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WOMEN IN THE VIKING AGE.
DEATH, LIFE AFTER DEATH AND BURIAL CUSTOMS

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Cover illustration: The picture-stone from Levide.
From Lindqvist 1941: Taf. 71, Fig. 178.

INTRODUCTION

The following thesis is a mentality study focused on the Viking beliefs connected with death, life after death and burial customs in relation to women. My main interest is to find out if it is possible to get a unitary picture of beliefs concerned with the fate of the Viking women after death. The paper is divided into four chapters, the first one being meant as a theoretical background in which I present the previous research done in the field, the aim of the thesis, and the theories and methods that are going to be used. I also take into discussion the various types of sources that form the basis of my thesis and give a short presentation of the concept of *Viking religion*.

The second chapter is a general presentation of *death* as understood during the Viking Age. This part of my thesis is meant to explain how death was perceived by the Vikings; life did not end upon the physical death of a member of society but rather went on, either inside the grave or in one of the various death realms. I discuss such aspects as the grave, seen as residence of the dead, the characteristics of the various death realms, the belief in corporeal revenants, and the various customs practiced upon burial: treatment of the body, placement and orientation of the grave, the burial method etc. All these represent an introduction and a background for the analysis of the Viking beliefs in relation to women and their fate after death.

The third chapter starts with a discussion on the importance of women during the Viking Age. The purpose of such a discussion is to see if we should expect to find in the sources enough information regarding the fate of women after death. The whole chapter is focused on the evidence of the written sources concerning the possible death realms open to women after death, the existence of female revenants, the belief in rebirth, and the possibility of communicating with the dead.

The last chapter deals with burial customs as mirrored in the written sources and supplemented by the contemporary material evidence. I start by explaining what burial customs and rituals are, and then I discuss the information found in the sources about the various methods of burial practiced in relation to women, the placement of grave goods, the significance of the ship burial, the raising of memorial stones etc. I also talk about the evidence of the Oseberg burial and interpret it in the context of a story about death, life after death and burial customs.

Last but not least, I sum up the information obtained and present it in the form of conclusions.

CHAPTER I

Theoretical Background

1.1. State of art

In the present thesis I am interested to find out what representations of death, life after death and burial customs were connected with women in the Viking Age. As part of such a subject it is always important to look at what other scholars have done in the same field, so that one becomes aware of what theories exist. Theories can be supported or argued against, but there is also the possibility of suggesting a new angle from which the whole situation can be seen.

When approaching such a subject as women's fate after death in the Viking Age, one stumbles upon a great problem: the scarcity of information contained by the written sources. Maybe this is the explanation for why most of the scholars dealing with death in the Viking Age focused their work on a more general level, insisting on the fate of men after death and with few references in what concerns women.

Anne Holtsmark, in *Norrøn mytologi. Tro og myter i vikingtiden* (1970), introduces the reader to the world of belief and myths of the North by the end of the pagan period; it must be mentioned that rather than being a project based on Holtsmark's work, the book is an introduction and a summary of the Old Norse world of myths and beliefs. It is not a book based on the study of women's fate after death and not even on death in general in the Viking Age, but a few references to these subjects can be found. In the first chapter she takes into consideration the evidence presented by foreign authors such as Tacitus, Adam of Bremen and Ibn Fadlān. The account of the Arab traveller is the one that presents interest to me, as Ibn Fadlān mentions the killing of a slave woman on the occasion of the funeral of a 'Rus' leader. According to Holtsmark, the rituals performed before the killing of the girl show that people believed that the dead man and the slave woman would begin a new life together. As such, the belief in a death realm is evident, as well as a belief in the existence of a soul, a personality independent of the body. This was burnt and the higher the fire rose, the faster the soul of the dead person came to its final destination. Holtsmark concludes that such a belief presupposes the existence of an unseen world parallel with the one we live in, a world in which the dead were to continue their life.[1]

Holtsmark also mentions that the Arabic sources often tell about women being buried alive or dead together with their dead lord, but because her book is meant only as a presentation these cases are not discussed.

[1] See Holtsmark 1970: 25.

In the second chapter, *Myter*, Holtsmark argues that even though we do not have any Scandinavian written sources about what these Northerners believed in, sources that could be a counterpoint to the foreign descriptions about heathen cult in the tenth century, many pictures of sacral content have been preserved from heathen times. These pictures tell myths, as for example the Gotlandic stones from the ninth – tenth centuries, or the textiles found in the Oseberg burial.[2] Nevertheless, we do not know how many of the grave finds that were buried together with those who had used them during their life on earth had had a cultic function; and the same is the situation with the Oseberg finds. Holtsmark suggests that the wagon buried together with the two women must have been used during cultic processions as carriages could not be useful as a means of transportation in a country that had no roads. As such, those who travelled with these carriages must have been connected with cultic activities. If the carriages found in the Oseberg burial had belonged to one of the two women buried there, it is possible that she also had had a function in the cult of gods. Holtsmark argues that maybe the Oseberg finds represent all that was needed for the cult of the fertility god Frey, or what he was called in Vestfold in the ninth century.[3]

The next step in Holtsmark's book is to consider the literary sources that have been preserved, such as eddic and skaldic poetry. In this subchapter the author refers to the various poems preserved in the *Codex Regius* as well as in *Snorre's Edda*. Holtsmark sums up the information given by these poems concerning death; several interesting episodes which could be useful for my project are mentioned: Odin's journey to the underworld in order to gain wisdom from a dead prophetess and Balder's funeral, where his wife, Nanna, followed him on the pyre out of love.

There are also references to the various death realms described in the eddic poems, but again, because Holtsmark's book is only a presentation and not a discussion of the sources, there is no reference to what might have happened to women in particular, after death.

Another book focused on the pre-Christian religion of the North is Folke Ström's *Nordisk hedendom. Tro och sed i förkristen tid* (1993). If in the first part of his study Ström presents the religious situation in pre-historical times, in the second part he takes into discussion the Viking Age. One of the subchapters deals precisely with beliefs connected with death in the Viking period. Here again, the interest is not on women in particular, but on the concept of death in general. Ström states that in the Viking period the family circle included

[2] Ibidem: 51.
[3] Ibidem: 52.

not only the living but also the dead; there was a kind of continuance inside the family conditioned by the awareness of the living members that they had to fulfil their tasks and that they knew their responsibility as bearers of their family's traditions. The living represented a link in the family chain. The physical death meant that a family member went from one family sphere to another; his soul kept on living in the grave or in one of the death realms, but the spiritual power the dead had gained for his family was still to be felt in the life of those living on earth.

Ström believes that the rituals and ceremonies that took place when a person died belonged to a very old religious tradition; such is the case of the treatment of the body after death, followed by burial or burning. Grave goods were usually placed together with the dead, but human sacrifices were also common (such as servants or slaves). According to Ström, their purpose in the death realm was the same as during the life on earth – to keep an eye on their master's comfort.[4]

When it comes to Ibn Fadlān's description, Ström considers that the sexual excesses involved in the preparations of the young woman's death may have had a religious-magical function – to let the girl act as a kind of medium through which new life power was transferred from the living to her dead master. The ritual of lifting the girl over the door had the function of allowing the girl to look in the world of the dead.[5]

Ström goes on discussing aspects of the burial ritual, such as the ritual meal and the building of memorial stones. He also mentions the old belief according to which the grave or the grave mound was the residence of the dead, belief that gave rise to ideas about a common underground death realm. Afterwards, there appeared the belief in a life after death inside the mountain, as well as the Valhalla concept. Ström argues that the Valhalla concept is related to the practice of burning the dead. Through burning, the soul was freed from the body and led to its final destination.[6] There is again no reference to what might have been in store for the Viking women after death. Nevertheless, the information concerning the rituals observed upon the death of somebody, as for example the treatment of the body must have been the same for both women and men.

H. R. Ellis Davidson distinguishes between gods of battle, gods of peace and plenty, gods of the sea, enigmatic gods, and gods of the dead in her book entitled *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (1964). In the chapter dedicated to the gods of the dead, Davidson

[4] See Ström 1993: 209.
[5] Ibidem: 213.
[6] Ibidem: 217.

starts the discussion with Odin, father of the gods and ruler in Asgard. He was the deity to whom human sacrifices were offered by burning, stabbing with a spear and strangling. Davidson presents Odin's realm, Valhalla, according to Snorri's description, as a warrior paradise; those dying a violent death, either in battle or by sacrifice, had the right to enter into his realm.[7] The author argues that in spite of Snorri's picture of an exclusively masculine Valhalla, there are grounds for believing that women too had the right of entry into Odin's realm if they suffered a sacrificial death. They too could be strangled and stabbed, and burnt after death in the name of the god. Ellis Davidson uses as arguments in favour of her theory the references found in the written sources to the death of a man's wife or betrothed, upon her husband's/lover's death – she could thus be burnt on the funeral pyre with her husband – eg. Balder's wife, Nanna, the slave girl mentioned in Ibn Fadlān's account etc.[8] She also considers that the many references in the literary sources, either to a deliberate act of suicide by a widow or to a sudden death of grief at the funeral, point to a survival from heathen times of the custom of sacrifice of the wife at her husband's funeral.[9] Davidson believes that such practices imply that the entry into the realm of Odin was open to women as well as men, but a violent death was demanded as the price of entry. It is an appealing theory, but there are still some questions to be answered before we can accept it: why the contemporary literary sources do not mention anything about the presence of women in Valhalla? And if they really went there, what was their function? What did they do while the warriors trained for the final battle?

Another book written by H. R. Ellis Davidson, which has something in common with my analysis of ideas connected with death and the fate of women after death, is *The Road to Hel. A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (1943). The book is, as the author says, an attempt to collect the evidence concerned with ideas about the fate of man after death. It is actually a study of funeral customs, beliefs in death realms, traces of a cult of the dead, and indications which literature can give as to the nature of survival after death according to heathen thought.

In what concerns the funeral customs, Davidson argues that if during the seventh and eighth centuries there was a tendency towards simpler funeral customs, the Viking Age reveals a movement in the opposite direction in Norway and Sweden. Not only the princely dead but men and women throughout the country were provided with both personal

[7] See Ellis Davidson 1964: 149.
[8] Ibidem: 150.
[9] Ibidem: 151.

possessions and all the familiar objects of daily life. This could be explained by a new and strong interest in the afterlife and a desire to provide the dead with everything needful in it.[10]

Ellis Davidson also records the presence of human sacrifices in Viking Age funerals, but she considers that in the case of the Oseberg ship-burial there is no conclusive evidence for such a practice; this is due to the disturbed state of the burial.[11] Yet, she mentions the existence of several other graves, where the grave goods suggest a double interment, thing that could mean that occasionally in the Viking Age, a widow was sacrificed at her husband's funeral.[12]

According to Norse literature, says Ellis Davidson, the practice of suttee is presented as an act of sacrifice – the woman is slain so that she, together with the dead man's other possessions, may be his in another life.[13] The author considers the idea that, the woman who gives up her life to follow the dead man has the right to become his wife in the next world, to be very significant. As examples Davidson uses the stories of Signe and Brynhild, who were not married with the men they died with.[14]

She also argues that an earlier conception than the life continuing in the grave mound was that of life continuing after the destruction of the body in some other place, where the vital principle has been set free from the body by burning.[15] She believes that the literary tradition supports the connection made in the *Ynglinga saga* between these beliefs about cremation and the worship of Odin. It also suggests that these beliefs were connected with men and women of royal blood, since it has survived in the traditions dealing with princes and chieftains.[16] At the same time, the idea that the wife had to die upon her husband's death seems likely to have belonged originally to the conception of a life elsewhere, and then to have been transferred to the other idea of life continuing in the earth. Davidson considers that the practice of putting the queen to death can hardly be expected to have survived unless a fierce and vital belief in survival apart from the body lingered on.[17]

Another interesting idea discussed by Davidson is the concept of rebirth. In the Helgi poems, Helgi and Svava – Helgi and Sigrun are said to be born again. Davidson argues that such a belief should be connected with the practice of burying the people in a howe and not

[10] See Ellis Davidson 1943: 13–14.
[11] Ibidem: 15
[12] Idem.
[13] Ibdiem: 57.
[14] Ibidem: 58.
[15] Ibidem: 62.
[16] Ibidem: 63.
[17] Ibidem: 64.

burning them (in which case the spirit was said to travel to another world).[18] The conception of rebirth presupposes that a part of man is immortal and survives the death of the body, argues Davidson.[19] The conclusion would be, says Davidson, that there can be survival either through a life lived with the gods after the end of the life on earth, or through rebirth out of the grave.[20]

Gro Steinsland, in *Eros og død i norrøne myter* (1997), has a chapter in which she discusses the relationship between death and eros and the possibility of interpreting death as an erotic journey to another world. Steinsland considers that death had a colossal meaning in the Viking Age and there were many ideas connected with death, burial, the grave mound and the different death realms. Death and burial represented a passage towards a new life dimension.[21] Steinsland underlines the idea that the literary sources do not tell very much about women's journey to the different death realms, but she argues that the Holy Mountain, Helgafell, and Hel's realm must have been open for women; so must also have been the case with Freya's Folkvang. According to Steinsland, the rich grave goods found in the graves of women from the upper social classes clearly show that women also were to expect new adventures after death.[22]

Steinsland argues that the eddic and skaldic poems, as well as the saga literature, offer examples of death being experienced as a love meeting between the dead and a person from the death realm, such as Hel or Ran. Death is thus seen as a kind of marriage.[23] She considers that the big mushroom-formed Gotlandic stones, which are monuments erected in memory of dead men, depict scenes which are connected with the erotic meeting in the death realm. These stones depict a rider approaching a hall on an eight-legged horse, while a woman welcomes him with a drinking horn. Being memory stones which present a journey and an arrival, it has been assumed that these stones point to a journey and arrival to a death realm. As the man is depicted with a phallus, Steinsland argues that the meeting between him and the woman must be an erotic one.[24]

What is more interesting for my thesis is the discussion on the smaller Gotlandic stones which are believed to be memory stones raised for women. The women on these stones are depicted coming to the death realm in a carriage or a sledge as women were not supposed

[18] Ibidem: 140.
[19] Ibidem:146.
[20] Ibidem: 198.
[21] See Steinsland 1997: 98.
[22] Ibidem: 102.
[23] Ibidem: 102–103.
[24] Ibidem: 106–107.

to ride. Such a woman travelling in a carriage was found in the Danish grave from Søllestedt. Taking into consideration the sculpture on one of the artefacts found in the grave, which depicts a pair of lovers, Steinsland argues that she was also expected to get married in the death realm.[25]

The richness of grave goods found in the Oseberg burial could also be used as a support for the images on the Gotlandic stones. In this grave there had been buried different means of transportation that made it possible for the dead women to travel on land and over the sea to the death realm. Thus, the choice of means of transportation from the Oseberg burial coincides with what is represented on the Gotlandic stones.[26]

Another find that could be used to support the importance of the journey after death in the Oseberg burial is the tapestry fragments. The biggest of them describes a procession with men on foot and women in carriages. Steinsland argues that this procession could be interpreted as a part of a symbolic death universe; then, we could wonder if it is not precisely the journey to the death realm which is depicted on the tapestry.[27]

Steinsland concludes that the rich material from the Oseberg find proves that there existed ideas connected with women's existence after death even though the sources are scarce when it comes to information about what expected them there. We might as well wonder if the Oseberg woman was not supposed to get married in her afterlife.[28]

It appears then that most of the scholars mentioned above have been interested in the subject of death and life after death in the Viking Age at a general level. The references to women are few and sometimes they would need more arguments. Still, I consider that some of the ideas presented by these scholars could be interesting to follow – as for example the possibility of women to go after death to Odin's realm in case they suffered a violent or sacrificial death and the idea of rebirth. When it comes to Gro Steinsland's theory about death and eros, I believe that it is a very good starting point for a discussion on death seen from a different angle – as a realm where even love can find its place.

1.2. **The Viking religion**

A study focused on representations of death, life after death and burial customs is a study that implicitly deals with religious beliefs and customs. It is necessary then to make a

[25] Ibidem: 109.
[26] Ibidem: 110.
[27] Ibidem: 112.
[28] Ibidem: 117.

few references concerning the Viking religion so as to be aware of the sphere in which the present paper will be written. The Viking Age is traditionally considered to have lasted from about 800 to about 1050 A.D. A linguistically neutral term referring to the Viking religion is 'pre-Christian Nordic religion', but at the same time this term defines religion negatively as something different from Christianity.[29] It is better maybe to stick to the term used by Norwegian scholars, namely 'Old Norse religion', a term which reminds of linguistic and cultural relations (the term 'Old Norse' refers to the old Norwegian-Icelandic form of the Scandinavian language, namely West Nordic). The Viking religion can also be referred to as 'Nordic paganism' or simply, 'paganism' *(heiðinn dómr)*, as long as we keep in mind that the term came to be used only after the introduction of Christianity *(kristinn dómr)*.

Religion, as a term used to denominate religious beliefs and customs, did not exist in the Viking Age. People used instead *siðr*, which meant *custom***,** when referring to religious practices. Religion played an important role in the lives of the Vikings, it was a part of culture. Paganism was based on cult and ritual and its main objective was the maintenance of the life and health of the kinship group rather than of the individual; as such, paganism was an ethnic religion. Being part of the social community meant being part of the religious brotherhood. Just as man was born in a certain social community, man was also born in the corresponding cultic community.[30]

An important characteristic of the ethnic Viking religion is that it was not based on dogmas, as the Christian religion, but on cult. The rituals had as their main target the maintenance of the kinship group there and then, rather than in a different world at a different time. In other words, the pagan ethnic religion was oriented towards the community and the world where the community was living, rather than the afterworld, the world after death. As a consequence, even though the Vikings believed in a life after death, they rarely had representations of an eternal existence in a death realm.

One of the difficulties we, as scholars, are confronted with when talking about Nordic paganism is that the Viking religion is no longer a living religion, it died out one thousand years ago. No matter what part of the pagan religion we are interested in, we are in a way forced to use our imagination in order to fill in the puzzle. Even more, being part of a society which has evolved in time since the Viking Age, we tend to use our knowledge in order to interpret what we know about the Nordic pagan religion. It is then a fortunate circumstance

[29] See Steinsland 2005: 12.
[30] Ibidem: 32.

that sources referring to the Viking religion have survived in time so that we can use them in order to obtain the information we need in our research. There are two different types of sources that come to our help when we plan to study a certain aspect of the pagan religion: written sources and material sources. While there exist few chances to discover new written texts, the situation is different with the material, archaeological sources. New projects and new areas of research might reveal new finds which might change certain aspects of our perception of the Viking religion. Nevertheless, this is what makes research such an interesting field; if things were to remain the same, what would we, as scholars, do? The possibility of discovering new finds offers us the chance to interpret the written texts in a new light and maybe even come closer to the truth.

Even though the written sources we have at our disposal are few, it would be difficult to interpret the material finds without them. The explanation lies in the fact that the written texts offer us a contemporary glimpse of the mental framework of the time. By help of the written sources we can understand how people thought, what they believed in, what they expected from the life on earth as well as from the afterlife. However, there seems to be a problem – most of the texts we have at our disposal, and which refer to the Viking religion, were not written down until several hundreds of years later, after the introduction of Christianity and that of the written word. There is an ample discussion among scholars concerning the possibility of using these sources in order to understand the pagan religion, but I will come back to it later, when referring to the written sources relevant to my paper.

1.3. **Thesis statement. Theory and method**

The unknown has always been a source of fascination for people in general. It is in our nature to be interested in the things we do not know rather than in those that we already know about. Our mind is in a continuous quest for things that are difficult to interpret, difficult to say something about because the information at our disposal is scarce or fragmentary. It should be no wonder that it is precisely this starting point which makes the research advance. What would happen if we were all content with what we already know? What would happen if we did not possess a curious nature? Without a constant need to penetrate the unknown, where the basic material is either badly preserved or limited, the research would be in a state of pause. It is difficult to imagine a world in which research has stopped on all plans: philological, scientific, medical, philosophical etc. It would mean living in a world which has no future but rather living in the past, satisfied with the discoveries made by the previous

human generations. Try to imagine for a moment living in the twenty first century but with no progress as compared to the Viking Age; without the knowledge accumulated over the centuries everything would look normal, but having in mind all the things that humanity has acquired since the Viking period, the world itself would look as if frozen in time, in a state of pause.

It is research which makes our world change. It is research which shapes our mind and thoughts. Curiosity is a human trait of nature, but not every human being is interested in pursuing it at a higher level, in the field of research; everybody has questions to answer, but not everybody is interested in finding an answer. It is the job of scholars, in different fields, to try to penetrate the unknown and transform it into something familiar. Starting from the unknown, we try to ascend the ladder of knowledge step by step. Sometimes it seems quite easy to advance, but at other times the ladder might break and we might fall, or we can even get stuck somewhere on the way. Nevertheless, we are left with the hope that scholars from other fields of research might come to our help; or that we can climb another ladder and finally get the information we want.

In my present paper I am interested to find out if it is possible to get a unitary picture of beliefs concerned with the afterlife existence and burial customs regarding women in the Viking Age. Rather than being a philological analysis of the written sources that we have at our disposal, or an archaeological analysis of the contemporary material evidence, the paper is going to be more like a mentality study of what people believed would happen to women after death. Combining the two types of sources, I want to find out what we can understand from the information we have concerning the Viking mentality about death when it came to women in particular. Were they supposed to continue their life inside the grave mound? Were they expected to travel to a death realm placed somewhere beyond the spatial limitations of the grave? Were women believed to be able to swing between the grave mound and one of the various death realms? Or were they expected to return to their grave at certain special occasions during the year? Is there any evidence in the sources that women preserved their status in death and joined a death realm according to their social class? Was there a death realm destined for the representatives of aristocracy, corresponding to the male Valhalla? Considering that women played an important part in the cultic life during the Viking Age, especially in connection with fertility rituals, is it possible to trace in the sources a belief in an afterlife existence in a death realm destined for women and ruled by one of the Vanir (Frey/ Freya)? The questions are multiple and rather than trying to apply various general theories to my study, I will try to filter the sources through my own lenses. How do I, as a medieval

scholar, understand the information contained by the sources? In other words, the present paper is going to be an empirical study, a study based on my personal experience with the texts and the material artefacts rather than on theory; it will reflect the way I perceive the information given by the sources. Still, it should be mentioned that, as modern scholars, we must always be aware of the gap in time between the information we are looking for, the time when it was written down, and last but not least, the time when we are doing our research.

When necessary, I will make use of certain theories that may give more power to my arguments, but I will not depart my study from a certain distinct theory. I rather depart from my personal assumption that, considering the important role played by women during the Viking Age, it is practically impossible for the Vikings not to have had various representations connected with the afterlife of women, just as they had when it came for men.

My working method will be a hermeneutical one, a process of understanding the sources and trying to extract an overall image concerning the fate of the Viking women after death. What can we find out from the literary sources and how can we supplement that information by using the material evidence? Can the two sources be used complementary? Is the information given by the written texts enough and if not, why? Could we obtain such an overall image only on the basis of the written texts, without the archaeological information?

When speaking about hermeneutics as methodology, it is consequently meant as a process or an act of interpretation and understanding. Hermeneutics implies rules and systems of explaining, understanding or deciphering texts. It can be applied not only to textual studies, but also to human actions in general, institutions and various cultural artefacts. That is why hermeneutics has been called "the art and the skill, as well as the theory and science, of interpretation and understanding".[31] Everybody should be able to find something in hermeneutics that falls into his/ her field.

Hermeneutics shows not only what it means to understand and interpret, but also supplies techniques for how to pursue that. It is a process which implies an understanding at two levels: the individual and the general. We understand the individual words only if we see them in relation to the whole sentence, but at the same time the understanding of the text is pre-conditioned by an understanding of the individual words. According to Zilmer, even though it might seem easier to start with the smaller unit, it is actually misleading because we can never exclude our conscious or subconscious pre-understandings from the interpretation process.[32] Without the general ideas we have concerning the whole situation, it would be

[31] See Zilmer 2003: 54
[32] Ibidem: 58.

impossible for us to identify its various components. Consequently, when we are trying to interpret a text, we already have some expectations as to its possible meaning and function. The availability of other texts or sources dealing with the same subject makes us change our initial interpretation and advance to another level of understanding. If we take the example of the present paper, I start from some general ideas concerning certain beliefs in an afterlife existence destined for women; with each source I consult, my initial interpretation is going to change, either by adding arguments or by taking the initial assumption into a different direction.

We must also be aware that, when interpreting a text, our understanding is shaped not only by the texts themselves, but also by our contemporary premises and the general structures of human understanding.[33] It is difficult to achieve a total fusion between our contemporary world view and the historical setting of a certain text but a partial fusion is possible. This could be explained by the fact that our contemporary view is different from the 'contemporary' view of the pre-Christian Vikings.

Furthermore, a text can be viewed as a possible answer to a question, which is an expression containing several gaps and an indication that and how these gaps are to be filled in.[34] It is possible that a text has filled in the questions of its time and so it reflected ideas of past times. It is precisely through questions that we try to penetrate the unknown and transform it into the familiar by finding the answer. By answering a question, a certain gap is filled in and the overall image grows bigger and bigger. A question is nevertheless connected with what we already know. For example, when trying to find out if it is possible to obtain an overall image of what happened to women after death, we depart from our knowledge that the Vikings had certain beliefs and representations related to life after death. The questions could be either explicit or implicit and it is sometimes difficult to trace the initial question behind a text, especially if the distance in time (between our time and the time when the text was written down) is big.

In consequence, a text can be seen as a source of information, an answer to a question asked at a certain moment in time. Not only texts can be viewed as answers to possible questions, but also material artefacts, which must have had a certain meaning and function. It is also the case of the present paper, which has as a purpose to answer to several individual questions in order to obtain a complete overall image. It is maybe ironic that for answering our questions we must use the 'answers' given by the medieval texts to questions related to

[33] Idem.
[34] See Kuhlmann 1989: 38.

their past. In other words, it is a never ending process of questions and answers that allow us to advance on the knowledge 'ladder', because no writer or scholar is interested in common things but rather in what is different, what is special.

1.4. **Sources and source criticism**

As mentioned above, a discussion about sources implies a distinction between written sources and material sources. The subject of the present paper being beliefs and customs concerning death, burial and life after death related to Viking women, it is very important to make use of both types of sources. The written sources can offer us an insight into the mental beliefs related to death in the Viking Age, while the material sources can reveal information about the practices used in real life. In other words, the written sources are the equivalent of a theoretical framework, while the material sources offer us the practical information. At the same time, the contemporary material evidence can show us if the beliefs recorded in the written sources were put into practice in real life; sometimes, it can also add information in those cases where the written sources lack it.

1.4.1. **The written sources**

The most important of the literary sources referring to the Viking Age are the Old Norse poems, the *eddic* and the *skaldic* poems. For the purpose of the present paper, I will make use of the *eddic* poems. Most of them were written down during the Middle Ages but the recorded myths may have been orally preserved from older periods. The explanation is that before the introduction of Christianity to the North, culture was mainly oral. Traditions, poems, stories, beliefs, customs were preserved throughout time by using memory. Only later, with the introduction of the new religion based on dogmas and books, could the old myths and stories be written down, probably by monks and priests. In a way, the vernacular literary texts that have survived from the Middle Ages are the products of two cultures: the pre-literate culture of the Viking Age, characterised by orality, and the literate culture, marked by the introduction of the written word by Christianity.[35]

The name *Edda* was first attached to Snorri's famous book of poetics written about 1220. It came to be called *Snorra Edda* and outside Iceland it is sometimes referred to as the *Prose Edda*. One of the interpretations of the word *edda* was that it meant 'great-grandmother' and it could hint to the fact that it was old women who preserved the tradition. Others said that it

[35] See Kellog 1991: 89.

had to do with the Old Norse word *oðr* meaning 'poetics' or that it came from *Oddi*, a farm and literary center where Snorri was educated as a boy. A more convincing solution seems to be that the title is a jokingly deprecating hypocoristic formulation from the Latin *edere* = 'to write/publish'.[36]

In the first part of the seventeenth century and maybe even earlier, the notion was born that Snorri's *Edda* was only an epitome of a much larger and more notable *Edda* which Sæmundr Sigfússon 'the Wise' (1056-1133) had written. He was a priest in Oddi and became famous in Icelandic history and legend but nothing he wrote has been preserved. The idea that he had written *Edda* may have been encouraged by the fact that people knew of a manuscript which was believed to contain some or all of this ancient *Edda* ascribed to him. In 1643 the codex in question came into the hands of Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson, who was convinced that this was indeed *Edda Sæmundi multiscii, Sæmundar Edda*. The theory that this was Snorri's precursor and source was strengthened by the fact that the codex contained complete texts of a number of the poems cited or referred to by Snorri. Later, the scholars recognized that the poems in Bishop Brynjólfur's manuscript were composed in various periods, most of them long before Sæmundr was born.[37] Nowadays, we refer to this collection of poems as *The Poetic Edda*.

Bishop Brynjólfur sent the manuscript to King Frederik III and it came to be referred as *Codex Regius*. It is of middle size, in quarto format, and is dated to ca.1270. *Codex Regius* 2365, 4o consists of 27 poems grouped in two: 10 mythological poems, with *Vǫluspá*, of cosmic and universal scope, at their head; the following mythological poems depend on which god figures as their main character; the last are more difficult to fit into this 'theological' scheme.[38] The rest of the poems are centered on mortal heroes.

The codex is written in a single hand throughout and bears a complex relationship to a number of other surviving manuscripts and literary texts. Consequently, it has been assumed that Codex Regius has been compiled from a variety of older written sources. It appears that the codex is "but the tip of a thirteenth century antiquarian iceberg, the main body of which has disappeared, making a detailed linkage impossible among the works that have survived".[39]

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[36] See Harris 2005: 74.
[37] See Kristjánsson 1997: 26.
[38] See Fidjestøl 1994: 309.
[39] Codex Arnamagnæn (AM) 748, 4o contains slightly variant texts of seven of the poems in Codex Regius. Twenty of the poems of the Codex Regius are also quoted whole or in pieces in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* and the prose legendary narrative *The Saga of the Voslungs (Vǫlsunga saga).*

The eddic poems are anonymously written. They belong to an oral tradition and as such, it is difficult to establish their age. One of the characteristics of an oral tradition is that it is under permanent change. The poems were preserved in peoples' memory and in order to understand the whole process it could be useful to take an example from our own time. If the same story is told by ten different persons, each story will bear the signs of the teller; this means that it is practically impossible to retell a story with the exact same words of the person who first told it to you. The general lines will remain the same, but the details will always show signs of change depending on the teller's knowledge of the initial story, his/her background, as well as the interests of the audience. The same must have been the situation with the Viking oral tradition; the poems were under permanent change until the time they were written down. The several variants of one and the same poem preserved in the different manuscripts bear signs of the changing process; and as long as the changes are present in the written material we should maybe accept the idea that the variables were probably greater in the oral transmission.

Besides, we also have to take into consideration the problem of source criticism. If the sources we have at our disposal were written down several hundreds of years after the events described and the introduction of Christianity, how far can we rely on them as historical sources? While pondering this question we must keep in mind that those who recorded the poems were Christian scribes writing about the pagan religion of the North. How far can we rely on their recordings? The most skeptical of the scholars would say that the written sources we have at our disposal can only be used as a source for the period when they were written down, the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, we cannot limit ourselves at considering the poems only as a product of the time they were written down; we must go deeper and find out if they really present pre-Christian ideas. Just because a certain poem was written several hundreds of years later than the age it refers to it does not mean that its content is not older. The myth presented in a poem might have belonged to an earlier period, a period in which writing did not play a major role but was rather orally transmitted from generation to generation until it came to be written down. This allowed for the preservation of their motives and also offered the possibility of adding to their content.

The date and provenance of the eddic poems have been two major points of discussion for the scholars interested in the Viking Age. Until the nineteenth century they were considered very ancient and part of the common Scandinavian legacy; but in 1871, Edwin Jessen argued for a late, mostly eleventh- to twelfth century provenance. A third line of approach came from the part of those scholars who totally reject the discussion of a poem's

age; these scholars argue that a poem orally transmitted has no age, it is 'newborn' with every performance. A possible solution for this debate would be to distinguish between the poem as a text and the matter it conveys. As mentioned above, a text can be young but the matter it conveys may be very old. We must also keep in mind that an oral text cannot be dated after the same principles as a written text; as belonging to an old oral tradition, it can be considered old, but once it manifests itself again through time, in a written text, it can be considered new.[40]

Related to the problem of the date and provenance of a certain poem is the question of historicity and the possibility of using the poems as genuine historical sources. If at the beginning of the nineteenth century the literary sources were accepted as historical sources of the Viking period, the following years gave rise to opposite points of view. There was even a time when the written sources were considered unacceptable as sources referring to the pre-Christian period. In the past years, there seems to be a tendency to recognize the historical value of the literary sources. However, the knowledge acquired over the years allows scholars to be more careful in interpreting the sources. We are now well aware that the preserved texts were interpretations of the past. We accept that they were written down in a Christian period by Christian people, which implies that the scribes had a different mentality than that of the pagan people who had orally preserved their myths. We are also aware that just as the Christian scribes wrote down the pagan myths and filtered them through their mentality, we, as modern scholars, use our mentality to understand the medieval texts. It is a hermeneutical process of understanding a text and it is difficult to forget all the things mankind has learned since the Viking Age in order to see the pagan world the way the pagans saw it. Nevertheless, as long as we are aware of this problem we can understand better the whole debate around source criticism and maybe even the position of the Christian scribe while trying to write down pagan myths in a Christian world.

Keeping these aspects in mind we can move forward to our next written source, Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*. Snorri was himself a Christian writing about pagan past times. He was born in 1179 at Hvamm, western Iceland, in a prestigious family. His father, Sturla Thortarson, descended in a direct line from Snorri the Priest (who had in many ways played a dominant part in Icelandic affairs), while his mother, Guthny, was daughter of Bothvar Thortharson (who reckoned among his ancestors the well-known fighter and poet Egil Skallagrimsson and the lawspeaker and able skald, Markús Skeggjason). Snorri himself

[40] See Meulengracht Sørensen 1991: 226.

became one of the most prominent Icelanders of his time, known as a powerful chieftain and ruthless intriguer.

What is of interest to us in the context of the present paper are his accomplishments as a writer, for which he has been compared in our own times with Thucydides; in some cases he even has been considered in nowise inferior to his Greek counterpart.[41] Snorri is regarded as being the author of a history about the Norwegian kings, *Heimskringla*, and many consider that he is also the author of *Egil's saga*. Sometimes around 1220-1225 he wrote the book known to us as the *Prose Edda*. We cannot tell if Snorri himself gave his work the title *Edda*, but at least that is what is mentioned in the oldest preserved manuscript of the book: Codex Upsaliensis.[42]

The *Prose Edda* is a handbook of poetics, primarily of the meter and diction of skaldic verse, designed to save skaldic poetry from the changing poetic fashions of the day as well as from the new form of religion. The introduction of Christianity around the year 1000 A.D. changed the attitude towards the old myths and they were on the verge of being forgotten and replaced by the new teachings. Without knowing the myths, the young poets would not have been able to understand the peculiarities of the skaldic diction; that is why Snorri decided to write a book meant to preserve the old skaldic language and its basis, the pre-Christian mythology.[43] The result was a well organized picture of the whole Norse mythology.

The *Prose Edda* is a singular book of its time, an attempt to provide a systematic and complex picture of the mythological material preserved from the pre-Christian period. Nowadays we possess four main manuscripts in which Snorri's book has been preserved: Codex Upsaliensis (circa 1300), Codex Regius (circa 1325), Codex Wormianus (circa 1350) and Codex Trajectinus (Utrecht ms., circa 1600).

The *Prose Edda* is divided into four sections: the *Prologue* represents a sort of introduction to the whole book mentioning the author's opinion and choice of sources, as well as the way he intends to use them. The work's background is also provided by presenting the Norse gods in a euhemeristic light as descending from men of Asia.

Next comes *Gylfaginning* (The Deluding of Gylfi), the story of a naive Swedish king, Gylfi, who puts questions of mythological nature to three chieftains of the *Æsir*, (one group of the Norse gods, the other being the *Vanir*) presented as earthly rulers. The result is an overall systematic picture of the Norse mythology, starting with the creation of the world and ending

[41] See the introduction to *Heimskringla* 2002: IX.
[42] See Steinsland 1995: 37.
[43] See Steinsland 2005: 52.

with the approaching of its end. This second part is a frame story which begins when Gylfi decides to travel to Asgard in order to find out what kind of people the Æsir are, and ends with the image of Gylfi, left alone again, after the miraculous disappearance of Asgard. There is no way we can miss the genial trick used by Snorri – as long as the Æsir do not appear in the frame of the story, everything can be seen as nothing more than imagery, a vision. Such a trick would have allowed Snorri to present pre-Christian mythology as truthful as possible, avoiding its negative perception by Christianity.

The third part of the *Prose Edda*, *Skáldskaparmál* (poetic diction) concentrates on kennings and heiti. It is mainly a list of kennings and heiti for different concepts; in some cases these are explained by the narratives of mythic or heroic character recounted by Snorri. Such stories add information about the gods and powers introduced in the previous section.

The last part of the book, *Háttatal* (enumeration of meters) gives examples of one hundred different verse forms which the poets could choose from. The majority of these examples are part of an elaborate skaldic poem honouring King Hakon Hakonarson and Earl Skuli.

The *Prose Edda* is a valuable source for any scholar interested in Norse mythology but we have to be critical any time we intend to use it. The same question mentioned before must come to our mind: how far can we rely on Snorri's work? He was a Christian writer living in a Christian world, meaning that his work must have been influenced to a certain degree by his background. How much was he influenced and how much did he preserve of the genuine pre-Christian beliefs? – is another aspect we should take into consideration.

As in the case of the eddic poems, there has always been a debate around the historical value of Snorri's *Edda*. If at the beginning of the twentieth century scholars believed that Snorri's picture of the Norse mythology included no falsifications, later critics denied any source value concerning pagan cult and ritual to Snorri's work. One of the most radical positions inside this debate was taken by the Danish archaeologist Olaf Olsen, who in the 1960's published his thesis entitled *Hörg, hov og kirke*. In his thesis Olsen rejected the source value of most of the literary material we possess concerning pre-Christian cult life, including Snorri's *Edda*. Nowadays, the situation seems to be changing mainly due to the acceptance of new ideas coming from such fields as anthropology and philology.[44]

Another tendency among the scholars interested in Snorri's work has been to prove Snorri's connection with European learning centers. Nevertheless, it has been difficult to

[44] See Steinsland 1995: 39.

establish how much of Snorri's knowledge is the result of direct influences from European books focused on theories of language. No matter if he had direct contact with these books or not, it is obvious that Snorri was aware of the scholarly theories of his time and at the same time, influenced by them in his writings.

Being a Christian, Snorri shared the religious ideas of his time but he was also interested in the history of his country and people. Just as the rest of the European people, the Nordic countries needed a written history of their own with a positive attitude towards their past; this also included the old religion with its pagan gods and powers who had been so forcefully fought against once Christianity had been introduced. The model was found in the Church's understanding of the relationship between the New and the Old Testament.[45] Just as the time before Christ's coming was accepted as a time preceding the true faith, the pagan gods were accepted as part of the old faith because the time for Christianity was not ripe yet. Snorri's attitude towards the old religion follows the same lines: he is sympathetic towards it and accepts it as part of the historical past of his people.

We must not forget that Snorri built his masterpiece on other sources, such as the eddic poems (for the mythological information systematized in *Gylfaginning*) and the skaldic poems (in *Skáldskaparmál*). Even though Snorri seems to be a faithful and dedicated historian, this does not mean that he was objective towards his sources. He rather chose among both his written and his oral sources (because he must have had oral sources too) the ones he considered that fitted his project best. He afterwards organized them according to his principles, removing the parts he did not like and adding other in order to suit his ideas and his way of thinking and understanding the pre-Christian mythology. He was an artist adjusting the material he disposed of according to his intentions. In other words, Snorri was no less a modern scholar for his time than we are for ours. He knew how to be critical about the sources he used, but it was a critical view shaped according to the trends of the time. We, as modern scholars, can understand the way Snorri worked while creating his masterpiece only if we have enough knowledge about people's way of thinking during the Middle Ages. In addition, we can follow Snorri's *ars poetica* by studying the eddic poems and the way Snorri made use of them in his project. We are faced again with a hermeneutical process of understanding the text; but in this case we must be more cautious because just as Snorri used his background in order to understand the sources he had at his disposal, so do we use our background in order

[45] See Steinsland 2005: 55.

to understand his writings. The result is that the information we finally use has been filtered twice – once by Snorri and once by ourselves.

The third source relevant for my paper is represented by the so called *Icelandic Family Sagas* (*Íslendingasǫgur*). These sagas are concerned with a time beginning with the settlement of Iceland (870) and ending with the introduction of the new religion (1030). The adventures described in these sagas are mainly placed in Iceland and their recurring theme is feud. The main characters are usually people endowed with special characteristics but who are faced with a difficult fate. They get involved in erotic adventures and conflicts about property, but no matter what they do they have to keep their honour.

The *Icelandic Family Sagas* are a fusion of history and legend in vernacular prose form and they could be considered either Europe's first novels or her only prose epics.[46] The sagas were written in the thirteen century, so again, several hundreds of years after the events described and the introduction of Christianity. The Icelandic sagas are anonymous and undated. It is impossible to identify their authors despite some more or less plausible attributions to named men proposed by scholars in our times. Due to the lateness of the manuscripts we possess (the most complete belong to the fourteenth century), the anonymity of the authors, the relative homogeneity of the style, it is difficult to locate the sagas in time.[47] However, they appear as a unique literary production of their time, which has aroused the interest of modern scholars preoccupied by their background and sources and especially by the relation of the preserved written texts to the oral tradition.

The debate around the source value of the *Icelandic Family Sagas* is one hundred-years-old and had its climax in the so called 'freeprose – bookprose theory'. The supporters of the freeprose theory claimed that the sagas had been orally composed and transmitted and that they had existed in their present form before they had been written down; as such, the sagas could contain a historical core. Their opponents, the adepts of the bookprose theory, believed that the sagas are the literary creation of thirteenth century antiquarians who might have used information preserved in the oral tradition, but who rather relied on literary sources and especially on their imagination; these scholars considered that the source value of the sagas was pretty low.

The sagas offer us a fascinating insight into people's political and legal dealings with one another, but the difficulty appears when we try to figure out how much they are rooted in reality. Besides, what reality are we faced with? Do the sagas reflect the reality of the

[46] See Clover 2005: 239.
[47] Ibidem: 247.

settlement period, the writing period, a combination of the two…? Couldn't they be just the result of imagination, an attempt to recreate the pagan past?

Nowadays, the sagas seem to be considered important works of art written in the Middle Ages but based on traditions which could be very old. We cannot be sure how much of the information contained in the sagas comes from the old oral tradition and how much from the imagination of the medieval scribes, so we cannot use the sagas as historical sources for real events. Still, if we accept the idea that the sagas are based on traditions which could be very old, they can offer us an insight into people's religion and mentality (and this is exactly what is of interest in the present project).

1.4.2. **The contemporary material sources**

In addition to the literary sources mentioned above, I will also make use of contemporary material sources, such as archaeological artefacts. Their importance is marked by the term 'contemporary', referring to the fact that these material finds actually belong to the period under discussion – the Viking Age (as opposed to the written sources which are much younger). The archaeological material is nevertheless complimentary to the written sources because we must interpret it. In order to interpret the artefacts we need a theoretical frame, frame offered by the information given in the literary material. In other words, it is difficult to use the material evidence if we lack the written source which contains the background. There are nevertheless cases when the material evidence can help us in interpreting the texts; once we have both a written text and artefacts that can be interpreted on the basis of the written text (or vice versa), we can begin our analysis.

There are several types of artifacts, and in a paper dealing with death and life after death these could include graves, grave finds, memorial stones, skeletons etc. In addition to the information offered by the artefacts as such, the place where they were found and the cultural landscape are also important sources for our knowledge about the past.[48]

If we keep in mind the fact that the pre-Christian Viking religion was not based on dogmas but on cult and ritual, it is obvious that the artefacts can help us a lot in an analysis focused on death, burial rituals and life after death. The material evidence can give us information about how rituals concerned with death were performed and what objects were placed inside the grave. Using the written evidence we can then find out if there is a correspondence between the rituals performed in real life and the way they were recorded

[48] See Steinsland 2005: 38.

during the Middle Ages. We can also interpret the significance of the artefacts and find out their symbolism. There may be cases when the written texts do not offer enough information to interpret the contemporary material evidence and then we might attempt at guessing their use and significance for the Vikings on the basis of similar finds. Furthermore, we must accept the existence of regional differences in the way rituals were performed in real life. In such cases, the written texts are of little help because they present the main myths on a general level, but the archaeological finds are more place-centered and they can offer better clues at how cult and rituals were performed in different regions of the Nordic area.

We could say that the written sources and the material evidence for the Viking religion are two faces of the same coin. While the texts were written down during the Middle Ages, the artefacts are contemporary with the Viking period. The texts offer us a kind of theoretical frame for the Viking pre-Christian religion, while the artefacts have a more practical function and show us how cult and ritual were performed in real life. We can use the texts to interpret the artifacts, but at the same time we can use the artefacts to interpret the texts and their myths. It is no wonder then that only by making use of both types of sources can we discover new angles of interpreting old theories, or even new theories concerning different aspects of the Norse religion.

CHAPTER II

Death in the Viking Period

2.1. **The concept of *DEATH* in the Viking period**

Death is a universal phenomenon which evokes a great variety of responses in the different cultures of the world. Every culture has its way of taking care of the dead in accordance with the religious beliefs and rituals practiced by the respective community. Some societies burn the dead, others simply bury them; animal and human sacrifices can or cannot accompany the dead person in the grave. Other people eat their dead or preserve them by embalming or smoking. Still others use to dismember the corpses and treat the respective parts in various ways according to the custom. The great variety that we meet at the level of treating the corpses is also obvious when it comes to funerals: some people weep on these occasions, others laugh and have huge parties, still others celebrate death through sexual orgies or fighting, dancing or music. Even though death is one of the few accepted universal concepts, it is characterized by a great diversity. This diversity has nothing to do with the fact that we live in different times and epochs because it is marked even among people living at the same time and in close places. It has rather to do with differences in mentalities and the way people understand the world and life in this world.

It is no wonder then that people living in the Viking period understood death in another way than we do it today; for the Vikings, life on earth was filtered through other religious beliefs than ours. Their religion, which later came to be called 'pagan', recognized the existence of several gods, each having his/her specific attributes. Life on earth functioned on the basis of religion, understood as the relation between man and a universe in which the communication between man, gods and various other powers was possible. There existed two different spheres: an empirical world, in which the living people were to be found, and another world, peopled by gods, spirits, forefathers and good or evil powers.[49] Repeated contact with the powers through cult activities assured the fertility and vitality of the community.

Cult and ritual represented the ground stone of the Viking religion. Through cult and ritual people reinforced their connection with the other sphere where the gods lived. At the same time, the cultic activities and rituals had as a final target the maintenance of the life and health of the kinship group. As the pagan religion was an ethnic one, the kinship group was essential. Life and death were understood from the perspective of the kinship group which included not only the living but also the dead.

[49] See Steinsland 2005: 29.

The deceased were considered to continue an existence in close connection with the living generations. There existed a strong communion between the living and the dead, who were generally trusted and venerated, but also feared. The dead were considered to perform functions that were important for the existence and continuity of the family as part of society. They could give advice and help their living relatives, but at the same time the dead could injure the living in some sort of revenge. The personal power which manifested itself in every individual was not lost upon the physical death. It represented rather a family inheritance which could become an individual characteristic of the future generations as long as they fulfilled their obligations and continued the family's traditions. In other words, the life and continuance of the kinship group was conditioned by the performance of important functions on the part of both the living and the dead members of the community.

The future existence and life of the kindred was what really mattered. As a consequence, life could gain meaning for the individual only seen as part of the kinship group.[50] Upon the physical death, one member of the kinship group was believed to go over from one sphere of the family group to another. Death was not regarded as a barrier separating the kinship group from one of its members and vice versa, but rather as a transition from one stage to another. Death was seen as related to the process of living because life continues generation after generation; it was precisely this continuity that the Vikings enhanced during the rituals surrounding death. The spiritual power that the dead had obtained for his kinship group was still to be useful for the future generations as long as they performed their rightful duties.[51]

Death seems to have had a huge meaning in the Viking period and the literary and material sources that we have at our disposal offer us plenty of arguments in this sense. According to Steinsland, we could probably talk about a kind of death ideology which stands as a basis not only for the Viking religion and cultic activities, but also for great parts of the poetry and art related to the Viking period.[52] There existed a whole ideological universe connected with death but not in the form of fixed teachings (like Christianity would introduce later), but rather in the form of myths, rituals and cultic activities. Death represented a barrier-breaking dimension with possibility of more profound experiences than life could offer.[53] Nevertheless, there existed a second relationship to death marked by fear. The dead could be not only benevolent and helpful, but also wicked and more dangerous than they had been

[50] See Steinsland 1997: 98–99.
[51] See Ström 1993: 208.
[52] See Steinsland 1997: 97.
[53] See *Sayings of the High One (Hávamál)* (138-141), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 34. Odin commits suicide by hanging in the tree of life in order to obtain wisdom.

while alive.[54] In addition, in *Sayings of the High One*, a third attitude towards death is presented: it is better to live than not to be alive, it is better to be blind than to be burnt on the funeral pyre, because "a corpse is of no use to anyone".[55]

2.2. **The grave – the residence of the dead**

The literary sources and the contemporary material evidence testify in favour of the existence of a multitude of representations and images connected with death, burial and life after death in the Viking Age. There was no logic relation between the various ideas associated with life after death which could continue either in the grave or in one of the various death realms.

Consequently, the grave was considered to be the home and residence of the dead and the placement of food and drink in the grave could be seen as a strong argument in this sense. Rituals and cultic activities were performed at the grave not only upon burial, but as long as the dead person was remembered among the living.

The graves were usually placed near the farm because it was considered safe to have your dead relatives near the house. Several Icelandic stories relate how a certain peasant wanted to be placed on a hill, close to his house, so that he could see the whole district and in a way supervise the activities of the living; others wanted to be buried in a place where they could see the ships sailing the fjord.[56] As mentioned above, the dead were believed to perform certain functions that secured the life and continuity of the kinship group. They offered comfort for the living, while the living kept on considering them members of the kinship group and offered them respect. A grave represented not only a home for the dead, but it also secured a certain status for the family living on the respective piece of land. The graves were more or less visible signs that there, the kinship group had had its property for generation after generation.

As long as the living generations performed the necessary rituals at the grave, the dead were remembered. Rituals involving the placement of food and drinks upon the grave could be taken as a sign that the Vikings believed in a posthumous existence in the grave mound rather than in a death realm conditioned by a journey either on foot, horse, carriage or boat. Yet, the lack of a logical relation between the various representations connected with death in the Viking Age needs to be taken into consideration when we are faced with the various

[54] The *Family Sagas* often tell stories about dead men hunting the living.
[55] See *Sayings of the High One* (71), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 23.
[56] See for example *The Saga of the People of Svarfadardal (Svarfdæla saga)* (ch. 21), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. IV: 182.

myths describing the existence of different death realms. A possibility could be that the dead were supposed to continue their existence in the grave for a while and then take their final journey to a certain death realm. It could also be possible that in certain cases the dead were expected to return to their grave at specific moments of the year, so that they could partake in rituals and cultic activities important for the living community. It is difficult to give a precise solution because unlike modern anthropologists, who have the advantage of coming into contact with the cultures they study, we have to base our research on problematic written sources and material artefacts. More than that, as long as the pagan religion had no fix teachings, the various representations and ideas connected with death must have been formed over a long period of time. The best we can do is to take the information offered by the sources and discuss it on the basis of the above-mentioned observations, without attempting to explain why and how the Vikings could have had several simultaneous representations about death. Just as Steinsland points out, even in our culture we have contradictory representations about death without it being a problem. We can believe in the soul's journey to heaven and at the same time we can have conversations with the dead as if it continued its existence in the grave.[57] Why then should we be puzzled when faced with the pagan beliefs in a life after death either in the grave or in a death realm?

2.3. **Death realms: life after death in a world beyond the grave**

2.3.1. **The realm of Hel**

The belief in the grave as a place of residence for the dead has something in common with ideas about a collective subterranean death realm. Hel (the name of the death realm can be connected with the verb *hylja* = to cover) was such a collective death realm, but it had no sense of community; it was not seen as a place for family gatherings. In Hel the dead continued their existence in an individual post-mortem state. Such a belief seems to be contradictory to the pagan preoccupation with performing cultic activities meant to maintain the life and health of the kinship group. If the living and the dead were considered to form together the kinship group, how could then the forefathers continue their existence after death in an individual post-mortem state?

Snorri Sturluson gives a very thorough description of Hel, which is the name of both the death realm and of its mistress. This 'half-black half flesh-coloured' giant woman was thrown

[57] See Steinsland 1997: 100.

to Niflhel by Odin, the supreme god, and she was given "authority over nine worlds, such that she has to administer board and lodging to those sent to her, and that is those who die of sickness or old age".[58] Hel's realm is surrounded by very high walls and great gates, description which brings forth connotations of a very well fortified prison, with no hope of escape. Hel is presented by Snorri as a universal death realm where existence has the connotation of anti-existence. To reach the realm of this rather downcast and fierce-looking subterranean mistress, one has to cross a river, over the Gioll Bridge; the bridge separates the world of the living from Hel's territory which is downwards and northwards. On the way to Hel, over the bridge, one is faced with Hel's hound, Garm, which snaps at the traveller with a bloody maw. Once arrived in Hel, one realizes that the door opens just one way and it closes heavily when the dead steps in Hel's kingdom. If this is not enough to make you feel a shiver going down your back, Snorri continues his description by enumerating Hel's possessions: her dish is called Hunger, her knife Famine, her threshold, where you enter, Stumbling-block, her bed Sick-bed, her curtains Gleaming-bale. By using a simple exercise of our imagination we could picture Hel's realm as a very dark and sinister place ruled by a 'half black half flesh-coloured' mistress, but was Hel really perceived as such by the pagan Vikings?

Snorri's presentation of Hel is rather fierce and scholars generally believe that in describing her in such a negative way Snorri was influenced by Christian ideas of a place of punishment after death.[59] Significant in this sense is that the universal death realm of Hel came to be associated later, in the Christian mission, with hell as opposed to heaven. With the coming of Christianity, death gained a totally new meaning, being often connected with fear and ideas of punishment and reward. Nevertheless, the pagans new no such conceptions, they had a positive attitude towards death considering it an attempt to justify the world order, to make the meaningless meaningful (the history of religion terms that for 'teodicé').[60] Life after death was not conditioned by one's deeds in the life on earth but rather by a code of honour. Whatever one did while alive, one had to keep one's honour and those who brought shame on the family and disgraced themselves in death became outcast ancestors. They were left with an unsettled afterlife. Christianity faced such people with options like purgatory and hell.

Besides, Hel could not have been seen in such a negative light by the pagan Vikings as long as death is often described by skalds as a love meeting between the dead and a figure from the death realm (be it Hel or Ran). Death was surrounded by the same type of eros as

[58] See *Gylfaginning* (34), in *Edda* 1995: 27.
[59] See Steinsland 1990 a): 182.
[60] See Steinsland 1997: 104.

life.[61] Through death energy was both taken and given back to life. Death took away a member of the kinship group, but in his turn the dead could help the living by imparting with them the wisdom gained from the death realm. Steinsland argues that the thirst caused by the need for this wisdom could have been at the basis of the ritual death undergone by a new ruler; before being recognized as the new king, the ruler had to acquire wisdom by symbolically passing over in the realm of death.[62]

The poems often depict death as an erotic experience, a wedding between a representative of the aristocracy and a female figure from the death realm. The lack of information concerning the fate of the common people does not imply that they could not experience such a love meeting, but rather that the skalds were interested in the fate of the upper social classes, the aristocracy. The *Saga of the Ynglings (Ynglinga saga)* often describes the ruler's (the king's) death as such an erotic meeting: "I doubt not/ but Dyggvi's corpse/ Hel does hold/ to whore with him; for Úlf's sib/ a scion of kings/ by right should/ caress in death:/ to love lured/ Loki's sister/ Yngvi's heir/o'er all Sweden".[63]

The people who died at sea could also experience death as a love meeting with Ran, mistress of the maritime death realm. Those who drowned were supposed to join Ran's realm after death and maybe also those who died in a battle at sea, considering that many died without being wounded (which could have assured them a place in the warrior kingdom of Valhalla), by drowning. Ran was thought to be gathering an army that was to fight Odin's warrior army at Ragnarok.

Another argument in favour of the opinion that Hel was not generally seen as such a dark and scary place as Snorri described it, is the information given by one of the eddic poems, *Baldr's Dreams (Baldrs draumar)*, about the way Hel prepared her realm for the coming of Baldr, Odin's son: the benches were decked with arm-rings, the dais were fairly strewn with gold and the mead was brewed for the coming of Baldr.[64] It seems to be a great difference in the imagery proposed by this poem and the one used by Snorri to describe Hel's realm; a difference between a welcoming place and a place of suffering and punishment characterized by hunger and sickness. We nevertheless have to keep in mind that the Vikings had multiple representations concerning death. These might have included ideas of a universal

[61] Ibidem: 102.
[62] See Steinsland 2002: 96.
[63] See *The Saga of the Ynglings* (ch. 17), in *Heimskringla* 2002: 20. Hel is referred to as Úlf's (Fenrir's Wolf) sister and Loki's daughter.
[64] See *Baldr's Dreams* (6–7), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 244. Even though the poem is in eddic form, it was not part of the Codex Regius but included in another manuscript which contained a number of fragmentary eddic poems.

death realm viewed both as a place where the old and the sick were supposed to continue their life after death, but also as a realm where the dead were to experience a love meeting with one of the mistresses of death. Based on the evidence of the written sources, it appears that eros and death were connected with ideas about life after death when it came to the representatives of the upper classes; but, as mentioned above, as the interest of the skalds lay in the fate and deeds of the aristocracy, this should not necessarily mean that the common people were excluded from such a type of post-mortem experience.

Mist-hell (Niflhel) is a death realm even further than Hel: "nine worlds I have travelled to Mist-hell/ there man die down out of hell."[65] Such an idea seems to have something in common with the Christian idea of a purgatory. Hel is represented as a last stop before the final destination. If the road to Mist-hell goes down from Hel, it means that it is another subterranean realm which lies to the north. A belief in a death realm further down than Hel implies the idea of a final death. As long as the dead were still remembered by their relatives through cultic activities and rituals, they continued their post-mortem existence in Hel. Once forgotten by the living generations, they could continue their journey in the death realm, down to Mist-hell.

In the *Seeress's Prophecy (Vǫluspá)* we encounter descriptions of other death realms as a parallel to the Hel conceptions. Lying far from the sun, Corpse-strand (Nástrǫndo) is a realm full of negative connotations as implied by its name. Drops of poison fall in through the roof-vents and the hall is woven of serpents' spines. This is a realm which houses those people who swore false oaths and murderers, as well as those who seduced the close confidents of other men.[66] It seems as if Corpse-strand was a death realm which had much in common with the Christian hell, perceived as a place of eternal punishment and torture. The dragon Nidhogg was there to suck the bodies of the dead and a wolf tore their corpses. In *Grimnir's Sayings (Grímnismál)*, Nidhogg is said to live at the root of Yggdrasill, the world ash.[67] So, on a vertical axis, the location of Corpse-strand corresponds to the position of a death realm downwards, under the earth. More than that, the realm of Hel is also situated under one of Yggdrasill's roots, while under the other two live the frost-giants and humankind.[68] If we consider this, then Corpse-strand appears to be indeed a parallel to the Hel conceptions.

Still, we must be aware that the Vikings did not know the concept of eternal life after death. The pre-Christian society based on the kinship group had no use for such beliefs in

[65] See *Vafthrudnir's Sayings (VafÞrúðnismál)* (43), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 47.
[66] See *Seeress's Prophecy* (38–39), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 9.
[67] See *Grimnir's Sayings* (32, 35), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 56–57.
[68] Ibidem (31): 56.

eternity because its main preoccupation was the life and continuity of the family group. Besides, the Vikings had no ideas about a life after death conditioned by their deeds on earth – consequently, representations of death realms where people were to be punished or rewarded, depending on the case, might be seen as bearing signs of a Christian influence. It was Christianity which introduced a totally new conception about man. Through their deeds on earth, people could practically choose between an eternal life after death in heaven or in hell; and hell was pictured as a grotesque place where one was to expect various kinds of torment and punishment.

To the north lie other possible parallels to the Hel conception: Dark-of-moon Plains (Niðavǫllom) and Never-cooled Plain (Ókólni) are two realms which belong to the lineage of Sindri (a dwarf) and respectively, to the giant Brimir.[69] Their names also render negative connotations of a dark and hot death realm. Moreover, a certain connection between dwarfs and death should also be mentioned in this circumstance. Through their nature, the dwarfs are related to the underworld; they live in the earth, under rocks and inside the mountains.

In *All-wise's Sayings (Alvíssmál)*, All-wise is portrayed as a dwarf who knows the terminology used by the different races of beings for natural phenomenon. He manages not only the language of the Æsir, the Vanir, the giants, the elves and the dwarfs, but also that of the dead. Consequently, when Thor asks him to tell him what the moon is called in each of the different worlds, All-wise answers: "Moon it's called by men, and fiery one by the gods,/ in hell it's the whirling wheel,/ the giants call it the hastener, the dwarfs the shiner,/ elves call it counter of years."[70]

A further connection could be established between giants and death if we take into consideration that Hel, the mistress of the death realm, was herself a giantess. In addition, the majority of the giants were pictured as huge, savage and violent; this could explain why one of the death realms came to be represented as the beer-hall of the giant Brimir.

If we take a better look at the main characteristics of the whole Hel concept, several conclusions seem to come forward. First of all, Hel is the name of both a death realm and its mistress. Snorri presents Hel as a rather fierce subterranean realm and this may be due to his Christian background rather than due to a pagan belief connected with this death realm. The fact that at death is often depicted by the skalds as an erotic meeting between the dead and a figure from the death realm could be an argument in favour of the idea that the pagans saw Hel in a more positive light. A confirmation of this theory is the luxurious welcome prepared

[69] See *Seeress's Prophecy* (37), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 9.
[70] See *All-wise's Sayings* (14), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 111.

by Hel for the coming of Baldr, Odin's son. Nevertheless, other unpleasant death realms are encountered in the eddic poems and these seem to be a parallel to the Hel conceptions as a dark and scary place. A Christian influence might also be the explanation for such an account as that referring to a death realm even further than Hel. The idea of the Christian purgatory may have been the back thought for this representation. Generally speaking, Hel was seen as a kind of second rate death realm, reserved for the old and the sick, while those who had died honourably on the battlefield could have hoped for the much better prospects of Valhalla.

2.3.2. **Helgafell or life after death inside the Holy Mountain**

Another collective death realm placed beyond the spatial delimitations of the grave was Helgafell, the Holy Mountain. As compared to Hel, Helgafell was a more pleasant death realm situated in the local environment, in the very landscape. Representations of this collective death realm are known only from Icelandic sources and they might have been restricted to only a couple of families. Helgafell was consequently a death realm destined for the departed forefathers who were believed to continue their existence in a similar way to the daily life they had led as members of the living society. A belief in such a death realm has a lot in common with the idea of kinship and communion between the living and the dead. Being close to the farm, the forefathers could supervise the activity of their living relatives and maybe help them and offer advice. In turn, the living could keep the memory of their dead forefathers alive by performing rituals and following the old traditions.

One of the written sources mentioning the belief in Helgafell is *The Saga of the People of Eyri (Eyrbyggja saga)*.[71] Thorolf Moster-biter lived close to a mountain where he believed that he and all his friends and kindred on the Ness would go after death. This mountain was so holy that nobody could look towards it in the morning without washing his face and nobody was allowed to kill, either man or animal there. When Thorolf died, his son Thorstein Cod-biter inherited the property. One day he left on a fishing expedition together with his crew.[72] While they were away, his shepherd went out in the mountains and got close to Helgafell; as he looked at it, the shepherd seemed to see the northern side of the mountain open while sound of merriment and feasting came out of it. Listening carefully, the shepherd realized that the company inside was welcoming Thorstein and his crew and Thorstein was invited to sit in the high-seat opposite his father. Such a vision signified that Thorstein and his crew had

[71] See *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (ch. 4), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 134. *Landnámabók* (ch. 85) also records that Thorolf believed that he would die in the mountain.
[72] Ibidem (ch. 11): 138.

drowned during the expedition and were now joining their dead forefathers in the Holy Mountain. Just like during his life on earth, Thorstein continued his life after death as a leader of his community, idea underlined by his placement in a high-seat opposed to that of his father. The community of the dead forefathers is pictured as continuing their existence in a place of merriment where the newcomers from the land of the living were celebrated according to tradition, through feasting. We could maybe trace some similarities between the grave seen as the residence of the dead and the Holy Mountain. In both cases people were believed to continue their existence there as they had done in their life on earth; the dead were close to their kinsmen and as a consequence, they could benefit from each other. Even though the grave was perceived as an individual residence as opposed to the collective idea of a death inside the mountain, life after death in the grave represented only another stage in the existence of the kinship group. An interesting aspect is also the fact that Thorstein's father was buried in a mound on the farm and at the same time he was believed to reside in Helgafell after death. We could maybe speak then about a kind of transference of beliefs about the dead leaders in their graves, leaders who were expected to bring blessing to their land and people.[73]

The Book of Settlements (Landnámabók) is another source which testifies the existence of a belief in a life after death inside a holy mountain. It seems that Aud, a Christian woman, marked the place where she used to pray by a cross. This place was somewhere in the hills and when her kinsmen reverted to heathen beliefs, they considered that they would die in those hills.[74] Similar beliefs were held concerning Thoris Cliff and Mælifell, into which the pagan kinsmen of Sel-Thorir and those of Crow-Hreidar chose to die.[75]

According to Ellis Davidson, it is likely that a belief in a life after death inside a holy mountain was connected to a local, perhaps even a family cult, brought to Iceland in the early tenth century.[76] An argument could be that the persons mentioned in *Landnámabók* as believing in such a fate after death were related to each other. It is even possible that Thorolf was the one who initiated the tradition once he arrived in Iceland. It was him who chose Helgafell as his holy mountain and his place of residence after death. Such a possibility would imply that the Helgafell conception is much younger than the belief in a collective death realm in Hel. Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that this is only a guess rather than a certainty.

[73] In *The Saga of the Ynglings* (ch. 10), Frey is presented as a Swedish king who was greatly beloved and blessed by good seasons. Upon his death, he was buried in a mound and people poured tribute into the grave so that they could still enjoy good seasons and peace. See *Heimskringla* 2002: 14.
[74] See *The Book of Settlements* (ch. 97), 1972: 52.
[75] Ibidem (ch. 68) and (ch. 197): 38, 90.
[76] See Ellis Davidson 1943: 90.

The belief in Helgafell was connected with the expression *deyja i fjall* = to die in the mountain, which underlines the idea that a belief in such a fate after death was quite common among the Icelanders. As opposed to the Hel conception, the Helgafell belief had a positive connotation, reminding in a way of the luxurious and pleasant fate that was supposed to await the Viking warriors in Valhalla. According to Ström, the Helgafell beliefs might have represented a kind of transition to the Valhalla complex.[77] An argument supporting this theory might be the fact that there are several names of mountains of the type Valhall, Valshall, Valshalla (in Sweden).

2.3.3. **Valhalla – the warriors' death realm**

Valhalla or the Hall of the Slain was a death realm connected with the idea of war and the cult of Odin, Father of the Slain. This realm was first and foremost dedicated to the ruler classes and to warriors. Only the best warriors were welcomed to Odin's hall and it was the god himself who chose every day the ones who were to die on the battlefield and join him in Valhalla.

Valhalla is said in the eddic poems to rise peacefully in Gladsheim, a place in the gods' world. The hall has spear-shafts for rafters, it is thatched with shields, mail-coats are strewn on the benches, a wolf hangs in front of the western doors, and an eagle hovers above.[78] The dead gathered in Odin's hall, the Einheriar, continue their post-mortem existence by doing what they are best at: they keep on battle-training all day long so that they should be prepared for the coming of Ragnarok, the final battle. This belief underlines the idea of limitation of time as the dead were supposed to live up to Ragnarok (the end of the world). Such a belief combats some theories according to which Valhalla would have been understood by the pagans as an eternal happy realm. Even though a new world was to be created afterwards, Ragnarok meant the final challenge for the dead. Valhalla was only a temporary realm where the dead were waiting, together with the gods and the people, for Ragnarok.

Having in mind the idea of the final battle, the Hall of the Slain was believed to have five hundred and forty doors, so that eight hundred warriors could get out from one door and take part in the battle, fighting the wolf.[79]

There are no negative connotations related to the Valhalla complex. It is rather an attractive place of residence where the cook, Andhrimnir, is cooking all day long in the

[77] See Ström 1993: 217.
[78] See *Grimnir's Sayings* (8, 9, 10), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 53.
[79] Ibidem (23): 55.

cooking pot, Eldhrimnir. Sæhrimnir is the boar whom the Einheriar eat every day and which is rejuvenated every night.[80] The drink is assured by Heidrun, the goat in Valhalla: "she will fill a vat of shining mead,/ that liquor cannot ever diminish".[81] In Valhalla, the dead warriors have an existence similar to the one they had on earth and even better. Their only preoccupation is battle-training because the food and drink are at their disposal. Besides, it was the function of the valkyries to look after the tableware and drinking vessels in Odin's hall. Valhalla seems then to be a kind of warrior paradise, an idealised continuance of the life the chosen warriors had had on earth. The Einheriar fight each other every day and choose the slain; afterwards, they ride from the battle and sit at more peace together, enjoying the comfort offered by Valhalla.[82]

Life after death in Valhalla was regarded as a great honour, but it was not to be perceived as a reward for people who had fulfilled the warrior ideals. On the contrary, Odin took to him those warriors who were to be of great help in the final battle. This means that even though the chosen ones were among those who would have deserved the victory in battle, Odin let them lose so that he could welcome them to his realm and prepare them for Ragnarok. Nevertheless, death was not meaningless because the warriors died on the battlefield so that they could help the gods.

According to Nordberg, the term Valhǫll cannot be too old. It probably got to replace the West Old Norse word *salr* which is to be found in the oldest skaldic poems.[83] *Hǫll* was used to denominate a bigger house with certain specific purposes, usually a king's or a chieftain's gathering hall, where feats were hold and where the political power was exercised. It must have been quite easy for the skalds then to represent Odin as ruling over a hall which resembled the one of the earthly king. The union of the fallen warriors with their god, Odin, could have been rendered metaphorically as a scene in which the dead drank mead with his god in Valhalla. This was possible partly because the loyalty between the warrior and his lord manifested itself in the ritual drinking inside the hall, and partly because it was through the drinking ceremony (which had a cultic significance) that man was united with the gods and the dead forefathers. In this context, it might be possible to make a certain association between the role played by the Viking women during these ceremonies and the role played by

[80] Ibidem (18): 54.
[81] Ibidem (25): 55.
[82] See *Vafthrudnir's Sayings* (41), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 46.
[83] See Nordberg 2003: 56–57.

valkyries in Valhalla; it could be the case that the valkyries' role in the myths had emerged as a result of the functions that women had in the warrior cult.[84]

The constantly renewed battle between the dead warriors is also mentioned in other sources in Norse literature. In *The Tale of Thorstein Bull's Leg (Þorteins þáttr uxafóts)*, Thorstein is said to have seen in his dream a mound open; a man in red clothing came out and persuaded him to get inside the mound. As Thorstein did that, it seemed that the mound was well furnished, with seats down each side, looking like a hall. There were twelve men dressed in red and twelve dressed in black; those in black looked hideous while the ones in red looked handsome. Thorstein was asked by the leader of the men in black to pay them tribute, but he refused and so a fierce battle started between the two companies. No matter how hard they wounded each other, the two companies of men seemed to be able to spring up again and fight; only Thorstein's blows had the expected effect.[85] There seem to be certain similarities between the everlasting battle in Valhalla and a battle inside the burial mounds. They both involve the dead who no matter what wounds they get, they cannot be slain, both involve an opposition between two groups of beings, both incorporate the idea of a hall where the dead reside. It might be possible then to assume that there was a certain connection between the picture of Valhalla and the idea of the dwelling within the burial mound.

A further connection is established in *A Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani (Helgakviða Hundingsbana II)*. After death, Helgi was welcomed in Valhalla, where Odin himself asked him to rule over everything with him. One evening Helgi was seen riding into his burial mound together with a large number of men. His return among the living was caused by a desire to spend one last night together with his lover, Sigrun.[86] In this context, the grave mound appears to be a kind of link between the two worlds, the world of the gods and that of the humans, between Valhalla and Midgard. The representation of the burial mound as a bridge between the two worlds might also explain the habit of sitting on a mound in order to gain inspiration. As long as the dead were believed to help the living by imparting them knowledge from the realm beyond, the mound would have represented the actual spot where such a communication was possible.

The Valhalla complex might also have been associated with the idea of an erotic meeting in death, between the dead warrior and a female being from the death realm, in this case a valkyrie. The written sources seem to be silent on this theme, but if we turn our

[84] Ibidem: 212.
[85] See *The Tale of Thorstein Bull's Leg* (ch. 6), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. IV: 345–346.
[86] See the prose sections preceeding and following stanza (39) in *A Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani*, in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 139.

attention to the contemporary material evidence we could maybe find arguments in favour of such a theory. On the Gotlandic stones (memorial stones raised in honour of deceased persons from the fifth to the eleventh centuries) several dramatic scenes are described. On some of these stones, two scenes seem to be repeated: a departure (on the lower part of the stone) and an arrival (on the upper part). The scene which interests us in the present context is the arrival scene: a man is depicted approaching a hall on horseback (usually an eight-legged horse). He is welcomed by a woman who has a drinking-horn in her hands. There are several variations of this welcome scene and the most complete includes a house with three doors. (fig. 1, p. 141)

It is very important first of all to be aware that the Gotlandic stones were meant as memorials for the dead. Consequently, their iconography should be interpreted in the context of death. The depicted welcome scene symbolizes a ceremony held in honour of the deceased who can be identified with the man on horseback. In some of the stones the welcoming woman is depicted with wings, to make it clear that she represents a valkyrie.[87] At the same time, the man on horseback is illustrated with a phallus/sword. Steinsland argues that this is a signal that the meeting which takes place between the man and the woman has erotic connotations; it is a parallel to the love meeting described in the literary sources.[88] The fact that it is actually Valhalla where the meeting is supposed to take place, is also pointed by the depiction of the house on the stone as having three doors; the other houses pictured have no more than one entrance and so the house with several doors may represent Valhalla. At Ragnarok, the warriors of Valhalla had to be able to get out of the hall as soon as possible. The eight-legged horse is another sign that there is a connection between the depicted scene and Valhalla. Odin himself was believed to have a horse with eight legs (Sleipnir).

The Valhalla complex has been considered by some to be a late development reflecting pre-conversion contact with Christianity as it appeared in poetry only in the mid tenth century. The oldest poems containing information about a belief in Valhalla were written down in 954 (*Eiríksmál/The Lay of Eirik*) and 961 respectively (*Hákonarmál/The Lay of Hakon*). However, if we consider the evidence of the Gotlandic stones, it might be possible to date the belief in Valhalla in the eight century, so even before the beginning of the Viking Age. It is not the purpose of this paper to pursue such a discussion, but rather to focus on the various beliefs in a life after death in pre-Christian Scandinavia. Valhalla is then a sort of counterpart for the subterranean realm of Hel; it has the positive connotations of life enjoyed on earth but with

[87] See Ellmers 1995: 168.
[88] See Steinsland 1997: 107.

even better prospects. As beautiful as it would seem, Valhalla was not destined for everybody. Only representatives of the aristocracy and of the warrior class could dream for such a fate after death. Besides the honour of fighting alongside the supreme god in the final battle, those who were to go to Valhalla might have also experienced a kind of erotic meeting with one of Odin's valkyries. So, the Valhalla complex embodied ideas of both a meaningful death and ideas connected with death and sexuality as part of the same whole.

2.3.4. **Various other death realms**

That love and death form together a meaningful unity is also underlined by the fact that one of the pagan goddesses shares characteristics from both spheres. Freya is not only goddess of fertility and love but also goddess of death. She was believed to choose half of the dead warriors together with Odin, gathering them in her own hall, Folkvang.[89] The interplay between the two spheres reminds of the rhythm of nature, an eternal repetition of a cycle of death and life, death and rebirth; life and death must then be ruled over by the same power.

In his *Prose Edda*, Snorri builds on the information found in the eddic poems concerning the existence of other afterlife destinations. A certain Christian influence might be traced in the conception that there will be many mansions that are good and many that are bad, in other words Snorri distinguishes between good and evil.[90] One of the eddic poems presents Gimle as a hall fairer than the sun, thatched with gold, where the lords will live and spend their days in pleasure.[91] Snorri assumes Gimle to be a place in heaven, the best of all the other places, where good and righteous people shall live for ever and ever. He also mentions the existence of a hall, Brimir, where plenty of good drink is served to those lucky enough to get there; this hall is also situated in heaven. The same positive connotations are connected with the hall of Sindri, situated on Nidafioll and built of red gold. It is interesting that Snorri gives these positive connotations to both the hall of Sindri and that of Brimir, especially if we consider that the eddic poem situates them in the north (most often associated with the world of Hel). More than that, Snorri states that good and virtuous people are going to dwell in these halls forever. These halls seem then to be open only for those who lived their lives apart from sin – an obvious Christian influence. Besides, the pagans had no conception of an eternal life after death. Snorri also mentions Corpse-strand, a large and unpleasant hall; in this hall's description he builds on the eddic poem *Seeress's Prophecy*, but he goes further

[89] See *Griminir's Sayings* (14), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 53.
[90] See *Gylfaginning* (52–3), in *Edda* 1995: 56.
[91] See *Seeress's Prophecy* (64), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 12.

saying that even worse than on Corpse-strand is in Hvergelmir, where Nidhogg torments the bodies of the dead. [92] Hvergelmir is placed by Snorri in Mist-hell (Niflhel).[93] Hvergelmir (a source of rivers) is not mentioned in *Seeress's Prophecy* at all, it appears only in *Grimnir's Sayings*. Nidhogg is rather placed by *Seeress's Prophecy* on Corpse-strand and further associated with Dark-of-moon Hills.[94] Nevertheless, considering that Mist-hell, Dark-of-moon and Corpse-strand are closely connected with the Hel conceptions, Nidhogg's place is unmistakeably in one of these realms marked by negative connotations.

If we take a better look at Snorri's description of the various death realms, a thing becomes apparent – it resembles the Christian distinction between heaven (Gimle), purgatory (the halls of Sindri and Brimir) and hell (Corpse-strand and Hvergelmir). Still, we must be aware that the pagans made no such distinctions and did not believe in an afterlife based on man's behaviour in this world.

Another goddess connected with death is Ran; we have already discussed the role played by this goddess in the so-called 'death marriage' awaiting the dead on the death realm. Ran was the wife of Ægir, the god of sea, and together they had nine daughters, the waves. Ran was believed to receive on her realm those people who died at sea. *The Saga of the People of Eyri* records that a group of people drowned, but their bodies were never found. When they attended their funeral feast, people took it as a good omen, a sign that the dead had been well received by Ran.[95]

A description of Ran's reception of the dead is given by another Icelandic saga. It is noted here that a group of people seemed doomed to die in a storm at sea and the hero decided then to divide the gold they had between them, so that each of them had some gold to show when they came to Ran's hall.[96] The eddic poems make reference several times to the hall of Ægir as being used as an assembly for the gods.[97] Ran being Ægir's wife, it is possible to assume that she shared the hall with her husband; consequently, the dead taken to her realm where to share their home with the gods.

The pagans seem to have had multiple ideas concerning the possible afterlife destinations. The lack of a dogmatic teaching of the Christian type made it impossible for the pre-Christian religion to offer a systematic view of these realms. The kinship-based pagan

[92] See *Gylfaginning* (52–3), in *Edda* 1995: 56.
[93] Ibidem (3–4): 9.
[94] See *Seeress's Prophecy* (66), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 12.
[95] See *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (ch. 54), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol.V: 201
[96] See *The Frithjof Saga (Friðþjófs saga)* (canto X): 73. "Gold is good for waves/ On the sea to carry;/ None must go to Rana/ With an empty hand./ For her lips are icy,/ Transient her embraces;/ Gold in flames attested/ Chains the ocean bride."
[97] See *Grimnir's Sayings* (45), *Loki's Quarrel* (3), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 58, 85.

religion developed ideas about collective death realms like Hel, Helgafell, Valhalla, Folkvang, Ran's realm, each depending on the people's personal/communal beliefs: a realm of the old and sick, a realm where the dead forefathers were supposed to gather, a realm for the brave aristocratic warriors, a realm for those who died at sea. Later, under the influence of Christianity, some of these realms received the connotations of heaven, purgatory and hell, distinction enhanced by man's behaviour while alive. Nonetheless, sin played no part in the lives of the Vikings who, besides the various afterlife destinations, could also enjoy ideas about a life after death inside the burial mound.

2.4. **The revenant – another 'face' of death/life inside the grave**

In a previous subchapter I discussed the pre-Christian belief in a life after death inside the grave, wherefrom the dead were considered to be able to exercise their power over the living by helping them. I also underlined the idea that death was considered a barrier-breaking dimension with possibilities of far more profound experiences than life could offer; but at the same time death could be feared, dead people could become even more dangerous than they had used to be while alive. Such is the case of the pagan belief in the existence of revenants, the so called *draugr* (pl. *draugar*) in the Icelandic sources.

Draugr is a generic term used to denominate revenants of a physical nature. The Icelandic sagas present a multitude of cases of revenants, implying thus that their existence was something generally accepted and acknowledged. Nevertheless, the problem of source criticism must always be somewhere at the back of our head when dealing with Christian written sources treating pagan customs and beliefs.

It has been argued that *draugr* is a collective noun used to describe several creatures with different attributes.[98] Thus there are four groups: the *haug*-búi (a mound-dweller), the *aptr-ganga* (a ghost, an apparition, the French revenant), the *fyrir-burðr* (an appearance, a vision, a specter) and a fourth group which doesn't have a linguistical marker attached, but which is characterized by a short period of revival and then a final collapse. Based on their main activity, to rise up, Guerrero identifies them as the *uppsitjendr*.[99]

The archaeological evidence offered by the burial mounds at Oseberg, Gokstad and Borre (in Norway) or other burial mounds from Denmark and Sweden, testifies that the process of building a mound was very costly and it took several days. If we add the presence of grave goods and sometimes animal or human sacrifices, it is obvious that the people buried

[98] See Guerrero 2003: 36.
[99] Ibidem: 84.

in such mounds must have had a certain social status that allowed their relatives to bury them in such a way. The *haug-búar* must have belonged then to the upper classes of the Viking society. Another important aspect connected with the *haug-búar* is that they had a dual nature: ethereal outside the grave and corporeal inside it. The ethereal nature outside the grave makes it possible to associate the *haug-búar* with visions or semiconscious dreams.[100] In their ethereal form, the *haug-búar* are capable of conferring the gift of poetry but once inside the mound they take a corporeal form and assume non human characteristics and strength.[101] Once provoked, the *haug-búar* became violent inside the mound. If the mound-breaker intended to steal his treasures or a precious object, like a sword, the *haug-búi* became aggressive. On the other hand, defeating a *haug-búi* conferred great honor, so rather than being feared, this group of revenants was respected. They were still considered part of the kinship chain.

The same was the case with the so-called *uppsitjendr*, who came back only for a short period of time, a couple of minutes, and with the *fyrir-burðir*, who just appeared and most often did not even interact with the living. These groups of revenants were not feared by the living generations.

The last group of revenants, the *aptrgǫngur*, differs from the previous groups, first and foremost through their actions. The *aptrgǫngur* interacted with the humans aggressively, haunting their houses with no excuse. It is this group of revenants that brings forth associations between death and the fear of the dead. According to the sagas, the people who became *aptrgǫngur* were usually foreigners or Norwegians who came to Iceland after the settlement period and as such, they were also seen as foreigners. William Sayers considers that they have been offered few opportunities of development so that they became frustrated and felt unfulfilled; that some of these foreigners also had a difficult character made them prime material to be reactivated as revenants.[102] People disliked them and rejected them, considering them not fit for their society. In addition to that, the strange circumstances of their death and the fear experienced by people when they found out about it were signs that it was

[100] See *Njal's Saga (Brennu-Njáls saga)* (ch. 78), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. III: 91. One evening, Skarphedin and Hogni were outside Gunnar's mound when they saw the mound open and Gunnar was looking at the moon. There were lights burning into the mound but there were no shadows. The absence of a shadow is a sign of the ethereal nature of the revenant.
[101] See for example *The Saga of Hord and the People of Holm (Harðar saga og Hólmverja)* (ch. 15), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. II: 210. When Hord entered Soti's mound, Soti grabbed him so strongly that Hord's flesh bunched together in knots.
[102] See Sayers 1996: 257.

possible for those who died to become revenants.[103]

The *aptrgǫngur* continued to treat the living the way they had done while alive but much worse this time.

One of the possible reasons for the behavior of this group of revenants could be that they only wanted to obtain in death what they did not have while alive, in the form of an honorable burial in a mound, accompanied by rich grave goods. Instead, they used to be buried in cairns, which were usually destined for the unwanted elements of the society, with no grave goods and as fast as possible. Killing an *aptrgangr* brought no honor but only peace for the whole community.

The pre-Christian belief in revenants, as described in the Icelandic sagas, incorporated ideas of both an ethereal afterlife existence, as well as a corporeal one. It was precisely in their corporeal appearance that the revenants could act aggressively and exercise their power and strength against the living. It might be interesting to point out that those revenants that seem to have belonged to the upper classes of society while alive were rather respected than feared. They could even impart the gift of poetry to the living (reminding of the barrier-breaking dimension of death, with possibilities much more profound than those offered by life; on the mythological level this dimension is symbolized by Odin's self sacrifice in order to obtain the knowledge of runes[104]). Those revenants who had belonged to the marginalized classes while alive, kept their status also in death. We could probably conclude that just like the living community was socially organized in classes, so was the dead community. If we accept this idea, it is an argument in favor of the theory that the living and the dead were part of a kinship chain which over-passed the limitations set by death. Furthermore, it is an argument in favor of the idea that the world of the dead was structured after the same principles as the world of the living.

2.5. **Burial customs**

2.5.1. **Preparing the body for burial**

The same diversity characterizing the belief in an afterlife existence is specific for the pre-Christian burial customs. Before discussing these customs it is important to make

[103] See *The Saga of Grettir the Strong (Grettis saga)* (ch. 32), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. II: 100–102. Glam was a person not given to worship, peevish and rude; everyone found him obnoxious. The day before Christmas, he ate despite the common custom and went out in a rather stormy mood when the farmer's wife reproached him that. Later, when people found him dead, they were repulsed and shuddered at the sight of him.
[104] See *Sayings of the High One* (138-139), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 34.

reference to the first stage in the process of burial, namely the treatment of the body, of the corpse. The eyes and the mouth of the dead were shut, the body was washed and the hair combed; afterwards, the body was put on a straw bed and after a certain number of days the corpse could be either buried or burnt. It was a duty for the living to take care of the dead and bury them according to the old customs. All the dead were treated with respect no matter if they belonged to the family, if they were friends, or enemies.

2.5.2. **The form, placement and orientation of the grave**

The graves could have various forms: circular, triangular, oval, in the shape of a boat, surrounded by stones in the form of a boat or a circle, etc. Besides flat graves, mounds could also be erected. An interdiction mentioned in *The Church Law* testifies that the custom of burying people in a mound or a heap of stones was a heathen practice.[105] Criminals and those who had met with a violent death were buried under cairns of stones and this practice is often attested by the sagas. In several cases, it is precisely these people who have the best potential to become aggressive revenants.

The grave could be placed individually on a farm or as part of a collective burial ground. The grave's shape and size, as well as the grave goods following the dead in their afterlife, depended of course on the social status of the dead (and that of his family) inside the Viking society, but also on the kinship relation between the dead and those who took care of his/her burial.

Another aspect of the pagan burial customs has to do with the orientation of the grave. With the introduction of Christianity, the graves came to be west-east oriented, the dead facing east as that was the direction from which Christ was expected to appear on Judgment Day. To distinguish between pagan and Christian graves, scholars used the principle of west-east orientation as a marker of a Christian burial. However, neither the Bible nor the early Christian Church supported such a view.[106] Moreover, it is difficult to establish if the pagan graves were placed according to certain principles. The literary sources testify that the realm of the dead was believed to be somewhere in the north and it seems that graves were usually built as having the entrance to the west and the burial chamber oriented to the north; but, we lack enough information in order to be certain if there was a connection between the orientation of the grave and the belief in an afterlife in a death realm situated in the north.

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[105] See *The Church Law* (23), in *The Earliest Norwegian Laws* 1935: 51.
[106] See Gräslund 1987: 85.

2.5.3. **Burial practices: inhumation vs. cremation. Grave goods**

One of the first to consider the relation between burial customs and the belief in an afterlife existence was Snorri Sturluson. In the *Saga of the Ynglings*, Snorri records that during the first age, the Age of Cremation, it was a custom to burn the dead and raise memorial stones after them: "but after Frey was put to rest in a burial mound at Uppsalir, many chieftains used to erect burial mounds as often as memorial stones to commemorate departed relatives".[107] The Age of Sepulchral Mounds followed after the decision of the Danish king, Dan the Proud, to have a burial mound made for himself. The Danish king decreed that he was to be taken inside the mound when he died, in his royal vestments and armor, together with his horse and much treasure beside. As I mentioned before, the Icelandic sagas offer several examples of people being buried in a mound together with rich grave goods and sometimes even animal sacrifices. Snorri connects the burial in a mound with Frey and also gives an explanation of the well known custom of burying people in mounds together with grave goods and animal sacrifices. He also mentions the custom of raising memorial stones in honor of the dead.

The custom of burning people is supported by the evidence of the archeological sources. It came to be in fashion sometime during the Bronze Age and it lasted until the conversion of the North to Christianity. During the Roman period, the custom of burying the dead came back to Scandinavia through influences from the Roman culture: elaborate burials in which the dead were accompanied by everything necessary for a great banquet became popular. While the graves remained flat in Denmark, burial mounds and memorial stones came into use in both Norway and Sweden. The custom developed even further in Norway and Sweden, when during the Migration period the dead were buried in larger mounds and fully clothed; the men were accompanied by weapons and the women by full household equipment. The Viking Age represented a climax in the method of burial, with the dead being accompanied in the grave by both a complete equipment of personal objects used in the daily life and animal sacrifices which were intended to bear them company; in some instances, even human sacrifices might have been practiced. A possible explanation for the magnificent burials of the Viking period might be a renewed interest in the afterlife, an afterlife similar to the life on earth, where the dead would have needed all his familiar possessions.

Snorri also mentions in his account a certain connection between the practice of cremating people and Odin. He records that it was Odin who ordained that:

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[107] See Snorri's *Foreword* to *The Saga of the Ynglings*, in *Heimskringla* 2002: 3.

"…all the dead were to be burned on a pyre together with their possessions, saying that everyone would arrive in Valholl with such wealth as he had with him on his pyre…His ashes were to be carried out to sea or buried in the ground. For notable men burial mounds were to be thrown up as memorials. But for all men who had shown great manly qualities memorial stones were to be erected…"[108]

Snorri gives a detailed description of a cremation on the mythological level when in *Gylfaginning* he describes the magnificent funeral of Baldr, the son of Odin, who is joined on the funeral pyre by his wife, Nanna, and his horse. Nevertheless, Baldr's final destination is Hel and not Odin's hall.[109]

An account which seems to correspond with Snorri's record, that it was Odin who had ordained cremation, is Ibn Fadlān's description of the burial of a Rus chieftain on Volga. The dead was accompanied on the funeral pyre by both grave goods and a slave woman. The Arab traveler further testifies that a person from the audience told him that they used to burn their dead so they could go to paradise in one moment with the help of the wind sent by the dead person's god. Still, Ibn Fadlān's account cannot just be taken for granted without any criticism. I will therefore come back to this source and its value when I will discuss the role played by the female slave in the burial (in a future chapter).

According to Steinsland, the literary sources do not support the idea that a difference in burial customs reflects significant conceptions about death and the post-mortem state.[110] It means that we do not have enough evidence to support the theory according to which the different burial customs implied a certain belief in an afterlife existence. Consequently, a belief that through cremation the soul would be liberated from the body is not sustained by the written evidence.

In spite of that, some scholars have connected the belief in an afterlife in Valhalla with certain burial practices revealed through archaeological finds. Else Roesdahl believes that the early to mid-tenth century horsemen's graves, especially known from Denmark but also from Norway, Iceland and Sweden, can be interpreted as a realization of the belief in an afterlife existence in Valhalla reserved for the pagan warriors.[111] These graves belong to upper-class men, often laid in timbered burial chambers. The men were accompanied in their graves by riding-equipment, weapons, items of leisure, food and various small necessities. They were

[108] See *The Saga of the Ynglings* (ch. 8), in *Heimskringla* 2003: 11–12.
[109] See *Gylfaginning* (49), in *Edda* 1995: 49–50.
[110] See Steinsland 1990: 11.
[111] See Roesdahl 1993 b): 131.

supposed to make their journey to Odin's hall on horseback. The food was meant for the journey and the equipment for the sort of life they would live there, a life of continuous battle-training and feasting. What is to be underlined in this context is the fact that we have to do here with inhumation burials rather than with cremations.

The archeological evidence is again a useful comparative method. Grave finds show that it was common for the dead to be accompanied in death by objects of personal possession, irrespective of the method of burial (cremation or inhumation). The richness of the grave goods depended on the family's status and economic situation and as such, a burial could enhance the honour and position of a kinship group in the respective society. However, the interpretation of these grave finds is not at all that simple because we must base our conclusions on the information given by the written sources. Should we interpret the presence of the grave goods inside the grave as a kind of mirror of what the dead used to do while alive? Or should we connect the material finds with the various beliefs in a life after death in a death realm? It is the latter interpretation that Roesdahl chose when dealing with the tenth century horsemen's graves and she is not the only one to have pursued such a line of reasoning. The famous ship burials have also been interpreted along the same lines, of a journey to the death realm somewhere across a river or a sea. I do not want to take the argument further because I plan to discuss the role of the ship burials in the context of women and the possibilities that expected them after death in a future chapter. I will therefore continue with making reference to other types of practices that accompanied the pagan burial.

2.5.4. **The memorial feast and the memorial stone.**

The memorial feast represented an important stage in the pagan burial ritual. It ensured the contentedness of the deceased and at the same time secured the dead person's aid for the living relatives. Under this ritual, food and drink was placed on the grave, which became implicitly a cult place. The memorial feast was a ritual in the memory of the dead forefathers who were considered to be present themselves under the whole process; by paying respect to the dead, the living secured their help in matters of fertility and continuity of the farm. On the occasion of the memorial feasts, people used to drink memorial toasts in honour of their departed kinsfolk, the so called *minni*, as recorded by Snorri.[112] According to Birkeli, the drinking of memorial toasts should be seen under a social-religious angle: the social was represented by the reunion of the community and the number of people present at the ritual;

[112] See *The Saga of Hákon the Good* (*Hákonar saga góða)* (ch. 14), in *Heimskringla* 2003: 107.

but the minute the drink was dedicated to the memory of the dead, the social community was transformed in a cultic community.[113] The drink was loked upon as an offer for the dead forefathers, a libation. Sometimes, in addition to the drink, animal sacrifices could also take place. Through the memorial feasts, the contact with the dead forefathers was thus re-instated.

Snorri also mentions the custom of raising memorial stones after the dead. This custom seems to have come into fashion long before the Viking Age and was re-enforced once Christianity introduced the custom of raising memorial stones on the graves. It was the size and appearance of the memorial stone which usually was meant to attract the attention, but sometimes runic inscriptions could also appear on them and even drawings. A great example are the famous Gotlandic stones, memorial stones decorated with dramatic images interpreted by some in a mythological context.

2.5.5. **Other burial customs**

The burial customs performed by the living generations upon the death of one of their relatives could also include rituals that did not necessarily have as a target the creation of a connection beyond the grave, between them and the dead forefathers. There are rituals which are rather generated by fear and by a preoccupation of the living with their own safety. These rituals are intended to prevent the dead from coming back again at other times than those expected. Some people used to stick an axe in the door of the living room, others carried the corpse out of the house with the feet coming first or out of a wall rather than the main door. In one of the eddic poems Odin himself is said to have whispered something in Baldr's ear before his son was mounted on the pyre, but nobody knew what.[114] It might have been a promise of revival or even that Baldr would go to his kingdom, Valhalla, after death, but the poem does not give us any information and leaves us with the doubt.

The dead were sometimes believed to be able to walk again if the proper procedures were not followed. Special doors were built, doors to be used only for burials, doors especially designed for the dead. These were usually placed in the opposite direction of the main door and were used only to take a corpse out of the house. The Icelandic sagas offer examples of such practices involving the dead: Thorolf Lame-foot used to have been an ill-natured, violent, unjust and hostile person even towards his son; when he died everyone was terrified and nobody was allowed to walk in front of him until his eyes were closed.[115] Such a

[113] See Birkeli 1938: 76.
[114] See *Vafthrudnir's Sayings* (54–55), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 48–49.
[115] See *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (ch. 33), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 173.

practice was probably meant to help the living, protect them from the negative power of the dead. Initially, it could have represented a service for the dead in the sense of not separating the soul from the body but rather bringing them together in the grave.[116] This act underlines the pagan belief in a unity between body and soul after death, as opposed to the Christian idea of survival of the soul in the detriment of the body.

Afterwards, Thorolf's corpse was dragged out of the house through a wall, not the main door, and buried in a strongly-built cairn; Arnkel, Thorolf's son, broke down a wall behind him so that he could drag the body outside.[117] With all the extreme precautions taken by people, Thorolf still became a revenant and terrified his former neighbors. The same was the case with Skallagrim who upon his burial was taken out of the house through the south wall which was broken down; his son also closed his nostrils, eyes and mouth.[118] Due to the circumstances of his death, people feared that he could have become a revenant. The symbolic meaning of taking the corpse out of the house through a different door seems to be the impossibility of the revenant to find his way back through the main door. The dead were supposed to be able to come back through the same door that had been used under the burial, but once taken out through a special door or a wall, this could have been blocked.

Connected with the practice of performing certain rituals so that the dead could not come back is the idea of respecting the dead person's last wishes. Another Icelandic saga tells the story of Thorgunna, who upon her death left her possessions to various persons, all except her bed and a special bed lined which she commissioned to be burnt; if not, great misfortunes were to be expected by the living.[119] (Her story will be discussed in more detail in another chapter). It appears then that certain personal possessions of the dead could bring bad luck to the living and it was better to get rid of them. According to Birkeli, the burning of the dead person's clothes and bed linen represented an old death ritual. The fire had a primary function in the burial by separating the dead from the living and bringing the dead in his/her new world; through fire, all the bridges between the two worlds were destroyed.[120] Nevertheless, we must not forget that death was not only a source of fear for the living. The dead were quite often considered to communicate with the living and impart with them the wisdom of a beyond realm; and then, why should all ways of communication be destroyed through fire?

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[116] See Birkeli 1938: 22.
[117] See *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (ch. 33), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 173.
[118] See *Egil's Saga (Egils saga)* (ch. 59), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. I: 115.
[119] See *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (ch. 51), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 198.
[120] See Birkeli 1938: 28.

Another burial ritual is described in *Gisli Sursson's Saga (Gísla saga Súrssonar)*, where it is recorded that it was an old custom to give the dead special shoes, the so called *hel-skór* (Hel-shoes), so that the dead could find his way to the death realm.[121] The symbolism behind this ritual seems to have been connected with a belief in a long and tiresome journey after death, on foot. At the same time, it could be associated with the fear of the dead: as long as the dead person was equipped with proper shoes, he/she could find the way to the death realm rather than come back among the living and torment them for not having fulfilled the old customs properly.

2.6. **Conclusions**

On the basis of the written sources and archaeological evidence it appears that death was very important for the pagan Vikings. When making such a statement we must keep in mind the character of the pre-Christian Viking religion, an ethnic religion based on cult and ritual. The kinship group was seen as a circle including both the living and the dead, each of them performing functions important for the 'survival' of the other. It is no wonder then that the Vikings enjoyed multiple ideas about the fate of the dead, either in the burial mound or in the various death realms, without any logic relation between them.

Connected with the belief in a life after death in the grave mound are representations of a life after death as close to the kinship group as possible. The dead were usually buried in mounds or graves on the family land thus securing a certain status for the living family. They offered security and assured the continuity of the kinship group as long as the living generations took care of their memory through rituals and cult. The dead were respected because they were believed to perform functions that maintained the welfare of the kinship group.

Parallel to the belief in a posthumous existence in the grave mound, the Vikings also had representations of various collective death realms. The Helgafell conception might be seen as a transference of a belief in a life after death in the grave mound wherefrom the dead were supposed to help their living relatives. It was believed to be a death realm destined for the deceased forefathers, who were considered to continue their lives in a similar way with the lives they had had on earth. Due to its positive connotations of a luxurious and pleasant death realm, Helgafell may also have represented an intermediary step for the Valhalla conceptions.

[121] See *Gisli Sursson's Saga* (ch. 14), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. II: 15.

Closest to the idea of a life after death inside the grave mound are the representations of a subterranean death realm situated somewhere in the north and identified with Hel, the mistress of the dead. Snorri describes Hel and her death realm in a very negative light, reminding us of the sinister connotations that the kingdom of Hel gained with the coming of Christianity. Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that death was understood as such by the pagan Vikings. Skaldic poetry testifies that death could very often be seen as a love meeting between the dead and a woman figure from the death realm.

In contrast to the Hel conceptions are the representations of Valhalla, a death realm destined only for privileged warriors and kings. Even though the dead who resided in Odin's kingdom enjoyed themselves in daily battle-training and feasting, we should not mistake Valhalla for a death realm which offered the possibility of an eternal life. The dead were supposed to live in this warrior paradise only until the final battle, Ragnarok. The Valhalla complex could also incorporate beliefs in a 'death marriage' between the dead warrior and one of Odin's valkyries, underlining the idea that death and life were governed by the same power.

It is also possible that the two beliefs (of a life after death in the grave mound or in a death realm) were combined in the sense that the dead were expected to reside for some time in their grave and then continue their journey to the death realm; or that they were expected to come back in the graves at various important rituals during the year and impart with the living the wisdom gained in a realm beyond the spatial limitations of the grave.

However, death could also be feared and people could tremble at the thought of encountering their dead relatives. Especially those people who died in strange circumstances and who had had a difficult nature while alive were expected to continue their life after death, outside the grave, as corporeal revenants.

The same variety that characterized the belief in an afterlife existence among the pagan Vikings, characterized their burial customs. The dead could be either cremated or buried, depending on personal or communal practices. Grave goods were usually placed beside the dead as a sign of what the person had done during their life on earth, or as a kind of equipment for the life that expected them after death. Memorial feasts were held in order to keep the memory of the dead forefathers alive, while memorial stones were raised in a similar context. Other burial practices were related to the belief in corporeal revenants that could come back and haunt the living. Such practices were a kind of reassurance that the dead were dead for good and could not come back.

By examining the various beliefs linked to death and life after death, it becomes more than clear that death played a major role in the Viking pre-Christian religion. A whole ideology was connected with death. Death offered the possibility of crossing a barrier and thus obtaining the much wanted wisdom which could be found only beyond the grave. It did not mean a disappearance of the self/individual, but rather a continuity in a place close to the living generations or close to the gods and similar to the one on earth. Death could also be perceived as a realization at the erotic level in the form of a love union beyond the grave. At the same time, death could be feared, but under no circumstances could it be considered unimportant. Keeping all these aspects in mind we shall now turn our attention to the Viking women and the fate that expected them after death.

CHAPTER III

Women in the Viking Age.

Death and Life after Death.

The Evidence of the Written Sources

3.1. **Women in the Viking Age**

Before analyzing the information given by the written and material sources concerning beliefs and customs related to the fate of women after death, it is important to take a short look at the role played by women in general during the Viking Age. Were they important at all? Did they have any religious functions? Should we expect to find in the written material information concerned with women's beliefs and practices related to a possible existence after death?

Finding out the position of women in the Viking society is a difficult task because we cannot base our study on field research, like modern anthropologies, but we rather have to use the written evidence available from the medieval period. In a previous chapter I have already underlined the disadvantages of such an approach: the literary material was written several centuries after the happening of the events described and the scholars were Christian authors relating pagan beliefs and customs.

Jenny Jochens is one of the scholars who undertook a study of the role played by women in Old Norse society.[122] She considers that in order to discern the daily social existence of Germanic women we must read the sagas, and especially the so-called *Family Sagas*, as they refer to pagan times, rather than look at the poetic images encountered in the eddic and skaldic poems. Jochens' study focuses on such aspects of human life as marriage, reproduction, leisure, work, and the economies of homespun. The author tries to examine the role played by the Norse women in each of these fields and she comes to some interesting conclusions.

Women in the Norse world seem to have enjoyed a life of both rights and limitations.[123] They could not refuse a suitor, but they could advance a divorce. Women received property in marriage and could obtain even more through inheritance. They enjoyed less leisure than men, but their work kept the families fed and clothed. In other words, life went on much as a result of the function women had in the Norse society. It was the role of women to keep life going on, while their male relatives kept themselves busy with feuding and politics.

Nevertheless, the human ideal most admired and to which both women and men aspired was more masculine than feminine. Widowhood offered women precisely this opportunity of embodying the much wanted masculine ideals: they were no longer under the control of their

[122] See Jochens 1995.
[123] Ibidem: 162.

fathers or husbands, their children were usually grown up or so young that they could not influence them, and they had secured sufficient wealth to hire male help without having to get married again. Especially older widows enjoyed great powers, probably the greatest at any stage in a woman's life.[124]

Not only in the Norse society, but in other traditional societies, women gained wealth, influence and prestige as they advanced in age. All these came to a climax when a woman became a widow. They were in a way left on the position enjoyed by their dead husband, that of the head of a family. The most representative example of such a powerful woman in the Icelandic sagas is that of Aud, daughter of Ketil Flat-nose, who became responsible for a large household after the death of her husband and son.[125] The fact that Aud is not simply a literary production is proved by her mentioning in *Landnámabók* as one of the early settlers of Iceland.

However, not only widows could enjoy power, but also women found between two marriages or in control of authority while their husbands were away. If we take into consideration that the Viking Age was especially characterized by the raids made by male Vikings to different territories, it should then not be strange to imagine a situation in which quite many of the Viking women were in a position of power even though, for some of them, it was only temporary (until their male relatives came back home).

On the political level, the situation was different. Jochens concludes that women were not allowed to participate in any political and judicial functions of society either as active participants or as legal supplicants.[126] They could not act as chieftains (*goðar*), judges or even witnesses and even though they owned property, it was under male administration. The political sphere was one destined only for men, but this should be understandable given the patriarchal character of the Norse society. The same idea is underlined by the fact that the endless genealogical chains, so important for the pagans, included generally only men. Women came to be mentioned only in those cases when they provided a more prestigious family than their husbands. Nevertheless, this meant that through reproduction women could acquire self-promotion; they could become important elements of the Viking society (like the example of Aud).

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[124] Ibidem: 62.
[125] See *The Saga of the People of Laxardal (Laxdæla saga)* (ch. 4), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 3. Upon the death of her father and of her son, Aud is said to have left Caithness with substantial wealth and many followers. When she finally got to Iceland she took as much land as she wanted and afterwards gave parts of it to various other men. According to the saga, Aud was an outstanding woman.
[126] See Jochens 1995: 163.

Despite the lack of implication in the political and legal sphere, women still could have an important function in the Norse society. As mentioned above, due to women the patriarchal Norse society went on; due to women, men could turn their attention from the household activities to the more interesting process of feuding and political disputes. Besides the work attributed to women inside the household, they also undertook other kinds of activities from the sphere of 'outside' (of the household) male work.

It is in a way understandable that the saga authors, compelled by the narrative demands, turned their attention from women to men and their more elevated pursuits. Who would have been interested in hearing stories about women cooking, cleaning, feeding the children, washing, spinning etc.? However, women are often described in the sagas as having authority to judge the honour of men, meaning that women decided whether or not blood-revenge was necessary to protect the honour of the family. If we think about how important honour was in the Viking Age, it is obvious then that these women had a lot of power.[127] As a consequence, we should not be surprised at the sagas describing strong women, possessing the qualities that the Old Norse society cultivated (a masculine ideal).

A similar study, focused on the female roles and ranks during the Viking Age, was undertaken by Liv Helga Dommasnes. The approach used is no longer departing from the information given in the written sources, but rather from the evidence of the material artefacts, namely an analysis of the burial customs.[128] Dommasnes' research focuses on the evidence offered by grave finds dating from the late Iron Age in the district of Sogn, Western Norway. She argues that the total percentage of women's graves increased from about 10 percent in the seventh century to more than 30 percent in the ninth century. The same increase also characterizes the total number of grave finds, suggesting that more women gained high status as the area grew more populated.[129] Moreover, it appears that a greater percentage of women's than of men's graves are found in big mounds, which is an important aspect, even though the majority seem to be secondary burials. Building such big mounds was a long and costly process involving not only the people living on the farm but also other members of the society. Among the grave goods found in women's graves there is a high frequency of less common elements, indicating that they represent certain well-defined positions symbolized

[127] See Mundal 1994 b): 9.
[128] See Dommasnes 1982.
[129] Ibidem: 76.

through burial. In other words, these women must have had power over a greater part of society than the farm alone.[130]

Dommasnes suggests that the increase in female power characteristic in this area in the ninth century could be explained by a taking over of the management of the farm while the male head of the household was away on trading or pirating expeditions. As such, their possibilities were extended and this might also be indicated by the presence of male equipment among the female grave-gifts. Anyway, just because things were like that in the district of Sogn, should not mean that the situation was the same in other areas of Norway. By comparing Sogn with three other districts, two coastal ones and an inland district, Dommasnes concludes that the percentage of high-ranking women seems to have increased from the eight to the ninth century, especially in the coastal areas.[131]

The explanation could be a simple one: imports bear witness that the contact with the West increased starting with the ninth century. The coastal areas were the most advantaged when it came to relations of trading as well as of plundering. Even though we must accept that men from the inner areas also took part in plundering expeditions, these were generally led by men living on the main farms of the coastal areas. At the same time, the first efforts towards a national unification started to be felt during the ninth century and many men were engaged in military activities meant to offer support for certain chieftains. The result was that a great number of the male population went in expeditions, leaving the responsibilities in the hands of their women. Who else could have replaced the male functions if not their women? Women came thus to undertake male roles, just like in the case of widows discussed above. Their new positions represented a means of gaining power and with power came also high rank.[132]

Going one step further, we must remember that the daily life and religion were closely connected in the Norse society, so it should also be of help to look at the role played by women in the pre-Christian cultic life; even more when the focus of the present paper is represented by religious beliefs and customs related to the Viking women. Once again, we have to base our conclusions on the evidence of the written sources, eddic and skaldic poems, and the situation seems to be problematic. Not only were the authors Christians but they were also men – consequently, the material referring to women is generally scarce because their

[130] Ibidem: 80.
[131] Ibidem: 82.
[132] A different opinion is held by Ellen Høigård who believes that women did not get such significant burials because they undertook their husband's roles while they were away, but rather because they had other roles than the typical one, that of a housewife. She discusses for example the case of the female burials from Kaupang and those found along the coast of Vestfold and comes to the conclusion that these women received such burials rather because they had been active in different fields while alive: commerce, manual work, cultic activities etc. See Høigård Hofseth 1999.

function was usually overseen. The problem arises not at the mythological level, where the female element is very well represented (by goddesses, giantesses, valkyries, norns etc.), but rather when we try to get some information regarding the daily cultic activities of women.

According to a study done by Gro Steinsland, women seem to have had some functions in rituals connected with birth; being a stage important both for the mother and for the child, the cult performers had to secure the life and health of the two. In order to do that people needed a special knowledge of the runes and chants. Such knowledge was available for women as well as men, while only men were in charge of the name-giving ritual.[133] It is also possible that women had certain roles in death- and burial rituals, as it is testified in Ibn Fadlān's account about a chieftain burial on Volga.[134]

During the Viking Age women were also responsible for the cult of the land-spirits and of the elves. The land-spirits were collective local powers and it was the responsibility of women to keep contact with them and give them food offers. The land-spirits were closely identified with the world of nature and associated with particular localities. They were perceived as protective beings and one account in *Landnámabók* recounts how a certain man was assisted by the land-spirits so that his herds increased and he prospered greatly.[135] As the land-spirits are not mentioned by the eddic poems or Snorri, they seem rather to have belonged to the world of popular beliefs.

The elves were another group of collective powers connected, particularly in Swedish folklore, with mounds.[136] Women were in charge of the so-called *álfa-blót* (sacrifices to the elves), which took place during late autumn and had to do with fertility, growth and health. In *Heimskringla*, the poet Sigvat is said to have been refused admittance to a farm in Sweden because the farmer's wife was holding a sacrifice to the elves.[137] The elves appear then to have been related to both fertility and death. The combination is not as weird as it looks like because the dead forefathers were also believed to be able to intervene with the fertility powers and bless their living relatives with a healthy child.[138]

The eddic poems seem to associate the elves with the gods of Asgard rather than with giants or dwarfs, just as the Vanir are represented as mingling freely with the gods.

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[133] See Steinsland 1985: 32.
[134] This source will be discussed in more detail in CHAPTER IV.
[135] See *The Book of Settlements* (ch. 329), 1972: 125–126.
[136] See *Kormak's Saga (Kormáks saga)* (ch. 22), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. I: 217. In order to recover from a wound, Thorvard is adviced by Thordis to go to a certain mound in which elves live. There, he had to take the bull killed by Kormak and redden the surface of the mound with the bull's blood, making thus a feast to the elves, and he would be healed.
[137] See *Saint Ólafs Saga (Ólafs saga Helga)* (ch. 91), in *Heimskringla* 2002: 336.
[138] See Steinsland 1985: 33.

Furthermore, Frey received Alfheim as a gift when he lost one of his teeth during childhood.[139] According to Ellis Davidson, such a connection might help us understand the references to elves and howes.[140] When Frey died and was buried into a mound, people kept on bringing offerings to his grave for three more years, so that they could benefit from great crops and prosperity. So, the main association of the elves should have been with fertility, and through this relation they have later allied themselves with the dead. At the same time, the emphasis should be on rebirth out of the grave rather than on existence within the grave.[141]

The relation between elves and the fertility god Frey makes it possible to imagine that women played a certain function also in the cult of the Vanir. Steinsland argues that it was precisely inside this cult that women had the opportunity to achieve a high status, by becoming a *gyðja* (priestess).[142] The lack of an organized priesthood of the type introduced later by Christianity, offered both men and women the possibility to reach the highest cultic position; the sagas and *Landnámabók* testify in this sense. In *The Saga of the People of Vopnafjord (Vápnfirðinga saga)*, Steinvor is said to be such a priestess who looked after the main temple (*hof*).[143] Most of the women occupying these positions seem to have their origins in Trøndelag, where the cult of Frey was also strong. Considering the relation between Frey and his sister, Freya, it is possible to assume that women were connected to a fertility cult dedicated to both representatives of the Vanir.

Even though the *gyðja* had not only religious functions, she still did not possess the political and judicial power characteristic for her male counterparts. As mentioned above, politics and legislation was a male sphere. It is nevertheless very important to underline the idea that women could reach such a position on the cultic level and especially that they seem to have been related with the cult of the fertility gods.

Women could also be associated with the magical sphere of prophesising. The *vǫlva* (prophetess, seeress) belonged to the more marginal layers of the Viking society, as opposed to the *gyðja*. She also fulfilled certain cultic and ritual functions but these were generally connected with magic. Through her mastery of *seiðr* (sorcery), the seeress had power over both nature and people. The techniques connected with *seiðr* are said to have been thought by

[139] See *Grimnir's Sayings* (5), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 52.
[140] See Ellis Davidson 1943: 114.
[141] Olaf Geirstaðaálfs is said to have been laid in a howe after his death and sacrifices were brought to his grave. He later came to be born again into the world of the living as Olaf the Holy. See *Flateyjarbók: Ólafs saga Helga* (ch. 5–8), 1945, vol. II: 74–79.
[142] See Steinsland 1985: 33.
[143] See *The Saga of the People of Vopnafjord* (ch. 5), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. IV: 318.

Freya, so the *seiðr* knowledge was initially a female function.[144] Typical for a seeress was to be an older woman, with a great life experience. She usually surpassed the attributes of a common housewife as she had to travel from place to place, where people needed her services.[145]

Another type of cult which seems to have involved women is recorded in *Vǫlsaþáttr*, in *Flateyjarbók*. It is a phallic cult performed by a housewife in the northern parts of Norway.[146] Even though the poem is connected with Olaf the Saint, Steinsland argues that it actually contains genuine mythological and ritual material.[147] What is interesting is the fact that the poem divides the participants at the ritual in two groups: women vs. men; while the women perform the phallic ritual, the men reject Volse. Even more important is that the king present at the ritual is nobody else than Odin; as such, we are faced with an old opposing relation between a fertility cult performed by women and the male-dominated Odin cult.

Steinsland considers that the whole ritual is dedicated to giantesses, while the housewife is nothing else than a representation of a seeress.[148] Other associations could be made with the so-called holy marriage, and fertility. It is a ritual meant to assure the harmony and balance of the cosmos through a cult dedicated to giantesses. The same balance is also accomplished in the myths about Thor who is fighting against the giants, but this time the giants are not killed but rather taken care of through cultic offerings. Even though the giants are connected with the dangerous spheres of the cosmos, the world also depends on their life-important powers.

Women appear then to have had multiple religious functions in the pre-Christian Viking period. They were most often connected with fertility cults and with the Vanir: Frey and Freya. Considering the strong connection between women and fertility, it is possible to wonder if this relation surpassed the limitations of the grave. In other words, we might be able to trace the same association in the various beliefs regarding an afterlife existence in a death realm. If we also consider the relation between fertility and death, the idea becomes even more appealing. Were high-rank women believed to join a death realm belonging to Frey/Freya as a result of their *gyðja* functions on earth? Were seeresses expected to go to Freya's realm, as she had been the primordial master of *seiðr*? Still, considering that the female priestesses were representatives of the high classes, while the seeresses belonged to

[144] See *The Saga of the Ynglings* (ch. 4), in *Heimskringla* 2002: 8.
[145] See *The Saga of Eirik the Red (Eiríks saga Rauða)* (ch. 4), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. I: 5. Thorbjorg, also called the 'little prophetess', used to spend the winter visiting one farm after another, where she had been invited by people curious to find out their future, as well as what was in store for the next year.
[146] See *Flateyjarbók: Ólafs saga Helga* (ch. 266), 1945, vol. II: 442–446.
[147] See Steinsland 1985: 38.
[148] Ibidem: 39.

the more marginal layers of the society, can we trace in the written sources beliefs in the existence of different death realms based on a social stratification? It is also interesting that women seem to have been involved in a cult dedicated to giantesses, while one of the death realms open for women was that of a giantess, Hel. However, in order to find out more about the possible destinations open to women after death we must turn our attention to the written evidence.

3.2. **Women and the various death realms available to them after death**

3.2.1. **The realm of Hel**

The collective death realm of Hel is represented in the Nordic sources as an underworld realm situated in the north. If we examine the eddic poems, it is quite difficult to build up a consistent picture of Hel's realm because the allusions are vague. The giant Vafthrundir is said to have travelled to the underworld, nine worlds below, to Niflhel, there men die out of Hel. A second reference to Hel' realm is made in *Baldr's Dreams*, where Hel is presented as a place with "beccir baugom sánir" (benches decked with arm-rings) and "flet fagrliga flóð gulli" (dais fairly strewn with gold).[149] Neither of the accounts makes any allusion to women residing in Hel's realm after death. It is in Snorri's account of the funeral of Baldr that we encounter the first indication that Hel was also open for women: when Baldr's body was carried out on the funeral ship, his wife, Nanna, collapsed with grief and died. Consequently, she was set on the pyre together with Baldr and joined him in Hel's realm, where Baldr was said to have gone. That Nanna actually resided in Hel's kingdom is testified by the fact that, when Hermod came to Hel to ransom Baldr, Nanna was there and she gave him a linen robe and some other gifts for Frigg and a finger-ring for Fulla.[150] It is puzzling that Snorri depicts Hel as a realm destined for those who die of sickness or old age, because neither Baldr nor Nanna were old or sick. It is probably as a result of his description of Valhalla, as a place destined for those who die in battle, that Snorri described Hel as a realm for the old and sick and at the same time as the residence for the young god Baldr. Baldr did not die on the battle-field so he could not join Odin's realm after death. Besides, as Snorri presents Valhalla as a male exclusive death-realm, it would have been impossible for Nanna to join him there.

So, Hel seems to have been open for women too and in this context it would be interesting to see how this death realm is described in the sources. Nevertheless, it seems that

[149] See *Baldrs draumar* (6), in *Edda* 1962: 278.
[150] See *Gylfaginning* (49), in *The Prose Edda* 1995: 49–50.

the only presentation of Hel's realm is the one given by Snorri, which is considered to have been influenced by his Christian background. It is rather the journey made by the dead or the living to Hel's realm that is described in the sources. Considering that women were believed to join this death realm, it is important to find out how the journey took place and what kind of experiences it involved.

It is again Snorri who gives the longest account of the journey to Hel, when he describes Hermod's ride to bring back Baldr.[151] Upon Baldr's death, Frigg asked the Æsir who wished to earn all her love and favour and was willing to ride to Hel in order to try and find Baldr and offer Hel a ransome if she agreed to let him go back to Asgard. It was Hermod the Bold, Odin's boy, who undertook the journey. In order to reach Hel's abode, Hermod took Odin's horse, Sleipnir. He rode for nine nights through valleys dark and deep so that he could see nothing. He then came to the river Gioll and rode on to Gioll bridge which was covered with glowing gold. At the bridge, there was a maiden (giantess) guarding it; her name was Modgud and she told him that the other day there had ridden over the bridge five battalions of dead men. Hermod also found out that the road to Hel led downwards and northwards and so he continued his journey. He finally came to Hel's gates (*helgrind*) and jumped over it by the help of Sleipnir, the best of horses. There he came upon a hall (*höllina*) where Balder was sitting in the seat of honour.

Snorri must have used some other source for this description because there is no counterpart in the eddic poems (from which he could have been inspired). He fails again to give a better description of Hel's realm, mentioning only the presence of a hall with a high seat, reminding thus of the typical Viking halls, where each chieftain had his own high seat. The emphasis is rather on the journey taken to the death realm and several elements retain our attention: the journey is made on horseback, through deep and dark valleys until the hero finally gets to a river and a bridge. Guarding the bridge is a maiden who gives information about other dead people passing over the bridge; by following a road downwards and northwards, a gate is finally reached and in order to jump over it, one needs a special horse, like Sleipnir.

Seen from a general perspective, the idea of a gate/wall is a very common symbol for the passage between the cosmic worlds, between the world of the living and that of the gods, between the world of the living and that of the dead, between the profane and the sacred. The idea of a gate/wall is often encountered in the Scandinavian literature and is often part of the

[151] Idem.

name of the realm of the dead: "Hrimgrimnir is the name of the giant who'll have you/ down below the corpse-gates (*nágrind*)" is one of Skirnir's menaces addressed to Gerd in order to make her accept Frey's offer.[152] Valhalla is also said to have a gate called Valgrind.[153]

In *Baldr's Dreams*, Odin himself travells to the underworld realm on the back of his eight-legged horse, Sleipnir.[154] The motif of using a horse could be a symbol which has its origins in countries lying more to the east: in Siberia for example, the horse bears the shaman's soul to realms outside the living world. In India, the horse is used to describe the coffin carried by four men and which looks like an eight-legged horse, bringing the dead to the grave.[155]

The details regarding the journey are not as extensive as the ones given by Snorri: on his way, Odin met a dog, bloody in front of its chest, which barked at him. Hel is again presented as residing into a hall: "hann kom at hávo Heliar ranni" (he approached the high hall of Hel).[156] In the *Seeress's Prophecy*, the same idea of Hel having a hall on her realm is expressed: upon Ragnarok: "sótrauðr hani, at sǫlom Heliar" (there crowed a sooty-red cock in the halls of Hel).[157]

References to a road to hell are also contained in one of the eddic poems. In the *Seeress's Prophecy*, the sibyl prophesises that upon Ragnarok "hræðar allir á helvegom" (all are terrified on the roads to hell).[158]

One thing which should be taken notice of is the fact that both journeys were undertaken by men, representatives of the gods, but they were not dead. Just as Modgud remarks, Hormod does not have the colour of the dead. Nevertheless, the same journey undertaken by Hormod must have been undertaken by Baldr and Nanna too. Baldr himself seems to have been accompanied on the pyre by his horse in full harness, as if prepared for a further journey; but what about Nanna? How was she supposed to continue her journey to Hel's realm?

In another eddic poem, Brynhild is burnt on the pyre with a wagon draped with costly woven tapestries. Next, "Brynhildr óc með reiðinni á helveg" (Brynhild drove the wagon along the road to hell).[159] It appears then that women were believed to make the journey to the death realm by wagons. Nothing of the kind is mentioned about Nanna; she was probably

[152] See *Skirnir's Journey (Skírnismál)* (35), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 66.
[153] See *Grimnir's Sayings* (22), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 54.
[154] See *Baldr's Dreams* (2), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 243.
[155] See Ellis Davidson 1996: 45.
[156] See *Baldrs draumar* (3), in *Edda* 1962: 277
[157] See *Vǫluspá* (43), in *Edda* 1962: 10.
[158] Ibidem (47): 11.
[159] See the prose section at the beginning of *Helreið Brynhildar*, in *Edda* 1962: 219.

supposed to join her husband on horseback, as long as they both had the same final destination.

Another interesting element is the presence of a ship in Snorri's account. Why would a ship be needed if the journey made by Hermod to Hel had required only a horse? Could it be that part of the journey was supposed to be made on water and only afterwards on land? In the context of Snorri's story, such a possibility is rather doubtful. Hermod did not have to use a ship or a boat for his journey, he rode for nine nights through darkness and only then did he come to a river, but there was a bridge over it. Maybe the ship had no other significance than that of Baldr's personal possession, the biggest of all ships, and it was only him who deserved to have it, even in death. At the same time, the ship symbol is closely connected with that of water, implying ideas of cleanness, fertility and rebirth. Water is the primordial substance which represents both the origin and the end. Such an approach is even more appealing if we take into consideration the last stanzas of the *Seeress's Prophecy*, where Baldr is said to be reborn in the new world which is to emerge after Ragnarok.[160] The fact that Nanna was not born again after the final battle, does not mean that such an interpretation of the ship symbolism is wrong. She is actually reborn in the world beyond, in Hel's realm, and it is probably this explanation that we should make use of in this case. Baldr is also reborn in Hel's realm and the burning of the ship on the pyre implies then a rebirth in the death realm rather than having any connection with his resurrection after Ragnarok. There is much more to say about the symbolism of the ship but it will be discussed later, in connection with the various burial customs regarding the Viking women.

Neither Brynhild used a ship on her way along the road to hell, but in one of the Icelandic sagas, it is recorded that when Aud the Deep-minded died, she was buried into a mound, in a ship, along with a great deal of riches.[161] First and foremost, we must be aware that Aud was a Christian woman according to *Landnámabók* (ch. 97) and she is noted to have been buried at the high water mark because, having been baptized, she did not wish to lie in unconsecrated earth.[162] However, the saga records that she was buried according to the heathen practice and there is no mention that Aud was Christian. It is not my intention to discuss why the two sources give different accounts of Aud's funeral but rather to interpret the elements described in the saga as being part of the burial ritual. There is a difference between the eddic accounts and Aud's story in the sense that she was not burnt on a pyre but

[160] See *Seeress's Prophecy* (62), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 12.
[161] See *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* (ch. 7), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. IV: 6.
[162] See *The Book of Settlements* (ch. 110), 1972: 55.

rather buried in a mound. The presence of the ship in the grave could indicate that she was believed to continue her existence in a death realm reachable only by boat (there was no wagon in the grave), or that she was supposed to continue her existence in the grave with the ship performing the role of residence of the dead. The placement of grave goods is another important element in the saga because they underline the idea of a burial chamber. No grave goods were allowed to be placed in the grave after the introduction of Christianity. Such an act might indicate that even though Aud was Christian, her relatives were still pagan and they considered that she should receive a burial according to the old custom. These grave goods could be interpreted as either supplies for the dead as a resident of the mound, or as nourishment on the road to the death realm.

If we turn back our attention to Hel's realm and the evidence of the written sources, there are other accounts which describe a journey to an underworld realm. Saxo Grammaticus recounts the story of Hading who, while taking supper at the court of Haquinus, king of Nitheri, whose daughter he has married, is invited by a woman arisen beside the brazier to go and see a land where plants as fresh as those she carries grow in winter. Eager to find out Hading agrees and they vanish beneath the earth under the woman's cloak:

"First, they penetrated a smoky veil of darkness, then walked along a path worn away by long ages of travellers…they eventually came upon a sunny region which produced the vegetation the woman had brought away. Having advanced further, they stumbled on a river of blue-black water, swirling in headlong descent and spinning in its swift eddies weapons of various kinds. They crossed it by a bridge and saw two strongly-matched armies encountering each other…'They are men who met their death by sword' she said 'and present an everlasting display of their destruction…' Moving on, they found barring their way a wall, difficult to approach and surmount. The woman tried to leap over it, but to no avail, for even her slender wrinkled body was no advantage. She thereupon wrung off the head of a cock which she happened to be carrying and threw it over the enclosing barrier; immediately the bird, resurrected, gave proof by a loud crowd that it had truly recovered its breathing". [163]

Before going on with the interpretation of the text we must keep in mind that Saxo's historic reliability has long been disputed by scholars. The first nine books of his history are looked upon as having little historic value. On the other hand, the grasp of events is uncritical (as opposed to Snorri's works), indicating ingenuity in bringing diverse material together and even more. The skilful presentation of the old myths, known from Snorri's writings, seems to

[163] See *The History of the Danes*, Book I, (30), 1979, vol. I: 30–31.

lack here, but still the fact that many of the tales are unrecorded elsewhere has aroused the attention of all those interested in new information regarding the Norse traditions.

Saxo's account is interesting from several points of view. It describes a journey beneath the earth, a journey permitted by the underworld gods, as Saxo puts it, to those parts which a man must visit when he dies. The world visited by Hading could then be identified with the death realm. Once again, it is a living person who undertakes the journey, together with a supernatural woman, capable of hiding Hading under her coat. The horse is no longer a means of transportation, but they rather walk along a path, a death road (reminding of the road to hell mentioned in the eddic poems). The first part of the journey corresponds with Snorri's description: the two characters of the story advance through darkness; they finally get to a sunny region and a river crossed by a bridge. Again we find similarities with Hermod's journey down to Hel; what is different is the presence of the two armies engaged in an endless fight, reminding of the everlasting battle in Valhalla. The mysterious woman strengthens the comparison even more by saying that these are people who died by sword. Further on, the great wall is again an element in the journey. In the absence of Sleipnir, the wall is difficult to surmount even for such a supernatural woman capable of taking Hading to the land of the dead. The fact that over the bridge lies the death realm is underlined by the resurrection of the killed bird once arrived on the other side. (The ritual will be discussed in a future chapter).

Hading's journey follows the main lines of Hermod's journey: a road through darkness, a river, a bridge and a huge wall capable of being surmounted only by beings with special powers. The description of the river reminds somehow of one of the stanzas in the *Seeress's Prophecy*: "From the east falls, from poison valleys,/ a river of knives and swords, Cutting it is called."[164] The puzzling part is the presence of the sunny region and of the two armies engaged in an endless fight; it is as if, in order to reach the realm behind the wall, one has to go through Valhalla. The killing of the cock and its resurrection on the other side brings forth the idea of rebirth; but if the two armies were continuously fighting each other (implying that the men never died), how could the bird be killed on the same side of the wall and come back to life only on the other side? We must admit that Saxo's narrative is difficult to interpret and full of confusion, but several of the elements included in the journey correspond with Snorri's description of a journey to Hel. More than that, this time it is a woman who joins Hading in the subterranean journey. Even though she is presented as a mysterious woman, the story

[164] See *Seeress's Prophecy* (36), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 8.

actually suggests that women, as well as men, could undertake the same journey on the way to the death realm.

An interesting aspect of Saxo's account is that the woman leading Hading to the underworld resembles the goddess Freya, who in one of the eddic poems is said to take her protégé, Ottar, on the way to Valhalla, to find information about his ancestry from the giantess Hyndla.[165] It is again a journey to the realm of the dead, where the hero cannot enter without the help of a guide lighter. In her quality of goddess of death, Freya is capable of taking Ottar to the Other World in the form of a pig with golden bristles, while the woman from Saxo's story hides Hading under her cloak in order to pass into the other realm. Yet, if we interpret the mysterious woman as Freya, it is quite difficult to explain why she could not jump over the high wall.

Intriguing again is the fact that there is no description of the world beyond the great wall. In addition, Saxo does not finish the story by telling us how the adventure ended and how Hading came back to his world, but rather goes on by relating how Hading returned to his homeland together with his wife.

It seems then that the written sources do not offer us a view of how the underworld realm of Hel looked like. All we obtain is a description of how the journey to such a realm was believed to take place. Even though the main characters who undertake this kind of journey are male and belong more or less to the world of myth, it does not mean that women were supposed to take another route. As long as Nanna joined her husband in death and to Hel's realm, we must assume that they made the journey together, along the same lines of Hermod's journey: first in a land of darkness, then across a bridge, and finally beyond a wall, difficult to surpass. There is a possibility that the wall was easier to jump over by those who were already dead, or even that there was an entrance visible only for those welcomed in Hel's realm. Provided that they were destined to continue their life in Hel's kingdom, there should have been no reason for the existence of a high wall, preventing the dead from entering. As soon as the persons who wanted to enter the death realm belonged to a different world, that of the living, the idea of an insurmountable wall might have gained its significance.

Even though the mythical example of Baldr and Nanna does not explain how she was expected to continue her journey after death, other sources testify that women could travel by wagons. If Baldr was buried together with his horse, which he was supposed to use as a means

[165] See *The Song of Hyndla (Hyndluljóð)*, in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 253–259.

of transportation, maybe we could also consider the possibility that Nanna was expected to make her journey on foot. In such a case, it is difficult to explain why she was not buried with a wagon, which was a common means of transportation for (high-born) women at the time.

A significant thing is that there seems to be a link between female supernatural figures, especially giantesses, and the land of the dead: at Baldr's funeral, a giantess named Hyrokkin was called to move the funeral ship, on his way to Hel's kingdom, Hermod met a giantess guarding the bridge that led to Hel, Freya woke up Hyndla, another giantess, in order to make a journey to the Other World. Moreover, the goddess of the land of the dead, Hel herself, was said to be a giantess. Another female figure connected with the land of the dead was the giantess Ran, who gathered in her realm the people who died at sea. Even though no source explicitly says that women were believed to go to Ran, we could maybe assume that some of them did. When the Vikings left on conquering expeditions they usually returned home to take their wives with them and settle in the new conquered areas. It should not be inappropriate to imagine then that during these voyages misfortunes happened and many people, both men and women, died at sea. As long as Ran's realm does not seem to have been male exclusive, we may then assume that women were welcomed too.

It is quite interesting that there appears to be a connection between the land of the dead and giantesses who seem to have power over it. Their function was either to admit mortals in the land of the dead or to conduct them along the road leading to it. Some of them even possessed a store of wisdom concerning dead ancestors (like in the case of Hyndla). These female figures are represented in the eddic poems as an element of chaos. In *Vǫlsaþáttr* the woman performs a ritual meant precisely to re-establish the order in the universe by dedicating it to giantesses. They are dangerous powers but life cannot go on without their participation. We should maybe understand the connection between giantesses and the land of the dead along the same lines: death means entering chaos, but with the help of the female powers the dead can reach their final destination. Through death, the dead enter a dangerous liminal period, but with the help of these underworld creatures they are finally incorporated into the new world.

3.2.2. **Helgafell**

As described in the previous chapter, Helgafell is a collective death realm situated in the local environment, where the departed forefathers were considered to continue their post-mortem existence close to their living relatives. Was Helgafell also open for women?

If we recollect the account given by *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, Thorolf believed that he, as well as all his friends and relatives would go to Helgafell after death. There is no mention in the saga that could make us believe that the Holy Mountain was restricted only to men; the circle of friends and relatives included both men and women. Especially if we consider that the belief in Helgafell started more or less like a family-based cult, it should be more than clear that such an afterlife destination was open for all the members of the kinship group, no matter of their sex.

The written sources do not explicitly say that a certain woman was considered to continue her post-mortem existence in Helgafell, as is the case with Thorolf and his son, but the information referring to a belief in the Holy Mountain certainly encompasses the whole circle of family and friends. On the example offered by *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, we could maybe go even further, using our imagination, and picture a life after death similar to the one women experienced on earth. Just as Thorstein was welcomed in the mountain, with feasting and merriment, and was placed on the high-seat opposed to that of his father, so must women have been also welcomed among their dead forefathers. If we consider the role played by women during the ceremonial gatherings of the Viking men in the hall of their chieftain, we can even picture them offering drinks to those men who took part at those feats. Moreover, knowing that the wife of a chieftain joined her husband on the high-seat on such occasions, it would not be difficult to imagine that Thorolf's wife would have done the same once she came to Helgafell.

Life inside Helgafell resembled the life the living generations were enjoying on earth. The closeness of the mountain to the family's land made communication between the two worlds possible because Helgafell was nothing else than another stage in the life of the kinship group. Women were probably expected to continue their post-mortem existence by doing the same things they had done while alive. Nevertheless, these are only hypothesis, the result of the power of our imagination which is trying to fill in the gaps left in the written material. There are no sources describing how exactly life inside Helgafell continued for women; but if we correlate the general picture of this afterlife destination (that of a place situated in the local environment, where existence resembled the one led by the living generations on the farm), with our information regarding the daily lives of the Viking women, it is possible to obtain a hypothetical answer to our inquiry.

3.2.3. **Freya - the goddess of death**

Freya is first and foremost the great fertility goddess during the Viking Age. According to Snorri, she was the daughter of Niord of Noatun and sister of Frey. They were both beautiful in appearance and mighty.[166] Freya was the most glorious of the Asyniur and her dwelling in heaven was called Folkvang ('battlefield' or 'the place full of people'). In *Grímnismál* it is said:

"Fólcvangr er inn níundi, enn þar Freyia ræðr
sessa kostom í sal;
hálfan val hon kýss hverian dag,
enn hálfan Óðinn á."[167]

"Folkvang is the ninth, and there Freya arranges
the choice of seats in the hall;
half the slain she chooses every day,
and half goes to Odin."[168]

So Freya gets half of the slain in battle, while the other half goes to Odin. On the other hand, Snorri recounts that Freya is the most approachable one for people to pray to (especially concerning love affairs) and from her name comes the honorific title whereby noble ladies are called *frúvur*. In *Heimskringla*, Snorri also tells us that every woman who rules over her property is called *freya* and if she owns a house, *húsfreya.*[169] She is also the supreme goddess beside Frigg.[170] Her cult, probably connected with the *dísa-* and the *álfablót*, had features which clearly recall fertility rites. Like Odin, Freya commanded the skill of sorcery, being the one who taught the Æsir *seiðr*, which was used by the Vanir.[171] Those who mastered magic could see in the past and the future and had power over both life and death. Freya's knowledge of witchcraft is attested by Loki: "Þegi þú, Freyia! þú ert fordæða/ oc meini blandin miǫc" (Be silent, Freya, you're a witch/ and much imbued with malice.)[172] In many ways, Freya is the female counterpart to Odin in his magico-religious function as well as in his role as the sovereign; like him, she has many names (Mardoll, Horn, Gefn, Syr). Freya seems therefore to be a multifunctional deity whose cultic realms extend far beyond the fertility aspect.

Freya has an ambivalent nature, reflecting aspects of life and death, fertility and magic, love and battle. Her function as a fertility goddess as well as the evidence pointing towards a female participation especially in fertility cult and rituals makes one wonder if there is not

[166] See *Gylfaginning* (23–5), in *Edda* 1995: 24.
[167] See *Grímnismál* (14), in *Edda* 1962: 60.
[168] See *Grimnir's Sayings* (14), in *Edda* 1996: 53.
[169] See *The Saga of the Ynglings* (ch. 10), in *Heimskringla* 2002: 14.
[170] See *Gylfaginning* (34–5), in *Edda* 1995: 29.
[171] Ibidem (35): 30.
[172] See *Locasenna* (32), in *Edda* 1962:103.

possible to associate Freya's death realm with women and their life after death. Furthermore, Freya seems to constitute a reflection of the ideal noble women, the wives of the aristocracy; she displays the characteristics of the ideal woman and her name is identical with the title given to the wives of the aristocracy.[173] Still, no matter how hard we would try, the literary sources offer only one short account which suggests that Freya also received dead women in her realm. When Egil's son, Bodvar, died Egil decided to starve to death because of his sorrow. His daughter, Thorgerd, hearing such news, went to visit her father and when asked whether she had eaten she gave the following response: "I have had no evening meal, nor shall I do so until I go to join Freya. I know no better course than my father's. I do not want to live after my father and brother are dead."[174]

The lack of support from other sources makes our job difficult because relying on only one piece of information is not enough. In *Egil's Saga*, Freya's realm seems to be also open for women and it is interesting that in this account, death implies an act of suicide. Should we believe that women who suffered an honourable death, in other words, women who committed suicide in order to protect their honour, were expected to join Freya's Folkvang? Such a hypothesis brings forth associations with the honourable death suffered by the male warriors who were destined to continue their life after death in Odin's realm, Valhalla.

There is an interesting account which has a close similarity with the one mentioned above. In *The Saga of Hervör and Heithrek (Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks)*, King Harold is slain together with his entire host and given to Odin; as a consequence, the queen takes her own life in the temple of the Dis.[175] Considering the connection between Freya and the *disir* (female protective powers), it is remarkable that the queen slew herself precisely in the temple dedicated to them; by committing suicide she accomplished an honourable act. While her husband seems to have joined Odin's realm, it is possible that the queen was welcomed in Freya's kingdom, Folkvang. Still, we must take into account the fact that the saga belongs to the group called *Sagas of the Ancient Past (Fornaldarsǫgur)*, which deal with times anterior to Harold the Fair-haired and the colonisation of Iceland. Their historical value is far inferior to that of the *Icelandic Family Sagas* or the *Kings' Sagas (Konungasǫgur).* Though they contain some element derived from tradition, this is generally very meagre. Most often the stories have their source in poems, but these also contain a large proportion of fictitious matter. Consequently, the reliance on the information found in the saga is quite problematic.

[173] See Näström, Britt-Mari 1995: 89.
[174] See *Egil's Saga* (ch. 79), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. I: 150.
[175] See *The Saga of Hervör and Heithrek* (ch. VII), in *Stories of the Far Past* 1921: 107.

Saxo also relates the story of Asmund who dies in battle while trying to avenge his son;[176] he benefited from a royal funeral at Uppsala. His wife, Gunnhild, did not want to survive him but stabbed herself. She preferred to follow her husband in death than desert him by living. Again we have the motif of a noble woman who commits suicide in an honourable way. Could we interpret her death as an attempt to join Freya's realm? However, the information regarding her wish to die as soon as her husband was dead brings forth ideas of a belief in an afterlife existence in some place where she could have joined her husband; several other sources refer to such a belief, which will be discussed more below.

According to Näström, when Hel is described in erotic terms as the receiver of the deceased kin, we should suspect that such references really allude to Freya in her double role as goddess of death and love rather than to the gruesome daughter of Loki.[177] Still, we should not forget that Snorri was influenced by his Christian background in the description of Hel's realm and there is no proof that the pagan Vikings understood Hel only along these negative lines.

There is another goddess connected with death which might have something in common with Freya. Snorri describes Gefion as being a virgin who is attended by all who die virgins.[178] In *Vǫlsaþáttr* the young maiden swears by Gefion and the other gods that she forcefully takes the phallus, indicating that she actually rejects the fertility rite and its consequences.[179] The fact that she names Gefion first among the gods could be taken as a sign that she was indeed perceived as a goddess of chastity. Nevertheless, at the beginning of *Gylfaginning*, Gefion is described as a vagrant woman (*varandi kona)* to whom the ruler of Sweden, Gylfi, gave as a reward for his entertainment (*skemtan*), one plough-land in his kingdom.[180] The account has the connotations of a sexual service and is thus in contrast with the image of the goddess as a virgin. On the other hand, she appears to have begotten four sons with a giant, which was a taboo for a goddess in the Old Norse world of myth. We should maybe point out that the narrative in *Gylfaginning* presents Gefion as a historical woman, who puts the basis of Zealand. Gefion's chastity is also questioned in one of the eddic poems. In *Loki's Quarrel (Locasenna)*, Loki accuses her of having laid her thighs over a white boy in exchange of a jewel:

[176] See *The History of the Danes*, Book I, (ch. 26–27), 1979, vol. I: 26–27.
[177] See Näström 1995: 88.
[178] See *Gylfaginning* (34–5), in *Edda* 1995: 29.
[179] See *Flateyjarbók: Ólafs saga Helga* (ch. 266), 1945, vol. II: 444.
[180] See *Gylfaginning*, in *Edda* 1995: 7.

"Þegi þú, Gefion! þess mun ec nú geta,	"Be silent, Gefion, I'm going to mention this,
er þic glapþi at geði:	how your heart was seduced;
sveinn inn hvíti, er þér sigli gaf,	the white boy gave you a jewel
oc þú lagðir yfir."[181]	and you laid your thigh over him."[182]

Ursula Dronke identifies the blond boy (sveinn inn hvíti) with Heimdall;[183] he is also described as the whitest of the gods (hvítastr ása)[184] and Snorri presents him as 'the white As' (*hvíti áss).*[185] Accordingly, the jewel that the boy gave to Gefion is actually the necklace saved by Heimdal from Loki and from the sea. In other words, Gefion is identified with Freya and the jewel refers to the story of the rescue of Freya's necklace, out of Loki's hands, by Heimdal, in an oceanic fight in which both contestants take the shape of seals.[186]

Considering all these accounts, Gefion reminds of Freya and her function inside the fertility cult rather than of the virgin goddess. According to Näström, it might be possible to connect the two extremes – virginity and intense sexual activity- if we compare Gefion with the goddesses in Classical Antiquity who had the byname of *parthenos*, meaning that they had no husband, they did not belong to the patriarchal system.[187] Gefion herself is depicted as not being married with any god and so she could have been called a maiden, not as a result of a lack of sexual experiences, but because her position was outside of the patriarchal system as a single goddess.[188] She could then have been worshipped not necessarily by those women who were virgins but rather by those who were unmarried.

Gefion has several common characteristics with Freya: she receives a jewel in exchange for sexual relations, she seems to be capable of a certain amount of magic (as implied in the story about Gylfi), women are said to go to her after death, and her name reminds of Freya's byname, Gefn, which means 'the giving' (O.N. < *gefa* = to give) and which alludes to the fertility aspect of the goddess.

If we accept such a hypothesis, it is possible to say then that some women were believed to go to Freya's kingdom after death. These women belonged generally to the high classes of

[181] See *Locasenna* (20), in *Edda* 1962: 100.
[182] See *Loki's Quarrel* (20), in *Edda* 1996: 88.
[183] See Dronke 1997: 360.
[184] See *Þrymsqviða* (15), in *Edda* 1962: 113.
[185] See *Gylfaginning* (25–7), in *Edda* 1995: 25.
[186] The story is told in a poem, *Húsdrápa*, and is also mentioned by Snorri, in *Skáldskaparmál*.
[187] See Näström 1995: 101.
[188] In *The Saga of the Ynglings* (ch. 5) Gefjon marries Skjold, a son of Odin, but we must remember the historical character attributed to her; she does not appear in her quality of a goddess of the Æsir. See *Heimskringla* 2002: 9.

society and they earned their place in Freya's realm either by dying unmarried or by dying through a heroic death. Still, it is difficult to accept the idea that only those noble women who died by suicide could go to Freya's realm; this is especially as a result of the above mentioned connection between women and fertility cults and the function of Freya as a fertility goddess. If noble women indeed had important functions in the fertility rituals, it is probable that they believed they were going to be reunited in death with their god, Frey/Freya, just as warriors believed they would join their god, Odin. Unfortunately, the written sources are of no help when we try to find arguments in favour of such a theory and the only option available is to turn our attention to the material evidence and see if there is something which indeed could confirm our guess.

3.2.4. **Other possible death realms open for women**

Among the literary sources referring to women and death during the Viking Age, there is an account written outside the Nordic area. It is an elaborate description of a cremation funeral in 921/922 which took place among the Rus, in Russia.[189] The author of this narrative was Ibn Fadlān, an Arab traveller sent to Russia to teach Islamic law to the king of the Slavs. He became thus witness to the funeral of a chieftain of the Rus and described his experiences in his book entitled *Risāla.* The description is significant from the point of view of the rituals described and in our context, because the funeral also included a woman. There are several problems with Ibn Fadlān's description making one wonder how far he relied on his imagination and how far on the actual state of events. However, the description is very relevant and might help us on the track of identifying possible death realms open for women.

Ibn Fadlān recounts that during his stay with the Rus on Volga, he was constantly told that when one of their chieftains died, the people performed certain rituals out of which cremation was the most important. One day one of their chieftains died and they put his body in the grave and left it there for ten days, until the women had finished sewing his clothes. According to the custom, when the person who died was among the poor, the Rus prepared a little ship and burnt the dead on it. When the person who died was among the rich of the community, they divided his money in three parts: one for his family, a second for the clothes that had to be sewed for him and the last third for making *nabīd*, a drink which they drank the same day that the slave girl gave herself to die with her master. It seems that each time a chieftain died, his family would ask the slaves who among them wanted to die together with

[189] See Birkeland 1954: 21–24.

their master. One of them offered himself/ herself and afterwards there was no going back. Most of the slaves who decided to die together with their masters were females, and so was also the case with the funeral attended by Ibn Fadlān.

Several rituals were performed up to the girl's death but these will be discussed in a future chapter, in the context of burial rituals. What is significant at this point is the way the slave girl is said to have died: she was slain by an old woman called the Angel of Death, who stabbed her in the ribs with a knife while two other men strangled her. The method reminds of a type of ritual offering used in the cult of Odin.

According to a study done by Ellis Davidson, there are several stories which record a kind of pact sealed between a king and Odin, a pact which implied that the king would offer to Odin those who died in battle.[190] Material evidence supporting these accounts is found in Danish and Swedish bogs where, beginning with the Celtic Iron Age and up until the sixth century A.D., there are traces of offering places, some of which have been archaeologically studied. Besides the objects indicating battle offerings such as swords, spears, bows, arrows, etc., human skeletons have also been found. The most representative is the skeleton of a man found in Tollund, Denmark, who seems to have been ritually hanged. The rope around his neck indicated that he had been killed by hanging, while the apparent expression of resignation on his face might point to a belief in a life continuing after death.

It appears that those who were taken prisoners during the battle were sacrificed to Odin by using the same method: hanging. In addition, another common practice was that of stabbing the offerings with a spear. Afterwards, they were left hanging in the tree, reminding of Odin's self sacrifice in order to gain wisdom. In one of the eddic poems, Odin himself says:

"Veit ec, at ec hecc vindgameiði á	"I know that I hung on a windy tree
nætr allar nío,	nine long nights,
geiri undaðr oc gefinn Óðni,	wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
siálfr siálfom mér,	myself to myself,
á þeim meiði, er mangi veit,	on that tree of which no man knows
hvers hann af rótom renn."[191]	from where its roots run."[192]

[190] See Ellis Davidson 1996: 32.
[191] See *Hávamál* (138), in *Edda* 1962: 40.
[192] See *Sayings of the High One* (138), in *Edda* 1996: 34.

The god of the dead himself, Odin, hung on a windy tree for nine long nights, wounded with a spear, sacrificing himself to himself. Using the example of Odin himself, those sacrificed to him were hanged and stabbed with a spear at the same time. The symbol for the death of a warrior was the spear, Odin's greatest treasure – Gungnir. It could assign victory, depending on the direction which it indicated during a battle.

However, not only those taken captives during a battle could join Odin's realm, but also high-born men who died on the battle field or those who had dedicated their lives to the cult of Odin. Furthermore, according to Snorri, Odin's adepts were believed to have practiced cremation rather than inhumation.[193] Therefore, death by hanging, stabbing and burning represented phases of an offering ritual usually connected with the cult of Odin.

If we go back to the description of the funeral on Volga, the girl is said to have been ritually killed using the same methods that were common for the cult of Odin. She accepted to join her master in death and came to be sacrificed so that she could keep him company in the afterlife. During the ceremonies before her death, the girl is treated as a privileged person, implying the idea of her becoming the chieftain's wife in the Other World. She is nothing but a case of suttee and the evidence seems to indicate that her destination after death was the same realm as the one expecting her master. Many elements found in the burial ritual of the Rus chieftain have a symbolism that can be associated with the cult of Odin: all his weapons as well as two horses and a dog were buried with him, reminding of the life of continuous battle-training spent by the chosen warriors in Valhalla. At the same time, Ibn Fadlān notes that one of the participants at the funeral told him that they used to burn the dead so that they could come to paradise the same moment; the god would then send a wind so that the dead could reach his realm in an hour. Considering these aspects, it might be possible to suggest that women could also have been offered to Odin so that they joined his realm after death. It is nevertheless difficult to prove it because the Scandinavian sources do not sustain such a hypothesis. There is no written text recording that women were expected to join Odin's realm after death. On the contrary, Valhalla is presented as an exclusively male realm, destined for high-born people. Still, the practice of suttee implies the idea that the sacrificed person was believed to continue his/ her existence in the same realm as that of the master. So maybe we should look in the Scandinavian sources in order to see if there is any information supporting such a theory.

[193] See CHAPTER II, p. 48.

In *Flateyjarbók* there is a passage referring to the practice of suttee as continuing in Sweden into historic times.[194] It looks like Aud married King Eric of Sweden in his old age after Sigrud the Proud had left him. People believed that he was disgraced by Sigrud's behaviour because the law in Sweden was so, that when the king died, the queen had to be laid in the mound beside him. In addition, it is also recorded that Sigrid knew that the king had vowed himself to Odin for victory and that he had not many years to live.

In this story again, the king vowed himself to Odin, meaning that he was to go to Odin's realm after death, while the queen was supposed to join him in death and probably to the death realm. Yet, the lack of details makes it impossible to prove such a hypothesis.

The Norse sources also present cases reminding of the practice of suttee: in the story of Baldr's funeral, his wife, Nanna, died of grief and was placed with Baldr on the funeral pyre.[195] However, the account does not imply that Nanna was sacrificed using the same procedures as in the case of the Rus slave girl, she rather died of grief. Nanna was not sacrificially killed on the occasion of her husband's death. Besides, both Nanna and Baldr are described as continuing their life in Hel's realm and not in Valhalla. As such, we cannot use Snorri's account as an argument in favour of the belief in a life after death spent by women in Odin's realm.

There are other stories which can be connected with the practice of the voluntary death of a wife at her husband's funeral. In *The Saga of Hervör and Heithrek* it is recounted that Ingibjörg, daughter of the King of Upssala, fell down dead when she saw the body of her dead lover, Hjalmar, who had been slain in battle.[196] They were both buried in one borrow. There is nothing confirming the possibility of the woman joining her lover in Odin's hall, actually there is no mention of Hjalmar going to Valhalla after death; still, that he died in battle would have favoured such a belief. The case rather resembles the story about Nanna and Baldr than the one described by Ibn Fadlān concerning the sacrifice of the slave girl. The two lovers might as well have been reunited in Hel's realm.

Saxo also relates the story of Signe and Hagbarth.[197] Signe promised her lover that she would rather die together with him than remain alone in this world so, when Harbarth was caught and condemned to death by hanging, he was prepared to test his maiden's loyalty by postponing a bit his execution. Meanwhile Signe, determined to fulfil her promise, asked her maidens if they wanted to be the associates of her venture and they accepted. They set fire on

[194] See *Flateyjarbók*: *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (ch. 63), 1944, vol. I: 94.
[195] See *Gylfaginning* (49), in *Edda* 1995: 49.
[196] See *The Saga of Hervör and Heithrek* (ch. III), in *Stories of the Far Past* 1921: 93.
[197] See *The History of the Danes*, Book VII, (ch. 197), 1979: 216–217.

the bed-chamber and made nooses of their gowns, tying them round their necks. They all drank some wine and afterwards they kicked away the footstools and died by strangling. Several elements in the story remind of Ibn Fadlān's description: the girls died by hanging themselves while also setting fire to the chamber; before consuming their deed they drank some wine to chase off the fear of death. So we have again the motif of death by hanging and burning. However, there is no reference to stabbing and the girls seem to have inflicted their death on their own. Moreover, seeing that his lover has accomplished her promise, Hagbarth sang a song from which it is clear that he believed they would be reunited in death as in life; and we must remember that he also died by hanging. So the story has some elements that seem to support in a way the practice of the Rus people and the hypothesis that women too could join Odin's realm, but Signe's method of dying implies suicide rather than sacrificial killing.

One of the eddic poems also reminds of the burial of the Rus slave. In *A Short Poem about Sigurd (Sigurðarkviða in skamma)*, Brynnhild asked Gunnar to build a broad funeral pyre for Sigurd and all those who died with him.[198] She wanted it to be covered with shields and hangings, foreign weaving and many slaves. Brynhild herself was going to join him on the funeral pyre, only with a sword between them, as the one shared by them in the marriage bed. She finally pierced herself with the edge of her sword (áðr sic miðlaði mækis eggiom)[199], prepared to join her lover in the Other World. The stabbing and the cremation remind of the rituals connected with a belief in an afterlife existence in the realm of Odin. On the other hand, the self-inflicted death reminds of the above-mentioned possibility of high-born women joining Freya's realm. It is difficult to explain such a dualism and it is even more problematic if we think that there is no account mentioning the presence of women in Valhalla. In spite of that, the many references to a belief in a wife/lover/slave joining her husband/lover/master in the death realm (in those accounts which explicitly or implicitly imply that the man was on his way to Odin's realm) cannot just be ignored. At the same time, the one explicit reference to a belief in an afterlife existence in Freya's realm, conditioned by an honourable suicide, seems to have something in common with the stories of those women who committed suicide in order to join their husbands in death. Considering that Odin and Freya, in their quality of gods of the dead, shared the fallen warriors, we might maybe imagine that while Odin's realm was male exclusive, Freya's hall was open also to women who died a heroic death while wishing to be reunited with their lovers in the Other World. Nevertheless, the stories

[198] See *A Short Poem about Sigurd* (65), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 190.
[199] See *Sigurðarkviða in scamma* (47), in *Edda* 1962: 215.

discussed above refer to the dead men continuing their life in Odin's realm and not in Folkvang. Could we then imagine a situation in which the dead warriors could swing between the two realms in order to join their lovers in Freya's kingdom? Of course this is pure speculation because there is nothing in the sources that indicates such a belief, but it is otherwise quite impossible to explain why some women committed suicide once their lovers were dead. Besides, some of the stories clearly support the belief in a reunited afterlife existence in the death realm. Another explanation could be that women could indeed join Odin's realm, but then we are faced with another puzzling question: why does the concept of Valhalla include no representations of women as continuing their lives together with their beloved husbands/lovers/masters?

3.3. **Life inside the grave. The female revenants**

Religious beliefs have always played an important role in peoples' lives giving shape to peoples' understanding of what life means and how the world is organized. As we have seen in the previous chapter, death had a great importance for the pre-Christian Vikings who had a number of representations about how life in the Other World was supposed to continue. One of the attitudes connected with death was that of fear. People were terrified of the possibility that the dead could return and haunt the living. The Icelandic sources present numerous cases of revenants, testifying thus in favour of a pagan belief in the walking dead. The generic term used to describe revenants of a physical nature is *draugr* (pl. *draugar*).

In the *Icelandic-English Dictionary* the following definitions are given to the word *draugr*: 1. a dry log (and in this sense it occurs only in old poets, in poetical circumlocutions of *a man*); 2. in prose – a ghost, spirit, especially the dead inhabitant of a cairn was called *draugr*.[200] It is mainly the second use of the word that is of interest to me in the context of the present paper.

According to a study done by Guerrero, the *draugar* loose in death some of the attributes with which the primordial human couple, Ask and Embla, were endowed by the three gods: Odin, Lodur and Hænir.[201] In the cases where there is a physical description of the *draugar*, they seem to have lost their human appearances, their fresh complexions (*lito góða*), as well as their vital spark, their blood (*lá*) – Lodur's gifts. The *draugar* also loose their reason, spirit (*óð*) – Hænir's gift, but they keep their breath (*ǫnd*) – Odin's gift.[202] The

[200] See Cleasby 1957: 103.
[201] See Guerrero, 2003: 25–27.
[202] See *Seeress's Prophecy* (18), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 6.

explanation could be found in the fact that Odin was considered to be the *draugardrottin* ('the lord of the *draugar*'). In one of the eddic poems he is credited with the ability of waking up the dead, so that they can walk and talk again.[203] The *draugar* could then be identified with the original tree trunks that preserve only the gift bestowed on them by their guardian, Odin.

Previous to Guerrero's study, the *draugar* were generally studied as to fit in just one box, but as mentioned in a previous chapter Guerrero argues that we should make a distinction between several creatures with different attributes.[204] I will not insist on the characteristics of the various groups but rather concentrate on the cases of female revenants encountered in the Icelandic sagas. What were their characteristics? To which of the four groups identified by Guerrero do they belong? How do they manifest themselves when they come into contact with the living?

When taking a closer look at the *Icelandic Family Sagas*, one is faced with a multitude of cases of revenants but only few of them are women. Most of the female revenants appear as part of a group of *draugar* who haunt collectively. An example is that of Thorgrima Magic-cheek, who appeared among the group of revenants mentioned in *The Saga of the People of Eyri*. She became ill and died and people could see her among her husband's company (who had died at sea).[205] Several other women died afterwards and they all appeared at the funeral feast organized on the occasion of their death. Because these women are presented as being part of a collective of revenants, there usually is no physical description of them.

Still, there are some instances of individual female *draugar*. One of these cases is recorded in *The Saga of the People of Eyri*.[206] Thorgunna was a Catholic Hebridean woman who came to Iceland. She was well-built, both big and tall and very stout, with dark eyebrows and narrow eyes and a full head of chestnut hair. She was probably in her late fifties but she still was a very vigorous woman. Even though Thorgunna is presented as being generally well-mannered, she was neither cheerful nor normally talkative. Due to her characteristics, she reminds of an *aptrgangr*: she was a foreigner, arrived from the Hebrides, just like many other cases of male *aptrgangr*.[207] She came to be considered an element strange to the society, the 'other', what is unknown and not understood. Thorgunna was not violent towards her

[203] See *Sayings of the High One* (157), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 37.
[204] See Guerrero 2003: 18.
[205] See *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (ch. 55), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 203
[206] Ibidem (ch. 50): 196.
[207] See the cases of Hrappr who was of Scottish and Hebridean origins (*The Saga of the People of Laxardal* (ch. 10), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 9)), Thorolf was a Norwegian who arrived to Iceland after the landnam period and was thus conferred the status of a foreigner (*The Saga of the People of Eyri* (ch. 8), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol.V: 135), Glam was Swedish (*The Saga of Grettir the Strong* (ch. 32),in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. II: 100).

neighbors while alive but she was not a sociable person, she was strange, and it was difficult to talk to her; it was only the farmer's son whom she liked and with whom she was on good terms. Another thing which she has in common with the male *aptrgangr* is that her body kept on falling from the horse on the way to the burial place.

Nevertheless, there are several aspects of her story which distinguish Thorgunna from the *aptrgǫngur* cases: first and foremost, she is described as being a Christian woman, while all the cases of male *aptrgangr* are presented as being pagan. At the same time, one of the pre-conditions for becoming an *aptrgangr* was to have been violent and ill natured while alive, so that in death this group of *draugar* behaved even worse;[208] but Thorgunna did not behave violently while alive and not even after death. She did not come back to haunt the living, both humans and animals, in order to provide herself with the so much wanted grave goods hunted by the male *aptrgǫngur*. She did not come back to punish the housewife for taking the linen, but she rather came back to provide shelter and feed the bearers of her corpse.

Another precondition for becoming an *aptrgangr* was to have died in suspicious circumstances so that people took great precautions with the corpse and buried it in a strongly-built cairn (*dys*).[209] Being buried in a *dys* was dishonorable because it was a mark of low social status. According to the *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, the verb *dysja* means "to bury in a cairn, to heap stones over a witch, criminal or the like, never used of a proper burying".[210] That criminals and witches used to be buried in cairns meant that the dead buried in such a way did not deserve the respect of the living. In the case of Thorgunna it is recorded that she was supposed to be buried at Skalholt, a place which later became very holy in Iceland. Still, the circumstances of her death are suspicious: she was helping with the hay-making one day, when there came a sudden cloudburst followed by a shower of blood. The shower dried quickly, except for the place where Thorgunna worked. She explained this event as an omen of someone's death, and *that* someone proved to be herself.[211]

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[208] Hrapp is described as being extremely difficult to deal with, aggressive and with a malicious nature. See *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* (ch. 17), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 19. Thorolf is also said to have grown more ill natured as he advanced in age, he was violent and unjust to everybody, even to his own son. See *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (ch.30), in *The Complete* Sagas 1997, vol. V: 167.

[209] See the case of Thorolf, who died very unhappy because he had not been able to get his own way, in *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (ch. 33), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 173.

[210] See Cleasby 1957: 111. An example is given in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* (ch. 37), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 54. Kotkel and Grima, accomplished magicians, were stoned to death and their bodies were placed in a shallow grave heaped with stones.

[211] See *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (ch. 51), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 197.

On her deathbed Thorgunna gave some instructions to Thorodd and these were to be respected carefully unless trouble would follow for the people at Froda. She asked for her body to be taken to Skalholt, to be buried together with her gold ring. Some of her things were to be disposed of as suited by the living, but her bed furnishings were to be burnt because they would not bring good fortune to those who owned them. Such a request seems to have something in common with certain taboos connected with death; these involved the dead person's clothes and personal possessions because they were considered dangerous for the living. Contact with death taboos could bring a negative power from the dead among the living. The traditional custom practiced in such circumstances was to burn the bedstraw (*likhalm*) on which the dead had lain in the final hours.[212] The smoke could indicate to the neighbors that a death had taken place on the respective farm.

Even though some of the elements in the story of Thorgunna remind us of the cases of male *aptrgangr*, she cannot be classified into this group. She comes back only because she wants to help the people who took care of her body on its way to church, and she does not act violently. Her apparition inspires fear because of its nature: the contact with the dead was feared precisely because of the deeds performed by the *aptrgǫngur*. It is as if Thorgunna is a gentle, tamed *draugr* who interacts with the living not in order to harm them but rather to help them. As soon as the farmer and his wife agreed to give the visitors all that they needed, Thorgunna went back to her coffin. That she appeared naked is intriguing and it reminds of the Christian tradition in which the ghosts appeared naked because they refused to clothe a poor person, stole a habit, or neglected to give back a borrowed article of clothing.[213] Nevertheless, neither of these situations fits the case of Thorgunna. Even though she refused to sell the bed linen to Thurid, Thurid was not poor but rather given to showy display and carried herself proudly.

An interesting aspect is the possibility to identify Thorgunna with the woman bearing the same name in *The Saga of Eirik the Red* written about the same date (mid thirteenth century). Thorgunna is presented here as a Hebridean girl of high birth with whom Leif Eiriksson fell in love.[214] When he decided to travel to Greenland, she asked him to take her with him because she was expecting a child, a boy, but he refused saying that her family would not approve with such a deed. Thorgunna then told him that she would send the child to Greenland and later on, she would go too. Upon Leif's departure, he offered Thorgunna a

[212] See Birkeli 1938: 26.
[213] See Schmitt 1998: 204.
[214] See *The Saga of Eirik the Red* (ch. 5), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. I: 7.

gold ring, a Greenland cape and a belt of ivory. Thorgunna named her son Thorgils and when he grew up he left for Greenland. One year before the huntings at Froda, which followed Thorgunna's death, Thorgils is said to have arrived in Iceland. According to Ellis Davidson, the scribe of the saga must have misspelled Thorgunna's name and written that of her son when relating the voyage to Greenland and the one to Iceland.[215] Otherwise, the dating would not fit because Leif's voyage to Greenland could not have taken place before 999, meaning that by the time of the voyage to Iceland, Thorgunna's child would have still been an infant. Arguments in favor of such a theory could be the fact that in both stories Thorgunna is said to have had a golden ring and a cloak; but then, we should probably interpret her arrival in Iceland only as an intermediary trip before her final destination, Greenland. Still, we would be left with the mystery of her son's fate.

If we accept such a hypothesis, the account in the saga, that Thorgunna was a woman of high birth is very significant. The persons who died and became *aptrgǫngur* did not belong to the high classes of society, fact proven by the absence of grave goods from their graves. As a consequence, they returned among the living looking precisely for the goods that they had not been provided with. However, as I have already mentioned, Thorgunna did not return to haunt the living but rather to help them.

The story actually has the outlines of a Christian moral teaching. The message behind Thorgunna's apparition is then one of charity – people should learn to behave better in relation to their fellow human beings, and hospitality is one of the ways of showing compassion. This is confirmed by the information given in the saga that after the incident at Lower Nes, most people showed the bearers of the coffin whatever hospitability they required.

Thorgunna's behaviour after death seems to have been influenced by Christian thinking. It is maybe relevant in this situation to point out that the story of Thorgunna is described as having taken place in the summer when Christianity was adopted by law in Iceland. Furthermore, the saga seems to have been influenced by the story of Styr (written by the mid thirteenth century) and modeled on it.[216] Before Styr's death, several drops of blood appeared on his axe-shaft and his sister said this was an indication of some dire event which she hoped would occur to someone who deserved it;[217] and indeed, Styr is depicted as being a reckless person, feared by people, who killed several men without offering compensation. He also

[215] See Ellis Davidson 1991: 157.
[216] Ibidem: 159.
[217] See *The Saga of the Slayings on the Heath (Heiðarvíga saga)* (ch. 9), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. IV: 79.

returned among the living to teach a lesson of respect for the dead or to adults' commands; this time, it was Snorri's advice (to stay in bed) that was disobeyed rather than the requests of a dead person. By defying the advice the girl suffered the consequences and became mad.

Given the similarities in the two stories (intended to be moral lessons for the living), it is possible then to imagine that the scribe of *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (written circa 1400) wanted to show that women too could appear as revenants, just as well as men. Guerrero argues that such a story could have been a strategy to underline that the new religion promoted certain equality among the sexes when it comes to the afterlife existence: women, as well as men, were to enjoy the same advantages or suffer the same punishments after death.[218]

Other two cases of female revenants are noted in *The Saga of Eirik the Red* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders (Grænlendinga saga).* The wife of Thorstein the Black appears in both sagas, but she is introduced under two different names: Sigrid and Grimhild, respectively. In *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, Grimhild is described as a very large woman, with the strength of a man.[219] However, she was stricken by an illness and died. While her husband went to look for a plank to place her body on, Grimhild is said to have been struggling to rise herself up on her elbow, stretching her feet out from the bedboards and feeling for her shoes. This behavior reminds one of the pagan custom of providing the dead with special shoes so that they could walk the long road leading to the Other World, the so-called 'Hel-shoes'. Grimhild seems to return from death only to check if she was well prepared for her afterlife experience. The fact that Thorstein's wife was pagan makes it possible for us to accept such an explanation for her return. Once the woman made sure that she had been well provided for her journey, she collapsed without further actions.

Even though Grimhild's return among the living lasts only a couple of minutes, she still has some of the characteristics common to all the *draugar*: she appears to have been quite heavy because her husband needed all his strength in order to carry her; at the same time, every single piece of timber creaked in the room when she collapsed, indicating that she was very heavy indeed. The fact that Thorstein hurried himself in preparing Grimhild's body for burial and made a coffin for her might indicate that he feared she would return another time. Anyway, if we accept the interpretation of her return as caused by the need to make sure she had shoes on, there was no reason to expect a further reanimation once she realized that she had been well provided.

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[218] See Guerrero 2003: 99.
[219] See *The Saga of the Greenlanders* (ch. 5), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. I: 26.

In *The Saga of Eirik the Red*, Sigrid is presented as the wife of Thorstein of Lysufjord.[220] At the beginning of winter, a sickness struck their farm and several of the inhabitants fell ill and died. One night, while outside the house, Sigrid had a vision of all the dead men, and among them she also saw herself and Thorstein Eiriksson. The next day she died and she returned among the living, trying to get into bed with Thorstein Eiriksson, who had also fallen ill. Sigrid is also described as being pagan and in the context of the information given in *The Saga of the Greenlanders* we might be able to interpret her return along the same lines; just as Grimhild returned in order to make sure she had something she needed in the afterlife, so did Sigrid. This time, it is not a pair of shoes she needs but rather a companion. Considering Thorstein's condition, he was soon to be on the other side of the world where he could have joined Sigrid as an erotic partner. The story could maybe be seen as a parallel to the mythological motif of a love union in the death realm, a union between the dead and a female representative from the world beyond. Only this time, the female representative is not a goddess of the dead, but rather a member of the dead community. She does not welcome the dead in a death realm, but rather returns among the living in order to provide herself with a 'husband' in the Other World.

It is nevertheless interesting that Thorstein is said to be a Christian. After his death, he also returns among the living but not from erotic reasons. So maybe the author of the saga wanted to contrast the two stories: the pagan woman who returns for her own sake, to provide herself with what she needs in the afterlife, and the Christian man who returns in order to ask his wife to bury his body, as well as those of the other dead, in consecrated ground. Thorstein is also preoccupied with his future life but along the lines of the Christian teachings which promised mercy and salvation for those who kept their faith. He ordered his wife to donate money to the church probably having in mind the possibility of saving his soul through prayers.

The treatment of Sigrid's corpse after her collapse indicates this time that she was really feared not to come back a second time. An axe was stuck into her breast, reminding of one of the methods used in order to get rid of an *aptrgangr*. She might have been feared not to return again and try to provide herself with a partner from those among the living. In such a case, the fear could have resulted from associations with the behavior of the male *aptrgǫngur*, who

[220] See *The Saga of Eirik the Red* (ch. 6), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. I: 9.

would often return to seek a person of the opposite sex and harassed her until she died.[221] In opposition, when Thorstein comes back, he is considered harmless enough to be allowed to speak with his wife.

In *The Saga of the People of Floi (Flóamanna saga)*, Gyda from Vik is depicted as a woman highly skilled in witchcraft and magic.[222] After her death, strange things happened and her son wanted to bury her so that there would be no problems. Nobody dared to remain and help him but Thorgils. They made a coffin and set it on some trestles, and then they tied the coffin with strong ropes because they considered that such a thing should be done in order for the things to be done properly. Audun, Gyda's son, said that he wanted to bury the coffin in the ground and put the heaviest weight they could find on top of it. This could only indicate that he feared his mother would come back among the living. As they were on their way to the burial place, the coffin started creaking, the ropes broke off, and Gyda got out of the coffin. They both grabbed her but it took all they had to carry her, even though both were strong men. As a consequence, they decided to take Gyda to the pyre prepared by Audun and threw her on it, watching while she was burning, as if to make sure that nothing was left. All these precautions remind of the characteristics and treatment of an *aptrgangr*: strange things happened after Gyda's death, even though we are not told what; nevertheless, they must have been quite serious as everybody wanted to leave the farm. Gyda's body is also said to have been very heavy so that it finally got out of the coffin, despite the fact that it had been tied up with strong ropes. When Gyda gets out of the coffin, she does not react, like all the other *aptrgǫngur* – they were extremely active outside the grave but did not react at all when they were dug up. This could also explain Audun's wish of placing the heaviest weight on her coffin, so that she could not get out and interact with the living. Significant is also the final treatment of the body, the burning on the pyre, because cremation in the sagas seems to be destined only to *aptrgǫngur*. It was a final procedure which confirmed the destruction of the body and the impossibility of the dead to come back as corporeal revenants.

Unfortunately, the saga does not give us any information regarding Gyda's behavior and character while alive. There is nothing indicating that she had been violent or ill-natured with her neighbours; still, the fact that she was a witch placed her among those elements of the society which were not understood by people. She was different as opposed to the mass of common people; that she must have been seen as the 'other', the unfamiliar and the strange, is

[221] See *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (ch. 34), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 174. Thorolf used to appear on the farm, pursuing the mistress of the house most of all. She finally went mad and died; people buried her beside Thorolf, as it was obvious that this was the reason for Thorolf's huntings.
[222] See *The Saga of the People of Floi* (ch. 13), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. III: 280–281.

proven by the treatment of witches after death – as mentioned above, the common procedure was to stone them to death and place them in a cairn like any other criminal. Significant in this case is that her son wanted to place a huge weight on her coffin, reminding to a certain degree of a heap of stones. We do not know anything about the conditions of her death, but being a witch must have been a good reason to be expected to become an *aptrgangr*, otherwise Audun would not have taken so much trouble at getting rid of the body of his mother.

In *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, Herdis dreamt one night that a woman approached her. [223] She wore a cape and a folded head-dress and she had an expression far from kindly. The woman complained about being disturbed by Herdis' grandmother, Gudrun, who tossed and turned on top of her each night and poured over her tears so hot that the woman burnt all over. The next day, Herdis told everything to Gudrun who considered it a revelation and arranged that the floorboards in the church were removed at the spot were she was accustomed to kneel in prayer. Under the ground they found bones, blackened and horrible, along with a chest pendant and a large magician's staff, indicating that a prophetess had been buried there. As a consequence, they decided to move the bones to a remote place little frequented by men.

The appearance of the woman in a dream suggests her non-corporeal nature. This is also confirmed by the fact that only bones were found in her grave, while in the case of the corporeal revenants there is always a body. She seems then to belong to the fourth group of *draugar* identified by Guerrero, the *fyrirburðir*. The representatives of this group usually appear as visions of dead persons, implying that something great is about to happen or has already happened, a kind of omen.[224] Most of the time they do not interact with the living and they are not violent. The sources do not refer to them as *draugar* but as *fyrirburðir*. The case of the prophetess seems to be the only case of *fyrirburðr* which did not imply an omen. She came back because she was disturbed and she needed peace. Once she was moved to a place little frequented by men she did not appear again. The fact that she was annoyed by Gudrun's prayers implies that she had been pagan. The story seems then to underline the belief in a continuation of life after death inside the grave, as long as the prophetess is said to have been burnt by Gudrun's tears.

[223] See *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* (ch. 76), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 117.
[224] See *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (ch. 11), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 138. When Thorstein's shepherd saw his master being welcomed in Helgafell, Thorstein's wife said that such an apparition might be a foreboding of much graver things; the next day, Thorstein's body was found on the shore.

In this context, it might be interesting to turn back to our initial inquiry about the possibility of prophetesses to join Freya's realm after death. The example presented above cannot be used in favor of such a theory as long as it seems that the woman rather continued her existence in the grave. At the same time, the eddic poems present the prophetess as a mythical and social being quite isolated from the rest of the society; even in death they are said to be buried in a grave which is placed outside the death realm.[225] The conclusion would be that even though the custom of *seiðr* was a characteristic of Freya, there is no evidence in the sources that prophetesses could have joined her realm after death.

The evidence of the sagas seems to indicate that women as well as men could become revenants after death. Women generally appear collectively, as part of a group of revenants hunting the living together. In such instances, it is difficult to say something about their characteristics because they lack an individual description. Nevertheless, there are several cases of individual female revenants which allow us to understand how they behaved in contact with the living. Through her characteristics, Thorgunna reminds in some ways of the male *aptrgangr* but she does not behave like one. She returns among the living to teach them a moral lesson rather than to harm them. As soon as people understand her message she returns among the dead. The Christian influence is rather obvious and we might trace a connection between the time when Thorgunna's story is said to have taken place (the summer when Chistianity was introduced to Iceland) and the elements in her story. The scribe offers us a description of a tamed *draugr*, probably intending to show that women, as well as men, had access to the same realms and were disposed to the same types of punishments during the afterlife.

It is significant that the events described in *The Saga of the Greenlanders* and *The Saga of Eirik the Red* are also said to have taken place during the conversion of Greenland. The scribe seems to have wanted to point out the difference between the pagan and the Christian revenants – while the pagan woman returned from death to make sure that she had what she needed in the Other World, Thorstein returned to comfort his wife/ to make sure that he was going to be buried in consecrated ground, according to the teachings of the true faith.

Both Thorgunna and Sigrid/Grimhild interacted with the living only for a couple of minutes and afterwards they died for good. Therefore, they can be classified among that group of *draugar* defined by Guerrero as *uppsitjendr*. The sagas do not attach a particular

[225] See Chapter III, p. 96–98.

denomination to this type of revenants but Guerrero names them according to their main activity, to rise up.

In the case of Gyda, it is impossible to classify her among the *draugar* because she does not come back among the living; it is only the precautions taken upon her burial that make us believe that she had been seen as a potent revenant.

The last case of a woman revenant belongs to the non-corporeal type which usually appears in dreams and visions, the *fyrirburðr*. She is the only one among the individual cases of female revenants who seems to have been able to communicate with the living, reminding thus of the male *haugbúar*, who also had an ethereal nature outside the grave and who could communicate in verse precisely in this state.

It appears then that the female revenants encountered in the Icelandic sagas owe their appearance to a certain Christian influence. Considering the characteristics of the most representative cases of *draugar*, the *haugbúar* and the *aptrgǫngur*, we should not be amazed at such a state of events. In the case of the stories about mound dwellers, the most common element was that of a combat inside the grave between the *haugbúi*, endowed with supernatural strength, and a person among the living, who was in search of gaining honour through defeating the mound dweller. At the same time, the *aptrgangr* was generally described as being a violent person who became even more violent after death, killing both animals and humans just because he wanted to. It is difficult to imagine then that women could have been presented as acting like these two types of revenants. First of all, because violence is not a common trait of female nature, and second of all because women were not supposed to engage in physical combats. What honour could a hero gain from a physical combat with a woman?

It is most probable that the cases of women revenants appeared only later, as suggested above, and it is significant that they seem to have rather manly appearances. Given the small number of individual female *draugar* (Thorgunna and Sigrid/ Grimhild) it is maybe possible that they were only a literary motif rather than a reflection of an actual belief. Anyway, when they appear in their corporeal form, they remain among the living only for a short period of time, without harming them. They return for a certain purpose and then they die for good. In other words, for a limited amount of time, they seem to be suspended in a world different from both that of the living and that of the dead, a world of transition. Being in such a liminal position is dangerous precisely because of the possibility of becoming revenants; this idea is more than obvious in the cases of male *aptrgangr* and *haugbúi* who needed to be killed a second time in order to pass the transition period and reach the realm of the Other World. This

also explains why the living hurried at burying the body and sometimes even took greater precautions than simple interment.

3.4. **The belief in rebirth**

Closely related to the belief in a life after death, either in the grave or in a death realm, is the belief in rebirth. According to Mircea Eliade, it is through the moon's phases – birth, death and resurrection – that men came to know at once their mode of being in the cosmos and the chances for their survival or rebirth.[226] It was lunar symbolism that enabled man to relate and connect heterogeneous things as birth, becoming, death and resurrection; the waters, plants, woman, fecundity and immortality; the cosmic darkness, prenatal existence and life after death, followed by a rebirth of lunar type etc. In general, most of the ideas of cycle, dualism, polarity, opposition, conflict, reconciliation of contraries, were either discovered or clarified by virtue of lunar symbolism. In other words, by observing the lunar cycle, man was revealed that death is indissolubly linked with life and more than that, that death is not final, it is always followed by a new birth. By observing the moon growing, reaching its full shape, and then descending back again only to start the process all over again, the religious man was reconciled with death. Just as the moon, he too could be resurrected after death. Death came to be seen under an optimistic angle: just as the disappearance of the moon is never final because it is followed by a new moon, neither is the disappearance of the human being.[227] Death came then to be understood as something necessary, so that regeneration could be possible. Without passing through death, the human being could not be reborn again.

"Any form, precisely because it exists and it lasts, is finally weakened; in order to get back its vigor, it must be reabsorbed in the amorphous, even only for a second; it needs to be reintegrated in the primordial unit wherefrom it came out; in other words, it needs to reenter chaos (in the cosmic plan), orgy (in the social plan), darkness (in the case of seeds), water (baptism, at the human level, and Atlantida on the historical plan)."[228]

So, the religious man was in a way a prisoner of the myth of the 'eternal return'. In order to be reborn, the human being had first to be physically born and then die.

However, once man came to see death from a positive angle, the idea of rebirth became natural. Death was not the end, but rather the beginning of a new cycle. Closely related to

[226] See Eliade 1987: 156.
[227] See Eliade 1999: 86.
[228] Ibidem: 88. The translation is mine.

such a representation is the Old Norse custom of giving the name of a dead person to a newborn child; such a custom is constantly recorded in the Icelandic sagas. In *The Saga of the People of Vatnasdal*, Jokul is said to have asked the man who had slain him not to let his name pass away in case he was granted a son or a grandson: "…it is from this that I hope to derive some benefit…"[229] So is the case of Thorolf, in *The Saga of the People of Svarfadardal*, who asks his brother to hand on his name to a son of his, as a matter of honour:

"I think that my name has not survived long enough and that it will disappear like withered grass and be forgotten when you are gone…I would like you, if you have a son, to name him Thorolf, and all the good fortune that I have had I will bestow upon him, because then I can hope that my name will survive as long as the world is inhabited."[230]

Karl too demanded that his wife, who was expecting a child, should give his name to it, as he feared he would die first; he hoped that such a deed would bring good luck.[231]

By examining the sagas, one can observe that the custom of choosing the name of the grandfather, on either the father's or the mother's side, is very frequent. Using the name of a dead relative is a custom that brings forth associations with the idea of rebirth. When a newborn child received a name from a dead relative it meant that he was believed to carry on the spiritual power that had belonged to the dead. As such, at least some part of the previous owner was believed to be reborn in the newborn child.

The cases presented in the sagas refer to male persons passing on their names to their sons or grandsons etc. The lack of information from genealogies naming women is a problem we have to face when we want to trace the same custom among women. Still, as long as the custom of giving the name of a dead relative to a newborn child was so widespread among the male representatives of the kinship group, we could maybe assume that the same was the case with the naming of the girls. In one of the sagas it is actually recorded that Ingimund named his first daughter Thordis, after his mother.[232]

There are some cases which explicitly refer to a belief in rebirth when it comes to women. It is maybe not insignificant that they are recorded in the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda* in which the mythological motifs and structures are transmitted from the world of the

[229] See *The Saga of the People of Vatnasdal* (ch. 3), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. IV : 5.
[230] See *The Saga of the People of Svarfadardal* (ch. 5), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. IV: 155.
[231] Ibidem (ch. 21): 182.
[232] See *The Saga of the People of Vatnasdal* (ch. 13), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. IV: 18.

gods and cosmic powers to the world of the living. The poems could contain traces of genuine myths and cults. In *A Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani* it is recorded:

"There was a belief in the pagan religion, which we now reckon an old wive's tale, that people could be reincarnated. Helgi and Sigrun were thought to have been reborn. He was Helgi Haddingia-damager, and she was Kara, Halfdan's daughter, as is told in the 'Song of Kara', and she was a valkyrie."[233]

In another poem, Helgi and Svava are said to have been reincarnated.[234] Here again, the woman is depicted as being a valkyrie, so there seems to be a certain connection between the idea of rebirth and valkyries.

A further account from *A Short Poem about Sigurd* is also significant because it implies a certain belief in rebirth. When Brynhild mentions her intention to burn herself together with Sigurd, Hogni exclaims: "Let no men hinder her from the long journey,/ let her never be born again!".[235] Hogni's remark is interesting and seems to suggest that by burning herself on the pyre Brynhild gives up her chances of being reborn again. Considering in fact the intention which lies at the back of Brynhild's action, namely her wish to be reunited with Sigurd after death, it might be possible to interpret burning (in the present context) as the beginning of a process which implies a journey to another world rather than a belief in an existence inside the burial mound. The same seems to be the case with Baldr and Nanna, as well as Brynhild – they are all burnt and continue their life in Hel's realm.

According to Ellis Davidson, rebirth should be connected with the practice of inhumation and an argument could be the fact that the burial mound seems to play an important part in the idea of the dead being reborn in the world.[236] However, cremation is not used in the sagas unless in those cases where people needed to get rid of a *draugr* so it is understandable why all the references to the custom of giving the name of a dead person to a newborn child are connected only with inhumations. We should maybe be more careful at drawing conclusions and not forget that the literary sources do not support the idea that a

[233] See the prose section following stanza (51) in *A Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani*, in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 141.
[234] See the prose section following stanza (43) in *The Poem of Helgi Hiorvardsson (Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar)*, in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 131.
[235] See *A Short Poem about Sigurd* (45), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 188.
[236] See Ellis Davidson 1943: 140.

difference in burial customs reflects significant conceptions about death and the post-mortem state.[237]

3.5. **Contact with the dead**

In a previous chapter I underlined the idea that the dead were believed to continue their existence in close connection with the living generations. As a result, there existed a strong communication between the living and the dead, who could help their relatives by imparting with them knowledge from beyond the grave. The literary sources present several instances of established contact with the dead on the mythological plan. Such is the case of Odin who rides down to Hel in order to summon a dead seeress from her grave.[238] Once arrived at her grave, Odin began speaking a corpse-reviving spell until she reluctantly rose. That the road from her death back to life is a difficult one is underlined by the seereess's own words: "I was snowed upon, I was rained upon,/ dew fell on me, dead I've been for a long time."[239]

It is quite intriguing that the seeress is said to have her grave in Hel and even more that she has to make such an awful journey in order to come back to life. If people were believed to continue their existence after death in a death realm, why was she dead and why did she need to be resuscitated? Moreover, if she is said to have come from her grave, why was it placed in Hel when we know that the grave was usually placed close to the farm? Of course, the story occurs in a mythological setting but that still does not explain the location of the grave in Hel; why would she need a grave there? On the other hand, the simple remark that she had to make a difficult travel implies that the place were she resided while dead, and the place where she met Odin were not one and the same. Did she reside in a realm even more remote than Hel? The questions are multiple and without further evidence it is difficult to give plausible answers. What is of interest is that she could give Odin what he was looking for – knowledge about his son's fate, knowledge about the future.

A similar case is that of Groa, who is awakened by her son, Svipdag, in order to teach him certain charms to guard him against danger during his future quest.[240] Svipdag summons his dead mother at the door of the dead, in her grave cairn. Groa's words confirm the idea that her residence was the mound rather than a remote death realm: "What baleful fate hast thou found,/ That thou callest thy mother, who lies in the mould,/ And the world of the living has

[237] See Chapter II, p.48.
[238] See *Baldr's Dreams* (4), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 243.
[239] Ibidem (2): 235.
[240] See *Groa's Spell (Grógaldr)*, in *The Poetic Edda* 1923: 235–240.

left?".[241] She again imparts knowledge to her son, teaching him various charms that might be of help during his journey: charms to protect him against wandering purposelessly, against the rivers of Hel, against foes and fetters on the limbs, against storms at sea and coldness, against Christian women ghosts; she also teaches him a final charm about how to have enough wit in case he might have to compete with a giant in words. We must still keep in mind that the poem is found only in paper manuscripts, none of them antedating the seventeenth century. Scholars have united the poem with another one, *The Lay of Fjolsvinn (Fjǫlsvinnsmál)*, under the single title of *The Lay of Svipgdag (Svipdagsmál)*, because they deal with a common theme: the love story between Svipdag and Mengloth. Yet, the poems are considered to be of late origin due to the extensive use of kennings and their romantic spirit, the absence of any reference to them in the earlier documents, the frequent errors in mythology etc. Even though neither the eddic poems nor Snorri's *Edda* make reference to this story, Snorri mentions Groa as being a sorceress, wife of Aurvandil the Bold, who chanted spells over Thor so that the whetstone stuck into his head began to come loose.[242]

Freya herself is said in one of the eddic poems to have awoken a giantess, again in order to obtain knowledge about the ancestry of her protégé, Ottar.[243] There is no mention of Hyndla's residence as a grave, but rather a rock cave. Still, the poem resembles in many ways the account from *Baldr's Dreams*: just like the seeress, the giantess is awaken from her sleep in order to impart knowledge, and just like the seeress, she becomes mad when she finds out the true identity of her interlocutor.

It seems then that, on the mythological plan, dead women could be consulted in order to obtain knowledge about the future. They could impart wisdom, which was not accessible even to the gods (Odin and Freya). The place where such communication with the dead could take place was the grave, seen probably as a symbolic threshold between the world of the living and that of the dead. The fact that such a communication was possible on the mythical plan is significant and can be explained.

According to Eliade, a myth relates a primordial event that took place ab initio.[244] The myth is the history of what took place in illo tempore; it tells how something was accomplished, how it began to be. A myth actually tells a sacred history. Considering that for the religious man only the sacred space was perceived as real, a myth telling a sacred history was a myth speaking of what really happened, of what was fully manifested. Therefore, the

[241] Ibidem (2): 235.
[242] See *Skaldskaparmal* (17), in *Edda* 1995: 79.
[243] See *The Song of Hyndla*, in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 253–260.
[244] See Eliade 1987: 95.

myth revealed an absolute sacrality because it related the creative activity of the gods; it described the various irruptions of the sacred into the world. The myth became then a paradigmatic model for all human activities because myth alone was capable of revealing the real. In other words, by imitating the gods man could remain in the sphere of the sacred, in reality.

Applying this theory to the above mentioned examples of communication with the dead, it is possible to explain a belief in the power of the dead of imparting knowledge to the living. Following Odin's example, people could establish communication with the dead through certain rituals. Through these rituals, people were returning to the primordial moment when Odin descended to the realm of Hel in order to find out information about the future of his son. By imitating Odin, communication with the dead could be established and important knowledge for the living became available. Through rituals, people gained the help of their dead forefathers and thus secured the continuity of the kinship group. In this context, it is maybe not insignificant that the dead awaken from their 'sleep' are women.

3.6. **Conclusions**

Women in the Viking Age enjoyed a certain amount of power. Their main role was that of keeping life going on, but under special circumstances, they could embody the much appreciated male ideal. Especially widows, but also women between two marriages had such possibilities because in lack of a male representative they could become the head of the family. At the same time, the political situation during the Viking Age allowed many women to take over the management of the farm and increase their power by assuming male functions. On the cultic plan, women could achieve a high status by becoming *priestesses*. They were active in rituals connected with birth and death, rituals dedicated to elves and land-spirits and they played a central part in the cult of the Vanir, the gods of fertility. Women could also be connected with the magical sphere of prophesizing and they seem to have had a certain role in rituals dedicated to giantesses. It appears then that women were quite active on the religious plan which also encompassed ideas about death and life after death. We should then expect that the written sources contain sufficient information regarding the fate of women after death.

One of the possible destinations reserved to women in the Other World was the kingdom of Hel. The sources do not offer us a description of this death realm or how life was supposed to go on there, but rather talk about a journey leading to the underworld. For both men and

women, the journey included a road leading downwards and northwards through darkness, either on horse, by wagon or on foot, a bridge guarded by a supernatural female, a huge wall, and finally Hel's hall.

In the case of a belief in Helgafell we again lack a description of how life was imagined to continue there for women; but by correlating the general image of this afterlife destination to what we know about the life of women in the Viking Age, we might be able to obtain a picture of life in Helgafell.

A single written source mentions the possibility of women to continue their life after death in Freya's realm. Such an existence seems to be associated with ideas about an honourable suicide underwent by high class women. There also exist other cases in the written material which have elements in common with such a practice and belief, but everything is a hypothesis. We cannot base our conclusions on one piece of evidence. There is no description of Freya's realm and how life continued there. The lack of evidence is puzzling especially if we consider the connection between women and a fertility cult dedicated to the Vanir and the ambivalent nature of Freya, goddess over both life and death.

There is also an account connecting dead women with the goddess Gefion. Rather than perceiving her as a virgin goddess we should maybe see her as a goddess of unmarried women. Due to her characteristics, Gefion might be only another hypostasis of Freya who welcomes to her realm unmarried women.

The custom of sacrificing people by hanging and stabbing, as well as cremation, is generally related to the cult of Odin. The description of the burial on Volga indicates that the girl was believed to continue her afterlife in the same death realm enjoyed by her master, Valhalla. Several other cases of women dying upon their husband's/lover's death could be connected with a belief in a post-mortem existence in Odin's realm; still, many of them imply an act of suicide rather than a sacrificial killing. We could maybe interpret such duplicity by a belief in an afterlife existence in Freya's Folkvang, where the dead women could be reunited with their lovers residing in Valhalla. Such a hypothesis would imply ideas of a possibility of swinging between the two realms, possibility opened only for men. Unfortunately, there is no argument in the written material in favor of such a theory and neither in a belief in a female afterlife in Valhalla which is presented rather as a male exclusive realm.

Observing once again the information given by the written sources in connection with the opportunities available to women after death we might feel quite disappointed. Despite the important role played by women on the cultic level, the accounts referring to death realms accessible for women are quite vague. We have nothing of the type of the male realm of

Valhalla, so well presented in the sources. Even when the evidence explicitly states that women could join a certain death realm, there is no hint at how their life was supposed to continue in the world beyond. The written material is also confused when it comes to a possible class differentiation in death; no source explicitly sustains such a belief. Even though prophetesses are said on the mythological level to be isolated from society even in death, their grave being placed outside the death realm, the written sources do not refer to a class differentiation as for example in the case of Valhalla. Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence for the existence of a similar death realm destined for high-born women.

Connected with the belief in an afterlife existence in the grave mound is the pagan belief in revenants. There are only a few cases of female revenants recorded by the written sources and they seem to have been influenced by Christian ideas. Due to the characteristics of the male corporeal revenants it is difficult to imagine that women would have fitted in such a scenario. Maybe they appeared later, as a literary motif rather than as a reflection of factual events.

The custom of passing on the name of a dead relative to a newborn child seems to have been related to a belief in rebirth. Even though we lack the necessary evidence, due to the fact that genealogies included mostly men, we might assume that such a popular custom was also practiced among women. Besides, several eddic poems comprise ideas about certain women being reborn; they are usually connected with the concept of valkyries.

Last but not least, by applying the mythic model on the human sphere, it is possible to understand the pagan belief in the possibility of communicating with the dead and obtaining vital information for the survival of the kinship group. The place for establishing such contact was precisely the grave, situated on familiar ground and symbolizing a threshold between the world of the living and that of the dead.

CHAPTER IV

Women in the Viking Age.
Burial Customs.
The Written Evidence supplemented by the Contemporary Material Evidence

4.1. **Burial rituals – what are they?**

Burial customs comprise the complex of beliefs and practices used by a culture to remember the dead, from the funeral itself, to various monuments and rituals undertaken in their honour. While 'customs' generally refer to habitual practices, the usual way of acting in given circumstances, 'rituals' are characteristic for the religious sphere and represent set forms performed for their symbolic value.

There has always been an ample debate around myth and ritual and the relation between them, if there exists any. The so-called *Myth-Ritual School*, active at the beginning of the nineteenth century, sustained that there had always been a relation between myth and ritual in the sense that the myth had appeared as an explanation of the ritual or vice versa, that the ritual was nothing but a dramatization of the myth. Nowadays, the relation between myth and ritual seems to be more complicated than that. The ritual can have a counterpart at the mythological level, but at the same time it can exist independently. The ritual can also be seen as transformative. Victor Turner considers the term 'ritual' to be more fittingly applied to forms of religious behaviour associated with social transitions and as such, it has a transformative power.[245] Rituals can also be an expression of social control; through rituals the society is maintained and can continue its existence because rituals strengthen the bond among the representatives of a community and thus maintain the power structure of the society.[246] Ritual has also been defined as the social aspect of religion. Rituals are thus the social processes which give a concrete expression to such notions as the supernatural and the sacred, life and death etc. In such a context rituals could be seen as rule-bond public events which in some way or other thematise the relationship between the earthly and the spiritual realms.[247]

The fact that several of the greatest anthropologists of the twentieth century have devoted many years trying to understand ritual indicates that this is a very complex field. In a very famous study dedicated to ritual, Catherine Bell refers to several representative approaches to ritual. Rituals can be perceived in different ways as: a) actions which express conceptual orientations inspired or caused by beliefs, creeds, symbols and myths; in this case ritual is differentiated from the mental categories of religion, as action is from thought; ritual is then a routinized, habitual and obssesive action; b) structural mechanisms meant to reintegrate the thought-action (belief-behaviour) dichotomy, since beliefs can exist without

[245] See Turner 1979: 235.
[246] See Mary Douglas 2005.
[247] See Eriksen 2001: 215.

rituals but not the other way round; c) affirmations of a communal unity which is in contrast to the constraints of the daily society; in this context, the rituals are creative 'anti-structures'.[248]

It is not the purpose of the present paper to go deeper and discuss the implications of ritual and its possible relation to myth, but rather to focus on the actual performance of rituals connected with death (and women) as it is testified in the written sources and the material evidence.

Through rituals something is both done and said in the sense that people must first perform the ritual and then something is implied through their actions. Burial rituals reflect both the material and the spiritual aspects of burial. The burial is the symbol of death and the dead, while the ritual is the symbol of life and the living.

Death rituals can be included in the the so-called 'rites of passage' which play a considerable part in the life of the religious man. Such rites accompany every change of place, state, social position and age, so they are not confined to culturally defined life-crisis.[249] It was Arnold van Gennep who brought into focus this now classical theory according to which, in order to pass from the profane to the sacred world one has to go through an intermediate stage.[250] This change of condition does not occur without disturbing the life of society and the individual and so, the role of the rites is to reduce the harmful effects that might appear. As a consequence, the rites discussed by van Gennep are meant to reconcile the condition of the individual before and after a certain stage in his life. He also subdivided the 'rites of passage' into 'rites of separation', 'transition rites' and 'rites of incorporation', because in order to pass from one stage to another, the individual must first be separated from his previous condition, then he/she is situated in a transitional, ambiguous position, and finally reintegrated to the new condition. Such stages in one's life as birth, marriage, death etc. imply a change in both ontological and social status which could be dangerous in the absence of the above-mentioned rites.

In regard to death, the dead must undergo certain ordeals that concern his own destiny in the afterlife, but he must also be recognized by the community of the dead and accepted among them.[251] The rituals performed upon one's death are intended to assure his/her position

[248] See Bell 1992: 19–21.
[249] 'Rite' and 'ritual' are often used as synonyms but they can also be used more specifically. A 'rite' can be seen as a simple sacred activity, while a 'ritual' is a chain of practices that constitute a fixed model. What rites and rituals have in common is the repetition of certain fixed and symbolic activities/practices which are meant to establish communication with the powers.
[250] See van Gennep 1960.
[251] See Eliade 1987: 185.

in the death realm, but at the same time to protect the living against the evil power of the dead. In the latter case we are rather dealing with an individual purpose of the burial ritual which can occur in juxtaposition and combination with the rites of passage.[252] Nevertheless, sometimes it is quite difficult to distinguish between a protection ritual and a separation one because they are intimately intertwined. Such could be the case with the corporeal revenants recorded in the *Icelandic Family Sagas*. The necessity to kill them a second time could be a ritual aimed at both finally integrating the deceased in the community of the dead and at protecting the living against their evil nature.

Consequently, even though it seems that separation rites are the most important when it comes to death, transition rites are also significant because the dead are in a liminal position which could be dangerous for the living. The liminal period in the 'rites of passage' has been studied by Victor Turner, but in relation to initiation rituals.[253] In his opinion, when found in the liminal period (removed and secluded from the rest of the society), the neophytes are actually in a 'betwixt and between' state, neither here nor there; and such a state is dangerous. This sends us again to the beliefs in corporeal revenants and the precautions taken by the living generations upon their death, as well as the necessity of killing them a second time.

The fact that so many scholars have been preoccupied with the meaning and function of ritual is of big help for the present paper, not only because we can see and understand ritual from different angles, but also because we can try and apply the different theories on our study related to women and burial customs. Different theories can lead to different ways of interpreting the evidence we have at our disposal and it is always interesting to compare and discuss the results.

4.2. **Burial customs as reflected in the written sources**

4.2.1. **Cremation and grave goods**

By examining in the previous chapter the literary evidence connected with death and women in the Viking Age, we came to the conclusion that even though women seem to have had important roles in the Viking society and religion, the sources do not give us too much information concerning the various beliefs related to their afterlife existence. Still, the few references recorded by the medieval *male* writers allow us to distinguish between two methods of burial practiced in connection with women: cremation and inhumation. The

[252] See van Gennep 1960: 12.
[253] See Turner 1979.

literary sources also mention the habit of burying the dead women together with grave goods, in a wagon or in a ship, as well as other funeral customs that will be presented below.

Snorri Sturluson gives a detailed description of a cremation in a mythological setting when he describes the funeral of Baldr in the *Prose Edda*. Even though the whole ritual seems to be dedicated to Odin's son, his wife Nanna finally joins him on the funeral pyre.[254] They were both laid in a ship and even though we are told that Baldr was accompanied in death by his horse with all its harness, and that Odin laid on the pyre a magic gold-ring, no precise information is given about Nanna. However, later on, when Hermod finally met Baldr and Nanna in Hel, Nanna seems to have given him a linen robe and other gifts for Frigg and a finger-ring for Fulla. Maybe we could interpret these objects as being the grave goods that she received on the funeral pyre. An argument in favour of this theory is the fact that Baldr himself is said to have sent back to Odin, as a keepsake, the magic arm-ring his father had placed on the pyre. Snorri's account does not offer us too many details about the burial customs practiced in relation to Nanna, but three elements are obvious: the burial method used is cremation, in a ship, with the possibility of receiving grave goods on the funeral pyre. As long as Nanna was believed to reside in Hel afterwards, it seems that the grave goods were intended to be used in the death realm rather than during an afterlife in the grave.

The eddic poems also record elaborate descriptions of cremation in connection with the burial of Brynhild and her lover Sigurd. In *A Short Poem about Sigurd*, Brynhild is said to have killed herself so that she could join her lover in death and she ordered a funeral pyre to be built on a meadow for both of them.[255] She asked that the funeral pyre would be covered with shields and hangings, skilfully patterned foreign weaving, and many foreign slaves; four of Brynhild's maids were also destined to be burnt, adorned with jewellery, and placed at Sigurd's head and at his side, along with two hawks. In addition to these, five-serving girls were also supposed to accompany him, as well as eight servants of good family and Brynhild's slave, who had grown up with her. Brynhild's burial is also described in a thirteenth century Icelandic saga.[256] This mythic-legendary tale is built to a large degree on the information given by the eddic poems. The saga notes that Brynhild asked Gunnar to raise a huge funeral pyre on the field for her and Sigurd, as well as all those who were killed with him. Two of Brynhild's men were to be burnt at Sigurd's head, two at his feet; two hawks

[254] See *Gylfaginning* (49), in *Edda* 1995: 49.
[255] See *A Short Poem about Sigurd* (65), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 190.
[256] See *The Saga of the Volsungs* (ch. 33), 1990: 92–93.

were also burnt upon the funeral. Besides, five bondwomen and eight attendants given by Brynhild's father were to join them on the funeral pyre.

Sigurd's body was prepared according to the ancient custom and a tall pyre was built. When it was fully kindled, the body of Sigrud, along with that of his three-year-old son, whom Brynhild had ordered killed, were laid on top of the pyre. Finally, Brynhild herself went out upon it together with her chambermaids and the gold she wanted them to have. Following the description of the funeral given by the saga author it is rather obvious that he relied on the eddic poem. Anyway, what is important in the context of the present paper is the complexity of the custom described by the eddic poem and the saga. We are again faced with a cremation, but this time it is rather a collective cremation than a double one; not only Brynhild and her lover are placed on the huge funeral pyre, but also slaves, maids and servants. The jewellery that adorned Brynhild's maids can again be interpreted as a form of grave goods. In one of the stanzas of the poem, Brynhild promises to give those who want to follow her in death fine-worked jewels, embroidered coverlets and bright clothing;[257] when the maids refuse to take the gold on the pretext that enough women have died, Brynhild answers that she does not want someone who is reluctant to lose her life for her sake, but then "…the less treasure/ will burn with your bones when you come down…to visit me."[258] In other words, if they refuse to join her in death now, the moment they will die they will not have the same opportunity of being joined in death by such riches. This could be an indication that being accompanied by rich grave goods was essential in the Other World and such a belief might contain references to the idea of status being important also after death – the more riches one had, the higher the status in death. An argument seems to be contained in the reply of Brynhild's servants who say that they want to live on, but "let the hall-servants achieve such *honour*".[259]

In addition, the killing of the maids and servants reminds of the custom of suttee and the idea of voluntarily joining the master in the afterlife; consequently, the jewellery that adorned Brynhild's maids seems then to have been intended for use in a death realm rather than in the grave. A further argument is the fact that Brynhild committed suicide in the hope of being reunited with her lover in a death realm and not in the grave. If the maids were supposed to follow their master in the afterlife, then the afterlife was in the death realm.

[257] See *A Short Poem about Sigurd* (49), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 188.
[258] Ibidem (52): 189.
[259] Ibidem (50): 189.

A significant aspect is that love seems also to continue beyond the physical limitations of the grave, in a death realm; Nanna was reunited with her husband in Hel's kingom, while Brynhild committed suicide so that she could join her lover in the Other World. This is an argument in favour of the idea that death did not mean the end, but rather a continuation of the life people had lived on earth.

Another poem confirms Brynhild's method of burial and this time we are told that two pyres were built rather than a huge one.[260] Sigurd's pyre was kindled first, while Brynhild was burnt on the second one. New information is given in this eddic poem in the sense that Brynhild is said to have been burnt in a wagon draped with costly woven tapestries. She then drove the wagon along the road to hell while trying to be reunited with Sigurd in the kingdom of the dead. This account is very significant because it supports the idea of an afterlife in the death realm rather than inside the grave. It suggests that the journey to the death realm could be made in a wagon; the wagon is then represented in this instance as a means of transportation to be used in the afterlife.

Cremation is also recorded in the *Icelandic Family Sagas* in connection with Gyda, who after her death was burnt on the pyre.[261] This case is a special one because cremation in the sagas is connected only with those people who were believed to be potential revenants. This only means that cremation in the sagas must be interpreted as a defensive rite against the walking dead rather than as a burial ritual in the sense and meaning of those mentioned above. Cremation is usually the last and final measure against the walking of the dead: first the corpse was buried on the farm; in case the dead walked again, the body was reburied far away from the farm; if the dead still did not rest, it was finally burnt and sometimes the ashes were thrown to the sea. Cremation was never used as a primary burial custom. The explanation could be found in the fact that cremation as a custom never reached Iceland, where the sagas were recorded; the burning of the dead as a ritual died out early in the west coastal region of Norway. This is maybe why the saga authors emphasized the mound-burial custom and inhumation is represented as being the custom burial, while cremation is the exception. The fact that Gyda was burnt on the pyre from the very beginning strongly suggests that she was believed to be able to come back and haunt the living.

The story about Signe and Hagbarth noted by Saxo also reminds of the custom of cremation, even though Signe set fire to the chamber herself. Anyway, the narrative is rather

[260] See *Brynhild's Ride to Hell (Helreið Brynhildar)*, in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 192.
[261] See *The Saga of the People of Floi* (ch. 13), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. III: 280–281.

focused on the love story between the two characters and the fulfilment of the promises they made to each other rather than on burial customs.[262]

Last but not least, the burial of the Rus chieftain recorded by Ibn Fadlān also culminates in the burning of the dead together with the slave woman who accepted to follow him in death.[263] The account is very significant because even though it relates the customs performed upon the burial and cremation of a male chieftain, the same procedure may have been used in the case of important female figures of the Viking society.[264] Still, we must be aware of the possibility that Ibn Fadlān interpreted some of the elements of the burial through his own cultural background. Besides, he used an interpreter in order to understand how the ritual was organized and what it involved.

4.2.2. **Cremation and burial rituals on Volga**

Ibn Fadlān recounts how the Rus chieftain was buried for ten days until the clothes he was supposed to be buried in were sewed. His possessions were then gathered and dealt in three: one third for his family, one third for his burial clothes, and one third to buy nabīd (a drink) for the burial ceremony. Afterwards, one of his slaves volunteers to join the master in his death. In most of the cases it is a woman who volunteers, and the same was the case with the funeral attended by the Arab traveller. Two women slaves were delegated to take care of the woman who offered herself to die with her master. They had to follow her no matter where she went and sometimes they even washed her feet with their own hands. While the clothes of the dead chieftain were being prepared for the funeral, the slave girl kept on drinking and singing merrily as if to announce a coming good luck.

The day the chieftain and the slave girl were supposed to be burnt together, the Rus people went to the river, where the chieftain's ship was and brought it to land. They built four posts of birch and other wood and around the ship they made a structure resembling the great ships' tents of wood. The ship was then pulled up on this wooden structure. A couch was brought on the ship and covered with Byzantine cushions and carpets.

An old woman called the Angel of Death came afterwards and spread the above mentioned carpets over the couch. It was her who had taken care of the sewing of the funeral clothes and the preparing of the body. It was also her who killed the slave women. Then they

[262] See *The History of the Danes*, Book VII, (ch. 197), 1979, vol. I: 216–217.
[263] See Birkeland 1954: 21–23.
[264] There is a close similarity between the rituals performed on Volga and the famous Oseberg burial which will be discussed below. In this context it is important to point out that Ibn Fadlān's account was written only about one hundred years after the Oseberg burial.

took the body of the dead chieftain out of the grave and Ibn Fadlān realized that they had put in his grave drinks, fruits and a mandolin. They dressed the dead chieftain richly, put him inside the tent, on the ship, and placed him on the carpets and propped him up with the cushions. Then they put drinks (nabīd), fruits and well-smelling plants besides him. They also brought bread, meat and onion and placed them in front of him. A dog was then brought, cut in two and put in the ship. Then they came with his weapons and put them besides him. Two horses were also cut in pieces and thrown into the ship along with two cows. Afterwards, a rooster and a hen were killed and thrown in the ship. In the meantime, the slave woman who was to be sacrificed went into each of their tents and had sexual intercourse with the master of the tent.

On Friday afternoon, they brought the slave woman to something they had made and which resembled a door frame. She put her feet on the palms of the men there, and looked over the frame. She said what she had to say, and they lowered her. Then they lifted her up a second time; she did the same and they lowered her. Then they lifted her up a third time and she did the same again, after which they gave her a hen. She cut off its head and threw it into the ship. When the Arab traveller asked the interpreter what she was doing, he replied that the first time she said she saw her father and mother, the second time she saw all her relatives seated, and the third time she saw her master seated in Paradise and Paradise was green and fair; and with him there were also men and servants and the chieftain was calling her.

Afterwards, the girl was led to the ship and was offered the intoxicating drink; she sang over it and drank it, taking goodbye from her friends. Ibn Fadlān records that she looked very confused when she entered the tent where her master was placed. Then the men started to beat their shields so that her screams could not be heard by the other slave women; it might have frightened them and made them not want to join their masters in death. Six men entered the tent and had sexual intercourse with the girl. She was finally ritually killed by the woman called the Angel of Death and the ship was set on fire. A gale of wind came just in time to fan the flames and within an hour the ship and all in it were burnt to ashes. In the end, they built something resembling a rounded mound on the place where the ship had been dragged from the river. In the middle of it they raised a great post of birch wood and wrote the name of the chieftain and that of the Rus king on it.[265]

Ibn Fadlān's account is very significant not only because it records cremation as a funeral custom, but also because it gives us information concerning the possible 'rites of

[265] See Birkeland 1954: 21–23. The translation is mine.

passage' practiced on the occasion of death and burials. It is even more important if we consider that the Scandinavian literary material is rather scarce when it comes to this aspect. As mentioned above, the fact that the funeral involves a male chieftain does not mean that women burials could not have taken place following the same rituals; but we must be aware that the funeral described is that of a chieftain, a representative of the higher classes of society, and then we should expect to find similar customs only in connection with high-born women rather than with women belonging to the middle or lower classes of society. Just as Ibn Fadlān's account shows, such a burial took not only time, but also money and it involved the whole community ruled by the respective chieftain. It is more than obvious that in the case of people belonging to the lower strata of the society the funeral customs would have been more simple and less time- and money- consuming. An argument is to be found even in Ibn Fadlān's text: he records that when poor people died, they just placed them in a little ship and burnt it, without any other rituals; but in the case of chieftains the funeral was much more elaborate.

If we sum up the information contained in Ibn Fadlān's account, it seems that the most important aspect of the ritual was the cremation of the body, and this is explained by the fact that by using such a procedure the body is burnt in a moment and goes to Paradise.[266] The term used by Ibn Fadlān when he refers to this Paradise is *djanna*, which is the word used to describe the Muslim paradise.[267] When the slave girl was lifted over the doorframe, she saw her master seated in a green and fair Paradise. This is an idea that is not characteristic for the various death realms described in the eddic poems, but rather for the Muslim paradise. In *The Lay of Hakon*, Hakon is said to have gone to Odin and the green homes of the godheads.[268] In spite of the fact that the eddic poems describe Valhalla as a pleasant death realm, there existed no belief in an eternal Paradise of the type introduced later by Christianity. We should maybe assume then that when translating the words into his language, Ibn Fadlān also translated the ideas that went with it. It would have been impossible to describe the traditional promises of life in Valhalla and still refer to it as *djanna*.[269] In this context, it might be important to say that although there is no explicit reference to Valhalla in the account of the Arab traveller, several elements in the burial of the Rus chieftain imply that he was believed to accompany Odin after death.

[266] See Birkeland 1954: 23.
[267] See Warmind 1985: 134.
[268] See *The Saga of Hákon the Good* (ch. 32), stanza 93, in *Heimskringla* 2002: 126.
[269] See Warmind 1985: 134.

According to the customs of the Rus people, the dead chieftain was first laid in a grave for ten days until all the preparations for his funeral were finished. While in the grave, we may say that the chieftain was a in a liminal period dangerous both for him and the living community; he had no status, no property, insignia, rank, kinship position while in this transition period. He was in a prototypal condition of sacred poverty.[270] The fact that he was placed first in the grave underlines the idea that important rituals had to be followed until the final cremation of the chieftain, so that his passage from one stage of existence to another could be successful: his funeral clothes had to be sewn, the ship had to be prepared (by building a tent on it and setting a couch with carpets and cushions that were to support the dead), and last but not least, the slave girl had to be prepared. Without these rituals, the passage from one state to another (from life to death and life in death) might not have been successful. The dead is provided with grave goods (drink and food, as well as a musical instrument) not only on the ship, but also while he is in the grave. This may indicate that he was expected to continue his existence in the grave and afterwards in a death realm. Such an idea also reminds us of the cases of corporeal revenants who used to come back among the living precisely because they craved so much for the grave goods that other high-born people enjoyed in death. So maybe, considering the liminal and dangerous period in which the Rus chieftain was while inside the grave, the placing of food and drink was also a kind of defensive rite from the part of the living. An argument could be the fact that the body of the dead chieftain remained the same while inside the grave, except for a change in colour, which also reminds of the cases of corporeal revenants.

Before being put inside the ship, the chieftain is dressed in rich clothes which point to his high status. He is finally placed on the couch, with the carpets and cushions supporting him in a sitting position, which reminds us of the Viking chieftain sitting in his high seat in the hall. In addition, the placement of a tent upon the ship has associations with the idea of a house of the dead, or even a hall. So again, we are faced with an mark of power and status. This might be explained by the belief that the dead chieftain was supposed to enter the death realm from the same position of power that he had enjoyed while alive.

The rituals performed in connection with the slave woman could also be included in the category of ‘rites of passage’. Once she volunteers to join her master in death, the girl seems to be elevated from her social status to a higher one. Two of the other slave women join her

[270] See Turner 1979: 237.

all the time and even wash her feet with their own hands, suggesting that the girl was now treated as if she belonged to the higher classes of society.

An interesting aspect of the burial ritual regards the reference to the sexual intercourses between the slave girl and the masters of the tents. Each of the tent masters, after having intercourse with the girl, asked her to tell her master that they had done that out of love for him. Eliade argues that the majority of the collective orgies can be ritually explained by a growth in the forces of vegetation.[271] They usually take place in the critical periods of the year, when the crops ripe and they always have as a model a mythical hieros gamos (sacred marriage). Every time the hieros gamos is imitated, the world (vegetation) is regenerated.

The death of a chieftain can also be regarded as a critical period in the life of the kinship group, and in several poems there are allusions to a marriage between the dead king and a female representative from the death realm. In this context, the slave girl may have been sacrificed as a substitute wife who was to join her master in the death realm, no longer as his slave but as an erotic partner. The fact that orgies are usually connected with a growth in the forces of vegetation is significant and can help us in finding an explanation for the sexual intercourses mentioned in Ibn Fadlān's account. If orgies trigger a regeneration of the world, and if the slave girl was supposed to join her master in death, we could interpret the sexual orgies as a means of passing on the life energy of the living to the world of the dead and their master. At the same time, the imitation of the hieros gamos assured the continuity and regeneration of the community after the death of their chieftain. While the dead need the power of the living, the living also need the friendship and care of the dead; so the sexual intercourses could be understood as a ritual meant to reinforce the life power that both the living and the dead needed in order to continue their existence.

Another rite performed during the burial of the Rus chieftain was the one in which the slave girl was elevated to overlook something resembling a doorframe. The door symbolism is a universal one and it suggests a limit, a boundary, a frontier between two spaces, to modes of being – the world of the living and the world of the dead, the profane and the sacred. A door also represents the place where these two worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred becomes possible. The door becomes then not only a religious symbol, but also a vehicle of passage from one space to the other.[272] Consequently, by being elevated up this symbolic doorframe, the girl could communicate with the world of the dead, with the sacred. She saw her parents, her relatives, and also her master expecting her in the Other

[271] See Eliade 1999: 31.
[272] See Eliade 1987: 25.

World. Warmind argues that slaves were usually without 'true' relatives and so it is odd that she could see her parents behind the doorframe.[273] The explanation may be that in order to be married to her master in the Other World, the slave girl needed her relatives to be present.

The third time the girl was elevated up the doorframe she was given a hen. She cut its head and threw it away, while the men took it and threw it in the ship. The same custom is recorded by Saxo in his story about Hading: the hen was killed on one side of the wall and resuscitated on the other side. [274] Here again it is implied that life continues in the world of the dead.

It is also significant that the funeral sacrifice was organized by a woman. While the men took care of the cremation, the building of the ship, the 'house' erected over it, and the making and lighting of the pyre, the woman prepared the body of the dead chieftain for burial and the laying of the dead man on a couch. She also killed the slave girl, thus providing a future wife for the dead chieftain. This may point out that women as well as men had an important role in the burial customs.

4.2.3. **The symbolism of the funeral ship**

The burial of the Rus chieftain in a ship which was afterwards set ablaze reminds us of a burial recorded at the mythological level – the burial of the young god Baldr and of his wife Nanna. In order to understand the significance hidden behind this custom we must first try to understand the symbolism of the ship. Symbolism plays a decisive part in the religious life of humanity because through symbols the world becomes transparent and is able to show the transcendent.[275]

The ship is a universal symbol of water so that ship symbolism is largely connected with water symbolism. Water symbolizes the spring and the origin of all the possibilities of existence, but at the same time immersion in water signifies regression to the undifferentiated mode of pre-existence. Water symbolism implies therefore both death and rebirth. Contact with water always brings regeneration – on the one hand because dissolution is followed by a new birth, on the other because immersion fertilizes and multiplies the potential of life.[276] Immersion in water is always followed by a new creation, a new life. Water is fundamental to every cosmic phenomenon and it represents the primordial substance. Water purifies and regenerates.

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[273] See Warmind 1985: 134.
[274] See CHAPTER III, p. 68.
[275] See Eliade 1987: 130.
[276] Idem.

Ship symbolism is also connected with the moon and the womb, both involving the idea of a return to the origins and a rebirth. Subsequently, the boat of the dead could be seen as a symbol of rebirth and regeneration. Using both water and a ship in a funeral ritual could have signified a disintegration of the human existence in the profane world and at the same time a rebirth in the sacred world.

A ship is also a symbol for movement as the practical/instrumental purpose of a ship in everyday life was to transport people from one destination to another. In this case, the ship could be connected with a journey from one state to another and this brings forth associations with the sun ship. The myth of the sun ship was of great importance in the Bronze Age, when both the wagon and the ship were important symbols used to show the journey of the sun up and down the sky. It appears that this further developed into the idea of a fertility god who after death travels in a wagon over the land, or in a ship over water, image often depicted in the literary sources. The god brings good luck to the people and visits them on the occasion of the various rituals performed at certain well established times during the year.

It is interesting that the literary sources associate the fertility god, Frey, with the best of ships, Skidbladnir.[277] Taken in this context, the placement of a ship in the grave could be interpreted as a symbol, an attribute of Frey. Following this line of reasoning, we might conclude that those buried in boats were directly involved in the fertility cult, either as priests or their helpers – through their close connection with the god they were 'authorized' to be marked out with the attribute of the god as an offering.[278] However, neither in the funeral of Baldr nor in Ibn Fadlān's account is it implied that the dead joined a fertility god after their death. Baldr was welcomed in Hel's kingdom, while the funeral of the Rus chieftain rather reminds of the belief in an afterlife existence in Valhalla. At the same time, both Ibn Fadlān's account and the contemporary material evidence testify that the poor were also buried in smaller ships/boats. We cannot argue that all these people had a certain function in the fertility cult because such a theory would seem unreasonable. Maybe in some cases the placement of a ship symbolized indeed a certain link between the dead and the fertility gods, but there is no doubt that many of the recorded ship burials did not fit into this frame.

Another thing that needs mentioning is the relation between the fertility god and the origins of the Swedish royal family as presented in the myths.[279] Frey was also called Yngvi and the name was for a long time kept in his line as a name for kings; Frey's race were

[277] See *Grimnir's Sayings* (43), in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 58. However, in *The Saga of the Ynglings* (ch.7), Skidbladnir is said to belong to Odin. See *Heimskringla* 2002: 11.
[278] See Crumlin-Pedersen 1985: 94.
[279] See *The Saga of the Ynglings* (ch. 10), in *Heimskringla* 2002: 14.

thereafter called Ynglings. The divine connection between the god Frey and his human successors served to legitimize power and royal status on the basis of the system of sacral kinship. So maybe in some cases, the placement of a ship in the grave was a symbol of the divine connection between the fertility god and his human counterparts; but, by accepting this theory we fail again to interpret the placement of smaller ships in the graves of the poor (as those noted by Ibn Fadlān). The burial of the poor in a ship cannot be interpreted as a symbol of legitimizing power and status because only the royal dynasty was believed to have descended from Frey, so a different reasoning must have formed the basis for the great majority of ship burials recorded in the Viking Age.

The use of a ship during the funeral ritual could also have symbolized a means of transporting the body both to the burial place and to the death realm. There is nothing in the cosmology we know from the written sources that suggests the existence of an ocean/water separating the world of the living from the world of the dead. Even if the journey to the death realm seems to include a passage over a river, there is usually a bridge crossing it (as in the case of Hel's kingdom). The explanation could be that although the ship was regarded as a symbol of a post mortem journey to a death realm, it was not necessary to have implied a journey across water. The ship may as well have been the symbol for a journey from one stage of existence to the other – a symbolic journey from life to death and the death realm. In this context, the use of a ship at a funeral may have underlined the great distance between the two worlds in a culture in which long distances were travelled by ship.[280] Maybe the use of a ship under the burial of the Rus chieftain had precisely this significance. Ibn Fadlān was told that the Rus used to burn their dead so that their god could send a strong wind in order for the dead to arrive in a moment in Paradise. This implies that the dead was believed to be taken to the death realm by the power of the wind rather than by using his funeral ship as a means of transportation.

We also have to ponder the possibility that the ship placed in a grave could have been regarded as an element of the burial furniture, suggesting the property status of the dead person, the social position, and the roles played by the dead in the social system.[281] The presence of a small ship in the grave was usually associated with the poor, while great ships inferred that the dead person belonged to the high classes of society – this was also the case of the Rus chieftain.

[280] See Schjødt 1995: 24.
[281] The ship could have indicated that the dead had been active in the cult of the fertility gods (as suggested above) or maybe even that he had been involved in the process of building ships while alive.

It appears then that the symbol of the ship is a multivocal one.[282] The ship could symbolize death and rebirth due to its associations with water/moon/womb symbolism. It could be linked with the sun ship and consequently with the ship of fertility. The ship could also be a symbol of the divine connection between the fertility god Frey and the ruling dynasties, legitimizing thus royal power and status. From a practical point of view the ship could represent a means of transportation either from one destination to another, or of the dead to the burial place – on the symbolic level this might have given rise to the symbolism of the ship as a transport between two stages of existence, life and death, between the profane and the sacred world. Last but not least, the ship could be perceived as an element of furniture indicating the social position and roles played by the dead in the society. Nevertheless, we must be aware that the presence of a ship in a burial could not have involved all these symbols at the same time. Depending on the cultural context, the ship symbolism was understood and used differently at particular times and in particular places. People living in different geographical areas could have had different representations connected with the ship burial. Consequently, whenever we want to find out the meaning of the placement of a ship in a burial we must first study the cultural context; only then can we say something about the different beliefs involved in such a type of burial.

Now, turning back to the funeral on Volga, we may say that the ship represented first of all a mark of status and social position. An argument is also the fact that the poor used to be buried in small ships but this was not the case for chieftains. The placement of fruits both in the grave and in the ship might have indicated a certain association with fertility, just as the ritual killing of the horses, but several other elements of the burial rather point to a belief in a life after death in Odin's realm: the presence of weapons, the cremation, the ritual killing of the girl etc. Still, the ship could have been a symbol for the journey between life and death, between the profane and the sacred worlds. It indicated rather the great distance between the two worlds than a belief in a journey which had to be made on ship, especially if we consider that the dead was believed to be taken to the Other World by a strong wind. At the same time, the ship might as well have underlined a belief in rebirth after death. In such a case, the ritual of lifting the slave girl up a frame door is significant: she saw her master alive in the Other World, waiting for her.

[282] Turner's most influential books deal with ritual and the meaning of symbols; he emphasizes the multivocality or ambiguity of symbols, showing how symbols simultaneously contribute to the maintenance of society and respond to existential problems. For further details see Eriksen 2001: 220–221.

In the case of the ship funeral described at the mythological level, cremation is again used. The ship may be regarded first of all as an object of personal possession of the young god Baldr and is consequently a mark of status. Second of all, if we consider that the journey made by Hermond to the Other World was made on horse, the ship could again point to a symbolic journey between the two worlds, the world of the living and the world of the dead, with a stress put on the great distance between the two spheres. The same idea is also suggested by the fact that Hermod had to travel nine days through darkness before he reached the Gioll bridge. Here again, the ship could be a symbol of rebirth in a world beyond, in Hel's kingdom.

Even though these two ship funerals were first and foremost organized for men (the young god Baldr and the Rus chieftain), it is significant that women were also involved. Both Nanna and the Rus slave girl joined their husband/master in the ship, on the funeral pyre and in death. It would not be too much then to suggest that the symbolism of the ship was applied in their case too.

It is quite interesting to remark the similarities at the level of the ship symbolism in these two cases, especially because one of the funerals is placed in a mythological setting while the other in a real-life one. It is even more significant if we ponder this aspect along Eliade's line of reasoning that the myth is a paradigmatic model for all human activities.[283] Still, we must be aware that by interpreting the ship symbolism in these cases we filter the information through our own cultural background, meaning that it is not sure that the people on Volga had understood the ship symbolism the way we have just interpreted it. In addition, if we consider that the myth of Baldr was recorded in a Scandinavian source, while the funeral of the Rus chieftain occurred on Volga, the possibility of the existence of regional differences is even greater.

4.2.4. **Inhumation and burial customs**

The two ship burials discussed above were connected with the practice of cremation and had male representatives as the main 'target' of the funeral customs. Nevertheless, in the Icelandic sagas several people are said to have been buried in a ship and the practice is usually associated with inhumations. So is the case of Aud, who seems to have been buried in a mound rather than cremated. She was also accompanied in death by a great deal of riches, which is a proof that Aud had belonged to the highest classes of the Icelandic society.[284] The

[283] See Eliade 1987: 97–98.
[284] See *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* (ch. 7), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. IV: 6.

saga actually confirms this by recording that after the death of her husband and son she was left with substantial wealth. After settling in Iceland, Aud soon acquired a position usually open only for men – she took as much land as she wanted and then she divided it, and gave it to her followers. So, by the time of her death Aud was an important figure in the Icelandic society. The placement of grave goods in Aud's grave may then be considered a sign of social status.

Mound burial seems to have been the favourite method of interment of either cremation or inhumation burials throughout the Viking Age. The mound could also be a mark of social status – the bigger the mound the more important the dead person had been while alive. Besides, the mound could represent a memorial reminding the living of the existence of the dead. The placement of grave goods in Aud's grave can be interpreted either as a belief in a life after death inside the grave, where she might have needed these provisions, or as a belief in a journey after death to a death realm, with the implication that she might have needed the food and drink on her way and the rest of the grave goods in the death realm. Unfortunately, the saga does not offer us any information about where Aud was supposed to reside after death. Maybe the ship is again a symbol for a journey to the death realm or maybe Aud was expected to reside in the grave with the ship having the function of a house of the dead.[285] However, it is difficult to say what beliefs in a life after death where connected with the practice of ship-burial in the mind of the saga-tellers.[286]

A significant element in the story of Aud is the funeral feast, which was an important way of paying honour to the dead. The funeral feast is usually recorded in the case of privileged people and not in the case of the poor. The funeral feast could have also been important for the living since it was at the feast that the son took over the inheritance of his father. It represented a ritual through which the living re-entered their normal lives, in other words – an incorporation rite. The fact that Aud had had a funeral feast organized in her honour testifies that the custom was not confined to men. Important women too could benefit from such a feast in their memory considering that they left behind them a great wealth and a position of power inside the living community.

[285] From the Viking Age we know the custom of building a house in the shape of an upside down boat, as well as cases where the dead were buried in upside down boats, suggesting maybe the idea of a house of the dead.
[286] Ellis Davidson argues that no particular belief in a life after death to be reached by ship is connected with the practice of ship-burial in the minds of the saga-tellers. If there had been a tradition of this kind, it had been forgotten by the time the sagas were composed. See Ellis Davidson 1943: 41.

Other references to burial in a mound in connection with women are mentioned in *Flateyjarbók*, where it is recorded that the law in Sweden was so, that if a king died, the queen should be laid in the howe beside him[287], and in *The Saga of Hervör and Heithrek*.[288]

Connected with the custom of inhumation is also the custom of burying people under heaps of stones or in cairns. As mentioned in a previous chapter, such a burial was destined only for the unwanted elements of the society: criminals, witches and the like. Cairns were also intended for those who died a violent death, and they were usually placed in isolated areas, such as old mountain and forest roads. Each person who used to pass by them threw a stone or a branch over the heap of stones. In one of the Icelandic sagas we are told that Grima was stoned to death and her body was placed in a shallow grave heaped with stones.[289] She was a witch and she therefore deserved no other method of burial.

The account in the *Saga of the Greenlanders* about Grimhild, who returns among the living in order to check her shoes, might point to the burial custom of providing the dead with the so called 'Hel-shoes'.[290]

Another interesting burial custom is recorded in *The Saga of the People of Floi*: when Gudrun died, Thorstein buried her under his bed.[291] This example of burial inside the house is different from the previous ones involving either cremation or inhumation on the family land. The whole story is actually about an extraordinary and difficult journey to Greenland and so the situation is special. According to Birkeli, the grave inside the house or the burial of parts of the body in the house seems to have been the starting point for the cult of the first owner of the house.[292] The phenomenon could represent a form of sacrality manifested on the private level of the house. It further developed in the cult dedicated to powerful dead persons, which can be included in the category of 'cult of the dead forefathers'.

Other burial customs mentioned in the literary sources in connection with women may fit in the category of the so-called 'defensive rites', in other words, rites meant to protect the living from the evil force immanent in the dead. Traces of these rites can be found in the sagas dealing among other things with the theme of women revenants. When Thorgunna asks Thorodd to burn her bed furnishings, she explains such a request by saying that it will not bring good fortune to those who owned them.[293] Things start to go from bad to worse until the

[287] See *Flateyjarbók*: *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (ch. 63), 1944, vol. I: 94.
[288] See *The Saga of Hervör and Heithrek* (ch. III), in *Stories of the Far Past* 1921: 93.
[289] See *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* (ch. 37), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. V: 54.
[290] See *The Saga of the Greenlanders* (ch. 5), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. I: 26.
[291] See *The Saga of the People of Floi* (ch. 22), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. III: 291.
[292] See Birkeli 1938: 198.
[293] See *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (ch. 51), in *The Complete* Sagas 1997, vol. V: 197.

bed furnishings are finally burnt. As underlined in the previous chapter, this story reminds of the taboo of keeping the dead person's possessions – they could be dangerous for the living and needed to be destroyed in order for the living to be safe.

Other defensive rites recorded in connection with female burials are setting a big stone on the coffin, binding it with ropes, putting an axe in the chest of the dead and cremating the body.[294] All these customs are linked with the fear of the return of the dead and their evil power used against the living.

4.3. **Burial customs as reflected by the contemporary material evidence**

4.3.1. **General remarks**

If we turn our attention to the contemporary material evidence, it seems that taking the Viking Age as a whole, the number of cremation graves exceeds that of inhumation ones, with a difference much more marked in the inland districts than in the west coastal regions; here the cremation was rapidly replaced by inhumation.[295] This only means that while cremation continued to be the main burial custom in the inland districts, the west coastal regions started practicing inhumation along cremation until it finally came to be replaced by inhumation. In this context, it might be significant that based on a study done by Helga Dommasnes, it seems that women's graves occur most often in the coastal districts.[296]

When it comes to ship burials, the custom appears not to have been peculiar to the Scandinavian North, but it was rather found among various folk at various times. Other forms of this custom, archaeologically attested, were the practice of making the grave in the form of a ship, the erection of stones in the form of a ship inside the grave, stone settings in the form of a ship outside the grave, and the erection of stones outside the grave on which a ship was figured. Boat graves have been archeologically recorded in Gotland at the beginning of the Iron Age and then in Scandinavia from about 500 A.D., proving that the ship burial custom is not representative of the Viking Age.[297] In the seventh century boat burials seem to have increased in number, so that by the Viking Age they are quite numerous. The custom probably culminated in the great ship burials of the Viking Age excavated in Norway at Oseberg, Gokstad and Tuna.

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[294] See CHAPTER III, p 82–93.
[295] See Ellis Davidson 1943: 11.
[296] See Dommasnes 1987: 75.
[297] See Ellis Davidson 1943: 16.

The Viking Age was also characterized by a great elaboration in the choice of grave goods for all classes of people. This means that not only people belonging to the high classes, but also those belonging to the lower classes were accompanied in death by as complete an equipment as possible of personal possessions. However, we must be aware that even though a great number of graves from the Late Iron Age are known, they usually represent graves of the middle and upper strata of society; the rest of the population benefited from such burials that it is difficult to identify them in the landscape.

The present paper does not have as a purpose an archaeological overview of the female graves belonging to the Viking Age, with the above mentioned distinction recorded in the written sources: cremation versus inhumation, ship burials etc. Such a study would constitute in itself the subject of a paper deeply rooted in archaeology. As far as my current interest rather lies in the field of the history of religion and mentality, I consider that it would be more helpful to select from the material evidence related to women such examples that could help us in tracing beliefs and customs of the Viking Age. Part of the selection is already made naturally because it is only the graves of the middle and elite classes that seem to be represented among the finds; and then, it is no wonder that we are more interested in the latter. It is precisely at the level of the elites that the religious beliefs and customs seem to have reached their highest point. Even the medieval authors were more preoccupied by the elites because there was something special and worth being mentioned in their mode of existence.

In order to see how the information contained in the literary sources about death, life after death and burial customs when it comes to women in the Viking Age can be supported, supplemented or contradicted by the contemporary material evidence, I will discuss ideas related to life after death and burial customs as reflected through the Oseberg find. Once again, I underline the fact that the Oseberg burial is not representative for women in general in the Viking Age, but rather for the most important representatives of the high social classes at that time (this will also be revealed by the contents of the grave and the elaborate funeral customs).

4.3.2 **The Oseberg find - a story about death, life after death and burial customs**

A grave can be seen as a sum of symbols and a symbol has a content/a meaning and a form. An identical form does not mean an identical content and vice versa. In other words, if we take the example of the ship burial, the ship can be encountered in graves from different regions but it does not mean that it had the same significance, the same content. The idea of a

post mortem journey could have been symbolized through the placement in the grave of a horse, a wagon, a ship, denoting an identity in content but not in form. While the same form could have implied different meanings in different communities, local variations were also possible in form, but the meaning of the symbol was the same. Accordingly, the meaning of a symbol is culture and not nature determined. What we as scholars can do is to try and understand the codes used between people in the pre-Christian period in the form of symbols. By interpreting the different symbols present in the grave we place ourselves in the field of hermeneutics. In order to understand the significance of the grave and of the burial ritual we must first identify the various symbols that form it and then interpret them individually, but also in relation to one another. Using this theoretical frame, I will try to identify the various symbols used in the Oseberg burial and interpret them in order to obtain a complete picture of the pre-Christian beliefs (related to death, life after death and burial customs) held by the community where the burial was performed.[298]

In 1903 the peasant living on the Oseberg farm in Slangdalen, Vestfold, discovered a buried ship. [299] The next year the excavation of the ship was started under the leadership of Professor Gabriel Gustafsson and since then it has had the status of a national treasure. The grave revealed a fabulous collection of grave goods that over passed all the other finds of the Viking Age. Two women were buried in the great ship – one around 60-70 years old and one around 30-40 years old; it is assumed that one of the two women belonged to the high classes of the society while the other was a slave who followed her mistress in death. The burial was completely covered by a great mound.[300]

The burial contained amazing items such as richly-ornamented wooden artefacts like sleighs and wagons, furniture, kitchen equipment, tools for weaving, personal belongings, a tent and much more. If we interpret the grave goods in the context of a study focused on beliefs involving life after death, the presence of so many means of transportation is significant. The burial included not only a wagon, a ship and four sledges, but also the

[298] Even though the following interpretation of the Oseberg burial will be made in the context of the pre-Christian Nordic religion and its beliefs about death and life after death, various other interpretations have been applied to the Oseberg find. Scholars have been preoccupied by the identity of the two women buried, their role inside the community, the function of the burial mound as a cultic place, the significance of the grave robbery etc. Such an ample interest only underlines again the importance of the Oseberg burial as a source 'talking' about the religious beliefs and rituals performed at that time.

[299] According to dendrochronological analysis, the construction date for the ship in the burial has been established to the year 834. For more details see Bonde 1997.

[300] If we compare the constitutive elements of the Oseberg burial with Ibn Fadlān's description, it becomes obvious that there are close similarities: although in one case the method of burial was cremation and in the other inhumation, the burial involved two persons, a high-born woman/man and her/his slave. In both cases the dead were buried in a ship, while a grave chamber was also built on top of it. Rich grave goods were placed inside the grave in both cases and last but not least, the burials were covered with a mound.

skeletons of fifteen horses and four dogs. According to the written sources, Brynhild travelled to the Other World in a wagon, so that the placement of the wagon in the Oseberg burial could indicate that the high-born woman was supposed to make a similar journey. The presence of the sledges signals that she could have travelled at any time of the year, including winter. Even though horses were also part of the burial, there was no harness for a rider and this might be an indicator that (in the case of a journey) they were supposed to drag the wagon, or the sledge, during winter. If we keep in mind that high-born women did not ride but rather travelled in wagons or sledges, such an interpretation seems to be correct.[301] The dog could have been seen as a guide for the dead to the underworld. Due to its refined sense of smell the dog could have been of help in finding the way to the death realm; in addition, the dog is often presented as a guardian of the underworld. The ship can also be viewed as a symbol for a journey in death to a certain death realm despite the fact that the written sources do not record the necessity of crossing a water on the way to the Other World. The ship might as well have implied a symbolic journey from one state of existence to another.

The Oseberg woman seems to have been well provided for a possible journey in the death realm, but the richness of grave goods that accompanied her in death might have also been intended for use inside the grave. From the literary sources it is quite obvious that people were believed to be able to continue their existence both inside the grave and in the various death realms. Considering this, we may be able to imagine that the grave goods included in the Oseberg burial were intended to be used both inside the grave and in one of the death realms: the high-born woman could have used the furniture, the kitchen utensils, her personal belongings in her post-mortem existence in the grave, while at the same time she could have used the various means of transportation for her journey to the death realm. We cannot be sure that the pre-Christian Vikings had such representations, but traces of such a belief can be found in the literary sources. One of the eddic poems records that Helgi was buried in a mound and he was afterwards believed to have continued his existence in Valhalla.[302] One evening he returned to his mound in order to comfort his sorrowful wife and afterwards he rode back to the death realm. The poem seems to suggest the idea that the dead were capable

[301] Else Roesdahl argues that on the basis of the archaeological evidence, several women graves discovered in Denmark contained traces of wagons. These were generally graves with rich grave goods, implying that the buried women had belonged to the high classes of society. Consequently, the wagon seems to have been a means of transportation appropriate for women with power and high status. On the other hand, other graves contained traces not only of wagons, but also of wagon wheels which seem to belong to the Viking Age. This underlines the idea that the wagon was also a common means of transportation in the Viking period, used for example to transport heavy goods. For further details see Roesdahl 1978.

[302] See the prose section following stanza (38) in *A Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani*, in *The Poetic Edda* 1996: 139.

of travelling between the grave and the death realm, with the grave seen as a symbolic meeting place with the living. Helgi used his horse as a means of transportation for this journey and this was only appropriate for a man, while women would have used wagons or sledges (maybe even ships). In this context, the Oseberg woman would have been able to travel between the mound and the death realm, being well provided for her after existence in either of these two places. She was probably believed to reside in a certain death realm and expected to get back to her grave at certain important moments of the year, such as cultic celebrations in which she might have played a significant role.

If we turn our attention to the archaeological evidence, it appears that when the grave chamber was erected on the Oseberg ship, the south part was left open - this is indicated by a difference in the colour of the turf forming the mound (a lighter versus a darker part).[303] This means that while the back part of the ship was covered, the front part remained open for a longer period. Such a situation might be interpreted in the sense that the front part of the ship was used as a cultic scene. The open part of the grave chamber would have been a 'door' which allowed communication between two worlds, the profane and the sacred, the world of the living and that of the dead. This line of reasoning seems to suggest that indeed the Oseberg woman was expected to be in her grave at certain times so that she could communicate with the living and maybe impart with them wisdom (as in the case of the sibyls mentioned in the eddic poems). The grave chamber would have then symbolized the house of the dead.

The Oseberg grave also held the largest and most varied collection of textiles and textile objects found in one burial. The finest among these are a number of extremely rare tapestry fragments and their uniqueness led scholars to think that the one of the two women buried there was a queen.[304] The biggest of these fragments shows a procession of horses, carriages, and people walking arranged in four rows, one above the other, with swastika symbols between them which have associations with death (fig. 3, p. 143). If we try to interpret the procession in the context of a symbolic death universe it is possible that it represents the burial of the Oseberg queen itself, in a mythic pictorial form.[305] The various means of transportation could have been symbolically used just once, on the occasion of the burial, because a burial can also perceived as a journey to a different realm, the world of the dead.[306]

[303] See Gansum 2002: 275.
[304] See Ingstad 1995: 139.
[305] See Steinsland 1991: 431.
[306] An argument in favour of a symbolic journey rather than an actual one may be the fact that the Oseberg ship had a north-south orientation, while the water was in the east.

Just like the ship, the wagon and the sledges could have indicated the symbolic journey of the dead, from the sacred to the profane world. Still, if we accept the hypothesis according to which the Oseberg woman could have returned to her grave on the occasion of cultic ceremonies, it is possible to see the grave also as a cult place, where people paid their homage to the dead. Under such ceremonies, the whole death procession depicted on the tapestry fragments could have been repeated and re-actualized, underlining once again the idea of a journey and an arrival to the death realm.[307]

Anne Stine Ingstad interpreted the tapestry fragments from a different angle, pointing out that the goddess Freya seems to occupy the most prominent position.[308] This interpretation is also significant in the context of the present study in the sense that we might be able to find out in what death realm the Oseberg queen was believed to reside after death. The composition of the grave goods is of great help for such an interpretation. No fewer than fifteen horses were buried, all of which were decapitated. The horse was a symbol for fertility and its role inside the fertility cult is underlined in *Vǫlsaþáttr*, where women seem to be in charge of the cult. There were also found traces of wild apples and blueberries which can also be connected with the idea of fertility. Among the grave goods there was an object consisting of two concave parts which together form a hollow pipe; four notches divide the object in five different parts and it is highly reminiscent of the staffs carried by the people represented on the tapestry fragments. Ingstad argues that the staff actually points to a function in the service of fertility.[309] On the tapestry, the staff appears beside a spear and a rhombic figure, both being symbols of fertility, with the rhombic figure symbolizing a female vulva. So, the staff should also be understood in this sense. The staff was also the attribute of the *vǫlva*, the sibyl, and its presence in the grave could indicate that the high-born woman was linked with a fertility rite.

An interesting part of the tapestry depicts a woman with a head in the form of a bird of prey. Several other ship burials included various types of birds (like in the case of the burial on Volga) and this could again have signified a connection with Freya. Just like Odin, Freya was able to assume the shape of a bird in order to travel to the Other World.[310] Such an attribute reminds of the characteristics of the shaman, with the bird being the symbol of the journey of the spirit to the world beyond.

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[307] See Steinsland 1991: 432.
[308] See Ingstad 1995: 144.
[309] Ibidem: 142.
[310] See for example *Thrym's Poem (Þrymskviða)* (3), in *Edda* 1996: 97.

The wagon illustrated on the tapestry has its counterpart in the wagon placed in the grave. That the rear part of the wagon is ornamented with cats may indicate a connection with Freya as in the account of Baldr's funeral, Snorri records that Freya came riding her cats.[311] The construction of the wagon shows that it was not meant for daily use because it could be driven only on a straight road, with no swings.[312] As a result, it could have been used in a procession of the type depicted on the tapestry, a procession leading from the farm to the cult place and on the symbolic level to the funeral place – so it must have had a cultic function rather than a practical one. One of the sledges in the grave also had cats' heads on the frame (pointing again to Freya), which may suggest that in case the cultic procession took place in winter time the sledge could also be used.

Last but not least, the ship included in the Oseberg burial was no ocean-going craft and its luxurious ornamentation could indicate that it had a cultic function too. A significant detail of the burial is that the ship was fastened to a large stone. The custom is also recorded in one of the Icelandic sagas, where Gísli is said to have laid a stone in the ship where Thorgrim was buried.[313] The placement of a stone inside the ship or its fastening to a stone could have been defensive measures taken by the living generations against the walking dead – the people might have feared the return of the Oseberg queen. In this situation, the custom of fastening a ship is related to the one of providing the dead with proper shoes so that they could continue their journey to the death realm.[314] Still, a different interpretation could be that the ship was fastened because the people wanted the queen to remain in her mound and perform the cultic activities so important for the living community.

Considering all the above-mentioned elements included in the funeral of the Oseberg woman and their apparent connection with Freya, and implicitly with a fertility cult, the woman buried together with these artefacts must have had an important role in the cult of the goddess of fertility and death. As such, she would have been expected by her community to return at certain well-established moments of the year and perform those activities that assured the peace and fertility inside society, just as she had done while she was alive. If we accept this hypothesis, we may imagine ourselves that the Oseberg queen continued her afterlife in Freya's realm; not only had she been a representative of the elite, but she also seems to have played an important part in the fertility cult connected with Freya.

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[311] See *Gylfaginning* (49), in *Edda* 1995: 50.
[312] See Christensen 1992: 119.
[313] See *Gisli Sursson's Saga* (ch. 17), in *The Complete Sagas* 1997, vol. II: 20.
[314] Some scholars have also interpreted the destruction of objects and skeletons inside the grave as an attempt from the part of the living to stop the walking of the dead. For further details see Brøgger 1945.

In a previous chapter I questioned the possibility of women to have joined Freya's realm after death. On the basis of the written evidence it is not possible to say for sure if the pre-Christians Vikings had such a belief, precisely because we have only one account mentioning Freya's realm as being open for women. I suggested that it is possible that high-born women who died an honourable death might have been welcomed by Freya. I also underlined the fact that considering the major role played by women in the fertility cult, it may be expected that some of these women could have joined Freya's realm in death. The evidence of the Oseberg burial points in such a direction; the Oseberg woman seems to have been involved in a fertility cult and at the same time it is possible that she was a prophetess (reminding again of Freya's qualities). As long as people were believed to continue their post mortem existence in a similar way with the life they had led on earth, the Oseberg queen was probably believed to be able to perform her functions from inside the grave, at certain moments of the year, while in the rest of the time she resided in Freya's realm, in her quality of a Freya priestess.[315] Due to the scarcity of information in the literary sources it is impossible to say how exactly the Oseberg queen was believed to continue her existence in the death realm, but it is likely that a death-wedding expected her in death.[316]

4.3.3. **Memorial stones**

Ibn Fadlān recorded upon the burial of the Rus chieftain that once the chieftain was cremated with the slave girl in his boat, the people built on that place something that resembled a round mound. In the middle of it they raised a post birch of wood where they wrote the name of the chieftain and that of the Rus king.[317] Such a custom must be considered in relation with the erection of memorial stones, raised in the honour of the departed relatives. Usually, the memorial stones were meant to impress though their size, but sometimes runic inscriptions and drawings could also appear on them.

As opposed to the literary sources which were written several centuries after the recorded events, these memorial stones represent contemporary evidence as they were raised during the Viking Age. They can cast some light on contemporary circumstances. If we take first the case of the runic inscriptions, it appears that there are about 2000 in Scandinavia,

[315] If we consider that Hel's realm was said to lie northwards, it is significant that the boat was north-south oriented. The South could symbolize the land of the sun and home of the gods, and according to one saga, Frey himself resided in the south. Being one of the gods and also the female counterpart of Frey, Freya's realm could have been placed to the south too. For further details about the connection between South and the land of gods, see Ohlmarks 1946: 208–217.
[316] See Røthe 1994: 93–99.
[317] See also CHAPTER II, p. 48. Snorri Sturluson also records the custom of raising memorial stones

most of them on raised stones but some on earth-fast rocks. The inscriptions are very unevenly distributed all over Scandinavia, with a preponderance in Sweden (especially Uppland) – 1750 cases, while in Denmark there are about 200 and in Norway even less, about 50. In the vast majority of cases, the runic inscription lets us know who commissioned the inscription, who was commemorated, and the relationship between them. Most often women appear on these inscriptions as erectors, on their own or together with men; only seldom have stones been erected in memory of deceased women.[318] The inscriptions occur in six different patterns, according to the relation between the commissioner and the woman commemorated.[319] The first group includes those stones erected by men in memory of women; generally those commemorating women were their husbands or sons, more seldom their fathers. A second category includes stones erected by women in memory of women; this group is even smaller than the previous one and it usually refers to daughters commemorating their mothers or vice versa. A third group is represented by stones erected by men together with women and commemorating women; there are only four cases in this group and they are found in Sweden. Men could also erect stones in memory of men together with women; this group of stones is unrepresented in Norway and it refers mostly to sons commemorating their parents. Other four cases form the category of stones erected by women in memory of men and women. Finally, there is a group of stones erected by men together with women in memory of men and women; this category is also small and occurs only in Sweden. A special class is represented by those rune stones erected to commemorate women as bridge builders. It seems that in this case women are over-represented in the sense that there are more women commemorated for building bridges than women being commemorated as such.[320] It appears then that the proportion of women commemorated on rune stones is generally lower in Denmark and Norway than in Sweden (and especially the east of Sweden) and is particularly low in Norway. At the same time, compared to the number of rune stones erected to commemorate men few women benefited from such a practice. Still, the existence of such stones erected in memory of deceased women is a sign that the custom was also practiced for women, even though to a smaller scale than for men, and with great regional variations.

[318] See Sawyer 1991: 216.
[319] See Sawyer 2000: 40–41.
[320] Rune stones commemorating women as bridge builders appear in Sweden. Out of a total of 100 inscriptions, those commemorating women represent 16%, while in the whole material, only 7 % commemorate women. Sawyer argues that this over-representation must be seen along the lines of an increased interest on the part of women towards the new religion, Christianity, and their readiness to support the church and give alms. For further details see Sawyer, 1991: 222–223.

A more interesting case is represented by those memorial stones including drawings. The Gotlandic picture-stones were stones erected from the fifth to the eleventh century A.D., precisely to commemorate deceased persons. As far as we are concerned only with the fate of women in the Viking Age, only the stones erected around this period need to be considered. These stones are covered with different figures and scenic representations which may help us identify ideas connected with death and life after death in the case of women. On the basis of their form the stones can be classified in two groups: the first group includes big, mushroom-shaped stones which can be up to 3-3.5 m high, while the second group includes smaller stones with pictures of a more special art than the ones represented on the first group. The mushroom-shaped stones are believed to have been raised after men, while the smaller ones were raised after women. The stones impress not only through their size, but also through the complexity of the drawings. They can be used as evidence of the importance of death during the Viking Age.

Considering that the Gotlandic stones were raised as memorial stones, so stones commemorating and honouring dead men and women, we may say that their pictures can be interpreted in relation to death and the various beliefs about a post mortem existence.

The first group of stones, the bigger ones, contain several scenes out of which two occur over and over a again: a travel scene and an arrival one. The typical travel scene includes a big square-rigged sailing vessel, in most cases crowded with armed warriors. In the arrival scene, a horseman is depicted as approaching a hall, usually on an eight-legged horse, while a woman welcomes him with a drinking-horn in her hand. The eight-legged horse reminds of Sleipnir, Odin's horse, so that the pictures seem to have mythological implications (fig. 1, p. 141). According to Steinsland, the purpose of such a memorial stone is among other things a desire to elevate the dead at the level of a hero. Through myth, the living could elevate the individual fate on a higher plan thus expressing their care for the honour and reputation of the dead man.[321] If we interpret these scenes in the context of a death ideology, they seem to depict the journey undertaken by the dead man to the death realm and his arrival there. The ship has the function of a means of transportation up to a certain point wherefrom the journey is continued on horseback.[322]

Seen along the same lines, the smaller stones, erected in memory of dead women, can also be understood as depicting the journey undertaken by women to the death realm. Women

[321] See Steinsland 1991: 426.

[322] Even though the literary sources do not record that the dead were supposed to travel to the Other World by ship, and neither the idea of a water which needs to be crossed, the ship must have had a central role in the Viking beliefs connected with death as long as it appears as a symbol in so many graves.

are represented as taking their journey not on horse, but rather by wagons or sledges (fig. 2, p. 142). Not only do the literary sources mention that Brynhild rode to the death realm by wagon, but also the evidence of the Oseberg burial can also be interpreted in the sense that the queen was supposed to reach the death realm either by wagon or by sledge, depending on the time of the year. Several other women graves belonging to the high classes of the society seem to have been provided with wagons, implying a belief in a post mortem journey to the death realm.[323]

If we consider that in the case of the stones erected in memory of dead men mythological motifs were used to elevate the dead at the level of a hero, the same could have been the case with the stones raised over women.

The oldest description of a Nordic woman travelling by wagon is found in Tacitus' *Germania*, written long before the Viking Age, in the year 100 A.D.[324] He describes a cultic celebration dedicated to a goddess: Terra Mater, Mother Earth, which is the Latin term for the Germanic fertility goddess Nerthus. From a linguistic point of view, Nerthus is the predecessor for the fertility god Frey, known in the Viking Age. The celebration described occurred in a South Scandinavian tribal society, early in spring. The people took the statue of the goddess out of the sacred building and placed it in a wagon which was then carried around, followed by a priest. The purpose of the ritual was to bless the earth so that it could provide good crops. So, Tacitus describes Nerthus as a fertility goddess which travels among the living in a wagon.

Seen from this perspective, the depiction of women travelling to the death realm in a wagon might reflect traces of older mythological beliefs on the basis of which a fertility goddess was believed to have travelled among her people in a wagon in order to bring peace and fertility to the land. As underlined previously, women in the Viking Age were religiously active mainly inside the cult of the Vanir. The reason for raising such memorial stones could have been then not only to commemorate their women, but also to elevate them to a higher plan and associate them with the goddess of fertility. By representing the women travelling to the death realm in wagons, people could have been reminded of the journey of the fertility goddess among them. So, there might be a possibility that the women who had these stones erected in their memory had been active in the fertility cult and, just like in the case of the Oseberg queen, they might even have been Freya priestess. An important aspect in such a hypothesis is the fact that women who had been provided in death with a wagon seem to have

[323] See note 301.
[324] See *Germania* (ch. 40), 1961: 88; 90.

belonged to the higher classes of society. In addition, the erection of such impressive stones (both when it comes to their size and the complexity of their drawings) underlines the fact that the Gotlandic stones must also have been erected in memory of high-born women. Last but not least, the only literary source referring to the possibility of women residing in Freya's realm after death seems also to imply that her realm was open only for high-born women. So maybe indeed, women belonging to the upper classes of society, who had been active while alive in a fertility cult dedicated to the Vanir, were believed to continue their existence in Freya's realm; unfortunately, we might never know it for sure.

4.4 Conclusions

The rituals performed upon the death of one member of the living community can have a double purpose: to assure his/her position in death as member of the community of the dead forefathers, but at the same time to protect the living generations form the evil power of the dead. Even though the written sources are focused on men and their activities, and thus on the various death realms and burial customs practiced in relation to them, there are several accounts that refer also to women and the customs and rituals practiced upon their death.

According to the written evidence, we can distinguish between two methods of burial: cremation and inhumation. Cremation seems to be the main method of disposing of the dead women in the mythological and heroic poems, while cremation in the sagas is only used in the cases of corporeal revenants. The explanation may be that the custom of cremation never reached Iceland, where the sagas were recorded, so inhumation came to be seen as the main method of disposing of the dead.

The eddic poems reveal how complex a cremation burial could have been. Both Nanna and Brynhild were cremated together with their husband/lover, suggesting the idea that love over passed the limitations of the grave and continued in a world beyond. In the case of Brynhild, the cremation seems to have included more people, so it was a collective burial, with several cases of suttee. Grave goods were also part of the burial ritual and the poems imply the idea that rich grave goods assured a high status in the Other World.

The eddic poems also present the wagon as a means of transportation on the way to the death realm, suggesting again that life after death continued in a death realm rather than inside the grave. While men made their journey on horseback, the wagon was a means of transportation used by high-born women – those belonging to the lower classes of society could have made the journey on foot.

The ship accompanying the dead in their graves could have had various explanations, from that of an object of personal possession to a symbol of the passage between the profane and the sacred worlds. The fact that ship burials were so common in the Viking Age does not mean that they had the same significance all over Scandinavia. In order to understand the ship symbolism in a burial we must first study the cultural context where such a custom was practiced.

Nevertheless, the Scandinavian written sources give scarce information when it comes to the various rites of passage that might have accompanied the burial of the dead. So, the elaborate burial recorded by Ibn Fadlān among the Rus people can help us in tracing customs performed among Scandinavians too. Anyway, we must be aware that regional variations could have occurred, especially if we consider the geographical distance between the place where the Rus chieftain was buried and Scandinavia proper. Even though the burial on Volga was organized for a male representative of the society, similar practices may have been used in the case of women. We have also to take into consideration the fact that the rituals described by Ibn Fadlān were performed only in connection with representatives of the high classes of society, while more simple burials were organized for the poor. It seems then obvious that only high-born Scandinavian women could have benefited from such a complex ritual, while those belonging to the lower strata of society were accompanied in death by simpler rituals.

The Rus slave girl is also an example of suttee. She offered herself to join her chieftain in death, implying again the idea that love exists in he Other World too. Through several rituals she is elevated to a higher social status, suggesting that she was believed to become her master's wife in death.

Several of the elements described in the account of the Arab traveller may also be traced in the case of the Oseberg burial although it is an inhumation and not a cremation burial. Two women were buried in the grave together with a richness of grave goods that indicates high status. The burial also included several means of transportation that may be interpreted in the sense of a post mortem journey to the death realm at any time of the year. It is possible that the Oseberg queen was supposed to reside in a death realm and at the same time to be able to come back to her grave at certain important times during the year. The same means of transportation encountered in the written sources in relation to the burial of women are also present in the Oseberg burial: wagon, sledge and ship. Several elements in the burial point to a connection with a fertility cult dedicated to the goddess Freya so that we may assume that

the queen had had an important function in the cult of this goddess while alive and she was probably believed to continue to do so after death.

Memorial stones seem also to have been raised after dead women, some of them including runic inscriptions and drawings. Even though the number of stones erected after dead women and containing runic inscriptions is relatively small as compared to those commemorating men, their existence proves that such a burial custom was practiced also in connection with women.

The Gotlandic memorial stones are very significant in the sense that they seem to support the belief in an afterlife journey in the case of women, with such means of transportation as the wagon. The same idea is represented both in the written material and among the material evidence of the Oseberg find. The fact that only high-born women were believed to travel in wagons, both in real life and in death, seems to be confirmed by the fact that the Gotlandic stones appear to have been erected in memory of women belonging to the upper classes of society; both their size and the complexity of the drawings are arguments in favour of such a theory.

Last but not least, the burial ritual performed in relation to women could also include defensive rites meant to protect the living from the dead; it is always in connection with the belief in corporeal revenants that we encounter such practices.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

The present study has started from a desire to find out if it possible to get a unitary picture of beliefs concerned with the afterlife existence and burial customs regarding women in the Viking Age. The focus of the research has been mainly on the written sources, while the contemporary material evidence was brought in to supplement the information already obtained. In other words, the two types of sources have been used complementary so that we could obtain as complete an image as possible. The necessity to make use of both types of sources was underlined from the very beginning: while the literary texts were written down only in the Middle Ages, the material evidence belongs to the Viking Age. Consequently, the written evidence represents a kind of theoretical background which has to be supplemented with the practical information offered by the contemporary material evidence.

Death had a huge importance in the Viking Age because it was understood along the lines of the Viking ethnic religion. Both the living and the dead were part of the kinship group. The dead performed functions that were important for the existence and continuity of the family as part of society, while the living also had to keep the memory of their dead alive by performing certain rituals.

Both the written and the contemporary material sources testify in favour of the existence of a multitude of representations connected with death, burial and life after death in the Viking Age; life after death could continue either in the grave or in one of the various death realms. The dead could be respected and also feared. Death offered the possibility of crossing a barrier and obtaining wisdom, but at the same time it could be seen as a realization at the erotic level.

Death must have had a great significance in the lives of the pagan Vikings, men as well as women. More than that, women appear to have played an important part in several aspects of the Vikings' lives and religion. Life itself went on much as a result of the function women had in the Norse society and they seem to have been especially active in the religious sphere. Women were responsible for the cult of the land-spirits and of the elves and more important, they appear to have played a certain function in the cult of the Vanir, the fertility gods. It is only natural then to expect to find sufficient information in the written sources about the burial customs practiced in relation to women, as well as about women's fate after death.

Contrary to such an expectation, the literary evidence is quite scarce and sometimes a bit confuse. In order to understand this situation we must keep in mind that the literary sources were written down by male scribes and authors. Being part of a patriarchal society, these

scribes had more interest in the actions and fate of men rather than in that of women. Besides, women were generally associated with household activities and these attracted little attention. The more elevated pursuits of men, such as feuding and political disputes, fitted better the narrative demands. The literary sources are rather male-centred leaving little space for women and their pursuits in life, and even less for their fate in death.

Nevertheless, by analysing and interpreting the information offered by the written evidence it is possible to trace several pagan beliefs connected with death, burial customs and life after death when it comes to Viking women. Being a collective death realm, Hel seems to have been opened for both men and women. In order to reach this realm, women had to go downwards and northwards, through deep and dark valleys; then they had to cross a bridge over a river and they finally came upon Hel's gate. Behind the gate, Hel was residing into her hall. There is nothing in the literary sources telling us how Hel's realm really looked like or how women were believed to continue their existence in Hel's kingdom. A significant aspect connected with the journey undertaken by women to Hel is the means of transportation they used. Women did not ride to Hel, like men did, but rather used wagons. Still, considering that wagons were a means of transportation common only for high-born women in the Viking Age, most of the women joining Hel's death realm had probably to make their journey on foot.

Helgafell is another collective death realm which seems to have been open for women too. Even though there is no explicit evidence that women were also welcomed to this death realm, the sources do not describe Helgafell as being a male-exclusive realm. On the contrary, if we consider that Helgafell started as a family-based cult in an afterlife existence close to the living relatives of the kinship group, and that the kinship group included men as well as women, then Helgafell must have been open for women too. The sources are faulty again when it comes to information about how life inside Helgafell went on for women. However, by using our imagination it is maybe possible to fill in the gaps: as long as men seem to have been welcomed to Helgafell with merriment and feasting, Helgafell resembles the ceremonial Viking gatherings in the chieftain's hall. The chieftain's wife used to be present at such gatherings, joining her husband on the high-seat and offering drinks to the other men. So, maybe women played the same role once arrived at Helgafell. Anyhow, in lack of further evidence we must admit that these are only hypothesis which are impossible to test.

The realm of Ran might as well have been open to women: many Vikings returned from their expeditions to take their families with them and not all of these voyages were successful. Being a death realm destined for those who died at sea, Ran could have welcomed women

too. Here again, the written sources do not record the possibility of women to join this giantess's realm.

The strong implication of women in the religious sphere, and especially their participation inside the cult of the fertility gods, Frey and Freya, made us wonder if it is possible to trace in the written sources a connection between women and the Vanir even after death. Especially Freya, in her quality of goddess of life and death, and ruler of a death realm (Folkvang), could have received women to her kingdom. Only one source explicitly records that Freya could welcome women to her realm; in this instance, death implies an act of suicide, a kind of honourable death followed by an afterlife existence in Freya's realm. There are several other sources which refer to death by suicide; all these women seem to have belonged to the high classes of society, but the information is confused and there is no explicit indication that these women too were welcomed by Freya.

Another goddess which appears to have welcomed dead women to her death realm is Gefion. Snorri mentions that in her quality of a virgin goddess she was supposed to receive virgins to her realm. Nevertheless, Gefion seems to have been called a maiden not as a result of her lack of sexual experiences, but rather because she was not married. Gefion also reminds in several aspects of the great goddess Freya so that she could be identified with her. As a consequence, Freya's realm could have been open for high-born women who either died unmarried or underwent an honourable death. Keeping in mind that women in general were rather active in the religion sphere, it is quite strange that only high-born women seem to have been welcomed to Freya's realm. Moreover, considering that Freya was the one who taught the gods the custom of *seiðr*, it is maybe even more strange that the sources do not refer to prophetesses as joing her realm after death.

Several other accounts refer to a woman's voluntary death at her husband's funeral, suggesting the hope in an afterlife existence in a common death realm. Ibn Fadlān's account, about the funeral of the Rus chieftain and the sacrifice of one of his servants, reminds of the practice of sacrificing men to Odin by hanging, stabbing and burning. Still, the other cases rather imply an act of suicide than a sacrifice, sending us back to the idea of a possible afterlife existence in Freya's realm conditioned by an honourable death. The problem arises when we consider the fact that all these women, no matter the way they died, hoped to be reunited with their men in death – and the men seem to have been destined to join Odin's realm, Valhalla. I suggested that maybe these women were indeed supposed to join Freya's realm, while their men could have swinged from Valhalla to Folkvang so that they could be

with their lovers/wives. Such a possibility would not have been open for women because Valhalla is presented in the written sources as a male-exclusive realm.

Besides an afterlife existence in a remote death realm, the Vikings also enjoyed ideas about a continuation of life inside the grave. The belief in corporeal revenants seems to have been very widespread, especially in connection with men; women revenants are usually presented as part of a collective and it is difficult to trace their characteristics. The few individual cases of female revenants seem to have been influenced by Christian ideas in an attempt to show that women, as well as men, had access to the same type of afterlife existence. We should then see the individual cases of female revenants as a literary motif rather than a reflection of real beliefs and events. It would have been difficult for women to embody the same characteristics as the ones possessed by the male corporeal revenants.

Women appear also to have been connected with a belief in rebirth. The custom of passing on the name of the dead to a newborn child was very popular among the Vikings. Due to the fact that genealogies usually included only men, it is difficult to trace such a custom among women; but, considering the popularity of the custom, it must have been spread among women too. Besides, several eddic poems confirm the belief in rebirth in relation to Viking women.

On the mythological plan women could also be consulted in order to obtain knowledge about the future and to impart wisdom. Such a practice was related to the belief in a post-mortem existence inside the grave and not in a death realm because the grave was regarded as a symbolic threshold between the world of the living and that of the dead. The fact that communication with the dead was possible at the mythological level also explains the Viking belief in the power of the dead, the power to impart wisdom to the living. It is very significant that all the dead who are awakened to impart knowledge are women; it means that in real life too, dead women were capable of communicating with the living and helping them.

When it comes to funeral customs, the written sources distinguish between two methods of burial: cremation and inhumation. The mythological and heroic poems record cremation as the main method of disposing of the dead, while in the sagas cremation is used only in connection with corporeal revenants. Women could also be accompanied in death by grave goods and various means of transportation such as wagons, sledges and ships. Some sources imply the idea that being supplied with rich grave goods in death was essential; this could refer to the belief in *status* as being important also after death. Unfortunately, the literary sources fail again to give us sufficient information. As a matter of fact, most of the written sources referring to funeral customs used in relation to women are quite superficial offering

us little details. Once again, men seem to be the main interest of the medieval authors and scribes. The one detailed description of a funeral refers to an area outside Scandinavia and is recorded by a foreign author. Ibn Fadlān's acoount depicts the funeral of a male chieftain, so a representative of the high classes of society. The description of the rituals performed upon this burial is significant because the same rituals could have been practiced also in the case of women belonging to the upper strata of society, while for women from the lower strata the burial customs must have been more simple. It is also important to take into consideration the existence of regional and geographic differences.

In order to supplement the written sources, the contemporary material evidence can be used as long as we are aware that we interpret it on the basis of the literary information. Precisely because the most detailed description of a burial refers to a person belonging to the upper classes of society, I chose to discuss the evidence of the Oseberg burial in order to see how it supports or contradicts the information obtained from the written sources. The Oseberg queen appears to have been accompanied in death by another woman (possibly a slave) and a great variety of grave goods representative of her status. The means of transportation found in her grave remind of the ones recorded by the written sources: as a representative of aristocracy the queen was joined in death by a wagon, sledges and a big ship. Consequently, she could have reached the death realm at any time of the year, either on land or over the sea. The richness of grave goods that accompanied her in death could as well have been intended for use inside the grave. So, the queen could have continued her existence both inside the grave mound and in a death realm.

Several of the elements of the burial indicate that this high-born woman was connected with a fertility rite and with Freya. She seems to have played an important role in the cult of the fertility goddess. Seen from this perspective, the woman must have fulfilled important functions inside the community where she lived. After her death, people would have expected to find her inside the grave, at certain times of the year, so that she could perform those activities that assured the peace and fertility inside society. It is possible then that the queen resided in Freya's realm in her quality of a Freya priestess.

If we go back to the written evidence about the possibility of women to reside in Freya's realm after death, we can observe that such an afterlife existence seems to have been conditioned by an honourable death. This is not the case with the Oseberg queen. Even more, she appears to have been a Freya priestess while alive and also a seeress. Based on the literary evidence, we could establish no link between prophetesses and Freya's death realm, but the evidence of the Oseberg burial seems to point into such a direction. In addition, the Oseberg

burial supports the idea that women belonging to the high classes of society could have been welcomed in Freya's realm.

Another burial custom related to women in the Viking Age is the raising of memorial stones, some including runic inscriptions and drawings. Few memorial stones had been erected after dead women as compared to men and their distribution varies greatly. While in some parts of Scandinavia the number of memorial stones with runic inscriptions raised after women is relatively big, in other areas the custom is poorly represented.

When it comes to the case of the Gotlandic stones, memorial stones including drawings, it appears that they support the belief in an afterlife journey by wagon. The depiction of women travelling to the death realm in a wagon could reflect traces of older mythological beliefs on the basis of which a fertility goddess was considered to have travelled among her people. The women who had these stones erected after them might have been active in a fertility cult dedicated to Freya. The size and complexity of the Gotlandic stones indicate that these women must also have belonged to the high classes of society.

The conclusion would be that on the basis of the written and material sources it is quite difficult to obtain a unitary and complete picture of beliefs about death, burial and life after death when it comes to women in the Viking Age. The medieval authors were either not very interested in the fate of women after death, or they did not have enough information. Considering that the Viking beliefs about death, burial customs and life after death in general have no logic consistency, it is no wonder that the situation seems to be the same when it comes to women. The written sources present women as being able to continue their existence both inside the grave mound and in the various death realms; unfortunately, the information about the various death realms open to women is confuse. Even though status must also have been important in deat there is little in the literary sources which supports such a theory: no source explicitly says that women belonging to the lower strata of society joined a certain death realm, while women from the high classes of society joined a different one, corresponding to the male Valhalla. If we supplement the written evidence with the material one, status seems indeed to have been significant; the richness of grave goods placed inside the Oseberg burial is an argument in favour of such an idea. It is also possible that the Oseberg queen was believed to continue her existence in death in Freya's realm, a realm which seems to have been open for high-born women. Still, there are many gaps to be filled in before we can support such a theory; and so is also the case with the Viking representations about death, life after death and burial customs in regard to women.

FIGURES:

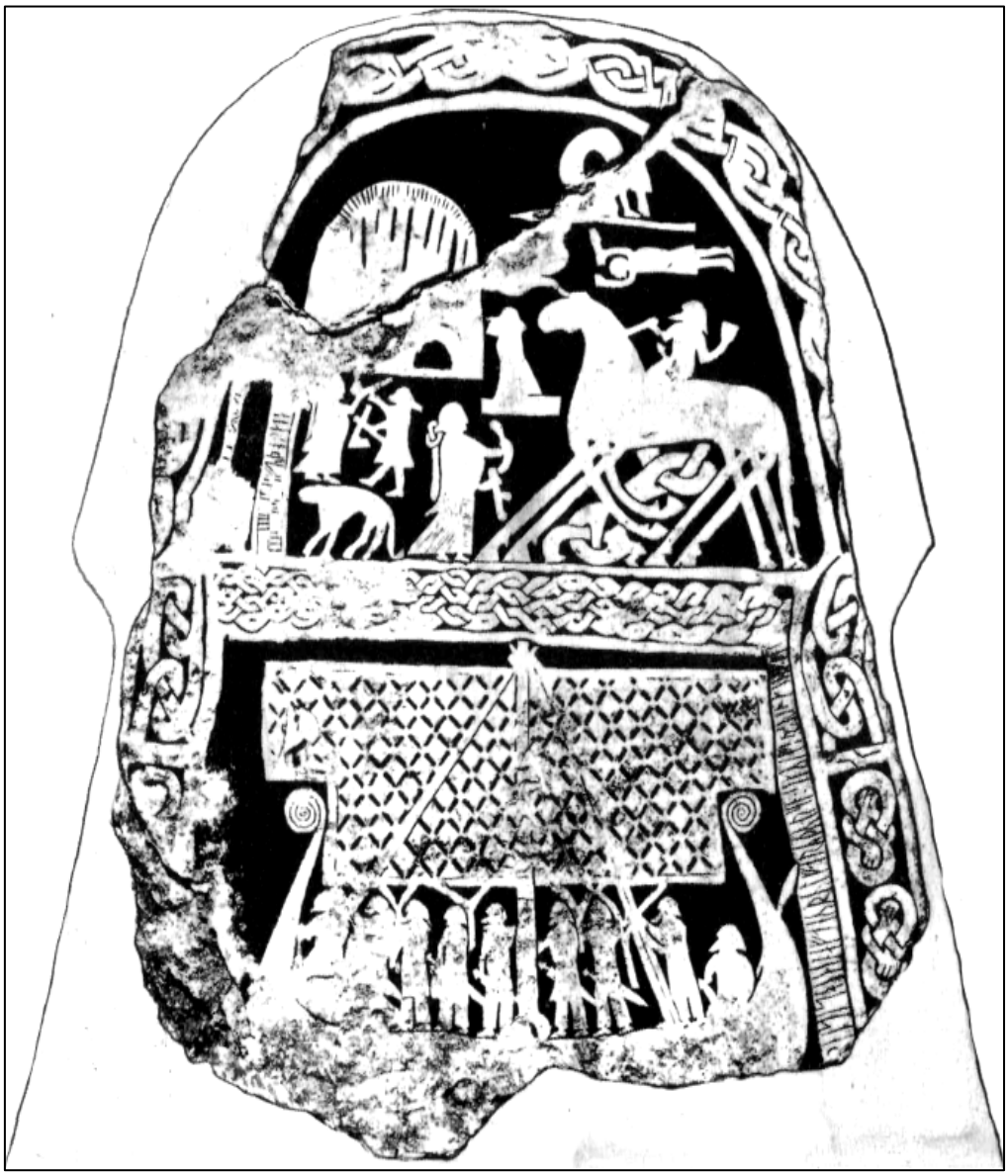
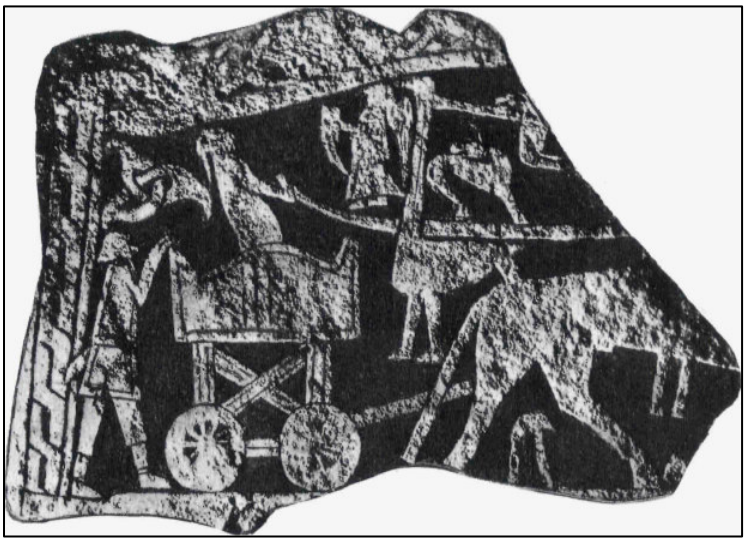


Fig. 1: The picture-stone from Tjängvide, in Alskog (from circa 700 – 800 A.D.). The man on horseback represents Odin, or the dead man, riding the eight-legged horse, Sleipnir. The rider is welcomed by a woman holding a drinking-horn, probably a valkyrie. (From Nylén & Lamm 1978: 69).

Fig. 2: Picture-stones from Levide (from circa 700 – 1100 A.D.) and Barshaldershed, Grötlingbo (from circa 600 – 1000 A.D.). Women travelled by wagons both during their lifetime and in death.
(From Lindqvist 1941: Taf. 71, Fig. 178 and Nylén & Lamm 1978: 102).



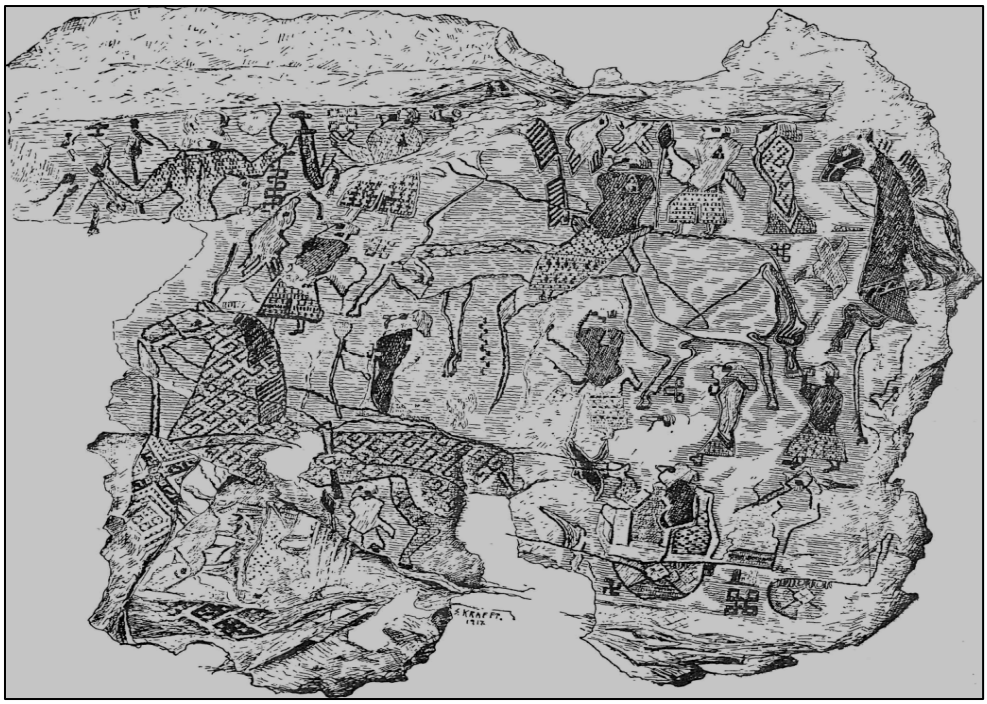
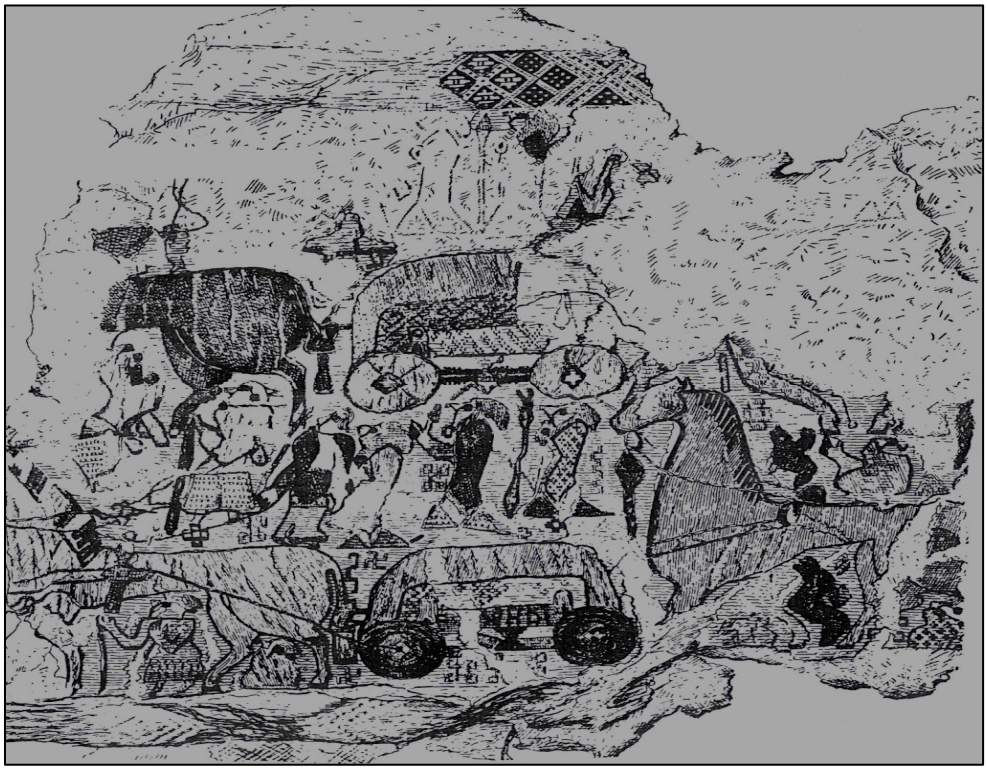


Fig. 3: The Oseberg tapestries – the procession. Drawings by Sophie Kraft.
(From Christensen, Ingstad & Myhre 1992: 232-233)



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