

## *Project Description*

### Negotiating Spaces of Power and Cult in the North Atlantic, AD 500-1200

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#### Abstract

This multidisciplinary thesis will examine the use of public and private contexts for the negotiation of power relationships between human and supernatural/Otherworld parties on the North Atlantic periphery in the pre-Christian and Christianisation periods (c. AD 500-1200), studying the actions, rituals and discourses through which variant social spaces were constructed at *þing* sites and farmsteads, two distinct types of location with different levels of public exposure. Human interaction with a variety of supernatural beings, and the various relationships and spaces created thereby, will be considered, and on the basis of textual, archaeological, runic and toponymic evidence, this thesis will propose models of the mutually-constitutive relationships between human/Other power negotiations and social spaces in different social, geographic and temporal contexts, seeking to understand how these spaces were regarded and used by those who created them in a period of religious upheaval.

#### Objectives

As an examination of the social spaces of *þing* sites and the farm/hall complex used as locations for the negotiation of power with the supernatural Other, the dissertation here proposed will engage with research from several academic disciplines, including historical, literary and archaeological studies of pre-Christian 'religions' and worldviews; studies concerning the nature of the supernatural and the various forms of pre-Christian cultic sites; as well as research that has been undertaken into the types, distribution and nature of *þing*, farmstead and hall sites across the study area. It will engage with primary source material including but not limited to medieval Icelandic sagas, church histories, archaeological site reports and place names, in order to address the following research objectives:

- to identify methods of power negotiation between human parties (on individual, group and regional levels) and supernatural/Otherworld parties in the pre-Christian world of the early-Medieval North Atlantic (defined for the purposes of this study as Denmark, Western and Southern Norway, Iceland, Orkney, Shetland and the Faroe Isles c. AD 500-1200);
- to examine the differences between such methods and the social spaces they engendered at *þing* sites and farmstead/hall complexes;

- to attempt to draw conclusions regarding the sacral and/or multivalent nature of such social spaces, and thus the public and/or private nature of cultic practice, in the pre-Christian North;
- to address the lack of scholarly consideration of cultic activity at *þing* sites;
- to compare the social spaces of North Atlantic *þing* sites with *þing* sites elsewhere in the Nordic region, examining the divergences and commonalities between them.

## **Methodology**

In addressing these research objectives, this work will build on my previous MA work (see Murphy 2010 and Forthcoming), as well as on a tradition of scholarship reaching as far back as the thirteenth century, when the Icelandic poet/statesman Snorri Sturluson composed his *Edda*. It is only relatively recently that scholarship has rejected the view of pre-Christian religious beliefs as a single reconstructable “Germanic” religion (e.g. DuBois 1999; McKinnell 1994) of the type propagated by Snorri, an attitude borne out by an increasing number of studies showing tremendous local variation in social and cultic practices across even relatively small areas of the Nordic region (e.g. Björk 2003 and Callmer 1992 on burial customs; Brink 2007 on theophoric toponymy). The dissertation outlined in this application will build on this development by establishing local models of social practice as they existed in particular areas on the North Atlantic periphery, raising the question of whether it will then be possible to apply these to wider regions on an experimental basis.

This underlies the key methodology of the project, which is that outlined by the proposed supervisor, Professor Schjødt himself (2009): as the completely accurate reconstruction of a historical situation is impossible due to the fragmentary nature of the available evidence (e.g. complicated manuscript traditions, confusing archaeological finds), this dissertation will instead seek to utilise as wide a range of relevant evidence as possible to construct a model (or models) which aims to reflect the historical situation, but makes no claims to be complete or infallible. Such a model, based on meticulous close readings of primary textual sources and examinations of archaeological and toponymic material, should allow a small number of highly probable conclusions regarding human/Other power negotiations and their consequent social spaces to be drawn. In order to make such models as reliable as possible, they require the widest possible range of evidence, which is why this project has been envisaged as multidisciplinary – making use of textual, archaeological, toponymic, and runic evidence – from the outset.

Such a methodology will also go some way to helping reinforce the findings of the project against the weaknesses of each corpus (such as the inherent bias of medieval Christian authors when writing about pre-Christian religious beliefs, or the difficulties of interpreting archaeological material), although the employment of a critical awareness of the difficulties inherent in each of the corpora will also be incorporated

throughout the study in order to avoid superficiality and misinterpretations based on insensitive readings of primary source material. The core data for this work is expected to be drawn from textual and archaeological sources – particularly Icelandic manuscripts and excavation-based and landscape archaeology from across the North Atlantic periphery – although toponymic evidence will also be consulted, as will other accounts of human-human power negotiations and their social spaces, in order to provide geographic and social context for the data under consideration.

## **Structure of the Proposed Dissertation**

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1. Preface
- 1.2. The Field of Study
- 1.3. Survey of Source Material
- 1.4. *Stand der Forschung*
- 1.5. Definition of Terms
- 1.6. The Structure of this Study

### **2. Spatial Theory**

- 2.1. The Origins of Spatial Studies
- 2.2. Use in Historical Studies of the North Atlantic
- 2.3. Use in Studies of ‘Religious’ Cultures
- 2.4. A Methodology of Spatial Studies

### **3. Power Negotiation at Farmsteads and Halls in the North Atlantic**

- 3.1. Human-Human Negotiation and its Spaces
  - 3.1.1. Legislative and Political Negotiation: Halls as Centres of Political and Royal Power
  - 3.1.2. Duels and Violence: Military Space on the Farmstead
  - 3.1.3. Trade and Economic Negotiation: Gift-Giving and Private Trade
- 3.2. Human-Other Negotiation and its Spaces
  - 3.2.1. Sacrifice and *Blót*
  - 3.2.2. Feasts and Royal Ritual as Human-Other Negotiation: Sacral Kingship
  - 3.2.3. Visiting *Völur*
  - 3.2.4. Land Usage on the Farmstead: Mounds, Groves and Water as Supernatural Residences
  - 3.2.5. *Hof* and *Hörgar*: Cultic Buildings on the Farmstead?
- 3.3. Models of Power at Farmsteads and Halls

### **4. Power Negotiation at *Ping* Sites Across the North Atlantic**

- 4.1. Human-Human Negotiation and its Spaces at the *Ping*
  - 4.1.1. Legislative and Political Negotiation: The Role of the *Ping* in Governance
  - 4.1.2. Duels and Violence at the *Ping*
  - 4.1.3. Trade and Economic Negotiation at the *Ping*
- 4.2. Human-Other Negotiation and its Spaces at the *Ping*
  - 4.2.1. Prophecy and the Casting of Lots as tools of Governance
  - 4.2.2. The Negotiation of Land Usage: Regional Sacred Areas?
  - 4.2.3. Seeking Supernatural Patronage

- 4.2.4. Political Rulers and the Supernatural: Election, Enthroning and other Rituals
- 4.2.5. Supernatural Protection: Sanctuary and the *Vé*
- 4.3. Models of Power and Space at *Ping* Sites
- 4.4. Testing Models of Power and Space
  - 4.4.1. Survey of *Ping* Sites outside the North Atlantic Region
  - 4.4.2. Testing Models: Do Other Nordic *Ping* Sites Resemble their North-Atlantic Counterparts?

## 5. Conclusions

- 5.1. Power Negotiations in Pre-Christian Society: Public and/or Private? Comparing the Spaces of Farms and *Ping* Sites from this Viewpoint
- 5.2. The Space of Negotiating with the Otherworld: Sacral and/or Multivalent Spaces?
- 5.3. Directions for Further Research
- 5.4. Final Reflections on Space and Power in the Early-Medieval North Atlantic

## Appendices:

- Appendix 1: Summary in Danish
- Appendix 2: Summary in Icelandic
- Appendix 3: Summary in German
- Appendix 4: Bibliography

## Research Timeline

### Year One (2013)

February-March	Initial gathering of primary and secondary sources
April-June	Drafting of Chapters 1-2
July-December	Drafting of Chapters 3.1-3.2
August	Summer School Courses (10 ECTS)
Sept.-December	Teaching as part of scholarship
Throughout	Research trips to examine the landscapes of archaeologically-identified sites of interest around Denmark, e.g. Jelling; Lejre (particularly the site at Fredshøj); Lake Tissø; Sorte Muld, Bornholm; Roskilde; etc. Presentation of initial findings and anticipated developments at academic conferences (e.g. the Saga Conference, the Annual Conference on Old Norse Mythology, the Kalamazoo Congress, Leeds IMC, etc.)
December	End-of-year review with supervisor

### Year Two (2014)

January-April	Drafting of Chapters 3.2-3.3 Stay abroad at The University of Iceland (working with Co-Supervisor Prof. Terry Gunnell) Teaching as part of scholarship (at the University of Iceland)
	Research trips to examine the landscapes of archaeologically-identified sites of interest around Iceland, e.g. Þingvellir; Hofstaðir; Helgafell (on Breiðafjörður); etc.
May-December	Drafting of Chapter 4 Teaching as part of scholarship

	Research trips to examine the landscapes of archaeologically-identified sites of interest around Denmark
August	Summer School Courses (10 ECTS)
Throughout	Presentation of findings as work-in-progress at academic conferences
December	End-of-year review with supervisor
<b>Year Three (2015)</b>	
January-March	Drafting of Chapter 5
April-July	Review and editing of Chapters 1-4
August	Editing of Chapter 5
	Summer School Courses (10 ECTS)
Sept.-October	Final preparations for submission (including proof-reading, formatting, compilation of bibliography, translation of Danish, Icelandic and German summaries, preparation of images, etc.)
November	Final review with supervisor
December	Submission
Post-Submission	Viva/Defence
	Editing of findings for publication as a monograph
Throughout	Research trips to examine the landscapes of archaeologically-identified sites of interest around Denmark
	Teaching as part of scholarship
	Presentation of findings at academic conferences
<b>Years Following (2016-)</b>	
Throughout	Publication as a monograph
	Presentation of findings at academic conferences

### **Proposed Impact and Publication**

In addition to the doctoral dissertation itself (intended for publication as a monograph after the defence) and a number of conference papers presented each year, the impact and relevance of this project lie in its innovative multidisciplinary study of a range of spaces and places across a specific region. The regional focus outlined here will also be highly relevant, allowing the contextualisation of regional material and spaces (e.g. Adolf Friðriksson 2004; Rindel 2002), power and landscape (e.g. Helgi Þorláksson 1989; Jørgensen 2003) and possible cultic sites (e.g. Jørgensen 2008; Lucas 2009, and McGovern 2009) within a wider, North-Atlantic framework. Thus it is envisaged that this dissertation will not only contribute to Danish, Icelandic and European scholarship through the presentation of original findings regarding the nature of human/otherworld power negotiations and the social spaces of *þing* sites and farm/hall complexes, but will also highlight both links and contrasts within geographic and temporal regions within the North-Atlantic study area (and with the wider Northern-European periphery more generally), and will also help foster international and cross-disciplinary cooperation between academics and experts working in the field.

**Total Number of Characters                      11,970**

## **Bibliography of Works Referred to in this Project Description**

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- McKinnell, John. 1994. *Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism* (Rome: Il Calamo)
- Murphy, Luke John. 2010. 'Holy Groves, Rocky Places, and Sacral Constructions: The Establishment of Sacred Social Space in Viking-Age Pre-Christian Scandinavia', *The Retrospective Methods Network Newsletter*, 1: 51-2
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- Snorri Sturluson. 1998-2005. *Edda*. ed. Faulkes, Anthony. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 4 vols. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research)