The study of belief, faith and religious practices can provide a deep insight into historical societies, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish or pagan. They form a constant of human behaviour. Through religion, cult and rituals, multi-layered and complex cultural norms are expressed, demonstrating group affiliation. However, popular devotion and belief in a rural environment can include practices that are not within the official religion.

Some of these practices discussed in this book can be investigated through archaeology. Important religious sites like churches, monasteries, mosques and synagogues as well as caves, holy wells and hermitages are discussed. Furthermore, burials of children, revenants and the condemned are analysed, as they often deviate from normal practice and shed light on particular communities and their beliefs. Rituals concerning the protection of buildings and persons which focus on objects attributed with religious qualities are another area explored. Through archaeological research it is possible to gain an understanding of popular religion of medieval and early modern times and also to draw conclusions about religious ideas that are not written in documents. By bringing together these topics this book is of particular interest to scholars working in the field of archaeology, history and cultural anthropology.

The addressed subjects were the theme of an international conference of the RURALIA association held in Clervaux, Luxembourg, in September 2015. Ruralia promotes the archaeology of medieval settlement and rural life. Current research questions in rural archaeology are discussed in an European wide context. The aim is to strengthen the exchange of knowledge, and the development of, archaeologically comparable studies, and to make archaeological results available to other disciplines.
Courtyard sites and their cultic context

Frode Iversen *

ABSTRACT
This article discusses the centralisation of religious ritual practices in Scandinavia in the second half of the first millennium. This is explored through detailed investigation of the courtyard sites at Skei and Heggstad, Inner Trøndelag, Norway, set in relation to Mære, a nearby pre-Christian cult site, as well as early 11th-century county churches established by the king. This study establishes that the number of houses in the courtyard sites correspond with the number of local administrative district within the shires (fylkir) of Verdal and Sparbyggja. This raises the question whether these sites were 'shire level' cult sites, subordinate to Mære, which served all four fylkir of Inner Trøndelag. Both Skei and Heggstad are surrounded by several large burial mounds, and exhibit traces of feasting. It is concluded that the courtyard sites were places where local politics were acted out, together with cultic and religious matters, as politics, religion and law were closely interwoven, and ancestor worship was also important. The last Earl of Lade was exiled from Trøndelag and Norway in ca. 1015 and the town of Nidaros was becoming increasingly important. During this period the king may have taken control of Mære, and other centres associated with the earldom and elites of Trøndelag. The two courtyard sites of Skei and Heggstad fell into disuse in this turbulent period. It is proposed that the pre-Christian cultic and legal system driven by the regional elite was transformed into a royal, Christian, system supporting larger polities and emerging kingship.

Keywords: Courtyard sites, cult sites, conversion, Trøndelag.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG
Versammlungsorte und ihr kultischer Kontext

Schlagwörter: Versammlungsorte, Kulstätten, Christianisierung, Trøndelag.

RÉSUMÉ
Lieux de rassemblements et leur contexte cultuel
Cet article traite de la centralisation des pratiques rituelles religieuses en Scandinavie durant la seconde moitié du premier millénaire, à travers une recherche détaillée des lieux de rassemblements de Skei et de Heggstad (Inner Trøndelag, Norvège) en relation avec le site proche de Maere, lieu de culte pré-chrétien, ainsi qu'avec certaines églises établies par le roi au X\textsuperscript{ième} siècle. Cette étude montre que le nombre de maisons dans les lieux de rassemblements correspond avec le nombre de districts administratifs locaux dans les « comtés » (fylkir) de Verdal et Sparbygga. Cela soulève la question de savoir si ces sites étaient des lieux de culte, subordonnés à Maere dominant ainsi les quatre fylkir du Inner Trøndelag. Les deux sites, Skei et Heggstad, sont entourés par plusieurs grands monticules funéraires (tumuli) montrant des traces de banquets. En général, la politique, la religion et le droit étaient étroitement liés. S’y ajoute l’importance du culte des ancêtres. Il est donc conclu que ces lieux de rassemblements étaient aussi bien des lieux d’expression de la politique aussi bien locale que des rites culturels et religieux. Le dernier comte de Lade fut exilé de Trøndelag et de la Norvège en 1015. Pendant cette période la ville de Nidaros monte en puissance, tandis que les deux lieux de rassemblement de Skei et Heggstad tombent en désuétude. Il semble qu’au cours de cette période troublée, le roi prend le contrôle de Maere et d’autres centres associés avec les fylkir et les anciennes élites du Trøndelag. Il est proposé que le système cultuel et juridique pré-chrétien dominé par des élites régionales ait été transformé en une royauté chrétienne, soutenant un système de pouvoir centralisé et la royauté naissante.

Mots-clés : lieux de rassemblements, lieux de culte, christianisme, Trøndelag.

Introduction
The aim of this article is to investigate the degree of centralisation of religious ritual in Scandinavia in the second half of the first millennium. The issues under investigation include: the location of the cult sites, their features and characteristics, as well as the areas which they represented. The terminology regarding religious meetings has changed in line with the new results. Earlier terms like ‘Norse’ and ‘Sami’, ‘Christian’ and ‘heathen’ were interpreted as more or less homogeneous groups. However, archaeology has revealed great variations in religious expression within what today is perceived as non-unitarian belief systems in Scandinavia (Anglert 2003; Stanberg 2003; Andrén et al. 2006; Nordeide 2011). Therefore, scholars like Peter Brown (2003) and Sæbjørg Nordeide (2011) stress the need for an increasing awareness of local variation in religious expressions and change through time.

The main area of this investigation is Inner Trøndelag in Norway, where I perceive the area representative of itself and nothing else. In terms of conversion, it is, however, an interesting area. According to Snorri Sturluson, the people of Trøndelag were the most powerful in Norway ‘because of their chieftains’ and a large population (Hkr, Saga of St. Olaf, ch. 247), and the societal organisation seems to have been rather conservative (Skevik 1997). The power of the chieftains in no other area of 11th-century Norway seems to have been as strong, even though the unification and Christianisation of Norway was underway at this point. Inner Trøndelag was also a multi-ethnic society with a Sami-population living in the inner forested areas bordering Sweden. Large pre-Christian feasts are described in narrative dealing with King Hakon I Adelsteinfostre’s (c. AD 934–61) attempt to convert a mainly rural ‘fjord-bound’ society in Trøndelag, as is the more successful Christianisation by King Olav Tryggvason (AD 995–1000).

Inner Trøndelag constitutes the northern half of Trøndelag. This area is highly suitable for the study
of pagan cultic practices and the conversion, for the following four reasons:

1. The youngest courtyard sites of Norway are found here (Fig. 1). These sites had military, judicial and perhaps also cultic functions (Storli 2006; 2010; Grimm 2010; Iversen 2015). In Inner Trøndelag the courtyard sites were in use from the 8th or 9th centuries until the 11th century when Christianity was established and the area became more closely integrated in the Norwegian kingdom (Strom 2007).

2. Saga evidence from the 1230s provides relatively detailed accounts of pre-Christian cultic practices in Inner Trøndelag. The description of the ON blót (sacrificial feast) at Mære is important. The site is

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Fig. 1. A) The 30 known Norwegian courtyard sites, of which two are in Inner Trøndelag. Several of the courtyard sites in Agder, Trøndelag and in northern Norway are uncertain (Alfheim, Øysund, Hustad, Spangereid and Oddernes). This study focuses on the Skei and Heggstad sites in Northern Trøndelag (© Frode Iversen). B) Top right: LiDAR scan of the courtyard site at Værem, Namdalen. This site was still in use in the early 9th century (© Lars Forseth, Nord-Trøndelag Fylkeskommune). C) Middle right: The courtyard site of Øygarden, close to Stavanger, during the excavation by Jan Petersen, 1939-1940. The site was still in use in the 8th century (© Arkeologisk Museum, Universiteit i Stavanger). D) Lower right: The courtyard site at Døjesæte at Tinghaug, Jæren, c. AD 200-600 (© Ragne Jonsrud, Arkeologisk Museum, Universiteit i Stavanger).
presented as a pre-Christian cult site for all four counties (ON *fylkir*) which historically constituted the Inner Trøndelag area. Archaeological evidence also strengthens an interpretation of Mære as an important pre-Christian cult site (Lidén 1969; 1999). As far as we know Mære was not a thing site or a combined thing site/cult site with formalised power within a given area. It appears solely as a cult site, seemingly important in the creation of a common religious identity in a larger area.

3. The so called *fylki* churches of Inner Trøndelag are relatively well-known (Hallan 1956; Brendalsmo 2006; 2016) (Fig. 2). These were main churches, built on royal manors in the 11th century, shortly after the Christianisation. They were essential for the emerging *state* church organisation in Norway, forming the building blocks of bishoprics, emerging in the mid-11th century. Did the *fylki* churches take over some of the functions of the courtyard sites, and if so, did these moves to other places in the landscape which were easier to control by *foreign* kings and their allies?

4. The medieval administrative geography of Inner Trøndelag is mapped and investigated in detail (Dybdahl 1997). It is therefore known to which *fylki* the various communities of the Middle Ages belonged. This knowledge is highly significant for the examination of which administrative areas that may have been related to the different cult sites.

The new contribution presented in this article does not concern, either the cult site at Mære, or the *fylki* churches, both of which topics have already been comprehensively studied (Lidén 1969; 1999; Hallan 1956; Brendalsmo 2006; 2016). The courtyard sites of Inner Trøndelag have not, however, been included in the study of cultic practices, seen in relation to Mære or the *fylki* churches, and it is this gap which this article will address. Did the courtyard sites have a role in pre-Christian religious practices and, if so, on what level? Did the *fylki* churches subsume the religious functions after the Christianisation? And what was the relationship between the high ranked cult site at Mære and the courtyard sites?

Of the approximately 30 courtyard sites in Norway, only two are found in Inner Trøndelag: Heggstad and Skei, both of which have been partly excavated and dated. While in other parts of Norway the courtyard sites fell out of use in earlier periods, these two sites were used until the Christianisation around AD 1000 (Strøm 2007). In Rogaland, further south, this took place in the 8th century, in Sogn and Fjordane, further north, in the 9th century, and finally in Hålogaland, in northern Norway, in the 10th century (Olsen 2014; Iversen 2017). It has been suggested that the pattern of site abandonment thus represents a reversed image of the emergence of larger political units. These chronological differences have been interpreted as sign of political centralisation and an emerging coastal kingdom in the south (Iversen 2015; 2017) as well as an Earldom in the north (Sterli 2006; 2010). These merged around AD 1015, roughly at the same time as the courtyard sites in Inner Trøndelag were abandoned.

### Background and sources

Recent research suggests that in pre-Christian society special cult buildings were erected (Jennbert et al. 2002; Sundqvist 2015). For many years, the archaeological finds from the Viking age farm Hofstadir on Iceland shaped discussions regarding pre-Christian cult buildings (Sundqvist 2015, 151). In Norway, the philologist Magnus Olsen (1926) identified farms with the name Hov (ON *hof*) as possible cult sites, proposing cult-site continuity from pre-Christian to Christian times, and that churches were built on the old hof sites. This discussion was dormant for a long time, but in 1966 Hans Emil Lidén found buildings remains and gold-foil figures (*gullgubber*) under the church at Mære. He argued that this confirmed the saga accounts of Mære as the site for the annual sacrificial feasts of Inner Trøndelag. The find of 13 gold-foil figures became especially associated with cultic activities going back to the Merovingian Period (Liden 1969; Tangen 2010, 19-25).

For many years it was argued, on the basis of Magnus Olsen’s place-name research, that farms with the name *hof* were pre-Christian cult sites. In the case of Trøndelag, the PhD thesis of the historian Merete Roskaft (2003) is an important contribution on the political development of Trøndelag c. 800-1200. She investigated many of the farms mentioned in the sagas, in terms of ownership, place-names and archaeological material, as well as the farms with courtyard sites (Skei and Heggstad) (Roskaft 2003, 54–77). She has convincingly argued that only a few of the *Hov* farms known in Trøndelag can be related to *hof* in the sense of a pre-Christian cult site (Roskaft 2003, 75).

It is striking that the most convincing examples of *hof* farms with possible cult sites were situated in Outer Trøndelag, and not in the inner area where the two courtyard sites are found. Only one of the nine more likely *hof* farms was situated in Inner Trøndelag (*Hov in Snåsa*), and Raskaft is somewhat uncertain whether this is a *true* *hof* farm. We can now conclude that there are no known courtyard sites in Outer Trøndelag, but several *hof* farms, while the opposite is the case in Inner Trøndelag. It is not known, however, if a link can be found.
From the sagas we can deduce that Outer Trøndelag and Inner Trøndelag formed geographically separate areas in terms of pre-Christian religious practice. We are told that regular religious feasts (*blót*) were held both at Lade in Outer Trøndelag, and at Mære in Inner Trøndelag. For Lade, only an autumn feast is known, while for Mære three different types are mentioned: an autumn, a mid-winter and a summer feast (Hkr, Saga of St. Olaf, chs. 108, 109; Saga of Olav Tryggvason, ch. 65; Saga of Hakon the Good, chs. 17, 18). In the *Heimskringla*, the Icelandic author Snorri Sturluson (1178/79-1241) portrays Mære as a central cult site for the four counties of Inner Trøndelag (Øyna, Sparbu, Verdal and Skøyne) where all the chieftains of Trøndelag met (Hkr, Saga of St. Olaf, ch. 109).

Snorri provides the names of the farms where the chieftains in charge of organising the Trøndelag sacrifices lived in the mid-10th century: Alstadhaug (Skøyne), Stav (Verdal), Egge (Sparbu) and Husabø on Inderøya (Øyna or Verdal) (Hkr, Saga of Hakon the Good, ch. 8). It is uncertain how trustworthy this information is; it was written down 200–250 years after the events allegedly took place. Snorri presents a system of permanent cult sites maintained by an elite from particular farms connected to certain shires (*fylki*). Such a strict and clear structure, could be the result of what the historian Knut Helle calls Snorri Sturluson’s ‘formidable sense of order’ (Helle 1993, 150). This, however, calls for an investigation of these chieftain farms and their relationship to the courtyard sites, *fylki* churches and the cult site at Mære.

Jan Brendalsmo examined the *fylki* churches of Trøndelag in his PhD thesis as well as in his later research (Brendalsmo 2006; 2016). These churches form part of a wider debate on the early ecclesiastical organisation of Norway. There is some uncertainty regarding the identification of specific *fylki* churches in Trøndelag and there is a lack of direct references in the sources. According to the Law of the Frostathing, such a system was clearly in place in Trøndelag and two charters provide evidence of two such *fylki* churches. The Church of St. Peter on Veøy in
Romsdal, mentioned as a *fylkis kirkio* in 1488 (DN III, no. 966). For Mære Church in Inner Trøndelag the evidence is more circumstantial; a document from 1279 states that the farmers of the upper half of Sparbyggja *fylki* were obliged to maintain this church (DN II, no. 18). This is in line with regulations regarding the maintenance of *fylki* churches found in the Law of the Frostathing. Apart from these two cases, identifications of *fylki* churches must be based on observations of church size, building materials and location.

Nils Hallan identified eight *fylki* churches in central Trøndelag, one in each of the *fylki*: in Inner Trøndelag these were Mære (Sparbu), Sakshaug (Øyna), Haug (Verdal), and Alstadhaug (Skøyna), and in Outer Trøndelag Værnes (Stjørdal), Melhus (Gauldal), Lade (Strinda) and Gryting (Orkdal) (Hallan 1956, 248). Brendalsmo used the following criteria for the *fylki* churches: they should be episcopal visitation churches in the year 1432, they should pay the highest cathedral tax in the 1530-40s, and finally they should be stone churches at farms associated with the king (Brendalsmo 2006, 166). For Inner Trøndelag, Brendalsmo identified the same *fylki* churches as Hallan, i.e. Mære, Sakshaug, Haug and Alstadhaug. These churches will form the starting point for the further discussion in this article (Fig. 2).

The historian Audun Dybdahl has carried out a thorough investigation of the *skipreiður* organisation in Trøndelag and linked individual units to specific *fylki* (Dybdahl 1979). Dybdahl’s main sources include the 1277 Will of Magnus the Lawmender, which lists 59 *skipreiður* in Trøndelag (DN IV, no. 3) and the 1430 Cadastre of Aslak Bolt (AB), in which 33 *skipreiður* are named.

Røskaft argued that the *fylkra* of Trøndelag were not necessarily ‘nature-given’ entities, but could equally have been established and regulated by the earls in the 10th century. This does not, however, exclude an older organisation. *Fylkra* are mentioned in the skaldic poem Vellekla from the end of the 10th century, in which the achievements of Earl Hakon (935-995) are praised (Røskaft 2003, 167, 185). We shall now move on to examining the courtyard sites of Inner Trøndelag in more detail. Were they sites of cultic gatherings, and if so, for which areas? What is the relationship between them and known pre-Christian and early Christian cult sites in Inner-Trøndelag?

**Courtyard sites**

Courtyard sites are a specific type of archaeological site found in Norway and on Iceland (Storli 2010; Iversen 2015; Vésteinsson 2015). They are often defined as ‘a collection of house foundations around an oval or semi-circular area’ (*tun*) (Johansen – Søbstad 1978, 55). Detailed research history overviews are provided by Oliver Grimm (2010) Inger Storli (2006; 2010), and the author of this paper (Iversen 2015). The view expressed by Oliver Grimm and Frans-Arne Stylegar of the courtyard sites as multifunctional and ‘served for social/cultural, judicial, ritual and military purposes, and additionally as places of trade/handicraft’ (Grimm – Stylegar 2004, 123) is convincing, and like Inger Storli, I would like to emphasise their role as assembly sites.

In Norway, these sites were in use from AD 100–1000. Several scholars have pointed out that the Icelandic assembly booths constitute later parallels to the Norwegian sites. In Iceland, 27 such sites are known, which have been subject to archaeological investigation in varying degrees. These sites were used from the 10th to the 12th centuries (Vésteinsson 2013, 119), possibly until Iceland was integrated in the Norwegian kingdom in 1262. The irregular pattern of the booths makes them different from the Norwegian courtyard sites.

My own research has shown a possible connection between the Norwegian courtyard sites and administrative areas known from the 12th to 13th century onwards. The number of houses at these sites often corresponds to the number of local assembly units within historically documented areas. This suggests that each local community had its own booth at the site, just as the system seems to have functioned in Iceland with possible correspondence between number of booths and parishes (Vésteinsson 2013). This connection has not been previously investigated in Trøndelag, and will therefore be attempted here. Were the courtyard sites primarily assemblies or did they also have cultic functions?

**Courtyard sites in the written sources**

The courtyard sites are rarely mentioned in written sources. The Law of the Gulathing refers to *thing* booths in a chapter dealing with murder at the *thing* (G 181). As this regulation refers to the booths of a courtyard site, it has to be old as these sites were abandoned in the Gulathing area in the 9th century. The toponymic sources contain little evidence of cultic activities at the courtyard sites. There is a courtyard site at the farm *Hov* at Løkta, near Dønnes in Hålogaland. This is, however, the only example of a possible connection between the name *hov* and a courtyard site. The name is relatively late, first mentioned in the 16th century (Houff, 1567), and traditionally it is interpreted as a cultic place-name (NG XVI, 110). Some place-names near Norwegian courtyard sites suggest gathering places (Leiknes, Leikenga (Tjotta), Leikvang (Skjelbrei)) (Grimm 2010, 43, 53), but in general there is little evidence of place-names indicating cultic activity.

There are only a few saga accounts with any relevance for the courtyard sites. Eyrbyggja saga, from ca. 1350, is one exception as it provides an account of an early assembly which was also a religious sanctuary. Using the
Eyrbygga saga as a direct source for pre-Christian matters poses problems, but it does at least portray medieval perceptions of pre-Christian ritual. It is uncertain if this description is applicable to the courtyard sites, but it is important enough to merit a brief discussion.

Eyrbygga saga tells the story of Þórólfur Mostrarskegg from Hordaland, who had a large sanctuary built at his farm Hofstadir in Iceland. The hof had been brought from Møster, together with the sacred soil from underneath the altar. According to the saga, not only the hof was holy, but also the area surrounding it. The beach was not to be polluted by blood spilt in anger. In the words of the historian Tormod Torfæus (1636-1719) in his Historia Rerum Norwegiarum, it was 'also exempt from the exercise of nature's secret necessities' (Torfæus 1711, 485). A separate islet (Dritsker) was set aside for such purposes. The nearby mountain Helgafell was also holy, as it was the home of the spirits of the ancestors, who provided help with difficult decisions. After an agonising power struggle where the beach had been soiled with enemy blood and Þórólfur's thing men refused to go to the skerry for their needs, the assembly was moved – to a promontory. The new assembly became the gathering place for the Icelandic West fjarðs.

The courtyard sites of Inner Trøndelag – older cult sites or places of fylki assemblies

The courtyard sites of Trøndelag (and Namdalen) have only recently been subject to research. They were acknowledged as courtyard sites in the 1980s, by the archaeologist Oddmund Farbregd (1980) and Lars Fredrik Stenvik (1988, 2001). Ingvild Onsøien Strøm (2007) provided a useful overview of the sites in Trøndelag in her master dissertation, together with some new dates Være (in Namdalen). These courtyard sites have not, however, been studied in the context of cult and assembly, within its administrative setting, as I will in this article. It is, in my view, precisely here that the potential for new insights is the largest.

Skei in Sparbyggja fylki

Skei (gno. 86) has the largest Iron-Age burial ground in Trøndelag, with more than 100 graves (Strøm 2007) (Fig. 3). In-between large burial mounds, standing stones, star-shaped mounds, long and round barrows of varying size, is a courtyard site with eight house foundations. Relatively little is known about the site and only one of the foundations has been dated (Stenvik 2001, 41; Strøm 2007, 41). Each of the eight foundations has two visible walls, and in some cases a gable wall is visible. The foundations are ca. 12m long and 6.5-7m wide (measurements taken at the top of the walls). There is some uncertainty regarding the number of foundations; Strøm suggested that there may have been ten, as a modern road may have destroyed parts of the site (Strøm 2007, 46), but this is far from clear.

In 1988 it was established that one of the buildings had been burnt down and later rebuilt (Stenvik 1988, 49; 2001, 41), and as investigations continued in 1995 and 1996, further evidence of fires was found. A sample for radiocarbon dating taken from a wall layer deriving from the last fire, gave a result of AD 1000-1060 (Stenvik 2001, 41-42). This courtyard site is thus the last of the Norwegian sites to have fallen out of use. In the close vicinity, Stenvik also excavated a rich female Viking-Age burial with insular finds (Mound 40). In addition, a cooking pit, located north of the site, was dated to the Merovingian period (Strøm 2007, 46).

How does the courtyard site at Skei relate to the administrative divisions of Sparbyggja fylki? There were eight skipreiður: Snása, Skaua, Vigmundar, Stod, Ongdal, Bågåbu, Idrotter and Sparbyggja (Dybdahl 1997, 218: no. 7-14), and Skei was located in Bågåbu, near the borders of Idrotter and Sparbyggja (Fig. 4). The distance to Mære, where according to the kings’ sagas, the sacrifices for Inner Trøndelag were held, is 5km.

Røskvafl (2003, 144) argues that Skei was very well positioned in the middle of the fylki and close to old communication routes. It seems that Skei was an important farm with central functions in the late Iron Age (c. 600–1050), but which lost its importance in the Middle Ages (c. 1050–1536). This is supported by the lack of references in written sources (Røskvafl 2003, 146-147). Skeið n. is a fairly common farm name which is often associated with horse-racing, both courses and designated sites. This place-name may indicate a kind of gathering place. Mære is located in the same fylki. It is striking that Mære had a totally different location from Skei. Mære fylki church, and the suggested blót site, were situated in the innermost part of the fjord (Borgin), central to the four fylkír of Inner Trøndelag. Mære was less accessible than Skei for the fylki as a whole, but easily accessible from the fjord and thus also for people from other areas. This wide accessibility presumably reflects important traits. Mære developed from being accessible for the four internal areas to being externally accessible for the royal power, while Skei was more accessible from within the fylki.

To sum up, there were eight skipreiður in the fylki and probably eight buildings at the courtyard site. This site is well suited as a gathering place for this fylki with eight known local communities. The courtyard site at Skei was in use at the same time as regional sacrifices for Inner Trøndelag were held at Mære, but seems to have gone out of use in the
11th century when the new fylki church was built at Møre. Its location in the middle of one of the largest burial grounds of Trøndelag suggests possible cultic functions in connection to burials and gatherings. Skei was centrally located in the fylki for gatherings of cultic, judicial and military form.
Heggstad i Værdøafylket
The courtyard site at Heggstad is located on a neutral place near a farm boundary towards Agle (32). The farms of Stiklestad (27-30) are the neighbours to the east. This courtyard site was also discovered by Stenvik, who, in 1989, found four or five house foundations. These were 12m long and 6.5m wide (Stenvik 1989, 21). There has been some debate regarding whether there were four or five buildings, but after the site was surveyed by Lars Forseth and the Municipality of Northern Trøndelag about ten years ago, there seems to be an agreement that there were four houses (Strøm 2007, 37). The site is surrounded by four very large burial mounds, and in 1920 a total of ten graves were reported (Fig. 5).

In 2003, a fire-place inside the south-eastern house foundation was radiocarbon dated to AD 990-1025 (Sigma 1) (Tua 4441). This suggests that the site was still in use at the end of the Viking Age. A nearby cooking pit was dated to AD 605-670 (Tua 16776). It is not certain, however, whether it can be linked to the courtyard site, even if it seems likely. This site is similar to the one at Skei, and was in use roughly at the same time. The difference is that both the site itself and burial ground are a lot smaller.

Heggstad lies in the middle of Verdal fylki, which, according to Dybdahl (1997, 219), had five skipreiður in the late Middle Ages: Haug, Ovanmyra, Fåra, Veddrar and Rabygga (nos. 15-19). This means there is one skipreiða too many’ in the fylki compared to the number of house foundations at the courtyard site. Maybe there really were five buildings at Heggstad, as Stenvik initially suggested, or maybe one skipreiða was divided in the Middle Ages, after the courtyard site was abandoned? We do not know. The courtyard site is on the boundary to Stiklestad and the date of the site is close to 1030 when the famous battle of Stiklestad stood. It is tempting to interpret Heggstad as a fylki assembly, which was abandoned during the turbulent period of the early 11th century.

The distance between Heggstad and Haug, where the fylki church was situated, is ca. 3.5km, and the distance from the church to the sea is short (less than 2km) (Fig. 2). This relationship is similar to the Mære/Skei one. Haug was externally accessible, while Heggstad was centrally located for the inhabitants of the area, probably functioning as a fylki assembly for military decisions and religious rituals.
Discussion and conclusion

It is clear that the two courtyard sites of Inner Trøndelag fit in well with patterns demonstrated for other Norwegian courtyard sites (Iversen 2015). These sites are positioned in the middle of historically documented units and may be interpreted as gathering sites for areas extending beyond local communities. In Inner Trøndelag, the two sites correspond well with the number of communities found in both Verdal and Sparbyggja fylki. They are therefore likely candidates for gathering sites on the fylki level. The
question is whether they were cultic, military or judicial sites, or a combination of the three. It has been established that they were in use until the early 11th century, and were probably abandoned shortly thereafter. It is thus be tempting to associate this with the Christianisation which was in progress at this time. However, in other areas, the courtyard sites were abandoned long before the religious conversion, and in Iceland the booth sites were in use through to the 12th century, long after the Christianisation, and maybe until 1262 when Iceland became subordinate to Norway. It seems more plausible that the courtyard sites became obsolete due to political processes involving a power shift from a regional power to a supra-regional and royal elite.

Trøndelag lost some of its provincial autonomy when the Earldom came under pressure in the early 11th century, and the last Lade Earl, Hakon Eriksson (998-1030) was banished in 1015. He reappears in English sources as an associate to King Cnut the Great (Johnsen 1981, 8-15). The battle at Stiklestad in 1030 was, to a large extent, part of a political conflict where the Trøndelag elite sought as much autonomy as possible from the Norwegian kingdom, and thought themselves better served by more geographically distant overlords, even supporting Cnut the Great. After Olav Haraldsson came to power in 1015, Trøndelag was gradually integrated in the new kingdom. The abandonment of the courtyard sites at Skei and Heggstad can be interpreted as signs that the regional aristocracy was losing its power over military matters to the king. An important factor may have been that the ON leiðanger, or fleet levy, came under royal supervision, perhaps in 1015.

Mære remained a central sanctuary and sacrificial site until the Christianisation in the time of Olav Tryggvason, around AD 1000. This site could perhaps be described as an institutionalised cult site, although it was not associated with any formal political activity – this took place at the courtyard sites. The task of organising the sacrifices alternated between the different elite families of Inner Trøndelag, and was therefore not linked to any particular dynasty. Shortly after the Christianisation, the king erected a fylki church at Mære, a sign that the king wished Mære to retain some of its role as a central gathering site. At the same time, Mære lost some of its status, as it was now reduced being the religious centre for one fylki, and not four as before.

At the same time, the king erected another three fylki churches in Inner Trøndelag, which meant that, in practice, local power over cultic practices was decentralised. In AD 1070, or maybe even earlier, a bishopric was established in the royal town of Nidaros, which strengthened central authority, and by extension also weakened local influence, over the cult. The new fylki churches became royal strongholds for the transformation of a conservative society. The fylki churches were not erected at the courtyard sites. The courtyard sites were centrally located within the fylki to ensure easy access over land, while the new fylki churches were located at farms close to the sea, near the fylki boundaries, and were thus easy to access for the new external power from the outside, via the fjord. I would like to suggest that cultic, judicial and military matters were moved from the geographically central, although neutral, fylki gathering sites, to farms with fylki churches, which were under stricter royal control.

The cultic aspects of the courtyard sites of Inner Trøndelag are supported by their cemetery locations. The courtyard site at Skei is situated in the middle of the largest burial ground in Trøndelag and the courtyard site at Heggestad is surrounded by four very large burial mounds. This suggests an intentional ‘link’ to ancestors and former leaders of society. The ancestral worship may have been important for the elite gathering at the courtyard sites. The presence of cooking pits may indicate that feasts were held during the assemblies. The courtyard site at Sausjord in Voss, Hordaland, is the only completely excavated site of its kind in Norway and has revealed multiple phases of human activity, both before and after its main period of use, that is, the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period, perhaps even later. Traces of at least 135 cooking pits were found, of which only four have been dated. These pits suggest that the site also functioned as a gathering place during the Viking Age and into the High Middle Ages (Olsen 2013).

In general, the material culture of courtyard sites indicates cultic activity. A bog find close to the Bjarkøy courtyard site revealed the largest ‘Vestland cauldron’ ever found in Norway, with a capacity of ca. 200-250 litres of liquid. When found this artefact was heavily worn, presumably from having been used during the courtyard site feasts (Hauken 2005, 90).

In other instances, place-names and gold-foil figures (gullgubber) indicate cultic activity at or near courtyard sites (Grimm 2010, 40). One of the best examples is the Dysjane site on the Tu mountain ridge. This site is surrounded by a ‘theophoric’ landscape; immediately to the east by Freylandsvatnet and the Freyland farm, indicating worship of the god Freyr, associated with sacral kingship. A stone cross that stood on the large mound named Kroshaugen, by the Dysjane site, may indicate that early Christian ceremonies were held on the hill before the first churches were built (Grimm 2010, 40).

At Skei five unusual star-shaped mounds are present. Bjørn Myhre has interpreted the star-shaped mounds at the courtyard site Dysjane (Hauge-Tu) and at the farm of Ullandhaug, in Rogaland, as used for closing rituals and expressions of Ægdisal, the world tree of Norse mythology (Myhre 2005, 8-9). Also Anders Andrén has interpreted star-shaped mounds, of which c. 900 are known in Scandinavia, as representations of trees in
general, and more specifically the Yggdrasil. He propose such monuments were erected over religious experts/priests or people who had cleared land and established new settlements which figuratively were seen as new ‘cosmos’ in community (Andrén 2004, 410, 414). The courtyard site at Skei is located close to a boundary of three communities (Fig. 4). It is tempting to suggest that the five star-shaped mounds represent the successive integration of new communities in the Sparbyggjafylke. Another, perhaps more likely explanation is that the star-shaped mounds were built over religious specialists who had been active on site.

In my view, in pre-Christian times military and judicial power was executed at the fylki level. These areas were bound together by communal religious rituals that took place at higher ranking locations, such as Mære. The courtyard sites were local, political, gathering places under the control of a fylki elite, where religious rituals and acts formed part of the proceedings. This changed with the emergence of the supra-regional royal power. In the 11th century, royal control over religion increased through the adoption of Christianity, and the new fylki churches were linked to loyal subjects. These may initially have been of lower social rank, such as the king’s ármaðr and the first priests, as this may have been a way of appeasing the local elite. In pre-Christian times, local chieftains probably met at places like Mære where they negotiated difficult matters, perhaps forming alliances to counteract the power of the Lade Earls. The king’s influence over military matters grew in the 11th century, and local elites lost their influence as the ship levy became a duty for the fylki and local communities, and the voluntary element disappeared.

To conclude: the courtyard sites were places where local politics was acted out, where cultic and religious matters were part of proceedings, as politics, religion and law were closely interwoven. The various fylkir cooperated on several levels, but the courtyard sites were not run by any higher, formal institutions. These were places of local, fylki, power. The sacrifices at Mære were important for the formation of alliances between the fylki units, but at these events formal governance was not enacted.

(Translated by Fredrik Sundman)

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