishop Friðrekr destroys the "*steinn*" in which lived the *ármaðr* ('steward', a fertility spirit) of the farm at Gilja;[220] and continue to do today for modern reflexes of the same traditions in the *huldufólk*.[221] These nineteenth-century *landdísir* almost certainly represent an amalgamation of different traditions absorbed from local *álfar*, *landvættir*, *bergúar* ('rock-dwellers'), *kvikendar* ('living beings') as well as, presumably, the 'original' *dísir* themselves that gendered the spirit collective female. As such, this would probably prove an incredibly difficult phenomenon to excavate Iron-Age data from – assuming any more data were available.

As it is, I will content myself with two observations. The first is that the cult of – or perhaps the cultic/traditional activity associated with – the *dísir* was probably stronger (perhaps more popular, or more visible, or better attended) than the cult of – or cultic/traditional activity associated with – the *álfar* in north-west Iceland during

---

217 E. O. G. Turville-Petre, 'A Note on the *Landdísir*', *Early English and Norse Studies: Presented to Hugh Smith in Honour of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Arthur Brown and Peter Foote (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1963), pp. 196-201, p. 196.

218 Gunnell, 'How Elvish were the *Álfar*?', p. 129.

219 Turville-Petre, 'A Note on the *Landdísir*', p. 196.

220 *Kristni saga*, ÍF XV, vol. 2, pp. 7-8.

221 See, for example, *Icelandic Folktales and Legends*, ed. and trans. Jacqueline Simpson (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1972), esp. pp. 43-52.

the late Iron Age, which would account for the fact that these particular stones became known as the stones of the *landdísir* (rather than *landvættir*), whereas the typical situation in the rest of Iceland appears to have been that the word *álfar* tended to be used for this phenomenon elsewhere.[222] My second observation is the apparent link between the *landdísir* and their local landscape, which, as de Vries has argued, may be taken to imply a fertility function.[223] However, due to what is likely to have been the gradual and fragmentary development of the conception and understanding of these beings over centuries – which probably included the absorption of other, previously distinct traditions into a new hybrid form – it is also possible that this close relationship with the land did not originate with the *dísir* themselves, but was actually absorbed into them from a different source (perhaps the *álfar* or *landvættir*?) at an early stage. Given that more than eight centuries passed between the official 'conversion' of Iceland and the first record of the *landdísir*, we will never know how they developed, nor truly be able to rely on their evidence to support interpretations of their (probably) Iron-Age ancestresses.

To conclude, the evidence in favour of the *dísir* being a distinct 'genus' of supernatural females is not expansive, but it is highly suggestive in the coherence of certain reoccurring associations: the celebration of the *dísablót* at significant farmsteads, which would have formed important nodes in central place complexes (*Ynglingasaga*, *Historia Norwegiae*, *Upplandslagen*, toponymy);[224] the timing of the rituals in both the autumn and spring, depending on their geographic location (*Víga-Glúms saga*, *Egils saga*, *Upplandslagen*, potentially *Þáttr Þiðranda ok Þórhalls*); the importance of these rituals for the whole community rather than just royalty or the nobility (*Víga-Glúms saga*, *Egils saga*, *Upplandslagen*, potentially *Þáttr Þiðranda ok*

222 *cf*. the ritual conducted on a small knoll "*er álfar búa í*" ('which the *álfar* live in') in *Kormáks saga* (ÍF VIII, p. 288). It must be noted, however, that this is an incidental ritual, performed in response to a wound received in a fight, rather than a regular, scheduled sacrifice, and the performance is not explicitly referred to as an "*alfablót*". See further Gunnell, 'How Elvish were the *Álfar*?'.

223 de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2, pp. 297-278.

224 On central place complexes, see in particular Lars Lundqvist, 'Central Places and Central Areas in the Late Iron Age', *Visions of the Past: Trends and Traditions in Swedish Medieval Archaeology*, ed. Hans Andersson, Peter Carelli and Lars Ersgård (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1997), pp. 179-197; Stefan Brink, 'Political and Social Structures in Early Scandinavia: A Settlement-Historical Pre-Study of the Central Place', *Tor* 28 (1996), pp. 235-281; and Stefan Brink, 'Political and Social Structures in Early Scandinavia II: Aspects of Space and Territoriality – the Settlement District', *Tor* 29 (1997), pp. 389-437; and, on Uppsala as a central place, *cf*. also Sundvist, *Freyr's Offspring*, pp. 89-96.

Þórhalls and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*); and the involvement of royalty, which might potentially suggest a *hieros gamos* motif (*Ynglingasaga*, *Historia Norwegiae*)[225] – when taken together, this evidence is indicative of associations with fertility. Given this uniting principle, it is therefore also possible to include the *dísir* of strophe 9 of *Sigrdrífomál* in this subchapter: although there is no evidence linking them to cultic activity or the landscape, when passing on her verses of gnomic advice, Sigrdrífa claims these *dísir* can be called on to ease childbirth – "*biðia þá dísir duga*" ('then ask the *dísir* to help')[226] – which clearly merits inclusion with other fertility motifs.[227] As such, even excluding the potentially tenuous link with sacrifices "*til árs ok til friðar*" that might be related phenomena, I find myself unable to agree with scholars such as Ellis-Davidson, who rejects any link between the *dísir* and the landscape on the basis of accounts where the beings in question are clearly labelled as *hamingjur* or *fylgjur*.[228] At the very least, the *dísir* appear to have been concerned enough with the local landscape to develop into the *landdísir* by the early nineteenth century – not that such late evidence alone can be relied upon to reach conclusions regarding late Iron-Age phenomenon. When used, as here, to support trends in pre-existing data, however, I believe it warrants mention.

There appear then to have been two distinct traditions of *dísir* cultic activity, at least in regard to the timing of ceremonies dedicated to them, with a Norwegian (and possibly Icelandic) tradition taking place in the autumn, and a Swedish (or at least Upplandic) tradition taking place in the spring. The division of *dísir* phenomena into eastern and western forms is a key tenet of Ström's *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, although Ström's reasoning is based not on the recorded difference in the timing of

---

225 On the concept of *hieros gamos* and rulers as fertility symbols, see, for example, Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi*; and 'Rulers as Offspring of Gods and Giantesses: On the Mythology of Pagan Norse Rulership', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 227-230; and Schjødt, 'Ideology of the Ruler in Pre-Christian Scandinavia' and references therein.

226 *Sigrdrífomál*, *Edda*, st. 9, p. 191, trans. mine.

227 I can find no basis for Lotte Motz's claim that Frigg and Freyja may offer similar help in childbirth, for which she references *Oddrúnargrátr* st. 9, which reads "*Svá hjálpi þér hollar vættir, | Frigg oc Freyia oc fleiri goð, | sem þú feldir mér fár af hǫndom*" ('May gracious beings, Frigg and Freyja and more of the gods, help you, just as you pulled that danger from me'). *Oddrúnargrátr*, *Edda*, st. 9, p. 235, trans. mine; Lotte Motz, 'Sister in the Cave: The Stature and the Function of the Female Figures of the *Eddas*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 95 (1980), pp. 168-182, p. 171.

228 Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 106.

the *blót*, but on the levels of public participation and the role played by royalty in the Swedish tradition. He argues that "västnordisk" *dísir* cults were primarily private affairs,[229] while the "östnordisk" cults were mediated through a form of sacral (and sacrifical) kingship,[230] and heavily stresses the role of horses and horse sacrifice in both traditions. While I believe a case might be made for a difference in levels of domesticity associated with the cult in Norway and Sweden – although the involvement of King Eiríkr in the *Egils saga* episode would, in my opinion, speak strongly against it – I am sceptical of Ström's insistence on linking the *dísir* to the Vanir deities (particularly Freyr), and I find his inclusion of *Völsa þáttr* in his consideration of Norwegian *dísir* cults particularly spurious.[231] Nonetheless, I believe Ström is likely to have been correct, at least in essence, when he linked the *dísir* to "en fruktbarhetskult".[232]

However, given the very general – even vague – nature of our source material, and Ström's overreliance on rationalising distinct traditions (such as the *dísir* and Völsi, or Freyja and Skaði[233]), perhaps the best description of the *dísir* as a coherent type of supernatural female in their own right is that proposed by Raudvere, who focuses on the *dísir*'s link with their local landscape without overstating any explicitly reproductive role:

> Disernas function verkar närmast ha varit att värna äring och produktion på en viss plats. De är mer forbundna till landskept och har mer utpräglat beskyddande roll än de mer abstrakta fylgjorna. De senare är relaterade till en individ eller familj, medan diserna verkar vara parimärt kopplade till en bestämd plats.[234]
>
> The function of the *dísir* seems to have been the protection of crops and production at a specific location. They are more connected to the landscape, and have a pronounced protective role, than the more abstract *fylgjur*. The latter are related to an individual or family, while the *dísir* seem to be linked primarily to a specific location.

229 Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, pp. 12-31.
230 Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, pp. 32-56.
231 Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, pp. 22-31.
232 Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, p. 20.
233 Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, p. 25.
234 Catharina Raudvere, *Kunskap och insikt i norrön tradition: Mytologi, ritualer och trolldomsanklagelser* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003), p. 68, trans. mine.

Much of the extant evidence concerning the *dísir*, particularly regarding their cult and the practice of *dísablót*, does seem to support one, if not both, of Ström and Raudvere's interpretations. As such, I do not believe there can be any doubt that there was a genuine pre-Christian tradition of *dísir* as a specific type of supernatural being, quite distinct from to generic meaning of "(supernatural) lady" proposed by Hall.[235]

2.2.2 (Supernatural) Ladies

Despite the evidence for the *dísablót* and the arguments of Ström and Raudvere considered above (see Chapter 2.2.1), there remain a wide range of other instances in which the term "*dís*" is deployed where there is little or no link with fertility, and which would appear to indicate a very different understanding of what a *dís* could be. Jan de Vries calls extant traditions regarding the *dísir* "nicht einheitlich" ('inconsistent, not uniform'), and suggests that "man sogar von einem Sammelnamen für übernatürliche Wesen hat redden können" ('one might even be able to speak of ['*dísir*' as] a collective name for supernatural beings'),[236] and it is this variety of usages – which may support Hall's proposed reading of "*dís*" as "(supernatural) lady" and refute Ström's rationalisation of all *dísir* into a "fruktbarhetskult [...] i norden" ('fertility cult [...] in the north')[237] – that this subchapter will scrutinise.

One interesting use of the word "*dís*(*ir*)" is to be found in Eddic poetry, where, appropriately enough for this thesis, the term is commonly deployed in the portrayal of distinctly valkyric female beings. As Egeler has noted, the term "*valkyrja*" itself is used only infrequently,[238] and in the *Poetic Edda* it appears only twice in verse,[239] and nine times in prose insertions,[240] with eight of those of usages (one poetic and seven prose) to be found in the three so-called 'Helgi poems' – a distinct concentration which might lend some credence to the suggestion that the Codex Regius as it

235 Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 22.

236 de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2, p. 297, trans. mine.

237 The Ström quotation is from the subtitle of *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, which in full reads "*Fruktbarhetskult och sakralt kungadöme in norden*" ('Fertility cult and sacral kingship in the north').

238 Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, pp. 33-4.

239 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, *Edda*, st. 38, p. 136; and *Vǫluspá*, *Edda*, st. 30, p. 7.

240 *Vǫlundarqviða*, *Edda,* pr., p. 116; *Helgaqviða Hiǫrvarðzsonar*, *Edda*, pr., pp. 142, 143, 147; *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*, *Edda*, pr., pp. 151, 153, 154, 161; and *Sigrdrífomál*, *Edda*, pr., p. 190.

currently stands was put together from a number of smaller, previously independent collections of poetry.[241] It is therefore unsurprising that the *Poetic Edda* includes instances of female beings with valkyric associations[242] (or who are elsewhere explicitly described as *valkyrjur*) but who are referred to periphrastically with a heavy incidence of the term "*dís*" in the language used to identify them: for example, both Brynhildr (in strophe 14 of *Brot af Sigurðarkviðo*) and Sigrún (in strophe 51 of *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*) are called "*dís scioldunga*" ('*dís* of the Skjöldungar [a legendary dynasty]'),[243] and a *valkyrja* is referred to as "*Herjans dísi*" (a '*dís* of Herjan [an Óðinnic byname]') in *Guðrúnarkviða I*.[244]

The valkyric credentials of these individuals is hard to question: Sigrún is implicitly identified as a *valkyrja* in the text of Eddic poems such as *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I* and *II* and in Chapter 9 of *Völsunga saga*,[245] and explicitly in the prose insertion "*hon varð valkyrja*" ('she became a valkyrie') in *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*;[246] and Brynhildr implicitly in *Helreið Brynhildar*[247] and *Sigurðarqviða in Scamma*,[248] and explicitly in *Skáldskaparmál*.[249] However, it ought to be observed that in the case of the individual, named *valkyrjur* of the 'Helgi poems', their status as *valkyrjur* is only one aspect of these beings' complex identities, and constructions such as "*dís scioldunga*" also make reference to the human social contexts in which these valkyric women existed. As this very duality indicates, these human societies were clearly not conceived of as entirely cut off from the more intensely 'mythological' sphere(s) of gods and supernatural beings.

---

241 Terry Gunnell, 'Eddic Poetry', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 82-100, pp. 83-84 and references therein.

242 A range of valkyric associations and attributes will be examined in more detail below in Chapter 3, but could include a link with Óðinn, the death of warriors on the battlefield, the wearing of armour and bearing of weapons, and personal relationships with human heroes.

243 *Brot af Sigurðarkviðo*, *Edda,* st. 14, p. 200; and *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*, *Edda,* st. 51, p. 161.

244 *Guðrúnarkviða I*, *Edda,* st. 19, p. 205.

245 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, *Edda*, pp. 130-139; *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*, *Edda*, pp. 150-161; and *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, p. 22.

246 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*, *Edda,* p. 151.

247 *Helreið Brynhildar*, *Edda,* st. 7-10, pp. 220-221.

248 *Sigurðarqviða in Scamma*, *Edda,* st. 43-48, pp. 214-215.

249 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 41.

Concerning the referent of "*Herjans dísi*": as Klaus von See *et al*. have noted,[250] this circumloction may be read as a generic *kenning* for a non-specific *valkyrja* on the basis that one mythological female may figure for another, if qualified by a determinant (here 'Óðinn's'), as Snorri explains in Chapter 1 of *Skáldskaparmál*.[251] This particular *kenning*, however, is spoken by (the human woman) Guðrún in a verse comparing her life in her husband's hall before his death to the existence lived by *valkyrjur* with Óðinn, which I would argue is intended as stinging rebuke of one *valkyrja* (emeritus?) in particular: Brynhildr, the instigator of Sigurðr's death. An expanded version of this image is to be found in strophe 29 of *Krákumál*, an Icelandic poem from the twelfth century, where the dying Ragnarr Loðbrók reports that "*heim bjóða mér dísir,/þær 's frá Herjans hǫllu*" ('*dísir*, those from Herjan's hall, invite me home').[252] This explicitly links the *dísir* in question with not only an Óðinnic figure, but also with dying human warriors and the wider Valhöll complex, as further indicated by the etymology of the *heiti* for Óðinn employed by the anonymous skald – derived from Germanic **harjanaz*, "Herjan" is closely related the verb "*herja*" ('harry, make war') and nouns "*herr*" ('army, troops') and "*einherjar*".[253]

Even the famous riders from Logafjall in strophe 15 of *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I* (later revealed to be Sigrún and her *valkyrjur* companions) would appear to fall into the category of what Ström calls "diser-valkyrjor",[254] being first identified in strophe 16 as "*dísir suðrœnar*" ('southern *dísir*').[255] Given the clearly valkyric nature of these women – even within the text of *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, where they ride horses (st. 17), wear armour and helmets (st. 15, 54), carry weapons (st. 15), involve themselves directly in the outcome of battle (st. 30, 54-55) and even fly (st. 15, 54)[256] – there can be little doubt that in this instance the word "*dísir*" is used to describe archetypical *valkyrjur*, qualified by nothing more unusual than a common adjective.

---

250 Klaus von See *et al*., eds., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, 5 vols. (Heidelberg: Universtiätverlag Winter, 2000-), vol. 6, p. 252.

251 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 5.

252 *Krákumál*, *Skj* A1, pp. 641-649, and B1, pp. 649-656, trans. mine.

253 Kris Kershaw, *The One-Eyed God: Odin and the (Indo-)Germanic Männerbünde*, *Journal of Indo-European Studies Monographs* 36 (Washington: Journal of Indo-European Studies, 2000), pp. 11-18.

254 Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, p. 97.

255 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, *Edda*, st. 16, p. 132.

256 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, *Edda*, pp. 130-139.

Another Eddic *kenning* which makes use of "*dísir*" as its base word when referring to one or more *valkyrjur* is slightly less straightforward to interpret: in strophe 46 of *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*, once the grief-stricken Sigrún has followed her revenant husband back into his burial mound, she declares:

> [...] *nú ero brúðir byrgðar í haugi,*
> *Lofða dísir, hjá oss liðnom.*[257]
>
> [...] now [the] brides are closed into the mound,
> Lofði's *dísir*, next to us, the departed.

The determinant of this *kenning* is the name Lofði, listed in *Skáldskaparmál* as a legendary king.[258] This would appear to make the referent of the *kenning* 'human women' in exactly the same way that strophe 51 of the same poem uses "*dís scioldunga*" to refer to *Sigrún* as a 'woman of a legendary dynasty'. However, only Sigrún and Helgi are mentioned in the rest of the scene, leading some commentators to assume they are alone in the mound when "*Lofða dísir*" is spoken[259] – which raises the question of who these human women are. As von See *et al*. have dryly remarked, "Irritirend sind die Pluralformen" ('the plural forms are vexing'),[260] and both Lee M. Hollander and Carolyne Larrington chose to singularise their translations of the strophe, having Sigrún's words refer to herself[261] – further reinforcing the use of the signifier "*dís*" in *kenningar* for *valkyrjur*, particularly in Eddic poetry. However, there is a less interventionist solution to the quandary which allows us to take the 'vexing' plural forms at face value: Sigrún was earlier referred to in the poem as accompanied to by eight sister *valkyrjur*, just as Helgi is described as entering the mound "*með marga menn*" ('with many men'),[262] and I would suggest that it is these *valkyrjur* whom Sigrún is referencing as "*brúðir*", and that it is these women – not only Sigrún and her servant woman – whom are meant when the prose following strophe 49 says that "*þær fóro heim til bæiar*" ('they [plural female] went home to the farmhouse').[263]

---

257 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*, *Edda*, st. 46, p. 160, trans. mine.
258 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 103.
259 von See *et al*., eds., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, vol. 4, p. 791.
260 von See *et al*., eds., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, vol. 4, p. 791, trans. mine.
261 *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), p. 201; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 140.
262 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*, *Edda*, pp. 154, 159.
263 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*, *Edda*, p. 161.

This resolution has the advantage of following what the text of the poem itself actually says, and also sheds interesting new light on what Egeler calls the "Kollektivcharakter" of "*Lofða dísir*" as *valkyrjur* without us having to invent previous unmentioned wives for Helgi's warriors, as von See somewhat dubiously proposes.[264]

Despite the use of the signifier "*dís*" to identify the female beings considered above, however, I think we should be cautious in assuming these instances necessarily refer to actual pre-Christian conceptions *dísir* – of the fertility-focused 'type' discussed above in Chapter 2.2.1 or otherwise. Rather, each of these instances would appear to reflect the employment of skaldic diction where "*dís*" or "*dísir*" functions as the base word of a poetic circumlocution or *kenning*, the referent of which is another type of supernatural female entirely.[265] In the case of the Eddic material considered so far, such referent beings would appear to be *valkyrjur* – or at least valkyric – but they are not the only '(supernatural) ladies' to receive this treatment: it also occurs when the Vanir goddess Freyja is termed "*Vanadís*" ('*dís* of the Vanir') not once but twice in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*. The text of Chapter 35 of *Gylfaginning* reads:

> *Freyja á mǫrg nǫfn, en sú er sǫk til þess at hon gaf sér ýmis heiti er hon fór með ókunnum þjóðum at leita Óðs. Hon heitir Mardǫll ok Hǫrn, Gefn, Sýr. Freyja átti Brísingamen. Hon er kǫlluð Vanadís*.[266]
>
> Freyja has many names, and this is the reason for it, that she gave herself various names when she travelled among unknown peoples searching for Óðr. She is called Mardǫll and Hǫrn, Gefn, Sýr. Freyja owned Brísingamen. She is called Vanadís.

What is particularly noteworthy about this extract is not the explanation Snorri provides for Freyja's many names (genuine tradition or otherwise) but the way in which "Vanadís" is treated very differently to her other appellations. Not only is it separated from a list of the names she went by amongst different peoples by a description of an important mythological possession – the necklace Brísingamen – but the language used to introduce it is also distinct. Mardǫll, Hǫrn, Gefn, and Sýr are

---

264 Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, pp. 34-8; von See *et al*., eds., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, vol. 4, p. 791.

265 For an excellent introduction to *kenningar* and skaldic diction, see Diana Whaley, 'Skaldic Poetry', pp. 486-488.

266 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 29, trans. mine.

prefaced by "*heitir*", the present form of the verb "*heita*" ('to be called', cognate to Middle English 'to hight') which is used when introducing proper names; whereas Vanadís is served by the construction "*hon er kǫlluð*", where "*kǫlluð*" is the past participle of the verb "*kalla*" ('to call'). By way of comparison, this construction is commonly used to introduce the cognomens of characters in *Íslendingasögur*: the opening line of *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, for example, reads "*Þorvaldr hét maðr ok var kallaðr skiljandi*" ('A man was called Þorvaldr, and [he] was called [the] Insightful').[267] As such, the sense of Snorri's description of Freyja is that her names were Mardǫll, Hǫrn, Gefn, and Sýr, but that she was known as Vanadís, implying that it is not truly a name at all. For this reason I do not consider Vanadís to be equivalent to other names attested to contain the *-dís* element, such as Bergdís or Þórdís, which are not uncommon in medieval Icelandic literature, but the pre-Christian popularity of which it is difficult to judge on the basis of the extant evidence.[268]

One possibility is that "Vanadís" functioned as a specific title of Freyja's, at least within a specific social, geographic or temporal community. However, the fact that it is included in a list of *kenningar* for her in Chapter 20 of *Skáldskaparmál* – alongside others such as "*dóttur Njarðr*" ('daughter of Njörðr'), "*systur Freys*" ('sister of Freyr') and "*eigandi valfalls ok Sessrúmnis*" ('owner of the fallen-*valr* and Sessrúmnir [her hall]')[269] – makes it seem much more likely that "*-dís*" is being used here as an interchangeable base-word for a female being, just as "*-brúðr*" is in "Vanabrúðr" ('bride of the Vanir') in *Skáldskaparmál* Chapter 37.[270] Snorri is quite clear in Chapter 68 of *Skáldskaparmál* when he tells us that and that "*Heitir ok dóttir ok barn, jóð. Heitir ok systir dís, jóðdís*" ('A daughter is also called a child, a baby. A sister is called a *dís* [or] baby-*dís*').[271] Considering these lists of poetic synonyms in light of his explanation of *kenningar* in Chapter 1 of *Skáldskaparmál*,[272] I do not believe that the fact Freyja is called Vanadís necessarily indicates any particular connection between her and the *dísir*, despite the claims of Ström and Sundqvist (who

267 *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, ÍF VIII, p .135, trans. mine.

268 Examples of such names in our extant textual corpus include Bergdís, wife of Grímr Ingjaldsson, and a huge range of women called Þórdís, one of whom is even connected to a farmstead called Þórdísarholt. For Bergdís, see *Landnámabók*, ÍF I, pp. 94-96; for the Þórdís entry in the register of names, see p. 512.

269 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 30, trans. mine.

270 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 40, trans. mine.

271 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 108, trans. mine.

272 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 5; *cf.* Margaret Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, pp. 50-63.

bases his work on the conclusions of de Vries) to the contrary.[273] Similarly, I do not accept that Skaði should be connected with the *dísir* on the basis of the *kenning* "Ǫndurdís" ('Snow-shoe-*dís*') in strophe 4 of Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson's poem *Háleygjatal* (typically dated to the mid-tenth century)[274] – again, despite Ström's claim that she represents the "vinterliga aspekt" ('winter aspect') of Freyja.[275] The linguistic context of these constructions makes it clear, in my opinion, that any such links are purely the result of skaldic diction based largely on the interchangeability of anthropomorphic being-terms within this specialised parlance, provided certain recognisable key features remain constant: the set of Vanadís, Vanabrúðr, and Vanagoð in reference to Freyja make it clear that genealogy and (to a lesser extent) femininity could each serve this role. *Valkyrjur* are, after all, elsewhere portrayed with *kenningar* using other supernatural females as base words: singularly as a "*dolga Sôgu*" ('Saga [an Ásynja] of hostility') in strophe 29 of Einarr skálaglamm's *Vellekla* (dated to the late tenth century),[276] and in plural as "*Svǫlnis Vára*" ('Vár [an Ásynja] of Svǫlnir [an Óðinnic byname]') in a tenth-century *lausavísa* attributed to Jarl Rögnvaldr of Orkney,[277] for example.

None of this evidence lends any credence to the idea that the term "*dís*" could be used, in a more generic sense, for "(supernatural) lady", as it is quite possible that the base-words of these *kenningar* are the fertility- and/or landscape-based *dísir* outlined above in Chapter 2.2.1. However, there are a number of other instances – some forming a semi-coherent continuum with each other, some extant only in discreet, single sources – that do appear to indicate traditions in which *dísir* were conceived of as distinct from both what Hall would call other "races" of supernatural beings (such as *valkyrjur* or *ásynjur*)[278] and the *dísir* who received sacrifices.

Perhaps the most dramatic of these references occurs in the penultimate strophe of *Grímnismál*, where, following his torture for eight nights at the hands of his

---

273 Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, p. 6; Sundqvist, *Freyr's Offspring*, p. 210, based on de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2, pp. 307-308.

274 *Háleygjatal*, *Skj* B1, p. 60, trans. mine.

275 Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, p. 6, trans. mine.

276 *Vellekla*, *Skj* B1, st. 29, p. 122, trans. mine.

277 Rögnvaldr jarl kali Kolsson, *Lausavísa* 13, *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300*, ed. Kari Ellen Gade *et al*., *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages II*, 2 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009, hereafter *SkP II*), st. 13, vol. 2, p. 590-591, trans. mine.

278 Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 22.

unwitting protégé Geirröðr, 'Grímnir' ('Mask' or 'Masked One') reveals himself to be Óðinn, declaring:

> *Eggmóðan val nú mun Yggr hafa,*
> *Þitt veit ec líf um liðit;*
> *úfar ro dísir – nú knáttu Óðin sia,*
> *nálgazt mic, ef þú megir!*[279]
>
> Yggr will now have [the] edge-hewn slain,
> I know your life to have passed;
> *dísir* are malevolent – now you can see Óðinn,
> approach me, if you are able to!

The narrative context of this strophe could not be more Óðinnic, and Óðinn's declaration that he "will now have [the] edge-hewn slain" could cast a distinctly valkyric light on these *dísir*. The furious deity prophecies Geirröðr's upcoming death and, in the same breath, proclaims the female sprits to be "*úfar*". This is a difficult construction glossed in the *Lexicon Poeticum* as "rejst eller rejsende sig (imod)" ('risen or rising [against]'),[280] but probably best understood as derived from the negative particle "*ú-*" and the metaphorical usage of the neuter noun "*far*" (literally 'trip, journey', metaphorically 'life, conduct, behaviour'[281]), thus 'negative with regards to life', 'hostile' or 'malevolent', and strongly implies there is a causal link between Geirröðr's approaching death and the malevolence of the *dísir*. The elliptic nature of the poetry, however, makes it impossible to tell whether Óðinn has influenced *dísir* already present (perhaps associated with Geirröðr himself), called forth spirits from elsewhere, or is merely commenting on the present state of affairs without exerting any control at all.

Given the manner in which Óðinn reveals himself, the subsequent prose description of Geirröðr's ill-fated death, and the deployment of semantically-loaded terms such as *valr* and *einherjar* in the build up to the poem's crescendo[282] – not to mention the list of female proper names who "*bera einheriom ǫl*" ('carry ale to the

---

279 *Grímnismál*, *Edda*, st. 53, p. 68, trans. mine.

280 Sveinbjörn Egilsson and Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon poeticum antiquæ linguæ septentrionalis. Ordbog over det norsk-islandske skjaldesprog* (København: S. L. Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1931), p. 584, trans. mine.

281 Cleasby and Guðbrandr Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 141.

282 *Grímnismál*, *Edda*, st. 53, pp. 130-139, trans. mine.

einherjar')[283] in strophe 36, quoted and identified by Snorri as *valkyrjur*[284] – it is notable that the anonymous poet of *Grímnismál* st. 53 does not employ the signifier "*valkyrjur*" in either case . A distinct possibility is that, in st. 53, the poet may indeed have been thinking of spirits that a twenty-first century audience would regard as *valkyrjur*, but chose to employ the shorter two-syllable term "*dísir*" instead, presumably in order to better suit is poetic needs. While there are no grounds for this to be considered a full *kenning*, as "*dísir*" is unqualified, it may well be that the term "*dísir*" in strophe 53 of of *Grímnismál* represents what Snorri, in *Skáldskaparmál*, calls an "*ókend heiti*": terms of similar meaning that could, in poetic contexts, serve as (near) synonyms, defined by Anthony Faulkes as "names, appellations, designations, terms without periphrasis, without qualifiers or attributives (determinants)".[285] Given that Snorri includes terms such as "*keisar*" ('emperor'), "*konungr*" ('king') and *jarl* as *ókend heiti* of *maðr* ('man'),[286] the use of "*dísir*" as a substitute for "*valkyrjur*" is certainly a possibility. However, on this occasion, the lack of information regarding the nature of the actual female spirits themselves makes me reluctant to declare my wholehearted support for a valkyric reading of the *dísir* of *Grímnismál* 53, although the circumstantial evidence for such a case is reasonably compelling.

To my mind, the hostile *dísir* of *Grímnismál* are strongly reminiscent of the earlier-noted *spádísir* of *Völsunga saga*, where another Óðinnic protégé at the height of his power receives short shrift from a group of female spirits, also at the instigation of his erstwhile mentor. I have chosen to include these *spádísir* in this examination based around the signifier "*dís*" primarily because I believe they represent another expression of the same extended tradition, and that any differences between the *spádísir* of *Völsunga saga* ch. 11 and any other *dísir* are unlikely to have been significantly more than differences between different reflexes of the mainstream '*dís*' continuum. The particle "*spá-*" exists independently both as a noun (covering a semantic field including 'prophecy, foretelling, revelation') and a verb ('to prophesy'), as well as a particle that can be fixed to other nouns to create compounds such as "*spámaðr*" ('prophet', also used in the biblical sense), "*spákona*"

283 *Grímnismál*, *Edda*, st. 36, pp. 130-139, trans. mine.
284 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 30, trans. mine.
285 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. lxxii.
286 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 99, trans. mine.

('prophetess, sibyl') and "*spámæli*" (literally 'prophetic-speech', i.e. 'prophecy').[287] However, there is no sense of prophetic ability about the *spádísir* of *Völsunga saga*: they appear to be battlefield-protective spirits *par excellence*, but there is no suggestion that this comes from any divinatory ability and subsequent warnings passed on to Sigmundr. Instead, given the composer of *Völsunga saga*'s recognised reworking of his source material "as well as [his penchant for] making adjustments to minimize their contradictions",[288] I would propose – as a possibility at least – that the thirteenth-century composer of the saga may have chosen to use "*spádísir*" rather than "*dísir*" in Chapter 11 in order to differentiate between these battlefield spirits and his rather confused presentation of the "*dísir*" that appear in Glaumvör's dream in Chapter 35 – an episode we will return to shortly.

To deal first with Sigmundr and his *spádísir*: the king is in the midst of battle, fully reliant on the protection offered by his supernatural *spádísir* companions and his superior tactical knowledge (another mark of an Óðinnic hero) to carry the day when he is faced with an opponent who exhibits the full range of Óðinnic attributes – wide-brimmed hat, hidden face, single eye, hooded cloak, and spear – who breaks the sword Sigmundr had drawn from the tree in his father's hall earlier in the saga. Following this symbolic act, "*váru Sigmundi konungi horfin heill*" ('luck turned from King Sigmundr') and he is swiftly killed.[289] Admittedly, the comparison with *Grímnismál* st. 53 is not exact, as it is not clear what exactly the role of the poem's *dísir* may have been before they turned on Geirröðr – if, indeed, they have a role

---

287 Cleasby and Guðbrandr Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 581. Also, despite an intensive search of the *Íslendingasögur*, *íslendingaþættir*, *fornaldarsögur*, and several *konungasögur*, I could not find any evidence for Catharina Raudvere's claim that "...in the sagas, a *vǫlva* is also referred to as *spádís*, or female diviner" ('Popular Religion in the Viking Age', p. 240). It is possible that "*spádís*" is here an error for "*spákona*", which occurs multiple times in texts including *Kormáks saga* (ÍF VIII, p. 282) and *Eiríks saga rauða* (ÍF IV, pp. 206-208). However, the design of *The Viking World* volume prohibits exact referencing, so it is possible that an instance (or instances) of "*spádís*" used for a *völva* figure exists in a text or texts I was unable to search due to time constraints.

288 Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*. trans. Randi C. Eldevik, *The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilisation* (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002), pp. 139; on *Völsunga saga*'s treatment of its source material, see R. G. Finch, 'The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Völsunga Saga*', *The Saga Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 16 (1962-65), pp. 315-353; and Per Wieselgren, 'Quellenstudien zur *Völsungasaga*', *Acta et commentationes Universitatis Tartuensis Dorpatensis* 3.2 (1935), pp. 5-15; and Carol J. Clover, '*Völsunga Saga* and the Missing Lai of Marie De France', *Sagnaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Palsson*, ed. Rudolf Simek, Jónas Kristjánsson and Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Wien: Hermann Böhlaus Nachf., 1986), pp. 79-84.

289 *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, p. 26, trans. and emphasis mine.

outside the punishing of wayward kings, which cannot be assumed – and there is nothing in *Grímnismál* to suggest whether the *dísir* were attached to Geirröðr, Óðinn, or neither of the two protagonists. In contrast to this, Sigmundr's *spádísir* are not only said to have protected him in battle, but are also specifically described as attached to him as an individual: "*En svá hlíðu honum hans spádísir, at hann varð ekki sárr...*" ('But his *spádísir* shielded him so that he did not become wounded...').[290]

Despite this highly Óðinnic context, however, it is difficult to say whether or not these *spádísir* ought to be regarded as *valkyrjur* masquerading behind confusing terminology. In favour of such a stance is the reliance of *Völsunga saga*'s composer on his source material, which is particularly notable in the later sections of the saga, for which the poetic sources of the prose work remain extant.[291] This might suggest that the signifier "*spádísir*" was present in an inferred source that is no longer extant, resulting in its use in Chapter 11 of the saga as it now stands, currently the oldest detailed source on Sigmundr's death, despite its mid-thirteenth century composition.[292] (The prose episode *Frá dauða Sinfiotla* in the *Poetic Edda* says only that "*Sigmundr konungr fell í orrosto*" ['King Sigmundr fell in battle'].[293]) However, Torfi Tulinius has argued convincingly that the composer of *Völsunga saga* is anything but a slavish compiler of pre-existing material, even if the *Völsunga saga* episode of Sigmundr's death lies outside the initial eight chapters of the saga that Tulinius proposes were "composed by the author in order to foreground one aspect of the heroic poetry associated with the Vǫlsungs and Gjúkungs that he finds useful."[294] What is more, unlike *Grímnismál*, the prose of *Völsunga saga* has no metric or rhythmic constraints that would require its composer to make use of one word over another for purely technical reasons. In addition, the use of "*valkyrja*" in Sinfjötli's flyting with Granmarr in Chapter 9 of the saga – where the Völsung declares his opponent to have been "*valkyrja í Ásgarði*" ('a *valkyrja* in Ásgarðr'),[295] presumably on the model of *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, one of only two poetic instances of "*valkyrja*" in verse in the *Poetic Edda*[296] – implies that composer of *Völsunga saga*

290 *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, p. 25, trans. and emphasis mine.
291 See Finch, 'The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Völsunga Saga*'.
292 *Völsunga Saga: The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. & trans. R. G. Finch (London: Nelson, 1965), p. ix; see also Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, pp. 139-140.
293 *Frá dauða Sinfiotla*, *Edda*, p. 163, trans. mine.
294 Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, p. 144.
295 *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, p. 21, trans. mine.
296 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, *Edda,* st. 38, p. 136; the other being *Vǫluspá*, st. 30, p. 7.

was familiar with the specific signifier "*valkyrja*", but deliberately chose not to use it in his description of Sigmundr's protectoresses. As such, I lean towards the interpretation that these *spádísir* were certainly valkyric in their presence on the battlefield and deciding role in Sigmundr's death, but were, nonetheless, fundamentally (*spá*)*dísir* – at least in the eyes of the composer of the mid-thirteenth century *sagamaðr*.

It may be possible that *Völsunga saga*'s battlefield-protective *spádísir* were based on the *dísir* of *Grímnismál* st. 53, as the latter text (but not the exact strophe) is quoted by Snorri in the early 1220s, at least quarter of a century before the saga was composed, but there is no direct textual evidence to support this suggestion, and there are a number of other texts that also preserve instances of beings labelled "*dísir*" offering warriors protection in battle.[297] Of these other texts, only strophe 24 of *Reginsmál* also preserves an association with Óðinn, and that in a fairly tenuous form: as the young Sigurðr and his foster father Reginn sail under a rocky cliff, they take aboard an old man who identifies himself by three separate Óðinnic names – Hnikar, Fengr and Hjölnir – and ask him for advice about warfare. His responses include the following verse:

> *Þat er fár mikit, ef þú fæti drepr,*
> *þars þú at vígi veðr:*
> *tálar dísir standa þér á tvær hliðar*
> *oc vilia þic sáran siá.*[298]
>
> It is a great calamity, if you catch your foot
> when you wade into battle:
> deceitful *dísir* stand on either side of you
> and want to see you wounded.

As with *Grímnismál* st. 53, it is quite possible that "*dísir*" is here being used as a *heiti* in place of "*valkyrjur*" for metrical purposes. *Reginsmál* as a whole is an irregular poem, with different sections in different metres, but strophe 24 is internally metrically coherent, and the displacement of "*dísir*" by another term could well be disruptive to the number of syllables present, affecting both rhythm and metre, which

297 It also seems highly likely that the compiler of *Völsunga saga* had access to a manuscript very similar to (at least parts of) the *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda* when he composed the saga. See Finch, 'The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Völsunga Saga*'.

298 *Reginsmál*, *Edda,* st. 24, p. 179, trans. mine.

makes it possible that "*dísir*" is being used as a *heiti* in this instance. If any group of named female spirits recorded in our extant sources is likely to be the referent of such a *heiti*, it would most probably be the *valkyrjur*, given the Óðinnic context in which the strophe is delivered and battlefield situation described. However, as *Grímnismál* st. 53 and *Völsunga saga* also preserve groups of (*spá*)*dísir* in battlefield contexts with Óðinnic connotations, assuming that the "*dísir*" *Reginsmál* are 'actually' *valkyrjur* would not only contradict the text on dangerous grounds, it would also set a worryingly interventionist precedent.

Reading the "*dísir*" of *Reginsmál* st. 24 as *dísir*, however, can tell us relatively little that is new, although it does reinforce some ideas to have appeared in texts already considered: when in battle, Sigurðr risks falling afoul of multiple unfriendly *dísir*, particularly if he were to trip. Given that these *dísir* are described as "*tálar*" ('deceitful, treacherous'), and that Sigurðr is a great hero and will doubtless be pressing forward into the enemy host, I understand the reference to *dísir* which "*standa þér á tvær hliðar*" ('stand on either side of you') to refer to *dísir* associated with his enemies. (Although it must be admitted that it is possible to interpret these words, when taken out of context, as implying a protective function.) This speaks in favour of these spirits being distinct from *valkyrjur*, who it appears were typically expected to work in favour of Óðinnic heroes (at least, until the moment the deity betrayed them), as is neatly expressed by Brynhildr in *Helreið Brynhildar*, when she mentions having 'given victory' to the wrong side, as a result of which "*þá varð mér Óðinn ofreiðr um þat*" ('then Óðinn became very angry with me for that').[299] The aggressive description of the *dísir* of *Reginsmál* st. 24 also implies a variation on the tradition preserved in *Völsunga saga*, where, although *spádísir* could clearly participate in a battle on one side or another, their role was purely protective. In fact, the *dísir* of *Reginsmál* st. 24 act as something of a conceptual bridge between the *spádísir* of *Völsunga saga* and *Grímnismál* st. 53, bringing together malevolent and protective (*spá*)*dísir* who are associated with the death of warriors (and, to a lesser extent, Óðinn).

The semi-coherent continuum based around battlefield protection (both offensive and defensive) also finds reflexes – albeit without the association with Óðinn – in two *fornaldarsögur*, both dated to the end of the thirteenth or early

[299] *Helreið Brynhildar*, *Edda,* st. 9, p. 221, trans. mine.

fourteenth century.[300] *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* preserves a mention of *dísir* in a series of flyting verses between two warriors, Útsteinn and Úlfr, the former of whom is a champion of the recently betrayed and murdered King Hálfr. An early part of the exchange, which is in straightforward *fornyðislag* metre, includes the following:

[*Útsteinn:* ...] *hygg við hjálmum*
hingat komnar
til Danmarkar
dísir várar.

Úlfr kvað: *Yðr munu dauðar*
dísir allar,
heill kveð ek horfna
frá Hálfs rekkum.[301]

[Útsteinn: ... I] believe our *dísir*
are coming here
to Denmark
in helms.

Úlfr said: All your *dísir*
must be dead,
I say Luck disappears
from Hálfr's warriors.

Both men clearly believe that the presence (or otherwise) of the newly-arrived Útsteinn's *dísir* would or could have an impact on any duel or fight that were to result from their mutual antagonism, further supporting the idea – already witnessed elsewhere – that *dísir* could be attached to specific individuals, offering them support (or protection?) in battle. As interesting as the details of the verses are – the idea that these *dísir* wear helmets, and, like the gods at Ragnarök, can die – I believe we should be cautious in attempting to garner anything more from this poetry than the most general sense of events. At least one early commentary found Útsteinn and Úlfr's flyting to be "[g]ar nicht im Stil der Heldendichtung" ('absolutely not in the style of

300 On *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, see Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, p. 125; on *Ásmundar saga kappabana* see Yelena Sesseja Helgadóttir-Yershova, 'Hildibrandr *Húnakappi* and Ásmundr *Kappabani* in Icelandic Sagas and Faroese Ballads', *Preprint Papers of the 14th International Saga Conference: Uppsala 9th - 15th August 2009*, ed. Agneta Ney, Henrik Williams and Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist (Gävle: Gävle University Press, 2009), pp. 1064-1071, p. 1064.

301 *Af Hálfssaga VIII*, *Skj* B2, p. 284, trans. mine; the prose context may be found in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 2, pp. 175-177.

heroic poetry') on account of its inclusion of dream visions, proposing that "[v]or dem 13. Jh. sind Útst. Kaum verfasst" ('Ústeinn's verses can hardly have been composed before the thirteenth century'),[302] which agrees with Finnur Jónsson's dating of the poetry of *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* as a whole in *Den norske-islandske skjaldedigtning*.[303]

While I disagree with Ranisch and Heusler's suggestion that Útsteinn must have seen his *dísir* in a dream before describing them[304] – much stranger things happen in the waking world of the *fornaldarsögur*, even assuming that the verse represents 'actual events' rather than metaphorical posturing for the benefit of the flyting – another *fornaldarsaga* features protective *spádísir* who do indeed appear to their ward in a dream vision. Ásmundr, the eponymous hero of *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, is in the middle of a series of duels against increasing numbers of berserkers, when he dreams that "*konur stóðu yfir honum með hervápnum*" ('women with weapons stood over him').[305] These women inform him that "[*v*]*ér erum spádísir þínar, ok skulum vér vörn veita þér móti mönnum, er at berjast við hertugana, en þá, er þú hefir at reyna við þik*" (we are your *spádísir*, and we shall provide you with a defence against those men who are struggling against the dukes, and those who you have to try yourself against'),[306] encouraging the flagging duellist to overcome his fear of the next day's engagement. In this episode, which absent from the narrative's earlier Danish analogue in Book VII of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*,[307] we are once again confronted with *dísir* who act *en masse*, are nameless, carry weapons, are attached to a specific individual, and offer that individual protection in battle. Interestingly, unlike the *spádísir* of *Völsunga saga* – who appear to have no real claim to the "*spá-*" element in their signifier – these spirits appear to Ásmundr the night before a significant battle, offering him the encouragement he needs for his future success. While not exactly the 'prophecy' (in the sense of 'knowledge of the future') we might expect from, for example, a *spákona* in a *fornaldasaga*, these *spádísir* do seem to

302 Wilhelm Ranisch and Andreas Heusler, *Eddica minora: Dichtungen eddischer Art aus den Fornaldarsögur und anderen Prosawerken* (Dortmund: Fr. Wilh. Ruhfus, 1903), pp. lxiv-lxvi, trans. mine.
303 *Skj* B2, p. 276.
304 Ranisch and Heusler, *Eddica minora*, p. lxv.
305 *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 2, p. 304, trans. mine.
306 *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 2, p. 304, trans. mine.
307 Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorvm*, bk. VII, pp. 243-244.

combine both the protective role fulfilled by at least some *dísir* and the future-focused role implied by the "*spá-*" they carry in their name.

It may be that the motif of (*spá*)*dísir* appearing in dreams – particularly when, as in *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, they bring advice for the dreamer – is not native to *dís* phenomena, but originates instead with the use of female figures in dreams in more naturalistic medieval texts. Perhaps the best known *draumkonur* (literally 'dream women') are the two of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, who bring the protagonist competing visions of being smeared with blood and gore on the one hand, and an afterlife in a richly-furnished hall strongly reminiscent of Valhöll on the other,[308] the latter of which was doubtless meant to play on the saga's thirteenth-century audience's conceptions of *valkyrjur*. A similar phenomena may be found in the interventionist approach to protection exercised by the supernatural female, who is called only a "*kona* [...] *óþekkilig*" ('hideous woman'), who appears in a dream to Án *svarti* ('the black', later *hrísmagi*, 'brushwood belly') in *Laxdæla saga*. In this dream, she cuts out his entrails and replaces them with dead wood. The very next day, Án receives a terrible wound to the abdomen in the ambush that kills Kjartan Ólafsson, but the dream-woman's intervention – and reappearance in a second dream, where she retrieves the wood and returns his guts – apparently enables him to survive, much to the surprise of those tending to him.[309] This episode is clearly, in my opinion, engaging with some of the same ideas informing protective *dísir* in texts such as *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* and *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, particularly in the appearance of the protective spirit on the eve of a potentially fatal battle. To a large extent, however, these medieval *draumkonur* (and their unlabeled cousins in other texts) were probably fulfilling the literary necessities of the texts that preserved them and/or simultaneously addressing the social concerns of the contemporary societies who created those texts, rather than reflecting genuine pre-Christian tradition. Án *hrísmagi*, for example, spared in the ambush that killed Kjartan, acts bravely but precipitously, even cruelly, in the revenge-killing of Bolli – going as far as to break a shepherd-boy's spine in order to preserve the attackers' secrecy – thus embodying the negatively-portrayed 'old ways' that precipitate many of the killings in the saga.[310] This literary usage of

[308] *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, ÍF VI, pp. 76, 94.

[309] Án's first dream occurs at the start of Chapter 48, and his wounding, second dream and recovery take place towards the end of Chapter 49. *Laxdæla saga*, ÍF V, pp. 149, 155.

[310] *Laxdæla saga*, ÍF V, pp. 165-168.

supernatural females is even more likely to have been the case with *samtíðarsögur* than with other texts, as the 'contemporary sagas', it has been argued, have a tendency to employ "misogynistic tropes such as the scapegoating of women for the results of men's violent actions, and negative images possibly resting on religious constructions of women as irrational and corporeal, or even abject."[311]

Evidently, to the extent that some 'dream women' protected the male protagonists they were attached to, there was a certain amount of overlap in the discursive space they occupied with (at least some) of the *dísir* currently under examination in this subchapter. However, if there is a direct genetic relationship between the protective dream-*dísir* and the highly varied corpus of male and female, benign and malevolent 'medieval' dream beings[312] – which I do not necessarily believe there must have been, as dream visions are also a staple of continental European literature[313] – then the latter probably represent an expansion of an older motif now extant in its full form only in *Ásmundar saga kappabana* and one other episode, found in *Atlamál in grœnlenzco* and an analogous scene in Chapter 37 of *Völsunga saga*, which is based on the *Poetic Edda* account.

The incident in question occurs as the brothers Gunnar and Högni are preparing to leave home to visit their sister Guðrún and her husband Atli, with the wives of two Gjúkungar each dreaming a series of visions that, in the words of *Völsugna saga*, "*þóttu líkligir til svika*" ('seemed to look like betrayal').[314] In one of the dreams recorded in the *Poetic Edda*, Glaumvör sees "*Konor* [...] *dauðar*" ('dead women') who "*værit vart búnar*" ('were not carefully equipped/dressed'), and who wished to "*kjósa*" ('choose') her husband Gunnar, inviting him "*brálliga til beccia sinna*" ('quickly to their benches', presumably a synechdochal reference to a hall).[315] Following this ominous description, Glaumvör declares that "*aflima orðnar þér dísir*" ('your *dísir* have become cut off from you').[316] I read the description in the first three

311 David Clark, 'Manslaughter and Misogyny: Women and Revenge in *Sturlunga Saga*', *The Saga Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 33 (2009), pp. 25-43.

312 For a dated but still useful overview of dream sequences in medieval Icelandic literature, see Georgia Dunham Kelchner, *Dreams in Old Norse Literature and Their Affinities in Folklore* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935).

313 On the use of dreams in Middle English literature, see, for example, Constance B. Hieatt, *The Realism of Dream Visions: The Poetic Exploitation of the Dream-Experience in Chaucer and His Contemporaries* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967) and references therein.

314 *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, p. 78, trans. mine.

315 *Atlamál in grœnlenzco*, *Edda,* st. 28, p. 251, trans. mine.

316 *Atlamál in grœnlenzco*, *Edda,* st. 28, p. 251, trans. mine.

lines of the strophe to be drawing on the *valkyrja* tradition (see further below, Chapter 3), most recognisably in the female figures' insistence on bringing Gunnar to a hall-based afterlife through "choosing" him and the text's depiction the "Kollektivcharakter" of the spirits in question,[317] but the possibility that the account of the women being dressed, in von See's terms, "nicht festlich" ('not festively'),[318] may strengthen this association if it is understood to spring from laconic understatement and be implying the presence of armour and practical battlefield gear.

What is perhaps most striking about strophe 28 of *Atlamál* is the clearly implied distinction between Gunnar's own personal *dísir* on the one hand, and the "*Konor* [...] *dauðar*" who have to "*koma í nótt hingat*" ('come here in the night')[319] – implying they occupy an entirely separate cosmological mansion under normal circumstances – on the other. Although it must be admitted that Gunnar and Högni are not killed in battle in *Atlamál*, *Völsunga saga*, or *Atlaqviða* (which omits the dream sequences found in its two analogues), the sphere of influence within which Gunnar's *dísir* operate is implied to be strictly limited, as it appears that once the 'dead women' have made their choice, Gunnar is doomed to die and nothing his *dísir* can do can prevent this. This implication further reinforced by the violent and bloody language of the strophe, which underlines the powerlessness of not only Gunnar to escape his fate, but also that of this his *dísir* to protect him, describing them as having become "*aflima*" – a word formed from the preposition "*af*" being prefixed to the root "*limr*" ('limb'), resulting not only in the adjective meaning 'cut off', but also the verb "*at aflima*" ('to dismember').[320] Whether this should be read as implying any sort of hierarchical relationship between the (probable) *valkyrjur* of *Atlamál* st. 28.1-3 and the *dísir* of st. 28.4 is, to my mind, highly doubtful, the distinction resulting instead from the scale of these beings' responsibilities: the afterlife destination (and perhaps time of death) of warriors for the former, and the protection of individuals (presumably in battle against other human individuals) for the latter.

The analogous scene in Chapter 35 of *Völsunga saga*, however, appears to conflate the two groups of spirits, with the entirety of Glaumvör's dream outlined in two curt sentences:

317 Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, pp. 34-8.
318 von See *et al*., eds., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, vol. 7, p.489, trans. mine.
319 *Atlamál in grænlenzco*, *Edda,* st. 28, p. 251, trans. mine.
320 Cleasby and Guðbrandr Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 8.

> *Enn þótti mér hér inn koma konur, ok váru daprligar, ok þik kjósa sér til manns. Má vera, at þínar dísir hafi þat verit.*[321]
>
> Yet it seemed to me that women came here, and [they] were downcast, and [wished] to choose you as their husband. It may be that these could have been your *dísir*.

The addition of the sexual element to this account seems likely to have originated in the composer of *Völsunga saga*'s understanding of the *valkyrja* tradition (the named *valkyrjur* of *Völsunga saga*, particularly Brynhildr, have extensive sexual relationships with human men), and, as Torfi Tulinius has convincingly argued, *Völsunga saga* is a coherent work that goes to some effort to created a rationalised sum from the content of its source texts.[322] Indeed, I would suggest that the subjunctive phrasing of the second sentence may represent the composer's acknowledgement that his sources represented a more complex situation than he wished to portray, and that, by allowing doubt to be cast on the identification of the visiting women as *dísir*, any discrepancies could be passed off as having been introduced by Glaumvör herself. This is assuming, of course, that the composer understood *Atlamál* st. 28 well enough to recognise that there are two separate groups of female spirit under discussion in the first place, for, in contrast to Tulinius' admiration for the saga in its present form, Per Wieselgren is sceptical of the talents of what he calls the "Sagaredaktor" ('saga editor'), commenting that "[f]ür Poesie hat er wenig Verständnis, das ist wahr, und es gelingt ihm bisweilen, die schönsten Eddastellen zu verderben" ('his understanding of poetry is not great, that is true, and he sometimes manages to ruin the most beautiful parts of the Edda').[323] Whatever the reasons for it, however, I believe the presentation of *dísir* in Chapter 35 of *Völsunga saga* presents a confused reworking of its older source material,[324] and, as such, should be treated with caution.

Before moving on to consider some of the more outlying accounts of *dísir*, a brief mention ought to be made of one iconographic representation of what may be a supernatural female protecting a warrior in battle (figure 2.A).[325] The so-called "triangle-carving" is preserved on the uppermost board on one of the long sides of the

---

321 *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, p. 78, trans. mine.
322 Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, pp. 139-158. See also references in note 288, above.
323 Wieselgren, 'Quellenstudien zur *Völsungasaga*', p. 14, trans. mine.
324 *cf.* Finch, 'The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Völsunga Saga*', pp. 315-353.
325 My thanks to Terry Gunnell for brining this carving to my attention.

ceremonial wagon excavated from within the burial-mound at Oseberg, on Oslo Fjord, Norway.[326] Made mostly of oak, with all four sides intricately carved with a variety of human and animal figures,[327] the wagon was buried inside the mound at Oseberg in the summer of 834 AD,[328] although the widespread assumption that this process took many months has recently been challenged.[329] Inhumed in the mound were two women, with a number of animals of different species and a wide range of other grave goods, including the famous ship (which originated in the west of Norway, not locally).[330] The mound was excavated in 1903,[331] although it also appears to have been broken into in the late Iron Age, possibly as a political act of defilement.[332] The very high-status grave goods found in the mound have lead to suggestions that at least one of the women was of high status, perhaps a queen,[333] or, on the basis of artefacts including the wagon and a ceremonial staff, a female ritual specialist such as a *völva* or "*hovgyðja*" (a compound of two difficult terms, of which 'temple-priestess' is only a very coarse approximation).[334] What the carving itself can definitely be said to show is two men, one mounted, one on foot, with the standing man grasping the bridle of the rider's horse in his right hand and raising what looks like a short, heavy blade – possibly a *sax*?[335] – in his left. The knife-wielding wrist, however, has been grasped from behind by another standing figure, this one identifiably female by her skirt, necklace, and hair-knot.[336]

---

326 Ellen Ettlinger, 'The Mythological Relief of the Oseberg Wagon Found in Southern Norway', *Folklore* 87 (1976), pp. 81-88, p. 81.

327 For one interpretation linking some of these carvings – but not the "triangle-carving" – to the Herakles myth, see Ettlinger, 'The Mythological Relief of the Oseberg Wagon'.

328 Niels Bonde and Arne Emil Christensen, 'Dendrochronological Dating of the Viking Age Ship Burials at Oseberg, Gokstad and Tune, Norway', *Antiquity* 67 (1993), pp. 575-583.

329 Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide, 'Death in Abundance – Quickly! The Oseberg Ship Burial in Norway', *Acta Archaeologica* 28 (2011), pp. 7-15.

330 Jan Bill and Aoife Daly, 'The Plundering of the Ship Graves from Oseberg and Gokstad: An Example of Power Politics?', *Antiquity* 86 (2012), pp. 808-24, pp. 820-821.

331 Bill and Daly, 'The Plundering of the Ship Graves from Oseberg and Gokstad', p. 810.

332 Bill and Daly, 'The Plundering of the Ship Graves from Oseberg and Gokstad', esp. p. 822

333 Nordeide, 'Death in Abundance – Quickly!', p. 8 and references therein.

334 Arne Emil Christensen, Anne Stine Ingstad and Bjørn Myhre, *Oseberg dronningens grav. Vår arkeologiske nasjonalskatt i nytt lys,* 2nd edn. (Oslo: Schibsted, 1993), esp. pp. 224-256, p. 250.

335 Cleasby and Guðbrandr Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 516.

336 On the identification of female figures in Iron-Age iconography, see Rudolf Simek, 'Rich and Powerful: The Image of the Female Deity in Migration Age Scandinavia', *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference 2-7 July 2000, University of Sydney*, ed. Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross (Sydney: Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 2000), pp. 468-479; Margrethe Watt, 'Images of Women On "Guldgubber" From the Merovingian Age', *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte*

Figure 2.A, The Oseberg Wagon "Triangle Carving". Image Source: Wikimedia Commons.

To quote Bek-Pedersen, the texts we have considered so far suggest that the *dísir* are "quite practically minded",[337] not least in their attitude towards intervention, and narrative accounts of *dísir* offering their wards protection in battle may well have found iconographic expression in images like the Oseberg wagon carving. In this case, the woman would appear to be holding the knife back, preventing the standing man from using it to attack the rider. However, despite the temptation to label the woman in the carving a *dís*, we must remain aware that such is only one possible interpretation, and, as Neil Price has argued, be willing to "abandon the simplistic attribution of divine identity" to iconography purely on the basis that such material is our current object of study.[338] Other readings of the carving could include that the woman in the carving represents a *valkyrja* in the process of 'granting victory' to the man on horseback, a scene from a particular narrative (perhaps a favourite of the woman of high status buried in the mound, if she was the owner of the wagon?), or perhaps a *völva*'s magic affecting her target at an opportune moment – this latter might be a particularly viable candidate if the archaeologists' suggestions that the

Motz, ed. Rudolf Simek and Wilhelm Heizmann (Wien: Fassbaender, 2002), pp. 81-92; Rudolf Simek, 'Goddesses, Mothers, Dísir: Iconography and Interpretation of the Female Deity in Scandinavia in the First Millenium', *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz*, ed. Rudolf Simek and Wilhelm Heizmann (Wien: Fassbaender, 2002), pp. 93-124.

337 Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, p. 64.

338 Price, 'What's in a Name?', p. 182.

mound was indeed built for a ritual specialist rather than a political figure, assuming such a distinction could meaningfully be made.

The ambiguity inherent in the Oseberg wagon carving (is the potential *dís* defending one warrior, or sabotaging another's attack?) is also to be found in written accounts: one text already mentioned briefly above is *Þiðranda þáttr ok Þórhalls*, a semi-independent narrative preserved within the late fourteenth-century compilation codex *Flateyjarbók*.[339] The action of the *þáttr* is set within the wider context of the ongoing Christianisation of Scandinavia and Europe (indeed, *Flateyjarbók* preserves the text within the saga of the missionary King Óláfr Tryggvason), and culminates with an atmospheric account of how the hapless Þiðrandi Síðu-Hallsson ignores the advice of a wise old man and ventures out into the fields after a *veizla* held during the Winter Nights. Once outside,

> *Hann sá, at þat váru konur níu, ok váru allar í svörtum klæðum og höfðu brugðin sverð í höndum. Hann heyrði ok, at riðit var sunnan á völlinn. Þar váru ok níu konur, allar í ljósum klæðum ok á hvítum hestum [...] Þá bar at konurnar þær hinar svartklæddu ok sóttu at honum...*[340]
>
> He saw that there were nine women, and they were all dressed in black clothes and had drawn swords in [their] hands. He also heard that [someone] was riding into the field from the south. There too were nine women, all in bright clothes and on white horses [...] Then the women in black clothes attacked him and struck at him...

In the aftermath of these events, Þórhallr, the same wise-man who had warned the inhabitants of the farmstead to stay indoors, is asked for his interpretation of events, to which replies:

> *Þat veit eg eigi, en geta má ek til, at þetta hafi engar konur verit aðrar en fylgjur yðrar frænda. Get ek at hér eftir komi siðaskipti, ok mun þessu næst koma siðr betri hingat til lands. Ætla ek þær dísir yðrar, er fylgt hafa þessum átrúnaði, nu hafa vitat fyrir siðaskiptið og fyrir þat, at þær munu verða afhendir þeim frændum. Nú munu þær eigi una því at hafa engan skatt af yðr, áðr þær skiljast við, ok munu þetta hafa í sinn hlut, en hinar betri dísir mundu vilja hjálpa honum ok komust eigi við að svo búnu.*[341]

---

339 *Þáttr Þiðranda ok Þórhalls*, *Flateyjarbók*, vol. 1, pp. 465-8.

340 *Þáttr Þiðranda ok Þórhalls*, *Flateyjarbók*, vol. 1, p. 467, trans. mine.

341 *Þáttr Þiðranda ok Þórhalls*, *Flateyjarbók*, vol. 1, pp. 467-8, trans. mine. *cf.* "*afhendir*" with *Atlamál* st. 28, "*aflima*", of the same meaning.

> I don't know, but I may guess, that these women can have been none other than the *fylgjur* of your relatives. I guess that there will soon be a change of *siðr* (lit. 'custom', implied 'religion'), and a better *siðr* will now come to this country. I suppose that the *dísir* of those of you who have followed this belief have now predicted the change of *siðr* and that they will now become cut off from this family. Now they will not accept it, [to leave] without exacting a price from you, before they are separated, and will have this [i.e. Þiðrandi's death] as their due, but the better *dísir* wished to help him and [did] not arrive in time/yet.

Just as some of the texts examined earlier in this subchapter appeared to show some overlap between the discursive spaces occupied by *dísir* and *valkyrjur*, *Þíðranda þáttr* explicitly labels the same female spirits both *dísir* and *fylgjur*. Like the (*spá*)*dísir* of *Völsunga saga*, *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, and *Atlamál* st. 28, the 'light *dísir*' of *Þíðranda þáttr* are explicitly presented as defending their wards, a motif elsewhere attached to the anthropomorphic (rather than theriomorphic) *fylgjur*. In a thorough study of *fylgjur* in extant literary sources, Else Mundal identified a fundamental difference between these two types of being denoted by the same signifier: although both can be associated with individuals (and subsequently their families), the anthropomorphic *fylgjur* (which always appear as women) offer protection, while the animal-shaped spirits represent the personalities of those to whom they are attached.[342] Indeed, this stark disparity led has Mundal to remark elsewhere that the two forms of *fylgjur* "have little in common but the name."[343]

I believe that the complex spirits of *Þíðranda þáttr* probably represent a hybrid resulting from a mixture of anthropomorphic-*fylgjur* and *dísir* phenomena, as they reflect traits that are found attached both of these groups of beings. The protection motif in particular is common to both some *dísir* and *fylgjur* in other accounts, but no other text that includes protective *dísir* suggests that they were conceived of as defending not just a single individual, but an entire family group – which suggests, in my opinion, that the term "*fylgjur*" was, in *Þíðranda þáttr*, deployed deliberately and with some understanding of its connotations. Similarly, I do not feel that the signifier "*dísir*" is here likely to have been used in a purely generic sense as a synonym for "*fylgjur*": like the hostile *dísir* of *Grímnismál* and *Reginsmál* st. 24 and the battlefield (*spá*)*dísir* of *Völsunga saga*, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* and

342 Else Mundal, *Fylgjemotiva i norrøn litteratur* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1974).

343 Else Mundal, 'Supernatural Beings: Fylgja', *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 624-625, p. 624.

Ásmundar saga kappabana, the hybrid spirits of *Þiðranda þáttr* are clearly martial, even – like *valkyrjur* and perhaps the helmed *dísir* of *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* – riding horses and carrying weapons, not traits typically associated with *fylgjur*.

Indeed, while the link to the divinatory *spádísir* of *Ásmundar saga* may be particularly pronounced – given Þórhallr's interpretation of Þiðrandi's killers as having "*vitat fyrir siðaskiptið*" ('predicted the change of *siðr*', literally 'known before [of] the change of *siðr*') – these female spirits may also be related to the fertility-based *dísir* discussed above in Chapter 2.2.1. Not only do the two groups of "*konur*" appear at a Winter Nights ritual *veizla* feast, half of them align themselves against Christianity, functioning as personifications of the pre-Christian "*átrúnaðr*" that is presented as firmly rooted in the landscape. This occurs when, shortly before the arrival in Iceland of the Christian missionary Þangbrandr, Þórhallr sees that "*margr hóll opnast ok hvert kvikvendi býr sinn bagga, bæði smá og stór, ok gera fardaga*" ('many a hillock is opening, and every living being is packing his bags, both large and small, and is moving today'),[344] leading Gunnell to describe the language of the *þáttr* as "full of literary formulæ and motifs drawn directly from the hagiographic literature."[345] This split between the two groups of "*konur*" is also comparable to the "*verri*" ('worse') and "*betri*" ('better') *draumkonar* of *Gísla saga*, and, although we have met the idea of different sides of a conflict opposing their adversary's *dísir* – metaphorically or otherwise – in texts such as *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, I am hesitant to assume that opposing *dísir* were, in pre-Christian culture, believed to combat each other directly on the basis of *Þiðranda þáttr* due to the overtly missionary tone of the *þáttr* itself. This agrees with the fact that majority of the *dísir* considered thus far in this subchapter have been presented as able (or willing?) to affect only humans rather than fighting other supernatural beings.

Overall then, I believe the amalgamation of elements associated with anthropomorphic *fylgjur* and (some) *dísir* – both landscape- and/or fertility-based and otherwise – into the hybrid beings described in *Þiðranda þáttr* is an idiosyncratic development restricted to this text alone, a result of the composer's Christian and hagiographical interests, and that, in Ström's words, there is no wider "genetiskt [...] samband" ('genetic relationship') between *dísir* and *fylgjur*.[346] As such, while *Þáttr*

344 *Þáttr Þiðranda ok Þórhalls*, *Flateyjarbók*, vol. 1, p. 468, trans. mine.
345 Gunnell, 'The Season of the *Dísir*', p. 131.
346 Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*, p. 98, trans. mine.

Þiðranda ok Þórhalls cannot be read as evidence for the use of the term "*dís*" as signifying "(supernatural) lady" in a purely synonymic sense (where "*dís*" is a context-dependent replacement, in this case for "*fylgja*"), it is our strongest evidence yet that "*dís*" had a broad, flexible semantic field that may indeed have been employed to describe a wide range of "(supernatural) ladies".

The remaining instances of *dísir* in textual sources are not as easily interpreted as those examined thus far. One such brief but problematic mention of a "*dís*" occurs in strophe 11 of *Reginsmál*, entirely separate to the *dísir* of the later advice stanzas: before Sigurðr is even mentioned in the poem, the dying Hreiðmarr curses Lyngheiðr, one of his daughters, as "*dís úlfhuguð*" ('wolf-hearted *dís*') when she refuses to avenge Hreiðmarr's murder by her brother,[347] in an instance which could be following Snorri's instructions on alternative methods for referring to women in Chapter 68 of *Skáldskaparmál* to the letter. The Eddic verse could be read as an excellent example of the use of "*dís*" as a *heiti* for "woman" when one of her key relationships is as a daughter,[348] which would imply that the use of the term here is a result (or an example) of skaldic diction, and cannot be said to reveal anything about pre-Christian belief in the *dísir*. (Whether *Reginsmál* or *Skáldskaparmál* came first is something of an irrelevancy, given that the *terminus ante quem* for both is in the mid-thirteenth century.) On the other hand, it is also possible to read the use of "*dís*" *Reginsmál* st. 11 as resulting from the nature of the woman so called: even within just the text of *Reginsmál* itself, Lyngheiðr's family is said to include at least one dwarf, whose two brothers are capable of taking on the shape of an otter and a dragon. If there were to be one 'lady' suitable to be judged 'supernatural' by dint of her birth, it would be Lyngheiðr! As such, it is possible that her father calls her a "*dís*" in reference to her essential nature as an inhuman female being. However, we know almost nothing about the woman herself – she and her sister disappear from the poem after Lyngheiðr speaks one more verse to Regin, revealing nothing about her own nature – and the very identification of her as 'supernatural' on the basis of genetic relationships may be flawed.[349] It is quite possible that she was regarded quite neutrally as (just) a woman, without any particular claim to the signifier "*dís*".

---

347 *Reginsmál*, *Edda,* st. 11, p. 176, trans. mine.

348 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 108.

349 There is also, very little, if any, evidence for female dwarves. See Anatoly Liberman, 'What Happened to Female Dwarfs?', *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz*, ed. Rudolf Simek and Wilhelm Heizmann (Wien: Fassbaender, 2002), pp. 257-263. On 'interspecies'

In another difficult case, the word "*dís*" also appears to be used to describe a human woman – Guðrún Gjúkadóttir – in strophe 35 of *Atlaqviða in grænlenzca*, the first three half-lines of which read: "*Scævaði þá in scírleita, veigar þeim at bera, afkár dís, iofrom*" ('then the pure-faced one strode, terrible *dís*, to bring drink to them, the warriors') – after which the poem describes how she feeds the cooked remains of their sons to her husband, then announces the fact to the packed hall.[350] As with some cases discussed above, it is difficult to say whether or not "*dís*" is functioning as an *ókend heiti* in this instance – or even if the simple adjective "*afkár*" is enough for this to register as a *kenning* in the minds of the poem's late Iron-Age audience – but it is a strong possibility that "*dís*" is, in this instance, a signifier base for poetic diction rather than a key to the signified of the *dísir* themselves. However, Guðrún's actions in this episode are far from those of a normal human woman, and it may be that her transgressive behaviour might have been enough to push her beyond social boundaries and into the category of 'female Other'.[351] Her actions have already been described by David Clark as "a form of subversive parody of her role as wife and queen",[352] but it must be admitted that a more extreme interpretation is probably doubtful, and would rely heavily on aggressive readings of *dísir* in other texts such as *Grímnismál* st. 53, but I believe the possibility is worth entertaining. At the very least, *Atlaqviða* st. 35 proves that not only *valkyrjur* and *ásynjur* may be referents of "*dís*"-based *kenningar*, and that the brackets in my working definition of "(supernatural) lady" remain justified.

It is also notable that, unlike *ásynjur*, *nornir* and *valkyrjur*, the only extant *dís* to have a specific name is Lyngheiðr Hreiðmarsdóttir of *Reginsmál* st. 10: the vast majority of *dísir* are unnamed and uncounted. The only exceptions to this are instances where previously-named individuals are referred to as "*dísir*" in skaldic diction, and *Þiðranda þáttr*, where it is explicitly stated that each side consisted of nine "*konur*". Snorri, however, contradicts our evidence, stating in Chapter 31 of *Skáldskaparmál* that *dísir*-names may be used as *heiti* for women: "*Kona er ok kend við allar ásynjur eða nornir eða dísir*" ('Women are also called the names of all the

sexual relations more generally, see Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*; and John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005).

350 *Atlaqviða in grænlenzca*, *Edda,* st. 35, p. 246, trans. mine.

351 For a seminal study of in-group/Other relations, see Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, esp. pp. 42-102.

352 David Clark, 'Undermining and En-Gendering Vengeance', *Scandinavian Studies* 77 (2005), pp. 173-200, p. 193.

ásynjur or *nornir* or *dísir*').[353] This implies that he either knew of *dísir* names that he did not include in his *Edda*, or that he somehow considered the *dísir* equivalent to the other two classifications of supernatural females and he felt that poets should be able to use the names of any *dísir* they knew. The former is possible, given that Snorri sometimes quotes only parts of whole poems (such as *Grímnismál*) that have come down to us whole elsewhere, although it seems an unlikely proposition given the *Edda*'s function as an *ars poetica* and the potential usefulness of such a list of *dísaheiti* to skalds. I believe it is more likely that Snorri genuinely did not know of any *dísir*-names, but intended to imply that *dísir* were (or in certain situations, could be) equivalent to *ásynjur* or *nornir*, not necessarily in order to elevate the *dísir* above their 'proper' station, but in order to lend stature to the *ásynjur* – many of whom, as Lotte Motz has proposed, are frequently portrayed as ineffective and "decorative shadows, prized possessions or abstractions invented by the poets or the learned men" and may well be relatively young, even post-Christianisation, phenomena.[354] As such, it seems probable that the group-based *dísir* at least were, like the *álfar* depicited in our surviving sources,[355] always anonymous, operating in anonymous and unnumbered "diskollektiv".

The final instance of the *dísir* I will examine is perhaps the most enigmatic: in the final poem of the *Codex Regius*, as Hamðir and Sörli are killed by their erstwhile brother-in-law Iörmunrekkr, one of the two brothers (it is unclear which) laments their murder of their half-brother Erpr, committed on the way to Iörmunrekkr's hall, and the cause of their defeat and death. As he does so, the speaker claims "*hvǫttomc at dísir* [...] *gorðomz at vígi*" ('the *dísir* drove [me/us ...] readied [me/us/myself/ourselves] to kill').[356] The text of the poem is far from straightforward, which has probably contributed to the "general consensus [which] dates Hamðismál [...] early (late ninth to early eleventh century)",[357] and the verb forms in particular are ambiguous, leaving it unclear as to whether it is one or both of the brothers the *dísir* drove to murder Erpr (although another line of the strophe makes it clear both did the deed together), and who is doing the 'readying' in the final half line. Regarding the

353 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 40, trans. mine.
354 Motz, 'Sister in the Cave', p. 172.
355 On the *álfar*, see Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 21-53; and Gunnell, 'How Elvish were the *Álfar*?'.
356 *Hamðismál*, *Edda,* st. 28, p. 273, trans. mine.
357 Clark, 'Undermining and En-Gendering Vengeance', p. 175.

dísir themselves, very little can be said: they certainly come across here as bloodthirsty, to the point where their aggression causes the death of the brothers, which might suggest that these *dísir* are not in fact associated with Hamðir and Sörli at all. In fact, given the way these spirits apparently sabotage the brothers' mission to assassinate Iörmunrekkr without managing to prevent the Goth's death, I am inclined to suggest that these might be Iörmunrekkr's own *dísir*, who, like the (*spá*)*dísir* of King Sigmundr in *Völsunga saga* and Gunnar in *Atlamál*, may be able to offer protection up to a point, but cannot gainsay a man's fate entirely. Another possible explanation proposed includes the reading that these *dísir* are in fact *valkyrjur*, and that not only Hamðir and Sörli but also Erpr constitute an Óðinnic sacrifice,[358] which I find unlikely. While Hamðir and Sörli could indeed have sacrificed Erpr for success in their bloody enterprise, I believe the text of the poem makes their motivation for his murder clear when it reports the brothers' frustration with his riddling and boastful talk: "*Kóðo harðan mioc hornun vera*" ('They said the bastard was very hard').[359]

The only other point of note is the possible identification of these "*dísir*" with the "*flagð*" ('troll-woman') mentioned when the brothers actually commit the murder of Erpr: "*Drógo þeir ór scíði scíðiiárn, mækis eggiar, at mun flagði*" ('They drew sword's edge's scabbard-iron from scabbard, to the troll-woman's delight').[360] Substituting the plural "*flogðum*" for the currently singular "*flagði*" would not appear to disrupt the rhythm of strophe 15, but given the uncertainty surrounding the pronunciation (as well as the exact meaning) of the verb forms in strophe 28, it is not impossible that the "*dísir*" there is only in plural in order to make up the correct number of syllables, and is indeed referring to the single troll-woman of the earlier stanza. Exactly what the 'troll-woman's delight' refers to is unclear, although one possibility may be that this is an unusual circumlocution for fratricide, referencing a tradition like that preserved in *Völuspá*, which states that, during the prelude to Ragnarök, "*Brœðr muno beriaz oc at bǫnom verðaz*" ('Brother will fight brother and become his slayer').[361] Overall, however, it is very difficult indeed to know what to make of the *dísir* of *Hamðismál* st. 28, but there can be little doubt that they represent

358 von See *et al*., eds., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, vol. 7, p. 987.
359 *Hamðismál*, *Edda,* st. 14, p. 270, trans. mine.
360 *Hamðismál*, *Edda,* st. 15, p. 271, trans. mine.
361 *Vǫlospá*, *Edda,* st. 45, p. 10, trans. mine.

some sort of supernatural being – almost certainly female, and possibly (even probably) malevolent.

2.3 Conclusions: Taxonomising the *Dísir* and *Valkyrjur*

Having now examined the extant evidence for on different forms of *dísir* in the 'Old Norse' cultural continuum, it is time to examine to what extent this data supports Hall's tacit assertion that *dísir* occupied a higher taxonomic level than other pre-Christian supernatural females and what implications this may have for our study of the late-Iron Age *valkyrjur*. In and of themselves, neither of Hall's definitions of "*valkyrja*" – as "a kenning ('chooser of the slain')" – or "*dís*" – "(supernatural) lady" – seem at all problematic,[362] although in the latter case it is possible that this is due to the extreme breadth implied by the modern English terminology, rather than an exact fit with the original pre-Christian concept(s).

As outlined above in Chapter 2.2.1, there appears to be a notable core of evidence which is supportive of the survival of a tradition in which the signifier "*dís*" was applied to a coherent conception of supernatural female beings associated with the landscape and fertility, as Ström has previously argued.[363] However, it is my position that Ström badly over-rationalises his material, subsuming distinct traditions within a greater "diskollektiv" without due cause. These *dísir* always appear *en masse*, are never named, and, unlike the *valkyrjur*, were the recipients of cult in both Norway and Sweden during the Late Iron Age, with key rituals apparently held at either the beginning or end of winter depending on the geographic location of the cult in question. This is, in my opinion, highly suggestive that at least some *dísir* did represent a discrete 'species' – what Hall would call a "race",[364] although I agree that such terminology probably causes as many problems as it alleviates – in their own right, quite distinct from phenomena such as *valkyrjur*, *fylgjur*, *nornir*, and so on.

However, this picture of clear-cut 'races' is severely complicated by the wide range of evidence discussed in Chapter 2.2.2, which indicates that the term "*dís*" could also be applied to a variety of supernatural females with no discernible link to

362 Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 22.
363 Ström, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor*.
364 Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 22.

either the landscape or the sphere of fertility, as Hall suggests. Even once cases where the ultimate signified of the signifier "*dís*" is unclear (typically due to the periphrastic nature of skaldic diction) have been omitted, there remain a significant number of instances where these "*dísir*" display characteristics and associations more typically connected with mythological pheonomena typically referred to via the use of their own distinct signifiers. This occurs with features linked to the *fylgjur* (most explicitly in *Þiðranda þáttr*, but potentially also in *Völsunga saga* ch. 11, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, *Ásmundar saga kappabana* and *Atlamál* st. 28), and to a lesser extent the *draumkonur* (in *Ásmundar saga kappabana*), but undoubtedly the greatest similarities were between the *dísir* and *valkyrjur* (in *Grímnismál* st. 53, *Völsunga saga* ch. 11 and 35, *Reginsmál* st. 24, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, *Ásmundar saga kappabana* and *Þiðranda þáttr*), leading me to conclude that there was a significant overlap in the discursive space(s) occupied by the latter two terms. However, it must be admitted that a close reading of the source material has produced no single instance where a *valkyrja* was definitively and explicitly referred to as a "*dís*" outside of skaldic diction, for all that the Óðinnic association of the "*spádísir*" in Chapter 11 of *Völsunga saga* and the "*dísir*" of *Grímnismál* st. 53 – and perhaps also the "*dísir*" of *Reginsmál* st. 24 – makes them strong candidates for this status. If we were to consider this quandary purely in terms of mythological 'species', such a situation would clearly prove problematic, necessitating that we construct arguments to 'solve' these difficult instances, interpreting the beings in question as either *dísir* or *valkyrjur*. Similarly challenging would be the survival of at least two (groups of) supernatural females (Lyngheiðr in *Reginsmál* st. 10 and the *dísir* of *Hamðismál* st. 28) and one human woman (Guðrún Gjúkadóttir in *Atlaqviða* st. 35) also termed "*dísir*" who cannot be neatly pigeonholed into such 'racial' categories.

This evidence would appear to provide strong evidence in favour of Hall's suggestion that "the convention of creating taxonomies of mythological races on a one-name, one-race basis" is itself outdated, and that "*dís*" should be understood as "(supernatural) lady",[365] or, in de Vries' terms, as a "Sammelnamen für übernatürliche Wesen" ('collective name for supernatural beings'),[366] in the sense that multiple types of supernatural female spirits could all be referred to as "*dísir*" without inherent contradiction. Such a category may have been flexible, able to accept new additions

365 Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 22.
366 de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2, p. 297, trans. mine.

and the loss of previous members (as those humans who made use of and maintained the phenomena in question gradually conceived of the beings in question differently than the generations before them, or as migrations of population groups took place) without losing its own (fundamentally very loose) coherency. It is also entirely possible that some female beings who remain extant today, but are not attested as "*dísir*" in our remaining sources, may at one time or in specific contexts have been regarded as such – Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr, for example, was apparently a female deity who was never subsumed into Snorri's *ásynjur* or Vanir groupings, and may well have been described as a "*dís*" in the sense of 'supernatural female',[367] although this is admittedly pure speculation.

Sensible-sounding arguments might be made for the seniority or primacy of either one of these groups of "*dísir*". One possibility is that the term "*dís*" originated as a non-specific term for '(supernatural?) female', and only was applied to the particular genus of fertility- and/or landscape-based spirits of Chapter 2.2.1 because those who worshipped these beings had no other way to designate them than '(the) female spirits', thus implying that there were no other (unnamed) female spirits with whom these *dísir* need compete for the title. (Such generic but locally-definitive naming might be indicative of a potential origin in ancestor worship.[368]) Alternatively, the opposite might equally have been the case, with the 'original' use of the signifier undergoing semantic widening from the fertility-based *dísir* to encompass the range of supernatural females covered by currently extant evidence.[369] Such semantic widening might have been as a result of contact with non-Nordic cultures and languages, in particular on the basis of analogy with West-Germanic terms such as Old English *ides*, Old Saxon *idis* and Old High German *itis*. These West-Germanic signifiers, although occasionally used for extraordinary women of a supernatural bent – *ides* for Grendel's Mother in *Beowulf*,[370] and both *itis* and *idis* for the Virgin Mary[371] – were

---

367 On Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr, see Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, pp. 413-414 and references therein; and de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2, pp. 340-342.

368 Indeed, Turville-Petre has already proposed that *dísir* were believed to have been female ancestors, apparently on the strength of the "*dauðr konur*" in *Atlamál* alone; 'A Note on the *Landdísir*', p. 201. On ancestor worship in pre-Christian culture, see de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 1, pp. 88-89, 176-177; *cf.* Also Gunnell, 'How Elvish were the *Álfar*?', pp. 128-129. A new dissertation on the topic is currently being prepared by Triin Laidoner at the University of Aberdeen.

369 For an early but influential study of semantic change, see Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (New York: Allen & Unwin, 1933; reprinted Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Press, 2005), pp. 425-443.

370 *Beowulf*, ed. F. R. Klaeber, 3rd edn. (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1950), ll. 1259, 1351.

first and foremost used for human women, albeit apparently women of some social stature. (Regarding Old English *ides*, for example, Audrey Meaney concluded that "the word [...] appears to have no moral connotations; but clearly to mean "noble woman, lady" rather than simply "woman"."[372]) Perhaps thematically closer to the North-Germanic *dísir* may have have been the *idisi* of the *First Merseburg Charm*, an Old High German text typically dated to the tenth century, who, despite the Christian context of the manuscript in which the *Charm* is preserved, appear to have supernatural abilities that both kept armies in check and released them (although it is entirely possible that the southern *idisi* were conceived of as human women with sorcerous powers, rather than female spirits).[373]

If the North Germanic "*dís*" did originally have a narrow semantic field focused on supernatural females related to fertility and/or the protection of specific landscapes – as indeed the potential linguistic relationship between "*dís*" and Old Indic "*dhiṣaṇyant-*" (which de Vries glosses as "fromm, andächtig" ['observant, pious']) might imply,[374] particularly once "*dhiṣaṇyant-*" itself is understood to have derived "from an s-form of *dhī-*, 'to see'"[375] – then it is easy to see how, particularly in zones of regular cultural contact in southern Scandinavia, this meaning could have undergone a gradual widening in response to regular contact with West-German speakers whose (near) cognate designated a much broader semantic field.

Attempting to posit any potential evolutionary relationship between the two 'types' of North Germanic *dísir* (or usages of the "*dís*" signifier) is, however, a fraught exercise given the relatively late origins and fragmented state of our evidence. On the basis of the data currently available, it is extremely difficult to say which of these scenarios – continuing specialised usage or semantic widening – is the more likely, but the result, by the late Iron Age, is the same: the signifier "*dís*" was applied

---

371 Audrey Meaney, 'The *Ides* of the Cotton Gnomic Poem', *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomingtom and Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, 1990), pp. 158-75, p. 158.

372 Meaney, 'The *Ides* of the Cotton Gnomic Poem', pp. 159-160.

373 See, for example, Wolfgang Beck *et al*. 'Einige neuere Publikationen zu den Merseburger Zaubersprüchen', *Indogermanische Forschungen* 114 (2009), pp. 337-356, p. 337; Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, p. 147 and references therein. However, Mindy MacLeod and Bernard Mees (*Runic Amulets and Magic Objects* [Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006], p. 154 and references therein) date the *Charm* to the ninth century.

374 Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957), p 77, trans. mine.

375 Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, p. 41.

to a wide range of supernatural females, some of whom appear to have formed a distinct sub-*dísir* tradition, while others occupied the same discursive spaces as other supernatural "races", and still others were purely idiosyncratic individuals who do not fit into either of these loose categories.

Fortunately, accepting the conclusions of Chapter 2.2.1 – regarding the coherent 'fertility/landscape' *dísir* – need not preclude accepting the conclusions of Chapter 2.2.2 – regarding the generic 'supernatural lady' *dísir* – provided we are willing assume a taxonomic relationship between groups of supernatural being. That is, the relationship may be formalised in the logical statement "all 'fertility/landscape' *dísir* are also generic 'supernatural lady' *dísir*, but not all generic 'supernatural lady' *dísir* are also 'fertility/landscape' *dísir*", and may be represented graphically as in figure 2.B:

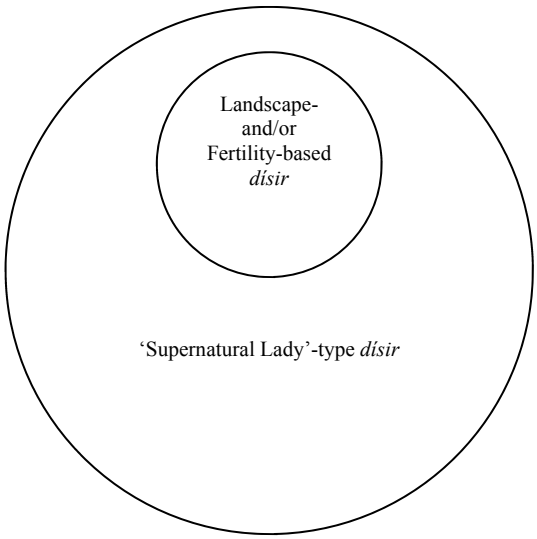


Figure 2.B, Euler diagram showing relationships between *dísir*, after Chapters 2.2.1-2.2.2.

This formalisation may therefore form the basis of our understanding of the relationship between *dísir* and *valkyrjur*: some *valkyrjur* shared traits and/or associations with some of the aggressive 'supernatural lady' *dísir*, but not with the 'fertility *dísir*. (Most pointedly, there is no extant evidence that the *valkyrjur* were ever the recipients of cult.) Indeed, the sheer number of these characteristics common to both groups of female beings – including an active role on the battlefield (*Völsunga saga* ch. 11, *Reginsmál* st. 24, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, *Ásmundar saga kappabana*), an explicit or causal link with death (*Grímnismal* st. 53,

Reginsmál st. 24, *Þiðranda þáttr*), the wearing of armour (*Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*), the riding of horses (*Þiðranda þáttr*), the carrying of weapons (*Ásmundar saga kappabana*, *Þiðranda þáttr*), a direct association with particular individuals, particularly Óðinnic heroes (*Völsunga saga* ch. 11 and 35, *Reginsmál* st. 24, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, *Ásmundar saga kappabana*), occasionally a direct association with Óðinn himself (*Grímnismal* st. 53, *Völsunga saga* ch. 11, *Reginsmál* st. 24), even 'choosing' a man for death (*Völsunga saga* ch. 35) – is doubtless the origin of Hall's assertion that "*valkyrja* is most likely a kenning ('chooser of the slain') for *dís* ('(supernatural) lady')",[376] although I would phrase such an explanation somewhat more carefully as "... a *kenning* ('chooser of the slain') for a type of *dís* ('(supernatural) lady')." A provisional representation of the relationship between the *dísir* and the *valkyrjur* may be seen in Figure 2.C:

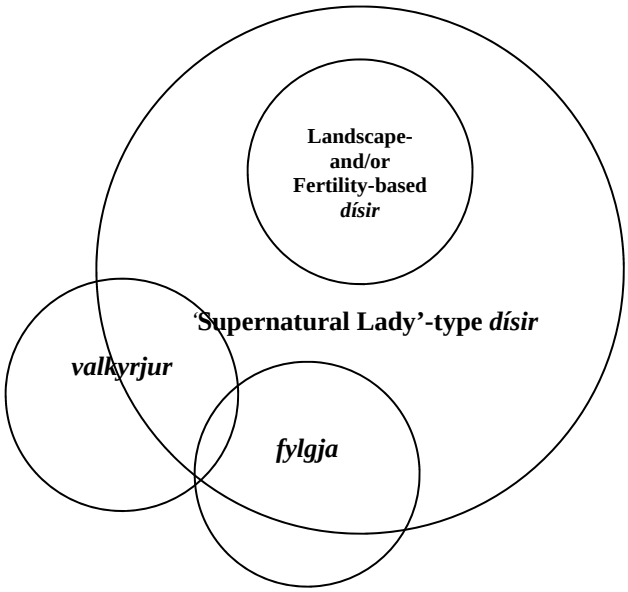


Figure 2.C, Euler diagram showing relationships between *dísir*, *valkyrja*, and *fylgja*, after Chapters 2.2.1-2.2.2.

Given our new understanding of how the signifier "*dís*" could be used as a generic term to denote a number of different 'types' of supernatural female, valkyric ones included, the next step in an examination of the Iron-Age *valkyrja* phenomena should be to consider the ways in which *valkyrjur* deviated from this 'base state' of supernatural femininity. After all, as similar as the highly-valkyric *dísir* of texts like

[376] Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 22.

Grímnismál st. 53 and *Völsungs saga* ch. 11 may sound to fully-fledged *valkyrjur*, these beings were not called this by the composers of the texts that preserve them. Is this significant? While there could be good reasons for this within the individual texts themselves (as discussed above), it is also possible that this distinction reflects a nuanced use of vocabulary, and that different female beings – such as *spádísir*, *valkyrjur* and *nornir* – needed to be differentiated from generic *dísir* by distinctive signifiers.

The criteria for differentiating between *valkyrjur* and *dísir* may vary widely, and could potentially include discussions of cosmological function;[377] the objects, events and individuals with whom these groups of beings are associated; or the context in which they appear (although, given the focus of this study on setting the *valkyrjur* in one specific context, care must be taken not to read that context into the data at this early stage). What is imperative is to avoid the rationalising urge that produced Turville-Petre's "Norse Olympus",[378] and to recognise that these data sets cannot and should not be wholly separated from one another. Nonetheless, establishing these criteria – what Schjødt calls the "discourse" – of the late-Iron Age *valkyrja* phenomenon will be the focus of the next chapter of this thesis.

[377] Note, however, the recent trend in scholarship to question the assumption that deities and other supernatural figures must have had a specific function: on the Nordic sphere, see, for example, Terry Gunnell, 'Pantheon? What Pantheon?'; regarding 'minor' female figures from earlier in the Germanic Iron Age, see Shaw, *Pagan Goddesses in the Early Germanic World*, esp. pp. 70-73.

[378] Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 23.

CHAPTER 3: VALKYRIC DISCOURSE IN THE LATE IRON AGE

3.1 Approaching the *Valkyrjur*

Establishing how the *valkyrjur* were regarded and utilised by the socities that created and made use of them is no straightforward matter, and requires, first and foremost, an understanding of the discursive space inhabited by late-Iron Age *valkyrja* phenomena. As outlined in the above discussion of the *dísir*, many supernatural female beings appear to have displayed attributes that might be considered valkyric, and (at least some of) the *valkyrjur* themselves may be regarded as a sub-type of *dís*, where the latter is understood as a generic term designating a supernatural female spirit. What is more, given the relative rarity of the use of the signifier "*valkyrja*" itself, simply deciding which characteristics or associations are definitive of the late-Iron Age *valkyrjur* (as opposed to other supernatural females) may drastically alter which individual cases are judged *valkyrjur* in the first place, with such judgements potentially influencing later decisions on subsequent definitive characteristics and forming a vicious cycle of circular reasoning. Given the necessarily arbitrary nature of such decisions (as outlined above, see Chapter 1.3), this chapter will begin by examining the various characteristics attributed to those beings in instances where the texts that preserve them explicitly label them as *valkyrjur*, before considering a wider range of evidence in an effort to produce a more generally-applicable model (see above, Chapter 1.3.2). Such an approach will doubtless be subjective, and produce imperfect results, but given the fragmentary state of our data there remains no way in which we can truly 'reconstruct' an accurate picture of historical reality – merely construct a model that seeks to reflect it.

Of course, deciding just which characteristics, associations, features or functions assigned to the *valkyrjur* (or any other pre-Christian religious or mythological phenomena) in our extant source material should be regarded as central or primary and which as of lesser importance or as secondary developments is in itself a prejudicial process. Depending on whether a study of the *valkyrjur* prioritises their portrayals as servants of Óðinn, their proclivity for romantic entanglement with human heroes, or their attested powers of flight, for example, different models of what

the *valkyrjur* were – and thus what role(s) they served for the societies that made use of their mythologies in the late Iron Age – may be proposed. This is particularly apparent in the existing scholarship on *valkyrjur*. For example, as part of his study of Iron-Age magic and warfare, Neil Price is keen to emphasise what he calls the 'battle-demon' incarnation of the *valkyrjur*, focusing largely on valkyric names and *kenningar* to propose that they were either "essentially personified attributes of Óðinn" in his aspect as shamanic war-god or that "the *valkyrjur* may instead have been special spirits summoned an unleashed for specific purposes".[379] However, given the interchangeability of *heiti* for different 'classes' of being in skaldic diction and the relative youth of some valkyric names – some of which are recorded only in the various *Nafnaþulur* appended to *Skáldskaparmál*, texts which are generally believed to have been added to manuscripts of *Snorra Edda* significantly after the original text's composition "in such a way as to imply Snorri's authorship of them"[380] – it is possible that Price is overstating his case as a result of his desire to prove that "both *valkyrjur* and magic-workers can be categorised".[381] Having said this, much of his analysis remains sound.

Similar biases may be found in the work of both Helen Damico and Mathias Egeler, two other leading valkyric scholars. Damico, concerned with the identification of a "valkyrie reflex" in Old English literature and society, is willing to acknowledge the "sinister battle-demon" aspect of the *valkyrjur* – which allows her to identify Grendel's mother as a "valkyrie-figure"[382] – but the majority of her article is concerned with what she acknowledges is a later development, "the radiant, courtly figure."[383] By focusing on the physical beauty and (alleged) wisdom of *valkyrjur* in the Old Norse cultural continuum, Damico proposes that various heroic (human) women from Old English poetry are valkyric reflexes,[384] despite the use of the Old English cognate "*wælcyrge*" (pl. "*wælcyrgean*") being restricted primarily to

379 Price, *The Viking Way*, p. 345.
380 Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 82.
381 Price, *The Viking Way*, p. 345.
382 Helen Damico, 'The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature', *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 176-89, pp. 178-179.
383 Damico, 'The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature', p. 177.
384 Damico, 'The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature', pp. 181-187.

apparently human witches and glosses of classical war-goddesses.[385] As such, I would argue that if Judith and her ilk truly are valkyric reflexes, they are very distant ones indeed. Less obvious, but still detectable, is the arrangement of data in Egeler's *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen* into typological categories that accentuate the comparative similarities between the Nordic, Irish and Mediterranean material he examines: for example, both his chapters on "Die Walküren" and "Die Bodb" (an Irish supernatural female [or females] associated with battle and birds, who probably shared what Schjødt calls a "genetic" relationship with the Nordic *valkyrjur* and other Irish figures like the Morrigan[386]) include subsections on "Kollektivcharakter" ('collective character'), "Tod" ('death'), "Vögel" ('birds'), "Sexualität" ('sexuality'), and "Tieferes Wissen" ('numinous knowlege').[387]

I would not wish to argue, however, that any of these analyses are inherently weakened by the biases identifiable in their arrangement of the source material. On the contrary, every analysis will make such judgements, consciously or not, but by acknowledging the aims and interests of a study openly, its readers and critics may make their own informed judgements on the validity of any conclusions reached with greater ease. As such: the lens through which this study seeks to consider the *valkyrjur*, as referenced throughout this thesis thus far, is that section of late-Iron Age society which – it is my belief – would have accorded the *valkyrjur* phenomena the greatest importance in its worldviews, and would have expressed its various "valkyrie reflexes" most frequently in its myths, legends, and poetry: the hall-based aristocratic warrior-culture of the *hirð* (the so-called 'commitatus', or 'warband'). Although much, if not necessarily all, of pre-Christian late-Iron Age society may have been familiar with *valkyrja* mythology, those members of male society who would have self-identified – at least in certain contexts – as warriors may be argued to have had the greatest interest in the mythological fields and functions apparently occupied and performed by the *valkyrjur*: an interest in the overall outcome of battles, the fate of individual warriors on the battlefield and their afterlife destinations, as well as in the accoutrements of the professional Iron-Age warrior such as weaponry, armour, horses and beautiful women. This chapter will therefore examine evidence linking late-Iron

385 Damico, 'The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature', p. 177; see also Stephen Mitchell, 'Warlocks, Valkyries and Varlets: A Prolegomenon to the Study of North Sea Witchcraft Terminology', *Cosmos* 17 (2001), pp. 59-81, pp. 70-76.

386 Schjødt, 'Reflections on Aims and Methods' (2012), pp. 275-80.

387 Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, pp. 31-115 and 116-166, trans. mine.

Age *valkyrjur* with these types of associations, features and fields, thereby establishing the boundaries of the discursive space occupied by *valkyrja* phenomena as used by hall-based warrior culture during the late-Iron Age.

3.2 Horn-Bearing and Valhöll

The obvious starting point for such an examination is the one extant description of *valkyrjur* that attempts to explain to its readers who (or perhaps what) the *valkyrjur* are, and what function the author believes – or at least claims to believe – they served in pre-Christian cosmology: Chapter 36 of Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*. Snorri's description is highly informative, although, given the potential dangers of working with *Snorra Edda* discussed above (see Chapter 1.2), it is necessary to approach the text critically. The account comes as part of the disguised Óðinn's answer to the question "*Hverjar eru Ásynjurnar*?" ('Who/What are the *ásynjurnar* [the female *Æsir*]?'),[388] a response which includes not only a list of names, but also a series of thumbnail sketches outlining dwelling places, occupations, familial and conjugal relations, possessions, and a number of terms supposedly derived from the names of these deities.[389] The last of these, coupled with the near total lack of corroborating evidence for some of the more minor figures on Snorri's list, has led Lotte Motz to suggest that these deities are Snorri's own invention devised on the basis of the words he lists in order to provide a more acceptable range of female powers than the morally questionable *völur*, *nornir* and assorted "Giantesses" found in Eddic poetry.[390] While I find Motz's ultimate conclusion that the *jötunn-konur* and their ilk represent an older layer of female deities that were either subjugated or "became the enemy" doubtful – I believe it is more likely that there were always female figures, both major and minor, on both sides of the cosmological Us/Them divide that the Æsir and *jötnar* seem to represent[391] – her arguments for the thirteenth-century origin of many of the lesser *ásynjur* remain convincing.

388 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, pp. 29-30.
389 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 30.
390 Motz, 'Sister in the Cave', p. 168.
391 *cf*. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*.

This is relevant to the *valkyrjur* as *Gylfaginning* appears to classify them as *ásynjur*, at least to some extent: the sentence before the description of the *valkyrjur* describes Sól and Bil, who "*eru talðar með Ásynjum*" ('who are counted among the *ásynjur*'), while that following reads "*Jǫrð, móðir Þórs, ok Rindr, móðir Vála, eru talðar með Ásynjum*" ('Jörð, Þórr's mother, and Rindr, Vali's mother, are counted among the *ásynjur*'), while Snorri's outline of the *valkyrjur* itself begins "*Enn eru þær aðrar er...*" ('Still [more] are those others, who...').[392] This is not entirely straightforward, however, as the other four females mentioned are far from typical *ásynjur*: Sól is described by Snorri (apparently on the basis of *Vafþrúðnismál* st. 23 and *Grímnismál* st. 37) as a personification of the sun,[393] not a goddess, while Bil figures in Snorri's telling of the sun and moon myth but is attested elsewhere only in generic *kenningar* as a female figure, leading Simek to remark that "Als Göttin im eigentlichen Sinn wurde B[il] in der heidnichen Zeit aber sicher nich betrachtet" ('Bil was not regarded as a goddess in the true sense of the word in heathen times').[394] Similarly, Jörð and Rindr are *jötunn-konur* apparently seduced by Óðinn to bear his sons,[395] and, unlike Skaði – who marries Njörðr and is included in *Æsir* society in both *Grímnismál* and *Locasenna*[396] – there is never any suggestion of a more long-lasting relationship between them and the *ás*, nor (unlike Skaði) are their homes included in lists of cosmological locations that appear to comprise what the poet of *Grímnismál* calls "*Land [...] er ec liggat sé ás om ac álfom nær*" ('[The] land which I see lying near the *Æsir* and the *álfar*').[397] As such, the inclusion of these female figures – and the *valkyrjur* – in the Æsir kin-group therefore seems questionable, or at least contingent on brief sexual liaisons.[398]

This taxonomy is repeated later in *Snorra Edda*, when the list of *heiti* known as the *Nafnaþulur* sandwiches a list of the names of "*Óðins meyjar*" ('Óðinn's girls') between a long list of *ásynjur* and a small group of assorted females, including *dísir*,

392 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 30, trans. mine.

393 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 13.

394 Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, p. 50.

395 Þórr is described as Jörð's son in a number of skaldic and Eddic texts, perhaps most prominently in the opening strophe of *Þrymsqiða* as "*Iarðar burr*" (*Edda*, st. 1, p. 111); similarly, Rindr is listed as Vali's mother in skaldic *kenningar*, and strophe 11 of *Baldrs daumar* includes the line "*Rindr berr Vála*" ('Rindr bore Váli'; *Edda,* st. 11, p. 278).

396 *Grímnismál*, *Edda,* st. 11, p. 59; and *Locasenna*, *Edda,* st. 49-51, p. 107.

397 *Grímnismál*, *Edda,* st. 3, p. 58.

398 On Skaði as an exception to the otherwise typical progression of exogamous "negative reciprocity", see Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, pp. 115-119.

nornir and "*nipt*" ('sister, female relative').[399] These "*meyjar*" are undoubtedly to be identified as *valkyrjur* not only through their association with Óðinn – who 'has' no other group of females – but also by the fact that seven of the nine names in the *þula* are the same as those listed as belonging to *valkyrjur* in *Gylfaginning*. Despite the undoubted pre-literary origins of the *þula* form, however, the questionable manuscript history of the extant *þulur* and the variation of the different exemplars preserved in manuscripts of *Snorra Edda* have lead many scholars to assume that the *Nafnaþulur* currently extant were added to *Skáldskaparmál* in the decades and centuries following Snorri's completion of his work,[400] and as such might be repeating Snorri's interpretation of his source material rather than genuine pre-Christian tradition.

Regardless of whether we accept the implication of *Snorra Edda* that the *valkyrjur* are to be viewed as *ásynjur* or not – and I do not think we should – the context of Snorri's description can be understood to reflect source material that closely associates these beings with the *Æsir*. (After all, the *valkyrjur* are not recorded as marrying or enjoying sexual relations with male *Æsir* [only human heroes], nor – in purely mythological narratives – do individual *valkyrjur* stand out from the collective and interact with deities, *jötnar*, or other mythic beings.) What is more, given Snorri's recognised manipulation of his source material to suit his own ends (*cf*. Chapter 1.2 above),[401] his depiction of the *valkyrjur* should be treated with some caution.

Even bearing these caveats in mind, however, Snorri's account is still worth quoting in full:

> *Enn eru þær aðrar er þjóna skulu í Valhǫll, bera drykkju ok gæta borðbúnaðr ok ǫlgagna. Svá er þær nefndar í Grímnismálum:*
>
> > *Hrist ok Mist*
> > *vil ek at mér horn beri,*
> > *Skeggjǫld ok Skǫgul,*
> > *Hildr ok Þrúðr,*
> > *Hlǫkk ok Herfjǫtur,*
> > *Gǫll ok Geirahǫð,*
> > *Randgríð ok Ráðgríð*
> > *ok Reginleif.*
> > *Þær bera einherjum ǫl.*

399 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 115, trans. mine.
400 Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 82.
401 Faulkes, 'The Sources of *Skáldskaparmál*', pp. 59-76; *cf*. Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, pp. 9-78.

> *Þessar heita valkyrjur. Þær sendir Óðinn til hverrar orrostu. Þær kjósa feigð á menn ok ráða sigri. Guðr ok Rota ok norn in yngsta er Skuld heitir ríða jafnan at kjósa val ok ráða vígum.*[402]
>
> Still [more] are those others, who should serve in Valhöll, carry drink and see to the tableware and ale vessels. They are named so in *Grímnismál*:
>
> > Hrist and Mist
> > I wish to carry a horn to me,
> > Skeggjǫld and Skǫgul,
> > Hildr and Þrúðr,
> > Hlǫkk and Herfjǫtur,
> > Gǫll and Geirahǫð,
> > Randgríð and Ráðgríð
> > and Reginleif.
> > They carry ale to *einherjar*.
>
> These are called *valkyrjur*. Óðinn sends them to every battle. They allot approaching death to men and govern victory. Guðr and Rota and the youngest *norn*, who is called Skuld, always ride to choose the *valr* and govern the slayings.

From Snorri's point of view, the preeminent feature of the *valkyrjur* is clearly their role as serving women in Valhöll, celestial barmaids to Óðinn and the *einherjar*. Not only is this the first aspect of their character or activities he describes – before even naming them – he is not content merely to state that they "*þjóna skulu í Valhǫll*", but goes on to outline in much more detail exactly what this entails: "*bera drykkju ok gæta borðbúnaðr ok ǫlgagna.*"

The prominence given to this drink-serving motif is particularly noteworthy given Snorri's awareness of other aspects of the *valkyrjur* phenomenon, as indicated by the secondary description that follows his quotation of *Grímnismál* st. 36: sent by Óðinn to 'every battle', the *valkyrjur* of *Gylfaginning* 36 also collect dead warriors and bring them back to Valhöll to swell the ranks of the *einherjar*. (See further discussion below, Chapter 3.6-3.7). The simplest possible explanation for this emphasis on the *valkyrjur*'s serving duties in Valhöll is that that Snorri was simply attempting to reflect a bias he found in his source material. Given the verse of *Grímnismál* Snorri quotes to support his assertion that the *valkyrjur* "*þjóna skulu í Valhǫll*", there seems little doubt that this was indeed regarded as one of their activities in the pre-Christian Iron Age.

---

402 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 30, trans. and emphasis mine.

However, in the Eddic poem itself, the strophe is contextualised by the scenario in which the speaker (Óðinn, disguised as Grímnir ['Mask' or 'Masked One']) declaims it: dying of heat and starvation after torture between two fires, the deity displays his wisdom, reciting a long list of mythological knowledge. Upon describing how Yggdrasil, the world-tree, is being gradually torn down from above and below in strophe 35 – a clear reference to his own gradual destruction between the twin fires in Geirröðr's hall – Óðinn's focus apparently shifts from his display of wisdom to his physical thirst, prompting his mention of the *valkyrjur* and their horn-carrying in strophe 36.[403] Indeed, it may be that strophe 36 was intended to function primarily not as a display of mythological knowledge, but rather as a double – or in this case, triple – scene, where the late-Iron Age performer of *Grímnismál* calls for drink, speaking physically in his own voice, but also in his persona as Óðinn, thus requesting drink for himself and the god through the invocation of the drink-bearing *valkyrja* image.[404] (This raises the fascinating possibility that a female member of the audience bringing the performer/Óðinn refreshment would thus also be performing the role of a *valkyrja* in the minds of the poem's audience, however briefly, particularly given the setting of the scenes described and implied – Geirröðr's hall and Valhöll – and the likely performance staging of *Grímnismál* in an actual late-Iron Age hall.) I therefore believe it would be ill-advised to assume, on the basis of *Grímnismál* st. 36, that the primary role of the *valkyrjur* was that of a celestial horn-bearer: there are good grounds to see this motif as emphasised as it is in the poem for dramatic or contextual reasons. The same, however, cannot be said of Snorri's privileging of the hall-bound duties of the *valkyrjur* in *Gylfaginning* – but nor can Snorri be assumed to be blindly reflecting the presentation of these supernatural females in his source

403 *Grímnismál*, *Edda,* st. 35-36, p. 36.

404 On the performance of Eddic poetry, see Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama*, esp. pp. 182-281; 'Narratives, Space and Drama: Essential Spatial Aspects Involved in the Performance and Reception of Oral Narrative', *Folklore* 33 (2006), pp. 7-25; '"Til Holts Ek Gekk...": The Performance Demands of *Skírnismál*, *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál* in Liminal Time and Sacred Space', *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions. An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 238-42; and, '*Hof*, Halls, *Goðar* and Dwarves: An Examination of the Ritual Space in the Pagan Icelandic Hall', *Cosmos* 17 (2001), pp. 3-36. On the concept of the 'double-scene', see Lars Lönnroth, *Den Dubbla Scenen: Muntlig Diktning Från Eddan Til Abba* (Stockholm: Prisma, 1978). For an English-language article on the same topic, see Lars Lönnroth, 'The Double Scene of Arrow-Odd's Drinking Contest', *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Odense: Odense University Press, 1979), pp. 94-119.

material, given that he also portrays the *valkyrjur* as pyschpompoi (see further below, Chapter 3.7), and must therefore have synthesised *Grímnismál* (where the *valkyrjur* only appear as celestial barmaids) with other material.

The sense Snorri is making a deliberate editorial choice in his presentation of these supernatural females is also strengthened by what does not appear in Chapter 36 of his text: the *valkyrjur* of *Gylfaginning* are some of the few who are unequipped to appear on a battlefield, let alone intervene in the fighting themselves. They are not described as carrying the weapons or wearing the armour associated with *valkyrja* reflexes in other texts, such as *Hákonarmál*, where the two *valkyrjur* are portrayed as armed with spears, sitting on horseback with helmets on their heads and shields in their hands,[405] or *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, where their armour is "*blóði stocnar*" ('soaked in blood').[406] Admittedly, the dress and equipment of the *valkyrjur* of *Gylfaginning* 36 are not described at all, and, while I admit it is dangerous to employ negative evidence, I believe the omission of this motif from Chapter 36 of *Gylfaginning* is deliberate, given that Snorri includes *valkyrjur* among the list of anthropomorphic beings as possible determinants of *kenningar* for both "*orrustu*" ('battle') and "[*v*]*ápn ok herklæði*" ('weapons and armour'),[407] and was therefore clearly aware of the tradition.

What, then, can Snorri have been aiming to achieve? His reasoning for what might seem, to modern readers at least, like a partial portrayal of the *valkyrjur* most likely lies in his design, not merely of the *valkyrjur* and *ásynjur*, but of the entire cosmology set forth in *Gylfaginning*. In this section of his *Edda*, Snorri's mouthpiece Hár not only retells various myths and narratives, but also describes pre-Christian mythological geography, setting out the cosmological mansions and social relations of various individuals and groups. In this schema, the *valkyrjur* serve as something of a conceptual bridge between the long list of *ásynjur* and near-*ásynjur* described in Chapters 35-36, and the rambling description of Valhöll itself in Chapters 38-42. (Chapter 37 is a digression telling the story of Freyr's remote attempt to seduce Gerðr.) In this context, Snorri's text presents the *valkyrjur* essentially as participants in a hall-based society that would have been entirely familiar to the intended audience of his *Edda*, in other words the producers and consumers of skaldic poetry in the

405 *Hákonarmál*, *Skj* B1, st. 11, p. 58.
406 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, *Edda,* st. 15, p. 132, trans. mine.
407 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 7, trans. mine.

courts of the Christian Nordic kings, successors to the pagan warrior-culture of the late Iron Age.

During the late-Iron Age, Nordic society as a whole lived in varying settlement patterns, with the normal model being a mixture of individual farmsteads and loose hamlets, albeit one occasionally supplemented by small villages in particularly fertile agrarian areas and proto-towns at vital trading points.[408] The warrior-elite, however, based its culture around halls, forming tightly-knit social groups under the authority of a king, jarl, or other leader, but to whom the *hirðmenn* were, in Andreas Nordberg's words "voluntarily subordinate" rather than completely subservient.[409] These *hirð* – in scholarship typically referred to by the German term 'Männerbünnde', reflecting the history of academia in the field – were a feature of Germanic society long before the late Iron Age. Scholars have sought to identify Männerbünde-style phenomena based on social class in accounts as early as Tacitus' *Germania* (from the early first century AD),[410] and have even suggested (as was noted above) on the basis of runic evidence, that a specific *koiné* dialect was utilised by members of the social elite from the emergence of runic writing in the second century until increasing dialectal differences made a single North-Germanic *lingua franca* impossible to maintain in the seventh century.[411] While the advent of central place (complex) theory might complicate this rather straightforward picture of a single hall in which the lord and his retainers lived and celebrated their (sometimes sacral) feasts

---

408 On settlement patterns generally in the Viking Age and before, see Jan-Henrik Fallgren, 'Farm and Village in the Viking Age', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 67-76; and the excellent range of articles in Charlotte Fabech and Jytte Ringtved, eds., *Settlement and Landscape: Proceedings of a Conference in Århus, Denmark, May 4-7 1998* (Århus: Jutland Archaeological Society, 1998). On proto-towns and their trade networks, see Søren Michael Sindbæk, 'The Small World of the Vikings: Networks in Early Medieval Communication and Exchange', *Norweigan Archaeological Review* 40 (2007), pp. 59-74; and Dagfinn Skre, 'The Development of Urbanism in Scandinavia', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 83-93.

409 Andreas Nordberg, *Krigarna i Odins sal. Dödsföreställningar och krigarkult i fornnordisk religion*, 2nd edn. (Stockholm: Akademitryck AB, 2004), p. 303. See also John Lindow, *Comitatus, Individual and Honor: Studies in North Germanic Institutional Vocabulary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

410 Lily Weiser, *Altgermanische Jünglingsweihen und Männerbünde. Ein Beitrag zur deutschen und nordischen Altertums- und Volkskunde* (Baden: Konkordia A.-G., 1927); and Arnold H. Price, *Germanic Warrior Clubs: An Inquiry into the Dynamics of the Era of Migrations and into the Antecedents of Medieval Society* (Tübingen: Lück und Mauch, 1994). For more up-to-date scholarship on the topic, see Nordberg, *Krigarna i Odins sal*; and Lindow, *Comitatus, Individual and Honor*.

411 Makaev, *The Language of the Oldest Runic Inscriptions*, pp. 45-47.

and other religious rites,[412] introducing (as it does) subsidiary locations within the local region at which different members of the Männerband may have settled with varying levels of permanence,[413] archaeological finds at undoubtedly politically-central locations such as Uppsala and Uppåkra in Sweden,[414] Borg in Norway,[415] and Lejre in Denmark are nonetheless indicative of the vital role such structures played in late-Iron Age society.[416]

It may be argued that reflections of this aristocratic hall-based society form the basis for the image of the society of the *Æsir* and other supernatural beings that is set forth in many of the extant mythological texts, which are also, as Clunies Ross has observed, presented in an "insistently pro-god narratorial point of view".[417] While current scholarship now mostly rejects the totalitarian structuralism of Georges Dumézil's proposed tripartite division of Nordic mythology along the lines of "the three Indo-European functions (magic and juridical sovereignty, physical force, fecundity)", which Dumézil argued were reflected in Óðinn, Þórr and Freyr,[418] there can be little doubt that the pre-Christian gods were envisaged as living lives not

412 On central place complexes more generally, see above, n. 224. On halls within central place complexes, see Brink, 'Political and Social Structures in Early Scandinavia', pp. 242-248; and Ulf Näsman, 'Sydskandinavisk samhällsstruktur i ljuset av merovingisk och angelsaxisk analogi eller i vad är det som centralplatserna är centrala?', *Centrala platser, centrala frågor: Samhällsstrukturen under Järnåldern: En vänbok till Berta Stjernquist*, ed. Lars Larsson and Birgitta Hårdh (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1998), pp. 1-26.

413 Stefan Brink, 'Social Order in the Early Scandinavian Landscape', *Settlement and Landscape*, ed. Charlotte Fabech and Jytte Ringtved (Århus: Jutland Archaeological Society, 1998), pp. 423-439, esp. pp. 443-445.

414 Magnus Alkarp and Neil S. Price, 'Tempel av guld eller kyrka av trä? Markradarundersökningar vid Gamla Uppsala kyrka', *Fornvännen* 100 (2005), pp. 261-272; Anne-Sofie Gräslund, 'Kultkontinuitet – myt eller verklighet? Om arkeologins möjligheter att belysa problemet', *Kontinuitet i kult och tro från vikingatid till medeltid: Projektet Sveriges kristnandet publikationer 1*, ed. Bertil Nilsson (Uppsala: Lunne Böcker, 1992), pp. 129-150; Sune Lindqvist, 'Gamla Uppsala kyrka: Bidrag till dess byggnadshistoria', *Fornvännen* 46 (1951), pp. 219-250; Lars Larsson, ed., *Continuity for Centuries: A Ceremonial Building and Its Context at Uppåkra, Southern Sweden* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 2004); and Lars Larsson, 'Ritual Building and Ritual Space: Aspects of Investigations at the Iron Age Central Site Uppåkra, Scania, Sweden', *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions. An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 248-253.

415 Gerd Stamsø Munch, Olav Sverre Johansen and Else Roesdahl, eds., *Borg in Lofoten: A Chieftain's Farm in North Norway*, *Arkeologisk Skriftserie* (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2003).

416 Christensen, 'Lejre Beyond Legend', pp. 163-85; Schmidt, 'Reconstruction of Lejre Hall'; Christensen, 'Lejre and Roskilde'.

417 Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, p. 51.

418 Dumézil, 'The Rígsþula and Indo-European Social Structure', p. 118.

wholly dissimilar to those of the upper echelons, at least, of their worshippers: they dwelt in halls,[419] at least some of which were set in *túmom* ('courts, in-fields')[420] and had "*becci*" ('benches'),[421] just as the human warrior-elite did in the late Iron Age.[422]

Yet it is not only the abstract cosmological mansions of the gods that are based around human halls: the afterlife destinations of deceased humans – many of which are, admittedly, conceived of as being 'with' one deity or another – also follow this pattern. Hel, for example, conceived of as both a place and a female figure, is described by Snorri in Chapter 34 of *Gylfaginning* as having been put into a position of power by Óðinn in order that she "*skipti öllum vistum með þeim er til hennar váru sendir, en þat eru sóttdauðir menn ok ellidauðir*" ('should arrange lodgings for all those who were sent to her, and those were those men who died of sickness and old age') in her "*mikla bólstaði*" ('great dwelling-place').[423] The text goes on to describe a twisted inversion of a typical elite hall: in contrast to the generosity and hospitality expected of a (stereo)typical skaldic patron, Hel's hall has a dish called "*hungr*" ('hunger'), a knife called "*sultr*" ('famine'), a bed called "*kör*" ('sickbed'), and a threshold – the symbolic division between inside and outside, safety and danger – called "*fallanda forað*" ('falling-trap, pitfall').[424] These details are obviously allegorical, meant to stress the unpleasant nature of an afterlife spent with Hel. As Christopher Abram has established, Snorri's extant sources for Hel as a place – Eddic poetry – "specifically an underworld realm of the dead", are vague at best, and they preserve "no standard iconography: it has a hall or halls; it may be reached by the *helvegr*; and it lies in a downward direction; but more than this it is impossible to say."[425] In contrast to this, skaldic poetry focuses almost exclusively on Hel as a female figure, a "personification, not of the realm [of death], but of death itself."[426]

---

419 e.g. *Grímnismál*, *Edda,* st. 5-16, pp. 58-60.

420 *Vafðrúðnismál*, *Edda,* st. 41, p. 52.

421 *Grímnismál*, *Edda,* st. 9, p. 59.

422 On late-Iron Age halls in Scandinavia, see Fallgren, 'Farm and Village in the Viking Age', pp. 67-69; Gunnell, '*Hof*, Halls, *Goðar* and Dwarves'; Frands Herschend 'The Origin of the Hall in Southern Scandinavia', *Tor* 25 (1993), pp. 175-199; and *The Idea of the Good in Late Iron Age Society*, *Occasional Papers in Archaeology* 15 (Uppsala: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, 1998), pp. 9-62.

423 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 27, trans. mine.

424 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 27. trans. mine.

425 Christopher Abram, 'Hel in Early Norse Poetry', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006), pp. 1-29, p. 11.

426 Abram, 'Hel in Early Norse Poetry', p. 22.

As such, Snorri is clearly, once again, operating with an agenda. In his expanded description of Hel's hall – assuming he is not drawing on sources now lost, a possibility which must be admitted – it may be that Snorri was inspired by the depiction of Náströnd (literally 'Corpse-Beach') preserved in strophes 38-39 of *Völuspá*, which also describes a hall, apparently the destination of dead men, which sounds like a deliberate reversal of all that would be desirable in a cosmological mansion (in both senses of the word).[427] Not only is Náströnd "*sólo fiarri*" ('far from the sun'), and literally facing the wrong way – "*norðr horfa dyrr*" ('[its] doors face northwards')[428] – it is also built out of an entirely otherworldly (and ghastly) building material which drop poison into the interior of the building, thus, like Hel's threshold, turning a place of expected safety into one of danger: "*fello eitrdropar inn um lióra*, *sá er undinn salr orma hryggiom*" ('drops of poison fall in at the smoke-hole, that is a hall woven of serpents' spines').[429] Given this extremely negative venue, it is perhaps unsurprising that the people associated with Náströnd are also those who break society's taboos or commit crimes: "*menn meinsvara oc morðvarga, oc þannz annars glepr eyrarúno*" ('men, perjurers and murders, and those who seduced other men's wives').[430] The opposite of civilised, productive members of society, these men are apparently sent to an afterlife that reflects their lack of respect for society's rules and order in its lack of reported social structure: unlike Snorri's Hel, for example, Náströnd is not 'ruled' by any single figure. Of course, Hel's power over the dead in her underworld mansion is also somewhat transgressive, given her female gender and monstrous lineage and appearance, and it is quite possible the inspiration for Snorri's assertion that 'men who died of sickness and old age' went to Hel is to be found in *Völúspá*'s account of Náströnd – particularly given that Abram's investigation found that, in earlier sources, "Hel was not associated with a good death, or a bad death, or with any mode or method of dying in particular."[431]

Yet if Náströnd – and potentially also Hel, if Snorri was indeed reflecting genuine pre-Christian beliefs – represents one extreme, a portrayal of an afterlife

427 Náströnd is attested only in *Völuspá* and Chapter 52 of *Gylfaginning*, where Snorri quotes poetic description and offers a prose explanation without expanding on its content (*Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 53).

428 Doors on the main buildings on Scandinavian farmsteads typically faced south to take advantage of the available sunlight, particularly in the north of the region.

429 *Vǫlospá*, *Edda,* st. 38-39, p. 9, trans. mine.

430 *Vǫlospá*, *Edda,* st. 38-39, p. 9, trans. mine.

431 Abram, 'Hel in Early Norse Poetry, p. 26.

based on normal human life, but so inverted it borders at times on parody or burlesque, then what are we to make of Valhöll, and the *valkyrjur* whom Snorri claims "*bera drykkju*" there? As early as 1913, Gustav Neckel proposed that "Walhall wurzelt in den primitivsten Vorstellungen vom Leben nach dem Tode" ('Valhöll is rooted in the most primitive ideas of life after death')[432] and reflects a continuation of life before death, specifically the type of life lived by warriors in an aristocratic hall, an idea picked up Nordberg over 90 years later.[433] However, I believe that while the elite warrior-culture of the Iron Age was indeed the inspiration behind Valhöll, the afterlife it presents is not simply a straightforward reflection of premortem human life and society.

Rather, (after)life in Valhöll is portrayed an idealised representation of the best aspects of masculine warrior ideology, a sanitised version of how life 'should' be – literally a "Kriegerparadies" ('warrior's paradise').[434] The extreme portrayals of society reflected in Náströnd and Hel may thus be regarded as occupying the opposite end of a graduated spectrum to the idealised Valhöll, where the scale represents the presentation of human social order(s). Broadly 'negative' afterlives, associated with the breakdown of that social order, are imagined as mirror-world reflections or inversions of the social order from which they deviate: halls are underground, women are in charge (or no-one is), the inside of a hall is more dangerous the outside, and so on. Such afterlives – (dis)functional societies of the dead – may be regarded as exhibiting an excess of what the anthropologist Victor Turner terms "communitas", one of "two major models for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating" which, in Turnerian thought, comprise social interactions, and thereby society.[435] Turner proposes that both communitas and its counterpart, which he dubs "structure", are both present at all times in all societies and relationships, and that one cannot exist without the other any more than can the warp and weft of a piece of fabric. Nonetheless, he argues that many societies present stages where one or the other model is dominant, and describes a communitas-heavy society "an undifferentiated, homogenous whole, in which individuals confront one another integrally, and not as "segmentalised" into statuses and roles", while one characterised by (Turnerian)

---

432 Neckel, *Walhall*, p. 37, trans. mine.

433 Nordberg, *Krigarna i Odins sal*, pp. 171-198.

434 Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, p. 469, trans. mine.

435 Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), p. 96.

structure is "a differentiated, culturally structured, segmented, and often hierarchical system of institutionalised positions."[436]

I believe that the elite society of the dead in Valhöll is what Turner would term 'structural', presenting, as it does, a romanticised, somewhat rose-tinted picture of aristocratic warrior life. Consider, for example, the description of the fighting engaged in by the *einherjar* (glossed variously as "die allein Kämpfenden" ('those who fight alone')[437] and "the 'only' or great champions"[438]), the inhabitants of *Valhöll* who Snorri describes as "*allir þeir menn er í orrostu hafa fallit frá upphafi heims*" ('all those men who have fallen in battle since the beginning of the world').[439] The Eddic poem *Vafðrúðnimál*, a wisdom contest between Óðinn and the *jötunn* Vafþrúðnir, includes Óðinn's challenge to his inhuman opponent to name "*hvar ýtar túnom í hǫggvaz hverian dag*" ('where men strike each other in courts every day').[440] In response, the *jötunn* not only identifies the fighters as *einherjar* and the 'courts' as Óðinn's, but adds that that "*val þeir kiósa oc ríða vígi frá, sitia meirr um sáttir saman*" ('they chose the slain and ride from battle, sit all the more at peace together'),[441] a description both quoted and expanded upon by Snorri in *Gylfaginning*:

> *Hvern dag þá er þeir hafa klæzk þá hervæða þeir sik ok ganga út í garðinn ok berjask ok fellr hverr á annan. Þat er leikr þeira. Ok er líðr at dǫgurðarmáli þá ríða þeir heim til Valhallar.*[442]
>
> Each day when they have gotten dressed they put on their gear and go out into the yard and strike at each other and fall on each other. That is their entertainment. And when dinnertime approaches, then they ride back to Valhöll.

This experience sounds completely divorced from the harsh realities of Iron Age warfare,[443] which doubtless involved a great deal more preparation (for both the warriors themselves and the families and communities they would be leaving behind) than simply 'getting dressed', and a lot more travelling than just 'going out into the

436 Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 177.
437 Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, p. 83, trans. mine.
438 Kershaw, *The One-Eyed God*, p. 15.
439 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 32. trans. mine.
440 *Vafðrúðnimál*, *Edda,* st. 40, p. 52, trans. mine.
441 *Vafðrúðnimál*, *Edda,* st. 41, p. 52, trans. mine.
442 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 34. trans. mine.
443 For an overview of this topic, see Gareth Williams, 'Raiding and Warfare', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 193-203.

yard', particularly for those involved in actual viking raids or warfare overseas. While *Gylfaginning* describes an easy-sounding day trip, the historical equivalent would presumably have necessitated weeks (if not months) away from home, long stretches at sea (with participants running the risk of being wet and cold without being able to light a fire), and having operate in enemy territory, surrounded by potentially-hostile foreigners. Yet not only does the experience of the *einherjar* differ in its physical parameters from 'real-world' violence, its social consequences are vastly idealised too. Unlike the world portrayed in sources like the *Íslendingasögur*, where violence is met either with counter-violence or arbitration and subsequent economic sanction in the form of compensation,[444] *Vafþrúðnimál* stresses that after the dead warriors have fought all day they return to Valhöll and "*sitia meirr um sáttir saman*" ('sit all the more at peace together').[445] The emphasis on the improved relations between the *einherjar* after their day fighting makes the entire process sound camaraderie-building, despite the reflexive form of the verb making it quite clear that the *einherjar* are fighting each other, which might suggest that the daily battles are intended to serve as a form of training, presumably in preparation for the eventual battle at Ragnarök in which strophe 23 of *Grímnismál* claims the *einherjar* will participate on the side of the gods.[446] This violence is clearly reinforcing the structural, social order, making warfare – typically a chaotic and destructive force – as socially acceptable, even constructive, as licensed feuding or the duelling ritual of the *hólmganga*.[447]

This idealisation of the warriors' afterlife in Valhöll is not restricted only to martial activities: spending their days fighting, the warriors spend their nights feasting on pork from the boar Sæhrímnir, who is mentioned in *Grímnismál* st. 18, and whose flesh (if Snorri is to be believed) is ever-renewing.[448] Similarly, the alcohol provided for the *einherjar* is never-ending, being drawn from a vat of mead refilled from a stream flowing from the udders of a goat perched on the roof of the hall.[449] Just as with Valhöll's romanticised presentation of battle, this image of feasting in the afterlife is clearly based on genuine experience of late-Iron Age hall-based society,

444 Jesse L. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 123-126 and 219-223.
445 *Vafðrúðnimál*, *Edda,* st. 41, p. 52, trans. mine.
446 *Grímnismál*, *Edda,* st. 23, p. 62.
447 *cf*. Gwyn Jones, 'The Religious Elements of the Icelandic Hólmganga', *Modern Language Review* 27 (1932), pp. 307-313.
448 *Grímnismál*, *Edda,* st. 18, p. 60; *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 32.
449 *Grímnismál*, *Edda,* st. 25, p. 62; *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 33.

Figure 3.A, Helgafell, Breiðafjörður, Iceland, from the NE. Image Source: Author.

but absolves all responsibility from the *einherjar* – they are able to attend a nightly feast at their own place of residence without bearing the economic costs or social liabilities that such events would usually incur. Similar motifs may be detected in the *Eyrbyggja saga* account of a passerby witnessing the hill Helgafell (lit. 'Holy Mountain' or 'Holy Cliff', figure 3.A) open following the death of Þorsteinn þorskabítr, a prominent local:

> [...] *hann sá, at fjallit lauksk upp norðan; hann sá iní fjallit elda stóra ok heyrði þangat mikinn glaum ok hornaskvöl; ok er hann hlýddi, ef hann næmi nökkur orðaskil, heyrði hann, at þar var heilsat Þorsteini þorksabít ok förunautum hans ok mælt, at hann skal sitja í öndvegi gegnt feðr sínumn.*[450]
>
> [...] he saw that the mountain opened up to the north; he saw big fires inside and heard a great clinking and racket of drinking horns from there; and when he listened, to see if he could make out what was being said, he heard that Þorsteinn codbiter was being welcomed there, and his crew too, and it was said that he should sit on the high-seat opposite his father.

The martial element found in Valhöll – both the 'practice' battles of the inhabitants, and the military paraphernalia described as decorating the hall in *Grímnismál* st. 10 – is lacking from Helgafell, which is probably due to the difference in the societies which made use of this afterlife destination: settlement-age Iceland, while undoubtedly a dangerous place, was sparsely populated in comparison with southern

[450] *Eyrbyggja saga*, ÍF IV, p. 19, trans. mine.

Scandinavia and, generally speaking, featured fewer of the large-scale Männerbünde that characterised the ruling classes of the mainland.[451] The flickering of firelight from within the mountain in this scene might, however, be one possible for the otherwise unexplained motif of the beam of light that accompanies the famous 'ride' of Sigrún and her companions from Logafjall (lit. 'fire-mountain'):

> *Þá brá lióma af Logafiollom,*
> *enn af þeim liómom leiptrir qvómo;*
> *þá var und hiálmom á Himinvanga*
> *Brynior vóro þeira blóði stocnar.*
> *Enn af geirom geislar stóðo.*[452]
>
> Then light burst from Logafjall,
> And from those lights bolts of lightning flashed;
> Then was [a troop] helmed on Himinvanga;
> Their armour was soaked in blood,
> Rays of light shone from their spears then.

This is admittedly nothing but speculation, but it could be that Logafjall represents an afterlife destination similar to Valhöll, just as Helgafell was. The idea of multiple, localised "Valhallir" may gain some support from Simek's report of two mountains in southern Sweden that are both called Valhall, and which are associated with the dead in local folklore.[453] (Despite this potential localisation, however, it bears repeating that, to the best of my knowledge, there is no extant evidence for a cult of the *valkyrjur* comparable to that associated with the *dísir* of Chapter 2.2.1, above.) It is also possible that beliefs in hall-based afterlives are responsible for (or are reflected in) the construction of richly-furnished chamber graves, in which individuals were buried in elaborate microcosms of halls, complete with a range of grave goods including weapons, armour, animal, furniture, food, drink, and occasionally even other people, as in figure 3.B.[454]

It is in such a social milieu – mythological though it may be – that we must consider the *valkyrjur*, at least in relation to Valhöll. Within the framework of a functioning warband, Michael Enright has proposed that the ritualised offering of

451 Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 5-24.
452 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, st. 15, p. 132, trans. mine.
453 Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, p. 470.
454 Price, *The Viking Way*, pp. 128-140.

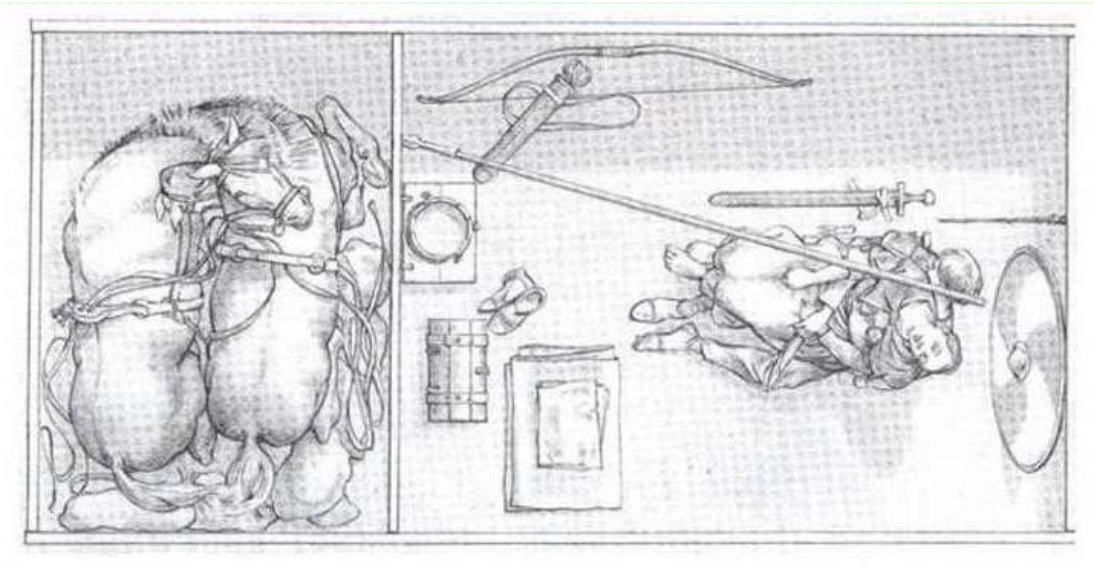


Figure 3.B, Reconstruction of Birka Chamber Grave Bj. 834, as seen from above. Artist Credit: Þórhallur Þráinsson. After Neil S. Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala: The Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University, 2002), p. 136.

alcohol by a high-status female serves as a method of ensuring social cohesion and compliance with an established hierarchy,[455] which, although Enright does not use this terminology, would essentially serve as a control mechanism to ensure that a balance is kept between Turnerian communitas and Turnerian structure. Enright's model is based on Old English and continental Germanic material, and focuses on the relationship between three nodes of a social nexus: the lord; his retainers; and a single female figure, the queen or lady of the lord, who, through the ritualised offering of alcohol,

> [...] functions in the hall as women do in society where they act as binders between families who create and embody alliances in order to fashion friendship or restore peace between feuding groups. This brittle equilibrium is achieved through a periodic renewal of the bond between lord and warband which is easily strained because of the inherently subjective judgements involved in the distribution of plunder, treasure and land together with the accompanying tensions and calculations. Conflict is bound to be endemic since rivalry for the lord's favor is constant and normally determines the future of the retainer. The public religiously sanctioned assignment of ranks is necessary, therefore, in order to prevent a relentlessly nourishing dissent.[456]

[455] Michael Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from la Téne to the Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996).

[456] Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, pp. 34-35.

Yet while this description might very well fit perfectly some of the queens of the *fornaldarsögur*, or even the conciliatory Sif in *Locasenna*, who offers Loki a "*hrímkálki mioð*" in an effort to settle the rapidly escalating squabble in *Æ*gir's hall,[457] it seems something of a poor fit for the *valkyrjur* of Valhöll. For a start, while both *Grímnismál* 36 and *Gylfaginning* explicitly record the *valkyrjur* as serving alcohol, the tone of both texts suggests they do so as part of their regular duties, rather than in a ritual role as "*freoðuwebbe*" ('peace-weaver').[458] What is more, they do so *en masse*, not individually, which would interrupt the private, sexual relationship between the female horn-bearer and the lord-figure proposed by Enright.[459]

As such, a tentative rejection of Enright's theory – at least on the basis of *Grímnismál* 36 and the dependent *Gylfaginning* text – necessitates a closer examination of other accounts of *valkyrjur* offering alcohol to warriors, the earliest of which is the skaldic poem *Eiríksmál*, an anonymous panegyric supposedly composed in the middle of the tenth century in praise of the exiled Norwegian King Eiríkr blóð-öx after his death.[460] Apparently incompletely preserved, *Eiríksmál* imagines the scene in Valhöll on the morning that Óðinn awakes to discover that Eiríkr will be arriving, and details his frantic preparations to welcome the king, cutting off just as Eiríkr arrives with an entourage of five other dead kings to take his place. The first strophe – which is also quoted by Snorri in Chapter 2 of *Skáldskaparmál*[461] – reads as follows:

> *Hvat's þat drauma,*
> *hugðumk fyr dag rísa*
> *Valhǫll at ryðja*
> *fyr vegnu folki;*
> *vakðak Einherja,*
> *baðk upp rísa,*
> *bekki at stráa,*
> *bjórker at leyðra,*
> *valkyrjur vín bera*
> *sem vísi kœmi.*[462]

---

457 *Locasenna*, *Edda,* pr. 52, pp. 107, trans. mine.
458 *cf*. Damico, 'The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature', pp. 179-180.
459 Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, p. 34.
460 *Eiríksmál*, *Skj* B1, pp. 164-166.
461 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 10.
462 *Eiríksmál*, *Skj* B1, p. 164, trans. mine.

> What is that dream,
> I thought I rose before dawn,
> to clear Valhöll
> for a host;
> I woke the *einherjar*,
> told them to get up,
> to strew the benches,
> to wash the beer vessels,
> *valkyrjur* carry wine
> as if a prince would come.

While the tone of the strophe is clearly hyperbolic in its praise of Eiríkr – the image of Óðinn springing out of bed in horrified realisation that Valhöll is a mess undoubtedly is meant to be light-hearted, if not outright comic – the phrasing of "*valkyrjur vín bera | sem vísi kœmi*" is somewhat more ambiguous. It is undoubtedly referencing the same underlying motifs of alcohol-offering and hospitality that underlie the Old English texts informing Enright's model (and *Grímnismál*), but the subjunctive phrasing of the text mean it is unclear whether or not the *valkyrjur* are understood to always perform this function, as Snorri implies on the basis of *Grímnismál*, or have only been pressed into service as barmaids due to the urgency of the situation.[463] It may be that the anonymous skald of *Eiríksmál* intended the image of *valkyrjur* carrying alcohol like serving girls as ridiculous, as laughable as his portrayal of the *einherjar* being forced out of bed early, like recalcitrant teenagers, to wash the beer mugs.

By way of comparison, *Hákonarmál*, typically attributed to Eyvindr skáldaspillir and thought to have been composed within a decade or so of *Eiríksmál*[464] – and based heavily on the former work – also employs the motif of the newly-arrived king in Valhöll being offered alcohol on his arrival, presumably to cement his place in the Turnerian structure of the society he is joining, just as Enright suggests. However, although Eyvindr's work features prominent roles for two *valkyrjur* on the battlefield on which Hákon dies, they take no further part in events once the scene, following Hákon, shifts to Óðinn's hall. Apparently sceptical of the greeting he will receive, the

---

463 The valkyric name Herþögn, if glossed 'Army-Hostess', as Price proposes, may well support such an interpretation (Price, *The Viking Way*, p. 339). However, I believe this is much more likely to have originated from "*herr*" ('army') and "*þögn*" ('silence'), the name thus joining the group of eleven others in Price's list catalogue of valkyric names that include noise (Price, *The Viking Way*, p. 340), and probably indicating either some sort of temporary deafness brought on by battle – comparable to the blindness implied by Mist – or perhaps the ultimate silence after battle: death.

464 *Hákonarmál*, *Skj* B1, pp. 57-60.

Christian king is met at the door by two *Æsir*, Hermóðr and Bragi (one way in which Eyvindr trumps *Eiríksmál*, whose patron is 'merely' greeted by the legendary Völsungar heroes Sigmundr and Sinfjötli), who assure him in strophe 16 that:

> *Einherja grið*
> *skalt þú allra hafa,*
> *þigg þú at æsum ǫl;*
> *jarla bági,*
> *þú átt inni hér*
> *átta bræðr – kvað Bragi.*[465]
>
> You shall have *grið*
> of the *einherjar*,
> you will receive ale from the *Æsir*;
> adversary of jarls,
> you have eight brothers
> here inside – Bragi said.

Hákonarmál therefore specifies that the alcohol Hákon is to receive comes 'from the *Æsir*' – not from the *valkyrjur*, nor from Óðinn himself alone. It is, of course, possible that the *valkyrjur* were understood to be the natural intermediaries in such a situation, although *Locasenna* records both Víðarr and Sif as capable of pouring drinks for the returned Loki in order to (re)integrate him into the society of Ægir's hall.[466] Admittedly, the setting of the Eddic poem is not Valhöll, and two separate texts – particularly when preserved in different metres, styles, and manuscripts – cannot be assumed to represent the same worldviews. What is notable about *Hákonarmál* is the clearly integrative function the offering of alcohol serves: the first helming of the verse is split into two phrases, one promising Hákon ale, the other the "*grið*" of the *einherjar*. *Grið* here carries a double meaning, expressing both 'peace' – in the sense that Hákon, who expressed doubt at the warmth of his welcome in the preceding strophe, has nothing to fear – and 'station, posting, [military] lodgings', in that Hákon will be assimilated into the martial society of Valhöll. All of this occurs, however, without the involvement of the *valkyrjur* beyond their recruitment of Hákon on the battlefield (strophes 1-12) and early return to Valhöll to bear news of his imminent arrival (strophe 13).

---

465 *Hákonarmál*, *Skj* B1, st. 16, p. 59, trans. mine.
466 *Locasenna*, *Edda,* pr. 5, st. 52, pp. 97 and 107.

In a different setting – one outside Valhöll – described in *Sigrdrífomál*, the lone *valkyrja* Sigrdrífa provides the hero Sigurðr with not one, but two separate drinks: the first a "*minnisveig*" ('lit. 'memory-drink', i.e. a toast) to various deities and supernatural powers, apparently in thanks for Sigurðr having awakened her; the second a magical potion based on "*bior*" ('beer') which signals the start of a series of strophes where she advises him on runic knowledge.[467] The latter seems to owe more to motifs of sorcerous women and witchcraft than elite hall culture, and while the former is more mundane, it also does not appear to have any link to hall-based cultures or social groupings given the two are alone when it is presented and drunk. This episode is repeated in Chapter 20 of *Völsunga saga*, where Sigrdrífa has become subsumed into the character of Brynhildr, and the two separate drinks of *Sigrdrífomál* have also become conflated,[468] but despite the prevalence of enchanted drinks in the saga, this later redaction of the Sigrdrífa episode can offer us no new information regarding *valkyrjur* and the horn-bearing motif, or the roles they may have fulfilled for the hall-based warrior elite of the late Iron Age.

Also recorded in the *Poetic Edda*, in both the verse and prose framework of the poem *Vǫlundarqviða*, is the name Ǫlrún ('Ale-Rune', 'Ale-Secret').[469] It is extremely difficult to know what to make of this name, or even to be sure that Ǫlrún should be considered a *valkyrja* at all: the verse of the poem describes her and her sisters only as "*meyjar*" ('girls') and "*drósir suðrœnar*" ('southern maids'),[470] the signifier "*valkyrior*" appearing only in the prose introduction to the poem.[471] It is possible that Ǫlrún's name refers to horn-bearing, hospitality, or social cohesion, but it seems more likely that it is related to magical cups and potions of the type referred to by Sigrdrífa in strophe 6 of *Sigrdrífomál*.[472]

Considering the accounts of horn-bearing *valkyrjur* and hall-based afterlives considered in this subchapter, it seems possible that the motif of the *valkyrjur* offering alcohol to dead warriors in order to integrate these dead men into their new societies may have originated only late in the Iron Age, on the basis of the witticism of the anonymous skald of *Eiríksmál*. *Snorra Edda* and *Grímnismál* are the only other texts

467 *Sigrdrífomál*, *Edda,* st. 2-5, pp. 189-190, trans. mine.
468 *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, p. 43.
469 *Vǫlundarqviða*, *Edda,* pr., st. 4, 15, pp. 116-117, 119, trans. mine.
470 *Vǫlundarqviða*, *Edda,* st. 1, 3, p. 117, trans. mine.
471 *Vǫlundarqviða*, *Edda,* pr., p. 116, trans. mine.
472 *Sigrdrífomál*, *Edda,* st. 5, p. 190.

that suggest the *valkyrjur* offered alcohol as anything more than casual hospitality, and Snorri, while clearly basing his account primarily on *Grímnismál*, also knew at least some of *Eiríksmál*, quoting the opening strophe in Chapter 2 of *Skáldskaparmál*.[473] The question then becomes whether *Eiríksmál* could conceivably have influenced *Grímnismál*. It has been observed that the poet of *Eiríksmál* may have been familiar with at least some Eddic poetry that was later included in the *Codex Regius*, Nora Kershaw drawing attention to the several similarities in phrasing found in both the tenth-century skaldic poem and the Eddic verse,[474] such as the minor variations on the phrase 'because it cannot be known' or 'because it is difficult to know' found in *Eiríksmál* 6 ("*Óvíst's at vita*")[475], *Hávamál* 1 and *Hávamál* 38 ("*þvíat óvíst er at vita*")[476], and *Fáfnismál* 24 ('*Þat er óvíst at vita*').[477] Although there are no such parallels with *Grímnismál*, this might suggest that the Eddic poem predates the skaldic, which, dating from the mid-tenth century, can be regarded as a product of a period of increasing Christianisation, not pure heathenism. However, I find it more likely that these relatively minor parallels are the result of certain fixed phrases circulating in an oral poetic discourse than the result of direct textual knowledge, and Eddic poetry is notoriously difficult to date, as Terry Gunnell has observed "[e]verything concerning their history before that date [*c*. 1270 for those verses not quoted in *Snorra Edda*] is a matter of speculation".[478]

As such, lacking extremely clear evidence, I am reluctant to assert that the motif of the socially-constitutive horn-bearing *valkyrjur* was the result purely of poetic imagination at the very end of the pre-Christian period in the Old Norse cultural continuum. Futhermore, there does not appear to be any evidence that would support an interpretation of late-Iron Age *valkyrjur* as the carefully balanced check between Turnerian structure and communitas that Enright proposes "the lady with a mead cup" represented in continental and West-Germanic society. Instead, it seems likely that those *valkyrjur* who are relegated to carrying cups or horns of alcohol do so as a result of an idealised vision of female behaviour in a hall as seen from the point of view of masculine warrior culture, as befits the new taxonomy of supernatural

473 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 10.
474 Nora Kershaw, *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems* (Cambridge: Cambirdge University Press, 1922), p. 95.
475 *Eiríksmál*, *Skj* B1, p. 165, trans. mine.
476 *Hávamál*, *Edda,* st. 1, 38, pp. 17, 23, trans. mine.
477 *Fáfnismál*, *Edda,* st. 24, p. 184, trans. mine.
478 Gunnell, 'Eddic Poetry', p. 94.

females – where *valkyrjur* are only one form of supernatural female among many – proposed above in Chapter 2.3, and where supernatural females associated with the dead have become subservient.

3.3 Óðinn and Agency

As noted above in Chapter 3.2, I have rejected Enright's schema of lord-lady-warband interaction as a model for the relationship between the *valkyrjur* and elite warrior culture due to the lack of evidence that *valkyrjur* ever played the role of the individual lady or queen in Valhöll, and the necessary sexual relationship this would imply between Óðinn and the *valkyrjur*, a relationship for which there is no proof – and given the god's famed promiscuity, I believe it likely that if such relationships were part of pre-Christian discourse, some hint of them would have survived. This is not to say, however, that the *valkyrjur* were sexless beings, nor that they had no relationship with their patron.

Taking the latter topic first, it is clear that Óðinn was, in some sources at least, presented as nothing short of the absolute master and commander of the *valkyrjur*, who are reduced to mere chattels in his possession. This is particularly noticeable in *Húsdrápa*, a skaldic poem preserved only in fragments in *Snorra Edda*. Fortunately, an account of the occasion of the work's composition is recorded in Chapter 29 of *Laxdæla saga*, which reports that Óláfr pai ('peacock') had a new building constructed on his farmstead in western Iceland, and at the first major event held there – the wedding of Óláfr's daughter Þuríðr, dated to either 983 or *c*. 987 AD[479] – Úlfr Uggason, one of the guests, composed a poem describing the mythological scenes carved into the walls.[480] One of the scenes is of Baldr's funeral, and Úlfr is reported to have declaimed: "*Þar hykk sigrunni svinnum | sylgs valkyrjur fylgja | heilags tafns ok hrafna*" ('There [I] see *valkyrjur* and ravens follow wise victory-rowan to [the] holy drink [i.e. funeral ritual] and corpse').[481] The ravens with whom the *valkyrjur* are equated are probably Óðinn's own Huginn and Muninn, but they also figure for

479 *Húsdrápa*, *Skj* B1, p. 128; see also Lee M. Hollander, *The Skalds: A Selection of Their Poems, with Introductions and Notes* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 49.
480 *Laxdæla saga*, ÍF V, pp. 79-80.
481 *Húsdrápa*, *Skj* B1, st. 9, p. 129, trans. mine

ravenkind as a whole, descending on the corpse of a slain warrior in a reflex of the 'Beasts of Battle' motif – Baldr was killed by a thrown spear, after all – which lends the *valkyrjur* a grisly, vulturish air, fully in keeping with their anonymous, dehumanised presentation. This sense of objectification is only reinforced in Snorri's retelling of the episode in Chapter 49 of *Gylfaginning*, when Snorri lists the theriomorphic entourages of not just Óðinn (whose following he expands to include Frigg) but also Freyr, Heimdallr and Freyja.[482]

It might be argued this form of strictly subservient *valkyrja* is behind the use of the term "*óskmey*" (lit. 'wish-girl') use to refer to two instances of valkyric beings – in the Eddic poem *Oddrúnargrátr* and *Völsunga saga*[483] – given the notable compliance exhibited by the *óskmey* Hljóðr in Chapter 2 of *Völsunga saga*. In normal prose, compounds for people (particularly children) based on "*ósk-*" ('wish') such as "*óskabarn*", "*óskasonr*" and "*óskbarn*" form words with meanings similar to the compound 'foster-' in Modern English – thus 'foster child', 'foster son' and 'foster child', respectively. The rare term "*óskmey*", however, is associated with Óðinn and the *valkyrjur* due to its use in *Oddrúnargrátr* and *Völsunga saga*. Although "*óskmey*" has been glossed as both "the chosen maid*,* the name of the Valkyriur" and the more ambiguous "wish maiden",[484] I believe it is clear that both females, Brynhildr and Hljóðr respectively, are presented as foster daughters of Óðinn, and while little is said of Brynhildr's agency or free will in *Oddrúnargrátr* – the focus is on comparing the active, helmet-wearing, Maiden-King Brynhildr with her more traditionally feminine and long-suffering sister[485] – Chapter 2 of the *fornaldarsaga* has Hljóðr fulfil Óðinn's errand in helping bring about the conception of Sigmundr, only to then be ordered to marry the human hero by her father Hrímnir. Hljóðr certainly seems to have very little, if any, free will of her own, which might tally with the impression of *valkyrjur* as subservient attendants of Óðinn suggested by *Húsdrápa* and *Gylfaginning* 49 – but

---

482 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, pp. 46-47. Snorri also quotes the relevant strophe of *Húsdrápa* in Chapter 2 of *Skáldskparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, p. 9.

483 *Oddrúnargrátr, Edda,* st. 16, p. 236 ; and *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, pp. 5-6.

484 Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 473; *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*, trans. Jesse L. Byock (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 36.

485 On the 'Maiden-King' motif, see Lise Præstgaard Andersen, 'On Valkyries, Shield-Maidens and Other Armed Women – in Old Norse Sources and Saxo Grammaticus', *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz, 1922-1997*, ed. Rudolf Simek and Wilhelm Heizmann (Wien: Fassbaender, 2002), pp. 291-318.

then, status as Óðinn's foster daughter (or 'chosen girl') is not necessarily the same thing as the office of a *valkyrja*. Unlike Brynhildr, who appears in a variety of sources in subtly different guises (but is never, to the best of my knowledge, explicitly called a *valkyrja*), Hljóðr appears only in *Völsunga saga* and is never called a *valkyrjur*, nor presents any valkyric features beyond flying in a "*krákuhamr*" – bird-*hamar* also belonging to the pseudo-valkyric figures in *Vǫlundarqviða*[486] and Brynhildr and her sisters in *Helreið Brynhildr*[487] – and a general link to Óðinn. Perhaps most damningly, she lacks any sort of martial attributes, and quickly settles down into the role of mother and queen, bearing a series of royal princes. While the very basis of this thesis is that such categories are mutable, I am unconvinced that Hljóðr should be regarded as a *valkyrja*, and probably ought best be thought of as an unspecified 'supernatural female'.

Unlike Hljóðr and the *valkyrjur* of *Húsdrápa* and *Gylfaginning* st. 49, Brynhildr is anything but submissive. Admittedly, she is never explicitly labelled a "*valkyrja*", but is undoubtedly martial, as witnessed by the helmet she wears in *Oddrúnargrátr* st. 16 and the "*gullbrynjo*" ('golden-mail') she puts on before committing suicide in *Sigurðarqviða in scamma* 47.[488] Nonetheless, it is only in *Helreið Brynhildar* (and the *Völsunga saga* scene dependent on the Sigrdrífa tradition[489]) that there is anything remotely supernatural about her, and only in this episode that she is directly linked with Óðinn, when she details how she came to be put into an enchanted sleep:

> *Þá lét ec gamlan á Goðþióðo*
> *Hiálm-Gunnar næst heliar ganga;*
> *gaf ec ungom sigr Auðo bróður;*
> *þá varð mér Óðinn ofreiðr um þat.*[490]
>
> Then I let the old [one] of the Gothic people,
> Helmet-Gunnar, go straight to Hel;
> I gave victory to the young brother of Auða;
> Then Óðinn became very angry with me for that.

---

486 *Vǫlundarqviða*, *Edda*, pr., p. 116.

487 *Helreið Brynhildar, Edda,* st. 6, p. 220.

488 *Sigurðarqviða in scamma, Edda,* st. 47, p. 215, trans. mine.

489 Brynhildr and Sigrdrífa seem to have become conflated in both *Helreið Brynhildar* and *Völsunga saga* ch. 20 (pp. 42-44).

490 *Helreið Brynhildar, Edda,* st. 8, pp. 220-221.

This account clearly implies differing traditions regarding the amount of free will available to the *valkyrjur*.

Snorri's *Gylfaginning* ch. 36 description claims that "*Þær kjósa feigð á menn ok ráða sigri*" ('They allot approaching death to men and govern victory'),[491] which I read as implying a significant amount of agency on behalf of the *valkyrjur* themselves. I argued above (see Chapter 2.1) that the verb "*kjósa*" designates the making of a decision between two (or more) fixed choices – as when Freyja chooses which half of the day's *valr* she will claim, while the others are left to Óðinn, according to in *Grímnismál* st. 14[492] – which would seem to suggest that the *valkyrjur* of *Gylfaginning* ch. 36 are choosing between the those men who are going to die, and those who are not (and, subsequently, which side will win a given battle). This would appear to conflict with both the implied disenfranchisement of *Húsdrápa* and the explicit statement in *Helreið Brynhildar* st. 8 that Brynhildr had been given orders to grant one side victory, but had disobeyed them, an account matched by the prose of *Sigrdrífomál*.

It seems possible that these different conceptions of the free will of the *valkyrja* represent different stages of development of the same phenomenon, with the intermediate stage of Óðinn delivering orders that the *valkyrjur* were capable of disobeying sandwiched between unflinching obedience and complete free will. Such a proposal would be supported by the fact that skaldic texts dating from the middle of tenth century, such as *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, both assign ultimate responsibility to Óðinn – *Hákonarmál* even opens "*Gǫndul ok Skǫgul sendi Gauta-týr* [...]" ('Gauta-Týr sent Gǫndul ok Skǫgul...')[493] – while the more romantic Helgi poems, whose *valkyrjur* frequently seem very human, stress the personal relationship between each *valkyrja* and her Helgi, whom she desperate wishes to protect – despite, in the case of *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*, Óðinn's determination to bring about Helgi's death.[494] This would essentially represent a modified form of the proposal put forward by Motz, that "there are two forms of Valkyries, one sovereign and one subservient to Odin",[495] attempting to reflect the subtleties of the textual sources that occupy shades of grey somewhere between Motz's black and white positions.

---

491 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 30, trans. and emphasis mine.
492 *Grímsnismál* 14, *Edda*, st. 14, p. 60.
493 *Hákonarmál*, *Skj* B1, st. 1, p. 57, trans. mine.
494 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II, Edda,* pr. 29, p. 157.
495 Motz, 'Sister in the Cave', p. 178.

However, it is quite possible that the Eddic poems existed, in very similar forms to those extant today, as part of the oral tradition long before the middle of the tenth century,[496] and would thus predate the skaldic evidence. Equally, Snorri's depiction of the *valkyrjur* is based on his thirteenth-century interpretation of earlier source material, and so, as appealing as it is to attempt to trace a definitive chronological progression of valkyric free will (from oppression to liberation) in the late-Iron Age, I believe such a model is untenable. Instead, it is safer to say that a range of different traditions coexisted within the same valkyric discourse over a significant period of time – some presumably more popular than others at different periods – allowing poets and storytellers to draw upon whichever arrangement suited their dramatic requirements: demanding gods to flatter the deceased warrior-king (*Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*) or set up the inevitability of a well-known legendary cycle (*Völsunga saga* ch. 2), or cruel counter-action from an uncaring deity in order to emphasise the heroic struggle of the lovers (*Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*). While the earlier stages of this discourse are lost to us, the evidence of *Gylfaginning* and the *Helgi* poems would seem to suggest that the later *valkyrjur* were freer to act than those of previous centuries.

3.4 Sex after Death?

Just as with the field of valkyric agency and responsibility, there seems to be a remarkable amount of scope for variation when it comes to lovers, even given the relatively small number of texts that make any sort of reference to the sex lives of the *valkyrjur*. Nonetheless, there does not appear to be much, if any, evidence, that other (semi-)coherent groups of female spirits such as the *dísir* or *fylgjur* were regarded as having active sex lives, which goes some way to setting the *valkyrjur* apart as a collective. (One exception might be the 'better' *draumkona* of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, who invites Gísli to live with her in a hall and 'be happy' after his death[497] – notably,

[496] On the oral tradition in the Old Norse cultural continuum, see Fidjestøl, 'Norse-Icelandic Composition in the Oral Period'; Gunnell, 'Narratives, Space and Drama'; and Judy Quinn, 'From Orality to Literacy in Medieval Iceland', *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 30-60.

[497] *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, ÍF VI, p. 94.

however, this particular episode is distinctly valkyric in its imagery, which might be responsible for the sexual overtones.)

At the most basic level, the terminology used to depict the *valkyrjur* portrays them not only as female, but as young women: the use of *heiti* for 'girl' or 'young (unmarried?) woman' such as "*mey*" (or its variant "*mær*") in addition to the term "*valkyrjur*" itself is commonly used to denote *valkyrjur* in poetic sources such as *Hrafnsmál*,[498] *Völundarqviða*,[499] *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*,[500] and *Helgaqviða Hiorvarðzsonar*.[501] In contrast to this, terms designating an older and/or married woman – such as "*kona*" and "*víf*" – are used much more rarely, and even then most frequently in cases where a single *valkyrja* is either married or is in the context of her lover's male warband, and could thus be seen as fulfilling Enright's proposed role of "lady".[502] As such, the use of these terms could be argued to signify sexual availability. However, I do not believe that the use of these *heiti* necessarily implies any particular allure on behalf of the *valkyrjur*, as, even in the relatively accessible Eddic metres, poetic diction demands a certain flexibility of vocabulary for which these single-syllable terms are well-suited, and it is quite possible that the *valkyrjur* were regarded as being young and/or unmarried women without this necessarily resulting in a sexual component.

All the same, it must also be observed that some texts certainly do emphasise the beauty of their *valkyrjur*, which clearly is a sexual trait: Sváva of *Helgaqviða Hiorvarðzsonar*, for example, is introduced to the poem as "*gǫfugligust*" ('most magnificent') of the nine females she leads,[503] and in his first speech Helgi not only addresses her as "*brúðr biartlituð*" ('bright-looking bride'), but also demands that he be allowed to 'have' her.[504] There is even a bizarrely chaste attempted seduction at the conclusion of *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*, where the distraught Sigrún confronts her roaming dead husband as he returns to his burial mound.[505] It is notable, however, that

498 e.g. *Hrafnsmál*, *Skj* B1, st. 1, p. 22.
499 e.g. *Völundarqviða, Edda*, st. 1, p. 117.
500 e.g. *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I, Edda*, st. 18, p. 133.
501 e.g. *Helgaqviða Hiorvarðzsonar*, *Edda*, st. 28, p. 146.
502 e.g. *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II, Edda*, st. 14, p. 153.
503 *Helgaqviða Hiorvarðzsonar*, *Edda*, pr. 5, p. 142.
504 *Helgaqviða Hiorvarðzsonar*, *Edda*, st. 7, p. 142.
505 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II*, *Edda*, st. 43-49, pp. 159-160. This may reflect a reflex of the same motif that finds expression in Helgi Hiorvarðzson's dying instructions that Sváva remarry (*Helgaqviða Hiorvarðzsonar*, *Edda*, st. 42, p. 149): if, at an earlier stage of the Helgi Hundingsbani version of the Helgi narrative, Sigrún had also remarried before meeting her Helgi

– with a single exception – the texts that focus on the physical beauty of the *valkyrjur* they portray are those whose action is set not in the mythological mansion of Valhöll, but in the legendary reflection of the 'real world' where "[c]oncepts of honour were thought to have been more stringent, heroes and heroines more magnificent and conflicts more tragic and insoluble than in the contemporary world",[506] and the relationships are between *valkyrjur* and living heroes, not the already-dead *einherjar* – at least when first established. As such, I would argue that these relationships may be seen as the reaction of the *valkyrja* phenomenon of warrior protection with the concept of the Maiden King or *skjaldmær*, a closely-related female warrior figure in legendary (but not mythological) texts who, once wooed by the right man, will settle down and bear his children.[507]

In fact, there is only a single instance of a *valkyrja* (apparently) participating in sexual activity in an explicitly cosmological setting, and this occurs in a context that cannot be considered reliable: during a flyting between Sinfjötli and a cliff-guard called Gunnar in *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*. As the two men trade a long series of imaginative and sexually derogatory insults, including charging the other with having played the female role during homosexual intercourse, Sinfjötli claims that:

> *Þú vart in scoða, scass, valkyria,*
> *ǫtul, ámátlig, at Alfǫður;*
> *mundo einheriar allir beriaz,*
> *svévís kona, um sacar þínar.*[508]
>
> You were the harmful *skass* [an ogress? witch?],
> fierce, loathsome, a *valkyrja* with Alfaðir;
> all the *einherjar* would fight each other
> for your sake, obstinate woman.

The implications of this strophe are subjective. Some sections of the flyting are appear to be pure fiction – such as when Sinfjötli declares that he fathered nine wolves on Guðmundr in strophe 39 – while others clearly reference 'genuine' events or

---

in the mound, his refusal to sleep with her may lie in his reluctance to violate her new relationship.

506 Andersen, 'On Valkyries, Shield-Maidens and Other Armed Women', p. 300.

507 Andersen, 'On Valkyries, Shield-Maidens and Other Armed Women', pp. 293-309; but *cf.* Carol J. Clover, 'Maiden Warriors and Other Sons', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85 (1986), pp. 35-49.

508 *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, *Edda*, st. 38, p. 136, trans. mine.

practices, such as when Guðmundr mentions Sinfjötli's werewolf adolescence in strophe 41. While it seems highly unlikely (to say the least) that Guðmundr actually visited Valhöll in the form of a *valkyrja*, it is therefore at least possible that Sinfjötli's imprecation is based on a genuine belief that sex – or at least desire – occurred between the *valkyrjur* and the *einherjar* they 'serve' in Valhöll.

In contrast to this is the evidence of *Hrafnsmál* (also known as *Haraldskvæði*), the oldest skaldic work to preserve evidence of the *valkyrjur* outside of poetic diction. In this dialogue, the *valkyrja* – who is explicitly labelled as such in the second strophe – engages a raven in conversation, and the two discuss the court and retainers of King Haraldr *hárfagri*, who ruled large parts of Norway in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. Unlike many later *valkyrjur*, the female speaker of *Hrafnsmál* does not herself perform act actions that might be considered valkyric (unless speaking directly with a raven could be constructed as such). Like the *valkyrjur*, heroes and gods of both *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, she was almost certainly intended to flatter the poem's patron by suggesting that the ultimate talent scouts were interested in how he ran his kingdom. Nonetheless, in order for this conceit to function, the *valkyrja* had to be recognisable as such, leading to the following description of the speaker as a "*mey* [...] *hvíta, haddbjarta*" ('a fair, light-haired girl) in the first strophe,[509] after which the poet continues:

> *Vitr þóttisk valkyrja,*
> *verar né óru*
> *þekkir svá enni fránleitu,*
> *es foglsrǫdd kunni*.[510]
>
> The *valkyrja* thought herself wise,
> [the] pleasures of men are not so
> to the flashing-eyed [one],
> who knew the language of birds.

My reading of the text, based on Finnur Jónsson's *Skjaldedigtning*, does not imply a great deal of sexual activity, curtailed or otherwise, although it might be possible to construe 'the pleasures of men' as referring to women. However, I believe this is actually an allusion to poetry, given the slightly sardonic phrasing of 'the *valkyrja*

509 *Hrafnsmál*, *Skj* B1, st. 1, p. 22, trans. mine.
510 *Hrafnsmál*, *Skj* B1, st. 2, p. 22, trans. mine.

thought herself wise [... because she] knew the language of birds', which subtly infers that the *valkyrja*'s ignorance of Haraldr's court (and thus the good things in life) stemmed from her wilful ignorance of oral skaldic tradition. Yet this is not the only possible interpretation of strophe 2 of *Hrafnsmál*. The verses of the poem are preserved within the many variant *Fagrskinna* manuscripts (although *Gylfaginning* also includes a single strophe), which has introduced a significant amount of diversity into the manuscript tradition. Kershaw offers an entirely different reading of the second strophe:

> The valkyrie prided herself on her wisdom; – and the warlike maid took no pleasure in men, for she knew the language of birds.[511]

This is explicitly sexual, and implies that the *valkyrjur* was indeed familiar with sex, but deliberately abstained from it due to her knowledge of avian speech. Assuming that Kershaw's reading is indeed a plausible one, it is possible that both avian language and chastity were standard – or at least plausible – motifs for a valkyric figure in the late ninth or early tenth century.

Such a motif, particularly if widespread, would certainly explain the otherwise somewhat puzzling lack of reference to sex between the *valkyrjur* and the *einherjar* in Valhöll: it may have its roots in Valhöll's reflection of the social practices of a hall in the 'real world' (not that Valhöll, Ásgarðr, or the afterlife were necessarily any less real to pre-Christian Scandinavians than their contemporary world). While a group of *valkyrjur* could not possible all fulfil the social functions of a single queen, Nordberg has suggested that they instead took the roles of the female kin of the leading elite[512] – essentially filling in for the missing daughters, sisters, cousins and other human women who had no place in the warriors' paradise at Óðinn's hall. If the *valkyrjur* were indeed viewed like this – as surrogate blood-kin – then it might be possible that the lack of sex in Valhöll is a result of late-Iron Age conceptions of this afterlife that featured an exogamous society, or the idealised realisation of a reality where aristocratic warriors are absolved from the responsibility of defending their female

511 Kershaw, *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems*, p. 83.
512 Nordberg, *Krigarna i Odins sal*, p. 305.

relatives, securing good marriage matches for them, and bearing the economic cost of the requisite nuptials.[513]

3.5 Silver 'Valkyries' and Iconographic Horn-Bearers

A range of iconographic female figures, appearing both within larger dioramas on Gotlandic picture stones and individually as small statuettes, brooches and other jewellery have been found, and are "reproduced in every work [... and] are almost always interpreted as valkyries."[514] The popularity of the *valkyrjur* in identifying otherwise nameless female figures is not surprising given their continued repute in modern culture (see above, Chapter 1.1) and the text of *Húsdrápa*, which makes it explicit that *valkyrjur* did indeed appear in some form in iconographic representations of pre-Christian mythology in the late Iron Age (see above, Chapter 3.3). Nonetheless, this survey of just a handful of such representations will be brief, as the identification of these female figures as *valkyrjur* rests on conclusions drawn from textual accounts, but can offer some reinforcement of the associations already highlighted by textual study.

The female figures on the Gotlandic picture stones commonly identified as 'valkyries' appear only during the third phase of grave-marking by these monuments (*c.* 800-1100 AD), which seem to have been used almost exclusively for male graves and memorials, and are typically presented in contexts that include ships, animals, armed anthropomorphic figures (sometimes mounted), and some more abstract patterns (e.g. figure 3.C).[515] As outlined above (see the discussion of the Oseberg wagon carving, Chapter 2.2.2), the identification of iconographic representations of

513 *cf*. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 320-323. This may also go some way to explaining the truism that '*valkyrjur* do not have children', the only exceptions to which are the unnamed, unnumbered sons attributed to Helgi hundingsbani and Sigrún Högnadóttir in the prose of *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II* (*Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II, Edda,* pr. 29, p. 157); and Áslaug, Brynhildr's daughter by Sigurðr, who does not appear in Eddic poetry and is interpolated somewhat awkwardly into *Völsunga saga* (despite the supposed chastity of her conception-night; *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, p. 57), but goes on to play a central role in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (*Ragnars saga loðbrókar ok sona hans*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, pp. 95-148).

514 Price, 'What's in a Name?', p. 180.

515 See, for example, Anders Andrén, 'Doors to Other Worlds: Scandinavian Death Rituals in Gotlandic Perspectives', *Journal of European Archaeology* 1 (1993), pp. 33-55, p. 36.

females has tended to be somewhat shallow, relying on cases where the picture stones feature a woman holding a horn facing a mounted figure, which is typically interpreted as a *valkyrja* welcoming either Óðinn or a deceased warrior to Valhöll. While there are some cases where the horseman's mount does indeed appear to have eight legs, thus supporting the Óðinn hypothesis – although this could also be

Figure 3.C, Picture Stone, Tjängvide, Gotland. After James Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*. 3rd edn. (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd., 2001), p. 179.

interpreted as simply an unfamiliar method of showing a group of horsemen, or a horse travelling at great speed – we have seen above that no textual account describes a newly-recruited *einherjar* being greeted with alcohol by a *valkyrja*, although *Hákonarmál* does preserve an account of a king being offered ale 'by the *Æsir*' in Valhöll. Having said this, *Hákonarmál* is a distinctly west-Norse text, and the Iron-

Age culture of Gotland was particularly idiosyncratic, so it would be unwise to reject such interpretations of those Gotlandic stones depicting a female figure greeting a mounted warrior outright on the basis of this poem alone. However, it is also worth noting that, to my knowledge, none of the identifiably female figures on the Gotland stones are equipped with any wargear (weapons, armour, or helmets), and in addition to horns, several carry short, twig-like items typically understood to be keys. While keys may be linked to semantically-linked objects such as chains and fetters, and thus to valkyric names such as Herfjötur ('Army-fetter'; and possibly Mist ['Mist', 'Fog'] and Sváva ['Sleeper', i.e. 'Killer'] in that Price has suggested the latter two might represent alternative expressions of personifications of battle-magic[516]), cases have also been made to see them as symbolic of *seiðr* practices or feminine domestic authority of a more mundane sort.[517] Given this, it seems reasonable only to say that it is possible that at least some Gotlandic picture stones could depict *valkyrjur*, but positively identifying any such to the exclusion of other possibilities would be near impossible.

A much more promising set of potential *valkyrjur* is formed by a small group of silver and bronze cast figures, none more than 4cm in their longest dimension, displaying female figures – identifiable by their dress and sometimes their hair[518] – who are equipped with military paraphernalia, notably shields. For example, one silver brooch from Tissø, Sjælland (Denmark), a site occupied from the sixth until the eleventh century,[519] depicts much the same motif as the Gotlandic picture stones, with a woman on foot facing a mounted male – but the woman in question is carrying a shield and wearing a helmet (figure 3.D).[520] It must be remembered, however, that this figure does not have to be valkyric: it may represent a *skjaldmær* ('shield-maiden'), other supernatural female associated with warriors (such as many of the *dísir* discussed above in Chapter 2.2.2), or even the goddess Freyja.[521] What is more, the

516 Price, *The Viking Way*, pp. 338-340.

517 Leszek Gardeła, 'Into Viking Minds: Reinterpreting the Staffs of Sorcery and Unravelling *Seiðr*', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 4 (2008), pp. 45-84 and pp. 57-58, and references therein.

518 On the identification of female figures in Iron-Age iconography, see Simek, 'Rich and Powerful'; and 'Goddesses, Mothers, Dísir'; and Watt, 'Images of Women On "Guldgubber" From the Merovingian Age'.

519 Lars Jørgensen, 'Manor, Cult and Market at Lake Tissø', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 77-82, pp. 77-79.

520 Nationalmuseet Website, 'Freja' <http://vikingekult.natmus.dk/foerkristne-kultpladser/temaer/de-nordiske-guder/freja/>, accessed 30/04/2013.

521 *cf*. *Grímnismál*, *Edda,* st. 3, p. 58.

mounted figure, who I interpret to be male from what appears to be trousers, cannot be seen to be carrying a shield, and the head is so stylised as to make it impossible to judge whether or not 'he' is wearing a helmet – it may well be that this is a returning warrior being greeted by his wife or a female family member who has taken some of his equipment, rendering the female utterly mundane.

Figure 3.D, Silver Brooch, Tissø, Denmark. Image Source: Nationalmuseet Website, 'Freja'.

Another silver figure (figure 3.E), this one slightly damaged but still recognisably a single woman on foot, bare-headed and holding both a sword and shield, was found (without context) by a metal detectorist at Hårby, near Odense (Denmark), in early 2013.[522] Unlike the Tissø find, this female's equipment would appear to be her own, but given the fact that the statuette is damaged and was found without context it is difficult to say more.[523]

Another set of potentially-relevant iconography comes from the early-ninth century Oseberg ship burial detailed above (see Chapter 2.2.2), which included fragments of a very rich tapestry, apparently portraying scenes including a ritual wagon procession and human sacrifice by hanging in trees.[524] Among the humanoid

[522] Nationalmuseet Website, 'Fynbo finder valkyrie fra vikingetiden' <http://natmus.dk/nyhedsoversigt/nyhed/article/fynbo-finder-valkyrie-fra-vikingetiden/>, accessed 30/04/2013.

[523] For references on the range of related silver and bronze pendants that show no valkyric features but are nonetheless frequently identified as "valkyries", see Price, *The Viking Way*, pp. 336-337 and references therein; and 'What's in a Name?', p. 180 and references therein.

[524] Christensen, Ingstad and Myhre, *Oseberg dronningens grav*, pp. 176-208; on textiles *cf*. Annika Larsson, 'Viking Age Textiles', *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 181-185; on the Oseberg tapestry and processional wagons see Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama*, pp. 60-66, 53-60; and on human sacrifice by hanging, see Aleks

figures preserved on these fragments are a number of male warriors (identifiable by their trousers, helmets, spears and shields) processing, riding on horseback and in ships, and offering each other weaponry; and females (identifiable by their dresses and hair) processing, dancing, and sometimes holding staffs with unusual diamond-shaped heads that might be indicative of (funerary) ritual specialists.[525] The context of these beings is thus clearly one of ceremony and ritual, which may go some way to

Figure 3.E, Silver Figurine, Hårby, Denmark. Image Source: Nationalmuseet Website, 'Fynbo finder valkyrie fra vikingetiden'.

explaining the apparently costumed humanoid figures with animalistic features, including what appears to be a selection of both men and women – to judge by the length of their clothes, which might be misleading if they truly are in full costume – carrying spears and shields, with wearing boar heads (see fig. 3.F; *cf*. Freyja's claim on half the *valr* each day and her link with the boar[526]). Other noteworthy figures include a gender-indeterminate humanoid in a bird costume (see fig. 3.G; *cf*. the *hamir* of the pseudo-valkyric figures in *Vǫlundarqviða*[527] and Brynhildr and her

Pluskowski, 'The Sacred Gallows: Sacrificial Hanging to Óðinn', *Archaeological Reveiw from Cambridge* 17 (2000), pp. 55-81.

525 *cf*. Gardeła, 'Into Viking Minds'.

526 *Grímnismál*, *Edda*, st. 14, p. 60; see further Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, p. 110.

527 *Vǫlundarqviða*, *Edda*, pr., p. 116.

Figure 3.F, Detail from the Oseberg Tapestry showing male and female figures, armed, in animal costume. Artist Credit: Sofie Krafft. After Arne Emil Christensen, Anne Stine Ingstad and Bjørn Myhre, *Oseberg dronningens grav. Vår arkeologiske nasjonalskatt i nytt lys,* 2nd edn. (Oslo: Schibsted, 1993), p. 244.

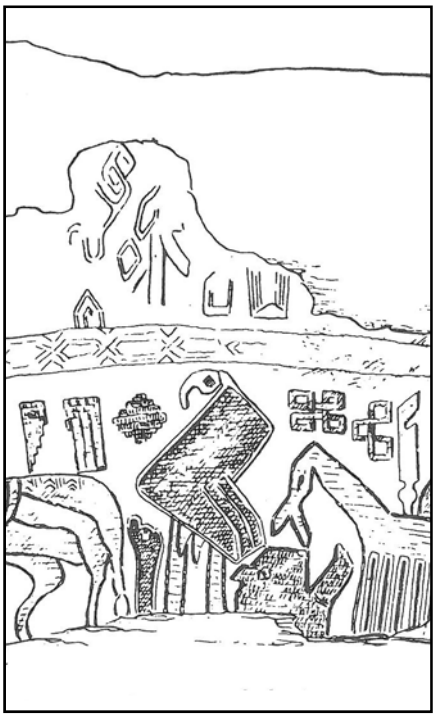
sisters in *Helreið Brynhildar*[528]) and a woman – not wearing armour or an animal costume – who is holding a sword in such a way as to imply its ceremonial presentation, seemingly as part of a procession (see fig. 3.H; *cf*. Sváva 'directing' Helgi to a particular sword in *Helgaqviða Hiorvarðzsonar*[529]).

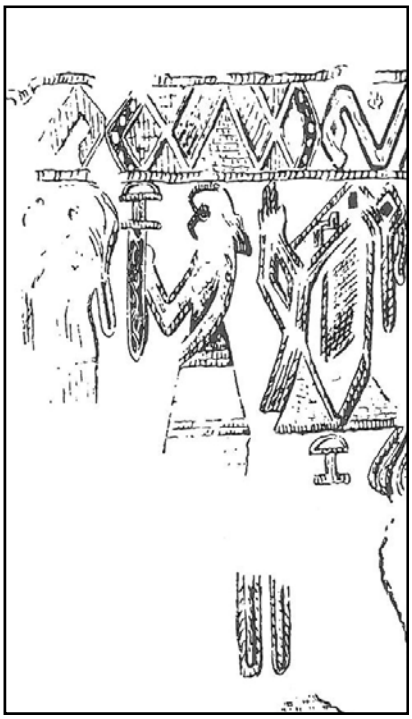
Due to the high-status burial context of the tapestry, I do not believe that any of these female figures should be identified as *valkyrjur* – at least not directly – but rather as human participants engaged in specific ritual(s). It is possible that these women could themselves have been performing the roles of *valkyrjur* in a ritual,[530] particularly if any of these rites were funerary in nature: not only are the *valkyrjur*

528 *Helreið Brynhildar, Edda,* st. 6, p. 220.

529 *Helgaqviða Hiorvarðzsonar*, *Edda*, pr., p. 143.

530 See further Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama*, esp. pp. 182-281; and '"Til Holts Ek Gekk..."', pp. 238-242. *cf*. also the account of the "Angel of Death" in Ibn Fadlān's *Risāla*: apparently a female funerary-ritual specialist, the Angel is described as an old woman who exercises absolute authority over the community during the funeral of a recently-deceased chieftain (Montgomery, 'Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsiyyah', pp. 12-21).





Left: Figure 3.G, Detail from the Oseberg Tapestry showing a figure in bird costume. Artist Credit: Sofie Krafft. After Arne Emil Christensen, Anne Stine Ingstad and Bjørn Myhre, *Oseberg dronningens grav. Vår arkeologiske nasjonalskatt i nytt lys,* 2nd edn. (Oslo: Schibsted, 1993), p. 245.

Right: Figure 3.H, Detail from the Oseberg Tapestry showing a woman holding a sword. Artist Credit: Sofie Krafft. After Arne Emil Christensen, Anne Stine Ingstad and Bjørn Myhre, *Oseberg dronningens grav. Vår arkeologiske nasjonalskatt i nytt lys,* 2nd edn. (Oslo: Schibsted, 1993), p. 242.

renowned psychopomps (although not in any extant instances for women), but the tapestry itself is closely linked to a very-high status burial of at least one member of the late-Iron Age warrior-elite (albeit a female member). Having said this, there is a huge range of other potential explanations for these figures, the simplest, and probably most likely, is that they do not represent any given figure or group from extant mythology, but are instead artistic reflections of concepts now lost to us – always assuming, of course, that these costumes were not simply the ceremonial garb and accoutrements of ritual specialists, used without inherent reference to some mythological patron.

One option I do not, however, think at all likely is that these armed women represent *skjaldmær*. Archaeologists have found no evidence of 'historical' women warriors in a professional sense, although there does seem to be evidence that women would fight "in the most dire circumstances of immediate self-defence when

homesteads were under attack".[531] (The occasional finds of weapons and military equipment in high-status female graves have been interpreted as symbols of temporal authority, rather than practical equipment.[532]) Literary accounts of *skjaldmær* are most likely the result of contact between native Nordic *valkyrjur* motifs and continental concepts of Maiden Kings, as Lise Præstgaard Andersen has convincingly argued for a small number of test cases.[533]

As such, despite the wealth of potentially-valkyric imagery in the small sample of iconography considered in this subchapter, I do not believe that visual representations of females who may or may not be *valkyrjur* can offer any genuinely new insight into these beings. Even attempts to confirm interim conclusions reached on the basis of textual evidence through the use of iconographic data are, in my opinion, on extremely unsteady ground, as the identification of *valkyrjur* in these images is simply too subjective to be of any real use.

3.6 Spirits on the Battlefield

Of all the roles played by the *valkyrjur*, it is perhaps that of the battlefield psychopomp that is the best known, and the one most relevant to this study, for it is in this capacity that the *valkyrjur* bridge the gap between the mythological mansion of Valhöll considered thus far in this chapter, and the contemporary world of the late Iron Age. Not only is their very name a *kenning* for 'chooser of the slain' (see discussion above, Chapter 2.1), it seems even Snorri Sturluson's incredible focus on the cosmological structures of his pre-Christian forebears' worldviews could not prevent him mentioning the battle activities of the *valkyrjur*: following his description of their role as horn-bearers in Valhöll and quotation of *Grímnismál* st. 36, Snorri tells us that they "*kjósa feigð á menn*", a complex phrase meaning something like 'allot approaching death (lit. 'the state of being fey') to men'. That is, they 'choose' which of the participating warriors is going to die in the upcoming battle, but, unlike the

531 Price, *The Viking Way*, p. 332. Note, however, that Price has indeed unearthed a single instance of a documentary account that describes apparently Nordic women fighting alongside their men in a pitched battle: a record of a battle between Kievan Rūs and Byzantian troops from *c*. 970 AD (*The Viking Way*, p. 332).

532 Gardeła, pers. com.

533 Andersen, 'On Valkyries, Shield-Maidens and Other Armed Women'.

"quite practically minded" *dísir*,[534] the implication is that the *valkyrjur* themselves do not interfere physically. The net result of these decisions would appear to result in the *valkyrjur* being able to "*ráða sigri*" ('govern victory') and "*ráða vígum*" ('govern slayings'), quite literally steering the course of a battle in one direction or another.

One text which describes the *valkyrjur* being sent to a battlefield in order to recruit new members of the *einherjar* – or one new member in particular, at least – is *Hákonarmál*, which is unique in that is describes the activities of the *valkyrjur* from the moment of their dispatch by Óðinn until their target, Hákon himself, is securely dead and "*átti til Valhallar vega*" ('was on the road to Valhöll').[535] The second strophe of the poem describes how the two *valkyrjur* arrive just as the battle begins, and locate Hákon, only, somewhat bizarrely, to do nothing at all for the next five strophes as the narration switches to typical skaldic reporting of Hákon's prowess in battle. Writing exactly a century ago, Neckel suggested that this inaction represented an "altem Volksglauben die Walkyrje in der Schlact unsichtbar wirksam war" ('old folk belief, that the *valkyrjur* were invisible when active in battle'),[536] which seems like a reasonable assessment of the situation. What Neckel appears to have overlooked, however, is that for the first five strophes of the battle – *Hákonarmál* st. 3-7 – Göndul and Skögul are <u>not</u> active in the battle, and, up until this point, everything has gone well for Hákon. Strophe 8, however, is different, even if the semantic kernel of the entire strophe could be rendered simple 'there was fighting'. Here the *kenningar* are no longer based on mundane, but rather mythological *heiti*, including the name of Óðinn and Skögul herself. Both names are used in the same *kenning*, "*Skǫglar veðr*" and "*Óðins veðri*" ('Skögul's storm' > battle, 'Óðinn's storm' > battle), which not only serves to reinforce the relationship between Skögul and Óðinn (*cf*. Chapter 3.3 above on valkyric agency), but also serves to combine the effects of the two 'storms', and thus blur their causes. Rather than two separate storms/battles, the exact repetition merges the two, bringing the absent Óðinn's power directly onto the battlefield – and, sure enough, once the storm/battle abates somewhat, strophe 9 tells us that Hákon has received his death-wound, suggesting that Skögul formed a channel through which Óðinn's power (or will?) could manifest.

534 Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, p. 64.
535 *Hákonarmál*, *Skj* B1, st. 9, p. 58.
536 Neckel, *Walhall*, p. 84, trans. mine.

As Hákon dies, he hears the *valkyrjur* discussing the battle and, in strophe 12, demands to know why Skögul "*svá gunni skiptir*" ('arranged the battle so').[537] Skögul's reply is that "*vér*" ('we') – possibly Skögul and Göndul, Skögul and Óðinn, or all three of them – caused the field to be held, and Hákon's enemies to flee. Thus the evidence of *Hákonarmál* would appear to confirm our earlier hypothesis that the *valkyrjur* are able to "*ráða sigri*" ('govern victory') through the management of specific killings, although the description of the "*veðr*" in strophe 8 make it no longer quite so certain that the *valkyrjur* themselves take a back seat and simply 'allow' men to die according to their plan. (Although it is quite possible that strophe 8 of *Hákonarmál* is more a piece of poetic artifice than a genuine representation of pre-Christian religious tradition.) However, what is stressed about Skögul and Göndul in *Hákonarmál*, in contrast to the horn-bearing *valkyrjur* of *Gylfaginning* ch. 36, is their martial attire: in strophe 11, Göndul leans on her spearshaft as she surveys as job well done, and as Hákon realises who the female voices he hears talking belong to, the poet provides a description of the *valkyrjur*:

> [...] *mærar af mars baki,*
> *hyggiliga létu*
> *ok hjalmaðar sôtu*
> *ok hǫfðusk hlífar fyrir.*[538]
>
> [...] girls on horseback,
> wisely they would also
> stay sitting helmed
> and keep shields forward.

Similar motifs may be found in a number of other texts, including, among others, the Völur of *Vǫlospá* reporting *valkyrjur* riding horses and carrying shields "*gorvar at ríða grund*" ('riding, prepared, to a [battle]field');[539] Sigrún and her *valkyrjur* companions appearing to Helgi *hundingsbani* on the edge of a battlefield, mounted, wearing helms, and carrying spears with their armour "*blóði stocnar*" ('soaked in blood');[540] and even the inscription "**skah : ualkyrriu**" of the Bryggen rune stick

[537] That Hákon can hear but apparently not see Göndul and Skögul may support Neckel's proposition of their invisibility.
[538] *Hákonarmál*, *Skj* B1, st. 11, p. 58, trans. mine.
[539] *Vǫlospá*, *Edda,* st. 30, p. 7, trans. mine.
[540] *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana I*, st. 15-17, p. 132, trans. mine.

from *c.* 1380-1390 apparently envisaged as going armed – at least depending on one's reading of "**skah**".[541] What is more, Snorri himself records a series of instructions on the formation of *kenningar* in which he states that "*orrustu*" ('battle') and "[*v*]*ápn ok herklæði*" ('weapons and armour') may be referred to through the use of determinants that include "*valkyrju*" for the former and "*valmeyja*" ('slain-girls', almost certainly a synonym for *valkyrjur*) for the latter.[542] As such, there can be little doubt that *valkyrjur* were frequently conceived of as armed in full battle-gear when 'choosing', and present on the battlefield in some sort of metaphysical form.

Whether or not we are able to reach any more in-depth conclusions regarding the methods by which the *valkyrjur* "*ráða sigri*" is less clear, however. Sígrdrífa's account of how she disobeyed Óðinn, mentioned above in Chapter 3.3, is rendered in terse prose, which records only that "*hét annar Hiálm-Gunnarr* [...] *hafði Óðinn hánom sigri heitið*" ('the second [king] was called Helm-Gunnar [...] Óðinn had promised him victory'), and that, apparently in disgust, "*Sigrdrífa feldi Hiálm-Gunnar í orrostonni*" ('Sígrdrífa felled Helm-Gunnar in battle').[543] The implication is that Sigrdrífa took direct action herself, and was physically present on the battlefield, but the brevity of the description makes it impossible to say more, and the parallel accounts of the same events can offer little further enlightenment: in *Helreið Brynhildar* st. 8, Brynhildr only says that she "*lét ec gamlan á Goðþióðo Hiálm-Gunnar næst heliar ganga; gaf ec ungom sigr Auðo bróður*" ('let Helmet-Gunnar go straight to Hel; I gave victory to the young brother of Auða'),[544] and the only new detail that the Brynhildr of *Völsunga saga* presents is that, in his wrath, Óðinn "*kvað mik aldri síðan skyldu sigr hafa*" ('said that I would never again have victory),[545] implying unsurprisingly that she had had some experience at her role previously.

There also remains a particularly idiosyncratic account in which supernatural women who appear to be hybrids of several different traditions influence the outcome of a distant battle. The poem known as *Darraðarljóð*, preserved in Chapter 157 of

---

541 John McKinnell *et al*. propose "jutting (spear-carrying?)" (John McKinnell, Rudolf Simek and Klaus Düwel, *Runes, Magic and Religion. A Sourcebook*, *Studia Medievalia Septentrionalia* 10 [Wien: Fassbaender, 2004], p. 132), while MacLeod and Mees see the valkyrja herself as the weapon in question, a form of magical *sending* (*Runic Amulets and Magic Objects*, pp. 34-39; *cf*. Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 96-118).

542 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 2, pp. 66-67, trans. mine.

543 *Sigrdrífomál*, *Edda,* pr., p. 190, trans. mine.

544 *Helreið Brynhildar*, *Edda*, st. 8, p. 220, trans. mine.

545 *Völsunga saga*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1, p. 42, trans. mine.

Brennu-Njáls saga, records a song sung by six named females, five of whose names are listed elsewhere as valkyric.[546] (The sixth name, Sanngríðr, appears to be based on the "*-gríðr*" element found in other valkyric names, although it also exists independently as the name of a *jötunn-kona* in a number of verses preserved in *Skáldskaparmál*.[547]) There may also be more women, as the prose framework of the verses claims there were twelve, although the setting of *Darraðarljóð* within *Njála* has become increasingly discredited due the emerging scholarly consensus that the prose sets the poem at the wrong battle entirely: it is generally now thought to describe a battle between one King Sigtryggr and the Irish High-King Njáll Glundubh near Dublin in 919 AD, as was first suggested by Kershaw in 1922,[548] rather than at the Battle of Clontarf (fought in 1014 AD) as the saga claims.[549] The poem itself is eleven strophes long, and appears to serve as a work-song for a the weaving carried out by the singers on a grisly loom they describe in the opening two strophes as being made up of human body parts and military paraphernalia, the operation of which may be interpreted as either paralleling the course of the battle as it happened, or setting out the course the battle would follow in the near future.

Although the singers declare that "*Framm skulum ganga | ok í folk vaða, | þars vinir órir | vôpnum skipta*" ('And we should go forward, wade into the folk, there when our friends divide weapons [i.e. fight]') in the fourth strophe of the poem,[550] which might imply that the text represents the supernatural women making plans for the future, I believe the instantaneous cause-and-effect of the song's speech act in strophe 7 – which calls for the death of one of the battle's leaders, a call followed immediately by the declaration "*nú's fyr oddum jarlmaðr hniginn*" ('now the Jarl is sunk before the spear-points') – implies that the poem and battle are each taking place simultaneously. This belief is backed up by word-play in strophe 3, which declares that "*Genga Hildr vefa*" ('Hildr starts weaving'), where Hildr is both the name of one of the valkyric weavers, and also a poetic *heiti* for battle. (In this case *Darraðarljóð* is very close to the textual *kenning*-play of *Hákonarmál*, although the latter is significantly more technical.)

---

546 *Darraðarljóð*, *Skj* B1, pp. 389-391.

547 *Skáldskaparmál*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 3, p. 466.

548 Kershaw, *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems*, p. 117; *cf*. Price, *The Viking Way*, pp. 332-334; and Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, pp. 132-145 and references therein.

549 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ÍF XII, pp. 453-460.

550 *Darraðarljóð*, *Skj* B1, st. 4, p. 390, trans. mine.

This contemporaraneity is, to my mind, strongly reminiscent of the battlefield presence and actions of the *valkyrjur* of the other texts considered in this subchapter. Nonetheless, it is not clear to what extend the weavers of *Darraðarljóð* can be regarded as *valkyrjur* rather than *nornir*, *dísir*, or something else entirely. Various critics have attempted to establish quite what the singers of the poem are: they bear valkyric names, and make an impersonal reference in strophe 6 to "*eigu valkyrjur | vals of kosti*" ('*valkyjur have the choice of* [*the*] *slain*')[551] – which could be anything from a generic poetic observation to a statement of intent – yet they apparently engage freely with supernatural textile production (a motif typically associated with the *nornir*[552]), and, if the prose of *Njála* may be trusted, when they depart at the end of the poem the group separates, riding off in two different directions, reminiscent of the two groups of armed, mounted *dísir* of *Þiðranda þáttr ok Þórhalls* (see above, Chapter 2.2.2). Given the Irish setting of the battle being fought, and the claims of the prose framework that the *Darraðarljóð* scene itself took place in Caithness, it is also unsurprising that scholars of Celtic mythology and culture have recognised enough Irish influence for Alexander Haggerty Krappe to state that the poem cannot be "safely utilised for an enquiry into the Teutonic legends connected with the valkyries, and their origin."[553] While we must therefore be extremely cautious in any attempt to use the evidence *Darraðarljóð* to draw substantive conclusions (and I have left *Darraðarljóð* to the very end of this thesis for this reason), I still believe that being able to compare an account that was obviously part of the valkyric discourse in the late Iron Age to other, similar accounts is a worthwhile exercise, particularly given that it is not the origin of the *valkyrjur* this thesis is concerned with, but the ways in which *valkyrja* phenomenon were made use of by the warrior-elite during the period.

From the evidence considered in this subchapter, it appears clear that the *valkyrjur* were heavily associated with military ideology and effects during the late Iron Age, even appearing in person the battlefield in some sources. In contrast to their position and roles in Valhöll, however, such activities and associations do not correspond to the cultural patterns and structures of the hall-based warrior elite who made such use of the *valkyrjur* during this time period, as will be examined further in the next subchapter.

---

551 *Darraðarljóð*, *Skj* B1, st. 6, p. 390, trans. mine.

552 Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, pp. 123-164.

553 Krappe, 'The Valkyrie Episode in the Njals Saga', p. 474.

3.7 *Valkyrjur* as Catalysts: Psychopompoi

Having considered various aspects of the *dísir* and *valkyrja* phenomena as they are recorded across a range of textual sources, and applied some of those interim findings to a selection of iconographic representations typically touted as "valkyries", it is time to evaluate valkyric discourse of the hall-based warrior-elite in late Iron Age that this chapter has sought to outline. It seems clear that something of a binary existed between valkyric activities conducted inside and outside of Valhöll: that is, within the boundaries of the society of the dead set up in the hall, and in the dangerous, temporary – and therefore liminal – battlefield where potential *einherjar* fought to the death. What is more, from the point of the view of these potential *einherjar*, the members of earthly warrior-elite cultures, this was no abstract relationship.

For an Iron-Age warrior, the process of dying on the battlefield – perhaps in direct service to the political aims of one's lord, or while on a viking raid, or simply in defending one's home – and then moving on to spend the rest of your life as a member of the *einherjar* in the idealised warrior's paradise that Valhöll would appear to represent (see above, Chapter 3.2) would (I assume) have been seen as involving an enormous psychological and cognitive transition. Any such transition would begin with a man fulfilling his culturally-determined role as a warrior to its fullest extent – that is, fighting on the battlefield – and thereby inhabiting completely the Turnerian structures of the society in which he lived. After the transition, this man would be one of the *einherjar*, which is also a 'lifestyle' (for want of a better phrase) heavily based on rigid hierarchy and class – there are the *einherjar*, who are separate from the *valkyrjur*, who are separate again from the *Æsir*, and so on – who apparently have fixed activities, fixed foods, and a fixed cosmological function (to fight alongside Óðinn at Ragnarök). While a 'real world' society might not be able to maintain such levels of rigidity for any length of time, the society inhabiting Valhöll is both idealised and mythological – not that this would necessarily have made it any less 'real' to pre-Christian warriors in the late-Iron Age.

Achieving this transition, from human warrior to *einheri*, should be considered a fundamental change of state, and is thus well represented in terms of van Gennep's

"rites of passage":[554] the two terminal phases are separated by a liminal phase that lies between them, and the subject of the transition undergoes first "separation (*separation*)" from his previous phase, then a period of "transition (*marge*)" while in the liminal phase, and finally "incorporation (*agregation*)" into the new phase.[555] For our Iron-Age man/warrior, it is abundantly clear that separation from the initial phase is achieved by death, and a violent and bloody one at that, if we are to believe *Gylfaginning*: "*margr kemr sá til Valhallar er dýrt mundi þykkjask kaupa vazdrykkinn ef eigi væri betra fagnaðar þangat at vitja, sá er áðr þolir sár ok sviða til banas*" ('many a one comes to Valhöll, who would consider a drink of water dearly bought if no better welcome could be gotten, one who had previously suffered wounds and agony until he died').[556]

Having undergone this painful-sounding rite of separation, our subject has thus lost his ability to fulfil his structurally-determined roll as 'warrior'. Like the heroes of modern action films, or King Hákon in strophe 9 of *Hákonarmál*,[557] he may be 'bleeding out', or even already dead, but by this stage he is now completely incapable of swinging a sword, throwing a spear, or holding his place in the shield-wall. It is during this liminal phase, after the separation from the human society of the living but before integration into the divine society of the dead, that the man – according to the mythology created and propagated by Iron-Age warrior culture, at least – had the possibility of encountering a *valkyrjur*. Such an encounter would be, by definition, an essentially liminal experience, and this one in particular would be made all the more so by the nature of the *valkyrja* herself: a woman (or at least a female figure), potentially beautiful, standing on the battlefield during the conflict, who (according to many sources) wears armour, wears a helmet, carries a shield, carries weapons, possibly even rides a horse, and – perhaps most subversive of all – is in the process of exercising power and authority in the form of selection of warriors to die and go to Valhöll.[558] That some or all of this authority may be borrowed from her Óðinnic

554 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge, 1960)

555 van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p. vii.

556 *Gylfaginning*, *Snorra Edda*, vol. 1, p. 33, trans. mine.

557 *Hákonarmál*, *Skj* B1, st. 9, p. 58.

558 A brief aside on the propagation of *valkyrja* phenomena: one manner in which the myth of the *valkyrjur* may have been spread and maintained throughout Iron-Age warrior culture may have been through genuine 'real world' liminal encounters following a battle. If an Iron-Age warrior were brought up on tales of the *valkyrjur* (and similar battlefield spirits) as psychopompic beings

patron, depending on the level of agency reflected in a given tradition, is irrelevant in this context: the *valkyrja* has power, while the dead man has none. In fact, in light of the features associated with the *valkyrja* on the battlefield (the spear, the armour, the horse, and so on) and the dead man's physical weakness and inability to wield or utilise his own such symbols of structural authority, it would appear that the *valkyrja* is not simply appearing as a transgression of the Turnerian structures of the society that produced both her and the dead man, but, together with the incapable warrior, is instead completely inverting these structures, reversing traditional gender-based roles. What is more, the *valkyrja* may not only have usurped the warrior's authority and position within the social structure, she may be read has having appropriated the man's physical symbols of power – his weapons, armour, horse – and his physical position on the battlefield as well. After all, warriors were probably expected to be physically larger, and thus taller, than their womenfolk, particularly once arrayed in helmet and armour. In this liminal phase, however, assuming that the man is supine on the ground from his wounds – or at least sitting, as King Hákon is portrayed as doing in *Hákonarmál* st. 9 – then a standing *valkyrja* would be physically larger than him, and a mounted one would tower above him. (If the *valkyrja*-reflex in question were one of those who appear to have the power of flight, as both Sváva and Sigrún of *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II* do,[559] then she could be literally overhead.)

---

that took certain warriors from the battlefield to a glorious afterlife, then such myths may have shaped his experiences of any genuine near-death experience he underwent. If such a warrior were wounded in battle – particularly if he became weak or disoriented from physical shock, blood loss, or psychological trauma – then he may have been predisposed to see *valkyrjur* (just as Christians might see Angels) in the aftermath of a fight. (In twenty-first century culture, soldiers are traditionally depicted as crying for their mothers and wives in such circumstances.) What is more, it is also possible that real women were the subject of such delusions: local women or camp followers may have been present in the aftermath of a battle, looking for loved ones, friends or relatives, picking over the bodies of the dead and wounded for valuables and abandoned weapons, or even – most valkyric of all – taking the wounded away for medical care or the dead away for funerary rites (or perhaps delivering the *coup de grace*). (While women may not have been present at every battle in the Iron Age, it is equally ridiculous to assert they were entirely absent for all of them.) It is easy to imagine that a wounded warrior – especially one in a foreign country, where the women may have spoken a different language and worn different clothes – perceived such strange female figures through the lens of his trauma as supernatural apparitions, the experience playing off the myths and legends he had been told. Similarly, should the warrior have survived, his retelling of his own experience would have added to the corpus of '*valkyrjur* stories', creating a feedback loop that helped propagate *valkyrja* phenomena. (My thanks to Alaric Hall for the term 'feedback loop' and to both him and Terry Gunnell for valuable discussions on this topic.)

559 Sváva is portrayed as flying in *Helgaqviða Hiorvarðzsonar*, pr. 9, p. 143; Sigrún flies in *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana II, Edda*, pr. 13, p. 153.

This liminal phase of transition appears to represent exactly the same type of inverted reflection of the original human social structures that produced it as the afterlives with Hel and at Náströnd did, exhibiting a mixture of symbolic and physical reversals (see above, Chapter 3.2). However, unlike our descriptions of (the after)life at Hel and Náströnd, the liminal phase experienced by the dead man and the *valkyrja* is temporary, as we witnessed in *Hákonarmál*, where the time between Hákon's death on the battlefield and his arrival at Valhöll was barely long enough for him to harangue the *valkyrjur* responsible. Once the dead man, like Hákon, leaves the place of his death and arrives at Valhöll, the bizarre inversions of the liminal phase are wiped away, and the man is reintegrated into the Turnerian structure of a society – undergoing a rite of integration that probably involves a horn of alcohol – becoming one of the *einherjar* and regaining his ability to fight, to wear armour and carry weapons. In contrast, the *valkyrja* who was so powerful just moments before (in the liminal phase of transition) gives up all of her authority, and slips back into the role of horn-bearer, as examined above in Chapter 3.2. If we were to go as far as taking Snorri's account in *Gylfaginning* at face value, we might even conjecture that she has to remove her armour and helmet and dress instead in something more appropriate to the roll of a young woman in an idealised warrior's hall.

This is, I freely admit, a heavily rationalised, probably over-simplified picture of how (I believe) elite Iron-Age warrior society made use of *valkyrja* phenomenon. Yet at this stage a particularly pertinent question to ask is 'why would they bother'? What do they gain from utilising the *valkyrjur* in this fashion? Many mythological rites of passage around the world are made without the benefit of guiding spirits such as psychopompoi, and I would like to conclude this chapter by proposing one possible explanation for the purpose of the *valkyrja* phenomenon in the late Iron Age: I would suggest that by inserting the *valkyrja* into the liminal phase between separation (death) and integration (the start of the afterlife) and having her turn established social order completely on its head, the very normalcy that the liminal phase deviates from would be underlined. In Turner's words:

> Cognitively, nothing underlines regularity so well as absurdity or paradox. Emotionally, nothing satisfies as much as extravagant or <u>temporarily permitted</u> illicit behaviour.[560]

[560] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 176, emphasis mine.

In essence, the *valkyrja*, as seen in the texts examined above, seem to have served as an instrument through which the hall-based warrior elite cultures of the late Iron Age could propagate their own social structures and ideologies, not outwards in geographic terms, but forwards temporarily, into their own afterlives, where these structures would stay enshrined until the end of the world at Ragnarök. In doing so, they were able to metaphorically secure for themselves in their afterlives the advantages they had enjoyed in the halls of the 'real world': positions of privilege, influence, and (relative) luxury. With these secure, at least on some level, it may be argued that the late-Iron Age warrior elite had less to lose, making them more willing to risk their lives for the goals of their social group (be that a family, warband, or kingdom) in the lethal chaos of Viking-Age warfare. As a tool to accomplish this end, the *valkyrja* phenomena of the late pre-Christian period would seem to have played an integral part in sustaining social structures, acting as a conservative force in hall-based elite society.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

This thesis set out to study the *valkyrjur* phenomena of the late-Iron Age, particularly those made use of and preserved by the elite, hall-based warrior-culture of the *hirð*. It began with a brief consideration of the thorny issue of terminology, where the decision was made to use the standardised Classical Old Norse/Icelandic word '*valkyrja*' (pl. '*valkyrjur*') to refer to the pre-Christian mythological figures and the modern English term 'valkyrie' to indicate post-medieval imaginings of 'the valkyrie'. The rest of the Chapter 1 detailed the available source material suitable for a study of pre-Christian religious phenomena in general (making occasional detailed comment on sources particularly relevant to the *valkyrjur*), considered the various advantages and disadvantages of different classes of evidence, and then presented the methodological considerations taken into account in two dedicated subchapters.

Chapter 2 sought to contextualise the late-Iron Age *valkyrjur* against a spectrum of different female supernatural beings, focusing most closely on the *dísir*. It was first established that the *valkyrjur* and *dísir* appeared closely related, and that a better understanding of the latter was a prerequisite for any study of the former. As such, the remainder of Chapter 2 was dedicated to examining evidence for two different forms of the word *dís*: one referring to a distinct, fertility-based spirit, while the other seems to have been a generic term applied to a wide range of supernatural female beings. It was concluded that the former could be regarded as nested within the latter, and that the discursive space occupied by *valkyrjur* could also overlap with the more general usages of "*dís*" and "*dísir*", although there were no specific instances found where a definitively identified *valkyrja* was labelled a *dís* outside of poetic diction.

Chapter 3 built upon these results, offering a direct examination of the *valkyrjur* myths created and made use of by hall-based warrior elite cultures of the late Iron Age. The chapter's introduction interrogated a small amount of important recent scholarship on the *valkyrjur* for its inherent bias in an attempt to understand how such prejudice might affect this study, before an attempt was made to set out the biases of this thesis as forthrightly as possible. The remainder of Chapter 3 was based around the close reading of source material relevant to the *valkyrjur*, which produced

a surprisingly flexible discourse of ideas, particularly regarding the relationship between the *valkyrjur* and Óðinn, sex, and valkyric agency. A small number of iconographic representations of female figures of the type typically described as "valkyries" were also examined on the basis of these new understandings, but none could be definitively identified on the basis of iconography alone. A dichotomy between two spheres in which the *valkyrjur* appear to operate – the afterlife and the battlefield – was nonetheless identified, and, drawing upon the ideas of van Gennep and Turner, an attempt was made to resolve this division by proposing that the *valkyrjur* were deployed as agents of inversion who nonetheless fundamentally supported – even propagated – the social structures of the culture(s) which created and made use of them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abram, Christopher, 'Hel in Early Norse Poetry', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006), pp. 1-29
- Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, ed. Schmeidler, Bernhard, 3rd edn. (Hannover & Leipzig: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1917)
- Alkarp, Magnus and Price, Neil S., 'Tempel av guld eller kyrka av trä? Markradarundersökningar vid Gamla Uppsala kyrka', *Fornvännen* 100 (2005), pp. 261-72
- Andrén, Anders, 'Doors to Other Worlds: Scandinavian Death Rituals in Gotlandic Perspectives', *Journal of European Archaeology* 1 (1993), pp. 33-55
- ———, 'Behind *Heathendom*: Archaeological Studies of Old Norse Religion', *Scottish Archaeological Journal* 27 (2005), pp. 105-138
- *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, see *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 2
- Bagge, Sverre and Nordeide, Sæbjörg Walaker, 'The Kingdom of Norway', *Christianization and the Rise of the Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900-1200*, ed. Berend, Nora (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 121-166
- Barnes, Michael, 'Languages and Ethnic Groups', *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, Volume I: Prehistory to 1520*, ed. Helle, Knut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 94-102
- Barrett, James H., 'Culture Contact in Viking Age Scotland', *Contact, Continuity and Collapse: The Norse Colonisation of the North Atlantic*, ed. Barrett, James H. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), pp. 73-111
- Bartlett, Robert, 'From Paganism to Christianity in Medieval Europe', in *Christianization and the Rise of the Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900-1200*, ed. Berend, Nora, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 47-72
- Beck, Heinrich, 'Die religionsgeschichtlichen Quellen der Gylfaginning', *Germanische Religionsgeschichte: Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, ed. Beck, Heinrich, Ellmers, Detlev and Schier, Kurt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 608-617
- Beck, Wolfgang, *et al*. 'Einige neuere Publikationen zu den Merseburger Zaubersprüchen', *Indogermanische Forschungen* 114 (2009), pp. 337-356
- Bek-Pedersen, Karen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology* (Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2011)
- *Beowulf*, ed. Klaeber, F. R., 3rd edn. (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1950)
- Berend, Nora, 'Introduction', *Christianization and the Rise of the Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900-1200*, ed. Berend, Nora (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1-48

- Bill, Jan and Daly, Aoife, 'The Plundering of the Ship Graves from Oseberg and Gokstad: An Example of Power Politics?', *Antiquity* 86 (2012), pp. 808-824
- Birkeli, Fridtjov, *Norske steinkors i tidlig middelalder: Et bidrag til belysning av overgangen fra norrøn religion til kristendom*, *Skrifter utgitt av det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo. 2. Historisk-Filosofisk Klasse. Ny Serie* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1973)
- Blair, Peter Hunter, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956)
- Blair, John, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 291-504
- Bloomfield, Leonard, *Language* (New York: Allen & Unwin, 1933; reprinted Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Press, 2005)
- Bonde, Niels and Christensen, Arne Emil, 'Dendrochronological Dating of the Viking Age Ship Burials at Oseberg, Gokstad and Tune, Norway', *Antiquity* 67 (1993), pp. 575-583
- Bradley, Sid A. J., ed., *N.F.S Grundtvig: A Life Recalled*, *Grundtvig in English Series* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008)
- *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslenzk fornrit* XII (Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1944)
- Brink, Stefan, ed., *Jämtlands Kristnande: Projektet Sveriges Kristnandet Publikationer 4* (Uppsala: Lunne Böcker, 1996)
- ———, 'Political and Social Structures in Early Scandinavia: A Settlement-Historical Pre-Study of the Central Place', *Tor* 28 (1996), pp. 235-281
- ———, 'Political and Social Structures in Early Scandinavia II: Aspects of Space and Territoriality – the Settlement District', *Tor* 29 (1997), pp. 389-437
- ———, 'Social Order in the Early Scandinavian Landscape', *Settlement and Landscape*, ed. Fabech, Charlotte and Ringtved, Jytte (Århus: Jutland Archaeological Society, 1998), pp. 423-439
- ———, '*Verba Volant, Scripta Manent*? Aspects of Early Scandinavian Oral Society', *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. Hermann, Pernille (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), pp. 77-135
- ———, 'How Uniform Was the Old Norse Religion?', *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. Quinn, Judy, Heslop, Kate and Wills, Tarrin (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 105-136
- Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil S., eds., *The Viking World* (London: Routledge, 2008)
- Byock, Jesse L., *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin, 2001)
- Campbell, James, *The Anglo-Saxon State* (Hambledon and London: London and New York, 2000)
- Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949; repr. London: Fontanta Press, 1993)

- Christensen, Arne Emil, Ingstad, Anne Stine and Myhre, Bjørn, *Oseberg dronningens grav. Vår arkeologiske nasjonalskatt i nytt lys,* 2nd edn. (Oslo: Schibsted, 1993)
- Christensen, Tom, 'Lejre Beyond Legend: The Archaeological Evidence', *Journal of Danish Archaeology* 10 (1991), pp. 163-185
- ———, 'Lejre and Roskilde', *The Viking World*, ed. Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil S. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 121-125
- Clark, David, 'Undermining and En-Gendering Vengeance', *Scandinavian Studies* 77 (2005), pp. 173-200
- ———, 'Manslaughter and Misogyny: Women and Revenge in *Sturlunga Saga*', *The Saga Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 33 (2009), pp. 25-43
- Cleasby, Richard, and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874)
- Clover, Carol J., 'Maiden Warriors and Other Sons', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85 (1986), pp. 35-49
- ———, '*Völsunga Saga* and the Missing Lai of Marie De France', *Sagnaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Palsson*, ed. Simek, Rudolf, Jónas Kristjánsson and Bekker-Nielsen, Hans (Wien: Hermann Böhlaus Nachf., 1986), pp. 79-84
- Clunies Ross, Margaret, *Skáldskaparmál: Snorri Sturluson's Ars Poetica and Medieval Theories of Language* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987)
- ———, *Prolonged Echoes I: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994)
- ———, 'The Creation of Old Norse Mythology', *The Viking World*, ed. Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil S. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 231-234
- The Comic Book Database, 'Valkyrie'

  <http://comicbookdb.com/graphics/comic_graphics/1421_20110630184723_char.jpg>, accessed 30/04/2012
- Cormack, Margaret, *The Saints in Iceland: Their Veneration from the Conversion to 1400*, *Subsidia Hagiogaphica* 78 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1994)
- Csapo, Eric, *Theories of Mythology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005)
- Damico, Helen, 'The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature', *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Damico, Helen and Hennessey Olsen, Alexandra (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 176-89
- Downham, Clare, *Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland: The Dynasty of Ívarr to AD 1014* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2008)
- ———, ''Hiberno-Norwegians' and 'Anglo-Danes': Anachronistic Ethnicities and Viking-Age England', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 19 (2009), pp. 139-69
- DuBois, Thomas, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999)

- Dumézil, Georges, 'The Rígsþula and Indo-European Social Structure', *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. Haugen, Einar, trans. Lindow, John *et al*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 118-25
- Dunham Kelchner, Georgia, *Dreams in Old Norse Literature and Their Affinities in Folklore* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935)
- Dronke, Ursula, 'Eddic Poetry as a Source for the History of Germanic Religion', *Germanische Religionsgeschichte: Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, ed. Beck, Heinrich, Ellmers, Detlev and Schier, Kurt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 656-684
- *Edda, die Lieder des Codex Regius*, ed. Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn, 5th edn. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1983)
- Egeler, Matthias, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen: Gedanken zur religionsgeschichtlichen Anbindung Nordwesteuropas an den mediterranen Raum*, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 71 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011)
- *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Nordal, Sigurðr, *Íslenzk fornrit* II (Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933)
- Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 'Kormakr the Poet and His Verses', *The Saga Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* XVII (1966-69), pp. 18-60
- *Eiríks saga rauða*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslenzk fornrit* IV (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1935)
- Ekrem, Inger, *Nytt lys over Historia Norwegie. Mot en løsning i debatten om dens alder?* (Bergen: IKKR, Seksjon for gresk, latin og egyptologi, 1998)
- Ellis Davidson, Hilda, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964)
- ———, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988)
- Ellmers, Detlev, 'Die Archäologischen Quellen Zur Germanischen Religionsgeschichte', *Germanische Religionsgeschichte: Quellen Und Quellenprobleme*, ed. Beck, Heinrich, Ellmers, Detlev and Schier, Kurt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 95-117
- Enright, Michael, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from la Téne to the Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996)
- Ettlinger, Ellen, 'The Mythological Relief of the Oseberg Wagon Found in Southern Norway', *Folklore* 87 (1976)
- *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslenzk fornrit* IV (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1935)
- Fabech, Charlotte and Ringtved, Jytte, eds., *Settlement and Landscape: Proceedings of a Conference in Århus, Denmark, May 4-7 1998* (Århus: Jutland Archaeological Society, 1998)
- Fallgren, Jan-Henrik, 'Farm and Village in the Viking Age', *The Viking World*, ed. Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil S. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 67-76

- Faulkes, Anthony, 'The Sources of *Skáldskaparmál*: Snorri's Intellectual Background', *Snorri Sturluson. Kolloquium anläßlich der 750. Wiederkehr seines Todestages*, ed. Wolf, Alois (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1993), pp. 59-76, also available online <http://vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/>, accessed 30/04/2013
- Fidjestøl, Bjarne, 'Pagan Beliefs and Christian Impact: The Contribution of Scaldic Studies', *Viking Revaluations: Viking Society Centenary Symposium, 14th-15th May 1992*, ed. Faulkes, Anthony and Perkins, Richard (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1993), pp. 100-119
- ———, 'Norse-Icelandic Composition in the Oral Period', *Selected Papers*, ed. Haugen, Odd Einar and Mundal, Else (Odense: Odense University Press, 1997), pp. 303-332
- Finch, R. G., 'The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Völsunga Saga*', *The Saga Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 16 (1962-65), pp. 315-53
- Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Den norske-islandske skjaldedigtning*, 4 vols (København: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1967-1973)
- *Flateyjarbók*, ed. Vilhjalmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson and Nordal, Sigurður, 4 vols. (Akraness: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944-5)
- *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 3 vols. (Reykjavík: Bókútgáfan forni, 1943-44)
- Gade, Kari Ellen, 'Poetry and its Changing Importance in Medieval Icelandic Culture', *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 61-95
- Gardeła, Leszek, 'Into Viking Minds: Reinterpreting the Staffs of Sorcery and Unravelling *Seiðr*', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 4 (2008), pp. 45-84
- van Gennep, Arnold, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Vizedom, Monika B. and Caffee, Gabrielle L. (London: Routledge, 1960)
- *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, *Íslenzk fornrit* VI (Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943)
- Gísli Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland: Historical and Literary Contacts – A Survery of Research*, 2nd edn. (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2000)
- ———, 'Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. McTurk, Rory (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 285-301
- Gísli Sigurðsson and Vésteinn Ólason, eds., *The Manuscripts of Iceland* (Reykjavík: Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland, 2004).
- Graham-Campbell, James, *The Viking World*, 3rd edn. (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd., 2001)
- Grammaticus, Saxo, *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorvm*, ed. Holder, Alfred (Strassburg: Verlang von Karl J. Trübner, 1886)
- Gräslund, Anne-Sofie, 'Kultkontinuitet – myt eller verklighet? Om arkeologins möjligheter att belysa problemet', *Kontinuitet i kult och tro från vikingatid till*

medeltid: Projektet Sveriges kristnandet publikationer 1, ed. Nilsson, Bertil (Uppsala: Lunne Böcker, 1992), pp. 129-150

- Gräslund, Anne-Sofie and Lager, Linn, 'Runestones and the Christian Missions', *The Viking World*, ed. Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil S. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 629-638
- Grimm, Jacob, *Deutsche Grammatik* (Göttingen, 1819)
- ———, *Deutsche Mythologie*, 4th edn. (Berlin: 1875-78; repr. Wiesbaden: Marixverlag GmbH, 2003)
- Grudtvig, N. F. S., *Nordens Mythologi eller Sindbilled-Sprog, historisk-poetisk udviklet og oplyst*, 3rd edn. (Copenhagen: J. H. Schubothes Boghandel, 1870)
- Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson, 'Manuscripts and Palaeography', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. McTurk, Rory (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 245-264
- Guerber, H. A., *Myths of the Norsemen: From the Eddas and Sagas* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1908)
- *Den eldre Gulatingslova*, ed. Eithun, Bjørn, Rindal, Magnus and Ulset, Tor, *Norrøne Tekster* 6 (Oslo: Riksarkivet, 1994)
- *Gulatingslagen*, see *Noregs gamle Love*, vol. 1
- Gunnell, Terry, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1995)
- ———, '*Hof*, Halls, *Goðar* and Dwarves: An Examination of the Ritual Space in the Pagan Icelandic Hall', *Cosmos* 17 (2001), pp. 3-36
- ———, 'The Season of the *Dísir*: The Winter Nights and the *Dísarblót* in Early Scandinavian Belief', *Cosmos* 16 (2005), pp. 117-149
- ———, 'Ritual Space, Ritual Year, Ritual Gender: A View of the Old Norse and New Icelandic Ritual Year', *First International Conference of the Sief Working Group on the Ritual Year (Malta 20-24, 2005): Proceedings*, ed. Mifsud-Chircop, George (Malta: Publishers Enterprises Group (PEG) Ltd., 2006), pp. 285-302
- ———, 'Narratives, Space and Drama: Essential Spatial Aspects Involved in the Performance and Reception of Oral Narrative', *Folklore* 33 (2006), pp. 7-25
- ———, '"Til Holts Ek Gekk...": The Performance Demands of *Skírnismál*, *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál* in Liminal Time and Sacred Space', *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions. An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, ed. Andrén, Anders, Jennbert, Kristina and Raudvere, Catharina (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 238-242
- ———, 'How Elvish were the *Álfar*?', *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth: Essays in Honour of T.A. Shippey*, ed. Wawn, Andrew, Johnson, Graham and Walter, John (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 111-130
- ———, 'Eddic Poetry', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. McTurk, Rory (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007)

- ———, ‘Pantheon? What Pantheon? Concepts of a Family of Gods in Pre-Christian Nordic Religions’, *The 15th International Saga Conference: Sagas and the Use of the Past*, Århus Universitet, 6th of August 2012
- Hadley, D. M., ‘“And They Proceeded to Plough and to Support Themselves”: The Scandinavian Settlement of England’, *Anglo-Norman Studies* 19 (1996), pp. 69-96
- Hadley, D. M. and Richards, Julian D., eds., *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000)
- Hall, Alaric, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007)
- ———, ‘“Þur Sarriþu Þursa Trutin”: Monster-Fighting and Medicine in Early Medieval Scandinavia’, *Asclepio: Revista de Historia de la Medicina y de la Ciencia* LXI (2009), pp. 195-218
- *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslenzk fornrit* VIII (Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939)
- *Harðar saga Grímkelssonar*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Íslenzk fornrit* XIII (Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941)
- Hawkes, Christopher, ‘Archaeological Theory and Method: Some Suggestions from the Old World’, *American Anthropologist* 56 (1957), pp. 155-168
- Haywood, John, *Encyclopaedia of the Viking Age* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000)
- *Hákonar saga góða*, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Íslenzk fornrit* XXVI (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1941)
- Hårdh, Birgitta, ‘Viking Age Uppåkra and Lund’, *The Viking World*, ed. Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil S. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 145-149
- *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, see *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 2
- Herschend, Frands, *The Idea of the Good in Late Iron Age Society*, *Occasional Papers in Archaeology* 15 (Uppsala: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, 1998)
- ———, ‘The Origin of the Hall in Southern Scandinavia’, *Tor* 25 (1993), pp. 175-199
- *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, see *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1
- Hieatt, Constance B., *The Realism of Dream Visions: The Poetic Exploitation of the Dream-Experience in Chaucer and His Contemporaries* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967)
- *Historia Norwegie*, ed. Ekrem, Inger and Mortensen, Lars Boje, trans. Fisher, Peter (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2003)
- *A History of Norway and the Passion and Miracles of the Blessed Óláfr*, ed. Phelpstead, Carl, trans. Kunin, Devra (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 2001)
- Hollander, Lee M., *The Skalds: A Selection of Their Poems, with Introductions and Notes* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1947)

- Jones, Gwyn, 'The Religious Elements of the Icelandic Hólmganga', *Modern Language Review* 27 (1932), pp. 307-313
- Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak: A Pagan Ritual Turning Point in the Conversion of Iceland*, 2nd edn. (Rekjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1999)
- Jónas Kristjánsson, *Icelandic Sagas and Manuscripts*, trans. Boucher, Alan, 2nd edn. (Reykjavík: Iceland Review, 1980)
- Johansen, Øystein, 'Religion and Archaeology: Revelation or Empirical Research?', *Words and Objects: Towards a Dialogue between Archaeology and History of Religion*, ed. Steinsland, Gro (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1986), pp. 67-77
- Jørgensen, Lars, 'Manor, Cult and Market at Lake Tissø', *The Viking World*, ed. Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil S. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 77-82
- Kershaw, Nora, *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems* (Cambridge: Cambirdge University Press, 1922)
- Kershaw, Kris, *The One-Eyed God: Odin and the (Indo-)Germanic Männerbünde*, *Journal of Indo-European Studies Monographs* 36 (Washington: Journal of Indo-European Studies, 2000)
- *Kormáks saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslenzk fornrit* VIII (Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939)
- Krag, Claus, 'The Early Unification of Norway', *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, Volume I: Prehistory to 1520*, ed. Helle, Knut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 184-201
- Krappe, Alexander Haggerty, 'The Valkyrie Episode in the Njals Saga', *Modern Language Notes* 43 (1928), pp. 471-474
- *Kristni saga*, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson and Foote, Peter, *Íslenzk fornrit* XV, 2 vols. (Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2003)
- *Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslenzk fornrit* I (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1986)
- Larsson, Annika, 'Viking Age Textiles', *The Viking World*, ed. Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil S. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 181-185
- Larsson, Lars, ed., *Continuity for Centuries: A Ceremonial Building and Its Context at Uppåkra, Southern Sweden* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 2004)
- ———, 'Ritual Building and Ritual Space: Aspects of Investigations at the Iron Age Central Site Uppåkra, Scania, Sweden', *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions. An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, ed. Andrén, Anders, Jennbert, Kristina and Raudvere, Catharina (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 248-253
- Lassen, Annette, 'Den prosaiske Odin: Fortidssagaerne som mytografi', *Fornaldarsagornas Struktur och Ideologi: Handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8-2.9 2001*, ed. Ármann Jackobsson, Lassen, Annette and Ney, Agneta (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2003), pp. 205-219
- *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslenzk fornrit* V (Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934)

- Liberman, Anatoly, 'What Happened to Female Dwarfs?', *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz*, ed. Simek, Rudolf and Heizmann, Wilhelm (Wien: Fassbaender, 2002), pp. 257-263
- Lindow, John, *Comitatus, Individual and Honor: Studies in North Germanic Institutional Vocabulary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
- ———, *Scandinavian Mythology: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1988)
- ———, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)
- Lindqvist, Sune, 'Gamla Uppsala kyrka: Bidrag till dess byggnadshistoria', *Fornvännen* 46 (1951), pp. 219-250
- Lundqvist, Lars, 'Central Places and Central Areas in the Late Iron Age', *Visions of the Past: Trends and Traditions in Swedish Medieval Archaeology*, ed. Andersson, Hans, Carelli, Peter and Ersgård, Lars (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1997), pp. 179-197
- Lönnroth, Lars, *Den Dubbla Scenen: Muntlig Diktning Från Eddan Til Abba* (Stockholm: Prisma, 1978)
- ———, 'The Double Scene of Arrow-Odd's Drinking Contest', *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium*, ed. Bekker-Nielsen, Hans (Odense: Odense University Press, 1979), pp. 94-119
- MacLeod, Mindy and Mees, Bernard, *Runic Amulets and Magic Objects* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006)
- Makaev, Ènver Achmedovič, *The Language of the Oldest Runic Inscriptions: Linguistic and Historical-Philological Analysis*, trans. Meredig, John and Antonsen, Elmer, *Filologisk-filosofika serien* 21 (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 1996)
- Marold, Edith, 'Die Skaldendichtung als Quelle der Religionsgeschicte', *Germanische Religionsgeschichte: Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, ed. Beck, Heinrich, Ellmers, Detlev and Schier, Kurt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 685-719
- McKinnell, John, *Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism* (Rome: Il Calamo, 1994)
- ———, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005)
- McKinnell, John, Simek, Rudolf and Düwel, Klaus, *Runes, Magic and Religion. A Sourcebook*, *Studia Medievalia Septentrionalia* 10 (Wien: Fassbaender, 2004)
- McTurk, Rory, 'Sacral Kingship in Ancient Scandinavia: A Review of Some Recent Writings', *The Saga Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 19 (1975), pp. 139-69
- ———, 'Scandinavian Sacral Kingship Revisited', *The Saga Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 24 (1994), pp. 19-32
- Meaney, Audrey, 'The *Ides* of the Cotton Gnomic Poem', *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Damico, Helen and Hennessey Olsen,

Alexandra (Bloomingtom and Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, 1990), pp. 158-175

- Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben, 'Religions Old and New', *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. Sawyer, Peter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 202-224
- Millington, Barry, '*Der Ring des Nibelungen*: Conception and Interpretation', *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 74-84
- Mitchell, Stephen, 'Warlocks, Valkyries and Varlets: A Prolegomenon to the Study of North Sea Witchcraft Terminology', *Cosmos* 17 (2001), pp. 59-81
- Montgomery, James E., 'Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsiyyah', *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3 (2000), pp. 12-21.
- Moreland, John, *Archaeology and Text*, *Duckworth Debates in Archaeology* (London: Duckworth, 2001)
- Motz, Lotte, 'Sister in the Cave: The Stature and the Function of the Female Figures of the *Eddas*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 95 (1980), pp. 168-182
- ———, *The King, the Champion and the Sorcerer: A Study in Germanic Myth*, *Studia Medievalia Septentrionalia* (Wien: Fassaender, 1996)
- Müller, Max, *Chips from a German Workshop*, 4 vols (New York: Charles Scribner and Company, 1867-1875)
- Munch, Gerd Stamsø, Johansen, Olav Sverre and Roesdahl Else, eds., *Borg in Lofoten: A Chieftain's Farm in North Norway*, *Arkeologisk Skriftserie* (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2003)
- Mundal, Else, *Fylgjemotiva i norrøn litteratur* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1974)
- ———, 'Supernatural Beings: Fylgja', *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 624-625
- Murphy, Luke John, 'Politicising Pagan Mythology in Tenth-Century Norway? An Experimental Rereading of *Þórsdrápa*', The *Power and the Sacred in the Medieval World (5th-15th centuries)* Conference, University of Leicester, 26th of November 2011
- ———, 'Continuity and Change in the Sacred Social Spaces of the Pre-Christian Nordic World', *Religion and Science in the Nordic Middle Ages*, ed. Arngrímur Vídalín, Etheridge, Christian and Gerður Sigurðardóttir (Forthcoming)
- Nationalmuseet Website, 'Freja' <http://vikingekult.natmus.dk/foerkristne-kultpladser/temaer/de-nordiske-guder/freja/>, accessed 30/04/2013
- ———, 'Fynbo finder valkyrie fra vikingetiden' <http://natmus.dk/nyhedsoversigt/nyhed/article/fynbo-finder-valkyrie-fra-vikingetiden/>, accessed 30/04/2013
- Näsman, Ulf, 'Sydskandinavisk samhällsstruktur i ljuset av merovingisk och angelsaxisk analogi eller i vad är det som centralplatserna är centrala?', *Centrala platser, centrala frågor: Samhällsstrukturen under Järnåldern: En vänbok till Berta Stjernquist*, ed. Larsson, Lars and Hårdh, Birgitta (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1998), pp. 1-26

- Neckel, Gustav, *Walhall. Studien über germanischen Jenseitsglauben* (Dortmund: Fr. Wilh. Ruhfus, 1913)
- Nordal, Sigurður, *Snorri Sturluson* (Reykjavík: Þór. B. Þorlákssson, 1920)
- Nordberg, Andreas, *Krigarna i Odins sal. Dödsföreställningar och krigarkult i fornnordisk religion*, 2nd edn. (Stockholm: Akademitryck AB, 2004)
- ———, 'Continuity, Change and Regional Variation in Old Norse Religion', *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*, ed. Raudvere, Catharina and Schjødt, Jens Peter (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012), pp. 119-151
- *Noregs gamle Love*, ed. Keyser, Rudolf, Munch Peter, Andreas, Strom, Gustav and Hertzberg, Ebbe, 5 vols. (Christiania: Chr. Gröndahl, 1846-95)
- Norr, Svante, *To Rede and to Rown. Expressions of Early Scandinavian Kingship in Written Sources*, *Occasional Papers in Archaeology* 17 (Uppsala: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University, 1998)
- O'Donoghue, Heather, *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in Kormaks Saga* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991)
- *Óláfs saga helga*, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Íslenzk fornrit* XXVII (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1979)
- *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Íslenzk fornrit* XXVI (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1941)
- Quinn, Judy, 'From Orality to Literacy in Medieval Iceland', *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Clunies Ross, Margaret (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 30-60
- Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. Bethmann, Ludwig Konrad and Waitz, Georg (Hannoverae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1878)
- Perkins, Richard, *Thor the Wind-Raiser and the Eyrarland Image* (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 2001)
- Pluskowski, Aleks, 'The Sacred Gallows: Sacrificial Hanging to Óðinn', *Archaeological Reveiw from Cambridge* 17 (2000), pp. 55-81
- *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Hollander, Lee M. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962)
- *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, Carolyne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)
- Price, Arnold H., *Germanic Warrior Clubs: An Inquiry into the Dynamics of the Era of Migrations and into the Antecedents of Medieval Society* (Tübingen: Lück und Mauch, 1994)
- Price, Neil S., *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala: The Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University, 2002)
- ———, 'What's in a Name? An Archaeological Identity Crisis for the Norse Gods (and Some of Their Friends)', *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions. An International Conference in*

Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004, ed. Andrén, Anders, Jennbert, Kristina and Raudvere, Catharina (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 179-183

- Præstgaard Andersen, Lise, 'On Valkyries, Shield-Maidens and Other Armed Women – in Old Norse Sources and Saxo Grammaticus', *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz, 1922-1997*, ed. Simek, Rudolf and Heizmann, Wilhelm (Wien: Fassbaender, 2002), pp. 291-318
- Quinn, Judy, 'From Orality to Literacy in Medieval Iceland', *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Clunies Ross, Margaret (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 30-60
- *Ragnars saga loðbrókar ok sona hans*, see *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1
- Ranisch, Wilhelm and Heusler, Andreas, *Eddica minora: Dichtungen eddischer Art aus den Fornaldarsögur und anderen Prosawerken* (Dortmund: Fr. Wilh. Ruhfus, 1903)
- Raudvere, Catharina, *Kunskap och insikt i norrön tradition: Mytologi, ritualer och trolldomsanklagelser* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003)
- ———, 'Popular Religion in the Viking Age', *The Viking World*, ed. Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil S. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 235-242
- Raudvere, Catharina and Schjødt, Jens Peter, 'The Study of Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions: Trends and Perspectives', *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*, ed. Raudvere, Catharina and Schjødt, Jens Peter (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012), pp. 7-12
- Rimbert, *Vita Anskarri*, ed. Waitz, Georg (Hannoverae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1884)
- *Rundata 2.5*, <http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>, accessed 30/04/2013
- *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. Tolkien, Christopher (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1960)
- *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*, trans. Byock, Jesse L. (London: Penguin Books, 1990)
- Sapp, Christopher, 'Dating *Ynglingatal*: Chronological Metrical Developments in *Kviðuháttr*', *Skandinavistik* 30 (2000), pp. 85-98
- de la Saussaye, Pierre Daniël Chantepie, *Geschiedenis van den godsdienst der Germanen voor hun overgang tot het Christendom* (Haarlem: F. Bohn, 1900)
- ———, *The Religion of the Teutons*, trans. Bert John Vos (Boston: The Athenæum Press, 1902)
- Sawyer Birgit, *The Viking Age Rune-Stones: Custom and Commemoration in Early Medieval Scandinavia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)
- Schjødt, Jens Peter, 'Diversity and its Consequences for the Study of Old Norse Religion: What is it We Are Trying to Reconstruct?', *Between Paganism and Christianity in the North*, ed. Słupecki, Leszek P. and Morawiec, Jakob (Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2009), pp. 9-22

- ———, ‘Reflections on Aims and Methods in the Study of Old Norse Religion’, *The Viking Society for Northern Research General Meeting*, University College London, 13th of March 2009
- ———, ‘Ideology of the Ruler in Pre-Christian Scandinavia: Mythic and Ritual Relations’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 6 (2010), pp. 161-194
- ———, ‘Reflections on Aims and Methods in the Study of Old Norse Religion’, *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*, ed. Raudvere, Catharina and Schjødt, Jens Peter (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012), pp. 263-287
- Schmidt, Holger, ‘Reconstruction of Lejre Hall’, *Journal of Danish Archaeology* 10 (1991), pp. 186-190
- von See, Klaus, *et al*., eds., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, 5 vols. (Heidelberg: Universtiätverlag Winter, 2000-)
- Skre, Dagfinn, ‘The Development of Urbanism in Scandinavia’, *The Viking World*, ed. Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil S. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 83-93
- *Skj = Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 4 vols. (København: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1967-1973)
- *SkP II = Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300*, ed. Gade, Kari Ellen *et al*., *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages II*, 2 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009
- Shaw, Philip A., *Pagan Goddesses in the Early Germanic World: Eostre, Hreda and the Cult of Matrons*, *Studies in Early Medieval History* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011)
- Shepard, Jonathan, ‘Rus’’, *Christianization and the Rise of the Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus’ c. 900-1200*, ed. Berend, Nora (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 369-416
- Simek, Rudolf, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, 2nd edn. (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1995)
- ———, ‘Rich and Powerful: The Image of the Female Deity in Migration Age Scandinavia’, *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference 2-7 July 2000, University of Sydney*, ed. Barnes, Geraldine and Clunies Ross, Margaret (Sydney: Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 2000), pp. 468-479
- ———, ‘Goddesses, Mothers, Dísir: Iconography and Interpretation of the Female Deity in Scandinavia in the First Millenium’, *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz*, ed. Simek, Rudolf and Heizmann, Wilhelm (Wien: Fassbaender, 2002), pp. 93-124
- ———, ‘The Vanir – An Obituary’, *Herzort Island. Zum 65. Geburtstag von Gerd Kreutzer*, ed. Seiler, Thomas (Lüdenscheid: Seltmann, 2005), pp. 140-155
- Sindbæk, Søren Michael, ‘The Small World of the Vikings: Networks in Early Medieval Communication and Exchange’, *Norweigan Archaeological Review* 40 (2007), pp. 59-74

- Simpson, Jacqueline, ed. and trans., *Icelandic Folktales and Legends* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1972)
- Smyser, H. M., 'Ibn Fadlān's Account of the Rūs with Some Commentary and Some Allusions to *Beowulf*', in *Franciplegus: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honour of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr.*, ed. Bessinger Jr., Jess B. and Creed, Robert P. (New York: New York University Press, 1965), pp. 92-119
- Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, ed. Faulkes, Anthony, 4 vols., 2nd edn. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005)
- Soffía Guðný Guðmundsdóttir and Laufey Guðnadóttir, 'Book Production in the Middle Ages', *The Manuscripts of Iceland*, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland, 2004), pp. 45-61
- Steinsland, Gro, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi: en analyse av hierogami-myten i Skírnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal og Hyndluljóð* (Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo, 1989)
- ———, *Norrøn Religion: Myter, Riter, Samfunn* (Oslo: Pax Forlag A/S, 2005)
- ———, 'Rulers as Offspring of Gods and Giantesses: On the Mythology of Pagan Norse Rulership', *The Viking World*, ed. Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil S. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 227-230
- Ström, Folke, *Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor. Fruktbarhetskult och sakralt kungadöme in Norden* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1954)
- ———, *Nordisk Hedendom*, 2nd edn. (Lund: Berlingska Boktryckeriet, 1967)
- Sundqvist, Olof, 'The Uppsala Cult', *Myth, Might, and Man: Ten Essays on Gamla Uppsala*, ed. Friberg, Gunnel (Emmaboda: Åkessons Tryckeri, 2000), pp. 37-39
- ———, *Freyr's Offspring: Rulers and Religion in Ancient Svea Society*, *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Historia Religionum 21* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2002)
- Svanberg, Fredrik, *Decolonizing the Viking Age 1*, *Acta Archaeologica Lundensia in 8°* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003)
- ———, *Death Rituals in South-East Scandinavia AD 800-1000: Decolonizing the Viking Age 2*, *Acta Archaeologica Lundensia in 4°* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003)
- Sveinbjörn Egilsson and Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon poeticum antiquæ linguæ septentrionalis. Ordbog over det norsk-islandske skjaldesprog* (København: S. L. Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1931)
- *Svenska landskapslagar: tolkade och förklarade för nutidens svenskar*, ed. Holmbäck, Åke and Wessén, Elias, 5 vols. (Stockholm: Hugo Gebers Förlag, 1993)
- Tacitus, *De origine et situ Germanorum*, ed. Bruun, Niels W. and Lund, Allan A., 2 vols (Århus: Wormianum, 1974)
- ———, *Germania*. trans. Rives, J.B., *Clarendon Ancient History Series* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002)
- Thomas, Roy and Buscema, John, *The Avengers* vol. 1 #83, December 1970

- Tilley, Christopher Y., *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994)
- Turner, Victor W., *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969)
- Turville-Petre, E. O. G., 'A Note on the *Landdísir*', *Early English and Norse Studies: Presented to Hugh Smith in Honour of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Brown, Arthur and Foote, Peter (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1963), pp. 196-201
- ———, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964)
- *Too Human* (St. Catharines: Silicon Knights, 2008)
- Tulinius, Torfi H., *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*. trans. Eldevik, Randi C., *The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilisation* (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002)
- Townend, Matthew, *Language and History in Viking Age England: Linguistic Relations between Speakers of Old Norse and Old English*, *Studies in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002)
- *Upplandslagen*, see *Svenska landskapslagar*, vol. 1
- Vésteinn Ólason, 'Er Snorri Höfundur *Egils Sögu*?', *Skírnir* 142 (1968), pp. 48-67
- de Vries, Jan, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957)
- ———, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 3rd edn., 2 vols. (Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1970)
- *Valkyrie Profile* (Tokyo: Square Enix, 1999-)
- *Víga-Glúms saga*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, *Íslenzk fornrit* IX (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1956)
- *Völsunga saga*, see *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1
- *Völsunga Saga: The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. & trans. Finch, R. G. (London: Nelson, 1965)
- Wagner, Richard, *The Rhinegold & the Valkyrie*, trans. Margaret Armour (London and New York: William Heinmann and Doubleday Pace & Co., 1910)
- Walaker Nordeide, Sæbjørg, 'Death in Abundance – Quickly! The Oseberg Ship Burial in Norway', *Acta Archaeologica* 28 (2011), p. 7-15
- Watt, Margrethe, 'Images of Women On "Guldgubber" From the Merovingian Age', *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz*, ed. Simek, Rudolf and Heizmann, Wilhelm (Wien: Fassbaender, 2002), p. 81-92
- Wawn, Andrew, 'The Post-Medieval Reception of Old Norse and Old Iceland Literature', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. McTurk, Rory (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 320-337
- Weber, Gerd Wolfgang, *Wyrd. Studien Zum Schicksalsbegriff Der Altenglischen Und Altnordischen Literatur*, *Frankfurter Beiträge Zur Germanistik* 8 (Bad Homburg: Verlag Gehlen, 1969)

- Welinder, Stig, 'Christianity, Politics and Ethnicity in Early Medieval Jämtland, Mid Sweden', *The Cross Goes North*, ed. Carver, Martin (York: York Medieval Press, 2003), pp. 509-530
- Westrinm Th., *et al.* eds., *Nordisk familjebok. Konversationslexikon och realencyklopedi*, 2nd edn., 38 vols. (Stockholm: Nordisk familjeboks tryckeri 1876-1926)
- Whaley, Diana, 'Snorri Sturluson', *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Pulsiano, Phillip (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 602-603
- ———, 'Skaldic Poetry', *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. McTurk, Rory (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 479-502
- Weiser, Lily, *Altgermanische Jünglingsweihen und Männerbünde. Ein Beitrag zur deutschen und nordischen Altertums- und Volkskunde* (Baden: Konkordia A.-G., 1927)
- Wieselgren, Per, 'Quellenstudien zur *Völsungasaga*', *Acta et commentationes Universitatis Tartuensis Dorpatensis* 3.2 (1935), pp. 5-15
- Wikimedia Commons <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oseberg_Wagon_detail_1.jpg>, accessed 30/04/2012
- Williams, Gareth, 'Raiding and Warfare', *The Viking World*, ed. Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil S. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 193-203
- Williams, Henrik, 'Runes', *The Viking World*, ed. Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil S. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 281-290
- Yelena Sesseja Helgadóttir-Yershova, 'Hildibrandr *Húnakappi* and Ásmundr *Kappabani* in Icelandic Sagas and Faroese Ballads', *Preprint Papers of the 14th International Saga Conference: Uppsala 9th - 15th August 2009*, ed. Ney, Agneta, Williams, Henrik and Charpentier Ljungqvist, Fredrik (Gävle: Gävle University Press, 2009), pp. 1064-1071
- *Ynglinga saga*, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Íslenzk fornrit* XXVI (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1941)
- *Þáttr Þiðranda ok Þórhalls*, see *Flateyjarbók*, vol. 1
- *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* see *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 2
- *Ǫgmundar þáttr dytts*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, *Íslenzk fornrit* IX (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1956)