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Constructing Space

### **The Scale of ‘Private’ Religions in Pre-Christian Scandinavia: Theoretical and Empirical Questions**

This paper seeks to contribute to the conference theme of ‘space’ by examining the construction of small-scale religious spaces in the pre-Christian era. A study of the extent to which ‘private’ religiosity, cult practice, and belief systems can be identified in the textual and archaeological corpora of the Late Iron Age, this paper will explore theoretical concerns surrounding the identification of religious practices as ‘private’ as opposed to ‘public’, and the implications of readings of Viking-Age social spaces being based on twentieth-century terminology. Interpretations of small-scale, personal and/or localised religious activities such as *blót*, *veizla*, dramatic performance, and prayer will be proposed through engagement with relevant academic debate on topics such as the construction of sacral social spaces (see Murphy, and references therein), the organisation of religion and religious activities within the communal landscape (e.g. Brink, Fabech), and methodological approaches to Viking-Age cultural phenomena (e.g. various chapters in Raudvere & Shjødt).

Such interpretations will necessarily draw on both textual accounts of localised pre-Christian religious activity (such as *Guta saga*, *Flateyjarbók*, *Kristni saga*, and the *Austrfararvísur*) and archaeological studies of small-scale sacral sites from across the Nordic cultural region, seeking to combine multiple sets of empirical data into a small number of representative models. It is hoped that these findings will allow the proposal of some general conclusions regarding the nature of ‘private’ cult in the pre-Christian era: how common was ‘private’ religion, as opposed to its ‘public’ counterpart? How different were these two forms of cult practice? Who practiced ‘privately’? What did ‘private’ practitioners seek to attain? Were some supernatural forces – particular gods, spirits, or ancestors – called on more or less than others? Were particular forms of religious practice characteristic of ‘private’ cult?

Part of a larger project concerned with public and private expressions of cultic and religious activity in the latter centuries of Scandinavia’s pre-Christian Iron Age, it is hoped that this paper’s findings will prove applicable not only for studies of household religiosity or farmstead-cult, but also in comparison: with the practice of religion in the public sphere, at magnates’ halls or the *þing* site; or, in later periods, with the establishment of the first churches on private grounds during the early stages of the Christianisation.

#### Bibliography

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