

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

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Appendix 1: Detailed Project Description



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a. STATE OF THE ART AND PROFICIENCY

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 recent 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. e.g. Andrén 2005; DuBois 1999; McKinnell 2005; Price 2002), particularly 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 reject the idea of architecturally developed cultic sites completely. 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 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 similarly 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 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) and Swedish and Anglo-Saxon *þing* sites (Pantos 2003; Meaney 1995; Norr and Sanmark 2008; Sanmark 2009, and Semple 2008; Semple 2004), 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.

b. OBJECTIVES AND ORIGINALITY

The objectives of the PhD thesis 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 Norway, Orkney, Shetland and the Faroe Isles c. 500-1200AD);

- 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.

The originality of the research proposed in this application lies in its innovative multidisciplinary study of a range of spaces and places across a specific region. The lack of previous research on the use of pre-Christian and Christianisation-era *þing* sites as cultic spaces will make the results of the relevant chapters of this study particularly worthwhile, as will the planned comparison with better-studied farmstead- and hall-spaces. The regional focus of the study outlined here will also be highly relevant, allowing the contextualisation of Icelandic material and spaces (e.g. Adolf Friðriksson 2004), power and landscape (e.g. Helgi Þorláksson 1989) and possible cultic sites (e.g. Lucas 2009, and McGovern 2009) within a wider, North-Atlantic framework. Thus it is envisaged that this doctoral thesis will not only contribute to 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.

c. METHODOLOGY, WORK PLAN AND TIMESCALE

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 practices 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 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. However, due to the relatively small amount of attention *þing* sites have received from archaeological studies to date (see above, §A), comparative material from elsewhere in the Nordic cultural sphere will also be examined and interrogated.

The thesis will be structured as follows:

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 German

Appendix 3: Bibliography

The proposed timeline for this work is as follows:

Year One (2012-3): Háskóli Íslands, Reykjavík

- 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 Abroad at the University of Århus

- 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. Borg, Lofoten Islands, Norway; Tingwall, Shetland; the Gulating, Norway; etc.
- Throughout: Presentation of findings as work-in-progress at academic conferences
- September: End-of-year review with supervisor

Year Three (2014-5): Háskóli Íslands, Reykjavík

- 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 Icelandic and German summaries, preparation of images)
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

d. CO-OPERATION (DOMESTIC/FOREIGN)

As a research project spanning multiple scholarly disciplines and national boundaries, the PhD thesis outlined in this proposal will naturally entail the cooperation of the applicant and supervisor with colleagues working in other areas, such as archaeologists and toponymy scholars. The cooperation of Prof. Jens Peter Schjødt, a potential doctoral committee member who has agreed to help with the supervision of this thesis during the applicant's planned year abroad at the University of Århus, will be particularly key to the successful resolution of this research as his in-depth knowledge of pre-Christian ritual practices, and the study of the history of religions, will supplement the supervisor's efforts. Prof. Schjødt's location at the University of Århus also offers valuable opportunities for the development of transnational and cross-disciplinary cooperation in this research, allowing the applicant the opportunity to tap into Danish networks of scholarship in addition to those available to him in Iceland, which notably include the supervisor's excellent working relationships with experts whose work is relevant to this research such as Neil Price and Stefan Brink.

Links will be actively fostered with scholars working on and in other regions through a year's study abroad, research trips to relevant regions and the frequent presentation of this study's ongoing findings at international conferences, in order that

this thesis engage, on a fundamental level, with regional and international research, both in Iceland and abroad. 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. Given the breadth of the study-area, incorporating territory in at least four nations (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 Fornleifastofnun Íslands, the Orkney Archaeology Society, the Shetland Museum and Archives (with which the supervisor has a well established working relationship) and the 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.

e. PROPOSED DELIVERABLES AND IMPACT

The project outlined by this proposal will result in the following deliverables:

- One doctoral thesis, published in a limited run before the applicant's defence;
- Three articles published (or submitted for publication) in peer-reviewed academic journals during the applicant's studies, detailing the findings of the regional and/or thematic studies undertaken as part of this thesis;
- One monograph published on the completion of the doctoral programme, presenting an edited version of the thesis produced as part thereof;
- At least one paper presented at academic conferences per year, in Iceland and abroad, either promoting the project as a whole (to garner feedback and raise the profile of the work) or presenting the findings of specific regional/thematic studies undertaken as part of the overall study;
- A number of articles presenting the project and its findings in regional newspapers and/or magazines across the study area.

The impact of this study is envisaged as wide-ranging and long-lasting, producing not only a large amount of original research, but also considering well-known phenomena (the *þing* and farmstead/hall complex) in a new light, as centres of power negotiation between both human and Other parties rather than purely 'secular' spaces. Such an approach is both challenging and innovative (see above, §A), and will hopefully

encourage others to undertake studies of other established historical activities and places from new spatial perspectives. It is also thought that the regional focus of this research will have a high impact on other studies within the North-Atlantic region, encouraging the study of historical sites, their activities and spaces as part of regional networks which cross modern national and cultural borders. Thus it is envisaged that this doctoral thesis will not only contribute to both Icelandic and European scholarship, but will also help foster international and cross-disciplinary cooperation between academics and experts working in the field.

f. PROPOSED PUBLICATION OF RESULTS

As outlined above (§E), a number of publications are planned as a result of this thesis. The primary publication (after the thesis itself) will take the form of a monograph, based on an edited version of the doctoral thesis outlined in this proposal. Such a monograph would make an excellent contribution to a series of academic works such as Brepols Publishers' *Studies in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* or *Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe*, or the new series of monographs being published by Fornleifastofnun Íslands. Additionally, a number of articles based on interim studies have been planned for, and it is envisaged that they will be published in peer-reviewed humanities, social-science, and/or archaeological journals – such as *Archaeologia Islandica*, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, *Norwegian Archaeological Review* or *The Saga Book of the Viking Society* – as appropriate. It may also be that one or more of the conference papers included in the planned deliverables (see above, §E) may see publication in the proceedings of the conferences at which they will be presented, and it is assumed that a project outline and interim reports will be published in a number of academic newsletters such as *The Retrospective Methods Network Newsletter*.

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