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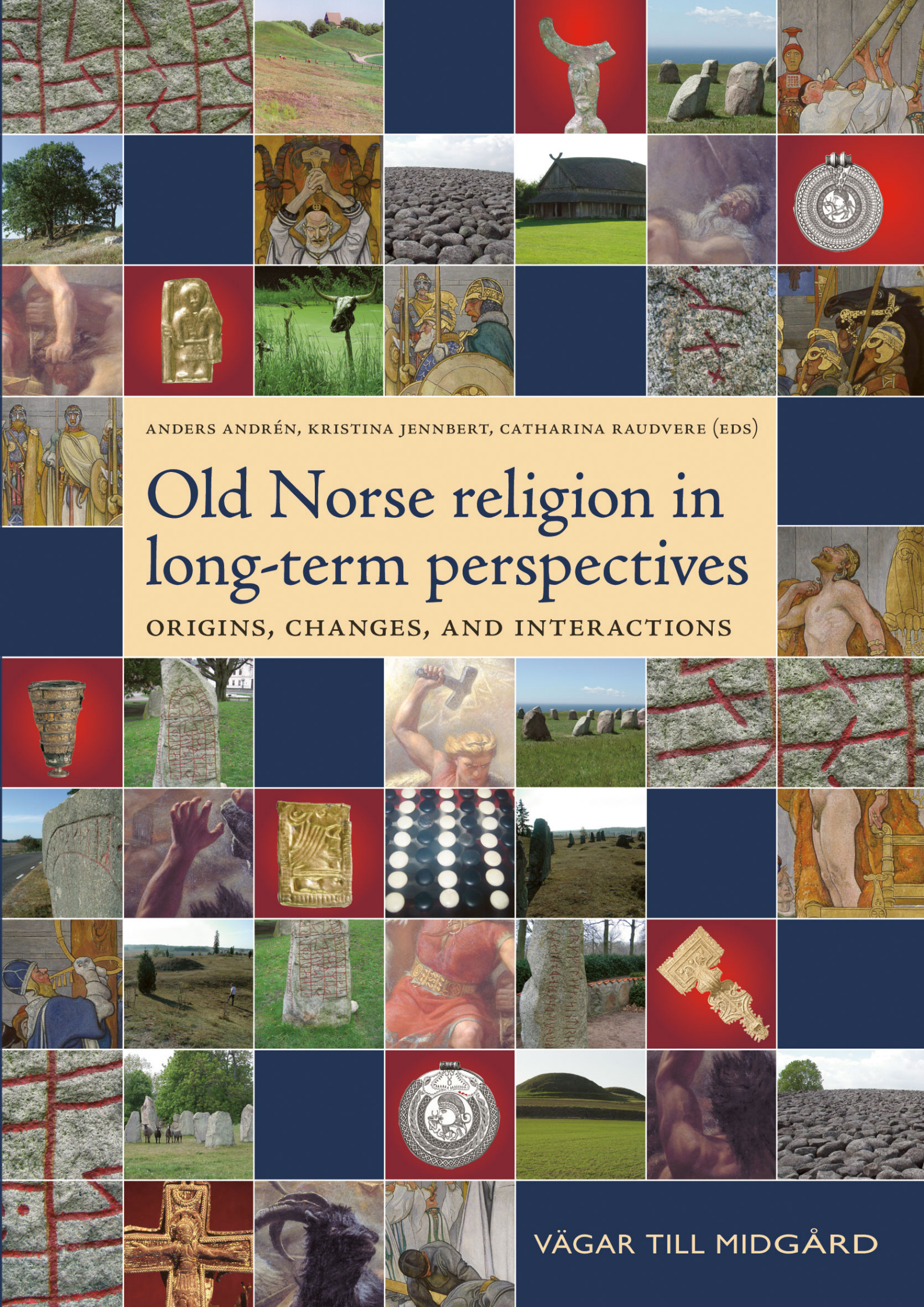

ANDERS ANDRÉN, KRISTINA JENNBERT, CATHARINA RAUDVERE (EDS)

Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives

ORIGINS, CHANGES, AND INTERACTIONS

VÄGAR TILL MIDGÅRD

Old Norse religion

Some problems and prospects

Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere

One of the most remarkable texts from prehistoric Scandinavia stands in a field near the church of Rök in Östergötland. The unique text is a very long runic inscription carved on five sides of a granite block almost four metres high. The Rök Stone, as this famous inscription is called, was written at the start of the ninth century, and it includes allusions to heroic poems and myths that are unknown today. The text contains alliterations, kennings, and a stanza in the *fornyrðislag* metre, and is partly written in secret runes. It ends with a piece of solemn, repetitive, artistic prose. The difficult text has been quoted and interpreted since the 1750s, and no other Scandinavia rune-stone has been studied in so many works. According to the interpretation that is generally accepted today, the inscription runs as follows:

> These runes stand in memory of Væmoð, but Varin wrote them (*lit*. painted), the father, for the dead (*lit*. death-marked) son.
> We tell a folk-memory (*or*: Let us tell, to youth), which the two spoils were that were twelve times taken as spoils, both together from different men.
> That we tell as the second, who nine ages (generations) ago lost his life (*or*: came to life, *or*: came to the shore) with the Hreið-goths and died with them for his crime (*or*: because of his pride, *or*: and he still makes verdicts, *or*: and he still rules over the battle).
>
> > Theoderic rules (*or*: rode), the bold ruler of sea-warriors, over the shores of Hreiðmar (the shore of the Hreið-Sea). Now (he) sits equipped on his horse (*lit.* on his goth, *or*: on his gothic horse), with the shield fastened, the prince of the Mærings.
>
> That we tell as the twelfth, where the horse of the Valkyrie (*lit*. the horse of Gunn) sees food on the battlefield, where twenty kings are lying.
> That we tell as the thirteenth, which twenty kings sat in Zealand (*or*: in Sillende) during four winters under four names, sons of four brothers.
> Five Valkis (*i.e.* Five by the name of Valki), sons of Raðulf, five Hreiðulfs, sons of Rugulf, five Haisls, sons of Haruð, five Gunnmunds (*or*: Kynmunds), sons of Björn.
> Now I tell the memories completely(?). Somebody … (?) (*or*: Now youth I foster … ? May somebody tell …?) … grew up (*or*: may grow up) from this (?)
> We tell a folk-memory, which among the Ingeldings was compensated (*or*: avenged) through a wife's sacrifice (*or*: through the sacrifice of a wife).
> We tell a folk-memory, for whom a kinsman was born, for (which) young warrior.
> Vilin it is (*or*: It is the Will, *or*: Do you want that?).
> He knew how to beat a giant (with his knuckles).
> Use (*or*: Enjoyment, *or*: Milk) (?)
> We tell a folk-memory (*or*: to youth): be bold (*or*: Thor).
> Sibbi, the guardian of the temple, begot a child at the age of ninety.

The Rök Stone and its ambiguous text can serve as a highly illustrative example of all the problems and paradoxes that encounter anyone who wants to study pre-Christian Norse religion. The text was written in an age that is conventionally regarded as "pagan", but the references to pre-Christian religion are vague and indirect. A supernatural being like a giant is crushed by a champion. According to one reading of the inscription, this hero is called Vilin, which arouses associations with the brother or double of the god Odin, Vili. But according to other interpretations this is not a name, so this divine association is lost. The name Thor is mentioned, but it is uncertain whether it is a man or the thunder god that is meant. Otherwise the text refers to tales of heroes and more or less historical persons. Despite the pre-Christian content of the Rök Stone, the main figure in the inscription, "Thiaurik the bold", that is to say, the Ostrogothic king Theoderic the Great (*c*. 455–526), was an Arian Christian. The cryptic formulation suggesting that he is still, after nine generations, sitting armed on his Gothic horse, has been convincingly interpreted as a reference to the equestrian statue of Theoderic the Great that originally stood in Ravenna. This statue was moved from Ravenna to Aachen in 801, causing a great commotion, after Charlemagne had been crowned emperor by the Pope in Rome.

It is surely no chance that the Ostrogothic king Theoderic the Great plays a central part on this rune-stone in Östergötland. Someone wanted to claim his own genealogy. The poem about Theoderic probably alluded to the Ostrogoths' myth of their origin, according to which they originated from the Scandinavian peninsula. The Östergötland magnate Varin may even have believed himself and his family to be distant relatives of the famous Ostrogothic hero-king. The Rök Stone thus contains both political claims based on history and indirect references to the great political power of the day, the Christian Carolingian empire.

If the references to pre-Christian religion are vague and contradictory, then the expressions of the cultural and mental world of the day are all the more explicit. The text was written by a man, for a man, and with narratives about men. These narratives are about war, booty, battlefields, an armed and

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mounted king, and kings with warlike names alluding to power, glory, combat, and fierce beasts of prey. Characteristically, the only glimpse of women is a reference to "a wife's sacrifice" as punishment for a man's acts.

The Rök Stone is a memorial raised to a young man. But the significance of memory and the allusions to history are underlined throughout the text by the recurrent questions about stories from the distant past. The solemn style and the poetic stanza in the middle of the inscription also express how narratives in oral cultures were remembered through formalized speech. Someone has suggested that the Varin who carved the stone was a *þulr*, a speaker or "sayer of saws" who preserved memories by reciting special poems with a mythological content. The text in itself is an expression of the very special knowledge of reading and writing, which was limited to the aristocracy of the time. The power of the written word has been further underlined in the text in that parts of the inscription are carved in secret runes, which can only be read through a special cipher placed on the top of the tall stone.

Unfortunately, the original location of the Rök Stone is unknown. The first time the stone is recorded in writing it was walled into the church at Rök. We thus do not know whether the Rök Stone, like later rune-stones, stood in a cemetery, at an assembly site, beside a road, at a village boundary, on in a farmyard. The only certain thing is that the large stone with the long and remarkable inscription was noticed, since it gave the place its name: Rök comes from the word *rauk*, meaning "stone". The Rök Stone thus provokes discussions of central concepts in the study of Norse religion, as well as fundamental questions about text and materiality.

Some central concepts

Phenomena in the distant past must of necessity be studied from the point of view of the present day and with the aid of present-day language. The crucial question is therefore which terms are most suitable in modern-day translations and interpretations of a past reality. The concept of pre-Christian Norse religion in itself causes problems, since the term religion was introduced to the Scandinavian languages with Christianization, and only acquired its modern meaning through studies in the history of religion during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The word religion goes back to Latin *religio*, meaning "obligation, conscience, reverence worship of god(s)", and is etymologically connected to the verb *religare*, "reconnect, bind". Although this etymology is disputed, the interpretation has been that the essence of religion is about how humans relate to a transcendent sphere. The consequence has been that studies of one's own and other people's religion have focused on the intellectual content of religion as put forward by institutional representatives, while everyday, ritual, and habitual behaviours have been more neglected.

The Norse sources – to the extent that a need was felt to use a specific term at all for the old religion – use expressions like *forn siðr* "old custom" or *heiðinn siðr* "heathen custom". The change of religion was called *siðaskipti*, "change of custom". The old days were thus denoted not only by their beliefs but just as much by the actions and behaviours that people had performed: religious rites, judicial acts, behaviour to mark ownership and belonging. An expression like "the old custom" has far-reaching connotations: the traditional, regular practice, but also with reference to knowledge about the past. The past stands as a guarantee for honourable behaviour. Just like many aspects of the material culture, a deliberate link back to history is palpable in a linguistic expression like this. The presence of the past becomes concrete, and one can detect simultaneity in the interaction between past and present. The conventional scholarly use of the term religion is therefore not really applicable, but the word is nevertheless needed in its everyday modern sense to mark the approximate boundaries of the research field.

At the centre of many studies of pre-Christian Scandinavian is the Norse mythology, with its gods and its cosmic events. The word mythology derives from the Greek *mythos*, "the spoken word", which at an early stage acquired the secondary meaning of something that is not really true, a story or fictitious narrative. This distinguishes it from the other designation for the spoken word, *logos*, which acquired the opposite meaning of rational knowledge. The word mythology may therefore seem like a contradiction in terms, and it often has negative and condescending connotations.

Mythology is never used by people about their own religious narratives; instead the term refers to systematic knowledge about other people's untrue stories. The word mythology has thus been used ever since the Middle Ages, explicitly or implicitly, as a contrast to correct religion, as a fundamentally disparaging term. We may note that the word is rarely or never used in accounts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, whose dogma and doxa are emphasized instead.

The concept of myth can nevertheless be useful as a designation for narratives about the past. Myth therefore contains a historical pre-understanding of the value of things from the past. The world of gods presented by Snorri Sturluson in his *Edda* is a monument to the past, but it is never superior to Christianity. In the *Roads to Midgard* project, mythology in the conventional sense has not been studied closely. This is not because we have undervalued the function of the narratives in religious life; it rather expresses an ambition to get away from the analyses of pre-Christian Norse religion which have placed the narratives at the centre.

One aspect of mythology is cosmology, which in the mythical narratives is the geography of the universe, from what is very near to the furthest limits of creation. The figures acting in cosmologies are gods, beings, the dead, humans, and sometimes also pure abstractions. Cosmology is not the criterion for religion, no more than the occurrence of a cosmology necessarily means that the purpose of an account is exclusively religious. There may be reason to consider a body of evidence that is to be studied and ask at what point it has been systematized: in a scholar's argumentation, in a compiler like Snorri, or in the local tradition as it was handed down.

Representations of the world-view and understandings of the world can take other forms than systematized accounts, but then they are not as accessible to research. In the case of Norse cosmology, the literary background is essential for understanding the totality brought together by Snorri, with classifying units and their mutual relations. Yet we still face a problem. The Eddic poems that present a cosmology were compiled on the basis of an editor's interest in the poetic

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form, but they nevertheless give a hint as to how cosmological elements are used in the poetry. We can only speculate about the circumstances that dictated which contextual and metrical versions have come down to us or what variations on the theme might have looked like. If the ambition is to proceed from the system to the context, the search for cosmology and world-view must therefore be extended beyond the world and the geography created in the texts.

The project has been geared in large measure towards ritual, as a way to broaden and supplement the conventional studies of pre-Christian Norse religion, from mythological structure to religious practice. But even the concept of ritual is difficult to handle, as is particularly evident from the intense debates on ritual in the last decade. Whereas ritual was formerly regarded mostly as the staging of myth, it is perceived today as a separate social category distinct from myth. Ritual can be a represented act and thus express myths, but it does not need to be this. Not all rituals are religious in the sense that they refer to a religious discourse. Ritual acts can very well be interpreted on the basis of other types of societal definitions: legal, political, or aesthetic. It is thus not the individual practitioner's intention that defines the act, but the contexts that place it in a specific discourse.

Based on an open definition, there is a risk of getting stuck within the boundaries of the convention and regarding only certain acts (for which we have names in the texts) as ritual. An analytical advantage is that the discussion does not stop at the question of the type of the act but leads on to questions about power and ideology: Who has access to social arenas in which to perform certain acts? Such discussions require a knowledge of and interest in the context, with parameters such as gender, class, and hierarchy.

The interdisciplinary work has also meant that the concept of material culture, and its relation to religion, myth, cosmology, and ritual, has been discussed intensively. In previous archaeology, material culture was viewed as passive traces of technology, economy, and social conditions, while religious traditions were a kind of residual category for everything that could not be explained. Since the contextual turn in the 1980s and 1990s, the outlook on materiality has changed in several fundamental ways. Objects, buildings, places, and entire landscapes are regarded as active elements in the constantly ongoing negotiations and renegotiations taking place between people. Material culture affects people's lives, it can be ascribed meaning, and it can represent complex ideas. As in many other human sciences, interpretation has come into focus in archaeology.

The changed view of material culture means that artefacts can play a different, more active part in the study of pre-Christian Norse religion. But the relationship between the Icelandic texts and the objects is still complicated. The links between the poems and the artefacts are indirect, and they should therefore be viewed chiefly as being analogies for each other. The distance in time and place between thirteenth-century Iceland and Iron Age Scandinavia means that the texts never contain descriptions of the actual contexts that can be studied archaeologically. Instead it is always a question of comparing similar structures with each other, for example, descriptions of a hall with the remains that can be unearthed by an excavation.

The indirect relationship also has constructive causes, since the common denominator for the written word and materiality is oral tradition. As many scholars have stressed, oral tradition is both changeable and rich in variation. An extant text is therefore just one possible variant of a narrative. And since pictures of the same narrative can render other versions, the relationship between artefact and text is only indirect.

The use of material culture in the study of pre-Christian Norse religion thus has its weaknesses and its strengths. The changed view of ritual means that it can be difficult to ascertain from material traces of ritualized acts whether the rituals were connected to a religious discourse or not. The variation in the oral tradition also means that the identification of different motifs and figures can never be any more than provisional. At the same time, the active role of materiality in all oral culture means that artefacts can be a truly primary source for narratives, conceptions, and patterns of action in the Norse world. Pictures of narratives could be used as mnemonic devices for composing new variants of the narratives. Cosmological perspectives are sometimes merely hinted at in mythical or heroic narratives, while the view of the world could be depicted in a highly systematic way in material culture, for example in settlement, buildings, and artefacts. Recurrent formalized acts at one and the same place may even show concretely how certain patterns of action were maintained for generations, in that the place and the acts were part of the collective memory. There is thus great potential to find new perspectives on pre-Christian Norse religion by using material culture, although the limitations of the objects must receive critical attention and scrutiny.

Some perspectives

Since the project is based on individually formulated subprojects, these inevitably emphasize different contexts and perspectives. Discussions of concepts were held within the project to arrive at a common denominator, or a shared platform summing up our new perspective on the research field. These perspectives can be specified as follows.

• *From mythological structure to ritual history*

A great deal of research on pre-Christian Norse religion concerns the Norse myths and their internal structure. There are several attempts to place the myths in their contemporary social context. With our work on the project, however, we want to go one step further and create a ritual history, which should be viewed as a complement to the studies of myth. In addition, we want to investigate this ritual history over a very long time, unlike the often short temporal perspectives in many of the mythological analyses. Through these changes in perspective we hope to reach a new understanding both of pre-Christian Norse religion and of the individual myths.

• *From one to several traditions*

By switching the focus from myth to rite it has become highly obvious that pre-Christian Norse religion is not a uniform or stable category. Instead there were profound chronological, regional, and social differences in pre-Christian religious practice in Scandinavia. The archaeological traces of rites are in fact so different in time and place that one can seri-

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ously question the term "Norse paganism". Instead a picture emerges above all of regional rites. Social differences in rites can likewise be detected, since certain rituals, and also sacral place-names, seem to be connected to a small but politically important aristocracy, with contacts all over Scandinavia and continental Europe.

• *Traditions without a common origin*

Apart from the regional and social differences there is also a complex "multitemporality" in what is often called "Norse paganism". The elements that are attested in the late pre-Christian religion differ greatly in age and origin. A symbol like the Thor's hammer is not evidenced before the ninth century, when it should probably be viewed as a conscious reaction to the Christian cross. In contrast, the mythological motif of the sun being drawn by a horse has a much longer history, since it is attested by archaeological finds and images as far back as the fourteenth century BC. Similarly, every ritual element and every mythological motif seems to have its own history and its own origin. In cases where it is possible to trace a non-Nordic origin we see influences and contacts in many different directions. Pre-Christian Norse religion can thus no longer be regarded as an archaic expression of an "original tradition" on the periphery of Europe.

• *From deconstruction to hybridization*

The results of the project mean that a concept like "Norse paganism" can in a way be deconstructed. But we do not want solely to break down the concept; through our ritual history we attempt to build up a new image of religious practice over a very long time in Scandinavia. This ritual history can be described as a continuous "hybridization", in which elements and motifs from outside are constantly incorporated in traditions, which are thereby successively altered. This means that even elements with a long history have changed in meaning, depending on the different contexts in which they have functioned. It seems, moreover, that the hybridization was not constant; it was particularly noticeable in certain periods, such as the Early Bronze Age, the Roman Iron Age, and the Early Viking Age.

• *Ongoing hybridization*

"Norse paganism" is often perceived as ending with the Christianization of Scandinavia, but we believe instead that we can see ritual practice with "pre-Christian" features, and the history of the reception of pre-Christian Norse religion, as cases of ongoing hybridization. Through new contexts and new perspectives, the interpretation of pre-Christian rites and myths has gradually changed from Christianization until the present day.

Back to Rök

The Rök Stone and its obscure text thus raises many of the questions and problems that concern studies of pre-Christian Norse religion. How should concepts such as religion, culture, and mentality be perceived and related to each other? What was the significance of the long-term cultural encounters between pre-Christian Scandinavian regions and Christian continental kingdoms? Who had the power over memory, myth, and history? Who had the knowledge of writing, poetry, and formalized speech? How should we perceive the relationship between the text and the stone? Why was the materiality of the stone so important that it gave the place its name? What role did material culture play, and how should its relation to text be perceived? There are no set answers to these questions, and we have not solved the problems in any definitive way. But by formulating them we hope that we have created a platform for further interdisciplinary research.

The English translation and interpretation of the inscription on the Rök stone are taken from: Lars Lönnroth 1977 The Riddles of the Rök stone. A structural approach. *Arkiv for nordisk filologi* 92:1-57.

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