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Óðinn: A Queer *týr*?

A Study of Óðinn's Function as a Queer Deity in Iron Age  
Scandinavia

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## ABSTRACT

Óðinn's gender has been very contentious within scholarship. While he is the god of war, he has also been argued to be queer or *ergi* - that is, perceived as somewhat passively homosexual or cross-dressing. Brit Solli argues that 'as a god, Odin thus constitutes a paradox: He is the *manliest* god of warriors, but also the *unmanly* master of seid.'<sup>1</sup> Ármann Jakobsson also argues that 'a god who is queer is not queer,'<sup>2</sup> implying that these two roles are mutually exclusive. I will be using these two statements as points of departure for this thesis, which will explore the ways in which Óðinn can be perceived queer, using the Prose Edda and Poetic Edda as my primary source material, and argue that this is not paradoxical to his role as a god, or a god of war.

I start by analysing what it meant to be a deity in pre-Christian Scandinavia, questioning emic words and categories, alongside discussions of cultic worship and the ideas of omnipotence and omniscience to demonstrate the disparity between pre-Christian deities and supernatural beings and modern Western ideas pertaining to this.

I then explore narratives and iconography surrounding Óðinn's queer nature, and employ a queer theoretical perspective to do so. By exploring semantic centres, various narratives, and religious variation, I demonstrate that Óðinn can be read as queer based on various examples, and that there was also diversity in how he was perceived based on source types.

I finally discuss the idea of the warrior cult and the role of women within this to demonstrate that this was not a strictly masculine space, and that therefore Óðinn's role within this did not constitute a paradox.

Finally, I conclude that Óðinn was a queer *týr*, and that this fits into a broader understanding of diversity of gender in Iron Age Scandinavia.

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<sup>1</sup> Brit Solli, 'Queering the Cosmology of the Vikings: A Queer Analysis of the Cult of Odin and "Holy White Stones,"' *Journal of Homosexuality*, 54 (2008) 194.

<sup>2</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'Óðinn as Mother: The Old Norse Deviant Patriarch,' *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 126 (2011) 13.

ÓÐINN, HINSEGIN TÝR? RANNSÓKN Á HLUTVERKI ÓÐINS SEM HINSEGIN  
GOÐMAGNS Á NORÐURLÖNDUM Á JÁRNÖLD  
ÁGRIP

Kyngervi Óðins hefur verið til umræðu meðal fræðimanna. Þótt hann hafi verið stríðsguð hafa menn jafnan séð hjá honum vissa *ergi*, þ.e. tilhneigingar til samkynhneigðar eða klæðskipta. Brit Solli hefur fært fyrir því rök að þetta feli í sér e.k. þversögn. Hann er í senn karlmannlegur guð hermanna en um leið ókarlmannlegur guð seiðsins. Ármann Jakobsson segir að guð sem er hinsegin er ekki hinsegin, en það hefur í för með sér að þessar tvær fullyrðingar útiloki hvor aðra. Það verður hins vegar gengið út frá þeim í ritgerðinni, sem mun fjalla um það hvernig skynja megi Óðinn sem hinsegin. Helstu heimildir verða eddukvæði og Snorra Edda og sýnt verður fram á að ekki sé um neina þversögn að ræða og að hann geti verið bæði goðmagn og sérstaklega tengdur hernaði. Í byrjun verður rakið hvað það merkir að vera guð í norrænni trú út frá innri hugtökum og flokkunum hennar. Enn fremur verður fjallað um helgisiði en líka um hugmyndir um alsæi og almætti, og það dregið fram hve mikill munur er á heiðnum goðmögnum og yfirnáttúrulegum verum annars vegar og nútímahugmyndum Vesturlandabúa. Í framhaldi af því verða kannaðar frásagnir og myndefni sem gefa til kynna að Óðinn sé á einhvern hátt hinsegin. Gripið verður til hinsegin fræða til að varpa ljósi á þetta viðfangsefni. Mörg dæmi sýna að það megi skilja Óðinn sem hinsegin, en líka að það var töluverð fjölbreytni í því hvernig fólk skynjaði Óðinn eftir því hverjar heimildirnar voru. Undir lokin eru raktar hugmyndir um vígamannatrú og að þar hafi konur gegnt hlutverkum. Með því er unnt að sýna fram á að hernaður var ekki einvörðungu karlafyrirbæri, og því er hlutverk Óðins ekki þversagnakennt. Niðurstaðan er að Óðinn er hinsegin *týr*, enda í ágætu samræmi við víðari sýn á fjölbreytni í skilningi á kyngervum á Norðurlöndum á járnöld.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most well-known deities of pre-Christian Scandinavian mythology, Óðinn is generally known as the god of storms, death, war, and poetry, as well as a master of *seiðr* (Solli 2008, 194; Simek 1993, 240; De Vries 1970, 84-85). According to Georges Dumézil, ‘Odin is the supreme magician, master of runes, head of all divine society, patron of heroes, living or dead’ (Dumézil 1973b, 4). Jens Peter Schjødt argues that Óðinn was, ‘above all else, the god of male bands, in this world and the next’ (Schjødt 2008, 51). However, Ármann Jakobsson notes that while Óðinn is associated with poets and warriors, he is also associated with *valkyrjur* and Freyja (Ármann Jakobsson 2011, 8), while Terry Gunnell highlights that there are disputes about which female deity Óðinn is most closely associated with, drawing attention to Frigg, Sága, and Freyja as just some examples (Gunnell 2015, 57).

‘Óðinn does not seem to easily [be] confined within a singular gender role,’ argues Ármann Jakobsson (Ármann Jakobsson 2011, 10). A number of other scholars have similarly noted this: Lotte Hedeager states that ‘his nature is particularly complicated and contradictory, and he is the most ambiguous in character and attributes of all the Nordic gods’ (Hedeager 2011, 7). He changes shape and as we learn from stanza 46 onwards of *Grímnismál*, Óðinn uses a number of names and is regularly in disguise (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I, 377-379; also highlighted by Ármann Jakobsson 2011, 11), and his name may have carried the meaning ‘leader of the possessed’ (Hedeager 2011, 7): a somewhat convincing argument. He is certainly a complicated and complex figure. Brit Solli draws attention to Óðinn’s role as a practitioner of *seiðr* and the queer connotations this had, and states that ‘as a god Odin thus constitutes a paradox: He is the *manliest* god of warriors, but he is also the *unmanly* master of *seid*’ (Solli 2008, 195). Ármann Jakobsson builds upon this, and argues that Óðinn ‘is not only a patriarch but also a deviant, a sorcerer, a queer’ (Ármann Jakobsson 2011, 7). He goes on to argue that ‘a god who is queer is not queer’ (Ármann Jakobsson 2011, 13) and that ‘while Óðinn behaves in a way that would be queer if a human did it,

both in his sorcery, his shapeshifting and his sex life, he is not queer' (Ármann Jakobsson 2011, 14).

I will be using these arguments as the points of departure for this thesis, in which I aim to explore and analyse the ways in which Óðinn was queer, to whom, how this impacted his role as a deity, and how this can be consolidated with his role as the leader of the supposedly masculine warrior culture. Indeed, I aim to demonstrate that these various facets of Óðinn's identity can not only be consolidated with one another, but are indeed not as paradoxical as has been argued. By approaching Óðinn through a queer lens, we can begin to see the nuances in gender in Iron Age Scandinavia, that allow room for this complicated identity.

## 1.1. METHODOLOGY

Due to the complicated source situation of the study of religion in pre-Christian Scandinavia, and the complex nature of the questions under study, some time must be taken to address how this thesis will make use of these sources and ideas in order to illuminate an alternative view of Óðinn within the Scandinavian Iron Age.

### 1.1.1 SOURCES: THE POETIC EDDA

This thesis is primarily informed by the Poetic Edda. This genre of poetry is almost impossible to date, but the main verse form, known as *fornyrðislag*, or 'old story metre,' implies that by the time it was first committed to vellum in c.1270 it was already considered to be part of an old tradition (Clunies Ross 2016, 18). These poems appear to have existed in oral form for a number of centuries before this: indeed, *Völuspá* is argued to have been composed c.1000 (Hultgård 1990, 350), but this is, of course, highly contentious. The extant manuscripts are somewhat easier to date. The primary manuscript, the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda is dated to c.1270 (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I, 19). However the poems exist in a number of other manuscripts: the Codex Wormianus, or AM 242 fol., is also a manuscript of significance, and it is dated to c.1350 (Clunies Ross 2016, 27; Lindow 2016, 127). A



further manuscript, AM 748 I a 4to has been dated to the first quarter of the fourteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

These poems appear to have existed in oral traditions in Iceland and mainland Scandinavia long before they were written into these manuscripts. Indeed, Schjødtt suggests that ‘the texts should be seen as more or less ‘coincidental’ written examples of what once existed as an extensive oral tradition (Schjødtt 2016, 136). While caution must of course be taken with these sources, Schjødtt warns that ‘the bottom line is that if we insist on purely philological methods, we would discover next to nothing about the myths of pre-Christian Scandinavia from eddic sources’ - I concur with this argument (Schjødtt 2016, 137).

#### 1.1.2. SOURCES: THE PROSE EDDA

The Prose Edda is an equally valuable source in this inquiry. It is thought to have been composed by Snorri Sturluson c.1220 (Clunies Ross 2016, 23), and it is likely that he had access to a large amount of orally transmitted information: Schjødtt argues that it was ‘at least partly rooted in the pagan era’ (Schjødtt 2016, 135). However, it is imperative to highlight the heavy Christian influence on this text. Indeed, the prologue of the text opens:

*Almáttigr guð skapaði himin ok jörð ok alla þá hluti er þeim fylgja, ok síðarst menn tvá er ættir eru frá komnar, Adam ok Evu, ok fjölgaðisk þeira kynslóð ok dreifðisk um heim allan.*

Almighty God created heaven and earth and all those things which follows that, and lastly he made the people from whom all people come, Adam and Eve, and they increased themselves in number and dispersed themselves among all of the earth. (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 3)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Lindow has dated this to c.1300 more specifically (Lindow 2016, 125). Meanwhile, Margaret Clunies Ross posits the date c.1325 (Clunies Ross 2016, 27).

<sup>4</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

Schjødt underlines this point and discusses how we can address this issue, suggesting that, primarily, we must determine if each individual part of the text is based on Christianity or paganism on its own merit (Schjødt 2016, 139). I will be taking this approach into consideration throughout this thesis.

### 1.1.3. ALTERNATIVE SOURCES

A number of other sources have been used throughout this thesis. These include medieval Icelandic sagas such as *Ynglinga saga* and *Jómsvíkinga saga*; archaeological sources; and the first century AD account of Tacitus on his time in the Germanic region. By consulting these sources, we can begin to build a slightly more varied picture. Of course, these sources come with their complications too: *Ynglinga saga* and *Jómsvíkinga saga* are both fantastical variants of the *konungasögur* genre of medieval Icelandic saga writing. Therefore, they exist solidly within that cultural mindset, and therefore cannot wholly reflect the pre-Christian mindset within themselves.

Despite being a somewhat contemporary source for the broader Germanic pre-Christian culture, Tacitus' *Germania* is equally problematic. Being from the first century AD and an unspecified region of the Continental Germanic area, it is hard to tell how these views changed and spread through the vast span of time between the Roman Iron Age and the late Viking Age. Alongside this, being a source describing Germanic peoples from an external perspective means that we must be aware that cultural misunderstandings are likely: we are not only seeing an interpretation of these people, but from someone who may have interpreted their beliefs within a different mindset.

Furthermore, one particular archaeological find is of interest in this thesis: a small figure found at Lejre, which arguably depicts Óðinn. Caution must be taken when interpreting iconographic depictions as specific characters from mythology: often cyclical arguments can lead to these conclusions.

These various sources allow us to draw an element of comparison to the information provided by the Poetic and Prose Eddas, and find both similarities and differences in these portrayals.

#### 1.1.4. MODELS

In order to analyse these sources one must use modelling. Luke John Murphy has discussed this in detail, and highlights that in making these mental models to understand historical realities, we are in fact constructing an *idea* of the past, not *reconstructing* the past itself (Murphy 2017, 23). Therefore, a degree of simplification is required (Murphy 2017, 22), succinctly summarised by Schjødt thus: ‘reconstructing a reality of the past always includes some sort of reductionism... It constitutes, in other words, a model of certain aspects of a delimited part of reality. It does not cover the real reality’ (Schjødt 2012, 270). The analysis in this thesis will rely on such a model and the simplification of reality. This will require considering the image of Óðinn as being somewhat more coherent than it may have been in pre-Christian Scandinavia, in order to have some extent of conceptual model with which to study. Variation will still be considered within this: Schjødt importantly highlights that we cannot look for an ‘original’ version of the myth (Schjødt 2012, 276). This will continue to be stressed as I implement Schjødt’s theories regarding religious variation.

Alongside this form of modelling, the notion of emic and etic categories must be considered. The term ‘emic’ refers to concepts and ideas that are found within the culture in question, what Murphy terms a ‘bottom up’ approach, while etic categories, or a ‘top down approach,’ are derived from outside the culture and are used to interpret the material (Murphy 2017, 26), which he summarises thus:

‘An emic approach focuses on what its creator sees as characteristically inherent in the object itself, “deducing” the frame of reference for the study at hand; an etic model concentrates on those aspects of the object that correlate with the analyst’s preselected aspects of interest, “inducing” their own framework.’ (Murphy 2017, 26)

He notes that it is rare for scholars’ work to exist in a binarised way in this sense: most scholars move between these poles (Murphy 2017, 21). Furthermore, neither of these approaches are inherently more valid than the other. Instead, they allow for a variety of approaches, with some investigations being more suited to one approach than the other. In this thesis I will be using primarily etic models. In order to discuss Óðinn’s

nature as a queer deity, ideas surrounding the concepts of ‘queer’ and ‘deity’ must be addressed, as these are etic categories being imposed upon this culture.

<b>Bottom Up</b>	<b>Top Down</b>
emic	etic
deductive	inductive
<i>Idealtyp</i>	<i>Normaltyp</i>
concrete to abstract	abstract to concrete
insider's perspective	outsider's perspective

Figure 1. Table highlighting the binarised ideas behind the emic/etic model.

(Murphy 2017, 21)

#### 1.1.5. TERMINOLOGY

There are a number of terms used throughout this thesis that must here be defined. The first of these is ‘queer.’ This term has a complex history: after becoming a homophobic slur in the second half of the twentieth century, the term has since been reclaimed in a number of ways, first within academic study in the 1990s, and later within the LGBTQIA+ community. The term itself is now incredibly ambiguous and is considered an umbrella term for anyone whose sexuality or gender falls outside the constraints of cisheteronormative society. ‘Cisheteronormative’ refers to the idea that it is assumed within modern Western society that one’s sex will align with one’s gender (making one cisgender), and that cisgender men and cisgender women will be exclusively attracted to one another within set models of attraction (Paramo 2018, 54-55). ‘Queer’ challenges these confines, and therefore allows for a variety of meanings within this. This is, of course, an etic category. However, its non-specific nature allows for contextual understanding. I will not try to define what was ‘queer’ in an Iron Age Scandinavian context, but instead will use the term as a means by which

we, as students within modern Western culture, can begin to approach gender or sexuality at odds with our society's dominant cisheteronormative worldview.

## 1.2. THE STRUCTURE OF THIS THESIS

This thesis consists of three chapters. I will start by exploring what it meant to be a pre-Christian deity. I will address the supernatural beings present in mythology, the words used to describe 'gods,' ask whether gods in pre-Christian Scandinavia could be flawed by the standards of the society that created them, and question how cultic worship related to the perception of who was a deity. I will argue that emic models are more beneficial for answering these questions, as we must acknowledge that Christian values influence our etic approaches to these concepts. This chapter therefore aims to respond to Ármann Jakobsson's argument that 'a god who is queer is not queer' (Ármann Jakobsson 2011, 7).

The second chapter will look at the portrayals of Óðinn as queer. I will start by setting out my theoretical framework. I will then address Óðinn's semantic centres in various sources and explore how this functions in relation to religious diversity. I will then discuss specific instances in which Óðinn is described as *ergi* and the impact this has of him.

In my final chapter I will seek to consolidate the image of Óðinn as a queer deity with his role as the leader of the *einherjar*, the mythological warrior cult. In my analysis I argue that the idea that the warrior cult was an inherently masculine space is flawed and ignores evidence of the prominence of women within these spaces. By deconstructing the narrative that this was a binarised male space, I therefore demonstrate that Óðinn's queer identity and role within this cult is not paradoxical, in response to Solli's argument, and is instead a complimentary image.

I will then draw my conclusions to argue that Óðinn was a queer *týr* in pre-Christian Scandinavia, and that by using queer theory we can begin to understand the flaws in the previous methods that have led to arguments for a paradoxical figure, instead of these elements complimenting one another.

## 2. DEFINING A DEITY IN PRE-CHRISTIAN SCANDINAVIA

### 2.1. INTRODUCTION

In order to understand how Óðinn's queer presentation affected his role as a god or deity, we must first question what it meant to be a deity in pre-Christian Scandinavia. Robert N. Bellah notes that 'in archaic societies, complex chiefdoms, and the tribal societies... gods, powerful beings, ancestors and human beings existed on a continuum' (Bellah 2011, 202). As Bellah argues, historians of religion should not view humans and gods as a binary system, but as a spectrum of various types of beings, with different roles and functions. This is clearly demonstrated within the religions of pre-Christian Scandinavia, which appear to document a wide range of beings, such as the *jötnar*, *álfar*, and *dvergjar*, alongside the gods. Gods are born of *jötnar*: *Gylfaginning* tells us that '*sá er nefndr Loki eða Loptr, sonr Fárbauda jötuns*' (that is named Loki or Loptr, the son of Fárbaudi the *jötunn*) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 26). We can therefore deduce that these boundaries were indeed somewhat undefined. As Thomas DuBois importantly notes, 'while Nordic pagans and Christians engaged in such comparisons of their gods, Christian theology itself offered a new image of omnipotence for its deity, a quality entirely novel to the Nordic religion' (DuBois 1999, 61). As this chapter will demonstrate, we must be very wary not to misunderstand the Nordic religions as viewing gods in the same way as their Christian counterparts, as per DuBois.

Gro Steinsland notes that religion functions in a way that divides the world into the realm where humans are and the realm of other beings, which contains 'guder, demoner, ånder, forfedre eller andre makter,' (gods, demons, spirits, ancestors and other powers) (Steinsland 2005, 29). Religions are then supported by mythology surrounding these beings (Steinsland 2005, 29). She goes on to discuss the theoretical structure used by historians of religion, by which most religions can be viewed as 'folk' religions or 'universal' religions. While Christianity is a universal religion, pre-Christian Scandinavian religions are folk religions. Therefore, as follows this structure, pre-Christian Scandinavia would not have had dogma, and mythology and cosmology would have been grounded within the shared cultic structure (Steinsland 2005, 32).

Steinsland argues that Nordic gods are a group with special powers for upholding the order of the universe, but that they are not omnipotent or omniscient as the Christian god is (Steinsland 2005, 134). I therefore aim to demonstrate that this distinction between these two forms of religion is essential to our understanding of what a god was in pre-Christian Scandinavia, and in turn how this would have impacted Óðinn's role as a queer deity.

<i>Hedendom og kristendom</i>	
<i>Hedendom</i>	<i>Kristendom</i>
folkereligion/ etnisk religion	universalreligion/ frelsesreligion
egen folkegruppe	alle jordens mennesker
ikke-misjonerende	misjonerende
dennesidig	transcendental
<i>friðr</i>	frelse
kulteksklusiv	troseksklusiv
ikke-dogmatisk	dogmatisk
tradisjon	lære
polyteistisk	monoteistisk
mannlig/kvinnelig kultledelse	mannlig kultledelse
i mindre grad egne sakralbygg	sakralbygg/kirke
ære-skam-moral	synd, nåde, frelse, fortapelse
kollektiv orientering	individuell livsorientering

Figure 2. Table demonstrating the binarised differences between pre-Christian Scandinavian religions and Christianity as folk and universal religions.

(Steinsland 2005, 33)

<b>Pre-Christian Scandinavian religions</b>	<b>Christianity</b>
Folk religion	Universal religion
Ethnic religion	Salvation religion
People within the group	People of any group
Non-missionary	Missionary
Focus on life	Focus on afterlife
<i>Friðr</i> , peace and prosperity	Salvation
Cult-focused	Belief-focused
Not dogmatic	Dogmatic
Tradition (oral culture)	Learning (book culture)
Polytheistic	Monotheistic
Male and female cult leaders	Only male cult leaders
Less focus on sacral/cult buildings	Big focus on sacral/cult buildings/churches
Honour/shame moral system	Focus on sin, mercy, salvation, and damnation
Focus on the group	Focus on the individual

Figure 3. My translation of figure 2. With thanks to Luke John Murphy for assisting my translation.

This chapter aims to address what a god or deity was within pre-Christian Scandinavia in terms of how they were conceived of as beings, their roles and powers, their omniscience or omnipotence, and the relationship their followers had with them. As such, it is useful to look at Bellah's argument in relation to Tikopia, a small island that he has categorised as a simple chiefdom transitioning to an archaic religion (Bellah 2011, 186). Simon Nygaard argues that pre-Christian Scandinavian religions are at a similar stage of religious evolution, with which I agree (Nygaard 2016, 12). With regards to Tikopia, Bellah states that 'the praise, thanksgiving, and requests for



blessings offered by the chief acting as priest are what allow us to speak of these rituals as worship and the objects of these rituals as gods' (Bellah 2011, 186). Bellah further notes that ritual in its early forms does not appear to be devoted to 'supernatural beings' as such, which is 'so often used as the fundamental definition of religion' (Bellah 2011, 95). This notion of cultic worship will form an important element of the discussion on what constitutes a god in pre-Christian Scandinavia. I demonstrate that the source material shows that beings that receive cult are not always the beings referred to as gods, highlighting how unclear these lines are in Iron Age Scandinavia, and that using a Christian lens to analyse this information is somewhat counterproductive.

Further to this, Bellah notes that 'it is especially dangerous to call powerful beings "gods" because of the loaded meaning of that term in a culture deeply influenced by biblical religion' (Bellah 2011, 95). In the context of this discussion, I will be avoiding using the term 'god,' as I believe it carries connotations of omnipotence and omniscience as demonstrated by the Christian God, a concept that I will be arguing against here. Instead, I will use the term 'deity' where possible. This is of course not without its own problems: the *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines 'deity' as 'a god or goddess (in a polytheistic religion)' (Stevenson 2010, 461). This does little to clarify the meaning, but highlights the applicability of this term to non-Christian religions. Therefore, I will be using 'deity' to imply a supernatural being conceptualised as a god of some kind, but beyond a Christian context.

A further point to note as a theoretical background to this chapter is the notion of *mana*. This concept derives from Pacific cultures and grew in use in Indo-European scholarship in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Meylan 2016, 150). It is usually taken to mean 'impersonal power' or 'impersonal religious power' (Meylan 2016, 153 & 161), and can be used to understand the power that deities or supernatural beings hold. The term appears to, in some ways, hold similarity to the Old Norse term *hamingja*, carrying the meaning of fortune, destiny, and strength, which has been linked to possible pre-Christian Scandinavian supernatural beings (Meylan 2016, 150; Turville-Petre 1945, 122-123). In this sense it can be understood that the deities of pre-Christian Scandinavia held this form of power, which may be what gave them the status of deities.

## 2.2. EMIC CATEGORIES FOR DEITIES

First, it must be addressed that a number of words are used within Old Icelandic texts to refer to Norse deities. These words include *goð/guð*, *áss*, *regin*, *bönd*, *höpt*, *týr*, *véar*, *díar*, *disir*, and *ffarg*. These words appear in a variety of circumstances and seem to have variations in their semantics. Steinsland suggests that the meanings of at least some of these words imply that the functions of the deities was in relation to their ability to ‘holde orden, samle og styre’ (keep order, gather and rule) (Steinsland 2005, 134), which may reflect the idea of *mana*. In order to understand how pre-Christian Scandinavian deities were viewed, I will first discuss the words used in order to determine a sense of their semantics and the variety within this.

The first commonly used term I will discuss is *guð* and *goð*, translated to ‘god’ in English. These terms were used to describe both the Christian god and the pre-Christian Scandinavian deities, both on their own, and with the qualifier *heiðinn* (heathen). Rudolf Simek notes that these terms were most strongly linked with the idea of the gods as ‘defenders and rulers of mankind and their world’ (Simek 2010, 10). Peter Jackson, in his exploration of the linguistic roots of various terms used to refer to religious concepts, argues that this term is derived from the idea of ‘that which is invoked (= divinity)’ (Jackson 2012, 54). This has the implication of linking to the concept of *mana* as an idea of ‘impersonal religious power.’ A further point of interest, particularly in the case of the study at hand, is that *goð/guð* was originally a neuter noun, shifting to being grammatically masculine as a result of the influence of Judeo-Christian perspectives of their god (Jackson 2012, 54).

The next, very common term is *áss* (masculine singular), with *æsir* in masculine plural, and *ásynja* as the feminine singular and *ásynjur* as the feminine plural. This grammatical variety pays testament to the variety of ways this term is used throughout the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus, and how specific and non-specific the term can be. The idea of the Æsir is the most prominent in discussions of pre-Christian Scandinavian deities, and the link between this term and deities can be traced to have Proto-Germanic roots (Simek 1993, 3). The Æsir appear to be conceptualised as a specific group, as we

can see in a number of sources. *Gylfaginning* describes how Óðinn's wife was called Frigg, and 'af þeira ætt er sú kynslóð komin er vér kollum Ása ættir,' (from this family comes the kindred that we call the Æsir) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 13). The implication here is that the Æsir were a family unit of sorts. Various mythological sources present the idea of the Æsir living in *Ásgarður*, literally 'stronghold of the Æsir,' and *Gylfaginning* tells us that 'tólf eru Æsir guðkunnigir' (there are twelve among the Æsir), and that 'eigi eru Ásynjurnar óhelgari ok eigi megu þær minna' (the Ásynjur are not less holy and not less powerful) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 21). This form of *ásynjur* describes the female deities of the Æsir, which are viewed as being in addition to the twelve Æsir. *Gylfaginning* presents these twelve Æsir as being Óðinn, Þórr, Baldr, Týr, Bragi, Heimdallr, Høðr, Viðarr, Áli/Váli, Ullr, Forseti, and Loki (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 21-26).

While the Æsir appear to be the main group of deities discussed, attention must also be drawn to the group referred to as the Vanir. *Skáldskaparmál* relates 'þat váru upphöf til þess at guðin höfðu ósætt við þat fólk er Vanir heita' (It [the mead of poetry] originated when the gods were at war with the people called the Vanir) (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 3). Furthermore, in *Þrymskviða* it is said that:

Þá kvað þat Heimdallr,  
hvítastr ása,  
vissi hann vel fram  
sem vanir aðrir

Then Heimdallr,  
The whitest of Æsir, said  
that he knew the future  
as the Vanir also do. (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I, 424)

The implication of this, with the use of ‘*vanir aðrir*,’ is that the Vanir are a separate group to the Æsir, of which Heimdallr is a part of, as also demonstrated in *Gylfaginning* (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 25).

The singular form, *vanr*, has no cognates in other Germanic languages (Hall 2007, 27), and is rare within Old Icelandic, with just two examples extant, both taken from *Skáldskaparmál*. The first of these reads ‘*hvernig skal kenna Njörð? Svá at kalla hann vagna guð eða Vana nið eða Van ok fǫður Freys ok Freyju, gefanda guð*’ (how shall Njörðr be known? He is so called as the wagon god or descendent of the Vanir or *vanr* or the father of Freyr and Freyja, the giving god) (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 18). This is shortly followed by ‘*hvernig skal kenna Frey? Svá at kalla hann son Njarðar, bróður Freyju ok enn Vana guð ok Vana nið ok Vanr ok árguð ok fégjafa*’ (how shall Freyr be known? He is so called the son of Njörðr, brother of Freyja, and a Vanir god, and descendent of the Vanir or *vanr* and god of plenty and giver of fortune) (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 18). However, Simek has noted their regular but non-specific appearance in the skaldic and eddic material (Simek 2010, 12) meaning that determining exactly who or what the Vanir were is near impossible.

Njörðr is the most clear example of a mythological figure being described as Vanir, with this appearing in a number of sources. Alongside the example previously given from *Skáldskarmál*, it is also said in *Vafþrúðnismál*:

*Óðinn kvað:*

*“Segðu þat it tíunda,*

*alls þú tíva røk*

*ǫll, Vafþrúðnir, vitir,*

*hvaðan Njörðr um kom*

*með ása sonum*

*hofum ok hǫrgum*

*hann ræðr hunnmǫrgum -*

*ok varðat hann ásum alinn.”*

*Vafþrúpnir kvað:*

*“Í Vanaheimi*

*skópu hann vís regin*

*ok seldu at gíslingu goðum;*

*í aldar røk*

*hann mun aptr koma*

*heim með vísun vǫnum.”*

Óðinn said:

“Tell me this tenth thing,

everything you, Vafþrúðnir, know of the fate of the gods,

from where Njǫrðr came to the sons of the Æsir -

a great number of temples and sanctuaries he rules over -

and he was not brought up among the Æsir.”

Vafþrúðnir said:

“In Vanaheim

he was made by the wise powers/gods

and parted with as a hostage to the gods;

in the age of fate

he will come back

home to the wise Vanir.” (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I, 362-363)

This same narrative is presented in *Gylfaginning*. It is said that ‘*eigi er Njǫrðr Ása ættar. Hann var upp fæddr í Vanaheimum, en Vanir gísluðu hann goðunum ok tóku í mót at Ásagíslingu þann er Hænir heitir. Hann varð at sætt með goðunum ok Vǫnum*’ (Njǫrðr is not one of the Æsir. He was brought up in Vanaheim, but the Vanir gave him as hostage to the gods and in turn took a hostage from the Æsir named Hænir. He made a truce between the gods and the Vanir) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 23). This

reinforces the argument that the Vanir are a separate group to the Vanir, and that Njörðr is a member of this group.

Also presented as members of the Vanir are Freyr and Freyja. This is implied initially in *Gylfaginning*, in which it is said that ‘*Njörðr í Nóatún gat síðan tvau börn. Hét sonr Freyr en dóttir Freyja*’ (Njörðr in Nóatún after that begot two children. He had a son named Freyr and a daughter named Freyja) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 24). This is further confirmed later in the text, when it is related that ‘*hon er kǫlluð Vanadis*’ (she [Freyja] is called goddess of the Vanir) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 29). What little we can therefore deduce from this is that the Vanir appear to have been a somewhat separate group to the Æsir, and that Njörðr, Freyr, and Freyja are the only specifically named members of this group.

It has been argued that not only are these two separate groups, but that there are two key ways in which they are differentiated, as argued by Dumézil. He proposed that these are a difference in function, and an inequality of rank as a result of this. Of the former point, Dumézil argued that the Æsir were ‘possessing the overall, royal, magical, judicial, and armigerous direction of the world,’ while the Vanir were ‘the patron gods of prosperity, fertility, sensual pleasure, even obscenity’ (Dumézil 1973a, 81). Of the latter, he argued that at the Indo-European stage of the religious development, these functions became hierarchised, with fertility being of lower importance than ‘high magic and martial strength’ (Dumézil 1973a, 81). This difference in function, with the Vanir having a clearer fertility focus is feasible: as earlier noted, *Skáldskaparmál* refers to Freyr as ‘*árguð ok fégjafa*’ (god of plenty and giver of fortune) (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 18). Freyr’s connection with fertility (both human and agricultural) has been further argued by a number of scholars (Simek 1993, 351; DuBois 1999, 56; Turville-Petre 1964, 159), although Simek has also convincingly proposed that this may be a creation of Snorri Sturlurson’s, as much of the evidence for this idea post-dates the conversion (Simek 2010, 18). Furthermore, Lotte Motz’s evaluation of the source material has led to her question this division of roles, and instead posit that the Æsir were in fact the deities of fertility, while the Vanir were deities of war (Motz 1996, 9). Indeed, in *Lokasenna*, Þórr, named as a member of the Æsir in *Gylfaginning* (Snorri

Sturluson 2005a, 22), is referred to as '*Jarðar burr*' (son of the earth) (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I, 58). This evidence suggests to me that this argument requires more nuance than it has perhaps received, and suggests that the ideas surrounding the function of these deities is more unclear than proposed, making it harder to distinguish for the purpose of the present argument precisely what a pre-Christian deity was.

A particularly intriguing term is *regin*. Simek suggests this may possibly be the oldest term for deities we have extant from pre-Christian Scandinavia, noting its presence on two runestones: one from Noleby, Västergötland in Sweden, seeming to date from c.600 AD, and the other from Sparlösa, also from Västergötland in Sweden, dating to c.800 AD. Both of these examples use the word '*raginakundo*,' translated by Simek as 'made known through the *regin*' (Simek 2010, 11). There is therefore an implication from this of receiving knowledge, and may further be a reference to *mana*. However, despite these early attestations, Simek also notes that *regin* appears to still be widely used in the tenth century (Simek 2010, 11), suggesting that the semantics of this term consistently stayed close to the understanding of pre-Christian deities. Alaric Hall suggests that *regin* may have become an archaic synonym for the *Æsir* (Hall 2007, 26). This semantic meaning has been discussed by many scholars of the last century: Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon define *regin* as the 'gods as makers and rulers of the universe'; Martin John Stanley states that 'many lexicologists agree on the sense of *counsellors*, linking the word with the Gothic *ragin* (counsel, decision)'; Albert M. Sturtevant argues that they were 'the controlling divinities of the universe'; Alexander Jóhannesson states that *regin* means 'die ratschlagengen Mächter, Götter' (the gods as the controlling powers), and Ferdinand Holthausen links the word to the Gothic *rahnjan*, meaning to reckon (summarised by Stanley 1972, 3). I agree with these interpretations, and their consistent theme of deities controlling the human realm, which again reflects the idea of *mana*. It must also be noted that the term *ragnarøk*, translated as the final fate of the gods, is constructed from the inflected form of *regin*, and can therefore be seen in use as a key term for the deities.

A further term of great interest is *týr* in singular, *tívar* in plural. Within some of the mythological texts, *týr* seems to refer to a deity in his own right: in stanza 37 of *Lokasenna* we are told ‘*Týr kvað*’ (Týr said), with Loki responding in the next stanza with ‘*þegi þú, Týr!*’ (Be silent, Týr) after previously responding to the other gods by name (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I, 415). Furthermore, *Gylfaginning* gives a description of a member of the Æsir named Týr, saying that ‘*hann er djarfastr ok bezt hugaðr ok hann ræðr mjök sigri í orrostum*’ (he is the boldest and most courageous and he decides the most who will be victorious in battle) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 25). However, within *Lokasenna* the form ‘*sigtívar*’ (victory-gods) (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I, 409) also appears, suggesting that this term had a dual function at this time of both the name of a specific deity and as a collective term for deities, similar to the proper noun God and improper god in English. Simek notes that the term *týr* may refer to one particular god, but that its use in kennings implies a more generic meaning of deities (Simek 2010, 10). Jackson also notes that while Týr may have been an individual deity, the singular form of *týr* as a non-specific term for deities only appears to be extant from the poetic sources and in kennings (Jackson 2012, 55). The suggestion that this term, particularly in plural form, was a catch-all term for deities is persistent. Jackson also argues that *tívar* may have been an infrequent synonym for *goða* (Jackson 2012, 55), while Hall suggests that the term may have been an archaic synonym for the Æsir, as with *regin* (Hall 2007, 26).

Yet more terms are extant that appear to refer to pre-Christian deities. Simek argues that *bönd* may carry the semantic meaning of ‘binding gods,’ linking them to the idea of oaths and rituals, with a strong connotation of cultic practices (Simek 2010, 11). The word *hopt* or *høft* appears only in the plural and seems to refer to the deities as a general mythological group (Simek 2010, 11). *Díar* appears only in *Sigurðardrápa* (Lindow & Schjødt, forthcoming) and *Ynglinga saga*, and Turville-Petre convincingly states that there is ‘little doubt that it was borrowed from the Irish *dia* (god)’ (Turville-Petre 1964, 163). *Fjarg* appears in *Lokasenna* (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I, 412) and seems to also mean ‘heathen god,’ and according to Geir T. Zoëga appears only in poetry (Zoëga 1910 [2004], 138). *Dísir* is also a common term (*dís* in singular), seeming



to refer to female deities, with Turville-Petre suggesting that they may have been 'tutelary goddesses' (Turville-Petre 1964, 221). The term *dísablót* appears in some sources, seeming to be a sacrifice or offering that takes place in the autumn or beginning of winter for these deities, (Turville-Petre 1964, 221) highlighting that they are the object of cult (Turville-Petre 1964, 224).

It is possible that this range of terms reflects a number of synonyms for deities in pre-Christian Scandinavia. However, there does also seem to be a certain extent of variation within this: *goð* and *guð* are more closely linked to the notion of the invocation of a supernatural being, while *regin* has closer links to these beings as rulers of the universe - a very small semantic difference. *Týr* seems to have somewhat been synonymous with *goð* and *guð* and therefore may have carried this same meaning. Other terms, such as *dís* and *áss* appear to have held more specific meanings in relation to certain groups of deities. From this we can infer that there may not have been a strictly coherent view of what a deity was in pre-Christian Scandinavia. This argument becomes more evident when we turn our attention to understanding the role of cultic worship within this.

### 2.3. CULT, DEITIES, AND SUPERNATURAL BEINGS

One way in which we can consider the importance of deities is to address whether they had a cult, meaning that they were worshipped in some way or received offerings of some form. Bellah has noted that this is often used as the fundamental definition of religion (Bellah 2011, 95). Not all named deities from mythological sources are known to have had a cult in this way, but as John Lindow and Schjødt point out, we must be wary that this may be due in part to the nature of our sources (Lindow & Schjødt, forthcoming). In order to determine the prominence of cultic worship, we rely to an extent on textual evidence, of which we have none from within pre-Christian Scandinavia. Instead, archaeological finds can be useful, but identifying these figures as specific mythological figures is of course highly problematic and often relies on circular arguments. Alternatively, descriptions from individuals outside Scandinavia can be of use, such as Adam of Bremen's description of a festival held at Uppsala. However,

misunderstandings and exaggeration can also appear throughout this. Finally, place-name evidence can be of particular use, as will be demonstrated in this subchapter. Therefore, our extant information on the nature of cult is unclear. Stefan Brink points out that there was worship of ancestors centred around burial mounds, but it is unclear how much this was used for cult and ritual (Brink 2013, 39), perhaps also reflecting Bellah's argument for a spectrum of beings, of which deities are just one group. Furthermore, Turville-Petre notes that we have little evidence for cults for Bragi, Iðunn, and Gefjun, to name a few, alongside no written evidence for cultic worship of Týr. However, place-name evidence suggests otherwise (Turville-Petre 1964, 180-181).

Place-name or toponymic evidence can be very valuable in understanding the cults that existed for various deities in Iron Age Scandinavia. There is more evidence for worship of Týr in place-names than in the written sources (Brink 2007, 119), but equally, Simek has drawn attention to the fact that there are more Vanir-based place-names than Æsir (Simek 1993, 351). This underlines the importance of the Vanir as figures of worship and cult, implying that they functioned as deities. However, Steinsland raises some important questions surrounding this when she highlights Hjalmar Lindroth's 1914 and 1930 arguments that there appear to be a number of place-names with the theophoric element of *Skedju-*, leading to names such as Skadevu, Skedvi, Skee, and Skjøl, which appears to be derived from the Old Icelandic name Skaði, a member of the *jötnar*. Further supporting this argument is the notion that these names are often linked to well-established cultic place names, such as *vé*, *hof*, and *lundr* (Steinsland 1986, 213-214). We can therefore postulate that cult may not have been restricted to the Æsir and Vanir, the beings we commonly recognise as being deities in pre-Christian Scandinavia. It has been argued by various scholars, such as Anna Holstmark and P. A. Munch, that the *jötnar* did not receive cult and were instead fought by the gods (Munch 1967, 78), with the highly influential Dumézil arguing that 'the giants are mythical and folk story characters, but no one ever makes sacrifices to them, or prays to them, or summons their aid' (Dumézil 1973a, 91). However, Steinsland draws attention to the fact that a 'shrine' to Skaði appears to be mentioned in Eddic poetry (Steinsland 1986, 213). This is perhaps a reference to *Lokasenna*, which relates:

*Skaði kvað:*

*“Veiztu, ef fyrstr ok øfstr  
vartu at fjörlagi,  
þá er ér á Þjaza þrifuð,  
frá mínum véum  
ok vöngum skulu  
þér æ köld ráð koma.”*

Skaði said:

“You know, if first and foremost  
were you at the killing,  
then when you seized hold of Þjazi,  
from my sanctuaries  
and fields, shall  
to you cold counsel come.” (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I, 418)

Steinsland has long been a key proponent of the argument in favour of *heiros gamos* in pre-Christian Scandinavian religion, as the marriage between a god and *jötunn* as a symbolic marriage of the Mother Earth and Father Sky, which ‘secures fertility and wealth’ (Steinsland 1986, 214). It therefore appears that cult was not confined to the Æsir and Vanir alone.

It is pertinent here to briefly discuss the *jötnar*. This plural term, *jötunn* in singular, is often translated into English as ‘giants,’ somewhat controversially. I will therefore be using the emic terms within this thesis. Steinsland’s analysis of the *jötnar* places them, to a certain extent, in contrast with deities, with the latter upholding order in the universe, while the former create chaos: in Steinsland’s view they are the enemies of the gods (Steinsland 1986, 212; Steinsland 2005, 140). Einar Haugen suggests that while the *jötnar* and deities may not have been in such strict opposition, deities do seem to be portrayed on the side of humans, while the *jötnar* seem to work against this (Haugen

1970, 178; Clunies Ross 1994, 103-143). Indeed, Steinsland also argues that they are connected to death (Steinsland 1986, 212), and are considered monstrous within monster theory frameworks, as demonstrated by Hall (Hall 2007, 32). These elements must be taken into account, and the idea that the *jötnar* may have received cultic worship therefore raises questions as to the role these attributes played within their mythology: this is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis.

The recipients of cult are not always strictly clear, raising questions about the beings involved. A key example of this is the tale of *Völsa þáttr*. This text appears in the fourteenth century manuscript *Flateyjarbók*, composed on the island of Flatey in Iceland. The fact that this text appears as part of the clearly Christian *Ólafs saga helga* makes it very uncertain how far it reflects reality; indeed it is possible that the episode's main purpose was to disparage pre-Christian beliefs. However, in the following discussion, the text will be treated as reflecting to some extent a genuine cultic practice. The text discusses the travels of Óláfr Haraldsson, who at this point is visiting a farm on a headland in northern Norway whose inhabitants know little of Christianity. The family kill a horse for the meat but keep the penis, referred to as a *vingull*, which is preserved with various herbs (Sigurðar Nordal 1945, 441). It is then passed around as the family take it in turns to speak a verse to the penis, referred to as *Völsi*. Each verse includes the formula '*þiggi Maurnir þetta blæti*' (Mǫrnir receive this sacrifice) (Sigurður Nordal 1945, 443-445). It is unknown exactly who this 'Mǫrnir' refers to, and this has been subject to some speculation. Steinsland particularly has noted that 'Mǫrnir' appears to have two translatable options: the first of these is the masculine singular form *mǫrn*, meaning sword, or the feminine plural form *mǫrnir*, appearing to mean 'giantess.' She notes that many scholars have preferred the latter translation and that Folke Ström in particular has chosen to translate *mǫrnir* as *dísir*, reflecting the idea of female deities. However, many scholars have also chosen to translate *mǫrnir* as sword, reflecting the parallels drawn between these two objects in relation to their phallic nature. However, Steinsland overall argues that *Völsa þáttr* is reminiscent of cultic ritual performed for female *jötnar* (Steinsland 1986, 216), and that the tale reflects ideas of a fertility cult (Steinsland 1986, 218).

Another emic group of supernatural beings worthy of discussion are the *álfar*. Commonly translated into English as ‘elves,’ these beings are often interpreted as nature spirits closely associated with rocks. However, as Terry Gunnell importantly points out, this is a development in folklore in medieval Iceland and does not seem to reflect pre-Christian Scandinavian beliefs (Gunnell 2007, 118). Hall instead notes that the *álfar* appear to be non-monstrous, in opposition to the *jötnar* (Hall 2007, 32), and adds that Snorri’s interpretation of the *álfar* as angels when Christianising the pre-Christian mythology suggests that they had positive connotations (Hall 2007, 26). Gunnell and Hall also take time to discuss the notion that the *álfar* may in fact be another term for the Vanir. In particular, the use of the phrase ‘*æsir ok álfar*’ in *Lokasenna* is used as evidence to support this (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I, 411), as we see both *Æsir* and Vanir present in this poem, with little other attention paid to the ‘*álfar*’ (Gunnell 2007, 121; Hall 2007, 27). Hall also notes the formulaic use of this expression, and therefore the care we must take when interpreting it (Hall 2007, 35), but this certainly appears to be one viable suggestion.

*Álfar* appear to have also been recipients of cultic worship. Attention must be drawn to the ‘*álvkvarnar*,’ translating literally to ‘elf-mills,’ and existing as cup marks carved into rocks, that appear to have been used from the Bronze Age into the medieval period, where people would leave offerings to the *álfar* (Gunnell 2007, 125). These sites appear to be connected to Viking Age *álfablót* sites (Gunnell 2007, 126), the existence of which further supports the idea that there was a broad variety of types of cults and ways of worshipping beings that were important to pre-Christian Scandinavians. As Gunnell notes, ‘the idea of active worship of figures known as *álfar*... certainly suggests that these beings were viewed by some people as having the power to influence the world around them, almost like gods’ (Gunnell 2007, 121). This seems to draw on the concept of *mana*, that is, impersonal religious power.

What we can therefore determine from this analysis is that while cultic worship is useful in establishing which supernatural beings were considered to have this type of power, such as *mana*, it also raises some serious questions about the distinctions between deities such as members of the *Æsir*, versus other beings such as *jötnar* and

*álfar*. I therefore argue that our understanding of pre-Christian deities is flawed, and we should instead view them as a more diverse and varied group.

#### 2.4. THE DEATHS OF THE GODS

The medieval Christian God, particularly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was seen as all-powerful and all-knowing (DuBois 1999, 61), with Brink noting that paganism was replaced with ‘a new, universal religion, with an omnipotent and omniscient sky god’ (Brink 2013, 39). However, this omnipotence and omniscience does not appear to be as strictly true for the deities in pre-Christian Scandinavia. It appears that these deities were not able to change the fate of the world (Lindow & Schjødt forthcoming), and that these ‘powerful beings are certainly not omnipotent or omniscient - they may even be injured or killed’ according to Bellah (Bellah 2011, 95), though it should be noted that Bellah is not arguing this in relation to pre-Christian Scandinavia specifically.

One key flaw of the pre-Christian deities is that they can die (Lindow & Schjødt, forthcoming). A key example of this is demonstrated in *Völuspá* and *Vafþrúðnismál*, which both relate the death of Óðinn. In the former, it is said that:

*Þá kómr Hlínar  
harmr annarr fram,  
er Óðinn ferr  
við úlf vega,  
en bani Belja  
bjartr at Surti;  
þá mun Friggjar  
falla angan.*

Then came Frigg’s next grief forth,  
when Óðinn went to fight the wolf,  
and Beli’s bright killer [went] towards Surtr;

then the love of Frigg [Óðinn] must fall. (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 304)

Furthermore, *Vafþrúðnismál* relates that:

*Vafþrúðnir kvað:*

“Úlfr gleypa

*mun Aldaföðr,*

*þess man Viðarr vrekka;*

*kalda kjapta*

*hann klyfja mun*

*vitnis víga at.”*

Vafþrúðnir said:

“The wolf will swallow Father-of-Ages [Óðinn],

Viðarr must avenge this;

He must cleave the wolf’s cold jaws in battle.” (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 365)

Óðinn is not alone in his ability to die. *Völuspá* also relates the death of Baldr, which is further told in *Baldrsdraumar*. The latter states that:

*Höðr berr hávan*

*hróðrbaðm þinig,*

*hann mun Baldri*

*at bana verða*

*ok Óðins son*

*aldri ræna.*

Höðr carried tall mistletoe to this place,

he will become Baldr's killer

and Óðinn's son will be deprived of life. (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 447)

A similar story is presented in stanzas 31 to 33 of *Völuspá* (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 299). Ursula Dronke has argued that Baldr's death may be functioning as a sacrifice, as it renews the aeon (Dronke 1988, 231-232). Regardless, it is notable that these two gods are both depicted as dying in more than one mythological source, as it implies a stronger and more consistent understanding of this concept throughout Iron Age Scandinavia.

Religions of various types often include an element of eschatology, that is, 'ideas and myths describing great and decisive events in the future which concern the world and mankind as a whole, a nation or group of people' (Hultgård 1990, 344). Within pre-Christian Scandinavian religion eschatology refers to *ragnarøk*, or the final fate of the gods (Simek 2003, 179). It is unclear how coherent this was in a pre-Christian context in comparison to how Snorri Sturluson presents it (Hultgård 1990, 349), and Axel Olrik has argued that the mythology of *ragnarøk* was not coherent, but was understood as a series of scenes (Stanley 1972, 1). It is probable there was some Christian influence on the narrative we receive, with Simek drawing attention to Snorri Sturluson's paraphrasing in chapter 50 of *Gylfaginning* as a key example of this (Simek 2003, 180; Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 48-49).

However, *Völuspá*'s portrayal of *ragnarøk* reads thus:

*Bræðr munu berjask  
ok at þoðnum verðask,  
munu systrungar  
sifjum spilla;  
hart er í heimi,  
hórdómr mikill,  
skeggöld, skálmöld,*



*skildir ro klofnir,  
vindǫld, varǫld,  
áðr verǫld steypisk;  
mun engi maðr  
ǫðrum þyrma.*

Brothers will fight each other  
and become one another's killers,  
cousins will ruin their kinship;  
it is hard in the world,  
great amounts of adultery,  
axe-age, sword-age,  
shields are split open,  
wind-age, wolf-age,  
before the world overthrows itself;  
no man will show another mercy. (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 302)

While this stanza seems to focus primarily on the impact of *ragnarøk* on the world of humans, its presence within the mythological narrative implicates the deities. Indeed, Simek claims that this downfall is due to the crimes, wars, and greed for gold of the deities (Simek 2003, 180). We can therefore infer from the conception of *ragnarøk* and the deaths of Óðinn and Baldr that these deities were not seen to be omniscient and omnipotent in the way that is implied in modern Western perspectives on deities.

## 2.5. CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated the ways in which conceptualising pre-Christian Scandinavian deities is complex and fraught with methodological problems. The use of the term 'deity' alone proves complicated and highlights the modern Western implications that are inherent in these semantically loaded terms. Given the problematic nature of our etic terms, this chapter has explored the wide variety of emic terms that

exist in Old Icelandic to denote a deity, in order to elucidate the semantic variances in these and suggest that there was not one homogenous idea of what a deity was throughout Scandinavia.

I have discussed Bellah's argument that beings exist on a spectrum rather than a strict binary of 'gods' and 'humans,' but this still raises a number of questions. If the concept of *mana* is taken into account, this appears to link closely with cultic behaviour. However, it has also been shown here that a number of supernatural beings who are not usually considered 'deities,' including *jǫtnar* and *álfar*, apparently received cult within pre-Christian Scandinavian contexts. Furthermore, in contrast to the Christian god, Scandinavian deities seemed to be flawed and fallible. These concepts in combination impact on our interpretation of Óðinn as a pre-Christian deity, and a possible practitioner of queer behaviour, as will now be discussed.

### 3. ÓÐINN: A QUEER FIGURE

#### 3.1. INTRODUCTION

Ármann Jakobsson argues that while Óðinn demonstrates queer behaviour, he cannot *be* queer as he is a god (Ármann Jakobsson 2011, 13). This chapter will question exactly how, and to what extent, Óðinn may have been queer, and to whom. I will initially set out the queer theoretical framework I will be using, addressing the complexities of sex and gender and the way these are constructed. With this in mind, I will then address a range of sources in order to understand how Óðinn is portrayed in varying circumstances, analysing specific instances that show non-normative behaviour in some way. Following this, I will explore Schjødt's axes of variation to address the ways in which the religious systems of pre-Christian Scandinavia were not uniform. As such, the images of Óðinn similarly vary, demonstrating that the presentation and perception of Óðinn as queer was dependent on the community constructing his identity in a number of ways.

#### 3.2. QUEER THEORY

My analysis of Óðinn's gender in this thesis is somewhat informed by queer theoretical perspectives, using 'queer' as an etic category - that is, one derived from a modern Western perspective, as opposed to having originated within the culture in question. The underlying principle of queer theory that I will be using here is to question the normative, and as such, queer theory is inherently distrustful of categories (Ryle 2012, 90). Chelsea Blackmore has noted that queer theory in fact deconstructs the normative, noting the disparity in nuanced understandings between our present lives and historical studies: 'while fluidity and plurality are easily conceived in a modern context, most examinations of prehistoric identity formation focus on one aspect of identity to the near exclusion of others' (Blackmore 2011, 76).

My key critical approach to gender follows Lara Ghisleni, Alexis M. Jordan, and Emily Fiocoprile's criticism of the so-called 'two-sex/two-gender' model, which presents men and women as oppositional and normative social groups, where the

assumed gender is defined by the culturally set biological sex and genitalia (Ghisleni *et al.* 2016, 767-768). I will further follow Laura Lee Downs' argument that 'gender identity was not a biological given but a social and historical creation' (Downs 2010, 3). Through these, we can begin to locate sex and gender within their cultural contexts. This in turn relies on an emphasis on post-colonial theory: scholarly discussions of sex and gender are heavily influenced by the modern Western model of binary gender and sex. We must therefore recognise that this model is not true of all cultures. Indeed, Robin Ryle draws attention to some key examples: India, Native American cultures, Thailand, and the Balkans have varying notions of gender, with hijras, berdache, katheoey, and sworn virgins respectively representing genders outside the Western binary (Ryle 2012, 9).

My approach also inherently criticises two approaches to gender often used within Old Norse studies. The first of these is the notion of 'third genders' or 'third sexes,' which have been particularly present in archaeological discussions since the 1990s (Moral 2016, 789). Ghisleni *et al.* note that by framing variations of gender production as dismissible deviants, we ignore the nature of personhood (Ghisleni *et al.* 775). By discussing 'third genders' and 'third sexes' scholars reinforce the binary categories as 'natural, normal, and even universal binary opposites,' replying on assumptions that 'limits both sex and gender to normative and stagnated categories that are conceived as universal, ahistorical, and invariable' (Moral 2016, 789-791).

The second of these is Carol J. Clover's model, which in turn follows Thomas Laqueur's one-sex model. Clover argues that within Old Norse-Icelandic literature, the term *blauðr* is defined as soft or weak, as well as feminine, while *hvatr* means bold or active, as well as masculine. She notes that these terms can be used for people regardless of what their culturally constructed sex may appear to be, and that their social power and status is what determines what words they are described with. She views them as fitting within Laqueur's one-sex model, with power as the determinate for gender (Clover 1993, 364). It is my view that this model is simplistic and ignores the further complexities of the nature of gender. Furthermore, as the primary literature for this argument is based on medieval Old Norse-Icelandic literature focussing on

Icelandic culture, it is also my view that this model is not applicable to pre-Christian Scandinavia, as it describes a different cultural mindset.

David Clark and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir's chapter on 'The Representation of Gender in Eddic Poetry' notes the variety of approaches that have been taken to the study of gender within the Eddic corpus, from essentialist to constructionist, and how all of these approaches have been contested at some point (Clark & Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2016, 332). They highlight the poetry as a world of male imagination, with male power 'relying on outstanding physical ability and military prowess, extensive knowledge, and/or sexual power' (Clark & Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2016, 334). Despite this, they also argue that men and women do not appear to be diametrically opposed within the corpus (Clark & Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2016, 336). However, they further note that the attitudes towards gender may reflect anxieties of the authors rather than the realities (Clark & Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2016, 335). Importantly, however, they argue that there are many non-gendered attributes that have been previously assumed to be male- or female-aligned (Clark & Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2016, 338). As such, we can begin to see the benefits of queer theory with this field of research.

### 3.3. ÓÐINN'S SEMANTIC CENTRES

One effective method of analysing the various portrayals of Óðinn is by exploring his semantic centre. As defined by Schjødt, this is 'a centre around which the various utterances concerning a mythic figure or a certain ritual should be seen' (Schjødt 2013, 12). As such, we can begin to see the defining features of Óðinn's characterisation and understand the consistencies between the various narratives that may have existed in pre-Christian Scandinavia. Schjødt argues that Óðinn's semantic centre is that of knowledge, acquiring it in various situations, and how he shares this. Schjødt argues that Óðinn can never be portrayed as 'stupid' in mythological narratives, as to do some would run counter to his entire being. Furthermore, when discussing Óðinn's portrayal in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* as dressing as a woman, he posits that this is closely related to his semantic centre of the acquisition and spread of knowledge, rather

than being an expression of effeminacy (Schjødt 2013, 12-13), an argument that I find tenuous.

Other scholars have drawn out other important qualities of Óðinn's, with Solli arguing that he is a god of storms, death, war, poetry, and *seiðr* (Solli 2008, 194), and Dumézil stating that Óðinn is the ruler of the gods, a magician, a god of warriors, and a god of the dead (Dumézil 1973c, 34). His role as a god of war will be discussed in more detail in Part 4, but it will here be acknowledged that queer theory enables us to question whether this position was inherently gendered in the same way it is in modern Western society. In addition to this, the gendering of his role of wisdom should also be addressed. Clark and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir have argued that 'femininity is strongly associated with wisdom, foresight, [and] sound advice' (Clark & Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 342). Lotte Hedeager has similarly suggested that sorcery and foresight are elements of 'womanhood' (Hedeager 2011, 123). Therefore, while Schjødt's argument that Óðinn's semantic centre of that of wisdom seems like a strong interpretation, this opens up many questions about the connections this has to Óðinn's gender, and how it is expressed. Furthermore, the variety of sources available to us surrounding Óðinn as a deity contain various mindsets. Therefore I will now analyse how these semantic centres differ by the sources and question what this reveals to us about how Óðinn's gender was perceived in a variety of ways.

I will begin this survey with how the key themes in the mythological poetry compose Óðinn's semantic centre within this genre. He appears in *Völuspá*, *Hávamál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *Skírnismál*, *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Lokasenna*, *Baldrsdraumar*, and *Hyndluljóð*, in all of which he is generally presented as ruling deity. In *Völuspá*, '*önd gaf Óðinn*' (Óðinn gave breath) (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 295), referring to his power in the creation of life. In *Vafþrúðnismál* we see Óðinn in disguise as '*Gagnráðr*' (§) (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 357), emphasising the significance of Óðinn's role as moving between images of himself. *Grímnismál* highlights Óðinn's role as a ruler, saying

*Heill skaltu, Agnarr,*

*alls þik heilan biðr*  
*Veratýr vera;*  
*eins drykkjar*  
*þú skalt aldregi*  
*betri gjöld geta.*

You shall be blessed, Agnarr,  
because Veratýr (Óðinn)  
bids that you be blessed;  
for one drink you shall never get a better reward. (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 368)

This particular stanza reflects the culture of the pre-Christian hall, and the importance offering a drink from the host had at this time. Óðinn's status is similarly stressed when it is stated that:

*en við vín eitt*  
*vápnqfugr*  
*Óðinn æ lifir.*

But with wine only  
the weapon-noble  
Óðinn always lives. (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 371)

With wine as a high status drink, this underlines his role, and the connection he is therefore likely to have had to the elite culture, as will be addressed in Part 4.

What is notable is Óðinn's consistent desire for knowledge in these poems, as noted earlier by Schjødt. *Völuspá's* exposition is the speaker, apparently a *völva*, acknowledging that Óðinn had asked her to tell him '*forn spjöll fira, / þau er fremst um man*' (old tales of men, from the furthest back I remember) (Jónas Kristjánson &

Vésteinn Ólason, I, 291). *Hávamál* is generally understood to be wisdom poetry, with many stanzas offering advice on correct behaviour and etiquette. Óðinn holds an increasing presence throughout the poem, giving him a strong link to the idea of wisdom and acquisition of knowledge, supporting Schjødts analysis of Óðinn's semantic centre.

The heroic poems of the Poetic Edda have a different focus, and consist of the legendary poetry of the Germanic-speaking peoples, with some suggestions that it may have developed as part of the Migration Period (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, II, 7). This heroic poetry deals with interactions between humans, but the action takes place in a clear framework of mythological understanding (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, II, 10). Óðinn appears in many of these as a reference, rather than as an active character, and as such we are shown another way in which he is seen to function. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* we are told of '*gremi Óðins*' (Óðinn's wrath) (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, II, 249). His connection to *seiðr*, which will be further discussed, is also drawn on, when Sinfjötli accuses Guðmundr of being a '*völva*' with '*Alfǫður*,' a name for Óðinn (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, II, 254). However, the rest of the references to Óðinn align with his role as a ruler who decides the victory in battle, drawing on ideas of the hall culture. Alongside this, there is a reference to '*Herjans disir*' (Óðinn's *valkyrjur*) (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, II, 332),<sup>5</sup> which acknowledges the link between Óðinn and femininity, particularly in a martial context. This notion will be discussed in greater detail in Part 4. However, it appears that Óðinn's semantic centre within this form of poetry related to his role in battle, primarily.

Alongside the mythological narratives we gain from the Poetic Edda, one must also consider the narratives presented in the Prose Edda. As already stated, this source seems to have been composed by Snorri Sturluson in the thirteenth century, and we must therefore be wary that while there are arguments for the Poetic Edda being grounded in oral tradition, this seems to be less true of this source, which therefore had a stronger

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<sup>5</sup> Translated following editor's note. For full discussion of this phrase, see Murphy (2013).



influence from Christianity. However, we must still consider the semantic centre Óðinn has within this context. The first mention of Óðinn within this text reads:

*“Hverr er æztr eða elztr allra goða?”*

*Hár segir: “Sá heitir Alfǫðr at váru máli, en í Ásgarði inum forna átti hann tólf nöfn. Eitt er Alfǫðr, annat er Herran eða Hnikuðr, þriðja er Nikarr eða Hnikarr, fjórða er Nikuz eða Hnikuðr, fimta Fjölfnir, séttá Óski, sjáunda Ómi, átta Bifliði eða Biflindi, níunda Sviðarr, tíunda Sviðrir, ellipta Viðrir, tólfsta Jálg eða Jálkir.”*

“Who is the highest or oldest of all of the gods?”

High says: “He is named All-father in our language, but in Ásgarðr the Old he has twelve names. One is All-Father, another is Lord or *Hnikuðr*, third is Thruster, fourth is Thruster, fifth is Wise One, sixth is Fulfiller of Desire, seventh is Resounding One, eighth is Spear Shaker, ninth is *Sviðarr*, tenth is *Sviðrir*, eleventh is Ruler of Weather, twelfth is Gelding.” (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 8)<sup>6</sup>

The last name is of particular interest: a gelding, as a castrated animal, usually a male horse, carries implications of unmanliness, as will be later discussed. Following this quote, this passage also presents him as a deity of creation: ‘*Hann smíðaði himin ok jörð ok loptin ok allra eign þeira*’ (he made heaven and earth and the sky and everything in them) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 8).

Later in *Gylfaginning*, it is said that ‘*þar er einn staðr er Hliðskjálf heitir, ok þá er Óðinn settisk þar í háseti þá sá hann of alla heima ok hvers manns athæfi ok vissi alla hluti þá er hann sá*’ (there is a place called Hliðskjálf, and there Óðinn sits himself there in the high seat from which he can see over all of the world and all men’s conduct and knows all things) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 13). Further to the image of Óðinn as the highest and most knowledgeable of gods, *Gylfaginning* also states that ‘*Óðinn er æztr ok elztr Ásanna. Hann ræðr ǫllum hlutum, ok svá sem ǫnnur guðin eru máttug, þá þjóna honum ǫll svá sem börn föður*’ (Óðinn is the highest and oldest of the Æsir. He rules all

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<sup>6</sup> Translation of names taken from Snorri Sturluson (2005b 11).

things, and so as other gods are powerful, they all serve him as children serve their father) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 21). The text also talks of Óðinn's role in Valhøll, as will be later discussed. It is pertinent here to highlight his association with the warrior cult as leader of the hall (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 32). Overall, the image presented of Óðinn in the Prose Edda appears to be one of being the most prominent deity, with his knowledge being incredibly important to this aspect. The fact that one of his names appears to be *Jálg* or *Jálkr* or Gelding is notable. While this text must be taken with caution, it is possibly further evidence that Óðinn was perceived to be somewhat queer.

The semantic centre Óðinn derives from expressions for him found in kennings is, again, different. These specific phrases are found in skaldic verse, created in courtly contexts and transmitted orally until they were committed to vellum by medieval scribes. These phrases often contain two or more elements and heavily rely on mythological knowledge (Whaley 2005, 486-487). They are therefore useful to determine which key ideas about a figure would have resonated with and been understood by the listener. It is interesting to note that Óðinn's semantic centre in this context is very closely linked to battle, with many of the kennings referring to him as '*valtýs*' (slaughter-god) (Poole 2012, 211), '*beiðis hapta*' (ruler of the gods) (Finlay 2012, 248), and '*dolgbands*' (battle-god) (Whaley 2012, 266), among other similar terms. However, the context of this poetry must be considered: these poems were composed for the elite, often within court settings (Gunnell 2015, 56). The implications of this will be discussed in greater detail below, but it should be noted that this variation is not without significance for how Óðinn's semantic centre varied.

Óðinn is also referred to as a number of names throughout the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus. This, primarily, reflects the regularity with which he is in disguise, but also suggests other elements of how he is understood, in a similar way to the *kenningar*. These names address a variety of elements, such as his role in war, his single eye, and possibly overwhelmingly, his position as a powerful god. It is worth noting that questions about his gender are not explicitly raised through these names, which are generally devoid of specifically gendered ideas.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Names primarily based on Orchard (1997, 410-412).

A number of iconographic depictions exist that have been argued to be Óðinn. Due to the nature of these sources, it is impossible to determine how many of these images show Óðinn, and caution must be taken surrounding the cyclical arguments that can lead to these conclusions. However, addressing these images can provide further interesting insights into the type of semantic centre Óðinn expressed, particularly as these images were created within pre-Christian Scandinavian society.

An iconographic image of particular interest and relevance to this discussion is a small silver figure from Lejre, argued to depict Óðinn, which is believed to date to between 900 and 950 AD. This miniature figure is less than 2cm tall and weighs less than 9g, but is incredibly detailed regardless (Christensen 2009, 7). The object shows a figure in what appears to be a long dress, possibly with a moustache, seated on a chair with carved animal headposts, and a bird on each armrest. The identification of the figure represented has been debated, with some suggesting it could be Óðinn, while others believe it may be a male ruler from Lejre, or a woman (Christensen 2009, 8). While identifying this figure is not possible and can lead to circular arguments, as mentioned earlier, speculation can pose some interesting notions. The seated human wears a jacket, a long dress of some kind, jewellery, and what appears to be a hat or helmet (Christensen 2009, 11). It is unclear as to how the gender of the figure is being marked based on the clothing, with parallels to various figures of multiple genders being drawn (Christensen 2009, 12-14). By deconstructing our normative assumptions, we can question whether this clothing is trying to show gender or status: it is likely that both of these play large roles, and therefore we must wary of oversimplification. The face shows two eyes, one of which appears to be damaged, and what may be a moustache (Christensen 2009, 15). Combining these elements with the use of the birds and the seat that echoes Hliðskjálf, it becomes possible to argue that this could be a portrayal of Óðinn, particularly with the context of Lejre being a central site of the elite (Christensen 2009, 21).



Figure 4. Photograph of the silver figure from Lejre, inlaid with niello. Photography by Ole Malling. Taken from Christensen (2009, 7).

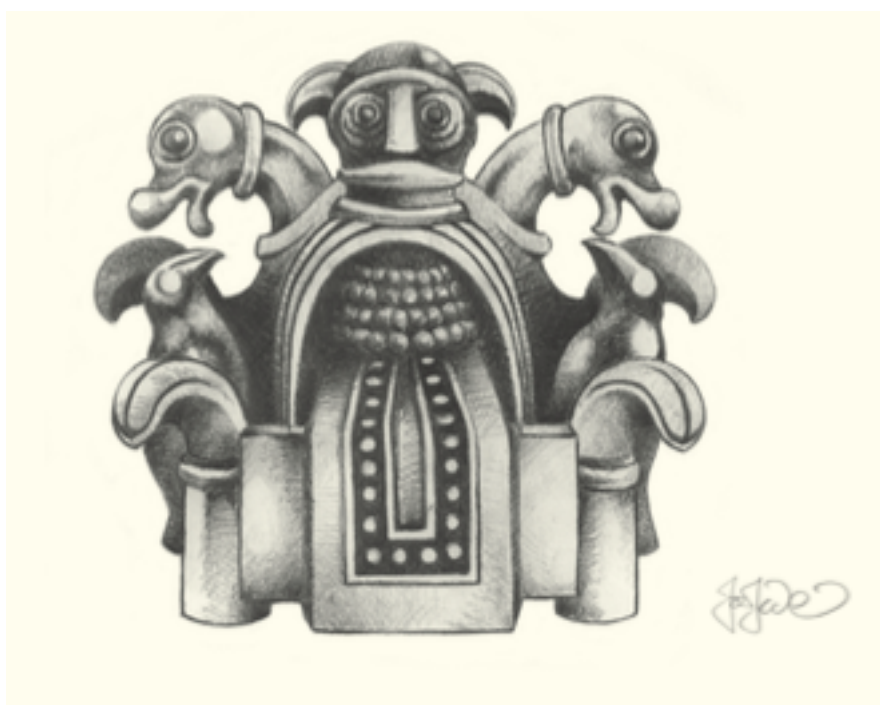


Figure 5. Sketch of the silver figure from Lejre, highlighting the detail. Sketch by Rune Knude. Taken from Christensen (2009, 6).

This section demonstrates that Óðinn's semantic centre varies somewhat depending on the type of source being addressed. Of course, it must be acknowledged that the divisions between the sources is somewhat arbitrary - these are imposed by modern scholars in reference to our own conceptualisation of types of sources. However, this does not make these differences irrelevant or without merit, but reminds us that we must treat these differences with appropriate caution.

### 3.4. RELIGIOUS VARIATION

As the above analysis shows, the type of source one chooses to read somewhat impacts the image presented of Óðinn. Therefore, these differences must also be addressed and questioned. It has been increasingly recognised by scholars of the history of religion in the last twenty years that religious practices in Scandinavia should not be seen as homogenous. Following DuBois' work, Gunnell refers to Old Norse 'religious systems' as opposed to 'religion' and warns that we must be wary of assuming consistency in these views throughout Scandinavia and Iceland (Gunnell 2015, 55-56). Brink and Schjødt similarly warn against this assumption (Brink 2007, 125; Schjødt 2009, 9). Schjødt further highlights that beliefs within religious systems do not have to be coherent (Schjødt 2012, 267). Indeed, Gunnell also notes that there are variations within the myths about key mythological figures, with debates arising, for example, about which goddess is most closely associated with Óðinn (Gunnell 2015, 57). As we can therefore establish that variations in religious beliefs appear to exist even within our relatively normative written sources, the axes along which this variation takes place must also be studied, in order to more comprehensively understand to whom Óðinn may have been queer. In order to achieve this I will use Schjødt's axes of variation, in which he discusses how changes based on chronological, geographic, social, and cognitive diversity influenced the differing religious beliefs (Schjødt 2009, 10). Schjødt notes that we cannot and should not attempt to reconstruct an 'original' mythological narrative, as this is unlikely to exist (Schjødt 2013, 7) due to the variations that will now be discussed.

The first of these, *chronological*, refers to the fact that these beliefs would have shifted throughout the Iron Age, a significantly extended period of time (Schjødt 2009, 10). Gunnell notes that there appears to have been a significant shift in religious beliefs around 500 AD, with a decrease occurring in depositions at wetland sites and an increase in central places. This is indicative of an increase in social stratification. However, alongside this stratification it has also been noted that there appears to have been a movement away from female deities, who may have been associated with fertility, towards male deities, who may have been more closely linked with war (Gunnell 2015, 58-59). Alongside these general trends, more specific questions can be raised about chronological variants in Óðinn's existence and portrayal, as scholars have suggested that Óðinn may have appeared as a deity relatively late in the Iron Age. Kathryn Starkey discusses Karl Hauck's analysis of portrayals of what he argues to be Óðinn on the Migration Age bracteates, and notes that if his arguments are correct, the images would be some of the earliest evidence for his cult (Starkey 1999, 380).

Further to understanding chronological variation in this sense, we must also address the chronological variations in the sources. Gunnell emphasises that scholars must pay close attention to these differences, discussing that Tacitus' description of religious practices from the first century AD would have portrayed 'tribal/family units,' while medieval Icelandic sources such as *Ynglinga saga* would have been produced with an understanding of a national level of religious function (Gunnell 2015, 67). Therefore, both the broader ideological contexts must be understood, alongside the ways in which religion would have functioned at various periods of time.

Schjødt's next axis to be discussed is *geographic* variation. Brink's 2007 article 'How Uniform Was the Old Norse Religion?' has been very influential in the resurgence of the use of toponymic evidence for Old Norse religion in the twenty-first century (see Murphy 2017). He highlights that place-name evidence's significance is derived from the way it is more likely to reflect the beliefs of the local people: he posits that 'no individual determined which names should be coined, and no one has the power to control the naming process' (Brink 2007, 106). His findings support Gunnell's argument that there does not appear to have been a clear pantheon of deities worshipped

throughout pre-Christian Scandinavia, and that instead various deities enjoyed specific cults in various locations (Brink 2007, 125).

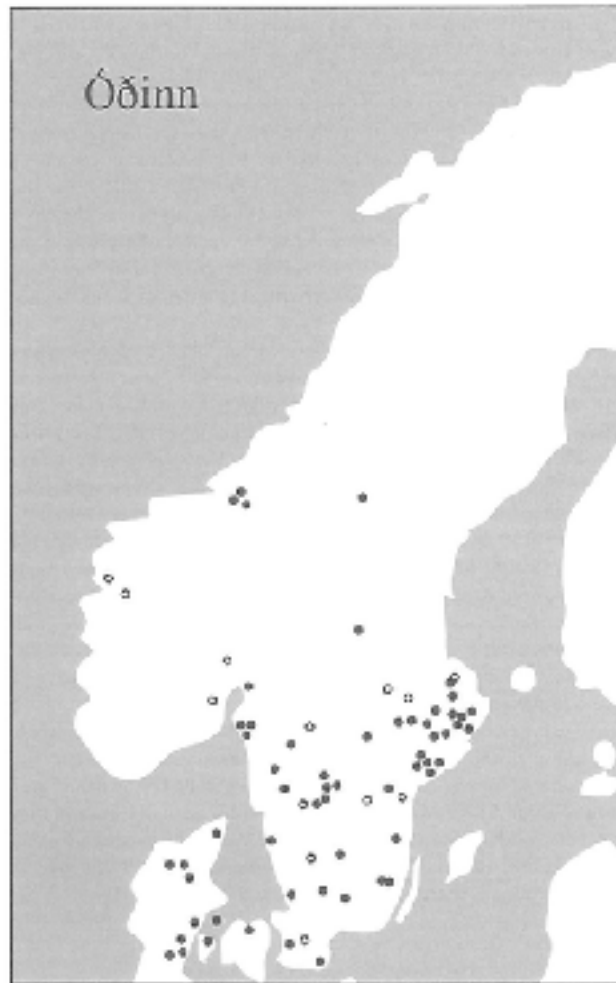


Figure 6. ‘The distribution of theophoric place names in Scandinavia containing the name of the god Óðinn (open circles are uncertain).’ Taken from Brink (2007, 112).

When looking specifically at Óðinic place-names, Brink determines that these theophoric names are usually a variant of *Ons-* or *Odens-*. He identifies around seventy such names in Scandinavia. The majority of these, forty-nine, appear in Sweden, clustering somewhat around Lake Mälaren but also appearing in Götland, Skåne, and a small number in northern Sweden. There are eleven Óðinic names appearing in Norway, with fairly even distribution, with the exception of western Norway where they are absent, and a further eleven in Denmark, with even distribution (Brink 2007, 111).

However, it is very significant that not a single Óðinic place-name is present in Iceland, despite other theophoric names appearing (Gunnell 2015. 61).

This variation in geographic spread demonstrates that belief in pre-Christian Scandinavia was not uniform, and therefore partly explains the incoherence in narratives surrounding Óðinn. We can therefore also use this to postulate whether the varying semantic centres in Óðinn's portrayals may have to some extent derived from these local variations.

Indeed, interesting evidence to suggest this relates very specifically to the two instances in the mythological Eddic poetry in which Óðinn is directly referred to as *ergi*, in *Hárbardsljóð* and *Lokasenna*. In the former, Þórr brags that he battles '*brúðir berserkja*' (brides of *berserkir*) on the island of '*Hléseyju*' (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 395) while in the latter, Loki accuses of Óðinn of

*En þik síða kóðu  
Sámseyju í*

And you practiced *seiðr*  
in Samsey. (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 413)

Interestingly, *Hléseyju* appears to correspond to being modern Læsø, and *Sámseyju* as modern Samsø, both islands just west of the coast of Jutland in Denmark, the latter of which also has the Óðinic place-name, Onsbjerg (Brink 2007, 130). The proximity of these islands to one another, and the links to Óðinn, together with his links to the supposed femininity that has arisen from these examples, make it possible to speculate that these views of Óðinn's queer nature may have been geographically specific to these regions of Denmark. Indeed, these sites are in turn close to Lejre, where the figure argued to depict Óðinn was found. Of course, due to the unknown transmission of these poetic sources, this cannot be more than mere speculation, but is an interesting pattern to draw attention to.



There will have also been significant variations in which deities were important to people depending on their *social class*. Schjødt notes that since the elite would have had different interests and desires to farmers, their rituals and myths would therefore have reflected this (Schjødt 2013, 7). Dumézil has argued, as part of his tripartite structure, that Óðinn was a deity of the elite (Dumézil 1973c, 33). Gunnell has demonstrated this argument in greater depth, noting that Óðinn and Valhøll appear to have been closely linked with the central places and military elite (Gunnell 2015, 57): indeed, he suggests that the Óðinic myths may have developed within the halls, and people external to these social structures may have focussed more on Freyr and Þórr (Gunnell 2015, 64). This within the context of the social stratification of the sixth century as earlier mentioned, alongside Óðinn seeming to have appeared as a deity following this, appears to support the notion that Óðinn had stronger ties to the elite of the Late Iron Age in Scandinavia.

This in turn raises more questions for the variance in Óðinic semantic centres with the source material demonstrated above. For example, the *kenningar* act as a key part of skaldic verse, which existed within the social elite of the Viking Age, which in turn appears to be strongly grounded in the warrior cult. I will discuss the role of warrior cult below. It therefore follows that these *kenningar* state Óðinn's role in battle most prominently. In comparison, the mythological poetry focuses on Óðinn's knowledge and nobility with a range of variation in his portrayals, which seems to reflect the general understanding of him. Meanwhile, the heroic poetry gives greater focus to his role in battle, and while this somewhat reflects the genre, it may also highlight an earlier idea relating to Óðinn, given that this genre is argued to be linked with the Migration Period, before the stratification of society. The Prose Edda and the Óðinic names in contrast focus most prominently on Óðinn as a powerful, knowledgeable deity, which may also reflect the later composition of the Prose Edda and may reflect some amount of influence from Christian theology, in comparison to the view of deities presented in Part 2.

### 3.5. ERGI AND SEIÐR

The notion of *ergi* has become prominent in discussions surrounding Óðinn's gender. This topic has a long and contentious research history, with Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's 1983 *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society* still being a prominent study of this phenomenon. The term, along with *níð*, *argr*, and *ragr*, appears to refer overall to a social construction of passive male homosexuality (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 18). Ármann Jakobsson notes that *ergi* is linked to medieval concepts of masculinity and femininity, and is used in reference to sorcery, cowardice, male homosexuality, female lust, and women more broadly, with 'unmanliness' being the most important element of the meaning (Ármann Jakobsson 2011, 9-10). He goes on to explain that he will use *ergi* in his work to mean queer, as 'it is ambiguous as well as negative' (Ármann Jakobsson 2011, 10).

I believe that for *ergi* to be properly understood in relation to Óðinn as a pre-Christian deity, the term must be somewhat contextualised. Solli comments that the term should not be used as a synonym for homosexuality as we would understand today (Solli 2008, 195) - in this way, we would misunderstand what is inherently an emic category. Therefore, we must be cautious in our approach, and acknowledge that our understanding of Óðinn being described as *ergi* may reflect various views. As such, it is important to explore these narrative portrayals of Óðinn.

Within the textual sources used in this thesis, there are three occasions in which Óðinn is referred to as a variant of *ergi*, all taken from the Poetic Edda. Two of these occur in *Hárbarðsljóð*, in which Óðinn is in disguise as Hárbarðr and Þórr calls him 'Hárbarðr inn ragi' (Hárbarðr the queer) after Hárbarðr boasts about his sexual exploits with various women (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 394, 397). This raises a number of questions about what was considered to be *ergi* behaviour. If the implications of incorrectly insulting a man as *ergi* are as severe as Sørensen argues (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 15-16), then why is Hárbarðr's behaviour in this poem *ergi*? One explanation for this lies in the single use of the term '*gambanteinn*' (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 392), which appears to be some kind of magic staff, only known from this poem and *Skírnismál*. The exact meaning is unknown, but Leszek Gardela

argues that the element ‘*gamban*’ is what indicates that this stick of some kind was deemed to have magic abilities (Gardela 2016, 138-140). This reference may therefore be indicative of Óðinn practicing *seiðr*, but it must be noted that the first occurrence of the *ergi* insult appears a number of stanzas after this mention of *gambanteinn*, during which time a number of other insults are exchanged. Significantly, the *gambanteinn* is mentioned within the context of Óðinn seducing women:

*Miklar manvélar*  
*ek hafða við myrkriður;*  
*þá er ek vélta þær frá verum*

Great love-tricks I have used on witches,  
that who I have betrayed from their men. (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 392)

By combining this description of sexual excess with the mention of the *gambanteinn* we begin to see an interesting picture emerging of Óðinn’s gender: not only is he engaging in what appears to be erotically charged magic, but the charge of *ergi* for sexual excess is more usually aligned with women than men. This raises some interesting questions: while the practice of *seiðr* here could be *ergi* from a male perspective, it is also *ergi* from a female perspective, suggesting that this binary deviation and sexual dichotomy was not as firmly established in pre-Christian Scandinavia than post-conversion.

Two alternative interpretations of this accusation are presented by Klaus von See *et al.*, who firstly suggest that this may be in relation to the exchange of verbal insults between Þórr and Hárbarðr/Óðinn. By their argument, this may be a reference to the lack of a physical fight, which may then have been interpreted as cowardly, an implication of *ergi* (Von See *et al.* 1997, 214). However, it must be acknowledged that this poem takes the form of a flyting, a way of exchanging verbal insults, and therefore it is questionable as to whether Þórr would call Hárbarðr/Óðinn a coward for taking part

in this. The other explanation offered by von See *et al.* is that Hárbarðr's name, translating as 'grey beard,' is a reference in some way to goats having beards, with goats being an animal that epitomises the notion of *ergi* (Von See *et al.* 1997, 214). However, this connection between the grey beard and a goat is not explained and therefore seems tenuous.

The other occurrence of Óðinn being accused of *ergi* is a passage of *Lokasenna*, in which Loki taunts Óðinn that:

*Ek þik síða kóðu  
Sámseyju í,  
ok draptu á vétt sem vǫlur;  
vitka líki  
fórtu verþjóð yfir;  
ok hugðu ek þat args aðal.*

And you practiced *seiðr*  
in Samsey,  
and struck on a drum like a *vǫlva*;  
in a wizard's form you travelled over mankind,  
and I thought that was *ergi* in nature. (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 413)

The nature of *seiðr* as an *ergi* or queer practice has a vast research history, which I will not engage with here for brevity (Gardela 2016, 26-27; Tolley 2009, 145-159). However, it is significant that Óðinn is here being connected with these practices, as this plays a key role in the evidence for Óðinn as being perceived as queer. The nature of *seiðr* is unknown, as specific details are rarely given, but it is commonly speculated to be shamanistic in some form (Solli 2008, 195), which Solli takes further to somewhat bizarrely suggest that it involved an element of autoerotic asphyxiation (Solli 2008, 199). However, this extreme sexual practice could indeed be read as being *ergi* or queer, as it challenges the boundaries of normative sexual behaviour. Importantly, this

suggestion also challenged the stagnated argument that *ergi* is indicative of passive male homosexuality.

This evidence does not make it clear how, or why, Óðinn was perceived as *ergi* or queer. The most damning evidence in this respect is derived from *Ynglinga saga*, the *konungasögur* that opens the collection known as *Heimskringla*. This text claims that:

*Óðinn kunni þá íþrótt, svá at mestr máttir fylgði, ok framði sjálf, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita orlof manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera monnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá monnum vit eða afl ok gefa qðrum. En þessi fjölkyngi, er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmönnum skammlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kennd sú íþrótt.*

Óðinn knew and practiced that skill that was followed by the greatest strength, called *seiðr*, and from it he knew the fortunes of men and things that had not yet come to be, and also caused the deaths of men or bad luck or ill health, and also took from men wit or strength and gave it to others. And this magic, when is it practiced, comes with such great queerness that it was shameful for a man to practice it, and the skill was taught to the goddesses. (Snorri Sturluson 1962, 19)

Of course, all the textual sources require a great deal of care when addressing pre-Christian Scandinavia, but this text requires yet more care in my view. This appears to be a somewhat Christian interpretation of the practice *ergi*. Indeed, Ármann Jakobsson argues that by twelfth and thirteenth century Iceland, magical practices, shapeshifting, and sex were all deemed to be queer or deviant practices (Ármann Jakobsson 2011, 12). It is therefore likely that this text presents a medieval Icelandic and Christianised view, as opposed to one held within pre-Christian Scandinavia. Of course, how different this interpretation would have been is incredibly hard to trace, but it must be taken into consideration. The fact that this portrayal is more detailed, and in turn more critical, than the examples demonstrated from the poetic sources, which may have been derived from earlier oral traditions, does however support this idea.

Furthermore, it is notable that this text fits the practitioners into gendered categories. Solli argues that *Hyndluljóð* shows evidence of a ‘third sex,’ with the *völur* representing female practitioners, *vitkar* as the male practitioners, and *seiðberendr* as another category. She further notes that the word *berendr* appears to be a ‘course [sic] word for female genitalia in old Norse’ (Solli 1999, 343-344). However, as earlier noted, the concept of third sexes or third genders is inappropriate in my view, as it reinforces a sexual dichotomy as ‘natural.’ Instead, I would like to suggest that the construction of gender was not as strict as modern Western culture imposes, and that in pre-Christian Scandinavia there were elements in this respect that could be more freely varied.

### 3.6. CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored Óðinn’s portrayals through various sources to try to understand if he was queer, and to whom. The key examples of Óðinn as expressing a queer gender are in *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Lokasenna*, in which Óðinn is accused of *ergi* practices. While I argue that these are debatably queer due to the unclear nature of the term *ergi*, it is notable that there is a geographic link between these two texts, which implies that Óðinn may have been perceived as more queer-aligned in the Danish area. This is of course nothing more than speculation, but is an interesting link to draw attention to, particularly in the context of the religious variation within Iron Age Scandinavia.

Óðinn appears to be primarily aligned with power and knowledge throughout the material I have surveyed here, but by taking religious diversity into account, greater nuances within this are seen. It is therefore possible to speculate that this diversity would have been greater, and that these inferences of queer behaviour are reflective of a greater, lost, and more nuanced understanding of Óðinn’s gender.

Queer theory has allowed me to question these assumptions to a great extent. It is important to reject rhetoric such as the ‘third sex’ as used by Solli, in preference for something more nuanced that allows for the rejection of sexual dichotomies. Overall, I believe that there were elements of Óðinn’s gender that were considered to some extent

queer, but his gender was not a key part of his semantic centre in any form of source material.

In the next chapter, I will continue to use a queer theoretical underpinning to explore the area of Óðinn's character that has been deemed most masculine: his role in battle.

#### 4. WARRIORS AND VALKYRJUR: A SEXUAL DICHOTOMY?

##### 4.1. INTRODUCTION

Thus far I have demonstrated that elements of Óðinn's nature may be deemed demonstrative of a somewhat queer expression of gender. However, as noted more than once by Solli, this appears to be antithetical to his relationship with the warrior cult: 'Odin thus constitutes a paradox: He is the *manliest* god of warriors, but he is also the *unmanly* master of seid' (Solli 2008, 195). The warrior cult of Iron Age Scandinavia is generally understood to be a purely masculine sphere (Murphy 2013, 10). However, I would like to challenge this idea. Michael Enright notes that there are a small number of studies on Germanic female regencies, but excluding these, all studies of the Germanic warrior cult focuses on the lord/follower dynamic (Enright 1996, 2), which is implicitly a male paradigm. However, given Enright's study on the role of women within the physical world of the war bands, and the presence of *valkyjur* in Óðinn's mythological war band, I will argue that this notion has been incorrectly framed, and that by adjusting our approach and making use of queer concepts, a different view emerges.

##### 4.2. COMITATUS, MÄNNERBUNDE, AND EINHERJAR

###### 4.2.1. VALHÖLL AND THE EINHERJAR

Snorri's *Gylfaginning* states that '*þat segir þú at allir þeir menn er í orrostu hafa fallit frá upphafi heims eru nú komnir Óðins í Valhöll*' (You say that all of these men who have fallen in battle from this world's beginning are now come to Óðinn in Valhöll) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 32). Valhöll and the *einherjar* appear to be a mythological analogy of the *comitatus* or *Männerbunde*, as will be discussed in the following section. Óðinn takes in all the fallen warriors in create what appears to be his own warrior band. Indeed, it is noted that '*svá njóta trú minnar at allmikill höfðingi er Óðinn er hann stýrir svá miklum her*' (it is my belief that Óðinn is a very powerful lord as he has a large army) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 34). *Grímnismál* tells us the size of this army:



*Fimm hundruð dura  
ok um fjórum tögum,  
svá hygg ek at Valhøll vera;  
átta hundruð einherja  
ganga senn ór einum durum,  
þá er þeir fara at vitru at vega.*

Five hundred doors  
and forty,  
so I thought there were at Valhøll;  
eight hundred *einherjar*  
go at the same time out of one door,  
when they go to fight the wolf. (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 372)

Kris Kershaw has calculated from this that ‘Valhall can accommodate at least 432,000 warriors’ (Kershaw 2000, 13). What we therefore learn from the impressive size of Óðinn’s army is that within the construct of the warrior cult, he appears to have huge amounts of power.

As the above stanza from *Grímnismál* notes, Óðinn’s army consists of *einherjar*. It is somewhat unclear as to exactly how this word should be interpreted, but seems to suggest the idea of members of one army united under Óðinn, the members of which may have been enemies in life (Nordberg 2004, 217). While it is notable that the word *einherjar* rarely appears in skaldic poetry (Nordberg 2004, 215), Kershaw is of the opinion that this idea is too deeply embedded to be a literary construct (Kershaw 2000, 15), an idea I agree with. As will be demonstrated, the concept of the warrior band can be traced throughout the Germanic Iron Age.

It is implied that only *einherjar* are present in Valhøll, and even more implicit is that the *einherjar* are all men. Indeed, it has been suggested by Schjødt that *einherjar* may have been *berserker* in life, following Otto Höfler’s argument (Schjødt 2008, 253 & 353), further implying that they were men. It should be noted that we are never told of

women being chosen to enter Valhøll. Andreas Nordberg convincingly maintains that men and women are both likely to have been present in Valhøll, but that we only meet the warriors in the sources (Nordberg 2004, 126).

#### 4.2.2. COMITATUS AND MÄNNERBUNDE

The Latin *comitatus* and German *Männerbunde* are the terms most commonly used in scholarship to denote this notion of the Germanic warrior cult. Schjødt draws attention to a key publication on this topic by Höfler, who he claims aimed to prove the existence of male secret societies in the Germanic context in his book *Kultische Gerheimbünde der Germanen* (Schjødt 2008, 50). Schjødt goes on to summarise Höfler thus: male secret societies existed in Germanic societies; these were generally connected to Óðinn, ‘who, above all else, was the god of the male bands;’ and that initiation played a key role in the nature of these groups (Schjødt 2008, 51).

A further, more recent, study of particular value is Lindow’s *Comitatus, Individual and Honor: Studies in North Germanic Institutional Vocabulary*. Lindow focuses on the linguistic evidence and traces the meanings of individual words linked with these concepts through from their Proto-Indo-European roots to how they settled in Old Icelandic in order to address the concepts behind these words. He first notes that despite many discussions of *comitatus*, making use of the Latin term presented by Tacitus, it is unclear what words, if any, were used in the Germanic languages at this time (Lindow 1975, 17).

Lindow argues that the Germanic term *\*druhtiz*, becoming Old Norse *drótt*, may have been the term used. As seen from evidence of other languages, *drótt* appears to have carried military links since its roots in Proto-Indo-European (Lindow 1975, 18-19), and came to ‘refer to a band of warriors in battle, almost always tied to a specific leader, most often a king or jarl’ (Lindow 1975, 26). He then traces the development of the meaning of this word throughout the Viking Age: in the ninth century it appears to refer to a ‘warrior band’ (Lindow 1975, 27), evolving to a dual meaning of ‘warrior band usually following a specific leader’ and ‘audience for skaldic poetry’ in the ninth to eleventh centuries, in keeping with the idea presented by Tacitus that the *comitatus* held

importance in both war and peace. In the tenth to thirteenth centuries *drótt* also saw a rise in occurrences in kennings of skaldic poetry, in which the base words for man and leader would be modified with *dróttar* (Lindow 1975, 31). From this study we can therefore see the consistency in the idea throughout the Germanic Iron Age, into the medieval period.

The earliest and most detailed account we have of the warrior cult is from Tacitus in the first century AD, apparently from the continental Germanic area. In this, he describes a ceremony in which young men are presented with weapons by their father or another relative. It is expected that they are proud to be a part of their retinue and are competitive to achieve higher ranks within it (Tacitus 1988, 80). Tacitus further says '*haec dignitas, hae vires magno semper et electorum iuvenum globo circumdari, in pace decus, in bello praesidium*' (Tacitus 1988, 80) ('this among them is both status and strength: always to be surrounded by a large throng of picked young men, a distinction in peace and protection in war') (Tacitus 1999, 82). In addition, he notes that the leader must be the most courageous member of the group, and that it is dishonourable for the leader to die and his followers to survive a battle (Tacitus 1988, 80).

We can therefore, based on this account, derive that the important elements of the early Germanic war band were glory and protection, with these concepts being fused together, apparently a common Germanic ethic (Lindow 1975, 10). It must be noted that Lindow states that 'the Latin definition of the [Germanic] *comitatus* in Tacitus is thus predicated on the assumption of martial activity; the trophies and booty of battle are used to reward loyal retainers' (Lindow 1975, 10-11). However, Lindow argues that the central element of the *comitatus* relationship was not war, but loyalty (Lindow 1975, 11).

Of course, care must be taken here - it is unclear from Tacitus' account exactly which Germanic group is being described, and as a cultural outsider information may have been misinterpreted. In addition, Lindow draws attention to the huge discrepancy in time and geography between Tacitus' writing and the medieval Icelandic sources, in which time the Germanic peoples split into a variety of cultures (Lindow 1975, 11). We therefore cannot assume that the *comitatus* of Tacitus' account was identical to war

bands identified in medieval Icelandic sources, but instead we can infer that there was some level of continuous understanding within these.

The *comitatus* concept has also become known as the German term *Männerbunde* (literally, band of men) through the prominence of German scholarship on the topic. This body of scholarship has underlined that the concept of the *comitatus* or *Männerbunde* as male ‘secret’ societies was inherent to Germanic culture and continued into Scandinavian culture throughout the Iron Age (Schjødt 2008, 50; Murphy 2013, 107; Nordberg 2004, 7). This institution seems to be somewhat secret and sacred, with initiation playing a key role in its function (Kershaw 2000, 131). It appears that initiation happens between the ages of twelve and eighteen as posited by Schjødt, based on the evidence of the late sources *Hálfs saga og Hálfsrekka* and *Jómsvíkinga saga* (Schjødt 2008, 354-355). The latter of these relates that men are accepted into Jomsborg at the age of eighteen (Sigurður Nordal & Turville-Petre 1962, 17), with Vagn’s presence after proving himself at the age of twelve portrayed as outstanding (Sigurður Nordal & Turville-Petre 1962, 17).

The *Männerbunde* appears to have had a cultic, sacral element that later evolved into the secular *Gefolgschaft* (Kershaw 2000, 131), and seems to have existed consistently within Germanic, moving into Scandinavian, contexts. Kershaw notes that ‘the *Männerbund*, of which the *einherjar* is a mythological paradigm, was always seen as a guardian against the forces of disintegration... what is uniquely Germanic, or perhaps Nordic, is that this role has been moved into the future and made eschatological’ (Kershaw 2000, 15). The concepts of the *comitatus*, *Männerbunde* and *einherjar* are therefore hard to disentangle, and must be addressed as part of the same notion.

#### 4.3. VALKYRJUR IN THE HALLS, VALKYRJUR ON THE BATTLEFIELDS

The *valkyjur* are a clear dynamic of the Óðinic/Valhöll paradigm, but Murphy has noted that it is incredibly hard to identify exactly what the *valkyjur* are. He notes that there are a number of other female spirits, such as (*spá*)*disir*, *nornir*, *fylgjur*,

*draukmonur*, and *hamingjur*, with which the lines of the *valkyrjur* threaten to blur. However, he also notes that we should not follow the Prose Edda's implication that *valkyrjur* were part of the *ásynjur* (Murphy 2013, 103). Nordberg postulates that the differences in the portrayals in the *valkyrjur* could be derived from their basis early on in Germanic culture, developing in parallel to one another (Nordberg 2004, 128). This would explain why, to some extent, it can be hard to define exactly what the *valkyrjur* were conceived as being. However, they do appear to be consistently linked with female supernatural beings, despite their links with battle.

The term *valkyrjur* can be broken into two words - *valr* and *kjósa*, translating to 'chooser of the slain in battle' (Murphy 2013, 45-48). The implication from the sources is therefore that the *valkyrjur* choose which fallen warriors will go to Valhøll, although Kershaw questions whether this means 'something far more sinister,' without elaborating this point further (Kershaw 2000, 18).

There are a number of ways that the *valkyrjur* are linked to Óðinn and Valhøll. The first of these is the Óðinn *heiti* '*Valkjósandi*,' also translating to 'chooser of the slain' (Murphy 2013, 49). However, it is important to note that this ending of '-andi,' indicating the preterite present, is a medieval development, highlighting that this name at the very least is a medieval construct. Additionally, the *valkyrjur* are described as '*herjans disir*,' or the goddesses of *herjan*, with this as another *heiti* for Óðinn. Murphy notes that *herjan* is derived from the Germanic *\*harjanaz*, from which the verb *her* (harry, make war) and the nouns *herr* (army) and *einherjar* (as seen above) are derived (Murphy 2013, 64-65). This is therefore consistent with the information provided in *Gylfaginning*, in which it is said that '*þessar heita valkyrjur. Þær sendir Óðinn til hvernar orrostu. Þær kjósa feigð á menn ok ráða sigri*' (they are called *valkyrjur*. They are sent by Óðinn to every battle. They choose those men approaching death and decide victory) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 30).

Links with battle are indeed central to the portrayal of the *valkyrjur*. *Völuspá* names the *valkyrjur* thus:

*Sá hon valkyrjur*

*vítt um komnar,  
gørvar at ríða  
til goðþjóðar;  
Skuld helt skildi,  
en Skögunn önnur,  
Gunnr, Hildr, Göndul  
ok Geir skögunn.  
Nú eru talðar  
önnur Herjans,  
gørvar at ríða  
grund, valkyrjur.*

She saw *valkyrjur*  
Coming from afar,  
Ready to ride  
to the place of the gods;  
Skuld held a shield,  
and Skögunn another,  
Gunnr, Hildr, Göndul  
and Geir-skögunn.  
Now are counted  
Herjan's goddesses,  
*valkyrjur* ready to  
ride over the plains. (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 298-299)

*Grímnismál* similarly takes time to name some *valkyrjur*:

*Hrist ok Mist  
vil ek at mér horn beri,  
Skeggjöld ok Skögunn,*

*Hildr ok Þrúðr,  
Hlökk ok Herfjötur,  
Göll ok Geirǫllul,  
Randgríð ok Ráðgríð  
ok Reginleif;  
þær bera einherjum ǫl.*

Hrist and Mist

I want to bear the horn to me,

Skeggjöld and Skǫgul,

Hildr and Þrúðr,

Hlökk and Herfjötur,

Göll and Geirǫllul,

Randgríð and Ráðgríð

and Reginleif;

They bear ale to the *einherjar*. (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 375)

These names translate to elements relating to warfare, for example battle (*Gunnr*, *Hildr*) and war-fetter (*Herfjötur*). Alongside these name elements, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* presents a particularly descriptive image of the role of the *valkyrjur*:

*Þá brá ljóma  
af Logafjöllum,  
en af þeim ljómum  
leiptrir kvómu;  
hávar und hjálmum  
á Himinvanga;  
brynjur váru þeira  
blóði stokknar,  
en af geirum*

*geislar stóðu.*

Then light shone  
from Logafell,  
and from that light  
came lightning flashes;  
high under helmets  
to Himinvanga [came the *valkyrjur*];  
Their mail-coats were  
congealed with blood,  
and from their spears  
beams shone. (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, II, 249-250)

This example shows us a perception of how the *valkyrjur* arrive on the battlefield to greet dying warriors to take them to Valhøll. Murphy particularly draws attention to this and questions the dynamics in gender that take place within these interactions. He notes that the *valkyrjur*, arriving in a position of power, are likely towering over a fallen warrior, ‘and - perhaps most subversive of all - is in the process of exercising power and authority in the form of selection of warriors to die and go to Valhøll’ (Murphy 2013, 145). It is pertinent is how intensely present the *valkyrjur* are in the role of battle, and how inherent this concept it to their very being. It is impossible to separate one from the other.

Another distinct element of the *valkyrjur* is their apparent role in serving drinks in Valhøll. The concept is present in the above stanza from *Grímnismál*, in which the speaker asks of the *valkyrjur* Hrist and Mist to ‘bear the horn’ to them, before stating that ‘*þær bera einherjum öl*’ (they [the *valkyrjur*] bear ale to the *einherjar*) (Jónas Kristjánson & Vésteinn Ólason, I, 375). Not only this, but *Gylfaginning* states that ‘*enn eru þær aðrar er þjóna skulu í Valhøll, bera drykkju ok gæta borðbúnaðr ok ölganga*’ (and there are others which should serve in Valhøll, bear drinks and watch the tables and drinking vessels) (Snorri Sturluson 2005a, 30). Murphy notes that, in Snorri’s



view, this appears to be the most important function of the *valkyrjur*, referring to them as ‘celestial barmaids to Óðinn and the *einherjar*’ (Murphy 2013, 104). However, he notes the context of *Grímnismál*, as a pre-Christian poem with potential performative aspects, suggesting that this role is somewhat overstated in this stanza (Murphy 2013, 105), a view I agree with.

However, this role should also not be entirely discarded. Attention must be drawn to Enright’s work on the role of women within the Germanic *comitatus* context, namely his concept of the *Lady with a Mead Cup*. He argues that women held a vital role in social cohesion in these war bands (Enright 1996, 2), and that by offering the drink to her lord and then his followers, a woman not only performed the bonding rite key to the relationship within these warrior bands, but she also established the lordship (Enright 1996, 10). There is further evidence that this Germanic practice was also intimately linked with the worship of Óðinn, as Enright demonstrates in the example from the *Vita Columbani* by Jonas of Bobbio, in which he meets a Germanic group with a cup of beer, which they were using as an offering to Wodan (Enright 1996, 16). Murphy notes this argument in relation to the *valkyrjur* and argues that their practice of this was not formally ritualised as they perform this service *en masse* and without having a sexual relationship with Óðinn, as far as our sources tell us (Murphy 2013, 117). While I agree somewhat with this analysis, I think there is some space for greater nuance: this role may not have been formally ritualised within the same paradigm as Enright proposes, but still appears to carry the same general elements and underlines the key role the *valkyrjur* play within Valhøll as well as on the battlefield.

#### 4.4. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN MASCULINE SPACES

Murphy states that his thesis is an ‘examination of the late-Iron Age *valkyrjur* and her essential relationship with the masculine, hall-based culture of the warrior aristocracy of the period’ (Murphy 2013, 10). However, if we must address this ‘essential relationship’ in the mythological world, while Enright argues for the importance of a similar relationship in the physical world, this suggests that there has been nuance lost here in the scholarly attitudes towards the concept of the

*Männerbunde*, *comitatus*, and *einherjar*. I believe that these concepts have been viewed through the lens of a sexual dichotomy, separating them into the categories of ‘male’ and ‘female,’ assumed to exist in separate spheres, that have then been considered irreconcilable.

Lise Præstgaard Andersen states that ‘in the Eddic heroic world, however, women play as big a role as men and it is almost always love, or rather passion, which motivates battle and revenge’ (Andersen 2002, 300). These concepts should not be viewed as separate spheres but consolidated to acknowledge that women played an essential role in the Germanic warrior cult, therefore deconstructing the notion that this was a masculine space. I will not dispute the role of battle as being a factor in constructing cultural notions of masculinity. *Skáldskaparmál* states that ‘*af þessum heitum hafa skáldin kallat menn ask eða hlyn, lund eða qðrum viðar heitum karlkendum ok kent til víga eða skipa eða fjár*’ (of this name have the poet called men ash or maple, grove or other masculine woods and known by battle or ships or wealth) (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 40). However, it also states that ‘*hvernig skal kenna orrostu? Svá at kalla veðr vápna eða hlífa eða Óðins eða valkyrju eða herkonunga eða gny’ eða glym*’ (how battle be known? Thus, to call it the weather of weapons or shields or Óðinn or *valkyrjur* or kings of armies, or din or clatter) (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 66). What this demonstrates is that women, in the form of *valkyrjur*, played a key role in the understanding of battle and were strongly associated with it.

I will not argue here that this is evidence that women were warriors within the Germanic Iron Age - this is a highly contentious topic well outside the bounds of this thesis. However, by acknowledging that women had a key role in the interactions of the warrior cult, in choosing the slain and serving drinks, possibly in a ritualised fashion, we can begin to move beyond an artificially imposed gender division. It is this artificial gender division that leads Solli, for example, to question this apparent contradiction between Óðinn’s portrayals as crossing gendered barriers and being the ‘*manliest* god of warriors’ (Solli 2008, 195) - it is my argument that there is in fact no contradiction, as the warrior cult was not perceived to be as strictly and solely masculine as later scholarship has framed it.

This concept can further be more intimately linked with Óðinn. As noted, Óðinn is often seen as being a god of war (Solli 2008, 195; Simek 1993 240; De Vries 1970, 84-85). However, Kershaw notes that in our extant sources he is almost never portrayed as engaging in battle (Kershaw 2000, 1),<sup>8</sup> and states that ‘when the question arises as to whether Odin was “originally” a war-god, the answer is that Odin was originally the mythical leader and personification of the *herr*’ (Kershaw 2000, 17).

Therefore, determining the gender of warriors specifically is not pertinent here. Instead, we must understand Óðinn as having a different key role in the warrior cult. By deconstructing the imposed gender dichotomy and understanding Óðinn as a queer deity, we can instead interpret him as a mediating figure in some respects, using his queer gender to bridge the gap between the gendered elements of the cult to bring this together.

#### 4.5. CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated that the portrayal of the *einherjar* and *valkyrjur* as mythological beings, the *comitatus*, *Männerbunde*, and Enright’s *Lady with a Mead Cup* concepts, and Óðinn’s presence and gender are all indelibly linked concepts. I believe it is disingenuous to try to disentangle these ideas and view them as separate structures within their own gendered spheres.

Schjødt claims that Óðinn is, ‘above all else, the god of male bands, in this world and the next’ (Schjødt 2008, 51). I agree with his assertion that Óðinn is the god of these warrior bands, but I disagree that they are male concepts. While the warriors themselves may have been solely male (although, again, this debate is too large and complex for a single thesis alone), they did not exist within a vacuum. These cultic groups were dependent on women in a number of ways: according to Enright’s model, the lady of the hall established the lordship of the leader through the ritualised serving of drinks; the *valkyrjur* were seen as fundamental to the entry of dead warriors into Valhøll to become members of the *einherjar*; and they continued to have key roles within Valhøll.

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<sup>8</sup> The most prominent narrative of Óðinn actively taking part in battle is in *Völsunga saga*.

It is for these reasons that I do not believe Óðinn's complicated gender needs to be consolidated with his apparently contradictory role as the masculine god of the warrior band: the warrior band was a site of equally complicated relationships and portrayals of gender, which has been incorrectly simplified in portrayals by later scholarship.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Óðinn is a commonly discussed and very debated pre-Christian Scandinavian deity. Solli argues that ‘as a god Odin thus constitutes a paradox: He is the *manliest* god of warriors, but he is also the *unmanly* master of seid’ (Solli 2008, 195). Ármann Jakobsson argues that ‘a god who is queer is not queer’ (Ármann Jakobsson 2011, 13), in that Ármann conceptualises the categories of ‘deity’ and ‘queer’ as being mutually exclusive. In this thesis I have aimed to challenge these ideas to question in what way Óðinn may have been both queer and a deity, and the interactions between these two states of being.

I began by questioning what it meant to be a deity in pre-Christian Scandinavia. I have argued that this differed significantly from Christian theology, in that the Christian God is omnipotent and omniscient, whereas the pre-Christian deities were not. Indeed, I have noted that there is no clear agreement of what constituted a deity in pre-Christian Scandinavia. I have explored a range of terms that are often understood to mean ‘god’ or ‘gods’ and discussed how these words varied somewhat in their semantics. I have also explored the idea of different types of supernatural beings in pre-Christian Scandinavia and questioned what may have separated these beings from the deities. The answer is unclear - through exploring the role of cult in pre-Christian Scandinavia I argued that *jotnar* and *álfar* appear to have also been receivers of cultic worship. Our understanding of pre-Christian deities is therefore incredibly unclear. As such, claiming that Óðinn’s queer nature is at odds with his role as a deity seems to be a view impacted by modern Western views of Christianity.

In my second chapter, I have explored the portrayals of Óðinn. I have outlined my queer theoretical approach, which primarily aimed to question the assumed construction of gender and acknowledge the modern Western view that impacts this. Further, I have criticised models of gender somewhat used in the study of Old Norse society, namely Clover’s one-sex model, and Solli’s approach to a ‘third sex.’ I have then explored Óðinn’s semantic centre and have surveyed various source material to understand the varieties within this. I have demonstrated that while the mythological poetry, Prose

Edda, and Óðinic names focus on Óðinn as a powerful god with a desire for knowledge, the heroic poems and *kenningar* focussed more on his role in battle. While these genre distinctions are somewhat arbitrary, they to some extent reflect different elements of the cultural understandings of Óðinn. I have highlighted this further by exploring Schjødt's axes of religious variation and used this to acknowledge how the different source material can be derived from different positions along these axes. Furthermore, I have also explored the portrayals of Óðinn as *ergi*, the primary way in which his gender has been questioned. The examples of *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Lokasenna* present intriguing ideas surrounding Óðinn's gender and *ergi*, with *Hárbarðsljóð* in particular seeming to imply an element of both male and female *ergi* simultaneously. Further, I have noted that the use of geography in these poems can be used to speculate some extent of religious variation regarding localisation of beliefs. I have concluded that Óðinn demonstrated some elements of queer behaviour, but, as with pre-Christian Scandinavian beliefs in general, this may not have been a strictly coherent view.

With the idea in mind that Óðinn was to some extent queer, I then aimed to explore the notion of the warrior cult, commonly perceived to be a masculine domain, to try to consolidate these ideas. I have addressed both the mythological *einherjar* and the historical *comitatus* and *Männerbunde*, and their portrayals in scholarship as masculine institutions. I then turned my attention to the *valkyrjur* and their portrayals. I have noted that their role in battle was inherent to their being, informing both their collective name as *valkyrjur* and their individual names. I have also noted their roles within the halls of the *einherjar*, and the links this has to Enright's argument of the role of women in the historical *comitatus* as serving drinks within the halls, and how this was an essential ritual for social cohesion and establishing the lordship of the ruler of the hall. I have therefore argued that the framing of the warrior cult must be shifted: the traditional view reinforces an idea of diametrically opposed genders which cannot be consolidated with one another. Instead, I argue that the role of women in battle and the halls of the warrior cult was innate and intertwined to the point that viewing them as incompatible is disingenuous.

If we use ‘queer’ as an etic category then the Scandinavian Iron Age *is*, because the construction of gender differs to that of modern Western culture. This is demonstrated in Óðinn’s portrayals as challenging apparent ideas of genders, while the warrior cult also challenges the notion of diametrically opposed gender groups. Óðinn was indeed a queer *týr*, and this can be consolidated with the warrior cult, as queer theory allows us to question the assumptions we have made through our cultural setting.

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