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The Viking Way
Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia

Neil S. Price
To the memory of my parents
Jean Bidewell (1930-1990)
Geoffrey Price (1928-1998)

The social role of magic is a prevalent theme of the medieval Icelandic sagas that claim to describe life several centuries earlier in the Viking Age, and indeed also saturates the Eddic poetry that is our primary source for the mythology and cosmology of the time. However, little archaeological or historical research has been done to explore what this aspect of ritual may really have meant to the men and women of late Iron Age Scandinavia.

This book examines the evidence for Old Norse sorcery, looking at its meaning and function, practice and practitioners, and the complicated constructions of gender and sexual identity with which these were underpinned. In particular, it focuses on the notion of a ‘supernatural empowerment of violence’ - essentially the way in which the physical prosecution of warfare was supported by a structure of rituals intended to produce success in battle. At the core of this concept, it is argued, lay the extended complex of performances collectively known as *seidr*, a form of operative magic connected with the god Óðinn and often interpreted as a form of shamanism.

The thesis addresses these issues by exploring the relationship between two aspects of life in the Viking Age, namely religion and war. For early medieval Scandinavia, neither of these concepts can be exactly equated with their modern, Western equivalents. The text examines a wide range of topics relating to the above themes, including surveys of current thinking on Viking religion and the frameworks proposed for the study of shamanism; claims for pre-Viking shamanism in Scandinavia and Europe, especially recent work on the Migration period; the cult of Óðinn and its rituals; gender boundaries and sexual concepts in Old Norse society, focusing on magic and studies of female ritual specialists; the concept of the soul; spirits and other supernatural beings; the material culture of *seidr* and related practices; battle magic and the ritualisation of aggression; Viking Age cultural attitudes to animals; and lycanthropic, ‘totemistic’ beliefs relating to warriors. The concluding section examines the overall concept of ritualised violence, as articulated by a gender-bounded caste of specialists corresponding to what might elsewhere be termed shamans, in the context of the socio-political changes taking place during the Viking period in Scandinavia.

The societies of Viking Age Scandinavia spanned a complex border zone between the Germanic and circumpolar cultural spheres, and their belief systems are discussed in this light. Throughout the book, the ritual practices of the Norse are examined in relation to those of the Sámi people with whom they shared much of the Scandinavian peninsular. Late Iron Age understandings of religion and war are also reviewed against the background of similar perspectives among the ‘shamanic’ cultures of the circumpolar region, from Siberia to the North American arctic and Greenland.

**Keywords:** Viking Age, Vikings, Óðinn, *seidr*, sorcery, shamanism, warfare, Norse religion, Norse mythology, Sámi

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*Cover illustration:* a late tenth-century runestone from Aarhus, Denmark (DR 66), decorated with a face-mask in the Mammen style. In the fragmentary inscription a fallen Viking is given a classic tribute by his friends: ‘Gunulf and Ógot and Aslak and Hrölf set up this stone in memory of Ful, their comrade-in-arms. He found death ... when kings were fighting.’
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Abbreviations

BMT Bergens Museums Tilvekst
BMA Bergens Museums Arbok
CMC Canadian Museum of Civilisation, Hull, Québec, Canada
DAUM Dialekt-, ortnamns- och folkminnesarkivet, Umeå (see ULMA below)
Dipl. Isl. Diplomatarium Islandicum
KVHAA Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Stockholm
LA Lundmark archive: private papers in the possession of Bo Lundmark
NGL Norges gamle Love indtil 1387
NM Nordiska museet, Stockholm
ONP Dictionary of Old Norse Prose / Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog, online word-list available at http://www.onp.hum.ku.dk/
OPIA Occasional Papers in Archaeology, University of Uppsala
Skjaldedigtning Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning. Ed. Finnur Jónsson 1912-15
STUAGNL Samfund(et) til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur
Svenska Landsmål Svenska Landsmål och Svenskt Folkliv
TVSS Det Kongelige Norske Videnskabers Selskabs Skrifter, Trondheim
ULMA Dialekt- och folkminnesarkivet, Uppsala (now incorporated in SOFI, Språk- och folkminnesinstitutet, Uppsala University)
ÅFNF Årsberetning for Foreningen til Norske Fortidsminnesmerkers bevaring
ÄVgL Aldre Västgötalagen

Dialects and dialect-groups of the Sámi language:

SaC Central Sámi dialect-group
SaL Lule Sámi dialect
SaN North Sámi dialect
SaP Pite Sámi dialect
SaE East Sámi dialect-group
SaI Inari Sámi dialect
SaKld Kildin Sámi dialect
SaSk Skolt Sámi dialect
SaTer Ter Sámi dialect
SaS South Sámi dialect-group / dialect
SaU Ume Sámi dialect
Preface and acknowledgements

There have been times during the long preparation of this thesis when I have wondered if I belong in the category of what Jarl Nordbladh (1993: 202) has called, "shaman-like archaeologists ... who do not mediate their experiences from site visits and the analysis of objects, who see text as a threat, as something which could be used against them", though he was alluding to Gustaf Hallström which would be a flattering comparison indeed.

A lot has happened in my life between October 1988, when a 23-year-old graduate registered for doctoral studies at the Department of Archaeology at the University of York, and October 2002 when a 37-year-old lecturer submitted the present work for examination at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History at the University of Uppsala. Not all of this is easy, or indeed appropriate, to communicate, but the events of this fourteen-year period have exercised a profound influence on the eventual form of this thesis. I hope the reader will forgive an unusually copious set of acknowledgements, and accept them as a reflection of these concerns.

It is conventional in works such as this to absolve one's colleagues from complicity in the opinions expressed, but in this case many of those whose advice I gratefully acknowledge here will find that what I have written is in complete contradiction to what they recommended. Nevertheless, if I have succeeded in overcoming my 'shaman-like' problems then this is largely due to the assistance that I have received from the people mentioned below. If I have failed, the responsibility for this and any errors that remain is mine alone.

York

The foundations of this book were laid during my initial doctoral research in the Department of Archaeology at the University of York, which lasted from October 1988 to May 1992. I would like to begin with heartfelt thanks to my friend and former supervisor Steve Roskams for all his encouragement and advice, and his support during a seemingly endless succession of personal crises from 1989-91, a period when life looked very bleak indeed. For their academic guidance and hospitality I would also like to warmly thank Martin Carver, Jane Grenville, Richard Morris, Priscilla Roxburgh and especially Julian Richards. In between the sounds of academic labour, I remember the postgraduate room at York as often filled with laughter, conversation and the treacherous smell of fast food, all of which contributed to this book: my thanks to all the postgrads, too many to name but none forgotten.

Although they do not feature in the pages that follow, my doctoral studies were originally very much concerned with the excavations of Anglo-Scandinavian tenements at 16-22 Coppergate in York. In connection with this the project director, Richard Hall, jointly supervised my work until 1992. In addition to showing my gratitude for his advice, I would also like to thank him for his understanding as Northumbria moved inexorably from the inner core to the outer periphery of this thesis. The Coppergate work also involved close liaison with the city's field unit, the York Archaeological Trust, where Martin Brann, Dave Brinklow, Dave Evans, Pam Graves, Kurt Hunter-Mann, Sarah Jennings, Ailsa Mainman, Jef Maytom, and Nicky Pearson were all particularly helpful. From the Environmental Archaeology Unit of the University of York, I would also like to thank Allan Hall and Harry
Kenward for allowing me to read a draft of the environmental report on Coppergate in advance of its final publication.

No decent academic work is possible without one's friends, and my thesis research in York was no exception. From my four years there I have fond memories of Helen Geake, Kaye Haworth, Andy Josephs, Liz Mullineaux, Wayne Sawtell, Chris Welch, Mark Whyman, 'the second-years', the site crew of the Queen's Hotel excavation, and everyone from Haroft Street and Poppy Road. I believe that the environment of discourse is important, so it is only right to acknowledge that many of these memories also involve the Golden Bull, Walker's Bar, The Other Tap and Spile, the Spread Eagle, the Blue Bell, the Anglers' Arms, the Shire Horses and the White Swan.

Uppsala

Difficulties in my personal circumstances meant that my effective engagement with the thesis at York was unavoidably part-time at best. Unable to complete the doctorate there, in 1992 I emigrated to a new life in Sweden where I spent the next five years working full-time in field archaeology. During this period I naturally continued to gather source material and to publish as much as was possible alongside the steady stream of excavation reports and archive documents that formed my daily work. Ever since moving to Sweden I had enjoyed a close connection with the Department of Archaeology (now combined with Ancient History) at the University of Uppsala, and so it was with particular pleasure that I was able to formally join it as a research scholar in 1996, having grown acclimatised to Scandinavia and its archaeology. I have been working there full-time since January 1997.

Although I have chosen to set out these acknowledgements in broadly chronological order, therefore beginning with my time at York, my foremost thanks must go to my supervisor at Uppsala, Anne-Sofie Gräsland. I am grateful for her friendship, knowledge and encouragement, as well as her patience with broken deadlines and in taking on the supervision of a work originally begun in quite different circumstances. Anne-Sofie, you have my deep respect, and you are definitely not a positivist!

Until the last phase of my doctoral studies, the professor and head of department at Uppsala was Bo Gräsland. His advice has been important to me at several crucial moments in my research, and his unruffled calm has kept us all on a smooth course. I thank him for all the conversations, his humane views on life and work, and for the chance to take up my studies in a new country.

At Uppsala I would also like to thank Władysław Duczko, Johan Hegardt, our new professor Ola Kyhlberg, and especially Stefan Brink and Frands Herschend for all their help and critique over the years, including detailed comments on the text. For similar discussions and much-needed intakes of international air, my thanks also go to Paul Sinclair of the department's section for African and Comparative Archaeology.

Special thanks are due to Britt-Marie Eklund, Lena Hallbäck and their colleagues in our departmental library at Uppsala, without doubt the best institutional collection I have ever worked in. I am also grateful to the staff of the main university library Carolina Rediviva, and especially to the librarians in the Special Reading Rooms for Early Manuscripts who gave me every assistance in my consultation of the circumpolar ethnographies and the Byzantine sources.

The administration of the department rests on the shoulders of Birgitta Karlsson, Britta Wallsten, Elisabet Green and Marina Weilguni, and previously Yvonne Backe-Forsberg. Without them, all our work would be impossible.

Another special mention must go to my fellow researchers in the Uppsala doctoral seminar, whose company and conversation has contributed more than they know to this thesis. Most of them are now PhDs themselves and I extend a warm thank-you to them all, but especially to Magnus Alkarp, Linn Lager, Cia Lidström Holmberg, Svante Norr, Katarina Romare, Alex Sanmark, Anneli Sundkvist, Helena Victor and Kajsa Willemark. For several years I shared an office with Michel Notelid, which was a pleasure and a privilege: there are few problems that I have been unable to put into proper perspective after coffee, cognac and a cigar with Michel. During the last year of work on the book I have shared an office with the egyptologist Sofia Häggman. Our conversations about the Western Desert and her beloved Siwa oasis have given me a calm mental space into which to retreat from the
tensions of thesis work, and I have gained a new friend: thanks, Fia.

These acknowledgements would not be complete without mentioning two institutions in Uppsala which have probably seen more archaeological discussions than the university. Charlie and all at Trattoria Commedia have maintained an alternative doctoral seminar for years, which improves on the official one with great food and drink - may the tradition continue for years to come! Round the corner at Taverna Akropolis, Nikos and his colleagues there have been a special part of my evenings for just as long, with a shared love of wine and conversation in good company. It won’t be long before you see me and Kalle again.

The Viking world

This book was produced at two universities in different countries, but its completion also involved visits to places and people in several more. I have been fortunate to be able to discuss my ideas at conferences and university seminars, to visit relevant sites in the field, and to research museum collections, in Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, the Faroe Islands, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Norway, the Russian Federation and Sweden. Rather than rehearse a long list of names and institutions, I extend my grateful thanks to all those who assisted me and participated in the discussions.

A few acknowledgements must, however, be made by name. Firstly I would like to thank James Graham-Campbell, Else Roesdahl and Colleen Batey, who have been instrumental in my participation in a number of Viking projects over the years. Their support is very much appreciated.

In general, I owe my introduction to Swedish archaeology and culture to the colleagues from my first five years of field archaeological work at Riksantikvarieämbetet UV Mitt (1992-3) and Arkeologikonsult AB (1993-6), and I would like to acknowledge my debt to them here. As part of their investment in employee training and personal development, Arkeologikonsult also funded my attendance at a number of conferences. For reasons that will become clear in chapter one, I owe a special debt to the 1990 staff of the Birka Project, and to Björn Ambrosiani and Helen Clarke who made it possible for me work there. Life in Sweden would not have been the same without my friends Magnus Artursson, Stefan Larsson, Björn Magnusson Staaf and Jonas Wikborg.

I would also like to thank the following friends and colleagues for their advice, assistance or a timely comment over the years of research: Anders Andrén, Jette Arneborg, Elisabeth Barford CarlSEN, Roger Blidmo, Richard Bradley, Axel Christophersen, Jennifer Deon, Charlotte Fabech, Oren Falk, Peter Foote, Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir, Eva-Marie GöranSSON (to whom I owe a letter), Anders Götherström, Guy Halsall, John Hines, Judith Jesch, Wayne Johnson, Kerstin Lidén, Niels Lynnerup, Rory McTurk, Caroline Malone, John McKinnell, Christopher Morris, Michael Müller-Wille, Richard North, Evgenie Nosov, Ulf Näsman, Adrian Olivier, Deirdre O’Sullivan, John Oxley, Richard Perkins, Mats Roslund, Elisabeth Rudebeck, Peter and Birgit Sawyer, Robert Schmidt, Dagfinn Skre, Simon Stoddart, Pat Wallace, Nancy Wicker, Rob Young and Ute Zimmerman. At both York and Uppsala, I would also like to thank all the undergraduate and MA students that I have taught and who have taught me in return.

Some of these acknowledgements are more specific. Kent Andersson of the National Museum of Antiquities in Stockholm arranged for me to examine the iron staffs from Birka, Klínta and the Norwegian examples in their collections, and in his previous life at Uppsala University provided much valuable advice; Jan Bill calculated the possible size of boat represented by the rivets in the Klínta cremation; Stephen Harrison drew my attention to the iron staff from the Kilmainham cemetery outside Dublin; Adrienne Heijnen and Bart Westgeest provided some Dutch material on staffs; Ola Kyhlberg talked me through his Birka chronologies; Annika Larsson and Margareta Nockert advised me on the reconstruction of the textiles in the Birka chamber graves and at Vivallen; and it was from the late Gun-B Britt Rudin that I first heard of the Hedeby masks. My thanks to them all.

I have been fortunate to have had close contacts with the Department of History of Religions at Uppsala, where Anders Hultgard, Olof Sundqvist and Torsten Blomkvist have been very helpful. For much-appreciated feedback on my work, my thanks also go to Catharina Raudvere and Leszek Pawel Slupecki. Concurrent with my own studies, a small group of scholars from various disciplines has
also been working with different aspects of *seiðr*, sorceresses and Iron Age 'shamanism'. Their research has made a great difference to my own, and I would therefore like to thank Stefan Andersson, François-Xavier Dillmann, Lotte Hedeager, John Lindow, Bente Magnus, Jens Peter Schjødt, Brit Solli and Clive Tolley.

I have also gained inspiration from the annual EC-funded Socrates seminars on Viking Society and Culture, held since 1998 as joint ventures between the universities of Aarhus, Kiel, Uppsala and York, and expanded from 2002 to include Nottingham, Poznan, Tartu and Trondheim. At these meetings I would especially like to acknowledge my friends Trine Buhl and Pernille Hermann, who embody all the positive sides of academic research. I also benefited from the late Iron Age postgraduate seminars organised in 1998 at the university of Oslo, and funded by them in conjunction with NorFa.

Þórhallur Þrétta has turned my written descriptions of what I believe to be the burials of *völur* into wonderful reconstruction drawings, and I would like to express my appreciation for his commitment to these illustrations. As for all Icelanders, for Þórhallur the sagas represent a living heritage and it is always a pleasure for me to discuss them in this light; he has brought several relevant episodes to my attention.

I am very grateful to Susanne Bøgh-Andersen for allowing me to use the artefact drawings from her 1999 thesis on roasting spits. This is the standard work on these objects, many of which I discuss here in the context of a proposed re-interpretation, and Susanne's generosity has saved me from having to commission a very large number of illustrations. I also thank Flemming Bau for permission to reproduce his line drawings from the Fyrkat cemetery report.

Unless otherwise noted in the text, all translations from modern Scandinavian languages are my own. I thank Mats Cullhed for checking my translations from Latin, Håkan Rydving for advice on the use of terms from the Sámi dialects, and Stefan Brink for doing his best to ensure that my Old Norse passed muster. Henrik Williams helped me with the runic inscriptions from the Klinta grave (which as it turned out were indecipherable!). In all this linguistic work I must again emphasise that any remaining errors are mine alone.

Svante Norr designed the layout of the book and set the text electronically, while at the same time providing valuable comments on its content. Karin Bengtsson and Cecilia Ljung have scanned all the illustrations, with great patience as I repeatedly came back to them with 'just one more' picture. A line of acknowledgements does not do justice to the amount of editorial and technical work that all this entailed, and I would like to record my debt to them here.

Sápmi and the Sámi

The Sámi people occupy a special place in this thesis, and it is no accident that of all the years of work I remember with most pleasure the time spent on this aspect of my studies.

Among all the scholars of Sápmi's archaeology and culture with whom I have collaborated, I owe my greatest debt to Inger Zachrisson, who since my first visit to Scandinavia has been a constant friend and guide through the Sámi world. She has my warmest thanks, and my deep respect for her quiet determination in the face of sometimes the bitterest opposition.

In 1997 I held a research scholarship in Sámi religion at Ájtte, the Swedish Mountain and Sámi Museum in Jokkmokk, and have made many visits before and since to this excellent institution just inside the arctic circle. I would like to thank Inga-Maria Mulak and her colleagues for their assistance, with a special mention for Ájtte's librarian Birgitta Edeborg whose efficiency made my research there many times more effective. In particular, a very warm thank-you to my friend Anna Westman for sharing her copious knowledge of religion, and for giving up so much of her work and leisure time during my visits to Lappland. Equal thanks go to another friend at Ájtte, Gunilla Edholm, who has been an unfailingly cheery guide through Sápmi's material culture and also Jokkmokk's somewhat dubious nightlife. Isse Israelsson at Ájtte generously allowed me access to her unpublished work on Sámi bark-face carvings. My visits to Jokkmokk have been enhanced by the goodwill of those I have met there, so a friendly wave to Ann-Catrin Blind, Kerstin Eidljitz Kuoljok, John Kuhmunen, Magnus
Kuhmunen, Gunnel Kuoljok, Lena Kuoljok Lind, Ingrid Metelius, and John Erling Utsi; Gertrud, please tell Gustav that ‘Armstrong’ says hello.

Much of our knowledge of Sámi traditional beliefs is preserved in the form of stories recorded by ethnographers, but this ‘anthropological’ context does little justice to a tradition that continues today and which forms a vital part of the Sámi cultural heritage. On several occasions I have been fortunate to listen to Johan Márak, Anna-Lisa Pirtsi Sandberg and Lars Pirak, whose family tales of great noaidi such as Unnásj, Birkit and Berhta still have much to say to a modern audience: I thank them here.

In addition to my own researches, most of what I know of Sámi religion comes from the teaching and conversation of Louise Bäckman and Håkan Rydving, the former at a number of conferences over the years and the latter during his courses at Uppsala University in 2000 and 2001; my thanks to them both. I also thank Bjørnar Olsen, who has given me both friendly encouragement, information and practical assistance on numerous occasions over the years of research, and outside the scope of the thesis in the course of our joint project on the Sámi sacred landscapes of the White Sea. Hans Mebius always has interesting ideas on Sámi religion, and I have enjoyed our conversations.

In the arctic midsummer of 1993 I was able to visit a number of museums in the Finnmarks-Vidda and Varangerfjord regions of Norwegian Sapmi, under the guidance of Audhild Schanche and Reidun Andreasson: thanks to them and to all at Guovdageainnu Gilisillju in Kautokeino, the Coastal Sámi Museum at Kokelv, SamiVuorka-Davirat at Karasjok, Vadsø Museum, and particularly the Varanger Sámi Museum at Mortensnes. Years afterwards, this field-trip prompted an entire book from one of its participants (Bradley 2000: xi), from which its quality can be judged. I would also like to thank Knut Helskog for his guidance around the rock art sites along the Alta fjord over several days that same summer.

Finally, at a more general level I have been fortunate to review the excellent Sámi collections in a number of museums. In Sweden these have included the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, Gammlia (Vasterbotten Museum) in Umeå, Norrbotten Museum in Luleå, and Jamtli (Jamtland County Museum) in Östersund; in Norway, Alta Museum and the Oldsaksamlingen in Oslo.

Comparative ethnographic and archaeological work

As will become clear in the following chapters, one of the key themes of this book concerns the unique location of Viking Age Scandinavia on the frontier between the Germanic and circumpolar cultural spheres. I have therefore come to feel strongly that no serious assessment of the popular religion of this region can be undertaken without a firm grasp of the other arctic and sub-arctic belief systems, especially those of Siberia. Inevitably, it is impossible for any one scholar to gain a deep expertise of this entire area, but an overview of the field - and especially its material culture - seemed necessary to acquire. Over the years of thesis research I have therefore visited a number of foreign institutions specialising in circumpolar shamanism, and attempted a regular attendance on the conference circuit for these issues.

Despite its relevance, the data that I collected obviously cannot be presented in its entirety here - partly for practical reasons, but mainly to avoid the transformation of the thesis into an ethnographic catalogue. I therefore chose to subsume much of this work’s conclusions in a separate edited volume, The Archaeology of Shamanism (Price 2001a), which I prepared parallel with the thesis and as a deliberate complement to it. My intention was to provide the kind of introduction to the subject that I wished had existed when I began my research. While I refer the reader to this other book, I must still emphasise that the synthetic work behind it formed an integral part of preparing the present one. Precisely because this aspect of my studies is not always directly visible in the following chapters, some brief summary of it is required here.

The survey that I undertook naturally focused on the belief systems of Siberia, and extended eastwards through Alaska, the Northwest Coast cultures of Canada, and across the arctic and sub-arctic to Greenland. This work focused around three research communities in Canada, the United States and Denmark, and the much larger network of contacts that connects them. In all cases, my viewing, handling and discussion of sacred material held at these institutions was undertaken with appropriate
respect and in accordance with the guidelines of access agreed with the First Nations peoples and other indigenous communities concerned.

Firstly, in the United States I was able to examine the outstanding archaeological and ethnographic collections held at the Arctic Studies Centre in the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History, in Washington, DC. In addition to their own Alaskan material, through a series of collaborative ventures with Russian institutions the Centre has also assembled the most comprehensive database on Siberian religion that exists outside St. Petersburg (I refer in particular to the results of the Crossroads of Continents project, which effectively provided the long-awaited synthetic report on the Jesup North Pacific Expedition of 1897-1903, discussed in chapter five; see also Fitzhugh & Crowell 1988). Beyond the circumpolar cultures proper, the museum also houses magnificent collections of related shamanic material from the Eastern Woodlands and Northern Plains. I would like to thank the director of the Centre, Bill Fitzhugh, together with Elisabeth Ward and Igor Krupnik for their advice and assistance on several visits to Washington. This research, which was undertaken while working on the Smithsonian’s exhibition Vikings: the North Atlantic Saga, was funded by my remuneration from the Arctic Studies Centre. Also in the U.S., I was able to make valuable contact with a number of shamanic researchers at the 66th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, held in New Orleans in 2001.

Secondly, at the Canadian Museum of Civilisation in Hull, Québec, I was fortunate to have been able to review two aspects of the ethnographic and archaeological collections, relating to the eastern Canadian arctic (Dorset and Thule cultures) and the peoples of the Northwest Coast (in particular the Tlingit, Gitxsan, Nisga’a, Tsimshian, Haida, Nuxalk [formerly known as the Bella Coola], Kwakwaka’wakw [formerly Kwakiutl], Nuu-Chah-Nulth [formerly Nootka], and the Xwe Nal Mewx [formerly Coast Salish]). In connection with this work at the CMC I would like to thank Pat Sutherland, Leslie Tepper and Margo Reid, and Stephen Inglis for arranging access to the magazine collections. My visit to the twin cities of Ottawa and Hull was funded by Berit Wallenbergs Stiftelse.

The third focus of this comparative work was made possible by Martin Appelt and Hans Christian Gulløv of the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, whom I warmly thank for taking me through the shamanic paraphernalia in the superb arctic collections there. My understanding of shamanism among the Netsilik, Nunivak and the Greenland cultures is largely based on this material, particularly that collected on Knud Rasmussen's expeditions. My visits to Denmark were funded by the National Museum’s Greenland Research Centre (now SILA) and the Danish Polar Centre, in connection with the Copenhagen conference on arctic identity held in 1999. In the same year I also received very valuable feedback on the thesis research at the conference on circumpolar shamanism organised by the Centre for North Atlantic Studies at Aarhus University, who also funded my participation there; I thank Frode Mahnecke, Adriënne Heijnen, Ulla Odgaard and Torben Vestergaard for their assistance.

In the autumn of 2000, in conjunction with presenting the thesis research at the Viking Millennium International Symposium in eastern Canada, I was able to extend my survey to the cultures of Newfoundland, Labrador and Nova Scotia (Groswater and Dorset Palaeo-Eskimos, Maritime Archaic Indians, Innu, Inuit, Beothuk and Mi’kmaq). Here I made valuable visits to the Newfoundland Museum in St. John’s, the Full Circle exhibit at Corner Brook, and the interpretation centre at the site of Port au Choix. Visiting L’Anse aux Meadows, where the Scandinavians probably first encountered the Native Americans, was an extraordinary experience. My participation at the symposium was funded primarily by the Swedish Institute, with additional contributions from the Government of Canada (Dept. of Tourism, Culture and Recreation), the Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Labrador Straits Historical Development Corporation, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and Parks Canada.

Beyond these detailed studies, I also spent much time working through the displays of shamanic material held in the ethnographic collections of Scandinavia and Great Britain. In Sweden these included the National Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, and the Ethnographic Museum in Göteborg; in Denmark, the National Museum in Copenhagen; in Norway, the Ethnographic Museum in Oslo; in Finland, the Museum of Cultures in Helsinki; and in the UK, the ethnographic collections of the British Museum (formerly housed separately as the Museum of Mankind) in London.
I have always tried to ground my work on discussions with the broader community of shamanic scholarship in archaeology, beyond the circumpolar area. Foremost here has been my collaboration with the group of researchers based at the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. Following the pioneering work of David Lewis-Williams on the sacred art of the San Bushmen, the RARI team and their circle in southern Africa now form one of the world’s most important centres of excellence for shamanic studies, and my work has benefited greatly from their comments. Although we have met in various countries at different times, I am particularly grateful for the guidance of David and his colleagues on an extended visit to rock art sites in the Drakensberg, Waterberg and Magaliesberg of South Africa in the spring of 2000. The experience of discussing the shamanic world-view with some of its most brilliant interpreters is always invigorating under any circumstances, but the memory of these conversations in the specific context of the rock shelters, as the sun set on the Berg, or around the fire as the constellations of the southern sky appeared overhead, will remain long in my mind. In addition to David himself, I would like to very warmly thank my friend Geoff Blundell for all his advice, assistance and hospitality on numerous occasions. In South Africa I would also like to thank Sam Challis, Jamie Hampson, Ghilaen Laue, Siyakha Mguni, Sven Ouzeman, Ben Smith, Pat Vinnicombe and Carol Wallace. My first visit to South Africa was made possible by a very generous grant from Paul Sinclair and the section for African and Comparative Archaeology at my home department in Uppsala, which in the nick of time enabled me to run the session on ‘Ritual and the Sacred Domain’ at the fourth World Archaeological Congress held in Cape Town in 1999; Antonia Malan at UCT helped arrange my stay there. The second, extended visit in 2000 was funded from a variety of sources credited below.

A vital element of shamanism is the world beyond the shaman - the community and society within which she or he operates. One aspect of this is the relationship between people and their environment, especially the ‘ensouled world’ that is such a crucial part of circumpolar belief systems. Having encountered such perceptions at first-hand within the arctic region, I wanted to try to understand how they functioned in other shamanic traditions. In the summer of 2000, while in Australia to speak at the 11th International Saga Conference in Sydney, I therefore took the opportunity to travel to the Northern Territory to visit the landscapes around Uluru (Ayers Rock) and Kata Tjuta, and to discuss their symbolic significance with representatives of the Anangu people who are native to the area. I would like to thank tribal elder Andrew Uluru and also Tiku Captain for sharing their ancestral stories from Tjukurpa, and the staff of the Anangu Cultural Centre for arranging these meetings.

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Previously published material

A few paragraphs in this book have previously appeared in other publications that I have produced during the period of thesis research (Price 1998b, 2000c; Price in press c & d; and parts of my text sections from Løndahl, Price & Robins 2001). In addition, the first half of my 2001b paper on ‘An archaeology of altered states’ is reproduced piecemeal in chapter five.

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My wife Linda Qviström knows how very much I owe to her, beyond anything that I can express here. She would be embarrassed if I wrote what I really want to say, so my thanks will be private.

My last thanks go to my parents, who always gave me their unqualified support in the pursuit of my chosen profession as in other areas of my life, and in particular during the production of this thesis. It is to their memory that I dedicate The Viking Way, with love.

Neil Price

Uppsala, 2nd October 2002
A note on language

Old Norse names and terms

A constant problem in the citation of Old Norse texts is the inconsistency of orthographic conventions and normalisation. After some deliberation, I have here chosen to retain the forms used in the editions from which I have worked. Similarly in poetic citations I sometimes quote stanzas by the half-line, and sometimes by the full line with caesura, following in each case the editions in which they appear (Neckel & Kuhn’s edition of the Poetic Edda employs the latter format, for example). I hope the reader will not mind this inconsistency, and will see it not only as an incentive to consult the texts directly, but also as an intentional reminder that the author is an archaeologist and not a philologist. My numbering of poetic verses and prose chapters follows the editions cited.

I have retained the Old Norse nominative forms for personal names, even when modern English equivalents are common. This principle has been applied in all contexts, for humans (thus Eiríkr, not Eirik, Erik, Eric, etc), gods and supernatural beings (thus Óðinn, not Odin, Oden, etc), and places (thus Valhöll, not Valhalla, etc). The use of the nominative raises obvious problems when these names are rendered in English grammar, especially in a possessive sense. For the sake of readability and in full awareness that it is technically incorrect, instead of dropping the nominative ending I have chosen to compromise with a combination of forms (thus Óðinn’s rather than Óðin’s, etc).

Sámi names and terms

One of the geographical terms used with some frequency in the following pages may be unfamiliar. Sámí is the name the Sámi people give to their traditional homelands, which today are spread over northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in the Russian Federation. While governments might not agree, in the Sámi spiritual consciousness this region is politically borderless.

In an English-language text it is difficult to ‘accurately’ render words from the nine different Sámi dialects within the three larger dialect-groups. A written language has existed in Sápmi for less than 300 years, and was produced under the influence of missionaries and outsiders (in an effort to capture the phonetics of speech, some letters were even borrowed from Czech). The process of orthographic standardisation is still ongoing.

For specific terms I have naturally employed the relevant dialects as appropriate. For the names of the Sámi gods and when a generic sense is required - as with noaidevuohta and noaidi, for which our nearest approximations are ‘shamanism’ and ‘shaman‘ - I have employed the North Sámi dialect according to the present literary language. The orthography for this has been codified in the Fenno-Scandic dictionaries by Svonni (1990), Sammallahti (1993) and Jernsletten (1997). It should be noted that these differ slightly from the spellings used in the classic North Sámi dictionary (K. Nielsen 1932-38).

Finally, the spelling of ‘Sámi’ itself is not uncontroversial. The accented vowel is really only of relevance in a Sámi-language text, so the anglicised and unaccented ‘Sami’ is sometimes used instead. Others prefer to use ‘Saami’, which is phonetically correct. I have chosen to retain the single accented vowel, as this follows the translation policies adopted by the main Sámi cultural centres in Sweden and Norway.
A note on ‘seid’

Much of this book is concerned with the complex of Viking Age rituals collectively known as seidr, associated in the written sources with a range of divinities, supernatural beings and human agents.

Though I make no mention of it in the following chapters, I do not wish to ignore the fact that for a great many people in the present-day Western world seidr has subtly different connotations. Today it is perhaps best known as the name for a set of alternative spiritual practices that have evolved within the broad umbrella of the so-called New Age movement. These practices involve neo-shamanic performances of varying form and emphasis, and take their ultimate inspiration from the religion of the Norse. This other ‘seid’ (there are various spellings) has generated a considerable body of literature, both within its own frame of reference and among anthropologists interested in modern spiritual expression.

My own reservations about neo-shamanism in general, and in the context of archaeology in particular, have been summarised elsewhere (Price 2001b: 10ff). With regard to ‘seid’, as an archaeologist I find this re-use of the past fascinating, though irrelevant for the interpretation of the ancient belief system on which it is loosely based. I have no spiritual interest in it whatsoever, but this may not be the case for some of the readers of this book. Jenny Blain, an academic who is also a ‘seiðworker’, has produced a comprehensive guide to this aspect of modern alternative religion, containing a useful bibliography for those who wish to engage with it further (Blain 2002; see Host 2001 for additional perspectives).

In the course of research for this thesis I have occasionally been approached by ‘seiðworkers’ curious about my work, and have discussed my findings with them both in person and via email. I have for the most part enjoyed these conversations, and I would not like to think that my scepticism towards contemporary ‘seid’ should be taken for disrespect for its practitioners. To Jenny Blain, Annette Host, Diana Paxson, Robert Wallis and their fellow travellers I therefore say that I hope you enjoy this book, and find in it some things of interest.
Fig. 1.1 Birka meditations: the Hemlanden cemetery in winter, from a pencil drawing by Gunnar Hallström, c.1900 (after Hallström 1997: 77).
Different Vikings?
Towards a cognitive archaeology of the later Iron Age

A man is the history of his breaths and thoughts, acts, atoms and wounds, love, indifference and dislike; also of his race and nation, the soil that fed him and his forebears, the stones and sands of his familiar places, long-silenced battles and struggles of conscience, of the smiles of girls and the slow utterance of old women, of accidents and the gradual action of inexorable law, of all this and something else too, a single flame which in every way obeys the laws that pertain to Fire itself, and yet is lit and put out from one moment to the next, and can never be relumed in the whole waste of time to come.

"Randolph Henry Ash, Ragnarök (1840)"

It mattered to Randolph Ash what a man was, though he could, without undue disturbance, have written that general pantechinicon of a sentence using other terms, phrases and rhythms and have come in the end to the same satisfactory evasive metaphor.

A.S. Byatt, Possession (1990: 9)

A beginning at Birka

With a political revision of the language and an added temporal focus, it feels appropriate to begin this book by echoing Antonia Byatt's fictitious Victorian poet: it matters to me what a person was in the Viking Age.

In the spring, summer and late autumn of 1990 I spent most of my evenings sitting on the rocky summit of the hillfort which forms part of the monumental complex at Birka, on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren. These were my first visits to Sweden, the country which is now my home, and I remember with great clarity the experience of looking out over the lake and its islands, the forests that stretched to the horizon and which faded slowly from dark green to almost black as the night came down. My most vivid memories are of the silence, the utter stillness and the vastness of the space - all very strange to me, born and raised in southwest London. Sitting there night after night and observing the gradual changing of the seasons which is so hard to do in England, I pondered the nature of the people who had lived there and built the town that I was then helping to excavate, and who lay buried in the hundreds of mounds surrounding the settlement. I also considered the extent to which it was possible for me to ask or answer that question, reflecting on the debates that had dominated archaeological theory in the closing years of the 1980s.

I had then just published my first book, a study of The Vikings in Brittany (Price 1989), and despite its favourable reception I had begun to have serious doubts as to whether I really understood the essence of that period, roughly the late eighth to eleventh centuries AD. As part of this, I had just begun to develop a serious focus on the pre-Christian mythology of Scandinavia, in which I was
interested as a potential window on the mentalities and pre-occupations of the time. Considering this at Birka, I was disturbed by the fact that the ancestral stories of the North should seem so much more intelligible when looking out over those Swedish trees than they had done while sitting in my office in England. Back in 1990 I was worried that my straying towards what felt like interpretative heresies would land me in severe professional trouble, but over the years of intermittent research that eventually led to the present work I was to discover that increasing numbers of early medieval scholars were experiencing similar crises of academic faith.

The incumbents of the Birka mounds were the same people from whose language we have taken a word and used it to define an age: the time of the Vikings. These figures of the popular and academic imagination are of course familiar to us, in the updated version that we have striven to create over the last few decades: not just the no-longer-horned-helmeted marauders of legend, but now also the peaceable traders, skilled poets, worldly travellers and supremely talented craftworkers who have partly replaced them. Now too, we see ‘Viking’ women alongside ‘Viking’ men, and we are learning to be cautious about our terminology. Like many such characterisations of past peoples, as far as we know this is all broadly accurate in its essentials. Obviously, in many respects the Vikings lived lives just like our own, experiencing the fundamental needs - to eat, to sleep, to cope with menstruation, to prevent their infant children from doing too much incidental damage to the home, and so on. On the other hand, we seem reluctant to acknowledge that aspects of these and many other facets of their lives come to us filtered through a world-view that most of us would find incomprehensibly distant, unpalatable, even terrifying.

Where in our synthetic models of the period do we find serious consideration of the torch-carrying man who walked backwards round a funeral pyre, completely naked and with his fingers covering his anus; the herd of six-legged reindeer depicted on a wall-covering; the armed women who worked a loom made from human body-parts; the elderly Sámi man who was buried in a Nordic woman’s clothes; the men who could understand the howling of wolves; the women with raised swords who paced beneath trees of hanging bodies; the men who had sex with a slave-girl, and then strangled her, as a formal sign of respect for her dead master; the woman buried with silver toe-rings and a bag full of narcotics?

Four of those examples come from archaeological finds, four from textual sources; they are far from unique. These and many similar instances of ‘different’ - though by no means unapproachable - Viking lives have been allowed to remain substantially unwritten in our archaeological histories, and our view of the early medieval North is much the poorer for that. Linking most of them are two strands of social expression which are the subject of this book, namely religion and war. In the Viking Age, neither of those terms can really be said to equate with the modern, Western understanding of them.

‘Religion’ to us conjures up something orthodox, a creed, with more-or-less rigid rules of behaviour that usually embody concepts of obedience and worship. These tenets are often set out in holy books, with holy men and women to interpret them, with all that that implies in terms of social differentiation and power relationships. To a greater or lesser degree, all the world faiths of our time fall into this category. In Scandinavia before the coming of Christianity, however, no-one would have understood this concept. For the late Iron Age it is instead more appropriate to speak of a ‘belief system’, a way of looking at the world. What we would now isolate as religion was then simply another dimension of daily life, inextricably bound up with every other aspect of existence. The people we call the Vikings belonged to a culture “that had, among other things, a looser sense than Islam or Christianity of the boundaries between our world and the next, as well as those between the world of humans and the world of beasts” (Hochschild 1998: 74). The Conversion in Scandinavia was a clash of perceptions as much as ideologies.

‘War’ is another problematic concept, if we are to use it in an attempt to recover an ancient viewpoint. To us, warfare may be complex in the logistical detail of its prosecution, with increasingly sophisticated tactical and strategic elements, not to mention its ideological support structure in the form of propaganda and media control; it is nonetheless essentially straightforward in its brutal mechanisms and purpose. It implies a kind of system, chaotic and yet conforming to a pattern in the sense that modern war involves always a suspension of normality and the so-called rule of law. No matter how savage or endemic the fighting, there is always a certain formality in the transition from a fragile
peace to the commencement of hostilities. In the Viking Age, again no such division existed, in that warfare had long been embedded in the general arena of social behaviour. We should not see this just in the overly-familiar sense of a male-dominated 'warrior culture', but in a far deeper way, seeping into the daily fabric of existence in a fashion that implicated every member of the community, regardless of sex or gender. Indeed, as we shall see the latter may have been partly constructed around a very explicit relationship to applied violence and its ramifications. Ritual and the supernatural world - 'religion', in a sense - was as important to the business of fighting as the sharpening of swords.

It is here that this book is located, in the border zone between our modern concepts and an equally modern idea of an ancient reality (for the way in which we experience the past is naturally a construction of the present). We shall be looking at the point where 'religion' and 'war' met and blended into a perception that I believe lay at the very heart of Viking Age men's and women's understanding of their world. This notion of ambiguity, of a fluidity of boundaries, also permeates my third main theme, namely the relationship between the Nordic population and their neighbours in the Scandinavian peninsula, the Sámi (also known, though not to themselves, as the Lapps). The early Norse concepts of religion and war will be examined not only in the context of Germanic culture, but also in terms of their relationship to the circumpolar arctic and sub-arctic peoples.

The following chapters will address all these themes, focusing primarily on the nature of the rituals in which they were combined. Through the medium of the archaeological and literary sources we will be exploring the social tensions between notions of religious belief, popular superstition and magic. In particular, the idea of the supernatural empowerment of aggression will be explored in several contexts - amongst and between the Scandinavians and Sámi, women and men, fighters and non-combatants, across social and political strata, and in relation to the wider world of mythological beings, including the gods and their various supernatural agents. Central to all this will be a discussion of what has sometimes been called shamanism, and the notion that in some form this may have occupied a significant place in the mental landscape of pre-Christian Scandinavia. In this light we shall be looking too at cultural attitudes to animals in the Viking Age, how the 'natural world' may have been understood by early medieval Scandinavians, and by extension what it may have meant to them to be human beings. Constructions of gender and sexuality form an integral part of such negotiations, and will be considered in detail.

Ultimately, this book argues for the existence of a particular concept of power in early medieval Scandinavia - intricate in its mechanisms, perceived as supernaturally-based, and gender-specific in its manifestation. It will be suggested that violence, both latent and applied, played a crucial role in this power system, articulated by means of a ritual 'motor' for the physical prosecution of warfare. Although highly variable both regionally and over time, it is argued that this construction of social relations nevertheless formed one of the defining elements in the world-view of the Scandinavians during the later Iron Age. It may also be seen as one of the key factors that decided the form taken by the Conversion process in the North.

To employ an over-used but nevertheless relevant term to which we shall return below, this book is therefore my attempt to write an explicitly 'cognitive' archaeology of the Vikings, an attempt which in some ways began with those evenings at Birka and my first feelings of unease about the adequacy of our previous enquiries into the Viking mind. This first chapter will take up that theme, exploring the intellectual background for the study of the Viking Age and the relationship between our sub-discipline and the broader pattern of developing archaeological thought in the profession as a whole. The role of texts (in every sense) and the tensions between the artificial constructions of 'prehistoric' and 'medieval' archaeology are fundamental to this discussion, so we can begin by looking at the recent steps taken towards a more self-consciously historical approach to material culture studies in Scandinavia.

Textual archaeology and the Iron Age

Archaeological research connected to periods for which written sources survive once tended to lie closer to historiography in its fundamental frame of reference. Until the mid-1980s, this remained largely outside the discussions within mainstream archaeology concerning the development of methodologies, theories and practice. The very concept, or relevance, of conducting archaeological re-
search into such well-documented periods was similarly challenged by several historians as an expensive way of establishing what was already known. This debate is now itself largely a thing of the past, as theoretical developments have led to a general understanding of history and archaeology (and many other related disciplines) as complementary discourses, each subject to the various processes that have filtered the passage of information from the past to the present, from its creation to our perception of its existence, form and meaning (cf. Bintliff & Gaffney 1986).

In a global perspective, these research frameworks have combined in the emergence of ‘historical archaeology’ as a branch of the discipline in its own right. This term can be understood in three ways, not all of which are mutually compatible:

- the archaeology of the post-medieval period (British usage)
- the archaeology of colonialism and the imperial aftermath (New World usage)
- the archaeology of literate or proto-historic societies

In the case of colonial and post-Reformation archaeology, as to some extent with Viking studies, some critics have seen it as inappropriate for archaeologists to work with written sources at all, even though the archaeologists argue that these are necessary for exploring the material culture of an historical age. Because of this, while the subject specifics of the first two categories do not concern us here, their newly-won theoretical underpinnings are of relevance. From gradual beginnings in the late 1970s (e.g. South 1977; Schuyler 1978) the interdependent study of historical and archaeological data sources has now grown to the point of playing a major role in the ongoing debate on these periods (e.g. L. Falk 1991; Orser & Fagan 1995; Orser 1996; Funari et al. 1998; I have here cited only general studies). Mindful of the kind of approaches that have evolved over the last three decades in the United States, parts of Africa, Australia and New Zealand, I will argue below that a similar kind of transformation is under way in the archaeological study of the later Scandinavian Iron Age.

Before moving on to this, however, we must also consider another aspect of textual studies in archaeology. With the growing impact of post-modernist ideas, imported into archaeology in the early 1980s as post-processualism, came an increased focus on the textual metaphor of material culture. This was pioneered by one of the architects of post-processualism, Ian Hodder, who argued in 1986 that “archaeology should recapture its traditional links with history” (1991: 80). Alongside his early experiments in archaeological historiography (e.g. 1987), reviewed below, Hodder developed the now-familiar image of all material records of the past as a kind of text. In this way, both material objects and written sources are equally regarded as products of the human imagination, that can be approached with the same understandings of contextualised agency. While Hodder certainly admitted to the need for specialist skills in appropriate areas, he nevertheless suggested that both artefacts and texts can be deciphered using the same principles of metaphor, an approach that he characterised as reading the past (also the title of his 1986 manifesto for the post-processual revolution, with a second edition in 1991; see especially his chapter five).

Hodder’s ideas have had a major impact on the archaeology of truly prehistoric societies, and have been developed further by others (for example, B. Olsen 1997, especially pp. 280-96). However, their reception within ‘historical archaeology’ has been more uneasy - indeed, there has been very little consciously post-processual work with written records of any kind.

One exception to this was a short debate in the journal Medeltidsarkeologisk tidskrift (META), beginning with a theme issue on textual problems in archaeology (META 92:4, 1992), focusing on the latent or manifest nature of data derived from written sources and material culture. Over the following two numbers Anders Andrén (1993b) and Axel Christoffersen (1993) somewhat acrimoniously debated this, and in 1997 Andrén produced a book-length meditation on the archaeology of literate societies. In the latter he sets out a methodology based around notions of correspondence, association and contrast, and argues in a similar way to Hodder that these levels of analysis may be applied equally to artefacts and texts. Unlike Hodder, however, he takes active steps to apply this to ‘real’ written sources:

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On an abstract level, this interplay of similarity and difference is not specific to the historical archaeologies; it is found in all archaeology, as in all meaning-producing work, for instance, in various forms of artistic expression. In the prehistoric archaeologies, classification, correlation, association, and contrast play at least as important a role as in the historical archaeologies. It is just identification that is unique to the historical archaeologies, and paradoxically it is scarcely this context that may be expected to lead to a renewal. The unique thing about the historical archaeologies, then, is not the types of context but rather the character of their structure. It is this very dialogue between artefact and text that is unique in relation to prehistoric archaeology as well as history.


This has been expressed again more recently by John Moreland in his study of Archaeology and text (2001). He first surveys the paths that attitudes to the Word have taken in archaeology, from 'culture-history' through the New Archaeology, to structuralism and orthodox Marxism, and the allegedly atheoretical 'common sense' approach. Following in the spirit of Hodder's contextualised archaeology, Moreland then chooses to see written sources as 'significant possessions' of past peoples, as material creations similar to any other 'artefact' that we study (ibid: 77-97, and Moreland 1998):

Archaeologists must recognise that people in the historical past wove or constructed their identities, not just from the objects they created, possessed and lived within, but through texts as well. As products of human creativity, they too were created and distributed within social relationships, and were crucial weapons in attempts to reproduce or transform them. As such, the 'silent majority' [i.e. the 'people without history' with whom archaeologists are often said to engage], although illiterate, were deeply entangled in the webs created by writing. Equally, however, historians must recognise that their exclusive focus on the written sources provides them with access to only one thread in the fabric of human identity - hardly a reliable basis for the reconstruction of the whole.

Moreland 2001: 83f

These points seem obvious, but they provide a solid justification not just for believing that "archaeology should not be given a more narrow distinction that what is provided by the etymology of the word itself: 'knowledge of the ancient' " (Norr 1998: v), but that archaeologists actually ought to concern themselves with written sources (see also Andrén 2002, which appeared as this book was going to press).

For the Viking Age, the question is to what degree it was actually 'historical' in the sense that Moreland and Andrén mean.

The Vikings in (pre)history

In this context we must observe firstly that the Viking Age Scandinavians themselves were on the cusp of such a distinction - undoubtedly literate in the use of runic scripts, though to an uncertain extent, but with a bookless culture that did not employ written documentation and historical record-keeping. A crucial point here must be the realisation that the early medieval Scandinavians certainly knew about these things, and that they either rejected them outright or chose to replace them with something else. Perhaps they did not serve their needs, or they did not fit into their view of how things should be.

From a research perspective, however, the situation is not as simple as this.

In Britain, the Viking Age forms the latter part of the early medieval period, the broad span of time usually taken to begin with the nominal end of Roman occupation around the beginning of the fifth century and encompassing the Germanic immigrations, the slow growth of royal power and its consolidation in petty kingdoms, the destructive Viking wars, and finally the creation of the unified England which faced the Norwegian and Norman invasions of 1066. The increasing impact and presence of Scandinavians runs like an interface pattern through the English experience from at least the eighth century and probably much earlier, and does not truly end until well into the medieval period proper, if even then. With only brief chronological gaps in the sources, it was a solidly historical age.
In the Scandinavian countries however, the Vikings occupy the final phase of the Iron Age, conceptualised and taught as the last prehistoric period. Beyond the evidence of the runestones and runic inscriptions (which should by no means be discounted - see Page 1993 and 1995: ch. 1) lies only an obscure world of stories, tantalising hints of which have come down to us in the poetry and epic narratives of the later Viking Age and after. As an indication of all the tales and histories that were once common currency and are now utterly lost, we need look no further than the ninth-century runestone from Rök (Ög 136; fig. 1.2) which relates whole lists of them in a manner which partly assumes prior knowledge and partly looks beyond it to a deeper level of secret lore, locked securely in the minds of a select few:

"I tell the ancient tale which the two war-booties were, twelve times taken as war-booty, both together from man to man."

"This I tell the thirteenth which twenty kings sat on Sjaelland for four winters, with four names, born to four brothers: five Valke, sons of Rādulv, five Reiduls, sons of Rūgulv, five Haiils, sons of Hord, five Gunmunds, sons of Bjorn."

"I tell an ancient tale to which young warrior a kinsman is born. Vilin it is. He could crush a giant. Vilin it is."

Translation after Peter Foote's rendition of S.B.F. Jansson 1987: 32ff which also provides a normalised Old Norse text, and on p. 179 references for further discussion of the runes

The lines quoted above are only a few of those in the complete Rök text, and its interpretation is highly problematic. The translation given here is only one of several that have been made, but the gist of the references is clear. In all, the stone alludes to at least eight such narratives and probably more, recorded in both prose and verse, set out in a mixture of standard runes and cipher crosses. Apart from the fact that the detail of the stories is deliberately omitted, none of them seem straightforward, and like the twenty kings above they almost certainly contain other levels of meaning which we do not understand. The same idea of hidden powers is a common theme in the Eddie poems, with their lists of spells and charms, of knowledge dearly bought and only sparingly communicated.

An interesting problem, rarely raised, concerns the application of source-criticism to the concept of oral history, the traditional narratives from which the saga legacy ultimately derives. Put simply, did Viking Age people believe their (hi)stories? How much trust did they place in their veracity, and how important was this to them?

Fig. 1.2 The runestone from Rök (Ög 136), Östergötland, Sweden (after Jansson 1987: 33; photo Bengt A. Lundberg).
All of this is present in the most elaborate sources for Viking Age Scandinavia, but filtered through a different faith and centuries of social change. Together these make up the corpus of Icelandic texts that has dominated western European perceptions of the period for more than 200 years: the Eddas and the sagas. All of these are, in a sense, joint products of the medieval imagination and its memory of an earlier reality. To ‘date’ these is far from straightforward. Many of the sagas are highly organic texts, perhaps with a single ‘author’ but building on earlier material, sometimes written, sometimes collected as oral tradition, each aspect of which must in turn be subject to individual scrutiny. The texts thus contain a spectrum of information from different times, collected and probably modified when the saga was formally composed, and then altering again through the further transmission of the work in different versions and the chance process by which certain manuscripts have survived while others have been lost. Beyond this, we then have to consider the social context and motivation behind their creation. We shall return to these problems in the following chapter (see Jónas Kristjánsson 1988 for an excellent overview of these questions).

In reviewing Viking studies today, we perceive a field of scholarship in which the Scandinavians of the eighth to eleventh centuries are seen as both the last flourish of a prehistoric Iron Age and simultaneously as leading players on the historical stage of early medieval, literate Europe. In line with this, the reader will notice that I have employed the terms ‘late Iron Age’ and ‘early medieval period’ interchangeably, and this has been done to stress my combination of Anglo-Scandinavian perspectives on the Nordic past from the Migration Period to the end of the Viking Age.

However, this is more than a mere question of semantics, since even the very span of the period is being constantly revised as the origins of what we choose to call the Viking Age are pushed further back into the early eighth century. This is a broad argument, and one which has continued for a decade now in Viking studies. In brief it concerns a series of new datings from emporia such as Ribe and Birka, which seem to confirm that certain jewellery forms previously held to be typical for the Viking Age (c. 790-1070) were actually in use much earlier, in some cases by the beginning of the eighth century. From this material and the results of research projects on elite centres at sites such as Borre, some scholars have extrapolated a new vision of the Viking Age. Taking account of the revised datings, it is argued that the socio-political and technological factors traditionally used to define the period were already in operation by the mid-eighth century at the latest (the debate in progress is summarised in Myhre 1993 and 1998, with a nuanced interpretation by Thunmark-Nylén in 1995, and is brought up to date by Skre, 2001: 1ff).

This approach was put forward partly in its own right, and partly in opposition to the ‘kings and battles’ perspectives that would locate the origins of an age in a single event, usually the 793 raid on Lindisfarne or another at Portland that may have taken place as early as 789 according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for that year. Reductionist terminology can certainly be a problem, but so long as dogmatism is avoided it is something of a necessary evil. We should remember, of course, that all the artificial divisions by which scholars analyse the historical continuum - whether these should be ‘the Bronze Age’, ‘the Vendel period’ or ‘the Age of Steam’ - were created as a means of defining significant social trends with the benefit of hindsight.

The ‘early’ version of the Viking Age is underpinned by a large amount of research on the regional polities that would eventually coalesce to become the Scandinavian nation states (some of this work is taken up below). However, like the perspectives it opposes, the new paradigm also falls prey to some polarised definitions. A period cannot be defined by a style of brooch, which is ultimately what lies behind the notion that pushing back the dating of specific objects should mean that the Viking Age ‘started earlier than we thought’. At the one extreme, we are presented with an historical period defined by an event deemed important by modern scholars solely because it happened to be recorded at all (there is no doubt whatever that Scandinavian maritime raiders had been active around the coasts of north-western Europe for many years, and perhaps even centuries, prior to the 790s). At the other extreme, the revised dating of objects that are common during the bulk of what is acknowledged as the Viking Age is somehow taken to mean that social or ideological change kept exact pace with precise forms of material culture. Myhre’s work and those of his critics meets in the middle of this divide, avoiding the extremes and trying to negotiate the changing social structures of a crucial half-century either side of 750.
Similar discussions are taking place at the other end of the Viking period, with some scholars arguing that it actually extends as late as the twelfth or even thirteenth centuries. As for the start of the Viking Age, this debate contrasts historical events with artefactual chronologies, trying to match the two in an assessment of what kind of socio-political changes were actually taking place at this time. The traditional close of the period has come with the destruction of the Norwegian army at Stamford Bridge in 1066, or more loosely with the adoption of Christianity as an official religion linked to the creation of unified nation states. In artefactual terms, we must consider the erection of central Swedish runestones into at least the 1130s (A-S. Graslund 1991), and the continuation of ‘Viking Age’ object forms into the 1200s in Gotlandic funerary material (Thunmark-Nylén 1991, with an adjusted view in 1995: 611ff). As with the beginning of the period, the notion of the ‘archaeological Viking Age’ has been partially divorced from an overview of historical process.

Elsewhere, other scholars with a non-Scandinavian background are suggesting that the colonial character of the period necessitates a flexible definition of the Viking Age that operates differently in different areas and circumstances. This issue has recently been worked through at length for the Northern Isles and Scotland (J. Barrett et al. 2000), but other obvious examples would include the hybrid Anglo-Scandinavian culture of northern England, the distinctive Hiberno-Norse settlements of Ireland, and the development of a Norman identity in France. A similar debate has long been in progress in Russia and Eastern Europe, and over the last decade has emerged from the state ideology of the ‘Slavic question’ to a more generalised level of discussion.

Against the background of these developments, we can try to isolate the key issues involved, and it can be quickly recognised that the central element has been above all a problem of perspective, and through this perhaps the greatest challenge to Viking studies for many decades. In simple terms, it seems that we are no longer sure quite what the Viking Age means, nor how it should be defined in either chronological, ideological or processual terms. If we cannot be certain when or why it begins and ends, then the reasons for its very conceptualisation are being called into question. Given this confusion over the (pre)history of the Vikings, and the far-reaching implications of this problem, how have archaeologists reacted to the use of written sources in reconstructing the period?

The materiality of text

Until sixty years ago, the dominant response was that of the classic ‘culture-history’ approach, which has long antecedents in Viking studies. As Svante Norr has discussed (1998: 1lf), Swedish archaeologists in particular have long employed written sources in studying the late Iron Age. For example, in their numerous studies of the Vendel and Viking periods in north Uppland, focusing on the mounds at Gamla Uppsala, both Sune Lindqvist and Birger Nerman made extensive use of them, and indeed published their own philological studies.

This kind of confidence was shaken by the political appropriation of Viking studies during the Second World War, and afterwards dealt a mortal blow by the growth of the source-critical school. Despite this, however, to some extent all Viking archaeologists continued to routinely make use of texts, often in small ways that were not always acknowledged: the moment that a small T-shaped object became a ‘Þórr’s-hammer amulet’, then written sources were being employed. In one sense this is a necessity. Viking studies is a unique discipline in which everyone involved needs at least a passing familiarity with the fields adjoining their own. In the case of Viking archaeologists, we need a working knowledge of Old Norse, and certainly the modern Scandinavian languages; we need to know about the history, literature, runic scripts, art and religion of the time.

Writing history in the early Iron Age

One approach has been to use archaeology in unexpected ways, not just to complement written sources, but almost to create them. This trend is particularly apparent in early Iron Age research, and in relation to military ideology - directly relevant to the Viking Age societies which would ultimately develop from these earlier structures. This work has focused on the origins of the material in the great Danish weapon sacrifices, analysing the composition of the armed forces that they represent, and tracing how it came to be deposited in the bogs.
In the first and second centuries AD, the finds indicate patterns of raiders moving into Denmark from the German marches, resulting in conflicts that left their mark in the bogs at Vimose, Kragehul, Ejsbøl and Thorsbjerg. Jørgen Ilkjaer's work on the early third-century Illerup find (published in 8 volumes with more to follow, synthesised in Ilkjaer 2000) has suggested a massive raid on east Jylland, launched as a maritime venture with up to 50 ships from Norway. The same pattern can be seen at other sites from the same period, like the later phase at Vimose. By the fourth century, the raiding seems to have been coming from Swedish Uppland, with a zone of fighting spreading through Skåne, Öland, even Gotland, and down into Denmark where it is reflected in the bog finds from Ejsbøl 2 and, again, Thorsbjerg (Ilkjaer 2000: 67-73).

This material can be coupled with the evidence of naust (boat-shed) finds from Norway's west coast, which imply a surprisingly large capacity to mount a marine military offensive as early as the pre-Roman Iron Age (Myhre 1997; Grimm 2001: 58-63). Along with the supporting settlement evidence, the bog sacrifices essentially begin to give us a 'history' of south Scandinavian warfare from this time up to the early Migration Period (this work is presented in Ilkjaer 2000, though there is no bibliography - for detailed references see Fabech 1996 and the various papers in Nørgård Jørgensen & Clausen 1997; similar work for the fourth-century BC Hjortspring deposit has been collected by Kaul 1988 and Randsborg 1995).

Many of these interpretations rest on the notion that the weapon sacrifices represent the arms of foreign troops defeated in a battle taking place near the site of deposition, while Andren and Jørgensen (Jøgensen 2001: 15f) have suggested that they instead represent booty brought home from abroad by victorious Danish armies. In either scenario, the war booties certainly enable a reconstruction of major international events (as opposed to processes, such as trade and exchange) in a way not previously possible for this period.

A complementary pattern has been proposed with regard to the destruction levels at fortified sites from the same region, particularly in the Iron Age 'war zone' that seems to have left Öland especially vulnerable to repeated attack (e.g. Engström 1991, Näsmann 1997). Again, in mapping the chronological sequence of fighting at these places, linked to the other material evidence, the picture of inter-regional political warfare is being sharpened.

From the bog finds, runic inscriptions of ownership on weapons, shields and items of personal equipment even tell us these warriors' names, the strange sound-combinations still jarring our ears eight centuries after their deaths. Through the Illerup runes we can encounter men called Nithijo, Wagwijo, Firha, Laguthewa, GauthR and Swarta (Ilkjaer 2000: 115f); from Nydam nearly 100 years later we know of WagagastíR who left his name on a shield, and HarkilakR who inscribed his mark on a piece of jewellery (Rieck & Jørgensen 1997: 222).

Reading the Vikings

This unwritten history can now be extended all the way to the sixth century, the period to which the earliest written notices retrospectively refer. It is partly upon work of this kind that the revisionist view of the Viking period has drawn, with impressive results. It is no accident that while these developments were taking place in early Iron Age studies, a similar transformation was slowly gaining ground in late Iron Age research. It is in this that we can find the increasingly text-reliant archaeologies discussed above.

An important inspiration for much of the current work, especially by younger researchers, came from the project Fra Stamme til Stat i Danmark ('From tribe to state in Denmark': Mortensen & Rasmussen 1988, 1991). Presenting its conclusions in two volumes of papers, this project included several works that laid the foundations for the kind of prehistoric 'histories' of the early Iron Age discussed above, and also some of the first examples of late Iron Age textual archaeology. A particularly important paper here was Ulf Näsmann's advocacy of historical analogies for Nordic prehistory (1988), a subject to which he returned a decade later (1998).

In Sweden, this work was expanded upon by Per Ramqvist (1991), who used Visigothic analogies to analyse the elites of middle Norrland. In Uppsala at the same time, Frands Herschend began to develop a more explicit integration of archaeology and text with two studies on Beowulf and Icelandic sources (1992, 1994), focusing on the nature of emerging royal power in late Iron Age Scandinavia.
This research was one of the foundations for the project from which the bulk of recent research of this kind has emerged, the Uppsala-Stockholm collaboration *Swealand in the Vendel and Viking Periods* (SIV). The results have been published as a series of monographs, supported by numerous papers, the majority of which make extensive use of textual sources. They include studies in which runestones and genealogical poems have been employed to illuminate the mechanisms of early medieval kingship (Norr 1998); semiotic explorations of the hall concept, in relation to individual and collective identity (Herschend 1997a, 1998a, 2001 and related papers); and the role played by ‘aristocratic’ animal husbandry in the construction of elite identities, focusing on horses, hounds and hunting birds (Sundkvist 2001); several other monographs are in progress as the project concludes. We may note too that similar processes are underway in Anglo-Saxon archaeology, as for example in Jos Bazelmans’ analysis of military obligation in *Beowulf* (1999).

Mythology as a window on Iron Age power structures has also proved a popular line of approach in the combination of texts and archaeology, with another work by Herschend (1996), Romare’s study of Langobard origin stories connected to Oðinn (1997), and a series of thought-provoking pieces by Lotte Hedeager (1993, 1996, 1997a & b, 1998). These latter studies trace the ritual overtones of power and identity in northern Europe from the fall of Rome through the Migration Period; they include considerations of Nordic war rituals, and are reviewed in chapter five.

These approaches were not the only integrations of archaeology and text on offer in the last decade of late Iron Age research. During the same period, a more traditional model was proposed in Norway with the synthesis on the Oseberg ship burial (Christensen et al. 1992, especially Myhre’s three papers on the Ynglinga dynasty and source criticism) and in Sweden by Åke Hyenstrand (1996). Archaeological collaborations were also considered by scholars from other disciplines, especially the history of religions. Some of these painted a positive picture of fruitful joint efforts (e.g. Steinsland 1986a), while others seemed to imply that archaeology’s role was the traditional one of ‘assisting’ the textual scholars to verify or disprove the evidence of the written sources (e.g. Slupecki 1998b).

General works also appeared from the ‘textual’ archaeologists. During the course of the SIV project, and in the same year as Andrén’s book on historical archaeology, Herschend published a kind of charter for his approaches (1997b). Here he proposed another threefold analytical process, working through what he called the intentional, the conceptual and the structural. Herschend argues that in looking at artefacts and texts together in this way, we join all our material in, “a human work or a manifestation of humanness ... meant to reveal different levels of consciousness” (ibid: 77). More recently, attempts at a synthesis of these developments have been made by Dagfinn Skre (2001: 1-3) and myself (Price in press d). In the latter paper, I referred to the creation of a ‘new’ Viking archaeology, partly text-driven and wholly integrated with the archaeological mainstream, but with a simultaneous concern to preserve the traditional research values on which Viking studies must rely. I return to these points below.

The value of the textual approach, as in the works quoted above, has been stressed by one of the new ‘Uppsala school’, Svante Norr again. In viewing texts as containing an “immanent materiality”, he has essentially come to the same conclusions as John Moreland. I believe that Norr has also correctly identified this trend as a return to the same principle that guided the narrative school, in that they recognised the *necessity* for early medievalists to consider textual material. However,

... that is far from maintaining that we should revive their theoretical position (if something scarcely existing can be revived). The point is, rather, to engage in new encounters with written records from our altered theoretical positions. Where narrative archaeology regarded different source categories as equally unproblematic we must regard them as equally problematic, meaning-laden sign systems. The texts may also strengthen our conceptual apparatus as we put them alongside material records and, in the process, expand our understanding of our process of inference.

Norr 1998: 13

It is in this light that the present book should be viewed. Of course, in any attempt to work across disciplinary boundaries there are inevitable questions of competence, but these must be balanced against the fact of differing research agendas. Archaeologists working with early Scandinavian texts often possess no more than basic skills in the Old Norse languages, but at the same time they are
following lines of enquiry utterly unlike those pursued by philologists. The depth of linguistic knowledge that a philologist would regard as a prerequisite for such studies may simply not be necessary for an archaeological examination of the same material. Not least, archaeologists should be able to use the results of research in these other disciplines, applying them in their own context of material culture studies, without trying to rework philological conclusions that are beyond their own abilities. The same is true for historians and historians of religions, and their respective fields. One might also observe that many scholars - from every branch of Viking studies - continue to build their arguments through the general citation of saga material as a primary source, simply bracketed with caveats as to its reliability.

As I have made clear, I regard both material culture and the written word as equally eloquent testimonies to the mental landscape of the past. While scholars from each sub-discipline of Viking studies may at times employ the same material sources - texts are the most common example - we will all ask different questions, and work at what Jens Peter Schjødt has called different “analytical and cultural levels” (1996: 195). In the case of written sources, the purposes for which I wish to use them guide the manner in which I do so. Whether approaching objects or approaching text, my work in this book should therefore be regarded as entirely archaeological both in inspiration and agenda.

One of the key aspects of recent work of this kind on the Viking Age concerns transitions, mainly those made by the early medieval Scandinavian peoples from one culturally-constituted understanding of the world to another, fundamentally different in form. At its simplest, this process can be expressed in the change of religion from 'paganism' to Christianity, but in reality this extends to encompass a broad range of elements including political structures and the centralisation of state power, judicial constructs, social and gender relations, literacy, and many other factors. Common to all these is the notion of cognition, the particular mind-set and world-view of the pre-Christian North. This mentality, one half of the transformative equation from the Viking Age to the medieval period, forms a focus of this book in relation to the themes of religion and war outlined above.

We shall examine the growth of a cognitive archaeology shortly, but we need first to consider perhaps the most pertinent link between textual archaeology and historical studies which can be of use to us in our exploration of the Viking mind. This concerns the so-called Annales school and their work towards what has been termed the ‘social geology’ of the individual.

**Annales school and a historical anthropology of the Vikings**

The roots of the Annales paradigm, representing the leading school of French historiography for much of the twentieth century, can be traced back to the late 1890s when scholars such as de la Blache, Durkheim and Berr began to register their disapproval of historical specificity and call for more generalising disciplines for the study of the past. Their sociological and geographical perspectives were enthusiastically adopted by the historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, who in 1929 founded the journal *Annales d'histoire economique et sociale* (later re-titled *Annales: economies, sociétés, civilisations*), from which the school of enquiry takes its name. Based on an explicit rejection of rigidly chronological, political history, *Annales* scholarship draws heavily on the incorporation of other disciplines to develop a concept of a ‘human past’ quite different from the event-led approaches of traditional narrative. The fundamental concept of *l'histoire globale*, or ‘total history’, first came to the fore with a second generation of *Annales* scholars led by Fernand Braudel (1949, 1964), who developed the framework of study for what he called a ‘structural history’. In essence, the *Annales* approach conceptualises different historical processes operating at different scales, which can in turn be subjected to different scales of examination. By the mid-1960s, three main levels of multiscalar analysis had been proposed:

- **Short term - événements**: individuals; events; narrative understandings
- **Medium term - conjonctures**: historical cycles; history of eras, regions, societies
- **Long term - longue durée**: ‘geo-history’, climatic change; history of peoples; stable technologies
Historians and sociologists like Gurvitch (1964), Hexter (1972) and Wallerstein (1982) developed Braudel’s concepts, with particular attention to the interplay between the different time-scales. The solution was felt to be a problem-oriented approach - the so-called l’histoire problème - and above all, a focus on cognition. This is primarily expressed in the other key Annales concept, the notion of world-views (mentalités), informing every aspect of a structural history but ultimately deriving from the medium term in a cycle as follows:

\[ \text{mentalités} \rightarrow \text{événements} \rightarrow \text{conjonctures} \rightarrow \text{longue durée} \rightarrow \text{mentalités} \]

In this spirit, during the late 1960s and 70s a third generation of Annaliste scholars further renewed the discipline, with a series of widely-read works in which the individual life and a discrete exploration of place came to assume the greatest prominence as the window through which to view the successive levels of a structural history. It was at this time that the Annales paradigm emerged triumphant in French historical studies and began to be adopted elsewhere in Europe and especially in Anglo-American research (Dosse 1994).

Like their predecessors, the classic works of these scholars largely concentrated on the medieval period, with the lens of study focused at different levels of resolution. Among the central motifs were the cultural biography of settlements, such as Le Roy Ladurie’s famous study of peasant society in Montaillou (1975) and his deconstruction of the carnival at Romans (1979). Others focused on popular belief in contact with state dogma, especially that of the later Inquisition (Ginzberg 1982 & 1983, both first published in the 60s and 70s). The tradition was continued into the 1980s and 90s by scholars such as Schmitt, with his 1994 study of medieval beliefs in the restless dead. The concept of mentalités has also been employed in a similar biographical fashion by non-Annaliste historians who have gone beyond the notion of a collective mind-set to additionally embrace cultural values. Examples here include Georges Duby’s study of medieval chivalry (1984) and, in Sweden, Peter Englund’s work on the Thirty Years’ War (1993 & 2000). The same approaches have also been used with success in the field of military history, first by Martin Middlebrook (1971) in a study of soldiers from different backgrounds who all took part in the catastrophic first day of the Somme offensive. Tracing their lives up to 1st July 1916, and afterwards if they survived, a single day is used to illuminate the structure of British society for decades either side of it. A similar technique has been employed by Evan Connell to analyse Custer’s defeat at the Little Bighorn (1985).

The potential applications of these ideas to material culture studies are considerable, with their ability to capture scales of time from moments to eras, but Annaliste perspectives were in fact adopted relatively late by archaeologists. Apart from a brief venture in France (Schnapp 1981) it was not until the late 1980s, parallel with the cohesion of post-processualism, that three edited volumes were published on archaeological applications of Annales ideas, representing broadly post-processual (Hodder 1987) and processual (Bintliff 1991; Knapp 1992) viewpoints. A decade after their publication these three books remain the only general works to explicitly take up Annales perspectives on archaeology; even individual papers have been very few in number (eg. Skeates 1990). Furthermore, the works by Hodder and Bintliff have been criticised for their undifferentiated readings of Braudel, and above all for their exclusive reliance on his ideas as representing an Annales ‘school’ that, it is argued, does not in reality constitute such a definable methodology (Delano Smith 1992; Chippendale 1993: 34f).

While it is certainly true that Annales scholarship is characterised not by its adherence to any orthodox line but by its willingness to accommodate diverse and competing categories of thought, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that the idea of an Annales school has long been accepted by historiographers (cf. Burke 1990; Héruber 1994; Clark 1999). Moreover, in archaeology these critics have overlooked the explicit and important employment of Annaliste methodologies to bridge the theoretical gap between the polarised positions of New Archaeology and post-processualism. In this context, with its central focus on the ‘ancient mind’, the Annales paradigm can be usefully combined with aspects of the cognitive studies considered below.

In all the major works of later Annaliste history, it is groups of individuals, or social patterns accessed through them, that provide the linking continuity for the crucial realm of mentalités. Indeed, Le Roy Ladurie (1979: 370) has argued persuasively that these tapestries of lives and experiences “show, preserved in cross section, the social and intellectual strata and structures ... a complete geol-
ogy, with all its colours and contortions”. Jacques Le Goff, one of the most prolific of current Annaliste scholars, has gone further (1989: 405): “it becomes possible to approach a specific and unique person, and to write a true biography through which a historically explained individual can emerge out of a given society and period, intimately linked to them yet also impressing on them his or her own personality and actions. From the chorus of human voices, a particular note and style can be made to stand out”.

In the light of this view of contextualised individuals, it is curious that there have been no attempts to write Annaliste studies of the Viking Age. Though much valuable work has been done in the way of focused social history - biographies of royal personages such as Knutr, for example, or studies of the campaigns of 1066 - little of this material has moved far beyond the confines of power politics. In moving to a more humble (and more informative?) level of society, we may think here of Céline’s maxim, adopted by several of the Annaliste scholars: Tout ce qui est intéressant se passe dans l’ombre. On ne sait rien de la véritable histoire des hommes (quoted as epigraph to Ginzburg 1982). This is equally applicable to the late Iron Age, especially for the sorcerers and Óinnic warriors that we will consider here, who can be the perfect guides into the murky shadows of the Viking world-view. We can use this fluid boundary between religion and war to illuminate the dialectic of forces operating in the later Viking Age, the social contradictions and contending mentalités which laid the ground for the adoption of Christianity in Scandinavia and the region’s integration into the social environment of literate Europe. In so doing, we may also build up a composite ‘structural history’ of the kind discussed above.

Spiritual belief can be plausibly put forward as one of the most appropriate aspects of society through which to study these phenomena, dealing as we are with the essentially unprovable and, up to a point, the insubstantial: attitudes, thoughts, emotions and responses. It is in this arena that we find the archaeology of power, the archaeology of fear (both fear of knowledge and fear of its lack, the unknown) and the archaeology of hope, and thus the territory of this thesis.

Such a search for the ‘essence’ of ancient lives is in itself hardly a new idea, and with all its varying degrees of prevarication it is one that goes back to the roots of our discipline. It has been especially prevalent in the post-war period, running as a continuum from Mortimer Wheeler’s ‘archaeology of people’ (1954) to Colin Renfrew’s ‘archaeology of mind’ and ‘archaeology of mental processes’ (1982a, 1994), the latter albeit clothed anew as cognitive processualism. In order to understand what this means for the study of the Viking Age, we must briefly examine the archaeology of the period in relation to theoretical developments in the discipline as a whole.

The Other and the Odd

Students of archaeological theory have become used to the relatively uniform manner in which the intellectual development of the discipline is presented in academic fora. Both textbooks and courses trace a familiar path from the origins of archaeological thought, through the famously-termed ‘long sleep’ until the advent of the New Archaeology (Renfrew 1982b: 6), to the concomitant development of Marxist and structuralist interpretations, and on to the impact of post-modernism together with its epistemological and phenomenological offshoots of the 1980s and 90s. For the present, we seem to be enjoying the comfortably vague reassurance of a ‘transitional phase’ in archaeological theory, in which complimentary discourses gently chide one another in a spirit of happy pluralism.

In relation to this overall pattern, it has become conventional for doctoral theses to include a formal statement - often a whole chapter near the beginning - setting out the author’s ‘theoretical position’, in accordance with which the subsequent text is allegedly disposed. The reader will find no such section in this book, but not because I hold some reactionary opposition to archaeological theory.

Archaeology is a complex discipline, and so much more than an illusorily sequential parade of paradigms. Such a linear view of the subject is still propagated surprisingly widely, with an unfortunate emphasis on Anglo-European and North American perspectives at the expense of other traditions. There is also a tendency to homogenise the early trajectories of archaeological thinking. What we now think of as modern archaeological method - as founded by men such as Thomsen, Worsaae, Montelius, and the rest - actually emerged from far more complex intellectual currents of the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries than we usually credit, and from circumstances in which women
had considerable influence. At this time, the development of ‘scientific’ archaeology was only one possible outcome for a subject that was equally composed of poetics and literary aestheticism, of subjective emotion actively embraced. This was subtly different from the National Romanticism that would succeed it in the late 1800s, and the other paths that this process might have taken form a vital, but largely unknown, backdrop to the present state of archaeological theory (see Notelid 2000, 2001a & b on this early phase of Nordic prehistoric enquiry; also Bokholm’s 2000 biography of Montelius’ wife, Agda, and Nordbladh’s 2002 paper on Pehr Tham).

I have mentioned this here because it serves as a neat parallel for what I will later say about the archaeology of the so-called Fourth World of indigenous peoples, and its application to the study of the Viking Age: there are still alternative routes that we may take in our exploration of the past. This also illustrates the fallacy of assuming that old work is necessarily inferior to more modern research. No archaeologist would assert this openly, of course, but the meaning is frequently implicit in the one-way street of theoretical progress that is often presented. As we shall see in relation to Old Norse religion, when we look beyond the antiquated syntax of the time it is clear that the ideas discussed in the nineteenth century were in many cases more constructively imaginative than today’s interpretations.

With all the above in mind, I have striven to write an integrated text which reflects the intellectual seams that I have mined in its creation. I strongly believe that these do not need to be explicitly articulated in order to be meaningful, or for the reader to be critically aware of their presence. I will make one extended exception, however, concerning the way in which we perceive the thought-world of the past - the notion of cognition raised briefly above - and how I will try to apply this to the Viking Age. These approaches may be relatively unfamiliar to early medieval scholars (see Price in press d), and thus my discussion here includes a short introduction against which the work below can be oriented.

**Conflict in the archaeology of cognition**

Cognition is a problematic term in archaeology, with a simultaneous potential for the most profound and the most superficial insights into antiquity. The profession has been rightly criticised for producing far too many ‘straw people’ propounding a shallow grasp of complex issues under the guise of theoretical awareness (Johnson 1999:182), and this is particularly true of cognitive studies. The same sentiment is echoed in Flannery & Marcus’ caustic view of what they see as cognitive archaeology’s fall from scientific rigour (1993). Aside from the inevitable question as to whether one might find oneself counted among such individuals, it is clear that the very nature of cognitive enquiry brings difficulties.

Essentially, cognitive studies concern the archaeology of the intangible as inferred from the material. Many archaeologists, especially on the positivist wing of the discipline, would argue that it is nearly or completely impossible to access the mentalities of past people, as opposed to the patterns in material culture that those mentalities have produced and which have been preserved through the taphonomic variables of the archaeological record. Others, of whom I am one, argue that archaeology has a unique opportunity for the recovery of such data in a form inaccessible by any other means, and I would link this to the Annaliste notion of mentalités outlined above. We can briefly examine this conflict, looking first at its uneasy incorporation into processualist theory, and the emergence of so-called cognitive processualism.

Although strands of this thinking were coming together in North American archaeology during the late 1970s (e.g. Fritz 1978 on ‘palaeopsychology’), in many ways cognitive processualism entered the scene in a formalised sense with Colin Renfrew’s inaugural lecture at Cambridge in 1982(a), in which he set out the desirability of a ‘scientific’ investigation of the way in which past people thought. The major breakthrough came a decade later, when several general publications appeared such as Renfrew’s second call to arms for a softer alternative to an already established post-processualism (1993) and his collection of papers with Zubrow on *The ancient mind* (1994). Essentially, these approaches are linked together by the notion that the analysis of prehistoric mind-sets can be incorporated into the systems thinking that characterises processualist archaeology. To take one of the most famous examples, cognition could be viewed as the kind of ‘psychological subsystem’ that Clarke
suggested as one core of the culture complex (1968: fig. 17), or the ‘ideational systems’ still commonly found in Transatlantic theory.

The weight of cognitive processualist research has focused on the evolution of human thought at the most fundamental level, looking at early hominids and their mental processes. A significant place in this must go to the work of Steven Mithen on patterned behaviour among early hunter-gatherers (e.g. 1990, 1996) and the recent achievements of the McDonald Institute scholars at Cambridge and their circle (e.g. Mellars & Gibson 1996; Davidson & Noble 1996; Mithen 1998; Renfrew & Scarre 1999). Virtually the only Scandinavian archaeologist who has ventured into this terrain is Bo Graslund (2001), with his comprehensive investigation into the cognitive-biological origins of the human species, and especially its sexual evolution.

This is probably the only effective way of approaching the world of the early hominids beyond the confines of biology, ethology and the archaeological analysis of crude technologies. However, once these first humans are left behind, cognitive processualism becomes problematic. In general terms it risks being watered down into banality, becoming at worst a kind of “linguistic ploy to capture the middle ground while minimising the influence of other approaches” (Johnson 1999: 181). This becomes more serious when what is essentially the notion of biological determinism is applied, explicitly or implicitly, to the cultural development of complex societies. The search for normative principles and cross-cultural generalisations that are necessary for a processualist perspective to be maintained have a tendency to rest in this context on an unspoken ethnocentricity, extending the values of Western culture to ancient societies that clearly had very different responses. This problem will be taken up below when we look at Viking archaeology in the context of indigenous peoples.

The ‘mainstream’ of cognitive studies is dominated by the archaeology of religion and spiritual belief, but all forms of perception are included. These can concern anything from categorisation and the conscious ordering of the environment to regulatory concepts such as law. This work has been much more loosely anchored in theory, being defined more by its subject matter than specific method. Structuralism, with its potential for generalising models, has not surprisingly proved a popular line of approach. However, a more pronounced concern for symbolism, semiotics and an acknowledgement of the subjective has drawn cognitive archaeology under the umbrella of post-processualism almost from its inception (Hodder’s Symbols in Action from 1982 is the type example here, appearing in the same year as Renfrew gave impetus to what would become the cognitive processual wave). The topics embraced by this work are too numerous to more than mention here: the study of ‘art’ and imagery, iconography, the body, gender, identity, ideology, power, literacy, language and even the concept of time itself have all been pursued from an explicitly ‘cognitive’ perspective. In every sense of the term, the growth of cognitive archaeology has been rapid over the last fifteen years, so much so that a Reader in the subject has already been compiled (Whitley 1998). Most introductions to the discipline also now feature sections on the mind, ‘looking at thoughts’, and so on (e.g. Dark 1995: ch. 6; Johnson 1999: ch. 6; Renfrew & Bahn 2000: ch. 10).

Cognition and the Vikings

The impact of mainstream cognitive archaeology on the more specific study of the Viking Age has been slow in coming, in part because every other area of Viking archaeology has undergone a period of rapid growth during the last twenty-five years. Our information on all aspects of the artefactual, environmental and settlement remains of the early medieval Scandinavians has increased many times over. Particularly important discoveries have come from urban archaeology in the early towns of Scandinavia and the colonial settlements, from excavations on rural sites throughout the Viking world, and from the growth of metal detector use. For the most part, these developments have come within very specific aspects of the period, concentrating upon artefactual typology and refinements in chronology, art-historical studies, settlement and cemetery archaeology, and analyses of early medieval economic systems. From this broadly empirical foundation a consistent, general model of Viking Age society has been built up, published in its details in individual reports and presented as an overview in updated form through synthetic volumes at regular intervals.

The speed of this expansion has in some ways brought its own problems. Despite the immense achievements of these years, the emphasis on empirical approaches and a concentration upon eco-
nomic modes of explanation has been favoured at the expense of social and especially cognitive interpretations.

Since the late 1980s this picture has begun to change, and an increasing number of Viking researchers have started to address exactly these issues of behavioural study, using paths of analysis quite different to more traditional studies of the period - some of these have been reviewed above in the context of ‘textual’ archaeology (see also Price 1998b, in press d). Tending to focus on discussions of power, religion, social structure and ideology, these new approaches are characterised by an increased awareness of the meaning content of material culture, and in particular the sophistication of Viking Age symbolic articulation and representation. Gender studies form a central part of this movement, and is in this area that some of the most rapid changes have taken place in Viking research. In this context it is vitally important to stress that recent theoretical perspectives on the Viking Age have not been proposed as replacements for earlier models - in effect as a ‘new’ tradition - but as pluralistic enhancements to them, what could in Swedish be called a form of kompletteringsarbete (a useful word which means, approximately, ‘work of complimentary addition’). In many instances social and cognitive models are in no way incompatible with existing, empiricist ones, and it should also be noted that the artefactual and art-historical researches which form the foundation of archaeological Viking studies will continue to do so regardless of the interpretative framework within which they are utilised.

The application of these perspectives has characterised a good deal of my own earlier work on the period. One starting point for me was the focus on landscape in the mainstream archaeology of cognition. In the 1990s scholars such as Richard Bradley (1993a, 1998, 2000), Christopher Tilley (1994), John Barrett (1994) and others explored notions of monumentality, and the relationship of prehistoric people to their ancestors as negotiated through traces of their physical presence in the landscape. The notion of ‘the past in the past’ is central here, the way in which ancient cultures understood not only the monuments that they built themselves, but also those constructed earlier. In this vein I worked through a series of research projects to examine the Viking Age built environment as it developed over time, especially in colonial or ‘sacred’ contexts. In particular I looked for signs of the mentalities underpinning the specific choices involved: why a certain type of mound, with a certain pattern of contents, was raised in a certain place, in certain spatial relationships to other monuments of their own certain types, and so on. My work focused variously on the Russian river systems (Price 1993, 1994b, 1996, 1998a, 2000d), the colonial architecture of Iceland (Price 1994c, 1995a) and Gamla Uppsala (Price 1994d, 1997; Price & Wikborg 1998). These ideas were finally drawn together in a synthetic discussion of the way in which Viking Age Scandinavians perceived the interplay of power, place and space, both at home and in the context of interaction with other cultures (Price 2000e). A crucial element in all these negotiations, which of course had their own internal strata of affiliations within Scandinavian society, were the Vikings themselves.

The growing need to understand this group and their place in their culture has been mentioned above. In the context of the crisis of confidence in Viking studies that I have described, a search for a deeper understanding of this group of individuals formed an obvious prerequisite for the study of cultural interaction that was the original subject of my doctorate. However, as work progressed it was this question that soon came to dominate the thesis itself, revealing more and more layers of potential study. As the original analysis of cultural interaction turned into a more basic examination of cultural definition, the theme of identity came naturally to assume greater prominence, and in particular its social construction in relation to the patterns of power emerging in early medieval Scandinavia. The role of gender in the constitution of this Viking identity seemed crucial from an early stage in the research, as did the ritual practices (in both religious and secular contexts) for which archaeology provides such a wealth of evidence. This shift of emphasis in the thesis research clearly brought with it a radical change in the source material under scrutiny, moving from the settlements of Anglo-Scandinavian Northumbria to a broad range of data from the history of religion, folklore studies and Old Norse textual scholarship, in addition to the existing historical material. Within archaeology, my inspiration originated primarily from the above-mentioned work on the ancient mind.

In essence, the thesis had become a cognitive exploration of the Vikings, in the context of their relationship to the rest of the Scandinavian population and the other cultures with which they came into contact: what they were, what they were not, and what they became having left Viking activities behind them. But how to approach this?
Meeting the Other?

An obvious beginning lay with other studies of ancient mentalities that have also focused on themes especially relevant to the present book, concerned with human emotions and appetites of various kinds. Some of this work, such as Taylor’s *The prehistory of sex* (1996), takes a decidedly modern spin on the interpretation of early mind-sets. Others are more profound, as with the growing literature on ancient sensuality which has concentrated on classical Athens (e.g. Dalby 1995; Davidson 1997) and Rome (e.g. Dalby 2000), alongside the many writings that have appeared on Greek homosexuality. The sensitivity of these accounts, focusing primarily on attitudes to food and sex, has been a model for my own work with the Vikings which in the following chapters also addresses sexual identity and its social location. Davidson’s study of Greek hedonism has been a particular inspiration, and his nuanced reading of our dialogue with the Athenians could equally apply to the Viking Age:

There are two main dangers in approaching the Greeks. The first is to think of them as our cousins and to interpret everything in our own terms. We are entering a very different world, very strange and very foreign, a world inconceivably long ago, centuries before Christ or Christianity ... a world indeed without our centuries, or weeks or minutes or markings of time. And yet these Greeks will sometimes seem very familiar, very lively, warm and affable. Occasionally we might even get their jokes. We must be careful, however, that we are not being deceived by false friends. Often what seems most familiar, most obvious, most easy to understand is in fact the most peculiar thing of all. On the other hand, we must resist the temptation to push the Greeks further into outer space than is necessary. They are not our cousins, but neither are they our opposites. They are just different, just trying to be themselves.

Davidson 1997: xxvi

Central to all this work, of course, is the idea of the Other. Deriving in large part from Lévinas’ philosophy of ethics (1987; Peperzak 1993), the concept also owes much to the work of G.H. Mead on the rational self held in tension with the ‘significant other’ (1934). These two scholars’ work embodies an important dichotomy between the Other as a personal and potentially reflexive socio-psychological category, and a meeting with it as an ethical dilemma on a professional level that does not need to be personal at all. These relationships are often unconsciously blurred by archaeologists, who have mostly employed the term as a useful image for the mass of dead humanity that silently faces us through the medium of the material culture that we study, unreachable directly but nevertheless constantly present as we touch the things that the Other has touched.

The idea has entered Swedish archaeological theory again during the late 1990s. In my brief comments here I have found helpful Svante Norr’s discussion of the term as a key to the archaeological use of texts (1998: 9-19), in which he argues that, “the meeting between us as archaeologists and the past Other ... involves a meeting of two horizons of understanding or languages in a kind of dialogue between participants who from an ethical point of view should be considered equal” (ibid: 10). This question of ethics is crucial. I have discussed this in more detail elsewhere (Price in press a) and will expand on it below, but we can also mention here Johan Hegardt’s deconstruction of “the ethical relationship between the Self and the Other” (1997: 266), and his argument that the latter must be the central conceptual tool in our understanding of the past. He has also identified the core problem of processual archaeology in this respect, in its implicit efforts to make the Other the Same (ibid: 257).

Håkan Karlsson has also approached the Other through what is to my mind a rather partial reading of Heidegger’s notion of Being. He interprets the distance between archaeologists and their subject as a ‘contemplative’ relationship, at the centre of which is a reflective response to the ancient lives that archaeological categories represent (1998, 1999). However, this presents another fundamental problem, because the archaeologist’s voluntary relegation to voyeuristic passivity, seemingly without direction, is simultaneously a resignation of active engagement with the past. If some archaeologists would see excavation as a process of careful interrogation, in which we (might) obtain answers to the specific questions that we think to ask, for Karlsson the Other seems to be expected to offer of itself. Ultimately this seems little different to the extremes of positivist belief that we simply ‘dig up’ a past that provides its own self-evident interpretation through the application of common sense; perhaps Karlsson would argue that processualism looks at prehistory through an analytical intelligence, whereas a contemplative archaeology lets it into our hearts.
This essential impasse of irreconcilable perspectives has been laid at the door of post-processualism as the single most fundamental problem in current archaeological theory, an accusation just as hotly rejected by the post-processualists themselves (see, for example, the debate surrounding the Lampeter Archaeology Workshop’s contribution to the journal *Archaeological Dialogues* in 1997-8). Others have seen post-processualism as something that broadens the entire framework of debate, rather than setting up an opposing camp (e.g. Hegardt 1997). The spectre of empty relativism conjured up by limitless deconstruction has loomed large over this discussion, but to a great extent this problem has been satisfactorily resolved, or at least contextualised, for some considerable time. This is no longer a major theoretical worry, but some of the solutions proposed along the way may well prove to be. Having passed through (or in some cases, remaining in) a phase dominated by phenomenology and epistemology, a number of scholars are apparently returning to the creation of synthetic models that, for all their loudly proclaimed self-awareness, seem remarkably similar to the ongoing interpretational revisions that have always appeared within a traditional view of the past (for example, Tilley’s 1996 survey of the Scandinavian Neolithic). In itself, of course, this is perfectly decent work, but one may question what it says about the achievability of a consciously post-processual interpretation of a ‘real’ past. It is even more discouraging that such gifted theoreticians as Matthew Johnson should find it necessary to praise the fact that these works actually deal with data (1999: 185).

One recent phase of theoretical effort has seen a move towards shared experience and reciprocity of interpretation, as a means of approaching the differentness of the past. This has been attempted at sites such as Stonehenge (Bender 1998), and through the experiments in explicitly self-reflexive fieldwork at Çatalhöyük (Hodder 1996 & 2000) and Leskernick on Dartmoor (Bender, Hamilton & Tilley 1997; Tilley, Hamilton & Bender 2000). Reviewing this work however, the result appears to be the creation of a past that is even more of an artificial construct than that produced by the blind empiricism which such scholars rightly criticise - a past that seems desperately forced and, sad to say, coloured by the earnest liberalism of the middle-class academic. We shall return to this point shortly.

Other scholars such as John Bintliff (e.g. 1993, 2000) have proposed a solution in the promotion of archaeology as a ‘human science of complementary discourses’, in the spirit of Wittgenstein. This would supposedly accord space for all perspectives in parallel, a kind of short-cut to a platform of constructive opposition. This is one of the most optimistic alternatives on current offer, but there are nevertheless problems with this too. As Johnson has again observed, “the search for such a middle ground all too often becomes an easy replacement for the hard work of serious yet sympathetic critique of one’s own and others’ theoretical positions” (1999: 187). We can all agree to disagree, but where does this leave us?

In particular, where does this leave the archaeologist’s search for the individual and the ancient mind? It is easy to feel a sense of hopelessness. Indeed, the debilitative potential inherent in the current theoretical trajectory was presciently foreseen nearly a decade ago by Richard Bradley, in a crucial article from 1993(b). Playing on Clarke’s idea of archaeology’s loss of innocence, with which he famously heralded the dawn of the New Archaeology twenty years earlier, the title of Bradley’s paper says it all: ‘Archaeology: the loss of nerve’. Addressing a problem that still threatens to paralyse the theoretical debate today, he gives a shape to our new-found fear of using the controlled imagination that has always been necessary for the investigation of the past. James Davidson has again written perceptively on this post-modern dilemma in his studies on the hermeneutics of Athenian sensuality:

Greek civilisation, according to this [post-modernist] interpretation, is an irretrievably alien culture, constituting a separate sealed world with its own peculiar possibilities for experience.... In fetishizing a culture’s representations of the world in this way, Foucault and his followers sometimes seem to forget about the world itself, which is still waving through the window, as if what a culture says is, is, on some important level, as if the Greeks walked around in a virtual reality they had constructed for themselves from discourse.

*Davidson 1997: xxv*

Norr echoes this with reference to another post-modernist icon who found archaeological favour in the 1980s, by emphasising how “the language of Derrida is not relevant to human life as everyday
experience" (1998: 10). However, he also makes the point that the same applies to any meta-language, “whether post-modern, realist, positivist or some other”. All of these narratives are inevitably detached and exclusive, in a manner which has unfortunately become part of what Bo Graslund has called the ‘liturgy’ of archaeological theory (1989: 47). Certainly, the achievements of post-processualism should not be under-estimated, and the boundaries of the discipline have been expanded since the advent of these ideas in the mid-1980s. Not least, this book is itself a product of this development and could not have been written without it. However, like any other field of research the study of material culture requires continual renewal if it is not to stagnate.

To my mind, one of the defining characteristics of current post-processual archaeology is the marked degree of intellectual comfort that its adherents afford themselves. This first began to manifest itself in a minor way, with small self-indulgences such as Hodder’s early use of random chapter ordering in The meanings of things (1989), though to be fair this also makes a point about the editor as disguised authority. More recently there has come a trend for creating an imaginary interlocutor to supposedly question or critique the author’s ideas on behalf of the reader, and often in the context of the latter’s education (eg. Tilley 1991: ch.11 and appendix; Preucel & Hodder 1996: 667-77; Hodder 1999 and Johnson 1999 throughout). Of course, a conceit of this kind does not provide an external viewpoint at all, and it would be difficult to find a more potent symbol of the reduction of archaeological enquiry to an internalised monologue, masquerading as a dialogue. In the field, however, the situation is more serious. Here I would argue that virtually none of those who consider themselves active post-processualists or ‘self-reflexive’ archaeologists are putting themselves in a position which genuinely challenges their ideas, which truly places them outside the Western intellectual context that so many of them have tried to deconstruct. The same applies to the idea of archaeology as performance, of which the most developed example is probably Michael Shanks’ long collaboration with contemporary dramatists (Pearson & Shanks 2001). The more provocative and confrontational the departure from academic convention, the more these approaches seem to embody what they are trying to reject. In this sense Çalıhlhöyük and similar projects are indeed “archaeology as theatre”, in Tilley’s contentious phrase from 1989, and its practitioners increasingly appear to be pursuing “an art which tells us more about themselves than about anything else, and what it reveals about them is, quite frankly, rather dull” (Malone & Stoddart 2000: 458).

At one level, of course, it is impossible to move outside one’s culture, but it is possible to bring ideas to a new human context and to explore what happens when that meeting takes place. Again, it may be significant that most of the archaeologists that I have encountered who are trying to work in this way would probably not take on a theoretical ‘affiliation’ at all, while nevertheless remaining solidly theoretically-aware.

It is at this point that we can make perhaps the most important link to the nature of the Other, which is directly relevant to the situation in Viking Age Scandinavia, via the Sámi people who formed a large proportion of its population: the archaeology of the so-called Fourth World of indigenous peoples.

Fourth World archaeology and the Vikings

At a general level I have written about this elsewhere in an essay on archaeological ethics (Price in press a), but it seems important to emphasise again that we should not isolate Viking research from the developments that have been taking place in the profession as a collective. In this case we can focus upon the call for a multivocal, pluralised archaeology with a truly global (but not globalised) equality of access that has been growing since the mid-1980s. This movement has been characterised above all by the development of the World Archaeological Congress (WAC), and its influential series of One World Archaeology volumes with more than forty titles now published. Especially important here is the post-colonial legacy, and the reactions of Western archaeologists to the demands of the Third and Fourth Worlds for access to their own past, and the right to interpret or relate to it in the manner of their choice. Central to this is the primary concern given by many indigenous groups to concepts of the sacred, particularly in relation to the dead. From this has developed the debate on cultural property, repatriation and the reburial issue (references for all these fields can be found in Price in press a, which discusses them specifically; for an introduction, see Ucko 1987 on WAC; Layton 1989a & b and Carmichael et al. 1994 on the development of indigenous archaeology; Greenfield 1996 and Fforde et al. 2001 on repatriation).
I would argue that it is in fact within the broad church of this ‘world archaeology’ that we may find the brightest future of the discipline, developing from a combination of unaligned theoretical consciousness and a perception of ethical responsibility. It is therefore with some concern that we can observe how the indigenous perspective is almost totally absent from the general introductions to archaeological thought used in western European teaching. Hodder’s classic *Reading the Past* (2nd ed. 1991) contains less than two pages on the subject, while in *The Archaeological Process* (1999) he subsumes the issues in a discussion of globalism without ever actually bringing them up specifically; Dark (1995) omits the indigenous voice completely; Johnson, in his otherwise excellent introduction to theory, absorbs the entire Fourth World without comment into ‘archaeology and politics’ and makes only very oblique reference to these issues (1999: 13, 125ff).

This is remedied only by a couple of articles in Preucel & Hodder’s anthology, compiled as the impact of post-processualism began to be diluted (1996: part VIII). Indeed, virtually the only other exception to this is Bjørnar Olsen’s *Fra ting til tekst* (1997), and here it is significant firstly that Olsen is himself a specialist in Sámi archaeology, and secondly that he works in Norway, a country to which these issues are of immediate relevance. There are signs that a change is on the way, for example in Hodder’s *Archaeological Theory Today* (2001) which for the first time explicitly includes post-colonial approaches, and we can also note Gamble’s new introductory text, *Archaeology: the basics*, in which he becomes one of the first to use the Fourth World as a coda to Trigger’s threefold division of archaeological politics (2001: 2; cf. Trigger 1989). It remains to be seen whether this represents the start of a genuine paradigm shift, or a small deviation from a familiar path.

This is not to say that the ‘world archaeology’ movement is without its problems. WAC itself still retains a core power-base and agenda in the developed countries, despite the varied nationalities on its committees. This reflects back onto the material and our approach to it. The critical problem with archaeology’s embrace of the Other as embodied by traditional cultures, is that it is nevertheless through the agency of archaeologists that the Other is allowed to allegedly speak. A typical example is provided in Shanks’ *Experiencing the past* (1992: 112), when the repatriation claims of the Zuni tribe in the American Southwest are discussed in terms of “the significance of the dynamic object”. Converting the demands of indigenous peoples into European academic language may well be relevant within that specific context – there is nothing intrinsically wrong with Shanks’ analysis - but the crucial point is that it says nothing at all about those making the original statement, nor about what they actually said and meant.

As archaeologists congratulate themselves on providing an egalitarian platform for the indigenous voice, the latter refuses to be homogenised and furthermore may simply not care to be ‘welcomed’ to a debate in which it has no interest at any level other than its own defence. It is fascinating that so few theoreticians have paid more than lip service to the fact that for many people the idea of archaeology itself - let alone any theoretical position within such a discipline - is at best utterly irrelevant and at worst actually offensive or distressing. This is quite unlike the indifference of someone who does not happen to have an explicit interest in the past, but rather has its basis in a culturally-embedded view of the world which has little sympathy for the entire fabric of Western intellectual thought within which the idea of archaeological enquiry developed.

In this sense, it may be that a literal, as opposed to figurative, confrontation with the Other is rather more than some theorists can cope with. Post-processualists sometimes portray their processualist colleagues as being afraid of subjectivity, of fearing the loss of control over the illusion of scientific method. And yet if we look at post-processualism in a Fourth World context, even the most eminent figures in what has become a kind of alternative orthodoxy risk becoming merely irrelevant, embarrassingly square.

Part of the reason for this lies in the circumstances in which these ideas have developed. The American processual archaeologist Peter Whiteley (2002:415) has suggested that, “post-processualists ... may be more open-minded, but the terms of their conceptual relativism are largely defined in the metropolitan space of the university rather than the cosmopolitan space of plural cultural reality”. Whiteley seems to see the solution in a rather bizarre understanding of indigenous oral history, in which the latter speaks essentially the same language of empirically testable truth-claims as processual science, albeit expressed in a different vocabulary of verifiable stories (2002: 407). This misses the
point that these two perspectives emerge from utterly different concepts of reality, but Whiteley’s
critique of post-processualism is still valid in this context.

A sharper insight into this was presented several years earlier by Christopher Chippindale, in an
Antiquity editorial from 1995. Reflecting on his rock art studies and work with the indigenous peoples
of Arnhem Land in Australia, he argued for the academic benefits of encounters with an Other that
can talk back:

You can see another side of this [the archaeologist’s distance from the past] in the proposals of the
post-modern thinkers who diffuse across the world from my own archaeology department in Cam-
bridge; intended to be self-consciously radical, their visions of what prehistoric worlds might have
been like seem too dependent on the encircled ideas of academics in other disciplines who also lead bourgeois
lives by the fixed conventions of the decade. Inward-looking shall write for inward-look-
ing. If you were to read that work in Arnhem Land, where you may encounter a notice by the road-side
announcing ‘Diversion, road closed due to ceremonies’, it would seem cosy and timid. Frankly, these
types of approaches are not odd enough: which is a sign that their creators, like all of us, should go more often to Deaf Adder Creek or - better - to somewhere further removed from their
home environments (since the last thing Deaf Adder Creek could do with is mobs of archaeologists in
search of the exotic).

Chippindale 1995: 437f

Chippindale’s idea of the ‘odd’ is the exception to my moratorium on explicit theory in this book, and
it is perhaps significant that the concept was not expressed as ‘theory’ at all, but as a comment in a
journal editorial. I believe it encapsulates exactly what I am aiming for in this study of the Viking
Age, especially in the context of a pan-Scandinavian analysis that considers the Sámi alongside the
Norse. Linked to a global commitment along the lines of the WAC-model or something similar, as
with Davidson’s Greeks an ‘odd’ archaeology simply acknowledges the past’s right to be itself, irre-
spective of (or even because of) how peculiar it appears to us.

Crucially important here is that this feeling for the potential ‘strangeness’ of prehistory must be
something that ultimately derives from the material itself, and its relationship to the other elements of
the past artefactual environment. We must be receptive to this, but it cannot be a preconception that
we wish to apply as an agenda in its own right, like Karlsson’s ‘contemplation’ or an active search for
what our culture perceives as the weirder or more profound aspects of the archaeological record. This
is a charge sometimes leveled against those who work with indigenous peoples, and especially in a
spiritual context, for example by Kehoe (2000: 45; 2002) who has argued that any concept of the
Other is inevitably projected through a racist lens as something inferior to ourselves. In some extreme
cases this is certainly true - we are all familiar with the kind of Westerners who regard indigenous
peoples as founts of unspoiled natural wisdom, and who thereby promote a patronising notion of
cultural primitivism. In general, however, such critique wrongly conflates a respectful acknowledg-
ment of difference with a value judgement - the latter ironically being formed in the minds of those
make the accusations of racism in this context.

As Chippindale stresses, the pursuit of an ‘odder’ archaeology is not about a quest for the exotic,
the fossilisation of unfamiliar cultures in the museum display of a colonising Romantic. While we
should be honest enough to admit to a certain thrill of displacement in our interactions with indig-
enumous cultures and their world-view - if indeed that is what we feel - we should nevertheless remem-
ber that socially-embedded belief systems do not involve a juxtaposition of the sacred (read: exotic)
with the mundane; the two are inseparable. The completely ordinary social context of most ritual
performance in traditional cultures is rarely stressed enough.

I should emphasise too that ‘odd’ is not the same as ‘queer’, in the sense of what is sometimes
called queer theory (to English-speaking readers I apologise for the rather ridiculous nature of a
discussion on ‘odd contra queer’, but I am stuck with the terminology of others). Some aspects of
queer theory are reviewed in chapter three below, in relation to archaeologists’ applications of them to
the religion of the later Iron Age; two of the works considered there provide extensive bibliographies
(Solli 1998; Strassburg 2000), and the reader is also referred to two recent anthologies, Schmidt &
Voss’s Archaeologies of sexuality (2000) and Dowson’s Queer archaeologies (2000). Suffice to say
here that there is a world of difference between the deviant, which forms the basis of queer theory, and the abiding challenge of the unfamiliar, which is at the heart of Chippindale's meaning of 'oddness'. Queer theorists examine the notion of deviancy, sexual or otherwise, in the meaningful context of its social sanction in specific circumstances. For odd archaeologists (!) the infinite uniqueness of these circumstances is itself the subject of study, the acceptance of which provides the imperative for a meaningful engagement with past world-views.

We may think here of a single Viking Age example, an excerpt from the well-known account of an Arab traveller, Ibn Rustah, who met a group of Scandinavians in Russia sometime after 922:

When a leading man among them dies, they dig a grave like a big house and put him inside it. With him they put his clothes and the gold bracelets he wore and also much food and drinking vessels and coins. They also put the woman that he loved in the grave with him, while she is still living. And so the entrance to the grave is stopped up, and she dies there.

Translation by Foote & Wilson 1980: 412, with my amendments; original text (not given here) after Jakubovskij 1926

He is describing a chamber grave, of a kind very familiar from both written sources and archaeology. The medieval sagas contain a great many references to live burial and sacrifice, which have been comprehensively summarised by Ellis (1943: 5-8), and the same phenomenon is mentioned in other first-hand Arab sources, such as those by Ibn Miskaweih (Arne 1932a: 216) and of course Ibn Fadlan. The account that the latter writer left of his journey to the Volga Bulghars in 921-2 will be taken up several times in these pages (I have dealt with this briefly on a previous occasion, Price 1998a, and explored its implications at considerable length in a forthcoming paper which contains a complete bibliography for this crucial source - Price in press e).

The reality of the sacrificial descriptions is proven by archaeological finds of several graves with more than one body, in circumstances that suggest either a live burial of this sort or a ritual killing, for example at Bollstanäs in Uppland (Hemmendorf 1984) and grave A129 at Birka (Holmiquist Olausson 1990), and of course the Oseberg burial (Christensen et al. 1992). Women have also been found as apparent sacrifices in several chamber graves of male Scandinavian warriors at Cernigov in the Ukraine (Arne 1931: 286), and there is considerable discussion of a possible live burial of a woman in graves Bj. 516 / 632 at Birka (Arbman 1937: 244-7 & 1939: 77; A-S. Graslund 1980: 36; see also Engdahl 1990: 26f for an overall survey of sacrificial burials).

This is a perfect illustration of the ‘different’ Viking world that I referred to at the start of this chapter, and of Chippindale’s ‘oddness’. We must picture here a couple, living their lives in much the same way as everyone else: the social round of family, friends and acquaintances; the everyday interactions of trade and exchange; all the activities of the domestic and ‘professional’ sphere. And yet when the man of the household dies, his partner - known to all the community in the network of relationships just mentioned - is buried alive in the chamber with his corpse. We can perhaps imagine the feelings of the woman, though we should not be too sure of this. It is hard enough to conjure up the level of horror that we would feel today before such an event, but harder still to envisage a situation where that emotion may not have been paramount. In the accounts of both Ibn Fadlan and Ibn Miskaweih, it is stressed that the slaves volunteer for this death; whether this was actually the case or a matter of convention is harder to discern (we can also consider the ethnographically-documented examples of mortuary suicide from more recent centuries). And how did the onlookers feel, watching this ritual entombment and then walking away, going home or to some continued funeral ceremony, or passing the sealed mound in the subsequent hours and days? How did they articulate the knowledge that inside that grave a woman they knew was slowly suffocating, dying in the dark beside the rotting body of her partner, and that one day the same fate might be theirs? To us this seems unthinkable, and yet to at least some of the people of the Viking Age, at an institutionalised and socially-sanctioned level, it clearly was not. Why? What does this tell us about them, and in this how far can we trust the judgement of a thousand years of hindsight?

For Chippindale in his Australian work and myself in my contacts with the Sámi, this subtle adjustment of perception arises most clearly in encounters with indigenous peoples, and - with their permission - what we take from those meetings to help us in other archaeological situations. In essence, this
concerns a confrontation with the ‘odd’ in an empirical context. For me, one of the benefits of working in Sápmi is that I often feel intellectually uncomfortable there, and I find this to be a decidedly healthy experience. However, this does not turn those who live there into an artificial Other that can be domesticated by inclusion in my own ‘academic’ discourse, on the printed page or in the lecture-room. We have come back to the relevance of archaeological theory, the maturity of which can only be assessed in relation to its application (cf. Graslund 1989: 47).

For our understanding of the Viking Age, as I have argued repeatedly elsewhere (Price 1998a & b, 2000a-c, in press b-d), I believe it is crucial to take the Sámi into account on equal terms to their Nordic neighbours. For our perspectives on the Viking Age, I believe it is also crucial to incorporate the theoretical lessons of archaeology in the Fourth World of which the Sámi are a part. The way in which I play this out will become apparent in the following chapters, as I present and interpret evidence from archaeological finds and written sources, but I can conclude this introduction with a summary of the path that leads there.

An archaeology of the Viking mind?

We begin in chapter two, with a short survey of Norse mythology and an overview of the approaches that have been taken to its study. The different paths adopted by philologists and historians of religions are compared, drawing out the main paradigms for the interpretation of Viking Age spirituality. The character of this ‘religion’ is then considered, examining its relationship to concepts of worship, ritual and superstition. An emphasis is placed on the broader world of supernatural beings, beyond the gods themselves, and this ‘invisible population’ is then introduced in some detail. From the other world we then move to our own reality, and examine the physical forms taken by religion in the societies of Viking Age Scandinavia. Here we look at cult places, the ritual landscape and the various kinds of ‘cultic officiaries’ who seem to have presided over these rituals.

Having established a platform of general synthesis for the more formalised religion of the Viking Age, the discussion then turns to the thesis’ primary subject of sorcery. The connections between ‘magic’ and ‘religion’ are reviewed in the context of definition and meaning. It is argued that sorcery was in many ways interlinked with the larger framework of humanity’s relations with the gods and their servants, while still retaining an independent base in an unfocused structure of popular belief. The main complex of Old Norse sorcery - known as seidr - is then introduced, and discussed in the context of other forms of magic including galdr, gandr and the supernatural skills of Óðinn. Against the background of seidr as a generic for Nordic sorcery, the chapter concludes with a full review of the written sources in which it appears, and a history of academic research in this field.

Chapters three to five form the core of the book, presenting an escalating scale of analysis that begins with the Viking Age Scandinavians, moves to the Sámi, and finally takes us to the level of the circumpolar cultures. Chapter three focuses on seidr, and begins with an exploration of sorcery in relation to Óðinn, Freyja and the Vanir, and Norse cosmology. Having examined magic among the immortals, we shall then turn to its human practitioners and review the evidence for the different types of ritual specialist operating in Viking Age Scandinavia. Moving on from the written sources, the extensive archaeological material relating to the burials of probable sorcerers will be discussed. The performers lead us to the performance, and the physical parameters of seidr will then be considered in depth as we look at the ritual architecture, equipment and props used in the practice of sorcery.

We will then explore the gender constructions with which seidr was encoded, the different roles sanctioned for men and women, and the apparent development of new forms of socio-sexual identity in connection with the rituals. It will also be argued that in many ways these rites can be seen as fundamentally sexual in nature, not merely symbolically but also literally in the manner of their performance. Part of this involves an intricate system of relations that were believed to exist between human beings and the inhabitants of other worlds, and a discussion of helping spirits in seidr therefore follows next. Chapter three concludes with a review of the ‘domestic’ functions of Nordic sorcery, as a background for the more developed set of aggressive rituals that I argue formed the core of the seidr complex and which are presented later.

At first, my account of the rituals and practices of the Scandinavians may seem an outlandish over-interpretation, and - especially to archaeologists specialising in the period - without place in the

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established models that we have built up for our understanding of Viking Age society. However, chapter four will demonstrate that very similar behavioural trends and patterns of belief can be traced among the Sámi, the Nordic population’s contemporary neighbours in the Scandinavian peninsula: the ritual world of the Viking Age North becomes more nuanced and complex.

Chapter four begins by examining the history of research into connections between seidr and its nearest equivalent among the Sámi, known as noaidevuohtha. This is then expanded into a consideration of Sámi relations with the Norse population in the Viking Age. Again, an overview of Sámi religion is presented, looking at the world of the gods, conceptions of spirit-beings, and the complex of Sámi soul beliefs. The institution of noaidevuohtha is examined in detail with a focus on the noaidi, the Sámi ritual specialist who played a central role in all communal and spiritual life. As with the Nordic material, we shall concentrate on building up a terminology of practice and practitioners to which the other sources can then be related. A detailed section then considers the role of women in noaidevuohtha, before examining the rituals associated with this form of sorcery. The archaeological material is reviewed, including the noaidi’s equipment and dress, and the single example of a possible noaidi burial from the early medieval period. As with seidr, the sexual overtones of the rituals are explored, together with the elements of offensive and defensive magic that are also present. As the functions of noaidevuohtha are summarised, the chapter concludes by setting these practices in their pan-Scandinavian context, and in comparison with the Nordic sorcery set out previously.

When we proceed in chapter five to the broader cultural context of which the Sámi are a part, that of the circumpolar region, we will find that none of the religious practices hitherto discussed appear at all unusual against this background. Chapter five focuses primarily on the concept of shamanism, which is introduced from the early Siberian ethnographies and followed through the subsequent centuries of anthropological debate. A range of definitions and perspectives are considered, and the components of the ‘shamanic world-view’ are discussed in detail: cosmology, the ensouled environment, the shamanic vocation, special constructions of gender and sexuality, and the role of aggression in shamanic ritual. From this we proceed to a subject which has been alluded to in the preceding chapters, the interpretation of pre-Christian Nordic belief in the context of shamanism. These perspectives too are charted in the history of research, focusing on the archaeology of Scandinavia from the Mesolithic to the early Iron Age. The work on seidr in the centuries before the Viking Age is considered, followed by a detailed review of Viking Age magic in the context of circumpolar spirituality. The picture painted of Viking sorcery then emerges as essentially what we ought to expect in the socio-geographical circumstances of early medieval Scandinavia, and in fact the absence of such phenomena would actually be far more remarkable than the oddities of their conventions as they appear to us.

In chapter six we return to the Scandinavians, and begin to assess how these complexes of ritual, sorcery, witchcraft and magic could have fitted within the wider social structure of the time: what did they mean, how were they used, whom and what did they serve? It is here that we introduce the concept of seidr as war sorcery, beginning with an overview of aggressive functions that it performs in the written sources. From this we shall move to the intervention of different supernatural agencies on the battlefield, either in parallel with human spell-working or as a result of it. The valkyrjur are considered at length here, with further discussion of other beings of destruction. From this follows an analysis of Nordic battle magic for both warriors and sorcerers.

At this point we shall shift our attention from the ritual battlefield to the physical one, and examine the operation of supernatural concepts in the actual fighting. The shifting of shape will be considered here in relation to seidr, and explored through the activities of Óðinnic animal-warriors such as the berserkir and ulfheðnar. These phenomena are then analysed in terms of the psychological dynamics of mass violence, and the concept of sacred battle-rage. The chapter finishes by bringing together the ritual and physical aspects of combat, which are summarised and worked into a coherent whole in the concluding chapter seven. The work ends with a presentation of the ideological frame within which it is suggested that these practices are articulated, the ‘Viking Way’ of the title.

To begin this project, however, we must start with the religion of the Norse.
Problems and paradigms
in the study of Old Norse sorcery

A mythology is the comment of ... one particular age or civilisation on the mysteries of human exist-
ence and the human mind, their model for social behaviour, and their attempt to define in stories ... their perception of the inner realities.

Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Gods and myths of northern Europe* (1964: 9)

Entering the mythology

When we think of ‘religion’ in pre-Christian Scandinavia, or read about it in our syntheses of the Viking Age, a number of familiar elements are always present. Our knowledge of this mythology is primarily based on a small number of written sources - the poems of the elder *Edda* and Snorri’s prose expositions in *Gylfaginning*, hints in skaldic poetry and the sagas – but this is backed up with contemporary narrative art from archaeological contexts, and the excavated detritus of everyday belief.

The outline of the Viking myth cycle is well-known, but worth reviewing to draw out points of relevance for the present discussion.

Some aspects of it belong to a level of over-arching scheme and cosmological order, such as the creation story which begins with Ginnungagap, the ‘yawning void’ filled with magical powers. The tales are sometimes contradictory, but Snorri tells us of two realms of ice and fire, Niflheimr and Muspell. Eleven or twelve rivers, named in the *Grimnismál*, flow out from these places into the emptiness, mixing and condensing in the mist. Perhaps the giant Ymir is born from this, or perhaps he was already there; in some ways the giants seem to predate it all. The great cow, Auðhumla ‘the hornless one rich in milk’, appears also at this time. Her milk provides food for Ymir, but she also licks the salty rime that has formed in the void. Under her tongue the first god slowly emerges from the ice. Somehow this being, Buni, produces a son, from whose union with a giantess comes the first of the Æsir. Óðinn has been born. Together with his brothers Vili and Vé he turns on Ymir and kills him, and then they begin to create the earth from his flesh. The seas come from his blood, the bowl of the heavens from his empty skull. *Grimnismál* says that the clouds were fashioned from his brain. Ymir’s hair becomes the trees, from two of which the gods shape the first humans, Ask and Embla.

At this time the worlds are also formed, but their number is unclear - at least nine levels of the underworld and possibly more, with a shadowy image of other realms in tiers above the sky (though this is probably a later addition following the Christian concept of heaven). There may have been others still, such as the water-world mentioned in two of the Eddic poems.

The sources also mention the coming of the divine families, the Æsir joined by the Vanir who seem to be somehow older, from an earthier, more fertile tradition. The realm of the gods is split by civil war, until the families join their forces.

They lived in Ásgard, a broad landscape dotted with buildings and fields. Óðinn resided in Valholl, the ‘hall of the slain’ with its roof thatched with shields, resting on rafters of spears. Each god and
goddess had a magnificent homestead, shining with silver, gold and other ornament, set on its own land. The abode of humans was nearby in Mĩgårôr, the ‘middle place’ connected to the home of the gods by Bifrost, the bridge of the rainbow. The dispersed settlement pattern of the gods in Āsgårôr duplicated and enhanced that of humans in this world. Beneath Mĩgårôr, the many halls of the dead stretched down into the earth to Niflhel, nine leagues deep. In the east was Útgarôr, the home of demonic powers, trolls and other horrors. To the north was Jǫtunheimr, ‘Giant-Land’. Sometimes this place appears in the plural, so the primordial giants may also have had several worlds to dwell in.

Connecting them all was the ash Yggdrasil, the ‘World Tree’ (fig. 2.1). We know of the creatures that lived on its trunk - the eagle at the top, the dragon underneath, and the squirrel that ran from one to the other carrying insults. Four harts grazed on the boughs, but Yggdrasil was refreshed daily from the well that lay under its roots. The latter stretched into every world, providing a hazardous route for travelers between them.

Other myths concern the inhabitants of these places, and their servants - the gods and goddesses, of course, but also the valkyrjur, nornir and other supernatural beings. They are surrounded by animals, each with its own special place in the cosmological scheme: cockerels, snakes and deer, goats, cats, hawks and ravens, wolves and dogs. At another level still we find the darker forces in the shadows of the Viking belief system - ambiguous subterranean creatures like the dwarfs and elves. Here too is the trickster Loki and his children, the wolf Fenrir, the ‘World Serpent’ Mĩgårôsormr (or Jormungandr - it has several names), and Hel who had custody of the anonymous dead.

The majority of the myths relate the stories that weave them all together: the many conflicts with the giants, some comic, some brutally violent; the skilful cunning of the dwarfs and their commissions from Āsgårôr; the gods’ marvellous transportation - their horses, including Óðinn’s eight-legged steed Sleipnir, Freyr’s collapsible ship, the chariots of Þórr and Freyja; the theft and recovery of Mjõlnir, Þórr’s hammer; Loki’s treachery and shape-changing; the fettering of Fenrir and the loss of Tyr’s hand; Freyr giving his sword to Skirnir; the erotic tales of Óðinn’s seductions and Freyja’s many infidelities; Þórr fishing for the World Serpent; the stealing of Þónn’s apples; and many, many more. At the centre of them run Óðinn’s quests for wisdom, and the awful predictions he receives of the end of all things. From these stem the death of Baldr, the flying of Loki and his subsequent capture to be bound in the entrails of his son, all the long preparations for the last conflict.

This is one of the most crucial aspects of Norse mythology for any understanding of the Viking worldview. The end is always the same: the final battle at the Ragnarök, the ‘doom of the gods’ and the terrible things that will be unleashed to fight it (fig. 2.2). In the words of Völuspá, the ‘Seeress’s Prophecy’ that we shall consider extensively below, it begins with a time of fear:

Fig. 2.1 An animal with ‘tree-antlers’ depicted on a Viking Age wall-hanging (weave II) from Øverhogdal in Härjedalen. This may be one of the four stags that graze in the branches of Yggdrasill, the World Tree (after Horneij 1991: 119).
Three years of war will first shake the earth, followed by the *fimbulvetr*, a period of three winters with no summers between. The bonds of kinship, the social cement which held the Vikings’ world together, begin to dissolve: brothers kill brothers, cousins sleep with cousins, families are destroyed in the worst nightmare that the Norse mind could conceive.

Then the cataclysms begin, as the earth shakes, the trees and mountains fall, and Yggdrasill itself shivers. All bonds are broken, Loki is released and Fenrir runs free. Great wolves race across the sky: Sköll swallows the sun, while his companion Hati attacks the moon. The land begins to sink beneath the sea, whipped to a froth by the World Serpent as it writhes its way out of the waters and onto Vigriðr, the plain of battle.

In Ásgarðr the cockerel Gullinkambi, ‘Golden Comb’, is rousing the gods. Watching for danger at the head of the Bifrost bridge, Heimdallr blows his horn. Now is the time for Öðinn to take counsel with the oracles that he has been collecting against this day. He talks to the severed head of Mimr the sage, and is told what the future holds. Like him, every being in all the various worlds knows their fated role, that they will fall at the last, as the cosmos disintegrates around them.

Roosters are also crowing among the dead and in the realm of the giants. The armies of Hel march back from the grave. Fenrir’s many children are let loose from Jarnvíðr, the ‘Iron Wood’ in the east where the troll-women have bred them. The trolls’ shepherd, Eggþér the giant, sits on his burial mound and plays his harp, smiling to himself as the end that he has waited for at last arrives. The dwarfs are also awakened, and start to howl outside the rocky doors of their halls under the mountains. The elves too are on the move. Every giant of fire and frost, all the trolls and underground things, all hasten to the Ragnarök to fight out their age-old enmity with the gods.

Breaking loose from its moorings on the seabed, with Loki at its helm, we find surely the most terrible vessel from any mythology - Naglfar, ‘Nail Ship’, made from the fingernails of the dead and crewed by all those who have ever drowned. We can picture a longship vast beyond imagining, muddy
and rotten with weed, salt water pouring off its decks as it breaks the surface after the long rise from the bottom. As its cargo Naglfar brings the hosts of destruction to their appointed places.

Everyone is making for Vigriðr, where the battle will be joined. The armies of evil are championed by Surtr the fire giant, with his sword that is brighter than the sun. Leading the sons of Muspell he rides through a hole that they have ripped in the sky. Flames dance on every side as they cross over the rainbow, the Bifrost bridge, which cracks and collapses behind them. At the same time Fenrir bounds onto the plain, his lower jaw touching the ground while his upper jaw stretches to scrape the heavens. Fire springs from his eyes and beside him the Mjögarðsormr spits poison over the earth.

Óðinn mobilises his troops, puts on his golden helmet, and then leads the Æsir and Vanir to war. According to the Grímnismál, from each of Valholl’s five hundred and forty doors stride eight hundred warriors, each of whom once died valiantly in Mjögarðr and was rewarded with a place in Óðinn’s hall. An equal number have dwelt with Freyja in Sessrumnir, her hall on Fólkvangr in another part of Ásgarðr. In all, eight hundred and sixty-four thousand warriors will now fight for the gods, earning the hospitality that they have received. The number may be even greater because the Norse did not use the decimal system, and their ‘hundred’ was probably a hundred and twenty. This would mean that the gods have 1,228,800 troops at their disposal.

Against them stands the great mass of the ordinary dead, risen from their beds in Hel under Loki’s command. The frost giants are there with Hrymr at their head - they also arrived in Naglfar. The fire giants from Muspell are drawn up separately in a great battle array: “it will be very bright”, says Snorri. The plain of Vigriðr stretches a hundred leagues in every direction, and it is entirely covered with the armies gathered to fight at the Ragnarök.

When the battle is finally joined, the gods themselves are in the thick of it. Each of them is matched against a creature of the underworld. As he rides from Valholl, Óðinn makes directly for the wolf, Fenrir. Þórr tries to help him, but soon has his hands full as the Mjögarðsormr attacks. Around them, all across the plain, millions are fighting. The human dead of every kind are locked in combat, as is every other being from all the worlds.

As the killing wears on and on, the mortals fall again, meeting a second and final death. The same fate waits for all the other creatures, those who have dwelt in stones and deep in the forests, in water and fire, in the ice and in the air. Even the gods are dying. Many opponents slay each other in the duels taking place around the field - Þýr and the hell-hound Garmr, Heimdallr and Loki. Þórr smashes the World Serpent with his hammer, but with a dying spasm it covers him with a fatal spray of venom. Even Óðinn does not escape his fate: he snags his foot in Fenrir’s jaws, and the lord of the gods is gulped down and eaten. Viðarr avenges his father by ripping the wolf apart. Surtr kills Freyr, helpless without his sword, and then lights the final fire that will consume all the realms.

The Norse world ends not with a whimper, but with a very big bang indeed. All the gods, all the giants, trolls and other monsters, all the mortals and every other living thing lie dead - either upon the field of Vigriðr or elsewhere. Nothing is mentioned of the goddesses and the human women who have presumably stayed behind while their menfolk fight, but perhaps they have remained in their homes. Wherever they are, they do not escape. All the great halls of the gods are burning, and the houses of every realm wither to ash in Surtr’s self-immolating fire. The stars fall into the sea, their heat turning the waters into a steaming mist that covers what remains of the world. Flames touch the sky and consume the heavens, and all of creation melts back into the void. Everything everywhere spins down to destruction, towards what has always been inevitable, the only possible end.

Under Christian influence, a myth of rebirth seems to have been added to the Ragnarök story as we see it in the closing strophes of Völuspá and Vafþrúðnismál. The earth rises again from the sea, and a son of Óðinn returns from the dead to find golden chess pieces sparkling in the green grass. Corn grows in the fields without being sown, and a hall for heroes stands on the plain: ‘there shall the worthy / warrior bands dwell / and all their days of life / enjoy delight’ (Völuspá 61, in Dronke’s 1997 translation). There is little to suggest that this was an original part of the Norse belief system, and its contradictions are clumsily unresolved - how can there be any ‘worthy warrior bands’, if everyone is dead? In the eleventh century or later it was probably added to the cycle of tales on which the composer of Völuspá drew.
We are left with a sobering conclusion, which is that the Vikings created one of the few known world mythologies to include the pre-ordained and permanent ruin of all creation and all the powers that shaped it, with no lasting afterlife for anyone at all. The cosmos began in the frozen emptiness of Ginnungagap, and will end in fire with the last battle. Everything will burn at the Ragnarok, whatever gods and humans may do. The outcome of our actions, our fate, is already decided and therefore does not matter. What is important is the manner of our conduct as we go to meet it.

The psychological implications of this and other aspects of the Norse 'religion' bear thinking about.

Research perspectives on Scandinavian pre-Christian religion

The mythological summary above draws on many sources. The Poetic Edda and Snorri's Edda have already been mentioned, while overviews can be found in Davidson (1964) and other texts taken up in detail in this and subsequent chapters, including contentious points of interpretation. A re-telling of the myths by Crossley-Holland (1980) blends the original sources and is thus of no critical value, but provides a usefully coherent synthesis.

Research into these myth cycles of the Norse has been continuous since the beginnings of Viking studies, and has affected every perception of the Nordic past. In 1997 David Wilson explored the fascination that early medieval Scandinavia has exerted over the artistic imagination from the Renaissance to the twentieth century, and it was no accident that he chose as his title the double-emphasis of Vikings and gods in European art. A preoccupation for the mythologies of the North, and their extraordinary cast of supernatural characters, can be traced in every Western country (see Mjoberg 1980 and Roedahl & Meulengracht Sorensen 1996 for an overview of this process). Óðinn, Þór and the rest have been seen as everything from archetypes of Victorian values (Wawn 2000) to ideal subjects for more modern narrative media such as adventure novels, movies and comic books (Djupdraet 1998 for Danish work; Garrec's 1996 exhibition catalogue for the French popular reception of the Vikings; Ward 2000 and G. Barnes 2001 on North American responses).

Within the academic sphere we can trace the study of Viking Age religion along two parallel streams. One of these runs naturally within the discipline of history of religions, and the other within the equally important mainstream of Old Norse philology and saga studies which provides so much of the primary data. A detailed overview of this field would be inappropriate to the present work, but as background to a history of research for Nordic sorcery we can make a few general observations.

Philology and comparative theology

The question of source criticism has of course been central to this discussion from the beginning, especially concerning the reliability of the medieval Icelandic texts as evidence for the Viking Age that they describe. Until at least the mid-nineteenth century they were regarded as essentially true relations of the Nordic past, a literary counterpart to the great archaeological discoveries that were then being made in Scandinavia (Mjöberg 1980: 225-30). As the sagas began to appear in critical editions, chiefly under the editorship of Icelandic philologists, the discussion on their dating, origin and integrity also expanded. From the 1850s onwards the veracity of the sagas came under ever more intense scrutiny, with early contributions to the debate made by scholars such as Keyser (1866), Maurer (1869) and Heusler (1914), and later Liestol (1929). By the time that Dag Strömbläck wrote his thesis in 1935, he could summarise a polarised situation where on the one hand the sagas were regarded as faithful oral histories preserved essentially intact since the Viking Age, and on the other dismissed as hopelessly compromised products of the medieval imagination.

As the historical view of saga research was gradually eclipsed by the source-critical approach, by the 1950s the sagas had come to be seen almost exclusively as literary constructs, analysed as to form, motif and composition in a similar manner to the medieval European Romance tradition. It is within this field that the majority of research on Old Norse prose has been undertaken in the last half-century.
From the early 1980s onwards, however, a new paradigm began to emerge in saga research in the form of a combined historical-literary approach. Influenced by the French Annales school discussed in chapter one, a new generation of researchers began to explore the sagas in terms of the cognitive environments of their creation. Thus instead of seeking Viking Age mentalités, the texts were seen as reflections of the world-views current in the thirteenth century and later, the Iceland of the Sturlungs in which scholar-politicians like Snorri played such a prominent role. Researchers such as Byock (1982, 1988), Hastrup (1985, 1998) and Miller (1990) have played a prominent part in this movement, alongside leading exponents from the ‘source-critical school’. Of the latter, Clunies Ross has probably made the most extensive contribution with her two-volume study Prolonged echoes (1994, 1998a), which is taken up in chapter three alongside the work of another important historical-literary scholar, the late Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (e.g. 1983, 2000). The discussion on the sagas as sources for the Viking Age continues, needless to say, and Stromback’s observation that “it is now more perilous than ever to adopt a fixed and consistent position” (1935: 4) remains just as true today - especially for an archaeologist looking at textual material.

Parallel with the philological debate, and to some extent dependent upon it, was the interpretation of the Old Norse texts as source material for the specific study of religion. Here too, it is possible to trace a changing pattern of analysis over the last two hundred years. We shall examine specific works in detail below in considering research on Nordic sorcery, but we can briefly review some of the main trends here. Comparative theology also had its ‘historical school’, though its effects lasted a little longer. This was the same paradigm as that pursued in archaeology by Nerman and Lindqvist, as discussed in chapter one. Here we see the same intensification of source-critical approaches, leading to a similar emphasis on the unreliability of the texts as evidence for Old Norse belief. As with mainstream saga studies, historians of religion also moved into a phase of literary-philological critique, which gathered momentum in the 1960s. Especially critical of the later medieval sources, this work focused on the creation of explanatory models.

Developing partly in phase with the literary critics, another school of comparative study took shape, which sought cross-cultural parallels for the components of ancient Scandinavian belief. Much of this work focused around the ideas of Georges Dumézil who placed greater reliance on Snorri than many of his contemporaries (see especially 1939, 1959 and the posthumous collection of essays from 2000). Dumézil’s influence has not declined, though some of the interpretations that are most central for his work are controversial today. These include his famous tripartite division of Indo-European religious culture, which has long been debated in a Scandinavian context. In applying structuralism to religion, Dumézil and his followers like Folke Ström, E.O.G. Turville-Petre and, for a time, Bruce Lincoln, pioneered an approach that is still relevant today, and has led to a number of separate avenues of enquiry.

The detail of much of this work will be considered below, but before turning to the specific questions of Nordic sorcery, we need to seek general patterns of consensus as to the nature of pre-Christian religion in the North - how was it organised, by and for whom was it operating? Although they do not form the primary focus of this book, these structures serve as a vital background against which the complex of sorcery can be considered.

Gods and monsters, worship and superstition

Religion and belief

The first observation we must make is that, beyond the convenience of disciplinary terminology, very few scholars still speak of Nordic ‘religion’ at all. In chapter one we encountered the notion of a ‘belief system’, perhaps a better term as it sets spirituality where it belongs alongside everything else that the Norse thought about, mixed together with every other aspect of their lives both sacred and profane.

Still, the notion of a system of any kind is misleading here. At present we in fact know very little about the detailed practice of Old Norse religion, but it is symptomatic that we conceptualise it as ‘pagan’, which both in English and the Scandinavian languages (hedendom etc) is taken to mean any set of rites and ceremonies deemed non-Christian in inspiration. Interestingly, we are by no means
sure exactly what a northern European Christian would have thought and believed in the eighth to
eleventh centuries. By formulating our ideas on early Norse religion by reference to that which it was
not - Christianity - we are missing an essential point. It is problematic to apply what is effectively a
monotheistic framework of interpretation to a whole pantheon of gods, and this also ignores the
whole host of other supernatural entities that were at least as important as the Æsir and Vanir. Viking
‘paganism’ was probably never a consistent orthodoxy such as writers like Snorri tried to present, and
may never have been systematically understood by those who practised it.

This applies not least to the inhabitants of Ásgardr, and their relationship with human beings. In the
same spirit as Philip Vellacott’s description of the gods of classical Greece (1973: 30f), the ‘worship’
required by the Norse pantheon was not adoration, or gratitude, or even unreserved approval, and was
thus utterly unlike the Christian relationship to the divine. The religion of the Æsir and Vanir de-
manded only a recognition that they existed as an integral and immutable part of human nature and
society, and of the natural world, and that as such they possessed an inherent rightness - perhaps even
a kind of beauty. If one wished to avoid disaster, it was necessary to come to terms with the gods, and
the terms would be theirs, not those of their followers. This is an important point in relation to the
interpretations that I will develop in the following chapters, because a refusal to acknowledge the
gods in this way could have dire consequences. It would also involve a contradiction, as such an act
would be a denial of the undeniable. The question of ‘believing in’ the Norse gods was probably
irrelevant.

In fact it is clear that their mythology was far from static, and changed both regionally and over
time. It was influenced by Christianity, in different ways at different periods, and in different places.
It may have been peripherally affected by Islam, and closer to home by the more familiar religions of
the Sámi. The Vikings also encountered the spiritual beliefs of the Balts and Slavs, and the nomadic
peoples of the western Asian steppe. In the west they met the indigenous inhabitants of Greenland and
Canada’s eastern seaboard, though it is doubtful that any of their beliefs were absorbed.

All this is particularly visible in the archaeology, both in the material culture of spiritual belief -
amulets, charms and so on - and in the evidence of mortuary behaviour. On the basis of burial ritual
alone, we see variation not just on a regional scale but almost from one community to the next,
expressed in differing opinions of what was the proper way to send the dead from this world to
another. Not least, the ceremonies for the departed were the concern of the living, and may be in part
read as such - with an eye for status, conspicuous consumption and a signalling of allegiance or
politics. This is, of course, an old and familiar debate in archaeological circles (see Parker Pearson
1999 for an overview).

In sorting out this mass of perspectives, an essential first step is to ask exactly what kinds of
supernatural beings we are dealing with. We also need to understand the balance between the ‘wor-
ship’ of the gods, in the sense described above, and other scales of relationship with the supernatural.
Discussions of Norse religion tend to focus on the higher beings such as the Æsir and Vanir, but this
overlooks a much broader range of creatures that may in fact have been more important to ordinary
people. Some of these have a central role to play in the system of sorcery with which this book is
concerned, and we may briefly review them here.

The invisible population

Beyond the gods themselves, what we might call the ‘invisible population’ of Scandinavia can be
classified in six broad groups:

- servants of the gods
- giants
- ‘spirits’
- beings of cosmological purpose
- supernatural beings of nature
- projections of the human soul

We can examine them in turn.
Servants of the gods

Firstly, many of the gods have 'servants' in the form of animals, often working for them as beasts of burden, steeds or in pulling their various vehicles. To some extent they also seem to symbolise the respective gods, and were the animals of choice for their sacrifices. Some of these are discussed in more detail in the following chapters, and all are described by Snorri in *Gylfaginning*; the animals that appear in the Eddic poems are interestingly discussed by von Hofsten (1957).

- Óðinn's ravens, Huginn ('Mind') and Muninn ('Memory')
- Óðinn's wolves, Freki and Geri (both meaning 'Greedy One')
- Óðinn's eight-legged horse, Sleipnir ('Sliding One')
- Þórr's goats, Tanngrímnir ('Snarl-Tooth') and Tanngnóstr ('Gnash-Tooth')
- Freyja's un-named cats
- Freyja's boar, Hildisvini ('Battle-Swine')
- Freyr's boar, Gullinborsti ('Golden-Bristles')
- Heimdallr's ram? (the god may simply be associated with this animal)

Besides these we find one category of being directly connected with the gods, and with Óðinn in particular - the valkyries. Acting as 'choosers of the slain' and bringing the valiant dead to Valhöll, the valkyries thereafter wait on them, carrying mead to their benches. They are discussed at length in chapter six.

- valkyrjur, 'valkyries'

Beings of cosmological purpose

Beyond the named characters who generically belong to the different types of beings listed in the rest of this section, the Norse mythos contains a very great number of individual creatures with a specific place in the cosmos. Examples here include the various animals that live on and around the World Tree, the cockerels that act as guardians in the different realms, and so on. Common to them all is that they play little or no part in anything outside their precise function. While some of them are discussed later in the book, the majority will not be treated further here (an overview of these beings may be found in any of the general syntheses on Norse religion).

Three exceptions to this are the nornir who live in a shining hall by the roots of Yggdrasill (Halvorsen 1967b). They water the tormented tree every day and coat its trunk with clay from the spring of knowledge. In *Völuspá* 20 the three maidens are named:

Urð héto eina, Urðr ['Had to be'] they called one,  
aðra Verðandi the second Verðandi ['Coming to be']  
- skáro á skjóti - - they incised the slip of wood -  
Skuld ena þrúði. Skuld ['Has to be'] the third.  
Þer log logði, They laid down laws,  
Þar líf kuro they chose out lives  
alda börnum, for mankind's children,  
örlög segga. men's destinies.

*Völuspá* 20; translation after Dronke 1997: 12

As embodiments of Past, Present and Future, the names of the nornir include an edge of necessity that alludes to their function as the mistresses of fate. Here they use wooden lots to decide human futures, though other sources describe them weaving a cloth for each life, in which every strand represented an event or moment - a great fabric of an individual's fate, finished by the cutting of the final thread. Their fingernails each bear a rune. In addition to the three principal beings of this kind, Snorri mentions that many more nornir exist, both good and evil. These are described in *Gylfaginning* 15 as being of three different ancestries, descending from the Æsir, elves and dwarfs. As we shall see in chapter six, the nornir share several characteristics with the valkyrjur and disir (see Ström 1954).
The giants

Alongside the gods, probably the most important mythological beings were the giants. As we have seen, they play a major role in the Norse cosmogony and in their dealings with Ásgarðr. The giants seem to have been viewed as in some way beings of nature, embodiments of the elements and natural phenomena, and also as representative of all that stood outside the circle of human experience or culture (see Motz 1982 for an overview). It is as this vision of threat personified that they appear in opposition to the gods in the mythological stories. The same picture is revealed by their numerous names that survive, describing the giants and giantesses as “dirty, hairy, ugly, stupid and especially loud” (Simek 1993: 107; cf. Motz 1981; the names are listed in Orchard 1997: 191-5). The giants are rarely described in detail, though their strength and cunning is a consistent feature. There are, however, some exceptions, as the giants are occasionally learned. At least some of the giantesses are objects of desire for the gods, just as many giants want goddesses as sexual partners (see Clunies Ross 1994: 107-40). They have few dealings with mortals. In several important studies that have partly re-shaped our view of Norse mythology, the historian of religions Gro Steinsland (1986b, 1991) has suggested a cultic role for the giants, and that the frequent sexual alliances between them and the gods represent a constant theme in Nordic kingship, symbolising the unification of different social forces in a sacred marriage. They may also represent other cultures, such as the Sámi, though this would imply a very pejorative view of them on the part of the Norse.

Supernatural beings of nature

The dwarfs were also important beings in the Norse mythos, and frequently appear in the stories of the gods (de Vries 1957: §181; Halvorsen 1958). More than a hundred of their names are recorded in the þulur and in the so-called ‘catalogue of dwarfs’ interpolated in Völuspá (10-16). They are generally helpful beings, though occasionally devious. The dwarfs are seen as often very wise, and as guardians of knowledge. They are skilled miners and craftworkers, especially in metals, and as in many cultures this transformation of ore into steel takes on a mystical, magical quality in the Norse myths. Many of the gods’ tools, instruments, items of jewellery and vehicles are of dwarfish manufacture. The dwarfs live underground, mostly in mountains, and their ‘apartness’ may again be significant. There is little evidence that they played any part in cultic ceremonies, but they could interact with humans, mostly in a positive way. In Snorri, they are seen as a sub-category of elves, svartálfar or ‘black elves’. There is little direct evidence as to their appearance, but the modern connotations of small stature inherent in their name were not current in the Viking Age and first appear in the medieval period.

The elves formed a more general category of being, playing little role in the mythos as such (though they do appear occasionally, as in Loki’s accusation that Freyja has slept with every elf in Ásgarðr - Lokasenna 30). They appear in many different guises, and often had contact with humans. There is some suggestion of links to Öðinn, and that they were in some way offered to in a similar fashion to the disir (see below). For example, the skaldic poem Austrfararvisur by Sigvatr Óðarsson, dating to c.1019, mentions an álfablót to Öðinn held in a hall, a ceremony over which a woman seems to preside; there are also two saga accounts of such ceremonies (de Vries 1932; 1957: §184). The elves are seen as bringers of good and bad fortune, as omens of luck or doom, as helpers and hinderers, and as bringers of sickness or health. They were also one of the longest-lived elements of pre-Christian beliefs, persisting even today in folklore. Along with the dwarfs, trolls and other similar creatures they have been subsumed into the more general concept of the huldufólk, ‘hidden people’, who take many different regional forms and names (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998a: 136-9).
On a different level, occurring in the sources in contexts which bring them into contact with ordinary humans, were other giant-like beings of many different kinds. Usually evil or ill-tempered, they are sometimes a manifestation of the undead, and are also occasionally associated with a degree of sexual deviancy. They are described as living in rocks or mountains, in streams and rivers, or generally underground. Collectively the trolls and their kind form the most common type of supernatural creature in the sources (see Hartmann 1936 for a comprehensive survey of these creatures).

- *purs, 'ogres'*
- *troll, 'trolls'*

'Spirits'

Perhaps the broadest, and least defined, category of supernatural being can best be termed 'spirits'. Again, following their introduction here many of them are discussed in later chapters.

Among the foremost of these were the *disir* (Ström 1954, 1958; de Vries 1957: §311, 528f). Always female, they seem to have been part deity and part spirit. There are references to sacrificial festivals in their honour, and even special buildings - *disarsalir* - where these were held. They appear in place-names, including a Disåping, and are also occasionally connected with particular gods, especially Öðinn. Poems seem to have been composed as tribute to them. Several of the Eddic poems, such as *Atlamál in greltenzko*, strongly imply that the *disir* were the souls of dead women, serving a function similar to the *valkyrjur*. *Disir* could also ‘belong’ to a person or their family, and in some saga accounts they appear almost identical to the *fylgjur* discussed below, communicating messages and warnings in dreams (*spádisir*). The element -*dis* is found in compound words in the sense of both ‘goddess’ and ‘woman’, adding further dimensions to these complex beings. The same element is found occasionally in female personal names, sometimes tellingly combined with the names of gods, as in Bóðis and Freydis. In a unique case we also know of a woman called Öðindis, commemorated by the Hassmyra runestone from Västmanland (Vs 24; A-S. Graslund 1995: 462-6). The *disir* also appear in other variants, including the *landdisir*, who seem to have lived in rocks.

- *disir*
- *landdisir, 'land-disir'*
- *spádisir, 'prophecy-disir'*

There were also spirits of the land, the *landvættir*, which appear to have been some kind of guardian beings of place (de Vries 1957: §185; Solheim 1965). They appear occasionally in sagas, and in other medieval sources. They could be aroused to anger by trespass, but could also be frightened away - *Landnámabók* records the Ulfjöts law code that required the figureheads to be removed from ships’ prows when approaching Iceland, so as not to scare the *landvættir*. There may have been some congruence between these spirits and the *landdisir*.

- *landvættir, 'land spirits'*

Two further types of spiritual beings could be summoned in the course of sorcerous performances, and were known as *gandir* and *verðir* (Tolley 1995a), who may have been subsumed in a general word for such beings, *náttúrur*. Little is known of their form or origin, but they could be employed to provide their summoner with knowledge of the future or distant events, as intermediaries with the dead (the *verðir* in particular may even be the spirits of the departed, at least in some form), or as agents of destruction. A crucial element of Old Norse sorcery, these beings are discussed at length in chapter three.

- *gandir, 'spirits'***
- *spágandir, 'spirits of prophecy'***
- *verðir, 'spirits'***
- *náttúrur, 'spirits'***
Other entities served more specific functions, such as mara, the Nightmare which ‘rode’ people in their sleep. This terrible creature appears in a number of Old Norse sources, and by comparison with similar spiritual beings it has been very well-studied (Tillhagen 1960, 1966; Raudvere 1991, 1993; see also Ginzburg 1990: ch. 3/2 for a brilliant overview of nightmare traditions in Europe). It is described most often as a threatening dream-creature, sometimes a horse. Occasionally it is the spirit-form of an evil sorcerer, and sometimes an agent of supernatural destruction unleashed upon an enemy. The mara was another of the longest-lived of the beings in which the Viking Age Norse believed, and can be traced far into the post-medieval period. It is discussed below in chapters three and six.

- mara, the ‘nightmare’

**Projections of the human soul**

In the Viking Age Norse understanding of reality, human beings also possessed dimensions beyond the physical body. In modern works these have been discussed in terms of soul beliefs, but it is important to emphasise that in many ways these aspects of early medieval Scandinavians were actually separate beings, with their own concerns and their own independent existences (early overviews are provided in Storm 1893, Blum’s 1912 book on protective spirits, and H. Falk 1926; one of the most comprehensive summaries may be found in Ellis 1943: ch. 5; see also Turville-Petre 1964: 221-30, Strömback’s 1975 & 1989 essays on Nordic soul beliefs; and B. Graslund 1994 for an archaeological analysis of possible earlier archetypes).

One of these human projections was the fylgja, literally ‘follower’ but more often translated ‘fetch’ (Rieger 1898; Lagerheim 1905; de Vries 1957: §162; Ström 1960; Mundal 1974). These appear either in dreams or to those gifted with powers of second-sight, most often in contexts of warning or as premonitions of doom. Crucially, the fylgjur were always female, even those of a man. They could take animal form, though often retaining some human element, especially about the eyes. The word may be related to fulga, ‘caul’ and fylgja, ‘afterbirth’, suggesting that these beings may have been seen as a sort of detached aspect of a human (special beliefs relating to those born with a caul are common throughout Europe, as we shall see in chapter six). The fylgjur could be inherited, and the same individual fylgjur were attached to a constant family line. However, they were also independent beings, and could ‘reject’ a person whom they did not favour. Some fylgjur seem to have ‘moved on’ at a person’s death, to lead entirely separate lives. In essence they seem to have been a sort of spirit guardian, perhaps a dead ancestress, protecting an individual with supernatural force. It is interesting that one of the formal grades of concubine in early medieval Iceland was called a fylgikona - a ‘follower woman’ - and her relationship with her patron was called fylgilag, but we do not know exactly why (Auður Magnúsdóttir 2001: 109-19). Many Icelanders still believe in the fylgjur today, running in families just as before. We shall encounter them several times in the following chapters.

- fylgjur, ‘fetches’, ‘followers’

Related to the fylgjur, and similarly connected with concepts of destiny, was the hamingja (de Vries 1957: §161; Solheim 1961). This was the personified luck of a person, and represented a spirit of good fortune. It was a separate being, and again like the fylgia it could be inherited, though it could also be transferred outside a particular family. The motif of a person’s luck deserting them or returning recurs in the sagas, and the movements of the hamingjur could be seen by those with special powers of perception.

- hamingjur, ‘luck-spirits’, ‘guardian-spirits’?

Another aspect of the Viking Age human personality was the hamr, the ‘shape’ (de Vries 1957: §160f; Ström 1961a). The hamr was what changed in the course of shape-shifting, linked to the lycanthropic beliefs in werewolves, bear-men and other transformations that we shall consider in chapter six. As such it seems to have represented the body’s physical form – not just in terms of superficial appear-
The Old Norse verb for shape-shifting, *skipta homum*, thus conveys something far more fluid and ‘real’ than our modern equivalent, implying the fundamental restructuring of the self. The word *hamr* is also related to *hamingja*, and it is possible that the latter represents an independently mobile form of the ‘shape’. If the *hamr* was destroyed in this separate form, the physical body died at the same time.

To some extent representing aspects of all the above was the *hugr*, a word difficult to translate but probably meaning something rather abstract such as ‘soul’ or even ‘mind’ (de Vries 1957: §160; Solheim 1962). The *hugr* has been described as combining “personhood, thought, wish and desire” (Raudvere 2001: 102). It seems to have represented the essential nature of a human being, and Strömback (1975) argues that it had a kind of aura that others could feel intuitively. Thus in *Volsunga saga* the evil King Atli (i.e. Attila the Hun) is described as having an *ulfshugr*, the ‘essence’ of a wolf. The word for a foreboding was *hugbod*, and as with the premonitions that accompany the movements of the *fylgjur* it seems that the *hugr* could visit others to give warning. As we shall see in chapters three and six, when a sorcerer traveled in ethereal form it was both their *hugr* and their *hamr* that were left behind. This may also be reflected in *Volsunga* 18, in the difference between the breath of mortal life that inhabits a body, and the soul which may be renewed (cf. Dronke 1997: 123f).

The human dead were also feared as corporeal beings, as Norse revenants were not insubstantial ghosts in the modern sense, but physically reanimated corpses (Klare 1934; Ellis 1943: ch. 6; Turville-Petre 1964: ch. 15; Sayers 1996). They were almost always evil and destructive, regardless of the person’s character when alive, and in death had often gained additional powers such as great strength or sorcerous ability. The unquiet dead form a consistent theme in the written descriptions of Viking Age sorcery, and we will examine a number of examples in the following chapters.

Thus far we have reviewed the supernatural inhabitants of the Norse mythology, but how did the people of the Viking Age bridge the gap between their world and that of the others? A brief consideration of the over-arching structure of Norse religion is necessary before beginning the investigation of its sorcerous parallel that comprises our main theme.

The shape of Old Norse religion

In some senses, as with the mythology, the structure of Nordic pre-Christian religion is well-known. The general syntheses give a thorough grounding in the cults of the gods, and in the practical reflections of the cosmology considered above (the latest of these are DuBois 1999 and Näström 2002a, but see also earlier overviews such as Ström 1961b and Holtsmark 1992 [1970]; others are considered later in the chapter). However, of the physical structures of religion, the material culture of places of ‘worship’, the landscapes in which they were set, and the functionaries who served there, far less is known.

The work that set the pattern for studies of Nordic cult buildings was Olaf Olsen’s *Hørg, hof og kirke* (1966), which placed the majority of pre-Christian rituals in open-air enclosures and sacred groves that would leave minimal archaeological trace. Olsen proposed a hierarchy of cult sites, with the *hof* as a permanent religious centre in a building, and the *hørg* as a less elaborate ‘holy place for nature-worship’ (*ibid*: 282). To these were added other, less easily defined, sites for religious observance, such as the vé sanctuaries that were tentatively identified with the kind of massive stone settings found under the royal mounds at Jelling, and at Lejre. Olsen’s views fitted neatly with the occasional excavated traces of ‘temples’, such as the structural remains found beneath the churches at Mære
(Lidén 1969) and Gamla Uppsala (excavated by Lindqvist in 1926 and reported by Nordahl in 1996). Together these formed a composite picture of a few major ‘cult centres’, often under the patronage of elites or serving the needs of fledgling kingdoms, surrounded by a more dispersed network of local places of reverence (though see Brink 1992 and A-S. Gräslund 1992 for important critique of Olsen’s concept of cult continuity).

Fresh material appeared in the late 1980s, when the boom in Scandinavian infrastructure development led to large numbers of rural excavations in advance of pipelines, motorways and rail links. As a result of this work, a number of new structures were found which support the idea of small-scale, local cultic and votive activities carried out at special sites. The modest buildings and enclosures found in these contexts resemble Olsen’s idea of the høgr or something similar. In Sweden such structures have so far been found as part of extended farmstead complexes of the Viking Age at Sanda and the Migration period at Säby, both in Uppland (Åqvist 1996), and on a Viking period farm at Borg in Östergötland (A-L. Nielsen 1997).

At the same time, new studies of sources for the Gamla Uppsala ‘temple’ have suggested that it may have been a very large feasting hall in which pagan festivals took place at certain times, rather than a dedicated religious building in its own right (see Dillmann’s article and other papers in Hultgård 1997). Olsen’s hof would fit this pattern, with the slight change that the cultic rituals were held actually in the homes of the leading families - or in the royal hall, in the case of Gamla Uppsala. The notion of prominent buildings taking on a temporary role as ‘temples’ for blot ceremonies or other rituals is now generally accepted, and has gained further support from the new programme of excavations to re-evaluate earlier findings at the famous Icelandic site of Hofstaðir. Despite the cultic functions clearly indicated by the name, the actual buildings there are of high status but otherwise have no unusual characteristics (Orri Vésteinsson in press).

The final and most elusive component of this cultic landscape, that of the open-air sanctuaries, has also left a remarkable physical trace. At the highest point of the island of Fröšö in the Storsjö lake near Östersund in Sweden, excavations in the mid 1980s under the floor of the medieval church uncovered the remains of what appears to be a Viking Age sacrificial grove (the find is summarised in Hildebrandt 1989, the osteological material is treated in Iregren 1989 and Näsström 1996 provides a general comment). Directly under the site of the medieval altar was found the badly-decayed remains of a birch tree, with a trunk approximately 0.5m in diameter and root systems spreading out up to 3m. The tree had clearly been deliberately felled. Spread over an area of 9m² around the stump was a very large assemblage of animal bones, which on stratigraphic grounds could be seen to have accumulated while the tree was still standing. The bones were mostly from quite young animals, primarily game. They were not from ordinary food remains or slaughter-waste, though a few of them bore traces of butchery. Some animals were represented by the whole body, while others were present only as skulls. In total, the following remains can be reconstructed:

- 5 bears (whole body)
- 6 elks (heads only)
- 2 stags (heads only)
- 5 sheep/goats (primarily heads, very few bones from legs and feet)
- 11 pigs (primarily heads, very few bones from legs and feet)
- 2 cows (primarily heads, very few bones from legs and feet)
- Bones from reindeer, squirrel, and teeth from horse and dog

Radiocarbon dates were obtained from the deposits with the bones (920 ± 140 cal. AD) and the latest roots of the tree (1060 ± 75 cal. AD), suggesting that the site was in use in the tenth century and the tree probably cut down in the eleventh. Two large Viking Age burial mounds survive in what is now the churchyard, and would have lain only a few metres from the tree. It is also possible that these were part of a larger cemetery, now removed by the modern graves.

Everything points to the Fröšö tree as being the site of animal offerings, perhaps deposited there as the remains of feasts, or actually hanging from the boughs and later falling to the ground as the bodies decayed. The latter would seem to fit the five whole animals (the bears), while the others could also
have been set up as hides with the cranium and hooves attached (the domestic livestock), or present as severed heads (the elk and deer). The place-name associated with the church is Hov (i.e. hof), and Frösö means 'Freyr's Island', both of which are at least of Viking Age date and would perfectly fit a cult site.

All the above can be combined to give us the structural components of the cultic landscape - the temple-halls, the open-air sanctuaries of the horgv and ve, and the sacred groves with their offerings. However, an important dimension of this that is only now beginning to be recognised is the way in which such places were also reflected in the organisation of the landscape itself. Our point of access to this is through the place-names, and by extension to what they once represented in terms of physical settlement.

These approaches have been developed in recent years by Stefan Brink (1990, 1996, 1997, 2001), who presents a series of case-studies from all over Sweden examining the social development of landscape during the Viking Age. He has argued that the small polities from which early kingdoms developed were built up effectively as a series of components, spatially distinct in a functionally-zoned landscape of settlement. The name of each place reflects a different political or social function, and together they build a network of religious and secular power imprinted on a careful spatial organisation. In the various areas that Brink presents, we see that the names of the sacred landscape cluster around those of the political one. Thus we find central-place signals such as husa, tuna and sal alongside the sacral names oilunda, vi, harg, hov, *al and øker. The theophoric names have also been focused upon by Per Vikstrand, with a case study of the area around Storsjö lake in Jämtland (1996), and a broader synthesis in his thesis from 2001 on the sacred patterning of space.

At the broadest level we can thus perceive a landscape of 'religious' functions, interwoven with the structures of secular power. From archaeology we can also reconstruct what some of these sites of cultic centres may have looked like in reality. The missing element is that of the human practitioners and functionaries who served at these places, and through whom the system of Viking religion worked.

In my remarks above on the nature of religion, I drew a distinction between the modern popular understanding of this term - its connotations of orthodoxy and controlled interpretation - and the belief systems of the Viking Age. However, this statement can be qualified in some ways, because there is also direct evidence of social stratification in the access to supernatural knowledge. These people are known partly from the later written sources - occasional mentions in the sagas and þetir - but also from runestones and place-names. Some of the latter reflect the offices of those who served there.

At one level are the secular, political names, beginning with the power-holding individuals from the king (konungr) through the highest stratum of chieftains such as the drótt, jarl and hersir. Here we also find the second tier of terms for military retinues and local administrators - karlar, rinkar, draengar, svennar and so on (Brink 1996: 267f and references therein). Alongside these we find much more shadowy traces of what seem to have been cultic leaders. Included in this were a number of figures whose precise function is somewhat obscure - the vivil, erilaR, þulr and véseti - along with others such as the *lytir, who appear to have had some divinatory or lot-casting associations. The concept of a 'priesthood' is probably misleading here, as there is no evidence of formal initiations into the requirements of a specific office, but rather an emphasis on directed skills in finite contexts. What little evidence there is suggests that some or all of these individuals possessed a knowledge of runic lore, the recitation of magical formulae, and perhaps a responsibility for the maintenance of oral record-keeping (the main sources are summarised by Brink 1996: 266f and Sundqvist 1998, while a more cursory overview may be found in Näström 2002b: 92-101).

Some of these people spanned the divide between spiritual and secular power, the most profound manifestation of which has been put forward in the notion of sacral kingship (a complete summary of the considerable research in this field may be found in Sundqvist 2002). Though there is little evidence to suggest that the early Nordic kings were actually thought to be divine, the royal appropriation of religious roles and associations was clearly central to the long process of state formation and the consolidation of centralised power.

The same pattern was played out at a more mundane level, in the form of the godi (Jón Hnefell Ásáldsteinsson 1998b). These were the wealthy landowners and chieftains who also seem to have fulfilled a kind of 'priestly' function as officiaries in cultic performances. It was probably these men whose great feasting halls were what was meant by the hof that we have seen above, and in Ynglingasaga
5 Snorri specifically mentions *hofgøðar*. The evidence for these figures is overwhelmingly Icelandic in origin, though the sagas place them in other countries too, such as Norway. Outside Iceland the term is known only from two Danish runestones, with inscriptions that hint at the *gøðar* having once had a purely ritual function, their political power developing over time (Brink 1996: 267; Nasström 2002b: 94ff).

The *gøði* also had a female equivalent, the *gyðja*, whom we will encounter again in the context of sorcery. The role of women in the officialdom of cultic practice was taken up relatively early in Viking studies, especially in relation to fertility rituals (e.g Phillpotts 1914), and it is clear that some of the *gyðja* enjoyed a very high status in the apparatus of cult. Several factors suggest a connection to Freyja and the Vanir, and both the *gøði* and the *gyðja* could have responsibility for the sacrificial *blót* (cf. Nasström 2002b: 97f).

A constant element in the written descriptions of all these ‘offices’ and ‘titles’ is that they could occasionally be combined with additional roles - again, this merging of secular and ‘religious’ power. There are suggestions that the inner access to the gods and their servants was relatively restricted, but more along lines of social standing than of initiation into the mysteries. Similarly, the various ‘officials’ mentioned above do not seem to have had a priest-like monopoly on communication with otherworldly powers, and this is important when we come to consider sorcery below. It is also clear that behind the cultic rites and those responsible for them, there was another level of popular belief and unarticulated superstition.

Here we find the mythology reflected in small ways, in everyday practices corresponding to everyday beliefs – though the latter may be far from mundane. In *Gylfaginning* (51) Snorri gives us a glimpse of this, relating to two aspects of the Ragnarök story. In the account above we have seen the ‘Nail-Ship’, Naglfar, and the vital role it plays in ferrying the armies of evil to fight against the gods. Because it is made from the fingernails of the dead, Snorri explains that this is why one should be very careful to trim the nails of a dying person – there is no reason to hasten the ship’s construction by contributing the raw materials. The exact corollary of this is mentioned later in the same passage, in relation to Viðarr’s shoe. After Fenrir has swallowed Óðinn, his son Viðarr plants his foot on the wolf’s lower jaw, which he presses down while forcing its mouth wider and wider. Fenrir is torn in two, and Óðinn is avenged. The animal’s jaws are enormous, stretching from the earth to the sky, so Viðarr obviously needs some impressive footwear: Snorri tells us that his shoe is sewn from all the tiny scraps of leather left over when anything is made here in Miðgardr. One should therefore be careful to throw these away, because every little helps.

The same process is probably visible in the archaeology of pendant ‘amulets’ and ‘charms’ of the kind that we shall consider in chapter three. Occasionally we are given a small window onto a broader scene, in which we can perceive not just objects but actions taken with them. A good example emerged at Birka in the excavations of the early 1990s, when a number of amulets of different kinds were found built into the make-up of a road through the town. Too many of these were found within a small area for there to be any question of accidental loss, and it seems certain that an amulet ring, Pórr’s hammer and a miniature weapon were deliberately laid down while the road was undergoing one of its periodic repairs (see Price 1995b: 75f).

The fabric of religious belief and practice in Viking Age Scandinavia can be seen to have been nuanced, multi-scalar and far from static, with a degree of regional variation and change over time. Seen against this pattern of semi-structured spirituality, how does sorcery fit in?

The double world: *seidr* and the problem of Old Norse ‘magic’

In 1986 when the French Viking specialist Régis Boyer published his study of Old Norse magic, he chose as his title *Le monde du double*, ‘the world of the double’. As he makes clear in his introduction, it often comes as a surprise to realise just how fundamental a role the practice of magic played in the Scandinavian mental universe. In his concept of the ‘Double’, he tries to frame this as a kind of parallel belief, a mirror held up alongside the more elevated apparatus of Viking ‘religion’ proper. To some extent I would agree with his assessment, though I feel that the two worlds are more closely
linked than he credits. The reason for this lies once again in terminology and what we understand by it.

We have already seen how our modern concepts of ‘religion’ are not necessarily compatible with those of the Viking Age. We can make the same observation about the social environment of sorcery at the same period. The first problems come at the level of apparently simple definition, which on closer inspection turns out to be far from straightforward. Today we speak fluidly of ‘magic’ and ‘witchcraft’, the working of ‘spells’ and ‘charms’, all performed by ‘sorcerers’, ‘witches’, ‘warlocks’, ‘wizards’ and so on. In popular parlance there is little to choose between any of these terms, but no-one would link them with formal religion as it is generally perceived. In the early medieval period the situation was very different, in two ways.

Firstly, there seems to have been a very precise vocabulary of sorcery, encompassing its forms, functions, practice and practitioners. Secondly, through intimate links with divinities such as Óðinn and Freyja, and also in its underlying principles which included some of the soul beliefs reviewed above, the whole structure of sorcery was interlaced with that of cult. Simek (1993: 199) has perhaps come closest to illuminating this relationship when he writes of magic as “the mentality [and] the practices with which the mechanisms of supernatural powers are set into motion”.

When defined in this way, it is clear from the written sources that one concept above others lay at the core of Old Norse concepts of magic. Its name was seidr, and its closer study will be central to much of this book.

Seidr would have been pronounced approximately ‘saythe’, rhyming with the modern English ‘swathe’, but with a slightly inflected ‘r’ sound at the end in the nominative form (similar to ‘the’ when spoken before a consonant, thus ‘sayther’). Several scholars have noted that etymologically it seems to belong to a group of Indo-European words with connotations of ‘binding’, especially in a sorcerous context (e.g. Dronke 1997: 133).

It is described at length in a number of Old Norse sources, and circumstantially in a great many more. These are all reviewed in detail below, but at this point we can simply note that it seems to have been a collective term for a whole complex of practices, each serving a different function within the larger system of sorcery. There were seidr rituals for divination and clairvoyance; for seeking out the hidden, both in the secrets of the mind and in physical locations; for healing the sick; for bringing good luck; for controlling the weather; for calling game animals and fish. Importantly, it could also be used for the opposite of these things - to curse an individual or an enterprise; to blight the land and make it barren; to induce illness; to tell false futures and thus to set their recipients on a road to disaster; to injure, maim and kill, in domestic disputes and especially in battle.

More than anything else, seidr seems to have been an extension of the mind and its faculties. Even in its battlefield context, rather than outright violence it mostly involved the clouding of judgement, the freezing of the will, the fatal hesitation. It was also closely linked to the summoning of spirits and other beings of various kinds, who could be bound to the sorcerer’s will and then sent off to do her or his bidding. In line with the ‘invisible population’ we have encountered above, an important category of these beings were also extensions of the individual in its manifestations of a multiple soul – the fylgjur, hamingjur and so on.

The link to cultic practice comes primarily through the god Óðinn, who as we shall see is named in several sources as the supreme master of seidr, along with Freyja from whom he learnt its power. The Vanir provide a clue to another important aspect of this sorcery, in their role as divinities of fertility and sexual potency. Not only do many seidr rituals seem to have been sexual in their objectives, but they may also have been so in the nature of their performance. Beyond the practices with specific carnal intentions, this emphasis on sexuality is also often found in a surprising number of seidr’s other functions reviewed above. By extension, the enactment of these rites seems to have placed so great a demand on their performers as to mark them with a different form of gender identity, outside the conventional norms of Viking Age society.

It is in connection with all these elements that seidr has consistently been viewed as a Norse counterpart to what has elsewhere been called shamanism. This, together with the social context and functions of seidr, forms the subject of the following chapters. We shall look especially at seidr’s employment in warfare and as part of what we might call a divinely-inspired ideology of martial
valour, backed up by the constructions of sexuality and gender with which it was underpinned. However, seidr is far from the only form of sorcery mentioned in the Old Norse sources, and before proceeding further we first need to pose a question as to the nature of these other magics, their relationship with seidr, and the degree to which they may be considered collectively.

The other magics: galdr, gandr and ‘Óðinnic sorcery’

Essentially there occur five categories of sorcery in the sources, besides seidr itself. Three of them were also named complexes of ritual and technique – though apparently in a looser sense than seidr - while the others are modern constructions which derive from an analysis of the texts:

- galdr
- gandr
- útiseta
- a group of un-named rituals connected through the abilities of the god Óðinn, here termed ‘Óðinnic sorcery’
- a general ‘background noise’ of popular magic, often unsophisticated or indeed completely unarticulated in a practical way, occurring throughout the literature

The most distinctive of these five is undoubtedly galdr, which seems to have been a specific form of sorcery focusing on a characteristic type of high-pitched singing. The word has a relative today in the modern Swedish verb gala, used for the crowing of a rooster and for the most piercing of birdcalls (see Raudvere 2001: 90-7 and 2002 on the importance of verbalising this kind of sorcery). The saga descriptions of galdr-songs note that they were pleasing to the ear, and there is a suggestion of a special rhythm in view of the incantation metre called galdralag, as described by Snorri in Håttatal (101-2) and used occasionally in Eddic poems such as Håvamál and Sigrdrifomál.

One of the first major studies of the form was made by Ivar Lindquist (1923), but he applied the term very liberally to a broad range of charms from the whole of the Iron Age. Reichborn-Kjennerud (1928: 71, 76, 81) argued that galdr was employed most often for cursing, with an emphasis on the destructive power of the tongue - he cites examples of its use to induce sicknesses of various kinds in both humans and animals, and also to kill. He claims a close connection between galdr and runic lore (ibid: 81). However, galdr in fact occurs in a variety of contexts as we shall see in the coming chapters, and it seems that its status as a distinct form of magic was probably beginning to blur by the end of the Viking period.

It performed many, if not all, of the same functions as seidr, and in a great many instances the two are used in combination (the term seidgaldr even occurs in a fourteenth-century source that we shall examine below). Despite this, in every case it is seidr which sets the pattern for the ritual as a whole. Galdr can be seen rather as a particular element in a larger complex of operative magical practice, one option in the toolkit of ritual. By the Middle Ages proper, the term had become synonymous with magic in general.

Gandr forms yet another distinct category here, with origins that go back much earlier than the Viking Age. The basic sense of the word is often argued to mean simply ‘magic’, and de Vries has suggested that it can be related to the concept of Ginnungagap (1931a; his interpretation is discussed in chapter three). This is important, as it suggests gandr to be one of the primal forces from which the worlds were formed, and thus implies that this form of sorcerous power was of considerable dignity. That this type of sorcery also had an early history is shown by tantalising references from Classical writers, for example the name Ganna attributed by Dio Cassius in his Roman History (67: 5) to the prophetess of the North German Semnones, and which is also from the same root (de Vries 1957: §229; see also Closs 1936).

By the Viking Age, and as with galdr, we find combinations of ritual forms. In several instances there are references to sorceresses using gandr in conjunction with seidr in order to prophesy, for example in Völuspá (22, 29). The term also had a special application in the sense of both spirit beings and the staff that may have been used to summon them; these are discussed in chapter three.
Another aspect of Norse sorcery was the practice of útiseta, ‘sitting out’, which does not seem to have been a specific ritual so much as a technique to put other rituals into effect. Clearly related to Óðinnic communications with the dead, in brief it seems to have involved sitting outside at night, in special places such as burial mounds, by running water or beneath the bodies of the hanged, in order to receive spiritual power. It is considered in greater depth in chapter three.

The rituals performed by Óðinn form a category in their own right, beyond the specific complexes of seidr and galdr, both of which the god employs. Several of them are also available to human sorcerers, but the Eddic poems make it clear that others are not, and are among the powers purchased on the god’s many quests for magical knowledge. These skills are recorded in the list of spells in poems such as Hávamál, in the catalogues of runes of power, and in the narratives of sagas. Again, they are reviewed in the following chapters.

Besides the magic used by Óðinn, we also find the fifth category of ‘general’ sorcery. One aspect of this has a vocabulary of terms that appear to mean simply ‘magic’ in the same vague sense as we use the word today. The most common of these was fjolkyngi, which seems to have been especially well-used. In the Old Norse sources we also find fröðleikr, and slightly later, trolldómur (cf. Raudvere 2001: 88ff). The latter concept became increasingly common through the Middle Ages, and together with galdr it continued as one of the generic words for ‘witchcraft’ long into post-medieval times (see Hastrup 1987: 331-6 for Icelandic terminologies of magic during this period).

There were also other terms which were used as collectives. These include gerningar, ljóð and tanfr - all apparently kinds of chant or charm - and the complexities of runic lore as set out in Eddic poems such as Sigdrífumál and Rígsþula. Another group of terms refers to various forms of unspecificated magical knowledge, and include affixes implying this on the part of people or supernatural beings. Thus we find visenda-, kinatta- and similar words used for ‘those who know’, a relatively common perception of sorcerous power that occurs in many cultures.

Given these ‘other’ magics, to what extent can we discuss Old Norse sorcery in generic terms, and can we use the terminologies of seidr for this purpose?

The key lies in the definition of sorcery itself, both in the sense usually employed by historians of religions and also with specific reference to the Viking Age. Even without the conventions of ‘worship’ discussed above, the human relationship to the gods was not an equal one, and inevitably involved a degree of subservience that characterised all the different kinds of cult activity that we have examined. This applies to the notion of blot, ‘sacrifice’, in particular. In the world of sorcery this was not the case, a state of affairs that hinges on the idea of control. Magic seems to have been used by human beings as a means of actively steering the actions of supernatural beings for their own ends, first attracting or summoning them, and then binding them to do the sorcerer’s will (cf. Ström 1961b: 221f).

In one form or another this concept is common to all the different magics reviewed above, but only in one of them is it made explicit - in seidr. This ‘binding’ sorcery is also the only one conceived as a complete type of magic in the original sources, and the only form of it that combines elements of the others into a greater whole. As we have seen, although both galdr and gandr are also categorised in the written sources, the former was more of a technique while the latter seems to have referred mainly to a general kind of sorcerous energy from which all power was drawn. Again, when each (or both) of these are performed in conjunction with seidr, there is never any doubt that the latter is the primary, formative element in the ritual.

In this specific sense, there are therefore grounds for discussing seidr as a generic for Old Norse sorcery. However, this is also warranted by the general vagueness of the descriptions of Viking magic, this lack of consistent orthodoxy which as we have seen was an integral part of the Norse attitude to the spiritual. Again and again in the sources, and in the terminologies of sorcerers that we will examine in the next chapter, we seem to find seidr used simultaneously as a precise term and also as a generalisation for ‘sorcery’ in our modern sense of the word. In using seidr as a primary category, in a manner that implicitly includes the other magics, we would therefore seem to be following the fashion in which the Norse themselves understood the concept.

We can now review the written sources on which our knowledge of seidr is based.
Seiðr in the sources

By the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when many of the heroic sagas and fornaldarsögur were composed, seiðr had become incorporated into the general stock of fantastic magical phenomena with which medieval authors entertained their readers. However, there is no doubt that at least in Iceland, and very probably in Norway and the rest of Scandinavia too, at least some details of its Viking Age reality were remembered. Not least, these included the breadth of seiðr’s applications and functions, and its capacity to produce positive and negative effects. The prologue to Gngu-Hrölf’s saga, one of the most outlandish of the medieval ‘Viking’ romances, gives us a brief glimpse of how seiðr was perceived in the High Middle Ages:

Er þat ok margra heimskra manna náttúra, at þeir trúu því einu, er þeir sjá sínnum augum eða heyrja sínnum eyrum, er þeim lýkkt fjarlegt sinni náttúru, svá sem orðið hefir um vítra mannaráðagerðir eða mikit afli eða fráberan létltikla fyrirmana, svá ok eigi síðar um konstir eða huklaraskap ok mikla fjølkyngi. Þá þeir seiðdu at sumum mönnum avíalinga ögæfu eða aldritila, en sumum veraldar virðing, fjár ok metnaðar. Þeir æstu stundum hofuðskępurn, en stundum kyrðu, svá sem var Óðinn eða aðrir þeir, er af honum námu galdristir eða lækningar.

Moreover there are plenty of people so foolish that they believe nothing but what they have seen with their own eyes or heard with their own ears - never anything unfamiliar to them, such as the counsels of the wise, or the strength and amazing skills of the great heroes, or the way in which seiðr, skills of the mind [huklaraskap] and powerful sorcery [fjølkyngi] may seiðr* death or a lifetime of misery for some, or bestow worldly honours, riches and rank on others. These [men] would sometimes stir up the elements, and sometimes calm them down, just like Óðinn and all those who learnt from him the skills of galdr and healing.

* seið is here used as a verb - see chapter three

Gngu-Hrölf’s saga prologue

translation after Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1980: 27, with my amendments

Viewed as a whole, it is true to say that the corpus of Icelandic sagas, skaldic verse and Eddic poetry is saturated with references to sorcery in general, and seiðr in particular. Its practitioners are of both sexes and are given a variety of titles, but the constant prevalence of magic never subsides.

Even taking into account the wavering reliability of the sagas as sources for the Viking Age that they describe, in view of the sheer cumulative volume of references to ‘everyday’ witchcraft it is surprising that so little work has been done on its integration into our models of the Viking world. Philologists have discussed sorcery, certainly, but almost exclusively in terms of medieval literary motifs and narrative structure. They have not tried to relate it to any kind of Viking Age reality, and understandably so because this is not part of the research agenda for ancient linguistics. Historians of religions have sought patterns of behaviour, and the ‘roots’ of different aspects of cult - especially that of Óðinn - but here again there have been relatively few attempts to build up an image of sorcery as it was perceived at the time. Although there are numerous synthetic treatments of Viking religion, referenced throughout this book, these do not generally present belief in the broader context of society in general (a good exception is Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1994, but this is deliberately written at a popular level and does not go into depth). Archaeological syntheses, equally common, tend to suffer from the same problem in reverse, reducing religion to a summary of the gods and Eddic myths in so far as they can be linked to material culture. These works have largely tended to ignore magic and witchcraft due to the difficulties of accessing such phenomena through the archaeological record. There are, of course, exceptions to which we shall return below.

We can begin by briefly summarising the textual sources for seiðr (cf. Strömbeck 1935: 17-107; Almqvist 2000: 250-60). The most important of them are quoted in full here, while others are merely referenced; all of them are taken up in detail in this and subsequent chapters.
Chapter 2

Skaldic poetry

The corpus of skaldic poetry contains two direct references to seidr, and a number of kennings that play upon it. The earliest dated reference occurs in a lausavisa of Vitgeirr seidmaðr, significantly a sorcerer himself. It was probably composed around 900 and is contained in chapter 35 of Snorri’s Haralds saga ins hárfragr. It is quoted in full in chapter three, in the section on male practitioners of magic.

Seidr is also mentioned in strophe 3 of the skaldic praise-poem Sigurðardrápa, composed by Kormákr Ógmundarson around 960. The poet alludes to Öðinn’s rape of Rindr, achieved by means of disguising himself through sorcery, with the words: seidr Yggr til Rindar, ‘Yggr [i.e. Öðinn] got Rindr with seidr’.

Two verses from the thirteenth-century Friðþjófs saga hins frækna, attributed to Friðþjóf himself, mention rituals that are described as seidr in the accompanying prose, but cannot be taken as direct early evidence for it (in Skjaldedigtning BII: 295).

The term also appears in four kennings, from three sources. The first is from a lausavisa of Egill Skalla-Grimsson, dated c.924 by Finnur Jónsson:

Upp skulum örum sverðum,
ulfs tannlituðar, glítra,
eigum doð at drýgja,
i dalmiskunn fiska;
leitt upp til Lundar
lyða hverr sem bráðast,
gerum þar fyr sjót sólar
seid ofagran vigra.

We shall, painter of the wolf’s tooth [warrior], make our swords glitter in the air. We have to perform our deeds in the mild season of the valley-fish [snakes > summer]. Let everyone go as quickly as possible up to Lund. Let us make the harsh spear-seðr before sunset.

Egill Skalla-Grimsson lausavisa 6 (Skjaldedigtning BI: 43), translation after Fell 1975: 184

This is a problematic poem, mainly because we know from archaeological data that the town of Lund was definitely not in existence in the early tenth century. There is thus no doubt that the text of Egill’s verse is at least partly corrupt. However, the attribution of the poem to a different battle than that for which it was written, for whatever reason, does not affect the kenning of vigra seidr, nor its probable location in the original verse.

Two more seðr-kennings were used by the eleventh-century skald Eiríkr víðsjá, in lausavisur dated to the year 1014. Both occur in battle contexts, and seem to refer to warriors in both instances (logðis seidr, ‘destruction’s seidr’ - str. 5; Fjólnis seidr, ‘Fjolnir’s seidr’ - str. 6). The fourth kenning, from strophe 12 of Sturla bórdarson’s Hákonarkviða, dates to the 1260s. Simpler in form, sverða seidr means ‘sword-seidr’ and is a clear parallel to Egill’s vigra seidr of three centuries earlier.

The intended sense in all these examples seems to be of seidr as a song, depicting the fighting warrior as embodying a sort of hymn to combat or to the patrons of such (a common theme in kennings).

Eddic poetry

From the corpus of Eddic poetry, we first find references to seidr in Völuspá (22), with slight variations between the Codex Regius and Hauksbók texts (Strömbäck 1935: 17-21). The original composition of the poem is most often dated to the very late tenth century, though its preservation stems from the early 1200s when the first - now lost - versions of the Codex Regius version seem to have been composed. Our existing texts derive from the late thirteenth century (Dronke 1997: 62f). The text is given here from Dronke’s edition, with a rather free translation by Larrington; its interpretation and alternative, more exact translations are discussed below:

Heiði hana héto
hvars til húsa kom, Bright Heiðr they called her,
wherever she came to houses,
völo vel spá
-vitti hón ganda.
Seið hón kunni,
seið hón leikin.
Ær var hón angan
illrar brúðar.

the seer with pleasing prophecies,
she charmed them with spells;
she made seiðr whenever she could,
with seiðr she played with minds,
she was always the favourite
of wicked women.

Voluspa 22; text after Dronke 1997, translation after Larrington 1996: 7

Seiðr appears again in Lokasenna (24), the ritualistic exchange of insults which many scholars be-
lieve to be an original composition by a pagan poet of the late Viking Age, or at least a twelfth- or
thirteenth-century embellishment of such (Dronke 1997: 355). In one of his series of slanders di-
rected against the gods, and in reply to Ödinn, Lóki makes the following allegation:

En þik síða kóðo But you, they said, performed seiðr
Sámseyio í, on Samsá,
ok draptu á vett sem vólor. and tapped on a vett like the völur.
Vitka líki Like a vitka
fótu verþíð yfir, you went over the world of men,
ok hugða ek þat args aðal. and that I thought to be argr behaviour.

Lokasenna 24; text after Dronke 1997, with her translation and my amendments

This introduces several of the key themes in the study of Old Norse sorcery: its context, its practition-
ers (the völur and the vitkar, amongst others), the ritual itself and its equipment (the vett), and its
social connotations (the idea of argr, or ergi). All these are taken up in detail in chapter three, where
the Lokasenna passage is reviewed.

The third seiðr-reference in the Eddic corpus comes from strophe 33 of Hymndulljóð, as part of what
is generally agreed to be an interpolation known as the ‘Shorter Voluspa’ (Voluspá in skamma) which
is also quoted in Gylfaginning 5. The passage recounts the genealogical ancestry of sorcerers:

Ero völur allar fra Viðólfí,
vitkar allir fra Vilmeiði,
en seiðberendr fra Svarthofða,
jötnar allir fra Ymi komnir.

All the völur are descended from Viðólfr,
all the vitkar from Vilmeiðr,
and the seiðberendr from Svarthofði,
all the giants come from Ymir.

Text: Neckel & Kuhn 1983; translation after Larrington 1996: 257

The ‘Shorter Voluspá’ is generally agreed to be later than the rest of Hymndulljóð, with datings ranging
from the late 1100s (Klingenberg 1974: 9, 36) to a century later (Finnur Jónsson 1920: 206; de Vries
1967: 107ff; the arguments are summarised by Steinsland 1991: 247ff, who suggests that the poem is
in fact a unified work, including the ‘interpolation’). Here the focus is once again on specific types of
practitioner, with the völur and vitkar being joined by the seiðberendi, the ‘seiðr-carrier’ which is
discussed in chapter three.

The sagas of the kings

In the royal sagas of Snorri’s Heimskringla we encounter seiðr on numerous occasions, generally
presented in incidental fashion embedded in the narrative. However, in one source it is presented in a
more explanatory context, and this is of course the Ynglingasaga. It first appears in chapter 4, when
we read of the introduction of sorcery to the Æsir gods by Freyja:
Döttir Niarðar var Freyja; hon var blotgydja; hon kendi fyrrst með Ásum seið, sem Vønum var titt.
The daughter of Njörðr was Freyja; she was a blotgydja ['priestess of sacrifices']; she was the first to
teach seiðr to the Æsir, as it was practiced among the Vanir.

Ynglingasaga 4; my translation

The importance of this gift becomes clear in chapter seven of the Ynglingasaga, when Snorri declares
how it was used by Öðinn, who came to be the supreme master of this form of magic. The reference
to seiðr is contained in a longer description of the god's powers, and this context is important to
preserve in its shifts of emphasis and tone, and the distinctions drawn between different categories of
sorcery which are here introduced for the first time:

Öðinn skipti hønum, la þá bükirin sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þar fugl eða dyr, fiskr eða ormr,
ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lønd at sínun erendum eða annarr manna. Þat kunni hann enn at
gera með orðum einum at sløkva eld ok kyrra sjá ok snúa vindum, hverja leið er hann víldi, ok hann
átti skip þat, er Skóðlaðnir hét, er hann fór á yfir höf stóð, en þat máttí veiða saman sem dúk. Öðinn
hafði með sér høfuð Mímis, os sagði þat honum týndið òr óðrum heimum, en stundum vakði hann
upp dauða menn òr þórðu eða settisk undir hanga; fyrrir því var hann kallaðr draugadröttinn eða
hangadröttinn. Hann átti hrafnla li, en er hann hafði tamit við mál; flugu því viða um lønd og öðru
hønum mórg týndið. Af þessum hlutum varð hann störliga fröðr. Alla þessar íþrottir kendi hann með
rúnum ok ljóðum þeim, er galdrar heita; fyrrir því eru Æsir kallaðr galdra-smíðir. Öðinn kuni þá
þrótt, svá at mestr máttir fylgði, ok framði sjálf, er seiðr heitir, en af því máttí hann vita stöðg manna
ok orðina hluti, svá ok at gera mónnum bána eða óhamingjú eða venheilendi, svá ok at taka frá
mónnum vit eða afl ok geða óðrum. En þessi fjalokyni, er framðið er, fyllgr svá mikil ergi, at eigi þotti
kárlmónnum skammlauð viðat fara, ok var gyðjumum kendi sú íþrott. Öðinn vissi um allt jørð, hvar
folfíti var, ok hann kunni þau ljóð, er upp lauksk fyrrir honum þróðin ok bjørg ok steinar ok haugarnir,
ok bæt hann með orðum einum þá, er fyrrir bjørggju, ok gekk inn ok tökk þar slíkt, er hann víldi. Af
þessum kroptum varð hann mjøk fræg, óvinir hans óttuðsk hann, en vinir hans treystusk honum ok
tröðu á kraft hans ok á sjálfan hann. En hann kendi flestar íþrottir sínar blóðguðumum; våru þeir næst
honum um allan fróðleik ok fjalokyni. Margir aðrir námu þó mikit af, ok hefir þaðan af dreifz fjalokyni
viða ok haldizk lengi.

Öðinn could change his shape [hamr], when his body would lie there as if asleep or dead, while he
himself was a bird or an animal, a fish or a snake, and would travel in an instant to far-off lands on his
errands or those of other men. He was also able, using words alone, to extinguish fires and to calm the
sea, and to turn the winds wherever he wished. He had a ship called Skóðlaðnir ['Built From Pieces
Of Thin Wood'] with which he sailed over great seas, but which could be folded up like a cloth. Öðinn
had with him Mímr's head, and it told him many tidings from other worlds [heimar]; at times he
would wake up dead men out of the ground or sit beneath the hanged; from this he was called Lord of
Ghosts or Lord of the Hanged. He had two ravens, which he had endowed with the power of speech;
they flew far over the land and told him many tidings. In this way he became very wise. And all these
skills he taught with runes and those chants [ljóð] that are called galdrar, because of this the Æsir are
called galdra-smíðir ['galdra-smiths']. Öðinn knew the skill from which follows the greatest power,
and which he performed himself, that which is called seiðr. By means of it he could know the futures
of men and that which had not yet happened, and also cause death or misfortune or sickness, as well
as take men's wits or strength from them and give them to others. But this sorcery [ljóður], as is
known, brings with it so much ergi that manly men thought it shameful to perform, and so this skill
was taught to the priestesses [gyðjur]. Öðinn knew everything about treasures hidden in the earth,
where they were concealed, and he knew such chants [ljóð] that would open up for him the earth and
mountains and stones and burial mounds, and with words alone he bound those who dwelled there,
and went in and took what he wanted. By these powers he became very famous - his enemies feared
him, but his friends trusted him, and believed in him and his power. Most of these skills he taught to
those in charge of the sacrifices [blóðgoði]; they were next to him in all magic knowledge [fróðleikr]
and sorcery [ljóður]. But many others learned much of it, and for this reason sorcery [ljóður]
was widespread and continued for a long time.

Ynglingasaga 7; my translation

Ynglingasaga 7 is a crucial text for the study of seiðr, as it provides both a wealth of detail and a degree
of social orientation for its rituals. We can also speculate that seiðr was originally mentioned in Bjóðólffr
or Hvini’s *Ynglingatal*, because the above prose seems to constitute a summary of the stanzas that Snorri does not directly cite (Tolley 1995a: 57). Öðinn’s powers are examined in the next chapter.

Seiðr appears occasionally in the rest of *Heimskringla*, in a series of incidents that are discussed individually below. *Volur* and other kinds of sorceresses are mentioned in *Ynglingasaga* (13f), while *seidmenn* and male sorcerers appear in chapter 22 of the same saga, together with *Haralds saga ins hárfragra* (35) and *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* (62). In Oddr Snorrason’s version of the latter story (27 / 35), the same idea is repeated, and many of the same traditions are also recounted in the *Historia Norvegiae*.

The sagas of Icelanders (the ‘family sagas’)

By far the greater part of our information on *seiðr* comes from the corpus of family sagas, and as such must be used with very great caution in any attempt to reconstruct genuine Viking Age practices from stories written down (if not actually invented) several centuries later. The saga debate has been briefly summarised above, so here we can confine ourselves to an overview of the relevant sources themselves.

Of all the saga accounts that mention *seiðr*, one takes precedence due to the unparalleled detail of its description and its social context. This is contained in chapter 4 of *Eiriks saga rauda*, the saga of Eiríkr the Red which is one of our primary sources for the Norse explorations westwards to Greenland and the Atlantic coast of Canada. The text exists in two versions, contained in the Skáagosbók and the Hauksbók, the former of which was published in a normalised edition by Storm in 1891 (this was the text employed by Strömbäck in 1935: 49-54). Both texts have been published in parallel by S.B.F. Jansson, and been translated a number of times. Given the central nature of the *Eiriks saga rauda* account, I reproduce it here in full in his edition of the Skáagosbók text.

The following events take place in the very late tenth century at Herjólfsnes in Greenland, at the farm of Porkell, the leading man in the district:

99. I þenna tíma, uar hallæri mikit a grænlendi [.]

100. haufdu menn feingit liitid. þeir sem i vedr ferd haufdu uerit enn sumir eigi aprtr komnir.

101. sv kona uar i bygd er. porbiorg. hett. hun. var spa kona. hun. var kaullut liitill volve.

102. hun. hafdi aatt ser. niv. systr. ok var hun. ein eptir. aa lifi.

103. þat var hattr. þorbiorgar. a vetrvm. at hun for a uetizlr ok budv menn henni heim. mest þeir er forvirni var a. um forlug sin. eda. at ferdir.

104. ok med þvi at. porkell var þar mestr bondi þa. þotti til hanns koma. hvenær at vita letta mundi varani. þessv sem yfir stod.

105. þorkei bydr spakonv þangat ok er henni buin god vit taka. sem sidr var til þa er vit þess haattar konu skylldi taka

106. hvit var henni ha sætt ok lagt unndir hægindi. þar skylldi i vera hænsa fidri.

107. enn er. hun. kom vm kuellidit ok se madrer i moti henni uar senndr . þa var. hun suo buin at hun. hafdi yfir sier tygla mauttv blann. ok var settr steinum. allt i skaut ofan

108. hun. hafddi a. haalsi ser gler taur. hun hafddi. a haufddi lamb skinz kofra suartann ok vid innan kattar skin skuit stav hafddi hun. i hendki ok var.a. knappar

109. hann uar buinn messingv. ok setturn steinum ofan vm knappinn

110. hun. hafddi vm sik hniokv linda ok var þar aa skiodu pungr mikill. varduettu hun þar i taufr þau er hun þvfrt til frodleiks at hafva.

111. hun hafddi kalf skinz sko lodna a. fornuk um i þveingi langa ok sterkliga. latuns knappar. mikler. a enndvnm.

112. hun hafddi a. haundvm ser katt skinz glofa. ok uoru hvitir innan ok lodner.

113. Enn er hvn kom inn. þotti avlvm mvvnnum skylt at velia henni sæmilgar kvedivr.

114. enn hun tok þui eptir sem henni uoru menn skapfeldir til.
115. Tok. þorkell, bonndi, i haunnd visennda konunni. ok leiddi hann hana til þess sétis. er henni var bvit.
116. þorkell. bad hana renna þar avgum yfir hiord ok hiv. ok hybyli.
117. hun var fa malvg vm allt.
118. bord voru vpp tekin um kvelldit. ok er fra þvi at. segia at spakonvni var mat bvit.
119. henni var giorr grautr af kidia miolk enn til matar henni uoru buin hiortv ur allz konar kvikenndum. þein sem þar. var. til.
120. hun hafdi messingar spon. ok hnif tansiskeftan tui holkadann af eiri. ok var af brotinn. oddrinn.
121. Enn er bord uoru vpp tekin. gengr. þorkell bonndi firir. þorbiorrgv ok spyr hvursv henni virditz þar hybyli. eda. hættir manna. eda. hvorsv fliotliga hann mun þess vis uerda er hann hefvis spurt eptir ok menn uilddv vita.
122. hun kvezt þat ecki mundv vpp fyrir enn vm morgvninn þa er hun hefdi sofot þar vm nottina.
123. Enn eptir a alidnm degi var henni uettir sa vm byrfti. sem hun skyldi sein fremia. enn þar knor funnduzt eigi
124. þa uar at leitad um bæinn. ef nauckr kynni.
125. þa. svarar. Gvdrirdr. huerki er ek fiolkvnnig ne visennda kona. enn þo kenndi halldis fostra min. mer a. islandi. þat fraedi er hun kalladi vard lokr.
126. þorbior. svaradi. þa. eru frodari enn ek ætldi.
127. Gvdrirdr. s. þetta er þesskonar frædi ok at ferli. at ek ætla i avngvm at beina at vera. þviet ek er kona kristin.
129. þorbiorrn. suarar. svo mæti uerda at þu ydir mavnnum at lidi. her vm enn vær konar at verri
130. enn vid. þorkel met ek at fa þa hluti her til er þarf.
131. þorkell herdir nu at gvdridi. enn hun kuezt mundv giora sem hann villdi.
132. slogv knor hring vm hverfis. enn þorbiorvg vppi a seid hiallinnvm.
133. qvad. Gvdrirdr. þa kuedit. suo fagurt ok uel at eingi þottitz fyrir heyrta hafva med fegri ravst kvedit. sa er þar uar.
134. spakona. þackar henni kvædit. hun hafdi margar nattvrur higat att sort ok potti fagurt at heyra. þat er kuedit var. er adr uilddi far oss snuazt ok oss avngua hlydni veita.
135. Enn mer erv nu margar þeir hluter aud synar. er aadr var baedi ek ok adrir dulder.
136. Enn ek kann þat at segia at hallæri þetta mvn eckí halldazt leingr. ok mvn batna arangr. sem uarar.
137. Sottar far þat sem leignt hefri legit mvn batna vovn bradara.
138. Enn þier. Gvdrirdr. skal ek launa i havnd lid sinni þat sem oss hafir af stadit. þviet þin forlvag eru mer nu aull glaugg sæ
139. þat muntu giaf ord fa hier. aa grænlandi. er semilagazt er til þo at þier verdi þat eigi til langædar. þviet uegir þinir liggia vt til islandz. ok mvn þar kona fra þier ætt bogi bedi mikil ok godr ok yfir þinvm ætt kvislvvm mvn skina biartr geisli. ennda far nu vel ok heil. dottir min.
140. Sidan gengu menn at usennda konunni. ok fretti hver eptir þvi sem mest forúini. var a
141. var hun ok god af fra savgnvm geck þat ok ltt i tavma. s. hun.
142. þessv næst var komit eptir henni af audrvm bæ ok for hun þa þannagat.
143. var. sennt eptir. þorðiði þui at hann uilldi eigi heima vera medan slik heidni var framan.
144. Vedradtta battndi skiopt. þegar er uora tok sem þorbiorg hafdi sagt.

At this time there was a great famine in Greenland. Those who had gone out hunting had caught little, and some never came back. In the Settlement there was a woman named Þorbjorg, who was a spákonan; she was called Litl-Vólfva ['Little-Vólva]. She had nine sisters, who had all been spákonur, and she
was the only one still alive. It was Þorbjörn’s custom to spend the winter attending feasts, invited home mostly to those who were curious to know their own future or what the coming year would bring. As Þorkell was the leading farmer there, it was felt that it was up to him to find out when the bad times that had been weighing upon them would let up. Þorkell invited the spákona to visit, and a good welcome was prepared for her, as was the custom when a woman of this kind was received. A high-seat was prepared for her, and a cushion laid upon it; this was to be stuffed with hen’s feathers. When she arrived in the evening, together with the man who had been sent to escort her, she was wearing a blue [or ‘black’] cloak fitted with straps, decorated with stones right down to the hem. She wore a string of glass beads around her neck. On her head she wore a black lambskin hood lined with white catskin. She had a staff in her hand, with a knob on it; it was fitted with brass and set with stones up around the knob. Around her waist she had a belt of tinder-wood, on which was a large leather pouch. In it she kept the charms (tæðr) that she used for her sorcery (fjórðleikr). She had hairy calfskin shoes on her feet, with long, sturdy laces; they had great knobs of tin [or ‘pewter’ or ‘brass’] on the end. On her hands she wore catskin gloves, which were white inside and furry. When she came in, everyone was supposed to offer her respectful greetings, which she received according to her opinion of each person. Þorkell the farmer took the visendakona by the hand, and led her to the seat that had been prepared for her. Þorkell then asked her to cast an eye over his flock, his household and his home-stead; she had few words for all of it. Tables were set up in the evening, and it must now be told what food was prepared for the spákona. A porridge of kids’ milk was made for her, and for her meat the hearts of all the animals available there. She had a brass spoon and an ivory-handled knife claspèd with copper [or ‘bronze’ or ‘brass’], and with the point broken off. Then when the tables had been cleared away, Þorkell the farmer walked up to Þorbjörn and asked what she thought of what she had seen there and the conduct of the household, and how soon he could expect a reply to what he had asked after and which people wanted to know. She said that she would not reveal this until the morning, after she had spent a night there. Late the next day she was provided with the tools she needed to carry out her seiðr. She asked for women who knew the charms (fjórð) necessary for carrying out seiðr and which are called varðlok[k]ur. But there were no such women to be found. Then they searched through the household, to see if there was anyone who knew [the charms]. Then Guðrøðr answered, “I am neither skilled in sorcery [fjölkynnig] nor a visendakona, but Hallðís my foster-mother in Iceland taught me such charms [fjórð] that she called varðlok[k]ur”. Þorbjörn answered, “Then you know more than I expected”. Guðrøðr said, “These are the sort of charms [fjórð] and proceedings in which I feel I want no part, for I am a Christian woman”. Þorbjörn answered, “It may be that you could help the people here by so doing, and you would be no worse a woman for that; but it is to Þorkell I must look to provide me with what I need”. Þorkell now pressed Guðrøðr hard, until she said she would do as he wanted. Then the women formed a circle around the seiðr-platform [seiðhjalir] on top of which was Þorbjörn. Guðrøðr then chanted the chants [kveði] so beautifully and so well, that no-one there could say that they had heard anyone recite with a more lovely voice. The spákona thanked her for the chant and said that many spirits [náttúrur] had been drawn there who thought it beautiful to hear what had been chanted, “who before wanted to turn from us and refused to obey us; moreover many things are now clear to me which were earlier hidden both from me and from others. And I can tell you that this famine will not last longer than this winter, and that the season will mend when the spring comes. The sickness that has long troubled you will also improve sooner than expected. And you, Guðrøðr, I will reward on the spot for the help we have had from you, for your fate is now very clear to me. You will make a match here in Greenland, the most honourable there is, though it will not last long, because your path lies out in Iceland, and there will spring from you a progeny both great and good, and over your line will shine a bright ray. Now fare you well, and health to you, my daughter”. Then people went up to the visendakona, and each asked after that which they were most concerned to know; she gave them good answers, and she went, but little that she had said was not fulfilled. Next she was sent for from another house, and so she went on her way. Then they sent for Þorbjörn, who did not wish to remain at home while such heathen things were going on. With the arrival of spring the weather soon improved, as Þorbjörn had said.

Eiríks saga rauda 4; text from Skálholtsbók after Jansson 1944: 39-44; my translation, generally following Kunz 2000 and Jones 1961; translation includes amendments from the Hauksbók text

Female seiðr-workers are also mentioned in Laxdæla saga (76), Egil’s saga Skallagrímssonar (59), Kormáks saga (6) and Landnámabók (194). A Sámi völva performs seiðr in Vatnsdæla saga (10; an episode also glossed in Landnámabók), a rather late source that must be used with particular caution (see Strömbäck 1935: 69-75). Seiðmenn appear again in Gísla saga Súríssonar (18) and Laxdæla saga
in *Njáls saga* (30) a man has his spear enchanted by *seiðr*. Each of these, and other appearances by sorcerers of various kinds, are taken up in detail over the following chapters.

**The fornaldarsögur (‘sagas of ancient times’, ‘heroic sagas’)**

Among the later sagas, principally concerned with heroic or mythical stories of a kind far more removed from any Viking Age reality than the family sagas, there are also a number of references to *seiðr*.

Some of these are extensive, and they include one in particular which has in the past been taken together with *Eiríks saga rauda* as a ‘type example’ for a *seiðr* performance, from *Hrólfs saga kraka* (3); this is reproduced in full in the next chapter. A second extended passage (ibid: 32ff) also concerns *seiðr*, but in the context of its use on the battlefield; this is presented and discussed in chapter six. Composed in the fourteenth century and only preserved in paper manuscripts from the seventeenth century and later, *Hrólf's saga kraka* is a problematic source - not least because despite its late date, like *Völsunga saga* it concerns some of the earliest of the heroic tales. It also contains a number of parallels with Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*.

Strömbäck (1935: 86f) believed that the *seiðr* elements in *Hrólf's saga kraka* were almost certainly medieval inventions, whereas the descriptions of shape-shifting and ‘totemistic’ relationships with animals were more likely to be of ancient origin. However, this can be reassessed in the light of the broader context of *seiðr* as battlefield magic, which I believe it possible to establish and which I discuss below. While there is no doubt that the saga is a highly problematic source, it is striking how well its descriptions of combat sorcery fit other evidence that is independent of the text. We shall explore this in subsequent chapters.

Among the later sources, references to *seiðr* and its practitioners also appear in *Norna-Gestspáttr*, *Fríðþjófs saga frókna*, *Ǫrvar-Odds saga*, *Orms þáttur Sjónlíassonar*, *Göngu-Hrólf's saga*, *Søgubrot af fornkongunum*, *Þóreins saga Vikingssonar*, *Völsunga saga*, *Sturlaug's saga starfsama*, *Gríms saga lodinakna*, *Hálfdanar saga Bǫrðufóstra*, *Gunnars saga Keldugnípsfljót*, *Sórla saga sterk*, *Níkulás saga leikara*, *Ektors saga*, and *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*. The term *seiðskrætti* also appears in *Hálfdanar saga Barkarsonar* (8), but this is a very late source, perhaps even post-medieval.

All these episodes, together with many more that refer to different kinds of sorcery and other activities related to these practices, are discussed in chapter three.

In addition to these, *seiðr* is also mentioned in a number of sources as late as the Reformation, and on into the early modern period. These can be seen more in terms of developing folklore and the longevity of words and concepts in the Icelandic language. These sources are mentioned in passing by Strömbäck, and many of them are collected by Almqvist (2000: 261ff).

**The Bishop’s sagas (Biskupasögur)**

From the contemporary sagas, that is those of similar date to the family sagas but describing the period of their composition, we also find a brief reference to something that may be a *seiðr* performance. In *Kristni saga* and the related text *Þórald's þátt viðforla* appears an episode in which two Christians are disturbed by the wailing of a pagan ‘priestess’, a *gyðja* of the type that we have seen above. She is sitting on a raised altar, apparently to make a sacrifice (*blótr*). *Seiðr* is not mentioned by name, but the implied platform is strikingly similar to those mentioned in connection with sorcery, and it may be that this passage is describing such a ritual.

**The early medieval Scandinavian law codes**

An important category of sources for the contemporary reality of *seiðr*, as opposed to its literary construction in the sagas, are the early medieval Scandinavian law codes. Strömbäck (1935: 106f) found two references to this practice. The first derives from a collection of royal and episcopal court records from 1281, preserved in a manuscript from c.1480. In one passage it is stated that,

... ef þat verdr kent korllvm eda konum at þau seide eda magne troll vpp at rida monnum eda byfe ... þa skal flytia utt aa sio og sockua til gruna. og aa konur og biskup hvern penning fiar þeirra
... if it is discovered that a man or woman has performed seïdr, or raised a great troll to ride people or animals ... then they shall be driven out beyond the parish bounds, and forfeit all their property to the king and bishop

Dipl. Isl. II: 223; my translation

There is some comparison here with the Norwegian Gulaping laws cited below (NGL I: 19, 182), which also mention raising trolls by sorcery, but Strömberg (1935: 106f) considers that the act of seïdr and the act of summoning are separate events.

The second mention of seïdr in the legal codes comes from an elaboration made c.1326 to the twelfth-century Skriptabod Þorlaks biskups helga, in which Bishop Jón Halldórsson sets severe penalties for:

sitr madr viti til fordleiks. eda fremr madr galldr. eda magnar madr seïdr. eda heidni.

a person who sits outside to make sorcery (fródleikr), or a person who performs galdr, or a person who makes powerful seïdr, or heathenism.

Dipl. Isl. I: 240ff, my translation

Neither of these notices tells us anything about the practice of sorcery itself, but its concept - and, presumably, reality - was clearly still current in the period of the sagas' composition.

Non-Scandinavian sources

Seïdr is mentioned explicitly in only two non-Norse sources. The first of these is Þiðriks saga af Bern, which as the name implies is an Icelandic version of a tale that derives from mainland Europe. The term is thus used to translate what was originally something different. The relevant passage is reviewed in chapter three.

The second reference comes from Upphaf Rómverja, an introduction to Rómverja sogur from the early fourteenth century (or perhaps earlier) that deals with the origins of Rome (Almqvist 2000: 252f). In the story of Romulus and Remus we find the words seïdgaldr and seïdmagnan, both of which are unique. The former represents a new kind of magic term and the second would seem to mean 'great seïdr'. They are clearly translations of Latin words, though which these might be is uncertain. The late date and context renders them largely uninformative for our purposes, but the concept of seïdgaldr is intriguing.

Although it does not mention the term by name, there is also a crucial reference to something that probably was a seïdr performance in a rather unusual source from Ireland. The Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, 'The Wars of the Irish with the Foreigners [i.e. the Norse]', is a series of retrospective chronicles of the Viking Age written for the great-grandson of Brian Bórama, Muirchertach Ua Briain, who died in 1119 (see Ni Mhaonaigh 2001: 101). It exists in several manuscripts, in three of which we find a single brief reference to the sorcerous activities of a Scandinavian woman called Otta. She is described as the wife of a Viking chieftain named Turges - probably an Irish reading of the Norse name Purgestr (Ó Corráin 2001: 19) - who temporarily gained control of several key centres in Connacht during a raid sometime in the period 838-45.

The oldest version of the Cogadh is contained in a single folio of the Book of Leinster (see the introduction to Todd's edition), and this fragment also contains the most complete note on the ritual. After listing the settlements occupied by Turges' Vikings, the chronicler comments:

Tuc Cluain mic nois da mnai. Is and ra bered a frecartha daltoir in tempoil móir. Otta aímn mnna Turgeis.

Cluain mic nois [Clonmacnoise] was taken by his wife. It was on the altar of the great church she used to give her answers. Otta was the name of the wife of Turgeis.

Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, Leinster fragment (Ms. L): XI; translation after Todd 1867: 226

The Dublin version of the manuscript has it slightly differently:
... ocus is and dobered Ota ben Turges a huricli ar altoir Cluana mic Nois.

... and the place where Ota, the wife of Turges, used to give her audience was upon the altar of Cluain Mic Nois [Clonmacnoise].

_Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh_, Dublin manuscript (Ms. D): XI; translation after Todd 1867: 13

The Brussels manuscript of the _Cogadh_ has a third variant of the woman's name, where it is given as Otur. Little work has been done on this episode, though in 1960 W.E.D. Allen interpreted 'Ota' as being a member of a foreign embassy to the Irish Vikings. Again, the _Cogadh_ will be taken up in the next chapter.

**Seiðr in research**

Having reviewed _seiðr_ in the sources, we can now look to an overview of scholarly studies in this field. Though it means losing a little momentum in the pace of our argument, the work set out in the following chapters demands that we first make a brief survey of the ways in which Nordic sorcery has been taken up by previous researchers. The notes below are not intended as an exhaustive synthesis, and a great many more works are taken up as appropriate throughout the book. Archaeological studies which have tried to identify aspects of _seiðr_ through the material record are treated separately in chapters three and five.

 Probably the earliest work to specifically discuss the role of _seiðr_ in Norse religion appeared in 1877, written by Johan Fritzner, and it is significant that even at this initial stage of tentative interpretation we find these rituals being connected both with Sámi religion and the broader framework of shamanic belief systems. Fritzner’s paper is primarily a discussion of Sámi religion in a comparative context (a subject more fully explored in chapter four below), and although he devotes some space to the possible transfer of specific divinities from one culture to another, the bulk of his detailed discussion is concerned with sorcery. As we have seen above, the problem of distinguishing between the different forms of Old Norse magic has a long research history, and we can note that even in this first account Fritzner interweaves his discussion of _seiðr_ and _gandr_ without distinction (1877: 164-83, 188-200). Nevertheless, all the key elements are present in his analysis, including the use of staffs, the _seiðhjallr_ and the metaphor of ‘riding’ - to all of which we shall return below - as well as the important relationship between human agents of sorcery and the various supernatural powers with which they communicate (the _valkyrjur_, _disir_ and so on). Most crucially of all, he addresses the use of these forms of sorcery for aggressive ends, with a discussion on magical projectiles (Fritzner 1877: 185ff, 208-10) - a subject avoided by the majority of subsequent _seiðr_-scholars, as we shall see.

 Fritzner’s important essay stimulated a small but steady interest in the trance rituals of the Norse, resulting in a suite of publications over the next few years that included Bang's 1879 study of _Voluspa_ in the context of Graeco-Roman oracular traditions, and Bugge’s arguments for the Christian overtones of Óðinn on the tree (published in 1889 but written in the early 1880s).

 The first specific study of _seiðr_ came in 1892 with Finnur Jónsson’s landmark paper in an Icelandic Festschrift to Páli Melsteð. As with Fritzner's work, 'Um galdra, seið, seiðmenn og völur' set out a number of key aspects of _seiðr_ and other forms of Old Norse magic that would come to be overlooked by the majority of twentieth-century researchers. In particular, Finnur focused on the practitioners of this sorcery, and made the first attempt to compile a terminology for them (ibid: 7ff). Crucially, he recognised that the different terms referred to different types of sorcerer - a realisation with far-reaching implications as we shall see below. He further addressed the performance and material culture of _seiðr_, reviewing the sources for _seiðr_ platforms, staffs and various forms of songs used in the rituals (ibid: 17ff). This was also the first work to attempt to carefully distinguish the dual complexes of _seiðr_ and _galdr_.

 By the last decade of the nineteenth century, these ideas were spreading into other areas of Old Norse studies, for example to the analysis of dreams and their significance in the sagas (e.g. Henzen 1890); these preoccupations naturally also reflected contemporary developments in psychology and the interpretation of dream symbolism. The _draumkonur_ - the strange spirit-women who appear as harbingers of ill-fortune and advice - and other inhabitants of dreams were compared to the soul-travelling agents of _seiðr_, and began to be linked to ideas about the personification of luck and the
nature of the soul itself.

In 1902 Hugo Gering published the first major study of the new century, with his book on prophecy and magic in Nordic prehistory, in which the disparate strands of the seidr complex began to be drawn together. The world of Óðinnic sorcery, the activities of the volur and others of their kind, the travelling soul and the power of dreams, all were seen to be connected, though as yet no overall structure could be proposed. Significantly, in this as in all earlier works no attempt had been made to integrate ‘magic’ into the wider social framework.

In the same year, 1902, an anonymous author contributed a paper to a German journal of sexuality, in which he or she discussed possible ‘contra-sexual’ elements in Norse sorcery. These included the ergi complex – the sexually charged state of dishonour which as we have seen from Ynglingasaga attached to men who performed seidr.

Other authors focused on elements of this new sorcerous pattern that Gering had identified. Karl Krohn (1906: 158) argued that seidr was the model for the Sámi shamanic rituals, and in 1909 Axel Olrik published a short paper on its ritual architecture, focusing on the elevation of the performer. In the same year Westermarck included a brief note on the sexual aspects of seidr in his great treatise on the origins of morality (1909). In 1911, Wolf von Unwerth produced his thesis on Óðinn and death cults among the northern Germans and the Sámi, and the Nordic soul conceptions were taken up again in Ida Blum’s thesis from 1912. This latter work looked nominally at Schutzgeister, ‘helping spirits’, but in fact focuses on the fylgjur, hamingjur and dream beings of different kinds.

The first major twentieth-century works specifically focusing on Norse magic appeared during the First World War. In 1916 B.M. Olsen and L.F. Löffler considered the puzzling strophe 155 from Hávamál, which seems to refer to the mobile souls of sorcerers in trance, and to which we will return several times in this book. Specific aspects of the seidr ritual were also taken up by N.Á. Nielsen (1917) in two essays on runic inscriptions with magical formulae designed to protect the monuments on which they were carved. He argued that the ‘curse’ inscribed on the stones was intended to harm a (presumably male) desecrator’s social standing by equating his actions with seidr, in view of the latter’s strong associations with effeminacy.

Meissner’s piece from the same year, ‘Ganga til fréttar’, is a complex paper, philological in inspiration but nevertheless concerned more with Viking Age conditions than with literary constructions. Again, this is in marked contrast to more recent work on the subject. Superceded by the publications of Strömbäck and others, Meissner remains nonetheless a fundamental source for the history of research in this field. Much the same can be said of the book produced in 1918 by Linderholm in Svenska Landsmål, which was intended to be the first part of a multi-volume work on Nordic magic from early prehistory to the coming of Christianity. Devoted primarily to pre-Viking ritual, the first volume was all that ever appeared but it did include a brief attempt to understand the complex socio-sexual phenomenon of ergi that will be taken up in the next chapter (ibid: 89f).

The inconclusive nature of this early work on sorcery may have been a contributing factor to the reincorporation of seidr research into a broader frame of reference in the 1920s. This first appeared in 1922 with Noreen’s study of poetic forms, in which he raised the question of insult poetry which was often used as a channel for allegations of ergi.

In 1923, as we have seen Ivar Lindquist published a book-length work on Galdrar, but with a narrower range than the title implies. Focusing partly on Old High German sources such as the Merseburg charms, and partly on runic inscriptions, Lindquist only briefly touched on seidr itself. However, already we see Fritzner’s connection with circumpolar religion being perpetuated, as seidr tydligen var ett slags sjamanism (‘clearly was a sort of shamanism’; ibid: 178).

In a rather simplified interpretation, Völuspá again formed the central motif for Höckert’s work on the Vanir from 1926, which was so heavily criticised that its author published a sequel in 1930 to answer his detractors. Seidr is mentioned relatively little, but the small amount of space devoted to it contains much of interest. Here again, for example, we see an early emphasis on violent magic, on this occasion in relation to the Vanir’s vígsþá, the ‘war-spell’ (Höckert 1926: 41f). Interestingly too, he sees the entirety of the prophecy in the Völuspá poem in the context of a seidr performance, and as a ritual rather than ecstatic event (Höckert 1930: 72f). One of the main points of conflict between Höckert and the critics was his combination of seidr and útiseta as part of the same phenomenon
Chapter 2

Wessen claimed that the sources showed these to be two quite separate practices, identifying one very important difference between them that has been only rarely taken up:

Sejd var åtföljd av en mycket stor apparat, en mångd ceremonier måste iakttagas, särskilt sång av galdrar och vardlokkur; det var därför alltid flera som måste hjälpa åt ... I motsats här till var utiseta en form av magi, som synes ha utövats utan några yttre trollmedel. Det viktiga är, att man, av källorna att döma, vid utiseta alltid befann sig ensam.

Seidr was accompanied by a very large apparatus, many ceremonies had to be observed, special songs of galdrar and vardlokkur; this was why several people always had to help out ... By contrast utiseta was a form of magic that appears to have been performed without external sorcerous equipment. The important thing is that, to judge from the sources, in utiseta one always found oneself alone.

In the same year Reichborn-Kjennerud presented the first volume in his review of Nordic witchcraft, published a few months later in 1928. Eventually stretching to five volumes of which the last would not appear until after the war, this work consists primarily of short essays on individual subjects, arranged thematically in a broad chronological scheme. In part one Reichborn-Kjennerud briefly reviewed a similar range of supernatural beings as Blum had done in 1912, but created a new conceptual category within which they could be compared. In a section entitled sjelslivets apenbaringsformer, ‘manifestations of the life of the soul’ (Reichborn-Kjennerud 1928: 33-45) we again encounter dreams, fylgjur and hamningjar, but for the first time they are discussed alongside beliefs in shape-shifting and lycanthropy, and beings such as the mara or Nightmare. This was an important breakthrough in the understanding of the socio-psychological background against which later studies of seidr would be set. Reichborn-Kjennerud also elaborated Finnur Jónsson’s categories of sorcerers, but with a focus on what he called ‘the evil eye’ and ‘the evil tongue’ (ibid: 63-70). Once again, the idea of sorcerous, projected violence was made explicit. Seidr itself receives little more than a page of discussion, as does galdr (ibid: 79-82), but in each case the author draws out key aspects such as the payment conventionally received for performances, the existence of sorcerous duels, and again, the projection of misfortune through these forms of magic.

Shamanism was once again taken up in relation to Öðinn by Rolf Pipping in 1928(b), in a short but important pamphlet. Here he argued for links with Finnish religion in the story of the god’s self-sacrifice on the world-tree, interpreting Öðinn’s hanging as a means to see into another world, and to obtain mystical knowledge in a state of trance.

In 1930, Konrad Jarasch published a long paper on magic in the sagas, in which he made an interesting attempt to isolate the different types of sorcerers described. In the second and third sections of his article Jarasch also tried to analyse magic-working by function and medium (ibid: 247-66), and to relate sorcery to the wider framework of cult. Much of his argument is rather abbreviated and the paper is essentially a kind of blueprint for future research, but it would be several years before anyone else approached Nordic magic with such precision.

Old Norse sorcery was briefly taken up again by Eggars in his 1932 thesis on magical objects in the Icelandic sources, though the paper focuses on more functional artefacts such as weapons, rather than the apparatus of witchcraft. In 1933 van Hamel returned to the subject of Öðinn on the tree, last raised by Pipping, but in many respects this again avoided a direct confrontation with the ritual itself. The following year, seidr was also briefly treated in Aakjær’s discussion of sacral place-names, which were interpreted as the location of ritual acts.

From 1934 until the end of the decade followed the single greatest concentration of research in this field up until the present day. Three scholars - an Austrian and two Swedes - each produced a book either wholly or partly devoted to seidr, and in doing so shaped the entire framework of discussion on Nordic sorcery for the remainder of the century. This was also the point at which modern political considerations entered the debate, with almost entirely negative consequences, as we shall see.

The first of the three works was published in 1934 by Otto Höfler, a Viennese historian of religions who held a Dozentur in his native country but taught at Uppsala. His book, Kultische Geheimbunde der Germanen, was intended to be a work in several parts but the first volume was all that ever
appeared. This was devoted to what he called *das germanische Totenheer*, the 'army of the dead' which is found in many forms including the 'Wild Hunt' of Óðinn, and which Höfler saw as the mythological reflection of real warrior fraternities operating in the Iron Age among the Germanic peoples. It is in many ways a work of brilliance, collecting a vast range of material, sorting and re-interpreting it to produce a unifying model for ancient Scandinavian military ideology and its place in society. Amongst various topics, Höfler discusses the idea of demonic and animal figures in symbolic aggressive contexts, the masking traditions of Europe and figures such as the berserkir and ulfhednar who appear to have been some kind of 'totemic' warrior elite connected to the cult of Óðinn. A discussion on shape-changing runs throughout, and indeed Höfler developed this further in an article two years later (1936). His work drew heavily on folkloristics, and among its important aspects is an emphasis on what later writers would call the 'social embeddedness' of ritual, and the manner in which vital elements of the Vikings' belief system saturated everyday activities. Höfler applied this reasoning in particular to the prosecution of warfare. It is true that he devotes very little space to seiðr, but in this case the terminology is less important than his understanding of the social dimension of magic.

While Höfler was working on his military fraternities, during the early thirties an Uppsala scholar was preparing what still remains the absolute fundament of all modern work on Nordic sorcery. In 1935 Dag Strömbläck published his monumental doctoral thesis, entitled simply *Sejd*. Even now, nearly seventy years after its publication, this work still stands unsurpassed in the breadth of its scholarship and critical reflection. Its status is confirmed by the decision to reissue it in a new edition in 2000 on the 100th anniversary of Strömbläck's birth, a step taken not merely as an honorific but with the explicit objective of bringing the work to a new audience.

Strömbläck was the first to conduct a systematic survey of the Icelandic textual material, paying particular attention to the family sagas, Lendmamabók, and the fornaldarsögur. He also made a further review of references to seiðr in texts dealing with a later period, including the Sturlunga cycle and the Bishops' sagas (Biskupasögur). He was one of the first to realise that while the sagas are a very poor source indeed for the higher levels of pre-Christian religion in a formal sense - the cults of the gods, the social functionaries of religion, and the afterlife - they are a mine of information about popular belief. Strömbläck's work on *Sejd* was undertaken at a time when others were reviving the late nineteenth-century interest in the Vikings' interpretation of dreams (e.g. Kelchner 1935), and it was in this area that he, correctly in my opinion, identified the key elements of the written sources: "fate, dreams and premonitions, fetches and shape-shifting, the unquiet dead and demonic beings, sorcery, curses, people of power and clairvoyance, enchanted weaponry or protective amulets and armour, customs of fostership and oath-taking, rites of office and the judiciary, battle customs and mortuary behaviour" (Strömbläck 1935: 3; my translation).

Crucially, it was Strömbläck who developed the shamanic interpretation of seiðr to its fullest extent at that time, making extensive comparisons with Sámi religion and also the circumpolar ethnographies. We shall return to Strömbläck's book throughout the following chapters.

The third cornerstone for seiðr research appeared at the very end of the decade. In 1939 a historian of religions at Lund University, Åke Ohlmarks, published *Studien zum Problem des Schamanismus*, partly based on the controversial thesis that he had defended two years earlier. Taking a broad, circumpolar perspective, Ohlmarks examined the phenomenon of 'sub-arctic' shamanism, looking especially at helping spirits and the role of women in the rituals. His final chapter dealt solely with seiðr, and it is effectively in preparation for this that the arguments of his earlier chapters are built up (later the same year he extrapolated much of this in a separate article). Of the three great works of the 1930s, Ohlmarks' is the one that has least stood the test of time, but this depends primarily on his somewhat racist attitudes towards the peoples of the far north, and his stubborn promotion of 'arctic hysteria' as the defining factor in the development of shamanism. As we shall see in chapter five, this has long been discredited as part of the general folklore of early twentieth-century racial biology. However, where Ohlmarks broke new ground was in his detailed relation of the Nordic world to that of the Siberian cultures, and his recognition of the significance of female ritual domains (the 'feminity' of seiðr had long been obvious to scholars, but few had thought to consider it in depth). Whereas Strömbläck approached seiðr first and then tried to explain it, Ohlmarks looked at shaman-
ism and then sought to say if and where Nordic sorcery fitted into its typological scheme. His work was also highly contentious, in that he set himself directly, and with great acrimony, against both Fritzner’s and Strömbäck’s interpretations. Ohlmarks rejected any Sámi affiliations for the seidr ritual, on the grounds that it did not involve ‘true ecstasy’ and was in fact more typical of Central Asian shamanism. We shall examine these ideas below.

In late 1939 with the outbreak of war, everything changed in seidr studies as in the rest of the world. The political overtones that some had sought in the study of Nordic ecstasy cults suddenly became explicit in the apparatus of archaeological propaganda set up by the German regime. The ‘Blood and Soil’ mysticism of the Nazis is well-known and need not be discussed here, but the extent of the National Socialists’ commitment to a state-controlled ideological agenda for archaeology should be emphasised: two government agencies were set up to oversee the political appropriation of the discipline, including one run by the SS; between 1933 and 1935 eight new professorships were created in Germanic prehistory; funding for excavations was made available on a scale unrivalled elsewhere in the world, and new museums were set up across the Reich. Infusing most aspects of this work was a politically-constructed, mendacious vision of the warrior Viking hero and the mystical power of Öðinn (see Arnold & Haßmann 1995; Müller-Wille 1996; Haßmann 2000; Price in press a).

For the study of seidr, the man chiefly responsible for bringing this under a National Socialist shadow was Otto Höfler. It does not seem to have been a coincidence that he published his great work on military fraternities the year after the Nazis came to power in Germany, and as the thirties progressed he actively embraced their ideas. In 1939 he published a short pamphlet on the ‘political achievement’ of the Migration Period, which dovetailed conveniently with the Nazis’ views on ethnic transportation and Lebensraum, and by the early 1940s Höfler had become a member of the SS-Ahnenerbe division under Himmler’s direct command. Early in the war he was ordered to prepare a memorandum on the state of morale in Scandinavia, drawing on his experiences in Uppsala. In this document he advocated winning over leading Nordic intellectuals ‘für einen freien ehrenvollen Dienst zu einem großgermanischen Reich’, ‘to render free and honourable service for a Pangermanic Empire’, which would work towards ‘eine germanische Zukunft Europas’, ‘a Germanic future for Europe’ (Jakubowski-Tiessen 1994: 135; Müller-Wille 1996: 170). That Höfler understood the popular resistance to this, and very clearly perceived the nature of the side he had chosen, is revealed later in the same document when he predicts what would happen if his strategies of cultural persuasion should fail:

Andernfalls konnen wir die Skandinaver moglicherweise niederhalten, nie gewinnen. Dann aber werden sie stets auf die Angelsachsen umkommen und warten.

Otherwise we may be able to subjugate the Scandinavians, but never win them over. In such a case, however, they will always find their hopes on the Anglo-Saxons and wait.


In 1943 Höfler was appointed to head the Wissenschaftliche Institut in København, which had been founded two years earlier following the German conquest of Denmark (Haßmann 2000: 101-4 describes the archaeological measures taken by the Nazis in the Nordic countries). Following his orders, he continued to promote the prehistoric ‘continuity’ of Germanic culture in the North, right to the end of the war.

During the de-Nazification proceedings after the German surrender, like many of the Ahnenerbe personnel Höfler managed to avoid serious recriminations, but he bore the imprint of his SS uniform for the rest of his life. He lived until 1987, but never wholly regained the personal credibility he had lost (at least internationally) with the defeat of the Nazis. Höfler’s academic work is in a sense more problematic than his personal reputation. On the one hand its subject matter could hardly have fitted better with Nazi ideology, dealing as it did with secret military brotherhoods of berserkers, bound by mystic rites in the service of Öðinn. However, this does not mean that he was necessarily wrong about the Viking Age. The direction of Höfler’s research was probably at least partly deliberate in the political climate of the times, but its actual content is generally free from such bias and is indeed of outstanding quality. Höfler’s work is still very relevant today, albeit an uneasy read in view of the
context in which it was written. With specific regard to Nordic sorcery, Höfler was probably the last to have tried to combine these strands of Viking Age belief into a coherent whole. Because of his political choices, beyond the circle of those who specifically work on Viking Age religion Höfler’s research is now almost completely unknown, and few archaeologists specialising in the period have heard of him.

Although by no means equally compromised, Åke Ohlmarks also flirted with the far right and paid the price after the war, though his problems seemed to stem more from his prickly personality than anything else. In both Uppsala and Lund a number of student societies had flourished during the thirties, supporting a broadly pro-German political stance which in many cases continued after the commencement of hostilities in Europe (the academic atmosphere at this time is well described by Baudou in his biography of Gustaf Hallström, 1997: 231-63). Ohlmarks had been involved with such organisations in Lund, and in 1933 he took a lecturing post in Tübingen a few months after the Nazis came to power. A year later he returned to Sweden and wrote his doctoral thesis, which was presented in 1937 and met with a barrage of criticism. Angry at this, in 1941 Ohlmarks emigrated to Germany, eventually moving to Berlin. This combination of factors not surprisingly resulted in a kind of academic banishment, which only worsened after the war. Ohlmarks seems to have been especially quick to take affront, and in a climate of genuine opposition this descended into paranoia. Near the end of his life, he wrote about this period in his autobiography Doktor i Lund (1980, subtitled ‘a book on academic intrigues’), a fascinating if rather disturbing blend of obsession and conspiracy theories in which all the major seiðr and shamanism researchers of the thirties play leading roles. Ohlmarks does not seem to have mellowed with age, and the tone of the book can be judged from the way he refers to his academic rivals with a variety of patronising epithets - Noreen is the ‘Traitor’ (Förrädaren), Strömbäck is the ‘Hater’ (Hataren), and so on - while the university community in Lund is run by ‘Gangsters’ and ‘Terrorists’.

If his memoirs are any guide to his character, it is hardly surprising that Ohlmarks wandered into an ever-deepening professional wilderness in the post-war years. This was more than a personal misfortune, because the political vacillations that he shared with Höfler and others ensured that a stigma of Nazi associations clung to the mystical dimensions of Old Norse religion for decades after the war. This is the main reason why the work of Strömbäck (who had no such sympathies) and his contemporaries was never taken up into the mainstream of Viking scholarship. It remained known to academics, mainly philologists and historians of religions, but the whole complex of seiðr and its practitioners was not incorporated into the syntheses of the Viking world that began to appear regularly from the fifties onwards.

The weight of this loss is all the heavier because the thirties and forties were otherwise a period of great productivity in research on Nordic sorcery. This can partly be explained by the expedient enthusiasm for Viking mysticism discussed above, but it should be stressed that the political climate that encouraged particular subjects did not necessarily mean that the works in question were deliberately distorted to promote a party line.

Höfler, Strömbäck and Ohlmarks were certainly not the only ones working on seiðr in the thirties. In 1931 the Dutch historian of religions Jan de Vries published a book on Óðinn controversially seen as a fertility deity, with several discussions of sorcery in this context, together with another paper the same year on the role of magic in the Norse cosmogony. He followed this in 1934 with a paper on Óðinn on the tree, and the next year - simultaneously with Strömbäck’s Sejd - de Vries published the first edition of his monumental Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte.

Also in 1935 Nils Lid published a short piece on conceptions of Nordic sorcery, and Magnus Olsen compared sorcerous attributes between gods and mortals. In 1936 N. Beckman contributed a note on ergi. During the war years, the majority of work in this field was undertaken by German scholars. In 1941 Kiessling published Zauberei in der germanischen Volksrechten which included a brief section on seiðr, but unfortunately I have been unable to trace a copy of this work.

One notable exception to the pattern was the Cambridge doctoral thesis published in 1943 by Hilda Ellis (later Davidson), The road to Hel, a complex and much under-estimated book that is still the best single treatment of Viking Age responses to dying and the dead. The discussion of seiðr and possible shamanic elements in Old Norse religion that she would go on to develop twenty years later can be seen in embryo here (ibid: 124-7), set against a pioneering discussion of the soul with ground-break-
ing implications that have not all been absorbed by students of Viking religion even today. In particular, and like Fritzner, she focused on elements of violent magic-working which would remain almost ignored in subsequent decades.

The following year, 1944, Nils Lid returned to sorcery with an effective paper on magical projectiles in the context of *gandr*, which more than a decade on would result in his major book on the subject. Shortly after Lid's work, Wilhelm Muster produced a thesis on shamanism in the sagas (1947), but despite its promising subject matter he confined himself solely to German translations of the texts, and also to German folklore traditions. In essentially ignoring the primary Norse material, a valuable opportunity was sadly missed. Later the same year, Folke Ström published a book on the supernatural powers of the dead in relation to Óðinn's communication with them, echoing much of Ellis' work. 1947 was also the year in which Åke Ohlmarks returned briefly to the study of *seiðr*, in a section of his *Svenskarnas tro genom ärtusendena*, a survey of Nordic religion for a popular audience. The book includes some twenty pages on shamanism, mostly excerpted from Ohlmarks' earlier work and comparing Óðinn to the 'Scythian shaman-gods' (*ibid*: 241-60).

In 1949, Carl-Martin Edsman took up the possible shamanic overtones of the Norse cosmology, in particular the nine worlds beneath Yggdrasill's roots that are mentioned in *Völuspá*. In comparing them with Celtic mythology and other sources, he concluded that no such associations could be sustained (*ibid*: 53).

From the 1870s to the 1940s we can thus trace a group of key themes in research related to *seiðr*:

- Óðinn's self-sacrifice on Yggdrasill
- possible initiation rituals
- dreams and their inhabitants
- communication with the dead
- spirits and the nature of the soul
- violent sorcery
- witchcraft
- connections between Norse and Sámi religion
- *seiðr* as some form of shamanism

For studies of Old Norse magic, the 1950s began retrospectively with Nils Lid's book on *Trolldom*, which collected a number of his earlier articles. These were devoted primarily to folkloristic surveys from later periods but also included brief notices on *seiðr*. In 1951 N.C. Bregger returned to *seiðr* as originally a Vanir practice, and proposed that it was a means of summoning either Freyja or other deities from this family. Some of this reasoning is strained, for example in the argument that *Hóðborr* in *Eiriks saga rauda* is "clearly" present as Freyja's representative, but like many of his predecessors he also reasserted the shamanic overtones of the rituals. In this he cited parallels especially among the Canadian and Greenland Inuit, working from Knud Rasmussen's findings which had then been recently published (*ibid*: 48-52).

An important work on female supernatural beings, several of them operating within the overall complex of sorcery, was published by Ström in 1954. His *Diser, nornor, valkyrjor* remains a standard work on these creatures, supplemented by his *Kulturhistorisk lexikon* entries from 1958 and 1960.

In 1957 the second edition of de Vries' *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* appeared, extensively revised and with an expanded section on *seiðr*. Although it was revised again in 1970, with fewer changes, this work remains even now the single most comprehensive study of Norse religion, at over 1000 pages of outstanding scholarship. Together with Strömbäck's work, it provides the best modern overview of Nordic sorcery and is referenced extensively throughout the following chapters.

A major figure entered the sorcery debate in 1959, when Georges Dumézil criticised shamanic interpretations of *seiðr*, though strangely without reference to either Strömbäck or Ohlmarks. An entire chapter of his *Les dieux des Germands* was devoted to magic - significantly discussed together with war - but the general framework of these practices is only reviewed briefly.

From the late 1950s and onwards for just over twenty years, a steady stream of short notices of
relevance to the study of seidr appeared in what is still the most ambitious publishing project ever undertaken for the medieval North, the *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid*. Some 22 volumes were produced between 1956 and 1978, which included expert analyses of Nordic sorcery from many different viewpoints. The entries for Ödinn, seidr and the other magics, the different kinds of human sorcerers, most of the supernatural creatures involved in these rituals, and many more are taken up below.

The shamanic framework for the interpretation of seidr became fully-developed in the 1960s, a time in which discussions of altered states of consciousness found a particularly receptive audience. At the beginning of the decade Vilhelm Kiil published an excellent paper on the special platforms used in the rituals (1960), which he followed two years later with one of the first attempts to discuss seidr in terms of sexual performance. In 1961 Folke Ström also produced the first edition of his *Nordisk hedendom*, which included an entire chapter on seidr and other forms of magic.

In 1964, Hilda Ellis Davidson returned to seidr in her book *Gods and myths of northern Europe*. Discussing the rituals in the context of both Freyja and Ödinn (*ibid*: 117-23, 141-9), she was the first post-war scholar to go back to the work of Strömback and Ohlmarks, and to propose a truly developed shamanic context for Viking sorcery. Over the following thirty years she extended this line of argument in several other works, including syntheses (1967: ch. 6; 1982: 45f, 93, 109ff; 1988: 155-62; 1993: 69, 76ff, 136ff, 159), studies of Ödinn (1972), the use of sorcery for aggressive ends (1973), and shape-changing (1978). Her research remains among the best published in this field, and is taken up below.

Just as Ellis Davidson produced her great synthesis in 1964, in the same year E.O.G. Turville-Petre published his similarly monumental *Myth and religion of the North*. It does not include a specific study of seidr, but treats it in relation to the gods, especially Ödinn. Despite its strong focus on the more formalised ‘religion’ of the period, together with de Vries’ work this also remains a standard work to which we shall repeatedly return.

Access to the primary sources for the study of seidr was considerably expanded in 1965 when Bo Almqvist published the first of two volumes on the ‘verse magic’ of insult poems (the second followed in 1974). An important aspect of these defamations concerned allegations of sexual perversity and dishonour which were characteristic of the male performance of sorcery. Aspects of Almqvist’s work were taken up by others in the 1970s and 80s as we shall see, but his study remains of fundamental value.

Another scholar of major importance for the study of seidr also emerged in the 1960s, when Peter Buchholz devoted his doctoral research to shamanism in the Old Icelandic sources (1968, two chapters of which appeared in English in 1971). This will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter, but in the context of seidr’s research history it is important to note how Buchholz was the first to explicitly set out what we might call the ‘shamanic parameters’ for Old Norse sorcery. Following a source-critical line with the Old Norse texts, Buchholz was the first scholar to emphasise that any shamanic discussion of seidr must first be rooted in a discussion of shamanism itself, and that the definition of this concept is variable. He also focused on the cultural location of the Vikings in the circumpolar region. Searching for elements in the seidr complex which he felt could be securely linked to a shamanic world-view, Buchholz proposed the following (1968: 22-77):

- religious phenomena
  - the animal ‘auxiliary spirits’
  - an ideology of transformation
  - the specific form of the Norse soul beliefs
  - the tiered worlds and the World Tree
- ecstatic techniques and social context
  - stimulation through fire and heat
  - spirit vision and altered states of consciousness
  - special gender constructions for those who performed such rituals
  - the place occupied by the performers of seidr in Norse society
In the same year that Buchholz’s thesis appeared, Jere Fleck published his own doctoral work on the motif of acquiring mystical knowledge in Old Norse religion. *Seiðr* made a very brief appearance again in 1970, in Anne Holtmark’s synthesis on Viking Age beliefs, *Norron mytologi* (a Swedish translation appeared in 1992), which repeats the shamanic view of sorcery.

Also in 1970, Dumézil’s *Du mythe au roman* appeared, which took up his shamanic critique of seiðr once again. He is respectful to Strömback, though finds his interpretations over-extended, and stresses how all the sources which can be related to a shamanic view of seiðr are very late (*ibid:* 69-74). Dumézil also tries very sensibly to move the debate away from ‘black’ and ‘white’ forms of magic to a consideration of higher and lower categories, seen especially in relation to the formalised cults of the gods.

In 1971 perhaps partly in response to Buchholz and Holtmark, Fleck prepared two papers in which he tried to refute shamanic interpretations of Óðinn’s behaviour in *Hávamál* and *Grímnismál*; these are taken up in the next chapter. A year later in 1972, Thomas Markey made some interesting observations on the etymology of *ergi,* the special state of shamefulness associated with men who performed seiðr, examined in detail in the following chapter. In 1973 Margaret Clunies Ross published a paper which took up other aspects of this complex, in an analysis of an episode from the *Ragnarsdrápa.* Here Clunies Ross explored several instances of ‘anal insult’ and allegations of sorcerous homosexuality in the Old Norse corpus. Another important article on the same subject was put forward by Folke Ström in the same year, with an English version in 1974. All of this work was an important forerunner to the more developed studies of *ergi* that would come later from Preben Meulengracht Sørensen.

In 1973 a veteran of the seiðr debate took the stage again, albeit briefly, when the seventy-two year-old Otto Höfler produced a large thesis on transformation cults, effectively the abandoned follow-up volume to his 1934 book. In the sixties he had produced a few small works on Goethe, but was perhaps encouraged to return to his earlier field by the cultural spirit of the times. In his 1973(a) book, it is striking how much space is devoted to the various forms of hallucinogenic and narcotic stimuli that he believed lay behind the trance experiences of the Iron Age. He writes at length of ‘the cult of masks’ inherent in the rituals of Óðinn, and argues that sorcery played a major role in this, linked to his old ideas about totemic warrior fraternities.

Höfler’s book, *Verwandlungskulte, Volkssagen und Mythen,* is a difficult work that at times strays far beyond the Northern world in its proposals for universal mythical themes. It also contains slight hints of its author’s former ideological allegiances in the emphasis on martial frenzy, and I wonder (though cannot prove) if these may have been inspired by the work of Konrad Lorenz. The latter’s thought-provoking and somewhat notorious book on the behavioural reflexes of human aggression - *Das sogenannte Böse,* ‘The So-Called Evil’ - was published in 1963 and it is virtually impossible that Höfler had not read it given his interests in the anthropology of war. Its absence from Höfler’s bibliography can be explained by the fact that Lorenz had been (somewhat unfairly) accused of Nazi sympathies, with an obvious association to his own life that Höfler would wish to avoid. We shall return to Lorenz in chapter six and discover that his work in fact included explicit rejections of fascism and racism in all its forms. By contrast, Höfler’s published record contained the very opposite of such exonerations, and having managed to salvage some of his reputation he may not have dared quote a work that I am certain was a major inspiration. With all this in mind, it is nonetheless clear that Höfler’s book on shape-changing still has much to offer the student of Norse sorcery. Again, he effortlessly returns to the necessity of seeing ritual in a total social context.

Höfler was not the only giant of seiðr studies to resurface at this time. In the seventies and later, a number of smaller works by Dag Strömback also appeared, some published posthumously after his death in 1978. In these papers he returned to the subject of the soul in Norse tradition, including naturally some discussions of seiðr, but in a form that essentially summarises aspects of his doctoral thesis updated with literature published in the intervening period (e.g. 1975, 1989).

In 1975 a short monograph on seiðr was produced as an undergraduate dissertation by Anders Nordin at the University of Stockholm, in which he critically reviewed the shamanic interpretations put forward by Ohlmarks.

One aspect of Óðinn’s personality that had hitherto received comparatively little attention was the great number of internal contradictions in the god’s powers. Chief amongst these is his role as the
male war-god and simultaneously as master of the ‘female’ sorcery of seidr, which was shameful for
men to perform. In 1976 Richard Auld tried to resolve this problem by subjecting Ödinn to literary
psychoanalysis, and concluded that the god was a kind of “mediating synthesis between two psychic
poles”, especially between the Æsir and Vanir (ibid: 149). This is an interesting idea, of Ödinn as the
true unifier of the Norse world-system, but unfortunately many of Auld’s arguments are mired in
rather strained Freudian semiotics - for example, he follows Neumann in seeing Ödinn’s cloak as “a
feminine symbol of shelter and protection”, apparently forgetting that such garments were a standard
part of male dress throughout the North (ibid: 150).

A new, structuralist approach to the Norse sorceresses was adopted by Lotte Motz in 1980, the
same year as Aage Kabell published a masterly if over-worked re-interpretation of the whole skaldic
institution, which he argued was closely linked to that of the shaman. His notes on the use of drums in
Norse religion are especially interesting, claiming that they were used to provide a beat to which the
skalds recited. Also in 1980, Jens Peter Schjødt produced the first of several sceptical articles on
claims for shamanic initiations in the Eddic corpus; this work is discussed in the next chapter.

At the same time Preben Meulengracht Sorensen produced what still remains the fundamental
study of ergi, the powerful and highly negative sexual associations with which seidr was charged.
This book, Norront nid (1980), was published in English in 1983 and we shall return to it in chapter
three.

In 1981, a French synthesis of Old Norse religion also included a focus on seidr in a shamanic
context, and also emphasised its links to the belief system of the Sámi (Boyer 1981: 148-57). Here,
Ödinn is again described formally as a ‘god-shaman’. During the same period another French scholar,
François-Xavier Dillmann, was working on a full thesis on the subject, completed in 1986 as Les
magiciens dans l’Islande ancienne. This remains unpublished in the archives of the University of
Caen and I have unfortunately been unable to consult it, but its contents have been summarised in
some of the author’s later articles (1994; 1995). Dillmann argues against a shamanic interpretation of
seidr, again focusing on the lack of ecstatic expression in the sources. In the same year as Dillmann’s
thesis was submitted, Boyer also published his own book on Old Norse magic, Le monde du double
(1986). We shall consider these studies in subsequent chapters.

The idea that the Eddie poems may have been ritual incantations in themselves was also raised
around this time, by Einar Haugen (1983). He suggested that the various cycles of mythical knowl-
edge should be seen as different facets of Ödinn’s personality, interpreted as a series of ‘masks’ - both
literal and figurative - that are slowly peeled away as an initiate approaches the true nature of the god.
Despite the close fit with shamanic ideas, Haugen also rejects this particular view of Ödinn (ibid: 20).
In the same year a brief comparison of Finnish shamanistic traditions with Nordic seidr was pub-
lished by Kuusi & Honko (1983: 24-32), though this mostly presented the Eiriks saga rauða episode
for a new audience.

Also at this time the Norwegian historian of religions Ronald Grambo published two papers on
specific aspects of seidr, including one on Órboðr in Eiriks saga rauða (1984) and a second on
sexuality in relation to the rituals (1989). The latter paper especially focused on North American
gender constructions, such as the so-called ‘berdaches’ of the Plains. These will be examined in
chapters three and five.

Between these two publications, Gro Steinsland produced two important papers on the sorceresses
(1985a & b), and similar themes were taken up by Grete Schmidt Poulsen in a paper from 1986,
building on her unpublished doctorate from 1982. All these are again taken up below.

In 1986 W.I. Miller published a paper on dream figures in relation to sorcery, seen from the perspec-
tive of the period of the sagas’ composition rather than the Viking Age that they describe. An-
other important work for the shamanic interpretation of seidr appeared in 1989, with Stephen Glosecki’s
examination of similar themes in the Old English poetic corpus. He adopted many of Buchholz’s
recommendations for a circumpolar frame of reference, and brought in both the Norse and Sámi as
points of comparison for his Anglo-Saxon material. Significantly, as an American researcher Glosecki
made extensive use of First Nations mythology, and it is in his work that the ritual complexes of the
Viking Age were first compared in depth to the Northwest Coast cultures. We shall rediscover this
material in chapter five. Miller’s ideas surfaced again in a different context in 1991, with Gísli Pálsson’s
study of witchcraft accusations in the sagas, which he argued reflected the 'micro-politics' of the early Icelandic commonwealth.

In 1991, Grambo returned to seidr studies and published a short but influential paper in a conference volume on Nordic paganism. Subtitling his article 'a clarificatory programme', he set out to define the key problems linked to a study of seidr, and to propose steps for their solution. Like Buchholz before him (1971: 7), Grambo understood that despite the monumental works by Strömbäck and others, there remained much that needed to be elucidated about Nordic sorcery. With this in mind, he laid out an eight-point plan for future research (Grambo 1991: 138):

1. the necessity for isolating seidr's constituent parts in order to create a typology
2. the necessity for understanding how seidr functioned within the religious system of which it was a part
3. the analysis of seidr as a social phenomenon, rooted in contemporary norms
4. the analysis of relationships between seidr and Sámi shamanism
5. the necessity of studying seidr in the context of the Eurasian thought-world, beyond the Nordic sphere
6. the analysis of the Norse myths to trace elements of seidr, and to provide the foundation for a typology
7. to study whether or not seidr changed over time, in terms of its morphology, structure and function, and especially around the time of the conversion to Christianity
8. the analysis of rock carvings in order to trace possible shamanic imagery

Having drawn up a programme for continued work, Grambo apparently abandoned the study of seidr for other subjects, and as far as I am aware has never published on it again.

The 1990s began well for seidr studies with Meulengracht Sorensen & Steinsland's synthesis on religion (1990), which for the first time presented seidr as an important and integral part of the Norse belief systems as a totality. Both authors drew on their work during the previous decade to good effect, with Sørensen's studies of ergi and gender combining with Steinsland's on the volur. The book is limited academically by being (intentionally) presented in a very popular style, but wins by its communication of these approaches to the widest audience. A more scholarly, though still public-oriented, overview presenting much the same conclusions was produced by them a few years later (Steinsland & Meulengracht Sorensen 1994).

An unusual contribution to seidr studies was also made in 1990 by the Italian Annaliste historian Carlo Ginzburg, in his controversial survey of ecstatic cults. Ginzburg examines the complete corpus of evidence relating to European witchcraft, especially the archives of the Inquisition, and concludes that these practices were not only real but in fact a genuine reflection of shamanic traditions spanning the whole Continent and with roots stretching far back into antiquity. He takes up a great many familiar themes - including shape-changing, soul journeying and sexual sorcery - and includes seidr in his review of European magical traditions. Most importantly, and extending from his 1966 work on a kind of shamanic soldiery in the Friuli region of Italy, Ginzburg devotes a substantial portion of the book to the notions of combat in ecstasy and animal disguise (1990: 153-204). At times his comparative survey is somewhat strained, covering the whole of Europe and much of Asia over thousands of years, but this is an interesting and thought-provoking work. Its contribution to seidr research has been undervalued, and some of Ginzburg's conclusions will be taken up below in chapter six.

The early part of the 1990s was otherwise dominated by the application of gender perspectives to the interpretation of Norse magic, often with considerable success. In 1991 Katherine Morris published an interesting survey of the sorceresses as icons of medieval understandings of sexuality, to which we shall return in chapter three. In the same year Jenny Jochens produced a useful exploration of gender roles in Nordic sorcery. She expanded upon this in 1993, just as Lotte Motz presented her own archetypes of femininity in Nordic myth. Jochens finally presented her research in full with the publication of Old Norse images of women (1996). These works contain a number of interesting insights into the gender mechanisms of seidr, at times controversially so, and Jochens is the scholar who has taken the sexual elements of the rituals furthest. Her argument that the practice of seidr incorporated literal sexual performance is discussed in chapter three. The volur are also discussed by Helga Kress (1993), who interprets many of the sorcery narratives as signals in an ongoing conflict of gender. She argues that this is played out within the framework of Christian misogyny and directed
against a predominantly female pre-Christian power base. This work forms the introduction to the first volume of the Nordic Kvinnolitteraturhistoria (‘History of Nordic Women’s Literature’), which is a uniquely prominent position for research on the Norse sorceresses.

In the 1990s the philologist Clive Tolley also produced a number of original studies of seidr, especially in comparison with Finno-Ugric practices (1993: ch.5; 1994; 1995a). Tolley works almost exclusively with the shamanic parameters of seidr, and has not so much addressed its functions in a social context, but his research is among the very best on the subject; my debt to his work on spirit assistants will become obvious below. Tolley’s collaboration with Ursula Dronke on volume II of The Poetic Edda is also important, as this has meant that analyses of seidr and its significance have for the first time been incorporated into a critical edition of this fundamental source. A forthcoming volume on the remainder of the mythological poems is to appear under their joint editorship.

Jens Peter Schjodt returned to his earlier theme of shamanic initiation ceremonies in 1993, with a paper on Óðinn’s self-sacrifice, discussed in chapter three. The following year an interesting volume on Viking Age totemic cults appeared in Polish, by the historian of religions Leszek Pawel Slupecki. The title translates to ‘Warriors and werewolves’, but unfortunately the work has no summary in another European language and so I have been unable to consult it. It appears to deal at great length with the berserkir and ulfhednar, in much the same vein as Høfler’s book from 1934, and should thus be of great interest to scholars of Norse sorcery.

During this period a major study in folkloristics was being produced by the British-Icelandic scholar Terry Gunnell, whose thesis was published in 1995 as The origins of drama in Scandinavia. Like Haugen in the early 1980s, Gunnell focuses on the idea of Old Norse literature and poetry as reflecting actual performances, using later evidence of masking traditions and festive dramas to explore the ritual calendar of the early Scandinavians. In addition to the textual corpus, he employs with dexterity a large number of archaeological sources - very unusually for a scholar whose primary field is not material culture studies. Gunnell discusses seidr at length, and his excellent work is treated in several chapters below.

The Anglo-Saxon analogues for seidr have been treated by Richard North in his 1997 study of paganism in the Old English sources. He makes many valuable observations on sorcery in the context of sexuality and regeneration, to which we shall return.

In the same year the great Icelandic philologist Hermann Pálsson published an important book on the landndam, suggesting that a considerable proportion of the ‘Norwegian’ settlers were in fact of Sámi origin. This well-argued thesis has been widely discussed, but in the present context we can note that Hermann includes some five chapters on different aspects of sorcery and the soul, including one each on seidr and útiseta. He focuses on sorcery used for sexual purposes and in connection with aggression of various kinds, and supports a shamanic interpretation with its origins among the Sámi.

Also in 1997 an Uppsala scholar, Stefan Andersson, produced an undergraduate dissertation on seidr as expressed in four Eddic poems - Völsúspá, Prymskvíða, Hávamál and Baldurs draumar - against a background study of circumpolar shamanism. Rejecting Strömbläck's ideas about a Sámi origin for seidr, and also Ohlmark's 'sub-artic' theories, Andersson instead refers to Nordic sorcery as having developed along its own path from a common Eurasian root of what he calls urshamanism, ‘original shamanism’. Two years later Andersson expanded on these ideas with a short paper on seidr in the Historia Norvegiae and Saxo.

In 1998 Slupecki published a second book on Norse religion, this time focusing on divination and prophecy, and with an English summary in addition to the Polish text. A chapter is devoted to seidr, in which Slupecki follows Ohlmarks in arguing that this kind of sorcery cannot be truly considered shamanic as it did not involve deep ecstasy.

The following year, 1999, the American folklorist Thomas DuBois released an important work on Nordic religions in the Viking Age. In some ways this is the single most innovative publication on Scandinavian pre-Christian belief for several decades, and the key to this lies in the fact that DuBois is the first scholar to have attempted a systematic integration of Nordic and Sámi religion on equal terms. He is primarily a specialist in Finno-Ugric and Sámi languages, and the book benefits enormously from his ability to access material often denied to Western scholars by the linguistic barrier.
The volume is built up along similarly unconventional lines, abandoning the familiar concentration on the gods to look instead at the concept of the restless dead, the importance of spirits, and, especially, seidr. The latter is given an entire chapter, one eighth of the book.

In connection with the reissue of Strömbäck’s thesis in 2000, several other authors contributed essays on seidr scholarship since the book’s original publication. A contribution by Bo Almqvist is of particular importance here, as he expands upon Strömbäck’s catalogue of literary references to seidr with several new excerpts. In the same volume Hans Mebius discusses some developments in Sámi research, which will be taken up in chapter four.

Though not named as such, seidr has also been briefly discussed in a recent general synthesis on shamanism by the folklorist and historian Ronald Hutton (2001: 139f). The bulk of the book is made up of an excellent study of Siberian religion, but unfortunately Hutton has been woefully misinformed about the Scandinavian source material. The practices of the Norse and Sámi are treated as a seamless continuum, for example, and he seems to be claiming that Eiriks saga rauda contains the sole reference to a völva in the entire Old Norse corpus! Hutton is a leading specialist on English pagan ritual, but one feels that on this occasion his usually exemplary scholarship has been spread a little thin.

In the same year an interesting thesis appeared from Oslo, in which the usual range of medieval written sources are employed by Dror Segev to analyse not Viking Age sorcery but that of the Middle Ages proper. Segev takes this discussion in a number of exciting new directions, not least through a study of possible Jewish influences on the descriptions of medieval magic.

The two most recent specific studies of seidr both appeared in 2001. The first of these was Jens Peter Schjødt’s consolidation of several years of work in a paper considering Óðinn as a shaman. In several conference presentations Schjødt has argued that the shamanic overtones of the seidr ritual are no more than general tendencies, and here he completes his argument by suggesting that Óðinn should be considered as primarily a god of the elite, to whom a certain degree of supernatural power is inherent. He rightly draws attention to the source-critical problems in extending the saga accounts of seidr with any security back into the Viking Age, and also finds contradictions in the notion of Óðinn’s supposedly shamanic powers and his other functions - for example, as a psychopomp, a god of kings and chieftains, and as a supernatural ruler-figure. These ideas are discussed in chapter five.

The second publication on seidr from 2001 was Catharina Raudvere’s contribution to the medieval volume in the series Witchcraft and magic in Europe. Focusing generally on trolldomr, Raudvere’s text is essentially a small book, and provides the fullest recent survey of seidr and its analogues, perhaps even the most comprehensive since Strömbäck. Raudvere provides an excellent overview of the sources and in her introductory remarks gives one of the most nuanced analyses of their convoluted critical value that has yet appeared (ibid: 75-90). Most importantly for current research, she discusses Norse sorcery as something that had once been perceived as a reality, and thus brings a fresh approach to the exploration of familiar material. Her text is deliberately short on examples, and instead attempts to draw a bigger picture of changing attitudes to magic over the whole span of the early medieval period. In part the work is hampered by the externally imposed framework of ‘witchcraft’ inherent in the series, which has brought a somewhat anachronistic emphasis on accounts of sorcery seen through accusations and legal proceedings, but this does not detract from the overall achievement of the essay. This is one of the most important studies of seidr to have appeared to date, and several of Raudvere’s ideas are discussed in the following chapters.

A broadly similar line to that of Jens Peter Schjødt is taken in a new introduction to Norse mythology for gymnasiial students and undergraduates (Näström 2002a, see especially pp. 104ff, 237-42). Seidr is briefly discussed, but the intentional simplifications of the text occasionally result in a somewhat superficial analysis. One interesting feature is the author’s total rejection of shamanic interpretations in any cultural context, on the grounds that the very concept of shamanism “is now a misused term ... which embraces so wide an area as to essentially have no meaning” (ibid: 61). This will be critically discussed below.

We have now reviewed the background to Nordic sorcery, in the context of the mythologies of the Scandinavians, the range of supernatural beings that populate them, and the ways in which these have been approached by scholars. To this we have added the material world of Norse cult – the places in
which the gods were approached, the people who did so, and the larger landscape (both social and physical) in which these were set. The relationship of magic to these complex of forces has been questioned, and we have begun to explore the terminology of sorcery. Having surveyed the sources for seiðr and the history of its study, we are now equipped to examine it in greater detail.
Seiðr

"...den kanske mest svårtillgängliga magiska företeelsen i västnordisk tid, nämligen sejden"

('...perhaps the most inaccessible magical phenomenon in West Nordic history, namely seidr')

Emanuel Linderholm, professor of history of religions, recommending a promising subject for postgraduate research to the young Dag Strömööck, Uppsala 1921

(quoted by Strömööck's daughter Gertrud Gidlund, 2000: 325)

Óðinn

There is a sense in which any discussion of seiðr, and its social context in the world of the pre-Christian Norse, must begin with Óðinn.

His origins are uncertain and obscure. We know from abundant source material that he was simultaneously a god of war and poetry, a seducer and a trickster, the embodiment of the mind and the supreme master of sorcery. He could control the weather and the elements, he could heal the sick and he could kill his enemies. According to Snorri, he will live forever. Óðinn was a god of the elite and of warriors, but was at the same time a supernatural protector of the outcast and the loner. In several of his personas he appears as a cloaked, friendless wanderer. As a patron, he understood the bitter pleasure of vengeance fulfilled and violence unleashed, but also the hungers of lust and love, the arrogance of skaldic composition, and the bleakness of senility. He was a god for both the young and the old. In particular he grasped the paradoxical balance between physical decline and the wisdom that increased with age but which infirmity often prevented from being put into practice. In his quest for ultimate power expressed through total information, Óðinn was left with few illusions as to the price of his knowledge. From what we know of those who followed him, a call on his skills required a kind of surrender, not only to a reality stripped of comforting filters but also to a liberation of the faculties. Such release could be attained along many paths - in the ecstatic rush of battle, through intoxication and the trance rituals that we shall shortly explore, and by the pursuit of dangerous trains of thought.

Óðinn was a being of many faces and facets. He had over two hundred names, as we shall see, and in one poem introduces himself with the words hétomk Grimr, 'I am called Mask' (Grimnismál 46). Above all he was someone in whom it was hazardous to place one's trust. He has probably attracted more scholarly attention that any other Norse divinity.

One of the earliest academic studies was that by Eirikur Magnússon, who in 1895 published his paper on Yggdrasill in both English and Icelandic editions. However, the first major work on Óðinn was the book produced by H.M. Chadwick in 1899, which remained one of the standard texts on the god until long into the twentieth century. Surprisingly, it is still the only single monograph devoted to Óðinn, though of course the works that take up aspects of his persona run well into treble figures.
The Old Norse sources in which Óðinn appears are listed by Halvorsen (1967a); the main published work is summarised by Turville-Petre (1964: 323) and Simek (1993: 245).

The mythological tales and attributes of Óðinn are well-known, but a human view of this god is harder to find. In order to understand how he was perceived by his followers, in 'real' terms that affected their lives, the closest insight into this has probably been handed down to us by Egill Skalla-Grimsson, one of the greatest of the Icelandic warrior-poets. His relationship with Óðinn runs as a constant throughout his adulthood, but it is only through a late tragedy that this is clarified. According to his saga, that many scholars believe to have been composed by Snorri Sturluson, towards the end of his life Egill loses one of the last of his surviving sons. An earlier boy was carried away by a fever, and now his beloved Boðvarr has been drowned in the most banal of boating accidents. Old and embittered, Egill despairs. At first he tries to starve himself to death, but his daughter persuades him to instead make a fitting memorial poem for his son. It is then that he composes the *Sonatorrek*, 'the Wreck of Sons', thought to date to around 960.

All his life Egill has followed Óðinn, his patron of war and the mead of poetry, and has enjoyed success sufficient to make him a household name in Iceland even today, a thousand years later. And yet after all this, over 25 strophes in the *Sonatorrek* Egill curses the god whom he feels has taken all meaning from his life:

```
Áttak gött
við geirs dróttin,
gerðumk tryggr
at trúa hónum,
áðr vinan
vagna rúni
sigrhöfundr
of sleit við mik.
```

I had good things from the Lord of the Spear [Óðinn], I became ready to trust in him, before the victory-lord, the friend of chariots [Óðinn] broke friendship with me.

Egill Skalla-Grimsson, *Sonatorrek* 22; translation after Fell 1975: 198

It is then, in the heart of his grief, that Egill realises what Óðinn has done: through the treacherous theft of his son and the consequent pain, the god has opened up in him the deepest reserves of poetry that would have been otherwise unreachable. One scholar, Bo Ralph (1976), has even hinted that the divinely bestowed inspiration for this poem may have been conveyed through *seidr*.

The *Sonatorrek* ends with words of reconciliation and acceptance of fate:

```
Blöetka því
bróður Vilís,
gotjaðar,
at gjarn séak;
þó hefr Míms vinr
mér of fengnar
hólvá boetr,
es et betra telk.
Gofumk þrótt
ulfs of bági
vigí vanr
vammi firða
ok þat geð,
es gerðak mér
vísá fjandr
af velþondum.
```

*Nú erum torvelt,*
*Tveggja bága.*
I make no sacrifice to the brother of Vilir [Óðinn], the foremost of gods, out of eagerness. Yet Mímir’s friend [Óðinn] has provided for me recompense for injuries if I make a better count.

The wolf’s adversary [Óðinn], used to fights, gave to me a flawless art [poetry] and that temper which made known enemies out of tricksters.

Now things are hard for me, the sister of the Double’s adversary [Óðinn > Fenrir > Hel] stands on the headland, yet I shall gladly, with good courage and unconcerned, wait for my death.

Egill Skalla-Grímsson, Sonatorrek 23-5; translation after Fell 1975: 198

Egill abandons thoughts of suicide, and gains fatalistic determination - and perhaps a little pride - from the success of his verses. On a small, human scale, this is the same philosophy that we see in the gods’ preparations for the end of the world. The Sonatorrek is Egill’s greatest poem and one of his patron’s final services to him, along with the Arinbjarnarkviða that he will compose two years later in honour of his best friend. At the extremity of a man’s capacity for art, and bought with an agony that brings him to the edge of death, we see the terrible beauty of Óðinn’s gifts. As in so many other things, this again reveals the subtlety and sophistication of the Viking mind.

Óðinn the sorcerer

The extent of Snorri’s knowledge of Norse pre-Christian belief, and the light in which he presents it, have long been subjects for study. Some scholars have taken a highly sceptical view of his descriptions of magic, such as Margaret Clunies Ross (1994:209) who argues that “Ynglingasaga is a rationalisation of established social and religious custom and cannot be taken as a straightforward historical explanation of why seidr was women’s business”. The problem with this kind of analysis is that it starts from an assumption (and it is nothing more) that there cannot really be any kind of Viking Age reality behind the later texts. Thus elsewhere in her work (ibid: 206-11), Clunies Ross goes on to discuss the Æsir’s rejection of seidr and its relegation to women in terms of overall medieval gender strategies, Freudian symbolism and the agenda of modern literary critique - all of which ignores the fact that the sexual codes of seidr as described in the sources are perfectly intelligible in the context of shamanic anthropology, as we shall see.

There is no doubt that Snorri’s views cannot be taken at face value, but they can be deconstructed with care. As we have seen, Snorri focuses his description of seidr on Óðinn as its master, with its human practitioners in a secondary role. In analysing what may have lain behind this viewpoint, we shall look first at Óðinn, then at Freyja and finally at the male and female sorcerers of the Viking Age.

If we examine the description of Óðinn’s magical skills presented above in Ynglingasaga 7, we can first note that seidr is only one category among several. It is in fact possible to discern a certain pattern based on type of ability and the form of sorcery (fjólkyni is Snorri’s collective term) with which it was associated:

- **galdrar (ljóð)** and runic sorcery
  - shape-shifting
  - ethereal travel in animal form while physical body remains still
  - control of fires, water and wind
  - conversation with men in their graves, or with the hanged
  - various forms of ‘helping spirits’ (Mímir’s head, Huginn and Muninn)
  - transport with a magical ship (Skíðblaðnir)
    - used for his own purposes or those of others
seidr
- divining the future
- killing
- inducing sickness
- inflicting misfortune
- depriving people of their wits, or augmenting them
- depriving people of their strength, or augmenting it
  - used for his own purposes?
  - brings with it immense ergi
  - shameful for ‘manly men’ to practice
  - taught to women

Other skills (*jólkyngr, fröðleikr, ljóð*)
- revealing the hidden
- opening mountains, stones, underground places and burial mounds
- binding the inhabitants of these places

Some of Óðinn’s attributes as depicted here are problematic in themselves, and contradict other sources for Norse mythology (sometimes even those by Snorri himself): for example, the ship Skiðblaðnir belongs to Freyr in *Grimnismál* 43, and also in *Gylfaginning* 42 and *Skáldskaparmál* 7. Others are complemented or expanded by additional texts, such as the explanation of Mímir’s head.

However, the realm of sorcery is actually present in almost all aspects of the god. We can begin with Óðinn as the supreme poet. His acquisition of the mead of poetry from the dwarfs and giants is a well-known story that exists in several versions (e.g. *Skáldskaparmál* 4-6; *Hávamál* 104-10, 140). More than one of these seems to have been current in the Viking Age, as we find allusions to them in skaldic verse such as Egill’s *Hofðulausn* (2) and in a number of kennings (Turville-Petre 1964: 38ff).

In *Ynglingasaga* 6, Óðinn is even said to speak only in skaldic verse.

His gift of poetic skill to those who follow him has several dimensions, not the least of which is a kind of holiness brought about by the intoxication of words. There is a clear sense in which poetry is a means of communication between humans and gods, and indeed is seen as conveying a measure of supernatural power (by definition, in fact, as the original abilities of this kind were retrieved by Óðinn from another world).

Similar features can be seen in the famous story recorded in *Hávamál* (138-45), which relates how Óðinn hangs for nine nights on a tree with roots that no-one knows, battered by the wind. He is *geirí unadór / ok gefinn óðni, / sjálfr sjálfrum mer, / wounded with a spear / and given to Óðinn, / myself to myself* (the main research on this is summarised by Simek 1993: 248ff). One of the first to discuss this aspect of the god was Sophus Bugge (1889: 291ff). As we have seen above, his work had been in part stimulated by Fritzner’s studies of sorcery, but he rejected a pagan origin for the image of Óðinn on the tree, and instead claimed it as a later interpolation of Christ on the cross. Turville-Petre (1964: 42ff) and others since him have refuted this, and demonstrated convincingly that every element of the tale is actually appropriate in a pagan context: the World Tree, the significance of the number nine, sacrificial hanging, the use of a dedicatory spear. This is especially true for the ecstatic haze through which Óðinn first perceives the runes (see below for more on this word):

```
  nýsta ek niðr,  downward I peered,
  nam ek upp rúnar,  I took up the runes,
  cepandi nam,  screaming I took them,
  fell ek aptr þaðan.  then I fell back from there.
```

*Hávamál* 139; translation after Larrington 1996: 34

Again there is a theme of the acquisition of supernatural power, as Óðinn learns ‘nine mighty songs’ and drinks the mead of poetry (strophe 140). Raudvere (2001: 115) has drawn attention to a certain focus on direction here, in that knowledge is called up from below. Finally Óðinn’s mind itself begins
to expand, his thoughts tumbling over one another in displays of mental dexterity, here laid out with marvellous suggestion by the Hávamál poet:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þá nam ek frævask} & \quad \text{Then I began to quicken} \\
\text{ok fröðr vera} & \quad \text{and to be wise} \\
\text{ok vaxa ok vel hafask;} & \quad \text{and grow and prosper;} \\
\text{orð mér af orði} & \quad \text{from a word} \\
\text{orðs leitaði,} & \quad \text{one word led to another for me,} \\
\text{verk mér af verk} & \quad \text{from a deed} \\
\text{verks leitaði.} & \quad \text{one deed led to another for me.}
\end{align*}
\]
Hávamál 141; my translation

Extraordinarily, Bugge (1889: 308f) noted that a local dialect variant of these verses was in popular currency as late as the 1870s on the island of Uist in the Shetlands - 'nine days he hang pa de rúttless tree' - indicating how deeply this pre-Christian visionary experience had been embedded in the minds of the Scandinavians and their descendants, even in the colonies. Jere Fleck (1971a) brought a new spin to the discussion by arguing that Óðinn was hanging upside down on the tree, a position that he justifies by some rather strained interpretations of Germanic sources and increasingly distant cross-cultural comparisons for the 'ritual inversion'. To my mind this finds little support in any source, especially the mortal parallel in the sacrifice of King Vikarr by hanging and a spear-thrust described in the longer version of Gautreks saga (7).

One obvious aspect of Óðinn's self-sacrifice is surprisingly seldom remarked upon: he does not die (contra Turville-Petre 1964: 49f). In this may be the key to his special relationship with the dead, and especially those who have died by hanging. Several of the god's names relate to this, as we shall see below, and there are also kennings which mention him in connection with the gallows. From Ynglingasaga (7) we have already seen how Óðinn would 'sit beneath the hanged', and in a lausavísa of Börðjörn Brúanason from 1014, Óðinn is called their heimpingadar, 'visitor'. The purpose of these visits is revealed in the so-called Ljóðatal, the 'Catalogue of Chants' that appears as strophes 146-63 of Hávamál. We shall return to these spells several times in the course of this book, but here we can recall the twelfth in the list:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þat kann ek it tölpta:} & \quad \text{I know a twelfth:} \\
\text{ef ek sé á tré uppí} & \quad \text{if I see up in a tree} \\
\text{vísna virgilínæ,} & \quad \text{a noosed corpse,} \\
\text{svá ek ríst} & \quad \text{I can so cut} \\
\text{ok í rúnum fák} & \quad \text{and colour the runes} \\
\text{at sá gengr gumí} & \quad \text{that the man will walk} \\
\text{ok mælir við mik.} & \quad \text{and talk with me.}
\end{align*}
\]
Hávamál 157; my translation

The motif also occurs in the archaeological material, as there are several depictions of hanged men on Viking Age picture-stones from Gotland (e.g. stone I from Lärbro Stora Hammers; Lindqvist 1941: fig. 81) and on other objects such as the Oseberg tapestry which is considered below. Of particular interest here is the picture-stone from Bote in Garda parish (ibid: fig. 141; Göransson 1999: 66f) which shows a line of seven hanged women, a most unusual image. Perhaps they depict the seven sorceresses whom Óðinn seduces in Hárbardzljóð, though there is no mention of their death.

Turville-Petre (1964: 45) makes the interesting point that we do not know exactly what kind of wisdom Óðinn gained from his gallows conversations. All his other exploits of this kind have specific objectives - discovering the fate of his son and what will happen at the Ragnarök, obtaining the mead of poetry, and so on - but Óðinn's dialogues with the hanged remain mysterious. It is worth emphasising that these are ordinary human dead, not the powerful volur whom the god also consults in poems such as Volsespá and Baldr's draumar. Óðinn is not all-knowing in himself, but he is prepared to run terrible risks to seek out knowledge from those who possess it. From his interrogation of the hanged, and the dead sorceresses, it is clear that death gave access to a secret lore than the god himself could
only reach at second-hand (cf. Ström 1947). This is important because it suggests a new aspect of Viking Age belief, namely that human beings could potentially explore places closed to even the most powerful of divinities. The fact that these people would have to be dead first may not have been especially relevant, considering the different aspects of the soul that we have seen in chapter two. It also is clear that human sorcerers, not just Óðinn, tried to gain knowledge from the dead in this way, as we shall see below when we look at the practice of atíseta.

The idea of the hidden and its revelation permeates every aspect of Óðinn's personality, even his persona as a battle god. Here it is manifested as trickery and lies, used to promote strife at every level from family quarrels to urging whole societies towards war. Time and again in the Eddic poems and in Snorri, we see Óðinn manipulating events for the worst. In the Hárbarðsljóð 24 he boasts that atta ek íforn, en aldri scettak, 'I incited the princes never to make peace'. In the sagas and in Saxo, Óðinn appears in disguise to bring kings into conflict, to break the bonds of kinship and generally to defile the social norms that sought to prevent these things.

Turville-Petre (1964: 51f) sees this aspect of the god as actively evil and sinister - Óðinn is far from the Classical traditions of divinities promoting a nobly romantic image of battle as a manly pursuit. Certainly this view was present in the Viking Age too, but in Óðinn we see war in a different light. The stereotypical victory through martial valour is here transformed into the altogether more sordid reality of early medieval combat: fighting men are stabbed from behind, or make a fatal slip, or freeze at a crucial moment; they are killed by mistake or through confusion, and often the bravest and best are the first to fall. All this was the god's doing, and though this can be perceived as a kind of betrayal, it paradoxically also fits in with the Óðinnic theme of revealing unwelcome truths in all their clarity. After all, these were the brutal facts of hand-to-hand fighting, the same as we see in European chronicles and on runestone inscriptions. Battles were won by default when one side 'gained possession of the field', a euphemism for everyone else having died or fled in panic. Runic epitaphs tell of a warrior fighting on 'as long as he could hold weapons', with an implicit image of the bloody circumstances in which that was no longer possible.

The malice of Óðinn gives us another insight into the mind-set of his followers, because there is no doubt that despite these tendencies he was genuinely seen as an appropriate patron of the elite, and especially of kings. Those who were said explicitly to have honoured the god by sending him the slain included rulers such as Hákon and Haraldr hárfagr, as well as heroes like Starkaðr, Sigurðr, Sigmundr and Sinfjotli. Battle itself was a sacrificial act, as the enemy dead were offered to Óðinn in advance. These elements of kingship, sorcery and power come together in the man who probably comes closest to embodying all of Óðinn's qualities - Eiríkr Blóðøx. Having fought his way to prominence by murdering most of his family, and finally exiled from Norway for his brutality, Eiríkr forged a new kingship for himself in York. It is significant that his queen, Gunnhildr, was notorious as a sorceress and shape-changer - a guise in which she appears in several sagas that we shall discuss below. As a couple they won a deserved reputation for treacherous evil, which is turned to praise in the great Eiríksmál commissioned by Gunnhildr after her husband was killed at Stainmore in 954. The poem relates how the foremost of the einherjar welcome Eiríkr to Valhöll, to take his place among the leaders of Óðinn's army.

This story also embodies another of the curiosities surrounding the god, because it is almost always at his hands that his most favoured champions are finally killed. This is not a sign of Óðinn withdrawing his support, but is in fact a compliment because it is the manner in which he gathers the dead warrior to him in Valhöll. The best of the mortal heroes are needed to fight beside the Æsir at the Ragnarök, and it is only through allowing them to be slain that Óðinn can bring them there.

Part of Óðinn's appeal undoubtedly lay in the opportunities that he offered for experiences beyond the usual social framework - a kind of divine ecstasy that could be obtained through a fusion of his power with the more mundane effects of alcohol, narcotics and what anthropologists would later term 'altered states of consciousness'. Much of this resembles the attractions of the Greek cult of Dionysus, and seems to have carried the same double-edged dangers of the bacchic frenzy. In the words of E.R. Dodds, "for those who do not close their minds against it such experience can be a deep source of spiritual power ... but those who repress the demand in themselves or refuse its satisfaction in others transform it by their act into a power of disintegration and destruction" (1960: 14; we shall return to this in chapter six). In the case of the Óðinnic mysteries, both aspects seem to have been socially
harnessed — the former as poetic inspiration and the latter as the berserk fury, both meeting in the grey middle-ground of sorcery.

Much of this is combined in the many attempts that have been made to see Óðinn as a shaman, an interpretation that in many ways took off with Strömback, Ohlmarks and Höfler as reviewed in chapter two. The disparate aspects of this argument were summarised effectively by Buchholz (1968: 60-77), who divided these facets of Óðinn’s nature into five groups:

- the shaman as sorcerer
- the shaman as poet
- the shaman as warrior (with reference to the berserkir and ulfhednar - see ch. 6)
- the shaman as craftworker (with reference to the transformatory power of the smith)
- the shaman as god

As we have seen, the notion of Óðinn as shaman was built primarily on the suggestions of trance, soul-journeying and shape-changing for which we find hints in the mythological poems and fuller explanations in Snorri. Beyond these, there are firstly two descriptions of Óðinn in the Poetic Edda which have been interpreted as shamanic initiation rituals. One of these we have already examined, from Hávamál when the god hangs for nine nights without food or drink, and has a vision of the runes which he grasps howling. The second is in the Grimnismál, in which a disguised Óðinn is made to sit between two fires for nine days and nights, again without eating. As this experience begins to affect him he recites long lists of magic and mythological knowledge.

This has been commented upon by several authors, many of whom have made comparisons with Finnish religion and Vedic sacrificial rituals in India, leading to the conclusion that this is an example of an initiation with shamanic overtones (e.g. R. Pipping 1928b; Krappe 1934; de Vries 1957: §336ff; F.R. Schröder 1958; Sauvé 1970). Several other authors have argued against a shamanic interpretation of Grimnismál, notably Jere Fleck, who has suggested that it is an attempt to increase supernatural power through the application of heat (1971b: 57). Like de Vries and Schröder, Fleck draws parallels with Indian practices, but differs from them in rejecting an initiatory context. However, as Schjødt has pointed out (1980: 32), this still supports the idea of some kind of augmentation of spiritual power through ordeal, and thus is not far from the shamanic agenda that Fleck rejects. More recently, the ‘initiation’ interpretation has also found favour with Elizabeth Jackson, in her study of the relationship between the magical lists in Hávamál (1994: 56).

While Jens Peter Schjødt generally accepts the account of Óðinn on the tree as representing an initiation (1980: 36; 1993), perhaps even one with shamanic tendencies, I agree with him that the ‘fire ordeal’ in Grimnismál probably does not (1980: 40f). An important clue comes with Óðinn’s recitation of magical lore - he does not need to be initiated because he already possesses these skills, and in this poem he has become a source of wisdom of the kind that he usually seeks himself (cf. Auld 1976: 156f). The question of heat and its purpose in the Grimnismál can be reoriented in the light of other aspects of ‘Óðinnic sorcery’. I feel that it can be more reasonably interpreted as a battle ritual connected with the resistance of heat as a useful accomplishment of a warrior, combined with the acquisition of supernatural power for use in that context. We will come back to this in chapter six, but here we can note that this same motif is in fact found in association with Óðinnic warriors, as in Hrólfss saga kraka (31) when Hrólfur and his men are challenged by Añils to sit still in his hall while a massive blaze is banked up in front of them. Unlike the god, at last Hrólfur’s men can stand the heat no longer; they throw their shields into the flames (discarding shields is a berserker attribute), and leap over the fires to attack their enemy. This is an interesting development in that the flames are in many ways a prelude to the violence, and almost its cause. We should remember that Óðinn’s fire ordeal in the Grimnismál results in him killing the king.

Shamanic overtones have also been seen in Óðinn’s animals, along with other possible helping spirits. Foremost of these are the two ravens alluded to in Ynglingasaga, which are nameless there but detailed at length in other sources. One of them, Muninn, is mentioned only in Grimnismál 20, but the other, Huginn, appears in a number of sources (as well as the Grimnismál, in Eddic poetry the raven plays a part in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I 54; Regimbló 18, 26; Fafnisbló 35; and Guðrúnarkviða...
Both birds also appear in skaldic poetry in the form of raven kennings (see Meissner 1921: 120; Turville-Petrel 1964: 58).

In *Gylfaginning* 38, Snorri relates how Óðinn sends out the ravens each dawn, and they return at dinner-time to sit on his shoulders and speak the news into his ears. Their intimate link to the god is made clear by *Grimnismál* 20:

```
Huginn ok Muninn     Huginn and Muninn
fly every day          over the mighty earth;
over the mighty earth;
I fear for Huginn,       lest he not come back,
lest he not come back,
yet I worry more about Muninn.

Grimnismál 20; my translation
```

The ravens’ names are difficult to translate exactly, as they have essentially the same meaning in English, but they can be rendered approximately as ‘Memory’ (Muninn) and ‘Mind’ (Huginn), though both names have the same connotation of ‘Thought’. Clearly, Óðinn is sending out part of his mental faculties in the form of the birds (*Ynglingasaga* mentions that he endows them with speech), and he worries that they will be lost. This fear for the hazards of such experiences will be returned to in chapter six.

Similar associations may have attached to Óðinn’s wolves, Freki and Geri, mentioned in the *Grimnismál* (19) and in *Gylfaginning* (38). Their names both mean ‘the greedy one’, and there is a suggestion that their master keeps them fed on corpses from the battlefield. They do not appear to have specific functions, unlike the ravens, but like them they clearly belong in the category of ‘beasts of battle’. Wolves play a major role in the mythology - the clearest example being Fenrir - and as we shall see they are also mentioned as the steeds of troll-women, giantesses and occasionally human sorceresses. The combination of the battlefield and the supernatural appears again, and it is probable that Óðinn’s wolves should be considered among his sorcerous familiars (see Lincoln 1979 for more on the role of such beasts).

Another kind of helping spirit may be represented by the head of Mimr mentioned in chapter two, which Óðinn uses as a source of predictions as the Ragnarök approaches (*Voluspá* 45). In *Sigrdrifomál* 14, Mimr’s head is seen as one of the sources from which the god gains knowledge of runes, alongside his self-sacrifice in *Hávamál*. The tale is alluded to in Egill Skallagrímsson’s poetry and was thus current in the tenth century, but its meaning is obscure. Especially on the later evidence of *Ynglingasaga* 7, in which the head appears in the context of Óðinn’s sorcerous skills, it is possible that it embodies a dim recollection of some kind of helping spirit. However, the significance of this tale is hard to assess, running out as it does in the vast literature on other European traditions of severed heads, which may or may not be of relevance (the Celts are a favourite point of comparison here; cf. Simpson 1962).

We should also consider the problematic relationship between this story and the tale of how Óðinn acquired wisdom by trading his eye for a drink from Mimir’s well at the roots of the world-tree (*Voluspá* 28). Some authors have identified Mimir with an aspect of Yggdrasill, and it is actually called Mimameidr, ‘Mimi’s Tree’, in *Svipdagasmál*. Similarly, Mimir drinks from his well of knowledge using the Gjallarhorn, which Heimdallr will later use to herald the doom of the gods. We do not know why the head and the well-guardian have slightly different spellings of their names, and it does not help that Snorri has different versions again of these stories in *Ynglingsaga* (4), interpreted as part of the divine war, and in *Gylfaginning* (14, 50).

It is clear that the story of Mimir *is* from the Viking Age, and probably concerned a prophecying head that also had associations to both the World Tree and the Ragnarök, but for want of further evidence we must leave this as a question mark in the apparatus of Óðinn’s sorcery (for a summary of work on Mim[i]r, see de Vries 1957: §176; Halvorsen 1966; Dronke 1997: 136ff). As a coda to this, it is worth mentioning John Lindow’s recent idea (2000) that Mimir’s ‘head’ was originally a kind of shamanic mask. This would fit with the idea of Óðinn’s interrogation of it, as either the residence of
a spirit or the means by which he could contact one. Lindow suggests that by the time of its appearance in the medieval literature, Mimir’s head had been transformed by the Christian saga writers into a pagan ‘relic’, understood by them in the same sense as the relics of saints with which they were familiar.

One of the most unequivocally shamanic images found not only in Norse mythology but also in material culture is that of Óðinn’s eight-legged horse, Sleipnir. Most of what we know of him in detail comes from Snorri, but the horse is also mentioned in Grímnismál, Hymndulljóð and Sigrdrífrsmaðr. Sleipnir’s name means approximately ‘the sliding one’, which may refer to the manner in which he moves between the worlds. His eight legs are mentioned by Snorri and in one of Gestumbindi’s riddles in Hervarar saga. Sleipnir was grey, and his teeth were etched with runes.

As we shall see, horses and their genitals had associations with sorcery in the Viking Age, and Óðinn’s stallion may be seen in this context. He was also clearly a metaphor for death. Just as the name of the World Tree, Yggdrasill, means ‘steed of Yggr [i.e. Óðinn]’, so the gallows is called hábrjóstr horva Sleipnir, ‘high-chested rope-Sleipnir’ in strophe 14 of the Ynglingatal. Óðinn and others ride him to the realm of the dead, and this fits well with the idea of a horse that bears the (male) deceased to his appointed place. We shall return to Sleipnir and his archaeological correlates in later chapters.

In some sources, Óðinn also takes on a role as a healer, using sorcery for this purpose in the same manner as a shaman. We see this in Hávamál, with the liknargaldr, ‘healing-galdr’, in strophe 120, and the fragmentary spell in strophe 147. These skills are made especially clear in the Second Merseburg Charm (de Vries 1957: §451-3). This Old High German spell is known from a tenth-century manuscript but is probably older, and describes how Wodan (i.e. Óðinn) heals the broken leg of Baldr’s horse:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Phol ende Uuodan vuorun zi holza;} \\
\text{du uuart demo balders volon sín vuoz birenkit;} \\
\text{thú biguolen Sinhtgunt, Sunna era suister;} \\
\text{thú biguolen Friia, Volla era suister;} \\
\text{thú biguolen Uuodan, só hí uuola conda;} \\
\text{sóse bërenkí sóse bhootrenkí sóse lidrenkí;} \\
\text{bën zi bêna, blut zi bluoda,} \\
\text{lid zi geliden, sóse gelímda sín!}
\end{align*}
\]

Phol and Wodan rode into the wood;
the foreleg of Baldr’s horse was dislocated;
then Sinhtgunt and Sunna, her sister, sang over it;
then Friia and Volla, her sister, sang over it;
then Wodan sang over it, for he could do that well;
be it dislocation of bone, be it an ailment of the blood, be it dislocation of the limbs:
bone to bone, blood to blood,
limb to limb, as if they were glued!

Text after de Vries 1957: §451; translation after Simek 1993: 278

While all these elements still hold up well as support for a ‘shamanic’ Óðinn, in discussing the god as a sorcerer it is equally important to dispose of misconceptions that have arisen. Some of these have emerged from the fact that at least as late as the Reformation, the figure of Óðinn played a role in practical magic of the kind recorded in the various works on the ‘Black Arts’ that appeared throughout Europe at this time (for example, the sixteenth-century Icelandic Gálaðrabók). The god also continued to feature prominently in Scandinavian folktales even down to the nineteenth century, most often as a demonic figure and sometimes identified with the Devil himself (see, for example, Lindow 1978: 114-6; Blecher & Blecher 1993). None of this has anything to do with the Viking Age. This perpetuation of Óðinn stories in fact conforms unremarkably to common patterns in medieval and later north European folklore and magic, and should certainly not be interpreted as a continuity of belief. Such material is wholly unreliable as a source for the religion of nearly a millennium earlier, and need not concern us further here.