

To Valhalla by Horseback?

Horse Burial in Scandinavia during the Viking Age

A Master's Thesis in Nordic Viking and Medieval Culture

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Table of Contents

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Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Survey of Past Research.....	6
Chapter 2: The Horse Cult.....	11
2.1 The Horse Cult at Skedemosse.....	12
2.2 Stallions, Hangings, and the Number Nine.....	15
2.3 The Bog Finds.....	18
Chapter 3: Horse & Ship.....	20
3.1 Ship Graves.....	20
3.2 The Horse and Ship in the Cult.....	22
3.3 The Swedish Boat-Graves.....	23
3.4 The Norwegian Ship Burials.....	29
3.4.1 Oseberg.....	30
3.4.2 Gokstad.....	42
3.4.3 Borre.....	43
3.4.4 Tune.....	45
3.4.5 Ship Burials from Western Norway.....	45
3.4.6 Summary of the Norwegian Material.....	48
3.5 The Danish Ship Burials.....	49
3.5.1 Hedeby.....	50
3.5.2 Ladby.....	51
3.6 Horses, Ships & the Ideology of Kingship.....	54
3.7 Horse-Ship Burials & the Afterlife.....	55
3.8 Ibn Fadlan’s Account of a Horse-Ship Funeral.....	56
Chapter 4: Horse & Man.....	61
4.1 The Remarkable Find from Arninge.....	61
4.2 The 10 th Century Horseman Graves.....	63
4.3 The Impact of Christianity on Horse Burials.....	67
4.4 The Chamber-Graves at Birka.....	68
4.5 Lindolm Høje—An Example of the Variation of Horse Burials.....	73
Chapter 5: Horse Burial in Old Norse Literature.....	75
5.1 Horse Burial as a Common Occurrence in the Sagas.....	75
5.2 To Valhalla by Horseback, Not by Ship.....	76
5.3 The Journey to Hel or the Underworld.....	76
5.4 The Horse’s Role in the Burial Mound.....	78
5.5 Frey and Horses in the Sagas.....	79
5.6 Sleipnir as the Horse of Death.....	79
Conclusion.....	80
List of Primary & Secondary Sources.....	81

Introduction

“The hundreds of horses found buried in graves throughout Scandinavia...suggest a close association between horses and death.”¹

-Gabriel Turville-Petre

Horse burial had already been practiced for over a thousand years in Europe before it first reared its fiery head in Scandinavia during the Late Roman Iron Age.² The custom of burying a horseman with his mount appears on the Continent from the Hallstatt period (800 BC - 600 BC) onwards.³ Accounts from Ancient Greece, for example, describe how horses were an important part of the funeral ceremony. At the funeral of Patroclus in the *Iliad*, Achilles slays four horses and hurls them onto the pyre in honor of his fallen comrade.⁴ Over the centuries, the custom enjoyed a rich history among the Celtic, Germanic, Slavic and Eurasian tribes alike. By the time it reached the North, the arrival of Christianity had begun to usher it out of practice in the rest of Europe. It was thus in Scandinavia that the horse burial tradition seems to have experienced its final flourish, so to speak. Not that it whimpered out and died entirely—for it also shows up now and then in post-Viking Age contexts. Horses were slaughtered at the funerals of King John of England in 1215 and Holy Roman emperor Karl IV in 1378 for example.⁵

There was surely a fundamental reason that horses were a popular grave good among European peoples. The compelling problem that faces us, however, is what this “close association between horses and death” might have been to the Vikings themselves. What motivations lay behind their particular practice of killing a horse and placing it in the grave? Was it indeed a gift to the fallen warrior so that he could make one last ride to the hall of the slain, Valhalla? Or was it rather a sacrifice to the Norse gods, for peace and prosperity in the wake of this death?

In order to examine this problem properly it is important that a coherent summary of the prominent archaeological finds of horse burials across Scandinavia is compiled. As will be shown in the next chapter, this is something that has not been the main focus of a paper before. I do not propose to present a *comprehensive* list of every last burial as in their entirety

¹ Turville-Petre 1964: 57.

² See both Oma 2000: 27-29 & Sørensen 2001: 106.

³ Gräslund 1980: 48.

⁴ *The Iliad* (23.163-174).

⁵ Jones 1995: 140.

they are both eclectic and numerous, but instead will draw attention to some intriguing trends that may afford us a better overall understanding of the practice.

Approach

This is an interdisciplinary paper, so I will be utilizing both archaeological finds and written sources, *leaning most heavily on the archaeology*. The advantages that archaeological research offers to the study of horse burials are obvious as a grave *is* primarily an archaeological site and thus valuable empirical data concerning burial techniques, dating and the relation of the grave to the landscape is more than historical sources can offer. In the words of Hilda Ellis Davidson, "the grave is an incontrovertible witness; changes of custom, trivial or sweeping, the importance of funeral ritual in the disposal of the dead, the choice of goods to lay beside or destroy with the body—all these it preserves for us, as definite facts which cannot be questioned."⁶ Yet, precisely the fact that archaeology deals with objects rather than words provides for problems. Objects rarely impart any meaning about themselves.

In order to make archaeological finds reveal something about our topic of interest we are obliged to do what historians do—interpret. Besides, there is no guarantee—in fact, it is unlikely—that the archaeology would ever give us the ‘big picture’ since excavations only uncover snapshots—mere snippets—of history that themselves may only represent customs carried out by a select part of the population.

Thus we must look at the written material to provide us with the complex background that archaeology cannot. These can help explain the concepts or beliefs that lay behind artifacts. Without them, for example, little sense could be made of the belief system that preceded Christianity in Scandinavia. The two main sources for this ‘pagan’ religion are the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*, and I will be discussing passages from these as well as a number of other sources connected to horses, horse burial and concepts of death throughout this paper. Concerning concepts of death, it is important to keep in mind, as Else Roesdahl writes, that “written sources tell of several realms of the dead, but these fragments are partly contradictory, so they give a very incomplete picture of pre-Christian concepts.”⁷ Also, we must consider the problem inherent in relying mainly on 13th century literature

⁶ Ellis Davidson 1943: 7.

⁷ Roesdahl 1987: 156.

written by Christian Icelanders about mainland Scandinavia where the old faith had ceased to be practiced over two centuries before. On top of this, those who were literate at the time represented an elite part of society that most certainly would have had its own particular motivations and biases. This would further obscure the ‘big picture.’

In summary, it is easy to get caught up in looking for a one to one relationship between the archaeology and literature that in most cases is just not there. The best possibility, it seems, is that the two *resemble* each other enough that some qualified conclusions might be drawn.

The Symbolism of Grave Goods and the Ideology of Horse Burial

According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Archaeology*, grave goods are "objects placed with the deceased on burial."⁸ Surely, this is the definition of the term in its most superficial form. The careful provisioning of items in the grave suggests, at the very least, that there is a meaning or purpose attached to them.

This meaning or purpose of grave goods is usually taken to involve a belief in an afterlife of some kind. Certain objects could have been seen as *helpful, advantageous or even necessary for the dead* to have with them for what was to lie ahead. Some grave goods may also have been the *(discarded) equipment of shamans*. The shaman might have, for example, used the object to spiritually travel to the realm of the dead and “talk” with the deceased. In such a case the item may have carried more import in the burial rites than in its actual presence in the grave.

Notions of the afterlife might not always have been the main reason for the appearance of grave goods. Some of the deceased’s possessions may have found their way into the grave simply because they were regarded as *taboo* for the survivors to use. Grave goods may also have been deposited for the *means of negotiating social status among the bereaved*.

With all of the above in mind, it is important for us to look at what the horse’s particular function as a grave good might have been to the Vikings.

One of the most popular answers to this is that the horse functioned as a vehicle by which the deceased could travel in the afterlife. In the Old Norse world this is often assumed to have been Valhalla, home of the god Odin. According to Snorri’s *Prose Edda*, however,

⁸ Bray & Trump 1982: 101.

Odin receives only half of the fallen warriors, whilst Freya is expected to claim the other half for her hall, Folkvang.⁹ Another possible destination is for the dead was Hel, a murky place overseen by a goddess of the same name.

A twist on this theory is that the horse was not necessarily the transportation to the other world, but was instead meant to be used for warfare or recreation (e.g. hunting) upon arrival there. The horse has also been argued to have served as guardian of the grave, enlisted to protect the living from the dead and vice versa.¹⁰ On the other hand, the horse's import could have been exclusive to the sacrificial rite itself, as the repast offered in satisfaction of the needs of the person honored.¹¹ Still others suggest that the horse was meant as a food offering to the deceased.

A more materialistic interpretation, however, is that the horse was viewed simply as part of the wealth buried with the dead, an item of luxury meant perhaps to boost the esteem of not only the deceased but also his family. At the same time, it could have been that everything in the grave, including the horse(s), was meant to recreate the environment that the deceased knew, and cherished, in his lifetime.

All of the above explanations are not by any means mutually exclusive. A horse on one hand could signify wealth or status, while simultaneously fulfilling a metaphysical role in the afterlife. It should also be stressed that people in different parts of Scandinavia may likely have had different beliefs as to the function the horse served.

Major Trends Discernable in Horse Burial

It would therefore be ill-advised to work with the assumption that burial practices in Scandinavia during the Viking Age would have been carried out with identical intentions. This would presuppose that a kind of common mentality existed across the region, something that is nearly impossible to prove and accordingly foolhardy to argue. For most of the period in question, the North was broken up into multiple and unstable socio-political units, which suggests the unlikelihood that any uniform set of beliefs regarding the disposal of the dead existed at any one time. Numerous factors likely determined the methods adopted—such as

⁹ *Gylfaginning* (v. 24).

¹⁰ Jones & Pennick: 140.

¹¹ Hughes 1991: 51.

local custom, social status, and the relative supremacy of Christian or pagan tradition.¹² All of this forces us to start off examining horse burial as a multi-faceted phenomenon.

Horse burial probably served several of the ideological functions we discussed above. Indeed, if we take a cursory glance at horse burials in the archaeological record, it is clear from their marked variation that diverse rationales would have underlain them. Horses are found in both men's and women's graves, in both inhumation and cremation burials and in both flat ground and mound burials. In many instances their skeletons have been found fully intact in the grave, while on a more than few occasions they have been found decapitated. Simply stated, a monolithic rule for a horse burial during the Viking Age did not exist.

Despite this, a **few major trends** present themselves in the archaeology. The most eye-catching of these trends is that of **horses inhumed in ship burials**. Horses and ships are regularly paired in the physical record, with roots reaching back to Bronze Age rock art, and appear together in the grave with exceptional frequency. Another trend that comes to light is the **10th century horseman burials** which show up primarily in Denmark. These graves characteristically contain rich riding equipment that seems to reflect the emergence of a new type of political/military elite in Scandinavia. The last major group of horse burials I will discuss involves the well-known **chamber-graves at Birka**. These show a high degree of homogeneity, suggesting a well-organized military presence in the early Viking town. Of the archaeological analysis, the three above topics will receive the stallion's share of the focus. To offer a more complete picture of the practice, however, I will do a case study on a particularly intriguing grave-find from Arninge in Sweden and, a bit further on, bring the horse burial evidence from Lindholm Høje in northern Denmark into our discussion as well.

The time frame of this study lies primarily within the generally accepted bookends of the Viking period, that is between the close of the 8th century and the middle of the 11th century. Earlier subject matter, however, must be discussed, as it is crucial to understanding what factors may have brought about or influenced the custom. On the other end of things, as the number of horse burials dwindles significantly by the close of the 10th century, there is not a pressing need to follow the practice into the Christian period. We will, however, briefly discuss how Christianity may have affected it before it died out completely.

¹² Brøndsted 1960: 270.

Chapter I

Survey of Past Research

Over the years, the unique subject of horse burials during the Viking Age has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. There have been a few recent works that flirt with the subject, but do not address it outright. In stark contrast, the phenomenon of ship burials has been actively—and deservedly—discussed in a number of recent publications.¹³ It is understandable that ships, certainly grandiose and captivating topics in their own right, would overshadow dead horses in the grave. But the fact that an article entitled “Early Medieval Dog Burials among the Germanic Tribes” has come out in the last decade, in the absence of any similar works concerning horses, begs for an updated look at the equine element. To either exclude or ignore the relatively frequent phenomenon of horse burials in the overall discussion of Viking burial practice would be to present an imperfect rendering of history.

In this chapter, I will review what has been written before about horse burials and discuss some of the general arguments the different authors make. I will be making wide reference to this relevant literature not only here, but throughout the paper.

In his foundation-laying work entitled “Hesten i førhistorisk kunst og kultus” (“The Horse in Prehistoric Art and Cult”) from 1943, **Gutorm Gjessing** follows the development of the ‘horse cult’ in Scandinavia from the Stone Age, through the Bronze Age, and up into the Iron Age until the end of the Viking Period. His approach is interdisciplinary in that he attempts to tie together knowledge from archaeology, art history, the Icelandic sagas and other foreign accounts.

Gjessing asserts that horse burials can be *partly* explained by the comradeship that inevitably has to develop between people and horses in a time in which there were no roads and the only convenient way for one to get anywhere was to ride horseback.¹⁴ This is a very elementary anthropological explanation to a phenomenon that is clearly more complex. It is surely true, but it can fit any group of people and therefore does little to reveal why Viking Age Scandinavians in particular felt the need to have horses follow them in death. Their conscious motivations for doing so could differ vastly from say, those of the Hittites in Asia Minor who practiced the custom as early as 1400 BC.¹⁵

¹³ For example: Crumlin-Pedersen & Thye 1995, Wamers 1995, Crumlin-Pedersen 1988, Kobylinski 1988, Müller-Wille 1974, 1970.

¹⁴ Gjessing 1943: 60.

¹⁵ Klindt-Jensen 1968: 68.

Gjessing readily admits, however, that this explanation does not take into account such instances in which, for example, only a horsehead is found in the grave. This may perhaps indicate that the rest of the horse was eaten, displayed or otherwise defiled as part of the funeral rites. And while this too could be explained away as a kind of homage to the horse, it more closely resembles the treatment of a hunted beast than that of a favored companion. Here, Gjessing has jumped from the broad and theoretical to a more direct interpretation of the archaeological material. Though I will also make use of both these approaches in this paper, my emphasis will be on the latter.

Furthermore, Gjessing believes that the horse sacrifices in graves from the Merovingian Period and the Viking Age must be seen in connection with the fertility cult, which was closely connected to the cult of Frey.¹⁶ He views the common occurrence of ships and horses in Viking Age graves as a continuation of sun worship from the Bronze Age, in which both were symbols of the sun and fertility. Following this, his general conclusion is that the cult of Frey gave way to the cult of Odin from the Bronze Age to the Viking Age, and along with that the symbolism of the horse and the ship changed drastically over time, though their popularity in burials and artwork continued uninterrupted. One of the section headings from his work neatly sums up his thesis: “From the Sun Horse to Sleipnir.”¹⁷

The argument Gjessing makes here about this ‘change of faith’ sounds fairly credible and is founded on a wealth of examples ranging from early Bronze Age rock carvings to medieval Icelandic sagas. The catch is that he essentially wants us to believe in a seamless cultural continuity spanning a period of over three thousand years. This type of contention is an especially common pitfall in the field of history of religion. Gjessing also succeeds in confusing the reader by saying that, as the god of fertility, Frey also must have been the god of death (pg. 64) and that, as the god of death, Odin was also a god of fertility (pg. 93).¹⁸ Yes, we cannot expect that a clean-cut ideological distinction between the two gods would have existed across Scandinavia, but this haziness alone makes Gjessing’s argument more difficult to swallow.

In a paper of more recent years, **Einar Østmo** discusses the importance of the horse and ship as symbols in the Scandinavian Bronze Age.¹⁹ He explores the origins of horse domestication and seafaring in the North and, like Gjessing, offers his interpretations of the numerous artifacts and rock carvings related to them. Østmo, however, comes to a conclusion

¹⁶ Gjessing 1943: 63.

¹⁷ Gjessing 1943: 65.

¹⁸ Gjessing 1943: 64, 93.

¹⁹ *Horses, Indo-Europeans and the Importance of Ships* 1997.

that is odds with Gjessing's in that he believes that horses and ships have little to do with Frey and the fertility gods of the pagan Norse religion, but instead are *expressions of social and political power*.²⁰ He does not take his discussion into the Viking Age proper, but his article is nonetheless quite relevant to our analysis of horse burials during the period.

Ulf Erik Hagberg's archaeological review of the Roman Iron Age horse sacrifice at Skedemosse in Sweden also contributes to our study. In the process of analyzing the cult worship that must have taken place there, Hagberg looks at earlier literature on other votive offering sites around Scandinavia, many of which contain horse remains. He also takes into account the writings of Roman historians like Tacitus, Procopius and Jordanes who—at the same time Skedemosse and other sites were in use—documented the practices and beliefs of Germanic tribes in and around the Scandinavian peninsula. Hagberg's work is quite helpful not only as a comprehensive overview of the material remains of the horse cult, but also as an even-handed interpretation of its origins and the belief system that lay behind it.

Over the last half-century, **Hilda Ellis Davidson** has written extensively about the religion of pagan Scandinavia.²¹ The issue of the horse cult comes up now and then in her writings, but she never fully explores it. She seems relatively satisfied with the explanation that horses found in graves were fertility sacrifices to the Vanir.²² In this, I think she fails to take up the issue of whether horses found in human burials were in fact slain for the same reasons they would have been at a 'regular' cultic sacrifice. Whereas the latter may very well have been carried out to ensure prosperity and a good harvest, a horse burial could have had an entirely different significance. We will explore the issue of the horse cult raised by Hagberg and Ellis Davidson in some depth in the following chapter.

Anne Stine Ingstad livens up the dialogue with her review of the Oseberg find—perhaps the most remarkable horse burial of them all—and its cultic implications. She centers her rather provocative discussion around the tapestry fragments found in the burial. The images on these textiles give us a tantalizing glimpse into the pagan burial rite and the horse's importance in it. Ingstad's basic stance is that the main woman buried at Oseberg had been an important figure in the fertility cult of the Vanir, especially as it pertained to the female deity Freya. She goes as far as to suggest that the 'queen' of Oseberg was Freya's "earthly

²⁰ Østmo 1997: 305.

²¹ *The Road to Hel: A Study in the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* 1943, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* 1964, *Pagan Scandinavia* 1967, *Scandinavian Mythology* 1982, *Myths & Symbols in Pagan Europe* 1988, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* 1993.

²² Ellis Davidson 1982: 79.

incarnation and representative.”²³ Accordingly, the horses were sacred beasts within her cult and played a key part of a sacrifice for peace and prosperity performed at the funeral. Ingstad’s analysis comes across as far-fetched at times, but it is well worth our attention.

Michael Müller-Wille has written an important work on the topic of horse burials, entitled *Pferdegrab und Pferdeopfer im frühen Mittelalter*. Though his main emphasis is on the areas influenced by the *Reihengräber* culture of Central and Western Europe,²⁴ he provides us with a detailed review of the horse burials and horse sacrifices in southern Scandinavia from the end of the Bronze Age up through the Viking Age.²⁵ He does not go very far into the possible reasons behind the practices, but rather—as a consummate archaeologist—presents the facts in a clear and orderly manner, often enlisting the aid of charts and maps.

In “Birka IV: The Burial Customs,” Swedish archaeologist **Anne-Sofie Gräslund** discusses the twenty chamber-graves at Birka in which horses were found along with their human occupants. Her handling is quite thorough and technically-oriented. She itemizes the position of the horses in the grave, the degree of east-west orientation of each grave, the equipment contained in them and even the estimated ages of the horses. Moreover, Gräslund brings other horse burials from around Sweden into the discussion, highlighting those that share a connection with the chamber-graves at Birka. In the end, she concludes that the function of the horse in Swedish burials during the Vendel and Viking periods was to provide the dead warrior with the means to make a fitting entry into Valhalla.

Gräslund does well to make an inventory of the archaeological findings in Sweden, but she spends little time analyzing the reasons behind the burial practice. Her treatment of horse burials in Norway and Denmark is limited to two sentences, so the overall Nordic picture is also left unexplored. The explanation she offers is an easy one to make, and more or less relies on the works of others.²⁶ Furthermore, she does not seriously consider the possibility of influence from the East in regards to in the Birka graves. A few researchers have identified a number of the artifacts from these graves as Oriental in origin,²⁷ something of which Gräslund makes no reference.

²³ Christensen, Ingstad & Myhre 1992: 254.

²⁴ “*Reihengräber* are inhumation graves laid out in fairly regular rows with approximately the same orientation. They were particularly common on the Continent in the period corresponding to the Late Iron Age in Scandinavia. From the ninth century on the occur also in the western Slav area. The *Reihengrube* culture is thought to have originated in Gaul and the Rhineland, and reached its peak from the middle of the fifth century to about the year 700.” (Gräslund 1980: 44).

²⁵ Müller-Wille 1971, 1993.

²⁶ See Gräslund 1980: 43.

²⁷ Hägg 1984, Duczko 2000.

Over the last decade, another Swede by the name of **Anneli Sundkvist** has focused on the role horses played in Sweden during the Viking Period.²⁸ In her latest work, she performs a comparative analysis of the 10th century graves with horses/horse tack and weapons in Birka and the Swedish boat-grave cemeteries. This study sheds light on how the motivations behind horse burials across even this limited geographic region may have been very different.

Trond Meling has written a Master's thesis about the graves with horses and riding equipment from the Merovingian period located exclusively in western Norway. The material he is dealing with is very sparse: only *four* graves from that period have been found to contain so much as horse bones or horse teeth.²⁹ His analysis therefore relies mainly on graves with riding gear and weaponry found in the western districts of Rogaland, Hordaland and Sogn og Fjordane. Meling's main focus is on how all of these graves can be connected to the political situation of the time. He argues that although the horse did not play a major military role, both it and its equipment in the grave symbolized the ideal warrior. He roams little beyond a mundane interpretation of horse graves, and only presents—rather than critiques—arguments connecting them to the horse's role in the fertility cult, shamanism and the journey to the other world.

In another recent Master's thesis, **Kristin Oma** takes the point of departure that the horse fulfilled two distinct roles in the Scandinavian Iron Age.³⁰ The horse was not only understood to perform its practical function in what Oma terms the “material realm,” but it also occupied a central position in society's mystical understanding of the cosmos, or the “symbolic sphere.” Oma includes a brief section on the horse burials of the Viking Age.³¹ Her focus is to demonstrate the wide range of forms the custom takes, and in doing so she pays little attention to the prominent trends that I will be reviewing. Though she rightly identifies the fact that horses almost always appear in ship burials, for example, she goes no further than to say that the bond between the two is strong.³² Moreover, she does not take up the discussion of the horse's role in the cult sacrifice as opposed to its role in burial. This is an issue that I believe is key to our understanding of the reasons behind the appearance of horses in the grave.

²⁸ Sundkvist 1992, 2001.

²⁹ Meling 2000: 34.

³⁰ Oma 2000: 1.

³¹ Oma 2000: 38-41.

³² Oma 2000: 45-46.

Chapter II

The Horse Cult

The horse was unquestionably an important animal in Scandinavia starting as far back as the Bronze Age. It served not only practical purposes, like those involved in transportation or labor, but also seems to have had strong correlations to ideology and religious symbolism.

Symbols of the horse show up on rock carvings throughout the period, such as on the Kivik grave in Scania dated to 1300 BC³³ and in the remarkable Sagaholm find,³⁴ and as a few Bronze Age artifacts, like the famous Horse and Sun Chariot from Trundholm on Zealand in Denmark (fig. 1). This preoccupation with the creature takes on even greater significance when one looks at the finds of horse bones that begin to appear towards the end of the period, bearing the marks of sacrifice. These testify to the development of a cult involving horses that would persist in one form or another for the next thousand years.

(Fig. 1. The Horse and Sun Chariot from Trundholm, Denmark. Courtesy of: Sagaholm 1999).

Horse sacrifice was certainly not unique to Scandinavia. Horses were venerated in this manner by early as well as later Indo-Europeans, ever since their earliest domestication in the Sredny Stog culture in the Dnieper river valley of modern-day Ukraine.³⁵ Horses were

³³ Østmo 1997: 289.

³⁴ Goldhahn 1999: 150. The grave and rock carvings are given the rough dating of 1500-1100 BC.

³⁵ Østmo 1997: 313-314.

also not the only sacral beast, as animal sacrifices of various kinds in the North occurred as early as the Late Bronze Age and continued far into the Iron Age.³⁶

In this chapter I will present the reader with a review of the horse-related worship and sacrifice that took place both prior to and contemporary with the emergence of horse burials in Scandinavia. The main issue we will be looking at is whether the horse as a votive offering or as part of a sacrificial feast would have had the same or related purpose as when it appeared as a grave good.

One possible way of determining this is by looking at the very remains of horses from cult sites and comparing these with horse remains found in burial contexts. Disparity in how the horses may have been killed and how their bodies were thereafter handled would suggest that their deaths served different symbolic goals. This discussion will serve as our point of departure in the forthcoming chapters where horse burials will be directly addressed.

2.1 The Horse Cult at Skedemosse

Beginning in the Roman Iron Age (0-500 AD) there is clear evidence of horse sacrifice in Sweden. At Skedemosse on the island of Öland in the Baltic Sea, the bones of hundreds of horses have been discovered on the shores of a shallow lake, alongside smaller numbers of cattle, sheep, and pigs. Where the layer of excavated sediment was undisturbed, a basic system for what were undoubtedly sacrificial rites can be made out. In certain areas, horse bones were found in heaps consisting of skull parts, extremities and tail vertebrae (fig. 2). Elsewhere, concentrations of ‘dismembered, marrow-split’ bones were uncovered.³⁷

(Fig. 2. The gray sections represent the typical bone finds from Skedemosse. Courtesy of: Müller-Wille 1971).

³⁶ Hagberg 1967: 71.

³⁷ Hagberg 1967: 55.

This is relatively strong proof that these horses had been eaten. Since they accounted for a larger percentage of the sacrificed animals, they were evidently a particularly favored victim. It is a completely different picture from normal dietary habits, as midden remains from area farms show that sheep and then cattle were the most common food animals. Eating horse meat must therefore have marked a special occasion, probably some kind of ceremonial feast.

The Icelandic historian, Snorri Sturluson, writing in the first part of the 13th century, indicates that such feasts involving horseflesh were held regularly at the Norwegian sites of Lade and Mære in Trøndelag during in the Viking Period. In *The Saga of Hákon the Good*³⁸ from *Heimskringla*, Snorri describes one of the annual pagan Yuletide feasts in which the Christian king Hákon is expected by the local chieftains and farmers to participate. Though at first he steadfastly refuses to partake in the meal, they eventually force him to eat a few bits of horse liver.

According to Snorri, this is how the whole sacrificial event played out and what it also may have resembled at other sites such as Skedemosse:

“...all kinds of livestock were killed in connection with it, horses also and all the blood from them was called hlaut [sacrificial blood], and hlautbolli, the vessel holding that blood; and hlautteiner, the sacrificial twigs [aspergills]. These were fashioned like sprinklers, and with them were to be smeared all over with blood the pedestals of the idols and also the walls of the temple within and without; and likewise the men present were to be sprinkled with blood. But the meat of the animals was to be boiled and to serve as food at the banquet.”

(*The Saga of Hákon the Good*, Ch. 14)

Clearly, ample attention is paid to the animals’ blood as well as the meat.³⁹ The horses’ blood probably received a similar focus at Skedemosse, as Hagberg notes that the horses at Skedemosse bore no traces of blows on their skulls, but rather seem to have been stabbed to death.⁴⁰ Stabbing would have been perfect for blood-letting. Such a manner of death would hardly have been swift, but rather drawn out—done therefore less for practical and more for ceremonial reasons.

³⁸ The contents of this saga have been widely criticized. It has been argued, for instance, that literary motifs similar to those in *The Saga of Hákon the Good* can be found in the second Book of the Maccabees in the Bible (Egardt 1962: 100).

³⁹ Again, the reliability of the source comes into question. The sprinkling of blood has enough in common with the sprinkling of holy water in Catholic mass that it raises the question as to whether Snorri took inspiration for his story from the latter or based it on what he considered to be good historical sources.

⁴⁰ Hagberg 1967: 80.

The very meaning of the place-name Skedemosse suggests that there was more to the horse sacrifice there than just ritualized slaughter and feasting. The first element of the word is thought to derive from Old Norse *skeið*, meaning either a fight between stallions or a horse-race, and it has been suggested that these competitions were used to select which animals should be used for sacrifice and which ones should be kept to breed.⁴¹ Horse-fighting is a well-known event in Icelandic literature⁴² and is even depicted on a Viking Age stone carving from Hägeby, Sweden (fig. 3). What also may be pictorial evidence of a horse-race preceding a sacrifice appears on one of the gold horns of the late 5th century from Gallehus in Denmark, in which a scene with the riding of a horse ends with a priest and priestess carrying a horn.⁴³

(Fig. 3. The stone carving from Hägeby depicting a horse fight. Courtesy of: Müller-Wille 1971).

We can be relatively sure that the horse sacrifice took place in one form or another across Scandinavia. The eating of horse meat must have been a significant part of pagan belief because the permission to do so was one of the conditions under which the Icelandic All-thing accepted Christianity in the year 1000.⁴⁴ Equally revealing, according to the early Norwegian law, *Gulatingloven*, a person would have all his possessions confiscated and face exile if he were to eat horse meat.⁴⁵

But what meaning may these sacrificial feasts have had for their participants? The Old Norse word for sacrifice was *blót*, which probably originally meant ‘strengthen (the god)’ and, despite the suggested cognate, does not belong etymologically to the word

⁴¹ Ellis Davidson 1988: 55.

⁴² See, for instance, *Pörsteins þátrr stangarhöggs* and *Grettis saga* (Ch. 29).

⁴³ Ellis Davidson 1982: 78.

⁴⁴ Simek 1993: 158.

⁴⁵ *Gulatinglovi*: 32.

blood.⁴⁶ This *blót* has been seen to have had a central place in the cult, serving as a direct connection between the people and gods in the ancient Scandinavian religion.⁴⁷

As such, the sacrifice was reciprocal. The people gave to the gods so that the gods would give back gifts. The particular sacrifice that Snorri tell us about is held in honor of Odin, for victory and power to the king, as well as for Njord and Frey, for good harvests and peace (*The Saga of Hákon the Good*, Ch. 14). Hagberg suggests that the people at Skedemosse were probably sacrificing to some kind of horse god,⁴⁸ hoping to secure fertility for the herds and a good crop for the following year. It is probable that the gods to whom these sacrifices were dedicated differed both temporally and regionally.

It follows that the greater the sacrifice made, the greater the reward the people hoped to receive. One would then offer that which was the finest food and drink available,⁴⁹ which was clearly horse meat and horse blood. Accordingly, it seems that the winner of the horse race at Skedemosse *rather than the loser* would have served as the perfect sacrifice.

2.2 Stallions, Hangings, and the Number Nine

If we are to rely on the historical writings of Adam of Bremen,⁵⁰ the horse sacrifice seems to have taken on a variety of forms:

“It is the custom moreover every nine years for a common festival of all the provinces of Sweden to be held at Uppsala.... The sacrifice is as follows: of every living creature they offer nine head, and with the blood of those it is the custom to placate the gods, but the bodies are hanged in a grove which is near the temple; so holy is that grove to the heathens that each tree in it is presumed to be divine by reason of the victim's death and putrefaction. There also dogs and horses hang along with men.”

(Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, Book IV, sect. 27)

Adam of Bremen never visited Uppsala, but his account jives with that of another German, Thietmar of Merseburg, who wrote about cultic activities at Lejre in Denmark in the early 10th century. People there gathered also every ninth year, but the sacrifice entailed ninety-nine people along with ninety-nine horses, dogs and cocks.⁵¹ What's more, the

⁴⁶ Simek 1993: 271.

⁴⁷ Näsström 2001: 177.

⁴⁸ Hagberg 1967: 67.

⁴⁹ Näsström 2001: 177.

⁵⁰ See Janson 2000 for source criticism. He sees Adam's whole description as a myth—a product of the political and evangelical circumstances of the times.

⁵¹ Roesdahl 1987: 153.

Stentofta stone in Blekinge, Sweden, from 600 AD relates that “with 9 billy-goats, with 9 horses gave Huthuwolfr a good year.”⁵²

It cannot escape notice that all of the victims of these sacrifices were male, humans and animals alike. It is also quite clear that the number nine had a special meaning for those performing the rites.⁵³ Considered along with the hanging that occurred at Uppsala, they may well have been connected to the worship of the god Odin. The poem *Hávamál* from the *Poetic Edda* illustrates this:

“I know that I hung on the windy tree
for nine full nights, wounded with a spear, and given to Odin,
myself to myself,
on that tree of which no one knows
where the roots run.”

(*Hávamál*, str. 138)

Elsewhere in Old Norse poetry, Odin is referred to as *hangaguðr* or *gálga valdr*, “Lord of the Gallows.” Even more revealing is that the world tree, *Yggdrasil*, from which Odin hangs himself, literally translates as ‘Ygg’s [another name for Odin] horse.’⁵⁴ Though various sources intimate that Frey, Thor and even Freya were all possible recipients of the sacrifices at Uppsala,⁵⁵ it makes most sense that in those instances in which male creatures, especially horses, were hanged in groups of nine, they were dedicated to Odin.

Unfortunately, the archaeology neither corroborates nor dispels the notion that such sacrifices took place. For one, the actual cult sites of Uppsala and Lejre have not been identified.⁵⁶ It would be interesting to analyze any horse remains from these places and find out what fate befell them. Yet, whether it was groups of nine horses (or other animals) that were rounded up and put to death at one specific time probably could not be determined. As these sacrifices would have taken place over decades, the number of carcasses would literally have piled up. It might also be quite difficult to prove that they had indeed been hanged and, as it was, hanging itself was almost certainly of a post-mortal nature. The very physics involved in yanking a horse up in a tree would have been demanding enough without it struggling and kicking on the end of the rope. Perhaps they would have been gashed first

⁵² Sundquist 1997: 135.

⁵³ For a closer look at the appearances of the number nine in Old Norse literature, see Gansum 1999: 460-461.

⁵⁴ Puhvel 1987: 194.

⁵⁵ Näsström 1995: 133.

⁵⁶ An enormous Viking Age hall has been excavated close to modern-day Lejre, but nothing of religious significance was found during the digging (Roesdahl 1993: 133).

with a spear—like Odin was in *Hávamál*—until they died and thereafter hanged, as has previously been suggested.⁵⁷

Still, at Skedemosse and other known sites like Rislev on Syd-Sjælland (300-400), and Lillemyr and Gudinsåkarne on Gotland (600-800)⁵⁸, the horses were found in such a manner that only the skull, hooves and tails remained. It is also possible that their hides were originally left intact. It may then still have been the case that they were hanged, for what eyewitnesses may have seen were simply the heads and empty carcasses dangling from the trees.

But perhaps a more plausible explanation is that these carcasses had been set up on poles for display (fig. 4). In the 950s, a Moorish Arab named Ibrahim At-Tartushi visited the town of Hedeby in southern Denmark and described the sacrifice he witnessed there:

“They hold a feast at which they all gather to honor their god and to eat and drink. Whoever kills a beast as a sacrifice sets up a pole at the door of his house and fastens the animal to it; thus the people know he has made an offering in honor of his god.”⁵⁹

This idea that the body was eaten, while the hide, head, legs and hooves were placed on a pole as a gesture to the gods, has been widely supported.⁶⁰

(Fig. 4. Reconstruction of the pole-offering of a horse. Courtesy of: Jones & Pennick 1995).

⁵⁷ Turville-Petre 1964: 47.

⁵⁸ These two sites are the only horse sacrifices in Denmark and southern Sweden that have been dated to the late Vendel or early Viking Period. All other such sites predate this (Müller-Wille 1971: 179 Map).

⁵⁹ Taken from Pluskowski 2000: 57.

⁶⁰ Hagberg 1967: 59, Krogh 1970:22, Müller-Wille 1971: 181, Backe 1993: 334.

However, this may not be the only possible reason for the practice. The act of putting just the horsehead on a pole is mentioned in some Icelandic sagas,⁶¹ where it serves as a symbol of insult and is referred to as a *niðstang*, or “pole of shame.” Travelers of the Viking Period also write of a custom in southern Russia where the horse’s skin, feet and head were placed on a pole over the grave of a dead man.⁶² Nothing, however, at the aforementioned sites suggests that the horse remains were associated with a human burial.

2.3 The Bog Finds

Elsewhere in Sweden, at sites like Bokarn lake and Rickebasta in Uppland, and in Denmark, at sites like Vimose and Nydam, further evidence for the presence of a pre-Viking Age horse cult has been fished out of bogs and fens. Since the list of these finds is long and difficult to categorize, I urge the reader to refer to Hagberg (p.63) for the particulars. Horse bones, some human bones, assorted war equipment (harnesses, swords, spear-heads, arrow-heads) and objects like bronze neck-rings and cauldrons have been recovered, all showing signs of severe damage. They seem to have been deliberately destroyed before being deposited in the mire.

A few of the horses may have wound up there by chance, unfortunate enough to get stuck in the mire, or were perhaps put to death or left to die by owners who saw them as too old or decrepit. However, nearly all of the horse remains involve dismemberment, split bones and/or deep cuts. In a few cases, the bones even seem to have been gnawed on by dogs or wolves. What was going on here?

It is most likely that the horses were the subjects of ritual sacrifice. Some classical sources⁶³ hint, however, that cult worship of different kind could have been at play than what we have discussed thus far. Paulus Orosius, a Spanish churchman of the 5th century recounting the writings of Caesar, reports the following concerning the defeat of a Roman force by the Cimbri in the lower Rhone Valley in 105 BC:

“Clothing was cut to pieces and thrown about, gold and silver were thrown into the river, corselets of men were cut up, trappings of horses were destroyed, and the horses themselves were drowned in whirlpools, and men with fetters tied around their necks were hung from trees, so that the victor laid claim to no booty, and the conquered to no mercy.”

(The Seven Books of History Against the Pagans [Historia adversus paganos], V:16)

⁶¹ *Egil’s Saga* and *Vatnsdæla Saga*.

⁶² Klindt-Jensen 1962: 128.

⁶³ Caesar, Tacitus, Orosius, et al.

Votive offerings of horse trappings from marshland in southern Sweden lend credence to this story. At the sites of Sösdala, Fulltofta and Vännebo we find exclusively horse-riding gear, saddles or harnesses that were either torn or broken into pieces before being deposited in the earth. Although these sites are contemporary with Skedemosse (dated to 400-450 AD), no horse bones were found in the excavations.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Hagberg considers these bog finds to be linked with the cult of horses at Skedemosse.⁶⁵

But rather than a recurring ceremonial feast perhaps in honor of a fertility deity, these findings could be the more sporadic offerings of the spoils of war to a god of war. Instead of the horses fulfilling a special function within the cult, here it seems that they were merely part of the war equipment. Caesar, Tacitus, and Jordanes claim that it was to both the god of war Mars and to the messenger god Mercury that these sacrifices among the Germanic tribes were made.⁶⁶ As Ellis Davidson sees it, Mercury represented the Germanic god Wodan at the time, while Mars was actually synonymous with the god Tīwaz. Over time, Odin appears to have taken the place of both of them and adopted many of their attributes.⁶⁷ Tacitus also mentions the Germanic goddess Nerthus as a possible recipient of the sacrifices. Philologically, the Norse god Njord is the Nerthus whom Tacitus names as a northwest Germanic goddess (not god) of fertility.⁶⁸

Archaeologists emphasize the connection between the bog finds and other such finds related to the nomadic horse-riding peoples from Central and Eastern Europe. Salin claims that the bog finds in general bear witness to population migrations from the Continent to Scandinavia.⁶⁹ Fabech offers the possibility that these traditions could have been brought back home by mercenaries who had served many long years with the Sarmatians or the Huns.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the custom of putting horse carcasses up on poles has already been mentioned as a possible result of contact with nomadic tribes from southern Russia.⁷¹

This concludes our examination of the 'horse cult.' As we will now move on to horse burials in Chapter 3, it will be interesting to see what, if any, aspects they share with those of the 'horse cult' that we have just discussed.

⁶⁴ Fabech 1991: 106.

⁶⁵ Hagberg 1967: 70.

⁶⁶ Ellis Davidson 1964: 55.

⁶⁷ Ellis Davidson 1964: 56-57.

⁶⁸ Brøndsted 1960: 260.

⁶⁹ Salin 1899: 45.

⁷⁰ Fabech 1991: 109.

⁷¹ Klindt-Jensen 1962: 128.

Chapter III

Horse and Ship

Horses have been found along with all of the major Viking ship burials in mainland Scandinavia.⁷² Indeed, horses are the most numerous among the animals found sacrificed in Scandinavian Iron Age ship burials.⁷³ These rather striking observations suggest a connection between the two symbols as it regards Viking concepts of death and an arguably comparable importance in the funeral rite.

3.1 Ship Graves

Boat- and ship-graves⁷⁴ were a common burial phenomenon in Scandinavia for about a millennium, stretching from the early Roman Iron Age (late 1st to 2nd century AD) up towards the end of the Viking Age in the 11th century.⁷⁵ As previously noted, the significance of burying people along with boats has been a fairly well-published subject matter.⁷⁶ What has not been so well-scrutinized is how the custom seems to have grown in popularity along parallel lines with horse burials.⁷⁷ The additional fact that so many Viking Age ship burials are also horse burials requires that we look at the symbolic function of the ship as well as that of the horse.

Various explanations have been given about the practice. Many scholars prefer the explanation that the boats from the graves of the Viking Age were intended to serve as ferries conveying their lifeless passengers on to Valhalla.⁷⁸ This notion draws its inspiration in part from the Greek myth of Charon, the ferryman who grants the dead passage across the rivers Acheron and Styx to Hades in exchange for the fee of a coin. Others support the notion that boats in the grave were themselves votive offerings, connected to the fertility cults of Njord

⁷² Oseberg—13 horses, Gokstad—12 horses, Borre—3 horses, Tune—1 horse, Ladby—11 horses, Hedeby—3 horses.

⁷³ Andrén 1993: 45.

⁷⁴ Wamers defines a ship as being over 20 meters in length, whereas a boat would presumably be fewer than 20 meters in length. (A.W. Brøgger was the first to argue for a distinction between the two in 1950). This distinction is important in that the size of the craft often indicates the wealth and standing of the dead. However, regarding symbolic interpretation, I do not see the distinction as of consequence because whether 19 meters or 21 meters, a boat/ship would in all probability have been put there for a reason independent of its physical size.

⁷⁵ Müller-Wille 1995: 106.

⁷⁶ See, for instance, *The Ship as Symbol in Prehistoric and Medieval Scandinavia* 1995.

⁷⁷ Gjessing 1943: 61.

⁷⁸ Examples: Stjerna 1905, Shetelig 1937: 280, Gjessing 1943: 64, Brøgger 1950, Müller-Wille 1970, 1995, Ellmers 1980, 1986, 1995: 92.

and Frey.⁷⁹ The Kvalsund boats from western Norway, though not associated with graves, are a typical example of this interpretation. They were intentionally broken into pieces before being laid down in a bog, circa 700 AD.

Both of these are religious rationalizations, but boats may have indeed served more practical or materialistic purposes in the grave. First, they could simply have been convenient tools in the act of interment.⁸⁰ Smaller boats were essentially ready-made coffins without a lid. Grave goods like weapons, jewelry and food could easily be loaded in the boat next to the deceased. If the burial was a cremation, then the boat would also have been a good source of fuel for the funeral pyre. Another valid explanation of its interment could be that the boat, along with everything else in the grave, was merely the personal property of the dead individual. This being the case, the amount and value of the grave's furnishings would communicate a lot about the wealth, power and prestige of the deceased and his family. An especially lavish display could further elevate their present status and renown in the community, while solidifying the claim on a past of noble lineage. Because of their high visibility, graves covered by a mound would be prime candidates for such an interpretation because they would stand as constant reminders of the influence of the individual or group buried there. Finally, the boat also could have represented exactly what its function was in the world outside of the grave—that of a vessel that traveled on the sea. This is to say that the man buried was a seafarer by trade or lifestyle, and it was only fitting that he would be left with it.

Certainly, these explanations could all in turn be applicable to the diverse boat graves found across Scandinavia. The possibility that a boat found its way into the grave on the basis of a mixture these beliefs would also not have been unlikely. Moreover, it should be said that the symbolic meaning of the sea vessel was sure to have changed with the passage of time. For his part, Gjessing goes to great lengths to convince us that some sort of evolution in this belief took place.

In this chapter, I will examine the archaeological findings from some of the most notable burials of both horse and ship. My focus will be to find out what can above all be inferred from the grave goods and their context about the purpose or meaning behind the burials. Were, for example, the horses 'ready for use' in the afterlife, as in outfitted for a journey of some kind? Were the ships indeed prepared to set out on a voyage? Perhaps most importantly, do the dead seem to be 'laid to rest' or are they rather 'sent off'?

⁷⁹ Crumlin-Pedersen 1995: 94, Müller-Wille 1995: 106, Ellis Davidson 1967: 119.

⁸⁰ Thorvildsen discusses this possibility in his analysis of the Ladby ship burial (Thorvildsen 1957: 114).

3.2 The Horse and Ship in the Cult

The connection between the horse and the ship goes far back into Scandinavian pre-history.⁸¹ Gjessing is particularly fascinated by their relation to each other and how the relationship changes over time.

Gjessing begins his discourse with the fascinating Horse and Sun Chariot from Trundholm, on the island of Seeland in Denmark. This Bronze Age artifact, according to Gjessing, symbolizes the ‘sun cult’ and was likely used as a votive offering in rites connected to the cult.⁸² As the sun’s foremost role was to promote fertility on earth, the ‘sun cult’ and ‘fertility cult’ would most certainly have been closely connected. Thus, the Trundholm horse and a number of rock carvings from Sweden and Norway depicting what may be horses drawing chariots⁸³ point to the horse as a symbol for both cults.

At the same time, Gjessing calls attention to appearance of the ship as a common offering to the sun god in the Bronze Age. In addition, ships are the frequent subjects of rock carvings from the period, and several of them are even depicted with horseheads and tails as their prows and sterns (fig. 5). In this way, the ship and horse appear in the same context and seem to play equivalent or at least complimentary roles within the cult.

(Fig. 5. The horse-ship carving from Skjeberg in Østfold, Norway. Courtesy of: Østmo 1997).

If one then fast-forwards to the Vendel Period, this horse and ship tradition has endured, and Gjessing sees both as having developed into symbols of Frey.⁸⁴ “Frey is the sun god and his horse is the sun horse, which is descended directly from the Trundholm horse in the late Bronze Age.”⁸⁵ Gjessing then proceeds on to the picture stones from Gotland which he interprets as showing how the ‘sun ship’ of Frey develops into the ‘death ship’ of Odin that sails on to Valhalla. His general conclusion is that the cult of Frey gave way to the cult of Odin from the Bronze Age to the Viking Age, and along with that the symbolism of the horse

⁸¹ This connection also clearly persists through the Viking Age and beyond. Typical kennings for ‘ship’ in Old Norse literature include ‘horse of the sea’ or ‘sea-horse’ (see, for instance, the 27th stanza of the *Lay of Hymir*, or *Hymiskviða*). The same relationship also surfaces in *Gulatingsloven*, in which horses and ships are often named in the same breath (Oma 2000: 96).

⁸² Gjessing 1943: 7.

⁸³ Østmo 1997: 292.

⁸⁴ Gjessing 1943: 92.

⁸⁵ Paraphrasing of Gjessing 1943: 58.

and the ship changed drastically over time, though their popularity in burials and artwork continued uninterrupted. “In other words, the new Odin-cult takes over the symbols from the Frey-cult.”⁸⁶

In contrast to Gjessing’s presentation of the material, Einar Østmo claims that symbols of both the horse and the ship from the Bronze Age are to be seen as “expressions of social and political power and significance rather than vestiges of a fertility religion.”⁸⁷ This is to say that they were venerated more for the access to power, fame and fortune they gave men through the world of trade and war. “The ship was to become the most popular symbol of all, and horsepower could only enhance that.”⁸⁸

3.3 The Swedish Boat-Graves

It is in the centuries immediately preceding the Viking Age with the graves at **Vendel** in Uppland, Sweden, that some of the first horse-ship burials appear in Scandinavia. The Vendel graves clearly indicate the presence of a noble family in the area, suggested by the richness of their grave goods and the remarkable uniformity they exhibit over roughly three centuries.⁸⁹ Some even suggest that they are the material remains of a royal dynasty.⁹⁰ The general pattern for these flat-ground, inhumation burials had the deceased placed in a boat up to 10 meters in length, equipped with an array of weapons (ranging from helmets, swords, shields, spear-heads to arrow-heads), and accompanied by hounds on a leash, horses with bridle and saddle, and the occasional hunting falcon.⁹¹ The boats were also provided with cooking gear and food supplies, including joints of ham and—in one grave—a sheep’s head.⁹²

As a rule, the horses in these boat graves were buried together with riding or driving tack, but the equipment was not always placed on the horse. Saddles were often placed together with the dead man rather than on the steed, though there is at least one instance in which a saddle was left on.⁹³ In the oldest of the Vendel graves, dating to roughly 600 AD, the dead chieftain was “seated in full war-gear in the stern of his ship with his horse behind

⁸⁶ Gjessing 1943: 90.

⁸⁷ Østmo 1997: 305.

⁸⁸ Østmo 1997: 309.

⁸⁹ Ellis Davidson 1967: 114.

⁹⁰ For example, Hyenstrand 1996. DNA analysis of the skeletal remains from these graves, however, indicates that there is not as much genetic relationship between the various grave occupants as previously assumed (Götherström 2001).

⁹¹ Shetelig 1937: 257.

⁹² Ellis Davidson 1943: 17.

⁹³ Ellis Davidson 1967: 115.

him.”⁹⁴ This seems to suggest he had not so much been ‘laid to rest,’ but that he had been gotten ready for a journey. Caution in drawing such a conclusion should be exercised, because instances in which the buried are found in a seated position can also be explained by the effects of rigor mortis.⁹⁵ But rigor mortis is probably not the case here, as the skeleton of a man from another grave at Vendel was found seated upright in a chair.⁹⁶ Examples of the dead being seated on a chair inside the burial mound also show up in Old Norse literature.⁹⁷

At **Valsgärde**, to the south of Vendel and quite near Gamla Uppsala, we find strong similarities to the boat-graves at Vendel. The fifteen well-preserved finds at Valsgärde show how the burial ships were outfitted in the same sort of regular pattern as at Vendel, that Greta Arwidsson sees as simply following the practical rules applicable when loading ships for a long journey.⁹⁸ Food for this journey consisted mainly of joints of ham, a few fish-bones and some hazelnuts.

Each grave was occupied by only one man, who was usually found amidships lying on a bed of down and textiles, surrounded by his weapons and other personal equipment. Aside from a few exceptions, Arwidsson notes that the stern of the ships at both Vendel and Valsgärde were often left completely empty.⁹⁹

As to placement of the horses in the grave, many of those at Valsgärde had “clearly been tumbled down into the pit between the sides of the boat and the grave-shaft so that they lay beside the boat.”¹⁰⁰ Still, they were normally outfitted with at least a halter, and sometimes also with a bridle. Their age, sex and health did not seem to follow a set rule. In one case, three young stallions were buried alongside a fifteen year-old mare.¹⁰¹ At least one horse was shown to have been afflicted with *spavin*, a degenerative joint disease affecting the horse’s hindquarters.¹⁰² All of this indicates that the ‘best’ animals were not always used, suggesting that their symbolic worth was more important than their physical worth.

A curious development at both Vendel and Valsgärde was that while the early boat graves contain two or more horses, often placed at the prow of the boat, the later Viking Age

⁹⁴ Ellis Davidson 1943: 16.

⁹⁵ Geary 1994: 31.

⁹⁶ Ellis Davidson 1943: 16.

⁹⁷ See, for instance, *Grettis Saga* (Ch. 18) & *Egils saga ok Ásmundar* (Ch. 7).

⁹⁸ Arwidsson 1982: 76.

⁹⁹ Arwidsson 1982: 74.

¹⁰⁰ Arwidsson 1982: 76.

¹⁰¹ Gräslund 1980: 42.

¹⁰² Sundkvist 2001: 67. The back haunches become stiff and the horse acquires an uneven gait (Hedman 1996: 163).

graves contain only one or two horses.¹⁰³ What would the reasons for this change have been? It could just be a sign that the wealth and influence of the noble family was on the wane. It could also owe itself to a gradual shift in symbolism over time; this possibility will be discussed a bit further on.

Comparing Vendel and Valsgärde to Skedemosse

In light of the sacrifices at Skedemosse, in which an important part of the rites included the eating of horse flesh, *it is apparent that what transpired at Vendel and Valsgärde was of an entirely different nature.* These early horse burials reveal a treatment of the animals that does not appear to involve dismemberment or other form of gratuitous destruction, but rather reveal a more ‘careful’ method of murder. Their skeletons were left more or less complete. A clear distinction was also made between the horses and the joints of meat which served as food for the deceased. Arwidsson points out that the best parts of the pig were eaten at the burial while the remaining pieces were granted to the dead.¹⁰⁴ Thus the horse was neither a source of food at the burial nor was meant to be so in the afterlife.

Another departure from the cultic rites we discussed in Chapter 2 regards the sex of the horses. Of the ten horses from Vendel whose sex was able to be determined, four were mares and six were stallions.¹⁰⁵ These numbers clearly show that the male horses that Adam of Bremen writes about were neither deemed to be a necessity nor were even preferred to an appreciable degree. The subject group is small, but striking enough to weaken the view that the stallion was the first choice in the horse sacrifice—as far as it concerns burials.¹⁰⁶

Animal Sacrifice as a Reflection of Hunting Culture

The horses, dogs and birds of prey that show up in these Swedish boat-graves constitute key elements in the pastime of hunting. Some scholars have construed this as a manifestation of the lively contacts between Sweden and the budding feudal culture on the Continent where, for example, falconry and hawking were highly appreciated.¹⁰⁷ The

¹⁰³ Gräslund 1980: 42.

¹⁰⁴ Arwidsson 1982: 81.

¹⁰⁵ Götherström 2001: Table 1.

¹⁰⁶ In this I am in disagreement with Sundkvist 2001: 66.

¹⁰⁷ Sjövärd, Vretemark & Gustavson 1982: 141.

keeping, training and breeding of such birds was surely expensive and almost certainly would have been a pursuit exclusive to the upper class or royalty.

Artwork on a Vendel helmet dated to the late 7th century may indeed represent the hunt: a rider is shown armed with a spear and accompanied by two birds, perhaps falcons or hawks (fig. 6).

(Fig. 6. Scene from a Vendel helmet. Courtesy of: Brøndsted 1960).

The consensus among academics, however, is that this is a battle scene depicting an early version of Odin and that the birds are actually his two ravens, Hugin and Munin.¹⁰⁸ The horse only has four legs, unlike Odin's eight-legged steed Sleipnir.¹⁰⁹ Despite this discrepancy, the theory is appealing because of how Odin figures so prominently in other artwork from the period, especially on the picture stones from Gotland.

Gotland Picture Stones

The picture stones from the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea are an invaluable archaeological source for our understanding of belief in the afterlife during the Viking Age. In contrast to the Icelandic sagas, they provide contemporary portrayals of what at least some upper-class Scandinavians (those who had the economic resources to have them designed and erected) thought would happen after one left the confines of Middle Earth. As stated

¹⁰⁸ Shetelig 1937: 259, Gjessing 1943: 90, Ellis Davidson 1943: 147.

¹⁰⁹ Sleipnir is described as having eight legs in Snorri's *Gylfaginning* (Str. 15 & 42) from *Poems of the Elder Edda*. Some explanations for the symbolism of the eight legs include that they were intended to give an impression of the horse's great speed (Turville-Petre 1964: 57) or that they represent the legs of four pallbearers carrying a coffin (Ellis Davidson 1964: 142). We will discuss Sleipnir more in the chapter dealing with instances of horses and horse burials in literature.

previously, both horses and ships seem to have been deeply entrenched in this concept of death.

The tradition of raising illustrated tombstones or memorial stones on Gotland goes as far back as 300 AD. Early stones were decorated with minimalist ship-drawings or three rosettes representing the Germanic view of the cosmos with the sun, earth ('Midgard') and Hel's realm of the dead.¹¹⁰ Gjessing interprets the ships on these first stones as symbolic of the 'sun ship' associated to the earlier Bronze Age sun/fertility cult (as opposed to the 'death ship').¹¹¹ Over the centuries, however, a change in motifs takes place that in all likelihood indicates a shift in belief concerning the ideology of death. By the 8th century, the picture stones display not only a ship with sail, but include additional scenes with an armed horseman being welcomed by a woman with a drinking horn (fig. 7). As these images are further developed, a dog is often found to accompany the horseman and a house with three doors crops up as the rider's destination. This house is probably meant to symbolize the residence of Odin, Valhalla, which according to Norse literature had more doors than any other house.¹¹² Finally, there are several instances in which the horse that arrives at this 'Valhalla' has eight legs, most likely meant to represent Sleipnir.

Unmasking the identity of the horseman would be helpful in construing the whole meaning of the sequence. Ellmers argues that the figure is indeed representative of the person the stones were raised in memory of: "Where one person is shown on horseback in the picture, only one dead person is named in the inscription, and where as an exception two warriors (not on horseback, but each with a dog) are depicted, the inscription names two dead men."¹¹³ Gjessing, on the other hand, claims that the rider is Odin himself. His main case for this is that the horseman is almost always equipped with a spear when he is armed. The spear was above all Odin's weapon, and his own spear, Gungnir, was supposed to hit every target it was thrown at. This contention is especially attractive, considering the stones that depict the eight-legged Sleipnir. Ellmers, however, sees this as Odin sending his own horse to carry the dead man to Valhalla.

But whether the rider is Odin himself or someone who is likened to Odin, there does seem to be agreement that Odin is the central deity involved in the Gotlandic concept of death. And the horse, whether it is Sleipnir or not, plays an integral part of this ideology.

¹¹⁰ Ellmers 1995: 167.

¹¹¹ Gjessing 1943: 66.

¹¹² "Five hundred and forty doors" to be exact. From *The Lay of Grimnir*, verse 8, in *The Poetic Edda*.

¹¹³ Ellmers 1995: 168.

(Fig. 7. One of the Gotland picture stones. Courtesy of: Internet Website).

Summary of the Swedish Boat-Graves

Taking a look at the Vendel and Valsgärde burials in light of the Gotland picture stones, they almost could not have fit the ‘picture’ more perfectly. Many of the elements on the picture-stones (and the Vendel helmet for that matter) are found as artifacts in the Uppland ship-graves. This is surely no coincidence. The relatively close proximity of the Uppland to Gotland speaks in favor of a cultural correspondence between the two areas.

The grave furnishings at both Vendel and Valsgärde offer the attractive argument that the dead were being prepared for a journey and a life of combat, recreation and hunting when they got there. The impression we are left with is that it was the ships that were embarking on this journey, rather than the horses. In most cases their prows are actually pointed towards the water, as if just about to set sail.¹¹⁴ The horses, for their part, are either positioned as passengers in the boat or are seemingly left behind, lying to the side of the boat. One would presume that the horses would be placed onboard if they were to be taken along on a voyage. Yet, the fact that the majority of the horses still wore gear, and that saddles and ornate bridles were also interred, hints that the horses still had a role to play in the grave.

The picture stones bolster the argument that what we find at Vendel and Valsgärde were Valhalla burials, suggesting that the ships accomplished the first part of the journey, while the horse was necessary for the final leg in order to make a fitting entrance in to Valhalla. The dwindling number of horses in the ship-graves over time also could be connected with the appearance of just *one* horse and its rider in the welcoming-scene. It would therefore not be unreasonable to suggest that the horses from these Swedish boat burials were meant to be used in the afterlife, as the manner in which the dead got to Valhalla.

3.4 The Norwegian Ship Burials

According to *Ynglingatal*, the late 9th century poem which forms the basis for Snorri's *Ynglingasaga* in *Heimskringla*, the royal dynasty of Vestfold on the western side of the Oslo fjord traced its lineage back to the royal Swedish dynasty of Uppsala. For that reason, some scholars have connected the burial mounds at Borre, Oseberg and Gokstad with the burial mounds at Vendel and Valsgärde.¹¹⁵ Others, such as Claus Krag, question the reliability of Snorri's account, arguing that the politics of his time may have influenced the historical designation of Vestfold as the focal point for Harald Finehair's unification of Norway.¹¹⁶ The bottom line is that archaeologists who would like to use *Ynglingatal* or *Ynglingasaga* as sources for identifying the Ynglinga ætt's grave-sites are faced with a great many difficulties.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Ellis Davidson 1967: 115.

¹¹⁵ For example, Brøgger 1926. See discussion in Myhre 1992: 35-50 & 258-266.

¹¹⁶ Krag 1990: 193.

¹¹⁷ Myhre 1992: 266.

Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore the fact that the horse-ship burial phenomenon is a common occurrence in Vestfold, not to mention other parts of Norway as well.

3.4.1 Oseberg

The **Oseberg** burial from Vestfold is arguably the most magnificent of all Viking ship burials. It is, however, *without a doubt* the greatest horse burial known of in Scandinavia. It has been dated to 834 and contained the bodies of two women who lay on a large bed in a wooden burial chamber situated in the stern of the ship. One of the women was in her twenties and the other was an elderly woman, perhaps in her sixties. The younger woman is regarded by most scholars to be the actual recipient of the extravagant burial and has thus been dubbed the “Oseberg queen”.¹¹⁸ There are various opinions as to who she was—the most notable of which (though not necessarily the most plausible) is the argument first forwarded by A.W. Brøgger that she was Queen Åsa, mother of Halvdan the Black.¹¹⁹ Though the grave goods make it apparent that she demanded a great deal of respect among her people, the title of ‘queen’ may not encompass all the functions she had in life, as we will discuss below.

The excavators of the burial mound found a great many horse skeletons in and around the ship. There has been a certain amount of disagreement or confusion concerning their exact number. Various sources list the total as ten,¹²⁰ thirteen,¹²¹ fifteen,¹²² sixteen,¹²³ and as many as twenty.¹²⁴ In this paper, I will rely on the figure of “at least thirteen” provided by the official publication of the find, not only because it should be the least adulterated source, but also because it is specific enough to denote where the horses were found *in situ*—ten lying scattered about the fore-ship and three just outside the ship on the port side.¹²⁵ It is also particular enough to specify that the horses were beheaded with one powerful, well-placed blow above the uppermost vertebrae.

¹¹⁸ Ingstad 1992: 226.

¹¹⁹ Brøgger 1916.

¹²⁰ Sjøvold 1969: 12.

¹²¹ Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig 1917: 215 (Bind I).

¹²² Gjessing 1943: 59, Christensen 1992: 61.

¹²³ Turville-Petre 1964: 57.

¹²⁴ Røthe 1994: 13, citing Guldberg 1907: 1396.

¹²⁵ Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig 1917: 64 & 82.

A number of other animals were also sacrificed at Oseberg. These were found onboard the ship and included three decapitated dogs, a whole ox and a severed ox-head, which lay on bed by itself.¹²⁶

All of the horses in the Oseberg burial were old¹²⁷ and were therefore probably not that great of an economic loss to the mourners. And, since it was also assumed for much of the 20th century that the ship itself was antiquated before its interment,¹²⁸ many could have argued that despite the grandeur of the find its contents were essentially expendable. Recent dating analyses, however, have shown that the Oseberg ship was less than 15 years old upon burial, meaning that it was a relatively new vessel.¹²⁹ And, as Shetelig remarks, the grave goods were limited only by the utmost utilization of space on the ship and were not subject to economic considerations.¹³⁰ Thus, the horses were probably not just rounded up because of their age and declining value. Perhaps there was a special affiliation between the queen and the horses. It is, after all, quite reasonable to assume that this had been the queen's ship and these had been the queen's horses in her lifetime.

Sacred Horses?

Anne-Stine Ingstad argues that the horses were in fact sacred creatures set apart from birth and reserved exclusively for such a sacrifice.¹³¹ Here she is drawing on the writings of Tacitus in which he talks about horses among the Germanic tribes who were kept “pure from the taint of earthly labor” so that omens could be interpreted from their assorted neighings and snortings.¹³² She bolsters her claim by pointing out that no harnesses or equipment related to riding were found in the excavation, taking this to indicate that the horses were never meant to be driven or ridden. In fact, several small fragments of bronze and iron that were probably once harness fittings were uncovered,¹³³ but if truth be told they are very few in number especially when compared to the number of horses buried. It is even more striking when put up against the rich provisions of riding equipment found at Vendel, Valsgärde and most of the other Norwegian and Danish ship burials which we will be discussing shortly.

¹²⁶ Shetelig 1937: 282.

¹²⁷ Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig 1917: 216.

¹²⁸ See Sjøvold 1969: 33.

¹²⁹ Bonde 1997: 199.

¹³⁰ Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig 1917: 216.

¹³¹ Ingstad 1995: 35.

¹³² *Germania* (Ch. 10).

¹³³ Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig 1917: 239 (Bind II).

We should take care, however, to bring up the fact that the Oseberg grave was robbed, with the burial chamber suffering the most damage and looting. What if the missing harness had originally been laid there and the graverobbers had helped themselves to it? Brøgger sees this as very unlikely because since most of the horses and some tethering equipment lay in the fore-ship, one should also expect to find the harness there.¹³⁴ But, as we have already seen at Vendel and Valsgärde, the saddles and bridles were often found with the deceased rather than on or near the horses. Why could this have not been the case at Oseberg? Brøgger himself remarks that the simple wooden saddle found in the bow was probably first located in the burial chamber before the forced entry was made. If there had been harness (and its finery rivaled that which was found at Borre) then it would not be hard to imagine the graverobbers taking it, while casting the relatively worthless wooden saddle to the side.

However, we cannot base a counter argument on the lack of such evidence and we are left to presume that no harness was buried. This still does not make Ingstad's line of reasoning more plausible. This is the first of many instances we will see in which she lifts passage from sources that are considerably older (Tacitus' *Germania*, circa 100 AD) in order to explain religious practices and symbolism of a much later period (the Oseberg burial, 834 AD).

But even though I see her contention as quite dubious when it regards the horses' function in life, the contextual evidence implies that the horses were not meant to be driven, ridden or otherwise employed in the afterlife. The fact that the horses were beheaded and placed almost randomly on or beside the ship points to their greater significance in the burial rite than to their actual presence in the grave. Had the horses been symbolically intended for use, one would think that they would have been left more or less intact. The horses, however, probably did have a special cultic function in the burial—or at least in the life of deceased 'queen'—and this is something we will discuss below in connection to the Oseberg tapestry.

The Ship's Final Destination...

Another reason to believe that not only the horses, but the dead women and everything else contained in the Oseberg burial may not have been intended to leave the earthly confines

¹³⁴ Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig 1917: 64 (Bind I).

of the mound¹³⁵ was that the ship was weighed down by heavy stones and—even more strikingly—moored fast to a huge stone. Thus, the ship could definitely be said to be “going nowhere.” The food items found on board included seeds, wheat, wild apples, corn, walnuts and hazelnuts. While these could be seen as provisions for a voyage, they are just as possibly connected with ideas of fertility and good harvest. In contrast to this, the food at Valsgårde included the perishable items of meat and fish.

There are, however, a few bits of opposing evidence that should be considered before coming to a hasty conclusion. For one, the Oseberg queen was provided with a wagon and four sledges. Enough horses were sacrificed to draw the wagon as well as the sledges.¹³⁶ Moreover, it is worth pointing out that some of the oars in the Oseberg ship were in fact put in position as though waiting for the rowers.¹³⁷ Thus, on both land and water, the dead queen was—in the words of Arne Emil Christensen—“prepared to go in style.”¹³⁸

Wagons have been found in women’s graves throughout Scandinavia, starting around the beginning of the Iron Age.¹³⁹ Gräslund discusses fourteen such burials from Denmark and northern Germany where the woman was laid to rest in the bed of the wagon.¹⁴⁰ For one, wagons could have served merely as a woman’s symbol of status, left to her in death as it was in life. They also could have had an important ceremonial function in the cult, illustrated as they are on the Oseberg tapestry (see below). But most interestingly, one of the picture stones from Barshaldershed on Gotland shows a woman riding a horse-drawn wagon and being received by the woman with a drinking horn. This implies that women could also use them to make a journey in the afterlife, possibly even to Valhalla.¹⁴¹

The ultimate fate of the Oseberg ship is nonetheless mired in ambiguity. It has recently been pointed out that, based on different light and dark sections observed in the soil, the burial mound originally *only covered the stern* of the Oseberg ship (fig. 8).¹⁴² Meanwhile, the bow of the ship was exposed to the elements for anywhere from a few months to several

¹³⁵ This idea of life after death *within* the mound shows up in a number of saga accounts, including *Hárðar Saga* (Ch. 15), *Njáls Saga* (Ch. 78) and *Grettis Saga* (Ch. 18).

¹³⁶ Christensen 1992: 61-62.

¹³⁷ Ellis Davidson 1943: 28-29.

¹³⁸ See these internet sites: http://www.norwegian-scenery.com/facts/history/the_vikings.html or <http://odin.dep.no/odin/engelsk/norway/history/032005-990460/>

¹³⁹ Ellis Davidson 1943: 28.

¹⁴⁰ Gräslund 1980: 24.

¹⁴¹ Here I must agree with Britt-Mari Näsström when she says, “it is hard to believe that the richly endowed graves of noble women were prepared for somebody who was bound for the misery of Hel” (Näsström 1995: 148).

¹⁴² Gansum 2002: 278. This would also help to explain why the aft part of the Swedish boats were often completely empty.

years before eventually being covered up by a larger mound. Thus, the craft was both *emerging and submerging at the same time*. Perhaps this configuration was meant to physically represent the soul's passage between two worlds. On the other hand, it could symbolize the soul's spiritual presence in both worlds.

(Fig. 8. Drawing of the Oseberg ship burial after the initial mound construction. Courtesy of: Gansum 2002).

Oseberg and the Fertility Cult

The notion that the Oseberg burial was closely associated to the fertility cult has been forwarded by Anne-Stine Ingstad and Gjessing, among others. Ingstad points to the placement of the burial mound in a boggy, flat area, the sacrificed animals with cut-off heads and the stones thrown deliberately onto the grave goods and connects all of these aspects with the votive offerings we discussed in Chapter 2. In particular, she draws parallels between how the horses were sacrificed at Oseberg and how they were sacrificed at Skedemosse and Rislev.¹⁴³

I would personally argue for more caution in making this claim. Despite the fact that the horses at Oseberg were decapitated, we still find the rest of their skeletons intact in the grave. At Skedemosse, what remains of the horses are skulls, extremities and some *'dismembered, marrow-split'* bones—nothing of the like was found at Oseberg. The horses were not stabbed to death, but seem to have been dispatched in a rather swift manner with one blow to the neck. To further illustrate my point, in Snorri's account of the *blót*, we see how the entire horse was consumed: the horses' meat, innards and blood were all eaten at the feast. We do not get the impression that the same fate was visited upon the horses at Oseberg.

¹⁴³ Ingstad 1992: 256.

It is certainly possible that the horseheads served a cultic function during the funeral ceremony, perhaps by being placed on poles. The skulls, after all, had been collected into a heap before the mound was covered up,¹⁴⁴ suggesting that they were paid added focus.

Yet another scenario, however, presents itself when one ponders the logistical consequences of lopping off the heads of so many horses, dogs and cows. The decapitation may actually have been directed towards getting the most possible blood out of the animals at one time. It should also be remembered that it was in and around the exposed fore-section of the ship that all of the headless animals lay. This must have been the site where the massive horse sacrifice took place. One can only imagine the gruesome spectacle of blood showering over the prow and the face of the mound behind it, inundating the plush array of grave goods in the ship's bow with pools of crimson.

This interpretation stresses the use of blood in the funeral rites, just like we saw in the *blót* that Snorri describes. This similarity alone, however, should not warrant tying the Oseberg burial specifically to the fertility cult.

The Oseberg Tapestry

A number of fascinating tapestry fragments were recovered in the excavation of the Oseberg burial chamber. They offer a tantalizing look into the proceedings of the pagan cult that neither written sources nor artifacts of a more utilitarian nature can equal.

One of the tapestry fragments depicts some sort of religious procession involving horses, wagons and people (fig. 9). These are all moving from right to left in the direction of an enlarged figure, holding what appears to be a sword and wearing either a helmet or mask with horns. The procession's 'goal' could be further to the left, but the tapestry is only preserved up to this point. Of the four horses that appear in their entirety, three of them are drawing wagons—one of these carries two people and the other two appear to be covered by curtains. The remaining horse carries a rider. The rest of the composition is filled with people on foot who are holding either staves or spears, several birds and a number of geometric shapes.

¹⁴⁴ Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig 1917: 64 (Bind II).

(Fig. 9. Reconstruction of one of the Oseberg tapestry fragments. Courtesy of: Marstrand 1986).

What kind of event is going on here? Is it possible that it could even represent the very funeral it was found in? Anne-Stine Ingstad believes at least that it was connected to the two women buried at Oseberg and portrays a special ceremony within the cult they belonged to. She even suggests that they were the ones responsible for weaving the tapestry.¹⁴⁵ Ingstad proceeds to interpret the religious significance of the work, and in turn connect many of the items displayed on it with what was found in the Oseberg excavation.

White Horses and their Royal Implications

As mentioned above, the tapestry depicts only one rider in the whole procession. He rides a light-colored horse, which Ingstad claims was originally white, and appears to be accompanied by two birds directly above him, if not two more to the front and rear of his mount. Ingstad bestows the title of ‘king’ upon him, citing the royal symbolism of the white horse and interpreting the birds as being either hawks or falcons—additional symbols of royalty. Furthermore, she proposes that the wooden saddle found on the ship probably belonged to him, as it was certainly not meant for a woman.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Ingstad 1992: 231.

¹⁴⁶ Ingstad 1995:145. Sundkvist, meanwhile, doubts that the Oseberg saddle was really a saddle, at least not in the sense that it was intended for riding. According to her, the ‘saddle’ would have put the rider in quite an uncomfortable position and, moreover, was probably unable to support a person’s weight (Sundkvist 2001: 131).

The association of the white horse and kingship has roots going well back in Indo-European history. A striking example of this belief is the ancient Hindu sacrifice known as the *Ashvamedha*.¹⁴⁷ This great horse sacrifice was an important rite that was carried out in order to confirm the king's power and authority. A white stallion would be picked out of a flock of fine horses and would then live apart from the flock for one year leading up to the sacrifice. When the time came, the stallion was led in a ceremonial procession to the cult place and then ritually slaughtered. The sacred horses to which Tacitus refers are also white and, as he informs us, it is either the king or the priest who was responsible for interpreting their behavior to prophesy the future.¹⁴⁸

Both of these examples have enjoyed discussion by a number of scholars in connection with the horse sacrifice and burials that took place during the Viking Age in Scandinavia.¹⁴⁹ They have taken it to mean that the color of the animal had significance for which animal would be sacrificed, with the white ones being considered most favorable.

We must again bear in mind, however, that these are examples taken from distant times and far-off lands. A Germanic tribe from the 1st century does not necessarily translate into a Norwegian 'tribe' of the 9th century; nor can a ritual from India that dates back to *well before the first millennium B.C.*¹⁵⁰ be said to have much to do with Scandinavia two thousand years later. Even if we were to assume that a sliver of this tradition or belief had been passed on somehow, we still cannot be sure whether this is what the artist of the Oseberg tapestry wanted to convey. Besides, the horse may not even have originally been white and birds, for that matter, show up elsewhere on the textile and could just as well have functioned merely as a stylistic motif. It is very hard to infer the notion of kingship from the tapestry, let alone connect it to the burial itself.

Red Horses and Freya

Ingstad discusses the procession's red horse, which has a large knot in its 'braided' tail and pulls a wagon covered by a curtain. She believes that the curtain conceals an image of the goddess Freya. Firstly, she defines red as "the colour of love, sexual excitement and of many

¹⁴⁷ The source of this is a hymn in the *Rigveda*. I paraphrase Näsström 2001: 98-99.

¹⁴⁸ *Germania* (Ch. 10).

¹⁴⁹ See, for instance, Näsström 2001: 98-99.

¹⁵⁰ Ellis Davidson 1993: 92.

other aspects of Freya's domain."¹⁵¹ Secondly, she declares that knots and braids symbolize the binding effect of magic and the eternal aspect of love which Freya stood for.¹⁵² She then conjures up Tacitus once again to provide us with an account of how a picture of the goddess Nerthus was driven around in a covered wagon.¹⁵³ As if this is not enough, she writes that beneath the belly of the red horse stands a little man with a stave, representative of a phallus, and how this underlines the fact that this was a wagon concealing the image of Freya.

All of these are more or less unqualified claims. Ingstad does not cite any references that directly connect the color red with Freya (though I allow that they may exist) and her only support for what she says about knots and braids (if the tail is actually braided) is that we know of them from "antiquity."¹⁵⁴ She also forgets to mention that the same little man with a stave conveniently fills up the gap underneath the belly of *every other horse in the procession*. Even if she is right in saying that the curtain (if that is what it is) is concealing the image of a deity like in Tacitus' account, this alone cannot prove that the image was of Freya in particular.

Odin on the Tapestry

On another section of tapestry a large tree is shown with several men hanging from its branches. Ingstad is quick to point out the similarities between this, Tacitus' description of the 'holy grove' and Adam of Bremen's account of the sacrifice at Uppsala.¹⁵⁵ She assumes that the victims are men, based on their clothing. Though she acknowledges that the hanging of men and animals in trees is connected to the cult of Odin, she goes out on a limb to argue that "the fact that the sacrifice consists of male bodies...makes it clear that they were sacrificed to a female deity," namely Freya.¹⁵⁶ She concludes that they were part of a 'sacred death wedding' in which they were offered to the goddess, just as the hanged sacrifices in Tacitus were offered to Nerthus.

It is puzzling here how Ingstad supports her argument with passages from the ancient writings of Tacitus and simultaneously dismisses the largely post-Viking Age literature that

¹⁵¹ Ingstad 1995: 141.

¹⁵² Ingstad 1992: 240.

¹⁵³ *Germania* (Ch. 40). Scholars have often questioned the reliability of Tacitus' account here, as there was a Roman fertility cult of Mater Magna ('Great Mother') in which the goddess' image also was driven around in a wagon → source: *Germania* translated by J.B. Rives 1999: 293-294.

¹⁵⁴ Ingstad 1995: 141.

¹⁵⁵ Ingstad 1992: 243. Ingstad does not mention it, but it looks like the number of the hanged is at least eight.

¹⁵⁶ Ingstad 1995: 143.

connects Odin to hanging. Whereas the latter at least has the chance of being historical accurate, the former at best can only indicate that the rite was spin-off of the remote past. This scene from the tapestry goes far in verifying the accounts that men were indeed hanged in such ceremonies during the Viking Age, but there seems to be very little documented basis for tagging them as sacrifices to Freya.

Elsewhere, Ingstad does make a case for Odin being represented on the tapestry. She fancies his image being carted behind the horse that is accompanied by two black birds. This claim in itself does not seem too objectionable. But then when she proceeds to suggest that Thor's image is found in another wagon surrounded by swastikas, the whole matter seems like an exercise in pure speculation—as fascinating as it may be.

Despite this lip service to Odin and Thor, Ingstad sees Freya as the most important deity on the tapestry fragments. Combined with her views on the physical evidence from the burial itself, she declares the buried noblewoman as Freya's "earthly representative and incarnation"¹⁵⁷ and the other woman as her temple maiden. At Oseberg, "the two women must lie for ever and ever, close to the cult site they had served in this world. They must remain in the valley, so that they could continue to bring peace and fertility to the people. In this world as in the life hereafter."¹⁵⁸

Connecting the Oseberg Tapestry to the Burial

A handful of other tapestries involving horses have been found elsewhere in Scandinavia, but these date to several hundred years after Oseberg.¹⁵⁹ Tapestries of a similar style and dating to Oseberg, however, have also come to light, and it has been suggested that they all could have come out of the same workshop.¹⁶⁰ In such a case, the illustrations would have been that of a generic cultic event and not necessarily connected to the women in the Oseberg burial or their community.

Still, the mere fact that the tapestry was put in the grave suggests that the events and symbolism appearing on it would have had some relation to the funeral and/or the women that

¹⁵⁷ Gjessing, on the other hand, sees the buried woman as having had an especially important cultic role in the Frey-worshipping Ynglinga ætt. He cites *Ynglingatal*, *Islendingabók* and *Historia Norwegiae*, where Frey is said to be the progenitor of the ruling dynasty at Uppsala.

¹⁵⁸ Ingstad 1995: 147.

¹⁵⁹ Sundkvist 2001: 144-150.

¹⁶⁰ Personal communication with Christian Keller. One example of a possibly related textile was found in a ship burial in Rostad, Østfold (Marstrander 1986: 45).

were buried. And while I hope to have pointed out some of Ingstad's misconceptions, it is nonetheless apparent that the Oseberg tapestry depicts events that had a strong religious significance.

Horses seem to have played a prominent role in the proceedings. The horses on the tapestry 'dominate the composition' to the extent that one is left to wonder whether this was due to mere stylistic license or if they are over-dimensioned precisely to emphasize their importance in the rite.¹⁶¹ If we allow ourselves to assume that the Oseberg 'queen' was involved in this kind of rite during her lifetime, then it makes sense to look for correlations between the tapestry and the grave. If Ingstad is correct in linking many of items on the Oseberg tapestry with the grave goods from the burial (e.g. the saddle, wagon, lamp, stave¹⁶²), then it is not too much of a stretch to try to connect the horses to those that were later sacrificed and buried.

We have unfortunately no idea what the original colors of the horses in the Oseberg burial were, and therefore cannot even begin to weigh whether what Ingstad says about the ones on the tapestry is true or not. Conversely, the sacred horses that Ingstad contends were the ones killed in the burial are nowhere to be seen on the tapestry. What one would hope to see, as support for her claim, is a herd of unbridled and unsaddled horses somewhere on the textile fragments. I grant the possibility that a section which displayed this could have been lost or destroyed, but without it the argument is just as flimsy as it was before. It is still possible that some of the horses shown on the tapestry drawing the carts were later sacrificed. We know that at least four sledges and one wagon did not need to make the journey back from the funeral ceremony.

Final Thoughts on Oseberg

Gjessing considers the Oseberg find to be *one of most important manifestations of the horse cult in pagan Scandinavia*. To paraphrase him, no other Norwegian archaeological find is permeated to such a degree by magic and the cult as the Oseberg find. The ship-grave in itself, the great horse sacrifice, the wagon, the sleds, the animal head posts, the rattles¹⁶³ and

¹⁶¹ Røthe 1994: 111.

¹⁶² It turns out that the 'stave' is a musical instrument known of as a 'lur.' Personal communication with Terje Gansum.

¹⁶³ One unusual item commonly found among Norse horse harness is a rattle of iron rings. Four such rattles were found in the Oseberg excavation. They probably were meant to hang from the harness itself or from the side of a wagon. Some believe them to have had magical properties, perhaps for the purpose of driving evil

much else remind us of the cult.¹⁶⁴ I will add that the human sacrifice was almost certainly connected to the cult. Furthermore, the Oseberg tapestry strengthens the argument for the religious significance of the Oseberg burial.

But what was the exact nature of this cult? Though Ingstad takes it too far, there does seem to be some evidence that it was connected to fertility deities, possibly the Vanir.¹⁶⁵ Support for this includes the food supplies of corn, apples and nuts, the ship's placement in a bog, and the deliberate destruction caused by the large stones thrown into the bow. I remain, however, reluctant to cite the tapestry as a clear-cut link to the fertility cult. The hanging motif, for one thing, is more closely associated to Odin than it is to any other god or gods.

It thus remains a mystery as to the exact motives behind the horse sacrifice at the Oseberg funeral. It is nonetheless plain to see that the horses played a central role in the rites.

Women and Horses

We can also be sure from the Oseberg burial that the horse did not only belong to the men's world in the Viking Age, as Østmo suggests that it did during the Bronze Age.¹⁶⁶ As a matter of fact, one of the earliest horse burials in Scandinavia, found on Fyn in Denmark, seems to have been a woman's grave.¹⁶⁷ In addition to this, a number of boat-graves containing women and horses have been unearthed over the years at Årby and Tune in Sweden.

Several scholars have pointed to the rather crass episode recounted in *Volsapátttr* from *Flateyjarbók* as evidence for women having had a special connection to horses and the cult of Frey.¹⁶⁸ After a family's horse dies, the housewife has its phallus cut off and wraps it in onions and herbs. Over the course of the autumn, she recites chants over it, commanding it to grow and offering it up as a gift to 'Maunir.'¹⁶⁹ When St. Olaf hears of this, he visits the farm in disguise and tosses the vile appendage on the floor to the family dog.

spirits away (Gjessing 1943: 117). It may be just as likely that they were used just as bells on reindeer harness today; as a means of locating the animal by sound in snow, fog or other inclement conditions.

¹⁶⁴ Gjessing 1943: 105.

¹⁶⁵ This is anyway the general agreement among Ingstad, Gjessing and Ellis Davidson.

¹⁶⁶ Østmo 1997: 295.

¹⁶⁷ Oma 2000: 27.

¹⁶⁸ Gjessing 1943: 40, Näsström 2001: 104.

¹⁶⁹ Many regard 'Maunir' to be a power of fertility connected to Frey (Ellis Davidson 1993: 105).

The debate as to whether there lies some residual truth in this tale or if it is merely a bawdy farce of the late 14th century, intended to showcase the righteousness of St. Olaf, does not lie within the scope of this paper. *Volsapáttir* may express a religious association between women and horses, but it has nothing to do horse burials.

3.4.2 Gokstad

Located to the south of Oseberg along the Oslo fjord, the **Gokstad** ship burial from the beginning of the 10th century also involved a large horse sacrifice. At least twelve horses and six dogs were killed and placed just outside the ship from stem to stern on both sides. Interestingly enough, a peacock was the only animal found onboard the ship.¹⁷⁰ Here too, like at Oseberg, the deceased lay on a splendid bed in a burial chamber erected in the rear of the ship. Gokstad's occupant was determined to be a strongly-built male over the age of 50 years.¹⁷¹ A.W. Brøgger connects him with Olaf Geirstaðaálfr, an early king of Norway.¹⁷² A recalibration in the dating of the grave, however, has caused Myhre to voice his skepticism of this claim.¹⁷³

The Gokstad burial was also robbed, so it is probable that it contained even richer goods than those that were recovered. Nonetheless, a good supply of metal fittings for harness as well as an intriguing ornament of bronze displaying a horseman, nicknamed the 'horseman roundel', were found in the burial chamber.¹⁷⁴ A curious feature of this burial is that a sledge and three small boats seem to have been intentionally damaged before the robbery, i.e. during the original interment.¹⁷⁵

The horse skeletons were more or less complete and a good deal of skin, hair and hooves remained on them. According to the bone examiner, the horses' ages varied from young to old. Each animal was killed by a blow to the frontal skull, perhaps administered by the small axe blade found just outside of the ship. It can be said from their remains that they were not partitioned up for consumption, though I allow the possibility that the funeral guests may have enjoyed some of their blood or innards. But this would hardly have been a feast of any great proportion such as the one we read of in Snorri.

¹⁷⁰ Brøgger & Shetelig 1951: 86.

¹⁷¹ Nicolaysen 1882: 75.

¹⁷² Brøgger 1915.

¹⁷³ Myhre 1992: 43.

¹⁷⁴ See website: <http://www.gaia.no/crew/GOKSTADE.HTM>

¹⁷⁵ Gjessing 1943: 63.

Yet despite the horses—and dogs for that matter—being left ‘whole,’ the implication is that they would be left behind if the Gokstad ship and its human cargo were indeed setting off on a voyage in the afterlife. Was their purpose then limited to the funeral ceremony itself, and thus of no real significance to what—if anything—was to occur afterwards in the grave? The ‘simple’ manner of their deaths, however, suggests that there may not have been too much pomp surrounding them in the burial rite. Perhaps then the need to include them may have been for the more mundane reason of conferring them upon their rightful owner. In the same vein, it would not be so curious that the peacock was given elevated status in the burial. It was clearly a rare and valuable possession and its placement in the ship highlighted this.

Gjessing asserts that the Gokstad ship must have symbolized the ‘death ship’ in which the dead man was to sail south with to the ‘sun kingdom.’ At the same time, he argues that three small boats were sacrificed in honor of the ‘sun god’ and ‘death god’ Frey, just as the horses had been.¹⁷⁶ The boats’ deliberate destruction is strikingly similar to the votive bog offerings discussed in Chapter 2 and does suggest cultic influences in the burial. But, as I explained above, the way in which the horses were killed does not share this similarity. Confusion about what the entire burial ‘means’ sets in when one questions why the smaller boats were smashed while the larger ship remained in one piece.

It is nonetheless tempting, considering its location in Vestfold and the large number of sacrificed horses, to suppose that some of the same beliefs involved in the Oseberg burial manifested themselves at Gokstad. Still, the seventy-year gap that separates the two makes it unlikely that the burial concepts were passed down in their entirety. Moreover, the fact that fully-intact horse carcasses were strewn along both sides of the ship does little to indicate that a similar sacrificial event took place here.

3.4.3 Borre

Another Vestfold ship burial containing horses was found at **Borre**. Though most of the material evidence was destroyed in haphazard digging carried out by a road-building crew in 1852, we know from the written accounts of Nicolay Nicolaysen that the long ship had been 15-20 meters in length and its mound had measured almost 40 meters in diameter.

¹⁷⁶ Gjessing 1943: 64.

Despite the looting that also took place not long after the burial, archaeologists believe that it originally must have been an especially rich grave, on par with Oseberg and Gokstad.¹⁷⁷

Three horses with finely ornamented trappings and stirrups were unearthed at Borre as well as the remains of a dog. One horse was found lying on its side with both a saddle and bridle, while the other two were reportedly found standing, somehow stiffened by clay while the rest of the mound consisted of sand.¹⁷⁸ Other grave gifts that were recovered included the sherds of a claw beaker, iron cauldrons, a few weapons and various tools. Judging by the artistic features of these artifacts the dating of the burial has been set to the late 9th or early 10th century. The splendid harness from Borre, whose ornaments gave their name to the Borre art style, may have escaped the graverobbers' notice because it remained on the horses and not in the burial chamber.

Based on the findings of stirrups and weapons, many have viewed the Borre ship burial as that of a man's grave. Others have cast doubt on this claim, basing their objections on a spindle whorl and rock crystal bead found by Nicolaysen.¹⁷⁹ Without skeletal remains to go on, one could go as far as to speculate that the grave was the double burial of a man and a woman. Unfortunately, the truth will probably always remain a mystery.

Traveling Horses

Horses buried in a standing position must be interpreted as having had a symbolic function in the afterlife. It is a very conscious decision to go to the effort of making the horse seem alive. Why was this done? Were these horses perhaps sentinels, standing forever watch over his earthly grave?

One of the two horses was found standing outside of the ship and was probably originally hitched up to a cart or sledge.¹⁸⁰ This strongly suggests that the horses were meant to be *in motion*—in other words, *traveling somewhere*. Indeed, if there were any horses most likely to have accompanied or conveyed their master to the afterlife—possibly Valhalla—they would have been the two horses from Borre.

Wherever they were headed, they clearly served a different purpose in the grave than the horses at Oseberg. Whereas the usefulness of the horses at Oseberg was probably

¹⁷⁷ Myhre 1992: 303.

¹⁷⁸ Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig 1917: 222.

¹⁷⁹ Myhre 1992: 303.

¹⁸⁰ Personal communication with Terje Gansum.

expended in the burial rite itself, that of the Borre horses undoubtedly pertained to what was to happen later in the grave.

3.4.4 Tune

The **Tune** ship from the eastern shore of the Oslo fjord in Østfold was unearthed in 1867 with only one horse, but this was also situated in a conspicuous manner. It was found in the flat-roofed burial chamber along with the remains of the deceased and had evidently been buried standing upright in clay, just like the two horses at Borre.¹⁸¹ The dead man himself had been equipped like a warrior with a sword, spear, shield and chain mail.¹⁸² This burial suffered grave robbing too, so any articles sporting fine metal such as clothing or riding equipment would likely have been removed from the grave. Still, a few carved pieces of wood may have once belonged to a saddle.¹⁸³

The dating of Tune to 910-915 places it just about a decade after the Borre and Gokstad ship-burials. Local chieftains in Østfold would certainly have been within Vestfold's sphere of influence, if not under their political control. It is therefore likely that Tune was an attempt to copy the spirit of the Vestfold graves—in particular Borre—only in a less extravagant fashion.

Was the horse at Tune also ready to set off to some distant realm at the behest of its master? With its placement in the burial chamber, it seems to be watching over or waiting for its master, ready to serve in death as it had in life.

3.4.5 Ship Burials in Western Norway

The burial at **Storhaug** in Avaldsnes, Rogaland, is a lesser known but nevertheless rich Norwegian ship burial that—like its more famous counterparts—contained the remains of a horse. The jaw bone was all that was left, but since the conditions for preservation were quite poor this was probably not all that was initially interred. The grave's principal occupant, though unpreserved, lay in a grave chamber made of pine in the ship's mid-section. He was most likely a man, judging from the assortment of weapons and tools in the find. Several of the grave goods bear a resemblance to others from the Continent, most specifically

¹⁸¹ Brøgger & Shetelig 1951: 82.

¹⁸² Marstrander 1986: 36.

¹⁸³ Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig 1917: 219 (Bind I).

the region of the Frankish empire. Aside from its location in southwestern Norway, what sets Storhaug apart is that it is dated to the years 680-730/750,¹⁸⁴ making it in all likelihood over a century older than Oseberg.

It is a shame that the find was not better preserved, because it is the only one of the big ship burials that was not plundered. We cannot tell whether it was just the horse's head or its entire body that was originally buried. This is a common problem archaeologists encounter with finds situated in the acidic soil of western Norway.¹⁸⁵

A seven-meter-long boat-grave unearthed in the last few years at **Gausel**, near Stavanger, contained the remains of a horsehead, still wearing its decorative harness.¹⁸⁶ A double-edged sword, spear, ax, hammer, shield boss and other iron objects indicate that the grave's occupant was a warrior of high-birth. The style of the sword dates the grave to the 9th century. Memorial stones were probably located in each corner, and postholes are evidence that a 'gravehouse' was erected over the grave.

Once again, we run into a horse that seems to have been beheaded. This time it is with a man's grave, but we know that the grave of the so-called 'Gausel Queen' (a non-boat grave from the Viking Period and the same region) also contained a horsehead. Are these findings really only due to poor preservation, or do they represent a particular trend in the horse burials of western Norway?

If the horsehead were all that was buried, then one has to wonder whether it or the harness was of greater importance in the grave. Of course, if the harness were the only thing that mattered, then it would merely have been taken off the horse before the inhumation. Both then would seem to be prized possessions—perhaps just the suggestion that the deceased had owned a horse in his lifetime was all that was desired to be signified.

Shamanism and the Eggja Runestone

The Eggja runestone from Sogndal in western Norway, however, offers another possibility. This stone slab from the second half of the 7th century¹⁸⁷ marks the site of a grave and features the engraved figure of a horsehead betwixt the lines of a long runic inscription

¹⁸⁴ Opedal 1998: 64.

¹⁸⁵ Oma 2000: 26.

¹⁸⁶ Børsheim 1999.

¹⁸⁷ Grønvik 1985: 8.

(fig. 10). Both the figure and the inscription have been seen to be deeply infused with magic.¹⁸⁸

(Fig. 10. The inscription from the Eggja runestone. Courtesy of: Oma 2000).

Despite what the picture may imply, Eggja was not a horse burial. In fact, all indication is that the grave the runestone covered was a cenotaph. There was no evidence from the excavation that someone had been buried there. The grave goods were far poorer than usual, and—in the eyes of Gjessing—those that were found were probably part of the dead’s personal possessions that were laid in the grave as a substitute for his soul.¹⁸⁹ The conventional explanation for a cenotaph suggests that the person had died at sea or abroad, and was thus unable to be buried back home in the usual way.¹⁹⁰ Gjessing, on the other hand, proposes that the corpse may have been laid in a boat and put to sea, either ablaze or with leaks in its keel so that it would not return.¹⁹¹

In the same way that stone ship settings have been seen to have served as a substitute for the real thing,¹⁹² the horse-drawing could have served as a substitute for a horsehead in the grave, like those that were found at Gausel. Whether present or not, the horsehead could have acted as a kind of conduit in the rites of a shaman.

A **shaman** is commonly understood to be someone who acts as a kind of priest, offering himself as a link between the human community to which he belongs and the other world.¹⁹³ While in a state of trance, he is believed to journey in spirit to the land of the dead, so that he may visit the gods to obtain knowledge, speak with the dead or serve as an escort

¹⁸⁸ The inscription on the Eggja-stone has been the subject of intense scrutiny over the years. See Grønvik 1985 for a review of previous translations and interpretations.

¹⁸⁹ Gjessing 1943: 103.

¹⁹⁰ Grønvik 1985: 9.

¹⁹¹ Gjessing 1943: 102-103.

¹⁹² Ramskou 1976: 135.

¹⁹³ Ellis Davidson 1964: 140.

for the recently departed.¹⁹⁴ The horse may have been an important medium in this process. The literary accounts of Sleipnir traveling to the other world are often used in support of this argument.¹⁹⁵

As to the specific role horseheads in the grave might have had, it has been hypothesized that they were ‘communion offerings.’ The shaman and/or funeral guests would eat the body of the horse, while the head was to be interred so that they could “talk” with the deceased from beyond the grave.¹⁹⁶

3.4.6 Summary of the Norwegian Material

As one can see, the Norwegian ship burials differ in a few major ways from the Swedish ones. While all of the Vendel graves were flat-ground burials,¹⁹⁷ the Norwegian graves were often covered with very large mounds. A ‘new’ feature in the Norwegian graves was a wooden burial chamber in the aft part of the ship that served almost as a ‘house’ for the deceased. Instead of this chamber, the fallen warriors in the Swedish graves sat or lay amidships while the stern was often left completely empty.

The Norwegian burials also tended to be more lavish than their Swedish counterparts. Five beds, storage chests, oil lamps, a chair, eating utensils, farming tools and looms were just some of the grave goods found at Oseberg.¹⁹⁸ Six beds, a large bronze cauldron, a carved wooden sledge and 64 wooden shields were part of the impressive display of wealth at Gokstad.¹⁹⁹ The fact that both of these graves had been looted suggests that even more extravagant items had originally been there. The Swedish graves contain many of the same items, only in smaller quantities.²⁰⁰ The boats from Vendel and Valsgärde were also typically much smaller than the Norwegian ships we have discussed. Do these differences owe themselves merely to the wealth of the buried individuals and their families, or is there a difference in symbolism?

The Swedish burials could have served more of a utilitarian purpose, in that they were outfitted with specific provisions (for a voyage, perhaps) rather than with all of the worldly possessions of the deceased. This interpretation rests on the hypothesis that they were intent

¹⁹⁴ Opedal 1998: 105.

¹⁹⁵ We will discuss these accounts at more length in Ch. 5.

¹⁹⁶ Personal communication with Terje Gansum.

¹⁹⁷ Brøgger, Falk & Shetelig 1917: 249 (Bind I).

¹⁹⁸ Graham-Campbell 1994: 42.

¹⁹⁹ Graham-Campbell 1994: 39.

²⁰⁰ See Arwidsson 1982: 74.

on providing the dead with the *essentials* and saw no point in leaving him with an *excess* of grave goods.²⁰¹ The grave goods from Oseberg and Gokstad, on the other hand, may have been the entire holdings of the deceased's house or estate. One person does not 'need' six beds, 64 shields or—for that matter—*twelve* horses if the main purpose behind the burial was preparation for a journey. (They certainly were not *all* going to carry him!) It is too much of a digression for this paper, but it would be interesting to do a thorough comparison of the grave goods to test this theory.

The beheading of the animals does not appear at Vendel or Valsgärde and, according to Ellis Davidson, can thus be regarded as a new development in the custom of horse burial.²⁰² The term 'development' implies that there was a kind of evolution in the custom, tracing its origins back to Sweden. The oldest Norwegian boat grave with a horse is the Torgård grave in Trøndelag and it dates to the end of the 6th century.²⁰³ Besides, the boat-graves from western Norway that involve decapitation, if such was what occurred at Storhaug, may also have pre-dated most of the Swedish finds. The early dating of Storhaug and its possible Continental influences punches holes in the theory that the horse-ship burial began in Sweden and spread its way west to Norway, arriving first in Vestfold then spreading elsewhere.²⁰⁴

3.5 The Danish Ship Burials

Although there are a great many boat- and ship-grave finds from the 7th and 8th centuries in Sweden and Norway, the custom was virtually non-existent in Denmark at the same time.²⁰⁵ It is therefore likely that it was oversea contact that gave rise to the two famous Danish ship-graves at Hedeby and Ladby in the following centuries. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the custom of sacrificing horses at the funeral also appears there.

²⁰¹ This can partly be supported by Arwidsson's observance that many of the grave goods from Valsgärde were clearly worn, mended or incomplete at the time of deposition. She suggests that this equipment was not that which the deceased was using at the end of his life, but rather had been brought out from the stores of the family's 'armory' especially for the occasion of the funeral (Arwidsson 1982: 72). This information stresses the symbolic function of the items instead of their physical worth.

²⁰² Ellis Davidson 1943: 20.

²⁰³ Gjessing 1943: 61-62.

²⁰⁴ The ship burials from western Norway certainly show relation to those from Østland (e.g. burial chamber, burial mound), and were thus argued by both Brøgger and Shetelig to be connected to the Ynglinga ætt and the early period of unification. Myhre has more recently claimed that Storhaug, for instance, had nothing to do with Vestfold and Østfold, but instead was either rooted in an indigenous local tradition or traced its origins to the Continent. See discussion of this in Opedal 1998: 31-39.

²⁰⁵ Brøndsted 1960: 270.

3.5.1 Hedeby

The boat-chamber grave from the early Viking Age town site of **Hedeby**, situated in the border zone between Denmark and the Frankish empire, provides us with another instance of a horse-ship burial combination. This intriguing find, dated recently to the second quarter of the 9th century,²⁰⁶ was located in a great mound that covered the *upside-down* body of a Viking long ship which itself covered a large wooden chamber.²⁰⁷ Within this burial chamber lay the remains of three warriors and their swords, alongside a pit containing the skeletons of three unbridled horses. One of the men lay in a N-S orientation in his own separate compartment in the western part of the chamber. He was equipped with an especially ornate sword, its silver-mounted belt, spurs, and a silver and bronze horse-bridle, among other valuables. The other two men were buried in the larger eastern end of the chamber.

Taking after Detlev Ellmer's interpretation,²⁰⁸ Egon Wamers presumes the first man from the Hedeby grave to be the 'lord' and the other two to be his 'cupbearer' and 'marshal.' Wamers argues that this 'lord' must also have been a south Scandinavian 'king,' when seen in light of the ship, his precious sword and the social hierarchy illustrated by the members of his retinue accompanying him in death.²⁰⁹ Moreover, Wamers maintains that this 'king' must have had strong ties with the Frankish empire, based on the number of grave goods of Carolingian origin, including the spurs and bridle.

The dating of the grave coincides with the period that the Viking warlord Harald Klak was known to have died, and Wamers pegs him as a likely suspect to be the buried 'king.' Harald Klak was involved in the dynastic struggles of Denmark throughout his lifetime, and at times served as a vassal of the Frankish emperor. Louis the Pious baptized Harald in 826, and thereby invested him as a Frankish king and the Christian ruler of Denmark.²¹⁰ During the ceremony, Harald received a Frankish horse with its harness, spurs and several other luxury items during the ceremony identical to the equipment from the Hedeby grave.

²⁰⁶ Wamers 1995: 151.

²⁰⁷ At Kiloran Bay in Scotland we know of another Viking burial involving an inverted ship (Ellis Davidson 1967: 118). (Online information relates that the burial dates to the 9th century and contained the remains of a man, his sacrificed female slave, a horse and its decorative harness--
<http://www.colonsay.org.uk/corncrake/old1/cornb27.html>).

²⁰⁸ Ellmers 1973.

²⁰⁹ Wamers 1995: 149.

²¹⁰ Wamers 1995: 152.

In contrast to Wamers, both Müller-Wille and Ellmers have argued that a king of the Olaf dynasty was buried in the Hedeby grave.²¹¹

Whatever the identity of its occupants, the boat-chamber grave at Hedeby clearly comes across as a hybrid of imperial Frankish symbolism and Viking paganism. A Viking longship covers a Frankish-style burial. Horses have been attested to in many Frankish graves, including that of Childeric, a Merovingian predecessor of Charlemagne, in which 21 horses were buried in three pits.²¹² Moreover, wooden chambers containing a human body with adjoining pits or chambers for horses were frequent on the Continent until the 8th century.²¹³ The rich grave goods are not the only signs of heathendom. Although the ship was aligned E-W, the lord himself was in a decidedly ‘pagan’ N-S orientation (a concept we come back to later). On top of this, the unique form of ‘suttee’ or sacrifice among his attendants stridently conflicts with Christian burial customs.

Yet despite its pagan flavor, the Hedeby grave can hardly be regarded as a ‘true’ Valhalla burial. Else Roesdahl believes it is,²¹⁴ but in this case the burden of proof is on her and any others who share her stance—it would take quite an inventive bit of reasoning to demonstrate how an upside-down boat was prepared to set off to a distant realm in the afterlife, let alone the next harbor up the coast. Rather, its placement seems to emphasize it as part of the king’s property in the grave, not as a functional vessel ready for use.

We are left in addition to ponder the function of the horses in the grave. There were three horses for three men. Could they have been left for the men to ride to Valhalla or were they just as much ‘property’ as the ship was? The fact that they were unbridled seems to say no, but it might still be the case.²¹⁵ Indeed, it is certainly possible that people in continental Scandinavia did not think boats to be necessary for the voyage to Valhalla,²¹⁶ but instead envisioned journeying there by horseback.

Still, it is most evident that the horses and their equipment were symbols of rank and authority in the outside world, and this significance was literally carried into the grave with the men. Such an interpretation would ring even more true if it were indeed Harald Klak who

²¹¹ Müller-Wille 1976, Ellmers 1980.

²¹² James 1992: 245.

²¹³ Wamers 1995: 152-153.

²¹⁴ Roesdahl 1992: 162.

²¹⁵ After all, the king’s “marshall” was present to harness them when needed (Wamers 1995: 155).

²¹⁶ Ellmers 1995: 170.

was buried at Hedeby, along with all that had been bestowed upon him by the Frankish emperor.

3.5.2 Ladby

The **Ladby** ship burial on the northeast part of the island of Fyn has been dated to the early 10th century, meaning that its noble honoree lived about three generations after the king buried at Hedeby. The craft had an estimated length of 22 meters, lay almost exactly north-south and was covered by a large mound.²¹⁷ This was situated in the western end of pre-existing Viking Age cemetery, where eleven graves of a much more humble nature were situated. Intriguingly, Ladby is the only one in which no trace of a human skeleton was found. This no doubt owes itself to the fact that the grave was robbed like all of the others,²¹⁸ with the stern receiving the most attention. It is probable that a grave chamber reminiscent of those from Oseberg, Gokstad and Tune was originally located there, containing the body of the chieftain²¹⁹ and any personal gear, such as swords or axes.²²⁰ Grave goods that were recovered elsewhere in the ship included one spur, a small iron axe, a fragment from a shield boss, a silver buckle, a bronze cauldron, and a checkerboard.

A heap of skeletons from *eleven horses* and four dogs were also found in the south-facing bow of the Ladby ship. Eight of the horses lay in the east or middle, while the remaining three lay in the west. This particular configuration was probably due to the fact that at some point during the loading of the ship the western side was broken off and pressed down.²²¹ To compensate for the imbalance, it is likely that some of the horses had to be moved over to the other side. What may be most noteworthy is that the horses and dogs were all put onboard the ship in this burial.

²¹⁷ Rosenberg 1977: 12.

²¹⁸ All but one of the Norwegian ship-burials and both of the Danish ship-burials were plundered long before modern-day excavations brought them to light. A.W. Brøgger argues that instead of mere theft these were premeditated exorcisms, possibly backed by the deceased's ancestors or the local authority, performed in Christian times in order to prevent the dead from haunting the place (See Thorvildsen 1957:109 & Krogh 1993: 196-197). In a similar deed of *translatio*, the bones of King Gorm were probably removed from the north burial mound at Jelling and relocated at the site of a church. Grave robberies on the whole remind us of the limitations of archaeology—it certainly does not tell us what was consciously selected not to be buried nor does it always tell us what was initially buried and later removed.

²¹⁹ On the evidence of a shield-boss, a spur and a bunch of arrows there can be little doubt that the buried person was a man.

²²⁰ Thorvildsen 1957: 108.

²²¹ Rosenberg 1977: 12.

The horses were of various ages and both sexes.²²² It is unclear how they were killed, though Thorvildsen suggests that the little iron axe found by the northernmost horse could have been the instrument of sacrifice.²²³ Sørensen, however, thinks the axe too small for the task but admits it might have been possible with a well-placed blow.²²⁴ This indeed may be the case. A similar implement was found in association to the horses in the Gokstad burial.

The riding equipment at Ladby was fairly extensive. It included decorated bridles, iron stirrups, a bronze-plated iron spur, what was probably a wooden saddle, and various other buckles and fittings. In total, the remains of five riding sets were recovered.²²⁵ In addition to this, a finely-made harness for a dog team, including leashes and collars, was found among the animals' bodies in the fore-ship.

The one spur was found in the 'disturbed area,' but it is reasonable to assume that the dead man had originally been buried with his spurs on and that the second spur disappeared in the break-in. Elsewhere in Viking Age graves that contain spurs, their placing suggests that they form part of the deceased's personal equipment, instead of his riding gear. This has been taken to mean that they were status symbols and indicated that the owners had special functions in the emergent political structure.²²⁶ We will come back to this topic later in our discussion of the 10th century horseman graves.

The archaeologist who excavated the Ladby ship burial, Knud Thorvildsen, linked the identity of the buried nobleman to the King Gnupa, who was forced to receive baptism in 934 by the German emperor, Henry the Fowler. More recently it has been suggested that the ship contained the remains of one of the kings of the Olaf dynasty.²²⁷

Wamers sees the inclusion of the lord's pack of hounds and their harnesses as performing much the same burial function as the stud of horses and their gear. If the dogs, for instance, are given equal treatment or status in a burial, then it cannot be so easy to claim that the horses (and so many of them!) were there for the special purpose of carrying the dead to Valhalla while the dogs are merely seen as 'companions' of the dead. Rather, as Wamers

²²² Sørensen 2001: 105.

²²³ Thorvildsen 1957: 112.

²²⁴ Sørensen 2001: 106.

²²⁵ Sørensen 2001: 80.

²²⁶ Martens 1992: 231.

²²⁷ Andersen 1985.

reads it, the horses from the Ladby ship are “a sign of royal lifestyle and of status, and hardly as functional for this particular journey.”²²⁸

One of the horses at Ladby lay somewhat apart from the others, closest to the grave area.²²⁹ Had it originally been housed in a burial chamber along with its master, as with the Tune ship? When killed it still wore its bridle and headstall. It would not be a stretch to infer that this was the departed’s personal charger, while the remaining horses had come from the lord’s private stables. In the same way, the one horse that lay on its side at Borre (while the others stood) could also have been the buried man’s own riding horse. It was closer to him and still had its bridle and saddle in place.

The large number of horses at Ladby finds its closest parallels in the Oseberg and Gokstad ship-burials. The additional evidence for a burial chamber and a similar assortment of grave goods suggest close connections to the Norwegian finds. Seeing as it rests upon no native tradition, an obvious interpretation is that the Ladby ship housed a Danish chieftain who had heard of or learned the ship-grave custom among the Norwegians and wished to be honored in the same way. The contemporary dating of both Gokstad and Borre only strengthens this notion.

3.6 Horses, Ships & the Ideology of Kingship

It is noteworthy that nearly all the true Viking Age ship-graves we know of today that contained an inhumation, royal equipment, and involved a vessel of over 20 meters in length are to be found in the dominion of Old Denmark, which encompassed the Oslo fjord region known as Viken. Wamers speculates that these could all have been **royal** ship-graves closely connected with the phase of Danish *rigssamling*.²³⁰ According to the *Annales Regni Francorum*, we know that Harald Klak, Hedeby’s hypothetical ‘lord,’ with his brother subjugated Vestfold in 813. *Ynglingatal* and *Heimskringla* also tell us how many of the noblemen from Vestfold were related to the Danish royal family. Of course from the Norwegian historical perspective, the mounds at Borre have been seen to be “the

²²⁸ Wamers 1995: 156. It is possible that part of this ‘royal lifestyle’ entailed hunting, such as the Swedish graves suggest. However, despite the presence of horses, a pack of fully-harnessed dogs, and a bundle of 45 arrows, the Ladby ship-burial contained no traces of rare birds or fowl, nor any other animals for that matter. (Sørensen 2001: 107).

²²⁹ Thorvildsen 1957: 107.

²³⁰ Wamers 1995: 158.

archaeological manifestation of the early phases of economic and political process towards a Norwegian State.”²³¹

Did any of the grave goods in these ship-burials testify to the regal status of their occupants? In the minds of the people of the Viking Age, horses seem to have had a religious symbolism connected to kingship. The horse sacrifice played a significant role in the making of a king in Norway, as we have already seen in *The Saga of Hákon the Good*. Its meaning for the power of the king is made obvious from the farmers’ reaction at Hákon’s attempt to avoid the horse sacrifice at Lade.²³² They apparently saw the horse sacrifice and feast as necessary not only to ensure well-being for the land, but to mark his status as king. If Hákon did not comply with their demands, he would not be accepted as their king.

We have, however, little reason to connect this ‘royal’ horse sacrifice to the ship burials. For one thing, few if any of the horses seem to have been eaten. Moreover, if the king himself was the one who was being buried we can be sure that he was not the one presiding over the sacrifice.

Still, the connection horses and ships have with power and prestige can certainly be inferred from all of these burials.²³³ This line of reasoning is supported by the fact that *large numbers of horses rarely occur in non-ship burials in Scandinavia*. Most often there is only one horse skeleton in the grave, and almost never more than two.²³⁴ This underlines how ships and horses—the more the better—were *the ultimate displays of wealth, power and status in the Viking Age*.

It is certainly possible that these displays were also a sign of royalty. But whether the buried were actual kings or queens—as we see in Oseberg—is debatable. Even if their ‘true’ identities were to be revealed, their ‘royal’ status would probably continue to be a hotly disputed topic among historians.

3.7 Horse-Ship Burials & the Afterlife

It is fascinating how all of these ship burials seem to express so many different concepts about the afterlife. In marked contrast to how the Oseberg ship was found moored to land with a pile of boulders weighing it down, the Ladby ship and the Gokstad ship had their anchors stowed in the bows as if for immediate departure.²³⁵ Indeed, the positioning of

²³¹ Myhre 1992: 331.

²³² Näsström 2001: 100.

²³³ In this, I am in agreement with the views expressed in Wamers 1995 and Østmo 1997.

²³⁴ Müller-Wille 1971: 160.

²³⁵ Ellis Davidson 1967: 118 & Thorvildsen 1957: 99.

the Hedeby ship seems to convey that it had a purpose all of its own. The burial chambers that ‘housed’ the dead in the Norwegian material also make us wonder whether the deceased were to ‘reside’ within the burial mound or whether they truly were to ‘set sail.’

It is perhaps sufficient to say that Viking Age Scandinavians were clearly NOT in agreement as to the purpose of the ship in the grave. And though many of the same grave goods and sacrificed animals are found in these ship burials, it is equally doubtful that they all had the same meaning attached to them. This certainly holds true for the horses, who—as we have seen—were killed and deposited in the grave in variety of ways.

The following may be the perfect illustration of the eclecticism of the horse-ship burial custom.

3.8 Ibn Fadlan’s Account of a Horse-Ship Funeral

Ironically, the only contemporary account of a Viking horse burial does not come to us from Scandinavia, but instead comes to us via the Arabic chronicler **Ibn Fadlan**, who bore witness to the ship funeral of a Rus chieftain on the Volga in 921. Fadlan relates a highly-ritualized ceremony that was ten days in preparation. On the day of the funeral, the chieftain’s ship was drawn up on land and the men placed piles of wood under and around it. The dead man’s body was taken aboard the ship and put inside a tent, where it was propped up on a bed of fine cloths and cushions. They laid his weapons beside him, as well as a fresh supply of beer, fruit, meat, bread and onion. After this, they took a dog, cut it in half and threw it in the ship. Next, they took two horses and made them run until they sweat, whereupon they cut them to pieces with a sword and threw them in the ship. Two cows were also chopped into bits and, along with a rooster and a hen, thrown into the ship.

Following this animal sacrifice, a slave girl who had volunteered to die with her master was taken into the tent by an old woman known as the Angel of Death. Six men followed them in and had sexual intercourse with the girl. Then, as men outside beat on their shields to drown out the screams, two of the men in the tent strangled her while the Angel of Death stabbed her repeatedly in the ribs until she was dead. Her body was then laid down next to that of her master. The ship was then set ablaze by the closest relative of the deceased.

When it was finished burning, the men erected a mound over the ship and placed a pole bearing the name of the chieftain and his king on the top of it.²³⁶

Comparing the Rus Ship Funeral with the Ship Burials in Scandinavia

Despite how far away from Scandinavia it takes place, this ship burial among the Rus bears some striking similarities with the Viking ship burials back ‘home.’ The dead chieftain is laid to rest on a bed next to his slave inside a tent, eerily identical to how the Oseberg queen was laid on a bed with her retainer in a burial chamber. To add this human sacrifice, the sacrifice of animals (including the familiar horses and dogs) plays a part in the proceedings. Also, the provisioning of food and weapons occurs just like at the other male graves from Sweden, Norway and Denmark.

The Rus ship burial, however, differs in several ways. For one, the horses clearly receive no preferential treatment. All of the animals are chopped into pieces—something that does not happen in any of the burials we have reviewed. One has to wonder what the significance of this was. In *Heidreks Saga* we come across an instance where this was clearly done for the purpose of feasting on the flesh. “A horse was led in front of the thing, hacked into pieces and divided up to be eaten, while the tree of sacrifice was colored red with the blood.”²³⁷ Fadlan, however, makes no mention of any of the horses being eaten during the funeral ceremony. He surely would have noted this if it had taken place, for in another chronicle of his concerning the burial rites among the Oguze people he relates how horses were slaughtered and summarily eaten.²³⁸

Nor do the horses seem to be ‘food offerings’ to the Rus chieftain, for why would he would be provided with the “beer, fruit, meat, bread and onion” if this were the case? I also see it as quite dubious that—in their mutilated state—they were likely to have served as ‘guardians of his grave,’ as the authors of one book have suggested.²³⁹ They and their fellow animals appear to be dispatched of in much the same way as the ‘spoils of war’ we discussed in Chapter 2, permanently destroyed so that no one else could make use of them. The ‘even-handed’ treatment of them supports the notion that they were simply meant to accompany the dead chieftain on the pyre as part of what had been his property.

²³⁶ Account paraphrased from Birkeland 1954: 21-23.

²³⁷ Paraphrased from Näsström 2001: 129.

²³⁸ Klindt-Jensen 1957: 85.

²³⁹ Jones & Pennick 1995: 140.

Making the horses run until they sweat may have been done to get the blood coursing through their arteries at an extra high rate. Hagberg suggests that horse-fights or horse-races may have made it ‘easier to bleed them at slaughter.’²⁴⁰ Though this was quite possibly the purpose elsewhere, it may not have been the case here, since Fadlan does not report any kind of special focus paid to the blood of the horses or other animals. It is nevertheless possible that what took place was a kind of ceremonial horse racing, though Fadlan’s terse account does not give us this impression either. (This discussion nonetheless gives us reason to believe that the horses at Oseberg were made to run or race before the sacrifice as well).

Cremation versus Inhumation

By far the greatest difference between the Scandinavian ship burials and the Rus ship funeral is that the latter was a cremation. Up to this point, all of the ship burials we have covered were inhumations. For whatever reasons, very few cremation ship burials from mainland Scandinavia have been discovered.²⁴¹

Cremation is often interpreted as a trademark of a pagan-style burial while inhumation is said to be a feature of Christian graves. It should be noted, however, that “although the presence of Christianity presupposes inhumations, the presence of inhumations does not necessarily indicate Christianity.”²⁴² In Scandinavia, right up to the end of the Viking Period inhumation and cremation were practiced side by side, but cremation was much more usual in Sweden and Norway than in Denmark.²⁴³

The literary sources suggest a few different reasons behind the ‘pagan’ practice. “Burning was remembered only to the effect of disposing of a corpse that would not lie quiet, or of someone who was so troublesome in his lifetime that cremation at a funeral was seen as the only way of preventing the corpse from walking out of its grave mound.”²⁴⁴ In other words, as long as the body was still around, its soul could always return to haunt the living. In *Ynglinga Saga*, Odin is said to decree that “all the dead were to be burned on a pyre

²⁴⁰ Hagberg 1967: 80.

²⁴¹ The Myklebostad ship from western Norway is one of the few. Unfortunately, neither the ship nor any other equipment was preserved, save for that which could not be consumed by the funeral pyre (Shetelig 1917: 226, Bind I). Outside of Scandinavia, a Viking ship-burial cremation from the Ile de Groix in Brittany, France, was unearthed at the beginning of the last century, containing a good deal of grave goods and some burned animal bones (Ellis Davidson 1943: 20).

²⁴² Clarke & Ambrosiani 1991: 154-155.

²⁴³ Shetelig 1937: 277, Andersson 1998: 361, 363. The cremations that do occur in Denmark are located mostly in Jylland (Randsborg 1980: 123).

²⁴⁴ Ellis Davidson 1943: 34.

together with their possessions, saying that everyone would arrive in Valhalla with such wealth as he had with him on his pyre and that he would also enjoy the use of what he himself had hidden in the ground” (*Ynglinga Saga*, Ch. 8). In Geir Helgen’s extensive research on cremation graves, he has come to the conclusion that there is no good explanation for the practice. He finds no demonstrable difference in the variety of the layout of inhumation and cremation graves or the equipment that is found in them.²⁴⁵

Fadlan does, however, find out why the Rus in particular burned the funeral ship and all of its cargo. During the ceremony, one of the Norsemen in attendance volunteered the comment that, “We burn them [the deceased] with fire in a twinkling, and they enter Paradise that very same hour.” This would make it apparent that it is the *fire* and not the ship that sends the dead chieftain off to the other world in this burial. This corresponds to Snorri’s account above where the funeral pyre was the means by which one could enter Valhalla. Does this then imply that in the absence of fire the ship was to send the dead off?

What can we take from Fadlan’s account?

What we may venture to assume from this example is that it was the custom of the Rus to burn their honored dead. Further generalizations would be unwise to make, especially concerning Scandinavia proper. It is rather tricky to try to link what we see here to a burial tradition many hundreds of miles away. Besides some say, we must remember that we are looking at the spectacle through the goggles of man coming from the Arabic world who could not have helped but infuse his own cultural perceptions into the account.²⁴⁶ Others would argue that this Arabic background is to his advantage, as he would be a more impartial observer to the events than those involved in them. But even if we do consider Fadlan to be a reliable source, the Rus he depicted may have been long removed from their Scandinavian homeland—if that was even where most of them had originally come from.

Is Ibn Fadlan’s entire account therefore null and void, useless to us as a source concerning a horse burial? There are too many parallels between what we see with the Rus ship burial and the archaeology of the Scandinavian ship burials for his story to be categorically written off. However, it might be best viewed as derivative rather than as indicative of the practice. Some of the rituals may have been added to the ceremony as a

²⁴⁵ Helgen 1982: 61.

²⁴⁶ See Warmind 1995 for source criticism.

result of influence from the years of life abroad, while others may have been removed. It has, for instance, been suggested that the “impetus for slaughter and cruel rites at the funeral of important people had come into Sweden from South-East Europe, by way of Russia.”²⁴⁷

One thing that we can be fairly certain of is that the Rus believed in an afterlife and that they were preparing their leader/comrade for that afterlife in the best way they knew. Fadlan actually succeeds in finding out a little about the nature of this afterlife. He reports the slave girl as saying right before she is sacrificed, “Behold, I see my master seated in Paradise, and Paradise is green and fair, and with him are men and servants. He is calling me. Send me to him.”²⁴⁸ The question of whether this ‘paradise’ corresponds to Valhalla or another version of the Old Norse afterlife is perhaps best left alone.

It is a shame that Fadlan does not find out the underlying reasons for the horse sacrifice or the reasons they were sacrificed in the way that they were. We also find out little about any deities that may have been involved in the ritual. All of this would have been fascinating information for us to either consider or discard—an explanation of belief from the actual practitioners.

²⁴⁷ Ellis Davidson 1967: 118.

²⁴⁸ Ellis Davidson 1943: 46.

Chapter IV

Horse & Man

Though horse burials are perhaps at their most striking when coupled with ship burials, there are also many remarkable burials not involving ships. But without a ship, it would be hard to argue that a *voyage* to Valhalla would be taking place. Might then the horse have played more of a prominent role in this picture of the afterlife?

4.1 The Remarkable Find from Arninge

The Arninge grave²⁴⁹ from Täby parish in Uppland, Sweden, provides us with a fascinating ‘non-ship’ horse burial not far from Vendel and Valsgärde. The location of this cremation grave of the early 9th century²⁵⁰ was marked by a low-lying circular mound of rocks, ten meters in diameter. It contained the burned remains of some 90 liters, or 61.4 kg, of human and animal bones. These belonged to *five humans, seven horses, eleven dogs*, two cats, three sheep, one goat, one pig, one lynx and a bevy of birds representing six different species. This osteological assortment is the largest found thus far in a single grave in Sweden.²⁵¹ The rich grave goods included fragments of gold, silver and bronze jewelry, two Arabic coins, a game board and pieces, and a large quantity of pearls.²⁵²

The seven horses make this one of the few multi-horse burials that does not also occur in a ship burial context.²⁵³ All seven horses were fully grown and seem to have been laid on the funeral pyre whole. While three of them were determined to have suffered from *spavin*, one of the others was no more than 4-6 years old. It is therefore hard to tell whether the offering was of B-quality steeds or whether the best horses available were used. Whatever the case, it must have been an extraordinary display of wealth to be able to dispense with so many at one time.

²⁴⁹ Anläggning 3 in RAÄ 75 (Hedman 1996).

²⁵⁰ Hedman 1996: 42.

²⁵¹ Hedman 1996: 162-163.

²⁵² Hedman 1996: 131-135.

²⁵³ One other cremation grave in Sweden contained six horses, while two others had three apiece (Sten & Vretemark 1988: 150 (Chart)).

The number of dogs is equally, if not more, impressive. Their varying sizes suggest that some had been watchdogs, while others were sheepdogs or hounds. Along with the latter, the remains of an eagle owl and a hawk betray a link to the aristocratic hunting culture expressed in the Uppland boat-graves. It should also be said that all these dogs, birds and other sacrificed animals were put on the pyre whole, with one exception. Only a few skull fragments and extremities of the pig were unearthed. It presumably provided the food at the funeral.

The most intriguing aspect of the Arninge grave, however, is the mystery of who was buried there and what may have led them being buried together. Based on the bones of the five people uncovered, one was a young woman, three were men and the sex of the fifth was unable to be determined. One of the men was elderly (over 50), while the two others and the unidentified corpse were middle-aged.

The Implications of a Large-Scale Human Sacrifice in a Horse Burial

According to Vretemark, there should be no reason to doubt that human sacrifice was at play in the Arninge grave.²⁵⁴ This is certainly not unthinkable, based on what we have already seen in Ibn Fadlan's account and at Oseberg and Hedeby. Was this then a burial made in honor of one man—or woman—and to whom *four* of his/her retainers gave their lives, either by sacrifice or suicide? Hedman points to several articles in the grave, including six combs, a buckle and the pearls, that most likely belonged to a woman. Likewise, a belt, the game board and the hunting birds probably belonged to a man. The implication is that the woman and one of the men, perhaps the eldest, were the principal occupants of the grave, while the others were lower-class servants or thralls.²⁵⁵ If these had truly followed their master(s) in death, then it testifies to a particularly fanatical pagan belief apparatus upheld by the community.

How do the horses fit into this scenario? Calling Arninge first and foremost a 'horse burial' would be a bit misleading, since there is a great deal more going on here than just the killing of a few horses and shoveling some dirt over them. One rather challenging interpretation is that what wound up in the grave comprised the worldly possessions of one chieftain. This included all of the living creatures and immediate members of his

²⁵⁴ Hedman 1996: 163.

²⁵⁵ Hedman 1996: 38-39.

household—one of whom may have been his “slave girl” or wife—that he had “won” or “commanded” in his lifetime. Considering that the grave was a cremation, this fits in well with Odin’s mandate concerning the burial rites in *Ynglinga Saga*. Maybe the horses were neither expendable nor costly gifts to the deceased, but rather just represented *the entire contents of his stables*. In other words, the motives behind his funeral may have had little to do with the establishment or negotiation of social status among the bereaved. Instead, the bereaved felt compelled by religious convictions to requisition all that had been his in life and send it off with him in a fiery blaze.

This would probably be too bold of a statement to make if it were not for what seems to have been the extravagant wasting of human lives. If such an act was permissible in the society of the day, then it forces us to stop appraising the burial in strictly pragmatic terms. Grave offerings may not always have been about “what could be spared” according to the status or wealth of the deceased.

4.2 The 10th Century Horseman Graves

Around the year 900 a new burial custom emerged in Denmark. While Swedish and Norwegian graves were fairly well-equipped throughout the first millennium AD, Danish graves—with the exception of the Hedeby boat chamber grave—really only began to contain weapons and other grave goods at the start of the 10th century.²⁵⁶ Suddenly swords, lances and riding equipment—including powerful bits and stirrups designed for cavalry formations (pieces that are unknown from previous periods)²⁵⁷—appear in these almost exclusively male graves all around the same time.

Horses are also a common appearance in these graves. Michael Müller-Wille reviews the horse burials from Denmark and southern Sweden²⁵⁸ in his 1971 work, *Pferdegrab und Pferdeopfer im frühen Mittelalter*. Excluding the graves on Bornholm,²⁵⁹ nearly every single horse grave dates to the 10th or 11th century (fig. 11).²⁶⁰ All but two of the graves contained

²⁵⁶ Randsborg 1980: 126.

²⁵⁷ Randsborg 1980: 127.

²⁵⁸ I will not be referring to data regarding the horses in the Hedeby and Ladby graves, for reasons expressed below.

²⁵⁹ On the island of Bornholm, horse burials have been found from all of the phases of the Late Germanic Iron Age, although there is a predominance in the last 100-150 years of the period down to and around 800 A.D. (Jørgensen & Jørgensen 1997: 78).

²⁶⁰ Müller-Wille 1971: 166 (Map).

the remains of only one horse, while the remaining two housed two horses.²⁶¹ Virtually all of these burials were inhumations.²⁶² There does not seem to be a fixed rule by which the horses were placed in the graves.²⁶³ In roughly half of the cemeteries the complete skeletons of the horses were preserved, while in the other half collections of horse bones were observed.²⁶⁴ Müller-Wille blames the latter partly on poor preservation conditions. It should be noted that at none of the sites did just the skull and/or extremities remain.²⁶⁵

(Fig. 11. The 10th century horseman graves in Denmark. Courtesy of: Müller-Wille 1971).

²⁶¹ Müller-Wille 1971: 160.

²⁶² Randsborg 1980: 127.

²⁶³ Personal observation based on data in Brøndsted 1937.

²⁶⁴ Müller-Wille 1971: 160.

²⁶⁵ Müller-Wille 1971: 165 (Map).

A Pagan Reaction to the Incursions of Christianity?

The notion that this up-cropping of ostensibly pagan burials was a reaction to the approach of Christianity has been forwarded by a few scholars.²⁶⁶ Else Roesdahl thinks that they may have been partly inspired by the great Norwegian ship burials and is convinced that they are Valhalla burials.²⁶⁷ Her main examples of this new 10th century burial custom are the ship burials at Hedeby and Ladby and the burials mounds at Jelling.

It is far too expedient to lump these ‘princely’ burials together with horseman graves of a humbler nature and make generalizations about the collective meaning behind all of them. Just as an example, since the publication of Roesdahl’s article, the dating of the Hedeby boat-chamber grave has been refigured to 830-850 AD.²⁶⁸ This puts it chronologically out of place and—according to Egon Wamers—most likely unrelated to the emerging burial customs of the early 10th century.²⁶⁹ Taking this into account, it also seems rather groundless to put just these three major burials under the umbrella of a common burial custom, as roughly fifty years separates Hedeby from Ladby (early 10th) and Ladby from Jelling (958 or 959²⁷⁰).

It seems therefore wisest to evaluate the 10th century horsemen graves on their own terms.

Warfare, Rank and State Building

Though the geographical distribution is not even, the horsemen graves appear to have begun in the south and moved gradually northwards over time.²⁷¹ This is perhaps not surprising, in that southern Denmark lay closest to the Carolingian and German (later Ottonian) empires. Some have argued that the grave custom was ‘spurred on’ by the political situation between Denmark and the German empire under Henrik (Henry the Fowler).

²⁶⁶ Richards 1991: 102, Näsman 1991: 171, Roesdahl 1992: 161, 1993: 132.

²⁶⁷ Roesdahl 1992: 161.

²⁶⁸ Wamers 1995: 152.

²⁶⁹ Personal communication cited in Pedersen 1997: 125.

²⁷⁰ Krogh 1993: 188.

²⁷¹ Pedersen 1997: 129. Horseman graves also appear in **Norway**, dated almost entirely to the 10th or early 11th centuries. Curiously, these also seem to have spread gradually northwards. The custom occurred in Vestfold in the early 10th century, enjoyed popularity in Romerike during the mid-part of the century and found itself in Hedmark by the close of the century (Braathen 1989: 101). It is probably not a coincidence that this occurred first at Kaupang and Borre in Vestfold, the area most exposed to influence from Denmark. It should be noted, however, that the criterion used for defining these graves was whether they contained spurs and/or stirrups (Braathen 1989: 5). Thus, many if not most of them are not technically ‘horse burials.’

Henrik, who had finally managed to halt the westward advance of the Hungarian mounted army by establishing a cavalry division in his own army, seized control of Hedeby in 934. It was also probably on this occasion that new bridle-bits and stirrups of the Hungarian type were first introduced to Denmark.²⁷²

There was probably not a direct cause and effect relationship between Henrik's documented incursion into Denmark and the emergence of the horseman graves. Recent research has isolated the custom of depositing riding gear in burials mainly to the period AD 925-975,²⁷³ indicating that the practice was around at least a good decade beforehand.

There seems to be a distinction in the distribution between these horseman graves and the so-called contemporary 'weapon graves' in Denmark. In general, the latter have been found in either marginal areas or cemeteries while the cavalry graves are often solitary, perhaps to give them a local status.²⁷⁴ It has also been noted that the graves with weapons alone often have simpler grave goods and a simpler form of burial. On the basis of this data, it could be inferred that these 'weapon graves' hold men of a lower social standing or military rank than the men who were accorded not only weapons, but horses, riding gear, gaming boards and a mound to mark the burial.²⁷⁵

The 10th century horseman graves have also been connected to early state building in Denmark. Randsborg, for instance, notes that they nearly all relate to the early west Jelling state: "The heavy cavalry interments with stirrups, etc., are found in a belt around the Jelling province, corresponding to the fortresses of Trelleborg type and the Danevirke walls, and thus marking the borderlands of the state."²⁷⁶ There has also been an attempt to take this further by connecting the men in the burials to the *thegns* and *drengs* named on runestones who probably served the king.²⁷⁷ A closer look at the distribution of these runestones, however, reveals that they are geographical unrelated to the horseman graves.²⁷⁸

²⁷² Thorvildsen 1957: 111.

²⁷³ Pedersen 1997: 128.

²⁷⁴ Randsborg 1980: 127.

²⁷⁵ Pedersen 1997: 127.

²⁷⁶ Randsborg 1980: 127.

²⁷⁷ Gräslund & Müller-Wille 1992: 187, Roesdahl 1992: 161.

²⁷⁸ Randsborg 1980: 127.

Summary of the 10th Century Horseman Graves

Instead of it being a pagan reaction to Christianity, the appearance of horses and riding equipment in 10th century Danish graves seems to have resulted from significant *political* changes going on at the time.

The graves of the 10th century seem to mark the beginning of a new kind of military organization and warfare in southern Scandinavia. They reflect the emergence of a new type of political/military elite, characterized by rich riding gear and horses. On a grave to grave basis, this grave equipment seems to symbolize what was thought of as the ideal warrior.²⁷⁹ Rather than serving merely as status symbols, the horse and its gear must have stood for the warlike lifestyle the man led and the prominent role in society he played.

On the whole, these graves may also represent the power and authority of the emerging royal state in Denmark. This is backed by the fact that they maintain a high degree of regularity despite their widespread distribution across the country.

4.3 The Impact of Christianity on Horse Burials

If we ask why horses were put in the graves to begin with, then we are also required to look at the question of why this burial custom was phased out. Though Christianity was perhaps not the impetus behind their initial placement in the grave, the adoption of these new religious attitudes could well have been the reason why horses and related gear began to be left out of the burial ceremony, or at least no longer placed directly in the grave.

I have come across some archaeological evidence that suggests how a people's mentality about horse burials could have been affected in process of Christianization. Anne-Sofia Gräslund has written about two conversion period male inhumation graves from Ås parish in northern Sweden.²⁸⁰ One grave, dating to the second half of the 10th century, contained the remains of a horse and a dog along with the deceased. In the other, dated to the middle of the 11th century, the man was buried alone, but a separate, obviously connected grave containing a horse was found just a few meters away. Gräslund asserts that this reveals a new view of the animal brought on by Christian ideology, though the fact that the horse got a grave of its own implies a compromise between pagan and Christian beliefs. In my own reading, I have encountered a parallel instance of this development. Just a few years ago a

²⁷⁹ This is a notion forwarded by Trond Meling in his Master's thesis concerning graves with horses and horse equipment in western Norway during the Merovingian period (Meling 2000: 112).

²⁸⁰ Gräslund 2000: 84-87.

horseman grave was uncovered in Lakenheath, England.²⁸¹ This has been dated to around the year 550, and contains a horse sporting an elaborate harness and lying at the side of a young nobleman. At nearby Sutton Hoo, a man and his horse have also been unearthed, but in separate graves. This burial is dated to the first half of the 7th century. Though these Swedish and Anglo-Saxon burials have a four hundred year time gap between them, a similar change in burial practice seems to have taken place at corresponding points in the two regions' respective conversion histories.

4.4 The Chamber-Graves at Birka

Birka on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren, Sweden, offers a rich collection of horse burials. The town itself was one of the greatest trading centers in the Viking world, and existed from sometime around the end of the 8th century until roughly 975, after which it seems to have been abandoned.²⁸² As a trade town, the people in Birka must have been a fairly heterogeneous population that came from a variety of places, and this diverse cultural background seems to reveal itself in the burial practices. Nearly all grave types from the Viking Age are represented at Birka.²⁸³

Horse-related artifacts were found in 21 cremation graves and 24 chamber-graves at Birka.²⁸⁴ Horses themselves were found in twenty exceptionally homogeneous chamber-graves, all of which probably date to the Late Period, the mid-10th century.²⁸⁵ Of these, sixteen were men's graves, three were double graves (containing a man and a woman) and one was a woman's grave. Though most of the graves held only one horse, it is interesting to note that of the two graves that held two horses, one was a double grave.²⁸⁶

All of the horses buried at Birka seem to have been in their prime. Their full carcasses were invariably placed on a raised platform just outside the foot end of the chamber, at a right angle to the deceased. In almost all cases, the horse was lying on its left side, facing in towards the chamber with its head to the south. The horses' limbs had to be carefully tucked

²⁸¹ At the moment I'm relying on an internet source for this information:
http://findarticles.com/cf_dls/m1373/n1_v48/20227242/p1/article.jhtml

²⁸² Clarke & Ambrosiani 1995: 71-76.

²⁸³ Arbman 1977: 113. Of the approximately 1,100 graves that Hjalmar Stolpe excavated, almost exactly half were cremations while the other half were inhumations.

²⁸⁴ Forsåker 1986: 114.

²⁸⁵ Duczko 2000: 21.

²⁸⁶ Sundkvist 1992: 48.

in to fit into such a small space, so it is likely, as Gräslund suggests, that the horses were killed before being lowered into the grave.²⁸⁷

In over half of the horse graves riding equipment was found, while spurs and/or stirrups showed up in nine of them. Forsåker identified the remains of what she believes to have been saddles in many of the graves which lacked stirrups (which otherwise must be an indication of the presence of a saddle). What therefore seems certain is that most of the horses had indeed been used for riding, instead of drafting or plowing. Still, as Stolpe noted, in most cases the horses were not bridled in the grave.²⁸⁸

It is also of note that nearly all of the chamber-graves with horses also held weapons. The lone woman's grave, as may be expected, was the exception and did not have any. Inventory from one of the men's graves included a double-edged sword, a beautifully decorated dagger, an axe, two shields, twenty-four arrows and a spear with silver and copper inlays.²⁸⁹ This equipment strongly suggests that warriors were buried in these graves, not merchants. The fact that balances and weights were found among the grave goods of some interments, however, may be indication that the men combined these trades in their daily lives.²⁹⁰

Comparing Birka with the Swedish Boat-Graves

Anneli Sundkvist makes an interesting comparison of the grave goods from the 10th century horse graves at Birka and material from the contemporary horse graves from Vendel, Valsgärde and Tuna (VVT).²⁹¹ For one, she finds that stirrups and spurs are more common in the graves from Birka than in the boat-graves. It is also striking that spears, for instance, show up in the 18 of the 24 Birka graves with horse equipment while they appear in less than half of the VVT graves.

On the basis of these findings, Sundkvist argues that the horses at Birka were war or cavalry horses to a greater extent than the horses in the boat-graves, which for their part were probably equally disposed to riding and driving. The fact that the horses at Birka were in their prime, while the ages of the horses at VVT were more varied, also points in this

²⁸⁷ Gräslund 1980: 39-41.

²⁸⁸ Stolpe 1882: 59, referenced through Gräslund 1980: 41.

²⁸⁹ Almgren 1972: 44.

²⁹⁰ Duczko 2000: 20.

²⁹¹ Sundkvist 2001: 194.

direction. Where the horses at Birka were most likely the man's healthy young warhorse, the horses at VVT may have served a variety of purposes—including hunting, riding, plowing and driving—that were not linked to warfare.

Sundkvist's grave study supports the theory that the southern part of Hemlanden—where most of the horse graves were found at Birka—was the cemetery for members of the king's retinue, known of as the *hirð*.²⁹² The high degree of homogeneity in the graves conveys the sense that they were not simply independent warriors, but belonged to some kind of elite military organization. It is not difficult to imagine that this organization was under the control of a royal power, which used it both to maintain peace and order with a show of force and to collect taxes and tolls from the town's merchants (this could be the explanation for the balances and weights found in the graves).

Eastern Influences

Evidence suggests that this *hirð* may actually have been composed of foreigners. Upon a closer inspection of the outfits the dead were buried in, it was discovered that they had nothing to do with local clothing styles in Sweden and were clearly exotic. It is thought that these kaftans, chemises, balloon trousers and pointed, fur-brimmed hats trace their origins back to Russia (fig. 12).²⁹³

Were these horse burials then the graves of Russian mercenaries, in service of the Svea-king? It is a well-known tale that the future king of Norway, Harald Hardrádi, served in the emperor's Varangian guard in Byzantium as a youth. Based on this, it is not hard to imagine that hired soldiers made their way north along the eastern trade route as well as south.

Wladyslaw Duczko, however, believes that the men buried in the chamber-graves were native warriors who merely dressed in oriental fashions. He points out that the sets of weapons in their graves were typical of the armament found in other Swedish graves of the same period. Moreover, the saber, a classic nomad weapon that was adopted by the Rus, does not appear in the Birka graves.²⁹⁴

²⁹² Sundkvist 2001: Abstract (English). A view supported by Duczko 2000: 21.

²⁹³ Hägg 1984: 205. This may find some corroboration in the fact that the horses themselves were a cross between the Nordic horse and the south-east European horse of Tarpan type (Gräslund 1980: 41).

²⁹⁴ Duczko 2000: 22.

It may then be more likely that these men were locals who had returned from years of service in the East. The refined clothing styles they wore may not only have indicated where they had been (and all the honor that came with that recognition), but apparently also served as the uniform for what was probably the king's special guard at Birka.

(Fig. 12. A. Birka chamber-grave 581.²⁹⁵ B. Reconstruction of the moment of burial.

C. Mounted warrior at Birka. Courtesy of: Duczko 2000).

²⁹⁵ Duczko mistakenly identifies these drawings as grave number 851. The correct grave number is 581 (Gräslund 1980: 41, Sundkvist 1992: 48).

Christian Horse Burials?

Perhaps the most peculiar thing about the fabrics the men wore was that *the embroidery on them was permeated with Christian symbolism*, including crosses, tintinnabula and small reliquary pendants.²⁹⁶ Could these horse burials then have been the burials of Christians?

Thanks to Gräslund's diligent diagramming, we know that most of the chamber-graves at Birka were oriented west-east.²⁹⁷ A west-east grave orientation is usually associated with a Christian influence, as it would be desirable for the dead to face east whence Christ will come on the Day of Judgment. In contrast, a north-south orientation is seen as a pagan trait.²⁹⁸ The fact that the horse burials at Birka were *in a cemetery* means that the people buried there were already under Christian influence. But, as Gräslund explains, the reason for nearly all of the inhumation graves on the island (over 85%) being oriented west-east may have had more to do with the location of the harbor, rather than the religion of the dead.²⁹⁹

Three of the chamber-graves contained two bodies. In such double burials, it is often suggested that the woman was sacrificed to follow her husband or master in death.³⁰⁰ According to a contemporary account of the Arab traveler, Ibn Rustah, it was even a custom at Birka to bury these women alive.³⁰¹ If such a fate indeed was visited upon the women in these horse burials, *it is hard to view them as Christian interments* as Christianity did not countenance human sacrifice.³⁰² The interpretation that thus presents itself is that the horse burials at Birka were of pagans who were either oblivious to or unconcerned with the Christian iconography sewn into their garbs.

Final Thoughts on Birka

The homogeneity of the Birka chamber-graves and the fact that they all occur in one localized spot makes it almost certain that they belonged to the same military unit, probably the king's *hirð*. The horses, riding gear, and weapons that accompanied the dead reflected

²⁹⁶ Hägg 1984: 212.

²⁹⁷ Gräslund 1980: 39.

²⁹⁸ Gräslund 1980: 26.

²⁹⁹ Gräslund 1987: 85.

³⁰⁰ Arbman 1977: 114.

³⁰¹ Birkeland 1954: 17.

³⁰² Clarke & Ambrosiani 1991: 155.

their elevated status in life, and likewise equipped them as the ideal mounted warrior should be equipped. In this, they betray a connection to the overall military developments that occurred in Scandinavia during the 10th century.

The placement of the horses on specially-made platforms in the Birka graves not only reveals great uniformity, but it speaks to a reverence for the beast that is equaled by few of the other graves we have examined. The horses were delicately tucked into place with their heads towards the deceased as if to suggest that there was a very special bond between horse and rider.

4.5 Lindholm Høje—An Example of the Variation of Horse Burials

At Lindholm Høje, in northern Jutland, we come across horse burials of an entirely different nature than what we looked at elsewhere in Scandinavia. Dogs were by far the most favorite grave companions here (appearing in 221 graves—roughly half of the examined graves), while horses turned up much less frequently as grave offerings (appearing in only 20 graves). Even more conspicuous than this, however, is that the horse remains recovered consisted mainly of extremities. The presence of only toes, feet, skull fragments and neck vertebrae has been interpreted as proof that the horses had been eaten before they were buried.³⁰³ This also seems to be confirmed by the fact that the dog skeletons were much more complete as a rule, though buried in identical conditions for preservation.

It should be noted that while inhumation graves were represented at Lindholm Høje during the early and late phases, animal remains were found exclusively in the cremation burials. Most of these burials, in turn, were marked by stones in the shape of a triangle, an oval or a ship. Half of the horse graves were marked by stone ship grave settings.³⁰⁴

Considering Lindholm Høje's size and longevity, this particular form of horse burial cannot be viewed as an anomalous fad practiced by a small community for a short period of time. It is Denmark's largest burial site from the late Iron Age and Viking Period, containing approximately 700 graves. The burial grounds were in use for roughly 500 years between the 6th and 11th centuries, though most of the graves date from the 8th and 9th centuries.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ Ramskou 1976: 135.

³⁰⁴ Ramskou 1976: 135.

³⁰⁵ Ramskou 1976: 130.

Moreover, similar kinds of horse burial have been observed elsewhere in Scandinavia. While horses are more of a common offering on the island of Bornholm, a percentage of the graves there also contained just a skull and bone extremities, or sometimes only a jaw and/or teeth.³⁰⁶ In Swedish cremation burials of the Viking Age this combination of parts of the skull and extremities has appeared at sites like Tuna in Badelunda.³⁰⁷ And, even though the west Norwegian material is both scanty and poorly studied, the same phenomenon is observed there.³⁰⁸

Thus, instead of revealing the kind of ‘special treatment’ they are shown in many of the other burials we have discussed, the horse remains at these sites were found in much the same condition as they were at Skedemosse. But while the horses at Skedemosse received a disproportionately high amount of attention, horses in the Lindholm Høje graves were not prioritized above the other ‘meat-type’ animals, as Ramskou terms them. Nevertheless, the findings strongly suggest that the type of horse sacrifice and feast related to the cult worship we discussed in Chapter 2 also could take place at horse burials.

³⁰⁶ Müller-Wille 1971: 161, 165 (Map).

³⁰⁷ Oma 2000: 35.

³⁰⁸ Meling 2000: 71.

Chapter V

Horse Burial in Old Norse Literature

In order to put this review of the major trends in the archaeology of horse burials in the proper perspective, it is important to take a closer look at the written sources related to the subject. In doing so, we can pluck out certain themes within the literature that resemble the physical record and see how these might give us a better understanding of the motivations behind the burial practice.

5.1 Horse Burial as a Common Occurrence in the Sagas

There are many instances in which the sagas describe the funerals of important characters or historical figures. Many of these accounts make special mention of the inclusion of a horse or horses. In the *Íslendinga Sögur*, for instance, horses are often killed to accompany their masters.³⁰⁹ In *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (Ch. 58), Skallagrímr is said to be laid in a mound together with his horse, weapons and smith's tools.³¹⁰

We also come upon an instance of horse burial in *Heimskringla*, where Snorri attempts to explain its origin as the result of a royal declaration:

"The first age is called the Age of Cremation...However, after Dan the Proud, the Danish king, had a burial mound made for himself and decreed that he was to be carried into it when dead, in all his royal vestments and armor, *together with his horse, fully saddled*, and much treasure besides, and when many of his kinsmen did likewise, then began the Age of Sepulchral Mounds. However, the Age of Cremation persisted for a long time among Swedes and Norwegians."

(*Heimskringla*, Snorri's Foreword)

This last story begs the question of whether King Gorm, Harald Bluetooth's father, was originally buried with a horse in the north burial mound at Jelling. Here, a "large wooden

³⁰⁹ Ellis Davidson 1943: 34.

³¹⁰ Incidentally, this is the same saga in which the ceremony of insult referred to as "raising the níðstang" features the mounting of a horsehead on a pole.

double burial chamber had been broken into and pillaged of everything including the skeletons.”³¹¹ A piece of what may have been a bridle-rein mount, however, survived.³¹²

5.2 To Valhalla by Horseback, Not by Ship

Taking into consideration the extravagant ship burials we have discussed, it is quite surprising to discover that the Old Norse sources mention only horses—not ships—as the means of transport to Valhalla.³¹³ This picture is clearly at odds with the events represented on the Gotland stones, where ships seem to be undertaking at least part of the journey.

Some sagas not only report horse burials, but fill us in on a little of the ideology behind them. In the narrative about Harald Wartooth in *Sogubrot*, for instance, Harald is granted a saddled horse and wagon at his funeral so that he could either “ride or drive to Valhalla.”³¹⁴ This story reveals how the horse in the grave is provided explicitly so that the deceased could make his final journey to the hall of the slain.

This journey was not always in one direction. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, a lay from the *Poetic Edda*, Helgi is laid to rest in a burial mound and thereafter is said to ride to Valhalla. He soon returns to the mortal world on horseback to spend one last night with his living bride. At dawn, he woefully declares,

“It is time for me to ride the reddening ways, let the fallow horse tread the flight-path,
I must go westward over the wind-helm’s bridge before Salgofnir wakes the sig-host.”

(*Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, stanza 49)

It was apparently not always necessary for the man to have a horse with him when buried. After Hákon the Good dies, it is said that he is buried alone in a great mound, without any grave goods except the armor and garments he wears. In spite of this, the praise poem, *Hákonarmál*, describes how Valkyries escort the king to the hall of Odin on horseback.³¹⁵

5.3 The Journey to Hel or the Underworld

³¹¹ Brøndsted 1960: 276.

³¹² Müller-Wille 1982: 10.

³¹³ Althaus 1993: 106.

³¹⁴ *Sogubrot af Fornkonungum* (Ch. 9).

³¹⁵ Found in *The Saga of Hákon the Good* (Ch. 32). Said to be composed by the skald Eyvind Skáldaspillir.

Horses were not only used for the journey to Valhalla, but to other realms of the afterlife as well. In Snorri's *Prose Edda*, horses are clearly shown to be how the dead—or the occasional living visitor—make their way to Hel. After Balder's death through the treachery of Loki, the gods pay their last respects to the fallen hero with a funeral on his ship, Hringhorni. Before setting it and all of its cargo ablaze, Balder's horse is also "led on to the pyre with all its harness."³¹⁶

Following the funeral, Frigg asks who among the Æsir was willing to ride the road to Hel and offer the goddess a ransom if she would let Baldr return to Asgard, the realm of the gods. Hermod the Bold, a son of Odin, accepts this task and is given his father's horse Sleipnir to ride down to Hel. After nine nights of traveling through dark valleys, Hermod arrives at a bridge over the river Gioll. The maiden who guards the bridge, Modgud, informs him that not only Balder, but five battalions of dead men had 'ridden' over the bridge the other day. When Hermod himself finally comes upon the gates of Hel they are shut, so he is forced to jump over them on Sleipnir's back.

Though this was the 'unconventional' way one could get into Hel, the gates would presumably have opened for the dead to ride through unimpeded. The implication from the events is that Balder rode through these gates on the horse he was burned on the pyre with. The fact that Balder was cremated aboard his ship also hints that a voyage may have been involved, although Snorri makes no mention of this. This does not have to be the case, however, as the funeral ship that Ibn Fadlan describes evidently plays no part in the Rus chieftain's journey.

We are left to conclude, from all of the above accounts, that Snorri and his fellow Icelandic scribes believed that their Viking ancestors reached the realms of death primarily by horseback. It is hard to say why they held this conviction. It is possible that it was simply a handy literary device, and not based on any kind of credible testimony of Viking beliefs passed down by mouth over the centuries. A logical interpretation is that Valhalla was imagined to be found on land, and the most convenient mode of transportation there would have been the horse. If Valhalla were located on an island, a ship would have been the vehicle of choice.

³¹⁶ *Gylfaginning* (v. 49-50).

5.4 The Horse's Role in the Burial Mound

Sometimes, however, buried horses were not intended to take a journey in the afterlife. This is often the case when the dead themselves do not depart to the netherworld and are said to be living *within* the burial mound. This concept of the *draugr*, or the living dead, who haunts both man and beast is a popular literary motif in Old Norse literature.³¹⁷

In *Grettis Saga* (Ch. 28), for instance, Kárr the Old is found in his mound seated on a chair next to the bones of his horse and a pile of gold and silver. The only apparent purpose the horse plays in this yarn is to provide a grim backdrop for the terrible struggle between the grave robber Grettir and Kárr's *draugr*. Nevertheless, the burial scene is eerily similar to what we saw at Vendel with the dead chieftain seated upright in his chair, surrounded by personal items and horse.

Another saga that portrays life within the mound alludes to the notion that horses were meant to serve as food for the dead. In *Egils saga ok Ásmundar* (Ch. 7),³¹⁸ a horse, hound and hawk are taken into the burial mound *alive* along with the dead man Aran, who is also seated on a chair. During the first night, Aran's *draugr* kills the hound and hawk and then devours them. On the second night, he tears the horse to shreds and gobbles it up, blood streaming down his chin.

In this story, as well as in the funerals of Dan the Proud and Balder, the horses are not ritually slaughtered—instead, they are buried or burned *alive*. There were no instances that the author came across in the archaeology where horses seem to have been buried alive. According to Ibn Rustah, of course, this may have happened to humans.

Whether buried alive or dead, horses are most frequently presented as having a definite use in the afterlife. It almost seems as though the authors saw the chief reason for their burial as a metaphysical one. Unfortunately, it is not manageable within the limits of this paper to attempt an in-depth analysis of their perceptions. We should keep in mind that the saga writers may have had a variety of reasons for believing what they believed and

³¹⁷ Simek 1993: 65.

³¹⁸ Translation found in *Seven Viking Romances*.

writing what they wrote. Some may only have wished to concoct a well-woven tale that captured the fancy of their contemporary audience, while others sought merely to glorify their ancestors, while even others may just have wanted to ‘justify the ways of God to men.’

5.5 Frey and Horses in the Sagas

As mentioned in the introduction, Old Norse literature is our primary source for information on pagan religion in Scandinavia. As such, it is from the sagas that we become familiar with the various gods within the Old Norse pantheon and their attributes. The god Frey has already turned up several times in this paper in association with horses, but his involvement with them may not necessarily have regarded the afterlife.

In Edda mythology we meet Frey’s horse only one time—in *Skirnismál* of the *Poetic Edda*, where it is used in connection with the wooing of the giantess Gerd. Though the horse is said to brave the perils of the giants’ realm and passes through a wall of flame before reaching its destination, it does not at any point cross over into a land of the dead.

There are, however, other episodes in the sagas where horses are sacrificed or dedicated to Frey. In *Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar*, we read of horses that are intended for sacrifice to Frey at the cult site in Trondheim. In *Hrafnkel’s Saga* (Ch. 6), the young Einar even suffers death for daring to ride Hrafnkel’s sacred horse, Freyfaxi.³¹⁹

None of these accounts, however, are connected to either horse burials or a journey undertaken in the afterlife. It is clear that Frey shares an association to horses in the sagas—he is, after all, named as one of the gods to whom the horses were sacrificed in *The Saga of Hákon the Good*. But there is little that connects his cult with death and the importance of horses in the afterlife. Based on the evidence from Old Norse literature, it does not seem likely that horse burials were fertility sacrifices to the Vanir, as Ellis Davidson suggests.³²⁰

5.6 Sleipnir as the Horse of Death

In stark contrast, many of the sagas discussed above link Sleipnir to the other world, especially Valhalla. There are even a few episodes in which Odin himself is seen riding Sleipnir to the land of the dead.³²¹ Sleipnir thus clearly comes across as the ‘horse of death.’

³¹⁹ The same name is given to a horse in *Vatnsdæla Saga*.

³²⁰ Ellis Davidson 1982: 79.

³²¹ *Vegtamskviða*, Saxo (Book 1: 31).

According to the literature, most of the credit should go to Odin and his swift-legged steed for the appearance of horses in the grave.

Conclusion

I will now briefly summarize the overall points that have been made all along in the process of this survey. Why were horses buried in Viking Age Scandinavia?

Horses often enjoyed a special place in burials of the Viking Age because of the *power and wealth* they symbolized in the world of the living. They were a reflection of the social and economic status the buried individual had in life. Together, *ships and horses were the ultimate displays of power, wealth and status in the Viking Age*. The fact that large numbers of horses rarely occur in non-ship burials supports this claim.

This was by no means the only reason for horse burials. Horses and riding gear in graves seem to have served as *symbols of a man's military rank*, which was also probably closely linked to his social status. As such, they outfitted him as the consummate warrior in an age of new military organization and early state building. Moreover, it is also possible that in some cases horses and their gear represented a connection to royal power.

Not all horse burials can be seen in such an exclusive light, however. In a number of cases those buried with horses were neither warriors nor people of wealth and importance.³²² This goes for perhaps the vast majority of horse graves—those too scattered and unremarkable to be covered here. In addition, there is no guarantee that the lack of a horse or grave goods is a certain sign of poverty.

It is difficult to attribute religious significance to archaeological finds. Nevertheless, *it is likely that most of the horses found in graves from the Viking Period had a cultic function and/or were symbolically intended for use in the afterlife*. Their burial contexts, however, exhibit a great variety. Sometimes horses were buried whole, sometimes in parts; sometimes with riding equipment, sometimes not; occasionally upright, mostly not; sometimes on the ship, sometimes beside the ship; often without ships at all. This variety is too great that no one general hypothesis can cover the whole lot.

³²² Ellis Davidson 1988: 54.

The truth is much more complex than the belief that horse burials were fertility sacrifices to the Vanir. As varied as the material is, there is quite frequently a distinction between the sacrifice involved in ‘the horse cult’ and the sacrifice involved in horse burials. The dismembered, incomplete remains of horses from cultic centers like Skedemosse greatly differ from the full skeletal remains of horses often found in burial contexts. However, when horseheads, bone extremities or decapitations do occur, they may indeed indicate a link to cultic worship.

There are grounds to believe that *horse burials and their religious symbolism figured more heavily with the cult of Odin* than the cult of Frey, Freya or Njord. The Gotlandic picture stones and themes from Old Norse literature certainly *resemble* each other in this respect. Both express the notion that Odin and Sleipnir were connected to concepts of death, especially in regards to the journey to Valhalla. On both the picture stones and in the literature, this trip *is* made by horseback.

The latter is of course the most “romantic” explanation for the practice of horse burial during the Viking Age. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine whether the horses in the actual graves were intended for a journey to Valhalla. In many of the burials I have reviewed, it seems readily apparent that such a journey was **not** in mind. Certainly, when horses appear in women’s graves, there is little in the literature to support the idea that they too would be riding to join the fallen heroes in Odin’s hall (though this is hinted at on the Gotland stones). But with some burials we have discussed, such as the Swedish boat-graves and the Borre ship burial, this interpretation seems like a real possibility. Still, the archaeological information alone is simply not enough to give us definite answers.

But given the typical great human yearning for everlasting life, and the equally typical great human love for the animal, one likes to believe that this union of man and horse even into the afterlife was the primary reason for the peculiar and widespread Scandinavian custom of horse burial.

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