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An Analysis of Icelandic Pagan Rituals and Norse Mythology

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Abstract: Viking Age burials have been extensively studied over recent years, and Icelandic, pre-Christian burials have been specifically investigated for trends and patterns in funerary rites. However, there are hardly any investigations that pair the archaeological material and literary material together. What were the religious influences on funerary rites in the pre-Christian Icelandic landscape? An analysis of pagan rituals from Viking Age Iceland was conducted, and connections to Norse mythology were made in order to understand the relationship Icelanders had to the pagan religion. Based on archaeological and literary evidence, it can be concluded that certain burial rites bare resemblance to mythological stories and gods.

Introduction

Viking Age burials have been extensively studied in recent years. Icelandic pre-Christian burials have been investigated for trends and patterns in funerary rites, but there are hardly any investigations that pair the archaeological material and literary material together. What were the religious influences on funerary rites in the pre-Christian Icelandic landscape? In this paper, I will analyze pagan rituals from Viking Age Iceland and draw connections with Norse mythology to understand the relationship Icelanders had to the pagan religion. I examine these rituals based on archaeological evidence, which I will then compare to Norse myths. This research will show that Norse pagan beliefs shaped burial rites and ritualistic behaviors in the Viking Age.

In the first section, I will discuss the settlement of Iceland to understand what regions of Europe influenced burial rites in Iceland. The second section will focus on Norse mythology, the documented and archaeological evidence of the pagan religion, tales of burial and ritual from these documented sources, as well as the conversion to Christianity in 1000 AD. Following this, I will summarize current trends in the study of Icelandic pagan burials. The final section of this paper includes three case studies of pre-Christian burials and rituals in Iceland: Hulduhóll in the Mosfell Valley, the Hofstaðir rituals, and the Dalvik (Brimnes) cemetery.

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As is the general practice in archaeological studies of pre-Christian sites, I will define paganism. The term "paganism" is used here to refer to the religious traditions in the Viking era from the 8th century to the 11th century AD. Paganism is a religious practice that either predates Christianity or is non-Christian that shares a worship of either many or no gods. Norse paganism includes the worship of many gods, divided into two clans, the Æsir and the Vanir. The burials of the Norse pagans usually share characteristics that sometimes reflect religious figures, such as amulets or statues that bear resemblance to gods. In Iceland, pagan burials are defined by the presence of grave goods, animal inclusions, cremations, and are not associated with a church structure. In his thesis, Kristján Eldjárn characterized pagan burials of Iceland by the presence of grave goods, and if a grave was without grave goods, it had to be in a cemetery with other pagan graves (Eldjárn 1956).

The Viking Age and the Settlement of Iceland

The Viking Age began in the 8th century AD, which was marked by the first documented raids on monasteries in the British Isles, and it ended around the 11th century AD, marked by the defeat of the Danes in England. Throughout these four centuries, Scandinavian Vikings pillaged, raided, and voyaged across Europe and as far as the Frankish Empire and North America. Raiding in the 7th century can be traced to commercial expansion in northwestern Europe. The increased trade between continental Europe and England also advanced knowledge about Europe's wealth, which gave the Scandinavian Vikings the opportunity to seize power and goods (Sawyer 1997).

The first accounts that mention Iceland by name were a papal letter from 1053 AD and Adam of Bremen's Gesta from 1073 AD. The earliest native history to survive is Íslendingabók, which translates to Book of the Icelanders. A priest named Ari Þorgilsson wrote the Íslendingabók in 1122-1134 AD depicted the settlement of Iceland, the establishment of the oligarchical government called the Alþing, and the introduction to Christianity. Another Icelandic saga, called Landnámabók or the Book of Settlements, provides the names of the first settlers who arrived in Iceland roughly 200 years after it was written (Rafnsson 1997; Þorgilsson and Grønlie 2006; Pálsson and Edwards 1972).

Irish priests were thought to have temporarily lived on the island before the migration and settlement of the Vikings (Eldjárn 1956: 26). Unfortunately, no archaeological material has been found that can confirm this, which is probably because the Irish priests were not numerous and did not have any lasting influence on the history and culture of the area. The Irish priests left in 860 AD when the Vikings arrived because they apparently did not want to live with pagans (Eldjárn 1956: 26; Þorgilsson and Grønlie 2006: 4).

The colonization of Iceland, according to the Íslendingabók and the Landnámabók, was a roughly 60-year period between 870-874 AD and 930 AD (Vésteinsson and Gestsdóttir 2014; Þorgilsson and Grønlie 2006: 3). Iceland was desirable for immigration because of a few factors: the rewards of hunting and gathering,

the agriculture, and easy exploration. Iceland's walruses, whales, and auks were coveted in Scandinavian markets due to their usefulness as waterproof clothing (Rafnsson 1997: 119-120). Additionally, the landscape of Iceland in certain areas resembles many parts of Scandinavia, such as northern Norway with its fertile soil for agriculture. This makes it easier for immigrants to start a farming settlement as they already know how to tend to this specific type of land. With the Scandinavian immigration and settlement, trees and natural vegetation became scarce, as settlers needed the wood for buildings and the vegetation was eaten by domesticated animals. Despite the rich opportunities for farmers and hunters, Iceland is prone to erosion and volcanic eruptions. Large scale erosion is shown to have started shortly after the beginning of the settlement period, according to geologists. However, the volcanic eruptions have been helpful in identifying and confirming dates when comparing the tephra layers of ash (Rafnsson 1997: 121; Vésteinsson and Gestsdóttir 2014).

There have been debates among historians over how long the migration period lasted, as literary sources sometimes do not match up with the archaeological material. A study using strontium isotopic analysis and tephrochronology prompted a new theory of the Viking Age migration period. A farm site called Sveigakot in Mývatnsseit was excavated and revealed that the small farmhouse was built on a less than suitable plot of land, something archaeologists might see if the rest of the region was already full and claimed. However, the tephrochronology proved that the house was built between the eruption of 871 AD and the eruption around 930-940 AD. This suggests a fast and complete occupation of Iceland in the late 9th century AD (Vésteinsson and Gestsdóttir 2014: 138). The strontium isotopic analysis of burials also concluded that immigration continued into the late 10th century, which is longer than the literary sources claim. The authors of the study, Vésteinsson and Gestsdóttir, suggest that Iceland's population was not able to sustain itself in its infancy. They attributed a few factors for this: an exaggerated mortality rate, the return migration back to an individual's homeland, or an unbalanced sex ratio. This would create the need for continued immigration well into the 10th century.

There are also theories about who settled Iceland. The sagas mostly mention Norwegian settlers, with brief mentions to those from other parts of Scandinavia and the Viking colonies, such as England and Scotland. The sagas also mention that the reason these Norwegian settlers migrated concerned King Harald Finehair (r. 872-930 AD), the first king to unite Norway. Barði Guðmundsson states that Norwegians came to Iceland because they disagreed with the king's governing style; although, if this were true there would be more archaeological evidence of mass exodus in Norway (Einarsson 1995: 43). This is not consistent with the current archaeological findings, so one can infer that the rich opportunities for trading and farming were

likely to have been the main motivators in migration to Iceland.

From literary sources, archaeological evidence of houses, tephrochronology, and strontium isotopic analysis, it can be concluded that the settlement period in Iceland began around 870 AD and lasted through the later 10th century AD. The settlement was rapid and land claims covered most of Iceland by the late 9th century, while immigrants still sailed over despite the lack of land available.

Conversion to Christianity

This section follows with a description of the history of Iceland's conversion to Christianity that occurred in 1000 AD and the effects it has to the funerary landscape. It will discuss both the literary and archaeological evidence to analyze the period of religious change.

Ari Þorgilsson, a priest who lived between 1068 and 1148 AD, wrote the Íslendingabók [Book of the Icelanders]. He reportedly wrote the book between 1122 and 1133 AD, although it may have been written earlier in that century, as there are no events mentioned after 1118 (Þorgilsson and Grønlie 2006: x-xiii). As mentioned earlier, Ari (which he was commonly referred to as) writes of Iceland's conversion to Christianity. In 930 AD, the Alþing, which is the oligarchical government overseen by chieftains, was established with a central lawspeaker, the "president" so to speak. The Alþing was composed of the country's most powerful leaders, or gódar, who dispensed justice and legislation in a democratic style with votes (Gunnarsdóttir and Jónsdóttir 2004: 6). In the year 1000 AD, when the conversion to Christianity occurred, the lawspeaker was a man named Þorgeirr (Þorgilsson and Grønlie 2006: 5, 9).

Before 1000 AD, King Óláfr [Olaf] Tryggvason of Norway sent a missionary to Iceland to preach Christianity and convert the small country. King Olaf at this time was already a Christian and had converted most of Norway to Christianity (Þorgilsson and Grønlie 2006: 7). However, Iceland and its peoples were not receptive to this missionary's efforts, as many of the citizens rejected Christianity. Two other missionaries, Gizurr and Hjalti, attempted to convert Iceland next and ultimately succeeded. Gizurr went along with the priest named Þormóðr to the Alþing to petition the court for the conversion, as Hjalti was convicted as a lesser outlaw for his blasphemy against the goddess Freyja. Þorgirr, who was a Norse pagan practitioner, agreed with changing the law and stated that he "thought people's affairs had come to a bad pass, if they did not all have the same law in this country […] and said it would give rise to such discord that it was certainly to be expected that fights would take place between people by which land would be laid waste" (Þorgilsson and Grønlie 2006: 9). Þorgeirr referenced the infighting in Norway and Denmark and how it almost broke the countries until the people had made peace between them. Þorgeirr wanted to avoid this, so it was proclaimed in all laws that the people should be Christian and be baptized. This took place in 1000 AD. There were a few exceptions in terms

of pagan practices, such as the exposure of children, eating horsemeat, and privately practicing sacrificial rites. These exceptions were abolished in 1016 AD (Þorgilsson and Grønlie 2006: 9). However, it is inferred that a few people did not convert fully to Christianity and continued to practice paganism, which is seen in the archaeological record.

Although Christianity was written into law in 1000 AD, the notion of a "clear cut" abrupt transition of burial rites is not consistent with the archaeological record. A study of both pagan and Christian burial paradigms determined the overarching themes that can be found in both cemetery types (Vésteinsson et al. 2019; Friðriksson and Vésteinsson 2011). The pagan paradigm, which will be discussed further, is characterized by each farm having its own cemetery either outside the homefield or close to the boundaries of the farm, often with grave goods and aligned with the landscape rather than the compass points (Vésteinsson et al. 2019: 163; Friðriksson and Vésteinsson 2011: 52). In contrast, Christian burials are inside the homefield, usually directly associated with a dwelling, or placed around a church inside an enclosure. Parish charters from the 14th century claim that about 1800 churches and chapels existed in Iceland, and this was used as a guide to the minimum number of churches and chapels in the 11th century (Friðriksson and Vésteinsson 2011: 56). The Christian burials are tightly spaced, unfurnished, almost always oriented towards the east, and mostly date from the 11th century onwards. However, there are a growing number of Christian burials that date from the 10th century (Vésteinsson et al. 2019:164).

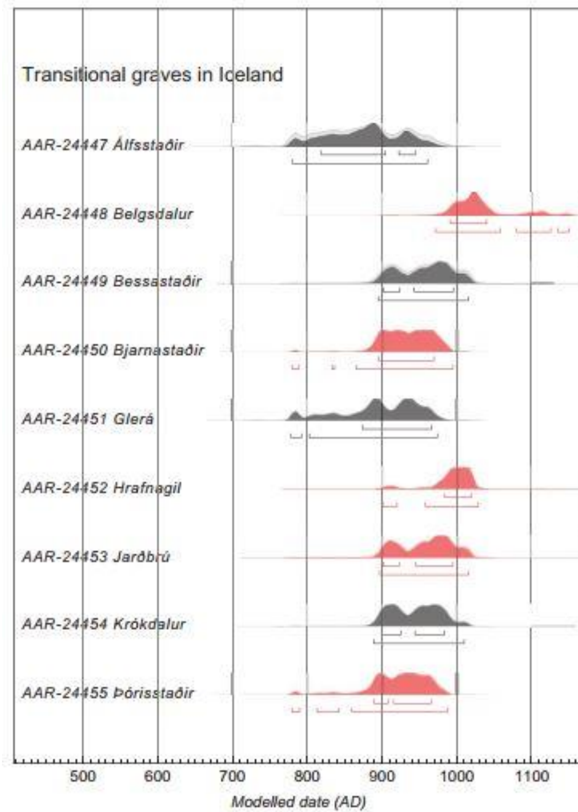

Figure 1. The radiocarbon dating calibrations with reservoir corrections for the "Death and Burial in Iceland for 1150 Years" project. The gray data indicates confirmed pagan burial sites, and the red indicates uncertain sites. From Vésteinsson et al. (2019).

In a project entitled "Death and Burial in Iceland for 1150 Years," radiocarbon dates were ascertained for five cemeteries that have mixed characteristics of pagan and Christian paradigms. Characteristics shared by the sites were a burial location inside the homefield and no evidence of grave goods or a nearby church. All five sites had radiocarbon dates that overlapped with a large number of burials in the pagan period, which indicate an inconsistency with the uniform pagan burial rite theory and the transitional phase theory after 1000 AD (Figure 1). Vésteinsson et al. (2019) determined

that there were two avenues that could explain this: 1) the conversion period was in the 10th century rather than the 11th century, or 2) there was a second pagan burial rite that included unfurnished intra-homefield burials (175). It is possible that during the 10th century, some citizens were converted to Christianity and were subsequently buried in a Christian fashion. Ari mentions in the Íslendingabók that the first missionary sent by King Olaf did manage to convert a few people (Þorgilsson and Grønlie 2006: 7). Vésteinsson et al offers a more persuasive theory, as it would be difficult to explain why many Icelanders rejected King Olaf's first missionary when a considerable number of people supposedly converted. In addition to the second pagan burial type, that unfurnished intra-homefield burials could have been a result of Christian church influence, as these uncertain sites are currently known only from the late 10th and early 11th century. The Christian church, which promoted unfurnished graves, could have influenced pagan practitioners to gradually adopt Christian burial practices. This is consistent with the long-term trend towards community Christian burials as individual farmhouse cemeteries began to disappear, which is an indication of pagan burial rites being overtaken by Christian practices (Friðriksson and Vésteinsson 2011: 61).

The introduction of Christianity to Iceland impacted not only the laws of the time, but also the burial practices. Although the burial practice changes were not immediate, the archaeological evidence shows a trend towards community churchyard cemeteries associated with the Christian burial paradigm. This study also shows a possible third burial paradigm, the unfurnished intra-homefield burials, during the late 10th and early 11th centuries; this line of study needs more investigation in future studies to be made a certainty.

Norse Mythology of Death

This section will discuss the sources from which most modern knowledge of Norse mythology is drawn. From these sources, descriptions of the major realms of the dead and their possible connections to archaeological material will be provided. A few key gods will also be explained as they are pertinent to funerary rites.

There are a few well known sources for Norse mythology. The first is Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda. Snorri Sturluson was a chieftain, poet, and historiographer of Iceland during the 12th and 13th centuries and served as the Lawspeaker for the Alþing twice. During his childhood, he was educated by Jón Loftsson, an influential chieftain and politician at the time (Þórðarson and Vigfússon 1878: lxxiv). The Prose Edda tells of the cosmology of Norse mythology, such as the creation of the Universe and the stories of the gods. In his work, Sturluson tells the story of a king named Gylfi who goes to Asgard to ask about the gods and their accomplishments. Odin, disguised as three gods, tells of the different worlds in the universe (Sturluson, n.d.). Sturluson's work was written in the 12th century AD, about 200 years after the peak of the Viking Age. The stories and poems that make up the Edda were preserved from oral traditions, as poetry was the main

vehicle in which knowledge of ethics, history, religion, and political ideology were transmitted in pre-Christian society (Sørensen 1997: 206). However, since the Prose Edda was written after the adoption of Christianity in Iceland, there may be influencing factors that flowed over from the ideals and stories of Christianity. Historians and archaeologists must understand that while this piece may arguably be the best source of Norse mythology; it may not be true to the Viking mythology during the height of the period.

A second source that tells of Norse mythology and ritual is Adam of Bremen's account of Uppsala. Adam of Bremen wrote the History of the Archbishops of Hamburg in 1070 AD and an account of a pagan ritual that was performed at Uppsala in Sweden. Uppsala was a pagan temple that celebrated a major ritual every nine years. In this ceremony, Adam talks of nine sacrifices of every living species, such as humans, cattle, and horses. These bodies were suspended in the sacred grove close to the temple. Despite the intricate details, Adam of Bremen's account is based on hearsay. He learns of this ritual from a person who supposedly saw these ceremonies, but it is unknown whether that person was true to their word or not (Sørensen 1997: 202-203).

A third account that is important in the study of death in Norse mythology is Ahmad Ibn Fadlan's description of a wealthy Rus funeral. Ibn Fadlan wrote his account in the 10th century, and the funerary ritual took place near the northwest coast of Russia. In this ritual, the deceased individual was placed on his ship in a newly built chamber alongside luxurious grave goods. They included feasting items, food, several sacrificed animals, and a sacrificed slave-girl, who became a significant part of the ritual. During the slave-girl's sacrifice, she is strangled, stabbed, and subsequently cremated with her master on the ship. The ritual itself is perceived as Odinic or performed to honor Odin (Warmind 1994). According to Snorri Sturluson's Edda, Odin hung himself on a tree and stabbed himself with a spear for nine days and nights to gain wisdom. Burning was also described as a way to transport objects to Valhalla, Odin's realm of the dead (Sturluson, n.d.; Abbink 2015; Ellis Davidson 1964).

In Norse mythology, there are three realms of the dead. The three are Hel, Valhalla, and Folkvang. There is evidence of perhaps more, such as Gimle or Vingolf, and Sturluson tells of righteous men going there after death to live with Odin (Sturluson, n.d.: 12). Gimle, as known later in the Edda, evades destruction when Ragnarok occurs (Sturluson, n.d.: 76). Sturluson says that this place is in heaven, which is a part of Alfheim, the realm of elves. The appearance of the name "heaven" could be an influence of Christianity, but this is uncertain.

Hel is supposedly in Niflheim, which is the realm of mist or the dead in some sources. Snorri Sturluson tells of the spring Hvergelmir [Roaring Kettle] being in the center of Niflheim, from which all other rivers come (Sturluson, n.d.: 12). All evil men go to Hel and then pass into Niflheim, which, according to Sturluson, is below the ninth world. Hel is also the name of the woman who rules over Hel. She is the child

of Loki. Odin threw her down into Niflheim, where "she has the power to dole out lodgings and provisions to those who are sent to her, and they are the people who have died of disease or old age" (Sturluson, n.d.: 39). Perhaps there is a connection between location of a burial and Norse cosmology in this respect. The spring Hvergelmir is said to be the origin of all rivers, meaning all rivers lead to Niflheim and in turn Hel. It might be assumed that any burial located by or near a waterway, such as a river or sea, could be transportation to Hel for that individual. Just as how the smoke of a pyre could bring objects to Valhalla, the river must have been perceived as a way to get to the afterlife. There is another reference in the Prose Edda of a way of transport to Hel. In the tale of Baldr's death, Hermod volunteers to ride to Hel to retrieve Baldr, as his death was ruinous to the Æsir. Hermod rides Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse, to the gates of Hel to barter with Hel for Baldr's soul (Sturluson, n.d.: 66-68). It can thus be concluded that there are two ways to reach Hel, one by water and the other by land.

Valhalla is Odin's realm of the dead, and it is said to be a tall hall with roof made of golden shields (Sturluson, n.d.: 10). Odin is said to be the Father of the Slain because all who fall in battle are his adopted sons (31). Valhalla is populated by those who died in Odin's service, by undergoing a violent death either by battle or sacrifice, which included men and women (Ellis Davidson 1964: 149). Women were more likely to enter Valhalla if they suffered a sacrificial death, which is often seen in sagas or accounts of rituals. Ibn Fadlan's account of the Viking Rus funeral shows the sacrifice of the slave-girl in a fashion that is attributed to Odin (Warmind 1994). Valhalla is staffed by warrior women called Valkyries, who serve the Einherjar (the deceased individuals) and would "invite" men from battle into Valhalla. Every day, the Einherjar would feast, drink, and fight until Ragnarok arrives (Sturluson, n.d.: 44, 48-49).

The third realm of the afterlife is Folkvang, or Folkvanger. This hall of the dead is in one of the heavens of Alfheim, where Freyja chooses those who sit in the hall. In the Prose Edda, Snorri tells us that whenever Freyja rides into battle, "half of the slain belong to her. Odin takes the other half" (Sturluson, n.d.: 35). Like Odin's hall Valhalla, those who spend the afterlife in Folkvang are individuals of great skill in battle, but also have great strength of heart (Maher 2009: 39). There is not much information on Folkvang, but it can be concluded that its location is in Alfheim and half of those who die in battle go there.

According to stories that survived through oral tradition, Hel, Valhalla, and Folkvang were the major realms of the dead. It is important to note that these stories may have been changed throughout the years since the peak of the Viking Age and Norse paganism. There also might have been a Christian influence, especially in Snorri's writing, that impacted the stories and portrayals of gods.

There are a few gods of Norse mythology that have a connection to funerals and burial rites. They include Odin, Thor, Freyja, Freyr, Njord, and Baldr. In the next few pages, each god's role in Norse mythology will be presented

and discussed concerning how they are connected to the archaeological material pertaining to funerary rites. It should be known that there are two types of gods: Vanir and Æsir. Most of the gods in Norse mythology are the Æsir, and some include Odin, Frigg, Thor, Baldr, and Loki. The Vanir are a clan of fertility gods and include Njord, Freyr, and Freyja as notable members.

Odin the All-Father is the highest and oldest of the gods, and he rules over all matters (Sturluson, n.d.: 30). As mentioned above, he rules over Asgard, the Æsir, and his hall of the dead, Valhalla. He is the father to all gods, and he is the god of wisdom and battle (Ellis Davidson 1964: 51). Certain objects (a spear) or ritualistic rites (i.e., hanging, burning) are attributed to Odin. According to the poem Hávamál, Odin recounts how he stabbed himself with a spear and hung himself from a tree to gain wisdom. The excerpt reads:

"I know I hung

on the windswept Tree,

through nine days and nights.

I was struck with a spear

and given to Odin,

myself given to myself." (Ellis Davidson 1964: 143-144).

Odin's voluntary sacrifice was supposedly imitated among his followers. There is evidence of this from Adam of Bremen's account, where the bodies of the sacrificed were hung in a sacred grove (Sørensen 1997: 203). Additionally, the slave girl in Ibn Fadlan's account was stabbed and strangled before she was burned on her master's pyre (Warmind 1994). From the known sacrificial rites that are associated with Odin, it is suggested that the presence of stabbing, strangling, or cremation are dedications to the god. There has only been one discovery of a cremation burial in Iceland, which will be discussed in depth later. Based on this fact, it is inferred that there was not a huge following of Odin in Iceland, although there is not enough evidence to be certain.

Thor was a popular Æsir god among the Norsemen because he symbolized thunder, fertility, and gave protection to his followers. He possessed three items: Mjollnir, a hammer, Megingjard [Belt of Strength], a belt that doubles his divine strength, and gloves of iron, which gives him the power to grip Mjollnir (Sturluson, n.d.: 32-33). Snorri tells of Thor's epic tales, such as him wrestling the World Serpent (63-65). It is through these tales that we can understand that Thor was the protector of mankind and Asgard. Thor's cult was strong in Iceland, as told in the Landnamabók [Book of Settlements]. One of his followers, Ingolf, upon his arrival to Iceland, threw the temple pillars from Thor's temple ashore and prayed that wherever they washed up he would build a temple for Thor (Ellis Davidson 1964: 77; Pálsson and Edwards 1972: 45). Another piece of archaeological evidence that supports Thor's religious presence in Iceland is the bronze figure from Eyrarland that has usually been interpreted as Thor (Figure 2) (Abram 2011: 6). The statue features Mjollnir in the figure's lap, as well as a

Figure 2. A bronze statue that has been interpreted as Thor. It was found in Eyrarland, Iceland. Photo from the National Museum of Iceland.

conical headgear that is characteristic of Viking Age god-statues.

Symbols of Thor have been found in association with almost all aspects of Viking Age life. Amulets of Thor's hammer have been found in many graves across Scandinavia, an indication that his cult was popular and widespread (Abram 2011: 5). The hammer has also been connected with fertility; it was customary in wedding rituals that it be laid in the bride's lap (Ellis Davidson 1964: 80). Adam of Bremen's account also mentions an image of Thor in the temple of Uppsala with a scepter in his hand (Ellis Davidson 1964: 77). Although there is not any connection with death in Thor's existing myths, it has led some historians to think that Thor's protection was believed to extend beyond death (Ellis Davidson 1964: 84).

Freyja is the Vanir goddess of fertility and love, who rides a chariot pulled by cats. As mentioned above, she houses half of those slain in battle in her hall Folkvang (Sturluson, n.d.: 35). She is the sister of Freyr and daughter of Njord, who will be mentioned later (Ellis Davidson 1964: 115). Snorri tells us that Freyja is a priestess of the Vanir who practiced and taught the Æsir seiðr, a form of magic. Those who practiced seiðr, called vǫlva, were usually women who could predict the future through divination rites (Ellis Davidson 1964: 117). The Vanir gods are associated with fertility, and because of this, sacrificial rites and fertility are often intertwined. Ritual deposits during the foundation and termination of houses are linked to the life cycle of that settlement, and they are usually in the form of sacrificial deposits of animals or tools in postholes or hearths of a building (Lucas and McGovern 2007: 15). The settlement house of Hofstaðir is a prime example, as a cow mandible and gaming piece was found in a posthole, and an articulated sheep was deposited when the site was abandoned (Lucas and McGovern 2007: 16). These rituals would have involved blessing the house and praying to the Vanir gods and goddesses. This indicates that the Vanir, specifically Freyja and Freyr, were involved with the life and death of mankind.

Freyr is the brother of Freyja and is said to be the most splendid of the gods. According to Snorri Sturluson, Freyr controls the rain and shining of the sun, and thus controls the harvest. Freyr also determines men's success (35). He is also associated with horses, ships, and burial

mounds. In the Flateyjarbók, a medieval Icelandic manuscript that describes sagas about the Norse kings, Olaf Tryggvason's saga tells of him going to Thrandheim in Norway to Freyr's horse sanctuary (Ellis Davidson 1964: 97). There is another saga that mentions Freyr's temples in Norway. A man named Hrafnkell had a stallion he dedicated to Freyr, and he named it Freyfaxi, meaning mane of Freyr (Ellis Davidson 1964: 97-98). In many burials across Scandinavia, horses were sacrificed and buried with the individual (Maher 2009: 52; Friðriksson 2000). Burial mounds are also found in association with Freyr, as it was told in the Ynglinga Saga that when Freyr died he was buried within a mound with a door, with lavish grave goods placed with him by priests (Ellis Davidson 1964: 100). Freyr is also said to own a ship named Skiðblaðnir, a vessel large enough to hold all the gods yet was able to fold up when not in use. This ship could travel in all directions as it always got favorable wind (Ellis Davidson 1964: 100). This could be a connection to wealthy individuals buried on ships, such as the Oseberg. However, this could also be in association with Njord, the god of ships and seas.

Njord is the Vanir god of sea and ships and resides in one of the heavens of Alfheim (Sturluson, n.d.: 33). There are Bronze Age rock carvings found in Scandinavia that show a close association between horses and ships, which may account for the wealthy ship burials, like the Oseberg and Gokstad, that had horses buried with the individual. This may be reference to the journey to the afterlife, as it could be navigated by sea and then by foot and on horseback (Ellis Davidson 1964: 133). In Ibn Fadlan's account, he tells of the wealthy individual being burned on his ship, something that may invoke Njord as well as Odin (Warmind 1994).

The use of ships in funerary rites is also referenced in the tale of Baldr's death. Baldr is Odin's second son, and he is said to be the most beautiful and wisest of the gods (Sturluson, n.d.: 33). Frigg, mother to Baldr and wife to Odin, made every living thing swear to not hurt Baldr, as he had ominous dreams about his life being threatened. Thus, Baldr was impervious to everything on Earth, except the mistletoe, as it was too young to swear to Frigg. All the gods threw stones and spears at Baldr in celebration of this feat, and they all glanced off without harming him. Loki convinces Hod, a blind god, to join in on the fun by throwing a twig of mistletoe at Baldr, who then dies. Hermod, as told above, rides to Hel to ransom for Baldr. During Baldr's funeral, his body and horse are placed on his ship Ringhorn. Baldr's wife, Nanna, dies of grief and is placed besides her husband. In the ceremony, Thor blesses the ship with Mjollnir before it is set on fire (Sturluson, n.d.: 65-67). This story could be related to the Scandinavian ship burials and cremations, perhaps as the followers mimicked this story in their own world. This story also shows a connection between Thor and death, as he blesses the pyre before it is set on fire.

Burial Patterns in Iceland

The descriptions of funerary rites in Icelandic Viking Age burials will be discussed in this section. During this analysis, I will point out

the various mythological connections to the burial rites and posit why specific burial rites were enacted.

There are currently over 300 known pagan graves in Iceland that date to the Viking Age and before 1000 AD. They are mostly found in the western, north central, and east central parts of Iceland, but this distribution does not accurately reflect the living population in the Viking period (Friðriksson 2000: 590; Vésteinsson and Gestsdóttir 2014: 141). There are a few arguments concerning the factors influencing the uneven distribution of burial finds, including erosion patterns, volcanoes, and the theory that pagan graves were moved to Christian cemeteries after conversion in 1000 AD (Einarsson 1995: 46).

Kristján Eldjárn's (1956) dissertation, *Kuml og haugfé úr heiðnum sið á Íslandi* (Burials and Mounds from Pagan Customs in Iceland), describes a common Viking Age grave based on observations and records of the burial excavations. Eldjárn describes a typical Icelandic burial as: a shallow pit grave cut in an irregular or almost square shape with just enough space for a body, which is sometimes covered or surrounded by stone and then covered by earth, with a low mound built over it (Einarsson 1995: 55). The orientation of the grave varies, mostly by the local conditions, and horses were a common addition to grave sites (Maher 2009; 51-52; Zugaiar 2012). There are a few burials where the body was enclosed in a wooden coffin or had a variety of stone arrangements in the grave cut (Friðriksson 2000). Eldjárn also speculates that most of the graves were marked by mounds or wooden structures (Maher 2009: 52). Other key features of a pre-Christian burial include being located outside a Christian cemetery and having multiple individuals in the same grave (Maher 2009: 64).

It is interesting to note that there are no exceptionally wealthy graves in Iceland from this period, which contrasts with the rest of Scandinavia. While there are lavish longship burials in the rest of Scandinavia, such as the Oseberg and Gokstad discovered in Norway, there have only been five to seven boat burials discovered in Iceland (Einarsson 1995: 56). Previous anthropologists, such as Lewis Binford, argue that difference in grave material indicates distinctions in age, sex, and social status, which in turn reflects social organization. This is based on an accounting of labor costs reflected in a specific funerary rite. The greater the funerary cost, the higher social status the individual is. This, however, does not account for funerary rites before and after a funeral, such as a feast or ritual. If social organization is reflected in burial rites, then it can be assumed that Iceland was an egalitarian society. Icelandic graves are characterized by a low labor cost, and there have been no discoveries of lavish tombs, great mounds, erected stones, or ship-formed monuments as of presently (Einarsson 1995: 61).

As of now, there has only been one cremation burial discovery, a site called Hulduhóll in the Mosfell Valley (Byock et al. 2012). The rest of the burials excavated and recorded are inhumations. There are a few theories as to why no other cremations have

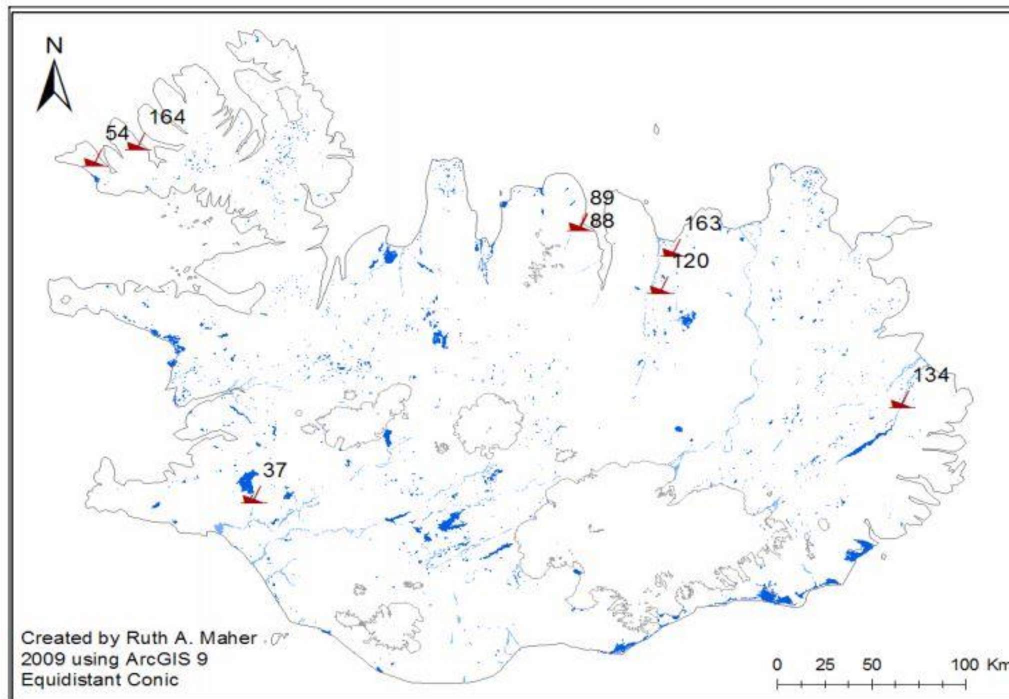

Figure 3. A map of the boat burial locations in Iceland. Number 69 is the site Dalvik (Brimnes). From Maher (2009).

been discovered in Iceland. One is the rarity of the practice. In the rest of Scandinavia, cremations are more prevalent in the eastern regions than the west (Maher 2009: 50), so perhaps the choice of cremations versus inhumations varied by the region from which emigration had occurred. A theory by Jón Jóhanneson attributes the lack of cremations to settlers' Christian views (Einarsson 1995: 43). This theory does not seem possible as there is evidence of pagan rituals being performed after the initial settlement. The theory that seems likely in terms of evidence is the scarcity of materials to perform a cremation. Wood is the choice commodity of the Viking Age, as settlers used the resource to build their houses and fences, as well as heat their buildings. Mass deforestation of trees increased the erosion patterns in Iceland, which was confirmed by geologists, as large-scale erosion started shortly after the beginning of the settlement period (Rafnsson 1997: 120). Cremations could not be performed if there was no wood to burn. However, the cremation at Hulduhóll indicates that more undiscovered cremations could exist in the Icelandic landscape.

There are presently nine possible known boat burials in Iceland (Figure 3). Boat burials can be identified in a variety of ways, usually by a preserved boat, the iron nails that are left behind after decomposition, or perhaps an impression of the boat in the soil. There is doubt about one of the nine, as there are only fragments of wood and a few nails (Maher 2009: 228). None of the boats discovered are as large or lavishly furnished as other ship burials in the rest of Scandinavia. Ship burials have been

referenced in Norse mythology, evident by Baldr's death in the Prose Edda. The use of ships in burials is often to imitate mythology. It is known that the ship was used as a symbol of high socioeconomic and political status in funerary rituals, as some wealthy or prestigious individuals were buried or cremated with ships. The ship was also a transportation device to the afterlife, which is in connection to waterways and Hel, as referenced above (Paulus 2020).

The rarity of ship burials may be due to several factors. Instead of burying the boats with the deceased individual, the community may have cremated it on a pyre or at sea, a rite seen in both Ibn Fadlan's account of the Viking Rus and in Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda. Both the cremation rituals are hard to find in archaeological contexts, the latter sea cremation virtually impossible. Another reason for the rarity of ship burials could be the value behind ships. Boats were expensive in Iceland due to the scarcity of quality wood. As mentioned above, the settlement period of Iceland marked a time of mass deforestation (Rafnsson 1997: 120). It would have been costly to use a ship in a funerary ritual.

In the following pages, I will describe potential variations in burial rites and their mythological connections. These include sex, burial location, burial orientation, the presence of burial mounds, and the presence of animals.

Gender Distribution

Of the 300+ graves excavated in Iceland, 108 have gender estimations based on skeletal analysis. 45 are confirmed male, while 28 are possibly male. 20 are confirmed female, and 15 are possibly female (Friðriksson 2000). Of these burials, the males tended to be located on elevated ground, while females tended to be associated with waterways (Maher 2009: 222). The division of location based on gender may be due to mythology and the afterlife. As speculated above, Hel could be reached by waterways as they all combined at the river Hvergelmir in Niflheim. Conversely, it would have been known in the surrounding community that those who died under certain circumstances would have been automatically chosen to go to Valhalla after death, meaning that their final resting place would have been known and planned. Perhaps many women, those whose deaths did not meet the requirements of Valhalla, would need guidance to Hel. Placing their burials near or by waterways would have aided their journey to the afterlife.

Burial Location

It is known that pre-Christian burials are located outside of a Christian cemetery and do not have a church nearby (Maher 2009: 64). Burials in the Viking world tend to be located near the farmstead and are representative of a household or a multi-generational family. In Norway, burials tend to be closer to the farm complex, probably due to the lack of space on the farmstead. Iceland has a different pattern, as burials are farther away from the complex. Despite this, the graves are still visible from the farmhouse with either a mound or a wooden superstructure and are approximately 500 meters away from the farmhouse (Maher 2009:

Grave Location	Number of Burials
Slope	14
Valley	12
Seashore	11
Riverbank	5
Hillock	15
Flat	11
Fjord	4
Cliff	6

Table 1. Landscape features burials were placed on. From Zugaiar (2012).

218, 227). The majority of burials are located within the boundary of the farmstead by the edge of a forest or water (Maher 2009: 226). It is possible that the household did not want to place the burials on usable farmland because farmland is more valuable than the unusable land.

About two-thirds of the pagan burials were placed on a prominent feature of the landscape. Each feature had an overall unobtrusive appearance and was speculated that the main purpose was to make generational claims to the land (Maher 2009: 227). This could be possible. The preferred feature to place a burial is either on a hill, a slope with higher elevation than the farm, near water, or down/upstream in a valley (Table 1) (Zugaiar 2012: 155). It is important to note that most burials had a view of the sea, about 67.7% (Maher 2009). This ties into the previously made point of water being the mode of transportation to the afterlife. It was more important to be near the water or within view of it rather than being on a water feature.

Burial Orientation

The orientation of graves in the Viking Age has not been widely explored, and little has been said about the choice in orientation. It is commonly assumed that Christian burials have a strict west to east (W-E) orientation, with the head in the west to view the coming of Christ on Judgement Day (Zugaiar 2012: 6). Pre-Christian Icelandic graves, however, have similarities within cemeteries but differ between other cemeteries. From Eldjárn's thesis, 96 burials have a known orientation; the most common features were the individual's head pointing to the south, west, or southwest (Table 2). Eldjárn concluded that the local topography, peculiarity, or indifference were possible explanations for choice in orientation (Zugaiar 2012: 10).

In her dissertation, Adriana Zugaiar analyzed the orientation of Icelandic burials to find patterns among issues of gender, age, animal inclusions, and influences of landscape.

Head's Direction (abbrv.)	Number of Burials
S	19
SSW	1
SW	19
WNW	4
NW	12
WSW	2
W	14
N	8
NNW	1
E	5
ESE	1
SE	8

Table 2. Direction the grave faced based on the placement of the head. From Zugaiar (2012).

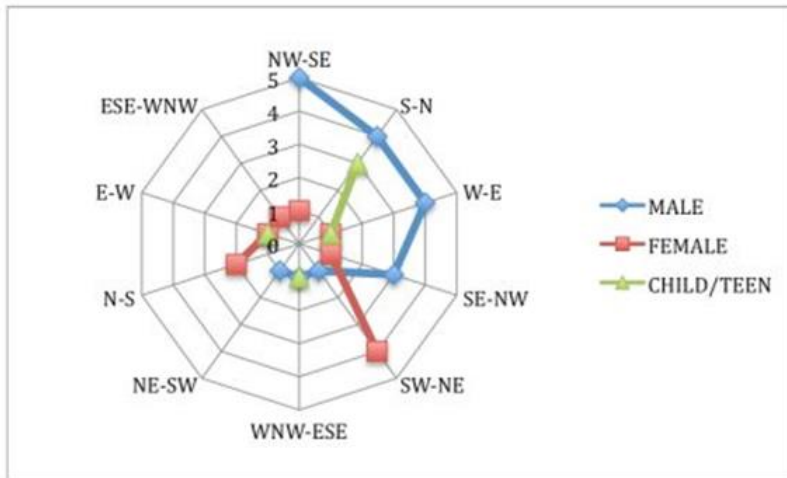

Figure 4. Comparisons between orientation of a grave versus the sex of the individual. From Zugaiar (2012).

She concluded that most men were oriented in a NW-SE pattern (5), while women were mostly oriented SE-NW (4) (Figure 4). Age did not seem to be a factor in the orientation of burials, as the orientation ranged widely within each age group (Figure 5). Additionally, there were no similarities between regions of Iceland, although larger cemeteries had most graves oriented similarly. Zugaiar argues that this could be due to each pagan cemetery having their own idea for orientation, as they could have been the same family and desired a familial tie (15).

One of the interesting discoveries in Zugaiar's dissertation is that many of the graves appeared to face away from their corresponding farm. Although 45 burials did not face the farm, 12 did. 13 burials were uncertain, as it was unclear which farm was associated with the burial or there was no farm at all within the area (Zugaiar 2012: 154). Zugaiar speculated that this trend could be due to a belief that the dead could be reborn and harass the living. Turning the grave away could be a deterrent for the dead who wish harm on the living (Zugaiar 2012: 158). However, more research needs to be conducted concerning the other explanations.

Although not much research has been conducted on burial orientation, it is clear that there was an order in cemeteries, which could have been dictated by ideology.

Presence of Burial Mounds

While Eldjárn names 17 mound burials, there are four confirmed mounds in the Icelandic burial landscape (Eldjárn 1956a;

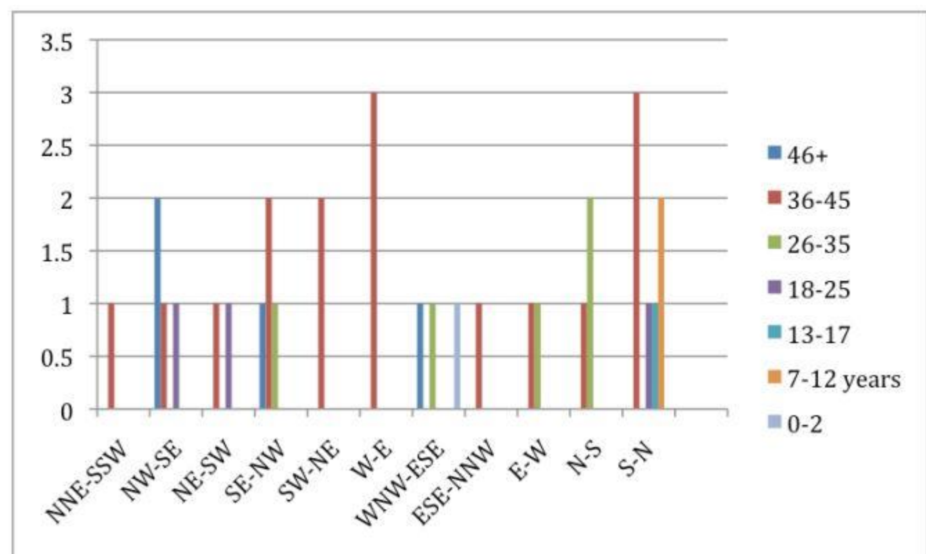

Figure 5. Comparisons between orientation of a grave versus the age groups. From Zugaiar (2012).

Einarsson 1995: 55). The mounds tend to be between 5.5 and 7.5 meters long, 2-2.5 meters wide, and roughly 0.5 meters tall. Friðriksson (2000) characterizes these mounds as either long mounds or round mounds (592). They tend to be in northern Iceland, with a few in western Iceland. While this is not seen as a common grave form, there may be more mounds in southern Iceland that have disappeared due to erosion. Among these, 16 mounds belong in a "cemetery", which Einarsson (1995) characterizes as a site having two or more graves (56). The final mound is an exception as it lies 500 meters from the second largest cemetery. This site, named Dalvik (Brimnes), will be discussed later. The graves that have a mound rarely have the body laid directly on the ground. Instead, in a similar fashion to other burials, the body is placed in a shallow grave and then covered in stone and/or soil in a mound (Friðriksson 2000: 592)

As mentioned earlier, Freyr has a connection to burial mounds. The Ynglinga Saga tells of Freyr's death being kept secret for three years, during which he was buried in a burial mound with a door and gifts of gold, silver, and copper (Ellis Davidson 1964: 100). However, this is the only mention of Freyr and burial mounds. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the cult of Freyr had influence on the use of burial mounds.

In Icelandic sagas, it was believed that elves lived in mounds. Sacrifices to the elves were common in Sweden as well as Iceland. The Kormáks Saga describes a sacrificial ritual to the elves, in which a priestess, called a vǫlva, told a man that in order to heal his wounds he needed to sacrifice a bull to a burial mound. Elves could cause harm as well as provide aid, which is why offerings were and still are made in Scandinavia. There is even evidence of cup marks in Swedish stone tombs, where a cup with an offering would be made (Ellis Davidson 1964: 156). There is a clear association between elves and death. Perhaps the connection between Freyr, who is said to live in Alfheim, the land of the elves, may indicate why (Ellis Davidson 1964: 156). Future research into this area could bring insight to this connection.

Presence of Animal Burials

Many burial sites in Iceland include animals. Around 49% of the known graves include an animal burial (Maher 2009: 62). While animal burials have been seen across Scandinavia during the Viking Age, such as the Gokstad and the peacock skeleton (Skurdenis 1993), Iceland is unique because of the number of horses. From the entire assemblage of graves and sites, 113 horses were found in association, 28% from female graves and 40% from male graves (Friðriksson 2000: 593). In his thesis, Eldjárn (1956) speculated that the reason so many horses were buried was due to either the commonality of horses, or the symbolic value horses held in terms of status. There is a slight hierarchy among the animal graves, as only 20.8% of graves with an animal had no artifacts (Maher 2009: 62). It could be argued that this rite had no ties to social standing or gender, as it was available to as many women as men.

Horses held a symbolic status in Scandinavia, which was also prevalent in

Iceland. It is true that owning a horse reflected one's socioeconomic status, as they are valuable because of the amount of time, effort, and resources that went into raising and training them (Halstad McGuire 2009: 230). Sacrificing the animal in the burial ceremony would be a way to show the community the amount of disposable wealth the deceased had.

Horses also held a religious symbol in the Viking community. Like the ship, they are tied strongly to the journey to the afterlife and death. In the tale of Baldr's death, Frigg asks for a volunteer to barter with Hel for Baldr after he was murdered. Hermod the Bold, one of Odin's sons, agreed to journey to Hel on Odin's eight-legged horse Sleipnir (Sturluson, n.d.: 66). Including a horse in one's burial could serve as transportation to Hel, as it was accessible by land. Baldr's funeral also included his horse, who was led onto the pyre with all its riding gear and burned with its owner (Sturluson, n.d.: 67). As mentioned earlier, Freyr has a connection to horses (Ellis Davidson 1964: 97). Perhaps the inclusion of horses in funerary rites connects to all three aspects of the mythology. While mimicking Baldr's funeral, the surrounding community invoked the journey to the afterlife and Freyr by burying a horse with the deceased.

Evidence supporting the symbolic journey can be found in the Gotland picture stones. The Gotland picture stones, found on the small island east of Sweden, depicts Viking daily life and what was valued in their society. Some of these picture stones served as tombstones or makers for graves. From the 8th century AD onwards, these picture stones

Figure 6. The Stenkyrka stone found in Gotland. It dates to the 8th century and depicts the deceased on a horse greeted by a Valkyrie with a drinking horn. From Ellmers (1994).

display recurring themes. A good example of this is the Stenkyrka stone (Figure 6). The stone depicts the deceased individual, Sinflötli, in Odin's boat while his father, Sigmund, stands on the beach. Above this scene, a woman carrying a drinking horn, interpreted to be a Valkyrie, welcomes a horseman. It is the scene with the horseman that is important. German scholar Detley Ellmers interpreted this as the custom that was performed when a neighboring king or noble visited; the neighboring king traveled by

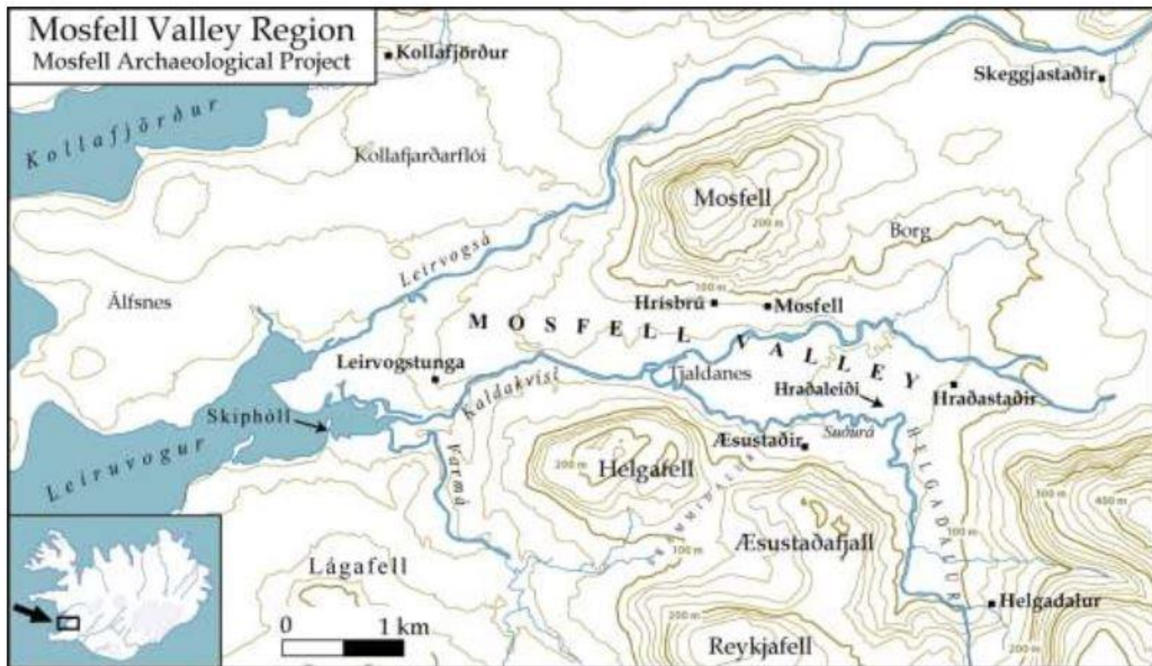

Figure 7. Map of the Mosfell Valley with the project site Hrísbrú labelled. From Byock et al. (2012).

sea, is greeted by a horse, and taken to the farm or lordly hall, where he was welcomed by a horn of mead (Ellmers 1994; Nylén and Lamm 1988: 70). This could explain why some deceased individuals had horses included in their burials, as the horses would transport the deceased to Valhalla in a fashion that paralleled this custom.

Dogs were also included in some burials. One mention of dog sacrifice is included in Ibn Fadlan's account of the Rus funeral, where many items and animals, including a dog, were sacrificed and placed on the deceased individual's ship (Warmind 1994). This may be due to an emotional connection between the dog and the owner, or perhaps the value placed on the dog from the investment of time and resources. It is possible that emotional sentiment dictates this funerary ritual versus mythological significance. It is also important to note that, as of presently, there has not been a discovery of a burial where a dog was decapitated, which differs from some horse burials. A few horses were decapitated before burial, and this may indicate a symbolic connection with disposable wealth and status, as mentioned above.

Case Studies

Hulduhóll, Mosfellsbaer

The Mosfell Archaeological Project is a project in the Mosfell Valley of Iceland that is dedicated to the construction of daily life in the Mosfell Valley beginning with the settlement of Iceland. Through this project, several excavations were conducted on the farmstead Hrísbrú, particularly on the sites of the early Christian church Kirkjuhóll and the burial mound Hulduhóll. Both sites were marked by grassy knolls, and during the initial survey, the farmer of the site said that no agricultural

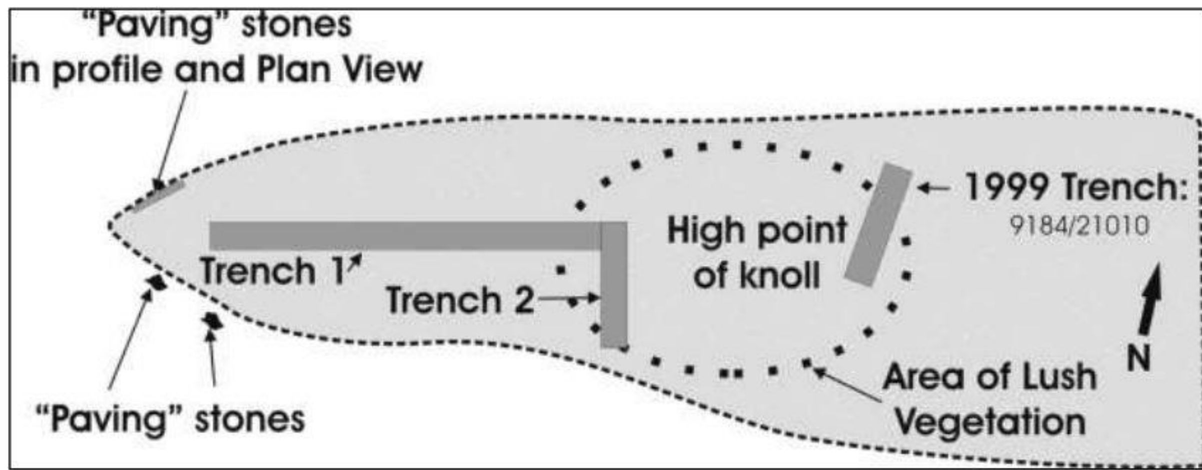

Figure 8. Drawing of the Hulduhóll mound, including the trenches dug from the 1999 and 2001 excavations. From Byock et al. (2012).

machinery has touched either knoll due to oral stories. From oral stories passed down, Kirkjuhóll is said to be the site of an ancient church, which proved to be true from the excavations. Hulduhóll, which translates to "Elfin Hill," was said to be inhabited by "the hidden people" or elves (Byock et al. 2005: 196). As it turns out, both sites were used for religious purposes, one pagan and the other Christian.

The Hulduhóll mound is located at the seaward entrance of the Mosfell Valley (Figure 7). The mound is ship-like in shape, and the western tip, or prow, was shaped with gravel to emphasize that shape (Figure 8). It has been determined that the gravel was placed by humans, an intentional behavior that may be rooted in mythology, and that it was modified with or in reference to the cremation grave. At the highest point in the mound, a cremation deposit of a human was discovered. This was the first cremation burial found in Iceland, and it consisted of charcoal, ash, five human skeleton fragments, worked bronze and iron fragments, and a single Viking Age bead (Byock et al. 2005: 215, 2012: 2). The human bones as well as the metal fragments bore evidence of burning. The human bones consisted of one tooth, three vertebral fragments, one piece of the cranial vault, and one deciduous tooth (Figure 9) (Byock et al. 2012: 2). These indicate that at least two individuals were cremated and buried in this mound. The adult individual's age was determined to be between 30-40 years of age based on the skull fragment sutures (Byock et al. 2005: 216).

Two methods were used to date the site. The first was the radiocarbon dating of a charred twig. It revealed the date estimation of 990-1020 AD. The second method was through the metallurgical procedures evident in the metal fragments, specifically the worked bronze sheet metal. The University of Oslo and LA Getty Museum analyzed the fragment and confirmed that the bronze sheet was produced consistently with the times of the Viking Age (Byock et al. 2005: 216). Considering that Christianity was made into law in 1000 AD, it is interesting to see a later date for a more

Figure 9. (Left) A fragment of a human cranial vault, (right) a Viking age bead. Both found in the cremation layers of the Hulduhóll site. From Byock et al. (2012).

traditional pagan burial. This indicates that perhaps pagan burial practices and Norse paganism continued after the conversion.

The symbolic nature of the ship-like mound could be important for studies in Norse mythology. The Gotland picture stones, as mentioned above, can provide a basis of how symbols changed throughout the centuries before the Viking Age. The stones from the 5th century have ships included in the carvings, as well as destinations for the dead. They are represented by rosettes, most often in groups of three, with a ship beneath them. These rosettes are interpreted as the sun, the earth, and Hel's realm of the dead (Ellmers 1994: 167). Later stones, however, from the late 6th and 7th century have a notable absence of rosettes. The destinations of the deceased were not depicted anymore, perhaps due to a change in mythology or society (Paulus 2020: 14). Perhaps that as time went on, the imagery of the ship was satisfactory in the message of where a deceased individual went. This could explain why stone settings and mounds were built in the shape of ships, to invoke the journey the individual had to take to the afterlife.

Hofstaðir

The site of Hofstaðir (Figure 10) was discovered and excavated in 1908 by Daniel Bruun. During his excavation, he theorized that the site, an abandoned settlement, was a temple because of the size (38m long). However, in 1956, Olaf Olsen further excavated the site and theorized that it was a temple-farm, home to a chieftain who acted as the presiding priest over religious activities on the site. A final excavation in 1992 concluded the nature of the site, as the interior of the hall was investigated. The paper during that time argued a chieftain's settlement which may have held religious ceremonies, and it was comparable to other feasting halls in Borg, Lejre, and Uppsala (Lucas and McGovern 2007: 8-9). Analysis of the volcanic eruption layers in the sediment revealed that the hall was built after 930-940 AD (Vésteinsson and Gestsdóttir 2014: 138).

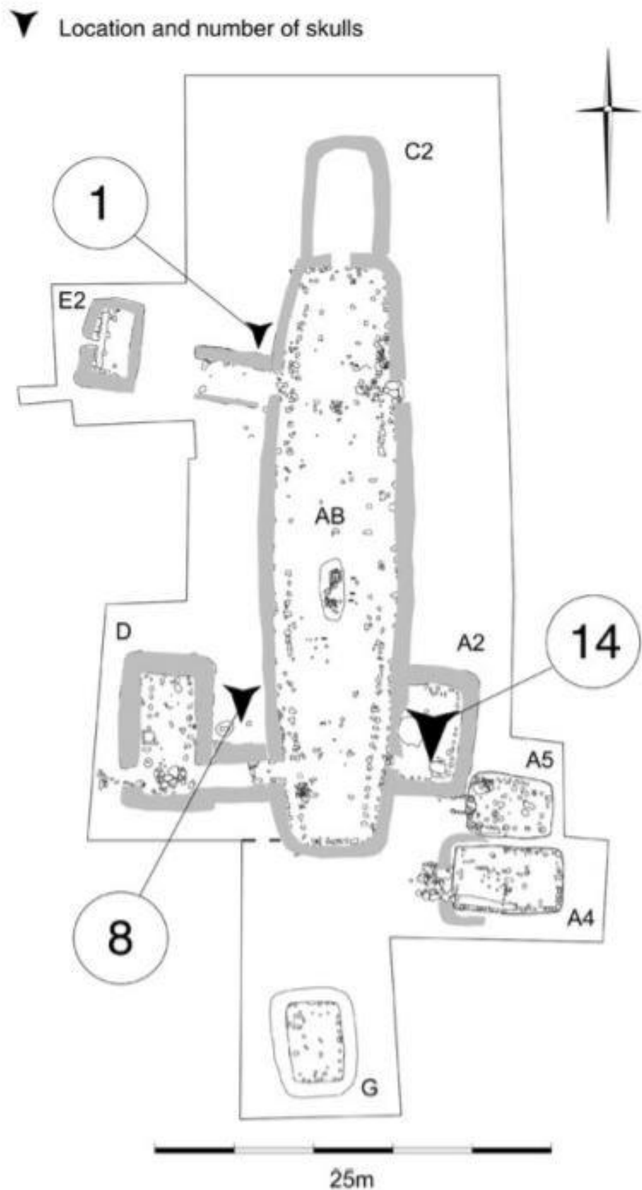

Figure 10. Structure of the Hofstaðir building with locations of the cattle skulls. The articulated sheep was found in A2. From Lucas and McGovern (2007).

In Lucas and McGovern's 2007 paper, they examined the 23 cattle skulls that were recovered during excavations and analyzed the unusual contextual, taphonomic, and butchery characteristics they presented (7). The cattle skulls were discovered during the excavations of 1992-2001, but they were found outside the hall with evidence of prolonged outside exposure. The fracture marks on the frontals of the skulls indicate blunt force trauma, while the surface weathering on upper external surfaces indicate a differential exposure to wind and weather. The skulls were most likely displayed with the face outwards and remained there for months or years after the flesh decomposed. There were two styles of presentation, a full face in which only the lower jaw was removed, and horn rack where only the frontal bones and attached horn cores were present (Table 3). Age estimations ranged from just fully grown to a middle-aged adult, and all the cattle were males (Lucas and McGovern 2007: 10-12). In addition to the cattle skulls, which were determined to be an accidental deposit when the building collapsed after abandonment, an articulated sheep was discovered in the rubble of the building's walls. The radiocarbon dates acquired from five skulls indicated that the animals died 50-100 radiocarbon years apart, with the latest date around 1000 AD. This indicates a recurring ritual activity which resulted in the accumulation of skulls rather than a single mass killing event (Lucas and McGovern 2007: 14).

One theory about the animal sacrifices is that they were a part of ritual deposits for the life cycle of the house. An investigation of ritual deposits in southern Scandinavia from houses from the Neolithic to the early Middle Ages discovered a connection to Norse literature and 19th century folklore.

ID #	Location	Horn Core Diameter (cm)	Notes	Type	C14 (calibrated to 1 sigma)
1	D		naturally polled, beheading cut	full face	
2	D	R 6.16, L 6.14	bull	horn rack	
3	A2		naturally polled	full face	
4	A2	R 6.14, L 6.10	bull	horn rack	
5	A2			full face?	
6	A2			full face	GU-12955: 1110+/−35 BP; AD 935-977
7	A2			horn rack	GU-12956: 1035+/−35 BP; AD 981-1025
8	A2			full face	GU-12957: 1015+/−35 BP; AD 985-1035
9	A2			full face	
10	D			full face	GU-12953:1065+/−35 BP; AD 968-1018
11	D			full face	GU-12954: 1120+/−35 BP; AD 892-972
12	D	5.84	bull	horn rack	
13	E			full face	
14	A2			?	
15	D			full face	
16	A2		paired halves of maxilla	full face	
17	D		beheading cut	full face	
18	D			full face	
19	A2			full face	
20	A2	6.47	bull, beheading cut	horn rack	
21	A2	4.17	cow?	horn rack	
22	A2	6.31	bull	horn rack	
23	A2	4.37	cow?	horn rack	

Table 3. Summary table of the characteristics of each cattle skull and their location on the Hofstaðir site. From Lucas and McGovern (2007).

The deposits, of which most were buried in corner postholes or hearths, are associated with inauguration acts to honor ancestors and/or obtain their protection for the household. Interestingly, by the 6th and 7th century, there is a notable decline in the use of vessels and animal skulls as deposits. They are instead replaced by craft tools or religious and legal artifacts (Carlie 2006). At the site of Hofstaðir, gaming pieces and a cattle mandible were found in the postholes of the structure, which can be argued as the foundational deposits for the site. It can be suggested that the articulated sheep found in the A2 structure could be the termination or abandonment deposit. The connection to fertility and Freyr can be made, as sacrifices can

be gifts to the sacred to ensure fertility or general well-being of the community (Lucas and McGovern 2007: 18).

Another interesting aspect of the Hofstaðir site is the sacrificed cattle skulls. It is potentially significant that all the skulls were estimated to be males, even though bulls were rare and expensive in most pre-modern agricultural settings (Lucas and McGovern 2007: 14). This could relate to Adam of Bremen's account of the sacrificial rites at Uppsala, where nine males of each animal were sacrificed to the gods. Perhaps expensive animals in sacrificial rites were better gifts for the gods than less expensive ones. Giving expensive gifts could show an individual's dedication to a god. In addition, the skulls of the bulls were displayed, as at Uppsala. They were most likely displayed on the outside of the building for the spring and summer months and stored in the rafters during the winter (Lucas and McGovern 2007: 25). The repetitive mass gatherings included a sacrifice of a bull, which would have died from a two-person team: one to strike the animal between the eyes, the other to behead the animal. The location of the cut marks on the base of the skulls indicates the animal was standing up when it was beheaded. One remark the authors noted was if there was good timing between the two blows, blood would spray from the neck, leading to maximum drama and an opportunity to display a person's weapon-handling prowess (Lucas and McGovern 2007: 23).

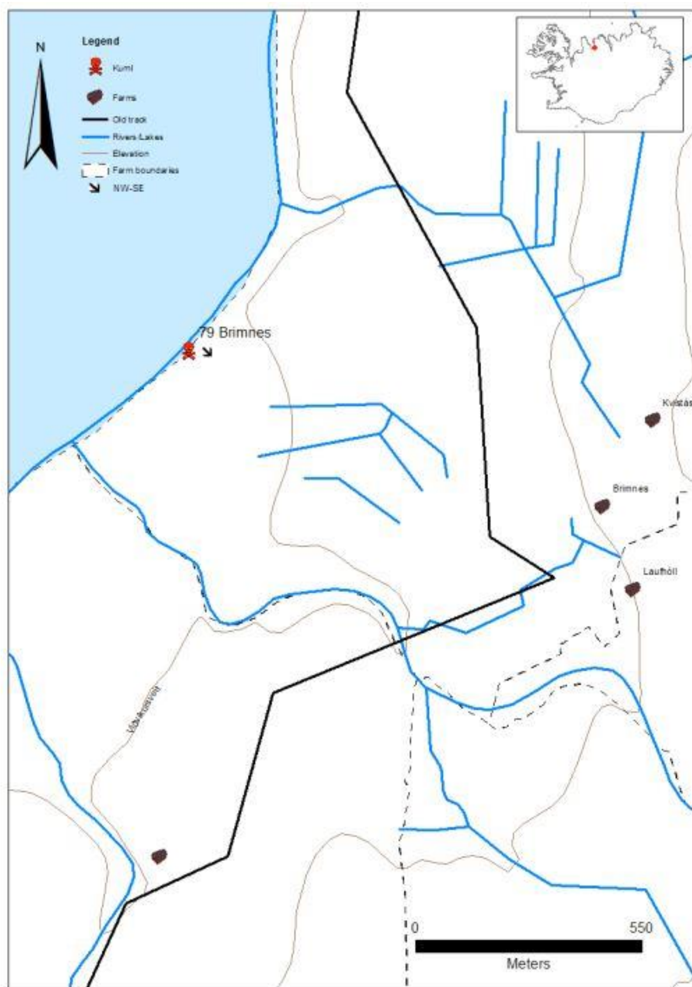

Figure 11. Map of the Dalvik (Brimnes) site. The arrow indicates the orientation of the burials. From Zugaiar (2012).

Dalvik (Brimnes)

The site of Dalvik (Brimnes) (Figure 11) was discovered during land improvements for the Höfn farm in 1908 where 13 graves were excavated by Bruun and Jónsson, and in 1942, Eldjárn excavated an original grave. Many of the graves were dug into heavy clay soil with large and small stones, although there was one oval in shape and was shallow. Exactly 11 graves were flat, and two (459/12 and 460/13) have an oval-shaped mound. The graves are mainly oriented southwest northeast (SW-NE), which follows the contours of the land and

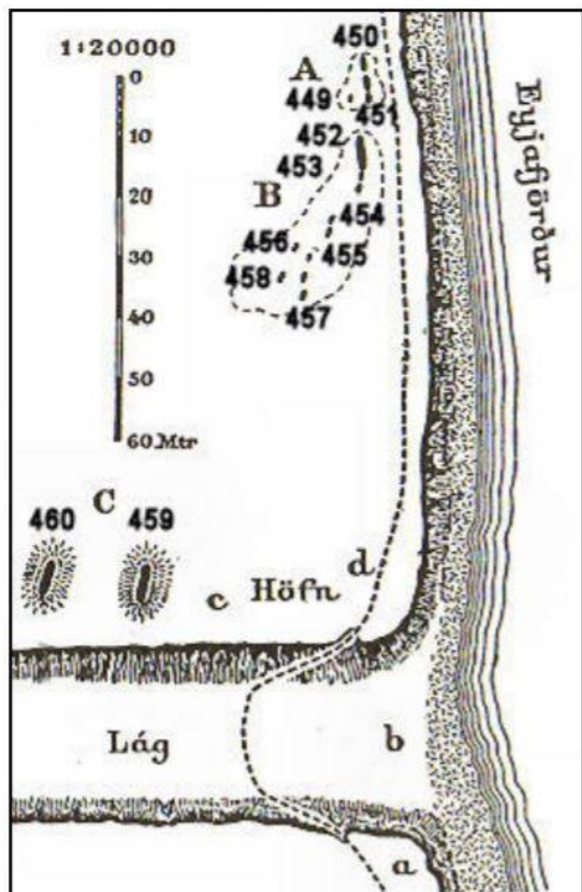

Figure 12. Drawing of the Dalvik (Brimnes) site by Daniel Bruun during its excavation. Two burials, 460 and 459, are the oval-shaped mounds. From Halstad McGuire (2009).

run parallel to the water (Figure 12). Eight burials had recorded a body position, which includes four supine and extended, and four in a seated position, which is exceptionally rare in Norse burial practices. While there were few grave goods in the cemetery, there are a considerable number of animal burials. Four graves have a dog skeleton at the foot of the human skeleton, while seven graves are associated with horse skeletons. The horse skeletons were decapitated with the heads placed nearby (Halstad McGuire 2009: 221-223).

There have not been any radiocarbon dates analyzed for this site, but an isotopic analysis was performed on 13 of the graves. Six individuals were immigrants to Iceland, while two were natives. Five graves had inconclusive results (Halstad McGuire 2009: 227). Among the four individuals that were placed in a seated position upon burial (449/1, 451/3, 452/4, and 455/7), two were identified as immigrants, one as native, and one was inconclusive (Table 4). It can be inferred from this that the seated burial was not exclusive to one group of people based on immigration status. The seated burial may have been exclusive to this area of Iceland, as no other seated burials have yet been found. This could be due to a particular practice in the region probably based on status or religion. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of information in Norse literature about seated burials, but it can be inferred that seated burials are reserved for higher class individuals, as it takes more time for rigor mortis to set in before burial, which would increase the cost of the funeral. The artifacts in these graves certainly indicate a higher social status, as grave 452/4 is a boat burial. Grave 449/1 includes amber and glass beads. More research needs to be conducted to understand the purpose behind seated burials and their possible connections with mythology.

The animal inclusions are interesting in this context, specifically the decapitated horses. As mentioned above, animal inclusions could be related to the journey to the afterlife or companionship. The decapitation of horses, however, could relate to something else. It could be a symbol for power and wealth, as horses

Grave (Bruun/Eldjárn)	Catalogue Details (from Halstad McGuire 2009)
449/1	• Sex: Male • Age: 46+ • Migrant Status: Immigrant • Description: Oriented SE-NW; seated position; facing NE towards mouth of fjord; several deep cuts on both femurs and one tibia; dog at individual's feet. • Grave goods: 8 glass beads, 2 amber beads, 1 lead bead (converted weight).
450/2	• Sex: Male • Age: 46+ • Migrant Status: Non-immigrant • Description: Supine and extended; oriented SW-NE; grave somewhat disturbed but good preservation; deep cut marks on one femur, a tibia, and tarsal bone; beheaded horse at individual's feet. • Grave goods: Iron spearhead, hone, knife, 8 lead weights, possible saddle.
451/3	• Sex: Male • Age: 35-45 • Migrant Status: Non-immigrant • Description: Possibly in seated position; oriented SW-NE; may have included a wooden structure with a roof. • Grave goods: Large iron spearhead, 3 lead weights, wood and iron fragments.
452/4	• Sex: Unknown • Age: Adult? • Migrant Status: Unknown • Description: Boat made of Norwegian oak, 7 meters long and 1.5 meters wide, filled with stones; oriented SW-NE; possibly in seated position; dog at individual's feet; beheaded horse at north/prow of boat with buckle. • Grave goods: Iron fragments
453/5	• Sex: Female? • Age: 36-45 • Migrant Status: Immigrant • Description: Supine and extended; oriented SW-NE; beheaded horse in separate grave NE of this one, includes 2 buckles and possibly a saddle. • Grave goods: Oval brooch, knife, 6 pieces of steatite bowl, iron fragments.

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Grave (Bruun/Eldjárn)	Catalogue Details (from Halstad McGuire 2009)
454/6	• Sex: Female • Age: 46+ • Migrant Status: Immigrant • Description: Oriented SW-NE; beheaded horse in separate grave N of this one. • Grave goods: None.
455/7	• Sex: Male? • Age: Adult • Migrant Status: Immigrant? • Description: Possibly in seated position; the N and NE edges of the grave cut were lined withs tones; remains of dog at individual's feet. • Grave goods: None.
456/8	• Sex: Unknown • Age: Adult? • Migrant Status: Unknown • Description: Supine and extended; oriented SE-NW. • Grave goods: Wood fragments.
457/10	• Sex: Unknown • Age: Adult? • Migrant Status: Unknown • Description: Only skull found in S end of grave cut; possibly associated with nearby horse grave; badly preserved. • Grave goods: None.
458/11	• Sex: Unknown • Age: Adult? • Migrant Status: Unknown • Description: Badly preserved. • Grave goods: Iron and charcoal fragments.
459/12	• Sex: Female • Age: 25-35 • Migrant Status: Immigrant • Description: Supine and extended; oval shaped mound; oriented SW-NE; dog remains near individual's feet; beheaded horse in separate grave underneath mound with a bridle bit. • Grave goods:19 bone game pieces, iron fragments, hone.

Grave (Bruun/Eldjárn)	Catalogue Details (from Halstad McGuire 2009)
460/13	• Sex: Male • Age: 18-25 • Migrant Status: Immigrant • Description: Supine and extended; oval shaped mound; oriented SW-NE; several deep cut marks on femur, tibia, and humerus; beheaded horse slightly N underneath the mound. • Grave goods: 5 glass beads, knife, bone and shell fragments.
461/14	• Sex: Female? • Age: Adult? • Migrant Status: Unknown • Description: Covered in stones; oriented SW-NE; badly preserved; horse remains at foot of grave with an iron buckle. • Grave goods: None.

Table 4. Descriptions of the 13 human graves at Dalvik (Brimnes). Grave 9 is a horse burial, which has been attributed to Grave 458/10. Created based on Halstad McGuire (2009) and Friðriksson (2000).

were valuable due to the amount of time, effort, and resources that go into raising and training them. Decapitating a horse during the funerary ceremony could have been a show of disposable wealth, communicating to the community that this family was wealthy (Halstad McGuire 2009: 230). The sacrificial ritual could also be a dedication towards Freyr, as he was intimately connected to horses in Iceland.

There was one boat burial at Dalvik (Brimnes), and it was burial 452/4. The boat was 7 meters in length and 1.5 meters wide, and it was made of Norwegian oak. Although this grave had an inconclusive isotopic analysis result, the boat itself could be an item from Norway that was brought over when either the deceased individual or an ancestor sailed to Iceland. A portion of the boat was filled with stones, something that has been seen at the Oseberg burial. Perhaps the stones represent the sinking of the ship, a way to decommission the vessel for the afterlife. This could be similar to the deliberate mutilation of iron objects before a ritual deposit. The deceased individual on the boat, who had an inconclusive sex estimation, was perhaps sitting in the boat when they were buried. A dog skeleton was placed by the human's feet, and a decapitated horse was placed at the northern end of the grave with a buckle (Halstad McGuire 2009: 224).

The two graves that were buried underneath mounds, 459/12 and 460/13, are both individuals that emigrated to Iceland during their lives. They both shared a similar orientation, southwest-northeast, and a decapitated horse in the northern end of the mound. Grave 459/12 was a female, approximately 25-35 years old, and had a dog skull at her feet as well as 19 bone gaming pieces and iron fragments. Grave 460/13 was a male, approximately 18-25 years old, and had five glass beads, a knife, and bone and shell fragments. The male individual had deep cut marks on his femur, tibia, and humerus, and analysis of the cut marks indicate that they were made peri-mortem, just around when he died. In Gestsdóttir's analysis, they concluded that if these marks were made when the individual was alive, they would need to be immobilized as it would have been very painful (Halstad McGuire 2009: 227). Could this be a part of a sacrificial ritual? It is hard to be certain, but much like the seated burials, this practice might have only taken place in this part of Iceland because of its rarity in other regions. The community could have found a religious basis for the practice, and more research is needed to be certain of a connection to Norse mythology.

Conclusion

My goal for this paper was to show the connections between Viking Age ritual and burial and Norse mythology. By studying various sources of Norse mythology, notably Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda, I was able to construct an interpretation of death and rituals during the Viking Age. I compiled the variations between Icelandic pagan graves, and attempted to draw connections between them, such as why some individuals were buried close to water or why horses were included in some graves. Finally, I analyzed three case studies to show

direct influences of Norse mythology on behavior and practices.

Overall, it appears that pagan mythology and religion permeated most aspects of Icelandic pagan life between 870 and 1100 AD. Rituals were performed during the building and abandoning processes of settlements, as well as throughout life on a settlement. Mythology influenced different aspects of funerary ritual, such as where someone was buried as well as their orientation. The evidence strongly suggests that some styles of burials were performed to imitate mythological funerals, such as Baldr's cremation with his horse, a burial style that we see at Hulduhóll.

The archaeological evidence often corresponds with the literary evidence. Apart from the inconsistencies with the dates regarding when and how long Iceland was settled, the mythological components are fairly consistent with the archaeological evidence. There are clear connections between them and pre-Christian burials and rituals, and they provide explanations as to why certain behaviors were performed. This in turn would imply that certain parts of the literary evidence are true to the Viking era. Although it cannot be assumed that all literary sources contain completely accurate historical accounts, I have shown here that in conjunction with the archaeological evidence they are important sources for analyses of Viking settlements in Iceland.

From this research, we can begin to understand that Iceland's history of paganism was visible in most aspects of life, between ritual, settlement, and death. Further research is still needed for some aspects, such as the seated burials found at Dalvik (Brimnes), and the connection to how an individual died and their burial location. This research can also be widened to include all of Scandinavia during the Viking Age before the introduction of Christianity. It would be interesting to see if Norway, for example, shares a similar connection to mythology in its burials. Future research in Norse mythology could also discover new ways the Vikings incorporated religion into their everyday lives.

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