

With the wagon-guider, a word do I seek:  
Examining gender, myth, ceremony, and interment  
in the social history of wagons in the Viking Age

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**With the wagon-guider, a word do I seek:**

***Examining gender, myth, ceremony, and interment in the social history of wagons in the Viking Age***

This thesis examines the social history of wagons from the Viking Age with a focus upon connections to gender, mythology, ceremonial purposes, and interment contexts. The aim is to explore examples from the archaeological, visual, and textual sources that describe wagons in different contexts in order to reconsider and further develop these connections in a comparative perspective. Earlier theories on the social history of wagons are reexamined and problematized. The aim is to further investigate and illuminate an important piece of material culture that offers interesting insight into social practices in the realm of Viking Age studies.

Master of Arts Thesis in Viking and Medieval Studies

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*Oslo, May 2019*

Erin Kristine Pevan

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	1
2. Research design .....	3
2.1 Theoretical framework: social history and cultural biography .....	3
2.2 Research history .....	4
2.3 Methodology: historical archaeological approach .....	6
2.4 Addressing the nature of primary sources .....	7
2.5 On the use of pre-Viking Age sources .....	9
2.6 Research questions .....	10
3. Wagons in Archaeological Sources .....	11
3.1 Wagon finds from the Iron Age .....	11
3.1.1 The Dejbjerg wagons and Dejbjerg-type finds .....	12
3.1.2 The Rappendam bog wagon parts .....	14
3.1.3 Tranbær type .....	16
3.1.4 Discussion .....	16
3.2 Wagon body burials from the Viking Age .....	17
3.2.1 Thumby-Bienebek .....	18
3.2.2 Fyrkat .....	19
3.2.3 Ketting .....	20
3.2.4 Hvilehøj .....	21
3.2.5 Hårup .....	21
3.2.6 Discussion .....	22
3.3 The Oseberg wagon .....	23
3.3.1 Discussion .....	25
4. Wagons in Visual Sources .....	28
4.1 The Oseberg tapestry .....	28
4.1.1 Discussion .....	29
4.2 The Gotland picture stones .....	30
4.2.1 Discussion .....	32
5. Wagons in Textual Sources .....	34
5.1 Translating “wagon” in Old Norse .....	34
5.2 Latin sources .....	36
5.2.1 Tacitus – <i>Germania</i> .....	36
5.2.2 Saxo Grammaticus – <i>Gesta Danorum</i> .....	37
5.2.3 Discussion .....	38
5.3 Old Norse poetry .....	39
5.3.1 Snorri Sturluson – <i>Prose Edda (Skáldskaparmál)</i> .....	39
5.3.2 Einarr Skúlason – <i>Geisli</i> .....	42
5.3.3 <i>Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar: Höfuðlausn and Sonatorrek</i> .....	43
5.3.4 <i>Eddukvæði – Alvíssmál</i> .....	44
5.3.5 Discussion .....	45
5.4 Old Norse prose .....	46
5.4.1 <i>Helreið Brynhildar</i> .....	46
5.4.2 <i>Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar</i> .....	47
5.4.3 <i>Óláfs saga helga</i> .....	48
5.4.4 <i>Ögmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars þáttur helmings</i> .....	48
5.4.5 Discussion .....	50
6. Conclusion .....	51
Bibliography .....	53
Appendix I: Figures .....	61
Appendix II: Publius Cornelius Tacitus, <i>Germania</i> , Chapter 40 .....	69
Appendix III: <i>Eddukvæði – Alvíssmál</i> .....	70
Appendix IV: <i>Ögmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars þáttur helmings</i> .....	71

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Vigfusson's dictionary entry for <i>vagn</i> . .....	35
Figure 2. Map of Denmark's early Iron Age wagon finds. ....	61
Figure 3. Ornamentation on the Dejbjerg wagons.....	61
Figure 4. Rappendam disc wheel.....	62
Figure 5. Map of wagon body burials in 10 <sup>th</sup> century Denmark.....	62
Figure 6. Reconstruction of the Thumby-Bienebek wagon body.....	63
Figure 7. Drawing of the Oseberg wagon featured in <i>Osebergfundet</i> .....	63
Figure 8. Fragments of the Astrup Banke wagon wheel. ....	64
Figure 9. Oseberg wagon <i>bukker</i> and <i>dragene</i> . ....	64
Figure 10. "Triangle drama", left panel of the Oseberg wagon body. ....	65
Figure 11. Right panel of the Oseberg wagon body. ....	65
Figure 12. Oseberg tapestry fragment no.2. ....	65
Figure 13. Oseberg tapestry fragments no. 1 and no. 2. ....	66
Figure 14. Levide picture stone, Levide parish. ....	67
Figure 15. Barshaldershed picture stone, Grötlingbo parish. ....	67
Figure 16. Alskog picture stone, Alskog Church .....	68

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to examine the wagon from a comparative perspective in order to better formulate a social history of this object based on archaeological, visual, and textual sources. My objective is to establish connections between this object and the practices, purposes, and values it represents or conveys within different social contexts of the Viking Age. This comparative historical archaeological approach to different types of sources is informed by a framework from social anthropology research that focuses upon social history and cultural biography. It assesses the “life stories” of objects through these social contexts and demonstrates the values in which they are connected to, found, used, and honored.

I hypothesize that a wagon is a complex and elaborate object that served more than utilitarian purposes, and several recurring themes illuminating these special functions will emerge from the sources to which wagons are connected. These themes, because of their recurrence in the sources and specific connection to wagons, form an important part of a social history of wagons. As part of finding the answer to this hypothesis, my goal is to revisit other previously proposed connections between wagons and women, aspects of mythology, ceremonial or ritual purposes, and burial or other interment contexts to ascertain the evidence for these theories, as well as explore any other new additions to the social history of wagons or contribute nuanced interpretations of previous theories.

To examine this hypothesis, I consider several different examples of archaeological, textual, and visual sources that include wagons, and cross-examine them together to determine recurring themes or purposes in which wagons were used, depicted, or described in these sources. I first begin with Chapter 2 focusing on my research design, including a more detailed description of social history and cultural biography theory. I also include the ways in which it can help to answer my questions regarding the purpose of wagons, as well as its previous applications in Viking Age and medieval studies. I consider also the research history regarding wagons as the foundation that guided this research. In this section I also discuss my methodological approach, and the challenges that arise when working with older primary sources. In Chapter 3, I present the archaeological sources that contain wagons, focusing upon contexts found in Iron Age<sup>1</sup> and Viking Age Scandinavia<sup>2</sup>. I revisit the methodology of some previous scholars of this subject that employ the use of Iron Age sources as a means to interpret Viking Age depictions of wagons, and determine if this method proves fruitful in

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<sup>1</sup> The term Iron Age refers to the time period applied in Scandinavia as it occurred from the 5th century BC to the 8th century AD. This is further divided into the Pre-Roman Iron Age (5<sup>th</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC), Roman Iron Age (1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) and Germanic Iron Age (5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). It immediately preceded the Viking Age.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term Viking Age to refer to the time period occurring in Scandinavia between roughly 800-1050 AD. In this context, Scandinavia refers to the area encompassing modern-day Norway, Denmark, and Sweden.



understanding wagons across time and space. The archaeological sources include several examples of buried wagons, wagon body burials, and the best-preserved example of a Viking Age wagon from the Oseberg burial. In all of these examples, the context of the find in addition to any information about the wagon is presented. Chapter 4 focuses upon wagons as depicted in visual sources, including the depictions on textile fragments from the Oseberg tapestry and the Gotland picture stones. Chapter 5 presents wagons as they are written in the textual sources. In addition to examples from Old Norse skaldic poetry, eddic poetry, and prose, I include two Latin sources, one contemporary with the Iron Age and one more contemporary with the Old Norse texts. In Chapters 3-5, I also include small discussions of the different sources at the end of each major section to assess the different themes or purposes that I find that could contribute to a social history of wagons. I conclude with a final assessment of these different themes or purposes in the social history of the wagon in the Viking Age.

## 2. RESEARCH DESIGN

### 2.1 Theoretical framework: social history and cultural biography

Examining a piece of material culture in archaeological, visual, and textual sources and successfully integrating these interpretations into defined meaningful practices presents a challenge that finds a solution in the framework of social history and cultural biography. I consider this framework, which explores objects as commodities with life cycles of social meaning, as discussed in Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986), as part of Appadurai's volume *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. The commodities perspective of an object's life cycle or cultural biography focuses upon the way an object is "consumed" or how it goes through modes of exchange, use, and deposition. Acts of exchange and consumption give an object an array of values, and focusing on the object in addition to the forms of exchange shows the values with which it is infused.<sup>3</sup> Through these different cycles of consumption, objects are imbued with attributes such as: values of restricted use (such as use determined by social status), scarcity in acquisition, purpose-filled social messages (semiotics), knowledge connected to methods of consumption, and links forged between the consumer and consumed.<sup>4</sup> This leads to what Appadurai and Kopytoff call the cultural biography of an object, or all of the values, knowledge, and connections with which an object becomes identified throughout its life cycle of consumption. An important distinction they make is that cultural biographies refer to individual objects and their life cycles, as opposed to a social history or collective knowledge of classes of objects that are acquired over time. It is in this distinction that I formulate my approach from which to understand wagons in the Viking Age. By examining in essence the cultural biographies of several individual instances of wagons through archaeological, visual, and textual sources, I can answer questions regarding a more general social history of wagons in the Viking Age.

Expanding upon the work of Kopytoff (1986), Gosden and Marshall (1999) advocates for cultural biography and social history as a framework for examining material culture in disciplines that usually do not consider this approach in their research, such as history or sociology. An important point they assert focuses upon material culture as both a part of social processes and an influence upon them. Objects are not only an inactive "stage setting" or a thing to which human actions or practices happen, they inform human practices through acts of production, exchange, and consumption.<sup>5</sup> This leads to new forms of analysis in which

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<sup>3</sup> Appadurai, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>4</sup> Appadurai, "Introduction," 38; Kopytoff "The cultural biography of things," 71-72.

<sup>5</sup> Gosden and Marshall, "The Cultural Biography of Objects," 169.

we can explore “the way human and object histories inform each other”.<sup>6</sup> As objects and people move through time and space, interacting, they both acquire individual cultural biographies. When enough cultural biographies of individual objects are formed through “a mutual process of value creation between people and things”, classes of objects also become associated with these values as part of a social history.<sup>7</sup> This becomes important when understanding a more general social history of wagons in the present case, as understanding the contexts of consumption or use in the individual examples of wagons in the sources will affect how we interpret its meaning in a larger scale such as a social history.

The applicability of cultural biography and social history to understanding the meaningful purpose of material culture in the Viking Age is explored in connection to agency by Lund (2017). Lund makes a distinction between objects in archaeological contexts, such as burials, that are animated or “categorically different” than the rest of the material culture present in the same context.<sup>8</sup> She explains that these animated objects relate to comparative examples of similarly animated objects in Old Norse textual sources that are named and distinguished. In both types of sources, archaeological and textual, the distinguished state these objects acquire is what Lund calls a social biography, described as “the changing meanings and social roles, and the social identity, that an artefact gained and acquired throughout its social life”.<sup>9</sup> Inspired by the work of Appadurai (1986), Kopytoff (1986), and Gosden and Marshall (1999), Lund describes that social relationships develop between objects and their possessors. The objects themselves develop social agency, or are animated, by becoming more than just their material composition.<sup>10</sup> In other words, objects acquire social biographies comprised of the qualities and values they develop throughout an extraordinary object life cycle to their final deposition. This understanding of the social biography of an object is important when interpreting identities and roles that objects acquire throughout their life, and how these qualities can contribute to an overall social history of a group of objects.

## **2.2 Research history**

Scholarly literature that focuses solely upon wagons tends to focus upon either the functionality, technical specification, and materiality of wagons themselves or their presence and purpose in burials, with the philological evidence of wagons, usually citing Tacitus’

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Gosden and Marshall, “The Cultural Biography of Objects,” 170.

<sup>8</sup> Lund, “Connectedness with things,” 99.

<sup>9</sup> Lund, “Connectedness with things,” 91.

<sup>10</sup> Lund, “Connectedness with things,” 91.

*Germania*, as supplementary discussion. All of these contexts, however, provide an important foundation or starting point from which to gather current or established theories on the purposes of wagons and their social history.

One of the most extensive works on the materiality of wagons is the doctoral dissertation of Per Ole Schovsbo (1987) where he classifies and creates a typology of the wagon types of Northern Europe. In this volume, Schovsbo discusses in great detail the archaeological evidence of wagons and wagon parts from the Neolithic to the Viking Age. Of particular value for this thesis are the histories of the wagon burials and reconstruction drawings of wagons and wagon parts from the Iron Age and Viking Age. Schovsbo provides also information regarding reconstructions of the Iron Age and Viking Age wagons, based upon the original surviving materials. From the archaeological remains and reconstructions, he is able to make hypotheses about their functionality in everyday life. He notes that there is an important connection to be made in the different styles of the wagons as they evolved over time, asserting that the older styles influenced the younger styles. Schovsbo also explores these connections between the evolution of the wagon styles and the changes that occurred in the ways in which wagons were used, proposing that wagons became heavier and bigger as transportation and commerce between early urban centers became more common. He also proposes a relationship between the evolution of wagons and the evolutions of roads, citing a mutual influence that resulted in changes to both as they each evolved.<sup>11</sup>

Other scholarly works focus more upon wagons and wagon bodies in burials. Works such as Roesdahl and Nordquist (1971) and Müller-Wille (1976) examine wagon bodies as inhumed in burial sites, focusing upon the 10<sup>th</sup> century burial sites in Denmark.<sup>12</sup> In addition to focusing upon the wagon bodies and the burial contexts and contents of the graves, these works also explore connections to gender, social status, and religious ideology in connection to the people and goods found in wagon burials. Roesdahl (1978) provides, through exploring archaeological evidence, some connections between wagons and women in the Viking Age.<sup>13</sup> She explores several Viking Age Danish women's graves and argues that wagons were a means of transportation for women of high status and power. She argues that this is because wagon bodies (as caskets) or wagon parts were often found in women's graves that also contained rich grave goods; this frequency of occurrence implied a connection between high status women and wagon usage. One point that Roesdahl highlights is that these graves also

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<sup>11</sup> Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden," 142.

<sup>12</sup> Roesdahl and Nordquist, "De døde fra Fyrkat," 15-32; Müller-Wille, *Das wikingerzeitliche Gräberfeld von Thumbby-Bienebek*, 12-45.

<sup>13</sup> Roesdahl, "Vognen og vikingene," 9-15.

contained wagon wheel parts that were indicative of use. Thus, in addition to exploring wagons as a means for funerary interment, Roesdahl also considers wagons from a practical perspective as a means of transportation in addition to their function in women's burials. Roesdahl also suggests that in addition to the wagon as a medium of transport in the physical world, it is also a medium of transport to the afterlife.<sup>14</sup>

Lastly, I consider the role of archaeological wagon remains as contributing evidence to the discussion of women's roles in the conversion of Scandinavia in Staecker (2003).<sup>15</sup> Staecker aims to answer questions regarding the process of conversion in Scandinavia and the role women played in this conversion by examining the objects found in graves, particularly those of Christian context, and why they would be found in the context of a female burial. Wagon graves become a focus to help answer this question because of a possible connection to pagan burial rites, finding evidence of wagon burials with Christian items such as crosses and pagan items such as Thor's hammers to be indicative of wagon burials, and those people in them, as evidence of playing a role in Christianization.

### **2.3 Methodology: historical archaeological approach**

The research questions and hypothesis of this work will be addressed by examining several examples of wagons in archaeological, visual, and textual sources in a historical archaeological approach. This approach involves a comparative analysis where I address differences and similarities among the sources in which I find wagons, especially with regards to some of the already proposed connections discussed in the literature. By utilizing this approach I aim to make connections to themes or social acts that will answer the questions I have regarding the larger purpose of wagons, or their social history, in the Viking Age. This comparison of different types of sources will provide examples of the circumstances in which wagons were used, depicted, or spoken about from different perspectives and in different contexts. The archaeological sources include a survey of early Iron Age wagon finds and then focus upon Viking Age wagon body burials in Denmark, followed by the Oseberg wagon in Norway. For the visual sources, I include two groups of sources, the Oseberg tapestry fragments and the Gotland picture stones. For these first two types of sources, it is important to not only describe the way in which the wagon is depicted, but also include a description of the context in which these sources were found. The textual sources include several examples from the sagas, and feature skaldic poetry, eddic poetry, and prose. It should be noted that in

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<sup>14</sup> Roesdahl, "Princely Burial in Scandinavia," 155-170.

<sup>15</sup> Staecker, "The Cross Goes North," 463-482.

all categories of sources, the selection is not exhaustive of all instances of wagons. This methodological approach aims to present a reasonable amount of contexts representative of wagons in different types of records and provides enough information to begin the discussion on the social history of wagons.

The work of Anders Andrén, professor of archaeology at Stockholm University, is helpful when considering the validity of using historical archaeological methodology in his work on the relationships between objects, texts, and imagery in Old Norse religion and medieval Christianity. He studies Icelandic literature and the archaeology of ritual sites, using the transition from open-air sites to ritual houses to churches as his case study, and examines how these relationships result in cultural constructs that define Old Norse religious rites.<sup>16</sup> Andrén asserts the importance of consulting textual sources in conjunction with archaeological work because works such as the *Prose Edda* provide much of what we know about the mythological world of the Viking Age, including knowledge of the gods, cosmologies, and non-human entities.<sup>17</sup> He maintains that a dialogue should be made between the textual sources and archaeological material so as to understand how one informs the other in order to create a more complete interpretation of both types of material.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.4 Addressing the nature of primary sources

It is sensible to address potential difficulties with the sources used in this comparative methodology. A main source of weakness with the textual sources concerns their reliability. Some of the textual sources used are examples from stories or treatises that are clearly mythological. They are nevertheless important to include as mythological tales often conveyed messages related to ethics, morality, or other values from which we can make connections to the objects described in their text. Other examples from the textual sources are from sagas and poetry which, while they contain verified historical events and people, encounter several problems in their historical reliability. Embellishment, glorification, and sometimes entirely fictional additions lessen their dependability as accurate historical accounts. In this case, it can cause challenges in the analysis of connecting the written examples to actual historical practices.

In addition, the historical setting or assumed occurrence of these written sources is generally set in the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, but the surviving records these sagas and poetry are generally from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and thus the stories, when recorded, are

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<sup>16</sup> Andrén, "Behind Heathendom," 105-138.

<sup>17</sup> Andrén, "Behind Heathendom", 105.

<sup>18</sup> Andrén, "Behind Heathendom," 105-138; Andrén, *Between Artifacts and Texts*.

removed from the time period in which they occurred. We must also consider that especially by the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian religious setting in which these sources were written introduced different viewpoints, biases, and even changes to their content from the original narrative. Nevertheless, these written sources are valuable for insight into general societal practices, ideologies, and values of Viking Age society, and can often provide other information that cannot be detected in archaeological material.

A final issue to address involves the subject matter of wagons in the matter of translation. As I will address in Chapter 5, determining exactly how to investigate wagons in the textual sources proved more complex than first anticipated. Two main problems emerged when examining the sources for their descriptions of wagons. First, while the Old Norse word *vagn* was the most obvious choice when initially looking for examples, it soon became apparent that it was not the only word used for “wagon”, or an object we generally call a wagon, in Old Norse. Second, *vagn* was not always directly translated as “wagon” or even meant to mean an actual wagon. Depending upon the interpretation (possibly due to the translation or narrative style of the translator), *vagn* is translated into other words for similar vehicles or into something else entirely. In some cases it served a more symbolic or metaphorical purpose in the text. Thus, I chose several texts that addressed these different situations in hopes of representing the variation in which wagons are presented, as this is indicative that wagons are much more complex in their social history.

Furthermore, the archaeological and visual sources, especially concerning a rare object type like wagons, also face the problem of representativity and the succeeding challenge of interpretation of such finds. The visual sources suffer from the same problems as any visual art, in which the interpretation is highly speculative, especially if the picture has little context or is removed from the original context. Physical remains of wagons in the material culture are almost exclusively found in graves, burials, or depositions, and even the number of these finds is quite low. Even these contexts are sometimes questionable, as the distribution of archaeological remains when unearthed may not be the original distribution when everything was buried. The influence of external factors such as destruction of land, grave robberies, abandonment of trash, or reuse of graves can alter the surrounding environment and thus their interpretation.<sup>19</sup> This is an especially important factor to consider, as the purpose of the wagon is difficult to determine without the surrounding interment context. After determining the nature of the surrounding context, one needs to interpret the object in connection to mortuary behavior with a connected social inference or intention, of which there may be a degree of

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<sup>19</sup> Hedeager, “Grave Finds from the Roman Iron Age,” 152-155; Schiffer, *Formation Processes*, 89-90.

variability even within the same society.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the challenge with interpreting the presence of wagons in an archaeological context is affected by the variation in mortuary behavior depending upon the purpose of the interment or the cultural formation processes that transform the objects before and after interment.<sup>21</sup> Part of this thesis aims to use a historical archaeological approach to address this problem, and contextualize these interment behaviors based upon how they are described in other spaces, such as the textual and visual sources, as well as across time in sources from different but adjacent time periods.

The context of interment really presents a problem as wagons are seldom represented, materially, outside of these very specific environments in burials, and thus is difficult to interpret their purpose outside of these quite specific contexts. It is even more complex when considering that wagons in burials themselves are a rare occurrence, and in those circumstances their materiality is in the form of just the wagon bodies. In the absence of a wagon body, archaeologists then have to agree upon what other objects in the archaeological records are part of or representative of a wagon.<sup>22</sup> Although this presents a problem with regards to interpretation, this is also a reason for why a historical archaeological approach that makes a comparative analysis with other contemporary sources that contain wagons (such as the visual and textual sources) is crucial to understand wagons outside of their limited material contexts and to also inform better interpretations or understanding of these material contexts.

## **2.5 On the use of pre-Viking Age sources**

In addition to the Viking Age sources used in this thesis, I also preface the archaeological and textual sources sections with examples from earlier periods, namely the Iron Age wagon finds and a Latin text from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD that references a wagon procession in modern-day Denmark. The justification behind the use of these sources is because Iron Age wagons are discussed as precursors or influencers of Viking Age wagons, in form, function, and in the written sources, in purpose. The comparative use of sources from adjacent time periods is not a new approach in comparative studies. These older archaeological and textual sources, such as those dated to the Iron Age in this case, have been used in previous studies as a means to help understand Viking Age source material that lacked not only representativity within its own temporal context, but also contemporary written

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<sup>20</sup> Schiffer, *Formation Processes*, 83-85.

<sup>21</sup> Schiffer, *Formation Processes*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Schovsbo, "Prehistoric Wheeled Vehicles," 202.



records to inform on their purpose.<sup>23</sup> In order to begin to interpret the Viking Age sources, we need additional information to make informed guesses. The use of sources depicting the same object from the same geographical area but within an earlier adjacent time period aids in this guesswork. It is reasonable to include these Iron Age sources as well in order to examine this hypothesized continuity and explore evidence for it.

## **2.6 Research questions**

The main aim of this thesis examines the social purposes, functions, and contexts associated with a social history of wagons in the Viking Age. I kept the research questions simple and aimed at encompassing the different contexts in which we find wagons and determine from those any greater or higher meaningful purpose of wagons.

First, my main question through the examination of each source is: in what contexts do we find wagons, and what kind of biography can be constructed about the occurrences based on these contexts? What is present in the source that can inform us about the purpose of the wagon? For each example, I discuss these contexts and provide a small discussion or interpretation of the possible purpose(s) of the wagon.

My next question focuses on a general social history of wagons, as it is informed by the answer to the first question. It is a question with two parts. First, I aim to explore previously argued theories regarding a general social history of wagons in the Viking Age. Are special connections to women, funerary rites, mythology, and ceremony actually a part of this social history? What evidence for these themes is present? The second part is connected to my hypothesis. What are the best represented purposes of wagons, as evidenced in the sources, which can be considered part of a social history of this vehicle? In other words, by understanding the individual pieces of evidence of wagons throughout all of my sources, I can begin to surmise more general purposes of wagons and if these proposed connections form part of that social history.

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<sup>23</sup> See Eisenschmidt (1994), Gabriel (1988), Gjessing (1943), Glob (1969), Gunnell (1995), Hougen (2006a), Hougen (2006b), Ingstad (1992), Ingstad (1995), Jennbert (2006), Johannsen (2010), Krag (2003), Pare (1989), Pare (1992), Todd (2004), Thrane (1975), and Thrane (1984).

### 3. WAGONS IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES

The first body of sources considered focuses upon archaeological remains and burial sites. Wagon bodies and parts are a rarer archaeological find in comparison to other artifacts such as weapons, jewelry, or tools. While their organic material composition (usually wood) presupposes deterioration after interment in a grave site, their presence within the site in the first place is the motivating question behind their scarceness. Our only archaeological information is based upon pieces found in burials sites throughout Norway and Denmark, with the Oseberg wagon serving as the best representative of Viking Age wagons due to its extraordinary preservation. While the Viking ship was the favored mode of the transport in the sea, the wagon poses as an attractive mode of transportation via land. It is generally known that roads existed in the Viking Age containing wheel ruts, evidence for the use of some kind of wheel-based cart system of transportation.<sup>24</sup> Based upon depictions of the wagon as horse-drawn in visual sources and supported by evidence of horse-related equipment, scholars speculate that wagons were pulled using collars or harnesses, resulting in enough force for wagons to carry loads up to 500 kg (1100 lbs).<sup>25</sup> Wagons, in general, were bulky, with high rims, wheels with spokes, and long hubs. The discussion below focuses upon the archaeological finds that contain either wagon bodies or wagon parts, starting from the Iron Age through the Viking Age. The following examples from the Iron Age and Viking Age were chosen because they are the most documented sources in the literature, and provide the most information about the wagon parts in each example, as well as the surrounding archaeological context.

#### 3.1 Wagon finds from the Iron Age

The first examples from the Iron Age in Scandinavia provide early burial and deposition contexts involving wagons, which, when compared with other contemporary sources, helps to provide a foundation for understanding how wagons were used in the Iron Age.<sup>26</sup> They have been argued as the pre-cursors and inspiration, both physically and symbolically, to Viking Age wagons.<sup>27</sup> It is within the contexts of some of these finds that the first possible evidence of ceremonial purposes for wagons exists. From the following examples, there is much to suggest about the use and functions of wagons. In some cases,

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<sup>24</sup> Andersen, "Transport," 655; Frandsen, "Henne Kirkeby Vest," 9; Stefánsdóttir and Malück, *Viking Age Sites*, 257, 269; Tummuscheit and Witte, "The Danevirke in the light of recent excavations," 72.

<sup>25</sup> Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden," 143.

<sup>26</sup> See Appendix I, Figure 2 for a map of these wagon finds in Denmark's Iron Age.

<sup>27</sup> Hougen, "Billedvev," 15-131; Hougen, "Stoffer med brosjering," 161-169; Ingstad, "Tekstilene i Osebergskipet," 176-223; Ingstad, "The Interpretation of the Oseberg find," 138-147; Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden"; Thrane, *Europæiske forbindelser*, 126f; Thrane, *Lusehøj ved Voldtofte*, 143f.

there is some evidence of purpose from the wagon parts themselves. More commonly for buried wagons of this period, the foundation of a social history of wagons is found in the surrounding burial context.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.1.1 The Dejbjerg wagons and Dejbjerg-type finds

The first archaeological source is the Dejbjerg wagons, deposits of wagon bodies and associated parts found in a west Jutland (Denmark) peat bog. Two wagons had been dismantled before their submersion in the bog, alongside furniture and branches. Dejbjerg I is the older of the two wagons, having been constructed in the middle of the Pre-Roman Iron Age (around 200-100 BC)<sup>29</sup>, and consists of two wagon bodies, one low and one tall. Dejbjerg II is dated to the Roman Iron Age (1-400 AD) and includes a tall wagon body and a wagon chair.<sup>30</sup> It also had four iron bars which could be used to mount the wagon body as a stand. It has been previously suggested that these different constructions and dimensions of the wagon bodies, in addition to the accompanying furniture, meant they performed different functions. Schovsbo (1987) suggested that the low wagon body of Dejbjerg I acted as a hearse and the tall box with the chair of Dejbjerg II was used to transport someone of high status.<sup>31</sup> In addition, the tall box of Dejbjerg II may have operated as a stand or display for goods such as textiles or food equipment, when mounted on the iron bars also found in the bog.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to these iron bars found with Dejbjerg II, bronze ornamentation is present on both wagons. The iron present in the wagon bodies and the bronze decoration found on both wagon bodies has been used as an argument in identifying these wagons and their origin, suggesting they were of continental and Celtic design.<sup>33</sup> The bronze ornamentation features a face with a limed hairstyle, argued to be a style consisted with this Celtic design.<sup>34</sup> It has also been argued that the bronze fittings were Danish in origin, because of their similarity in design to other Danish wagon finds.<sup>35</sup> What purpose could these wagons have served? Based upon Schovsbo's theories and the evidence from the deposit, the wagon could have been used to transport the dead to their burial, which was situated in a site away from the bog. Thereafter, the wagons played a ceremonial role in the burial ceremony. Upon completion of interment, the wagon was sacrificed and placed thereafter into the bog.

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<sup>28</sup> Pare, *Wagons and Wagon-Graves of the Early Iron Age*, 194.

<sup>29</sup> The Pre-Roman Iron Age encompasses the years 400 BC to 1 AD.

<sup>30</sup> Schovsbo, "Vogne i ældre jernalder," 163.

<sup>31</sup> Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden," 28.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Klindt-Jensen, "Foreign influences in Denmark's Early Iron Age," 87f; Schovsbo, *Dejbjerg-vognene*.

<sup>34</sup> See Appendix I, Figure 3.

<sup>35</sup> Schovsbo, "Prehistoric Wheeled Vehicles," 202.

Buried wagon vehicle parts consistent with the style of the Dejbjerg I and II wagons (known as Dejbjerg type) and also dated between the Pre-Roman Iron Age to the Roman Iron Age have been found in areas of present-day Denmark and Germany.<sup>36</sup> The buried wagons in these finds occur in several types of contexts. The cremation graves at Kraghede, Husby, and Langå, in addition to the buried wagon parts, also have a rich array of burial goods. Kraghede, dated between 100 BC to 1 AD<sup>37</sup>, contained weaponry such as iron spears and daggers, bronze tweezers, a La Tène fibula, two horses, two pigs, one sheep, and an ox.<sup>38</sup> The wagon parts in the grave were severely damaged by the cremation fire, but the fragments recovered were examined closely enough to establish that the style of the wagon resembled the wagons of Dejbjerg I and the Langå wagon.<sup>39</sup> Husby, near to Jutland just across the border in present-day Germany (Schleswig), comprised the burnt remains of a four-wheeled late Pre-Roman Iron Age wagon found under a stone coffin, two iron bridles, pot sherds, and a bronze two-handled vessel, likely a cauldron or kettle imported from Italy in 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, entombing the burned remains of a male body surrounded in remains of bearskin.<sup>40</sup> The wagon remains most resemble the design of Dejbjerg II. It has been suggested that Husby contained the burial of a high status male individual such as a chieftain or priest.<sup>41</sup> The Langå grave, dated also to the Pre-Roman Iron Age circa the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, consists of an urn fire pit that enclosed a large cauldron or kettle like vessel situated near a burial mound and buried skeletons of two horses.<sup>42</sup> This vessel, similar to the one from Husby and likely from the same area in Italy, was surrounded by dark earth filled with ash, charcoal, and bone fragments.<sup>43</sup> The vessel itself was filled with more dark soil, bronze pans, earthenware, bronze and iron wagon hardware, a sword, daggers, shields, a gold ring, and an Etruscan bronze pitcher. The wagon body and the parts found in this grave pit resemble the Dejbjerg I wagon. The bronze carriage hardware found is assumed to have attached to the corners of the wagon body; Schovsbo claims this wagon body resembled a stretcher. The settlements of Fredbjerg in northern Jutland and in Dankirke in southern Jutland contained deposits of metal parts from

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<sup>36</sup> Todd, "*The Early Germans*," 20. The deposit at Husby is considered part of this group of Iron Age buried wagon finds, the others of which are largely found in Denmark, despite being found in an area in now present-day Germany. This is due to the similarity of design and close proximity of the territory that, during the Iron Age, was not defined by modern borders.

<sup>37</sup> Schovsbo (1987) dates this, based upon the work of Ole Klindt-Jensen, to La Tène III, which corresponds in Schovsbo's dating chart to roughly 100 BC to 1 AD.

<sup>38</sup> Klindt-Jensen, "Foreign influences in Denmark's Early Iron Age.,"; Martens, "The Pre-Roman Iron Age Cemetery at Kraghede," 115-119; Pare, "From Dupljaja to Delphi," 98.

<sup>39</sup> Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden," 27.

<sup>40</sup> Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden," 25; Todd, "*The Early Germans*," 20-21.

<sup>41</sup> Raddatz, *Das Wagengrab der jügeren*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden," 25. This dating is approximate and is based upon Schovsbo (1987) including this example within the *Nordeuropa og Danmark* group of wagon finds. Schovsbo dates these finds to another classification of La Tène finds according to Danish archaeologist C.J. Becker, in this case La Tène C and D, which correspond to roughly 300 BC to just before 1 AD.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

six nearly identical wagons, apparently intended to be used as scrap metal several centuries after the construction of the wagons.<sup>44</sup> The Fredbjerg site held wagons similar to both Dejbjerg types with both low and high wagon bodies, while the Dankirke wagons consist of only the high body Dejbjerg II type.<sup>45</sup> These wagons, due to their comparable design to the wagons at Dejbjerg, may perhaps have had several functions related to ceremony or burial. All of these wagons, despite being found at different sites, resemble each other very closely stylistically, and therefore may have been constructed in in the same workshop for similar functions.<sup>46</sup>

Pare (1989) and other scholars have also suggested that all of these buried wagon finds were found in the area settled by the Germanic tribes who worshiped Nerthus, an early wagon-riding female deity, who was described by Publius Cornelius Tacitus in his work *Germania*.<sup>47</sup> This is an important connection because it suggests that these sources could serve as material evidence for the ceremonial and ritualistic procession of wagons associated with Nerthus in Tacitus' work.

### 3.1.2 The Rappendam bog wagon parts

In 1941-1942, a marshy bog outside of Rappendam, Zealand, Denmark, originally examined for its rich peat, produced another find containing Iron Age wagon parts. At this site, deposits of wagon parts such as an undercarriage, axles, and 28 disc-shaped wheels were found.<sup>48</sup> The wagon body featured an elongated shape, situating this specimen within the late Pre-Roman Iron Age.<sup>49</sup> The wagon parts were distributed throughout the bog in groups, with several groups (designated *Gruppen A-C*) found near the skeleton of a man on a layer of hazel and birch branches.<sup>50</sup> Skeletal remains such as vertebrae of dogs, sheep, cows, horses, and pigs were also found in the bog.<sup>51</sup> Glob (1969) both argue for a meaningful connection between the environments of the bog find (the goods found and the position of the man) and the descriptions of fertility sacrifices to Nerthus in Tacitus' accounts.<sup>52</sup> Kunwald (1970) revisits this assertion, introducing a debate questioning if the skeleton in the Rappendam bog truly represents a site of sacrificial ceremony (supported again by the Tacitus connection), or

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<sup>44</sup> Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden," 28-29.

<sup>45</sup> Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden," 28.

<sup>46</sup> Kaul, *Gundestrupkedlen*, 536; Pare, "From Dupljaja to Delphi," 98-99.

<sup>47</sup> Pare, "From Dupljaja to Delphi," 97-98; Todd, *The Early Germans*, 20-21. The passage of *Germania* containing this event will be discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>48</sup> Glob, *The Bog People*, 120; Kunwald, "Der Moorfund im Rappendam," 42. See Appendix I, Figure 4.

<sup>49</sup> Johannsen, "The Wheeled Vehicles of the Bronze Age," 176.

<sup>50</sup> Kunwald, "Der Moorfund im Rappendam," 45-48.

<sup>51</sup> Kunwald, "Der Moorfund im Rappendam," 48.

<sup>52</sup> Glob, *The Bog People*, ch.5 and 6.

rather if it is a person killed for a crime. He argues that while the description of Nerthus' wagon procession, ritual acts, and the description of her sacred grove in *Germania* parallels the manner of the bog find of Rappendam and the description of its surrounding area, no explicit connection in this find indicates that this was the area of Tacitus' account and thus an affirmative identification of Rappendam as a sacrificial burial is arguable.<sup>53</sup> More recent research contends this same argument as Kunwald, though still highlights the possibility of a link.<sup>54</sup> The debate between sacrifice and execution is made based upon the presence of the animal bones in the bog alongside the skeleton, particularly the dog bones, which did not appear to have damage on them indicating them as a food source. Bogs in this time period often served as places to store food, and thus the animal bones could have been food, though Kunwald does not think this is the case here.<sup>55</sup> Kunwald emphasizes that dogs were considered sacrificial animals, and the presence of these dog bones in close proximity to the person, itself argued to be a socially meaningful practice related to animal-human bonds in life and the afterlife, indicates either that the person here was part of a sacrificial act along with the animals, or was killed for a crime and his animals shared his sentence.<sup>56</sup> A nearby site at Lærkefyrd, just a few hundred meters from Rappendam, hosts finds from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries that include gold bracteates, Roman *denarii*, Arab, *dirham*, gold finger rings, bronze fibulae, pendants, chopped swords, jewelry, and horse harnesses.<sup>57</sup> The goods that were broken appear to have been subjected to ritual destruction. This ritual destruction at Lærkefyrd, though occurring much later than the Rappendam burial, suggests that this area was chosen, throughout the centuries, as an important place for ritual acts. This provides further evidence, by association, of a ritualistic act as the explanation of Rappendam's skeletal remains. Therefore, it is within reason to conclude that these sites constituted ritual sacrifice and the goods interred within them (such as the wagon parts) also served a ritual purpose.

Schovsbo (1987) describes the reconstruction made of the Rappendam wagon, which comprised of remakes of the wheels, axles, and undercarriage from the original find and other parts based upon finds from Binderup and the carvings from Lille Borg and Solberg in Østfold (Norway) and Rished and Långön in Bohuslän (Sweden).<sup>58</sup> Schovsbo suggested the overall design of the Rappendam wagon may have been based upon earlier Bronze Age type wagons. It thus may have served as a middle design between older Bronze Age wagons and

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<sup>53</sup> Kunwald, "Der Moorfund im Rappendam," 75.

<sup>54</sup> Bradley, *Ritual and Domestic Life in Prehistoric Europe*, 82.

<sup>55</sup> Kunwald, "Der Moorfund im Rappendam," 72.

<sup>56</sup> Jennbert, "The heroized dead," 137-138; Kunwald, "Der Moorfund im Rappendam," 69-73; Simek, *Dictionary of northern mythology*, 57f.

<sup>57</sup> Jørgensen, "Norse Religion and Ritual Sites," 256-257.

<sup>58</sup> Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden," 133.

later Iron Age and Viking Age wagons. Another interesting observation Schovsbo makes is the suggestion that the Rappendam style of wagons possessed wagon bodies made of lighter material, such as wicker, and not planks.<sup>59</sup> This would have made the construction of the wagon easier, lighter, and stronger as well.

### 3.1.3 Tranbær type

The last example from the Iron Age to be examined is known as the Tranbær type.<sup>60</sup> Little information of the context of the Tranbær find exists outside of the discovery of the wagon parts as depositions in a bog.<sup>61</sup> The parts that have been excavated include a spoked wheel, axles, chassis, drawbar (draught pole), pull arms, and tree bolts.<sup>62</sup> The dating of the wagon parts is debated, but falls between the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC and the 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.<sup>63</sup> The design typology of this wagon type resembles earlier provincial Roman and Celtic designs. However, Schovsbo argues these types are badly documented and thus a strict comparison or connection between the Tranbær type and these wagons is inconclusive. However, a case could be argued for a similarity to the provincial Roman type, other wagons of a similar Roman-like type are found nearby Tranbær.<sup>64</sup> This type of wagon also uses the same types of wood as found in the wagon parts from the Rappendam find. Interestingly, Schovsbo also suggests that the Tranbær type possesses stylistic connections to other types of wagons that are outside of Denmark, rather than just resembling other Danish Iron Age buried wagon finds. The spoked wheels of Tranbær resemble wheels of the same prevalence and in the same time period as those found in the Netherlands and Scotland.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.1.4 Discussion

These wagon finds and their archaeological contexts present several interesting insights into the purposes these wagons may have served. The differing structural design of the Dejbjerg and Dejbjerg-type wagons suggests first that wagons performed different functions for transport, including transference of the dead to a burial site and as a processional (possibly in the context of ceremonies) vehicle for people of high status. The Dejbjerg II wagon body stylizes wagons for display purposes, indicating a possibility as a multitasking tool for farmers or as tool to demonstrate wealth, goods, or for cultic purposes. Since the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden," 22.

<sup>61</sup> Witt, "Egerhjul og Vogne," 145.

<sup>62</sup> Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden," 135.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

Dejbjerg design types were found in several sites throughout Pre-Roman and Roman Iron Age northern Europe, one could conclude that the accompanying practices and uses of the wagons also occurred relatively frequently. The evidence of these buried wagons in connection to skeletal remains, specifically in Rappendam, provides evidence for wagons as playing some part in ceremonial sacrificial acts, such as following the sacrifice of a person as a punishment for crime. Wagons as part of a ritual, sacrifice, or other deliberate funerary act is also a possible explanation for their presence in the cremation burials at Kraghede, Husby, and Langå, as these wagons were burned alongside the interred. These finds also indicate that wagons often accompanied other types of rich goods such as weapons, jewelry, animals, imported commodities, and materials of precious metals, indicating that wagons have a possible connection to high status individuals. It seems practical, with regards to all the cases discussed, to surmise that wagons were purposefully included as part of a deliberate act related to a specific purpose for the burial or deposition. The motivation behind these acts results in the used of wagons, or the purpose the wagons served, still remains the overarching question. However, these finds provide a basis to posit that wagons served purposes related to transport, display of wealth, marketing, ceremony, sacrifice, and possibly criminal punishment.

### **3.2 Wagon body burials from the Viking Age**

This next section focuses upon a selection of 10<sup>th</sup> century wagon body and parts burials found in Viking Age Denmark. Most of the current body of work known regarding the wagons found in these burials involves just wagon bodies<sup>66</sup> that functioned as burial caskets, and little other specific details about the wagons, such as ornamentation or signs of use, are known. They are important to investigate because the archaeological context in which they are found provides information from which their purpose can be speculated. In general, establishing the dating of these wagon body burials to the 10<sup>th</sup> century is based upon the analysis of other artifacts in the burial, their presence in Viking Age grave fields, and iron fittings or hardware found on the wagon bodies, which separates these burials from other graves in the same areas that contain Iron Age graves.<sup>67</sup> The scholarly literature on this subject claims between 50-60 wagon body burials have been found, mostly occurring in female burials with as many as 34 female graves (versus 7 male graves and 10 undetermined)

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<sup>66</sup> Wagon body refers to the main carriage body sans wheels, axles, draught poles, etc. In many of the following examples, this was the only part of the wagon found and thus most of the information of the wagon such as construction or decoration, of which little usually exists, from the burial is based upon the body.

<sup>67</sup> Eisenschmidt, *Kammergräber der Wikingerzeit*, 62ff.; Staecker, "The woman on the wagon," 16.



containing wagon bodies.<sup>68</sup> The following sites were chosen as they are the best represented and most detailed wagon body burials in the literature, and are the sites which contain information not only about the wagon body, but the archaeological context of the site as well.<sup>69</sup>

### 3.2.1 Thumby-Bienebek

The first site of wagon body burials discussed is found in a 10<sup>th</sup> century cemetery/burial complex positioned in a churchyard at Thumby-Bienebek outside of the Viking Age market center of Hedeby/Haithabu (near modern Schleswig). The cemetery here spatially resembles that of Fyrkat in Jutland (see Section 3.2.2).<sup>70</sup> There are over 50 documented inhumation graves in this site and approximately half of these have grave goods.<sup>71</sup> Most of the graves are oriented west to east, a practice associated with burials from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards and indicative of Christian influence.<sup>72</sup> Five of these burials contain wagon bodies.<sup>73</sup> The wagon bodies constitute just the carriage portion of the wagon, and other parts such as wheels or other steering equipment are not documented. Of particular note for these grave sites are the documented goods which include both pre-Christian and Christian symbolism, found within the same grave complex dated to the same time period. The grave documented as Thumby-Bienebek 7 contained a Thor's hammer pendant, and in Thumby-Bienebek 21, a cross-shaped pendant.<sup>74</sup> The presence of these different pendants, which are argued to symbolize or represent pagan and Christian cosmology or religious belief respectively, suggests that the burials found here indicate the transition from pagan cemeteries to Christian cemeteries, reflective of the changes and transitions in belief in this period.<sup>75</sup> In addition to Thor's hammer and cross pendants, rich graves such as Thumby-Bienebek 7 contained the wagon body, knives, whetstones, keys, beads, buckets, and drinking horns. Thumby-Bienebek 51 and 54A included, in addition to the above goods, horse-bits, wooden pails, bowls, and harnesses, while the nearby 54B included a horse body. An interesting note regarding Thumby-Bienebek 21: alongside the cross pendant found in this grave was found a separate casket, featuring a carved border with ornamental iron fittings and hanging rings, in

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<sup>68</sup> The sources are not explicitly clear on the exact number of wagon body burials found in Denmark, with different sums between 50 to 60 burials in the sites in Denmark. Müller-Wille, *Das wikingerzeitliche Gräberfeld von Thumby-Bienebek*; Müller-Wille, "The Cemetery at Bodzia," 501; Roesdahl & Nordquist, "De døde fra Fyrkat," 15-32; Staecker, "The Cross Goes North," 471.

<sup>69</sup> See Appendix I, Figure 5.

<sup>70</sup> Müller-Wille, *Das wikingerzeitliche Gräberfeld von Thumby-Bienebek*, 13.

<sup>71</sup> Müller-Wille, "The Cemetery at Bodzia," 499.

<sup>72</sup> Müller-Wille, "Graves," 238.

<sup>73</sup> Staecker, "The Cross Goes North," 472. See Appendix I, Figure 6 for a reconstruction of the wagon body structure.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Müller-Wille, "Graves," 238.

addition to the wagon body (Müller-Wille, 1976, p. 13-14). It also contained other rich goods similar to the other surrounding graves, including pins, harness mounts (though no horse is nearby), keys, and knives. The last wagon body burial, Thumbby-Bienebek 19, featured knives, coins, and gold and silver wire.<sup>76</sup> Of these five wagon body burials, the graves designated 7, 19, and 21 were positively identified female graves.<sup>77</sup> The wagon bodies in graves 7 and 21 were also covered with the remains of fine fabric and textiles. Nearby these graves was burial identified as male, which interred a horse, bridle, and weapon in addition to the skeleton.<sup>78</sup>

### 3.2.2 Fyrkat

The Viking fortress at Fyrkat in northern Jutland, dating to the late 10<sup>th</sup> century AD, contains a cemetery with approximately 30 discovered burials.<sup>79</sup> Two lines of post holes, resembling a wooden causeway, traverse east-west through the center of the grave field. Roesdahl (1977) suggests that this signifies a road, while Price (2014) argues that the east-west orientation of the posts suggests this indicates the direction and progression of the graves.<sup>80</sup> Graves that contained richer goods circled about a central platform. Those inhuming females generally held, in addition to knives and whetstones, keys and jewelry such as brooches. Male graves contained weapons such as axes.<sup>81</sup> Several of the graves in this site contain wagon bodies as the container which held the body upon inhumation. Grave IV, a female grave, is the most documented and most elaborate burial of this site.<sup>82</sup> It offers several interesting insights into purposeful connections between the body in the grave, the wagon, and the surrounding archaeological context. It is found in the middle of the wooden “road” discussed above, argued to be a position of prominence.<sup>83</sup> It contains the body of a woman, found in a wagon body, buried alongside jewelry including silver rings, an oak chest, a metal stick (sometimes identified as a staff or wand), a silver chair-shaped pendant, and imported goods including a silver and gold Gotlandic box brooch and bronze bowls from Asia. The wagon body she is buried in was removable from the frame, suggesting that it was probably used to transport her to the grave site.<sup>84</sup> There have been various debates in the identification of this woman based upon the contents of her burial. Some arguments suggest that the goods and wagon body inhumation indicate high status and wealth of this individual and possibly for

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<sup>76</sup> Müller-Wille, “The Cemetery at Bodzia,” 500.

<sup>77</sup> Müller-Wille, *Das wikingerzeitliche Gräberfeld von Thumbby-Bienebek*, 44.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Roesdahl, *Fyrkat: En Jysk Vikingeborg II*, 189.

<sup>80</sup> Price, “Nine paces from Hel,” 184; Roesdahl, *Fyrkat: En Jysk Vikingeborg II*, 188-189.

<sup>81</sup> Roesdahl, *Fyrkat: En Jysk Vikingeborg II*, 190-193.

<sup>82</sup> Price, “Nine paces from Hel,” 185.

<sup>83</sup> Price, “Nine paces from Hel,” 185.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

the surrounding Fyrkat community as a whole, a common assumption with graves that contained a bevy of goods. However, Roesdahl and Nordquist (1971) dispute this claim. They assert that the woman in this grave is not noble, and may not even be Nordic in origin.<sup>85</sup> They liken the woman to a tourist or as part of a nomadic group of individuals due to the presence of the imported burial goods, and assert that she previously owned the imported goods found within her grave or was gifted them. This would indicate that she may not necessarily have been inherently wealthy, but well-traveled or well-connected. More recent arguments identify this woman as a *völva* or priestess who practiced *seiðr* magic.<sup>86</sup> The main argument for this identification is based upon the presence of the metal wand-like object found in the burial, which is said to be an identifying tool of practitioners of this type of Viking Age magic. Other goods such as the pendant and brooch have also been connected as tools for this magic. This more recent argument supports cautious initial links between wagon bodies and a sort of magical or cosmological connection.

### 3.2.3 Ketting

Ketting, excavated in Denmark on the island of Als, contains five burials with wagon bodies.<sup>87</sup> It is dated to the first half of the 10th century. Ketting 2 and 3, both west-east oriented burials, contained wagon body burials of a man and a woman, respectively.<sup>88</sup> Little specific information about the contexts of the burial is known other than the presence of rivets and nails, as well as pendants. It is important to note that these burials, like those of Thumbby-Bienebek, contain evidence of both pre-Christian and Christian influence. In the complex designated Ketting 18, there are two wagon burials which contain Thor's hammer pendants. Fragments of silver Christian crosses have also been found in the other wagon body burials here, alongside the bodies of women.<sup>89</sup> While it is not unusual to find goods such as pendants in a wagon body burial, as they are generally rich in nature, it is the presence of both types of pendants (pre-Christian and Christian) within the same burial site, dated to the same time period, that generates interest. Finding both of these types of pendants at this time (10<sup>th</sup> century) is not unusual given that this was the time conversion to Christianity occurred in Scandinavia and a transitional period where some people were pagan and other had converted is to be expected and thus both emblems of the faiths would appear in the material record. The

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<sup>85</sup> Roesdahl and Nordquist, "De døde fra Fyrkat," 30.

<sup>86</sup> Gardela, (*Magic Staffs in the Viking Age*, 73-74. While a thorough explanation of *seiðr* magic is outside the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that what constitutes *seiðr* magic in the Viking Age features subjects related to religious practice, sexuality, divination, and medicine.

<sup>87</sup> Staecker, "The Cross Goes North," 472.

<sup>88</sup> Müller-Wille, *Das wikingerzeitliche Gräberfeld von Thumbby-Bienebek*, 23.

<sup>89</sup> Whittock and Whittock, *The Vikings: From Odin to Christ*.

presence of *both* symbols of these faiths within these wagon body burials raises questions of a possible connection between the wagon bodies and the values or beliefs of the people in which they are interred.

### 3.2.4 Hvilehøj

The mound at Hvilehøj, found near Randers in eastern Jutland, was excavated in 1880 by Conrad Engelhardt of the National Museum of Denmark. This mound was found at the site of an older Iron Age and Bronze Age monument burial which had been reused in the Viking Age.<sup>90</sup> The mound contained a burial featuring the body of a woman, wearing a dress, laid to rest in a wagon body surrounded by a rich array of objects including a whetstone, knives, copper alloy and wood tableware, scissors, a spindle whorl, and several textiles of woven wool cloth, silk, gold thread, and fur. The age of the grave is dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century based upon the finding of a silver coin minted for the German King Otto I, who ruled from 936-962 AD and later as Holy Roman Emperor from 962 AD until his death in 973 AD. The coin had been punctured and used as jewelry.<sup>91</sup> At least three patterned silk bands were also discovered next to the body of the woman.<sup>92</sup> A particularly interesting find was an elaborately patterned tablet-woven band 16-17 millimeters wide. Studies of the band posit that as many as 37 tablets in total were used in a time-consuming process to weave the band.<sup>93</sup> Though much of the band had decomposed and is fragmented, the parts left and identifiable are made of silken silver and gold thread and brocade.<sup>94</sup> The presence of the fine cloth has been argued as evidence of high-status grave, as such decorated fabrics are distinguished from ordinary clothing and would have been the mark of someone within the nobility or as part of another high rank.<sup>95</sup>

### 3.2.5 Hårup

A more recent discovery from 2012 also features a female wagon body burial within a larger tomb complex. The complex, found in the Hårup, Jutland region of southwest Denmark, features a 4 meter by 13 meter *dødehus* or “death house” containing burials that have been dated to the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>96</sup> The burials of the death house entomb three men

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<sup>90</sup> Pedersen, “Ancient mounds for new graves,” 348.

<sup>91</sup> Müller-Wille, “Sammenfattende bemærkninger,” 341.

<sup>92</sup> Krag, “Denmark-Europe: Dress and Fashion,” 29.

<sup>93</sup> Knudsen, “Brocade Tablet-Woven Bands,” 39; Krag, “Herskersymbolber i dragten,” 74.

<sup>94</sup> Knudsen, “Brocade Tablet-Woven Bands,” 38; Krag, “Herskersymbolber i dragten,” 69.

<sup>95</sup> Müller-Wille, *Das wikingerzeitliche Gräberfeld von Thumby-Bienebek*, 44-45.

<sup>96</sup> Nielsen, “Enekammer eller dobbeltværelse?,” 139.

and one woman, and are considered of unusual construction for the area.<sup>97</sup> The death house itself is surrounded by a larger Iron Age village, which features 11 cremation plots and between 7-10 burial mounds. According to archaeologist Kirsten Nellemann Nielsen, leader of the excavation of the site, the death house covering the burials distinguishes them from other graves in the vicinity. Their location along the northern boundary of the larger Iron Age settlement places them in a prominent position in the area.<sup>98</sup> One of the men, found in a single grave in the main chamber of the house, was buried with a very large two-handed axe. The other two men were placed in smaller graves, and were buried with smaller axes. The woman, buried in the westernmost part of the death house, was found in a wagon body along with two keys, six glass beads, two pendants, a whet stone, and an eastern/Baltic style pot.<sup>99</sup> The clothing she wore contained silver and gold threads and animal fur. The presence of expensive items such as the large axe, the wagon body, the keys, the silver and gold threads, and the imported pot has led Nielsen to speculate that the death house served people of high status. Specifically, the large axe and keys are strong indicators that the one man and the woman, respectively, held high influence in this community.<sup>100</sup> While more specific information about the wagon body is not known at this time, it is important to note this find because it connects a wagon body to a female burial, and provides another example connecting wagon body burials to rich grave contexts.

### 3.2.6 Discussion

What conclusions can be added to the social history of wagons when considering the connections between the Viking Age wagon body burials and their archaeological contexts? In several examples, wagon bodies are associated with female burials, with a large majority of the 10<sup>th</sup> century wagon burials featuring women. Men were also buried in wagon bodies, but specific information about these burials proved difficult to find as the current literature tends to emphasize the more numerous and better documented female wagon body burials and their contents.

It should be noted that there is a long period with no wagon burials between the Roman Iron Age and the later Viking Age. This raises the question regarding a possible catalyst that prompted the use of wagons in burials again, and the conversion of faith may have been this catalyst. It has been hypothesized that the act of burial in a wagon body carried

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Nielsen, "Enekammer eller dobbeltværelse?", 142.

<sup>99</sup> Nielsen, "Enekammer eller dobbeltværelse?", 142-143.

<sup>100</sup> Nielsen, "Enekammer eller dobbeltværelse?", 144.

over from pre-Christian to Christian practice as a reflection of the transfer of values from earlier pagan faiths to Christianity, and the wagon body served as the value marker in burials.<sup>101</sup> The presence of Thor's hammer and cross pendants is also possible evidence for these claims. Other scholars disagree with this association, arguing that distinguishing explicitly between a pagan or Christian interpretation of the wagon body burial contexts is difficult. Attributes that identify an item as "pagan" by some may be "Christian" in other interpretations, and the incorporation of diversified grave goods, especially in higher class burials which may have included both pagan and Christian "status symbol" items, was permitted and thus does not definitively identify a burial with either faith.<sup>102</sup> But this hypothesized connection between transition and the conversion period raises interesting questions with regards to wagon bodies. It is also interesting to note that many of the wagon body burials of this period contained a number of imported goods, and specifically goods such as knives and whetstones were commonly found in the burials as well. Keys were a common object found with the female burials. It should be noted that these finds are also used as evidence of early connections between wagon bodies and identification of the females as priestesses, though this evidence is small and speculative. Lastly, the Viking Age wagon body burials further the establishment of the commonly argued connection between women and wagons, and men and weapons.

### 3.3 The Oseberg wagon

The Oseberg wagon is considered the best preserved archaeological example of a wagon from the Viking Age. Most of the parts of the wagon have survived with remarkable detail, and the entire burial find itself contains an extraordinary amount of goods which have also survived. This wagon and the burial context is often the most-referenced find concerning wagons, and is sometimes used as a basis of comparison when interpreting other wagon finds.

The Oseberg mound burial site was discovered in 1904 in the Slagen valley on the western coast of the Oslofjord, north of the present-day city of Tønsberg, Norway.<sup>103</sup> The burial is dated to 834 AD.<sup>104</sup> The mound over the burial site was six meters high and 40 meters across at its widest point.<sup>105</sup> In the mound was found an exceptionally well-preserved

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<sup>101</sup> Carver, "Boat-burial in Britain," 111-124; Meier, "Siedlungen – Gräberfeld – Kirche," 201-219; Staecker, "The woman on the wagon," 15-18; Staecker, "The Cross Goes North," 470-478.

<sup>102</sup> Gabriel, "Hof- und Sakralkultur sowie Gebrauchs," 223.

<sup>103</sup> Bonde and Christensen, "Dendrochronological Dating," 575-576; Løchen and Vike, "Oppstøtting av vognen fra Osebergfunnet," 4; Rosenqvist, "The Stabilizing of Wood," Part 1, 13; Shetelig, "Queen Asa's Sculptors," 1.

<sup>104</sup> Bill, "Ambiguous Mobility," 208; Bonde and Christensen, "Dendrochronological Dating," 581; Brøgger et al., *Osebergfundet 1-3*.

<sup>105</sup> Rosenqvist, "The Stabilizing of Wood," Part 1, 13.

Viking ship (approximately 21.5 meters long and 5.1 meters at the widest) and a large 5.6 meter long burial chamber containing the bodies of two women and a large assortment of burial goods.<sup>106</sup> In a trench surrounding the ship were the remains of horses and a cow. The stern of the ship contained burial goods such as kitchen utensils, furniture, and another slaughtered cow.<sup>107</sup> Ship equipment such as oars and rigging were placed within the ship as well. Within the burial chamber, in addition the bodies of the deceased, was found food (such as apples), a chair, beds, textiles, personal items such as combs, and chests. The fore of the ship contained the wagon (disassembled), four sledges, several rattles, two tents with carved animal-head staves, and five richly decorated animal heads, four of which were in the grave chamber.<sup>108</sup> The remains of more horses and four dogs occupied the very front of the ship. Stones were placed over the grave goods, likely causing damage or destruction of the items in the process. Finally, a mound constructed of peat and turf covered the entire ship.<sup>109</sup>

The Oseberg wagon is roughly 4.5 meters in length including the draught pole and features a 1.15 meter wide carriage body.<sup>110</sup> It is constructed primarily from wood, but also includes pieces of fittings, rivets, nails, and rings made of iron.<sup>111</sup> Analysis of the wood of the wagon puts its creation date at around 850 AD.<sup>112</sup> The wheels of the Oseberg wagon may provide evidence connecting the older Iron Age wagons and the Viking Age wagons. This same wheel design is also found in the remains of a wagon, also dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, found on the Astrup Banke in Denmark.<sup>113</sup> The wheel design type of Oseberg and Astrup Banke is broader and more powerful than earlier types of wagon wheels such as those of Tranbær, but the overall design of the Viking Age wheel rims resemble designs from the Iron Age wagon examples found in Denmark.<sup>114</sup> This illustrates a possible continuity in design between these two eras containing wagons. This may provide evidence to expect or assume some continuity in functionality and purpose as well.

The wagon body can be separated from the rest of the wagon and carried, much like the wagon bodies featured in the Viking Age wagon burials from Denmark. This piece, along

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<sup>106</sup> Bonde and Christensen, "Dendrochronological Dating," 577; Brøgger, "Oseberggraven-Haugbrottet," 1-5; Christensen et al., *Osebergdronningens grav*, 142-153; Grieg, "Gravkamrene fra Oseberg og Gokstad.," Ingstad, "The Interpretation of the Oseberg find," 139; Rosenqvist, "The Stabilizing of Wood," Part 1, 14-15.

<sup>107</sup> Bill, "Ambiguous Mobility," 209.

<sup>108</sup> Bill, "Protecting Against the Dead?," 146-147.

<sup>109</sup> Bill, "Ambiguous Mobility," 211.

<sup>110</sup> Løchen and Vike, "Oppstøtting av vognen fra Osebergfunnet," 4. See Appendix I, Figure 7 for the schematic of the Oseberg wagon.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ettliger, "The Mythological Relief of the Oseberg Wagon," 81.

<sup>113</sup> Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden," 137-138. Per Ole Schovsbo made a reconstruction of a wagon known as the Astrup-Jelling wagon based off of reproductions of parts from several wagon finds. These included the oak wheel from Astrup Banke, wheel axles from Jelling, a *drejeskammel* from Try, and a *krumvokset kæpstok* from Ravnholt. For the Astrup Banke wheel, see Appendix I, Figure 8.

<sup>114</sup> Schovsbo, "Oldtidens vogne i Norden," 137.

with two draught poles (*dragene*) and six wagon body frame pieces (two *bukker*, two *tverstykker*, and two *forstykker*) are richly ornamented.<sup>115</sup> The draught poles have intricate interlaced designs and the faces of men.<sup>116</sup> The *bukker*, which cradle the wagon body, feature on the ends decorated heads resembling men. The *tverstykker* and *forstykker* are more simply ornamented with interweaving designs. The wagon body top border is richly ornamented with rope designs. The front panel features a complex scene that includes several snakes and quadrupedal animals resembling cats/lions, as well as three similar-looking men, all of which appear to be in battles taking place in water.<sup>117</sup> The back panel contains a simpler yet remarkably detailed ornamentation consisting of nine cats. Each cat appears to have one of its paws up to its eyes, which Anne Stine Ingstad proposes is indicative of the cats crying.<sup>118</sup> The rest of the panel contains patterned motifs surrounding the cats. One of the side panels, the left side when viewed from the front of the wagon, contains a scene referred to as the “Triangle Drama”.<sup>119</sup> It contains three people, one of which bears a strong resemblance to the main man attacked by snakes of the front panel scene, sporting a similar hairstyle and facial features. In the scene, a rider approaches the standing man, who is wielding a weapon. A woman grips the arm of the man holding the weapon, either restraining him or encouraging him in the fight.<sup>120</sup> The last panel on the right of the Oseberg wagons features interweaving rope-like and knot patterns.<sup>121</sup>

### 3.3.1 Discussion

The Oseberg wagon and the burial context provides much information from which to learn about wagons in the Viking Age, and consequently, many theories and interpretations abound about this question.<sup>122</sup> An early theory from Haakon Shetelig, one of the archaeologists who worked with the Oseberg find, connects the Oseberg burial to the lineage of kings in *Ynglinga saga*. He cites the finery of the burial goods in a chamber as elaborate as a ship as reminiscent of the king burials in Uppsala, and thus one of the women in the

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<sup>115</sup> Løchen and Vike, “Oppstøtting av vognen fra Osebergfunnet,” 6.

<sup>116</sup> See Appendix I, Figure 9.

<sup>117</sup> Ettlinger, “The Mythological Relief of the Oseberg Wagon,” 81-82. This has been argued as imagery of the story of Gunnarr in the snake pit, but Fuglesang (2007) argues that this is highly questionable, as verified imagery of Gunnarr is not attested before the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the wagon was carved in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century (p. 204-207). She does, however, attest to the iconographic purpose of this scene, the meaning of which could have passed down through the centuries into later pictorial interpretations.

<sup>118</sup> Ingstad, “The Interpretation of the Oseberg find,” 144

<sup>119</sup> Brøgger et al., *Osebergfundet 3*, vi. See Appendix I, Figure 10.

<sup>120</sup> Fuglesang, “Ekphrasis and Surviving Imagery,” 197.

<sup>121</sup> See Appendix I, Figure 11.

<sup>122</sup> It should be noted that interpretation of the Oseberg burial finds is complicated by problems that occurred during excavation and by an act of plundering that occurred approximately 100 years after the burial commenced (Bill and Daly, “The plundering of the ship graves.”).



Oseberg burial was a queen.<sup>123</sup> Other theories, such as that from Gjessing (1943), suggest one of the Oseberg women was a priestess of a cult devoted to the god Freyr, due to the wagon and horses present in the burial, as well as the procession of wagons and horses depicted on the Oseberg tapestry fragments.<sup>124</sup> Ingstad (1995) furthers a connection between the Oseberg women and a religious cult by asserting that the wagon, with its depiction of cats on the back panel, is a vessel for the cult of Freyja, whose own chariot was drawn by cats.<sup>125</sup> Ingstad also claims that in addition to the wagon as evidence of the Oseberg women as part of a Freyja cult, either as priestesses or sorceresses, the burial context including the horses<sup>126</sup>, the saddle<sup>127</sup>, and the placement of stones on the top of the grave are indicative of a fertility sacrifice, likely to Freyja, or a sacred death-wedding.<sup>128</sup> The absence of harnesses or other equipment necessary for attaching the horses to the wagon or sledges is also argued as evidence for their sacrificial purpose. Bill (2016b) proposes that the animal head posts, the rattles, the animal head decoration on the sledges, and the carved human faces on the wagon body supports (*bukker*) are possible evidence for apotropaic magic, or the practice of using objects that function as mechanisms for supernatural protection.<sup>129</sup>

I believe that based on all of these theories and the evidence provided by the wagon and burial context, it is reasonable to propose that the Oseberg wagon served both a practical purpose related to the burial process and a ceremonial purpose. The whole of the ship burial itself included everything needed for a sea journey, but the lack of practical functionality of much of the ship's equipment supports implied this was meant to be a symbolic or ceremonial voyage, likely to the afterlife.<sup>130</sup> The wagon, in this context, was thus part of this ceremonial journey, perhaps as a piece of equipment necessary for use in the afterlife. The wagon was suitable for transport and likely was the vessel that carried the two women to their final resting place within the burial chamber.<sup>131</sup> Evidence of use is present in the wagon to attest this.<sup>132</sup> It seems of little point to create such an elaborately decorated piece if it served no practical function, when other wagon burials have showed the bodies serving as a transport

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<sup>123</sup> Shetelig, "Queen Asa's Sculptors.," Shetelig, *Vikingskipene*.

<sup>124</sup> Gjessing, "Hesten i forhistorisk kunst og kultus." The wagon, horses, and procession have been linked to the cult of Freyr in the textual sources, most notably Tacitus' *Germania*, which depicts a similar scene of a priestess of the cult of Freyr in procession around the countryside.

<sup>125</sup> Ingstad, "The Interpretation of the Oseberg find," 144.

<sup>126</sup> Ingstad, "The Interpretation of the Oseberg find," 147. Ingstad asserts that horses were typical sacrifices in bog-offerings, especially since they were decapitated in a similar manner as found in the Oseberg burial.

<sup>127</sup> Ingstad claims that this represents the symbolic presence in the burial of the king, since his physical body is not found. It's unclear from the source how the presence of the saddle, representing a male figure, connects to the burial as a site of a sacred death-wedding.

<sup>128</sup> Ingstad, "The Interpretation of the Oseberg find," 145.

<sup>129</sup> Bill, "Protecting Against the Dead?" 143, 148, 150-151.

<sup>130</sup> Bill, "Ambiguous Mobility," 211-212.

<sup>131</sup> Bill, "Ambiguous Mobility," 212.

<sup>132</sup> Bill, "Ambiguous Mobility," 214.

vessel for the dead body to the grave.<sup>133</sup> Even two fragments which comprise the Oseberg tapestry depict a ceremonial procession complete with wagons; given the wagon's accompanying presence in the burial, as well as the four sledges also found, one can theorize a similar procession occurred as part of a funerary act for interring these two women.<sup>134</sup> The decoration of the Oseberg wagon likely depicts heroic tales or stories from mythology, which may have been carved as part of the wagon's greater purpose in this procession. The carvings themselves can be interpreted as related to elements of protective magic, religious belief, or storytelling, but were ultimately placed upon the wagon for a specific purpose possibly relating the greater ritualistic or ceremonial aspect of the Oseberg burial.

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<sup>133</sup> Price, "Nine paces from Hel," 185.

<sup>134</sup> Bill, "Ambiguous Mobility," 210; Price, "Nine paces from Hel," 184.

## 4. WAGONS IN VISUAL SOURCES

Visual sources from textiles and picture stones are considered because of their role as “channels of communication” that conveyed messages and stories that both the creator and viewer were familiar with.<sup>135</sup> The important point to make with regards to the interpretation of imagery is that while it can be easily dismissed as arbitrary or projected, the visual sources depict knowledge and values that were popular and important at the time in which they were created.<sup>136</sup> Thus, their intended interpretation, especially when compared to sources from the same time period, imparts possible patterns that are not necessarily arbitrary.

### 4.1 The Oseberg tapestry

The Oseberg burial, in addition to the wagon described before, also featured an assortment of textiles consisting of fragmented pieces that have survived in varying states of preservation. They consist of different materials and designs and comprise 277 cataloged items, some of the individual numbers consisting of many individual pieces and fragments.<sup>137</sup> The textiles were recovered from different areas of the burial site, mainly in the burial chamber (on the east and west sides), and near the ditch of the 10<sup>th</sup> century burglary of the mound.<sup>138</sup> The purpose of the textiles has long been debated, with different scholars surmising the function of the textiles to be wall-hangings or bed-coverings.<sup>139</sup> The two fragments (no. 1 and no. 2) that constitute what is commonly referred to as the Oseberg tapestry (which is what I will call it henceforth) are relevant for the elaborate scene depicting a procession of horses, people, and wagons. From this scene there have been many connections made between the overall purpose of the burial, the objects found in the burial chamber and ship, and the identities of the women.

The fragments of the tapestry were found in the eastern part of the burial chamber, but the natural process of the mound pressing upon the chamber and ship together moved the fragments out of their original context. It has been suggested that they were not originally

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<sup>135</sup> Guðmundsdóttir, “Saga Motifs on Gotland Picture Stones,” 63-64.

<sup>136</sup> Guðmundsdóttir, “Saga Motifs on Gotland Picture Stones,” 70.

<sup>137</sup> Ingstad, “Tekstilene i Osebergskipet.” See Appendix I, Figures 12 and 13.

<sup>138</sup> Brøgger et al., *Osebergfundet* 1, 27, 36-46; Dedekam, “Funnliste,” 33; Vedeler, “The textile interior,” 281.

<sup>139</sup> Ingstad, “Tekstilene i Osebergskipet,” 211-212; Shetelig, “Graven,” 213-214. It was not until the later 20<sup>th</sup> century that detailed examinations and closer interpretations of the Oseberg textiles were made, including positing the reconstructed design of the textiles, their placement in the chamber, and the purpose of their presence in the burial. Bjørn Hougen, in the year 1940, extensively examined the textile fragments in conjunction with their burial context and deduced that the tapestry fragments were quite likely made by the occupants of the burial chamber, as these women had been assumed to be of high social position and tapestry weaving was itself an occupation performed by ladies of this standing. Hougen, “Billedvev” and “Stoffer med brosjering.”

placed upon the chamber walls.<sup>140</sup> The Oseberg tapestry may have laid upon the mattress of the burial chamber, facing upwards, almost as if they were on display and thus meant to be viewed, whereas other textiles were found folded and placed upon the mattress, or were found facing-downwards.<sup>141</sup> Vedeler (2014) proposes that the tapestry fragments were treated and decorated as separate objects in comparison to the other textiles.<sup>142</sup>

The main focus of the fragments, as argued in Ingstad (1995), is that of a man riding a white or light-colored horse, with two large (likely white) birds flying over his head. Two other birds are flying over another man in front of this main rider, and one flanking the horse.<sup>143</sup> The bottom row of the tapestry, below the main horseman, contains another horse, covered with a caparison pattern, drawing a wagon containing two seated figures, which Ingstad surmises to be two women.<sup>144</sup> A large black bird flies over the horse and wagon procession, and swastika symbols are patterned below the wagon. A shawl-wearing female, whom Ingstad believed to have a symbolic role in the tapestry, carries a lamp on a pole near the main horseman. Another man holding a sword and other objects is found in the top left-hand corner of fragment no. 1, and also has a swastika symbol next to him. Other figures stand near this man holding spears or staffs.<sup>145</sup> The last part of fragment no. 1 contains the front part of a red horse with a braided and knotted tail, which continues onto fragment no. 2 in the top row. This horse is led by a man with a spear (appearing under the horse), and also draws a wagon, the contents of which are unknown. In the bottom row of fragment no. 2 is another horse, with another staff-wielding man beneath it and another on top holding the horse's reins, which draws another wagon with its contents obscured. This part of the tapestry also contains more swastikas and snake-like symbols.

#### 4.1.1 Discussion

What can the depiction of the wagons in the Oseberg tapestry tell us about their purpose? Ingstad asserts that the wagons depicted in the scene have important religious symbolism tied to their purpose. She describes the wagons in the scene as covered in tapestries, and proposes that they were covered because they contained something precious and "too sacred for human eyes to behold" i.e. relics or other special objects in connection to the divine. In fact, Ingstad builds upon Hougen's earlier interpretations and theorizes that the

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<sup>140</sup> Hougen "Billedvev," 29-30; Ingstad, "Tekstilene i Osebergskipet," 211; Shetelig, "Graven," 213-214; Vedeler, "The textile interior," 291.

<sup>141</sup> Vedeler, "The textile interior," 291.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ingstad, "The Interpretation of the Oseberg find," 140.

<sup>144</sup> Ingstad, "The Interpretation of the Oseberg find," 141.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

procession here is reminiscent of Nerthus' wagon procession in *Germania*.<sup>146</sup> She connects the scene as a procession to Odin, Thor, or Freyja, depending upon how one interprets the other symbolism in the scene. While the scene is undoubtedly a procession and could be the representation of a religious procession for the gods, it is likely that the Oseberg tapestry served to tell the story or stories of an important event, like other visual sources of the time. Fuglesang (2007) speculates that the tapestry shows several different heroic or mythical stories.<sup>147</sup> It is probably not meant to be like a photograph of the *actual* Oseberg burial procession (as this tapestry would have been made well in advance). The Oseberg tapestry, with its upward facing position on the bed and very detailed depiction of an elaborate procession, was meant to be seen as the pictorial explanation of the events prior to the burial. In this context, the wagons served as transport for the deceased or the burial goods found within the mound.

#### 4.2 The Gotland picture stones

The Gotland picture stones, a group of over 500 stones found on the island of Gotland, Sweden, were constructed over a period from 400-1100 AD and are considered visual counterparts to the Icelandic sagas. Much of their cataloguing and typology was produced in 1941-1942 by Sune Lindqvist in her work *Gotlands Bildsteine*, but more recent studies, including Lisbeth Imer's 2004 paper focusing upon Groups C and D of their catalogue and Jan Peder Lamm and Erik Nylén 2003 edition of the catalogue, have produced a larger and more detailed corpora of the stones, including efforts to refine their dates and digitize the stones.<sup>148</sup> Many of the stones were used for burials or graves, while others were taken from their original sites and reused for structures such as churches, cairns, or broken to be used for sharpening or grinding stones.<sup>149</sup> Four stones have images of wagons etched into them, and they include the stones at Levide (Go 77), Grötlingbo (Barshaldershed), Alskog, and Ekeby. As the information available for Ekeby is scarcer than the stones for Levide, Grötlingbo, and Alskog, I will focus upon those three.

The stone (Go 77) in the churchyard wall of the Levide kirk was found in 1857 and is dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>150</sup> It depicts a person holding a horn, likely a drinking horn, whilst driving a spoke-wheeled wagon. The person's mouth is either open, or resembles a beard.

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<sup>146</sup> Ingstad, "The Interpretation of the Oseberg find," 139-140.

<sup>147</sup> Fuglesang, "Ekphrasis and Surviving Imagery," 212.

<sup>148</sup> Åhfeld, "3D Scanning of Gotland picture stones.;" Lindqvist *Gotlands Bildsteine Vols I-II.*; Nylén & Lamm, *Bildstenar*; Imer, "Gotlandske billedsten."

<sup>149</sup> Rundkvist, "The secondary use of picture stones," 145-146.

<sup>150</sup> Peel, *Guta Lag and Guta Saga*, 152. See Appendix I, Figure 14.

Another person holding a circular object sits with their legs outstretched on the back of a horse. A dog is in front of the horse and carriage. The border of the stone contains a very damaged runic inscription which according to Staecker (2003) translates as: “...son, like his father...on one. That was...God (help) the souls of this couple.”<sup>151</sup> Other interpretations of the stone disagree on the gender of the people in the scene. Lagerlöf and Stolt (1996), in a report on the Levide church grounds and artifacts, describes the person in the wagon and holding the drinking horn as a man with what looks like a beard. The person above the horse is female, and is holding a circular loaf of bread.<sup>152</sup> But Göransson (2002) and Staecker (2002) both assert that the horn-wielding person driving the wagon is female.<sup>153</sup> Göransson emphasizes this is because of the similarity in style (particularly the hair) to other Gotland picture stones depictions of women.

The Barshaldershed stone is dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century and was found near Grötlingbo parish.<sup>154</sup> The dating of this stone is more uncertain, as it was moved and used in a nearby grave site. This stone shows a carriage driver on another spoked-wheel wagon being pulled by an animal. It is difficult to ascertain exactly what this animal is because part of the body is gone and thus it can only be assumed it is a horse or ox. The carriage driver is being handed a drinking horn from another person. A third person follows the wagon on foot. Two other animal-like creatures are on the right side of the stone, but it is difficult to identify their species. Other interlocking designs are found on the left hand side and top of the stone. The carriage driver and the person with the drinking horn, in comparison to other stones found in this style, are possibly women because of their long hair and clothing which appears to be dresses. The third person has been identified by Göransson (2002) as female as well.<sup>155</sup> This stone is found in proximity to burials dated to the Viking Age. One of the graves contains a rarely seen north-oriented body of a male, buried in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, which replaced a 5<sup>th</sup> century aristocratic burial, and an 11<sup>th</sup> century west-oriented male grave.<sup>156</sup>

The picture stone at Alskog Church, dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, was reused as the foundation for a baptismal font within the church.<sup>157</sup> The stone was pierced in the center and placed under the font with the pictures facing up, making the images viewable by the church attendees. While damaged from the alterations, the scene still has an abundance of figures.

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<sup>151</sup> Staecker, “The Cross Goes North,” 472.

<sup>152</sup> Lagerlöf and Stolt, “Levide kyrka,” 86.

<sup>153</sup> Göransson, “Images of Women and Femininity,” 9-11; Staecker, “The woman on the wagon,” 15-18.

<sup>154</sup> Peel, *Guta Lag and Guta Saga*, 152. See Appendix I, Figure 15.

<sup>155</sup> Göransson, “Images of Women and Femininity,” 9-11.

<sup>156</sup> Rundkvist, “The secondary use of picture stones,” 147-149.

<sup>157</sup> Burström, “Other Generations’ Interpretation,” 28; Fuglesang, “Ekphrasis and Surviving Imagery,” 211; Peel, *Guta Lag and Guta Saga*, 152. See Appendix I, Figure 16.

The wagon in this scene, found in the lower left corner, is drawn by a horse and features one or possibly two drivers/wagon riders. Above the wagon scene there are several figures that look in the midst of a battle, holding objects that resemble swords and shields, with one figure holding an object that looks like a hammer or axe. This last figure has been interpreted as Thor by some, manipulating the sky above the scene.<sup>158</sup> One figure just above the reins of the horse is supine and enclosed in an oval shape, possibly indicating they are dead and buried. The middle of the scene is heavily damaged by the baptismal font alteration, but includes several bird-like animals and a woman, indicated as such by her long hair and dress. The right side of the stone features several kneeling people under an arch-like figure, and several more figures, quite possibly soldiers or warriors due to their helmets and hanging swords which resemble those in the battle on the left, appear to be walking out of the scene on the bottom. Intricate knot work forms a border on the bottom and right hand sides of the stone.

It has been theorized that the stone was used to further the contrast between Christian and pagan beliefs. The baptismal font contains Biblical scenes, with sacred scenes depicted on top and hellish scenes on the bottom.<sup>159</sup> Placing the stone under the font, with its depiction of pagan stories, nearest the scenes of hell, would illustrate this contrast between Christianity and paganism as reflected in the values of this time period.<sup>160</sup>

#### 4.2.1 Discussion

In each of the stones discussed, the first clear purpose of the wagons was transport. Each stone contains a wagon being clearly driven by one or more individuals. But where and why does this transport take place? If we consider the perspective of Fuglesang (2007), these stones may contain narrative scenes that feature motifs found throughout all of the Gotland picture stones.<sup>161</sup> The stones, particularly the one from Alskog church, likely represent mythological or heroic tales, but the identification of the specific story can be difficult to ascertain.<sup>162</sup> It may even contain an image of Thor amidst battle. The Barshaldershed and Levide stones are said to depict a journey to the afterlife on a wagon driven by a woman.<sup>163</sup> Another interpretation theorizes that these figures represent Valkyries.<sup>164</sup> These are interesting arguments that yet again connect wagons as motifs of the afterlife or in connection to gods.

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<sup>158</sup> Westholm, "Choosing Heaven," 7.

<sup>159</sup> Lindqvist, "Forngutniska altaren," 87-88.

<sup>160</sup> Burström, "Other Generations' Interpretation," 29-30.

<sup>161</sup> Fuglesang, "Ekphrasis and Surviving Imagery," 203.

<sup>162</sup> Fuglesang, "Ekphrasis and Surviving Imagery," 203-204.

<sup>163</sup> Göransson, "Images of Women and Femininity," 9-11; Staecker, "The woman on the wagon," 15-18.

<sup>164</sup> Müller-Wille, *Das wikingerzeitliche Gräberfeld von Thumby-Bienebek*, 44-45.

A more challenging problem arises with the identification of gender with the figures on these stones. While the main arguments presented equate long-haired and dress or robe-wearing figures as female and weapon wielding figures as male, this is problematic because of the simplistic detail of the figures as well as damage which I believe precludes definitive identification of the figures as male or female without further, more dedicated study into the stylistic themes of the stones. Indeed, there is disagreement even amongst scholars about the gender identification of the figures. While at first these wagon riders offer evidence for identifying wagons with women, I think that this evidence is troublesome given the above circumstances. I believe a better argument is made through viewing these stones as memorials or representations of mythical and heroic tales. They could even be ceremonial given the proximity of some of these stones to graves, in that they are commemorating the dead through pictorial narrative. Therefore these stones lend stronger practical evidence of wagons as specially connected to mythology and quite possibly the afterlife.



## 5. WAGONS IN TEXTUAL SOURCES

In order to have a better comparative study between the textual sources and the archaeological and visual source material, I chose textual sources whose accepted dating is roughly contemporary to the archaeological and visual sources, for both the pre-Viking Age and Viking sources. With regards to the Old Norse sources, although generally written down in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, much later than actual occurrence of the events within them, they are argued to reference oral traditions from that time and cultural memory of the social practices of that time. These textual sources thus, to an extent, act as repositories for the cultural memory of historical events or cultural traditions of the Viking Age.<sup>165</sup>

As addressed earlier in my methodology, one possible problematic factor concerning the Old Norse textual sources is the time differential between the content of the stories (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the manuscripts in which they were recorded (13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries), as well as the sometimes uncertain date attributed to sources without an attributed author, such as the eddic poetry. Changes in many aspects of society, not least of which was religious, may have affected these textual sources with biases or led to changes during their content that reflected the changes in ideologies from the time. Nevertheless, the content of the stories, whether considered biases or not, corresponds contemporarily to the material sources and thus provides relevant information which, when utilized in a comparative approach, illustrates some of the purposes for wagons.

### 5.1 Translating “wagon” in Old Norse

How do wagons appear in the textual sources? I first began with sources based upon the Old Norse term that most directly translates to “wagon”, which is *vagn*. *Vagn* in its dictionary entry, according to *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* by Geir T. Zoëga (2004[1910]) is: [*vagn*, m. (1) vehicle, sledge, wagon, carriage; (2) Charles’s Wain].<sup>166</sup> An even more interesting and extensive definition is reproduced below in Figure 1 from *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* as compiled by Gudbrand Vigfusson in 1874, considered one of the most comprehensive and authoritative dictionaries of Old Norse.<sup>167</sup> While the most common translation offered by Vigfusson relates to a wagon, there are others to note that offer connections to subjects other than vehicles. Vigfusson also cites *vagn* in relation to astronomy, and includes references to *vagn* as “the Wain” or *Ursa Major*, the name for the constellation the Big Dipper, and in earlier times, was called *Óðins vagn*. The heaven (or sky)

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<sup>165</sup> Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 2.

<sup>166</sup> *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, s.v. “vagn”. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 467.

<sup>167</sup> *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, s.v. “vagn”. Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 674.

is known as *vagns-höll* (wagon hall). Vigfusson’s definition alludes to a special connection to Odin, which describes Odin as “*vagna verr* by the poets”. This definition provided a basis from which I began my search for sources referring to wagons, and thus several of these references will be discussed later.

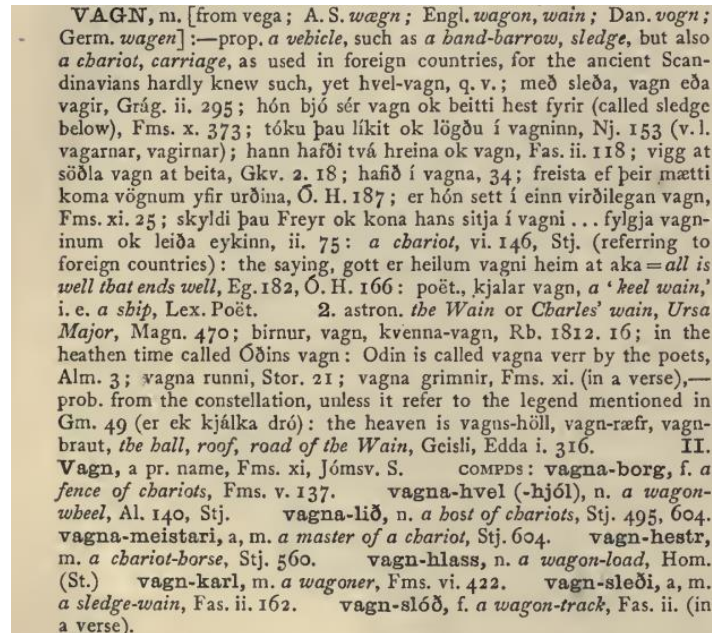


Figure 1. Vigfusson’s dictionary entry for *vagn*. From Vigfusson (1874): 674.

While the use of *vagn* proved fruitful in finding several examples of wagons in textual sources, it soon came to my attention that the word “wagon” existed as a translation for other words as well, and also that *vagn* as “wagon” was not as straightforward as I originally expected. Thus I have included some examples that translate *vagn* less literally and examples that include “wagon” but use another Old Norse word (such as *reið*). The word *vagn* can be more broadly translated in Old Norse as “cart, wagon, wain, or carriage”, often reflective of the context in which the word is found in the text. In some cases it can even be used for “chariot”.<sup>168</sup> Interestingly, in some cases *vagn* is translated as something else entirely, and this introduced some challenges in interpretation. I chose to exclude the words that have been translated as “sledge” as these refer to other types of transport objects (without wheels) which do not reflect the same vehicle studied in the material sources.

The Old Norse sources chosen for this section are based upon an initial keyword search for *vagn* using the corpora of the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* from the University of

<sup>168</sup> It should be noted that some archaeologists distinguish between *chariot* and *wagon*, the former being a vehicle used primarily in battle and the latter used primarily in processions (Pare, “*Wagons and Wagon-Graves*,” 195). This is an important note when considering how to interpret the text sources depending upon which translation is used. However, because of the seeming flexibility or interchangeability some scholars use when translating passages referring to these wheeled vehicles, I still consider instances where *vagn*, the word most commonly used in Old Norse for “wagon”, may be translated as “chariot”.

Copenhagen and the corpus of poetry from the international projects *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* and *Lexicon Poeticum*. *Vagn* is a regular *a*-stem masculine noun, and when performing my searches of the textual databases, I included as relevant examples all declined forms (indefinite and definite, all cases) and spelling variants of these declined forms, accounting also for variations with [-*ö*, -*o*, -*a*] for normalized -*o*. While it is not possible to list every example found, I chose a sampling from sources in all the types of Old Norse writing (skaldic poetry, eddic poetry, and prose) to account for the breadth of variation in this genre and to illustrate the variation in accounts of wagons in these textual sources.

As addressed earlier in this thesis, I also included an older Latin source from 98 AD in order to provide a better comparative basis of wagons across space and time just as I did with the archaeological sources. This source is well-documented and often referenced in regards to wagons, and as part of my aims in this thesis includes revisiting these sources to assess the veracity of their claims, I thus included it as well below.

## 5.2 Latin sources

### 5.2.1 Tacitus - *Germania*

The first text I will focus upon is one of the most often cited texts that establish connections between form and function of the wagon in the Viking Age. This text, *Germania* by Publius Cornelius Tacitus, is considered an informative work about the people of the Germanic tribes before the Viking Age. Tacitus is regarded for his observations in his writings as precise, detailed, and fair, and thus his works are oft cited for their detailed information regarding his subjects.<sup>169</sup> This work, considered both a historical and ethnographic account, covers the geography, laws, customs, traditions, and lifestyles of the Germanic tribes that surrounded the Roman Empire.<sup>170</sup> It is dated to circa 98 AD (during the Roman Iron Age).

Chapter 40 of *Germania* describes an instance of the worship and ritual acts of Germanic groups who worshiped the goddess Nerthus; this particular passage is of interest for its descriptive details of the goddess' wagon procession.<sup>171</sup> In this text, *vehiculum*, the vessel driven by the priest containing the shrine to Nerthus is translated as “chariot”, rather than a wagon.<sup>172</sup> In this scene, a procession consisting of a covered chariot, containing a shrine to the

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<sup>169</sup> Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, 53; Rives, *Tacitus: Germania*, 69-74.

<sup>170</sup> Rives, *Tacitus: Germania*, 69-74.

<sup>171</sup> See Appendix II for the Latin text and English translation of this passage.

<sup>172</sup> *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “vehiculum”. From *veho* + *culum*. The Oxford Latin Dictionary (1968) defines this as “a wheeled vehicle for the conveyance of passengers or goods, wagon, cart, etc.” as well as “(in general) a means of transport.”

goddess Nerthus, moves through the land to be amongst the people. At the end of the journey, the chariot, the cloth covering the shrine, and the likeness of the deity (representing the deity herself) are washed, and slaves of the procession are implied to be sacrificed. Nerthus is described as a goddess of the earth, implying a link to the hearth and fertility. This procession acts as a dramatic ritual to bring her to the mortal world, in the form of the idol or a person acting as the goddess.<sup>173</sup> This implies a connection between wagons or chariots in procession transporting a goddess through the land and ritual performance. In addition, the chariot in this scene is draped in a cloth and is driven by female cattle, watched over by a male priest. This draping of cloth or another act of covering the wagon, perhaps to conceal the contents within, is also seen in the illustrations on the Oseberg tapestry. Wagons perhaps thus have this connection as the transport for gods and goddesses as they moved amongst the living. This is not an uncommon motif in Scandinavia tradition, as other accounts of gods and goddesses of the Norse pantheon also move about their realm and the earthly realm via wagon.<sup>174</sup> Later, after the procession ends in this description in Germania, all of these items (the shrine, the cloth, and the chariot) are washed in a lake. This is an interesting connection implied between wagons and the sea, as one may ask why these items are washed in this particular source of water. Other sources, which will be discussed, also make more metaphorical links between wagons and the sea.

### 5.2.2 Saxo Grammaticus – *Gesta Danorum*

The *Gesta Danorum* is an early history of medieval Denmark written by the grammarian Saxo Grammaticus in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It consists of sixteen books, written in Latin, that describes the peoples who inhabited Denmark and other parts of Scandinavia and their history from pre-history to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Wagons in the *Gesta Danorum* are found in early passages of Book III that describe the fight between Høther, the first Danish king of the Svanhita dynasty, and Balder, the god of light from the Norse pantheon. The first instance of a wagon is as a means of transport for a weakened Balder, who was tormented by the loss of Nanna to the point of needing assistance provided by the wagon (here translated as a chariot or carriage):

2.12 *Idem laruarum Nanne speciem simulantium continua noctibus irritamenta perpessus adeo in aduersam corporis ualitudinem incidit, ut ne pedibus quidem incedere posset. Quamobrem biga rhedaue emetiendorum itinerum consuetudinem habere coepit. Tanta*

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It is therefore reasonable to assert that we are talking about the same time of vehicle here as in the Old Norse sources and that connections between the contexts of the same vehicle are plausible.

<sup>173</sup> Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, 54.

<sup>174</sup> Turville-Petre, "Fertility of Beast and Soil," 249-252.

*amoris ui suffusum pectus ad extremam pene eum tabem redegerat. Nihil enim sibi uictoriam dedisse credidit, cuius Nanna preda non fuerit.*

Balder was incessantly tormented at night by phantoms which mimicked the shape of Nanna and caused him to fall into such an unhealthy condition that he could not even walk properly. For this reason he took to traveling in a chariot or carriage. The violent passion that soaked his heart brought him almost to the verge of collapse. He judged that victory had yielded nothing if it had not given him Nanna as a prize.<sup>175</sup>

Later in the story, Høther considers whether or not to continue to fight against Balder, as he was advised by his followers that a mortal man fighting a celestial being was an impossible task. However, Høther was not swayed, and thought “*Vel fortasse meminerat Høtherus excellentissimis uiris incertissimam extare potentiam exiguamque glebam ingentes arietare currus*” or “Or perhaps Høther had recollected that the power of the most illustrious men is unstable, and a small tussock can overturn large wagons”.<sup>176</sup> In this way, perhaps Høther knows of Balder’s weakness and means of movement by wagon, thereby giving this passage an added metaphorical depth wherein Høther is represented by the small tussock (grass) that will overturn the large wagon which represents Balder.

A final example of wagons is found in passage 3.7, during the last fight between Balder and Høther, which results in Balder’s death. Upon being grievously injured by Høther, Balder knows his death is near. Following this,

*Quo feruente lectica se in aciem deferri iussit, ne intra tabernaculum obscura morte defungi uideretur.*

As the struggle raged he gave orders for his litter to be carried to the battle front, in case it should be thought he was dying unseen inside his tent.<sup>177</sup>

In this instance, Balder is asked to be carried in his “litter” or the carriage body of the wagon/chariot, in order to face his inevitable death on the battle front in front of his men and not hidden away. This is a particularly interesting passage for its description of a death (of a god) and the use of a wagon body carrier of the dead.

### 5.2.3 Discussion

For what purposes did the wagons serve in these sources? There is a very clear example of a wagon as a ceremonial vessel in a ritual procession in *Germania* Chapter 40. It acts as the method by which a representation of a god or goddess is transported. While this wagon procession might be part of a literal journey to a sacred site, it might also be

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<sup>175</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, “The History of the Danes,” trans. Fisher, 154-155.

<sup>176</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, “The History of the Danes,” trans. Fisher, Passage 3.5, 158-159.

<sup>177</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, “The History of the Danes,” trans. Fisher, 160-161.

representative of the gods moving amongst the people. In this way, the wagon acts as a cosmological beacon linking the spiritual and physical worlds. The wagon may have also served a sacrificial or other ritual purpose as well, as it was washed in the lake before the sacrifice of slaves.

There is an obvious purpose for wagons to serve a Germanic deity, here in the form of transport for both Nerthus and Balder. Nerthus is transported as part of her ritual procession, but Balder uses a wagon as a means for transportation when weakened. It also eventually becomes the vehicle which literally transports him to his death. This description in the story is interesting, as the purpose of wagons as the vehicle transporting a dead body to a burial site is represented, as we have seen, in the archaeological record. Wagons are also used as a metaphor to illustrate Balder's character as large and powerful. Høther aims to defeat Balder as a piece of grass (represented by Høther, a mortal) would be able to topple even a wagon (Balder, a god). This passage possibly foreshadows how overconfidence of the god's power will mean his death. As we will see, wagons as a metaphor forms an interesting example that adds a dimension of complexity to their social history.

### 5.3 Old Norse poetry

The body of work that comprises Old Norse poetry includes the skaldic and eddic poems found in many of the sagas, or in collected works such as the *Prose Edda* (*Elder Edda*). Skaldic poetry, those works often with an attributed author, followed strict meters (such as *dróttkvætt*) with specific numbers of lines and stressed or unstressed syllables per stanza, as well as the use of alliteration and varying word order to best fit the meter. Skaldic poetry often consists of complex kennings, words or phrases that used figurative language to describe or stand-in for something else. Eddic poetry generally was anonymously written with simpler meters (such as *fornyrðislag* or *ljóðahátt*), more forthright word order, and sparse use of kennings.<sup>178</sup> Old Norse poetry is important as a source for its conveyance of emotional expression through words in the stories, something that is lacking in material sources, as well as for understanding the ways in which objects connect to values, beliefs, and other objects particularly through the use of kennings.

#### 5.3.1 Snorri Sturluson – *Prose Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál*)

These first examples presented are from the collective work known as the *Prose Edda*, also known as the *Younger Edda* or *Snorri's Edda*. It was written, or according to some

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<sup>178</sup> Ólason and Tómasson, "The Middle Ages", 4.

scholars, compiled by, the Icelandic historian and politician Snorri Sturluson. The work is often originally dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, around the year 1220 AD.<sup>179</sup> The generally agreed upon composition of the text includes a prologue that focuses upon the origins of Norse mythology, followed by *Gylfaginning*, which deals with the creation of the Norse pantheon, after which is *Skáldskaparmál*, a dialogue between Bragi, the god of poetry and Ægir, the god of the sea, on the standards of skaldic poetry, and lastly *Háttatal*, which is Snorri's own discussion of Old Norse poetry verse structure.<sup>180</sup>

This first example is from the description of the gods at the beginning of the *Skáldskaparmál*. Here Snorri is presenting older poetic sources and quotations from them as examples of proper *kenning* structure in the tradition of skaldic poetry, rather than telling a story. He expected a degree of accuracy with regards to their content and structure. Therefore, these poetic devices as presented in *Skáldskaparmál*, as opposed to those used for fantastical purposes in the sagas, are more reliable examples of much older sources and their dating as contemporary with the material sources (pertaining to wagons, in this instance) is more trustworthy. The god Njörðr is described as the “god of chariots” and a member of the Vanir, and is also connected to Frey and Freyja as their father:

Hvernig skal kenna Njörð? Svá at kalla hann **vagna guð** eða Vana nið eða Van ok föður Freys ok Freyju, \*gefanda guð.<sup>181</sup>

How shall Niord be referred to? By calling him god of chariots or descendant of Vanir or a Van and father of Freyr and Freyja, the giving god.<sup>182</sup>

This particular use of *vagn* here, as *vagna guð*, is found in the most complete manuscript for the *Prose Edda*, the *Codex Regius*.<sup>183</sup> The other manuscripts for this texts use the Old Norse *Vana guð*, which means “god of the Vanir”.<sup>184</sup> The text *vagna guð* is the *lectio difficilior*, or more difficult reading of the text, as the change from *vagna guð* to *Vana guð* could be explainable since Njörðr is described as a Vanir in the text. Thus the presence of *Vana guð* is an explainable change from *vagna guð* in the other manuscripts. However, it is more difficult to explain why *Vana guð* would have changed to *vagna guð* in the *Codex Regius*. This connection of Njörðr as “god of the chariots” is interesting as the name *Njörðr*

<sup>179</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda, Skáldskaparmál*, trans. Faulkes, x-xi.

<sup>180</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda, Skáldskaparmál*, trans. Faulkes.

<sup>181</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda, Skáldskaparmál*, trans. Faulkes, 18.

<sup>182</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, 75.

<sup>183</sup> Þorgeirsson, “A Stemmatic Analysis of the Prose Edda,” 49. The *Prose Edda* and variations of its text survive in four manuscripts and four fragments, and no one manuscript or fragment is a complete record. The manuscripts include: the *Codex Regius* (GKS 2367 4°), 1300-1350 AD, which is considered the most comprehensive version of the *Prose Edda*; the *Codex Upsaliensis* (DG 11), 1300-1325 AD, and is the oldest version of the *Prose Edda*, containing some variations not found in other versions; the *Codex Wormianus* (AM 242 fol), 1300-1325; and *Codex Trajectinus* (MSS 1374), a copy produced around 1595 AD of an earlier produced 1200s manuscript.

<sup>184</sup> North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 24.

has been argued to be a younger, male, Old Norse evolution of the older Germanic goddess Nerthus or even the same deity.<sup>185</sup> The evidence for this is linguistic in relation to the evolution of Proto-Germanic to Old Norse. *Nerthus* is an etymon (or earlier form) of *Njǫrðr*, and according to McKinnell (2005) developed as Nerthus > \*Njarðuz (breaking) > \*Njǫrðuz (u-mutation) > Njǫrðr (syncope).<sup>186</sup> This particularly piece of verifiable linguistic evidence provides a solid link between the older *Germania* source linking Nerthus to a wagon procession, and the later Old Norse text here in *Skáldskaparmál* which connects a deity with the same name Njǫrðr, as the god of chariots (or wagons). The implications of this linguistic connection is very important, as an association between the same deity and the same object over the span of hundreds of years suggests a degree of continuity in cultural values or ideologies in this society.<sup>187</sup> This therefore strengthens the argument to view these older sources as guides to interpret the cultural significance of the newer sources.

The next text contains lines from *Skáldskaparmál* chapters 31 and 64, which is part of a larger text on the guidelines for skaldic poetry. In particular this chapter forms part of the guidelines for the construction of *kenning* and *heiti*.<sup>188</sup> The texts are sections of poems from skalds quoted by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál*. Both of these skalds were quoted by Snorri because of their technique in writing skaldic poetry.<sup>189</sup> The first is from Ormr Barreyjarskáld in *Skáldskaparmál* Chapter 31. Ormr, who is argued to have written this poetry about the sky and the sea in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century, describes *vagn* in the context of the heavens, moon, and stars. Faulkes (1987) also translates *vagn* in these instances as “constellations”, illustrating an astronomical or cosmological connection to wagons:

Hvernig skal kenna himin? Svá at kalla hann Ymis haus ok flar af  
 jötuns haus ok erfiði eða byrði dverganna eða hjálm Vestra ok  
 Austrá, Suðra, Norðra, land sólar ok tungls ok himintungla, **vagna**  
 ok veðra, hjálmr eða hus lopts ok jarðar ok sólar.<sup>190</sup>

How shall the sky be referred to? By calling it Ymir's skull and hence giant's skull and  
 toil or burden of the dwarfs or helmet of Vestri and Austri, Sudri Nordri, land of sun and  
 moon and stars, constellations and winds, helmet or house of air and earth and sun.<sup>191</sup>

...  
 Svá sem kvað Ormr Barreyjarskáld:  
 Hvégi er, Draupnis drógar  
 dís, ramman spyr ek vísa,

<sup>185</sup> McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 50-52.

<sup>186</sup> McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 50.

<sup>187</sup> North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 11.

<sup>188</sup> Faulkes, “The sources of *Skáldskaparmál*,” 2-4.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda, Skáldskaparmál*, trans. Faulkes, 33.

<sup>191</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, 88.



sá ræðr, - valdr - fyr veldi -  
**vagnbrautar** mér fagnar.<sup>192</sup>

As Orm Barreyriarskald said: However mighty, goddess of Draupnir's band [lady], I learn the lord is – he rules his realm – the ruler of the constellation's path will welcome me.<sup>193</sup>

However, *vagnbrautar* may not need to be so dramatically translated. It can also be translated as “the wagon road”, thus acting as the path by which wagon-driving gods and goddesses traverse the sky.

The second skald is Styrkárr Oddason, believed to have been an Icelandic lawman from 1171-1180 AD, and was also used for his descriptions of the sea.<sup>194</sup> *Skáldskaparmál* Chapter 64 brings *vagn* back the more straightforward definition of “wagon”:

Ok oxí. Skip er kallat skíð eða **vagn** eða reið.  
Svá kvað Eyjólfur dáðaskáld:  
Meita var at móti  
mjök síð of dag skíði  
ungr með jöfnu gengi  
útværs frömum hersi.<sup>195</sup>

And ox. A ship is also called ski or wagon or carriage. Eyjólfur Dadaskald said this: Young, he went very late in the day on ski of Meiti's fishing-station [sea] with the same sized troop against the bold lord.<sup>196</sup>

...  
Svá kvað Styrkárr Oddason:  
Ok ept ítrum <støkkvi>  
ók Hogni lið **vögnum**  
hlunns á Heiða fannir  
hyrjar flóðs af móði.<sup>197</sup>

Styrkarr Oddason said this: And Hogni's troops drove slipway-wagons over Heidi's snowdrifts [waves] in fury after the splendid flood-fire-[gold]-scatterer.<sup>198</sup>

These two passages again make this connection to ships as wagons of the sea, first by literally naming *vagn* as another name for ships and through describing ships as wagons on the waves.

### 5.3.2 Einarr Skúlason – *Geisli*

The next example is the *drápa* poem *Geisli*, which is the earliest known Christian *drápa* poem known to exist, written in the 12<sup>th</sup> century by the Icelandic poet and priest Einarr Skúlason.<sup>199</sup> It is found within *Óláfs saga helga*. A *drápa* poem, in the skaldic tradition, is a

<sup>192</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda, Skáldskaparmál*, trans. Faulkes 34.

<sup>193</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, 89.

<sup>194</sup> Jónsson, *The Old Norwegian and Old-Icelandic Literature History*, 169.

<sup>195</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda, Skáldskaparmál*, trans. Faulkes 76.

<sup>196</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, 125-126.

<sup>197</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda, Skáldskaparmál*, trans. Faulkes 76.

<sup>198</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Faulkes, 126.

<sup>199</sup> Chase, *Einarr Skúlason's Geisli*, 9.

heroic or laudatory poem that contains a long series of stanzas with refrain, usually composed in the *dróttkvætt* meter.<sup>200</sup> *Geisli* is considered a very important poem because it marks a stylistic shift in Old Norse poetry based upon the advent of Christianity in Iceland and Norway, and reflects the influence of Christianity and the continent upon inducing these style changes in skaldic poetry, as well as demonstrating the skill of Einarr Skúlason, who adapted pagan imagery and subject matter common to skaldic poetry in ways appropriate to Christian beliefs and meaningful to a Christian audience.<sup>201</sup>

This poem, which translates to “Ray of Light”, focuses mostly upon the symbolic connections between the physical light in a cathedral and the metaphorical light of those in worship:<sup>202</sup>

Bœn hefð, þengill, þína,  
þrekrammr, stoðat framla;  
iflaust höfum jöfri  
unnit mærd, sem kunnum.  
Ágætr, segið, ítran,  
Eysteinn, hvé brag leystak  
— hós elskið veg vísa  
**vagnræfrs** — en ek þagna.<sup>203</sup>

Courage-strong prince, I have excellently fulfilled your request; without a doubt we [I] have made praise to the king as we are [I am] able. Excellent Eysteinn, say how I have delivered the outstanding poem; love the honour of the king of the high wagon-roof [SKY/HEAVEN > = God]; and I fall silent.<sup>204</sup>

In previous examples, *vagn* was also used in connection to the heavens or as a word for the constellations found in the sky, as well as to a god, which in the example from *Skáldskaparmál* was Odin. The instance of *vagn* here shows the influence of Christian beliefs on previously used pagan imagery in skaldic poetry by the use of the kenning *vagnræfrs* “wagon-roof” for the heavens and by association, God, as the king of the wagon-roof, much as Odin was the ruler of the constellation’s path (*vagnbrautar*) as found in *Skáldskaparmál*.

### 5.3.3 *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar: Höfuðlausn and Sonatorrek*

The excerpts of texts from *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* are verses from two skaldic poems in the saga, *Höfuðlausn* and *Sonatorrek*. These poems are dated to roughly 936 AD

<sup>200</sup> Gade, *The Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt Poetry*, 1-2.

<sup>201</sup> Chase, *Einarr Skúlason's Geisli*, 13-15; DuBois and Ringgaard, *Nordic Literature*, 609.

<sup>202</sup> DuBois and Ringgaard, *Nordic Literature*, 609.

<sup>203</sup> Chase, “(Introduction to) Einarr Skúlason, *Geisli*,” 64-65.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.* The bracketed inserts are featured in Chase’s original translation.

*Höfuðlausn*, which translates to “Head’s Ransom”, is a laudatory poem for the 10<sup>th</sup> century king of Norway Eirik Haraldsson, also known as Eiríkr *blóðøx*.<sup>205</sup> The following verse from *Höfuðlausn* contains several connections to wagons:

Njóti bauga  
sem Bragi auga  
**vagna** vára  
eða vili tára.<sup>206</sup>

May he avail himself as Bragi avails himself of the eye of the defender of the Wain [Oðinn > Wisdom] or as Vili avails himself of the tears of the goddesses of chariots [Freya > gold].<sup>207</sup>

Wagons (or as translated here, chariots) are connected to Freya, who is named “goddess of chariots” and represents gold. There is yet another connection as well to Odin as the “defender of the Wain”, or defender of the wagon, as wain is another word for “wagon”, (seen earlier in Vigfusson’s comprehensive definition of *vagn*). In this instance, the wagon is a means to describe wisdom.

The next poem, *Sonatorrek*, is a lamentation of the deaths of Egill’s sons Gunnar and Böðvarr. In the following stanza, Egill is expressing frustration with Odin:

Áttak gótt	‘Once bare I goodwill
við geirs dróttin.	To the great spear-lord,
Gerðumk tryggr	Him trusty and true
at trúa hönnum,	I trowed for friend:
áðr vinan	Ere the giver of conquest,
<b>vagna</b> rúni,	The car-borne god,
sigrhöfundr,	Broke faith and friendship
of sleit við mik. <sup>208</sup>	False in my need. <sup>209</sup>

*Vagn* in this example is again connected to the gods where Egill describes a broken friendship and faith in “the car-borne god”, another likely referral to Odin. However, this translation is questionable as Green (1893) was more interested in the translation retaining its poetic finesse rather than creating an accurate translation. Another and arguably better translation of *vagna rúni* is as “friend of wagons”, or “friend of chariots”. Some scholars believe this is a reference, in the form of a kenning, to Odin.<sup>210</sup> However, other interpretations argue that this not refer to Odin, but is a kenning for Thor.<sup>211</sup>

<sup>205</sup> Hines, “Egill’s Höfuðlausn in Time and Place,” 87.

<sup>206</sup> *Höfuðlausn, Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigting*, ed. Jónsson.

<sup>207</sup> Chase, *Eddic, Skaldic, and Beyond*, 51. The bracketed inserts are featured in Chase’s original translation.

<sup>208</sup> *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, Íslenzk fornrit, via [www2.hf.uio.no/polyglotta](http://www2.hf.uio.no/polyglotta).

<sup>209</sup> *The Story of Egil Skallagrímsson*, trans. Green.

<sup>210</sup> Aðalsteinsson, “Religious Ideas in Sonatorrek,” 171-173.

<sup>211</sup> *Egils saga*, ed. Einarsson, 112, 153; Hultgård, “Personal Religion among the Ancient Scandinavians”, 27.

### 5.3.4 *Eddukvæði – Alvíssmál*

The following example is from the eddic poem *Alvíssmál*, found in the *Poetic Edda*, a collection of anonymously-written dramatic poems found in the 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript *Codex Regius*.<sup>212</sup> The poems were likely derived from older stories of oral tradition, and thus feature dramatic storytelling that resulted in stories which evolved over time but still carried an element of the memories passed down in oral tradition. This poem focuses on a conversation between the dwarf Alvíss and the god Thor, regarding Alvíss' desire to wed Thor's daughter. In stanzas 2-4, Alvíss speaks to a being he does not yet recognize as Thor, and seeks conversation with him. Alvíss refers to Thor, the one with whom he seeks conversation, as *vagna vers*, or "the wagon-rider". This is an interesting use of a wagon as part of a title or as part of an identity, as Alvíss is specifically requesting for Thor in this passage. This is another example of a connection between wagons and gods, here in the form of an honorific title for the god Thor.<sup>213</sup>

### 5.3.5 Discussion

These examples from the Old Norse poetry surprisingly provide quite compelling examples of the purposes of wagons. This is especially interesting considering that these sources, especially those from *Skáldskaparmál*, are the most reliable as reflective of actual practices or beliefs involving material culture, considering their verifiable dates contemporary to the archaeological material and Snorri's purpose to present the content as representative of proper writing, not as a spectacular story embellished with unnecessary details or stylistics. The solid linguistic evidence connecting Nerthus and Njörðr as deities associated with wagons, even across hundreds of years, is very important with regards to supporting the argument for using a text such as *Germania* to interpret similar source material from the Viking Age. This linguistic evidence that illustrates a continuity of association between these deities and their activities with wagons allows us to suppose that ritual processions were an important purpose for wagons.

The description of wagons in these sources illustrates how wagons are also used to perform a more symbolic purpose within textual descriptions. Wagons, as well as being connected to the gods, are connected to the heavens, as the "wagon road" or sky, of which a wagon is used as a metaphor to describe it, is the realm of the gods, especially Njörðr, Odin, Freya, and Thor. This particular connection to deities and the heavens is even expressed in

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<sup>212</sup> See Appendix III for the Old Norse text and English translation of this passage.

<sup>213</sup> It should be noted that this reference, *vagna vers*, in connection to the Thor, is very close to one of Vigfusson's references in his dictionary entry. That entry was *vagna verr*, and is connected to Odin.

texts that have a noticeable Christian bias or influence, with *Geisli*, as wagons are still described as metaphors for the sky (“wagon-roof”) but this time, in the realm of God.

## 5.4 Old Norse prose

In addition to Old Norse poetry, the prose of the sagas also gives much information about the values and traditions of life during the Viking Age. Many of the examples following are found within sagas that relate the exploits of families or kings, and thus while they are not regarded as reliable for completely accurate recollections of history, they nevertheless provide and reflect, in a similar fashion as the poetry, insight into societal ideals of the time.

### 5.4.1 *Helreið Brynhildar*

The next example of an eddic poem that describes wagons is found in *Helreið Brynhildar* or “Brynhildr's Hell-Ride” or “Brynhildr’s Wagon-Ride”. This poem, also found in the *Poetic Edda*, describes the funeral pyres of the hero Sigurðr and Brynhildr. The story of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, including the subject of this poem, is also known in *Völsunga saga* and another poem within the *Poetic Edda*, *Sigrdrífumál*. In the following prose, a description is given of Brynhildr as she is prepared for the pyre:

Eptir dauða Brynhildar váru gøðr bál tvau, annat Sigurði ok brann þat fyrr, enn Brynhildr var á qðru brennd, ok var hon í **reið** þeiri er guðvefjum var tjölduð. Svá er sagt at Brynhildr ok með **reiðinni** á helveg ok fór um tún þar er gýgr nokkur bjó.<sup>214</sup>

After the death of Brynhild there were made two bale-fires, the one for Sigurth, and that burned first, and on the other was Brynhild burned, and she was on a wagon which was covered with a rich cloth. Thus it is told, that Brynhild went in the wagon on Hel-way, and passed by a house where dwelt a certain giantess.<sup>215</sup>

Several interesting points are connected to wagons in this stanza. In this instance, rather than the Old Norse *vagn* for wagon, the word *reið* is used to describe the wagon in which Brynhildr is interred, implying a journey requiring transport as part of the funerary rite. First, Brynhildr was placed into a wagon that was to be burned in a funeral pyre, which depicts a connection between wagons and their use in burial rites. Second, a cloth is draped over the wagon prior to the funeral pyre. Draping a wagon in cloth or a tapestry for a special purpose was also present in the wagon procession in *Germania*, and has been argued as the means of obscuring the interiors of the wagons depicted in the Oseberg tapestry. The last line of this stanza describes Brynhildr riding in the wagon to Hel, one of the realms of the Norse

<sup>214</sup> *Eddukvæði II, Hetjukvæði*, eds. Kristjánsson and Ólason, 349-351, via [www2.hf.uio.no/polyglotta](http://www2.hf.uio.no/polyglotta).

<sup>215</sup> *Poetic Edda – Helreið Brynhildar*, trans. Bellows.

afterlife. This provides possible evidence of the belief that the wagon becomes a mode of transportation to the afterlife.

#### 5.4.2 *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*

The Icelandic family epic *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, or more simply *Egil's saga*, is the tale of the family of Egill Skallagrímsson, who was a farmer, skald, and warrior, and traces his family lineage from Egill's grandfather through his children.<sup>216</sup> The stories and poetry in the saga take place c. 850-1000 AD, encompassing most of the Viking Age and during a time when many people were moving from Norway to Iceland. In addition to being a work that reflects upon the lineage and qualities of Egill's family, it also a tale about Egill himself and his character as an exemplar of the warrior poet spirit.<sup>217</sup> This saga also illustrates the important and power of poetry and oral tradition in the Viking Age, where these mediums had the power to influence people's reputations, especially those in power, and thus their words and those who mastered them were held in high regard for their veracity.<sup>218</sup> This passage gives an example of a metaphorical use of wagons:

En um várit lýsti Þórólfr yfir því, at hann ætlaði útan at fara um sumarit. Skalla-Grímr latti hann, sagði, at þá var gott heilum **vagni** heim at aka.

'Hefir þú,' sagði hann, 'farit fremðarför mikla, en þat er mælt, er ýmsar verðr, ef margar ferr. Tak þú nú hér við fjárlut svá miklum, at þú þykkist verða mega gildir maðr af.'<sup>219</sup>

But in the spring Thorolf declared that he meant to go abroad that summer. Skallagrim forbade him, saying: 'Tis good to drive home with your wain whole.'

'You have,' said he, 'gotten great honour by travel; but there is the old saw, many farings, many fortunes. Take you now here as much share of the property as you think will make you a great man.'<sup>220</sup>

The *vagn* here is again translated as “wain” and is a metaphorical representation, using a full “wain” or full wagon to illustrate restoring someone's honor or face. By insisting that Thorolf make his “wain whole”, he is encouraging him to restore his character. Also, when Skallagrim encourages Thorolf to gather as much property as “you think will make you a great man”, it is a questioning of Thorolf's intentions and what he contends will make him a great man.

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<sup>216</sup> *Egil's Saga. The Sagas of Icelanders*, trans. Scudder.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> Ólason and Tómasson, “The Middle Ages,” 72-75.

<sup>219</sup> *Egils saga Skalla-grímssonar*, ed. Jónsson, via [www.heimskringla.no](http://www.heimskringla.no).

<sup>220</sup> *The Story of Egil Skallagrimsson*, trans. Green.

### 5.4.3 *Óláfs saga helga*

I next turn to *Óláfs saga helga*, also known as the Saga of St. Olaf. It focuses upon the stories of King Óláfr Haraldsson the Saint, king of Norway from 1005-1028 AD. It exists in several forms, including: fragments from ca. 1190 AD, the Norwegian manuscript *De Gardie 8*; the *Heimskringla* version compiled by Snorri Sturluson in 1230 AD; a reportedly lost version in *Fagrskinna*; and as part of the expanded sagas of Saint Óláfr Haraldsson in *Flateyjarbók*.<sup>221</sup> This saga is particularly known for its intertwining tales that utilize skaldic poetry, Latin hagiography, and old oral legends.<sup>222</sup> While not extraordinary in explaining wagons in the late Viking Age, it does provide another example of wagons as a means of transport. In Chapter 12 in *Óláfs saga helga*, it describes a large market town besieged by King Óláfr and English allies that was held by King Sveinn *tjúguskegg* (Forkbeard) of the Danes in England. This market town, Southwark, contained “arched bridges there over the river between the city and Southwark so wide that wagons could be driven over them in both directions at once.”<sup>223</sup> This illustrates wagons as a means to transport goods between urban centers, as well as giving a specific description of a bridge and roadway that can accommodate two wagons side by side. This is quite important to understanding a fundamental configuration of not only roads in this time period and setting, but also provides a bit of evidence of the construction of wagons implying a large size.

### 5.4.4 *Ögmundar þátr dytts ok Gunnars þátr helmings*

The next example of source material is related to the kings’ sagas and the sources are known as *Íslendinga þættir*, or short stories of the Icelanders. They were written generally in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. They often act as asides or side-stories in the main narratives of the kings’ sagas with the purpose of illustrating the qualities – both good and bad – of the kings they describe.<sup>224</sup> Those that are part of a compilation are generally focused upon the travels of Icelanders to the courts of Norway.<sup>225</sup>

The particular example I have chosen, from *Ögmundar þátr dytts ok Gunnars þátr helmings*, was written ca. 1350-1375 as part of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*.<sup>226</sup> It discusses the adventures of Ögmundr *dyttr* and Gunnarr *hellingr* as they travel through Norway and

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<sup>221</sup> Lindow, “St Olaf and the Skalds,” 112-127.

<sup>222</sup> Lönnroth, “Óláfs saga Helga,” Vol. 9.

<sup>223</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla Volume II*, eds. Finlay and Faulkes, 9-10.

<sup>224</sup> Jakobsson, “The life and death of the medieval Icelandic short story,” 258-259.

<sup>225</sup> Rowe and Harris, “Short Prose Narrative (þátr),” 466-469.

<sup>226</sup> Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 253.

Sweden, respectively.<sup>227</sup> The specific part I focus upon is the experience of Gunnar with the cult of the god Freyr in Sweden. In this passage, another example of a wagon procession (or in this case, cart procession) is conveyed, specifically named as that of another Germanic deity. However, the bias of the time period in which this was written is apparent in the message in this passage. Here it is a journey to pagan ceremonial sites of the god Freyr, in the form of a statue carried in the wagon, and his “wife”, who is really a woman who has been chosen to serve as or represent his wife.<sup>228</sup> Gunnar, fleeing to Sweden in a case of mistaken identity related to a vengeance killing at the court of King Óláfr (Tryggvason), leads the wagon in the ritual procession. After a time he grows tired of the long journey through blizzards and mountains, forcing him to stop. Freyr’s wife warns Gunnar that he will be attacked by Freyr should he not continue. Gunnar contemplates fighting the god much in the same way that Høther contemplates his fight with Balder in *Gesta Danorum*. But the difference that while Høther thought of honor before confronting Balder, Gunnar thinks of King Óláfr and promises that should he overcome the god, he will return to the faith (Christianity) and King Óláfr. Immediately after this thought, the god, which is revealed to be a demon, leaves the statue and flees. Gunnar assumes Freyr’s identity in the procession, which continues on towards their destination.

This passage is valuable for exhibiting another example where wagons are used in the processions of deities for ceremonial or ritual purposes. What is compelling about this particular example is that although it is written much later than the previous example of procession of Nerthus and the bias of its medieval Icelandic Christian setting is apparent, it still retains that continuity of connecting Germanic deities to wagon processions.<sup>229</sup> Gunnar’s journey as the wagon driver in this story is both literal and metaphoric, as his physical struggle and fatigue in the harsh environment and weather reflects his internal struggle between his desire to return to the Christian faith and his duty as a servant the pagan god Freyr. That Freyr is revealed to be a demon that is driven away is not surprising, as this fits as an allegory for driving out the older pagan faiths during the introduction of Christianity to Scandinavia. The last line in this passage “Ferr Gunnarr þá í umbúning skurðgoðsins” suggests hagiography, implying that by defeating the Germanic god/demon and assuming his identity, Gunnar is triumphing over his struggle with paganism, returning to his Christian faith, and presenting it as a new identity of higher spirituality. If anything it is extraordinary that despite the Christian bias within the content of the prose that is reflecting the

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<sup>227</sup> See Appendix IV for the Old Norse text and English translation of this passage.

<sup>228</sup> Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 253.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.



contemporary struggles between paganism and Christianity in the conversion period, the association between wagons and processions of deities is still accounted for in a strikingly similar fashion as the older sources.

#### **5.4.5 Discussion**

The prose presents several more examples of themes or purposes of wagons that have been presented before within other examples of textual sources. Brynhildr, much like Balder, rides within a wagon on the way to her death. Yet this source adds an implication that her funerary wagon becomes a symbolic means for her journey to the afterlife. Perhaps this particular functionality as depicted in this source provides support to understand the purpose of Viking Age wagon body burials as well.

Wagons as a metaphor for another object or more abstract concept features yet again within the textual sources, in this instance representing the character or honor of a person. While in other cases they have been connected to the gods as representative of the heavens, the realm of the gods, or their character (such as in the instance of Balder), here they are connected to mortals to represent the state of their being or character.

The story in *Ögmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars þáttur helmings* provides a fitting last example of wagon as processional vehicles for ceremonial or ritual purposes. It is a clear example of a wagon used in a ritual procession, yet again connected to the cult of a god. However, this particular story is interesting because even though it expresses Christian influence and clearly recounts the procession of a pagan god in a different way from that of, for example, the procession of Nerthus, it still maintains a continuity in expressing wagons as purposeful in a ritual procession. This particular theme connecting wagons and processions is quite recurrent throughout the textual sources, and despite being featured in stories from different times and within different societal contexts, the core nature of wagons as purposeful in ceremonial or ritual processions remains steadfast.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The primary focus of this thesis has been to explore wagons in their social contexts as depicted in several archaeological, visual, and textual sources, and comparatively examine these sources for evidence that connects wagons to previously theorized themes of gender, myth, ceremony, and interment. The purpose was to determine if and how these themes form part of the social history of wagons, or if there were nuances to these motifs. I argue that while connections between wagons and these themes are found, one must consider a stimulating purpose such as performance or ceremony/ritual as the motivating theme that explains the presence of wagons in these events. In many examples, the wagon serves as either a physical vehicle related to a ceremonial purpose, often in ritual processions, or performs a metaphorical or symbolic role in connection to the identity of a being or ritual act.

Wagons serve as the vessels of transport for several gods and goddesses in myth, both in the heavens and in the realm of mankind. They are linked in several textual sources to the gods Njörðr, Freyr, Thor the “wagon-rider”, and Odin the “friend of wagons”. They are also linked to the older goddess Nerthus, as well as to Freya as the “goddess of chariots”. While in most of these cases the wagons serve a functional purpose as transport for the deities, in others wagons performs as metaphors for other cosmological or religious iconography, such as the sky (constellations).

Establishing a firm connection between wagons and women became challenging given the examination of a wider body of source material for wagons. Previous studies have tried to establish that wagons functioned as a vessel especially connected to women. Wagon body burials, such as those from Denmark, feature women in the majority as opposed to men. The richness of the Oseberg burial, its interment of two women, and rare presence of a well-preserved and highly ornamented wagon was a likely driving force in examining a purposeful and deliberate connection between women and wagons. However, the evidence at hand suggests a tenuous connection at best. There are several examples in the texts where wagons are specifically connected to gods in addition to goddesses, and arguably, the Viking Age sources have more connections to gods. Both gods and goddesses feature in wagon funerals and ritual processions. While the wagon body burials from Denmark featured more women than men, an argument can be made that perhaps there is not a specific gender correlation between wagons and women in burials, but rather a connection between wagons and their use as a method of burial, possibly driven by an external factor relating to a religious or spiritual purpose. Whether this is gender specific is an interesting question for further research. Lastly, our visual representations of wagons present as problematic evidence for wagons as a

women's vessel, as there are disagreements in scholarly literature of the gender of the figures depicted with the wagons (especially for the Gotland picture stones). While it would appear that a degree of connection exists between women and wagons, the most plausible relationship might be that wagon bodies served as a burial casket especially for women.

This leads to the purpose of wagons in burial or funerary rites. There is enough evidence to suggest that wagons were a specifically chosen vessel for burials given that a large quantity of surviving archaeological evidence for wagons is found in burials, often as the object that contains the deceased. But why were wagons chosen for burials? Wagons in burials may have functioned symbolically as the vessels that would transport the dead to the afterlife, much like Brynhildr on her way to Hel via wagon in *Helreið Brynhildar*. This may have also been part of a greater ritual or ceremonial aspect of the burial, where the dead were transported via the wagon to the burial site as a physical representation of the metaphoric journey from the world of the living to the afterlife.

The most compelling evidence connects wagons to ritual processions and ceremonial purposes. There are several sources that depict wagon processions directly, such as the textual accounts of the ceremonial processions of Nerthus in *Germania* and of Freyr in *Ögmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars þáttur helmings*. The Oseberg tapestry arguably depicts a wagon procession, likely a pictorial representation intended to depict a procession similar to that which occurred during the ceremony that accompanied the Oseberg burial. Even the Oseberg wagon itself has been argued as the ceremonial vessel which carried the two women to the grave site. The linguistic evidence making a direct connection between the wagon-procession goddess Nerthus of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and the “god of wagons” Njörðr in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the same name continuously associated with wagons even centuries apart, provides an argument for connecting the older descriptions and deposits of wagons to interpret Viking Age wagon sources and finds. To add to this argument is the later story *Ögmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars þáttur helmings* written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It further expresses this continuity with the other, earlier sources by describing yet again wagons as a vehicle for a ceremonial procession, in this case for the god Freyr, as well as a metaphor for a difficult journey. Despite being written in a time where the story reflects a more Christian bias, it still maintains continuity describing wagons as processional vehicles. This continuity throughout all of the sources across space and time as a processional vehicle for ceremonial or ritual purposes stands out as one of the most interesting and viable purposes for wagons in their social history.

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## APPENDIX I

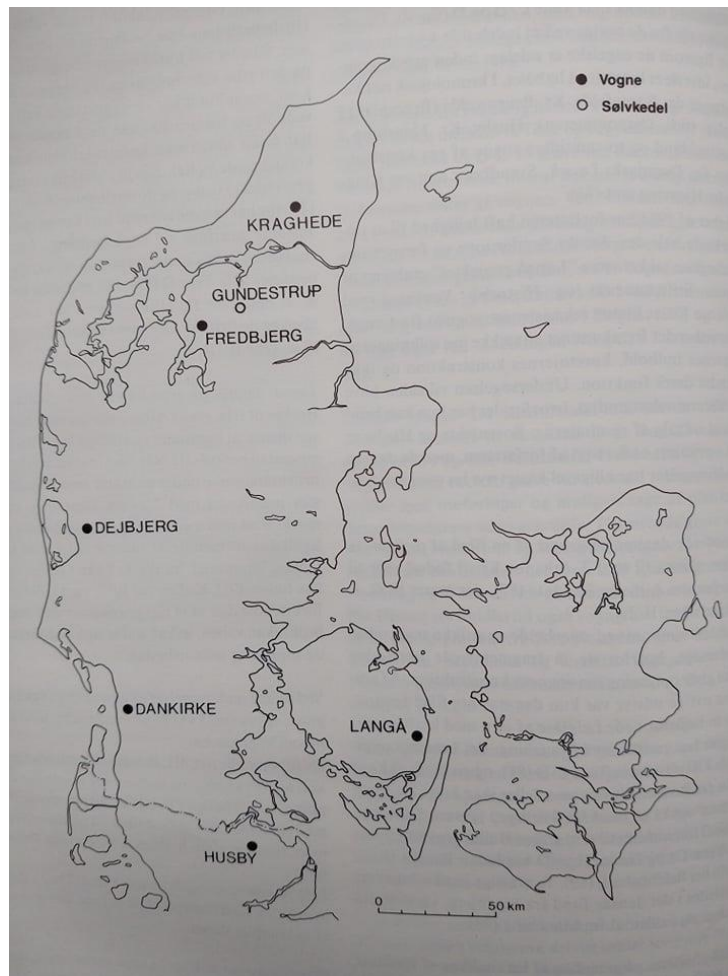


Figure 2. Map of Denmark's early Iron Age wagon finds. After Schovsbo (1987).



Figure 3. Example of the ornamentation on the Dejbjerg wagons. From The National Museum of Denmark archives, Copenhagen.



Figure 4. Rappendam disc wheel. From The National Museum of Denmark archives, Copenhagen.



Figure 5. Map of wagon body burials in 10<sup>th</sup> century Denmark. After Staecker (2003). ♀ represents female graves, ♂ represents male graves, and ? are undetermined.

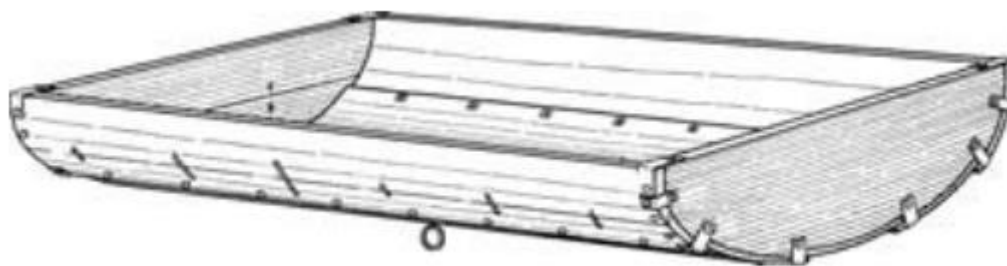


Figure 6. Reconstruction of the Thumby-Bienebek wagon body. After Müller-Wille (1976) and Staecker (2002)

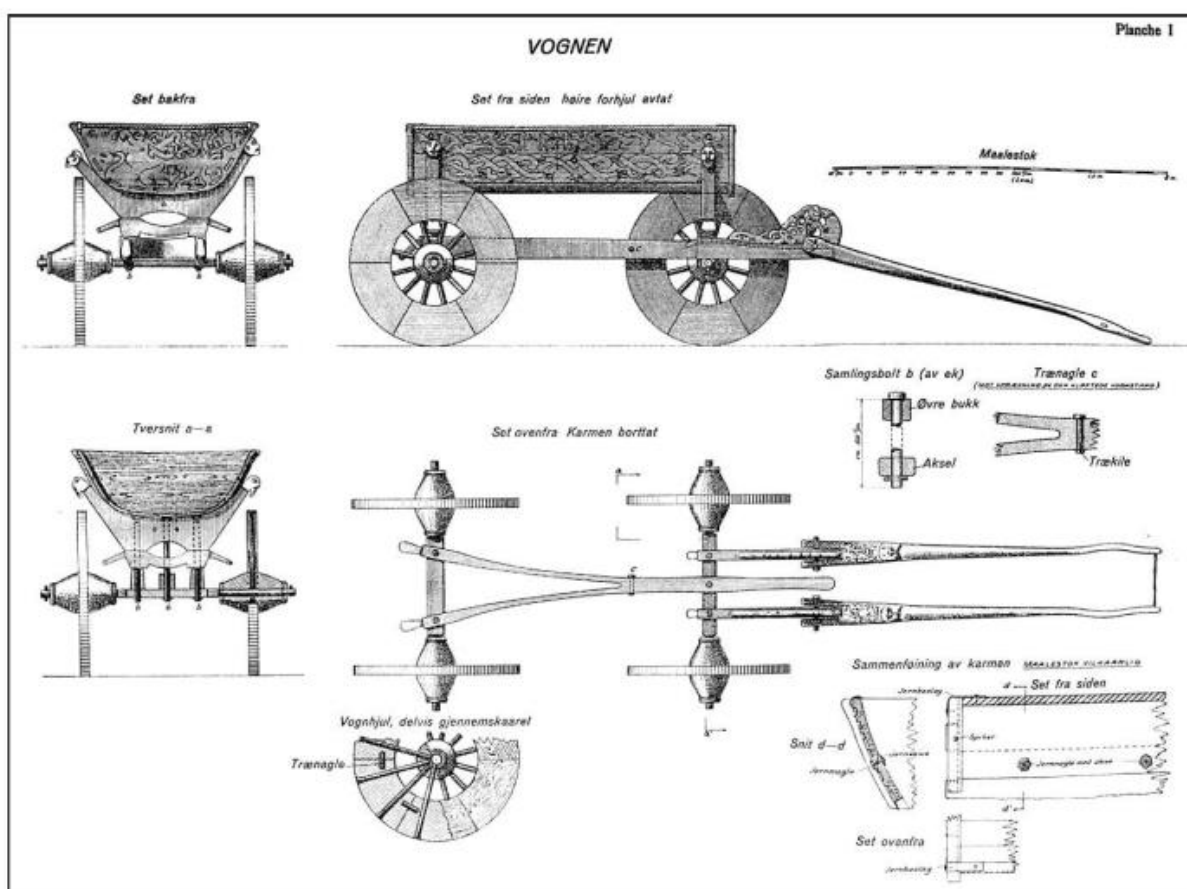


Figure 7. Drawing of the Oseberg wagon featured in *Osebergfundet*, After Brøgger et al. (1917).



Figure 8. Fragments of the Astrup wagon wheel. From The National Museum of Denmark archives, Copenhagen.

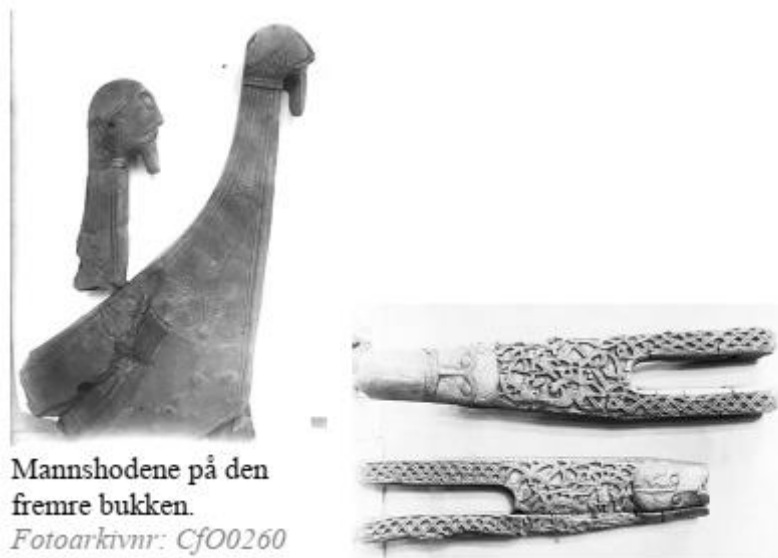


Figure 9. Oseberg wagon *bukker* featuring decorated heads (right) and decorated Oseberg *dragene* (left). Photo from the Museum of Cultural History archives, Oslo, after Løchen and Vike (2008).





Figure 10. "Triangle drama", left panel of the Oseberg wagon body. Photo from the Museum of Cultural History archives, Oslo.



Figure 11. Right panel of the Oseberg wagon body. Photo by Erin Kristine Pevan December 2018.



Figure 12. Oseberg tapestry fragment no.2. Photo by Eirik Johnsen, Museum of Cultural History archives, Oslo.



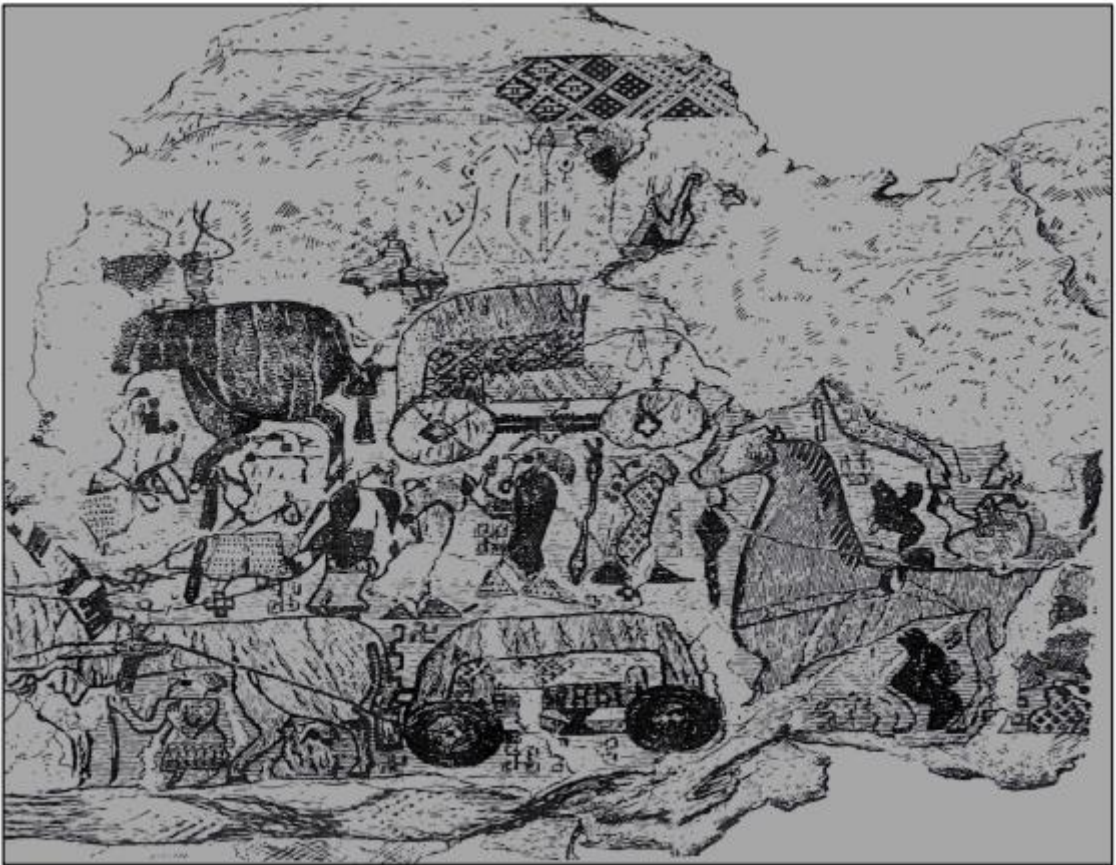


Figure 13. Oseberg tapestry fragments no.1 and no. 2. After Christensen, Ingstad & Myhre (1992): 232-233.



Figure 14. Levide picture stone, Levide parish. After Lagerlöf and Stolt (1996), p. 86., photo by Göran Ström.

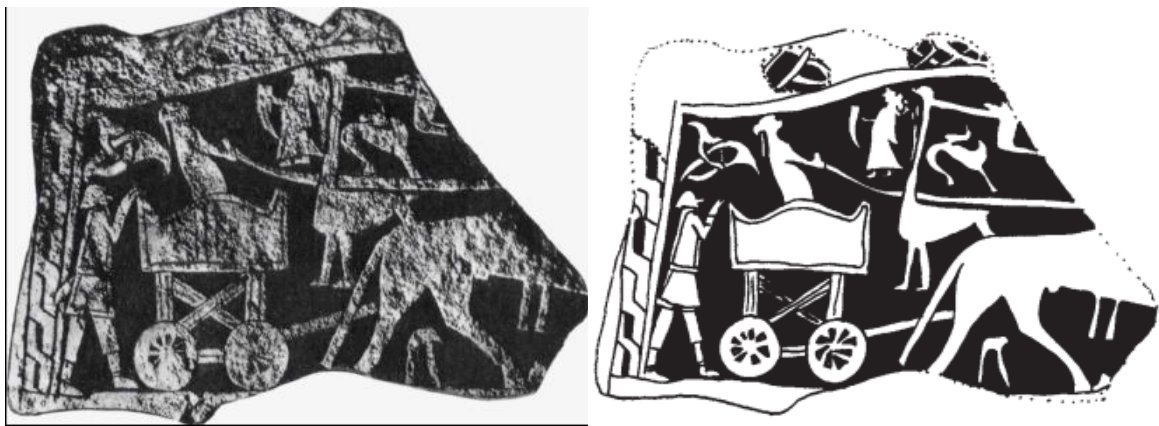


Figure 15. Barshaldershed picture stone, Grötlingbo parish. Left: After Nylén & Lamm (1978): 102. Right: After Göransson (2002).



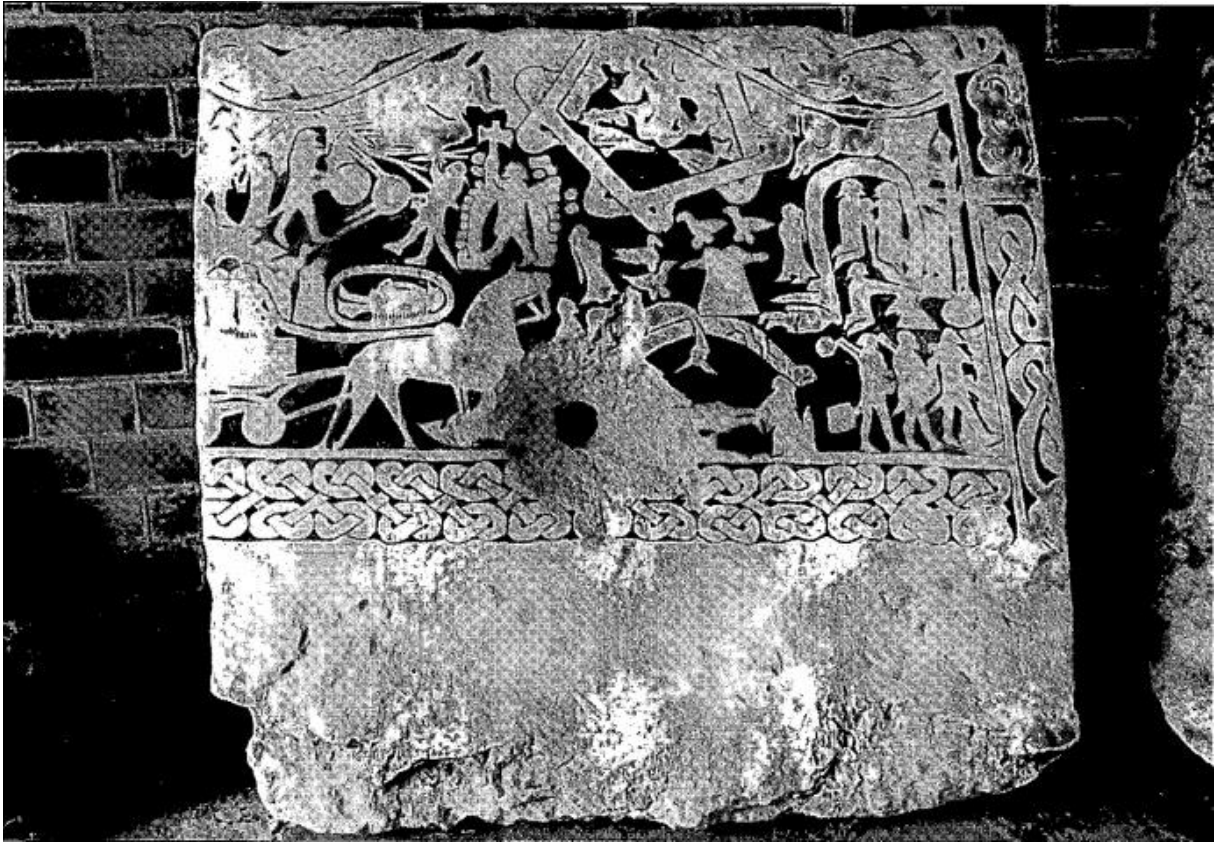


Figure 16. Alskog picture stone, from Alskog Church. After Burström (1996).

## APPENDIX II

From Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *Germania*, Chapter 40:

*Contra Langobardos paucitas nobilitat: plurimis ac valentissimis nationibus cincti non per obsequium, sed proeliis ac periclitando tuti sunt. Reudigni deinde et Aviones et Anglii et Varini et Eudoses et Suardones et Nuithones fluminibus aut silvis muniuntur. Nec quicquam notabile in singulis, nisi quod in commune Nerthum, id est Terram matrem, colunt eamque intervenire rebus hominum, invehit populis arbitrantur. Est in insula Oceani castum nemus, dicatumque in eo vehiculum, veste contactum; attingere uni sacerdoti concessum. Is adesse penetrati deam intellegit vectamque bubus feminis multa cum veneratione prosequitur. Laeti tunc dies, festa loca, quaecumque adventu hospitioque dignatur. Non bella ineunt, non arma sumunt; clausum omne ferrum; pax et quies tunc tantum nota, tunc tantum amata, donec idem sacerdos satiatam conversatione mortalium deam templo reddat. Mox vehiculum et vestes et, si credere velis, numen ipsum secreto lacu abluitur. Servi ministrant, quos statim idem lacus haurit. Arcanus hinc terror sanctaque ignorantia, quid sit illud, quod tantum perituri vident.*

(Stuart 1916)

By contrast, the Langobardi are distinguished by being few in number. Surrounded by many mighty peoples they have protected themselves not by submissiveness but by battle and boldness. Next to them come the Ruedigni, Aviones, Anglii, Varini, Eudoses, Suarines, and Huitones, protected by river and forests. There is nothing especially noteworthy about these states individually, but they are distinguished by a common worship of Nerthus, that is, Mother Earth, and believes that she intervenes in human affairs and rides through their peoples. There is a sacred grove on an island in the Ocean, in which there is a consecrated chariot, draped with cloth, where the priest alone may touch. He perceives the presence of the goddess in the innermost shrine and with great reverence escorts her in her chariot, which is drawn by female cattle. There are days of rejoicing then and the countryside celebrates the festival, wherever she designs to visit and to accept hospitality. No one goes to war, no one takes up arms, all objects of iron are locked away, then and only then do they experience peace and quiet, only then do they prize them, until the goddess has had her fill of human society and the priest brings her back to her temple. Afterwards the chariot, the cloth, and, if one may believe it, the deity herself are washed in a hidden lake. The slaves who perform this office are immediately swallowed up in the same lake. Hence arises dread of the mysterious, and piety, which keeps them ignorant of what only those about to perish may see.

(Birley 1999)

Tacitus. *Germania*. Translated by Duane Reed Stuart. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916.

Tacitus. *Agricola and Germany*. Translated by A.R. Birley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

## APPENDIX III

*Eddukvæði – Alvíssmál, stanzas 2-4*  
From *Poetic Edda*

Þórr kvað:

2. “Hvat er þat fira?  
Hví ertu svá fölr um nasar?  
Vartu í nótt með ná?  
Þursa líki  
þykki mér á þér vera;  
ertattu til brúðar borinn.”

Alvís kvað:

3. “Alvís ek heiti,  
bý ek fyr jörð neðan,  
á ek undir steini stað;  
**vagna vers**  
ek em á vit kominn;  
bregði engi föstu heiti fira.”

Þórr kvað:

4. “Ek mun bregða  
því at ek brúðar á  
flest of ráð sem faðir.  
Varka ek heima,  
þá er þér heitit var,  
at sá einn er gjöf er með goðum.”

(Kristjánsson and Ólason 2014)

Thor spake:

2. “What, pray, art thou? | Why so pale round the nose?  
By the dead hast thou lain of late?  
To a giant like | dost thou look, methinks;  
Thou wast not born for the bride.”

Alvis spake:

3. “Alvis am I, | and under the earth  
My home 'neath the rocks I have;  
With the wagon-guider | a word do I seek,  
Let the gods their bond not break.”

Thor spake:

4. “Break it shall I, | for over the bride  
Her father has foremost right;  
At home was I not | when the promise thou hadst,  
And I give her alone of the gods.”

(Bellows 1936)

*Eddukvæði I, Goðakvæði*. Edited by Jónas Kristjánsson og Vésteinn Ólason gáfu út. In *Íslenzk fornrit*, 438-443. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2014. Accessed via <https://www2.hf.uio.no/polyglotta/index.php?page=volume&vid=651>.

*Poetic Edda – Alvíssmál*. Translated by Henry Adam Bellows. New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1936.

## APPENDIX IV

### *Ögmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars þáttur helmings*

From *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*:

Líðr nú at þeiri stundu, er þau búast heiman, ok skyldu þau Freyr ok kona hans sitja í vagni, en þjónustumenn þeira skyldu ganga fyrir. Þau áttu at fara yfir fjallveg mikinn. Þá gerði at þeim hríð mikla. Gerðist þá færðin þung, en Gunnarr var til ætlaðr at fylgja vagninum, ok kom þá svá um síðir, at allt fólkit dreif frá þeim, svá at Gunnarr einn varð eftir ok þau Freyr ok kona hans í vagninum. Tók Gunnarr þá at mæðast f ast, er hann gekk ok leiddi eykinn, en er svá hafði farit um stund, þá gefr hann upp fyrirgönguna ok sezt í vagninn ok lætr eykinn ráða ferðinni. Litlu síðar mælti hon til Gunnars: "Dugi enn, ella mun Freyr upp standa at þér." Hann gerir enn svá um hríð, en er hann mæðist, mælti hann: "Til mun ek hætta nú at taka í móti Frey, ef hann ræðr á mik." Freyr reis þá ór vagninum, ok takast þeir fangbrögðum, ok verðr Gunnarr mjök aflvani. Hann sér þá, at honum muni eigi svá búit duga. Hugsar hann þá með sér, ef hann getr yfirkomit þenna fjanda ok verðr honum auðit at koma aftr til Nóregs, at hann skal hverfa aftr til réttar trúar ok sættast við Óláf konung, ef hann vill við honum taka, ok þegar eftir þessa hugsan tekr Freyr at hrata fyrir honum, ok því næst fellr hann. Hleypr þá ór líkneskinu sá fjandi, sem þar hafði leynzt, ok var þá skrokkrinn einn tómr eftir. Síðan braut hann þat allt í sundr, gekk svá at vagninum ok gerði konunni tvá kosti, at hann mundi hlaupa frá henni ok leita fyrir sér, ella skal hon segja, at hann sé Freyr, þá er þau koma til byggða. Hon kveðst þat gjarna heldr vilja segja. Ferr Gunnarr þá í umbúning skurðgoðsins.

(Jónsson 1953)

Now it came to the time that they set out from home, and Freyr and his wife were to sit in a cart while their retainers walked in front. They had far to go over some mountain tracks. Then a great blizzard of snow came upon them; the journey became difficult, but Gunnar was ordered to go with the cart and lead the carthorse. But at last it came to the point that the whole force drifted away from them, so that only Gunnar was left, with Freyr and his wife in the cart. Then Gunnar began to get very tired as he was leading the carthorse; and when that had gone on for a while, he gave up leading and sat down in the cart, allowing the beast to choose its own way. A little later she said to Gunnar: "Make another effort and lead the horse, or else Freyr will attack you." He did so for a bit, but when he became very tired once again, he said: "Now I'll risk having to stand up to Freyr if he comes at me." Then Freyr got out of the cart and they began to wrestle, and Gunnar was much too weak. He saw that this would never do. Then he thought to himself that if he could manage to overcome this demon and it was granted to him to get back to Norway, then he would turn back to the true faith and be reconciled with King Ólafr if he was willing to accept him. And immediately after this thought Freyr began to reel before him, and next he fell. Then the devil which had been hidden in the idol went rushing out of it, and only a hollow log of wood was left – and he broke that to pieces. Afterwards he gave the woman two choices – either he would abandon her and look out for himself, or else she was to say when they came to settled country that he was Freyr. She said she would much rather say that. Then he put on the clothes of the idol, and the weather began to clear.

(McKinnell 1987)

*Íslendinga sögur*. Edited by Guðni Jónsson. Reykjavík: *Íslendingasaganaútgáfan*, 1953. Accessed via [www.heimskringla.no](http://www.heimskringla.no).

*Víga-Glúms saga: with the tales of Ögmund Bash and Thorvald Chatterbox*. Edited by John McKinnell, 141-143. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1987.

