

SHAMANISM
IN NORSE MYTH AND MAGIC

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**SHAMANISM
IN NORSE MYTH AND MAGIC**

VOLUME I

BY

CLIVE TOLLEY

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PREFACE

Shamanism and magic within the Norse field have been the subject of several major studies in recent years. Even within the bounds set by our limited medieval sources, the topic is a wide one – wide enough, perhaps, not to call for particular pleading when another study is presented. Each scholar has his or her own forte; my own focus is on the literary use of mythic motifs, and this has informed my approach throughout, although not all the discussion is devoted precisely to this consideration. My focus therefore differs somewhat from other recent substantial studies: Neil Price, in his *The Viking Way*, covers a good deal of the same ground as do I, but his most worthwhile focus is upon archaeological aspects of the topic; François-Xavier Dillmann, in *Les magiciens dans l'Islande ancienne*, concentrates on what the title states, magicians (rather than magic as such) as depicted in Icelandic family sagas; John McKinnell, in *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend*, offers a detailed analysis of beings such as *volur*, but his focus is upon the structural analysis of literary themes, and his ambit extends far further into folklore materials than does mine, though I do indeed recognise that while motifs which appear in literature may have many sources, any attempt, such as, in part, the present one, to glimpse something of the ancient pre-Christian traditions through this literature takes us into a pre-literary world of originally oral tradition, which formed part of the folklore of the people concerned. The present study therefore involves looking at the manipulation of motifs, many (but not all) deriving ultimately from folk tradition, in an increasingly artistic, literary milieu; yet the overriding concern is to answer the question of whether Norse literature indicates that ancient Scandinavians had the notion of a practice which might reasonably be termed “shamanism”, whether as an actual phenomenon of ordinary life, or as a motif appearing in fictional settings.

I hope that the length of the present study will not predispose the reader to nod in agreement with the poet and cataloguer of the great library of the ancient world at Alexandria, Callimachus, who proclaimed μέγα βιβλίον μέγα κακόν, “a big book is a big evil”; the length in fact reflects a fundamental aim I have sought to meet, namely to avoid considering an isolated list of supposedly “shamanic” features divorced from their context: I therefore present fairly full discussions of the myths and texts in which these features occur, dealing with a wider range of interpretations than the purely shamanic. I do not engage in lengthy consideration of purely historical or archaeological materials or arguments.

The present work is the result of a long process of maturation; I began my investigations in the topics under consideration in the mid-1980s,

leading to my doctoral thesis, submitted at Oxford University in 1993. Personal circumstances thwarted my intention to develop my research and produce a more substantial and connected interpretation than appeared in my dissertation within a reasonable period thereafter, but, my thoughts on the topic having naturally developed over the years, I am glad now to be able to offer these reflections in a rather more considered form than would have been the case fifteen years ago, and which in important areas also amend earlier published work of mine (the section on *Hrólfs saga kraka* in Chapter 20 is, however, adapted from my recent article, Tolley 2007a).

Whilst the book is scholarly in intent, I believe it may also be approached by less specialised readers, as well as by scholars whose speciality is not Norse. I have presented as wide a range both of shamanic source material (though still very selective) and of Norse texts as seemed feasible and justified by the aim of contextualising the Norse sources under discussion, and out of consideration for readers who may not otherwise have ready access to them. I have also held to the principle that all materials discussed should not only be presented in the original language whenever possible, but also rendered into English (as translation is interpretation, and the scholar is thereby obliged to clarify what he believes a text to mean; translations are mine unless noted otherwise). I trust too that the reader will find I have been able to avoid any obfuscation of academic jargon and expression.

It is my hope that this volume will contribute positively to the growing debate in this area of research, and that the reader will emerge from this book not only with greater understanding, but also, through that, with greater enjoyment of the works considered and appreciation of the cultures described.

Clive Tolley
Chester, Christmas 2008

THE COVER ILLUSTRATION

The front cover shows the painting by Thomas Fearnley (1802–42), a Norwegian of English descent, of the Slinde birch, which he completed in 1839. The tree grew on an ancient Iron Age grave mound, Hydneshaugen, in Sogn. It was the subject of a number of romantic paintings and poems in the nineteenth century, which have rendered it one of the best known of Norwegian trees, yet its tale is not a happy one. It is clear from local research, in particular by Wilhelm Christie in 1827, that the tree was regarded as holy in the eighteenth century, and offerings of beer were placed at its foot at Christmas, but such customs had dwindled by the early nineteenth century. The mound was supposed to contain treasure, guarded by a white snake, and twelve interlocking copper cauldrons. In 1861, the tree had a girth at ground level of 5.6 metres, and its height was 18.8 metres, whilst the canopy had a diameter of 21.6 metres. The grave mound on which it grew, which was 19 metres in diameter and 4 metres high, was a local boundary nexus; Fearnley's painting illustrates how the tree also functioned, at least metaphorically, as a vertical axis uniting heaven, earth (mountain) and sea, as well as, on a temporal plane, standing on the boundary of light and darkness, day and night – the discussions later in the present volume suggest these may not have been simply nineteenth-century romantic notions. The tree blew down in a storm in 1874. In 1892–3 locals dismantled the grave mound, no longer awed by the old stories that disaster would ensue any damage to the monument, and removed three thousand loads of stone from it. A couple of burial cists were found, but no treasure, cauldrons or white snake; no archaeological survey was undertaken. Nowadays a new road and petrol station have, it seems, obliterated what remained of this once revered site.

The Slinde birch is surely a late local manifestation of an ancient Norse tradition of sacred guardian trees, which reached its culmination in myth in the form of the world tree, guarding and sustaining the cosmos and reflecting its passage through time, stretching up to heaven and, like the Slinde birch on its burial mound, reaching down to the world of the dead, where resided the serpent *Níðhöggr* and where were to be found springs bestowing life and wisdom, as well as the spring *Hvergelmir*, the Cauldron Roarer, the source of all waters. In Siberia, it was along the world tree that the shaman was believed to pass to other worlds to fulfil his spiritual missions for his community.

Aside from its topical relevance, Fearnley's depiction of the Slinde birch stands as a fitting symbol for much that is discussed in the present volume: it is an imaginative, artistic response to and use of an object rooted in cult,

as are many of the poetic and literary sources discussed here, and it portrays something of erstwhile religious significance, a significance which had already faded into vague memory. The Slinde birch teeters, a thing of beauty, on the brink of oblivion.

I. PROLEGOMENA

1. Introduction

Norse myth is the main topic of this work, and the main aim is to discuss and clarify a selection of myths and practices, in particular magic practices, usually in the specific form of *seiðr*. The selection is made on the basis of their arguably “shamanic” character, or connection to myths which might be so described. Shamanism provides material for comparative investigation, and is used to help elucidate the Norse myths in question; I aim to present a fairly broad selection of materials in order to give a sufficient indication of the nature of the sources which are compared,¹ but it is not my aim to consider in detail questions of interpretation posed by shamanic texts, except as this impinges on the main areas of discussion:² it is my aim to discuss the Norse sources in detail.

The scope of investigation is not confined just to elements which relate directly to shamanism as a religious phenomenon: other characteristic elements of the belief-systems of societies which practised shamanism, notably cosmological concepts such as the world tree, and the ritual of the bear hunt, are also discussed. Some have fallen into the trap of ascribing shamanism to the ancient Scandinavians on the basis of coincidences of imagery or practice in both Norse and Eurasian³ belief-systems relating to such meta-shamanic phenomena; clearly, some investigation is called for to clarify what may reasonably be said on these issues. Equally, it seems misplaced to consider the Norse evidence in isolation from other European evidence for shamanic-type practices, and so some consideration is given to the question of shamanism in ancient Greece, and the witchcraft of medieval western Europe, and a brief consideration is made of European contacts with the peoples of the steppe in the early Middle Ages, whence some shamanic ideas may have been brought.⁴

¹ The amount of material relating to classic shamanism which is presented is in fact but a small selection; for a useful collection of texts rendered into Italian, see Marazzi (1984).

² I make one exception: the Norwegian account in *Historia Norwegie* of Sámi shamanism, which I seek to elucidate both from a Norse perspective and from that of Sámi and Siberian shamanism.

³ I use “Eurasia” to refer, approximately, to the territory of the former Soviet Union, which includes most of the areas of classic shamanism (by extension, the Sámi areas are also included in the cultural-geographic area of Eurasia); I do not consider areas south of the steppe in any great detail, though I do make some use for example of Indian and Japanese material, which, treating the term “Eurasian” flexibly, may be included within it.

⁴ I also make some use of Celtic materials, but a more thorough study than as yet exists of Celtic traditions of seers and magicians, themselves often exhibiting broadly shamanic

The use of shamanism as a criterion of selection deliberately raises the question: did the Norse in fact practise shamanism? “Norse” (or “Scandinavian”) refers to the ancient, and particularly pre-Christian, Germanic-speaking inhabitants of Scandinavia and (secondarily) of colonies they settled elsewhere (notably Iceland), who for many centuries before their conversion to Christianity around the end of the first millennium had had a fairly hierarchical society based largely on agriculture and trade, whilst in its classic form shamanism, a practice of mediation with the spirit world, is associated above all with the scattered and often nomadic societies of northern Siberia, which relied primarily on hunting for subsistence, and which usually lacked a developed social hierarchy.

The reason for examining this question is that features are found in Old Norse literature and other writings which appear to reflect characteristic attributes of the classic forms of Siberian shamanism; the fact that the Norse lived on or near the geographical periphery of the classic shamanic world gives us further motivation for examining the issue. However, the problems that hinder a direct answer to the question are manifold, chief among which are the difficulties of defining shamanism precisely, and then of considering whether Norse practices do in fact fit within this definition – a task made all the more trying by an insufficiency of extant information about ancient Scandinavian beliefs and practices. Whilst I do not avoid these difficulties, my approach is more one of highlighting and defining as closely as possible what does remain in our Norse sources, and seeing to what extent it may compare with classic Siberian shamanism and also with non-classic forms from further south (but without straying too far into the definitional maze of whether it “is” shamanism or not). One line of argument often propounded by those eager to uncover shamanism amounts to detecting features in Norse records which may be paralleled in indisputably shamanic societies, and then concluding that the ancient Scandinavians, either in the pagan period, or even, in later times, practised some form of shamanism. I seek to avoid this logical fallacy (for many such elements occur individually outside shamanism), but I also seek to discuss such areas in some detail, without, however, seeking to elicit arguments for the presence of shamanism when the evidence does not support it. The scope of the study is, in fact, rather wider: shamanism acts as a point of reference, but it is my aim to probe more generally into the nature of pre-Christian belief in Scandinavia, and in particular its expression in myth. This inevitably also involves discussion of the nature of our sources, many of which are composed well after the disappearance of paganism as a practised system of belief or ritual.

Naturally, the topic of the present work does not emerge *ex nihilo*. I do not wish, however, to give a detailed history of the scholarship on the topic – such surveys are tedious and serve little purpose – but rather to bring in earlier work in the course of discussion at appropriate points. I will merely

characteristics, would do much to help contextualise the Norse evidence within a broader north European setting.

note that comparisons between Norse and Sámi, and other, shamanic practices and beliefs go back well into the nineteenth century, notably to Fritzner's comparison between Sámi and Norse magic practices (1877); in 1935 Dag Strömbäck argued for a strong connection between Norse *seiðr* and Sámi shamanism, whereas Åke Ohlmarks (1939) saw the evidence as not supporting such a link, whilst recognising similarities with forms of shamanism from further afield. In more recent years, the debate may be said to go back to Peter Buchholz's short thesis of 1968, which outlined a number of features in Norse myth of an ostensibly shamanic nature, and hence rekindled the debate about the extent to which ancient Norsemen practised a form of shamanism.⁵ Thereafter opinions have been divided on the issue, with for example Regis Boyer and François Dillmann arguing against any strongly shamanic presence in Norse, while Neil Price is more sympathetic to the idea, and, like Strömbäck, seeks parallels in Sámi practices and beliefs. As long as the debate focuses only on those features which can be directly perceived as shamanic or not, it will continue endlessly; my own approach is to attempt to encompass a rather wider array of material in order to provide a much more substantial body of contextual evidence and argument, of which the debate on shamanic features forms part. Rather than relying on, or referring to, the presentations of primary materials by scholars such as Buchholz or Price, I have presented such materials anew along with my own interpretations (acknowledging the contributions of earlier scholars as appropriate).

As nearly all our ancient Norse records are literary⁶ in form, a constant leitmotiv will be the interpretation of the sources which relate religious or mythic information in the light of their literary context. I find myself much in agreement with Jane Harrison, who in the introduction to her great work on Greek religion, *Prolegomena*, pointed out the tension inherent in using literary sources to illuminate religion (1962: vii): whereas for literature Homer is the beginning, for religion he represents "a culmination, a complete achievement, an almost mechanical accomplishment, with scarcely a hint of *origines*, an accomplishment moreover, which is essentially literary rather than religious, sceptical and moribund already in its very perfection". These words apply just as forcibly to the Norse monuments,

⁵ Buchholz's thesis is at best preliminary in nature: the number of texts and mythic motifs discussed is very limited, there is practically no discussion of the reliability and background of sources, and little consideration of the degree to which supposedly shamanic features in Norse add up to anything like a systematic religious practice.

⁶ By "literary" is meant that the main focus of the piece is on the aesthetics of the composition (use of words, structures and so forth), whether the composition is written or oral in origin; the point is that the main purpose is not to communicate a religious message or information. Many works might be termed "semi-literary", in that the main purpose was (arguably) divided among various concerns; for example, Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān's account of his journey to the kingdom of the Bulgars, which describes a Viking funeral, was partly what we might call ethnographic, but this is balanced with a desire to produce an aesthetically pleasing composition (in this case, we have the further complication that the extant account is in fact only a summary of the original with various passages cited from it; a different sort of problem also arises from the account being that of an outsider to the culture described).

where our earliest poetic records already appear for us as highly crafted artefacts; none of the texts functioned as hymns, for purposes of worship, though religious considerations, or more precisely the artistic crafting of religious concepts in literary form, were still important in early texts such as *Völuspá*. Harrison declared her concern to be with the “substratum of religious conceptions, at once more primitive and more permanent” which are found in Homer and elsewhere, and yet her aim was to “come to a better understanding of some forms of Greek poetry”; a similar aim motivates the present study. The sources are often the works of poets who use material which, while perhaps originally possessed of an essentially religious purpose, is always directed to poetic ends. In fact, to obscure matters still further, religion and rite are rarely glimpsed in the literature we have; more often we are presented with myth, which may reflect religion or rite but does not do so in a necessarily straightforward way. Nonetheless, it is the practice and belief lying behind the literary presentation of myth that is sought in this study – but given the indirect way in which these have to be uncovered, they are bound to be “seen through a glass darkly”. Yet, like Harrison, my ultimate aim is to achieve a better understanding of the poetry (in this case Norse poetry).⁷ The more clearly we can perceive the nature of the material the poets worked with, the greater will be our perception of what use, in poetic terms, they have made of it. The aim in the present work is not primarily to produce a book of literary criticism, or even of literary motifs, in the way for example McKinnell (2005) does with material which overlaps with that considered here, yet literary considerations are bound to enter the arguments, as is consistent with the nature of our sources. I would like to think that this study will further the appreciation of Norse poetry in literary terms, mainly because the poets deserve to be treated for what they are, but also because without it our understanding of the myth and religion will be seriously compromised, as indeed already happens all too frequently at the hands of those lacking a keen literary awareness.

Methodology

My approach to the study of the materials considered is essentially pragmatic and seeks to avoid being hide-bound to a theoretical framework imposed from without. I am, of course, familiar with various theoretical approaches, and have employed them (or elements of them) as they have seemed appropriate. The only theoretical position I adhere to consistently is that the human mind is not bound by any one approach to reality; no individual theory will serve to explain the multifarious expressions of human imagination.⁸ It is my aim to respect the complexity of the evidence

⁷ Prose works are also considered, but are less of a focus of this study (as opposed, for example, to Dillmann’s exhaustive study of magicians in ancient Iceland (2006), where by contrast the poetry lies largely outside the work’s ambit).

⁸ As Bleeker (1979: 176) notes: “As to methodology, there actually exists only one general

and the mental capacity of the original thinkers who produced it, and to allow the sources to speak for themselves as far as possible; the converse approach of applying an ideologically formulated theory and finding evidence to fit it has been eschewed.

It is fundamental to my approach to place any inferences about the presence or absence of shamanism within as broad a context as possible: throughout, the prime question I seek to answer is "What is the nature and meaning of the text or motif under discussion?" rather than directly "Is this text or motif shamanic?" In essence, I find the primary sources far more fascinating than any theoretical discussion; yet a few further remarks may not be out of place.

One principle adopted in this study in the elucidation of Norse sources is to work from the close to the distant. "Close" means other sources close in time and place, and "distant" means sources further removed in time or place. Problems arise immediately, of course: most of our Norse sources are written down in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, but many are believed to be much older, in whole or in part, and moreover many derive not so much from their place of writing, Iceland (usually), but rather Norway or elsewhere, with roots going back further in time and place. As well as geographical distance, cultural distance also has to be taken into account; Indian traditions may be more informative than Sámi, for instance, since both Indian and Norse mythic systems developed out of a shared Indo-European base (at least, so it appears), whereas the Sámi belonged to a different cultural sphere. Levels of culture also have to be borne in mind; an agricultural society with a hierarchy from peasants to princes (the Norse) is rather different from semi-nomadic hunters with only rudimentary animal husbandry (the Sámi).

Hultkrantz (1970: 84) writes: "Every allegation which is made concerning a religion or an element of religion is comparative in its nature, this being due to the fact that the identification in itself presupposes a comparison with other religions and other elements of religion." He mentions the two main types of comparison: between phenomena that can be related genetically to each other (for example, they belong to one time and place, or one is a borrowed version of the other), and between those that cannot (they are from societies with no links); the present study involves both

rule, i.e. that one should study the religious phenomena both critically, unbiasedly, in a scholarly manner, and at the same time with empathy [...] I am firmly convinced that the average historian of religions should abstain from speculations about matters of method, which can only be adequately solved by students of philosophy and philosophy of religion." This eminently sensible statement has come under much bombardment from partisans of the "theory before practice" school, but is reiterated by Hultkrantz, who, in an important work on the methods of comparative religion available only in Swedish, says (1973a: 7): "It should, however, be apparent that every method is only a help-mechanism, that it only suits a particular type of objective, and that a humanist science like comparative religion with its many turns of insight cannot be bound to any specific method. It is always the aim of research and its object which determine which methodology should be used, and it is up to the individual researcher to choose the method he finds most practical and appropriate in the context. One and the same comparative religious investigation can indeed make use of several methods, according as the objectives change."

sorts of comparison. A genetic relationship between motifs strengthens the case for interpreting one in the light of the other. Yet the pursuit of genetic relationships between phenomena is often bound to fizzle out in uncertainty, given the inevitable sparsity of information, and the pursuit of genetic relationship poses problems: for example, why should we accept *a priori* that the society of adherents to an Indo-European mythic system was coterminous with the society of speakers of Indo-European languages, or indeed postulate that such a thing as Indo-European myth existed as a definable entity at all?⁹ In the present study, I have not pursued the matter of genetic relationship far, but I have assumed that such a relationship exists with other Indo-European mythic systems, and I have provided a historical account of links between Scandinavia and societies with acknowledged shamanism, to illustrate the general point that a genetic relationship may have existed in many cases (but I do not seek to prove it other than in certain instances), as the Norse were in direct contact with the Sámi and Finns, and probably with other Siberian peoples on their trade routes to Bjarmaland and down to the Byzantine Empire. Such relationships, where they are of a genetic kind, could either reflect direct borrowing, or a common participation in a widespread and geographically contiguous circumpolar culture.¹⁰

In so far as the comparisons are non-genetic, the aim may be described as *typological*, in other words to delineate what Norse features are of the same type as those found elsewhere, and in what ways: only once this is done can questions about borrowing, shared mental complexes and so forth be considered.¹¹ The further purpose of making typological comparisons may, however, be to suggest meanings, or structures, within mythic traditions, even when they are not (apparently) related. The assertion, which I follow, is that people, at least those living in roughly comparable economic and social settings, tend to realise a given notion about the world in similar symbolic ways, even down to details; why this should be is in the province of psychologists, but the implication is that when we encounter similar

⁹ Cf. Hultkrantz (1973a: 65), who objects to the principle of stopping comparisons at language boundaries, since religious studies are not the same as philology, and he asks if for example sufism in Arabia and Iran should be regarded as distinct phenomena on the grounds that the languages of the two countries are unrelated. He observes that it is well recognised that myths and tales wander from one people to another irrespective of language.

¹⁰ The possibility of an Indo-European heritage of shamanism can also not be dismissed; thus Fleck (1971b: 57, 65) notes similarities to Iranian practices, for example. In fact, lexical borrowings in for example Finnish (such as *nimi*, "name", or *vesi*, "water") indicate contact between proto-Indo-European and proto-Uralic speakers, and at a subsequent period there was strong contact between Finno-Ugric speakers and Indo-Iranians in which it appears much religious vocabulary entered the Finno-Ugric languages. The ancient and long-standing contact between Uralic and Indo-European peoples at least raises the possibility of shamanic ideas passing between them, and certainly illustrates the complexity of trying to trace genetic relationship between religious ideas.

¹¹ It is worth noting that commonly accepted notions such as that of a circumpolar cultural complex (to which I do *not* believe ancient Scandinavia belonged, other than in certain aspects which were probably borrowed) are typological in nature, and not proved, over all, by evidence of cultural contact.

symbolisms, one may elucidate the meaning of the other. I am, however, far from Eliade's realist, or neo-Platonic idealist, position, with his notions of the "logic of symbols" and "invariant core meanings";¹² the comparisons are introduced by way of suggestion, and the likelihood of their being useful depends on how much supporting evidence there is, and how far we believe structures of myth tend to be replicated throughout the world (for whatever reason). Tradition is, in any case, always variable. Meaning resides in an interaction between accepted (but changing) tradition and individual creativity, so that a myth or symbol cannot in fact ever be said just to have one meaning per se (hence, my position is fundamentally informed by nominalism in a way Eliade's is not).

Needless to say, the results of comparison are bound to be speculative to a greater or lesser extent, but uncertainty is a hallmark of almost any consideration of medieval sources. There is a certain inadequacy imposed by the practical necessity of isolating merely one aspect of ancient religion, namely shamanism, and the insufficiency of contextualised source materials on both the Norse and Siberian sides leads to a discussion which might otherwise be more holistic in its approach. Nonetheless, these problems are relative, and do not preclude us from making useful observations about Norse monuments.

Some concepts

RELIGION

Religion has been defined in many different ways. The functional definition of religion as "ultimate concern", suggested by Baird (1971: 18), may appeal in a general study of religion, but is scarcely of much use in the Norse field: we cannot, given the paucity of sources, determine what was of ultimate concern to people, a matter which no doubt varied from one person to the next anyway; we cannot say in any case that worship of the pre-Christian gods of the Norse people necessarily was, or related to, their ultimate concern. For the present purposes, especially given that this work is not primarily concerned with the nature of religion in itself, the definition of Hultkrantz (1973a: 13, my translation) is adequate: "the certainty of the existence of a supernatural world, a certainty which is mainly expressed in various sorts of opinions relating to belief and which in concrete terms is manifested in rites and observances, as well as in narrative accounts". In most cases, it is (the outward manifestation of) Norse religion that is referred to, that is the worship of the *æsir* and *vanir* gods and related beliefs

¹² A useful summary of Eliade's approach is given by John Clifford Holt in his introduction to Eliade (1996: xiv–xv). For a lengthy and penetrating discussion of Eliade's approach, see Dudley (1977). Dudley (*ibid.* 129), following Lakatos, makes an important point about methodology and falsification theories: he suggests that instead of attempting to use methodological falsification, a system should be judged on whether it is progressive, leading to the discovery of new or unexpected phenomena and accounting for known but unexplained phenomena, or degenerative, when it ceases to clarify unexplained facts and when there are alternative theories that promise to be more progressive.

and practices, especially as expressed in our surviving, mainly written, monuments. Shamanism is counted as a religious practice reflecting the religious belief system of the society concerned.¹³ Religions may impose ethical codes on adherents, as in the religions of the Book; they may also be primarily aimed at enlisting (or in the case of magic compelling) the aid of divine powers to further the aims of individuals or communities in an amoral fashion. Most sources indicate that Norse religion was of the latter sort; the same is true of many forms of shamanism. The division is scarcely hard and fast, however, and one sort may develop into the other (Judaism, for instance, appears to have moved over into the ethical category in the course of its recorded history).

Connected with religion are terms used when two religions come together. Baird (1971: 142–4) has pointed out the need for a more precise terminology here; thus, when elements from different religions come together in a harmonious unit then the term *synthesis* is appropriate; when the elements co-exist without consistency, we have *syncretism*; when an element is absorbed from outside and the borrowing religion changes as a result, we have *reconception*. Yet determining which process is at play in any given instance requires an objective knowledge of the history of the religions in question, which is rarely available in the case of Norse paganism.

RITUAL

Rites may relate to many aspects of life – passage from one state to another (such as adolescence), the seasons, commemorations, exchange, communion, affliction, feasting, fasting, politics (Bell 1997: 94). Although ritual has sometimes been seen as a sort of dramatised version of myth, such a view is now rejected; the relationship of ritual to myth is often casual, so the one cannot automatically be used to illuminate the other (G. Kirk 1970: 18). Rites can only be understood by taking their whole social context into account, yet they are not merely reflections of social order (or of mythic order). Bell (1997: 38) argues: “These rites also function to reinforce the social status quo, since temporary inversions or suspensions of the usual order of social relations dramatically acknowledge that order as normative. Hence [...] ritual is the occasion to exaggerate the tensions that exist in the society in order to provide a social catharsis that can simultaneously affirm unity and effect some semblance of it. The goal of ritual as such is to channel the expression of conflict in therapeutic ways so as to restore a functioning social equilibrium.” There has, of course, been a long

¹³ A. Jensen (1963: 233) regards shamanism as magic: “Shamanism – as we encounter it today – is inseparable from acts of volition, which in extreme forms do not even hesitate to make the deity subservient to human will. This is ‘genuine magic’; through it, shamanism attains its exceptional position.” This legitimate viewpoint raises matters of the distinction between religion and magic, which I do not believe it would be beneficial to discuss here. For the present purposes, magic may be regarded as a subclass of religion, one in which ritualistic control of the supernatural plays a significant role.

tradition of social interpretation of ritual (with varying ideas about how ritual reflects society), but this is not the only dimension: ritual clearly also fulfils a religious function, and also participates in the symbolic world of the adherents – the symbols of ritual must be interpreted in terms of the position they occupy within the overall system of symbols operating within the society concerned (ibid. 41). Ritual action may be metaphoric (for example, pouring water stands for rain) or metonymic (a crown stands for royal authority). An interpretation of the socio-mythic structure of ritual is offered by Bouritius (1979: 406–7), who argues that ritual reflects what he terms a “macro-micro-cosmic order relationship”: most societies believe that a macrocosmic primordial chaos is abolished by the establishment of a macrocosmic order, which is realised on the microcosmic level as a human society, the life of which maintains order. Yet there is always a latent tension between hidden chaos and order, so that order is perceived as potential disorder, and all rituals are directed at the continuation and realisation of the everlasting order of macrocosmic and microcosmic relationship. Whilst order itself is everlasting, the forms in which it is realised are in a state of change, so that rituals are to be understood as ordering a continuum, and as fighting the hidden chaos latent in all life. There are three types of rituals, dedicated to *ordering*, *re-ordering* or *new-ordering* the macro-micro-relationship. The first includes rites of passage, which put all members of a community in their just place, and daily rituals needed in ordinary life, such as hunting rituals; the second group includes seasonal rituals, re-ordering society and its concrete environment of place and time on the everlasting model of the original macro-cosmic order, and renewing the powers of nature, as well as rituals directed against latent chaos in everyday life, such as healing or anti-witchcraft rituals; the third group includes for example rituals of new religious movements, which change the order of the macro-micro-cosmic relationship in totally new circumstances unbounded to kinship, time or place.

MYTH

Imagination is central to myth. A myth conveys an unreality that is imagined as real.¹⁴ A myth is a tale – though it may be presented so allusively as to lack almost all narrative thread.¹⁵ Myths may be distinguished from legends, which purport to communicate historical stories, though since gods and supernatural beings intervene in legends, and since legends may be humanised versions of divine myths, the distinction is often difficult to make in practice. Myths are also in principle distinct from folktales, in which the supernatural element is subsidiary and the narrative element

¹⁴ I thank Ursula Dronke for this succinct description.

¹⁵ In Norse poetry, a so-called *kenning* may be an allusion to a mythic or legendary motif (or narrative); for example *Draupnis dagg*, “dew of Draupnir”, designates gold, since the mythological ring Draupnir dripped gold rings from itself. Even in extended poems, the narrative element may be limited: for example, a myth of Þórr is alluded to in *Þórsdrápa*, but rather by means of a series of scenes than a linked narrative.

to the fore; again, since myths often employ folktale elements, particularly for instances of ingenuity, the one class overlaps with the other. Myths are distinguished as being about serious matters – this may be the gods, or the creation of the world, or reflections on deep problems (of society or individuals); nonetheless, among these serious matters may sometimes be counted humour. Myths are not narrative versions of rituals: the connection with rituals is often tenuous and trivial; nor do they necessarily reflect religious practices or beliefs. Myths are usually traditional, and exist as part of cultural heritage, but each retelling alters elements, sometimes drastically, and a non-traditional myth is a theoretical possibility. Interpretations of myth no doubt varied from time to time, place to place, person to person. In Norse, we usually have a myth preserved only once or a few times, and often in a fragmentary or allusive form. Each realisation of a myth is distinct, and we must aim to distinguish between what the poet “inherited” and what he has altered, rearranged or emphasised differently, despite the difficulty of doing so in many instances.¹⁶

It is unacceptable to impose a particular generalised theory on all myth, such as structuralism or social function. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that myths often, if not always, served a function beyond the purely narrative, be it religious, political, initiatory or whatever, and hence the structuring of a particular version may be subject to these external factors.

I assume on the part of the reader an understanding that myths are often expressed through figurative language; I do not undertake any discussion of this topic here, since much has already been written on it. As an example of what I refer to, consider the mental processes at work when a shaman says that his drum is a boat which takes him to the other world; having set off on this path of metaphor, the shaman is then free to elaborate the picture of the boat in question. Both the drum and boat are legitimate objects of study (are both “real”, so to speak) in the context of the present study; it is necessary to be able to perceive the distinction between, for example, physical objects of rituals or concepts such as the structure of the cosmos and mythical objects which explain or materialise them, whilst also discerning the conceptual interpenetration involved.¹⁷ The essential figurativity of myth also allows for, indeed encourages, the figuring of concepts in multiple ways, even within one myth – and the all too frequent attempts to apply “logic” at the expense of imagination to the interpretation of myths leads to an over-systematised and stultified misapprehension of the poetic creativity which engendered and refined them. Thus when, for example, I suggest that Óðr may be viewed both as an *áss* mate to the *vanr* Freyja, and as a realisation of her own inspired soul, *óðr*, it is not because I am hedging my bets as to the “correct” interpretation,

¹⁶ This summary of myth is based largely on G. Kirk (1970: 7–40). He points out the unacceptability of pinpointing the function of myth in general: for example, he attacks Lévi-Strauss’s notion that all myths mediate contradictions, or the ideas of the nature-myth school, and so forth.

¹⁷ Siikala discusses this area at greater length with specific reference to shamanic texts (2002: 49–60, whence the drum/boat example is taken; see also the works referred to there).

but because I believe that ancient poets exploited all the potential readings of the myths they told, and of the words they used in telling them.

EVOLUTIONISM AND CHANGE

Evolutionism is the notion that religions develop along a predictable course from primitive to advanced, and it is usually normative, i.e. each successive stage is regarded as better than the previous. This approach, typical of the nineteenth century,¹⁸ is now defunct;¹⁹ the point of mentioning it is to distinguish it from legitimate approaches to the uncovering of processes of religious change. An example of this is the ecology of religion, which seeks to relate the type of religion found in a society to its relationship to its environment and hence the source of its economy; the correspondence is pertinent particularly in more "primitive" societies (see Hultkrantz 1979).

An important aspect of cultural change is the survival of elements from earlier stages, which may be simple practices, superstitions or aspects of the overall world view, which make statements about reality which are no longer experienced as true. In practice this means that in investigating any religious system, we should expect to find elements which are inconsistent with each other because they reflect different rates of change, or for that matter may reflect different geographical origins.

In the unfolding of religious, and indeed cultural, change there is an interplay of the polarities of creativity and *Urdummheit*. The term *Urdummheit* was used by evolutionists with reference to the supposed state of primordial human ignorance, but is appropriated by A. Jensen (1963: 8) as an apt word for something found at all stages of human development: "it is spiritually uncreative [...] it was in most instances a significant force in the degeneration of originally meaningful phenomena into semantically depleted routines". Thus, whatever stage of a culture we look at, we shall find such depleted routines, as well, perhaps, as newly creative forms of expression.

These points are mentioned as a potential theoretical means of justifying the existence of something like shamanism, which is after all characteristic of socially non-hierarchical hunting societies, as a survival within Norse religion even though the society was clearly hierarchical (and not primarily based on a hunting economy); moreover, while it may have been a meaningful phenomenon in say the tenth century, it could have become fossilised and depleted by the thirteenth.

¹⁸ It was pursued by leading scholars such as Müller, Tylor and Lang.

¹⁹ The fact that certain human activities, for example scientific knowledge, involve progress has the unfortunate effect of persuading people that all human activities progress; religious evolutionism was a crude response to the new thinking of Darwinism. A. Jensen (1963: 34) puts the case well: "It has long been apparent that the idea of progress could contribute statements of only limited value to culture history. Who would apply 'progress' to a comparison of the work of Beethoven, Bach, and Corelli? [...] But the inalienable, individual worth of a culture, which permits no comparison with other cultures, is not fundamentally (and never solely) determined by the sum and the distinctiveness of rational cognitive elements; it lies in a genuine creativity which can never be any the truer, more beautiful, or better, for belonging to a more advanced period."

2. The nature of the sources

The great majority of sources used in the present work are written; I delimit the field of investigation to exclude, other than incidentally, sources of an archaeological nature, or which stem from later oral folk tradition.¹ In the case of Norse texts, they are not only written, but also chiefly literary, or sometimes historical, in nature, and date predominantly to before around 1400. Shamanic texts are mainly of a broadly ethnographic nature, recorded by outsiders observing the practices of shamanic peoples; they are mainly from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. The principal texts which are considered in the discussions are presented in the Sources section in the second volume (which it is intended should be used in conjunction with the discussions throughout); some general observations about the source materials are offered here, but more detailed presentations of the background and interpretation of the individual texts are given, in the main, in the course of discussion later in the volume.

Sources for shamanism

Our sources of information on shamanism are varied.² Records of Siberian shamanism begin in the thirteenth century, but become plentiful only in the seventeenth; full and reliable accounts were made from about 1880, and from the early twentieth century onwards trained ethnologists, sometimes native to shamanic cultures (for example, Banzarov), have undertaken extensive field work, which has, however, been increasingly the taking down of the last vestiges of moribund traditions.

After the Revolution, shamanism continued to be a subject of research by Soviet scientists; they are characterised by a more or less overt political agenda, predictably reflecting a materialist Marxist-Leninist perspective. Whilst a good deal of useful information is given, the ideological approach

¹ For a study which seeks to incorporate far more archaeological material into the discussion of Norse shamanism, see Price (2002). I am not an archaeologist, and whilst accepting that archaeology may sometimes have useful material to offer, I remain generally sceptical that physical objects by themselves, without some piece of writing or other expression of human thought upon which to hang an interpretation, can suggest meanings (as distinct from any utilitarian purpose their form suggests). The classic case is the Scandinavian rock paintings, which appear to be replete with narratives of possibly religious significance, which, however, we can never fathom or define more specifically than to observe, for example, that the sun played a significant part in prehistoric religion; the extensive literature on these is therefore more or less ignored here (see Schjødt 1986, and, for a somewhat more positive view of the usefulness of rock art in comparative religious study, Hultkrantz 1986; there are, admittedly, some interesting contributions to the interpretation of Scandinavian rock art, such as Bradley 2006).

² See Siikala (1978: 77–87) for a detailed account of the history of recording of information on Siberian shamanism.

can sometimes call into question their value as scientific studies, and the self-adulatory tone of some of them, contrasting with what was actually taking place in the Soviet empire (in particular programmes designed to root out all aspects of local cultures), can make them particularly sickening to read. Since throwing off the shackles of Communism research has fortunately continued and is moreover often published in English or German.³

Shamanism has also become, over the last few decades, a major component in general anthropological and religious studies in the West (see, for example, the whole chapter devoted to it, with references to further works, in Morris 2006). Such works often expend considerable effort on matters such as the distinction between trance, ecstasy and possession in an attempt to plumb the religious nature of shamanism, as well as seeking to place the study of shamanism within philosophical schools of anthropology or religious study. These more general considerations lie outside the ambit of the present work.⁴

Since shamanism still survives (just), there are some excellent modern studies based on field work. I would mention as exemplary Jane Atkinson's *The Art and Politics of Wana Shamanship* (1989) and Caroline Humphrey's *Shamans and Elders: Experience, Knowledge, and Power among the Daur Mongols* (1996). To mention some points from Humphrey's work: the emphasis is upon shamanism as one part of the overall culture of the Daur, and indeed determined in its nature by that culture. Not only is a questioning, comprehensive approach taken, but the very assumptions that a Westerner brings to the questioning are themselves questioned. Unfortunately, such approaches are rare, and have only taken place in very recent years, when shamanism has largely disappeared from many areas of the world (particularly from Siberia). Humphrey, however, was in a privileged position, of having a native informant who had spent much of his life in the West, and so could communicate his ideas clearly, and this was supplemented

³ Most of the major Russian research into shamanism has appeared in one form or another in English or German; there are, of course, many studies available only in Russian, but these are generally concerned with what might be termed the minutiae of shamanism, which it is beyond the aim of the present study to consider except in so far as they are relevant to Norse materials. Hence, whenever possible, I use materials which have been published in Western languages, which are more accessible to most scholars of Norse (myself included), both linguistically and in terms of library holdings. For a detailed study of Soviet researchers into shamanism (primarily of the Samoyed peoples) and their political agendas, see Sundström (2008).

⁴ On the issue of trance/ecstasy/possession, it seems clear that in practice shamanism included various degrees of altered consciousness, even within a single tradition, which stretched from an unaltered state to one in which the shaman might appear merely a vessel of the spirits. The determination of the physiological differences between such states is not of relevance in the present study, nor are they used to determine the presence or absence of "true" shamanism. It may be expected that in general possession will involve the summoning of spirits to the shaman to speak through him or her, whereas trance is more likely to involve the shaman's soul undertaking journeys to the spirit realms, but examples such as the Indian Soras, where spirits speak through the shaman, yet the shaman is also believed to travel down to the realm of the dead (Vitebsky 1993: 21), show that any such simple expectations are often likely to be frustrated.

by visits to the area studied, where further interviews were obtained. We cannot question the past in this way, only weigh up fragmentary and biased sources, and our results are bound to be more hesitant. Essentially, the further we go back from the present, the less satisfactory the sources become.

Another way of looking at our records of shamanism is from the point of view of *Rezeptionsgeschichte*: almost all the accounts we have are etic, and therefore represent a view of one type of society (generally a more primitive one) by another (in the main, a modern or early-modern Western one). Whilst this is a fascinating topic, which indeed has spawned a number of important studies (such as Flaherty 1992; Hutton 2001; and, with a focus more upon neo-shamanism, Znamenski 2007), it is concerned essentially with the recipient, non-shamanic, society, and hence lies outside the compass of the present study. There is one area of exception, however. The studies mentioned are almost invariably deficient in that they begin too late, often only with seventeenth-century accounts. Our earliest reasonably detailed Western account of shamanism is from the twelfth century, and it is Norwegian (the *Historia Norwegie*);⁵ a number of other, less significant, accounts of Sámi shamanism also exist in Scandinavian sources before the main records begin in the seventeenth century. My discussion of these sources therefore complements the published studies of the reception of shamanism in the West.

Shamanism was practised by speakers of many language groups. The neighbours of the Norsemen were predominantly Finno-Ugric speakers (the Sámi and the Finns, with other groups scattered in European Russia, through whom the Vikings passed on the way to the eastern Mediterranean). Not all Finno-Ugric speakers had a developed form of shamanism, at least in historical times, but the Sámi certainly did, as did the Ob Ugrians (the Khanty and Mansi). The Hungarians, who split from the other Ob Ugrians in the first millennium AD and migrated south, appear to have preserved vestiges of shamanism, as recorded in Hungarian folklore (see, for example, Oinas 1987, Hoppál in Siikala and Hoppál 1992: 156–68, Voigt 2001), but the intermingling with traditions local to the Carpathian area presents problems of interpretation which, while fascinating, would lead the present study too far astray; hence I use Hungarian materials only sporadically. More obviously relevant to the Norse area are the beliefs of their neighbours the Finns. Finnish⁶ sources present their own problems. Shamanism in Finland survived in a coherent but remnant form, as compared with classic shamanism, and the Finnish sources used in the

⁵ The next oldest Western accounts would appear to be those of Pian del Carpine, who wrote of Tatar practices seen on an expedition of 1246, and Marco Polo's account of Chinese shamanism (written in 1298) (Flaherty 1992: 26–7).

⁶ I use "Finnish" as a short-hand for "Finnish/Karelian": the majority of traditional poetic texts were recorded in Karelia, which spans the Finnish–Russian border, but most of which in fact lies outside Finland. Various dialects were spoken in Karelia, all closely related to more westerly Finnish but distinct in certain respects (Karelian dialects have now largely been displaced by Russian).

present volume are not only shamanic but also mythic, and are mostly poetic; they are thus comparable to Norse sources, preserving ancient motifs in traditional verse. The earliest writer to give information about Finnish gods is the Lutheran reformer Mikael Agricola (1510–57).⁷ Serious collection of mythological poems did not however begin until the late eighteenth century under the inspiration of Gabriel Porthan; there are now some 150,000 poems (mostly variants) in the *Kalevala* metre in the archives of the Finnish Literature Society, of which around 86,800 have been published in the multi-volume *Suomen kansan vanhat runot* (Ancient poems of the Finnish people), now available online (Timonen 2000: 627).⁸ The dating of Finnish poems poses problems. As they belong firmly to an oral tradition, our records merely present a particular version of a poem as sung on one occasion; nonetheless, these poems, considered as an artistic assemblage of themes rather than of specific words, have an origin at a particular point of history. Yet working out what that point may have been is fraught with difficulty. Kuusi proposed a system for establishing broad dates for poems, based on various factors. One of these factors is style (as set out for example in Kuusi 1994a); while Kuusi's analysis of differences in style in traditional poems is interesting, the inferences drawn about what styles are likely to have originated at any historical period are characterised by rather more assertion than evidential proof;⁹ moreover,

⁷ On the collection of Finnish folk beliefs and poems see Virtanen and Dubois (2000: ch. 1), Hautala (1954, 1958); a brief account is also given in *FFPE* (pp. 27–38). Although it scarcely constitutes a full scholarly edition, I refer to *FFPE* for versions of relevant poems when possible, since it provides a fairly substantial collection in Finnish, with English translation, of some of the main Finnish poems (including, on occasion, variants), as well as brief introductions and commentary on each. There is, of course, a huge literature in Finnish which informs these presentations, some of which is listed in *FFPE*, and which I refer to when it appears enlightening on points under discussion. One of the main earlier anthologies of traditional poetry in Finnish is Haavio (1980, 2nd edn), which has valuable discussions of mythological background, though it is rather outdated (being written in 1952), presents the poems in standardised Finnish without ascription of singer, place or collector, lacks a line-by-line commentary, and does not discuss social context or purpose.

⁸ For readers not conversant with Finnish, it is worth pointing out that as most poems exist in many – sometimes hundreds – of variants, the selection of 148 poems edited and translated in *FFPE* in fact presents a far larger proportion of the total number of major narrative and mythological themes (as opposed to poem variants) than might be apparent.

⁹ As an example of the problematic nature of the methodology of suggesting dates may be mentioned comparison with Norse poems (for example Kuusi 1949: 348); these are themselves often of uncertain date, and the stylistic interpretations he uses, by scholars such as Finnur Jónsson and Erik Noreen, have of course been subjected to half a century of criticism. In any case, the co-existence of stylistic features in two traditions only weakly suggests contemporaneity of these features, even if it can be proved; in fact, it is unlikely that Finnish oral poetry underwent similar chronologically determined stylistic developments to Norse skaldic verse, from which it is utterly distinct in almost every aspect. Kuusi's notions of what constitutes a style would need greater space than can be afforded here; it is simply worth pointing out that, valuable as a typological analysis of features such as syntax is, it is impossible to assign particular syntactic features to particular periods without external corroborating evidence. Kuusi (1978: 223) also suggests a line of development of the *Kalevala*-type verse form, which he relates broadly to actual dates: but this chronological scheme is based on now discredited notions of when the Finns occupied given parts of Finland, and needs wholly reconsidering.

the categorisation of the features of a particular style derive in large part from the subjective opinions of the modern scholar – it is impossible to demonstrate that any traditional folk-poetry singer would accept them.¹⁰ There is a clear need, which has still not been met, to attempt to delineate the stylistic features of individual singers, of particular communities, and of the whole *Kalevala*-type verse area, before any firmer arguments can be drawn. There are, of course, many other factors involved in assigning a date to traditional poems;¹¹ nonetheless, the need for a re-examination of some of the arguments is worth noting (to some extent, more recent scholarship, as exemplified by Siikala 2002, seeks to establish broader cultural epochs as likely to have given rise to elements within the poems, without being precise either about dates or about individual poems' provenances). Despite such doubts, it is, in any case, clear that, as in Norse poetry, ancient pre-Christian elements survived to varying extents in the Finnish poems; Siikala (1986a: 224) for example is of the opinion that "some mythical poems and the so-called adventure poetry contain so many features referring to pre-medieval cultural milieux that it is impossible to imagine that folk poetry singers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Karelian cultures invented them – especially since no corresponding tradition in prose has been found to exist": it is these ancient elements from pre-medieval cultural milieux which are of use in the present study, whatever the absolute age of the compositions. The slow adoption of Christianity means that the gap between a pagan origin and the time of recording may not be as great as might be imagined.

Norse and other sources for Germanic traditions

The scope of sources discussed here is somewhat wider than purely Norse texts, as analogous materials are drawn from other Germanic and classical writings, but the Norse material forms the focus.

Some evidence on Germanic religious practice is to be gleaned from classical sources as ancient as Strabo (7 BC) and Tacitus (AD 98);¹² post-

¹⁰ These comments are not meant as a critique of the "Finnish method" of analysing folk poetry (and folklore) taken as a whole, as set out in some detail in Kuusi (1980). The method seeks to apply logical methods to determine the dissemination and development of poetic redactions through examination of recorded variants, and in this respect relative datings may emerge, but it is notable that Kuusi only mentions dating within the context of the section on stylistics, a section which lacks any detail, and where the reader is referred for more discussion to the introduction to Kuusi (1963) – where, in turn, scarcely any more detail is given.

¹¹ An example in Finnish of the detailed use of a wide array of arguments over the date and dissemination of the *sampo* poems is found in Kuusi (1949); he shows that some later poems deal with datable events, though none of these are relevant to this study. Some mythological poems in the *sampo* cycle existed in groups of variants on either side of historical borders (between Sweden and Russia), indicating an origin prior to the establishment of the border, and subsequent differentiation on either side (ibid. 326–35): however, such datable events, which merely form a *terminus ante quem*, again fall too late to be relevant for the present study.

¹² The dates represent the publication of Strabo's *Geography* and Tacitus's *Germania* (Pauly

classical sources in Latin such as the late-eighth-century Langobard Paulus Diaconus's *Historia Langobardorum* are also made use of. Chronicles and histories, notably the twelfth-century Norwegian *Historia Norwegie*, are occasionally cited. Arabic sources give factual evidence of the practices, including sometimes the religious practices, of the Rus, who were in origin Swedish Vikings who traded through modern Russia; the most important such source for the present study is the account of a Rus funeral in 922 by Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān.¹³

As noted, most of the written sources in Germanic languages used in the present study are *literary*: they are artistic compositions whose main aim was not the expression of religious worship – religious texts are almost entirely non-existent – nor, usually, merely to recount the events of a myth, but to select and remodel them. They were composed for an audience that already understood the necessary religious or mythological background, as well as the ways that complex artistic artefacts like skaldic verse work. To go into further details of literary theory would take us too far beyond the topic of this work; many works already deal with this topic within the Norse field, such as the recent study of Clunies Ross (2005) on Old Norse poetry and poetics (where further references may be found).

One obvious fact about almost all Norse records (some early runic inscriptions form an exception) is that they were written down long after the introduction of Christianity, even when they were composed, which not all ostensibly “pagan” poems were, before the conversion. The reasons for the survival of ancient myth and legend in a Christian society is an interesting one, but is not relevant here;¹⁴ however, it is relevant to bear in

1964–75, *s.vv.* “Strabo” and “Tacitus”). As Tacitus is the earliest extant author to give any detailed information about Germanic peoples, the reliability of his account has come under scrutiny; it is generally agreed that his picture is coloured by influences from his own Roman culture, but the extent to which this invalidates what he says is a contentious issue. The matter needs a more thorough discussion than appears to have been undertaken anywhere; my own stance is to err on the side of accepting him as reliable (but being aware of a certain degree of distortion due to classical influences or rhetorical considerations). Jankuhn (1966) argues that in general archaeology confirms his reliability, and in the field of beliefs, McKinnell (for example 2005: 51–2) also considers him generally reliable.

¹³ Questions of various sorts arise when dealing with such sources. How far is a Moslem writer’s understanding of pagan practices reliable? Thus, for instance, the “angel of death”, while doubtless an actual female officiant in the ritual described, cannot have been conceived as an angel by the Scandinavian Rus, to whom the concept was alien. How far were Rus practices actually Scandinavian, as opposed to Slavic (or Bulgar, or Finnic)? Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān’s account is analysed from this perspective by Schjødt (2007), who concludes (146): “There seems to be no doubt that the ideological framework behind this funeral ritual is likely to have existed among the pre-Christian Scandinavians, and even if there may have been no funeral ritual proper carried out in exactly the same way all over Scandinavia, it would be a serious mistake not to use ibn Faḍlān’s description as a sort of model when trying to reconstruct such rituals from archaeological material or from texts that are defective in some way.” However, while Schjødt offers an excellent analysis of points which may be paralleled in Norse myths, he offers no consideration of possible parallels in Slavic, Finnic or Bulgar traditions, so the question cannot be described as settled.

¹⁴ See, for example, McKinnell (2007*a*), who, among other things, argues (49) that “What I would finally like to suggest, however, is that eddic poetry on mythological subjects was preserved (and continued to be composed) mainly because, like the works of Ovid, it could be used to investigate some of the personal, social, and moral issues that faced Icelandic

mind that texts which were themselves ancient were subject to alteration within the Christian milieu that preserved them, and that, given that certain ancient pagan elements did survive in these ancient texts, it was possible for antiquarian-minded Christians to fabricate pseudo-pagan texts. The opposition between paganism and Christianity is but one aspect of the development of religious notions, and their expression, over the centuries. Norse paganism itself was certainly no monolith, unchanging over time and place, and our surviving monuments doubtless represent traditions (or fragments of traditions) of different geographical and chronological origin. Yet, with some few exceptions, it is generally difficult or impossible to trace the date or place of origin of pagan motifs. The uncovering of parallels, for example from classical sources, can sometimes suggest that a motif is ancient; yet even if a motif is in itself very ancient, its context, and hence its specific meaning, may nonetheless vary greatly. Unless otherwise indicated, any suggestion in the present work of the existence of a pagan Norse motif (including those which are arguably shamanic) is intended to place the motif in the religious belief system of some (not necessarily all) Scandinavians of the few centuries preceding conversion, with the implication (sometimes made explicit by reference to more ancient analogues) that such motifs are often derived from yet more ancient and centuries-old tradition, but also with the understanding that a countless line of poets and other tellers will each have used such motifs for their own specific purposes.

Some of the main types of Norse sources are:¹⁵

Skaldic poetry. The extant verse dates back as far as the ninth century and it continued to be composed for several centuries; since the verse-style flourished for long after the conversion, comparison of the old and the new provides good relative dating evidence. It is commonly by named authors, and can be fairly accurately dated (often to within a few years). While written down in many cases several centuries later, the texts are on the whole reliable, representing something close to the original composition, since the strict metrical requirements prevent serious corruption, and facilitate emendation when corruption does occur.¹⁶ On the other hand surviving compositions are rarely more than fragmentary, as often they have been preserved as illustrations of poetics or of history, not as complete poems; in Snorri's time (the early thirteenth century) it is clear that the skaldic corpus was substantially more complete, and he makes use of sources, and refers without citation to others, now lost to us. A great deal of skaldic verse consists of so-called *lausavísur*, "loose verses" – odd verses inserted into sagas

secular aristocrats". In another vein, Nordal (2001, esp. ch. 1) argues that skaldic verse continued to be found useful as a vernacular equivalent of some of the complex Latin verse discussed in the schools, that is it offered a sought-after intellectual training.

¹⁵ McKinnell (2005: ch. 3) presents a somewhat fuller discussion of Norse sources relating to myth or religion.

¹⁶ This statement admittedly masks a good deal of debate on the issue, as well as varying levels of textual corruption between poems; for further discussion, see for example the earlier chapters of Clunies Ross (2005).

and ascribed to early skalds, but often by the saga writers themselves, or their immediate predecessors: such verses are of uncertain (often late) date.¹⁷ Skaldic verse is rarely concerned primarily with communicating facts (which may be few and far between), but with clever, ornate poetic expression within strict metrical and other rules. Deriving actual pieces of information from skaldic verse is therefore fraught with difficulty.

A stanza may be given as an example of skaldic diction from the earliest preserved poem, the ninth-century *Ragnarsdrápa* by Bragi Boddason (*Skj B*, 4, st. 16); the verse recounts the god Þórr's fishing of the mighty serpent which, lying in the depths of the ocean, encircled the world:

Vaðr lá Viðris arfa
vilgi slakr, es rakðisk,
á Eynæfis öndri,
Jormungandr at sandi.

The fishing-line of Viðrir's heir lay not at all slack – as unwound – on Eynæfir's snow-shoe – Jormungandr on the sand.

Here, Viðrir is a name for Óðinn, whose son is Þórr; Eynæfir is a sea-king's name, used generically as a designation of the giant from whose boat ("snow-shoe", emphasising giants' association with the barren cold) Þórr is fishing; Jormungandr is the world serpent. Its unwinding on the beach is presented dramatically as a syntactic obtrusion into the statement relating Þórr's angling.

Eddic poetry. The separation of Norse verse into skaldic and Eddic types is somewhat arbitrary, and some poems are in-between cases, but generally skaldic verse follows stricter metrical rules than Eddic, and is often by named poets, and associated with particular events or people, whereas Eddic is always anonymous and is "traditional" in nature, dealing with more general topics of myth or legend, and it does not, in general, engage in complex kennings (poetic periphrases); the justification for distinguishing skaldic and Eddic verse is further discussed in Clunies Ross (2005: 21–8). As an example, stanza 22 of *Grímnismál* will serve:

Valgrind heitir, er stendr velli á heilög fyr helgom durom; forn er sú grind, en þat fáir vito, hvé hon er í lás lokin.	"Gate of the slain" is its name, that stands on the plain, holy before the holy door; ancient is that gate, but few know how it is locked.
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The reference to Valgrind is unique, but it may be related to other gates as boundaries of the otherworld, such as Nágrindr, "Corpse gates" (*Skírnismál* 35, *Lokasenna* 63); the actual information in the stanza, however, is given

¹⁷ See for example Marold (1992) for a consideration of skaldic verse as a source for Norse religion; she makes the important point that the whole of the tenth century should be viewed as one of transition to Christianity – and in fact Christianity was an influential force in the North even before this.

in a straightforward manner, and the word order is almost prosaic. The contrast with skaldic diction should be clear.

The largest collection of Eddic poetry is found in the Codex Regius (GkS 2365 4^{to}), written down in Iceland around 1250–1300.¹⁸ There is considerable debate about the nature and dating of Eddic poetry (which I consider somewhat more fully below), but the outer limits are generally recognised (for example, Clunies Ross 2005: 5) as the ninth and fourteenth centuries, though the mythic or legendary motifs may well go back to much earlier dates.¹⁹ One criterion of date is the extent to which the particular poem shows an understanding of pagan myth or religious practice;²⁰ thus *Völuspá* for example shows a depth of understanding of pagan practices, yet within a Christian mould: hence its composition must be placed near to the end of official paganism in Iceland in 1000.²¹ On the other hand *Fjölsvinnsmál*

¹⁸ Lindblad (1954: 241, 325) dates the manuscript to c. 1270 (arguing also that it was based on earlier antecedents from before c. 1240); however, the margin of uncertainty of date is necessarily fairly wide, as Stefán Karlsson confirmed to me (personal communication), since we do not possess a sufficient number of Icelandic manuscripts from this period to make a closer dating possible.

¹⁹ Fidjestøl (1999) devotes a whole book to the question of dating Eddic poetry; the work was left unfinished at his death, with some significant topics left undiscussed, such as the use to be made of skaldic verse in dating Eddic poetry, and the question of loans and allusions. Over all, whilst the work maps out some of the main areas of the topic, it cannot be described as furthering our understanding greatly; we encounter statements such as the following (187–8), which is a *petitio principii* (since it asserts a position about the nature of pre-written Eddic verse for which we have no evidence): “In the very moment that Eddic poetry was written down, a metamorphosis took place, in which it was transferred from one type of literature into another, radically different from, or even directly opposite to, what it had been before, namely a fixed text.” For a briefer discussion on the dating of Eddic poetry, see Söderberg (1986).

²⁰ The matter is, of course, more complex than this, since the identification of a pagan element only illustrates that the passage in which it is contained is likely to be of pagan origin (if it is not a later fabrication), without implication either for the rest of the poem, into which it may, for example, be an interpolation, or for the age of the specific wording in which it is expressed, since this too may change. It is possible to adduce arguments based on other criteria to suggest that at least some poems (notably most of *Völuspá*) are, in fact, coherent wholes, though other poems (for example *Grímnismál*) do not have great artistic cohesion. The dating of poems such as *Lokasenna* is a contentious issue, illustrating the difficulty of arriving at anything like a firm conclusion even on some of the basic questions concerning the nature of our sources; the poem shows a depth of knowledge about myths whose basis in pagan religious belief can be paralleled by comparative research, as pointed out by U. Dronke (1989), who also, among other things, notes the fact that while we have poetic compositions from around the thirteenth century, none of them in the least resembles *Lokasenna*, nor do we have any evidence from this time for any archaising “school” able to produce such a well-wrought fabrication of paganism which we would have to suppose the poem to be (this is not to argue, of course, that the particular form in which the poem is preserved has not been altered, and possibly its content edited to some small extent, since its date of composition). Yet other factors point to a not particularly early date, in that there are possible allusions to other Eddic poems, and the frequency of the expletive particle places the poem chronologically tenth out of thirty-one in the Codex Regius (Fidjestøl 1999: 224) – though the validity of this factor as a criterion of date is itself open to debate. *Lokasenna* certainly alludes to myths we no longer have in poetic form, but other Eddic, and indeed skaldic, poems could well have been extant in say the twelfth century where such myths were presented. (On the dating issue here, see also Ruggerini 1979: 154–62; Söderberg 1986: 56–61; McKinnell 1987–8.)

²¹ A similar dating applies if it was composed in Norway, where paganism officially ended

for example is a composition that makes widespread use of extant Eddic sources in a way that is literary and creative but does not reflect any specific pagan belief or religious reference (though it may preserve allusions to older beliefs otherwise lost from record): hence a late date of *c.* 1200–50 is to be assigned to it (P. Robinson 1991: 397–406).

Snorri Sturluson's works. The works of (or ascribed to) the Icelander Snorri Sturluson (†1241), in particular his *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* (and to some extent other parts of *Heimskringla*, of which *Ynglinga saga* forms the first section) contain much mythological knowledge culled from earlier poetic sources, which on occasion are cited; Snorri is sometimes the only preserver of a mythological or religious record as a result of the loss of his source since his time,²² but also sometimes, it would seem, because he has invented the feature himself.²³ Whilst Snorri is cited frequently, I use his work as a primary source only in instances when other, earlier poetic sources are not extant.²⁴

Sagas and other prose sources; most used are *Íslendingasögur* (family sagas of Icelanders) and *fornaldarsögur* (“sagas of ancient days”), with occasional reference also to other types such as *riddarasögur* (chivalric sagas). These date from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries (and some even later). They make considerable use of pagan themes, but these are often the creation of the authors made on the basis of increasingly vague traditions of actual paganism; nonetheless, arguably genuine elements do survive.

Laws of Norway and Iceland (and occasionally other Scandinavian areas). Laws were originally handed down orally, but began to be committed to writing soon after the arrival of Christianity, and underwent many revisions thereafter. Icelandic laws rarely mention anything connected with paganism, but the mainland Scandinavian codes have slightly more.

a few years earlier than in Iceland. The apocalyptic theme of *Völuspá* argues for a dating of *c.* 1000. Christianity was not, of course, necessarily adopted wholesale and deeply by the whole population in one fell swoop, but my position is that its official adoption would have weakened the understanding of pagan religious elements within a couple of generations, so a date very much later than mid-eleventh century for *Völuspá* (leaving aside the millennium arguments) would appear unlikely. Moreover, McKinnell (1994: 107–8) has shown that the poem must almost certainly have been composed between 962–5 and 1046–65, since *Völuspá* mentions two *valkyrjur*, Skögul and Geirskögul, which appears to be a misunderstanding of Eyvindr Finnsson's *geir-Skögul*, “spear-Skögul”, as a separate being from Skögul in *Hákonarmál* 12 (*Skj* B, 58), composed around 962–5; the *terminus ante quem* is given by Arnórr jarlaskáld's allusion to *Völuspá* in *Porfinnsdrápa* 24 (*Skj* B, 321) when he mentions the sun darkening and the land sinking into the sea (cf. *Völuspá* 54, «Sól tér sortna, sígr fold í mar», “The sun starts to blacken, land sinks into sea”).

²² Of course, if Snorri alone records something, we can go no further than to deem it *likely* that it is a part of older tradition on the basis of other relevant information; an example is the information in *Ynglinga saga* ch. 4 that the *vanir* became the *blótgöð*, “sacrificial gods”, among the deities.

²³ For example, that the three maidens who determine men's fates were *nornir* who came from a hall (rather than a sea) beneath the world tree.

²⁴ Clunies Ross (1994: 32) also notes Snorri's selectiveness: “When pagan material did not accord with his Christian explanatory model, he tended to omit it, so the apparent comprehensiveness of the *Edda* is to some extent an illusion.” Examples include the myth of Óðinn on the tree (recounted in *Hávamál* 138–9 (48c)) and Gullveig (recounted in *Völuspá* 21).

As a good deal of the earliest evidence for pagan practices is found in sources of an originally oral type, it is worth considering briefly what the nature of these sources is. Extreme oralists take the Norse poems as recordings of a performance of a poem, and each performance is viewed as an autonomous recreation of the “text”, of no greater or lesser value than any other performance. The amount of variation between performances is accepted as being potentially great. The aim of reconstructing the original text, by consideration of likely interpolations and so forth, is rejected. This is scarcely an acceptable approach to Norse texts, and it moreover represents the imposition on our sources of a particular theory of orality derived from outside the Norse field, against the evidence proffered by those sources, and is at the least disingenuous in its ignorance of the clearly scribal history behind the recorded versions of texts;²⁵ moreover, it seems to me an uninformed approach, given the recognition afforded by scholars working on indisputably oral traditions that each tradition is different, and values memorisation to varying degrees, sometimes deeply (see the contributions to Honko 2002, to pick but one example).

The situation is in fact bound to have been a complex one; a scribe, and before him a singer in the oral tradition – and singer and scribe may on certain occasions have been one and the same person – could alter a text either through carelessness, or deliberately, or else because variation was a natural part of re-realising a song. At the beginning of the written period some “recreation” of lines in correct metrical form is likely to have taken place as a result of the scribe’s familiarity with variants found in the oral tradition interplaying with failings in short-term memory of the text. The likelihood of change occurring in the transmission of a particular poem can only be assessed on an individual basis; as noted, Eddic poems are more likely to have incorporated changes than skaldic because of their looser structure, but also the more general point can be made that carefully worked texts are either less likely to suffer change (since their corruption is more patent), or if they do suffer it, we are more able to detect it; for example, had a “Húsatal” of extra divine dwellings been added to those already presented in *Grímnismál* we might well be none the wiser,

²⁵ On the Codex Regius, Lindblad (1954: 233–5, 247–53, 325–7) has shown that several stages of written development may be discerned, going back to before 1240, and including two distinct histories, of the mythological poems on the one hand and the heroic on the other (which appear to have been united into one collection only shortly before or as a result of the composition of the Codex Regius collection); it is therefore not unlikely that the poems go back in written form to about 1200, at around which date, indeed, the learned monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson in the monastery of Þingeyrar composed the poem *Merlinusspá* (*Skj B₂* 10–45), which quotes from Eddic poems, including *Grípisspá*, itself probably a written composition from the start – the inference Lindblad draws (1978: 22) being that there was already a written collection of Eddic poems available to Gunnlaugr. Of course, given that the Eddic poems do not appear to come from a tradition which espoused the sort of fluidity found for example in Finnish oral poetry, it is possible that Gunnlaugr’s source (if we accept Lindblad’s arguments for the borrowing) existed in a fixed oral form. Arguments can be made either way for the existence of written forms of Eddic poems between about 1190 and 1240, but they appear to have achieved something approaching the form in which they are recorded in the Codex Regius during this period.

whereas the Dvergatal, or list of dwarfs, of *Völuspá* is clearly an irrelevant interpolation in a subtle poem with important plays on key words, choice of myths, and structure.

In fact we only rarely have different versions of texts on which arguments about variation can be based; when we do, it seems to me that the vast majority of difference can best be explained as a result of scribal, not oral, change (whereas, for example, the many variants in Finnish traditional poems are almost entirely oral in origin). For example, the supposed evidence of the Hauksbók version of *Völuspá* as indicating an oral Eddic tradition, with widely variant versions of this and other poems existing well into the fourteenth century, may be dismissed. Ursula Dronke, in her edition of the poem (in *PE II*), has demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that all the Hauksbók variants, barring an occasional line possibly introduced from other popular verse, can be explained as scribal confusion of a broken-up text and lost pieces.²⁶ Moreover, while Snorri in the 1220s to 1230s clearly had access to a wide range of both Eddic and skaldic poetry now lost to us, the compiler of the Codex Regius some fifty or so years later did not – he was unable to correct errors or gaps in his written exemplars from any oral versions; the tradition, at least in the areas to which this scribe had access, had by then become both attenuated, and perhaps purely written (though no doubt the oral tradition survived longer in some areas than others – we may ponder, for example, whether the presence of *Grottasöngur* in its entirety within manuscripts SR and T of Snorri's *Edda*, as opposed to only the opening stanza in C, derives from an immediate oral tradition later than Snorri's time).²⁷

Whilst there was bound to be a certain amount of variation between performances of poems in the oral period, our surviving evidence suggests that memorisation of a notionally fixed text was the main principle followed; possibly this may be a reflection of the rise in the ninth century or earlier of the strictly structured skaldic verse, which of its nature demands

²⁶ Quinn (1990) attempts to see the Hauksbók version as a legitimate alternative reflecting variations in oral tradition, but Dronke's arguments that the version derives (apart from a few stray lines imported from oral poems) solely from confusion in a scriptorium are much more persuasive, and tip the balance towards literacy rather than orality being the more important component in the transmission of Eddic verse in the thirteenth century.

²⁷ Quinn (2000) provides a useful survey of orality and literacy in Iceland from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, though some of the points she makes call for more detailed and careful consideration: for example, the fact that verse in Eddic metres was still being composed in the mid-thirteenth century (and indeed, in an antiquarian manner, even later) does not mean, for example, that the poems found in the Codex Regius were still being re-realised in an oral fashion, or indeed that they were known at all in an oral form, at the time the Codex was compiled. The assumption Quinn notes as being fairly commonly espoused by Old Norse scholars that skaldic verses found cited in various prose texts derive from immediate oral tradition may also be questioned (which is not to say it need necessarily be discounted, however): though we have no direct evidence of a skaldic collection equivalent to the Eddic Codex Regius, the erstwhile existence of such a manuscript is eminently possible – if the Codex Regius had happened to perish, for example on one of the many ships transporting manuscripts from Iceland to Denmark (which were indeed wrecked on occasion), our view of the interplay of orality and literacy in the Eddic tradition would be quite different, which should act as a warning when speaking of the skaldic corpus.

memorisation rather than improvisation for its survival.²⁸

In dealing with Norse materials we are confronted with the problem of Christianity. Adhering to my standpoint as set out above, the earliest records antedate the official introduction of the new faith (around 1000), though not its influence. I take as my starting point that familiarity with the old beliefs waned with the coming of the new; hence greater familiarity indicates greater proximity, usually in time, but potentially also in place, to pagan belief and practice. Whilst all relevant factors must be considered, and may alter our assessment, in general I believe that this may be used as a principle of dating, though it can scarcely be anything but vague as our only point of comparison is the small corpus of dated skaldic poems, which indeed do not necessarily lend themselves easily to such comparison.

It is possible to take the line that if we wish to uncover anything reliable about Norse paganism, our study should be confined to poems definitely composed in the tenth century and before, a line pursued for example by Marold (1992). This seems to me a deceptively simplistic temptation. Several very obvious factors militate against such an approach. We do not have direct access to any actual pagan verbal material, except a few enigmatic runic inscriptions: the early skaldic poems were all written down in (roughly) the thirteenth century, and were therefore the ones chosen for preservation by a society long Christian; the centuries of oral transmission before their recording will have had some effect on them, and vicissitudes subsequent to their recording have further reduced their number through the loss of manuscripts. Even if we had a more complete corpus of pagan skaldic verse, the view of religion we would gain would be biased, since most skaldic verse is in the form of praise poems dedicated to warrior princes, where it is no surprise, for example, to find that the dominant god is Þórr; religion outside this rarefied setting could well have differed significantly. We must, certainly, be ever on guard when using the much fuller sources composed in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, but when their reliability as transmitters of lore from the pagan period is taken into account sufficiently, I do not believe we end up with a picture of paganism which is any more distorted than if we chose to ignore them, and is certainly a lot fuller. Marold objects to a structuralist tendency to ignore the nature of sources and reconstruct meanings on the basis of disparate pieces of information. The present study is not structuralist, in any classic Lévi-Straussian sense for example, but I do use what may be called basically structuralist arguments at various points; I have attempted to bear in mind the likely reliability of the sources employed in each case, but essentially any such reconstruction of a myth's meaning or structure must remain tentative. More problematic to me seems the implication, such as may be inferred from the ability to reconstruct such structures, that these structures were indeed some sort of fixed mythological entity in the pagan period, whereas the truth will certainly have been that many

²⁸ I consider the oral/written problem in Old Norse texts more fully in Tolley (2002a); see also Lönnroth (1971), J. Harris (1983).

inconsistent features existed alongside each other, with poets and others making their own varying structures and deriving their own meanings within the kaleidoscope of living tradition; unfortunately, we can only work with what we have, which may to a great extent leave the impression of a monolithic mythic structure which never existed.

TEXTS ON MAGIC

Adam of Bremen, discussing the early-eleventh-century Norwegian king St Óláfr in *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* II.57, claims that this righteous monarch rid the land of sorcerers, but then switches to the present tense to intimate that Norway still exceeded other lands in the number of such monsters:

Dicunt eum inter cetera virtutum opera magnum zelum Dei habuisse, ut maleficos de terra disperderet, quorum numero cum tota barbaries exundet, precipue vero Norvegia regio monstris talibus plena est. Nam et divini et augures et magi et incantatores ceterique satellites Antichristi habitant ibi, quorum prestigiis et miraculis infelices animae ludibrio demonibus habentur.

They say that among other works of virtue he had a great zeal for God, so that he evicted sorcerers from the land: the whole heathen world overflows with their number, but Norway in particular is full of such monsters. For diviners and soothsayers and magicians and spell-casters and other satellites of Antichrist dwell there, by whose tricks and wonders unfortunate souls are made a laughing-stock of demons.

The medieval sources – could we but take them at their word – bear out the general truth of Adam’s statement.²⁹ But it is not my intention to examine all magic as recorded in medieval Scandinavian records (see Dillmann 2006 for a wider presentation of magicians and their art in primarily Icelandic prose sources), but only such as has attracted attention through its apparent similarity to shamanic practices. Any such separating off of one sort of magic is bound to be arbitrary to some extent, but the sources themselves name a particular sort of magic *seiðr*, and it is this which has attracted most attention for its shamanic character, and which is hence dealt with in most detail here.

The practice is attributed to both gods and men. The practitioner of *seiðr* is called by various names, most commonly “*seiðr* man/woman”, but also, in the case of women, *volva* – though the activities of the *volva* are not (explicitly, at least) confined to *seiðr*; other terms such as *spákona*, “prophecy woman”, *vísindakona*, “wise woman”, and periphrases such

²⁹ Adam too, of course, is one of these medieval sources in question, which cannot be relied on, generally speaking, to give a true picture of magic on the ground. Adam had his own reasons for misrepresenting or exaggerating the lack of Christian observance in Norway, a country which for some time had been converted, but which was not (yet) under the control of Adam’s German master, the would-be patriarch of the North, Archbishop Adalbert. Yet there may be some grain of truth in his statement.

as a woman who is *fróð ok framsýn*, “wise and foresighted”, also occur. As McKinnell (2005: 95–6) points out, there is practically no distinction, such as between divinatory and efficatory roles, in the use of the terms. I do not offer any comprehensive survey of the many terms, usually compound words, connected to *seiðr* or other magic: doing so would tell us nothing more than that the writers of mainly thirteenth-century works of fiction could easily come up with whatever term seemed appropriate to them in a given context – we have no reason to suppose such terms derive from ancient tradition; moreover, the terms are considered by Dillmann (2006, *passim*), and, gathered together in a more convenient manner, by Price (2002: ch. 3).

It is clear that although *seiðr* remained distinct as a term, the practices referred to do not necessarily form a discrete type of magic, at least by the time of most of the prose texts which mention *seiðr*; an overall examination of magical practices (which it is impossible to undertake here: but see Dillmann 2006, which surveys this whole area) would reveal that the assigning of the title *seiðr* to any particular example is more or less random. For example, bad weather is attributed to *seiðr* (or at least to performing on a *seiðr*-platform) in *Laxdæla saga* ch. 35 (102), but in *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 40 Þorgríma galdrakinn is paid to cause bad weather, without *seiðr* being mentioned; the same is true of Gríma in *Fóstbræðra saga* ch. 10, who uses old chants she had learnt in her childhood to change the wind to help her protégé Kolbákr (see Dillmann 2006: 91–3).

The etymology of the word *seiðr* is unclear, and hence it is impossible to lay too much emphasis on interpretations of possible prehistories. A brief survey may, however, be of some value (derived from *AeW*, s.v. “*seið*”; recently Hall 2007: 119 presents effectively the same etymology). The word may be related to Old English *ælfsiden*, “elf magic”; along with the fact that in Old Norse a related strong (hence probably ancient) verb *síða*, “to practise *seiðr*”, is found, this suggests at least a fairly ancient Germanic heritage. Related may also be Welsh *hud*, “magic” (< **soito*-). Other suggestions listed by de Vries seem implausible, in particular the suggestion of a connection with Finnish *soida*, “to ring”;³⁰ there does not appear to be any Finno-Ugric origin to the word.³¹ An original meaning of “bind” for the root from which *seiðr* derives is possible – it fits well with designations elsewhere of sorcery, for example Latin *fascinum*, “evil eye, bewitchment”, alongside *fascia*, “band, bandage”, and would suggest a binding by the practitioner either of spirits to her power, or else of human victims under a spell.

The earliest mention in skaldic verse of *seiðr* is in Kormákr’s *Sigurðardrápa*, c. 960 (98); thereafter it is mentioned fairly frequently, though not in skaldic

³⁰ The dentals in the Finnish forms cited are deceptive: *-da* is simply an infinitive ending, and the root is *soi-*, which immediately bears less similarity to the Norse word.

³¹ Karsten (1955: 11) proposes a connection with Sámi *sieidi*, but the difference in meaning poses problems, and later scholars do not favour any etymological link: a *sieidi* is a natural object perceived as in some way abnormal – for example, an unusually formed rock – and hence regarded as sacred; offerings are made to *sieidi*.

verse, and only rarely in Eddic – but the Eddic texts include *Lokasenna* and *Völuspá*, both of which contain much archaic mythic (and potentially ritual) material (on which see in particular U. Dronke 1989: 106–8).³² Most of the sources mentioning *seiðr* are prose sagas, mainly of the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, of which a high proportion are fantastical *fornaldarsögur*. On the whole, the corpus of texts represents a motley collection scoring fairly low on the scale of reliability for providing information about an actual practice; some of the texts are of considerable literary interest, however (though many are frankly not).

All the sources on *seiðr* were assembled and cited by Strömbäck (1935, with supplement by Almqvist 2000), but it seems beneficial to give them all in the Sources section of the present study, along with an English translation, as it is otherwise difficult to gain an overall view of the material and what sort of sources the term occurs in. Were a wider survey to be produced of all references to magical activities, it would not, I think, differ greatly in terms of distribution among these various types of source, but it would be considerably larger.

The question of how far literary sources' mentions of magic indicate the real presence of magical practices in medieval Scandinavia is a matter of importance. The collection of sources on *seiðr* cited in the Sources section will demonstrate that on an axis ranging from the factual historical to the fantastic imaginative, the occurrences of *seiðr* are very much concentrated towards the latter end; the study by Boyer (1975) on pagan survivals in *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary histories) such as *Sturlunga saga* is therefore particularly valuable. There is little doubt that of the various types of medieval saga these come closest to revealing what life in thirteenth-century Iceland actually involved at around the time when most of our literary sources were composed, or (in the case of originally oral poetry) recorded. Among the significant points Boyer makes are the numbers of occurrences of various pagan features known from other sources:

gods	many mentions, esp. in verse, but no religious value is attached to gods.
place names implying cult	about a score (as opposed to many in <i>Íslendingasögur</i>)
day/season names	almost none
festivals	survive, but toasts etc. are christianised: no actual pagan elements are found

³² The verse occurrences of *seiðr* and related words are listed by McKinnell (2005: 96–7). *Seiðr* occurs twice in a literal sense (*Völuspá* 22 (125); *Orms þáttir Stórolfssonar* ch. 6 (107)), and four times in skaldic verse in kennings for battle ((83)). *Seiðkona* does not occur in verse, and *spákona*, “prophecy woman”, and *spámær*, “prophecy maiden”, once each in allegedly tenth-century stanzas (Kormákr, *lv* 53 (*Skj* B, 82); Þórarinn máhlíðingr, *lv* 7 (*Skj* B, 107), in a kenning for missiles, “dangerous prophecy maidens” of battle). The verb *síða* or *seiða* occurs six times: twice in mythic Eddic poems (*Völuspá* 22; *Lokasenna* 24), three times in supposedly tenth-century verses (twice in Vítgeirr’s verse on Rognvaldr réttileini (*Skj* B, 29), and in Kormákr, *Síгурðardrápa* 3 (*Skj* B, 69)), and once in a verse attributed to a giantess in *Gríms saga loðinkinna* ch. 1 (90) (a late, archaising text).

<i>Jól</i>	assimilated to Christmas
<i>vetrnætr</i>	assimilated to St Michael's feast (except in one saga)
<i>blót</i> as sacrifice	none (<i>blót</i> just means "swear, revile" in <i>samtíðarsögur</i>)
<i>öndvegissúlur</i>	none (<i>öndvegi</i> is replaced by <i>hásæti</i>)
<i>tannfé</i> payment on first tooth	none
reincarnation (<i>endrborinn</i>)	1 (<i>Þorgils saga skarða</i>)
<i>hugr</i> as wandering soul	1 (in the late <i>Geirmundar þáttur heljarskinns</i>)
<i>fylgja/hamingja</i>	4; <i>fylgja</i> concept merged with guardian angel
<i>landvættir</i>	2
<i>álfar</i>	2 in kennings; 2 in miracle stories, representing impish beings, not the pagan spirits
<i>troll</i>	assimilated to <i>draugr</i> or <i>flagð</i> , regarded as demons
<i>seiðr</i>	none
<i>fjölkyngi</i>	1 ³³
<i>vǫlva</i>	none ³⁴
<i>galdr</i>	none
<i>gandreið</i>	none
runes	5 (without magical powers)
prophetic powers	nearly all important people have them, but as a sign of sanctity.
pagan baptism (<i>ausa barn vatni</i>)	none
betrothal/marriage rites	none
death rites	none
political/juridical systems	survive (formulas christianised)
law	no pagan elements like <i>níðstǫng</i>
<i>hólmganga</i> duelling	none
<i>fóstbræðralag</i> fostering	none

Such references as there are to pagan matters occur largely in skaldic verse or in connection with artistic objects, suggesting a literary/artistic convention. All the details of the gods and myths, even the kennings, can be derived from Snorri's *Edda*; Boyer (ibid. 156) concludes that "as far as mythology is concerned in the *samtíðarsögur*, the so-called pagan revival or pagan survivals are a purely literary feature devoid of all living religious significance". Most of the pagan survivals are concentrated in the latest piece, *Geirmundar þáttur heljarskinns*, of c. 1300; mistakes such as the parity of gold to silver being 1 to 10 instead of the correct 1 to 8 of the Viking Age show an antiquarian desire to reconstitute an image of the past: the author "has endeavoured to recreate a society and an atmosphere as he imagined

³³ This is noted by Gísli Pálsson (1991: 164).

³⁴ This is noted by McKinnell (2005: 98).

that they should have been" (ibid. 165). On witchcraft, Boyer (ibid. 161) notes that none of the distinctively Norse features such as *seiðr* occur, and such mentions as there are cannot be distinguished from continental models. He concludes (ibid. 138):

The so-called pagan revival in Iceland is the result of foreign and literary influences [...] there is a kind of displacement of time (décalage) or deliberate attempt to fuse past and present by including archaic elements in the texts [...] The pagan features which may appear in the *samtíðarsögur* have not infrequently an origin which is *not* local.

The importance of Boyer's conclusions must not be underestimated. To form a picture of Viking Age "shamanism" on the basis of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century *fornaldarsögur* and the like, compositions which are manifestly fantastic in intention and drawn up at a time when the magic they describe was at best an antiquarian memory, would be only slightly more reliable than, say, determining the nature of magical practices in contemporary England on the basis of the Harry Potter novels. When magic is mentioned in late sources it needs to be treated with special caution. It is possible that some genuine tradition derived from pagan times is preserved on occasion – but it may equally well be an antiquarian invention of the author, or if it is indeed traditional lore it may still have been misrepresented or attenuated. Nor should the degree of literary borrowing be underestimated: a number of examples are discussed later in the volume, but the overall effect of such borrowing is to reduce the number of independent witnesses to traditions over which a huge Damoclean question mark was already hanging. Thus McKinnell (2005: 97) comments on how remarkably consistent the picture of *seiðr* is in the sources: but what is this evidence of? If the sources are assumed to be independent, then we might conclude we are being given a picture of something "real" in the everyday world that the writers could describe. But if the writers are all borrowing from each other, we arrive at the diametrically opposed view that there is no reality to the practice described other than as a literary tradition; this, as we have seen, is the view that Boyer arrived at, with good reason as far as Iceland is concerned.

CONCLUSION

Despite the apparent absence of paganism in thirteenth-century Iceland, it survived in the literary culture of the poets and was recorded in some detail by Snorri Sturluson, whose *knowledge* of pagan myths and to some extent practices was considerable, even if his *understanding* of them can often be faulted; some practices may in addition actually have continued in continental Scandinavia – their continued condemnation in the laws, and, arguably, events such as that recorded in *Völsa þáttr*, set in an out-of-the-way farm, are some sort of indication of this.³⁵ Unless we take an extreme

³⁵ McKinnell (2005: 98–9) notes that early Norwegian law codes forbid *seiðr*, defined as

position of assuming that all supposedly pagan or near-pagan poems are in fact the creation of a twelfth- and thirteenth-century pseudo-pagan revival, the poetry provides at least a better prospect of having preserved ancient lore about both the gods and practices such as *seiðr*. It is therefore upon the poetry that the present study is focused; in some areas, we only have evidence from prose sources, so there is no choice but to use them, but on the whole the prose sources are regarded with a greater degree of scepticism.

at segja spár or *at fara með spásögum*, “to tell fortunes” or “to go for fortune-tellings”; those seeking prophecies are said to *gera Finnfarar*, or *fara at spyrja spá*, or *fara á Finnmarkr at spyria spádóm*, or *trúa á Finna*. In Iceland, there is a reference in *Hákonarbók* §19 (78c) to *spáfara* but this is derived from Norwegian codes: no other prohibitions exist in Icelandic law. Norwegian codes also prohibit «at vecia tröll upp oc fremia heiðni með því» (78). *Hákonarbók* is the only Icelandic code to mention *sitja úti*. An apparent historical event is recorded in *Hákonar saga herðibreids* ch. 16 (81), in 1161, when a woman called Þórdís skeggja was commissioned to sit out to discover if Hákon might be victorious.

VII. EPILEGOMENA

21. Conclusion

I have sought in this book to present a measured approach to the question of Norse shamanism. In the first place, my aim has been typological: this has involved tracing, in some detail, what classic shamanism actually is, to see how far Norse records yield anything which follows, in any systematic or cohesive fashion, the features of this shamanism. This is a necessary first step before the presence of shamanism can be adjudicated on. I have also sought to highlight more specific features which resemble those found in shamanism, but with the proviso that they can only be judged shamanic if they can be accommodated within a wider system, such as that proposed by Vajda; it is not, I think, necessary absolutely to demonstrate the presence of all these features each time, since our evidence is too meagre to allow for this, but without at least some indication of a wider context it becomes impossible to argue for the presence of shamanism, as a system of belief (or rather of belief-related ritual), on the basis of isolated resemblances. Nor is it acceptable to assemble a series of such isolated resemblances and then force them into a system which the sources themselves do not give any indication of.

My investigation has, over all, found little grounds for proposing the presence of shamanism in pre-Christian or later Scandinavia, if by that is meant the classic form of shamanism typical of much of Siberia. The evidence does, however, support the likelihood of *some* ritual and belief of a broadly (but not classically) shamanic nature as existing and being remembered in tradition. Yet most of what we uncover from investigating literary sources is bound, in my view, to be literary in nature: we are discovering motifs and themes, worked on by poets over the generations, and only loosely based on real practices (even when such practices were current). The underlying assumption in my arguments for the antiquity of a motif has been that we are dealing, in the first place, with a literary motif of long standing, and its presence in real life is yet a further step back, and hence all the more debatable. The distance between our sources and lived experience is greater than is often allowed for in studies of pagan Norse beliefs.

The most recent lengthy discussion of some of the core themes dealt with in the present volume is that of Price (2002). Despite the many interesting discussions and materials he offers, I find myself essentially at odds with his viewpoint: he has argued for an extensive presence in Viking Age ritual and belief of “shamanism”, in particular in the form of *seiðr*, and for

its intimate connection with the war mentality of the time. He is inclined to use *seiðr* in a wider, catch-all fashion for practices which he regards as shamanic, which is not justified from the sources. I see scant evidence for a particularly military aspect to *seiðr*, any more than any practice in our medieval sources is imbued with military overtones. Price's arguments, as far as the literary sources are concerned, are built, it seems to me, too much on an assumption of these sources' general reliability, and relevance indeed for a "Viking" period; I would not like to include the literary culture of thirteenth and fourteenth-century Iceland, which produced most of these sources, within the definition of the Viking Age. Information elicited from these sources should be used to construct a picture of pagan practices of some centuries earlier only with the greatest circumspection and scepticism being applied in the analysis, which is what I have endeavoured to do. The remoteness of our sources from the reality of pagan life is something that in my view Price takes insufficient account of, allowing him to construct a picture of pagan Scandinavia which is exciting, but whose weight a careful consideration of the sources will not bear. For me as a non-archaeologist, Price's archaeological evidence forms the most interesting part of his presentation – though here too I would be far more sceptical of some of the interpretations; archaeological artefacts are dependent on input from intellectual monuments for their interpretation, and, as we have seen, these sources are far from accommodating in the clarity of their meaning. In short, archaeology cannot in itself demonstrate the presence of shamanism, and the written sources are mainly too late and unreliable to use as evidence of it either: to lean one flimsy card against the other in the hope of securing some stability does not make for an enduring or reliable structure, however high it may tower in the short term.

I would like now to sum up in more detail what I think the examination conducted in this present volume has shown.

The comparison with Greek sources, in particular the *Bacchae*, has shown illuminating similarities in the way two Indo-European societies, roughly comparable in their social structures and sources of livelihood (as opposed to the generally simpler hunting societies where shamanism prevails), reacted to the presence of shamanic elements, and particularly how this reaction was manifested in literature: such elements are regarded as "other" (even when they may well have largely been indigenous), and hence are often characterised as foreign; this otherness is realised in various similar ways, so that the Norse *seiðr* and the Greek bacchic rites are both essentially the realm of women, though led by gods (Óðinn and Dionysus) willing to accept the concomitant effeminacy, and the practices are regarded as being brought by newcomers (the *vanir* and Dionysus). The Greek sources sound a warning shot, that much of the depiction of such practices, in both societies, relies on the literary artifice of poets, the reconstruction of actual cult practices from their works being fraught with difficulties and uncertainties.

Nonetheless, such practices did lie behind at least some of the depictions. The examination of medieval witchcraft, the sources for which are

not literary, illustrates this – though here we have an equally limiting problem, of the religious manufacture of pseudo-systems of belief, from which genuine folk practices have to be deduced, and the difficulty is compounded by much of the detailed information being very late (relative to Norse sources). When we are able to elicit likely folk practices or beliefs in this way, witches appear as practitioners of magic, making contact with the spirit world, often on behalf of the community, working for healing, divination and the protection of livelihoods, though their skills were also clearly resorted to for malicious purposes such as cursing livestock and sexual relations. There is probably enough of a credible nature that can be sifted from the sources to describe the beliefs and practices upon which the descriptions of witchcraft are based as broadly shamanic. Scandinavia should (probably) be included within the area of such practices.

However, when we start to examine in more detail how far the recorded Norse practices or myths correspond to what is found in classic Siberian shamanism, the case for any close connection begins to evaporate, though there are striking resemblances in certain areas, nonetheless. There are several features of Norse sources that permeate the whole investigation. The first is their scarcity: we simply do not have evidence, one way or the other, for many things that are found in shamanism, so it is impossible to determine to what extent Norse practices may have coincided. The second is the often tantalising nature of the sources we do have: for example, should the search of the originator of *seiðr*, Freyja, for her lost husband Óðr, whose name may indicate the soul or life-giving principle, be seen as parallel to the shamanic retrieval of souls from the otherworld? The third is the isolated nature of features which appear to be shamanic: we could describe the attempted return of Baldr from the underworld, with Hermóðr as the active agent, as similar, again, to the shaman's journey after lost souls, but we have no context, no allusions to any other shamanic features, to suggest that any shamanic framework was conceived; this is a problem with a great many features which are often adduced as indicating shamanism (by no means all of which have even seemed worth discussing). The fourth, in a way an extension of the third, is the presence of conceptual structures in Norse of a far-reaching kind, which are fully compatible with the presence of shamanism, but do not in fact provide strong evidence of any shamanic use: an example is the concepts of the various types of spirits.

Seiðr differs in its purposes from classic Siberian shamanism in several respects. Most notably, the central shamanic task of retrieving the souls of the sick is absent; even healing of a more general sort is absent, whereas it is still a central feature of even vestigially shamanic practitioners such as the Finnish *tietäjä*. Even though the concept was familiar to the Norse, *seiðr* does not seem to have involved the sending out of the free soul, which is characteristic of many, and particularly circumpolar, shamanisms. Divination appears to have played a central role in the Norse practices, and this was probably an ancient tradition, since classical sources mention a number of Germanic seeresses; in shamanism, divination is of secondary importance, and often performed by others than shamans. *Seiðr* was largely

the domain of females, whereas classic circumpolar shamanism is usually, and certainly among the Sámi, dominated by men – though this is not the case with shamanism of the non-classic type, as practised in more agrarian societies such as Japan or India. Unlike shamanism, *seiðr* seems always to have carried the onus of social rejection with it. The practitioner of *seiðr* emerges not so much as a mediator with the spirit world who resolves conflicts, as either a medium, communicating supernatural knowledge, or a manipulator of the spirit world who uses spells (*galdrar*) in a way that often increases rather than dissipates tension – though this picture is built up in large part on the basis of unreliable prose sources.

As the *völva* appears always to be in some sense an outsider, she does not fit into any of the four social bases of shamans which Siikala outlines; given the hierarchical level of Norse society, we would expect some form of territorial professional shamanism, such as was practised by the Buryats, but we find no such thing. The sources rather present the *völva* in line with the witch of later European sources, someone in but not of the society they live in; nonetheless, the same is clearly not true of the classical seeresses, or the priestesses of the Cimbri, encountered in accounts of actual pagan practices, so the social position of the *völva* as depicted may well be the result of later literary tradition, or (additionally) of social change over the centuries after Tacitus wrote.

Seiðr explicitly involved a sexual element: it is said to be associated with *ergi*. For men, this probably indicated a loss of the strength which defined their virility, which may have been connected to the notion of penetration by spirits (which could be seen as standing metaphorically for sexual penetration), and may also have involved a feminisation, as the practitioners of *seiðr* identified with the goddess Freyja, its founder and mistress (such identification is nowhere directly indicated, though it is implied in the case of the first practiser of *seiðr*, Heiðr, in *Völuspá*); for women, *ergi* implied promiscuity, which was certainly a feature of the *vanir*, among whom *seiðr* originated, and may have played a part in the practice among women, though, again, this is not directly witnessed in the sources. As a female practice, *seiðr* is likely to have been concerned with birth, and rebirth: it is therefore noticeable how it is referred to in cases of engendering an heir, such as Váli, and also appears as a means of rebirth (according to Dronke's arguments) or of indomitable life on the battlefield in *Völuspá*. This is consistent with the practices of female shamans such as the Daur *otoshi*.

Some, but not all, of the various sorts of Norse spirits were involved in *seiðr*. As noted, the practice originated among the class of fertility deities, the *vanir*. It involved the summoning and manipulating of dangerous spirits called *gandar*, which it would appear both provided information and carried out tasks, and would often (or perhaps always) assume animal form. Giants, in one of the several guises in which they appear, seem to correspond to the anthropomorphic (and often ancestral) spirits of classic shamanism, who are sometimes summoned for information, but whose main role is to initiate the shaman. The *völva* of *Völuspá* learnt her art from

these ancestral beings, and possibly Óðinn's hanging on the tree was an initiatory exercise supervised by such beings; he certainly is said elsewhere to have learnt from the giants. The practice of magic condemned in the Norwegian laws involved the summoning of *troll*, a word which designated any practiser (or even victim) of supernatural activities. It seems that the *völva* would also call forth her protective spirit, *vörðr*, probably representing her innate powers, before undertaking a ritual contact with the spirit world (this interpretation relies, admittedly, on just one word, of the greatest interpretative difficulty, surviving in an otherwise unreliable source). The *völva*'s contacts with and manipulation of the spirit world thus correspond in many respects with what is found in shamanism – though parallels can also be adduced from European witchcraft, so again the feature can only be described as broadly shamanic. The examination of *gandr* has shown that differences existed between Norse and Sámi concepts of what took place during a shamanic *kamlanie*, indicating a rather different base to Norse magic from the circumpolar shamanism of the Sámi.

Many features of the Norse spiritual cosmography find parallels in shamanic and other Eurasian societies. The predominant image is of the world tree, associated hypostatically with the god Heimdallr, acting as *vörðr*, protective guardian, of the world, in the way an animate protective tree stood guard over the farmstead, and sacrificially with Óðinn. The tree connects Scandinavia typologically primarily with the sub-circumpolar shamanic societies, which were not so reliant on hunting. There is some evidence to make a tentative identification of a secondary Norse image of the world axis as a pillar, associated in particular with Þórr; the pillar is typical of circumpolar societies, including the Sámi. It is likely (but the evidence is tenuous) that the pillar was believed to culminate in the North Star, which perhaps was represented mythically by the whetstone in Þórr's head and in cult in the nails at the head of the hall pillars, the *ondvegissúlur*. Similar ideas are found among the Sámi and Finns, and this is likely to represent a common Nordic motif (it is also found in the far east of Siberia, however, possibly independently, or possibly as part of a more general, but rather amorphous, circumpolar culture). The spiritual cosmography of the Norse was thus consistent with the layered universe typically encountered in shamanism. However, its presence does not determine the existence of shamanism. We do have strong indications of cult offerings being made to representative world trees in the Norse area, but we do not encounter anything parallel to the shaman's ritual clambering on the tree to represent his passage through the worlds. Many of the parallels to the religious significance of the world tree in fact seem to lie in India rather than Siberia, so it emerges as a rather dubious indicator of shamanism.

Óðinn was also associated with *seiðr*, and some of the myths he is represented in have ostensibly shamanic elements to them. The initiatory experiences of Óðinn can also be illuminated by comparison with shamanic analogues, but a closer examination of them has shown that the explicitly shamanic elements within them are fairly minimal. There are notable differences even in the areas of greatest similarity: thus although

the world tree is a typical feature of the shamanic cosmology, the shaman is not hanged upon it, like Óðinn, but remade by a smith, an idea which does not occur in Norse. The Norse “initiatory” myths also involve aspects not found in shamanism, such as the complexity of the retrieval of Són, the sacrificial (and life-giving) blood, in the form of poetic mead. Óðinn’s otherworld journeys are essentially connected with knowledge and skill, rather than with healing (though there is some evidence of Woden/Óðinn as a healer in both Old English and Old Norse). However shamanic they may ultimately be judged, Óðinn’s initiatory or martyric acts are not associated with human (or divine) practices like *seiðr*, and are divorced from any ritual context which could be regarded as shamanic (they may be connected to sacrificial practices).

Seiðr is not said to involve any initiation; this may be a reflection of the lack of sources, but the female shamanism of the Indian Soras also did not involve any initiatory experience comparable to that of the Siberian shaman. As a female practice, *seiðr* may well not have involved such essentially male warrior imagery, so its absence cannot be used as an argument against the potential shamanic nature of *seiðr*, but it does remove another element which might be used to argue that *seiðr* was indeed shamanic.

The accoutrements found in association with *seiðr* are not, on the whole, particularly shamanic. We can say little about any dress, since the sources describing it are untrustworthy. The *vǫlva* almost certainly had a staff, which may, just possibly, have been conceived as stemming from the world tree, and which almost certainly would have been endowed with numinous power, probably to command the spirits and to effect curses. The belt or girdle may also have been used: Freyja was possessed of the *Brísingamen*, which was associated with birth (and rebirth, probably); if the *vǫlva* represented Freyja, she may well have been endowed with a representation of the goddess’s girdle, though this is nowhere clearly the case. The importance of the belt to the divinatory priestesses of the ancient Cimbri suggests that the possession of a belt by their spiritual successors was quite likely. The main accoutrement of the *vǫlva* was the *seiðhjallr*, the platform on which she performed. This has no parallels in classic shamanism; it rather characterises the *vǫlva* as a medium, cut off from the members of her audience and not interacting actively with them. It suggests through elevation the idea of increased spiritual vision over the world, but it does not imply the layered cosmos traversed in shamanic kamlania. Over all, it is a distinct mark of the non-shamanic nature of *seiðr*.

The smith often assumed a central role in shamanic initiations (though we do not have evidence for this amongst the Norsemen’s neighbours, the Sámi or Finns). Leaving aside dwarf smiths, there is essentially one smith hero in Norse literary tradition, *Vǫlundr*. The poem dedicated to his story, *Vǫlundarkviða*, shows an awareness of aspects of far northern society, probably derived from familiarity with Sámi culture, yet this does not amount to a systematic awareness of religious aspects of such an alien society: rather, the poet has manipulated motifs to create an impression of northernness by means of literary artifice. It seems likely that the poet

has employed some features typical of the Sámi to reinforce Völundr's otherness, and the danger of offending the Other, rather than because of any deep connection of the smith with the Sámi or other shamanic societies; Sámi features are much less evident in the *Vélents þáttur* version of the story (which was of German origin).

The examination of the bear similarly illustrated a distinct chasm between Scandinavians and circumpolar peoples such as the Sámi, though it also showed the likelihood that some motifs were borrowed from the Sámi (evident particularly in the man–bear transformation and associated narrative in *Hrólfs saga kraka*). In northern hunting societies the bear is a sacred animal, a liminal beast who acts as a mediator between the worlds of men and the gods. The bear is hunted, but with special apotropaic ceremonies which ensure the sacrilege of killing him is not visited upon the perpetrators. None of this exists in Norse tradition. When it came to hunting actual bears, it was carried out with no religious respect whatever. The bear is still liminal, but in a very different sense: he functions as a metaphor for the warrior. The bear warrior *par excellence* was the *berserkr*: he would, it seems, rush into battle in a sort of ecstasy, which has inclined some to see a shamanic element at play. This is misplaced: ecstasy can exist in many contexts, and does not in itself indicate shamanism. Nor does anything else about the *berserkr* link him with shamanism.

If we allow the Norse to have had practices or systems of mythic belief which might be termed shamanism, it is not, on the whole, to the tundra shamanism of the far north, as practised by the Sámi, that we should look for the closest parallels, but to the forms of shamanism practised further south, in areas where agriculture plays a large part in the winning of a livelihood, and where female shamanism is more evident. The shamanism of Japan is illuminating in this respect: here, an earlier ecstatic form of shamanism was gradually formalised over the centuries, to produce a system with primarily female divinatory mediums, answering questions from a temenos comparable to the area of the *seiðhjallr* of the Norse *völva*, and not having an active interaction with the audience, in marked contrast to classic shamanism, but in agreement with the Norse sources; many of the questions were about the crops, which again corresponds to the Norse situation. Even the way that an *itako* would be a wandering seeress, who was welcomed into houses with all due attention paid to her welfare, corresponds to some of the descriptions of similar visits by *völur* in Norse. There is, of course, no genetic connection between Scandinavian and Japanese practices, but there is a typological one, resulting from the presence in comparable hierarchical agrarian societies of ecstatic divinatory practitioners, whose presence and role needed to be accommodated within the norms of those societies.

It is notable that where we do find features which are close to Sámi shamanic practices (or beliefs about practices), such as the visit from mainland Scandinavia to Iceland within three days, or the lying as if dead for periods of time, the practitioners are explicitly described as *Finnar*; similarly, the author of *Historia Norwegie* included his description of a Sámi kamlanie out

of amazement at the *difference* from what he was used to. The Norsemen were well aware of Sámi magic, but they were also aware how far it varied in most points from their own, just as they were aware of the drastically different lifestyle, based on hunting as the main means of sustenance, that many Sámi practised. My overall position is essentially in agreement with Ohlmarks (1939), who fiercely opposed Strömbäck's arguments for a close link with Sámi shamanism. Ohlmarks had a wider acquaintance with other forms of shamanism, whereas Strömbäck was, perhaps, seduced by certain similarities he saw in the practices of the Norsemen's nearest neighbours, the Sámi, whilst not taking sufficient account of the huge differences. I have sought to follow Ohlmarks's example in offering a wider panorama of shamanism than just that of the Sámi, and the examples examined (which do not coincide particularly with Ohlmarks's) back up Ohlmarks's general position.

All things considered, then, it seems to me unsafe to argue for the presence of shamanism within Norse pre-Christian belief and practice, if by "shamanism" is meant something like the tundra shamanism of the Sámi – it is clear at least that neither *seiðr* nor the exploits of Óðinn will fit within the stringent definition of shamanism suggested for example by Vajda – but it is likely that a practice involving contact with the spirits did exist (and was alluded to and elaborated in poetry), which could be described as broadly shamanic in nature. But the same could probably be said for much of Europe: the evidence from ancient Greece and from medieval witchcraft in Europe, contentious as it is, points in this direction. This is in line with the proposal by Hultkrantz (1993: 10):

I consider trance, direct contact with spiritual beings and guardian spirits, together with the mediating role played by the shaman in a ritual setting, to constitute the minimum requirement for a case of shamanism. The presence of guardian spirits during the trance and following shamanic actions is, as I see it, a most necessary element, and one that delimits shamanic trance from other states of trance. The above describes what I would call the salient features of "general shamanism", the simple form of shamanism that we find everywhere, in contradistinction to the more specialized shamanic pattern such as Arctic shamanism, Siberian shamanism, and Mongolian shamanism. Maybe general shamanism should be seen as a defoliated but nevertheless ideologically meaningful shamanism, a kind of spiritual platform from which the more specialized and developed forms of shamanism have grown.

The evidence of *seiðr* and other practices considered in this volume suggests that the Norse practices can well be accommodated within this general shamanism. I fear, unfortunately, that such an apparently anodyne conclusion will do little to dampen the enthusiasm of those many modern devotees who seem determined to conjure up "shamanism" – taken implicitly as the exciting Siberian kind – from ancient sources as if from thin air; indeed, such prestidigitation appears to do not a little to enhance their standing, as once it did for the shamans themselves in their communities.

It has been an important part of this study to make a reassessment of

the value of some of these sources. In particular, the classic account of *seiðr* found in *Eiríks saga rauða* has been shown to be almost wholly unreliable, and to reflect primarily Christian concerns. The description of *seiðr* in *Orvar-Odds saga* is derived in large part from *Eiríks saga*. Similarly, the account of Óðinn's performance of *seiðr* in *Ynglinga saga* is unreliable: it derives partly from surviving poetic sources (which can be considered on their own merits), and partly from Snorri's use of traditions concerning Sámi practices, probably through the *Historia Norvegie*. With other sources, it has proved important to emphasise their allusive nature: thus *Grímnismál* is by no means an account of ritual initiation, but a dramatic presentation of the god Óðinn in a difficult situation in which he reveals divine knowledge, which makes suggestive reference to the god's initiatory experiences, as on the tree, but refrains from pretending that this drama constitutes an initiation in itself. *Völundarkviða* contains a number of shamanic elements: the author uses these as local colouring, to aid the process of verisimilitude in his depiction of this far northern hero; the elements are bereft of religious significance, but richly endowed with literary meaning. *Skírnismál* and *Völuspá* have been deeply mined for their apparent shamanic references. There may, indeed, have been some awareness on the part of the authors of the ritual dimensions of practices such as *seiðr*, which may be inferred from the texts as we have them. But a great deal of caution is necessary. In the case of *Skírnismál* the shamanic structure – the vision into other worlds, the journey thither undertaken by an alter ego figure, the “salvation” from an underworldly realm, the wand and the magical charms – may appear shamanic merely as a result of the author's manipulation of traditional motifs into this particular form. The same is true of *Völuspá*: the presence of the world tree, for example, does not necessarily imply any real ritual use of the tree by *völur* – it occurs in the poem for essentially literary structural purposes, not ritual ones; some features, however, perhaps reflect notions that may have been part of the older tradition on *völur*, such as the way that *Heiðr*, the first *seiðkona*, is to be identified in some way with *Freyja*, the divine originator of the practice, and how she is said to become *leikin*, “entranced”, as she practices, and uses *gandar* to secure her prophetic knowledge. But in its composition *Völuspá* alludes, it would appear, to non-Norse sources, such as the sibylline oracles or the Bible, so that it becomes impossible to determine quite how far it may reflect genuine Norse practices, particularly given the artistic mastery the author shows in ordering his composition. It is the perception of this artistic mastery, whatever the sources involved, that is in the end the chief target of investigation.

Vitð ér enn, eða hvat?

Nú mun hon sökkvaz

