

Wotan: The Road to Valhalla

by

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Forward

Dedicated to the memory of Lionel Hornby, last of the Saxons: true priest, true lover, and true friend.

This book could not have been written without those great skalds of the Viking Age who showed us the road to Valhalla: Eyvindr skáldaspillir, the *Eiríksmál* poet, and Egill Skalla-Grímsson. To them and their fellows I am endlessly grateful; also, to Snorri Sturluson, whose writings preserved so much of Wotan's lore. In more recent times, I owe special thanks to Hector Munro Chadwick and Jan de Vries, whose work has inspired much of my own.

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Finally, I must offer my own thanks to Wotan himself--Valhalla's lord, god of death and memory, who gives the mead's gold to his true thanes, that their staves be more lasting than the runes carven on memorial stones. May the Old Man continue to inspire us and show us the way between the worlds: the road to Valhalla.

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Chapter I: Seeking the Western Soul

It was not in Wotan's nature to linger on and show signs of old age. He simply disappeared when the times turned against him, and remained invisible . . . working anonymously and indirectly. Archetypes are like riverbeds which dry up when the water deserts them, but which it can find again at any time . . . The longer it has flowed in this channel, the more likely it is that sooner or later the water will return to its own bed.

(Jung, C.J., *Essays on Contemporary Events* (London: Ark, 1988), p. 20)

It's like comparing Sal Mineo with James Dean. They were both in the same movie, Rebel Without a Cause, but only one of them car-smashed his way into permanent Valhalla.

(comparing Franz Kline with Jackson Pollock in "Reactivating Kline's Impact", by Robert Hughes, *Time*, Jan. 16, 1995, p. 46)

In the dark woodland of the Northern European consciousness, a figure waits: an old man, wrapped in a blue-black cloak. His broad-brimmed hat hangs low, hiding one eye; a sharp metal point glints at the tip of his staff, and two ravens croak from the branches of the ash-tree above him. He beckons: in his hand he holds an ancient drinking-horn, and the scent that rises from it is honey and alcohol, strong enough to set the head spinning with a single whiff. He is a grim one, this old man; his spear is streaked with blood, and the hounds that crouch at his side look more like wolves than dogs. Yet the gift he offers is enough to overcome fear, for the brave . . . for those who are not afraid to die.

For a long time, Westerners have had little time for figures such as this graybeard - the chimerical archaisms of a religion stamped out by force a thousand years ago, living on only as shadows in the stories of the poor and uneducated. The gods and goddesses of an agricultural people seem incongruous amid computers and cars, Concord jets and CD players: forty years ago, the thought that the ancient tribal deities of Northern Europe might have anything to teach an educated Westerner would have been considered laughable. And why should this god, his worship long forgotten and his name known only through myths that are far less a part of common Western culture than those of the Greeks or Jews, be of interest now, when he has not been seen as a living part of existence for so long?

Yet, as the pace of technology speeds onward and few physical achievements seem impossible, our outlook on many things has begun to change. Monotheism is no longer considered the natural pinnacle of spiritual philosophy, as it was only a generation ago; the customs and spiritual practices of traditional peoples are less often seen as 'primitive, chaotic, pagan activities that should be replaced by Christianity, the only civilized religion',¹ and beginning to be recognised as valuable elements of living cultures.

And, as we begin to recognise the value of other worldviews than that of the monotheistic, technological, progress-oriented West, we have also begun to recognise what the West has lost in the process of becoming what it is. Technology is not enough to satisfy the cravings of the spirit for understanding and expression: as we look around the world we have made, we are coming to realize that something is missing and to seek for it--sometimes looking at other cultures which have not been fully assimilated to the Western way of thinking, borrowing snatches of thought from Native Americans, Orientals, Siberian shamans, Australian aborigines, and other traditional peoples in order to fill the gap we feel in our own society; sometimes looking into European folk-tales for the understanding that can be gleaned from the remnants of the organic traditions onto which the progressive rationalism of modern Western society has been grafted. At the same time, we are experiencing an upswing in religious activity, both christian and non-christian. This upswing has both heartening and frightening elements, as charities and environmental action on the part of various religious groups are balanced by murder and dirty politics in the name of closely related groups: both, however, stem from the same deep desire to re-spiritualize modern life. This trend was noted by Jung earlier in the century, when he described the loss of traditional spirituality and the psychological reactions attendant upon it as a specific malady of the West:

A Pueblo chieftain once confided to me that he thought all Americans (the only white people he knew) were crazy, and the reasons he gave for this view sounded exactly like a description of people who were possessed. Well, perhaps we are.

For the first time since the dawn of history we have succeeded in swallowing the whole of primitive animism into ourselves, and with it the spirit that animated nature . . . Now, for the first time, we are living in a nature bereft of gods. No one will deny the important role which the powers of the human psyche, personified as "gods", played in the past . . . Even though nature is depyschicized, the human conditions which breed demons are as actively at work as ever.

The demons have not really disappeared but have taken on another form: they have become unconscious psychic forces. This process of reabsorption went hand in hand with an increasing inflation of the ego, which became more and more evident after the sixteenth century. Finally, we even began to be aware of the psyche, and, as history shows, the discovery of the unconscious was a particularly painful episode. Just when people were congratulating themselves on having abolished all spooks, it turned out that instead of haunting the attic or old ruins the spooks were flitting about in the heads of apparently normal Europeans.
(*Essays on Contemporary Events*, pp. 67-68)

As if in direct response to Jung's diagnosis, expressions of the desire to retrieve what has been lost are growing more and more commonplace. It is almost impossible to go into any bookstore today without seeing books purporting to teach shamanism, the wisdom of the Native Americans, or the general mishmash of philosophies and beliefs going by the name "New Age". Some of these efforts are genuinely valuable sources of information; some are laughable; some appear to be snake oil designed to make money off the gullible. Nevertheless, they all share a single characteristic: their presence is a response to the increasing interest of Westerners in not only learning about traditional forms of spirituality, but in incorporating the wisdom of tribal peoples into their own lives. The Western-raised person of European descent who sits in a sweat lodge, goes on a vision quest, or attends a \$200 seminar on the practice of shamanism is seeking something that is not a part of the society in which she or he has grown up: he or she has made the conscious realization that complete emotional and spiritual fulfillment is not possible within the bounds of that society. The same is also true of the woman who leaves her Baptist church to join a Wiccan coven, the man who supplements or replaces his Catholicism by seeking initiation as a priest of the orishas, and the couple who turn away from Lutheranism in order to follow the gods of their Scandinavian ancestors. Whether the choice of means for seeking it is a wise choice or not depends on the people and the circumstances: however, it is the common recognition that this search is necessary that begins to show what is lacking in Western society.

Even more significant is the tremendous success of such works as *Iron John* and *Women Who Run With the Wolves* - books based on the analysis of traditional folk-tales as models for defining ourselves and discovering what is lacking: as Clarissa Pinkola Estés describes the process for using these works, "We contact the wildish Self through specific questions, and through examining fairy tales, folktales, legends, or mythos".² The effectiveness of these books, and their strength, stems from several different factors, chief among which is their grounding in stories which, though preserved as children's tales, represent something far deeper than an evening's amusement. In fact, these stories serve as blueprints embodying the understanding of a traditional culture as to the fullness of human nature: how to recognise when necessary elements are lacking or undeveloped, how to find or bring out what is missing within oneself - in short, how to gain a fulfillment towards which our society today does not offer any guidelines, and the process of reaching which it hinders in many ways.

Trying to live without such blueprints has not only hindered Westerners, but, indeed, seems to have done us psychological injury, an injury which is becoming more and more apparent as time goes by. On the one hand, traditional values seem to be rapidly failing: divorce rates are

rising, child abuse seems rampant, and our city streets are swiftly becoming grounds for open warfare. Perhaps most significant of all, our society's willingness to care for its old people and value their knowledge is disintegrating before our eyes. At the same time, many forms of hatred - racism, homophobia, rabid isolationism, religious intolerance - all of which spring from fear like the heads of a hydra - are not only on the rise, but making themselves felt as significant factors in political activity.

But what, exactly, is it that has been lost, and how can it be regained?

The first thing that can easily be observed is that any traditional society has, over many generations, evolved mechanisms for dealing with crises and changes of all sorts, both on an individual and on a group basis. Such societies have specific, prescribed rituals designed to integrate all processes: pregnancy and birth, puberty, the stresses of labour and fighting, marriage, divorce, menopause, the recognition of age, and finally death and grief. To some degree, every society has certain rituals for these purposes: in the West today, however, many of them (for instance, puberty and adulthood rites, the reintegration of soldiers from war to peacetime society, divorce, menopause, and age) are not part of our society, while the others are quickly disintegrating.

To give a fairly mild example: in rural Finland, a mother would give birth in the sauna, where she and her child would then be confined until the rite of "churching", which purified both from the birthing process. As well as the hygienic advantages (the sauna being the nearest thing to a sterile environment available), this confinement encouraged rest and promoted the bonding between mother and baby during the most vulnerable time for both, in an environment specifically designed to be warm, clean, pleasant and non-stressful, while the concluding ritual acted to mark the end of this period of separation, returning the recovered woman to normal life. In contrast, Westerners usually give birth in the stressful environment of a hospital, with no special consideration given during or after the birth to anything but the physical requirements of the mother: even the vestigial rituals of passing out cigars at the conclusion of the birthing process and sending out birth announcements are dwindling.

In traditional societies, the crucial period of puberty is especially hedged about with rituals and social mechanisms designed to smooth the difficult passage from childhood to adulthood. For instance: an African youth traditionally undergoes certain tests and initiations, after which he is accepted into the ranks of men, at which point not only does his perception of himself change, but the way in which he is perceived and treated by others--parents and peers alike--must change as well. The energies of young men are then directed in other socially acceptable ways--hunting, raiding, participating in athletic contests--until they are ready to take wives and settle into the next stage of life; sexual activity is also allowed appropriate outlets. At the same time, the young man is also expected, indeed required, to internalize the spiritual realities underlying his society and thereby to become integrated, not only with the living members with whom he is immediately interacting, but with the stream of tradition defining his entire social context and personal understanding of the world.

In contrast, Western adolescence, lacking clearly defined rites of passage, is typified by rebellion and anti-social behavior. These problems are usually direct expressions of the young person's growing need to assert his or her independence, to be accepted as an adult in a society where there is no clear sign of the transition from childhood to adulthood; where in fact she or he can expect to be treated as a child long after reaching physical maturity; where the acceptable outlets for his or her energies and sexual desires are either minimal or excessive; and where no solid guidance for personal spiritual experience is given--where, in fact, direct spiritual experience is looked upon with suspicion as certainly indicating oddness and possibly showing psychological instability. An acute analysis of the situation is given by Somé Malidoma in his book *Of Water and the Spirit*, in which he describes his return to his tribe after a Western upbringing and his late initiation into manhood.

In general, the absence of a ritual framework in which to conduct life produces a feeling of alienation: a lack of self-definition in terms that are generally recognised as valid. Appropriately, the first theme that comes out strongly in nearly all books on traditional (or pseudo-traditional) spirituality, overtly or subtly, is that of the need for self-definition and self-empowerment. *Iron John* and *Women Who Run With the Wolves* use their folktale frameworks to trace specific stages of individual development, against which the reader can measure him- or herself and, armed with the knowledge of which, she or he can bring out his

or her own internal Wild Man, witch, and other figures of power. Most forms of traditional (or even pseudo-traditional) spirituality offer similar processes. Spiritual exercises for finding one's own "power animal" or "animal guardian" are particularly common: through the nature of this creature, one can discover one's own innate power and the image through which to express it at the same time.

More than that, however, such self-definition offers a visible link to a whole traditional way of being. A person whose power animal is a bear, for instance, can obviously identify with the strength and self-confidence of the bear; if that person is heavy, the physical trait which may previously have been a source of distress can now be experienced as a source of pride and power. But more than that: the bear has a tremendously rich folklore and strong place in the religions of the Native Americans and many other traditional cultures. Using his or her bear as a focus, the person who has this beast as a power animal can read Native American tales of the bear as a healer, herbalist, teacher, or warrior; she or he can identify with the bear slain and worshipped in the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*; the bear who is the totemistic animal and greatest beast of power among some of the Ob-Ugric and Saami tribes;³ a bear-woman can seek out her links with the Jungian bear-goddess/Earth Mother,⁴ and so forth. The discovery of a power animal, therefore, provides not only self-definition, but a place for the discoverer within a complete spiritual tradition, which in turn validifies the importance of his or her self-discovery. Similarly, the identification of internal "characters" or personality elements with characters in traditional folktales provides an anchoring point for the subject's self-definition, and allows him or her to achieve further personal identification with major cultural archetypes.

Another frequent element in traditional spiritual practices and those practices derived from them is the confrontation with one's "shadow side", or the initiatory process through which one faces and overcomes a personification or personifications of one's own fears. The methods may vary, as do the beliefs in the degree of objective reality of the images encountered during these processes. However, the methods and purposes are, in the end, nearly identical: to guide the person undergoing the process into becoming a fully integrated human being who knows his or her own powers and, thus, has confidence in his or her control over his or her life.

Useful and necessary as this personal work is, however, it fills only part of the requirement - the answer to the questions that drive us all to some degree. It is in the renewed enthusiasm for religion that the other side of the equation is filled: the search for the spirituality and powers within is balanced by the search for the spirituality and powers without. Or, to put it another way: the need for self-definition is complemented by the need for external meaning, a meaning which is most often codified in terms of, or experienced as the presence of, the supernatural.

In traditional societies, the supernatural and the natural cannot be separated: they form a single order. As Malidoma Somé describes,

... let's say that you want a particular job. In the West, you do the linear thing and apply to the person in charge. In Africa they say that if you want a job, go demand it, then let the job come and get you.

Q: Demand the job from whom?

A: From where it is--from the spirit. The African would go and see the shaman first, because the spirit gives you the job, not the employer - he's just a human being, that is, a spirit who doesn't even know he's a spirit. So you must ask spirit, who actually sees where the job is, and will bring the job to you.⁵

Holding to this order creates a particular sense of wholeness: that the individual is one with his or her society, and both are balanced and integrated successfully with the worlds beyond.

That integration leads to the final security: if the Other worlds and this world are continuously interacting and in proper balance; if the living can help and communicate with the dead and the dead with the living, then death loses much of its terror--it becomes, not a

leap into “The undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns”,⁶ but a passage of life which can be smoothed by appropriate rituals, both during and after the death process, into the road to a land which is well mapped-out and understood. Thus, in traditional societies, the ultimate trauma--death--becomes not the end, but the crown of life: it is the point at which the meaning of life is fully defined.

In the modern Western world, however, death has largely ceased to be seen as a necessary and often welcome gateway to the Otherworld through which everyone must pass in time. Rather, it is an alien and frightening thing, a foe to be overcome by regular exercise, good diet, and improved medical technique. In a study of the social attitudes towards death and dying in Northern Ireland, Lindsay Prior particularly observes the “clinicalization” of death and its increasing divorcement from human causes or factors, especially the emotional and physical: “Death is primarily regarded as an illness and an aberration rather than something which is natural and inevitable.”⁷ Even the rituals by which our grandparents were able to recognise the presence of death and come to terms with it are swiftly disintegrating and not being replaced: in “the processes which intervene between physical death and disposal of the body . . . There is, for example, no role for . . . a priesthood, a community, or kinship groups...they are superfluous to the system which discovers, defines, and allocates the causes of death.”⁸

As well as removing the human factor from the process of death and dying, modern society is also geared to removing the awareness of death from humans. In this regard, Prior mentions the isolation of the mortuary from the hospital, noting that, “This isolation of the mortuary not only signifies the separation of functions which are performed within it, but further expresses the isolation of death. The modern mortuary is no longer a part of life . . .”⁹ Nils-Arvid Bringéus discusses the transition from *memento mori*--“Remember that you shall die” to *fuga mortis*--the flight from death, comparing the prevalence of images of death and reminders of mortality in churches of earlier times to their complete absence in modern religion. Even in Sweden, where death is much less of a taboo subject than it is in the United States--where state-authorized funeral homes and suppliers of gravestones stand in the heart of town beside other businesses--Bringéus observes that the word death is avoided altogether on funeral announcements, replaced by “N.N. has left us”; that in the bereaved home, there is no sign of a death having taken place; and that, indeed, many adults have not seen a death anywhere but the television screen.¹⁰ The modern world, rather than dealing with death as it did in the days when death was very much a daily experience, has done its best to shove it beneath the rug, which deprives both the dying person and the mourners of a clear ritual framework by which death can be understood, the prospect of the individual’s transition between realms faced, and the process of grief and memory experienced and dealt with. As a whole,

Society at large has transformed itself in the past 100 years or so from a death-recognising and honoring society into one that repudiates and generally disavows not only death and dying, but aging, as well. This has occurred largely through industries that remove the dying from the home and that minimize the difference between the stilled bodies of the dead and the active bodies of the living and through psychologically-naïve religious philosophies that actually cause more suffering for those grieving and dying . . . The slow and largely unsuccessful hospice, death and dying, and elder-honoring movements have not achieved enough critical mass to influence social structures enough to permit a shift in consciousness that could result in significantly more supportive beliefs and practices for the dead and dying.

(Jim Lovette, Celtic Wiccan Elder and gay psychotherapist, e-mail interview, Nov. 4, 1995).

This situation, and the need for such a ritual framework, has been heightened in recent years by the AIDS crisis, which has restored some of our understanding of the frailty of life at

the best of times, and made us aware that the young are as vulnerable as the old. Especially in the communities where the greatest devastation has taken place, such as San Francisco, new rituals have been created in order to deal with the grieving process: as Lovette has observed in his worship and practice as a psychotherapist, “Certain sub-cultures and communities have allowed for the emergence of death-positive rituals and practices, specifically, the gay community in facing HIVD/AIDS and the women’s community, with chronically inadequate and discriminatory health care, cancer, abortion, and many other problems.”¹¹ These tend to be, by and large, pagan, New Age, and/or Eastern in flavour: Lovette mentions specifically that “The pagan and Wiccan communities are substantial resources in many gay and women’s communities, depending on their visibility and availability”.¹² For example, Starhawk’s Spiral Dance, held at Halloween every year, includes both the reading of the names of those who have died during the year, with the refrain ‘What is remembered, lives’ repeated after every name, and a portion of the ritual involves dancers who are made up, in the tradition of mediaeval *danse macabre* art, as dead people in graphic stages of decomposition. The same rite also includes the chanting of a paganized form of the traditional English “Lykewake Dirge”, a song about the journey of the soul through the trials of death and its judgement, with its repeated lines,

This aye nicht, this aye nicht,
Every nicht and all,
 Fire and sleet and candlelight,
May Earth receive thy soul

which, in modern San Francisco, evoke the image of the candles carried every year in the AIDS memorial procession and those set on the AIDS shrine in the middle of the UN Plaza. Among other traditional customs, Lovette also mentions candle-lighting, the performance of favourite melodies shared by the dying and the grieving, planting trees, shrubs, and flowers, gathering for a party (rather than a more solemn memorial, the changing of one’s living space or personal appearance to mark the loss, and the bringing of flowers, noting particularly here that “Flowers, either brought to the scene of a tragic accident resulting in loss of life, to the hospital or bedroom of the dying, or used in ritual grieving meetings, are common. Indeed, flowers buried with the dead date back to pre-historic human culture, and can be viewed as an incredible reminder of the circle of life”.¹³ More modern customs that he observes are donating money or volunteering time or other resources in memory of the dead, paying more attention to one’s own health after the death of a significant other, and, quite commonly, a heightened political awareness or increased political activism, “especially in the more politicized terminal illnesses”, all of which fulfil the function of bringing some meaning to the life and death of a loved one through creative, active memorialization.

All of these reasons offer arguments for seeking understanding in traditional cultures with which to fill out the lacks of the Western world. However, as we are discovering, there are certain problems with seeking out our own definition and understanding of ourselves and our universe in cultures which have no direct relationship to our own. Comprehending such cultures requires the adoption of a completely alien worldview; it often calls for an understanding of concepts which cannot be expressed in any Western language, which are completely foreign to the patterns of thought imprinted in us from the time we begin to speak. While it is possible for someone of European descent to be genuinely accepted into a Native American or African tribe, for instance, such acceptance calls for a long and difficult renunciation of white thought and ways--of the whole of Western life. On the other hand, attempts to take up the most convenient or desirable elements of a native tradition and leave others results in an uneasy and ill-fitting accommodation, which does not, in the end, provide the seeker with a new and complete culture, but alienates him or her from both the society of birth/native acculturation and the society from which piecemeal enlightenment is sought.

In the process of searching for oneself, one’s integration into society, and ultimately one’s place in the cosmos, it is clearly far easier to learn from traditional folktales with which one has grown up and which stem from cultures that have been major contributors to one’s own

than to partially fit oneself to ways of thought that are all but incomprehensible to aliens. However, the Western mindset is geared to forgetting that Europe had a living, thriving, religion and folk-culture of its own, which was similar in many important respects to currently surviving traditional societies. The native tradition of Northern Europe, in particular, is usually seen by those who have not studied it as the last threshold of “primitive, chaotic, pagan activities”, as the Scandinavian countries were not only the last to be christianised, but had a profound effect on christian Europe during the last centuries before their own religion was extirpated. As a result of this, the most common Western image of Viking Age Scandinavia is of bloodthirsty, illiterate raiders, who were not merely uncivilized, but the chief menace to civilization: except as a symptom of the Dark Ages, most history books have little to say of the Norse until they had settled elsewhere and converted - until they had become Normans, French-speaking christians, preserving of their origins only what a romantic historian might speak of as “the driving vitality of the Northmen”. The experience of one graduate student at Texas Women’s University is not, unfortunately, untypical:

Well, my history of Medieval Europe class was the class I was referring to. The teacher's specialization is ecclesiastical history (if that doesn't say it all), and he picked for our text this ridiculous book by N. Cantor. Cantor treats the whole Middle Ages throughout Europe as if there were no religions there but the Abrahamic ones. He even spends pages retelling the stories of the Old and New Testaments (in case no one has ever heard them, I guess). Meanwhile the book (therefore the class) ignores the existence of any culture besides the Roman one from 300 C.E. on. When I brought up in class the fact that all religions of the time should be represented if one was going to be, the teacher ignored me completely. When the book came to the barbarians, Cantor compared them to "marauding urban street gangs" that only donated their bloodline to Europe, and even that wasn't worth it. I protested this chapter as well, only to get the response, "Well Jennifer, the author is Jewish, so what do you expect?" I told him I expected supplementary texts that clarified the information, but was told there would be none. Then he showed Kenneth Clark's "Civilisations" video called "By the Skin of our Teeth" that said the Germanic tribes had no regard for life, no sense of permanence, and only kept craftsmen around for weapons . . .

A lot of it is the same in other classes. In the mythology class I surveyed four different groups, and no one (including me) got any information on Norse mythology because the prof. spent half the semester on the Greek and Roman stuff we already know . . . (The professor in) my religion class at TWU . . . says that polytheistic religions are a stage in the religious process and therefore not as sophisticated as monotheism.

(Jennifer Holliman, e-mail interview, Oct. 24, 1995).

Yet it is precisely that abused and forgotten native tradition--the religion of the Vikings, the Anglo-Saxons, the Goths and Vandals--which, in Northern Europe, was the embodiment of the elements that Western civilization has lost and for which many are seeking so desperately elsewhere. Malidoma Somé asks, “Why is it that the modern world can’t deal with its ancestors and endure its past?”¹⁴ At least part of the answer lies in the fact that a large portion of the modern world--the descendants of the Norse, Anglo-Saxons, and Germanic tribes people--are not aware of their ancestors, or their past: they have only a dim image of horned helmets and bloody axes, of tribes of barbarians who were not part of the culture Westerners believe themselves to have inherited by right, but rather its enemies, who only appear, at best, as footnotes in classes on Western history. For Northern Europeans to deal with their ancestors and understand their past--let alone enduring it--they first have to learn who these ancestors were and where their past came from.

Though not a shamanic culture, as most of the traditional cultures surviving today are, the native religion of the North has many characteristics in common with Native American and African tradition. Every person was thought to have a *fylgja*, or fetch, often perceived as a semi-independent animal spirit whose nature embodied that of the person it was attached to. Ancestor-worship was regularly practiced; the spirits of departed kin were often thought to

look after their descendants. The future was made known, and matters in the Otherworlds, often made clear, through dreams. As with most traditional cultures, the stones, the streams, and every part of nature was inhabited, by beings called land-wights--beings whose goodwill and comfort were so important that the laws of heathen Iceland required that "men should not have head-prowed ships in the harbour, and if they had, then they should take off the head before they came in sight of land, and never sail towards the land with gaping heads or yawning snouts so that the land-wights were frightened by them"¹⁵ (the belief in these wights is still current in Iceland among a large percentage of the population).

Like most traditional cultures, also, the Germanic peoples made limited use of writing. The surviving examples of their native runic alphabet are chiefly memorial stones and statements of ownership or manufacture (Ketill made a good comb; Thorkell owns this axe), although graffiti and short messages scratched on bones and sticks were not uncommon, and both the archaeological and literary corpora contain a number of examples of magical runic inscriptions as well. However, they had a tremendously highly developed oral culture: the poetry of the Viking Age skalds (often professional poets attached to the retinues of kings or major noblemen) is at least as formally structured and complex of image and conception as anything written in christian Europe during the same period, and in several instances possibly more so; and competitions of poetic skill were fit for warriors to engage in, as seen in the scene in *Orkneyinga saga* where the jarl Rögnvaldr Kali challenges a man named Oddi to make a verse about a wall-hanging in the hall - adding that Oddi would have to make his poem after the jarl had spoken his own on the subject, in the same span of time, and not using any word that the jarl had used (Oddi succeeded). The Norse verse-convention of the kenning, or riddle-image, was based in large part on knowledge of the religion: for instance, since Óðinn was a god especially associated with death in battle, and Yggr, "The Terrible", was one of his by-names, the slain could be called "the fair barley of Yggr", ¹⁶ while poetry itself is referred to by a number of kennings describing the god's theft of the mead of inspiration, such as "the stream of the gladness-rock (heart) of Mím's friend (Óðinn)".¹⁷

And, just as it had its professional poets, Northern Europe also had its professional magicians and priests, and its own native forms of magic. From the time of Tacitus to the end of the Viking Age, the Germanic peoples were known for their attention to the words of their prophetesses, or spae-wives: like some of the great medicine people of the Native Americans, Germanic prophetesses such as the Veleda, through their visions, were able to guide and advise their warleaders in their resistance against the Roman invasions. Visionary trances were not uncommon; the saga of Erik the Red describes a professional prophetess calling forth and interrogating spirits about the future. A practice which also took place was "sitting out": sitting alone on a high place at night, perhaps either to see visions or speak with spirits.

Although much of this lore was lost with the conversion to christianity, much also survived in folk culture. A number of the traditional motifs in the *Märchen*, or "fairy stories" such as those collected by the Brothers Grimm, are repeated in the Norse tales of gods and heroes. For instance: the story of Sleeping Beauty, pricking her finger on a spindle to sleep for an hundred years and be awakened only by the destined hero who can force his way past an impassable barrier is told in the Eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál*, where the valkyrie Sigrdrífa (the same figure as Wagner's Brünnhilde) is pricked with a sleep-thorn by Óðinn (Wotan) and must sleep until the hero Sigurðr (Siegfried) forces his way past a wall of shields, or in some versions, a ring of fire, to awaken her. It is no exaggeration to say that the native religion of Northern Europe is still a strong, if largely unseen, thread running through the culture of Northern Europe; and that the road to understanding opened by analysing our folktales in regards to what they show us of our lives and needs leads inevitably back to that native origin. In the search for understanding--of ourselves, of our proper relation to our society, and of our spiritual existence and goals--the way to recover what has been lost is to go back to the point where it was lost: the point at which what had been a traditional culture, where the individual was completely integrated with his or her society, god/esses, and the natural world, ceased to be such and, instead, became a part of the christian West.

And in the traditional culture of Northern Europe, the first step on that road, and its greatest challenge, is the meeting with the old man at the edge of the wood--the old, one-eyed god,

whom the Vikings knew as Óðinn, the English as Woden, and the Germans as Wotan--and leads on to a hall which is still very much a part of our cultural expression, whose name, alone of all the halls of the gods, is a part of our everyday vocabulary: Valhalla.

Wotan's history is a long and impressive one. His name stems from a proto-Germanic **Woðanaz*, a word related to the German word for fury (*Wut*), the Gothic word for frenzied possession (*wops*), the Icelandic adjective *óðr*, "raging", and the archaic English *wood*, meaning "insane". At its very root, this word stems from an Indo-European word for "voice", which also developed into the Latin *vates* and Irish *fáith*, words describing inspired priests and poets, and supplied the name of the Norse mead of poetry, *Óðrærir* - "Stirrer of Inspiration". However, the form from which the god's name is derived separated from the word for voice or inspiration perhaps five hundred years before the beginning of the Common Era: as far as we can know, he was always, "The Frenzied One", or perhaps, in the older form Wod, simply "Frenzy". This name, **Woðanaz*, developed into the German form Wotan or Wodan, the Anglo-Saxon Woden, and the Old Norse Óðinn (usually rendered in English as Odin): there is no doubt that the same god was referred to by these dialectal forms of his name, and little doubt that his cult was substantially the same among the branches of the Germanic people where he is known to have been worshipped. Whether the Goths knew a god bearing the name that would have become *Wodans* in their tongue or not is a question that is unlikely to ever be solved, since only the faintest shreds of lore about Gothic religion survived their conversion. But they were at least aware of his original force, *wops*, as a possessive frenzy: in his translation of the Bible into Gothic, Ulfila uses this word for the Greek *daimonizomenos* and *daimonistheis*, words which imply the presence of a possessing *daimon*. Moreover, the use is in a context showing certain characteristics known from the cult of Wotan: the possessed man demonstrates a physical frenzy similar to that of the god's berserks, he dwells among the tombs, and his ability to break his fetters is reminiscent of the god's special might of binding and loosing. Thus, even if the Goths were not familiar with the deity, they were at least familiar with his root force.

The question of where and when Wotan's cult began and how it spread has yet to be settled. The range of theories includes everything from seeing him as a native Scandinavian god since the earliest days to interpreting him as a Roman import who came to the Germanic tribes when they adopted the idea of writing and developed the runes that are associated with him in Norse literature; discussing the various possibilities is, unfortunately, quite beyond the scope of this book. However, we are reasonably sure that the god was worshipped at the beginning of the Common Era, and probably for some time before that, by the Germanic tribesmen fighting against Rome, who offered up their captive enemies to him. The Angles and Saxons who made their way over to Britain in the fifth century when the rising waters of the North Sea threatened their Continental homelands drew the authority of their royal lines from his place at the head of their dynasties: even today, Queen Elizabeth II and Queen Margrete of Denmark can both trace their lineage back to him. Wotan was one of the most powerful and active gods of the Viking Age, on whom the fierce Northern warriors called not only for victory in battle, but also for the skills of poetry and magic, rune-writing and knowledge of lore.

After his people were subjugated by christian kings, Wotan lived on as a shadowy demon-figure, leader of the spectral horde called the Furious Host or Wild Hunt, and general sign of ill-omen. But his career was not over when his worship ended. As soon as the expansions of the nineteenth century led nations to look within themselves and seek to define their own cultures, their own strengths and characters, he appeared again: dominating the music of a turning century as he had once dominated the poems of the Vikings, firing the imagination in this new age as he had once fired that of the old--standing on the opera stage as the chief protagonist of Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle, the wise, furious, but ultimately doomed god, in which incarnation he is best known today.

Even the worship of Wotan has not stayed dead. For the last twenty-five years, small groups of people in Iceland, England, and America have lifted horns of ale and mead to this god after the manner of the Saxons and Vikings. Not only that, many of these groups, such as the Ásatrúmenn of Iceland and the North American-based Ring of Troth, have achieved legal recognition, and their numbers are swelling swiftly.

The reasons for Wotan's particular endurance, of all the gods in the Norse pantheon, can

sometimes be hard to fathom. In the tales of the North, he is often portrayed as grim, bloodthirsty, and cruel--the only god who we know to have regularly received human sacrifice, from the first reports we have of his worship among the Germanic tribesmen to the end of the Viking Age. His heroes and heroines are brutal folk--berserks, raiders, werewolves, and murderers of children; he himself is an oath-breaker and betrayer, more often to be seen creeping about disguised as an old low-life than sitting dignified in his godly seat; and his blood-brother and best friend is Loki, the trickster of giant race who, in the end, helps to bring about the doom of the gods. He has over an hundred and eighty *heiti*, or by-names, including such ominous titles as *Helblindi* (Hel-Blinder or Death-Blinder), *Báleygr* (Funeral Pyre-Eyed), *Skollvaldr* (Ruler of Treachery or Cunning), and *Geiguðr* (The One Swinging On The Gallows); this prevalence of alternate names may not only show his penchant for disguises and dominant role in Norse poetry, but may also have derived from a certain fear of speaking his true name aloud, lest it draw his attention.¹⁸

The more closely he is examined, the darker Wotan appears. Although he is called upon by warriors, and characteristically thought of as a god of battle, he does not take part in battle himself: his blessing is the arc of his spear--cast over, not those who shall win, but those who are doomed to die, seen as sacrifices to him. His knowledge comes from necromancy and journeys to the realm of the dead; even the mead he drinks is brewed from the heartblood of a murder victim and gotten by the breaking of one of the solemnest oaths known to the Norse, the vow on the holy ring. And the very hall where he sits as a god, his own home, is called *Valhalla*--the Hall of the Slain, where he gathers his chosen dead. He is an ominous figure, who does not lend himself easily to understanding or love.

Yet this god was one of the favourite deities of Northern Europe for at least a thousand years that we know of, and probably for some time before Tacitus wrote. Once, this might have been attributed to the perceived dark and bloody-minded character of Germanic culture, with allusions to the *furor Teutonicus*. However, the time is long past when the Northern peoples could fairly, through ignorance or misunderstanding on the part of modern scholars, have been dismissed as violent barbarians in this manner. We know now that the Germanic successes in the Migration Age, often caricatured with the image of dirty, fir-clad hordes sweeping down on Rome, stemmed from their ability to adapt, learn, and make treaties. As has been observed, the Germanic peoples were far more dangerous to Rome as her guests than her foes; the Vikings owed more to the technological superiority of their ships and their researches in the natural science of navigation than to their possession of a culture more battle-focused than others in the Dark Ages.

We first see Wotan appearing as a Germanic battle-god in the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus, who described how the Chatti and Hermunduri, before a battle, made a vow to sacrifice the entire defeated army, men, horses, and booty alike, to "Mars and Mercurius".¹⁹ Tacitus' Mercury is generally taken to have been Wotan, as the equivalence between the two was maintained from a very early period until the end of the Viking Age: for instance some two or three centuries after Tacitus wrote, when the god-names of the weekdays were translated into Germanic forms, "Mercury's Day" became "Wotan's Day", or, as it still survives in English, Wednesday. The cult of Mercury as Tacitus describes it is generally consonant with what we know about the cult of Wotan: the Roman historian mentions, for instance, that "of the gods, (the Germanic tribesmen) give a special worship to Mercury, to whom on certain days they count even the sacrifice of human life lawful".²⁰ Tacitus' description of the aftermath of the battle of Teutoburger Wald, where Varus' three legions were destroyed by Arminius the Cheruscan and Rome's ambitions to conquer Germany were fatally crushed, also shows significant similarities to the vow of the Chatti and Hermunduri:²¹ the defeated warriors are not merely taken prisoner or slain, but dedicated as religious sacrifices, in a manner largely characteristic of the cult of Óðinn as described by Viking Age and mediaeval Norse sources.

Hard by lay splintered spears and limbs of horses, while human skulls were nailed prominently on the tree-trunks. In the neighbouring groves stood the savage altars at which (the Cherusicans) had slaughtered the tribunes and chief centurions.

Survivors of the disaster . . . spoke of the tribunal from which Arminius made his harangue, all the gibbets and torture-pits for the prisoners . . .”²²

In these earliest accounts of his cult, Wotan appears chiefly as a battle-god, giver of victory to his chosen ones. But as a battle-god, he is a rather peculiar figure: he is not a warrior, not to be compared to Mars or other war-gods. It is the host of the enemy that is dedicated to him, not the host of his worshipper that receives his blessing, and once that dedication has been made, he must receive his sacrifice, whether on the field of battle or in the hallowed groves afterwards.

The Norse sources also seem to show us a perception of the slain as sacrifices given directly to Óðinn. In verse 12 of *Hrafnsmál* (“The Speech of the Raven”) the poet Þórbjörn hornklofi has a raven telling a valkyrie about one of King Haraldr Hairfair’s successful battle, at the end of which, “The slain lay there on the sand, dedicated to the one-eyed dweller in Frigg’s embrace; we rejoice over such doing”. Helgi trausti Ólafsson boasts that, “I gave Óðinn the strong son of Thórmódr; I gave the ruler of the gallows Óðinn’s sacrifice, and the corpse to the ravens”.

This belief is emphasized by the casting of the specifically Óðinnic spear to open hostilities. The fullest account is given in *Styrbjarnar þáttur*: before his battle with Styrbjörn, King Eiríkr the Victorious goes to the temple of Óðinn and offers his own life as a sacrifice which the god may take after ten years, if only Óðinn will grant him the victory. After this prayer, a tall man with a broad hat comes up to Eiríkr and gives him a reed, telling him to cast it over Styrbjörn’s army with the words, “Óðinn have you all!” Eiríkr does so; Styrbjörn’s host immediately goes blind and an avalanche falls over them, killing them all.²³ In *The Battle of the Goths and the Huns*, thought to be one of the oldest poems in the Norse corpus or at least to preserve a quantity of ancient material,²⁴ a similar, though less immediately devastating, scene takes place. The old Gizurr Grýtingaliði, a rede-giver and strife-stirrer who, if he is not Óðinn himself in one of his many disguises, at least appears as a strongly Óðinnic figure,²⁵ rides up to the Hunnish army and says,

*Your host is frightened, and fey your leaders,
Above you fly battle-flags-- Óðinn is angry with you!
. . . So Óðinn lets his shot fly, as I said before
(verses 27-28).²⁶*

For the spear as a sacrificial instrument, we have both literary records and iconographic evidence: the account of Odin’s own self-sacrifice by means of hanging and stabbing in the Eddic poem *Hávamál*, with the corresponding sacrifice of his worshipper King Vikar in *Gautreks saga*, is confirmed as stemming from Viking Age practice by the Lärbro St. Hammars I picture stone, carved on the Swedish island of Gotland in probably the ninth century. This stone shows scenes of battle surrounding a human sacrifice: one man, recognisable as a warrior by his shield, is hung from a tree, another lies on an altar before him, and the robed priest who is performing the sacrifice holds a spear. The interlaced triple triangle appears a number of times on stones of this sort, and in modern Norwegian weaving the pattern is known as a valknut--the knot of the slain; it is often thought to be a sign of Óðinn, perhaps associated specifically with Óðinnic sacrifice.

Thus, we can say that in his most usual form as a god of battle-victory, Wotan appears not as a war-god, but as a god of death: his function is generally to give victory by default to the surviving side. The name by which his handmaidens were known, valkyries--”Choosers of the Slain”--and some of his own titles, such as Valhögnir (Receiver of the Slain), Val-Týr (God of the Slain), and Valkjósandi (Chooser of the Slain--a masculine form corresponding to the feminine *valkyrja*, or valkyrie), bear this out, as, ultimately, does the road which leads to his own hall--Valhalla, the “Hall of the Slain”,²⁷ where he receives the dead.

Yet there is more to this god, to the complex character which has fired so many imaginations up to the present day. The god of battle-death, the giver of berserk blood-lust, is also the giver of inspiration: the Vikings, who appear as the archetype of barbarism in

Western culture, were also notable poets, and many of their poems began by referring to Óðinn's winning of the mead of poetry and his gift of that same mead to the composer of the verses. At the same time, it comes as no surprise that many--perhaps most--of the same poems dealt with the subject of battle-death: with Óðinn's choices of heroes to fell, the sacrifices of slain men made to him, and his reception of the best in his own hall.

As well as the giver of poetry, Wotan also appears as the chief god of wisdom and magic, and it is in this form that he often exerts the greatest fascination. The shadow of this aspect has survived particularly strongly in the twentieth century through the works of Tolkien: both Gandalf the Gray, the old wizard with his broad hat and his staff, travelling about in disguise to learn from all he comes across and revealing himself at the most vital moments, and Saruman the White, the deceptive, slippery, untrustworthy wizard looking down from his high tower to stir his strife and brew his plots, appear to have been shaped by the images of Wotan as the wise magician in the Norse literature with which Professor Tolkien was so deeply familiar. Much of the romanticism of the runes stems directly from their connection with the god: it is the literature dealing with his use of them to waken the dead, to help in birthing, to bedazzle the minds of men, and for various other purposes that gives the clearest picture of their magical character, making it easy for many folk to overlook the large body of evidence that shows the runes as primarily a means of mundane communication. Wotan's runes, immortalized in poetry and fiction from the Viking Age to the present day, are the potent mysteries of the old enchanter, far more fascinating than the everyday inscriptions such as "Thorkell owns this comb."

But like the blood-brewed mead of poetry, the god's mental crafts cannot be separated from his character as a death-god. According to *Hávamál*, he learned the runes through his own death, dangling hanged and stabbed with his own spear for nine nights as a sacrifice to himself. He is also a necromancer, who learns his lore and gets his knowledge of things to come from the severed head of the giant Mimir or from the dead he awakens to talk to him, such as the seeress whom he calls forth at the gates of Hel in *Baldurs draumar*. The same ravens who feed off the corpses rotting on the battlefield or dangling from the gallows as Wotan's sacrifices are another source of his great knowledge: known as Huginn and Muninn, "Thoughtful" and "Mindful", they fly over the world every day to return to him with news of the doings below.

It is in the relationship between the mysterious powers and gifts Wotan offers and the world of death from which they spring--between the god as receiver of battle-sacrificed lives and the god as the giver of the mead of poetry through which the slain are forever remembered--that something of the depth of the Northern understanding of death and life, and the integration of one into the other, can be seen. The core of this understanding is summed up by certain words the god is said to have spoken, which are often thought to express the guiding spirit of the most tumultuous and powerful age of his worshippers. According to the Eddic poem *Hávamál* (The Words of the High One) 76-77:

*Cattle die, kinsmen die,
you yourself shall die.
But words of fame never die,
for him who gets them well.
Cattle die, kinsmen die,
you yourself shall die.
I know one thing that never dies,
how each dead man is judged.*

The road to Valhalla, then and now, is the road to undying memory and fame, bought at the price of a good death--the sacrifice to Wotan, in return for which he offers his highest gift.

In analysing Norse religion and the culture of which it was an integral part, a variety of sources has to be used. Our chief literary sources are the Poetic and Prose Edda's--the first a collection of mythical and heroic poems, the dates of which are generally thought to range from approximately the eighth century C.E. to the twelfth; the second a systematic presentation of Norse mythology written down by the Icelandic author, historian, and political figure Snorri Sturluson circa 1220-21 as an instructional text and attempt to keep the fading

art of skaldic poetry alive. It is from Snorri that we get most of the popular images and tales of Norse mythology; however, both his own christianity and his desire to present a coherent and consistent literary work can be shown to have strongly influenced his retelling of the religion of his forebears. As well as the Eddas, the sagas written down in Iceland (chiefly over the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) often contain references to religious practices, or descriptions of the activities of the gods, most particularly Óðinn. Because of the late date of their writing--ranging from two to four hundred years after the conversion of the Icelanders, which took place in the year 1000 C.E.--and the strong antiquarian interest of educated Icelanders in their heathen past, there is considerable discussion as to how accurately the sagas portray Norse religious custom and beliefs; however, many of the mythological details that appear even in the latest and most literary sagas do appear to have genuine heathen origins.

The contemporary native references to Norse religion appear chiefly in the poetry of the skalds, which ranges back as early as the beginning of the ninth century, and in the occasional mention of a god or practice in the memorial runestones, which were carved from roughly the third century until well into the christian period. These references, while undoubtedly authentic reflections of the beliefs of their time, are made problematical as guides to the religion both by their brevity and by the difficulty of interpreting the meaning of many of the inscriptions.

Germanic religion was also described occasionally by historians from other cultures. Tacitus is the earliest and fullest of these sources, particularly in his *Germania*, meant to describe the culture and practices of the Germanic tribes to educated Romans, and perhaps to remind his readers of the continuing presence of a "German menace" across the Rhine. Other notable historians and commentators include Procopius, Adam of Bremen, the archbishop of Hamburg who, in the eleventh century, wrote a lengthy description of the great temple at Uppsala and the rituals practiced there, and the English priest Wulfstan (late tenth--early eleventh century), whose treatise *De Falsis Deiis* described and condemned the heathen practices of the Norse in no uncertain terms. The problem with such sources is that, although they contain varying amounts of material which can be shown to be genuine (for instance, Tacitus' description of the peculiar hairdo of the Suebi--the "Swabian knot"--was verified in 1948 by the discovery of a male head adorned with such a hairdo in a bog at Osterby),²⁸ they are largely based on second-, third-, or fourth-hand information, perhaps filled out with a certain amount of literary license, and therefore cannot be considered to be absolutely reliable.

Archaeology supplies more authoritative material, both in the form of direct physical representations of religious beliefs such as appear, for instance, on the Gotlandic picture stones, and in the evidence that can be gathered from grave goods and excavation of cultic sites. However, it must be remembered that the items left behind by the dead are subject to a wide variety of interpretations. For instance, a picture stone that one researcher sees as showing a dead man's reception in Valhalla may be taken by another as memorializing a successful battle. The ships that appear so frequently on the same stones can be interpreted as showing the belief that the Otherworld lies across a large body of water or a scene from a myth or heroic tale in which ship-travel is important; they may be read as memorials to a dead seafarer, a man who died at sea, or one who died across the ocean; or they may be seen as simply a standard artistic motif with no direct association to the deceased--assuming, indeed, that these stones are all memorials to the dead. Likewise, it is difficult to tell whether a horse in the grave means that the dead man was meant to ride to the Otherworld, that he was expected to need a steed in the Otherworld, or that he or one of the gods or goddesses received the horse as a sacrifice requesting a blessing or propitiating the intended recipient.

All of these sources, and the flaws in each, must be considered in any analysis of Norse religion in order to come closer to the thoughts of those who practiced it in the early days. In seeking to find out, not only what the Scandinavians of the Viking Age believed, but how it is relevant to our own time and what we can recover from the folkways of Northern Europe, the use of anthropological methods and psychological analysis is also useful.

By these means, looking closely at what the traditional native culture of Scandinavia believed about death and life, about memory and art, we shall take the horn the old man

Wotan offers us. We shall drink deeply, for it is his mead of inspiration--*Óðrærir*--that shows us the rainbow bridge arching above the rushing river of death . . . the road to Valhalla.

Some village people, who chose to see things only from their own tribal perspective, believed that to have become so spiritually sick, the white man must have done something terrible to his own ancestors . . .

(Somé Patrice Malidoma, **Of Water and the Spirit**, p. 3).

I think it is crucial to our development as a sentient species that we restore rituals honoring the dying, the dead, and the elderly. We risk becoming automatons, incapable of whole living, being, or doing if we refuse to find ways to successfully incorporate and integrate loss, change, and differences into our lives, families, and social structures. If we have to jettison the entirety of authoritarian religious and political structures to do this, so be it. We risk losing our identities and our potential as human beings if we continue to permit this spiritual tragedy.

(Jim Lovette, e-mail interview, Nov. 4, 1995).

- 1 Somé, Malidoma, interviewed by D. Patrick Miller in *Mother Jones*, March/April 1995, 22-24, p. 22.
- 2 *Women Who Run With The Wolves: Contacting the Power of the Wild Woman* (London: Rider, 1992), p. 15.
- 3 Lauri Honko, Senni Timonen, Michael Branch, Keith Bosly. *The Great Bear* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 71.
- 4 Jung, *The Collected Works*, vol. 5
- 5 *Mother Jones*, March/April 1995, p. 24.
- 6 *Hamlet*, Act III, scene I, 80-81.
- 7 *The Social Organization of Death: Medical Discourse and Social Practices in Belfast* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 26, also pp. 43-46.
- 8 Prior, p. 30.
- 9 *The Social Organization of Death*, p. 68.
- 10 'Vår hållning till Döden', in *Dödens Riter*, ed. by Kristina Söderpalm, 9-31, p. 30.
- 11 Lovette, e-mail interview, Nov. 4, 1995.
- 12 Ibid
- 13 Ibid
- 14 *Of Water and the Spirit*, p. 9.
- 15 *Landnámabók* ; *Hauksbók*, ch. 268, p. 313.
- 16 II, 159, 60,2
- 17 93,1,4
- 18 de Vries, Jan, 'Contributions to the Study of Othin, especially in his Relation to Agricultural Practices in Modern Popular Lore', *Folklore Fellowship Communications* 94 (1931), 3-79.
- 19 *Annals* 13, 57
- 20 *Germania*, ch. 9
- 21 Chadwick, Hector Munro, *The Cult of Othin*, p. 31
- 22 *Annals* I, 61, p. 349
- 23 *Flateyjarbók*, II, p. 72.
- 24 Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, ed. and tr. by Peter Foote, pp. 65, 73.
- 25 cf. E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, pp. 51-53.
- 26 *Edda*
- 27 This is the most generally accepted interpretation of the name: others, such as 'The Foreign Hall', have also been put forth, but will be discussed further in the chapter on the origins of Valhalla.
- 28 Gløb, P.V., *The Bog People*, pp. 116-18

Chapter II: Valhalla

One of the chief questions to be posed in any religion--the answer to which is often the religion's first line of defense in influencing the activities of its worshippers--is "What will happen to me when I die?" This is a question that cannot help but be of interest to everyone at some point in their lives. It is bred inevitably by the first recognition of death, perhaps when a child's pet goldfish floats belly-up in its bowl or a turtle ceases to crawl about its tank; it continues to trouble throughout the hazards and heartbreaks of adolescence. In times of war this question reaches the chief rank of importance: it has been said that "there are no atheists in foxholes", a saying which surely applies as much to the hope of something beyond death as to the rule of luck and the whim of fate--or the gods--in the thick of battle. In middle age, one is likely to begin burying parents and friends, and to wonder about their fate; as one grows older, the gates of the grave seem to widen before one. In any culture, it is the exceptional person who rejects all belief in Otherworld and afterlife, declaring the cessation of cerebral activity to be the end of all being.

Just as all people wonder about the fate of the soul after death, so all religions have an answer--or several answers--to the question. Some of the most common elements are travelling to a land of peace, plenty, and bliss (assuming that one has lived well and/or been given proper death-rites), or, alternatively, either going to a realm of punishment, joining a host of evil spirits, or wandering lost in desolate places (if one has lived badly and/or not received appropriate death-rites); going to a general realm of ghosts and shades; continuing to exist as a spirit worshipped and fed by one's descendants; being reborn, either as an animal of some appropriate sort or as a human being; if one has committed some great misdeed or failed to do something that one ought to have done, being bound to earth as a restless ghost until a living person can carry out the action necessary to release the dead. Nearly all religions include at least a positive and a negative alternative, though the determination between the two may range among anything from the careful weighing of the heart seen in ancient Egyptian belief (the outcome of which could be affected both by deeds performed during life and by the performance of appropriate rituals by family and the relevant professionals after death) to the various alternatives offered by different forms of christianity (such as the Catholic requirement of last rites to cleanse the soul versus, for instance, the Baptist insistence that accepting Christ as a personal saviour is the necessary ritual to get into Heaven, or the Calvinist doctrine of predestination).

Even christianity, with its strong emphasis on judgement and an Otherworldly destination for the soul, was by no means able to root out the belief in various forms of ghosts, both harmful and helpful. Rather, a syncretization of beliefs took place, so that, for instance, in the Balkans, a child conceived during a church holy period or one who is the illegitimate offspring of illegitimate parents, is likely to become a vampire, as is a Greek person who is ill-tempered or a great sinner. In Scandinavia, the restless dead include the "guilty dead" (persons who moved boundary stones, committed perjury, stole communion wafers or called on the devil, and sinners in general), the "solicitous dead" (those who had left a task or promise unfulfilled, mothers dying in childbirth or the engaged who died before marriage, and so forth), the "unsatisfied dead" (those not buried properly or according to their wishes, those overly grieved or unmourned), the 'avenging dead' (those badly treated, enchanted, or murdered), and the "disturbing dead", or poltergeists. Pentikäinen observes that the walking dead are usually explained within christian terms as sinners who have breached christian norms or broken taboos, while the "innocent dead" "reflect the intimate relationship between living and dead members of a family . . . The same is suggested by legends and memorates in which the dead person appears in a solicitous role to caution or express sympathy with the living . . ." The phenomenon of dead family members appearing to warn or comfort the living is attested to in folklore worldwide, and need not necessarily be a survival of Scandinavian belief as such, though its strong presence in the native religion suggests the possibility of continuity.

The restless dead are, however, unusual: their roaming emphasizes the normal belief that "people who have died a natural death and are properly provided for by their relatives

reach the land of the dead". And it is, for better or worse, these lands or Otherworldly fates that are inclined to shape the character of the religion. A religion which offers a choice between infinite bliss and infinite pain in the afterlife, for instance, has a stranglehold on the activities of its worshippers so long as they accept the official terms regarding the judgement of their souls. Earthly responsibility becomes less important than spiritual responsibility: the abandonment of family, position, and possessions--casting away treasure on Earth in order to lay up treasure in Heaven--becomes a positive good. Likewise, such a religion has a necessary interest in defining sin and virtue so that its worshippers will know precisely which actions lead to which afterlife result and what they must do in order to gain a place in the preferable destination. In a culture where one's hope of a good afterlife is based on the offerings made after death by one's descendants, on the other hand, the most important thing in life is to keep on good terms with one's family, fulfilling all responsibilities towards them properly so that they, in turn, will fulfil their responsibilities of burning incense or setting out food and drink for the dead.

The native beliefs of Scandinavia show, more or less simultaneously, the full range of afterlife fates. However, the images which are most familiar to us, the two halls Valhalla and Hel, are those which seem to replicate the christian Heaven and Hell most closely--indeed, the christian place of punishment draws its name in English, German, and the Scandinavian languages from the name of the Germanic underworld: Hell, the "place of concealment". To understand how the Norse thought about death and its relationship to life, it is necessary to look closely at these two realms, and especially Valhalla--how it was reached, and what entry into it meant.

1. Valhalla and Hel

The name "Valhalla" is better known in Western culture than that of its lord Óðinn or Wotan. It has, in fact, become an archetype for the barbarian afterworld: a Paradise to which entry is not gained by virtue, but by bravery, where the warrior-dead fight all day and drink all night. This is the image shown to us by Snorri Sturluson, writing ca. 1220 C.E., in his dialogue between the king Gangleri and the god Hár (Wotan in a very thin disguise):

(Gangleri) You say that all those men who have fallen in battle from the time of the heavens' raising are now come to Óðinn in Valhöll . . . What do the Einherjar (Óðinn's chosen warriors) have to drink that lasts them as fully as the food, or is water drunk there?

(Hár) You ask wondrously, that All-Father should bid kings or jarls or other powerful men to himself and give them water to drink . . . There is a goat called Heiðrún, who stands on top of Valhöll . . . and from her udders runs that mead, with which she fills a cauldron every day; it is so big that all the Einherjar become fully drunken from it . . .

(Gangleri) But how do the Einherjar pass their time when they are not drinking?

(Hár) Every day, when they have clad themselves, then they arm themselves and go out into the yard and battle together and fell each other; that is their play; and when meal-time approaches, then they ride home to Valhöll and set themselves down to drink, as is said here:

*All the Einherjar in Óðinn's hall,
hew each other each day;
the slain they choose, from slaughter ride,
sit the more gladly together.*

(Edda Snorra Sturlusonar. Finnur Jónsson, ed. Copenhagen: Nordisk Forlag, 1931, pp. 42-44).

Earlier, Snorri has informed us that to Hel's realm "were sent . . . men dead of sickness and of old age", setting up the sharp popular distinction between the battle-paradise for the few and the gloomy afterlife for the many--in which the name of the hall is Rain-Wet, the dish is called Hunger, the knife Starvation, the serving-man and maid are named Slow-

Walking, the threshold Stumbling-Block, the bed Sickbed, and the curtains Gleaming Bale.

The name Valhalla itself--probably "Hall of the Slain" (though, as will be discussed later, other interpretations are possible), as contrasted to Hel ("Concealment"; the underworld)--seems to support such a distinction, as do the two skaldic poems in which it appears: *Eiríksmál*, telling of how Óðinn greeted Eiríkr Blood-Axe with his train of felled foes, and *Hákonarmál*, which describes the reception of the battle-fallen Hákon the Good in the same hall. The belief that the only hope for a happy afterlife for a Norseman lay through death on the battlefield has also shaped the views of popular culture. For instance, in the film *The Vikings*, based very loosely on the saga of Ragnar Loðbrók, when Ragnar is thrown into the wolf-pit, he asks for a sword, saying that he can only get into Valhalla if he dies with a sword in his hand--returning us, again, to the paradise of the barbarians who value nothing except bravery and fighting skills. But was that the case among the Norse?

We do not know how much the sagamen of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries knew about the religion of their forebears, but we do know that they had other examples of afterlife beliefs to draw on. On the one hand, well-educated Icelanders such as Snorri were aware of Classical literature (in the prologue to the Prose Edda, for instance, Snorri traces Thórr's lineage back to Priam of Troy) as a model for pagan beliefs. On the other, by the period of the sagas, a certain amount of christian contamination of the native culture had already taken place, so that, for instance, the description of a heathen hof (temple) given by the composer of *Eyrbyggja saga* is described in terms of, and looks suspiciously like, a christian church, complete with "a chamber similar to the choir in churches now, and there stood a stall in the middle of the floor like an altar".

Snorri's perception of the Norse afterlife seems to follow the Greek model. He often uses "Valhöll" as a synonym for either the bright world of the gods itself or as the name of the chief hall in that world, in a manner reinforcing the apparent Valhöll-Hel dualism. For instance, when Snorri describes the entrance of the *jötunn* (giant) Hrungr into the realm of the gods, Hrungr first passes through the gates of Ásgarðr, then is asked by all the gods into Valhöll, where Freyja is the only one who dares to keep serving him drink after he has had too many and begins to make threats, and Thórr finally has to be called as an enforcer. His gloomy description of the underworld Hel, inhabited by those who are not taken up specifically by the gods, seems to reflect the melancholy character of Hades, the shadow-lands in which it is worse to be a king than it is to be a slave upon the living earth; though it could also be argued that christian semantic contamination of the native word for the underworld influenced Snorri's portrayal of Hel as a decidedly unpleasant place.

The sense of a heathenized Heaven/Hell dualism appears especially clearly in *Brennu-Njáls saga*. When his temple is found burnt, the notable heathen hero Hákon jarl remarks that "the man who has done this shall be cast out of Valhöll and never come there". This text is clearly an antiquarian's attempt to fit heathen names to the foreign dualism of christianity: "Valhöll" has suddenly become, not the Hall of the Slain, but the afterlife destination for good heathens.

Looking on these texts, the question, then, comes inevitably to us: what, if any, of the surviving traits that we associate with "Valhalla" are really a part of Norse belief, and how much was cobbled up by antiquarians and modern fantasists. The difficulty of dating the earlier texts makes the question hard to judge; but when the sources that seem likelier to stem from the heathen era are analyzed, the view of the afterworld that appears is more complex and deeper than that given by Snorri and the *Njáls saga* composer.

2. Cosmos and Afterlives

The most complete description of the Norse cosmology is found in the Eddic lay *Grímnismál*. Here, Valhöll is only one of the many halls in the realm of the gods. Each god and goddess has a private land and/or hall, carefully listed: Thórr's hall Bilskírnir in the land Strength-World; Ullr's land Yew-Dales, Freyr's land Elf-World, Sunken-Benches where Óðinn drinks with the goddess Sága, Valhöll in World-of-Gladness, Skaði's hall Thrymheimr, Baldr's land Breiðablik, Heimdallr's Heaven-Berg, Freyja's Army-Meadow,

Forseti's Glitnir, Njörðr's Nóatún, and the thickly vegetated land where Víðarr lives. Indeed, though Valhöll is the most intensively described, it is not even presented as the greatest hall: Óðinn observes that, "I think that Bilskírnir has five hundred and forty doors about it; of those houses which I know to be rafted, I know that the greatest is my kinsman's." Separate halls for different deities are also mentioned in other sources: for instance, Frigg's dwelling Marsh-Halls appears in stanza 36 of the Eddic poem *Völuspá*; Snorri mentions the hall Seat-Roomy for Freyja.

The godly realm as a whole does not even seem to have been confined to the single world Ásgarðr. Many of the halls or the lands in which they lie have the second element - *heimr*, "world"--for instance, Álfheimr (Elf-World), Thrúðheimr (Strength-World), Gladsheimr (World of Gladness), and Prymheimr--names implying that the realms they describe are separate in the same sense as the more clearly identified Jötunheimr (Etin-World), Vanaheimr (World of the Vanir), Niflheimr (World of Mists), and Muspellheimr. Skaði's hall is certainly not only outside Ásgarðr, but in the world of the giants, for the verse mentions that she inherited it from her father, the *jötunn* Thjazi who had previously abducted the goddess Iðunn. Supporting this diversity of view, *Hákonarmál*, which can be dated with reasonable reliability to the latter part of the tenth century and attributed to an apparently staunchly heathen poet, speaks of the "green *worlds* of the gods".

Besides the worlds of the gods and Hel, the Scandinavian afterlife also offered several other options. It was not uncommon for the dead to be perceived as dwelling in holy mountains, a belief which has persisted among the Saami, and for certain families to have their own hill-homes. The dead were also sometimes believed to continue life within their burial mounds. This view is apparently one which, though it cannot be traced from the Stone Age through the Viking Age with unbroken continuity, appears to have been of considerable significance during most of Scandinavia's past, reappearing at regular intervals from the stone chamber-tombs of the Farming Stone Age to the house-shaped cremation urns of the Bronze Age to the burial customs of the Viking Age and the later literature: for instance, in *Laxdæla saga*, a man named Gestr observes, as a prophecy of the day when he and his friend Ósvífr shall be laid in the same grave, that "it shall be a shorter way between my dwelling-place and Ósvífr's, and then it will be comfortable for us to talk, if we have leave to talk then". Even travelling between worlds was apparently an option: the Eddic hero Helgi Hundings-Bane rides back and forth between Valhalla and his burial mound, while Högni Gunnarsson and his friend Skarpheðinn see Högni's father Gunnarr of Hliðarend resting in his howe with lights burning about him and chanting poetry, but later when Högni goes to avenge his father, he tells his mother that he is taking Gunnarr's thrusting-spear "to my father, and he shall have it in Valhöll and bear it at the Weapon-Thing".

The Norse also, apparently, believed in various forms of rebirth. The prose tag to the heroic lay *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* states simply that "Helgi and Sváva were born again": the pair of lovers seem to be reincarnated once as Helgi Hunding's-Bane and Sigrún, of whom it is then said at the close of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II, "That was the belief in old times, that men were reborn, but now that is called an old wives' tales. It is said that Helgi and Sigrún were reborn. He was then called Helgi Haddingjaskaði, and she was Kára, Hálfðan's daughter, as it is said in the *Song of Kára*." There is also some evidence for rebirth within the family line, often connected with the naming of a child after a deceased kinsperson or person whom one wishes to honour--a practice which is still alive in modern times. H.R. Ellis cites a number of saga examples for dying persons requesting that their names be passed on, as, for instance, in *Svarfdæla saga*, where Karl, expecting his death in battle, says to his wife Thórgerðr, "I wish, if you bear a son, that you let him be named after me".

The most eerie and powerful description of rebirth as a significant element in Norse belief, however, is found in *Flateyjarbók*. The dead king Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr appears in a dream to a man called Hrani, telling Hrani to break into his mound and take his ring, belt, and sword to the pregnant queen. The child who receives these items is also named Óláfr. He later converts to christianity, ultimately becoming St. Óláfr as a reward for his bloody efforts to convert his countrymen. Nevertheless, to his apparent dismay, the belief that he

was the original Óláfr reborn, persisted: when the king was riding by the old mounds, one of his followers asked,

‘Say to me, lord, if you were buried here’. The king answered him: ‘Never has my spirit had two bodies and never will it have, neither now nor upon the day of Resurrection. And if I said otherwise there would be no right belief in me’. Then the king’s man said, ‘Men have said that when you came to this place before you spoke thus: here was I, and here fare I’. The king answered, ‘I have never said that and I shall never say that’. And the king was much disturbed in his soul and spurred on his horse and fled most swiftly from that stead.”

Through all its varying forms, however, the most significant characteristic of the Germanic afterlife is the sense of unity with the family: to die is to join one’s kinfolk, and not only in the sense of being reunited with the dead, but of continuing to have an effect upon the living. This is not, of course, unique to the Germanic peoples: most societies who have preserved their native beliefs perceive the dead as continuing to interact with the living. The belief in the continuity of kinship stands out especially strongly in the Germanic culture, however, because it dominates so many aspects of the afterlife. For instance: rebirth of the soul or separate aspects thereof most commonly takes place within the family line; *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Landnámabók* both mention hills into which certain clans die; and when Sigmundr (Siegmund) lies dying on the battlefield, ready to set out on the road to Valhöll, he states that, “I must now go to visit my kinfolk who have gone before me”.

The unity between dwelling with the dead kin in the afterlife and continuing to guide the living kin (and the discordance between this belief and that of official christianity--as opposed to folk christianity, which restores the afterlife to the place where dead kin wait for their family members) was expressed with a special clarity by King Radbod of Frisia near the beginning of the eighth century C.E. On the brink of conversion,

(Radbod) still hesitated and he told the bishop to swear by his oath about where the dead kings and princes of the Frisians had their dwelling: in that heavenly kingdom, that he was to get if he would believe and be baptized, or in infernal damnation, about which the bishop spoke very often. To this the man of God answered, “Do not be mistaken, noble prince! By the side of God is the throng of his chosen ones. But your ancestors, the princes of the Frisians, who died without having received the sacrament of baptism, have truly received the sentence of damnation . . . “ As the untrusting duke, who had already stepped up to the font, heard this, he pulled his foot back from the source of grace, and said that he could not get along without the fellowship of all his predecessors, rulers of the Frisians before him, and that he did not want to sit in the celestial kingdom with a little pack of beggars. And, therefore, he could not give the new faith any fealty and he would rather stay with the one to which he, along with the whole of the Frisian race, had held fast.

(Vita Vulframmi episcopi Senonici, in Passiones Vitaeque Sanctorum Aevi Merovingici. B. Krusch and W. Levison, eds. Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum, 5. Hannover: Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1910), p. 668).

It seems that to Radbod, the fellowship of his forebears was not merely something to look forward to in the afterlife (though clearly he did), but also of great meaning to his living rulership. The full importance of this connection between the dead and the living--especially in terms of rulership--will be discussed in the next chapter: for now it is sufficient to observe that death, to the early Scandinavians, was not a process of separation, but of greater integration with the whole community.

3. *Grímnismál* and the Architecture of Valhalla

Between the various halls of the gods, the life in the grave, and the possibility of rebirth, we can see a considerable diversity in the character of the Scandinavian afterlife--a

diversity which further begs the question of why Valhalla so captured the imaginations, not only of the modern era, but of the immediate successors of the Norse religion.

Part of the answer, or at least a signpost towards it, may be given by the Eddic poem *Grímnismál* ("The Words of Grímnir"). In this poem, Óðinn has come in disguise, calling himself *Grímnir* (the Masked One) to test a favourite of his, Geirroðr and win an argument with his wife Frigg. Frigg, however, has warned Geirroðr to beware of the stranger, and thus Óðinn is seized and hung in chains between two fires for eight nights. On the ninth, Geirroðr's son Agnarr brings the god a horn of drink. Óðinn then describes the world and halls of the gods to Agnarr, lingering on Valhöll for several stanzas. The list of halls and attributes ends with a sudden rush of action: after a long recounting of his various by-names, Óðinn reveals himself to Geirroðr with the fateful words--"Now you may see Óðinn!" Rushing to take his guest from the fire, Geirroðr falls on his sword and dies--seeing Óðinn, in truth, in a manner which may explain why Valhöll is described in such detail: not only is it the hall known best to the god, but it is the hall upon which his foster-son will soon have the chance to gaze.

The hall is easily recognised by those who come to Óðinn: (spear)shafts are the rafters, the hall is thatched with shields, and the benches are strewn with byrnies. The hall is easily recognised by those who come to Óðinn: a warg (wolf or outlaw) hangs before the western door, and an eagle hovers above . . . Andhrímnir (the cook) lets Sæhrímnir (the boar), best of flesh, be seethed in Eldhrímnir (the cauldron), though few know what the Einherjar feast on. Battle-accustomed, glorious Host-Father (Óðinn) feeds Geri and Freki (his wolves); but weapon-stately Óðinn lives on wine alone. Huginn and Muninn (Óðinn's ravens) fly over the mighty earth every day; I fear for Huginn, that he not come back, but I look more for Muninn. Thundr roars loudly; Thjóðvitnir's fish sports in the flood; the river roars loudly, the battle-slain think it too strong to wade. That which stands on the holy fields, before the holy doors, is called Valgrind (Slain-Gate); those gates are old, and few know how they may be locked. Five hundred and forty doors: so I know to be in Valhöll; eight hundred Einherjar go out of one door, when they fare to battle the Wolf. The goat who stands on Host-Father's hall is called Heiðrún, and bites off the limbs of Læraðr (sometimes thought to be the World-Tree); she shall fill a cauldron with the shining mead, that drink will never be exhausted. The hart who stands on Host-Father's hall is called Eikthyrnir, and bites off the limbs of Læraðr; and drops fall from his horns into Hvergelmir (the well at the deepest root of the World-Tree), to which all waters wend their way. Shaker and Mist (valkyrie-names) I wish to have bear a horn to me; Skeggjöld and Striker, Shrieker and Battle-Fetter, Loudness and Spear-Striker, Shield-Strength and Rede-Strength and God-Inheritance, they bear ale to the Einherjar.

(*Grímnismál* 9-10, 18-22, 23-26, 36).

The age of *Grímnismál*, like that of most Eddic poems, is not known; however, the description of Wotan's hall as being shingled with shields goes back to the beginning of the ninth century, when the first skaldic poet of surviving memory, Bragi the Old, used the kenning "Svölnir's (Óðinn's) hall-penny" for a shield. Much of it, especially the long list of Óðinn's by-names, appears to be a vehicle for the memorization of the basic lore necessary to write skaldic poetry, suggesting that much of the material could have been passed down over time. However, the Óðinnic frame story lifts it from the simple ranks of the *pulur*, or poetic lists. Instead of a dull recitation of knowledge, Óðinn's intervention makes the lore a vehicle for both Geirroðr's death beneath his eye and the succession of Agnarr to the kingship, giving the account of the Otherworld and the names which reveal the many aspects of the god--from "Wished-For" and "Victory-Father" to "Death-Blind", "Terrible", and "Slayer"--a peculiarly poignant and powerful quality.

Within the lore-list, this juxtaposition of magnificent and terrifying qualities stands out especially in "Grímnir's" description of Valhöll. At first, Óðinn's dwelling seems to show the best of a noble hall of the Viking Age. The pork is cooking, the mead is endless, women carry horns of ale about, and the hall is full of strong men ready to defend their lord in

battle; the hall's ruler sits drinking a precious imported drink as he feeds the hounds at his feet. However, the hounds are wolves named "Greedy" and "Ravenous", kin to the devouring death-hounds who appear throughout the Indo-European world, and in Old Norse poetry there is only one kind of meat that feeds wolves--the flesh of the slain on the battlefield. Instead of beams, the hall is rafted with spear-shafts, and shingled with shields, and chain-mail strews the benches in place of soft golden straw; instead of hawks, the hall's lord sends out ravens . . . his loyal warriors are dead men, ghosts doomed to endlessly refight the battles that killed them, and the women who bear them drink are, as their names describe, the same fierce and bloody spirits who ride out to choose those who shall fall in fight. The hall itself lies beyond a roaring river: a good defensive fortification, but also one of the most typical signs by which the land of the dead can be known.

In short, Valhalla can be seen as a fine and lordly hall, or it can be seen as a stylization of a battlefield after the fight: covered with broken shields, spears, and byrnies, and peopled with dead bodies, on whom the wolves and ravens feed and among whom--to a Norse eye looking through the gray mists of sunset--the dark Choosers of the Slain walk: in fact, it is both. Thus we can see that the distinction between the bright home of the gods and the dreary halls of Hel is not clear, as the later sources would make it, but rather difficult to sort out.

The similarities between Valhalla and Hel become even clearer when the chief descriptions of Hel aside from Snorri's *Edda* are considered. The Eddic poem *Baldrs draumar* speaks of the reception that has been prepared in Hel for Óðinn's son Baldr: the benches are strewn with rings, and the seating platform a flood with gold; the mead is brewed and a shield lies over the shining drink. Likewise, in *Eiríksmál*, Óðinn (presaging the coming of Eiríkr Blood-Axe) dreams that he bade the benches to be strewn, the beer-cups cleaned, and the valkyries to bear wine as though a prince were coming. The geographies of Valhalla and Hel mirror each other as well: both lie over fierce rivers, both are guarded by certain gates (Valgrind, "Gates of the Slain", in Valhalla; Helgrind or Nágrind, "Death-Gates" or "Corpse-Gates", in Hel).

The author Saxo Grammaticus, whose *Gesta Danorum* ("Deeds of the Danes") is a massive, if often confused, compendium of heroic and godly legends written in ornate (sometimes to the point of illegibility) Latin, also offers interesting material in regards to the relationship between Valhalla and Hel. In fact, Saxo's accounts of the Otherworld combine otherwise separated elements of the halls of the dead: for instance, when his hero Thorkillus journeys to the land of the giant Geruthus, Thorkillus is received in a hall whose architecture is similar to that of the spear-raftered Valhöll of *Grímnismál*, but the floor of which is made of snakes, recalling the serpent-woven Underworld hall described in *Voluspa* 38 and also the description, in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Judith*, of Hell as the "wyrm-hall". The hall stinks frightfully, but is filled with rich treasures--a thinly disguised grave.

Another of Saxo's heroes, Hadingus, is taken to the Underworld by a strange woman along a mysterious road. At first she shows him fresh herbs (it is winter on Earth) and says she will take him to the land where they grow--a land which may be compared to the 'green worlds of the gods' mentioned by the valkyrie Skögn in *Hákonarmál* 13. She leads him through a dark cloud and to a bridge above a river that seethes with weapons; the bridge could lead either to Valhöll or Hel, but the river of weapons is described as part of the Underworld in *Völuspá* 36:

A river falls from the east - among poison-dales -
of saxes and swords ; Slíðr it is called.

After this, they see two armies battling: the woman explains to Hadingus that these are those who died in battle in life, doomed to fight again every day until the end of the world. They come to a wall, but though the woman tries, she cannot leap over it: she then chops off the head of a cockerel and tosses head and body over the wall, whereupon it comes to life and is heard crowing on the other side. H.R. Ellis compares this to the funeral rites of a Rus (Swedish Viking) chieftain along the Volga, in which the slave-girl who was to be

sacrificed to accompany her master to the Otherworld decapitated a cockerel and flung the pieces into the boat in which she and her master were to be burned. The fresh herbs, the battle, and the resurrection of the cockerel seem to point to the realm of the gods; the context, and some of the elements, better describe Hel.

It could be argued that Saxo, as a christian writer, could be expected to lump Valhöll (and/or the other godly halls and worlds) and Hel together into a single “infernal” realm: he cannot be taken as a clear authority on Scandinavian afterlife beliefs. However, it can also be argued that his inability to tell the difference between the various aspects of the Norse afterlife could have stemmed from a lack of strong distinction in the original beliefs. Thorkillus’ visit to Geruthus is especially interesting: Saxo never identifies that land as the land of the dead, but the pertinent characteristics are there. This suggests that he may have used the received elements of his story without understanding them, so that he could interpret the world of the dead as a world of monsters; but also that the original sources may not have clearly codified the distinctions between the different elements of the afterlife, so that the spear-hall and the snake-hall, the hoard of treasure and the stench of the dead, either could be lumped together with ease or were originally elements of the same grave.

4. Above the Clouds, Beyond the Waters

Even the location of Valhalla (and the worlds of the gods in general) is not as clear as it seems at first. Snorri’s imagery is nothing but confusing: he describes the World-Tree as having “one root . . . with the gods, and a second with the rime-thurses (frost-giants) . . . but the third stands over Níflheimr . . . The third root of the ash stands in heaven and under that root is a well which is greatly holy, which is called Wyrð’s Well: there the gods have their deeming-stead. Every day they ride thence up over Bifröst; that is also called God-Bridge.” Snorri’s difficulty here may have stemmed from his efforts to reconcile received poetic tradition with his cosmological ideas: *Grímnismál* 31 gives a slightly variant form, stating that:

Three roots stand on three ways,
beneath the ash Yggdrasil.
Hel dwells beneath one, under another, rime-thurses,
beneath the third, human men.

The dead Helgi Hundingsbane rides through the air in his travels between Valhalla and his burial mound--over the “wind-helm’s bridge”. To this, Neckel compares particularly the words of the valkyries in *Darraðarljóð*, a poem with, according to *Njáls saga*, a particularly interesting provenance. Before the Battle of Clontarf (fought between the Norse and Irish in 1016), a man by the name of Dörruðr went out and “saw, that twelve people rode together to a certain hut and turned in there together. He went to the hut and looked inside, and saw that it was women inside and they were weaving. Men’s heads were the weights, and the guts of men for warp and yarn, a sword was for the beater, and an arrow for the shuttle. Then they spoke a certain verse . . . “ a prophecy of battle, in which the women identify themselves as valkyries, which ends with the statement,

Bloody clouds sweep through the heaven,
the air shall be dyed with the blood of men . . .
Let us ride horses hard without saddles,
with drawn swords, forth from here.

Neckel takes the description of the air being dyed with blood as suggesting that the road of the dead leads through the sky. This, thus far, fits with Snorri’s Upper World-Middle World-Underworld division.

However, an alternate, and perhaps older and more compelling, image of the geography of the Otherworld, is offered by a number of other sources: rather than being a heavenly

realm, Valhalla is reached by crossing the water. *Grímnismál*, for instance, tells us that the realm (or realms) of the gods lie beyond the waters: not only is there the great flood Thundr flowing around Valhalla, but there are also the rivers which the gods ride the fiery God-Bridge over to reach their deeming-stead by Yggdrasil (and which Thórr must wade). In another Eddic poem, *Hárbarðsljóð*, Thórr is coming home from Jötunheimr and must cross a river that is too great for him to ford in his usual fashion at that spot: the poem consists of his dialogue with Óðinn, who has disguised himself as the ferryman.

The waters that lie between life and death appear in the spiritual realities of more folk than the Norse. The best-known river of the dead is the Greek Styx, with its old ferryman Charon; the Celts believed that one means of reaching the Otherworld was by sailing west over the ocean or crossing a lake. Outside of the Indo-European sphere, H.R. Ellis also cites the sending of corpses out in funerary ships from as far afield as North Borneo and Polynesia, observing that in both cases, “we have evidence for the belief in a journey to the land of the dead, reached in the first case along a river, and in the second across the sea”. In American folk christianity, “crossing the Jordan” or “crossing the river” is equivalent to going to Heaven, as seen, for instance, in a number of folk hymns, as described by George Pulla Jackson in his analysis of white spirituals. “Now the wayworn pilgrim stands on Jordan’s banks . . . He may travel by air as the prophet did, in a chariot. But the usual means of transportation is the boat or ship.” The trend may be easily seen in a few examples such as “Poor Wayfaring Stranger”,

I’m going to meet my mother,
She said she’d be there when I come,
I’m just going over Jordan,
I’m just coming over home,

the Appalachian hymn, “The Good Old Way” (“Come sail with me, all Christ’s good friends . . . We’ll gather there on the further shore to meet with our kin who have gone before”), and a couplet which appears in variant forms in, for instance, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Michael, Row The Boat Ashore”:

The river is deep and the river is wide
(Coming for to carry me home),
There’s milk and honey on the other side
(Coming for to carry me home).

Interestingly, the former of these has been adapted by followers of Wotan today, with very little damage to either the concept or the cosmology, as “Swing Low, Sweet Valkyrie Maiden”, and includes the *Grímnismál*-inspired verse,

*The river roars loud and the river is wide,
(Coming for to carry me home)
There’s mead and fighting on the other side
(Coming for to carry me home).*
(Anonymous: overheard at the house of Wotan-priestess Freya Aswynn, Aug. 25, 1995).

The same image of crossing the water to the blessed land is found in the belief of American Wiccans, as shown, for instance, in the song “Set Sail” in Starhawk’s Spiral Dance Samhain ritual. “Set sail, set sail . . . over the waves, into the night . . . follow the twilight to the West, where you may rest.”

A number of traditional folksongs throughout Northern Europe also preserve the passage over water to the Otherworld, whether by crossing a bridge or other means. The English song “Lykewake Dirge” includes the verse,

*From Whinny-muir when thou mayst pass,
Every night and alle;*

*To Brig o' Dread thou comest at last,
And Christ receive thy saule.*

(William Dallam Armes, ed. *Old English Ballads and Folk Songs*. New York: the Macmillan Company, 1910, p. 56).

In travelling to Elfland, Thomas the Rhymer and his guide have to ford rivers:

*O they rade on, and farther on,
And they waded through rivers aboon the knee,
And they saw neither sun nor moon,
But they heard the roaring of the sea*
(Armes, *Old English Ballads and Folk Songs*, p. 48).

Similarly, the C version of the Swedish ballad "Sorgens Makt" has the dead lover leading his beloved over a bridge into a cemetery:

*And they went all over a bridge,
And the young man he wept, and the maiden she laughed.*
(Bengt R. Jonsson, ed. *Sveriges Medeltida Ballader*, vol. 1. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1983, p. 436).

The folk-belief that the undead cannot cross running water may also be related to this original geography of the Otherworld: the earthly running water may stand for the water that parts the world of the dead from the world of the living, which is not easily passed.

Death is, of course, the final journey into the unknown--and understanding it as a voyage into uncharted waters must have rung especially true for a sailing people, who, whenever they put forth from shore, could hope to make land again, but never be sure of it. The link between voyaging and death in the minds of the Norse is expressed clearly by the old warrior Flosi at the end of *Njáls saga*: "Men say that this was Flosi's end: that he fared out, when he had become old, to seek out house-timbers, and he was in Norway that winter. And that summer he stayed on late. Men advised him that his ship was not seaworthy. Flosi said that it was good enough for an old and death-doomed man, and got on the ship and left the harbour, and nothing was heard of this ship afterwards." Whether the scene distantly echoes a memory of funerary ships set adrift, reflects a belief in the land of the dead lying across the sea, or relates to other religious and/or literary traditions (such as, for instance, the theme of the old in heathen times voluntarily committing suicide?), the Icelanders who heard it--perhaps thinking of the day when the planks of their own boats might split to let the cold waters in--must have felt a shudder of icy awe at Flosi's open-eyed choice to set sail into the darkness.

The prose description of the death of Sinfjötli, the eldest son of Sigmundr (Wagner's Siegmund), presents an especially poignant view of the way over the waters to Valhalla and Óðinn's role as death-god. Sigmundr's pride has led him to foolishly advise his son to drink a poisoned drink rather than show fear, whereupon "Sinfjötli drank and was thereupon dead". Sigmundr lifts his son's warm body in his arms and "bore him a long way in his embrace, and came to a firth both wide and long, and there was a little boat and a man in it. He offered Sigmundr passage over the firth. But when Sigmundr carried the corpse out to the ship, then the boat was fully-loaded. The man said that Sigmundr should go around the firth. The man pushed the boat off and was gone from there." The ferryman is, of course, Wotan (whose by-names Farmaguð and Farmatýr, both meaning "Cargo-God", may well refer to him as the ferryman of the dead); the next time Sinfjötli was heard from, he was dwelling in Valhalla as an honoured hero, bidden by Óðinn to give greetings to the recently slain Eiríkr Blood-Axe.

But it was not only heroes of legend that followed the way over the water to Valhalla. Although that most pervasive image of a burial in barbarian splendour--a burning ship set adrift on the sea--is actually rare in literature, appearing most notably in the description of the funeral of Óðinn's son Baldr, various sorts of boat-burial are found in the North through different periods. The first of these on the Swedish island Gotland from the late

Bronze Age to the early Iron Age: it was usual for the early Gotlanders to place upright stones in the outline of a ship around the remains of both cremated and inhumed dead. Although no connection can be demonstrated between the Gotlandic burials and those which followed them several hundred years later, from about 500 C.E. onwards, boat-burial suddenly became an important part of funeral ritual throughout much of Scandinavia. This period is often called the Vendel Age because of the multiple ship-burials from Vendel, Sweden, the forms of which stand as a clear signpost to the Otherworld.

The dead Vendel chieftain would be dressed in full war-gear, a shirt of chainmail draped over his cold shoulders and a sword girded at his side; the helm on his head was wrought as a mask to terrify his foes, its dome plated with images of heroes and mighty beings aiding men in battle. Those who buried him dragged his ship up onto the land; they led his horses--perhaps walking calmly, perhaps stamping and tossing their heads at the scent of death--to the boat, slaughtering them there and laying them on the starboard side with heads to the prow. Horses and hounds and hawks; the weapons of a man, spear and shield and sword; and more than that: the dead man was given cauldrons and cooking utensils and, in one grave, a joint of beef and a ham, for he would need to eat where he was going. As for the chieftain himself, as his armour and weapons suggest, he was not laid peacefully to sleep. In the two graves where human remains survived, both men were seated upright, one in a chair, one in the stern of the ship with his steed beside him--gazing out over the dark waters where he was to sail, one might say.

One of the more vexing questions in dealing with horse- and boat-burials is always that of knowing whether the means of transport was meant to be used in getting the dead person to his or her destination in the Otherworld, or was simply something that would be needed in the next life, as in this. However, the Vendel burials may be contrasted in this respect to the later (Viking Age) Norwegian ship-burials in Oseberg, Gokstad, and Tuna. All three of the latter have special burial chambers, that in the Oseberg ship even including a bed; the Oseberg ship was, indeed, carefully moored to a large rock to keep it from sailing anywhere. The implication here is not that the ship itself was the means of the voyage to the Otherworld, but that the dead chieftain (or queen, in the Oseberg burial) would desire his or her ship in the hereafter for the same uses as it found in earthly life, just as the Oseberg queen also wanted her sledge, her wagon, her tapestries, her servant, and her servant's cooking implements.

The Viking Age, however, did not lose the image of the voyage over the waters. As well as the literary sources mentioned above, one of the most common images on the Gotlandic picture stones is that of a ship crossing the waves. These picture stones are generally thought to have been chiefly set up between 700-800 C.E., and were probably commemorative of the dead. One of the oldest ones shows a rider and has the simple runic inscription, "Frawawardar was slain on horseback"; some of the later ones include runic inscriptions such as "God help Rodfos' soul! God betray those, who betrayed him" -- the Heathen concept of a runestone's curse on the foe surviving into the christian era. Their style is simple, but imaginative, mixing scenes from battle with scenes of heroic and godly legends. The most common focus, however, is what appears to be violent death and the fallen man's good reception in the afterlife, perhaps, as Sune Lindqvist suggests, combined with exhortations to revenge embodied by the illustrations of legends in which revenge plays such a significant part (for instance, *Völundr*/Wayland's smithy is shown with the decapitated bodies of the sons of the king who had the smith hamstrung, while revenge is also one of the chief motivators throughout the *Völsung*/Nibelung legends).

The association between the ship and the way to Valhalla is clearest on the Tjängvide I stone. The lower half of the stone is occupied by a ship in full sail; the upper part shows a battlefield with a spear passing over a dead man; a man riding to a hall on an eight-legged horse, greeted by a woman with a horn of drink; and warriors fighting outside the hall, with a dog or wolf below them. The combination of the ship and the rider seated on Wotan's eight-legged horse has led to the suggestion that, especially on the island of Gotland, the road to Valhalla was seen as comprising, first a sea-faring, then a journey by horse from the coast to the god's hall. As according to human custom of the time, the arriving guest was especially honoured by having the lord's horse sent to fetch him at the shore. Other

versions of the ship/reception by a woman with a horn of drink motif are Lillbjärs III, Ardre VIII, Halla Broa IV, and Klinte Hunninge I, among others. These stones, particularly Ardre VIII and Tjängvide I, present the strongest argument for seeing the ship as intrinsically part of the journey to the Otherworld rather than an artistic motif, reference to an heroic legend involving sailing, or other such options: as the other frames seem to be telling a story with a specific memorial/Otherworldly reference, it is not unreasonable to take the ship as part of the same procedure that leads from the battlefield to Valhalla.

Of the picture stones which seem to detail the process of battle, perhaps the most fascinating is Lärbro St. Hammars I, which shows several scenes of battle, including one fight between the crew of a landing ship and a party of warriors headed by a woman with a torch on-shore. The thing that makes this stone unusual, however, is that the aftermath of the battle includes the sacrifice of the defeated prisoners in the typical Óðinnic manner: hanging and spearing. This takes place beneath an emblem of three interlocked triangles--a sign which appears on other stones such as Lillbjärs III and Lärbro Tängelgårda I to mark the central rider. Though we do not know if the Norse had a name for the sign itself, it has survived as a Norwegian textile design called the *valknut*--knot of the slain--and is often interpreted as the mark of Wotan, especially in the context of heroic death. If this interpretation is accurate, then, for instance, Lillbjärs III, which has only the ship, the rider, and the woman in common with the more explicit "Sleipnir" stones (Tjängvide I, Ardre VIII), could be clearly labelled as showing the dead man's welcome in Wotan's hall, and strongly intimate that these images were specifically intended to chart the pathway to Valhalla.

Lastly, Saxo gives us a description of the road to Wotan's hall which covers both water and air. When "Othinus" takes his fosterling Haddingus to his own home, he lifts the young man up onto his steed, then covers Haddingus' eyes with his cloak, telling him not to look down. Haddingus does anyway, and sees the ocean far beneath the horse's hooves. "To ride over air and water" is something of a stock phrase in describing supernatural transport abilities: Freyr's boar, and the women of the Helgi poems, for instance. But one may easily imagine that if Valhalla lies beyond the waters, then it may be reached either by ship--or by riding over the "wind-helm's bridge", as the dead and those who lead them between the worlds may do.

5. Wotan's Children: Valkyries and Einherjar

(Siegmund is keeping watch over his sister Sieglinde, who has collapsed at the end of their wild flight from Hunding's house. The valkyrie Brünnhilde appears and speaks to him)

(Brünnhilde): Siegmund! Look at me! I am the one, whom you shall soon follow.

(Siegmund): Who are you there, that appears so fair and grave?

(Brünnhilde): Only those hallowed to death meet my gaze--who gazes on me must part from life's light. On the battlefield alone I appear to the noble ones: he who sees me, I choose as the slain!

(Siegmund) He who follows you--where do you lead the hero?

(Brünnhilde) To Walhall, where the one that chose you waits--to Walhall you shall follow me.

(Siegmund) In Walhall's hall, will I find the Father of the Slain alone?

(Brünnhilde) The blessed host of fallen heroes will embrace you with high and holy greetings.

(Siegmund) Shall I find Wälse, my own father, there?

(Brünnhilde) The Wälsung shall find his father there.

(Siegmund) Shall a woman greet me joyously there?

(Brünnhilde): Wish-maidens rule there--Wotan's daughter will truly bring you drink.

(Siegmund): You are fair, and I recognise Wotan's child as holy . . .

(Wagner, Richard. Die Walküre. Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1899. Act II, scene iv. pp. 153-157).

Despite Richard Wagner's best efforts to capture the terrifying beauty of Wotan's

daughters, the valkyries of Norse belief have experienced a not entirely complimentary revival in modern culture. As a seemingly infinite number of caricatures suggest, the word “valkyrie”, especially in the Wagnerian context, immediately summons an image of a fat woman with long blond braids trailing from under a preposterously winged helmet as she lets out glass-breaking soprano screeches. This image is played upon devastatingly by English fantasy-humourist Terry Pratchett: “Even shorn of her layers of protective clothing, Lady Sybil Ramkin was still toweringly big. Vimes knew that the barbarian hublander folk had legends about great chain-mailed, armour-bra’d, carthorse-riding maidens who swooped down on battlefields and carried off dead warriors on their cropper to a glorious, roistering afterlife. Lady Ramkin could have been one of them.”

While the shrieking and howling may have been characteristic of the valkyries the early Germanic people believed in, as suggested by the name Göll (Screamer), the other aspects are not. The word “valkyrie” means “Chooser of the Slain”, and also appears as the Old English *wælcyrge*, suggesting that these beings were known both to the Norse and the Anglo-Saxons. There are two obvious interpretations for the title “Chooser of the Slain”: one, that the valkyries choose who shall die in battle, or two, they choose who, out of the slain, shall be brought to Valhalla. Both seem to fit the functions of the valkyries as described in Norse literature: for instance, *Hákonarmál* begins before Hákon’s last battle, with the words,

Gauta-Týr
sent Göndul and Skögun (two valkyries)
to choose among kings,
who, of Yngvi’s clan,
should fare with Óðinn
and be in Valhöll.

The use of the term “to choose the slain” appears in various ways in other context. In *Grímnismál* 14, it is explained how Freyja chooses half the slain every day for her own hall, while Óðinn owns the other half--in this case, picking over the dead is the most probable interpretation. In *Vafþrúðnismál* 41, the expression is used for the daily activities of the einherjar, and seems to be a poetic phrase for “to slay”. In regards to the valkyries, however, they seem to perform the double function of arranging battles (apparently at Wotan’s will) so that the correct people will live and die, and of identifying Wotan’s own among the dead on the battlefield.

The process of identifying the valkyries is, however, complicated by the confusion between the human, or demihuman, women described as “valkyries” in the prose of the heroic poems (the swan-maidens who marry the smith Völundr/Wayland and his brothers, and the thrice-reborn woman who accompanies the three Helgis) and the use of the word in the skaldic and mythological poems exclusively to describe Óðinn’s battle-spirits. The latter are exclusively Óðinnic: several of their names, indeed, are feminine versions of his own by-names, and one of his by-names is *Valkjósandi*, the masculine form of “valkyrie”. Wotan’s maidens have no romantic interest: the earliest Norse use of the word “valkyrie”, in the skaldic poem *Hrafnsmál* (ca. 900 C.E.), tells us that

I thought the valkyrie to be wise,
men were never beloved by the keen-eyed one.

The tragedy of the valkyrie Sigdrífa, better known as Wagner’s Brünnhilde, of course, is that she is punished for disobeying Wotan by being stripped of her position as a valkyrie and, as a final seal to her loss of that place, she is forced to fall in love and marry, as described in the prose of *Sigdrífumál*: “Óðinn stuck her with a sleep-thorn in revenge for this and said that she should never again deal out victory in battle and said that she must be married. ‘But I said to him, that I swore an oath in answer to this that I should never be married to a man who was able to be afraid.’”

In contrast to this, the “valkyrie-brides” of the Eddic prose are all romantically involved: for instance, the Helgi-woman’s romantic relationship with her hero, whom she guides and

magically protects, is the center of her existence. Nor does she actually choose death for her hero: rather she is unaware of his approaching doom and bewails it piteously afterwards. Finally, she has neither a connection with Óðinn of any sort nor access to Valhalla: Sigrún cannot follow her dead husband over the “wind-helm’s bridge”, but must sit beside his mound, hoping that he may ride back to her. In short, since the word “valkyrie” is never used for these women in the poetry, but only in the explanatory prose given by the late thirteenth-century scribe, it can probably be safely taken that the original form of the Norse valkyrie was that seen in the skaldic and mythological poems--the fierce, chaste worker of Wotan’s will. The scribe’s confusion is likely to have stemmed from the way in which the Helgi-women, in particular, were able to ride as spirits over air and water to magically protect their beloved in battle, assisted by the image of the host of women riding from a mountain among streaks of lightning, with blood-sprinkled byrnies and flashing spears given in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* I, 15.

When the “valkyrie-brides” (a term in itself impossibly contradictory) are put aside, we begin to get a clearer picture of Wotan’s maidens. They are often associated with ravens in Norse poetry: *Hrafnsmál* consists entirely of a valkyrie interrogating a raven about the deeds of the king Haraldr Hairfair (who, according to a rather late and garbled reworking of the *Grímnismál* tale in *Flateyjarbók*, was a guest/fosterling of Óðinn in his childhood) --an interrogation which begins with the promising words,

How is it with you, raven?
 From whence have you come
 with bloody beak
 so early in the day?
 Bits of meat hang from your claws,
 the stench of carrion comes from your mouth
 I think you spent the night
 near where you knew the dead to lie.

In kennings, ravens are usually described as belonging either to Wotan or to valkyries: they are Óðinn’s hawks and the swans of the Hanged One or of Yggr; the hawks of Gunnr, Hlökk, and Hildr, and so forth. The Anglo-Saxon poem *Exodus* also describes ravens as *wælceasiga*--they, too, pick over the dead on the battlefield as the valkyries do. In regards to this, Tolkien’s suggestion that the “valkyrie”-word “derived partly from the actual carrion-birds of battle, transformed in mythological imagination”, is an attractive theory--the more so when the valkyries are compared to Celtic raven-goddesses of battle such as the Morrigan--but difficult, if not impossible, to prove. However, a relationship in image as well as function is certainly present both in *Exodus* and in the Norse sources regarding ravens and valkyries: both are seen as dark creatures that delight in the blood and carrion of the battlefield, who can foretell the turnings of war, and who take their share from the field when the slaughter is over.

In human life, therefore, valkyries are figures of terror, as characterized by their bloody weaving in *Darraðarljóð*, their close relationship to the carrion-birds of battle, and their very nature as Choosers of the Slain, handmaidens of the god of battle-death. Like Brünnhilde in her first appearance to Siegmund, they may be stately, riding above the field horsed and in full armour with their spears in their hands, but they are pitiless deemers of death: the best comfort they can give is shown by Skölgul’s words to the newly slain Hákon, when he asks if he did not deserve better from the gods, “We ruled it thus: that you held the field, and your foes fled” (*Hákonarmál* 12). In Valhalla, however, they play a different role, welcoming those whom Wotan seeks to honour with horns of drink. With these figures, as much as any, we see the transformation of the gory battlefield into the lordly hall. Where queens and noblewomen would bear the mead about at earthly feasts, speaking, as the queen Wealtheow does in *Beowulf*, words of welcome and wisdom, the only women who frequent the bloody field of the slain are Wotan’s wish-daughters, transmuted from the shrieking ghosts who ride over the slaughter and choose the deaths of those below into the stately greeters of the honoured guests.

Those guests themselves, the *einherjar*, or Single-Champions, comprise a wider range

than simply men fallen in battle. Loki uses the title “einheri” mockingly when speaking of Thórr (*Lokasenna* 60); and in *Grímnismál* 51, Óðinn speaks of the einherjar as though they were of godly rank: Geirroðr has won the enmity of all the einherjar together with Óðinn, just as the *dísir* (family goddesses) are angry with him (53). As mentioned earlier, Sinfjötli is one of the heroes in Valhalla, even though he was poisoned rather than dying in fight: in his case, the deciding factors may have included his deeds, his lineage, or the high regard in which he was held after his death--here, it must be remembered that while modern folk might consider Sinfjötli, like Sigmundr, Sigurðr (Siegfried), and the rest of the characters in the saga, a pure fiction, or at best loosely based on a dim memory of a Migration Age prince, the Norse believed him to have been an historical figure, and the accounts of legend generally accurate.

In short, it is clear that to be one of the einherjar means something particular and special beyond simply having died in battle. What exactly it may have implied will be discussed further in the next chapter, when I look at the poems describing the respective receptions of Eiríkr Blood-Axe and Hákon the Good into Valhalla, among the ranks of the einherjar. For now it will be sufficient to look at their condition and activities in Wotan’s hall.

Like everything else in Valhalla, the einherjar appear in two ways. First is the horde of fallen warriors who live on bloody, with shattered byrnies, under a roof of shields and spears--the dead men on the battlefield, who rise each day to do battle again (this image received a rather peculiar revival in the film “Erik the Viking”, near the end of which all those who have died in the course of the film appear with their wounds shown in full and gruesome detail, but observe grimly that they are the lucky ones). Secondly, we see the ranks of princes, dwelling in honour and happiness within Wotan’s lordly hall. According to Gustav Neckel, the first group are the ghosts of the dead, for whom Valhalla is inseparable from the half-life within the burial mound; the second are heroes raised to the rank of half-gods. Hákon, who comes to Valhöll covered with blood and mistrustful of Óðinn, shows one aspect of the einherjar; Eiríkr Blood-Axe, arriving in glory as a king with five kings behind him, can be seen as showing the second.

And yet, like the other aspects of Valhalla, the two forms of the einherjar cannot easily be separated from each other. Eiríkr’s condition is not actually described in *Eiríksmál*, so that one could as easily see how, as Lee Hollander put it, “Eric draws nigh-- . . . we may fill out the picture after *Hákonarmál*--bleeding from deep wounds and pale unto death”, as follow Neckel’s vision of the king in glory and good health. The use of the word *heill* (healthy/blessed) in welcoming Hákon into Valhalla, on the other hand, suggests--whether it is meant literally or simply as a greeting, carries the idea that Hákon is being welcomed to health and happiness after his bloody death, perhaps even as the einherjar who fight all day are healed again for their feasting every evening.

6. The Everlasting Battle

The Everlasting Battle is best known to us as the characteristic daily activity of the einherjar in Valhalla, but is by no means limited to that hall. The best-known version, and the oldest, is the story of Högni, Hildr, and Heðinn. Briefly told: Högni’s daughter Hildr runs off with Heðinn; Högni and his men pursue them, meeting on the island Hoy (one of the Orkneys). Under the guise of trying to reconcile the two men, Hildr inflames them further to battle. At the end of the day, both sides are dead; Hildr then magically brings them back to life so that they will do battle again. According to Snorri, it is said that they will continue this until Ragnarök. The later and more corrupt version in *Sörla þáttr* adds the figure of the valkyrie Göndul (perhaps Freyja in disguise) as the waker of the dead, putting the ultimate blame for the conflict on Freyja and Óðinn and ending the battle with the intervention of one of Óláfr Tryggvason’s christian followers; but Snorri’s version of the story accords better with that of the skald Bragi, which, being composed in the early ninth century, cannot be taken as either degenerate or garbled in the way that post-conversion accounts of the legend might be. Bragi leaves out the awakening of the dead, but his description of Hildr as “the goddess who heals bloody wounds”, and “witch among women”, suggest that he knew the story. Interestingly, the scene from the legendary battle Bragi is describing is actually shown on an elaborate shield which he is praising: thus,

when he tells us that “This battle may be seen on Svölnir’s (Óðinn’s) hall-penny”, he is setting it within an Óðinnic framework--literally, under the very shingles of Óðinn’s roof.

However, it appears in other contexts as well. In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, a man by the name of Thórsteinn Uxafótr dreams that he is led into a burial mound and witnesses a battle between two companies, one red-clothed and fair of appearance, one ugly and dressed in blue-black. The blows given by the fighters to each other heal almost as swiftly as they are given; only the blows Thórsteinn deal, presumably because he is a living man, have a lasting effect.

A similar folktale “Sundered Today, Whole Tomorrow”, was collected in Sweden in 1943 from an informant born in 1873:

There was a man, who asked for lodging in a house on a Holy Thursday or Easter night. That night the old woman of the house took something out of a horn and smeared herself, and so she climbed up on the stove and sat herself on a broom and said,

*“Here up and here out
and off to Snake Farm!”*

So she went up through the chimney, and so he thought he would follow after. He took his walking stick and would ride upon it. “Here up and here down,” he said, but then came the old woman’s maid and taught him what he should say, and so it bore him away to Blåkulla.

There the old women were enjoying themselves and struck at each other and said, “Sundered today and whole tomorrow.” But then he said, “Sundered today and sundered tomorrow and sundered for all eternity.” And when the old women came home they were all wounded, and that could never be healed.

(Svenska Folksägner. Bengt af Klintberg, ed. Stockholm: Norstedts Forlag 1972, pp. 227-28).

Whether or not the story reflects a degenerate form of the Valhalla belief, it certainly stems from the Eternal Battle motif--complete with the outside intervention--and is altered only in that the participants are witches rather than dead men. However, Jacqueline Simpson interprets “Snake Farm” as the christian Hell, “since Satan can take on the form of a serpent”, while snakes are one of the elements in the Germanic realm of the dead, as mentioned above--their presence in a stylized depiction of the grave being obvious; so that the image of a host of battling dead is not obscured by the later Swedish witch-folklore.

The Högni and Hildr story was also known in North Germany, but its German rendition, the epic poem *Kudrun*, while retaining the motif of battle and healing, tones the magico-religious elements down in typical mediæval German form. Just as *Nibelungenlied* marginalizes Siegfried’s dragon-slaying, downplays the magical elements of Günther’s wooing, and diminishes Brünnhilde from a disgraced, but still awe-inspiring, valkyrie to a burlesque Amazon, so *Kudrun* stops the fight before the deaths of the chief participants, and takes great care to normalize the healing. Instead of being done by the young woman who instigated the fight, the healing is done by the older man Wate, who learnt the art “from a wild woman”. It is mentioned that he could almost raise the dead (verse 542), but he is specifically stated to use natural means (530), and there are still a great many slain left on the field when he is done (545). The motif of the Everlasting Battle itself also exists in Celtic stories such as *Culhwch and Olwen* and *The Death of Muircertach Mac Erca*, while similar ghostly battles took place in Marathon, as described by Pausanias in *Graeciae Descripto* and after a fight between Romans and Scythians, as told about in *Vita Isidori*.

Nevertheless, although the Everlasting Battle is not exclusive to the north, its association with a deity is, and in particular, its attribution to his hall. The situation in Valhalla is different than that in most of the other versions of the story: the hosts of Heðinn and Högni, for instance, do not sit down to feast together after a hard day’s fight. In *Grímnismál*, the feasting of the einherjar is shown as central to the Valhalla experience; in *Vafþrúðnismál*, the daily reconciliation of the heroes is as important an identifying characteristic of Valhalla as is their endless fighting. This seems to accord with the welcome and, perhaps,

healing of Hákon: the einherjar experience their deaths--but also recovery, and feasting afterwards, every day. The reconciliation of the einherjar is part of the perception of Valhalla as a pleasant godly hall: even the ferocious valkyries appear, in this context, as the bearers of the drink representing welcome and fellowship.

However, the characteristics which would have led to the Everlasting Battle becoming part of the Óðinnic afterlife are both early and well-documented: most particularly, Wotan's reception of the battle-dead, which would make him the obvious figure to associate with their continued combat, but also his delight in the battles of men. The practice of burying weapons and war-horses with the dead also suggests that they were expected to need these things in the afterlife--that the burial-weapons were not only adornments, but tools that would serve for battles in the world beyond. This idea is, naturally, not unique to the Germanic peoples, nor even the Indo-Europeans; nor does it necessarily mean that all men buried with battle-gear are einherjar, even in Viking Age Scandinavia. The general evidence of grave-goods, as well as the descriptions which make it clear that the halls of the gods were very similar to the halls of their worshippers, seem to imply that life within the mound, or in the god-worlds, was expected to go on as usual, including eating, drinking, riding--and, of course, fighting. Nevertheless, if an afterlife which includes fighting is not quite the same as the Everlasting Battle, the road from the former to the latter is not too far; and when the beliefs that led to the burial of weapons are combined with the name "Hall of the Slain" and the emphasis on Valhalla as a warrior's afterlife (if not necessarily limited to those who died fighting), the appearance of a slightly modified form of the Everlasting Battle motif as an integral part of Valhalla seems not only natural, but inevitable. Life leads into death, and we can expect death to reflect life in its chief particulars, if changed in those odd ways that are often encountered in the Otherworld.

Juha Pentikäinen, 'The Dead Without Status', in *Nordic Folklore: Recent Studies*, ed. by Reimund Kvideland and Henning K. Sehmsdorf in collaboration with Elizabeth Simpson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 131.

Pentikäinen, 'The Dead Without Status', p. 132.

Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, p. 35.

ibid., p. 35.

Eyrbyggja saga ch. 4, p. 8. *Íslenzk fornrit* 4.

Snorra Edda, p. 101.

Brennu-Njáls saga p. 215.

Grímnismál 25.

Snorra Edda, p. 31.

see Alfgeir, *Idunna* 27

H.R. Ellis cites, for instance, *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 11, *Njáls saga* ch. 14, and *Landnámabók* II, chs. 2, 5, 7 as the chief explicit references to this belief. *The Road to Hel*, pp. 88-90. ch. 23, p. 91.

Helgakviða Hundingsbana II, 40-51.

Brennu-Njáls saga, ch. 78, pp. 192-94.

Brennu-Njáls saga, ch. 79, p. 194.

The Road to Hel, pp 140-46.

Íslenzk fornrit 9, ch. 22, p. 191.

Flateyjarbók II, chs. 8-9, pp. 9-11.

Flateyjarbók II, p. 135.

V_Ísunga saga, ch. 12, p.29.

cf. Ranke, *Die Indogermanische Totenverehrung*

Baldur draumar 6-7.

Gesta Danorum I, Book 8, xiv, 14, p. 242.

Dobbie, *Poetic Records* IV, p. 102.

Road to Hel, pp. 85-86.

Snorra Edda, p. 22.

Helgakviða Hundingsbana II, 49.

Gustav Neckel, *Walhall*, p. 25.

Green, Miranda. *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, pp. 167-68.

The Road to Hel, p. 49.

White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), p. 295.

Brennu-Njáls saga. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed. Íslenzk fornrit 12. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954, p. 463.

H.R. Ellis observes of this passage that it might preserve traces of memory regarding funeral ships set adrift, a belief in the land of the dead across the sea, and/or other literary or religious traditions--*Road to Hel*, p. 44.

Eiríksmál 5.

Described in Úlfr Uggason's *Húsdrapa*, and, following his description, in *Snorra Edda*, pp. 65-66.

H.R. Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, p. 16.

Sjonheim I. Sune Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine* I, p. 104.

Gotlands Bildsteine I, p. 104.

Detlev Ellmers, 'Der frühmittelalterliche Hafen der Ingelheimer Kaiserpfalz und Gotländische Bildsteine', *Schiff und Zeit* 1 (1973); 'Fränkisches Königszeremoniell auch in Walhall', *Beiträge zur Schleswiger Stadtgeschichte* 25 (1980), pp. 115-26; 'Religiöse Vorstellungen der Germanen im Bildprogramm gotländischer Bildsteine und der Ostkrypter des Bremer Domes', *Jahrbuch der Witttheit zu Bremen* 15 (1981), pp. 31-54. Summarized by Erik Nýlen and Jan-Peder Lamm, *Bildstenar* (Stockholm: Gidlunds, 1987), p. 70.

Snorra Edda, p. 124.

Prachett, Terry. *Guards! Guards!* London: Corgi, 1989, p. 94.

Flateyjarbók I, pp. 563-66.

Meissner, Rudolf. *Die Kenningar der Skalden* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1984, rep. from Bonn: Kurt Schroeder, 1921), p. 121.

Exodus: Text, Translation, and Commentary, ed. and trans. by J.R.R. Tolkien, ed. by Joan Turville-Petre (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 50.

Walhall, p. 73.

'Was the Lay of Erik a Fragment?', *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 7 (1932-35), 247-57 (p. 254).

Flateyjarbók, I, pp. 279-83.

Flateyjarbók, I, pp. 253-55.

Scandinavian Folktales (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 146.

Kudrun, ed. by Karl Bartsch and Karl Stackmann, 5th edn (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1965), p. 108, verse 529.

Cited by Meisen, *Die Sagen vom Wütenden Heer und Wilden Jäger* (Munster: Aschendorffschen Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1935), pp. 22-23.

Cf., for instance, Otto Höfler, *Verwandlungskulte, Volkssagen, und Mythen* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1973), p. 234.

Chapter III: Death, War, and Politics

While the life of the Vikings was not necessarily as “nasty, brutish, and short” as it is often thought to have been, nevertheless, death was an ever-present reality to the folk of that age to a much greater degree than is the case in the Western world. For instance: in a Danish cemetery with 240 adult skeletons, 100 were in the 20-35 age group, while 140 were in the general range of 35-55, with only two of those demonstrably having passed 55. It would have been difficult, if not indeed impossible, for a child in this period to grow to adulthood without experiencing the death of a family member or close friend, which is much likelier to be the norm in modern Western society. Stephen King--a novelist whose popularity is at least partially due to his close investigation and accurate rendition of modern American society and behavior--makes a very similar observation in *Pet Semetary*: his protagonist's best friend, Jud, who is in his eighties, comments to the much younger (mid-thirties) doctor,

“Well, we come from a different time . . . We was on closer terms with death. We saw the flu epidemic after the Great War, and mothers dying with child, and children dying of infection and fevers that it seems like doctors just wave a magic wand over these days . . . We knew it as a friend and as an enemy . . . In those days you didn't need to take a course in college to study death, hot-spice, or whatever they call it. In those days it came into the house and said howdy and sometimes it took supper with you and sometimes you could feel it bite your ass.”

As it was in old Jud's day, so it was--and even more so--for the folk of the Viking Age. Each and every early Scandinavian, like anyone in an agricultural world, had ample opportunity to see for him- or herself that “Cattle die”--of course they must: hopefully butchered as the winter's supply of meat, or by starvation, freezing, or accident in worse times. Likewise, they all knew that “kinsmen die”: everyone had lost a few kinsmen--and quite possibly helped to wash the bodies, lay them out, and dig the graves--and expected to lose more. From there, it was only a short step to the inevitable conclusion, “You yourself shall die”. Keeping this in mind may have raised the degree of awareness of the supernatural--folk watched for omens, interpreted dreams, and waited for the sure knowledge of being fey (the psychic recognition that death is about to be upon one)--but also made it easier to live life a little more securely, having resolved that what could not be avoided could be met with a strong heart, and being aware that the territories beyond were not uncharted, but rather could be known and trusted. This firm belief in the necessary and duly timed death survived in Icelandic communities as far away as Canada, as seen in the Icelandic-Canadian proverb, “Ekki verður feigum forðað né ófeigum í hel komið”--the fey cannot be saved, nor the un-fey forced into the land of death.

In contrast, although images of violent death are frequently presented by the media today, the context is that of something unexpected and shocking--and, unfortunately, even sensational. The element of personal contact, either in regards to a personal connection with the deceased or a strong reason to identify with them, is usually lacking: in fact, the context in which the media present newsworthy disasters, all of which are by definition unusual events and most of which take place in foreign countries, tends to intensify rather than lessen the sense of the watcher's detachment from the concept of death by violence. The degree of this detachment becomes especially clear when an event does break through the barrier of the media: in such cases, most Westerners have no preparation for dealing with tragic disaster affecting people who could be themselves--let alone people they might know. The Oklahoma bombing, for instance, was a trauma almost beyond American comprehension, whose overwhelming emotional repercussions are still going on, precisely

because it was one of the few such events in modern history in which ordinary Americans, going about their business in their quiet hometown, were slaughtered (and, moreover, by the hands of compatriots). Still, death from right-wing or terrorist bombs is not yet a frequent occurrence in America: the response of shock to an unusual catastrophic event is very different from the personal understanding of the inevitability of death. The discrepancy between the presentation of unusual death and the experience of ordinary death was brought out by an American study done in 1971, which found that a child in the US would, by the age of 14, probably have seen an average of eighteen thousand killings on television, whereas, "the average American will reach the age of 40 before encountering a death of someone close to them." The AIDS epidemic and the rising level of crime in America have probably lowered the latter figure somewhat; but that the former figure has gone down is, to say the least, unlikely.

The comparative rarity of personal experience of death in our times, combined with the strong social emphasis on avoiding thinking about or actively denying the inevitability of a natural death at all costs--particularly the perception of death-denying euphemisms such as "passed away", "at rest", and so forth as being more appropriate and tactful in the context of a funeral than "died" and "dead"--is one of the contributing factors in making death more difficult to deal with when it occurs. Part of the immense trauma caused by the AIDS epidemic is that it came as a betrayal of modern expectations of lifespan (and its twin, our faith in modern medicine).

The painful gap between expectation and reality appears especially clearly when gay writings from the late seventies are compared with those a decade later, as in the *Tales of the City* series. In the second book, *More Tales of the City* (originally published as a serial in the late seventies) Archibald Gidde and a friend are discussing, semi-seriously, plans for a gay old folk's home, in the confident expectation that, "There are - and this is conservatively speaking - one hundred and twenty thousand practicing homosexuals within the city limits of San Francisco . . . Those one hundred and twenty thousand homosexuals are going to grow old together, Arch. Some of them may go back to Kansas or wherever the hell they ran away from, but most of them are gonna stay right here in Shangri-la, cruising each other until it's pacemaker time." Gidde's death is reported in the sixth book, *Sure of You*, no more than ten years later, after he has already outlived many of his friends and contemporaries. Even in his obituary, the attempt to deny Gidde's role as a victim in a continuing crisis goes on: he is reported as having died of liver cancer, to which gay activist Thack responds with appropriate scorn. "Liver cancer . . . How tired is that? . . . He was a worm in life, and he's a worm in death."

The general denial of death as a physical reality in modern Western society is complemented by the spiritual denial of death which has been the mainstay of christianity virtually since its foundation. The rhetoric of Jesus of Nazareth--"He that believeth in me shall not die, but have everlasting life", supported by the Resurrection myth and the writings of the Apostle Paul, led to very specific doctrines presenting death as a temporary inconvenience (at least for the virtuous), emphasizing Christ's triumph over death, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" and promising resurrection in the original flesh for the faithful (a doctrine leading to much concern among, for instance, literal-minded Victorians, who took great precautions to protect their deceased from illegal exhumation and dissection lest the unfortunate victims find themselves missing important organs on the happy day).

Even the aspects of earlier christianity which seem, to the modern eye, to dwell on death to the point of being offensive to current sensibilities --for instance, the *memento mori* imagery of the late Middle Ages, which included such images as graphic depictions of burst abdominal cavities with maggots crawling about in them--differ strikingly from the conceptions of death normally maintained by traditional peoples. The christian *memento mori* was not meant to recognise death or honour its importance as both a physical and spiritual phenomenon; it was meant to demonstrate, in the strongest terms possible, the weakness and perishability of the flesh, warning christians that they should mortify their bodies (and all earthly goods and desires, which would also perish in the end) and tend to their spirits, which would never suffer the indignity of death (that the *memento mori* also undoubtedly served as a means of relieving the fears and concerns of a particularly death-

fraught time says little about its religious function and much about the human capability to adjust to even the most horrifying traumas by means of artistic expression).

By denying not only the inevitability, but the very presence of death, industrialized Western society has simply handicapped its members. Without the awareness of death as a necessary and natural part of life, it becomes difficult for us to deal with the deaths of those we love and even more difficult to deal with the realization that we ourselves must die--let alone to appreciate death in the manner of traditional peoples, for whom it can be both the crown of this life and the initiation into the next.

Ironically, virtually the only guideline modern Americans have for both the personal preparation for death--recognising it in its often gruesome forms and imagining ourselves undergoing the same processes--and, at the same time, for reassuring ourselves of the existence of a realm or realms beyond this which guarantee the continuance of something of ourselves after death--is horror fiction and films. Short of deliberately seeking out books of pathology and mortuaries, very few Westerners are likely to observe a dead body as anything other than a waxwork doll, with rouged cheeks and eyes carefully glued shut, artfully arranged in the "Doesn't she look natural!" position. The British *Manual of Funeral Directing* explicitly states that "The aim of the funeral director or his assistant (when dealing with the corpse) should be to attain a natural position"; those bodies on which the signs of death cannot be hidden are the "bad remains", which are presented to mourners only in closed coffins. The horror genre, on the other hand, frequently requires a direct confrontation with the realities of death and decay--and with the belief that something other than blood flow and brainwaves separates the dead from the living; while if a work in this field is effective in the slightest way, the reader/viewer *must* identify with the possibility of experiencing death (or worse). As Stephen King has commented in an astute observation on his own genre, "(Horror is) a rehearsal for death. It's a way to get ready . . . I also think that some of horror's current popularity is due to the failure of religion . . . Horror fiction, supernatural horror fiction, suggests that we go on." Even this mode of preparation, however, is distanced from us by its very nature: "It's only a book. It's only a movie." Likewise, the reassuring imminence of the supernatural can also serve as a distancing effect: if there are no vampires lurking in their hiding places, no ghosts trying to deliver their dying messages--if the supernatural in the book or movie must be dismissed altogether as a fantasy, then its comfort goes away at the same time as its terror, when the covers close or the theatre lights come up (or the reader wakes up from a subsequent nightmare).

If not usually a welcome guest, Death, of course, was a common visitor in the Viking Age, coming in through many windows and doors. Sickness was not uncommon: for instance, *Eyrbyggja saga* and the two chief sources on the Greenland and American settlements, *Grænlandinga saga* (Saga of the Greenlanders) and *Eiríks saga rauða* (Eiríkr the Red's Saga), describe contagious and fatal diseases striking Iceland and Greenland respectively. However, death by sickness could neither be explained rationally, foreseen by non-supernatural means, nor prepared for in normal ways: its mystery, especially in cases of epidemics, led to a sense of it as being unnatural, as we see in the Icelandic and Greenlandic materials, where the diseases have a strong supernatural element to them of a sort which is typical for beliefs concerning the undead. The corpses of the Greenland settlers killed by the plague sit up, move, and sometimes speak. In both cases, the living can see the dead coming back to fetch more of the living. The Greenland plague was attended by a host of the dead somewhat resembling both folklore of the Wild Hunt and mediæval images of the dance of death:

And one evening Sigríðr desired to go to the outhouse, and stood beside the outer door. uðríðr followed her, and they opened the outer door. Then Sigríðr cried out loudly. Guðríðr said, 'We have gone out carelessly, and you should not be here where the cold is on you, and we should go home as fast as possible'. Sigríðr answered, 'There is no going to the dwelling: here is now the host of all the Brummie's before the door, and Thorsteinn, your husband, and there I also recognize myself, and there is much grief in seeing this' ..

Thorsteinn was gone then. She thought that he went before and had a whip in his hand

and would drive the host along. Afterwards they went in, and before morning came, then she was dead, and a coffin was made for the corpse.

(*Eiríks saga rauða*. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthias Þórðarson, eds. Íslensk fornrit 4. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935, pp. 214-215.

The Icelandic troubles are heralded by a dead woman walking, followed by a “Moon of Wyrd” circling a certain farm’s main sitting room counter clockwise. The chief attack of the epidemic begins with the death of the farm’s shepherd, apparently by some sort of supernatural agency. Then,

It was one night, when Thórir Wood-Leg went out to his outhouse and back the other way; and when he wanted to go in, then he saw that the shepherd had come in front of the door; Thórir wanted to go in, but the shepherd did not want him to; then Thórir wanted to walk away, but the shepherd sought after him and grabbed him and cast him against the door; he took that ill, but he got back to his room and was bruised blue-black. After this he took sick and died; he was also buried at the church there; afterwards they were both seen together, the shepherd and Thórir Wood-Leg; and folk were all terrified of this, as might be expected.”

After this, folk begin to die in earnest. The sickness is not ended until the ghosts have been banished by the peculiarly Icelandic means of summoning them to a legal court “for having come without leave into a dwelling and depriving folk of both life and health . . . The door-court was held and the charges spoken and all formulae carried out as at a Thing-court”, after which the ghosts depart, no more people die, and Thuriðr, who is ill, becomes well again.

Although this takes place after the conversion, the source of the procedure is one Snorri goði (Snorri the Priest; although the title *goði* was used primarily to mean “chieftain” in Iceland, the *goði* of the heathen period was responsible for keeping up the local temple and performing certain communal rituals). Snorri himself had been a heathen *goði* for some time before the conversion (which appears to have been skin-deep at best); and though a christian priest is sent, the christian priest has nothing to do with the effects of law-court or the process of banishment--his only role is to sprinkle holy water and sing psalms after the ghosts have already departed. Thus, in Snorri’s solution, we may still observe one of the characteristics contributing to the health of native Norse society: the dead are subject to law in the same manner as the living; the supernatural and the natural are ultimately governed by the same rules, and the Otherworld, as noted in the previous chapter, can be understood in terms of this world. When the power of the whole community (perhaps, one might imagine, implicitly including those dead kinsmen who are not acting out of turn?) is brought to bear, a pack of ghosts can no more be allowed to trespass and cause injury than can a pack of outlaws. The individual element is also strongly present in maintaining the judgement of the court: instead of abandoning the farmstead, its young owner Kjartan hires new servants in the spring to replace the dead ones, and continues to farm on that spot, thus reinforcing and maintaining the effect of the law-court (and winning the admiration of his contemporaries).

Sickness, then, was a matter of fear and supernatural remedy. Death by old age, on the contrary, was rare, and when it did occur--if the sagas can be trusted--it was usually met in a well-spirited and dignified manner--prepared for carefully and accepted with clear foreknowledge. The death of the old in the sagas is, indeed, one model for the “good death” or the “appropriate death”--that is to say, “a death that someone might choose for himself--had he a choice”. Their keen awareness of their approaching end seems to have made, in general, the old of the Viking Age able to choose and face death in the manner most fitting to their lives. This is not uncommon among traditional peoples, especially those living in harsh environments. For instance, among the Alaskan Inuit, a man would normally fix the day of his own death, whereupon he would tell his life story to his kin, pray, instruct his fellow tribesmen on important matters, and then set out onto the icecap. Even long after their christianization, the rigors of Saami herding life required similar sacrifices on the part

of the elderly. Hugh Beach describes an account told to him by the elderly Swede Nevada Larsson of something that happened when Larsson was a child: one springtime, during the Saami migrations, an old man who was too weak and tired to keep up with the trek “went out on the lake, cut a hole in the ice and jumped in. The lake had thawed and frozen over again, however, and so when he jumped he did not drop far before hitting another layer of ice. He was stubborn and sat down on the bottom layer with the water to his shoulders and waited until he froze to death . . . Old Saami in the past had traditionally ended their own lives rather than become a burden.” Even now, “For many Saami . . . used to a totally different life, death is far preferable to a long decline at the nursing home.” A similar practice appears, though reduced to a rather fantastic and humorous form, in the Norse *Gautreks saga*: a certain family is so miserly that, whenever they feel that their fortunes are diminished by such trifling things as an extra guest at dinner, one of the older members will go to a certain cliff called Ættarstapi (Kin-Cliff) and leap off. It may be suspected that this account preserves memories of a rather grimmer reality: famines were not uncommon in Scandinavia, and the long winters were often difficult to survive after a thin year, so that those who had outlived their chief usefulness might well have spared their younger and healthier kin the burden of feeding them in bad times.

While the Scandinavians were not unusual among traditional peoples, their sense of the worthiness of accepting and even choosing death at an appropriate time seems remarkable within their context. When we see that this attitude towards death is not that of a marginal (but perceived as exceptionally spiritual) tribal people such as the Inuit, Native American, Saami, or Australian Aboriginal, but rather that of a Northern European culture in the relatively recent past, it brings home the awareness that the West did not need to lose its understanding of the cycle of death and life.

Like the aged Inuit, Flosi's choice to set sail in an unseaworthy boat at the end of the summer gives him full power over the end of his life and the last memory that survives him. When the cantankerous and difficult Egill Skalla-Grímsson reaches the end of his life, he wishes to go out with a bang, scattering his hoard of silver about at the national Thing and seeing how much strife and fighting he can cause: while this might not be seen as the model of a well-adjusted person, it is perfectly characteristic for Egill, who has been making trouble and enjoying fights since his early childhood. Dissuaded from this course of action by his family, he gets revenge on them by taking two of his son's thralls out with him, burying the hoard, and (in spite of being blind and in his nineties, with bad circulation) killing the thralls; satisfied that no one will get the better of him even in death, he is then able to die relatively peacefully. Sigurður Nordal goes even farther in interpreting Egill's last wishes, arguing that Egill is actually emulating his patron Óðinn in these activities: “he wants to. . . egg men on against each other after Óðinn's example, in order to get him a following, though he himself is unable to kill.” Perhaps so.

Probably the best of all the non-violent “good deaths” in the sagas, however, is that of the old matriarch Unnr Deep-Thinking. After the death of her husband and son, she gathers her clan and people together and leads them from Scotland to Ireland. Choosing her grandson Óláfr as her successor in her old age, Unnr arranges a great feast at which she announces his inheritance.

After that Unnr stood up and said that she would go to that chamber, where she was wont to sleep; she bade, that everyone have the chambers which might be most pleasing to them, although the chambers must be divided among all the folk. Folk say thus, that Unnr had been both high-spirited and strong; she went swiftly out of the hall, and words were found among the folk, that she was a worthy woman. Folk drank that evening until they thought it time to go to sleep. But the day after Óláfr feilan went to the sleeping-chamber of Unnr his kinswoman, and when he came to the chamber, Unnr was sitting up on the pillow; she had died there. After that Óláfr went out into the hall to tell the tidings; folk thought a great deal of it, how Unnr had held her worth until her dying day. Now all was drunken together: Óláfr's wedding and Unnr's arvel.
(*Laxdæla saga*, pp. 12-13)

Although the chances of having the opportunity to deal with one's own death in old age,

both among the Norse and among the other tribal peoples mentioned, was relatively rare, it still happened often enough that there was a clear societal sense of an appropriate response: disposing of one's goods as one wished them to be disposed of, and leaving a memory fitting to the life one had lived. In contrast, even the best of circumstances for a death in Western society--at least, when death occurs outside the context of the most ritual-conscious religions (such as the highly conservative elements of Catholicism)--usually can be met only by an improvised response. An example of such a response is given by Haim Hazan:

... one of the members of a day centre for Jewish elderly people ... was determined to celebrate his ninety-fifth birthday. He was well aware that his death was imminent, and, although his doctors maintained that his hours were numbered he insisted on going ahead with the celebration, which he attended connected to an oxygen tank. During the party, he announced that he was donating a sum of money so that the other members of the day centre could continue celebrating his birthday until he reached the age of one hundred. He did not mention his impending death. When he had finished his speech he was taken to a side room, where he died. This event had an enormous impact on everyone present.

Clearly the man wished to think in terms of time after his biological death, and he succeeded in fulfilling his desire in the most practical sense by guaranteeing the continued celebration of his birthday long after his physical departure.

(Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 72-73)

Here, the celebration of the birthday replaces the distribution of money and/or goods to the heirs; it also fulfils something of the same purpose as the repetition of the Kaddish (the Jewish prayer recited after the death of a loved one, said twice a day for the first eleven months afterwards and then on all holy days) in the man's native tradition. The same motivation is present as in the last arrangements of Unnr and Egill, or of the elderly of the other traditional peoples mentioned above: to finish off life by setting in motion a final effect upon the living, which will continue after biological death. However, Hazan's example represents a rarity--an idiosyncratic response to impending death, rather than one established and supported by societal norms.

Sickness and the unusual condition of old age aside, the Norse were chiefly faced with the prospects of death by accident--drowning was particularly common in Iceland, for obvious reasons--and, most commonly of all, death related to what might be called the occupational hazards of gender: violence for men, childbirth for women. It is unfortunate that we have little except archaeological evidence describing this latter cause of death. Perhaps this may be partially due to the generally masculine perspectives of the sagas: we know a great deal about the last words of men killed in fight, about how they conducted themselves and were expected to conduct themselves when dying of their wounds, but we have only a few hints regarding women who died of childbirth, such as the account in *Völsunga saga* of how the mother of the hero Völsungr had difficulty getting pregnant, then bore the child in her womb for an unlikely six years, eventually feeling the approach of her death and bidding that the child be cut out. Her death appears to be a necessary element in the typically unusual birth of a hero. However, this motif is seldom repeated. The sagas are also chary of adding extraneous detail, and it may be that since a child without a mother to care for it was likely to die or be set out unless a foster-mother could be found, the deaths of women and their newborns were generally of little interest in regards to overall plot lines. In this regards, it may be noted that a large percentage--possibly the majority--of the dominant women in the sagas are mothers of adult sons and hence past the dangers of childbearing.

The absence of oral/written materials regarding death by childbirth when compared to those on the heroism of facing death in battle may also reflect the lesser need of cultural reinforcement for women to bear children in the normal pattern of life, as opposed to the cultural encouragement required for men to deliberately choose to risk their lives in battle.

Here, with this deliberate assumption of risk and acceptance of the possibility of death, we see a setup strongly leading to the glorification of the “good death”, defined in the Viking Age as the ability to meet one’s end knowingly and without fear, as expressed by Sigurðr (Siegfried) to the ex- Valkyrie Sigdrífa (Brünnhilde):

I shall not flee though I know myself death-doomed,
I was never born with cowardice.
(*Sigrdrífumál* 21).

The ideal of the “good death”, and the distinction between that and a “bad death” appears nowhere so poignantly as in *Völsunga saga*’s account of the death of Högni (Hagen). After the capture of Högni and Gunnarr (Günther) by Atli (Attila), Atli tries to force Gunnarr to give up the secret of where the Rhine’s treasure is hidden. Gunnarr replies that he will not answer until he holds his brother’s heart in his hands, and Atli orders that Högni’s heart be cut out.

Högni said: “Do as you like. Gladly will I await whatever you wish to do, and that shall be seen, that my heart is never timid, and I have proven hard trials before” . . . Then a rede-giver of Attila the king spoke, “I see better counsel. Let us rather take the thrall Hjalli, and spare Högni” . . . The thrall heard and cried out loudly and ran away, wherever he might expect shelter. He said that he had drawn an evil lot from their strife, and himself to pay for it. He said that it was an ill day, when he should die and lose his good life and his pig-keeping. They grabbed him and drew their knives towards him. He cried out loudly before he felt the edge. Then Högni spoke, as strong men do when they come in mortal danger, so that he interceded for the life of the thrall, and said that he did not wish to hear the shrieking, and that it was easier for himself to play out that game . . . (Eventually the heart of the thrall is cut out anyway, but Gunnarr recognises by its cowardly quivering that it is not the heart of his brother) . . . Now, following the incitements of King Attila, they went to Högni and cut out his heart. And his strength was so great, that he laughed while he suffered this torment. (*Völsunga saga*, pp. 99-100).

Although legendary rather than historical, this tale stood as a paradigm of proper behaviour in the face of suffering and death: though Högni and Hjalli are killed in the same manner, Hjalli’s death is shameful and, due to the poor figure he cuts, distressing to everyone around him, but Högni’s death stands as the heroic crown to an heroic life. The “good death”, whether taking place in old age (rarely) or long before the end of the potential natural lifespan (usually), was not only seen as a cultural ideal, but as something within the control of the individual--for no matter how hideous the means of dying, it was the personal response to death which made all the difference.

As a natural development of the “good death”, the folk of the Viking Age--or at least the saga characters who expressed the ideology of Scandinavian culture--also seem to have cultivated what Christian writers of a later date called the *Ars moriendi*: the art of dying. There is, of course, a great difference between native Norse and Christian concepts of this art: while the Christian *Ars moriendi* consisted of such things as confession, proper behaviour for family members and priests attending the dying, ways of recognising and meeting deathbed temptations; the Norse art of dying was characterized chiefly by a show of hardiness, staunch acceptance of facts, and, ideally, a certain grim humour and skill with words, as seen by Thórgrímr in *Brennu-Njáls saga*: a member of a band of men who have come to slay the noted hero (and currently outlawed) Gunnarr of Hliðarend, Thórgrímr goes to see if Gunnarr is in his house. As he returns to the band, another man asks if Gunnarr is in, whereupon Thórgrímr replies, “‘You may know that, but I know this: that his thrusting-spear was at home.’ After this he fell down dead.” Grim wit seems to have been the most effective means of dealing with the reality of one’s own death (Interestingly, this phenomenon has recently made a resurgence with the “AIDS humour” prevalent in the community of those dying of AIDS and their caregivers: though the humour may seem sick and unfeeling to outsiders, it provides a necessary outlet for those who must daily deal with

their own deaths and those of their friends). As observed by Celtic Wiccan Elder and gay psychotherapist Jim Lovette,

I combine (the deathbed scene and AIDS humour) because I think they are so closely related. The primary factor that sets up deathbed scenes is the relationship to both the families of origin and of creation. If the relationships are generally positive and supportive, the dying person can generally be expected to have more freedom to uniquely grieve. This support can translate into permission for expressions ranging from social gatherings or adventures to small or large Hollywood-esque depictions, ribald/risque wit, bawdy singing, dancing, drag/costumes, etc., ad infinitum, with the dying person as either the central organizing person or focus. Generally, individuals are coping with such pervasive and profound financial and psychological stresses that their friends provide entertainment or re-creation for their diversion, resulting in explicitly stronger interpersonal bonds during a time when those bonds are most challenged. Humor generally is used by all humans during periods of intense psychological stress as a primary, compensating means of sanity-maintenance. It relieves stress and allows for the recognition of loss in ways unique to the culturally- and relationally-specific expressions of humor. This permits individuals to move into acknowledgement of the profundity of change facing them and the dying individual.

(Jim Lovette, e-mail interview, Nov. 4, 1995).

Nevertheless, both the Norse and christian ideals are alike in elevating the “good death” to its role as the final expression of a good life. One may compare the ideal of the christian literature (as summarized by Robert Kastenbaum)--“There is an art to dying as well as to living. The two, in fact, are intimately related. One should live each day as though it might be the last. Furthermore, this should not lead to immoderate or self-indulgent behaviour: the sure prospect of death must surely inspire us to the highest plateau of moral rectitude. And in life’s final scene one will face such fear, such agony, and such temptation that it will require all the purity, strength, and faith one can bring to the crisis” -- with two of the high literary examples of the art of dying in the Old Norse corpus. The first, *Hjálmar’s Death-Song*, is a poem supposed to have been spoken by the hero Hjálmar, a friend of the romantic saga-figure Arrow-Oddr, as he lay dying. His reference to “the last eagle I feed” turns around the poetic convention of referring to the slaying of foes as feeding the eagle: having fed the birds of prey on the corpses of others, he is now ready to feed them on his own flesh.

Sixteen wounds have I, slit is my byrnie,
all is dark before my eyes, I cannot see to tread.
Angantýr’s blade has struck against my heart,
the keen weapon, hardened with poison . . .
A raven flies from eastward, from the high gallows-tree,
after him flies the eagle.
This will be the last eagle I feed,
thus he shall drink my blood.

The second, *Krákumál*, is the poem supposedly spoken by Ragnar Loðbrók (a semi-historical character, involved in the sack of Paris, but unlikely to have done most of the fantastic things mentioned in his saga--on which the movie *The Vikings* was very loosely based) from a pit of poisonous serpents where he had been cast by the English king Ælle. After a lengthy (27 stanzas--one may only observe that the venom of the European adder is not particularly virulent) recounting of his life and deeds, beginning each stanza with the line, “We hewed with blades”, Ragnar at last concludes with the triumphant account of his death:

We hewed with blades.
The warrior has carried out
fifty-one host-battles.

Least of all guessed I,
 that it should befall me
 (who, young, took blade to redden it)
 that another king should overcome me.
 The gods must invite me,
 One should not complain of dying.

I am joyous at ending,
 the goddesses bid me home,
 who, from Herjan's hall,
 Óðinn has sent to me;
 gladly shall I, in high-seat,
 drink of ale with Æsir:
 all hope of life is gone,
 laughing shall I die.

Through the legendary mouth of Ragnar, we are furnished with the last necessary piece for making one's own death a "good death": the belief in an afterlife worthy of dying well for. The Norse view of a "good death" in battle as one way into a good afterlife can, here, be contrasted starkly to the Iroquois view: "Iroquois beliefs as recorded in later eras made death in battle a frightful prospect, though one that must be faced bravely if necessary. The slain, like all who perished violently, were excluded from the villages of the dead, doomed to spend a roving eternity seeking vengeance." Much of the difference between the two may be attributed to the fact that the chief purpose of Iroquois warfare was to win captives and thus replenish the tribe: the loss of men in battle lessened the tribe's chance of survival. Among the Norse, on the other hand, a man's readiness to die in battle increased the survival chances of his family and clan, since the consequence of losing a fight was not adoption into another tribe, but death or, worse, the dishonour to self and kin of being enslaved. Death by violence was likely, could well be necessary, and had to be faced regularly both as a prospective end for oneself and a frequently occurring end for friends and family members. It was, therefore, necessary for those who faced it to feel that dying bravely and well was pleasing to gods, clan, and society, and a gateway to a good world beyond.

The concept of dying in battle as the passage to a better afterlife is not, of course, unique to Scandinavian belief. It has been used, to immediate military and political effect, by two of the largest religions in the world today: Islam and Christianity. The latter has largely abandoned the promise of entrance into Heaven for those who die in holy wars; regarding the former, however, the belief is still of immediate impact.

The *jihad*, or holy war, has been part of Islamic belief since the foundation of the religion; the description of the Paradise waiting for the fallen exists already in the Koran: "Let those who would exchange the life of this world for the hereafter, fight for the cause of God; whoever fights for the cause of God, whether he dies or triumphs, We shall richly reward him . . . The believers who stay at home--apart from those who suffer a great impediment--are not the equals of those who fight for the cause of God with their goods and their persons. God has given those that fight with their goods and their persons a higher rank than those who stay at home. God has promised all a good reward; but far richer is the recompense of those who fight for him."

The reception of the slain man is pleasant: "feasting on fruit, and honoured in the gardens of delight. Reclining face to face upon soft couches, they shall be served with a goblet filled at a gushing fountain, white, and delicious to those who drink it. It will neither dull their senses nor befuddle them. They shall sit with bashful, dark-eyed virgins, as chaste as the sheltered eggs of ostriches" --the cool green land desired by desert-dwellers; an heightened idealization of pleasures to which only the very richest could have aspired in life.

To those who truly believe, whether in the Dark Ages or now, there is no hope better than to die in such a holy war, as an episode from Muhammad's own life makes clear:

‘By him who holds Muhammad’s soul in his hands,’ (Muhammad) said, ‘not one who fights this day, if he has borne himself with steadfast courage, if he has gone forward and not back, shall meet his death without Allah’s bringing him to paradise!’ Umayr ibn al-Humàm, who was eating a handful of dates, heard this and shouted out: ‘Fine! Fine! Have I only to get myself killed by these men to enter into paradise?’ He threw away his dates and, grasping his sword, plunged into the thick of the battle and soon was killed.

This belief made it easier for Islamic leaders to raise military forces from the end of the seventh century, when Muhammad urged his soldiers on with not only the hope of the afterlife awaiting, but with the guarantee that those who took part in battle should reap higher rewards than those who did not, through the modern age, where the possibility of *jihad* is a serious potential weapon of legitimate Islam and a terrifying incitement to the lunatic fringes of that religion.

For official christianity, the evolution towards not only sanctioning, but actively blessing and encouraging, battle was a much longer and more troublesome one. The Dark Ages practice of conversion by the sword was supported by the Church: Charlemagne’s genocidal war against the Saxons (including the mass slaughter of 4,500 Saxon prisoners in one day) was generally approved, since one of his official purposes was to destroy their native religious culture by forcibly baptizing those who could be baptized (in some instances, after clubbing them on the head to prevent resistance) and killing the rest. The Mainz pontifical and Ottonian *Ordo* (ca. 960) gave the king/emperor the explicit duty of suppressing non-christian nations and supporting missions, by means of force if necessary.

However, the encouragement of violent conversion was a very different thing from granting blanket indulgences to all those who participated in the process of slaughtering traditional religionists or the supporters of heterodoxical views. The former was cloaked with the shamefaced admission that the use of violence to spread christianity was, at best, a necessary evil; the latter made it a positive good. The concept of promising Heaven, or at least general absolution, to those who fought against the enemies of christendom, first seems to have come up in the ninth century, with the proclamations of Pope Leo IV in 853 and Pope John VIII in 878. Thereafter, however, nothing similar was proposed until the eleventh century, when the Church’s involvement with military operations to protect its territory increased under Gregory VII, who is often given credit for making the “militia Christi” a physical reality of warfare. Nevertheless, the First Crusade was met with mixed feelings: a religion with a nominally non-violent ideology was suddenly placed in a situation where an active call to militarization seemed to be to its best advantage. The solution, for the time being, was to emphasize the concept of the crusader as a pilgrim (albeit a specialized and martial sort), with all the relevant duties and rights.

It was not, however, until the time of the Second Crusade that the uneasy marriage of Christ and Mars was finally reconciled in a comfortable fashion--by the “New Knighthood” of Bernard de Clairveaux, the orders of military monks such as the Templars, Hospitallers, and Teutonic Knights who, in theory, united all the spiritual advantage of reclusive monastic orders with the bravery, strength, activity, and honour of secular chivalry. The combination of a new warrior-religious ideology with the granting of indulgences to those killed on Crusade and major temporal privileges offered to all participants provided a strong social impetus for major political leaders to attempt the reclamation of the Holy Land, probably assisting to a great degree in the prolongation of one of the most costly and destructive phenomena of the Middle Ages.

In modern christianity, although mainstream churches no longer offer the promise of Heaven to those who die in holy wars--and are turning away from the encouragement of “righteous violence”--the belief is finding a disturbing new upsurge in the radical right-wing fringe. Such activities as violence against family planning clinics and doctors who perform abortions--for instance, the Dec. 1984 bombings of a clinic in Pensacola, Florida by two couples who called themselves “knights” --are strongly rooted in the background of a culture which has included a direct linkage between the practice and promotion of christianity and the use of violence since the age of the Crusades. As observed by H.E.J. Cowdrey,

As we look back over nine hundred years to the age of Gregory VII and Urban II, we cannot fail to recognise it as one of the most powerfully formative periods in our common culture, outlook, and institutions. It saw the reversal of a thousand years of Christian tradition, when the Gregorian papacy accepted warfare without reservation as a meritorious activity, and the profession of arms as a Christian vocation so long as it was directed towards the extirpation of what is alien to Christianity both inside and outside Christian society . . . The Crusade itself, as a kind of war aimed at propagating one set of ideas and habits of life, the Christian, as against another set, the Muslim, has exercised an especial influence on this century. Did not Eisenhower describe his part in the Second World War in terms of a "Crusade in Europe"?

("The Genesis of the Crusades". *The Holy War*. Thomas Patrick Murphy, ed. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1976, 9-32, p. 27)

On the surface, the Norse belief that death in battle would be rewarded by a good afterlife (whether in Valhalla, Freyja's hall, or elsewhere) seems very similar to both the Islamic and christian models, particularly the former. Lamm and Nýlen compare the Islamic image of beautiful women serving fine drink to the warriors fallen in battle to the Norse descriptions of Valhalla, suggesting that perhaps some influence could have occurred via the Viking roads to the East, on which the Norse frequently came into contact with followers of Islam.

A closer examination of the uses and reasons for the beliefs, however, makes the distinction between them clear. For monotheists with a strict dogma, of course, the use of holy war and the promise of heaven to its slain is--whatever religious validity it may have--chiefly an effective political tool: it arouses the sentiments of a populace that might otherwise be less enthusiastic, and whips up fighting frenzy to the point of fanaticism. It also serves as an excuse in case God's side loses, since it is just as blessed, or even more so, to die a martyr as it is to conquer in God's name: "Never think that those who were slain in the cause of God are dead. They are alive, and well provided for by their Lord". For the early Scandinavians, the former concept would have been unimaginable: to carry out a holy war, whatever its actual political or economic motives, requires an ideology which believes that a single means of worship and/or conduct is good, and that those who do not conform to it are evil. The latter--the problem of how to reconcile death in battle with the continued favour of the gods--will be discussed later in some detail; for now it is sufficient to observe that among the Norse, the matter was not a question of which side was in the right, but of the individual's relationship with the deities, particularly Wotan. In this context, it is worth noting that, while the Islamic imagery of Paradise may have reinforced the Norse imagery of the valkyries serving drink in Valhöll to some degree, the cultural expectation that a guest would be honoured by receiving drink from the hands of the hall's noble women was fundamental to Germanic society, as demonstrated in *Beowulf* as well as the numerous Norse examples.

Because of the political power of holy war in a monotheistic society, both the Islamic and christian promises of Paradise to those who die fighting are usually restricted to specific battles sanctioned by chief religious figures--or, at the very least, the "holy causes" of fringe groups. In contrast, no similar value judgements seem to have been made by the Norse: neither the war's purpose nor the ideologies of the combatants affected the value of the individual "good death" in battle. Right and wrong in a social sense were matters to be decided in law-courts or, in extremes, by ritual single combat: good was largely what benefited the community, not an abstract concept to be defended against foreign ideas by force. The difference could not be greater between the portrait painted in the *Chanson du Roland*, of Roland and Oliver sending a host of treacherous Arabic foemen to Hell, and Haraldr Hairfair leaving his slain foemen "destined for the one-eyed dweller in Frigg's embrace" (*Hrafnsmál* 12), that is, given to the god who may well be Haraldr's own patron. In a christian or Islamic world, if bloody slaughter were to take place, one side must by definition be offensive not only to the other, but to God. In a Heathen world, both sides might very well be pleasing to the gods, and favour was not necessarily determined by victory: Loki, quite likely expressing the opinions of many humans during the Viking Age,

says to Óðinn, “You could never deal out battle among men; often you gave victory to the worse men, to whom you should not have given it” (Lokasenna 22). Indeed, the participants on both sides were assumed to have the same general destination: the only question was which of them Wotan would choose to call to himself first--or if it would be simultaneous, as in *Eiríksmál*, where Eiríkr Blood-Axe boasts that he is followed by five kings (whom he has slain); he himself is the sixth.

The Norse were, of course, by no means above using religious beliefs--particularly beliefs concerning the afterlife--for political purposes, as is shown in the following poems *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*. The chief difference between this usage and that of Islam and christianity is that, whereas the promise of Paradise in monotheistic religion (and the corresponding reassurance of fighting for God’s cause) was used to stir up fighters, the Norse poems were written after the deaths of the chief participants for, among other things, the purpose of making a political statement relevant to the dead man’s successors, in a manner comparable to the role of the political dead in Northern Ireland as described by Prior: “the dead can be, and are, also used for purposes of political legitimation. They can be used either to legitimise a political movement, or to defend a particular strategy.” Such usage is part and parcel of a heritage-based society, of which the dead are not the weakest, but the most powerful elements; and among the dead, of course, the strongest are those ritually enthroned in the hall of heroes--in Valhalla.

To understand the memorial poems *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* fully, it is necessary to look at the story behind them. At this time, Norway was in a state of considerable tumult. Two of the chief players--and causes of the chaos--were the notorious King Eiríkr Blood-Axe and his wife, Queen Gunnhildr, who was said to be a practitioner of the generally malicious form of mind-altering magic known as *seiðr*. Eiríkr and Gunnhildr had become enemies of Egill Skalla-Grímsson--who was equally famed for his skills at fighting, poetry, and runic magic--by depriving him of a portion of his inherited land. In revenge, Egill set up a nothing pole (“pole of shame”, in this case, a stave with a horse’s head on top and runes carved on it), turning it against the spirits of the land so that they would have no rest until they had driven Eiríkr and Gunnhildr out of Norway. This eventually came to pass; the royal couple, with their several sons, sought sanctuary in the city of York.

Norway, meanwhile, was taken over by Eiríkr’s younger brother, Hákon the Good. Hákon had been a fosterling (or hostage) in England during his youth and temporarily converted to christianity. This was not met well upon his return, when he refused to do the ruler’s duty of taking part in the seasonal feasts of worship which assured the blessing of the gods. For a short period of time, his counsellor Sigurðr covered for him with the other great men of Norway (interpreting the king’s refusal to drink to Óðinn as a toast to Thórr, and the concurrent sign of the cross made over the horn as the sign of Thórr’s Hammer), and eventually managed to re-integrate the king with his society, whereafter Hákon made the blessings his position demanded and protected the holy shrines. His reign was generally peaceable and well thought-of; however, he might have paid more heed to the words of the ex- Valkyrie Sigrdrífa: “This is my tenth rede, that you never trust those dropped by an outlaw . . . a wolf is in the young son, though he seems gladdened by gold.” (*Sigrdrífumál* 35) The sons of Hákon’s wolfish older brother would return, and would eventually be Hákon’s death.

The first of the poems, *Eiríksmál*--if the later saga description of its writing is correct--was commissioned by Queen Gunnhildr from an anonymous skald, about 950 C.E. It was composed as a memorial at the time when Eiríkr’s sons were trying to win Norway back from their uncle Hákon the Good. It specifically addresses the question of, “If Eiríkr were the best leader, favoured by the gods, why did he lose the battle?” thereby providing Eiríkr’s sons with an assurance of legitimacy. It also may have been intended to soothe the anxieties of the Norwegian populace in several respects, including their worries about the encroachment of christianity. The Norwegian people still held largely to their native religion at this time, and Eiríkr was not popular among them. He had been a nominal convert to christianity; Turville-Petre comments that, “(Eiríkr) was described by a contemporary poet as the defiler of holy places, and it is plain that he was not a devout pagan, and may thus have earned the enmity of conservative landowners of Norway”.

In the poem, Eiríkr’s death is specifically not a consequence of the gods turning against

him, but rather of Óðinn's need for him to stand beside the heroes of legend; here the god justifies himself in an otherwise uncharacteristic fashion. It is, perhaps, also significant that this poem is the one in which Valhalla is most like an earthly hall, complete with strewn benches, washed beer-cups, and the most costly of imported drinks, wine, to be borne to the honoured guest. All of these things raise the standing of Eiríkr as a leader and emphasize his legitimacy as a ruler, just as (if Ellmers' interpretation of the Gotlandic picture stones is correct) Wotan's offer of his own horse for the dead man to ride into Valhalla verifies the high standing of the man thus memorialized.

(Óðinn speaks)

1. "What manner of dream is this?
I dreamed I rose before dawn
to ready Valhöll
for fallen warriors:
wakened the einherjar
bade rise up
to strew the benches
to clean the beer-cups,
valkyries to bear wine,
as if a prince came.
2. "From the world I expect
to come to me
certain great men:
that gladdens my heart.
3. "What resounds there, Bragi,
As if a thousand hurried
or a huge host?"

(Bragi)

"The benches all creak,
as Baldr must be coming
again to Óðinn's hall."

(Óðinn)

4. "Foolish words
wise Bragi should not speak,
for you know something well:
they clash before Eiríkr,
who shall come in here,
the battle-boar in Óðinn's hall.
5. "Sigmundr and Sinfjötli,
rise up quickly,
and go to meet the ruler.
If you see Eiríkr
bid him come in,
it is him for whom I now wait."

(Bragi)

6. "Why do you await Eiríkr
rather than others?"

(Óðinn)

"For he has reddened his blade
in many lands,

and borne a bloody sword.”

(*Bragi*)

7. “Why did you take victory from him,
if you thought him to be brave?”

(*Óðinn*)

“Because of that which cannot be known:
the gray Wolf gapes ever
at the gods’ dwellings.”

(*Sigmundr*)

8. “Hail now, Eiríkr,
you shall be welcome here
and, wise one, walk into the hall.
This shall I ask:
which battle-boars
follow you from the edge-thunder?”

(*Eiríkr*)

9. “There are five kings -
I ken all their names -
I myself am the sixth.”

Hákonarmál followed shortly after *Eiríksmál* (961 C.E.) and was written by Eyvindr Skáldaspillir (usually translated as Eyvindr the Plagiarist, though the literal meaning “destroyer of skalds” may imply that his poetry was so good as to give no other skald a chance). The most apparent characteristic of the poem is the author’s strong personal feeling: Eyvindr was the court poet of Hákon the Good, and deeply loved his king. However, there is a strong political element to *Hákonarmál* as well. It is literally a sequel to *Eiríksmál*: Hákon died fighting the sons of Eiríkr. Having no living heirs of his beloved lord to support, Eyvindr plays directly off *Eiríksmál*, possibly in order to convince Eiríkr’s sons of the virtue of Hákon’s policies, especially in regards to religion: *Hákonarmál* shows Hákon as doubtful of his place, but emphasizes that his dealings with the holy shrines are what has won him his glory. Eyvindr was right to be suspicious of Eiríkr’s sons, who were christians and went out of their way to destroy Norwegian places of worship--leading, apparently, to prompt retaliation from the gods: as recorded in a fragment of Eyvindr’s, under their rule, it snowed in the middle of the summer and the Norwegians had to keep their cattle inside during the summer time as the Lapps did.

1. Gauta-Týr
sent Göndul and Skögun
to choose among kings,
who, of Yngvi’s clan,
should fare with Óðinn
and be in Valhöll.
2. Björn’s brother was found
faring in byrnie
the fine king
coming under battle-banners,
the staves of enmity sank,
and the shafts shook,
thus was the battle begun.
3. The single-handed jarls’ bane
urged on the Háleygjar

as the Holmrygjar,
 he fared to battle;
 well trusted the noble one
 in Norwegians' good hopes,
 terrifier of the Eydanes,
 stood under brass helmet.

4. The ruler of men
 cast battle-clothes
 byrnies swiftly on the field,
 before he began to fight:
 to play with the host,
 he should ward his land,
 the glad-souled king
 stood under gold helmet.
5. So sword bit then
 --in the ruler's hand -
 the clothing of Óðinn (armour),
 as if brandished through water;
 shafts broke apart,
 shields were sundered,
 swords rang out
 on the skulls of men.
6. Targes and skulls
 were trodden beneath
 the hard hilt-feet
 of Týr-of-rings (Hákon) and Norsemen;
 there was battle on the isle,
 the king reddened
 the shining shield-wall
 in blood of men.
7. Wound-fires (swords) burned
 in bloody hurts,
 the long-beards (swords) turned
 against lives of men;
 the wound-drops swarmed
 down the point of swords
 flood-of-shafts (blood) fell
 on Stord's strand.
8. Skögun's storms played,
 blended together
 beneath reddened shield-heaven,
 against cloud-of-rims;
 the blood-waves roared
 in Óðinn's weather,
 many men sank,
 before the blade's flood.
9. The day-bright leader sat there
 with drawn sword
 with shattered shield
 and sundered byrnie,
 out of heart was the ruler, waiting

to fare to Valhöll.

10. Göndul spoke thus,
striking down her spearshaft:
“The following of the gods grows now,
for the gods have bidden Hákon
home with a mighty host.”

11. The ruler heard
what the valkyrie said,
well-known, from horse’s back:
he held himself bravely
sat with his helm on
and held his shield before him.

12. “Why did you rule the battle
thus, Spear- Skögul?
Did we not deserve better from the gods?”
“We ruled it thus:
that you held the field
and your foes fled.”

13. “We shall ride,”
said the mighty Skögul,
“to the green worlds of gods,
to say to Óðinn
that now the king shall come
to see him himself.”

14. “Hermóðr and Bragi,”
said Hroptatýr,
“go to meet the ruler,
for that king
whom I think to be a hero
fares hither to the hall.”

15. The leader spoke thus -
he was come from battle,
and stood all spattered with blood:
“Greatly ill-willing
I think Óðinn to be,
and fearful am I of his thoughts.”

16. “You shall have all
the einherjar’s friendship,
receive you ale from the gods!
Foe of jarls,
you have eight brothers
here within, “ said Bragi.

17. “All our gear,”
said the good king,
“we shall keep ourselves;
helm and byrnie
shall be warded well,
it is good to have gear at hand.”

18. Because that is known
 how the king had
 well warded the holy steads,
 Hákon was hailed
 and bidden welcome
 by ruling might and gods.
19. In a good day
 was the ruler born,
 who had such a soul;
 his age must ever
 be known as good.
20. Unbound
 through the worlds of men
 the Wolf Fenrir shall fare,
 before a king as good,
 comes to take his empty place.

Both in their political function and their personal expression of feeling, the two “Valhöll” memorial poems show the development of a certain form of traditional belief to its highest point: the belief that a person who was sufficiently powerful or worthy in life becomes, in death, not only a worthy companion of the gods, but a being of power in his or her own right. As Jan de Vries has observed, it is clear that from the Stone Age onward, death was seen as intensifying the characteristics of the dead. A murderer or evil sorcerer might become a greater danger to the community in death than in life; but a chieftain, a leader, protector, and/or advisor of the clan, would equally become a greater help to the community as a local or tribal protective spirit.

This belief is not, of course, unique to the Germanic peoples. Cultures practicing “ancestor-worship” include, for instance, not only some Native American and African tribes, but also modern Japan: as an article in the *Herald Tribune* recently observed, “While Japan is one of the most technologically sophisticated countries in the world, many people worship their ancestors as divinities and believe that each big tree or rock is also home to a god”. The belief in the power and activity of the dead is, however, one of the oldest--perhaps the oldest continuous element in Scandinavian religion--and is vital in any discussion of what death and different forms of honour for the dead meant.

As mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, the relationship between the dead and the living in Scandinavia was not one of separation, but one of community--of the family extended to take in all its generations, from the first to the last. It was quite common for the burial place of the first homesteader to stand near to the house on his land, where he continued to receive offerings placed there by his family members and to be seen as the embodiment and guardian of the family “luck”. Both shards of the belief and the cultic practice of setting out food on special nights, such as Yule, kept alive even into the twentieth century: although the dead ancestor had dwindled into a household sprite--the red-capped Swedish tomte or Danish nisse, similar to the Scottish brownie--he was not forgotten.

As well as being the root of a family’s luck, and the embodiment of its connection with the Otherworld, the mound or ceremonial burial place was also of tremendous importance to the whole community, especially when it was the mound of a leader or other person greatly respected by his or her fellows. From the Stone Age onward, burial edifices were chief sites of religious gatherings. This sense of the leader’s burial mound as a community holy place strengthened in the North, rather than weakening: some of the greatest mounds were raised during the Migration and Vendel Ages, in the major centres of both religious and political power (most notably, the three great mounds at Old Uppsala, but also, for instance, those at Lejre and Sutton Hoo). The perception of death and the active dead as central, both spiritually and physically, to the community was precisely the opposite of modern perception and practice: Prior, for instance, observes the emphasis on segregating

the dead from the living with, at the very least, high walls and forbidding gates and, when possible, the building of cemeteries outside, rather than inside, of the city. The concept of holding regular meetings in a burial ground would seem, to say the least, macabre and morbid to most Westerners; but to the native people of the North, there was no more logical place to perform religious rites, hold important speech, and receive good counsel than that place on the border between themselves and the mighty and powerful ones who had gone before them.

There are several explicit references to a king in the mound continuing to work on behalf of his people--doing the same job for the land as a whole that the *tomte* or *nisse* does for the farmstead. *Flateyjarbók* mentions how, after the burial of Óláfr at Geirstaðr, “Then that rede was taken, that they made blessings to King Óláfr for good harvest and called him the Elf of Geirstaðr.” *Hálfðanar saga ins svarta* mentions that, since Hálfðan’s reign had been so prosperous and his folk placed so much trust in him that his body had to be divided up and laid in howes at Hringaríki, Raumaríki, Vestfold, and Heiðmörk. Snorri gives a similar, if rather garbled, description of the secret burial of Freyr (here euhemerized from a god into a Swedish king), who received “tax money” poured into his mound for a long time after his death.

The burial mound--especially that of the clan-father --in fact, seems to have been the chief focal point of a king’s authority: and that authority was gained specifically by sitting upon the mound, as seen by the proverb, “to sit on a hove (burial mound) like a king” and by the various saga-instances in which the action of sitting on the mound is directly connected with the claiming of succession. This deed certainly functioned on one level as a statement of identity; but more, it seems to have had a specific religious function--the function of allowing the ruler to speak with the wisdom of his dead ancestor within the mound when he gives out his judgements from its height. As cultic leader and holder of sacrificial feasts for his community, the ruler also had a particular relationship with the realms of the dead. In his person, he linked the gods, the dead, and the living, and was responsible for maintaining good relationships between them: and the ancestral mound seems to have been one of the chief focal points for this intersection of the worlds. Even now, although the rulers of Sweden have long since forsaken Old Uppsala and a christian church stands where the gilded roof of the heathen place of worship once glimmered, it is possible to gaze up at the three great mounds through the branches of the ancient ash-tree that stands beside them, and see--with the sight of the mind, if nothing else--the king standing on the middle mound in his figured helm, staring wide-eyed from his height into the river-mist below and calling out his words into the wind that howls around the holy howes. It takes little more imagination to feel the awe that must have come over the folk listening to him, seeing in him not only the living ruler, but the ghosts of his great forebears speaking through him, all the way back to the god Yngvi-Freyr, father of his line.

As a being of special might, a dead hero or king naturally had a place in the world of the gods as well as the world of humans: and this is the belief that seems to have inspired and informed the receptions of Eiríkr Blood-Axe and Hákon the Good in Valhöll, especially the latter. Hákon is given ale by the gods--that is to say, he is taken up as an honoured guest in the godly community. The idea that his entrance into Valhöll is also his admission to the ranks of the holy powers fits well with the characterization of the *einherjar* in *Grímnismál*: like the *dísir* (family goddesses), they are beings whose favour is important to living men.

The idea of humans being worshipped in their graves or even taken up among the gods is surprisingly common in the North: most notable is the description in Rimbert’s *Vita S. Anskarii* of how, when missionaries first brought the cult of Christ to Birka, the gods came to one of their worshippers, saying that if the folk thought there were too few of them, they would rather raise the late King Eiríkr of Sweden to godly rank than see their people worshipping a strange deity who spoke against them.

From this point of view, Wotan’s hall appears to be taking on a new and special role towards the end of the Viking Age. It is not only the hall of the dead, it is the hall of the especially honoured dead, of the dead who have been taken up among the gods and whose names and deeds will continue to be mighty among the living. Interestingly, it is at this time that the name Valhalla--Hall of the Slain--first appears in skaldic poetry as a name for

Óðinn's hall: the name is inseparable from the receptions of Eiríkr and Hákon. The tenth-century Valhalla is, in fact, the most elaborate Scandinavian development of the age-old worship of dead heroes: it explicitly describes Wotan's choice of the best for his own, and presents the recently slain as the equals of the greatest heroes of legends.

From a political point of view, the purpose of the deification of a dead leader or hero is clear. It offers a sense of continuity: often, perhaps, the direct continuity of the new ruler sitting on the forebear's mound and speaking with the voice of the dead; but also the continuity expressed by subsequent ritual activities (offerings, memorial stones and poems, and so forth) showing the continued importance of the dead person and seeking his or her continued assistance. This feeling of continuity was certainly embodied locally by the barrow in which the hallowed body is entombed--but may also have been expressed over a wider area by the account of a mighty king's reception among the *einherjar* in Valhalla. The expansion of political bodies in Scandinavia from the realms of provincial kings to large nations may, indeed, have contributed to the importance of the belief in Valhalla: the ruler's burial mound might be far away, part of what was perceived as a different land (cf. the desire to have four different howes for Hálfðan inn svarti), but if he were known to be dwelling in Valhalla with gods, heroes, and kings, then his power was as immediate in one land as in another.

The importance of the political element in expressions of afterlife-belief is, however, always based on the presence of a personal element: if the death and subsequent fate of a ruler/hero were not expected to bear a great emotional impact, then the whole process would become irrelevant. The ties between ruler and folk were, however, often close and personal, the death of a good king expected to bring sadness--a mourning which, in itself, served as a tribute to his previous (and continuing) power. In *Eiríksmál*, this aspect is minimized, perhaps because of the circumstances of its composition (a memorial commissioned from a relatively uninvolved professional, the poetic equivalent of a tombstone purchased from a funeral home). In *Hákonarmál*, on the contrary, Eyvindr's personal grief makes Hákon's reception in Valhalla all the more poignant. Eyvindr himself had to hear of the death of his lord--perhaps even see the shattered shield and sundered byrnie, the beloved body of his king all spattered with blood, as the skald describes in his poem. The poet is, perhaps, answering his own sorrow with Skölgul's words to Hákon: he reminds himself that Hákon's death was not in vain, for though the king died, he won the battle. Eyvindr's dark view of Óðinn is equally as personal. Although it is to Óðinn that he owes the art of poetry, since it is Óðinn who won and deals out the mead of inspiration, and although Eyvindr expects the god to receive Hákon well, it is also at Óðinn's choice that the valkyries rode to take Hákon--and "to fare with Óðinn", as Eyvindr makes clear in the first stanza, is to die.

In Eyvindr's poem of mourning, we can feel both that something great has passed from this earth and that Hákon's death was worthwhile. *Hákonarmál* gave--and still gives--its hearers the same sense of ultimately tragic triumph that has made the legend of King Arthur so dear to many through the ages: a mighty struggle was fought here for a good cause, and though the beloved hero fell with weapons in hand, he did not lose altogether; but with his death, an age of glory has passed. The reality of the artist's feeling, of course, does not lessen the political usefulness of the work: rather, it increases it, in that it lets those who experience his telling also experience his grief over his loss, the comfort offered by the hero's reception in the Otherworld, and his forebodings about what will come afterwards. The Arthurian materials have been used for every political purpose possible over the last several centuries--the first widely popular incarnation of the legend, Geoffrey of Monmouth's rendition, being in fact an outright and bold-faced work of propaganda against King Stephen (Geoffrey was a staunch supporter of Queen Matilda in the English civil war at that time). *Hákonarmál*, and indeed the belief in Valhalla as a whole, can be seen as fitting into a similar mould: what one mourner feels for a fallen hero standing at Wotan's gates, many are likely to feel--that heady mixture of sorrow and hope, of grief and relief, offered with the *einherjar*-ale; and the corresponding belief in the worth of Hákon's cause (and apparently, from Eyvindr's account, the protection of the gods and holy places) and the worthlessness of Eiríkr's temple-breaking sons.

To win one's way into Valhalla, then, is to die a "good death", but it is also something

more. It is to be enshrined in holy memory, to have one's reception among the gods forever established by the words of a poet--one who may perhaps have been taken as speaking with a certain spiritual authority. Although poetry was not necessarily magical or religious in its purpose or operation, it was perceived as a divinely inspired skill, a gift specifically given by Óðinn; and something of this respect for the craft itself might perhaps have carried over to the subject matter, when a poet spoke of the way to the Otherworld and the fate of the dead.

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H.R. Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, p. 107; cf. also Lehmann, 'Grabshügel und Königshügel in nordischer Heidenzeit', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 42 (1910), pp. 83-194.

cf. Axel Olrik, 'At sidde på Høj', in *Danske Studier* (n. vol.) (1909), pp. 1-10, for a discussion of the sacral/mantic element of the king's sitting on a high place; also H.R. Ellis for the specific relationship of the choice of the forefather's mound as the place of inspiration with the cult of the dead.

cf. Edith Marold, 'DasWalhallbild in den Eiríksmál und den Hákonarmál', and Fred Robinson, 'The Tomb of Beowulf'.

ch. 26, R. Buchner, ed. *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches* (Darmstadt 1961), pp. 86 ff.

A sound argument against a significantly earlier use of the name is made by Ursula Dronke, who points out the use of the (probably) homonym val-höll--'The Foreign Hall', in *Atlakviða* and suggests that skaldic nomenclature such as 'Valhöll' and 'Hliðskjálf' may not have been adopted until the tenth century, so that a 'secular' use of these words could reasonably (as indeed appears to be the case) have been current in the ninth century. *The Poetic Edda, vol. I. Heroic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 44.

Chapter IV: “What Is Remembered, Lives”

Huginn (Thoughtful) and Muninn (Mindful) fly every day
 over the mighty earth;
 I fear for Huginn that he come not back,
 but more I look for Muninn.
 (*Grímnismál* 20)

What is remembered, lives.
 (Starhawk, from the Spiral Dance memorial liturgy)

Among the Norse, as with many traditional cultures, the past was not seen as something dead and gone, powerless to shape the present--or worse, something that should be cut loose as quickly as possible. Rather, it was alive and growing, the strongest force known to Northern thought: it was the might of Wyrð. The word Wyrð is a past form of a root verb “to become”: it can also be roughly translated as “that which has become”. However, it is usually translated as “fate”; its use is generally in the sense of inescapable destiny. The power of Wyrð was known to all the Germanic peoples--for instance, the Old High German poem *Hildebrandslied* has the hero Hildebrand lamenting “Woe-Wyrð”, which has brought him into a situation where he must fight his own son to the death or betray his sworn oaths, and even the Christian Anglo-Saxon poems recognise Wyrð as a force that cannot be denied. However, the only direct personification of Wyrð that has survived is in the Norse poetry: the three Norns who stand by the Well of Wyrð beneath the World-Tree, where the gods also hold their council.

Urðr (Wyrð) one is called, the second Verðandi -
 they carve on staves-- Skuld hight the third;
 they laid down laws, they choose life
 for the bairns of men, they speak destiny
 (*Völuspá* 20).

Snorri describes them further: every day Urðr, Verðandi, and Skuld take the water from the Well and mix it with mud, sprinkling it over the World-Tree to heal the damage done to it by the four stags that gnaw at its bark and the many wyrms chewing at its roots. Two swans swim in the well; two bees fly above it.

Although the three Northern Norns are sometimes compared to the three Grecian Fates, their characters and means of action are different. Unlike Clothos, Lachesis, and Atropos, each of whom has a different job (one spinning the life-thread, one measuring it, and one cutting it), the Norns work together, carving rune-staves and setting the destinies of humans. The names of the second and third Norns do not, as they are sometimes interpreted to do, indicate “present” and “future”: “Verðandi” means, roughly, “Becoming”, and “Skuld” can be best translated as “Necessity”. They are, clearly, reflections from, or perhaps aspects of Wyrð, the embodiment of the living and ever-growing realm of “that which has become”.

The very way in which the Germanic peoples thought about time is strikingly different from the conceptions of modern thought: they did not perceive a set past, present, and future, but rather thought in a binary manner: there was “that which has become” and “that which is becoming”. This view of time is reflected in the basic structure of the Germanic languages. Even in modern English, there is no true future tense, as there is, for instance, in Latin. To speak of the future, a modal auxiliary must be added: you can say, “I *went* to the store” or “I *go* to the store”, but to indicate that this lies in the future, it has to be something like, “I *shall* go to the store”. These modal auxiliaries can indicate something that is established as necessary to occur, “should”, or that is desired to occur, “will”, but the future

is not a set thing: it is merely a shadow cast by that which has already happened--by Wyrð. Bauschatz compares the Germanic view sharply with Augustine's definition of tripartite past/present/future created time, in which the desire is to rid oneself of the past--to be "born again"--and press forward to a glorious future at the side of Christ, observing the difficulties of reconciling the two.

It is also clear . . . that the Christianization of the pagan Germanic peoples eventually must have created very great conceptual problems for them. The temporal reorientation towards the future, which the Christian conception stresses so strongly, involved a 180-degree wrench away from the past towards a future that did not even exist prior to Christianity . . . Repentance and absolution involve a moment in which the sins of the past are confronted, repented of, and, in effect, washed away. The absolved individual at this moment enters a state of grace; the past disappears, and he is born anew. How the Germanic peoples must have struggled with the idea that the past could ever disappear!

Even after christianization, the Well of Wyrð--the embodiment of the active force of that-which-has-become--remained the source of world-shaping might: after his conversion, the skald Eilífr Goðrúnarson wrote, "Thus has Rome's strong king set his might over the rocky bergs; he is said to sit southwards at Wyrð's well." The names had changed: it would take christianity much longer to root out the basic beliefs and destroy the worldview of the native Scandinavian culture.

With a worldview based, first and foremost, on the prevalence of Wyrð, the intensity of the importance set on memory by the Germanic peoples can be understood: memory is the means by which Wyrð can be known and the shapes of Becoming and Necessity--Verðandi and Skuld--seen in her reflection. Another aspect of the great Well of the Norse is Mímir's Well--the well guarded by the *jötunn* Mímir, whose name stems from a word for "Memory". The great seeress of *Völuspá* says that, "I know, Óðinn, where you hid your eye, in the famous Well of Mímir. Mímir drinks mead every morning from Slain-Father's pledge" (*Völuspá* 28). Snorri tells us that Óðinn gave his eye for a draught from the Well of Mímir, in which all wisdom is kept; but the seeress' words can be read as telling us a little more--that Wotan's hidden eye is not lost or given away, but merely concealed; and that, gazing ever into the Memory-Well, it is one of the chief sources of his might. Later in the seeress' prophecy, she speaks of Óðinn going to seek counsel from Mímir's head (verse 46) as the end of the world nears. Thus, memory is that which explains the moment of becoming and shows what must necessarily follow on: it is the key to the whole of being.

It is, thus, not surprising that, of Wotan's two ravens, it is Muninn--the one which *remembers*--for whose safety the god fears most when he sends them out over the worlds in search of news. To be without, not only personal memory, but the cultural memory of legends and history, or the family memory embodied by the knowledge and worship of the forebears who are still present as guiding spirits or reborn in the descendants who bear their names, would have been an unthinkable horror to the early Scandinavians, just as it still is to tribal peoples such as the Dagara today. Nevertheless, after the many generations following the conversion, those memories were indeed lost, to a greater or lesser degree, by most descendants of Germanic people. The results of that loss are observed by Malidoma Somé from his own tribal perspective--a perspective having a great deal in common with that of the early Germanic peoples: "It is my belief that the present state of restlessness that traps the modern individual has its roots in a dysfunctional relationship with the ancestors. In many non-Western cultures, the ancestors have an intimate and absolutely vital connection with the world of the living. They are always available to guide, to teach, and to nurture . . . Most importantly -- and paradoxically -- they embody the guidelines for successful living -- all that is most valuable about life."

Modern American society carries the Western/christian separation of the past and push towards the future to its farthest extremes. A portion of this attitude has been intrinsic in the ideology of the country since its founding: the desire to leave the Old World behind, to create a new society and press on into new frontiers. A portion of it stems from the short duration of Western settlement in America: in most parts of the U.S.A., for instance, a

building that is an hundred years old is an historical monument. In Europe, such a building is hardly worth noticing.

The most decisive blow to the modern Western sense of any sort of continuity with the past, however, has probably been the pervasive effect of television, which, to a considerable degree, acts to block family communication and to shift the interest of its viewers from the real to the entertaining. In his chilling study of the effects of television among the Dene (a Native Canadian people, who had only recently gotten access to TV), Jerry Mander observes, among other things, the near-total breakdown of the storytelling tradition which had been a vital and universal part of the Dene culture for over five thousand years--the means of transmitting not only the tales themselves, but the sense of community they embodied and the spirituality which they taught. In a visit to a school in the town of Rae, to which television had only come two years previously, "I began by asking the kids about their TV viewing habits . . . every home now had one . . . I asked how many of the children had parents who attempted to control the viewing by setting times or selecting programs, or by turning it off altogether at a certain hour. Only two kids raised their hands. I asked how many of their families were still telling stories at night. There was no response. Television had apparently taken over in Rae, suddenly and totally."

The general American ignorance of even recent American history is appalling: as a recent article in the *International Herald Tribune* observed, according to a study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, "More than half of American high school seniors lack basic knowledge of U.S history . . . And they are unable to use their spotty knowledge to reason, analyze, or back up opinions". The general American ignorance of world history is in even worse condition, going beyond appalling to unbelievable. And the absence of a past, as Malidoma Somé observes, is, effectively, the absence of both a solid identity and a solid spirituality.

The ability to remember, on the other hand, may be considered one of the chief hallmarks of a living, healthy culture. It is no surprise that most traditional cultures have special figures who are designated as the chief keepers of the tribal memory, as, for instance, are the elders of the Dagara and the shamans of the Buryat, Yakut, and Kazak Kirgiz. The Germanic peoples, being a generally settled agricultural culture with a large-scale social system, had both the economic surplus and the motivation to support a class of professional poets who could not only recite old tales, but also regularly compose new poems for the purpose of memorializing their patrons--the latter being apparently the chief duty of the Norse court skald. Although Germanic heroic poems often contain supernatural elements, their primary purpose is as memorials of persons and events: the earliest accounts of Germanic vocal performance, given by Tacitus in his *Germania* and *Annals*, show that German composition was largely narrative and commemorative (the tale of the god Mannus, father of the three great Germanic tribes; the deeds of Hermann the Cheruscan; the recollection of the visit of "Hercules"). In his study *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry*, Opland also cites Jordanes' *History of the Goths* description of the poetry or songs of the Goths as eulogistic, as well as several other sources listing this as the chief orientation of early Germanic oral poetry.

The early songs of memory fulfilled a number of practical purposes. They served to inspire living warriors with the deeds of those who had gone before, thereby preserving cultural continuity by preparing men to live up to the deeds of their forefathers. Tacitus comments that "They further record how Hercules appeared among the Germans, and on the eve of battle, the natives hymn, "Hercules, the first of brave men."" Such songs or poems taught men how to handle themselves in battle, in victory, in defeat, and in death.

The use of memorial songs, epic poems, and legends as cultural paradigms, however, was not limited to the field of battle. As seen so poignantly in *Hákonarmál*, the memorial was not merely about death: it was a summing up of all that was worthy in the dead person's life. Dying after his last battle, Beowulf speaks his own memorial--a paradigm for a good ruler:

"I held this folk, fifty winters . . .
 . . . On earth I abode

the time shaped for me held well what was mine,
 never sought treacherous quarrel nor swore I many
 oaths unrightly. For all this I may --
 though sick with life-wound -- have joy".
 (lines 2731-40).

He then calls for Wiglaf to heap up the treasure he has won in his mortal fight with the dragon, that he may see it before his death, and concludes,

"Tell my battle-friends to raise a howe,
 bright after bale-fire at the sea's headland:
 it shall stand to remind my folk,
 lifted high on Whale's Ness
 so that sea-travellers shall call it afterwards
 Beowulf's Mound when the ships
 over flooding waves drive from afar"
 (lines 2802-08).

The social function of memorials, then, can be seen as going far beyond exhortations to make a good death: they also define what is good in life--what is worthy of remembrance.

At the same time, memorials serve as the specific link between the living and the dead. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the memorial poem for the hero going to Valhalla defines his afterlife. It is not only the description of his reception among the gods, but the vehicle bearing him there--his own ship of words crossing the dark waters of death. The same may well have been true of the Gotlandic picture stones, which appear to depict visually what Eyvindr and the *Eiríksmál* composer depicted in their poetry: death and the pathway to the Otherworld, the greeting at the door of Wotan's hall, and the reception into the company of heroes. The connection between Eyvindr and Hákon the Good did not break with Hákon's death. Rather, the skald whose duty had been to tell the deeds of his king in life was able to continue that duty after Hákon fell--understanding that even though Hákon no longer trod the earth of this world, his being continued, not only undiminished, but made greater by his passage into Valhalla. The act of creating a memorial, particularly one which describes the dead person's continuance into the afterlife, is also the act of preserving the relationship between the dead and the living, even as it eases that relationship onto a different plane of interaction.

The memorial is also the means of preserving the existence of the dead past the memory of the living. Without memorials of some sort, as our forebears knew, names and deeds are quickly forgotten: but a song or tale that endures, or a carven stone, is sure to keep the dead person's name known and living, and the more who hear or see it, the better. For this reason, memorial stones were often placed near roads rather than on burial mounds--and usually raised by the relatives of the deceased as a last act of love, as described by Wotan in *Hávamál* 72:

A son is better though he be born
 after the man is gone;
 seldom memory-stones stand near the road,
 unless kinsman raise them for kin.

At the same time, memorials of those long-gone also served the living, by keeping them aware of what had gone before and constantly reminding them of their roots--of the essence and pattern of their being. This was true both in regards to great heroes of legend/the distant past (historical accuracy is not necessarily to be sought over five hundred years of long-distance transmission of an oral tradition) and in regards to one's own personal family. Folk of good lineage could, indeed, commission poems detailing the most important information about their clan: names, chief deeds, deaths, and places of burial. Such a poem is *Ynglingatal* (Tally of the Ynglings), which recounts the history of a line of early Swedish kings, apparently tracing their eventual migration from the area around Uppsala and Vendel

to Norway, as a few sample verses show:

- (5) That was in early days, when the sword-bearers reddened the earth with their
drighten, and the land-army bore bloodied weapons from Domaldi's body, when
the harvest-greedy Swede-clan should sacrifice the foe of Jóti.
- (6) And I have often asked wise men about Yngvi's corpse, where Dómarr was borne
onto the roaring bane of Hóalfir (funeral pyre); now I know that the sickness-dead
descendant of Fjölfnir was burned beside the Fyris . . .
- (30) Everyone has heard that peaceable men should miss Halfdan, and the protection-
Nauma of the stone-caster (Hel) took the folk-king at Thótinn; and Skereiðr sorrows
over the bones of the byrnie-alf in Skíring-Hall . . .
- (35) And the descendant-branch of Thórr's strength had thrived greatly in Norway; Óláfr
ruled in elder days over Upsa's wide land and Vestmar, together with Grenland's folk,
like to the gods.
- (36) Footwork should bring the friend of men to Fold's (Earth's) rim; the battle-brave army
-king lies in a howe at Geirstaðr.

This poem both supports and supplements the cult of the dead, especially the aspect of the cult which focuses on the burial place: even when the Ynglings no longer dwell beside the river Fyris, in their holy hold at Uppsala, they know where their dead are laid and how they died--and thus they know who they themselves are, and everyone who hears the poem can be duly awed by the mighty weight of Wyrd the descendants of Domaldi and Óláfr (among the many other great kings whose line ultimately led back to the god Freyr, or Yngvi) bear.

On a personal level, the active forging of the memorial link between the living and the dead was one of the most important and constructive means of dealing with grief, particularly in cases where there was no chance to seek either legal or personal redress (death by accident or sickness, for instance). The Germanic peoples were keenly aware of the need for the bereaved to express grief, as seen in the First Lay of Guðrún. After the killing of Sigurðr, Guðrún will not weep: the women of the court know that she must find an expression for her grief, and rehearse their own sorrows at her until one of them advises her to kiss her husband as if he were still alive. She embraces Sigurðr's corpse, and her tears are able to flow at last, after which she is able to regain control of her own life, even physically escaping from the unreasonable demands of her family for a time. Brynhildr, however, will not weep; instead, she kills herself, and her body is burned beside Sigurðr's. The contrast between the two--the sane Guðrún who is able to mourn appropriately and the disturbed Brynhildr whose response to Guðrún's cry of grief (as described in *Völsunga saga*) is wild laughter and for whom the sole conceivable response to Sigurðr's death is suicide--could not be greater, nor could it better express the Northern understanding of the need to mourn.

As observed by Lovette, it is usually the presence of the ritualized memorial which makes it possible to express and direct grief: "Some of the most significant psychological functions of ritualized memorials are the granting of permission to grieve, health maintenance through provision of basic daily activities of daily living that can be neglected or inappropriately attended (eating, dressing, solace through companionship, feeling, etc.), the mental land marking of the significance of the loss by community, affirmation of continuity of life for the bereaved, a public valuing of the deceased's importance, and provision of space for moving in and out of grieving. The global psychological product is the provision of emotional containment for the bereaved and "good enough" incorporation of loss, allowing for the re-emergence of the non-grieving and emotionally stable self" -- as is the case with Guðrún, who, in due course, becomes a notable heroine in her own right (unlike her weak Wagnerian incarnation, Guttrune, whose natural mourning is abbreviated and pushed aside by Brünnhilde's lengthy eulogy of Siegfried and the old world which has just come to an end).

We know that the Norse, as well as recognising the vital importance of expressing grief, were directly aware of the therapeutic quality of memorialization--much as Lovette describes it--from an example in *Egils saga*. Here it must be noted that the saga was written some three hundred years after most of the events in it, serving as a lengthy prose framework to the poems (which themselves are not universally accepted as attributable to the persons traditionally credited for composing them). What is relevant here, however, is the process of grief, anger, and final acceptance of death expressed by the memorial poem itself and the sagaman's perception of both the power of memorializing and the emotional process undergone by the bereaved. Thus, whether the account is taken as fact, as fiction, or (perhaps most sensibly) as something in-between, it can in any case be read as directly expressing a function and process which were understood by early Scandinavians, and which, as other examples have already shown us, were a vital part of the maintenance of mental health in a culture and environment in which the awareness of death was continuously present.

According to the saga, in the course of his long life, Egill has already seen the deaths of his parents, brother (killed fighting for the English king Æthelstan), and eldest son (who had died of a fever), and borne up under these usual burdens as well as anyone might expect of a stoic Viking. However, when his second and favourite son, Böðvarr, is drowned at sea, Egill goes himself to see the corpse, which he then takes up and sets on his knee, riding back to the burial mound of his father, where he also lays his son. After burying his son, Egill shuts himself up his sleeping closet and lies there without food or drink, readying himself for death. At last, on the third day, his daughter Thórgerðr, having been sent news of her father's situation, comes to the house, saying that she has not eaten her evening meal, nor will she until she comes to Freyja, "I know no better advice than my father's; I will not live after my father and brother." Egill then lets her into the sleeping closet. After a while he hears her chewing and wonders what it is. Thórgerðr says that she is chewing seaweed to shorten her life. "It is bad for one?" Egill says. "Very bad," she answers. "Will you eat?" The seaweed, as Thórgerðr had known full well it would, makes them thirsty; they then call for drink, and are given milk instead of water. Then Thórgerðr says,

"What shall we now take for counsel? These plans are now at an end. Now I wish, father, that we lengthen our life, so that you may make a memorial poem after Böðvarr, and I shall carve it on a piece of wood, and after that we shall die, if it seems best to us. I expect that it will be a long time before your son Thórsteinn makes a poem after Böðvarr, and it will not do if he does not have a funeral feast, though I do not expect us to sit at that drinking when his memory is toasted." Egill said that it should not be expected that he would be able to work, although he would try it, "and I may be able to try it," he said . . .

And this is the beginning of the poem.

1. *Greatly unwilling am I
to move my tongue
or the air-weight
of songs' steelyard;
there is no good hope
of Viðurr's (Óðinn's) theft (poetry),
nor does it come gladly forth
from the hiding-place of soul.*
2. *It is not easy--
yet heavy grief achieves it--
to drive from thought's stead
the glad hoard
of Frigg's descendants
early borne
from Etin-Home.*

3. *Faultless, which lived
on the ship of the dwarf . . .
the wounds of the etin's throat (the sea)
roar below
before the boat-house (burial mound)
of my near kinsman.*
4. *For my clan
stands at its end
like the rotting trunk
of a maple in the forest;
no man is happy
who must bear all the parts
of a kinsman's corpse
down from the house.*
5. *And yet I shall tell first
my mother's death as well
and my father's fall.
This I bear out
from the word-hof,
the staves of praise
leafed out with speech.*
6. *Grim to me was the gap
which the wave broke
in the kin-garth of my father;
unfilled, I know,
and open stands
my son's shattered place
which the sea left to me.*
7. *Roughly has Rán shaken me.
I am cut off
from beloved friends;
the sea has slit
the strands of my clan,
a strong-spun thread of myself.*
8. *Know, that if that wrong
I could avenge with sword,
the alesmith's (Ægir's) days would be over.
If I could battle
against storm's oath-brother (the sea),
I should go, warlike,
against Ægir's bride.*
9. *But I could not
think to have
the might of revenge
against the ship's bane,
for before the eyes
of all folks may be seen
the lack of support
of an aging man.*
10. *The sea has robbed me of much,*

*grim is the fall
of kin to tell,
since the shield of my clan
turned from life
to the pathways of joy.*

11. I know this myself:

*that in my son
an ill man's seeds
would never have grown,
if that shield-tree
had been let to grow
until he bore
a warrior's hands.*

12. Always he most heeded

*what his father spoke
although all the folk
spoke differently;
he upheld me
within my house
and my strength
supported best.*

13. Often comes to me--

*in the fair wind
of the moon's bear (thought)--
my lack of a brother;
I think upon it,
when battle thrives,
I seek about for the other,
and think upon this.*

14. Who else, brave,

*would stand at my side,
what other thane,
in furious fight?
I have need of this often
against strife-rousing men--
less willing to flee,
though my friends grow fewer.*

15. Far harder to find,

*one whom I may trust
of all the folks
of Elgr's (Óðinn's) gallows (the world),
for it is a good-blackening
betrayal of kin
who, for rings,
sells his brother's corpse.*

16. I find that often,

when payment is asked . . .

17. That is said, as well,

*that no man gets
recompense for a son*

*unless he gets
yet a descendant
who will be born
as a second man
in his brother's stead.*

*18. To me the company
of folk is not pleasing
although each one
may hold the peace;
my son is come
to the bee-road's dwelling,
the son of my wife,
to visit his kin.*

*19. And it seemed to me
that the malt's chieftain (Ægir)
his heart holding fast,
stood against me.
I may not hold up
the land of the mask
the wain of rune-lore (the head),*

*20. since the bitterly harsh
fire of sickness
seized my son
from the world,
he, whom I knew
to ward himself--
wary of faults--
against evil speech.*

*21. This I remember yet:
the speech-friend of the Gauts (Óðinn)
raised up into God-World,
the ash-tree of my clan,
that which grew from me,
and the kin-wood
of my wife.*

*22. I got on well
with the spear's drighten (Óðinn),
I became trustful,
trusting in him,
until the friend of wains,
uplifter of victory,
broke friendship with me.*

*23. I do not make blessing
to Víli's brother (Óðinn), god-warder,
because I am eager to;
yet Mím's friend has given me
bettering for ills,
if I tally it better.*

*24. The foe of the Wolf (Óðinn),
used to battle,*

*gave me that skill without fault (poetry),
and that mind
which made for me
clear-seen foes
out of false friends.*

25. *Now it is hard for me . . .
the sister of Tveggi's foe (Hel)
stands on the headland;
yet shall I, glad,
with a good will,
and unfearing,
wait here for Hel.*

(*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, pp. 243-56)

After composing his poem, Egill has no more desire to commit suicide.

The therapy offered to Egill by the act of memorializing his son and thereby working through his own feelings about, not only his grief, but his own impending death is especially relevant because of the circumstances. Although folk of the Viking Age are likely to have had much less emotional investment in young children than we do, due to the high mortality rates, the attachment to an adult child was at least as strong--perhaps stronger. An Icelander's adult child was not only the embodiment of his parents' hopes for the future, he was also, as verse 12 describes, an ally and assistant in every respect--political, personal, and in terms of daily activity. Egill's unrestrained and suicidal response to Böðvarr's death is little different from the responses of parents today who lose their children: "The typical experience of parental grief after a child's death closely resembles what is considered to be "unresolved" or "abnormal" grief after the deaths of others". His decision that there is no point in living further suggests a deep sense of failure--he could not protect his son from death, and he cannot take revenge upon the sea. The memorial poem, as the saga explicitly states, offers Egill a reason to continue to live: it is the last gift he can give to his son, and he, the famed poet, is the only one who can do it properly.

In addition to the social and spiritual functions discussed above, the act of making a memorial also--as told to us by Egill's words, echoing from more than a millennium deep in the Well of Wyrð--serves to redefine the bereaved survivor in the face of an immediate confrontation with death, and prepare the survivor for meeting his or her own end. The awareness of his own impending death is heavier than usual for Egill, because, for the old Viking as for a modern parent, "The death of a child multiplies the losses to self usually felt after the death of any close person. This is true not only because of the numerous investments placed in the child, but because mourning for the child means mourning for the self as well, since parental attachment is built upon a mixture of love for the child and self-love". To Egill, this feeling was further intensified because so much of the individual identity of the early Scandinavian was bound in with family-identity. His personal sense of experiencing the "mutilation" felt by a parent losing a child is projected onto his own family, which he envisions as a rotting tree in stanza 4, then, in stanza 6, with the terribly poignant image of a pasture surrounded by a protective wall of rough Icelandic stone (the "kin-garth"), in which a wave has broken a gaping hole that can never be filled. Therefore, he is mourning not only Böðvarr, but also his parents, his brother, his previously lost son Gunnarr--and, most of all, himself.

While Egill does not follow the precise outline of the Kubler-Ross "five stages" of terminal acceptance--denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance --his general personal progression in the course of the poem is not too far different. He begins by recounting his state of shock and psychological numbness: it is nearly impossible for him, great poet that he is, to even begin to speak, let alone to compose. This is followed almost immediately by anger: he rages against Rán and Ægir, the two giants (wife and husband respectively) who personify the sea, especially in its wilder and harsher aspects. He would

take revenge against them if he could: they are living beings who have treated him cruelly, and it is his nature to fight back. After another interlude of recounting his losses, Egill calms himself by considering what he has gotten in return for his services to Óðinn--to the god of death, who he sees as having claimed his kin. Although this is not "bargaining" in the classic sense--Egill is neither asking Óðinn for any further favours nor promising anything--it is closely related: the bargain has already taken place, and Egill considers himself to have come out well. And indeed he has: the gift of poetry which Óðinn gave him has indeed been "bettering for ills", being the vehicle of his self-analysis and emotional healing. Lastly comes acceptance: the aging man sees Hel, the embodiment of the Underworld, standing on the headland, and can say that he awaits her "glad, with a good will, and unfearing".

This process is partially helped, of course, by the poet's genius and capability of self-analysis and self-expression. It is also, however, strengthened by the presence of a strong cultural and religious framework which gives Egill a setting in which to place the whole of his experience of grief and thus integrate the life-shattering trauma which he has just suffered. Skaldic poems frequently refer to the art of poetry itself in terms of the holy drink which Wotan stole from the etins and gave to humankind: in both *Höfuðlausn* (Head-Ransom) and *Arinbjarnarkviða* (a poem in honour of his friend Arinbjörn), Egill speaks proudly of bringing Óðinn's mead with him. Now, it appears in a sorrowfully ironic context: instead of bearing the gift of the gods, Egill finds it hard to come by--and yet the act of describing the mead of inspiration itself seems to open the tap. The image of the "ship of the dwarf" (a kenning for the poetic mead, referring to an episode in its history) fades neatly into the Norse account of the creation of the world, which explains that the sea is the blood which flowed from the wounds of the proto-giant Ymir; and this, in turn, becomes the waves that roar beneath the burial mound of Egill's father and son--the "boat-house" from which Skalla-Grímr and Böðvarr have begun their faring to the Otherworld.

This pattern continues throughout the poem: the religious/cosmological balances the human and gives it both perspective and meaning. As *Sonatorrek* began with the creation of the world, so it concludes with its end: the final kenning for Óðinn is "the foe of the Wolf", referring to the last battle when the Wolf Fenrir shall devour the god, and Egill calls Hel "the sister of Tveggi's foe"--that is, the sister of Óðinn's enemy, which is Fenrir. He thus ruefully reminds himself that even his god must die someday: the world goes on and Wyrð works as she must. Having thus placed the deaths of his kin, and his own death, into the necessary pattern of being, Egill is able to accept them and continue. This, too, is part of the basic function of memorialization in dealing with grief. The act of memorializing allows death to be integrated into a pattern, ideally a pattern which provides support and reassurance both in a social context--as Thórgerðr's words make clear, by composing a memorial poem, Egill has now done a socially proper and expected thing, as a less gifted man might have done by, for instance, having a runestone raised after the dead--and in a religious context: that is to say, a context which simultaneously aligns the microcosm and the macrocosm (the world began with Ymir's death and ends with Wotan's; the deaths of Egill's kin, and of the poet himself, are equally inevitable and part of the process of being) and offers individual reassurance (Egill's sons have been taken up by Óðinn; they dwell with their kinfolk). In the lengthy history of memorial-making, there have been few efforts which have achieved this goal so effectively and so beautifully.

In modern times, the process of memorialization by setting the dead into the context of the past has not been entirely lost, though the forms in which it appears vary a great deal. One of the best examples can be seen in the Battlefield Park in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Among the states' monuments to their dead stands the "Temple of Fame", a massive building modelled after the Roman Pantheon, with the names of all the Illinois soldiers who took part in the Vicksburg campaign inscribed upon sixty bronze tablets. Even though the raisers of that monument were most unlikely to have been Classical pagans, the message is clear: those who fought there have been judged in terms of the great ones of earlier times, and found worthy.

The use of individual creativity in memorialization as a means of both making a worthy monument for the dead and healing the living is especially notable today in the great AIDS Quilt, a massive collection of memorial panels made by the friends and loved ones of those

who have died of AIDS. The Quilt has become a national symbol of the link between the dead and the living. It is one of the most direct and active mass recognitions of the need of the dying to know that they will be remembered--the cry "Remember my name!" could have sprung as easily from the heart of any fallen Viking as from that of an AIDS sufferer--and of the survivors to express the worth of those who are lost. Regarding the particular form this memorial has taken, as one of the original contributors to the first display in Washington, DC, Jim Lovette notes that,

Quilts have been traditional in many American and other cultures, providing a link to our immediate ancestors and to a repository of highly charged socio cultural symbols and ideas. The thought of being comforted is strongly linked to quilts, as the metaphors of being warmed, made safe, and prepared for a period of time when we are most vulnerable is associated with quilts. The direct transfer of the energy in these metaphors is smooth and fluid, resulting in virtual identification with the Quilt on an enormous scale, which is the primary reason for its popularity and success. The creativity permitted by making, displaying, and seeing a specific quilt is psychologically one of the most intensive and effective healing methods to arise from the fight against AIDS.

The memorial services of people whose lifestyles do not necessarily find mainstream acceptance, whether for religious, sexual, or political reasons, are also particularly interesting in the context of creative memorialization, as they are often composed by the immediate friends and local co-religionists of the deceased. From his extensive experience as both a Celtic Wiccan Elder and a gay psychotherapist living in San Francisco, Jim Lovette observes that, while the general absence of personal preparation for death in Western culture causes most people to default to the usual death and dying rituals of whatever religious tradition they were raised in, the communities in which such specific terminal illnesses as HIVD/AIDS and breast cancer have brought a heightened awareness of mortality have tended to develop

individual styles of anticipatory grieving and death/dying rituals, attempting to address the loss of the self or of significant others. These grieving styles range from the eccentric to the mundane and have been shaped heavily by non-Western and non-Judeo-Christo-Islamic philosophies. The resulting rituals have therefore been influenced largely by esoteric, New Age, tribal, pagan, Eastern, and Wiccan beliefs and practices.

In particular, such rituals often include portions of older memorial poems, which serve to place the dead in the context of the ancient religion and world-view--and also, like Egill's references to the winning of the mead of poetry at the beginning of *Sonatorrek*, help to provide a framework which can control and direct otherwise inexpressible feelings of grief. As described by Melodi Lammond,

(Jerry's funeral service) was very eclectic. Nearly everything in it was from an ancestral tradition, but there were a lot of different traditions involved..Jerry's lover was a Pomo Indian, and he taught the women a traditional Pomo mourning chant. A member of the circle who was African had his head ritually shaved. Jerry's daughter covered all the mirrors in the house, which is a Jewish tradition, even though they were not Jewish. I wrote a piece based on the lament of Deirdre for the sons of Oishin (an Old Irish lament).

I was too upset and freaked to write anything completely original, although I often do write original pieces. I just couldn't do this. Then I realized that other people had been through this before . . . I remembered reading the lament in a historical novel, and realized that with just a few changes in the words, it would fit the deceased. I left most of the original imagery in, but also translated some of it into modern terms, because I felt that as a Wiccan high priest and union organizer, Jerry had walked between the past

and the present. Also, the idea was to mourn and express our grief for this person, not the one who had died two thousand years before.

(personal conversation, Oct. 30, 1995)

One of the few exceptions to the “homemade” character of neo-Pagan burial rites--the funeral service offered by the Ring of Troth in their handbook *Our Troth* (full text in Appendix 2)--is an attempt to recreate something similar to what a Viking Age funeral might have been like, based on archaeological, literary, and folkloric sources. Characteristically for modern Germanic heathenry, the ritual itself is preceded by a citation of its sources so that those who perform it can fully understand the ritual actions and thus, presumably, come closer to their forebears: the formal affirmation of the unity of past and present is also a formal affirmation of the continuing link between the living and the dead. When I saw this ritual performed, at Midsummer of 1994, it was slightly altered in that the deceased, Lionel Hornby, had already been cremated: his widow Freya Aswynn and their friends performed the rite around a six-foot replica of a Viking boat, which they then set on fire and launched at Maldon, the site of one of the most famous battles of the Saxons and Vikings (commemorated in the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, a portion of which was quoted during the funeral service). Freya wanted to send Lionel off in this manner because he was “the last of the Saxons”, to be ranked with both the kings of Sutton Hoo and Vendel (buried in their ships) and the Anglo-Saxon leader Bryhtnoth, who had let the Viking host cross the causeway in order to allow a fair fight (Bryhtnoth lost, but his name is remembered and the name of the Viking leader forgotten, while to one of his men is attributed the statement that summed up the ideal mood of the Germanic warrior: “Soul shall grow the harder, heart the keener, bravery the greater, as our strength grows less”).

The usage of archaic imagery in order to create a context and framework for understanding and integrating a death can also be particularly useful in times of national tragedy. My wife and I moved to Uppsala, Sweden two days after the sinking of the *Estonia* (which took place on September 28, 1994. The final official death toll was slightly under nine hundred), at which time the country was still in a state of tremendous grief and shock. Although we had not lost anyone on the ferry ourselves, both the scale and circumstances of the catastrophe itself and the distress of those around us affected us very profoundly: in particular, I was haunted by the recurring image of Ingvi-Freyr, the national god of the Swedes and father of the Yngling line, standing by the great mounds at Old Uppsala and weeping for his lost children. Eventually I was able to find a place for these feelings by writing a song in which I described the *Estonia*’s sinking as an early Scandinavian would have seen it (full text in Appendix I), adapting lines both from the Eddic poem *Hávamál* and, in the verse below, from *Sonatorrek*:

If men could bear swords to sea as their foe,
 Ægir would brew no more ale.
 His bride has slit the strands of our clan,
 been bane to our mothers beloved,
 and death to our children dear.

The sorrow is still with me, but I was able to sleep at night again, and whenever I perform the song, I feel that I have done what I can: I am keeping the memory alive, lest those who died be forgotten--or carelessness allow another such tragedy.

The overlap of personal and national memorialization is, no doubt, as old as the first tribe who buried their dead together: though today it may be faced with certain difficulties, it still continues to be a matter of considerable significance, not least of all politically. At its best, national memorialization yet serves the purpose it did in the earliest days: to unify, to exemplify, and to allow an appropriate outlet for private feelings within the context of the larger group. On the greatest scale, we find national monuments such as Westminster Abbey in Britain and the less well-known, but nevertheless impressive, Walhalla in Germany. The latter is a hall set up in the early part of this century to honour German heroes and persons of accomplishment, beginning with Hermann the Cheruscan (who defeated the Romans at the Battle of Teutoburger Wald in 9 C.E., thereby saving Germany

from the fate of occupied Gaul) and the Veleda (a German seeress of roughly the same period, whose advice guided the tribe of the Bructeri to victory over the Romans) to literary figures such as Goethe and Schiller. Towering high on a hilltop, lined inside with the busts and names of the chief creators of German history and culture, it is an awesome edifice.

Westminster Abbey is even more overwhelming: the chief burial place of the kings and queens of England from the time of Edward the Confessor onward, it has also been the coronation stead for every English sovereign since William the Bastard (or Conqueror) onward (except for Edward V in the fifteenth century and Edward VIII in the twentieth), thus maintaining a living continuity between the royal dead and their successors (even the service itself, though it has been elaborated on since, can be directly traced back to St. Dunstan's coronation of King Edgar in 973, which was probably based on earlier services). The Abbey became even more significant, however, in the eighteenth century, when, "burial in the Abbey seemed appropriate for anyone, irrespective of birth or rank, who had made a notable contribution to the life of the nation and perhaps to the welfare of the human race as a whole". Among those who lie there now are Rudyard Kipling, Charles Darwin, Ernest Rutherford, and David Livingstone. Memorial plaques also stand to, among others, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill, whose inscription is particularly telling both in what it says--and in what it does not need to:

REMEMBER
WINSTON CHURCHILL
IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE WISHES OF
THE QUEEN AND PARLIAMENT
THE DEAN AND CHARTER PLACED THIS STONE
ON THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF
THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN
15 SEPTEMBER 1965

Westminster Abbey serves, in quite a literal sense, as Britain's Valhalla: the hall of the honoured dead, whose deeds will be remembered as long as the Abbey--and Britain--stand.

This is shown, above all, by the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey, whose inscription reads,

BENEATH THIS STONE RESTS THE BODY
OF A BRITISH WARRIOR
UNKNOWN BY NAME OR RANK
BROUGHT BACK FROM FRANCE TO LIE AMONG
THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS OF THE LAND
AND BURIED HERE ON ARMISTICE DAY
11 NOVEMBER 1920, IN THE PRESENCE OF
HIS MAJESTY KING GEORGE
HIS MINISTERS OF STATE
THE CHIEFS OF HIS FORCES
AND A VAST CONCOURSE OF THE NATION

THUS ARE COMMEMORATED THE MANY
MULTITUDES WHO DURING THE GREAT
WAR OF 1914-1918 GAVE THE MOST THAT
MAN CAN GIVE LIFE ITSELF
FOR GOD
FOR KING AND COUNTRY
FOR LOVED ONES HOME AND EMPIRE
FOR THE SACRED CAUSE OF JUSTICE AND
THE FREEDOM OF THE WORLD

THEY BURIED HIM AMONG THE KINGS BECAUSE HE
HAD DONE GOOD TOWARDS GOD AND TOWARD

HIS HOUSE

At the time of the Unknown Warrior's internment, he served as a focal point of the mourning of all those Britons who had lost loved ones in World War I--especially those whose sons, husbands, or fathers were buried in unknown graves in foreign lands. Reaffirming the unity of the present with the past, as well, King George V gave a Crusader's sword from his own private collection, which was attached to the top of the coffin --thus setting the Unknown Warrior, and all the British dead, in the same rank as the men who were at that time seen as the paragons of chivalry. On the day of his burial, "King George V unveiled the Cenotaph . . . and stood in silence for two minutes; a silence which was to be observed throughout the country and the empire . . . By the end of the day, over 200,000 people had passed the Cenotaph and had also visited the Unknown Warrior's final resting place at the Abbey to pay their respects, and over 10,000 wreaths were laid at the new, unveiled Cenotaph. The nation mourned; cities, towns, and villages, all who had sent their men in their country's hour of need, mourned their passing."

Today, the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior stands as a symbol of the British people: it always bears fresh flowers, and all heads of foreign states making official visits to London come to Westminster Abbey to lay a wreath upon it. It is the only stone in the Abbey on which no one is allowed to tread. Even now, a long lifetime after the burial of the Unknown Warrior, it is not easy to gaze upon his grave and remain unmoved: the slab of black marble bears a huge freight of the dead, made known only as a gathered host of the slain, through the stone that names the war they fell in--but sets them among the kings and great ones of their land, in England's own Valhalla.

To most, if not all, folk today, there is little difficulty in honouring the Unknown Warrior, or letting his grave serve as a memorial to all those who fell in the Great War. But when his epitaph is read closely--and understood, as it should be, as a fairly exact and literal description of how the British felt about the war at the time, including the deliberate equation of the Unknown Warrior with the Crusaders by means of King George's gift of the Crusader sword--it raises a more difficult problem of the modern day: the problem of memorializing those who fought and fell in battles that are harder to construe as having been "for the sacred cause of justice and the freedom of the world." This problem exists precisely because of the nature of the memorial: it serves to honour what is good, to encourage what is desired, and to affirm the ideal pattern of the world--by either positive reinforcement, as seen in the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, or negative reinforcement, as in, for instance the Holocaust memorials, which condemn the Nazi regime even as they commemorate its victims. War memorials throughout Europe and America reflect this: it is difficult to find, for instance, a World War I monument for someone who did not die, not only bravely and well, but for a cause defined in the memorial as good. A similar usage can be found in Northern Ireland, where "the political dead are regarded as symbolising the strongest and most vibrant elements of the political culture. To remember the dead is to approve of the dead, and to approve of the dead is to condone the elements of the ideology with which they are now associated."

The most blatant recent example of the problem of separating the soldier from his cause came at the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II, when President Reagan proposed to lay a wreath in a World War II cemetery in Bitburg, Germany--a cemetery where, it turned out, a number of soldiers that had fought in the Waffen-S.S. were buried. After forty years, most Americans were ready to concede that perhaps all German soldiers had not been Nazi ogres--that many, probably most, had been drafted into a war for which they were not responsible and fought for a regime whose horrors were, by and large unknown to them; and that some reconciliation with the dead could take place. The issue was, however, still a very sensitive one on both sides. In America, the idea of an official memorial recognition of men who had actively supported the Nazi regime was beyond what living memory could accept: the House voted resoundingly against the wreath-laying (390 to 26), and the Senate also passed a voice vote against it. In contrast, a German public opinion poll showed that 72% of West German adults thought that Reagan should go ahead with the ceremony--an attitude expressed most strongly by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, to

whom the symbolic reconciliation of the Western world with Germany's recent past was clearly a matter of the most intense concern, both on political and personal levels. The intention of the wreath-laying, and its apparent meaning to the German public, was to officially recognise the humanity of the German war dead, as made clear in Reagan's speech: "The crimes of the S.S. must rank among the most heinous in human history. But others buried there were simply soldiers in the German army . . . The evil world of Nazism turned all values upside down. Nevertheless, we can mourn the German war dead as human beings, crushed by a vicious ideology." A large percentage of the American public, however, was not prepared to make that recognition: the wounds, especially for Holocaust survivors, were too deep, the memories too strong.

Interestingly, the question was not a matter of the deeds of the soldier buried in the specific grave, nor even of the history of the Waffen-SS men buried there, but simply one of image. The SS men in question were elite fighters, not concentration-camp guards; it is exceedingly unlikely that the soldier on whose grave Reagan laid the wreath or any of his companions in the graveyard had been directly involved with any of the chief horrendous atrocities for which the Nazi regime is known. It was, however, the political symbol that mattered: the desired message of an historical reconciliation with the vast majority of Germans who had been innocent of the appalling deeds of their government and who themselves had been among the chief victims of the war's fighting could not be transmitted to Americans by a wreath laid in this particular cemetery, regardless of how the soldier himself had fallen. The general American sentiment regarding the matter was expressed by a statement in the *Los Angeles Times*, "Those who protest the Bitburg trip do not seek to give offence. Their wish is only that the President of the U.S. do nothing that could be interpreted as memorializing or dignifying the agents of Nazi criminality."

Reagan's response to the concerns was to schedule a memorial trip to Bergen-Belsen, at which he concluded with the statement, "We are the witnesses", and, similarly, to promise the survivors of the Holocaust (in regards to the wreath-laying at Bitburg), "Many of you are worried that reconciliation means forgetting . . . But I promise you, we will never forget." Some might consider this the highest point in Reagan's career as President. For a rare and powerful moment in the modern world, it became clear that memory is the only coin of lasting worth, the only comfort and the only recompense. Seen in this light, it is little wonder that the visit to Bitburg stirred such a furor: the act of memorialization, for that moment, served both to awaken the past and to define the ideals and beliefs of the present, thereby shaping the way for what would follow afterwards.

A different answer to the problem of memorializing dead soldiers without necessarily glorifying their cause is offered by the Vietnam memorial--a huge wall of black marble bearing only the names of the dead. Despite the original controversy over its design, the strength of this memorial lies in the open space it leaves for personal response: it neither condones nor condemns the war, so that the viewer can, as she or he chooses, see the names of heroes who died keeping the world safe for democracy, of unnecessary sacrifices to an unjust and stupid conflict, or anything in between; while those who fought in the war and survived are not subjected to unnecessary romanticism or pious sentiments--only the list of names. By deliberately avoiding political usage, the Viet Nam memorial opens itself to fulfil its personal purpose more fully. Every day, offerings are left beside the lists of names--flowers, war medals, even cans of beer. If not a Valhalla, the memorial has become a shrine: a gateway to the other world, where the dead can receive their due. In this sense, the Vietnam memorial is closer to a Norse understanding of the proper way to honour the fallen than to the memorials set up after World War I, for instance: a judgement upon the cause of fighting is far less important than how the individual who fought and fell is remembered, so that however history may choose to view the battle, the soldier himself is known by the legacy of his own personal deeds.

The use of memorialization--particularly artistic memorialization--as a means of dealing with grief and the recognition of death can easily be seen as a human universal. To the Norse (and the ancestors of the English, Germans, and Dutch), it was literally the link between this world and the ones beyond. Living memory and afterlife expectations were hardly to be distinguished from one another: the process of memorialization was also the process by which the deceased travelled the road to Valhalla.

- Neckel, *Walhall Gods and Myths*, pp. 142-43.
Kultische Geheimbünde, pp. 49-53; *Verwandlungskulte*, pp. 215-16.
 Grundtvig, *Danske Folkesagn*, I, p. 374.
 Arnkiel, *Cimbrische Heyden-Religion*, p. 55.
Shamanens Hest, p. 69.
 de Vries, *Religionsgeschichte*, II, p. 64.
 M&R, p. 57
 Jón Árnason, *Þjóðsögur*, II, p. 101, IV, p. 138.
 ch. 125, p. 320
 Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 212.
 Kvideland & Sehmsdorf, *Nordic Folklore*, p. 145.
Vampires, Burial, and Death, p. 111.
 cf. Thýre's use of *blár* (or, in the F version, black) hangings to let her husband Gormr know that his son Knútr is dead--*Fornmanna sögur* XI, p. 17; also Thórbjörn Brúnason's statement in his *lausavísur* that his woman will not wear *blár* at his death (*Skjaldedigting* I, p. 198).
Totenverehrung, p. 117.
Germania, ch. 43, p. 203.
Totenverehrung, p. 117.
 Herman Pálsson, pp. 357-58.
 cf. Turville-Petre, M&R
Ynglinga saga, ch. 7, pp. 18-19.
 Basilov, in *Traces of the Central Asian Culture in the North*, pp. 35-51.
 Rolf Pipping, "Oden i galgen"
 cf., for instance, van Hamel (Óðinn Hanging) and Folke Ström ('Döendes Makt'). Van Hamel's argument is based on the idea of 'magical martyrdom' by which Óðinn is able to raise his *ásmeginn*, or 'god-might'; Ström's, on the theory that, since the Norse materials are rich in examples of the dying demonstrating a sudden burst of exceptional wisdom, Óðinn himself must have experienced this prescient moment before death (but, as a surviving shaman, not quite died).
 'Schamanistische Züge', p. 77.
 Bugge, *Entstehen*, pp. 317-414.
 A.G. van Hamel, 'Óðinn Hanging', p. 260.
Myth and Religion, p. 43.
 cf., for instance, *Egils saga*, ch. 1, in which Egill's grandfather Úlfr ('Wolf') is thought to roam around in the shape of a wolf at night and is therefore called Kveld-Úlfr ('Evening-Wolf'); and *Landnámabók* M 14, in which two men do battle in the shapes of a dragon and stag.
Eiríks saga
 Lommel, p. 73.
 Fleck, 'Knowledge-Criterion', pp. 55-56.
 cf. de Vries' discussion in 'Odin am Baume', including his argument for the tree as the dwelling of the dead and the tree-sacrifice as specifically reserved for the god of death.
Cult of Othin, p. 81.
 cf. *Jómsvíkingadrápa* 2, *Hávamál* 157, *Ynglinga saga* ch. 8.
 For a full discussion of the distinction between sacral and penal hanging, see Ström, *Death-Penalty*.
Myth & Religion, pp. 49-50.
 Other possibilities include the Latin *rumor*, and, more doubtfully, 'sign cut in wood', or possibly an evolution from **wruna*, related to the name Varuna (de Vries, *Wörterbuch*, pp. 453-54); the interpretation 'secret speech' is also considered plausible (Ásgeir Magnusson, *Orðsifjabók*, p. 779).
 Moltke, p. 78.
 'Runes and Semantics', pp. 195-229.
 Hauck, *Brakteaten*, Text I, p. 83.
 Moltke, p. 356.
 see *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ch. 44; *Grettis saga*, pp. 249-50; also cf. the Eggjum

stone's description of the use of the 'corpse-sea' (blood) in empowering the inscription.
p. 19.

Egils saga, ch. 44, p. 109.

Grettis saga, ch. 79, pp. 249-50.

The name 'Týrfingr' appears to be etymologically identical to the name of a Gothic tribe, the Tervingi; a number of other personal and place-names in the saga suggest a genuine preservation of some elements of Gothic history, though obviously much transformed through the legendary process.

Rabani Mauri Opera 6, pp. 1581-82.

His 'Marcomanni' or 'Northmen' are probably Scandinavians, but the alphabet he gives seems to be strongly influenced by the Anglo-Saxon Futhork (including 'asc' for 'ase', the name and shape of the p-rune, and the oss-stave for o), with Old Norse elements (such as the Younger Futhark's *hagall*-stave for k), as well as perhaps a hint of surviving or reinterpreted Upper German elements (the name 'Týr' translated into 'Ziu' and given as corresponding to the letter z, attached to the Anglo-Saxon *ear* stave, while the usual t-stave bears the German name *tac*).

Derolez, R., *Runica Manuscripta: The English Tradition*, p. 359.

Schamanistische Züge, p. 77.

This opinion is not universally shared; cf. Ivar Lindquist's argument for a separation of the stories of the mead and the runes (*Die Urgestalt der Hávamál*) and von See's opinion that the songs of power were a different section patched on by the redactor by means of verses 142-45 (*Die Gestalt der Hávamál*, p. 8). However, arguments have also been made for not only this section, but the poem itself, as a consistent whole, as by Carol Larrington (*A Store of Common Sense*), who argues for a logical progression from the mundane entry of the guest into the hall to the ultimate mystery (the eighteenth song) that none but Óðinn can understand.

Dictionary, p. 184

Van Hamel, Mead.

Turville-Petre, M&R p. 41.

Flateyjarbók I, pp. 214-15.

Flateyjarbók I, pp. 320-21, 400-03.

Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, pp. 109-13; Bostock, *Handbook*, pp. 30, 36-37.

de Vries, Jan. "The Problem of Loki". *Folklore Fellowship Communications* 110 (1933), 1-306, p.277.

Hrólfs s. kraka, p. 105.

Gesta Danorum, I, Book 2, vii, 26, p. 60.

I, Book VIII, iv, 7, pp. 219-20.

Germania, ch. 39, p. 195.

According to *Waltharius*, Hagen chops off Walter's hand and Walter puts out Hagan's eye. This pair of mutilations has several times been compared to the missing hand and missing eye of Týr and Wotan respectively; see esp. Stephen Schwarz.

Frühmittelalterliche Bildüberlieferung und die organisierte Kult, p. 487.

Chapter V: Wotan--Death, Runes, and Poetry

Having considered Valhalla and its roots in the need to deal with death and grief through memorialization, it is now time to turn again to its lord: to one-eyed Wotan in his broad-brimmed hat. "What distinguishes the historical Valhalla from Hel is, shortly stated, Óðinn"; and indeed, the god himself can hardly be separated from his hall. For as Valhalla is the Hall of the Slain, Wotan is the Father of the Slain (Valfather) and the Receiver of the Slain (Valthögnir), and he is also the one whom the Norse skalds had to thank for the gift of poetry by which they enshrined their holy dead within his hall. To fully understand what this meant to the Norse, it is necessary to delve deeper into the god's nature--to see him as they saw him, both awesome and terrifyingly dark, giver of victory and song, and claimer of lives in return.

As discussed in the first chapter of this book, Wotan's role as a battle-god is specifically that of a god of death in battle, who receives the slain as his own sacrifices; and it is this role which he obviously fulfils in regards to Valhalla. Egill Skalla-Grímsson's *Sonatorrek* shows him as a more general god of death, bearing up, for instance, the sickness-dead Gunnarr; and blamed for breaking troth with Egill in regards to the death of Egill's sons. Wotan also seems to reveal himself as a god of death--perhaps even a personification of death--in *Grímnismál*, where his threat to Geirroðr, "Now you shall see Óðinn!" says nothing other than, "Now you shall die!" Several of Wotan's attributes in the Norse sources also provide us with the clear image of his role as a death-god--and, perhaps, a member of the host of the dead himself. How the Norse understood, and felt about, Wotan was expressed directly by how they described him: wandering through the wilderness in his blue-black cloak, sacrificial spear in his hand and his face half-hidden by his low-hanging hat, riding on a many-legged gray horse, followed by ravens and wolves--perhaps with the mark of the hangman's noose to be seen beneath his beard, as hinted at by his by-names such as "Hanged One" (*Hangi*).

The first mark by which a Norseman would have known Wotan from any ordinary mounted wayfarer is, of course, his peculiar steed, the eight-legged gray Sleipnir. A number of theories have been advanced regarding Sleipnir's multiple legs, some of which would point directly to a specific relationship between Sleipnir and Wotan as death-god. H.R. Ellis-Davidson, for instance, suggests that the eight legs may signify the four pallbearers who carry the dead, comparing the Norse image of the eight-legged horse to an Indian dirge which sings of the funeral bier as the horse with eight legs and four heads. Höfler likewise argues for the eight legs as representing four humans, but perceives Sleipnir as the "horse" of traditional folk-masquerades, which, according to his theory, are related to the folklore of the Wild Hunt and to the cult of Wotan as, not only god of death, but specifically leader of the frenzied dead who ride out during stormy nights in autumn and winter (especially around the Yule season). Mis-legged horses, as well as appearing in German Wild Hunt folklore, are also often taken as signs of death or ill-omen: North German and Danish folk belief both include tales of the Helhest, or "death-horse", which "has three legs and one eye, and when someone sees it, he shall die", or else goes around in times of plague.

Alternate interpretations, however, include an influence from neighbouring shamanic cultures, since the eight-legged horse is attested in Siberian shamanism (Nancke-Krogh, for instance, compares a shaman's many-legged hobby-horse from northern Mongolia and an eight-legged bronze horse ornament from Russia on which the legs are formed by hanging bells); Sleipnir as a symbol of the winds, with his eight legs corresponding to the eight directions of the Northern map; or the eight feet simply showing Sleipnir's unusual speed. The plethora of plausible explanations makes it difficult, if not impossible, to single out any one as an indicator of Sleipnir's character--or Wotan's.

More significant is Sleipnir's gray colour. Turville-Petre observes that the dead Guðrún Gjúkadóttir (Wagner's Guttrune), when she appears in a dream to a post-conversion

Icelander, is mounted upon a gray horse, as is the woman who appears in a dream to foretell the death of Gísli the Outlaw. In Icelandic folktales of the Black Death, the plague takes the shape of a man and woman riding gray horses or of a gray bull. *Brennu-Njáls saga* includes a frightening vision of a pitch-black man on a gray horse riding through fire and shooting a fiery shaft as a token of the catastrophic events to come: whether this man is meant to be Óðinn or not, the imagery is certainly reminiscent of Óðinn (whose name appears nowhere in the saga); and if he is not Óðinn, he is certainly dead, as his colour and the repetitive staves of his verse (in Icelandic literature, it is typical for dead persons to repeat the last lines of their poetry) make clear. The Norse word for gray, *grár*, is also used metaphorically to denote spite or malice. Sleipnir's colour, thus, is the colour of a death-horse, the gray shadow bringing forth the terrifying quality of his rider--whose appearance on horseback bodes a coming war, as seen, for instance, in the tale of the Smith of Nesjar:

That same winter (1208 C.E.) after Yule, before the beginning of summer, a smith lived in Nesjar. That was one evening, when a man came riding and asked him for lodgings and asked him to make horseshoes. The farmer said he could well do that: they got up when it was a long time until dawn, and started to forge. The farmer asked: "Where were you last night?" "In Melðadal", said the guest: that was north in Telemark. The smith said: "You must be the greatest liar-man, because no one could have travelled all that way." Then he went back to forging, and could not forge as he wished. The guest said: "Forge as you yourself wish to fare", and the horse-shoes became larger than he had seen before, but when they carried them to where he had the horse, then they shod it. Then the guest spoke thus: "You are a foolish man," he said, "and unwise: why do you ask nothing?" The smith said, "What sort of man are you? or from whence have you come? or where shall you fare?" He answered, "I have come from the North over the land, and I have long dwelt in Norway, but I expect now to fare eastwards to Sweden, and I have long been on shipboard, but now I must go about by horse." The smith said, "Where do you expect to be by evening?" "Eastwards in Sparmörk", he said. "That must not be the truth", the farmer said, "for that can hardly be reached in seven days' ride." He mounted then upon the horse; the farmer asked, "Who are you?" He answered, "Have you ever heard Óðinn spoken of?" "I have heard him named," the farmer said; "Here you may now see him", the guest said, "but if you do not trust that which I have said to you, you may now see my horse leap over the wall." The horse backed up: then he turned the spurs to the horse and pricked him on; the horse leapt over the wall, and never came down, so that he (the smith) never saw him again. Four nights later there was a great battle . . . between King Sörkvir and King Eiríkr. The smith told this tale to Jarl Filippó that same winter in Túnsberg . . .

(*Fornmanna sögur*, vol. 9. Sveinbjörn Egilsson and others, eds. Norræna fornfræðafélags, 1828-37, pp. 55-56.)

In spite of his disbelief, the smith is spared from death, probably because he has done Óðinn a favour--a common motif in folktales of the Wild Hunt, and also frequently appearing in Scandinavian folktales of the Black Death, where Plague rewards the man who has carried her across the river either by sparing him, or, if he is already doomed to die, giving him a quick and easy death.

Wotan's blue-black (*blár*) cloak was another sign of his dark and terrifying nature in the minds of the Norse. *Blár* is a colour associated directly with death, especially with the evil dead. For instance, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the body of the undead Thórólfr Twist-foot is described as "*blár as Hel*" and big as an ox, while the same description also appears for the malicious corpse Glámr in *Grettis saga*. Such descriptions were based on observed reality: the darkness of skin and gross swelling are well within the range of normal symptoms of decay, while the tendency to interpret such signs as supernatural, especially if the person has died under abnormal circumstance (violence, accident, an unfamiliar illness), is also usual, as discussed extensively by Barber: "it is these people . . . who are apt to lie undiscovered long enough to develop into monsters, growing in size, changing colour,

shedding their skin--in short, undergoing all the diverse changes that we have seen in the 'vampires'". When the dead appear in the supernatural world, the dark hue of the decaying body may have appeared symbolically as dark clothes, as in the case of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir in *Sturlunga saga*, for example.

In the human world, *blár* and black were used as mourning clothes among the Norse. Here, as with the other Indo-European peoples who followed this usage, the purpose was probably that of identification with the dead--whether, as Ranke suggests, to symbolically share the experience of death with the deceased, or, as is more often the case in folklore, to prevent the jealous dead from dragging the living back with them.

Unique to the North, however (as far as we know), was the custom of wearing blue-black for the purpose, not only of acknowledging death, but of actively dealing it out. This practice may have gone back to a very early time in the Germanic world: Tacitus speaks of the Harii as blackening their shields, dyeing their bodies, and attacking on dark nights: "by sheer panic and shadowy effect they strike terror like an army of ghosts", an activity which Ranke interprets as imitating the dead and perhaps thus assuming their powers. In the sagas, wearing blue/blue-black clothing is specifically a sign of the intention to kill, as noted, among others, by Hermann Pálsson: "The image of Hrafnkell on both occasions riding in blue clothing is all we need to know about his mood and intention, for in the sagas blue clothing is customarily worn by killers". The hero Víga-Glúmr (Battle-Glúmr), quite possibly an hereditary worshipper of Óðinn, is given a *blár* cloak and inlaid spear by his grandfather in Norway; when he kills his enemy Sigmundr, Víga-Glúmr's brother Þórsteinn recognises what his sibling has been up to by the combination of "both cloak and spear" (ch. 8, p. 28) before he sees the blood in the inlay-work on the spearhead. Interestingly, the cloak is the article most often referred to in this context. Of course, as the usual outer garment, it would be the most immediately visible and thus the obvious choice for announcing one's intentions to the casual observer (or the saga-audience, as the case may be). However, the cloak, especially a hooded one such as Víga-Glúmr's, is also significant because it conceals the wearer's body and, at times, face--as would be appropriate if the garment were indeed seen as a means by which the bearer identified himself with the dead and the powers of the realm of death.

"Now you may see Óðinn": as the Norse saw him, a terrifying figure, whose image encompasses both the dead and the force of death--riding to herald war on his ghastly gray horse, swathed in his blue-black cloak, holding the spear which dooms his battle-sacrifices, followed by carrion-beaked ravens and bloody-mouthed wolves. He is a god to be feared and propitiated, certainly--but worshipped out of love, for himself and his gifts?

God of Runes and Magic

Óðinn shifted shapes. His body lay then as if sleeping or dead, but he was then a bird or an animal, a fish or a wyrm, and fared in a moment to faraway lands on his errands or those of other men. He was also able to slake fire with a single word or calm the sea or turn the wind in any direction he willed . . . he woke up dead men from the earth or sat himself beneath hanged men . . . He was able to achieve all these accomplishments with runes and those songs which are called galdrar . . . Óðinn was accomplished at that skill from which the greatest power followed, which is called seiðr, and practiced it himself, and with this he was able to know the fates of men and things unset, and also how to cause the deaths or soul-loss or ill luck of men, and also how to take from men wit and life-force and give it to another
(*Ynglinga saga*, pp. 18-19).

Throughout his wanderings among his people, Wotan seems to have two chief guises. One was spoken of more fully in the first chapter: the god of battle-death and sacrifice, the armed and armoured god who sits in Valhalla among his heroes, watchful against the end of the world. The other, at first glance, seems to have very little to do with Valhalla or heroic deeds: this is the ancient wizard wandering between the worlds in his endless search for wisdom, who we see in several of the Eddic poems. In "The Dreams of Baldr", for instance,

Wotan rides down Hel-road to call a dead seeress forth from her grave; though she struggles against him, complaining of her long sleep, in time she must tell him all he wishes to know. *Vafþrúðnismál* shows him, ever-greedy for lore, going in disguise to the hall of the *jötunn* Vafþrúðnir--a journey of peril from which Frigg fears he will not return. Óðinn wagers his head against Vafþrúðnir's in a riddle-game; having found the answers he seeks, he wins by asking the *jötunn* the one unanswerable question: "What did Óðinn whisper in the ear of his son Baldr on the funeral pyre?" Like the unlucky Geirroðr, Vafþrúðnir recognises his guest--and loses his life.

Most of all, however, the image of Wotan as seeker of wisdom, willing to go to any lengths in order to get the power of knowledge, is summed up in one of the best-known passages of *Hávamál*: at the climax of his lengthy recitation of lore and advice, he reveals,

I know that I hung on a windy tree,
 nights all nine,
 gored by a spear, given to Óðinn,
 given, self to myself.
 On that tree of which no man knows,
 from what roots it rises.

With no bread they heartened me nor with drinking horn,
 I pried downward,
 I took up the runes, roaring I took them,
 I fell afterwards from there . . .

This image--the long-bearded god hanging on the ancient tree, struck through with his own spear, to find the hidden lore of the runes through his own pain and death--has struck many as the deepest and most meaningful face of Wotan. It is ironic, then, that over the past century both the age and the Northern origin of the ordeal of the runes have been questioned more thoroughly than any aspect of the god's existence.

Óðinn's self-sacrifice on the windswept tree hangs, both geographically and spiritually, between two equal and opposite poles. Eastward stands the Siberian shaman: beating on an adorned drum (similar to the drums used by the Saami, whom the Norse both respected and feared for their magical skills), and clad in a costume which might perhaps resemble a bird, reindeer, or bear, jingling with iron pendants. In due course, he may climb into the white branches of the birch-tree that, for him, embodies the cosmos; by doing this, he travels through the worlds, where he may seek out the spirits that dwell in the various realms--like Óðinn on the World-Tree (if indeed, as most interpretations would have it, that is the tree on which the god hangs). More importantly still, it is only through the initiation of death that the shaman finds his own powers: in a visionary trance, he experiences the rendering of his flesh, the sundering and re-forging of his bones. Often this is preceded by an sickness which has put him in grave danger of physical death; both during and after his initiation, it is not uncommon for him to use means such as extreme heat, extreme cold, and pain in order to raise his own spiritual powers. Could the shaman's gaining of power through death and suffering have influenced the figure of Óðinn hanging on the tree? This has been argued extensively since the nineteen-twenties, since the similarity between Óðinn's hanging on a tree which might be the World-Tree and the shamanistic means of travelling between the worlds by climbing a birch-tree was first observed, followed quickly by comparisons of the transformative ordeals of initiation, which can be summed up most neatly by Buchholtz's observation that "(Óðinn's ordeal) is the most impressive example in favour of shamanism . . . the ecstasy first creates the godly."

However, far to the South stands a figure whose ordeal is, in many of its particulars, a near-perfect reflection of Óðinn's. Like the Northern god, he hangs on a tree; like the Northern god, he is pierced with a spear, and receives no bread to comfort him or strong drink to numb his pain; his death, too, is couched in terms of a sacrifice, and, like Óðinn (according to later interpretations of the Southern legend) he descends to the Underworld, then comes back in full godly power. This is, of course, the central figure of christian

mythology: the crucified and resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. The close similarity between the two legends was noticed by the Danish scholar Sophus Bugge as early as the 1880's: though the popularity of his theory has long since been superseded by the theory of a shamanic origin for Óðinn's ordeal, Bugge's arguments have yet to be convincingly disproved. Not only does Bugge consider the apparent resemblance between the suspended and stabbed deities, but he closely studies the similarities of language between *Hávamál* 138-39 and Germanic descriptions of Christ's death, mentioning particularly the common use of the Germanic "gallows"-word for translating 'cross'; also the "windy tree", the descriptions of the sacrificed god as "wounded", and, most telling from Bugge's point of view, the concept of a god sacrificed to himself.

The chief argument against Bugge's theory is that "we know now that the practices of hanging a victim on a tree and stabbing it with a spear are intimately connected with the cult of Óðinn and do not need an explanation from christian legends." However, Bugge does not ignore the native evidence for hanging and stabbing as a means of sacrifice within the cult of Óðinn; instead, he argues that the existing association between hanging/stabbing and the god made it particularly easy for the christian idea of a deity sacrificed to himself to be assimilated into Germanic belief, most probably--in his view--in the northern British Isles, where the two religions were in frequent contact. As further evidence for the overlapping perceptions of Óðinn and Christ in northern Britain, Bugge cites a folk ballad from Unst (Shetland):

Nine days he hang pa de rütless tree;
for ill wis da folk, in' güd wis he.
A blüdy mael (hole) wis in his side -
made wi' a lance 'at wid na hide.
Nine lang nichts i' da nippin rime
hang he dare wi' his naeked limb.
Some, dey leuch (laugh);
Bit idders gret (weep).

As Turville-Petre observes, "If the myth of the hanging Óðinn did not derive from the legend of the dying Christ, the two scenes resembled each other so closely that they came to be confused in popular tradition". What we cannot know, however, is if this song (as Bugge believed) represented a genuine conflation of the cult of Óðinn and the cult of Christ in the heathen period, or if it, like many manifestations of folk christianity in areas where elements of traditional religions survived strongly, is merely a substitution of the publicly accepted name and mythic framework for the original heathen belief.

Between Asiatic shamanism and Middle Eastern religion filtered through Germanic and/or Celtic coverts, it is difficult to determine which, if either, might have influenced Óðinn's rune-winning ordeal. Both the shaman's initiation and the christian myth show strong similarities to the legend of Óðinn on the tree; both also, however, differ from it in significant--indeed, crucial--points.

The first difficulty in seeing Óðinn as a shaman lies in the lack of evidence for full-blown shamanism among the Germanic peoples. Shamanism is, in general, characteristic of nomadic peoples--most often hunter-gatherer tribes, but occasionally pastoralists or horticulturalists; it normally gives way to organized, "cultic" religion as part of the process of adaptation to a settled agricultural lifestyle of the sort which the Germanic peoples have enjoyed since the latter part of the Stone Age. While many Norsemen (and women) demonstrated some skills typical of the shamanic complex (for instance: berserks were capable of reaching, occasionally at will, a state of excitation in which they showed superhuman physical strength and sometimes could not be harmed by fire or sharp objects; a number of characters in the sagas--other than the example cited for Óðinn above--are able to shift shapes and roam about as animals while their bodies lie asleep; the Greenland seeress in *Eiríks saga rauða* is able to summon spirits and ask them about when a famine will end), none of them demonstrate anything resembling the various range of capabilities typical of a tribal shaman, nor are there any figures in the Norse sources who perform the

central social role of the shaman among a traditional people.” Where shamans exist, they are the centre of the native community . . . (The shaman) is, so to speak, the regulator of the soul of the group or tribe, and his function is to adjust, avert and heal defects, vacillations, disturbances, and diseases of this soul.” In other words, his duty is to act as spiritual leader for the tribe and intermediary between it and the spirit-world, to heal illnesses of body and soul, to ensure the proper relationships between the dead and the living, and in general to ensure that all goes well by keeping this world and the Otherworld in balance and communication.

In regards to the specific ordeal of hanging/experiencing death to learn the runes, Óðinn is not, so far as we know, undergoing an initiation which is typical in any way: within the Germanic context, his experience has no predecessors and is never repeated. The shaman, in contrast, is not alone in his experiences: every tribe has its own shaman, and while the initiation may vary depending on the individual, the elements are consistent and, within a general framework, expected. Further, as Jere Fleck has pointed out, Óðinn’s tree-death is not typical for shamanism: the usual shamanic death-initiation is one of dismemberment and reconstruction. The shamanic tree-climbing, on the other hand, is associated not with initiation, but with the journey to the Otherworld, usually the upper world: shamans are not hanged.

Finally, there is the sacrifice itself and the terms in which it is put, together with the wide-ranging body of evidence for the combination of hanging and stabbing as a means of human sacrifice: Óðinn is slain in just the same manner as his own human offerings. One cannot, for instance, interpret the scene on the Hammars I stone as showing a shamanic initiation. The story of King Víkarr in *Gautreks saga* is even more telling: Víkarr is set up for a symbolic sacrifice of a sort which looks a great deal like an initiation--since his men do not want to slay him, they have put a noose of soft calf-gut around his neck, and a reed is ready to be cast at him in place of a spear. However, Óðinn has already arranged matters: at the moment when his hero Starkaðr says, “I give you to Óðinn” and throws the reed, the frail plant becomes a spear and the yielding calf-gut a stout rope. Thus the god gets his sacrifice--and there is no chance of Víkarr returning from the Otherworld as a shaman. The language of *Hávamál* also shows that the composer saw Óðinn’s ordeal as falling into the same ritual-religious sphere as that of ordinary sacrifices to him: the phrase “gefinn Óðni”--*given to Óðinn*--indicates precisely that. As the late Hector Munro Chadwick observes, “The bearing of the story related in *Gautreks* s. 7 (the story of Víkarr) . . . on Háv. 138 is obvious. The nature of the connection between the two passages ought to be equally clear, namely that we have in both cases a picture of the ordinary ritual of sacrifice to Óðinn.”

None of these things argue against Bugge’s view of a christian origin for Óðinn’s ordeal: the concept of a god sacrificed to himself is, if anything, easier to fit into this context. However, the situations and result are drastically different. Jesus is said to be dying for the sins of a tainted world, suffering the worst of human pains, including rejection by his heavenly father (“My god, my god, why have you forsaken me?”); neither knowledge nor power are among his motives. Óðinn’s ordeal is, so far as we can tell, undergone for the specific purpose of learning the knowledge he can only achieve through death and gaining the power that he can only achieve through receiving the mightiest of all sacrifices--the sacrifice of the god that he already is. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with Óðinn’s world as there is with Jesus’: the Northern god has nothing to set to rights, he has only to further learning and growth (first his own, then that of those he teaches). Nor is there any reason to think that the concept of a godly sacrifice, even a god sacrificed to himself, was beyond the comprehension of the Norse. A god that can be killed can be sacrificed, after all--the slain Baldr is even specifically referred to as *heilagr tafr*--“holy sacrifice”, in Ulfr Uggason’s *Húsdrápa* (a description of an interior mural depicting Baldr’s ship-funeral, written ca. 983). And the sacrifices which seem to have been associated most with specific gods are the sacrifices of the creatures which themselves embody the power of the deity: swine and horses for Freyr, for instance--and warriors, particularly his own heroes, for Wotan. It is, therefore, no great leap to see the god choosing to sacrifice himself to himself.

This choice is entirely in keeping with everything we know of Óðinn’s character, with the risks he takes and the prices he pays: for access to Mímir’s well, he gives up one eye; to

win the mead of poetry, as described below, he must break an oath sworn on a holy arm-ring; he is willing to hazard his head to gain Vafthrúðnir's lore--and to give up his life to gain the knowledge of the runes and the strength he receives from the sacrifice of self to self. Precise details of external influence on this latter deed, whether Siberian or Middle Eastern, will perhaps never be ascertained. But if either, or both, were part of the inspiration leading ultimately to the Northern poet's description of the winning of the runes, the Germanic worldview transformed any such influences beyond recognition, by setting them into the traditional context of ritual sacrifice to Óðinn and providing a motivation typical of the god. His death by hanging itself is especially significant because, in the Norse sources, the corpses of hanged men are specifically identified as the sources of wisdom. There is no way to tell whether such hanged were originally sacrifices, or whether any dangling corpse would do, but it is safe to say that these dead men are not themselves shamans, nor in any way related to christian myth, and that it is perhaps more reasonable to seek the most direct origins of the god's ordeal in immediately attested native belief. As Turville-Petre observes, "Óðinn, swinging on the tree of the world, was in the company of the dead, sharing the wisdom which only they possess . . . If wisdom could be won from a dead delinquent swinging on the gallows, how much more could be gained from Óðinn after he had passed through the world of death . . . There is no way to master all the wisdom of the dead but to die."

We can fairly safely state that, in the Norse view, whatever outside influences may have been present, that Óðinn almost certainly experienced genuine death, and as not merely a dead man, but that special kind, a hanged man (and a sacrifice to boot), he was able to look down into the Underworld and take up (or "understand": the Norse phrase can be translated either way) its "runes". It might, perhaps, even be speculated that he was able to bring himself back to life with them just as he boasts later in *Hávamál* 157 that

. . . if I see up on a tree
a wavering hanged corpse,
So I cut and colour the runes,
that the man may walk
and talk with me.

The distinction between a god of the dead and the dead in his keeping is not necessarily an easy one to make, and, as discussed above, Óðinn shares certain telling characteristics with the dead.

With this as a signpost to Wotan's own nature, his right to raise up heroes and call them to himself grows clearer. He can challenge others to die, because he himself has died: he is not only the god of death, but himself the greatest of the mighty dead.

But what of the mysterious "runes" themselves--this root of Wotan's power, so it seems? Some things can be known for certain: first, that the "rune"-word probably did not originally refer to the letters of the Germanic alphabet (usually referred to as the "futhark"--the name comes from the first six letters of the runic alphabet: F, U, Th, A, R, K). The origin of the word is unclear, perhaps being related to the German "raunen" (whisper); probably having something to do with speech. The earliest inscription using the word, the Einang stone (Norway ca. 300 C.E.), reads only "GudagastiR coloured the rune"--here referring to the whole inscription. It is not until the fifth century or so that the word seems to be used to indicate the individual staves, with the phrase **runorunu** "a run of runes" or "a row of runes" appearing on the Björketorp and Stentoften stones. Still, the older meaning of rune = phrase may have survived in the Norse: over six hundred years after the carving of the Einang stone, if the verse and saga can be trusted, Egill Skalla-Grímsson says, "I carve a rune on the horn" (for the purpose of revealing a poisoned drink), perhaps referring to his verse or a portion thereof. C. Fell has observed that in Old English, the "rune"-word can mean "discussion", "counsel", and "knowledge", as well as "secret"; the frequent usage in christian contexts suggests that if it were part of the terminology of Anglo-Saxon religion, it was only so in the general sense that all religions have "mysteries", "knowledge", or "significant sayings", and was unlikely to have been intrinsically

associated with native magical or religious practices. In general, “rune” seems most likely to have originally indicated a “significant saying”, whether its chief effect was meant to be felt in this world or another.

The question of whether the rune-staves themselves were originally seen as magical tools, or simply as letters, has received a great deal of discussion, which is far outside the scope of

this book. Like the tree on which Wotan won them, we can say of the runes that “no one knows from what roots they rise”: their shapes (vertical and slanting strokes only, with horizontals strictly avoided) show that they were developed chiefly for carving on wood, but none of these original wooden inscriptions have survived; all our earliest examples of runic inscriptions are on stone and metal. Unless and until some hitherto unknown staves surface, say from a peat-marsh in Germany, we will not know if the first runesters were carving charms and curses, deep god-lore, merchants’ tallies, or personal communications similar to the mediaeval rune-stave from Bergen which reads, “Gyða says you should come home” (Gyða’s husband was apparently at a pub; the other side of the stave is covered with illegible scratches, possibly meant to say something along the lines of, “Thórólfr says Gyða should shut up”).

We do know that, by the sixth century or so, there was some use of runes for magical, as well as memorial, purposes. A fairly common form of adornment at this time, which often seems to have been seen as a form of amulet, was the type of pendant known as a “bracteate”.

These bracteates were originally inspired by the design of Roman coins, many of which showed images that also meant a great deal within the Germanic culture (a man on horseback, sometimes carrying a spear, which might have been easiest for the Northerners to interpret as Wotan but could also have been read, for instance, as any of the great heroes; a wolf suckling a pair of children--several of the great dynasties of the North, such as the East Anglian Wuffings, or “Wolfings”, were said to be descended from or in other ways associated with wolves). Native Germanic artists, however, quickly claimed the images as their own, transforming the realistic Roman artwork into their own elaborately stylized figures--active, swirling, chimerically hypnotic shapes bordering on the abstract. Many of these bracteates are inscribed with runes, some of which seem to have specifically magical or religious purposes, such as Darum I, which shows the bust of a man with upraised hands and reads *frohila laPu--FROHILA LAPU* (“Frohila invites”)--a formula generally taken to suggest the invitation of gods or other mighty beings to bring weal to the wearer --or the bracteate from Sjælland which reads, “I am called Hariuha, wise about dangers: I give *auja* (a word which appears elsewhere in runic inscriptions and can be interpreted as “good luck” or protection)”; the formula *alu, ALU*, which appears to be from the same root as the “ale” word, is also found several times, and appears, like *AUJA*, to mean “good luck” or “protection”.

In addition to these examples, where the power could reasonably be seen as lying in the word rather than the staves, there are a number of bracteates with so-called “nonsense inscriptions”--some of which are clearly garbled by illiterate goldsmiths, others of which leave the possibility open for seeing power in the runestaves themselves. The names of the runes, which were probably established at least by the fifth or sixth century (since many of them are consistent in Old English and Old Norse), have also led some to speculate as to their possible cultic or magical uses. Often, interpretations based on this theory have been taken to absurd extremes; but in some cases, speculations about a connection between runic names and runic magic have reasonable backing. For instance: the F-rune, *f*, has the reconstructed name **fehu*, “wealth” (Old English *feoh*, from whence comes our modern “fee”, and the Old Norse *fé*; the latter also implies herd animals, a measure of wealth in the old days, and is still used in Modern Icelandic for “sheep”). In the seventh century, a man named Haduwulfar carved a stone (the Gummarp stone) to read, “Haduwulfar placed three staves: *fff*”--clearly a charm to bring fruitfulness and prosperity.

In Viking Age literature, in contrast, we have a great deal of evidence, not only for magic being carried out by means of words or phrases written in runes, but for magic in the staves themselves. The valkyrie Sigrdrífa advises Sigurðr of a great many uses for runes, all of which involve carving and some of which name specific staves.

You shall ken victory runes if you will have victory,
 and rist them on hilt of the blade,
 some on the guard-ring, some on the hilt-plate,
 and two times name Týr (the name of a rune-stave as well as a god).

You shall ken ale-runes if you wish that another's woman
 not betray your troth, if you trust;
 you shall rist them on horn and on back of the hand,
 and mark Nauðr (a rune-name) on your nail . . .

These are beech-runes, and those are warding-runes,
 and all ale-runes,
 and mighty runes of main.
 he who knows them unconfused and undestroyed,
 shall have them for good,
 for use, if you take them,
 until the doom of the gods.

The poem *Skírnismál* includes a runic curse made operant by the carving of the rune thurisaz (Þ) and “three staves--perversion, loathing, and lust”, and cancelled by scraping the runes off (verse 36). Given the available information, it is quite easy to suspect a development from rune = significant phrase (Einang stone, preserved in Old English) to rune = stave transcribing such a phrase (Björketorp stone) to rune = sign with its own name, which may be used as an abbreviation for the name--as in the Stentofte stone, which reads “Haduwolfar gave j (the J-rune *jera*--“harvest”)”--to rune = embodiment of the power of the name (Gummarp stone) to rune = a sign which can be used to bring all the characteristics associated with its name into an operant inscription (*Sigrdrífumál*, *Skírnismál*), with the older meanings surviving beside the younger.

It should also be remembered that in the Viking Age and the period immediately following, even if rune-staves *could* be seen as magical, they did not *have* to be magical: we have a great many simple inscriptions ranging from “Ketill owns this comb” and “Gyðja says you should come home” to a few graffitos which would not be out of place on the walls of any men's room frequented by sailors, such as one of the Bergen inscriptions which plays on the repetition of the word “fuþ”--the first three letters of the futhark, but also a coarse slang-word for the female genitals. The distinction seems to have lain in what was done during the carving: runes intended to have some effect beyond simple communication were coloured (with blood, according to the sagas) and chanted over.

Indeed, while runic poetry is by no means necessarily magical, runic magic appears to have almost always been poetic. Snorri tells us in *Ynglinga saga* that Óðinn taught his accomplishments “with runes and those songs, which are called *galdrar* (magical songs)”. When Egill Skalla-Grímsson receives with suspicion the horn of drink brought to him by his enemies Queen Gunnhildr (Eiríkr Blood-Axe's wife) and Barðr, he “drew then his knife and stuck it in his palm; he took the horn and carved runes on it and reddened them in blood”. The carving and colouring of his “rune” go together with his speaking of a verse declaring, in good magical fashion, what he is doing and the effect it must have, as indeed it does:

I rist the rune on the horn,
 I redden the spells in blood,
 I choose the words at the root
 of the wood of the wild beast's ear (the drinking horn).
 I drink, as I will, feast-ale
 of the well-gladdened bondsmoids,
 let be known what lies for me
 in the ale that Barðr signed!

The horn burst asunder and the drink fell down into the straw.

A similar description appears in the saga of the famous outlaw, Grettir the Strong. Grettir has wounded an old witch in return for her wish that all his luck and happiness turn from him; as revenge, the woman goes to the beach across from the island where Grettir is holed up and finds an uprooted stump, on which “She let a little flat place be shaved . . . then she took her knife and risted runes on the root and reddened them in her blood and sang *galdrar* over them. She went backwards and widdershins around the tree and had there many mighty utterances over it. After that she let the tree be pushed out into the water and spoke thus: that it should drive out to Drangey, and be all harm to Grettir.” Grettir later tries to chop the tree up; his axe slips and hits his leg, and the wound becomes infected and weakens him so that when his enemies come for him, they are finally able to kill him. The witch’s use of magic to harm a man who is too physically strong for any other man (including her own foster son), let alone an old woman, to meet face to face, is not surprising in any genre of mediaeval literature. What is more interesting is that the same technique of chanting over bloodied runes was also used, in an honourable and admirable context, by one of the strongest and fiercest of warrior Vikings to protect himself against the weapons of those who did not dare to face him outright. This is a reversal of the expected perception of magic as the last resort of the weak or socially displaced; it is also, perhaps, a telling observation of the equal importance of mental, spiritual, and physical skills in the Northern culture--especially the highly respected skill of word-craft.

The direct association between songs and magical staves also appears, literally, in the *ale* *Sigrdrífa* brings *Sigurðr*, which is “full of might and mainstrength glorious / it is blended with songs and staves of liking, / good *galdrar* and pleasure-runes” (*Sigrdrífumál* 5). Later in the poem, *Sigrdrífa* speaks of the mighty runes she has taught *Sigurðr* as being scratched, scraped off, and mixed into “the holy mead” to be sent out through the worlds; it is not stated that this mead is the mead of poetry, but the leap would not be too far.

Speech in general could also be spoken of as “staves”, suggesting that the unity of the words (and the power behind them) with the runic letters in which they could be written was firmly set in the Norse mind. Such a usage, again in a magical context, appears far away from *Sigrdrífa*’s holy mountain shimmering with dawn-fire. Rather than dawn, the time is sunset: the site is a burial mound in which twelve undead berserks dwell, and the fire that burns around it is the unearthly fire of the barrow. Instead of a man awaking an armour-clad woman, it is an armour-clad woman, the warrior-maid *Hervör*, who comes to call forth her dead father *Angantýr* and demand the sword of power, *Týrfingr*, which is her inheritance (and may have at some point come to embody the leadership of her tribe). She does so with a mighty curse,

“Hail thee, *Angantýr*! *Hervör* wakes you,
the only daughter of yourself and *Sváva*.
Bring from the howe the hard-edged blade,
that which *Sigrlami* sought from the dwarves.

Hervarðr, *Hjörvarðr*, *Hrani*, *Angantýr*!
I waken all of you, wide roots beneath,
with helm and byrnie, with harshest sword-edge,
with shield, shield-rim, and spear-point red . . .

Hervarðr, *Hjörvarðr*, *Hrani*, *Angantýr*!
So be to all of you, inside your rib-cage,
as if you mouldered in mound of ants,
unless you bring me the blade forged by *Dválnir*;
unseemly ‘tis for dead men dear weapons to bear.”

At last the corpse within the barrow answers her:

“*Hervör*, daughter, why do you call so,

full of foul staves? you fare towards ill,
 you have grown mad, miswitted as well,
 wildly thinking to wake up dead men.”

Here, though no runes are carved, the “staves” are still present in the verses that Hervör has spoken (Angantýr argues with her for some time, prophesying that the sword will be the destruction of her descendants in days to come, but neither the sight of the dead man standing before her, his dark words, nor the unearthly flames between the world daunt her will; and at last he brings out the blade for her). Wotan’s gift still provides the power to link the living and the dead, as Hervör makes clear when she tells her reluctant father that “So would the god let you rest, whole in your howe, if you did not hold Týrfingr with you”-- “the god” here surely being none other than Wotan, who boasted in *Hávamál* 157 of knowing that song by which, with the carving and colouring of runes, he can make a dead man walk and speak.

That this unity of runestaves, poetry, and magic was a matter of more than literature is shown to us, ironically, by the churchman Hrabanus Maurus--a member of the court of Charlemagne, that great promoter of cultural genocide against heathens. In *De Inventione Linguarum*, along with many other alphabets, Hrabanus Maurus provides a (slightly garbled) variant of the runes, mentioning their connection with “songs” and “incantations”, together with, in the “A” version of the manuscript, “divination” and “pagan rites” (these are left out of the “B” version--which may have had an English redactor, since the runic alphabet apparently had no connection with either of these things in England at that time).

Wotan’s own words in *Hávamál*, too, bring the three together:

. . . I took up the runes, roaring I took them,
 I fell afterwards from there.

Nine mighty songs got I from the well-known son
 of Bölthorn, Bestla’s father,
 and I got a drink of the dear-bought mead
 sprinkled from Óðrœrir.

Then I began to grow and to become wise,
 to wax and to do well:
 word from word to word on led me,
 work from work to work on led me.

Runes you shall find . . .

The runestaves, the mighty songs, and the mead appear here as the threefold source of Óðinn’s power; Peter Buchholtz even suggests that the three gifts can be seen as offering a magical fulfilment corresponding to the god’s threefold torment (hanging, spearing, and starvation/thirst). Further, these verses (and the ones immediately following about the power and recommended usage of the runes--see Appendix I) both connect the episodes of the winning of runes and mead to each other and lead directly into the final section of the poem, in which Óðinn lists his magical songs and their uses. Although doubt has been cast on the original structure of *Hávamál*, this section--which is set aside by a large red capital letter in the manuscript--seems well-unified in concept and progression. The magic of the runes seems, then, to be the magic of the staves through which the might of the poetry is made clear, sung over and reddened in blood: even as the runes give Wotan the tool for bringing his songs forth, it is his poetic and sorcerous craft which imbues them with the force that separates the “very great staves, very powerful staves, which Fimbulþulr (Wotan) coloured and the great powers made and Hropt-r-of-the-gods (Wotan) carved” (*Hávamál* 142) from the ordinary letters in which Vikings scratched graffiti on their gnawed bones after a good dinner or identified the owners of combs and boxes.

Finally, it hardly seems coincidental that a considerable portion of our surviving runic

inscriptions are specifically on memorial stones for the dead. Stone is, of course, far more likely to survive the ravages of the years than bone or wood, on which the majority of inscriptions were probably carved. Nevertheless, from the early Migration Age onward, runestaves were inextricably connected, to the Northern mind, with the creation of a lasting memory: Óðinn observes himself in *Hávamál* 72 that,

A son is better though he be born
after the warrior is gone.
Seldom memory-stones stand near the road,
unless raised by kinsman for kin.

Indeed, the typical runestone inscription reads something like “Thórsteinn and Helga raised this stone after Ketill their father”, perhaps with a brief epigraph such as, “a good man” or “he fell in the east with Yngvi”, or with the dead person’s position named. The importance of these memorials is shown by the fact that, at least by the end of the Viking Age and for some time into the Christian period, there were a number of professional carvers of runestones, and even recognisable schools of runestone art. Though their letters were, perhaps, mysterious even to some of the folk who paid to have the stones carved, the assurance that the names of their kin (and their own) would be remembered was enough.

God of Poetry

“I did not get Ygg’s booty (poetry) under a hanged man” boasts the Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson in *Jómsvíkingadrápa*. Here the Christian poet is subverting the heathen convention of describing poetry in terms of the mead of inspiration that Óðinn won and attributing his own craft thereby to the god. As I have discussed in earlier chapters, poetry was one of the most important gifts of the Northerners—it was the chief mechanism for memorializing heroic deeds and deaths; it was the means by which name and fame lived on. That it should stem directly from Valhalla’s lord is little surprise, given that the poet’s words and the Hall of the Slain are so interwoven that there is hardly any parting one from the other; where it came from, and how it was one, tell us more of Wotan’s right to hold it and deal it out.

According to the *Prose Edda*, and backed up in many particulars by kennings from older poetry, after the war of the two godly tribes of the Æsir and Vanir (which seems to have ended in a draw with an exchange of hostages, whereby the Vanic god Freyr and his father Njörðr’s came to live with the Æsir), the two tribes sealed their treaty by chewing berries and spitting into a pot, from which arose a being called Kvasir, the wisest of all wights (Kvasir’s name seems to be derived from a word for a berry-fermented drink; Simek observes that “In archaic cultures, the method for the production of such a drink was that the berries were chewed (as a communal practice) and then spat into a vessel”).

Kvasir was murdered by a pair of dwarves, who brewed mead out of his heartblood mixed with honey and put it, according to Snorri, in the cauldron Óðrœrir (“Voice-Stirrer”) and the two vessels Boðn (“Vessel”) and Són (“Reconciliation”). The dwarves are, of course, typically the greatest smiths of the Germanic world, so their role as makers here is not surprising. It is also, however, interesting that the dwarves are not only associated with the underworld, in which they live and work, but, rather than being characterized largely as natural beings associated with rock, ore, and so forth, are often associated specifically with the dead. Dwarf-names listed in the Elder Edda include *Dáinn* (“Dead One”) and *Nár* (Corpse); other telling names include *Bláinn* (“Blue-Black One”) and *Eggmóinn* (“Slain by the Sword”). According to Snorri, the dwarves were made out of the maggots crawling in the dead flesh of the giant Ymir.

After brewing the mead, the dwarves chanced to murder a giant couple; the couple’s son, Suttungr, responded by putting them out on a skerry at low tide and threatening to let them drown unless they gave him the mead. They did so; Suttungr took it away and hid it beneath the mountain Hnitborg, setting his daughter Gunnlōð to guard it.

Hávamál and Snorri differ here on what happened next. In *Hávamál* (see Appendix I) Óðinn came to Suttungr’s hall as a guest, going by the name Bölverkr (Evil-Worker),

impressing the etins with his speech (104), and swearing an oath on a holy ring--perhaps a vow of marriage--to Gunnlöð. Snorri adds an episode in which Óðinn/Bölverkr tricks the workers of Suttungr's brother Baugi into killing each other, then takes their place and asks for a drink of the mead as payment. Baugi first bores the hole into the mountain where the mead was hidden, then stabs at the snake-shaped Óðinn as he crawls down it (A.G. van Hamel concludes from this that there were at least two original versions: one in which Baugi was the keeper of the mead who offered Óðinn a sip as payment, saw the god drink the whole cauldron, and struck at him as he retreated; one generally following the outline of *Hávamál*). Snorri continues by having Óðinn get into the mountain by this method, meet Gunnlöð, and seduce her into letting him drink from the cauldron. In any case, the hiding place of the mead is certainly underground and the god must pass through a narrow hole in the rock to make his escape. Snorri then describes how Óðinn, once free, became an eagle, flying back to Ásgarðr with his booty and spewing it out into cauldrons as he passed Ásgarðr's walls; Snorri adds that a few drops fell outside for anyone to gather, "and that is called the fool-poet's share"--a reading based, perhaps, on Thórarinn stuttfeldr's contemptuous reference in one of his verses to an inferior contemporary's work as "the mud of the old eagle".

As a result of this adventure, Óðinn becomes the chief possessor of the mead, sips of which he can grant to those he wishes to favour: he is thus the source of all poetry. The story itself seems to come from an Indo-European original describing the theft of a drink of power by an eagle, who brings it to the gods. It is interesting, however, to note the elements which were specialized by the Norse. In the Vedas, the drink is *soma*, a drink which generally supplies all forms of power, of which poetry is only one aspect: "Soma is said to stimulate the voice, and to be the leader of poets. Those who drink it become immortal and know the gods. Soma gives strength to gods and men . . . Indra, filled with soma, conquered the monster Vritra, and fortified with it he performed many a mighty feat." The *soma* is not kept underground, but in an iron fortress; in one version of the story, the eagle is not any of the gods, but in the *soma* prayers, Indra (a storm-god noted for his strength, similar to Thórr in several respects) is also hailed as an eagle. The elements of the under worldly hiding place, and the creation of the drink through death and perhaps in the world of the dead, are absent in the Indian version, while the Norse mead is only the producer of poetry: it does not, for instance, fortify Thórr in his battles with giants.

The Norse understanding of poetry as stemming from death and as the possession of the death-god Wotan is thoroughly understandable when two of its most common purposes are considered: the commemoration of battles in praise poems for the living, and the memorialization of the dead. That the Norse were aware of this shows up in the sophisticated interplay of the raven, the valkyrie, and the skald who describes their dialogue in the early tenth century *Hrafnsmál*. The poem is a praise-poem for Haraldr Hairfair: the raven is telling the valkyrie of Haraldr's deeds, with special emphasis on his making offerings to Óðinn in battle. Since Haraldr is still alive, the context is significantly different from that of the Valhöll poems: however, *Hrafnsmál* can be clearly seen as belonging to the genre in which a hero's deeds are reckoned up by either Óðinn himself or, in this case, two of his messengers.

The truly interesting subtext, however, is the unspoken identity of the poet with the two followers of battle--the carrion-breathed raven and the bloodthirsty valkyrie. Battle-dead feed the skald as well as the raven (and Óðinn): the raven eats the corpses King Haraldr has left on the field to be received as sacrifices by Óðinn, but the skald expects to be paid by Haraldr for composing the poem about the bodies the king has strewn over the strand. The deliberate pun is emphasized by the skald's nickname: Thórbjörn, called hornklofi--because "hornklofi" is a by-name for a raven. And, indeed, the valkyries questioning suggests that the raven should especially know about how skalds fare with Haraldr:

I will ask you of the skalds' state,
for you seem to know all well,
how the poets fare -
you should know it clearly.

Although this is the most direct and obvious way in which Óðinn functions as a god of poetry--since most of what we know about his role in this respect comes from the references of professional skalds--the concept of poetry (and related word-skills) as being a gift from the Otherworld, or the dead, extends much farther. In Celtic tradition, one could sit on certain burial mounds, as a result of which one would either become a poet or go mad. A similar story appears in the *þáttr Þórleifs jarlaskálds*: after Þórleifr's death,

(the shepherd) was called Hallbjörn . . . he was most often accustomed to come to Þórleifr's howe and slept there at night and kept his sheep laid nearby. That once came into his thoughts that he would like to get the words for a certain poem of praise about the howe-dweller and speak it while he laid on the howe. And the reason for this was because he was not a skald and he had never gotten the craft; he did not get the poem and nothing more of poetry came to him but that he made this:

Here lies a skald.

but he could get no poem more. That was one night like many when he lay on the howe and thought upon the staves if he could get some praise of the howe-dweller. After that he went to sleep and after that he saw that the howe opened and out of it walked a very large and well-adorned man. He walked up the howe to Hallbjörn and said: 'There you lie, Hallbjörn, and you wish hard for that which is not given to you: to work a praise-poem about me. And it is a fair return that you become set in this accomplishment, and you shall get much more of it from me than most other men, and it is to be expected that you need to struggle no longer over this. I shall now speak a verse for you and if you can take this verse and remember it when you wake then you shall be a folk-skald and work praise-poems for many chieftains and you shall become greatly skilled in this accomplishment.'

Hallbjörn did remember the verse, and became a great skald afterwards, as the dead Þórleifr had promised. It is particularly worth noting the constant emphasis on the phrase "getting the craft", "getting a poem", etc.: this emphasises the importance of poetic skill as a gift from the Otherworld, whether directly from Óðinn or, as here, from one of his host of the dead.

The gift of poetry from the dead goes along with the gifts of magic and prophecy also held by the dead. In the Eddic poem *Svipdagsmál*, when the hero Svipdagr is preparing to make the dangerous journey into Jötunheimr to woo the maiden Mengloð, he first goes to the burial mound of his mother, the seeress Groa, and says,

"Awake, Groa! Good woman, awake!
I waken you at death-door:
do you remember how you bade your son
to go to your howe? . . .

Speak you the spells that will speed my way!
Ward and shelter your son!
Full of peril, ween I the fearsome journey
for one so young of years."

Groa chants spells against all the perils of the road, including high water and storms, capture by foemen, cold, verbal challenges, and the wandering ghosts of christians, concluding,

"May your errand no longer ill seem to you,
nor hold you from your love.
On earth-fast stone stood I inside doors
while I spoke these spells for you."

A very similar scene appears in *Baldrs draumr*, when Wotan awakes the dead seeress to explain Baldr's dreams: the dead who were wise and mighty in life are yet wiser and stronger in death, and it is their power that must be drawn forth from the Otherworld. While their awakening is by no means a power limited to Wotan, any more than is the use of runes or magical songs, he is the chief holder of the skill, the figure who is most noted for bridging the gap between the living and the dead so that the two may speak and work upon one another.

Wotan Among the Gods

Despite Wotan's dark and furious aspects, he is often seen as chieftain and patriarch of Ásgarðr, based primarily on Snorri's descriptions. Here, however, Snorri's familiarity with Classical mythology betrays him, when he puts Wotan in the same category as Zeus by declaring that "Óðinn is the greatest and eldest of the Æsir; he rules over everything, and although the other gods are mighty, they all serve him as children their father." (*Snorra Edda*, p. 27). Neither in the myths nor in the surviving fragments of religious practice does Wotan appear as able to give orders to other deities, nor do they seem to show him honour beyond that respect due to his accomplishments. Accounts of heathen temples more often put Thórr or Freyr in the chief place: for instance, in Adam of Bremen's description of the statues in the great temple at Old Uppsala, it is Thórr whose image is set in the central and highest place; when Óláfr Tryggvason visits Trondheim in order to vandalize the temples there, his attentions are directed against the image of Thórr on his first trip, against the image of Freyr on his second.

If Wotan is not the godly ruler and patriarch, that Snorri and most popular books on Norse mythology present him as being, what is his role? Firstly, he is the bringer and teacher of his special crafts: poetry, runes, and magic. As *Hávamál* 143 describes, apparently in regards to the teachers of the runes to the various wights of the worlds (if these are not names taken by Wotan among the different beings):

Óðinn among the gods, but Dáinn ("Dead One") for the alfs,
Dvalinn for the dwarves,
Ásviðr for the etins,
I carved some myself.

A similar description appears in *Sigrdrífumál* 18: after Óðinn's learning of the runes, he scrapes them into the holy mead to send out and,

These are with the gods these with the alfs,
some with the wise Vanir,
some with human beings.

While many of the gods and goddesses have magical skills, Óðinn appears to be the chief magician among the gods--a role which may be quite ancient and widespread, as it appears in an Old High German charm for a horse with a wounded foot:

Wodan and Phol fared to the wood,
then the lord's horse broke its foot.
Then chanted Sinthgunt, Sunna her sister,
Then chanted Frija (Frigg), Folla her sister,
Then chanted Wodan as well he was able,
Thus be the bone-sprain, thus be the limb-sprain, thus be the blood-sprain,
bone to bone
limb to limb
blood to blood
so be the binding.

Many other versions of this charm appear, including one with Jesus as the master magician;

in all cases, the chanting of less-able wights, deities, heroes, or saints as the case may be, is climaxed by the working of the most powerful sorcerer.

As well as a magician and poet, Wotan is also a traveller. It is he who goes down to the gates of Hel or into Jötunheimr in search of information; it is also he who appears on Middle-Earth most often and has the most direct dealings with human beings. While this is usually for his own purposes--raising up and collecting his heroes or causing strife--it can also be seen that he is the god with the most immediate interest in the human realm. Thórr's battles are always on the supernatural plane, whether he is fighting giants or the Midgard Serpent; he is seldom seen walking upon the earth. Wotan, in contrast, wanders in and out of the sagas, advising his heroes and arranging things as they should go. Unlike Thórr, who always travels with a friend or two (usually Loki and his human servants Thjálfí and Röskva), Wotan goes alone on his quests.

What is remarkable is that, although many of his activities seem to be those of persons normally set slightly apart from their society (when they are not downright anti-social), Wotan seems to be, if not quite the Jupiter-like patriarch often envisioned from Snorri's description, a god well-integrated into the community of gods. He is the husband of Frigg, who seems to deal chiefly with domestic matters and keeping the peace in the hall (as she does in *Lokasenna*, where she reminds Óðinn and Loki that no one wants to hear about the horrible things they did in their youth). He is also the father of Thórr, the mighty-thewed defender of gods and men alike, who, more than any other deity, seems to embody the social norms of the Viking Age: honest, straightforward, physically strong, possessed of an intelligence more practical than abstract, with a strong sense of propriety and responsibility. Óðinn is not above teasing his son (as happens in *Hárbarðzljóð*, where he appears in disguise and taunts Thórr until the latter is ready to hit him with his Hammer); but there is never any indication of active conflict between them, nor that one considers himself the effective superior of the other.

Part of the ease of Wotan's integration into the godly community probably stems from the importance of his chief function: as death-god, he holds a very special place in the relationship between the dead and the living which is one of the mainstays of Norse (or any other traditional) religion. Death, the dead, and the powers stemming from the world of the dead were not something to be carefully pushed aside or hedged off: they were, as has been discussed already, a vital part of the psychological and spiritual wholeness of Scandinavian life.

A second element, however, can also be seen in the presence of Wotan's blood-brother Loki. A giant who has sworn blood-brotherhood with Wotan and is therefore admitted to the ranks of the gods, Loki appears, most of the time, as a classical Trickster figure similar to the Native American Coyote (and, often, not all that dissimilar from Wile E. Coyote in the Roadrunner cartoons). He typically gets the gods into trouble, then gets them out of it, often improving their situation in the process but suffering some pain and embarrassment himself as a result of his tendency to over-elaborate his clever plans. It is Loki, for instance, who cuts off the hair of Thórr's wife Sif: to make up for it (and save his life), he gets some dwarves to forge hair of real gold for her, plus Freyr's ship *Skíðblaðnir*, which can run over both water and air and be folded down small enough to fit in a pocket, and Óðinn's spear *Gungnir*. Then, thrilled with his own success, Loki bets his head against the dwarf Brokk's that nothing better can be forged. Brokk's brother promptly forges Freyr's boar *Gullinbursti*, which can run over water and air as well as land and shines like the sun, Óðinn's ring *Draupnir*, which drops nine gold rings of weight equal to its own every ninth night, and Thórr's hammer *Mjölnir*. The gods decide that Brokk's offerings are the best; Loki gets out of losing his head by arguing that he said nothing about his neck and therefore Brokk cannot touch it, but the dwarf gets his own back by sewing up Loki's lips.

Like Wotan, Loki is often involved in getting things from the Otherworld for the gods (though sometimes he is responsible for their loss in the first place); like Wotan, he is verbally skilled and often considered to be untrustworthy. Unlike Wotan, however, Loki frequently appears as a humorous figure, often the originator of jokes and just as often their butt. And unlike Wotan, Loki is always perceived as something of an outsider--as the Lord of Misrule, the Trickster-clown whose inversion of social norms helps to reinforce the structure of society, and who therefore must eventually be cast out or otherwise suppressed.

In “The Problem of Loki”, de Vries, having made an extremely strong case for the original role of Loki as culture-hero, comments that, “Othin is certainly rather the positive, and Loki the negative side of the culture-hero type. This is already evident in the tale of their robberies: Othin steals the mead from the giants and for the benefit of mankind, but Loki on the contrary steals Iðunn from the gods to deliver her into the power of the demons. This is, indeed, exactly the contrast between the culture-hero and the trickster-deceiver”.

By embodying the humorous and undignified on the one hand (at one point, in order to make the giantess Skaði laugh, Loki ties one end of a rope to a goat and the other to his testicles), and, on the other, the forces of treachery and destruction (he is the father of the Wolf Fenrir, the Midgard Serpent, and the goddess Hel, and fights against the gods at the world’s end), Loki takes a certain amount of the shadow from Wotan. His presence clarifies the line between the insider and the outsider: though Wotan may steal, break oaths, and betray in order to serve his various purposes, his long-range goals and basic functions can, in the flickering light shed by Loki, be seen as directly constructive; whereas with Loki’s pranks, though the outcome is often constructive, there is a sense that mischievous humour is always verging on long-range disaster. Loki’s presence helps to keep Wotan’s place among the gods clear and firmly set; by scrambling roles and social norms in his own person, Loki, like other traditional Tricksters, makes it possible to keep the roles and rules of godly society sharply delineated.

Wotan and his Heroes

“Greatly ill-willing I think Óðinn to be,
and fearful am I of his thoughts . . .”

(*Hákonarmál* 15)

“Here are many come against us together now . . . but I cannot recognise Óðinn here;
yet I have the strongest suspicion that he must be rising up against us, the false
and untrothful son of Herjan . . .”

(*Hrólfs saga kraka ok Bjarkarímur*. Finnur Jónsson, ed. Copenhagen: Møller, 1904, p. 105)

These latter words, according to legend, were spoken by the were-bear Böðvar-Bjarki in his last battle beside his liege-lord Hrólfr kraki; in the Latin version of Bjarki’s verses, the bear-hero speaks of his desire to fight with the betraying god in person. The god’s ill-favour here is easy to explain: Óðinn has helped Hrólfr and his band with good advice when they risked their lives by guesting with their enemy King Aðils in Uppsala, but when he met them again and offered them strange-looking weapons of black iron, they refused the gift. Yet Hrólfr is not alone in the band of Wotan-heroes who fall before their god. Saxo Grammaticus tells the tale of Harald War-Tooth, charmed against the bite of iron by the god and always eager to make offerings to him--who, in his last battle, is brought down by the hand of the god himself. Óðinn disguises himself as the king’s charioteer, telling the aged and blind Harald “with a small smile upon his face” that Harald’s enemies have lined up against him in a *svínfylking* (swine-wedge) arrangement. This formation had been taught to Harald by Óðinn, and by this news, he knows that the god has turned against him. Óðinn himself cannot withdraw the invulnerability against sharp edges he has given Harald--so, when the time has come, he turns around and clubs Harald to death.

Wotan’s heroes live chancy lives. On the one hand, they get the help and guidance of the god, his manifold gifts and the promise of victory while it pleases him, and it is good to have his favour: as Freyja explains to the etin-woman Hyndla,

“Let us bid Host-Father in good heart to sit!
He pays out and gives gold to his followers
he gave to Hermóðr helm and byrnie
and to Sigmundr a sword to receive.

To some he gives victory and wealth to some,

wisdom to many and man-wit to men,
 he gives winds to sailors, word-skill to skalds,
 he gives manfulness to many warriors”

(*Hyndluljóð* 2-3).

On the other hand, the god's heroes know that in the end they will see him come against them, to claim their lives as his own booty: to embrace Wotan is to embrace death, to take up one's place in Valhalla. The choice of being a Wotan-hero is often the choice of Achilles: a short and glorious life, or a long and peaceful one--though sometimes with a third option that was not given to the Greek hero: a long life bright with victories, but lacking peace, and fuller than usual of trouble and pain . . . the hero sharing in the sufferings the old god himself feels, paying the same prices he pays for what he is driven by need to do.

The sharp distinction between the Wotan-hero and the ordinary person is brought out by the story of Starkaðr in *Gautreks saga*. The young Starkaðr is on the island with King Víkarr when the omens direct that the king be sacrificed, and a mock sacrifice, as mentioned above, is therefore planned. Starkaðr's foster-father, an old man called Hrosshágrani (Horse-hair Mustache), takes him to a house on another island where there are many people gathered. There, Thórr and the old man--Wotan--set to shaping Starkaðr's future in a manner similar to the magical duelling of the fairies who shape the future of Sleeping Beauty--each unable to directly undo the work of the other, but doing their best to counteract blessings and curses. Thórr cursing him (since he holds an ancestral grudge against Starkaðr, who is the grandson of a giant by the same name) and Wotan blessing him. Thórr says that Starkaðr shall have no descendants; Wotan grants him a lifespan thrice normal; Thórr adds that he shall do a nothing-work (dastardly deed) in each lifespan. Wotan says that Starkaðr shall have the best weapons and clothes; Thórr says that he shall never hold land; Wotan says that he shall always have riches; Thórr says that his gold will never be enough to meet his needs. Wotan states that Starkaðr shall always have victory in battle; Thórr, that he shall receive a grievous wound in every fight. Wotan says that he shall make poetry as fast as he can speak; Thórr says that he shall remember none of it. Wotan says that Starkaðr shall be a friend to princes and the best folk; Thórr adds that the common people shall always hate him. With his fate thus set, Starkaðr returns to his war band and performs the first of his nothing-works: the slaying of his friend King Víkarr in the mock-sacrifice. Barred from ordinary peace or contentment, he then wanders for two hundred years, collecting scars and leaving tales, doing Wotan's work where-ever he goes--not a comfortable fate, but a fate of greatness nevertheless. The ancient, gray-haired Starkaðr, who is still as eager for battle at the end of his long journeying as he was at the beginning, often seems to echo Óðinn as he urges men such as the young prince Ingeld on to battle and revenge: if he is not an avatar of the god, he at least seems to represent him and do his work in Miðgarðr.

However, the essence of the relationship between Wotan and his heroes is nowhere expressed as fully as in the death of Sigmundr the Völsung. Like Starkaðr's, Sigmundr's career has been long and tumultuous. It begins when a one-eyed man in a broad cloak enters his father's hall and drives a sword into the tree that holds the hall-roof up--a sword which, it turns out, can only be drawn by the young Sigmundr. Thereafter, his heroic string of successful battles shadowed by more than a decade of lurking in the woodland to take revenge on his sister's husband who had slain their father and brothers (during the course of which he fathers a son, Sinfjötli, on his sister and later turns into a werewolf with the boy). Then, after he has regained his place as a warleader, he loses Sinfjötli to his first wife's poison. Undaunted, Sigmundr weds again, but is ambushed by an unsuccessful suitor of his new wife Hjördís. In the battle,

(Sigmundr) had both arms bloody to the shoulders. But when the battle had gone on for some time, then came into the fight a man with a wide hat and blue-black cloak. He had one eye and a casting-spear in his hand. This man came against King Sigmundr and brandished the spear before him; and when King Sigmundr hewed

against him, the sword struck on the spear, and it broke asunder in two parts . . . Hjördis came among the slain after the battle at night, and came to the place where King Sigmundr lay, and asked if he could be healed. But he answered, "Many live when there is little hope of it, but my luck has turned from me, so that I will not be healed. It is not Óðinn's will that I draw sword again, since now it is broken. I have had my battles as long as it pleased him . . . You are carrying a boy-child. Rear him well and carefully, and that boy shall be the best and most famed of our clan. Ward well also the sword's pieces. From them shall be made a good sword, which shall be called Gramr and our son shall bear it and carry out many great works with it which shall never grow old, and his name shall live while the world lasts. Content yourself with that. But I am weary with my wounds, and I must now go to visit my kinsmen who have gone before me". (Völsunga saga, pp. 28-29).

Sigmundr's view of the god who gave him his sword, guided him in his long waiting for revenge, took up the body of his son, and has now taken his life, is very clearly the view of a thane (an oath-bound member of a warband) to his drighten (the leader of the warband, or *comitatus*). The leader of the warband seals his pledge of responsibility to his men with the gifts he gives them. In an earthly warband, these gifts are usually gold arm-rings (a leader was typically described as a "ring-giver"), byrnies, helms, and weapons; with the sword Wotan gives Sigmundr, the god also gives the promise of victory and luck. In return, the thane gives his loyalty and help--and, when the time comes, he lays down his life in battle for his drighten.

The death of a Wotan-hero is more than an ordinary death in battle for one's lord, however: it is, after all, Wotan's choice as to who shall fall, and Wotan who gains by the deaths of his followers as well as by their foes. They can, in fact, be seen as holy sacrifices--a relationship made explicit in the death of King Víkarr, who, according to *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, was given to the god only shortly after his conception, but allowed to grow and do battle until Wotan chose to take him as a sacrifice. The death of the hero Helgi Hunding's-Bane is presented in a similar manner: "Dagr, the son of Högni (whom Helgi had killed in order to win Högni's daughter Sigrún as his bride), made an offering to Óðinn for avenging his father. Óðinn lent Dagr his spear. Dagr found Helgi, his kinsman, at the place which is called Fetter-Grove. He went against Helgi with the spear. Helgi fell there." When Dagr tells his sister Sigrún what she has done, she curses him, to which he replies,

"Óðinn alone shaped all ill,
because among siblings strife-runes he bore."

The "Fetter-Grove" of this poem has often been associated with the holy grove of the Semnones which Tacitus talks about, a place given to the "god who rules all" where human sacrifice is practiced, and which "no one enters . . . unless he has been bound with a cord". For Helgi to be killed with Óðinn's spear in a grove whose name hints strongly at an association with the god, and to be received in Valhalla afterwards, suggests that, indeed, his death is an offering to Óðinn.

A similar scene appears in the German version of the story of the Völsungs and Nibelungs. While the Norse Sigurðr is murdered in his bed by a half-brother of Gunnar and Högni (very possibly introduced to save the honour of the two epic heroes), his German incarnation, Sigvrit (Siegfried), is speared from behind in a woodland by Hagen. In this version of the story, not only is Hagen an older advisor to Gunther whose counsel is usually harsh and martial, but sensibly cautions; but according to Continental tradition (as told in the Latin epic poem *Waltharius* and the lengthy Norse rendition of German heroic tales, *Thiðriks saga*), he is also one-eyed, having lost the other in a duel with his blood-brother Walther of Aquitaine. Questions can fairly be raised as to how much memory of Wotan might have survived to the time of *Nibelungenlied*'s composition (early 1200's; it bridges the gap between heroic epic and chivalric romance), or whether the poet(s) or hearers would have recognised the image of the wise warrior with graying hair, single eye, and upraised spear as reflecting Wotan. It can, however, be observed that the roots of the story

reach back at least to the Migration Age (an older origin has been argued for some particulars), and that thus, while it cannot be claimed that the death of Sigvrit in *Nibelungenlied* is told as a sacrifice to Wotan (a thought which might have horrified the poet), it is possible that the oral sources on which the poem was based could, indeed, have preserved a sacrificial memory.

The death of Siegfried has often been compared to the death of Wotan's own son Baldr as described by Snorri Sturluson in the Prose Edda and alluded to in *Völuspá* (a very different version of the story is told by Saxo Grammaticus). Both heroes are rendered invulnerable (Siegfried by bathing in the blood of the dragon, Baldr by virtue of his mother Frigg demanding an oath from everything in the nine worlds not to harm him); both, however, have one fatal flaw in their protection (a linden-leaf stuck to Siegfried's shoulder-blade, leaving that spot uncovered; Frigg forgot to ask an oath of the mistletoe, since she thought it was too weak to do Baldr any harm). In both cases, the weak spot is discovered by a clever ruse (Loki disguises himself as an old woman and interrogates Frigg; Hagen gets Siegfried's wife to mark the vulnerable spot on Siegfried's tunic for him, telling her that he wants to be able to protect the hero's back in battle); in both cases, a harmless game becomes the opportunity for the killing (Hagen challenges Siegfried to race to a certain stream after a day's hunting and spears him in the back there; when the gods are laughingly throwing weapons at the invulnerable Baldr, Loki puts the arrow of mistletoe in the hand of Baldr's blind brother Höðr and aims it).

A clear connection between Siegfried and Baldr cannot, perhaps, be proven (though it may be suspected). However, Baldr's death has several elements which may, again, hint at a Wotanic sacrificial original. The most direct of these is Úlfr Uggason's description of him as a holy sacrifice in the verses of *Húsdrápa* (8-9) describing Óðinn's place in the funeral procession:

Well-known Hropt-Týr (Óðinn) rides
to his son's wide bale-fire . . .
There I know that valkyries
follow the wise victory-tree (warrior)
and ravens, to the holy sacrifice's blood.

The image of Wotan, valkyries, and ravens faring together towards the blood of a sacrifice is a sight more typical of a battlefield than of a mourning procession--and one which suggests that Wotan has more in mind than mourning. Regarding Snorri's description of Baldr's death itself, the seemingly harmless shaft which suddenly becomes fatal appears both in the death of King Víkarr (where, again a third party becomes the unwitting agent of the subject's doom) and in *Styrbjarnar þátttr*, where, after King Eiríkr the Victory-Blessed has sacrificed to Óðinn for victory (and promised the god his own life in return), Óðinn gives the king a reed to cast over Styrbjörn's host; as Eiríkr speaks the words, "Óðinn have you all!", the reed becomes the spear that designates the enemy army as sacrifices, which the god promptly takes. The name "Höðr" means "warrior", and the "blind warrior" can easily be seen as another form of Wotan, who also goes by the names "Blindi" (Blind), "Tvíblindi" (Twice-Blind), "Helblindi" (Death-Blind), and "Gunnblindi" (Battle-Blind).

That this version of Baldr's death may well be ancient is supported by the "Three-God Bracteates" from Denmark, which the noted German scholar Karl Hauck interprets as representations of the slaying. The bracteate from Fakse (Denmark) shows a man with a ring in his left hand and a half-broken twig jutting down from his solar plexus; he stands inside a roughly sketched enclosure. Behind him stands a man with a spear; before him, a winged man wearing a feminine skirt and holding a ring. A bird of prey hovers over his head. The man with the spear can easily be seen as Wotan: the other as Loki--who is known to have borrowed Freyja's falcon-hide (*Thrymskviða*, *Haustlög*) and also to have disguised himself as a woman on several occasions, including the events in connection with Baldr's death. The bracteate from Beresina-Raum shows the same grouping, except that the figure in feminine garb stands within the semi-enclosure and holds the twig up--the shot has not yet been fired. The one from Gummerup has the foremost figure holding a sword as well as a ring; the twig is shooting overhead--perhaps, again, suggesting the sacrificial dedication.

Karl Hauck interprets the ring which Baldr is holding as Draupnir, Wotan's armring which he put on his son's funeral pyre, and suggests that here, it appears as the symbol of Baldr's sacrifice. According to Hauck, it is possible that in the oldest version of the story (as it appears on the bracteates), Wotan gave Baldr the ring while Baldr was still alive, to mark him out for doom. The fenced enclosure is particularly interesting because, in the area from which these bracteates stem, a number of place-names go back to an original "Óðinn's enclosure", in which the particular term for "enclosure" seems to describe a construction of wood. In Snorri's version of the story, immediate vengeance cannot be taken on Höðr because the slaying occurred in a "peace-stead"--a term which might likewise refer to a specific holy enclosure. The bird of prey may, as Hauck suggests, represent a baleful battle-wight whose appearance is a sign of Baldr's doom, or it may be one of Wotan's birds ready, like the ravens of *Húsdrapa*, to take its part in the sacrifice.

But why should Wotan sacrifice his own beloved son in this manner? And why, if Baldr is a sacrifice to his father, is his place readied in Hel instead of Valhalla? The answer is given in *Völuspá* 62 after the old world has been destroyed, a new one rises from the sea, and,

Then shall unsown acres grow,
all bales be made better, Baldr shall come;
Höðr and Baldr shall dwell in Hropt's (Óðinn's) victory-abodes,
well, the slain-gods, would you know more, or what?

Although Wotan himself has fallen in his fight against the Wolf Fenrir, Baldr's earlier death--and safe housing in Hel--make it possible for him to come back after Ragnarök and take his father's place: for Wotan, in effect, to live again in his son. Just as Sigmundr is content to pass to Valhalla in the knowledge of Sigurðr's coming birth and deeds, so the prophecy of the seeress answers the question of why Wotan does as he does. This knowledge, one may speculate, may also have something to do with the Unanswerable Question with which Wotan defeats the etin Vafþrúðnir in their riddle-game (*Vafþrúðnismál* 54):

What did Óðinn say, before climbing on the funeral pyre,
himself in the ear of his son?

There is one secret that we know Wotan and Baldr share: the secret of passing into the world of the dead to rise again more powerful, the secret by which the soul survives the death of its body (and, indeed, the very body of the cosmos) to come forth again. Thus Baldr, the hope of the gods, is reborn after Ragnarök, in the time when the survivors of the catastrophe gather again,

and judge of the mighty Miðgarð-Wyrm,
and remember there of the great doom,
and of Fimbultýr's (Óðinn's) ancient runes.

There, afterwards, wonderfully,
gold gaming-pieces in grass they find,
those which in eldest days they had owned.

The deaths of the gods are not wasted, for they are remembered: Wotan's might, and that of the rest, lives on in the new world, and for that all the pain of Baldr's death--and the deaths of all the other heroes who fall while doing the deeds of honoured memory, and the death of Wotan himself--are, in the end, worthwhile. The new world bears its own Valhalla: the road there is the dark road trodden by Baldr, as by his father before him.

Neckel, *Walhall*

Gods and Myths, pp. 142-43.

Kultische Geheimbünde, pp. 49-53; *Verwandlungskulte*, pp. 215-16.

- Grundtvig, *Danske Folkesagn*, I, p. 374.
 Arnkiel, *Cimbrische Heyden-Religion*, p. 55.
Shamanens Hest, p. 69.
 de Vries, *Religionsgeschichte*, II, p. 64.
 M&R, p. 57
 Jón Árnason, *Þjóðsögur*, II, p 101, IV, p. 138.
 ch. 125, p. 320
 Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 212.
 Kvideland & Sehmsdorf, *Nordic Folklore*, p. 145.
Vampires, Burial, and Death, p. 111.
 cf. Thýre's use of *blár* (or, in the F version, black) hangings to let her husband Gormr know that his son Knútr is dead--*Fornmanna sögur* XI, p. 17; also Thórbjörn Brúnason's statement in his *lausavísur* that his woman will not wear *blár* at his death (*Skjaldedigting* I, p. 198).
Totenverehrung, p. 117.
Germania, ch. 43, p. 203.
Totenverehrung, p. 117.
 Herman Pálsson, pp. 357-58.
 cf. Turville-Petre, M&R
Ynglinga saga, ch. 7, pp. 18-19.
 Basilov, in *Traces of the Central Asian Culture in the North*, pp. 35-51.
 Rolf Pipping, "Oden i galgen"
 cf., for instance, van Hamel (Óðinn Hanging) and Folke Ström ('Döendes Makt'). Van Hamel's argument is based on the idea of 'magical martyrdom' by which Óðinn is able to raise his *ásmeginn*, or 'god-might'; Ström's, on the theory that, since the Norse materials are rich in examples of the dying demonstrating a sudden burst of exceptional wisdom, Óðinn himself must have experienced this prescient moment before death (but, as a surviving shaman, not quite died).
 'Schamanistische Züge', p. 77.
 Bugge, *Entstehen*, pp. 317-414.
 A.G. van Hamel, 'Óðinn Hanging', p. 260.
Myth and Religion, p. 43.
 cf., for instance, *Egils saga*, ch. 1, in which Egill's grandfather Úlfr ('Wolf') is thought to roam around in the shape of a wolf at night and is therefore called Kveld-Úlfr ('Evening-Wolf'); and *Landnámabók* M 14, in which two men do battle in the shapes of a dragon and stag.
Eiríks saga
 Lommel, p. 73.
 Fleck, 'Knowledge-Criterion', pp. 55-56.
 cf. de Vries' discussion in 'Odin am Baume', including his argument for the tree as the dwelling of the dead and the tree-sacrifice as specifically reserved for the god of death.
Cult of Othin, p. 81.
 cf. *Jómsvíkingadrápa* 2, *Hávamál* 157, *Ynglinga saga* ch. 8.
 For a full discussion of the distinction between sacral and penal hanging, see Ström, *Death-Penalty*.
Myth & Religion, pp. 49-50.
 Other possibilities include the Latin *rumor*, and, more doubtfully, 'sign cut in wood', or possibly an evolution from **wruna*, related to the name Varuna (de Vries, *Wörterbuch*, pp. 453-54); the interpretation 'secret speech' is also considered plausible (Ásgeir Magnússon, *Orðsifjabók*, p. 779).
 Moltke, p. 78.
 'Runes and Semantics', pp. 195-229.
 Hauck, *Brakteaten*, Text I, p. 83.
 Moltke, p. 356.
 see *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ch. 44; *Grettis saga*, pp. 249-50; also cf. the Eggjum stone's description of the use of the 'corpse-sea' (blood) in empowering the inscription.
 p. 19.
Egils saga, ch. 44, p. 109.
Grettis saga, ch. 79, pp. 249-50.

The name 'Týrfingr' appears to be etymologically identical to the name of a Gothic tribe, the Tervingi; a number of other personal and place-names in the saga suggest a genuine preservation of some elements of Gothic history, though obviously much transformed through the legendary process.

Rabani Mauri Opera 6, pp. 1581-82.

His 'Marcomanni' or 'Northmen' are probably Scandinavians, but the alphabet he gives seems to be strongly influenced by the Anglo-Saxon Futhork (including 'asc' for 'ase', the name and shape of the p-rune, and the oss-stave for o), with Old Norse elements (such as the Younger Futhark's *hagall*-stave for k), as well as perhaps a hint of surviving or reinterpreted Upper German elements (the name 'Týr' translated into 'Ziu' and given as corresponding to the letter z, attached to the Anglo-Saxon *ear* stave, while the usual t-stave bears the German name *tac*).

Derolez, R., *Runica Manuscripta: The English Tradition*, p. 359.

Schamanistische Züge, p. 77.

This opinion is not universally shared; cf. Ivar Lindquist's argument for a separation of the stories of the mead and the runes (*Die Urgestalt der Hávamál*) and von See's opinion that the songs of power were a different section patched on by the redactor by means of verses 142-45 (*Die Gestalt der Hávamál*, p. 8). However, arguments have also been made for not only this section, but the poem itself, as a consistent whole, as by Carol Larrington (*A Store of Common Sense*), who argues for a logical progression from the mundane entry of the guest into the hall to the ultimate mystery (the eighteenth song) that none but Óðinn can understand.

Dictionary, p. 184

Van Hamel, Mead.

Turville-Petre, M&R p. 41.

Flateyjarbók I, pp. 214-15.

Flateyjarbók I, pp. 320-21, 400-03.

Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, pp. 109-13; Bostock, *Handbook*, pp. 30, 36-37.

de Vries, Jan. "The Problem of Loki". *Folklore Fellowship Communications* 110 (1933), 1-306, p.277.

Hrólfs s. kraka, p. 105.

Gesta Danorum, I, Book 2, vii, 26, p. 60.

I, Book VIII, iv, 7, pp. 219-20.

Germania, ch. 39, p. 195.

According to *Waltharius*, Hagen chops off Walter's hand and Walter puts out Hagen's eye. This pair of mutilations has several times been compared to the missing hand and missing eye of Týr and Wotan respectively; see esp. Stephen Schwarz.

Frühmittelalterliche Bildüberlieferung und die organisierte Kult, p. 487.

Chapter VI: Ragnarök and Rebirth

What, then, of Ragnarök--of the doom of the gods? Some would say that the Norse gods met their doom at the turn of the last millennium, when their children were forced by their own rulers to turn away from the ways of their own culture and join christian Europe. The last great stead of heathenry to hold out, the temple at Old Uppsala, fell in the year 1100 C.E.: thereafter the gods survived, if they lived at all, only in folk-stories, peasant charms, and garbled memory. The same had happened in Gaul, in Germany, in the British Isles: by the year 1200, European religions survived only in Eastern Europe and among the Saami in the far north of Scandinavia.

However, when gods have been part of a people's life for generations without counting, woven into the very words they speak--and, even more, when those gods have been the chief inspiration and source of their most prized art-form--the sprinkling of holy water and swinging of censers is seldom enough to get rid of them completely. Yet this feat had largely been managed over a few generations throughout most of Europe. The difference in Iceland was made by two factors: first, the near-total dependence of skaldic poetry on an extensive knowledge of theological trivia, which required the preservation of myth if poetry was to exist; second, the strange circumstances in which its conversion took place.

In the year 1000 C.E., Iceland--a colony for whom survival was, at best, never easy--found itself torn from within, as well as threatened from without by Norway, its chief link to the European mainland. The cause: Óláfr Tryggvason, a Norwegian king best known for inflicting frightful tortures on those who opposed him or refused to convert to christianity, had sent missionaries to Iceland and given his full support to the conversion (not to mention threatening to mutilate or kill those Icelanders visiting in Norway at the time), with the result that Icelandic society was about to split asunder. At the Althing of 1000, however, both sides agreed that Iceland would have to live under one law, and the choice was turned over to one Thorgeirr the Lawspeaker, himself a heathen. Thorgeirr is said to have gone "under the cloak" for a day and a half while he meditated on this. What he thought, or what happened there, is unknown. Some speculate that his meditation may have actually been a soul-journey similar to that of the Northern Asian shaman, during which he sought out the gods and mighty spirits in order to find out what was best for Iceland. Or perhaps he may have entered a trance in order to peer into the Well of Wyrð: to see what must happen, and what should arise from it. Then again, he may simply have wished to be let alone while he carefully weighed the words of those who had spoken to him and the worth of keeping the European trade-roads open, balancing old troth to the gods against the peace and survival of Iceland's people. In any case, when Thorgeirr came out from under the cloak, he had a judgement: Iceland should become christian, but heathen practices should still be allowed in private. Unlike Norway, where Óláfr Tryggvason was later succeeded by the even more brutal Óláfr the Stout (St. Óláfr), Iceland's conversion took place with relatively little bloodshed--without persecution, without officially sanctioned murders, and without active attempts to wipe out traces of heathen religion.

The Icelandic interest in preserving their history began to become apparent not long after the conversion. *Íslendingabók* ("Book of the Icelanders"), a history of the settlements, was written by Ari the Wise ca. 1130; and it is this book which tells of Thorgeirr's going "under the cloak" and his subsequent decision. By the lifetime of Snorri Sturluson, there seems to have been a great deal of antiquarian interest--indeed, a fascination with the Heathen past. The poems and tales of the gods were still common currency, and a brief overview of any of the sagas is likely to show several examples of things done in the old days "after ancient custom". Heathen temples are described in great detail in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Kjalnesinga saga*, as are elements of heathen ritual--though there is much discussion as to whether or not these descriptions preserve authentic memory of native shrines, or whether they are an antiquarian's fantasy about his ancestors. Snorri Sturluson himself, of course, represents the flowering of the antiquarian fascination with

Scandinavian religion: the desire to preserve the memory of the ancestral troth, codify it in understandable terms, and explain it being a vital part of the identity of the Icelanders, who were, and are, still quite proud to be the descendants of strong Vikings and explorers.

This interest continued throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Eddic poems were written down, as were the histories of kings, stories about the settlement of Iceland (some chronicles, such as *Sturlunga saga*, continuing right up to the period in which they were written), and, finally, stories about heroes of old days and translations of heroic tales from other lands (such as *Piðriks saga*, a collection of German legends, and *Karlamagnús saga*, the saga of Charlemagne). In these stories, the presence of the Scandinavian gods often appears both as part of the plot and as a means of setting the scene firmly in the days of antiquity. Interestingly, the gods seldom appear directly in the sagas of Icelanders, perhaps because those stories were a little too close to home--Egill Skalla-Grímsson, for instance, speaks about Óðinn regularly, but never sees him face-to-face. The gods are more often present in the sagas of kings; and Óðinn, particularly, is a major actor in several of the *fornaldarsögur*, the “sagas of ancient times”--perhaps because, as the sagas grew more literary and moved farther away from the daily activities of Icelandic life, it became safer to treat directly with the gods. However, even the most prosaic Icelandic family sagas contain skaldic verses, such verses often being included in order to validate the authenticity of the prose framework describing the circumstances of their composition; and most of our surviving skaldic poems were preserved in this manner, which, in turn, preserved much valuable religious information. As Jónas Kristjánsson observes, “much skaldic diction is closely connected with pagan religious beliefs . . . It is natural therefore to consider all this under one head and to conclude that, like pictorial art, poetry was a handmaid of religion--a connection that remained unbroken throughout the pagan period, no matter whether the subject-matter of the skaldic verse concerned the gods directly or not. Names of gods and valkyries had two-fold significance: in kennings they come in phrases referring to men and weapons and battle, and so serve one purpose; but at the same time they serve another by inevitably drawing attention to the origins of the imagery in Heathen belief and to the existence of the pagan deities and their intervention in human affairs--after all, poetry itself was a gift from Óðinn.”

A similar opinion was expressed more poetically in the late tenth century by Hallfrøðr vandræðaskáld (Troublesome-Skald, so nicknamed by Óláfr Tryggvason because he proved rather difficult to convert). Hallfrøðr observes sadly,

The whole kindred of mankind
have shaped poems for Óðinn's favour,
I remember the all-worthy
occupation of our fore-fathers;
but unwillingly--for Viðrir's (Óðinn's) rule
suited the skald well--
I set foeship towards Frigg's husband
for we serve as Christ's thralls.

(These wistfully Heathen sentiments did not go over well with the king, and Hallfrøðr was forced to make a second verse renouncing and speaking more sharply of his gods). Indeed, between the skalds, Snorri, and the sagas one might say that it was through the power of Wotan, god of poetic inspiration, that the memories of the Norse gods were preserved--the god of life and strength drawn from death keeping his clan safe through the long years.

A brief budding of interest in the old ways of Scandinavia took place in Sweden in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, with the “Storgoticism” (Great Gothic) movement founded by Johannes Magnus and taken up by Johannes Bureus. This movement seems to have been a reaction against the dominance of Classical culture and in favour of a spiritual identity for the “Gothic” or Scandinavian peoples (the Gothic tribes originated in southern Sweden). However, this movement, though led by illustrious men (Johannes Magnus was the last Catholic Archbishop of Uppsala, and Johannes Bureus was the tutor of King Gustav Adolphus), was never large, nor was it long-lasting.

A true, widespread revival of interest in native Northern religion did not really begin to

occur until the nineteenth century, when a combination of the desire to define cultural and national identity with the Romantic movement's emphasis on internal spiritual discovery began to impel both scholars and artists to seriously look into the folklore and myth of the Northern countries.

Two key figures of the Teutonic revival were Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, whose collections of folktales have played a tremendous part in reintroducing native lore to European and European-derived cultures. Jakob Grimm was also a serious philologist, folklorist and student of Germanic literature and mythology. Although dated and, by modern standards, unreliable in many particulars, his great work *Deutsche Mythologie* (*Teutonic Mythology*) represents an early and rather brilliant attempt to link the folktales and popular beliefs of the Northern countries with the mythological literature of Scandinavia. However, the *Märchen* or fairytales which he and his brother collected are of particular importance in this regard, as they represent the folk preservation of archetypes and of a traditional understanding about the way in which the human psyche functions: the story of "Iron John", for instance, has been explained by Robert Bly as a powerful guide to the process of attaining manhood.

In this way, the prevalence of the Grimm fairytales in modern culture has provided a certain psychic foundation: as in the case of "Iron John", the basic elements of spiritual maturation and initiation are frequently observable in these tales. Most of them start with a young man or a young woman who, with little preparation, finds him- or herself in a situation of danger or difficulty, able to rely only on her or his native abilities and what assistance his or her actions have earned along the way. Proper conduct (honesty, open-handedness, kindness) is strongly reinforced: a gift of food to a hungry stranger is rewarded with the advice necessary to avoid peril; disentangling a bird from a snare brings its help in a moment of need. On the opposite side of the coin, greed, cruelty, dishonesty, and so forth are punished in ways which are often toned down for modern sensibilities or deleted entirely (wicked stepmothers are forced to dance in shoes of red-hot iron or rolled down hills in barrels studded with spikes; the witch in "Hansel and Gretel" is roasted in her own oven; the eyes of the wicked stepsisters in "Aschenputtel", the German Cinderella, are plucked out by doves). Although good and evil are usually delineated quite sharply in these stories, the moral code is not a Christian one. The Christian deity plays no part in the Grimm tales; responsibility, repayment, and vengeance when appropriate are the determining values.

The Northern antecedents of some of the Grimm stories can be directly identified. Many figures of the Northern spiritual world walk through the pages of these "fairytales": the giants, elementally huge and strong, keepers of much-desired treasure that can be won just as Wotan won the mead of poetry from their kingdom; people enchanted into the shapes of beasts and birds that can speak in human tongues and give advice; the dwarves, plotting and crafting their smithwork in their underground halls. The tale of Sleeping Beauty, for instance, includes the Scandinavian belief in "norns" or spirit-women who gather around a newborn in order to set its fate. "There are many norns, who come to every child that is born to shape its life . . . Good norns from good kindred shape good lives, but those men who have bad lives, they are ruled by ill norns." The working of the "fairies" over Sleeping Beauty is very similar to the working of Óðinn and Thórr over Starkaðr: none can take away the gifts or curses of another, but they can add their own to neutralize or mitigate what has already been spoken. Finally, as observed before, the plot itself is in many ways identical to the story of Siegfried and Brünnhilde: in both cases, a small prick by a fated item causes enchanted sleep (*Sigrdrífumál* has Óðinn sticking the valkyrie with a "sleep-thorn"); the woman is surrounded by an impenetrable barrier--thorns for Sleeping Beauty, a wall of shields (*Sigrdrífumál*) or flame (*Völsunga saga*)--which only the destined man can cross; in due time, he makes his way through and awakens her.

Similarly, we see the initiatory journey of the Bear's Son--the strong, but often bumbling, youth who descends into the underworld, does battle with a monster for its treasures, is betrayed by his comrades above, who attempt to abandon him, but makes his way out by himself and ultimately triumphs--repeated in the story of the hero Beowulf (whose very name, "bee-wolf", is a kenning for the honey-loving bear) and also echoed in the stories of Siegfried. The tale of the Bear's Son can be, and has been, seen as an heroic

exemplum and as the retelling of a shaman's journey into the Underworld; it could also be read as a metaphor for the exploratory journey into the dark cave of one's own unconscious. In all these cases, this tale, like many of the other Grimm stories, shows the deep psychological and spiritual understanding expressed in what has survived of the Northern tradition.

But of the great minds of the nineteenth century who were inspired by the old tales of the North--who, one might say, tasted the drops of Wotan's mead for the first time in centuries--undoubtedly the most powerful and most effective in bringing the gods back to a renewed life was not a scholar in anything but the most amateur sense of the word. He was a composer and musical innovator who found in mediaeval German and Scandinavian literature tales great enough to give his tremendous imagination free rein--Richard Wagner, through whose vision Wotan found his voice and raised his spear again. It is through Wagner's Ring cycle that Wotan and his fellow gods have become best known in the modern world; it is Wagner's Wotan who speaks for the old world--and dies with it.

In following his own artistic vision, Wagner made a number of changes in his sources. The building of the walls of Ásgarðr by the giants and subsequent contract dispute, which in the Norse myth is solved by Þórr breaking the builder's skull, serves in Wagner as the means by which the Ring comes into the hands of the giants, while the human tragedies which lead to Fáfnir's theft of the hoard and metamorphosis into a dragon in the Old Norse sources are absent in Wagner. Most blatant, however, is Wagner's treatment of the end of the story, and the world. To him, the death of Siegfried is the signal for the final catastrophe--the flames of Siegfried's funeral pyre set Valhalla alight. Ironically, the loyal Hagen, whose first concern in both the Norse sources and the German *Nibelungenlied* is for Günther, becomes Günther's slayer in *Götterdämmerung*. In all the earlier works, Guttrune (Guðrún/Kriemhild) goes on after Siegfried's death to marry Attila the Hun; Günther and Hagen are then decoyed to Attila's court and killed together with the flower of the Burgundian nobility--lovers of Wagner's music can hardly forgive him for ending the whole story where he did, when he might have given us another entire opera in the cycle!

Wagner's desire, however, was to show Wotan as a tragic hero: a god who is trapped by his own power and ambition, and by the laws he himself has made and is bound to uphold, into bringing about his own end and the end of the world he has made. His portrayal of the god is often sympathetic, even heart-rendingly so: Wotan is doomed to betray his human twins Siegmund and Sieglinde; he is forced to punish his beloved daughter Brünnhilde for doing his true will. When Wotan plaintively asks Mime during their riddle-game (speaking of the Wälsungs Siegmund and Sieglinde), "Which was that kindred to whom Wotan showed himself cruel, though its life was most beloved to him?" (*Siegfried*, Act I, scene ii) Wagner shows us a more human side of the god: the sorrow Wotan feels when he must bring about the deaths of the heroes he loves, and the way in which he is constrained by his own *wyrd* to act--in Wagner, because his spear is the upholder of law; in the Norse sources, because he cannot change the doom that is already laid in the Well of *Wyrd*, but must do his best to work around it so that a new world can be born and the might of the gods can live again.

In this respect, Wagner was very much a man of his own time: his most beloved vision, whether expressed light-heartedly, as in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, or with full dramatic seriousness, as in the Ring Cycle and *Parsifal*, was of the young hero who overcomes the old and established powers. In the Ring Cycle, it is Siegfried, unconstrained by any ancient laws, bargains, or betrayals, who at last breaks the power of the gods--Siegfried, who shatters Wotan's spear with his father's reforged sword, as Wagner perhaps envisioned his own art shattering the old world and creating one wholly new. For Siegfried to be the hero Wagner demanded, he had to be completely free from the god's self-made bindings: he had to prove his absolute freedom, and release the god as well, by breaking the emblem and source of Wotan's power. The concept is late nineteenth-century rather than Heathen: the idea of casting off the might of the old, of facing and destroying the embodiment of what has gone before and shaped the present situation, could never have occurred to a Norseman of the Viking Age--any more than the notion that a human being could break Wotan's spear.

It is less, however, in Wagner's reworking of the plots for his sources than in his music

and imagery--especially the scenes drawn directly from Norse religious literature--that Wotan's force truly strides forth upon the stage: and this is where the god still touches the soul today. When Wotan goes in night and wind to awaken the ancient prophetess Erda and call her up from the depths (*Siegfried*, Act III, scene i), those watching see something, perhaps, very close to what the Norse would have seen upon hearing the poem upon which the scene is based,

Óðinn rose up, the ancient Gaut,
and upon Sleipnir the saddle laid.
Hence rode he downwards into Misty-Hel,
he met that hound from Hel that came.

He was bloody about the breast,
at Galdr-Father barked he long
forth rode Óðinn, the earth-ways thundered,
he came to the high gates of Hel.

Óðinn rode then before eastern door,
where he knew lay the völva's tomb,
he began to speak spells of the slain,
till the corpse rose and spoke to him
(*Baldrs draumar* 2-4).

Wotan's riddle-game with the dwarf Mime, a contest inspired by *Vafþrúðnismál*, shows another side of the god--the wily Wanderer, creeping about in disguise to learn and work his will. And Wotan stands in all his ancient, awesome and terrible strength as the god of battle-death in Siegmund's fight with Hunding, stretching out his spear to shatter the hero's sword and claim Siegmund's life for his own (though, alas, Siegmund is cheated of his magnificent last words by the demands of stage drama). If the Ring Cycle was not meant as a *Bühnenweihfestspiel*, or ritual drama, in quite the same way as *Parsifal*, at least we can say that in his best moments, Wagner manages to evoke Wotan and bring his might forth for humans to feel as they did in the ancient days when his voice howled in the snow-laden winter winds and roared above the storms of battle--or sang through the words of the skald within the firelit hall.

Unfortunately, Romanticism and radical artistic vision were not the only forces working upon Western Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, nor were they the only ones which engaged the power of ancestral symbols. In addition to Grimm's scholarly and Wagner's artistic works, a number of small extremist political parties and journals also adopted the names of Norse gods and heroes in order to give their views a veneer of legitimacy in the context of Germanic culture. And, of course, it was one of those parties that eventually devoured Germany beneath the emblem that had been the sign of holy and magical power on the bracteates of the Migration Age, on runestones, and on tapestries such as that with which the Oseberg queen was buried--the swastika. The depth of the taint on that emblem, even in the most innocent contexts, can perhaps be seen in this relatively frivolous example: even as a dedicated researcher in early Germanic religion, it took me a very long time of gazing at amulets and fine metalwork made some fifteen hundred years before the Nazi banner was ever raised before I could see the symbol without a shudder--no matter that it had set on those pieces by craftsmen who had nothing else in mind than good luck and the blessing of the gods, who had no concept of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas of racial identity, let alone of racial genocide.

The question of the degree to which elements of the Nazi party were inspired by native Germanic religion and culture is a difficult one to answer. The anti-Semitism of the Nazi philosophy is relatively easy to trace to its origins, which have nothing to do with Wotan, Germanic religion, or native Northern European culture--no Jews (or any other race) are vilified in the sagas, nor is there any suggestion that the early Teutonic peoples were particularly conscious of the concept of race. Rather, the blame can be laid directly upon teachings of christianity, from the Church Fathers to mediaeval Europe. As Rabbi Dr.

Cohn-Sherbok observes in *The Crucified Jew: Twenty Centuries of Christian Anti-Semitism*, the foundation of European anti-Semitism was set by such writings as Augustine's "Tract Against the Jews", which argues that the Biblical denunciations against Israel's iniquities apply strictly to the Jews, while the divine promises for the nation of Israel were meant to indicate the Christian Church; that the Jews are, in fact, the enemies of God. Other tracts in a similar vein--the Patristic *Adversus Judaeos* tradition--include Cyprian's *Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews*, Ephrem's *Rhythm Against the Jews*, Aphrahat's *Demonstrations Against the Jews*, and Hippolytus' *Expository Treatise Against the Jews*, as well as a great many more works in a similar vein, which place the blame for Christ's death specifically upon the Jews and identify them as a people whom good Christians should consider accursed. Good Christians took this up eagerly: Crusaders on their way to the Holy Land warmed up their sword-arms by slaughtering European Jews, as in the great massacres of Speyer (May 3, 1096), Worms, and Mainz, which preceded the First Crusade, the similar incidents throughout France and Germany at the beginning of the Second Crusade, and the butchering of the Jewish populations of London, York, Norwich, Stamford, and Lynn as a prelude to the Third Crusade. In 1290, the Jews were brutally expelled en masse from England; rumours of ritual murder, well-poisoning, and other atrocities became common, finding a place even in the best of literature with Chaucer's appalling "Prioress's Tale", which shows a band of Jews--by nature identifiable with the devil, as is made explicit by the Prioress's lines, "Oure firste foo, the serpent Sathanas, / That hath in Jues herte his waspes nest" --killing a small child and hiding his body in a heap of dung (and exults appallingly in the punishments meted out to them). The piece closes by reaffirming its supposed reality with an appeal to Hugh of Lincoln, allegedly the victim of a Jewish ritual murder,

O yonge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also
 With cursed Jewes, as it is notable,
 For it is but a litel while ago,
 Preye eke for us
 (lines 684-86).

During the mid-fourteenth century, while the Black Death raged, matters became even worse: the Jews were accused particularly of poisoning wells and causing plague by other nefarious means. The first massacres took place in France in 1348, and spread from there throughout Europe; "In all, sixty large and one hundred and fifty smaller communities are believed to have been exterminated and three hundred and fifty massacres of various dimensions took place." The chief cultural motivation behind these massacres seems to have been the general Church presentation of the Jew as demonic or even as Antichrist, which had festered in Europe for some time; Ziegler observes that "The Black Death concentrated this fear and hatred of the Jews into one burning grievance which not only demanded vengeance but offered the tempting extra dividend that, if the Jews could only be eliminated, then the plague for which they were responsible might vanish too."

The hostility of late mediaeval Christianity against the Jews was taken up and furthered enthusiastically by the Protestant movement, as shown in Martin Luther's pamphlet, "Of the Jews and their Lies", in which the author comments that "The Jews, being foreigners, should possess nothing, and what they do possess should be ours," offering a fully planned solution which would be taken up with a vengeance later,

First, that their synagogues or schools be set on fire, and what will not burn should be heaped over or covered with earth so that no one may ever be able to see a stone or cinder of it. And this should be done for the honour of our Lord and of Christianity in order that God may see that we are Christians . . . Secondly, that their homes likewise be broken down and destroyed . . . Thirdly, that all their prayer books and Talmuds in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught be taken away. Fourthly, their rabbis must be forbidden under threat of death to teach any more . . . Fifthly, that passport and travelling privileges should be absolutely forbidden to the Jews, for they have nothing to do on the land . . . Sixthly, that usury be forbidden

to them . . . Seventhly, let the young and strong Jews and Jewesses be given the flail, the axe, the hoe, the spade, the distaff, and spindle, and let them earn their bread by the sweat of their noses

(Walter Bienert. *Martin Luther und die Juden: Ein Quellenbuch*. Frankfurt: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1982, pp. 149-150).

Indeed, Martin Luther's suggestions, offered here to the "overlords who have Jews in your domain . . . so that we may be pure of the Jewish burden" lacked only the inscription "Arbeit Macht Frei" ("Work Makes You Free") over the door of the labour camp. Bad enough for their own time, Luther's words are a bone-chilling prophecy of horror fulfilled to the reader of the post-Holocaust age. Neither Wotan nor the Heathen past of the Germanic peoples can be blamed for European anti-Semitism, which was by no means confined to Germany. Rather, it can be clearly observed that even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "The Christian age-old conception of the Jew as a demonic and evil force animated Christian consciousness and evoked considerable resistance to proposals for the acceptance of Jewry as equal citizens in the modern world". Anti-Christian as much of the Nazi philosophy was, many of the most appalling crimes of the Third Reich were solidly rooted in the long-term doctrines and practices of Christianity, from its early days on through the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, such activities as Himmler's attempt to de-Christianize his SS men by replacing Christmas with a solstice celebration and church ceremonies such as marriage and baptism with his own rituals certainly gave the impression of a strong neo-Pagan influence, especially to outsiders. Runes were used as emblems, their jagged spikes giving a dramatic flair to badges and rings. The most notorious of these uses, of course, was the double Sowilo-rune (s) or "lightning-bolt" of the SS (the term "lightning-bolt" for this rune is actually a misnomer: the name of the rune is "Sun" in all the rune-poems). To this day, the S-rune remains almost as tainted as the swastika: in the German edition of Stephan Grundy's novel *Rhinegold*, which includes several runic inscriptions, the standard S-form of the Sowilo rune had to be replaced with a sporadically occurring alternate form. Other examples of runic use by the SS included the Viking Age rune Hagall, "Hail" () as the sign for the *Lebensborn* foundation, which encouraged the reproduction of the "racially sound" outside the normal bounds of marriage.

An interesting, if somewhat eccentric, contemporary English book, *Germany Possessed* (by one H.G. Baynes, published in 1941), actually argues that the conditions in Germany were due to the uncontrolled powers of Wotan, the embodiment of the *furor Teutonicus*, raging through the souls of his people. The tone of this rather peculiar work is that of a Christian Englishman ascribing the political situation to the awakening of a pagan madness from the barbaric past. Interesting as the social attitudes revealed by *Germany Possessed* may be, Bayne's view of the psychic underpinnings of the Third Reich was a response to the pomp and pageantry of the Nazi regime--not to its substance.

In fact, neo-Paganism was far too strange for most racists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (with a few exceptions such as the odd mystic Guido List, who also taught the eighteen-stave "Armanen Futhark", a new runic alphabet revealed to him during a temporary period of blindness). A much more popular form of religion was "Ario-Christianity": the belief that Jesus had not been a Jew, but really a blond-haired, blue-eyed Indo-European, and that therefore Christianity belonged properly to the German people. This belief was put forth by, among others, Jörg Lanz, producer of an Austrian magazine called *Ostara*, which enjoyed a surprisingly wide circulation, well out of proportion to the actual value of its contents.

Hitler himself, as his table-conversations show, had little patience with any form of organized religion: Providence and Destiny were as far as he was willing to go. In *Mein Kampf*, he roundly thrashed the neo-Germanists:

it is entirely out of harmony with the spirit of the nation to keep harping on that far-off and forgotten nomenclature which belongs to the ancient Germanic times . . . I had to warn followers repeatedly against those wandering scholars who were

peddling German folk-lore and who never accomplished anything positive or practical . . . we considered the friendship of such people as not only worthless, but even dangerous to our young movement.

The neo-Pagans fared even worse in Hitler's estimation, for a very revealing reason,

The impression which I often get, especially of those so-called religious reformers whose creed is grounded on ancient Germanic customs, is that they are the missionaries and protégés of those forces which do not wish to see a national revival taking place in Germany. All their activities tend to turn the attention of the people away from the necessity of fighting together in a common cause against the common enemy, the Jew.

The chief interest in the rites of the Germanic past stemmed from Alfred Rosenberg and Heinrich Himmler, but in a highly edited form. The chief purpose of the research supported by Himmler's *Ahnenerbe* was not to retrieve the ancestral past, but to make it fit with the Nazi ideology. An example of this is shown, for instance, by the rather amusing treatment of Bronze Age women's costume by historical researchers of the Third Reich. Since Germanic women were supposed to be chaste by racial nature, the Egtved Girl, who was buried in only a short blouse and rather revealing string skirt, was always shown wearing a long and dignified woven skirt--"but as the corded skirt was after all a fact, one could sometimes see it sketched in as an overskirt above the long one!"

The SS solstice rites and family rituals were chiefly a product of the fantasies of Himmler and Rosenberg: in an address to his *Gruppenführers* in November of 1936, Himmler seriously explained how, in the days of their forefathers the period between the spring festival and the summer solstice had been a time when the youth of each village, each *Gau*, engaged in contests for the selection of the fittest. They were tested intellectually in the wisdom of their forefathers, and physically in games and races, both girls and boys.

Then it was usual for the youth of each year group to dance and skip with one another to the solstice festival. Their marriages were sealed . . . I propose that the sporting contests of the SS, which we will hold every year, always take place between Easter and the summer solstice. Then at the summer solstice the prize-giving will take place . . .

As the leader of the SS, Himmler was able to enforce their solstice celebrations. However, he had relatively little success in convincing his men to abandon their traditional christianity in favour of his newly created rituals and symbols. "The SS-women hungered, before Christmas, for the christian festival gleam--every year a stream of "Yule candlesticks" and "Yule plates" flowed from the Allacher factory to the SS families . . . In actuality, Himmler's neo-pagan customs remained limited to paper."

It must also be observed that, in his SS religion, Himmler made no attempt to revive the actual gods and goddesses of the Germanic peoples. Quite the contrary: his chief inspirational text, which he claimed to have with him constantly, was the *Bhavad-Gita*; his sources a mixed bag including "the *Bhavad-Gita*, the Eddas, the Vedas and the Rig-Vedas, the sayings of Buddha, the Vesudi-Magga, the Book of Purity, and some astrological works." The religion Himmler compounded from this eclectic collection was a monotheistic one, arranged by Herr Gott (Lord God)--or "Got", as the SS took to spelling the word--"allegedly the old Germanic spelling, but it was chiefly useful, probably, to distinguish the SS God from the conventional Christian *Gott*". His spiritual mentor, a man going by the assumed name of Karl Maria Weisthor (actually Karl Maria Willigut), had created his own religious history based on sources revealed through his ancestral memory (to which, as a self-described descendant of ancient Aryan priesthoods, he of course had access) -a decidedly peculiar vision of history with little affection for Wotan, whose clearly defined and undeniable character was difficult to reconcile with the chief elements of

Ariosophist philosophy. According to Willigut,

Around 12,500 B.C. the Irminist religion of Krist was proclaimed, becoming the universal faith of the Germans until it was challenged by the schismatic Wotanists. In 9600 B.C. a climax occurred in the continuous wars between the two religions. Baldur-Chrestos, a holy prophet of Irminism, was crucified by Wotanists at Goslar . . . The Wotanists ultimately succeeded in destroying the Irminist sacred centre at Goslar in 1200 B.C. and the Irminists founded a new temple at the Externsteine near Detmold. But this was taken by the Wotanists in 460 before being finally sacked in its corrupt form by Charlemagne during his campaign against the pagan Saxons in the ninth century.

To finally mark the incompatibility between SS philosophy and the historical Germanic past, in his booklet *The Schutzstaffel as Anti-Bolshevik Battle Organization*, Himmler actively denied that a true polytheistic religion had ever existed among the early Northerners:

all that there was and is on this earth was created by God and animated by God. Foolish, malicious and brainless people have created the fable, the fairytale that our forefathers worshipped gods and trees. No, they were convinced, according to age-old knowledge and age-old teaching, of the Godly order of this whole earth, the entire plant- and animal-world.

For all Himmler's attempts to revive what he believed to have been the glory of ancient days--his Round Table at Castle Wewelsburg, his black-clad Teutonic Knights with their feudal motto "Meine Ehre heißt Treue" (My Honour is Loyalty)--his beliefs about early Germanic religion were fundamentally as false and ridiculous as his belief in the *Welteislehre* (the teaching that all events in the cosmos stemmed from the endless struggle between the heat of the sun and the massive quantities of ice in space) as a valid scientific theory. Wotan and his kindred cannot be blamed for either the ideology or the actions of the Third Reich: they were not so much as invited to take part in the "reawakening of the German folk", not even by those Nazi leaders who were farthest gone in their own peculiar brand of pseudo-"Germanic" mysticism!

Nevertheless, the Nazi use of early Germanic imagery and their emphasis on all things "folkish" inevitably contaminated the general perception of the Germanic deities after the war. Wotan, Thórr, Freyja, and the rest. They fell under the same shadow as the swastika, the runes, and those folk traditions which the Nazis encouraged--a shadow which is only now beginning to fade slightly, and in some cases to grow darker, as with the runic alphabet, which it is now technically illegal to display openly in Germany. I first realized the extent and longevity of this shadow at the age of sixteen, as an exchange student in 1983, when I asked a fellow student who was studying to be a professional dancer if she knew any German folk dances. She immediately replied, "Oh, no, that is Nazi stuff." Some nine years later, when Stephan Grundy's novel *Rhinegold* (which retells the saga of the Völsungs) was published in Germany, he was told several times that "A German could never have written this book and gotten it published in Germany--it's all right for an American to have done it, because you are not tainted by the memory of Nazism". The name Wotan, in particular, is often singled out: in the German translation of Grundy's novel *Attila's Treasure*, when the alternate title *Wotan's Curse* was suggested, it was made clear that the Scandinavian form "Odin" would be acceptable in a book title, but not the German "Wotan", specifically because it might awaken memories of the Third Reich. Wagner's works are tolerated because they are, after all (and in spite of their misuse in the Nazi era), a major contribution to world culture; new works in the same general field are a much touchier matter. Even in the academic community, research into early Germanic religious beliefs has often seemed to carry a certain stigma, which has only lifted in recent years.

Jung's sharp observations in his essay "After the Catastrophe", though somewhat blunted by time, German achievement, and the melding together of a greater Europe, have

not entirely lost their sting--least of all within the German conscience.

If a German intends to live on good terms with Europe, he must be conscious that in the eyes of Europeans he is a guilty man . . . The German can hardly expect other Europeans to resort to such niceties as to inquire at every step whether the criminal's name was Müller or Meier . . . If a German is prepared to acknowledge his moral inferiority or collective guilt before the whole world, without attempting to minimize it or explain it away with flimsy arguments, then he will stand a reasonable chance, after a time, of being taken for a more or less decent man, and will thus be absolved of his collective guilt, at any rate in the eyes of individuals.

This is, more or less, the course taken by most modern Germans: because of the corrupt uses made of the Germanic heritage during the Nazi era, everything associated with that heritage is now, to a large degree, shied away from as a sign of "moral inferiority or collective guilt". And what Jung says about the Germans here holds doubly true for the Germanic gods: though Hitler condemned the neo-Pagans and Himmler's mysticism had no place for Wotan, Thor, or Freyja, there are few people who bother to enquire as to whether Himmler's deity went by the name "Wotan" or "Got". In the popular mind, it is image, not substance, which survives, with the result that Wotan, once reviled together with his worshippers by the leaders of the Nazi party, is now seen by many as a god chiefly associated with the worst elements of German nationalism.

With this blight--undeserved as it may have been--upon the religion of the North, its next development in the modern age is all the more surprising. Wotan is worshipped today: offerings of beer, wine, and mead are poured out to him. Indeed, there are a number of sane, rational people, with jobs, houses, and families to look after, who call on Wotan regularly and will swear that he has helped them--that they have personally felt his presence, perhaps even seen him in a dream or vision. The religion of the North has, in fact, come back alive and well after its long silence. The number of folk who follow it is small, but includes a surprising selection. At least two major figures of the revival hold doctorates in Germanic culture; other professions include medical doctors and professional computer programmers. As an example of the general diversity: the nine-person administrative council of the Ring of Troth in 1996 was made up of a lawyer, a librarian, two full-time professional novelists, a legal secretary, a union representative, a pensioner, a doctoral researcher, and an ex-cop--and this varied body conducted the vast majority of its organizational business over e-mail.

The history of the revived religion has not been particularly smooth. In the early 1970's, the Icelander Sveinbjörn Beinteinssen (recently deceased) and the American Stephen McNallen independently and almost simultaneously founded organizations for the purpose of furthering the religion of "Ásatrú"--of those who are "true to the gods". Ásatrú was recognised as an official religion in Iceland with relatively little trouble, and continues to be practiced there today. McNallen's organization, the Ásatrú Free Assembly, was more fraught with strife and frequently bedevilled by racists and other forms of extremists. It dissolved in 1987, to be replaced at the close of that year by a group called the Ring of Troth; another organization, the Ásatrú Alliance, also formed out of the shatters of McNallen's group. Both are currently still in existence. The Ring of Troth is considerably larger and more active; in fact, it is the largest official Ásatrú organization in existence (numbering around three hundred and fifty members, including quite a few in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, as well as some scattered through the rest of Northern Europe). In addition to a quarterly journal, the Ring of Troth has published its own massive (711 pp.) handbook, *Our Troth*, and has a clergy training handbook in the works. It has also lately added both a general newsletter and one which deals specifically with clergy issues--recent subjects of discussion in this newsletter have included pre-marital counselling and the theological problem of reconciling agricultural feasts and symbolism with a predominantly non-agricultural lifestyle.

Perhaps in response to the problems which dogged the Ásatrú Free Assembly, the Ring of Troth states outright in their official material that racism, sexism, and homophobia are not permitted within their organization--an attitude which is supported in their practice (for

instance, four of the nine members of the administrative council in 1996 were women) and their published materials. *Our Troth* includes a lengthy conceptual analysis demonstrating, with extensive literary and historical references, that the idea of “race” as it exists in the twentieth century was not a familiar concept to the Northern people, and that racism, the ideologies of racial purity and racial superiority, etc., have no place within the practice of the religion. The Troth’s journal, *Idunna*, has several times printed articles by the openly gay Godman (certified Troth priest) William Karpen, discussing the ritual use of cross-dressing and the possibility that homosexuality may have held a special place in the practice of early Scandinavian religion. The records of the smaller organizations have, by and large, not shown them to be so tolerant, which, according to many Troth members, is one of the things attracting people to the Ring of Troth in particular.

It is interesting to note that Wotan, in particular, seems to be a dominant influence in the process of the revival. The early days of Ásatrú in America were coloured by Stephen McNallen’s rhetorical declarations that Wotan was also the god of science and technology, his spirit guiding the spaceships of today as it guided the longships of yesteryear. The term “Odinism” was synonymous with “Ásatrú”, as seen, for instance, with the small groups called the “Odinic Rite” (England) and the “Odinist Fellowship” (America); one of the earliest, self-published efforts at presenting a revived Norse theology was entitled *The Religion of Odin*. It was not until the early 1990’s that “Odinism” and “Odinist” as general descriptions of the Northern religion began to lose popularity, perhaps because the religion as a whole was reaching a wider range of people who were correspondingly interested in a wider range of deities (ironically, the persons whose writings were, in large part, responsible for this extended awareness--Edred Thorsson, Freya Aswynn, and myself--are all dedicated worshippers of Wotan).

The founder of the Ring of Troth, Dr. Stephen Edred Flowers (better known to his fellow worshippers as Edred Thorsson, author of several books on runic magic and Germanic religion), makes it clear in his writings that he considers Wotan to be the most important of the gods.

WISDOM is watched over by Woden. This is the hidden lore and powers welling up from the darkest depths of our souls and hovering high over our heads, shining beyond the clouds, and leading us on into the unknown. This is the mysterious force that has the ability to hold all things together, ruled by those who can see and understand the whole. Above all, wisdom must be preserved, for in it are the wells of all memory; if it and only it survives, all other parts of the whole may be regenerated. From this is derived our sense of adventure, our curiosity about the unknown, our seeking and questing character.

Indeed, a disproportionate number of the chief figures in the revival of the Northern religion identify themselves as followers of Wotan. Among the most notable of these are the leader of the revival in Britain and Holland, Freya Aswynn (author of *Leaves of Yggdrasil*); Kveldulf Gundarsson, Warder of the Lore of the Ring of Troth (in charge of the clergy training programme, and responsible for writing a great deal of the Troth’s published materials; author of *Teutonic Magic* and *Teutonic Religion*, and editor of *Our Troth*); renowned novelist Diana Paxson (among other works, she has written the Westria series; *The White Raven*; and, most recently, the “Wotan’s Children” trilogy--*The Wolf and the Raven*, *Dragons of the Rhine*, and *Lord of Horses*--based on the story of the Völsungs and Nibelungs); and several others such as Garman Lord, self-declared (and recently crowned by his group in an elaborate ceremony) King of the Theodish Rice (an Anglo-Saxon word meaning “realm”, pronounced ree-chuh). In response to my question, “Do you think that Wotan has played more of a role in the revival of the Germanic religion than other gods?” Garman, who has worshipped Wotan (or, in his Anglo-Saxon idiom, Woden) since late 1976, observes,

To my own mind, and in my own experience, Woden has purposely taken it upon himself to be the trailblazer and stalking horse for the contemporary revival. He was the inspiration of most of the early pioneers, and in the old days of the revival

you hardly ever heard any other god's name much seriously mentioned except perhaps Thor, who was often almost a comic-book god to many. We started out as a Woden cult, and then after seventeen years he was done with us, and turned us over to Ing Frea (Frey). I believe that he often recruits followers for other gods, and that he is the reason why we have been brought into contact with so many other gods lately.

This appears to be a frequently-held belief among followers of Wotan; a similar opinion was expressed by Freya Aswynn and by Diana Paxson. In this respect, I have several times heard Paxson compare Wotan to Eshu, the *orisha* (Afro-Caribbean deity) who is usually called on first in santeria ceremonies because it is his responsibility to open the way for the other gods. She also observes that, even in the rather distorted histories of Saxo Grammaticus, one of Wotan's notable characteristics is that he insists that worship be paid to all the deities, rather than seeking it chiefly for himself. Another follower of the god, William West, suggests that perhaps the god's early influence as

the significant player helping to move the religion from near-forgotten obscurity to the active and growing status that it holds today . . . speaks to Woden's ability to reawaken a sense of wonder in the minds of men, or to his gift of intellect and reason to mankind, thereby sparking the first flames of the reawakening in the minds of the inspired . . . heavily influencing the early revival through runecraft and wonder.

Those who worship Wotan generally tend to view him as a being independent of humankind, though they perceive his nature in different ways. In her novel *Brisingamen*, Diana Paxson makes the interesting observation that the way in which a deity manifests him- or herself may often be directly shaped by the way in which she or he is called: one scene has Freyja beginning to manifest as the Lady of the Woodland, when the man invoking her forces her to change her appearance by calling upon her as Lady of Love. Humans, according to this point of view, assist in shaping their gods: the process of religious evolution is a mutual one. In contrast, Garman Lord expresses the opinion that not only is Wotan independent of humanity, but, "So far, I can no more figure out exactly what kind of beings the gods really are than the family dog can conceive of exactly what ilk his owners really are."

Garman's attitude is not common in Ásatrú as a whole, nor is it shared by most of Wotan's worshippers. The image of the god as an ultimate forefather (as, for instance, according to the Anglo-Saxon and some Scandinavian royal genealogies) and occasionally harsh, but essentially caring, teacher is brought up far more often; one memorable comparison I have heard likens him to a crafty old grandfather who gives his ten year-old grandson a cigar to smoke, then laughs and says, "I told you so" when the boy makes himself sick with it. As for the general relationship between humans and gods, I commented in *Our Troth* on what seems to be the most common conception,

To us, the god/esses are our eldest kinfolk, to whom we give the greatest love and respect . . . Most folk of the Troth . . . know the god/esses as real and mighty beings, as free-standing and individually aware as we are (or more so!) . . . They are mightier than we are (though not omnipotent), wiser than we are (though not omniscient), and probably more complex of character than we are. Although they are greater than we, however, there is no doubt that we are (or can be, if we are honourable and strong), worthy of them, in much the same way as children can be worthy of great parents and grandparents . . . Thus the worship we give our god/esses is not a matter of moaning about their highness and our lowness, but literally "worth-ship": we honour them for what they are and have given us, and seek to bring forth that in ourselves which mirrors them.
(*Our Troth*. KveldúlfR Gundarsson, ed. Seattle: Ring of Troth, 1994, p. 56).

Stephen Flowers takes this philosophy of potential equality between humans and gods even farther, with what he calls the "O dian" path, an interesting combination of Gnostic

and Germanic elements. According to his terminology, an “Odinist” is someone who worships Wotan as a god; an “O dian” is one who seeks to become as much like the god, in nature, power, and wisdom, as possible. His view represents an extreme in modern Nordic religious philosophy, though one which is not entirely outside the general stream of thought, nor does it seem to be entirely alien to the cult of Wotan, in which the god and his heroes often seem to overlap in curious ways.

The modern worshippers of Wotan, though well aware of his darker and grimmer aspects, generally seem to have little problem with them. Regarding the question of whether he betrays his heroes, Garman Lord comments,

It always makes me feel somewhat rueful to see and hear the scornful ways in which Woden is so often referred to as a troth breaker. I would just like to say that he has always been faultlessly honourable and kind and a good friend to me, even at times when he has gotten me in trouble. I don't buy into the troth breaker dialectic, and suspect that any kind of man can call himself a Woden-worshipper if he wants to, and there are some Woden worshippers who doubtless get the Woden they deserve.

Freya Aswynn offers a different, and perhaps more traditional, view--certainly one strongly coloured by the accounts of Wotan in Icelandic literature. She recognises that Wotan is a god of death, and that by wearing his sign, the interlocked triple triangle known as the valknut, she is courting her own doom--but she considers it worthwhile: “How could Odin possibly betray me? I've already given myself to him; I'm marked with the valknut, so that he can take me whenever he wants. Of course he'll take me, but my life is so little in return for all that he's given me. That's not betrayal, that's fair exchange. He gets me, but I get him as well, and that's all I've ever wanted--to be with him, to actually be a part of him. He's such a lovely god!” In a later e-mail interview, Freya adds, “It is my hope that at the end of this life He will cloak me in His radiant being and take me unto Himself.”

A similar, if somewhat more cautionary, perspective is taken by William West, who notes that, “the path of Woden is not for everyone. While one is blessed with great gifts from the god, it is also true that there are dark aspects to his character, and some of Woden's gifts come only with great personal sacrifice.” West cites a violent altercation with his brother as typical of the Norse observation (not uncommon in both sagas and Eddic poetry) that Wotan often turns kinsman against kinsman. He also mentions receiving Woden's mark only slightly thereafter, under rather unusual circumstances,

I worked, at the time, for a school for “at risk” teens. My job was to provide mental health team support to the teaching staff. Essentially what this means is that when a student became frustrated and angry in the classroom, it was my job to deal with the explosive behavior. Oftentimes this included physical restraint and there were times when the job was extremely stressful. However, I never felt myself to be in any real danger despite the daily threats that come with working with this population.

On one occasion, though, correlating almost exactly with my entry into the Troth's early clergy training program, I had been trailing a rather gentle-natured, extremely likeable young man whom I had never considered any sort of a physical threat to anyone I had worked with . . . The student had left the classroom and I had followed him, attempting to talk with him and encourage him to go back to class . . . I followed the student into the large tin building we had converted to a gym. I confronted him verbally at a distance of approximately 30 feet about his contradictory ideas and behaviors and made the very distressing mistake of turning my back to him. When I turned around I saw the enraged student for only a rushed fraction of a second, then it hit me. Something had struck me directly in the left eye with enough force to knock me to the ground . . . Apparently the student had picked up a piece of brass left on the ground after a repair had been started and not finished to the lock/knob assembly on the gym's door. He had thrown this piece of brass at me with considerable force.

An ambulance was called and as I awaited my ride to the hospital it occurred to me that this had been a visitation from the god that I had dedicated myself to. It seems to me

that the angry teen had acted as a vehicle for Woden and he had come to mark his own.

Vision in the injured eye was slow in returning. For several months the pupil in the eye was frozen in a contracted position so that night vision was near impossible through the eye and a strange visual effect haunted me after twilight where one eye would focus and the other remained dark. The vision did return to normal but there are times, especially when I am tired, when the pupil gives me trouble. It usually returns to normal after I've slept.

So the question as to whether it is worthwhile for modern Westerners to worship Woden is a difficult one. I think that it is certainly worthwhile for those that choose in an informed manner to answer Woden's calling, as the path is blessed with the gold of wisdom gained from following the trail of the great wanderer. But this wisdom is not always pleasing and is often terribly challenging. A stable and secure life is not always easily maintained by the Wodenist, as I have come to find out. If one chooses to answer Woden's calling, let him first be prepared for all that it entails. Gift does, after all, demand gift.

(William West, e-mail interview, Dec. 12, 1995).

By and large, Wotan's character as a god of battle is less apparent in the practices of his worshippers than is his character as a god of magic, wisdom, and poetry. It is not uncommon for followers of Wotan to practice some form of martial art or mediaeval-style fighting (I, for instance, hold a black belt in Shotokan karate, and another Wotanist formerly on the Troth's High Rede has a black belt in kendo), but neither does it seem to be required, and many Wotanists have little or no interest in physical combat; nor does there seem to be a particular preponderance of Wotan's followers among the Ásatrú members of the armed forces. In contrast, the most outspoken worshippers of Wotan in the modern era are, to a man (and woman), all practitioners of runic magic, and several of them also participate in prophetic trance-work (spae-craft).

According to Freya Aswynn,

It's a question of what is needed . . . Odin does what is needed. These days, the battles are on a different plane of being. If I stuck my spear into an enemy on the street, they'd lock me up. Instead we battle with words and with magic, because those are the forces that have real power now. Those are the forces that really affect people. Odin is the god of communication, he adjusts to the times--he's the god of the Internet! . . . Sure, there are still plenty of battles, and he still takes his pick of the slain. But what he needs his worshippers for now is a very different war: the war to reclaim what we've lost, and transform Western culture. Odin doesn't need Siegfried's big muscles and thick head today, he needs the clever little buggers who can tell people about him and make them listen.

There also seems to be a clear-cut relationship between both Wotan and writing and Wotan and academic work. All the major published works on the modern practice of the Germanic religion and magic have been written by Wotanists; Diana Paxson is a full-time professional writer; while Edred Thorsson and I both hold doctorates in Germanic studies.

The two priestesses Freya Aswynn and Diana Paxson, in particular, are living disproof of the idea that the worship of Wotan is a matter chiefly for macho men whirling twelve-pound swords about their heads. Both women are enthusiastic dedicants of the god--though Freya Aswynn's dedication is exclusive, while Paxson works closely with many members of the Germanic pantheon, including Wotan's wife Frigg, a goddess who seems particularly fitting to Paxson's calm nature and motherly demeanor. The two are a fascinating study of opposites. Aswynn, a native Dutchwoman, is tall, almost skeletally thin (though with a surprising strength in her wiry limbs), with a long tail of tarnished golden hair falling down her back like the plait of a horn-bearing woman from the Viking Age picture stones. Her voice is a strong mezzo-soprano, its cigarette-roughened rasp lending her words an edge of power and urgency, like the words of a prophetess whispered straining through the smoke of her holy fire. Freya Aswynn's mood is mercurial--a description she would leap on with glee, "Mercurius" being the standard Latin translation of "Wotan"--and her manner utterly

unrestrained. Though in her forties, she has the unlined face and slim, lanky body of a teenager; the impression of youth is heightened by the expression of absolute delight and devotion that comes over her when she speaks about her god. Occasionally, when overwhelmed by enthusiasm, Freya Aswynn will let out the ear-splitting shriek of “OOOODOIIINN!” which is apparently her trademark--a habit which, now and again, leads to ejection from public places. Her intensity often unsettles those who do not share her dedication: most modern Westerners find it difficult to know how to react when their hostess grasps the rune-carved shaft of a spear and, shaking it aloft, declares that her life is lived only for Wotan’s sake and that she is ready for the god to take her whenever he chooses. In spite of appearances, however, the shrieking valkyrie is also a practical Dutch housewife: she has successfully managed a housing cooperative for many years, and when visiting as a house-guest for any length of time, leaves the home that has offered her hospitality tidier and better-scrubbed than it has ever been.

Not only is Aswynn’s relationship with Wotan intense, it is unique, a surprising rebirth of an element of religion belonging to the eldest days. Her love for her god was ritually marked in its fullness on November 9, 1993, through a rite based on a combination of sagic and historical references describing priestesses or priests as married to the deities they served and the theories of noted Dutch scholar Jan de Vries about the sacrificial origins of certain Danish customs and beliefs surrounding the Last Sheaf (the cutting of which marks the end of the harvest and is marked by a diversity of folk practices and superstitions throughout Europe). The rite itself was largely conducted as a recreation of a Germanic wedding, including the presence of a Kinsman on Wotan’s side and a Kinswoman on Freyja’s, recounting the gifts that each brought to the wedding; the god himself was embodied for the wedding by a Wotan-priest in a state of ecstatic trance. The essence of the ritual beyond the social forms of the wedding was spoken by the Kinswoman and presiding goði (priest):

Kinswoman: *I weep because my kinswoman must wed with the Old One--my fair sister Freya must be bound with the Last Sheaf, reaped with Ygg’s barley and hung to waver in the winter storm. So Earth sighs at her daughter’s loss, though she herself has known the love of the wind-raging god who rides above her bare fields and scatters the seeds from the sheaf.*

Goði: *Ørlög (fate) has been laid and wyrd been turned: the gift goes willingly. With her own hands the Old One’s bride braided her hair into the dry stalks of grain; with her own hands she bears the Sheaf here--bridegroom and bride, gift and giver and god in one. None shall hinder Hárr’s harvest; Galdr-Father gets his share of all that is felled, and sweeps up what is sworn to him. Now let your oaths be sworn upon the hallowed Sheaf, before the holy harrow: Wodan and Freya, speak your troth!*

(unpublished ritual, written by Kveldulf Gundarsson).

Freya Aswynn wears Wotan’s wedding ring and considers herself sworn to him alone, as his chaste priestess and his valkyrie. Like Brünnhilde in the Ring cycle, she can say to the god, “Who am I, if I am not your will?” (*Walküre*, Act I, scene ii) --this is her sole reason and motivation for existing, a dedication worthy of the heroes and heroines of the oldest Norse poetry. She is a remarkable woman.

Diana Paxson--likewise remarkable in her own way, but not nearly so startling on first impression--is an American in her fifties. Of middle height, built in a solid German fashion, with curly dark hair and bright blue eyes, Paxson could easily be a housewife from the Black Forest or Bavaria. Her behavior is perfectly proper in all settings, from taking tea with elegant and venerable English academics to hosting the riotous party held every New Year at her home and writers’ sanctuary, Greyhaven. When dressed for public appearance, in her neat dark blue suit and sensible shoes, Diana Paxson resembles nothing so much as a maternal Lutheran minister or Episcopalian priest, exuding a calm built up over many years

of raising a family and keeping a household of temperamental artists running smoothly. Her tremendous creativity (in addition to being a successful professional novelist, Paxson was one of the founders of the Society for Creative Anachronism, and has since founded several neo-Pagan religious organizations; she has also contributed a great deal to the Ring of Troth's clergy training programme and current organization, and, in addition to her international prominence, is the chief representative of the Northern tradition in the San Francisco/Northern California area) is not apparent on the surface. It is not until one speaks with her that one realizes the extent of her considerable intellect and deep understanding of the subjects with which she deals.

Although Diana Paxson considers herself chiefly dedicated to Wotan, her main contribution to the revival of the Northern religion has been her tremendous efforts towards rediscovering the techniques of trance by which Scandinavian seeresses were able to utter the prophecies of which even Wotan stood in awe. As described in the saga of Eiríkr the Red, Diana has a special high seat to sit in; members of her group Hrafnar (the Ravens) sing trance-inducing songs consisting of modern words set to traditional Norwegian folk melodies, such as the haunting "Summoning Song" (words by Tom Jonsson and William Karpen) with its hypnotic refrain:

Make plain the path to where we are,
A horn calls clear from o'er the mountain,
 The gods to gladden from afar.
And mist rises on the meadow.

The gods to gladden us below,
A horn calls clear from o'er the mountain . . .

Paxson's techniques have been adopted by many other groups, including Freya Aswynn's, but the high level of performance quality which Hrafnar has reached is seldom, if ever, matched: to attend one of their prophetic sessions, with the seers and attendants in full Norse dress, is truly to experience a timeless moment in which one feels that the old wisdom and crafts of the Vikings have never died.

With this as a background to the worship of Wotan today, it may fairly be asked: to what degree is his character as god of death recognised and/or incorporated into practice--do his worshippers gaze up to Valhalla? The ages of the Wotanists I have discussed here currently range from early thirties to mid-fifties (Diana Paxson); their standard of living is generally middle-class, and all of them appear to be in good health. Barring accident or unexpected disease, they can all easily expect from twenty or thirty to fifty or more years of life. It is easy to offer one's life in return for a god's gifts, if death does not appear imminent: but how does the religion of Wotan as it is practiced now actually deal with death? Is the ancient understanding of the native Scandinavians a part--even a small part--of the modern world in any sort of real sense or practice?

Most of my own studies of Wotan and Germanic religion in general have focused on the unification of the dead and the living; my writings over the past few years also include several memorial poems and essays, and Freya Aswynn affectionately calls me "the priest of death". My funeral rituals in *Our Troth* and *Teutonic Religion* are based on a strong awareness of the value of traditional practices in responding to the death of a loved one.

As far as the practical effectiveness of the worship of Wotan in dealing with death, however, it was Freya Aswynn, describing the death of her man Lionel Hornby, who presents the most immediate and relevant view of the role Wotan can play today in dealing with death and grief. As she tells it,

Lionel had been sick for some time--his liver was packing up on him, and he had some other health problems. We were all afraid, me especially since I know something about medicine, that he was going to have three or four months dying painfully in hospital. But Odin told us that he would only live one more harvest, maybe two if he looked after himself carefully and stopped drinking spirits; and Odin promised to take him peacefully when his time came. He was an old man, he had done a lot in his life, and he was ready

to go on to the next thing.

That was in August of 1993. In November, at my wedding with Odin--where Lionel stood as Odin's Kinsman and gave me away, because he knew that this was what I needed and he wouldn't live much longer Odin told Lionel to enjoy himself while he could, because his wyrd was set. He seemed in good health and spirits. Then, at the beginning of January, Lionel was sitting in his chair watching the telly. He was half asleep, and he looked up at me, and he said, "Love, I think this is it." Then the phone rang and I went to answer it. When I came back, he was still sitting there, peaceful and happy. But he was dead. And he had one eye open, and one eye shut--Odin's sign that he had kept his promise to us. Odin is the god of death, but not just death in battle: he brought Lionel a good and an easy death at home, just as Lionel wanted it to be.

And, when it come to the end, dying right is the most important thing about life--isn't it?

(personal interview, June, 1994).

Lionel's ashes were sent across the causeway at Maldon on his flaming ship with the rite from Our Troth,

*Wodan, we call thee! From Walhall's seat,
send ravens winging their way.
Well thou know'st pathways the worlds between -
ferryman, fare to this shore!
A burden waits for thy boat.*

*Saddled the gray steed stands on the shore,
readied for dead to ride,
Wodan's wish-daughters wait with bright drink,
where heroes are gathered in hall,
where swords are shining flames.*

*Wodan, we call thee! Wrap thy dark cloak
over thy son's keen eyes.
Carry him onward to kin in thy home,
where benches are brightly strewn,
where einherjar share the ale.*

(Our Troth, p. 536).

In readying for Lionel's death, in meeting it, in mourning him, and in holding the last rites for his remains: Wotan stood by the shore with open sail and bridled steed, to guide Lionel across the waters to Walhall and to bring Freya and the rest of the household who mourned him back to set their feet firmly on Midgard's earth.

As in earlier days, the old man at the edge of the wood still has his gift to offer: the wisdom of life and death and memory, as it was known by a traditional people for whom death was often but a heartbeat away, life a treasure to be prized--but not too greatly, for if hoarded too long without worthwhile use it became worthless--and memory the shimmering bridge between the two, by which the dead might live again and the living might measure the worth of a good death.

In closing, I will let myself sip of the old man's mead: it is not, I think, a betrayal of the Norse poets who retold the legends of Continental heroes several hundred years later according to their own understanding, if I slip into a fanciful dream of what might have been, of a matter that we will never know the certain truth of. If, as has been suggested, Thórgeirr truly spoke with the gods--if Wotan's eye glimmered against the darkness beneath his cloak, if he heard the whirring of Frigg's spindle or the rustling of Freyja's falcon-cloak as he set his dilemma before them--time has shown how good their advice to him was. Many of the poems of the Viking Age skalds were composed outside of Iceland; some of the Eddic poems may have been as well. But the vast bulk of what we know about the religion of the North was written down and preserved in Iceland, where the Heathen

past was not something to be eradicated and replaced with christian culture as soon as possible, but rather a source of the greatest pride--partially, perhaps, because Iceland's most notable export was her skalds, and skaldic poetry could not well exist without a close knowledge of Scandinavian religion. Iceland's antiquarians of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries did their best to save what could be remembered of the tales and poems of the gods, and it is because of this that we have a clearer picture of the Norse religion than we have of any other European faith. Perhaps Thórgeirr gazed into the dark depths of the Well of Wyrð, where the religions of the continental Germans and the Anglo-Saxons had already been reduced to scattered shards; perhaps he saw there a golden hoard of poems and tales, that could bear to be sunken in the water for the sake of future generations who could bring them up. It is certain that when Thórgeirr returned to his own home in the north of Iceland, he did not take an axe to the carven images through which the might of the gods dwelt with him. Instead he bore them carefully to a mighty, glacier-fed waterfall above a deep lake, and there he cast them over--to sink like the treasure of the Rhine, perhaps to rise again. Those falls are called 'Goðafoss' even today--"Waterfall of the Gods".

If Wotan had wrapped Thórgeirr in his own cloak, carrying the Lawspeaker on Sleipnir's back to the roots of the World-Tree even as his body lay still beneath the shroud of earthly cloth--if Thórgeirr had dismounted at the foot of Yggdrasill's great trunk where the Well of Wyrð stands, if he had looked into those endlessly deep waters, down to the glinting star of Wotan's lost eye--what might he have seen shadowed forth by the Norns?

First, Wyrð, the eldest: the sound of axe-blows rising from the water, drowning out the weeping of widows; the sight of a great and hallowed pillar, the Irminsul of the Saxons, toppling and breaking, and a bloodied cross raised in its place. The whispering of kings, a flash of parchment with Latin letters on it--the advantages of conversion, to English kings who wished to ally their lines with the power of the Frankish kingdoms, the administrative efficiency of Rome. Nothing has changed: on the one hand, treaties and favour; on the other, brutally violent sacrilege, to be done by outsiders for those who refuse to do it for themselves.

Second, Verðandi: more frightful images these, beneath the towering mountain crags of Norway. The king Óláfr Tryggvason--a tall man, well-built and fair to look on, with long flowing hair--sits quietly watching his captive, one Eyvindr kinnrifi. Eyvindr is tied on his back: a brass brazier stands on his naked belly. It is beginning to glow from the coals within, its round foot scorching Eyvindr's flesh black. Still he will not convert, not for freedom and the king's favour, nor to save himself pain. His charred skin splits open first: his guts tumble out like a tangle of sausages. Another man, large and heavy-built, known by the name Rauðr the Strong, stands before Óláfr. He, too, is restrained--it takes several men and a great weight of iron. One end of a metal horn is forced halfway down his throat; the king signals, and an adder is poured slithering into the horn. It will not go all the way through to the flesh at the other opening of the tube, so the outer end is heated until it does. Óláfr's reign will not outlast the year--so Verðandi knows--but he is the first, not the last, of the tyrant-convertors of Norway.

Thus matters stand: now Skuld, the youngest Norn, casts her shadows above the other two. Thórgeirr sees a man in late middle age sitting with a quill-pen in hand, writing--pulling at his silvering hair, perhaps, as he struggles to make some sense of the contradictory jumble of poems and tales, words and songs, which he knows to be the foundation of his beloved art of skaldcraft. Trying to fit all these things into a coherent mythology, his vision dimmed a little further by his Classical models and christian upbringing, he undoubtedly makes some errors: nevertheless, he is able to set down and explain a vast number of things that otherwise would have been forgotten. His name is Snorri Sturluson, and he is a man of many crafts: literary man, historian, active politician, and antiquarian whose love for the old days comes through clearly in his work: even his booth at the Thing is called 'Valhöll'.

Snorri is followed by a parade of other figures. They move as vague shadows through the Well's waters, their names long forgotten--but the calf-bound manuscripts in their hands glimmer gold, the red initial letters gleaming from the pages like garnets in the firelight. One of these will someday bear the name *Codex Regius*, another *Hauksbók*: but more important are the names of the poems within their pages: *Völuspá*, *Grímnismál*,

Vafþrúðnismál, and all the other ‘Eddic lays’ that recount the doings of the gods and heroes, songs which Snorri had only time and space to quote a few scattered verses from. Other manuscripts are named after men or peoples: *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*; *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Völsunga saga*--the saga of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, the saga of Eiríkr the Red, the saga of the Völsungs. In these stories, too, memories of the gods glow like banked coals under ash.

And one of these glowing manuscripts, whose pages strain to hold torrents of red gold and the ancient writhings of a dragon within (Thórgeirr might have seen as he sat gazing into the far-cast shadows of Wyrð, the scratching of his heavy woollen clothes and the little itchy bites of fleas and lice long-forgotten), catches a gust of wind, flaring up into a ring of fire around a mountaintop where an armour-clad maiden sleeps, where Wotan’s single eye flares again from beneath his broad-brimmed hat as he strikes his spear on the ground and cries out in a voice that sends a cold ripple of well-water up the spine,

Wer meines Speeres Spitze furchtet--durchschreitet das Feuer nie!
Who fears the point of my spear--shall never tread through the fire!

That might have been enough for Thórgeirr: both a promise and an answer to him. But if he gazed longer, he would see more. In the land across the sea, the land that Bjarni Herjólfsson sighted, but did not land on, a small group gathers in a grove of trees bigger than any Iceland has yet sprouted, ringing themselves around a large boulder of red sandstone which is carved with the shapes of intertwined wyrms with runes inscribed within their ribbon-bodies. Their clothes are half-familiar, half-strange, a mixture of styles from Northern and Saxon and Eastern lands; yet it is a rich gathering, for many of them are armed with swords as well as axes and spears, and several of the women are adorned with rope upon rope of amber that glows gold in the early morning Sun. It is a man who steps before the harrow-stone--a short, broad-shouldered man, with long flaxen hair and a close-cropped reddish beard. Taking a horn of mead in his hand, he raises it and speaks words which are well-known to Thórgeirr: the words spoken by the valkyrie Sigdrífa as she awakens from her long sleep.

Hail, Day! Hail, ye Day’s sons!
 Hail, Night and her daughter!
 Look down upon us here with loving eyes,
 and give victory to those sitting here!

Hail the gods! Hail the goddesses!
 Hail to need-giving Earth!
 Goodly speech and human wit may you grant to we, the mighty,
 and hands of healing, while we live.

Then, having watched Skuld shadow almost a thousand years of what should become, Thórgeirr might hear the mocking words of the seeress of *Völuspá*--“Would you know more, or what?” And he might take the cloak from his head, blinking against the misty summer brightness; and, knowing that he was not destroying, but saving, make his way up to the Law-Rock above the plain of tents and the bustling of folk in their best and brightest clothing, there to speak the decision that would lay down the first layers upon which Skuld’s foreshadowing could be built. Though the signposts along the road to Valhalla would be hidden for a time, they would not be destroyed: one day Wotan’s spear would point the path to the shimmering bridge again--to the heroes’ holy hall.

The second draft, which is the only surviving version. The original, now lost, was drafted between 1122 and 1133.

Eddas and Sagas, pp. 88-89.

Snorra Edda, pp. 23-24.

Larry D. Benson, general ed. *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987),

lines 558-59.

Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 111

Ziegler, *The Black Death*, p. 101.

Bienert, *Martin Luther und die Juden*, p. 154.

Cohn-Sherbok, *The Crucified Jew*, p. 124.

Hitler's Table Talk 1941-44: His private Conversations, tr. by Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens, 2nd edn. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973). 27th Feb. 1942, midday, p. 341; 1 Aug. 1942, evening, pp. 603-07.

(unexpurgated edn., 2 vols. in one, tr. by James Murphy (London: Hurst & Blackett Ltd., 1939), pp. 301, 304).

Mein Kampf, p. 302.

Gløb, P.V. *The Mound People*. John Bulman, tr. London: Book Club Associates, 1973, p. 64.

Padfield, *Himmler*, p. 173.

Heinz Höhne, *Der Orden unter dem Totenkopf: Die Geschichte der SS* (Gütersloh: Sigbert Mohn, 1967), p. 147.

These works were listed as spiritual favourites of Himmler by SS-leader Brandt in a conversation with Himmler's masseur Felix Kersten on Aug. 8, 1942. *The Kersten Memoirs 1940-1945*. Constantine Fitzgibbons and James Oliver, trs. London: Hutchison, 1956, p. 149.

Padfield, p. 175.

Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, p. 181.

Padfield, p. 176.

Essays on Contemporary Events, p. 53.

A Book of Troth, pp. 115-16. This book was the original handbook of the Ring of Troth, later replaced by the larger and vastly more detailed collection *Our Troth*.

Garman Lord, e-mail interview, Nov. 24, 1995.

William West, e-mail interview, Dec. 12, 1995.

personal interview, Sept. 13, 1995.

It should be noted that a number of followers of Loki insist that Loki is the god of the Internet.

Personal interview, Dec. 10, 1995.

Appendix I: Poem Texts

Ynglingatal (tr. KveldúlfR Gundarsson)

Ynglingatal is one of our older skaldic poems, attributed to the ninth century skald Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni. It recounts the deaths and burial places of the Ynglings, traditionally considered to be the royal line of Sweden, descended from Ingvi-Freyr.

1. The word of the doomed, that came to Fjölnir, was fore-gone where Fróði dwelt; the windless sea of Svigðir's spears (ale) should overcome the prince.
2. Yet the day-cloud hall-watcher of Dúrnir's descendents deceived Sveigðir, that the proud kinsman of Dusli ran after the dwarf into the stone, and the bright, jötunn-settled hall of Sökmímir and his folk opened for the ruler-boar.
3. And the witchly wight caused Vanlandi to visit Vilji's brother (Óðinn?), that the troll-born Grímhildr should tread the foe of the host of men; and so burned the gift-mild who the nightmare had tormented on the bank of Skúta.
4. And the descendant of the sea (fire) was able to swallow Vísburr's will-fortress (breast), when the desirers of the kingdom incited the forest's harm-thief (fire) against their father, and the glow's baying hound bit the all-ruler in the eagle-ship.
5. That was in early days, when the sword-bearers reddened the earth with their drighthen,

and the land-army bore bloodied weapons from Domaldi's body, when the harvest-greedy Swede-clan should sacrifice the foe of Jóti.

6. And I have often asked wise men about Yngvi's corpse, where Dómarr was borne onto the roaring bane of Hóalfir; now I know that the sickness-dead descendant of Fjölfnir was burned beside the Fyris.

7. I tell no deception, that Glitnir's Gná (Hel) had Dyggvi's corpse for joy, for the horse-dís of the Wolf and Narfi should choose the king-man; and Loki's maid had the all-ruler of Yngvi's folk to play with.

8. I have heard that Dagr, eager after fame, should travel according to death-word, when the wise one of the slain-twig (warrior) came to Vörvi to avenge his sparrow.

9. And the host of the prince bore that word on the eastern ways from battle, that the ruler should be overcome by Sleipnir's hay-thief.

10. That wonder tell I, if Agni's armi had thought Skjalf's actions natural, when Logi's dís heaved the ruler aloft with the gold necklace, he who should tame the cool horse of Signý's man (the gallows) by the Taur.

11. Alrekr fell there where a brother's weapon became Eiríkr's bane, and it is said that Dagr's kinsmen slew each other with steed's bridles; none had heard of it before, that Freyr's offspring had used a bridle in war.

12. And he who slew Alfr, the warder of the véstallr, lay slain, when the jealous ruler reddened a sword in Yngvi's blood.

13. That was not to be told, that Bera should whet the slayers to battle, when the two brothers unnecessarily became each others's bane out of jealousy.

14. Jörundr, who died a long time ago, was bereft of his life in Limafirð, when the high-breasted linen-rope Sleipnir (gallows) should bear Goðlaugr's bane; and Hagbarðr's string went around the throat of the army's lord.

15. In former times, old age overtook Aun at Uppsala, and the life-desiring should receive a babe's nourishment for another time.

16. And he brought a horn's point to his mouth, when the destroyer of his ætt drank, lying down, from an ox's horn; the hoary-haired eastern king could not hold the horn up.

17. And the clan-fellow of Týr fled the kingdom before Tunni's might, but the ox reddened its head-sword in Egill's blood.

18. Which earlier in the east had long-born its eyebrow-altar (or temple), but the woodless sword of the gorer stood in the heart of the descendant of Skilfings.

19. Óttarr fell, mighty, under the claws of the eagle, before the weapons of the Danes, the battle-geese trod him with bloody feet, borne from afar, at Vendel.

20. I have heard it said that the works of Vátr and Fasti became a tale among the Swede-folk, that Fróði's island-jarls had slain the battle-promoters.

21. Yet I have heard that a witchly wight should take away Aðil's life, and the death-greedy kinsman of Freyr should fall from the horse's back.

22. And the ruler's son's brains became blended with gravel, and Ali's death-blessed foe

should die at Uppsala.

23. I know that Eystein's end followed, his closing of life, at Lófundr, and it was said that Jutlandish men burned the king inside among the Swedes.

24. And the devouring sickness of the meadow-seaweed (fire) ran over the ruler in the fire's ship, where the timber-fast house, full of men, burned over the king.

25. That was rumoured, that the folk of Sysla had sacrificed Yngvarr, the Estonian army attacked the light-skinned king at the harbour's heart (stone; the place name Steinn); and the eastern sea sings Gymir's song for the pleasure of the Swedish king.

26. Önundr was beaten down with the harm of Jónakr's children (stones) under Heaven-Fells, and the foe of the Estonians was pressed weightily; the bastard's doom (stones) came to hand, and so the promoter of Högni's corpse was slain with stones.

27. And Ingjaldr was trodden, living, by the overturner of rye (fire) at Ræning, when the house-thief stood against the god-kin with fire's feet.

28. And all the folk saw the fate of the most crucial among the Swedes, that he himself should be the first to bring the end of his brave life.

29. And at the harbour, the elm-tree's wolf (fire) swallowed the corpse of Óláfr, who had ploughed the wood, and Fornjót's glowing son loosed the clothing of the ruler of the Swedes; so the kinsman of Lofði's clan turned from Uppsala a long time ago.

30. Everyone has heard that peaceable men should miss Halfdan, and the protection-Nauma of the stone-caster (Hel) took the folk-king at Þóttinn; and Skereiðr sorrows over the bones of the byrnie-alf in Skíring-Hall.

31. But Eysteinn, before the mast, fared to the maid of Býleistr's brother (Hel), and now the inviter of heroes lies under the sea's bones at the end, where Vaðla's ice-cold stream comes to the sea by the Gautish ruler.

32. And Hveðrungr's maid (Hel) bade the leader, third in the Thing, from the world which Halfdanr, who dwelt in Holt, had enjoyed the life doomed for him by the Norns; and the victory-having one buried his prince at Borre afterwards.

33. The greatly laden Goðrøðr, who lived a long time ago, was met with treachery, and the person who wished to be ruler used cunningness against the king when he was drunk.

34. And the deceitful thrall of the Æsir bore a deceitful winner above the ruler, and the prince was stabbed at the ancient bank of Stíflusund.

35. And the descendant-branch of Þrór's strength had thrived greatly in Norway; Óláfr ruled in elder days over Upsa's wide land and Vestmar, together with Grenland's folk, like to the gods.

36. Footwork should bring the friend of men to Fold's rim; the battle-brave army-king lies in a howe at Geirstaðr.

37. I know that ken-name to be the best under the blue heaven, which the king had, which Rögnvaldr, wagon-steerer, called the high-glory; and the gift-mild forestland's frighten...

38. The chief kinsman carried out awesome deeds at the harbour...

Estonia: Memorial from Uppsala (KveldúlfR Hagan Gundarsson, 1994 C.E.)

The North folk have sailed on the sea long years,
 women have wept on the shore.
 The Baltic's waves are wild as of eld,
 Rán brooks no bridle of steel,
 our crafts cannot bridle her cold.

At Holy-month's end there howl north winds,
 screaming over the sea,
 Yet the stout ferry feared not the waves,
 the ale was all loaded on,
 the lights were lit on the decks.

Strong must the bolt be unbarring the door
 to each and every guest.
 The wagons rolled on, and weened to be safe,
 but Wodan's wain rolled on last,
 Wal-God's wain rolled on last.

Merry the night then much ale was drained,
 towards Sweden the ship turned her prow,
 Rán's daughters leapt high, rough at the sides,
 musicians made songs within,
 there was dancing without and within.

A Hunt rides 'neath wave as wild through the sky,
 Rán's lover storms under sea,
 No warning at midnight to wave-farers came,
 but Ægir lifted his axe,
 the Brewer struck ship her bane.

Too swift to count moments, to call out for aid,
 little was wisdom worth.
 Those who had heeded Hár's words on ale -
 most surely death-doomed were those
 who left beer early for beds.

The old only wept all hope was lost,
 the wounded left where they lay.
 But musicians' hands shaped human chain,
 gave life jackets out to the lost,
 till they had none for themselves.

Woe to those left within the ship,
 when down she plunged to the depths!
 Kind gods grant that cold killed soon,
 swift stilled the struggling bairns,
 left none to dying long.

Above, lights flickered - lamps small on waves,
 stars on the waters stark:
 More chill than wind the winding arms:
 what Rán's daughters had, they held;
 no need of her hungry hounds.

And yet the waves waged battle high,

few were the ferries of hope
 with strength through storm to struggle then,
 thus many died lifted to deck,
 but Farnatýr's ferry found more.

If men could bear swords to sea as our foe,
 Ægir would brew no more ale.
 His bride has slit the strands of our clan,
 been bane to our mothers beloved,
 and death to our children dear.

Wild the Baltic in winter-time,
 who trusts the Robber's troth?
 Now north winds howl to hail the dead,
 the bodies brought down by waves,
 the souls ripped loose by the sea.

And Yngvi weeps o'er all lost kin,
 his sons in sunken depths,
 where ship's decks high are halls of Rán
 where drowned may drink her ale,
 so far from howes of home.

Freyr weeps on land, Freyja sheds gold tears,
 on Uppsala's age-old earth.
 The grave-lights burn, beacons for kin,
 to call them from waters cold,
 to light them a way to land -
Estonia's lost, all mourned.

Hrafnsmál (Thórbjörn hornklofi, ca. 900 C.E.; tr. KveldúlfR Gundarsson)

1. Hear, ring-bearer
 while of Haraldr
 I tell all the accomplishments,
 of the wealthy ruler;
 I shall speak of the words,
 which I heard from the maid,
 white and fair-haired,
 who spoke with the raven.
2. The valkyrie seemed wise to me,
 men were never
 beloved by the keen-eyed
 who knew the bird's voice.
 With bright eyelids
 and white throat
 she spoke to Hymir's skull-breaker (the raven)
 which sat on the berg's peak.

Valkyrie:

3. 'How is it with you, raven?
 From whence are you come
 with bloody beak

so early in the day?
 Bits of meat hang from your claws,
 the stench of carrion comes from your mouth.
 I think you spent the night
 near where you knew the dead to lie.'

4. The dark-feathered one stirred itself,
 and dried its beak,
 the eagle's oath-brother,
 and considered its reply.
 'We followed Haraldr
 the son of Halfdan,
 the young Yngling,
 since we came from the egg.

Raven:

5. 'I thought that you knew the king,
 he who dwelt in Kvinne,
 warleader of the Northmen
 ruling over deep keels,
 reddened rims
 and red shields,
 tarred oars
 and sleeted tent-poles.
6. 'He will drink Yule outside,
 if he alone has the choice,
 the brave host-leader,
 and hold Freyr's play (battle);
 young, he avoided the hearth
 and sitting inside,
 the women's warm bower
 or down-filled pillows.
7. 'It was heard in Hafrsfjörð,
 how hotly battled
 the kin-proud king
 against Kjötvi the Wealthy;
 the knarrs came from eastward,
 lusting for battle,
 with gaping heads
 and graven prows.
8. 'They were loaded with strong men
 and with white shields,
 with western spears
 and with Welsh (foreign) swords;
 the berserks roared,
 battle was in their minds,
 the Wolf-Coats howled
 and shook their spears.
9. 'They would test the strong one,
 who had taught them to flee,
 ruler of the Eastmen,
 who dwelt at Útsteinn;

Nökkvi's steeds (ships) surged forward,
for battle was awaited,
there was beating on shields,
before Haklangr fell.

10. 'Led then before Lúfa -
- to hold the land -
the broad-necked ruler,
onto the island like a shield;
those who were wounded
cast themselves under roomy seat-planks,
let their backs stick up,
stuck heads in the keels.
11. 'On back they let blink
Sváfnir's hall-shingles (shields)
the cautious warriors,
but were slain with stones;
the Easterners were terrified
and ran over Jaðar
home from Hafrsfjörð
and thought of mead-drinking.
12. 'The slain lay there on the sand,
marked out for the one-eyed
dweller in Frigg's embrace:
thus we rejoiced over the dead.
13. 'Something else shall
Ragnhildr's serving maids have to tell
the haughty women
at drinking-speech,
but that battle-lynxes (wolves) were seen
which Haraldr had
starved of slain-blood,
while their own men fed them.
14. 'He scorned the Holmrygians
and maids of the Hörðar
all of the
and Hölgir's kinswomen,
the kin-great king
took a Danish woman.'

Valkyrie:

15. 'How does the wealth-giver deal
with his men of great deeds,
who ward his land?'

Raven:

16. 'Greatly are rewarded
the warriors
who in Haraldr's hall
cast the dice;
they are given wealth

and fair blades
with Hunnish gold
and eastern bondsmails.

17. 'Then they are glad,
when they expect battle,
hastily to leap up
and swing the oars,
to snap the oar-thongs
and break the tholes.
I know the strong ones strive
over the waves
when the king bids it.'

Valkyrie:

18. 'I will ask you of the skalds' state,
for you seem to know all well,
how the poets fare -
you should know it clearly -
who dwell with Haraldr?'

Raven:

19. 'It can be seen by their clothes
and their gold rings
that they are good friends of the king,
they own red cloaks,
and fairly fringed,
swords wound with silver,
ring-mail sarks,
gilded trappings
and graven helms
arm-borne rings
which Haraldr gave them.'

Valkyrie:

20. 'I will ask you of the berserks,
drinkers of the corpse-sea (blood),
what is the booty
of those who wade into the host,
the battle-brave men?'

Raven:

21. 'They are called Wolf-Coats
who, in battle,
bear bloodied shields,
who redden spears
when they come in the fight,
they work together,
most renowned of men only
I think the wise prince sets
among those who hew at the shield.'

Valkyrie:

22. 'Of actors and tumblers
I have asked you little.
What is the place
of Andaðr and his folk
in Haraldr's house?'

Raven:

23. 'Andaðr makes love to a dog
and plays foolishly
with the earless one,
and the battle-boar (king) laughs.
There are also others
who shall, over the fire,
bear burning spoons,
flaming shingles
they have beneath their belts
the heel-tripping heroes.'

Sigrdrífumál 5-19 (tr. KveldúlfR Hagan Gundarsson)

Sigrdrífa (Brünnhilde) said,

5. Beer I bring to you, byrnie-Thing's apple-tree (warrior),
blended with might and mainstrength glorious;
it is full of songs and staves of liking,
good *galdrar* (magical songs) and pleasure-runes.
6. You shall know victory-runes if you will have victory,
and rist them on hilt of the blade,
some on the guard-ring, some on the hilt-plate,
and two times name Týr.
7. You shall know ale-runes, if you will that another's woman,
not betray your troth, if you trust.
You shall rist them on horn, and on back of the hand,
and mark Nauðr on your nail.
8. You shall sign the cup, and look out against hate,
and cast a leek in the liquid.
Then I know that for you will never be
evil blended into the mead.
9. You shall know saving-runes, if you shall save
and loose children from women.
They shall be risted on palm and on back of the hand,
and bid then the *dísir* (ancestral female spirits) aid.
10. You shall make brine-runes, if you will have warding,
for sail-steeds (ships) in the sound;
on mast you shall risk them and on rudder's blade,
and lay fire in the oar,
there will not crash such breakers nor such blue-black waves,

but you will come hale from harbour.

11. You shall know limb-runes, if you will be a leech,
and know how to deal with wounds;
on bark shall you rist them and on branch of a tree
whose limbs lean towards the east.
12. You shall know speech-runes, if you will, that none to thee,
out of hate shall work harm.
Wind them around, weave them around,
set them all together,
at that Thing where the folk shall
fare to make full judgement.
13. You shall know soul-runes, if you will be to everyone
the best-thought of warrior;
Those were reded, those were risted,
those were thought of by Hroptr (Wotan),
from the liquid which had leaked
from the skull of Heiddraupnir,
from the horn of Hoddrofnir.
14. He stood on the crag with the sword Brimir,
he had a helm on his head.
Then spoke Mímir's head
wisely the first word
and said truly the staves.
15. On the shield they were said to be risted, which stands before the shining god (the Sun)
on Early-Awake's ear, and on All-Swift's hoof (the two horses of the Sun),
on the wheel that turns beneath Hrungrnir's wain,
on Sleipnir's teeth, and on the sledge's straps,
on the bear's paw, and on Bragi's tongue,
on the wolf's claw, and on the eagle's beak,
on the bloody wings, and on the bridge's head,
on the loosening palm, and on the healing spoor,
on glass and on gold, and on the luck of men,
in wine and wort and the will's seat,
on Gungnir's point and on Grani's breast,
on the Norn's nail, and on the owl's neb.
18. All were scraped off that were scratched on,
and cast into the holy mead,
and sent on wide ways.
These are with the gods, those with the elves,
some with the wise Vanir,
some have human folk.
19. These are beech-runes, those are warding-runes,
and all ale-runes,
and mighty runes of main.
He who knows them unconfused and undestroyed,
shall have them for good,
for use, if you take them,
until the doom of the gods.

Hávamál: Selections (tr. KveldúlfR Hagan Gundarsson)***The Winning of the Mead of Poetry***

104. I sought the old etin, now am I come again,
 well was I received there,
 with many words I made myself welcome,
 in Suttungr's hall.
105. Gunnlöð gave to me - on a golden stool -
 a drink of the dear-bought mead;
 ill geld in return I let her have afterwards,
 for her good soul,
 for her heavy heart.
106. I must let Rati run about,
 and gnaw through the stone;
 over and under stood etin-ways about me,
 so I risked my head.
107. Of the well-bought, well made I use
 from few is wisdom lacking;
 because Óðrœrir up now is come,
 to the holy stead of the old god.
108. That knowledge I have that I could not have come,
 out of the etins' garth,
 If I had not had Gunnlöð's help, the good woman,
 she whom I laid my arm over.
109. The day afterwards, the rime-thurses came
 to ask of Hár's redes, in the hall of Hár;
 they asked about Bölverkr, if he was come among gods,
 or if Suttungr had slain him.
110. A ring-oath I know Óðinn had sworn,
 how shall his troth be trusted?
 Suttung he swindled, stole feast-drink from him,
 and left Gunnlöð to weep.

Rúnatal's þáttur

I wot that I hung on the windy tree
 nights all nine,
 wounded by spear, given to Óðinn,
 given, self to myself,
 on that tree of which no man knows
 where it rises from roots.

They comforted me not with loaf nor with horn,
 I pried below me,
 took up the runes screaming I took them,
 and fell back from there afterwards.

Mighty songs nine I learned I from the famous son
 of Bölþorn, Bestla's father,
 and a drink I got of the dear mead,
 sprinkled from Óðroerir.

Then I began to learn and to become wise,
 and to wax and do well.
 Word led me from word to another word,
 work led me from work to another work.

You should find runes and read the staves,
 mickle great staves,
 mickle strong staves,
 which Fimbul-Þulr stained
 and the Ginn-Reginn readied,
 and Hroptr risted.

Óðinn among Æsir, for the alfs, Dáinn,
 Dvalinn for the dwarves
 Ásviðr for the etins,
 I risted some myself.

Know you, how to rist, know you, how to read?
 know you, how to colour, know you, how to test?
 know you, how to ask, know you, how to bless?
 know you, how to send, know you, how to sacrifice?

Better 'tis unoffered than to be over-offered,
 a gift ever looks for a gift;
 better 'tis unsent than over-sacrificed,
 So þundr wrote before the history of folks,
 there he rose up when he came again.

I know a song no folk-ruler's queen knows,
 nor human kinsman;
 "Help" it hight, because it shall help,
 against sicknesses and hurts and sorrows full-wrought.

That ken I secondly which men's sons need,
 they who wish to live as healers.

That ken I third, if great need is on me,
 chains against my foe,
 edges I deafen of shots against me,
 that those weapons cannot bite.

That ken I fourth, if are set upon me
 bonds upon my limbs,
 so I chant that I can go,
 fetters spring from my feet,
 and chains spring from hands.

That ken I fifth, if I see the shot on the way,
 throwing-spear in the folk's throng,
 it cannot fly so fast that I cannot stop it,
 if I should sight it.

That ken I sixth, if some thane would scathe me,
 with a young root's wood,
 I will be hale but who says he hates me,
 the harm eats him rather than me.

That ken I seventh if I see high fire,
 in the hall around my seat-kin,
 It does not burn so broadly that I cannot protect from it,
 I know how to sing that galdr.

That kenn I eighth which is for all,
 a needful thing to take.
 Where hate waxes among warriors' sons,
 I am able to quell it.

That ken I ninth if there is need for me
 to save my ship on the flood,
 I can still the wind upon the waves,
 and make all the sea to sleep.

That ken I tenth if I see garth-riders
 playing aloft
 I can work it that the wild ones fare (home),
 their shapes home,
 their souls home.

That ken I eleventh if I shall into battle
 lead old friends,
 I sing under shield-rim that they fare with power,
 hale to the battle,
 hale from the battle,
 they come hale, where-ever.

That ken I twelfth if I see up on a tree
 a dangling hanged-man,
 so I rist and in runes I colour,
 that so the man walks
 and speaks with me.

That ken I thirteenth if I shall cast water
 upon a young thane,
 he shall not fall although he comes in battle,
 he shall not sink before swords.

That ken I fourteenth if I shall, before the folk,
 speak of the gods,
 of Æsir and elves I can tell all,
 few unwise ones are so able.

That ken I fifteenth which Þjóðrørir sang,
 dwarf, before Dellings door.
 Might sang he to Æsir power to the elves,
 understanding to Óðinn.

That ken I sixteenth if of a young maid I will
 have all heart and pleasure,

I turn the soul of the white-armed woman
and wend to bed with her.

That ken I seventeenth that she will not scorn me
for any other man -
this song remember you, Loddfáfnir,
long will you lack it,
but it will be good to you, if you get it,
useful, if you take it,
needful, if you receive it.

That ken I eighteenth which I will not make known,
not to maid nor man's wife -
it is wholly better which one alone knows -
that follows to the end of the song -
except for her who lies in my arms
or be my sister.

Now are Hár's sayings spoken in the hall of Hár,
all-needful for men's sons,
un-needful for etins' sons.
Hail the one who spoke! Hail the one who knows!
useful to the one who takes,
help, to the one who heeds.

Appendix II: Neo-Heathen Rituals

I. Funeral Service (rep. from Our Troth). Note that Our Troth uses Old German name forms: Wodan for Wotan, Frija for Frigg, Fro Ing for Yngvi-Freyr, Thonar for Thórr)

As spoken of in the chapter on "Soul, Death, and Rebirth", the burial customs of our forebears varied greatly. In Scandinavia, the common practice was to bury the dead in mounds; mounds were also raised over those who had been burnt, as was the case with the great howes at Gamla Uppsala, for instance. During the first few hundred years of the Common Era, the Germanic tribes had largely lost this practice: the dead were both burnt and buried (though burial was more common, and the only form used by some tribes, such as the Burgundians). Among many tribes, the dwelling above the ground was replaced by a wooden chamber below the ground; this was the case with the Alamanns, for instance, who built quite elaborate chambers. The Franks commonly buried their dead in neat rows, not unlike the layout of most cemeteries today; they, too, sometimes built wooden burial chambers beneath the ground. While the Goths knew two words that seem to describe mound burials - *hlaiw* (from the common Germanic word for a mound, which itself may originally mean "dwelling") and *aurahjom* ("heap of gravel"), they had largely lost this practice in the course of their migrations: Gothic graves are normally flat. Another form of cemetery was the urnfield (Grundy, *The Cult of Óðinn: God of Death?*).

Some Anglo-Saxon graves are marked by postholes or beam-slots at the corners of the grave, suggesting that small huts or shrines were raised over the individual graves; others are surrounded by penannular or ring-shaped ditches, some of which have preserved stake-holes that show that the grave was originally ringed by a fence. The gap in penannular fences was sometimes marked by a larger post-hole, which may have held something such as one of the god-staffs with a head carved at the top which ibn Fadlan described for the Rus on the Volga (Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, pp. 53-63). If a true wo/man's body must be buried in a secular (or even, gods help us, a christian) cemetery, the setting up of such a covering structure, small ring of stakes, and/or god-post is one way in which the grave could be set apart as hallowed.

Another common form of burial among the Anglo-Saxons was the cremation/urn burial,

and quite large urnfields have been found. The pottery containers were often decorated with holy emblems such as swastikas and Tiwaz-runes; pots from Lovedon Hill and Spong Hill bore runic inscriptions (Wilson, pp. 147-49). Wyrms and animal figures were not uncommon; one pot from Caistor-by-Norwich shows a large dog or wolf apparently barking at a retreating ship, and it has been suggested that this has something to do with the events of Ragnarök, with the wolf being Fenrir and the ship being that steered by Loki.

Burning and burial were both known in the Viking Age; because Snorri says in *Ynglinga* saga that Óðinn introduced the custom of burning, and given the reference in ibn Fadlan's account to the dead man's Lord sending the wind to fan the flames of his pyre and take him straight away to "Paradise" (see "Soul, Death, and Rebirth"), it is usually taken that cremation is more fitting for the followers of Wodan (and perhaps the other Ases as well), while burial, especially howe-burial, is more fitting to the Wans - Snorri specifically mentions that Freyr introduced the custom of mound-burial. The Icelandic sagas seldom mention cremation otherwise; this likely stems from the simple fact that, even at the time of the settlement, the "woods" that covered Iceland were little scrub birches, and the amount of wood needed to burn a human body would have been prohibitive except in cases where a draugr was a major threat to the community.

Given this range, it follows that the most common means of burial in the West today - flat inhumation and cremation - are both well-set within the traditions of the Troth. The only modern custom which is not particularly fitting is that of scattering ashes; this was done only when there was reason to think that the dead person would walk again (often because he had been walking and making trouble) - and even then it was not always successful, as the story of Þórólfr Twist-Foot from *Eyrbyggja* saga shows. Cremation urns were usually buried, or at least those which have survived have all been from burials. This means of dealing with the dead offers the simplest way of carrying out the traditional practice of keeping the kin by the stead; it is unlikely that one will be allowed to bury a body in a mound in the backyard, but there is no difficulty, legal or otherwise, in heaping a small howe over a cremation urn and grave-gifts.

The setting of runestones or memorial picture-stones was deeply important to Northern beliefs about the dead, as it was through these that the dead could be remembered forever. As *Hávamál* 72 says, "Better to have a son, though he be born after the warrior is gone; memorial stones seldom stand by the road, unless raised by kinsman for kin." It was by no means definite that the stone had to be set on top of the burial as a grave-marker. Some runestones, such as the Eggjum stone, were set within the mound, and apparently meant to affect the dead or protect them from anyone who might break into the grave (but nothing stops an archæologist!). Others, such as the Swedish group commemorating the men who "fell in the East with Ingvi", memorialize folk whose bodies are far away. The Gotlandic picture-stones are not generally found in association with actual graves, either; and they seem to be not only memorials (and some of them bear runic inscriptions making it clear that they are), but some of them also appear to describe the expected afterlife of the dead man. Runestones can be set upon the grave as markers, and if the body must be buried among other folk, this probably should be done. They can also be put up on your own lands or at public gathering places. In the old days, stringent curses were often carved into the stone against anyone who should break or disturb it, and (what with one thing and another) this is not a bad idea now. We would also advise against setting smaller or less firmly-rooted stones where vandals or thieves can get hold of them - odd as it may sound, people have had small runestones stolen in the past few years. Limestone is probably the ideal medium for a runestone, being soft enough to carve with relative ease, but durable enough to hold its images for a long time - most of the Gotlandic picture stones, for instance, are limestone. A Troth Elder should be able to design a fitting runestone or picture-stone at need. As far as the carving is concerned, anyone with moderate artistic skill and a little practice should be able to execute it. However, if there is some doubt, it should be remembered that there is a fairly strong body of evidence to the effect that the craftsmen who actually did runic inscriptions (as on bracteates or runestones) were not necessarily runemasters themselves, which suggests that a mundane stonecarver can be hired if necessary. If you do this for a runic inscription, you do need to oversee the person carefully, as a lot of the staves look an awful lot alike to non-runesters. This is thought to be one

explanation for the great number of surviving "nonsense inscriptions". The raising of the runestone, and whatever rites seem fitting to that, was usually done nine months to a year after the death.

Likely the most common element in all Germanic burials - from the eldest days to the end of the Viking Age, from Scandinavia to Italy - was the setting of grave-goods. This practice (beginning at the dawn of humanity and common to many more peoples than our own) was based on the belief that the dead still lived in some way, and would need not only food and drink, but weapons, tools, and all those things they had enjoyed in their lifetimes. Grave-goods were given to both the burned and the buried; Snorri tells us (and we can probably trust his account of the belief, though we may be dubious about what he says of its origins) that Óðinn decreed "that everyone should come to Valhöll with the same wealth that he had on the bale-fire; and he should also enjoy that which he had hidden in the earth himself" (Ynglinga saga, ch. 8). Sometimes the goods themselves were cremated, and sometimes set in the grave with the urn after the body had been burnt. The description of Beowulf's funeral has both: Beowulf's pyre is "hung with helm, with battle-boards, with bright byrnies" (lines 3139-40), and Wiglaf says earlier that the treasure must "melt with the brave-one...the fire shall eat it" (3011-14); but when the cremated body is buried, it is also told how "they placed in the barrow arm-rings and jewels, all that treasure which the fierce men had earlier taken from the hoard (3163-65).

Food and drink, especially apples and hazelnuts (filberts, to Americans), were very usual, and perhaps the most meaningful of gifts (see "Things and their Meanings"). The Oseberg queen was sent off with a bucket and a chest full of wild apples, as well as grain, loaves, and meat. Food was still given to the mound-dead until modern times, although this likely stems from the worship of the alfs rather than an awareness of dead humans needing food (see "Alfs").

The dead were usually buried (or burnt) with those things which they had used in life, fully dressed in their best clothing. Usually they were laid on their backs; the Anglo-Saxon folk buried face-downward are suspected to have been considered dangerous or disgraced in some way (Wilson, pp. 80-86). Women had their spinning and weaving implements, as well as cooking utensils - the frowe of the Oseberg ship-burial had a fully equipped kitchen. Men had weapons and armour (some weapons have also been found in female graves); Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar mentions the burial of smiths with their tools, which is supported by archæological finds. Both sexes were buried with jewelry, with fine goods such as glass cups or drinking horns; it was thought shameful for someone of good standing to be sent to the mound without some treasure. Animals, especially horses but also dogs, hawks, and farm animals, were very often laid in the mound with their owners. Some of these, such as pigs, sheep, and cattle, were probably meant for the dead to eat in the Otherworld; the horses, hounds, and hawks suggest that riding and hunting would be done in death as in life.

One of the most definitely religious practices particularly associated with cremation/urn burial in the Viking Age was the setting of an iron ring with Þórr's Hammer pendants, miniature firesteels, and other such small iron emblems (one ring, from Torvalla, Sweden, has what appear to be a spear, hammer, and sickle, which may have been meant as emblems of Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyr) on top of the urn. This was probably meant to ward the dead from all the dangers of the Otherworld. Hammers and miniature fire-steel pendants of silver are also common, as are Hammers of amber; some of the latter sort from Gotland seem to have been made for the sole purpose of burial, as they show no sign of wear (Roesdahl and Wilson, *From Viking to Crusader*, p. 190). Small images of other sorts were also put in cremation graves: one from Kungsängen (Sweden), ca. 800 C.E., held both a little bronze figure of a man with a bird-horned helmet (often thought to have some connection with the cult of Wodan, as hinted at by the Torslunda matrices in which the bird-horned dancer is one-eyed) and another of a man in a wolfskin who is apparently biting a snake, which may possibly refer to a scene from Völsunga saga. Such images were found in the graves of folk of both genders: a woman's grave from Birka, for instance, had a small mounted warrior, another horseman, a woman's image, and a miniature strike-a-light (Roesdahl and Wilson, p. 277). The Anglo-Saxon graves were also rich in amulets, including quartz crystals, amethyst, horses' teeth, and, for women, cowrie shells (Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets and*

Curing Stones); quartz crystals in various polished and unpolished forms were common amulets/grave-goods throughout the Germanic world, as were also sundry animals' teeth (especially boar-tusks) and claws (especially bear-claws), beads, and stones.

The equipping of the dead person with the means of faring from one world to the next has been spoken of in "Soul, Death, and Rebirth". As well as boats, wains, and horses, the dead could also have "Hel-shoes" sewn onto their feet. These shoes, like the stone-moored boats mentioned in the earlier chapter, served two purposes: they kept the dead shod on the faring to the Otherworld, and also kept them from getting up and walking about in the Middle-Garth.

In modern times, if the dead cannot be buried in a full-size vehicle, a model of a ship, wain, or car might be laid in the grave or burnt for the dead person. Otherwise, the body should be readied with a warm coat or cloak, warm and sturdy walking shoes or boots, and perhaps a staff: it is a long, cold, and wet way to the lands of the dead.

In Norway, at the moment of death, a window or door was supposed to be opened; if the death-struggle was especially long, a hole might be made in the roof or someone might climb onto the roof to call the dying person out through chimney or smokehole (Christianssen, "The Dead and the Living", p. 19). It was sometimes thought dangerous to bring the body out through a window or a door, as the dead might remember the way back in (especially if they were the sort of folk who were likely to walk again, such as berserks, shape-shifters, magic-workers, and the generally obnoxious); Egill Skalla-Grímsson, whose father was a berserk, had a hole broken in the wall of the house through which Skalla-Grímr's corpse could be carried out. In Denmark, houses were sometimes built with a keyhole-shaped "corpse-door" which was usually bricked up, and opened only for the sake of bringing the dead out. Interestingly, many rune-stones and picture-stones are shaped like large keyholes, which may suggest that the memorial stone itself could have been seen as an embodiment of the doorway between life and death.

It was also usual to keep an overnight watch by the body with candles burning. In older days, this called for some bravery, as if the corpse were going to walk again, this was usually the time when it would sit up and perhaps even speak, as Þórsteinn Eiríksson does in Eiríks saga ins rauða and as also occurs in Icelandic folktales. In the latter case, worse happenings are prevented by the watcher - one maiden breaks her needle and sticks the pieces into the soles of the dead man's feet, while another watcher, a strong man, physically forces the corpse down.

In some parts of rural Britain today, it is still common (as it was everywhere in Northern Europe through the beginning of this century) for the women of the family to wash and lay out the corpse. It is, and was, thought of as the final act of love shown to the kin.

After death, it was common to hold a wake around the coffin with much merriment and dancing; special beer might be brewed for the funeral (Christianssen, "The Dead and the Living", pp. 28-ff). Christianssen also mentions how "In some districts (Romerike) the open coffin was left in the room where they were eating and - as reported by an eyewitness - the old women used to say in a plaintive voice: 'now you have had your last meal with us'" (p. 34). In the last century, the dead person was given a parting cup, the velfarskål (fare-well draught), which had a ritual of its own. In Vrådal, the coffin was placed on the sledge or cart which would bring it to the cemetery, and "A bowl of ale was placed on the coffin, between two lit candles, and the contents were poured into smaller cups and handed to those present, to relatives first....(in) Seljord, it is added that the one who led the horse on leaving touched his hat, saying in the name of the deceased, 'Farvel og takk for meg' (Farewell and thank you)". In Telemark and Setesdal, the ritual extended to someone (usually a relative) giving a longer speech in the name of the deceased, offering thanks and sometimes even answering questions about why he had died or if anyone had been unkind to him. Small wooden drinking cups were put in the bowl to float on top of the ale, and if any relatives were not able to be there, some of the ale was saved for them (Christianssen, pp. 34-36). Christianssen is dubious about the heathen origins of this custom. However, given the character of the Northern soul as something that passed, at least in parts, to the kin at the time of death, it seems not unlikely that it might have been believed that the dead person was literally able to speak through a relative, to share in the drinking and express his/her thanks, and so forth.

After the dead were buried, a feast was held at which the arvel (inheritance-ale) was drunk. If the dead person had been the head of the household, the next head of the household would ceremonially go up to sit in the high seat. The various shares of an inheritance could be dealt out at this time; in today's terms, the will would be read and such things as the dead had wanted to leave to specific people would be given to them. Toasts would be made to the dead person, and the deeds of his/her life would be spoken of. This was a time of merriment: Grønbech quotes the "English priest in the 10th century" as saying, "You shall not take part in the cries of rejoicing over the dead; when invited to a funeral feast, forbid the heathen songs and the loud-voiced peals of laughter, in which folk take delight" (II, pp. 184-85).

Dressing in dark colours or pale colours for mourning goes back at least to Indo-European times. It is likely that the traditional dark or pale mourning-clothes may actually have been meant to imitate the dark or pale colouration of the dead (see "Hella" for a fuller description of these two colours in relationship to death). The black, blue-black, or white mourning garb thus strengthened the sense of the oneness of the dead and the living: for the time that the living mourned, they shared a world with their dead kinswo/man or friend. This is especially meaningful during the burial rites, for this border-period when the dead are not quite gone and the living are dressed as the dead is the time when the two can touch most closely. It may also perhaps have been thought that for the living to imitate the dead to a degree would keep the dead from dragging them on their faring as companions, a fear which is usually strongest when the dead come back from the grave, but which is always in the awareness of traditional peoples (Ranke, "Indogermanische Totenverehrung", pp. 113-131). According to Ranke, this border-time usually lasts for thirty days after death.

For Troth practice, a general model might be as follows: if the body cannot be laid out at home, it is sent to a professional undertaker for preparation, with strict instructions about the clothing and jewelry if the dead person is to be buried in traditional or ritual gear. The lich is then brought back to the home and fully equipped with any weapons, tools, or ritual jewelry that will go with him/her. The wake is held in the evening; someone, preferably a relative, sits up with the body all night by candlelight. The next day, the velfarskål should be done (as described above, complete with the farewell-speech if any of the close kin or friends are willing) beside the hearse before the coffin is driven to its last resting place, and the rite done at the graveside. If the body is to be burned, the rite may either be done before the velfarskål and all gifts placed within the coffin to be burned with it (assuming that this can be cleared with the crematorium), or it can be done when the urn is buried and the gifts placed in the mound about the urn.

Burial Rite

The folk are gathered about the coffin (which is still open) or urn. They should be dressed in dark colours. The Elder holds a Hammer amulet or iron ring with Hammers, miniature firesteels, and so forth, and three apples - wild apples, if possible. There is a bowl with water drawn from a hallowed spring at dawn, before sunrise. There is also a horn with enough drink to fill it three times. The blessing-twigs should be mistletoe, yew, or from a fruit- or nut-bearing tree, preferably an apple. All gifts that are going in the burial should be ready to go.

I. The Elder does the Hammer-Rite with the warding-emblem which will go with the Dead.

II. A Kinswo/man of the Dead (either by blood or by oath) speaks:

Alfs and idises all fore-gone kin,
hear us at side of howe!
Hallow the earth here where we lay
the lich of our lovéd sib.

The Kinswo/man walks slowly deosil around the burial ground sprinkling the earth with the hallowed water. What is left is poured out around the coffin or urn.

II. The Kinswo/man fills the horn with drink and raises it saying,

Clan of our clan, kinfolk unseen,
 we bid you welcome your bairn.
 What springs must fall, what sinks must rise,
 but sib stands one with sib.

S/he drinks. If there are any other relatives of the Dead - by blood or oath - there, they too may share in the horn; otherwise it should be poured into the blessing-bowl, then onto the burial ground.

III. The Elder speaks:

In Ases' Garth awesome, on Wan-Home's wide ways, in Hella's quiet halls - holy ones, we call you; our kinswo/man shall fare to your shores! Fair are the gods' green worlds, gleaming beyond the high wall; our kinswo/man must soon pass through the gaping gates. Wodan, open the ways; Ing, bless burial earth. Ases and Wans, we call you all, sitting at symbol in garth of the gods. (Name of Dead's patron), we call you, sitting at symbol in (name of god/ess' hall. If the Dead was very strongly given, a longer call to the god/ess may be given here - see examples at end of this rite)! Fill the beakers with shining drink, strew the benches with golden straw, for soon your host shall grow greater. Let the idises bear the ale, let the bright ones ready the bed - let (Name of Dead) see the hall, gleaming beyond the dark ways! Now hear of the deeds of the wo/man who fares forth to dwell with his/her fore-gone kin, that you may know the worth of the one you shall greet.

The folk speak in turn of the deeds of the Dead, as truthfully, but lovingly, as they can. It is most fitting to have a praise-poem spoken now, if anyone has been able to make one. When they are done, the Elder speaks.

Apples I give, as in eldest times - to set within the mound, the riddle and gate of renewing. So the seeds of our lives sink into earth; so we spring ever fresh from the howe - the new rising ever from the roots of the old. Evening's reddening is morning's watching; life shall yet harvest what death has sown here.

The Elder puts the three apples into the coffin or urn and fills the horn with drink.

I raise this toast to thee, (Name of Dead), thy safe path forth and good rebirth. Hail to you in faring; hail to you, coming again; hail to you on your ways!

The Elder hallows the horn with the Hammer-sign and drinks, passing the horn deosil. Each of the folk makes the Hammer-sign, saying, "Hail thee in faring; hail thee, coming again; hail thee on thy ways!"

When the circle is done, the Elder should pour the last of the drink out on the burial-earth. S/he speaks:

Now let all gifts be given; speak your last blessing-words.

IV. The folk, in turn, set their gifts into the coffin or into or on the urn, saying whatever they have to say to the Dead.

V. The Elder speaks:

The tide is rising; the ship is waiting; the gray steed stands on the shore. Now, (Name of Dead), you must set your feet towards the paths that lead to the lands beyond the Middle-Garth's ring.

The Elder raises the Hammer pendant or iron ring, saying.

Thonar, Warder, we call upon thee! Your Hammer hallows the howe; your Hammer hallows the dead. The Elder swings the Hammer above both coffin /urn and burial site. Ward (Name of Dead) against the writhing wyrm; ward (Name of Dead) against the greedy wolf; ward (Name of Dead) against woe-wights all. Not wyrm nor warg, not troll nor thurse may stand against Hammer's might: Thonar ward (Name of Dead) aye! The Elder puts the Hammer on the chest of the Dead or into the urn and speaks again.

(Name of Dead's) ringing steps shall soon sound on the bridge. Let the thurse-maid sink before him/her, but Heimdallr hail with gladdened eyes, for s/he is worthy of the halls of the gods.

VI. The Elder fills the horn with drink again, saying

Gods and goddesses all, we give this horn to you: bless our beloved one's faring, and give him/her fair welcome in your worlds.

The Elder Hammer-signs the horn and drinks, passing it deosil. When each of the folk have drunk from it, s/he pours what is left into the blessing bowl and says, "We hail you from holy stead", then pours it onto the burial ground.

VII. The Elder speaks:

We send thee forth to (name of chosen god/ess') hall!

S/he then puts the lid on the urn or coffin and crumbles a handful of earth over it. The vessel is then placed in the mound or lowered into the grave, and the burial begins. The Folk go back to the house of the dead person's heirs to drink the arvel.

Calls to different god/esses

These calls - to Wodan, Frija, Fro Ing, and Thonar - can be used as models for calls to other god/esses, or easily altered as seems fitting to you.

Wodan

Wodan, we call thee! From Walhall's seat,
send ravens winging their way.
Well thou know'st pathways the worlds between -
ferryman, fare to this shore!
A burden waits for thy boat.

Saddled the gray steed stands on the shore,
readied for dead to ride,
Wodan's wish-daughters wait with bright drink,
where heroes are gathered in hall,
where swords are shining flames.

Wodan, we call thee! Wrap thy dark cloak
over thy daughter's (son's keen) eyes.
Carry him/her onward to kin in thy home,
where benches are brightly strewn,
where einherjar share the ale.

Frija

Frija, we call thee! from Fensalir's depths,
 thy falcon-wings rise fair.
 The way through the worlds that wends to thy hall,
 - light over water's ways,
 finds (Name of Dead) the path through the fens.

Saddled the fair steed stands on the shore,
 readied for dead to ride.
 Fulla is waiting with the bright drink,
 where thy sons and daughters sit,
 where spindles are swirling aye.

Frija, we call thee! Wrap feather-cloak
 over thy daughter's (son's keen) eyes.
 Carry him/her onward to kin in thy home,
 where benches are brightly strewn,
 where goddesses gather, all fair.

Fro Ing

Fro Ing, we call thee! From Alf-Home fair,
 let the bright boar run.
 God of the world we hail thee here,
 on Skíðblaðnir sail (Name of Dead) forth,
 from darkness into day.

Saddled, the Bloody-Hooved stands on the shore,
 readied for dead to ride.
 Gerðr waits gladly to give the sweet drink,
 where sibs hold symbol in frith,
 where bells ring bright with joy.

Fro Ing, we call thee! Cloak of earth wrap
 over thy daughter's (son's keen) eyes.
 In howe or Alf-Home, hold her/him well-loved,
 where alfs and idises feast,
 where no frost freezes stead.

Thonar

Thonar, we call thee! From Trud-Home high,
 let goats twain gallop with speed.
 Stark through the clouds shines lightning-road,
 for (Name of Dead)'s strong feet to find,
 where Might-Thonar makes his way.

Harnessed are goats and hauling at wain,
 ready to run above,
 Trude and Sif, full-trusted, pour drink,
 where worthy ones wrestle, might-thewed,
 where strong folk strive at their games.

Thonar, we call thee! Thy Hammer-flash brightens
 with awe thy daughter's (son's keen) eyes.
 Carry him/her onward to kin in thy home,
 Bilskírnir, bright through storm,

where Ase-mighty share the ale.

Written by: KveldúlfR Hagan Gundarsson (inspired in places by Oskar Merikanto's 'Hell dig, Liv!')

II. Wotan-Blessing (rep. from Our Troth)

This rite was written in order to recreate the spirit of a Viking Age sacrifice to Wotan in a manner practical for a time and place in which prisoners of war and other such people are no longer regularly offered to the gods. The substitution of a figure for a living being is based on folk customs such as the Swedish substitution of pig-shaped cakes for the old heathen Yule boar. Care should be taken with this ritual, as even a symbolic human sacrifice is, in a sense, a self-sacrifice, and certainly likely to draw Wotan's attention. Though short, the ritual is both dramatic and effective, as demonstrated by its recent successful performance at Ecumenicon 1995 (assisted by the Raven Kindred, who supplied a realistic life-sized dummy for the sacrifice).

You will need a hornfull of mead, cider, or wine, a blessing bowl, a knife or spear (if you have one), and a deep blue candle; if recels are burnt, they should be a mixture of juniper, mugwort, and ash wood or leaves (remember that yew is poisonous, whether eaten or burnt). The gift for Wodan should be a small human figure (something biodegradable, such as bread) with a noose lightly wrapped around his neck. Before beginning the rite, you should sit for some time with this figure in your hands, feeling might and main flow through you into him until he seems alive. At this time you may even sprinkle him with a drop of water and give him a suitable name. Any of the Ás- or Os-names are fitting (such as Ásmundr, Ásbjörn, Osmund, Oswald), since these names show one given to the god, as he is about to be. In this rite, we will speak of him as Aswald.

To make the gift, you will either need to go outside to a tree or bring a branch in and fasten it up to use as a hanging-tree for Wodan. If the latter, be sure that there is a wide tray of earth underneath it to catch the drips when you pour the contents of the blessing-bowl over your sacrifice.

I. Hammer-Rite.

II. Light the candle and/or recels, saying,

I light the way, the worlds between,
my call in kindled flame.
show bright the path shine bright for him,
whom heart now hails forth.

III. Stand in elhaz-stance and call,

Raven's blót-goði! Gungnir's wielder!
Feeder of Freki, hear me!
Sig-Father shining! shield uplifting,
walkurjas' wish-father, hear me!

Wild Hunt's leader, wolf-wood howler,
draugs' dark drighten, hear me!
Reaper of barley red on the field,
helm-trees' high chooser, hear me!

Rune-winning Hroptr, rowner of wisdom,
seeker of Suttung's mead, hear me!
Teacher of spell-lore, lighting our skull-clouds,
loosener of all locks, hear me!

To Middle-Garth ring, I rune thee forth,
 haring from Hliðskjálf, High One, adown.
 Father of folk who's fared here often,
 I call thee at need, come here to my stead.

To Middle-Garth ring, I rune thee forth,
 riding on Sleipnir, shining mount gray...

(fill the horn and raise it)

I bid thee with horn of holy drink,
 Welcome, thou wise one... ...Wodan! - to hall.

IV. Pause a little while, until you can feel the might of the god about you. Then sign the horn with the walknot, saying,

Wodan, this horn is hallowed to thee,
 blessed, I raise it, I bid thee share.

Pour a draught into the blessing bowl, then sprinkle a drop on Aswald, then drink yourself. Do this three times, till the horn is empty.

V. Raise the blessing bowl. Hold it silently for a few moments, meditating on the god.

VI. Pick up Aswald and hold him high, saying.

Wodan, I give thee this chosen one here,
 I give thee Aswald awed by your might,
 signed to thee, Sigtryggr, Sváfnir, take him!
 signed with the walknot as Wodan's gift.

Scratch the walknot lightly over Aswald's heart with the point of your knife or spear. Sprinkle his head with a few drops from the blessing bowl. Stand holding him in your right hand, the blessing bowl in your left. Either speak or think of the matter in which you wanted Wodan's aid, rede, or help, and open your mind to him in turn.

VII. Go in silence to the stead where you will make the sacrifice, carrying Aswald, the blessing bowl, and your knife or spear. Tie the free end of Aswald's noose over a branch and ready the blade with its tip touching the walknot. Say, "Aswald, I give thee to Wodan!" as you plunge the blade into him, tugging down against the hanging-rope with your other hand (if he is made of bread, be careful not to rip his head off!). Almost at once, dash the contents of the blessing bowl over Aswald and the tree. You should feel all the might that you put into Aswald earlier bursting free to Wodan, flowing out as the mead drips to the ground like the blood of the sacrifice. Stand there until you can feel that Aswald's "life" has all flowed out for Wodan.

VIII. Come back to your harrow in stillness, without speaking to anyone else or looking them in the eyes. Stand in silence, waiting to see if you sense anything more from the god.

IX. Say,

Welcome art ever, Wanderer dark-cloaked,
 holy within my hall.
 Hail in thy coming, hail in thy guesting,
 hail in wending thy ways!
 Fare when thou wish'st to fare,
 while when it be thy will.

Blow out the candle. The rite is over.