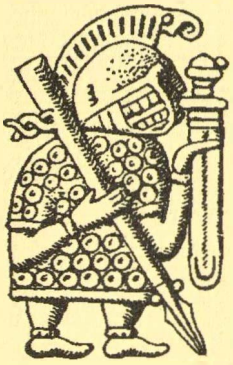

FORN VÄNNEN

JOURNAL OF SWEDISH ANTIQUARIAN RESEARCH

2018:2

Circular flow of tradition in Old Norse religion

By Andreas Nordberg

Nordberg, A., 2018. Circular flow of tradition in Old Norse religion. *Fornvännen* 113. Stockholm.

This paper discusses processes that drove the ability of pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia to vary and adapt to shifting conditions and contexts in society. They also helped to keep religion cohesive over both social and geographical boundaries and hierarchies. Based on a substantially reduced and contextually modified variant of McKim Marriott's description of the changeability of religious traditions as a constantly on-going circular flow, I tentatively exemplify the dynamism of religion in the Late Iron Age through three case studies.

The first of these concerns the relationship between local, regional and supra-regional deities; the second addresses *the axis mundi* complex and the relationship between private and public worship; and the third examines the exchange of mortuary practices and eschatological religious traditions across social boundaries. All these cases also illustrate the ability of religious elements to spread geographically, and in doing so adapt to varying sociocultural contexts. Such processes took place in all contexts where people interacted. The sociocultural foundations of religion can in this sense be compared to a multitude of overlapping, interacting, changeable networks of social and cultural relationships.

The characteristics that kept religion dynamic and alive were flexibility and an ability to adapt to this sociocultural patchwork. Religion was part of culture, and just like culture, it was shaped by the constant circular flow of tradition.

Andreas Nordberg, Dept of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies, Stockholm University, SE–106 91 Stockholm
andreas.nordberg@rel.su.se

Cultural variation in time and space have always been a central issue in research into pre-Christian and pre-modern Scandinavia. Anyone studying cultural diffusion patterns will, however, find a kaleidoscopic picture. Admittedly, from a generalising bird's-eye perspective it is possible to observe overarching structures, but strikingly often the reach of various regional elements of culture and tradition does not coincide with distinct mutual boundaries. Cultural diffusion patterns might therefore perhaps be best represented graphically as a continuum of innumerable, irregular overlapping distribution areas.

In terms of the variations in pre-Christian religion, it appears that historians of religion have above all shown interest in change over time, while the study of regionality and social hierarchies has mainly been pursued by toponymists and archaeologists. This is a multifaceted field of research, however, and often individual scholars decide whether to focus on regionality or on larger common patterns.

For example: during the pre-Roman Iron Age, internal burial arrangement and the composition of grave goods in urn graves in southern Scandinavia bear considerable resemblance to the urn

grave tradition in the continental northern Germanic area. Based on these circumstances, many archaeologists have regarded this entire area as a single cultural province or unbroken continuum. Swedish archaeologists Tore Artelius and Mats Lindqvist (2007, p. 17 f) have, however, observed that a completely different picture emerges if our focus is placed on the graves' superstructures. This varies widely between regions, which may indicate that southern Sweden was divided into several cultural regions during this period.

Concerning the issue of regional differences and common supra-regional patterns in culture and religion, various aspects of the same urn grave tradition therefore point in partly different directions, which led Artelius & Lindqvist (p. 101 ff) to the conclusion that the urn grave tradition in a multifaceted way actually exhibits local and regional expressions as well as supra-regional patterns.

Regarding the issue of a common Old Norse religion, some researchers suggest that the common Scandinavian elements of the religion primarily belonged to a pan-Scandinavian aristocratic echelon of society. For example, archaeologist Fredrik Svanberg (2003, pp. 101 f, 142 f) is of the opinion that the popular religious traditions displayed such wide differences between regions that they cannot be reduced to variations of a common cultural heritage. Among the aristocratic supra-regional elements, which Svanberg describes as "superficial" in relation to the "overwhelming cultural diversity" of popular culture, he includes sacred and theophoric place-names, iconography and certain items of material culture, as well as mythology. Similar socially hierarchical regional and supra-regional patterns have also been highlighted by other researchers (e.g. Andrén 2007, p. 34 f). Some have even suggested that the worship of the pre-Christian gods was limited to a supra-regional, socially delimited aristocracy, while the wider population above all worshipped lesser animistic beings (e.g. Hellström 1996, pp. 229, 231 ff; Sanmark 2004, pp. 147 ff, 163, 177 ff).

In my opinion, it is unambiguous that aristocratic culture – however its social group should be delimited and defined – was supra-regional to a higher degree than the more localised culture of the people they governed. However, I think that there are risks in overemphasising the sociocultural differences between a perceived locally and regionally based people and a supra-regional mobile elite. This would in practice follow the now broadly questioned model launched in the 1930s by a group of social anthropologists working within the so-called Community Studies school. A defining characteristic of this school was the separation of culture into several local and regional popular *Little Traditions* on one hand, and a supra-regional *Great Tradition* maintained by the social and religious elite on the other. This model was eventually abandoned as it is simply impossible to divide culture in this manner, since social, cultural and religious interactions constantly take place between different regions, social groups and hierarchical strata. (For criticism of the Great/Little Tradition model, see e.g. Saler 2000, p. 34 ff w. refs.) In a 1955 study, American anthropologist McKim Marriott explained these cultural movements between regions, social groups and hierarchies as a constantly ongoing "circular flow".

Circular flow of tradition in pre-Christian Scandinavia

Marriott accepted the theoretical framework of the Community School. He studied how the supra-regional "indigenous civilisation" of Hindu India and the Sanskrit *Great Tradition* – maintained above all by wandering Brahmins – related to the many *Little Traditions* in rural village communities. According to him, individual villages, surrounding regions and Indian society overall had to be understood "as relative structural nexuses, as subsystems within greater systems, and as foci of individual identification within a greater field" (Marriott 1955, p. 191). Between these many different sociocultural systems and subsystems were constant circular flows of cultural traditions, which were often so long-lived, multifaceted and complicated that their directions were impossible to determine retrospectively. Marriott claimed, however, that there were three main processes in this circular flow. In one, elements spread between various Little Traditions in local villages and regional areas. In another, elements of the Sanskrit Great Tradition, divested of several aspects and adapted to local contexts, became established in the local

villages' Little Traditions. Marriott called this process parochialisation. In a third process, Little Traditions from various villages were adopted into the Sanskrit Great Tradition; Marriott called this process universalisation. Often "little" local versions and the variant in the "great" tradition were then able to coexist, even in a single location. Furthermore, through combinations of *parochialisation* and *universalisation* processes, sometimes local little traditions were adopted into the great supra-regional tradition, thus spreading over large geographic areas and subsequently being absorbed, adapted and established as a new little tradition in totally different local communities (Marriott 1955, p. 197 ff).

Marriott's fundamental acceptance of the *Great Tradition* and *Little Traditions* categories of the Community Studies school later earned him criticism (e.g. Saler 2000, p. 34 f w. refs). However, the basic features of his model for illustrating the constantly shifting movements of culture elements as a circular flow have lasting value. I believe that, in a contextually modified form, it can usefully be applied as a theoretical tool in the study of pre-Christian Scandinavia. Such a starting point, however, is based on two important prerequisites:

Firstly, a study of the circular flow of tradition in Old Norse religion cannot be conducted on the basis of some sociocultural hierarchical two-tier model of society, which would ultimately be a variation on the Community School's refuted *Great Tradition* and *Little Traditions*. Below, in my discussion of the circular flow of religious tradition between local, regional and supra-regional spheres, between different social groups and between private and public religious practices, my starting point is instead that these constant processes operated within a common cultural continuum.

Secondly, anyone wishing to study the circular flow of religious tradition in pre-Christian Scandinavia must accept (and be clear) that any attempt to exemplify these processes will be more or less tentative. When Marriott conducted his fieldwork in rural India, he was able to follow individual flows of tradition over a period of approximately 3,000 years because he supplemented his anthropological material with an extensive and in part very old literary corpus. He nonetheless emphasised that the circular flow of culture often took such complex routes that the directions of flow for most traditions were virtually impossible to reconstruct retrospectively (Marriott 1955, pp. 71–91). This calls for reflection. Given the much scantier sources available to researchers of pre-Christian Scandinavia, it is obvious that what was challenging to achieve with the conditions Marriott had must be even more difficult for a researcher of Late Iron Age Scandinavia.

This said, it is still apt to describe the processes of cultural and religious change and variation in pre-Christian Scandinavia as a circular flow, which both affected and was affected by all types of social situations; markets and *þing* assemblies, marriages, friendships and business relationships, the slave trade and war. Below I limit my discussion to the sphere of religion. The lived religion of Late Iron Age Scandinavia was based on a cultural-ecological foundation that did not differ widely between various groups and social strata. Both aristocrats and commoners (if these categories are permissible, because any definitive hierarchical boundary between these social groups appears to have been far from self-evident, cf. Ljungkvist 2006) primarily depended on a basic subsistence economy grounded in farming, animal husbandry, hunting and fishing. This shaped the lived religion, and these joint strands were reinforced by the fact that many commoners had various forms of social connections to the aristocrats and their manors.

For example, commoners were permitted to attend some of the religious ceremonies that took place at or near the nobility's residences. Additionally, people from all social strata gathered at common local and regional sanctuaries for collective worship, which the nobility was to some extent expected to lead. Some of these shared sanctuaries were located at central places used for joint worship, judicial assemblies and market gatherings, thereby constituting recurring meeting places for people from different backgrounds. These central places were of varying importance, but were also parts of a common, overlapping hierarchical network that linked together local, regional, supra-regional Scandinavian and even non-Scandinavian territories. Within this net-

work, the central places acted as centres, nexuses or hubs for cultural innovation, standardisation and diffusion. This is also likely to have affected religion. To mention an analogy, in Ancient Greece geographically separate areas were kept politically, culturally and religiously cohesive by means of common links to certain prominent cult locations. In Scandinavia, central places probably had similar significance, particularly those of supraregional importance, such as for example Tissø, Lejre, Lade and Old Uppsala.

Below, through three tentative case studies, I intend to discuss the circular flows of religious tradition in Late Iron Age Scandinavia.

Locality, regionality and supra-regionality in the circular flow of tradition

The periodically recurring public worship at the most central sanctuaries in Scandinavia was significant for entire regions. For example, people from all of Trøndelag gathered at Lade, while the *þing* assembly, market and cult at Uppsala appear to have been significant to all of Svithiod. Most religious gatherings of course did not have such a reach. Unfortunately, our knowledge of this entire field is considerably restricted by lack of sources, but it seems reasonable to assume that some pre-Christian festivities attracted participants regionally, although most festivals were celebrated within local communities and individual farms (cf. Sundqvist 2016, pp. 503–520). Of all the year's festivals, it is likely that only some were celebrated throughout all the Germanic-speaking parts of Scandinavia. In particular, these would have been annual festivities linked to the changing of the seasons and certain fixed calendrical points in the astronomical year, such as Yule (cf. Nordberg 2006). Other celebrations were known only regionally, and some probably only had a local reach.

Some literary evidence may point to such regionally celebrated festivities. For example, in *Austrfararvísur* the skald Sigvatr Þórðarson describes arriving at a village named Hof in the forest of Ed, in what is today Värmland province in Sweden. Every farm he called at denied him overnight lodgings and turned him away because they were celebrating *álfablót* (a sacrifice to the elves). Judging by Sigvatr's immense surprise and annoyance at the entire situation, he was not familiar with these festivities, which were celebrated in an area unknown to him and which were clearly strictly private (Skj. B1, 220 ff).

Another possible example can be found in *Vǫlsa þáttr* in the long version of *Óláfs saga helga*. This much-debated account (cf. Sundqvist 2016, p. 365 ff) describes how the Christian king Óláfr in late autumn visited a farm in a remote area of northern Norway, where the people celebrated a pagan feast related to fertility. The events are described in great detail in the saga but have no equivalents in other sources, which might indicate a local or regional tradition. The focus of the festivities was Vǫlsi, personified by the severed penis of a stallion. Many researchers claim that Vǫlsi should be perceived as an incarnation of Freyr. This interpretation might be correct, but it cannot be ruled out that Vǫlsi was in fact a local deity that has not made any further mark in place-names or written sources.

According to Stefan Brink (2007), the gods that have left an imprint in Scandinavian theophoric place-names are Óðinn, Þórr, Freyr/Frø, Ullr/Ullinn, Njǫrðr/*Niærþer, Týr and probably Freyja. All these deities have a supra-regional, almost pan-Scandinavian distribution, and some are even pan-Germanic. There are possibly also a few isolated examples of place-names containing the names of the gods Baldr, Forseti and Frigg. However, for many of the gods and goddesses that feature in Old Norse mythology there is no toponymic evidence whatsoever. This leads Brink to conclude that all gods and goddesses in mythology were not subjects of actual worship. Brink is certainly correct in this conclusion. Most polytheistic religions include deities that primarily belong to the world of mythology and never receive worship. Nevertheless, we should not discount the possibility that some of the deities named sporadically in the extant mythical sources but not in place-names may have been local or regional gods only.

As regards the relationship between local, regional and supra-regional gods, it may be possible to identify overall patterns that can easily be accommodated within the concept of the circular flow of religious tradition.

In certain circumstances, the cult of a local

deity can spread over an increasingly large area. In some cases, it may even become universalised and part of the supra-regional pantheon of gods. At least parts of the Old Norse pantheon probably developed in this manner, although the trajectories of that development are completely beyond the scope of empirical study. Such processes can, however, be discerned behind figures such as Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr in the Norwegian county of Vestfold, as well as Irpa and Þorgerðr Hǫlgabrúðr in the Hálogaland area of Norway, who appear to have arisen as protective spirits (*genii loci*, compare *Hǫlgabrúðr* 'the bride of Hǫlgi', i.e. the eponymous hero of Hálogaland) and subsequently developed into regionally worshipped gods. The cult of Þorgerðr and Irpa even seems to have spread to Iceland (cf. Hultgård 2014, p. 33 ff; Sundqvist 2016, p. 469 ff).

A local deity can also become universalised and part of the supra-regional pantheon by being identified as a hypostasis of a supra-regional god (cf. Marriott 1955, pp. 207–218). This can occur in two directions. On the one hand a local deity can be interpreted as a manifestation of a supra-regional god with similar function. On the other hand, people with supra-regional political and ideological ambitions can harness local communities and regions by identifying their local deities with the gods that they themselves focus on.

In India – if I may be permitted to use an additional analogy with that area – it has been common to allow local and regional goddesses to ritually marry one of the male Sanskrit gods (often Šiva), who in this context also represents the superior royal power (Harman 1989; for a possible Scandinavian parallel, cf. Ström 1983). This enables the goddesses to continue to be worshipped in their local forms, in parallel with them also being identified in certain contexts as aspects of a supra-regional goddess.

In my opinion it is at least hypothetically possible that some of the many bynames of the goddess Freyja can be explained through similar secondary identifications. For instance, in chapter 35 of *Gylfaginning* Snorri relates that Freyja "gave herself many names when she roamed among strangers looking for [her husband] *Óðr* [= Óðinn]" (*gaf sér mis heiti er hon fór með ókunnum þjóðum at leita Óðs*). She called herself *Mardǫll*, *Hǫrn*, *Gefn* and *Sýr* (SnE, 1988, p. 29), and in *Skáldskaparmál* 435 Snorri also adds the names *Þrungra* and *Skjálf* (SnE, 1998, p. 115). It is possible that some of these names originally denoted local and regional goddesses, which, for various reasons, were later identified with Freyja (Nordberg 2012, p. 128).

Britt-Mari Näsström (1995, p. 85 f) instead ascribes the list of names to Freyja being worshipped in various guises in various locations. It is well known that local gods can arise through individual functional aspects of supra-regional deities branching off and adapting to local contexts. The local hypostasis can then adopt one of the supra-regional deity's many bynames, at the same time as it is separated from the bulk of the mythology surrounding the supra-regional deity. Sometimes the hypostasised local god(dess) and the supra-regional deity are subsequently worshipped in parallel within the same area. Here it may be relevant to highlight, for example, the enigmatic figure of OSw. **Liudhgudha* or **liudhgudha* 'goddess of vegetation', which together with the final element *-vi* 'holy place' occurs in three Swedish place-names: *Ludgo* (>*Liuthguthuvi* 1293) in Södermanland province, *Luggavi* in Närke and *Luggude* in Skåne.

Per Vikstrand, who has discussed these place-names in detail (2001, p. 310 ff), argues that the great geographic distances between the locations in question imply that **Liudhgudha* was originally a noa name for, or **liudhgudha* a fixed epithet for, a supra-regional goddess who was worshipped throughout this vast area. In that case, the hypostasis **Liudhgudha* may also have been parochialised over time, adopting the functions and characteristics of a local deity.

Supra-regional deities can have varying local and regional traits. Although this is difficult to prove, it is probable that several of the supra-regional gods were manifested in regionally varying ways in different parts of Scandinavia. Anders Hultgård exemplifies this possibility with a hypothetical central Swedish "Thor Upsaliensis" with distinctive regional characteristics (2014, p. 32). Another example might be suggested from the god Ullr's alternative name form *Ullinn*, which is found regionally in certain Norwegian place-names.

Various supra-regional gods can secondarily take over each other's functions and mythical motifs. One well-known example of this is the connection between Óðinn and Týr. Another concerns the relationship between Freyja and Frigg. The last two have so many common traits that several researchers suggest that they originally were one and the same goddess, even though they indisputably constitute two separate deities in the preserved mythical texts (cf. Näsström 1995, p. 98–123; Grundy 1996). In my view, these similarities are due instead to a development in the opposite direction. The cult of Freyja appears to have been limited to Scandinavia. Frigg (Frija, Frea) on the other hand was a prominent goddess among the Continental Germanic peoples. She seems to have held a weaker position in Scandinavia, where she above all belonged to the world of myth and was not the subject of extensive worship. This may indicate that the traditions about Frigg spread from the Continent to Scandinavia, where the goddess's similarities to Freyja were instrumental in both of them subsequently attracting some of each other's mythical motifs.

The pre-Christian religion was never a static monolith. Constant negotiations and interaction took place between its local, regional and super-regional dimensions. On the one hand these processes contributed to rich religious variation across pre-Christian Scandinavia. On the other they constituted a force that helped to create cohesion among all the various aspects of religion. As I wish to illustrate below, both these aspects of the lived religion's numerous spatial relationships are also central to understanding the social hierarchies of religion and the relationship between private and public within the framework of the circular flow of tradition.

Private and public in the circular flow of tradition

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of central places with large, public sanctuaries for the circular flow of religious tradition. Take (Old) Uppsala as an example. This central place was a social, economic, judicial, political and not least religious hub in Late Iron Age Svithiod. The fact that it was even of pan-Scandinavian importance is evident not just from Uppsala's almost mythical status in several Old Norse texts, but also because several places in Sweden, Norway, Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Orkney have been named after it (Vikstrand 2013, p. 152 ff).

People from many parts of Scandinavia regularly visited Uppsala. Many came to participate in the *distingen* council assemblies and to trade at the *disting's* market. Professional warriors and skalds made their way there to take up employment in royal and aristocratic retinues. Aristocrats with their own retinues stopped there for lengthy stays. Visitors from various backgrounds attended the sanctuaries and participated in religious activities there. Thus Uppsala's traditions were able to influence religion in other parts of Scandinavia. At the same time, visitors brought their own traditions and parallel variants of common traditions, which could conversely be adapted to and integrated with the worship in Uppsala – and thus later again influence new visitors from other parts of Scandinavia. Through such encounters cultural and religious traditions were reshaped and harmonised in constant, slow circular processes.

Central places constituted hubs and nexuses for the circular flow of tradition, and it can be assumed that the public worship that took place there was often more lavish, extensive and complex than the cult at more local sanctuaries and on private farms. If the categories of *Great Tradition* and *Little Traditions* had been accepted, in a pre-Christian Scandinavian context it would have been more natural to link them to these spatially based sociocultural spheres, rather than to a socially hierarchical division between the commoners and the elite. For the aforementioned reasons I nonetheless advise against applying these categories. But the fundamental question that could have made them of interest in this particular case remains relevant: what was the relationship between the grand, collective religious worship at the large, public sanctuaries and the less lavish private cult on individual farms?

In my attempt to discuss this issue below, I use two locations with pre-Christian sanctuaries: the royal estate complex in (Old) Uppsala and a more ordinary Late Iron Age farm at Skeke, Rasbo parish, north of Old Uppsala. I will limit my discussion to the well-known and in recent years thoroughly investigated *axis mundi* com-

plex centred on the conception of the world tree or world pillar and the cultic tree or pillar. In this tradition complex, which is very old and is found over the entire northern hemisphere and in large parts of the Middle East, the tree and the pillar are interchangeable functional variants. Both are found in pre-Christian Scandinavian literary, archaeological and onomastic sources (cf. Holmberg 1922; Drobin & Keinänen 2001; Vikstrand 2001, p. 292 ff; Andrén 2004).

The best-known literary description of a pre-Christian sacrificial tree is undoubtedly found in the account of the legendary sanctuary complex in (Old) Uppsala, written in about AD 1076 by the German cleric Adam of Bremen. He describes a large banqueting hall (Lat. *triclinium*), which he also identifies as a temple (Lat. *templum*), in which statues of Óðinn (*Wotan*), Þórr (*Thor*) and Frø (*Fricco*) occupy central positions. He mentions a holy grove where extensive sacrifices take place. He also mentions that the participants sing obscene cultic songs, and he adds:

> Close to this temple stands a mighty tree that stretches out its branches far and wide and that is always green, in both winter and summer. No one knows what species it is. There is also a spring, at which the pagans are accustomed to perform sacrifices and into it to plunge a living man. And if he is not found, the people's wish will be granted.
>
> *Prope illud templum est arbor maxima late ramos extendens, semper viridis in hieme et aestate; cuius illa generis sit, nemo scit. Ibi etiam est fons, ubi sacrificia paganorum solent exerceri et homo vivus inmergi. Qui dum non invenitur, ratum erit votum populi.*
>
> (Adam of Bremen, Book IV, schol. 138, ed. Schmeidler 1917).

As this passage has been discussed extensively, especially in recent decades, in terms of source criticism, parallels and interpretations from a history of religions perspective (cf. Sundqvist 2016, pp. 110–132, 249–257), I will not dwell on these aspects. Note only that Adam describes the tree and spring in Uppsala in terms with dramatic similarities to Old Norse mythical motifs of the cosmic tree, which is often described as ancient, enormous and of an unknown species, with a perpetually green crown of leaves and growing next to a cosmic spring.

Why Adam describes the Uppsala tree in this manner has been the subject of debate. As far as I can see, the most common explanations have been a) that Adam was aware of the pre-Christian mythical motifs of the world tree and used them to pad out his Uppsala depiction, b) that Adam's informants were describing the mythical world tree to him, and he mistook the account for a description of the Uppsala tree, or c) that his informants described the actual Uppsala tree by means of mythical motifs. I believe the third alternative to be the most plausible, and that this makes Adam's account all the more interesting.

The distance between Old Uppsala and Skeke in Rasbo parish is about 15 km. There, a farm dating from the Migration and Vendel Periods has been excavated (Larsson 2014, pp. 109–125, 174 ff, 193 f, 301, 357 ff). It was situated on a hill and had several buildings spread among older graves and burnt mounds dating from the Bronze Age. The hilltop was separated from the rest of the farm by a wooden fence. At the heart of this fenced-off area stood a ceremonial hall (one during the Migration Period, and a different one during the subsequent Vendel Period). Just outside the hall extensive food preparation areas were discovered, including hearths and cooking pits, as well as a Bronze Age boulder grave. This monument appears to have been used in the Late Iron Age as a sacrificial site, since large quantities of animal bones from, for example, cows, horses, pigs, geese and chickens, had been deposited there. Other ordinary food waste etc. was found in a different area. Immediately adjacent to the hall and sacrificial site was a well that appears mainly to have collected rain water. At the bottom of it were found the remains of a wooden post, which appears to have stood there as a permanent fixture.

The position of the well, right next to the sacrificial site, appears to argue against the possibility of it providing the hall and cooking areas with water, because the large quantities of deposited raw animal remains immediately adjacent to the well would have made its water undrinkable.

Bearing in mind the general and very widespread cultic-cosmological symbolism of the spring/well and the pillar/tree, it might be suggested that the well and the vertical post at Skeke formed a key part of the cultic-cosmological architecture of the enclosed ceremonial area. This hypothesis is the starting point for the following discussion.

Similar archaeological remains have been found throughout Scandinavia. In this particular context, however, the proximity of Skeke to (Old) Uppsala raises the very question that I discuss here. What relationship may there have been between the cultic pillar–well at Skeke, the cultic tree–spring in Uppsala and the universal mythical motifs of the world tree or world pillar and the cosmic spring or well? The tradition complex as such appears to be very old in Scandinavia (cf. Andrén 2004). The farm at Skeke was in use during the Migration and Vendel Periods, which was when the royal estate complex at (Old) Uppsala developed and was in its absolute heyday. Admittedly, Adam of Bremen did not describe the Uppsala sanctuary until the final part of the Viking Period, but for the purpose of this discussion, let us assume that the cultic tree was either quite old at that time, or had replaced an earlier one with similar functions. Both alternatives are hypothetical yet plausible. It is highly likely that some of the people who lived on the farm at Skeke visited the large gatherings in Uppsala, participated in the cult and were influenced by what took place there.

Adam's use of mythical imagery in his description of the cultic tree at Uppsala probably stems from the authority of the cult and ceremonial centre. In the religiously charged atmosphere of the worship, the sanctuaries constituted microcosmic representations of the universe, and it is probable that passages from myths about the world tree and the world pillar were recited in the rituals at the actual cultic trees and pillars. As the former were identified with their cultic replicas, the relevant mythical motifs might become attached to the actual trees and pillars (Nordberg 2011, p. 219). A parallel to this aspect of Adam's account can be found in a description by the monk Rudolf of Fulda of the pagan Saxons' famous cultic pillar *Irminsûl* in the Eresburg hillfort, Hochsauerlandkreis. The name *Irminsûl* etymologically means 'large/gigantic log/pillar' (Drobin & Keinänen 2001, p. 141), but according to Rudolf it meant "pillar of the universe, as it supports everything" (*universalis columna, quasi sustinens omnia*; Rudolf of Fulda 1925, p. 676). Rudolf's description of the pillar thus alluded to the world pillar of the cosmological myths, in the same way that Adam described the Uppsala tree with references to the mythical world tree.

Such mythologised descriptions were assigned to grand sanctuaries and holy places such as those in Uppsala and Eresburg because the public, official cult in which the mythical passages were recited, was particularly extensive and significant at those sites. This is especially evident in Adam's depiction of the public worship at Uppsala, where the holy spring and the tree seem to have been at the very heart of the cult. In my opinion however, the cultic pillar and well at Skeke also appear to have formed a variant of the same tradition complex. Can we therefore assume that the same forms of symbolic mythical language and extensive cult practices were also in use there?

Possibly, but not necessarily. In a general comparative perspective, private worship tends to lack detailed mythical frames of reference. Marriott (1956, pp. 199–206) was thinking along the same lines when he showed that traditions and tradition complexes from the "*Great Tradition*" that were parochialised and adapted to smaller-scale situations and local contexts tended to lose many of their earlier aspects, at the same time as they were assigned new, contextually more functional meanings. Marriott also demonstrated that both variants of the same tradition could subsequently coexist.

Most likely, similar relations also existed in pre-Christian Scandinavia, and I suggest that together, the cultic pillar and well at Skeke and the cultic tree and spring at Uppsala could be an example of this. Fundamentally, they were probably variants of the same tradition complex. The tree and spring at Uppsala represented an extensive and complex variant that appears to have been closely connected to cosmological mythical motifs as well as extensive rites and cult practices for the well-being of the entire people and country. The pillar and well at Skeke, meanwhile, may represent a much simpler and more

pared-down local variant, perhaps with partially different meanings and functions. In this sense, Uppsala and Skeke may be an example of how grand, public "official" variants of a tradition complex were able to coexist with locally adapted versions – although both were perceived as equally relevant and functional within their respective sociocultural contexts.

Social hierarchies in the circular flow of tradition

Anyone intending to study the exchange of religious traditions between socially hierarchical groups in pre-Christian Scandinavia within the framework of the circular flow of religious tradition has good reason to look at eschatology and burial customs. Conceptions of death usually change slowly, but individual elements in mortuary practices may change more rapidly. In Late Iron Age Scandinavia, the positions of the dog, horse and burial mound superstructure in eschatology and burial traditions constitute interesting examples of this. I will concentrate my discussion below on the development of these burial customs in eastern central Sweden. From a very general point of view, one might say that in this part of Scandinavia it was common during the period to bury the dead under mounds together with a horse and one or two dogs. Nonetheless, the dog, horse and burial mound actually represent three very different paths of eschatological development that converged in eastern central Sweden during the Late Iron Age.

The position of the dog in eschatology and burial practices is ubiquitous and very old. In 1938 the German researcher of religion Freda Kretschmar showed that the tradition complex was widespread in large parts of the world, with the exception of Greenland, Australia, South America and southern and central Africa. She also demonstrated that dogs were usually portrayed as psychopomps (best known through Cerberus in Greek mythology), which guided those travelling to the underworld and guarded the entrance to the Kingdom of Death so that only the dead could enter. In Scandinavia both motifs occur in Old Norse myths and images (for example, on the picture stones of Gotland). Dog remains are also regularly found in Late Iron Age graves, and although there are usually few bone fragments of any kind in Early Iron Age and Late Bronze Age graves, bones from dogs are not entirely uncommon there either. The role of the dog in mortuary practices was thus ancient and common among both commoners and the elite (cf. Nordberg 2004, p. 247 ff w. refs).

The central position of the horse in Scandinavian eschatology appears to have quite a different background. In north-eastern central Sweden, horses are found sporadically in some rich warrior graves dating from the 4th century AD. They are often present in 5th-century chamber graves (Sw. sing. (*kist*)*kammargrav*), and several horses are frequently found in boat graves from the 6th and 7th centuries. These graves are linked to a larger pan-Germanic sphere, characterised by among other things a distinctive aristocratic warrior ideology with prominent equestrian ideals (Nylén 1973; Oexle 1984; Hyenstrand 1996, p. 104 ff). In commoners' graves, however, horses were not included more regularly until the 7th century (Iregren 1972, p. 79; Petré 1984, p. 115; Sigvallius 1994, pp. 70, 82 f). This chronology may indicate that the horse was first introduced as a more exclusive component in funeral ceremonies for aristocratic warriors with international contacts, and then gradually became part of a more widespread common heritage. In the 8th and 9th centuries, horses were part of the burial customs of both aristocrats and commoners, and in the eschatological myths the horse now served as a psychopomp that carried or pulled the dead in a cart on the long journey to the Other World (Nordberg 2004, p. 241 ff).

The tradition of building burial mounds appears to have taken a different course of development in the Lake Mälaren area. Although the processes that contributed to the spread of mound burial over eastern central Sweden are partly unknown, there is a great deal to indicate that the start of this development can be traced to Norway, where the tradition continued for a very long time from the Bronze Age to the Viking Period (Solberg 2000, pp. 77 f, 135, 186 f, 222 f). In Sweden the oldest mounds from the Iron Age are found in central northern Sweden (Sw. Mellannorrland), which during much of Prehistory had direct cultural links across the mountains with Trøndelag in central Norway. For example, in the

Swedish province of Medelpad the oldest burial mounds found so far date from the 2nd century (Selinge 1977, pp. 227 f, 235, 281, 284, 412 ff; Bratt 2008, p. 34 ff).

It is not entirely clear how this emergence of the mound tradition in central northern Sweden was related to developments in the Lake Mälaren provinces, but the tradition developed later to the south than in more northerly parts of the country. In the provinces immediately north of Lake Mälaren, it appears possible to date a few mounds to the 4th century. In the 5th century, burial mounds were at first built sporadically, and then increasingly often at many cemeteries. By the early 6th century they constituted a common form of grave superstructure at hamlet cemeteries. Mounds were thereafter a dominant type of grave monument up to about AD 1000 (Bennett 1987, p. 73 ff; Ljungkvist 2006).

There is also another interesting difference between the Lake Mälaren area and more northerly regions. Although the number of prehistoric graves per century and square kilometre is far smaller in Norway than in the Lake Mälaren area, both small mounds for commoners and huge aristocratic barrows were built in parallel there throughout the Iron Age. The same is evident in central northern Sweden. But this pattern is not seen in eastern central Sweden, where the first aristocratic great barrows were not built until after AD 550, when the burial mound had already been a common grave superstructure at hamlet cemeteries for several generations (Bratt 2008, pp. 29 ff, 42).

Even though a great deal is unclear regarding the development of the mound tradition in eastern central Sweden, at least in my opinion a process may be discernible in which it spread from Norway to central northern Sweden and from there gradually southwards to the old *folkland* provinces within Uppland, Södermanland and southern Västmanland. It is uncertain why the tradition of great barrows was established among the aristocrats of the Lake Mälaren provinces later than in several other Scandinavian regions. However, as the burial mound tradition had already been widespread for a few generations among the peasantry in the Lake Mälaren provinces when it also became established within the nobilities, it cannot at any rate have been detrimental to the kings and regional leaders to emphasise a common burial custom and thereby manifest their affinity with the commoners whom they governed.

This could possibly also explain a noteworthy detail in this context. In the Uppsala region the uppermost elite adopted the barrow tradition in the decades around AD 600, while certain families of the lower elite instead developed the late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period chamber grave tradition into the Vendel Period boat inhumation custom. This may possibly have been because the kingship institution in Uppsala was, at least officially, based on a popular mandate, while the region's lower-ranking warrior aristocrats, some of whom were buried in boats, lacked such locally rooted legitimacy and instead guaranteed their ranking through personal and historical allegiances to the folk-kings in Uppsala.

When the tradition of great barrows became established within the aristocracy in the 7th and 8th centuries, this seems to have helped to further universalise the general, popular burial mound tradition in eastern central Sweden. It possibly also contributed to the mound superstructure gaining greater ideological significance; on the one hand as a legal monument, and on the other as the only type of grave that, after becoming established, was retrospectively sanctioned mythologically. In both cases it is notable that no such aspects – as far as we can discern from the sources – were linked to any other form of grave monument in Scandinavia.

The function of the grave mound as a legal monument emerges most clearly in two ways. At least in Norway the ruler appears to have sat on a mound when exercising his power in certain situations (cf. Sundqvist 2016, p. 493 ff). The name *Tingshögen* for several barrows in Sweden possibly indicates that similar traditions existed there. It also seems that, at least in the 11th century, mound monuments manifested allodial rights and confirmed an allodial farmer's ownership of a farm and its infield and rights to utilise outfield land. There is evidence of this tradition in large areas of Scandinavia and in the Scandinavian colonies in Iceland and the British Isles (Zachrisson 1994, p. 226 ff; Solberg 2000, p. 148 f).

It is difficult to say how far this way of mani-

festing allodial rights dates back in Norway. In eastern central Sweden the mounds can hardly have assumed their legal significance before the mound tradition became universalised during the Vendel and Viking Periods. To the best of my knowledge, the mythical sanctioning of the mound superstructure (if it even existed) is only hinted at in chapter 8–10 of Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga Saga*. There, Snorri states that some of the burial customs and eschatological conceptions of the pagan age in old Svithiod were introduced by (euhemerised) Óðinn himself, who decided that "in memory of noblemen [*gǫfga menn*] a mound should be created, and in memory of all those men honoured with various distinctions, standing stones should be erected, and this custom endured for a long time". He also explains that it was Freyr who founded the Uppsala royal estates (ON. *Uppsalaauðr*) and that the Svear buried him in a mound at Uppsala when he died (ÍF 26, 1979, p. 20 ff).

From a source-critical perspective, there are obviously many potential pitfalls here, but we can at least make two observations: firstly it is undeniable that Freyr (OSw. *Frø*) was linked to the Uppsala kings and the royal estates of Uppsala (cf. Sundqvist 2002). Secondly, Snorri's information follows a larger and more general mythical pattern, in which the god Óðinn appears as a culture hero who created and shaped the world and human beings; who introduced cultural phenomena such as mead, runes and skaldic poetry; who founded social institutions and classes; who established religious traditions and rituals such as calendrical annual feasts and human sacrifices; and who, not least, was closely associated with death and the dead. From this perspective it is quite plausible that traditions also existed regarding Óðinn as the establisher of burial rites.

Having said this, there is yet another important detail in Snorri's account that is worth focusing on, viz the claim that the burial mounds were reserved for *gǫfga menn* m. pl. This expression can be translated literally as 'honourable, revered men', but in this context is more likely to mean 'noblemen, aristocrats' – compare *gǫfug-menni* neut. 'distinguished men, noblemen', *gǫfug-kvendi* neut. 'distinguished, high-born woman', etc. (Heggstad 1963, p. 238). Snorri's claim can initially seem confusing. Snorri was both well travelled and well read. Through Icelandic and Norwegian sagas as well as his own experiences during his journeys, he must have been well aware that burial mounds were a common "heathen" type of grave for both women and men in Scandinavia and Iceland. Despite this, he explicitly links the grave mound tradition to *gǫfga menn* in the Svear heartland in his *Ynglinga Saga*.

In my opinion, the most plausible explanation for this is that Snorri was actually describing the situation in Norway, where only one or very few individuals per generation and farmstead were buried under mounds. However, this does not explain the association with Uppsala and eastern central Sweden. It is therefore perhaps worth very cautiously putting forward an alternative (or complementary) possibility. Might Snorri's focus on Svithiod and the Ynglinga kings indicate that his information, at least in part, stemmed from regional, semi-mythical accounts about the establishment of the grave mound tradition within the patriarchal dynasties in the Svear heartland? Many scholars have suggested that Snorri may have learnt of certain regional traditions regarding Svithiod and Uppsala in conjunction with his visit to the lawspeaker Eskil Magnusson in Västergötland province, in 1219. Did Snorri on that occasion learn of a semi-mythical tradition about the emergence of the grave mound tradition among the Svear? This idea is of course highly hypothetical, but also tempting, as it would then be all the more interesting that this mythical sanctioning of the grave mound tradition was specifically linked to the Uppsala kings and the Svear heartland. In this context, this may have constituted a stage in the universalisation of the grave mound tradition in eastern central Sweden.

We can of course only speculate about the latter. What is clearer, however, is that the cultural relationship between various socially hierarchical groups is often much more complex than we think. It is not possible in a general sense to separate religious traditions into two hierarchical strata representing the general population and the elite. Nor should we regard the exchange of religious elements between these groups as, for example, a kind of general process of *gesunkenes*

Kulturgut, in which the elite are the givers and the wider population the recipients. The exchange of religious elements between groups in society was complex, kaleidoscopic and took place in all directions within the framework of the circular flow of religious traditions.

Conclusion

Above, I have discussed some of the processes that on the one hand helped to keep pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia cohesive over social and spatial boundaries and hierarchies, and on the other hand sustained the ability of religion to vary and adapt to shifting conditions and contexts in society. Based on a substantially reduced and contextually modified variant of McKim Marriott's description of the changeability of religious traditions as a constantly ongoing circular flow, I have attempted to exemplify the dynamism of religion in the Late Iron Age through three case studies.

The first of these concerns the relationship between local, regional and supra-regional traditions and tradition variants; the second addresses the relationship between private and public worship; and the third examines the exchange of religious traditions across social boundaries. All these cases also illustrate the ability of religious elements to spread spatially, and in doing so adapt to varying sociocultural contexts. Such processes took place in all contexts where people interacted. The sociocultural foundations of religion can in this sense be compared to a multitude of overlapping and interacting, changeable networks of social and cultural relations. The characteristics that kept religion dynamic and alive were flexibility and an ability to adapt to this sociocultural patchwork. Religion was part of culture, and just like culture, it was partly shaped by the constant circular flow of tradition.

Acknowledgement

This work was sponsored by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond/The Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences.

References

Adam of Bremen = Schmeidler, B. (Ed.) 1917. *Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte.* Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum ex monumentis germaniae historicis separatim editi. Magistri Adam Bremensis Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum. Hannover–Leipzig.

Andrén, A., 2004. I skuggan av Yggdrasil: trädet mellan idé och realitet i nordisk tradition. Andrén, A. et al. (eds). *Ordning mot kaos. Studier av nordisk förkristen kosmologi.* Lund.

– 2007. Skandinavisk religion i tid och rum. Andrén, A. & Carelli, P. (eds). *Odens öga: mellan människor och makter i det förkristna Norden*. Lund.

Artelius, T. & Lindqvist, M., 2007. *Döda minnen*. Stockholm.

Bennett, A., 1987. *Graven – religiös och social symbol: strukturer i folkvandringstidens gravskick i Mälarområdet*. Stockholm.

Bratt, P., 2008. *Makt uttryckt i jord och sten: stora högar och maktstrukturer i Mälardalen under järnåldern.* Stockholm.

Brink, S., 2007. How uniform was the Old Norse religion? Quinn, J. et al. (eds). *Learning and understanding in the Old Norse world: essays in honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*. Turnhout.

Drobin, U. & Keinänen, M-L., 2001. Frey, Veralden olmai och Sampo. *Kontinuitäten und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte. Festschrift für Anders Hultgård*. Berlin & New York.

Grundy, S., 1996. Freyja and Frigg. Billington, S. & Green, M. (eds). *The Concept of the Goddess*. London.

Harman, W., 1989. Sacred marriage in the study of religion: a perspective from India on a concept that grew out of the Ancient Near East. *Religion* 19. London.

Heggstad, L., 1963. *Gamalnorsk ordbok med nynorsk tydning. Ny umvølt og auka utgåve av 'gamalnorsk ordbok' ved Hægstad og Torp.* Oslo.

Hellström, J.A., 1996. *Vägar till Sveriges kristnande.* Stockholm.

Holmberg, U., 1922. *Der Baum des Lebens*. Helsinki.

Hultgård, A., 2014. Kultplats och gudatro: Om framväxten av lokala gudomar på germanskt område. Nyman et al. (eds). *Den heliga platsen*. Sundsvall.

Hyenstrand, Å., 1996. *Lejonet, draken och korset. Sverige 500–1000*. Lund.

ÍF 26 = 1979. *Heimskringla I*. Íslenzk fornrit 26. Hið íslenzka Fornritafélag. B. Aðalbjarnarson (ed.). Reykjavík.

Iregren, E., 1972. *Vårby och Vårberg II: Studie av kremerat människo- och djurbensmaterial från järnåldern*. Stockholm.

Kretschmar, F., 1938. *Hundestammvater und Kerberos II*. Stuttgart.

Larsson, F. (ed.), 2014. *Skeke – gudar, människor och gjutare. Rituella komplex från bronsålder och äldre järn-*

ålder samt en höjdbosättning från yngre järnålder med gjuteriverkstad. UV Rapport 2014:53. Riksantikvarieämbetet. Stockholm.

Ljungkvist, J., 2006. *En hiar atti rikr. Om elit, struktur och ekonomi kring Uppsala och Mälaren under yngre järnålder.* Uppsala.

Marriott, M., 1955. Little communities in an indigenous civilization. *Village India. Studies in the Little Community.* Chicago.

Nordberg, A., 2006. *Jul, disting och förkyrklig tideräkning. Kalendrar och kalendariska riter i det förkristna Norden.* Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur 91. Uppsala.

– 2011. Vad är en kultplats? *Fornvännen* 106.

– 2012. Continuity, change and regional variation in Old Norse Religion. Raudvere, C. & Schjødt, J.P. (eds). *More than mythology: narratives, ritual practices and regional distribution in pre-Christian Scandinavian religions.* Lund.

Nylén, E., 1973. Stridshästens mundering. *Tor* 15.

Näsström, B-M., 1995. *Freyja – the great goddess of the North.* Lund.

Oexle, J., 1984. Merowingerzeitliche Pferdebestattungen – Opfer oder Beigaben? *Frühmittelalterlische Studien* 18. Neumünster.

Petré, B., 1984. *Arkeologiska undersökningar på Lovö II.* Stockholm.

Rudolf of Fulda = 1925. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Rerum Germanicarum Fontibus II.* Transl. S. Alexandri. Leipzig.

Saler, B., 2000. *Conceptualizing religion: immanent anthropologists, transcendent natives, and unbounded categories.* New York.

Sandmark, A., 2004. *Power and conversion. A comparative study of Christianisation in Scandinavia.* Uppsala.

Selinge, K-G., 1977. Järnålderns bondekultur i Västernorrland. *Västernorrlands förhistoria.* Härnösand.

Sigvallius, B., 1994. *Funeral pyres: Iron Age cremations in North Spånga.* Stockholm.

Skj. B1 = 1973. *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning, B1.* Ed. Finnur Jónsson. Copenhagen & Kristiania.

SnE, 1988 = *Snorri Sturluson. Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning.* Ed. A. Faulkes. London.

SnE, 1998 = *Snorri Sturluson. Edda. Skáldskaparmál 1. Introduction, Text and Notes.* Ed. A. Faulkes. London.

Solberg, B., 2000. *Jernalderen i Norge 500 før Kristus til 1030 etter Kristus.* Oslo.

Ström, F., 1983. Hieros gamos-motivet i Hallfreðr Óttarssons Hakonardrápa och den nordnorska jarlavärdigheten. *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 98. Lund.

Sundqvist, O., 2002. *Freyr's offspring. Rulers and religion in ancient Svea society.* Historia Religionum 21. Uppsala.

– 2016. *An arena for higher powers: ceremonial buildings and religious strategies for rulership in Late Iron Age Scandinavia.* Leiden.

Svanberg, F., 2003. *Decolonizing the Viking Age 1.* Stockholm.

Vikstrand, P., 2001. *Gudarnas platser: förkristna sakrala ortnamn i Mälarlandskapen.* Uppsala.

– 2013. Namnet Uppsala. Sundqvist, O. & Vikstrand, P. (eds). *Gamla Uppsala i ny belysning.* Uppsala.

Zachrisson, T., 1994. The odal and its manifestation in the landscape. *Current Swedish Archaeology* 2. Stockholm.