Beyond Medieval Europe

SOCIAL NORMS IN MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA

Edited by

**JAKUB MORAWIEC,
ALEKSANDRA JOCHYMEK,
and GRZEGORZ BARTUSIK**

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PREFACE

THE RICHNESS AND diversity of the preserved literary tradition, together with the spiritual and material culture of medieval Scandinavia, have encouraged scholars of various fields to engage in searching analytical enquiry into the histories of past societies of the North. At the same time its disparities and fragmentation leave many aspects without final answers. This is especially relevant in the case of normative behaviour and reasoning which are mainly preserved orally, performatively, or ritually, and rarely in a written or material shape, making their transmission dependent on ongoing cultivation. Since no state in the North now follows the laws of past societies, they would have been inaccessible to us if it were not for new research methods that allow us to get a glimpse of these lost worlds preserved fragmentarily on archaeological sites and in literature.

For centuries studies undertaken in the field of Old Norse–Icelandic culture have embraced many issues: developments in material culture, religious change, processes of power consolidation, to name only a few. While individual and singular historical events and figures have perhaps for too long been the main subject of historical inquiries, the immense corpora of preserved texts and objects can reveal the regularities and recurrences of everyday life of both social elites and ordinary people, embodied in a set of implicit norms that determined behaviour and common understandings of social coexistence.

History is built on the great battles and wars, but the past consists in large part of the everyday struggles of ordinary, very often anonymous, people. Values cultivated by them such as honour, prestige, loyalty, fidelity, manhood, authority, and duty, were even more important than prescriptive norms superimposed by wishful thinking elites and rulers, because their meaning, practice, and evaluation exceeded legal provisions and law codes, expressed instead in rituals, habits, customs, religion, literature, language, and social cognition, revealing those norms that were actually internalized and performed by the society. These implicit rules and laws ultimately motivated human actions and were crucial as much for the pursuit of personal ambitions and goals as for everyday survival. There are numerous instances in which Scandinavian literature of the Middle Ages can be used to reveal the core meaning of these ideas. It is a rich source of representations of characters both maintaining and obeying the norms, as well as transgressing and breaking them.

The Icelandic sagas, the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) in particular, constitute the main source of insight into the normative phenomena of morality, ethics, and legality. Thus, unsurprisingly, the vast majority of chapters of this volume deal with the Old Norse–Icelandic literary corpus and its classical subgenres, *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*. Naturally, analyses of particular narratives of the sagas are undertaken here with methodological awareness of certain limitations of the sagas, when it comes to reconstructing the past society in a distant time. The origins of particular stories have

their beginnings in now lost oral tradition, whereas most of their literary incarnations are dated to the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries onwards, which were preserved mainly in the manuscripts from the late Middle Ages, (most of them from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), and the early Modern Ages. Moreover, their stylistic flavour, often triggered by a will to provide entertainment rather than genuine historical accounts, and additionally motivated by certain needs and expectations of the potential audience concerning saga characters and their dealings, results in a literary approach to various behaviours and/or social norms rather than allowing us to decipher pure and unaffected insights into the “social reality” of Commonwealth Iceland.

Despite these limitations, the Old Norse–Icelandic literary corpus, with *Íslendingasögur* at its helm, remains both the exclusive and the most coherent source of our present-day knowledge of social development in the medieval North. Preserved, compiled, and finally written down by those with their own ancestors in mind, the corpus consists of stories that were told to invoke particular values and norms found to be relevant and reliable, in order to fulfill their main role: the preservation of local lore and tradition treated as the main instigator of self-identity of the whole community.

Literary depiction of social developments in the medieval North can be, to some extent, confronted and corroborated or disproved by the relics of material culture. Such work also requires methodological awareness, particularly when the work is interdisciplinary. Still, this exclusive insight into specific aspects of economy, culture and everyday habits of medieval Scandinavians allows one to supplement a picture of the society and its norms with important and intriguing elements.

The desire to explore these issues in greater depth stands behind the present volume. Articles collected in this book address varied and complex matters to do with the functioning of Scandinavian society, such as lawmaking, pre-Christian ritual practices, the symbolic importance of economy and artifacts, the status of the ruler, interpersonal relations (from enmity and conflict to friendship), social cognition, and literary reflection on environmental developments. Together they shed light on multifarious aspects of medieval Scandinavia via normative values and how they changed over time, with the Christianization and Europeanization of Scandinavia as important steps in the development of northern societies.

Several years ago a fruitful cooperation started between the Institute of History at the University of Silesia in Katowice and the Andrzej Kaube Museum in Wolin, which resulted in a cycle of conferences and other scholarly endeavours aimed at popularizing the history of Wolin, the Baltic zone, and Scandinavia in the Middle Ages. The success of the original initiatives inspired representatives of both institutions to introduce a series of cyclical, international, and interdisciplinary conferences known as the Jónsborg Conference.

The first such gathering took place in Wolin on April 20–22, 2017, dedicated to the topic of “Defining and Applying Social Norms in Medieval Scandinavia.” The conference brought together a group of scholars representing various international institutions and disciplines (history, archaeology, linguistics, literary studies, legal studies). The papers presented and the lively discussions that followed resulted in this collection of chapters, which seek to decipher social norms in medieval Scandinavia from a variety of

angles and their significance to everyday life. The editors and contributors believe that research on such a multifaceted and potentially elusive phenomenon calls for cooperation between diverse disciplines to conduct a cross-methodological investigation. The book therefore offers the audience a variety of methods, approaches, and, expectedly, results. The structure of the book proposes therefore a division into three thematic sections, preceded by introductory remarks on political developments on eleventh- to twelfth-century Iceland by Jón Vidar Sigurdsson (University of Oslo).

Part I: Pre-Christian Ritual Practices and Literary Discourses

The normative structure of a society is often expressed through its material culture. Certain social practices, trading and fashion among them, are reflected in material remains such as coins and clothing. Dariusz Adamczyk (German Historical Institute in Warsaw), in an article entitled “The Use of Silver by the Scandinavians of Truso and Wolin: The Logic of the Market or Social Prestige?,” uses silver finds from these ports-of-trade as his point of departure for discussing the varied roles of silver and different economic, social, and political contexts of its usage. Anita Sauckel (University of Iceland), in her article entitled “Silk, Settlements and Society in *Íslendingasögur*,” takes into account clothing and social norms at the thing-assemblies as depicted in *Íslendingasögur*, an occasion on which exclusive fabrics played an important role.

Social norms are implicit in the texture of certain literary works. The conventions a society follows in its forms of worship, mourning, and commemoration can be isolated from the text itself for close examination. Poetry, performed orally and ritually, resembles religious practices by mirroring its structures. Simon Nygaard (University of Aarhus), in an article entitled “Being Óðinn Bursson: The Creation of Social and Moral Obligation in Viking Age Warrior-Bands through the Ritualized, Oral Performance of Poetry: The Case of *Grímnismál*,” argues that pre-Christian Scandinavian rituals featured oral performances of Eddic poetry, that, like *ljóðaháttir* poems (e.g. *Grímnismál*) contained ritualized performatives, crucial to the formation and upholding of pre-Christian Scandinavian religions. Mourning practices were captured by a distinctive subgenre of skaldic poetry, the funerary ode. David Ashurst (University of Durham), in his article entitled “Elements of Satire and Social Commentary in Heathen Praise Poems and Commemorative Odes,” discusses the submerged and pervasive strains of satire and commentary on social norms in tenth-century funerary odes composed amid the intellectual turmoil of the late heathen period. The main focus is laid on *Eiríksmál*, Eyvindr skáldaspillir’s *Hákonarmál* and the group of Egill Skalla-Grímsson’s utterances (particularly *Sonatorrek* but reference is also made to *Arinbjarnarkviða* and *Höfuðlausn*).

The ideals embodied in the roles of friend, warrior, and king were among the most important of Old Norse–Icelandic society, as reflected in its tales of people succeeding or failing to live up to them. They are characterized by binary thinking such as the distinctions *good* versus *bad* friend / warrior / king; a mode of expression which is regularly encountered in the Icelandic sagas. In an article entitled “Friendship and Man’s Reputation: A Case of *Odds þáttir Ófeigssonar*,” Marta Rey-Radlińska (Jagiellonian

University) provides a case study based on one of the *þættir* preserved in the *Morkinskinna*, the oldest collection of the kings' sagas. The analysis focuses both on the motive of friendship in the story and the stylistic devices used to achieve an emotional effect—a deviation from objectivity in the narrative, and deployment of language that highlights negative emotions.

Part II: Reception and Cultural Transfer

Human behaviour is primarily influenced by cognitive processes, with metaphorical thinking at the core of human understanding of the world, influencing our experience of being in the world. Grzegorz Bartusik (University of Silesia in Katowice), in an article entitled "Cultural Transfer of Cognitive Structures of Fortune in the Latin and Old Icelandic Literatures and Languages: The Case of the Metaphor *Fortune is a Wheel*," explores questions concerning influences of Latin culture on Old Norse-Icelandic language and literature and the potential influence of classical ideas on Old Norse-Icelandic ones. He looks for evidence of the transfer of social norms, in the form of cognitive metaphors, from continental Europe in the sagas of antiquity (*Antikensagas*) and the vernacular sagas.

With the increasing alphabetization introduced to Scandinavia by the Catholic Church and the development of written literature, Scandinavians adapted new literary modes of commemoration and cultivation of social memory through the medium of written language. The commemorative function of a saga is analyzed by Yoav Tirosh (University of Iceland), who, in "Dating, Authorship, and Generational Memory in *Ljósvetninga saga*: A Late Response to Barði Guðmundsson," returns to the hypothesis that Þórðr Þorvarðsson was the author of *Ljósvetninga saga*, and, interpreting it through the prism of the thirteenth-century society that generated the text, emphasizes its functional value as a form of cultural memory.

Łukasz Neubauer (Koszalin University of Technology), in "Quid Sigurthus cum Christo? An Examination of Sigurd's Christian Potential in Medieval Scandinavia," examines various features of Sigurd Fáfnisbani's character that might have influenced the transformation of the legendary Germanic hero into the essentially St. George-like figure depicted by the anonymous late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century artist responsible for carvings on the portal doors of the Hylestad stave church.

The society depicted in sagas, with its norms, values, and behaviours, has attracted not only scholars but also people of widely defined culture and politics for centuries. It resulted, inevitably, with its idealization and rise of certain myths defining the Viking Age and the Middle Ages in the North as a golden era, free from evil and deceit of the contemporary world. Such attitude can be traced in numerous means of art (painting, literature) and political views that have been produced throughout recent centuries. Even if the picture it provided was biased, unreliable, and hence rejected by present-day scholarship, its popularity serves to inspire research questions aiming to find deeper and more coherent understanding of the phenomenon. Michael Irlenbusch-Reynard (University of Bonn), in his article "Jómsborg and the German Reception of *Jómsvíkinga saga*: Introducing Masterhood as a Social Norm," examines the legend of the famous warrior band in the

context of the political and ideological conditions of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany. Various works of propaganda that used the saga as a crucial point of reference were responsible for an important transformation in the depiction of Jónsborg—from the residence of a romantic warrior community to the symbolic affirmation of a genuine Germanic socio-cultural institution, culminating in the suggestion of a normative epicentre for the whole North.

Part III: Outsiders and Transgressors

Sometimes, we are only able to distinguish a normative code when it is being transgressed. A norm is known by what it is not: a deviance, perversity, monstrosity, or rejection.

Alexander J. Wilson (University of Durham), in his article “The Unfamiliar Other: Distortions of Social Cognition Through Disguise in Two *Íslendingasögur*,” analyzes the way in which two narratives, *Droplaugarsona saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*, portray violent conflicts between different communities as expressions of the distortion of social cognition. This serves as a method of interpreting the way people constructed and deployed identity at various levels, both individually and within their communities, to structure perceptions of the world around them.

Keith Ruiter (University of Nottingham), in his article “A Deviant Word Hoard: A Preliminary Semantic Study of Non-Normative Terms in Early Medieval Scandinavia,” considers some of the particular lexical choices in early medieval Scandinavian texts in order to better understand the contemporary web of associations surrounding deviance and deviants. Utilizing philological, historical, literary, and legal methodologies, the article sets out to consider some words used to describe non-normative peoples and behaviours in three categories: terms relating to law, honour, and morality. Rebecca Merkelbach (University of Zurich), in an article entitled “Enchanting the Land: Monstrous Magic, Social Concerns, and the Natural World in the *Íslendingasögur*,” analyzes the way magic-users in *Íslendingasögur* are depicted as socially monstrous figures operating within and through the natural world to cause harm to society. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were a time of growing climatic variability, which must have caused significant anxiety to contemporary Icelanders, an anxiety that found its expression in the monstrous practitioners of magic. Aleksandra Jochymek (University of Silesia in Katowice), in “Social Margins in *Karlamagnús saga*: The Rejection of Poverty,” examines the two sides of medieval poverty in Scandinavian society, as expressed through the *Historia Caroli Magni et Rotholandi* and its northern counterpart, translated into a part of *Karlamagnús saga*.

In the Icelandic sagas there are several distinctive figures who put laws to the test by breaking them. Trouble-makers and outlaws hold a prominent place among them. In “*Pótti monnum ... hann myndi verða engi jafnaðarmaður*: The Narrator, the Trouble-Maker, and Public Opinion,” Joanne Shortt Butler (University of Cambridge) explores the ways in which public opinion is invoked by saga narrators through the frequently occurring figure of the *ójafnaðarmaður* (“inequitable person”), who is described as acting against the social norms of the society depicted in the sagas. Marion Poilvez (University of Iceland), in “Discipline or Punish? Travels and Outlawry as Social Structures in Medieval

Iceland,” discusses outlawry as a social structure from an inclusive perspective, arguing that many forms of outlawry did not function as outright exclusion, but were social structures made to respond in a didactic way to anti-social behaviours, with the goal of re-educating wrongdoers, or at least providing them with a fitting function to suit the dynamics of a given society.

The present volume could not have been completed without the contributions and support of particular individuals. We would like to express our deep gratitude towards Ryszard Banaszkiewicz, the head of the Andrzej Kaube Museum in Wolin; Christian Raffensperger, Erin T. Dailey, and Anna Henderson from ARC Humanities Press; Miriam Mayburd from the University of Iceland for her stylistic advice; and all participants of the First Jónsborg Conference.

Jakub Morawiec
Aleksandra Jochymek
Grzegorz Bartusik

BEING ÓÐINN BURSSON: THE CREATION OF SOCIAL AND MORAL OBLIGATION IN VIKING AGE WARRIOR-BANDS THROUGH THE RITUALIZED, ORAL PERFORMANCE OF POETRY—THE CASE OF GRÍMNISMÁL¹

Simon Nygaard

THE ORAL NATURE of Old Norse poetry and indeed Old Norse society is almost a commonplace within scholarship today. Recently the idea of the performance² aspect of these poems has been re-examined and re-actualized by the folklorist and dramaturg Terry Gunnell,³ who aptly terms his approach “performance archaeology.”⁴ While Gunnell’s theories have been criticized,⁵ his research is nonetheless thought-provoking and a valuable contribution to academic discourse, as the performance aspect Gunnell highlights is entirely in keeping with oral poetries throughout the world.⁶ Indeed, we may benefit from viewing much of Old Norse poetry as a form of oral-derived poetry, which the late scholar of orality John Miles Foley terms “voices from the past”; that is, oral-poetic traditions that are long dead and transferred on to vellum “leaving us with textual shards of a once-living work of verbal-art.”⁷ Taking this stance allows us to draw inspiration from orality research, which prompts us to investigate any given oral tradition according to its own internal oral-poetic rules, language, register, and idiomatic meaning systems in order to comprehend the tradition in its own right⁸ and also to pay heed to the context of any given oral poem: “The performance, the audience, the poet

1 Simon Nygaard, Aarhus University, email: sn@cas.au.dk. A shortened version of this article including a short analysis of the skaldic poem *Eiríksmál* (*Words about Eiríkr*) has been published in the Interdisciplinary Viking Symposium Series: Nygaard, “... nú knáttu Óðin sjá.” See also Nygaard, “Poetry as Ritual in Pre-Christian Nordic Religion” for further analyses of both poems.

2 I understand *performance* to be the recital or communication—be it from text or memory, melodically or droningly—of a text in the widest possible sense of the word by a trained performer or performers to an audience, be it implicit or explicit (see Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 28; Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, 118–26).

3 Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*; “The Drama of the Poetic Edda”; “The Performance of the Poetic Edda”; “*Vǫluspá* in Performance”; “Eddic Performances” on eddic poetry; “Performance Archaeology” on skaldic poetry. Research on pre-Christian skaldic poetry using a “performance archaeology” approach has also recently been done by Anna Millward (“Skaldic Slam”).

4 For example, Gunnell, “Eddic Performances,” 95; “Performance Archaeology.”

5 For example, Mitchell, “Review of *The Origins of Drama*”; Walsh, “Reviewed Work: The Origins of Drama.”

6 Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 79–94; Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, 28.

7 Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 45.

8 Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 85, 113–23; *Immanent Art*.

[...] the ritual and the myriad other aspects of the given poem's reality."⁹ What I propose to examine in this article, and what has not been sufficiently researched and reassessed in recent times, is the possible ritual¹⁰ framework behind these proposed oral performances in pre-Christian Nordic religion.¹¹ The interest in the possible rituals that may lie behind some Old Norse eddic poetry is not new, the prime example being Dame Bertha Phillpotts's seminal 1920 work.¹² In this book, Phillpotts concluded that several of the extant eddic poems represented "actual shattered remnants of ancient religious drama."¹³ Phillpotts, however, seems to be overly emphatic in her certainty. Being heavily inspired by the Cambridge myth-and-ritual school and their assumption that Greek drama evolved from a grand seasonal vegetation ritual pattern,¹⁴ Phillpotts tried to infer the existence of the same pattern in a Nordic context, filling in the blanks, so to say, with lost sources and assumed earlier, different versions of poems that did not fit the scheme. Generally, Phillpotts's approach and conclusions are very interesting, but her methodology is not satisfactory to current scholarly standards. Gunnell's research is in the same vein as Phillpotts's, but is more cautious and more methodologically sound, and where Gunnell's older research¹⁵ seems to focus on establishing the dramatic performance context of Old Norse poetry, the articles of a newer date seem to take more interest in the potential ritual aspects.¹⁶ In line with this, a new take on this subject focusing on the function of the proposed rituals¹⁷ and the role of the ritual specialist¹⁸ as a performer thus seems justified and relevant.

9 Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 60.

10 Inspired by Roy A. Rappaport, I understand *ritual* to be the performance of a series of formalised acts and utterances the meaning and origin of which is often not, and indeed need not be, clear to or defined by the performers (see Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 24. See below for a quotation of Rappaport's definition of ritual).

11 *Religion* can be viewed as an adaptive symbolic system of meaning (Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 409–10; Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 90) often drawing this meaning from feelings of community and togetherness or from otherworldly beings that are thought to influence this world from their Other World. Pre-Christian Nordic religion may be viewed as the religion that existed in the North Germanic speaking cultural area roughly between AD 1–1100, after which Christianity was gradually accepted.

12 Dame Bertha S. Phillpotts, *The Elder Edda*. Other earlier and contemporary relevant works are surveyed in Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, 1–10.

13 Phillpotts, *The Elder Edda*, 114. See also Haugen, "The Edda as Ritual," who treats a number of eddic poems—including *Grímnismál*—as being "very close to the cultic rituals" ("The Edda as Ritual," 21). Insight from orality research prompts us to nuance this statement; ritual frameworks can certainly be found behind the oral-derived Old Norse poetry, although the medieval texts should not be viewed as direct recordings of oral, pre-Christian rituals.

14 Evident from Phillpotts, *The Elder Edda*, vii–viii.

15 Mainly *Origins of Drama*.

16 For example, "Völuspá in Performance"; "Eddic Performances"; "Performance Archaeology."

17 See also Gunnell, "Eddic Performances," 96.

18 *Ritual* or *religious specialists* (see Malefijt, *Religion and Culture*, 229–45; Turner, "Religious Specialists") are in various ways mediators between this world—that of the group—and the Other

I propose that emphasizing the poems' ritual dimension can prove fruitful since it would allow us to view ritual as a structured medium capable of transmitting cultural memory in some cases almost verbatim through generations and maybe longer.¹⁹ Ritual aspects of seemingly old, oral-derived works are, of course, a relevant place to search for traits of pre-Christian Nordic religion.²⁰ Ritual descriptions in the Old Norse corpus are nonetheless scarce, and collective rituals are only mentioned sporadically. If we want to know anything about how these rituals functioned and were originally performed, then reconstruction is necessary.²¹ The present author is of the opinion that such reconstructions can further our understanding of the function of pre-Christian Nordic religion. In the case of this article, the focus will be on a reconstruction of the ritual performance that might lie behind the eddic poem *Grímnismál* (*Grímnir's Sayings*).

By applying the anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport's ritual theory²² to this poem, I will argue not only that it was originally meant for oral performance, but also that it may contain ritualized *performatives*²³ (see further below) that may produce *high-order meaning*²⁴—functions crucial to the construction and continuation of pre-Christian Nordic religion. Envisaging a Viking-Age warrior elite as ritual participants, the proposition is that the ritualized performances of this poem will have involved a ritual specialist taking on the identity of Óðinn in a bid to secure the loyalty of his warriors and uphold their shared community underlining social and moral obligation towards the group in the ritualized setting of a Viking Age hall.

Theoretical Approaches

In order to argue that the function of pre-Christian rituals may be discerned through a reading of medieval Old Norse texts, it is my claim that an approach based on Memory Studies, Performance Studies and Ritual Studies allows us to discern and examine the ritual framework which lies behind the Old Norse poetry in question. Memory Studies can provide us with a theoretical framework for understanding how religion may have functioned and been transmitted in an oral society. Following the Egyptologist

World of the otherworldly beings. They are also often "specialized carriers of memory" (Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," 114) and mythical traditions.

19 Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory". Verbatim—or word for word—may, however, mean different things in different cultural and religious contexts. In an oral context, a "word" is not necessarily what we literate, text-users consider it to be (i.e. black signs separated by white spaces on a page); depending on the register it can be a set formula, a scene or an idiomatic expression (see Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 15–16, 118). We are likely dealing with variation within limits. See also Harris, "Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry."

20 Nygaard and Schjødt, "History of Religion".

21 Schjødt, "Diversity and its Consequences"; "Reflections on Aims and Methods."

22 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*.

23 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 114–19.

24 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 71–72.

Jan Assmann, religion can be seen as a primary constituent of what he calls *cultural memory*, especially in oral societies, this cultural memory having a crucial role in the forming of group identity and tradition in such societies.²⁵ Performance Studies²⁶ allows us to situate instances of cultural memory, such as that found in Old Norse poems, in a ritual context by viewing them as performed pieces of oral-derived poetry. This, in turn, allows us to analyze the poems using ritual theory²⁷ to investigate how the proposed ritual performances that lie behind some Old Norse poetry may have functioned in pre-Christian Nordic religion.

In the case of the present article, it is argued that this approach might enable us to provide plausible answers to the following two questions: First, how did a warring ruler legitimize his own rule and secure the loyalty of his warriors? And second, why did these warriors follow their ruler into war? Military historian John Keegan terms this phenomenon “the will to combat.”²⁸ He mentions intoxication by drinking, the bond between military leaders and their followers, and the religious nature of the medieval society as important factors, but underlines the prospect of personal enrichment through ransom and loot as the chief reason for the medieval soldiers’ will to combat. In an Old Norse context intoxication probably also played a part, through, for example, the drinking of alcohol; the prospect of personal wealth was undoubtedly also the driving force behind many Viking expeditions. I will, however, focus on the bond between leaders and followers (which is described in the Roman historian Tacitus’ *Germania* chapter 14 (AD 98) and also in the Latin version of the poem *Bjarkamál* in the Danish chronicler Saxo’s thirteenth-century *Gesta Danorum* 2, 7, 6). My opinion is that the bond which was established between the members of a warrior band was a further central reason for the Viking Age warriors’ will to combat.²⁹

Orality and Religion

Since Old Norse society was an oral society, we need some knowledge about how religion in oral societies functions in order to understand what type of religion we are dealing with. To gain this understanding, we can utilize the traits highlighted by various typologies of religion, such as Gro Steinsland’s distinction between *folkereligion* (ethnic religion) and *universalreligion* (universal religion),³⁰ which is comparable to Jan Assmann’s

²⁵ Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*; “Communicative and Cultural Memory”; *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*.

²⁶ For example, Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*; “Performance of the Poetic Edda”; “*Völuspá* in Performance”; “Eddic Performances”. Cf. Schechner, *Performance Studies*.

²⁷ For example, Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*.

²⁸ Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, 113–16.

²⁹ See also Raffield et al. 2016, “Ingroup Identification Identity Fusion”.

³⁰ Steinsland, *Norrøn Religion*, 31–34. Though not explicitly acknowledged by Steinsland, this is most certainly based on the distinction between folk-religious societies and universal religions of Russell in *The Germanization of Medieval Christianity*. Thanks to Terry Gunnell for pointing this out to me.

distinction between primary and secondary religion.³¹ Pre-Christian Nordic religion would be classified as an ethnic or primary religion, which means that we can expect various traits to be present: it is collective in its main aim, polytheistic, undogmatic, and diverse,³² rooted in tradition, primarily orally transmitted and firmly grounded in cult or ritual. Such a typologization thus gives us an idea of which type of religion we are working with.³³

Cultural Memory, Religion, and Ritual Reconstruction

As noted, religion and cultural memory are intrinsically connected, and one might even follow scholar of religion Hans J. Lundager Jensen in viewing religion as memory,³⁴ especially in primary religions.³⁵ Nonetheless, following Assmann, memory in oral societies can be classified into the two following types: (1) individual memory, or an embodied storehouse,³⁶ that is, memory kept in the minds of trained specialists; and (2) collective memory, which is social and shared within the group. Assmann speaks of both communicative and cultural memory as being collective,³⁷ but it is cultural memory which is most relevant to the study of religion. In oral societies, cultural memory consists of the sum of all the things one needs to know about the tradition, culture, and religion of the group—everything is remembered, learned, taught, examined, and interpreted by ritual and memory specialists because it is necessary.³⁸ The cultural memory of the group is mediated and transmitted by these ritual and memory specialists to the group through modes of reconstruction. And without writing, ritual becomes the chief mode of reconstructing and transmitting the cultural memory in an oral society.³⁹ It has been argued that oral societies are founded upon the principle of ritual coherence and immanence, that is, “the idea of the need to maintain the world.”⁴⁰ If the rituals are not performed properly,

31 Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 122–25; inspired by Sundermeier, “Religion, Religionen.” See Nygaard, “Religion og sakrale herskere,” 9–12; “Religion and Sacral Rulers,” where the need for and usefulness of these typologies and typologization of religion in general is argued for.

32 See DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*; Brink, “How Uniform Was the Old Norse Religion?”; Schjødt, “Diversity and its Consequences”; “Reflections on Aims and Methods”; Nordberg, “Continuity, Change and Regional Variation”; Gunnell, “Pantheon? What Pantheon?”; cf. Murphy, “Between Unity and Diversity.”

33 Such typologies are always a form of *Ideal type* and universal or secondary religions certainly also contain rituals. Their main focus, however, is (ideally) on dogmatic, canonized written records (cf. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 122–25). This canon then forms the basis of the rituals that, of course, are part of secondary religions like Islam or Catholicism.

34 Lundager Jensen, “Religion, hukommelse og viden,” 4, 7. Lundager Jensen argues for this stance by situating Assmann’s use (Assmann, *Ägypten*, 7) of semiotician Yuri Lotman’s statement: “Kultur ist Gedächtnis” in a Durkheimian understanding of religion, like that mentioned in footnote 11.

35 See also Nygaard and Schjødt, “History of Religion.”

36 Hermann, “Memory, Oral Tradition, and Sources.”

37 Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory.”

38 Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 24.

39 Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 39–40.

40 Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 126. See also Nygaard and Schjødt, “History of Religion.”

then it is believed that the world will suffer and ultimately come to an end, and since the group strives towards its own durability and resists change in this pursuit,⁴¹ the ritual reconstruction needs to be as stable as possible. Thus, because of the idea of immanence and the group's wish for durability, ritual can be viewed as a structured, stable medium for cultural memory.⁴²

According to Assmann,⁴³ three functions have to be fulfilled in order for this ritual transmission and reconstruction of cultural memory to take place in oral societies: (1) *preservation* through poetic form, which makes the cultural memory relatively stable and easier to remember;⁴⁴ (2) *retrieval* through ritual interaction between the ritual specialist and the group; and (3) *communication* maintaining the world view and coherence of the group through ritual participation. Thus, it is through this ritual reconstruction of cultural memory in oral societies—in other words, through oral transmission—that we can argue for some degree of continuity in religion from at least the early Iron Age until the end of the Viking Age. This has been substantiated by archaeological finds throughout the North in the first millennium.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, when the rituals cease to be performed—for instance, when a change in religion takes place—the tradition is broken and the group risks forgetting. In spite of this, no oral tradition disappears overnight, and motifs and crystallized images of the past can survive in, for instance, myth, folklore, and later writings as various descriptions of rituals. As scholars, these crystallizations are what we are left to work with. Continuity aside, which functions might the original ritual reconstruction mentioned above have had?

Obligation and Ritual Performativity

Rappaport stresses the importance of performance in ritual “defining it [ritual] as the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers.”⁴⁶ Ritual, he argues, is central to human interaction and performance is central to ritual acts.⁴⁷ According to Rappaport, the central function of ritual

⁴¹ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 26. See also Nygaard and Schjødt, “History of Religion.”

⁴² Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory”; however, see footnote 19. See also Nygaard and Schjødt, “History of Religion.”

⁴³ Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 39.

⁴⁴ Skaldic poetry in particular is traditionally viewed as having been an especially stable form of poetry due to its very strict metric requirements, and the written versions are thought to reflect the oral tradition rather closely, while eddic poetry is less rigid in its metrics and therefore less stable, if only to a slightly lesser degree. In their now lost oral form, both are essentially thought to be instances of memorised literature with varying degrees of room for improvisation (Ise Mundal, “Introduction,” 2; Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society*, 76–77). And while every performance of an oral poem may essentially be viewed as a new poem (Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*; Gunnell, “Eddic Performances,” 93), some stability and continuity can be expected in both forms (Harris, “Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry”).

⁴⁵ Gräslund, “The Material Culture of Old Norse Religion.”

⁴⁶ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 24.

⁴⁷ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 107.

is the creation of social and moral obligation between the participants in the given ritual. Through what Rappaport calls *auto-communication*, each individual communicates this obligation to him- or herself by participating in the ritual, while all the participants communicate their obligation to each other through *allo-communication* via their collective participation in the ritual. This creates commitment and solidarity between the participants, and exacts the necessary conformity and acceptance of the performed ritual act from both the ritual specialist and the remaining participants. This conformity is a key characteristic of ritual performativity. In the end, this process may lead to what Rappaport calls *high-order meaning*, which creates a sense of unity in the collective of people who have taken part in the ritual.⁴⁸ Standing in a special relationship with ritual are the utterances termed *performatives* by Rappaport.⁴⁹ These ritual utterances “transform ourselves or the conditions surrounding us”—if the rituals are properly performed by authorized specialists, then the performatives in the rituals come into being.⁵⁰ This capacity of change and transformation inherent in the ritual is what I understand as ritual performativity.

Combining these considerations with Gunnell's *performance archaeology* approach mentioned above, I will argue that these functions—the creation of social and moral obligation towards the group perhaps resulting in the creation of high-order meaning and ritual performativity through the use of performatives—may be found in the ritual framework which lies behind the performance of the *ljóðaháttr* poem *Grímnismál*.

Grímnismál as Ritual

The context in which I aim to examine this poem is the following: a ruler in the Viking Age is involved in war, and he needs his warriors to fight for him in order to win this war. This raises the question of how the ruler in pre-Christian North persuaded his warriors to follow him into war instead of staying at home tending to their farms and families without the imminent risk of dying a violent death? The promise for elite warriors of Valhøll with its never-ending meat and mead, violence and *valkyrjur* was most likely part of it, as Gunnell has suggested.⁵¹ Additionally, it should be remembered, Old Norse society seems permeated by an ethics of honour and shame, and the undying fame of performing well in battle,⁵² always tinged by the religious notions that seem to have influenced all parts of life in the pre-Christian North.⁵³ Tacitus states that if disgraced in battle a warrior loses his rights to participate in rituals and councils (*Germania* chapter 6), and in all likelihood this kind of notion also

⁴⁸ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 71–72.

⁴⁹ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 114–15; following Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*; cf. Searle, *Speech Acts; Making the Social World*.

⁵⁰ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 114–19.

⁵¹ Gunnell, “From One High-One,” 167.

⁵² Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*; Lindow, “Ethics”. This is, however, not noted by Gunnell in his article “From One High-One.”

⁵³ Hultgård, “The Religion of the Vikings,” 212.

Figure 3.1. Detail of reconstruction of the early seventh-century Sutton Hoo helmet-mask by Dave Roper of the Wulfheodenas living history group (photo by Lindsey Kerr; courtesy the owner, Paul Mortimer of the Wulfheodenas living history group).

applied to the individuals who did not go to war at all—staying at home tending the farm means forfeiting your honour and chance at undying fame.⁵⁴ Also, as we shall see, the social and moral contract set up in the participation in a ritual⁵⁵ will have played a large role—at least as a means of securing the loyalty of the warrior band. In this way, religion and war seem intrinsically linked.⁵⁶

As Gunnell has argued,⁵⁷ many of the Old Norse poems may have been performed in a ritualized hall setting, in which the construction of the hall could have represented a microcosm of the mythological landscape. Furthermore, a ritual specialist could have used ritual props, like the Sutton Hoo helmet-mask (Figure 3.1) playing on externalized

⁵⁴ Possibly also echoed in the famous stanzas 76–77 of the eddic poem *Hávamál*.

⁵⁵ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 107; see also Gunnell, “From One High-One,” 165–68.

⁵⁶ Kershaw, *The One-Eyed God*, 18; Price, *The Viking Way*.

⁵⁷ Gunnell, “*Hof*, Halls, *Goðar* and Dwarves.”

memory to become Óðinn in the ritual moment.⁵⁸ In the following, I will explore and further argue for this transformation taking place through ritual performativity.⁵⁹

The *ljóðaháttir* poems,⁶⁰ of which I will use *Grímnismál* as an example, seem particularly well suited for such ritualized, oral performance and contain several performance markers. In performance, the poems in the *ljóðaháttir* metre seem to make past and present appear at the same time through the performer, whom we can assume to have been a ritual specialist of some kind, taking on the roles of the gods and heroes of the poems in the first person, bringing them into the presence of the audience—in other words, making them seem real to the participants in the ritual. Sound patterns stressed in the alliteration are used to create additional aural sense impressions, underpinning the poem's narrative content.⁶¹ The wording also helps stress that the poems actually take place inside the ritual space of the present hall using expressions such as *hér* and *inn*. While this also makes sense from a purely literary, narrative standpoint, such instances of what linguistics call *space deixis*⁶²—that is, expressions that have a fixed semantic meaning but denote different things depending of the context of their use—function very well in a performance context. Used in the proposed setting of a hall-based, oral performance they may function to establish what Foley terms the virtual *performance arena*, which makes the participants know that the oral-poetic language, or *register*, now applies and instigates the ritual of oral poetry.⁶³

In *Grímnismál*,⁶⁴ Óðinn, in disguise, visits the ruler of the Goths, Geirrøðr, and stages a sort of wisdom monologue. His alias in the poem, Grímnir (“the helmeted or masked one”), could also hint at the use of a mask, like the Sutton Hoo helmet-mask, in the ritual performance. Stanza 2 then sets the scene when Óðinn states that:

2. Átta nætr
sat ek milli elda **hér**, [...]

(Eight nights I sat between these fires **here**.) My emphasis.

The liminal action on the supernaturally charged ninth night⁶⁵ takes place here by these fires, in this very hall as indicated by use of *hér*, which is substantiated by the similar use of *inn* in stanza 45:

⁵⁸ Price and Mortimer, “An Eye for Odin?”; Gunnell, “*Völuspá* in Performance,” 167–68.

⁵⁹ See also Nygaard, “Poetry as Ritual in pre-Christian Nordic Religion.”

⁶⁰ See Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, 185–94 on the pre-Christian character of the *ljóðaháttir* metre (“metre of incantations” [Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, 190] suggesting magical or mythical content). Also Gunnell, “Eddic Performances,” 97. See Fulk, “Eddic metres” on eddic metres in general.

⁶¹ Gunnell, “Eddic Performances,” 94–96; “*Völuspá* in Performance”; “Performance Archaeology.”

⁶² For example, Fillmore, *Lectures on Deixis*; Hanks, *Referential Practice*, 4–9.

⁶³ Foley, *Immanent Art; How to Read an Oral Poem*, 114–17.

⁶⁴ All quotes from *Grímnismál* are from the 2014 Íslenzk fornrit edition (Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, *Goðakvæði*, 368–79). The translations of the Old Norse are my own.

⁶⁵ Gunnell, “Eddic Performances,” 102. The general performance context of *Grímnismál* is explored in Gunnell, “Eddic Performances,” 101–7.

45. [...] ǫllum ásum
þat skal **inn** koma
Ægis bekki á, [...]

([...] to all the *æsir*, who shall come **in here** on Ægir's benches [...] [i.e. in the hall].) My emphasis.

Aural sense impressions underpinning the narrative are used in for instance stanza 19, where the r-sounds resemble the growling of the wolves mentioned in the stanza:⁶⁶

19. Gera ok Freka
seðr gunntamiðr,
hroðigr Herjafðr, [...]

(Geri and Freki, the battle-seasoned, glorious Army-father satiates [...].) My emphasis.⁶⁷

This might all have been accompanied by ritualized gestures, such as the lifting and spreading of the burning cloak in stanza 1.⁶⁸

So why is this not merely a dramatic play, in which the ritual specialist plays a role for the entertainment of others like an actor? Gunnell⁶⁹ invokes Richard Schechner's ritual-play dyad,⁷⁰ stating that the narrative in *Grímnismál* is more a ritual than a play, and this seems beyond a doubt. We are definitely dealing with a ritual scene with a person posed between two fires in a hall in an initiation-like ritual.⁷¹ The "smoking gun," arguing for ritual transformation, as it were, seems to be stanzas 3, 24, 46–50, 51, and 53–54. I propose that they be read in the context of *Grímnismál* being a performative piece of oral-derived poetry drawing on cultural memory with the goal of the ritual specialist becoming Óðinn in the ritual moment.

The stanzas mentioned above seem to represent a process of identity revelation taking place throughout the poem, where Grímnir gradually reveals himself as Óðinn—a process by which the ritual specialist is transformed into Óðinn in the ritual moment.⁷² Of course all indications are that, if the performance of an oral version of *Grímnismál* should be viewed as a ritual—that is, a series of acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the participants—then the participants are in all likelihood aware of the fact that Grímnir (represented by the ritual specialist) is actually Óðinn in disguise. The ritual efficacy of the performance nonetheless still depends on the correct execution of the

⁶⁶ Gunnell, "Eddic Performances," 101–2.

⁶⁷ Following Gunnell, "Eddic Performances," 102.

⁶⁸ Gunnell, "Eddic Performances," 103–4.

⁶⁹ Gunnell, "Eddic Performances," 95, 102.

⁷⁰ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 71.

⁷¹ *Grímnismál* does not seem to represent an actual initiation, at least not for Grímnir/Óðinn. See Schjødt, "The 'Fire Ordeal,'" on this discussion.

⁷² See also Larrington, "Vafþrúðnismál and Grímnismál."

ritual acts and utterances, and as such the gradual revelation of identity is crucial to the ritual performativity of the ritualized oral performance.

The transformation begins by Grímnir greeting Agnarr in stanza 3, announcing that:

3. Heill skaltu, Agnarr,
alls þik heilan biðr
Veratýr vera [...]

(Blessed shall you, Agnarr, be since Veratýr ["god of men"⁷³] bids you be blest [...].)

At this point, it is not clear whether Grímnir himself is Veratýr or whether he is just invoking the name of a god, perhaps commonly known to be Óðinn. This statement is nonetheless the first allusion to the actual identity of Grímnir and by extension the ritual specialist. Grímnir then proceeds to relate cosmological knowledge interspersed with cosmogonic and eschatological hints in stanzas 4–44,⁷⁴ during which the audience receives the second allusion. This happens in stanza 24, which states that:

24. Fimm hundruð gólfa
ok um fjórum tögum,
svá hygg ek Bilskirni með bugum;
ranna þeira
er ek rept vita
míns veit ek mest magar.

(Five hundred floors and forty, so I think Bilskirni has; of those halls that I know to be roofed, my son's I know to be greatest.)

Here, the identity is revealed with steadily increasing clarity, although still indirectly and clouded in references to familial relations and ownership of property. Who owns Bilskirni? Þórr. And who is Þórr's father? This is, of course, Óðinn, but it is not stated explicitly, and depends on the degree of mythological knowledge possessed by those present. A key shift then occurs in stanza 45, where Grímnir seems to lift his head and summon the *æsir*⁷⁵ to the performance space to witness the climax of the poem. In stanzas 46–50, Grímnir starts listing the names he has used in the past, several of which are actually used for Óðinn throughout the Old Norse textual corpus (for example *Bolverkr*

73 Larrington translates Veratýr as "Odin" (*The Poetic Edda*, 49), although this line is the only example suggesting this outside the *bulr* (here referring to the poetic genre of lists) of the names Óðinn apparently uses for himself given later in *Grímnismál* (mainly stanzas 46–51), also used by Snorri in *Gylfaginning*, 22.

74 This section of the poem is analyzed and grouped convincingly by Olsen ("Fra Eddaforskningen"), who highlights the continuous shifting between cosmological and eschatological information as a characteristic of the poem's composition.

75 Gunnell, "Eddic Performances," 103.

(*Skáldskaparmál*, 4–5), *Fjölfnir* (*Reginismál*, stanza 19) and *Þundr* (*Ögmundardrápa*, stanza 1)). The hints at Grímnir's actual identity are nonetheless still indirect, and the ritual identity revelation progresses slowly.⁷⁶ In stanza 51, however, the picture becomes slightly clearer, when Grímnir states that:

51. [...] miklu ertu hnugginn
er þú ert mínu gengi,
öllum einherjum
ok Óðni hylli.

([...] much are you denied when you lose my support, that of all the *einherjar* and Óðinn's favour.)

It is nevertheless still not completely clear whether Grímnir's support and Óðinn's favour are the same thing, but in all likelihood it is beginning to become apparent that this is indeed the case. The identity revelation then finally culminates in the last half of stanza 53 and the first half of stanza 54, where Grímnir at last formally reveals himself as being Óðinn, now using the present tense, thereby simultaneously suggesting that the ritual specialist and the god are one in this ritual moment. That these stanzas carry ritual significance can be substantiated by the following: the stanzas 46–50 and 54 contain a number of emphatic, formulaic “I”s (*ek*) that could be reminiscent of cultic utterances.⁷⁷ Here, the ritual specialist uses these “I”s – what may also be called person deixis⁷⁸ – to tell the audience that *he* was Grímr, Gangleri, Herjan, Hjálmbéri, and so on, finally revealing himself to be Óðinn, demonstrating his supreme wisdom surrounded by the invisible *valkyrjur* and *æsir*, conjured up in stanzas 36 and 45. These instances of emphatic *ek* may be a form of aretology,⁷⁹ a self-praising “recitation” of a god's attributes (here names) by a ritual specialist traditionally found in Egyptian and Iranian contexts. If we view *Grímnismál* as involving cultural memory consisting of cosmological, cosmogonic, and eschatological knowledge related by a ritual specialist for an audience of bearers of pre-Christian Nordic religion, then the self-references (in for instance stanza 46) and lastly the words in stanzas 53–54 along with the gradual revelation of identity mentioned above would have had an important function.

46. Hétumk Grímr,
hétumk Gangleri

⁷⁶ As modern readers of the poem (including the prose introduction), we are, of course, told that Grímnir is Óðinn. However, as Gunnell has argued convincingly (*Origins of Drama*, 223–35; “Eddic Performances,” 99) one should be wary of considering the prose introductions and interpolations in the dialogic eddic poems as a part of the “original” oral versions of these poems. This is partly because much of it can be traced back to Snorri's *Edda*, and when viewing the poems in an oral performance context they seem largely superfluous. This also seems the case with *Grímnismál* (Gunnell, “Eddic Performances,” 101; Nygaard, “Poetry as Ritual in Pre-Christian Nordic Religion”).

⁷⁷ Fillmore, Lectures on deixis.

⁷⁸ This may also be the case in the eddic poem *Hávamál*, for instance. The use of *ek* in *Hávamál* has been examined by McKinnell, “Personae of the Performer in *Hávamál*.” See Nygaard, “Poetry as Ritual in Pre-Christian Nordic Religion” for a separate “performance archaeological” treatment of this paper.

⁷⁹ Sundqvist, *Kultledare i fornsandinavisk religion*, 205–9, on the runic appellative *erilar*.

(I was called Grímr, I was called Gangleri). My emphasis.

53–54. nú knáttu Óðin sjá [...]
Óðinn **ek** nú heiti'

(now you can see Óðinn [...] Óðinn I am now called.) My emphasis.

These personal utterances given in first person present would have effectively transformed the ritual specialist into Óðinn in the ritual moment, functioning as *performatives*,⁸⁰ making what is said a reality rather than a pretence for the participants in the ritual. Furthermore, ritual performance can also be seen as being potentially personality transforming.⁸¹ Additionally, it is worth bearing in mind Rappaport's statement that what makes a ritual performance radically different to a dramatic performance is the fact that the ritual performativity requires conformity and acceptance of the performed ritual by both the participating audience⁸² and the performer.⁸³ By stating that he is called Óðinn, the ritual specialist *becomes* Óðinn, something accepted by any audience that accepts the reality of this statement.

It might also be borne in mind that the recurrent mention of the *einherjar* (mentioned directly in stanzas 18, 23, 36, and 51; indirectly in stanzas 8 and 14) may also have prompted a ritual transformation of the warrior-audience into Óðinn's mythological warriors.⁸⁴ In addition, the continuous mentions of Valhöll (in stanzas 8–10, 23, 25–26) along with the cosmological information which is centred on Óðinn's hall—for instance the mythological cook Andhrímnir's preparing of the pig Sæhrímnir for the *einherjar* in stanza 18—may also have helped transport the warrior-audience temporarily into this Otherworldly hall described in detail in the poem;⁸⁵ they would perhaps even have identified the sounds and smells of their own meal with the information given in the ritual performance, possibly transforming their meal as well.⁸⁶

These ideas are accentuated by the transformation of space that such a hall performance entails:⁸⁷ we start in a ruler's hall and are gradually taken into a mythological space, perhaps even representing a microcosm of the mythological landscape.⁸⁸ The mention of such known mythological locations as the World Tree—Læraðr (and the animals biting at its leaves in stanzas 25–26) or Yggdrasil (which is the subject of stanzas 29–30)—or

⁸⁰ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 114–19.

⁸¹ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 136; Bellah, "Durkheim and Ritual," 193; Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 63–64; Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 378.

⁸² Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 135–36.

⁸³ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 248–85.

⁸⁴ Gunnell, "Eddic Performances," 104, 107.

⁸⁵ This also seems to be the case in for instance the skaldic poem *Eiríksmál* (Gunnell, "Performance Archaeology"; "Eddic Performances"; Nygaard, "...nú knáttu Óðin sjá").

⁸⁶ See also Nordberg, "Handlar Grimnesmál 42 om en sakral måltid?"

⁸⁷ Gunnell, "The Drama of the Poetic Edda"; Nygaard, "...nú knáttu Óðin sjá."

⁸⁸ Gunnell, "Hof, Halls, Goðar and Dwarves"; Nygaard, "...nú knáttu Óðin sjá."

the body of water Hvergelmir (sometimes equated with Urðarbrunnr from e.g. *Völuspá* stanza 19) may have been mirrored by the high-seat pillars or, for instance, Urnes stave church-like carvings, or the kettle on the hearth respectively. In addition, one can imagine the ritual specialist using a prop like the Sutton Hoo helmet-mask. A mask of this kind would change his voice, and in a dark hall where the fire is the only light source, it has been noted that only the left eye of this specific helmet—decorated with garnets on gold leaf—would light up, suggesting Óðinn's one-eyedness.⁸⁹ This feature would have added to the believability of the ritual and to the idea of the ritual specialist being Óðinn. Thus, in this performance, the pre-Christian audience is not told of animals biting at the leaves of Læraðr or the names of the abodes of the *æsir* by a mere ritual specialist: they are instructed by Óðinn himself, who grants them direct access to their shared religious cultural memory, which is burned deep into their minds by means of the ritualized performance in the hall.

But what kind of ritual may have been performed?⁹⁰ One possibility is that we are dealing with the initiation of a future ruler, represented by Agnarr, who needs to acquire all of the numinous knowledge conveyed in *Grímnismál* in order to be able to take over from his father, represented by Geirrøðr, as Grímnir foretells in stanza 2—an initiand in an original, oral ritual performance of this poem may then have taken on the identity of Agnarr. Jens Peter Schjødt⁹¹ has been critical towards earlier scholarship on *Grímnismál* and its ritual context—both as evidence of the idea of shamanism in pre-Christian Nordic religion (in line with Jere Fleck's⁹² criticism of Franz Rolf Schröder)⁹³ and as an initiation of Óðinn⁹⁴—mainly because Óðinn gains no new knowledge and because Schjødt sees no notion of liminal space in *Grímnismál*. However, by viewing the poem in its performance context, as argued above, I would suggest that the ritual transformation of the hall space does constitute a liminal space. I agree that Óðinn undergoes no initiation, but by applying Schjødt's four criteria for initiation⁹⁵ to the poem here, I will argue that the figure represented by Agnarr does.

1. Irreversibility. In initiations, Schjødt states that a change of status is vital and that “the status that the individual obtains in the final situation is *irreversible*.”⁹⁶ Agnarr is the son of the ruler Geirrøðr and presumably the next in the line of succession in what we may surmise is the initial situation where Grímnir is sitting between the fires. Agnarr then grants Grímnir a drink which unlocks a virtual treasure trove of

89 Price and Mortimer, “An Eye for Odin?”; Gunnell, “From One-High One.”

90 See also Nygaard, “Poetry as Ritual in Pre-Christian Nordic Religion.”

91 Schjødt, “The ‘Fire Ordeal’”

92 Fleck, “Knowledge Criterion in *Grímnismál*.”

93 Schröder, “*Grímnismál*.”

94 Both Fleck and Schjødt suggest that a transmission of knowledge to—but not an explicit initiation of—Agnarr takes place.

95 Schjødt, *Initiation*, 72–84.

96 Schjødt, *Initiation*, 72.

Figure 3.2. Jens Peter Schjødt's five-phase initiation sequence. After Schjødt, *Initiation*, 83 (courtesy of Jens Peter Schjødt).

numinous knowledge imparted upon him by Grímnir. After this his father dies and Agnarr becomes the ruler of the Goths, which must be said to be a new, irreversible social and religious status; especially considering the role of the ruler as a sacral figure in pre-Christian Nordic religion.⁹⁷

2. The tripartite (or five-phase) structure (Figure 3.2). Schjødt proposes to expand Arnold van Gennep's⁹⁸ structure for passage rituals to, in the instances of initiation rituals, consist of an initial phase, a separation phase, a liminal phase, a reintegration phase, and a final phase.⁹⁹ Agnarr is the son of the ruler in the initial phase, then he grants Grímnir the drink that represents the separation phase. In the liminal phase, he is present in the ritual, microcosmic liminal space of the hall, as argued above (and has as such symbolically entered the Other World), and a ritual specialist gradually revealing himself to be Óðinn grants him first hand access to numinous knowledge. The implied reintegration happens at the death of Agnarr's father Geirrøðr and after this—in the final phase—Agnarr is the ruler of the Goths.
3. Binary oppositional pairs analogous with the liminal/non-liminal. Schjødt highlights the move between the categories the liminal and the non-liminal as vital to the idea of an initiation ritual, and this is represented by binary oppositional pairs in the myths.¹⁰⁰ The liminal has by Victor Turner, from whom Schjødt draws inspiration,¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ For example, Sundqvist, *An Arena for Higher Powers*; Nygaard, "Sacral Rulers."

⁹⁸ Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*.

⁹⁹ Schjødt, *Initiation*, 74.

¹⁰⁰ Schjødt, *Initiation*, 74–78.

¹⁰¹ Schjødt, *Initiation*, 34–43.

been described in general as anti-structure or inversion of social norms:¹⁰² in *Grímnismál*, the torturing of a guest in one's own hall seems to exemplify the breakdown of social order by inverting the trope of hospitality and the sanctity of the hall.¹⁰³ As far as the transformation of the ruler's hall into a ritual, liminal space is concerned we may argue for the existence of the oppositional pair of ritual hall space/everyday hall space and an implied move between these. This move also symbolically represents a move from this world to the Other World adding this oppositional pair to the list of binary oppositional pairs in *Grímnismál*.

4. The numinous knowledge-object. In the liminal phase a certain knowledge is usually gained, which is described by Schjødtt as "fundamentally secret or unknown to those who are not initiated."¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, Schjødtt describes this numinous knowledge in part as something, which the initiand lacks in the initial phase, but is in possession of in the final phase and that "it may be a matter of verbally transferred knowledge of cosmic events [...]"¹⁰⁵ The numinous knowledge, which Grímnir relates to Agnarr and the remaining ritual participants, fits this description of what numinous knowledge may look like very well. Information about the abodes of the gods, the mythological landscape, the creation and end of the world surely fall in under the category of numinous knowledge and it is acquired by Agnarr during the liminal phase, as argued above. This knowledge can be viewed as the deciding factor for Agnarr to be able to shoulder the responsibilities of being a ruler and for him to gain an irreversibly higher status.

Thus, according to the criteria for dealing with an initiation ritual so convincingly put forth and analyzed by Schjødtt, the ritual occasion of the performance of *Grímnismál* may in fact be the initiation of Agnarr into his new role and status of ruler of the Goths. Certainly, there are also problems, even though all the criteria seem to be in place. One point of contention is why Grímnir is the one placed between the fires and not Agnarr? Besides creating a very dramatic performance situation, the fires may have acted as an ordeal of endurance in place to augment Grímnir or the ritual specialist's numinous capabilities as in seen in other, comparable rituals across the world, like the Sun Dance ritual of the North American Plains Indians¹⁰⁶ or the Indian *tapas* rites.¹⁰⁷ To my mind, the analysis above seems equally as convincing as for instance the analysis Schjødtt himself makes of Óttarr in *Hyndluljóð*, where he concludes that this myth has at least something to do with initiation.¹⁰⁸ He is hesitant to go further because of the lack of ritual context for the events of *Hyndluljóð*—a thing that seems clear enough in the case of Agnarr in

¹⁰² Turner, "The Centre out There," 216.

¹⁰³ See Kuusela, "Hallen var lyst i helig frid."

¹⁰⁴ Schjødtt, *Initiation*, 78.

¹⁰⁵ Schjødtt, *Initiation*, 79.

¹⁰⁶ Gunnell, "Eddic Performances," 102–3.

¹⁰⁷ Fleck, "Knowledge Criterion in *Grímnismál*," 65. This has been criticised by Schjødtt, who sees the fires as an attempt at annihilating Óðinn ("The 'Fire Ordeal,'" 40–41).

¹⁰⁸ Schjødtt, *Initiation*, 251–57.

Grímnismál—along with the lack of a clear final phase; this is also clearly implied by Agnarr's becoming the ruler of the land of the Goths. With *Grímnismál*, it seems that viewing the poem in its oral performance context and considering its place in what we might call practiced religion allows us this reading: Agnarr represents the initiand and Grímnir represents the initiator in an initiation ritual.

Who may then have been the actual ritual specialist performing this possible initiation ritual? A likely candidate would be the *pulr*.¹⁰⁹ The main role of the *pulr* seems have been that of an orator of numinous knowledge¹¹⁰—etymologically substantiated (from Old Norse *þylja*, to recite, speak)—perhaps in a ritualized hall setting as implied by, among other sources, part of the Viking Age Snoldelev runic inscription (Figure 3.3, DR 248; Old Danish “pulaR ã Salhaugum,” (*pulr* at *sal*-mounds)). The noun *salr*, it has been argued, often describes a ritual hall,¹¹¹ and this would indeed fit the setting proposed here for *Grímnismál*. Whoever the ritual specialist may have been, the transformative qualities of ritual performativity would have aided his transformation into Óðinn, the hall's transformation into a ritual space,¹¹² and the warrior band audience's own transformation into Óðinn's *einherjar*, perhaps a mythological *pendant* to their comitatus status and even the initiation of the ruler represented by Agnarr.

Concluding Remarks

This reconstructed ritualized performance of the Old Norse poem *Grímnismál* could, in the end, have produced the form of unity that Rappaport terms *high-order meaning*; the feeling where

in its ultimate manifestations [...] that which is meaningful and she for whom it is meaningful, is obliterated in [...] the experience of unification with another, or others, or the cosmos, or the divine [...] *participation* is the way to high-order meaning [...] participation is a *sine qua non* of ritual.¹¹³

This is what creates the social and moral obligation towards the group—a group that now also counts the otherworldly beings of the performed poem. This collective effervescence, to use the Durkheimian equivalent,¹¹⁴ entails a participation in the sacred, which is key to the formation and upholding of groups. In short, the ritual participants and the

¹⁰⁹ As proposed by Fleck, “*Konr, Óttarr, Geirrþōðr*.”

¹¹⁰ See Vogt, *Stilgeschichte der eddischen Wissensdichtung*; “Der frühgermanische Kultredner”; de Vries, “Om eddaens visdomsdigtning,” 58–59; Poole, “Pulr”; Sundqvist, *Kultledare i fornskandinavisk religion*.

¹¹¹ Brink, “Political and Social Structures in Early Scandinavia,” 255–58.

¹¹² This was a feature which played a prominent role in pre-Christian Nordic religion. See for instance Jørgensen, “Pre-Christian Cult at Aristocratic Residences and Settlement Complexes in Southern Scandinavia”; Murphy, “Continuity and Change.”

¹¹³ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 72.

¹¹⁴ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*.

Figure 3.3. The Snoldelev rune stone (DR 248; ca. AD 700–800)
(photo by Roberto Fortuna; courtesy of Nationalmuseet (CC-BY-SA)).

ritual specialist signal a conformity towards themselves and each other, through auto- and allo-communication. By participating and accepting the ritual as real and meaningful, they form a community. The ritual specialist bringing about this act of unity in *Grímnismál* “is” Óðinn. At the same time, the warriors may through this religious experience envision themselves as *einherjar* for the duration of the ritual; they may even have gotten an idea of what would happen to them if they died in battle—the undying fame of Valhøll would await. The participation and plausible achievement of high-order meaning means that they are socially and morally obliged to go to war And fight for their ruler and for each other, thereby strengthening their will to combat, their comitatus, and group coherence and solidarity.¹¹⁵

115 This could be what was at work in the odinic *Männerbünde* or warrior bands we hear of in several sources (e.g. *Hrólfs saga kraka*; cf. Kris Kershaw, *The One-Eyed God*). We might also anticipate that the warriors had been ritually initiated into the warrior comitatus as is posited by Schjødt

The social and moral obligation created by participating in such reconstructed rituals in the Viking Age ruler's hall would then serve to strengthen this allegiance and the warriors' sense of *communitas*.¹¹⁶ For one named participant, represented by Agnarr, this performance may additionally have meant the initiation into a new and irreversibly higher social and religious status.¹¹⁷

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(*Initiation*, 352–55), and also noted by Gunnell, in “Performance Archaeology.” See also Raffield et al., “Ingroup Identification and Identity Fusion.”

116 See Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94–130. See also Raffield et al., “Ingroup Identification and Identity Fusion.”

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