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## Chapter 8

# Living on: ancestors and the soul

*Alexandra Sanmark*

### Introduction

The written evidence for pre-Christian belief among the Anglo-Saxons is extremely sparse (Wilson 1992, chapter 2) and its character remains elusive. Compared with Norse religion, Anglo-Saxon pre-Christian religion has been subject to few in-depth studies, and only a vague image has been pieced together from the scattered written sources and archaeological material (see *e.g.* Wilson 1992; Herbert 1994; Davidson 1964 and 1982). One of the few scholars who have provided a more detailed view of Anglo-Saxon religion is Stephen Glosecki (1989). Through his examination of written sources and some archaeological material, he has argued that motifs in Anglo-Saxon poetry, charms and artefacts contain ‘reflexes of shamanism’ identifiable from a number of universal traits, such as animism, ecstasy, therapy (healing), shamanic initiation and assistance (from shamanic guardians). Glosecki argued, as Blomkvist (2002) has for Scandinavia, that the ‘widespread nature of this belief [shamanism] ... makes it less difficult to credit its presence in Old English than in its absence’ (Glosecki 1989, 79). Shamanism, like a number of other aspects of religion in the pre-Christian north, is more graphically illustrated in the evidence from Norse culture, including early material culture and later writing. It is now clear that great similarities existed between Norse and Sámi religions, particularly regarding sorcery (*seiðr*), and within this, shamanism (Dag Strömbäck 2000: 196–206; Price 2002, chapter 3; Sanmark 2004, chapter 4.1).

In this chapter I make use of later Norse religion as an echo or an analogy of Anglo-Saxon religious thinking, but focussing on a particular aspect that could be productive, namely the cult of ancestors. I intend to show that an ancestor cult was a highly significant and fully integrated part of pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia and Iceland, and from this point of departure, to demonstrate that it must have been an important feature in the pre-Christian religion of the Anglo-Saxons too. To this end, I shall employ written sources, archaeological evidence and comparative anthropological and ethnographical evidence. As will be shown below, there are clear similarities between the Anglo-Saxon and the Norse concept of the soul, implying that both had an ancestor cult and also strengthening the link between them.

## Structure of Norse religious thinking

Influenced by ideas of evolution, early scholars argued that religions developed from 'primitive' to more 'advanced' stages. Belief in spirits and ancestors was seen to represent religions at an early stage of the evolutionary ladder, while religions that focused on gods, such as Christianity, were seen as more sophisticated (see e.g. Klare 1933–4: 1). Thus deities such as Óðinn, Þórr, Freyr and Freya would form the most significant part of the more developed Norse religion. Although in theory superseded, this evolutionary perspective has continued to colour scholars' views. A prevailing theme is that Norse religion was constituted in two main strands. One consisted of myths and cults connected to individual and personal deities who were seen as 'ruling and reigning'. The other strand consisted of more 'animistic' cults connected to a wide variety of beings, such as norns (goddesses of fate), trolls, elves, giants, and dwarves. Many of these were connected to home and nature and played important roles in people's everyday lives and contributed to their general survival (Ljungberg 1980: 117; Hellström 1996: 229).

Thus, during the first half of the twentieth century, scholars who had based their ideas primarily on Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* and *The Poetic Edda* saw the cult of the gods as the most important religious aspect. This strand was named 'higher religion', while the cult connected to other beings was termed 'lower religion'. Although the *Poetic Edda* also contains many references to gods, this work mentions a larger number of other supernatural beings (Faulkes 1987; Larrington 1996; Ljungberg 1938: 282; Hellström 1996: 229–30). Scholars now mostly avoid weighting the two strands, but distinctions may still be found between 'major' gods, 'divinities of lesser importance' and 'spirits, giants and ancestors' (Brink 2001: 85, 88).

One way of approaching the general theatre of religion, whether involving higher gods or not, is in the study of ancestors and its implied belief in what becomes of us. Many scholars of religion such as Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim and Fustel de Coulanges have stressed the centrality of the ancestor cult in religious systems (Artelius 2000: 178; Spencer 1877; Durkheim 1915; Fustel de Coulanges 1874). Very little attention was initially paid to it in Norse religion, yet, as Torsten Blomkvist has pointed out (2002: 136), excluding an ancestor cult from Viking Age Scandinavia and Iceland, would make these peoples the unique exception. Emil Birkeli (1938, 1943) was the first scholar who studied the ancestor cult, separating it from the cult of the gods (Ellis 1943, chapter s IVff) and since then, it has been increasingly emphasised (A.-S. Gräslund 2001; Sognnes 2000; Brink 2001; Artelius 2000, 176–80; Kaliff 1997; Blomkvist 2002, chapter 4; Badou 1989; Gurevich 1969). However, despite studies of this kind, there are many major works, in which the ancestor cult is still not described as a significant part of Norse religion (Näsström 2001; Graham-Campbell 2001; Branston 1980; Steinsland 1992).

Written sources from Iceland and Scandinavia contain a large number of references to the ancestor cult, but we must keep in mind that all these sources are Christian, and written down some time after the introduction of Christianity. One reason why the ancestor cult may seem prominent in these sources is that while the cults of the gods seem to have disappeared rather quickly after the 'official' introduction of Christianity,

belief in supernatural beings of various kinds appears to have survived long after the beginnings of the Christianization (Sanmark 2004, chapter 4.1).

Scholars have suggested various definitions of ancestor cult over the years. One of the most useful reads as follows:

'continuous worship of dead family members, which presupposes that death is only a transition to another form of existence; it usually means a continuous feeling of solidarity and community with deceased ancestors, as well as dependence on and care of these past family members' (after Anne-Sofie Gräslund, 2001: 224).

It is important to point out that an ancestor cult may not be motivated in the same way a cult of the dead would be, as manifested in mortuary rituals, *i.e.* rites performed before and during the burial (Hardacre 1993: 263–4; Ranke *et al.* 1973: 112–15; Williams, this vol.). But the two may be difficult to distinguish in practice.

In general, pre-Christian Norse religion consisted of three strands: the cult of the gods, the animistic strand, and magic (Sanmark 2004: 147–50). By looking at other types of evidence, archaeological and anthropological, it is clear that magic and animism must have formed a large part of the religion. The ancestor cult fits into the second strand, as animism can be defined as belief in the existence of spirits (Sanmark 2004: 147–50). The complex concept of animism has been widely discussed (see for example: Bowie 2000: 14–15), and in this regard it is important to maintain the distinction between gods and ancestors (*cf.* Blomkvist 2002: 137).

In recent research Norse religion is seen as most similar to so-called *indigenous religions* (*cf.* B. Gräslund 1994: 16–17; Sanmark 2004: 178–9; Brink 2001; Hultgård 1996: 28). An indigenous religion can be defined as belief in the existence of a supernatural world and supernatural powers, which include 'gods' and spirits of various kinds. The spirits are however seen as more important than the gods, since they play more significant roles in people's daily life. The spirits of the ancestors play a central part, and are contacted through 'medicine men'/shamans (Hultkrantz 1968).

The relationship between the ancestral spirits and the living is often very close and 'characterised by a combination of love, respect and fear' (B. Gräslund 1994: 17). The ancestral spirits are seen as potent and at times also malicious, and incessantly demanding support from the living. They must therefore be treated with reverence. Despite the fact that they are often supposed to dwell in some remote otherworld, they continue to appear among the living, as well as in or close to their graves (B. Gräslund 1994: 17 with references; Brendalsmo *et al.* 1992: 101–111). As a consequence of this, death becomes nothing but a 'temporary exclusion from society' (quote from R. Hertz found in Taylor 2002: 164).

### Character of the soul

The belief in the enduring presence of ancestors as animated and active spirits is rooted in a belief in a soul that survives after death. Indigenous religions often feature a pluralistic soul, which means that the soul is seen to represent several spirits and spiritual entities (B. Gräslund 1994: 17–18). This concept can be simplified into a duality, consisting of the 'breath soul' (also called the body soul) and the 'free soul' (or the

dream soul). The breath soul is seen to leave the body at the time of death ('with the last breath'). The free soul, on the other hand, is believed to stay until the corpse has 'collapsed completely', e.g. through decomposition or cremation. After this has taken place, the free soul can begin its new life. It is this soul that is thought to represent the dead in the next life. During life, the free soul is active in the various states of the unconscious mind, such as dreams and trances. As long as a person is conscious, this soul is passive. When a person enters a state of unconsciousness, the free soul becomes active and leaves the body, and when it returns, the person wakes up (B. Gräslund 1994: 18 with references).

The ancestor cult described in the Norse sources is to a large extent connected to a pluralistic soul. The concept has been discussed by many scholars from the end of the 19th century and onwards, and a number of different souls have been identified in the primary sources: *hugr*, *hamr*, *fylgja* and *hamingjur*. It is important to point out that these various souls were in many ways separate beings who could lead their own autonomous existences (Turville-Petre 1975: 227–30; Price 2002: 59–60).

The *hugr*, which can be translated as 'soul', 'thought' or 'mind', could leave the body either in the shape of a human or an animal. A person could control her/his own *hugr*. It is possible that Óðinn's two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, who every day flew across the world, were concrete forms of his *hugr*, i.e. his 'thought' and 'mind'. The *hamr* can be translated as 'shell', 'shape', or 'coat', and can be seen as the form that the *hugr* took through shape-shifting (*hamhleypa*). During this phase, the *hugr* most often appeared as a bird, but at times also as e.g. a bear, a wolf or a whale. The aim of shape-shifting was temporarily to *become* an animal. In this way, it was possible to enter the otherworld and visit the spirits of the ancestors. While this lasted, the body was in a state of unconsciousness (Ellis 1943: 127; Turville-Petre 1975: 229–30; Hedeager 2004: 235–6; Price 2002: 59–60).

The *fylgja* can be described as a 'follower' or '*doppelganger*', and appeared in either human or animal form. The etymology of this word has been interpreted in different ways (see Glosecki 1989: 186; De Vries 1977: 147f; Price 2002: 59; Hedeager 2004: 235). It is important to distinguish between the animal *fylgja* and the animal shape taken on by a spirit. The latter was active only while the body was unconscious and seems to have been enlightened by the person's conscious mind. The *fylgja* on the other hand was the active follower of the human. At the person's death, the *fylgja* could start leading her own independent existence. Another interesting point is that the *fylgjur* could be inherited and 'belonged' to one family line. They have thus been seen as some kind of dead ancestors (Hedeager 2004: 235; Ellis 1943: 127ff.; Price 2002: 59). The *hamingjur* could also be passed on after death and usually stayed within the same family. The *hamingjur* can be seen as a personification of a person's luck, or luck-spirit (Price 2002: 59–60; Ellis 1943: 13ff.).

## The Norse migration of the soul

After it leaves the body, the pre-Christian soul is often said in literature to take the form of an animal. Icelandic sagas contain many examples of this shape-shifting (Ellis 1943: 122ff.), especially in association with Óðinn, who was the master of this art. According

to the *Ynglinga saga*, Óðinn's body seemed dead or asleep, while he himself took the shape of a winged creature, a quadruped animal, a fish or a snake. In this shape, he then travelled to 'far-off lands' (*Ynglinga saga*, chapter 7, see Hollander 1964: 10–11; Ellis 1943: 122; Ström 1958: 435; Price 2002: 93–107; Hedeager 1997 and 2004: 234–5). It is also interesting to note that Óðinn, on at least one occasion, is described as the lord of the undead (*drauga dróttin*) (*Ynglinga saga*, chapter 7, see Hollander 1964: 11; Price 2002: 104). In *Hávamál* it is stated that Óðinn could make hanged corpses walk and talk to him (Larrington 1996: 37, stanza 157; cf. Ström 1958: 434). Óðinn thus had an important function in connection with the dead.

Birds were often the chosen vehicles of shape-shifting. In the Poetic Edda, birds were the bringers of prophetic advice. One such example is the eagle in *Völuspá* who was seen as an omen of the New Age (Larrington 1996: 12). Sigurd Fafnisbani was guided by birds after accidentally having consumed some of the dragon's blood (Faulkes 1987: 101–2; Larrington 1996: 162–4). Other examples include *The List of Rig* where Kon was advised by a bird, and *The Poem of Helgi Hiorvardsson*, where Atli made a compact with a bird (Larrington 1996: 123–4 and 252). The significance of birds in the Norse religion also seems to have survived in various forms of Nordic folklore. In southern Sweden, people talked of the 'night ravens', which were evil or unhappy dead who left their graves at night. Birds must moreover be well treated; to kill a small bird, or even imitate one, could be dangerous as they could then take their revenge (Schön 1998: 58).

### Intimations of the Anglo-Saxon soul

In contexts that could be pre-Christian, the Anglo-Saxons too appear to have had wandering souls, often showing a strong connection with birds. Bird imagery is clearly seen in the poems *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, in which the speaker refers to 'the flight of his soul'. Glosecki argued that this reflects a pre-Christian tradition of shamanic travel in the form of winged creatures (Glosecki 1989: 78–83).

*The Seafarer* contains several examples of 'the flight of the soul':

*And so now my mind (hyge) moves out beyond the spirit-locker,  
my soul with the sea flood  
over the whale's country soars widely-  
over the surfaces of the earth – then comes back again to me,  
hungry and greedy; the lone-flier (anfloga) yells,  
whets for the whale-road my spirit; irresistibly  
urges it out over the stretches of seas.  
(The Seafarer, lines 58–64a, cited in Glosecki 1989: 78).*

This passage refers to the *hyge* which crosses over to another world, screaming like a bird. According to Glosecki, this points to a lingering belief in the existence of a 'free soul' in Anglo-Saxon England. The Old English word *hyge*, 'mind' is a cognate to the Old Norse *hugr*, which was discussed above (Glosecki 1989: 78–9). In another passage from *The Seafarer*, traits of Old English *hama* meaning 'coat' or 'covering' is found. This word is a cognate of the Old Norse *hamr*.

*Therefore now compel*

heart thoughts            that I high streams  
 salt waves' rolling,    should try for myself;  
 my heart's desire urges    on every occasion  
 my spirit to travel,    to seek far from here  
 the land of strangers.

(*The Seafarer*, lines 33a-38, Glosecki 1989: 79).

Glosecki interpreted this passage as a reference to the flight of a dissociated soul, which has a life of its own and a capability to compel the body, its 'flesh-coat', *i.e.* *flæschama*. Compounds with *hama* occur frequently in Anglo-Saxon poetry, which demonstrates that the soul was seen as a separate entity surrounded by a coat of flesh. Another such example is *feþerhama*, *i.e.* feather-coat. The Old Norse equivalent is *fjadrhamr*, which signifies that when someone, *e.g.* Óðinn, put on this feather coat, he/she can fly to other worlds (Glosecki 1989: 79–80).

Elsewhere the poem suggests that in the minds of the population, the ancestors could at times provide comfort for the human soul. Also in this passage, the ancestral spirits were reached through ecstatic flight, where the soul took the shape of a bird (Glosecki 1989: 80).

At times the song of the wild swan  
 I made do for my entertainment,            the cry of the gannet  
 and music of the curlew            for the laughter of men,  
 the singing mew            for a drink of mead.  
 Storms there beat stone-cliffs,    where the tern answered them,  
 icy-feathered;            full often the eagle screamed,  
 dewy-feathered;            nor could any protector-kinsman  
 comfort my destitute spirit.

(*The Seafarer*, 19b-26, Glosecki 1989: 80).

Another interesting Anglo-Saxon example where the soul takes the shape of a bird comes from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. The chapter which describes how King Edwin and his High Priest Coifi accepted Christianity contains the well-known passage comparing human life to the flight of a sparrow through the hall (Sherley-Price 1968: II.13). According to this description, the bird entering the hall through one door and leaving through another is capable of going between the different worlds.

On at least two instances in the sources, there are possible references to the Anglo-Saxon version of the Old Norse *fylgja*. One such example is the Old English charm *Wid Dweorh*:

Here came walking in, in here, a spider-creature –  
 he had his coat (*hama*) in hand, said that you were his horse,  
 laid his reins on your neck. They began to travel from the land;  
 once they came from the land, then the limbs began to feel cold.  
 (Glosecki 1989: 186)

Glosecki's interpretation of this is that the 'spider-creature' (*spiderwiht*) is a version of a *fylgja*, carrying its coat/skin (*hama*). The rider may thus be a shape-shifter (Glosecki 1989: 187). Another possible example of a *fylgja* is seen in the term *anfloga* (*i.e.* 'the lone-flier'), which is found in a passage of *The Seafarer* quoted above. The lone-flier and

the *fylgja* share some similarities: they leave from and return to the same ‘corporeal home’, they travel through the same otherworldly medium, and they both resemble winged creatures more than humans (Glosecki 1989: 187).

### The evidence of images

Lotte Hedeager has argued that the metamorphosis of animals and humans described in the written sources may be seen in the animal ornament on objects of the 5th to the 7th centuries (Hedeager 2004: 246). For example, the C-type bracteates, which portray human beings surrounded by various kinds of animals have been seen to depict a shaman’s journeys to the otherworld. The heads of the humans, often shaped like birds, have been interpreted as the ‘free soul’. The large animal that is frequently present (depicted as a hybrid between a horse and an elk) is seen as escorting the shaman to the world of the dead. By the animal’s mouth there is often a sign, which has been seen to indicate that the animal is ‘ensouled’. Other animals escorting the shamans are birds and snakes. This type of iconography also appears on several of the B-type bracteates (Hedeager 1997: 274–5 and 2004: 227–32; Hauck 1983). The decorations thus include the three animals that are significant as guiding spirits within the shamanic worldview. The snake procures knowledge from the otherworld, the bird flies to different parts of the world and is therefore knowledgeable, and the large animal serves as a protector on the journey (Hedeager 2004: 228–32). Other interesting animal images, probably intended as shape-shifters, are the birds and boars represented on Vendel-period helmets, such as Valsgärde 7 (Uppland) (Figure 8.1) and Torslunda (Öland).

Anglo-Saxon artefacts have similar ornamentation to the Norse, which in turn suggests similarities in belief. A wild boar decorates the crest of the helmet from Bentley Grange (Derbyshire). On the Sutton Hoo helmet, a dragon forms the crest from the neck to the forehead, a bird covers the forehead and eyebrows and upper mouth with its beak, wings and tail, while the boars are placed by the temples, at the very edges of the bird’s wings (Figure 8.2) (Hedeager 2004: 228–32; Bruce-Mitford 1979: 35). Further Anglo-Saxon examples include the Sutton



Figure 8.1. The Valsgärde 7 helmet. Photography: Annika Larsson





*Figure 8.2. Replica of the Sutton Hoo Helmet. © Trustees of the British Museum*

Hoo purse and shield. The purse-lid is decorated with a pair of plaques depicting a man between two raging animals, an image strikingly similar to the Toroslunda dies, and another representing a bird of prey lunging on a duck (Figure 8.3) (Bruce-Mitford 1979: 104 and 110–11). Winged creatures – a bird of prey and a winged dragon – moreover feature on the fittings for the front of the shield (Bruce-Mitford 1979: 32 and 38).

Through her detailed study of early Anglo-Saxon animal-ornamented shields, Tania Dickinson concluded that the shields decorated with Salin's Style I frequently include references to 'monstrous, underworld embodiments of evil or death and to gods or sorcerers who can defeat or offer salvation from them'. The interrelationship between the motifs in Style I, the figural mounts, and Scandinavian bracteates suggests that the cult of Óðinn was at the heart of the iconography (Dickinson 2005: 160).

Stephen Glosecki strengthens the arguments put forward by Hedeager and Dickinson. Glosecki felt that the aggression of the wild boar made it a symbol of 'manly power': 'We can visualize the boar on Beowulf's helmet – especially when we look slantwise at the Benty Grange, Sutton Hoo, or Toroslunda analogues – but we can hardly imagine the highly charged resonance the boar image had for men who could recall the last time they were a spear's length way from a quarter ton of animated anger intent on their destruction' (1989: 53). He used the word *nigouimes* to describe the boar, finding English terms, such as 'follower' and 'guardian spirit' to be misleading. *Nigouimes* simply means 'shamanic personal guardian', a term also used by Lévi-Strauss (Glosecki 1989: 31–2 and 55–8). Shamanic peoples believe that such guardians are needed in order to stop shamans and spirits from stealing other people's souls. Since the *nigouimes* is the most effective guardian of the soul, it plays a significant role for the warrior. Glosecki thus

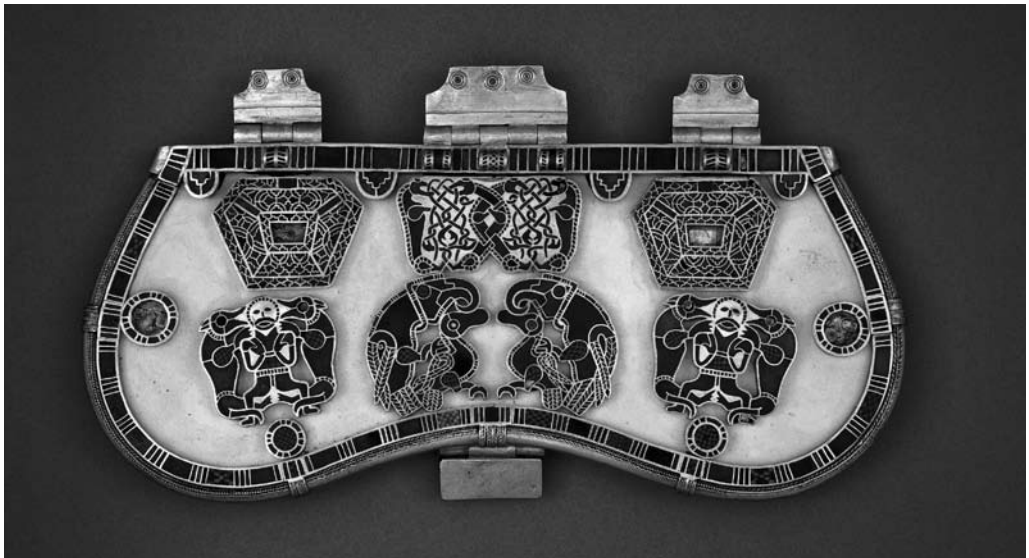


Figure 8.3. The Sutton Hoo purse lid. © Trustees of the British Museum

concluded that the wearers of the Sutton Hoo and the Benty Grange helmets ascribed the boar images with the animistic power that these spirit guardians were seen to have. An important concept in shamanic societies is that of sympathetic magic: 'the image equals the object represented'. This means that the boar image provided the power of a boar to the wearer, and was thus seen as alive, and as a 'power source capable of independent action' (Glosecki 1989: 53–7).

## Ancestors and burial

The treatment of burial mounds should provide an important point of entry to the cult of ancestors as these monuments functioned as places for communication between the dead and the living. The rituals performed at burial mounds seem to have had at least two different functions: to honour the dead through offerings, or to wake the dead in order to gain esoteric knowledge (*cf.* Brendalsmo *et al.* 1992: 96.) One of the most famous examples of offerings to the dead comes from the *Saga of King Hákon Hákonson*, a Christian king in 10th-century Norway. According to this saga, Hákon had unsuccessfully tried to turn Norway into a Christian country. At one point the farmers of the kingdom demanded that the king should participate in their annual ritual feast at Trondheim. At this feast, the participants drank to the gods as well as 'in memory of departed kinsfolk' (Hollander 1964: 107–11).

The wakening of the dead appears to be referred to in some Norwegian runic inscriptions, such as that on the stone from Eggja, Sogndal i Sogn, which has been archaeologically dated to 650–700 (Brendalsmo *et al.* 1992, 92). According to Ottar Grønvik's interpretation, part of this inscription states that one should 'not seek the man who howls over the naked dead'. Grønvik argued that this was a prohibition against necromantic practices, which was carried out under ecstatic forms. He saw this kind of necromancy in opposition to the 'traditional' part of the ancestor cult, *i.e.* to sit on the grave of an ancestor (Brendalsmo *et al.* 1992, 92; Grønvik 1985: 154–5, 163). This practice of 'sitting outside' (*útisetá*) had traditionally been connected to *seiðr* (Ström 1961: 227; Brendalsmo *et al.* 1992: 92). Sitting on a mound is connected to the cult of the dead (Ellis 1943: 105ff.). According to Folke Ström, there were two kinds of *útisetá*, one active and one passive. The active form included the wakening of the dead, who were then more or less forced to reveal their secrets (Ström 1961: 227). Brendalsmo and Røthe argued that this could be described as necromancy and that it was most likely performed at burial mounds (Brendalsmo *et al.* 1992: 92–3). The eddaic poems also contain several references to the wakening of the dead (Brendalsmo *et al.* 1992: 93–6). One such example is *Grogalder*, which tells us about a son who wakes up his mother from the dead in order to get her help (Brendalsmo *et al.* 1992: 93–4). Another example is found in the *Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani*, in which a man called Helgi who had died and gone to Valhalla was called back to his burial mound to comfort his mourning widow (Larrington 1996: 139–40; *cf.* DuBois, 1999: 77–8).

Practices connected to the ancestor cult are more evident in the medieval provincial laws. 'Sitting outside' was prohibited in the Law of the Borgarthing, (BL I: 16). The Older Law of the Gulathing outlawed the making of sacrifices to mounds (*hauga*) (GL 29: *Hauga* most likely refers to burial mounds. *Cf.* Brendalsmo *et al.* 1992: 96). According

to the Older Laws of the Gulathing and the Borgarthing, it was illegal to ‘wake up trolls’. In line with Grønvik’s arguments quoted above, this has been interpreted as the waking of the dead who were buried in mounds (GL 32; BL I: 16; Brendalmo *et al.* 1992: 97). The Later Law of the Gulathing also prescribed strict punishments for those who ‘tried to wake up ghosts or those who lived in the mounds’. This law moreover made it illegal to believe that mounds were inhabited by *landvættir* (Keyser *et al.* 1848: 308). Furthermore, *Gutalagen* (the Law of Gotland) made it illegal to invoke mounds (Holmbäck *et al.* 1979).

For Anglo-Saxon England, Sarah Semple has reviewed secondary uses of prehistoric burial mounds, for burial, ritual deposition, and cult, concluding that burial mounds must have played an important part in a variety of Anglo-Saxon religious practices (2002, chapters 2, 3, 6). Semple also reviewed the perceptions of burial mounds and barrows in Anglo-Saxon written sources, showing how they changed over time. In the 8th century, burial mounds symbolised ‘death, terror, sorrow and imprisonment’ (e.g. *The Life of Guthlac* and *The Life of Wilfrid*, see Semple 2002: 228–242; this vol.). She saw this perception as due to a ‘concerted attempt’ by ecclesiastics to discourage the population ‘both from barrow-burial and from using traditional ancestral locations for funerary rites, and ultimately to sever ancestral links with their pagan forefathers and heathen past’ (Semple 2002: 246–47). It is well-known that priests made use of local legends during the conversion period in order to explain Christianity to the population. There are many examples from Scandinavia, where priests used figures from the Norse mythology in order to achieve this aim (Sanmark 2004: 95–99).

By the 10th century, two new sets of perceptions had evolved. The barrows were now either seen as places inhabited by ‘supernatural agencies’ described as criminals or murderers, or as places inhabited by monstrous mythical creatures. Examples of the former are *Andreas*, *The Wife’s Lament* and *Guthlac A*, while examples of the latter type are *Wid Færstice*, *Maxims II* and the 10th-century account of Cedd’s foundation at Lastingham (Semple 2002: 242–47). According to Semple, the reason for the 10th-century perceptions was the increasing use of these monuments as execution cemeteries between the 8th and the 11th centuries. The use of prehistoric remains as places for execution cemeteries formed part of judicial practice particularly from the 8th century onwards. Two thirds of the excavated execution sites are associated with prehistoric or Anglo-Saxon barrows (Reynolds 1999: 105–10; Semple 2002: 318–23).

Semple’s analysis implies that an ancestor cult had formed a central part of the Anglo-Saxon pre-Christian religion. Ancestors were not always good-natured: when not properly looked after, they were seen to become angry and dangerous, and were thus often feared. It would not be surprising if horror stories regarding burial mounds were spread in Christian times. Where the belief in ancestral spirits was strong this unrest could be transferred to Christian burial grounds. After the introduction of Christianity in Finland, when the population had to bury their dead in the churchyards, the dead ancestors could no longer be cared for in line with the old traditions. As a result, the churchyards came to be seen as ‘frightful places, full of dissatisfied dead’ (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1987: 34).

*The Wife’s Lament* from the 10th-century *Exeter Book* has traditionally been seen as a description of a woman who after the death of her lord lived in a ‘friendless exile’

in an 'earthen dugout' (*eorðscræfe*) or 'earth chamber' (*eorðsele*). Semple has pointed out that these same words were also used in *Beowulf* in the description of the burial mound. She has moreover drawn the attention to the use of the term *leger* in the poem, which is generally associated with the dead and their graves. Semple's interpretation of this poem is therefore that the woman was not exiled, but rather 'a restless ghost confined to the place of her burial, the *eorðscræfe* or *eorðsele*' (Semple 2002: 225–27; Bradley 1982: 382–85).

A well-known scene on the 8th century Franks casket has long been seen as representing a burial mound (Becker 1973; Webster 1999; Fern, this vol.; Figure 8.4). The right-hand scene depicts three cloaked figures. The central scene portrays a horse, a bird, a burial mound with a person inside it, and a cloaked figure with a staff. The left-hand scene shows a winged horse sitting on a 'mound' with a snake round its nose. Opposite this creature there is a warrior. The central and left-hand scenes, in contrast to the right-hand one, are set in a forest. The accompanying text reads:

'Here Hos sits on the sorrow-mound; she suffers distress in that Ertae had decreed for her [had imposed it upon her], a wretched den of sorrows and torments of mind' (Semple 2002: 228; Becker 1973: 27–40 and 275).

Leslie Webster has convincingly argued that the central and the left-hand panels signify a world of terror, similar to that found in Felix's description of Guthlac's fenland. This consisted of woods and rushes, 'a world of spiritual dangers, of demons and evil spirits, at least as much as physical ones' (Webster 1999: 241–46; Colgrave 1956: 86–89,



Figure 8.4. The Franks Casket. © Trustees of the British Museum

116–19). In this context, it must be of significance that the body inside the mound (in the central scene) is depicted wearing a cloak, and not as a skeleton or a pile of bones, as this implies that the body is neither cremated nor decomposed. The figure standing to the right of the mound seems to be wearing a similar piece of clothing. This in turn suggests that the tale set out here is based on a story with pre-Christian origins about a woman whose free soul has not been released. She would thus be trapped in a liminal place, between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The horse, the bird, the winged horse and the snake suggest the animals that Hedeager (above) saw as acting as guiding spirits in a shamanic worldview. The presence of these animals thus further strengthens the idea that the left and the middle scenes represent a liminal phase between the world of the living and the world of the dead (see also Fern, this vol.).

### Ancestors and Drinking

That burial mounds also served as locations of feasts for the dead has already been mentioned in the story of King Hákon (above). Drinking rituals have been seen as one of the most important elements in the ceremonies that served to strengthen the link between the living and deceased ancestors (Ström 1960a: 120; Sundqvist 2002: 259–66; Sanmark 2004, chapter 5). Chapter 23 of the Older Law of the Gulathing deals with ale feasts that were held for the dead, called ‘inheritance ale’ or ‘soul’s ale’. These feasts could be held on ‘the seventh or the thirtieth morning’ after the death of a person, ‘or even later’. The law required a priest to be present at such feasts, presumably to make sure that they were carried out according to Christian rituals (GL 23). In the *Capitula Synodica* (for the year 852) Hincmar of Rheims stated that priests must not get drunk at the annual feasts for a dead person, nor consecrate the devotional bowl at the feasts. It was moreover not allowed to drink to the soul of the dead (Sundqvist 2002: 263; cf. A.-S. Gräslund 2001: 226).

That food and drink were offered by pre-Christians not only at the time of death, but also at regular intervals, e.g. the anniversary of the death, is strongly suggested by much later evidence from Estonia and Latvia, areas officially christianized in the first quarter of the 13th century. According to the Riga Provincial Council of 1428, the Livonians organised meals in cemeteries and churches, and brought food to their dead ancestors in order to console them. This statement is supported by the pottery fragments found in churchyards, and also by the traditions present in the isolated area of Setomaa in south-eastern Estonia. Here, the population hold commemorative meals on the graves of their dead ancestors, both on church holidays and at commemorative days for the dead (e.g. 40 days, 6 months, 1, 3, 6 and 9 years after the death). As part of this tradition, vodka can also be poured on the grave. According to popular belief, the commemorative meal is a way of communicating and reconnecting with the deceased, who are believed to take part in the meal. The reasoning behind the current practices may not be the same as in pre-Christian times, but echoes a similar expression of the human need to be near their loved ones. It should also be noted that food offerings to the honour of the dead are part of Orthodox Christianity. There seems to be no reason to doubt that the population has had a continuous tradition of offering food to the

dead from early Christian times onwards. These rituals in themselves most likely derive from pre-Christian religious practice (Valk 2001: 7, 81–4). The tradition of leaving food offerings on graves was also present in Sweden as late as the twentieth century (A.-S. Gräslund 1992: 142; A.-S. Gräslund 1969).

Another interesting example from the present day comes from the Khanties, a Finno-Ugrian people living in Western Siberia. In the Khanty burial grounds, small house-like constructions are erected on the graves. These ‘houses’ have small windows that lead straight into the grave chamber. When the people visit the grave of a dead relative, they open the window and knock three times. They then have a memorial meal on the grave and put a serving of food and drink close to the window of the house-like construction (A.-S. Gräslund 2001: 222–23).

Anne-Sofie Gräslund has linked these rituals to archaeological finds from Sweden, in particular to the external cists found at the edges of some Viking Age burial mounds. These cists are *c.* 1.5 x 1.2 metres in size. Some are square and others have three sides, with the open end towards the mound. The contents of these cists varied. Some contained very few finds, such as cremated bones or potsherds. Among the most interesting finds were however a horse skull, and a set of horse’s teeth (A.-S. Gräslund 2001: 227–31; A.-S. Gräslund 1969). Gräslund has argued that these cists were used for food and drink offerings to the dead (A.-S. Gräslund 2001: 227–31; A.-S. Gräslund 1969).

Another possible example of this tradition comes from the island of Gotland. On the southern side of some graves from the early Iron Age, there are large, often flat, stones. These have been interpreted as a kind of sacrificial stone or table (Blomkvist 2002: 144; Nylén 1958: 80–81). It is interesting to note that these stones, as well as the external cists discussed above are located on the south or southwest side of the grave. (*cf.* A.-S. Gräslund 2001: 227ff.).

In Anglo-Saxon England evidence of drinking and feasting associated with burial has been noted in a few cemeteries. At Sutton Hoo, a cattle feast was inferred immediately following the construction of the first mound in the princely cemetery, Mound 5 (Carver 2005, 83–4, 187–99). At the mixed cemetery at Snape (East Anglia) seven pits of early Anglo-Saxon date were interpreted as cooking pits used for ritual feasting or cooking at the time of the burial. Pestell pointed to other possible examples of such pits at a number of cemeteries including Norton (Cleveland), Flixton (Suffolk) and Nettleton Top (Lincolnshire) (Pestell 2001: 260). A similar interpretation was offered for two features identified within a Bronze Age round barrow at Cossington (Leicestershire), re-used for burial in the early Anglo-Saxon period (Thomas 2008: 63–65). In this context it is naturally important to note that post-burial feasting would in most cases not leave any traces or may not be dated conclusively as contemporary with the use of the site. Pestell’s findings however led him to conclude that features of this type may well prove ‘to have been far more common in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and to have played a regular part in the ritual associated with burial’ (Pestell 2001: 260). A late reference to the practice is found in the 10th-century writings of Ælfric, who advised priests not to ‘eat or drink in the place where the corpse lies, lest you are imitators of the heathenism which they practise there’ (Whitelock 1981: 218; Morris 1989: 61).

## Ancestors and landscape

Ancestors were connected to natural features in the landscape, such as mountains and hills. In the *Landnámabók* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, we are told about a father and a son (Thorolf Mostur-Beard and Thorstein Cod-Biter) who after their deaths retired to their 'familial mountain', where they feasted together with their ancestors. This mountain was called *Helgafell*, i.e. the holy mountain (Chapter 11, Pálsson *et al.* 1989: 38; Pálsson *et al.* 1972, chapter 85, 45–46)

Another interesting example is found in *Landnámabók*. Here it is stated that the descendants of the Christian settler Auðr Djúpúgða (Aud the Deep-minded), began to worship the hills where she used to pray during her lifetime. The descendants are also reported to have sacrificed to her/the mountain and to have built a 'temple' there. It is moreover stated that they 'believed they would go into the hills when they died' (Pálsson *et al.* 1972, chapter 97, 52). The connection between ancestor cult and natural landscape features is supported by evidence from both Sámi and indigenous religions, where the ancestor cult is often combined with the concept of transmigration. This means that the deceased can reappear in animals, plants, stones or other objects. This also includes the concepts of rebirth and reincarnation into another person. (B. Gräslund 1994: 17; Price 2002: 244–47). We are told that when the brothers Haukr and Gaukr drowned together with their father, they were transformed into dragons (Klare 1933–34: 24).

The fact that ancestors seem to have been connected to features in the landscape also fits in with the arguments that the pre-Christians believed in an 'ensouled' landscape. Stefan Brink has argued that to the people of pre-Christian Scandinavia, the landscape was metaphysically charged, and that they thus lived in a 'numinous environment' (Brink 2001: 81–82). He compared this to the religion of the Greeks where 'all nature must be described as a sacred landscape, created by the gods and inhabited by gods, and especially demons, spirits or 'powers'' (Brink 2001: 84). In Roman religion, similarly, supernatural powers, named *numen* or *genius loci*, were believed to be present in particular places. Brink associated these concepts to the Polynesian *mana*, which both people and places were seen to possess, and thus became taboo in various degrees (Brink 2001: 84–85; for the ensouled world of the Siberian peoples, see Price 2002: 293–96). The aspect of taboo is particularly interesting in connection to the description of *Helgafell* in *Landnámabók*, as it is stated that 'no one was allowed even to look at it [the holy mountain] unless he'd washed himself first' (Pálsson *et al.* 1972, chapter 85, 45.)

It seems very likely that the ancestor cult formed a large, if not the major part, of the ideology behind these practices. In Anglo-Saxon England the same ideas may be implied by placenames connected to the gods, such as Wenslow (Bedfordshire), i.e. Woden's mound (*hlāw*), Thunderlow, (Essex), i.e. Thunor's mound. (Meaney 1995: 36).

### *Malevolent ancestors: the laying of ghosts*

In Icelandic sagas ghosts are often said to cause illnesses, madness or death. One such example concerns the story of Thorolf Twist-Foot in *Eyrbyggja saga*. After his death, Thorolf began to terrorise the area around his old home. Animals that came too close to his grave were driven mad and died. Soon afterwards, humans started



dying from strange illnesses. In the end, all the farms in the valley were abandoned. The people had either been killed, or driven away, by the spirit of Thorolf (Pálsson *et al.* 1989, chapter 34). The descriptions of the ghosts' physical appearance in the sagas are particularly interesting in this context. The most crucial point is that the ghosts have retained their human body. The suggested term 'corpse ghosts' thus seems rather fitting (Ström 1960b: 253). An example of a 'corpse ghost' is found in the *Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani* mentioned above. When Helgi returned from the dead, he had blood streaming from his wounds, and his hands were ice cold (Larrington 1996: 139f). There were various methods to stop the corpse from haunting the world of the living. The body could be decapitated, staked, or its spine could be broken. Another alternative was cremation, followed by the scattering of the ashes into the sea (Ström 1958: 432–34). Thorolf's body was removed from his grave, and reburied in a new grave. On top of this grave, a wall was erected that was so high that only birds could fly over it. This stopped Thorolf temporarily. When he again started to haunt the living, his body was exhumed and then cremated, and the ashes were scattered in the wind (Pálsson *et al.* 1989, chapters 34 and 63). In Greenland in recent times, hunters are reported to have boiled two corpses to rid them of the flesh and prevent them haunting, then buried the bones in a churchyard (Nedkvitne 2004: 146–48).

It seems likely that stories of this kind indicate behaviour from pre-Christian times. The presence of this type of belief is also indicated by burial practices at Valsgårde, Sweden. Frands Herschend has pointed out that the boat burials were 'open, or at least easily accessible' until some time after the funeral. According to Herschend, this suggests that 'the living considered the deceased gone, rather than dead. Eventually they declared him dead and closed the grave' (Herschend 2001: 71).

Evidence of belief in 'corpse ghosts' is found also in Anglo-Saxon England. In the writings of Ælfric it is stated that 'Witches still go to cross-roads and heathen burials with their delusive magic; and call to the devil; and he comes to them in the likeness of the man who is buried there, as if he arise from death; but she cannot bring it about that the dead arise through her magic' (Pope 1968: 796, lines 118–23; Meaney 1984–5: 130–31). The words 'in the likeness of the man who is buried there' is significant in this respect and can be seen as evidence of a belief in ghosts in the shape of 'corpse ghosts'. Ælfric's statement that the witches could not raise the dead, suggests necromantic practices, as was discussed above in relation to the Norse religion (*cf.* Meaney 1984–85).

The Life of St Modwenna (Chapter 47) tells the story of two peasants who had wrongfully left the abbot of Burton in order to live under the jurisdiction of Count Roger the Poitevin (Bartlett 2002: 193–99). The peasants brought false charges against the abbot, which caused the count to seize and destroy the monastery's crop. The next day, the two peasants suddenly died. They were placed in coffins and buried in the churchyard. However, the same evening, they reappeared carrying their coffins. This happened also the following evening, when they walked through the paths and fields of the village, now in the shape of men carrying coffins on their shoulders, now in the likeness of bears or dogs or other animals. When these astonishing events had taken place every evening and every night for some time, such a disease afflicted the village that all the peasants fell into desperate straits and within a few days all except three perished by sudden death in a remarkable way. In order to stop the two ghosts,

the bishop gave his permission for the exhumation of their corpses. When the graves were opened, the bodies were found to be intact. The villagers decapitated them and placed their heads between their legs. They also tore out their hearts and placed them on a fire, where they eventually ‘cracked with a great sound and everyone there saw an evil spirit in the form of a crow fly from the flames. Soon after this was done, both the disease and the phantoms ceased’. Despite this, the village was abandoned, and for a long time, no one dared to live there.

Some of the best evidence for the treatment of the potentially malevolent dead comes from the Anglo-Saxon execution cemeteries recently collected and studied by Andrew Reynolds (Reynolds 1999: 105–10; Reynolds 2009). The execution sites were often located on the borders of the hundreds, *i.e.* in the physically liminal place of society, and, not least, in places where the ‘dissatisfied’ ancestors were seen to dwell. In the case of Sutton Hoo the execution cemetery was founded by the Christian authorities on a seventh century princely burial ground, presumably in living memory (Carver 2005, Ch 9). Andrew Reynolds argued that the reason why these places were used for this purpose was that they were seen as ‘evil and and haunted and outside of normal society’ (Reynolds 1997; Semple 2002: 244). The bodies were often decapitated or in other ways mutilated, presumably to stop them from haunting the living. The executed were also denied burial in consecrated ground, and would therefore not be received into Paradise on Judgement Day (Reynolds 1999: 105–10). Consequently, they would also have been trapped between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This may well have been visibly demonstrated by the gallows where the dead were left hanging ‘between heaven and earth being deemed unworthy of both’ (Reynolds 1999: 109).

### **Ancestors and the church**

On Christianization, the concept of the soul and thus the attitude to ancestors was modified. One of the few aspects of eschatology on which the Scriptures are clear is the separation of body and soul at the time of death: the soul departed once and for all (Cross *et al.* 1974: 1292; *cf.* MacGregor 2005). Like pagans, Christians made a connection between breath and soul, the soul being seen as an exhalation or a breeze. This originated from Genesis where it is stated that God created man and ‘breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul’ (Genesis 2: 7; Cross *et al.* 1974: 1292). This idea is also clearly seen in the Latin words for ‘soul’ and ‘breath’, *animus* and *anima*. A further parallel is the Latin *spiritus*, which denotes both ‘breath’ and ‘spirit’ (Hellquist 1999: vol. 1: 20). The Old Norse word *önd* is derived from the Old Saxon word *ando*, which can be traced back to the Indo-European root *an*, ‘to blow’, ‘to breath’. Old English *anda* was used for anger (*i.e.* snorting). Moreover, the Gothic word *usanan* denoted both to exhale and to die (Hellquist 1999: vol. 1: 20). On some occasions in the Norse sources the verb *andast/ændast* was used for ‘to meet one’s end’/‘to breath’. A particularly striking use of the verb occurs in *andadz i hvítavaðum*, which presumably refers to people who were baptised on their deathbeds, and thus ‘met his/her end in white clothes’ (*i.e.* in their baptismal robes). It is also interesting to note that *andalauss* denoted ‘soulless’,

as well as 'without breath'. (Heggstad 1930, 19–20; Fritzner 1893: 53). Significantly, the verb *andast/ændast* also appears on rune stones, most frequently in reference to people who died in the east. Ingmar Jansson has pointed out that the use of this particular word seems to have come from Byzantium. In this area the expression 'to die' was avoided in favour of 'to meet one's end' (Jansson 2005: 48–9 See e.g. Sö 40, Sö 345, Sö 148, U 518 and U 136. Brate *et al.* 1924–36; Wessén *et al.* 1940–43). Two such inscriptions from the province of Småland commemorate people who died in England (Sm 27 and Sm 29. Kinander 1935–61).

The above examples suggest that the use of *andast/ændast* was Christian. The same idea of dying is expressed by the Old Swedish *siælas*, Old Icelandic *sálast* and Anglo-Saxon *sáwlian* (Hellquist 1999, vol. 2: 918), suggesting that the Old Norse word for 'soul' *sál* (and its variants) was a Germanic word introduced by Christian writers for Christian concepts only (Hellquist 1999, vol. 2: 917–18; Turville-Petre 1975: 229).

It is also interesting to note that in older translations of the Bible death is described as 'surrendering the spirit' or 'giving up the ghost' (Parrinder 1993: 548). Further evidence of this idea is also found on rune stones, where the frequently occurring expression 'may God help her/his soul', always contains the word soul (*sál*) in the singular (see e.g. U 440, U 940, Sö 66, Sö 195, Sö 289 and Sö 382: Brate *et al.* 1924–36; Wessén *et al.* 1940–43). The introduction of the Christian concept of the soul thus also entailed a new concept of death; that the one and only soul was seen to leave the body with the last breath.

The Christian idea of ghosts thus also differs from that found in the sagas. According to the Gospel of Luke, the disciples were terrified by the resurrection of Christ, as they believed that they were seeing a ghost. Christ however assured them this was not the case since he, unlike a ghost, was made of flesh and blood (Parrinder 1993: 548; Luke 24: 37–40). Over time, the Christian attitude to ghosts was rather divided, and the existence of ghosts was neither rejected nor accepted. All Souls' Day has been celebrated since the 10th century in the Western church. Exorcism has been practised in order to put drifting souls to rest. In the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, which were widely read among the Norse, there are several stories about ghosts. Augustine of Hippo, on the other hand, had rejected the existence of ghosts (Parrinder 1993: 548; Nedkvitne 2004: 142). Another difference is that in the sagas that relate to pre-Christian times it was not a punishment to become a ghost: it was a voluntary decision taken by the dead. The damage caused by the ghosts was a result of their evil minds (Nedkvitne 2004: 38–43). By contrast, clerics explained the appearance of ghosts as due to burial in unconsecrated ground. This laid the foundations among the population that burial in consecrated ground was a necessity in order to give peace to the dead. This must have strengthened people's belief that access to Paradise was dependent on churchyard burial. Thus, the ecclesiastical legislation and the ghost stories worked in the same direction (Nedkvitne 2004: 148–51; Sanmark 2004: 264–68).

Clerics presumably used the ancestor cult for their own purposes, as they wished to take the dead away from the communal feeling of kin and farm, and instead bring them together in the community of the churchyards. Christian burial was clearly a high priority in early Christian times, as it was one of the five major Christian practices that were required by law, the other four major practices being the observance of

fast and feast days, baptism, and Christian marriage regulations (Sanmark 2004, chapters 5–7).

## Conclusion

As scholarship moves away from traditional views of religion, the importance of the ancestor cult, both for the Anglo-Saxons and the Norse, becomes increasingly clear and further evidence of this will most likely come to light in future research. This may apply particularly to archaeological evidence as awareness of features possibly related to this cult develops among excavators.

## References

[The alphabetical order including the Scandinavian and Icelandic characters is:  
aåbcđēéfgghijklmnoópqrstuúúvwxyzþáäæöø]

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