

Familial Religion in Pre-Christian Scandinavia? Ancestor-Worship, Mother-Priestesses, and Offerings for the Elves

Luke John Murphy, Aarhus University (Denmark), The University of Iceland (Iceland),
Stockholm University (Sweden)
luke@luke-murphy.com

Introduction: Pre-Archaic Religions

This text is an examination of so-called “private cult” in Scandinavia during the Late Iron Age, c. 500-1100AD. At this time, Scandinavian polities were undergoing a succession of societal upheavals under the influence of Christian cultures elsewhere in Europe, resulting in increasingly hierarchical and centralised societies that would eventually form the medieval kingdoms of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden – and instigating the outpouring of raiders, traders, and settlers that would later come to be called the “Viking Age” (c. 750-1100AD). Following the elite bias of the extant medieval sources describing pre-Christian religion\’s in Germanic Nordic societies,¹ traditional scholarship on Nordic paganism have tended to focus on the large-scale, public cults of the ‘big gods’ – like Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyr – made famous in thirteenth century Icelandic mythological texts. While the spectacular descriptions of large late-pagan religious gatherings conducted at central places like Gamla Uppsala (Sweden) and Hlaðir (Norway) have understandably garnered the lion’s share of scholarly attention to date,² Anders Kaliff has remarked that:

... it is likely to presume that most of the cult actions took place in private or at a lower collective level. Such a cult would have been more incorporated in everyday life and would have a larger importance for the daily life of individuals. (Kaliff 2001, 443)

¹ On the distinctions between “religion”, “religion(s)” and “religion\’s”, see Luke John Murphy, “Reasoning Our Way to Privacy: Towards a Methodological Discourse of Viking Studies,” forthcoming.

² Magnus Alkarp and Neil S. Price, “Tempel av guld eller kyrka av trä? Markradarundersökningar vid Gamla Uppsala kyrka,” *Fornvännen* 100 (2005): 261–272; Klaus Düwel, *Das Opferfest von Lade. Quellenkritische Untersuchungen zur germanischen Religionsgeschichte* (Wien: K. M. Halosar, 1985); Gunnel Friberg and Alan Crozier, *Myth, Might, and Man: Ten Essays on Gamla Uppsala* (Emmaboda: Åkessons Tryckeri, 2000); Anders Hultgård, “Altskandinavische Opferrituale und das Problem der Quellen,” in *The Problem of Ritual: Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Religious Rites Held at Åbo, Finland, on the 13th-16th of August 1991*, ed. Tore Ahlbäck (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993), 221–259; Sune Lindqvist, “Gamla Uppsala kyrka: Bidrag till dess byggnadshistoria,” *Fornvännen* 46 (1951): 219–250; John Ljungqvist and Per Frölund, “Gamla Uppsala – the Emergence of a Centre and a Magnate Complex,” *Journal of Archaeology and Ancient History* 16 (2015): 1–30; Bertil Nilsson, ed., *Kontinuitet i kult och tro från Vikingatid till Medeltid* (Uppsala: Lunne Böcker, 1992); Else Nordahl, *... Templum quod Ubsola dicitur...: i arkeologisk belysning* (Uppsala: Department of Archaeology, Uppsala University, 1996); Olof Sundqvist, *Freyr’s Offspring: Rulers and Religion in Ancient Svea Society* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2002); Sundqvist, “Gamla Uppsala som förkristen kultplats: En översikt och en hypotes,” in *Gamla Uppsala i ny belysning* (Uppsala: Swedish Science Press, 2013), 69–112.

In this essay, I hope to offer some initial analysis of just such “private” cult, religion conducted in the domestic or familial sphere rather than in public.³

In pursuit of this aim, I borrow a template of private religiosity from the comparative Study of Religion, where scholars of the Mediterranean and Near-Eastern religions of antiquity have, in the last decade, entered into a debate about the extent of and role played by what is variously termed “household”, “familial”, and “domestic” religion.⁴ While I do not believe the use of such etic categories is inherently problematic,⁵ Late Iron Age Nordic religion can be linked “genetically” to Antique Mediterranean and Near-Eastern religions via both groups’ Proto-Indoeuropean roots, and I believe they are also typologically similar – indeed, I would argue that both may meaningfully be regarded as “pre-Archaic” according to Robert Bellah’s cultural-evolutionary paradigm.⁶ The structural similarities that this implies allows an emic paradigm of private religiosity developed for the former to be meaningfully employed – albeit as an etic model – in the latter. On the basis of synthetic comparisons and emic models produced by scholars of domestic, familial, and/or household religions in the Antique Mediterranean and Near-Eastern world,⁷ I understand such pre-Archaic private religiosity religiosity to have:

³ I omit a range of other potentially “private” religiosity, including individual i-Religion (the internal religion found in a single human brain), Christianisation-era paganism conducted “á laun” (‘in secret’), and the enigmatic warrior cults associated with mangate’s halls and the elite military aristocracy of the period. On i-Religion, see Jeppe Sinding Jensen, “Religion as the Unintended Product of Brain Functions in the ‘Standard Cognitive Science of Religion Model’: on Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained* (2001) and Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works* (2003),” in *Contemporary Theories of Religion: A Critical Companion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 128–55. On elite military cults, see Lydia Carstens, “Powerful Space. The Iron-Age Hall and Its Development During the Viking Age,” in *Viking Worlds: Things Spaces and Movement*, ed. Marianne Hem Eriksen et al. (Oxford & Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2015), 12–27; Frands Herschend, “The Origin of the Hall in Southern Scandinavia,” *Tor* 25 (1993): 175–199; John Lindow, *Comitatus, Individual and Honor: Studies in North Germanic Institutional Vocabulary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); Andreas Nordberg, *Krigarna i Odins sal. Dödsföreställningar och krigarkult i fornnordisk religion*, 2nd ed. (Stockholm: Akademiförlaget, 2004); Arnold H. Price, *Germanic Warrior Clubs: An Inquiry into the Dynamics of the Era of Migrations and into the Antecedents of Medieval Society* (Tübingen: Lück und Mauch, 1994); Lily Weiser, *Altgermanische Jünglingsweihen und Männerbünde. Ein Beitrag zur deutschen und nordischen Altertums- und Volkskunde* (Baden: Konkordia A.-G., 1927).

⁴ Rainer Albertz et al., eds., *Family and Household Religion: Toward a Synthesis of Old Testament Studies, Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Cultural Studies* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014); John Bodell and Saul M. Olyan, eds., *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity*, *The Ancient World: Comparative Histories* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

⁵ Murphy, “Reasoning Our Way”.

⁶ This model of cultural development takes the form of a progression, where each stage represents distinct phases in an evolutionary model of culture; Robert N. Bellah, “Religious Evolution,” *American Sociological Review* 29, no. 3 (1964): 358–74; Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011). These different stages are understood to feature characteristic religious, social, political, and economic structures, which – it is argued – appear to have arisen independently around the world at different times throughout history in a sort of convergent evolution. Each successive stage is understood to build on the stages before it, with cultures retaining characteristics of their earlier forms as they develop from one stage to another. Thus the early Archaic phase still features aspects of the earlier Tribal phase, while the subsequent Axial phase evidences characteristics of both the Archaic and Tribal phases – in Bellah’s own words, “[n]othing is ever lost [...] the face-to-face rituals of tribal society continue in disguised form among us” (*Religion in Human Evolution*, 267).

⁷ I draw primarily on the 2008 volume *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity* (Bodell & Olyan 2008), but see further Albertz et al., *Family and Household Religion*; John Bodell, “Cicero’s Minerva, Penates, and the Mother of Lares: An Outline of Roman Domestic Religion,” in *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity*, ed. John Bodell and Saul M. Olyan, *The Ancient World: Comparative Histories* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 248–75; Marja-Leena Hänninen, “From Womb to Family: Rituals and Social

1. been located primarily in the domicile, although nearby “local sanctuaries” also featured in some cultures;
2. been the expression of a culturally-relevant household, family, or equivalent emic congregation;⁸
3. typically been concerned with interaction with specific household or familial deities (sometimes including ancestor worship), although these figures were sometimes also present in public or state religion;
4. often featured iconographic representations of the deities or ancestors on whom the cult was predicated, although these were not always anthropomorphic in nature;
5. often been expressed through food-based rituals, although meat was largely eschewed;
6. often been expressed through *rites de passage*;
7. often featured significant roles for women, particularly when the public or state religion offered no such roles.

This characterisation obviously generalises a great deal of variation both between and within the individual cultural models upon which it is based, but a broad picture of household, familial, or private religiosity does emerge. The first two characteristics – a location in the domicile and being the product of a culturally-relevant household or familial unit – should probably be regarded as the most definitive aspects of private religions, and it would appear that pre-Archaic private religion should feature a clear domestic setting or familial congregation, but does not require both.⁹ The other characteristics may be regarded as secondary identifiers: not every *rite de passage* was conducted as part of a private religion, nor was every religion to offer important roles to women a domestic or familial one. We should not expect to find all of these characteristics in every individual case of pre-Christian private religion\,s, and some appear more relevant for the Nordic articulation of pre-Archaic household religion than others.

Establishing the extent to which pre-Christian Nordic religion can be described as domestic, familial, and/or household should thus be our first step, after which the presence (or absence) of secondary characteristics will be investigated. The resultant model of private cult in the pre-Christian Nordic region will hopefully also show where Nordic primary material diverges from the antique data, thereby offering insight into what might be uniquely Nordic about pre-Christian religion\,s in Scandinavia and its environs. In order to achieve this, I will

Conventions Connected to Roman Birth,” in *Hoping for Continuity: Childhood, Education and Death in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Katariina Mustakallio et al., Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae 33 (Roma: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 2005), 49–59; Hänninen, “Domestic Cult and the Construction of an Ideal Roman Peasant Family,” in *Religious Participation in Ancient and Medieval Societies: Rituals, Interaction and Identity*, ed. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Ville Vuolanto, Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae 41 (Roma: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 2013), 39–49; David G. Orr, “Roman Domestic Religion: The Evidence of the Household Shrines,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ed. Wolfgang Haase, vol. 2, 3 vols., Principat II 16 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1978), 1557–91.

⁸ I contrast the audience of a play (who are passive) with the congregation of a ritual, who – even if they were primarily observers – served nonetheless as active participants in its performance through the acceptance of the ritual’s communicative content. See further Roy A. Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning and Religion* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1979).

⁹ Not every private religion displays the same concern with both domestic settings and familial congregations: some are “domestic”, prioritising a location in or in the immediate vicinity of the dwelling; others are best described as “familial”, predicated on the congregation; while still others are called “household”, which might designate either the domestic arena or those who live there; while still others feature multiple descriptors.

draw on a range of medieval accounts of pre-historic religious practice, contextualised by archaeological and philological evidence. The key accounts utilised in the remainder of this article are *Þiðrandi þáttur ok Þórhalls*, *Þorvalds þáttur víðfjóra*, *Volsa þáttur*, *Kristni saga*, and Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Austrfaravísur*. With the exception of the *Austrfaravísur*, these medieval texts are prose narratives produced in a Christian cultural setting, and reflect what is assumed to be a living oral tradition regarding pre-historic paganism in the Nordic region. Such sources suffer source-critical issues stemming from their transmission through generations of manuscripts, as well as the pervasive influence of Christian values and authorial agendas. The *Austrfaravísur* ('Verses of a Journey East') are a poem by Sigvatr Þórðarson, a tenth-century follower of the Norwegian King Óláfr *inn helgi* ('the holy', later St. Óláfr) who was sent on a diplomatic mission through what is today south-western Sweden in 1017-1018AD. The tight metrical constraints of such poetry is generally assumed to offer a great deal of protection against the sort of distortions suffered by prose texts preserved in medieval manuscript traditions, although many details about the poem's composition and Sigvatr's journey remain controversial.¹⁰

Domestic Settings

Let us start by considering evidence for pre-Christian Nordic cult praxis in a domestic setting – that is, religion practiced in the dwelling place. What we know about Iron-Age dwellings comes primarily from two sources: archaeological excavations and medieval textual descriptions. The latter appear to have been greatly influenced by the buildings of their writers' period,¹¹ and it is not unlikely that the dominant influence of the social elite in the later-transcribed poetic oral discourse also had a lasting effect on medieval understandings of earlier buildings. I thus believe archaeological evidence to be a better point of departure for the pre-historic house than textual sources. Such archaeological evidence (which admittedly tends to come from larger and/or higher-status sites) suggests that most people in the Nordic Late Iron Age lived in three-aisled longhouses with internal load-bearing beams and minimal room separation (see Figure 1).¹² Unlike the many rooms of the medieval Icelandic farmhouse, each with their specific purpose,¹³ the main room of the Late Iron Age longhouse was truly a multifunctional living space, used for just about every aspect of daily life: food preparation, sleep (and thus sex), handicraft, recreation, and so on. As such we should not be surprised that these spaces were also employed for religious praxis, however contradictory invoking the supranatural or sacred in the mundanity of an everyday living space might appear.

¹⁰ Robert D. Fulk, "Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Austrfaravísur*," in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to C. 1035*, ed. Diana Whaley, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 578–614, 581–2.

¹¹ Teva Vidal, "Houses and Domestic Life in the Viking Age and Medieval Period: Material Perspectives from Sagas and Archaeology" (University of Nottingham, 2013).

¹² Vidal, "Houses and Domestic Life," 75–119; Jan-Henrik Fallgren, "Farm and Village in the Viking Age," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 67–76; Holger Schmidt, *Building Customs in Viking Age Denmark*, trans. Jean Olsen (Herning: Poul Kristensen Grafisk Virksomhed a.s., 1994).

¹³ Vidal, "Houses and Domestic Life," 133–48.

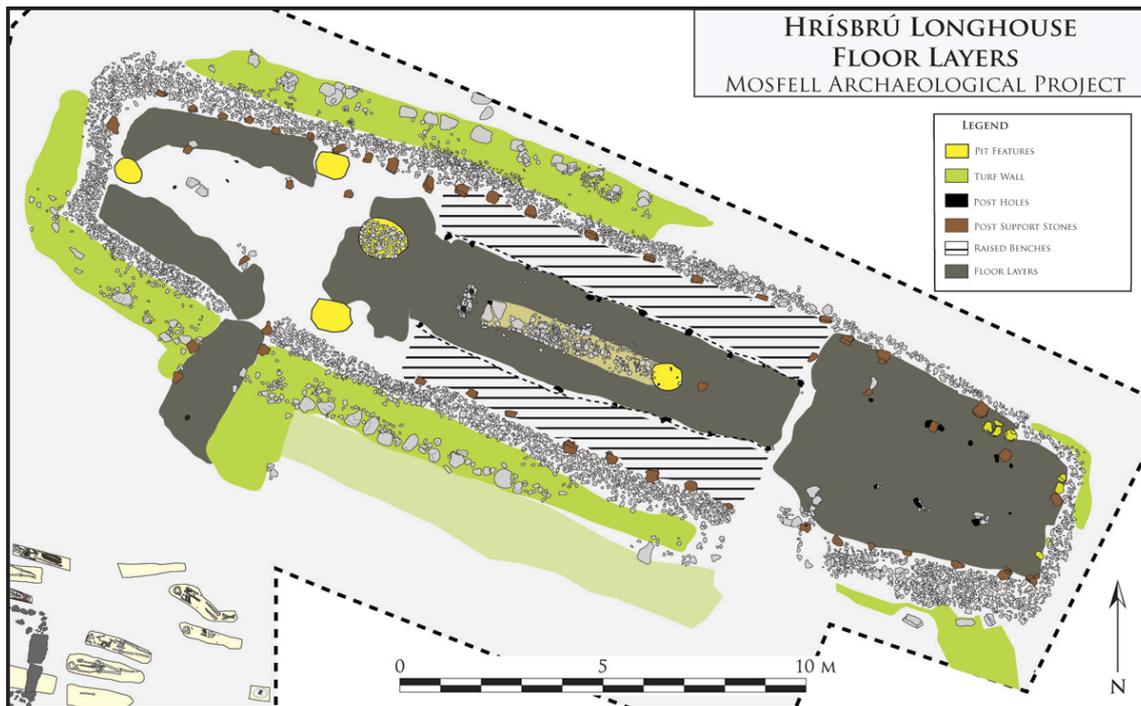


Figure 1. Plan of the longhouse at Hrísbrú, Mosfell (Iceland), Viking Age.¹⁴ after Zori & Wake 2008.

Some medieval texts also describe what appears to have been pre-Christian ritual carried out in the dwelling, as in the B tradition of *Þorvalds þáttur víðförla I* description of how the housewife Friðgerðr ‘sacrificed indoors’ in her late tenth century home in Hvammr (Iceland);¹⁵ the extraordinary *Flateyjarbók* account of the Vǫlsi cult in the “stofa” (‘main room’) of an early eleventh century Norwegian farm;¹⁶ and the many accounts of divinatory rituals conducted in (or nearby) longhouses.¹⁷ Even so, few such accounts highlight the dwelling itself as an important aspect of the proceedings they outline.

¹⁴ Davide Zori and Thomas Wake, “Archaeofauna from the Chieftain’s Farm at Hrísbrú, 2001-2008” (Mosfell Archaeological Project, 2008).

¹⁵ Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Peter Foote, eds., *Biskupa sögur I*, 2 vols., Íslenzk Fornrit, XV (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2003), II, 73.

¹⁶ Vilhjálmur Bjarnarson, Finnbogi Guðmundsson, and Sigurður Nordal, eds., *Flateyjarbók*, 4 vols. (Akraness & Reykjavík: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944), II, 441-446.

¹⁷ Divinatory rituals in particular are noted as having taken place in the home, most famously in *Eiríks saga Rauða*’s account of Þorbjörg *lítill-völva*, set in late tenth-century Greenland but preserved in Icelandic manuscripts – the fourteenth-century *Hauksbók* and the fifteenth-century *Skálholtsbók*; Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds., *Eyrbyggja Saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, IV (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), 206–209). Related accounts occur in chapter 2 of *Orvar-Odds saga*, *Norna-Gests þáttur* in *Flateyjarbók*, chapter 10 of *Vatnsdæla saga*, and chapter VI.4.12 of Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*; Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds., *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, 3 vols. (Reykjavík: Bókútgáfan forni, 1943), I, 286–9; *Flateyjarbók*, I, 397; Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Vatnsdæla Saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, VIII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939), 29–31; Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. Peter Fisher, 2 vols., Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), I, 374–7. However, the use of the term *útisetumaðr* (‘man who sits out[side]’) to designate practitioners of forbidden pre-Christian ritual in the thirteenth-century *Frostabing’s Law* suggests that a domestic setting was not required; Rudolf Keyser et al., eds., *Norges Gamle Love Indtil 1387*, 5 vols. (Christiania: Grøndahl & Son, 1846), 182; see also Neil S. Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala: The Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University, 2002); 65–6, 125–7; François-Xavier Dillmann, *Les magiciens dans l’Islande ancienne: Études sur la représentation de la magie islandaise et de ses agents dans les sources littéraires norroises* (Uppsala: Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk

Two sources that do appear to indicate the importance of a domestic setting are *Þiðrandi þátr ok Þórhalls* and Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Austrfararvísur*. In the *þátr*, the farmer Síðu-Hallr hosts an 'autumn feast' as part of the seasonal pre-Christian calendar: 'the sacral feast was held during the Winter Nights'.¹⁸ Among the few guests present is Hallr's long-standing friend Þórhallr the Seer, who had been staying at Hallr's farm, Hof (lit. 'temple'), all summer. On the evening of the feast, Þórhallr advises 'that no-one should venture outside tonight'.¹⁹ Yet once the festivities have been concluded, Hallr's son Þiðrandi answers a knock at the door and steps outside to greet what he assumes are guests delayed by the weather. There he sees two groups of nine women – one clad in black, the other in white – before being killed by the black-wearing group. This event is later interpreted by Þórhallr as the last act of the pagan (black) spirits whom Hallr's family would shortly abandon for the new Christian religion, represented by the women in white. *Þiðrandi þátr* demonstrates a clear concern with architectural boundaries: while human space normally encompassed an entire settlement, running out only where settled lands gave way to the wilderness between farms, in the *þátr* it is clear that the space permissible for humans to occupy contracted during the Winter Nights. Þiðrandi's transgression was not conversion to Christianity, but his invasion of the space beyond the walls of the house. As Þórhallr made clear, remaining inside would have protected him as it did everyone else present. A similar theme emerges in the *þátr*'s short epilogue when a window allows safe observation of the pre-Christian Other without leaving the safety of the house and its human space.

The verses the *Austrfararvísur* of particular interest to us describe Sigvatr's attempts to find lodgings somewhere in or east of Eiðaskógr in western Sweden, likely in 1018 AD. Travelling first "til Hof's" (lit. 'to Temple') – presumably a settlement named for its *hof* – Sigvatr finds the door barred, and is forced to converse with the inhabitants from outside:

I decided to aim for Hof, the door was barred, but I inquired from outside, I stuck my hooked nose in. I got few words from men, but they said [it was] holy, heathen men drove me away. I bade the ogresses deal with them.²⁰

That the inhabitants of Hof refuse to even open the door – let alone come outside – to talk with Sigvatr is highly reminiscent of Þórhallr's insistence that no-one present at the sacral feast venture out in *Þiðrandi þátr*. The Icelandic narrative gives us an account of what might conceivably have happened inside the Swedish Hof: a ritual specialist declared that the doors were not to be opened for a particular period of time. I would therefore propose that we are dealing with a sacrally charged event rather than a holy place, an interpretation borne out in Sigvatr's next strophe, when a woman declares that an *álfablót* ('sacrifice of/to/for the elves') is being celebrated:

folkkultur, 2006); Leszek Gardela, "Into Viking Minds: Reinterpreting the Staffs of Sorcery and Unravelling Seiðr," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 4 (2008): 45–84.

¹⁸ *Flateyjarbók*, I, 466

¹⁹ *Flateyjarbók*, I, 467.

²⁰ trans. from Fulk, "Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Austrfararvísur*," 589. All translations are my own.

“Come no further in,” said a woman, “wicked man; I fear Óðinn’s wrath, we are heathen.” The unpleasant woman said she/they had *álfablót* inside, in her/their farm; she drove me away like a wolf, without hesitation.²¹

That Sigvatr is turned away due to the performance of a sacrifice – one explicitly performed inside the house – implies the import of spatial boundaries during particular events, which even the significant responsibilities of a (potential) host could not overcome. Strophes 6-8 of the poem go on to detail the group’s further rejection at three further settlements, further suggesting that Sigvatr had arrived during a holy period when the Other was abroad, and the boundary between human and supranatural spaces – quite literally inside and outside – was not to be breached.²²

Admittedly, rituals performed in connection with the house need not have taken place inside it. The *Þorvalds þáttur víðförla* I account of pagan ritual at Koðrán Eilífsson’s farm Giljá (Iceland) in the 980s specifies that Koðrán’s supranatural patron ‘lives here, not far from my farm in a large and magnificent boulder’ (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, & Foote 2003, II, 63). Furthermore, Gunnell has argued that some sacral drama – that is, the dramatic performance of mythological, particularly eddic, texts – was likely performed at multiple locations around a single farmstead.²³ Similarly, Ibrāhīm ibn Ya‘qūb al-Isrā‘īlī al-Turṭuṣhī’s description of Hedeby (Denmark) describes the pre-Christian Danes’ religious activities as taking place outside their homes:

They hold a celebration at which they all come together to honour their god, and to eat and drink. Anyone who slaughters a sacrificial animal puts up poles at the door to his home, and impales the animal on them, be it a piece of cattle, a ram, billygoat or a pig, so that his neighbours know that he is sacrificing to honour his god.²⁴

Even considering any potential flexibility in subjective spatial boundaries of the Late Iron Age longhouse,²⁵ I would argue that locally-focused cults in the pre-Christian Nordic region were not bound so closely to the dwellings of their congregations that they can be said to have an uncomplicatedly domestic setting. Furthermore, the restriction of access to the sacred so clearly expressed in both *Þiðrandi þáttur* and the *Austrfararvísur* also appears to be a feature of more public cult.²⁶ We might therefore regard the control of space as a feature of pre-Christian Nordic religion generally, but not of “domestic” religion specifically. It is thus worth

²¹ trans. from Fulk, “Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Austrfararvísur*,” 590-591.

²² Similar traditions are known from elsewhere, including the Celtic Samhain (Halloween) and the Christian All Souls’ festivals.

²³ Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1995), 182–281; Gunnell, “‘Til Holts Ek Gekk...’: The Performance Demands of Skirnismál, Fáfnismál and Sigrdrífumál in Liminal Time and Sacred Space,” in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions. An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere, 8 (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 238–42.

²⁴ trans. from Georg Jacob, ed., *Arabische Berichte von Gesandten an germanische Fürstenhöfe aus dem 9. und 10. Jahrhundert* (Berlin und Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1927), 29.

²⁵ Murphy, “Continuity and Change in the Sacred Social Spaces of the Pre-Christian Nordic World,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 12 (2016): 147–82.

²⁶ Murphy, “Processes of Religious Change in Late-Iron-Age Gotland II: Centralisation, Enclosure, Privatisation, and Nationalisation,” forthcoming.

examining the congregations of such cults more closely, to establish whether “familial religion” would be a more appropriate description than “domestic religion”.

Familial Congregations

The idea that highly localised, small-scale cult could have a familial focus in the pre-Christian Nordic region is supported by a number of written accounts from medieval Iceland. The thirteenth-century *Kristni saga* description of pre-Christian Giljá stresses that the cult is linked to the family of the landowner Koðrán: ‘At Giljá stood that stone, which those kinsmen had worshipped’.²⁷ The importance of family as the basis of a congregation might also be traced in *Landnámabók*, a twelfth-century text that records the activities and genealogies of ninth- and tenth-century settlers in Iceland. A minority of early settlers were Christian, including Auðr Ketilsdóttir, who erected prominent crosses on a hill near her farm where she would pray (later called *Krosshóll*, literally ‘Cross-Knoll’). Auðr’s family are said to have regressed to paganism after her death and used the site of her Christian prayers for ‘[pagan] sacrifice’, believing ‘that they would die into the knoll’.²⁸ A similar phenomenon is recorded in both *Landnámabók* and the thirteenth-century *Eyrbyggja saga* descriptions of the settlement at Helgafell (lit. ‘Holy fell’), established in the late ninth century by the ‘great sacrificer’ Þóroólfr Mostr-Beard, who had overseen of a *hof* in Norway before emigrating to Snæfellsness in western Iceland.²⁹ *Eyrbyggja saga* recounts an episode in the middle of the tenth century where a fishing boat is lost at sea, and a witness sees Helgafell open to reveal a feast hosted by the deceased Þóroólfr, who welcomes his son and the rest of the crew of the lost boat: ‘Þorsteinn Cod-Biter was being welcomed there, and his crew too, and it was said that he should sit on the high-seat opposite his father’.³⁰

Describing these episodes as “familial” religion is useful, as it allows us to sidestep the difficulties outlined above that arise in attempting to describe the Giljá or Hedeby cults as straightforwardly “domestic”. A family might live together in one building and serve as a single (more-or-less unified) religious congregation, but still practice their cult at some remove from their dwelling in both literal objective terms and more subjective spatial ones. Giljá, Helgafell, and archaeological evidence from Abbetorp (Sweden) all appear to be examples of this,³¹ as does the *Landnámabók* account of another ‘great sacrificer’ Þorsteinn Rednose, who threw offerings into the waterfall for which his farm was named.³² Freeing ourselves from a strictly spatial focus and considering the membership of a congregation rather than just its emplacement may also help to explain the pointed display of ritual activity in Ibrāhīm ibn Ya‘qūb’s description of Hedeby.

There remain, however, some instances of small-scale, localised religion that could call a more widespread adoption of “familial religion” in the pre-Christian Nordic region into question. Parallel traditions regarding the Giljá cult, for example, do not refer to Koðrán’s family

²⁷ *Biskupa sögur I, II, 7.*

²⁸ Jakob Benediktsson, ed., *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók, Íslenszk Fornrit, I* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1986), 140.

²⁹ *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók, 124; Eyrbyggja saga, 6-7*

³⁰ *Eyrbyggja saga, 19.*

³¹ Abbetorp features a boulder associated with a wetland depositional site, which lies some 300m away and on the far side of a burial ground from the settlement proper; Maria Petersson, “Abbetorp - Settlement, Cult Site and Burial Ground, A Preliminary Presentation,” in *Settlement and Landscape*, ed. Charlotte Fabech and Jytte Ringtved (Århus: Jutland Archaeological Society, 1998), 395–404.

³² *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók, 358; cf. Murphy, “Continuity and Change.”*

as the defining feature of the congregation. The *Þorvalds þáttur víðfjara I* account makes no mention of exactly who worshipped at the stone, but describes Koðrán's religious authority as extending over everyone who lived on his farm – blood-related or not – when he converts to Christianity: “Then Koðrán the farmer, his wife Járngerðr, and other members of their household were baptised, except for his son Ormr...”.³³ *Flateyjarbók* uses very similar words: “Then Koðrán, Þorvaldr's father, was baptised along with his wife and the members of his household, except for his son Ormr...”.³⁴ *Kristni saga* also uses a broad term for those who convert to Christianity alongside Koðrán, calling them “hjú hans ǫll” (‘his entire household’).³⁵ These descriptions make it particularly clear that the Giljá congregation was not limited to Koðrán's family, and that not all of Koðrán's family were necessarily members of the congregation he appears to have led.

Kristni saga's use of the term *hjú* is particularly revealing: in some instances the word appears to designate something approximating a modern nuclear family, or even a married couple, as in the mid-thirteenth century AM 334 fol manuscript of *Grágás*: “Ef hiu sciliaz” (‘if a couple divorces’).³⁶ In instances like *Kristni saga*, Koðrán and his wife are distinguished from the other members of what can best be described as their household: the extended family, servants, slaves, and workers who live with them and run their farm. Such figures would presumably have included free servants, freedmen, and slaves. Distinctions do seem to have been drawn between full-blooded and unrelated members of a family, but the medieval Icelandic family sagas feature many narratives where a slave or affiliated freeman is definitely regarded as a member of the social unit. The thirteenth-century *Brennu-Njáls saga*, for instance, describes a tenth-century conflict between two women (Hallgerðr and Bergþóra) of different Icelandic households that escalates from insults to the killing first of slaves, then free men, then affiliate family members (an in-law on one side, and a foster-father on the other), and finally a full-blooded family member.³⁷ Although fictionalised (or wholly fictional), this narrative demonstrates that while there were degrees of belonging to what was broadly understood as family, even slaves were seen as members of a household. Yet just as non-related members of a household may have shared the same dwelling as full-blooded familial members, blood-relations – even within the immediate family – were sometimes detached, living elsewhere for short periods, such as on the summer-time use of highland shielings. Such detachment may, in some instances, have been longer term, as when chapter 28 of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* explicitly records Skalla-Grímr breaking up the group of people who emigrated with him to form subsidiary settlements around his main farm, presumably to make use of the new land's abundant natural resources.³⁸

I therefore believe we ought therefore to pay heed to Stowers when he argues that:

³³ *Biskupa sögur I*, II, 68.

³⁴ *Flateyjarbók*, I, 297.

³⁵ *Biskupa sögur I*, II, 8.

³⁶ “Ordbog over Det Norrøne Prosasprog,” *Ordbog over Det Norrøne Prosasprog*, accessed October 19, 2016, <http://onp.ku.dk/>. Terms expressing similar – but distinct – concepts include not only “hjú” (‘household’) and “heimamaðr” (‘member of a household’), but “heimkynni” (lit. ‘home-relationship’, thus ‘household’) and “heimoll” (‘household’); see further Murphy, “Reasoning our Way.”

³⁷ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, XII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), 92–118.

³⁸ Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Íslenzk Fornrit, II (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), 73-75; see discussion in Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Det norrøne Samfunnet. Vikingen, kongen, erkebiskopen og bonden* (Oslo: Pax Forlag A/S, 2008), 50–8.

The sum and intensity of actual social realitions is what counts. [...] A household in which there is no distinction between work and home, and in which public and private, outsiders and insiders blur *is* different from the nuclear family that evolutionary psychologists find to be universal [...] place and residency must be given their due weight. Who lived together and what were their relations?³⁹

Examining evidence for small-scale, locally focused cult in terms of households rather than familial congregations (or domestic settings) may also elucidate distinctions in our data that seem, at first glance, to be purely spatial: Sigvatr and his Norwegian companions may have been turned away from four Swedish dwellings not only because the *álfablót* mandated a strict division between inside and outside of the houses where it was conducted, but also because they were not members of the household congregation.

Yet the presence of guests during the conduct of such household religion does not always seem to have been problematic: Þórhallr spends the summer with his friend Síðu-Hallr, and appears to have been an active participant in the latter's sacrally-charged feast.⁴⁰ It is conceivable that the participation of guests in household religion would have granted them honorary membership of the household social unit, with any benefits (and duties) that entailed, and that different households had different requirements for such membership. Given that Þórhallr was an old friend of the head of the family and shared the living space of Síðu-Hallr's household for up to three months, it is easy to see how he is accepted, while the religionists of the *Austrfárarvísur* were less receptive to the inclusion of travellers – presumably here one day and gone the next – in their household.⁴¹

That said, even unknown guests are invited to participate in the cult at the unnamed farm in northern Norway that is the setting of *Vølsa þátr*. This narrative, another of the conversion *þættir* preserved in *Flateyjarbók*, may well be so heavily fictionalised that it can no longer be said to have any historical basis, although it certainly reflects Christian discourse about late forms of paganism.⁴² The narrative describes how Óláfr the Holy fled Knútr the Powerful (thus dating events to 1029 AD), hearing of and then visiting a remote household of pagans in disguise. Prior to the exiled king's arrival, the elderly farmer's horse had died and been butchered for its meat. Following some crude antics on behalf of her son, the 'Old Woman' of the farm preserves the horse's phallus.⁴³ Following this, a sacrally charged ritual – explicitly called 'household-custom' – is carried out at the isolated farm, where the old woman produces the phallus (now dubbed *Vølsi*) every evening, and circulates it between the members of the

³⁹ Stanley K. Stowers, "Theorizing the Religion of Ancient Households and Families," in *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity*, ed. John Bodel and Saul M. Olyan, *The Ancient World: Comparative Histories* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 5–19, 6.

⁴⁰ *Flateyjarbók*, I, 465–467.

⁴¹ Events at Giljá are harder to parse in these terms: although there is no explicit evidence to suggest that Koðrán conducted pre-Christian ritual during the winter when Þorvaldr and Friðrekr were his guests, I think it unlikely that the farmer stopped practising his religion while his guests were present, whatever their beliefs or – presumably – their refusal to participate.

⁴² See discussion in Tolley, "Vølsa Þátr: Pagan Lore or Christian Lie?," in *Analecta Septentrionalia: Beiträge zur nordgermanischen Kultur- und Literaturgeschichte*, ed. Wilhelm Heizmann, Klaus Bödl, and Heinrich Beck, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* 65 (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2009), 680–700.

⁴³ This was not necessarily an act with religious significance in and of itself, given that animal penises were employed as switches in timber-poor Iceland until the twentieth century; Gunnell, pers. com. January 2012.

sometimes reluctant congregation to the accompaniment of verse.⁴⁴ On his arrival, the woman demands Óláfr and his companions participate in proceedings, which are abruptly terminated when Óláfr throws the phallus to the farmer's dog.⁴⁵

The apparent importance of the congregation's participation in this ritual, particularly compared to the seeming lack of stress put on its location, suggests that the Vølsi cult should not be regarded as strongly domestic in character. Indeed, the participation of not only slaves but guests makes me prefer the descriptor "household" to both "familial" and "domestic" religion, and implies to my mind that identification with a household – or congregation – was highly contextual, even negotiable. The cult witnessed in *Austrfaravísur* might therefore be described as "domestic", "familial", and "household", all at once. In most cases, however, I believe that whether small-scale, locally focused pre-Christian religion is best referred to as "domestic", "familial", or "household" will vary from instance to instance. *Þiðrandi þátr ok Þórhalls*, for instance, evidences strong spatial boundaries and a clear domestic setting, while in *Vølsa þátr* the domestic setting is almost incidental to a cult based strongly in the participation of its household. On balance, I believe "household" is a more widely applicable term for the Nordic articulation of the more general pre-Archaic model, and posit that a discourse of small-scale, locally focused household religion does emerge from texts like *Vølsa þátr*, the *Austrfaravísur*, and accounts of the Giljá cult.

Secondary Characteristics: Ancestor-Worship, Mother-Priestesses, and Offerings for the Elves

In order to further characterise our emerging model of pre-Christian Nordic household cult, it is worth briefly considering evidence for the other characteristics of pre-Archaic private religion outlined above. The first of these is the worship of localised deities, and the accounts we have examined thus far certainly seem to feature supranatural beings with strong links to the region in which the account is set, or to a specific group of humans. The cult at Giljá, for example, is dedicated to what appears to be a fertility spirit, described in *Kristni saga* as the family's 'steward' and in *Þorvalds þátr víðförla I* as Koðrán's 'seer' who 'tells me in advance of many things that have not yet happened; he protects my livestock'.⁴⁶ Other locally relevant spirit collectives occur in the *Íslensk hómilúbók*, where sacrifices are made to "land vettír" ('land-beings') and *Þiðrandi þátr ok Þórhalls*, where the mysterious riders are called not only "konur" ('women'), but also "dísir" (an all-female spirit collective with links to fertility) and "fylgjur" (familial protective spirits comparable to both Christian guardian angels and Scottish fetches).⁴⁷

A connection between a group of supranatural beings and a particular (human) family can also be traced in what may be evidence of ancestor worship. The worship – or at least sacrally-charged veneration – of ancestral figures was not unknown in the Nordic region, with worship rituals at grave mounds best evidenced for kings and rulers (Laidoner 2015). Such cult offers a genetic link between the familiar world of the present and the Othered worlds of the

⁴⁴ *Flateyjarbók*, II, 444.

⁴⁵ A very similar tradition, known as "at senda drunn" ('to send *drunnur*'), appears to have survived into the twentieth century in the Faroe Islands (Joensen 2004, 31-37), although such looping participation in games – as in the Anglophone children's game "Who Stole the Cookie from the Cookie Jar?" – is far from uncommon.

⁴⁶ *Biskupa sögur I*, II, 7; 73.

⁴⁷ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Hauksbók. Udgiven Efter de Arnarnagnæanske Håndskrifter No. 371, 554 Og 675, 4^o; Samt Forskellige Papirshåndskrifter* (København: Thieles bogtrykkeri, 1892), 167; *Flateyjarbók*, I, 467.

past and the dead, and may be witnessed in the *álfablót* of the *Austrfararvísur*: at least one deceased monarch is elsewhere recorded as both the recipient of cult and an *álfr* ('elf') following his interment. The *Þáttr Ólafs Geirstaðaálfs* preserved in *Flateyjarbók* notes that after the eponymous King Óláfr dies, the local population 'would sacrifice to King Óláfr and called him the Elf of Geirstaðr'.⁴⁸ These events apparently took place in a region of south-eastern Sweden, an area it is entirely possible that Sighvatr and his companions passed through on their journey. While I would argue that overstressing a putative division between more widely recognised and more locally focused supranatural beings risks returning scholarly discourse to the bad old days of "high" and "low" mythology,⁴⁹ pre-Christian household religion does appear to have featured a clear predilection for less widely known, more locally focused deities and supranatural beings usually associated with the family and/or local landscape.

There is a surprisingly rich corpus of iconography interpreted as representing pre-Christian deities in the Nordic region. However, few archaeological finds can be straightforwardly linked to a domestic setting, and there is a similar scarcity of narratives describing idols that unequivocally represent household religion. The most overt instance is *Völsa þáttr*, where the *Völsi* cult is clearly centred on a non-anthropomorphic representation of divine power. The horse penis at the centre of events is in one verse explicitly identified as a "blæti" ('idol, fetish, sacral object'), and it is said the old woman 'regarded it as her god'.⁵⁰ I therefore believe there some grounds to regard iconographic elements as an identifier of household cult in the Late Iron Age, although the apparently widespread use of different images in other pre-Christian Nordic religion\ should caution against its adoption as a definitive aspect.

The modern folk tradition of making dairy-based offerings in so-called "älvkvarn" ('elf mills') – Bronze Age petroglyphs – in some parts of Sweden might reflect 'vegetarian' food offerings in a household context, although the petroglyphs are typically found at some remove from settlements.⁵¹ The *Icelandic Homily Book*, a fourteenth-century Christian religious tract, preserves a small account of food-based offerings by women to explicitly local supranatural beings called "landvettír" ('land-beings') in its list of forbidden magical and prophetic practices that may reflect an Icelandic articulation of the Swedish *älvkvarn*:

⁴⁸ *Flateyjarbók*, II, 7. Óláfr is also named *Geirstaðaálfr* in *Af Upplendinga konungum*, a short synoptic of the Ynglingar dynasty preserved in the fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript *Hauksbók*, 457.

⁴⁹ Such a return would, I believe, entail all the biases, indifference to and disdain for popular religion such terminology entails; Catharina Raudvere, "Popular Religion in the Viking Age," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 235–242; cf. Charles H. Long, "Popular Religion," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed., vol. 11, 15 vols. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 7324–33.

⁵⁰ *Flateyjarbók*, II, 442.

⁵¹ cf. Reimund Kvideland and Henning K. Sehmsdorf, eds., *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend*, The Nordic Series 15 (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 241, 248–249; Lasse Bengtsson, "Cup Marks of the Common People, Images of the Elite," in *Prehistoric Pictures as Archaeological Source. Förhistoriska Bilder Som Arkeologisk Källa*, ed. Gerhard Milstreu and Henning Prøhl (Tanumshede: Gothenburg University Department of Archaeology, 2004), 167–177; Gunnell, "Nordic Folk Legends, Folk Traditions, and Grave Mounds: The Value of Folkloristics for the Study of Old Nordic Religions," in *New Focus on Retrospective Methods: Resuming Methodological Discussions: Case Studies from Northern Europe*, ed. Eldar Heide and Karen Bek-Pedersen, Folklore Fellows' Communications 307 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia/Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2014), 17–41; 30–31.

Some women are so witless and blind with regards to their needs that they take their food and go out on piles of stones or under slabs of rock, and consecrate [it] to the *landvættir* and then eat [it], in order that they should have better farms than before.⁵²

This account should definitely be considered further evidence of localised food offerings in Iceland, and the *blót* at Giljá – dedicated to a chthonic, local being with links to fertility – could very well have been the pre-Christian ancestor of the medieval practice against which the *Homily Book's* author railed. Nonetheless, as accounts of pre-Christian ritual that explicitly exclude food are few and the communal consumption of food appears to have played a significant role in cult at all social levels,⁵³ I would argue that relatively little utility can be attained from the use of food-based ritual in attempting to define or identify pre-Christian Nordic household religion\.

The obvious *rites de passage* likely to be accompanied by rituals in a household context are those that marked separation from and incorporation into the social unit:⁵⁴ births, weddings, divorces, and funerals. Little evidence of pre-Christian childbirth ritual has survived into the texts recorded during the medieval period: the poem *Oddrúnargrátr* invokes the goddesses Frigg and Freyja to reward the singing of ‘spells, magical chants’ during childbirth,⁵⁵ and strophes 7, 19, and 32 of the poem *Rígsþula* witness the use of water in a naming ceremony,⁵⁶ but much more than that cannot be said. Given the practice of exposing unwanted children to the elements as a form of population control – in both pre-Christian and Christian times⁵⁷ – it is perhaps unsurprising that Nordic culture appears to have placed relatively little emphasis on childbirth rituals, although we should not overlook the elite, male bias of our written medieval sources. Weddings (and divorces) are, unfortunately, similarly under-recorded, with Schjødt noting “[w]e have no actual descriptions of wedding rituals that could give us an insight into their symbolism and structure”.⁵⁸ Funerals are better attested, although most narrative accounts clearly refer to high-status individuals and appear to have included large congregations performing ritualised movements around an outdoor site⁵⁹ – none of which can be convincingly linked to a household or domestic setting.

The role of women in pre-Christian Nordic religion in general is a topic easily worthy of an article all its own,⁶⁰ and there is some evidence of *gyðja* (a female equivalent of the male

⁵² trans. from *Hauksbók*, 167.

⁵³ Murphy, “Processes of Religious Change in Late-Iron-Age Gotland II.”

⁵⁴ cf. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B Vizedom and Gabrielle L Caffee (London: Routledge, 1960).

⁵⁵ trans. from Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, eds., *Eddukvæði*, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2014), II, 366.

⁵⁶ trans. from *Eddukvæði*, I, 450-445.

⁵⁷ Pre-Christian exposure is recorded in *Kristni saga*, while Christian exposure is mandated to occur post-baptism inside the local church by the *Gulatingslova*; *Biskupa sögur I*, II, 36; Björn Eithun, Magnus Rindal, and Tor Ulset, eds., *Den Eldre Gulatingslova*, 6 (Oslo: Riksarkivet, 1994), 44–5.

⁵⁸ Jens Peter Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008), 333.

⁵⁹ See ibn Fadlān’s *Risāla* (Montgomery 2000; 12-21); accounts of Baldr’s funeral in *Húsdrápa* and *Snorra Edda* (Finnur Jónsson 1967-1973, A1, 136-138; Snorri Sturluson 2005, 46-47); and *Hákonar saga goða* (Snorri Sturluson 1941-51, I, 193).

⁶⁰ cf. Siân Grønlie, “‘No Longer Male and Female’: Redeeming Women in the Icelandic Conversion Narratives,” *Medium Aevum* 75, no. 2 (2006): 293–318; Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 113–31; Gro Steinsland and Else Mundal, “Kvinner og medisinsk magi,” in *Kvinnors rosengård. Medeltidskvinnors liv och hälsa, lust och barnafödande*, ed. Hedda

priest-chieftain *goði*) that implies that at least some women fulfilled roles in public religion.⁶¹ Yet there is also clear evidence of female involvement in household cult: the second time Sighvatr and his companions are refused accommodation in the *Austrfararvísur*, they are turned away by a woman who appears to have some authority. It is also Friðgerðr who sacrifices in all three accounts of the Hvammr cult, and, as noted above, Þorvaldr derides her as a *gyðja* in his verse.⁶² The *Icelandic Homily Book* account of women making food-based offerings to *land vættir* is also noteworthy, although *Vǫlsa þáttr* is perhaps the clearest example of household religion under female leadership: it is the housewife who preserves Vǫlsi, who presents the penis every evening and speaks the first verse of the poetic ritual,⁶³ and the *þáttr* even notes that she is the only member of the household for whom the penis would ‘stand erect’!⁶⁴ The medieval, Christian depiction of gender binaries between a masculine public sphere and feminine domestic sphere that emerges from many missionary texts – including *Vǫlsa þáttr* – is almost certainly an exaggeration, if only an unintentional one, of the possibilities pre-Christian Nordic women had to take on religious roles in society.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, women could certainly be highly influential figures in Late Iron Age culture, albeit within strictly defined bounds,⁶⁶ and it is thus not unreasonable to posit that household cult allowed both women and men to take on prominent roles – as opposed to more public cult, which appears to have been male-dominated.

In addition to the various characteristics of the general model of pre-Archaic domestic, familial, and/or household religion proposed above, one further aspect of pre-Christian household religion emerges from the data presented here: the timing of ritual activity. The Nordic region in the Late Iron Age has been argued to have evidenced a stark division between summer – when outdoor work was possible – and winter – when society moved indoors, occupying their dwellings for longer and longer each day as the daylight lessened and the weather worsened.⁶⁷ Household cult does appear to be better attested in the winter than in the summer: *Vǫlsa þáttr* describes how ‘it happened from then in the autumn, that the old woman

Gunneng (Stockholm: Centrum för kvinnoforskning vid Stockholms universitet, 1989), 97–121; Karen Swenson, “Women Outside: Discourse of Community in Hávamál,” in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. S. M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (London: Routledge, 2002), 273–280.

⁶¹ Generally speaking, our medieval Christian texts are more keen to stress the role of women in what today would be termed “magical” rituals, particularly prophecy, many accounts of which take place in domestic settings: the female-led prophetic rituals of *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Qrvar-Odds saga*, *Norna-Gests þáttr* and *Vatnsdæla saga* already mentioned in this article are all set inside dwellings; *Eyrbyggja saga*, 206–9; *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, I, 286–289; *Flateyjarbók*, I, 397; *Vatnsdæla saga*, 29–31). However, Saxo’s account has Fridleuus visit three prophetic women in a ‘shrine’; Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, I, 374.

⁶² *Biskupa sögur* I, II, 9; 73; 95.

⁶³ *Flateyjarbók*, II, 442.

⁶⁴ *Flateyjarbók*, II, 442–443.

⁶⁵ cf. Grønlie, “No Longer Male and Female.”

⁶⁶ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*; Michael Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996); Anne-Sofie Gräslund, “The Position of Iron Age Scandinavian Women: Evidence from Graves and Rune Stones,” in *Gender and the Archaeology of Death*, ed. Bettina Arnold and Nancy L Wicker (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2001), 81–104.

⁶⁷ Gunnell has proposed that this two-fold division of the year was explicitly gendered, stating that “for many the winter period was seen as being under the control of female spirits that held life and death in the balance”; Gunnell, “The Season of the Dísir: The Winter Nights and the Dísarblót in Early Scandinavian Belief,” *Cosmos* 16 (2000): 117–149, 138; cf. Gunnell, “Ritual Space, Ritual Year, Ritual Gender: A View of the Old Norse and New Icelandic Ritual Year,” in *First International Conference of the SIEF Working Group on the Ritual Year (Malta 20–24, 2005): Proceedings*, ed. George Mifsud-Chircop (Malta: Publishers Enterprises Group (PEG) Ltd., 2006), 285–302.

took him [Völsi] out each evening';⁶⁸ and the sacral feast of *Þirðranda þáttr ok Þórhalls* is also called an 'autumn feast' (Vilhjalmur Bjarnarson, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Nordal 1944-45, I, 446; cf. Gunnell 2000; 2006a; Nordberg 2006). The *Austrfararvísur* are also explicitly set during the winter, with strophe 10 explicitly describing autumnal travel: 'But in autumn, I was required to ride'.⁶⁹ Some accounts do not specify the period they describe (e.g. Ibrāhīm ibn Ya'qūb's writings and *Norna-Gests þáttr*), and descriptions of the Hvammr cult explicitly take place while the farmer Þórarinn is away at the Alþing, placing events at the height of summer.⁷⁰ Overall, however, I believe there is significant evidence for domestic cult performed during the long months of the Nordic winter, particularly in late autumn or early winter as the seasons changed and when the household and dwelling were the centre of activity.

Conclusion: A Nordic Articulation of Pre-Archaic Household Religion

I believe we now have enough information to propose a working model of pre-Christian household religion in the Nordic Late Iron Age: on the basis of the evidence examined in this article, such cult is best regarded as expressing the religiosity of a particular small-scale, localised social unit – the household (see Figure 2). It was typically, but not always, performed in or near the dwelling of this household; appears to have been dedicated more often to localised supranatural beings (including ancestral spirits) than to more widely-known deities; seems to have offered more significant roles for women as cult specialists and leaders than other pre-Christian Nordic religion; and seems to have been more common in the autumn and winter than during the spring and summer. This latter would appear to be a notably Nordic feature of pre-Archaic private religion. Food-based rituals undoubtedly played an important part of this Nordic articulation of household religion, as did the use of iconographic representations of the supranatural, although neither of these aspects allows useful differentiations from more publically accessible religion to be drawn. There is little evidence for *rites de passage* being explicitly linked to a household-based congregation or domestic setting. This model cannot, of course, cover every eventually, and the cases I have employed in this article are obviously not exhaustive. It is also possible that my findings overlook a great deal of temporal and regional variation, as the majority of the sources I have employed here stem from Iceland and most likely describe the very latest forms of pre-Christian religiosity prior to the arrival of Christianity.⁷¹ I nonetheless hope that my findings here will prove both an effective basis from which to study pre-Christian religion more generally, and a useful contribution to pre-Archaic domestic, familial, and/or household religions in a wider comparative context.

⁶⁸ *Flateyjarbók*, II, 442.

⁶⁹ trans. from Fulk, "Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Austrfararvísur*," 597.

⁷⁰ *Biskupa sögur I*, II, 9; 72.

⁷¹ Christianity, as an Historical/Axial Religion, does not appear to have had an obviously equivalent domestic, familial, and/or household cult; cf. Bellah, "Religious Evolution;" Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*. On lay religiosity in medieval Scandinavia, see Arnved Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief in Norse Society 1000-1350* (University of Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009).

	Domestic Setting	Familial/ Household Congregation	Localised Supranatural Beings	Ancestor Worship	Iconographic Representation	Food-based Rituals	<i>Rites de passage</i>	Female Role	Autumnal or Winter Timing	Source (earliest attested date)
The <i>Austurfara vísur</i>	✓	✓ (exc. guests)	✓	?	-	-	-	✓	✓	Snorri Sturlusson's <i>Óláfs saga helga</i> (1230s)
The Giljá Cult	?	✓	✓	-	x	✓	x	x	?	<i>Kristni saga</i> (early thirteenth century)
	✓	?	✓	-	x	-	x	x	?	<i>Þorvalds þátr viðförla I</i> (late fourteenth century)
The Hvammr Cult	?	?	-	-	?	✓	-	✓	x	<i>Kristni saga</i> (early thirteenth century)
	?	-	-	-	?	✓	-	✓	x	<i>Flateyjarbók</i> (1380-1400)
	✓	-	-	-	?	✓	-	✓	x	<i>Þorvalds þátr viðförla I</i> (late fourteenth century)
Ibrāhīm ibn Ya'qūb	✓	?	-	-	-	✓	-	-	-	Abu Yahya Zakariya' ibn Muhammad al- Qazwini (thirteenth century)
<i>Norna- Gests þátr</i>	✓	✓	-	x	x	✓	✓	✓	-	<i>Flateyjarbók</i> (1380-1400)
<i>Seiðr</i> in Greenland	✓	✓ (possibly inc. guests)	✓	-	-	x	-	✓	✓	<i>Eiríks saga rauða</i> (early thirteenth century)
<i>Völsa þátr</i>	✓	✓ (inc. active guests)	✓	x	✓	x	x	✓	✓	<i>Flateyjarbók</i> (1380-1400)
<i>Þiðranda þátr</i>	✓	✓ (inc. guests)	✓	?	-	✓	-	-	✓	<i>Flateyjarbók</i> (1380-1400)

Figure 2. Overview of material examined, and potential articulations of pre-Christian Household cult.