

VÄGAR TILL MIDGÅRD



# ANIMALS AND HUMANS

Recurrent symbiosis in archaeology  
and Old Norse religion

Kristina Jennbert

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Alskog

Parish, Gotland. The stone is now in the National Historical Museum,  
Stockholm.

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# Preface

My study of animals, or rather my study of the relations between humans and animals, is a part of the larger project ‘Roads to Midgard: Old Norse Religion in Long-term Perspectives’. This is a multidisciplinary project at Lund University, Sweden, involving archaeology, medieval archaeology, and history of religion. As one of the archaeologists in the project, I have carried out a long-term study of ritual practice in Old Norse religion, and how rituals can be related to Old Norse mythology.

The interdisciplinary character of the Midgard Project (as it is called for short), and the contrast between archaeological material culture and written texts, has yielded far-reaching research findings. Words and concepts, outlooks and research perspectives from different disciplines came together during the project period, chiefly in the intensive years 1999–2004. One result of the interdisciplinary discussions within the project was that my own sense of belonging to the subject of archaeology was strengthened. The temporal depth of archaeology and the focus on oral cultures exerted an increasing fascination on me. The prehistoric periods in Scandinavia are a time with little or no textual sources. They were oral cultures where material culture was important for social identity, for communicating and remembering. It is the fragmentary material remnants that are in focus in this book, where the intention, besides studying animals, is to sum up the potential of archaeology to study religion.

There are several interpretative barriers to researching attitudes to animals, not least because of anthropocentrism. Yet it is a challenge to study the Norse pre-Christian conceptual world and with it an extinct religion. This book chiefly concerns how a pre-Christian everyday mentality shaped the keeping of animals and the outlook on animals, and how the different animals seem to have had functional, symbolic, and connotative meanings. The source material of prehistoric archaeology is viewed in relation to the medieval texts that were written down long after the period they concern. The subtitle of the book stresses the scientific study of mentality, ritual,



power, and lifestyle based on archaeological material culture and textual evidence.

*Animals and Humans: Recurrent symbiosis in archaeology and Old Norse religion* has grown over a long time. I have gradually changed the way I think archaeologically. Several passages and discussions from my earlier articles written in the course of the project have been incorporated, but they have also been reappraised during the work with this book (Jennbert 2000, 2002, 2003a, b, 2004a, b, 2005, 2006a, b).

The research was mainly done in the years 1999–2005 as part of my research lectureship in the archaeology of religion at Lund University, and subsequently parallel to my work as head of the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Lund University.

All the participants in the Midgard Project have been significant, so I would like to take the opportunity to thank them all for the wonderful years spent together on the project: Anders Andrén, Catharina Raudvere, Stefan Arvidsson, Åsa Berggren, Ann-Britt Falk, Peter Habbe, Ann-Mari Hållans, Maria Lundberg Domeij, Ann-Lili Nielsen, Gunnar Nordanskog, Erik Magntorn, Nina Nordström, Heike Peter, Gun-Britt Rudin, Jörn Staecker, and Louise Ströbeck. Thanks to Alan Crozier, who translated the text into English, and to Annika Olsson, editor at Nordic Academic Press, for fruitful collaboration. Thanks also to Gunnar Broberg and Inger Ahlstedt Yrlid, Deans of the Faculty of History and Philosophy at Lund University, who many years ago put their faith in my project about animals in the archaeology of religion. The book is dedicated to my family: Anders, Karin, and Maria.

Lund 2011  
Kristina Jennbert

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

Animals are a fascinating object of study, whether you are standing in front of one of the famous Palaeolithic cave paintings of Lascaux in the Dordogne, or looking at Viking Age artefacts with pictures of animals and fantasy creatures. In the cave at Lascaux the animals step out of the rock; they are in the rock itself and the visitor almost becomes a part of the rock. On the Viking Age objects the real and imaginary animals mock the observer, grasping, intertwining, and grimacing. In Norse mythology, Odin's eight-legged horse Sleipnir communicates speed and strength. He was conceived by Loki, who had turned himself into a mare to distract the stallion Svadilfari so that the giant who was supposed to build Asgard was delayed in his work. Sleipnir has the ability to move through the world of the gods (see the cover picture). Why is this? What does Sleipnir actually represent? Animals do not leave the observer unmoved; animals concern us.

Animals play an important part for humans. We relate to animals in different ways and are somehow dependent on animals for their practical utility as a source of food, for transport, for medical research, and as company. Besides the functional aspects, animals and their properties hold symbolic values for humans. Through their mere existence, animals contribute to the way people regard themselves.

Humans and animals have been close to each other for thousands of years, and the outlook on animals differs in different cultural worlds. Emotional and functional relations to animals go a long way back in time.

It seems as if there has always been some ambiguity in the connections between animals and humans. The archaeological evidence of the way man has humanized animals and assumed animal forms goes back to the Palaeolithic. Symbiotic relations like these also seem to be cross-cultural. In Norse mythology, for example, animals have human and superhuman properties. In pre-Christian Scandinavia, as in other times and places,

animals had tremendous powers, presumably reflecting the prevailing social structures. The transformation between human and animal that is found in the archaeological evidence, as in Norse mythology, suggests that hybridity between species is not merely biological but also expresses cultural relations.

The historian of ideas Gunnar Broberg writes that people in early modern times ascribed human features to animals. It was the natural instincts of cruelty, greed, sexuality—the kind of properties that people feared most in themselves—that animals were allowed to symbolize. The concept of ‘animal’ arose as a comment on human behaviour. There are several descriptions of the human character and its animality. Aristotle called man *the political animal*, the medical scholar Thomas Willis coined the term *the laughing animal*, the inventor and politician Benjamin Franklin wrote about *the tool-making animal*, the philosopher Edmund Burke spoke of *the religious animal*, the lawyer and author James Boswell and the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss used the term *the cooking animal*.<sup>1</sup>

In his book *The Artificial Ape: How Technology Changed the Course of Human Evolution*, the archaeologist Timothy Taylor draws attention to the complex relationship between animals and humans and his theory of the significance of technology for evolution and our contemporary drive for technical innovations. One example of innovative technology which touches on this research project is the technologizing of the word and the creation of written language. This revolutionary technology radically restructured human cognition and communication.<sup>2</sup>

Human features have probably been ascribed to animals in all cultures. The characteristics specific to various animals and to humans have developed and changed over the millennia. Selective breeding to achieve fine, aesthetically pleasing animals, with useful properties for man’s functional needs, has thus been combined with mankind’s own development, particularly with the aid of technological innovations which have also concerned animals, breeding, and the outlook on animals. Animals, their breeding and husbandry, may therefore also have affected human evolution.

Generally speaking, animals serve as comments on human behaviour and abilities. In Swedish a person can be described with animal metaphors such as *wise as a poodle*, *strong as a horse*, *stubborn as a donkey*, and *hungry as*

*a wolf*. Animals thus help us to understand people's characteristics. Hypothetically, then, it may be assumed that pre-Christian animal metaphors also shed light on the way in which people perceived themselves in relation to animals of different kinds.

Do animal metaphors trigger a psychological drama? Is there a built-in ambiguity between species? To what extent are species dependent on each other? What are the practical and functional aspects of the relationship between humans and animals? What do different animal species represent in the human mind and in Old Norse religion? Can animals be an expression of social identity and lifestyle, of power and political alliances? Do animal metaphors help to define what is human? And how do people define animals in terms of their view of themselves? Is there a need today to justify hunting, animal husbandry, and meat eating? No matter what question of this kind we ask, animals prove to be a vital aspect of human life. Animals are *good to think with*, wrote the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Our perception of the animal kingdom is a cultural construction and is connected to social relations, kinship ties, ecological circumstances, and modes of linguistic expression. <sup>3</sup> This classical statement puts into perspective the study of the different roles that animals may have played in a Norse pre-Christian conceptual world as well.

There are several reasons to assume that perceptions of humans and animals were different in pre-Christian times from what they are today. The early Christian church historians in the fifth century and the medieval law texts show that perceptions differed from those in previous periods. In the fifth century Augustine wrote that there is a dividing line between human and animal. In the Middle Ages, on the other hand, there were numerous expressions of ambiguous dividing lines between humans and animals. <sup>4</sup> From a Darwinist perspective man is a biological creature, one among many others in the animal world. Animals can therefore be defined in very broad and biological terms. Both a biological and a teleological outlook also seem to influence today's perceptions of humans and animals, and the relationship between them.

Human relations to animals are specific to each time and culture. Nevertheless, there seem to be general attitudes to animals that go back into prehistory. We may assume that attitudes to animals are related to their practical utility and have to do with how they are tended. Even stocks of

game animals need to be looked after if hunting is to be sustainable in the long term. Animals have been treated according to human needs but also according to how people have related the animals to themselves. The actual domestication of animals and the keeping of livestock requires knowledge and continuous work. One may wonder whether this time-consuming work actually means that humans have been domesticated by animals rather than the other way around.

As early as the Stone Age, because of technological innovations, animal husbandry probably became so demanding that the production conditions provided a way to create identity and express status and power. Animals thereby became part of a power game, which can be studied archaeologically in any period through house design and landscape development, rituals in connection with death and burial, innovative technological processing, and images adorning artefacts, rocks and stones, textiles, wood, and antler/horn.

People's relations to animals depend on social and political circumstances. But there is also an undercurrent of a cosmological framework that links contemporary events with those in earlier times. Animals were involved in communicative strategies in their own time and in the conceptual world. They were used metaphorically to describe the creation, the structure, and order of the world. It is possible that they were also used to manipulate, change, and exert influence? The Norse myths describe animals with their powerful properties: they could make the world quake, or they could save it from destruction, like Thor's goats and the Midgard Serpent.

The aim of this research project has been to study the different functions and meanings of animals in pre-Christian times and to ascertain the various ways in which animals were incorporated in Norse cosmology, mythology, and rituals. Another intention is to study the role of animals in the process of Christianization and what this was like in relation to paganism. The main aim, however, is to assess how this research project about relations between humans and animals helps us to understand the character and structure of Old Norse religion.

The project started with questions concerning the stock of animals, how they were managed and bred, fundamentally examining how animals were a part of everyday life and what might be called a Midgard mentality in pre-Christian times. Domesticated animals, wild animals, exotic animals, and

fantasy creatures are a part of this Midgard sphere. The project builds on analyses of archaeological find contexts, animal bones, artefacts, and iconography, specific places such as settlement sites, farms, graves, and wetland finds, above all in southern and central Scandinavia during the first millennium AD.



[Figure 1](#). Map of the Nordic countries showing principal areas mentioned in the text. (Henrik Pihl, Riksantikvarieämbetet.)

The practising of Old Norse religion and Saami religion is related to the Christianization of Europe, which was significant for the development of societies in Scandinavia. The emphasis here is chiefly on conditions in the Iron Age and the Early Middle Ages, that is, AD 200–1200, but the situation in the Stone Age and the present day will also be considered ([Figure 1](#), [Table 1](#)).

[Table 1](#). Scandinavian chronological terminology for the Iron Age and the Middle Ages up to the Reformation, 500 BC–1536 AD

|                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Iron Age</b>       | <b>500 BC–1050 AD</b> |
| <i>Early Iron Age</i> | <i>500 BC–400 AD</i>  |
| Pre-Roman Iron Age    | 500 BC–1 AD           |
| Early Roman Iron Age  | 1–200 AD              |
| Late Roman Iron Age   | 200–400 AD            |
| <i>Late Iron Age</i>  | <i>400–1050 AD</i>    |
| Migration Period      | 400–575 AD            |
| Vendel Period         | 575–750 AD            |
| Viking Age            | 750–1050 AD           |
| <b>Middle Ages</b>    | <b>1050–1536 AD</b>   |
| Early Middle Ages     | 1050–1200 AD          |
| High Middle Ages      | 1200–1400 AD          |
| Late Middle Ages      | 1400–1536 AD          |



In most religions, animals are significant in ideas and rituals. Sanctity is ascribed to animals. They have important functions in the exercise of religion. Animals act together with gods and other beings in creation stories. Mummified animals in Egypt, Greek sacrificial ceremonies, Celtic rituals, and the Roman outlook on animals are all testimony to the ritual use of animals in connection with ceremonies and burials. The sacrificial lamb in the Christian confession, the sacred cow in Hinduism, domesticated hens in the eleventh century BC in India, the Jewish and Muslim prohibition of pork are evidence that different views of animal species are connected to religion and taboos on eating slaughtered meat. The butchering and consumption of meat is hedged with strict rules and taboos, affecting different kinds of animals in different religions and parts of the world. Animals have a metaphorical meaning in stories about the creation of the world, about gods and spiritual beings. Animals can be perceived as dangerous and hostile or as divine and fabulous. Animals have been considered in a great many studies in the history of religion, concerning other geographical areas and culture complexes.<sup>5</sup>

In pre-Christian Scandinavia animals also played a major role, both practically and metaphorically, in people's thoughts. Animals were integrated in the pre-Christian conceptual world, and they occupy a prominent place in Norse mythology, where they act in different situations. Mythic animals occur together with gods and giants in the most fantastic shapes. On real prehistoric farms and early urban sites, domesticated animals were used in various kinds of rituals. Wild beasts, exotic animals, and imaginary creatures combining elements of different animal species were significant in the pictorial world that surrounded people. Animals were a part of the human world. Certain domesticated animals, such as the horse, goat, pig, and cat, seem to have had a dominant position in Norse pre-Christian religion. Yet all domesticated animals came into ritual use as they were introduced to Scandinavia, over a very long period from the Neolithic to the start of the Middle Ages and the time when Christianity became the official religion. Wild animals did not attain prominent positions until the iconographic programmes that emerged during the Late Iron Age. The question is what role animals had in the exercise of religion and how they were used as metaphors for social identity and in the quest for social and political power.

Research on Old Norse religion and literature has discussed animals from various angles, but there has been no synthesis concerning the role of animals in Norse mythology. The literary scholar Margaret Clunies Ross has set animals into mythological structures in Old West Norse literature, thus making them a part of the research instead of merely an illustration of the world of the gods, as is the most common practice in research on comparative religion. Likewise, the literary scholar Lena Rochbach's interdisciplinary analyses of human–animal relations in the saga literature have given new perspectives on medieval Icelandic society and its relation to continental narrative traditions.<sup>6</sup>

Animals were of great significance in pre-Christian Scandinavia. Animals are a starting point for everyday history, but they also belong to the political and ideological changes that occurred in Scandinavia during the first millennium; that is to say, the Norse Iron Age with its links to an increasingly Christianized Europe.

Which animals were used, and how were they used both in practice and as metaphors for mentality and lifestyle? Did the ownership of animals, the possibility to hunt, the ability to read imagery and understand animal ornamentation involve a recognition of the owner's identity? Could people use their assets and prosperity to manipulate the surrounding world? In archaeological research, several studies in recent decades have highlighted animals for their potential to broaden perspectives on prehistoric times.<sup>7</sup>

The ritualized reality comprises not only animals but also other material culture. Material culture seems to have expanded, and materiality seems to have acquired increased significance in the course of the Norse Iron Age. Archaeological contexts including farms, graves, and wetlands with archaeological objects are therefore used in my analyses and interpretations of relations between humans and animals and between humans. The historical reality of practical and functional everyday character, as well as the metaphorical and symbolic expressions, are thus important components of religion, and not least of political and ideological conditions in pre-Christian Scandinavia.

The long temporal perspective and the historical background of the animals allow us to put the role of animals into perspective. Relating animals to the pre-Christian reality and the late medieval texts about Old Norse religion is thus one of the main aims of the project. In theoretical and

methodological terms, the research project is about the possibility to study the archaeology of religion in an oral culture. Another result of the culture-historical approach of the research project is a discussion of how we view animals today.

Just as cultural filters affected the pre-Christian attitude to animals, modern cultural filters influence the archaeological questions we ask, and our mental capacity to analyse them. Research traditions and the different academic disciplines have been shaped by a research *habitus*.<sup>8</sup>

The use of sources, classifications, and the view of what is scientific depends on the particular subject. With a multidisciplinary question like the one proposed by this project, however, one must go outside the core area of one's own discipline. Paradoxically, the consequences can be disastrous, since few scholars can have a full mastery of other academic subjects. A discipline's research habitus integrates both the research that has long been pursued and the current view of what is scientifically acceptable. A subject's research habitus both creates and is created by the way that academics classify themselves, their research, and their scholarly environment. Habitus constitutes a framework for scientific analyses. A research community that is reproduced by a group of people integrates previous experiences with new angles of approach. This was very clear among the group of researchers in the Midgard Project, as impressions from other disciplines were important but also had the effect of giving a clearer sense of belonging to one's own discipline. The perspective of the archaeology of religion requires multidisciplinary research.

## **Archaeology and Old Norse religion**

Archaeology of course, like other disciplines, follows the ideas of our time. Hesitation and ambivalence about the study of prehistoric religion have been recognizable both in archaeology and in comparative religion. Due to the lack of sources, the earlier periods without any written sources at all induce more doubt as to the study of religion. Yet with the changing attitudes to material culture in the discipline, there is potential within archaeology. Today we have several studies dealing with the rituals and religion of periods as far back as the Palaeolithic. And perhaps the attitudes and ideas of archaeologists are not stuck in the earlier paradigm of scientific

work, but transformed into a more open-minded and interpretative approach in a post-modern spirit. Archaeologists of today perhaps also have a kind of affinity with the archaeologists of several decades ago. As a reaction to the very scientific approach, today's archaeologists enjoy a certain poetic and artistic liberty, as displayed by archaeologists in the nineteenth century. One challenge for the future, however, is to interpret and bind together different kinds of sources, whether material culture or texts, and to synthesize.

The focus on ritual and religion has never been so intense within archaeology as during the last few decades, both internationally and in the Nordic countries, particularly in Sweden and Norway and recently also in Denmark. The interest in religion is notable in scholarly studies as well as in several public events. The exhibitions *Viking og Hvidekrist* in Copenhagen, Paris and Berlin (1992–93), *Kult, Kraft och Kosmos* in Stockholm (1996), *Ragnarok* in Silkeborg, Denmark (2005), *Odin's Eye* in Helsingborg and Stockholm (2006), *Barbaricum* in Lund (2007), and the exhibition at the rock-art museum in Tanum on the Swedish west coast are just a few examples.<sup>9</sup> Publications have been presented especially concerning mentality in the Viking Age.<sup>10</sup> Research on the religion and ritual of the past is now a scholarly phenomenon but also a subject of public interest, as it was previously.<sup>11</sup>

All disciplines undergo changes, of course. In earlier archaeological research the interest in prehistoric religion was a natural component of the interpretative framework.<sup>12</sup>

In retrospect the evolutionist paradigm, along with diffusionism and functionalism, have been and still are the frameworks in archaeology as in other disciplines. They are also fundamental in earlier as well as ongoing studies associated with religion in prehistory. From these theoretical points of departure the material culture more often illustrates the cultural history, rather than being analytical in itself. The historian Christopher Hawkes explicitly formulated the archaeological limitations of studying past religions in his famous ladder of inference.<sup>13</sup> And in the 1960s and 1970s, in connection with an explicitly scientific archaeology, religion was more or less regarded as impossible to study. Religion was difficult to interpret and capture in a deductive manner within the generalized and neo-evolutionist paradigm with its methods of quantitative analysis.

Many of the premises for investigating the past have changed during the last four decades in the field of archaeology. In the early 1980s it became evident that material culture could have various meanings. Material expressions were interpreted not as passive objects but rather as being very actively used and playing a role in the social process. The publication *Symbols in Action* had an enormous impact on archaeology.<sup>14</sup> Instead of being just expressions of great economic importance, artefacts could also have metaphorical meaning, as shown, for example, by the Swedish studies of iron slag and grinding tools.<sup>15</sup> Scandinavian animal art is another example of interpretations in a post-processual framework, viewed as active and communicative for individuals as well as for groups of people.<sup>16</sup> The gold bracteates have also been interpreted as ingredients in a religious and political struggle; for example the iconography in the light of mythology or in political and religious circumstances and their original context and ideological function.<sup>17</sup> New perspectives and potentials of the material culture opened up for critical archaeology, but also for the interpretative challenge of solving the code of the archaeological remains.

Research within the tradition of post-processual archaeology, and later in the tradition of cognitive archaeology,<sup>18</sup> also opened up for questions about ritual and religion in ways not tried before. But it is also intriguing that in the earlier post-processual works, studies of religion appear very seldom. Instead the focus is on symbols in power relations and ideological structures, and religion is hidden within these concepts.

Old Norse religion had of course been studied before. It was, however, mainly a research field to do with the history of religion and literary studies, based on the analysis of written sources. Of course, this is still an important research field today. Results are published both internationally and in the Nordic countries, and there are valuable handbooks for the interpretation of Old Norse religion.<sup>19</sup> A wider range of sources, however, could be integrated into the study of pre-Christian religion. In short, the Norse evidence consists of literature as well as settlement finds, grave finds, votive offerings, picture stones, rock art—in other words, the ordinary archaeological material culture.

Until about four decades ago, however, religion was of low scientific value in archaeology, as was the potential to interpret the meaning of

material culture. There was little communication among the disciplines that used different sources and methods to research Old Norse religion. Until a few years ago, archaeologists did not sufficiently question the various theories of Norse religion. This was probably a result of the almost total absence of collaboration between archaeology and the history of religion or literary studies. Presumably, the apprehension about the possibilities inherent in written sources and material culture originated from a lack of constructive dialogue.

Fortunately, the communication has been enhanced during the last four decades. In the 1980s and 1990s historians of religion arranged several conferences for unlimited dialogue among the academic disciplines. [20](#) These conferences have had a great impact on archaeology. Archaeologists themselves were forced to find ways to use the archaeological material in order to trace religion in prehistoric societies. Archaeologists began to take an interest in questions of religion and ritual, as reflected in a large number of conferences and workshops. [21](#)

Interpretations of rituals inspired by sociology, anthropology, and the history of religion [22](#) are nowadays frequent in archaeology. Rituals can be understood as being performed in conformity with mythology and cosmology, within an ideologically structured society and cultural identity. Hence, rituals are powerful in the structuration of society and not always religious in character. Embedded in material culture, thus, rituals relate to mythology and cosmology, as people act according to their conception of the cosmos and their understanding of reality.

However, difficulties in grasping the constitution of ritual and religion are discernible in the archaeological debate. The main questions are related to the possibilities of studying pre-Christian religions on the basis of texts and material culture. Another fundamental controversy concerns the character and role of religion in connection with political power and ideological preferences.

The unquestioned separation into sacred and profane in Western society has to be considered in the study of prehistoric societies. The concepts of religion and ritual are linked to the Western world of ideas, too, and there is extensive debate about the concepts. [23](#) The later, more theoretical, discussions of the concepts of religion and ritual within the fields of history of religion and anthropology are therefore very important for further



application to archaeological projects. The same is true of different kinds of sources. The relation between material culture and literary sources is a significant methodological question.<sup>24</sup> On the whole, there are theoretical, methodological and empirical problems in studying past religions. And no doubt there is an abundance of questions to be asked.

One question of interest is: how should the religion that preceded Christianity be designated? Several terms have been used, for example Nordic heathenism, pagan religion, paganism, old Scandinavian cult, Old Norse religion, and fertility cult. The terms have slightly different meanings and are used in different kinds of associations. The term 'heathenism' in particular is loaded with subjective judgements.<sup>25</sup> In this book I mainly talk of Old Norse or pre-Christian religion.

Is it possible to discern separate 'religions' or cosmologies during the thousands of years before Christianity? How is the Old Norse religion related to earlier and later cosmologies? Whose religion or cosmology is being investigated? What constituted ritual and religion in the material record, and what kind of representations do we find in the archaeological evidence? Was religion transformed during the past millennia, and how far back in time is Norse religion discernible?

For a start, we may ask what characterized the pre-Christian religion a few hundred years before Christianity. Many aspects of rituals, myths, and cosmos in connection with the ideological structure, and also in relation to areas south of Scandinavia, have been discussed. The following examples represent a few important topics in the field of research. The structure of cosmology has been debated.<sup>26</sup> Several scholars have stated that paganism was a shamanistic religion,<sup>27</sup> but it has also been claimed that pre-Christian rulership was sacral.<sup>28</sup> The potential of the archaeological material for analysing Christianization has been emphasized,<sup>29</sup> and Viking Age crosses and crucifix pendants, for example, have been seen as expressions of the Christian mission.<sup>30</sup> Kings, power, churches, and parish formation are well-known topics central to research on Christianization.<sup>31</sup>

To understand Christianization and thereby the disagreements over the process of conversion is a complex matter.<sup>32</sup> An interdisciplinary project, *Christianization in Sweden*, was started in the 1980s. Different perspectives

from some of the provinces in Sweden were considered, and as a result Christianization was regarded as a lengthy process and in a sense a very peaceful conversion which was not a sudden collective change of religion.<sup>33</sup> Another interpretation emphasizes a dramatic confrontation between different ideologies, in which the pre-Christian societies were forced to make social and political choices.<sup>34</sup> One suggestion in the latter direction is that the presence of riding equipment and horses in Viking Age burials might express an ideological and religious reaction on the part of landowners.

Of significance in a Nordic perspective and for the problematic designation of religions is the Saami culture. The interest in the pre-Christian religion of the Saami goes back to the nineteenth century, when it was studied chiefly by scholars in ethnography and the history of religion.<sup>35</sup> From an archaeological standpoint, too, Saami religion and rituals have been in focus.<sup>36</sup> According to Juha Pentikäinen, there was no word for 'religion' in the Saami language as in the modern Western world. He mentions a problem tangent to the opinion that religion is a historical category that emerged in Western society. Pentikäinen argues that the concept of an ethnic religion is more suitable, as the term Saami religion is something constituted by Christians in the seventeenth century. Ethnic religion embodies much more: the landscape of the souls, the Arctic human, nature, and a way of life, philosophy and conception of the world.<sup>37</sup> These statements could very well apply to the Old Norse religion as well.

Chronologically, the Bronze Age and the Late Iron Age are the periods that have been most frequently analysed in terms of religion. The image of the Bronze Age as very pastoral and cultic, with beautiful bronze objects, rock art, and conspicuous mortuary practices and deposition traditions, is widespread. A rich corpus of archaeological material with marvellous variation, such as artefacts, picture stones, runes, the literary sources of Norse mythology, together with great public interest, are important components of the attraction of the Late Iron Age and the period of Christianization. This attraction goes back to the nineteenth century, to the national romantic era.

However, other prehistoric periods have also tempted studies of religion. The number of articles and publications focusing on ritual and religion has



increased remarkably in recent years, and they illustrate the heterogeneity of approaches in studies of rituals and religion within the field of archaeology. As a consequence, a wide range of material culture and themes has been discussed.<sup>38</sup>

During the 1990s and after the more functional and economic approach, the mental dimensions of the settlement area, the farmsteads, and the landscape *per se* appeared in archaeological research. Nowadays, many archaeologists are more or less convinced that the landscape is saturated with cultural messages. *La longue durée* is a perspective that is extremely important in several of these studies. At the same time, ritual space as a representation of specific cosmological concepts is an interesting issue. Consequently, the idea that landscape is not only functional but also societal, mythical, and cosmological is inherent in several archaeological studies from different provinces in Sweden. The farm as a cosmological model<sup>39</sup> has inspired archaeological interpretations in relation to the Late Iron Age.<sup>40</sup> Changing mental processes behind the organization of social practice from the Late Iron Age up to about AD 1700 have been studied in a parish in the province of Dalarna.<sup>41</sup> Another study focuses on changes of farms and stone enclosures during the Roman Iron Age in Gotland, interpreting them as changes in society and in people's way of perceiving their world.<sup>42</sup> In a contextual analysis of silver and gold deposits from the Viking Age and the Early Middle Ages in the province of Uppland, the archaeological remains are interpreted in terms of landmarks related to religious rituals.<sup>43</sup>

The landscape is not only understood in connection with the economic functions. The landscape also has a 'social structure' and a 'social ecology', based on economy, society, myth, and cosmology. Thus people of different ages and genders and all manner of social standing have left their mark individually or collectively on the landscape, which in turn has left its mark on them.

During the whole of the pre-Christian period, animal and human bones were disposed of in ways that cannot as yet be explained in terms of a traditional burial and a Christian outlook on death and the hereafter. Thus it seems that the concept of burial was much more diverse in the pre-Christian period than can be imagined in present-day Western thought. Animals are

found buried together with people, but also in specific animal graves for dogs, cattle, horses and bears.<sup>44</sup> Human and animal bones have also been deposited, for example, in wells and slag heaps, or in pits dug in farmyards and other types of enclosures.<sup>45</sup> There seems to be ample evidence that it was not just any person who was laid to rest in a regular grave during the pre-Christian period. The bones found in the archaeological contexts mentioned above indicate that, in certain circumstances, human bodies and animal bodies were disposed of by similar methods and in manners much more varied than those included in our modern Western burial concept. The rites used and the pre-Christian notion of death seem to unify humans and animals in such a way as almost to obliterate the distinctions between humans and beasts.

## **The archaeology of religion**

The term *archaeology of religion* is defined here as a perspective that proceeds from analyses of material culture and inscriptions in order to investigate ritual practice and conceptions. The terms ritual, mythology, and cosmology, as used in comparative religion, are basic premises. An archaeologist of religion must consider how scholars in other disciplines define these concepts and their ontological meaning, about which there has been extensive discussion. The definitions of the concepts and the relationships between them are not unambiguous. To put it simply, the relationship between them is that the narration of the myth and the performance of the ritual are in harmony with the cosmology. The cosmology serves as a backdrop to what people actually do, not just in religious terms but also in other societal situations.<sup>46</sup>

This is where the archaeology of religion can be fruitful, since it gives an opportunity to use material remains to study religion. The theoretical discourse about religion and ritual has concerned, among other things, the two concepts of thought and action. Thought or belief cannot be studied archaeologically. There are no texts, no people to interview. Ritual is therefore a central concept for the archaeology of religion. When Old Norse religion is defined on the basis of the term by which it was known after Christianization, *forn siðr*, that is, ‘ancient custom’, it opens for the

possibility of applying the perspective of archaeology of religion. There are no dogmas, no written rules, just the established custom. The concept has a much broader meaning than it is allowed by Christian authors in Scandinavia during the Christianization process, when they emphasize only the religious aspect. The term *forn siðr* in Old Norse can mean much more than merely religion. It comprises aspects of belief, morals, habits, and tradition. The term also includes an understanding that in pre-Christian times there was a set view of how rituals should be performed. The historical background, customs, and traditions played a major role for the way the ritual was to be enacted.<sup>47</sup>

Rituals can be interpreted as a social force that leaves material traces. This is how archaeology and its material remains enable analyses in the archaeology of religion in a broad sense, since material culture has an active symbolic and communicative role in social relations. Today's studies of ritual in comparative religion and anthropology, and the interest that archaeology takes in material culture with contextual and symbolic connotations, therefore provide good conditions for developing the research field of archaeology of religion.

A crucial foundation for research in the archaeology of religion is the meaning of the term ritual. Rituals need not have been religious, and it is impossible for us to pin down the exact meaning of the actions.<sup>48</sup> Ritual practice is repetitive and formalized, and it reproduces and legitimizes social structure. Ritual acts take place according to rules and socially accepted patterns and are rooted in their historical background. The individual performing rituals has no purely personal intention but merely follows conventions and rules, which are adapted to suit the current circumstances. Rituals are strategic, existential and structural, and they create relations. Rituals can transform, make differences, and create communities between different people and states. Rituals are an evocative language for communication and power through physical and dramatic performances which can include movements, sounds, and bodily metaphors. They are purposeful, even if we cannot obtain concrete answers about the intentions of either present-day practitioners of ritual or those long dead. Social practice comprised everyday actions and ritual performances, and these were linked to the ideological and political circumstances.<sup>49</sup>

The term ritual has undergone a radical theoretical change since the perspective of action theory was introduced, giving a concrete tool with which to interpret archaeological finds and contexts. The concentration on what people actually did thus replaces questions of belief and what was going on inside a person's brain, and thereby avoids 'celestializing' the ancient past. The interpretations of the past are not based on the assumption that rituals express some kind of religiosity, but instead on a claim that the motives can be found in other societal interests or cannot be ascertained at all. Rituals in connection with, say, burials or depositions in wetlands can therefore be viewed from different theoretical perspectives in sociology and other social sciences. The motives behind the action may lie in other aspects of society than religion, such as the body and the senses, or ideology and power structures. This opens archaeological study towards even more intellectual domains, while simultaneously challenging us to maintain a critical attitude as regards the questions that can be studied archaeologically.<sup>50</sup>

Rituals can express ideological situations just as much as they can be anchored in a functional and economic reality. Archaeologists have the potential to discover and interpret the fragments since the constituents of ritual are repetitive and formalized and thus leave a pattern. Ritualization and the actual performance of rites usually comprises some materiality, an object that plays an important part in the actual performance. The material side of the ritual can be its meaning and affect the ritual act.<sup>51</sup>

Ancient rituals leave traces where conditions for the preservation of organic material and metals are sufficiently good. Only residues of a bygone materiality survive. Archaeology is unable to reconstruct such aspects of events as speech, singing, and movements. It is likewise impossible to conduct participant observation or interviews asking about the underlying intentions, why people did what they did. The research field of ritual archaeology therefore entails a number of problems of source criticism and representativeness. Since rites are culturally complex and have their own history, the long chronological perspective of archaeology nevertheless allows the possibility of revealing patterns of action and figures of thought that reflect cosmology, mentality, and ideology.

Cosmological models based on Icelandic texts have been the most common points of departure for the interpretation of how people in the Late

Iron Age, especially in the Viking Age, perceived themselves and the world around them in relation to the abodes of the gods and the giants.<sup>52</sup> It is possible that the structures in the cosmological models are not sufficient to admit being related to a prehistoric pre-Christian reality. They are presumably far too close to the texts whose descriptions of the world of the gods have been allowed to serve as a model for the way people understood the world. The material remains will be in focus here instead, but in a manner that is different from what is found in many other analyses of Old Norse religion, where archaeological artefacts have mainly been used as illustrations. Material culture displays a complementary picture, with several alternative possibilities to interpret what people actually did in pre-Christian times and what can be associated with Old Norse religion. The initial assumption, however, is that cosmological ideas are actually rendered in material form and that we can arrive at the meaning behind the material expressions through archaeology. In a sense, then, the visuality and decipherability of the artefacts for the people who lived then is one of the necessary conditions for an archaeological perspective.

The texts that used to serve as the main foundation for the interpretation of Old Norse religion were written down in the thirteenth century by Icelandic scholars and Christian believers. The poetry, sagas, and literary works give us an opening to an interpretation of the earlier oral culture. Here too, source criticism reminds us that the texts are not historical documents but literary products. One major starting point for this research project is the *Elder Edda*, also called the *Poetic Edda* or *Sæmund's Edda*. This collection of poems by unknown authors is an important source for the interpretation of Norse mythology. An equally significant source is Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, also called the *Younger Edda* or the *Prose Edda*, which is a poetic textbook. There are also other written sources that give glimpses of the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of animals, such as the Old Norse sagas, Tacitus, Jordanes, *Beowulf*, Adam of Bremen, and the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus.

In the disciplines of archaeology, historical geography, and place-name studies, Old Norse religion has chiefly been studied on the basis of archaeological evidence. The pre-Christian historical situation is actually a subject of as much debate as the content of Norse literature and the character of pre-Christian religion that will be in focus here. There are many problematic questions concerning the distinctive features of pre-

Christian religion and how long it persisted, and it is not obvious which analytical concepts are useful. Even designations of pre-Christian conceptions are filled with value judgements and are therefore tricky to use. The term Norse *paganism* or *heathenism* is in fact disparaging, having been coined by Christians to refer to people who were not Christian. Terms such as Norse paganism or pre-Christian Norse religion have been constructed by observers and interpreters of what was *old*, and they involve an evaluation. Yet we are forced to use them, even though they risk locking us in our line of thought.

The long temporal perspective of archaeology makes it possible to write a prehistory across period boundaries and 'culture' boundaries. The archaeology of religion therefore has a potential to highlight conceptions and customs over a very long time, the perspective of *la longue durée*. The possibility to study religion archaeologically lies in interdisciplinary approaches, but chiefly in the possibilities that exist when we consider material culture as an active medium. The source-critical aspects as regards preservation conditions and questions of representativeness, as in other archaeological research fields, are of vital significance for the scholarly conclusions.

The historical background and the rituals performed over thousands of years are the foundation for archaeological interpretations of relations between animals and humans. Traditions in the Stone Age and Bronze Age provide a long background to attitudes to animals during the Iron Age. It seems as if people in pre-Christian times viewed their fellow humans and animals in many different ways. The animal metaphors arose from changing historical currents. The ideas are thus not elements in isolated societies separated from the world around them; instead they testify to contacts and cultural exchanges between different geographical areas.

Analogies help archaeologists in their thinking, so that they can conjure up potential pre-Christian scenarios. What the archaeology of religion can contribute most to studies of Old Norse religion, however, is the focus on ritual practice. Rites were performed at different places in the landscape and in different contexts. Regardless of whether or not it is possible to get at the intention behind rituals, their meaning may have been linked to an annual cycle or a life cycle, or merely to communicate with worldly or higher powers for completely different purposes.



The *Annales* school and the history of mentalities, along with theories of ritual in sociology and comparative religion, are a fruitful source of inspiration for studying the relationship between material culture and the prehistoric conceptual world. It is above all the idea of societal structures and the long, sluggish history of everyday life, *la longue durée* as opposed to *la courte durée* (the short span), the *histoire événementielle* that inspires interpretations of relations between people and animals from a mundane perspective.<sup>53</sup> We may therefore also use the term ‘mentality’, although this can be perceived in several different ways: as norms and patterns of thought, collective manifestations, belief systems, conceptual maps, unconscious or preconscious habits; that is to say, the inert, what changes last—like a counter-force—in history. In this sense the term mentality is as broad a concept as that of religion, and it is significant for the interpretation of human–animal relations, of animal husbandry, of breeding and domestication.

The research field of archaeology of religion involves an interdisciplinary approach and therefore proceeds from concepts from the study of religion: cosmology, mythology, and ritual. Academic disciplines and research traditions are shaped by their special habitus. Internal scholarly traditions and the historical background of the subjects, along with the academic hierarchy, are significant for what is said and what is heard. This applies to all fields of academic study: technology, natural science, the social sciences, and the humanities. The sociology of knowledge provides the framework for scientificness and the evaluation of new knowledge.

My approach to the history of religion can be understood from two angles: (1) a perspective of habitus applied to the people of Scandinavia, (2) a perspective of modern research in archaeology, physical anthropology, and history of religion, and especially research on Old Norse religion. I believe that the two angles are necessary for understanding the kind of knowledge we have about Old Norse religion and early Christianity in Scandinavia. The habitus perspective helps to split up our understanding of pre-Christian ritual practices and Norse mythology into different domains, both among people long ago and among researchers today.

A habitus perspective on the role of sheep and goats can be fruitful for an understanding of their significance in pre-Christian Scandinavia. Pierre Bourdieu’s term habitus proves to be a useful tool in order to grasp collective actions that integrate past experiences and perceptions. Habitus at

the same time creates and is created by the way people classify and act in their world.<sup>54</sup> Somewhat simplified, one could say that togetherness is reproduced by groups of people integrating past and present. In the same manner it could be said that research traditions in our academic disciplines form our special habitus. We also have our classification and understanding of scholarship. The perspectives of habitus in the past and in Old Norse religion, as well as in modern-day scholarship, are fundamental for the kind of understanding and knowledge we have in whatever research is being carried on.

One example of the implications of interdisciplinary studies is the interpretations of sheep and goats. Among the most important animals in prehistoric Scandinavia. The habitus of the animals was used and transformed into cultural categories. Owing to their important and long-term utility they were ritualized during the pre-Christian periods. The role of these animals and the attitudes towards them in and beyond Old Norse religion could be discussed with habitus perspectives applied to the animals themselves and to the field of modern research.

Sheep and goats were very important animals during prehistory in Scandinavia, as they are today in many parts of the world. Along with cattle and pigs, sheep and goats were the most significant domestic animals from the Neolithic onwards in Scandinavia. Yet sheep and goats, or ‘ovicaprids’ as they are often termed in research, are very often categorized as utility animals. They are more rarely interpreted as symbols or metaphors in mentality or cosmology. Sheep and goats appear in the archaeological material culture and in Old Norse texts, but in different ways. They become visible and invisible in our interpretations of Old Norse religion, hidden between a pronounced utility and a kind of unspoken symbolic meaning.

The dissimilarity between the representation of sheep and goats in the archaeological record and that in the written sources could be due to various social and ritual customs within paganism, and attitudes to Old Norse religion within Christianity. However, the interpretations of their role in pre-Christian societies and attitudes towards them in Old Norse religion depend on our specific habitus in modern research in the fields of archaeology, osteology, and history of religion.

What is left behind in our days is coloured not only by the historical practice in the past but also by our own abilities to understand, as the academic disciplines also present coloured ideas of the past. We have our



special habitus in research and in presentation. In other words, different analytical perspectives and sources provoke ideas about the ways in which groups of people in the past used animals, and the interpretations of them today. This could be part of the reason why sheep/ goats are mostly interpreted in terms of utility in archaeology: goats are placed with ritual practices in the study of Old Norse mythology and the history of religion, and sheep became a natural and theological symbol in Christianity.

Different questions about Old Norse religion have been asked in different disciplines: comparative religion, philology, archaeology, and history. In these fields there has been discussion of what can be regarded as scientific. Not all scholarly methods are accepted over the whole research field, since the theoretical perspectives vary greatly. The use of source material, the evaluation of different types of evidence, and the outlook on the production of knowledge are therefore specific to each subject, and this itself is a challenge for research in the archaeology of religion.

A subject's research habitus integrates the research that has been pursued for a long time and the changing criteria for assessing the scientific stringency. A subject's research habitus grows as a result of generations of scholarly work. It also creates the way that academics classify themselves, their research, and their environment. Habitus is the framework within which we act. To put it simply, a research community is reproduced by a group of people, with both previous experience and new angles of approach being integrated.

In the interpretations of the the religion that preceded Christianity in Scandinavia, the material culture in different kinds of archaeological contexts both contradicts and confirms the written sources.<sup>55</sup> The contextualized material culture allows us to glimpse what was done in social practice and ritualization before the Christianization of Scandinavia. Archaeological perspectives provide a background and contribute to a debate about what was expressed in Norse mythology, as interpreted and formed within Christianity. My study of the representations of animals in the pre-Christian Scandinavian material culture and in Snorri's *Edda* exemplifies how a range of animals can be related to gods, supernatural beings, aristocracies, and ordinary people in the different bodies of information. In away, the animals acting in Old Norse mythology are a kind of illustrations to the archaeological record. My archaeological perspective on Snorri's *Edda* is intended to highlight the intense integration of animals

in the human world and in the world of gods and supernatural beings. Animals are in action, so to speak, in constructing a pre-Christian world-view.

Research in the archaeology of religion is interdisciplinary in character. When studying animals and Old Norse religion, the research field encompasses subjects ranging from veterinary medicine to philology. The challenge for the archaeology of religion is to synthesize different kinds of knowledge from these very different academic disciplines, which means that one must also take each distinctive research habitus into consideration. The aim of this study is therefore to interpret Old Norse religion and the conceptions of pre-Christian oral culture. Associations between different categories of sources thus suggest new angles of approach. Research on animals and Old Norse religion in the first millennium of the common era concerns archaeological evidence, remains of animal bones, inscriptions in an oral Scandinavian Iron Age context, and texts from late medieval Old West Norse literature.

## **Human–animal relations**

Research on relations between people and animals has mostly developed in archaeology since that was the main topic at the first World Archaeological Congress in Southampton in 1986. The conference on *Cultural Attitudes to Animals, Including Birds, Fish and Invertebrates* resulted in four important publications. There were participants from several different disciplines, but it was especially archaeologists and anthropologists who debated the significance of animals in cultural contexts from different theoretical angles. Tim Ingold's publication *What Is an Animal?* is about animality and whether animality is the opposite of human behaviour or a part of humanity. Juliet Clutton-Brock's book *The Walking Larder* deals with the problem of the domestication of animals, and what the terms predation and pastoralism actually mean. Roy Willis's *Signifying Animals* takes an interest in how animals are presented in art and how they represent values in human societies. The essays in Howard Morphy's book *Animals into Art*, like Ingold, deal with animality, and with non-human and human animals in anthropological studies and the growing ecological awareness. [56](#)

The research field grew and is still highly topical, partly because of ethical problems associated with the management of animals in our times and our attitudes to animals, with consequences for our food supply. The risk of extermination for certain animal species is increasing in pace with the exploitation of natural resources. There is also an increasing interest in pets and thus selective breeding, especially of dogs. The historical background to more general issues concerning man's relationship to nature and animals has yielded valuable perspectives, as has ethnobiology, on the ruthless human exploitation of the world's ecological system. Relations between people and animals are polyvalent, based as they are on personal emotions and political stances, on transnational agreements about hunting, transport, and medical research. Research on animals and humans is being pursued by anthropologists, ecologists, biologists, philosophers, feminists, psychologists, historians, and social scientists—all with the force to underline ethical questions.<sup>57</sup>

In recent decades the research field has been established through a number of symposia, workshops, and publications, and with journals such as *Society & Animals* publishing studies about non-human animals by scholars in psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science and other social sciences and history, literary criticism, and other disciplines of the humanities, and with *Anthrozoös*, addressed to interactions and relationships between people and non-human animals across areas such as anthropology, ethology, medicine, psychology, veterinary medicine, and zoology.<sup>58</sup>

Following up the topic of the World Archaeological Congress in 1986 and the four publications resulting from it, the five volumes of *Animals & Society* show the breadth of the human–animal problem complex in modern times. The research field has taken up its place in other intellectual domains than the archaeology where it originated.<sup>59</sup>

Archaeological and zooarchaeological research on prehistoric and early modern relations between humans and animals has also found other forms of collaboration.<sup>60</sup> Several network forums discuss intradis-ciplinary problems to do with animals and their role. In zooarchaeology there is a very open dialogue in progress about classification, methods, and theoretical perspectives.<sup>61</sup> The problem complex commonly arises at

conferences and workshops, and several edited volumes focus on archaeological and zooarchaeological questions about relations between people and animals.<sup>62</sup> Workshops, theses, and other publications about particular animal species, such as dogs, horses, and sheep, yield richer perspectives on human–animal relations, on domestication, breeding, and transhumance.<sup>63</sup>

Zooarchaeological research on remains of animal bones involves a range of basic efforts. Analyses of animal bones have left us today with good knowledge of the wealth of species over a long time. Studies of the occurrence of individual species and the function of animals, for example as regards butchering and breeding, have dominated the zooarchaeological research field. Taphonomy, as regards the human selection of animals and the decomposition of organic material and the preservation conditions for organic material, represents another variable in source criticism, as the representativeness of the surviving bones must be considered in interpretations of any assemblage of bones. In recent years the concept of ritual theory has also been in focus in zooarchaeological research, which has been a significant addition to the archaeology of religion.<sup>64</sup>

Studies in the history of fauna and osteological investigations are extremely significant for the archaeology of religion since they provide important data. Often, however, osteological reports are difficult to locate, as there is rarely any great space for these in publications of archaeological excavations.

Our frame of reference influences us in our interpretative work. A fundamental aspect of research is the problem of classification. One might be led to believe that, for example, sheep and goats are the same kind of animal if one looks at lists of fauna. In fact, the morphological distinctions between bones from sheep and goat are problematic, and the separation of sheep and goat bones has been discussed on the basis of measurements of the metapodials<sup>65</sup> and studies of the mandibles and mandibular teeth.<sup>66</sup>

However, the methodological problems have in fact petrified interpretations of the roles of the animals, as the species in most publications are treated as one category. Again, sheep and goat are good examples. These are in fact quite different animals. But the rule in archaeology has been to treat them as one category, as ‘ovicaprids’ or ‘sheep/goats’. The problems of this kind of cultural classification in

archaeology are of course of a philosophical nature. The consequence is often a one-sided interpretation by archaeologists of the role of the animals, solely in terms of utility. The manifold archaeological contexts with sheep and goats indicate that an understanding of the role of sheep and goats must combine utility and symbolic meaning. A separation of ‘sheep/ goats’ into sheep and goats is thus very relevant.

The research field of human–animal relations is huge and interdisciplinary in character, and despite the traditional research habitus of different disciplines, constructive dialogues have taken research forward.

Research in archaeology and zooarchaeology is extremely vigorous. There is still a need for methodological development for the classification of animal-bone morphology and for an understanding of the taphonomic process. Development of the DNA method and molecular analyses will surely lead to greater knowledge about breeding and the genetic relationship between animals in archaeological contexts. Detailed studies of bone surfaces for analyses of butchering methods and animal health could provide further understanding of animal husbandry. Taken together, systematic analyses of animal bones in archaeological contexts will lead both to more detailed knowledge and to a more general synthesis of the role of animals in the world of humans.

## **Old Norse religion versus Christianity**

During the Iron Age, Scandinavia was a part of a Europe that was characterized by ongoing Christianization and changes in power, by conflict and political consolidation. In 385 Christianity became the state religion in the Roman Empire. Missionary activity resulted in much of Europe being converted by the year 500. The politically strong Frankish kingdom sent missionaries to Denmark and Sweden in the ninth century. The subsequent Carolingian empire was to exert a great influence on Scandinavia. Paradoxically, Charlemagne, as the Christian emperor he was by virtue of his coronation in Rome in 800, was buried according to pre-Christian customs in Aachen.<sup>67</sup> There was a blend of Christian faith and older rituals.

Rimbert’s biography of Ansgar from *c.* 870 tells the story of Ansgar’s mission in Denmark and Sweden in the 820s and his second journey in the 850s. Adam of Bremen’s ecclesiastical history from 1075/76 tells of how

the archbishoprics in England and Hamburg-Bremen dispatched missionaries, and how they were received with mixed feelings by the natives. The bishoprics of Hedeby/Schleswig, Ribe, and Århus were founded in 948. The archbishoprics of Lund and Uppsala were established in 1104 and 1164 respectively.<sup>68</sup> The Christianization process was to play a major role in the political power struggles that preceded the establishment of royal power. In Denmark King Harald Bluetooth was baptized in 965. Around 995 Olav Tryggvason became the first Christian king of Norway. Around 1005 the Swedish king Olof Skötkonung was baptized in Sigtuna. Christianity was adopted in Iceland by the Althing in 1000.

The official Christianization of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden thus took place during a forty-year period. This was to affect fundamental norms and rituals, especially concerning burial customs, although pagan mortuary practices and other rituals survived well into the Middle Ages. We may assume that, even before this, there were political negotiations of different kinds; the lavish Sutton Hoo grave in East Anglia from the seventh century has great similarities to the burial customs in central Sweden. In pre-Christian times there were material expressions that can be traced back to Anglo-Saxon England and to a Christian symbolic world in continental Germanic Europe. The first millennium also saw major changes in the ritual use of animals, both in rituals of different kinds involving real animals and in iconography. This should be viewed in relation to the Christianization of Europe and Scandinavia.

Throughout the first millennium there was political restructuring in Europe as Christianity steadily gained ground. Cultural encounters and political contacts took place between different areas and regions, and these contacts led to altered ideological attitudes in Scandinavia. Perhaps the Christianization process began much earlier in Scandinavia than has previously been assumed. The missionaries—individuals and families who used their power to advance Christianity in continental Europe—may have been a threat to people in Scandinavia who refused to be Christianized, instead asserting their own identities.

The archaeological evidence in Scandinavia, the British Isles, and continental Europe is saturated with weapons and associated equipment. There was undoubtedly a great deal of armed conflict in the different parts of Europe. We know that war, violence, and aggression, both real and ritualized, were of great significance in the ideological and political



situation that prevailed in Europe ever since the third century. Christianity evidently encountered resistance on the northern periphery of Europe. Some ideas were accepted while others were rejected, as will be discussed below. It may be hypothetically assumed that this, too, affected Old Norse religion in Scandinavia and the process of Christianization.

The material traces uncovered by archaeology in Scandinavia show that, from the third century to the twelfth century, there was an extension of ritual practice to include animals. The question is how this increase in ritual activity over several hundred years should be interpreted. Some scholars have discussed Christian influences in the archaeological sources and iconographic representations during the Iron Age.<sup>69</sup> Confrontations and generous cultural exchanges between pre-Christian and Christian took place through encounters between people. This had happened continuously for several centuries. Ritual practice with humans and animals was a part of communication between people for thousands of years. There were lasting and unchanging traditions in pre-Christian times, but also periods of relatively rapid change. Cultural and social needs gave scope for technical innovations, which in turn brought material prosperity. Relations between people, animals, and nature were expressed in different ways, and I would argue that they had cosmological subtexts, which can be interpreted archaeologically through traces of social practice.

A parallel question concerns the relation between the archaeological traces and the much later documents, the chief sources for interpretations of Old Norse religion. To what extent was Scandinavia affected by Christian societies in Europe, and how can we discern a Norse pre-Christian religion? What happened in the encounter between north and south, where animal metaphors also seem to have played a part in a growing social and political game?

Animals and their representation in the archaeological sources give a perspective on and a prehistoric background to Norse mythology. Animals had a significant role in Norse mythology. Odin's horse, Thor's goats, and Freyja's cats are examples of central animal figures in the life of the gods. But the prehistoric background gives a much more varied picture of the role of animals than is evident from Snorri's *Edda*. While all the animals mentioned in Snorri's *Edda* are also found in archaeological contexts, the number of animal species in the archaeological sources that relate to ritual practice is much greater than those mentioned by Snorri. It could be said

that archaeology sheds more nuanced light on pre-Christian times than the much later texts with their literary focus can do.

There was great variety in material expression during the Iron Age, a variety that also goes far back into prehistoric times. This also illuminates the relations between people and animals in the Iron Age, showing that there was a long historical background to what happened during the Iron Age and Early Middle Ages. It could possibly be claimed that the archaeological fragments from the Iron Age and Middle Ages are interwoven from different times. Cultural choices and attitudes to animals from different prehistoric periods lie hidden.

Is it possible to historicize the Scandinavian Iron Age and to study the period from an event perspective? Can one discern events, or short spans? And if so, how can we connect these across chronological gaps of varying length? How far is it possible to interpret the practical/ functional, symbolic, and metaphorical connotations of the material culture in terms of social identity and lifestyle, regionality, alliances and prosperity, and Old Norse religion/early Christianity? In the period *c.* 500 BC to AD 1200 there were material expressions of both rival and syncretistic cultural encounters. Scandinavia seems to show regional forms in lifestyle patterns but nevertheless belongs together with the rest of Europe. The encounter between pre-Christian Norse and Christian societies in Europe perhaps involved political contacts and networks to do with dominance and competition. There may also have been alliances maintained by gift institutions and marital pacts. The material expressions in the archaeological remains are powerful enough to allow us to assume that the Iron Age was not solely a time of idyllic peace. In the Late Iron Age it seems as if the pre-Christian societies in Scandinavia were influenced by Christianity.

It is thus impossible to tell an unambiguous story. We have only a multifaceted history to fall back on. Edward Said writes: 'all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and non-monolithic'.<sup>70</sup>

To attempt to understand the social processes and the social order that prevailed in pre-Christian Scandinavia during the Iron Age and Early Middle Ages, there are some central theoretical perspectives for investigating the extent of the influence exerted by non-Scandinavian and Christian currents on Scandinavia. Is it possible to ascertain how new



influences were received? Were they felt to be positive, or was there resistance? How great an impact did Christian values and symbols have? Can we detect how Scandinavians responded to these external influences, and vice versa?

Since the archaeological evidence comprises a multitude of artefacts and archaeological contexts reflecting networks and exchange, it is worth testing the now well-known concept of the *gift*, as developed by the French sociologist Marcel Mauss, referring to the honour of both giver and receiver. Discussions of migration theory inspired by post-colonial theory are also valuable ways to put people's communication strategies and networking in perspective. Central concepts are *creolization* as regards cultural complexity, *diaspora* as regards the life of exile and nostalgia, and *hybridity* as regards post-colonial identities and cultures.<sup>71</sup>

*Creolization* was originally a linguistic term for mixed language. The term has been extended to describe the cross-fertilization that takes place between different cultures when they interact. A local community chooses certain elements of incoming cultures, gives them meanings that differ from those they had in the original culture, and then creatively combines these with indigenous traditions to yield completely new forms. Creole cultures have been shaped by multidimensional cultural encounters with a dynamic that has continuous repercussions and transforms cultural patterns shaped by different social and historical experiences and identities. Creolization is a finite process which ends when a new group identity has been formed with reference to cultural heritage and ethnicity.<sup>72</sup>

Another possible way to put cultural encounters in perspective is to work with the concept of *diaspora*. Parts of Scandinavia may have developed a diaspora when people emigrated as a reaction to royal proclamations of a switch to Christianity. In a diaspora, a link with the traditions of the old homeland is retained by people in the new homeland. Old traditions and values are more conservative. This may be particularly true of Viking Age Iceland, where it may have affected the oral narratives, poems, and songs that were committed to writing there, for example by Snorri Sturluson in his *Edda*. He created a kind of ideal picture.

This ideal picture corresponds to the author's purpose and to his empathy. Elementary source criticism of the written sources—their authenticity, tendencies, contemporaneousness, and dependence—is therefore necessary.

This has also been repeatedly pointed out by philologists, historians of religion, and historians working with Norse society.<sup>73</sup> The societal context in which the Norse texts were formulated gives the texts their historical background. This in turn provides a background to Iron Age and medieval society, possibly as an expression of diaspora or creolization.

The following points can be developed for an analysis of material reflections of social identity and cultural patterns in the Iron Age and Early Middle Ages:

- Standardized iconographic programmes
- Cultural circulation
- New animal species/breeds
- New identities

Was there a branding in Scandinavian pre-Christian times which had to do with animals?

## **Orality, materiality, visibility**

This research project concerns an oral culture. The pre-Christian period in Scandinavia comprised a culture that was in change, a centuries-long process that led to a literate culture. The Scandinavian pre-Christian societies in a Christian Europe probably found themselves between a number of different communication strategies, both those typical of oral cultures and those which characterize societies with writing. Communicating through conversation, narratives, material objects, and not with the aid of writing and texts, also implies a different way of thinking. It is based on narrative and direct visual communication. The source material available to us for studying the role of animals and Old Norse religion lies in the border zone between the oral and the text-based society. The predominant orality favours a strategy for communication without writing, where oral presentation, materiality, and visibility are important aspects of communication. A text-based society can be glimpsed, for instance in laws about the theft of hawks; legislation which existed from the sixth century in Europe.<sup>74</sup>

A knowledge of the pre-Christian period in Scandinavia is therefore mainly based on interpretations of archaeological artefacts and sites. There are no long written documents from the area apart from runic inscriptions. The runes, which were introduced during the first centuries AD with the older 24-character futhark, consisted of short messages with a few words or runes. Often the runes were concealed from observers. They could take the form of names indicating the maker or owner of an object.<sup>75</sup> The younger futhark of 16 characters came into use around AD 700. This was when the practice of erecting runic stones began, with texts that are mainly interpreted in terms of memorials, inheritance, and landowning, with named persons who were related to each other.<sup>76</sup> Walter Ong writes that names in oral cultures give power over the things they name, and the names thus seem like a way to understand things. Names are not abstractly invisible as in a literate society, but have close associations with material culture and how it is perceived.<sup>77</sup>

In an oral culture it is significant that there are mnemonic patterns with rhythms, alliterations, or other formulaic expressions that enable oral repetition. Remembering means being able to repeat, preferably also with a rhythm that is physiological; that is, with singing, dancing, and other movement. The myths recorded in writing were in all probability memorized in the oral tradition of pre-Christian society. The extant texts were either recorded in the Middle Ages or written outside Scandinavia to report on Norse conditions or in some other way connect to that part of Europe.<sup>78</sup>

Our knowledge of Old Norse religion and mythology has hitherto been based chiefly on literary and philological analyses of texts from the end of the Viking Age and the Early Middle Ages. The value of the texts as historical sources is a subject of debate, however, and perceptions of them divide the scholarly community into different camps. One view is that the texts cannot be used at all for historical purposes since they are solely literary in character. Another opinion is that the texts, beside their literary quality, display a structure and themes with information about the society in which they were written down, and about historical situations. The literary scholar Lars Lönnroth argues that the Eddic poems cannot be read; they should be experienced as a performance, a recitation, and a communicative encounter between the narrator and the audience. He claims that an oral

poem risks losing its poetry if the symbolism is overemphasized, and that the interpretation can be far too imaginative and highly uncertain as a historical reconstruction.<sup>79</sup>

The medieval texts allow us to understand that the world of the gods was the scene of deeds and adventures in which animals of different kinds were often available to help and could intervene in events. Fantastic stories provoke wonder about gods, giants, and other beings who struggle along with animals and heroes to achieve order in the world. Who thought all this up, and what force existed behind the passing down of the narratives? How firmly were these stories rooted in reality during pre-Christian times? Should the tales be interpreted solely as later literary works?

Archaeological traces of events, or rather the reality in which the texts arose, have mostly been used by previous scholars to illustrate their interpretations of Old Norse religion. In this research project the pre-Christian farm, with all the animals that could be found on it, is the starting point from which we aim to pin down the pre-Christian mentality via human relations to animals. Perhaps it is therefore too vain a hope to reach a pre-Christian conceptual world on the basis of material culture and attitudes to animals, but the aim of this study is the reverse: to use the Old West Norse literature as illustration. Drawing on scholarly disciplines with a different research habitus requires balancing between one's own research ideals and the source-critical consequences of the reasoning. The association between material culture, iconography, and runic script is used here as a basis for interpreting Old Norse religion.

Since the Iron Age in Scandinavia was a time of transition from orality to literacy, society at this time was also in a phase of change between different communication strategies, and between a pre-Christian and a Christian conceptual world. Materiality and visuality in pre-Christian society were therefore probably of great significance, as they were in the early Christian period when literacy was still not general. People in oral cultures use material objects not just for practical and functional purposes but also to manifest themselves in different ways, to display a social identity and their belonging to a world of either pre-Christian or Christian beliefs. Monuments in the landscape thus also became a part of narratives about former generations and kinship. Objects and iconography were therefore at least as full of meaning and significant for memory as texts are today for modern people.

Material culture and people's material necessities, whether practical or identity-building, are fundamental premises for archaeological research. The basic archaeological questions about chronology, space, and function have been increasingly expanded in recent decades to include questions about symbolic values and connotations. More and more archaeologists are tackling the task of interpreting abstract and mental phenomena on the basis of material remains. Questions of materiality, along with memory, identity, power, violence, gender, and lifestyle, are highly topical today in the archaeological research field.

Materiality signals identity and ownership, knowledge and quality. Material culture is as significant for oral narration as a dramatic performance, for describing a thing and for remembering an event or a person in the present or the past. Animals may have been employed in a similar way, using the behaviour, characteristics, and appearance of individual species as a social force.

The practical functions of animals probably remained relatively unchanged during the prehistoric period. The symbolic and connotative meanings of animals, on the other hand, would have changed along with changes in political and social structures. The meaningful materiality that animals expressed was presumably connected to the animals' historical background in any particular area. Pre-Christian Scandinavia was not a homogeneous area, and in the Viking Age, for example, there were distinctive regions with their own burial customs, with a distinctive tradition for the design of artefacts, and with special iconography.<sup>80</sup> Despite this, there are common features in the archaeological traces and in the material culture, uniting pre-Christian customs in Scandinavia. There was a visuality that was comprehensible to people in Scandinavia, even further back in time. Viking Age people in Scandinavia evidently revived older customs and developed a pictorial language that had already existed in the Roman Iron Age and before.

With the prehistoric perspective of this project, religion is not perceived as being exclusive or ascribed to a narrow social institution. In this archaeological account, the concept of religion comprises ritual practice with a materiality that was linked to social welfare and political power. Archaeological vestiges of material culture from houses, farms, villages, early towns, and the landscape itself provide the foundation for the interpretation of pre-Christian religion. Cult houses have been discovered in

recent years. There may already have been an institutionalized religion in Scandinavia before the official Christianization, although the existence of cultic leaders has been inferred from interpretations of written sources. New archaeological finds allow us to reassess the reliability of Adam of Bremen's account from 1075/76 of what he had heard at second hand about large sacrificial feasts at the temple of Uppsala; these were held every nine years, and nine males of each animal species were slaughtered and hung in the trees around the temple.<sup>81</sup>

The archaeological research field is thus dynamic. The major infrastructure developments of recent years have led to large-scale excavations with new archaeological discoveries, such as cult houses and cult sites. These require elaborating on traditional interpretations and weighing up written evidence against new archaeological finds. The material culture studied by archaeologists, along with the long time frame of archaeology, affect our view of the relationship between culture and nature. Pre-Christian contexts entail complex obstacles to interpretation, obstacles most likely built with an anthropocentric bias. The field of scholarly work is filled with stances based on personal experience and the research habitus of the scholar's own discipline.

In both oral and literate cultures, pictures are of crucial significance for human communication. In pre-Christian Scandinavia an iconographic programme was developed in the sixth century. Norse animal ornamentation, as found on metal objects, wood carvings, and textiles, evolved and changed over more than six hundred years. In the twelfth century animal ornamentation, no longer having a part to play and beginning to lose its creativity, was replaced by the Romanesque style.

The pre-Christian iconography was of great importance for the recognition of an identity and regional belonging. Norse animal ornamentation served as a social cement. As pictures they were important for the communicative aspects of status, power, gender, and religion. One may assume that the iconography was related both to a reality and to a cosmology, probably with both a pre-Christian and a Christian foundation.

The figures, lines, and points in a picture were visual representations in their own time. A type of animal, for example, was depicted on runic stones in the tenth and eleventh centuries as part of a system that signalled a pre-Christian/Christian ideal of knowledge, and it is designated today by the neutral term 'quadruped', but also interpreted as a wolf or a lion. Another



example is the tapestry from Överhogdal in Jämtland, radiocarbon-dated to 1040–1170. A swarm of animals and humans, trees, boats, and buildings have pagan and Christian connotations of Ragnarok and of how Christian missionaries try to convert Saami.<sup>82</sup> In the archaeological evidence surviving today the ornamentation is usually found on exclusive metal artefacts in rich graves, or in areas where crafts were performed. There were probably pictures on all kinds of objects and in house interiors, and adorning materials that have long since decomposed. The iconography surely surrounded most people on farms both large and small, but it has not been preserved to the present day.

Communicative processes, especially in an oral culture, are based on visuality. Visuality is one of the most effective communication techniques for putting across a message and a story. Theories of sight show that the impact of pictures depends on their form. Cognition theory, cognitive psychology, and gestalt psychology emphasize how visual representations and ideas are linked to the capacity of the human brain to perceive pictures. Images appeal to previous experiences in order to be interpreted and set in a context. Pictures in themselves do not contain any information or message, but must be viewed in terms of the observer's experience and the context in which he or she is located. Visuality therefore has a cultural, social, and historical context. Pictures function both as a source of memory and as a knowledge structure. Memory is of great significance for the reception of images.<sup>83</sup>

Pictures and ornamentation in pre-Christian times are therefore visual artefacts. The material, the pictorial technique, and the presentation have a content, a meaning. The image seizes the observer today, just as it did centuries ago. The question is just how to get at this content. A follow-up question is whether a hermeneutic approach makes it easier for us to perceive the codes carried by images. It may be hoped that associations between different types of contexts and between the archaeological material culture and the written documents give us theoretical approaches to an interpretation and an understanding.

The possibility to analyse a long temporal perspective distinguishes archaeology from many other sciences. The vast time span reveals the significance of long continuity in animal husbandry and hunting. It is also possible to discover watersheds; for instance with the introduction of a new

animal species, accompanied by a ritual use of the animal in question. Pre-Christian rituals, like political events, require analyses of longer periods of time if they are to be detected, and if we are to assess the materiality of the time via the traces that survive today.

A very long chronological perspective, from the Stone Age to the official adoption of Christianity, shows us that certain traditions, such as the use of wetlands for depositions of different kinds, lasted for thousands of years. The archaeological division into periods actually helps us to find the breakpoints in the long time span. Changes of period are probably an expression of historical watersheds which can be associated with changes and variations in social practice and cultural codes. Even though there is a very long chronological depth in the bodily related ritual practice reflected in the archaeological record, the Early Roman Iron Age stands out particularly as a time when major changes occurred.

The third century saw a noticeable growth in material expressions, not least in the fact that whole pigs and sheep were deposited in rich graves. In the fifth century the use of animals in rituals became much more evident, and domesticated animals, wild beasts, and especially fantastic creatures become more common in the iconography. The archaeological finds indicate that there were changes in society and ideology as a result of influences from other parts of Europe. The use of bodily metaphors—of humans and animals and pictures of them—continued throughout the Iron Age, but stopped when Christianity became the official religion. The way of handling dead people and animals that was so characteristic of the entire pre-Christian period was thus gradually abandoned.

The concept of time as we in the modern West usually understand it should be modified when we study pre-Christian societies and an oral culture in ancient Scandinavia. Alongside the static division of analytical time we should also consider much more relative ways of conceiving time: time as experience and mythical time. A long analytical time span can be experienced as very short, or can become much longer in a mythical time. The concept of time is therefore relevant for an understanding of 'old' and 'bygone' days. For the same reason it is important to emphasize regionality, geographical space, and geographical distance in order to obtain a perspective on communications, transports, and possibilities for contacts with other people. The role of animals is dependent both on a temporal awareness, that is, how long they have existed in their cultural context, and



a spatial structure, so that we can place them in a social context. Contact networks and gift systems or flows of ideas are significant for encounters between people and societies. Well into historical time, ideas about chronological depth and geographical distance were probably very different from those created in connection with the emergence of modern time.

In an oral culture, people perceive time and distance in a multidimensional way that does not exist in a literate culture.<sup>84</sup> Oral narratives about myths and cosmological origins in oral cultures can therefore span over a very long time.

# CHAPTER 2

## Animals in Norse mythology

Norse myths tell of how giants, gods, humans, animals, and other beings were significant for the creation of the world, through their bodies and body parts. All these living creatures acted to ensure balance and order in an otherwise chaotic world. The different figures are given metaphorical expression in the stories, where they could be transformed and modified in various ways. Animals were involved in events in all the parts of the universe around the world-tree Yggdrasil. They were important for the creation of the world, but also for the various catastrophes that caused it to end. At Ragnarok, it was above all monsters, demons, and beings in animal guise, with their powerful properties, that attained such strength and force that the gods could not control them.

Norse mythology is filled with animals of different kinds. There are domesticated animals, wild animals, and imaginary animals with extraordinary properties. The animals have both functional and symbolic meanings. They are active, doing different things. They intervene in events. They can be destructive but also helpful in many ways. The figures are often highly independent, and many of them are given individual names.

My chief starting point is the stories and poems in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, also called the *Younger Edda* or the *Prose Edda*, written around 1220. It was intended as a handbook of poetry, so that the old literary tradition could be preserved in the medieval Christian world. The *Elder Edda*, also called the *Poetic Edda* or *Sæmund's Edda*, is another important foundation. This collection of poems by unknown authors consists of orally transmitted poems and songs from the pre-Christian era.

These two works have been the most important sources for interpretations of Norse mythology. They constitute a significant compilation of stories that are used to interpret Old Norse religion.<sup>85</sup> These late medieval narratives about the different animals can act as a backdrop to

the archaeological interpretations of ancient ritual and religion, which use the material fragments surviving from prehistoric times to show that the picture of pre-Christian society we are given in the texts is one-sided.

The tales about the pre-Christian period are captured in poetry and prose, as a fragment of pagan times. The intentions behind the recording of the Norse texts show a hint of influence from Christian cosmology. They were also a part of the historiography of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when they were written down by learned Christian authors. Despite this, the texts comprise parts of a pre-Christian conceptual world in which bodily metaphors of animals and humans are also expressed.<sup>86</sup> The creation of the world is described in *Grímnismál* (*Grimnir's Sayings*) in the *Poetic Edda* as follows:

40. Out of Ymir's flesh the earth was formed,  
And from his 'sweat' [blood] the sea.  
Mountains from bones, the tree from hair,  
And from his skull, heaven.  
41. And from his brows the blithe gods made  
Midgard for the sons of men;  
And from his brain the tough-minded clouds  
Were all formed.<sup>87</sup>

The verses describe how the body of the primeval giant was used to form different parts of the world. The bodily metaphors in Norse mythology give us reason to bring bodily awareness into the actual world in which people were in control of their reality. It is with the body that people exist in the world, and is it through the body that we experience the world and structure it, according to the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>88</sup> 'The body is the bearer of ideological meaning,' writes the Swedish historian of ideas Karin Johannisson. From the shape and sensual impressions of the body, its knowledge and feelings, we derive images and language through which we can sort and understand the world around us.<sup>89</sup> People proceed from themselves in their understanding of the world. It is not strange that the body serves as a natural reference. Body language and body signals, bodily awareness and bodily metaphors are universal, with different expressions in specific cultural contexts. The question is to what extent people themselves

and the rituals that surrounded human bodies in pre-Christian times expressed an Old Norse cosmology.

According to Norse mythology, humans lived in the middle of the world, in Midgard. The gods have their mansions in Asgard and at Idavoll. Warriors who fall in battle go to Odin's Valhalla, where they are plentifully supplied with food and drink. Animals are significant for their maintenance. The boar Sæhrimnir is slaughtered and cooked each day but is whole again by evening. The goat Heidrun provides the warriors with a never-ending flow of mead from its teats. The world outside is called Utgard, the abode of threatening creatures. It is also the scene of the home of the giants, Jotunheim. The Midgard Serpent coils round the world, protecting it. Outside is the world ocean, Ægir. The ash tree Yggdrasil marks the centre of the world, and at its foot sit the three norns, Urd, Skuld and Verdandi, spinning the threads of fate. Also here is the giant Mimir's well with its bottomless knowledge.

The most prominent animal both in Snorri's *Edda* and in the archaeological record is the horse. In *Skáldskaparmál (The Language of Poetry)* Snorri names some special horses: 'Arvak and Alsvinn draw the sun, ... Hrimfaxi or Fiorsvartrnir draw the night. Skinfaxi or Glad go with the day'. This statement has presumably inspired the archaeologist Flemming Kaul in his studies of Bronze Age cosmology. In Kaul's theory, the sun moves across the sky with the aid of a ship, horse, serpent, and fish.<sup>90</sup> The iconography of Late Bronze Age razors has elements very similar to those described briefly in the verse.

In many religions we find associations between cattle and gods. The Germanic goddess Nerthus rode in a wagon pulled by cows.<sup>91</sup> The cow Audhumla is a significant animal in the Norse creation story, but otherwise cattle have a very low profile in Eddic poetry, even though they were among the most important livestock. On the other hand, cattle occur in the sagas; in the *Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok*, for instance, heifers have unusual powers. In *Gylfaginning (The Tricking of Gylfi)* Snorri tells of how Audhumla gives birth to gods:

Then spoke Gangleri: 'Where did Ymir live, and what did he live on?'

'The next thing, when the rime dripped, was that there came into being from it a cow called Audhumla, and four

rivers of milk flowed from its teats, and fed Ymir.’

Then spoke Gangleri: ‘What did the cow feed on?’

High said: ‘It licked the rime-stones, which were salty. And the first day as it licked stones there came from the stones in the evening a man’s hair, the second day a man’s head, the third day there was a complete man there. His name was Buri. He was beautiful in appearance, big and powerful. He begot a son called Bor. He married a wife called Bestla, daughter of the giant Bolthorn, and they had three sons. One was called Odin, the second Vili, the third Ve. And it is my belief that this Odin and his brothers must be the rulers of heaven and earth; it is our opinion that this must be what he is called. This is the name of the one who is the greatest and the most glorious that we know, and you would do well to agree to call him that too.’<sup>92</sup>

Snorri’s *Edda* mentions horse, cow, pig, dog, goat, bird, squirrel, wolf, serpent, and dragon. Eighty-four different animals are given names in Snorri’s *Edda* ([Tables 2](#) and [3](#)). Many of these named animals were also buried in separate graves on the owner’s land or beside his own grave. It seems as if this tradition goes far back in time, a theme that is discussed in more detail at several places in this publication.

[Table 2](#). Names of horses, cattle, goats, pigs, and dogs in Snorri’s *Edda*.<sup>93</sup>

| <b>Horse</b> |            | <b>Cattle</b> | <b>Goat</b> | <b>Pig</b>   | <b>Dog</b> |
|--------------|------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|------------|
| Alsvinn      | Holkvir    | Apli          | Geirdnir    | Gullinbursti | Garm       |
| Arvak        | Hrimfaxi   | Arf           | Grimnir     | Slidrugtanni | Hrodvitnir |
| Blakk        | Ior        | Arfuni        | Heidrun     | Sæhrimnir    |            |
| Blodughofi   | Kort       | Arvak         | Tanngiost   |              |            |
| Drosul       | Lettfetti  | Audhumla      | Tanngrisnir |              |            |
| Drosul       | Lung       | Himinhriot    |             |              |            |
| Fak          | Mar        | Hlid          |             |              |            |
| Falhofni     | Modnir     | Hrid          |             |              |            |
| Fiorsvartnir | Mor        | Hæfir         |             |              |            |
| Folkvir      | Silfrtop   | Iormuni       |             |              |            |
| Gardrofa     | Sinir      | Iormunrek     |             |              |            |
| Gils         | Skævad     | Lit           |             |              |            |
| Glad         | Skeidbrimi | Kyr           |             |              |            |
| Glaum        | Skinfaxi   | Regin         |             |              |            |
| Glær         | Sleipnir   | Rekin         |             |              |            |
| Goti         | Slungnir   | Stuf          |             |              |            |
| Grani        | Soti       | Vingnir       |             |              |            |
| Gullfaxi     | Stuf       |               |             |              |            |
| Gulltopp     | Svadilfari |               |             |              |            |
| Gyllir       | Tialdari   |               |             |              |            |
| Hamskerpir   | Vakr       |               |             |              |            |
| Hod          | Val        |               |             |              |            |
| Hofvarpnir   | Vigg       |               |             |              |            |
| Hrafn        |            |               |             |              |            |

[Table 3](#). Names of birds, squirrel, stags, wolves, bears, snakes, and dragons in Snorri's *Edda*.<sup>94</sup>

| <b>Bird</b> | <b>Squirrel</b> | <b>Stag</b> | <b>Wolf</b> | <b>Bear</b> | <b>Snake</b> | <b>Dragon</b> |
|-------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| Habrok      | Ratatosk        | Dain        | Fenrir      | Iorek       | Goin         | Fafnir        |
| Hugin       |                 | Duneyr      | Freki       | Biarki      | Grabak       | Nidhogg       |
| Munin       |                 | Durathor    | Geri        |             | Grafvitnit   |               |
| Vedrfol-    |                 | Dvalin      | Hati        |             | Grafvollund  |               |
| nir         |                 | Dvalar      | Moongarm    |             | Jormindgand  |               |
|             |                 | Eikthyrnir  | Skoll       |             | Moin         |               |
|             |                 |             | Vanargand   |             | Ofnir        |               |
|             |                 |             |             |             | Svafnir      |               |

Horses predominate, with 41 individuals bearing names. The naming indicates that certain animals were more important than others. They had special tasks to perform in the gods' service, just as animals in later periods had. Hannibal's elephant Cato, Alexander the Great's horse Bucephalus, Caligula's horse Incitatus, and Karl XII's dog Pompe and his horse Brandklipparen were all animals with a special relation to their master.

In Norse mythology, horses are a significant part of the world; the gods, the sun, the valkyries, and the giants have horses. The gods have many horses, and they are described in *Gylfaginning*:

Every day the Æsir ride there up over Bifrost. It is also called As-bridge. The names of Æsir's horses are as follows: the best is Sleipnir, he is Odin's, he has eight legs. Second is Glad, third Gyllir, fourth Glær, fifth Skeidbrimir, sixth Silfrtopp, seventh Sinir, eighth Gils, ninth Falhofnir, tenth Gulltopp, Lettfeti eleventh. Baldr's horse was burned with him. [95](#)

The horses in the world of the gods have fantastic properties. Sleipnir was born after the mating of Svadilfari and Loki in the guise of a mare. Sleipnir's birth was a direct result of divine intervention, intended to delay the work of the builder who was constructing a wall around Valhalla; if that had been completed in time it would have meant that the gods had to give Freyja, the sun, and the moon as payment to the builder. Sleipnir became Odin's horse. A grey horse with eight legs, it can go anywhere, and it is fast. The centre of the world, the ash Yggdrasil, has a name that contains



both Odin (Ygg) and *drasill* (horse). Other names of Odin are also connected to the horse: *Hrosshársgrani*, ‘horsehair bearded’ and *Jálkr*, ‘gelding’. It is chiefly on some of the Gotlandic picture stones that the eight-legged Sleipnir is depicted.<sup>96</sup> Judging by descriptions in *Gylfaginning* and in poems, Sleipnir is associated in various ways with magic, death, and the search for knowledge.<sup>97</sup>

Other horses maintain order in the world. *Gylfaginning* tells of the horses Arvak and Alsvinn which draw the sun over the sky, and of how the giant Night drives the horse Hrimfaxi while her son Day, one of the Æsir, drives the horse Skinfaxi. Hrimfaxi ‘bedews the earth with the drips from his bit’, and ‘light is shed over all the sky and the sea’ from Skinfaxi’s mane. The valkyries have the ability to ride through the air. Frey’s horse has supernatural powers, can understand human speech, and can be ridden through fog and fire, according to *Skírnismál* (*Skirnir’s Journey*). The goddess Gna, who is one of Frigg’s messengers, can ride her horse Hovvarpnir across sky and sea.

Odin has many animals in his service: besides his swift eight-legged horse Sleipnir, he has the ravens Hugin and Munin. The boar Sæhrimnir keeps Odin’s warriors fed with pork, and the goat Heidrun supplies them with mead. The cock Gullinkambi crows at the top of a tree, where a nameless eagle also sits, and between the eagle’s eyes sits the hawk Vedrfolnir. The squirrel Ratatosk scuttles up and down the tree, acting as a messenger. The wolf Fenrir threatens the world, while the Midgard Serpent holds the world together with his enormous body. Frigg used to assume the shape of a falcon, while Loki could turn himself into a bird of prey or a salmon when he needed a disguise. The goddess Freyja, who is most famous for having two cats, also owns a farm called Folkvang, which is noted for its pig breeding, and a fighting boar called Hildisvin. In Frey’s Alfheim there is the boar Slidrugtanni or Gullinborsti, which can run on land or air better than any horse; it draws Frey’s chariot.

The mythical wolves Geri and Freki serve wine to Odin, but in Asgard they are bloodthirsty predators. Utgard is teeming with monsters and giants in animal form. A giantess in Iron-wood gives birth to wolves, which run across the sky devouring stars. One of the wolves, which is called Moongarm, feeds on dead men and chases the light during the night. When he catches the moon, the sky turns red from the blood of his jaws. The two

wolves Skoll and Hati instead chase the sun in order to swallow it. There are other wolves which are not given individual names. In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri mentions a she-wolf who devours mutilated corpses, so that the green sea is dyed red with blood.

Times of unrest, horror, and ghastliness are filled with serpents and dragons in poetry and sagas. The dragon Nidhogg gnaws at the root of the world-tree Yggdrasil. The serpents Goin, Grafvitnir, Grafvollud, Grabak, Moin, and Svafnir live in the water under Yggdrasil's roots.

The animals in Norse mythology were active players in stories about the creation and destruction of the world. Their properties, and the fact that animals of many species were given individual names, suggest that they had a special position close to the gods and in the cosmology. Domesticated animals, wild beasts, and fantastic and exotic animals had a place in stories about the order and structure of the world. The animals that appear in Norse mythology serve in this study as a kind of illustration to animal husbandry and breeding in the Scandinavian pre-Christian era. The animals in mythology can be set in relation to the practical, functional and ritual meanings they had in pre-Christian society.

# CHAPTER 3

## Animals in Midgard

Can we picture people's living conditions on prehistoric farms? What were the economic and functional circumstances in which people spent their everyday lives, and to what extent did these affect their outlook on animals? Why did humans use animals in rituals, and why were certain animals included in the iconography on various craft products? One approach to finding possible answers to these questions is to start with people's homes, the centre of their world—their Midgard—and study which animals may have lived on and near the farm. People, domesticated animals, and wild beasts were actors in the landscape, in the ecological environment that surrounded the farms and their outlands.

Day-to-day life and chores performed in the family and along with people in the neighbourhood were the foundations for the conceptual world and for the meanings ascribed to different animals in rituals and in crafts. Practical tasks, then as now, must have been the life-blood of human existence, and animals, with their utility for human subsistence, must have been attractive in different ways. Modes of production and assessments of animals were the basis for the mental world and for how people perceived themselves in relation to animals and to the world around them. People's conceptions were rooted in a reality where domesticated and wild animals were treated and perceived on the basis of previous knowledge and experience. Abstract ideas about animals were based on an assessment of the properties of individual species and on practical animal husbandry.

Palaeoecological analyses of landscape environments and osteological examinations of remains of animal bones paint a background to the conditions in which people lived. The concrete traces of domesticated and wild animals in the different prehistoric periods provide the necessary information for relating the role of animals to Old Norse religion. The properties of the different animals on the farm give us knowledge about the

animals, and open perspectives on the pre-Christian mental world. A 'Midgard perspective' and an examination of what may have been boiling in the pot over the hearth may tell us what we need to know about animal husbandry and stock breeding, about the production, reproduction, and consumption of animals, and help us to interpret their social and ritual roles.

Farms varied in size. Communities were probably socially stratified, with influential individuals and kindreds in political alliances throughout the prehistoric period. Whether all these groups are visible in the archaeological records, on the other hand, is highly uncertain. It is very likely that it is the fragments left by the most materially prosperous people and farms that are preserved today, which of course has consequences for archaeological interpretations of living conditions and conceptions.

Modern research on the history of fauna shows that there was limited access to game animals in certain parts of Scandinavia in the prehistoric era, including the Stone Age. The wild fauna had already begun to decrease during the Mesolithic in Denmark. Aurochs, deer, elk, bear, lynx, and smaller predators began to disappear from the Danish islands in that period. There were several reasons for this. The islands were isolated from the continent and the animal stocks could not increase. The animals were also exposed to the human impact on the landscape and to hunting. From the start of the Neolithic, lynx, elk, bear, beaver, wild horse, and aurochs also vanished from Jutland as a consequence of animal husbandry and tillage in the growing cultural landscape. The wolf survived in both eastern and western parts of Denmark until quite recently. The last wolf was shot in Jutland in 1813. Wild boar lasted until the eighteenth century. Of the early wild fauna, the only ones that exist today in Denmark are deer, fox, and small predators.<sup>98</sup>

On the Scandinavian peninsula, by contrast, many animal species survived well into historical times, above all in the northern parts. The aurochs, however, lasted only a short time, disappearing in the Mesolithic in mainland Sweden. Despite reductions in animal populations in historical times, roe deer and red deer can be found today in the southern and central parts of the country. Bears survived until the seventeenth century in southern Sweden and were almost exterminated in the northern parts of the country by the start of the twentieth century. Wolf and lynx were common in Sweden into the nineteenth century, and the stocks now living are protected. Occasional wolverines can still be found today in northern

Sweden. Smaller predators are widespread throughout the country. Wild boar became extinct in the seventeenth century but have returned since imported animals escaped from captivity and spread over Sweden from the latter part of the twentieth century.<sup>99</sup>

Access to game animals was thus not constant in prehistoric times. Depending on the geographical location, that is, whether the animals were on isolated islands or the mainland, the size of game stocks and the animal species that could survive into later periods varied. Changes in the landscape due to agriculture restricted the ability of several species to survive, especially in Jutland and the Danish islands, but also in parts of southern and central Sweden. The size and species variation of the wild fauna ended up depending on local conditions.

Attitudes to animals are based on their behaviour, characteristics, and patterns of movement, and on their relationship to humans and settlement. Red deer and roe deer are favoured by a semi-open agricultural landscape with arable fields and pastures. Other deer and elk require a small area of more or less continuous forest and therefore prefer a landscape that has become open as a result of grazing. Elk can also find a habitat in wet, marshy areas with aquatic plants in lakes. Red deer, on the other hand, do not find it as easy as elk to move around in marshy ground. Red deer and roe deer are nocturnal animals, living in herds and with well-trodden paths marking their movements in the landscape.<sup>100</sup>

Bear, wild cat, and lynx thrive in woodland and stay away from human settlement. Wild boar, wolf, and small predators, on the other hand, are attracted to farms and domesticated animals. When they approached farms they must have been regarded as a threat, which meant that these animals would have been hunted ruthlessly. Farmers cannot have appreciated the way wild boars grubbed up the soil or mated with the pigs on the farm.<sup>101</sup>

There have been attempts to domesticate red deer, perhaps as a way to control the exploitation of the stocks. A three-year-old red deer was found at the Neolithic site of Muldbjerg in Sjælland. It had grown up in captivity, so that its skull had become shorter due to less intensive grazing on its own. The base of the antler was polished shiny, suggesting that the animal had been tied with a rope.<sup>102</sup>

The ecology was shaped by humans, and it in turn shaped people's attitudes to animals and nature. This culturally created environment, with its

domesticated and wild animals, required knowledge and cultural stances. Patterns of cultural action were rooted in local topographical conditions, dependent on the location of water and the composition of the vegetation. This does not mean that the external environment determined social practice, but it was composed of the different elements of nature to which people were forced to relate.

Domesticated animals were bred to satisfy human needs and aesthetic values. Useful and desirable properties made the animals attractive for breeding and cross-breeding. Stone Age people's animals therefore differ from those in the Viking Age, and even more from today's specially bred animals. Domesticated animals in prehistoric times were generally small and thus possibly easier to handle. It is likely that people did not endeavour to obtain bigger breeds. Having many small animals was perhaps better if prosperity was measured in the number of animals. The risks of disease and fodder shortage could be spread better if there were many individuals. Selection can lead towards smaller animals when fodder is in short supply.<sup>103</sup> Animals were modified through conscious or unconscious selection. Several animal breeds within each species were created to serve new needs and to adapt the animals to the grazing flora and the economic requirements.<sup>104</sup>

The animals' sexual maturity, heat, and covering, and the length of pregnancy and suckling, were all a part of the farm's annual cycle. Selective slaughter was practised so that some of the stock could be spared depending on the amount of winter fodder available. Deliberate breeding produced different races of animals in different parts of Scandinavia. Sheep and goats were presumably not valued solely in terms of the quality of their meat and milk, but also for the colour of their coats, the quality of the wool, and the form of the horns. It is very possible that purposeful breeding also took place in prehistoric times, for example to enable the variety in wool and fibres that has been found in the dress of the Skydstrup woman, dated to the Bronze Age.<sup>105</sup>

Domesticated animals were a significant element on farms, in villages, and in towns, while their wild counterparts lived at a distance from human settlement for a long time. Different proportions of domesticated animal species could be found in different settings, depending on the practical utility of the species and the type of population in any particular area. Cattle

were the most common animals among farm livestock in prehistoric times. Generally speaking, cattle dominated on farms throughout the pre-Christian era, but sheep, goats, and pigs were also a significant element in the household's stock of animals. Occasional examples of dog and horse occur on farms. Cattle, pig, and sheep/goat are found in different proportions in Viking Age and medieval towns.<sup>106</sup> The very occurrence of animals which people had tended in different circumstances suggests a much greater mutual dependence between humans and animals than has usually been acknowledged in archaeological research.

## **Domesticated animals**

Different species of domesticated animals have existed in Scandinavia for varying lengths of time. The differences in their historical background are probably significant for the mental pictures that people had of them for a long time to come. Cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs, together with dogs, are the oldest domesticated animals in Scandinavia. They occurred as early as the Stone Age and can be found on most prehistoric farms, in villages and towns. Horses began to appear in the Bronze Age, while hens and cats are first found on Iron Age farms. A general tendency in excavated assemblages of animal bones is that those of domesticated animals predominate in all the find contexts that are represented. They occur on farms and in towns. Bones from domesticated animals were thrown on refuse heaps or in waste pits, scattered on occupation layers, or placed in pits or trenches under house foundations. The bones show that animals were a part of the household production; they were consumed in the household and were used in different ways. The osteological evidence thus suggests that it was common for animals of some kind to be found in places where people lived.

Through the occurrence of bones we can obtain archaeological evidence of the different domesticated species from the Neolithic onwards. Dogs had been used as far back as the time of the reindeer hunters. Because the animals had been domesticated, turned from wild to tame, humans assumed a responsibility for looking after them. The animals gave people food, pulled their ploughs and wagons, carried them on their backs, watched over the farm, and tended other animals. They were living capital and an



insurance; they provided necessities and brought prosperity. Nor should we forget that people may also have taken a pride in owning fine animals, which would have been attractive for crossing and breeding.

Managing the animals on the farm so that the stock would persist required a knowledge of reproduction and selective slaughter. Houses and enclosures were built to protect humans and animals from predators. The practical utility of animals and their close contact with humans must have influenced the attitudes to animals that developed over thousands of years, and the way people in ancient times used them symbolically and metaphorically.

The aesthetic value of animals, their breeding properties, and their practical function were probably significant for their use in ritual and their metaphorical guises in Norse mythology. Sleipnir, Audhumla, Heidrun, Tanngniost, Tanngrisnir, and Vidfavnir all had distinctive features and appearances. The wild animals that occurred in the vicinity of farms, with their differing behaviour and characteristics, were a part of people's life-world, as was also expressed in Norse mythology, but they are rarely glimpsed in archaeological contexts. The ravens Hugin and Munin, the four grazing deer, the wolves Freki and Garm, communicated with the gods, and it was for them they displayed their skills.

Our modern categorizations of the animal world and of domesticated and wild animals are coloured by our attitudes to animals and our perceptions of ourselves. Domesticated animals require care, which leads to human control and a reciprocal dependence between people and animals. One may wonder who domesticates whom. One may also ask whether the numbers of game animals and predators could be controlled by humans, and if so, to what extent. Finds of animal bones give an approach for interpreting attitudes to animals and the materiality that they express in the pre-Christian era.

Bones of both domesticated and wild animals are found in most archaeological contexts from the entire prehistoric period, at places where the soil allows the preservation of organic material. Domesticated and wild animals are found in different proportions on different prehistoric sites. The animal bones from farms, graves, and wetlands show that cultural filters classified animal species in different ways. Domesticated animals are mainly found in waste pits and rubbish dumps, but are also ritually deposited in buildings and wells on the farmstead. People selected certain domesticated animals, and instead of using them for their own subsistence

they placed them in graves or used them in rituals at cult houses or at other places in the outlands. Wild animals occur to a lesser extent in all archaeological contexts, which will be discussed below. A characteristic feature is that wild animals were depicted on artefacts, and that especially the skins of predators were used as shrouds for corpses.

The selection of animals for use in different contexts depends on how people viewed the world, and animals ended up projecting prevailing values and self-images. The management of animals is based on assumptions and self-evident facts which are then placed in relation to other cultural norms and values. What one does affects communication with other people. Animal deposits can thus give us information about similarities and differences between different archaeological contexts and cultural systems. Values and attitudes create different patterns of action, which are important for self-recognition and provide a possibility to handle complex realities. We may assume that a conceptual world was constructed through categorizations of what people actually did in practical terms.

[Table 4.](#) The frequency of animals on Iron Age farms in Skåne and Gotland (number of fragments and each species as a percentage of the total) after Elisabeth Iregren 1997: [table 2](#)).

| Sites            | Stockholms-<br>gården, Valle-<br>berga Par.,<br>Skåne |    | Rinkaby 13,<br>Rinkaby<br>Par.,<br>Skåne |    | Trehögs-<br>parken,<br>Fosie Par.,<br>Skåne |    | Oxie,<br>Oxie Par.,<br>Skåne |    | Fjelie 19,<br>Fjelie Par.,<br>Skåne |    | V. Karaby 3:1,<br>V. Karaby<br>Par.,<br>Skåne |    | Vallhagar,<br>Fröjel Par.,<br>Gotland |    |
|------------------|---|----|--|----|---|----|------------------------------|----|-------------------------------------|----|---|----|---------------------------------------|----|
|                  | No.   | %  | No.                                      | %  | No.   | %  | No.                          | %  | No.                                 | %  | No.   | %  | No.                                   | %  |
| Period           | 500–1000  |    | 11th<br>century                          |    | 11th<br>century                             |    | 1000–<br>1200                |    | 500–1000                            |    | 500–1000                                      |    | 100–550                               |    |
| Horse            | 98  | 22 | 22                                       | 4  | 9   | 5  | 3                            | 1  | 96                                  | 29 | 110   | 14 | 191                                   | 19 |
| Dog              | 3   | +  | 3  | +  | 2   | +  | 1                            | +  | 4                                   | +  | 2   | +  | 13                                    | +  |
| Sheep/<br>goat   | 77  | 17 | 167                                      | 27 | 62  | 35 | 59                           | 24 | 34                                  | 10 | 171   | 21 | 334                                   | 34 |
| Cattle           | 172   | 39 | 284                                      | 46 | 39  | 22 | 49                           | 20 | 117                                 | 36 | 335   | 42 | 403                                   | 40 |
| Pig              | 93  | 21 | 139                                      | 23 | 65  | 37 | 129                          | 52 | 79                                  | 24 | 184   | 23 | 51                                    | 5  |
| Cat              | 0   |    | 0  |    | 0   |    | 0                            |    | 0                                   |    | 0   |    | 2                                     | +  |
| Bear             | 0   |    | 0  |    | 0   |    | 0                            |    | 0                                   |    | 0   |    | 0                                     |    |
| Hen              | 3   |    | 5  |    | 6   |    | 10                           |    | 0                                   |    | 0   |    | 52                                    |    |
| Birds of<br>prey | 0   |    | 0  |    | 0   |    | 0                            |    | >2                                  |    | 0   |    | 3                                     |    |

[Table 5](#). The frequency of animals in Öland, on farms (Ormöga and Hässlebyborg), in wetland (Skedemosse), at a fort (Eketorp), and in a water hole at Eketorp (after Elisabeth Iregren 1997: [tables 3](#) and [7](#)).

| Sites            | Ormöga, Bredsättra Par., |    | Hässleborg, Köping Par., |    | Skedemosse, Gärdslösa Par., |    | Eketorp I, I-II, Gräsgårds Par., |    | Eketorp II, Gräsgårds Par., |    | Eketorp III, Gräsgårds Par., |    | Eketorp water-hole |    |
|------------------|--------------------------|----|--------------------------|----|-----------------------------|----|----------------------------------|----|-----------------------------|----|------------------------------|----|--------------------|----|
|                  | Öland                    |    | Öland                    |    | Öland                       |    | Öland                            |    | Öland                       |    | Öland                        |    | Öland              |    |
| Date             | 200-700                  |    | 0-200                    |    | 200-500                     |    | 300-700                          |    | 400-700                     |    | 1000-1300                    |    | 0-1100             |    |
| Species          | No.                      | %  | No.                      | %  | No.                         | %  | No.                              | %  | No.                         | %  | No.                          | %  | No.                | %  |
| Horse            | 28                       | 5  | 128                      | 4  | 7,160                       | 40 | 4                                | 1  | 696                         | 1  | 1,624                        | 1  |                    | 29 |
| Dog              | 2                        | +  | 39                       | 1  | 342                         | 2  | 6                                | 1  | 1,884                       | 2  | 4,441                        | 2  |                    | ?  |
| Sheep/<br>goat   | 302                      | 53 | 1,392                    | 45 | 2,946                       | 16 | 185                              | 31 | 36,847                      | 48 | 91,570                       | 47 |                    | 28 |
| Cattle           | 180                      | 32 | 1,029                    | 33 | 6,610                       | 37 | 325                              | 55 | 30,622                      | 40 | 67,495                       | 35 |                    | 41 |
| Pig              | 58                       | 10 | 448                      | 15 | 805                         | 4  | 69                               | 12 | 6,869                       | 9  | 28,362                       | 15 |                    | 3  |
| Cat              | 0                        |    | 1                        | +  | 6                           | +  | 0                                |    | 56                          | +  | 424                          | +  |                    | ?  |
| Bear             | 0                        |    | 0                        |    | 0                           |    | 0                                |    | 0                           |    | 0                            |    |                    | ?  |
| Hen              | 0                        |    | ?                        |    | 8                           |    | 1                                |    | 323                         |    | 3,380                        |    |                    | ?  |
| Birds<br>of prey | 0                        |    | ?                        |    | >57                         |    | 0                                |    | 43                          |    | 134                          |    |                    | ?  |
| Deer             | 0                        |    | 0                        |    | 35                          | +  | 0                                |    | 0                           |    | 0                            |    | 0                  | ?  |

The osteologist Elisabeth Iregren has analysed and discussed the distribution of animal species from the Iron Age based on animal bones from the Mälaren valley, Skåne, Öland, and Gotland.<sup>107</sup> In farm contexts cattle were usually in the majority, but there were also sheep, goats, and pigs, along with horses, dogs, cats, and poultry ([Tables 4](#) and [5](#)). Normally there was very little game. It seems as if wild animals were not consumed or used on the farm. The animal bones lay in concentrations or in waste pits. Some of them derive from special rituals associated with the construction of houses or the abandonment of a site.

We find a distinctive composition—very different from what is seen in more ordinary settlements—in the material resulting from the excavation in 1969 and 1971 of a small area in the harbour area in the Black Earth at Birka, the Viking Age site on Björkö in Mälaren, central Sweden. What distinguishes Birka is the larger quantity of fur-bearing animals. Most of the

bones come from fox, but there are also alpine hare, squirrel, beaver, stoat, pine marten, badger, wolverine, and otter. Several of these species were brought to Birka as fur commodities, which the osteologists can see because certain parts of the skeleton remained when the animals were skinned. Domesticated animals nevertheless predominate. Cattle and pigs were the most common meat animals, while sheep were kept above all for their wool. The fragments of different parts of animal skeletons suggest that the animals were slaughtered at Birka. Dog, horse, goat, and cat were also found, as were fish and bird.<sup>108</sup> Later excavations in 1990–1995, chiefly of a house plot and workshops, further into the former urban settlement in the Black Earth, confirm the earlier osteological examinations, yielding finds of livestock, fur-bearing animals, fish, and birds.<sup>109</sup>

The fourth century AD saw an increase in the ritual use of animals on farms and in graves, at the same time as animals began to appear on jewellery and other metal objects. The iconography often includes depictions of wild animals, exotic animals, and imaginary creatures. Since rituals generally always have a historical background, the following section looks at the cultural history of individual animal species further back in time.

Animals of different species were involved in what people did at different outdoor sites. There are reasons why animal bones are distributed in different ways. Before discussing this we must first consider the historical background of the domesticated animals, their properties, and our potential to acquire knowledge about the management of animals. It will then be necessary to shed light on the history of wild animals and predators, the occurrence of wild animals, and their ecological adaptation. Animal husbandry, breeding, and hunting are some of the underlying factors affecting human attitudes to animals. The history of domestication in Scandinavia goes back to the Stone Age. Let us examine the characteristics of the different domesticated animals and their first appearance in Scandinavia.

### *Cattle*

The aurochs was a large animal, one of the indigenous mammals that had lived in Scandinavia since early in the Stone Age. Cattle were much smaller

than aurochs and must have been brought to Scandinavia, since there is no evidence that aurochs were tamed here. Aurochs preferred relatively open wooded grassland, natural meadows along rivers, and bogs where they could graze on grass and herbs. Presumably there was only a small population of aurochs in southern Scandinavia, and they died out 7,000 years ago. We may assume that the aurochs vanished because of hunting rather than because the vegetation became so dominated by woodland that they could not find sufficient grazing.<sup>110</sup>

The oldest find of domesticated cattle comes from Sjælland in Denmark, dated to 4800 BC, the Ertebølle period of the Mesolithic.<sup>111</sup> In earlier research archaeologists did not expect a dating as far back as the Mesolithic, since it was claimed that no such animals could be found in a hunting society. The introduction of cattle to Scandinavia is a controversial topic which requires more research.

Through deliberate breeding, different varieties of cow were created in different parts of Scandinavia. Cattle became the most common farm animals in prehistoric times, and fragments of their bones can be found in most archaeological contexts. Cattle are gregarious. The herds move according to a regular pattern on set paths between different parts of their grazing area, from the pasture to the water hole and to resting places. Keeping these animals therefore required good pastures and water, access to covered byres and storage places for hay. Cattle were the most common domesticated animals in the pre-Christian era and they seem to have been a valuable economic resource.

The Roman authors Columella and Varro wrote that cattle were important as draught animals and sacrificial animals but not for their milk products. The Romans did not drink milk, probably because of lactose intolerance.<sup>112</sup> Milk production has traditionally been important in northern Europe, since the proportion of the population with lactose malabsorption is very low. It may therefore be assumed that cattle in Scandinavia during the Iron Age and Middle Ages provided the people of the farm with meat, dairy produce, skins, and draught power.

In archaeological contexts, cattle are the most common animals along with sheep/goat.<sup>113</sup> Iconographic representations of cattle can be found on the large Danish bronze cauldrons in graves from the Pre-Roman Iron Age, and on imported Roman bronzes, for instance the statuette of a bull found in

Öland. Later in the Late Iron Age, on the other hand, cattle are no longer depicted.

### *Sheep/goat*

Ever since the Neolithic, sheep and goats have been present in Scandinavia. One of the earliest datings from Danish settlements is of a tooth (sheep/goat), calibrated age 3980–3810 BC.<sup>114</sup> The dating and the findings indicate the use of sheep/goat in the earliest phase of the Neolithic. In the Middle Neolithic there are bones preserved at settlements. Bones of sheep dominate.<sup>115</sup> Several goats, as well as sheep, have been found in wetlands,<sup>116</sup> and sheep occurred at special places like the Alvastra pile dwelling in Östergötland, Sweden.<sup>117</sup> Sheep and goats are present in different ways in archaeological contexts, with preserved bones of both species and artefacts decorated with an iconography of goats.

Herds of sheep and goats were valuable sources of subsistence during Scandinavian prehistory. Work with animal husbandry goes on in annual cycles. Milk, meat, wool and the whole bodies can be used for all kinds of purposes. In short, the animals had a great value in the struggle for survival using the available resources of the landscape.<sup>118</sup> Herding is also a central theme in the Icelandic sagas. For instance, in *Egil's Saga* 29 we are told that Skallagrim's herd increased so much that the animals had to spend a longer time up in the mountains in the summer and that they could winter in the mountain valleys. He also started a sheep-breeding farm near the mountains.<sup>119</sup>

Of course, herding may have changed over the millennia. Such aspects as the ratio of sheep to goats, the age structure of the flock, and the sex ratio among breeding adults could be helpful for understanding herding.<sup>120</sup> Yet even if we do not know enough about these variables to understand every aspect of prehistoric herding, or to know which age and sex of animals were significant in livestock herding and ritual practice, it is important to note the different characteristics explicitly ascribed to sheep and goats.

Sheep and goats use different kinds of land, and the animals have quite different abilities. They are kept for economic reasons and probably appeal



to humans in special ways. Sheep are grass-eaters whereas goats prefer brushwood. In terms of individuality the goat can be sagacious, as the animal can learn to do several things related to the herd. A goat can also be a kind of leader among a herd of sheep, as it is calmer and thus acts as a stabilizer in the herd; sheep are sheep, although it is perhaps sheepish to point that out. In a way sheep and goats also have their special *habitus*.

## ***Pig***

Wild boar were domesticated during the Neolithic. This species was especially easy to tame since the animals are omnivorous and probably lived close to human settlements. Pigs therefore competed for food with humans.

Pigs live in flocks, with a group of sows, young animals, and piglets under the leadership of an old boar. A flock can therefore be herded by a human being acting as leader of the group. Because of their social nature, pigs are easy to tame and can be used in a number of ways. A pig can be trained to find mushrooms, to herd sheep, and to be a pet.<sup>121</sup> A sow can have up to two litters a year, with many piglets in each litter. In view of the good reproductive capacities of pigs and the high proportion of meat in the slaughtered bodies, it is far from strange that the mythical boar Sæhrimnir served as a never-ending food resource in Valhalla. The ability of pigs to provide households with meat, lard, skins, and bristles goes far back in time.

Pigs have been important farm animals since the Neolithic. Pigs are always represented among the bones excavated on Iron Age farms. They were a natural part of the livestock, just as in the pig-breeding on the Alfheim farm in mythology. They are not represented by large numbers of animals. It is conceivable that pigs functioned as they did in more recent times, when each household had one pig. Pigs were not used very much in ritual; they are above all found in graves. In the yard outside the Viking Age cult house at Borg in Östergötland, central Sweden, there was a large amount of sow bones, indicating that special ritual acts took place here.<sup>122</sup> In iconography, however, wild boar occur in the Late Iron Age, for example on Vendel Period helmets. In the absence of bones from wild boar, on the other hand, it is impossible to say whether they were commonly hunted.



## *Dog*

The dog is the oldest domesticated animal. About 13,000 years ago the wolf was tamed. Despite selective breeding, dogs retain the original behaviour of the predatory animal, with speed, strong muscles, and a very good sense of smell. The wolf, like the dog, is a pack animal, which means that cooperation between the members of the pack is fundamental for survival. The speed makes it possible for wolves/dogs to chase their prey over long distances, and they can then kill it with a bite from their powerful jaws. Hunting and survival require cooperation between the animals, and that is also why a human can become the leader of his pack and his dog.

The properties of dogs are such that they can become very close to humans, as faithful companions. They can sense danger and guide their leader. Dogs are adaptable and therefore have many uses besides being pets. Even today dogs are kept for herding animals, pulling vehicles, and tracking. A dog leash from the Viking Age boat grave at Ladby in Fyn, Denmark, shows that four dogs were leashed together, probably in connection with hunting. Another dog leash from Valsgårde grave 10, Uppland, has a stouter spiked collar, evidently to control a more aggressive dog. [123](#)

The Roman authority on farming, Columella, wrote in the first century AD that it was advisable to breed dogs. The right colour could be chosen to suit the use intended for the dog. It was preferable to have a white dog as a sheepdog because it could then be distinguished from other predators. A dog with many colours was not suitable for any purpose. In Roman times there were many different breeds of dog. [124](#)

Breeding goes back a long way. In Scandinavia the Mesolithic dogs resemble Norwegian elkhounds but with stronger jaws. In the Neolithic there were also smaller sizes. As long ago as the Early Roman Iron Age, in the second century, there were greyhounds in Scandinavia. A richly equipped woman's grave in Överbo, Västergötland, in central Sweden, contained five greyhounds. During the Late Iron Age there were also larger dogs of sheepdog type and occasional greyhounds, known from finds in graves. Osteological analyses have demonstrated four different breeds of dog in the Iron Age. [125](#)

Dogs, along with horses, are the most common animals deposited as whole bodies in graves. Special animals were buried in separate graves.

Parts of dogs were also deposited in building foundations. In the archaeological record we see a much greater variety of uses for dogs than in Norse mythology. Dogs have a low profile in Eddic texts, apart from the watchdog Garm, who guarded the subterranean Hel until he broke loose at Ragnarok.

### *Horse*

Tame horses are descended from wild horses, the tarpan in Europe and western Asia, and Przewalski's horse in eastern Asia. The domestication of wild horses took place 3600–3100 BC in northern Kazakhstan, and not long afterwards there were tame horses in continental Europe and Scandinavia.<sup>126</sup> Tame horses occur in Scandinavia during the Bronze Age and are thought to have been imported as early as the Neolithic, although the horse was already present here in its wild form. When horses came to Scandinavia, farms already had domesticated cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs.

Morphological studies of bones suggest that in the Scandinavian Iron Age there were five different breeds of horse in Sweden: the old horse of the Scandinavian Bronze Age, the Gotlandic Ihre horse, a breed of tarpan type from Valsgårde grave 12 in Uppland, and two Öland breeds of different sizes. It is presumed that horse-breeding occurred on the island of Öland in the Late Iron Age and Early Middle Ages.<sup>127</sup> Horse skeletons in bogs and graves show that the horses were of more or less the same height, 120–140 cm, as modern Icelandic ponies or fjord horses. It is possible that prehistoric horses were slightly smaller and slimmer.<sup>128</sup>

Today's great variation in horse breeds is a result of efficient breeding to achieve the desired appearance and characteristics. The original dun colour has been changed towards the standard colours bay, black, and chestnut, which occur with different colour combinations of mane and tail, and with white highlights on the forehead and the bridge of the nose, on hoofs and upwards. Combinations of colour predispositions yield new colours, such as isabelle, grey, skewbald, and leopard.<sup>129</sup>

The horse is decidedly a herd animal, but ever since it was domesticated it has had the character of a partner to man, in a way that makes it different from other domesticated animals. Horses use their senses of hearing, smell, and touch for communication with other animals, including humans. The

rearing and feeding of horses requires good grazing in relatively large areas with resting places and water. Horses are faster and stronger than sheep and cattle. They have therefore been used for a great many other purposes compared to other domestic animals. Horses have served as pack animals, draught animals, working animals, and riding animals, and have not been kept merely to supply food like other animals. Their meat was however eaten during the pre-Christian era, and their skin and hair have been important household products.

Horses have to a large extent signified power and prosperity in most world cultures since Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Greece, and the Roman Empire.<sup>130</sup> Horses have both practical/functional and symbolic/metaphorical connotations. They are associated with aristocratic manners and warfare between states but also with ordinary people's needs for horse power.

Horses are represented archaeologically in several different ways. Slaughtered horses are found on farms and in wetlands in outlying areas. Horses are excavated in pre-Christian graves, and together with dogs they are the most common animal found buried along with men and women alike. Horses were also buried in graves of their own. The different functions of the horse have left extensive archaeological source material, including harnesses and mounts, spurs, stirrups, and saddles. Harness saddles for carriage horses are found especially in richly equipped graves from the Vendel Period and the Viking Age.

### *Cat*

The domestication of Asian wild cats probably took place in the Middle East about 9,000 years ago, but the African and European wild cat is also considered to be the origin of domestic cats. These arrived in Scandinavia in the Early Roman Iron Age, probably through the network of contacts that Scandinavians had with the south. The Romans imported domestic cats from Egypt. The fifty or more breeds of cat that exist today arose through breeding by humans. This has given rise to exterior differences in size, fur quality, colour, and the shape of the ears, as well as in behaviour and temperament.<sup>131</sup>

The earliest find of domestic cat in Scandinavia comes from a cremation grave from Kastrup, Gram Parish in South Jutland, Denmark. The grave has been archaeologically dated to the Late Roman Iron Age, *c.* AD 200. From the settlement site of Sejlflod, Ålborg, there are also finds of cat from the Roman Iron Age. At Lundeberg near Svendborg in Fyn, also in Denmark, there are domestic cats which are dated to the Late Roman Iron Age.<sup>132</sup> In Sweden the earliest cats occur in the cremation grave of a rich woman in Västergötland, dated to the Early Roman Iron Age, *c.* AD 200. Two cats, not cremated, were observed in the grave. It is not until the Viking Age, however, that cats are more regularly deposited in graves.<sup>133</sup>

### *Poultry*

Domestic geese have been kept in Scandinavia since the Stone Age. They derive from the greylag goose, and domestication led to greater body weight, a diminished ability to fly, and increased egg production. The stock of poultry was expanded in the Iron Age with the introduction of hens in the Early Roman Iron Age.

The domestication of Asian jungle hens took place about 5,000 years ago. Breeders of hens concentrated on egg production, size, and the colour of the feathers. The birds that have primarily been domesticated are of the kind that do not feed their young, which can easily be reared without their parents. Hens require a dry and draught-free place, but can be allowed to go around loose in a yard. They are adapted to life on the ground and therefore do not fly well. They have a poor sense of smell but better hearing. Hens have a special behaviour to protect themselves from predatory animals and birds, by escaping or lying flat and motionless.<sup>134</sup> Hens need to be tended by humans, and because of their behaviour they have in turn domesticated humans, without whose help hens could scarcely exist.

Poultry bones are found from as early as Pre-Roman times, as evidenced by an excavation at Burlöv, just north of Malmö in Skåne. A fragmentary bone of an ulna was found in a well and fragmentary bone of a tarsometatarsus was retrieved from a waste pit. The finds show that hens, along with geese, played a part in the human diet even in the centuries before the birth of Christ. In Denmark the oldest find of hen is from

Smedegaard, in Thy, Jutland, radiocarbon-dated to the time around the birth of Christ. [135](#)

### *Pets*

The number of pets in western Europe today is larger than it has ever been in human history. Pet keeping grew quickly in connection with urbanization in the nineteenth century. Pets lived on terms dictated by their owners and were isolated from other species and from animals of their own species. Animals become pets not merely for their practical properties but above all as company and as a part of the owner's social identity.

The British historian Keith Thomas writes about pets from an English perspective, but it may also be applicable to the situation in other urbanized and industrialized countries. In the Middle Ages it was fashionable for rich people to have pets. Even though it was forbidden, monks and nuns had pets in the monasteries and nunneries. In the thirteenth century, monkeys were imported as pets. It was chiefly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that people in England began keeping pets in earnest. Both the middle class and the working class in the cities had tame monkeys, tortoises, otters, rabbits, and squirrels, besides dogs and cats. On rural farms there were also pet lambs. In the eighteenth century other animals found their way into homes as pets: hares, mice, hedgehogs, bats, and toads. Both wild and imported birds, such as canaries, larks, nightingales, linnets, magpies, parrots, and jackdaws were put in cages. Pets were allowed into the house, they accompanied their owners to church, and they attended banquets. Horses and bears, like other animals, were often given human names. Dog breeds differed in status just as their owners did. In the eighteenth century it was said that people used to choose a dog to suit their position in society. Estate owners had hounds, aristocratic hunters had greyhounds or setters, artisans had mongrels. The hunting dogs of the nobility, chiefly greyhound and beagle, were also pets. They became an appendage to human society and thus metonymically human or semi-human. [136](#)

Can the situation have been similar in pre-Christian times? Could any species of animal become a pet? It is perfectly possible. Dogs have been given individual graves since the earliest part of the Stone Age, as far back

as 11,000 years ago in Siberia and 9,500–8,500 years ago in Lepenski Vir in Serbia. In ancient Egypt, cats were mummified, as were other domestic animals and wild animals (e.g. crocodiles, birds, gazelles) in connection with funeral rituals.<sup>137</sup> It is not possible, of course, to draw conclusions about any pets on the basis of these examples of the treatment of dead animals in such cultural contexts that differ so much in pre-Christian Scandinavia in the Iron Age and the Early Middle Ages.

In graves in Scandinavia where animals were buried together with a human being, the animal may actually have been a kind of pet or companion, especially when the whole animal was deposited in the grave as part of the burial ritual for a particular person. The individual graves for dogs and horses especially suggest that these animals had a close relationship to their owners and that they meant a great deal emotionally to them. The archaeological evidence shows that cats were not placed in individual graves in Scandinavia. Cats have most frequently been found in Viking Age graves, both male and female.

Because of the properties of the dog and the cat, it is very likely that they had the role of pet, as today. The role of dogs was not merely functional, or just guarding the household, as indicated by the mosaics in the doorways of houses at Pompeii. At the House of the Tragic Poet, there is a mosaic of a chained guard dog. On the threshold is the warning *Cave canem*, ‘Beware of the dog’.<sup>138</sup> The cat, because of its hunting instincts, gets rid of pests. The obedience of the dog and the independence of the cat mean that these animals, besides having their functional roles, may have blended into the farm environment and become pets.

## **The farm perspective and animal husbandry**

Domesticated animals have existed in Scandinavia for varying lengths of time, and their different historical backgrounds were probably significant for abstract ideas about animals for a long time subsequently. These animals also differ in behaviour and characteristics, and thus have different uses on the farm.

The practical utility of the farm animals puts prehistoric animal husbandry into perspective. This chapter proceeds from the farm where people lived, assuming a Midgard mentality. This Midgard perspective –

considering needs, resources, and knowledge of how the animals were used—sheds light on aspects of animal husbandry, on how humans controlled the animals' reproduction and well-being. Animals were necessary for their subsistence. Humans, domesticated animals, and wild animals were all actors on the farm and in the landscape with its different biotopes. The day-to-day chores on and around the farm created the conditions for ritual practice and iconography. Our archaeological knowledge of everyday life is one of the foundations for understanding people's attitudes to animals and for interpreting ritual practice in pre-Christian times.

Practical tasks, then as now, must have been the life-blood of human existence, and the different animals were attractive in different ways, depending on their behaviour and properties. A personal relationship to animals played a major part, just as it does today. It was mainly with horses, dogs, and cats that people had personal relations. Milk-yielding animals were also close to humans, leading to a personal relationship to cows, ewes, and nanny goats. Because of these close relationships, it is highly likely that animals even in pre-Christian times were given individual names. Production conditions and the values ascribed to animals comprised a conceptual system to do with the way people perceived themselves in relation to the world around them, to nature and animals. This Midgard mentality is important for understanding the living conditions of animals and humans. The domestication of the animals, the way they were looked after, and knowledge of the behaviour and properties of different animals meant that they were a distinct sphere of responsibility for humans.

What was the economic and functional significance of animals for people in their daily lives, and to what extent did this affect their view of animals? Why were domesticated animals used in ritual practice? Why did certain animals occur in rituals, and why were certain other animals included in iconographic programmes? These questions cannot be answered unambiguously. Interpretations must bear in mind several different aspects of the practical considerations and needs, as well as the behaviour of different species and their potential for integration in the world of humans. This means that a limited farm perspective is necessary but not sufficient; we must also consider political structures and ideological stances.

An understanding of pre-Christian animal husbandry and the outlook on animals is based on the historical background of the individual species and



traditions about their existence, their prevalence, behaviours, and characteristics, their requirements of care and fodder, and their practical uses. Information about all these aspects of animal husbandry must be assembled from different disciplines. The occurrence and proportions of different species can be interpreted through osteological analyses of excavated bones. Analyses of macrofossils and pollen by environmental historians can paint a picture of the extent to which animals were kept outdoors. Analyses of trace elements and isotopes in bones give information about food intake in humans and animals.<sup>139</sup>

A knowledge of the natural environment—with access to water, pasture, and arable field systems—in which animal husbandry was practised at the time can be obtained through palaeoecological landscape analyses. Modern descriptions of the management of farm animals contribute knowledge of fodder requirements and supervision during the year, and of the animals' habits and properties.<sup>140</sup> Folkloristic studies from historical times are crucial for the light they shed on relations between humans and animals. Recorded traditions provide information about friendly relations and intimacy, but also about people's fear and scorn, and about how animals played a part in folk belief and folk medicine.<sup>141</sup> We know from present-day and historical circumstances that the care of animals was a gendered pursuit. The division of labour between women and men and people of different ages is clear in connection with chores such as foddering, milking, slaughtering, or herding. All the ways in which an animal body could be used are significant for being able to assess and understand the conditions for prehistoric animal husbandry. A knowledge of the work done by humans is important for clarifying the attitudes that may have existed to the animals on the farm.

Different categories of people, with their own special interests, lived on different farms of varying size. There may have been places where there were no animals at all, and farms which specialized in, say, sheep-or horse-breeding. There were socially stratified communities with influential individuals and families in political alliances throughout the prehistoric period; individuals and families with the right to own livestock enshrined in oral law. At the same time, there were people who did not have the same opportunity to own animals and who did not have the same say as individuals of better birth. In this study I do not consider these differences

in population structure in different prehistoric periods and in different environments. The extent to which different population groups or social classes are visible in the archaeological record is a controversial question. It is likely that the vestiges left by the most materially prosperous people and settings dominate the archaeological remains and that other categories are less visible. This of course has consequences for archaeological interpretations of farms, villages, and towns. Questions of this kind will be passed over here in favour of a more general discussion of animals and their maintenance, but this is not to claim that there was any 'average person' in the pre-Christian period.<sup>142</sup>

A farm perspective on the care and uses of animals comprises not just the livestock but also the farm with its buildings and enclosures. A farm was adapted in one way or another for the management of animals. The livestock had to be kept the whole year round. Like tillage, animal husbandry was subject to seasonal conditions, and the composition of the livestock depended on factors such as the availability of fodder and pasture.

The composition of farms and the design of farm buildings changed during prehistoric times. During the long period when domesticated animals have existed in Scandinavia, the meaning of the term 'farm' has been far from self-evident. In the Stone Age, for example, there might be just one building, and it seems as if the household had a structure that differed from that of farms in the Iron Age.<sup>143</sup> Animals were kept outdoors the whole year round. It may be envisaged that herding was important work, and that enclosures for animals or arable fields took up much of the landscape in the vicinity of the house.

The design of houses and the stabling of animals in the Early Bronze Age indicate a close relationship between humans and animals. The architecture suggests that the animals did not merely provide labour and meat; they were important in other ways too. It is possible that animals in the Early Bronze Age, because of the new architecture, already had a more noticeable and materially expressed affinity to the people on the farm and to the household. Such close relations between people and animals were also reflected in mortuary rituals, with sheep, dogs, horses, and other animals accompanying members of the farm into the grave. Domestic animals were also deposited in outlands and wetlands. The major animals in Bronze Age iconography were horses and birds.

A controversial problem is whether the larger houses from the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age, with their division into rooms, also housed livestock.<sup>144</sup> It is conceivable that the animals were herded in the outlands in the warmer part of the year and could be kept outside, close to the farm the rest of the year. A cooler and damper climate could have led to a need to stable livestock during the winter, so that people and animals lived under the same roof. Pollen diagrams show that the acreage of meadow land increased, which suggests that more land could have been used for haymaking to give winter fodder for the animals. During the Early Iron Age, moreover, tillage grew in scope, and in much of Scandinavia it was reorganized. Farms and groups of farms were ordered in a system of infields and outfields. Pasture land and arable fields were expanded. A cattle path led to the farmstead with its houses and byres.<sup>145</sup>

Animals, above all farm animals, were deposited at houses and farms all through prehistoric times: in the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age. This indicates that there was a palpable and materially expressed dependence between people and animals. The animals participated in the household.

Research in nutritional ecology and settlement history is crucial for our understanding of animal husbandry in prehistory. The image we gain of agriculture and settlement structure is that there were clear regional variations in landscape use in Scandinavia. In a down-to-earth perspective, this means that people provided for themselves and structured their world in different ways. Local and regional conditions were significant for the manner and the extent to which people adopted innovations and changed their life-world.

Generally speaking, animals were kept outdoors, as was possible throughout prehistoric times. Animals could also be kept in byres, which were first built during the Bronze Age and then in the Iron Age. The advantage of this was that the livestock were protected from damp and wind, and it was possible to give them additional fodder when the pasture had been overgrazed or was covered with snow. Milking was easier, and the manure may have been collected to fertilize the fields. Keeping livestock indoors gave effective protection against theft and predators. It meant that an even closer relationship between humans and animals was established. This also had consequences for people's health, with the increased risk of

contagion. The main reason for the introduction of byres was probably the need for more rational milk production, rather than concern for the animals' health, according to the human geographer Mats Widgren. Byres have disadvantages, as the animals can more easily contract diseases spread by bacteria, viruses, parasites, and fungi, which can also be transferred to humans.[146](#)

Different domestic animals have different requirements as regards pasture and fodder, and they thrive in different biotopes. Cattle eat grass and certain herbs, and it is harder to provide for them in the winter if there is snow cover. Sheep and horses eat grass. The horse is a choosy eater, preferring the same type of pasture as cattle. Sheep and goats do well in different kinds of landscape. Goats can live on bushy vegetation and like shoots, leaves, and tender twigs of small trees more than grass. Pigs are omnivores. Cats are carnivores, while dogs can eat anything.[147](#)

In the Early Iron Age, when there was a switch from open pasturing to indoor feeding, chiefly of cattle, it became necessary to satisfy the animals' need for fodder. This reorganization of agricultural production probably led to a change in attitudes to livestock. There was closer contact between humans and animals, which needed tending during the winter, and the animal bodies provided energy in the form of heat. The constant milking in particular brought animals close to people. Indoor feeding meant that haymaking and fodder collection became as important and labour-intensive as ploughing, sowing, and harvesting were for cereal production. Feeding the animals and supplying them with fresh water involved a great deal of work. A modern milking cow, for example, needs about 100 litres of water a day. Access to fresh water is extremely important for ruminants, since their digestive systems do not tolerate bad water; water for animals has to be as pure as water for humans.[148](#)

The material remains, however, yield scant information about how animals were looked after. Details in the design of houses and enclosures can give indirect knowledge. Some insight into the conditions and methods of animal husbandry in prehistoric times can be gained from studies in agrarian history, chiefly from the post-Reformation period, and from modern knowledge about farm animals. Only a person who has been confronted personally with animals can have a full understanding of the importance of knowing about animals.

The proportions of sheep and goats, and the variation in age and sex within the flock, are important aspects for understanding sheep farming. [149](#) Icelandic records from the seventeenth century about sheep farming expand our knowledge of how animals were used and valued. The tending of sheep in Iceland was divided according to the four seasons. Wool, milk, and meat were of supreme importance for the Icelandic household. The annual cycle started in the late autumn or early winter, when the sheep were brought back to the farm after the summer grazing in the mountains. It then had to be decided how many of them would be slaughtered and how many would be allowed to live over the winter. In the autumn slaughtering, most parts of the animal were saved for some purpose. The blood was drained off, and when it had been cooled it was stored in large containers for later use. The sheep was skinned, the stomach cut open and the entrails removed. The fat in which the entrails were embedded was kept as a delicacy. The stomach and intestines were cleaned for use as containers, while other internal organs such as the liver and kidneys were cooked in various ways. The heart was eaten fresh. The lungs were fed to the dogs. The scrotum and textiles became bags. The majority of the male lambs were castrated in the spring after reaching an age of fourteen days. They were kept for wool and fat. [150](#)

Whole animal bodies could be used in different ways. If their main practical utility was as food, it seems that cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and later hens together satisfied the desire for meat, milk, and egg products. We know that sheep's wool was important for clothes, textiles, and sailcloth, and goat's hair for hard-wearing garments such as socks. Different wool fibres and spinning techniques gave yarn for a wide variety of textiles. Skins became parchment, soft leather was used for clothes, stomachs were turned into bagpipes and liquid containers. Horns and bones were used for all kinds of implements, and also for musical instruments.

Ethnographic descriptions of the uses of fur, skin, and leather tell of traditions, know-how, and techniques from bygone times. Different animal species and different parts of animals were used to satisfy the need for clothes and rugs. Skins from cattle, sheep, goat, and dog were tanned to give leather, either with or without hair, and cat skins were treated. The materials from the different animal species have differing qualities and were

used for sacks, aprons, furs, clothes, belts, and shoes. The best soft leather, for example, was made from goatskin.<sup>151</sup>

Animal husbandry has of course changed over the millennia. Although we have no archaeological evidence for the different uses of the individual species in pre-Christian times, they were significant in many ways on the farm and essential for its existence. The question is whether we can conceive of animal husbandry back then, with all its dimensions and attitudes to animals. There is a serious risk of falling into a romantic vision of pastoral idylls, or of a harsh world filled with cruelty to animals. Presumably the management of animals in pre-Christian times oscillated between these two extremes. Osteological studies of animal bones from Skedemosse in Öland, Sweden, show pathological changes to the bones. The teeth on both sides of the upper jaw of a six-year-old stallion indicate injury caused by excessive strain. The horse's foot bones also show traces of strain and wear, and a healed fracture was also observed.<sup>152</sup> At the Eketorp fort in Öland, fractures in dogs, pigs, and cattle show that animals were not treated well.<sup>153</sup> The archaeologist Anneli Sundkvist points out that several of the horses in the boat graves at Vendel and Valsgärde in Uppland and at Eketorp in Öland suffered from spavin.<sup>154</sup> A future osteological research task would be to analyse pre-Christian assemblages of bones from domestic animals in order to learn more about animal health and attitudes to animals.

The different behaviours and properties of animals affect the way they are managed, and the division of labour is crucial for relations established between humans and animals. In this connection I assume that animals retain certain inherent characteristics despite the changes brought about by breeding over thousands of years.

Animal behaviour depends on innate abilities and to a large extent the learning of conditioned reflexes. Some movements, for example, are characteristic of a particular species: a cow must be able to stand up in her own natural way, and a sow must build her own 'nest' when she is to farrow. Managing animals entails spatial demands, since they are programmed for certain patterns of movement. A trusting relationship to humans is grounded very early through contact with young animals.



Imprinting is significant for trust in the future herdsman. Likewise, a pup that is intended to be used as a sheepdog must be with the sheep. [155](#)

Dogs, horses, and goats are herd animals and thus function well in the company of humans or other animals. They have an innate ability to learn patterns of behaviour and can thus establish animal (personal) contacts with a human being. They can be domesticated for all manner of tasks in people's lives. They can be led by people and can also lead other animals. A goat or a dog, for example, can learn how to watch and control a herd of sheep, since they are calmer than sheep and can stabilize the herd, as a kind of leader of the sheep. Pigs are herd animals but can become attached to a person; they can be pets but not leaders. A cat does as it pleases.

Each domestic animal has its distinctive character. Their management is made easier if one is familiar with the animals' innate behaviours and can use conditioned reflexes to train them or teach them routines. Milking shows that personal friendships can develop. Since animals began to be domesticated in the Stone Age, extensive knowledge about animals must have been passed down so that a successful stock could survive. This included deliberate selection for desirable properties, so that knowledge about breeding was passed on from one generation to the next.

We have a rich corpus of source material illustrating attitudes to humans and animals. The ways in which bodies were handled and represented figuratively were intentional and in keeping with norms and values. Humans observe themselves between nature and culture, and bear the stamp of a duality as regards materiality and characteristics, their biological constitution and their forgotten corporeality. When people had the concrete task of handling the bodies of humans and animals in connection with death and other events, they expressed their outlook on life and the world.

To sum up, studies in the disciplines of archaeology, physical anthropology, veterinary medicine, and stock management show that domesticated animals were used in different ways in pre-Christian times. Besides providing food and raw materials for crafts, the animals could be used for a variety of purposes. Cattle could serve as draught animals. Horses were suitable not only for riding but also as pack animals for transporting goods on roadless land. Dogs could be watchdogs, sheepdogs, and take part in hunting.

Animals were kept on the farm to provide necessities and perform useful tasks. There were many uses, but they required having a good hand with



animals and possessing craft skills so that different parts of the animal could be used and worked. The term Midgard mentality can therefore combine all the knowledge about animals that was necessary in everyday life, and that led to the ritualization of animals in various respects.

In prehistoric times there was a change in attitude to animals as people began to keep them indoors. In the Early Roman Iron Age the stock of farm animals was enlarged with the introduction of poultry and domestic cats. Political events in Europe influenced the reorganization of indigenous Scandinavian agriculture. It is possible that ownership and land divisions were inspired by Roman law as early as the Roman Iron Age. Changed farm structures and the growth of villages allowed scope for the development of animal husbandry. Another consequence of this was a change in the ritual use of domesticated animals, for instance burial rituals, and the new use of wild animals in iconographic programmes and for exclusive craft items, such as the snake-head rings on female finger and arm ornaments.

Domesticated animals and their management provide a background for analyses and interpretations of how people in the pre-Christian period ascribed symbolic and metaphorical meanings to animals. The animals on the farm required looking after by humans, and from this we can conclude that the animals in a way domesticated humans in return. Animals occur outside the everyday context of the farm in completely different archaeological contexts, such as cult houses, graves, and wetland deposits. The farm, with the people and animals living on it, is the starting point for coming chapters about ritual acts.

## **Game**

The modern idea that wild animals in prehistoric times surrounded people in a 'natural' way in untouched nature will be reappraised here. Stereotyped modern thinking presupposes that wild animals were important for the survival of prehistoric people. Animals are often assumed to have been an inexhaustible resource in an almost paradisiacal existence, and hunting has been interpreted as solely a survival strategy, more important the further back in time we go. This functional interpretative paradigm of a hunting society has dominated research on the Stone Age. Nature, the wild fauna,

and hunting, on the other hand, often disappear in interpretations of later periods, particularly in the Iron Age, to become popular again as a natural part of medieval feudal society with its hunting privileges. Agriculture as the economic base for human survival has instead been given greater space in interpretations of the later periods. Economic conditions and social power structures provide the main perspectives for interpreting subsequent periods.

The term ‘wild animal’ is used here to cover the animal world that was outside people’s direct care. Through their different functions in the landscape, big game, small game, predators of varying size, birds, and fish meant different things to people. A selection of these animals from different biotopes is visible in the archaeological record, as will be examined below.

It turns out that bones from wild animals are scarce in prehistoric farm contexts. Research on the history of fauna also demonstrates a changing stock of wild animals since the Mesolithic. Being close to humans and to domesticated animals affected the wild animals’ movement patterns. Fundamental living conditions were destroyed for many animals by human intervention in nature, while other species were favoured.

The occurrence of wild animals varied regionally in Scandinavia. The specific local topography and the local intensity of farms and settlement affected the basis for the different animals’ existence.<sup>156</sup> Wild animals of different kinds are documented on settlement sites from the Stone Age. From Bronze Age and Iron Age occupation layers, graves, and wetlands, on the other hand, there are surprisingly few bones of wild animals. In the Norse Iron Age it is possible that red foxes were kept in captivity on farms, so that the fox cubs could provide winter furs.<sup>157</sup> The majority of the animal bones in farm contexts, however, come from domestic animals, while only a few per cent are from the wild fauna.<sup>158</sup>

From the Bronze Age and Iron Age we find depictions of wild animals such as deer, other game animals, birds, and fish. Some animals –chiefly snakes, predators, wild boars, and birds–first appear clearly in artistic metal crafts from the Roman Iron Age and Late Iron Age. Iconographic representations of wild animals are much more common on craft objects than bones of wild animals in archaeological contexts.

What relations did humans have with wild animals, and what part did the animals, their hunting and trapping, play in people’s lives and conceptions?

Since there are, generally speaking, so few bones of wild animals on Iron Age farms, it is likely that people in that period simply were not interested in hunting big game on any scale. This was probably because big game was not common in the immediate vicinity of the farms, living instead in more distant outlands. Since game was limited, it is reasonable to assume that hunting rights were regulated early on, perhaps in the Early Iron Age, at the time when agriculture underwent a transformation, when animals were stabled and more land had to be farmed to provide fodder for the livestock.

Wild animals, above all predators, were nevertheless apart of everyday life, but not at all in the same way as domesticated animals. Wild animals, such as deer, which may have grown up in captivity, cannot be regarded as domesticated. The resulting reduction in body size, the shorter noses and weaker jaws and abnormal dental status, were generally not hereditary and did not alter the species. [159](#)

Tillage and stock keeping were evidently the main human subsistence strategy from the Neolithic onwards. It seems as if game and hunting were of minor importance on the farm. In the culturally created landscape, domesticated animals had the greatest functional utility. The wolf and fox, however, did not avoid farms, and they could be found all through the prehistoric period. These predators were a threat to the domesticated animals and must have provoked fear among the people on the farm. Predators threatened the livelihood of the farm, and they were probably hunted to protect the farm and its occupants, but there are no traces of them in refuse heaps.

Attitudes to big game and small game probably depended on the accessibility of the animals and on how useful they were, or how harmful they were to domesticated animals and humans. Game was evidently not normal food on Iron Age farms. However, hunting may have been an exclusive privilege subject to regulation, not for immediate survival but more as a form of show in a social practice.

Despite the scarce representation of wild animals in the osteological record, the wild fauna underwent a renaissance in the iconography and crafts of the Late Iron Age. A selection of wild animals were depicted on objects: serpent, wild boar, wolf, and birds of prey. These animals then ended up playing a completely different role from domesticated animals in the human conceptual world and in Old Norse mythology. Hypothetically, it seems as if they not only had their part to play in the cosmology, but could

also become political actors, perhaps as part of the resistance to European power, with an exotic quality that expressed the strength of the humans and animals on the farm and in the locality. It seems as if Norse animal ornament was a kind of branding for Scandinavian Iron Age communities.

The question is thus whether there had ever been a natural environment with a wealth of different wild animals close to houses and farms, so that people could hunt all kinds of game as they needed and desired. Of course there was wild nature a long time ago, and it certainly existed especially in the central and northern parts of Scandinavia for most of prehistory. In the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age, however, a cultural landscape was shaped, above all as a result of intensified agriculture in much of southern and central Scandinavia. It is difficult, of course, to say exactly how open the landscape was in general and how much human impact it displayed in different periods in different parts of Scandinavia. But we know that the landscape was changed through the building of farms and the system of infields and outlands, lynchets and pastures. This affected the wild fauna so that certain species were favoured while others were driven away. It is therefore not entirely true to say that the prehistoric landscape was filled with wild animals.

The picture we can obtain today of the occurrence of wild animals requires careful source criticism. Our interpretations and our understanding of attitudes to wild animals in pre-Christian times are also affected by our own cultural filters, our perceptions of nature, wild animals, hunting and trapping. There can be a considerable geographical and mental distance to nature and wild animals. Animals tend to become exotic, and today they are mostly experienced through visits to zoos or safari tours in faraway lands. Wild animals of all kinds, moreover, are accessible through nature films and the world of books. The rich cultural heritage of animal stories, fables, and myths shapes our modern images of animals. They can be perceived as good-natured, friendly creatures or as dangerous, menacing beasts.

There are further problems of source criticism if we seek to explain the low proportion of wild animal bones in the osteological material. The occurrence of wild fauna in different periods, and the possible existence of different animals close to farms, is difficult to ascertain. Several aspects have to be taken into consideration. The representativeness of the animal bones depends on a number of factors, not just the preservation conditions of the site. The occurrence of animals also depends on the accessibility of

the animal stock; that is, how the different animals' requirements for different biotopes could be satisfied when the landscape was increasingly culturalized. Assessing the stock of animals in a local environment calls for detailed palaeoecological investigations, of the kind that will be used below.

The archaeological finds are probably not representative of all categories of farms and people. Like other categories of archaeological evidence, the cultural rules of the ancient past affect the composition of the finds. People's attitudes to game and their opportunities for hunting and trapping are crucial in determining which animals are represented in the archaeological record. Hunting, slaughtering, and butchering may have been done at other places in the landscape, but this is extremely difficult to prove archaeologically.

One may ask whether game animals really were accessible around the settlement site or the farm, and whether it was possible for everyone to hunt. There may be many reasons for the small amount of wild animal bones and the huge number of figurative representations of wild animals. There could have been different kinds of cultural filters. It may be the result of a lack of functional and cultural interest in game, if domesticated animals satisfied people's needs. It can also be a consequence of a lack of attractive game close to the farm, so that people had to go far away if they wanted to hunt. Depictions of wild animals may therefore underline the exotic quality of wild animals, an expression of their symbolic value. The pictures could also be a way for individuals with hunting rights to demonstrate their talents and their social status.

The fragments of animal bones in the concrete remains of prehistoric settlements signal, on the one hand, a (Midgard) mentality reflecting a lack of interest in non-domesticated nature; in game, predators, and hunting. On the other hand, there was a (Midgard) mentality with a keen interest in wild animals, since they are depicted on artefacts, picture stones, and runic stones. Did domesticated meat taste better than game? Were wild animals simply of no interest for people's subsistence, but instead valuable symbols for the person who made or wore the objects beautifully decorated with animals?

The archaeological source material cannot, of course, provide full answers to questions like this. Yet they must be posed if we are to have any hope of getting at the significance of wild animals. The following discussion is therefore based on empirical evidence, with associations in

different directions inspired by other categories of material and later legal regulations. My approach in assessing attitudes to wild animals is to outline the history of the fauna and to cite a couple of examples of prehistoric settings from the Bronze Age and further back in time. This is followed by a consideration of hunting, chiefly with regard to falconry, an art that is attested in the Scandinavian Late Iron Age.

Hunting and fishing were undoubtedly important pursuits in northern Scandinavia well into the modern period, in areas that were not transformed to any great extent by human impact. Likewise, it is probable that people in all coastal districts and along major water systems engaged in fishing and hunted seals and sea birds. In these settings, wild animals were important and stable resources.

The problems of interpreting attitudes to wild animals arise above all when we consider the situation on farms in the Bronze Age and Iron Age in central and southern Scandinavia. The sites that have been excavated, of course, do not represent average settlements, but they are in most cases connected to agriculture, with tillage and animal husbandry. Settlements could therefore differ in character. The following two sites testify to the occurrence of wild animals: the Bronze Age site of Apalle in Uppland and the Viking Age site of Järrestad in Skåne. Here they represent prehistoric settlements, although there will be no in-depth discussion of how the sites were incorporated in the social structures of their times.

Apalle was located in an ancient archipelago landscape not far from an area with rock carvings in today's southern Uppland. Farms were excavated on the site, with buildings and refuse heaps from the Early and Late Bronze Age. The animal bones are dominated by domesticated species, with wild animals accounting for only three per cent: small rodents, fox, beaver, otter, elk, bear, and wolf. The oldest phase yielded the largest quantity of bones from wild animals in separate areas. In the later phase there was instead a small amount of game deposited in the same way as domesticated animals; that is to say, scattered on the site. The consumption of game during the Late Bronze Age may suggest that game animals were on an equal footing with domesticated animals, according to the Swedish archaeologist Inga Ullén.<sup>160</sup> Another interpretation is that the location of the site in an archipelago had led to an actual decrease in game in the vicinity. As game declined in importance, domesticated animals had to satisfy the need for food.

The area around Järrestad in south-east Skåne represents a completely different setting about 1,500 years later than the Apalle site in Uppland. Beside a river, a short distance from the coast, was an aristocratic farmstead with long-houses and a small cult house during the Viking Age. The landscape was used for grazing more than tillage; it was open around the farm and its buildings. The animal bones mostly consist of cattle, horse, pig, sheep/goat, and dog. Only one elk bone and small amounts of fish and bird bones were documented. For the settlement areas in eastern Skåne there may have been game a good distance away, on the south slopes of the Linderöd ridge.<sup>161</sup> It is perfectly possible that game animals grazed near the Järrestad farm, but if these were hunted there is no trace in the archaeological record.

In early medieval towns and on rural sites, the following bird species have been found: hens, tame geese, wild geese, ducks, swans, hawks, eagles, falcons, game birds of field and forest, cranes, gulls, auks, waders, doves, cuckoos, owls, woodpeckers, crows, passerines, cormorants, herons, ibises, divers and swifts. The species that occur depend on the terrain and the topography. Game birds, for example, were important at the Eketorp fort in Öland during the Early Middle Ages.<sup>162</sup> Wild birds probably played a major social role for the upper class. An increase in the consumption of game birds may be a result of falconry or snaring.

Finds of fish bones on Iron Age farms along the coast and inland suggest that coastal fishing was a part of food production. Coastal fishing in the Middle Ages was regulated by the state, the nobility, and the towns. Fishing was a seasonal pursuit which involved fishermen, salters, farmers, and merchants. Whether fishing in the Iron Age was regulated as much as in the Middle Ages is a complex question to answer, since we lack written documents. The main season for catching herring in the Kattegatt and Öresund, for example, was in connection with the spawning in late summer and autumn, from late July to the end of October. Stocks of herring varied: it is reckoned that, in favourable conditions with oceanic water flowing into Öresund and the Kattegatt, there were several busy herring periods from the end of the tenth century. The finds in the Lahibia cave at Kullaberg in southern Sweden show that the stock of Öresund herring was significant earlier as well, up to the seventh century and recurrently in the ninth and tenth centuries; it is not possible at present to date these periods more



accurately. The predominant species were herring, cod, and whiting. Otherwise the same species were caught as in today's waters.<sup>163</sup>

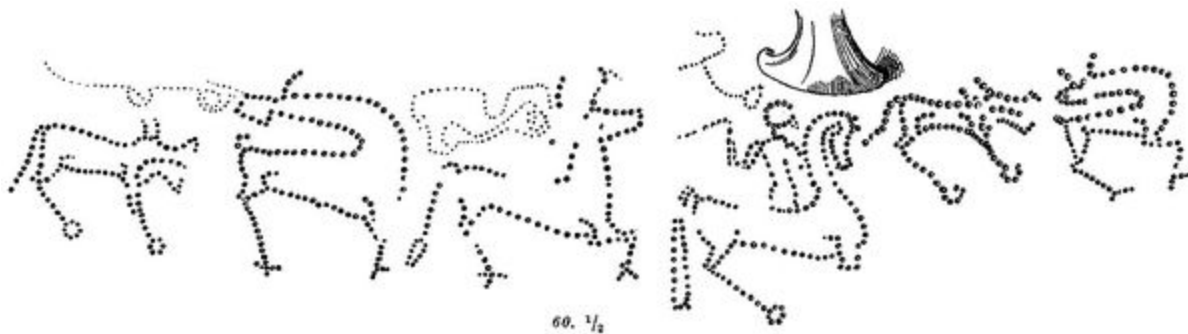
A general statement to the effect that the forests were filled with wild animals and that they lived on until relatively recent times is evidently erroneous. The negative traces, however, are problematic to interpret. The representation of animal bones and the small proportion of game on these sites is not solely due to the availability of game. The frequency also depends on social practice and the type of farms that have mainly been excavated and therefore constitute the archaeological evidence. We cannot be sure that we have representative selections of different types of settlement. It may be the case that we have big aristocratic farms where a large number of people lived and where buildings have left clear traces for archaeologists to document. We may also have small farms for single families living in very different circumstances and not leaving noticeable traces. Since the economic systems were mostly based on animal husbandry and tillage, the landscape was more or less open. The orientation of farm production, the composition and size of the livestock, were significant for the use of different biotopes in the environment.

## **Hunting**

Hunting has been an important source of livelihood well into modern times, chiefly in areas where agriculture and stock keeping have not been dominant. Narratives about hunting from historical times in central and northern Scandinavia therefore tell us something, at least indirectly, about the hunting that may have been done in prehistoric times, perhaps also in areas with tillage and animal husbandry.

Hunting can be practised in many different ways depending on the needs, the prey, and the conditions for organizing hunting. Passive or active hunting require different types of action on the part of the individual hunter or the team. Stalking, battue, chasing, snaring, and systems of traps and pits are different types of hunting that may have occurred in prehistory. Active hunting could be done with the aid of dogs or with both horses and dogs. Disguised as harmless domestic animals, hunters could conceal themselves while hunting birds. Animals living in holes—badgers, rabbits, and foxes—could be hunted with a tame ferret or otter. Fishing could be done with

mergansers, with the birds driving the fish into specially built traps. Eggs could be stolen from birds' nests. [164](#)



[Figure 2.](#) Hunting scene on a pre-Roman pot from Kraghede, northern Jutland. (After Müller 1933: 40.)

Hunting involves a series of rules about the division of labour among the members of the team, the time of the hunt, and the devices used. It is seasonal, like animal husbandry, and must take into consideration the animals' cycle of heat, pregnancy, calving, and suckling. Well-fed animals in the autumn must have been more attractive than animals in early spring, still lean after the winter.

Hunting affected the stock of animals and may be one of several reasons why they declined and disappeared in the Stone Age and the Early Bronze Age. Studies in the history of fauna suggest that there was a limited supply of wild animals in the Bronze Age and Iron Age. The animal bones in the archaeological record likewise indicate that there was limited hunting in those periods. The medieval provincial laws restrict hunting rights to the king and the privileged stratum of society, with detailed guidelines for the actual hunt. [165](#) The medieval laws may therefore be the result of a limited stock of game in the agrarian landscape, a situation that evidently goes further back in time.

The archaeological evidence of prehistoric hunting should therefore be sought in different categories of evidence, such as hunting implements and pictorial representations. The breeding of hunting dogs is also significant, as different sizes of these dogs can be found in Iron Age contexts. [166](#)

Bows, arrows, and spears testify that there could have been active hunting throughout the prehistoric period. Passive hunting with pits for trapping elk and wolf may have been used all through prehistoric times,

although the evidence for pits is chiefly found in the central and northern parts of Scandinavia. Hunting with pits took place well into modern times in Sweden.[167](#)

For later periods in prehistory, the equestrian equipment and the bow and arrows used by horsemen are significant evidence for the study of hunting. Pictures of fishing trips and hunting scenes with horse and dog exist from the Bronze Age and Iron Age. On Early Iron Age pottery there are several scenes depicting cooperation between horsemen, horses, and dogs in different types of hunting ([Figure 2](#)).[168](#) On a medieval door from Rogslösa Church in Östergötland there is a representation of a hunter with a horn, two hounds, a hunting bird, and a deer. The door has previously been interpreted as a reminiscence of pre-Christian times, but it could instead be a contemporary reflection of a general European trend of looking back to the time when the Scandinavians had created a place of their own in Christian Europe.[169](#)

Cooperation between a hunter and a dog is important for stalking and has existed ever since the Mesolithic, perhaps one reason why the wolf was tamed. The selective breeding of different dog breeds and the import of greyhounds in the Roman Iron Age was connected with an interest in battue and chase. Horse-breeding and the import of large horses during the Roman Iron Age were likewise not merely intended for purposes of warfare but also for hunting. The close association of hunting with the aristocracy and war goes back at least as far as the Roman period and continued during the subsequent centuries.[170](#)

Different types of hunting and cooperation in hunting can be glimpsed in the scanty archaeological material. People probably hunted for household consumption, although this is not visible in the archaeological record. The hunting, slaughter, and consumption of wild animals may have been done at special places away from the settlements, and if the meat and furs were brought home they would not have left any traces. It is highly likely that battue or chase took place at a distance from the farms, as a kind of sport, of which we have written evidence from the courts of Europe. Large areas were turned into royal deer parks, and hunting was a motif in royal regalia and heraldry.[171](#)

A certain kind of hunting, including falconry, may also have been a pastime reserved for the aristocracy. Just as the instinctive behaviour of domesticated animals was exploited by humans, it was possible to take advantage of the instinctive behaviour of wild animals. Archaeological traces of hunting and the different methods used can give us some insight into attitudes to wild animals.

Falconry is a skill, and a lifestyle. People have trained falcons and hawks for hunting for over a thousand years. Falconry is a cooperative endeavour of many years' standing between the falconer and the bird of prey. Falconry is supposed to have been introduced to Europe from the east, expressed pictorially perhaps as early as the gold bracteates of the sixth century.<sup>172</sup>

[Table 6](#). Birds of prey and prey in 34 Swedish 'falconry graves', AD 500–1000.<sup>173</sup>

| <b>Species</b>                                       | <b>Number of graves</b> |
|--|-------------------------|
| Goshawk <i>Accipiter gentilis</i>                    | 28                      |
| Peregrine falcon <i>Falco peregrinus</i>             | 5                       |
| Gyrffalcon <i>Falco rusticolus</i>                   | 4                       |
| Sparrowhawk <i>Accipiter nisus</i>                   | 3                       |
| Eagle <i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>                       | 2                       |
| Eagle <i>Aquila chrysaetos/ Haliaeetus albicilla</i> | 1                       |
| Merlin <i>Falco columbarius</i>                      | 1                       |
| Eagle owl <i>Bubo bubo</i>                           | 13                      |
| Teal <i>Anas crecca</i>                              | 1                       |
| Goldeneye <i>Bucephala clangula</i>                  | 1                       |
| Red-breasted merganser <i>Merganser serrator</i>     | 1                       |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Duck <i>Anatinae sp.</i>                 | 5  |
| Black grouse <i>Tetrao tetrix</i>        | 3  |
| Capercaillie <i>Tetro urogallus</i>      | 1  |
| Hazel grouse <i>Bonasia bonasia</i>      | 2  |
| Crane <i>Grus grus</i>                   | 5  |
| Golden plover <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i> | 1  |
| Snipe <i>Gallinago gallinago</i>         | 1  |
| Pigeon <i>Columba sp.</i>                | 1  |
| Starling <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>         | 1  |
| Crow <i>Corvus corone</i>                | 1  |
| Fowl <i>Gallus gallus</i>                | 19 |
| Goose <i>Anser anser/Anser sp.</i>       | 15 |

Several species of birds of prey, the most common being goshawk ([Table 6](#)) indicate that vegetation and the landscape scenery evoke different hunting methods and species of bird of prey. The prey, such as crane and duck, was also placed in graves. The archaeological contexts and the bird bones indicate that falconry actually was a skill practised in the period of the bird brooches.

Bones of birds of prey are mainly found in graves, but nowhere are bones of ravens found either in graves or at settlements or ritual places. Chronologically, graves with birds of prey lasted over a period of 500 years, with the earliest at the end of the fifth century. They mostly occur in eastern central Sweden, although there are a few of them a little further south, but none in southern Scandinavia. Large mounds with male and female

cremations, bodies of horses and dogs, parts of sheep, goat, and cattle were luxuriously equipped, partly with artefacts imported from abroad. [174](#)

## **Animals in rituals**

The archaeological evidence from pre-Christian Scandinavia shows great diversity of ritual practice. A running theme is that animals were an element in rituals. Certain features, such as the deposition of sheep bones in house foundations and their use in burial rituals, go as far back as the Stone Age and Bronze Age. For several millennia, animals were used in different types of rituals and hence had a symbolic and cognitive meaning.

What lies behind these archaeological traces? What do we actually see in the archaeological record? What rituals do we have archaeological evidence for? What did people do? We may assume that the cultural codes underlying the rituals were created in a society that differed ideologically and socially from our own. Our accustomed categorizations must be questioned. One of the greatest challenges of archaeology is to illuminate and explain a bygone time that is very different from our own and is simultaneously relevant to the present.

Here analogies can help archaeologists to think and associate the evidence with possible pre-Christian scenarios. One archaeological contribution to studies of Old Norse religion is the possibility of highlighting rituals and studying the vestiges that have survived until the present day. It seems as if rituals were performed at different places in the landscape. We cannot possibly know anything about the character of all the different ritual acts, but it may be assumed that they involved individuals and large collectives: a family, the occupants of a farm, or a whole village. We may also assume that the rituals had something to do with ideas (not necessarily religion), and that the rituals brought people together and were significant for the social order. Yet rituals may also have been active in transformations of society. There were evidently a number of ritual acts, with a variety of meanings, that were held at different places in relation to the pre-Christian farm units. Animals were used in all these types of rituals. They were a part of life-cycle rituals, such as burials, and of rituals connected to a specific place, as for instance when people built houses.

A long-term archaeological perspective on Norse paganism also requires a discussion of the principle of continuity, which is in itself a fundamental archaeological problem. It is connected to remembering and how far back in time a memory can be traced. How do memories work in oral cultures? How far back can we follow the different types of rituals? Can we discuss connections with Bronze Age contexts, and can an iconographic programme or elements of it survive for several hundred years? Are there connections in material expressions between different periods? Is it possible at all to use the animals in Norse mythology as illustrations of pre-Christian ritual practice?

Bearing in mind how mnemonic techniques in oral cultures can function, it is likely that the animal metaphors concealed in Iron Age rituals have a long ancestry. To sum up, the archaeological evidence shows that both real animals and imaginary creatures were a part of pre-Christian ritual practice and that the rituals can be followed over a very long period. Animals and iconographic programmes with animals probably tie different prehistoric periods and pre-Christian contexts together much more than has previously been assumed. Perhaps the archaeological perspectives provide a background to the animals that occur in Norse mythology. In any case, the animals in the myths may illustrate some of the links between humans and animals that occurred in the Scandinavian Iron Age and Middle Ages.

The archaeological record shows that animals were of great significance on the prehistoric farm. The archaeological find contexts tell us that houses and both wild animals and imaginary creatures played a major role in iconography during the Iron Age and the Early Middle Ages. Anthropological comparisons make it possible to envisage how people on a farm ritualized animals and how a Midgard mentality influenced what they did ([Table 7](#)).

[Table 7](#). Animals and rites.

**When?** Special seasons

The farm occupants' passage rites: birth, initiation, marriage, death



**Where?** In the open air, indoors

Special places: in the house or on the farm, infields or outland

Open or enclosed spaces

Wetlands or dry land

Monuments

**How?** Preservation of animals

Destruction of animals

Visual representations

**Who?** Local population

Aristocracy

Guests

Friends or enemies

**Why?** Functional and practical purposes

Pets

Status and power

Social identity

Regionalism

Alliances

Exchanges of gifts

Meals

Gender roles and sexuality

Human properties

Transformations between animal and human

Cosmology and world-view

Animals are thus important markers in studies of a multivalent pre-Christian reality with different types of rituals. Although animal bones and iconographic programmes with animals show only limited aspects of pre-Christian societies and Old Norse religion, they had an important part to play in ritual practice. Animals are found in virtually all known archaeological contexts. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that animals also occurred in even more types of rituals and at places where preservation conditions do not permit further study.

Finds of bones from humans and animals suggest that people in certain contexts disposed of human bodies and animal bodies in a similar way. Dead people and dead animals can be found at similar places, and not necessarily in what we normally call graves. People got rid of animal bones and human bones in many different ways. Uncremated and cremated bones of humans and animals were deposited, for example, in wells or slag heaps, or buried in pits on farms or at enclosures, and in wetland areas in the outlands. There is a great deal to suggest that not all people were buried in proper graves throughout much of the pre-Christian period. Although the sites of funeral pyres in the Late Iron Age mortuary practice may have been the same as the actual burial places, bones were picked out of the pyre. The amount of bones in the graves is much smaller than it ought to have been if a whole body had been buried. This applies to both humans and animals.<sup>175</sup> Were parts of humans and animals deposited elsewhere?

It is clear that animals in everyday settings were important for providing food, labour, and transports. Some species were also a constituent of burials, cult, of iconography and artefact design. It is problematic, however, even with the aid of anthropological analogies, to interpret the events that

occurred in the different places. Certain patterns can nevertheless be discerned; these concern rituals in houses and on farms, at cult houses, graves, special animal graves, and in outlands.

### *Houses and farms*

Archaeologists usually find bones of cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, horses, dogs, cats, ducks, and geese in Iron Age farm contexts. There were small and large farms with all kinds of animals, but there were also farms which specialized in, for example, sheep-rearing or horse-breeding. Bones from wild animals are rarely found in farm contexts, although of course they occurred in the vicinity. Hunting and slaughtering of wild animals may have been practised at special places in the landscape.

With a knowledge of all the animal species that existed in people's surroundings, we can better understand the ritual use of animals. When people built houses for themselves, they placed things—pots or grindstones, but also whole or partial animal bodies—in the holes dug for the posts to support the walls or roof, in trenches running the length of the walls, and in pits right beside the houses. In archaeological research these rituals are called 'building offerings'. In this context the sheep was the most commonly used animal, but cattle, pigs, dogs, and horses also occurred. In rare cases cats and wild birds were also used in depositions. [176](#)



[Figure 3](#). Female sheep in situ, Agerbygaard 1996, Bornholm. (Photo: Bornholms museum.)

Some examples show how animals could be treated. At Bronze Age settlements in Denmark, sheep, and goats are more frequent than during the Middle Neolithic. In special depositions like the Budsene deposition at Møn in Denmark, dated to the younger Bronze Age, fragments of unburnt

skeletons of sheep, dog, pig, horse and oxen had been placed together with beautiful bronzes in a large tree trunk.<sup>177</sup>

At the Apalle site in eastern central Sweden, bones of sheep/goat dominate among the domestic livestock, and they occurred all over the settlement, both scattered in occupation layers and in special contexts. In the Early Bronze Age at Apalle, fragments of animal skulls and jawbones of sheep/goat, as well as cattle, pig and horse, surrounded middens of fire-cracked stones in the bottom part. During the same period jawbones of sheep/goat were distributed around the entrance to a house.<sup>178</sup>

Just before the birth of Christ, a three-year-old stallion was cut into eight parts which were deposited in the foundation of a house at Sejlflod in northern Jutland. A century or so later, unburnt dog bodies were placed in two houses on the settlement site of Lundsgaard on Fyn. In both buildings the dogs were placed close to the fireplace and the entrance.<sup>179</sup> A special find is the deposit of two sheep on the Agerbygård site on Bornholm.<sup>180</sup> Two complete sheep were placed in a shallow pit when a building was to be erected on the site. Among the skeletons were two identical brooches (fibulae), a small bronze bead, and seven amber beads. The find can be dated to the time around AD 400 ([Figures 3, 4 a, b](#)).

Wells in the Iron Age were likewise used for deposits of animal parts. One example comes from a well at Hjärup, just south of Lund, Sweden. The well contained unburnt bones of cattle, horse, pig, sheep/goat, and dog. Parts of the bodies of at least three cattle and two horses came from both the meaty and the less meaty parts of the animals. Pigs were represented by two skulls, dogs by one skull.<sup>181</sup> The reasons behind the finds in wells have mainly been interpreted in terms of votive offerings and pagan cult. These interpretations should be questioned, however. The animal cadavers must have polluted the water in the wells. The bones can instead be interpreted simply as having been deposited when people moved away from the farm, as a form of closure.

We know of other rituals where parts of animals and humans were deposited in slag heaps and pits on the farm or at some enclosure. Bones of horses, cattle, sheep, or pigs in wells suggest that they were used to seal the well when people abandoned the place.<sup>182</sup> Domesticated animals were significant for life on the farm; they gave protection, but they could also be

used to mark a move away from the place. Animals, like other objects, were used actively and consciously to bring good luck and in farewell situations.



Figure 4a. Seven amber beads and one bronze bead, Agerbygaard, Bornholm. (Photo: Bengt Almgren, LUHM.)



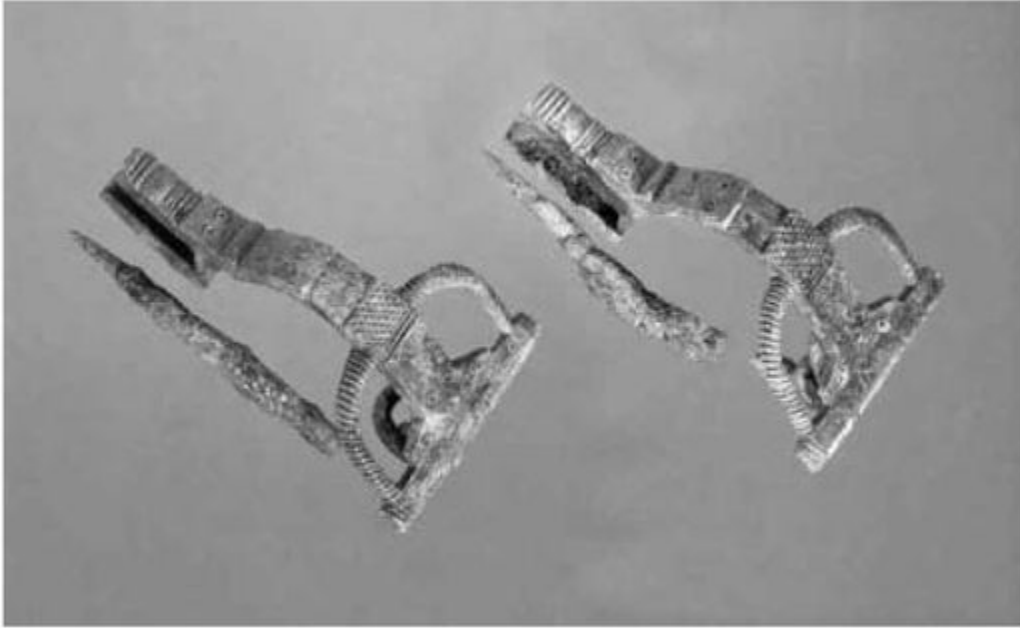
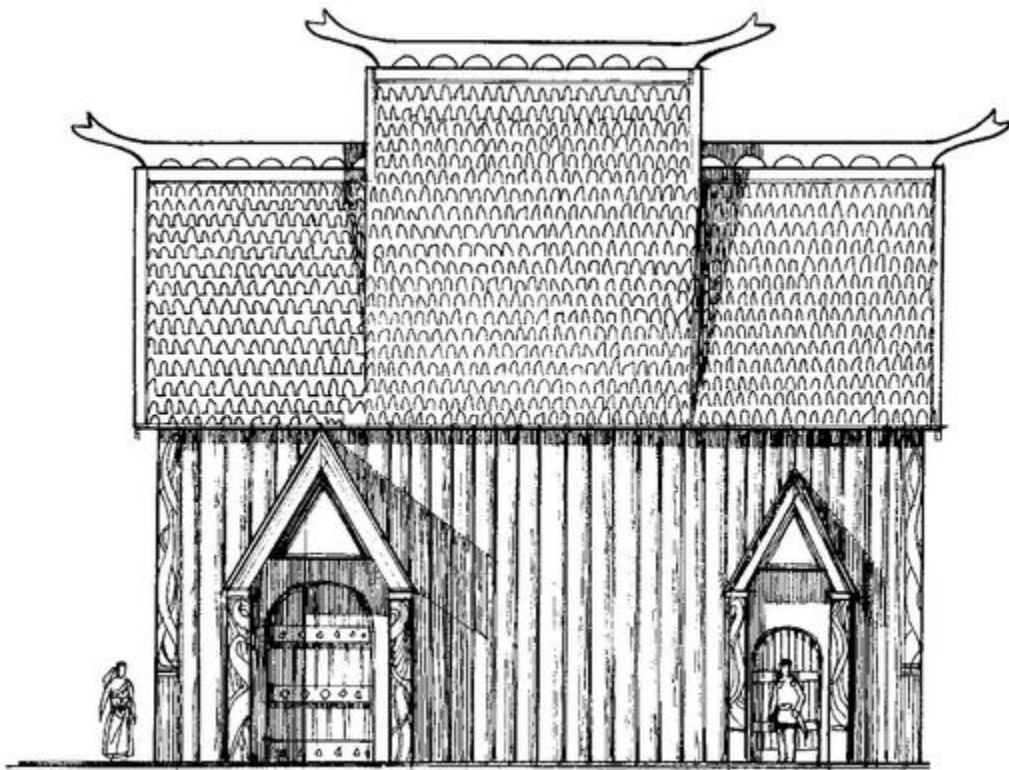


Figure 4b. Fibulae, Agerbygaard, Bornholm. Length *c.* 50 mm. (Photo: Bengt Almgren, LUHM.)



[Figure 5](#). Reconstruction of the cult house at Uppåkra, Skåne. (Drawing: Loïc Lecareux, after Larsson & Lenntorp 2004: 22.)



## *Cult houses*

Animals were also a part of rituals in and beside special houses which began to be constructed in the fifth century, inspired by early churches in the Roman Empire. Fragments of humans and animals have been documented from cult houses and so-called cult sites of varying character, and from the different pre-Christian periods on the continent and in Scandinavia.[183](#)

The Bronze Age cult houses, however, were of a special type, and beside them we find burnt bones from parts of animals. Burnt bones of cattle, sheep or goat, and pig have been identified at the cult house at Hågahögen in Uppland. At special places in the landscape, such as enclosure systems from the Late Bronze Age, cremated humans and animals were deposited together in small pits. Burnt bones of humans and animals have been found on a moraine beside the Iron Age settlement and the cemetery at Lunda in Södermanland.[184](#)

The excavation of the cult house at Uppåkra, just south of Lund in Skåne, uncovered masses of animal bones, chiefly slaughtered horses and other domesticated animals. Inside the cult house, in the central part just south of a hearth, archaeologists excavated a metal beaker and a glass bowl and found cremated bones in the beaker and lying around both objects. The objects had been buried in the second floor layer; that is, around AD 500. The house with its seven floor layers was a building that had stood on the site from about AD 200 to the tenth century, when it was presumably dismantled because it no longer had a purpose as a cult house ([Figure 5](#)). The metal beaker of bronze was decorated with seven gilt silver bands. The bands were adorned with elements from two iconographic programmes that included both humans and animals: serpent and probably horse ([Figure 6](#)).[185](#)



[Figure 6](#). The beaker from Uppåkra, Skåne. Height 165 mm. (Photo: Bengt Almgren, LUHM.)

House complexes, wall sections, ritual depositions, and the cult house show that the Uppåkra site was important throughout the Iron Age, perhaps one of the earliest urban formations to develop in southern Sweden. Huge amounts of artefacts have been unearthed with the aid of metal detectors. Small-scale osteological analyses show that domestic animals, fish, and birds were found on the site, along with very small amounts of game. It turns out that domestic animals are equally represented in the trenches and north and south of the cult house. Butchering marks reveal that people slaughtered and cut up carcasses of cattle, sheep/goat, and pigs in similar ways. One explanation why the heads of cattle, sheep/goat, and horse dominate among the bones may be that the inedible parts were left lying alongside during the slaughtering, while the edible parts were cooked in

various ways and consumed so that only small amounts of bone remained, or that some were used for craft purposes ([Table 8](#)).<sup>186</sup>

[Table 8](#). Animal bones at Uppåkra in Skåne. Number of bone fragments.<sup>187</sup>

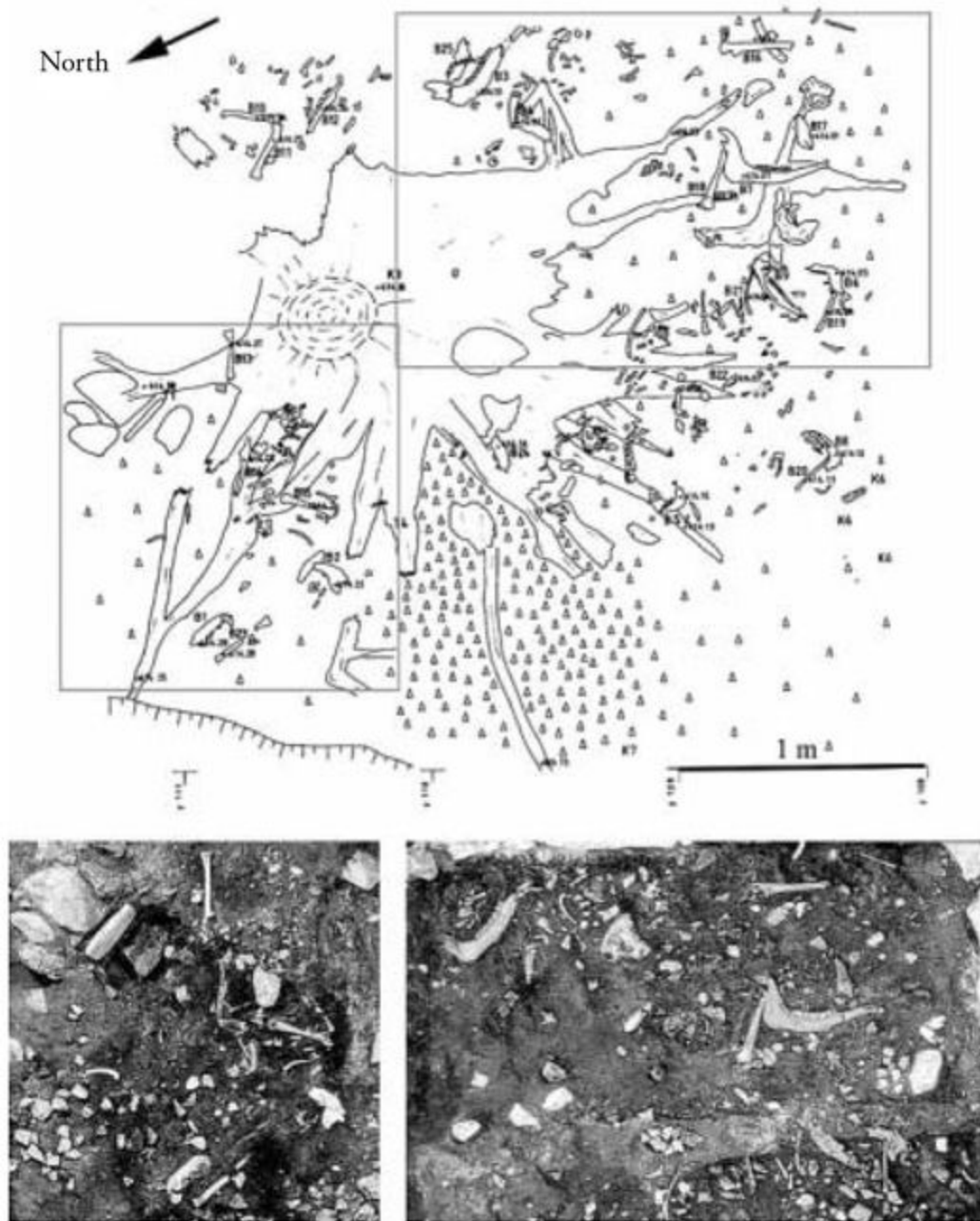
| Dating      | Small areas | Small areas | North and south   |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|
|             | 1997–1999   | 1997–1999   | of the cult house |
|             | AD 1–400    | AD 400–800  | AD 400–800        |
| Horse       | 43          | 50          | 54                |
| Dog         | 7           | 5           | 2                 |
| Sheep/goat  | 860         | 1,409       | 293               |
| Cattle      | 1,189       | 1,626       | 1,145             |
| Pig         | 508         | 1,692       | 445               |
| Cat         | 0           | 5           |                   |
| Red deer    | 1           |             | 2                 |
| Roe deer    |             | 1           |                   |
| Seal        | 2           | 1           | 1                 |
| Marten      |             | 2           |                   |
| Weasel      |             | 1           |                   |
| Rodent      |             |             | 141               |
| House mouse | 18          | 7           |                   |
| Vole        | 40          | 48          | 44                |
| Hen         |             | 11          |                   |
| Goose       | 5           | 5           |                   |
| Mallard     |             | 1           |                   |
| Wild goose  | 1           |             |                   |
| Swan        |             | 2           |                   |
| Fish        |             |             | 241               |
| Bird        |             |             | 69                |

A completely different explanation could be that animal skulls are to be found in other special places on farms and in wetlands away from the farms. This would suggest that ritualized slaughtering and consumption could also have occurred in other places resembling a farm or village settlement. Healthy adult animals seem to have been slaughtered in the late summer or early autumn and cut up into smaller parts suitable for boiling in a pot, and the leftovers were placed on refuse heaps right outside the cult house or scattered in occupation layers at this central place.<sup>188</sup> Fish was also a part of the diet. Of the identifiable fish bones, it has been found that

herring, cod, and perch dominated throughout the Iron Age. Other species that occur are eel, garpike, carp, pike, porbeagle, ide, plaice, flounder, turbot, salmon, bream, and roach, caught in lakes, rivers, and the sea. [189](#)

Another example is the large assemblage of animal bones found at a small Viking Age building in Borg in Östergötland. In the yard outside the house there was a huge amount of bones, chiefly from cattle and horse, but also from pig, sheep/goat, dog, and cat. The material showed that people also slaughtered red deer, fox, beaver, badger, salmon, hen and goose on the site, albeit in smaller quantities. Several of the domesticated animal bones show traces of violent chops and blows. The distribution of the pig bones shows that the animals were probably segregated by sex, since the sow bones were found together with amulet rings in one part of the yard, while the boar bones were in a quite different part, close to ovens and smith work. [190](#)

Of quite a different character was the Viking Age cult site found at Frösö Church in Jämtland. The site lies on a crest right beside a Late Iron Age cemetery with a view over Lake Storsjön ([Figure 7](#)). Excavations under the chancel of the church revealed the stump of a birch tree surrounded by animal bones. Sixty-four per cent of the animal bones come from game, half of this from bear, and the rest from domesticated animals. Radiocarbon dates show that rituals were performed around the tree in the second half of the tenth century and some time into the eleventh century. Bear, elk, red deer, squirrel, jackdaw, capercaillie, whitefish, salmon/trout, pike, pig, sheep/goat, cattle, horse, dog, and domestic hen were identified in the unburnt bones. The finds also included the greater part of a bear skeleton that was lying closest to the birch, while remains of pigs, sheep/goats, and cattle consisted solely of parts of skulls and long bones. Interestingly, occasional fragments of human bones were found beside the tree trunk: at least two adults, one child aged 3–5, and an infant of 0–6 months. But since the human bones are very well-preserved and are of a different colour from the animal bones, it is likely that they come from much later periods. It is not possible to say with certainty whether there were human sacrifices in the Viking Age. The finds of bones around the birch in all probability derive from pre-Christian sacrifices. Judging by the slaughtering patterns, three possible times for the deposition of these animals crystallize: late autumn, early spring, and possibly around the summer solstice. [191](#)



[Figure 7](#). Plan of the birch stump and bone remains under the chancel of Frösö Church, Jämtland. (After Magnell 2009: 12; photographs and plan: Margareta Hildebrandt 1984.)

The site is at the top of a ridge and was used for several centuries. In the present-day cemetery there are three burial mounds from the Iron Age, and beside the cemetery archaeologists have excavated graves from the Roman Iron Age (AD 200–300). The large element of game, especially bear, at the tree indicates that creolized rituals took place, with Saami rituals and beliefs as a dominant feature in relation to Old Norse religion. The ideological and

cosmological charge of the site was further emphasized when a Christian church was built, with the chancel right on top of the tree.

On cult sites animals denote slaughter and remains of meals. Certain types of objects found in cult houses are also decorated with animals and humans, probably with ideological and cosmological allusions.

## *Graves*

Ways of burying people have varied in the course of history. A recurrent theme, however, is the ritual use of animals in connection with death and burial. Finds of bones suggest that people in certain contexts discarded dead humans and animals in a similar way.

Among animals used in mortuary practices during the Bronze Age, fragments of sheep/goat predominate. In the Early Bronze Age, the dead were wrapped in simple cow skins, as we find in oak-coffin graves. The use of goat especially is exemplified in the burial of a small child in the Early Bronze Age. The child was laid in the coffin on a dark goatskin. A much more widespread custom was to wrap the dead in a cowhide. This suggests that there was general prosperity and that humans and animals were very close at this time.[192](#)

During the Roman Iron Age fragmented animals integrated in mortuary practices are more numerous. Around AD 300 whole bodies of animals, among them sheep/goat, were placed in graves; a standard practice in the boat burials of the Vendel Period and in cremations in the Viking Age. Sheep/goats are used as commonly as other domestic and wild animals in a variety of combinations in both cremations and skeletal burials during the Iron Age. Sheep/goat, along with cattle and pig, are the most important animals in the livestock during the Iron Age, and they were also ritualized in burials. In later periods people used skins of bear and lynx as shrouds. Horses, sheep, goats, cattle, pigs, dogs, cats, hens, and birds of prey are animals that often occur in graves from the Iron Age. In several graves from the Late Iron Age, more than one dog, horse or another animal was found in a grave together with a person.[193](#)

Domesticated animals likewise dominate in cremations from the Late Iron Age (500–1000) in the Mälaren valley. Game also occurs, as do some fish and birds. As the osteologist Elisabeth Iregren has shown, however, the



animal species in the graves by no means reflect the stock of animals on the farms. Certain animals were deliberately selected and cremated together with humans. The most common animals in the graves are dogs, found in up to two-thirds of the graves in the cemetery at Spånga near Stockholm, Sweden. Dog occurs on farms but accounts for only 1–2 per cent of the bones. Horses are found in a third of the graves at Spånga but constitute a varying proportion of animal bones from excavated farms, ranging from only a few per cent up to 20 per cent. Iregren therefore believes that horses are over-represented in many of the graves. Cattle is another example of the selection of animals to place in graves; they occur in less than a tenth of the cremation graves but can account for up to 55 per cent of the bones on farms. Cattle are therefore under-represented in ordinary cremation graves.[194](#)

Another example is Vibyhögen in Uppland, Sweden. It contained a cremated middle-aged man who had probably been wrapped in skins of bear and lynx. The grave also had a rich array of artefacts made of gold, silver, and bronze. The grave is dated to the end of the ninth century or the start of the tenth century. The grave contained burnt bones of 19 different animal species from a total of 25 individuals, amounting to some 65 dm<sup>3</sup> of burnt bones and a few cubic decimetres of unburnt bone. The dogs and the horses had been cremated whole. Parts of cattle, sheep, pig, hen, and goose were also cremated. Of six dogs, five had reached adulthood, and lesions on the vertebrae on one of the dogs indicate a high age. One dog was less than 15 months old. Of the six horses, one was young. The ox proved to be an old animal with morbid lesions on both fore and rear ankles, of the kind that arise from strain after hard work. The two parts of sheep came from one adult and one younger animal. The piece of pig was from an individual roughly two years old. Altogether the following animals were cremated on the pyre along with the dead man: six dogs, six horses, one ox, two sheep, one pig, one cat, one hen, one goose, one goshawk, one eagle owl, one cod, one bear and one lynx. Some animal species had been deposited unburnt in the grave: one crow, one squirrel, one cock, one perch and one pike.[195](#)

Yet another example from the same time comes from the graves in the Vendel Period and Viking Age cemetery at Hårads Kyrkby in Södermanland, where 17 of the 18 excavated graves contained 11 animal species. The number of animal species per grave varied between one and



six, which is common in Scandinavian mortuary ritual. The animals were placed on the pyre, but whether it was as whole animals or specially selected parts cannot be exactly determined. Dogs, cats, and poultry are well represented anatomically and were cremated as whole animals; cocks were attested through finds of spurs. On one of the dogs it was observed that it had been killed with a blow that went through the second cervical vertebra. Whole horses are represented in five graves. Parts of sheep/goat were probably placed on the pyre at several of the cremations. Parts of domestic pigs and pieces with little meat were likewise cremated. Geese are less well represented anatomically, and it was only in one grave that one can assume that a whole goose was placed on the pyre. Cattle are the rarest species in the grave material, represented only by one unburnt toe joint.<sup>196</sup>

An exceptionally rich cremation from the early ninth century is a grave at Arnänge, just north of Stockholm, Sweden. A low, round stone setting contained 90 dm<sup>3</sup> of cremated bones from five humans, seven horses, eleven dogs, two cats, three sheep, one goat, one pig, one lynx, and six species of birds. The grave is one of the cremations with the greatest range of species in Sweden.<sup>197</sup>

In a lavishly furnished ship at Ladby on the island Fyn in Denmark, no fewer than eleven horses and three or four dogs had been sacrificed in the stern of the boat. In boat graves in central Sweden from the Vendel Period and the Viking Age there are often one to five horses, one to four dogs, and one or more specimens of either cattle, sheep, or pig. It is also common to find birds of prey in these graves. Apart from martial pursuits, the dead also indulged in hunting, especially falconry.<sup>198</sup>

Burial rituals are not just something that people do because of a particular belief system; they are interwoven in a society's ideology and power structure. Burial rituals may therefore have been performed without any thought of an afterlife, as is assumed without exception in most archaeological interpretations of prehistoric grave contexts. It is this difficulty of thinking outside modern Christian or other religious values, and taken-for-granted assumptions about how dead people are handled, that is the challenge when interpreting the traces of pre-Christian mortuary rituals.

Moreover, there is great variation in the handling of bodies, and in addition to this there is the problem of how representative the excavated

archaeological evidence is. The variety of visible and concealed grave markers and the absence of finds and bones are highlighted as some of the problems, as is the fact that human bones have been found not only in cemeteries but in completely different places. Death and burial are not easily understood in connection with pre-Christian mortuary rituals. Contextual links between different categories of finds in a broader geographical perspective are therefore necessary for obtaining an overall local and regional picture, since mortuary rituals were communicative, a part of the social structure and its networks.

Archaeology is a broad field of knowledge extending between the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences, and archaeologists can choose their point of departure anywhere in this field. The theoretical approaches to the study of burial and ritual sometimes lead to excessively speculative interpretations in publications. There is a tendency to focus on the afterlife when considering what people express through these rituals, but this is to forget that rituals are not just religion.

Rituals in connection with death and burial give the impression of having been performed in memory of the dead persons. Animals, like the other grave goods, were important for symbolizing the characteristics and social position of the dead person. Ownership of a large stock of animals was expressed after death in the burial ritual, when certain animals were slaughtered to accompany the dead person into the grave. Rituals in memory of the dead reflected responsibility for and protection of the survivors' farm and the continued life of the kindred. This was achieved by ritualizing the dead person's prosperity and characteristics. The burial ritual also meant that the survivors gave up wealth and valuable animals to honour the dead person and to ensure worldly power. The question is whether the choice of animals was a confirmation of the strong personality of the deceased or his hunting skill.

The different ways of treating bodies in pre-Christian times can be related to the rich variation in ideas about the realm of the dead as described in Icelandic texts; ideas which also seem to be reflected in different parts of the landscape. Graves could probably be perceived in different ways, and it is possible that the form was linked to a conception of a specific realm of the dead. Graves could be understood as abodes of the dead, and they had to be tended by the living in order to protect the farm and its people. But it was also believed that the dead travelled to places in different natural

elements. Valhalla was to be found somewhere in the heavens, Hel was underground, and there was a realm of the dead inside the mountain in Helgafell.<sup>199</sup>

We may assume that the treatment of the body during pre-Christian time was one of a set of intentional acts that were anchored in the conceptual world and the mentality of people of that time. The view of the human body and the treatment and care of human and animal bodies were influenced by people's desires, emotions, values, and needs. Their world-view was determined by social interaction, by social patterns and conventions—probably in the same way as today but expressed differently. For the archaeologist today, there are only remnants of a former material world, which makes it hard to understand the intentions and meanings behind the material.

Most likely the animals had significance for the owner's identity, status, and emotions. They had different roles for their owner: perhaps they were important for hunting or guarding, for work or transport, for their character or qualities, or as faithful companions. In particular a buried dog or horse may once have been an owner's beloved animal; or perhaps the horse or the dog was valuable for breeding.

In prehistoric times people not only buried intact bodies; they also skeletonized, burned, sorted, polished, and packaged the bodies or parts of them. Depending on the social relations and the context in life, the ritual practices changed in the course of time. There were no long and stable periods. The treatment of the body varied in time as well as in different geographical areas. In my opinion, however, a millennia-old mentality has existed whereby people and animals have a close relationship with each other. That is what the animal graves express, since the entire bodies of animals have been placed in the graves. They must have been special animals.

### ***Animal graves***

Why were animals buried in a similar way to people, and what is the meaning of the burial context in this respect? The special graves for only animals in pre-Christian time give rise to questions about the importance of animals, which I believe lies somewhere between their practical use and their metaphorical meaning. It is interesting to note that animals that are

herded are not buried in special graves. This applies, for example, to pigs, sheep, and goats, yet these were animals that had important practical and economic roles. The absence of these animals sets the dog, horse, and bear in a special interpretative context. People had a special relation to these animals, and in particular to the individual animals that are buried in the animal graves.

The animals in the separate graves probably had even stronger ties to people than the animals placed together with others in a human grave, although the connection between dog and human was not always easy to determine at the Mesolithic site of Skateholm,<sup>200</sup> and a contemporaneous link between horse graves and cemeteries is in many cases difficult to prove.

In certain periods, for example, dogs and horses were buried in special graves which closely resembled those of humans. In the third century it became more common to deposit large body parts or complete bodies of a domesticated animal in human graves. One example is the cemetery of Skovgaarde in Sjælland, where whole pigs and sheep were placed in the richly equipped graves. One of the earliest horse graves has also been found in this cemetery.<sup>201</sup>

Animal graves are not unique to prehistoric time. The burial of animals also occurred during the Middle Ages and modern time, and it occurs even today. In a global perspective, there is evidence of the burial of both domestic and wild animals during a long time span, from the Mesolithic to modern time.<sup>202</sup>

There are not many animal graves in Scandinavia. But the fact that they occur at all gives us reason to contemplate the burial ritual and the relationship between people and animals. Graves were not the only option for the disposal of dead people and animals during pre-Christian time. The deposition of bodies of animals and humans could occur in other ways besides graves.

Animals graves are associated with specific, individual animals. I assume that dogs have been buried in special graves ever since the Stone Age. In my view, the dog is one of the animals that have a very strong link to the individual person. The dog accompanies its owner on hunts. It is a faithful companion, which creates a close bond between the dog and the owner. The dogs that were buried must have been very special in character, and

presumably only the most highly valued animals were buried in separate graves. The graves of cattle belong to the Stone Age and Bronze Age. They are found above all in continental Europe, although there are also some indications from Neolithic Denmark. I believe the continental cattle are linked to prosperity and that the animals had great practical value and were good to eat. The graves of horses are linked to the Iron Age and wealthy cemetery milieux—an aristocratic world in which horses represent wealth and prestige but also an emotional bond with the rider.

Care was invested and rules were followed when dealing with the bodies of animals; this shows that the treatment of dead animals was intentional. My conclusion is that the relationship between animals and people is complex. However, the graves of dogs primarily reflect personal and emotional relations. Presumably, the graves of horses are also related to prestige and status. The Saami bears, on the other hand, are in my opinion an expression of the ritualizing of the wild and the powerful, and of nature.

## **Cattle**

Domestic animals dominate among the animal graves documented in central Europe. Here, in the Neolithic, cattle were buried in graves. These cattle have mainly been interpreted as economically important, but also as having a sacred status. There are several double graves containing cattle. They have been viewed in connection with the presence of wagons and other items, as well as with the existence of some type of sun symbolism in Neolithic Europe. The graves of cattle are therefore interpreted as religious phenomena in the light of their connection with different archaeological source materials.<sup>203</sup> The European double graves with cattle direct our thoughts to the stone-packing graves in Jutland. In these graves the bones are usually poorly preserved. Sporadic teeth of cattle have, however, been found in some graves.<sup>204</sup>

An unusual find of an unburnt calf skeleton has been discovered, however, at Högstrum in western Öland, Sweden. The animal lay in a pit with six flint flakes and a handful of fragmented and burnt bones. The calf has been radiocarbon-dated to the Neolithic, more specifically the period 3500–3100 BC, which corresponds to the latter part of the Early Neolithic and the earliest part of the Middle Neolithic.<sup>205</sup> The calf pit was probably an animal grave and is a unique find in the Scandinavian Neolithic.

## Dog

As far back as the Stone Age, dogs have been buried in separate graves. At the Late Mesolithic cemetery of Skateholm in southern Skåne, eleven dogs were buried in individual graves. Seven other dogs were buried together with people. Grave goods were also found in the dog graves, deposited in a similar way to those in human graves. One dog (grave XXI) had been placed on its left side with its legs drawn up. A red-deer antler was placed by the dog's back; a hammer of antler, with incised decoration, lay beside the dog's chest; and three knives lay at its thigh. With regard to the dogs in human graves, Lars Larsson writes that at least two of these dogs had been killed in connection with the burial. Young dogs had their necks broken, while other dogs had been cut into pieces before burial. This was not the case with the dogs in the separate graves, which contained both puppies and older dogs. In Lars Larsson's view, there are marked similarities between the burial rituals for humans and for dogs. The placement of the bodies, the use of red ochre, and the giving of grave goods apply to both humans and animals.<sup>206</sup>

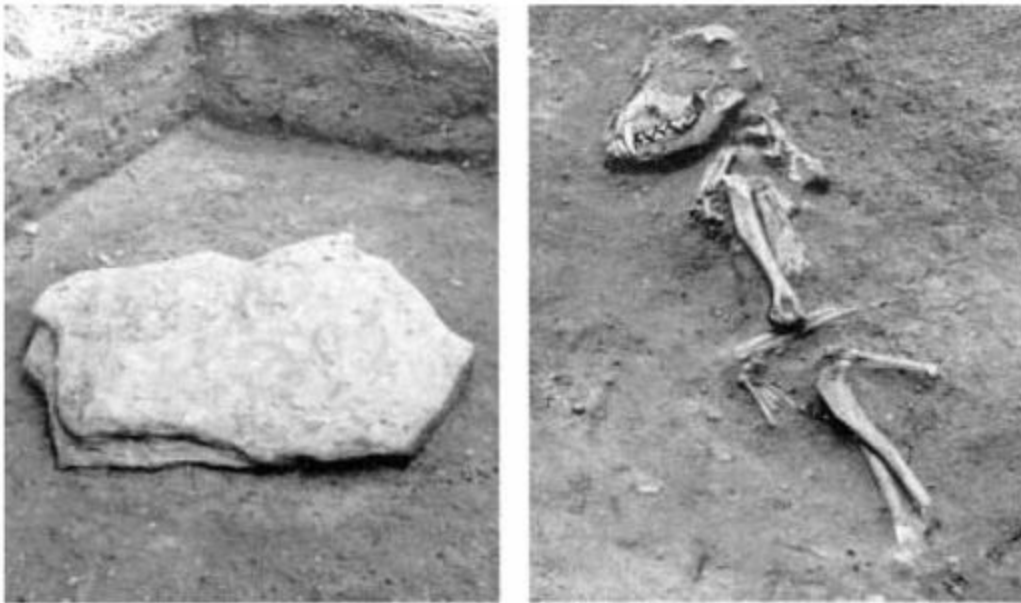
The buried dog at the Iron Age grave-field at Gårdlösa in southeastern Skåne in Sweden is another example of an individual dog grave. The dog was placed under a large stone without any grave goods near a human cremation pit, with a burnt bead from the Migration/Vendel Period ([Figure 8](#)).<sup>207</sup> From the same time and close to a human grave, another dog was found at Svinninge in north-western Sjælland, Denmark. Beneath the dog a pot dated to the Late Roman Iron Age and part of a pig cranium in a way confirm that rituals were connected to the burial of this special and medium-sized dog.<sup>208</sup>

In other find contexts dated to the Iron Age and the Middle Ages, greyhounds were given individual burials. One example is the dogs from the medieval fortress of Næsholm in Sjælland, Denmark. Dogs as well as horses had been buried intact in the rampart of the fortress itself.<sup>209</sup> Dog graves are not known from all the prehistoric periods. Dogs occur in numerous other archaeological contexts during pre-Christian time. During the Migration Period in central Europe, it was not unusual to place one or two dogs together with a horse in a burial pit.<sup>210</sup>



## Horse

The horse is another animal that could be given a special burial, even during modern time. Horse graves in central and northern Europe have been dated to the Early and the Late Iron Age. For instance, horses at the *Reihengräberfeldern* were buried in pits with a west–east orientation, just like human graves. The artefacts in horse graves consist often of snaffles and strap-end ornaments. The horse graves here have been interpreted as grave goods for the men in weapon graves, which often lie next to the graves of horses. Very few horse graves have been documented in Scandinavia, but there are a few in Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland. [211](#)



[Figure 8](#). The dog burial, grave 26, at Gårdlösa, Skåne. (After Stjernquist 1993: 127, Figure 41.)

Three graves from the Late Iron Age may serve to illustrate this phenomenon in Sweden. The oldest grave was found in Ölands Skogsby, Torslunda Parish, Öland. The horse lay in an oval pit, which had probably been edged with hewn limestone. The grave was marked with two unusually large stinkstones. The fill of the grave yielded undecorated shards of pottery. The young stallion lay on its stomach in the burial pit, with its head towards the south-west and its legs out to the sides ([Figure 9](#)). The horse is radiocarbon-dated to the Migration Period. The horse grave lay at



the edge of a cemetery, which was dated by means of pottery to an early phase of the Roman Iron Age.<sup>[212](#)</sup>

The other horse grave is chronologically younger and was found on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren. Under the rampart of the fortress of Birka, a burial mound was discovered. The grave contained a man about fifty years of age, as well as a stallion that was three or four years old. The horse was placed next to the man's wooden chest, in a separate deposition. The horse lay on its side with its back towards the man's feet and its head to the south. Two radiocarbon dates from the horse's teeth gave a calibrated 1-sigma value of AD 670–780.<sup>[213](#)</sup>



[Figure 9](#). The young stallion from Ölands Skogsby, Torslunda Parish, Öland. (Photo: Hella Schultze 1987, ATA, Riksantikvarieämbetet.)

Right beside a Viking Age boat cemetery at Gamla Uppsala, a horse was buried in a cramped little pit. The horse has been radiocarbon-dated to the fourteenth century. It is later than the cemetery but is a good example illustrating how horses were buried in separate graves for a long time.[214](#)

Two horse graves, which are chronologically somewhat older than those mentioned above, represent this type of graves in southern Scandinavia. One of the graves was found at Slusegård cemetery in Bornholm. The cemetery is dated to the Roman Iron Age, and the horse grave is

stratigraphically tied to the Late Roman Iron Age. The horse lay on its side with its head to the north-east, its forelegs raised and its hind legs extended.<sup>215</sup> Another horse grave was discovered at Skovgårde cemetery in Sjælland. In this case as well, the grave is dated stratigraphically to the Late Roman Iron Age, even though a radiocarbon date indicates the Migration Period. The horse was placed in a north–south direction, with its head in the southern part of the grave and its muzzle turned towards the west. The forelegs were bent in a natural way, but the hind legs were in an unnaturally bent position. The stallion was large and powerful, much larger than other horses of the Roman Iron Age. The horse was about eight years old.<sup>216</sup>

### **Bear and reindeer**

Wild animals also belong to the category of animals buried in separate graves. About 40 bear graves have been found along the coast of northern Norway, as well as in the mountain regions and in the forested interior of northern Sweden. The archaeological finds of Saami bear graves show that the burial ritual existed as early as the Roman Iron Age. Historical sources reveal that bear burials took place as late as the nineteenth century.<sup>217</sup> Reindeer graves may be a parallel to the bear graves, but they belong to a later period, after the reindeer-based economy had begun and up to modern time.<sup>218</sup>

Bear graves in the Saami lands of northern Scandinavia appear during the Iron Age, and their presence is linked to religious conceptions of the bear's power. Naturally the bear did not have the same close relation to people as the dog or horse. On the other hand, thanks to its strength and individuality the bear played an important role in Saami religion and was a component of many different rituals. Finds of skulls, single bones, teeth, and claws show that the bear had potential power in various forms.<sup>219</sup>

In all the excavated bear graves the bones, apart from the skull and shoulder blades, had been split to get at the marrow. It was an important part of the ceremony to put all the bones back in the grave according to a specific pattern, however. The bones were arranged starting from the bear's skull, which had to be intact. An example of a bear grave is the one from Sörviken near Lake Storuman in the interior of northern Sweden. In front of

the collection of bones lay the skull, and adjacent to the latter lay the bear's two shoulder blades. A sheet of birchbark had been placed on top of the bone collection. The birchbark was covered with two layers of logs that lay in a transverse position ([Figure 10](#)).<sup>220</sup>

Of interest here is the archaeologist Audhild Schanche's statement that similarities exist between the bear burials and Saami human graves regarding the terrain and the grave forms. Bear graves and human graves are parallel phenomena to a great extent, chronologically and geographically.<sup>221</sup> In contrast to the burials of dogs, cattle and horses, historical descriptions of bear ceremonies give very different opportunities to understand the bear graves as well as the relationship between people and bears. The rituals connected with the burial of bears were gender-structured socially and linked to set rules. The bear had a special status in the Saami conceptual world. It was regarded as a sacred animal.<sup>222</sup>

### ***Outlands***

During the Stone Age, the dead bodies of animals and humans could be deposited where people lived, that is, in the settlement milieu, and in special places such as wetlands. During the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age, fragmentary as well as intact bodies of animals could be placed in human graves and in other locations, for instance in buildings and wetlands. This further complicates our interpretation of graves, since the bodies of animals and humans have been deposited in similar ways in other contexts and other places as well.<sup>223</sup>

Rituals in wetlands with deposits of artefacts, animals, and humans are documented from the greater part of the pre-Christian period. In many places there is more or less uninterrupted continuity of depositions from the Mesolithic to the Early Middle Ages. It seems as if certain wetland areas were used for a long time, with a changing landscape creating a spatiality that was attractive for different types of actions.

Rituals were performed at a number of different places in the landscape, and at several of these there are fragments preserved of humans and animals. The whole landscape was utilized, with the farm, its infields, and the outlands. The landscape around the farm was culturally manipulated and somehow inscribed in people of different age, sex, and social identity. The

landscape was used and changed depending on what happened at different places. One may assume that rituals activated, influenced, and helped to create a Midgard mentality.

Significant places may have been linked by roads or with lines of stones. In hoards, fence systems, and burnt mounds from the Stone Age and Bronze Age, there are find circumstances suggesting that humans, cattle, pigs, sheep/goats, and horses were deposited in a similar way and in places not associated with ordinary graves. Human and animal bones are also found together in small areas in Early Iron Age outlands beside water or wetlands.<sup>224</sup>



[Figure 10](#). The bear grave from Sörviken, Stensele Parish, Västerbotten. (Photo: Björn Allard, ATA, Riksantikvarieämbetet.)

In the large south Scandinavian war-booty sacrifices from the Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period, by contrast, there are fewer animal species. It is above all horses and cattle that are represented at Nydam and Illerup in Jutland, Denmark. The horses were killed with blows to the skull and the legs with swords, axes, or lances. They were destroyed in a similar way to the weapons in the find. The sites used for this type of ritual depositions are in topographical locations that would have allowed large numbers of people to look on as objects representing a whole army's equipment were destroyed and deposited in the wetland. Interpretations of this category of find have concerned questions of the hierarchical structure



of the Iron Age army and its strategic organization, along with questions of the religious meaning of the deposits and their possible link to Celtic and Common Germanic votive practices.<sup>225</sup> The weapon deposits from the same period—the Roman Iron Age—at the central place of Uppåkra, on the other hand, have a completely different character, deposited right beside the dwelling house and the cult house on the site. The animals here represent an ordinary stock of animals typical of an Iron Age farm: cattle, pigs, sheep/goats, dogs and horses.<sup>226</sup> There is a possibility that the different methods of depositing weapons in combination with animals in outlying wetlands and at the central place of Uppåkra represent a variation on a theme concerning rituals to do with war, violence, and hostility.

In the well-known bog of Skedemosse in Öland, there is a clear preponderance of archaeological objects from the Roman Iron Age. Bones of animals and humans from the Early Iron Age are also found on the site. Horse dominates, but there are also bones of sheep/goat, cattle, pig, and dog. Cats, hens, fish, birds of prey, and roe deer have been found in smaller quantities.<sup>227</sup> A similar wetland find was excavated at the bog of Hassle Bösarps in southern Skåne. Apart from spearheads, belt mounts with silver coating, and equestrian equipment, there was a whole human skeleton with an iron knife stuck between the ribs, further bones of humans, horses, and the usual domesticated animals. The finds have been dated to the Late Roman Iron Age and the start of the Migration Period.<sup>228</sup>

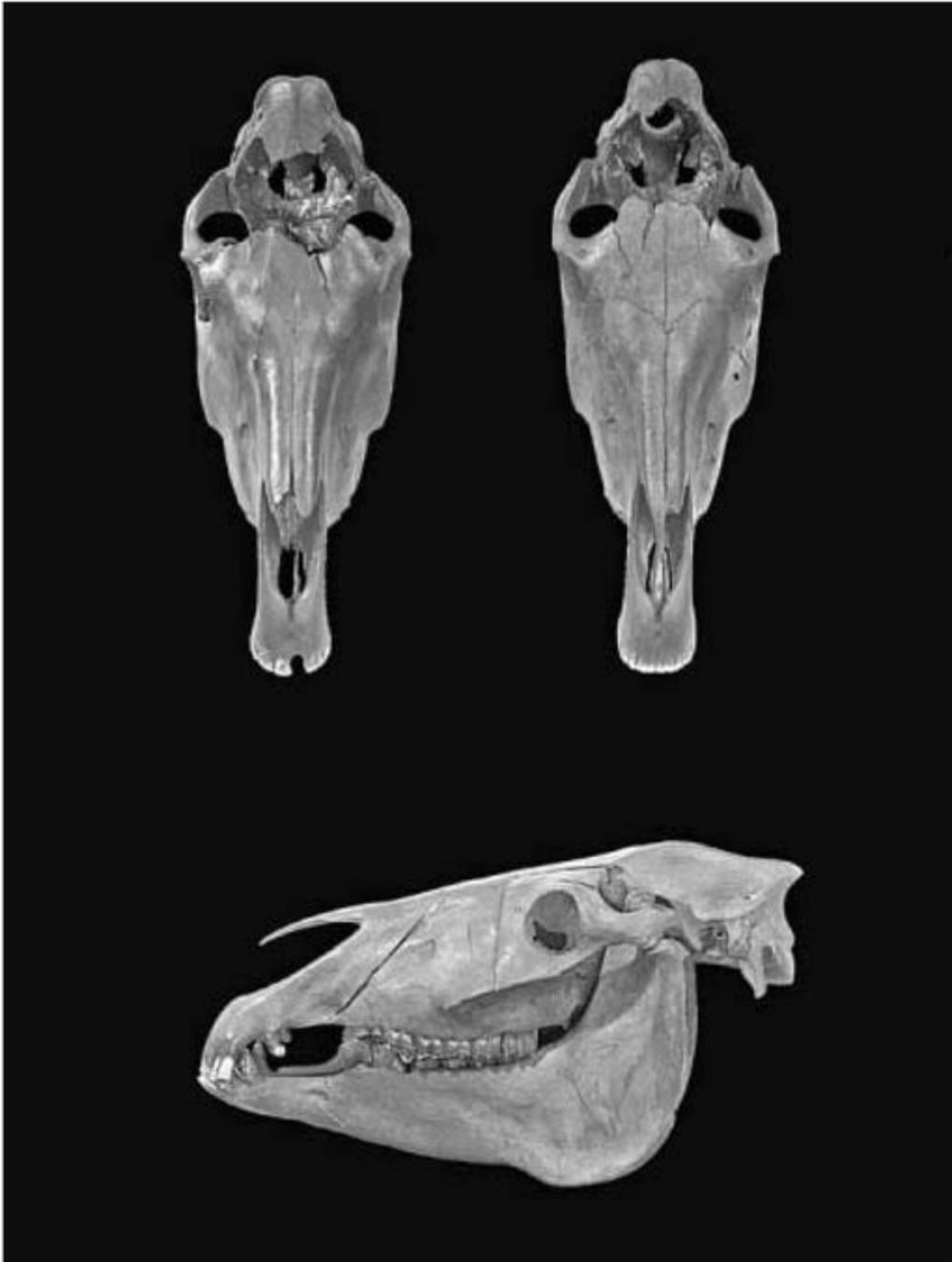
The bog of Östra Vemmerlöv in south-eastern Skåne is a similar Bronze Age site, with deposits of bones consisting of skeleton parts from four humans and bones from domesticated and wild animals. Twenty dogs and five foxes were deposited as whole animals, and skeleton parts of one horse, two cattle, two sheep/goats, one wild boar, and one red deer.<sup>229</sup> At Röekillorna in southern Skåne, people during the period from the Neolithic to the Roman Iron Age offered artefacts, pots, human bones, and bones of horse, dog, cattle, sheep, pig, and hen on numerous occasions. Rituals could also be performed on a single occasion at a special place.<sup>230</sup>

At Langemosen on the island Fyn, pots were deposited in the bog in the Early Roman Iron Age. Beside the pots were bones of cattle, pig, and horse, along with bast ropes.<sup>231</sup> Yet another example of a wetland deposit, but with a shorter history of deposition during the Iron Age, from the fourth and

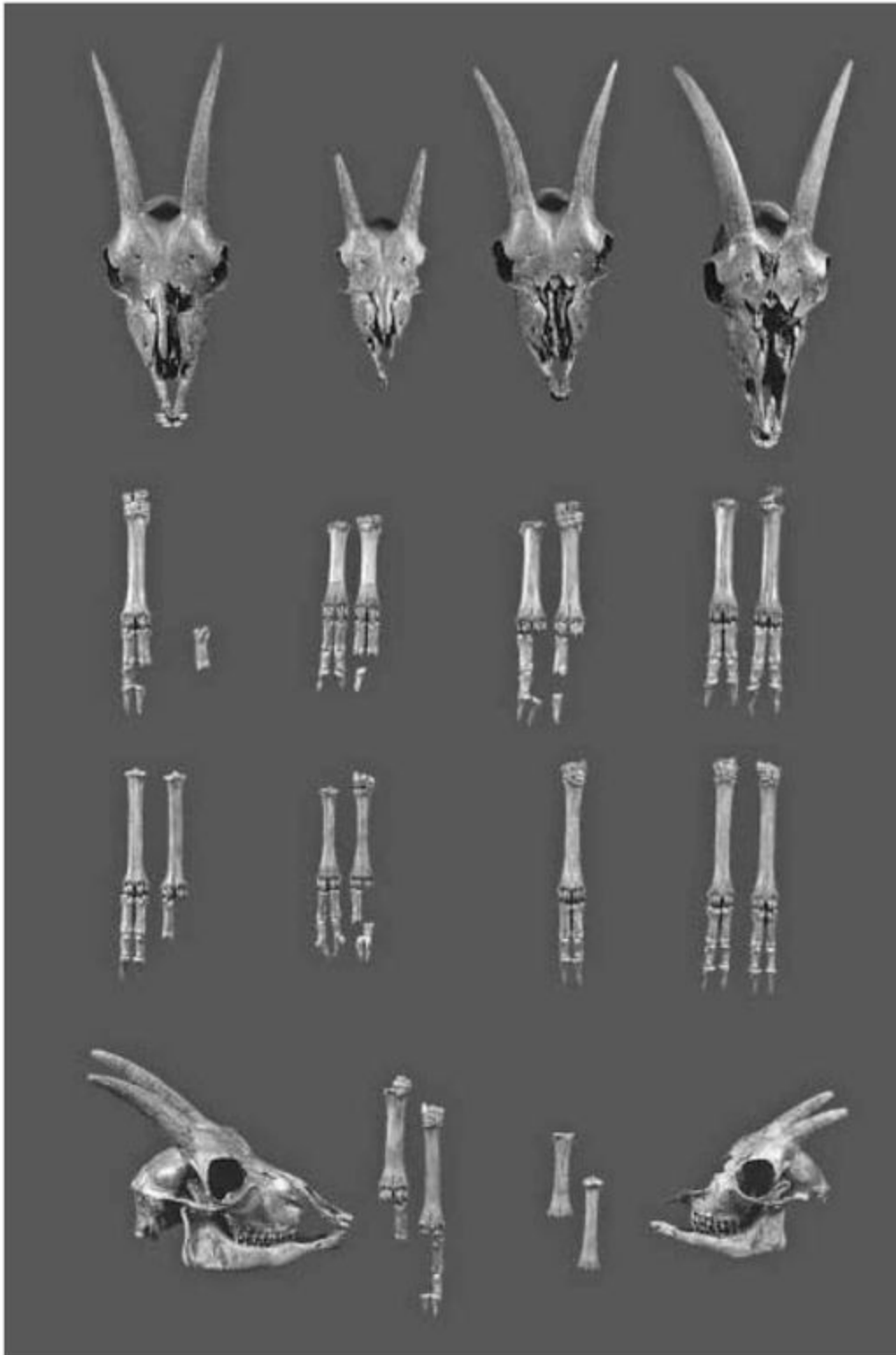
fifth centuries AD, is the bog at Valmose near Rislev in Jutland, Denmark. In different groups there were deposits of whole bodies or parts of animal bodies: at least eleven horses, three pigs, seven oxen, five sheep, and three dogs. The horses were all deposited with skulls and feet ([Figure 11](#)). At least four humans were deposited in a way similar to the 29 different animals.<sup>232</sup>

A comparable example is the find at Bøgesø Mose, near Præstø in southern Sjælland. At the end of the ninth century, six goats were deposited in a boggy area, a short distance from dry land. Six more or less intact skulls with lower jaws, and the lower parts of the metacarpals and metatarsals including parts of the feet of four adult goats and two kids, all females, were found together in a net within a limited area framed by small stones. Pollen samples showing copious amounts of beech and rye support the radiocarbon dating to the Viking Age ([Figure 12](#)).<sup>233</sup> These bone residues should not be interpreted in the same way as deposits of horse skulls and feet, as a sacrifice.<sup>234</sup> The Bøgesø find, like the horse deposits, with skulls and feet, may mean that people deposited the skin with the parts of the skeleton that were still attached to it. The meaty parts of the animals would have been used for a meal.





[Figure 11](#). Horse skulls from Valsmose at Rislev, Nydam in Jutland. (After Aaris-Sørensen 2001: 40. Photo: Geert Brovad. With kind permission of the Zoological Museum, Copenhagen University.)



[Figure 12](#). Skulls and bones from 4 adult goats and two kids, all female, Bøgesø Mose, Sjælland. (After Aaris-Sørensen 2001: 40. Photo: Geert Brovad. With kind permission of the Zoological Museum, Copenhagen University.)

Through myths, memories, and ideas about how the world was structured, the landscape formed a symbiosis between the past and the present. The multifaceted ritual handling of people and animals was undoubtedly a consequence of social practice over a very long time at many of these archaeological sites.

Archaeologically we can demonstrate that people and animals were sometimes treated in a similar way in pre-Christian times, but on other occasions they could be treated completely differently; some people and animals were placed in graves, others at completely different places and in other contexts; others were simply thrown away. Perceptions of people and animals and the rituals surrounding them in the different parts of the landscape are not inevitably a testimony to a material spatial system of cosmological ideas. Several of the activities that took place at the wetlands may instead have been performed for functional reasons; for example, the goat bones from the bog at Bøgesø. The bone finds may be simply a result of refuse sorting.

# CHAPTER 4

## **Animals between context and text**

Evidence of animals in archaeological remains shows that animals had practical functions and that they were ritualized in various ways. Animals and humans are often found in the same contexts, as a part of different types of rituals at the same places in the landscape. It is clear that animals were buried in the same way as people. There is a great deal to suggest that not all people were buried in proper graves for much of the pre-Christian period, and that not all animals were ritualized. Is it the case that special animals were included in rituals, and that it is an aristocratic custom that is preserved and can be observed archaeologically?

It may be that the concept of grave is much more ambiguous than archaeologists have usually assumed; the existence of special animal graves suggests this. Unburnt and burnt bones of humans and animals were also deposited in places such as wells and slag heaps, or buried in pits dug on farms or at enclosures. In Late Iron Age mortuary practice the funeral pyre may have been on the same spot as the grave itself. The amount of bones—both human and animal—in the graves is much smaller than it ought to be if whole bodies had been buried, which suggests that bones were removed from the pyre.

A rich amount of archaeological and osteological evidence is available from different parts of Scandinavia. The animal contexts show that animals could be found in everyday settings and that they were important as a source of labour and food. Animals also occurred at burials, in cult, and in artefact design. It is problematic, however, to ascertain exactly what happened at the different places. Modern words and terms are barriers to understanding, inadequate for interpreting and categorizing the sites and what was done at them. A common feature is that domesticated animals, besides their practical and functional significance in the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age, were of major significance in ritual practice. Wild

animals and fabulous creatures were not given such a clear and active role until the Late Iron Age, when animal ornamentation also took on exceptional and expressive forms. The archaeological material culture testifies to cultural customs that were regionally coloured. At the same time, there are great similarities within Scandinavia.

The animals that occur in pre-Christian times display great diversity. The types of animal vary, as does the treatment of the individual species. Perhaps the diversification of animal involvement in pre-Christian ritual practice is significant? We find variation instead of regulations, although certain patterns can be observed. Domesticated animals are most common in farm settings, where wild animals are rare. Horses and dogs dominate in the burial ritual. There were carefully observed rules for taking care of animals and humans. In that sense the handling of bodies and the iconographic programmes with animals and humans were intentionally harmonized with norms and values.

Animals in their contexts in the pre-Christian societies of Scandinavia demonstrate both similarities and differences in relation to the way animals are presented in texts about Norse mythology. There are probably several reasons for the imbalance between the archaeological sources and the written documents.

One possibility is that different communication strategies in oral and literate societies led to different mnemonic techniques. The rituals that were performed in pre-Christian times could have been forgotten and are therefore not recorded in the texts. Some animals that were apart of pre-Christian rituals, especially sheep, got lost in later poems and sagas.

Another possibility is that the domesticated animals in the archaeological record represented the ritual practice of the common people, different from the practice reflected in the texts. The contrasts between the texts and the material culture perhaps reveal significant differences in what poets wrote about and what was done in reality. Perhaps what we see archaeologically is something that was not verbalized and later recorded in writing. Perhaps it was dangerous to write about this in a Norse Christian environment, if it was not simply forgotten when people ceased performing the pre-Christian ritual acts.<sup>235</sup> Yet this could also mean that the special animals that stand out—chiefly horses and serpents—are important symbols for the aristocracy, visible both in the texts and in the archaeological sources. Other parts of the

population are not given much space in the myths, and are not visible in the material culture that we can study archaeologically.

A third possibility is that there is a class difference between the categories of evidence. The pre-Christian contexts reflect a larger share of the population. The representativeness of the extant archaeological remains may be distorted. Because of the character of the evidence, the upper class and the aristocracy may be over-represented. Objects of precious metal, which largely dominate the evidence in the Iron Age, are more durable and can be preserved better than objects of organic material.

Associations between archaeological contexts and other texts give us angles from which to consider animals in rituals. One example is the Arab emissary Ibn Fadlan, who wrote in detail in the 920s about a funeral ritual on the shores of the Volga in Russia when a Norse (Rus') chieftain was buried.<sup>236</sup> We see a correspondence with the rituals and the animals used for ritual purposes in the boat graves from the Vendel Period and Viking Age excavated in Scandinavia, Britain, and northern continental Europe.

Then they brought a dog, cleft it in two halves, and laid it in the boat. Thereupon they brought all his weapons and laid them by his side. Then they took two horses, drove them until they perspired, then cleft both of them in twain with a sword and laid their flesh in the boat. Then they brought two cows, cut them in two likewise and laid them in the boat. Then they brought a cock and a hen, killed them and threw both into the ship.<sup>237</sup>

The archaeological remains can also be associated with the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri's *Edda*, and the animals there may illustrate a pre-Christian conceptual world. But the pre-Christian animal world can also be associated with completely different texts: everything from Proto-Norse and Norse runic inscriptions to chronicles, songs, sagas and travel accounts, all with their different purposes.

It may be noted that the recorded myths in some way have their prehistoric background in the archaeological sources. The myths display an aristocratic and also a male bias.<sup>238</sup> It seems as if the Eddic poems were of aristocratic origin, but the pre-Christian reality could have been much more

complex. Perhaps there was no uniform mythology during the time that we mostly associate with Norse paganism?

Domesticated animals seem more important and symbolic in the archaeological sources, despite the stories about the animals on the farm of Alfheim. In Snorri's *Edda*, by contrast, there is greater emphasis on wild animals. These occur in archaeological contexts above all in the Late Iron Age, when fabulous creatures and serpents also begin to appear on magnificent objects of precious metal, or on picture stones and runic stones. The archaeological images of animals arouse associations with the dragon Fafnir and the Midgard Serpent, Nidhogg, even though the fragmentary textual evidence cannot directly explain the material traces. Possible connections between texts and material remains should be interpreted with a certain degree of scepticism. However, it is possible to find more links, chiefly as regards horses and dogs but also cattle, pigs, and wild animals, than between the different categories of evidence as regards sheep and goats.

In Norse mythology goats had a great value. Named goats are found in the poems, but named sheep do not appear at all. At Odin's Valhalla the well-known goat Heidrun eats leaves, and clear mead flows from her udder into the beakers of the warriors. Thor's goats Tanngrisnir and Tanngniost draw Thor's chariot, according to Snorri. A short mythological tale about Thor's journey to Utgard-Loki tells us of the incident when Thor and Loki visited a farmer's family.<sup>239</sup>

Thor's goats were important on his journeys in the sky. The goats were used for drink and food in sacrificial rites. Such sacrificial meals are also documented in other mythologies. Moreover, other kinds of animals could be involved in such sacrificial meals, as for example the boar Sæhrimnir in Norse mythology. After the slaughter of the sacrificial animal it is resurrected in a never-ending story.

Sheep are of no importance at all in Norse mythology. They have no names, and are hardly even mentioned.<sup>240</sup> On one occasion, in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, sheep serve more as props to illustrate Heimdal's very good hearing, as he can hear 'the grass growing in the field and the wool on the sheep'.<sup>241</sup>

Animals and zoomorphic images in the archaeological sources provide a background to the myths involving animals. Animals appear in different



ways in the archaeological record and in Norse mythology. I would claim that the animals represent different social and ritual contexts in pre-Christian times, but also that they reflect how the research habitus can differ in today's academic disciplines.

It is clear that animals play a significant part in Norse mythology. Odin's horse, Thor's he-goats, and Freyja's cats are examples of central animal figures in the lives of the gods. The background, however, gives a much more varied picture of the role of animals than we see in Snorri's *Edda*. The animal species in the archaeological record which relate to ritual practice are much more numerous than what we find in the texts.

Animals in Norse mythology are significant, connected as they are with gods and mortals. Humans, animals, gods, and other beings exist together in a world that arouses associations which are often complex and difficult for us to understand. In pre-Christian times there was a close relationship between people and animals that was not solely due to economic factors. Animals were integrated in the pre-Christian conceptual world, and they are represented in different archaeological contexts such as graves and hoards; expressions of various ritualized acts. The division into sacred and profane spheres of society is an early modern construction which may not necessarily be valid for a pre-Christian time and context.

The most prominent animal, both in Snorri's *Edda* and in the archaeological record, is the horse. In *Skáldskaparmál* there is a stanza describing the importance of horses for the world: 'Arvak and Allsvinn draw the sun, as was written above. Hrimfaxi or Fiorsvartnir draw the night, Skinfaxi or Glad go with the day.' In the archaeological sources both horses and dogs often appear in connection with funeral rituals. Dogs, on the other hand, have a low profile in the texts, with the exception of the dog Garm, who guarded the underworld until he broke free at Ragnarok.

There is both an imbalance and a concordance between the different animals that occur in Snorri's *Edda* and the archaeological material. The prominence of special animals seems to have something to do with their relationship to leading groups both in the divine world and in pre-Christian society. The link, for example, between horses, important gods, and mortals is clear. There is an aristocratic and masculine bias in the recorded myths, and it seems as if the Norse mythology as it was written down served as a historical background to an equally aristocratic and learned environment in the thirteenth century when it was committed to parchment.

Links between the archaeological evidence and texts can be established in certain cases, for example in the Viking Age iconographic material that obviously illustrates narratives, such as the common Germanic tale of Sigurd's struggle against Fafnir the dragon, which is depicted in the Ramsundsberg rock carving in Södermanland.<sup>242</sup> Likewise, several of the Gotlandic picture stones probably illustrate mythological scenes also known from written sources.<sup>243</sup>

Another field of interest is the correspondence between material culture and written texts.<sup>244</sup> The stories in the texts are in very sharp contrast to what can be understood from the archaeological contexts where sheep and goats, for example, are ingredients. Both sheep and goats are found in bone deposits; as far as I can see, only goats are found in pictorial representations. The contrast between sheep and goats in material culture versus texts is obvious. Animals, and especially sheep and goats, have not attracted much interest either in archaeology or history of religion; an exception to the rule is archaeologists working with textile production and handicraft. When considered from a habitus perspective, academic fields highlight connections and difficulties in interpretation between excavated bones, archaeological material culture and written texts. One-sided accounts, whether looking at the archaeological circumstances or focusing on the mythological texts, give us no further insight into customs and ritual practice.

It seems that the archaeological sources versus the written sources can be interpreted in terms of different social and ritual customs in Old Norse society. Animals were used in ritual practices and in ideological manifestations. Their presence and surely their differing significance could express gender relations, and they certainly express relations between classes, between farmers and rulers, between males and females.

Instead of separating different categories of evidence, we can compare and contrast archaeological contexts with written sources concerning animals. The question is, what associations can be found between animals and humans if we proceed from the way people handled dead, executed, or slaughtered bodies? Is there a bodily metaphor in the archaeological and in the written evidence that can be connected in some way to cosmology?

## **Bodily metaphors**

Plato wrote in the fourth century BC about the human body as a representation of the cosmos. He believed that the body was the physical expression of the soul, and that it reflected the four elements –fire, air, water, and earth–through the four humours.<sup>245</sup> The material remains and the figurative depictions from Norse pre-Christian times give us a hint that the outlook on mankind, on the body and its different parts, was likewise significant for people on what was then the edge of Europe.

People proceed from themselves in their understanding of the world. It is not strange that the body is a natural starting point and reference. Body language and body signals, bodily awareness and bodily metaphors are universal phenomena, with distinctive expressions in specific cultural contexts. The question is to what extent people themselves, and the rituals surrounding human and animal bodies in pre-Christian times, expressed Norse cosmology.

Cosmology is not only narrated; it can also be expressed in action and in the shaping of the landscape. The concept of cosmology, a word constructed by scholars, is complex and charged with meaning. It will be explored here on the basis of comparisons and analyses, chiefly of archaeological evidence. In my opinion, it is essential that cosmology is communicated through practical action if it is to be handed down, to live on, or to be deliberately changed. Cosmology is therefore dependent on a society's ideological framework and political interests. The anthropologist Mary Douglas declares that cosmology is built up of norms and values, and therefore functions as a control system. Cosmology contains principles for the composition of nature and the world, and it can be controlled through ritualization of different kinds.<sup>246</sup>

Ritualization of people and animals could be a part of a cosmological framework that explains and activates a desirable course of events. Rituals are thereby assumed to be a kind of practising of people's thoughts in their life-world and with their ideas about the cosmos. Rituals have their historical background and they live on, affecting life. Like myths and stories, they play an active role for memory and tradition.

Could there have been representations of cosmology in prehistoric times, from the Stone Age to Early Middle Ages? It is of course difficult to apply a 7,000-year perspective. The system of archaeological periods reflects how

archaeologists have classified and systematized artefacts and find combinations. The typologies, that is, the differing forms of the artefacts, probably have their background in cultural conditions and in pre-Christian political and ideological constellations. Changes in the typology, which have often been used to mark breakpoints in archaeological and analytical time, can be due to actual changes in social and ideological practice. My ambition in the following is to discuss bodily metaphors in a long-term perspective, without the inference of pre-constructed historical breakpoints in pre-Christian times.

It goes without saying that the long temporal perspective entails the loss of nuances and detailed studies, without necessary and sufficient consideration for social and cultural situations. Of course, social and political conditions shaped the outlook on humans and animals, and there were a great many regional expressions in different periods. My aim here is not to describe individual places, regions, or periods, but instead to analyse tendencies and possible breaks in tradition, similarities and contrasts, in a historicity of social practice. I want to demonstrate that bodily metaphors enrich the interpretation of Norse pre-Christian cosmology. There may have been fundamental ideas about cosmology that affected how people ordered their world, embedded in social practice, although this changed over time. The term 'pre-Christian' is used for the ideas that can be described and studied before the official Christianization of Scandinavia, and not as a designation for a uniformly defined religion. The long time span contrasts a Christian world-view with the Norse pre-Christian one, albeit at a very superficial level.

Bodies of both humans and animals are profusely represented in the archaeological record, reflecting many different patterns of action.<sup>247</sup> They were transformed through fire and other processes, which shows that humans and animals were viewed in the same way, with significant associations between them. The handling of bodies throughout the pre-Christian period indicates that the ritualization of entire bodies and body parts—both human and animal—was significant. In cases where complete humans and animals were deposited, it was chiefly in connection with death and burial, as well as certain deposits in wetlands. Complete and grossly oversized human figures are also documented in rock carvings from the

Bronze Age, and extremely large wooden figures have been registered among the finds from Bronze Age and Iron Age bogs.<sup>248</sup>

The better-known bog bodies, from the Neolithic up to the first centuries of the common era, are examples of how people were deposited as complete bodies. Children, women, and men were killed and held in place with stakes and withies in bogs; they often had physical defects.<sup>249</sup>

The clearest traces of concrete attitudes and strategies to humans and animals concern death and burial. In certain periods the mortuary practice involved burying intact, unburnt bodies, placed in coffins of different kinds. In other periods the dead were cremated, causing the fragmentation of the bodies, and they were buried in smaller containers, or scattered within a small area. We cannot take it for granted that all people were treated with equal care after death. There may have been corpses without any great value, of people who were buried in such circumstances that they have not been preserved for posterity. In some periods of prehistory the graves—for example, the Neolithic megaliths, the Early Bronze Age barrows and cairns, or the Late Iron Age large barrows—express an exclusiveness that seems to have been reserved for certain individuals. Not everyone was buried. Graves from other prehistoric periods give a different impression, showing that the majority of the population were buried, as evidenced in the graves and cemeteries of the Late Bronze Age, the Early Iron Age, and the Viking Age.

### ***Complete bodies***

The careful burial of complete bodies reflects the importance of a complete human being, and the idea that no part of the body could be set aside. Can we today perceive burials of complete bodies as representations of the cosmos? One clue to answering this question comes from the different procedures for the burial of an uncremated human body. It could be placed in the grave in different postures: on the back or the side, with arms and legs in special positions. There was a kind of body language which in certain cases describes distinct patterns of action in limited periods. In the Iron Age the orientation of external grave markers, that is, stone settings of various forms, instead of the cremated bodies, may possibly represent the compass points. The orientation of the bodies and the graves probably

expresses cosmological attitudes. Although we cannot describe in detail the ideas behind the placing of the bodies, the posture and orientation of the bodies suggests that cosmological overtones were embedded in social practice.

The archaeologist Klavs Randsborg writes that the Bronze Age oak-coffin graves are mostly oriented west–east (with the head to the west), and that the orientation depended on the season, and on the rising and setting of the sun.<sup>250</sup> Iron Age graves in Denmark show that a north–south orientation of the bodies dominated in the Early Roman Iron Age, and that a south–north orientation also occurred in the Early Roman Iron Age. During the Late Iron Age people preferred a north–south orientation of the bodies, while west–east prevailed in the Viking Age.<sup>251</sup> At the Viking Age town of Birka, on Björkö in Lake Mälaren, the predominant orientation of bodies was likewise west–east.<sup>252</sup> In Christian burial practice, a west–east placing of the dead dominates, being crucial for the idea of the resurrection on Judgement Day.

The significance of the different compass points in Norse mythology is debated; it has been claimed that north was viewed negatively.<sup>253</sup> In contrast to graves with uncremated bodies, it is not possible to discuss orientation when it comes to cremation graves, since the remains are gathered in a small container. Randsborg nevertheless shows that at the end of the Early Bronze Age, when cremation was introduced, later becoming all-prevailing, the cremated bones were placed in coffins. These were oriented in the same way as the uncremated bodies in the more traditional oak-coffin graves.<sup>254</sup> Although cremation broke the corpse into small parts, the burnt bones were assembled as a whole and buried with features from an earlier mortuary ritual. In the ploughed-out barrow at Stora Köpinge in Skåne, a cremated man aged about 40 was placed in such a way that the bones ran the entire length of the coffin.<sup>255</sup>

### *Parts of bodies*

In the prehistoric periods it was not just complete and intact bodies that were buried; whole bodies and parts of bodies could be skeletonized, cremated, sorted, cleaned, and packaged. Skeletonized bodies have been



found, for instance, at the Neolithic cemetery of Ajvide in southern Gotland, representing the Pitted Ware culture. In several graves bodies were buried without heads.<sup>256</sup> A later example comes from Viking Age graves on the island of Langeland in Denmark. In one grave the man was lying on his stomach, with his head alongside, and in another grave a woman was placed stretched out on her back, with her head between her legs.<sup>257</sup> Pre-Christian bodily metaphors probably include basic ideas about the significance of entire bodies, but these must be supplemented with other attitudes to people, and the meaning of fragmented bodies and body parts.

Cremation destroys and fragments the body before it is buried. The deceased takes on properties different from those of a materially preserved body. Cremations took place in different ways, and the archaeological contexts show that rituals varied. In the earliest cremations in the Late Bronze Age, the burnt bones were cleaned and sorted before they were placed in an urn; no soot or charcoal accompanied them in the urn. Cremated and cleaned bones occur to a lesser extent later on, right up to the Vendel Period in the Mälaren area. At the end of the Bronze Age and throughout the Iron Age we find sooty and burnt bones mixed with the remains of the actual pyre in the grave cache. Both cleaned and sooty burnt bones of animals and humans occur from the latter part of the Late Bronze Age up to the Late Iron Age.<sup>258</sup>

When bones were cleaned after cremation, the best-preserved bones were selected and placed in an urn. Femur, humerus, bones from the trunk and the skull are therefore the most common bones in urn graves. Sooty bones in fire layers, on the other hand, come from bones collected without having been sorted after the cremation. In these fire layers we therefore find small bones from the neck, feet, and hands better represented.<sup>259</sup> The archaeologist Agneta Bennett Lagerlöf believes that in the Early Iron Age in the Mälaren valley there was variation in cremation customs through the different ways of storing the burnt bones. By contrast, a more homogeneous mortuary practice with fire layers dominated in the Late Iron Age.<sup>260</sup>

Practical approaches to cremation are significant for how much the cremated body was fragmented. People handled the remains with thought, deciding whether the whole body or parts of it should be collected after the cremation, and selecting the parts that were considered important to bury.



As far as I understand it, the concrete treatment of the body involved taking a series of stances on the meaning of the body and the value of the person or animal.

### ***Special body parts***

The handling of special body parts is another aspect of pre-Christian bodily metaphors. Parts of both human and animal bodies seem to have been saturated with meaning, since they have been found in the most varied archaeological contexts. Plaits of hair were deposited in wetlands at the end of the Bronze Age.<sup>261</sup> Heads and foot bones of horse, cattle, pig, and sheep/goat were deposited in wetlands, in wells, and in buildings during the Iron Age.<sup>262</sup> Nails and hair were important in Saami burial customs. Teeth from different animals are common in graves from the Stone Age into the Iron Age. Teeth of wild animal were put in graves in the Mesolithic, while teeth of domesticated animals, especially horses, occurred to a greater extent in later periods. Special body parts such as heads, hands, or feet are also depicted in Bronze Age rock carvings and are rendered on richly decorated objects from the Iron Age.

The archaeological finds and pictorial representations show that pre-Christian bodily metaphors comprise people and animals as both whole bodies and parts. The significance of different body parts as an element in materially expressed bodily metaphors was characteristic of pre-Christian ritual practice. Norse myths tell of how the ship Naglfar was built of the nails of dead people, and it was launched at Ragnarok. Snorri writes in *Gylfaginning*:

It [Naglfar] is made of dead people's nails, and it is worth taking care lest anyone die with untrimmed nails, since such a person contributes much material to the ship Naglfar which gods and men wish would take a long time to finish.<sup>263</sup>

In the kennings (metaphorical circumlocutions) of Norse poetry there are terms that graphically describe how different body parts could be perceived.

The following examples are taken from Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* :<sup>264</sup>

- Arms                      hawk-fells, bow-forcer, falcon-perches
- Blood                     raven-beer; corpse-heap-wave, corpse-dew,
- warm ale, wave of points, hot wound-surge
- Breast                    thought-land; mind-fiord
- Breast/backbones      the cave-women's age-old laughtership-keels
- 
- Eye/Skull                eyelash-moon-flame-sky
- Face                      my ground
- Feet                       sole-palms
- Hand                      bow-land
- Heart                     power-stone
- Neck                      soft necklace-stand
- Tears                     eye-rain
- Teeth                     song's skerry
- Tongue                    word-meadow; gum-skerries

The kennings are not passive descriptions of parts of the body. They evoke actions and show that parts of the body may have been associated with something that could be performed. There is movement and strength, and a slightly humorous tone in the kennings. Their metaphors, of course, cannot be translated verbatim into pre-Christian perceptions of parts of the body or

the meaning of specific parts. Yet the kennings show that body parts actually played a part, that the different parts of the body were significant aspects of a cosmological structure.

The meaning of specific body parts, their deposition in graves or at special places, is linked to the medieval cult of saints and the medieval practice of cutting up the bodies of significant persons.<sup>265</sup> A similar bodily culture is described by Snorri in *The Saga of Halfdan the Black*.<sup>266</sup> The hero, Harald the Black, was highly popular. When he died his body was divided so that different parts of it could be buried in mounds at different places in four different districts. This would give good harvests. The head was placed in a mound at Stein in Ringerike, and the other parts of his body were buried in mounds in Romerike, Vestfold, and Hedmark. Place-names also shed light on the significance of body parts in a landscape. Place-names with allusions to parts of animal bodies, such as Lofoten, further illustrate the use of the landscape space, and perceptions of the body and its parts, as bodily metaphors in a mental landscape.<sup>267</sup>

## **Animals and humans**

Animals provide yet another clue for capturing materially expressed cosmological ideas based on the metaphorical use of the body. Animals were important constituents in different ritual acts in pre-Christian time. They can be found in most archaeological contexts, and they seem to have been significant elements in people's world-view. Graves were not exclusively for dead humans. As we have seen, complete and unburnt bodies of dogs and horses were buried just like humans in southern Scandinavia and continental Europe, as were bears in Saami territory.

Animals were also buried in human graves. The occurrence and character of the animal bodies in human graves changed over the centuries. In the Bronze Age, parts of sheep were sometimes placed in graves, and occasionally also horses. In the Mälaren valley, parts of animal bodies were laid in graves during the Early Iron Age. Sometimes archaeologists find claw phalanges of bear from skins that had been wrapped round the bodies in the graves. Animals are much more frequently found in graves during the Late Iron Age, when complete cremated animal bodies were also buried

with humans. The most common animals were cattle, sheep/goats, pigs, horses, and dogs, but there were also bears, cats, birds, and fish.<sup>268</sup> In the Late Roman Iron Age there was a striking increase in the animal element expressed in mortuary practice, which precedes the large amount of animal elements in Migration Period iconography. Rituals still survived then which involved placing both unburnt and burnt bodies, both whole animals and parts, in human graves, and this continued into the Viking Age.

The occurrence of animals in mortuary ritual seems to be associated with special ties between humans and animals. The use of animals in burial rituals, and for several other types of rituals as well as more everyday situations, signals a special pre-Christian outlook on animals. In mythology the practical and functional sides of domesticated animals are toned down, and what we see instead are their fantastic and ritual capacities. Wild animals have a more prominent place in myths, as in iconography, during the Late Iron Age.

The way animals act in Norse mythology is not strange if we consider the prehistoric reality, when animals were very clearly integrated in everyday life and ritual practice. Animals therefore add a further dimension to the study of Norse pre-Christian cosmology, particularly because of the distinctive features of each species which could be used in various transformative expressions. Different categories of animals –domesticated animals, wild animals, exotic and fantastic animals–played a major role in Norse cosmology. The animals were attributes of different gods, as we have seen in the examples of Odin's horse and ravens, Thor's goats, and Freyja's cats. Animals were integrated in the world of humans, and they were significant not just for their practical utility. They seem to have played an active role in transformations and manipulations, with relations between humans and animals being, to say the least, ambiguous.

In the Neolithic in particular, people and animals have not just been found together in graves. Parts of humans and animals are also found in settlement sites, in cult houses, and in causewayed enclosures ('Sarup sites') which comprise large enclosed areas. The fragments are difficult to assess. The human and animal bones can be remains of everyday or ritual acts. One interpretation of the bones is that they are part of some kind of circulation system that was important for social contact networks and relations between different kin groups and their ancestors.<sup>269</sup> In the Late

Bronze Age and the Iron Age, fragmented animal bodies were deposited not only in graves but also in buildings and wells. Wetland is a special category of landscape that was used, all the way from the Stone Age up to the Middle Ages, for rituals of a highly diverse character. Various different types of wetland deposits are documented from the entire pre-Christian period, including whole or fragmented bodies of humans and animals, along with artefacts in varying degrees.

Fragments of humans and animals have been documented from cult houses and so-called cultic sites of various kinds, and from different pre-Christian periods on the continent and in Scandinavia. The Bronze Age cult houses are special in character, and beside them there are unburnt bones of parts of animal. Burnt bones of cattle, sheep/goats, and pigs have been identified beside the cult house at Hågahögen in Uppland. In the latter part of the Iron Age, at Borg in Östergötland, humans and animals were constituents in ritual acts performed inside and outside the cult house. At special places in the landscape, and earöerat the enclosure systems from the Late Bronze Age, cremated humans and animals are deposited together in small pits. Cremated bones of humans and animals have been found on a moraine beside the Iron Age settlement and cemetery at Lunda in Södermanland.

Throughout the pre-Christian period, dead people were buried intact, without any great alteration of the bodies, and parallel to this they could be cremated, with the bones fragmented and undergoing various forms of treatment before they were buried. It is true that there were periods, in the Stone Age and Early Bronze Age, when unburnt and complete bodies dominated. We find graves with both one and more than one skeleton, and complete or skeletonized bodies. Alongside the most common Stone Age practice of burying bodies uncremated, cremation burials also happened sporadically; for instance at the Mesolithic site of Skateholm in southern Skåne, about 7,000 years ago, and in the Neolithic Battle Axe culture. In the oak-coffin graves of the Early Bronze Age, about 1400 BC, the grave of the Egtved girl in Jutland, however, held a cremated child of about six. Some of the burnt bones were wrapped in a cloth beside the girl's left leg, the others placed in a chip basket at her head. From the Late Bronze Age, that is, from *c.* 1000 BC, cremations dominated until the first centuries of the common era. Burials of uncremated bodies then began to reappear parallel to the continued custom of cremation. Until the conversion to Christianity, burial

and cremation took place in parallel, with distinctive regional variations in the proportions. After Christianization, interment predominated, and cremation was not resumed until the start of the twentieth century, since when it has now become more common than burial.

The parallel ways of dealing with dead humans and animals—with either intact, preserved bodies or cremated, transformed bodies—did not just take place at rituals connected with death and burial. In Stone Age contexts there are several attested cases where cremated human bones have been found on settlement sites and at special cultic sites. In the Late Bronze Age, when cremation predominated, there are documented wetland finds with unburnt, intact animal bodies, such as the Budsene find in Denmark.<sup>270</sup> The ways of handling humans and animals, and of depositing unburnt or burnt bodies, are explained in terms of social practice and ideology, but they probably also had a basis in cosmology. The overall picture painted by archaeology and literature suggests that, even though social conventions were modified through time, there may have been cosmological ideas that were linked to corporeal materiality.

To sum up, corporeal materiality and bodily metaphors were expressed through ritual practice as far back as the Stone Age. Bodily metaphors are also distinguishable much later in the abstract ideas recorded in Icelandic literature. The combination of the different categories of sources gives new interpretative perspectives on the link between bodily metaphors, landscape, and transformed humans and animals:

- Bodily metaphors
  - complete bodies
  - parts of bodies
  - special body parts
- The different elements of nature
  - fire
  - earth
  - water
- Transformed humans and animals
  - concrete expressions
  - abstract ideas

The materiality of the preserved bodies indicates that there were very well formulated strategies for the treatment of dead people, and for representations of animals and humans in iconography. The significance of complete or fragmented bodies, and of specific body parts, illustrates a system of bodily metaphors connected to the landscape, transformed humans, and imaginary creatures, or else *forn siðr* and the performance of ritual.

There were situations when complete bodies or fragments were not merely placed in graves, but also planted in special places. They have been found on settlement sites and farms, in wetlands, and at special topographical locations in the landscape. The Icelandic stories put interpretations of the archaeological fragments of body parts in the landscape into some perspective. It is characteristic that some of the mythical beings were created from different natural elements. The dwarfs were created out of earth, or possibly from the blood and bones of one or more giants. Supernatural beings were classified as compounds of different properties linked to the different elements and powers of nature: air, fire, water, and earth. Supernatural creatures, such as Utgard-Loki, represent natural forces that could not be controlled.<sup>[271](#)</sup>

The boundaries between nature and humans, gods, giants, animals, and other beings were fluid in Norse mythology. The world and mortals resembled each other, and were born from each other. The primeval cow Audhumla gave life to the human-like primordial giant Ymir, and the first man and woman, Ask and Embla, were made from tree trunks. The gods tore the giant Ymir apart and used the parts of his body to make the world.<sup>[272](#)</sup>

The world was envisaged as a cycle in which all the parts were dependent on each other. Humans were in a landscape between different natural elements. They lived between different structured worlds which consisted of gods and giants and other bodily phenomena, and which could not be identified as either human or animal. Animals could also have unusual properties. Odin's horse Sleipnir had eight legs, Thor's goats Tanngniost and Tanngrisnir, like the pig Sæhrimnir, could be eaten and then arise again, and the teats of the goat Heidrun provided a never-ending flow of mead.

Nature could be created and transformed into properties that were useful to the gods. Fire and water were the most intractable elements in nature,



whereas earth was regarded as a more stable and immobile substance linked to humans, giants, dwarfs, and the dead. The air was open to all beings that could fly. Among the gods, Odin and Loki were able to fly, while Thor could travel through the air in his chariot. In Norse mythology the elements earth, water, air, and fire are accessible to different kinds of mythological beings. They are portrayed in keeping with transformative features in descriptions of gods, giants, other supernatural beings, and animals. I think it is impossible to imagine similar events in interpretations of landscape-related bodily metaphors. When interpreting spatial phenomena, on the other hand, one can find inspiration in the myths for analyses of larger geographical areas than, say, the immediate surroundings of a farm. The landscape was peopled. Bodily metaphors, both in the archaeological evidence and in the Icelandic texts, seem to be a significant category which may have been active in the creation of order in the world. People in pre-Christian times seem to have proceeded from the significance of their own bodies and those of animals, and they used themselves in a mental and polyvalent landscape.

Rituals over thousands of years have provided the background here for archaeological interpretations of bodily metaphors and cosmology. I argue that a basic theme persisted over the millennia in attitudes to humans and animals. This could be expressed through variations on metaphors about bodies and body parts, the different natural elements in the landscape, and transformed people and animals. There were local and regional variations over this long span of time, and even within the same period. The human body was evidently an important point of departure in ritual action, but so too were the contacts and networks that existed between Scandinavia and Christian Europe. Late Iron Age mortuary practice can possibly be linked to ideas about the realm of the dead that were recorded much later, and they may possibly have existed even further back in time. The way of handling the dead seems not to have been random or indifferent; on the contrary, the mortuary customs and other ritual depositions suggest that there were different, well-formulated strategies. There seems to have been a kind of considerateness and concern in the treatment of dead people and animals, at least as this can be observed in graves, and it contrasts starkly with the Christian funeral liturgy.

It also seems as if people long ago regarded their fellow human beings and animals in many different ways. As an archaeologist I interpret the

many different methods of handling bodies as showing that the different rituals also distinguish humans from other humans or from animals. This type of distinction probably expressed participation and community, or exclusion and estrangement, and a pattern of action influenced by ideas about the surrounding world. For several different reasons, the handling of dead people and animals was not only a matter of social practice but also a philosophy of life. Cosmological ideas may have their foundation in responsibility for and protection of one's own farm, and the continued life and fertility of the family. This is a kind of Midgard mentality. They may also have been dependent on the notion that different categories of dead people could end up in different realms of the dead in different places and natural elements in the landscape.

My interpretation is that there was a link between the burial of complete, uncremated bodies and that of cremated, fragmented bodies. It is tempting to imagine that uncremated bodies buried in monumental tombs express a strategy for social conventions that were not spatially mobile. They marked special persons and special places in the landscape, and burials that could only be performed with complete, intact bodies. Cremated bodies, by virtue of their portability, and the possibility of dividing them, were actually easier to carry over long distances. Moreover, the large number of cremation graves presumably contains a greater share of the population, and many flat-earth graves give the impression of staking a claim to a set area. It is of course extremely complicated to suggest an archaeological interpretation of the concrete meaning of different ways of handling dead bodies related to different archaeological find contexts. The outlook on humanity reflects several underlying stances. Attitudes to death are given many different expressions.

The metaphors involving bodies cited here arose from changing historical currents. They are therefore not elements in isolated societies separated from the world around them, but testify to contacts and cultural interaction between different geographical areas. Confrontations and exchanges between the pre-Christian and the Christian took place through encounters between people over several centuries; other confrontations that we cannot label in a comparable way took place long before that. Rituals with people and animals were a part of the interpersonal communication that occurred over thousands of years. There were no lasting and unchanging traditions in pre-Christian times. Links between humans, animals, and nature were

therefore expressed in different ways, and in my view they had cosmological subtexts that crystallize archaeologically through interpretations via material traces of social practice.

The bodily metaphors can be considered in relation to the historical breakpoints that divide archaeological periods. Accentuated use of material metaphors for the body begin to appear in the Early Roman Iron Age, and in the fourth century there was a striking growth in the different material expressions. Complete, uncremated human bodies are found to a much greater extent than earlier, although cremation continued to be practised. Intact, uncremated pigs and sheep were placed in graves. There are a few documented cases of horses being buried in separate graves in southern Scandinavia. In subsequent centuries there are countless examples of figurative representations of animals and humans and artistic depictions of transformations between human and animal. Horses, dogs, cattle, pigs, wild animals, fish, and birds appear in many graves with extremely profuse finds from the Vendel Period and the Viking Age. Bodily metaphors involving humans, domesticated animals, wild beasts, and in particular fantasy animals actually increased during the Late Iron Age, but they waned when Christianity was officially introduced. They survived with the Christian animal ornamentation until the construction of stone churches began, and during the continued practice of depositing offerings in wetlands and in connection with the construction of buildings. The different ways of looking after dead bodies then dwindled after the coming of Christianity.

The focus has been on ritual practice involving humans and animals, 'archaeological bodies', their placing in different natural elements in the landscape, and the problem of transformations between humans and animals. People construct an understanding of the world, a cosmology, to explain the structure of the world. Cosmology provides a holistic perspective so that people can sort events, create order, and make the world comprehensible. Present-day scholars have a tendency to ascribe a cosmology to pre-Christian people, but the cosmology need not have been either conscious or especially meaningful for the people who lived back then. However, the archaeological fragments suggest that there were expressive bodily metaphors. The metaphorical theme displays great variation, and there are certain shared features of bodily materiality, which could constitute a cosmological theme over a long course of time.

The text-based models of Norse cosmology describe how people oriented themselves spatially in the landscape, based on their own farm and its surroundings. People lived in Midgard, in the middle of the world. The ritualization of humans and animals could be a part of the cosmological framework; the rituals made it possible to control the world. Bodily metaphors enrich the text-based cosmological models of how people may have understood their world. The archaeological traces of people and animals and the iconographic representations therefore supplement the fragmentary texts about how people viewed themselves, and not least of all the role of animals. People were dependent on animals, functionally and ritually, and animals—like humans—were portrayed through metaphorical body language.

Cosmological models have usually captured Viking Age people and society, and how people back then may have perceived themselves and their world. The material remains provide a different perspective from what can be read in the texts. With an archaeological material perspective on bodily metaphors, I think we can find a chronological depth in bodily related ritual practice that goes much further back in time, possibly all the way to the Stone Age. People categorized themselves, in relation to each other and to animals, and they used themselves and animals as metaphors in a cosmology.

It is possible that the fragments that can be studied archaeologically deal with special situations. The link to death and burial is obvious. There may also be links to other events in a person's life cycle, or special events in connection with, for example, peace, agreements, war, conflicts, or traumatic experiences. The ritualization of humans and animals could have been part of the cosmological framework, which explained and displayed possible courses of events. Rituals are linked to the time in which they are performed. The archaeological traces show that people and animals were recurrent motifs in a persistent world-view. The bodily metaphors in the remains of people and animals, and particularly the transformations between them, I would interpret as a way for people to practise their thoughts, their world-view, and their ideas about the cosmos.

The animals from pre-Christian times occur in archaeological contexts and in written texts. Bodily metaphors concerning animals and humans can be read from the contexts and the texts. These metaphors characterized pre-Christian rituals and provide a foundation for coming chapters. A Midgard

mentality forms the background to the different roles of animals associated with archaeological contexts and mythological texts.

# CHAPTER 5

## **A Midgard mentality –why animals?**

What then was the significance of animals, and why did they play such a major role in prehistoric society, as evidenced in archaeological contexts and interpreted from Norse myths? What relations did humans have to animals, and what roles did the different animal species have in the pre-Christian conceptual world?

The animal species on farms evidently had different functions and meanings. The practical utility of the individual animals, and their symbolic value in a concrete pre-Christian reality, will serve as the point of departure here for a discussion of a pre-Christian conceptual world and of differences between pre-Christian and Christian symbolic language. The powerful properties of the animals in Norse mythology, as recorded in the thirteenth century, will constitute a kind of reception of Old Norse religion in a Christian era. The mythological animals are an illustration of pre-Christian perceptions of animals.

Animals were incorporated both practically and symbolically in the human life-world. With their differing behaviour and distinctive properties, the animals served as actors for various purposes in pre-Christian settings. It seems as if animals domesticated humans instead of the other way around. Animals tamed people, forcing them to satisfy what the animals required to be healthy, give a good yield, and reproduce. A symbiotic relationship between humans and animals was formed during the prehistoric period.

Animals lived on the farm and had various practical purposes. They were slaughtered to be eaten by the people on the farm. They were consumed for basic survival and on special occasions, as demonstrated by archaeological excavations of farmsteads, cult houses, and cultic sites. Animals were also used for practical labour, for transport, and after they were slaughtered their bodies became raw material for interior furnishings and craft products.

Animals were a part of a Midgard mentality, in which animal husbandry and breeding were important tasks, calling for knowledge and experience, consideration and concern.

Animals were also a component of the rituals that took place on the farm. Parts of animals were placed in house foundations when new buildings were constructed, and when people moved away from a place they put animal bones in wells, making the water unfit to drink.

Animals were a part of burial rituals. Animals were slaughtered so that they could be laid in graves. Above all bodies of dogs, horses, and birds of prey and their quarry were deposited whole in women's and men's graves. Dogs and horses were also buried in graves of their own. It is interesting to note that animals that live in large herds or flocks were not buried in special graves. Pigs, sheep, and goats, animals of major practical and economic utility, were not buried in graves of their own. These species often ended up as roasts and smaller pieces of meat in graves. This might indicate that dogs, horses, and bears had a special relationship to people, and that the ordinary animals reared for slaughter were not regarded as special individuals. It also seems as if both animals and humans were executed on other occasions in connection with some type of ritual. Their bodies were deposited in wetlands some distance from settlements.

The highly varied archaeological contexts show that the essence and metaphorical significance of animals goes far beyond their concrete utility. Their practical and metaphorical meaning testifies to their importance for human communication. Animals seem to have lived in symbiosis with humans, and they were significant for people's understanding of the world around them. Were the animals helpers, survivors, or identity makers? Was there some special animal affinity?

If we look at animals in concrete terms, we see that whole animal bodies or parts of them were deposited in different ways near places where people enacted their everyday lives, on farms and at cult houses, and at wetlands away from the farm. It may therefore be assumed hypothetically that animals had functional, symbolic, and cognitive meanings in what I call a Midgard mentality. Based on the archaeological and osteological evidence and on Old West Norse texts, the following causal connections crystallize:

- The practical and functional purposes of animals
  - Food



- Raw material
  - Assistance to humans
- Social identity and lifestyle
  - *Forn siðr*
  - Status and power
  - Prosperity
  - Regionality and alliances
  - Networks and communication strategies
  - Meals
  - Gender roles and sexuality
- Human properties
  - Personal names
  - Attendant spirits in animal form
- Cosmology
  - Long temporal perspective
  - Differences between pre-Christian and Christian symbolic language
  - Differences between animals and humans
  - Shape-changing and ritual specialists

In pre-Christian times it is conceivable that what was then regarded as the past was also used for political legitimation. A tradition and a historical background constituted a social force. This agrees with the meaning of the term *forn siðr*, in which religion is integrated in social and cultural matters.<sup>[273](#)</sup> An innovation, for instance the introduction of new domesticated animals such as hens, should also signal social competence, communication with other people outside one's own sphere. Pre-Christian ritual practice can therefore relate to everyday and religious spheres and to social abilities and even propagandist manipulations.

Animals suggest a down-to-earth existence close to the farm, but they also indicate the existence of an aristocracy and a leading stratum in society and their need to be seen and noticed for their ideological and political legitimation. Materiality and visual signals were characteristic of society's communication strategy. It is above all the life of the male aristocrat and the

warrior that can be detected in Icelandic poetry and literature and in Norse mythology. The warrior can also be found in archaeological contexts, but these contexts and the material culture tell an additional story in which women's lives seem as significant as men's.

Death rituals also express a Midgard mentality and lifestyle metaphors. Since graves are like installations of prosperity and materiality, they also ritualize a form of cosmology and ideology. Mortuary rituals show that there was such prosperity and social abilities that the actual ritual not only symbolized the structure of society but also social and political communication strategies. The encounter between Scandinavia and continental Europe entailed the confrontation of different political wills. It is perfectly possible that the use of animal metaphors, and the symbolic relations between humans and animals, were expressions of the political mentality that had been handed down in Scandinavia since the third century, or even earlier.

Throughout the prehistoric period, animal bodies or parts of animals were buried along with dead people in graves. Dogs and game animals were laid in graves in the Mesolithic; domesticated animals were added in the Neolithic. Parts of dog, horse, sheep, goat, and pig are found in graves in the Bronze Age. In the oak-coffin graves of the Early Bronze Age, human bodies could also be wrapped in cow hides. It was not until the Early Roman Iron Age, the fourth century, that large body parts or complete domesticated animals accompanied people into the grave. Horse, sheep/goat, cattle, pig, dog, cat, bear, hen, and birds of prey are the kind of animals found in graves from the late pre-Christian period; that is to say, the Late Iron Age. When Christianity came, this entire mortuary ritual disappeared, replaced by a homogeneous burial custom without animals.

The archaeological evidence shows that people and animals were ritualized in different ways in the pre-Christian period. Such ritual acts with fragmented or complete bodies took place both indoors and outdoors, both close to and far from the farmstead. In Bronze Age votive finds, enclosure systems, and burnt mounds, the find circumstances suggest that humans, cattle, pigs, sheep/goats, and horse were deposited in a similar way and at places that are not associated with ordinary graves. In Early Iron Age wetlands we find human and animal bones. At Skedemosse in Öland, for example, horse dominates; there are also bones of sheep/goat, cattle, pig,

dog, and fish, and smaller amounts of bone from cat, hen, fish, birds of prey, and roe deer. [274](#)

The animal perspective and the materiality expressed by the animal symbolism give us a background against which to interpret human relations to animals. Animal husbandry and the iconography on objects are evidence that attitudes to animals have a very long history. The history of domesticated animals in Scandinavia goes back to the Stone Age. The oldest known domesticated animal is the dog, which occurred as early as the Palaeolithic; that is, over 12,000 years ago. Cattle, sheep, and goats became common much later, around 4000 BC. During the Neolithic pigs were also domesticated. This is a relatively easy species to domesticate since it is omnivorous and therefore likes to be close to human settlements. Tame horses began to appear in Scandinavia during the Bronze Age and are believed to have been imported here, even though the species existed in Scandinavia in its wild forms. In the Late Bronze Age beekeeping also began to occur. Contacts with the Roman Empire brought significant influences and left material traces in Scandinavia. The stock of domesticated animals was thus expanded, with imported poultry (hens, ducks, and geese) in the centuries around the birth of Christ. Another result of the Romans' extensive contacts was that the first tame cats came to Scandinavia at this time, as well as greyhounds.

It may be assumed that there were leading families who had a greater say than others. They had more power. One can call them an elite or an aristocracy depending on one's theoretical premises. There were kings with a hird and a retinue. It makes no difference what we call the influential people, the individuals who most often are made visible by archaeology as a result of their material wealth. These families with high-ranking people enjoyed greater prosperity. They owned bigger farms and had many animals. They had far-reaching contacts and could acquire exotic objects. They also had opportunities to use specialized labour to produce metal objects of various kinds and to build grand monuments of the kind that have been preserved through the ages.

In this context it is interesting to allow animal husbandry and what I call the Midgard mentality to play a greater role in the interpretation of Norse pre-Christian religion. Since farm animals have a long historical background, there are traditions associated with the different species which constitute the foundation for different types of ritualization. Attitudes to and

ideas about animals over a long time of use, *la longue durée*, give us occasion to discuss them in terms of materiality, which can increase our understanding of their great value for the people who tended or owned them. People managed and dealt with animals, and the animals affected people's lives and living conditions. The animals brought prosperity, but they also required a great deal of labour from people. Relations between animals and humans are coloured by this reciprocal dependence.

Transferring the Midgard concept to a concrete archaeological Midgard is of course a daring idea. The farm and the landscape in which people lived are a part of the material culture studied by archaeologists. The farm and the landscape make up a choreography that surrounded the family, with its people of different ages, different sexes, and different social positions. The concept of Midgard thus provides a useful associative perspective on how people may have shaped their life-world and how we can interpret the archaeological traces in prehistoric settlements.

People's life-world is functionally and socially structured, and it rests on a mythological and cosmological foundation. One way to capture it is to envisage that a Midgard mentality also had a material basis. Functional tasks and ritual acts on and around the farm made use of material categories. The tasks and rituals were integrated in people's lives and ideas. The farm and the landscape were thus a metaphorical reality, in the production and reproduction of a concrete reality. How, then, were animals used ritually on farms and in the landscape? In what way can these types of ritual practice add something to the interpretation of a Midgard mentality?

Depending on the domesticated animals' economic significance and their different qualities, they were used for food and raw material, but also as watchdogs, as draught animals, or for riding. Favourable and desirable characteristics made animals attractive for crossing and breeding. Aesthetic values in animals, their hereditary traits, and their practical function were probably significant for the use of animals in ritual practice and in metaphor in Norse mythology. Wild animals close to the farms—whether fur-bearing animals, animals killed for meat, or beasts of prey—were also an important part of the human life-world on account of their various forms of behaviour and characteristic features, and this was expressed in Norse mythology. The same applies to the fantasy creatures that we see depicted. They were both human-like and composed of different body parts from the living world of animals and the world of the imagination.

The long temporal perspective of archaeology thus gives us opportunities to distinguish how rituals with animals underwent variation and change in the course of the Iron Age. There were clear changes in mortuary practice in the third century AD, and from that time we can detect rituals which survived throughout the Viking Age. It is possible that the different rituals were connected to special situations which had to do with events in a person's life cycle or special happenings in connection with peace agreements, war, conflicts or other traumatic experiences. Animals were evidently of great significance for the life of people at the time.

## **The practical and functional purposes of animals**

The symbolic value of animals, and people's relations to individual species and particular animals, depended on the animals' practical and functional purposes. The behaviour and properties of the animals, as well as their management, were embedded in a Midgard mentality. The animals' practical function included everything from providing food to assisting people in their work.

### ***Food***

Animals are classified in categories according to their benefits. They are divided today into edible, inedible, useful and useless, wild and domestic animals, in keeping with an anthropocentric view of animals. To what extent did people during prehistoric periods classify animals? Were all animals edible?

The osteological evidence shows that domesticated animals and wild animals were used as food in pre-Christian times. On prehistoric farms, however, the element of game animals is small in proportion to animals that were raised for meat: cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs. The animal bones have butchering marks indicating that they were cut up to be cooked. There were presumably food taboos in pre-Christian Norse societies, as in most of the world's cultures. Unfortunately, the osteological evidence does not permit us to draw conclusions about any prohibitions on the eating of certain animals in pre-Christian times. It is not until the time when we have church documents that any taboo of this kind is attested, as we shall see below.

It is problematic, however, to assess whether slaughtered animals were used solely as food, or whether they might also have been used in different types of ritual activities. It is estimated that no more than 10 per cent of the animal remains in Gaul were linked to human consumption. <sup>275</sup> No comparable calculations have been attempted using the evidence of bones from pre-Christian Scandinavia. Another complex question is the context of the animal bones, their placing on the farmstead or away in wetlands. The sites of deposition do not always allow a direct interpretation as either everyday or special ritual acts.

One major problem concerns the handling of food waste. Several of the deposits of animal parts that have been found in waste pits, refuse heaps, and wells may be the result of waste management. In several cases, however, deposits in wells have been interpreted in religious terms without making the context comprehensible. Finds in wells are one of several archaeological contexts that archaeologists and osteologists are particularly prone to interpret in terms of some supposed religiosity. One example of an over-interpretation of bone deposits is a well find from Järrestad in southern Sweden, but there are many other cases in the archaeological literature. The Viking Age well finds on the magnate's estate at Järrestad consisted of bones of cattle, horse, pig, sheep/goat, dog, and elk. Dog and elk were represented by only one fragment each. The bones from cattle and sheep/goat consisted of some skull fragments and bones from parts with little meat. Most of the bones came from the meaty parts of the animals. The horse bones were mostly fragments of skulls and lower jaws. Other bones were from meaty parts and showed cut marks. Pigs were represented by fragments of lower jaws from both boars and sows, with cut marks displaying that the tongues had been cut out of the lower jaws. Both fore and hind quarters of the meaty parts of pigs were found. The animal bones in the adjacent buildings reflected the same species as those found in the wells. <sup>276</sup> The remains of animal bones have unfortunately been interpreted in excessively religious terms, ascribed to the worship of specific mythological animals. The perspective of archaeology of religion applies methodological and theoretical self-criticism as regards what is possible to study archaeologically and what can lead to an acceptable interpretation. Rituals are by definition not solely religious but also have social and cultural connotations. It is therefore problematic to interpret vestiges of

animal bones as parallels to mythological animals and their relation to the Norse gods.

Another problematic area is the archaeological grave contexts. Entire animal bodies and parts of bodies were deposited in graves. Parts of animal bodies have often been interpreted as remains of meals in connection with the burial, or as food for the deceased on the journey to the realm of the dead. Both explanations are possible, but they cannot be proved or linked to the meaning of a pre-Christian *forn siðr* where intentions of this type are not specified. It is striking that so many entire bodies of horse, cattle, sheep, goat, dog, and birds of prey were buried in graves. These animals are often reported to have been killed; for example, horses were clubbed on the forehead. One may assume that the idea behind throwing in whole animal bodies was not so that they could be eaten in a putative afterlife. One possible meaning could instead be that the animals represent prosperity and that they were a component of the traditional funeral ritual, with social and cultural features demonstrating social identity and inheritance rights.

There is a rich body of source material available that shows the attitudes towards animals. An interesting field of research would be to combine molecular analyses, dietary analyses and osteological analyses of bone treatment/disposal. This would enable more detailed studies of the archaeological contexts involving food culture and food taboos in relation to different animal species in different parts of people's environments.

Finally, there are significant differences in Old Norse societies among the burial rituals for dogs, horses, and bears. Bears were consumed before the burial, which is not the case with dogs and horses. The skeletal parts of the bear, aside from the skull and shoulder blades, are split to the marrow. In addition to these split bones, there are numerous small bones and fragments in the graves indicating that the bear was eaten, and that all the bones were then somehow placed in a skeletal order in the grave.<sup>277</sup> With regard to dogs and horses, other archaeological contexts indicate that these animals were part of a social practice linked to food consumption.

## **Dog**

The osteological analyses from several Mesolithic and Neolithic settlements in Denmark, for instance, show that dogs were butchered and cut up, or were skinned for their coats.<sup>278</sup> At the Mesolithic site of Segebro in



southern Sweden, however, the dog bones were untouched.<sup>279</sup> The dog bones at the Bronze Age site of Apalle in central Sweden do not seem to have butchering marks either,<sup>280</sup> whereas the analysis of dog bones from Hedeby does not exclude the possibility that dogs were eaten.<sup>281</sup> It is obvious that dog meat was sometimes human food in pre-Christian times.

## Horse

There has been debate as to whether horse meat was eaten in the pre-Christian period. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that this was the case. At all the Bronze Age settlements in Denmark, marrow-split and cut-marked bones show that people ate horses.<sup>282</sup> This was also true at Apalle during the early phase of this Bronze Age settlement, but not during the later phase.<sup>283</sup> Horse bones dated to the Migration Period, found in the water hole outside the Eketorp ring-fort on Öland, point to meals that included horsemeat. The horse bones from Röekillorna in southern Skåne and from Valsmose near Rislev in Jutland likewise suggests that the animals were slaughtered for meals.<sup>284</sup> Since horse bones with butchering marks have been found in farm contexts, at cult houses, and in outlands, it may be assumed that horse meat was a part of meals in pre-Christian times.

Folk tradition has passed on the aversion towards eating horse meat, with the claim that the horse was a pagan sacrificial animal and therefore the Christian Church wanted to eradicate the ritual consumption of horse meat. The Swedish ethnologist Brita Egardt, after a detailed study of sources from the fourth to the eighteenth century, concluded that it was not possible to ascertain the reason for the Church's prohibition on horse meat. There were also bans on the eating of blood food, suffocated animals, meat sacrificed to idols, and animals without cloven hoofs. In Norse texts there is no antipathy to blood dishes. In Icelandic and Norwegian laws, on the other hand, there is a prohibition that shows striking similarities to the rules in the Old Testament about eating the meat of horse, dog, cat, fox, eagle, crow, falcon, and hawk. Pope Gregory II wrote to the German missionary Boniface in the eighth century that the flesh of horse, jay, crow, stork, beaver, and hare should not be eaten.<sup>285</sup> The ban on horse meat was thus not the only food prohibition for a Christian; other animals were also rejected as food. One

may presume, however, that most animal species could be eaten if there was a shortage of food.

*The Saga of Hakon the Good* describes how the farmers tried to persuade the king to eat horse meat at the sacrificial feast, and he was forced against his will to savour the steam from the boiled horse flesh. The Scandinavianist John Lindow writes about Snorri's detailed description of a feast (*blót*), which shows that he and other Icelandic intellectuals were greatly influenced by Christian liturgy in their view of Norse pre-Christian religion. Lindow points out that, if one removes the references in the story to 'the gods and the blood spattered all about', one might well have a picture of a wealthy man's feast in medieval Norway or Iceland.<sup>286</sup> In *Njal's Saga* and Ari's *Íslendingabók* there are accounts of how Iceland was converted to Christianity at the Althing in the year 1000. With slight differences, the two sources describe how Icelanders were exempted from the ban on eating horse meat and exposing children when Christianity was adopted. It is possible that these rules were due more to general Christian attitudes to pagan rituals than to the tradition of eating horse meat, and that both the consumption of horse meat and the exposure of infants were common in Iceland at the time.<sup>287</sup>

Judging by the bone analyses, horse meat was actually a part of the Iron Age food culture. Rob Meens argues that the aversion to eating horse meat in the Early Middle Ages was not a general reaction against paganism, but instead a reflection of the intimate association of humans with horses. Even dogs, cats, and mice had a close relationship to humans, whether as companions or as pests. Furthermore, collections of canon law and manuscripts from the tenth century show that eating horse meat involved a class perspective. Outsiders and vulnerable people without property ate horse meat, which gave it a social stigma.<sup>288</sup>

The prejudice against horse meat, then, can probably be linked to ecclesiastical principles and not to any opposition to horse rituals in Old Norse religion.<sup>289</sup> It is possible that the aversion to horse meat is part of a general western European attitude that came with Christianity. That may be why medieval towns and trading sites have no traces of horse consumption. At medieval rural sites, by contrast, there are traces of horse slaughtering and the consumption of horse meat.<sup>290</sup>

As a consequence of the prohibition on eating horse meat, archaeological finds have probably been over-interpreted to mean that the horse was a pagan sacrificial animal. The presence of horse skulls and foot bones in Iron Age settings has been interpreted as reflecting ceremonial activities.<sup>291</sup> From quite another perspective, however, the horse bones might indicate that the bodies of horses were consumed, and the inedible parts were thrown away. Wetland deposits where horses are represented by skulls and teeth, or by skulls and foot bones or only foot bones,<sup>292</sup> therefore need not be interpreted as religious. The bones may simply be slaughtering waste, while the meaty parts of the animal were kept for food.

### ***Raw material***

A large proportion of the animal bones probably represent the remains of the use of animal bodies for something other than food. Different parts of animal bodies served as raw material for various purposes. Animals' fur, skin, intestines, horns, bones, and other tissues were attractive categories of material for household functions on farms, in villages, and in the early towns.

Fragments of animal bones in early medieval towns and on rural sites reflect the hunting of hare, beaver, squirrel, marten, stoat/weasel, hedgehog, badger, otter, bear, wolverine, wolf, fox, roe deer, red deer, elk, wild boar, seal, porpoise, whale, grampus, and walrus. Relatively little bone from game animals has been found, however; this is explained in terms of restrictions on the hunting of big game in the medieval laws.<sup>293</sup>

Craft production of objects such as textiles, drinking horns, combs of horn and bone, game pieces, and dice required access to material of different qualities and from different animals.

### ***Animals assisting humans***

As a general fact it may be stated that certain animal species help humans in various ways to do work that they cannot manage on their own. Besides providing food and raw material, animals can therefore be described as an extension of manpower. Animals have been used for riding, driving, and

traction, so that people have been able to transport themselves and goods with ease, and to perform especially hard work.

Through a combination of pictures and archaeological finds, the archaeological sources give insight into the way horses were used for riding and driving. Pictures from the Vendel Period and Viking Age give us some conception of riding and ideals of horsemanship. Images of horses and horsemen can be found on metal jewellery, brooches, and helmet adornments, on picture stones and runic stones, and on textiles, and we may assume that the images were well dispersed in different social milieux. The pictures are highly visual, giving a general impression of a rider on a horse with a proud posture and the neck held high. The Swedish archaeologist Anneli Sundkvist writes that the pictures are reminiscent of the ideal for a well-trained horse, an ideal that first arose with the art of dressage in the Renaissance. The Scandinavian pictures of horses from the Vendel Period and Viking Age suggest that there were trained animals even in pre-Christian times. This is suggested by the high posture of the horse and the fact that the horseman often rides with hanging reins.[294](#)

In the Roman Iron Age a Roman ideal prevailed even in Scandinavia. The snaffles that have mostly been found in depositions in bogs are not very different from today's. The snaffle consists of a headstall of leather, a bit, and reins. The reins were usually in the form of heavy metal chains attached to leather straps. The most common bit was a rather thin straight mouthpiece with a square cross-section, giving the horse freedom to move its tongue. The equipment gives an impression of a mode of riding that required good balance on the part of rider and horse alike. The sharp bits probably made it unnecessary to rein the horse in hard. The weight of the chains no doubt facilitated the transmission of the rider's signals to the bit even if the reins were not tightened. The reins were probably held in one hand or completely dropped when the rider needed both hands to wield weapons in combat.[295](#)

The art of riding underwent changes in pre-Christian times, with influences from the Roman Empire and later from the east.[296](#) In the Migration Period and the Vendel Period the ideal of horsemanship was affected by eastern customs and the use of spurs ceased. Franks and Germans influenced the Scandinavian ideal. In the tenth century the western influence made itself felt again, as spurs are once again found in the

archaeological material. The Roman ideal returned in parallel to an eastern element, and a bit with cheekpieces became a part of the horse's headstall.

Since saddles are made of impermanent material and only parts of the saddle construction are preserved, the appearance of saddles is an unsolved archaeological problem. Instead, metal mounts and saddlebows, as well as stirrups, give us a glimpse of the use of saddles. Different types of saddlebows are however preserved from pre-Christian Scandinavia, indicating a different mode of riding. The oldest example is from the Late Bronze Age. The bronze pipes from Fogdarp in Skåne, Sweden, are decorated with two human heads with horns and bird beaks. They may very well have belonged to a saddle, although the design is uncertain. [297](#) These Bronze Age finds, like the Viking Age harness bows, had both a practical function and a metaphorical meaning. They were designed in order to attract attention. [298](#)

Just over thirty saddles from AD 200–500 have been found in bogs and graves in Scandinavia. The extremely fragmentary finds prove to be of four different types, varying from high to low saddlebows, which suggests that riding for both combat and hunting occurred. Fighting on horseback is easier if the horse has a highly arched saddle and stirrups. This makes it easier for the rider to maintain balance and to move backwards on the horse's back. Lower saddlebows were used for hunting, to allow rapid movements and to make it easier for the rider to jump off the horse. Saddles were made for different purposes and riding techniques. The riding saddle was not introduced in earnest until the Pre-Roman Iron Age, presumably through influences from south-eastern Europe. [299](#)

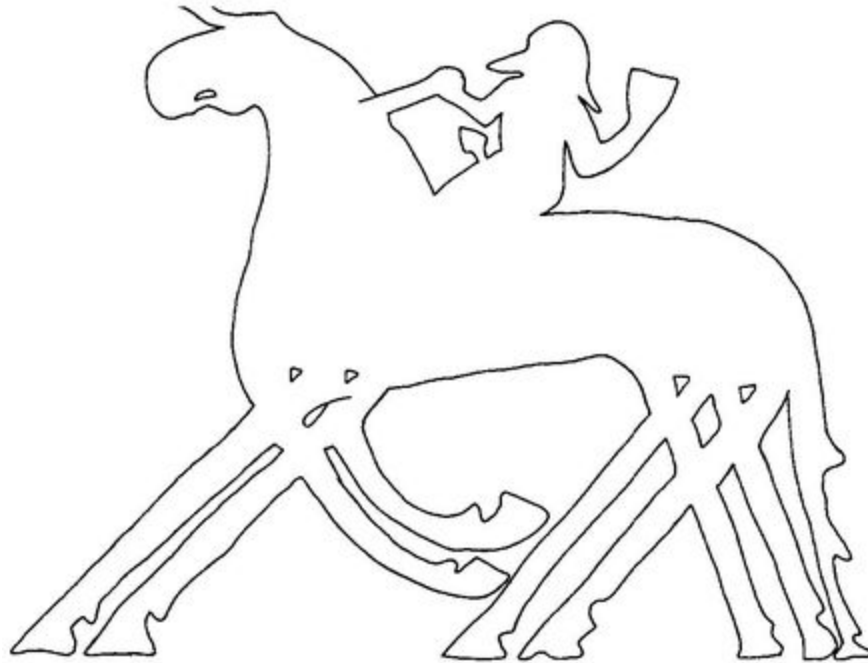
There is less archaeological material illustrating the use of draught animals. There were probably ox-drawn carts, but no archaeological traces have been retrieved. On the other hand, there is archaeological evidence for the use of horses for driving. This primarily comes from finds of chariots. The Danish Dejbjerg chariots from the Pre-Roman Iron Age were drawn by horses. From the same time, two burnt chariots of the same type were buried in cremation graves at the Kraghede cemetery in Vendsyssel. Two horses belonging to one of the chariots were placed in a pit beside the chariot grave. The Viking Age harness bows for chariots from the Late Iron Age indicate that the horses could be steered and manoeuvred by the driver. [300](#)

The horse's different functions affected the manner of riding, with everything from the horse being used as a shield for the rider in battle to the peaceful practice of riding for company. The horse's natural paces – walking, trotting, and gallop—were used. The Swedish archaeologist Erik Nylén thinks that the pictures of riders from around AD 600 show galloping movements. The Danish archaeologist Torben Witt believes that the horses on Gotlandic picture stones have a posture and a leg position suggesting a fast pace. The archaeologist Anneli Sundkvist is doubtful about these interpretations, however, because we do not know which type of gallop is intended and hence what level of dressage may have existed.<sup>301</sup>

It is certainly problematic to interpret pictures. If domesticated animals were used to assist humans, it is possible that animals were portrayed in a similar way in the world of the gods and giants. Can horse gaits be associated with the depiction of Sleipnir and his eight legs? Sleipnir is portrayed on just three Gotlandic picture stones, all from the eighth century. Eight-legged horses in a more static position are also found woven into the Överhogdal tapestry from Jämtland. The horses on the picture stones are in some form of movement, with the rider sitting almost laid back, holding loose reins in one hand. Sleipnir was the best of all horses according to the myths, with speed and endurance, and he could also move through the air and between different worlds. He was the offspring of Loki, transformed into a mare, and the stallion Svadilfari.<sup>302</sup> Sleipnir was a truly unique horse.

Sleipnir was a horse with many properties: the archaeologist Neil Price cites analogies from Siberian shaman motifs to argue that the eight-legged Sleipnir is an expression of shamanism.<sup>303</sup> Besides this interpretation, it is conceivable that the portrayal of Sleipnir with his eight legs also illustrates a concrete reality. Hypothetically, Sleipnir may show how a horse moves with the gait known as *tölt*; whether high or low makes no difference. Although few breeds of horse can master the *tölt*, this interpretation could explain the eight legs. The *tölt* is a type of quick walk, and instead of having three legs on the ground and one raised, the horse has one on the ground and three in the air. The visual impression of a quick *tölt* is that the horse has many legs. It is very pleasant for the rider, who sits calmly and comfortably on the horse's back. The horse can move quickly over long distances, an important skill in many cultures ([Figure 13](#)).





[Figure 13](#). Sleipnir. Close-up of picture stone Tjängvide 1, Alskog Parish, Ardre VIII, Lärbro Tängelgård 1. (Drawing: Erika Rosengren, LUHM.)

A rich amount of archaeological material to do with equestrian equipment is deposited in different archaeological contexts.<sup>[304](#)</sup> Horse gear such as mounts, spurs, and saddles was often decorated with expressive images emphasizing the value of the horses. The Sösdala find in Skåne from the fifth century, with stamp-decorated metal mounts on thin gilded foils of silver and bronze, is one example. Punched decoration is sometimes supplemented with naturalist portrayals of horse heads in profile on the end of the mounts. The Sösdala style is one of the early examples of Norse ornamentation with parallels in eastern European handicraft.<sup>[305](#)</sup> The decoration on the objects thus confirms the eastern influence on the mode of riding ([Figure 14](#)).





[Figure 14](#). Detail of Migration Period mount, Sösdala, Skåne. Height *c.* 50 mm. (Photo: Bengt Almgren, LUHM.)

Good and strong animals were a benefit to the owner and the farm. They contributed to prosperity in everyday life. They were significant for social identity and lifestyle, and for maintaining contacts with other people. Some of the animals could be selected from the stock to be dedicated for ritual acts, as a part of *forn siðr*.

### **Social identity and lifestyle**

Animals were valuable in pre-Christian settings, not just for their practical and functional properties. They gave prosperity to the owners, whose ability to keep good animals also gave them social status and thus power. The animals created a social identity and a lifestyle. Not only could this prosperity be displayed in rituals; a visual programme comprising animals of different kinds could be manifested in decorative art with precious metals and sometimes precious stones.

One may wonder to what extent animals represented a conceptual world and a pre-Christian cosmology. A question that follows on this is how they contributed to new social identities and cultural networks in the encounter between pagan Scandinavia and Christian Europe. Alternatively, one may wonder whether the animals and representations of them instead led to isolation, the retention of old traditions, as a form of diaspora.

### *Forn siðr*

Why are animals and other items of material culture taken out of their own cycle of production and consumption to be used in rituals of different kinds? Can we apply the archaeology of religion to interpret how the prosperity found on farms involved a turnover of animals? Archaeological finds, above all in grave contexts, show that there were areas and districts in Scandinavia which had greater political dominance than others. New animal species such as hens and greyhounds in graves from the Roman Iron Age seem to have appeared first in south Jutland in Denmark and Västergötland in Sweden. In the Late Iron Age, eastern central Sweden seems to have been an exceptionally prosperous region, judging by the frequency of rich graves with large numbers of animals. The Baltic Sea islands of Bornholm, Öland, and Gotland seem to have been central and prosperous regions throughout the Iron Age.

From interpretations of material culture and animal bones in graves we can build up a regional mosaic. Broadly speaking, one can follow similar material expressions chronologically, at least in southern, western, and central Scandinavia. In the different phases of the Iron Age, however, burial traditions show even greater variation between different regions. The composition of animal bones in the graves suggests that there were regional and intra-regional differences. The special weapon graves in the Roman Iron Age, like the Viking Age mortuary traditions in Scandinavia, are further examples of regional diversity, with locally coloured burial rituals. [306](#)

In favourable production conditions, the surplus was set aside for rituals that involved depositing animals and objects in graves and wetlands. We can conclude that this was well known even in prehistoric times from the

fact that grave robbing happened back then. Plundered graves from all through pre-Christian times are examples of this.<sup>307</sup>

During the first millennium AD a great variety of death rituals and some extraordinarily well-equipped Scandinavian Iron Age burials confront our interpretations of pre-Christian mentality and religion with the intricate social and political comings and goings in European history. The staging of the dead appears to have been extremely important. The archaeological evidence articulates varied but also common practices relating to certain recurrent attributes in the graves. People used animals and objects in the inner grave constructions and they built monumental graves; the burial customs display variations on a theme indicating similar norms and values in the long term. Around AD 200 a set of ideas were implemented in death rituals that continued, with differing regional and local expressions, during the first millennium and finally changed radically in connection with the official Christianization. During the tenth century, elements in the death rituals dating back to AD 200 were still being performed. It is like a Viking remembrance of how persons should be treated after death.

Finds of bones suggest that people in certain contexts discarded dead humans and animals in a similar way. Dogs and horses were buried in special graves, which closely resembled those of humans. As mentioned before, in the third century it became more common to deposit large body parts or complete bodies of a domesticated animal in human graves. One example is the cemetery of Skovgårde in Sjælland, Denmark, where whole pigs and sheep were placed in the richly equipped graves. One of the earliest horse graves has also been found in this cemetery.<sup>308</sup> During the same period well-equipped graves were created in different parts of Scandinavia. For example, in the Late Roman Iron Age a woman at Tuna in Badelunda in central Sweden was buried in a chamber rich in gold and metal objects from different places across Europe.<sup>309</sup> Other examples are the Simris graves and the Gårdlösa graves in Skåne, Sweden,<sup>310</sup> and Himlingøje in Sjælland, Denmark.<sup>311</sup>

More exclusive graves and perhaps more complex death rituals are known in the Migration Period and in the Vendel Period. Especially in eastern and central Sweden, the boat graves from Vendel, Valsgårde, and Tuna in Badelunda reveal elaborate death rituals involving lots of animals

and objects. Often one to five horses, one to four dogs, and one or more specimens of either cattle, sheep, or pig were placed in the grave together with weapons, armour, jewellery, household equipment, and other exotic objects.<sup>312</sup> It is also common to find fowls and birds of prey in these graves, as in the Vallentuna burial, around AD 600.<sup>313</sup>

The ship grave at Ladby in Fyn is an example of a grave from the first part of the tenth century. In a lavishly furnished ship, no less than eleven horses and three or four dogs had been sacrificed in the stern of the boat.<sup>314</sup> The Ladby ship was a long, narrow warship. The grave gifts included weapons, tableware, riding equipment, textiles, and a board game. No human body was left, only a few burnt bones. The Ladby burial is related to other Scandinavian Viking Age ship graves and chamber graves; for example, the boat-chamber grave in Hedeby,<sup>315</sup> the examples from Gokstad and Oseberg in Norway,<sup>316</sup> and also the Birka graves in eastern central Sweden.<sup>317</sup>

To sum up, the regional variations in death rituals included a huge amount of material wealth. Animals, objects, and grand monuments relating to gender and social strata began to be used in death rituals during the third century. At the end of the sixth century the death rituals became more dramatic in their use of animals and objects. Similar death rituals continued to be performed until the Viking Age.

Important Viking practices included traits continued from the death rituals of past centuries. The use of animals and certain objects, for example board games, drinking horns, combs, brooches, and weapons, was a recurrent phenomenon going back to the Roman period.<sup>318</sup>

The same *longue durée* has the building of monumental barrows and the erecting of different stone settings. The combination of animals and things was a theme in the death rituals for several centuries. The dead person was made visible above ground in monumental graves, and in the death rituals with the deposition of slaughtered valuable animals and expensive objects from abroad and nearby.

The burial custom could be characterized as a grave language, significant for the persona of the dead but also an activator of norms and values, memories and traditions, networking and regeneration, as well as religion and mentality in everyday life. The grave is a kind of montage of lifestyle

attributes, and a ritualization of the dead within the scenery near farms and villages.

The kind of grave language taken from the above-mentioned examples of very richly equipped graves represents Scandinavian death rituals, AD 200–1000. Humans, animals, and the material remains, along with the staging of the dead, are remnants of the ritual concerning the dead person. In the following I will discuss the evidence, showing how the materiality in the graves could be a kind of active remembrance in order to maintain power relations and networking strategies. The following connotations may be suggested:

- *War and violence*: horses, ships, weapons, shields, helmets
- *Hunting*: birds of prey, dogs, dog harnesses
- *Negotiation and communication*: domesticated animals, vessels, cups, glass, board games, drinking horns, musical instruments
- *Personal attraction*: animal art, iconography, combs, dress pins, ornaments, fibulae, brooches, beads, textiles
- *Working experiences*: textile production, metalwork, special tools
- *Wealth*: domesticated animals, lavishly expressed materiality and monumental graves

We may presume that in the Scandinavian Iron Age, lifestyles and shared values were expressed in the death rituals. As in life, the dead person was staged in the ritual and in the ritualization of the dead, the animals, and objects. The wealth was supposed to be provided by the relatives and the kindred of the dead person. Certainly, the generosity and affluence were related to power and prestige, and the death ritual heroized the dead person. The building of monuments also ritualized the landscape, as the monuments took up a place. Thus, the graves represented a remembrance of earlier generations with their manifestation of wealth and materiality. The Ladby ship burial, the Vallentuna burial, the Tuna ship burial, and many more examples were surely related to the contemporaneous leadership.

The graves are installations of wealth and materiality, and richly equipped burials have a large package of attributes denoting lifestyles. These rich graves probably represent a grave language in its whole complexity, and they also hint at interpretations of lifestyle metaphors of persons in graves with not so much wealth and materiality.

The rich male boat graves at Vendel and Valsgärde can provide a more detailed illustration of how animals were used in burial rituals and *forn siðr*. Like the rest of the material culture, they were representations of the deceased's persona. Through their materiality and visibility, grounded in a Midgard mentality, the animals and objects indicate prosperity. The different animal species and the find contexts are shown in [Table 9](#). Several of the boat graves had been plundered, and some archaeological material was badly preserved when the graves were excavated. The composition of finds is thus not representative of the original grave furnishings but should instead be regarded as a fragmentary basis for discussing the role of the individual animals in relation to the suggestion above for the interpretation of the social connotations of the deceased. [319](#)

[Table 9](#). Migration Period and Vendel Period boat graves in Uppland. Chronological order. [320](#)

|                                 |  |   |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Vendel X AD<br>520/30–600       | 1 horse, 1 dog, 1<br>(head of) cattle            | 1 helmet, 1 shield, 3 arrows, 1<br>coat of chain mail, 1 bridle, 1<br>hook, 2 frost-nails, 1 knife, 1 pair<br>of scissors, 1 cauldron, 1 pot fork   |
| Vendel XIV<br>AD 520/30–<br>600 | 1 horse, 2 dogs,<br>sheep, pigs, cattle          | 1 helmet, 1 shield, 1 sword, 1<br>chopping knife, 1 spear, 1 belt<br>with knife, 1 saddle, 1 bridle,<br>stirrups, 4 frost-nails, 2 knives, 1<br>pair of scissors, 1 cauldron, 1 pail,<br>2 game pieces  |
| Vendel XII<br>AD 520/30–<br>600 | 2 horses, 2 dogs, 1<br>cattle, 3 pigs, 1<br>bird | 1 helmet, 1 coat of mail, 2 shields,<br>2 swords, 1 chopping knife, 1<br>spear, 50 arrowheads, 1 saddle, 2<br>bridles, 1 hook, 5 frost-nails, 1<br>hammer, 2 knives, 1 pair of<br>scissors, 1 hoof pick, 1 tether ring,<br>1 glass beaker, 17 game pieces, 1<br>die |

|                                  |   |  |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Vendel XI<br>AD 20/30–<br>600    | 3 horses, 1 dog   | 1 helmet, 2 shields, 1 sword, 14<br>spearheads, 1 lance, 1 coat of<br>chain mail, 1 bridle, 1 hook, 1 dog<br>leash, 4 frost-nails, 1 hammer, 1<br>knife, 1 pair of scissors, 1<br>cauldron, 1 pot fork, 1 roasting<br>spit, 1 drinking horn  |
| Valsgärde 8<br>AD 560/70–<br>600 | 2 horses, 1 dog,<br>cattle, sheep/goat,<br>goose          | 1 helmet, 2 shields, 1 sword, 1<br>chopping knife, 1 lance, 45<br>arrowheads, 1 coat of mail, 1<br>saddle, 2 drawhooks, 1 hook, 1<br>dog leash, 11 frost-nails, 2<br>harnesses, 1 halter, 1 dog leash, 1<br>dog collar, 1 axe, 2 knives, 1 pair<br>of scissors, 1 coat of mail, 1 fire<br>steel, 1 strike-a-light, 1 lump of<br>resin, 1 pair of tweezers, 1 comb,<br>iron wire, 1 glass beaker, 1<br>cauldron, 1 pot fork, 1 wooden<br>beaker, 1 drinking horn, 29 dice, 1<br>game board, textiles, quilts, 1<br>blanket, cushions, 2 birchbark<br>mats |
| Vendel I AD<br>600–630/640       | 3 horses, 3 dogs, 1<br>cattle, 2 sheep, 1<br>pig, 1 goose | 1 helmet, 1 shield, 2 swords, 1<br>chopping knife, 1 spear, 7 arrows,<br>1 axe, 1 hammer, 1 knife, 1 pair of<br>tongs, 1 pair of scissors, 1<br>whetstone, 1 pair of tweezers, 3<br>bridles, stirrups?, 7 frost-nails,<br>tether ring, 1 hook, 1 dog leash, 2<br>glass beakers, 2 glass bowls, 1<br>cauldron, 1 pot fork, 1 roasting<br>spit, 1 earthenware pot  |
| Valsgärde 7                      | 5 horses (4   | 1 helmet, 3 shields, 2 swords, 2   |



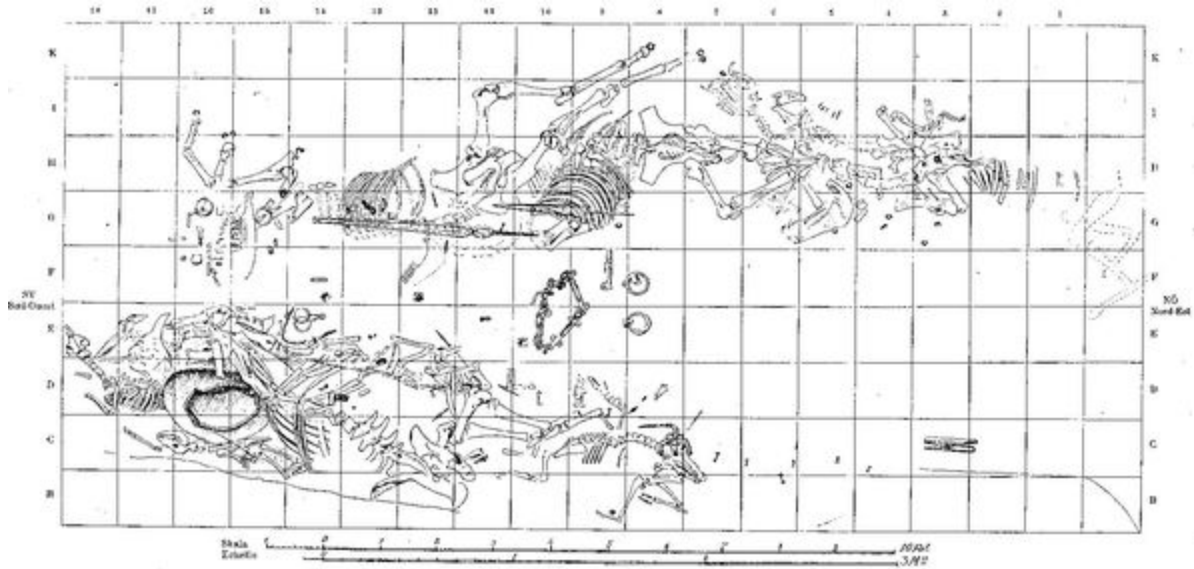
|                                  |  |   |
|----------------------------------|--|---|
| AD 600–<br>670/80                | bridled), 3 dogs,<br>at least 5 cattle, at<br>least 5 pigs, at<br>least 3 sheep,<br>snowy owl, black<br>grouse, duck,<br>goose, pike | sword belts, 2 chopping knives, 1<br>lance, 53 arrowheads, 1 saddle, 4<br>harnesses, 1 drawhook, 4–5 dog<br>leashes, 20 frost-nails, 1 neck<br>ring, 1 halter, 1 axe, 3 knives, 1<br>pair of scissors, 1 pair of<br>tweezers, 3 drinking horns, 1 iron<br>cauldron, 1 roasting spit, 1 pot<br>fork, 1 frying pan, 1 pair of fire<br>tongs, 8 wooden bowls, 1 stave<br>vessel, 3 wooden pails, 1 key, 1<br>fire steel with flint, 3 combs, 36<br>dice, 3 dice, textiles, bolsters,<br>cushions, hazelnuts  |
| Valsgårde 6<br>AD 600–<br>670/80 | 2 horses, 3 dogs, 1<br>cattle, at least 4<br>pigs, 6 sheep/goat,<br>black grouse,<br>goshawk, greylag<br>goose, pike                 | 1 helmet, 3 shields, 2 swords, 2<br>chopping knives, 1 lance, 32<br>arrows, 1 sword belt, 2 belts, 1<br>saddle, 3 drawhooks, 2 dog<br>leashes, 9 frost-nails, 2 harnesses,<br>1 neck ring, 3 snaffles, 3 axes, 1<br>hammer, 3 knives, 1 pair of tongs,<br>4 iron blanks, 1 band iron, 1 pair<br>of wool shears with case, 1<br>whetstone, 1 pair of tweezers, 1<br>awl, 4 frost-nails, 2 glass beakers,<br>1 glass bowl, 1 cauldron, 1 pot<br>fork, 1 fire block, 1 roasting spit,<br>1 lump of resin, 6 tools, 1 Thor’s<br>hammer ring, 1 fire steel with flint<br>and tinder, 1 bone comb, beads,<br>quilts, bolsters, cushions, 63<br>gaming pieces, 2 dice, 1 game<br>board, textiles, quilts, bolsters,<br>cushions, birchbark mat |
| Valsgårde 5                      | 2 horses, 4 dogs,  | 1 helmet, 3 shields, 1 sword, 2   |

|                                 |   |  |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| AD 600–<br>670/80               | at least 1 cattle,<br>1.5 pigs, 5 sheep,<br>greylag goose?  | chopping knives, 18 arrowheads,<br>1 knife, 1 belt, 2 sword belts, 3<br>bridles, 1 drawhook, 4 frost-nails,<br>3 dog leashes, 1 axe, 1 pair of<br>scissors, 1 glass beaker, 1 iron<br>cauldron, 1 pot hanger, 1 pot fork,<br>1 fire block, iron spirals for the<br>boat? |
| Vendel VII<br>AD 630/40–<br>720 | 5 horses, 2 dogs, 1<br>cattle   | 4 bridles, 4 frost-nails, 1 hook, 1<br>hoof pick, 2 tether rings, 1 dog<br>leash, 1 spear, 11 arrowheads, 1<br>axe, 1 knife, 1 pair of scissors, 1<br>whetstone, 1 pricker, 1 flint, 2<br>beads, 1 box, 15 game pieces   |
| Vendel III<br>AD 720–750        | 3 horses, 4 dogs, 2<br>cattle, 2 sheep, 1<br>boar, 1 falcon, 1<br>eagle owl, 1<br>crane, 1 goose, 1<br>duck | 10 arrows, 13 frost-nails, 2<br>bridles, 2 stirrups, 4 hooks, 2 dog<br>collars, 1 bell, 4 knives, 1 pair of<br>scissors, 2 whetstones, 1 pot fork,<br>10 beads, 1 bone comb, 2 game<br>pieces  |
| Valsgärde 13                    | Horse, dog, cattle,<br>bird, bird, fish   | 1 sword, 2 shields, 37 arrowheads,<br>1 bridle, 2 halters, 15 frost-nails, 2<br>drawhooks, 2 iron buckles, 1 pair<br>of scissors, 1 hammer, 1 bead, 1<br>horse fibula, 1 fire steel, 1 flint,<br>36 game pieces. Blanket-like,<br>yellowish-green textile                |

The Swedish archaeologist Greta Arvidsson, who took part in the excavation of several of the boat graves, describes a recurrent pattern in the burial ritual. A few remains of the person's bones were placed on a bed of down and textile. This was covered with quilts and birchbark mats. The drinking vessels were put beside the dead person's left-hand side. In the

prow of the boat there were food supplies and kitchen equipment. In the middle of the boat was the personal equipment, with game boards, dice, game pieces, food bowls, drinking vessels, and little boxes with small tools. Sometimes the dogs on their leashes were placed in the middle of the boat. The weapons lay around and over the dead man or further towards the stern. The spearheads, however, were often elsewhere, far forward in the prow. The helmets were not where one might have expected the head of the dead man to have been. They were close to the middle of the boat, on the bottom or beside the foot-end, or else far forward in the prow. The shields lay on top of the thwarts, and one may assume that they had been placed there. The stern of the boats was mostly empty. The horses and cattle were usually on the starboard side and along the railing, and the dogs on the port side. The horses sometimes had halters and sometimes bronze-mounted headstalls and ring bit/curb bit. The horses in the Valsgårde cemetery generally had one frost-nail in each hoof.<sup>321</sup> The boat was presumably loaded according to the standard rules for a real voyage by a long-distance ship ([Figure 15](#)).

Whole animal bodies or parts of bodies were deposited in the boat graves. The parts of bodies have often been interpreted as remains of meals held in conjunction with the burial, or as food for the dead on the journey to the otherworld. Both explanations are possible, but there is no evidence either way. It is striking that so many complete bodies of horses, cattle, sheep, goats, dogs and birds of prey were placed in these graves. It is reported that these animals were often killed; the horses, for instance, were clubbed on the forehead. One may assume that the idea of flinging whole animal bodies into the grave was not that they were to be eaten; it is some other function that the animals were supposed to fill. They are part of the whole that the funeral ritual was intended to represent. Presumably, the ritual honoured the dead man with all the objects that were considered worthy of a hero at the time.



[Figure 15](#). The boat grave Vendel I, Uppland. (After Stolpe & Arne 1912, Figure XIV.)

That the funeral ritual was a complex ceremony is particularly evident from a description of a chieftain's burial written by the Arab geographer Ibn Fadlan on the Volga in Russia at the start of the tenth century.<sup>322</sup> His account shows obvious similarities to the Scandinavian ritual.

The boat graves speak a language which emphasizes that the boats, the magnificent personal equipment for battle, the household utensils for cooking, the meal-related drinking vessels, the tools, the gaming boards and pieces, and all the animal species testify to prosperity. The owner enjoyed a surplus that could be taken out of the ordinary production cycle and laid aside.

The message of the boat graves must have been significant for what the persons buried in them represented. The funeral ritual was repeated for more than 250 years. The mortuary practice represents an ideal image of the aristocracy, but presumably also the properties that were required of a prosperous leader. It may therefore be assumed that the rich material culture in the graves represents several different facets: *war and violence* with the ship, the horses, the weapons, the shields, the helmets; *hunting* with the birds of prey, the dogs, the dog harness, the prey; *negotiation and communication* with the domesticated animals, vessels, cups, glass, board games, drinking horns and musical instruments; *personal attraction* with the animal art, the iconography, the combs, the pearls, and the textiles; *working experiences* with the textile production, metalwork and special

tools. Finally, *wealth* is represented by the domesticated animals, the profuse expressions of materiality and the monumental graves.

It seems as if the ships in the graves were conveying the magnificently equipped persons somewhere; but not into battle, for the helmets are lying to one side. It may be a winter journey, as the horses have frost-nails. Each funeral activated norms and values, memories and traditions, networking and regeneration, as well as religion and mentality in everyday life.

The boat graves can be compared to the Gotlandic picture stones, which have been related to epic poetry. Anders Andrén says that picture stones highlight two male qualities, heroism and wisdom, and that the stones metaphorically display the honour of the dead man. The images of ships on the picture stones and the boat graves arouse associations with the same phenomenon: paying honour.

Ships and pictures of ships have been used in connection with death and burial in prehistoric Scandinavia, especially in the Bronze Age and the Late Iron Age. From the sixth century until around 1100, burials in real boats took place all over northern Europe. In Scandinavia this form of burial was practised chiefly in southern and central Scandinavia and along the Norwegian coast, but not in Gotland. It was mainly men who were buried in boats, but there were also women, as in the example of the boat graves at Tuna Badelunda in Sweden.<sup>323</sup> Andrén believes that the picture stones and the boat graves are structured according to the same principles, with the sequence of pictures on the stones corresponding to the arrangement of the grave goods in the boats, and that the same pattern can be found in wagon burials. It was mainly women who were buried in the latter type of graves.<sup>324</sup>

It is possible that the funeral rituals and the picture stones represent elements in mythology, as Andrén argues. The boat graves at Vendel and Valsgärde are also good examples of *forn siðr*. It was on the basis of rituals that Old Norse religion was defined by people in subsequent periods, not in terms of belief in old gods. It is therefore meaningless to try to distinguish particular categories of artefacts or animal species in search of a link to artefacts or animals in Norse mythology. Religion in pre-Christian times, just like today, was not an exclusively distinguishable realm of holiness. *Siðr* has a much broader meaning in Old Norse, including religion, faith, morality, custom, and tradition. As Catharina Raudvere writes: ‘The term

includes traditional conceptions and ideas about the ways things were to be done. This multitude of meanings gave the term a wide range of possible applications, cognitive and practical as well as juridical and religious. It was certainly a semantic field of great variety.<sup>325</sup>

One could therefore say that funeral rituals in pre-Christian times, as exemplified here through the richly equipped boat graves at Vendel and Valsgärde in eastern central Sweden, constituted *forn siðr*. The funeral rituals reflect a Midgard mentality, according to which the ritual acts were based on tradition and the values that prevailed in society at large. This agrees well with the term *forn siðr*, with multiple meanings that can also be observed in the regional expressions of the funeral rituals, where both men and women were buried in boats, but with variation in the mortuary language as described above.<sup>326</sup> The funeral ritual was rooted in the mentality of the time, and performed in order to make the world comprehensible and to assert social identity and lifestyle. It is therefore perfectly possible that the funeral ritual with the concept of *forn siðr*, and also the Norse animal ornamentation, represents an ideology of honour.<sup>327</sup>

The animals contributed to the ritual through their relationship to the deceased. The intact animal bodies, especially of horse, dog, cattle, sheep, goat, and pig, and also the hunting birds, presumably represent a close and personal relationship depending on the individual animal's practical and functional role. All the animals, through their distinctive behaviour and abilities, represent prosperity and a high symbolic value. The funeral ritual as a whole reflects the properties and social skills required of leaders at the time.

The Vendel Period and the Viking Age saw the development of a mortuary language which suggests a return to older funeral rituals as performed in the Roman Iron Age. In eastern central Sweden the burial places established in the Roman Iron Age and used until the Viking Age are often located on abandoned farms from the Pre-Roman Iron Age and the Bronze Age. The placing of graves on top of older graves was practised during the Roman Iron Age and more or less continuously until the introduction of Christianity. However, it was mainly in the Migration Period and above all the Viking Age that this happened.<sup>328</sup> The references to the past, with the reuse of older burial places, monuments, and farmsteads,<sup>329</sup>

are a further aspect of the concept of *forn siðr*, testifying to the significance of traditions and a historical background.

In this context I do not mention the magnificent and often exceptional artefacts that testify to regional and local communication strategies with areas inside and outside Scandinavia. In the section about Norse animal ornamentation, however, some objects will be discussed in terms of their iconographic content. [330](#)

### ***Networking***

New animal species and breeds were successively introduced to Scandinavia in the prehistoric periods. The underlying reasons have to do with different kinds of communication strategies. According to the economist Karl Polanyi, the distinction between the different ways in which goods and services change owners can be described with the aid of the terms reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange. Here the focus is on reciprocal exchanges and redistributive systems. Reciprocal exchange relations mean that a mutual symmetric advantage is gained either between individuals or between complementary groups. The reciprocity is in line with what the sociologist Marcel Mauss means by the familiar concept of the *gift*, which brings honour to both the giver and the receiver. With redistribution what happens instead is that benefits, such as goods and services, are distributed differently. This process is steered either by a person, for example, an aristocratic leader or king, or a group, which may be a kindred or an administrative unit. [331](#)

A negotiation between people can be described as a process that is supposed to lead to the best possible conditions for the parties, and the opposite party can further his interests in practice. Successful properties in a negotiator, apart from having to be liked, are the ability to live with uncertainties and conflicts, the capacity to improvise and persevere. It is not necessarily the wisest or most knowledgeable person, but someone who is clear, concise, and in skilled in administration.

People's communication strategies and networking are fundamental for satisfying a society's need for social relations and for the exchange of such things as technological know-how and raw materials. Networking is one



essential if social identities are to be developed and lifestyle patterns are to be stabilized or changed.

It is possible that new imported animal species in the Early Roman Iron Age were an asset for increased prosperity and for social identity. Tame hens, which allowed the control of egg production, and the house cat with its characteristic behaviour and its fur, were valuable additions to the household.

The archaeological evidence comprises a large number of objects, and several archaeological contexts have connotations of networking, as is particularly obvious from the preceding section on *forn siðr* and the meanings of that term.

Animals—horses, hunting birds, greyhounds, and other exotic species—are the starting point here for a discussion of networking in Scandinavia in pre-Christian times. The question is what networking meant for attitudes to animals, and for social identity and lifestyle. Another question concerns the significance of animals for rituals and the character of Old Norse religion, and whether *forn siðr* changed in the encounter with Christian values outside Scandinavia.

## **Horses**

Since horses are among the animals most frequently found in the archaeological record, one may assume that these animals and their breeding were a very important part of livestock management, and that horses were the chief icons of social identity and lifestyle. It is difficult to find archaeological evidence that horses were part of a gift system or a redistributive system. Hypothetically, however, we may assume that horses with a certain colour combination, muscular strength, or suppleness were attractive and that horses were therefore a part of different communication strategies.

Morphological studies of horse bones from the Iron Age suggest that there were five different breeds in Sweden: the old Scandinavian Bronze Age horse, the Gotlandic Ihre horse, a breed of tarpan type (Valsgårde grave VII in Uppland), and two Öland breeds of different sizes. However, mitochondrial analyses of horses from the Late Iron Age in eastern central Sweden show that the bones that were previously identified as horses of tarpan type instead comprise at least four different breeds, two of which resemble other northern European horses and two that are unknown in

modern genetic material. It seems, however, that there were relatively few breeds of horse in Scandinavia compared with the Roman Empire, where roughly fifty different breeds have been identified. <sup>332</sup> This may mean that horses were not imported to Scandinavia on any large scale, and that horses were not involved in reciprocal or redistributive systems. The archaeologist Ulf Eric Hagberg, on the other hand, claims that horse trading was a vital part of the economy in the Early Iron Age in Öland, where the large numbers of leather-working tools in female graves are also considered by archaeologists to be evidence of commodity production for export. <sup>333</sup> It would be interesting, however, to have further molecular analyses of horse bones from other regions in Scandinavia, since other archaeological evidence explicitly indicates external communication strategies and networking. <sup>334</sup>

Horses were of great symbolic value in pre-Christian times, associated with transport, hunting, war, and death, and with both men and women. Horses served as diplomatic gifts between aristocratic families and between kings and representatives of nations in historical times and down to the present day. This testifies to the great significance of horses for social relations, and that they were also included in one way or another in networking in the pre-Christian period.

## **Falcons**

There is evidence of falconry since the fifth century in western Europe. Grave contexts in Scandinavia from the fifth century up to the eleventh century indicate the occurrence of this sport. The iconography on items such as bird fibulae, helmets, and shield mounts arouse associations with falconry. In the Norse sagas falconry and the ownership of hunting birds brought status, as one of the attributes of royalty. *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, a saga of ancient times recorded in the fifteenth century, with events that possibly go back to the sixth century, tells of how King Adil in Uppsala owned thirty falcons. The door of Rogslösa church in Östergötland, with wrought iron decoration from the twelfth century, shows a hunter with a horn, two hounds, a hunting bird, and a deer. Falconry was important much later too, and is also described in a number of medieval sources from

western Europe. As in other parts of the world, the art of falconry was associated with lifestyle and prosperity.<sup>335</sup>

The earliest legislation on falconry is found in the Salic Laws from the reign of Clovis I, the first king of the Franks (c. 500 AD):

If anybody steals a hawk from a tree, and be proved guilty, besides the return (of the object) and the informer's fee, he shall be judged liable to the extent of 120 dinarii, which makes up 3 solidi. 2. If anybody steals a hawk from a perch, let him be judged liable to the extent of 600 dinarii, which make up 15 solidi. 3. If anybody steals a hawk from inside the household, and he be found guilty, let him be judged liable to the extent of 1,800 dinarii, which make up 45 solidi, besides the return (of the object) and the informer's fee. *Add 1.* If anybody steals a sparrowhawk let him be judged liable to the extent of 120 dinarii, which make up 3 solidi, besides the return (of the object) and the informer's fee.<sup>336</sup>

Yet there were also similar laws in other western countries, which suggests that falconry already existed, but also that the sport had developed into a mania of the time. Evidently falconry was a custom that was widespread in the upper classes, as we also can interpret from the Scandinavian archaeological contexts. In the Vallentuna burial, a very well equipped male cremation just north of Stockholm, the grave gifts included one horse, four dogs, steaks of sheep, cattle and pig, birds of prey and the prey and luxury goods including a dice with runes, interpreted to mean 'hawk'—the name of the dead warrior, a *rinker*?<sup>337</sup>

From the twelfth century there is written evidence that falcons were bought, sold, and bestowed as gifts. In the Pipe Roll of Henry I of England (around 1130) a man is recorded as owing the king two gyrfalcons and two Norse hawks, and another person 'renders account for one hundred Norway hawks of which four are to be white'.<sup>338</sup> From the fourteenth century there is also mention of lucrative trade in falcons and hawks between Scandinavia, the Baltic, western Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa. In one medieval text there is a statement that eighty gyrfalcons were captured near the Arctic Circle to be sent to the sultan of

Babylon, for his crane-hawking. There were also fine and coveted falcons in Norway—peregrines, merlins, sparrowhawks, both mewed and eyass birds—which were a part of reciprocal and redistributive systems in the Middle Ages.<sup>339</sup>

Hunting falcons were probably of equally great value further back in time, for instance at the end of the fifth century when falconry was a part of the aristocracy's social identity. As in state life in Rome, it was a good communicative strategy to be able to offer a meal including crane and other game. Birds of prey were therefore presumably a part of the networks that built political alliances in Scandinavian pre-Christian times as well. Exchanges of gifts of beautiful falcons, like the hunting itself, may very well have been an opportunity for meetings between leading individuals in pre-Christian communities in Scandinavia and in European Christian societies.

## **Greyhounds**

Five greyhounds were buried in a richly furnished woman's grave in Överbo, Västergötland in Sweden. The funeral ritual had also included horse and other domesticated animals. The grave is dated to the second century AD and is the oldest dated grave with greyhounds in Scandinavia. Two big dogs in the plundered boat grave of Vendel III are very similar to the greyhounds in Överbo, as are two other dogs from central Sweden, from the boat grave Valsgårde 6. The graves are dated to AD 720–750. The dogs resemble the Danish greyhound from Errindlev from the ninth century.<sup>340</sup>

Being swift and lithe, greyhounds have been attractive for hunting and falconry. Greyhounds were a part of the communication strategies that developed in the Early Roman Iron Age and survived into the Viking Age. One may suppose that greyhounds, like horses and hunting birds, were significant for networking and for maintaining a social identity and high status.

## ***A social game***

Aristocracies can be discerned in the archaeological sources. War, violence, and more peaceful networking were aspects of communication between people. Political conflicts and social negotiations led to power play, through

which new aristocracies could be established and grow. Animals, above all horses, falcons, and hounds, were a part of the networks of contact and the communication strategies that existed within Scandinavia and with societies in Christian Europe.

Yet there were other animals involved in reciprocal and redistributive systems. From the Early Roman Iron Age, hens and cats were probably a part of these exchanges. These first appear in Scandinavia in magnificently equipped female graves, as well as the occasional farm context. When house cats begin to occur more frequently in funeral rituals in the Viking Age, it may also be a reflection of a return to older rituals from the Early Roman Iron Age, as a revival of *forn siðr*.

The earliest evidence of hunting birds comes from the Migration Period, when they were a part of the funeral ritual chiefly in profusely equipped men's graves. A ritual (*forn siðr*) began to appear at the end of the Early Roman Iron Age, around AD 200, when horses were clubbed to death in connection with burial rituals for dead men and women. Although there is no further archaeological or osteological evidence, it may be assumed that horses were involved in reciprocal or redistributive systems from the Early Roman Iron Age.<sup>[341](#)</sup>

There was a common supra-regional ritual language in pre-Christian Scandinavia, but there were also regional differences in funeral rituals and picture programmes, as variations on a shared theme. It is possible that networking and alliances created powerful social bonds within Scandinavia and that there were different types of communication strategies and social negotiations. The historian of religion Peter Habbe states that, instead of writing a protocol, an exchange of objects as gifts can conclude negotiations, just as a handshake can confirm an oath and an agreement. In the exchange systems of the Icelandic family sagas, it is not everyday objects that are mentioned most, but items of exceptional value, such as furs, ships, or gold objects.<sup>[342](#)</sup>

Animals and their symbolism were a part of this social game. Through their different connotations of life on the farm, and their individual characteristics, animals also expressed existential issues. The significance of animals for cosmology was also made comprehensible and visible in pre-Christian rituals.

## *Norse animal ornamentation*

From the fifth century and well into the Christian period of the High Middle Ages in the thirteenth century, objects belonging to both the male and the female sphere were decorated with animals and imaginary creatures. An eye, a foot, a thigh, and a head from some domesticated or wild animal were often put together to give a fantastic animal in an ingenious pattern. Norse animal ornamentation, with its complex zoomorphic motifs, changed in the course of the Late Iron Age and the Early Middle Ages. The animal motifs were taken so far that they became totally illegible to those who were not familiar with the symbolic meanings of the style. This zoomorphic language reflects a link between the Norse areas and continental Christian Europe. From these contacts, Norse animal ornamentation developed its distinctive imagery which contained information about the owner's identity and his or her conceptual world.

Norse animal ornamentation is overflowing with figures of such ambiguous species. Fantastic beasts composed of serpents, dragons, birds, and humans are ingeniously depicted with their faces in profile or *en face*, with separated or joined body parts, and with what seems to be a specially composed language of body gestures. The basic theme is combinations of a horse, a snake, a bird, a fish, or other animal-like bodies and humans and human-like bodies. They were portrayed with variations on this theme. What type of message was supposed to be conveyed by this visuality? Did it have something to do with social identity and lifestyle, or with the world of ideas?

The pictures were made using different metalworking techniques on jewellery, weapons, and equestrian equipment. They could be carved on objects of wood and horn, and probably also adorned textiles and clothes.

Band-shaped figures were created in the fifth century and survived in new forms on Viking Age runic stones and in medieval churches. The pictures generally display high-quality handiwork. There were animal images on small exclusive objects produced in large series, such as the various metal mounts for equestrian equipment, the Vendel Period bird and fish fibulae, and the Viking Age animal-head brooches. The pictures were rendered on exclusive items which were presumably not mass-produced.

For 700 years and more, Norse animal ornamentation predominated in Scandinavia. After it first took shape in the fifth century, it developed into a fairly standardized programme with regional features, above all during the

Viking Age ([Figure 15](#)). Similar designs could be found in other parts of Europe, but there the animal ornamentation was integrated with other artistic expressions, not wholly dominant as in Scandinavia. Although there were changes over the centuries, individual details and basic composition patterns were retained. In the course of several centuries, animal ornamentation underwent changes, with different regional styles developing. The Swedish art historian Lennart Karlsson describes the iconography as being traditional and conservative in its form. He believes that animal ornamentation was developed in Scandinavia and that it does not need to be explained in terms of foreign influence.<sup>343</sup>

Yet is it not conceivable that inspiration for changes to an iconographic programme could have come from some outside source? The Swedish archaeologist Johan Callmer believes that Norse animal ornamentation ought not to be regarded as a long, continuous artistic development, but should instead be analysed in terms of regional production and in relation to the consumer. He thinks that there was an iconography in eastern Scandinavia around 800 comprising a set of female jewellery with a combination of pre-Christian animal motifs and Christian crosses. The producer must have had a knowledge of Christian symbols, perhaps a generation before Ansgar's visit to this part of Scandinavia.<sup>344</sup>

When Norse animal ornamentation is described as a standardized programme, with variations over time and place, this inevitably raises the question how this could be possible. What made this iconography so firmly rooted in Scandinavia, and in European contexts?

One may wonder whether the pictures were exclusive to a small group of people or accessible to everyone. How easily could they be read by ordinary people? And one may wonder about the system of metaphors underlying the cut-up bodies in Norse animal ornamentation. Who cut up the animals and devised all the inventive, cunning, and comical combinations of patterns? Who could read this? Was animal ornamentation an iconography for well-informed aristocrats in political alliances or for a sect of robber barons? Many of these questions cannot be answered archaeologically. Thanks to their visuality, however, the pictures can be put into a societal context. The animal representations will be discussed here as a part of communication strategies and networking between pre-Christian societies in Scandinavia and Christian societies in Europe.



The ornamentation found on jewellery, weapons, and other objects immediately gives the observer an opportunity to grasp a message, even if the details cannot be discerned. Norse animal ornamentation was both communicative and informative in character, but perhaps not to everyone. Given the fact that the iconography survived with gradual changes for several hundred years, it is likely that the pictures had a broad general impact. The theme of hybrid animals and humans permeated the iconography, giving the animal ornamentation its meaning. It seems like a kind of trade mark for the producer and the owner, indicating their social and cultural affiliation.

Visual representations have to do with the ability of the human brain to perceive images. Our cognitive capacity is the foundation for designing or observing an iconography which in turn affects the brain.<sup>345</sup> With animal ornamentation the smiths and stonemasons succeeded in shaping pictures with lines and points in a framework, and with the colours painted on runic stones. This appealed to the observer. If the intention was to reproduce an idea, a value, or a mentality concerning the social, cultural, and pre-Christian context in the Iron Age and Early Middle Ages, then the intentions of the designer and the craftsman were fulfilled. Norse animal ornamentation existed, with certain modifications, for centuries. If the images were to function, they had to refer to people's previous experience so that they could be interpreted and put into a context. The pictures themselves did not contain any information or message; they had to be contextualized. The meaning of the ornamentation must be viewed in terms of the observer's experience and context. The visuality of animal ornamentation, with its recurring themes, was thus both a source of memory and a structure of knowledge in a familiar pictorial world.

It seems as if there is a peculiarity about Norse animal ornamentation. It concerns the representation of bodily metaphors. These build on the transformative character of individual animal species and humans; the fact that body parts can be exchanged between species. Both domesticated and wild animals can be discerned on the basis of a single body part, sometimes on the basis of entire animal bodies ([Figure 16](#)). Body parts are transformed, in a way that makes the figures seem comical to a modern observer. But what could be the meaning of this style that had such a great impact on pre-Christian Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe?

Some Scandinavian archaeologists have suggested a fruitful theme for the interpretation of Norse animal ornamentation, by studying the parallelism that exists between the iconography and the Old Norse poetry.<sup>346</sup> The basic idea for this argumentation is that poets, smiths, and stonecutters were able to represent ideas in words and on artefacts. Norse animal ornamentation and poetry thus combined materiality with oral presentation.<sup>347</sup> The link between animal ornamentation and kennings leads to the realization that there was a riddling form of communication. The iconography conveyed a message about ambivalence, and one element of the human conceptual world was the possibility of transformations between separate animal species and humans. Such transformations and boundary crossings can also be demonstrated archaeologically from the material remains of dead animals and people (cf. chapter 4, 'Animals between context and text'). The Swedish archaeologist Maria Lundberg Domeij argues that Norse animal ornamentation is about the ideas of *grasping*, *binding*, and *giving*; actions that were important for an ideology of honour.<sup>348</sup> In that sense the purpose of Norse animal ornamentation coincides with the interpretation here of *forn siðr* in connection with death and burial. The animal metaphors on artefacts and in mortuary ritual testify to a close relationship between animals and humans. Hybrid creatures and the handling of animals and humans suggest that animals and humans were valued equally highly.

Animal ornamentation, with its images of transformations between human and animal, was a kind of animal language used by influential people and probably *vis-à-vis* mighty powers. In Norse mythology, many-sided and powerful beings are not portrayed as a definite species. They were something in between real beings and imaginary creatures. Transforming beings played a major part in the Norse cosmology, both at the creation of the world and at its destruction. They had unlimited possibilities.

### ***Falconry and visuality***

Animal ornamentation dominated Scandinavian iconography, but there were also associated iconographic programmes with links to Norse animal ornamentation. A more detailed study of bird brooches below will

exemplify the significance of visibility for social identity, lifestyle, and networking.

At Uppåkra, near Lund in southern Sweden, metal detector surveys have yielded thousands of finds.<sup>349</sup> Among all these finds were the bird brooches. The objects are of very high quality, made of copper alloys; some of them are embellished with silver or gold, and decorated with stones or gems. Ribbons, bands, and a male head sometimes decorate the back of the bird. The pictorial language signals a bird seen from behind. The beak, the head, the wings, the claws, and the tail are depicted on the front of the fibulae. Fragments of a pin or a pin anchor on the back of the bird's head indicate that the items were worn as brooches. Many of the brooches are perforated in the tail, suggesting that they were also used as pendants ([Figure 16](#)).

The finds are without context as they were retrieved in the plough soil over a very large area. Presumably, they are not fragments from a former cemetery as the total archaeological material found during the surveys does not indicate the existence of a cemetery. Instead, the large amount of metal is interpreted as scrap. The mixed alloys in Uppåkra indicate advanced experimentation and knowledge among skilled craftsmen, similar to metalwork at Helgö.<sup>350</sup> Whether the bird brooches were robbed from graves, or taken/received from living persons, and brought to Uppåkra is of course impossible to know. Apparently they were taken out of circulation, and later on they were going to be remoulded into something else. If not, the bird brooches could have been manufactured at Uppåkra, even though no identical cast bird brooches were noticed.<sup>351</sup>



[Figure 16](#). Bird brooch from Uppåkra, Skåne, U560. Length 58 mm. (Photo: Bengt Almgren, LUHM.)

The large amount of metal finds at Uppåkra has been connected to continuous metal handicraft and production lasting many centuries. The use of the bird brooches as pendants, and the secondary use of them as metal scrap, indicates that the bird brooches had symbolic and economic values beyond their use in female grave rituals from the seventh century. Uppåkra was a place of impressive economic and ritual importance for many centuries in the first millennium AD.<sup>352</sup> The site also could be interpreted as a crucible, a melting pot, important for ideological changes as old items were melted down and new ones were produced.

Looking through the brooches together with the professor of ornithology at Lund University, Thomas Alerstam, we noticed typical characteristics of the bird brooches, a theme with variations.<sup>353</sup> However, the pictorial language communicates a bird body. The question is what kind of species is represented, and whether it is possible at all to identify the species of birds from an art object. The perspective of the bird is an artistic design created by the artisans' skills and perception. The bird constitutes a sign, with codes and elements of some forms that were understandable and recognizable to people at that time.<sup>354</sup>

The brooches must have had messages for the viewer, but how can we as modern people decode this message in fragmentary survivals of ancient cultural material? The following interpretation of the bird brooches and the bird images is an associative argumentation using different archaeological and written sources in Scandinavia and the continent.

The bird brooches found in women's graves evoke falconry, an aristocratic form of hunting which is also attested in the bones in richly equipped graves, and the brooches and mounts with birds of prey in profile. The falconry is surely linked to the aristocratic consumption of game, perhaps for the table but also as a symbol of wealth and social abilities.

The bird brooches have been interpreted as ravens, with connotations of Odin's ravens, Hugin and Munin.<sup>355</sup> They could also be understood as representations of birds of prey. In the field of archaeology dealing with the finds in question there is caution about attributing the pictorial image to any species. It may be impossible to ascertain whether they represent ravens or birds of prey, or something else entirely.

Doing archaeology is a never-ending adventure, and as an amateur entering the world of birds, exploring descriptions and habitats of different

species arouses associations of travel. The raven has a relatively long and curved bill, long pointed wings with obvious separation of primaries while soaring, and a long graduated or wedge-shaped tail. Falcons and hawks are broad-chested and have a heavy curved bill, long, broad pointed wings, and heavy feet with sturdy claws, and a long tail which may be rounded, straight, or wedge-shaped.

Ravens and birds of prey have different habitats and behaviours. While ravens follow predators to scavenge on leftovers and carrion, birds of prey, depending on which species they belong to, hunt in different ways. Gyrfalcons (*Falco rusticolus*) fly low and surprise prey on the ground. They force it low or high and exhaust it. Gyrfalcons strike prey or drive it to the ground, rather than grasping it in the air. Peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) search for prey from a perch or while flying, and dive on prey from high above and strike it with the feet, or pursue it from behind. The prey is killed by a bite in the neck. Goshawks (*Accipiter gentilis*) perch silently, waiting and watching for prey. They follow prey rapidly through forest vegetation. [356](#)

Both ravens and different species of birds of prey change body position and feathers depending on what they are doing. Thus, the examination of bird brooches to identify species is an ambiguous job. Looking through all the bird brooches found at Uppåkra, taking into account that the objects do not represent taxonomic species but artistically moulded creations, one can see that the different elements, such as the feet with their heavy claws, the shoulders of the wings, that is, the wrists, the pointed wings, and above all the shape of the body, indicate birds of prey. The bills are straight, and resemble either a raven or a bird of prey. The tails are varied; they can be straight, rounded, or wedge-shaped.

A general trend is that they have marked eyes, and the wrists have 'eyes'. The ornamentation on some of the objects shows ribbons between the bird's head and the body, and between the wings on the body. A few have a man's head between the wings.

In conclusion, a closer study of the ornamentation leads to an interpretation based on the form and stance of the bird's body. The stout aerofoil of the shoulders and the folded wings with the claws in diving position suggest that the image represents a bird of prey. It is less likely that the pictorial language signals a raven, even if a sitting raven viewed from behind would be a possibility.

The ornamentation gives the impression of a tamed bird of prey, hunting its quarry in a straight diving position. It could be a goshawk or a peregrine falcon, but further attempts at identification are fruitless and impossible. Thus, the iconography of the bird brooch signals birds of prey, with connotations of falconry, a special lifestyle. The question is what kind of information about the bird brooches, and similar pictorial representations, can be obtained from their archaeological context, and what conclusions can be drawn about the practice of falconry as a whole.

The bird brooches belong to the south Scandinavian material equipment of the seventh century, usually occurring as single finds, as in Skåne and Öland, with a few also found in Norway.<sup>357</sup> However, especially in Bornholm, there are brooches in female graves, in pairs or singly as a part of a jewellery collection on the woman's breast.<sup>358</sup> In Skåne some bird brooches were found in cremations at the cemetery of Gårdlösa in the south-eastern part of the province.<sup>359</sup> Unfortunately, the gender cannot be determined.

In quite another part of Sweden a similar portrayal of a bird was created on the helmet found in the boat grave Vendel XIV from Uppland in eastern central Sweden. A bird flying down with the wings held together, and with 'eyes' on the wrists, composes the nose guard of the helmet. Foils showing warriors with birds on their helmets, and with swords, shields, and spears, also decorate the helmet. The male grave is one of many extremely richly equipped boat graves. Hjalmar Stolpe dated Vendel XIV to the latter part of the seventh century, but Birgit Arrhenius places the grave earlier, AD 560–600 ([Figure 17](#)).<sup>360</sup>

The south Scandinavian female jewellery expresses the same animal art style and decorative elements that are found on helmets, weapons, and button-on-bow fibulae in the Mälaren region and Gotland during the seventh century. The similar animal art style with clear female connotations in south Scandinavia has connections with men in central Sweden. The bird brooches belong to phase 1C and D, and the typological element groups (EKG) 2 and 3, which have no geographic delimitation in Scandinavia, are dated to 600–680/700.<sup>361</sup>

The suggested diving position of a bird of prey is associated with female jewellery in southern Scandinavia, and is a male warrior attribute in central



Sweden. What kind of relations can be seen between these archaeological contexts?

Another pictorial bird, formed during the same period, gives new perspectives: birds in profile adorned brooches associated with female graves, and mounts on shields and saddles in the previously mentioned rich boat graves. These bird images have been interpreted by the Swedish archaeologist Bo Petré as birds of prey, also with associations of falconry.

[362](#) Birds of prey in different images connect south Scandinavian women with women and men in central Sweden, Öland, and Gotland, but they also have eastern and western connections, as the bird profile and falconry are known from other parts of Europe. But what about true birds of prey and ravens in archaeological contexts? The bird brooches have a changing biography, as grave gifts, pendants, and scrap metal. So, what do the birds represent more than the suggested falconry? Certainly, that generosity and affluence were related to power and prestige. The pictorial language of the bird brooches was a part of communication by the social elite. But what about the male masks on the bird brooches?

On quite a few of them a male mask is situated on the bird's back. Bearing in mind that the pictorial perspective of the brooch signals a physical movement of the bird, the male mask communicates different messages depending on how the brooches were worn. Male masks are also found on other objects not only during the same period, but in earlier and later centuries as well. A good example is the above-mentioned brooches with a bird of prey in profile; on some of these brooches a male mask is situated on the bird's hip.





[Figure 17](#). Helmet with a bird on the nose guard, Vendel XIV. (After Stolpe & Arne 1912, Figure XLI.)

To sum up, the association between bird brooches and birds of prey, and a male face on female jewellery, makes the wearer and the male person quite interesting. Whose is the prey? The bird brooches and the connotations of falconry denote both a social identity and a lifestyle, expressed in the aesthetic of the time. Obviously, the bird brooches conveyed a message within the social elite, between men and women, and in continental networking with east and west. The gender issues are supported with the ideological preferences of the time. Thus, the large numbers of bird brooches, and other metal objects, at Uppåkra also represent contemporaneous travel, objectified in the production and remoulding of elegant handicraft.

### *Gender and sexuality*

The human relationship to animals is gendered, judging by representations of animals in the archaeological evidence and the Norse mythology. To continue the sheep/goat story, why are goats so significant in the mythology and visible in pictorial representations? Why are sheep so frequent in the archaeological contexts yet not represented in images, not mentioned and not named in Norse mythology?

It seems that sheep and goats could represent different social categories. Perhaps we see a gender pattern in female and male domestic domains, but there is no clear-cut division between male and female symbolic uses of the animals in the archaeological contexts. In the first hand it seems as if the goat is an animal assigned to the male sphere, for example the use of buck in the *fylgjur* traditions, indicating the inner qualities of its owner.<sup>363</sup> On the Stentofthen stone in Blekinge, southern Sweden, a new interpretation of the runes sheds light on sacrificial customs: ‘With nine bucks, with nine stallions HapuwolfR gave good growth.’ The number nine and the masculine gender of the sacrificial animals have a direct parallel to the Uppsala sacrifice reported by Adam of Bremen.<sup>364</sup>

*Eirik the Red’s Saga* tells how, before performing her ritual, a *seiðr* woman had a special meal. She was served a gruel of goat’s milk and then a stew of hearts from a variety of animals.<sup>365</sup>

The other domesticated and wild species are not equally trapped in a particular research habitus, as sheep/goats are. Horse and dog are frequent in male and female prehistoric contexts, but they always have male connotations in Norse mythology. The pig is associated with different gender roles in prehistoric times, and crosses gender roles in the mythology. Cattle are meant for all gender roles in the real world, but supreme in the role of creating the world. Birds of prey are found in male and female burials, but in the mythology they support Odin, as do ravens.

Animals provide a perspective on different gender roles, and with their specific abilities they participate in structuring the world. In the mythology they act to assist the gods, but in the real world they support people and their survival.

The animal gender issues relate to a discussion about the potential within archaeology to interpret pre-Christian gender roles, reproduction, and sexuality. Sexuality is a field that has been scantily discussed in Scandinavian archaeology in spite of a long tradition in gender research.

First of all, the problem is to analyse the representation of the physical body in terms of sex and gender. Another problem is that sexual reproduction is based on cultural habits.<sup>366</sup> Carol Clover argues that social organization in Old Norse societies was not a matter of biological sex, but of gender. Regardless of sex, inheritance was built on personality and personal abilities.<sup>367</sup> This seems to be an attitude that also concerned *forn siðr*, and it is reflected in the fact that men, women, and children were buried according to the same ritual.

The predominance of orality in Iron Age Scandinavia affects the possibilities to obtain knowledge. The sagas give some perspectives on the metaphorical use of animals in terms of sexuality and reproduction. The Icelandic *Flateyjarbók* from the late fourteenth century tells the story of Volsi (*Völsa þáttr*). An embalmed penis from a stallion was kept in linen fabric with onions and was circulated around the table by the mistress of the farm for prosperity and good reproduction on the farm. The horse had a much greater sexual meaning than can be deduced from the archaeological sources. Another example of sexual reproduction in the Norse mythology concerns how Sleipnir came into being. Sleipnir's father was owned by the giant who built Asgard. In order to delay the construction, Loki turned himself into a mare and lured Svadilfari out into the woods. The construction was delayed and Sleipnir was born. As for the goat, in medieval bestiaries the animal symbolizes pride and lust. Obviously, animals had a variety of sexual associations: goats, apes, hyenas, and beavers had visual and verbal references to sex.<sup>368</sup>

To be sure, talking about sexuality in archaeological terms may seem problematic. Still, the rock carvings indicate that, at least in Bronze Age society, sexuality was amply expressed in the rituals. Bronze Age rock carvings depict sexual intercourse between men and women but also between men and animals, and more than a quarter of the figures are phallic.<sup>369</sup>

In a discussion of the boundaries between men and animals these images of bestiality are indicative of boundary-crossing actions. Most of them are found in the well-known rock-carving districts in Bohuslän, but there is an instance by Lake Åbo in Ångermanland.<sup>370</sup> Another depiction of bestiality is found in the stone circle of the Early Bronze Age barrow at Sagaholm in

Småland.<sup>371</sup> Despite the difficulty of identifying the species of the animals in the rock carvings, these images of bestiality show that the most frequent animals are horses and elks. On one of the rocks in the Kivik tumulus in south-eastern Skåne, bird-like figures are depicted in procession. A similar bird-like figure occurs in a bestiality scene from Hoghem in Bohuslän. These bestiality themes form a link between rock carvings and stone-built tombs. Burial rites are connected not only with burial sites but also with rock carvings.

Bestiality has shocked and fascinated people throughout history. Sexual intercourse between men and animals has been a recurrent theme in mythology and religion. In the Bible bestiality is condemned as unnatural and sacrilegious. Sexual intercourse with animals was a dangerous and boundary-crossing activity in times when the boundaries between man, animal, and the supernatural were difficult to define. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries bestiality was one of the most serious social problems.<sup>372</sup>

Bestiality is a boundary-crossing sexual activity in which man and animal are united. Sexuality involves love-making, emotions, and reproduction, but it also entails power and domination. Perhaps the Bronze Age bestiality scenes can be interpreted in terms of power and domination, representing a patriarchal aristocracy. The aristocracy of the Bronze Age favoured attributes linking ritual practices to rocks and funeral monuments. These attributes are associated with horses and metal objects. Like the rock carvings, these objects abound with images of horses, snakes, fish, the sun, and ships—a Bronze Age cosmology.<sup>373</sup>

Perhaps the combination of ships, horses, and death can be linked to an aristocratic yearning for a cosmological origin during the Bronze Age, and it may also be relevant for an Iron Age cosmology. At Kivik, animals and men are represented, but also creatures intermediate between men and animals. At times the boundary between man and beast seems blurred, and no doubt sexuality was integrated in the rituals attending death and cult. Is bestiality an expression of affinity with animals, or a manifestation of power? The interpretations that archaeology can give to boundaries and bonds between man and beast are as varied as conceptions in that distant past are likely to have been.

In the poetry too, there are expressions of sexuality. The literary historian Lars Lönnroth believes that the art of poetry was something that had to be acquired through cunning and deceit, but also through desire. Odin humiliates the giants, and the encounter with Gunnlod shows that sexuality and pottery may have belonged together.<sup>374</sup> The role of the serpent may also be a metaphorical expression here for sexuality, but perhaps also power: the power to control other beings and women. The implicit cunning of serpents leads from associations with sexuality and gender roles to claims of power and control over others. The story of Thorkil's journey to Utgard shows the potential for transformation:

Before the gates they saw dogs of uncommon savagery keeping vigilant watch over the entrance.... Thorkil warned them to exercise restraint and not touch any object in the dwelling they were to penetrate, even if it appeared delightful to own or of lovely aspect. ... One man, inflamed by unbridled avarice, laid his covetous grasp on the gold, unaware that the sheen of its beautiful metal concealed fatal destruction and that deadly peril lurked within this glittering prize. Another too, incapable of restraining his greed, stretched uncontrollable hands towards the horn. A third, matching the other two in self-assurance and unable to discipline his fingers properly, did not flinch from loading the tusk on his shoulders. These spoils displayed a seductive appearance to men's eyes, yet though they were fascinating to gaze upon, they were magical in their operation. The armlet turned into a snake and fell with the poisoned tips of its fangs upon the man who wore it; the horn, lengthening into a dragon, took the life of its bearer; the tusk assumed the form of a sword and plunged its point into the bowels of the one who was carrying it.<sup>375</sup>

A mythological origin may have been ascribed to animals, but they were also significant in social networks, both for their practical utility and for their metaphorical meaning. The various kinds of real and imaginary animals may possibly represent social relations resembling those of humans, based on, for example, solidarity and generosity, or opposition and

dictatorial power. Human characters and properties build social networks in which the metaphorical meaning of animals becomes a part of a gender-related communication that also comprises sexuality and reproduction.

## **Animal and human properties**

Animals were an important part of the human life-world, and they stand out as significant forces in the mythology in which fantasy creatures were created. Real animals and fantasy animals became mouthpieces for human characteristics and reflections of people's social position. With the aid of animals one could show who one was, and with animals one could moreover control the higher powers.

Animals signal ownership and power, but they also say something about people's character. One can envisage that what was then perceived as 'history' also gave identity and power. The animals' historical background was thus important for the way the rituals were performed. If one had knowledge of a very distant time, of myths and cosmological origins, one could reconnect oneself and one's family to this history by performing the rituals. Pre-Christian ritual practice can therefore be said both to have religious causes and to be an expression of contemporaneous values. Animal symbolism hints at everyday realities close to the grass-roots level of the farm, but also at an aristocracy with all its need for political and ideological signals.

### ***Personal names***

When children in the pre-Christian and early Christian periods were given names of animals, the reasons were probably not the same as in our day. In the *Poetic Edda* Odin is given over seventy names, two of which are associated with the same species of animal, the serpents Ofnir and Svafnir. In the sagas Odin is called by names referring to several different animal species: bear, eagle, hawk, horse, and wolf. [376](#)

In the Scandinavian evidence it is possible to discern an older and a younger system of naming. Personal names occur written in the older futhark with its 24 runes. In this Proto-Norse system, names were carved on

artefacts and stones. The later naming system is connected to the younger futhark with its 16 characters.

Proto-Norse names written in the older futhark were carved on objects of metal and bone and were chiselled into runic stones. These names occur in sources from around the start of the common era until the end of the seventh century. The onomastic scholar Lena Petersson in Uppsala, Sweden, has studied these early name forms and their etymology; her results are summarized in [Table 10](#). The names indicate personal characteristics, such as being swift, alert, competent, and dangerous. There are also associations with social status; for example, names indicating a young man, a lord, or a servant. About a quarter of the names are female, some are of indeterminate gender, but the majority are male names. Of the over 90 names, 10 are linked to animals. The name on the Fyn bracteate might not be a personal name but a designation for the horse that is depicted there.

[Table 10](#). Personal names with animal elements inscribed on artefacts and runic stones in the older futhark, up to *c.* 700. [377](#)



| Name, normalized Proto-Norse nominative form | Inscribed name           | Inscription context                                      | Etymology     | Animal |
|--|--------------------------|--|---------------|--------|
| Eh(w)ō                                       | eho                      | Donzdorf fibula, Germany                                 | Ehwaz;<br>Jór | horse  |
| Fākaz  | fakaz<br>akaz            | Femø bracteate, Denmark<br>Åsum bracteate, Sweden        | Fákr          | horse  |
| Habukaz                                      | hAUkz                    | Dice, Vallentuna, Sweden                                 | Haukr         | hawk   |
| Habukōþuz<br>Haukōþuz (?)                    | haukōþuz<br>hakuþo       | Vånga runestone, Sweden<br>Noleby runestone, Sweden      | Haukōn        | hawk   |
| Hakuþuz (?)                                  | hacud                    | Kjølevik runestone, Norway                               | Hacud         | pike   |
| Hariwulfaz                                   | hAriwolAfZ<br>hAriWulafa | Stentoften runestone, Sweden<br>Istaby runestone, Sweden | Ulfr          | wolf   |
| Hōraz  | horaz                    | Fyn bracteate, Denmark                                   | ?             | horse  |
| Hrabnaz                                      | harabanaz                | Järsberg runestone, Sweden                               | Hrafn         | raven  |
| Widuhundaz                                   | widuhudaz                | Himlingøje fibula, Denmark                               | Hundr         | dog    |

Personal names from the Viking Age and the Early Middle Ages suggest interpretations involving the boundaries between man and animal. These names were most frequently taken from wild animals. *Björn* (bear), *Ulv* (wolf), *Ari* (eagle) and *Orm* (snake) were the most common names, but there are also instances of *Ræv* (fox), *Iævur* (boar), *Biur* (beaver), *Ramn* (raven), *Høk* (hawk), *Val* (falcon), *Hani* (cock), *Spirv* (sparrow) and *Gase* (goose). Of the domesticated animals, *Ior* (horse) is the sole instance. As we saw in connection with personal names in the older futhark, male personal names referring to an animal are considerably more common than female names ([Tables 11, 12](#)).

[Table 11](#). Personal names with animals as the first element inscribed on runic stones in the younger futhark, Viking Age and Middle Ages. [378](#)

| <b>Eagle</b><br>Arn/Örn/Ærn |           | <b>Horse</b><br>Io/Iór | <b>Snake</b><br>Orm | <b>Wolf</b><br>Ulf/Ulver |
|-----------------------------|-----------|------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>male</b>                 |           | <b>male</b>            | <b>male</b>         | <b>male</b>              |
| Arnbiorn                    | Ærnils    | Ioar                   | Ormar               | UlfrikR                  |
| Arnfin                      | Ærnulf    | logeiR                 | Ormger              | Ulvar                    |
| Arnniutr                    | Ærnvardht | lostein                | Ormsten             | Ulvidh                   |
| Arnsten                     | Ærnvast   |                        | Ormulf              | Ulvidhin                 |
| Arnulf                      | Ærnvidh   |                        |                     |                          |
| Arnvald                     | Ærmund    |                        |                     |                          |
| Arnvast                     |           |                        |                     |                          |
| Arnvidh                     |           |                        |                     |                          |
| <b>female</b>               |           |                        | <b>female</b>       | <b>female</b>            |
| Arnfridh                    |           |                        | Ormløgh             | Ulfhild                  |
| Arngun                      |           |                        |                     |                          |
| Arnchild                    |           |                        |                     |                          |
| Ærngun                      |           |                        |                     |                          |
| Ærndis                      |           |                        |                     |                          |
| Ærgærdh                     |           |                        |                     |                          |

[Table 12](#). Personal (male) names with animals as the second element. [379](#)

| <b>Bear</b><br>Biorn/Björn |             | <b>Snake</b><br>Orm | <b>Wolf</b><br>Ulf/Olf |          |         |
|----------------------------|-------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------|---------|
| Abiorn                     | Kætilbiorn  | Oddorm              | Arnulf                 | Hæriulf  | Unnulf  |
| Arnbiorn                   | Mæghinbiorn | Uddorm              | Asulf                  | Ingulf   | Vighulf |
| Asbiorn                    | Runbiorn    | Viorm               | Biærghulf              | Nannulf  | Ærnulf  |
| Fastbiorn                  | Sighbiorn   |                     | Borgulf                | Oddulf   | Ødhulf  |
| Folkbiorn                  | Stenbiorn   |                     | Botulf                 | Ormulf   | Øiulf   |
| Frøbiorn                   | Styrbiorn   |                     | Bryniolf               | Radhulf  | Arnolf  |
| Gerbiorn                   | Sæbiorn     |                     | Farulf                 | Ragnulf  | Asolf   |
| Gudhbiorn                  | Thingbiorn  |                     | Fastulf                | Rikulf   | Botolf  |
| Gunbiorn                   | Thorbiorn   |                     | Gerulf                 | Ringulf  |         |
| Halbiorn                   | Vibiorn     |                     | Grimulf                | RunulfR  |         |
| Hidhinbiorn                | Vidhbiorn   |                     | Gudhulf                | Sighulf  |         |
| Holmbiorn                  | Væbiorn     |                     | Gunnulf                | Stenulf  |         |
| Hærbiorn                   | Ænbiorn     |                     | Gøtulf                 | SæulfR   |         |
| Ighulbiorn                 | Ærinbiorn   |                     | Hemulf                 | Thingulf |         |
| Ingebiorn                  | Æsbiorn     |                     | Hyggiulf               | Thiudulf |         |
| Kolbiorn                   | Ødhbiorn    |                     | Hæghulf                | Thorulf  |         |

These names may have been linked to forces of good or evil, or to a philosophy of honour, honesty, and authority. Perhaps the use of words for wild animals as elements in personal names is related to the nature–culture dichotomy in Norse mythology. Midgard is the abode of men, and in its midst lies Asgard, home of the gods. Beyond the pale of Midgard is Utgard, the realm of evil creatures such as the giants. The animal names may express the need for an alliance with nature, with the giants and other fiends outside Midgard; an alliance that was also sought by the giants when they wooed Frigg, the goddess of fertility and farming. In this interpretation the personal names would not only be tokens of a bond between men and animals but also bridges between nature and culture, between the known and the unknown, between the finite and the infinite.

Rituals and transformations of animals and blends of human and animal in pictorial art link the archaeological evidence with the Icelandic narratives and the art of poetry itself. The material expressions also give a background to interpretations of personal names, attendant spirits (*fylgjur*) in animal form, and shape-changing. People's relations to animals and the role of animals thus become more distinct and more nuanced. Names are important, and personal names in the Viking Age and Early Middle Ages reveal people's attitudes to animals.

Wild animals, as we have seen, were common in the naming of persons, with bear, wolf, eagle, and serpent dominating heavily, while fox, wild boar, beaver, raven, hawk, falcon, and sparrow were less common. Among the domesticated animals, horse, cock, and goose occur occasionally as part of personal names.<sup>380</sup> For some reason, men had animal species in their names much more often than women. Perhaps animal qualities such as speed, strength, courage, or cunning were supposed to be transferred to the bearer of the name and could therefore be associated with the self-image of the family. The names could also be linked to good or evil forces, or to honour, power, and integrity. Personal names are therefore part of the merger of culture and nature that is found in Norse mythology.

As in Norse mythology, animals in other cultures and religions were also given personal names. They became individuals with a value of their own. They could be cunning, athletic, and honourable. Human characteristics were translated into animal ones, which suggests that those animals which were given names of their own had a special value for people or gods. It is

conceivable that certain species were likewise significant for the naming of people.

Were these animals used as personal names as metaphors for an accepted boundary-crossing act? Were they expressions of potential shape-shifting with links to shamanism? Do the properties of the various animals reveal how the characters and family traits of these men were perceived? Do the names *Örn* (eagle) and *Bear* (bear) signify swiftness, strength, and courage, or do they indicate a position in society? A close study of gender, class, and genealogy might offer a better opportunity for a discussion of further aspects of naming and personal names.

In Old Norse poetry, when a hero was named a boar, he became identical with a boar.<sup>381</sup> Animal names used as personal names suggest that these names and name elements were once profoundly significant.

### ***Animal fylgjur***

Animal *fylgjur* in Icelandic literature are associated with male characteristics. Among the attendant spirits of the leading men, tame animals are represented by ox, goat, and boar. Those from untamed nature were fox, wolf, deer, bear, polar bear, swan, eagle, falcon, leopard, lion, and serpent. Imaginary beings such as giants, dragons, and fabulous birds could also protect men in leading positions. The animal *fylgjur* of the more anonymous men included cattle, pig, wolf, hawk, and other birds. An interesting aspect is that horses are not associated with animals as attendant spirits. Persons with animal names and animal *fylgjur* marked transformations between human and animal. Certain people also had the ability to change their shape temporarily.<sup>382</sup>

Domesticated animals from farm contexts and wild animals from the Norse fauna contrast with the more exotic animals. Polar bear, lion, and leopard testify to far-reaching contacts since these animals did not occur naturally in Scandinavia. There is thus no agreement between the animal species in the fauna of *fylgjur* and the species found in the archaeological record. Perhaps the transformed bodies and interwoven animal and humans can be compared with the shape changes of which we hear in mythological tales and sagas? These tell how mortals and gods, above all Odin and Loki, could change their appearance. They could act outside their own bodies; for

example, swimming or flying, concealing themselves, or deceiving others. They could also play other parts by turning into animals.

## **Transformations between animal and human**

Norse mythology has versatile and powerful animals which do not represent any distinct species. They were something between real animals and imaginary creatures. Their properties enabled them to act forcefully and flexibly, so that they could solve serious problems.

Historically there are different types of transformations between animals and humans. In folkloristic, occult, and anthropological literature we find many descriptions of boundary-crossing creatures. Scapegoats, human souls in animal bodies, werewolves, werefoxes, lion- and tiger-men, and human serpents are examples of transformations between animal and human in different parts of the world. With a more phenomenological perspective, the animal in man has been interpreted in different ways. One foundation for this is the human cognitive capacity for perception, memory, language, problem solving, and decision making.[383](#)

Judging by the archaeological traces in everyday and ritual contexts, animals and humans occurred in the most diverse situations and in *forn siðr*. People and animals in prehistoric times were handled in ways which might suggest that the pre-Christian ideals combined human properties with the properties of different animal species. The boundaries between humans and animals therefore appear ambivalent and capable of being stretched in various ways. It seems that there was hybridity across species boundaries, a symbiosis between human and animal.

These transformations can be interpreted on the basis of material remains of dead people and animals, and representations of humans and animals in pictures, especially in the animal ornamentation. Domesticated animals occur more frequently in the archaeological evidence and less so in the iconography, where wild animals, exotic beasts, and imaginary creatures seem more important.

The archaeological contexts give the following examples of conceivable situations and *forn siðr* where the boundary between animals and humans is crossed:

- Burial rituals
- Wetland deposits
- Separate graves for dogs, horses, and bears
- Bodily metaphors, human body parts replaced by parts of animal bodies
- Cannibalism and technological processes
- Iconography

The names inscribed on runic stones and recorded in the Icelandic texts and Norse poetry are further examples of sources that express ideas about transformations between animal and human:

- Naming
- Animal *fylgjur*
- Shape-changing
- Kennings

These examples of pre-Christian boundary-crossing and transformations between animal and human are both concrete and abstract. They are concrete expressions of prevailing pre-Christian social practice and *forn siðr*, and they were later formulated verbally in abstract ideas.

It seems that bodily metaphors, with their transformative character, permeated *forn siðr* throughout the pre-Christian period, going all the way back to the Stone Age. The metaphors comprised both whole bodies and parts of bodies in rituals connected with death and burial, as well as rituals performed in the outlands at lakes or bogs or in other special topographical locations.

There are occasional examples of excavated graves from different pre-Christian periods where parts of a human being were replaced by parts of an animal body. Pig and seal bones replaced human teeth in a burial at the Stone Age cemetery of Ajvide in Gotland. A man aged 18–20 had had his head and seven cervical vertebrae separated from his body just after death. His teeth had then been pulled out of the jaws and placed in two perfect rows beside the body. Two canine teeth had been replaced with two phalanges from pig and seal.<sup>384</sup> A Viking Age example from Birka is a grave in which a pig jaw can be interpreted as a replacement for a human head. The skeleton was well preserved and the head lay on the right arm,



and the lower jaw of a pig was found beside the cervical vertebrae. The grave did not seem to have been disturbed; the placing of the body parts was considered to come from the time of the burial.[385](#)

Another type of transformation is that between human and human which involves cannibalism. This is a controversial phenomenon which is ascribed to other people far away from the continent of Europe. It turns out, however, that there is ample evidence of cannibalism in European prehistory as well.[386](#) In Scandinavia there are indications that not only animals but also people were consumed in connection with burials and rituals conducted beside water. In Stone Age contexts, bones of humans and animals, split to extract the marrow, have been discovered together with archaeological finds in graves and wetlands. The bones mostly come from domesticated animals such as pig, sheep, goat, and dog, but it also happens that both young and old humans are found together with the animal bones.[387](#)

A Bronze Age example comes from Uppland. The Hågahögen mound was found to contain unburnt parts of human and animal skeletons scattered in the central cairn and in the surrounding turf. Some of the bones had been split to get at the marrow. At least three people, one woman and two men, were ‘scattered around in a way that was wholly analogous to the animal bones’, according to the excavator Oscar Almgren. The bones come from cattle, sheep, pig, and dog, with occasional examples of horse, roe deer, pike, and goose. Almgren interprets the human bones and the animal bones as remains of a funeral feast in connection with the cremation of a man, who was buried together with a large number of magnificent objects of bronze and gold. The grave is dated to the Late Bronze Age, period IV; that is, the tenth century BC.[388](#) The majority of the examples of cannibalism with bones from the Neolithic and Bronze Age show traces of butchering, marrow extraction, and burning, boiling, or singeing.[389](#) To my knowledge, however, there is no evidence from the Norse Iron Age apart from a doubtful case from a Migration Period house at Vallhagar in Gotland.[390](#)

Yet another example of transformations of bodies is the use of bones in technological processes such as pottery and iron production. Ceramic clay was tempered with finely ground bone to make the vessels strong and elastic. Bone-tempered pottery is rather rare, however, occurring from the



Neolithic to the Late Roman Iron Age. On some occasions, bone-tempered pottery has been found at iron production sites in Skåne. At Uppåkra, for example, just south of Lund, bone-tempered potsherds have been found in occupation layers together with finds from metal production.<sup>391</sup>

The link between bone and metal craft has been observed in connection with experimental iron production. Bone turns out to be very important for tempering iron and for producing steel. The technological procedure for steel manufacture comprises a number of transformation processes. The Norwegian archaeologist Terje Gansum sees a parallel between the steel-making process and metaphorical mergers of human and animal, bodily metaphors in Iron Age animal ornamentation, and the growing social elite.<sup>392</sup> At present it is impossible to determine whether it was human or animal bones that provided ingredients for steel manufacture, but it is definitely thought-provoking to envisage this type of transformation between humans or animals and artefacts.

The iconography also includes transformed bodies. In Bronze Age rock carvings we find examples such as human-animals or animal-humans in the form of bird-like creatures, horned dancers, and trumpet blowers. Bodies and body parts of humans and animals were combined in a great many different ways. The combination of human and animal is also expressed in horned objects from the Bronze Age; for example, the helmets from Viksø and the human figures from Grevensvænge, both in Sjælland, Denmark, or Fogdarp in Skåne, Sweden.<sup>393</sup> The heads from Fogdarp have owl's beaks and horns, and they show that parts of wild and domesticated animals could be combined with humans.

The transformative features in figural representations and the ambiguity as regards species can be seen in even more striking forms in Norse animal ornamentation with hybrid creatures ([Figure 18](#)). The animals are seldom depicted realistically. They are often composed of different animal species; for instance, a quadruped can have pig's feet, bird's claws, and horns. Norse animal ornamentation is also teeming with figures of ambiguous species. Fantastic creatures with serpents, dragons, birds, and humans are portrayed ingeniously *en face* or in profile, with the parts of the body broken up and put together again, and with specially composed body language. Domesticated and wild animals can be combined into imaginary creatures.

The birds and the quadrupeds with elements of horse, pig, goat, and wild boar seem to have been assembled for manipulative purposes.

Hybrid bodies consist of parts of humans and both wild and domesticated animals. Horses, pigs, and goats are common in the graves of people from the upper strata of society, and they also seem to have been highly ritualized animals in Norse mythology. Ritual practice in *forn siðr* and the abstract portrayals of transformations link the material expressions to the Icelandic narratives and the art of poetry itself. The material expressions provide a historical background and a frame of reference for interpretations of personal names and animal *fylgjur*. At the same time, they give scope for deeper interpretations of human relations to animals, allowing us to see how integrated a Midgard mentality was with the role of animals in the pre-Christian conceptual world.



[Figure 18](#). Embossed foil from the Uppåkra beaker, Skåne. (Drawing: Björn Nilsson, after Hårdh 2004: 64, [Figure 14](#).)

It is perfectly possible that the transformed bodies and the interweaving of animal and human can be linked to the stories of shape-changing in the myths and sagas.<sup>394</sup> These tell of how mortals and gods, above all Odin and Loki, could change shape. They could act outside their own bodies. They could play other roles by turning themselves into animals.

The very art of poetry is transformative in character. Icelandic skaldic poetry called for extensive knowledge of rhyme and metre and involved a complex system of kennings and *heiti*—metaphorical circumlocutions and poetic synonyms. A kenning is defined as a phrase substituted for an ordinary noun, consisting of two or more elements, while a *heiti* is a poetic designation in one word, used as a substitute for a name or a concept. A knowledge of kennings and *heiti* was required in order to compose and understand the poetry.<sup>395</sup> Kennings are explained in detail by Snorri Sturluson in his introduction to *Skáldskaparmál*. He writes:

But these things have now to be told to young poets who desire to learn the language of poetry and to furnish themselves with a wide vocabulary using traditional terms; or else they desire to be able to understand what is expressed obscurely. Then let such a one take this book as scholarly inquiry and entertainment. But these stories are not to be consigned to oblivion or demonstrated to be false, so as to deprive poetry of ancient kennings which major poets have been happy to use. [396](#)

Snorri then goes on to describe the kennings for gods, animals, the weather, fire and water, sun and moon, and so on. It was common to use animals to symbolize other things. Although source criticism is necessary when considering Snorri's recording of the poetry, the examples of kennings in *Skáldskaparmál* listed in [Table 13](#) illustrate how people in olden times expressed associations with animals and parts of the human body.

[Table 13](#). A selection of kennings in *Skáldskaparmál* with animals, gods and bodies.

|                            |                     |
|----------------------------|---------------------|
| The sea-thread             | The Midgard Serpent |
| Shooting-snakes            | Spears              |
| Fish-trap river            | River               |
| The lady-wolf              | Thiassi             |
| The mountain-wolf          | Giant               |
| The raven-god              | Odin                |
| The land-whales            | Giants              |
| The bow-string-Var's whale | Ox                  |
| The yoke-bear              | Ox                  |

|                       |                 |
|-----------------------|-----------------|
| The bird of the blood | Eagle           |
| The wolf 's father    | Loki            |
| The whale-roof-ridge  | Wave            |
| Battle-swan's feeder  | Raven's warrior |
| Floor-horse           | House           |
| Grafvitnir's bed      | Gold            |
| High-bow bear         | Giant           |
| Hawk-fells            | Arms            |

The most common animals in the kennings are raven, eagle, and wolf; the beasts of the battlefield, according to the philologist Rudolf Meissner. Of other animals it is above all snakes that occur in kennings for the Midgard Serpent. Other animals are bear, fox, goat, sheep (or cow), ox, dog, cat, duck, falcon, and fish.<sup>397</sup>

For a modern reader, the animal kennings are often comical and bizarre sequences of words. In the kennings wild animals above all are turned into landscape elements and seasons. The horse is the only domesticated animal that occurs in the kennings, primarily as a metaphor for ships. Body parts seem to be used mainly as metaphors for gold, while the body of Ymir the primeval giant represents the elements earth, sea, and sky. In view of the fact that Snorri had his own Christian ideas about what could be expressed in poetry, the kennings must be regarded critically. An indirect comparison is possible only with the archaeological remains from the pre-Christian period. Kennings can only be used as a kind of hint of ideas in a pre-Christian setting, using parts of the body and animals in linguistic expressions. The crossing of boundaries between species seems to be a cosmological feature with a long historical background in the pre-Christian conceptual world.

Of all the animal species that occurred on pre-Christian farms, the species used in kennings seem to make up only a selection. Domesticated animals, with the exception of the horse, play a subordinate role. They were not important in poetry. On some occasions Meissner mentions that a sheep, which he says could possibly be a cow, is referred to as *grasbitr* or 'grass-biter'. His interpretation is interesting since the sheep is a species that seems to be invisible in mythological texts.

Transitional forms between humans and animals in these examples from the archaeological sources and the literature suggest that properties of different animals and creatures were interwoven. Their characteristics could be transferred to humans. Hypothetically, this interweaving and boundary crossing may reflect the symbiotic relationship implied by a Midgard mentality. The close day-to-day relationship between humans and animals on farms was the basis for survival, and simultaneously the animals' behaviour and properties constituted the foundation for rituals that can be summed up in the term *forn siðr*.

# CHAPTER 6

## Old Norse religion

As humans we proceed from ourselves in our understanding of the world, and the body is an obvious starting point and reference. Body language and body signals, bodily awareness and bodily metaphors are universal phenomena, with distinctive expressions in specific cultural contexts. The question is to what extent people themselves and the rituals concerning human and animal bodies in pre-Christian times were an expression of Norse cosmology.

There is a long historical background to the pre-Christian bodily metaphors. They were not constant throughout the prehistoric era, but changed at major social and cultural breakpoints, above all in the Neolithic, the Early Bronze Age, the Roman Iron Age, the Migration Period, and the Early Viking Age.

Animals and humans were used in ritual throughout prehistory. Despite changed rituals, there seems to have been an attitude, a mentality, that linked humans and animals in a similar way for a very long time. This mentality disappeared in connection with the official introduction of Christianity. The pre-Christian bodily metaphors are related to a pre-Christian cosmology in which people's attitudes to animals were not anthropocentric.

This basic cosmological theme can be found all through the prehistoric period. The theme gives the impression that people categorized themselves on equal terms with animals. It looks as if there were no clear boundaries between humans, animals, and nature. Animals and humans were handled in a similar way. There was a functional and symbolic dependence on domesticated and wild animals.

The contrasts and the complementary practices, with unburnt and burnt bodies, that existed in the different prehistoric periods are the result of *forn siðr*, as influences from networking with different geographical areas led to

the modification of traditional burial rituals. The rituals may have excluded certain people from being buried and may have included others. Perhaps the bodies of some people were handled differently in certain ritual circumstances, in situations of hostility and violence. Monumental tombs manifested special individuals and special places in the landscape. Cremated bodies are easily portable, and may in some cases be a result of the death having taken place elsewhere and the body being cremated for easier transport. The number of cremation graves, on the other hand, indicates that the majority of the population must have been interred. The many flat-earth cemeteries give the impression of being enclosed areas. The different methods for ritual handling of dead animals and humans cannot be linked to any change of religion in pre-Christian times. Instead they represent regional customs, changes in traditional burial rituals because of changed social and cultural networks.

*Forn siðr*, the ancient custom involving whole or parts of humans and animals, was a kind of communication strategy that existed for thousands of years. There were no long-lasting, stable, or immutable traditions in the pre-Christian era. The basic cosmological theme of nature, humans, and animals was expressed in different ways that altered over time. It is obvious that not everyone was treated in such a way that we can study them archaeologically. Only certain categories of people are visible through the burial ritual.

The meaning of special body parts and their deposition in a grave or at a particular place in the landscape, and their link with cosmology can be interpreted through a number of associations. A clear awareness of the significance of certain parts of the body can be found in the art of folk healing. Bones, hair, teeth, and nails played a major role in preventing and curing ailments.<sup>398</sup> The significance of nails for the protection of the dead is expressed, for instance, by the Skolt Saami in their practice of cutting the nails before death and placing them in the coffin with the deceased.<sup>399</sup> The ship Naglfar is built of dead people's nails and is launched at Ragnarok, when the wolf Fenrir and the Midgard Serpent are loosed and the forces of nature destroy the world. Further association along these lines leads to the phenomenon of boat graves. The ship graves from the Bronze Age and the Iron Age are further examples showing how the treatment of bodies in rituals of death and burial is connected to cosmology.



It may be observed that the recorded mythology has its prehistoric background in the archaeological sources. There is an aristocratic as well as a male emphasis in the myths. It seems as if the Norse mythology was recorded as a historical background for an equally aristocratic and learned environment during the thirteenth century. Exegesis of the texts is complex, yet they normally serve as the basis for interpretations of Old Norse religion. But the interpretation of archaeological material culture is also problematic. The pre-Christian reality gives a much more nuanced picture of the society, which will be elucidated below in terms of animals.

The practical utility and metaphorical meaning of animals were important throughout the prehistoric period. With the aid of representations of animals and the significance of animals for people's social identity and lifestyle, complementary interpretations of Old Norse religion emerge. It appears that domesticated animals and wild animals belonged to different social fields. Social practice suggests that domesticated animals, ever since the Neolithic, had been part of a ritual structure on farms and in social and cultural relations. Wild animals, in contrast, had a subordinate role for much of prehistory, but they became powerful animals during the Iron Age, starting in the fourth century. They were staged in iconographic programmes and were allowed to act in an Iron Age scenario characterized by political power games and alliances inside and outside Scandinavia. Wild animals and Norse animal ornamentation seem to be a kind of branding.

It is possible that the basis for the presence of animals in *forn siðr* was a desire to establish links with a cosmological origin. In this respect, animals were considered as important as living people, relatives, and ancestors. Anthropological studies have found that material culture, not merely artefacts but also animal bones and skeletons (especially the long bones and the skull, but also teeth, fur, skin, and feathers), are associated with the ancestors and what happened long ago. It may therefore have been important for leading persons to own both fragmented animal bodies and skilfully produced pictures of animals, since the objects gave status and legitimation for their leadership. Animals were involved in people's perceptions of the world and its structure. In many origin myths, chiefly among hunting peoples, humans and animals have shared ancestors; for example, animals and humans could marry each other. Animals were affines of humans, and there could be human–animal offspring.<sup>400</sup> The

connections between humans, gods or other beings, and animals may have been similar in Old Norse religion too.

Animals were thus interwoven in a mythological origin, but they were also significant in social networks by virtue of their practical utility and their metaphorical significance. The different animal species and fantastic creatures therefore represent social relations comparable to human relations, based, for example, on solidarity and generosity or opposition and dictatorial power. Human characteristics and properties build up social networks in which the metaphorical meaning of animals becomes a part of human communication.

## **Shamanistic features**

Pre-Christian archaeological contexts suggest that ritual practice brought humans and animals together so that differences between them were almost obliterated. Animals became mouthpieces for human communication and for human thought.

Hybrid beings and the symbiosis between animal and human could thus be expected to play a highly concrete role in rituals and cosmology. The possibility that people could move between an animal and human state seems to be attested not just in the archaeological remains but also in the literature and poetry. Animal names and *fylgjur* also show that the boundary between human and animal could be crossed. Some people had the ability to change character and temporarily assume a different shape.

In the myths and sagas, gods are likewise able to change shape and act outside their ordinary bodies. Loki could turn himself into an animal or a woman. His children by the giantess Angrboda had infinite powers: the fettered wolf Fenrir, the Midgard Serpent circling the earth, and Hel in her underground realm of the dead. Loki's children all became active at Ragnarok, contributing to the destruction of the world. Beings representing such natural forces were present in the world and threatened its existence, possessing forces that the gods could not subdue.

The significance of animals in boundary-crossing acts also applies to Odin. Snorri tells in chapter 7 of *The Saga of the Ynglings* how Odin changed shape and how he could leave his body to travel freely in the guise of an animal:

Óthin could shift his appearance. When he did so his body would lie there as if he were asleep or dead; but he himself, in an instant, in the shape of a bird or animal, a fish or a serpent, went to distant countries on his or other men's errands. He was also able with mere words to extinguish fires, to calm the sea, and to turn the winds any way he pleased. He had a ship called Skith-blathnir with which he sailed over great seas. It could be folded together like a cloth.[401](#)

The way in which Odin changes shape is the same as that commonly found in tales of magic; the ordinary body disappears or lies lifeless. People were also believed to have spiritual abilities that contrasted sharply with what the Church later taught. Some people could let their *hugr*, 'mind', leave the body and travel away to carry out some task. Sometimes this free mind or soul took on a different material form, a *hamr*, a 'shape or skin'. A person who could travel in the shape of an animal was said to *hamhleyppa*, literally 'shape-run'. Ideas about *fylgjur* belong together with this idea about mental powers.[402](#)

Boundaries between human and animal and boundary-crossing acts have been discussed especially in research on comparative religion in the context of shamanism,[403](#) and in research on Saami ritual and religion.[404](#)

It is perfectly possible that there were shamanistic features in Old Norse religion. What speaks in favour of this interpretation is the transformations between animal and human. It is clear that both animals and humans were ritualized at special sites at cult houses and at wetlands in the outland. The pre-Christian bodily metaphors, with their long historical background, also testify to the part played by animals and humans in a cosmological order. The main theme of Norse animal ornamentation, with hybrid creatures, indicates that this theme had a cosmological foundation in iconography too.

The archaeologist Neil Price has shown, with the aid of anthropological analogies, archaeological evidence, and textual sources, that Old Norse religion was closely associated with power and force. His argument is that creolization took place between Saami and Norse people, as shown particularly in certain burial rituals, for instance at Birka in Lake Mälaren

and in the well-known Klinta grave in Öland, where the features indicate that a person with distinctive properties was buried. Price's interpretation, based particularly on the fact that the graves contained staffs/skewers and special jugs and beakers, is that women who practised *seiðr* were buried here.[405](#)

What could possibly speak against this shamanistic interpretation is the problem of finding archaeological evidence of ritual specialists with shaman properties in the original sense of the term. Another problem specifically concerns the question of ritual specialists. Hypotheses that there might have been ritual specialists, cult leaders, or some kind of priests are discussed by the Swedish historian of religion Olof Sundqvist. Based on philological analyses, he argues that in the pre-Christian aristocratic setting it was the leader who was responsible for religious rituals, but not for the larger ceremonies. The terms *goði*, *pulr*, and *vivil* probably indicate that other persons were responsible for these ceremonial acts, which gave the leader high prestige. Sundqvist stresses that the cult was integrated in the economy, with reciprocal and redistributive systems.[406](#)

The one interpretation does not rule out the other. Moreover, it is conceivable that people with Christian values and priestly authority began to act in Scandinavia in pre-Christian times, long before Christianity became the official religion. In principle there is no unambiguous archaeological evidence for this interpretation either, and there are no textual sources on this topic. There is, however, scope for continued discussion. This can be done by proceeding from the concepts of orality, materiality, and visuality and investigating to what extent pre-Christian societies in Scandinavia were influenced by Christian symbolism in encounters with people in Christianized Europe.

## **Pre-Christian versus Christian**

Modern interpretations of human relations to animals and the role of animals in pre-Christian rituals go together with the modern Western outlook on nature and the classical dichotomy of culture and nature. Pre-Christian evidence is therefore surrounded by complex barriers to interpretation, probably exacerbated by anthropocentrism. At the same time, it is tricky to interpret an iconographic programme since it was created

within a prehistoric communication system with its traditional background and with influences in its own time.

The bronze brooch from Skabersjö in southern Skåne illustrates the complexity of the iconography and the difficulty of linking it to a pre-Christian or a Christian world of symbols. The Swedish archaeologist Holger Arbman believed the brooch to be of south Scandinavian origin, probably made in Denmark or Skåne. It may, however, have been modelled on a mount from a reliquary of Irish origin. On the gilded front the picture is executed with a carving technique of Scandinavian Vendel style D. The brooch is divided into four fields with two animals back-to-back in each field. The cross-shaped centre contains a bird and fourteen quadrupeds, all seen in profile and framed by interlace ornament ([Figure 19](#)).



[Figure 19](#). The Skabersjö brooch, Skåne. Size 143 × 53 mm. (After Salin 1900: 19.)

The brooch is dated to around 700, while the runic inscription on the back has been dated to the time around 1025.<sup>407</sup> The brooch was evidently circulated, perhaps in political and aristocratic circles, for several hundred years, and is yet another example of the reuse of old artefacts. Arbman states that it is impossible to determine whether the Skabersjö brooch alludes to pre-Christian or Christian symbolism, since it is out of its context.



In the following the aim is to discuss the relationship between pre-Christian and Christian on the basis of some selected animals: sheep/ goat, dog, horse, serpent, and wolf/lion.

### *Sheep/goat*

The role of sheep and goats and the attitudes towards them in pre-Christian Scandinavia and afterwards seem to have been trapped in different perspectives depending on circumstances. Sheep and goats appear in different ways in the archaeological record and in the written sources. Both sheep and goats had powerful ritual connotations of *forn siðr*. However, only goats are mentioned in Norse mythology, and the goat became a strong mythological animal with individually named examples. Sheep, on the other hand, are invisible.



[Figure 20](#). Gold bracteate with an image of ambiguous quadrupeds, Ravlunda, Ravlunda Parish, Skåne, Sweden. Diameter 73 mm. (Thomsen 1857, Table VIII, no. 144.)

The pictorial representations of sheep and goat are very striking in pre-Christian society. Sheep are absent in pre-Christian iconography, quite unlike the situation in the Mediterranean region. Very few pictorial representations of goats occur in the Scandinavian record. A few goats are found in Bronze Age rock carvings on the west coast and in the eastern central part of Sweden. A goat is reproduced on one of the golden horns, dated to the Roman period, from Gallehus in southern Jutland, Denmark. The horns were stolen and melted down, but not before detailed drawings had been made. Without attempting a full interpretation of the iconography, it may be said that the goat is placed near a three-headed person.<sup>408</sup> Problems in the interpretation of motifs are manifold, especially if they could be mythological representations.

Among the motifs on the gold bracteates dated to the Migration Period, a quadruped has been interpreted as a horse and in some instances as a goat, referring to either Odin or Thor ([Figure 20](#)).<sup>409</sup> A look at the animals, however, shows that they are often constructed of elements from all kinds of animals. The attributes are assembled from reality and fantasy, and that is surely one of the main points. The distinction between human and animals, and between the animals and their characteristics, is ambiguous.

The unbalanced representation of the two species might also show how historical practices were formulated in the thirteenth century. A long-lasting ritual practice of using sheep in sacrifices disappeared as the rituals were not relevant things to record. When the rituals ceased to be performed, they were forgotten, and perhaps some pagan rituals were believed to be dangerous in the Christian community. The pagan symbolic meaning of sheep was perhaps forgotten in the thirteenth century when the Eddic poems were written down. Instead, the goat represents a sacrificial animal in Norse mythology. Perhaps the goat in fact had male connotations. Male perspectives have been ascribed significance in Norse mythology.<sup>410</sup>

On the other hand, the word for sheep sheds further light on the role of sheep in the pagan world. The Gothic word *sáups* is interpreted as 'sacrifice'. The cognate Old Norse word is *sauðr*, which means sheep. The verb *seuðan* is a general term for 'to seethe, boil', suggesting the preparation of the animal for a ritual meal.<sup>411</sup>

The meaning of the word for sheep strengthens the idea that the sheep was a sacrificial animal, as it was in archaeological contexts for perhaps



thousands of years. In Christianity the sheep was preserved as the symbolic sacrificial lamb. The pagan sheep was transformed into a Christian symbol, and continued to be a special animal. Could it be that sheep belonged to a kind of popular culture in pre-Christian Norse societies, connected to the ancestors and with connotations of utility? Perhaps the symbolic sacrificial lamb was one of many bridges allowing people to face and accept Christianity? Goats had quite a different habitus and were ascribed other attributes, and the animal –like the horse–was demonized in Christianity. In popular legends and Scandinavian popular belief recorded after Christianization, goats are connected with the Devil, as they were the animals of the Norse god Thor.<sup>412</sup> Goats are also related to sexuality, with their heated buckish behaviour. In contrast, sheep play a very passive role in popular legends<sup>413</sup> and serve quite different purposes in the Christian religion.

I would suggest that the dissimilarity represents a difference in social and ritual customs in the pre-Christian religion; a different habitus in Old Norse religion. The animals' differing habitus was used and transformed into cultural categories. Owing to their important and long-term utility, they were also ritualized in pre-Christian times, and I am sure that the symbolic meaning was transformed as time passed. Sheep and goats were used later in Christianity as metaphors for the good and the bad respectively. The pagan sheep and the pagan goat were transformed into the sacrificial lamb and the Devil, with roots in their pagan social and ideological domains.

### ***Dog***

The pre-Christian bodily metaphors and the custom of burying individual animals can be illustrated with dog burials. The Swedish archaeologist Anne-Sofie Gräslund has highlighted the phenomenon. She shows that dog burials in different geographical areas in Europe ceased when Christianity came. Among the Thuringians, Langobards, Franks, Alamans, and Anglo-Saxons, most dog burials are from the period 400–700; among the Saxons and the Frisians the period 600–800, and in Scandinavia *c.* 600–1050. Although dog burials occurred as early as the Stone Age, Gräslund emphasizes the Late Iron Age and states that the number of dog burials increases during the Viking Age. The chronological and spatial differences

clearly mark the spread of Christianity, which did not admit dogs or other animals in its mortuary practice. Animal burials are one of the main criteria of *forn siðr* and a pre-Christian burial ritual.<sup>414</sup>

### ***Horse***

In Scandinavia, horses were placed in both men's and women's graves from the Early Roman Iron Age until Christianity became the official religion. It is usually one horse that is found deposited in the grave, but two to three horses also occur, especially in the Late Iron Age. In exceptionally splendid burials, even more horses were killed and arranged in the graves; for example, in the Norwegian Oseberg and Gokstad graves, with 15 and 12 horses respectively, the Danish Ladby grave in Fyn with 11 horses, and the Swedish cremation grave at Arninge in Uppland, with 7 horses.<sup>415</sup> In the graves where several horses were placed, one may wonder why so many horses were included in the ritual. Hypothetically there are several alternative explanations, for which there is no certain archaeological evidence. Did the deceased own many riding horses which were killed when he died, or does the large number of horses represent a funeral procession in which all the horses that had taken part were executed and then placed in the grave?



[Figure 21](#). Gravestone raised over Karl XV's horse Shejk from 1872, Bäckaskog Castle, Skåne.  
(Photo: Kristina Jennbert 2009.)

After Christianization, horses played as important a role in the burial ritual as in pre-Christian times, but in a different way. It is well-documented from royal funerals in the Middle Ages and the modern period that an armed horseman rode before the catafalque with the king's helmet, shield,

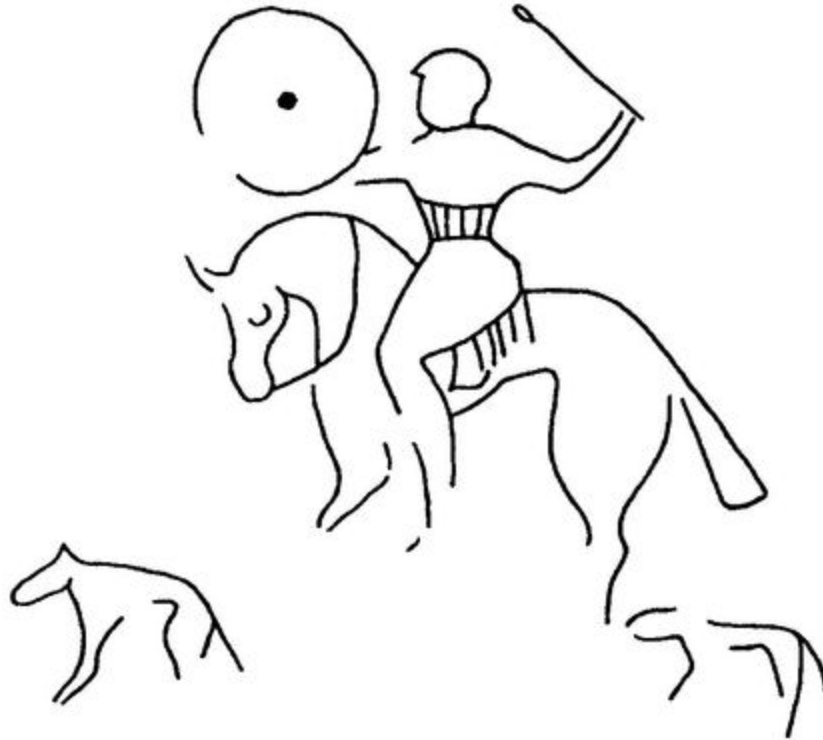
and sword. Magnificently decorated horses drew the catafalque, and behind it went the king's own riding horse. These horses were not killed to be placed in the king's grave. The custom of killing the king's horse was maintained, however, until the nineteenth century. When the Swedish king Karl XV died in 1872, his horse *Shejk* was shot and buried in woodland beside the castle of Bäckaskog in Skåne ([Figure 21](#)).<sup>416</sup>

The prestige value of horses was high in the aristocracy in pre-Christian and Christian times. Horses are also the wealth of the upper classes and an aristocratic expression of prosperity in Icelandic poetry. It seems as if horses in the pre-Christian burial ritual had a similar role to that of horses in the Christian royal funeral ritual, but the Christian idea of the afterlife meant that animals and objects did not need to be marked in the same way.

### **The Möjbro stone**

There are pieces of evidence from pre-Christian Scandinavia that undoubtedly point to communication and alliances between Scandinavia and Christian communities in Europe. One example is the runic stone from Möjbro, just south-west of Uppsala. The stone was raised around AD 500. The inscription is difficult to decipher but contains the man's name *FrawaradaR*. The picture under the runes shows a horseman and two dogs. The man is riding with loose reins, holding a shield in his left hand, and probably a sword in his right hand. The picture may of course be a portrait of *FrawaradaR*, but in its composition it is probably an ideal image of a horseman representing late Roman culture ([Figure 22](#)).

The picture of the horseman arouses associations with scenes on gold bracteates, as well as the eighth-century Gotlandic picture stones, which have counterparts in Roman iconography and Roman hunting sarcophagi. The iconography resembles continental Germanic images of horsemen. It is a common motif in the sixth and seventh centuries, also with links to other early Christian motifs.<sup>417</sup> At the same time, the picture shows a warrior hunting, as is clear from the two dogs. Hunting scenes, that is, a mounted man with birds, are not uncommon on gold bracteates, although there they have usually been interpreted as having a religious or mythological meaning.<sup>418</sup>



[Figure 22](#). Hunting scene with horseman and hounds, the Möjbro stone (U877), Uppland, a Proto-Norse runic stone from the sixth century. (Drawing: Erika Rosenberg, LUHM.)

### Gotlandic picture stones

Another example of animal language is the figures on the Gotlandic picture stones. The imagery can be interpreted in many ways, but the pictures probably tell of mythical sagas and events, in a way similar to modern comics. Among the animals on the picture stones, horses are often central motifs, such as Odin's eight-legged horse Sleipnir. Dogs, cattle, elk or deer, fish, birds, serpents, and fantasy animals are also portrayed on picture stones. [419](#)

Equestrian motifs in the ninth-century Gotland picture stones may illustrate the relations with the Christian Carolingian Empire, designed to suit the local aristocracy's desire for a continental Christian lifestyle. [420](#) Pictures of animals on runic stones are dominated by fantastic dragon-serpents, twisting artistically, sometimes around a large quadruped. The reason for the profuse occurrence of animals and imaginary creatures in these contexts is not certain, but they were perhaps used to characterize families and individuals ([Figure 23](#)). [421](#)



[Figure 23](#). Equestrian motifs in the ninth century, picture stone Lärbro Tängelgårda 1. (Drawing: Erika Rosengren, LUHM.)

### *Serpent*

In Norse mythology the serpent is considered to be of great significance for Odin. In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri tells the story of the mead of poetry concealed in the mountain. When Odin wants to taste the mead, he turns himself into a snake and can crawl through a hole into Suttung's mountain. Having seduced the giant's daughter Gunnlod, who was keeping watch over the mountain, he was able to take three draughts of the precious mead. With the last draught he swallows all of the mead, turns into an eagle, and flies off as quickly as he can.<sup>[422](#)</sup>

Serpents begin to appear in the iconography of the Late Bronze Age.<sup>[423](#)</sup> Snakes or dragon-serpents are a recurrent motif; for example, on snake-head rings in lavish graves from the Early Roman Iron Age. A serpent tradition continues to be expressed through pictures of snake coils on artefacts and runic stones. Serpents are also depicted in other iconographic contexts; for example, along with wild boars and birds on much later Vendel Period helmets.<sup>[424](#)</sup> The association of serpents with Odin and their



frequency in animal ornamentation shows that they were powerful animals in Norse mythology ([Figure 24](#)).<sup>425</sup>



[Figure 24](#). Snake pendant from Uppåkra, Late Roman Iron Age or Early Migration Period. Diameter 45 mm. (Photo: Bengt Almgren, LUHM.)

The visuality of the serpent and its affiliation to a landscape finds expression on runic stones. The Swedish archaeologist Birgitta Johansen interprets serpents on later runic stones in terms of protective creatures, especially for women and treasures. She regards serpents as guardians of a farm or a village. They are interpreted as a kind of boundary marker for inherited land, and as a counterpart to the Midgard Serpent of Norse mythology.<sup>426</sup> It turns out, moreover, that there is an integrated discursive context, and an association between the images of coiling serpents and the runic texts inscribed in the coils.<sup>427</sup>



A snake wriggles in order to disappear and get away. In the Christian world it is sneaky, evasive, and dangerous in character. In the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament it is the cunning of the serpent that brings evil into the world. It seems as if the serpent in these examples has opposite connotations in Old Norse religion and in Christianity.

### ***Wolf or lion?***

Is it a wolf or a lion that is depicted on the Jelling stone, on other runic stones and on artefacts? Do the pictures belong to a pre-Christian iconography or are they Christian motifs? The starting point for a discussion of this problem of interpretation is some runic stones from southern Scandinavia. The oldest example is the Stentofthen stone from Sölvesborg in Blekinge, southern Sweden, which can be dated to the period 550–650. The other examples are the classical Jelling stones in Jutland, raised around 965, and the Hunnestad monument in southern Skåne from the start of the eleventh century.

### **Stentofthen**

This stone is part of a group of four runic stones, situated not far from each other in the same part of the country. The Proto-Norse runes mention bucks and stallions. The stone was found beside a fen, and because of the runic spells also inscribed on the stone it has been associated with sacrifice and magic spells. [428](#)

With nine bucks,  
with nine stallions  
*HapuwolfR* gave good growth

But the runic text contains yet another animal association; in the name *HapuwolfR*. The Swedish historians of religion Olof Sundqvist and Anders Hultgård believe that the name belongs together with the personal names on the other runic stones in the same group: *Hapu-wolfR* (Istaby, Stentofthen, and Gummarp), *HariwulfR* (Stentofthen and Istaby), and probably the propatronymic *HeruwulfiR* (Istaby), where *wulfR* means ‘wolf’. Instead of making the usual association of such names with war and a heroic ideology, Sundqvist and Hultgård put the names in a religious and ritual context. The

wolf names are part of a Germanic custom of linking a group of people by giving them names in which one element is the same. The names create identity and allude to ritual lycanthropy, a transformation into a wolf. The persons in question were part of a *Männerbund*, a warrior band and age-group sodality.<sup>429</sup>

It is uncertain whether the text tells of a ritual or of ownership. What is clear, however, is that the bucks and the stallions bring great prosperity. The number nine can be associated with Adam of Bremen's brief account of the sacrifice at Uppsala, written in 1075/76. The Uppsala cult involved huge sacrificial feasts with ritual meals and a cult building; it was held every nine years, with the bodies of humans, dogs, horses, and other animals hung in the sacred grove.

Anders Hultgård argues that, despite Adam's rhetorical style with its polemical elements resulting in misunderstandings and deliberate amendments, Adam nevertheless gives us a glimpse of Norse religion in Uppland at the end of the Viking Age.<sup>430</sup> Thietmar of Merseburg, who wrote in the early tenth century about cultic activities at Lejre in Sjælland, Denmark, tells of how people gathered every nine years. They sacrificed 99 people together with 99 horses, dogs, and cocks.<sup>431</sup>

In pre-Christian times the wolf was an animal with distinct connotations of battle, masculine strength, and power.<sup>432</sup> The combination of a wolf-name, horses, and bucks on the Stentofte stone suggests that these animals were a part of the pre-Christian communication strategies for social identity and lifestyle.

### **The Jelling stones**

When Denmark became Christian, runic stones were erected at Jelling in Jutland. On one of the stones there is a runic text inscribed on three sides of the large granite block, with the majority of the message on Face A: *King Harald commanded this monument to be made in memory of Gorm, his father, and in memory of (Thorvi) Thyre, his mother—that Harald who won the whole Denmark for himself, and Norway and made the Danes Christian.*<sup>433</sup>

On one of the three sides of the stone (Face B) there is a carving of a large animal. The species is uncertain, often described as a neutral

‘quadruped’, but one interpretation that has been put forward is that it is a lion and thus belongs to the symbolic language of Christianity. A serpent is coiled round the quadruped on the third side (Face C); an animal that is also interpreted as ‘the Jelling beast’, a pagan symbol, and as a lion, a Christian symbol ([Figure 25](#)).<sup>434</sup>

The question is how we can interpret the quadruped and how it alludes to similar animal figures on other runic stones and in Norse animal ornamentation. It obviously meant something in the contemporaneous political network, with connotations of Christianity, that existed in Scandinavia in the tenth and eleventh centuries.



[Figure 25](#). The Jelling stone, face C, Jutland. (Photo: National Museum, Copenhagen.)

### **The Hunnestad monument**

One of the originally eight stones in the Hunnestad monument in southern Skåne shows a human figure riding an animal ([Figures 26, 27](#)). The species is difficult to determine; it has been identified as a kind of dragon or a monster, but most likely a wolf.<sup>[435](#)</sup> The rider is wearing a knee-length shirt and a pointed hat with a long tassel twisted in a knot. A snake is crawling

from the rider's mouth, and he is holding another snake in each hand, like reins.



[Figure 26](#). Hyrrokin, the Hunnestad monument, Skåne. (Photo: Kristina Jennbert, 2010.)





[Figure 27](#). The Hunnestad monument, Skåne. (After Wåhlin 1931: 55.)

The picture has been interpreted as the giantess Hyrrokkin, of whom we can read in *Gylfaginning* 49 in connection with the myth of Balder's death and burial. When the ship containing Balder's corpse cannot be pushed off from the shore, the gods call for assistance from Giantland. Hyrrokkin then comes riding on a wolf with vipers as reins, and is able to launch the ship immediately.

The historian of religion Catharina Raudvere points out that, in Snorri's story, the animal is a wolf. But it could also be the female magician's *gandr*: an instrument used by people skilled in magic, according to some texts. The *gandr* can thus also be a wolf, with its powerful properties that help the owner to carry out certain wishes. Saami magic involves a *gandus* used for travelling on, and sometimes this takes the form of a wild animal. Raudvere suggests yet another interpretative perspective, focusing on the animal's paws and the blanket it is wearing. These attributes indicate continental influence, with lions and gryphons. Raudvere believes that even if the story of Hyrrokkin is part of the myth of Balder's death, it can arouse Christian associations. [436](#)



The Hunnestad monument as a whole can be connected to the transfer of property rights between generations. The stones were erected at the end of the tenth century and the start of the eleventh century, during a period when power was centralized in Scandinavia. It is perfectly possible that stories and visual images from pre-Christian times were powerful signals of opposition to this centralization process, although other stones in the Hunnestad monument display Christian symbolism. The monument is a sign of the hybridization tendencies of the time.

## **Summing up**

The different animal species fulfilled various practical functions on the farm. They were important for people's social identity and were a part of their lifestyle. Certain animals, chiefly wild ones, had properties which allowed humans to identify with them. Animals were used in networking, and as such they were a part of the cultural encounters between pre-Christian Scandinavia and Christian societies in Europe. This possibly shows that societies in Scandinavia, as early as the sixth century, developed with Christian influences and that it was already a more creolized society than has hitherto been assumed.

Hybrid forms merging animal and human functioned as trade marks for the pre-Christian Scandinavian ideology of honour. Transformative animal-humans and human-animals were a part of the cosmological conceptual world and an element in rituals, serving to identify ritual specialists. Old Norse religion was also blended with Saami ritual and Saami religion. Old Norse religion had shamanistic features, just as there were elements of Christian symbolism, as seen in the hybridization of the Norse iconography.

Attitudes to animals changed in connection with Christianization. The pre-Christian bodily metaphors ceased, and animals were not a part of the Christian burial ritual. Certain species were emphasized as good animals after Christianization, for example sheep and lambs. Other animals were demonized as evil, for example goats and snakes. Horses, dogs, and hunting birds continued to enjoy high status, although it was not considered suitable to eat horse meat.

# CHAPTER 7

## The archaeology of religion

A few decades ago, studies of ritual and religion in daily life on the farm and its immediate surroundings were rare. This was probably due to a narrow view of the sacred in relation to the profane in Western ways of thinking. Economic life was understood as a functional matter that was not affected by rituals or faith and therefore not involved in the sacred places. With a broader view of relations between the sacred and the profane, remains of past farms, villages, and the landscape are integrated into studies of religion.

Animals are represented in many different forms in archaeological contexts. There are domestic animals, wild animals, exotic animals, and imaginary animals; animals that had once existed or animals that are depicted are found in farm environments, graves, and depositions from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. It is also interesting to note that, in the creation myths in Old West Norse literature, the boundary between nature and people, gods, giants, animals and other beings is fluid, not fixed. The world and the people are similar to each other; they are born out of each other. The giant Ymir's body, which is human-like, gave life to the world, and the first man and woman, Ask and Embla, were created from tree trunks. The people live on the boundaries between different natural elements of the landscape and between different structured worlds, which also consist of gods, giants, and other beings. People in pre-Christian time had in fact positioned and categorized themselves. In my opinion, the various ways of dealing with human and animal bodies are an expression of this. The separate graves of animals express the special value of these animals, which was apparently comparable to that of people. The animals were important with respect to their practical use and symbolic meaning.

In summary, animals were important for prosperity in life and functioned in the memory of the dead. They represented prosperity and gave social

identity and status. And with their characteristics they were humanized while simultaneously being used to identify the qualities of human beings. The archaeological traces show that people and animals were recurrent motifs in an enduring cosmology. The bodily metaphors with humans and animals, and in particular the transformations between them, were a way to manifest people's thoughts, their world-view, and their ideas about the cosmos. Significantly, the term *óðal* in Old Norse meant the hereditary landed estate of a kindred; a family's property inherited 'from time immemorial' with burial mounds and heathen sanctuaries.<sup>437</sup>

Despite social and political movements during the Iron Age and Early Middle Ages in Scandinavia, there is a detectable skeleton of significant norms and values in *la longue durée* and in the slowness of everyday life, a Midgard mentality. The large monuments with valuable animals and properties of considerable value were a part of the staging of the dead within the social and cosmological domains, in *forn siðr* and the ideology of honour.

The materiality in the death rituals is evident, suggesting a material agency embedded in the death rituals, as a tool for memory production. Thus, the Viking Age death rituals seem to express the remembrance of the past as well as the expression of the identity of the dead in that age. The animals and the other objects were important for symbolizing the characteristics, abilities, and social position of the dead person. Ownership of a large stock of animals could be expressed in the death ritual, when certain animals were slaughtered to accompany the dead person into the grave. Rituals in memory of the dead reflected a responsibility and a protection of the survivors' farm and the continued life of the kindred. This was achieved by ritualizing the dead person's prosperity and characteristics. The burial ritual also meant that the survivors gave up wealth and valuable animals to honour the dead person and to ensure worldly power.

Therefore, the death rituals did not just have the purpose of handling rotten bodies. The death rituals activated networking and they were important for restructuring social positions. As such they manifested the dead and the family, the heritage and the power of the time. The material agency and its performativity were used as metaphors for the dead person's abilities, attributes, and capacities. The animals and the objects played a social and multivocal role in the memory production of the past, and the honour of the dead.

The long temporal perspective of archaeology thus gives us opportunities to distinguish how death rituals with animals and material culture underwent variation and change in the course of the Iron Age. There were clear changes in mortuary practice in the third century AD, and from that time we can detect rituals which survived throughout the Viking Age. The extremely rich and varied grave finds in Scandinavia indicate a common grave language beginning in the Roman period. Of course, regionally expressed variations signal different political and territorial heritage during the Iron Age.

The Scandinavian death rituals in *forn siðr* are expressions of agency (war, negotiations, hunting, and personal attraction), and the outcome of the archaeological investigation of depositional practices. Thus, the death rituals cannot be interpreted as self-explanatory after-life constructions. Wealth surely depended on political mobilization, and on a narrative of belonging. As such, the death rituals acted for social identity in diasporic relations and networking, a kind of cultural hybridity as in our modern times. The power of the past, and the grand narratives to glorify the past, as explored by Charlemagne as Roman emperor, speak for a power of remembrance in the long term.

Old Norse religion should thus be understood as *forn siðr* and not perceived as a separate sacred category in pre-Christian Scandinavia. *Siðr* has a much broader meaning in Old Norse, including religion, faith, morality, custom, and tradition. The term comprises traditional views and values concerning how things were supposed to be done. The historical background and a long temporal perspective are therefore fundamental for interpreting *forn siðr*: that is, Old Norse religion. The concept of religion thus embraces cognitive and practical, ideological and religious aspects.

The theoretical and methodological aim of this research project has been to perform an archaeological study of people's relations to animals in an oral culture from the perspective of the archaeology of religion. This multidisciplinary question has gone beyond the core area of the subject to find itself between archaeological contexts and written sources. This has required a balancing act, having to be concrete and simultaneously critically assessing what the evidence can tell us about events in pre-Christian times in Scandinavia. One example is the tale of Volsi in *Flateyjarbók*, one of the most frequently retold stories in Old Norse religion, about an animal ritual to do with fertility. The archaeological material from the pre-Christian

period is far too elusive to put such isolated events in perspective, or to allow a detailed description unless the events took place in a highly specific context. It is instead events in the long chronological perspective, and those that have left traces of repeated actions in characteristic contexts, such as graves or cult houses, that can be illustrated through the archaeological evidence.

To conclude, I shall make some comments about the study of Old Norse religion through archaeology. A crucial question in the ‘Roads to Midgard’ project has concerned which concepts are suitable for modern-day interpretations of a pre-Christian conceptual world. The term Old Norse religion causes problems since it was created in the Scandinavian languages in connection with Christianization. The concept of religion itself is likewise complicated to use, since it refers to belief and not to ritual, not to what people do. Norse sources talk of the old religion in terms of *forn siðr*, ‘ancient custom’, with connotations of tradition and regular practice, or *heiðinn siðr*, ‘heathen custom’. The change of religion was called *siðaskipti*, ‘change of custom’.

In the project the emphasis has been on ritual studies and cosmological expressions in material culture and in Old Norse texts. Rituals have not been regarded as exclusively religious acts, but as part of the society’s ideology and political structure. The archaeological focus on the use of material culture as an active social medium has opened for the possibility of studying religion archaeologically.

The conclusions of this study agree with those presented in the volume of conference papers from 2006, *Old Norse religion in Long-term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*:[438](#)

- People’s relations to animals confirm the idea that there were old traditions and a historical background to *forn siðr*. There was a *Midgard mentality* concerning animals, with roots going back to the Stone Age.
- Regional ritual variations with animals are related to the idea that Old Norse religion was not a uniform and stable category. There were chronological, regional, and social differences in pre-Christian ritual practice, and these also concerned animals. Animals relate to gender and hierarchies, and they were important

for networking and the forging of alliances all over Scandinavia and with continental Europe.

- The idea that Old Norse religion consists of a multitude of traditions without a common origin is also corroborated by studies of animals. The mythological motif of horses pulling the sun and moon may go back to the Early Bronze Age: that is, the fourteenth century BC. The roots of Freyja's cats cannot go back further than the Roman Iron Age, at the start of the common era.
- Just as we stated in 2006, the animal studies confirm that the concept of Old Norse religion can in a sense be deconstructed. Animal rituals show that there were gradual changes during the Iron Age, in encounters between pre-Christian and Christian values; changes which affected animal husbandry and iconography. Animals and representations of animals reflect a hybridization/ creolization of the Norse societies, as new elements from outside were incorporated in the Scandinavian traditions. As regards the use of animals, such breakpoints occurred in the Neolithic, the Early Bronze Age, the Roman Iron Age, the Migration Period, and the Early Viking Age.

History can be seen in a time perspective of millennia as a series of changes within different aspects of life. As archaeologists, we look far back into the past and we are influenced by contemporary life in our research on ritual practices and past cosmologies. It seems that people position themselves in their surroundings with a kind of mentality, which has a long chronological depth. Human attitudes to animals were dependent on people's needs and on how people related the animals to themselves. The actual domestication of animals and their management required knowledge and continuous labour. This means that it was actually humans that were domesticated by animals, rather than the other way around. In terms of technological innovations, animal husbandry was also of crucial significance for human evolution. This gives unexpected views of the cultural inheritance, of the idea of humans as the crown of creation, and of the way in which the main threads are interwoven in Western cultural history.

# CHAPTER 8

## To interpret interdependence over time

‘How can we explain that something which seems obvious in one world is absolutely incomprehensible in another?’ Those are the words of the philosopher Luc Ferry in his discussion of trials of animals.<sup>439</sup> This dilemma is well known to us archaeologists, who work with periods in a distant past. Normally it is the *material culture* that gives us evidence for interpretations of periods long before our era. As for our capacity to isolate and visualize *relations*—evenly matched, as it were—between animals and humans, it may be the result of strong influence from an anthropocentric notion of the world founded in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Like other disciplines, archaeology is affected by its position in time. It is thus not remarkable that our interpretational range restricts our chances of reaching beyond the familiar horizons of our comprehension.

It is an established fact in archaeology that archaeologists specialize in working in just one of the many prehistoric periods. This specialization has had its impact on their views of nature and culture, in particular since a social-evolutionist approach has permeated the whole fabric of the discipline. Thus, Stone Age research has been influenced primarily by visions of a harmonic co-existence between humans, animals and plants. The more distant the periods studied, the stronger is the impact of the idea of man as a ‘primitive being at one with nature’.

However, the anthropocentric outlook did not reign supreme, as Ferry showed in his study of trials of animals. Over ten court records from such trials in Europe, dating from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, are still extant. The animals themselves were considered to cause offence and they could be sentenced to beheading, or to be moved to another place. People were protected from animals by means of ecclesiastical curses, and pests were seen as a devil’s invention.<sup>440</sup> These trials raise questions about the boundary between human and animal, as well as about our ethical and



moral precedence. The pre-modern approach to animals and nature in general included an inability to see animals as legal entities. As the age of scientific discoveries began in the late sixteenth century, our uniquely privileged position in culture and nature was undermined.

How archaeologists interpret the differences between human and animal depends on their views of nature and the classical culture–nature dichotomy. This dichotomy has become axiomatic in the West. Almost as fundamental to the archaeologists is their inspiration, whether conscious or unconscious, by a structuralist view of human reasoning and categorization of the concepts of culture and nature.<sup>441</sup>

The scope of archaeological interpretations is extended through studies of attitudes towards nature, as well as of interplay with nature, undertaken, for example, in ecology, sociology, anthropology and the history of ideas. The pre-Socratic philosophers' interpretations of relations between human and nature have been brought out in poetry and philosophical texts ever since. In world literature, both in the West and in other cultures, there is a complexity in commitment and political will, with an external as well as an internal perspective.<sup>442</sup> In the course of time humans' view of animals and nature has changed, and nature has increasingly become subjected to human devices. Very briefly, we may say that the views of nature have changed, from an organismic view to a rational view which would turn into a post-modern view of nature as a creation of culture. To be sure, this process does not move by fits and starts; it is continuous and complex and rests on a large number of religious and ideological foundations.<sup>443</sup> The views of nature have differed in keeping with different cultures, regions, and eras. Among these views we find the understanding of nature as a resource and a commodity, as threatening, awe-inspiring, magical, or inanimate. The view that the sole purpose of nature is to be a resource for humans has been increasingly questioned in catastrophe and chaos theories, as well as in ecological, philosophical, and feminist research.<sup>444</sup>

Studies of attitudes towards nature, as well as of interplay with nature, within other disciplines provide a large number of opportunities, as well as inspiration, to interpret pre-Christian conditions. It would seem that attitudes towards nature are affected not only by the level of knowledge or the intensity of emotions. Inherent in every society, group, or individual there is a comprehensive cosmological explanation, a teleological opinion,

of the design of the universe. Ethical conceptions of nature are found in most religions. Regarding humans and animals in the pre-Christian period, a variety of approaches give the impression that the relations between them go beyond specific physical, organismic or rational notions of nature and culture. Thus, archaeological interpretations should preferably be based on the specific pre-Christian Norse religions and rituals, for example in connection with death, sexuality, and naming. Thus the archaeological interpretation of material culture requires collation with theories of ritual practices, as well as of social behaviour.

People's relations to animals are complicated and not entirely easy to describe in our society. Animals are positioned somewhere between practical use and symbolic meaning. Animals stir our emotions, whether because of their role in the food industry, in rearing and breeding, or as pets.

The ethical issues of animal rights and the fact that people are given priority over animals are actively expressed by both eco-feminists and militant vegans.<sup>445</sup> In the environmental-ecological debate, the argument is for animal rights but also that it is right to give people priority over animals.

An important issue is the responsibility of people to animals and nature.<sup>446</sup> The intensive debate on animal rights has led to political decisions. In recent years new legislation has been passed concerning, for example, the transportation of animals and the use of animals in medical research. In different scientific fields and different political contexts, and not least in the mass media, the sight of animals awakens deep feelings regardless of whether it concerns animal breeding, animal experiments, or the transplanting of animal organs to humans. Thus there is reason to discuss the attitudes of people towards animals, and to examine the relation between people and animals in a longer chronological perspective.

In today's society our perceptions of animals are inconsistent and problematic. Animals are significant in several ways, not only as living creatures but also as metaphors expressing people's thoughts. Domesticated animals are bred and consumed. Domesticated as well as wild animals appear in widely different contexts, such as food production, spectator sports, family life, recreation, and wildlife experiences. Nature programmes on television provide glimpses of all kinds of wild animals from all over the world. Breeding on an industrial scale, as well as trading in domestic and exotic animals, indicates that animals have a market value. Animals are

important in public life, but also in people's private lives—never have there been so many veterinary hospitals, pet cemeteries, and animal psychologists as in the twenty-first century.

In our times, people's attitudes towards animals are inconsistent, to say the least. Behind these heterogeneous attitudes there are several economic and cultural aspects. What possibilities do we have of studying relations between people and animals, between nature and culture, in the distant past? What are our starting points? How do we understand realities that differ from our own? What are our challenges?

In prehistoric society animals were of great importance not only for the food supply but also in religious cults, and as metaphors in social identity and in power relations. In the course of time people's views of animals and nature have changed, and both animals and nature have increasingly been subjected to humans. The traditional nature–culture dichotomy is problematic, giving rise to intense discussion. This is a challenge to archaeologists, who are forced to depart from their traditional trains of thought and their accustomed archaeological classifications.

The material culture studied by archaeology opens up vistas of various relations between people and animals. However, a close inspection of the contexts involving people and animals in the pre-Christian period reveals a number of practices that do not serve a mundane purpose. Animals were integrated into symbolism and ritual practices, and in certain contexts the boundaries between people and animals are not always distinct. There seem to have been conceptions that differ radically from the ideas prevalent in our time of humans' unique position in the universe and of a predetermined differentiation of species. This anthropocentric approach does not, however, go unchallenged. For a considerable time there has been an intense debate which calls anthropocentrism into question and disapproves of our general attitude towards animals, as well as of our treatment of them.

Medical research has found that cells taken from pigs can be used in human beings in the treatment of diabetes and other internal diseases. The regrowth of human skin after severe burns can be facilitated by skin grafts from pigs. Can a human heart be replaced by a pig's heart? Tests are being conducted, and while experiments on animals are offensive to some, their results have contributed to the recovery of other people. On the anatomic and genetic level, the boundaries between humans and animals are regarded as not altogether clear-cut. Medical research rules out sharp distinctions

between human and animal. Cognitive research, on the other hand, stresses that the difference in their mental capacities is obvious, and that the human capacity for reasoning and reflection far exceeds what is within reach of animals.[447](#)

The elastic boundary between human and animal is notably apparent in the large number of animal metaphors concerning human behaviour and disposition found in literature and the visual arts. Animals act as our mirrors, and function as vehicles for human communication and human logic.

Thus, animals have several distinct significances, and the boundaries between what can be regarded as human and animal are not beyond dispute. Criticism of the anthropocentric approach is particularly strong in the ecological debate. That animals are an ethical concern to us is evident also from protests and manifestations by ‘the man in the street’.

The ecological debate is emotional, and questions prevailing fundamental views on the nature–culture, animal–human dichotomies. Here, too, there are a number of sociological and anthropological studies, as well as studies pertaining to the history of ideas, proving that views of nature and of animals are culture-specific and may differ radically from those of the modern West. Animal and environmental ethics are both major issues in today’s public debate. During the past century genetic and biological research has contributed to a more diversified picture of humans and their place in the world. This may result in an extension of our moral liabilities to include animals as well as plants, sceneries as well as eco-systems.[448](#)

Studying pre-Christian conceptions gives us a perspective on our present-day ideas of nature and culture, as well as on our attitudes towards animals. It is thus a desideratum that archaeologists analyse and discuss the problematic nature–culture dichotomy in the distant past. People position themselves in their surroundings in a ‘slow’ way, which gives unexpected views of the cultural inheritance, of the idea of people as the crown of creation, and of the way in which the main threads are interwoven in our cultural history.

Animals and people are given similar burials even in our own time. Today animal burials are regulated in Swedish law. In general it is forbidden to bury dead animals except at specified places. Animals have to be cremated in special crematoria, often at municipal or regional

incinerators. In each municipality there are special burial or memorial places for dogs, cats, birds, snakes, monkeys, and other kinds of pets. Animal burial places often have the character of a cemetery. Each grave is decorated. They have stone markers or metal plaques with inscriptions. Flowers are planted at the grave or placed in vases. An animal burial plot can be leased, usually for five years, and the contract can be renewed. It is not uncommon, however, that animals are also buried at other sites than specified burial places. Animal graves are found in forest groves or in private gardens, often decorated in various ways just like normal graves.



[Figure 28](#). Gravestone raised over the stallion 'Phenix, died 1816', Flyinge stud farm, Skåne. (Photo: Kristina Jennbert 2005.)

The horse graves at the Flyinge stud farm in Skåne, southern Sweden, are of a special character. Seventeen stallions were buried here between 1904 and 1984. The burials surround an oak, which was probably planted in 1904. At the base of the tree there was once a granite stone commemorating



*Warren Hastings*, the horse whose grave also lies here. Near the oak are additional graves of stallions from the nineteenth century. Today there are only three stones left of the original sixteen stones, with the name and year of death of the buried stallions. The tradition of burying stud horses in Flyinge can be traced back to the early nineteenth century ([Figure 28](#)).

The occurrence of modern animal graves does not necessarily mean that animals are buried for the same reasons today as in the past. However, the phenomenon of animal graves in pre-Christian time has similarities to our own time.

The species differ clearly in character, and they appear in different ways in archaeological and written sources. They are both visible and invisible. Old Norse religion should not be understood as one homogeneous archaic religion with a common origin, as is often the case today when the concept of Old Norse religion is used, in connection with New Age movements or right-wing extremists.

The boundaries between human and animal are thus at the same time peculiar and familiar. Archaeological interpretations are by definition problematic and complex. On the one hand there is the consciousness of influences from present-day ideas, ethical values and conceptions of what is human. On the other hand there is the consciousness that things were in fact different in the past. The apparatus of archaeological concepts that are used to describe and analyse material culture in various contexts is usually based on this perception. The comprehension of unfamiliar phenomena is thus limited by the conventional classifications and concepts of archaeology. In order to find analogies offering perspectives on the interpretations of material culture and relations between humans and animals, we must rid ourselves of our present-day notions.

Research on religion and ritual is well established in archaeology. The interest in ritual and religion in archaeology may also reflect a kind of nostalgia. Perhaps archaeologists, too, are looking for other values in a search for affinity in a society that is more segregated and more dependent on market conditions and commercial activities than ever before. These also include the New Age movements, where archaeology plays a crucial part. Whatever the reasons are, studies of ritual and religion in the field of archaeology appear frequently today in scholarly and popular publications, as well as in antiquarian texts. The significance of ritual and religion in the archaeology of the past may be essential to modern people in other ways,



too. Western society can be criticized for its narrow outlook with respect to comprehending cultural and separate historical contexts. The long-term perspective offers alternatives and alterations. In a time when digitized mortuary monuments and guided tours of churchyards have appeared, archaeologists are tempted to critically scrutinize our own age.

In conclusion, the archaeological contexts illustrate different types of problems that archaeologists are confronted with in interpreting the nature and import of pre-Christian delimitations between humans and animals. These obstacles are manifold. A striking example is the limitation of the archaeological burial concept. Pre-Christian deaths and burials confront our present-day burial concept with quite unexpected ways of disposing of dead bodies. Naming might illustrate boundary-crossings between humans and animals in the pre-Christian and early Christian periods. But to someone today who runs into Björn or Ulf, these names have undoubtedly lost their original importance.

# Notes

## 1. Introduction

[1](#)

Broberg 1988: 4

[2](#)

Taylor 2010; Ong 1991

[3](#)

Lévi-Strauss 1969: 159; Tambiah 1969

[4](#)

Salisbury 1994

[5](#)

Toynbee 1973; Boessneck 1988; Green 1992; Méniel 1992; Detienne & Vernant 1996; Ekroth 2002; Giebel 2003; Johnston 2004; Gilhus 2006

[6](#)

von Hofsten 1957; Clunies Ross 1994; Rochbar 2009

[7](#)

Cf. the references in chapter 3 and the volume *Old Norse religion* (Andrén, Jennbert & Raudvere eds) 2006

[8](#)

Bourdieu 1999

[9](#)

Roesdahl 1993; Knape 1996; Capelle & Fischer 2005; Andrén & Carelli 2006; Rosengren 2007

[10](#)

Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1994; Steinsland 2005

[11](#)

E.g. Hildebrand 1880: 32ff.; Müller 1897; Stenberger 1964; Brøndsted 1966

[12](#)

E.g. especially O. Almgren 1926–27

[13](#)

Hawkes 1954

[14](#)

Hodder 1982

[15](#)

Burström 1990; Fendin 2006

[16](#)

Højlund Nielsen 1991; Kristofferson 1995, 2010; Hed Jakobsson 2003; Domeij Lundborg 2006; Neiss 2010

[17](#)

Kolstrup 1991; Axboe 1991; Andrén 1991; Hedeager 1997; Gaimster 1998

[18](#)

Renfrew & Zubrow 1994; Pearson 2002; Whitehouse & Luther 2004

[19](#)

E.g. de Vries 1956–57; Ström 1961; Dumézil 1973; Görman 1987; Simek 1993; Näsström 2001; Lindow 2001; Steinsland 2005

[20](#)

Steinsland 1986; Steinsland et al. 1991b; Schjødt 1994

[21](#)

Engdahl & Kaliff 1996; Bredholt Christensen & Sveen 1998; Jennbert, Andrén & Raudvere 2002; Melheim, Hedeager & Oma 2004; Andrén, Jennbert & Raudvere 2004; Andrén, Jennbert & Raudvere 2006

[22](#)

E.g. Bell 1992, 1997

[23](#)

Asad 1993; Klippenberg 2002

[24](#)

Steinsland 1986, 1991c; Andrén 1998; Andrén, Jennbert & Raudvere 2006

[25](#)

Hultgård 1991

[26](#)

E.g. Schjødt 1988

[27](#)

Hedeager 1997, 1998; Solli 2002; Price 2002

[28](#)

Steinsland 1991a; Sundqvist 2002

[29](#)

Roesdahl 1987; Gräslund 1985; Theliander 2005

[30](#)

Staecker 1999

[31](#)

E.g. Brink 1990; Anglert 1995

[32](#)

Schjødt 1989

[33](#)

Nilsson 1996

[34](#)

Steinsland 1989, 1991b; Sanmark 2004

[35](#)

Johnson 1983; Ahlbäck 1987; Rydving 1993

[36](#)

E.g. I. Zachrisson 1987; Schanche 2002

[37](#)

Pentikäinen 1997; Insoll 2004

[38](#)

E.g. the series 'Vägar till Midgård'; Steadman 2009

[39](#)

Gurevich 1985; Hastrup 1985

[40](#)

E.g. Johansen 1997

[41](#)

Ersgård 1997

[42](#)

Cassel 1998

[43](#)

T. Zachrisson 1998

[44](#)

Jennbert 2003a

[45](#)

E.g. Ferdinand & Ferdinand 1961; Hagberg 1967; Pettersson 2006

[46](#)

Taylor 1998; Segal 1998; Rappaport 1999; Raudvere 2004; Stausberg 2009

[47](#)

Sundqvist 2005: 276; Raudvere 2003: 120, 2005: 196

[48](#)

Habbe 2005: 67ff.

[49](#)

Bell 1992; Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994; Clunies Ross 2002

[50](#)

Damm 1998; Peter 2004; Ekengren 2009; Berggren 2010; Berggren & Stutz Nilsson 2010

[51](#)

Modée 2005

[52](#)

Gurevich 1992; Hastrup 1985

[53](#)

Braudel 1980; Ariès 1983

[54](#)

Bourdieu 1999: 82f.

[55](#)

Andrén 1998

[56](#)

Ingold (ed.) 1988; Clutton-Brock (ed.) 1989; Morphy (ed.) 1989; Willis (ed.) 1990

[57](#)

Thomas 1984; Singer 1995; Noske 1997; Ryder 1998; Guerrini 2003; McKenna & Light 2004; Cassidy & Mullin 2007; Haraway 2008

[58](#)

*Society & Animals: Journal of Human–animal Studies*

[59](#)

Wilkie & Inglis 2006

[60](#)

The International Council for Archaeozoology (ICAZ); International Society for Authrozoology (ISAZ); Medieval Animal Data-Network (MAD)

[61](#)

Archaeologic.com/Zooarchaeology, ZOOARCH website

[62](#)

European Association of Archaeologists, Annual meetings, Pluskowski 2005; Oma & Hedeager 2010

[63](#)

Santillo Frizell 2004; Olsen, Grant, Choyke & Bartosiewicz 2006; Smith 2006; Pluskowski 2006a; Bliujiene 2009

[64](#)

In Swedish and Danish e.g. Liljegren & Lagerås 1993; Aaris-Sørensen 1988, 2001, 2009; Iregren 1997; Vretemark 1997; Mansrud 2004

[65](#)

Rowley-Conwy 1998

[66](#)

Payne 1985; Halstead & Collins 2002

[67](#)

Brown 1996

[68](#)

Sawyer & Sawyer 1993: 100ff.

[69](#)

Danbolt 1989; Staecker 1999; Andrén 2002; Lager 2002

[70](#)

Said 1994: xxvi

[71](#)

Mauss [1924] 2000; Hannerz 2010; Hylland Eriksen 2010

[72](#)

Cohen 2007

[73](#)

Collingwood 1946; Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994: 119f.; Meulengracht Sørensen 1993; Clunies Ross 1994, chapter 1

[74](#)

Epstein 1943

[75](#)

Düwel 2001; Imer 2007

[76](#)

Jansson 1976; Moltke 1985; Sawyer 2000

[77](#)

Ong 1990: 46

[78](#)

Eddic and Skaldic Poetry, Old Norse Sagas, *Beowulf*; Tacitus, Jordanes, Adam of Bremen; *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus

[79](#)

Clunies Ross 1994; Lönnroth 1996: 61

[80](#)

Dubois 1999; Svanberg 2003

[81](#)

Hultgård 1997; Sundqvist 2002

[82](#)

Horneij 1991; Price 2002: 320f.

[83](#)

Barthes [1981]2006; Sonesson 1992; Solso 1994; Sandström 1995; Gärdenfors 2001; Wells 2008: 27ff.; Eriksson 2009

[84](#)

Ong 1982; Lundmark 1984; Connerton 1989; Gosden & Lock 1998; Berggren, Arvidsson & Hållans 2004

## **2. Animals in Norse mythology**

[85](#)

E.g. Clunies Ross 1994; Lindow 2001

[86](#)

E.g. Clunies Ross 1998; Raudvere 2004

[87](#)

*Grímnismál* stanzas 41–42, translated by Lindow 2001: 322f.

[88](#)

Merleau-Ponty [1945]1999

[89](#)

Johannisson 1998: 11

[90](#)

Kaul 1998

[91](#)

Simek 1993: 22

[92](#)

Stanza 6, from Snorri's *Edda*, translated by Faulkes 2002: 11

[93](#)



Names after Faulkes 2002

[94](#)

Names after Faulkes 2002

[95](#)

*Gylfaginning*, translated by Faulkes 2002: 17–18

[96](#)

Lindow 2001: 274ff.; Simek 1993: 293f.; Lindqvist 1941–42: Tjängvide 1, Alskog Parish, Ardre VIII, Lärbro Tängelgård 1, Gotland in Sweden

[97](#)

Gjessing 1943: 65ff.; Buisson 1976; Lindow 2001: 274ff.; Raudvere 2003: 47

### **3. Animals in Midgard**

[98](#)

Aaris-Sørensen 1998, 2009

[99](#)

Liljegren & Lagerås 1993

[100](#)

Ahlén 1965, 1975

[101](#)

Liljegren & Lagerås 1993; Aaris-Sørensen 1998, 2009

[102](#)

Ahlén 1965: 173

[103](#)

Wiktorsson 1998

[104](#)

Hallander 1989

[105](#)

Hallander 1999: 109ff., 339

[106](#)

The occurrence of animals chiefly concerns the situation in southern and central Scandinavia. The literature on the domestication of animals and their occurrence in Scandinavia is extensive. See also Lepiksaar 1986; Nyegaard 1996; Vretemark 1997; Aaris-Sørensen 1998; Welinder, Pedersen & Widgren 1998; Wigh 2001; Petersson 2006

[107](#)

Iregren 1997

[108](#)

Ericson et al. 1988

[109](#)

Wigh 2001: 29

[110](#)

Lepiksaar 1984; Degerbøl & Fredskild 1970; Ekström 1993: 63

[111](#)

Price & Noe-Nygaard 2009

[112](#)

Clutton-Brock 1999: 82

[113](#)

Hallander 1989: 109ff.; Vretemark 1997; Welinder 1998; Wigh 2001

[114](#)

AAR-4031, Østerberg Friborg 1999: 124

[115](#)

For example at Bundsø on the island of Als in Denmark, Mathiassen 1939: 143f.

[116](#)

For example Lyngby, Sjælland in Denmark, Aaris-Sørensen 1988: 214

[117](#)

Browall 1986: 171f.

[118](#)

Aðalsteinsson 1991

[119](#)

*Egil's Saga*, translated by Pálsson & Edwards 1976

[120](#)

Redding 1984

[121](#)

Hallander 1999: 369ff.; Blomberg 2001

[122](#)

Nielsen 2006

[123](#)

Sørensen 2001; Öhman 1983

[124](#)

Clutton-Brock 1999: 51f.

[125](#)

Lepiksaar 1986; Öhman 1983; Sjösvärd 1989; Crockford 2000; Gräslund 2004

[126](#)

Clutton-Brock 1999: 102ff.; Olsen 2006; Greenfield 2006

[127](#)

Boessneck & von den Driesch 1968: 40; Hagberg 1967: 123; Götherström 2001: 27

[128](#)

Mayer-Kuester 2006

[129](#)

Sundkvist 2001: 165f.; Lärn-Nilsson 1998: 403ff.

[130](#)

Hyland 2003

[131](#)

Lepiksaar 1986; Aaris-Sørensen 1998: 192ff.; Boessneck et al. 1968: [table 8](#); Clutton-Brock 1999: 133ff.

[132](#)

Aaris-Sørensen 1988: 223f.; Hatting 1994: 94

[133](#)

Iregren 1997

[134](#)

Lärn-Nilsson 1998: 224

[135](#)

Johansson 2000; Berggren & Celin 2004: 135ff., 180ff.; Raahauge 2002; The bones from Burlöv 20 C at Malmö in well A270 and pit A723 are dated to the Early Pre-Roman Iron Age with reference to pottery with everted rims. The Danish find has been radiocarbon-dated to 165–35 BC (AAR-3784).

[136](#)

Thomas 1984: 123ff.; Lévi-Strauss 1966

[137](#)

Morey 2006; Boessneck 1988: 85f., 134ff.

[138](#)

Guzzo & d'Ambrosio 2002: 75

[139](#)

Lidén 1995

[140](#)

Hallander 1989; Lärn-Nilsson et al. 1997, 1998

[141](#)

Tillhagen [1958]1977; Biörnstad 1986

[142](#)

Cf. Burström 1995: 176

[143](#)

Welinder 1998: 126f.; Petersson 2006; Artursson 2009

[144](#)

Olausson 1995; Årlin 1999; Gröhn 2004

[145](#)

Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement development and the change in agriculture with the stabling of animals and the use of manure as fertilizer is a central research field in archaeology, osteology, historical geography, and palaeoecology. See Widgren 1983; Berglund 1991; Liljegren & Lagerås 1993; Myrdal 1996; Vretemark 1997; Welinder 1998; Pedersen & Widgren 1998, Viklund, Engelmark & Linderholm 1998; Myrdal 1999; Petersson 2006. *Den danske landbrugshistorie* and *Det svenska jordbrukets historia* contain descriptions of source material and interpretative surveys with references about agriculture in Sweden from the Stone Age to the twenty-first century.

[146](#)

Zoonosis: Pedersen & Widgren 1998: 253f.; Lärn-Nilsson 1997: 28ff.; Meslin 1997

[147](#)

Lärn-Nilsson 1997: 139ff.; Wiktorsson 1998

[148](#)

Lärn-Nilsson 1997: 165f.

[149](#)

Redding 1984

[150](#)

Aðalsteinsson 1991

[151](#)

Wincent 1984

[152](#)

Boessneck et al. 1968: 40f.

[153](#)

Backe et al. 1993

[154](#)

Sundkvist 2001: 67

[155](#)

Lärn-Nilsson 1997: 19f.

[156](#)

The main lines of the following account of faunal history and wild animals are based chiefly on Liljegren & Lagerås 1993; Aaris-Sørensen 1998, 2001

[157](#)

Lepiksaar 1986: 9

[158](#)

There are no separate analyses of wild animal bones in zooarchaeological reports. They are found in the reports and publications mentioned in note 84. The occurrence and significance of wild animals is a hitherto neglected research field, but see Pluskowski's studies of wolves, e.g. Pluskowski 2006a & 2006b

[159](#)

Lepiksaar 1989: 9

[160](#)

Ullén 1994, 1996

[161](#)

Söderberg 2003

[162](#)

Vretemark 1997: 152ff.

[163](#)

Vretemark 1997: 156ff.; Enghoff 1999; Jennbert 2009: 101ff.

[164](#)

Brusewitz 1969

[165](#)

Granlund 1962; Andrén 1997

[166](#)

Vretemark 1983b; Gräslund 2004

[167](#)

Spång 1997: 78

[168](#)

Bugaj 1999

[169](#)

Nordanskog 2006

[170](#)

Junkelmann 1993; Dahlgren 2001

[171](#)

Cummins 1988: 32ff., 260f.

[172](#)

Åkerström-Hougen 1974

[173](#)

Tyrberg 2002

[174](#)

Vretemark 1983a; Sten & Vretemark 1988; Jennbert 2007

[175](#)

Petré 1984: 204ff.

[176](#)

Carlie 2004; Beilke-Voigt 2007; Falk 2008

[177](#)

Nyegaard 1996: 151f.; Nordman 1920

[178](#)

Ullén 1994: 254f., 1996: 174

[179](#)

Nielsen 1982

[180](#)

Det kvartærzoologiske centralregister, Zoologisk museum, Copenhagen

[181](#)

Ullén 1995; Carlie 2002: 663ff.

[182](#)

Backe et al. 1993; Ullén 1995; Carlie 2004; Falk 2008

[183](#)

Cf. Müller-Wille 2002

[184](#)

Victor 2002: 168; Olausson 1995; Andersson 2005

[185](#)

Hårdh 2004; Larsson 2004. Unfortunately, the burnt bones found beside the beaker have not yet been examined.

[186](#)

Lindell 1997; Svahn 2002; Nilsson 2003

[187](#)

Svahn 2002; Nilsson 2003

[188](#)

Magnell 2010

[189](#)

Cardell 2001

[190](#)

Nielsen 2006

[191](#)

Magnell & Iregren 2010

[192](#)

Boye 1896

[193](#)

Sigvallius 1994; Iregren 1997; Steen & Vretemark 1988; Wigh 2001

[194](#)

Iregren 1997: 13ff.

[195](#)

Sten 1976; Sten & Vretemark 1988

[196](#)

Jonsson 1995

[197](#)

Sten & Vretemark 1988: 147ff.

[198](#)

Sørensen 2001; Hyenstrand 1996: 94ff.

[199](#)

Simek 1993; Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1994: 90ff.; Näsström 2001: 207ff.

[200](#)

Larsson 1990

[201](#)

Ethelberg 2000: 35

[202](#)

Behrens 1964

[203](#)

Pollex 1999

[204](#)

Fabricius & Becker 1996: 234ff.



[205](#)

Papmehl-Dufay 2008

[206](#)

Larsson 1988: 148f., 1990

[207](#)

Stjernquist 1993: 127

[208](#)

Wickman 2001

[209](#)

la Coer 1961; Møhl 1961b: 377f.

[210](#)

Schmidt 1961: 82f.

[211](#)

Bruun & Jónsson 1910; Eldjárn 1956; Schmidt 1961: 82f.; Müller-Wille 1972

[212](#)

Schulze 1987; Ekström et al. 1989: 17

[213](#)

Holmquist-Olausson & Götherström 1998: 107; Fennö Muyingo 2000: 9; During 2000

[214](#)

Nordahl 2001: 62; Ua-10996, 615±60 BP, 1300–1388

[215](#)

Klindt-Jensen 1978: 207

[216](#)

Ethelberg 2000: 35f., 252f., Hatting 2000: 408

[217](#)

Mulk & Iregren 1995; Myrstad 1996; Schanche 2000: 269f.

[218](#)

Iregren 1985; I. Zachrisson 1985; Schanche 2000: 271f.

[219](#)

Zachrisson & Iregren 1974: 11ff.; Schanche 2000: 290

[220](#)

Zachrisson & Iregren 1974: 20f., 83f.

[221](#)

Schanche 2000: 269f., 288f.

[222](#)

Fjellström [1755] in Bäckman 1981

[223](#)

Jennbert 2002

[224](#)

Olausson 1995; Cassel 1998; Andrén 2002; Jennbert 2002; Rudebeck 2002; Petersson 2006

[225](#)

Ilkjær 1984, 2000; Fabech 1991; Jensen 2008; Døbat 2009

[226](#)

Larsson 2002; Magnell 2010

[227](#)

Boessneck, von den Driesch-Karpf & Gejvall 1968

[228](#)

Stjernquist 1963

[229](#)

von Post 1919

[230](#)

Stjernquist 1997; Møhl 1997

[231](#)

Albrechtsen 1944

[232](#)

Ferdinand & Ferdinand 1961; Møhl 1961

[233](#)

Z.M.K. 118/1967; KIA 22758, BP 1145±23, cal. AD 893, one sigma cal. AD 884–902

[234](#)

Klindt-Jensen 1967

#### **4. Animals between context and text**

[235](#)

Clunies Ross 2001

[236](#)

Frye 2009

[237](#)

Ibn Fadlan, translated by Frye 2009: 68

[238](#)

Clunies Ross 1994

[239](#)

*Gylfaginning* 38, 20–21, 43–44, translated by Faulkes 2002: 22–38

[240](#)

von Hofsten 1957: 19

[241](#)

*Gylfaginning* 27, translated by Faulkes 2002: 25

[242](#)

Staecker 2006

[243](#)

Andrén 1993

[244](#)

Andrén 1998

[245](#)

Louth 1997

[246](#)

Douglas [1970] 1978: 77ff.

[247](#)

The generalized picture of pre-Christian treatment of the body is based on an interpretation of archaeological literature describing excavations in Scandinavia (cf. Jennbert 2002). The body is one of several themes in the ‘Roads to Midgard’ project, studied by several of the participants (Catharina Raudvere, Maria Lundberg Domeij, Louise Ströbeck, and Nina Nordström).

[248](#)

Capelle 1995

[249](#)

Glob 1965; van der Sanden 1996

[250](#)

Randsborg 1986

[251](#)

Sellebold et al. 1984: 239f.

[252](#)

Gräslund 1980: 26f.

[253](#)

Nilsson 1994: 21ff.

[254](#)

Randsborg 1986

[255](#)

Iregren 1973; Widholm 1973

[256](#)

Burenhult 1997

[257](#)

Grøn et al. 1994: 14f.

[258](#)

Bennett 1987: 184; Sigvallius 1994: 118ff.

[259](#)

Iregren 1972: 66ff.

[260](#)

Bennett 1987: 185

[261](#)

Brøndsted 1957: 278

[262](#)

Klindt-Jensen 1967; Müller-Wille 1972; Söderberg 2002: 65f.

[263](#)

*Gylfaginning* 51 in Snorri's *Edda*, translated by Faulkes 2002

[264](#)

*Skáldskaparmál*, translated by Faulkes 2002

[265](#)

Geary 1986

[266](#)

*Hálfðanar saga svarta 9*, in *Heimskringla*, translated by Hollender 1964

[267](#)

Bandle 2000: 457

[268](#)

Sigvallius 1994: 109ff.; Iregren 1997

[269](#)

Andersen 2000; Thomas 1999

[270](#)

Nordman 1920

[271](#)

Clunies Ross 1994: 65ff.

[272](#)

## 5. A Midgard mentality—why animals?

[273](#)

Sundqvist 2005: 276; Raudvere 2005: 196

[274](#)

Boessneck et al. 1968

[275](#)

Meniél 1992

[276](#)

Carlie 2002; Nilsson 2003: 293ff.

[277](#)

Zachrisson & Iregren 1974: 83f.

[278](#)

Noe-Nygaard 1995: 223

[279](#)

Lepiksaar 1982: 112f.

[280](#)

Ullén 1996: 175f.

[281](#)

Wendt 1978: 21

[282](#)

Nygaard 1996: 153

[283](#)

Ullén 1996: 176f.

[284](#)

Ferdinand & Ferdinand 1961: 62; Backe et al. 1993; Møhl 1997

[285](#)

Egardt 1962: 10, 75ff., 92ff.

[286](#)

*Hákonar saga góða* in *Heimskringla*; Lindow 2001: 35f.

[287](#)

Egardt 1962: 97f.; Miller 1991

[288](#)

Meens 2002

[289](#)

Egardt 1962: 80

[290](#)

Vretemark 1997: 144

[291](#)

Klindt-Jensen 1967

[292](#)

Müller-Wille 1972: 180ff.

[293](#)

Vretemark 1997: 148ff.

[294](#)

Sundkvist 2001: 158ff.

[295](#)

Andersson 2005

[296](#)

Nylén 1991; Sundkvist 2001

[297](#)

Larsson, L. 1975

[298](#)

Dobat 2006

[299](#)

Mayer-Kuester 2006

[300](#)

Brøndsted 1966: 61f., 68ff.; Dobat 2006

[301](#)

Nylén 1977: 164; Witt 1978: 21; Sundkvist 2001: 161ff.

[302](#)

Sleipnir is depicted on the Gotlandic picture stones from Alskog Tjängvide, Ardre VIII, Lärbro Tängelgårda, in Lindqvist 1941–42; Gjessing 1943: 92ff.; Buisson 1976; Simek 1993: 293f.; Lindow 2001: 274ff.

[303](#)

Price 2002: 320f.

[304](#)

Grave contexts, e.g. the Högom find in Ramquist 1992; Birka in Arbman 1940, 1943; wetland deposits, e.g. Illerup in Jensen 2008; the Sösdala find and others in Geisslinger 1967

[305](#)

Forssander 1937: 33ff.; Karlsson 1983: 163

[306](#)

Nicklasson 1997; Svanberg 1999: 131; Notelid 2007

[307](#)

Eldjarn 1956; Capelle 1978; Myhre 1994

[308](#)

Ethelberg 2000

[309](#)

Nylén & Schönback 1994: 34; Fernstål 2004

[310](#)

Stjernquist 1955, 1993

[311](#)

Hansen 1995

[312](#)

E.g. Arwidsson 1942; Lamm & Nordström 1983; Nylén & Schönback 1994

[313](#)

Sten & Vretemark 1988; Sjösvärd 1989

[314](#)

Thorvildsen 1957; Sørensen 2001

[315](#)

Müller-Wille 1976; Wamers 1995

[316](#)

Nicolayson 1882; Ingstad 1995

[317](#)

Arbman 1940, 1943; Gräslund 1980

[318](#)

Thäte 2007; Ekengren 2009; Boye & Hansen 2009

[319](#)

It would have been interesting to compare the Vendel and Valsgårde graves with corresponding boat graves and chamber graves containing women at Tuna in Badelunda in Västmanland. Unfortunately, no animal bones were preserved there (Nylén & Schönback 1994; Iregren 1994).

[320](#)

Lundström 1980; Arwidsson 1983; Arrhenius 1983: 44; Hyenstrand 1996: 94–95



[321](#)

Arwidsson 1983; Müller-Wille 1970 has a similar description of burial patterns in boat graves

[322](#)

Ibn Fadlan, translated by Frye 2005

[323](#)

Müller Wille 1970; Capelle 1986; Andrén 1993; Nylén & Schönback 1994

[324](#)

Andrén 1993: 43f.; Müller-Wille 1985

[325](#)

Raudvere 2005: 196

[326](#)

Lidén et al. 2001

[327](#)

Domeij Lundborg 2006

[328](#)

Hållans Stenholm 2006

[329](#)

Pedersen 2006; Thäte 2007

[330](#)

There is a huge amount of archaeological literature describing the finds and discussing their chronological placing and their part in a larger Common Germanic network of contacts, e.g. Lamm & Nordström 1983; Ramqvist 1992; Arrhenius 1995

[331](#)

Polanyi 1968 in Gerholm 1971: 36f.; Spång 1978; Gustin 2004: 25ff.

[332](#)

Lidén et al. 1998; Götherström 2001: 27. Horses from Vendel, Valgärde, the Eketorp water hole, Skedemosse, and Broa in Gotland have been analysed

[333](#)

Hagberg 1967: 127f.; Räf 2001

[334](#)

E.g. Gustin 2004; Hårdh 1996

[335](#)

Cummins 1988; *Das Falkenbuch Friedrichs II* [2000]

[336](#)

Epstein 1943: 506

[337](#)

Sjösvärd et al. 1983

[338](#)

Oggins 2004: 46, note 54, page 160

[339](#)

Cummins 2001: 197f.

[340](#)

Sahlström 1939; Öhman 1983

[341](#)

One example is the large horse in a separate grave at Skovgaarde, Sjælland, Hatting 2000.

[342](#)

Habbe 2006: 161ff., 208

[343](#)

Karlsson 1933: 7. Karlsson is critical of the way that changes in style are generally explained in archaeology in terms of foreign models. Norse animal ornamentation has a century-long research history, as one of the most frequently studied archaeological research fields, including stylistic concepts, datings, interpretation, craft traditions; e.g. Salin 1935; Ørsnes 1966; Haseloff 1981; Karlsson 1983; Hedeager 1997, 2004; Høilund Nielsen 1998; Johansen 1979; Kristoffersson 1995, 2010

[344](#)

Callmer 2010

[345](#)

Wells 2008

[346](#)

Johansen 1997; Zachrisson 1998; Andrén 1998, 2000; Hedeager 2004; Back Danielsson 2007; Domeij Lundborg 2006; Neiss 2006, 2010; Kristofersson 2010

[347](#)

Domeij Lundborg 2006; Neiss 2006, 2010; Kristofersson 2010

[348](#)

Domeij Lundborg 2006

[349](#)

Branca 1999; Larsson 2004

[350](#)

Hjärtner-Holdar et al. 2002

[351](#)

E.g. beak-shaped brooches in Hårdh 2001

[352](#)

E.g. Hårdh 2003; Larsson 2002, 2004

[353](#)

Ørsnes 1966: 101ff.

[354](#)

E.g. Sonesson 1992

[355](#)

Petersen 1991: 55, 2005; Rosengren 2007

[356](#)

Pers. comm. Thomas Alerstam, Lund University; *All about Birds*, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University, New York

[357](#)

Strömberg 1961: 116f.; Ørsnes-Christensen 1955: 149

[358](#)

Vedel 1886: 163f., Ørsnes 1966: 101ff.; Højlund Nielsen 1987: [table 4](#); Jørgensen 1990: 31f.; Jørgensen & Nørgård Jørgensen 1997

[359](#)

Stjernquist 1993: 23

[360](#)

Stolpe & Arne 1912: 53ff.; Arrhenius 1983

[361](#)

Højlund Nielsen 1991

[362](#)

Atterman 1934; Nerman 1969; Petré 1984

[363](#)

Mundal 1974, Raudvere 2002: 98

[364](#)

Santesson 1989

[365](#)

Raudvere 2002: 124

[366](#)

Nordbladh & Yates 1990; Arwill-Nordbladh 1998; Sørensen 2000; Solli 2002; Sofaer 2006; Back Danielsson 2007

[367](#)

Clover 1993

[368](#)

Brown 1999; Hassig 1999

[369](#)

Malmer 1981, table 24

[370](#)

Jørgensen Bruun 1987; Kallhovd & Magnusson 2000: 87; Fandén 2001

[371](#)

Wihlborg 1972, 1978

[372](#)

Granlund 1974; Liliequist 1991

[373](#)

Kaul 1998

[374](#)

Lönnroth 1996: 15

[375](#)

Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, Book 8, English translation, 265f.

[376](#)

Price 2002: 101f.

[377](#)

Peterson at [www.sofi.se/1465](http://www.sofi.se/1465), with references; Düwel 2001: 197ff.; Imer 2007

[378](#)

Janzén 1947: 261–263

[379](#)

Simplified after Modéer 1964: 25–34, first elements, 18–24

[380](#)

*Nordiskt runnamnslexikon*; [www.sofi.se/1765](http://www.sofi.se/1765)

[381](#)

Mittner 1955

[382](#)

Mundal 1974: 30f.; Raudvere 1993

[383](#)

Hamel 1915; Gärdenfors 2000, 2001; Fudge 2002; Tymieniecka 2007

[384](#)

Grave 6, Burenhult 1997: 58f.

[385](#)

Grave 959, Arbman 1943: 384

[386](#)

Taylor 2002

[387](#)

Ebbesen 1986; Nilsson & Nilsson 2003

[388](#)

Almgren 1905: 44

[389](#)

White 1992

[390](#)

Gejvall 1955

[391](#)

Stilborg 2001

[392](#)

Gansum & Hansen 2002

[393](#)

Brøndsted 1966; Larsson 1975

[394](#)

Hedeager 2004

[395](#)

Lindow 2001, Introduction

[396](#)

*Skáldskaparmál* Epilogue, translated by Faulkes 2002

[397](#)

Meissner 1921: 107ff.

## **6. Old Norse religion**

[398](#)

Tillhagen [1958]1977

[399](#)

Storå 1971: 222

[400](#)

Helms 1998: 41

[401](#)

*Ynglinga saga* 7 in *Heimskringla*, translated by Hollender 1964

[402](#)

Raudvere 2003: 73ff.

[403](#)

E.g. Ellis 1943: 124ff.; Edsman 1949; de Vries 1957; Dumézil 1959; Ström 1961; Eliade 1964; Schødt 1993, 2001; Raudvere 2002; Solli 2002; Price 2002: 76ff.

[404](#)

E.g. Rydving 1995; Schanche 2000; Dubois 2009

[405](#)

Price 2002

[406](#)

Sundqvist 2003

[407](#)

LUHM 3828; Arbman 1956; Moltke 1985: 291f. '(R)ade took *fauka* of his property and with that I, Åse, have rewarded (NN)'

[408](#)

Axboe 1997

[409](#)

Gaimster 1998: 25

[410](#)

Clunies Ross 1994, 2002

[411](#)

Green 1998: 23

[412](#)

Bernström 1960: 292

[413](#)

Wigström 1900

[414](#)

Prummel 1992: 39, [table 5](#); Gräslund 2000: 86, 2004: 169

[415](#)

Gjessing 1943: 59; Müller-Wille 1972; Sørensen 2000; Sten & Vretemark 1988

[416](#)

The Royal Armoury, Stockholm

[417](#)

Holmqvist 1952; Jansson 1977: 18

[418](#)

Hauck 1981 in Gaimster 1998: 60

[419](#)

Lindqvist 1941: 89

[420](#)

Lundin 2006

[421](#)

Johansen 1997; Andrén 2000

[422](#)

*Skáldskaparmál* in Faulkes 2002: 63

[423](#)

Kaul 1998

[424](#)

Karlsson 1983; Hansen 1995; Ethelberg 2000

[425](#)

Gräslund 2006

[426](#)

Johansen 1997: 143ff., 224; Zachrisson 1998

[427](#)

Andrén 2000

[428](#)

Moltke 1985: 137f.; Santesson 1989; Imer 2007; Scandinavian runic-text database

[429](#)

Sundqvist & Hultgård 2004

[430](#)

Adam of Bremen, Hultgård 1997

[431](#)

Roesdahl 1987: 153

[432](#)

Pluskowski 2006a,b

[433](#)

Jelling stone 2 (Harald's stone, the great Jelling stone). Translated by Moltke 1985: 207

[434](#)

Fuglesang 1980: 92f., 1991; Moltke 1985: 208

[435](#)



Moltke 1985: 252ff.

[436](#)

Raudvere 2003: 33

## **7. The archaeology of religion**

[437](#)

Gurevich 1992: 294f.; Zachrisson 1994

[438](#)

Andrén, Jennbert, Raudvere 2006

## **8. To interpret interdependence over time**

[439](#)

Ferry 1995: 16

[440](#)

Evans 1906

[441](#)

Lévi-Strauss 1966

[442](#)

Clarke 1993

[443](#)

Thomas 1984; Merchant 1980

[444](#)

Sörlin 1991

[445](#)

Merchant 1992: 61ff., 157ff.

[446](#)

Ferry 1997; Coetzee 1999

[447](#)

Gärdenfors 2000

[448](#)

Merchant 1980; Thomas 1984; Ferry 1995; Singer 1995; Clarke 1993;  
Gålmark 1997; Coetzee et al. 1999; Lundmark 2000

# References

## Abbreviations

|      |                                       |
|------|---------------------------------------|
| ATA  | Antikvarisk topografiska arkivet.     |
| LUHM | Lunds universitets historiska museum. |
| RAÄ  | Riksantikvarieämbetet.                |
| SHM  | Statens historiska museer, Stockholm. |
| ZMK  | Zoological Museum, Copenhagen.        |

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