



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

Hugvísindasvið

# **The Role of Horses in the Old Norse Sources**

*Transcending worlds, mortality, and reality*

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í Medieval Icelandic Studies

**Katrín Sif Einarsdóttir**

**September 2013**



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## Abstract

This thesis presents the depiction and use of horses in the Old Norse sources, including their role in religion, rituals and beliefs. A close reading of the myths in the Poetic Edda and Snorra Edda shows that horses were seen as a bridge between worlds – a main form of transportation through the gaps between the living and the dead, between mythological worlds, and even beyond the boundaries of reality. In the *Íslendingasögur*, echoes of the horse's role as a transcendent animal are also seen, since the horse is often associated with the dead and the afterlife through its ability to foretell fates and forebode death. Superstition also surrounds the horse with regards to land settlement, fertility and health, and the horse is associated with supernatural powers over the elements in some accounts. These characteristics of the horse in the Old Norse sources support the hypothesis that the horse served as much more than just a transport animal for the living and the dead, but as a shaman in Old Norse culture. This thesis will explore the ways in which horses were considered sacred and spiritual animals, providing a connection between the mortal and mythological beings to the unconscious and supernatural realms.

## Ágrip

Í ritgerðinni er fjallað um lýsingu hesta og hlutverk þeirra í fornnorrænum heimildum, þ. á m. í trúarbrögðum, helgisiðum og átrúnaði ýmiss konar. Nákvæmur lestur á goðsögum í eddukvæðum og í Snorra Eddu sýnir að hestar brúuðu bilið milli heima – þeir voru eitt helsta samgöngutækið milli heima lifenda og látinna, milli aðskildra goðsögulegra heima og jafnvel út fyrir mörk raunveruleikans. Í Íslendingasögum má einnig greina enduróm af hlutverki hestsins sem dýr sem fer milli heima, þar sem hesturinn er oft settur í samband við feigð og getur sagt fyrir um örlög og dauða. Tengt hestinum má einnig finna átrúnað sem varðar frjósemi, heilsu og í sumum tilfellum tengist valdi yfir náttúruöflunum. Þessi eiginleikar hestsins í fornnorrænum heimildum styðja þá tilgátu að hesturinn þjónaði breiðara tilgangi en bara það að flytja menn á milli staða, jafnvel meira en yfir í heim hinna dauðu; hesturinn hafi verið eins konar sjaman í menningunni. Í ritgerðinni verður farið yfir trúarlegt og andlegt hlutverk þessara dýra og fjallað um tengslin milli dauðlegra og goðfræðilegra vera og heima hins yfirnáttúrulega og dulvitaða.

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout the history of Iceland, horses had many practical purposes, and served as a source of joy, pride, and social status (Karlsson 2000; Oexle 1984). Horses were indispensable for carrying hay, fish and other products between farms and harbors, as well as rounding-up sheep and taking men to Alþing each year (Karlsson 2000: 46, Jesch 2005: 129). During the settlement of Iceland, horses were well respected animals, necessary for travel, battle, entertainment (horse fights), attending assemblies, and used for herding and other farm work.

Beyond serving these practical roles, horses also held many religious, superstitious, and even supernatural connotations, sometimes serving the function of a spiritual medium in Icelandic society. Sagas refer to the sacrifice of horses up until the Middle Ages, when the horse was still considered a sacred and spiritual animal used for various ceremonies, so the eating of horse meat was also an important topic of debate during the conversion period. In the Norse mythological sources, horses play important roles as transcendent animals, transcending reality, mortality and different worlds, and these uses of horses are sometimes echoed in the *Íslendingasögur*.

We must be aware that the *Íslendingasögur* are only 13<sup>th</sup>C representations of the pre-Christian, settlement period, and even the extant collections of mythological poems, the *Eddukvæði*, as well as the tales of the gods recounted in the *Snorra Edda* were recorded in the post-heathen era. However, these works are used to dissect ancient motifs and pagan lines of thought that originate from well before the time of literacy, since archaeological records and skaldic poetry from the pagan period help confirm their validity. It is also important to understand that the conversion period was not an overnight process, but an ongoing change that lasted many hundreds of years; paganism and Christianity lived side by side, in communities and even individuals (i.e. the example of King Hákon), and the horse also played a role in defining and differentiating both religions. Though there is a discrepancy between the time of events taking place and their time of writing, sometimes many hundreds of years, the role of horses in the sagas and eddaic sources can still be discussed to some accuracy, since the Norse myths and poetry are assumed to have been passed through the oral tradition for many generations until scribes began to write them down.

Norse mythology teaches us about the mounted Valkyries, the choosers of the slain, and how they carry fallen soldiers to Valhøll on horseback; the Æsir ride daily to their judgement seats on their horses; and Sleipnir is Óðinn's eight legged horse who leads the

dead and carries Hermóðr to Hel. The horse is trusted to carry the gods between worlds and over fiery bridges and big rivers, through light and dark, while Svaðilfari is the stallion who fails to build the protective wall around Ásgarðr to keep it ever connected to Miðgarðr. Horses have both practical and supernatural purposes in the *Íslendingasögur*, serving man while he is alive, dreaming, or dying. Horse spirits, a type of *fylgjur*, visit men in their dreams to forebode death, and some saga heroes are buried with their horses fully tacked in examples of riding graves (i.e. Skalla-Grímr in *Egils saga*). In both the recorded mythology and the sagas, horses are associated with other worlds and the afterlife, not only as a transport animal, but also an intermediary connecting man to the supernatural and spiritual realms.

Through a literary review of the Norse sources, a case study on Sleipnir and Yggdrasill, and some support examples from archaeology, this thesis will discuss the many roles of the horse, discrediting its role as a transport animal for the deceased and highlighting its important function as a spiritual mediator in Old Norse-Icelandic society.

## 2. Sacrifice and Burial Practices

There is a strong connection between pagan worship and sacred horses in the Old Norse sources (O'Donoghue 2007:61). The horse was popular in pagan sacrifices because it was such a respected, valued and sacred animal. The offering of horses to the gods was very meaningful, and moreover, was maybe believed to be able to carry messages or requests to the gods. As an animal, horses were trusted to find their way to the gods, providing their own transport and knowing the way to the next life (Loumand 2006:133). When horses were sacrificed, their blood was read to foretell the future, following a feast of horse meat, and horse cults were often attributed to Freyr worshippers (Andrén 2007, Davidson 1964:97) and pagan cults (DuBois 1999:61-6). Furthermore, some horse sacrifices were given to the gods of death to keep them content in the underworld, as in the case of the Sámi god Ruto, the Finno-Ugric god of disease and misfortune, who was given a black horse to keep him in his underworld (DuBois 1999:49).

Jochens (1999:631) believes the horse was a means for bridging many burial aspects of both Christian and pagan religious practices. There are both Christian and pagan forms of burials practiced in the *Íslendingasögur*, with cremation and burial in mounds being the most commonly referred to. Mound graves, or *haugar*, were custom in the pagan tradition, and the *haugar* burial custom was institutionalized by King Danr of Denmark who asked to be buried in a mound with his horse fully saddled (ÍF 26.4-5). Tacitus explains the heathen Germanic burial practices as simple procedures, where the bodies of famous men are burned on the pyre with their horse and buried in a mound of turf:

“...the bodies of famous men are burned with particular kinds of wood. When they have heaped up the pyre they do not throw garments or spices on it; only the dead man's arms, and sometimes his horse too, are cast into the flames. The tomb is a raised mound of turf.” (Lund 1988:90)

Here we have a cremation and a mound burial described, where the horse is buried with the deceased. To bury a man with his horse was perhaps a sign of securing their passage to the next world, in the same way that soldiers were buried with their horse to secure a mount in battle heaven, Valhøll. The continuity of pagan burial customs past the Christianization of Iceland is referred to in *Landnámabók*, where settlers in Iceland are said to have buried their dead in mound graves (i.e. Ásmundr and Björn Ketilsson in *Landnámabók* ÍF 1.102-3, 122).

Many grave sites across Scandinavia have been found with ships and horses buried together, suggesting a Baldr type funeral where both ships and horses were seen as useful means of transport when entering the afterlife. Baldr's funeral is described in *Gylfaginning* (49.45-46); his body was laid on the ship Hringhorn, along with his fully harnessed horse, and burned together and pushed out to sea. Archeological evidence from the Vendel graves in Gokstand and Oseberg, Sweden, also provide examples of ship burials containing horses (Graslund 1980:44), and archeological digs in Iceland found forty-eight riding graves, a man or woman buried with their horse (Loumand 2005).

There are three plausible hypotheses for why the burial of a man would require the killing of his horse to accompany him or her to their grave. The first, suggested by record of Óðinn's law in *Ynglinga saga*, states it is for the sake of material wealth:

“Óðinn setti lög í landi sínu, þau er gengit hofðu fyrr með Ásum. Svá setti hann at alla dauða menn skyldi brenna ok bera á bál með þeim eign þeira. Sagði hann svá, at með þvílíkum auðæfum skyldi hverr koma til Valhallar sem hann hafði á bál, þess skyldi hann ok njóta, er hann sjálfr hafði í jorð grafit.” (ÍF XXVI.8.20)

This law states that a noble man should be burned on a pyre with all his possessions, so that he may arrive in Valhøll with all the same things he had had with him before in his living life; this way, he could continue to enjoy his worldly possessions also in the afterlife (Ellis 1968:40).

The second hypothesis is that horses and other burial goods were markers of social status or profession. In Frankish burial practices, animals found in Medieval Merovingian graves are believed to have reflected the social rank of the deceased (Effros 2003:112). The burial of horses with the deceased should not necessarily be a sacrificial offering, but could also have been a marker of status (Oexle 1984). The fact that many riding graves consisted of the dead person, a horse, and all their riding gear could support both hypotheses, since the riding equipment was often expensive, ornamented and personal to the horse and its owner, but Brink and Price (2008:187) disagree that identifying a buried man's status or profession by the many things he was buried with is possible.

However, Loumand (2006) disagrees that the horse was buried with its equipment as an emblem of social status; the riding equipment must have served a more functional purpose. A third hypothesis is that the horse was a necessary possession for the deceased, since the journey to the afterlife could not be made without a horse to ride there. The valuable

riding gear was not simply buried with the horse and rider, but tacked on the horse. Since the possessions were laid on the horse, fully bridled and saddled, it makes sense that the horse would have to be buried fully tacked so he was ride-ready to transport his owner in the same riding comfort he was accustomed to in the former life. This idea of riding to the afterlife is only assumed, since the practical role of horses to transport its rider in the living life can be extended to the afterlife, but nowhere in the sources can we find this explicitly stated or explained.

An extension of this hypothesis is that the horse needed to accompany the defeated rider from battle to the next life, carrying him not only to Valhøll, but ensuring that the deceased had his horse, tack, and weapons to use in the daily play fights carried out by the *einherjar* in Óðinn's hall: "*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 þeirra. Ok er líðr at dǫgurðarmáli þá ríða þeir heim til Valhallar ok setjask til drykkju*" (*Gylfaginning* 41.54). The daily fights of the *einherjar* are meant to prepare the fallen soldiers for the final battle of the worlds, suggesting that the afterlife is to be enjoyed on horseback until *Ragnarök* comes, and everything starts again.

### 3. Horses, the dead, and mortality

The horse's role in sacrifices and grave spaces prove that it was considered a sacred animal, and both its practical purpose for transport and its supernatural role for carrying men in the afterlife were highly valued. The horse's ability to transcend the mortal and immortal worlds make it a useful transport animal, but did they really carry the deceased on their journey to the afterlife?

Loumand's (2005) doctoral dissertation analyzes forty-eight grave sites across Iceland that were found containing a body with a horse. Even though we cannot know for sure, it is safe to assume that most of those riders died without the lives of their horses being lost, so we can guess that the horse was killed to accompany the deceased to his or her grave. In one case, the horse meat was cut down to small chunks, suggesting the horse served as food for the deceased, but usually the horse was killed by beheading, a slit to the throat, or a blow to the head to be buried whole (Loumand 2006:130). This could be interpreted as some sort of final sacrifice to the deceased, or ensuring that their worldly possessions were carried on with them to the next life, unless it was, as Loumand believes, a means of supplying the deceased with their mounted transport for the afterlife.

The powerful image of Valkyries arriving to a battlefield, choosing the noblest warriors, and taking them to Valhøll as riding maidens leaves a vivid impression:

Sá hon valkyrjur  
vítt of komnar,  
görvar at ríða  
tíl Goðþjóðar;  
Skuld helt skildi,  
en Skögunn önnur,  
Gunnr, Hildir, Göndul  
ok Geirskögunn.  
Nú eru talðar  
nönnur Herjans,  
görvar at ríða  
grund valkyrjur. (*Völuspá* 30.13)

The seeress explains that she sees Valkyries coming, from far and wide, 'ready to ride' to the nation of the gods, and ready to ride over earth. They are also called hag-riders or troll women, flying across the sky (*Hávamál* 155.52), riding across the sea (*Helgakviða*

*Hjörvarðssonar* 9.182) and in other sources are referred to as night riders (*Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* 15.184). The arrival of these riding maidens signaled coming death on the battlefield, as they were the ones responsible for carrying the fallen soldiers to Valhöll.

However, it is important to make the distinction that the deceased do not ride alone to Valhöll; the horses are not a means of transport for them, but for the Valkyries, and it is the Valkyries who directly transport the deceased to the afterlife. Horses only serve as a direct means of transport for the deceased in their next life after they have arrived at Valhöll. The daily sport of the einherjar involves the noble slain riding to the battlefield, play fighting, and then riding back to Valhöll:

"Allir einherjar  
Óðins túnum í  
höggvask hverjan dag,  
val þeir kjósa  
ok ríða vígi frá,  
sitja meirr of sáttir saman." (*Vafþrúðnismál* 41.69)

In the story of Sigrún and Helgi from the *Völsungs*, Sigrún's maid goes out to Helgi's burial mound and sees him riding to the mound with many men, and thinks it's a sign of *Ragnarök* coming:

Ámbótt Sigrúnar gekk um aftan hjá haugi Helga og sá að Helgi reið til haugsins með marga menn. Ambótt kvað: "Hvort eru það svik ein er eg sjá þykjumst eða ragnarök? Ríða menn dauðir, er jóa yðra oddum keyrið, eða er hildingum heimför gefin?" "Er-a það svik ein er þú sjá þykist né aldar rof þótt þú oss lítir, þótt vér jói óra oddum keyrim, né er hildingum heimför gefin." (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 39-41.203).

Helgi explains it is not the end of the world, but that it's true that she sees dead men riding because they have not yet been allowed to go home (to Valhöll). Here, like the einherjar, we see the horses living on with the rider in the afterlife and the noble soldier carrying on the same activities and comforts of riding, but no concrete explanation of the horse's role as a means of transport to the afterlife. The horse's job was not to carry its rider to the next world, as Helgi has not arrived there yet even though he is mounted and would ride there if he could, but instead the horse continues its regular role of serving as a mount for the warrior. Horses are then seen as dwelling in different worlds, and transcending mortality, but not necessarily providing transport to the next world.

This distinction is significant because the horse cannot serve as a means of transport for the dead alone for passage to Valhøll, so the burial of horses with noble men does not necessarily mean the horse can complete the journey to the afterlife; it is necessary that the Valkyrie is mounted on her horse to provide transport to Valhøll. Thus, horses were more likely buried for the riders to enjoy the same comforts and use as mounts in the next life, making the first hypothesis about riding graves, and as stated in Óðinn's law, seem the most likely.

Though the horse's role in carrying his rider in the mortal and immortal worlds is clear, but not necessarily as transport between the worlds, horses could still carry messages between worlds and represent the coming of death. Horses could either visit one in spirit form through fateful dreams, or concretely be the active agent bringing about death. In the mythological-heroic saga *Völsunga saga*, Svanhildur is trampled by death to horses at the command of King Jörmunrekur:

Enn mælti Bikki: “Engum manni áttu verri að vera en Svanhildi. Lát hana deyja með skömm.” Síðan var hún bundin í borgarhliði og hleypt hestum að henni. En er hún brá í sundur augum þá þorðu eigi hestarnir að spora hana. Og er Bikki sá það mælti hann að belg skyldi draga á höfuð henni. Og svo var gert en síðan lét hún líf sitt. (*Völsunga saga* 42.95).

After Svanhildur is bound and blind-folded, a herd of horses is sent trampling over her, and this results in her shameful death.

In *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, Hrafnkell's dun stallion Freyfaxi is another horse which dooms the fate of one life, Einar. It says in the saga that Hrafnkell valued this animal more than all the other horses and sheep, called him his 'foster-son' (ÍF XI.3.104) and owned only half of him since the other half he dedicated to the god Freyr. Moreover, he loved his horse so much that he made an oath to kill any man who rode it without his permission (ÍF XI.3.102). The story says that a young neighbor named Einar came to Hrafnkells farm and asked for work in exchange for a year's provision, and Hrafnkell told him he needed a sheep herder to take care of his fifty ewes and bring them home each night. Before Einar accepted, Hrafnkell also explained that it was forbidden to ride Freyfaxi, and that he would lose his life if he did. Einar agreed, as there were some ten or twelve other horses he could ride instead, but one night after midsummer, he lost more than half the sheep for almost a week. Getting desperate, he thought it would be faster to ride than walk to look for the missing ewes, but all the horses ran from him except Freyfaxi. He decided to ride him all night and all day, fast and

far, thinking Hrafnkell would not find out, and finally succeeded in finding all the missing sheep. Once he returned them home and unbridled Freyfaxi, the stallion, soaked in sweat and mud splattered, neighed and ran to Hrafnkell. Hrafnkell realized what had happened, and Einar did not deny it, so in keeping to his oath, Hrafnkell rode the next morning to Einar and killed him with an axe (ÍF XI.3.104-5).

There are two elements of this saga that refer to the horse's role in bringing about death. The first is Hrafnkell's oath, that a horse dedicated to the pagan god Freyr could be so valuable and important that no price would be high enough to pay for a ride on his back other than your life. The second element is the self-agency of Freyfaxi himself, in standing still when all the other horses in the herd ran away. Then, after successfully tempting Einar into having no other choice but to ride him, Freyfaxi then seems to communicate what has happened to Hrafnkell right away, by running to him and showing himself in distress. Both of these elements connect the horse in fating Einar's death, but it is Hrafnkell who rides to Einar and kills him in the end, not Freyfaxi.

Later on in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, Hrafnkell takes his revenge against Eyvindr, Einar's cousin who had Hrafnkell outlawed and all his possessions confiscated because of Einar's murder. Hrafnkell waited to do this until one day Eyvindr was riding with sixteen pack horses across the soggy Fljótsdalsheiðr, since he knew that the horses would slow him down as the trail was so muddy. Again, Hrafnkell rode to take the life of Eyvindr, following a different, higher and drier trail only he knew about, and was able to catch up to him and kill him. In this part of the story, horses aid Hrafnkell to kill Eyvindr because Hrafnkell rides to Eyvindr, doomed by his bogged down horses (ÍF XI.8.127-30).

There are other sagas where horses are the root of a dispute which leads to death. In *Laxdæla saga*, Þórleikr would not sell Eldgrímr some horses despite the very generous payment he offered. When this price was refused, insulted Eldgrímr stole the horses anyway. Þórleikr's kinsman Hrut tried to stop Eldgrímr and offer him his horses instead, but he would not trade the horses for any other herd, so Hrut decided to kill him (ÍF V.37). Similarly in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, a horse fight led to a feud between Starkaðr and Gunnar, and Njáll predicted that Gunnar would only win the next horse fight at the cost of many deaths. This became true, when Gunnar and his brothers were ambushed by Starkaðr and a total of fifteen men lost their lives (ÍF XII.58-66).

*Qrvar-Odds saga* tells the story of Qrvar-Oddr, a man believed to live in pagan times but dislike heathen practices (Torfi Tulinius 2005). When a sibyl came to visit Oddr but was ill-received, she cursed him and prophesied that Qrvar-Oddr's horse Faxi would be responsible for bringing him to his death. Qrvar-Oddr tried to take his fate into his own hands by killing the horse, burying it deep in the ground, and fled from his home. Though he managed to live a long life, he returned one day the place he buried his horse, and saw that all the soil above the grave had blown away; then, from the exposed skull of the horse's head, came a snake which bit and killed Oddr. In the end, the sibyl's prophecy became true, and even though Faxi himself is dead, it is the horse's skeleton who facilitated Oddr's death.

Horses were also believed to predict upcoming death when they appeared in one's dreams. For example, dreaming of a big horse could mean death by hanging was fated (Davidson 1964:194). In *Vatnsdæla saga*, Þorkell silfr dreamt of a red horse, which he thought to be a good sign, but his wife saw it as a bad dream and the horse, an omen of death:

Porkel silfra dreymði ina næstu nótt áður fundurinn var ok sagði Signýju, konu sinni, at hann þóttisk ríða ofan eptir Vatnsdal hesti rauðum ok þótti honum trautt vit jörðina koma - "ok vil eg svá ráða, at rautt mun fyrir brenna ok til virðingar snúa." Signý kvazk annan veg ætla, - "Sýnisk mér þetta illr draumr" - ok kvað hest mar heita "en marr er manns fylgja" ok kvað rauða sýnask ef blóðug yrði "ok má vera at þú sér veginn á fundinum, ef þú ætlar þér goðorðit því at nógir munu þér þess fyrirmuna. (ÍF VIII.42.110-1)

Signý understands that the horse is a mare who represents Þorkell's *fylgjur*, and thinks the fact that the mare is red means she symbolizes blood. Þorkell silfr later gets slain at a meeting held to choose a new chieftain for Vatnsdalr, so his wife's interpretation of the horse visit in his dream was correctly predicting his upcoming death, and not meant to boost Þorkell's confidence at the meeting.

In *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (ÍF VI.16), Gísli's upcoming death is prophesied to him by a dream woman riding a grey horse. In the dream, she invited him to come home with her, where they would live comfortably in a great hall, with plenty of pleasures. Here the grey horse may represent Sleipnir and the dream woman a Valkyrie, both images of passage to Valhalla. When Gísli awoke from the dream, he recited three verses in response to this bad omen, which suggests he understood the meaning of the dream and was prepared for his upcoming death.

Horses were also responsible for bringing deadly fates through the strange gesture of tripping (Lindow 2001:94). In *Ynglinga saga*, we learn about King Aðils death occurring right after his horse stumbled "Aðils konungr var at dísablóti ok reið hesti um dísarsalinn. Hesturinn drap fótum undir honum ok fell ok konungr af fram ok kom hofuð hans á stein svá at haussinn brotnaði, en heilinn lá á steininum. Þat var hans bani." (ÍF XXVI.29.57-58). Kelcher (1935:28) also parallels this bad omen of a horse stumble to an example from Danish folklore, where the mother of Helli Hagens dreams her son rides a foal that stumbles, and he later dies too.

In other myths and sagas, the horse is a shape taken on by evil spirits and witches to kill or haunt others (Davidson 1964:121-2; Price 2002). The word 'night mare' poses interesting etymological question, since "mara" or "mare" can refer to a female horse, and the night ride of a horse could translate to a fear of death or dying while sleeping. The old English word 'mare' means spirit, and the idea of a nightmare was a succubus or incubus sitting, or 'riding' on ones chest, and the misinterpretation of 'mare' being etymologically related to a female riding horse may have resulted in the connotation of nightmares involving demonic horses (Gettings 1988). The most famous piece of art work by Henri Fuseli inspired by the Old Norse myths is entitled *The Nightmare*, a painting of Óðinn, three female figures, and a wild, eye-bulged horse with its mane blowing in the wind (O'Donoghue 2007:121). Price (2002) explains that a nightmare often involved a threatening dream creature, like the horse. Even today, there are medically diagnosed symptoms called night terrors, a sleep paralysis being caused by nightmares of horses (or hags) which can result in *dyspnea*, a shortness of breath caused by a feeling of weight or restriction on your chest. The analogy of someone riding your chest while you sleep is another reason why nightmares are associated with riding; witches were sometimes called "evening riders" (Tolley 2009b:132) and in *Eyrbyggja saga*, one witch is actually trialed in Iceland for riding a man to death (ÍF IV.16). In the strange scene 'Glam rides the roof' in *Grettis saga*, the ghost Glam keeps haunting a farmstead by 'riding' the roof (ÍF VII.33). Glam's curse also includes the slaying of a cow herder and breaking every bone in Grettir's horse's body (ÍF VII.35). After three nights of waiting to face Glam, Grettir finally heard him 'riding the hall and beating down on the roof with its heels, so that every timber in the house creaked' before he was able to kill him (ÍF VII.35.100).

#### 4. Horses, Reality, Religion and Superstition

From the examples thus far, we can assume that the horse was trusted for the practical purposes of transporting the rider in the living life and the afterlife, while also being highly respected for being able to cause death and relay fateful messages from unconscious realms. However, the horse's supernatural powers are much more complicated and far reaching than just connotations to the dead and dead spaces. The many myths of transcendent horses show us how it was also believed to be an animal that could travel between mythological worlds and over all the elements. Superstition surrounding the horse was not just with regard to deadly fates, but also fertility, health, land settlement and weather. Furthermore, the horse remains eerily untamed, since he is never fully domesticated but always borders on the wild, with his liminal tendencies for inhabiting and traveling between multiple realms and different worlds (including the immortal). The existence of horse cults highlights some of the religious connotations the horse had, and how important they were for identifying with some aspects of paganism and understanding the heathen faith.

Some heathen customs of Icelanders especially emphasize the close relationship between horses and the pagan god Freyr (Sigurður Nordal 1940). One of the best known examples of pagan worship from the *Íslendingasögur* is the case of Hrafnkell and his beloved stallion Freyfaxi, devoted to the god Freyr, in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* (Orton 2005:303, Turville-Petre 1964:17-21). When his horse is killed by his enemies and his temple to Freyr burned down, Hrafnkell denounces his heathen faith, suggesting that his pagan faith could have only lived on through his horse.

Horses sometimes helped define (or blur) the boundaries of religion. This can be seen both through the religious practices of pre-Christian and Christian Icelanders, since many superstitions and religious beliefs surrounding horses remained intact after the conversion. The conversion of Iceland was not an overnight process, and was certainly not completed by the immediate collapse of paganism (Orton 2005). The adoption of Christianity in Iceland also included a special consideration of horse meat, '*of barna útburð skyldu standa in fornu lög ok of hrossakjots át*' (ÍF 1.7.17), though the eating of horse meat was not tolerated in other Christian societies. However, horse meat was still associated with heathen traditions and the eating of horse meat became an important marker of pagan religion, especially considering the fact that the adoption of Christianity usually required a ban on slaughtering horses and the law explicitly states that the eating horse meat was an ancient custom.

However, the adoption of Christianity in Iceland nevertheless included this exception; *Íslendingabók* (ÍF 1.7.17) explains the conversion process decided at Alþing in the year 1000, which stated that all men should be baptized into the new religion, while the old laws would remain for the eating of horse flesh. Moreover, the new religion also allowed that men could still sacrifice horses in secret - but face lesser outlawry if found out (Karlsson 2000:35, Jochens 1999:650).

In addition to marking pagan practices, the ban on sacrificing horses and flexibility of being able to eat horse meat also reflected some basic Christian ideals; one should not kill or harm needlessly, unless one cannot care for an animal or the family is hungry, which then justifies killing the horse to spare the suffering on both sides. Eating horse meat, in the Christian sense, then became a sin, since the horse was a valuable laborer to each farmer, and only using the horse as meat was forgiven in cases of starvation. We see in the Saga of the Confederates, *Bandmanna saga*, that eating horse meat was associated with desperate measures. In the saga, Hermund accuses Egill of lying about eating his thirty horses, and Egill replies that those horses and his other livestock were in poor condition and could have died, but Egill says he was never in such a desperate state of starvation that eating horse meat was possible (ÍF VII.10). Whether or not they died or he ate them is not clear, but at least Egill acknowledges that the eating of horse meat was a shameful act only acceptable for one reaching a desperate state of starvation.

This example with horse meat is an ironic way that the horse marked both pagan and Christian principles, since the sacrifice of your most sacred animal was just as an important marker of respect as was the Christian ideal of keeping it alive and well kept. Then, the eating of horse meat for the pagan follower was part of the sacrificial ritual, while the exception to eating horse meat to the Christian devotee was also intact with respecting the horse for its ability to sustain one's life. Ironically enough, this situation eventually out-fashioned the eating of horse meat, since eating horse in a Christian era identified you as desperate or poor, and the eating of horse meat became more than just a pagan custom, but uncommon and distasteful (Bartlett 2007:69).

In the *Hákonar saga góða* (ÍF XXVI.151-97) account of King Hákon's rule in Norway, many aspects of his life and kingship transcended religious boundaries. He was believed to be a Christian king, but is said to have forsaken Christianity for the sake of his heathen wife and to favor the pagan peoples he ruled over (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson

1998:63). The story of King Hákon not wanting to partake in the pagan blót with the people of Þrandheimr surrounds the issue of eating horse meat. When Hákon only inhaled the steam of the horsemeat-stew after signing the cross over it, the people were displeased and they rebelled against his Christianity and his rule, burning down churches and killing priests. In the end, King Hákon had no choice but to eat some bits of horse liver at the Yule feast in Mærr, without signing the cross over it:

Inn fyrsta dag at veizlunni veittu bændr honum atgöngu ok báðu hann blóta, en hétu honum afarkostum ella. Sigurðr jarl bar þá mál í millum þeira. Kømr þá svá, at Hákon konungr át nokkura bita af hrosslifr. Drakk hann þá ǫll minni krossalaust, þau er bændr skenktu honum (ÍF XXVI.172).

Here we see how important a role the horse served in pagan sacrificial rituals, and that a blót could not be partaken without also ingesting horse meat (Simpson 1967:200). Thus, the horse meat is not only a sign of pagan ritual, but also considered a sign against Christianity. The act of eating horse meat is the one explicit action that King Hákon does not want to do to forsake his Christian religion, but in the end is persuaded to by Sigurðr jarl because of reasons more or less political. The reality of religion during the time of conversion (this saga is believed to have taken place in the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century when historical accounts say that King Hákon reigned in Norway) can be closely tied to law and legal matters, since the conversion and rules of kings depended heavily on their religious affiliations and those of their people. In the end, the religious intentions of King Hákon to convert Norway was gradually abandoned under pressure from the people of Þrandheimr (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998:73), and he let the Norwegian chieftains keep their ancient religion in practice while he, the king, was then attributed for giving the land good crops and peace: *‘kǫlluðu hann veraldargöð ok blótuðu hann mest til árs ok friðar alla ævi síðan* (ÍF XXVI. 25). In a Christian society, where only one God should be praised, King Hákon became the mortal being thanked for bringing harvest and peace, creating neither a wholly Christian nor pagan society, since both the Christian God and Freyr are then attributed to King Hákon.

*Níðstǫng*, the ‘pole of scorn’, was another superstitious ritual practiced in pagan Iceland, which involved the decapitated head of a horse being placed on a pole to curse or insult an enemy (Simpson 1967:196). There is an account of a *níðstǫng* in *Egils saga*, when Egill erected a pole of scorn and carved runes on it to curse King Eirik and Queen Gunnhild and all the land-spirits that inhabited their land (ÍF II.57). A similar curse is laid in *Vatnsdæla saga* (ÍF VIII.34) when Jokull visited Faxi-Brandr and borrowed the horse Freysfaxi to pull

him and his brother in a sledge, through a bad snow storm, to meet Finnbogi for a duel. However, because of the bad weather, Finnbogi and Berg thought they would not make it, and so did not go outside to meet them. When Jokull and his brother finally arrived and they did not come out to face them, Jokull took a mare from the yard, killed her, sliced her open at the breast, and placed her on a pole that he carved curse runes on. The niðstǫng was placed facing Finnbogi's farm, and the brothers were said to be in 'good humor.' In this case, the scorn pole was more of an insult than a curse, but still the role of the horse as a means to damn the land and farmstead comes up again. Moreover, the insult on the horse's owner probably stems from the murder of his own horse to use as a curse on his land, and the value of horses and their importance must be assumed in order for its murder to be taken as a harsh insult.

Horses served an important role in spiritual devotion, beliefs, and also in understanding the world. In the pre-Christian myths explaining the creation of time, the sun, and night and day, all these creations involve horses. The cycle of day and night is symbolically represented by the goddess Dagr driving her horse Skinfaxi ('shining mane') daily through the sky whose shiny mane lights up the day, and the goddess Nótt driving her horse Hrimfaxi ('frost mane') whose frothing mouth brings dew to the grass each night (*Vafþrúðnismál* 11-14:63, *Gylfaginning* 10:21). The sun goddess Sól drives the sun chariot through the sky, pulled by Árvakr and Alsviðr (*Grímnismál* 37:84): "*En guðin reiddusk þessu ofdrambi ok tóku þau systkin ok settu upp á himin, létu Sól keyra þá hesta er drógu kerru sólarinnar þeirrar er guðin hqfðu skapat til at lýsa heimana af þeiri síu er flaug ór Muspellsheimi. Þeir hestar heita svá: Árvakr ok Alsviðr.*" (*Gylfaginning* 11:22). The description of the cyclical day, how the sun and moon moved through the sky, and an explanation for where dew comes from were all built on stories and belief in these mythological horses.

Spatial realities were also transcended by horses, in the sense that they could be representative of both day and night, or light and dark. Norse myths attribute horses as responsible for day and night, carrying the sun and the moon across the sky daily, and the sagas also offer examples of horses representing both light and dark. The horses' associations with day and night reiterates the horses' ability to cross between light and dark worlds, which often symbolized life and death or good and evil. This is a unique characteristic of the horse,

since other animals in the Old Norse sources are rarely identified as either good *or* evil, much less both good *and* evil.

*Gísla saga Súrssonar* explains that Gísli was frequently visited by two draumkonur in his sleep, one evil and one good, and the good dreamwoman was mounted on a white horse (ÍF VI.12, see also Turville-Petre 1972:38). *Piðranda þáttur* (*Flateyjarbók* 1.419–21) tells us the story of Piðrandi, when he sees nine white deities riding white horses from the north, but then gets taken by nine black deities with swords riding from the south. This idea of white and black may represent good and evil *dísir*, or simply the light of life and the darkness of death, since it is the black deities who take Piðrandi. In many ways, this gives the horse's role a dual nature, that it was never purely good or only evil, but that its transcendent roles could serve both good and evil purposes. Moreover, it means the horse had important, multi-purpose roles that do not wholly comply with the Christian reality, since the Christian ideals viewed much of the world as either good or bad. In the Christian belief, the idea of only two afterlives, heaven or hell, and polarizing every act (and being) as either good or evil, is not consistent with the pagan beliefs; many Norse gods and saga heroes were capable of being both good and bad, and the different worlds and afterlives one inhabited depended more on what role an individual had (i.e. god, giant, warrior, etc.) than whether or not he/she was good or evil.

The horse's ability to bring about both light and dark, life and death, and good and evil can also be discussed in relation to health. Superstition surrounded the role of horses in healing and health, and though horses could represent or bring about death, the horse was also a symbol of well-being and trusted to also preserve life. The 10<sup>th</sup> century Germanic second Merseburg charm (Griffiths 2003:174) also suggests that the story of Wotan healing Baldr's young horse's injured foot was something that could be sung or chanted aloud to bring about healing for someone who was injured in real life. This faith in horses to have supernatural powers shares similar beliefs with Shamanism, and further hints at Óðinn's shamanistic role (Simek 1993) and his connection to the mythical and unknown through his two steeds, Sleipnir and Yggdrasil (this will be discussed at greater length in chapter 9).

In *Landnámabók*, there is one account of a horse being entrusted to choose what land to settle. The mare Skálm is prophesized by a merman to choose the land that Grímr should settle: "*hann skal þar byggja ok land nema, er Skálm merr þín leggsk undir klyffjum... þá gekk enn Skálm fyrir, þar til er þau kvámu af heiðum suðr til Borgarfjarðar, þar sem sandmelir*

*tveir rauðir stóðu fyrir; þar lagðisk Skálm niðr undir klyffjum undir enum ytra melnum*” (H56). Grímr does as the merman says, and waits to claim the land that Skálm decided to lay down her load on.

In *Grettis saga*, a story about a weather-predicting horse is told. The wise mare Kengala was supposed to signal to the horse herd keeper if the weather would be bad by refusing to leave the stable. The saga says that she went out to graze every day until nightfall despite how cold it was, and she was wholly entrusted by Grettir’s father to correctly predict a storm. When Grettir realized that he did not like how cold he was always tending to the horse herd, he decided to flay her skin so she could not go outside. When Grettir’s father saw that Kengala kept to the stable, despite a storm coming for three days, he went to check on her, only to find her hide detached from her back (ÍF VII.14). She did not die from this (Grettir’s father kills her later) but her weather-predicting capability was so much trusted by Grettir’s father, that perhaps Kengala remained in the stable to signal to him that she was injured and unable to predict the weather.

Horses were also used as symbols of fertility (Salisbury 1994:40, Loumand 2006), or more specifically, the horse’s penis. *Völsa þáttur* in *Ólafs saga Helga* explains the story of an embalmed horse penis that was used nightly by members of the house to hold and recite verses, one being about fertility “*Beri þér beytil fyrir brúðkonur. Þær skulu vingul væta í aftan. Þiggi mörnir þetta blæti, en þú, dóttir bónda, drag þú að þér Völsa.*” (Flateyjarbók 2:331-336), Brink & Price (2008:240), Ellis (1968:163)). O’Donoghue (2007:50) suggests that the family name Völsung is likely derived from the Old Norse word for phallus, *völsi*. The first generation of Völsungs is born from Völsung and a Valkyrie sent by Óðinn, and their grandson Sigurðr, is later given a horse named Grani, a descendent of Sleipnir.

This horse Grani also offers an interesting case study of the role of horses in Norse mythology. Sigurðr’s horse Grani is able to ride through fire, but only under the likeness of Sigurðr. It says in *Völsunga saga* (29) that when it came time for Gunnar to woo Brynhildr, Gunnar’s horse Goti would not pass through the wall of fire protecting the mountain where Brynhildr was sleeping. Gunnar then asked Sigurðr to borrow Grani, who he knew would pass through the fire, but Grani would not budge for Gunnar. In the end, Gunnar and Sigurðr had to change bodies, so that Gunnar could ride Grani in the likeness of Sigurðr to get Grani to carry him over the wall of fire. Since Gunnar was trying to get to Brynhildr to wake her and take her home to marry her, but it was Sigurðr who loved her and had promised himself

to her, the horse's role is not only to carry the rider across the fire, but it's as though Grani would only carry the right man to her, and must therefore have had some way of knowing that Sigurðr was the one who truly loved Brynhildr. There are often hints of horses in the sagas having more knowledge than we think they do, and this lends support to why they were trusted to make important decisions (i.e. land claiming) and the basis of many superstitious beliefs.

A similar association with horses and ecstatic love occurs in *Skírnismál*, when Skírnir asked Freyr to give him a horse he can ride over the flames to the beautiful maiden he saw from Óðinn's high seat, whom he has fallen hopelessly in love with. Freyr then lent him a horse he could ride over *myrkan beri*, *vísan vafurloga*, the dark and fiery journey:

“Freyr kvað:

"Mar ek þér þann gef,  
er þik um myrkvan berr  
vísan vafurloga,  
ok þat sverð,  
er sjalft mun vegask  
ef sá er horskr, er hefr."

Skírnir mælti við hestinn:

"Myrkt er úti,  
mál kveð ek okkr fara  
úrig fjöll yfir,  
þursa þjóð yfir;  
báðir vit komumk,  
eða okkr báða tekr  
sá inn ámáttki jötunn."(8-9.85-86)

Skírnir would not have gone to find his love without this horse's help, and he trusted this mount to carry him over the dark and dangerous journey. Here again we see the role of a specific horse being trusted to carry his rider over fire and to love, suggesting that some horses were also a means of transport to ecstatic love.

## 5. Horses and transcending the elements

Both the *Skírnismál* example and the role of Grani in the Völsung myth suggest that horses were a necessary means of safe transport over fire. Fire is a traditional element separating the land of the dead (Tolley 2009:139), which further supports the hypothesis that horses were needed to travel to the world of the dead since they were needed to overcome fire barriers. Throughout Norse mythology, horses are often trusted to make the journey over all the elements: earth, sky, fire and water. This transcendent role is perhaps one of the most important uses of horses in the eddaic sources, since so many myths revolve around the interplay of various worlds; the mythological worlds are always separated by fire, water, air or land, and bridges and horses serve as the main means of connecting these different realms.

The ability of the Æsir's horses to cross fiery Bifröst daily to their judging seats and transport living gods to Hel are two examples of elemental barriers that the Æsir could only cross by way of riding, and whose crossing resulted in them entering other worlds. Bifröst, sometimes referred to as a rainbow, is said to burn where the red color of the rainbow glows: *Þá mælti Gangleri: "Brenn eldr yfir Bifröst?" Hárr segir: "Þat, er þú sér rautt í boganum, er eldr brennandi (15.18). Gylfaginning* also explains that all the Æsir must ride over the *ásbrú* (Bifröst) daily to reach their judgement seats: *Priðja rót asksins stendr á himni, ok undir þeiri rót er brunnr sá, er mjök er heilag, er heitir Urðarbrunnr. Þar eiga goðin dómstað sinn. Hvern dag ríða æsir þangat upp um Bifröst. Hon heitir ok ásbrú (15.17).*

Þórr is the sole exception among the gods that walks, not rides, over Bifröst to Miðgarðr. It is unclear exactly which worlds are connected by Bifröst, but Urðr's well where the gods take their daily council is across the bridge at a holy/central place, even though Bifröst is said to connect the world of gods to the world of men, but all the Æsir except Þórr can only cross it to enter their judgment seats and other worlds by way of horse. Both the eddaic sources enumerate twelve homes of the twelve gods (*Grímnismál* 5-17.71-64), but there are only eleven horses of the Æsir named: Sleipnir, Glaðr, Gyllir, Glær, Skeiðbrimir, Silfrtoppr, Sinir, Gils, Falhófnir, Gulltoppr, and Léttfeti (*Gylfaginning* 15, *Grímnismál* 30.76). It would make sense to have twelve Æsir and only eleven horses of the Æsir named, since Þórr is the one who does not need a mount to cross Bifröst, and Þórr is never referred to as riding in the eddaic sources. There is some discrepancy since a twelfth horse is mentioned but not named; Baldr's horse is said to have been burned with him, and the past tense use of the verb suggests that this count was made after Baldr's death, or that one of the horses

already named was Baldr's and this sentence is just fore-shadowing Baldr's funeral episode which comes later.

The horses' ability to ride over the fiery realm of Múspellsheimr and swim through the river when Bifröst breaks at *Ragnarök* is another important characteristic of the horses' transcendent role. The preparation of *Ragnarök* is an important theme throughout the Norse myths, since the inevitable doomsday of the world serves as a driving force behind the *Eddukvæði* poetry, pushing time and building suspense in different stories and various characters preparing for the final battle. The final war will result in the sons of Múspell, from the Múspellsheimr realm of fire, riding over Bifröst, the weight of their attack breaking the bridge, but the horses still reaching Ásgarðr by swimming through the river: “*Ok svá sem hon er sterk, þá mun hon brotna þá er Múspells megir fara ok ríða hana, og svima hestar þeirra yfir stórar ár. Svá koma þeir fram.*” (*Gylfaginning* 13.24).

In the sagas, horses are also associated with water and being able to cross water barriers that were unexpected. One example is Fluga, the first horse mentioned in *Landnámabók* (S202, H169), who swims to Iceland after jumping overboard. She was assumed dead, and the owner sold the rights to find her and keep her to a lowly farmer, since he didn't think she would be found again. Þórir dúfunef did find her, and she became known as the fastest horse in Iceland, a very valuable possession for the farmer. Tragically, she died in a bog at her farm, drowning to death. A more interesting example is found in *Landnámabók*, where the story of a grey horse not only starts and ends in water, but he seems to live in the water, and offers this story of the supernatural encounter Auðun has with him:

Auðun sá um haust, at hestr apalgrár rann ofan frá Hjarðarvatni ok til stóðhrossa hans; sá hafði undir stóðhestinn. Þá fór Auðun til, ok tók enn grá hestinn, ok setti fyrir tveggja yxna sleða, ok ók saman alla tǫðu sína. Hestrinn var góður meðfarar um miðdegit; enn er á leið, steig hann í völlinn til hófskeggja; en eptir sólarfall sleit hann allan reiðing ok hljóp til vatnsins. Hann sásk aldri síðan. (S83)

After the stallion appeared from a nearby lake, Auðun caught him, hitched him to her working carriage, and was able to bring home all her hay. Though he overcame Auðun's other stallion who was working for her, and he had a bad-growing temper, he only broke free and returned back to the lake after he had finished helping Auðun. There in the lake he disappeared and was never seen again. This example highlights the liminality of the horse's nature, bordering not only on the elements of land and water, but also on the domestic space of farm work and the wild space of the lake where he came from.

The horses' association with water and being able to cross water boundaries also comes up in the eddic poetry. Before the settlement of Iceland, Scandinavians were heavily reliant on sea-transport, navigating the many water passages between islands and lands around the Baltic and North Atlantic seas. On land, horses were vitally important for transport (Karlsson 2000:46); once a permanent settlement in Iceland had been established, travel around the country became more heavily reliant on horses, due to the many fjords and rocky shores of Iceland's circular island that were slower to navigate than travel across land. In Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, we are given specific examples of kennings, and when Ægir asks what a ship should be called, Bragi answers a horse "Svá, at kalla hest eða dýr eða skíð sækonunga eða sævar eða skipreiða eða veðrs" (51.74). In the religious poem *Geisli*, there is a kenning where *víkmarr*, roughly translated as an inlet-horse, refers to a ship (Chase 2005:16-20). In the description of Baldr's funeral, Baldr is said to burn on the ship pyre, referred to as 'sea-Sleipnir' (Gylfaginning 49.70-73, Lindow 2001:67). Thus, ships were understood as symbolizing a ride over the sea, and sometimes referred to in poetry and the sagas as a type of horse or vice versa.

The analogy between ships and horses may not seem so significant, since these were the main two forms of transport over land and sea, but horses had the supernatural gift of flight too. In Norse mythology, we encounter numerous horses which can traverse over both the sea and the sky: Óðinn rides his horse Sleipnir over the sky and sea to reach Jötunheimr:

Óðinn reið Sleipni í Jötunheima ok kom til þess jötuns, er Hrungnir hét. Þá spyrr Hrungnir, hvat manna sá er með gullhjálminn, er ríðr loft ok lög, ok segir, at hann á furðugóðan hest. Óðinn sagði, at þar vill hann veðja fyrir höfði sínu, at engi hestr skal vera jafngóðr í Jötunheimum. Hrungnir segir, at sá er góðr hestr, en hafa lézt hann mundu miklu stórfetaðra hest. Sá heitir Gullfaxi. Hrungnir varð reiðr ok hleypr upp á hest sinn ok hleypir eftir honum ok hyggir at launa honum ofrmæli. Óðinn hleypir svá mikit, at hann var á öðru leiti fyrir, en Hrungnir hafði svá mikinn jötunmóð, at hann fann eigi fyrir en hann kom inn of ásgrindr (*Skáldskaparmál* 17.20)

Here the *jötunn* Hrungnir accidentally ended up in Ásgarðr after challenging Óðinn and Sleipnir to a race, and they ran so fast and so far that he ended up within the walls of their city. Hrungnir would otherwise not have been able to enter the walls of Ásgarðr if he wasn't riding a horse, perhaps because of the barriers he had to cross or perhaps simply because of the speed at which they rode, but the story of Skaði also suggest that a *jötunn* only entered Ásgarðr when mounted: *En Skaði dóttir Þjaza jötuns, tók hjálm ok brynju ok öll hervápn ok ferr til Ásgarðs at hefna föður síns* (*Skáldskaparmál* G56.2). Here Þjazi came to the place of

the gods fully armed and carrying her weapons, which implies she may have rode, since it was custom for soldiers to ride to battle and its unlikely she walked to the gods dressed in battle gear.

*Gylfaginning* introduces us to the goddess Gná: “*Fjórtaða Gná: hana sendir Frigg í ymsa heima at eyrindum sínum. Hon á þann hest er renn lopt ok lög, er heitir Hófvarfnir*” (35.30). Her horse Hófvarfnir travels through air and sea to run errands in other worlds for Frigg, suggesting that Gná could not transcend the world boundaries without having a means of transport over sky and sea. Valkyries are female spirits, described as mounted maidens who fly through the air, riding horses in order to choose the slain from the battlefield and take them to Óðinn’s hall:

“Þessar heita valkyrjur. Þær sendir Óðinn til hvefrrar orrustu. Þær kjósa feigð á menn og ráða sigri. Guðr ok Rota ok norn in yngsta er Skuld heitir ríða jafnan at kjósa val ok ráða vígum.” (*Gylfaginning* 36.30)

The fact that horses could move through all these mediums is analogous to the horses’ ability to move between worlds, since Hel is sometimes associated with fire, Miðgarðr and Útgarðr with earth and sea, and Ásgarðr or the heavens with the sky. In *Skírnismál*, “*Skírnir reið í Jötunheima til Gymisgarða*” (9.86), since Skírnir’s love is a giantess living in Jötunheimr, so again the horse is not only a means of transport over the barrier elements, but the horse is also serving the important function of allowing the rider to transcend world barriers. Óðinn and Hermóðr are transported to the world of the dead by riding Sleipnir, both in an attempt to help save Baldr. Óðinn rides to hell in *Baldr’s draumar* (*Eddukvæði* p. 380-384), and Hermóðr receives all of Frigg’s love to try and bring Baldr back home from Hel to Ásgarðr, but can only complete the task with Óðinn’s horse Sleipnir:

En er goðin vitkuðusk þá mælir Frigg ok spurði hvefrr sá væri með ásum er eignask vildi allar ástir hennar ok hylli, ok vili hann ríða á Helveg ok freista ef hann fái fundit Baldur ok bjóða Helju úrlausn, ef hon vill láta fara Baldur heim í Ásgarði. En sá er nefndr Hermóður inn hvati, sveinn Óðins, er til þeirrar farar varð. Þá var tekinn Sleipnir, hestr Óðins, ok leiddr fram, ok steig Hermóður á þann hest ok hleypti braut. (*Gylfaginning* 49.46)

These many instances of horses traveling through the elements in Norse myths show us how the horse could move and carry people through non-conventional spaces; horses were trusted to carry their riders not only overland, but also through sea, sky and fire. This mythological nature of how a horse could travel through multiple mediums is yet another

confirmation that the horse had supernatural capabilities, transcending the boundaries of reality, and its transcendent role was a pivotal contribution to the myths since man could only move between worlds and overcome elemental barriers with the horse's aid.

## 6. Horses and the mythological worlds

From the literary sources on Norse myths, we see the horse acting as a means of travel between worlds, facilitating the ongoing relationships that Æsir had with otherworldly creatures (mainly the *jötnar* and the dead). Furthermore, the story of Svaðilfari and Loki gives us one example where a horse caused the permanent inseparability of worlds, since the disappearance of Svaðilfari results in the walls of Ásgarðr never being finished and the threat of Miðgarðr and Útgarðr entering the halls of the gods becoming ever more pertinent (*Gylfaginning* 42.34-35).

Eigi kanntu deili á Sleipni ok eigi veiztu atburði afhverju hann kom!- en þat mun þér þykkja frásagnarvert. Þat var snimma í ǫndverða bygð goðanna, þá er goðin hǫfðu sett Miðgarð ok gert Valhǫll, þá kom þar smiðr nokkvorr ok bauð at gera þeim borg á þrim misserum svá góða at trú ok ǫrugg væri fyrir bergrisum ok hrímþursum þótt þeir komi inn um Miðgarð. En hann mælir sér þat til kaups at hann skyldi eignask Freyju, ok hafa vildi hann sól ok mána. (*Gylfaginning* 42.35)

The *jötunn* offers to build the wall in exchange for Freyja, the sun, and the moon. It ends up that the Æsir agreed to this offer, though still skeptical that he could do the job, but let him try to build a wall around Ásgarðr with his own hands and the help of his stallion, Svaðilfari. When it came time for the wall to be finished, the gods were distressed to see that the giant and his stallion were nearly done, so Loki was called upon to help save the Æsir from losing Freyja, the sun, and the moon. To do this, Loki transformed himself into a desirable mare, and taunted the stallion away from the wall for a night. Though his owner ran desperately after him into the forest, they did not return in time to finish the wall before the agreed time. The high one Hár explains to Gangleri where Sleipnir, Óðinn's eight-legged horse, comes from later in the chapter:

Ok it sama kveld, er smiðrinn ók út eftir grjótinu með hestinn Svaðilfara, þá hljóp ór skógi nökkurum merr ok at hestinum ok hrein við. En er hestrinn kenndi, hvat hrossi þetta var, þá æddist hann ok sleit sundr reipin ok hljóp til merarinnar, en hon undan til skógar ok smiðrinn eftir ok vill taka hestinn, en þessi hross hlaupa alla nótt, ok dvelst smíðin þá nótt, ok eftir um daginn varð ekki svá smíðat sem fyrr hafði orðit. (42.35)

The next day the wall was not finished, causing the eternal inseparation of Ásgarðr and Miðgarðr. This is another example where the horse's role, or lack of role rather, has kept the worlds connected, and again the horse remains as a means of bridging the two worlds. From this episode, Loki and Svaðilfari procreated a son, Sleipnir, who becomes Óðinn's famous eight-legged horse.

## 7. Sleipnir: A Bier?

Sleipnir is the finest of any steeds, the best horse of the Æsir (*Grímnismál* 44.79), and better than any other horse in Jötunheimr, “*engi hestr skal vera jafngóðr í Jötunheimum*” (*Skáldskaparmál* 17.20). Óðinn’s steed is grey, has eight feet, is swifter than the wind when he gallops over the sea, and the product of Svaðilfari and Loki’s sexual frolicking. Though it may be reading too much into detail, it is interesting to note that Sleipnir is foaled from the trickster Loki, who is a male god transformed into a mare, and often associated with evil, while Svaðilfari is a hard-working, well-meaning stallion, who had only good intentions. Furthermore, Sleipnir’s dapple-grey coat colour is a mix of black and white, or light and dark, mirroring the many ways in which a horse could represent both good and bad and light and dark. However, a strong case can be made for Sleipnir as the iconic symbol of the horse’s shamanistic role as a medium between the living and dead worlds.

Depictions of Sleipnir found on the 8<sup>th</sup> century Gotland stones show him with sailing ships and potential images of Valkyries (Lindqvist 1941-2: II, 15-17) – all three of which are associated with some sort of transport for the deceased (Dubois 1999:151-3). Most depictions on these stones and also golden bracteates found by archeologists show a rider mounted on Sleipnir, and this could be a dead man riding to Valhøll, but is more likely Óðinn himself, riding as the leader of the dead (Simek 1993:243-4). An important distinction I would like to draw is the difference between Sleipnir’s role as a means of transport for the dead, and Sleipnir’s role as a means of communication with the other world.

A closer look at Óðinn’s eight-legged horse could strengthen the hypothesis that horses played a major role transcending worlds to the afterlife. Sleipnir means ‘slippery one’, and may be a reference to the ways this horse could slide easily between worlds and down to the underworld (Price 2002:101). However, did Sleipnir or other mythological horses play a role in transporting the deceased to the afterlife? The burning ship of Baldr’s funeral pyre is referred to as ‘sea-Sleipnir,’ and is pushed out to sea to transport the beautiful god to the next life (*Húsdrápa* 10-11), but Baldr’s horse is also burned on the pyre, so which transport agent is the one entrusted to carry Baldr to the afterlife? It seems likely that the horse and ship are meant to accompany Baldr to the afterlife, in accordance with Óðinn’s law stated before from *Ynglinga saga*, and not to transport him there.

If we look closely at all the instances of Sleipnir carrying a rider between worlds, there is never a dead person said to ride him, only living riders. Óðinn rides Sleipnir between the mythological worlds (i.e. to Jötunheimr), and his ride to Niflhel is told in *Baldrs draumar*:

Upp reis Óðinn,  
alda gautr,  
ok hann á Sleipni  
söðul of lagði;  
reið hann niðr þaðan  
niflheljar til;  
mætti hann hvelpi,  
þeim er ór helju kom. (2.380)

After the goddesses and deities had discussed Baldr's foreboding dreams, Óðinn placed a saddle on Sleipnir and rode to Niflhel, where Hel resided, and at her high hall, he asked the seeress who will kill Baldr. After reluctantly telling Óðinn that it is his son who will kill Baldr, she told him to ride home, and fate will take his course. In this example, Sleipnir is the horse used to travel between worlds, and is the means by which Óðinn can find out the meaning behind Baldr's foreboding dream and who will eventually become Baldr's murderer. However, the horse is never used to carry Baldr and neither Óðinn or Sleipnir are successful in retrieving the deceased Baldr and carrying him back to the world of the living.

Hermóðr's ride to Hel in *Gylfaginning* is at the request of Frigg, who wants someone to win all her love and favor by agreeing to ride the road to Hel to find Baldr and bring him back home to Ásgarðr. Once Hermóðr had ridden through eight days of darkness, and crossed the bridge over the great river Gjall, he arrived at the foreboding gates of Hel, which Sleipnir jumped over without even grazing the top of the gate (49.46). Sleipnir is able to transport Hermóðr through the dark, in hope of bringing Baldr back to life, but Sleipnir never carries Baldr or anyone dead in this example either. Óðinn's horse is used for the journey because of his world-transcending ability and how much he is trusted to carry Hermóðr over the dark and dangerous barriers, but Sleipnir is not a means of transport for the dead. In the end, it may be because of the horse's lacking ability to transport the dead that Baldr is never retrieved, since Sleipnir can only carry Hermóðr to Hel and back again safely.

Why does Sleipnir have eight legs? To some, this is a great mystery in Norse mythology, and others think it is quite a simple and insignificant question since it just meant he could travel twice as fast with two times the number of legs. Double the number of legs

would also have helped him with his balance and sturdiness, to traverse over all the worlds' boundaries and elemental barriers. Whether or not his speed or sturdiness was affected, other possible ideas are that the tölting gait or *skeið* (flying pace), when engaged at full speed, blurs the view of how many legs there really are.

Another hypothesis, suggested by H.R. Ellis (1964:142), is that the fast-traveling, slippery horse had eight legs to symbolize a bier. If you visualize the image of a bier being carried by four men, from far away or the shadow of it, you get an image similar to a horse with eight legs walking and carrying the deceased. Though we know Sleipnir was a horse associated with the afterlife, and his owner Óðinn was the god of the dead, it does not seem plausible that Sleipnir's eight legs were symbolic of a bier; there are no references to coffins or biers in the Old Norse sources. In the archaeological sources, there are some examples of Viking age burials which can be assumed to have used coffins; in the church yard excavated in Faroe Islands, the bodies were laid parallel, aligned east-west in an organized manner (Arge 2012:583), but we can only assume there was a coffin which was *maybe* carried in a processional procedure, since the wood has all rotten away. Since these findings are not common or occur anywhere else, it would be difficult to conclude that biers were used to carry the dead.

However, we do know from the literary sources that during the settlement of Iceland, the burial customs were changing between mound burials and cremation, the *haugsöld* to the *brunaöld*, and the conversion period caused several pagan burial customs to evolve over the settlement age (Jochens 1999:631). The custom of burying men in mounds, sometimes with their horses too, would not have required a bier, and the burning age, or cremation burial practices, would just have needed a pyre.

Sleipnir was an important horse for transcending worlds, both mythological and immortal, and his supernatural abilities to ride over the various elements support the idea the horse was a vital means of transport for the gods. However, Sleipnir was never used to carry the dead, but rather lead the dead as Óðinn's mount. Similarly, it is the Valkyries who carry the slain to Valhöll, they do not ride themselves or on their own horses to the afterlife. The 10<sup>th</sup> C Alskog Tjängvide stone is believed to depict Óðinn on his eight-legged horse, being greeted by Valkyries, the other mounted transporters of the dead (Lindqvist 1941), and from the Old Norse myths, we now know that it was always these living beings that were transported by horses to and from the world of the dead.

## 8. Yggdrasill: Óðinn's other horse

The world tree Yggdrasill proves another interesting case study in the exploration of horses as a symbolic means of transport to other worlds and carriers of the dead. One of Óðinn's names, as listed *Gylfaginning* (3.8) is “*Jálg eða Jáldr*,” words which mean male-horse or gelding. Even though Freyr is considered the best rider of the gods (*Lokasenna* in *Eddukvæði* 37.128), the greatest tree is Yggdrasill, the greatest god Óðinn, and the greatest horse Sleipnir: *Askr Yggdrasils, hann er æðstr viða, en Skíðblaðnir skipa, Óðinn ása, en jóa Sleipnir (Grímnismál 44.79).*

Óðinn is heavily associated with his horse Sleipnir and the world tree. The word Yggdrasill can be broken down to “Ygg” and “drasill,” *Yggr*, meaning dread or ‘the terrifier’, is one of Óðinn's many *heiti*, listed in *Gylfaginning* (20.22), and *drasill* is an ancient or poetic word for ‘horse’ or ‘steed’ (O'Donoghue 2007:17). Yggdrasill can thus be a compound word, meaning Óðinn's steed’ or ‘the horse of dread’, and again we have a symbol of the world tree as a horse that connects the mortal and immortal worlds (Kure 2006:68).

Yggdrasill is described in *Grímnismál* as having its three roots grow in three directions, namely, in the direction of the three worlds it connects:

Þrjár rætr  
standa á þrjá vega  
undan aski Yggdrasils;  
Hel býr und einni,  
annarri hrímþursar,  
þriðju mennskir menn. (31.76)

Similarly, Óðinn's horse Sleipnir is able to travel between all three worlds, so both of Óðinn's ‘horses’ are the mediators which connect the worlds; furthermore, both Yggdrasill and Sleipnir are not only connected to all three worlds themselves, but also provide means of traversing between them.

Since we can also dissect the word as “the horse of dread” or “the tree of dread,” we can relate the story in *Hávamál* as Óðinn's dreaded tree that he hangs himself from, sacrificing himself (to himself) for the sake of gaining the knowledge of the runes:

“Veit ek, at ek hekk  
vindga meiði á

nætr allar nú,  
geiri undaðr  
ok gefinn Óðni,  
sjalfr sjalfum mér,  
á þeim meiði,  
er manngi veit  
hvers af rótum renn” (138.48)

Here we return to a shamanistic procedure, the idea that Óðinn must die, or leave his pierced, dying body to reach a spiritual realm. He must ride the gallows for his rite of passage to retrieve the knowledge of the runes from another world or level of cognition that he could otherwise not reach without hanging from the world tree, or, riding the tree of dread.

The inverted idea of hanging from the gallows being described as ‘riding’ the gallows is an analogy that poses interesting questions, since parallels in other ritualistic procedures also employ this nature of switching things inside out or upside down (i.e. the old woman Ljót walking around backwards, with her head between her legs and exposing her ass and privates in *Vatnsdæla saga* ÍF VIII.26). The relationship between Sleipnir’s ability to travel to the underworld and the idea that Yggdrasill grows up to the heavens from the underworld is yet another parallel of inversion, since both of these Óðinn steeds connect the world above with the world below (O’Donoghue 2007:17). If one is taken to death by way of riding a horse, then hanging a man from the gallows to meet his death is referred to as ‘riding the gallows’ since the gallows is now responsible for taking the man to his death. The inversion is seen here as the difference of sitting on or being carried by a horse, versus hanging down from a tree, but both being a form of a ‘ride’ to death.

However, the distinction must be made that horses did not carry the deceased to the afterlife, whereas hanging from a tree would take one to his death. As mentioned earlier, horses could serve as a symbol of deadly fate through the dreaming of a big horse, which Davidson (1964:194) said could mean that death by the gallows was being foretold. Agni is killed by hanging in *Ynglingatal*, where the tree is referred to as the wooden horse to hell (ÍF XXVI.22), and Signý’s husband Hagbraðr is hung on the gallows, referred to as his horse (Saxo, *Gesta Danorum* VII.7.15). Here the horse’s role is to convey the message of coming death, but not transport the dead to the next life as the tree does.

Throughout the Old Norse sources, Óðinn’s contact with the other worlds is completed in various ways. Sometimes he walks, rides, or sails on his ship *Skiðblaðnir*, but

he only achieves the wisdom of the world, the secret runes, and the mead of poetry by hanging on the world tree. Furthermore, he can only reach the world of the dead and lead the dead by riding his horse, so Sleipnir and Yggdrasil serve similar, important functions to transport Óðinn to the most distant, darkest, and secretive realms. Only with his two steeds can Óðinn communicate with the supernatural and spiritual worlds, so the symbolic role of both these mounts is to keep him in contact with the supernatural world.

## 9. The Horses Role as a Shaman

Marold (1983:119-20) believes that the horse was a psychopomp between conscious and unconscious realms, and that a psychopomp could fulfill the role of a shaman. Marold refers to a passage in *Ynglingatal*, which suggests the horse was a psychopompos animal: “*kveðkat dul, nema Dyggva hrór, Glitnis Gná, at gamni hefr, þvít jóðís, ulfs ok Narfa, konungmann, kjósa skyldi, ok allvald, Yngva þjóðar, Loka mæð, at leikum hefr*” (ÍFXXVI.17.33-4). The relationship of horses to *dísar* and other female deities is significant since most human psychopomps are female. Hultkrantz (1973:34) defines a shaman as a social functionary who, with the help of guardian spirits, attains ecstasy in order to create a rapport with the supernatural world, on behalf of his group members. Though many peoples across the Viking world had a spiritual practitioner, maintaining and manipulating contact with the spirit world, problems of definition arise (Tolley 2009:66). Though very vague definitions, to some overly complicated definitions, exist, it is also possible to accept that there were different types of shamans within each culture, and cultural variations of shamans within each society, and horses, like Sleipnir, can certainly be considered one type of animal shaman in Old Norse mythology.

We can break down Hultkrantz definition into four defining traits, each of which can exist independently, but the coincidence of all of them together creating the phenomenon of shamanism:

1. The shaman has contact with the supernatural world
2. The shaman acts on behalf of a human group and mediates for them
3. The shaman is granted inspiration by helping spirits
4. The shaman attains extraordinary ecstatic experiences

With just the example of Óðinn's eight-legged stallion, we can meet all four traits. Sleipnir is: 1. A means of travel between worlds, supernatural realms, and the afterlife; 2. Acting on behalf of Óðinn and other gods; 3. Aided by other gods and seeresses; and 4. Can overcome boundaries of reality and elemental barriers that no god can alone. Let us dissect these traits further with the other roles of horses discussed so far in this thesis.

1. The shaman has contact with the supernatural

The role of horses in the *Íslendingasögur* and Old Norse poetry repeatedly show the horse's ability to travel between worlds, thrive in the liminal boundaries, and extend beyond the barriers of reality. Even in the sagas, horses are considered on the border between domesticated and wild, since horses inhabit and traverse between the controlled and uncontrolled spaces in Iceland and are never fully domesticated (in where and how they live and how they build relationships with people) (Hastrup 1990). The horse is then a mediator between the safe and wild spaces, and this leads to a lot of the examples of superstition surrounding horses.

The horse, then, is seen as an animal with some higher level of intelligence or foresight than other animals, and perhaps even man himself, and that is why its domestication was never really complete (the horse is never really 'broken-in'), and the horse's knowledge is often attributed with superstitious meaning, entrusted to make important decisions, foresee futures, and offer healing.

## 2. The shaman mediates for a human group

The horse's role, in both the sagas and eddaic sources, was to mediate, transport, and communicate to the afterlife and other worlds on behalf of the gods, worldly beings, and Icelandic settlers. The horse does this both as the physical animal (as in the example of carrying Óðinn and Hermóðr to Hel) and as a spiritual animal (visiting men in their dreams to warn them of their deadly fates).

## 3. Aided by other gods and seeresses

The horse is not the only animal who maintains communication with the spiritual world, but the presence of other gods, spirits and people help the horse transport and transcend between worlds and realities. For example, the Valkyries and *dísir* are riding them to carry the deceased to the afterlife, and Óðinn rides Sleipnir to lead the dead.

## 4. Can overcome boundaries of reality and elemental barriers that no god can alone

The dependency that the Æsir have on their horses to transport them daily to their judging seats and over the fiery *ásabrú* is one of the clearest examples that horses were a necessary animal to transcend worlds and safely traverse dangerous barriers. The connotations of horses

and the four elements also shows us that the horse was a spiritual animal, interconnected to nature and mother earth in a way that no other animals or beings could match.

Another shamanistic element of the horse in the Old Norse sources is their association with water and trees. Yggdrasill is a tree reached only by crossing a river via the fiery Bifröst bridge; then there is the seeress Urðr (“fate”) who resides at the tree, and her spring flows from the foot of the tree (*Völuspá* 20, 27. 7,9). Horses are seen as spirits who fate futures, and the idea of hanging horses in groves and over marshes in pagan rituals may also connect the shamanistic nature of the horse to water and trees. Going back to archaeological sources from as early as the Iron age in Scandinavia, numerous examples of horse sacrifices in bogs and water places also exist, suggesting that horses were commonly killed and either deposited in water or hung from a tree over a bog (i.e. Skedemosse in Öland) (Monikander 2006).

The idea of mound graves containing horses and ships meant that travel over land and sea was most important for the afterlife, and also the most valuable possessions of a noble man (Graslund 1980). The horse was not only a transport animal between worlds, but it was arguably *not* a transport animal for the deceased, and instead served to connect the living world with the afterlife by being a spiritual mediator, continually serving man in the afterlife, and connecting the conscious and unconscious, living and dead, good and evil, and light and dark for its (living) riders.

## 10. Discussion of Findings

After a close reading of the role of horses in Norse mythology and the *Íslendingasögur*, some comments must also be made on the other humans, animals and practices that fulfilled similar roles, as well as the arguments against the role of horses as fateful animals. In the interpretation of dreams and superstition of fetches, other animals also brought bad omens and coming death; wolves, foxes and bears could be evil, and bulls or oxen could be the fetches of feuding men (Turville-Petre 1972:37-8). *Fylgja* animals other than horses were also seen in dreams by their owners to prophesize death, as in the case of a goat *fylgja* in *Njáls saga*; Þórðr sees a bloody goat in a hollow which remains invisible to Njáll, but he understands that this was a premonition of Þórðr's death (ÍF XII.41.106-9). In *Þorsteins þátrr uxafóts*, Þorsteinn's *fylgja* is a polar bear who walks past him, and signifies Þorsteinn's unknown lineage, marking him as a greater man than he is and revealing his heroic nature (ÍF XIII.5.350-1). Though there are these other examples of animal *fylgjur* in the sagas and the polar bear did not mean death, all the examples of horse *fylgjur* in the sagas do result in ill fates

Turville-Petre suggests that it may not be so common to associate dreams of horses with ill-fates, but that the meaning of the dream depends much more on the colour of the horse; the chestnut horse that Þorkell silfri dreamt about was representative of a red or bloody fetch, an omen of violent death. White horses were carriers of good things (like for Þiðrandi and Gísli Súrsson), bay could signify illness, spotted grey represented drunkenness and debauchery, and a roan horse could foretell severe weather and snow (Margeir Jónsson 1936).

Bartlett (2007) discusses the ways in which social practices, cultic loyalty and religious affiliation interacted during the conversion from paganism to Christianity, even through kingship and diet. In the story of *Hákonar saga góða*, we see the Christian King Hákon sharing many similar attributes to the euhemerized accounts of Freyr in *Snorra Edda*; he acts also as an intermediary between the world of men and the world of gods (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998:77) and transcends religious boundaries when it comes time to meet his death. Even though he wanted to be a Christian King, he maintains elements of heathenism and his incomplete religious devotion is proven by his eating of horse liver, an act carried out in pagan blót sacrifices. The Norwegian chieftans that lived under his rule also thanked King Hákon for good crops, as they had done to Freyr before (IF XXVI 25). When Hákon dies, he

is invited to Valhøll, but is not entirely pleased with the sight of Valkyries arriving at the battlefield, until Skögnul reminds him that their arrival means a battle victory will soon be had (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998:58).

Göndul þat mælti  
studdisk geirskapti:  
“Vex nú gengi goða,  
es Hákonni hafa  
með her mikinn  
heim bönd of boðit.” (ÍF XVI.30-1)

*Hákonarmál* stanzas 2-18 (ÍF XXVI.30-31) explains that Hákon was afraid to arrive at Óðinn's hall since he feared he had not been true to the pagan gods, but Bragi, who planned to receive him in Valhøll, said he was welcome to join his brothers and men in Óðinn's hall since the pagan gods had forgiven and accepted him; they knew he had always respected their sacred places and holy shrines. In this way, the Christian King is forgiven for his leniency towards the ancient gods and is given a pagan burial, just as if he had practiced the ancient religion throughout his Christian life (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998:60). This is one example of a man in the sagas who similarly transcended the religious realities of the times.

Though the horse was a creature that transcended many boundaries, their ability to move between worlds is not different from the gods, *jötnar* or *dvergar* in the eddaic sources; all of these creatures are also seen moving between mythological worlds. Similarly, many other spirits or deities (i.e. *æsir*, *vanir*, *álfar*, *dísir*, *valkyrjur*, *fylgjur*, *nornir*, *dvergar*, *giants*, *troll*, *mornir*, *vættir*) had connections to other worlds and supernatural realms, but they are not seen as transporters for living men or gods to make the journey between them. The one large exception are the maiden Valkyries and some examples of *dísir*, but they are never independently referred to as transporting the slain since they are always mounted on horseback to make the passage.

There are other literary sources that refer to similar riding deities that are responsible for taking life, like the black *dísir* who take Þiðrandi. Some archeological sources from across Scandinavia and from a range of dates support the theory of riding women, which we can guess were connected to the world of the dead since mounted men were so much more heavily associated with the world of the living (i.e. little riding figurines recently found in

Denmark<sup>1</sup> are hypothesized to be depictions of Valkyries, and the Iron age Gundestrup cauldron found in a Danish bog shows a procession of armed men walking towards a women while men on horses ride away from her).

There were other sacred animals used in sacrifices and buried in graves, so it is not only the horse who was used as a sacrificial animal or related to trees and water. Bears and pigs were also hung in groves according to pagan sacrificial rituals, and Adam of Bremen described how the pagan temple at Uppsala held a sacrificial festival every nine years in a sacred grove where humans and dogs were also sacrificed (O'Donoghue 2007:65-66, Turville-Petre 1964:244-245). Thietmar also reports the sacrifice of other animals and men in Seeland (Bartlett 2007:64).

There were other animals and possessions which could represent similar meanings in sacrifices and burial practices as well, as in the case of horses representing a status symbol or delivering the same comforts in the next life; archaeological findings show that jewelry, clothing, furniture, weaponry and other animals were also found in riding graves to accompany the deceased to the next life (Effros 2003; Jochens 1999). In the Viking age burial site excavated in the Faroe Islands, the graves were found to contain many personal belongings, like rings, knives, a pouch, and some silver and bronze fragments (Arge 2012). Ship burials were also popular in Iceland (Eldjárn 1974:124-6, 133-39), containing other treasures like armor and clothing.

Though the horse is evidently associated with the realm of the dead and serves the practical purposes of transport within different worlds, there are other transcending creatures found in Norse mythology. Freyja's bird costume and the ability to fly in bird form is encountered several times (i.e. when Loki in the falcon dress retrieves Iðunn from Jötunheimr and kills Þjazi in the form of an eagle – *Skáldskaparmál* G56.2), Þórr moves between worlds walking or in a chariot pulled by goats (i.e. *Útgarða-Loki Gylfaginning* 21.23), and Baldr's funeral pyre is a ship which must be pushed off to ensure his safe journey to the afterlife (*Gylfaginning* 49.45).

There is one concrete example of a horse carrying dead men found in the sagas, but the horse is only a means of transport for the bodies back to the farm. The entire *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhoggs* (ÍF XI) tale is based on a horse fight scene. Both Þorsteinn and Þorðr had

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<sup>1</sup> <http://natmus.dk/nyhedsoversigt/nyhed/article/fynbo-finder-valkyrie-fra-vikingetiden/> Website accessed July 27, 2013

arranged a fight between young stallions, which lead to Þorsteinn hitting Þorðr's horse in the jaw, and Þorsteinn then hit Þorðr's horse, and finally Þorðr smacks Þorsteinn on the face with his horse prod which ripped the skin down over his eye. Þorsteinn later killed Þorvaldr and Þorhallr, and tied both their bodies down onto their horses and sent them back home to Hof.

In *Vatnsdæla saga*, old Ingimundr was led to the site of his son's battle by a servant boy on a horse, and later carried back home to die (ÍF VIII.22). After he was struck by a spear, he was led back to his farm on horseback by the boy, and there he sat in his high seat to die. Ingimundr did not die on his horse, but he rode willingly to the scene of the fight, where he knew he was in danger of receiving a death blow, and then the horse carried him back to his final resting place on the high seat.

In *Egils saga*, old Skalla-Grímr is said to have ridden his horse at night, carrying a big chest full of valuables, the night before he died (ÍF II.59). Here the horse served as a means of transport for the old man, his treasures, and a useful way of traveling through the dark of night, but Skalla-Grímr did not die on his horse. We also find out at the end of the chapter that Skalla-Grímr was buried in a mound with his horse, echoing the idea of sending a man to his *haugar* grave with all the possessions he needed to enjoy in the next life.

## 11. Conclusion

The hypothesis that horses were an important means of transcending worlds and mortal and immortal boundaries has been confirmed after a literary review of the Old Norse-Icelandic sources. After providing examples of the horses' transcendent role in mortality, reality and between worlds, the role that horses served in Iceland as mediators between realms indicate the horse's important, unique and special powers, since these boundaries were bridged by few other animals or humans. However, the means of transport to the afterlife was not directly served by the horse; burial practices, sacrificial customs and the mythological stories all suggest that horses were much more of a spiritual mediator and means of communication between the mortal and immortal worlds.

References to the horse's role as a transport animal for the deceased to the afterlife is one theme seen both in Norse mythology and the sagas, and this idea is also recurrent in other world mythologies; for example, good souls of Muslim faith are believed to be carried to paradise on horseback, and Epona, the horse riding goddess known from Britannia to North Africa as the carrier of deceased souls. What is often overlooked is the fact that few examples can be found of horses actually carrying the dead in the Old Norse sources; it is the mounted Valkyries who carry the slain from the battlefield, and Óðinn rides Sleipnir himself to lead the dead. Hermóðr rides to Hel but fails to bring Baldr back from the dead. Dreams of horses bring death, but no horse is the physical transporter of a man to his death. Even though riding graves are found with horse and rider buried together, the horse is no more important as a transport animal than ships are in mound graves or burning pyres, and *Ynglinga saga* tells us the horse is buried for the owner to have and enjoy all the same possessions and comforts in the next life - not to simply carry him there.

Although horses could not transport you to death, the tree could. As mentioned earlier, horses could serve as a symbol of deadly fate when one dreamt of a big horse, which Davidson (1964:194) said could mean death by hanging was being predicted. But both horses and trees connected man to the spiritual and supernatural realms. Furthermore, horses were not only transcending worlds, but dwelling in different worlds, attesting to their liminal role as animals with few boundaries.

Superstition around horses and their ability to predict fates, weather, and even bring about fertility also lend to the horses importance in the Old Norse sources, and their ability to

carry their rider over land, air, water and fire are all unique features which no other one animal or human can boast. In reality, riding a horse can easily carry one over land and water, and in the Norse myths and sagas, we find not only examples of this, but also references to the horses' supernatural ability to carry one over sea, sky and fire. There are connotations between horses and water, as well as connections between horses and trees, which further support the theories behind the horses' supernatural capabilities, spiritual role, and relationship with the dead and unconscious realms.

The horse's supernatural powers and associations with death reaffirm its role not only as a psychopomp, but as a form of shaman: the horse maintained and manipulated contact with the spirit world. Hultkrantz (1973:34) defines a shaman as a social functionary who, with the help of guardian spirits, attains ecstasy in order to create a rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of a group. In this sense, the horse fulfills three of Hultkrantz's four constituents of shamanism: he can communicate with the supernatural world and maintain contact with it, he acts on behalf of the human group, and he is inspired by his helping spirits (namely, the gods). The fourth constituent, the extraordinary ecstatic experiences of the shaman, are not solely or uniquely fulfilled by the horse alone, but between the horse and the rider or the horse and the dreamer, so here the horse again serves a transport role to bring the rider/dreamer to a supernatural realm. This idea is strongly supported by the symbolism of Óðinn's shamanistic experience of sacrificing himself to himself by hanging from his other steed, Yggdrasill, for nine days in order to obtain wisdom. Thus, the horse's role as a transport animal to 'carry' riders to other worlds is a much more symbolic role, functioning as the means to bring others to different states and levels of knowledge, and this Shamanistic role is arguably more important and common than the practical role of transporting the deceased to the afterlife.

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