

M.A. IN MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES

Riding To The Afterlife:

The Role Of Horses In Early Medieval North-Western Europe.

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Abstract

In order to establish the role of horses in the pre-Christian religions of Anglo-Saxon England, Viking-Age Scandinavia and other Germanic regions in mainland Europe, this dissertation will look for evidence of burial, sacrifice and other rituals involving horses in both archaeological and literary sources. In the ideology which is reconstructed in this essay, the horse serves as a status symbol to Christian and pagan alike as well as an efficient means of transport. To pagans it was also a source of food and was connected to religious rites involving decapitation and ritual consumption. The analysis shows that the numerous examples of horse burials in north-western Europe serve a variety of functions: From status symbol in grave-goods, sacrifice to gods or ancestors and a means of posthumous transportation to another world.¹

By comparing the literary with archaeological ways in which horses are represented in Norse mythology and accounts of pagan rituals, I identify two main categories of divine function for the horse in this era. Firstly, high status, warrior burials, accompanied by horses, which are most identifiable with the cult of Óðinn. In these cases the horse functions both as status symbol and as a means of transportation in the afterlife, probably to *Valhöll*. Secondly, other burials mainly involve the cremation of horses, sometimes accompanied by harnesses and bridles in which case they were also intended as transport in the afterlife and most seem to have spiritual significance related to the cult of the Vanir. Horses that were sacrificed and eaten may have been dedicated to the fertility god Freyr, just like living horses in *Hrafnkels saga*. Tacitus provides older evidence of the horse as a divine medium and I believe this rite is an earlier manifestation of the same one described by Adam of Bremen, and that this rite was also related to a Vanir horse-cult.

Analysis of semi-pagan medical charms from the tenth century as well as early Christian legislation regarding horses provides context which helps to distinguish what is genuinely pagan about horse related folk culture in early medieval north-western Europe.

¹ Peter Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback? Horse Burial in Scandinavia during the Viking Age*, (The Centre for Viking and Medieval Studies, University of Oslo, Fall 2002), p.31.

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Introduction

The north-western European mythology of horses is best illustrated in Icelandic literature, particularly in the kings' and family sagas and in the prose and poetic Eddas. Although these sources were recorded by Christian writers, it is certain that they contain some genuine references to pre-Christian custom, particularly the poetry which was preserved through the oral tradition.

The literary sources can be compared to the archaeological evidence so that the numerous examples of horse related cultic activities can be categorised in relation to geography, context and the intended purpose of the ritual.

Mythology

Many horses are mentioned in the Eddas and nearly every god, king and giant has a horse which is named. In the mythology depicted by Snorri Sturluson, horses play a significant role in the order and structure of the universe. While many of these roles are minor, it is necessary to elaborate in more detail on the subject of those whose significance has deeper relevance to the essay.

There are four horses who are assigned specific tasks involving the cycles of nature. Árvakr "early riser" and Alsviðr "all swift" are the horses that pull the sun's chariot through the sky. Skinfaxi and Hrímfaxi belong to Day and Night as is related in *Gylfaginning*:

Night rides first with the horse called Hrímfaxi (Frost Mane), and every morning, foam from the horse's bit sprinkles the Earth. Day's horse is called Skinfaxi (Shining Mane), and with its mane it lights up all the sky and the Earth.²

Night is the daughter of the giant named Norfi/Narfi.³ The giants are associated with primal nature and although they sometimes intermarry with the gods, they are generally an enemy who threaten the stability of the gods' home, Asgard. It is fitting therefore that the giants occupy the architecture of the universe through day and night, though the active role in the passing of the night and the rising of the sun is always played by a horse. In the Eddic poem *Vafþrúðnismál*, it is on the subject of the horses, rather than the giants, that Vafþrúðnir tests Gagnráðr:

11. 'Tell me, Gagnráðr, since you wish from the floor to make a test of your talents,
what's the name of the horse who always drags the day over troops of men?'

12. 'He's called Shining-man who always drags the day over troops of men.'

The glorious Goths think him the best horse: his mane shines always aflame.⁴

The horse assumes this significant role because both the space through which the sun travels and the time through which day and night pass are perceived as journeys that require transportation. A ship might just have easily fulfilled this function but travelling through the air is only achieved with the aid of a unique beast; there are no flying vehicles in the mythology except those drawn by some kind of magical creature. This indicates the spiritual

² Jesse L. Byock, (trans), 'Gylfaginning' v.10 in *The Prose Edda*, (Penguin Classics: 1970), p. 19.

³ Ibid., p.19.

⁴ Andy Orchard, (trans), 'Vafþrúðnismál' v. 11-14 in *the Elder Edda*, (Penguin Classics: 2011), p. 41.

significance of the horse as a means of transportation, not just through space and time but also between different states of being.

Óðinn rides his stallion Sleipnir into the underworld to recover his dead son Baldr in the Eddic poem *Baldrs Draumar*.⁵ Óðinn's role as lord of the dead is facilitated by this shamanic steed which transports him between worlds. Another mythical horse not only travels through the air but also on the sea; Hófvarpnir is a flying, sea-walking horse ridden by the goddess Gná.⁶

Most of the gods themselves have horses which they use every day to attend the place of judgement, over Bifrost to the Well of Urðr, beneath the third root of the world ash, Yggdrasil. Only Pórr, the son of Jörð “Earth”, gets there by foot, wading through rivers as he goes. The gods of a more aristocratic nature all have horses, and Óðinn, the most noble of all gods, is in possession of the best of horses, as is related in *Gylfaginning*:

The horses of the Æsir are named as follows: Sleipnir [Fast Traveller] is the best; Odin owns him, and he has eight legs. The second is Glad, the third Gyllir, the fourth Glaer, the fifth Skeidbrimir, the sixth Silfrtopp, the seventh Sinir, the eighth Gils, the ninth Falhofnir, the tenth Gulltopp and the eleventh is Lettfeti. Baldr's horse was burned with him.⁷

The horses of the gods are also mentioned in the Eddic poem, *Grímnismál*:

'Glad and Golden, Glær and Skeidbrimir,
Silver-top and Sinir,
Gisl and Falhófnir, Gold-top and Light-foot:
these are the horses the Æsir ride,
each day, when they journey to judgement
close by the ash Yggdrasil.'⁸

The possession of horses is synonymous with wealth and power so it is appropriate that the gods were imagined as owning marvellous horses. The function of the horse for the gods is as cyclical as that of Skinfaxi and Hrímfaxi. All make a journey each day which transports them between states, from darkness to light or in the case of the horses of the Æsir, from one world to the next over Bifrost, the bridge that reaches between worlds.

The ash tree, Yggdrasil, can be likened to a horse, for the name itself means “Terror-steed”. The first part *Yggr* “terror” is Óðinn's second most significant name in *Grímnismál* (54).⁹ The name itself is a reference to Óðinn's self-sacrifice when he hangs himself from Yggdrasil as is mentioned in *Hávamál*.¹⁰ This suggests that Óðinn's self-sacrifice was perceived as a journey, perhaps from life to death, with Yggdrasil as his horse.¹¹

This concept of the tree as a horse has parallels in the Anglo-Saxon Christian poem, *The Dream of the Rood*, in which the cross is likened to a horse in the sense that Christ is likened to a warrior who *gestigan* “mounts” the cross at crucifixion, in the same way that a

⁵ Orchard, ‘Baldrs draumar’ v. 2 in *the Elder Edda*, p. 248.

⁶ Byock, ‘Gylfaginning’ v.34 in *The Prose Edda*, pp. 43-4.

⁷ Ibid., v.15, p. 25.

⁸ Ibid., ‘Grímnismál’, p. 55.

⁹ Richard North, *Heathen gods in Old English Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 279.

¹⁰ Orchard, ‘Hávamál’ v. 138 in *the Elder Edda*, p. 35.

¹¹ North, *Heathen gods*, p. 300.

warrior would mount a horse.¹² *Gestīgan* is related to the word *stigrāp* “stirrup”, the stirrup was imported to Germany by the early eighth century during Charlemagne’s campaign against the Avars. The Anglo-Saxons acquired it soon after so that they too could use this new technology to ride a horse into battle rather than just to a battle.¹³ The use of equestrian terminology employed to depict Christ as an Anglo-Saxon warrior is an example of the importance of the horse as a status symbol and also shows the natural association that Anglo-Saxons made between gods and horses.

Consumption

Some sparse references in clerical literature, the Icelandic sagas and some archaeological grave sites are the only evidence available regarding rituals involving horse burial and the ritual consumption of horse meat. The exact religious purpose of eating horse is therefore unknown. Pope Gregory III wrote to the Anglo-Saxon Saint Boniface when he was a missionary amongst pagan Germans and instructed him not to allow the converts to eat horse meat:

You say, among other things, that some have the habit of eating wild horses and very many eat tame horses. This, holy brother, you are in no wise to permit in future but are to suppress it in every possible way, with the help of Christ, and impose suitable penance upon the offenders. It is a filthy and abominable practice.¹⁴

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle also relates that in 893, heathen Danish Vikings in Buttington on the Severn were forced to *fretan* “devour” horseflesh for want of any other food. The word *fretan*, like Modern German *fressen* and Dutch *vreten*, is only used to describe animals eating; its use in this instance demonstrates the author’s contempt for heathens. Although it does not specify a religious aspect to the practice, the reference certainly portrays the Danes as ‘other’ by virtue of their alien custom:

Da hi þa ðær fela wucena sæton on twa healfa þære ea, 7 se cing wæs west on Defnum wið þone sciphere, ða wæron hi mid metelieste gewægde, 7 hæfdon þa micelne dæl þara horsa freten. 7 ða oþre wæron hungre acwolen.¹⁵

Then when they had settled for many weeks on the two sides of the river, and the king was West in Devon against the raiding ship-army, they were weighed down with lack of food, and had devoured the greater part of their horses, and the others were perishing with hunger.¹⁶

The fact that horse meat is a rich and readily available source of protein, in an era when food could sometimes be scarce, marks the prohibition of its consumption as an imposition of culturally or religiously motivated legislation. Reference to this same practice and its prohibition occurs in conversion narratives in England, Norway and Iceland. In Norway, an early law named *Gulatingsloven*, stated that if a man ate horse meat he would be exiled and

¹² Alfred J. Wyatt (ed), *An Anglo-Saxon Reader*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1919), p.170.

¹³ Sarah Larratt Keefer, ‘Hwær Cwom Mearh? The Horse in Anglo-Saxon England’ in *Journal of Medieval History*, Vol. 22, Issue 2, (Elsevier Science Ltd: 1996), p.122.

¹⁴ Ephraim Emerton, (trans), *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, (New York: Columbia University Press: 1940), p. 58.

¹⁵ Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, ASC, (Cambridge: 2001), p. 68.

¹⁶ Michael Swanton, (trans and ed), ASC, (Phoenix press, 2000), p. 87.

have all his possessions confiscated.¹⁷ In *Íslendingabók* (c.1125), the law-speaker, Þorgeirr, decides that the heathens must convert and describes the new laws prohibiting some pagan practices but makes exception for eating horse-flesh, demonstrating the cultural importance of this practice to Icelanders:

It was then proclaimed in the laws that all people should be Christian and that those in this country who had not yet been baptised should receive baptism; but the old laws should stand as regards the exposure of children and the eating of horse-flesh.¹⁸

A similar declaration is made by the law-speaker in *Njáls Saga*:

‘This will be the foundation of our law,’ he said, ‘that all men in this land are to be Christians and believe in one God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — and give up all worship of false idols, the exposure of children, and the eating of horse meat. Three years’ outlawry will be the penalty for open violations, but if these things are practiced in secret there shall be no punishment.’¹⁹

In seventh century England, Theodore of Tarsus, the Archbishop of Canterbury, specifically says that the consumption of horse meat should not be prohibited. This seems to have been a diplomatic decision like in Iceland, intended to placate the heathen population.²⁰

The horse is a forbidden food in the Jewish religion, as are all mammals that do not have cloven hooves; this custom is contained in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, but many of the dietary restrictions of the Old Testament were not widely practiced among European Christians. The fact that the horse is specified among so many potential prohibitions, leads one to assume that the eating of horse-flesh was not merely regarded as un-Christian, but was associated with active heathen worship and was therefore threatening to Christianity.²¹

The Saga of Hákon the Good in *Heimskringla*, written in the 1220’s by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), includes a description of a ritual pagan feast reluctantly attended by the diplomatic, Christian King Hákon the Good. Snorri describes the custom with the assumption that the reader has no prior knowledge of pagan customs. It cannot be taken literally because of the potential for Christian bias and also error due to the fact that few pagan customs are likely to have been preserved in Iceland up to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But Snorri’s proud Icelandic identity coupled with his fervent antiquarianism resulted in his desire to accumulate and record native customs and mythologies which must be assumed to have at least some accurate content. His description of the feast at a heathen temple reveals the importance of animal sacrifice:

All kinds of domestic animal were slaughtered there, including horses, and all the blood that came from them was then called *hlaut* ('lot'), and what the blood was contained in, *hlaut*-bowls, and *hlaut*-twigs, these were fashioned like holy water sprinklers; with these the altars were to be reddened all over, and also the walls of the temple outside and inside and the

¹⁷ Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback?*, p. 16.

¹⁸ Siân Grønlie, (trans), *Íslendingabók. Kristni saga. The Book of the Icelanders. The Story of the Conversion*, (Viking Society for Northern Research: University College London, 2006), Ch. VII, p. 9.

¹⁹ Robert Cook, (trans), *Njal's Saga*, (Penguin Books: 2001), p. 181.

²⁰ Malcolm Jones, ‘Saints and other horse mutilators, or why all Englishmen have Tails’ in *Beihefte zur Mediaevistik: Fauna and Flora in the Middle Ages*, (Peter Lang europäischer verlag der wissenschaften: 2007) p.160.

²¹ Ibid., p.160.

people also were sprinkled, while the meat was to be cooked for a feast.²²

The horse flesh here is specified amongst all animals potentially involved in the slaughter. This could be because the horse was the most significant animal in the ritual, or because more horses were killed than other animals or it could have been emphasised by Snorri because the eating of horseflesh was an act that was perceived as intensely heathen by Christians of his time. The latter explanation fits in with King Hákon's reaction when told to eat the horse meat. It also explains the hostility of the farmers when the King refuses:

The next day, when people went to table, the farmers rushed up to the king, saying that he must now eat horseflesh. The king wanted on no account to do that. Then they bade him drink some of the gravy. He would not do that. Then they bade him eat some of the fat. He would not do that either and he was on the point of being attacked. Jarl Sigurðr says that he will settle the matter between them, and told them to stop the disturbance, and told the king to lean with his mouth open over the handle of the pot where the steam from the cooking of the horseflesh had risen up, and the handle was covered with fat. Then the king went and wrapped a linen cloth round the handle and opened his mouth over it and then went to his throne, and neither side was well pleased.²³

Clearly the eating of the horse is a significant aspect of a larger ritual which involves blood being sprinkled in a manner similar to that of holy water by a priest; it might be assumed that the horse blood thus transfers a kind of energy or power onto the temple and people on to which it is sprinkled. Indeed, blood is high in iron and protein, so when ingested also provides literal power in the form of nutritional sustenance. Like the Catholic Eucharist, the consumption of blood, whether from a god or a powerful and valuable animal like a horse, seems intended to transfer power to the one who ingests it. The meaning of the horse blood being sprinkled on the congregation may be understood via comparison to other religions, such as Mithraism in which blood was sprinkled in such a way.²⁴ There are also similarities with the feast in the *Odyssey*, in which blood is the means by which the dead may be revived and communicated with and as Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson has pointed out, the feast at Hlaðir is also intended for the fallen as well as the gods.²⁵

Though this ritual can be called a form of communion, Jón Hnefill rejects the suggestion that the comparison of the blood sprinkler to an aspergillum is merely intended to give Catholics a point of reference, since the two ceremonies serve different purposes, “Holy water was sprinkled as a symbol of purification, but blood was sprinkled to charge the surroundings with power.”²⁶

The following winter Hákon is confronted by the pagan reactionaries at the Yule feast and is again encouraged to consume horse meat in a way that is part of a deliberate attempt to “root out Christianity”:²⁷

The first day at the feast the farmers attacked him and told him to offer sacrifice, promising him trouble if he didn't. Jarl Sigurðr mediated between them. The outcome was that king

²² Snorri Sturluson, ‘Hakonar Saga Goða’ in *Heimskringla volume 1*, Alison Finlay, Anthony Faulkes (trans) (Viking society for Northern Research, UCL: 2011), p. 98.

²³ Sturluson, ‘Hakonar Saga Goða’ in *Heimskringla*, p.101.

²⁴, J.H. Aðalsteinsson, *A Piece of Horse Liver: Myth, Ritual and Folklore in Old Icelandic Sources*, (Háskólaútgáfan: Reykjavík, 1998), p. 40.

²⁵ Ibid., p.40.

²⁶ Ibid., p.38.

²⁷ Sturluson, ‘Hakonar Saga Goða’ in *Heimskringla*, p.101.

Hákon ate a few pieces of horse-liver.²⁸

This infuriated the King and drove him to take vengeance on the Þrándheimers; such is the severity of a Christian king being forced to eat horse. The theme of King Hákon eating horse appears in a very similar form in another text, *Ágrip*, in which the Þrándheimers threaten to drive the king from the throne unless he makes a pagan sacrifice. Hákon refuses to actually ingest the horsemeat which is apparently in some way connected to the sacrifice and once again is said to make a compromise. In this story, however, compromising his Christian faith is enough to change his fate:

It is said that he bit horse-liver, but wrapped it in cloth
so that he should not bite it directly. He would worship in
no other way, and thereafter, it is said, his troubles were
greater than before.²⁹

The Saga of Hákon the Good illustrates the political ramifications of a Christian leader assuming the throne among a people to whom the concept of kingship is based on divine inheritance. Hákon's claim to the throne is based on his birth right as a descendent of a pagan god and also on his ability to bring prosperity to the land.³⁰ By being Christian and opposing pagan practices, Hákon was also opposing the traditional laws of a kingdom in which law itself was confirmed by sacrifice.³¹

These accounts all show the consumption of horse flesh to be a detestable and un-Christian act, not something done out of necessity, for want of sustenance, but as a religious ritual which is so opposed to the values of Christianity that the Christian God would bring ill fortune upon a converted leader who practiced it. A more practical analysis of these representations leads one to suspect that Christian authors identified horse meat and the use of horses in pagan ritual as being a suitably alien act by which to define heathens as an 'other' in opposition to the civilized culture of Roman Catholicism. The fact that horses were involved in fertility cults, sacrifice and divination might be sufficient explanation for why Christian Icelanders and Anglo-Saxons were concerned with banning their consumption.³²

Christian perspectives

The horse is a prominent symbol in Christian mythology as well as pagan. The book of Revelation of Jesus Christ to Saint John the Baptist 6:1-8 describes the arrival of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, who will mark the time of the Last Judgement. The horse plays another celestial role in Revelation 19:11 when a white horse is revealed behind a door in heaven and again in 19:14 when the armies of heaven are said to ride on white horses. The importance of the horse to many cultures and religions is understandable given the value of the animal for agriculture, warfare and transportation. It can easily be imagined that the horse-cult of a newly converted Germanic people could be absorbed into Christian theology, were it not for the dietary restrictions of the Christian faith regarding horse meat.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 102.

²⁹ M. J. Driscoll, *Ágrip Af Noregskonungasogum*, (Viking Society for Northern Research, Vol. X, UCL: 2008), p. 11.

³⁰ William Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity*, (Manchester University Press: 1970), p.15.

³¹ Aðalsteinsson, *A Piece of Horse Liver*, p. 70.

³² William Ian Miller, "Of Outlaws, Christians, Horsemeat, and Writing: Uniform Laws and Saga Iceland", in *Michigan Law Review*, Vol. 89, No. 8 (Aug., 1991), pp. 2086-2087.

The stigmatisation of pagan activity was a necessary part of the conversion process, so aspects of the national or tribal cultures that pertained to heathen spiritual beliefs had to be publicly condemned. The construction of social taboos relating to said practices creates an aversion to them in the collective psychology of the populace. This was the function of the prohibition of eating horse in England and Scandinavia and of the prohibition of idolatry and exposure of children.³³ Bede, in *Historia Ecclesiastica*, and Ari Þorgilsson in *Íslendingabók*, both depict pagan practices being easily extinguished and no total prohibition of eating horse was enforced in either Iceland or England, but the story of Hákon the Good shows an ongoing political power struggle played out at the heathen feasts where horse was eaten.³⁴

To understand Hákon's disgust at the horse meat, it is prudent to consider a similar reaction by Óláfr Tryggvason when offered another type of meat tainted by heathen association. There are two main versions of the story 'The King and the Guest'; one exists in *Flateyjarbók*, the other in *Heimskringla*. In both versions King Óláfr is entertained at a banquet by a hooded old man who tells tales of the pagan king Qgvaldr who had worshipped a cow.³⁵ There is specific reference to the fact that Qgvaldr enjoyed drinking the milk of the cow, thus equating the taboo of pagan worship with the consumption of the taboo substance. The king later realises that the hooded man was Óðinn in disguise; he discovers that the old man had left two sides of beef in the kitchen which had since been cooked with the rest of his food. The king has all the food thrown out saying that, "Óðinn must not now be allowed to do anything to deceive them."³⁶

Larrington identifies the two kinds of discourse that are opposed in this story; firstly the pagan tales which the king enjoys, because they are an un-Christian pastime with an associated taboo. Secondly, after waking, the king instinctively knows that Óðinn will have launched a second attack and checks with the cook to see if any food has been left:³⁷

We infer that the sides of meat he supplies are, in some sense, derived from the long dead cult-cow of King Qgvaldr, centuries old, long buried in the earth, but made to look 'fat and meaty' ('feitar ok digrar'). The king's curiosity about the pagan past has exposed him and all his men to the risk of the worst kind of diabolic food-poisoning during the Easter feast.³⁸

The forbidden food of the heathen is employed in this early Norse-Christian morality tale to stigmatise the nostalgic habit of enjoying the heroic tales of heathen times.³⁹ Nostalgia for one taboo is shown to make one vulnerable to other heathen customs, customs which ultimately lead to damnation. The disgusting nature of the contaminated meat is assigned due to the heathen association; the consumption of horse meat therefore had this same type of taboo in Scandinavia and in England where even to this day it is rarely eaten.

Sacrifice and prognostication

The earliest literary reference to a horse-cult among Germanic peoples is Roman, from Tacitus' *Germania* (c. 98^{AD}). His focus is neither on consumption nor sacrifice, but on the

³³ Carolyne Larrington, 'Diet, Defecation and the Devil' in *Medieval obscenities*, Nicola McDonald (ed), (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2006), p. 147.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 147.

³⁵ Sturluson, 'Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar' in *Heimskringla*, p. 195.

³⁶ Ibid., p.195.

³⁷ Larrington, 'Diet, Defecation and the Devil' p. 151.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 151.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 155.

taking of auspices by pagan priests who recognise that the horses are able to receive divine counsel:

Although the familiar method of seeking information from the cries and the flight of birds is known to the Germans, they have also a special method of their own — to try to obtain omens and warnings from horses. These horses are kept at the public expense in the sacred woods and groves that I have mentioned; they are pure white and undefiled by any toil in the service of man. The priest and the king of the state, yoke them to a sacred chariot and walk beside them, taking note of their neighs and snorts.⁴⁰

He does not inform us of the extent to which the gods controlled and determined the future or fate.⁴¹ This is a topic that is also ambiguous in later forms of Germanic paganism; in Norse mythology all the gods are resigned to their fate at Ragnarök, but this by no means proves that fate had always been beyond the control of the gods in earlier Germanic mythology. The excerpt illustrates the spiritual significance invested in horses in Germanic paganism of the first century and their role as a link between the earthly and the divine and this helps to explain some of the burial rituals that will be discussed later.

Adam of Bremen records a similar custom of equine prognostication in eleventh century Sweden. It may be that Adam took this directly from Tacitus, but Adam provides an additional observation that such beliefs were not confined to one social class but were universal among the heathen:

To inquire of the cries and flight of birds was characteristic of this folk; also to make trial of the presentiments and movements of horses and to observe their neighing and snorting. On no other auspices was more reliance placed, not merely by the common people but also by their betters.⁴²

Both Adam and Tacitus look down upon the customs of the Northern peoples as culturally inferior. The similarities between the two accounts are striking. That a custom appears to have survived this long is testament to the popularity of the horse as a spiritually significant animal for Germanic paganism. In each account there is a reference to social division, but whereas Tacitus records the custom as being practiced exclusively by an elite with white horses bred for purpose, Adam testifies to its significance to all classes and makes no mention of the type of horse required for the ritual. This suggests that by Adam's time the ritual was practiced more widely among different sections of the populace.

Ibn Fadlan's *Risala* documents provide an Islamic perspective of a funeral held by the Rus on the Volga c. 921-922. He describes how two horses were run until sweating and were then cut up with a sword and placed in a boat with other animals and a girl, and then they were all burned and finally buried.⁴³ This account bares a close resemblance to archaeological evidence which is examined later.

⁴⁰ Cornelius Tacitus, *The Agricola; and, The Germania*, H. Mattingly (trans) (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 109.

⁴¹ Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, (Continuum: London, 2011), pp. 58-59.

⁴² Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, Francis J. Tschan (trans), (New York: Columbia University Press: 1959), Bk. 1, p. 11.

⁴³ Sikora, 'Diversity in Viking Age horse burial', p. 88.

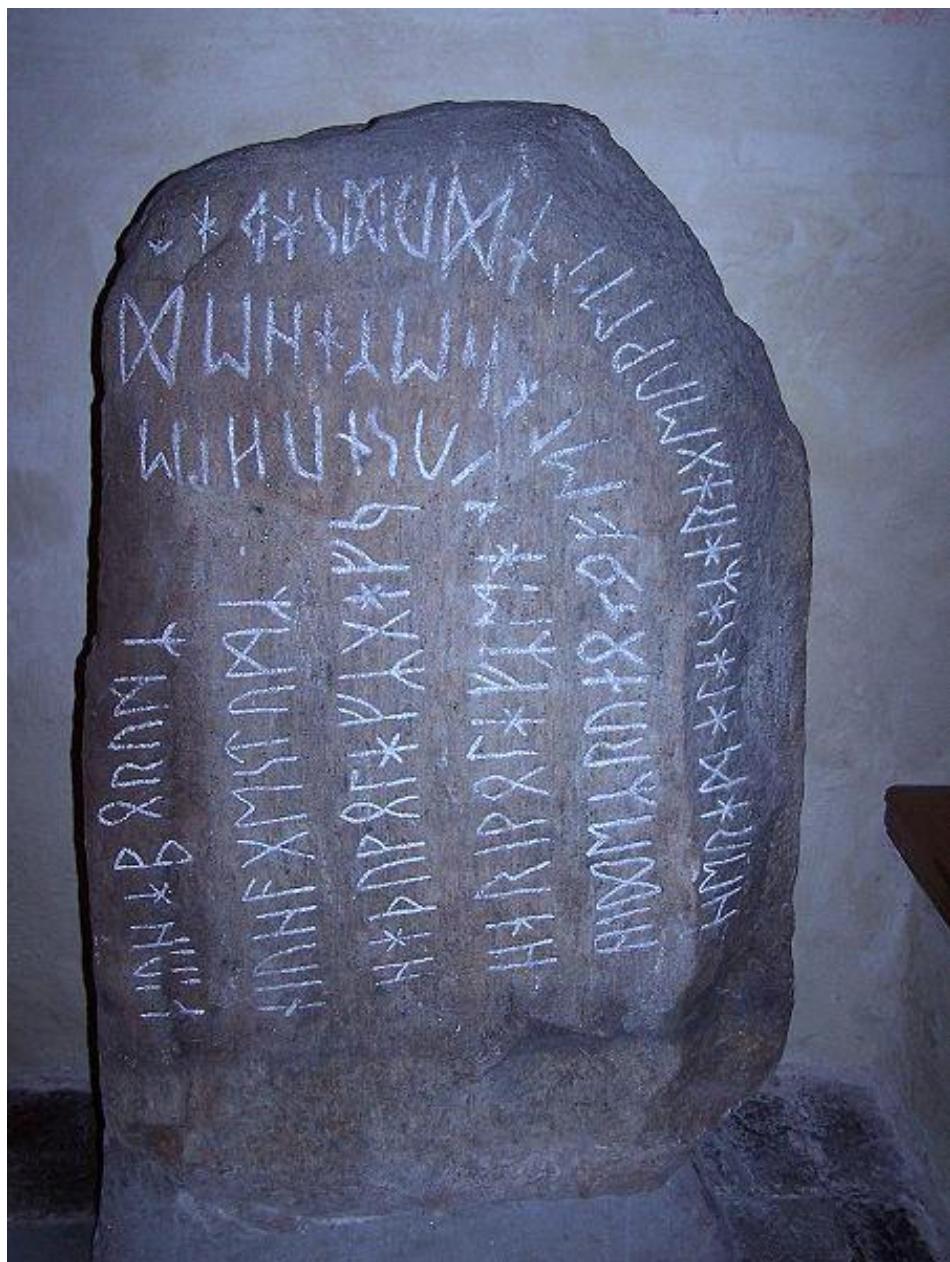


Figure 4– Stentoften Rune Stone

The consumption of horse meat in Trøndelag in the 950s, according to *Heimskringla* and earlier sources, is associated with the sacrifice of the animal itself. The toasts drunk at the feast by Hákon and the farmers were dedicated to heathen gods. Hákon making the sign of the cross on the toast is excused as being the sign of Þórr's hammer, but the first toast at the Yule feast is said to be to Óðinn.⁴⁴ Adam of Bremen's account of horse sacrifice also appears to be an offering to Óðinn, the god of the hanged:

The sacrifice is of this nature: of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads, with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple. Now this grove is so sacred in the eyes of the heathen that each and every tree in it is believed divine because of the death or putrefaction of the

⁴⁴ Sturluson, ‘Hakonar Saga Goða’ in *Heimskringla*, p. 98.

victims. Even dogs and horses hang there with men.⁴⁵

Adam of Bremen never actually visited Uppsala where the sacrifice he describes allegedly took place but his sources are reputedly reliable. In his Master's thesis, Peter Shenk points out the similarity between Adam of Bremen's account and that of Thietmar of Merseburg, who wrote of the pagan activities in Lejre, Denmark in the early tenth century. There too the worshippers gathered every ninth year, the sacrifice involved ninety-nine people and ninety-nine horses, dogs and cocks.⁴⁶ Shenk compares this to the Stentoften rune stone in Blekinge, Sweden, from 600 AD, (fig. 1) which has a curse inscribed upon it stating, "with 9 billy-goats, with 9 horses gave Haþuwulfr a good year."⁴⁷ Shenk observes that all the animal and human sacrifices are male and also that the hanging at Uppsala and the presence of the number nine both point toward a cult of Óðinn.⁴⁸ In *Hávamál*, Óðinn describes his self-sacrifice which involves both hanging and the number nine which, like Óðinn, was associated with the world of the dead:

I know that I hung on the windy tree,
Spear-wounded, nine full nights,
given to Óðinn, myself to myself,
on that tree that rose from roots
that no man ever knows.⁴⁹

Óðinn had an eight legged horse called Sleipnir and the Germanic Wotan before him also rode on horseback.⁵⁰ The association between Wotan and horses is demonstrated in *The Second Merseburg Charm* in which he heals a horse's leg. Óðinn was a god of the aristocracy; horses were valuable possessions so it is logical to assume that he was the patron of a horse cult.

Hilda Ellis Davidson argued, with reference to non-Germanic shamanistic traditions, that Óðinn's eight legged horse is typical of a shamanic vehicle to heaven or the underworld.⁵¹ Davidson also points out the similarity between Sleipnir and the bier on which a dead body is carried during a funeral procession by four bearers in such a way that the body may be described as riding an eight-legged steed.⁵² This is an interesting resemblance but I am not aware of an account that verifies whether Norse pagan funeral processions specifically involved four pallbearers. Even in modern Christian custom the number is not fixed but is more likely to involve six men.

The horse cult is not necessarily a single religious discipline within Germanic paganism; it seems more likely that there were numerous unrelated customs that involved horses. Horses were also associated with Freyr and it is known that sacred horses were kept in his sanctuary at Prandheim in Norway.⁵³ In *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* which is contained in *Flateyjarbók*, Ólafr Tryggvason goes to Prandheim and rides a horse that is dedicated to

⁴⁵ Tschan, *Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, p. 208.

⁴⁶ Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback?*, p. 17.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁹ Orchard, 'Hávamál' v. 138 in *the Elder Edda*, p. 35.

⁵⁰ H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and myths of Northern Europe*, (Penguin books, Baltimore, Maryland: 1964), p. 141.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 142.

⁵² Ibid., p. 142.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 97-8.

Freyr. This was done in direct defiance of the god, for it was forbidden.⁵⁴ He also insults the god by dragging his image from its shrine and locking it out after having smashed the images of the other gods down from their altars.⁵⁵

These special horses are similar to those described by Adam of Bremen which were used for divination. If they are related then Tacitus may have described an earlier form of this same Freyr/Vanir horse cult. The literary motif of defying Freyr by riding his horse is repeated in the Icelandic sagas. In *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, Hrafnkell, a devotee of Freyr, dedicates a horse to the god:

Hrafnkell had that treasure in his keeping which he prized higher than anything else. It was a stallion, dark mouse-grey of hue, which he called Freyfaxi. He gave his friend Frey the half of the stallion, and for this horse he had such great love that he made a mighty vow that he would be the death of that man that rode him against his will.⁵⁶

This vow is to be the undoing of Hrafnkell, for though he specifically tells Einarr never to ride Freyfaxi, unusual circumstances conspire to bring it about that Freyfaxi is ridden to the point of exhaustion and Hrafnkell must make good his vow:

When he came to the mares, he went after them, but they were now shy, that had never been wont to run away from man, save Freyfaxi alone, but, as for him, he was as still as if he were enrooted. Einarr knew that the morning was wearing on, and thought that Hrafnkell would not know though he rode the stallion.⁵⁷

Hrafnkell kills Einarr, an act that causes legal disputes. In the end his enemies kill the horse by pushing it off a cliff. Finally Hrafnkell abandons worship of Freyr which leads one to assume that this story is constructed for the purpose of showing the futility of heathen worship.

Despite the anti-heathen moralism of the saga, it objectively demonstrates a horse based aspect of devotion to Freyr. *Vatnsdæla saga* also contains a horse named Freyfaxi and states that the Freyr worshipping sons of Ingimundr attended horse-fights.⁵⁸ Davidson interprets the presence of Freyr's horse cult in the sagas as evidence that the Icelandic custom of horse-fighting was originally associated with the cult of Freyr.⁵⁹ Richard North has compared these examples from the sagas with horse burials in Anglian England and with other literary examples to elaborate on the subject of Freyr's horse-cult.⁶⁰ Hrothgar from the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* is potentially a devotee of a version of Ingvi-freya, because after he gives Beowulf eight stallions, he is called *eodor Ingwina*, 'Prince of the Ingwine' and also *se wisa frea Ingwina*, 'the wise lord of the Ingwine'.⁶¹ North also asserts that the Anglo-Saxon king Edwin of Northumbria (d. 632/633) may have owned, across Deira, "the herds of Ingui, probably the god from whom Edwin claimed his descent."⁶²

The horse being set aside for devotion to a specific god in this manner is similar to the special white horse described by Tacitus, which was used for prognostication. Tacitus says that in that early stage in the development of Germanic paganism, the fertility goddess

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 97-8.

⁵⁵ North, *Heathen gods*, p.331.

⁵⁶ Gwyn Jones (trans), "Hrafnkel Freysgoði's Saga" in *Four Icelandic sagas*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, New York: 1935), p. 38.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 40.

⁵⁸ Davidson, *Gods and myths*, p. 98.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 97-8.

⁶⁰ North, *Heathen gods*, p. 331.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 180.

⁶² Ibid., p. 331.

Nerthus was popular. Richard North has interpreted Nerthus as a hypostasis of Ing, which is etymologically related to Ingvi, a prefix for the name of the god Freyr.⁶³ It is possible that as the cult of Nerthus changed over time, so too did the associated rituals, to the point where the equestrian rituals regarding specially bred horses with divine properties, were dedicated to Freyr and thus named Freyfaxi. The literary evidence certainly seems to associate Freyr with the cult of the living horse, while sacrificed horses, as described by Adam of Bremen, are more likely to be associated with Óðinn.

Horse-Fighting

Horse-fighting may have originated as an aspect of the cult of Freyr; the fights were held in the spring and could have been intended to bring a good harvest.⁶⁴ But saga depictions make no specific reference to this and it is instead shown to be a secular type of sport involving simulated conflict that can lead to real feuds and real conflict when foul play is suspected. This is the case in *Grettir's saga*, when a fighter attacks his opponent's horse which leads to further conflict. The horse-fight is introduced with specific reference to who owned the horses and of what quality they were. Most significant is the fact that only the stallions actually fight. This lends weight to Davidson's theory, since Freyfaxi is also a stallion:

The stallions were then led forward, while the other horses were kept farther out on the riverbank. They were tied together as a group, standing on the bank just above a deep pool. The stallions fought well, providing fine sport.⁶⁵

It might be assumed that the “other horses” are mares that are used in such a way as to encourage the stallions to fight with each other for the Icelanders’ entertainment.

Horse-fighting is depicted in numerous literary sources and is also shown on a Viking Age stone carving from Höggeby, Sweden (fig. 2), where two figures can be seen goading their animals on to fight one another. Shenk identifies what he believes may be a depiction of a horse race preceding a sacrifice on one of the golden horns from Gallehus in Denmark (fig. 3), “in which a scene with the riding of a horse ends with a priest and priestess carrying a horn.”⁶⁶ If correct this would provide pictorial evidence of the horse-fight and its potentially Vanir-related cult, going back as far as the fifth century.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 45.

⁶⁴ Maeve Sikora, ‘Diversity in Viking Age horse burial’ in *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* (Belfast: 2003-4). P.87.

⁶⁵ Jesse Byock , (trans), *Grettir's saga*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 84-5.

⁶⁶ Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback*, p.16.

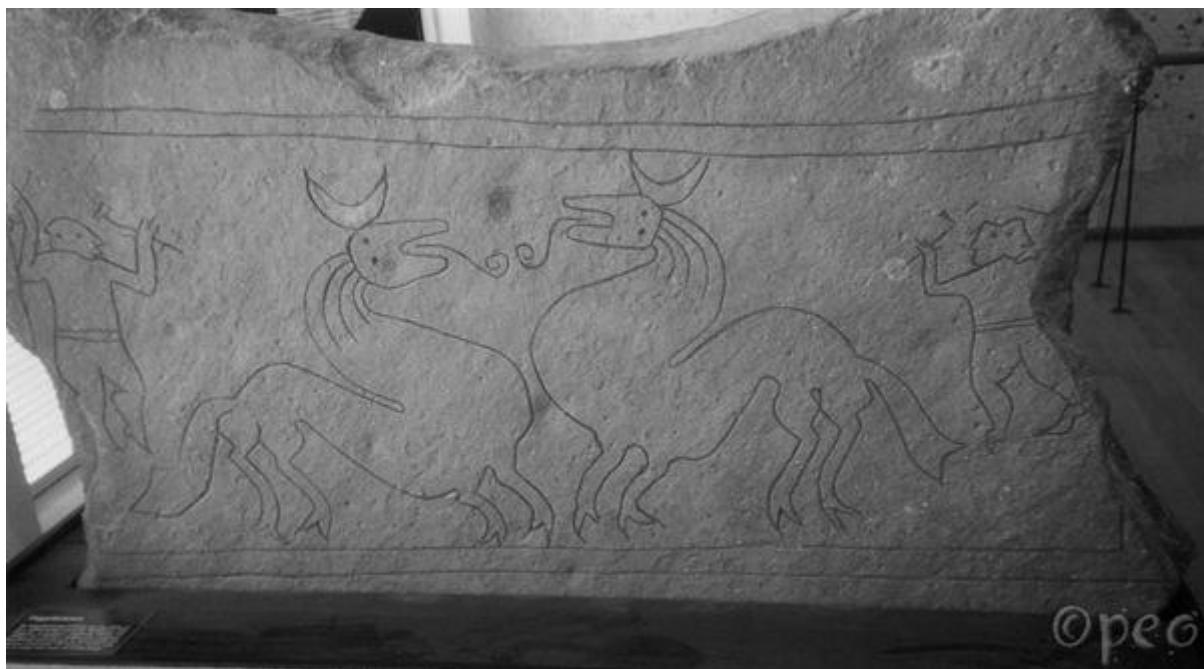


Figure 5 - Stone from Höggeby, Sweden, showing horse fight.

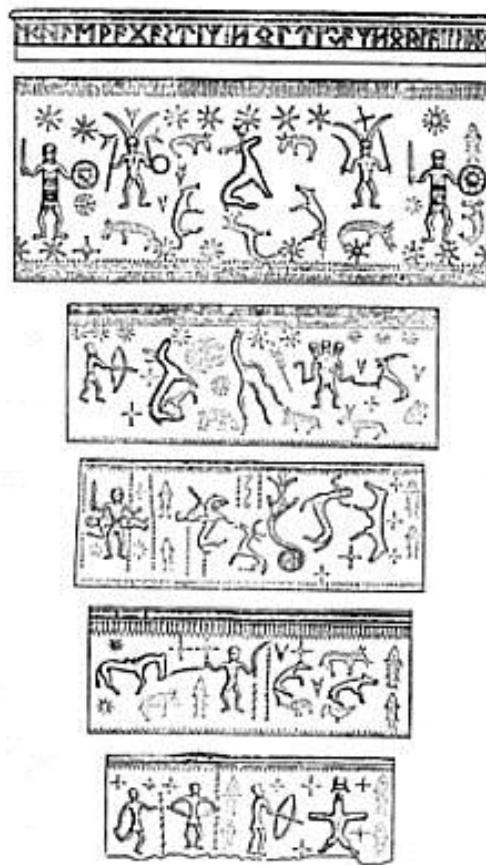


Figure 6 - copy of detail from Jute horn of Gallehus, Denmark.

Níðstang and seiðr

Seiðr was a Norse form of black magic that was used to acquire knowledge and to put spells on enemies. Though typically a feminine practice, this witchcraft is related in *Heimskringla* as being associated with Óðinn:

Óðinn knew, and practiced himself, the art which is accompanied by greatest power, called *seiðr*, and from it he could predict the fates of men and things that had not yet happened, and also cause men death or disaster or disease, and also take wit or strength from some and give it to others. But this magic, when it is practiced, is accompanied by such great perversion that it was not considered without shame for a man to perform it, and the skill was taught to the goddesses.⁶⁷

In both *Egils Saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, a ritual is described in which a horse's head is placed on a pole and faced toward an enemy so that it serves both as an insult and as a type of *seiðr* curse. This custom is known as the *níðstang* "pole of shame."⁶⁸ Egill uses the scorn-pole in conjunction with a runic curse and an invocation of land spirits to bring misfortune to his enemy:

He took a hazel pole in his hand and went to the edge of a rock facing inland. Then he took a horse's head and put it on the end of the pole.

Afterwards he made an invocation, saying, 'Here I set up this scorn-pole and turn its scorn upon King Eirik and Queen Gunnhild' — then turned the horse's head to face land — 'and I turn its scorn upon the nature spirits that inhabit this land, sending them all astray so that none of them will find its resting-place by chance or design until they have driven King Eirik and Gunnhild from this land.'

Then he thrust the pole into a cleft in the rock and left it to stand there. He turned the head towards the land and carved the whole invocation in runes on the pole.⁶⁹

Jokul's use of the scorn-pole in *Vatnsdæla saga* is very similar, but is exceptional because a mare is specified. Archaeological evidence of ritual horse slaughter usually involves stallions, just as the horse dedicated to Freyr in the sagas is always a stallion. Jökull is a friend of Brandr who owns a horse dedicated to Freyr, it may be that this use of *níðstang* is connected to the horse-cult of Freyr. Jokul raised a scorn-pole against Finnbogi the strong and his brother-in-law, Bergr, when they fail to attend a fight, thus branding them cowards:

Jokul carved a man's head on the pole-end and raised runes on it... Then Jokul slew a mare, opened her by the breastbone and set her on the pole, and had her turned toward Borg.⁷⁰

This custom seems to have had equivalents in Russia where travelers from the Viking age described a custom which involves a horse's head, skin and feet being placed on a pole over the grave of a dead man.⁷¹ They may both derive from an older custom, or the custom may have been exported, perhaps by trading Vikings on the Volga.

The malicious aspect of *seiðr*, when it is used as a weapon, is found in conjunction with the horse-cult on more than one occasion in the sagas. *Seiðr* was associated with the Vanir, most particularly Freyr's sister, Freyja, for it says in *Heimskringla* that it was she who taught *seiðr* to Óðinn and the Æsir, "She was a sacrificial priestess. She was the first to teach

⁶⁷ Sturluson, 'The Beginnings to Olaf Tryggvason' in *Heimskringla*, Ch.7, p.11.

⁶⁸ Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback*, p. 20.

⁶⁹ Bernard Scudder (trans), *Egil's Saga*, (Penguin Books: 2002), p. 119.

⁷⁰ Gwyn Jones (trans), *Vatnsdæla saga*, (Princeton University Press, the American-Scandinavian Foundation: New York, 1944) p. 93.

⁷¹ Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback*, p.20.

the Æsir black magic, which was customary among the Vanir.”⁷² It was also associated to a lesser extent with her brother Freyr and to the horse-cult which was connected to the Vanir.⁷³

In The Eddic poem, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana önnur*, a curse is used to control the horse of an enemy. This is another example of how horses are singled out as unique among animals by virtue of their connection to the spiritual world of gods and magic:

May that horse not run onwards, that runs under you,

Though your enemy is hot on your tail.⁷⁴

Another example of horse related *seiðr* from saga literature is an early Swedish king who was crushed to death by a *seiðkona* “seeress” who had taken the shape of a horse.⁷⁵ In *Landnámabók* ‘book of settlements’, a witch was brought to trial for a similar incident which is expanded upon in *Eyrbyggja Saga*, where she is depicted as evil.⁷⁵ The endurance of this association is evident from a twelfth century English chronicle in which King Edgar’s wife was accused of using magic to take on the form of a horse and was reported by a bishop who claimed to have seen her, ‘running and leaping hither and thither with horses and showing herself shamelessly to them’.⁷⁵ Davidson points out that this accusation of sexual promiscuity while in animal form is similar to the one launched against Freyja by Hyndla the völva in *Hyndluljóð* where she is compared to a she-goat.⁷⁶

In *Örvar-Odds Saga*, in which it is prophesised that the hero will be killed by his horse, he tries to evade this fate by killing the horse. Many years later Oddr returns to the dead horse’s remains, a snake crawls out of its skull, bites him and causes his death just as the witch had prophesised.⁷⁷

This saga is very similar to a Russian story of a Kievan prince named Oleg. Elena Melnikova has identified the Norse origin of the Russian version and that only the Norse version contains the killing and burial of the horse which is itself a reinterpretation of ritual horse sacrifice.⁷⁸ In her view there was a prototype of the myth from which both versions are derived, one in which the focus was on ritual and cultic connotation. For this reason it is the role of the horse in both versions which is the key element:

In both the Old Russian and Old Norse versions the horse seems at first sight to be subordinate or auxiliary, as it is only a mediator between the hero and the real agent of his death. However, horses played an important role in Indo-European and Germanic religions... In Old Norse mythology the horse appears as a chthonic creature connected with the world of the dead.⁷⁹

The Christian attitude toward witchcraft and horses, such as prophecy of death by horse or witches taking on the form of the horse, helps us to understand why there was such an aversion toward eating horse-flesh in the medieval period.⁸⁰

⁷² Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Ch. 4, p. 8.

⁷³ Davidson, *Gods and Myths*, p. 122.

⁷⁴ Orchard, ‘*Helgakviða Hundingsbana önnur*’, v. 32, in *the Elder Edda*, p. 141.

⁷⁵ Davidson, *Gods and Myths*, p. 122.

⁷⁶ Orchard, ‘*Hyndluljóð*’, v. 47, in *the Elder Edda*, p. 256.

⁷⁷ Hermann Pálsson & Paul Edwards (trans), *Örvar-Odds saga: Arrow-Odd: a medieval novel*, (New York: New York University Press, 1970). p. 6.

⁷⁸ Elena A. Melnikova, ‘Reminiscences of Old Norse Myths’ in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, Margaret Clunies Ross (ed), (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003), p.79.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp .76-77.

⁸⁰ Davidson, *Gods and Myths*, p. 122.

Archaeology

Through archaeological evidence, patterns in horse inhumation and cremation practices can be identified in Anglo-Saxon England, Viking Scandinavia, Iceland and continental Germanic Europe. Peter Shenk's dissertation looks at evidence on rune stones as well as large ship burials such as that at Oseberg. The ship burials are a demonstration of status; the numerous grave goods and the prominence of the burial mound all contribute toward compounding the perceived status of the deceased and serve as reminders of the influence of that individual or group.⁸¹ Shenk balances the opinions of Einar Østmo, who sees the horse and ship in burial custom as mere status symbols, with those of Gjessing who regards them as the vestiges of a fertility religion based on the cult of Freyr.⁸²

Looking at a range of burials, Shenk attempts to identify the role of the horse in ritual inhumation. At Valsgärde a ship burial was accompanied by irregular horse burial; age, sex and health did not follow an obvious rule, "In one case, three young stallions were buried alongside a fifteen-year old mare."⁸³ Additionally, at least one of the horses was afflicted with degenerative joint disease which Shenk argues is evidence that the horses were selected for symbolic rather than material worth.

The ship burials at Vendel and Valsgärde (Sweden) differ from sites such as Skedemose which has been identified as being of a sacrificial nature involving the consumption of horse-flesh.⁸⁴ The horses in these ship burials are left with complete skeletons and with a clear distinction being made between the horses themselves and the meat which was intended to be food for the deceased.⁸⁵ It is hard to demonstrate the criteria by which these horses were selected; out of the ten horses from Vendel whose sex could be identified, four were mares and six were stallions.⁸⁶ That such animals were buried alongside weapons, birds and dogs, lends weight to their interpretation as status symbols, most likely connected with an aristocratic hobby of hunting which could have had cultic significance.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback?*, p. 23.

⁸² Ibid., p. 24-5.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 26.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 27.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 27.



Figure 4 - Sleipnir on a picture stone in Tjängvide, Gotland.

Shenk's analysis of picture stones from the island of Gotland traces evidence of a hunting aristocracy motif that seems to place Óðinn as the central deity in the Gotlandic concept of death.⁸⁸ Many of the stones include a ship, but those from the eighth century onward also depict a man on horseback. Sometimes the horse has eight legs and in those instances represents Sleipnir (see fig. 4). The rider sometimes has a spear, so may be Óðinn, the spear god, but could also be a warrior being brought by Sleipnir to Óðinn at *Valhöll*.⁸⁹ Shenk sees both horse and ship as vehicles intended for transport to the afterlife and therefore regards the ship burials with the accompanying horses as being intended for this purpose.⁹⁰

The Oseberg ship burial from Vestfold is the largest known horse burial in Scandinavia, dendochronological analysis of the grave chamber timbers gave a precise date of the construction at c. 834.⁹¹ There are between ten and twenty horse skeletons, Shenk identifies at least thirteen. The animals in this burial were decapitated by one blow above the uppermost vertebrae and interestingly they were old horses. Nothing else at this site indicates that economic limitations were considered when arranging this lavish funeral, so it is unlikely that old horses were chosen in the light of economic restraints. The age of the horses could be an indication of their significance to the queen who owned them and for whom the funeral was being held.⁹²

The decapitation of the horses at Oseberg points toward a fertility cult of the Vanir, but Shenk is cautious of such a reading, pointing out that in Snorri's account of the *blót* in the *Saga of Hákon the Good*, the entire horse was eaten, which does not seem to have been the case at Oseberg.⁹³ Two possible explanations include that the heads were removed for some

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 31.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 32.

⁹² Ibid., p. 33.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 36.

kind of *niðstang*-style purpose or that they were removed so as to extract the maximum amount of blood possible from the beasts. The fact that the animals' heads were all collected into one pile before the mound was covered demonstrates the special attention that was paid to them during the ritual.⁹⁴ Either function could be connected to the Vanir and their fertility cult although this cannot specifically be proven in the case of the Oseberg burial.

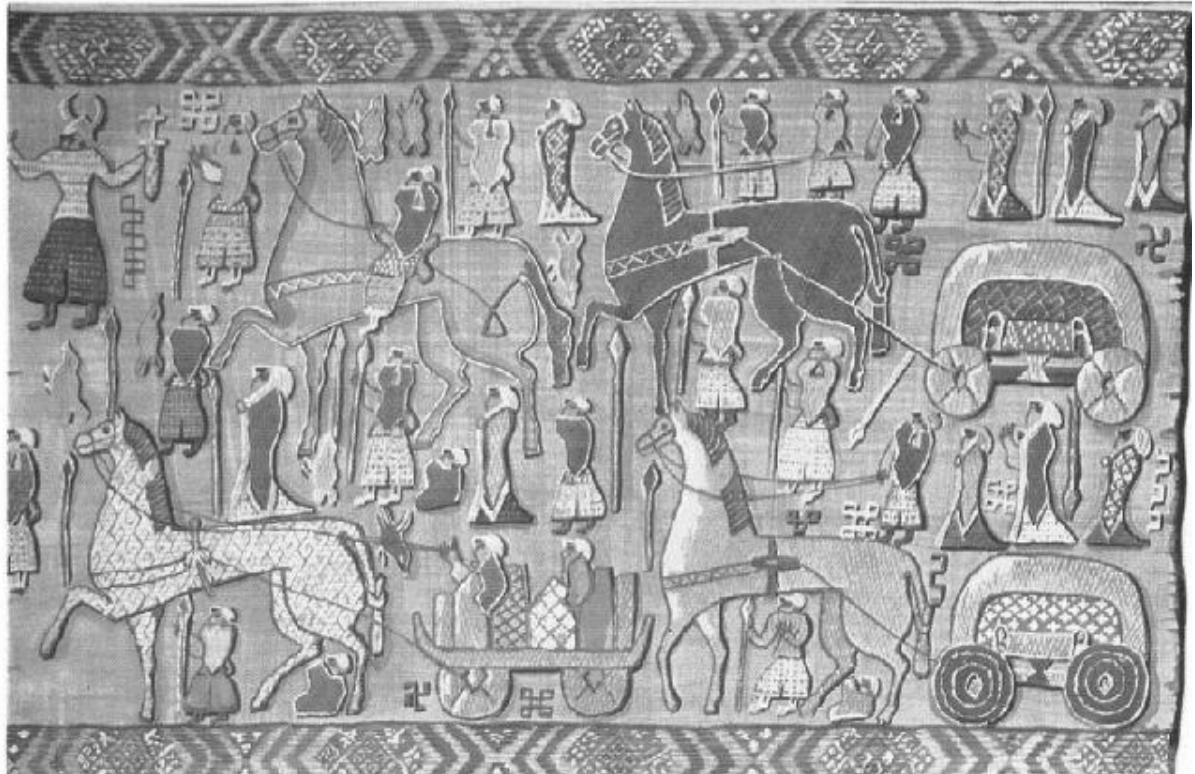


Figure 5 - Reconstruction of the Oseberg tapestry

A tapestry was found in the Oseberg burial (see fig. 5) which features horses very prominently. Many draw chariots; which could contain deities like the chariot mentioned by Tacitus, which was used in a ritual to transport an image of the goddess Nerthus to a sacred grove.⁹⁵ There is only one rider and it could be an aristocratic hunter similar to one depicted on a late seventh century Vendel helmet, which, due to the presence of two birds, is thought to be an early version of Óðinn.⁹⁶ One chariot on the tapestry is carted by a horse which is accompanied by two black birds and has therefore been interpreted as containing an image of Óðinn.⁹⁶ The tapestry also shows a tree from which men are hanging, in what appears to be a clear reference to the cult of the hanging god, Óðinn.⁹⁷

It is unclear whether the rite depicted on the Oseberg tapestry was the Oseberg burial itself or whether this was the kind of rite with which the queen being buried was associated. In either case, the horses are the largest figures on the tapestry, demonstrating the significance of the animal in that rite and the numerous horses in the burial itself do the same. The theory that the burial, if not the tapestry too, was connected to the cult of the Vanir, is supported by the presence of food goods associated with fertility, such as corn, wild apples and nuts. The presence of the hanging motif in the tapestry indicates that this is more likely to

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

⁹⁵ Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North*, p. 57.

⁹⁶ Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback*, p. 28.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

be a sacrifice to Óðinn.⁹⁸ The burial rituals at Oseberg must have involved at least two deities.

Archaeological evidence from Viking settlements in Iceland, Ireland and Scotland demonstrate further variation in horse burial practices. Iceland has the highest incidence of horse burial relative to population in the Viking world with 113 burials.⁹⁹ There are two on mainland Scotland (Reay and Ballindaloch), four on the Orkney Islands and five on the western islands.¹⁰⁰ There are only four examples from Ireland and it is worth noting that none of the burials from Scotland, Ireland or Iceland were cremated. This is probably the result of cultural influence from the native cultures in the case of Ireland and Scotland, and influence of settlers from the British Isles in the case of Iceland.¹⁰¹ The horse burials in Ireland were found near Scandinavian trading centres (eg. Haithabu and Kaupang), they are mainly dated from the ninth to tenth centuries and are less extravagant, probably as a result of contact with local Christians.¹⁰² There is also a possibility of influence from residual Celtic pagan beliefs regarding horses.

In Iceland it is mainly men who are buried with horses but in a less pronounced ratio than in Norway and elsewhere. There are 40 males, 18 females and 2 cases in which the horses are buried in a double grave with both male and female human remains. Sikora believes this evidence points toward a change in the status of women in Iceland, so that as they were able to gain more power, they too could be buried with horses.¹⁰³ Orkney, where fewer burials of the modest type found in Iceland occur (36% of horse burials in Iceland are of this type), is comparatively more hierarchical.¹⁰⁴ This might be explained by the prominence of place names in Orkney which are connected to the aristocratic god Óðinn. His cult was prominent there so the horse burials may have been connected to it. Sikora provides an alternative explanation; that the geography of the area favours a maritime culture and so ship burials would have been understandably more common.¹⁰⁵

The evidence from Anglo-Saxon horse burials may demonstrate, to an extent, the practices of the earlier examples of the Germanic cult of horse-sacrifice, that were most-likely imported to England from Denmark and the continent.

Wietske Prummel's study of dog burials included an analysis of many mixed animal graves including many horse burials. The study involved all archaeological sites from Anglo-Saxon England and the continent that were dated from the fifth to eighth centuries, so can be presumed to have been predominantly pagan in nature. His study identifies the overwhelming trend for stallions rather than mares in pagan inhumation. All the horses in dog graves from England and the continent were males: 26 stallions and one gelding, but not a single mare were identified by osteological research.¹⁰⁶

Chris Fern's 2007 work on early Anglo-Saxon horse burial continues Vierck's survey of 1970/71, which identified sixteen cemeteries with inhumed horses dated c. 450-650. His own research acknowledges an additional nine inhumations of complete horses and two head burials, therefore basing his study on about thirty two examples.¹⁰⁷ Fern also considers the

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

⁹⁹ Sikora, 'Diversity in Viking Age horse burial', p. 91.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 92.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁰⁶ Wietske Prummel, 'Early Medieval Dog Burials Among the Germanic Tribes' in Bone Commons, p. 142.

¹⁰⁷ Chris Fern 'Early Anglo-Saxon Horse Burial of the Fifth to Seventh centuries AD' in *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History 14*, (Oxford: Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2007), p. 92.

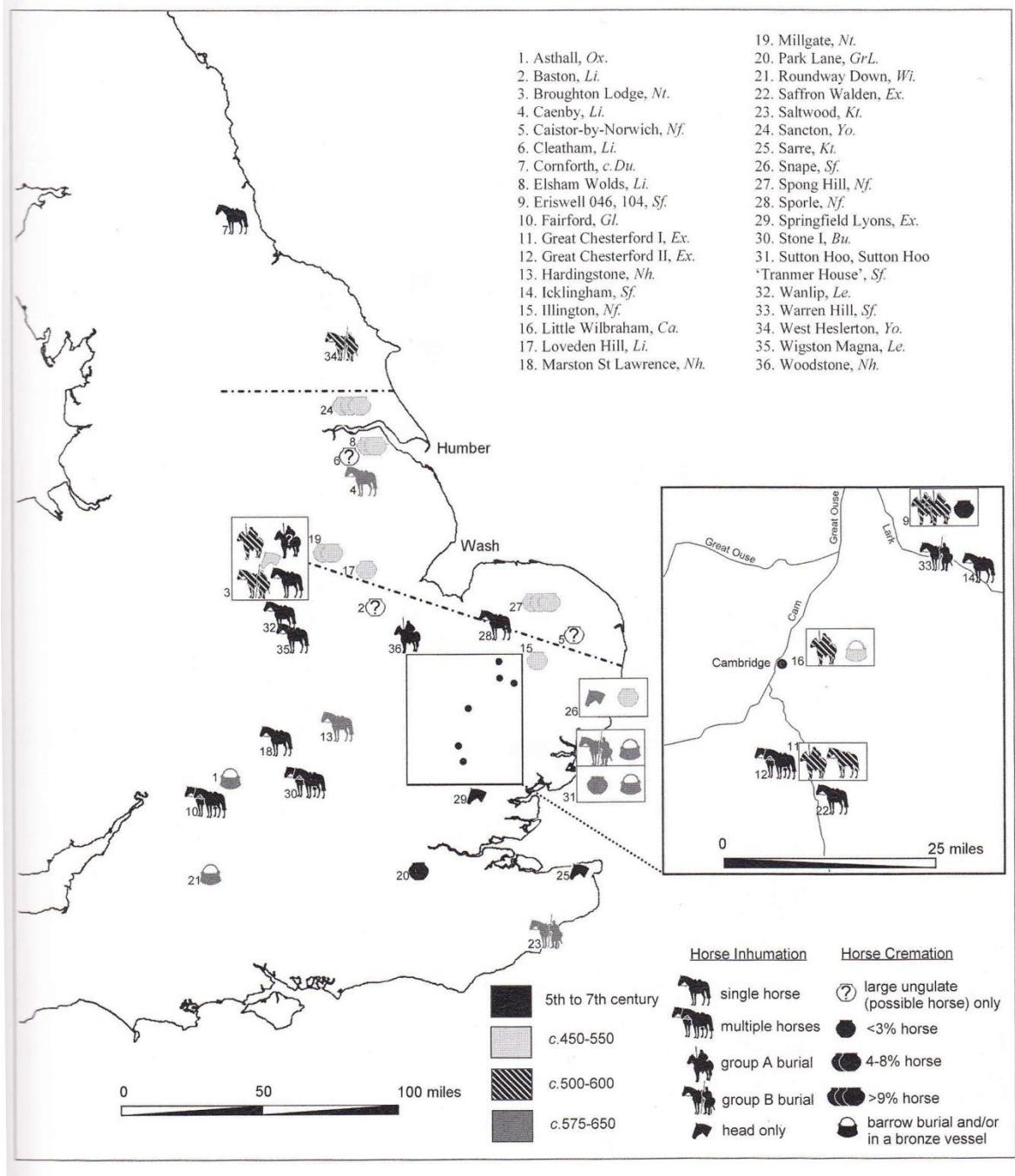
roles of class, the difference between inhumation and cremation rituals and the military symbolism of the horse in Germanic cultures.

The presence of horse harnesses and horse equipment decorated with precious materials and ornate art-work in horse burials on the continent shows which social group was able to achieve equestrian status.¹⁰⁸ The horse cremations in Anglo-Saxon England were comparatively modest and included a larger section of the populace.¹⁰⁹ Fern's analysis of more recent finds in England supports Vierck's conclusion that the rite of horse burial was primarily for adult males with weapons and other such status symbols.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 92.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 92.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 95.



Distribution of horse inhumations and cremations from the fifth to seventh centuries AD

Figure 6 - courtesy of Chris Fern, (Oxford: 2007).

The majority of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries containing horse remains are located in the regions of the Humber estuary, The Wash and North Norfolk.¹¹¹ In the Humber-Wash region, where horse cremation is most frequently discovered (See Fig. 6), horses sacrificed with humans did not follow a pattern based on sex or age.¹¹² Contrastingly, the inhumation rite involving horse and bridle is most commonly associated with high ranking men of a military

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 93.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 99.

type such as those found at Sutton Hoo, Saltwood and Caenby.¹¹³ The horses used in the inhumation rite were status symbols, probably chosen for their pedigree and value.¹¹⁴

The harnesses and bridles present in such inhumations are absent from cremations, so either they were not used for riding or they were not intended to be viewed this way as far as the rite was concerned. Fern suggests that if the role of the horse in cremation was not of an equestrian nature then perhaps it was a “totemic species-emblem for a sizeable group within society, which was of modest rather than elite status.”¹¹⁵ Such a reading would not contradict the theory that these cremations of the fifth and sixth centuries were related to an early manifestation of a Vanir fertility cult that had been imported from the continent.

If horse related cults are to be identified with worship of specific deities, then the aristocratic, hunter/warrior culture of the inhumations must be assigned to Woden, an Anglo-Saxon version of Óðinn. The cremations point to a cult of Frey, an Anglo-Saxon version of Freyr, who would be appealed to in domestic matters by farmers and other low status Anglo-Saxons. Since the burned horses do not have harnesses or bridles, they are unlikely to have been intended for riding. It might be assumed therefore, that only the inhumations contained horses intended for transportation in the afterlife, perhaps to Valhöll or an equivalent destination.

Alternatively, there are some horse cremations which accompany human cremation burials that could also have been meant for transporting the dead to the afterlife. There are 54 horse cremations from Elsham Wolds, Illington (Norfolk), Millgate, Sancton and Spong Hill, which include one decorated pot and one undecorated. In twenty of these, the horse and human remains had deliberately been separated, with the human being deposited in the decorated vessel.¹¹⁶ In seven cases, both human and horse remains were contained in separate decorated vessels. The horse appears to be secondary to the human in these burials, though the seven exceptions could be instances of a horse that was dedicated to a god and was thus awarded a more ornate urn.

Horse inhumation in post-Roman Europe began with the Saxons, Thuringians and Lombards in the fifth century but the Huns had buried horses with harnesses prior to this.¹¹⁷ It is possible that instances of horse inhumation from the late Roman era, such as one found in Skovgarde cemetery, Zealand Island, Denmark, dated to the third century, were the result of influence from Prussian tribes of the Sambian-Natangian culture.¹¹⁸ The practice spread westward so that by the late sixth century it was common among the eastern Franks and Alamanni, when horses are again buried with harnesses.¹¹⁹ Cremation was more popular than inhumation in Scandinavia; Fern attributes the small number of horse inhumations in this region, mostly from Vendel and Valsgärde, dated to the sixth century, to the influence of the Franks and Alemanni.¹²⁰

Fern observes the relevance of the association of masculine connotations of equestrianism, apparent from Anglo-Saxon horse inhumations, to the ancestral figures of Hengest (stallion) and Horsa (horse), from whom, according to Bede, many of the Anglo-Saxons claimed descent.¹²¹ The equine names of these two mythological heroes were probably intended to reinforce their perception as aristocratic warriors. Similarly, the horse

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 99.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 100.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 100.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 100.

¹¹⁸ Konstantin Skvortsov, ‘Burials of Riders and Horses Dated to the Roman Iron Age and Great Migration Period’ in *Archaeologia Baltica* 11, (Vilnius :Alma littera: Institute of Lithuanian History), p.143.

¹¹⁹ Fern ‘Early Anglo-Saxon Horse Burial’, p. 100.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 102.

inhumations may have been more than mere material status items but part of a tradition linking them back to the Germanic, warrior aristocracy who settled England in the post-Roman era. Sarah Laratt Keefer supports J. D. Richard's view that Anglo-Saxon pagans identified the horse with the god of battle, Tiw, and that it was associated with status.¹²² There is sparse evidence to connect Tiw with horse burials in Anglo-Saxon England, but David Raoul Wilson has pointed out the possibility of Tiw's association with the Red Horse depicted at Tysoe, meaning Tiw's hill (fig. 7.)¹²³



Figure 7 - The red horse at Tysoe, Yorkshire. 1961

Wilson's analysis of horse burial among Anglo-Saxons shows they were considerably smaller in scale than those on the continent such as one from Beckum, Westphalia, in which 30 horses were buried with 24 male inhumations.¹²⁴ The horse was probably the most valuable animal that the Anglo-Saxons sacrificed but it is unclear how commonly the horse was used for food. Wilson cites two horse burials of the status-symbol variety; a sixth-century cemetery at Little Wilbraham, Cambridgeshire, in which "the complete skeleton of a horse, together with harness trappings, was found with the skeleton of a male with a sword, spear and shield."¹²⁵ There was also a human skeleton at Hardingstone, Northamptonshire, accompanied by a spearhead, bridle-bit and cheek piece rings. These burials are of horses of an equestrian type that are unrelated to the ritual of consumption.¹²⁶ The horse was eaten by Anglo-Saxons when food was scarce, this is proven by the presence of butchery marks on bones as well as by Theodore's Penitential, but it is unlikely that the horse was bred and kept for this purpose.¹²⁷ Theodore's liberal stance on eating horse is contrasted by the canons of the papal legates in England in 786 which forbid it, perhaps in response to the presence of a horse-cult.¹²⁸

Further prohibitions were imposed by the church against the wearing of amulets, denounced as a pagan practice. Bede refers to them as "the false remedies of idolatry" and in a canon of the synod of *Clofeshoh* in 747, amulets are said to be among the "errors of the

¹²² Keefer, 'Hwær Cwom Mearh?', p.116.

¹²³ David Raoul Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, (London: Routledge ,1992) p. 15.

¹²⁴ Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, p. 101.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 101.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 101.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 101.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 101.

heathen.”¹²⁹ There is a possible connection between the horse-cult and the presence of horses’ teeth in certain burials. Wilson cites an example from Castle Bytham, Lincolnshire, where a piece of a horse’s tooth was found which had, “been rubbed down to a conical shape and perforated, giving the appearance of a pendant amulet”.¹³⁰ Wilson admits, however, that with less than a dozen examples of inhumation cemeteries and barrows where the burial of a tooth/amulet can confidently be described as deliberate, there is not enough evidence to confirm a connection between tooth amulets and a horse-cult in England.¹³¹

Some horses were buried with grave goods, others without, some were decapitated, some partially eaten, some left intact and some cremated. Despite the great variety of customs, it is most likely that all horse burials had a cultic-spiritual function, though these functions themselves were probably just as diverse. In many cases the horse seems to have been intended for transport in the afterlife.¹³² Fern’s principal distinction is between the inhumations of Anglo-Saxon England which follow the conventions of continental martial symbolism, and the cremations of England and Scandinavia which were more popular and derived from traditional and insular custom.¹³³ Horse burials among Germanic pagans were far too varied for one theory to be postulated that might explain them all.

Folklore

Beneath the term ‘folklore’, I assign those aspects of the horse-cult that continued after the conversion of these respective Germanic peoples to Christianity. Some sources are a great deal more reliable than others; namely the tenth century charms from England and Germany, for curing horses of various ailments. Attempts to connect rural customs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with ancient pagan practices are far more problematic but will be touched on briefly.

The Second Merseburg charm has been dated c. 925-928.¹³⁴ This is well beyond the time of Saxon conversion under Charlemagne so cannot be an aspect of religious worship, even though it is an example of the survival of a pagan custom:

Phol and Wodan rode into the woods.

Then the lord’s [*i.e.*, Phol’s] horse sprained its foot.

Then Sinhgunt charmed it, as did Sunna, her sister,

Then Frija charmed it, as did Volla, her sister,

Then Wodan charmed it, as he was well able to do:

Be it bone sprain, be it blood sprain, be it limb sprain,

Bone to bone, blood to blood, limb to limb, thus be they joined together.¹³⁵

The deities invoked here may have been regarded as powerful spirits of dead magicians but it is unlikely they were regarded as actual gods. Clearly though, there was an association between the *Æsir*, magic and horses. Fuller argues that the charm preserved in writing, a

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 103.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 103.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 103.

¹³² Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback*, p. 82.

¹³³ Fern ‘Early Anglo-Saxon Horse Burial’, p. 102.

¹³⁴ Susan D Fuller, ‘Pagan Charms in Tenth-Century Saxony? The Function of the Merseburg Charms’ in *Monatshefte*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (University of Wisconsin Press: Summer, 1980), p. 167.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 162.

continuation of the pagan oral tradition.¹³⁶ Practically, this charm could have been a reaction to military requirements of the era; a time when mounted Magyars had been invading Saxony. Henry I (919-936) responded by training the Saxons in mounted warfare, thus the Merseburg charm may have been intended for horses of war and should therefore be dated to within his reign¹³⁷

A similar example can be found in the Anglo-Saxon *Lacnunga*. It contains charms in which both Christian and heathen gods are invoked to heal horses of various ailments, including the mysterious *ylnfa gescot* “elf shot”, which is itself the product of supernatural beings derived from pagan belief. The Christian charm acknowledges a non-Christian source to the ailment and offers a conventionally Christian remedy:

If a horse is ‘shot’: may the beasts on earth be healed; They are shaken indeed in health. In the name of God the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost may the devil be cast forth by laying on of our hands.¹³⁸

The heathen equivalent is harder to decipher; the magician first describes and then defies the host (that is the *Æsir*, elves or hags responsible for the shot) and then says he will return a shot to them, describes the making of the spear and urges it to come out of the afflicted person/horse. The lay ends with him reassuring the victim of their imminent recovery:

Out, out, spear! not in, spear!
If herein be of iron a fragment,
Hag’s work, it shall melt away.

If thou wert shot in skin or shot in flesh,
Or shot in blood, or shot in bone,
Or shot in limb, may thy life ne’er be shattered.¹³⁹

There are similarities to the Merseburg charm; talk of blood, bone and limbs and this may be, according to Fuller, the result of an Anglo-Saxon foundation to the script of the second Merseburg charm.¹⁴⁰ *Lacnunga* is also dated to the tenth century, but it can be assumed that the pagan charms are much older and that they survived the centuries since conversion by way of oral tradition. After the conversion, the horse was no longer sacrificed to the gods or ritually eaten, but the old gods could still be invoked when a horse was injured.

Violet Alford’s theory from the late nineteen-sixties acknowledged a letter to a friend, from Aldhelm, Abbot of Malmesbury in the seventh century, in which he wrote, ‘long ago horses and stags were worshipped in temples in crude stupidity among the impious.’¹⁴¹ Yet, she contradicts him, assuming he was unaware of some such custom still existing in his time and beyond, so that she thought it plausible that the same customs survived into the twentieth century in the form of the West-country hobby horse.¹⁴² This wishful historical thinking has earlier precedents such as C.A. Miles’ 1912 book on the rituals and traditions of Christmas, in which he associated both the English “Old Hob” and also the German *Schimmel* with either

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 164.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 167.

¹³⁸ J. H. G. Grattan (trans), *Anglo-Saxon magic and medicine: illustrated specially from the semi-pagan text “Lacnunga”*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1952) p. 185.

¹³⁹ Grattan, *Lacnunga*, p. 175.

¹⁴⁰ Fuller, ‘Pagan Charms’, p. 168.

¹⁴¹ Violet Alford, ‘The Hobby Horse and Other Animal Masks’ in *folklore*, Vol. 79, No. 2, (Taylor and Francis: Summer, 1968), pp.125-6.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 125-6.

worship of Woden or the medieval heathen horse-cult.¹⁴³ It is possible that remnants of the horse cult survived into the tenth century in Europe and England but such remnants would be prone to cultural erosion over time. In his *Teutonic Mythology*, Jacob Grimm claims that witches were accused of eating horseflesh and thus participating in heathen sacrifice, which, whether true or not, at least shows the legacy of the prohibition of eating horse and its continued association with pre-Christian religion.¹⁴⁴ Even if modern folk customs could be verified as being derivatives of pagan ritual, they still cannot offer any reliable insight into the nature of the original custom.

Conclusion

The horse inhabited the fabric of the universe of Norse mythology, bringing day and night and transporting both gods and men between worlds. Its spiritual significance is primary in understanding the cultic function of the horse as flesh for ritual consumption. This custom was present in pre-Christian cultures in Scandinavia, Anglo-Saxon England and among Germanic peoples on the continent. The consumption of the horse in Nordic culture is accompanied by sacrifice of the animal to a god, with only certain parts of the animal being eaten and the rest dedicated to the deity. Those horses which were sacrificed could be hung from trees, dedicated to Óðinn like those Adam of Bremen wrote of, alternatively they can be burned and/or buried with their owners and in these cases, they were probably intended as transport to the afterlife.

The Christian reaction to eating horse meat is informed by the associated taboo of heathen activity, and is therefore repulsive from this cultural perspective. Enforcing prohibition of the consumption of horse meat was a means of developing a cultural stigma against all heathen customs. The fact that horse meat is specified among many possible dietary restrictions, demonstrates the significance of this animal to the spiritual and historical cultures of the heathen peoples.

Horses could also be dedicated to a god while they lived; the sagas show that this custom was related to a Vanir cult in which stallions were dedicated to Freyr. It was forbidden for anyone to ride such stallions and this custom was probably a version of a much older one described by Tacitus, in which a white horse was chosen to be a conduit to the gods and was never ridden or used for labour but was used by a priestly caste for prognostication. Adam of Bremen described a similar function for horses in Sweden centuries later, by which time the custom was more widespread among different social classes within heathen society.

Further saga evidence for a Vanir horse-cult is present in references to *seiðr*, *níðstang* and horse-fighting. Though Óðinn is associated with *seiðr*, he learnt it from the Vanir who have a much older association with magic. In *Egils saga*, Egill sets up a *níðstang* with runes, and Egill himself, as a warrior-poet, is a very Odinic figure. But in *Vatnsdæla saga* the horses are associated with Freyr who, as a Vanir god, has a natural association with such magic including where *níðstang* is mentioned. Horse-fighting is also associated with Freyr and the Vanir cult, although there is no solid evidence of horse-fighting as a religious activity. There are also several examples from the sagas of horse related magic being conducted by witches and this type of *seiðr* is related to the cult of another Vanir deity, Freyja.

Analysis of the varied archeological evidence has led different historians to similar conclusions about the function of horse inhumations in pre-Christian north-western Europe. In Scandinavia, the age of the horses at Valsgärde and Vendel indicates that those being

¹⁴³ Clement Miles, *Christmas in ritual and tradition: Christian and pagan*, (T. Fisher Unwin: London, 1913), p. 200.

¹⁴⁴ Grimm, Jacob, *Teutonic Mythology*, (George Bell & Sons: London, 1883), p. 1050.

buried had a sentimental attachment to the beasts and intended to use them again in the afterlife. Picture stones from Gotland support the theory of the horse being used again in the afterlife. The sacrifice at the cultic centre, Skedemose involved ritual consumption rather like the type described in *The Saga of Hákon the Good*. The burial was accompanied by other status-symbol grave goods, so the horse was both a material status symbol and a spiritual offering.¹⁴⁵ The ship burial at Oseberg was accompanied by many horse skeletons, some of which were decapitated. If the decapitation was a form of *seiðr* like *níðstang*, then it is likely to have been related to the Vanir horse-cult. The accompanying tapestry shows hanging which points instead to an offering to Óðinn, but there are many wagons depicted on the tapestry which probably contain other deities and the relationship between the burial and the tapestry is unclear. It is not unlikely that the Oseberg burial involved rituals relating to the cults of two or more deities.

The burials in Anglo-Saxon England can be divided into two broad categories; the status symbol burials of the warrior aristocracy and the more popular cremations. Either can be seen, in some cases, as a means of providing the dead with transportation in the afterlife. Most of the horses buried were stallions and most are buried with male humans. The fact that the cremated horses were not buried with harnesses or bridles means they are unlikely to have been meant for transport and so, like Freyfaxi in the sagas or like Tacitus' horses, were used for prognostication. The cremation rites which were most popular in England and Scandinavia appear to have been derived from an older Vanir cult, most likely involving Frey/Freyr.

The horse as a status-symbol in burials for noblemen is a custom which was brought westward by the Franks and may be related to the cult of Woden. This is supported by Bede's account of the equine warriors, Hengest and Horsa, as progenitors of the English nobility and descendants of Woden. Both Óðinn and Freyr were high status gods from whom royal bloodlines claimed descent, so it is fitting that the most valuable animal in that culture should be associated with royalty and their gods. The horse serves both a military and an agrarian function so Óðinn as a god of war and Freyr as a god of fertility each share a cultural connection to the animal. With the exception of those horses that were partially eaten and those which were buried without human remains or equestrian equipment, the horse burial was almost certainly intended as a means of transport to the afterlife.¹⁴⁶

The practical and social functions of the horse in the early medieval era were diverse and the religious functions equally so. It is a mistake to attempt to identify a single "horse-cult" associated with just one god because the mythology shows how horses were used by numerous gods and giants.¹⁴⁷ Just as the horse had a variety of roles in mythology and society so too is it likely to have had a prominent role in the rituals of the cults of many gods, not all of whom can be identified by the existing archaeological and literary evidence. The horse is consistently connected with aristocracy and wealth in a tradition which goes back to the time of Tacitus and extends far beyond the conversion period. The evidence of its endurance was preserved by Christians in pagan charms in England and Germany. For these reasons the horse attained a spiritual status of far greater prominence than other valuable livestock such as goats, sheep or pigs.

¹⁴⁵ Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback*, p. 82.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 82-3.

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Images

Fig. 1. - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Stentoftenstenen.jpg>

Fig. 2. - <http://www.runesnruins.com/runes/u664.html>

Fig. 3. - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Small_Gallehus_horn_images.png

Fig. 4. - <http://www.sjolander.com/viking/museum/m/l/xl/horned.htm>

Fig. 5. - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ardre_Odin_Sleipnir.jpg

Fig. 6. - Fern, Chris 'Early Anglo-Saxon Horse Burial of the Fifth to Seventh centuries AD', (Oxford: Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2007).

Fig. 7. - <http://www.hows.org.uk/personal/hillfigs/lost/tysoe.gif>