The Wagon, The Phallus and The Conical Hat
Origins and Features of Freyr’s Cult in Heathen-Age Iceland

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
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Abstract

This essay aims to examine the features, social demographics and origins of Freyr worship in Heathen-Age Iceland to ascertain to what extent it bears the marks of a Scandinavian Vanir cult, separate from the Icelandic cult of the Æsir (namely, that of Þórr). For this purpose, accounts from saga literature and Landnámabók will be analysed with reference to mythological sources on the Vanir. An attempt will then be made to identify the geographical origins of the Icelandic cult, through analysis of personal names and genealogies.
**Foreword**

When I enrolled on a Folkloristics BA, it was largely out of a desire to get myself a fate similar to that of the priestess in *Gunnars þáttur helmings*, cruising around Sweden in a wagon with my feet up and blessing everybody's crops. Today I am no closer to that dream. Nonetheless, the past few years have been very enjoyable, interesting, and with fewer nasty surprises than the above-mentioned priestess had to experience. Fewer demons and frogs.

I would like to thank my friend Bjarni for encouraging me to apply for this degree, and I am particularly grateful to my BA supervisor, Terry Gunnell, for his input, support and patience. I would also like to thank my mother for her help with proof-reading, her encouragement, and for not objecting to the title of this thesis.
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Introduction

In this 15 credit BA thesis, I will attempt to draw up a picture of the nature, distribution and origins of Freyr’s cult in pre-Christian Iceland. In Chapter 1, it shall be demonstrated that Old Norse religion consisted of a number of localised cults, and was subject to regional, cultural and chronological variation. Iceland, as a land of immigrants, would have had a particularly high level of religious diversity, even within the West Nordic heathen religion. In Chapter 2, consideration will be given to the types of literary sources which are available on pre-Christian Icelandic religious belief and practice, and in Chapter 3, I will look at the value of place names and personal names as sources. In Chapter 4, an overview of recurring motifs in sources on the Vanir will be given, in order to ascertain to what extent the cult of three gods (Njörðr, Freyr and Freyja) was a separate tradition with its own functions and rites, distinct from those of the Æsir. With reference to the sources and academic debate on the nature and role of the Vanir as a group, Chapter 5 will give an analysis of the descriptions we have of Freyr worship in Iceland, mostly from saga literature. Lastly, in Chapter 6, an attempt will be made to identify the origins of these traditions, with reference to sources on the locations of Freyr’s cult in Norway and Sweden.
1.0. Introduction to Pre-Christian Religion in Iceland

In order to ascertain the extent to which Freyr would have had his own distinct cult in Iceland, we must first consider the ways in which belief was expressed in pre-Christian Nordic Germanic societies, and what this tells us about how followers of Old Norse religion perceived their gods. The following chapter thus aims to give an overview of the kind of belief system which existed during this period in the Nordic countries, and to what extent it was polytheistic. In the context of Freyr’s cult in Iceland, the question of how many gods might have been important to the individual is particularly relevant. It is also worth asking to what extent religion during this period, and particularly in an immigrant society such as Iceland, would have been uniform. Indeed, as Old Norse religion was non-doctrinal, the extent to which individual communities would have moulded their own religious traditions is a very important question when looking at sources on the worship of any given deity.¹

1.1 The Nature of Old Norse Religion

The term "Old Norse Religion" is most commonly used to refer to the religious systems which existed amongst speakers of Old Norse in Scandinavia and their settlements elsewhere (including Iceland, the Faroe Islands, the British Isles and eastwards into the Baltic countries). One defining feature of Old Norse religion was that it was closely interwoven with the collective tradition and everyday life.² The term forn siðr was used to refer to pre-Christian religion in Iceland (roughly translated as old "ways" or "practices") while heidinn (heathen) was a Christian-era definition which referred to an absence of Christianity more than any specific religious ideology.³ Other important features of this religion were a strong

¹ See, for example, Steinsland, Norron religion, 31 and Hultgård, "The Religion of the Vikings", 212. The non-doctrinal nature of Old Norse religion will be discussed in chapter 1.1. of this thesis.
² Steinsland, Norron religion, 32; DuBois, Nordic Religions in the Viking Age, 42-43.
³ The term forn siðr is used in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla ("þat var forn siðr, þá er blót skyldi vera, at allir bøndr skyldu þar koma sem hof var ok flytja þannig fong sin") and and in Vatnsdæla saga the term is used more loosely to refer to landtaking rituals: see Snorri Sturluson, Hákornar saga göða, 167 and Vatnsdæla saga, 27-38. In this thesis, the Íslenzk fornrit series will be referenced for all Family Sagas, Landnámabók and Snorri's Heimskringla. For references to Snorri's Prose Edda, Anthony Faulkes' edition will be used. For more discussion of the term forn siðr and its connotations, see, for example, Raudvere, "Popular Religion in the Viking Age", 235 and Andrén, Jennbert & Raudvere, "Old
belief in fate (örlagatrú),⁴ an apparent polytheistic nature and the likely existence of both male and female cult leaders.⁵ Both of these aspects in Icelandic practice will be discussed in Chapters 5.1. and 5.5. of this thesis respectively.

Various attempts have been made to create a definition for Old Norse religion based on these main attributes, although most scholars accept that finding a modern-day definition which fits with a Viking-Age religion is problematic. The knowledge we have about Old Norse religion nonetheless broadly fits the 19th century theological definition of a "primal" religion. "Primal" religions differ from "world" religions in the sense that they are oral or lack written scripture, are "this-worldly" (rather than being focused on the afterlife), are confined to a single language or ethnic group and are strongly connected to the social.⁶ In relation to Old Norse religion, Gro Steinsland talks about "folk religions" or "ethnic religions", as opposed to "universal" religions.⁷ This terminology may be more appropriate in an Old Norse context, as ethnic/cultural and local identities appear to have been an integral part of religious life in Viking Age Scandinavia. According to DuBois, while the Germanic groups of the North viewed themselves as a single identity, united by a common language, within this group, local rituals and customs reinforced the importance of kinship alliances and there were high levels of local variation.⁸ This picture of Old Norse religion fits well with Steinsland’s observation that ethnic religions emerge as part of a group’s tradition and history and gods are often localised.⁹

It was this local nature of cults which made Nordic religions in the Viking Age well-suited to variation and fluidity. The oral and non-doctrinal nature of the mythology also

Norse Religion: Some Problems and Prospects", 12. For discussion of the Icelandic word heiðinn, see Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn síður á Íslandi, 7.

⁴ Jón Hnefill Ádalsteinsson, Kristnitakan á Íslandi, 18.

⁵ Steinsland, Norrøn religion, 33.

⁶ Bowie, The Anthropology of Religion, 23. For an example of the intertwining nature of social and religious life in Iceland, see Gunnell, "Hof, Halls, Goðar and Dwarves". For more on orality in pre-Christian Iceland and the arrival of literacy, see Gísli Sigurðsson, Túlkun Íslendingasagna í ljösi munnlegar heiðar.

⁷ Steinsland, Norrøn religion, 31.

⁸ DuBois, Nordic Religions in the Viking Age, 18-19 and 42.

⁹ Steinsland, Norrøn religion, 32.
meant that even in local areas it was liable to gradual change and personal choice.\textsuperscript{10} In this context John McKinnell gives the example of preserved poetry, which he argues would have reflected the individual worldview of its skald, albeit moulded by tradition and blurred by oral transmission.\textsuperscript{11}

In ethnic religions, Steinsland writes, religious ideas are not conveyed through formal dogma or teaching; rather rites and rituals are rooted in culture to ensure food, health and fecundity. The focus in such religions is on localised cult activity rather than a universal belief and the ultimate aim is to ensure the prosperity of the group.\textsuperscript{12} In this context, DuBois describes all religion as a way of interacting with non-human equals, with whom humans share and compete on a daily basis, equals which can be mobile and immobile, visible and invisible.\textsuperscript{13} Religious rituals and rites, therefore, could be seen as a way for humans to seek control over their surroundings to ensure the survival and prosperity of themselves, their families and their wider communities. This idea is particularly useful with regard to Old Nordic religion because it also takes into account the importance of beings other than celestial gods (such as álfar, disir and fylgjur). Indeed, those religious activities which invoked a god such as Þórr or Freyr were often performed with the aim of aiding human survival, for instance through procuring good harvests or finding a safe harbour.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, relations between humans and non-human entities could also take a personal nature.

Old Norse religion was, of course, short-lived in Iceland, with the land only being

\textsuperscript{10} McKinnell, \textit{Both One and Many}, 25.
\textsuperscript{11} McKinnell, \textit{Both One and Many}, 27. Hultgård supports the idea of variation: see Hultgård, "The Religion of the Vikings", 212. See also Nordanskog, "The 'Volsung Legend' in Norwegian Stave Church Portals", 397 for discussion of the different nature of Old Norse religion to doctrinal religions.
\textsuperscript{12} Steinsland, \textit{Norrøn religion}, 32. It is, however, worth noting that organised religious activities and publically acknowledged sacred sites did exist, as did some hierarchical structures, legislature and taxes connected to religion. See DuBois, \textit{Nordic Religions in the Viking Age}, 43.
\textsuperscript{13} DuBois, \textit{Nordic Religions in the Viking Age}, 31.
\textsuperscript{14} An example of Þórr being relied on to find a landing place can be found in \textit{Landnámabók}, 250. In \textit{Gylfaginning}, Snorri writes that Freyr was the god people called upon to procure good harvests: \textit{Gylfaginning}, 24. Adam of Bremen writes that sacrifices were made to Frikko (Freyr) if marriages were to be celebrated: Adam of Bremen, \textit{History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen}, 207-208.
pagan for under 100 years according to *Landnámabók*\(^{15}\) and the influence of slaves and colonisers with links to the British Isles brings into question whether the country was at any point completely pagan.

Sources on Icelandic heathenism, however, show a very similar religion to that of mainland Scandinavia, consistent with the above description of a folk religion. The personal nature of relations between humans and gods can be seen in accounts of the settlers’ devotion in *Landnámabók* and the language used in Icelandic texts, which will be discussed further in Chapter 5.2. of this thesis. Indeed, with regard to the worship of Freyr in Iceland, the element of ritual and the nature of relationships between man and god seem to have been particularly important, as will be shown below.

### 1.2. Snorri’s Pantheon and Arguments for Variation

The modern perception of Old Norse deities has largely been shaped by the pantheon of many gods presented in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, although the accuracy of Snorri’s portrayal has been heavily criticised in recent years by scholars of Old Norse religion.\(^{16}\)

In *Gylfaginning*, Óðinn assumes a role similar to that of the Christian god, as an all-father ruling over all things in his kingdom, big and small,\(^{17}\) and sitting on a throne in a place called Hliðskjálf from where he watches over the deeds of men.\(^{18}\) This thesis will show that sources on religious practice in Iceland, particularly with relation to the worship of Freyr, do not reflect Snorri’s representation. Indeed, conflicting accounts of the positions and attributes of different gods are also found in other mythological sources. In the prose

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\(^{15}\) *Landnámabók*, 368.

\(^{16}\) Criticism of the idea of the pantheon led by Óðinn has come from scholars arguing against uniformity in Old Norse religion in general. See, for example, Brink, "How Uniform Was the Old Norse Religion?", 105; Schjødt, "Diversity and its Consequences for the Study of Old Norse Religion", 9-22 and Nordberg, "Continuity, Change and Regional Variation", 129. It has also come from scholars who have questioned the heirarchy of gods which emerges in works such as *Gylfaginning* and *Ynglinga saga*. See, for example, Gunnell, "Pantheon? What Pantheon?", 55; Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 25 and 55-6 and Gunnell, "Hve hár var hinn háví?", 297-300.

\(^{17}\) Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, 8. Turville-Petre finds this idea of Óðinn as a father of all gods troublesome as it is hard to reconcile with the account of the Æsir-Vanir war: see Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 55.

introduction to the Eddic poem *Skírnismál*, for example, it is Freyr who is presented sitting in Hliðskjálf and watching over the world and it is not stated that it is Óðinn’s seat. Meanwhile, Snorri’s version of this myth, told in Chapter 37 of *Gylfaginning*, explicitly states that Freyr’s torment after seeing the jötunn Gerðr was a result of the hubris of taking Óðinn’s seat ("þat var einn dag er Freyr hafði gengið í Hliðskjálf ok sá of heima alla, [...] ok svá hefndi honum þat mikla mikillæti er hann hafði sekk í þat helga sæti at hann gekk í braut fullr af harmi"). Indeed, Snorri’s characterisation of Freyr as a lesser god, unworthy of sitting in Hliðskjálf, is in line for the most part with the description that Snorri gives of him earlier on in *Gylfaginning*. In order of importance, Snorri names Óðinn first in Chapter 20 ("Óðinn er òeðr ok elzt Ásanna. Hann ræðr ǫllum hlutum"), then Þórr in Chapter 22, Baldur in Chapter 22 and Njörðr in Chapter 24 as Njörðr’s son alongside his sister Freyja ("Freyr er hinn ágætasti af Ásum. Hann ræðr fyrir regni ok skini sólar ok þar með ávexti jarðar, ok á hann er gott at heita til árs ok friðar"). John Lindow uses this typical description of a fertility god as a starting point to argue that "in the warlike culture of the Æsir, there is little for him to do." Else Mundal, however, interprets the words "hinn ágætasti af ásum" as an indication that Snorri had "some idea of Freyr as a god of equal importance to Óðinn." Certainly, in light of the position Snorri gives Freyr and the reasoning given for Freyr sitting in Hliðskjálf, it is perhaps unlikely that his intention was to suggest anything outside of the frame into which he attempts to put pre-Christian mythology. Nevertheless, Mundal is correct to point to the way in which the line jars with the rest of Snorri’s narrative. If we are to assume that this idea is not simply a creation of Snorri (Freyr is also described as "bestur allra ballríða" in *Lokasenna* [st. 37] which is also indicative as a type of masculine authority, and "fólkvaldi

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19 *Skírnismál*, prose introduction. In this thesis, Gísli Sigurðsson’s 1998 *Eddukvædi* edition of the Eddic poems will be used.
20 *Gylfaginning*, 31.
21 *Gylfaginning*, 21.
22 *Gylfaginning*, 24.
23 Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 121
24 Mundal, "Gods and Goddesses with Reference to the Female Divinities", 297.
"god" in Skírnismál [st. 3]), then the conclusion could be drawn that remnants of an idea of Freyr being a main god existed in 13th-century oral or literary tradition which did not fit with Snorri’s narrative. Freyr’s name, which means "lord", would also support this. Furthermore, the title "veraldarguð" (world god) given to him in Flateyjarbók is also suggestive of a power which goes beyond the limited role attributed to Freyr by Snorri. A similar picture emerges in accounts of worship in the accounts of worship in the Icelandic sagas, in which most nearly all accounts of organised worship relate to that of Þórr or Freyr, and Landnámabók.

In Iceland, Freyr-derived place names are the second most common after those connected to Þórr while Óðinn’s name is absent. This can be viewed as an indication that to some communities (especially in the East of Iceland, as will later be discussed), Freyr may have been the god who was the most worshipped. It is, therefore, perhaps not too far-fetched to assume that as his many titles in literary sources suggest, he could have had a wider range of roles than Gylfaginning and Ynglinga saga would have us believe.

These striking discrepancies between Snorri’s cosmology and other Icelandic prose and toponymical sources have been attributed to a divide between the culture of the mainland warriors and poets and that of the Icelandic farmers and seafarers, Óðinn being essentially the god of a Scandinavian military elite which had close ties to Icelandic skálds. Indeed, Turville-Petre argues that there is reason to believe King Haraldur hárfagri would have been more inclined towards Óðinn, while the settlers who fled to Iceland were mostly conservatives wanting to preserve their traditional farming-based ways of life in opposition

25 Gunnell, “How Elvish Were the Álfar?”, 123. It is worth noting that Jesus is referred to as "Frēan mancynnes" (with Frēa meaning "lord") in the Anglo-Saxon poem Dream of the Rood. See: Dream of the Rood, 91. Translation of frēa: Swanton, "Glossary", 139.

26 Flateyjarbók I, 448.

27 Jón Hnefill Ádalsteinsson, "Norræn trú", 56-7 and Gunnell, "Hve há var hinn hávi Óðinn?", 295. Gunnell counts one mention of Óðinn in all Landnámabók manuscripts compared to five of Freyr and six of Þórr.

28 Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, 65; de Vries, Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte II, 113; Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn síbur á Íslandi, 68 and Svavar Sigmundsson, “Átrúnaður og órnenfni”, 241-254.

29 Gunnell, “Pantheon? What Pantheon?”, 56. See also Gunnell, "Hve há var hinn hávi Óðinn?"; and Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, 35-73.
to the new rulership.30

Criticism of Snorri’s pantheon as a whole has also been based on the aforementioned rejection of the idea of a uniform Scandinavian religion (or even Germanic, as Grimm had proposed).31 In Snorri’s Edda the Æsir and Vanir are depicted as living alongside each other, each with distinct roles serving under the leadership of Óðinn. In addition to Óðinn, Þórr, Baldr, Njörðr, Freyr and Freyja, Snorri names Týr, followed by Bragi, Iðunn, Heimdallr, Hóðr, Viðar, Váli, Ullr, Forseti and Loki (who is sometimes counted among the Æsir).32 Snorri then lists the goddesses Frigg, Sága, Eir, Gefjun, Fulla, Freyja (who is worshipped alongside Frigg), Sjófn, Lofn, Vár, Vör, Syn, Hlin, Snotra, Gá, Sól and Bil separately.33 A similar pantheistic picture is apparent in the Eddic poem Grímnismál.34 This version of Nordic mythology, nonetheless, also has a number of discrepancies. Firstly, as noted above, toponymical analysis has pointed towards the existence of localised cults, some gods being completely absent in certain areas of the Nordic world, yet having a large following in others. Magnus Olsen’s 1926 study of Norwegian place names certainly drew attention to a high level of variation in Old Norse place names,35 and was supported by Jan de Vries’ 1937 study.36 While de Vries has since faced criticism for inaccuracy, Brink’s more cautious 2004 study of localised Scandinavian place names still indicates a similar trend. Brink also finds that cults of

30 Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, 67.
31 Grimm, Teutonic Mythology I, 10-12. Grimm bases his arguments for a shared Teutonic religious system on similarities in language, terms relating to religious worship, mythic notions, blending of myths and heroic legends, the mingling of the mythic element with the names of plants and constellations, the gradual transformation of gods into devils, the development of myths into folk-tales and the intermixture of religious doctrine and law.
33 Snorri Sturluson, Gylfaginning, 29-30.
34 From stanzas 4 to 16 of Grímnismál, gods are mentioned alongside their halls. They include include Öðinn, Þórr, Ullr, Freyr, Sága (who could be Frigg), Skaði, Baldr, Heimdallr, Freyja, Forseti and Njörðr. See Grímnismál, st. 4-16.
35 Olsen’s study, Ættegård og helligdom, was published in English in 1928 under the name Farms and Fanes of Ancient Norway. As well as noting geographical variation, Olsen makes the case for historical variation especially in the cases of Njörðr and Ullr who he deems to be figures of an older tradition. See Olsen, Farms and Fanes of Ancient Norway, 129.
36 De Vries’ topynomical maps can be seen in de Vries, Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte II, 53, 116-117, 155, 194, 195 and 309.
many gods and goddesses are not supported by toponymical material.\textsuperscript{37} In the case of Freyr, however, it is evident that names were most common in the Lake Mälaren area of Sweden and the Viken area of Norway.\textsuperscript{38}

Studies such as those mentioned above have made clear, therefore, that Old Norse religion was obviously subject to variation of many types, and that its subjects were not obliged to follow a universal hierarchy of deities or even believe at all in many of those mentioned by Snorri. This discrepancy is particularly clear in the case of Ullr, who is very prominent in Swedish place names but appears very little in written sources.\textsuperscript{39} It is certainly possible, as Hultgård has argued, that people may have had a vague belief in a pantheon of gods yet have only been personally devoted to one or two,\textsuperscript{40} and this is supported by Nordberg's observation that it is "common in polytheistic religions that some gods are purely mythological figures and not the objects of actual worship."\textsuperscript{41}

The same problem is reflected in the evidence concerning other areas of Old Norse religion in which scholars have identified variation. Rival cults seem to be for example reflected in poems such as \textit{Hárbarðsljóð}.\textsuperscript{42} Similarly, Neil Price, drawing upon Johan Callmer's work, has used evidence from burial practices to further the case for regional variation in Viking Age Scandinavia.\textsuperscript{43} Bearing all this in mind, Schjødt identifies four categories of diversity within Old Norse religion; chronological, geographical, social and cognitive. He argues that because of "cognitive diversity", a term he uses to refer to the differences in individuals' world views within a given religion, it is not possible for sources to

\textsuperscript{37} Brink, "How Uniform was the Old Norse Religion", 124.
\textsuperscript{38} Brink, "How Uniform was the Old Norse Religion", 109.
\textsuperscript{40} Hultgård, "The Religion of the Vikings", 213.
\textsuperscript{41} Nordberg, "Continuity, Change and Regional Variation", 131.
\textsuperscript{42} McKinnell, \textit{Both One and Many}, 22.
\textsuperscript{43} Price, "Dying and the Dead", 258. See also Callmer, " Territory and Dominion in Late Iron Age Scandinavia", 257-273.
present as clear and un-contradictory a religious world view as modern-day scholars would like.\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{1.3. Variety in Heathen Age Iceland}

Although a degree of fluidity and variation in belief and practice can be found in all areas of the Viking Age Nordic world, Nordberg argues that this would largely vary by area. He distinguishes between areas such as Dalarna which had comparatively little contact with the outside world and others which were in frequent contact with other societies, serving as "innovative regions for new impulses and currents."\textsuperscript{45} Iceland, as a new nation of Nordic and Celtic/Gaelic immigrants ranging from chieftains to slaves, should be seen as one such innovative area.

A limited number of written sources support the theory that there were Christian hermits (\textit{papar}) living in Iceland before the Norse settlement, who were probably from Ireland or Scotland.\textsuperscript{46} These include passages in \textit{Íslendingabók} and \textit{Landnámabók}, as well as Icelandic place names which allude to the \textit{papar}.\textsuperscript{47} Ólafur Briem notes, however, that if we are to conclude that there were Christian inhabitants in Iceland beforehand, it is very unlikely that they would have had any influence on the religious landscape.\textsuperscript{48}

Other Gaelic influences on Icelandic culture would have come from Irish and Scottish

\textsuperscript{44} Schjødt, "Diversity and its Consequences for the Study of Old Norse Religion", 16.

\textsuperscript{45} Nordberg, "Continuity, Change and Regional Variation", 129.

\textsuperscript{46} There is a lack of archaeological sources to support the settlement of Iceland before 870. Gísli Sigurðsson draws attention to archeological finds in Vestmannaeyjar in the 1970s which point to earlier settlement, although in this case the evidence points to earlier Norsemen rather than the commonly postulated Irish hermits: see Gísli Sigurðsson, \textit{Gaelic Influence in Iceland}, 24. See further Margrét Hermansdóttir, "Fornleifarrannsóknir í Herjólfsdal- Vestmannaeyjum 1971-81".

\textsuperscript{47} A passage in \textit{Íslendingabók}, 5 says that \textit{papar} were in Iceland when the Vikings arrived and that they left because they did not want to live among heathens. It says that they left behind Irish books, bells and croziers. A passage in \textit{Landnámabók}, 31-32, says the same thing, adding that they are thought to have been from islands in the Western Atlantic and that the idea of people travelling between these lands has been mentioned in English books. In the \textit{Hauksbók} version of \textit{Landnámabók}, the passage on \textit{papar} connects them to Papey and Papýli. See also \textit{Íslendingabók}, 32 (footnotes).

\textsuperscript{48} Ólafur Briem, \textit{Heiðinn síður á Íslandi}, 16. Jónas Gíslason argues that they possibly would have fled to the West Fjords: see Jónas Gíslason, "Acceptance of Christianity in Iceland", 226.
slaves brought to Iceland by the Scandinavians, as well as from Norse immigrants from mixed families.\textsuperscript{49} Sources indicate that these settlers would have had a degree of impact on the religious landscape of settlement-era Iceland.\textsuperscript{50} For the most part, Gaelic settlers in Iceland were lower class and had little political power.\textsuperscript{51} However, there are some examples of prominent figures from a Gaelic background such as Helgi \textit{enn magri} and Auðr \textit{djúpúðga}.\textsuperscript{52} DuBois and Gísli Sigurðsson note that even Gaels with little social status or political power would have been included in Icelandic cultural life, bringing intercultural and interreligious influences into the Scandinavian household.\textsuperscript{53} It is most likely, therefore, that this exchange of knowledge, culture and experiences would have extended to religious thought and practices. DuBois writes that in areas such as Iceland, "real religious exclusivity was only possible on an abstract philosophical level. Intercult contact was an inevitable aspect of life, finding manifestation both between and even within clans or communities."\textsuperscript{54} As he says, "ideas and personnel from different religions crossed cultural lines and became incorporated into new and changing belief systems."\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{49} Ólafur Briem, \textit{Heiðinn síður á Íslandi}, 17. Christianity was taken up long before the end of the 10th century on Orkney and Shetland, as well as in Irish and Scottish Viking settlements: see Gísli Sigurðsson, \textit{Túlkun Íslendingasagna í ljósi munnlegrar hefðar}, 258.

\textsuperscript{50} For example, several early churches in Iceland were dedicated to St. Columba of Iona: see Cormack, \textit{The Saints in Iceland}, 91-2. Jónas Gíslason identifies a number of possible Christian settlements, in which few heathen graves have been found and a large number of settlers had Gaelic names: see Jónas Gíslason, "Acceptance of Christianity in Iceland", 226-227.


\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Landnámabók}, 248 says of Helgi’s parents and upbringing: “Eyvindr fór þá í vestr víking ok hafði útgerðir fyrir Írlandi. Hann fekk Rafǫrtu, dóttur Kjarvals írakonungs, ok staðfestisk þar; því var hann kallaðr Eyvindr austmaðr. Pau Rafǫrtu áttu son þann, er Helgi hét; hann seldu þau til fóstrs í Suðreyjar.”

\textsuperscript{53} DuBois, \textit{Nordic Religions in the Viking Age}, 18 and 22. Gísli Sigurðsson has identified several examples of a Gaelic/British influence on the Icelandic oral tradition, which he argues could be an explanation for the radical difference between Old Icelandic and Norwegian narrative traditions: see Gísli Sigurðsson, \textit{Gaelic Influence in Iceland}, 23. Gísli has also drawn attention to Gaelic and British connections with regard to knowledge of geography in saga texts: see Gísli Sigurðsson, "Mynd Íslendingasagna af Bretlandseyjum”, 819-820 and Gísli Sigurðsson, \textit{Leiftur á horfinni öld}, 146-64.

\textsuperscript{54} DuBois, \textit{Nordic Religions in the Viking Age}, 42.

\textsuperscript{55} DuBois, \textit{Nordic Religions in the Viking Age}, 44.
The following passage from *Landnámabók* demonstrates the volatile nature of religious systems in the new country which had a high level of diversity and was going through a time of great political change:

Svá segja vitrir menn, að nökkurir landnámsmenn hafi skirðir verit, þeir er byggt hafa Ísland, flestir þeir, er kómu vestan um haf. Er til þess nefndr Helgi magri ok Órlygur enn gamli, Helgi bjóla, Þrundur kristni, Auður djúpúðga, Ketill enn fífski ok enn fleiri menn, er kómu vestan um haf, ok heldu þeir sumir vel kristni til dauðadags. En þat gekk óvíða í ættir, því at synir þeira sumra reistu hof og blótuðu, en land var alheiðit nær hundraði vetra.

The last line in particular is worth taking into consideration when considering Old Norse religion in Iceland (although whether it can be completely trusted is a matter of debate). Around one hundred years is a very short period of time for Old Norse religion to survive, especially when compared to other areas of the Norse world where there was less influence from the outside world, where communities were more settled and where local populations had greater cultural connections to the land. At times of transition and movement such as this, "mixed religion" can easily emerge and this can be seen in the description of the aforementioned Helgi *enn magri* in *Landnámabók* who was apparently mixed with regards to religion, believing in Jesus but turning to Þórr when at sea and in times of hardship ("Helgi var blandinn mjök í trú; hann trúði á Krist, en hét á Þór til sjófara ok harðræða").

The picture of Old Norse religion which we are presented with during this era, therefore, is one of a rather loose system of ideas and deities which were subject to change and variation depending on the communities which practised them. Cult practices were often distinct to a family or an area, as we shall see in Chapter 6.

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56 *Landnámabók*, 396.
58 Finnestad, "The Study of the Christianization of the Nordic Countries", 265.
59 *Landnámabók*, 250.
2.0. Written Sources on the Vanir and Freyr Worship: An Introduction

The written sources which are available on the cult of the Vanir (and specifically that of Freyr) give strong indications of a separate cult. As has been mentioned in Chapter 1, most modern studies of Old Norse religion point to an ethnic religion spread over a large area, with high levels of variation. For the most part, this fits well with the picture which emerges in the written sources. In accounts of mythology, the Vanir appear as a distinct group of gods with their own roles and attributes. This is particularly profound in the Prose Edda, but in Chapter 4 I will argue that Eddic poetry also attributes a separate status to the Vanir gods. Other written sources such as the Family Sagas and þættir and Landnámabók indicate that certain ideas about the Vanir as a separate group could have been reflected in religious practice, and that their cult could have been tied to certain communities and areas.

These written sources naturally have limitations and must be studied alongside other source types (in the case of Iceland, these are place names and personal names). For the written sources to have real value as accounts of Heathen-Age religious practice, we must assume that they have some basis in an oral tradition which pre-dates their writing, or that their writers referenced older works which were subsequently lost (this is particularly the case for works by Snorri Sturluson). Nevertheless, lines between older folk belief/pre-Christian religious motifs and medieval Christian literary invention are often blurred and it can be difficult to piece together a coherent picture of pre-Christian attitudes and beliefs, especially in cases where a certain motif only appears in a limited number of sources. It must, therefore, be taken into account that very few of these sources can be used as a wholly trustworthy authority in themselves on pagan thought.

2.1. Eddic Poetry

Some of the earliest attitudes, ideas and motifs about Freyr and the Vanir have been preserved in the Poetic Edda, a collection of poems mostly found in the Codex Regius manuscript, written in Iceland around 1270. Another slightly later manuscript, AM 748, includes the additional poem Baldrs draumar, while Rigspula is to be found in a manuscript
of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*. An Eddic poem which deals with Freyja, *Hyndluljóð*, is also preserved in *Flateyjarbók* and referenced in Snorri's *Edda*. The *Codex Regius* itself derives from one or more lost manuscripts written earlier in that century, at least one of which appears to have been used by Snorri for his *Prose Edda*. Eddic poetry deals both with mythology and heroic tales. The mythological poems come in a variety of forms. Some are didactic, while others narrate stories. Turville-Petre writes that the more didactic poems such as *Vafþrúðnismál* could "almost be viewed as treatises on pagan legend and belief." In the case of such poems, Turville-Petre writes that the chief purpose was to teach both rules of conduct and pagan beliefs. Although Eddic poems cannot be used on their own as sources on religious practice, Gísli Sigurðsson observes that a code of ethics is to be found in Eddic poetry (both mythological and heroic) which would have moulded people's ideas about right and wrong in many aspects of human life.

Only one the Eddic poems features Freyr as the protagonist. The poem *Skírnismál* tells the story of the union between Freyr and Gerðr, and has since been interpreted as depicting a sacred marriage, or *hieros gamos*. The contents of the *Skírnismál* myth, and its parallels with the marriage of Njörðr and Skaði, will be further discussed in Chapter 4. Fragments of a *ljóðaháttr* poem detailing the myth of Njörðr and Skaði's marriage are to be

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60 Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 14.
61 Gísli Sigurðsson, "Inngangur", xii.
63 Gísli Sigurðsson, "Inngangur", ix.
67 Ólafur Briem, *Heiðinn síður á Íslandi*, 12. Some poems have, however, been interpreted by scholars as providing clues on ritual practice. These include *Skírnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál*: see Gísli Sigurðsson, "Inngangur", xxxi.
68 Gísli Sigurðsson, "Inngangur", ix. It is worth noting, however, that the worldview behind different Eddic poems differs greatly. This is particularly apparent in conflicting stories of creation seen in *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Völuspá* (in the former the world is created from Ymir's body and in the latter it rises from the sea). See, for example, Gunnell, "How Elvish were the Álfar?", 115.
found in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning.* Freyr is also mentioned in *Grímnismál, Lokasenna* and *Völuspá.*

Eddic poetry would have been composed, transported and preserved orally until it was recorded, as the Eddic tradition is largely accepted to pre-date mainstream literacy. It is generally considered by most to be a remnant of a much older tradition which pre-dates the conversion. Partly because of their subject matter, certain aspects of the poems can be placed before the settlement of Iceland. Certain motifs can be traced to 4th- and 5th-century Europe and remnants of a pre-literate Germanic tradition can also be identified in the metre and diction, according to Kellogg. It is therefore generally accepted that although individual poems may have been subject to some degree of Christian influence as the poetic tradition evolved, the poems of the Edda are the main source we have today on old Norse mythology in pre-Christian times, and not least concerning the Vanir.

### 2.2. Skaldic Poetry

Skaldic poetry is attributed to named authors, mostly from Iceland and Norway with a few exceptions from the Orkney islands. Examples of skaldic poetry can be found dating from

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71 Harris, “Eddic Poetry”, 112. The extent to which Eddic poems are really oral works has been the subject of debate. Some scholars have focused on the improvisational aspect of the poems (see, for example, Kellogg, “The Prehistory of Eddic Poetry”, 188) while others have argued they are memorial rather than improvisational: see Lonnroth, “Hjalmar's Death Song and the Delivery of Eddic Poetry”, 2.
72 Gísl Sigurðsson, “Inngangur”, ix.
74 Examples of poems which have come under scrutiny for this reason are *Völuspá*, *Lokasenna*, *Prymskiða* and *Skírnismál*. *Völuspá* makes use of some Christian symbols, for example, especially in its description of Ragnarök: see Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 9. For interpretations of *Lokasenna* as a product of a 13th-century renaissance, see Abrams, *Myths of the Pagan North*, 229. The authenticity of *Prymskiða* as a pagan-era myth has also been questioned, largely due to its humorous nature: see Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 14. Gro Steinsland has also identified Biblical motifs in *Skírnismál*, arguing that they have been put in a pagan context and subverted: see Steinsland, "Pagan Myth in Confrontation with Christianity", 323-324.
76 Ólafur Briem, *Heiðinn síður á Íslandi*, 11.
the 9th to the 13th centuries. The "skaldic" genre is, as Turville-Petre suggests, a modern classification which did not exist in medieval times. Skaldic poetry nonetheless distinguishes itself from Eddic poetry by making use of a more complex and regular metrical style, and a more complicated sentence structure. The dróttkvætt (or "court measure") was the most commonly used metrical form in this style of poetry.

The subject matter of skaldic poetry ranges from contemporary events and praise poetry in memory of kings and chieftains to myths and poems which directly address the gods. While many of the kennings used are based on old myths, there are fewer narratives to be found in this genre about the gods. The mentions of Freyr and the Vanir which are to be found, however, can offer further insights into how they were viewed in a pre-Christian society and to what extent and for what purpose their powers were invoked. For example, Freyr and Njörðr are called upon by Egill Skallagrímsson for help in stanza 21 of his lausavísur and in stanza 17 of Arinbjarnarkviða they are named as the givers of wealth. Kennings used in skaldic poetry can also hint at possible associations and roles of gods, as for example with "Freyr's leikr" in stanza six of Þorbjörn hornklofi's poem Haraldskvæði, which is most probably used to mean battle.

One major benefit of skaldic poetry is that, unlike Eddic poetry, it is believed to be less problematic to date the religious ideas in it, and in general more is known of its origins. This means that many scholars consider it to be second only to Eddic poetry in terms of the

77 Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, 16. For an online catalogue of skaldic poetry, see The Skaldic Project.
78 Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, 13.
79 Gísli Sigurðsson, "Inngangur", i-x.
80 Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, 14.
81 Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North; Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn siður á Íslandi, 11.
82 Egill Skallagrímsson, Lausavísur, st. 21.
83 Egill Skallagrímsson, Arinbjarnarkviða, st. 17.
84 Þorbjörn hornklofi, Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál), st. 6. This interpretation of the words "Freyr's leikr" can be found in the notes to The Skaldic Project edition of the text.
85 Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn siður á Íslandi, 11.
usefulness of the mythological information it conveys, even though there is significantly less of such material.  

2.3. The Works of Snorri Sturluson

The most descriptive accounts of the Vanir gods appear in the works of Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), an Icelandic poet and public figure. He wrote the Prose Edda around 1220, which comprises of a prologue and three parts: Gylfaginning, Skáldskaparmál and Håttatal. Gylfaginning tells the story of the Swedish King Gylfi’s quest for knowledge, working as a framework for the presentation of pagan mythology. Håttatal and Skáldskaparmál are primarily aimed at teaching poetry techniques, although Skáldskaparmál also contains a large amount of mythology. Snorri’s authorship of the Prose Edda has generally been accepted without question, although Faulkes points out that the surviving manuscripts were all written over 50 years after Snorri’s death and differ from each other in varying degrees.

With regard to source value, it must be remembered that Snorri was a Christian writing around 200 years after the conversion to Christianity, and the ideology of his time has left a strong mark on his work. The Prologue of his Edda is a clear example of this, as it attempts to fit the history of the pagan religion into a Biblical and Classical framework. This serves, as Lindow observes, to ascribe to the Nordic pagans a kind of unenlightened yet natural religion. Lindow writes that this approach would have been especially attractive to Icelandic Christians of the 13th century who traced their descent directly from the pagan settlers. A similar approach can be seen in Heimskringla, a history of the kings of Norway written between 1223 and 1235 which is also generally attributed to Snorri Sturluson. The first saga of Heimskringla, Ynglinga saga, euhemerises the pagan gods, turning the Æsir into a warrior tribe from Asia.

Although Snorri’s work must be seen as a product of its time, it is still an important

86 Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn siður á Íslandi, 11; Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, 17.
87 Faulkes, "Introduction", xiii.
88 Faulkes, "Introduction", xiv.
89 Lindow, Norse Mythology, 22.
90 Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, "Formáli", vi.; Turville Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, 25.
source on Nordic mythology. Faulkes observes that while Snorri undoubtedly had a Christian background and was writing for his contemporaries (something most explicit in the Prologue of the *Prose Edda* and in *Ynglinga saga*), his outlook was remarkably secular compared to other medieval writers.\(^91\) His aim was first and foremost to preserve poetic, mythological and historical material, and putting it into a Christian context (or the context of a textbook in the case of *Skáldskaparmál*) was arguably a way of making it accessible to the contemporary reader.

For the reasons stated in Chapter 1.2., Snorri’s presentation of the world of the gods should be viewed as a framework used to relate mythology rather than a reflection of the reality of daily pre-Christian religion. Nonetheless, the material in Snorri’s *Edda* (and, to a lesser extent, *Ynglinga saga*), most likely came from both written and oral sources, many of which have since been lost. Therefore, individual myths and ideas relayed by Snorri can be considered reliable in cases where comparison with other sources suggests that they are not purely Snorri’s work. An example of this would be the Njörðr-Skaði myth, which is told by Snorri in *Gylfaginning*\(^92\) but follows the same pattern as the myth of Freyr and Gerðr as it appears in *Skírnismál*.

2.4. *Landnámabók*

*Landnámabók* (e. The Book of Settlements) comprises of narrative accounts of the settlement of Iceland in the 9th and 10th centuries, arranged by area clockwise around Iceland. The stories principally deal with the names of settlers and the areas of land they took, but this is often accompanied by other information such as the names of the settlers’ wives, descendants, ancestors and sometimes also where they came from and what drove them to Iceland.\(^93\) In these short narratives, insights are given into the religious rites, rituals and beliefs of the settlers, and in some cases sufficient information is provided for us to identify the origins of certain traditions.

*Landnámabók* is preserved in five versions, not all of which are complete. The oldest

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\(^91\) Faulkes, "Introduction", xv.
is the 13th-century Sturlubók, followed by Hauksbók and Melabók from the early 14th century, and then Skarðsáróbók and Póðararbók from the 17th century. The conclusion of Hauksbók, written by Haukr Erlendsson, claims that his Landnámabók was based on Sturlubók and another book written by Styrmir. All of these works are said by Haukr to be based on the writings of Ari fróði Þorgilsson (the writer of the historical work Íslendingabók) and Kolskeggr hinn vitri. Whether Ari wrote the original book (as shall be assumed here) or rather shorter writings (schedulae) has been a matter of scholarly debate. Nonetheless, it is clear that Ari’s original work and Styrmisbók have both since been lost. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson considers Styrmisbók to have been written in the first part of the 13th century (the author, Styrmir fróði Kárason, died 1245), followed by Sturlubók only a few decades later. 

One consequence of Landnámabók being preserved in five different versions is that some differences exist between the narratives of individual settlers found in each version, and discrepancies between different manuscripts, particularly on the subject of religious rites, can be quite telling. Jón Hnefill draws attention, for example, to two versions of the same passage in Sturlubók and Hauksbók, in which the name of a Þuríður hofgyðja (who will be looked at in relation to Freyr’s cult in Chapters 5.5. and 6.2. of this thesis) is completely left out of the Sturlubók version. Jón Hnefill connects this to the folkloristic phenomenon of narratives adapting to the dominant culture, which in Sturlubók is more Christian. Nevertheless, as Jón Hnefill points out, in most other cases when pagan ritual is covered in Landnámabók (in some cases even in Sturlubók), the tone is remarkably neutral. In most

94 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, Blót í norrænum sið. For a diagram of the relationship between the different versions, see Jón Jóhannesson, Gerðir Landnáma, 226.
95 Jakob Benediktsson, "Formáli", v; vii.
96 Landnámabók, 395-397.
97 Turville Petre, Origins of Icelandic Literature, 105.
98 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, Blót í norrænum sið, 14. For a summary of the scholarly debate about the relationship between the different versions of Landnámabók, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, Blót í norrænum sið, 14-17.
99 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, Blót í norrænum sið, 21.
100 Jón Hnefill, Blót í norrænum sið, 28.
101 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, Blót í norrænum sið, 23.
cases, emphasis is placed on reporting the details of the story rather than passing judgement. As a source on the backgrounds and religious practices of individual settlers, *Landnámabók* is therefore relatively trustworthy. As will be noted below, in relation to Freyr, use of the words "Freysgoði" (as used in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*) and "Freysgýðlingar" (which appears in the *Landnámabók* list of settlers in Eastern Iceland) also provide some evidence of a Vanir cult in Iceland. In Chapter 6, the genealogies in *Landnámabók* which give indications of Freyr worship will be examined more closely with particular reference to where in Iceland these people settled, how their status as Freyr worshippers could have manifested itself in religious practice and where the traditions could possibly have come from.

### 2.5. Family Sagas

The so-called Family Sagas (Íslandingasögur) nearly all describe events which happened in a period of Icelandic history often referred to as the söguöld (930-1050). They are generally considered to be a separate genre with their own distinctive style.

The manuscripts containing the sagas are nearly all younger than the 13th century. Liestøl points out that this means that there is a difference of at least six to ten generations (or 200 to 300 years) between the time when the events are said to have taken place and when they are written down. This poses a big problem in terms of reliability, especially if the sagas are to be used as a source on historical religious practices. This is particularly the case with younger sagas such as *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* and *Brandkrossa þáttr*, which both make claims about Freyr worship in the settlement era. Turville-Petre writes that Family Sagas should be studied as a product of a literary movement of the 13th century, and consideration should be given to the aims, methods and sources by which each saga is

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102 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Blót í norrænum sið*, 27; 40-1. Jón Hnefill counts eight narratives about sacrifice (*blót*) in all versions of *Landnámabók*, of which four have a positive tone, while three are neutral and only one is negative (about human sacrifice) which he considers to be a younger story.

103 Liestøl, *Uppruni Íslandinga sagna*, 22. An example given by Liestøl is when a name is given followed by "hét maður". When the character's part in the saga is over, their involvement is often ended with the words "ok er hann ór sogunni."

governed. 105 Turville-Petre, for example, distinguishes between sagas those which aim for historical accuracy, and others (often from the later period) which are conceived primarily as works of art. It has been argued that Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða belongs to the latter category.106

With regard to the veracity and trustworthiness of the sagas, academic discourse during the 20th century has largely been characterised by the "bookprose" versus "freeprose" debate. "Bookprose" involves the idea of the saga author as a creator, while the proponents of "freeprose" envisage the writer as being more of an editor, working with oral material from a highly developed tradition preceding the time of writing.107 Knut Liestøl, a leading proponent of "freeprose", argued that as stories which have their roots in orality, the conditions in which sagas existed will have had the most impact on their form; some factors will have aided their preservation while others will have worked against it.108 He argues, however, that they were intended to preserve history and that was the way that they would have been received and understood by a medieval audience.109

It is certainly possible that some sagas had more foundation in oral tradition than others. If we are to assume that all Family Sagas had some basis in orality, then the ideas which they contain about pagan religious practices cannot be discounted purely on the basis that they are written down centuries after they are purported to have happened. Although historical and genealogical information can become distorted over time, as Ólafur Briem points out, memories of rites and rituals can still be preserved, even in a story which is otherwise inaccurate.110

105 Turville Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, 19.
106 Turville Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, 19.
108 Liestøl, Uppruni Íslendinga sagna, 196.
109 Liestøl, Uppruni Íslendinga sagna, 212.
110 Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn síður á Íslandi, 12.
2.6. Þættir

The so-called Þættir are self-contained shorter narratives preserved primarily in the Flateyjarbók and Morkinskinna manuscripts. In the 20th century, there has been a movement towards publishing them as independent stories.\(^{111}\) Þættir can be found in all three versions of Morkinskinna, that is the manuscripts GKS 1009 fol. which is the oldest version of Morkinskinna, dating from the late 13th century; Hulda/Hrokkinskinna from the first half of the 14th century (preserved in manuscripts AM 66 fol. and GKS 1010 fol.), as well as the version of Morkinskinna which was added to Flateyjarbók (GKS 1005 fol.) in the late 15th century.\(^{112}\) Þættir are also found in the part of Flateyjarbók which deals with the Christianisation of Norway and stories of kings, particularly in the saga of the missionary king Ólafur Tryggvason.\(^{113}\)

The Þættir contain little ambient information, as Theodore Andersson notes, and are therefore more difficult to date than longer sögr.\(^{114}\) Whether they belong in the contexts they are preserved in or whether they were interpolated at a later date is also a matter of debate. Andersson accepts that it is possible that they are the work of the author(s) of the texts they appear in, but writes that it is nonetheless "difficult to believe that they could be shaped with such uniform skill if there were not an anterior tradition of well-told, anecdotal stories."\(^{115}\)

The Þættir thus pose similar problems to Family Ságas when used as sources on Old Norse religion. If we are to take into account Andersson’s suggestion that they may have some basis in oral tradition, then it is very possible that like the Family Sagas, the Þættir could well preserve various ideas, attitudes and motifs which have their roots in pre-Christian society. Nevertheless, like the Family Sagas, the Þættir should first and foremost be treated as products of the age in which they were written, or perhaps the era directly preceding that. We will see in the case of Ógmundar þáttr dytts ok Gunnars helmings that

\(^{111}\) Ármann Jakobsson, Íslendingaþættir, 45-6.
\(^{112}\) Ármann Jakobsson, Íslendingaþættir, 74.
\(^{113}\) Ármann Jakobsson, Íslendingaþættir, 81.
\(^{114}\) Andersson, The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas, 11.
\(^{115}\) Andersson, The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas, 11.
even when a story retains elements which have parallels in other records of pre-Christian practice, the influence from a medieval Christian writing tradition can be very profound.
3.0. Non-Literary Sources on the Vanir and Freyr Worship in Iceland: An Introduction

As noted above, non-literary sources, such as toponymical material and personal names, can also be useful for providing a better picture of the nature of the cult of Freyr in Iceland and the Vanir in general. They can indicate the distribution of religious ideas, as well as supporting associations documented in written sources (place names in Scandinavia, for example, support ideas expressed in literature about fields which are sacred to Freyr). Like the written sources, however, it is important that they are not used as evidence in themselves, and should rather be used in conjunction with other source types.

3.1. Place Names

The main non-literary sources available on pre-Christian religion in Iceland are place names. In comparison to mainland Scandinavia, there has been relatively little place name research specific to Iceland. A map of Icelandic place names is included in Jan de Vries’ 1937 toponymical study of the Nordic countries, and in 1942 Ólafur Lárusson wrote a chapter on Icelandic place names in Nordisk kultur. It is mostly from this chapter that Ólafur Briem draws his place name analysis from in Heiðinn síður á Íslandi. The most recent compilation of Icelandic place name evidence is to be found in Svavar Sigmundsson’s short article, "Átrúnaður og örnefni", published in 1990. The research of Svavar Sigmundsson, Ólafur Lárusson and Jan de Vries all show three 'Freyr-' place names in Iceland (two Freysnes and one Freyshólar), all situated in the East. De Vries, however, also includes Freyfaxahamarr. Svavar Sigmundsson’s research also shows that none of these places seem have since had churches built on them (as have many of the 'hof-' places).

Toponymical sources have the advantage that they are less susceptible to

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116 Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, 165
117 Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn síður á Íslandi, 38.
118 de Vries, Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte I, 113.
119 Svavar Sigmundsson, "Átrúnaður og örnefni", 241. See also Ólafur Lárusson, "Kultminne i stadnamn".
120 Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn síður á Íslandi, 38; Ólafur Lárusson, "Kultminne i stadnamn", 79; and de Vries, Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte I, 113.
121 Svavar Sigmundsson, "Átrúnaður og örnefni", 243.
manipulation by later medieval writers, and so are more likely to reflect the beliefs of the
general population at the time they were conceived.\textsuperscript{122} In the case of Iceland, as opposed to
mainland Scandinavia, there is the advantage that is little uncertainty about which era pagan
place names represent, as the country was settled in a very short period of time and
Christianised shortly afterwards, as has been discussed in Chapter 1.\textsuperscript{123}

This is not to say, however, that place name studies are not without their flaws. Place
names can be influenced by folktales and legends which are products of a later era, and it
can sometimes be hard to pinpoint the exact time at which a name came into use (old
sources such as maps and manuscripts need to be used in such studies). In the case of Freyr
worship in Iceland, Freyfaxahamarr (most likely named after Hrafnkels saga) is an example
of such a name. It is worth noting that it is not included in Svavar Sigmundsson’s map (Figure
2). Another possible limitation is that place name analysis often relies on etymological
interpretation of very old words, which can often be misleading. One issue of relevance to
‘Freyr-’ names is that they could also derive from the adjective ‘freyr’ (fertile).\textsuperscript{124}

3.2. Personal Names

Personal names can also give some insight into the religious beliefs of Heathen Age
Icelanders, or at least the naming traditions of their home countries. Although these are
arguably a less reliable source than place names as we know little of people’s motivations
for naming their children, they can give indications of which god or cult people associated
their families with. For example, Ólafur Briem writes that Icelandic personal names from the

\textsuperscript{122} Brink, “How Uniform was the Old Norse Religion?”, 106.

\textsuperscript{123} This is, however, a problem in Scandinavia. Mundal writes that place names can often tell the most
about beliefs at the time when the most farms were established, rather than providing a balanced
picture of religious belief in one given area. Another problem specific to Scandinavia is that deities
associated with the cult of fertility and agriculture (such as the Vanir) can be overrepresented: see
Mundal, "Gods and Goddesses with Reference to the Female Divinities", 296. To my mind, Iceland is
an exception to this rule as settlements are concentrated along the coast and it has been a seafaring
society from the very beginning. Most of these coastal settlements, therefore, are named after Þórr
rather than Freyr or Freyja. There is, however, also a Njarðvík. In my opinion, the inclusion of Njǫrðr
should possibly be looked at in the context of his association with the sea, as Njǫrðr place names in
mainland Scandinavia have generally been associated with an earlier time period.

\textsuperscript{124} Svavar Sigmundsson, “Átränaður og òrnefni”, 243.
settlement era serve to demonstrate, alongside other types of evidence, that Þórr and Freyr were by far the most commonly worshipped.\textsuperscript{125}

The prominence of names beginning with prefixes deriving from 'Þórr-' or 'Frey-', however, could possibly be described by a passage in \textit{Eyrbyggja saga}:

\begin{quote}
Hrólfr var hǫfðingi mikill og inn mesti rausnarmaðr; hann varðveitti þar í eyjunni Þórshof og var mikill vinr Þórs, ok af því var hann Þórólfr kallaðr.\textsuperscript{126}
\end{quote}

This passage is worth considering, especially in relation to the four 'Freyr-' names that are found in \textit{Landnámabók}. Titles such as \textit{Freysgoði} and \textit{Freysgyðlingar}, although not in themselves part of personal names, do support this to some extent as they suggest that in pre-Christian Iceland, devotion to Freyr was considered a significant enough part of a person's identity to follow their name in genealogical records. It is difficult, however, to ascertain to what extent religious devotion played a part in people's decisions to name their children. This is particularly the case when names beginning in 'Ing-' are studied. At first glance, there seems to be some connection with the Vanir and four out of the 36 men and women with 'Ing-' names in \textit{Landnámabók} have apparent links to Sweden. However, these people are all named as ancestors rather than settlers and Icelanders, and some of the language used indicates that they may have lived in a mythological past which bore little connection to settlement-era life in Iceland. One example of this is to be found in the case of Ingigerðr Garðadrottning:

\begin{quote}
Gormr hét hersir ágætr í Svíþjóð; hann átti Þóru, dóttur Eiríks konungs at Uppsǫlum. Þorgils hét sonur þeira; hann átti Elínu, dóttur Burisláfs konungs ór Gǫrðum austan ok Ingigerðar, systur Dagstryggs risakonungs\textsuperscript{127}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{125} Ólafur Briem, \textit{Heiðinn siður á Íslandi}, 38. Although ‘Þórr-’ names significantly outnumber ‘Freyr-’ names, there are four listed in \textit{Landnámabók}. These are the women’s names Freygerðr and Freyleif, and the men’s names Freysteinn and Freyviðr. The lives and origins of the people carrying these names will be examined further in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Eyrbyggja saga}, 6.

\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Landnámabók}, 236.
In the case of settlers with 'Ing-' names and their descendents, there is little evidence that they would have adhered to a culture that was distinct from that of Norwegian Þórr-worshippers. At least ten of the 36 are closely related to somebody with a 'Þórr-' name, and their origins are also very varied, in a way that could easily have been reflective of Icelandic society in general at that time (see Appendix 1 of this thesis for a list of origins, family members and settlements).

There is some indication that some who bore 'Ing-' names may have had links to Freyr's cult. One of the 36 is Ingimundr enn gamli and another two are the children of Helgi enn magri. Both Helgi and Ingimundr will be discussed in relation to Freyr in Chapter 5.1. of this thesis. Yet another is the son of a Þuriðr hofgyðja who will be discussed in Chapter 5.3. While this overlap may not be entirely coincidental, however, the backgrounds and lives of the people who had 'Ing-' names are way too varied to make any assumptions based solely on their personal names.
4.0. Characteristics of the Vanir in Old Norse Religion: An Introduction

The Vanir feature in the works of Snorri Sturluson as a distinct family or tribe of gods who merge with the Æsir after a war and include Njörðr, Freyr and Freyja. In his description of Njörðr in Gylfaginning, Snorri specifies that Njörðr is descended from a different tribe:

\[\text{Eigi er Njǫrðr Ása ættar. Hann var upp føeddr í Vanaheimum, en Vanir gísluðu hann goðunum ok tóku í mótt at gíslingu þann er Hœnir heitir. Hann varð at sætt með goðunum ok Vǫnum.}\]

In Ynglingasaga, Vanaheimr is also described as a separate place to Ásgarðr, and a similar story of a hostage exchange and subsequent peace between the tribes is told, with Óðinn appearing in this instance as an euhemerised chieftain of war:

\[\text{Óðinn för með her á hendur Vǫnum, en þeir urðu vel við ok vörðu land sitt, ok høfðu ýmsir sigir. Herjuðu hvárir land annarra ok gerðu skaða. En er þat leiddist hvárumtveggjum, lögðu þeir milli sin sættarstefnu ok gerðu frið ok seldust gíslar. Fengu Vanir sína ina ágæztu menn, Njǫrð inn auðga ok son hans, Frey, en Æsir þar í mótt þann, er Hœnir hét.}\]

This image of the Vanir as an opposing tribe later united with the Æsir has some basis in Eddic poetry. Vanaheimr is mentioned in stanzas 38-39 of Vafþrúðnismál as being where Njörðr comes from, and the words "varð-at hann ásum alinn" allude to the idea that he is of a different tribe.\(^{130}\) In stanza 24 of Völuspá, the first battle ("fólkvíg/ fyrst í heimi")\(^{131}\) is described. Here the threshold of the Æsir’s stronghold is broken and the Vanir are described as being "indomitable, trampling the plain"\(^{132}\) ("Brotinn var borðveggur/ borgar ása,/ knáttu vanir vígpá/ völlu sporna").\(^{133}\) The taking of Njörðr as a hostage is also alluded to in

\(^{128}\) Snorri Sturluson, Gylfaginning, 23.
\(^{129}\) Snorri Sturluson, Ynglingasaga, 12.
\(^{130}\) Vafþrúðnismál, st. 38-39 and Gisli Sigurðsson’s notes on page 69.
\(^{131}\) Völuspá, st. 24.
\(^{132}\) Trans. Larrington, Seeress’ Prophecy, st. 24.
\(^{133}\) Völuspá, st. 24.
Lokasenna ("þegi þú, Njörður,/ þú vart austur héðan/ gísl um sendur að goðum").\textsuperscript{134}

In addition to these references to the war, the Vanir's status as a separate group is also conveyed in Skírnismál in a line attributed to Freyr's servant Skírnir where he says he is neither of the álfar, nor of the Æsir or Vanir ("Emk-at eg álfa/ né ása sona/ né vissa vana").\textsuperscript{135}

In spite of this, Rudolf Simek has recently argued that the Vanir as a separate family of gods are Snorri's creation, drawing attention to what he considers to be the scarcity of evidence for the existence of a separate tribe of gods with separate functions outside of the works of Snorri Sturluson.\textsuperscript{136} He counts only seven mentions of the term "Vanir" in Eddic poetry, limited to five poems, in addition to four in skaldic poetry.\textsuperscript{137} This argument has nonetheless been challenged,\textsuperscript{138} and it can be argued that Simek's analysis of Eddic poetry alone as a source in itself is not a sufficient basis on which to dismiss the distinct roles and associations of the Vanir which scholars have identified across a number of other sources.

This chapter will focus on the functional divisions between the Æsir and the Vanir which have been identified by earlier scholars (such as Dumézil, de Vries and Turville-Petre) and more recently defended by Schjødt and Gunnell against challenges posed by Motz and Simek.\textsuperscript{139} In Chapter 5, individual accounts of Freyr worship in Iceland will be examined to determine what extent this "otherness" was reflected in actual religious practice, as Terry Gunnell has suggested.\textsuperscript{140}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{134} Lokasenna, st. 34.
\item \textsuperscript{135} Skírnismál, st. 18. Note, however, that in other sources such as Lokasenna, stanzas 2, 13 and 30, only Æsir and álfar are referred to, possibly suggesting that to the poet the álfar were synonymous with the Vanir: see Gunnell, "How Elvish were the Álfar?", 121; Ström, Nordisk hedendom, 199; and Schjødt, "Relationen mellem aser og vaner", 306.
\item \textsuperscript{136} Simek, "The Vanir: An Obituary", 154.
\item \textsuperscript{137} Simek, "The Vanir: An Obituary", 143-144.
\item \textsuperscript{138} See: Tolley, "In Defence of the Vanir", 20; Gunnell, "Blótgyðjur, Mimi, Incest and Wagons" (forthcoming); Schjødt, "New Perspectives on the Vanir Gods in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Mythology and Religion", 21-24.
\item \textsuperscript{139} See: Gunnell, "Blótgyðjur, Mimi, Incest and Wagons" (forthcoming) and Schjødt, "New Perspectives on the Vanir Gods in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Mythology and Religion", 25; 31.
\item \textsuperscript{140} Gunnell, "Blótgyðjur, Mimi, Incest and Wagons" (forthcoming).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
4.1. The Vanir as Gods of Peace and Fecundity

Most scholars consider the Vanir to be a distinct group of gods with separate associations and functions. Their aforementioned role as fertility gods has in particular been a focal point in scholarship. Folke Ström, for example, interprets the Æsir as representing an aristocratic, military class while the Vanir represent an agricultural class with an emphasis on fertility. He connects Vanir worship with a peacetime farming society.\(^{141}\) Similarly, de Vries characterises the Vanir as gods of fecundity who had their place in agricultural ritual,\(^ {142}\) taking his influence from Dumézil, who draws ties with ancient Indian mythology, characterising the Vanir as "gods of the third function", coming lower in the hierarchy than the Æsir in the mythological present. They are, he writes, first and foremost, givers of riches (fecundity, pleasure and peace), and are associated with the earth and the sea.\(^ {143}\) Expanding this association between Indian and Norse mythology, Dumézil also makes use of motifs in Skírnismál, drawing parallels between Freyr losing his sword with Indian gods of the third function being armed in a humbler way than those of higher functions.\(^ {144}\) Other scholars such as Ólafur Briem, John Lindow, Hilda Ellis Davidson, Gro Steinsland and Jens Peter Schjødt have also highlighted the importance of the Vanir’s connection with fertility.\(^ {145}\)

The interpretation of the Vanir as gods of the earth has a strong foundation in written, archaeological and toponymical sources. Snorri connects Freyr with the idea of "ár ok friðr" (good years and peace) in Ynglinga saga, Gylfaginning and Hákonar saga góða.\(^ {146}\) In Adam of Bremen’s account of Nordic religion in Uppsala, he describes a statue of "Frikko" (almost certainly Freyr) as having a large phallus, and adds that Frikko is to be sacrificed to if marriages are to be celebrated.\(^ {147}\) Possibly related is the way Njörðr and Freyr are both the

\(^{141}\) Ström, *Nordisk Hedendom*, 74.

\(^{142}\) de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* II, 163.


\(^{144}\) Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, 78.


\(^{146}\) Ynglinga saga, 23-24; Gylfaginning, 24; Snorri Sturluson, *Hákonar saga góða*, 167-168.

subject of similar myths in which they are involved in a sexual union with a woman
descended from the *jötnar*, told in Snorri’s *Edda* (Gylfaginning and Skáldskaparmál)\(^{148}\) and
the Eddic poem *Skírnismál* respectively. Magnus Olsen certainly interprets the *Skírnismál*
myth as a representation of a celestial god and a goddess of the earth coming together to
make a fruitful harvest, drawing on etymological links between Gerðr and the earth and
fields.\(^{149}\) As will later be discussed, it is noteworthy that the motif of the sacred field appears
in other sources in relation to Freyr, notably Vitazgjafi in *Víga-Glúms saga*. Examples of
Freysakr place names can also be found in Norway and Sweden.\(^{150}\) For Turville-Petre,
however, the meaning of both the Njǫrðr-Skaði and the Freyr-Gerðr myths is slightly
different, involving a god of fertility becoming allied to a goddess of winter and death.
However, for Turville-Petre, fertility and death in Norse myth are intimately related.\(^{151}\)
Certainly, the Vanir are connected elsewhere with death, such as in stanza 14 of *Grímnismál*
where it is said that Freyja takes half of the slain.\(^{152}\) Freyr is also associated with a burial
mound in both *Ynglinga saga* (the euhemerised Freyr is kept in a mound after his death as
his subjects continue to pay him gold),\(^{153}\) in *Flateyjarbók*\(^ {154}\) and *Gísla saga* when Freyr

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\(^{148}\) Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, 38. In this myth Skaði wants to live in the mountains but Njǫrðr by
the sea. The myth of how Skaði chose Njǫrðr is told in Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, 2.

\(^{149}\) Magnus Olsen, “Fra Gammelnorsk Myte og Kultus”, 22.

\(^{150}\) Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the Pagan North*, 165-166. It might be noted that Lotte Motz
has disputed the idea of the sacred field being specific to the Vanir. Based on de Vries’ maps of
placenames, she has argued that there are in fact more places with -akr in the name which are related
to the Æsir (she counts six Torsakr, six Frösakr, five Onsakr and no akr places connected to Njörðr
and Freyja): see Motz, *The King, The Champion and the Sorcerer*, 107; and also de Vries,
*Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* II, 113; 171; 208; 272; 273.

\(^{151}\) Turville Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 165. It might be noted that in this context, Abram
draws parallels with Spartan society where Eros took a similar role: see Abram, *Myths of the Pagan
North*, 94.

\(^{152}\) *Grimnismál*, st. 14. This is repeated and elaborated on by Snorri in *Gylfaginning*, 24.

\(^{153}\) Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglinga saga*, 24. A parallel is to be found in the story of Ólafr Geirstaðaálf, 
preserved in *Flateyjarbók*. Ólafr Geirstaðaálf was a king who was put in a burial mound after his
death with many riches. When the mound was sealed and the times of peace and plenty ceased, the
people started sacrificing to him: see *Flateyjarbók* II, 74-48.

\(^{154}\) *Flateyjarbók* I, 448-449.
rewards Þorgrimr for his devotion by never letting his mound freeze over. This episode will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 5.2.

As they appear to be connected with the earth, harvests and the circle of life across a wide range of sources, the worship of the Vanir can be seen as a development of fertility worship in the Nordic area. Ólafur Briem considers Bronze Age rock carvings of hieros gamos acts in Southern Sweden and Norway to be an earlier form of this same tradition. DuBois supports these developments suggesting that "as the coital act emerged as a prime metaphor for the mystery of agricultural fecundity, the gods responsible for the seasonal cycle, sunshine, rain, and plants took on the characteristics of human sexuality." This statement evokes not only Adam of Bremen’s earlier noted description but also the Rällinge statue from Sweden, generally interpreted as Freyr, which depicts a male with an erection, a beard and a conical hat.

Some scholars have traced the roots of the Vanir cult in Viking-Age Scandinavia, with its associations with fertility, to an older Germanic tradition. It has been proposed that Freyr’s father Njörðr is actually a form of the goddess Nerthus described in Tacitus’ Germania as a terra mater figure who is connected with the sea (or water), peace and chariots, although Lotte Motz has disputed this, partly on the basis that the Njörðr place names do not coincide with where Nerthus was worshipped. This has, however, been contested by Per Vikstrand who has found female Njörðr names in Sweden. If we are to assume, however, that the cult of Nerthus described in Germania also existed in (or migrated to) Sweden and Norway, then there are a number of possible explanations for Nerthus’ transition into Njörðr. It has been suggested that the goddess has morphed into a male god

155 Gísli saga, 18.
156 Ólafur Briem, Vanir og Æsir, 49.
157 DuBois, Nordic Religions in the Viking Age, 54.
158 Steinsland, Nørøn religion, 152.
159 Tacitus, Germania, 134-135.
161 Vikstrand, Gudarnas platser, 101-107.
over time,\textsuperscript{162} that she was a hermaphrodite\textsuperscript{163} or that Nerðus was Njǫrðr’s female equivalent who has since lost her identity (if she wasn’t simply one half of a sibling pair).\textsuperscript{164}

### 4.2. Vanir and Dísir: Femininity, Blót and the Cult at Uppsala

The cult of the Vanir, like that of the álfar, has also been linked by some scholars to that of the disir, female deities mentioned in some sources as the recipients of blót (like the álfar).\textsuperscript{165} Raudvere distinguishes them from the fylgjur (other minor female deities), writing that they are concerned with the prosperity and fortune of a specific place or family.\textsuperscript{166} Certain parallels can be seen with the Vanir gods who seem to be much more rooted in the landscape of mortals than the Æsir, as noted above.

Sundqvist writes that similarly to the Vanir, the disir also have connections to Uppsala. In \textit{Ynglinga saga}, it is said that Freyr raised a hof at Uppsala, and that following his death Freyja presided over the blót rituals there until Freyr’s son Fjǫlnir took power.\textsuperscript{167} As noted above, the practice of Vanir worship at Uppsala is also mentioned in Adam of Bremen’s aforementioned account,\textsuperscript{168} and Sundqvist interprets archeological findings of horse bones in the area as indicative of Vanir cult worship.\textsuperscript{169} The disir, meanwhile, are linked to Uppsala in Chapter 24 of \textit{Ynglinga saga} when King Aðils (himself a descendent of Njǫrðr and Freyr according to the genealogy of the saga) dies at a disablót riding his horse around the disarsalr.\textsuperscript{170} Sundqvist points out that another source, \textit{Upplandslagen}, makes

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{162} Abram, \textit{Myths of the Pagan North}, 57.
\item \textsuperscript{163} Turville Petre, \textit{Myth and Religion of the North}, 172.
\item \textsuperscript{164} Abram, \textit{Myths of the Pagan North}, 57; Ólafur Briem, \textit{Æsir og Vanir}, 19; Turville Petre, \textit{Myth and Religion of the North}, 172.
\item \textsuperscript{165} Ström, \textit{Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjar}, 20; Sundqvist, \textit{Freyr’s Offspring}, 229; Motz, “Sister in the Cave”, 171; Gunnell, “The Season of the Disir”. For examples of disablót, see: Víga-Gláums saga, 17; Egils saga, 107 and \textit{Ynglinga saga}, 58.
\item \textsuperscript{166} Raudvere, “Popular Religion in the Viking Age”, 240.
\item \textsuperscript{167} Snorri Sturluson, \textit{Ynglinga saga}, 23-5.
\item \textsuperscript{168} Adam of Bremen, \textit{History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen}, 207.
\item \textsuperscript{169} Sundqvist, \textit{Freyr’s Offspring}, 230-1.
\item \textsuperscript{170} Snorri Sturluson, \textit{Ynglinga saga}, 58.
\end{itemize}
reference to "disthing" at Uppsala.  

Of all the Vanir, it is of course Freyja who is most likely to have been connected to the disir. Snorri gives "Vana dís" as a kenning for Freyja in Skáldskaparmál and Ström notes that the term "disarsalr" in Ynglinga saga’s description of King Aðils' death uses the genitive singular of the noun dís, indicating that it is not referring to a collective group (as would be the case with disablót). Disarsalr can, therefore, be interpreted as "Freyja’s hall", according to Sundqvist, who also notes that this would fit well with the Dianae aedes described in Historia Norwegiæ (an interpretatio romana of "Freyja’s temple"). Parallels between Freyja and the disir can also possibly be found in the heroic Eddic poetry. In stanza 9 of Sigurdrífumál the disir are named as beings to call upon for help in childbirth ("Bjargrúnar skaltu kunna/ ef þú bjarga vilt/ og leysa kind frá konum,/ á lófa þær skal rísta/ og of liðu spenna/ og biðja þá dísir duga"). Lotte Motz draws a comparison between this and stanza 9 of Oddrúnargrátur when Borgný thanks Oddrún for saving her from a difficult labour ("Svo hjálpi þér/ hollar vættir, /Frigg og Freyja /og fleiri goð, /sem þú felldir mér/ fár af hónum"). Luke John Murphy has nonetheless criticised this comparison on the basis that in Oddrúnargrátur Borgný is merely thanking Oddrún for her help and asking that Oddrún be blessed, rather than calling upon Freyja and Frigg for help in childbirth. Nevertheless, it is interesting that Frigg and Freyja are the ones Borgný names in this context. It is perhaps not unreasonable to draw the conclusion that Freyja, Frigg and the disir could have had an overlap of roles in the sense that all were considered women’s gods, connected with the human world and fertility.

171 Sundqvist, Freyr’s Offspring, 230.
172 Snorri Sturluson, Skáldskaparmál, 30.
173 Ström, Diser, Nornor, Valkyrjor, 44.
174 Sundqvist, Freyr’s Offspring, 230.
175 Sigurdrífumál, st. 10.
177 Murphy, Herjans dísir, 61.
4.3. Sorcery and the Vanir

Another aspect of the Vanir’s portrayal which can be connected to the fertility function is their link with sorcery. In *Lokasenna*, Freyja is accused by Loki of being a malevolent witch ("þú ert fordæða/ og meini blandin mjög"), and in *Ynglinga saga* Snorri writes that it was she who taught the Æsir seiðr, which was a custom of the Vanir ("hon kenndi first með Ásum seið, sem Vǫnum var títt"). In *Þrymskviða* they are also linked with prophecy when it is said of Heimdallr that he could see well ahead like the other Vanir ("vissi hann vel fram / sem vanir aðrir"). DuBois considers this association with magic to be a direct result of their role in early societies as fertility gods: "within the worldview of early agriculturalists, the magic of natural regeneration - the very basis of agriculture - leads naturally to magic of other types." Eduard Neumann has also attempted to connect the role of the Vanir as generative nature gods to their involvement with fate. Neumann argued in his study *Das Schicksal in der Edda* that as the forces of the natural world, the Vanir are associated with a concept of fate he calls "werde- schicksalsdenken" (fate as what must happen/comes to pass), as opposed to the Æsir, who are associated with "macht-schicksalsdenken", which is more indicative of a superwill.

It is worth noting that seiðr, the same magic which Snorri attributes in Chapter 4 of *Ynglinga saga* to the Vanir as a group with the words "sem Vǫnum var títt", is described in Chapter 7 (in relation to Óðinn) as a shameful and effeminate magic when practised by men ("En þessi fjölkynngi, er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karl mónnum skammlaut við at fara"). *Seiðr*, particularly when practised by men, is also equated with ergi (a male

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178 *Lokasenna*, 122.
179 *Ynglinga saga*, 13.
180 *Þrymskviða*, 15.
183 Neumann, *Das Schicksal in der Edda*, 35; 58. See also Ström, "Scandinavian Belief in Fate", 69-70.
184 *Ynglinga saga*, 13.
185 *Ynglinga saga*, 19.
sexual passiveness believed to bring shame) elsewhere in Old Norse literature.186

Snorri’s attribution of seiðr to all of the Vanir is in keeping with the different sexual mores that the Vanir hold, both in Ynglinga saga and in other texts. Snorri describes incest as a custom of the Vanir in Chapter 4 of Ynglinga saga (“Þá er Njǫrðr var með Vǫnum, þá hafði hann átta systur sína, því at þat váru þar lǫg. Váru þeira børn Freyr og Freyja. En þat var bannat með Ásum at byggva svá náit at frændsemi”),187 and this allegation against Njǫrðr is repeated in stanza 36 of Lokasenna.188 In stanza 32 of Lokasenna, Freyja is similarly accused of having had sex with Freyr.189 Another of Loki’s taunts directed at Njǫrðr, that Hymir’s maidens urinated in his mouth,190 also alludes to a kind of sexual passivity which can be associated with the Norse concept of ergi.

Such descriptions of behaviour which falls outside the margins of what is socially acceptable in the world of source writers suggest an attitude towards the Vanir as a group which connects them with a more primitive state, perhaps concerned more with pleasures of the flesh and the laws of nature than high civilisation. If this is the case, it would fit very well with the idea of the Vanir as primarily a family of nature gods.

4.4. The Vanir as Gods of Ritual

In mythological sources, the Vanir are also often linked with ritual activity.191 In Ynglinga saga Freyja is characterised as a "blótgyðja" while Freyr and Njǫrðr are "blótgoðar",192 and Freyr is said to have raised a hof at Uppsala.193 The idea of the Vanir being active in the

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186 Sørensen, The Unmanly Man, 63-64. Sørensen focuses on the description of Þorgrímr nef from Gísla saga. The line in question can be found in Chapter 18 of Gísla saga (page 56-57): "Nú flýtr Þorgrímr fram seiðinn ok veitir sér umbúð eptir venju sinni ok gerir sér hjall, ok fremr hann fjólkynngiliga með allra ergi ok selmiskap"

187 Snorri Sturluson, Ynglinga saga, 13.

188 Lokasenna, st. 36.

189 Lokasenna, st. 32.

190 Lokasenna, st. 34.

191 Terry Gunnell has drawn particular attention to this association in his article "Blótgyðjur, Mimi, Incest and Wagons" (forthcoming).

192 Snorri Sturluson, Ynglinga saga, 13.

organisation of cult activities is not restricted to the works of Snorri Sturluson, as it is supported by Eddic poems, including those which appear to be part of a more Odinic tradition. In stanza 16 of *Grimnismál* it is said that Njörðr rules over the high-timbered hǫgr ("hátimbruðum hörgr ræður"). A very similar passage is to be found in *Vafþrúðnismál* (st. 38) where it is said of Njörðr that he rules over hof and hǫrgar ("hofum og hörgrum/ hann ræður hundmögurn"). *Skírnismál*, a poem which appears to be from a very different mythological tradition to *Grimnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál*, can also be considered an example of associations between the Vanir and ritual activity. In connection with this, Terry Gunnell has pointed to processional elements in the poem, including actions which link a central place to a peripheral sacred spot. These movements, he argues, could have had some basis in religious ritual.

Indications can be found in non-mythological sources that a link between the Vanir and ritual was also present in heathen-age religious practice. An apparent early Icelandic legal oath from Úlfjötslög, preserved in *Landnámabók* (Hauksbók 268), includes the words "hjálpi mér svá Freyr ok Njörðr ok hinn almáttki áss". Njörðr and Freyr are similarly connected to ritual activity in Hákonar saga góða, where it is said that a toast was drunk to Njörðr and then to Freyr "til árs ok friðar". It is, nonetheless, worth mentioning that this account appears in Heimskringla, and so cannot be considered to be completely independent from Ynglinga saga.

A particularly interesting account of ritual Vanir worship is to be found in the relatively late and decidedly Christian text *Ǫgmundar þáttr dytts og Gunnars helmings*, which is preserved whole in Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar, and partially in the Vatnshyrna

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194 *Grimnismál*, st. 16. It is worth noting that "ræður" (rules) is missing from the Codex Regius manuscript but is found in the manuscript AM 748 I 4to: see Gísli Sigurðsson’s notes on page 79.
195 *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 38.
196 Gunnell, "Blótgyðjur, Mimi, Incest and Wagons" (forthcoming); see further: Gunnell, "The Play of Skírnir", 22-27.
197 *Landnámabók*, 315.
198 Snorri Sturluson, Hákonar saga góða, 168.
manuscript of Viga-Glúms saga. The second part of the þáttr includes a description of the cult of Freyr at Uppsala as witnessed by Gunnar helmingr. The story tells of a wooden idol of Freyr filled with evil spirits which is drawn around the land on a horse-drawn chariot or wagon to help make the harvest fruitful ("gera mǫnnum árbót") accompanied by a priestess or wife ("kona Freys"). The role of the priestess, who appears to have sexual relations with the god, will be looked at further in Chapter 5.5. of this thesis, with reference to possible priestesses recorded in Landnámabók and Family Sagas.

The motif of the procession across the land indicates that in the minds of the medieval Icelanders who narrated this story, the cult of the Vanir was connected to ritual activity. Although Þórr is known to travel by chariot (for example, in the story of Útgarðar Loki told in Gylfaginning), this type of ritual movement does not appear to be documented in relation to the Æsir gods.

Many scholars have drawn parallels with Tacitus' description of Nerþus worship amongst Germanic tribes living along the North Sea and Baltic coasts. In Tacitus' Germania, Nerþus is depicted in a cow-drawn chariot being attended to by a priest. As has been mentioned in Chapter 4.1. of this thesis, the cult of Nerþus is generally seen as a predecessor of the cult of the Vanir in Scandinavia, not least because Nerþus and Njǫrðr come from the same word. In both accounts wagons play a central part of the ritual (wagons considered to have been used for ceremonial purposes have been found in Scandinavia) and the god appears as part of a male-female pair. This idea of ritual marriage being used as a way to bring about agricultural fertility is, according to Ólafur Briem, also helpful in explaining the significance of the explicitly sexual rites mentioned in

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199 Jónas Kristjánsson, "Formáli", lv.  
200 Ógmunðar þáttr dyttas, 112-113. It is not uncommon for pagan gods to take on the roles of demons in medieval literature. See also Larrington, "Diet, Defecation and the Devil", 150-155.  
201 Jónas Kristjánsson, "Formáli", lviii.; Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn síður á Íslandi, 49-50; Olsen, Farms and Fanes of Ancient Norway, 289.  
202 Tacitus, Germania, 134-135.  
203 Jónas Kristjánsson, "Formáli", lviii; de Vries, Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte I, 185-186.  
204 Jónas Kristjánsson, "Formáli", lix.
the works of Adam of Bremen.\footnote{\textit{Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn síður á Íslandi}, 49; Adam of Bremen, \textit{History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen}, 207.}

It can therefore be inferred that, at least amongst Snorri Sturluson and the medieval Icelanders who narrated and recorded stories such as \textit{Ǫgmundar þáttir dytts ok Gunnars helmings} and the Eddic poetry, the Vanir were distinguished, to some extent, by their connection to ritual activity. In the following chapter of this thesis, it will be argued that the importance of ritual can also be seen in the few sources we have of Vanir worship in pre-Christian Icelandic society.
5.0. Themes of Vanir Worship in Icelandic Accounts

As stated above, there are certain themes which appear to be often connected to Vanir worship. Nonetheless, bearing what has been said in previous chapters about blurred boundaries between the functions of different gods, it is worth examining to what extent Freyr worship in Iceland resembled that of the Æsir. In this section, Icelandic accounts of Freyr worship will be examined with reference to the mythological sources on the Vanir in an attempt to ascertain whether Freyr’s cult in Iceland could be considered a distinct localised religious movement with its basis in a separate ideology, like those other localised cults noted above.

5.1. Connection to Fate

A close connection between Freyr and fate can certainly be seen in a number of Icelandic accounts, something which is in keeping with the image presented of the Vanir in the Eddic poetry, as has been discussed in Chapter 4.3. of this thesis. The association is particularly explicit in the account of Ingimundr gamli given in Landnámabók and Vatnsdæla saga. In the Landnáma account (preserved in Sturlubók ch. 179 and Hauksbók ch. 145), fate is personified as Heiðr the völva who is called on by Ingimundr before he leaves Norway for Iceland:

Heiðr völva spáði þeim òllum at byggja á því landi, er þá var ófundit vestr í haf, en Ingimundr kvezk við því skyldu gera. Völvan sagði hann þat eigi mundu mega ok sagði hann þat til jartegna, at þá mundi horfinn hlutr ór þússi hans ok mundi þá finnask, er hann greiði fyrir òndvegissúlum sínum á landinu [...] sendi hann Finna þvo í hamfórum til Íslands, eptir hlut sínum. Þat var Freyr ok gørr af silfri.206

It is possible to interpret this passage as an example of the type of fate Neumann calls "werde-schicksalsdenken" (as discussed in Chapter 4.3.) and connects specifically with the Vanir and the forces of nature. Similar ideas may also lie behind the story of Helgi enn magri. Although, as has been mentioned earlier, Landnámabók identifies Helgi as a worshipper of

206 Landnámabók, 216-8.
both Jesus and Þórr ("var blandinn mjök í trú"), he lets a boar and a sow guide him to his eventual settlement:

Hann lendi við Galtahamar; þar skaut hann svínnum tveimr á land, gelti þeim, er Sölvi hét, ok gyltu. Þau fundusk þremr vetrum síðar í Sölvaldal ok váru þá saman sjau tígr svína.

Turville-Petre makes a strong case for this being connected to the Freyr’s cult as the pig in Norse mythology is most commonly connected to Freyr. In this context, it is also worth remarking that the idea of a boar and a sow could suggest some kind of symbolic sexual union, similar to that of Freyr and Gerðr in Skírnismál (see Chapter 4.1.). Indeed, the idea of ritual marriage for the purpose of bringing fruitfulness to the earth has long been associated with the cult of the Vanir, from Tacitus’ description of Nerðus and her priest to the medieval Christian account in Ógmundar þáttir dyttss ok Gunnars helmings of Freyr and his "kona" in the wagon at Uppsala. In the case of Helgi enn magri, therefore, it can be argued that the boar and sow could be seen as manifestations of Freyr, similar to Ingimundr gamli’s statue.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that the role of the god as a symbol of fate in these cases does not seem to have been unique to the cult of Freyr, or even to the Vanir in Iceland. For it can be argued that in this passage, Ingimundr’s statue plays the same role in the narrative as Þórólfr Mostrarskegg’s high-seat pillars (ǫndvegissúlur) with the image of Þórr carved on them which he throws overboard on his way to Iceland to let Þórr show him where to settle ("skaut hann fyrir borð ǫndvegissúlum sínum; þar var skorinn á Þórr. Hann mælti svá fyrir, at Þórr skyldi þar á land koma, sem hann vildi, at Þórólfr byggði").

Similarly, it is said that Kráku-Hreiðarr finds a place to land by calling upon Þórr.211

207 Landnámabók, 250.
208 Landnámabók, 251.
209 Turville Petre, Cult of Freyr in the Evening of Paganism, 330; For more information on the image of the boar in Norse religion, see: Kovárová, The Swine in Old Nordic Religion and Worldview, 209-212. In Gylfaginning, for example, Freyr is described as riding to Baldr’s funeral with the boar called Gullinbursti or Slíðrugtanni: Snorri Sturluson, Gylfaginning, 47.
210 Landnámabók, 124.
211 Landnámabók, 232.
There is little doubt that the cults of Freyr and Þórr at this point were very much separate, and so it appears that the idea of the god as a guardian of fate was rather a common religious motif in this society which was not tied exclusively to any one cult.

5.2. Sacrifice and Reciprocity

Another area in which Freyr appears in a role as a rather generic power for certain individuals or families is that of sacrifice and reciprocity. In the most detailed account we have of the relationship described as existing between Freyr and a devotee, in Víga-Glúms saga, Freyr is presented as an all-purpose patron. In Chapter 9 of the saga, this description appears of Þorkell’s sacrifice of an ox to the god:

> Ok áðr Þorkell fóru á brott frá Þverá, þá gekk hann til hofs Freys ok leiddi þagat uxa gamlan ok mælti svá: "Freyr," sagði hann, "er lengi hefir fulltrúi minn verit ok margar gjafar at mér þegit ok vel launat, nú gef ek þér uxa þenna til þess, at Glúmr fari eigi ónauðgari af Þverárlandi en ek fer nú. Ok láttu sjá nokkurar jartegnir, hvártú þiggr eða eigi." En uxanum brá svá við, at hann kvað Við ok fell niðr dauðr, ok þótti Þorkatli vel hafa við látit ok var nú hughœgra, er honum þótti sem þegit myndi heitit.212

It is worth noting that as he sacrifices the ox in Freyr’s temple, Þorkell declares what he wants in return, namely, for Glúmr to be driven from Þverá.213 A very similar passage appears in Brandkrossa þáttr (which set in Eastern Iceland and a younger relation of Droplaugarsona saga)214 in which Oddr declares, "Þessa veizlu gef ek alla Frey, at hann láti eigi þann með minna harmi brott fara af Oddsstöðum, er í minn stað kemr, en ek fer nú."215 Although this passage is widely considered to be based on Víga-Glúms saga and thus often dismissed by scholars,216 Jón Hnfill Ádalsteinsson has proposed that this method of calling on Freyr could have happened in more than one place in Iceland, and that Brandkrossa þáttr could be the result of various similar memories of Heathen-Age practice being preserved in

212 Víga-Glúms saga, 34.
215 Brandkrossa þáttr, 186.
216 See, for example, Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn siður á Íslandi, 41.
oral tradition.\textsuperscript{217}

In the case of Þorkell, the saga suggests that the sacrifice was sufficient to gain Freyr’s favour. It goes on to show how Glúmr dreams in Chapter 26 that Freyr ignores the appeals of Glúmr’s dead kinsmen, replying that Þorkell’s gift of an ox has turned him against Glúmr:

\texttt{En áðr Glúmr riði heiman, dreymði hann, at margir menn væri komnir þar til Þverár at hitta Frey, ok þóttisk hann sjá mart manna á eyrunum við ána, en Freyr sat á stóli. Hann þóttisk spyrja, hverir þar væri komnir. Þeir svara: „Þetta eru frændr þínir framlíðnir, ok biðjum vér nú Frey, at þú sér eigi á brotf förðr af Þverárdandi, ok tjóar ekki, ok svarar Freyr stutt ok reiðuliga ok minnisk nú á uxaðjǫf Þorkels ins háva.“
Hann vaknaði, ok lézk Glúmr verr vera við Frey alla tíma síðan.\textsuperscript{218}

This, as well as Glúmr’s overall bad fortune shown in the latter part of the story, can be seen as a remark underlining the effectiveness of the sacrifice according to Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson.\textsuperscript{219}

\textit{Gísla saga}, likely written in the mid 13th century,\textsuperscript{220} contains another example of Freyr’s favour being courted by means of sacrifice. In Chapter 15, we read how Þorgrímr Freysgoði organised a gathering at the beginning of winter at which sacrifices would be made to Freyr.\textsuperscript{221} Þorgrímr is a particularly interesting character as, Turville-Petre has pointed out, not least because he appears to have come from a Þórr-worshipping family and community, and therefore may have chosen his religion himself. Turville-Petre argues that this could also be an indication that Freyr’s cult was introduced to the West Fjords later than

\textsuperscript{217} Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, \textit{Kristnitakan á Íslandi}, 41.

\textsuperscript{218} \textit{Víga-Glúms saga}, 87-88.

\textsuperscript{219} Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, \textit{Kristnitakan á Íslandi}, 38.

\textsuperscript{220} Björn Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, "Formáli", xl. Note, however that the verses quoted in the saga are older.

\textsuperscript{221} \textit{Gísla saga Súrssonar}, 50. Note the parallels to the dísir, who were also sacrificed to at "vetrnóttum" (see Chapter 4.2.)
that of Þórr. \(^{222}\) In Chapter 16, Þorgrímr is murdered,\(^ {223}\) but we are shown that in death his earlier devotion to Freyr is rewarded. In Chapter 18, it says:

Varð ok sá hlutr einn, er nýnæmum þótti gegna, at aldri festi snæ útan ok sunnan á haugi Þorgríms ok eigi fraus; ok gátu menn þess til, at hann myndi Frey svá ávarðr fyrir blótin, at hann myndi eigi vilja, at frøri á milli þeira.\(^ {224}\)

Similar to the example from \textit{Víga-Glúms saga}, this passage shows a belief that devotion to Freyr demonstrated through sacrifice was rewarded by the god, who actively watched over land. Here, it is apparent that the society which composed \textit{Gísla saga} would have been aware of associations between Freyr and burial mounds (as mentioned in Chapter 4.1., he is associated with mounds in \textit{Ynglinga saga}, and in the \textit{Flateyjarbók} story of Ólafs saga \textit{Tryggvasonar}, and this can be linked to his status as a fertility god). It is also appropriate, as Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson and Turville-Petre have pointed out, that a god of fecundity and growth would reward his worshipper in this way.\(^ {225}\) The motif of the land which is watched over by Freyr can also be found in \textit{Víga-Glúms saga}, in the form of the field \textit{Vitazgjafi}:

En þau gœði fylgðu mest Þverárlandi, þat var akr, er kallaðr var Vitazgjafi, því at hann varð aldregi ófrær, en honum hafði svá skipt verit með landinu, at sitt sumar hþfðu hvárir.\(^ {226}\)

Turville-Petre, alongside many others, consider \textit{Vitazgjafi} to be a sacred field dedicated to Freyr, largely due to its position by Freyr's \textit{hof}. One of Glúmr's crimes, therefore, could be the pollution of the sacred field. Turville-Petre notes that it is from this point on that Glúmr

\(^{222}\) Turville-Petre, \textit{The Cult of Freyr in the Evening of Paganism}, 329.

\(^{223}\) \textit{Gísla saga Súrssofar}, 54.

\(^{224}\) \textit{Gísla saga Súrssofar}, 57.

\(^{225}\) Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, \textit{Kristnitakan á Íslandi}, 38;

\(^{226}\) \textit{Víga-Glúms saga}, 22. The name \textit{vitazgjafi} is most likely Norwegian in origin, as Turville-Petre notes that it appears in \textit{Ketils saga hœngs}, referring to a fjord in Hálogaland which teemed with fish. In this context, Turville-Petre counts two further Norwegian placenames possibly related to the concept of the ever-giving natural resource, Vitazgjoð and Vítdalsgeff: see Turville-Petre, "General Notes", 61-62.
is at odds with Freyr.\footnote{Turville-Petre, \textit{Cult of Freyr in the Evening of Paganism}, 330-331.}

Both examples nonetheless also indicate that the power (or favour) of Freyr is limited. Freyr could not, or did not, stop Þorgrímr from being murdered. Nor could he persecute Glúmr until he lost the protective items given to him by his grandfather Vigfúss in Norway. In the case of \textit{Víga-Glúms} saga, Ólafur Briem argues that a struggle between two opposing spiritual forces seems to be taking place: on the one side are the \textit{fylgjur} of Glúmr’s maternal family (who appear in the dream) while on the other there is Freyr.\footnote{Ólafur Briem, \textit{Heiðinn siður á Íslandi}, 40.}

In these accounts of methods used to invoke Freyr’s power, there is very little information which is indicative of a distinct Vanir cult. Turville-Petre attributes this to the age of the sources, writing that in Christian-era oral and literary tradition it seems that Freyr had lost his original qualities and was remembered primarily as a patron and family friend.\footnote{Turville Petre, \textit{Cult of Freyr in the Evening of Paganism}, 327.}

This is certainly the case in the two above examples, as well as in the language used in \textit{Hrafnkels saga} ("Hann gaf Frey, vin sínum, þann hest hálfan").\footnote{Hrafnkel’s saga Freysgoða, 100.} The sacred horse is particularly indicative of a Scandinavian Vanir cult, and this motif may even have its roots in much older Germanic traditions.\footnote{Jón Hnefill Áðalsteinsson interprets the decisive "hnegg" of Freyfaxi, which draws attention to Einarr's crime of riding him and thus starts the feud between Einarr and Hrafnkell, to mean that Freyfaxi’s snort was taken by Hrafnkell as a message from Freyr, in the same manner that Germanic priests took signals from their horses in Tacitus' account of Germanic priests. Like Freyfaxi, the horses in Tacitus' account were also not meant to be worked, as they were kept purely for religious use ("the priest and the king, or the chief of the state, yoke them to a sacred chariot and walk beside them, taking note of their neighs and snorts"). See: Jón Hnefill Áðalsteinsson, \textit{Kristnitakan á Íslandi}, 40; \textit{Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða}, 104; Tacitus, \textit{Germania}, 109-110.}

The view of Freyr as a personal or family patron could, however, still be a product of the Heathen Age, and it is possible that individual worshippers in Iceland would have considered Freyr to be a personal advocate rather than a fertility god with determinate functions. Freyr and Njörðr’s generosity is also mentioned, for instance, in stanza 17 of Egill Skallagrimsson’s \textit{Arinbjarnarkviða} (Þat alls heri/ at undri gefsk,/ hvé urþjóð/ auði gnœgir,/ en...}
Grjótbjörn/ of göddan hefr/ Freyr ok Njörðr/ at féar afli). Nonetheless, certain elements of the rituals described in Viga-Glúms saga and Gísla saga bear some elements of a distinct cult with links to animals and the disir. One notes both the importance of sacred land, animals (particularly horses) and timing ("at vetrnóttum").

5.3. Priestesses and Fertility

It has been suggested that female priestesses may have played a significant role in Freyr’s cult. Although no women take the title of Freysgyðja in Landnámabók or the sagas, five are referred to as gyðja or hofgyðja. Of these, two are closely connected to men who are identified as worshippers of Freyr. One, Þuríðr hofgyðja, is the half-sister of Þórðr Freysgoði and therefore a member of the family referred to in Landnámabók as the Freysgoði. Magnus Olsen, Ólafur Briem and Hermann Pálsson have all drawn the conclusion that Þuríðr hofgyðja was most likely a worshipper of Freyr. Similarly, Þuríðr gyðja of Vatnsdœla saga can be connected to Freyr’s cult as she lived in the area where Ingimundr enn gamli found his statue or medallion of Freyr and was married to his son Þorreinn who is named as a goði and lived at Hof. It is also worth noting that according to Landnámabók, one of their sons was called Ingólfur.

The three other women who are connected with the gyðja title include Steinvör of Vopnfirðinga saga ("kona hét Steinvör ok var hofgyðja og varðveitti hófuðhöfði"), Þórlaug hofgyðja and Friðgerðr who is called gyðja in one verse. Ólafur Briem notes that

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232 Egill Skallagrímsson, Arinbjarnarkviða.
233 Magnus Olsen first drew attention to this and it has more recently been studied by Terry Gunnell. Olsen, Farms and Fanes of Ancient Norway, 288; Gunnell, "Blótgyðjur, Mimi, Incest and Wagons" (forthcoming).
234 Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn siður á Íslandi, 52.
235 Landnámabók, 321.
237 Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn siður á Íslandi, 52.
238 Landnámabók, 223.
239 Vopnfirðinga saga, 35.
240 Landnámabók, 79.
Friðgerðr lived at Hvammur in Dalir, which is close to a place called Hofakur. Ólafur concludes that this could be an indication of Freyr’s cult in the area. Similarly, Gunnell notes that Steinvör of Vopnfirðinga saga would have lived in North-Eastern Iceland, near areas where there is saga and place name evidence for Freyr worship. In all of these three cases, however, there is no strong evidence to suggest that the women’s titles were specifically connected to Freyr worship. Nonetheless, it has been pointed out that women have not generally been connected with the organised worship of gods other than Freyr.

The existence of gyðjur in Iceland who are connected to the cult of Freyr has led to speculation about their possible roles and functions within what many assume was a fertility cult. The role of "Freys kona" in Ógmundar þáttr dýtts (mentioned in Chapter 4.4.) in relation to these women has been a subject of debate. As the evidence from place names, personal names and Landnámabók indicates, Freyr worshippers in Iceland were in a minority, even for the short time that Iceland was a heathen country. Sources on rites and rituals in Iceland are limited, and it is for this reason that it is difficult to know whether the scene described in Ógmundar þáttr dýtts would have any relevance to Freyr worshippers in Iceland. Magnus Olsen has nonetheless gone as far as to argue that the Freysgoði in the sagas could have played the role of the god in marrying a woman "initiated into the mysteries of Freyr worship." Whether this would have been the case in Iceland is unclear, especially as Freyr worship seems to have been performed by a limited number of people who were often closely related, such as the Freysgyðlingar of Eastern Iceland.

Barði Guðmundsson has made an interesting argument based on place names in Breiðafjörður for possible fertility worship connected to Old Norse religious rites. He focuses

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241 Kristni saga, 16. Friðgerðr is said to have been at a hof performing blót ("Fridgerdur var medan i hofino oc blotadi") and is then called gyðja in a verse ("þa kreppi (m) Gud gydiu"). Here a 1773 version of the saga is used, which has since become accessible on the internet.
242 Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn síður á Íslandi, 53.
243 Gunnell, "Blótyðjur, Mimi, Incest and Wagons" (forthcoming).
244 Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn síður á Íslandi, 52; Hermann Pálsson, Hrafnkels saga og Freysgyðlingar, 26.
245 Ólafur Briem, Heiðinn síður á Íslandi, 53; Olsen, Farms and Fanes of Ancient Norway, 291.
246 Olsen, Farms and Fanes of Ancient Norway, 291.
on the name Saurlífisgjá in Heiðnarey which is close to Blótsteinn and Blótvammur. Barði’s argument is, however, not supported by place names or saga evidence from the area. To my mind, these place names could be a product of later Christian folklore.

With all this considered, it is difficult to draw a solid conclusion on the extent to which fertility rituals would have been a part of day-to-day Freyr worship, if at all, as it is often difficult to make a distinction between Heathen-Age motifs and Christian speculation. However, the descriptions given in the Family Sagas and Landnámabók (as well as the Kristni saga account of Friðgerðr) of gyðjur appear to connect these women to the cult of the Vanir more than that of Þórr or Óðinn through family ties and their geographical proximity to explicit accounts of Freyr worship. As has been discussed in Chapter 4.4., there is evidence in literary sources for associations between the Vanir and ritual activity, and so it is perhaps not far-fetched to speculate that a gyðja such as Friðgerðr who performs blót at the hof may have been described by the story-teller with traditions of Vanir worship in mind.

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249 In connection with this, it is worth noting that the adjective “heiðinn” is often connected with trolls in Icelandic folklore. For example, in the story “vígð Drangey”, it is said that after the bishop decided not to consecrate the rocks “lét biskup vættirnar þá halda því er eftir var óvigt og er það kallað Heiðna bjargið”: see Jón Árnason, Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri, 3, 217. Another Heiðnabjarg, inhabited by trolls, is recorded in Látrabjarg: see Jón Árnason, Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri, 3, 219. Places called Heiðnabergh are also explained by connections to trolls and álfar in Jón Árnason, Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri, 1, 138. Saurlífisgjá and the Blót- placenames could therefore be part of a Christian-era association with immorality.
6.0. Origins of Freyr Worship in Iceland

The above evidence indicates that the cult of Freyr in Iceland had a strong basis in the Vanir traditions of mainland Scandinavia, which had developed from much older Germanic traditions connected to the cult of Nerthus. In this final chapter, an attempt will be made to find out where in Scandinavia the traditions detailed in Icelandic sources had their roots.

6.1. Western Norway: Sogn

The most clear case of a line of Freyr worshippers available in Icelandic genealogical records is that of the Freysgýðlingar of the East Fjords, who are only ever referred to in the plural. As has been discussed in Chapter 3.1. of this thesis, the only 'Freyr-' place names in Iceland are to be found in this area, and it is also in the East Fjords that Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða and Brandkrossa þáttr are set. In Landnámabók, the origins of this family are traced back to Sogn in Norway:

Ásbjörn hét maðr, son Heyjangrs-Bjarnar hersis or Sogni; hann var son Helga Helgasonar, Bjarnarsonar bunu. Ásbjörn fór til Íslands ok dó í hafi, en þorgerðr, kona hans, ok synir þeira kómu út ok námu allt Ingolfsfelli ok Guðlaugr, son þeira Ásbjarnar, eptir hana; frá honum eru Sandfellingar komnir. Annar son þeira var Þorgils, er Hnappfellingar eru frá komnir. Priði var Þórðr Freysgoða, er mart manna er frá komit.250

Terry Gunnell has noted in connection with this that there are a number of place names in the Sognefjord area derived from the word 'Freyr'.251 Considering this, it is worth noting that Chapter 69 of Sturlubók also mentions a Freyviðr Álfsson of Voss ("Vors") in Western Norway. As has been noted in Chapter 4, the Vanir are linked elsewhere with the álfar.252 Freyviðr’s descendents, however, mostly have 'Þór-’ names (Þörviður, Þórðr and

250 Landnámabók, 320.
251 Gunnell, "Blótyðjur, Mimi, Incest and Wagons" (forthcoming).
252 Another possible link Vanir names and ‘Álf-’ names can be found in the case of Íngjaldr Álfarinson who settled in Western Iceland: see Landnámabók, 112. It is, however, not possible to know where Íngjaldr came from.
Þormóðr).\(^{253}\) It is therefore very difficult to tell just from his name whether he would have been connected to a cult of Freyr, and even then whether this connection would have come from his family or elsewhere.

### 6.2. Western Norway: Trondheim

Another suggestion of links to Western Norway is found in the account of Hrafn \textit{hinn heimski}, who named his daughter Freygerðr is said in \textit{Landnámabók} (almost identical accounts exist in both \textit{Hauksbók} and \textit{Sturlubók}) to have come from Trondheim. A genealogy is given:

Hrafn enn heimski hét maðr, son Valgarðs Vémundarsonar orðlokars, Þórólfssonar váganefs, Hrœreks-sonar slöngvandbauga, Haraldssonar hilditannar Danakonungs. Hann fór ór Þrándheimi til Íslands ok nam land milli Kaldaklofsár ok Lambafellsár; hann bjó at Rauðafelli enu eystra ok var et mesta göfugmenni. Hans börn váru þau Jörundr goði ok Helgi bláfauksr ok Freygerðr.\(^{254}\)

It is worth noting that Turville Petre considers Trondheim to have been somewhat of a centre of a Freyr cult.\(^{255}\) In support he makes reference to the saga of Ólafr Tryggvason preserved in \textit{Flateyjarbók}, in which two wooden men are placed in a grave with Freyr in Uppsala to join him in death. The mound is then raided and the two men taken, one wooden man being kept in Sweden and worshipped, while the other sent to Trondheim. It is also said that some in the area who claimed to be Christians continued to sacrifice to Freyr and refused to destroy his image.\(^{256}\)

### 6.3. Sweden

Other links are to be seen in the account of Ingimundr \textit{enn gamli}, who was guided to Iceland by a medallion or statue of Freyr, and is said in \textit{Landnámabók} to have roots in both Norway

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\(^{253}\) \textit{Landnámabók}, 98.

\(^{254}\) \textit{Landnámabók}, 340. This passage is taken from \textit{Sturlubók} but the names are all the same as in the \textit{Hauksbók} version.


\(^{256}\) \textit{Flateyjarbók} I, 448-449.
and Sweden. Through his mother Þordís he is apparently descended from Ingimundr jarl of Gautland, while through his father’s family he is from Raumsdal in Western Norway, with earlier roots in Northern Norway. As the account says:


With regard to Ingimundr’s North Norwegian roots it is interesting to remember that it is said in *Landnámabók* that he sent two shape-shifting Finns ("Finna tvo í hamfǫrum") to find the lost silver Freyr. 258 In this case, the term 'Finnar' could apply to non-Germanic Scandinavians from Northern Norway. 259

From the point of view of Freyr worship, however, it is likely that this may have been stronger on Ingimundr’s mother’s side, especially as he takes his Ing-name from his maternal grandfather. As has been mentioned in Chapter 3.2., Ingimundr jarl is one of four Swedish ancestors named in *Landnámabók* who have 'Ing-' names, and appear to largely be from an aristocratic background. Turville Petre writes that its origin in Gautland in Southern Sweden would have meant that Ingimundr’s maternal family would have been close to "the cradle of the Freyr cult" in Uppsala. 260

257 *Landnámabók*, 216.
258 *Landnámabók*, 218.
259 Hermann Pálsson, Úr landnorðri, 107.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate that the worship of Freyr in settlement-era Iceland had roots in a much older Germanic cult. It has been argued in Chapter 4 that the Vanir cult of Viking-Age Scandinavia had its own functions, motifs and rituals which were distinct from those of the Æsir, although lines were often blurred. These motifs, which can be found in West Norse mythology as well as in accounts of Heathen-Age practice across Scandinavia, appear in fragments in medieval accounts of settlement-era worship in Iceland. These can be seen in the importance of sacred land and animals in Freyr’s cult in Iceland, the most explicit examples being the field Vitazgjafi and Þorgrimr Freysgoði’s burial mound, and the sacred horse Freyfaxi. It is also possible to speculate from saga evidence and genealogical records that women may have played a more active role in Freyr’s cult in Iceland than they would have in that of an Æsir god. This could, however, be a result of the importance of ritual in Freyr’s cult, and it should be noted that only men carry the title of Freysgoði. As Gunnell has remarked, there is an interesting absence of Þórs- or Óðinsgoðar in sources on Old Norse religion.

Although the traditions of Vanir worship are distinctly Scandinavian, and may have roots in the worship of Nerthus as described by Tacitus in the 1st century AD, they do not appear to be confined to a particular group in Iceland. As has been discussed in Chapter 5.1., Helgi enn magri, a settler of Norse-Gaelic origin and worshipper of Jesus and Þórr, demonstrates behaviour which could suggest influence from the cult of the Vanir. Similarly, Þorgrimr Freysgoði of Gísla saga appears to have changed cult and adopted religious behaviour which distinguished him from the others in his community. This is, to a large extent, unsurprising. In the relatively short time that Iceland had a Heathen majority, there was a degree of mixing in all areas of Icelandic cultural life, both within the West Nordic traditions and with ideas and cultures from elsewhere. In this respect, the limited information we have on Freyr’s cult in Iceland suggests that it was very much a product of its own era, which was one of fluidity and variation.
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**Online Sources**


## Appendix 1: Origins of Settlers in *Landnámabók* With 'Ing'- Names

<table>
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<th>Name</th>
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<td>Ingibjörg Árnad.</td>
<td>Related through her father to Munda-Steinarr jarl in England</td>
<td>Maternal grandfather settled in Höðadalr, W. Iceland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ingibjörg Hávarsd.</td>
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<td>Descendents settled between Grjóta and Deildará, Kolbeinsdalr and Hjaltadalr, N. Iceland</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Descended from a priest, most likely</td>
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<td>Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ingiríðr Kjartansd.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ancestors settled in Langadalr, N. Iceland</td>
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<td>V. little info</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ingjaldr enn hvíti</td>
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<td>Note that his father has an Álf-name</td>
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<td>Ingjaldr Helgason Ólafssonar</td>
<td>Roots in Sweden? “Óleifr enn hvíti hét herkonungr; hann var son Ingjalds konungs Helgasonar, Ólafssonar, Guðrøðarsonar, Hálldánarsonar hvítbeins Uplendingakonungs”</td>
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<td>Ingólfr Ærnason</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ingudr Porsteinsd.</td>
<td>Lived in W. Iceland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ingunn wife of Ketill hæng</td>
<td>Most likely of mixed Norse/Gaelic heritage: &quot;Helgi fœddisk upp á Írlandi. Hann fékk Pórunnar hymnú dóttur Ketils flatnefs ör Suðreyjum ok Yngvildar, dóttur Ketils veðrs af Hringariki&quot;</td>
<td>Helgi magri settled in Eyjafjørð, N. Iceland</td>
<td>250-251; 284</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ingunn Helgadóttir ens magra</td>
<td>Daughter of Helgi enn magri (note that Helgi believed in Christ and Þórr yet let a boar and sow guide him to land)</td>
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<td>Ingunn Þórólfsd.</td>
<td>Her husband was from the Mývatn area</td>
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</table>