

MYTH AND RITUAL IN PRE-CHRISTIAN SCANDINAVIAN LANDSCAPE

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♣ I grew up in the forest region of northern Sweden. As a young boy, an old female relative of mine, an aunt to my father, told me now and then of her encounters with the ‘small people’ when she was herding cattle as a herdess at the *seter* (Sw. *fåbodvall*) in the forests, especially of the beautiful *Skoje-Kare*, a supernatural female whom you could see sometimes herding her small, white cattle in the forest.¹ At the *seter* one also had to be aware of the ‘small people’, not to upset them and make them angry, whereupon they would leave you alone and not make life difficult for you. These were no tales told to frighten me; she had seen these supernaturals and they were for real — for her. Aunt Emma had these encounters with the ‘small people’ at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Scandinavia had been a part of Christendom for a millennium. Was she then a pagan in the twentieth century? Certainly not: she was a devoted Christian, who knew how to cut a protective, Christian cross with a knife in the wooden beam over the entrance to the cattle barn, scaring off and preventing malicious supernatural beings stealing cattle or making mischief amongst the animals — and who also attended Mass in church on Sunday.

Legends, stories, the solitude in the deep forest, first-hand knowledge of the environment, and a vivid imagination and preventive actions to take care of fear resulted in an ordering of the landscape into safe or dangerous places. This led to the use of learned or invented ‘rituals’ to cope with fear or ward off potential hazards — real or imagined — such as bears, wolves, or supernatural beings. Myths were created to explain incomprehensible phenomena; rituals were performed to disarm dangers. All this was a means of responding to the environment and maintaining a continuous dialogue with the surrounding landscape.

In this article I will discuss how it was or might have been to live side by side with supernaturals, the perception of their abodes in the landscape, and also how people could manipulate or change or charge the landscape to come to terms with phenomena that people had no direct control over. By certain rituals, it was possible to charge land with godly power, to symbolically ‘fertilize’ land, or to dedicate a district to a god, probably for protection amongst other things.

A Theoretical Background

All cultures have myths, stories that make an unknown, metaphysical world graspable and familiar. In many cultures there is no dividing line between mythology and history,² something that it is important to bear in mind when dealing with oral cultures (see [Hastrup 1987](#); see also [Lindow 1997](#); [Meulengracht Sørensen 1991](#)). For early Scandinavia, we have remnants of such myths in the Poetic *Edda* and in Snorri’s *Edda*. These myths are not linear or focused stories; they normally lack logic and continuity ([Lévi-Strauss 1977–78](#): passim), they are fragmentary and repetitive, and they become very ‘kaleidoscopic’ because they lack depth in time, constituting rather of fragments set in the present (see [Magnus 1990](#)).

Very often these myths are connected with certain physical features in the landscape, objects that, owing to their perpetual presence, make the mythical stories not only memorable but enable them to function as sanctions or witnesses to these myths. When the famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski analysed the myths of the Trobriands, he noticed that they were linked and laid out in the

¹ Stories of these kinds from my home parish are to be found in [Lundh 1952](#).

² See [Vansina 1965](#); [Sahlins 1981](#); [Sahlins 1985](#); [Siikala 1982](#): 64–78. As for the ancient Celtic culture, see [Pennick 1996](#): 7.

landscape: to move in this landscape was to reiterate the course of the myths. This physical omnipresence of the myths makes them tangible and permanent, for as Malinowski writes:

Here we must try to reconstruct the influence of myth upon this vast landscape, as it colours it, gives it meaning, and transforms it into something live and familiar. What was a mere rock, now becomes a personality; what was a speck on the horizon becomes a beacon, hallowed by romantic associations with heroes; a meaningless configuration of landscape acquires a significance, obscure no doubt, but full of intense emotions. Sailing with natives, especially with novices to the Kula, I often observed how deep was their interest in sections of landscape impregnated with legendary meaning, how the elder ones would point and explain, the younger would gaze and wonder, while the talk was full of mythological names. It is the addition of the human interest to the natural features possessing in themselves less power of appealing to a native man than to us, which makes the difference for him in looking at the scenery. A stone hurled by one of the heroes into the sea after an escaping canoe; a sea passage broken between two islands by a magical canoe; here two people turned into rock; there a petrified *waga* — all this makes the landscape represent a continuous story or else the culminating dramatic incident of a familiar legend. This power of transforming the landscape, the visible environment, is one only of the many influences which myth exercises upon the general outlook of the natives. (Malinowski 1922: 298)

One might say that the mythical sites motivate, explain, and sanction the existence and presence of the mythical or numinous world. Historical memories become associated with places familiar to people in myths or stories recapitulated from generation to generation. The moving between these places in the landscape creates a structure for this ‘history’.

The mnemonic ‘pegs’ used to remember myths are extraordinary natural objects, remarkable ancient monuments,³ other man-made structures, and especially place-names in the landscape. As long as the place-names are remembered, they preserve the myths. When the place-names are forgotten, the myths may also fall into oblivion (Magnus 1990: 170), something that Maurice Leenhardt was faced with when studying indigenous cultures in Melanesia. On several occasions, people were unwilling to tell him stories of the past, with the excuse that they had forgotten one or more of the place-names relevant to the story. This goes back to a phenomenon often found in studying the myths and mythical histories of indigenous cultures; in telling a story, the teller places himself where the story takes place and becomes part of the geography of the story, as Leenhardt (1979: 84) describes it.

A new land is also in a way domesticated by producing metaphysical explanations of features in the landscape — for example, mythic, creational stories of when a giant threw a huge rock or cut a mountain in two, thus making a valley — which may end up in some myths. Some of these may even produce place-names attached to the physical object, something that we have a lot of in the [DAO1]Book of Settlement in Iceland (see Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1974; Bandle 1977a; Bandle 1977b).

In this way, the landscape becomes history (Tuan 1977), the past of the people living in that territory. To destroy that landscape or to move the people away from the territory is to wipe out their history. The territory is not only a land resource for the physical existence of a people, it is also their past and their memory (see Johansen 1988: 19). In this landscape, it is not only history that is embedded, but also morality. The Indians of North America took knowledge and morality from the landscape; the landscape was the basis of myths, and the myths produced guidance for good behaviour and decent morality (Basso 1984: 26).

In historical times, we in the western world have transformed nature and landscape (i.e. the cultural landscape) from an essentially existential ‘partner’ — charged with mythical, cultic, numinous, and socializing places of memory, places with which people had a ‘religious’ connection — into economic entities, containers of resources and raw material, that we can use or rather misuse in a unilateral way. For the former ‘places of memory’, Michail Michailovic Bachtin (Bachtin 1981: 7) has coined the term

³ For myths and popular beliefs regarding ancient monuments in central Sweden, see the interesting accounts by Mats Burström and Torun Zachrisson in Burström, Winberg, and Zachrisson 1997.

chronotops, by which he means places in the landscape where time and space coincide and fuse together, where time materializes and where history petrifies into monuments.

I wonder if it is possible to set up stages in our attitudes and relations to the landscape, or perhaps better in our perceptions of the intrinsic value and character of the landscape? During pre-Christian times, all nature and landscape were metaphysically 'charged' in different ways, with different degrees of energy as regarded holiness or sacrality; the landscape was *metaphysically impregnated* as a totality, and people lived in a numinous environment (see Lévy-Bruhl 1925; Lévy-Bruhl 1931; Lévy-Bruhl 1938). Everything 'out there' was, as Mircea Eliade (Eliade 1968: 9) would have called it, a huge *hierophany*. Under the influence of Christian culture, a division emerged between the profane and the holy, where sacrality became 'institutionalized' in certain buildings and structures, whereas the environment that surrounded these built-up structures became profane. Today in the secular western world, there are practically no sacral entities that cannot be profaned. Parish churches, no longer having a parish to serve, are turned into galleries, table-tennis halls, and coffee shops. The environment and the landscape are at our disposal as raw materials, and the religious component has vanished, so that the sacral structures may be profaned and used for other, secular purposes.

The modern world's perception of landscape is both secular and profane. In a way, the landscape has lost its innocence and mysticism. The rationality of modern man and his constant demand for understanding and explanation constitute major obstacles to our understanding of our earliest ancestors' world of ideas. For them, nature was allowed to be mystical, without any demands for rational explanations; a mountain could be the abode of one's forefathers without raising any importunate reflections or doubts as to whether this was *de facto* possible or not. The landscape was allowed to be metaphysically charged. Where modern man rationalizes and intellectualizes, early man allowed himself Being in the World, as it was, to be overwhelmed by it and to be amazed at it.

According to the American sociologist Daniel Bell, this process of secularization is due to the fact that life has become so much more rationalized, and the profanization is due to modernism's claim to superiority (see Edsman 1995: 234). *Science* has taken the place of *religion* as the source of wisdom and as the Superior Elucidator, and the landscape or the environment is totally in the hands of the Market, looked upon as a reservoir or container which we may exploit for the benefit of human progress.

Yi-Fu Tuan has qualified this theme by contrasting the European and the Chinese attitudes to nature. He concludes that the European sees nature as subordinate to himself, whereas the Chinese sees himself as a part of nature. Tuan also focuses on Greek culture, in which land was not regarded as an object to be exploited, but as a true force that physically embodied the powers that ruled the world. In many non-Christian cultures, natural settings and nature itself were holy in different respects, and selected features in the landscape were regarded as sacred and worshipped. In the Christian tradition, on the other hand, holiness was not associated with the landscape but was invested in man-made features, such as altars, shrines, churches, and other buildings that often dominated the landscape. Churches were erected over holy rocks, caves, and other features of importance in Christian mythology. In the Christian view, as Tuan formulates it, it was not emanation from the earth, but ritual that consecrated a site. Man, not nature, bore the image of God. Tuan continues with pagan antiquity, in which each facet of nature had its own guardian spirit, and before one ventured to cut down a tree, for example, it was important to placate the spirit in charge. By destroying animistic beliefs, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a way that other cultures would never have dreamed of (Tuan 1974; Tuan 1977).

Hence, in ancient Greek culture, the landscape was metaphysically charged in a way that meant that gods, lower deities, demons, and spirits possessed the environment and lived side by side with man (see Burkert 1987: 24–26; Zaidman and Pantel 1992: 55 ff[DAO2]; see also Gullög Nordquist, this volume). The mountain peaks belonged to or represented *Zeus*, the sea *Poseidon*, the fertile soil

Demeter, the pasture *Pan*. In this overall picture, islands in particular were dedicated to or the home of certain gods, such as *Apollo* on Delos and *Helios* on Rhodos. In the early Greek geographer Pausanias's travel guide and description of Greece dating from the middle of the second century AD, we find many examples of the perception of this sacral landscape and mythical geography (Alcock 1993: 174–75).

In the landscape, caves and peaks in particular were often sanctuaries or sacred sites (see Burkert 1987: 24–26; Bradley 2000: 18–32). Fresh water, in the form of springs, wells, rivers, and lakes, could be sacred in the landscape as well, to the extent that these were sanctuaries (van Leuven 1981: 13). Although the temple seems to have been introduced into the religious sphere of ancient Greece in the eighth century BC, the active cult still took place outdoors, on mountain peaks, in caves, or at small altars out in the landscape (Coldstream 1985: 68). The temple was merely the house of the god(s).

To the Greeks, all nature must be described as a sacred landscape, created by the gods and inhabited by gods and demons, spirits or 'powers', in Greek *daimon* (*δαίμων*). This word corresponds to the Roman concept of *numen* or *genius*. In the Roman religion, a certain place might have some kind of sacred value or power, a *numen* or a *genius loci*. These concepts must be considered to correspond with the concept of *mana* found in the Polynesian cultures of the South Pacific. A person might have *mana*, a royal person certainly had a great deal of the stuff, but a place could also possess it. In these cases, the persons or sacred sites became *tabu* to different degrees (see e.g. Best 1982: II, 15–30).

Apart from mythical poems, place-names also inform us of mythical and religious beliefs in the landscape. In this way, the Greek landscape reflected mythic history, and mythic history defined the landscape. Therefore the past — both the historical and the mythical past (which are one and the same) — continues to live in the present landscape.

The pre-Christian religion of Scandinavia from the first millennium AD as we know it — or rather as we think we know it — was a religious system called *siðr* or *forn siðr*, which consisted of a pantheon of 'major' gods and divinities of lesser importance, together with spirits, giants, and ancestors.⁴ The gods and their personalities are presented to us with Snorri's *Edda* as the major filter; we know practically nothing of the spirits and the minor divinities. In particular, we apprehend the myths and eschatological framework in the poems of the Poetic *Edda*. The fact that the *siðr* was obviously also an agrocentric religion is intimated in the many theophoric place-names. These place-names also show us that there were regional differences throughout Scandinavia regarding the worship of certain gods. It was a religious system adapted to and grown out of a static, sedentary culture within a spatially graspable society with chieftains and 'kings'. The worship of ancestors was obviously centred on burial mounds and burial grounds, but to what extent these burials were used for ritual and cultic activities, we do not know. However, in studying Iron-Age society in Scandinavia, it seems most probable that ancestors played a vital part in the life of the living and that burial mounds were most likely looked upon as cult sites (see Birkeli 1938; Birkeli 1943; Baudou 1989; Kaliff 1997; Kaliff 2001; Artelius 2000; Sognnes 2000: 96–100; Gräslund 2001; see also Fortes 1961; Sahlins 1968: 106–13; Barth 1975: 123–25).

A religion may either bind people to a place or free them from it. The pagan religion of Scandinavia was obviously of the former kind. The worship of local and regional gods probably bound people to places and districts. This pagan religion was hence in a more 'primitive' stage, with its earthbound deities in a fertility cult, than the Christian religion. It is therefore obvious that, when the 'Europeanization' started in Scandinavia, with towns, feudalism, coinage, a new written language, territorialized 'nations', etc., the old, pagan, religious system also became obsolete and had to be

⁴ For descriptions of religious systems with major and minor deities, together with ghosts, spirits, and other supernatural beings, see for example the Maori of New Zealand (Best 1982) and the ancient Polynesians of Tahiti (Oliver 1974: I, 47–122).

replaced by a new, universal religion, with an omnipotent and omniscient sky god. This new religion cut Scandinavian society's chains to the earth and to the *heimat*.

On this theme, it is appropriate to cite Yi-Fu Tuan, who has written:

In religions that bind people firmly to place the gods appear to have the following characteristics in common. They 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 extends from the living members of a family, with their graded authority, to ancestors and the spirits of dead heroes. Religions of this local type encourage in their devotees a strong sense of the past, of lineage and continuity in place. Ancestor worship lies at the core of the practice. Security is gained through this historical sense of continuity rather than by the light of eternal and timeless values as propounded in transcendental and universal religions. (Tuan 1977: 152–53)

This kind of religious system was obviously present during the first millennium in Scandinavia, a type of religion that the pagan Scandinavians shared with the ancient Greeks (see e.g. Burkert 1987; Sissa and Detienne 2000), with the Maori of Polynesia (see e.g. Best 1982: 1), and with many other peoples in history.

The Origin and Content of Sacred Place and Space

In a pagan or ethnic religion, a mountain, valley, lake, river, spring, grove, stone (slab), or tree could be recognized as sacred, but also, of course, the same could apply to man-made structures.⁵ Even more spatial phenomena, such as land, a settlement district, and even an administrative district could have a certain link with a god.⁶

To some extent, we find the kind of natural features that could be regarded as sacred in the pagan Scandinavian landscape in the enactments in the provincial laws that prohibit the worship of these objects (Nilsson 1992: 27–39). In the older Gulathing's Law (Eithun, Rindal, and Ulset [year]: [DAO3]ch.(?) 29) we read that: 'vér scolom eigi blota heiðit guð ne hauga ne horga [eða reiser staung og kallar skaldzstöng]', i.e. ('we shall not sacrifice to pagan god or to mounds or to *hörgir* [or erect a pole and call it *skaldzstong*]'). In the Hälsinge Law (Schlyter 1844: Kb 1), and also similar in the [DAO4]Upplandic Law: 'Ængin skal affgubum blotæ, ok ængin a lundæ æller a stenæ troæ', i.e. ('No one shall sacrifice to idols, and no one shall believe in groves or stones'). In the Guta Law:

Þet er nu þy nest at blot ier mannum mikit forbuðit, oc fyrnska all þaun sum haiðnu fylgir. Engin ma haita a hautki a hult eða hauga, eða haiðin guð, huatki a vi eða stafgarða. Þa en naquar varðr at þi sandr ok laiðas hanum so vitni a hand at han hafui haizl naquar þa með mati eða með dryckiu sino som ey fylgia kristum siði. (Schlyter 1852: [DAO3]ch.(?) 4)

[And thereafter, that sacrificial feasts is severely forbidden for everyone and all old customs, following paganism. No one may invoke groves or mounds or pagan god(s), *vi* [cult sites], or *stafgarða*. If anyone is found guilty and convicted by witnesses, that he has given food and drink as offerings, not according to Christian custom.]

From these quotations, we can see that the Church was of the opinion that it was necessary to write down prohibitions on the worship of mounds, that is, within a pagan cult of the ancestors on the burial grounds, of cult sites and constructions (*hörgir*, *vi*, *stafgarða*, *stang*), of groves and stones (*lunder*, *sten*). They obviously had in mind the pagan custom of making offerings to and dealing with the 'lower' deities — the land spirits and elves — and giving them food and drink (*mater*, *drykker*).

⁵ As for the terms *landscape* and *myth* also the use of the term *pagan* (Sw. *bednisk*) for a kind of ethnic, non-Christian, non-Islamic, non-Hindu, etc. religion raises problems; see Hultgård 1991.

⁶ In his dissertation, Per Vikstrand (University of Uppsala) is laying a new foundation for the study of the pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia and the pagan sacral place names (see Vikstrand 2001).

It is extremely difficult today to understand the underlying concepts that constituted the imbued metaphysical or supernatural quality that was assumed to exist in a sacred grove, well, forest, mountain, or river. Their existence as what the ancient Romans would term *numen* — that is, objects and phenomena imbued with godly or spiritual power — is obviously one aspect. However, there are perhaps other aspects, such as a defined area impregnated with what the early Polynesians would call *mana* or an elevated disposition, with, for instance, special conditions regarding jurisdiction (in a society where cult and law were intimately connected). A sacred grove, well, lake, river, or mountain could therefore be a place or an area (1) where one might sacrifice to the gods, that is, a cult site, (2) where one could have a closer contact with gods or ancestors, and where one might perform rituals, hence interfaces in the landscape (3) where one might receive godly power or be spiritually charged, for example, with holy water or under a sacred tree, (4) which was dedicated to some god, because you were one of his or her ‘people’ or so that he or she might protect you, or (5) where you might be given asylum or protection that was sacrally sanctioned.

Manipulating or ‘Charging’ the Landscape

After this introductory discussion, I would like to address a very difficult topic, namely how man interacted with the landscape to ‘charge’ it, in the way that man ‘addressed’ the gods or communicated with them and appeased them so that they would fertilize land and make life more prosperous, hence actually to ‘manipulate’ the landscape with the help of the gods. This is, of course, a theme well known in most cultures, and also found in the Christian religion. To start from the end, two very common means of charging land were (1) by using fire and (2) by walking the land carrying idols, and the element which was used as the main interface with the godly world, and therefore the best element for religious interaction, was, of course, water.

Fire is well known as being useful for claiming, taking charge of, or charging people or land. Two famous cases are mentioned in the Icelandic sagas, first when a burning arrow was shot over the enemy, thereby predestining the warriors to Óðinn, and the other as mentioned in *Landnámabók* where land was claimed in the initial settlement period by shooting a burning arrow over the area in question.

We find this theme also among the highland Scots and Picts (Dodgshon 2002: 34). In this mountainous, treeless landscape, freestanding hilltops, which provided an exceptional view over the surrounding landscape, always seem to have been important in mythical and cultic perceptions. It is common to find man-made constructions on these hilltops, in the form of standing stone slabs, some of them probably cult buildings and some that seem to be dated to as early as the Neolithic period. The eastern highland Scots had an annual ritual, performed well into historical times, whereby a bonfire was lit on one of these prominent hills. This fire was then used to light a series of torches, which were taken down to the farms by the farmers and their families. There they walked — sun-wise — around a field, around the farm and the byre, before lighting the farmstead’s fire. Usually the most fertile field in this area was called *The Lost*, which seems to be derived from a Scottish word *losaid* ‘fire’, probably referring to this annual fire ritual (Dodgshon 2002: 34). These kinds of fire cults were well established and are found in historical church records. The purpose was obviously to communicate with the godly world, where the fire on the hilltop probably was looked upon as a communication device located close to the gods, from which godly power could be harnessed to charge the land and secure fertility and prosperity for the field and people on the farm.

In this connection we have some utterly strange toponyms found in Scandinavia — theophoric district names, hence place-names for an area, with a god’s name as the qualifier (see Vikstrand 2001: 63–65). These are not plentiful, and they are in any case interpretatively problematic, but their potential existence opens up interesting perspectives.

In southern Jutland we have the old hundred *Fros herred*, while elsewhere in the old Danish realm we find *Onsjö härad* (ODa. *Othins hærath*) in Scania. The first name could indicate that the district was dedicated to or in some way affiliated with the god *Freyr*. However, the name is somewhat puzzling, since southern Scandinavia in principle lacks theophoric place-names where *Frø* is a qualifier (Brink 2007: 109–10). A similar uncertainty occurs with *Onsjö härad*. Formally the name may be translated as ‘Óðinn’s hærath’, where *Óðinn* in some way was affiliated to the district, considered to be its protector, and so on. In the case of *Fros herred*, I have the creeping suspicion that the qualifier may be another name or word than the god’s name, due to the fact that *Freyr* names seem not to be found in southern Scandinavia, and therefore a cult of *Freyr* may not have existed there. In the case of *Onsjö härad*, there is a strong possibility that the first element in this juxtaposition is elliptical, emanating from an earlier *Óðinssior*, especially perhaps in a compound **Óðinssioar hærath* (> *Óðins hærath*). In *Onsjö härad* we have a most enigmatic lake, which several scholars have assumed to be the origin of this theophoric name, thus an earlier **Óðinssior*. To continue, in the province of Västergötland we find OSw *Frosfierpungar* as a name for a sub-district in the hundred of Vadsbo härad, and in the province of Uppland a (probably ancient) small district is called OSw *Frøstolpt*, later found in a parish name *Frøsthults socken* (Andersson 1990).

Within this category of names we may perhaps also count two intriguing examples, again from Uppland, namely two hundreds (OSw. *hundari*). In the central part of Uppland we have a hundred called OSw. *Ullarakers hundari*. A very prominent settlement in this hundred was in the Iron Age *Ulltuna* (< *Ullartunir*) (Ljungkvist 2006). The name of the hundred most certainly refers to the Thing assembly site for the *hundari*, hence a place called *Ullaraker*. In this case a probable and interesting possibility is that the god *Ullr* had some affiliation to the district, being especially worshipped here or a protector for the people in the district in some way. We find a similar case in the west of Uppland, *Dorsakers hundari*. In the same way, the Thing assembly site must have been *Dorsaker*, which gave its name to the hundred. Additionally, we also here have a prominent settlement called *Torstuna* (< *Dorstunir*). In this case we thus have the god *Þórr* linked to the district in some way.

There are many ways to try to explain these names (Wahlberg 2003: 258; Vikstrand 2001: 182). In the case of *Torsåker/Torstuna*, Per Vikstrand (Vikstrand 2001: 151–54) has come up with an exciting idea. In and around the settlement of Torstuna he identifies several indications of early medieval and prehistoric cult and centrality.⁷ Some 500 metres north of the church at Torstuna, Vikstrand has found an area of arable land called *St. Olofsåkeren* ‘Saint Olof’s arable land’, which he identifies with the former *Torsåker* ‘Þórr’s arable land’, an identification that is impossible to prove, but potentially likely. In the case of *Ulleråker/Ultuna* we have the somewhat different situation where the two are found not geographically together, but at a distance of around 10 kilometres between each other, if we follow Per Vikstrand’s location of Ulleråker’s Thing site to somewhere in the centre of the city of Uppsala as it stands today.

There are of course many possibilities to explain these names. One interesting hypothesis is that a god or a goddess was dedicated to or affiliated with a people or an area, either for protection or for some other purpose.

The syncretistic features of the medieval Church have been discussed in an important and interesting article by Anders Hultgård [DA05](Hultgård 1992),⁸ which in some cases were continued

⁷ *Torstuna* and *Torslunda* both containing Þórr’s name; Kungshögen ‘the King’s Mound’ and *Kungshusby* ‘the King’s *husaby* (royal farm or manor)’.

⁸ The discussion below is building on Hultgård’s article. For references, see Hultgård 1992.

into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of these was the carrying of idols or relics of holy saints around in the fields. These kinds of rituals are found all over Europe and have been described and discussed before. A common theme is that the Church seems to have adopted a pagan ritual, and adapted and changed it into a Christian ritual. In the case of Scandinavia, the question is whether the examples we have are borrowings from the Continent, brought in by the Church in the Middle Ages, or if they originate in a domestic, pagan Scandinavian context. Hultgård makes a good case for Scandinavian origins for the examples he gives.

The best example we have, at least for Sweden, is the so-called ‘kornguden’, the grain or barley God, known from Vånga parish in Västergötland. When the sowing was completed in the spring, the farmers in the parish went to the church and took out a wooden idol, identified as St Peter by the art historian Jan Svanberg, and all parishioners followed when the idol was carried through the fields to secure good growth for the season. This ritual is known from the eighteenth century, and similar rituals are known from other parishes in Sweden and Norway. The actual idol is still preserved today and dates from the thirteenth century. The common explanation for all these rituals, the carrying around of an idol of a saint or Christ in the fields, is to secure good growth and gain good harvest.

In Vånga during periods of droughts, the walking and idol-carrying ritual was accompanied by the digging out of a dried-out pond, which Hultgård argues is an example of a ritual connection to water. This is further evidenced by the fact that in some parishes the starting point for the walking ritual was at some prominent sacrificial well, such as in Edestad in Blekinge. In Eidsborg in Norway each Midsummer night, the idol of St Nicolaus was carried around a small lake, in which the idol eventually was washed. I will not expand on this example by connecting it to the well-known case told by Tacitus when the wagon with the ‘idol’ of Nerthus was washed in a small lake, after it had been used in a ritual journey. Instead Hultgård connects these ‘gångriter’ to the well-known medieval procession with the relics of St Erik in Uppsala. In the early text [DAO6]St Erik’s Miracles the cult of St Erik is described. Every year during the ‘gångedagarna’, the ‘walking days’, it says that it was custom to take the saint’s relics in an official procession from Old Uppsala to Östra Aros (modern-day Uppsala). According to another source, on 18 May, hence St Erik’s day in the ecclesiastical calendar, there was a procession with St Erik’s banner over the field in Uppsala, aiming to ‘helga fruchten med på jorden’, as it is described in the source, hence to fertilize the land. Medieval benedictions, obviously to be read out in the fields to secure good growth, have been preserved in some Swedish books of rituals. In *Manuale Upsalense* from 1487 we have the tradition of a *benedictio seminis*, potentially used during the procession in the cult of St Erik.

Hultgård’s analysis of these rituals is that they probably, or most certainly, are adoptions and adaptations of pagan fertility rituals, and he connects these with place-names such as *Frösåker*, *Torsåker*, and *Ulleråker*, which have been interpreted as examples of places where fertility cult rituals had been performed, and also with Continental examples, where it is explicitly stated that the rituals were of pagan origin. What we have is an expression of man using godly power to charge land and to ‘manipulate’ the landscape with the help of the gods.

In his discussion, Hultgård stresses that water was an important device in these rituals, and I will end this paper by once again highlighting how water was the main interface for communication with the metaphysical world, something that has existed since time immemorial.

Water from lakes, rivers, wells, and bogs — that is, liminal places — was looked upon as a medium that brought human beings closer to gods. If one wished to communicate with the gods, it would be wise to present values and goods — in other words, offerings — to these waters. This act would be by far the quickest way to get into contact with ‘the other side’ (Ilkjær and others 1990–2006; Stjernquist 1998; Busch 2000; Capelle 2000).

As regards chronology, an overall picture emerges for these offerings and depositions in waters and bogs in Scandinavia. We find them in the Stone Age, in the Bronze Age, and in the early Iron Age, and

the custom continued into the Christian time with the adoption and consecration of wells used in the pagan cult to Holy Trinity wells and St Olaf's wells in particular.

A special case is the war-booty offerings in lakes and bogs, found especially during the early Iron Age in southern Scandinavia. These archaeological sites are today famous: Thorsbjerg, Vimose, Nydam, Kragehul, Illerup, Ejsbøl, and Skedemosse on Öland (see esp. [Ilkjær and others 1990–2006](#); [Hagberg 1967–77](#); [Fabech 1991](#)). In other cases, more commonplace offerings have been found in bogs, wells, and lakes, such as Röekillorna in Skåne, Kärringsjön in Halland, and Tissø on Sjælland ([Arbman 1945](#); [Carlie 2000](#)). Bog body finds of people who were probably ritually killed are known from Borremose, Tolund, and Grauballe in Denmark ([Glob 1971](#)).

Several *Gudsiór* are found in Scandinavia, obviously to be interpreted as the lake where one or several god(s) dwell or which is dedicated to god(s), hence the examples of names that are direct counterparts to similar place-names from other ancient landscapes, such as Greek place-names with a god's name. One example is *Gussjö* in the province of Västmanland in Sweden ([Ståhl 1985](#): 90). Running water could also be the abode of god(s). One example of this is the Norwegian river of *Gudå* in Meråker, Nord-Trøndelag. The name is a compound of *Gud* 'god' and *å* 'river', and it has been interpreted by Sophus Bugge (see [Rygh 1904](#): 85; [Sandnes and Stemshaug 1990](#): 135) as 'the holy river, the river consecrated to the gods'.

I will end this paper by illuminating the importance of the water, lakes, and rivers in the pre-Christian cult of Scandinavia, by presenting a new, potentially very important case from Tjølling in southern Norway. In the very centre of the settlement district and parish of Tjølling there is, just north of the church, one small lake, *Vittersøtjønna*, and one even smaller lake, *Lillettjønna*. It is possible to show that they are remnants of a much larger lake, which was situated between the church at Tjølling and Vittersen in the north. To the east, it ended at a steep hill called *Helgafjell*. The name of this lake was probably ON **Vettriv*, to be found as the first element in the name *Vittersen* (Vittrixsyni RB, Vittrissinne 1440), which may be derived from a word group ON *vitr*, *vettr*, *vettr*, *vettr* (f. 'supernatural being, spirit, god'), Sw dial. *vittra* ('fairy (of the forest)'), OE *with* ('demon, being'), hence a probable meaning for the lake name is 'the lake where supernaturals or gods dwell'. This could thus be a counterpart to names like *Gudsjö* and *Tissø*. With this interpretation, of course the name *Helgafjell* becomes very interesting. It looks as though what we have here is evidence of a sacrificial lake in the central parts of the Tjølling and Kaupang area, perhaps a counterpart to the more well-known Tissø in Denmark. It would be extremely interesting to have an archaeological excavation in this former lake, especially at the foot of the steep Helgafjell. This is a concluding tip to any archaeologist amongst us.⁹

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⁹ This article links up with, expands, and reuses some of the material I discussed in [Brink 2001](#).

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