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Höf, höll, god(ar) and dvergar
Ritual Space in the Pagan Icelandic *Skáli*

One of the most recurring questions in the field of studies into the Old Nordic religion is that of where and how people worshipped. This applies especially to the newly settled Iceland, where *Landnámabók* and the Icelandic sagas talk of *hof*, a word still found in numerous placenames around Iceland, Norway and Sweden (see Orri Vésteinsson 2003; Magnus Olsen 1915, 10-25, and 1926, 226-256; de Vries 1957, II, 53, 116, 155, 194-195; and Olaf Olsen 1966, 89-104). It is generally accepted that the placename, both alone and in compounds like Hofstaðir and Hofvin, must have cultic significance, and should thus be placed alongside other cultic placename elements like *lundr, vé, hörgr, vangr vin* perhaps also **al* (see Magnus Olsen 1926, 226-56; Brink 1996, 260-266; Olaf Olsen 1966, 68-115; and Wilson 1992, 5-21). Unlike most of these other words, however, the *hof* is generally interpreted in Old Icelandic as meaning a building (cf. *Völuspá* st. 7: "hörgr og hof/ hátimbroðo", referring to the first buildings made by the gods; see also *Grímnismál* st.16). For this reason, backed up by both placenames and Old Norse texts and laws, most scholars up to the middle of the last century felt assured that "kulthus" of some kind must have existed at the *hof* sites. The problem was that almost all of the Viking-Age buildings found by archaeologists at these particular sites in mainland Scandinavia and Iceland turned out to be simply farmhouses (albeit sometimes large ones, as at Hofstaðir in Northern Iceland: see further Orri Vésteinsson 2003). This encouraged some scholars to argue that the remains of the old temples must be hidden beneath churches, or even that the Norwegian temples must have been transformed into stave churches (on the basis of advice like that meted out by Pope Gregory to Mellitus in 601). However, even this seemed to be unlikely, since few potential cult buildings came to light beneath those churches that were excavated.¹ A turning point came in the discussion in 1966 when Olaf Olsen carefully re-reviewed all the proposed evidence for the existence of temple buildings, and concluded that the *hof* must simply have been central farmhouses where sacrificial and other banquets took place. This idea has most recently been underlined by Orri Vésteinsson partly on the basis of his findings at Hofstaðir in northern Iceland (Orri Vésteinsson 2003), and I see no reason to dispute this main conclusion. What I would like to do here though is go a little further. The idea that these buildings were multifunctional implies that the meaning of their deily space was "transformed" in some way at certain points in time. I would thus like examine the evidence that might support such a potential transformation. To what degree were these particular *skálar* viewed as having a dual function? Were they were actually regarded in Iceland as "holy places" or "cult or cosmological centres"? My argument is based in part on the recent discussions by about the nature, role and spatial organisation of so-called "central places" during the pre-Christian early Middle Ages.

Before discussing the Icelandic situation, however, it is necessary to summarise briefly the background of the Icelandic understanding of pagan religious worship and the main information available about religious cult centres in Scandinavia from the Bronze Age to the later Iron Age. One of the most commonly quoted passages in this regard is Tacitus' statement in *Germania*, about how the Germanic tribes worship their gods in the open air in forests (Tacitus

¹ Olaf Olsen (1966, 245-275, and 1969) argued that the cases of Mære and Uppsala might be exceptions. See further Andréén 2002, 320-329; and Nordahl 1996 on the recent discoveries in Gamla Uppsala.

1948, 108). This idea, along with talk of worship and sacrifice of animals, humans, and various objects of worth on islands, in lakes and in marshes, is backed up by numerous other references by commentators such as Tacitus, Orosius, Jordanes, Procopius, Alcuin, Ibn Rastah and Adam of Bremen. It finds visual support on the Gotland stones and the Oseberg tapestry (see for example, Krafft 1956, 35; and Lamm 1988, 63). New archaeological finds are continuing to give solid support to this, stressing that the tradition of bog and lake offerings in Scandinavia has roots in the Bronze Age, and that there seems to have been a great deal of conservatism in these matters, some places being used continuously for offerings for over five hundred years, often and in close vicinity to wooden idols (see, for example Glob 1969; Ström 1985, 30 and 33-38; and Todd 1975, 182-208). These outdoor offerings then start decreasing rapidly in the fifth-sixth centuries (Fabech 1998, 151-154; 1999a, 459; and 1999b, 38; and Andrén 2002, 304 and 316-317).

The Stone Age and Bronze Age rock carvings of southern and northern Scandinavia underline still further the regular use of certain sites for outdoor worship from a very early stage. Recent archaeological examination has shown that many of these sites, like the later Iron Age marsh sites, were often marked off by stones or even a fence, underlining the concept of an "inner" and an "outer" area, the former being a space that was regarded as more sacred or at least "off bounds".²

Further support for the existence of recognised sites for outdoor worship throughout Scandinavia is naturally seen in the placename evidence as in names like Frösakur, Torshlunda, Fresvik, and Nærø (see Magnus Olsen 1915; and 1926, 226-256; de Vries 1957, II, 53, 116, 155, 194-195; and Olaf Olsen 1966, 89-104; and Brink 1996, 1997, 1998, and 1999). In recent years, scholars have suggested that there seems to be a clear pattern to these sites, the cultic importance of which is regularly being supported by archaeological finds.³ In short, the sites seem to be so-called "central places" in a well understood local settlement or region, often in borderline areas, but in close vicinity to key settlements and meeting sites. They were religious centres for a particular group of people; places where they came into contact with their gods, and gave them gifts. Prior to the fifth century, at least, these sites tended to form part of a "central place complex" (Brink 1999, 425). At that point, there was still no one main centre for the community.

Returning to the placename *hof*: the use of the word seems to first occur in the fifth century, after which it becomes quite common in Sweden, Norway and Iceland (see see Orri Vésteinsson 2003; and Magnus Olsen 1926, 227-256). Like the other cult-related placenames, these sites, probably related to buildings of some kind, play a key role in the central place complexes. And interestingly enough, archaeological evidence has started to appear supporting the existence of cult buildings, usually in the form of smallish constructions closely associated with the halls of important chieftains in the late Iron Age. These buildings show few if any signs of daily habitation but contain - or are found in the context of - remains that point to religious offerings, statues, or sacrifices: one can mention here the recent finds at Lunda, Uppåkra, Säby, Sanda and Borg in Sweden; at Dejbjerg, Lejre, Tissø and Gudme in Denmark; and at Yeavinger in Northumberland, the latter giving some support to Bede's suggestions of pagan temples having existed in England (on this material see for example Olaf Olsen 1966, 91-96 and Wilson 1992,

² Cf. the use of the word *staþgarðr* for a place of worship in *Gutasaga* and the *Gutalög*: see *Guta saga* 1999, 4-5; and *Guterlov og Gutersaga* 1910, 31-32. Note also the expression "frögærd" for a fence around a rock, tree or spring, in an Northumbrian law; see Olaf Olsen 1966, 84.

³ See for example Brink 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999; Andrén 1998, 1999 and 2002; Fabech 1998, 1999a and 1999b; Näsman 1998; and Hirschend 1997 and 1999. See also recently the finds at Lunda near Strängnäs: <http://www.zaa.se/uv/lunda2002>

28-36).⁴ Interestingly enough, most of these buildings come from the fifth-seventh centuries. It would thus seem that in spite of what Olsen said, “kulthus” of some kind did exist in certain central sites, even if they were not beneath churches and they were not all called “hof”. Furthermore, as Andrén notes, there is all reason to believe that some form of continuation of worship must have existed around central sites such as these into the time of Christianity (Andrén 2002, 300-305).

The above, however, does not detract from the fact that this kind of “kulthus” has yet to be found beside the halls at the *hof* sites in Iceland. There, it must be assumed that most worship must have taken place inside the *skáli* rather than outside (indeed it is interesting to note how the saga accounts of worship in Norway and Iceland differ in this regard).⁵ The key accounts of pagan worship in the Icelandic *hof* are well known, the most famous being those given in *Eyrbyggja saga* (1935, 8-9; see also *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 7; and *Hákonar saga goða in Heimskringla* 1941-1951, I, 167-168), and then in the early Icelandic laws known as *Úlfjótslög* (see *Landnámabók* 1968, 313-315; *Flateyjarbók* 1945, I, 274-275 and *Íslendingasögur og þættir* 1998, 2004) most of which are argued to have come from pagan times (see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998, 44-50). All of these accounts seem to point to a purely sacred building of the kind so far only found abroad. The key features in the first account are the *öndvegissúlur*, the *reginnaglar* attached to these, the *stallr*, the *goð* idols, the arming which the *hofgoði* is supposed to wear when officiating, the *hlautteinn*, the *bolli* and the blood which is scattered. *Úlfjótslög*, meanwhile, says nothing about idols, the *hlauttein*, the *súlur* or the *reginnaglar* but underlines the importance of the ring, and the oaths to Freyr, Njörðr and “hinn almáttki áss”. The *blói* itself has been previously covered by Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1997; and 1998) and nothing more will be said about it here. Worth noting, however, is the way the arm-ring is seen as a key means of temporarily transforming the *goði* into something more powerful as part of religious activities.

As was noted above, most scholars (see for example Roussell 1943, 220; Olaf Olsen 1966; Stefan Brink 1996, 260; and most recently Orri Vésteinsson 2003) believe that the real Icelandic *hof* at least must have been essentially a large central hall (like that in Hófstaðir) in which people lived, but where also politically and alcoholically charged sacrificial banquets were held for large numbers of people at particular times of year, for example during the *vetrnætr*, at midwinter, and at other religious festivals. But is there any evidence that the building was seen as being anything more than a good restaurant in the lead-up to Christmas; that it, like the *goði* could have been occasionally temporarily transformed into a sacred building of the kind described in the saga accounts?

As part of this discussion it is worth bearing mind a few differences between the pagan religious situation in Iceland and that known in mainland Scandinavia, something underlined by the fact that belief in the the deeply rooted guardian spirit (the *nisse*, *tomte* or *gårdvord*) on mainland Scandinavian farms, does not seem to have come to Iceland along with belief in other

⁴ See Larsson 2001 and 2002 on Uppåkra; Nielsen 1996 on Borg; Hansen 1996 on Dejbjerg; Christensen 1991, 48-50 on Lejre; Jørgensen 1998 and 2002 on Tjassø; Åqvist 1996 on Sæby and Sanda; Sørensen 1994 and Thrane 1998 on Gudme; and Wilson 1992, 45-47 on Yeavinger. See also <http://www.rgs.se/uv/lunda2002> on the recent Lunda finds.

⁵ Certainly *Landnámabók* (1968, 358) talks of references to offerings to waterfalls; *Kristniðsaga* has a reference to an *ármadr* in a rock; *Kormáks saga* (1939, 288-289) refers to sacrifices to elves in a rock; and *Kjalnesinga saga* (1959, 7) contains an intriguing reference to a sacrificial pool; and there are placenames demonstrating that natural were dedicated to gods as happened elsewhere, but the key cult activities referred to in saga accounts do not seem to have taken place at these more personal sites of worship.

nature spirits such as the *huldufólk*, *mara*, *marbendlar*, *nykrar* and *selfólk*. This is related to the fact that the *gardvord* was closely bound to the local environment, more particularly to the farm gravemound (often stemming from the Bronze or early Iron Age). As noted above, later practices stress that these guardian spirits commonly received nutritional offerings at certain times of the year to guarantee their help in coming times. Interestingly enough, those Scandinavians who settled in Shetland and Orkney (islands already rich in gravemounds) seem to have continued this belief in the form of the protective *brownies* or *haugbuar*. Iceland and the Faroes on the other hand, were virgin territory: there was no basis for the beliefs in the mound-based guardian spirit to develop. The family-worshipped mounds, however, were not all that the settlers left behind. They were also departing from their culturally mapped out central place complex, and the old but deeply rooted outdoor (and by this time maybe also indoor) cult sites. They were coming to a place that had no geographically related oral history, no religious, inherited past; and no family tradition. It was not the "old" country.

It is interesting to note the accounts of the first settlers given in *Landnámabók*, in relation to the earlier mentioned fact that *Eyrbyggja saga* talks of the *hof* containing *goð* or idols (like the Norwegian *hof* in Mære and Hlaðir mentioned in the sagas of the Norwegian kings). One notes the total absence of any accounts in *Landnámabók* telling of settlers bringing large religious idols with them (the only possible exception being Þórólfr Mostrarskegg's *öndvegissúlur* carved with the image of Þórr also mentioned in *Landnámabók* 1968, 124), even if they were said to be *hofgodar*. The same applies *Ulfjótslög* and the temple account in *Hákons saga goða*, neither of which mentions idols. This raises the question of exactly where the focus of the worship of the god is placed in these accounts? If anywhere, it is on the revered man who has donned the arm ring.

So why are no idols mentioned? The answer is probably that the idols at home, like the *gardvord*'s gravemound were seen as being part of the old home environment, part of the rooted religious surroundings of the local central place, be it inside or outside. It would have been impossible to remove without causing deep trouble. At least six of the settlers, however, probably those with a prior position of responsibility at home, seem to have found another way of "bringing" the holiness of their central place with them. According to the accounts in *Landnámabók* (1968, 42-45; 124-125; 232; 302; 312; 317; and 371; see also 307 and 163-164), they came accompanied by their so-called *öndvegissúlur*, and then used these objects, whatever they were, as a means of guiding them to the sites in which that they were felt fated to settle.⁶

There has been much discussion about the actual nature of the *öndvegissúlur*. Most people, however, agree that the *öndvegi* must have been the place in the hall where the *goði* sat, perhaps in the centre of the long wall or in the corner of the room (see Herschend 1995, and 1997, 29-52). The *öndvegissúlur* are thus reckoned to have been the pillars either side of this "high seat", possibly key pillars holding up the building (see for example Valtýr Guðmundsson 1889, 184-186; and Arnheiður Sigurðardóttir 1966, 32). Their religious importance is underlined, amongst others by the account in *Eyrbyggja saga* (1935, 7; see also *Landnámsbók* 1968, 124-125) of Þórólfr Móstrarskegg's pillars adorned with the image of Þór and their key role in Þórólfr's *hof*. The same religious importance is stressed in the *Vatnsdæla saga* (1939, 42; see also *Landnámsbók* 1968, 219) account of how Ingimundur *gamli* finds an image of Freyr in the

⁶ See further Strömbäck 1928. There is no reason to doubt that this practice occurred: studies of folk customs show that people in many parts of Sweden believed that similar approaches were used to decide the original sites for their farms and churches: see Nyman and Campbell 1976, 1.12-16; 2.37-42.

ground at precisely the site where he plans to place the *öndvegissúlur* in his *hof*. The importance of the earth beneath the pillars is also stressed in the account of Þórolfur in *Eyrbyggja* and the account in *Landnámabók* (1968, 307) of Þórhaddr *hofgoði* who supposedly took both the *öndvegissúlur* and the earth beneath them from the central *hof* in Mære.

The stress on the earth in these accounts brings to mind the fact that several archaeological excavations of Scandinavian central halls and cult houses over the last thirty years or so have discovered shards of valuable glass and tiny *guldgubber* foils when excavating the earth beneath certain of the pillars in these buildings (see Herschend 1995, 225-227; Stamsø Munch 1991 328-329; Hansen 1996; and Hansen 1990 on Helgø, Borg, Dejbjerg and Dankirke). All of these particular objects are seen as having particular religious or cultic significance (see for example Watt 2002). Obviously, the soil beneath certain pillars in these buildings was charged in some way (see further below).

Another point to bear in mind when considering the importance of the *öndvegissúlur* is that wherever they originally stood, they were once rooted in the earth of the central homeland. Further back they were rooted in a homeland forest or grove. Arguably, they brought an element of the old central place and its protective “power” with them. In many ways, this parallels the nostalgic interest in remembering other family roots abroad that is regularly displayed in the sagas. In essence, the earth and the *súlur* were all of the old nature-based religion that could be brought with the settlers. At the same time, one sees in the central siting of the *súlur* in the *hof* the old cultically charged landscape being symbolically transferred into a man-made building.

In many ways, this development echoes another movement that was already underway for other reasons back in Scandinavia several centuries before, as local chieftains were beginning to be taken over by local kings, and eventually national kings (see Näsman 1998). As noted earlier, in the fifth and sixth centuries, the old bog sacrifices seem to be dying out. Fabech (1999a, 459) argues that this “change in cult coincides with the introduction of the hall at the magnates’ farms...” as “during the sixth century, the cult leaders, local magnates or kings were able to move religious ceremonies into their residence”. Herschend (1999, 334), particularly intrigued by the changing nature of the hall as a centre of religious and political activities at this time, notes that these new central farms “give rise to a new layer of religious landscape expressed as a social and economic landscape characterised by a number of halls of a certain sacred character.” For him this was “the late Iron Age contribution to cosmology”.

The settlers of Iceland came from countless different old political regions, and to start with often tended to be independent units, operating essentially “for themselves” around their own personal centres (indeed the old centre was arguably now symbolically enshrined in the new house if they brought their pillars with them). However, as Orri Vésteinsson as recently argued (2003), working along similar lines to Brink, Fabech, and Herschend, it was not long before exactly the same process as that which had earlier occurred in mainland Scandinavia began taking place in Iceland. Those regions or areas of settlement that had not already got obvious leading figures at the time of settlement needed to attain them, first and foremost as a means of representing the area in the developing system of *þing* meetings, and secondly to organise the local settlement as a form of regional body. As Orri notes, those placenames in Iceland involving the element *hof* are rarely the sites of the most powerful original settlements in the area. They seem to have come into being later, either as a challenge to the existing ruling figures, or as a new essential part of the local central landscape, in many places close to the site of the local meeting place, something that also applies to the siting of many of the old cult sites around the central areas in mainland Scandinavia. According to Orri, the Icelandic *hof* farms were essentially places

where a chieftain, or prospective chieftain wined and dined those he represented or wanted to represent (Orri Vésteinsson 2003).

However, in the pagan community of ninth and tenth century Iceland, political and legislative power was sanctioned by religious power. The Icelandic *goði* was both a chieftain and a priest, and, if we follow the arguments mentioned above, the hall of the *goði* was also a form of religious "temple". If *Eyrbyggja* has any basis in fact, the hall would also have been the place where the *stallr* and the arm ring resided, and where the *öndvegissúlur* from the old religious home area stood. Moving on from this, I think that there is also good reason to believe that like most places of worship in other religions (see Eliade 1958, 379; and Hedeager 2002, 10), the central *hof* was at times viewed by people simultaneously as being both a farm building, and a symbolic pagan microcosmos (like a theatre stage which has the gift of being two places at once in the minds of the audience for the duration of the performance).

As Fabech argues (1999, 458; see also Herschend 1999, 334), echoing to some extent the structural view of the medieval Icelandic farmer's world suggested by Hastrup (1985, 136-154), Gurevich (1985, 47), and Hedeager (2002), in the worldview of pre-Christian Scandinavian society the farmstead formed a central point in the cosmos, similar to the way that *Miðgarðr* and *Ásgarðr* formed a centre surrounded by a dangerous outer world of wild natural and supernatural forces. Herschend (1999, 334) has a slightly different, but no less relevant picture of *Ásgarðr*, *Miðgarðr* and *Útgarðr* all representing different centres in a similar landscape rather than different worlds. He goes on to draw comparisons with the way medieval Christianity regularly viewed the world and its holy buildings in a cosmological sense, the church being not only a ship, but also a visual three-dimensional cosmological map of the Christian universe, designed to educate the medieval congregation. Herschend (1999, 334) feels that "the congregation in the church must be paralleled with the guest in the hall, and the hall owner replaced by Christ".

Certainly, it is important to be wary of going too far with Christian comparisons when analysing Old Norse religion. There is no doubt that the wording of many of the descriptions of pagan "temples" both in the sagas and in near contemporary accounts are strongly coloured by the writers' knowledge of Christian churches. However, there is just as little doubt that the pagan Scandinavians, like the native Americans and the Sami bear dancers, must have had a sense of symbolic landscapes, even within a hall, in which some areas were seen as being more charged than others. This has recently been demonstrated by the earlier mentioned distribution of finds in some of the large chieftains' halls that have been excavated in mainland Scandinavia, especially those from Borg in Lofoten, and in Helgö in Sweden. In both places, as in other key halls, multiple finds of *gulgubber* foils have been made. The general belief today is that these objects represent a form of religious offering, similar perhaps to the stamped copper foils offered by visitors to Greek monasteries in our own time. One particularly interesting feature of about them is that, as noted above, in some places the foils have been found beneath certain pillars of the main living rooms of central halls or in a particular corner of the room (see Herschend 1995, 225-227 on Helgö; and Stamsø Munch 1991, 328-329 on Borg). Clear parallels are seen in the positioning of coin finds in the early church that was dug up in Överkyrke, Västergötland (Andrén 1999, 386-387), just around the site of the main crucifix at the entrance to the chancel, where most offerings were made to the church. There is all reason to believe that the same applied to the positioning of the gold foils in the hall.

So what was in the corner where the gold foils were found? Herschend argues that this must have been the site of the high seat, near where *öndvegissúlur* stood, and where the *goði*, the

earthly representative of the god sat (see Herschend 1997, 49-55).⁷ Whether this was so or not, it again underlines the fact that some places in the hall were more charged or “sacred” than others. Herschend (1997a, 53-55) goes on to argue that the same sense of different symbolic areas existing within a hall can be seen in the placement of grave goods around certain bodies during the Age of Migrations, apparently echoing the positioning of objects in a house.

There is, however, yet another feature of the hall which has so far not been discussed, but underlines still further the idea implied above that the Icelanders, Norwegians and Danes, at least, saw a comparison between the concrete structure of the *skáli* and the pagan cosmological world. This feature in question comes in the form of the name, *dvergar*, which was used for the small blocks of wood which stood on on the rafters of the twelfth-century farmhouse (and almost certainly those in earlier times), and held up the *ás* or main beam of the roof. The earliest reference to the use of *dvergar* in this sense is in the twelfth-century *Íslensk hómiljubók*, in a sermon explaining the symbolic message that the church building presents to the congregation. Ironically it makes no reference to the obvious pagan context of the word:

Pvertré, er skorða staflasgur og upphalda dvergunn, er ás styðja, merkja þá menn í kristinni, er efla veraldaríðfingja í ráðum, en heilög munkklif í auðsæjum (*Íslensk hómiljubók* 1993, 150).

There can be no doubt that this name was regularly used in later times for these objects in farm buildings, not only in Iceland, but also in Norway and Denmark (see Aasen 1983, 120 and 923; *Norsk ordbok* 1966-, II, 279; Torp 1919; and Feilberg 1886-1893, II, 220; and *Orðabók háskólans*: <http://lexis.is>). It was obviously deeply rooted. There is no doubt either that its use is a direct reference to the statement in *Snorra Edda*, that the sky – and the skull of the Ymir – is held up by four dwarves: Norðri, Suðri, Austri and Vestri (Snorri Sturluson 1926, 14, and 90, where the sky is literally referred to as “byrði dverganna”). This in turn demonstrates that people saw symbolic parallels between roof of the hall (centring around the high *ás*) and the sky or heavens (similar to the roofs of Icelandic churches which in later times were often painted with stars). This encourages further consideration of other potential symbolic parallels that people may also have had in mind in the buildings, and not least the already weightily significant carved *öndvegissúlur* which reached up to the rafters below the *dvergar*. In this new context, it is hard to avoid placing them alongside the image of the enormous strangely flowering central oak tree that is said to have grown up to the rafters in *Völsungr*’s hall (*Völsunga saga* 1943, 6-7).⁸ Casting the mind’s eye further down to the foot of the *öndvegissúlur* there is the *öndvegi* itself and *goð(i)* seated before the long fire, and in front of the pool-like cauldron that one can expect to have hung close by. If the two pillars were carved with images of the gods (as *Eyrbyggja* and *Landnámabók* suggest), one faces a potential trinity of “sacred” figures (like the gods in Adam of Bremen’s image of the temple in Uppsala). Furthermore, considering the evidence of *Húsdrápa*, *Gísla saga* (1943, 42); and the Oseberg tapestry, one can assume that the *höll/hof* might have had other wooden carvings or hangings depicting mythological subjects, especially at the times of key

⁷ It can be no coincidence that the priest-chieftain was referred to as a *goði*, and the priestess as a *gyðja*. The latter word is also used for a goddess, and there can be little question that the former is also drawn from the word *goð*. See further Jakob Benediktsson 1974, 172; and Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989, 265. The term *goði* was clearly more widespread than was previously thought. In addition to Iceland, it was used in at least both Sweden and Denmark in this religious meaning: see Brink 1997, 428; 1998, 308, and 316-317; and 1999, 424-427, and 430-431; and Fabeck 1999a, 462-463 and 1998, 158-159.

⁸ Further comparisons might be made to the image (and name) of the sacred tree, Irminsul, destroyed by Charlemagne: see Turville-Petre 1972, and the references in Grimm, 1882, 115-119.

festivals or when other people of lower status visited to share in a sacrificial banquet (cf. the *vetrnætr* festival celebrations described in several sagas).

This might appear a little neat, but all the evidence suggests that the potential microcosmos is there for the taking, just as it is in the Christian church, the Navajo *hogan*, the Cree tent, or the Sami house. But is there any solid evidence beyond the linguistic suggestions and *Ulfjótölög* to support the idea of the *goði* taking on the role of the god; that at times, he might have formed part of this secular and the religious double world? In this connection, it is worth noting two things. First of all there are the recurring images of the dancing horn-helmeted man on a Torslunda helmet-plate matrix, the Finglesham bracelet, and on the Oseberg tapestry, just to mention three examples found over a wide area of territory over a space of about two hundred years (600-835) (Gunnell 1995, 36-80). The common interpretation of this figure is that he represents a priest in the role of Óðinn (with two bird heads on the ends of the horns on the helmet, and possibly one eye in the Torslunda example), dancing with spears in his hands alongside what seems to be an animal-skinned *berserkr* warrior. Full-sized helmet masks from both the Bronze Age and Iron Age have been found in bogs in Viksö and at Sutton Hoo, and animal masks in Hedeby (see Gunnell 1995, 44 and 73). If the horned figure here is a priest, then the picture implies a basic element of role-taking by two figures.

I have argued elsewhere that such dramatic activities are backed up by the direct speech *ljóðaháttir* monologues and dialogues of Eddic poetry. These are the second piece of evidence. Although these were recorded in the thirteenth century, many believe that their form must have roots in pagan times, possibly in earlier initiation and seasonal rituals (see further Gunnell 1995). Whatever performance context these works had in the thirteenth century, they still involve the earlier “gods” speaking directly to the listeners of a later time, in some cases enumerating mystical, cosmological and ritually-based wisdom, as in works like *Grimnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Skrnismál*, *Sigrdrífumál* and *Rúnatal Hávamála*. Dramatic monologues and dialogues like these, even when recited or chanted in a thirteenth-century hall, create their own symbolic setting. The same would have applied in a *hof*-höll before the arrival of Christianity. The presenter of *Grimnismál*, “Óðinn”, visually stands simultaneously in both the mythological hall of Geirröðr and in the later hall of his audience. As noted before, up above him are the *dvergjar*, both wooden and mythological, holding up both the solid roof and the mythological heavens, above the wooden *súlar* both practical and symbolic of the world tree. The day after such a performance, with the return of daylight and the fading of the alcoholic haze that would have added to the liminality of the moment, the *hof* would be a hall again, and the priest an ordinary farmer. But the visual moment of the presentation in the *þularstól* would be indelible, and underlined the political power of the speaker in the eyes of the inhabitants of his followers. That was one of the gains of moving religion from nature into the hall. In short, even considering the fragmentary evidence presented here, there was no real need for individual temple buildings in Iceland. The archetypal *hof* and old natural cultic central place was already implicit in the structure of the *höll*.

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