Food, blood and little white stones

A study of ritual in the Icelandic Viking Age hall

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í fornleifafráði

Jakob Orri Jónsson

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Abstract

The study of ancient beliefs and rituals is a complex thing that has troubled scholars through the centuries. People have always wondered about the religions, beliefs and traditions of other people throughout time. Scholars as far back as the time of Tacitus and the Roman Empire have described the religious and ritual practices of foreign cultures, however, such accounts tend to be coloured by the writer's own religious background, the political climate of the time and bias in which texts survive and in what form. Similar problems surround oral accounts. The advantage of archaeology in this case is, to use the words of Ann-Britt Falk "that you get to analyse what people really did, not what they were supposed to do."

The aim of this thesis is to look at the archaeology of the Icelandic Viking Age hall and draw out signs of ritual as theorized from a combination of historical, folkloric, ethnographic and archaeological material. It is my hope that using these sources it will be possible to identify heathen rituals in the archaeological record of Iceland. While leaving out other archaeological remains does potentially exclude large amounts of evidence for ritual, the focus this does afford allows a more in depth look at the subject matter than might otherwise be possible.
1. Introduction

The study of ancient beliefs and rituals is a complex thing that has troubled scholars through the centuries. People have always wondered about the religions, beliefs and traditions of other people throughout time. Scholars as far back as the time of Tacitus during the Roman Empire (Aðalsteinsson, 2001) have described the religious and ritual practices of foreign cultures, however, such accounts tend to be coloured by the writer's own religious background, the political climate of the time and bias in which texts survive and in what form. Similar problems surround oral accounts. The advantage of archaeology in this case is, to use the words of Ann-Britt Falk (2006, p. 200), "that you get to analyse what people really did, not what they were supposed to do."

The aim of this thesis is to look at the archaeological record and draw out signs of ritual from Viking Age Iceland as theorized from a combination of historical, folkloric, ethnographic and archaeological material. It is my hope that using these sources it will be possible to identify heathen rituals in the archaeological record of Iceland. However, due to concerns of length it is necessary to limit the scope to a single category of sites, the Viking Age hall. While leaving out other archaeological remains does potentially exclude large amounts of evidence for ritual, the focus this does afford allows a more in depth look at the subject matter than might otherwise be possible.

For the purposes of this thesis I will use the word 'heathen' when referring to the beliefs of the non-Christian people of the Viking Age. However, such definitions can perhaps not be easily applied to the religious beliefs of the Icelandic people from around the period of the conversion to Christianity as will become apparent later in this thesis.

Definitions of terms like religion and ritual are very complex but most archaeologists seem to approach religion as abstract symbolic systems, that exists only in the minds of those that share the religion, and rituals as human action which leave traces in the material record (Fogelin, 2007, p. 56). Despite this common agreement on the broad definition of these terms there is still a great difference on how religion and ritual are approached by archaeologists, primarily in whether they emphasise religion over ritual or the other way around. Those that emphasise religion over ritual tend to view religion as a "long-lasting cultural phenomenon" (Fogelin, 2007, p. 57) that changes little over time and that ritual is the enactment of the symbols, myths and
beliefs that make up a religion. Those that view ritual as primary over religion tend to see ritual not as a passive enactment of religion but as constructing, creating and modifying religion (Fogelin, 2007, p. 58, and references therein). Whichever approach is favoured most agree that religion and ritual exist in a mutual relationship, one affecting and informing the other.

Recognizing this definition of ritual as human action attempts have been made to try and discover methods to identify rituals in the archaeological record. Renfrew and Bahn (2004, pp. 416-417) drew up a list of sixteen archaeological indicators of ritual, in four different categories that are; focusing of attention, boundary zone between this world and the next, presence of the deity and participation and offering. Slightly less specific is Bell's (1997, after Fogelin, 2007, p. 58) list of six characteristics for ritual activity; formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism and public performance. Both of these lists have definitions general enough to include activities that are not religious, e.g. sporting events and theatre. This led some to think of religion and culture as same which avoids the question of whether a ritual is religious or not as not only would every ritual be religious but also everything else in the archaeological record. While it is true that there is no reason, except for modern Western ethnocentrism, to assume that even functionalistic elements cannot be religiously motivated, this approach assumes a level of religiosity in past societies that may not have been present in all cultures (Fogelin, 2007, pp. 59-60 and references therein).

Whether a ritual is religious or not can be difficult, even impossible, to distinguish, and such a distinction may not even be applicable, depending on the culture being examined. For the purposes of this thesis the question of whether a ritual is religiously motivated or not will be suspended, and instead a more empirically led approach will be taken to see whether or not ritual can be identified in the archaeological record of the Viking Age Icelandic hall.

The thesis is divided into three main chapters, the first of these, chapter 2, discusses the State of Research of Viking Age ritual, especially the concept and study of hof-structures in Iceland. This focus on hof-structures in chapter 2 relates directly into the thesis' focus on the Icelandic Viking Age halls. That discussion leads into chapter 3, Viking Age Halls, which opens with a short discussion of rituals associated with Viking
Age halls as presented in the historical, folkloric and ethnographic literature before moving on to discuss seventeen Viking Age hall sites excavated between 1939 and 2013. Chapter 4, *Remnants of Ritual*, discusses the material from chapter 3 further, looking at the material for evidence of ritual as described in the literature as well as comparing the material from different sites to attempt and draw out similarities, and differences, between places and time.
2. State of Research

The study of places of ritual in Iceland has a long history, mostly in connection with the study of so-called hof-structures, but hof is an Old Norse word which in modern Icelandic translates to ‘temple’, a meaning the word acquired as early as the 12th century. The original meaning of the word has been debated but it is most likely that it was ‘hill’ (Andersson, 1986; Vikstrand, 2001, pp. 252-254 & 258-272, after Vésteinsson, 2007, pp. 72-73 and other references therein). In his book *Sagas and Popular Antiquarianism in Icelandic Archaeology* Adolf Friðriksson (1994, 47-104) provides a comprehensive discussion on the work which had been done in the study of ritual and religion in the earliest period of Icelandic archaeology and up until the time of the book’s writing.

Where I reference the old Icelandic sagas I will primarily be using the version published by *Hið íslenzka fornritafélag* but for English texts I will use *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (1997).

There are a number of references to hof-structures in the Icelandic sagas and other literary sources of the medieval period. Most of these are simple, mentioning the structure only in passing while others give more detailed descriptions. In chapter 1 of *Gull-Þóris saga*, for example, it is merely mentioned that one of the settlers, Hallur, “built a great temple”¹, while in *Laxdæla saga* (ch. 19) it says that a man by the name of Hrútur had a hof “in the hayfield nearby, the remains of which can still be seen.”² Other sagas describe hof-structures in much greater detail, though descriptions of the outward appearance of hof-structures tends to be quite generic. In *Vatnsdæla saga* (ch. 15) it says: “He built a great temple a hundred [original emphasis] feet long”³. This description of a hof-structure is virtually the same as in *Kjalnesinga saga* (ch. 2), though *Kjalnesinga saga* adds to it, saying that the temple is built in the homefield/hayfield (Old Norse. tún) and that it is sixty feet wide in addition to being a hundred feet long. *Kjalnesinga saga* also describes the interior, after claiming Þór as the principal god of that hof and that all should pay a hof-toll to it, in this way: “It was rounded on the inside,

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¹ Original Text: „[...] reisti þar hof mikit [...]“ (ÍF XIII, p. 177)
² Original Text: „Hof átti hann í túni, ok sér þess enn merki“ (ÍF V, p. 48)
³ Original Text: „[H]ann reisti hof mikit hundrað fóta langt [...]“ (ÍF VIII, p. 42)
like a vault, and there were windows and wall-hangings everywhere. The image of Thor stood in the centre, with other gods on both sides. The text goes on to describe how there was an altar (ON. *stallur*) before the gods on which burned a holy fire that should never go out. On the same altar a great ring of silver to be worn by the *goði*, the chieftain and religious leader, during gatherings should be kept. There was, according to the text, also a large copper bowl for the sacrificial blood, called either a *hlaut* or a *hlautbolli*, on the altar. Lastly there was a sacrificial spring in a swamp outside the *hof*-structure into which people were thrown.

Similarly detailed descriptions can be found in *Fljótsdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. In *Fljótsdæla saga* (ch. 26) there is no description of the outside of the *hof*-structure in question, other than it was locked when the companions Helgi and Grímur arrived there, but of the inside it says:

> “Then Helgi went inside the temple and saw that it was so light that there were no shadows. All the walls were covered with hangings. There were figures seated on both benches. Everything was shining with gold and silver. They stared with their eyes and did not invite the newcomers. In the high seat on the lower bench Frey and Thor sat together in the same seat.”

Opposite to where Freyr and Þór sit Helgi finds Frigg and Freyja, interestingly in the higher seats, one can assume, than their male counterparts. The gods in this saga seem to be idols as Helgi proceeds to address them without receiving a reply, then throws them down to the ground along with other unspecified objects and rips off the cloth draped on them.

In *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 4) it says of the *hof*-structure the settler Þórólfr built at Hofstaðir in Hofsvogur:

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4 Original Text: “Þar var gert af innar kringlótt svá sem húfa væri; þat var allt tjaldat ok gluggat. Þar stóð Þórr í miðju ok önnur goð á tvær hendr.” (ÍF XIV, p. 7)

5 Original Text: “Þá gengr Helgi inn í hofit ok sér, at þar er ljóst, svó at hvergi berr skugga á. Þar var allt altjaldat. Setið var þar á báða bekki. Þar glóaði allt í gulli ok silfri. Þeir blígðu augum ok búa ekki þeim, er komnir vóru. Í öndvegi á hinn öæðra bekki sátu þeir í samseti Freyr ok þór.” (ÍF XI, p. 295)
“There he had a temple built, and it was a sizeable building, with a door on the side-wall near the gable. The high-seat pillars were placed inside the door, and nails, that were called holy nails, were driven into them. Beyond that point, the temple was a sanctuary. At the inner end there was a structure similar to the choir in churches nowadays and there was a raised platform in the middle of the floor like an altar, where a ring weighing twenty ounces [original emphasis] and fashioned without a join was placed, and all oaths had to be sworn on this ring. It also had to be worn by the temple priest at all public gatherings. A sacrificial bowl was placed on the platform and in it a sacrificial twig – like a priest’s aspergillum – which was used to sprinkle blood from the bowl. This blood, which was called sacrificial blood, was the blood of live animals offered to the gods. The gods were placed around the platform in the choir-like structure within the temple.”

The tone of these accounts varies and arguments have been put forth that these variations could be indicative of the age of the original account and thus, possibly, indicating which of the accounts can be taken seriously (Aðalsteinsson, 1997, 22-23). This can be seen in the difference between Fljótsdæla saga, which is very critical of the hof-structure and ends with its destruction, and Eyrbyggja saga, which is mostly neutral in its account. Despite this variation in tone there are a few things that are similar between the accounts. The presence of idols is shared between most of them, and the hlautbolli – a bowl into which the blood of sacrificial animals was collected so it could later be thrown, sprinkled or smeared, depending on the source (e.g. Eyrbyggja saga, ch. 4; Hákonar saga góða, ch. 14), on those participating in the ritual taking place and the hof-structure itself – is also a common feature. For the purpose of spreading the

6 Original Text: “Þar lét hann reisa hof, ok var þat mikit hús; váru dyrr á hlîðvegginum ok nær öðrum endanum; þar fyrir innan stóðu öndvegissúlurnar, ok váru þar í naglar; þeir hétu reginnaglar; þar var allt friðarstaðr fyrir innan. Innar af hofinu var húss í þá liking, sem nú er söngþús í kirkjum, ok stóð þar stallí á miðju göflinu sem altari, ok lá þar á hringr einn mótauss, tvífugsiyrringr, ok skyldi þar at sverja eða alla; þann hring skyldi hofgoði hafa á hendi sér til allra mannfunda. Á stallanum skyldi ok standa hlautbolli, ok þar i hlautteinn sem stókkull væri, og skyldi þar stökkva með ór bollanum blöði því, er hlaut var kallart; þat var þess konar blöð, er svæfð váru þau kvikendi, er goðnum var fürnat. Umhverfis stallann var goðunum skipat í aflúsinu.” (ÍF IV, p. 8-9)
sacrificial blood a special implement called *hlautteinn*, compared to a Christian priest’s aspergillum in the *Eyrbyggja saga* account above, was used.

Aside from the literary sources mentioned above the earliest antiquarian mention of possible temple sites in Iceland is dated to 1700 when Árni Magnússon makes note of a structure at Hofstaðir on Þórsnes, the same area in which *Eyrbyggja saga* largely takes place, with the name of “*göðahofstöfti*”, meaning ‘a *göði*’s temple ruin’, but Magnússon was sceptical and thought it likely that the wedge-shaped structure was a simple fence (Magnússon, 1955, p. 70-71). Magnússon mentions two other alleged temple sites, at Hof on Kjalarnes (ibid, p. 62) and at Hofstaðir in Gufufjörður (ibid, p. 73).

In their travelogue of Iceland Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson mention two of the same temple sites as Magnússon, those on Kjalarnes (Ólafsson, 1943, Vol. I p. 49) and on Þórsnes (ibid, p. 251), as well as three additional temple sites, one at Hofstaðir in Reykholtsdalur (ibid, 176) and two in the north, at Hof in Míðfjörður and at Hof in Goðdalir (ibid, Vol. 2, p. 86). They do not make any remarks about these sites, beyond noting that their ruins can be seen but do seem to suppose their existence and purpose from a combination of philological reasoning and place name evidence.

During the early 19th century questionnaires were sent by the Royal Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities to parish priests around Iceland. These questionnaires, collated by Finnur Magnússon, asked various questions concerning ancient remains including a question about temple sites and things concerning ancient belief (*Frásögur um fornaldarleifar*, 1983, p. xxxvii), thus establishing temples as a category of archaeological sites. The questionnaire resulted in reports on twenty alleged temple sites in addition to folklore about temples without a direct connection to a site (Friðriksson, 1994, 51-53). A few of these reports include descriptions of the temples which reveal no common characteristics. The identification of a site as a temple seems to have originated in local tradition or as saga explanations, frequently pairing an alleged site with a named character from one of the Icelandic Sagas (e.g. *Frásögur um fornaldarleifar*, 1983, p. 352).

Kristian Kålund, a Danish philologist, collected information on temples in Iceland, among many other things, for his topographical work *Bidrag til en topografisk-historisk Beskrivelse af Island*. He travelled around Iceland and, using many different sources, from Sagas to local lore to observations of the ruins themselves he recorded
over sixty supposed hof sites (Friðriksson, 1994, 53-54). However, he did not emphasise these sites as more important or remarkable than others, instead recording the sites according to the sources available to him, though he seems to have found little reason to question any of these sources, which included place name evidence, local tradition and folklore and philological evidence (e.g. Kålund, 1985, p. 75-76).

Through the 1880’s Sigurður Vigfússon, largely on behalf of the Archaeological Society, or Hið íslenzka fornleifafélag, and inspired by descriptions of hof-structures in the saga literature, conducted excavations of ten temple sites while recording almost thirty more that he did not excavate, taken from such sources as place name evidence and sagas (Friðriksson, 1994, 55-56). Judging by his papers Vigfússon considered himself to be identifying temple sites according to a typology of such structures, yet he would include structures completely unlike his supposed typology by virtue of place name evidence and local tradition, as at Lundur in Syðri-Reykjadalur (Vigfússon, 1885, p. 97-100). In broad strokes his hof-structure typology consisted of a hall with an elevated platform near one end, opposite the entrance, where the altar and associated objects were arranged, and a room beyond that where the idols of the gods were kept. Vigfússon seems to have thought that while this idol room was inaccessible from inside the hof-structure it was open in a way that allowed the idols to be viewed from there (ibid; Fig. 1 & 2). This typology is obviously greatly influenced by the descriptions from the Icelandic sagas, especially Eyrbyggja saga as quoted above. When he found structures that he assumed, by virtue of place name evidence, on philological grounds or both, to be a hof-structure but did not adhere to his typology he would usually confirm the theory simply by claiming to have discovered one of an unusual appearance, as at Sæból. There the supposed hof-structure does not have the expected room for the idols but a small building is found just few metres away from it, a building Vigfússon called goðahús, ‘house of the gods’ (Vigfússon, 1883, p. 17-20).
Eventually, even Vigfússon himself had to admit that some of the ruins he was recording as hof-structures did not fall in line with his typological expectations but instead of abandoning his ideas of a typology of temple sites he merely ignored the anomalies or called them hörgr (Vigfússon, 1893, p. 7-8), an Old Norse word probably meaning a stone or pile of stones and commonly thought to have had some ritual purpose (Olsen, 1966, p. 281). Vigfússon does not seem to have had any sort of specific idea for what a hörgr might look like or in what way it differed from hof, other than it did. In fact, the only reason he begins to use the word is that he encounters sites with ruins that differ considerably from his expectations of a hof but have some link to heathen belief, usually only a place name or local tradition. In this way Vigfússon uses hörgr as a kind of miscellaneous category for sites that must have, to his mind at least, had some religious significance but do not fit with his typology of hof-structures.
This trend set by Vigfússon of finding and identifying ritual sites in spite of archaeological evidence pointing to a different purpose was continued until the end of the 19th century (Friðriksson, 1994, 61-63). The change in emphasis can be said to have begun with an article written by philologist Finnur Jónsson (1898) in which he criticised Vigfússon for his willingness to believe in any and all explanations of a site as a temple. He also examined saga accounts of temples from a philological point of view, organising them into categories of reliability. In 1908 Jónsson got the chance to put his ideas concerning temples to the test as he joined the Dane Daniel Bruun in excavating Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit. The Hofstaðir site had long been claimed by local tradition to be a temple site (Bruun and Jónsson, 1909, p. 265). The two claimed to have confirmed this idea through excavating the site and comparing the results to their ideas of what a hof-structure should look like, ideas based on descriptions from the sagas (bid,
p. 292), especially *Eyrbyggja saga*. This resulted in an idea of *hof*-structures not unlike those of Vigfússon’s ‘typology’, though, unlike Vigfússon, Bruun and Jónsson were not as willing to alter their ideas in favour of literary explanations. This is very apparent in their discussion of 32 supposed *hof* sites which they surveyed, two of which they also dug into, in addition to Hofstaðir. Of those 32 only at three locations did they believe that there may have been a *hof*, dismissing all the others, most of which were identified by Vigfússon, as they did not adhere to Bruun and Jónsson’s ideas of a *hof* (ibid, p. 308-315). However, they are careful to preface their discussion of these sites by saying “[...] that excavation is the only way one can, with certainty, say whether a site was a temple, where such things are indicated; in many cases an excavation would prove negative”\(^7\) (ibid, 308).

Despite this Vigfússon’s legacy lived on, even among otherwise reputable scholars. Matthías Þórdarson is perhaps the prime example of this as through various reports on excavations and surveys he continued to find temple sites and confirmed various ones already identified by Vigfússon (e.g. Þórdarson, 1908; 1911 and 1924). Then in 1939 the site at Lundur in Syðri-Reykjadalur, which Vigfússon had previously excavated and identified as a temple site, was re-excavated by the Finn Jouko Voionmaa (1943) as a part of a cooperative Nordic research expedition, primarily aimed at researching remains in the valley Þjórsárdalur. He considered Lundur to be a dwelling of unusual form but definitely not a temple. A little over two decades later Kristján Eldjárn (1965) re-examined Voionmaa’s excavation report in an article that is perhaps the most critical of, not to mention sardonic towards, Vigfússon, infused as it is with Eldjárn’s obvious dislike for the man’s work and his emphasis on philological, place name and folkloristic evidence beyond the archaeological evidence. Eldjárn came to the conclusion that while Voionmaa was correct in that the Lundur site is no temple he was wrong that the site was a dwelling, instead claiming the site to be “a *byre* and a *barn* [original emphasises] and a small outbuilding – and nothing else”\(^8\) (Eldjárn, 1965, 104).

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\(^7\) My translation. Original text reads: “[…] at udgravning er det eneste, der med sikkerhed kan afgøre, hvorvidt der har været et hov, hvor sådant udpeges; i flere tilfælde vilde en udgravning blive ganske negativ.”

\(^8\) My translation. Original text reads: “Því tóftinar á Lundi eru *fjós* og *hlæða* og lítil útbygging – og ekkert annað”
Criticism of Vigfússon’s work on ritual sites was taken up by foreign scholars in the 1940’s and continued for decades (Friðriksson, 1994, 68-74 and references therein). The temple site can be said to have been finally abolished as a valid archaeological site type by Olaf Olsen in 1966 in his book *Hørg, hov og kirke*. In that work he makes the case that there was no such thing as a specialised heathen ritual building called *hof* in the Viking Age as suggested by the medieval literature (Olsen, 1966, 277-279). Instead, he interprets “*hof as a farm where cult meetings were regularly held for more people than those living on the farm* [original emphasises]” (ibid, 280). This interpretation gained favour among scholars and the so-called ‘temple-farm’ theory became generally excepted in the 1980’s (e.g. Branston, 1980; Briem, 1985; Roesdahl, 1982). Olsen also discusses the related concepts of *hörgr* and *vé*. Citing the medieval literature he puts forward the idea that *hörgr* may have originally been outside venues, possibly connected to stones or piles of stones as already mentioned, but as time passed roofs were built over these places, which subsequently resulted in timber buildings (Olsen, 1966, pp. 281-282). His discussion of *vé* is quite a lot shorter as he cannot find any hint of the nature of these sites beyond that the words seem to indicate sacred sites (Olsen, 1966, p. 282), however, modern scholars have used *vé* when referring to natural spaces that were considered sacred or used in ritual context, particularly groves (e.g. Näström, 1996).

This reinterpretation of *hof* sites as primarily secular, mundane farm sites with an occasional sacred role has led to the term *hof* falling out of favour, along with the related *hörgr* and *vé*, and replaced with the more general ‘ritual site’. Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit being the sole Icelandic ritual site that scholars up to the 1980’s and 90’s could agree on. This interpretation of Hofstaðir was put to the test in the 1990’s and early 2000’s when Adolf Friðriksson and the newly established Institute of Archaeology re-excavated the site. Investigations at Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit began in 1991 and continued to 2002. Early in the excavation the last piece of evidence, provided by Olsen who had dug test trenches at the site (Olsen, 1966, p. 190-192), used to support the temple-farm hypothesis was proven incorrect; a supposed cooking pit intended solely for feast preparations was shown to be a pithouse filled with midden material (Friðriksson and Vésteinsson, 1997). However, as excavations proceeded several factors contributed to the site once again being interpreted as having a ritual significance,
including evidence of possible ritual feasts and abandonment ritual (Lucas, 2009, pp. 398-408). These will be further discussed later.

In the year 1991 Adolf Friðriksson also set out to catalogue other putative hof sites through surface surveys. The results from this research indicate that such putative hof sites do not have any kind of typological basis at all and place names with the word ‘hof’ as an element seem to be given to many different kinds of ruins, from what seem to be sheep houses to a simple, standalone wall fragment (Friðriksson, n.d.). This would seem to show that discovering ritual sites using place name evidence alone is near impossible, though there is some indication that it might be possible to discover such sites using a combination of sources, including place name evidence (e.g. Vésteinsson, 2007, 62-70). It may also be that even though a recent sheephouse or other such structures are indicated as hof by place name evidence it may be possible that the name is indicative of a memory of such structures at the site and that the wrong ruin was identified, possibly in lieu of a vanished ruin.

Outside Iceland many discoveries in Scandinavia have been made which have altered archaeologists' ideas of where and what we can expect to find at ritual sites. At
Frösö, for example, the discovery of what is likely a sacrificial grove under a modern church has lent credence to the idea that ancient Scandinavian cults were primarily ‘outside’ cults with little in the way of manmade structures to draw it ‘inside’ (Näsström, 1996).

Anne Carlie has studied the ritual significance of deposits in connection with Viking Age and pre-Viking Age buildings in southern Scandinavia, i.e. deposits of artefacts connected to the erection, abandonment or alteration of structures. The most common of the deposits seem to be foundation deposits, which in the Viking Age took the form of craft finds, “weapons, jewellery and personal belongings, as well as religious and legal objects” (Carlie, 2006, p. 209), while butchering remains of animals, pots and quernstones are less common in the Viking Age than earlier, though still present to some degree (ibid). Carlie has interpreted changes in the deposits as representative of changing social circumstance in Scandinavia, in particular as the importance of ancestor cults diminished in favour of formal cults with the gods at their centre (ibid, p. 210) and moved from being a part of the ‘life-cycle’ of any building to be found mostly in specialised buildings for crafts and buildings of larger households (ibid, p. 209).

Much along the same lines as Carlie’s work Ann-Britt Falk has studied similar deposits, which she calls “building offerings” (Falk, 2006, p. 200), but with a focus on structures from the medieval era. She does not agree with Carlie in that building offerings began to slowly fade away with the ancestor cults but argues that quite apart from any one belief system the building offering maintained its importance in Scandinavian society despite changes in belief system and even into Christianity (ibid, p. 202). She argues that the deposition of objects, whether artefact or ecofact, was an important part of marking the foundation of a new building and transformed to accommodate a new social reality, probably leading to new understanding of the offering’s meaning and, with it, the objects offered (ibid, p. 201-202).

Studies of the site at Tissø in Denmark have revealed a chieftain’s, or possibly a king’s, hall and a market place on the shore of the lake Tissø (Jørgensen, 2002). The location of the hall on a high place overlooking the lake may have given it a kind of monumentality beyond simple size, but presumed that boats travelled along the numerous rivers that run into the lake and from there out to sea (Jørgensen, 2002, p.
218-221). The travellers along those water routes would have been greeted with the sight of a large, high hall. This situation is quite similar to the one of Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit, though the hall at Tissø is older, 7th century, and bigger, or about 36 m long (Jørgensen, 2002, p. 229). In addition to being a chieftain's hall and a market centre, the site has been interpreted as a ritual site and possibly even a ritual centre, with signs of sacrifices into the lake, mainly in the form of miniature weapons, (Jørgensen, 2002, 221) and a number of statues and amulets, interpreted as having cultic significance (Jørgensen, 2002, 234). It is interesting to note that there is no mention of foundation or abandonment deposits in connection with the site at Tissø, despite the large amount of offerings found in the lake.

At Uppåkra in Sweden excavations have discovered a hall with many features that have resulted in an interpretation of a ritual structure. These features include a deposit of a beaker and glass bowl under the floor of the building’s last phase or phases, a large number of guldgubbar, or gold-foil figures, and other gold artefacts found mostly in fills of post-holes and wall-trenches, pits outside the structure filled with quernstones, both whole and broken, a number of features with burnt stones and animal bones, and many purposely destroyed weapons laid in the ground (Larsson, 2006, p. 250-251). However, most of these features are older than the Viking Age. In addition the structure is located on the edge of a plateau, making it a prominent feature in the landscape. This structure has been interpreted as possibly being a kind of metaphor for the mythological Valhalla (ibid, 251). Though that interpretation seems somewhat far-fetched there are many features of the structure at Uppåkra that might be of interest for investigation of possible ritual sites in Iceland. The deposits of vessels for drink and gold objects in post-hole and wall-trench fills are such features, especially in contrast to another artefact in a fill at the site, namely an iron ring (ibid, 250), which seems to stand out like a sore thumb in comparison to the other, much richer fill artefacts.

Studies of ritual and ritual sites are, of course, not the sole domain of archaeologists and many scholars have taken part in the discussion. Perhaps of most interest to this thesis, and archaeologists interested in Viking Age ritual, are the contributions of folkloristics in the past two decades, for example Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson’s Blót í norrænum síð (1997), where he discusses sacrifice and ritual in the literary sources.
Another folklorist whose work is of interest is Terry Gunnell, particularly an article titled “Hof, Halls, Goðar and Dwarves: An Examination of the Ritual Space in the Pagan Icelandic Hall”, where he argues that the literary sources do not necessarily point to the existence of buildings with special ritual purpose in Viking Age Iceland but that examination of those sources alongside other sources about the construction of the Viking Age hall seem to indicate that the construction of the hall itself has implicit ritual connotations, which meshes well with modern thoughts on ritual being integrated with everyday practice (e.g. Insoll, 2004, p. 17; Renfrew and Bahn, 2004, p. 414 and 416). Gunnell points to the concept of öndvegissúlur (Gunnell, 2001, 15-17), posts supposedly placed on either side of the most important seat in the hall, the high seat, as well as the names of the various parts of a hall’s woodwork. The dvergr, dwarves, that hold up the ás, main roof beam and possible cognate with the Old Norse word for god, may be an allusion to the story of the creation of the world where four dvergr are said to hold up the sky. The hall can in this way have been seen as a micro-cosmos in the Viking Age world view (ibid, 20-23). In this way even the literary evidence for hof-structures, at least in Iceland, can be seen to indicate, not special buildings for ritual practice but another facet of the Viking Age hall structures.

As has been shown here a great deal has changed in the last century and a half when it comes to ideas of Viking Age heathen temples and ritual. The hof, such a prominent feature in the early days with its idols and sacral bowls of blood, has fallen completely out of favour, even the word is only rarely used and when it is, it is nearly always in the context of disproving the descriptions found in the medieval sources and propagated by antiquarians like Sigurður Vigfússon. In its stead we have a view of the Viking Age hall as one of, possibly, many sites of ritual, including outside venues, such as at lakes and in groves. Sacrificial behaviour still plays a role in the perception of Viking Age rituals with examples ranging from building offerings to the slaughter and possible hanging of animals in trees at special sites. Ritual feasts have become accepted by scholars as one of the main rituals in the Viking Age community, often with an emphasis on the feasts as events designed to curry favour and reinforce the social order. This change in the view on rituals can be seen as part of a shift from viewing ritual as belonging to specific places, and instead being specific practices. This change in the
view of the place of ritual in the archaeological record follows the same changes taking place in other parts of the world (Fogelin, 2007, p. 59). These practices may, or may not, be linked to places or structures but it is the practice rather than the place that imparts ritual meaning.
3. Viking Age Halls

In this chapter a number of excavated Viking Age halls in Iceland will be examined in the context of a possible ritual role. As the previous chapter has shown the history of research on ritual and belief in the Viking Age has numerous examples of scholars who believe themselves to have some knowledge of the truth about heathen ritual and belief and how that should be presented in the archaeological material, namely the connection to specific places, often tied to the concept of hof. This approach to ritual has led many scholars to make claims about ritual in the archaeological context only to be proven wrong. This is, of course, the case in any study but when the study involves religion and ritual in archaeology there is a feeling, often expressed but rarely discussed, that ritual as an explanation is the sign of a lazy or inept scholar incapable of finding a 'proper' explanation or of those using ritual explanations for those things in the archaeological record that seem to defy functional explanation to the modern mind. This feeling is most likely a reaction to the binge of relativism and ritual explanations that followed the coming of post-processualism, where, perhaps, no such explanations were warranted (Renfrew and Bahn, 2004, p. 416) or where the arguments used to come to a ritual explanation were uncomfortably reminiscent of the manner in which the antiquarians had come to their conclusions about the religious lives of past peoples.

People in the past need not have been more, or less, religious than modern people, but their religiosity may have expressed itself differently and been more intertwined with everyday life. How then is it possible to discover these signs of belief in the past? If looking at the archaeological material for signs of ritual and belief without having formed any ideas of what those signs may be, I believe it is inevitable that nothing or very little of value will result as everything and nothing will become a valid reason for a ritual explanation. For this reason it is necessary to define what to look for while examining archaeological sites when trying to seek out signs of ritual.

Signs of Ritual

One of the problems when discussing the archaeology of ritual and religion is the fact that even with the historic, ethnographic and folkloric material available it is not exactly
known what rituals were performed by Viking Age Icelanders and in what context. This means that we do not know what the remains of these rituals may look like in the archaeological record but through examining the historic, ethnographic and folkloric material we can get some idea of what to expect from the archaeological record regarding this topic as the stories and traditions of a culture may hold memories of much older traditions and beliefs (e.g. Insoll, 2004; Aðalsteinsson, 1997). However, as the cliché goes 'history is written by the victors' and the victors over the religious lives of the Viking Age Norse were, without a doubt, the Christians. In addition there were very few anthropologists at the time, conscientiously recording the rituals of the heathen Scandinavians!

As previously stated looking at the archaeological record without a reference point will probably lead to few results of any value. The challenge then is to identify the signs of ritual in the archaeological record using historic, folkloric and ethnographic studies as references to build on. Only through the interplay of that material and the archaeological record can we begin to approach, to understand, the ritual practices of past peoples, though once that has been accomplished it may be possible to not only identify these ritual practices in the archaeological record but also the way they have changed and diversified through time and space (Hayden, 2001, p. 29). When looking for signs of ritual, and religion, we must, as Renfrew and Bahn (2004, p. 394) put it, "be very careful about specific contexts of discovery: it is the assemblage, the ensemble, that matters, not the individual object in isolation".

In the following sections I will consider three kinds of ritual most commonly associated with the Viking Age hall in the literature. They are; feasting, blood sacrifices and building offerings.

**Feasts**

Ritual feasts are, as the name suggests, communal meals with some ritualized elements, though definitions are nearly as many as those using the term (Dietler and Hayden, 2001, pp. 1-3). These elements may involve, to give a few examples, the kind of meal being consumed, at what time – whether time of the year, day or some other timescale – the meal is consumed or where the meal takes place. Evidence of feasting can most readily
be found in the archaeological record through analysis of the bone collections. While it is very probable that feasting was practiced as a part of the traditions surrounding funerals and marriages, for example (Hayden, 2001, p. 29), evidence of these kind of irregular feasts may vanish in the archaeological record (Lucas, 2009, p. 404). Evidence of regular feasting, as at, for example, seasonal gatherings, may be more readily apparent. It is fairly safe to assume that at such occasions as feasts the host would want to offer high quality food and food that was enjoyed fairly rarely, such as the meat of young animals, lambs, piglets and calves. Commonly, the animals would have been allowed to grow to their peak, a practice optimized to secure the greatest amount of meat for effort expended. For feasts, however, the animal would likely be slaughtered earlier, resulting in a lesser amount of meat but of higher quality (McGovern, 2003 and references therein). This would be reflected in the bone collection of feasts as an unusually high ratio of young animals to older animals, in contrast to assemblages from everyday consumption. However, unusual patterns in the bone collection may also be indicative of other activities, whether due to special environmental circumstances or even other kind of rituals. The production of such high quality meat would be much more expensive than conventional maximized meat production which might indicate what have been called "patron-role" feasts which do not assume reciprocal feasts and work to establish and maintain the social hierarchy (Dietler, 1996; Zori et al, 2013).

Other indicators of feasting are possible and can take a wide variety of forms, from food containers, to specialized facilities for feasting and food preparation (Hayden, 2001, p. 40-41). Feasting, as it would be most readily apparent in the archaeological record, means a large number of people sitting and consuming copious amounts of food and drink together. These people would need to be housed, at least for the duration of the feast. In the summertime in Iceland it might be possible to accommodate a large number of people outside, perhaps in tents or other temporary structures. In wintertime, however, it would be necessary to provide a heated place inside for those participating. Doing that in a temporary structure is harder than in a permanent one so one might expect that a hall's size might be indicative of its owner's ability to hold feast for many people. However, it is possible that such a big hall was not a necessity as some guests could be housed in outbuildings, as in *Egils saga* (ch. 43 and 44).
Blood Sacrifices

Blood sacrifices as described in the medieval literature and presented in the previous chapter are events with a great dramatic presence. One can fairly easily imagine the impact the sight of the blood in the bowl, as it is smeared on the temple and those in attendance, the sounds of the animal being slaughtered and the smell of the animal's blood would have on those present. It is then regrettable that there exists little to no archaeological evidence of the blood sacrifice as presented in the literature in Viking Age Iceland. The blood itself would not normally survive in the archaeological record, except perhaps as residue in containers. However, experimentation seems to indicate that blood rarely survives in any identifiable form longer than a few months, except under laboratory conditions (Eisele et al, 1995).

According to the medieval literature the blood was, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, collected in bowls, sometimes said to be of copper, and spread using a thing like a Christian priest's aspergillum. No reliable evidence has ever been discovered that can be linked to the literature's blood sacrifices, though during one of his one day excavation at Þyrill in Hvalfjörður Sigurður Vigfússon found a stone with a small bowl, 4 inches in diameter and 2.25 inches in depth, chipped into it. This stone he called blótsteinn, thus connecting it with heathen ritual (1881, p. 74) and, implicitly, to
blood sacrifice and the concept of hlautbolli discussed in the previous chapter, even though most of the literary sources seem to indicate that the hlautbolli was a proper bowl and not a rock with a small hole chipped into it. Other artefacts that might be indicative of blood sacrifice as described in the medieval literature, like the ‘heathen aspersgillum’ hlautteinn or stökkull, are unknown. However, the patterns seen in some bone collections may indicate a ritualized practice of slaughter, intended to spread the blood over an area surrounding the slaughter and may be a part of a blood sacrifice, feast or both. It is quite possible that blood sacrifices were an integral part of other rituals, such as feasts and funerals, and that searching for evidence of blood sacrifices separate from other rituals is futile.

**Building Offerings**

The term 'building offering' is an ambiguous and potentially problematic one as the word 'offering' implies a gift of some sort to an independent entity. The status of a building as an independent entity capable of receiving such offerings is not attested to anywhere and assuming that they are gifts to appease or appeal to some deity or a spirit of some kind potentially preempts any power the objects themselves may have been considered to have. The term is, however, useful as a catch-all term for a variety of deposits connected with the erection, alteration or abandonment of a building. While these may be indicative of different kinds of rituals their presence in the archaeological record share many characteristics, such as indications of deliberate placement as opposed to accidental loss or incidental deposition. Building offerings can be of a wide variety and can be found in many contexts (Falk, 2006).

Foundation deposits can most often be found in post-holes, under floors or hearths, or even under the walls themselves and can range from simple, everyday items such as whetstones, knives and animals bones, possibly indicating an offering of food, to jewellery, beads or even coins (Carlie, 2006; Falk, 2006). Deposits connected with the abandonment of a site can be more difficult to identify as they would be found above the floor, or in cuts through a building's floor, but usually under structural collapse or accumulated soil. Such artefacts are also likely to be whole or purposely destroyed before being deposited. In addition it is possible that as a part of the
abandonment ritual there is something not deposited but removed, as may be indicated with cuts into a hearth or a hearth's ember pit. Deposits that are more easily connected with abandonment are animal carcasses deposited in the structure or near to it, either whole or in parts. Deposits that can be linked to alterations to the structure in which they are deposited fall somewhere in between foundation and abandonment deposits and can include elements of both and can be found between the floors of building phases or in post-holes which have been altered in some way, the post fixed or the hole replaced with a post-pad.

**Signs of Other Ritual**

It is possible that in addition to direct evidence of these three categories of ritual there may be other indicators for ritual at a given site. Depending on the context these indicators may be interpreted to point towards one or more of the kind of rituals discussed above, or they may be indicative of drastically different rituals.

Here it is worthwhile to reiterate the quote from Renfrew and Bahn cited above, that it is not the individual object but the context that is important. It is also important to mention again what is mentioned in chapter 1, that while modern people are used to a separation between the religious and the secular, that separation may not have been the same in the past or even existed at all (e.g. Fogelin, 2007, p. 60; Insoll, 2004, p. 17; Renfrew and Bahn, 2004, p. 414 and 416). For example Ædalsteinsson (1997, pp. 113-161) theorises that the weaving of Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir while her husband slays her former betrothed in *Laxdæla saga* (ch. 49) is a form of ritual, either a magical ceremony or sun worship. From this example a question arises of whether that means all weaving should be considered as religious ritual. Weaving is certainly a ritualized activity but the question of whether weaving in the Viking Age in general should be considered as religious ritual would be answered by most in the negative. Weaving can, however, be considered a part of what might be called 'everyday rituals', where everyday activities, like weaving, slaughter or even family meals (Hayden, 2001, p. 28), become ritualized. Such everyday rituals may or may not be religiously motivated but the question of whether they are or not can be considered to be flawed. Such rituals and the objects
associated with them can be both religious and secular and it is the context in which they are used that impart such qualities (Fogelin, 2007, pp. 60-61).

Distinguishing everyday rituals in the archaeological context can be a complex matter. Continuing with the example of weaving, would a lone loom-weight be enough to interpret the performance of the everyday ritual of weaving at the site? Given that weaving is a ritualized practice a loom-weight could be considered a ritual object, however, unless the find context indicates the usage of the loom-weight in weaving it cannot be used to interpret ritual practice at a given site (Fogelin, 2007, p. 61). Thus, an incidental discovery of a loom-weight cannot be used to interpret ritual practice, while a loom-weight in a post-hole along with other objects, a knife or a vessel for food or drink, may indicate ritual practice.

**Excavated Viking Age Halls in Iceland**

Having discussed what may be considered types of ritual practice it is necessary to examine the archaeological record for signs of any of these practices in those Viking Age halls in Iceland which have been excavated. Unfortunately, the material is somewhat limited; since the expedition to Þjórsárdalur in 1939 around twenty or so Viking Age sites with halls present have been fully excavated. The published records of these excavations vary widely in quality and many are insufficient to make many inferences about their possible association with ritual activity. The records do, however, improve through time so the halls most discussed here were excavated in the last twenty years. It should be noted that for those sites excavated before the 1990's only published material is referenced, while for those excavated in the 1990's and later published material is used, where available, along with excavation reports.

The sites discussed in this section are arranged according to the year of their excavation.
The site of Skallakot in Þjórsárdalur was excavated as a part of the cooperative Nordic research expedition in 1939 by Aage Roussell. At Skallakot a structure was excavated that was a little over 30 metres long, on the outside, with three rooms attached to the back of the hall (Roussell, 1943, pp. 58-67). Roussell believed that while the main hall of the structure was older than the Hekla 1300 eruption he thought that the additional structures, the rooms at the back and the extension to the north added when the site was reconstructed after the eruption, a theory strengthened by the presence of volcanic ash, believed to be from the Hekla 1300 eruption, about 50 cm above the older floor (ibid, p. 57). This meshes well with the prevalent hypothesis in Icelandic archaeology that the
oldest halls are of simple construction with rooms formed only through wooden partitions, while younger halls, from the 11th century onwards, have added rooms through the construction of further turf walls, either at the back or at the short walls of the halls (e.g. Magnússon, 1973, p. 53). Although this hypothesis has proven useful it, by no means, provides an absolute date for a structure.

The hall seems to have been around 31 x 5.2 m internally, though the main hall itself is only 13.6 m long (Roussell, 1943, pp. 58-67). When Skallakot was briefly revisited in 2001 it became apparent that the western end of the hall had only been partially excavated by Roussell, bringing all his work at the site into question (Gestsdóttir, 2002, p. 15). The internal arrangements of the hall were found to be minimal by Roussell, with an ash-filled hearth, no obvious sign of an ember pit and only a few indications of post-holes (Roussell, 1943, pp. 62-64). Roussell does not even bother to tell the reader how many they were but does remark that there were arrangements of stones, especially in the hall's eastern end, which could have been post-pads (ibid, pp. 64-65).

Under the hall, particularly the western end, Roussell discovered older remains, possibly of a smithy. However, these remains were not excavated thoroughly and thus remain unknown (ibid, pp. 65-67).

Few artefacts, most rather badly preserved, were discovered during Roussell's excavations and no bone material at all. Those few artefacts that were discovered were all found in the main hall. The find contexts of the artefacts are, as for other excavations of the period, ambiguous but it would seem none were discovered in the few post-holes that were found (ibid, 70-71).

The excavation of Skallakot is indicative of the time it was performed. Better than those that came before, certainly, but still flawed in its execution. Blanks are filled in with the educated guesses of the excavators to give a full picture of the site (Gestsdóttir, 2002, p. 15), even though such a picture has not been attained.

Snjáleifartóttr in Þjórsárdalur
Snjáleifartóttr is another site excavated by the cooperative Nordic research expedition of 1939 but the site had been visited by Brynjúlfur Jónsson in the 1880's, though he did
not excavate. He did, however, remark that of the visible ruins in the area of Snjáleifartóttir one must be the farmstead of the local settler, Þorbjörn, while another must be his hof (Jónsson, 1885, p. 46). Mårten Stenberger, who led the excavation in 1939 adds that a third ruin is probably a sheephouse with barn. While he did not excavate the ruins Jónsson believed to be a hof Stenberger does not seem to agree with Jónsson and says that they are probably common farm structures, barns or the like (Stenberger, 1943b, pp. 99-100). Of the three ruins Stenberger identified as belonging to the Snjáleifatóttir site he only excavated the farmstead itself, which turned out to have had two, or possibly three, structural phases (ibid, pp. 106-107).

The youngest of these phases included five rooms and post-dates the Hekla 1300 eruption, though Stenberger believed that of those rooms II and III were older, pre-dating the eruption and forming the second structural phase, and were added to and reconstructed later (ibid). However, this second phase does not seem to be much older than the eruption and while room III is long and narrow - c. 12 x 2.75 m, its western end is unclear but it is not likely it was much longer - it is by no means a hall, or indeed of the Viking Age (ibid, pp. 102, 104-105). The third phase, about 40 cm under the previous one but oriented in the same way, is clearly a hall without any additional rooms (ibid, p. 107).

The hall was 16.25 x 5.5 m internal size with what Stengerber considered a double hearth but may indicate that the hearth was repaired or enlarged, with an ember pit, all filled with ash and charcoal (ibid, pp. 108-109). The internal arrangement of the hall is surprisingly well documented for its time, with many post-holes and post-pads noted (ibid, p. 110). Only one find is noted for the entire site of Snjáleifartóttir, a fragment of a blue bead, found by the hearth of the hall (ibid, pp. 111-112). Stenberger makes no mention of bones or other ecofacts but it is likely that, as for Skallakot above, preservation was bad.

Ísleifsstaðir in Borgarfjörður
While the cooperative Nordic research expedition of 1939 focused mostly on Þjórsárdalur other sites were excavated as well. Ísleifsstaðir in Borgarfjörður was one of these sites, excavated by Mårten Stenberger. At Ísleifsstaðir Stenberger identified two
ruins on low hills situated by a stream, called Sleggjulækur, in an otherwise flat landscape. He only excavated one of these two ruins as he considered the other to be a barn or sheephouse and thus uninteresting in his mind. At the ruin he did excavate, he uncovered three structural phases. Phase 1 was the youngest and phase 3 the oldest but absolute dating of the site and its phases is difficult (Stenberger, 1943a). However, all the structural phases are of simple halls without additional rooms, which might indicate a terminus ante quem of the 11th century.

Phase 1 was a hall structure 17,2 x 5,1 m internally with clear internal arrangements (ibid, pp. 149-150). Despite few post-holes being discovered the hall's division into four rooms by internal partitions was rather clear. In the centre of the structure's largest room, the main hall, there was a hearth with ember pit, both of which were filled with ash (ibid, p. 152). While excavating phase 1 Stenberger noticed a thick layer of ash on top of the floor layer of the entire structure, which he interpreted as evidence of a fire which had burned down this last phase and ended occupation of the site (ibid, p. 150).

Up against the wall of the phase 1 hall there was another structure, which seems to have escaped the fires that destroyed the hall, unless it is actually a later construction. This structure was very badly preserved, with the south-western wall being completely gone. As a result it is difficult to say what the original size of the building was or indeed its function, though Stenberger hypothesises that the structure was a kitchen, based largely on the well constructed but small hearth which it contained. The hearth was filled with ash, as were the two ember pits on either side of it (ibid, pp. 155-157).

The floor layer of phase 2 was situated about 18 cm under the floor of phase 1, with a slightly larger internal size than phase 1, or 19,75 x 5,6 m. If anything the internal arrangement of phase 2 were clearer than that of phase 1, with a great many post- and stake-holes, though of unspecified number, which clearly indicate the hall's arrangement into four rooms by means of wooden partitions. Many of the post-holes were empty, though some had remains of rotted wood in them (ibid, pp. 157-164). In the southern end of the structure there are two roughly oval holes or pits. One of these is of about 1,25 x 0,75 m and was filled with turf, while the other was about 1,5 x 1,05 m and had turf only on top. Under the turf in the second pit there were four layers of ash from a fireplace, the pit being about 39 cm deep. Each layer contained some burnt bones
but in different quantities. Stenberger considers these to be cooking pits belonging to phase 2 (ibid, p. 164).

The oldest known phase of occupation at Ísleifsstaðir, phase 3, is known only from its hearth, which was located during the excavation of phase 2. The hearth was some 12 to 15 cm deeper in the ground than that of phase 2 and situated about 1.5 m to the north of phase 2's hearth. The hearth of phase 3 was larger than the 2.4 m long hearth of phase 2, or about 4 m, judging by Stenberger's diagram (ibid, p. 159 and fig. 104 on p. 158). Due to time constraints and a great deal of rain Stenberger was unable to attempt any further excavation of phase 3, leaving only the hearth as evidence of its existence (ibid, pp. 159-160).

Finds at the Ísleifsstaðir excavation included a number of stone artefacts and badly corroded metal artefacts without find context, typical of Viking and Middle Age sites in Iceland (ibid, p. 167-170). Besides burnt bones no bone material was discovered (ibid, p. 170).

Klaufanes in Svarfaðardalur

In 1940 Kristján Eldjárn spent nine days, over the course of a month and a half, excavating a Viking Age hall in Svarfaðardalur. The structure was about 17 x 4.7 meters, internal size, with an internal wall that marks a room of about 5 x 3.5 meters in the north-eastern end of the structure, which Eldjárn interpreted as a kitchen (Eldjárn, 1942, pp. 18-19). However, following a reassessment of the excavation's published reports Elín Ósk Hreiðarsdóttir has put forward the idea that the internal wall, which was made of stone while the rest of the hall's walls were made of turf, actually represents a second, younger phase of the hall (Hreiðarsdóttir, 2004, pp. 108-110). The only other features of the structure were the hearths in the hall, which seemed to have been reconstructed at one time, and in the 'kitchen'. No other features could be discerned despite claims of having searched (Eldjárn, 1942, pp. 22-23).

Of artefactual material there were only three pieces, all rocks with naturally formed holes, which Eldjárn thought to have been loom or net weights. In addition a few bones and horse teeth were discovered but in very bad condition (ibid, p. 23). Find locations were not registered for any of these nor do they seem to have been stored for
future examination (Hreiðarsdóttir, 2004, pp. 103-104) and these few objects that were discovered cannot, without a proper find context, be said to represent anything but common household waste.

**Bær by Gjáskógar in Þjórsárdalur**

In the year 1949 Kristján Eldjárn began excavations at a site he called Bær, meaning farmstead, at Gjáskógar in Þjórsárdalur, following in the footsteps of the Nordic research expedition of a decade earlier with continued research in that valley. Unfortunately, he was unable to complete the excavation at that time and was could not continue the excavation until 1952. Again time ran away from Eldjárn and this time he was unable to return until 1960 (Eldjárn, 1961, pp. 7-8).

At Bær Kristján Eldjárn discovered, along with more recent remains, a hall which he dated to the 11th century (ibid, pp. 11-18). The hall was about 14,5 x 4 meters internally, with several postholes in which the posts seem to have rotted *in situ* as they were filled with the remains of wood (ibid, pp. 20-21). In the north-eastern end of the hall a man-made depression (IS. þró) was discovered, lined with unburnt stone, about 30 centimetres deep. In the depression a loom weight and a piece of slag were found (ibid, p. 24). Most likely this depression was used for some sort of food storage, though no positive remains were discovered for that, or any other, purpose.

The remains of the hall are not the oldest remains in the area. Eldjárn discovered the remains of another structure under the hall, that seem to be of the oldest structure at the site (ibid, p. 39-41). From Eldjárn’s report it seems most likely that he discovered a pit house, possibly representing the first phase of occupation at the site.

With regards to the artefactual material and the bone collection, neither were drawn onto the plan of the structure and little information is available about the find locations of artefacts and bones. In addition there is very little about the artefacts which indicates anything other than a functional farmstead. In the bone collection there were, however, two discoveries that jump out. Firstly, there was a piece of the skull of a fully grown male sheep, complete with horns, whose find location is described in such a way that it may be understood to have been found on the floor of the hall. However, the dubious way in which the find location is described makes it difficult to determine if the
skull fragment was deposited when the structure was abandoned or if it found its way there some time after the abandonment (ibid, p. 43).

Secondly, there was a collection of phalanges from cattle found in a probable pit house under the hall (ibid, p. 43). Here, again, the find location is somewhat dubious but definitely a part of the oldest structure. The dubious part here arises from the fact that the phalanges are described to have been found in a post-hole, at the same as they are described as being a part of the floor layer of the structure (ibid, p. 43). Possibly this means that the phalanges were in the floor layer of the structure and fell into the post-hole after the post was removed.

Bær, then, is a good example of the importance of accurately locating the find locations of both artefacts and ecofacts. Were the skull fragment and phalanges discussed above more accurately located within their respective structures it might be possible to give a definitive conclusion as to the presence of ritual activity at the site but as it stands the evidence is ambiguous.

Hvítárholt in Hrunamannahreppur

Between 1963 and 1967 excavations went on at a Viking Age settlement in Hvítárholt, led by Þór Magnússon (1973, pp. 8-14). Three halls were excavated, along with other structures. The halls were similar internal sizes; the first, called “Hús III”, was 19 x 6,25 m (Magnússon, 1973, p. 22); the second, “Hús VIII”, was originally 19 x 5 m but was altered down to 14 m length (ibid, pp. 40-41); and the last, “Hús IX”, was 16,3 x 4,95 m (ibid, p. 46). There were few signs of the internal arrangements of the halls, few post-holes were discovered, clustered around the hearths and none of them seem to have contained any artefacts (ibid, p. 54). A man-made depression (IS. þró), possibly an ember pit, was found at the eastern end of the hearth in Hús III, which was filled up with ash (ibid, p. 22).

There is little else to say about this excavation. There were few finds of any kind and the bone collection is hardly discussed. None of the artefacts or ecofacts were given a find location. There is then nothing that indicates the presence of ritual activity at the site at Hvítárholt, though whether that is due to there actually having been no ritual
activity at the site or the way in which the site was excavated and/or recorded cannot be said.

Sámsstaðir in Þjórsárdalur

The years 1971 and 1972 saw yet another return to Þjórsárdalur, this time led by Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (1977). A hall 13.6 x 4.5 m internally was excavated at the site of Sámsstaðir in Þjórsárdalur (Rafnsson, 1977, p. 61). Rafnsson dates the hall as being occupied from sometime after AD 1000 to c. AD 1104 (ibid, pp. 90-92).

Here, as at Hvítárholt, there is little to suggest what the internal arrangement of the hall was like, with no post-holes discovered. There were, however, a few post-pads (ibid, p. 62-68). At the hall’s hearth Rafnsson conjectures that an ember pit may have been situated at the western end of the hearth (ibid, p. 68). At the eastern end of the hearth there is an area of undefined size without the charcoal which is otherwise found around the hearth, which Rafnsson describes as “peculiar” (IS. einkennilegur) but makes no attempt at explaining it except to remark that it may indicate some internal arrangement of the hall (ibid, p. 62 & 68).

While there is little discussion of the artefactual material (ibid, pp. 93-96) and none of the bone collection and thus little to work with, it is possible that Rafnsson’s “peculiar” area without charcoal is the remains of an attempt to rob the hall’s ember pit.

Herjólfsdalur in Vestmannaeyjar

In 1971 Margrét Hermanns-Auðardóttir began excavations on Viking Age remains in Herjólfsdalur in Vestmannaeyjar, however, due to a number of reasons, including a volcanic eruption, the excavations were not complete until 1983 (Hermanns-Auðardóttir, 1989, p. 1). In Herjólfsdalur she excavated a number of ruins, including four halls, labelled I, II, III and V, a few outbuildings and a great number of cooking pits, both within structures and outside (ibid, pp. 9-17).

Hall I was 8 x 3.5 m internal size, with seven post-holes which do not point to any internal division. Inside the hall three holes were discovered in a row along the hall's long axis. These holes were interpreted as cooking pits, one of which had an ember pit associated with it. In one of the post-holes a piece of pine was discovered
which Hermanns-Auðardóttir interprets as being a part of the hall's wooden structure (pp. 9-10).

Hall II was 13.5 x 3.5 m internal size, with nine post-holes, which, again, pointed to no definitive internal division. This hall had a hearth and a cooking pit with several small pits which Hermanns-Auðardóttir interpreted as ember pits connected to iron working. In addition this hall had an impression from a barrel pit (IS. súfar) (ibid, pp. 10-11).

Hall III was 7.5 x 2.8 m internal size with four post-holes, again non-indicative of internal division, but with three cooking pits and an ember pit in the north-eastern corner of the hall (ibid, p. 11).

Hall V was of 10 x 3.5 m internal size and was the only hall with signs of internal division, a possible wood panelled wall and was, apparently, the only one with benches along the long walls. Only one post-hole was discovered inside the hall, that had been converted to a stone-pad. In addition there was one post-hole outside the hall, at the end of a paved entrance on the hall's northern gable wall (ibid, 13-14 and plan pp. 20-21).

The artefacts discovered during the Herjólfsdalur excavation are discussed only superficially in the publication and while some of them are given a rough find location in the form of a sign on small overview maps of the site none of them are linked to a specific context in the text (ibid, p. 25-33). The bone collection can hardly be said to even be mentioned, let alone discussed in any detail (ibid, p. 121-126). The most interesting thing about the Herjólfsdalur site in this context are the great number of cooking pits in the excavated area. It is tempting to interpret these pits, based on their sheer number, as evidence of feasting activity, however, as has been shown with the example of Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit, both in the previous chapter and below in this chapter, such interpretations are based on tenuous assumptions, at best.

Grelutóttir in Arnarfjörður
In the summers of 1977 and 1978 the site of Grelutóttir by the farm Hrafnseyri in Arnarfjörður was investigated by the National Museum of Iceland and five structures excavated but the site had been protected since September 1973 (Ólafsson, 1980, pp.
In addition to those structures that were excavated fourteen others were identified at the site, test trenches were dug into four structures but the others, mostly turf fences (IS. *garður*), were only surveyed by aerial photography (ibid, p. 28). The structures were interpreted as two smithies, two pit-houses and a hall with a room at the back (ibid, p. 26).

The hall, excavated in the summer of 1977, was about 13.4 x 5.4 m internal size but the walls of the hall, particularly the eastern end, were badly eroded (ibid, pp. 31-32). The internal arrangements of the hall were not very clear but it would seem that the western end of the hall was closed off by a wooden partition, behind which were found two man-made depressions, interpreted as holes for food storage containers (IS. *sáför*) (ibid, pp. 32-33). Arranged slightly east of the hall's centre was the 3.1 m long hearth with an ember pit, full of charcoal (ibid, pp. 35-36). The few artefacts that were found in the hall were either of stone or iron, spread across the hall (ibid, p. 68-70 and hall plan, pp. 32-33).

The room at the back of the hall was added later, as shown by the way it was constructed. The back wall of the hall, where the entrance to the room was located had been altered to make way for the entrance and a row of stones had been placed under the wall of the room (ibid, pp. 37-39). Under one wall of the room a group of three unidentifiable iron objects were found, with one more at the far end of the same wall, under the corner (ibid, pp. 38-40 and hall plan, pp. 32-33). Inside the backroom a nail was found jabbed into the floor layer with no indication of it being a part of any structure (ibid, p. 68).

The two pit-houses and the two smithies will not be discussed here in any detail, as they fall outside the focus of this thesis but both of the pit-houses were damaged by a nearby river or stream, which has since dried up, running over its banks and bringing gravel with it (ibid, p. 41). The gravel filled both pit-houses and damaged part of the hall's wall, as well (ibid, p. 41 and 50). However, the way the position of the gravel is discussed in the published report it seems that the houses were probably abandoned by the time the river overflowed, meaning the structures were not contemporary as is assumed in the report (ibid, p. 41, 50 and 67).
Granastaðir in Eyjafjarðardalur

As a part of his doctoral work Bjarni F. Einarsson excavated a 10th century farm (Einarsson, 1995, pp. 99-101) in Eyjafjarðardalur called Granastaðir, named for a character from Saga sources and maintained by local place name tradition (ibid, pp. 69-73). The excavation took place between 1987 and 1991 (ibid, p. 69). Granastaðir is located deep in Eyjafjarðardalur at 250 metres above sea level, on a grassy alluvial cone close to the river Eyjafjarðardalsá and a stream, Glerá, which has occasionally damaged parts of the homestead complex of Granastaðir (ibid, p. 69).

The Granastaðir hall had an internal size of 14,7 x 5,4 m (ibid, p. 79). From the internal arrangements of the hall eight post-holes and post-pads were discovered, along with a long hearth and an ember-pit (ibid, p. 79-80). The location of the posts might be indicative of three or four rooms in the hall. Room I most likely had something to do with a cistern, vat and a hearth found in the northern part of the north/south oriented hall (ibid, p. 79), though the specific purpose is unknown. Rooms II and III were the main hall and a possible vestibule with a storage or drying room in the southern part, Room IV (ibid, pp. 80-82). Two additional structures were found built to the hall. One was built at the back of the hall with no access to the hall itself and was interpreted as a smoke house. The other was constructed to the south gable wall of the hall and though its floor layer was about 50 cm lower than the one of the hall there were steps between the structures. This structure was interpreted as a kitchen (ibid, p. 82-85).

A few iron objects were discovered in the hall, mostly nails but also two knives. A number of stones were discovered, a few of which were interpreted as ornamental (ibid, p. 81). No artefacts were discovered under the hall's floor or in the post-holes (ibid, p. 81). The bone material included bones from marine fish but no freshwater fish. Also present were cattle bones, sheep bones and pig bones. The ratio of sheep bones to cattle was unusually low, 2 to 1, for a farm of Granastaðir's size and location. A high proportion of the sheep bones were of very young lambs. In addition there were a great number of pig bones. Einarsson believes that this bone material is indicative of some unknown ecological pressure (ibid, p. 99).
Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit

Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit has a long history of research, as has already been touched upon in the chapter on research history. The first excavations at Hofstaðir were done by Daniel Bruun and Finnur Jónsson in 1908, an excavation which revealed a structure that conformed to their ideas of what a hof structure should look like (Bruun and Jónsson, 1909, pp. 265-297). The next excavation at Hofstaðir took place in 1965 when Olaf Olsen dug test trenches into a structure which he interpreted as a cooking pit intended for feasting (Olsen, 1966, pp. 190-192). The site was then revisited by Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson in 1991, at which time Olsen's cooking pit was found to be a pit-house filled with midden material (Friðriksson and Vésteinsson, 1997), and excavations of the hall at Hofstaðir continued until 2002 (Lucas, 2009, p. 15), though excavations continue on other remains at the site. As of this writing the cemetery is under excavation (Isaksen and Gestsdóttir, 2012).

The site of Hofstaðir was found to have seven phases, of which phases I to III are of most interest to the current topic as they are dated from the Viking Age, or c. AD 940 to c. AD 1070 (Lucas, 2009, pp. 55-62). The hall itself possibly had two structural phases, the earliest of which was c. 28 x 6.6 m internal size and then extended to a length of c. 33 m (ibid, pp. 112-115). The internal arrangement of the hall was quite clear, with many post-holes and post-pads discovered (ibid, pp. 67-74). In the latter phase not only was the hall lengthened but had two rooms added. One, Annexe A2, was located at the back of the hall and the other, Annexe C2, was located at the northern end of the hall. In addition a structure, Small Hall D, had been built 3 m in front of the hall, near the southern end, and may have been connected to the hall by a turf passage (ibid, pp. 120-137).

Hofstaðir is, without a doubt, the Icelandic site that has been most discussed in relation to ritual and pre-Christian belief. Hofstaðir has been included in this discussion since the time of Vigfússon, yet each researcher has disproven the specifics of the previous researcher's theories but still Hofstaðir has always retained its heathen ritual status. Following the most recent excavation the primary arguments for Hofstaðir's heathen ritual significance has been through the site's location in relation to the area's other Viking Age sites, resources available to the farm at Hofstaðir - particularly pasture, woodland and fishing - and the farm's prominent location both on travel routes in the
Mývatn area and on high ground which makes it visible from afar, as well as the site's apparent importance for gathering and feasting, as shown through the hall's size and the bone material present at the site. A collection of skulls which, judging by weathering on only one side, hung on the outside of the hall may indicate ritual slaughter or sacrifice, as shown by the method of the animals' slaughter. The fact that these skulls were not destroyed or disposed of, along with a whole skeleton of a sheep deposited at the time the hall was abandoned, indicate that the hall was abandoned with a sense of non-Christian tradition (ibid, pp. 400-408).

In addition to these, other arguments can be made for the presence of ritual activity at Hofstaðir. A number of artefacts were found in the hall's post-holes, mostly pieces of slag or stones but also iron objects, a spindle whorl, a piece of quartz and silver wire. The fill in most of the post-holes where artefacts were found was redeposited floor material which may indicate accidental deposition rather than a purposeful offering (ibid, pp. 70-74). After the hall was abandoned a pit was dug into the hall's hearth. This pit is dug directly into the southern end of the north-south oriented hearth and seems very focused on what was probably an ember pit (ibid, pp. 115-117). It seems very unlikely that this could have happened long after the hall was abandoned and may indicate the final stage of an abandonment ritual.

Hrísbrú í Mosfellsdalur
In the year 1995 archaeological investigations began in the valley Mosfellsdalur in south-west Iceland (Zori, 2010, p. 295) through the Mosfell Archaeological Project. Between 2001 and 2008 large scale excavations went on at the medieval church and Viking Age hall at the site (Zori, 2010, p. 295). The Hrísbrú hall, and later church, would have been very visible from afar, particularly to travellers coming from the direction of the coast, from where the hall would have been visible long before entering the valley itself (Zori et al, 2013, p. 155).

The hall at Hrísbrú was of 25 x 5 m internal size with a great number of post-holes and post-pads which clearly indicate its internal arrangement into three rooms (Zori, 2010, p. 305). Most of the post-holes were void, indicating that the wooden structure of the hall had been removed before it was abandoned (ibid, p. 306). The hall
has been dated as being constructed in the late ninth or early tenth century and occupied until the early eleventh century (ibid, 2013, p. 157).

The site at Hrísbrú has the same problem as many other Icelandic sites concerning the bone collection, in that the soil is not conducive to the preservation of bone material. As a result most of the bones uncovered at Hrísbrú are burnt or calcined, yet despite this, enough of the bones can be identified for analysis. The analysis shows that there is an unusually high ratio of cattle to sheep bones (ibid, 2013, p. 157). From floatation of layers from Hrísbrú a great number of barley seeds were recovered. This is interpreted as signs of barley being cultivated at Hrísbrú for the brewing of beer (Zori et al, 2013). The hall at Hrísbrú had a number imported prestige goods, particularly non-ferrous metals as well as the greatest number of beads recovered for any hall site in Iceland (ibid, 2013, p. 156). Several finds were uncovered from post-holes, including a boar's tooth and a spindle whorl, engraved with crosses. Additionally, under the southern bench of the hall a pit with burned material was discovered, which may have been a part of some foundation ritual (Davide Zori, pers. comm.).

The combination of the hall's size, the high ratio of cattle consumed to sheep, the apparent consumption of barley beer and prestige goods have led to an interpretation of the hall as a site of feasting (ibid, 2013, p. 162). Another interesting feature of the hall is a round pit which abuts the eastern end of the hearth (ibid, 2010, p. 434). This pit was contemporary with the occupation of the hall, though its purpose is unknown, possibly the remains of a barrel pit or other food preparation structure (Davide Zori, pers. comm.), which would make it unique in the archaeological record of Viking Age Iceland.

Also at the Hrísbrú site a conversion era church was discovered with associated graveyard (Byock et al, 2005, p. 208). Near the hall and the church a possible cremation site was discovered in a hill, the only claimed Viking Age cremation site in Iceland (ibid, pp. 214-215). Radiocarbon dating of the cremation site has been dated to around the time of conversion and the construction of the church which seems to indicate that there was a mixed Christian and heathen society at Hrísbrú (ibid, pp. 216-217).
**Hólmur in Laxárdalur**

Investigations at the site of Hólmur at the mouth of the valley Laxárdalur in south-eastern Iceland took place over twelve summers during fifteen years, from 1996-2011 (Bjarni F. Einarsson, 2011a, p. 3). The site is located under a ridge which lies across the valley. On the far side of a small creek, directly under the ridge two Viking Age graves were discovered, along with a number of other features, including a pair of post-holes and a turf structure (ibid, 2008, p. 158-159). At the farmstead two halls were discovered and excavated (ibid, 2006 and 2011a).

The internal dimensions of the first hall were c. 14-15 x 3,7-3,8 m (Einarsson, 2006, p. 5) but unfortunately a portion of the north-eastern part of the hall had eroded away (ibid, p. 12). Only three post-holes were discovered, two of which were stone-lined (ibid, p. 11). A hearth in the centre, was at first, thought to have an ember pit, which was later reinterpreted as small hole in the floor, possibly the result of a stone falling from the hearth itself (ibid, p. 10).

For a Viking Age hall the one at Hólmur has provided a great deal of artefacts, a large portion of which were small stones (ibid, 2003, p. 10 and 2006, p. 12). None of the artefacts discovered were found in post-holes, in the hearth or under the floors or walls. No bones, except for burnt bone fragments in the floor, were discovered in the hall (ibid, 2003, p. 11). This may be due, in part at least, to that it seems that no midden associated with the hall was found.

The second hall was probably of a later construction than the first one but it was quite damaged, with near as makes no difference the entire northern long wall eroded away (ibid, 2011, p. 4). In addition there were only three post-holes and one post-pad but despite this there were some indications of a wood panelled wall in the hall (ibid, pp. 6-7). The hall may have been extended to the north-west (ibid, p. 12). The artefactual material for the second hall was very similar to that from the first hall (ibid).

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Hólmur site is the presence of the Viking Age graves across the stream and the associated features, the two post-holes near the graves, through which slag and fire-cracked stones seem to have been thrown, and the turf structure nearby, which Einarsson has interpreted as a *blót* house, a building for heathen worship (ibid, 2008).
**Eiríksstaðir in Haukadalur**

The site of Eiríksstaðir has, for about two centuries, been identified by local tradition as being the farm of Eiríkur the Red and birthplace of his son, Leifur, who is best known as Leifur the Lucky for his discovery of Vínland in North America (Ólafsson, 2001, p. 147). The excavations in 1997-1999 were instigated by the Eiríksstaðir Committee which had decided to build a full-scale reconstruction of the hall and for this reason contracted the National Museum of Iceland to investigate the site (ibid, pp. 148-149). Two previous investigations at the site, one in 1895 and the other in 1938 have little of value to add and did not thoroughly excavate the hall, as the team excavating in the 90's discovered (ibid).

The hall at Eiríksstaðir was c. 12.5 x 4 m internal size (ibid, 1998, p. 25). The internal arrangements of the hall were ambiguous, no post-holes were discovered (ibid, p. 24) and the hearth had been dug apart by previous excavations (ibid, p. 20-21) or, possibly, by a second building phase which had been shortened width-wise (ibid, 2001, pp. 150-151).

No artefacts were recovered from the hall structure and only very little bone material. Most interesting is a collection of burnt bones found under the southern wall of the hall (ibid, 1998, p. 33). It is tempting to interpret these bones as the remnants of a foundation offering but it is also possible that the wall was erected on top of a small midden from an earlier phase of the site.

**Aðalstræti 14-18 in Reykjavík**

This hall, excavated in Reykjavík in 2001, was found to be very well preserved, especially for remains within the city (Roberts, 2001, p. 41), so the decision was made to protect it and today the hall is the main exhibit at the Reykjavík 871+-2 exhibition.

The internal size of the hall was 16.7 x 5.81 m (ibid, p. 64). A number of post-holes and stake-holes were found in the hall which clearly showed its internal arrangements, with possible rooms at either end of the hall (ibid, p. 46 and plan p. 42). The hearth in the hall was filled with ash and pieces of charcoal (ibid, p. 43). The excavation in 2001 revealed that the hall had two phases, the first was the construction and the occupation of the skáli, dated to c. AD 950-1050. The second phase was the
construction and occupation of an annexe, joined to the south gable wall of the hall, dated to c. AD 975-1050 (ibid, p. 37). In 2003 a small foyer to the hall's entrance was discovered in an area which had fallen outside the boundaries of the 2001 excavation and was probably built after the hall (Snæsdóttir, 2004, p. 17-19).

Unfortunately the bones from the Viking Age contexts of the site were badly preserved but seem to have been a mix of sheep, pig and unspecified large animals (Tinsley, 2001, p. 89). As for the artefactual material there is little that can be considered unusual. The artefacts include a number of nails and other small iron pieces, probably from the hall's wooden structure. However, there were many small stones in the hall, only a minority of which could have come from local sources. This obviously means that these stones, which included jasper, onyx, opal and quartz, must have been transported to the site from elsewhere. For what purpose is unknown, though some could have been used as strike-a-lights. However, they could also have something to do with folk belief (Mehler, 2001, pp. 68-70).

**Sveigakot in Mývatnssveit**

Archaeological investigations at the Viking Age site of Sveigakot in Mývatnssveit began in 2000 and continued until 2005. At Sveigakot a Viking Age farm was discovered that was constructed before the one at Hofstaðir and was not fully abandoned until the 12th century (Vésteinsson, 2002, p. 6-7).

The hall at Sveigakot was found to have two major structural phases, Structure 4, or S4, and Structure 1, or S1, where S1 is the older phase (Milek, 2003, p. 18). The occupation of the hall at Sveigakot was dated as shortly after AD 950 until the 12th century (ibid, pp. 18-19), though occupation of the site predates the hall (Vésteinsson, 2005, p. 57).

The surviving internal size of S4 was 12 x 5 m but it is probable that the western wall, eroded away by the river Kraká, was up to three meters further west, making the size of the hall 15 x 5 m (Milek, 2003, p. 18). The internal arrangements of the hall were quite clear, with many post-holes, a hearth in each phase and benches on either side of the hearth, clearly marking the main room of the hall and possible internal
division (ibid, pp. 18-23). The earlier hall, S1, was very similar, about the same length, 12-15 m, but slightly narrower or 4.8 m (ibid, p. 18).

At Sveigakot, as at Hofstaðir, there were signs that the hearth and ember pit of S1 may have been robbed before the younger phase was constructed (Gísladóttir and Vésteinsson, 2004, pp. 11-13). As the hall is dated to post-950 and was occupied for a few decades, as suggested by alterations to the internal arrangements of the hall (ibid, p. 23), it seems probable that this robbing took place in a period not too far removed from the robbing of the hearth at the Hofstaðir hall. A number of artefacts were discovered in the hall's post-holes particularly white stone pebbles and fragments of iron but also a gaming piece of steatite and fragment of a lug-handled steatite vessel (ibid, p. 10). The iron fragments, most of which are nails or unidentifiable, are possibly not purposely deposited but fell from the wooden structure of the hall (ibid, p. 37). The other objects, however, the white pebbles, the gaming piece and the fragment of a steatite vessel, seem to have been purposely deposited, though it is, of course, possible that they fell from the floor layer (Batey, 2004, pp. 39-41).

The bone material from the Sveigakot investigation suggests cultivation of cattle for milk, pigs for meat and sheep for wool and possibly meat. This is what might be considered a typical pattern for a Viking Age farm trying to maximize the resources of its livestock and not, as at Hofstaðir, for the rearing of cattle for high-quality meat (McGovern, 2003).

**Vatnsfjörður by Ísafjarðardjúp**

Vatnsfjörður is a small fjord that opens into the much larger fjord Ísafjarðardjúp. The Viking Age remains are only a part of the remains investigated at Vatnsfjörður but as investigation on other remains at the site continue the Viking Age remains, the excavation of which began in 2002, were fully excavated by 2011 and a monograph about the site is planned for publishing in 2015 (Guðmundsson, 2013, p. 10-12).

The hall at Vatnsfjörður had two structural phases, the first between c. AD 900 and 950, the second was between c. AD 950 and 1000, after which it was abandoned (Edvardsson, 2005, p. 37). The internal size of the older phase was 16 x 6 m (ibid, 2004, p. 9), while the younger phase was shortened by c. 6 m for an internal size of c. 9 x 6 m.
The internal division of the hall seems to have been similar to what can be seen in a few of the halls previously discussed, three rooms, one at either end and a main living area in the centre (ibid, 2005, p. 37-38). A number of post-holes were discovered, along with post-pads (ibid, 2004, p. 7 and 2005, p. 36), however, the contents of the holes are not described. While the hearth of the older phase had been partially disturbed by it being shortened into the younger phase, it had also been disturbed by a hole that had been dug through the northern end of the hearths of both the younger and older phases. This hole was dug down to undisturbed natural soil and at the bottom a pile of burnt stone had been deposited (ibid, 2004, p. 6-7). This hole has been interpreted as a cooking pit (Milek, 2010, p. 51).

The artefactual material of the Viking Age site is not unusual for such a site, though there is one find that stands out; a piece of decorated gold that seems to have been at one time part of a bigger artefact but been reworked as a pendant (Batey, 2005, p. 77). Despite being interesting there is nothing to suggest that the pendant had a ritual purpose.

Unfortunately the soil in Vatnsfjörður is rather acidic and few bones were preserved (Friðriksson and Tulinius, 2005, p. 5), however, under the wall of another structure at the site, Structure 4, a piece of whalebone was discovered, that has been interpreted as a foundation deposit (Milek, 2008, p. 16). Structure 4 has been interpreted as being used for storage or for drying fish (Milek, 2010, p. 51).

**Vogur in Hafnir**

The Viking Age hall in Hafnir was discovered from an aerial photograph as a part of an archaeological survey of the area and in 2004 further investigations were made to confirm the discovery (Einarsson, 2004). The hall was then excavated in 2009 and 2010 through a cooperative effort by the Archaeology Office (IS. Fornleifafraðistofan) and the Department of Archaeology at the University of Iceland (ibid, 2009, p. 3 and 2011, p. 3). The site of the hall, named Vogur by Bjarni F. Einarsson, is located on a field in the small town of Hafnir, about 80 m ENE of the modern church there (ibid, 2004, p. 4).

The hall was 15.5 x 4.1 m internal size (ibid, 2011b, p. 9) and faced roughly east-west (ibid, 2004, p. 8). No post-holes were discovered in the hall but despite this
the internal arrangements were quite clear with an untouched hearth, benches and possible rooms (ibid, 2011b, p. 11).

While there were few artefacts and bones at the site of Vogur there are a few interesting aspects to those that were found. At a bench, south of the hearth, a small stone of micro-granite was discovered. This stone could not have come from Iceland and must have come from Norway, the British Isles or Greenland. This stone must then have been purposely brought to Iceland, possibly due to some belief in the stone (ibid, 2011b, p. 18). From Vogur comes also the only positive example of ceramics from the Viking Age in Iceland; two fragments which seem to be from the spout of the same vessel (Einarsson, 2009, p. 15).

In a small hole or crevice (IS. *skora*) on the outside wall of the hall a sperm whale tooth was discovered, thrust into the wall (ibid, 2009, p. 33). This is possibly some sort of building sacrifice. In addition another bone was discovered in a wall, though there is nothing more noted about this particular bone in the reports. Judging from the accompanying picture, however, it seems to be a rib bone, possibly of a sheep (ibid, 2009, p. 31).
4. Remnants of Ritual

Looking at the halls discussed in the previous chapter a number of probable ritual deposits in the Icelandic halls have been identified. In this chapter these deposits will be discussed in more detail.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Feasting</th>
<th>Blood Sacrifice</th>
<th>Foundation/Alteration Deposit</th>
<th>Abandonment Deposit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aðalstræti 14-18 in Reykjavík</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bàr by Gjáskógar in Pjörsárdalur</td>
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<td>Possibly</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Possibly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eiríksstaðir in Haukadalur</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Possibly</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Granastaðir in Eyjafjarðardalur</td>
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<td>Possibly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Grelutóttir in Arnarfjörður</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Possibly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herjólfsdalur in Vestmannaeyjar</td>
<td></td>
<td>Possibly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hofstaðir in Mývatnsveit</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hólmur in Laxárdalur</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hrísbrú in Mosfellsdalur</td>
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<td>Hvítárholt in Hrunamannahreppur</td>
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<td>Ísleifstaðir in Borgarfjörður</td>
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<tr>
<td>Klaufanes in Svarfaðardalur</td>
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<td>Sámsstaðir in Pjörsárdalur</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sveigakot in Mývatnsveit</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Possibly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vatnsfjörður by Isafjarðardjúp</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vogur in Hafnar</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Possibly</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

Table 1. Signs of ritual at the discussed sites. An X denotes positively identified ritual deposit(s).
Signs of Feasting

One of the archaeological signs of feasting are a site's bone collection, unfortunately, the bone collections associated with most of the Icelandic halls tend to be rather small or not analysed in any detail. The hall with the most extensively discussed bone collection and which have been interpreted as the remains of feasting is Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit (Lucas, 2009, p. 252). The bone collection from Hríðbrú in Mosfellsdalur has the largest ratio of cattle bones to sheep of any Viking Age site thus far excavated in Iceland, or 1.92 cattle bones to 1 caprine, compared to Hofstaðir's 0.33 cattle to 1 caprine (Zori et al., 2013, pp. 157-158) This copious consumption of beef has been interpreted as an indicator of feasting (Zori et al., 2013, pp. 157-159). There is one other site that may have signs of feasting apparent in its bone collection is Granastaðir in Eyjafjarðardalur. The bone collection from Granastaðir has a high number of bones from "very young" sheep (Einarsson, 1995, p. 99). Einarsson attributes this profile in the bone collection to some unspecified "ecological pressure" (Einarsson, 1995, p. 99) but it could be interpreted as indicators for the production of high quality meat. Interpreting such meat production as indicative of feasting is difficult as meat of cattle rather than sheep seems to have been preferred (Zori et al., 2013, p. 153).

The signs of feasting, as noted in the previous chapter, are not limited to the bone collection. A hall's size may be indicative of the need to house a large number of people during feasting and a number of objects and structures may be associated with feasting, including food preparation facilities (Dietler and Hayden, 2001, pp. 17-18; Hayden, 2001, pp. 40-41). Of the halls excavated in full in Iceland only three are longer than 20 metres and of those two are over 30 metres in length in their largest phases. These are the hall at Hríðbrú in Mosfellsdalur, Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit and the one at Skallakot in DJórsárdalur but as discussed subsequent investigations have found that the excavation at Skallakot was perhaps not as thorough as Roussell would like the reader to think (Hansen and Vésteinsson, 2002, p. 15). The Skallakot hall's size is interesting and it is tempting to interpret it in light of ritual feasting. However, with no other indications and the questionable quality of the excavation that is a very tenuous interpretation. Only further investigation at the site, perhaps a complete re-excavation, will shed light on this question.
As for the other signatures of feasting a number have been theorized. Preparation and serving vessels, facilities for preparation of food, feasting and food storage, and special features for disposing of food remains are all examples of possible signatures (Hayden, 2001, pp. 40-41). From the Icelandic Viking Age farmstead context there are, in general, very few artefacts recovered and most of those that are tend to be objects associated with the general household activities, artefacts like loom-weights, spindle-whorls, nails, knives and other small iron objects. Ceramics from the Viking Age are extremely rare in Iceland, in fact there is only one positively identified example, two fragments from Vogur in Hafnir (Einarsson, 2009, p. 15). While fragments from stone vessels are, comparatively, not uncommon there is little to suggest anything 'unusual' about them. None of the vessels seem to have decorations, for example, that might indicate they were for use at special occasions. Regarding other artefacts from the Viking Age there is little to indicate a connection with feasting. It might be possible to implicate various other objects to feasting, for example beads worn as a part of a festive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hall</th>
<th>Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit</td>
<td>33 x 6.6 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skallakot in Pjorsárdalur</td>
<td>31 x 5.2 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hrísbrú in Mosfellsdalr</td>
<td>25 x 5 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ísleifstaðir in Borgarfjörður, Phase 2</td>
<td>19,75 x 5.6 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hvítárholt, Hús III</td>
<td>19 x 6.25 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hvítárholt, Hús VIII</td>
<td>19 x 5 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klaufanes in Svarfaðardalur</td>
<td>17 x 4.7 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adalstræti 14-18 in Reykjavík</td>
<td>16,7 x 5.81 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hvítárholt, Hús IX</td>
<td>16,3 x 4.95 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snjáleifartöttir in Pjörsárdalur</td>
<td>16,25 x 5.5 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vatnsfjörður by Islafjardardjúp</td>
<td>16 x 6 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vogur in Hafnir</td>
<td>15,5 x 4.1 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hölmur in Laxárdal</td>
<td>15 x 3.8 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Granastaðir in Eyjafjardardalur</td>
<td>14,7 x 5.4 m</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bær by Gjáskógar in Pjörsárdalur</td>
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<td>Sámsstaðir in Pjörsárdalur</td>
<td>13,6 x 4,5 m</td>
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<td>Herjólfsdalur, Hall II</td>
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<td>Grelutótir in Arnarfjörður</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eiríksstaðir in Haukadalur</td>
<td>12,5 x 4 m</td>
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<td>Sveigakot in Mývatnssveit</td>
<td>12 x 5 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herjólfsdalur, Hall V</td>
<td>10 x 3,5 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herjólfsdalur, Hall I</td>
<td>8 x 3,5 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herjólfsdalur, Hall III</td>
<td>7,5 x 2,8 m</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Sizes of excavated Icelandic Viking Age halls, in descending order of length
dress, but that is difficult to substantiate as the beads might just as well have been part of everyday dress. However, as beads had to be imported to Iceland they can be interpreted as signs of affluence, a requirement for the sort of "patron-role" feasts as have been interpreted in Iceland (Zori et al., 2013, pp. 152 & 156) and appear to have taken place at both Hríðbrú and Hofstaðir (for further discussions on the artefacts for each site see the various books, articles and reports cited in the previous chapter).

While food is very important for a feast, as anyone who has been to a modern dinner party knows, drink is no less important. It is likely that in Viking Age Iceland beer was the drink of choice, as is indicated by the presence of barley at, for example, Hríðbrú and Hofstaðir. At Hríðbrú a relatively great number of barley seeds were discovered in those layers that were sieved and floated which has led to an interpretation of barley being cultivated at the site. Though it is possible that the barley was consumed in other forms, for the effort and time required to grow barley in Iceland it would seem most likely that the barley was used in the production of beer (Zori et al., 2013).

Turning to the structures, there is more material to work with. Obviously, there is nothing unusual about the presence of facilities for food preparation at sites of human occupation. Small kitchens, such as at Granastaðir in Eyjafjarðardalur, are to be expected, but for a feast it has been theorized that larger than average cooking facilities would be present (Olsen, 1966, pp. 190-192; Hayden, 2001, p. 40). Cooking pits have been interpreted at halls at Ísleifstaðir in Borgarfjörður, Herjólfsdalur in Vestmannaeyjar and Vatnsfjörður.

At Ísleifstaðir there were two pits, interpreted as cooking pits, inside the hall. The smaller of the two was probably either never used or used for a short time only as can be seen by the difference in the contents of the pits, where one was filled with ash, charcoal and burnt bones while the other was filled with soil (Stenberger, 1943b, p. 164). In Vatnsfjörður the cut through both phases of the hall has been interpreted as a cooking pit. It may be possible to interpret this pit as the remains of a feast for the abandonment of the hall, a kind of wake or funeral, but unfortunately there is nothing else to indicate feasting at Vatnsfjörður, which makes such an interpretation dubious.

In Herjólfsdalur there are a great number of cooking pits, both outside and inside the structures. Hall II had a hearth, a cooking pit, ember pits which were interpreted as having a connection with iron working and an impression from a food container. It
seems more likely that either the cooking pit or the ember pits were incorrectly interpreted, rather than iron working having gone on in the same room as the cooking and storing of food or the hall had more phases than are discussed by Hermanns-Auðardóttir, though it is impossible to say for certain with the available records. Hall II is then possibly a kitchen and food storage structure intended for everyday consumption.

Halls I and III in Herjólfsdalur have three cooking pits each. The cooking pits of Hall III are most likely not contemporary, indicating a succession of cooking pits through the occupation of the hall. Hall I, however, has three cooking pits along the hall's long axis. It is difficult to say much about this hall and whether the pits are contemporary or not, but if they are it would point to large scale food preparation. That in turn would point to either a large, communal society in Vestmannaeyjar that is otherwise not indicated, or to feasting that occurred regularly enough that the construction of a specialised building for food preparation was considered advantageous over other, smaller scale or temporary, structures.

Besides the one in Hall II in Herjólfsdalur there are a few other examples of the impressions from food storage containers, at Grelutóttir in Arnarfjörður for example. Neither their number, nor their size can be said to indicate anything beyond food storage for the needs of the household. That being said, there has never, to my knowledge, been a study on the storage capacity of a sár, a food storage container, in relation to the probable food requirements of a household. This does make any assessment of the relation between food storage containers in Iceland and feasting difficult.

To summarise, the only sites that can be positively identified as having signs of feasting are Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit and Hríðbrú in Mosfellsdalur, while two others, Granastaðir in Eyjafjarðardalur and Herjólfsdalur in Vestmannaeyjar have possible signs of feasting. While the presence of the cattle skulls and the evidence they present, as discussed below, positively indicate the feasting at Hofstaðir to be ritual. There is, however, little to indicate that the feasting at Hríðbrú had a ritual purpose beyond that implied by the feasting itself and the consumption of mind altering substances, i.e. beer. Other halls either have no probable signs of feasting or such few signs that an interpretation of ritual feasting cannot be maintained.
Signs of Blood Sacrifice

As has been noted in the previous chapters there are a number of references to blood sacrifices in the medieval literature (e.g. *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 2; *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 4; *Hákonar saga góða*, ch. 14). There also exist references to bloody animal sacrifice in contemporary texts, the most famous of which is the account of a Norse funeral by the Arab Ibn Fadlan who witnessed the ritualized slaughter of a large number of animals (Montgomery, 2000). From these accounts one might expect to find remains of the sacrificial bowls, the 'heathen aspergillum' or the sacrificed humans and animals. Unfortunately there has never, in Iceland at least, been found an artefact that could be interpreted as the literature's *hlautbolli* or *hlautteinn*, Vigfússon's (1881, p. 74) *blótteinn* notwithstanding. Additionally, human remains from Viking Age Iceland have never been discovered in a context that could be interpreted as indicating human sacrifice.

Examining the animal bone collections there might be some evidence of bloody animal sacrifice. The collection of a minimum of twenty three cattle skulls from Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit is possibly one such example. The skulls, complete with the remains of horns, which would normally have been removed for craftwork (Lucas, 2009, p. 236), have signs of weathering on the front which has been interpreted as signs of the skulls having been displayed outside the hall at Hofstaðir for some time (ibid, 236). The skulls can be roughly divided into two groups, which differ in their presentation. There are the whole skulls without the lower jaw and "horn racks" where only the frontal bones of the skull with the attached horn cores remain (ibid). The slaughtering marks that could be identified on the skulls indicate that the cattle who contributed their skulls to the archaeological record were killed with a heavy blow on the animal's forehead and the head then removed, most likely with an axe, in a manner which may have been intended to spread the blood across as large an area as possible in a fountain of blood (ibid, pp. 236-237). Such a spectacle is counter-intuitive for common slaughtering practices where the object is to acquire meat but linking them to ideas of blood sacrifices seems plausible.

Performing such a ritual outside and performing it in such a way that the blood spreads naturally over the area where the slaughter takes place, and the participating
people and possibly nearby structures as well, negates the need for sacral bowls of blood or the 'heathen aspergillum' from the medieval sources. If the intention was to spray the blood over those participating in the ritual then they need only stand close enough to the slaughtered animal to be sprayed with its blood. Considering these aspects of the blood sacrifice as they can be interpreted from the archaeological record it seems plausible that the central theme in the descriptions from the medieval literature, the blood and the spreading of the blood, are actually derived from a memory of such rituals but contextualized with medieval concepts of an institutionalized, 'indoor' religion, i.e. Christianity, which added that the blood need be collected into a sacred vessel of some kind before being distributed by a religious leader in a mirroring of Christian ritual.

The bone collections of the halls discussed in the previous chapter is rather limited and only a small part of the collections have been thoroughly analysed, let alone examined with an eye to slaughtering practices. This does limit the interpretations that are possible when discussing blood sacrifice but there is a piece of possible interest in this regard. From Bær by Gjáskógar in Þjórsárdalur there is a fragment from the skull of a fully grown male sheep (Eldjárn, 1961, p. 43). The fragment comes from the forehead and had the remains of horns attached, which seems similar to the "horn racks" from Hofstaðir, though, of course, the skulls from Hofstaðir were all from cattle and not sheep. The fragment does not seem to have been examined at all so there is very little to work with, it is even uncertain whether the skull was deposited whole or already fragmented. In addition, the find context is very ambiguous but the skull seems to have been deposited after the hall was abandoned, rather than immediately after abandonment or during abandonment.

**Signs of Building Offerings**

Building offerings, as previously discussed, can vary greatly in how they appear in the archaeological record but are generally considered as unusual deposits connected to the erection, alteration and abandonment of a building.
**Foundation and Alteration Deposits**

Deposits connected with the foundation or alteration of a building can most readily be found under walls, floors, hearths or in post-holes (Carlie, 2006). There are a few examples of these sorts of deposits in Iceland. In Bær by Gjáskógar in Þjórsárdalur a collection of phalanges from cattle was found in a post-hole near the hall's western gable-wall or possibly on the floor of a pit-house under the hall. The presence of the phalanges as a group in the post-hole and the fact that Eldjárn deems this fact worthy of comment - the only other bone from Bær given a rudimentary find context is the fragment of skull discussed above - seems to be supportive of interpreting them as a building offering.

At Hofstaðir there are number of objects in post-holes, pieces of slag, stones and various iron objects are the majority of these objects in post-holes spread throughout the hall and mostly from redeposited floor material. These objects were probably deposited in the post-holes by accident, from the floor layers or from the hall's wooden structure. In addition to these a white stone, silver wire, a crucible fragment deposited together with a human tooth, and a spindle whorl which was deposited along with what was probably a knife (Lucas, 2009, p. 267) were discovered in post-holes in the central hall within c. 5 m south of the hearth (ibid, pp. 69-71, including figures and tables), with a collection of 17 stones, 16 of basalt and of 1 quartz, interpreted as gaming pieces, in a single post-hole in the northwest part of the central hall by the northern partition (ibid, p. 69, 73, 85 & 394, including figures and tables). The single stone was a piece of zeolite (Lucas, 2009, p. 302 & 304). The deposition of two objects together in two separate post-holes, virtually flanking the southern end of the hearth, one containing a crucible fragment and a human tooth, the other a spindle whorl and knife are interesting. As has been discussed before certain everyday activities can be considered ritual and both weaving, alluded to by the spindle whorl, and metalworking, alluded to by the crucible fragment, were such activities. The presence of knives and other edged or pointed objects in the context of building offerings were considered as providing protection from various evil beings, disease and other things and were often placed in particularly 'dangerous' areas of the house in Scandinavia (Carlie, 2006, p. 209). The combined deposition of the spindle whorl and knife together might then have been intended to provide protection and good fortune for the household. The crucible
fragment and human tooth have less apparent meaning but with the presence of an artefact associated with metalworking and the transformative, often considered magical, power of that activity (Fogelin, 2007, p. 60-61 and references therein) it is tempting to interpret them as an effort to create, even forge, a history for the hall by giving it an ancient inhabitant, represented by the tooth. Together the two posts and the objects beneath them can be seen as cementing both a past and a future for the hall and people of Hofstaðir.

While these are mostly unsupported ideas, the idea of the human tooth as a representative of some sort of 'ancient ancestor' especially so, they would fall in line with the theory that the relatively late establishment of the household at Hofstaðir put it into competition with other households in the area in an effort to establish its chiefly status (Lucas, 2009, pp. 400-408), as the deposition of these objects, probably through public performance during the construction would serve to establish the idea of a chiefly status, if not the status itself.

In the post-holes at Sveigakot in Mývatnssveit a number of objects were recovered. Many of them were iron objects that may have fallen from the hall's wooden structure. In addition to the iron objects there were thirteen quartz pebbles and two pieces of steatite, one from a lug-handled vessel and the other interpreted as a gaming piece. The pebbles, discovered in a several post-holes, though of unspecified number, were deliberately brought into the hall but whether they were deposited directly into the post-holes or were brought for another purpose, as ornaments perhaps or gaming pieces, and fell into the holes from the floor is difficult to say as they could have functioned as such as needed (Batey, 2004, p. 40). The steatite gaming piece, made from a vessel sherd, does seem to have been purposely deposited in the post-hole, and the same goes for the fragment of a lug-handled vessel. The steatite vessel appears to have been used for some time, as evidenced by soot on its outside and the smooth inside, and was even mended at some point with an iron rivet (ibid). Similar deposits from southern Sweden exist where vessels for food and drink were not always deposited whole (Carlie, 2006, p. 207). The deposition of the gaming piece and the vessel sherd can very plausibly be interpreted as a building offering. The locations of specific post-holes are not discussed in the excavation reports for Sveigakot but the majority of the post-holes were
discovered along the remains of the hall's benches (Gísladóttir and Vésteinsson, 2004, p. 10).

At Hrísbrú in Mosfellsdalur several objects were recovered from post-holes, including a boar's tooth and an engraved spindle whorl. The boar's tooth's presence in the post-hole might be the remains of a food offering, though a single tooth is hardly definitive. The spindle whorl is engraved with crosses and makes for a very plausible interpretation for a building offering.

Under the north wall of Structure 4, a probable storage structure, at Vatnsfjörður a piece of whalebone was discovered. This piece has been interpreted as a foundation deposit (Milek, 2008, p. 16). Similarly, at Grelutóttir in Arnarfjörður four iron objects were found under the wall of the room which had been constructed to the hall. A third example of objects discovered under a wall in a Viking Age context are the burnt bones under the southern wall of the hall at Eiríksstaðir in Haukadalur. The find context for the objects at both Grelutóttir and Eiríksstaðir is ambiguous, at Eiríksstaðir the burnt bones are simply said to be in the "bottom layer" (IS. botnlag; Ólafsson, 1998, p. 33) of the south wall. The same goes for the iron objects from Grelutóttir, they are simply said to have been under the wall. These iron objects could well have been accidentally lost, though the clustering of three of the unidentifiable objects would indicate otherwise and may point to the objects being building offerings.

### Table 3

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Animal Remains</th>
<th>Human Remains</th>
<th>Knives</th>
<th>Other Iron Objects</th>
<th>Stones</th>
<th>Spindle Whorls</th>
<th>Crucible Fragments</th>
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</table>

Table 3. Frequency with which objects appear together, or more than one at a time, in foundation alteration deposits.
At Vogur in Hafnir a whale tooth, originally thought to have been a walrus tooth (Einarsson, 2009, p. 33), was discovered, apparently thrust into the outside of one of the hall's wall. The tooth had been roughly worked, with the tip cut off and the sides smoothed, before being thrust into the wall. In the excavation report Einarsson adds the comment "sacrifice?" (Einarsson, 2009, p. 33) and an interpretation of a building sacrifice is very probable as the accidental deposition of such a potentially expensive object, particularly as it has been worked, seems unlikely, though not impossible. The tooth can then be interpreted as a building offering, possibly an alteration or abandonment deposit, though the context of the find only indicates the tooth's deposition after the construction of the hall.

Comparing the contents of foundation or alteration deposits the similarities in the finds discovered are quite interesting. In Table 1 above there are eight probable examples of foundation and alteration deposits, though two of them in particular, the ones from Eiríksstaðir and Grelutótir, should perhaps not be, as discussed in the previous chapter. In 2 out of 8 sites spindle whorls are present, while white stones have appear in 3 out of 8. Possible remains of food offerings can be identified in, at least, half the cases. The deposition of the whale tooth and bone is not interpreted here as food

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White Stones</th>
<th>Spindle Whorl</th>
<th>Food Offerings</th>
<th>Craftwork</th>
<th>Animal Remains</th>
<th>Iron Objects</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bær By Gjáskógar Pjórsárdalur</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hríðbrú in Mosfellsdalur</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sveigakot in Mývatnssveit</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vatnsfjörður by Ísafjarðardjúp</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vogur in Hafnir</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Presence of various categories of foundation/alteration deposits. Note that some categories overlap, e.g. the whale tooth from Vogur in Hafnir.

At Vogur in Hafnir a whale tooth, originally thought to have been a walrus tooth (Einarsson, 2009, p. 33), was discovered, apparently thrust into the outside of one of the hall's wall. The tooth had been roughly worked, with the tip cut off and the sides smoothed, before being thrust into the wall. In the excavation report Einarsson adds the comment "sacrifice?" (Einarsson, 2009, p. 33) and an interpretation of a building sacrifice is very probable as the accidental deposition of such a potentially expensive object, particularly as it has been worked, seems unlikely, though not impossible. The tooth can then be interpreted as a building offering, possibly an alteration or abandonment deposit, though the context of the find only indicates the tooth's deposition after the construction of the hall.

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remains, though they could have been that as well and thus bring the total for such remains to 6 out of 8, but as the remains of craftwork. The silver wire from Hofstaðir should possibly be included as such as well, making the remains of craftwork present in 3 out 8 cases. Spindle whorls might also be interpreted as remains of craftwork, bringing that total to 5 out of 8. Animal remains are present in 5 out of 8 cases. While iron objects are common in contexts that are associated with foundation and alteration deposits yet most of them seem to be accidental deposits rather than intentional. There are only two cases of iron objects as probable foundation or alteration deposits, one identified as a knife, the other a collection of four unidentified iron objects from Grelutóttir.

Whether this sort of analysis can be said to reveal that there was some sort of idea of a 'proper' foundation or alteration deposit is difficult to say. The relatively high ratio of those deposits that can be interpreted as food remains might indicate that offerings of food or food related objects were considered 'proper', as were the remains of craftwork.

Abandonment Deposits
In the same room as where most of the Hofstaðir skulls were discovered a carcass of a sheep was discovered. The sheep had been slaughtered and deposited whole at the same, or similar, time as the cattle skulls. The fact that this sheep - which was naturally hornless, a rare trait in Viking Age Iceland (Lucas, 2009, p. 237) - was left whole, with no pieces removed for consumption, and the time of the deposition being so close to both that of the cattle skulls and the abandonment of the hall has lead to an interpretation that the slaughtering of the sheep was performed as a part of some abandonment ritual (ibid).

At Hofstaðir, in context with the deposition of the cattle skulls and the sheep carcass, a pit dug into the hall's hearth after its abandonment has been interpreted as a probable attempt to 'rob' the hall's ember pit, possibly the last stage in an elaborate abandonment ritual, perhaps a kind of symbolic removal of the hall's life. The fact that a similar pit was discovered at nearby Sveigakot from a context resembling the one from
Hofstaðir may strengthen this interpretation. Besides these two examples, there are possibly two other sites with signs of such possible hearth robbing from the Icelandic Viking Age material. The first is Sámsstaðir in Þjórsárdalur and Rafnsson's "peculiar" absence of the charcoal that is otherwise prevalent around the hall's hearth. This could very well be the result of an attempt to rob the hall's hearth or ember pit, positioned as it is right on the eastern end of the hearth. These three examples are also reminiscent of the pit at the east end of the hearth in the Hríðbrú hall and seen on a plan the pits at Hofstaðir, Sveigakot and Hríðbrú are all somewhat similar. The pit from the Hríðbrú hall, however, is contemporary with occupation of the hall and not associated with its abandonment.

The last possible example is the pit dug into the hall's hearth at Vatnsfjörður. This pit has been interpreted as a cooking pit, as discussed above, but that it digs through the northern end of the hearths from both of the hall's phases might indicate an intention to rob the hearth, or possibly even to rekindle the hall's hearth temporarily by having a fire or cooking pit at the same place. This might have been a phase in an abandonment ritual or have been done as a part of some sort of memorial ceremony.

In a reversal of the Vatnsfjörður pit a pit was discovered under one of the benches at Hríðbrú with burned material. While this pit has not been interpreted as a cooking pit the presence of burned material is reminiscent of what is seen in Vatnsfjörður. It may then be possible that the pit was a part of some kind of foundation ritual, a meal for the 'birth' of the hall. This is, however, not very likely and the most probable interpretation may be that the pit had no ritual connotations.

**Other Signs of Ritual**

Other signs of ritual in and around the Icelandic Viking Age hall are thin on the ground. At many sites a variety of small stones or pebbles have been found that must have been brought there from other places, sometimes from abroad. This, it can be argued, indicates a devotion to these stones beyond them being pretty stones for decoration or collecting and if that was the case for these foreign stones then it is very possibly also the case for other, domestic stones. Belief in the magical properties of stones has existed throughout the centuries in Iceland and they were kept for a variety of purposes, for
example to make the household or the carrier invulnerable to magic and disease and provide protection from ghosts (Bárðarson, 1995, pp. 256-257). Such stones have been found in the halls at Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit and Sveigakot in Mývatnssveit, where they were found in post-holes, at Granastaðir in Eyjafjarðardalur, Hólmur in Laxárdalur, Aðalstræti 14-18 in Reykjavík and Vogur in Hafnir where they were not found in post-holes, as well as having been found burials.

Obviously, those stones that were found in post-holes were not intended to impart their protection, if that was indeed their purpose, upon a single person but rather on the entire household or even the building itself. Those stones were discussed in the section on building offerings, above. Those stones that were found outside post-holes may have been either, or both, such household 'wards' or personal 'charms' and can be interpreted as religious objects but their context does not give them reason to be interpreted as ritual objects.

Up until this point the discussion has focused on the ritual practice and its associated contexts and objects. As discussed in chapter 1 and touched on in the closing of chapter 2 the study of ritual has, by and large, moved away from the study of ritual places and towards the study of ritual practice. The study of ritual places has, however, not been completely abandoned; in their list of the indicators of ritual Renfrew and Bahn the first two indicators are for ritual places rather than ritual practice, and examples from sites in Scandinavia would seem to indicate that despite having fallen out of favour by archaeologists study of the ritual place may have some merit; at Tissø in Denmark the 7th century chieftain's hall was located on a high place overlooking the lake and the surrounding structures and at Uppåkra in Sweden the hall is located on the edge of a plateau from where it could have been seen a long way away. It is very possible that these structures were built on such prominent locations to advertise their importance and to make them a logical destination for travellers. It may then be worthwhile to make a very brief detour into examining the ritual place evidence of the Icelandic Viking Age hall.

Beginning from the same approach as the Scandinavian halls mentioned above, with the site's visibility in the landscape, it is, unfortunately, not discussed, as such, for most of the older Icelandic material, but it is interesting to note that for many of the sites, particularly evident in Þjórsárdalur, the later sites tend to occupy locations that are
higher in the landscape than the earlier ones. For some others a prominent location in
the landscape can be explained through functionalistic requirements. This could be the
case at Ísleifsstaðir in Borgarfjörður where the prominent location of the hall in the
landscape can be explained by the flats that surround it today potentially having been
wetter, even marshy, in the Viking Age. Such an explanation need not replace a ritual
interpretation but a ritual interpretation of a site's location cannot reasonably be
maintained without the presence of other signs of ritual. No such signs can be said to
exist at Ísleifsstaðir. In fact, while a few of the sites discussed in the previous chapter
can be said to occupy such a visible location in the landscape, Granastaðir in
Eyjafjarðardalur and Vogur in Hafnir for example, there are only two sites discussed
here the location of which could positively indicate such ritual significance. They are
the halls at Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit and Hrísbrú in Mosfellsdalur. The Hofstaðir hall's
prominent location on a hill above the lake Mývatn and the nearby contemporary road,
coupled with the various signs of ritual discussed above and an interpretation of the
Hofstaðir hall as a cultic centre in the 10th century becomes very probable. The hall at
Hrísbrú is located at the southern foot of the mountain Mosfell from where it would
have been visible to those travelling through the valley or approaching the valley mouth
(Zori et al, 2013, p. 155). This visibility coupled with the hall's size clearly marks the
site as a central location in the area.

Exaining the archaeological record there is another possible indicator of a site's
ritual significance that is worth discussing. At Hólmur in Laxárdalur there were a
couple of Viking Age graves nearby, across a small stream from the hall, under an
ancient beach ridge which forms a sort of natural barrier to the valley beyond, along
with a couple of free-standing posts, through which slag and fire-cracked stones had
been thrown. In addition a turf structure had been built nearby which Einarsson has
interpreted as a "blót-house" (Einarsson, 2008). While the interpretation of the building
itself can be debated there is little doubt that rituals took place at the site of the graves.
This does not make an interpretation of the hall itself a ritual place valid, but may
indicate an idea of a "boundary zone between this world and the next" as Renfrew and
Dating Rituals

Most of the halls discussed in the previous chapter have very rough dating, many of them are dated to only the Viking Age, while a few are narrowed down to a single century. For many of the sites, particularly those excavated in the 1960's and earlier, this broad date is the result of the excavation methods used at the time. In addition dating some of the rituals to a particular period is difficult at best. Feasting, in particular, is difficult to date more specifically than the dating of the hall or, perhaps, a period within the hall's occupation. The best chance of dating feasts, and perhaps blood sacrifice as well, is carbon dating the bone material identified as being from such rituals. However, carbon dating gives a range that is rarely much more accurate than other dates, mostly based on tephrachronology and structural and artefactual typology, of the hall in general (see for example Lucas, 2009, pp. 236-237 for dating of the skulls from Hofstaðir).

Building offerings may be the simplest to date more specifically. Foundation deposits are, obviously, going to be as old as the hall and abandonment deposits are as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aðalstræti 14-18 in Reykjavík</td>
<td>c. AD 950 - 1050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bær by Gjáskógar in Þjórsárdalur</td>
<td>11th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eiríksstaðir in Haukadalur</td>
<td>Viking Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grænastaðir in Eyjafjarðardalur</td>
<td>10th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grelutóttir in Arnarfjörður</td>
<td>10th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herjólfsdalur in Vestmannaeyjar</td>
<td>Viking Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit</td>
<td>c. AD 950 - 1070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hólmur in Laxárdal</td>
<td>Viking Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hríðbrú in Mosfellsdalur</td>
<td>Early 10th - early 11th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hvítárholt in Hrunamannahreppur</td>
<td>Viking Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ísleifstaðir in Borgarfjörður</td>
<td>Viking Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klaufanes in Svarfaðardalur</td>
<td>Viking Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sámsstaðir in Þjórsárdalur</td>
<td>Post AD 1000 - c. AD 1104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skallakot in Þjórsárdalur</td>
<td>11th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snjáleifartóttir in Þjórsárdalur</td>
<td>10th - 12th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sveigakot in Mývatnssveit</td>
<td>c. AD 950 - c. 1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vatnsfjörður by Ísafjarðardjúp</td>
<td>c. AD 900 - 1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vogur in Hafnir</td>
<td>Viking Age</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Dates of the discussed halls.
old as the abandonment of the structure. These can, though, never be more accurate than
the dating of the structure itself. Therefore the deposits discussed above from Bær by
Gjáskógar, Grelutóttir, Vogur and Sámsstaðir cannot be given an absolute date, only a
relative date within the sequence of the site. The ones from Hofstaðir, Sveigakot and
Vatnsfjörður, on the other hand, can be dated more accurately as the halls have been
dated more accurately. The whalebone from Vatnsfjörður that has been interpreted as a
foundation deposit comes from a Viking Age structure that has been dated to the late
10th century, and by extension the deposit as well.

The construction of the halls at Sveigakot and Hofstaðir took place at not too
distant a time and so did their post-hole deposits, if they are indeed foundation deposits
and not alteration deposits. The difference for interpreting the dating of the deposit is
important but can be difficult to determine, particularly where the posts have been
removed during abandonment and floor material fallen into the voided holes (e.g. Lucas,
2009, pp. 70-74). Perhaps more interesting is the sign of hearth robbing from Hofstaðir
in relation to the similar context from Sveigakot and the fact that these seem to take
place around the same time, or c. AD 1050. That these two examples take place so close
to each other in both space and time as it would appear, might suggest a belief in a
'proper' manner of abandoning a hall, in the Mývatnssveit area, at least.

The fact that these take place well after the conversion of Iceland to Christianity
in c. AD 1000 is very interesting and may indicate an active resistance to the
Christianization process. The overt displays of non-Christian rituals in a time when
Icelanders should already have been Christian could be interpreted as a kind of a
counter movement, an open defiance to the new ways with a religious fervour which is
not much evident in earlier times when there was little, or less in any case, pressure to
adhere to a single, organized belief system. Such resistance has been theorized to have
taken place in Scandinavia during the Christianization process, one form of which was
the creation and wearing of 'Thor's hammers' (Nordeide, 2006). However, recent
investigations of the church and associated cemetery at Hofstaðir seem to indicate its
construction in the late 10th century (Isaksen and Gestsdóttir, 2012, p. 6), contemporary
with the possible blood sacrifice and ritual feasting at the hall. This would seem to make
the hypothesis of Hofstaðir as a center for religious resistance very unlikely and may
instead indicate a household of mixed belief or that the people of the Viking Age, in the
Mývatn area at least, did not consider the performing of bloody rituals with associated feasting as incompatible with attending a Christian church service as we, modern Westerners, would, instead they may have accepted a syncretic view of the old and new beliefs, blurring, possibly erasing, the conventional line between heathen and Christian.

At Hríðbrú feasting activities seem to go on for the lifetime of the hall, at least, though barley production seems to go on until the thirteenth century (Zori et al, 2013, p. 161, figure 6) or nearly two hundred years after the abandonment of the hall in the eleventh century (Zori et al, 2013, p. 157). However, what is interesting is that around the same time as a church and a Christian cemetery was constructed at Hríðbrú a cremation burial, dated to between AD 990 and 1020, took place nearby (Byock et al, 2005, p. 216). This seems to suggest that "a mixed Christian and pagan community living side by side at the time of the conversion" in Mosfellsdalur (Byock et al, 2005, p. 217) or, as suggested above for Hofstaðir, that these were not discreet communities living together and merely tolerating each other but a fusion of traditions.

Dating other signs discussed above can be difficult or might even be impossible. How does one date the ritual significance of locating a site within the landscape? Or the significance of the various stones? Perhaps the best answer to this is that one does not. These are ideas that permeate a culture and not particular events, or rituals, that can be dated, though their manifestations can sometimes be dated.
5. Conclusion

The presence of ritual in Viking Age Iceland is undeniable. From feasts to foundation deposits and even blood sacrifice, rituals were not only present but varied. They took place inside the hall, outside it, while it was being constructed, and during abandonment. There remains a question of the spacial relation of ritual and the hall, do they center around a particular location or locations or are they randomly placed? From the evidence available in this regard, mostly from Hofstaðir, it would seem the hearth is important in this relation but further examination of this aspect would be needed for a more sustainable hypothesis. The problem with ritual in the archaeological context is one of interpretation, of knowing what to look for, as well as the importance of proper excavation techniques and thorough documentation of the excavations. There is no denying that the archaeological record of Viking Age Iceland is rather poor compared to material from the same period in Scandinavia, a case has been made, for heathen graves at least, that this difference is not necessarily a matter of actual difference in wealth but in scale or even cultural difference as an especially Icelandic tradition emerged (Pétursdóttir, 2009).

While these ideas of differences in scale and culture between Iceland and Scandinavia may account for much of the difference that the way the excavations were conducted certainly have a great deal to do with it as well. With, for example, the post-holes of most halls excavated before the 1990's having only sometimes been identified and not excavated evidence for many building offerings have not come to light. Even today walls are generally not excavated but left unless another structure is discovered under the floor, a structure is usually considered to be fully excavated once the floor layers have been removed, which may lead to evidence of some foundation deposits being left undiscovered. There is also the concern of how both artefacts and bones were collected, analysed and stored, or rather how much of them were not.

Additionally, it is important to note again that for most of the sites discussed here and excavated before the 1990's only published literature was used. There remains then a question of whether there is more information to be gleaned about them if one were to examine the original records. Offhand it would seem unlikely, and re-excavating the sites, particularly those from the 1960's and earlier may prove more
fruitful, but it would be an important step in a more detailed academic discussion of the sites.

Through the examination of the sites discussed in the previous chapter a number of probable rituals have been identified. While most of those that can be positively identified as ritual have already been identified as such by researchers, a few, mostly from older excavations, have not. Unfortunately, there are only a few examples of each sign of ritual which makes drawing conclusions difficult, but doing so may still prove a worthwhile exercise.

From comparing the material discussed in the previous chapters it may be possible discern a difference between 'chiefly' and 'common' rituals in the archaeology of the Viking Age hall. The 'chiefly' rituals being marked by expense in time and wealth needed for the rituals, most obviously the large size of a site's hall and signs of regular feasting, while 'common' rituals are marked by consuming less wealth in their performance, placing a spindle whorl or a meal in a post-hole, for example. However, there are only two examples of the 'chiefly' rituals, those being Hofstaðir and Hrísbrú, while the examples of the 'common' rituals are more numerous, though not by much and it is not at all unlikely that this is a matter of scale and status in the practice of everyday rituals rather than actual difference in ritual practice.

It is here that we may run up against the limits of this study. With only eighteen sites to work with and with the exclusion of other site categories, particularly Viking Age grave sites, this division into chiefly and common will more than likely, if more sites were to be included, turn out to be completely artificial or a matter of scale as mentioned above. However, this division may also turn out to be not only valid but more complex, with various rituals associated with graves, for example food offerings as known from Viking Age Scandinavia (Gräslund, 2001) or as indicated by features surrounding grave sites as at Hólmur in Laxárdalur (Einarsson, 2008) or at Litlu-Núpar and Ingiríðarstaðir (Roberts & Hreiðarsdóttir, 2013, particularly pp. 126-127). There might even be undiscovered evidence for other kinds of ritual, for example objects thrown into lakes as known from Scandinavia (Jørgensen, 2002) or even human sacrifice as mentioned in Kjalnesinga saga (ch. 2) and theorised by Aðalsteinsson (2001).
What is certain is that while the hof of the sagas may not have existed the people of Viking Age Iceland did not live simple, functionalistic lives, yet too often the discussion seems slanted in that way. Only in the last twenty years or so have scholars, and not only archaeologists, turned to the idea that the people of the Viking Age inhabited a supernatural world vastly different from the one inhabited by medieval and later Christians or the one imagined by modern New Age popular mythology. What has been discovered is a world that was both less and more fantastic than the one previously imagined, which clearly shows how much, or little, we know of the religious lives of the people of the Viking Age.
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