Sacred Places, Sacred Persons: Religion, Death and Leadership in Roman Iron Age Scandinavia[1]

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Abstract

The primary aim of this essay is to try to better understand the ancient Germanic religious practise and it‘s organization and structure, based on archaeological evidence. In the introductory part, several approaches to the archaeology of religion, as well as certain terminological issues are discussed. Next comes a summary of various types of "sacred sites", i.e. places where religious activity took place, and discussion on possible interpretations of such places. The following part includes discussions on the often neglected connections between religion and funeral customs, domesticity, productivity, and social and political structures of the ancient Germanic society. Position of religious performers and elites and changes in society, reflected in changes in religious practice, is mentioned in the final pages.

Keywords

Archaeology of Religion, Ancient Germanic Religion, Scandinavia, Roman Iron Age, Cult, Ritual, Funeral Customs, Sacred Places, Religious Performers

Introduction

The present essay deals with ancient Germanic religion in Scandinavia in archaeological context, primarily during the Roman Iron Age. It is supposed to be a preparation and source for a comparative study for a master thesis concerning archaeological records of ancient Germanic religion during the Roman Age and Migrations Period in Middle Europe. The main topic are questions on organization and institutionalization of the practical side of religion, i.e. it‘s cult, and places associated with it. My aim is an attempt to summarily describe various archaeological records, often interpreted as sacred sites, and compare some of the applied interpretations and approaches in order to try to achieve a better understanding of the "religious situation" in ancient Germanic society. Religious specialization and leadership are matters of considerable concern as well.

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[1] Studie vznikla jako seminární práce na Institutionen för arkeologi och antik historia Uppsala universitet.

Research history

Scholars of religion in the late 19th and early 20th century often imagined that religion originated in "primitive" notions which gradually evolved into more advanced religious ideas. Ethnographic anthropological research, under the influence of the new theory of evolution, thus had a great impact on research on religion. The view of the role and development of religion has since been modified and become much more complex. For the majority of scholars of religion it became increasingly clear that religious ideas also interact to different degrees with other parts of society, though there is a variation in the perception of the role that should be ascribed to religious experience. Some believe that the real meaning of religious ideas can only be fully understood by those who nourish them, on the other hand it is equally possible to regard religion as a fundamental part of being human, without adopting any stance whatever on what religious experiences really consist of. A technical and materialistic understanding of and description of life, that increasingly dominated the Western world-view in the 19th and 20th centuries, led to the replacement of religious representatives by scientific and medical authorities. Similarly, due to the impact of processual archaeology and it's epistemology, it was rare in the second half of the twentieth century that works by Swedish archaeologists dealt with religion and beliefs. In earlier Swedish archaeology, on the other hand, there was a keen interest in studies of religion and eschatology and works from the first half of 20th century often resemble those of comparative religion. The reawakened attention seen in recent years (see References), after the emergence of post-processual streams of thought and the formation of cognitive archaeology, has had the result that interpretations of ritual, symbolism and religion have been integrated to a greater or lesser extent in virtually every new archaeological work, which in turn, unfortunately, has led to a watering down of the content. The fact that cognitive issues have once again become so popular in archaeology means that many such studies result in more or less distinct repetitions of earlier interpretations. Reasons for this are, that interest in the problem among many scholars is relatively superficial, and that the subject quite simply is trendy right now; there is also the fact that a steady flow of new publications in the field means that not even those who are especially interested have time to read them all (Kaliff 2007: 15–22).

Theoretical problems

Limitations and sources

The first and foremost limitations of this essay are time constrains (and limited extend stemming from this) and language barrier, allowing me to use only literature written in English and German. Focusing on a more narrow topic would allow me a deeper and more thorough analysis and possibly also better understanding of the studied phenomena, but since I am not that familiar with Scandinavian archaeology and since this essay is supposed to serve as a comparative material for a broader image of ancient Germanic religion, the topic here remains quite general.

The archaeological record and its interpretations are the main source of data used in this essay. Interpretation of archaeological material is often influenced by the background and approach of the interpreter (see Johnson 1999; Kaliff 2007), therefore we must be aware of the possibility that we may unwittingly try to ascribe our biases and misinterpretations to the past reality through the present record.

Written historical sources are used only sparsely here, for there are only few of them referring directly to the chosen topic. Written sources may often be inaccurate and biased by culture, ideology and time of the author. However researchers appear to be more aware of these problems when approaching written sources, than when approaching "neutral" archaeological sources (see Johnson 1999). A reinterpretation of a known written misinterpretation is at least as plausible as a possible brand new and unconscious misinterpretation of an archaeological record.

Ethnographic evidence, analogies and homologies are often used in the study of religions (see Johnson 1999; Kaliff 2007; Renfrew 1994). These are fine as long as the compared contexts have at least something in common and as long as there is the awareness that a similarity in appearance does not necessary indicate similarity in meaning. Comparisons with different cultures should broaden our horizon and allow us to look at the problem from different perspectives, not replace our own biases with those of another culture. Phenomenology in particular, trying to compare world-wide occuring concepts and ideas in a generalizing manner is at serious risk of misinterpreting local evidence by taking it out of its contexts.

Linguistic evidence, in the form of theoforic place names or name elements indicating significance, power or "holiness", has proved to be useful indicator of sacred places (see Brink 2001). Although exact dating of the time span in which the place actually had a religious significance, is problematic before an archaeological inquiry takes place, these places often show a long continuity of use for ritualized activities.

Definitions and interpretations

A sacred site (leaving the problematic definition of "sacred" itself aside) could be easily defined as a place of religious significance to a certain group of people or a place where religious practice is performed. Transferring this definition into archaeological practice and the context of past religious systems, however, is more problematic. Interpretation as a sacred site has usually been ascribed only to places of special appearance and/or setting, accompanied by unusual set of artefacts or human or animal bones, and even then, more "secular" interpretations could compete with it (for some ideas regarding Scandinavian sacred places in general see Brink 2001: 76–90). Part of this problem might be, as the archaeologist Anders Kaliff pointed out, that the same term is often used both as an operative term and an interpretation of a phenomenon (Kaliff 2007: 27). Grave is one such term, for our modern concept of grave in itself has an emotional content, and we may be unconsciously tempted to perceive the way prehistoric people viewed burial rituals (a problematic term itself) as being like our own (Kaliff 2005; Kaliff 2007: 28; see also Artelius 2005: 8–10).

Another part of the same problem is, that in our secular society, with it's modern world-view, we tend to see "sacred" and "profane" meanings and functions

of objects or places as separate, therefore a building with an obviously practical, “profane” function, such as granary or storehouse, cannot be considered “sacred” at the same time. The English archaeologist Richard Bradley has criticised the trend of separating ritual and domesticity (in the same way as sacred and profane), setting them into opposition and treating their overlaps as a problem, rather than a clue to the origin and nature of many of the rituals undertaken in prehistoric society (Bradley 2005: xiii, 28–36).

In order to better deal with such issues, I wrote down a list of several terms connected with archaeology of religion and their definitions. The following definitions are based on (but are not exact citations of) definitions provided in the Oxford English Dictionary <http://www.oed.com/>. I chose this “disciplinarily neutral” source consciously in an attempt to avoid biases stemming from the use of definitions of archaeologists and scientists of religion, which are, in addition, sometimes varied or not generally agreed upon (in science of religion especially). This may prove to be a step in the wrong direction, but I believe it may help us to deal better with the likely differences between the conceptual grasping of reality in our time and culture and in the past.

Sacred

Sacred: something esteemed especially dear or acceptable to a deity; exclusively appropriated to some person or some special purpose; set apart for or dedicated to some religious purpose, and hence entitled to veneration or religious respect; made holy by association with a god or other object of worship; secured by religious sentiment, reverence, sense of justice, or the like, against violation, infringement, or encroachment, having a religiously secured immunity from violence or attachment, not to be lightly intruded upon or handled; things consecrated or offered in sacrifice to the gods.

All these definitions more or less reflect the (supposed) original Latin meaning of something associated with the gods and therefore set aside from common mortals. There is no place to discuss whether this is truly the same meaning as the Romans understood the term or to contribute in any other way to the extensive debate over the theory and definition of the sacred. Still there are some problems that should be noted.

Firstly, there is a question whether the Germanic people of the Roman Iron Age had an equivalent concept to the Latin sacred, or whether they adopted it later through Christian missions. There probably was a concept of “holy” (*heilagr*) in the sense of “imbued with power through association with divinity”, this power could then be used instrumentally in legal sphere or stimulated by rituals (Brink 2001: 87).

Secondly, even if this “setting apart” was present in the ancient Germanic mind, it‘s identification in archaeological context is debatable (Kaliff 2001). “Sacredness” is not a physical attribute and does not have to manifest materially (although it often does); physical separation in space does not have to denote sacred nature and vice versa, as pointed out by Bradley using the example of Viereckschanzen (Bradley 2005: 19–21).

Rituals and ritualization

Ritual or rite in general: a series of actions compulsively performed under certain circumstances, the non-performance of which results in tension and anxiety; a formal procedure or act in a solemn observance; any form of repetitive behavior, which is fixed by tradition, a custom of practice of a formal kind. Religious ritual is a prescribed order of performing religious or other devotional service ceremonial acts; common to these is a conviction that what is being done on earth approximates the divine or supernaturally revealed order.

Ritual is viewed as a specialised form of behaviour which emphasises some of the concerns of daily life through a kind of performance (Bradley 2005: xiii). In the past the significance of ritual and ritualization used to be neglected by various scholars, nowadays however it seems to be clear, that ritualized behaviour is a fundamental part of human culture. Rituals, religious or not, may reflect the structure of the society that established and performed them and thus may help us (even without precise knowledge of religious beliefs, ideology or world-view behind them) in better understanding of the past (Bradley 2005: 3; Kaliff 2007: 20).

Colin Renfrew has created a list of 16 archaeological indicators of ritual, which may be helpful in recognizing traces of ritual behaviour in archaeological record (Renfrew 1994: 47–54). What is important here is, that these are *indicators,* not *criteria,* and many of them contain the word "may", that means a ritual might have taken place without leaving any of these indicators apparent in archaeological material. It should also be stated, that some of these indicators may reflect rituals, which in our contemporary world-view are not regarded (primarily) as religious in nature (honouring a guest, sealing a treaty, celebration of military, political or other achievement, banquet of a chief and his retinue, etc.), but which contained closer ties with religion in the past.

More important for Renfrew, however, is the documentation of repeated actions of symbolic nature, directed towards transcendent forces. By this, he tries to counter the prevailing attitude to ascribe ritual function only to residual material when there is no better explanation, while noticing some difficulties of distinction between ritual and activities leaving similar archaeological record (play for example). While his statement that separate setting and special distinctive manner of actions are important for detection by archaeologists is true, his claim that these activities are mostly formalized, carefully prescribed and often take place in special places should not be overemphasised (Renfrew 1994: 47–54). Ritual interpretation should not exclude "informal" or improvised activities performed at "common" places, for it seems that religious rituals have been more closely connected with "profane" daily life, than is usually believed. In societies, called "genuinely religious" by Kaliff, religion is the very explanatory model for reality and no distinction in principle is made between what we in our culture would define as a ritual or a functional fact (Kaliff 2007: 21, 28–29). Also the concept of ritual as expressing fundamental propositions about the world and strongly associated with religious belief is now overshadowed by emphasis on the formality of the procedure and the performance itself. "What matters is not to adhere to a strict set of procedures, but that they should "work"; this may override the need to believe in the message of a specific ritual, it is participation and commitment that count far more" (Bradley 2005: 33). More emphasis is also added on the practice of ritualization: a process by which

certain actions gain an added emphasis through particular kinds of performance. It should be understood more as a form of action or social strategy, rather than a specialised kind of communication (Bradley 2005: 32–35).

Sacrifice and offering

Sacrifice: primarily, the slaughter of an animal (or a living being in general) as an offering to a deity; in wider sense, the surrender to a deity, for the purpose of propitiation or homage, of some object of possession.

Offering: the presenting of something to a deity in worship or devotion; an act of sacrifice or oblation; the act of making something available; a thing given as an expression of religious homage.

These two terms have a similar meaning, the main difference is that sacrifice demands surrendering of one‘s own possession, or something valuable to the giver while offering does not, which makes it a more general term. This difference is often forgotten and sacrifice and offering are mostly used interchangeably, especially by non-English authors (see for example Larsson 2005: 115; also in Czech one term – oběť – is used for both "offering" and "sacrifice" as well as "victim", "sacrifice" being probably the closest in meaning). And here lies the problem; war-booty hoards like the ones from Illerup or Nydam could be regarded more as an offering rather than a sacrifice, but the dividing line in other situations is harder to spot; giving away an individual‘s property is "sacrifice", but is "sacrifice" giving the property of a deceased person, or something considered to belong to the whole community? Is killing of a human for religious purpose a sacrifice or an offering? This unclarity makes use of these terms and differentiating between them difficult, therefore I will in this context use only one of them – offering, because of it‘s more general nature (according to the definition above) and less emotional connotations (see also Kaliff 2007: 28).

Still there are other, more important problems concerning offerings in archaeology. Foremostly the recognition and identification of an "offering". There are some useful indicators, like intentional destruction of the offerings, deposition in an irretrievable manner or on hardly accessible places, on sites demonstrably used for religious activities etc. (on the problem of food offerings in ancestral cult, which may leave little or no archaeological record at all see Gräslund 2001). Some forms of "offerings" will be further discussed below.

Graves and funeral

Grave: a place of burial; an excavation in the earth for the reception of a corpse; the natural destination or final resting-place of everyone; anything that is, or may become, the receptacle of what is dead.

When speaking about grave, it‘s contents is what counts, i.e. the deposited remains of dead body (whole or partial), not it‘s form. Grave should be used as a descriptive term indicating the presence of human remains, regardless of their amount, condition or they way in which they were deposited (similarly, animal remains could be designated as animal grave, but without the clear distinction between "grave" and "funeral" its use in practice would probably be very confusing).

Burial: the depositing of anything under earth or water, or enclosing it in some other substance.

Funeral: the ceremonies connected with the burial (or cremation, etc.) of the body of a dead person; obsequies; a burial (or its equivalent) with the attendant observances.

These two words are often used in an interchangeable manner (see also Kaliff 2007), however, in my opinion, the term burial should be used only for the deposition (or the manner of deposition) itself; funeral or funerary rites form the "religious" or "ritual" part of the treatment of the deceased. This includes the construction of a mound, stone structure or any other adjustments to the form of the grave as well as scattering of cremated remains into air, water or a cairn, or dismembering the body into several parts which are then buried separately. Human remains that bear no traces of human interference and are buried "naturally", for example due to an accident or natural disaster, could be considered a grave without funeral. On the other hand a cenotaph is a funeral without burial, therefore not a grave. The separation of "funeral" rites from "other" or "religious" rites is to a great degree, if not completely, ungrounded; this will be further discussed below. Also, the use of grave or any other place for funeral does not exclude performance of different practices or actions on the same place.

Altars, Shrines and Temples

Altar: raised structure, on which to place or sacrifice offerings to a deity; a place consecrated to devotional observances.

Therefore a place where offerings, rites and worship took place, probably close to dwellings or contact places (shrines and temples) of deities and spiritual forces (the objects of the cult) and central in importance for cultic activity; still this does not indicate that they should be in nature different or separated from their surroundings. The restrictive description of altar as a "raised structure" or elevated surface in this definition is false, for the same function, purpose, meaning and importance may be ascribed to any object, whose form suits the needs of the specific religious practice. The use of terms "altar" and "shrine" should not be considered as misleading because of our culture associating them with Christianity (see Kaliff 2007: 118; Widholm 2006: 146; in fact the word "liturgy" Widholm uses for example on p. 56 or 145 is even more associated with Christianity), but because of their definitions, being constructed to fit in the context of institutionalised monotheism, do not fit when transferred into the context of other religions and they begin to overlap. Suddenly, a sacred tree may become an altar, a shrine or both, or something completely different and it is hard to differentiate between them. Still, as long as the meaning is roughly the same, any of these terms will have to do.

Shrine: a receptacle containing an object of religious veneration; a place where worship is offered or devotions are paid to a saint or deity.

As stated above, the distinction between altars, shrines and temples in ancient Germanic religion is unclear. In this sense the dwelling of a deity or a spirit may be also considered a shrine, therefore certain natural objects, graves, mounds, even buildings believed to be dwellings of spirits or deities may be regarded as shrines.

Temple: an edifice or place regarded primarily as the dwelling-place or "house" of a deity or deities; hence, an edifice devoted to divine worship; any place regarded as occupied by the divine presence.

This is again a very broad definition that would include in fact all ancient Germanic sacred sites, be they of "artificial" or "natural" origin; it is quite possible that in this sense, for the ancient Germanic people, the whole world would be a "temple". However the term "temple" is usually used in a restrictive meaning of an edifice, building constructed specifically for the purpose of worship or religious activity. To avoid confusion and separate "temples" from "sacred groves, sacred lakes, "sacred" granaries, shrines etc.", I will adhere to the traditional meaning of a special building constructed for religious purposes only (or first and foremostly). Since there is little evidence of any buildings that would actually fit this definition (most "graveless monuments" cannot be considered edifices or occupiable buildings, while Late Iron Age hall buildings served also for "non-religious" purposes; certain objects are often interpreted as "cult houses" and as such could possibly be considered "temples", though this is still an ongoing debate), I would personally stick to Tacitus' statement, that the Germanic people (in the Roman Iron Age) had no temples as such (Tacitus: Germania 9; see also Widholm 2006: 132–133).

Sacred places

Sacred stones and rocks

Stone embodies hardness and eternity, which makes it symbolically (as well as practically) appropriate for graves and other monuments, representing the aspect of immortality. Stone is thus often regarded as containing spiritual properties and as means of communication with the numinous.

A very common aspect of the ancestor cult in several Indo-European traditions is the phallic symbolism, where the origin of life and death were believed to be interconnected principles inherent in the stone. Greek Hermes was worshipped also as a stone phallus and Bronze and Iron Age standing stones are sometimes regarded as his Scandinavian equivalent (Ericsson 2005, in Kaliff 2007: 175–176). Phallus shaped stones seem to be more common in Norway, known as the "holy white stones", found on Early Iron Age graves in Trřndelag and Vestlandet. More common in Sweden are standing stone slabs on burial grounds; probably memorial monuments similar to runestones, but their eschatological function is unknown. Exemplary is Rögubben – a red painted stone slab near a farm called Rösten (red stone), linked by local tradition with fertility cult (Brink 2001: 90–92; Kaliff 2007: 176).

The male stone and female arable land may be seen as a form of *hieros gamos* (holy matrimony), but the stone may be connected also with the female sphere and with the cult of the dead. Fertility cult of stones, seen as power centres inhabited by gods, has been documented from different regions (and banned by Christianity). Under such stones, placed near farms, protective spirits, such as the *gårdstomte*, should live. In Iceland even today wights and elves live in special stones. On some cemeteries (Klinga in Östergötland, Ringeby, grave and enclosure at Odensala Rectory) various amounts of stone were transported and piled up to "improve" the local rock areas. Bauta stones were also transferred from one place to another and

sometimes made a part of a larger structure, probably because of their supposed power (Brink 2001: 91; Kaliff 2007: 176–177, Widholm 2006: 104–112).

According to Kaliff (2007: 121–124, 180–185) rock and stone also had a special connection to fire. Generated by stroking of stones, fire is constantly present in stone in a "frozen" form. Thus stone may have been a burnt offering in itself, or the deceased could be united with the stone through ritual splitting or incineration and take up residence in it.

Another way how to communicate with powers concealed in mountains, earth and stones, might be by penetrating the ground and carving images on the rock or through fire-drilling in cup marks (Kaliff 2007: 181–184).

Sacred mountains

Certain mountains, especially those of remarkable appearance or height, were probably believed to be "animated" in the same way as stones, trees or mounds; inhabited by ancestor spirits as "mountains of the dead". In the Eyrbyggja saga one such mountain (called *fell* in Iceland) appears: the Helgafell – "holy mountain", was named by the first settler Þórólfr Nostrarskegg, who believed that he and his kinsmen would go into the mountain when they died. Mountains of this character are often located in the vicinity of a farm (just like mounds or standing stones), also grave-fields are commonly located on mountains or ridges. Natural hills may be used as graves as well, only in areas, where there are no hills near communications, an artificial mound has to be built. A similar idea appears to be present in Sámi tradition as well and is probably of very old origin. The "holy islands" named Helgö or Helgøy might have been understood in similar context. Some mountains also functioned as *axis mundi*, the world axis connecting heaven and earth (Aspeborg 2005; Brink 2001: 99–100; Kaliff 2007: 177; Larsson 2005).

Sacred islands

Some islands, like Selaön in Södermanland, have many prehistoric theoforic settlement-names or names like Lytislunda – "grove of Lytir" (probably a term for pagan cult reader). Other islands' names contain theoforic elements themselves, such as Frösö and Norderö in lake Storsjön. The "holy" islands (Helgö, Helgøy etc.) may be understood as places, where gods were supposed to dwell or one could get into closer contact with them; in context with the cult of ancestors they could also be regarded as homes of dead relatives. Examples: Helgö (Storjungfrun) in Hälsingland, Enhälga in Uppland (former island neighbouring to thing assembly place – Öbolund, and a hamlet called GÍde – "island of gods", probably original name of the island), Helgö in Frösunda parish (originally Torsholma – island of Thor) (Brink 2001: 92–96).

Sacred waters

Bogs, lakes, springs and riverbeds are common locations of many sacral deposits, not only in Scandinavia. Throughout the Iron Age various sets of items were deposited: weapons and war booty on famous sites like Thorsbjerg, Vimose, Nydam, Kragehul, Illerup, Ejsbøl or Skedemosse; cauldron from Gundestrup or wagon from Dejbjerg. Others contained more commonplace artefacts, but were

used for very long periods like Röekillorna in Skåne or Tissø (Lake of Týr) on Zealand, with a nearby seat of Late Iron Age Danish chieftain with hall building and craftsmen‘s area; similar situation represents the "royal seat" at Gudme on Fyn, probably a regal, economic and religious centre. There are lakes "of the gods" as well, like Gussjö in Västmanland, while the river Gudĺin Norway may be interpreted as "holy river, consecrated to the gods" (Brink 2001: 96–98; Christensen 2003; Kaul 2003).

Some of these places contained human bones or more preserved human bodies, like Borremose, Tollund or Grauballe. While their interpretation as offerings or executed criminals (or both at the same time) is still under discussion, their deposition probably involved an awareness of the "supernatural" (Bradley 2005: 81–82; Glob 1971).

Underwater deposits belong to a very old tradition, dating back to Stone Age, culminating in Bronze and Iron Age and to some extend still alive today; the well known contemporary example, tossing of coins into wells and fountains, still sustained a tinge of magic in it‘s purpose – to bring luck. The connection between sheets of water and the "other" world appears in many cultures across the whole world; the origin of these ideas remains uncertain. Although it could be the simple fact, that humans and most of the land animals cannot live and breath underwater and vice versa, the matter is likely to be more complicated, for water is essential for life and growth and the contact with the other side (by offerings or otherwise) through water could just be another part of the life-death-rebirth cycle discussed further below. This connection is supported by depositions of ards and ploughs, which Bradley connects with ritual spring ploughing, or by the location of these places close to settlements. It seems there were only territorial or social reasons when selecting a lake or bog for ritual purposes and that they were often used for very long time (Christensen 2003; Kaul 2003).

Some of the deposited artefacts were only partial, unfinished goods, probably intended as offerings from the beginning, others were worn-out beyond usability (Bradley 2005: 82–85) or intentionally destroyed (mostly weapons), their fragments sometimes scattered. This might be interpreted as part of the "sending to the other side" (though the deposition itself might be enough), but it could also be connected to the idea, that total destruction of an object is needed for it to be created anew, as discussed by Kaliff (Kaliff 2007). In his work the possible use of water for burial rituals as well as it‘s significance as an element (for example in connection with rock art and ritual sites) is also discussed.

Sacred trees, groves and forests

A sacred tree may be an abode of spirits, ancestors or deities or posses beneficial qualities; as a symbol it may be embodiment of a life principle and bearer of divine power. The world tree is a common form of the *axis mundi* appearing in many traditions. The ash Yggdrasil from Norse mythology and the Saxon pillar Irminsul both refer to this concept. As the world tree is the axis mundi of the macrocosmos, where gods assembled for thing, it's microcosmic equivalent is the *vårdträd* (Norwegian *tuntre*), a tree planted in the courtyard of a farm, usually oak or other deciduous tree: ash, rowan, lime, maple or birch; some of them still exist. Some placenames containing a tree element may refer to a sacred tree, such as Eik

in Sogndal vicarige, Eig in Lund and Eig in Bjerkreim. Also some theoforic names, like Fröseke, Onsike or Hälke, denote "grove" in their second element, usually oak grove – *eke*, probably considered as sacred in early Scandinavia. Beech tree might occur in these names too as –*böke*– grove of beechtrees. A whole forest may be named after the gods, as is the case of Tiveden on borders between Västergötland and Närke, a deep forest far away from the open settled land and charged with metaphysical beliefs (Brink 2001: 98–100).

The fact that the world tree motif is present in the neighbouring Saami, as well as in other circumpolar religious traditions has been discussed in context with the Northern mind concept by Neil Price (Price 2002: 290–293). Similar comparisons, made between the cult of Horgalles, represented by wooden pillars crowned by iron nails, and the cult of Thor, represented in similar fashion, were made by Åke Hultkrantz (Hultkrantz 2001: 417).

The sacredness of trees might have been reflected in burial customs as well: oak coffins from Bronze Age barrows, wood and bark containers in later cremation graves and oak log coffins from the Iron Age may originate in similar ideas (Kaliff 2007: 125–126).

Graves and "grave structures"

As mentioned earlier, the modern archaeological conception of grave is one of the most problematic and therefore this work is more focused in this direction. Especially when the connection of "graves" and "grave structures" with ritual and domestic fertility cult comes into discussion.

For example Dag Widholm, in his *Sacred sites* (Widholm 2006), deals with possible reasons for constructing monuments of different shapes in Bronze and Iron Age Scandinavia. In his opinion circular mounds, cairns and stone settings are the mainstream form of grave structure (with long continuity), while other monuments which deviate from the circular shape – rectangular, triangular and oval stone settings and stone ships, etc. – are connected with graves of aristocracy or significant people, unusual burial customs or non-funeral function etc. Especially rectangular constructions contained some wealthy graves, often with weapons, and represented certain power (exclusive graves for the highest elite), which however was not reserved solely for funerals; they had generally religious significance and purpose (Widholm 2006: 23–86, 142). He realizes that in many of these constructions there were only very few (or none at all; see also Aspeborg 2005; Häringe Frisberg 2005) human bones, and he admits that they may have had a different primary function, than that of a place for burial of human remains, such as altars, shrines, cult buildings or simply sites where religious rituals took place; in some cases he favours this interpretation (Ekaryd, Ringeby, Disa's Ting, etc.). Still, throughout the book he mostly refers to all these constructions generally as "graves" or "grave structures", regardless of their shape or whether there really were any human remains buried inside. This seems a bit confusing to me, since it appears that the interpretation of these constructions is based on the premise that they should be regarded as graves, unless proven otherwise. This premise, however is not explicitly stated anywhere in the book, nor is there any explicit definition or criteria for "grave" or "grave structure".

> "It is not necessary to regard all constructions on a grave field as graves, even if they might contain remains of human skeletons [...]. However this is not the essential factor that needs interpretation. What needs interpretation is the ancient function of a construction which was not primarily regarded as a grave in prehistoric time, even if men and society were aware of the presence of cremated bones [...] [C]hristian churches are not primarily regarded as graves, even when they contain human remains." (Widholm 2006: 55).

The problem, as I see it, is that what *was* primarily regarded as grave in prehistoric time is not discussed here thoroughly. Is the circular shape really more important than the presence of deposited human remains? Since he uses this term also for standing stones it seems to me that he tries to denote as "graves" all stone-formed monuments that were believed to contain at least some part of the "soul" or "spirit" of the deceased ancestors. This may be a good way how to better understand the concept of funeral monuments in prehistoric societies and be aware of it's differences from contemporary view of graves, but nothing like this is stated nor discussed anywhere in the text; it also shows that new terminology or at least redefinition and consolidation of the old one may be needed in order to truly increase our knowledge of the past.

Maybe a too much reliance on the sacred/profane duality and separation might be another problem of his work (Widholm 2006: 82–83, 100, 123–127, 134, 139–142), and the claim that the need to separate the living from the dead is "universal" human trait (123) is, in my opinion, far from the truth. Of course the enclosures, kerbstones, "fences" etc. prove, that there was a certain level of separation and distinction, but all those settlement graves and traces of ritual activity in otherwise "profane" context, suggest that this separation was not that strict or universal; in fact this separation might have been based on social status or family relationships of the buried, rather than on the fact that they were dead. Also when it comes to the notion that a piece of land was consecrated for funeral purpose (125), I am more inclined towards the possibility that human remains were deposited on these places, because they already were sacred (Kaliff 2007: 80). That would explain why there are many cairns without traces of a central grave (Häringe Frisberg 2005; Widholm 2006: 55) – because there never was any. Whether graves were placed on certain sites because of it's significance or whether the graves themselves created this significance might be just another chicken and egg dilemma.

An alternative interpretation of stone settings, often identified as graves, is presented by Anders Kaliff in his work *Fire, Water, Heaven and Earth* (Kaliff 2007). Here he uses the comparison with vedic rituals and analogical practices in other Indo-European cultures as a basis for reinterpretation of various archaeological records in a broader context of common mythological and conceptual roots of the Indo-European cultures. Certain similarities between the compared data indicate, that there probably was a complex ideological system, partially shared by most Indo-European cultures and significantly different from our own contemporary world-view, employed in the performance of the most essential (ritualized) activities (including funeral), connecting them together, rather than separating. Although the attempted reconstruction of this ideological system and the measure of it's affinity to the vedic tradition is hardly provable, this approach allows more plausible interpretations regarding records of past religious activity. Personally

I believe even a far-fetched theory may be more valuable for better understanding of the past, than holding onto established stereotypes and as Kaliff stated, the lack of a conscious analogy is a bad analogy in itself (Kaliff 2007: 35, 133).

Here follows a summary of some of the ideas presented in Kaliff's work. Certain forms of stone settings show a strong resemblance to altars in some of the compared traditions (many of these originally appeared in the form of a real grave), which appear in various shapes for different purposes, mostly fire sacrifices. Because of our modern concept of grave, we failed to see it's significance for rituals (fire rituals especially) and communication with the dead and the divine through offerings. The form of the grave and funeral reflects collective imagination of what happens after death and the individual identity and position of the deceased. The current distancing of ourselves from death prevents us from being aware of possible varied functions of different "grave forms" and the view of death as a continuous process rather than sudden event. Particularly square stone settings often lack traces of burial and could be interpreted as altars; also the so-called burnt mounds were probably complex altar structures with indications of "sacrificial" activity as well as many other remarkable structures (Ekaryd, Igelstaberget, Ringeby, Skelhřj, Sneden). The presence of the ancestors cult on settlements and farms in Norway, with the grave as the most important cult site, has been previously discussed by E. Birkeli (Kaliff 2007: 83), and reflection of this cult could, until recently, be still seen in certain folk traditions. (Kaliff 2007: 73–84, 103–119, 124–125).

Evidence of bone cutting, defleshing and dismemberment on human bones (usually interpreted as anthropophagy) as well as the burial of only a part of the cremated bones in graves may be a reflection of the cosmogonical myth, where the world is created from separated body parts of the first being (human or animal). The purpose for "repeating the first cosmogonical sacrifice" might had been the need to sustain the universal order by restoring elements or encourage fertility by releasing "life energy" through destruction of the body. Other reason for this could be a need to release the soul from the body or the notion of multiple "souls" which are separated with the body, each with a different fate or function after death; similarly the remains of a distinguished person believed to posses special powers could be separated in order to distribute this power over a larger area. According to the concept of composite soul, a part of the deceased remained in this world as a "mound dweller" (*álfar*), or a guardian of a settlement, farm (*gardvor*) or other specific place (*landdísir, landvaettir*). In folklore the elves used cup marks as "*älvkvarnar*", elf-mills, where their corn (burnt bone?) was ground to fertilize the soil; the dead were in control of the (re)generative powers of earth (Aspeborg 2005; Häringe Frisberg 2005; Kaliff 2007: 187–194).

This idea is attested in later written sources (Ellis 1943: 121–150; Price 2002: 54–60) and is a sound explanation for the separated burials of various body parts. Strong links to ancestor cult and domestic fertility cult are apparent here. The destruction of the body could be intended as a "sacrifice" (offering) in itself, returning of the constituents to the divine powers and the continuous cycle of life, death and rebirth. Reburials, secondary opening of graves and "grave-robbing" may be manifestations of the same tradition and part of a ritual process of a controlled destruction of the human body. Querns and rubber stones are often found in or near graves and might have been used for grinding cremated bones into fine fragments,

a transformative activity similar to grinding grain connecting the dead to fertility cult and an idea of cyclical rebirth (regrowth); the same treatment is provided for body and harvest (apparent in Scandinavian and some neighbouring lands‘ folk traditions – simply put, cremated human corpse appears to be the best fertilizer). The rubber stones could also represent bread, historically attested grave “gift” and offering for the dead; the same would count for grave orbs (see Gräslund 2001). Human bones also appear on settlements, in pits, wells and houses, these may be regarded as offerings in the same way as stated above and as the animal bones found in similar context, or simply as graves, where the spirit of the dead (or one of it‘s parts) is supposed to dwell where the bones are deposited and protect or bring prosperity to the surrounding settlement (Apalle, Odenslunda, Hulje). “Human depositions” in wells are similar in principle to those in wetlands, lakes and rivers, which was probably a widespread tradition (Ringeby). It is a well-known fact that the number of found human remains do not correspond to the estimated total number of living individuals in the Early iron Age, therefore an untraceable destruction of the body must have been performed to some extend (Aspeborg 2005; Häringe Frisberg 2005; Kaliff 2007: 69–70, 87–98, 137–173).

The placing of graves and grave-fields (including graveless monuments) also seems to be an interesting matter (exemplary grave-fields mentioned here are: Fullerö, SnÍret, Vallby, Älby and the Forsa mound-like natural hill). As stated above, they often appear on elevated ground or take on the form of a hill themselves. Natural formations are sometimes “improved” by adding material; in folk tradition, each stone added to a cairn increases its power (or the power of its inhabitant). Other typical placing is in transitional areas, prominent promontories or peninsulas near rivers or roads, often on boundaries between districts or between (present-day) arable lands and forests, close to a nearby settlement. Sometimes it is difficult to draw a physical line between the grave-field and the settlement. This positioning close to the living or on borders, and as much visible as possible (although some of the preserved graves are quite unremarkable today), defines the grave-fields and monuments as symbolic images and landmarks with judicial function as evidence of ownership. Claiming allegiance to the dead meant rights to the land, guarded by them; the monuments were an expression of power relations and descent and might have been the target of intentional and declarative destruction with the introduction of a new order (Aspeborg 2005; Häringe Frisberg 2005; Kaliff 2007: 178–180).

Hoards and offerings

Since we can not know the actual intentions and thoughts of the past people, offering will always be a tricky interpretation (see section Sacrifice and Offering). With all the unfamiliar (for us) ideas, that seem to have been present in the ancient Germanic world-view, there is no telling how their own concept of the “offering” actually looked like and how and to what extent was it interconnected with other ideas. With the recent admittance that even “common” finds like animal bones, “waste” deposits, grave goods, even buried human bodies might have been intended as offerings, we cannot really tell, where does an offering end and something else

begins; most likely the concept itself, if it was even clearly defined, was significantly overlapping with others.

When it comes to human remains, there is really no definite dividing line; preserved bodies from bogs (Skedemosse, Elling, Windeby in Germany, etc.) are most likely to have been primarily intended as offerings, but what about all those divided, scattered or completely destroyed bodies, human bones found in layers or "waste" pits, deposited in, under or near buildings, even those buried in an "ordinary" fashion (see also section Graves and "grave structures")?

Ritual killing of animals is often followed by their consumption and in Roman Iron Age finds animal bones often appear in contexts, which, if not support, then at least do not exclude ritual killing. In my opinion even when consumption of the animal was the primary purpose of its slaughter, this was performed in a ritualized way and served the purpose of an offering as well. Bones belonging to animals not bred primarily as food source, like dogs or horses, are most likely to be connected with offerings (see Kaliff 2001: 451–454; Kaliff 2007; Larsson 2005; Sigvallius 2005).

Grave goods often went through the same process and ritual as the body with which they were deposited and are often interpreted as an offering. Whether this was aimed at the deceased, or along with him at some higher power, or whether it was an offering at all is hard to say, though the destruction through breaking or cremation indicates an attempt to send the items into a different sphere of existence (see Hedeager 1992; Kaliff 2007: 84; 167–170).

The number of hoard-finds from the Roman Iron Age is quite limited. Apart from the famous weapon deposits (for a review of hoards from Gudme, Nydam and Fallward in a military and politico-ideological context see Fischer 2005: 113–116) found in bogs and lakes (mentioned above) there are only few hoards from this period, while most of the prestigious goods are found in graves. Other forms of depositing, usually marked as "waste" or "settlement layers", are now being reconsidered as possible offerings, but the distinction may never be absolutely clear (see Hedeager 1992; Kaliff 2007).

With the transition into the Migrations Period the situation changes and hoards appear again, but the role of watery environment is weakened in favour of dry lands, often in relation with settlements and chieftains' halls. Svante Fischer classified gold hoards from Gästrikland, Södermanland and Uppland into 6 groups and considers groups 1 and 2 (Tuna, Fagernäs, Skarpan) to have "royal and religious power", group 2 is described as "collective or temple treasures" (Fischer 2005: 156–157). He claims that it is gold now, that carries meaning and importance, not specific artefacts (like the Roman imported goods did before; for his analysis of the Germanic reaction to Roman imperialism and changes in hoarding and rituals see: Fischer 2005; see also section Continuity and change; Hedeager 1992; Kaul 2003).

Settlements, fields and sacred districts

Names and terms

The separation of sacred areas from domestic environment seems to be incorrect according to current research. Fields and dwellings could have been, for the ancient

people, as “sacred” as any spectacular mound, rock or bog; these places also had their spirits – elves and landvaettir of the later textual sources. These were believed to dwell in stones, groves, caves, hills and waterfalls, but their goal was to guard the land and the fields, their well-being was essential for the prosperity of the settlement. In order to make the land more “holy”, certain rituals were performed. A textual description of an Icelandic ritual, when claiming new land for farming, includes marking the boundaries of the land with fires and shooting a burning arrow over it. By doing this the land was sanctified and became the property of the performer. Some rituals and rules were probably also involved in the cultivation of the field and to ensure good harvest particular deities might have been invoked, as is indicated by many theoforic names including the element *–akr* (arable land), frequently Thorsakir, also Odhinsakir, Frøsakir or Ullarakir. Several such place names denoted hundreds or parishes, these sites were probably important cult places for a settlement district, which may give us perspective on the organisation of cult practices for a large congregation or district, probably performed annually during the Late Iron Age in Scandinavia. It seems that Christian Church took over many of these rituals and transformed them into field processions to bless the seed and pray for good harvest (Brink 2001: 101–103).

Some district names begin with the name of a god, mostly Freyr, like Fröstolft in Uppland, which probably reflect a special position of the deity either as especially worshipped or as the district‘s protector. The situation in Onsjö hundred (Skåne) may indicate that the whole district was dedicated to Odin due to the existence of a cult place of regional importance.

As for terms denoting cultic places in particular, there are three from the pre-christian written evidence: Old Norse *vé*, *hörgr* and *hof*. *Vé* is defined as holy place, sanctuary, in poems as dwelling of gods, these were the “true” cultic places. Hof was probably a cult site and chieftain’s farm in Late Iron Age (farm, mound and sacred site at one place, see Gräslund 2001: 224). *Hörgr* was originally a rock or stone assemblage, later a structure from stone or wood – an altar. An offering to Freya at a *hörgr* was described in Hyndluljóð, where blood of the killed animal was poured on a pile of stones; burnt mounds and certain stone settings could fit this description (Apalle in Uppland; Kaliff 2007: 112–113; see also Kaliff 2001: 457–458).

Rituals and productivity

Some problems concerning rituals and domesticity were described by R. Bradley in *Ritual and domestic life in prehistoric Europe* (Bradley 2005); he uses examples and comparisons from various times and areas, but still points to something we should be aware of. Everyday activities and rituals are often hard to distinguish and our scheme of distinction of sacred and profane is often subjective and bound to the “modern” objectification of the world. We do not see the strategy with which the specific people employed ritualization, but rituals were most probably embedded in every-day activities. However, overlap between ritual and domesticity is not universal, some of the places claimed as sanctuaries were isolated and rituals conducted there involved quite different artefacts from those used in domestic sphere. This may be related to the importance of religious specialists in the politics

of the Late Iron Age and, according to Bradley, exposure to influences from the Mediterranean (Bradley 2005: 102–120, 195–203).

Food production was of primary concern to the ancient societies; it was ritualized and along with the elite, responsible for the organization and distribution, storage houses had a special position. Farming techniques themselves can be regarded as ritual systems. Ploughing, along with granaries, appears on rock art, but often in areas where cultivation would be difficult, therefore a ritual explanation in this case is possible. Plough marks under mounds, indicating intentional ploughing just prior to the construction of the mound (i.e. not from previous agricultural use), may be also interpreted as traces of ritual ploughing. On Bornholm, larger dispersed cairns, together with barrows appear on arable lands and elsewhere even clearance cairns were used for rituals. Deposits of ards, plough and sickles (mostly in Bronze Age, replaced by agricultural products in iron Age) indicate, that agricultural tools were seen also as ritual instruments (Bradley 2005: 24–26, 83–120, 163–173; Widholm 2006: 64).

A likely link between agriculture, religion and death may be seen on the example of granaries taking on form similar to tombs, probably symbolizing the cycle of death and rebirth. It is possible that "cult buildings" used in the Early Iron Age (before the ascend of hall buildings) had the appearance similar to granaries, or that actual granaries were used for this purpose. Animal and human bones found in pits, that could originally serve as grain pits, probably refer to the same concept. A settlement near Mjölby in Högby parish (RAÄ 89) is an example of a continuous ritual site in domestic environment with "ritual" pit system, stone setting and bone deposits (Bradley 2005: 3–14, 165–211; Kaliff 2001: 449–458).

Fire had a crucial role in ancient societies as a medium for transformation and communication with the divine (and sending to "the other side"). Hearth systems, at least certain geometrically placed types (Odensala Rectory, Klinga, Ringeby, Svarteborg), indicate practising of fire rituals. Seasonal bonfires ("bone fires"), dedicated to the dead as well as helping to new life, might have been one of them. Fire is necessary for metal working, which was not a purely profane activity but a carrier of ritual significance; in fact some prehistoric iron production sites are probably in need of reinterpretation as remains of cult practices. Cremated bones were found in forging context, and some cooking pits might have been used as reduction furnaces. Terje Gansum (referenced by Larsson) has been looking for evidence that bones from graves might have been transformed into bone charcoal, and the dead (animals, maybe humans) thus mixed into the iron. Combination of cremation, burnt offering and metal working at one place (Håga, Ringeby, Sandagergård in Denmark) is an expression of a belief system with structural similarities between different activities resulting in an important transformation (Bradley 2005: 23; Kaliff 2007: 70, 84, 99–106, 121–124, 164–166; Larsson 2005).

Cult houses and dwellings

The so called "cult houses", of the "Broby type" and the smaller posthole structures, often appear in context that indicates ritual use, but it is hard to ascertain whether they were used repeatedly or only once (Ullevi – "Ull's *vé*"). These were unlikely to serve as "houses" or dwellings, but as stated above, they might have been connected to food production or storage. Hall buildings of the

later periods were likely to serve also as cult houses and their lack of internal subdivision could be the most reliable way of identifying early temples. (Bradley 2005: 43–80; Kaliff 2007: 104).

Significant buildings and dwellings were likely to be perceived as having a life of their own; the deposition of human or animal remains in the house or it‘s foundations may be seen as animating the building with previously living spirit, which then protects and helps the inhabitants (*tomtar* or *nisser*). Other things (axes, querns, etc.) could be deposited with the creation and leaving of a house, often close to the hearth; abandoned buildings might be then turned into monuments, though these often show differences from buildings found in other contexts (Bradley 2005: 43–80, 175–177).

Some connections between settlements and the dead have already been discussed above, yet there is one more thought, that might be mentioned. Since the mounds, graves and stone structures were probably regarded as houses or dwellings of the dead, it may be plausible to say, that concentrations of these "objects" (or "features"), usually referred to as grave-fields or burial-grounds, were seen as something like "settlements of the dead" (literally a necropolis). But, with regard to all the indications of interaction rather than separation, these were likely to be considered as a part of the settlement as a whole, rather than an opposition to the settlement of the living.

In any case positioning of houses seems to have been interacting with positioning of graves (Bradley 2005: 61–62).

Sacred persons

The Iron Age Scandinavian society was decentralized, split into several areas ruled by local leaders from local centres (these central places may bear certain elements in their names, like *husa-*, *tuna-*, etc., S. Fischer established a list of criteria for the identification and evaluation of regional centres, where more than half need to be met in the centre of a given region to qualify as a likely seat of a runic literate social hierarchy; Fischer 2005: 190–195). These rulers had a central positions in public affairs and probably had many social duties and functions (some might be reflected in the titles the particular ruler bore), religious and cultic leadership including. In archaeological record these elites are connected with "royal" mounds, stone ships and hall buildings (since Migrations Period); all of these were used for cultic purposes as well (Sigvallius 2005; Sundqvist 2000: 59–80, 152). Their graves contain prestigious goods, often Roman imports, which signified the status and power of their owners and were essential in the establishment of the new political system as representation of a new ideology. As these became more common in Germanic daily life and ritual (these including alcoholic beverages, quite rare in earlier times when their use, along with other possible hallucinogenics, was restricted to only a small part of population), it became increasingly difficult to distinguish competence and performance by means of qualitative and quantitative measurements. As a result, one put more objects of the same kind into the aristocratic Germanic graves, and still more of these goods had to be amassed to signify social power (Fischer 2005: 75–79; Hedeager 1992: 89, 174–175).

This power and duties in public cults and performance of ceremonies were not confined to one man, but to his kinsmen as well, who formed the ruling elite. For these families or dynasties legal and genealogical issues were of significant concern and the religious office included law keeping and law enforcing functions (Sundqvist 2000: 59–195; Tacitus: Germania 11).

Thus the power of the Germanic elites combined economic productivity with ideological legitimization through rituals and symbolical distinction from other groups. Another domain of the elites, warfare, was highly ritualised as well. This ritualization was nothing new and was not confined only to the elites, but "ordinary" warriors were involved as well, as may be seen on the emergence of "wolf brotherhoods" throughout the whole Europe, and the depictions of initiative rituals for those entering such war-band or ritualised duels (Fischer 2005: 130–227; Hedeager 1992: 80–146; Sundqvist 2000: 96; West 2007: 411–504; for the use of magic in combat see Price 2002).

Women probably had a somewhat special position in religion and sorcery, and served as leaders and cultic officials as well. Strabo's notion of grey-haired Cimbri priestesses and seeresses performing human offering and later appearances of *völva* in old-Norse sources may be supplemented with archaeological evidence of rich female graves, some of them in unusual context and with indications of cultic significance (Högby), and with imported prestige goods as indicators of power (Nordin 2005; Strabo: Geographica VII, 2: 3; Sundqvist 2000: 74).

There is little evidence of an exclusively priestly class in ancient Germanic society. The ruler was the link between the people and the divinities. Written sources are often prone to distortion through interpretatio romana/christiana (in fact much of the Christian clergy came from transformed Roman nobility; Fischer 2005: 118) and the Germanic terms *gođi* (male, used by Wulfila as translation of "priest") and *gyđja* (female) point to a political leadership as well as religious. A different title, *erilaR*, appears on several runic inscriptions (notably on the spear-shaft from Kragehul). The title itself has been interpreted in various ways as magician, rune-master, earl or Heruli; in other words a powerful function with access to the divine, possibly by the means of some secret knowledge. In the archaeological record, grave finds indicating religious function are often accompanied by prestigious goods indicating elite, a distinction of the two is therefore hardly possible (Fischer 2005: 130–131; Sundqvist 2000: 72–74, 162–163; see also Price 2002: 70). In the past, there were attempts to connect these leaders with the concept of sacral kingship, but its existence in Scandinavia nowadays seems unlikely (see Sundqvist 2000).

All in all, position and function in public cult stemmed from position in society and political power. Even when it comes to the ancestors cult, the common dead appear to be more like instruments of a divine power, than it's wielders (from written sources), it is the dead elite, the kings and heroes who have a more potent influence of a different kind (Ellis 1943: 165–169).

Continuity and change

The transition from Roman Iron Age to the Migrations Period is accompanied by significant changes in higher strata of Germanic society materialized, among other things, in burial customs. Parts of the rests of the cremation pyres were now buried

in round cairns, more uniform than during the late Roman Iron Age, with grave fields now consisting of large amounts of small mounds. Cremation layers with animal bones became more common, while weapons were rarely included. These became more common in the Vendel period, which suggests an increasing need to represent men as warriors in the afterlife (Fischer 2005: 128–129; Widholm 2006: 142–143).

Late Iron Age settlements have increasing signs of remains of cult activities (guldgubbar, amulets, armlets, etc.), as opposed to earlier periods, but then mainly in chieftain environment and "central" places with hall buildings. The cult was gradually "brought indoors" and lost it's connection with graves, without which stone ships and square structures lost in importance and more uniform grave fields appeared (Kaliff 2001; Sundqvist 2000: 160; Widholm 2006: 144–145).

The way in which wealth is distributed is an important indicator of social changes, since wealth was usually channelled either into graves or into hoards, rarely into both at the same time. In the Late pre-Roman Iron Age individual families broke the continuity of Bronze Age rituals, separated themselves from the commonality and aligned themselves with gods through funerals (large barrows or rich imported grave goods as manifestation of power). During the Roman Iron Age almost all wealth comes from rich graves, while hoards are few and seem to lack any link to systematic ritual practice (although pots found in bogs probably show continuity in local food offerings); only in the latter half of this period the great weapon deposits start to appear. The situation changes in the Migrations Period, when the hoards (official offerings) come to the fore, while grave finds fade away (as seen on grave-fields like Bo Gård and Östra Bökestad; see Larsson 2005). The new elite performs offerings to the gods and ancestors, who take care of the newly established order, in the Late Iron Age these offerings, however, seem to stop. Rituals often play innovative role in establishing a new social order, but when this is fixed and stable they revert to a conservative function. The changes during the transition between Early and Later Iron Age may be reflecting separation of gods and men, institutionalization of the religion, consolidation of the elite and monopolization of power leading to the origins of a state. Signs of ritual re-use of older burial fields during Vendel Period and Viking Age may mark a social reform and the society's ritual respond for the need for re-stabilization of social and mythological order (Hedeager 1992; Kaliff 2007: 132–133; Larsson 2005, Sundqvist 2000: 67).

Continuity or revival of using monuments for rituals is often taken as evidence of the awareness of the past in prehistoric society (Aspeborg 2005; Brink 2001: 80, 104–107; Larsson 2005; Sundqvist 2000; Widholm 2006: 54, 113–114, 121), but we must take into account that their concept of time and past was probably different from ours (Widholm 2006: 136–139). Memory of important events and people connected to certain sites was surely important (Aspeborg 2005; Bradley 2005: 43–48; Sundqvist 2000) and could live in oral tradition for a long time as well as local religious customs, but I think there was an even more important concern. In my opinion, older monuments were not used for cult primarily because the predecessors of the current users did so as well, but because these monuments were *meant* to be used in this way. The original users might have been viewed just as "smart enough to worship the forces that reside there, just as we do", without

giving them any credit for building the monument (or shaping it for cultic use) in the first place; the divine powers are that which counts and it was more or less the "duty" of the first people who worshipped them, to do so properly and with a fitting monument. The "symbol" might have been crafted by human hands, but it's meaning had nothing to do with them, but with the divine powers (although the distance between the divine and the ordinary people is unclear). What I want to say is that the tradition carried by memory alone, in my opinion, only answers the question "How?" (regarding the cult), but for the answers for the questions "What?" and "Why?" a continuity in "symbolic mind" is needed. And this symbolic mind is not carried on only by memory and tradition, but the same (or similar) way of thinking must be maintained as well, which must have been quite complicated with the influx of new ideas and concepts from the Roman Empire and early Christianity. On the other hand, social changes based on intentional "memory loss" or "refusal of history" (denunciation of previous practices, change of ruling group, etc.) may be only superficial and temporary if a change in thinking does not follow in greater measure.

The eventual spreading of Christianity led to changes in view of the sacred landscape, as explained by Yi-Fu Tuan:

> "In many non-Christian cultures natural setting and nature itself were holy in different respects and selected features in the landscape were regarded as sacred and worshipped, in the Christian tradition holiness was not associated with the landscape but was invested in man-made features – shrines, altars, churches and other buildings that often dominate the landscape. [...] In the Christian view it was not emanation from the earth but ritual that consecrated a site, man not nature bore the image of God, while in pagan antiquity each facet of nature had its own guardian spirit" (Tuan 1974, quoted in Brink 2001: 83).

The ancient Scandinavian religion differed regionally and was centred on agriculture and worship of ancestors, with burial mounds as likely cult sites, it was a religion binding people to a place, which became obsolete with the development of towns, feudalism, coinage, new written language, territorialized nations etc. Gods of these religions have no power beyond the vicinity of their particular abodes, they reward and protect their own people but are harmful to strangers, they belong to a hierarchy of beings that extend from the living members of a family, then ancestors and spirits of dead heroes; these religions encourage a strong sense of past, lineage and continuity in place, ancestor worship lies at the core of practice and security is gained through continuity not through eternal and timeless values. The latter were provided by a new universal religion which cut off the chains to the earth and replaced the former tradition, while the celebration of dead family members was replaced with celebration of dead bishops and local martyrs and later prohibited completely (Brink 2001: 83–87; Gräslund 2001).

Recently the influence of Mithraism on ancient Germanic religion has been discussed, but no general consent has been achieved and the measure of importance ascribed to the role of Mithraism by different researchers varies (Fischer 2005: 99–102, 147–148; Kaliff 2004).

Concluding remarks

> "Without death, there would be no religion" (Carus 2008: 360).

> "I find some of my new works disturbing, just as I find nature as a whole disturbing. The landscape is often perceived as pastoral, pretty, beautiful – something to be enjoyed as a backdrop to your weekend before going back to the nitty-gritty of urban life. But anybody who works the land knows it‘s not like that. Nature can be harsh – difficult and brutal, as well as beautiful. You couldn‘t walk five minutes from here without coming across something that is dead or decaying." (Andy Goldsworthy)

It seems, at least according to most of the contemporary interpretations, that the ancient Germanic religion dealt primarily and foremostly with death and that what is beyond (be it afterlife, rebirth or transformation through the vegetative/ agricultural cycle) and with its close link to fertility. There might have been a concept similar to some of the laws of contemporary chemical thermodynamics, i.e. that in order to spend energy and simpler elements to create a new life, this energy and elements must first be obtained elsewhere, usually through destruction and decomposition. Whether the death and rebirth cycle was really perceived in this way is hard to say, the destruction of bodies and artefacts in funeral and ritual context, might as well be just "sent away" to another, more or less separated, sphere of existence, outside the domain of the living.

Ancestral cult, descent and family relationships were of great importance and the dead had a great deal of influence on the well-being of their living relatives, but their power varied in a reflection of their power while being still alive. Persons with a significant influence position in cult (and leadership) retained these even after death.

Shifts in ritual practice, connected with powerful people, their worship in ancestor cult and belief in "mound dwellers" and their powers may be used to connect historical persons with certain lesser deities and spiritual beings in an Euhemeristic manner. But it is unlikely that the major gods from Old Norse sources could be interpreted in the same way (as Snorri Sturluson attempted), since they appear to be connected more with the "natural" sacred places, rather than with funeral environment and; also their traits fitting into the general pattern of Indo-European pantheons indicate older origin. Origins of Indo-European gods as actual historical people far in the ancient prehistory can be neither excluded nor proved, but this is outside the scope of this work (and for the time being outside the reach of History of Religions as well).

There are also certain animistic and animatistic notions apparent in the pre-Christian Germanic religion. Some of them survived until today in folklore and local customs, like the concept of the *huldufólk* (hidden people) – including elves, trolls and other similar beings. Certain types of these beings may share common characteristics, but they may as well take many different regional forms and names (Price 2002: 57) and the same being may be described with quite different characteristics (compare Brink 2001; Ellis 1943; Kaul 2003: 20–21; Price 2002: 54–60); additionally, they do appear mostly in later written sources and it is likely that the wide range of these beings known to us today was even more extensive in

the Early Iron Age (Brink 2001: 88). Therefore we should be careful about using these names in a definitive manner when trying to define beliefs in a particular context.

Concerning the organisation of ancient Germanic religion, the evidence seems to be pointing more towards a loose belief system, than to any form of an institution organized on more than local or regional level. This loose system was probably quite variable and always adjusted to local specifics and needs. It changed with the society in which it was embedded and the religious hierarchy followed or reflected the socio-political one. Overlap and interaction, foreign to our secularized experience, are defining attributes of religion in ancient Germanic culture.

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