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Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives

ORIGINS, CHANGES, AND INTERACTIONS

VÄGAR TILL MIDGÅRD

Old Norse religion
in long-term perspectives
Origins, changes, and interactions

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The heroized dead

People, animals, and materiality in Scandinavian death rituals, AD 200–1000

Kristina Jennbert

Introduction

As an archaeologist, my interpretation of Old Norse religion is broadly formulated on the basis of the archaeological evidence, and in the Midgard Project my focus has been especially on people's relationship with animals. Thus, in this article the role of animals will be outlined in terms of lifestyle metaphors, social identities, and cosmological agents in connection with pre-Christian death rituals. The ways of burying people have varied in the course of history, and the archaeological evidence shows that the death rituals have a long history and can be traced far back in time. A recurrent theme, however, is the ritualization of animals and material culture during the pre-Christian era.

Graves are one of the best-known archaeological sources, and generations of archaeologists have used them in chronological and spatial analysis, as well as in analysis of wealth, social status, and gender. However, in this paper the focus on Scandinavian death rituals is drawn from theories of ritual practice in addition to theories of memory production and materiality (e.g. Connerton 1989; Bell 1997; Modée 2005). The *Annales* School inspires me as well to reflect on a long-term materialized remembrance and to consider the social and political reasons behind the variations in the handling of dead bodies during the time span (Braudel 1980; Ariès 1983).

In general, death rituals are traditions changing in pace with the mental norms that are important for the reproduction of society, norms which bind individuals together as a consequence of social fellowship. In pre-Christian death rituals the animals and objects involved, as well as the building of graves, formulated a social identity on behalf the dead. Therefore, the death rituals created the social world, and they activated cosmological ideas and relations with higher powers.

An intriguing problem in the interpretation of Scandinavian death rituals AD 200–1000 is the correlation between the archaeological evidence and the Old Norse written sources, and our modern ideas of death and afterlife. Why did the dead attract such great attention in the death rituals? Why were large monuments built, valuable animals killed, and properties of considerable value placed into the earth? Are the material expressions related to the afterlife, and the cosmos, or do they also represent other ideas?

The graves

During the first millennium AD a great variety of death rituals and some extraordinarily well-equipped Scandinavian Iron Age burials confront our interpretations of pre-Christian

mentality and religion with the intricate social and political comings and goings in the course of events in Europe. The staging of the dead appears to be extremely important. The archaeological evidence articulates varied but also common practices relating to certain recurrent attributes in the graves. People used animals and objects in the inner grave constructions and they built monumental graves, and the burial custom embraces variations on a theme indicating similar norms and values in the long term. Around AD 200 a set of ideas were implemented into death rituals that continued with regional and local expressions during the first millennium and finally changed radically in connection with the official Christianization. During the tenth century, elements in the death rituals dating back to AD 200 were still being performed. Was there a Viking remembrance of how persons should be treated after death?

Finds of bones suggest that people in certain contexts discarded dead humans and animals in a similar way. Dogs and horses were buried in special graves, which closely resembled those of humans. In the third century it became more common to deposit large body parts or complete bodies of a domesticated animal in human graves. One example is the cemetery of Skovgårde in Zealand, Denmark, where whole pigs and sheep were placed in the richly equipped graves. One of the earliest horse graves has also been found in this cemetery (Ethelberg 2000). During the same period well-equipped graves were created in different parts of Scandinavia. For example, in the Late Roman Iron Age a woman at Tuna in Badelunda in central Sweden was buried in a chamber rich in gold and metal objects from different places across Europe (Nylén and Schönbäck 1994:34; Fernstål 2004). Other examples are the Simris graves and the Gårdlösa graves in Scania, Sweden (Stjernquist 1955, 1993), and Himlingøje in Zealand, Denmark (Hansen 1995).

More exclusive graves and perhaps more complicated death rituals are known in the Migration Period and the Vendel Period. Especially in the eastern and central part of Sweden the boat graves from Vendel, Valsgärde, and Tuna in Badelunda show elaborate death rituals with lots of animals and objects involved. Often one to five horses, one to four dogs, and one or more specimen of either cattle, sheep, or pig were placed in the grave together with weapons, armour, jewellery, household equipment, and other exotic objects (e.g. Arwidsson 1942; Lamm and Nordström 1983; Nylén and Schönbäck 1994). It is also common to find fowls and birds of prey in these graves, as in the Vallentuna burial, around 600 AD (Sten and Vretemark 1988; Sjösvärd 1989).



Figure 1. The reconstructed Ladby barrow, Funen, Denmark. Photo: Karin Wihlborg 2004.



Figure 2. The Ladby ship. Photo: Karin Wihlborg 2004.

The ship grave at Ladby in Fyn (figure 1) is an example of a grave from the first part of the tenth century. In a lavishly furnished ship, no less than 11 horses and three or four dogs had been sacrificed in the stern of the boat (Thorvildsen 1957; Sørensen 2001). The Ladby ship was a long, narrow warship (figure 2). The grave gifts included weapons, tableware, riding equipment, textiles, and a board game among other things. No human body was left but a few burnt bones. The Ladby burial relates to other Scandinavian ship-graves and chamber graves, for example the boat-chamber grave in Hedeby (Müller-Wille 1976; Wamers 1995), the Gokstad and the Oseberg graves in Norway (Nicolaysen 1882; Ingstad 1995), but also to the Birka graves in eastern central Sweden (Arbman 1940, 1943; Gräslund 1981).

To sum up, the regional variations in death rituals included a great amount of material wealth. Animals, objects, and imposing monuments relating to gender and social strata began to be used in death rituals during the third century. At the end of the sixth century the death rituals became more dramatic in their use of animals and objects. Similar death rituals continued to be performed until the Viking Age.

Important Viking practices included earlier traits from the past centuries' death rituals. The use of animals and certain objects, for example board games, drinking horns, combs, brooches, and weapons, were recurrent phenomena going back to the Roman period. The same *longue durée* is displayed by the building of monumental barrows and the erecting of different stone-settings. The composing of animals and things were a theme in the death rituals during several centuries. The dead person was made visible beyond the earth in monumental graves and in the death rituals when depositing slaughtered valuable animals and expensive objects from abroad and nearby.

Lifestyle metaphors

The burial custom could be characterized as a grave language, understood as a kind of montage, and significant for the *persona* of the dead, but also an activator of norms and values, memories, and traditions, networking and regeneration, as well as religion and mentality in everyday life (Jennbert 1988). The grave is a kind of montage of lifestyle attributes, and a ritualization of the dead within the scenery of nearby farms and villages.

The kind of grave language taken from the above-mentioned examples of very richly equipped graves represents Scandinavian death rituals, AD 200–1000. Humans, animals, and the material remains, and the staging of the dead, are remnants from the ritual circulating around the dead person. In the following I will discuss the evidence and how the materiality in the graves could be a kind of an active remembrance in order to maintain power relations and networking strategies. The following connotations could be suggested:

- *War and violence*: horses, ships, weapons, shields, helmets
- *Hunting*: birds of prey, dogs, dog harness
- *Negotiation and communication*: domesticated animals, vessels, cups, glassware, board games, drinking horns, musical instruments
- *Personal attraction*: animal art, iconography, combs, dress pins, ornaments, fibulae, brooches, pearls, textiles
- *Working experiences*: textile production, metalwork, special tools
- *Wealth*: domesticated animals, heavily expressed materiality, and monumental graves

Presumably, in the Scandinavian Iron Age lifestyles and shared values were expressed in the death rituals. As in life, the staging of the dead person and the *persona* came to be visible in the ritual and in the ritualization of the dead, the animals and objects. The wealth is supposed to be provided by the relatives and the kindred of the dead person. Certainly, the generosity and affluence of wealth was related to power and prestige, and the death ritual heroized the dead person. Yet the building of monuments ritualized the landscape, the monuments became places. Thus, the graves represented a remembrance of earlier generations with their manifestation of wealth and materiality. The Ladby ship burial, the Valentin burial, and the Tuna ship burial were surely related to the contemporary leadership.

The graves are installations of wealth and materiality, and richly equipped burials have a large package of attributes for several lifestyles. These rich graves probably represent a grave language in its whole complexity, and they hint at interpretations of lifestyle metaphors even of persons in graves with not as much wealth and materiality.

Social identity and cosmology

The Scandinavian death rituals centred around certain norms and values expressed in wealth and materiality, apparent in various degrees for different social strata or kindreds in the society. Of course the ritual practice is a social practice and thereby related to world-view and ideological frameworks. Power relations and the political situations are interwoven with cosmology. The ritualization of people and animals in the death rituals, along with the animal art style on the artefacts, is a part of such cosmological and ideological settings. The relations between people and animals, and the death rituals also have their historical background. It seems that people positioned themselves in their surroundings with a kind of mentality that goes back to at least the third century AD.

In general, the archaeological interpretation of pre-Christian burials in terms of religion are mainly interpreted with the inspiration of written documents, and the idea of afterlife in different physical localities depending how the person died (Simek 1993:57f). The question is whether it is possible to use Old Norse texts as analogies in a retrospective way, and how archaeologists could do so, in order to interpret historical realities in pre-Christian Scandinavia. The sagas were certainly written down much later under the influence of Christianity, and in specific literary genres. The pre-Christian death rituals were stagings of materialized lifestyle metaphors and they triggered power relations with connotations to the past. It is possible that they could also actually correspond to the ideas of different physical death spheres, as in the sagas. They were metaphorical, and important for honouring dead persons. They could be understood as material parallels to skaldic poetry, and the objects in the graves could have a mythological background (Andrén 1993). Thus, the pre-Christian death rituals were incorporated in the contemporary world and had ideological issues, but were also related to a pre-Christian cosmology, not least in the use of animals, and in people's relation to nature.

Animals

A result of my animal studies in the Midgard Project is that people's relations to animals and their various roles took many different expressions in the pre-Christian era. Of course, in certain contexts animals had practical functions, but in others they also had symbolic values. Animals were significant for humans in many different ways. Domesticated animals, wild beasts, and fabulous creatures were a part of different spheres of human life and were used in a variety of ways. We therefore find animals in most archaeological contexts. Domesticated animals are found above all as skeletal remains on farms and in graves, while wild animals and fantasy animals are chiefly depicted on artefacts, picture-stones, and rune-stones. Rituals involving animals are attested from most of the pre-Christian period, indeed, all the way back to the Stone Age.

The material traces signal attitudes to animals which are both similar to and different from today's. They therefore provide interesting perspectives on pre-Christian rituals and ideas, and not least on how people valued and related to animals. Horses, sheep, goats, cattle, pigs, dogs, cats, hens, and birds of prey are animals that often occur in graves from

the first millennium AD. This suggests that there was general prosperity and that humans and animals were very close at this time. Before this, in the Early Bronze Age, the dead were wrapped in simple cow skins, as we find in oak-coffin graves. In later periods people instead used skins of bear and lynx as shrouds. The question is whether the choice of these animals was a confirmation of the strong personality of the deceased or his/her hunting skills.

Personal names in the Viking Age and Early Middle Ages reveal people's attitudes to animals. Wild animals were common in the naming of persons, with bear, wolf, eagle, and serpent dominating heavily, while fox, wild boar, beaver, raven, hawk, falcon, and sparrow were less common. Among the domesticated animals, horse, cock, and goose occur occasionally as part of personal names (Janzen 1947). For some reason, men had animal species in their names much more often than women. Perhaps animal qualities like speed, strength, courage, or cunning were supposed to be transferred to the bearer of the name and could therefore be associated with the self-image of the family. The names could also be linked to good or evil forces, or to honour, power, and integrity. Personal names are therefore part of the merger of culture and nature that is found in Norse mythology as well as in iconography on objects found in graves.

Rituals and transformations of animals and blends of human and animal in pictorial art link the archaeological evidence discovered in graves with the Icelandic narratives and the art of poetry itself. The material expressions also give a background to interpretations of personal names, attendant spirits (*fylgjur*) in animal form, and shape-changing. Animal *fylgjur* in Icelandic literature are associated with male characteristics. Among the attendant spirits of the leading men, tame animals are represented by ox, goat, and boar. Those from untamed nature were fox, wolf, deer, bear, polar bear, swan, eagle, falcon, leopard, lion, and serpent. Imaginary beings such as giants, dragons, and fabulous birds could also protect men in leading positions. The animal *fylgjur* of the more anonymous men included cattle, pig, wolf, hawk, and other birds. An interesting aspect is that horses are not associated with animals as attendant spirits. Persons with animal names and animal *fylgjur* marked transformations between human and animal. Certain people also had the ability to change their shape temporarily (Mundal 1974; Raudvere 1993).

Domesticated animals from farm contexts and wild animals from the Norse fauna contrast with the more exotic animals. Polar bear, lion, and leopard testify to far-reaching contacts since these animals did not occur naturally in Scandinavia. There is thus no agreement between the animal species in the fauna of *fylgjur* and the species found in the archaeological record. Perhaps the transformed bodies and interwoven animal and humans can be compared with the shape changes of which we hear in mythological tales and sagas? These tell how mortals and gods, above all Odin and Loki, could change their appearance. They could act outside their own bodies, for example, swimming or flying, concealing themselves, or deceiving others. They could also play other parts by transforming themselves into animals (Raudvere 1993).

Animals and zoomorphic images in the archaeological sources provide a background to the myths involving animals.

It is clear that animals play a significant part in Norse mythology. Odin's horse, Thor's he-goats, and Freyja's cats are examples of central animal figures in the lives of the gods. The background, however, gives a much more varied picture of the role of animals than we see in Snorri's *Edda*. The animal species in the archaeological sources which relate to ritual practice are much more numerous than what we find in the texts.

In addition, the domesticated animals seem more important and symbolic in the archaeological sources than in the *Eddas*. There are nevertheless some narratives which describe domesticated animals, for example, the tales of the animals at Alfheim, a farm that was famous for its pig breeding. Wild animals, in contrast, are stressed more in Snorri's *Edda*. The archaeological images of serpents and dragons arouse associations with the dragon Fafnir and the Midgard Serpent Nidhogg, although the texts cannot directly explain the material traces. The most prominent animal both in Snorri's *Edda* and in the archaeological record is the horse. In *Skáldskaparmál* there is a stanza describing the importance of horses for the world: "Arvak and Allsvinn draw the sun, as was written above. Hrimfaxi or Fiorsvartrnir draw the night, Skinfaxi or Glad go with the day" (Sturluson in translation by Faulkes 1995). In the archaeological sources both horse and dog often appear in connection with death rituals. Dogs, on the other hand, have a low profile in the texts, with the exception of the dog Garm, who guarded the underworld until he broke free at Ragnarok.

There is both an imbalance and a concordance between the different animals that occur in Snorri's *Edda* and the archaeological material. The prominence of special animals seems to have something to do with their relationship to leading groups both in the divine world and in pre-Christian society. The link, for example, between horses, important gods, and mortals is clear. There is an aristocratic and masculine bias in the recorded myths, and it seems as if the Norse mythology, as it was written down, served as a historical background to an equally aristocratic and learned environment in the thirteenth century when it was committed to parchment.

Animals were an important part of the human life-world, and they stand out as significant forces in the mythology in which fantasy creatures were created. Real animals and fantasy animals became mouthpieces for human characteristics and reflections of people's social position. With the aid of animals one could show who one was, and with animals one could moreover control the higher powers.

In conclusion

The animals and the material culture, as well as the grave monuments relate to a range of other practices in households, farms, and manners with property and wealth. But the death ritual also correlated to knowledge and skill in practical matters, as well as in mental abilities. Animals and material culture were actors in different rituals, serving different purposes. Domesticated animals were particularly important in rituals at houses, and farms and in wetland rituals. They were also very significant in death rituals. Wild animals and fantasy creatures were significant for identity and cultural transformations, i.e. their different iconographical representations on artefacts and rune-stones.

Animals signal ownership and power, but they also say something about people's character. One can envisage that what was then perceived as "history" also gave identity and power. The animals' historical background was thus important for the way the rituals were performed. If one had knowledge of a very distant time, of myths and cosmological origins, one could reconnect oneself and one's family to this history by performing the rituals. Pre-Christian ritual practice can therefore be said both to have religious causes and to be an expression of contemporary values. Animal symbolism hints at everyday realities close to the grass-roots level of the farm, but also an aristocracy with all its need for political and ideological signals (e.g. Hedeager 2004; Jennbert 2004).

Animals were important for prosperity in life and functioned in memory of the dead. And with their characteristics they were humanized while simultaneously being used to identify the qualities of human beings. The archaeological traces show that people and animals were recurrent motifs in an enduring cosmology. The bodily metaphors with humans and animals, and in particular the transformations between them, were a way to manifest people's thoughts, their worldview, and their ideas about the cosmos. Significantly, the term *odal* in Old Norse meant the hereditary landed estate of a kindred, a family's property inherited "from time immemorial" with burial mounds and heathen sanctuaries (Gurevich 1992:294f; Zachrisson 1994).

Despite social and political movements, there is a detectable skeleton of significant norms and values in *la longue durée* and in the slowness of everyday life. Our possibility to grasp the essence and the fully adequate expression of the lengthy death rituals during the Scandinavian Iron Age is probably from the outcome of analysis of very richly equipped graves. The large monuments with valuable animals and properties of considerable value were a part of the staging of the dead within the social and cosmological domains.

There are a number of theories and analyses concerning ritual that inform the numerous interpretations of archaeological remains. The materiality in the death rituals is evident and it suggests a material agency embedded in the death rituals, as a tool for memory production. Thus, the Viking Age death rituals seem to express the remembrance of the past as well as the expression of the identity of the dead in that age. The animals and the other objects were important for symbolizing characteristics, abilities, and social position of the dead person. Ownership of a large stock of animals could be expressed in the death ritual, when certain animals were slaughtered to accompany the dead person into the grave. Rituals in memory of the dead reflected responsibility for and protection of the survivors' farm and the continued life of the kindred. This was achieved by ritualizing the dead person's prosperity and characteristics. The burial ritual also meant that the survivors gave up wealth and valuable animals to honour the dead person and to ensure worldly power.

Therefore, the death rituals did not just have the purpose of handling rotting bodies. The death rituals activated networking and they were important for the restructuring of social positions. As such they manifested the dead and the family, the heritage and the power of the time. The material agency and its performance were used as metaphors for the dead person's abilities, attributes, and capacities. The animals and

the objects played a social and multivocal role in the memory production of the past, and the honour of the dead.

The long temporal perspective of archaeology thus gives us opportunities to distinguish how death rituals with animals and material culture underwent variation and change in the course of the Iron Age. There were clear changes in mortuary practice in the third century AD, and from that time we can detect rituals which survived throughout the Viking Age. The extremely rich and varied grave finds in Scandinavia indicate a common grave language beginning in the Roman period. Of course, regionally expressed variations signal differing political and territorial heritage during Iron Age (e.g. Hjørungdal 1991; Ramqvist 1992; Ethelberg 2000; Svanberg 2003).

The Scandinavian death rituals are expressions of agency (war, negotiations, hunting, and personal attraction), and the outcome of the investigation of depositional practices archaeologically. Thus, the death rituals cannot be interpreted as self-explanatory afterlife constructions. The wealth depended on political mobilization and a narration of a sense of belonging. As such, the death rituals acted for social identity in diasporic relations and networking, a kind of cultural hybridity as in our modern time (Anthius 2001). The power of the past and the grand narratives to glorify the past, such as Charlemagne as the Roman emperor, speaks for the power of remembrance in the long term and a heroizing of the dead.

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