

**DETAILED PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

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Submitted as part of an application for doctoral study in Norræn Trú (Þjóðfræði) at Háskóli Íslands.

**PART D: LÝSING Á RANNSÓKNARSVIÐI DOKTORSVERKEFNIS OG FRUMHUGMYND AÐ RANNSÓKNARÁÆTLUN****PROJECT ABSTRACT:**

The doctoral research project outlined in this proposal seeks to examine the construction of social spaces in which power relationships were negotiated between human and supernatural/otherworld parties in Iceland, Western and Southern Norway, Denmark, Orkney, Shetland and the Faroe Isles during the pre-Christian and Christianisation periods of the Early Medieval Ages (c. ad 500-1200). It will study the actions, rituals and discourses through which variant social spaces were constructed at þing sites and farmsteads—two distinct types of location which represent different levels of public exposure. Human interaction with a variety of supernatural beings – including gods, land spirits, elves, familial spirits, and human dead – and the various relationships and spaces created thereby will also be considered, and conclusions regarding these beings’ influence on human spaces put forward. Thus on the basis of textual, archaeological, runic and toponymic (place name) evidence, this multidisciplinary thesis will propose models of the mutually-constitutive relationships between power negotiations and social spaces in different social, geographic and temporal contexts, seeking to understand how these spaces were regarded by those that used them.

KEYWORDS: Social Space, Pre-Christian Religions, Cult Practice, Ritual, *Þing* Sites

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:**

The objectives of the research project outlined in this proposal are, in short, as follows:

- Primary Objective: 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 Iceland, Western and Southern Norway, Denmark, Orkney, Shetland and the Faroe Isles c. AD 500-1200);
- Primary Objective: to examine the differences between such methods and the social spaces they engendered at *þing*-sites and farmstead/hall complexes;
- Primary Objective: 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;
- Secondary Objective: To compare the spaces of North Atlantic *þing* sites with *þing* sites elsewhere in the Nordic region, examining the divergences and commonalities between them.

**METHODOLOGY:**

The study of social phenomena such as relations with the otherworld, or the engendering of social spaces, is difficult in any society, but even more so in one that is arguably prehistoric. Although there is evidence for these phenomena in pre-Christian North Atlantic culture(s) preserved in a range of different sources – from medieval

manuscripts to material culture – much of it is fragmentary, difficult to interpret, and inconsistent. As such, the thesis outlined here is envisaged as multidisciplinary from the outset, drawing upon textual, archaeological, toponymic and runic evidence in order to bridge the gaps present in any single corpus. Such a methodology requires that the employment of a critical awareness of the difficulties inherent in each of these corpora be incorporated throughout the study (in a manner established in my previous work on social spaces: Murphy 2010; forthcoming) in order to avoid running the risk of 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 North-Atlantic sites – although toponymic evidence will also be consulted, as will accounts of human-human power negotiations and their social spaces, in order to provide geographic and social context for the data under consideration. Due to the relatively small amount of attention *þing* sites have received from archaeological studies to date (see below, *Stand der Forschung*), comparative material from elsewhere in the Nordic-Germanic cultural sphere will also be examined and interrogated.

Thus, as a research project spanning multiple scholarly disciplines and several national boundaries, the thesis outlined in this proposal will naturally entail the cooperation of the applicant with scholars and experts in a range of fields: primarily the supervisors of the project, but also academics working in other areas, such as archaeologists and toponymy scholars. As such, this doctoral thesis has been designed as a jointly supervised programme of research, split equally between Prof. Jens Peter Schjødt (of the Department of Culture and Society for the Study of Religion at the University of Århus; an expert in pre-Christian religious practices and sacral kingship) and Prof. Terry Gunnell (of the Department of Social Anthropology and Folkloristics at the University of Iceland in Reykjavík; an expert not only in Folkloristics but also in pre-Christian sacral performance and social spaces). The applicant will split his time between Århus and Reykjavík in order to allow him to make the most of the opportunities for field research, regional networks of scholarship, and specialised resources (such as manuscript collections) available at both universities.

Links will also be actively fostered with scholars working on and in other regions through research trips to relevant areas and the frequent presentation of this study's ongoing findings at international conferences in both Iceland and Denmark as well as elsewhere. The planned study trips will be of particular relevance in the study of specific sites such as farmsteads or regional *þing* sites, where collaboration with local-area experts will offer a great deal of input not otherwise available (see below, *Research Timeline*). Given the breadth of the study-area, incorporating territory in at least five modern nations (Denmark, Iceland, Norway, the Faroe Islands and the UK), consulting regional specialists both formally and informally will increase the source data available, as well as the accuracy and relevance of this study's output. Such regional collaborations could include partners such as the National Museum of Denmark (Nationalmuseet), The Institute of Archaeology in Iceland (Fornleifastofnun Íslands), the Orkney Archaeology Society, the Shetland Museum and Archives (with which Prof. Gunnell has a well-established working relationship) and the National Museum of the Faroe Islands (Føroya Fornminnisavni), in addition to key groups and individuals engaged in thematically or temporally pertinent research, such as the members of *The Assembly Place* research project (see below, *Stand der Forschung*).

## STRUCTURE OF PROPOSED THESIS:

### **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 *Þing* Sites Across the North Atlantic**
  - 4.1. Human-Human Negotiation and its Spaces at the *Þing*
    - 4.1.1. Legislative and Political Negotiation: The Role of the *Þing* in Governance
    - 4.1.2. Duels and Violence at the *Þing*
    - 4.1.3. Trade and Economic Negotiation at the *Þing*
  - 4.2. Human-Other Negotiation and its Spaces at the *Þing*
    - 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 *Þing* Sites
  - 4.4. Testing Models of Power and Space
    - 4.4.1. Survey of *Þing* Sites outside the North Atlantic Region
    - 4.4.2. Testing Models: Do Other Nordic *Þing* 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 *Þing* 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 Icelandic
- Appendix 2: Summary in Danish
- Appendix 3: Summary in German
- Appendix 4: Bibliography

STAND DER FORSCHUNG:

As an examination of the social spaces of *þing* sites and the farm/hall complex when used as locations for the negotiation of power with the supernatural Other, the thesis here proposed will naturally engage with research from several different 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 other research that has been undertaken into the types, distribution and nature of *þing*, farmstead and hall sites across the study area.

The study of the pre-Christian religious systems of the Nordic region can be said to have begun as early as the thirteenth century, with the composition of the Icelandic poet/statesman Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*. Ostensibly an *ars poetica*, Snorri’s work presents an overview of the gods, spirits and worlds of pre-Christian belief, albeit one heavily rationalised and filtered through the lens of Snorri’s own Christianity. Early twentieth-century examinations of Nordic beliefs, such as volumes ten and eleven of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1906-15), were similarly philological in nature and uncritical of their source material, focusing heavily on extant mythological narratives rather than religious practice, a trend continued by the two major mid-twentieth century scholarly studies: de Vries’ *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (1937) and Turville-Petre’s shorter overview *Myth and Religion of the North* (1964). 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), 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). This thesis 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.

Another development in recent decades has been a renewed interest in beliefs in lesser spirits and beings in the Old Norse world (e.g. Acker 2002; Bek-Pedersen 2011; Gunnell 2007; Price 2002; Raudvere 2008) and the cultic practices behind the extant mythology (e.g. Andrén 1993, 2004, 2005; Gräslund 1992, 2008; Hultgård 2008; Kaliff 2001; Price 2002), driven partly by the progress made in archaeological process and methodology and the subsequent boom in excavated material. Of particular relevance to this thesis are those recent studies which have examined relations between humanity and the otherworld (both in terms of gods and lesser spirits, e.g. Andrén 2005; DuBois 1999; McKinnell 2005; Price 2002), especially those that focus on the rituals and actions through which these relations were mediated (Andrén 1993; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997, 1998, 1999; Kaliff 2001; Schjødt 2000, 2005, 2008). The issue of *power negotiation* between human and otherworld agencies has also received some attention, almost entirely limited to the study of sacral kingship (e.g. McTurk 1975, 1994; Schjødt 2010; Steinsland 2008; Sundqvist 2002, 2008), something this thesis seeks to expand on by considering such negotiation as it occurred in a variety of different geographic and social contexts with the aim of producing findings of relevance to all studies of human/Other relations.

Running parallel to the study of such social phenomena has been a steady interest in what might be called the ‘architecture’ that provided them with a concrete context in the early medieval period: the physical nature of

halls, farms, and, most controversially, cultic sites. In the early twentieth century, Magnus Olsen (1926, 1928) produced a detailed study of possible cultic sites in Norway, only for later scholars – principally Olaf Olsen (e.g. 1966) – to completely reject the idea of architecturally developed cultic sites. However, archaeological excavations soon confirmed earlier ideas regarding cult continuity by finding pre-Christian constructions, initially interpreted as dedicated “temples”, under the remains of early medieval churches (e.g. Lidén 1969). Later scholarship has focused less on identifying different types of cultic building, and more on interpretations of individual cult sites (e.g. on Tissø, Sjælland, Denmark, see Jørgensen 2003, 2008; on Hofstaðir, Iceland, see Lucas 2009, and McGovern 2009; on Borg in the Lofoten Islands, Norway, see Munch *et al.* 2003; Nielsen 1997, and Lindeblad 1998; on the “cult house” at Uppåkra, Skåne, Sweden, see Hårdh 2008; Helgesson 2004; Larsson 2001a, 2001b, 2004, 2006, and Hårdh 2006, and Lenntorp 2004), although work has also been done on the position of such sites within the landscape (e.g. Brink 1996, 1997, 1998, 2001; Fabech 1994; Fallgren 2008). Scholarship has also considered the social and cultural role of such sites, although this has tended to focus much more on halls and possible *hof*-sites as an extension of research already occurring on the hall itself (e.g. Enright 1996; Herschend 1993). Of particular relevance to the study outlined in this proposal is Gunnell’s work on the use of halls as spaces for the performance of ritual drama (particularly 2001, but see also 1995, 2006a, 2006b, and 2008; *cf.* Viðar Pálsson forthcoming). These examinations of dramatic and ritual spaces are based on the concept of spaces as social constructions, as originally proposed by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French scholars such as Durkheim (see Buttimer 1969 and references therein), and later developed by scholars including Foucault (1986), Feldman and Tilly (1960), de Certeau (1988, 1997, with Giard and Mayol 1998) and Murdoch (2006). The application of spatial theory in archaeological studies (particularly Bradley 2000 and Tilley 1994, but also site-based articles such as Card and Downes 2003) will be of great relevance to this thesis, as explored in my previous research (Murphy 2010, forthcoming).

Despite their importance in Iron-Age and Medieval Nordic cultures, *þing* sites across the Nordic region have received relatively little scholarly attention, either as archaeological sites or as social phenomena, a situation that this thesis aims to change. Brink has examined some cultural aspects of the *þing* in his work on early law codes (2002, 2003, 2004; see also Myrberg 2008), but very little research has been published on North-Atlantic *þing* sites – with the exception of some archaeological work at Þingvellir (Adolf Friðriksson 2002, 2005; Bell 2010; Damiata 2005) – since the early twentieth century (Gössler 1938). There is, however, a small but steadily growing body of material on Norwegian centres of political power (Iversen 2004, 2005; Skre 2007, 2008a, 2008b), Swedish and Anglo-Saxon *þing* sites (Pantos 2003; Meaney 1995; Norr and Sanmark 2008; Sanmark 2009, and Semple 2008; Semple 2004) and Danish Central Place complexes (Näsman 1998; Rindel 1999, 2002; Tornbjerg 1997, 1998; etc.), a trend consolidated with the establishment of the EU-funded *Assembly Project* in 2010. While this umbrella project will doubtless produce a great deal of worthwhile scholarship, at no point does it plan to conduct any research into the cultic or supernatural aspects of *þing* sites (TAP 2010) of the sort outlined in this thesis.

**PART E: GREINARGERÐ UM FYRIRHUGAÐ NÁM OG FAGLEGAR FORSENDUR UMSÆKJANDA TIL ÞESS AÐ  
LEGGJA STUND Á NÁMIÐ**

Given that the applicant holds an MA from the University of York and is also in the process of completing a 120-credit MA in Norræn Trú at Háskóli Íslands (including work in the History of Religions, Archaeology, Palaeography and Codicology as well as more general historical studies with academics including Terry Gunnell, Torfi Tulinius, Haraldur Bernharðsson and Neil Price), the study planned as part of the proposed doctoral research

project will be primarily research-based. Having said that, a small number of highly-specialised courses – particularly the summer school courses in Manuscript Studies organised by The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, and the thematic summer school courses offered at the University of Århus – will also be undertaken.

In addition, it is planned that the applicant will spend two semesters of the study programme at the University of Århus in Denmark, working with Prof. Jens Peter Schjødt, a leading expert in pre-Christian religious ritual and sacral kingship, whose specific expertise will support Prof. Gunnell's supervision of the proposed thesis.

### **PART F: VERKÁÆTLUN**

The planned schedule for the envisaged doctoral thesis, to be written in English, is outlined below. The course of study is planned as full time, and will require no further facilities than a dedicated workspace and access to library resources. Access to the manuscript collections at the National Library and The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies may also be necessary, but this would be a periodic requirement. As outlined in the plan below, it is envisaged that the second year of the three-year programme will be spent as a visiting student at the University of Århus in Denmark, working with Prof. Jens Peter Schjødt.

In order to bear the financial costs of the study programme, the applicant has already submitted applications for funding to RANNÍS *Icelandic Research Fund for Graduate Students* (<http://www.rannis.is/english/funding/icelandic-research-fund-for-graduate-students>) and the Háskóli Íslands *Eimskip Fund* ([http://www.sjodir.hi.is/en/eimskip\\_university\\_fund](http://www.sjodir.hi.is/en/eimskip_university_fund)), and it is hoped that such funding will be supported by teaching work during the course of the study programme.

#### **RESEARCH TIMELINE:**

##### YEAR ONE (2012-3):

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|-------------------|---|
| October-December: | Initial gathering of primary and secondary sources  |
| January-March:    | Drafting of Chapters 1-2  |
| April-September:  | Drafting of Chapters 3.1-3.2  |
| June-July:        | Research trip to examine the landscapes of archaeologically-identified sites of interest around Iceland, e.g. Þingvellir; Hofstaðir; Helgafell (on Breiðafjörður); etc.                                 |
| Throughout:       | 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.) |
| September:        | End-of-year review with supervisor  |

##### YEAR TWO (2013-4): YEAR OF STUDY ABROAD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ÅRHUS

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|--------------------|---|
| October-December:  | Drafting of Chapters 3.2-3.3  |
| January-September: | Drafting of Chapter 4   |
| June-July:         | Research trip to Norway/Orkney/Shetland/the Faroe Isles to examine the landscapes surrounding archaeologically-identified sites of interest, e.g. Tingwall, Shetland; Borg, Lofoten Islands, Norway; the Gulating, Norway; etc. |

Throughout:	Research trips to examine the landscapes of archaeologically-identified sites of interest around Denmark, e.g. Jelling; Lejre (particularly the site at Fredshøj); Roskilde; etc. Presentation of findings as work-in-progress at academic conferences
September:	End-of-year review with supervisor
YEAR THREE (2014-5):	
October-December:	Drafting of Chapter 5
January-April:	Review and editing of Chapters 1-4
May:	Editing of Chapter 5
June-July:	Final preparations for submission (including proof-reading, formatting, compilation of bibliography, translation of Danish, Icelandic and German summaries, preparation of images, etc.)
August:	Final review with supervisor
September:	Submission
Post-Submission:	Viva/Defence
Post-Submission:	Editing of findings for publication as a monograph
Throughout:	Presentation of findings at academic conferences
YEARS FOLLOWING (2015-):	
Throughout:	Publication of findings as a monograph
Throughout:	Presentation of findings at academic conferences

### **PART G: LEIDBEINANDI**

It is planned that Prof. Terry Gunnell will act as the supervisor of the envisaged thesis, building upon his already established working relationship with the applicant, established while acting as the applicant's MA thesis supervisor. Natural members of a potential supervisor committee would also include Prof. Jens Peter Schjødt (of the University of Århus), Prof. Neil Price and Prof. Stefan Brink (both of the University of Aberdeen).

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