

# Animals of Sacrifice: Animals and the *Blót* in the Old Norse Sources and Ritual Depositions of Bones from Archaeological Sites

Ola Magnell

Arkeologerna, National Historical Museums

## Introduction

In the practice of Old Norse religion, animals seem to have played an important role.<sup>1</sup> Both the written sources and the archaeological record indicate that the sacrifice of animals played a significant part in the *blót*, the Old Norse act of sacrifice. At the *blót*, the ritual killing of animals was followed by consumption and feasts on the meat, which is described in the Eddic and scaldic poetry, Icelandic sagas, in Early Medieval laws, rune stones, and foreign sources by bishops and Arabic travellers.<sup>2</sup>

Sacrifices of animals seem to have been a significant part of various religious practices on different occasions and in different contexts. *Blót* was a seasonal occurring communal sacrificial feast, which can be described as a ritual to ensure fertility and a “good year” – a thanksgiving to the gods.<sup>3</sup> Sacrifices of animals were also included in family rituals at the farm-houses, such as the *álfablót*.<sup>4</sup> In Viking Age funeral rites, the killing of animals was also important.<sup>5</sup> *Blót* appears to have been a natural part of the assembly meeting at the thing (*þing*).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, there are sources indicating the sacrifice of animals in order to ensure good luck in sailing, trading, at single combat (*hólmganga*), and in sorcery aiming to cause misfortune to enemies.<sup>7</sup> The ritual

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practice of *níðstǫng* and the raising of a horse's head on a pole in order to cast bad luck (*níð*) on enemies also include the killing of a horse.<sup>8</sup>

The problem of using written sources in order to understand Old Norse religion and especially the practice of the religion is well known and has been an important issue in the studies of Old Norse religion.<sup>9</sup> The source criticism involves several different aspects concerning translation and linguistic interpretation and the fact that most texts written down in the 12<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries describe events that took place centuries earlier. Furthermore, the authenticity of texts was probably affected by the writer's agenda, which in most cases was written from a Christian perspective and the literary genre may also have affected the texts.<sup>10</sup>

The aim of this study is a comparative analysis of the sacrifice of animals in written sources about Old Norse religion and the archaeological record with animal bones interpreted to represent ritual depositions. To restrict the study, funeral rites and killing of animals from burials have not been included.

The use of the archaeological record and animal bones to study sacrifices and rituals is associated with at least as many problems as with interpreting texts, but the problems are different. They involve issues about taphonomy and preservation, dating, and how to identify the remains of ritually killed animals. In archaeology, interpretation and definition of ritual depositions have often been relatively arbitrary, but how to identify ritual depositions and how to differentiate them from common waste have been widely discussed and debated.<sup>11</sup> This study is based on a compilation of several different excavations, so criteria and definitions for ritual depositions have varied between different archaeological studies. In general, it is based on finds of animal bones in specific contexts such as cult houses and stone packings, often associated with ritual objects such as amulet rings. Also, the arrangement of bones in archaeological structures and the placing of specific bones, such as skulls or whole mandibles, have been interpreted as ritual bone depositions.

In the study of Old Norse religion, the archaeological finds have in many cases been used as a kind of “illustration” to the texts, and finds of ritual deposition have often been used to verify the written sources. When ritual depositions are to be interpreted in archaeology, there is sometimes a desperate and almost futile search for written sources from the Icelandic sagas via Tacitus to Celtic folklore so as to verify interpretations rather than basing them on the archaeological record and methodology. This is not necessarily a bad thing to do and is partly the purpose of this paper, but the most important aim in archaeological studies of ritual depositions must be to consider and reveal new aspects of the Old Norse religion that we do not find in the written sources. One of the advantages of using the archaeological record for the understanding of the Old Norse religion is the extensive material which is constantly increasing with new excavations and the development of methods that makes it possible to study archaeological finds from older excavations with new perspectives. One of the purposes of this study is to show how the archaeological record, and especially animal bones, can be used to study the sacrifices of animals.

## The Animals

The importance of different kinds of animals in the *blót* has been quantified by the number of citations of animals in various written sources. In a total of 17 texts describing Old Norse religious practice, it is evident that cattle are the animals that occur most frequently (in eleven of the sources). Horse is also common and occurs in nine cases (Table 1). Other animals such as pig, sheep, goat and dog occur more rarely and are mentioned in two sources.

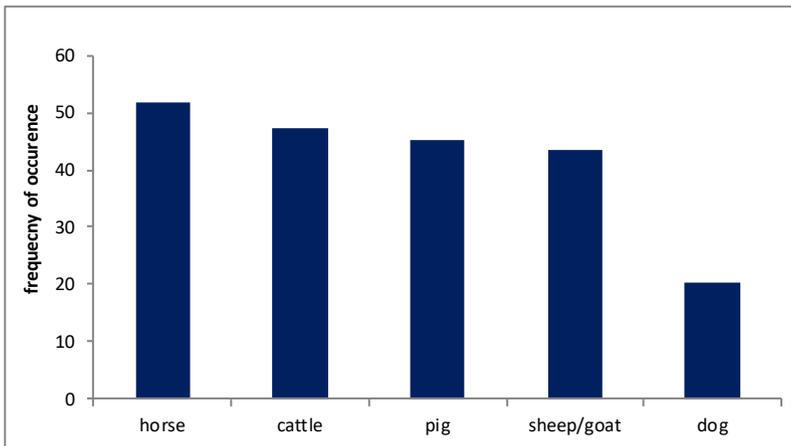
Even though the authenticity of several of the written sources and especially the sagas can be questioned, the significance of sacrifices of cattle is of interest. It has often been stated that horse had a special position as the sacrificial animal in the Old Norse religion.<sup>12</sup> This claim is mainly based on the most detailed descriptions of the animal sacrifices from the *blót* in Hlade in *Hákonar saga góða*, Adam of Bremen’s and Thietmar of Merseburg’s

**Table 1.** The number of times different animals occur in written sources of Old Norse religion. n= *níðstong*.

	Horse	Cattle	Pig	Sheep	Goat	Dog
Adam of Bremen, <i>Gesta Hammaburgensis</i> Ch. 27 <sup>13</sup>	I					I
Al-Tartuschi's visit to Haithabu <sup>14</sup>		I	I	I	I	
<i>Egil saga</i> <i>Skallagrímsonar</i> Ch. 56, Ch. 66 <sup>15</sup>	I <sup>n</sup>	I				
<i>Þiðranda þáttr ok</i> <i>Þórhalls, Flateyjarbók</i> <sup>16</sup>		I				
<i>Guta Saga</i> <sup>17</sup>		I				
<i>Hákonar saga góða</i> Ch. 14, Ch. 17, <i>Heimskringla</i> <sup>18</sup>	2					
<i>Hervarar saga ok</i> <i>Heidreks</i> Ch. 8 and 11 <sup>19</sup>	I		I			
<i>Hyndluljóð</i> Ch. 10, Poetic Edda <sup>20</sup>		I				
Ibn Fadlan's meeting with the <i>Rûs</i> <sup>21</sup>		I		I		
<i>Kormáks saga</i> Ch. 22 <sup>22</sup>		I				
Stentofte rune stone <sup>23</sup>	I				I	
Thietmar of Merseburg, <i>Cronicon</i> I:17 <sup>24</sup>	I					I
<i>Ûlfjót Landnámabók</i> I <sup>25</sup>		I				
<i>Vatnsdæla saga</i> , Ch. 34 <sup>26</sup>	I <sup>n</sup>					
<i>Víga-Glúms saga</i> Ch. 9 <sup>27</sup>		I				
<i>Völsa þáttr</i> , <i>Flateyjarbók</i> <sup>28</sup>	I					
<i>Ynglingatal</i> Ch. 15, 26, <i>Heimskringla</i> <sup>29</sup>		2				
total	9	11	2	2	2	2

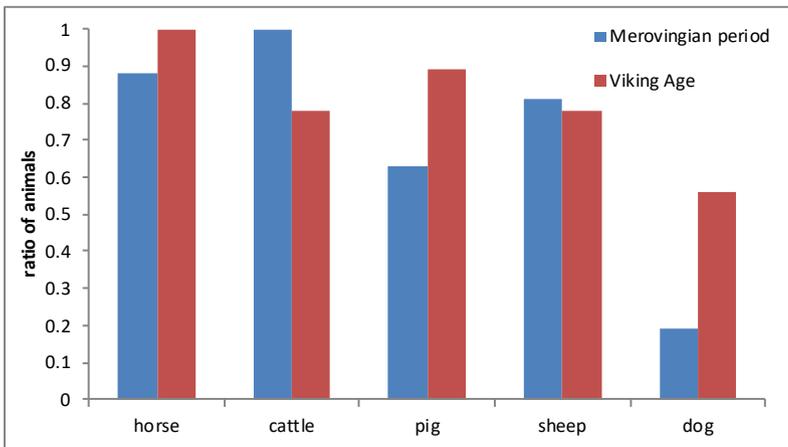
descriptions of sacrifices from Uppsala and Lejre, respectively. The reliability of these sources has also been debated, but to some extent has been considered to be authentic by several scholars.<sup>30</sup> In the *blót* in *Hlade* it is stated that “they also killed small livestock and also horse...”,<sup>31</sup> and Adam of Bremen also states “that of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads...”<sup>32</sup> This indicates that not only horse was sacrificed at these *blót*, but rather different kinds of animals. Further, the Arabic sources describing sacrifices mention cattle, sheep, goat and pigs, but no horses. It has also been discussed whether these sources describe actual Old Norse rituals or other groups of people rather than Scandinavians.<sup>33</sup>

An analysis of 104 different depositions of animal bones from 53 archaeological sites in Scandinavia and Iceland<sup>34</sup> indeed shows that horse occurs commonly in 52 % of these, but cattle, pigs, sheep and goat occur almost as often (Figure 1). Dogs are less common and appear in 20 % of the depositions. Based on bone morphology, it is often difficult to differentiate sheep from goat. In the cases identification has been carried out sheep is confirmed in 16 depositions and goat in six. Since sheep is most common in bone assemblages from settlements, this rather reflects the fact that sheep was more available and not specifically chosen to be sacrificed.



**Figure 1.** Frequency of occurrences of animals in 104 ritual depositions of bones from Scandinavia and Iceland. Copyright: Ola Magnell.

This compilation is based on sites dating from the Merovingian Period and Viking Age (approx. 7<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> Centuries). It could be questioned how relevant ritual bone depositions from the 7–8<sup>th</sup> century is to written sources of which many are written down in the 12–14<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Because of this, chronological differences in the occurrence of animals in ritual depositions have been studied. There seems to be a change over time in the relative occurrence of different kinds of animals between the two periods. Cattle are the most occurring animals in ritual depositions from the Merovingian Period while, during the Viking Age, cattle are only the third most common animals. In ritual depositions from the Viking Age, horse is the most occurring animal, but the increase is relatively small. Pigs increase distinctly, while for sheep and goat no change in occurrence can be noticed. On settlements from the Viking Age the frequencies of pigs are generally higher than on sites from the Merovingian Period.<sup>35</sup> The increase of pigs in ritual depositions corresponds with the increase of pigs in the subsistence and preference for pork during the Viking Age. However, the most significant chronological difference is the high frequency of dogs in the ritual depositions from the Viking Age (Figure 2).

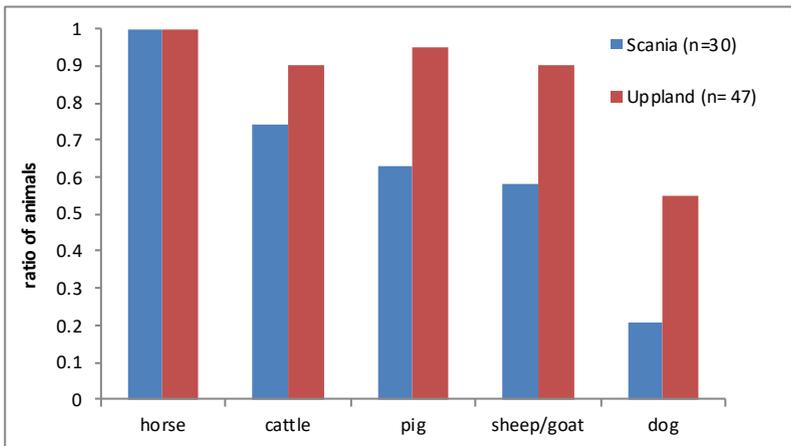


**Figure 2.** The ratios of animals present in ritual bone depositions from Merovingian Period (550–800 AD) and Viking Age (800–1050 AD). To enable comparison ratios of the occurrence of different animals in ritual depositions have been calculated in relation to the most frequently occurring animal species from each period. Copyright: Ola Magnell.

Ritual depositions from the two regions Uppland and Skåne have also been examined in order to study regional differences in the occurrence of animals in ritual depositions. The comparison reveals some regional differences. In both regions horse is the animal most frequently found in ritual depositions, but sheep, pigs and especially dogs seem to occur relatively more often in depositions from Uppland (Figure 3).

At the Viking Age cult site Frösö Church in the Province of Jämtland, in the northern part of Sweden, bones from brown bear and elk occur frequently.<sup>36</sup> These are animals which are not found on ritual sites in the southern parts of Sweden. This can partly be explained by ecological differences, but it has also been interpreted to be the result of a Sami influence in the ritual practice at this site.<sup>37</sup> Anyhow, this indicates regional variations of animals in ritual depositions between different regions.

This study is based on ritual depositions from various archaeological contexts. The written sources mention sacrifices in different places and structures. Several sources mention *blót* associated with places called *hørg*, which seems to have had a kind of stone

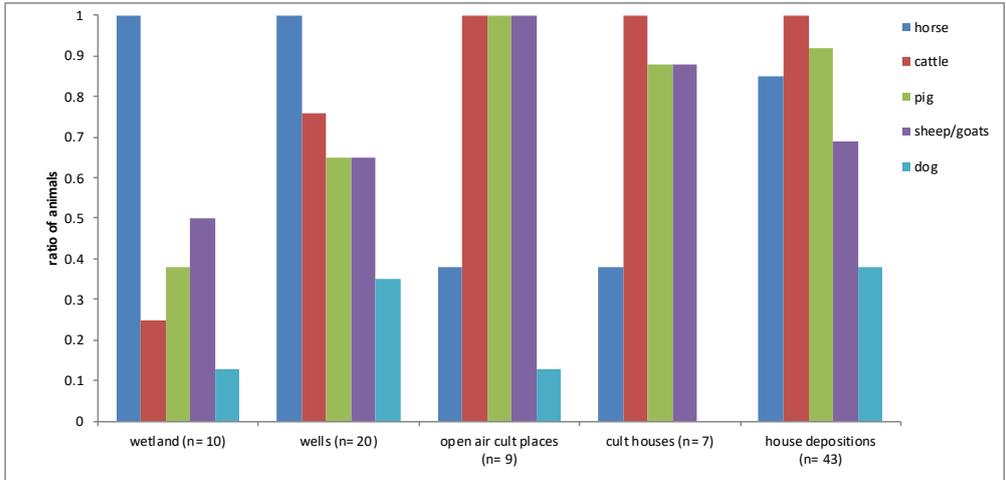


**Figure 3.** The ratio of animals from ritual bone depositions from Uppland, Sweden and South Scandinavia (Skåne, Sjælland, Fyn). To enable comparison ratios of the occurrence of different animals in ritual depositions have been calculated in relation to the most frequently occurring animal species from each geographic region. Copyright: Ola Magnell.

structure.<sup>38</sup> Several archaeological finds of stone structures from places such as Lilla Ullevi, Slavsta and Kättsta have been interpreted to be the remains cult places corresponding to *hórgr*.<sup>39</sup> It is also mentioned in Old Norse sources that *blót* took place at house structures called *hov* and *blóthús*.<sup>40</sup> At several places, such as Borg in Östergötland, Uppåkra, Tissø and Lejre, archaeological finds of house structures interpreted to be cult houses have been found.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, there are written sources mentioning sacrificial trees or groves and the depositions of bones around the remains of a birch tree in Frösö Church and the site at Lunda are archaeological examples which have been interpreted as ritual depositions by trees or groves.<sup>42</sup>

The analysis shows some interesting patterns in the frequencies of animals from different types of contexts which have been divided into different categories. In depositions from wetlands, it is horse that is the most frequently occurring animal (Figure 4). These kinds of rituals can possibly represent the continuation of a long tradition of the ritual depositions in bogs from the Early Iron Age where horses occur frequently.<sup>43</sup> The depositions in wells also have a frequent occurrence of horse. Smaller livestock, such as pigs, sheep and goats occur less frequently, but rather regularly in the depositions in wells (Figure 4). The animal bones from sites in open-air cult places with stone constructions interpreted as *hórgr*, depositions of weapons or amulet rings as well as within cult houses or halls show a similar pattern with relatively few finds of horse and dog, but with a large proportion of the common livestock; cattle, pigs and sheep (Figure 4). Most of these kinds of depositions consist of food remains and in certain cases and sites it can be discussed to what extent the bones from some of these sites represent remains from ritual meals or ordinary consumption at the settlements.

The house depositions have more equal occurrence of different kind of animals and a high occurrence of cattle and pigs as for cult houses, but also a relatively large proportion of horse and dog as for the wells. The depositions in houses probably represents family rituals and cult activities on household level involving sacrifices of various kinds of animals at the farmhouses.<sup>44</sup>

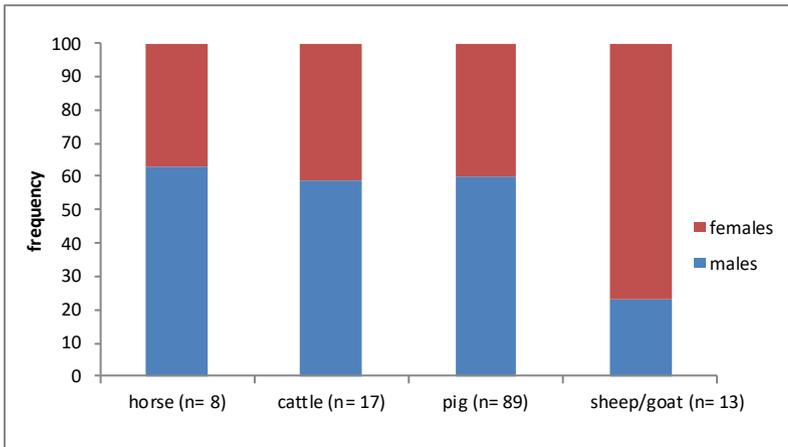


**Figure 4.** The ratios of animals present in ritual bone depositions from different types of archaeological contexts. To enable comparison ratios of the occurrence of different animals in ritual depositions have been calculated in relation to the most frequently occurring animal species from each type of context. Copyright: Ola Magnell.

## Sacrifices of Bulls and Stallions?

Whenever the written sources mention the sex of the sacrificed animals, it is in almost all cases male. The number of cases mentioned is four stallions, five bulls or oxen, one he-goat and two boar.<sup>45</sup> In the description of the *níðstǫng* in *Vatnsdæla saga* a mare is killed and this is the only example of a female animal.<sup>46</sup>

For horses and cattle there are few bones from ritual depositions where the sex has been determined, but it is quite clear that not only males were sacrificed, which has been noticed in earlier studies<sup>47</sup> (Figure 5). There are more stallions than mares in the ritual depositions, but the sample size is small. The sex distribution of cattle shows that bulls/oxen are somewhat more common than cows. In faunal remains from the Viking Age settlements, there is almost always a larger proportion of cows (about 60–70 %).<sup>48</sup> Even though the sample sizes are small from ritual depositions, the higher proportion of males may indicate that bulls were preferred in sacrifices in relation to cows. In ritual deposition, boars are also more frequently found than sows. However, this is often



**Figure 5.** Sex distribution of different animals found in ritual depositions. Copyright: Ola Magnell.

also the case at settlements, so it cannot be concluded that boars were preferred over sows in the sacrifices. Few sheep and goats have been sexed, but bones of females occur more frequently than those of males. Also, this rather seems to reflect what is found among animal bones from settlements.<sup>49</sup>

## Feasting and Handling of Body Parts

The sacrifices of animals seem in almost all cases to have been followed by feasting with the cooking and consumption of meat. This is mentioned in many of the written sources about the *blót*<sup>50</sup> and is also confirmed by the animal bones from ritual depositions which to a large extent consist of food refuse. Butchering marks show that the meat of the slaughtered animals was taken care of and eaten. It does not seem as though whole animals were killed and given to the gods, but rather that the consumption was an important part of the *blót*. At several cult houses from Borg and Uppåkra large amounts of animal bones have been found indicating large scale feasting.<sup>51</sup> Several scholars have also discussed the significance of ceremonial feasts at the *blót*.<sup>52</sup>

However, there are exceptions such as depositions of an entire he-goat, dogs, large parts of a cow and the hind limb of a horse

in the sacrificial wells in Trelleborg.<sup>53</sup> In a well in Old Uppsala, a find of a whole neck and the hind limb from a horse is another example of a deposition of larger body parts.<sup>54</sup> What these kinds of depositions represent is a little unclear, but possibly it is not from the “ordinary” annual *blót*. Rather, it may represent sacrifices with a more specific purpose such as promises to a deity that a specific animal would be sacrificed if a particular event, such as a safe return from warfare or travel.

Besides the slaughtering, cooking and consumption, there are few descriptions in the written sources of how different parts of the animals were treated and whether certain body parts were dedicated to the gods. However, there may have been rituals with blood performed at the *blót*, which some sources mention.<sup>55</sup> This has been widely debated – some scholars will see this as pure fiction based on biblical inspiration by the authors, while others have stated that even the word *blót* means “the sprinkling of sacrificial blood”.<sup>56</sup> At the Viking Age cult place Götavi in Närke, Sweden, an analysis of lipids from a stone paving has indicated that blood has frequently been left and decayed at the site.<sup>57</sup> If rituals actually involved the handling of blood, it most likely played a significant part in the *blót*.<sup>58</sup>

However, some written sources mention further rituals with the heads of the sacrificed animals. The Arabic sources, i.e. Ibn Fadlan’s meeting with the *Rûs* and Al-Tartuschi’s travels to Haithabu, tell us that the heads of the sacrificed animals were placed on poles.<sup>59</sup> The description of the sacrifices at Uppsala by Adam of Bremen can be interpreted as the heads of the killed animals being given to the gods by hanging them in the trees.<sup>60</sup>

Whether the heads of the sacrificed animals were placed on posts or in trees is difficult to verify from the archaeological record. However, there are a lot of examples of depositions of skulls in various contexts such as wetlands, wells and pit houses indicating rituals with skulls and mandibles. From the wooden monument in Old Uppsala there are several examples of depositions of skulls and mandibles of horse, cattle and pigs in the postholes of the pillars.<sup>61</sup> Finds of 23 cattle skulls at the Hofstaðir settlement on Iceland indicate that the heads of sacrificed animals have probably been placed on the roof of a house.<sup>62</sup> If this was

a common practice, it would only in exceptional conditions be preserved in the archaeological record.

Furthermore, there is evidence from several sites indicating rituals and depositions of mandibles. From a pit at Norra Gärdet and postholes from the hall on the Kungsgården plateau in Old Uppsala, depositions of cattle mandibles have been found.<sup>63</sup> Also, from a weapon deposition in Uppåkra of mainly lance heads similar depositions of cattle mandibles have been found.<sup>64</sup> The deposition at Frösö Church consists to a large part of mandibles and in several pit houses from Old Uppsala depositions of whole mandibles have been found.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusions

The written sources emphasize the significance of horse and cattle in the *blót*, while archaeological finds of ritual depositions indicate that pigs, sheep and goats were almost as important in the sacrifices. Even though the choice of animal for killing and slaughter at the *blót* probably has varied depending on the purpose of the sacrifice and the socio-economic setting; it often seems to be the case that several different types of animals were sacrificed. Partly, this could have been affected by the availability of animals, but possibly it could also have been of significance to include the different animals that were important in the everyday-life in the rituals.

The chronological differences in the occurrence of animals in ritual depositions can be noticed, with a decrease of cattle while pigs and dogs occurring more commonly in the Viking Age. This indicates a shift in preference of sacrificial animals. The regional differences of animals in ritual depositions indicate that the killing of smaller animals, such as pigs, sheep and dogs, was more frequent in Uppland than in Skåne.

The frequency of sacrificed animal species varies between ritual contexts. Horse seems to have been associated with depositions in water, such as wetlands and wells, while at open air-cult places and cult houses cattle, pigs and sheep played a more significant part in the sacrifices. There also seems to have been differences in the ritual practices in different social context. At Old Uppsala

cattle and horse occur relatively more frequently in communal ritual areas, such as the wooden monument and cult area by burials, while smaller livestock and dogs are relatively more frequently found in ritual depositions on the farms.<sup>66</sup> This possibly indicates the preference of large prestigious animals at communal sacrifices and feasts at cult places, while smaller animals were more commonly sacrificed in the family rituals on the household level.

No obvious selection of males in sacrifices can be noticed in the ritual depositions, as stated in written sources. Skulls and mandibles are shown to have been of major significance in the rituals, both in the texts and in the depositions of bones.

Several aspects of the sacrifices of animals in the Old Norse religion mentioned in the written sources and the ritual depositions of bones are in accord, but there are also clear discrepancies. The interpretations of ritual depositions of animal bones, and how representative they are as source to sacrifices, must be considered and discussed, but it can also be concluded that the ritual depositions of bones represents an important source, which contributes to a more complex and detailed picture of the animal sacrifices. In particular, it is important to consider and study the chronological, regional and contextual aspects of animal sacrifices and other ritual depositions to gain a deeper understanding of the religious practice of the Old Norse religion.

## Notes

1. Jennbert 2002; Jennbert 2011; DuBois 2012.
2. Näsström 2002; Steinsland 2007:300–327; Aðalsteinsson 1997:222–226.
3. Näsström 2002; Steinsland 2007:300–302; Hultgård 2011:215.
4. Dillmann 1997:62.
5. Iregren 1998; Price 2010:135–136; Jennbert 2011:102–105.
6. Aðalsteinsson 1997:223.
7. Aðalsteinsson 1996:14–17; Ibn Fadlan, translation by Wikander 1978:65; *Egils saga Skallagrímsonar* Ch. 66, in Jóhannesson et al. 2014a.

8. Steinsland 2007:395.
9. Hultgård 1993; Steinsland 2007:35–38.
10. Hultgård 1993, Sundqvist 2000:36–37.
11. Grant 1991; Hill 1995; Berggren 2006; Thilderkvist 2013:27–42.
12. Carlie 2002:124; Nilsson 2003:89–90.
13. Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, translation by Svenberg 1984.
14. Birkeland 1954:103–104.
15. *Egils saga Skallagrímsonar*, in Jóhannesson et al. (eds.) 2014a.
16. *Flateyjarbók*, in Vigfússon & Unger (eds.) 1860–1868.
17. *Guta Saga*, in Herlin Karnell 2012 (ed.) 2012.
18. *Heimskringla*, translation by Johansson 1994.
19. *Hervar saga ok Heidreks*, translation by Tolkien 1960.
20. *Eddukvæði I, Godakvæði*, in Kristjánsson & Ólason (eds.) 2014a.
21. Ibn Fadlan, translation by Wikander 1978:65.
22. *Kormáks saga*, in Jóhannesson et al. (eds.) 2014a.
23. Santesson 1989:221–229.
24. Thietmar of Merseburg, *Cronicon*, translation by Trillmich 1957.
25. *Landnámabók*, translation by Ohlmarks 1962:123.
26. *Vatnsdæla saga*, in Jóhannesson et al. (eds.) 2014c.
27. *Víga-Glúms saga*, in Jóhannesson et al. (eds.) 2014b.
28. *Flateyjarbók*, in Vigfússon & Unger (eds.) 1860–1868.
29. *Heimskringla*, translation by Johansson 1994.
30. Hultgård 1997:43; Sundqvist 2016:113–120.
31. *Hákonar saga góða* Ch. 14, *Heimskringla*, translation by Johansson 1994.
32. Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis* Ch. 27, translation by Svenberg 1984.

33. Birkeland 1954; Montgomery 2000.
34. Lindqvist 1910; Christensen 1991; Ambrosiani & Ericsson 1993; Backe et al. 1993; Thörn 1995; Lindeblad & Nielsen 1997; Ljungkvist 2000; Carlie 2002; Nilsson 2003; Carlie 2004; Olson 2004; Björhem et al. 2005; Lindkvist 2005; Seiler 2005; Stensköld 2006; Lucas & McGovern 2007; Nordström & Evanni 2007; Olsson 2007; Andersson & Skyllberg 2008; Bäck et al. 2008; Fagerlund & Lucas 2009; Friman & Skoglund 2009; Magnell & Iregren 2010; Monikander 2010; Beronius & Seiler 2011; Gotfredsen & Thomsen 2011; Jennbert 2011; Sköld 2012; Lucas & Lucas 2013; Magnell et al. 2013; Björck 2014; Carlie & Lagergren 2014; Jørgensen et al. 2014; Strömberg et al. 2014; Zachrisson 2014; Fredengren 2015; Gotfredsen et al. 2015; Eklund & Wikborg 2016; Lagerås & Magnell 2016; Magnell 2016; Frölund et al. 2017; Seiler & Magnell 2017; Wikborg & Magnell 2017.
35. Bergman et al. 2017.
36. Magnell & Iregren 2010
37. Näsström 1996:77; Welinder 2008:90–91.
38. Näsström 2002:126–128; Steinsland 2007:311.
39. Olsson 2007; Bäck et al. 2008; Fagerlund & Lucas 2009.
40. Näsström 2002:128–130; Steinsland 2007:311–312; Sundqvist 2016:95–96.
41. Gräslund 2011:250–252; Kaliff & Mattes 2017; Sundqvist 2016:97–102.
42. Hultgård 1997:38–39; Andersson & Skyllberg 2008; Magnell & Iregren 2010; Gräslund 2011:253; Sundqvist 2016:212–255.
43. Nilsson 2009; Monikander 2010, Fredengren 2015.
44. Seiler & Magnell 2017.
45. Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis* Ch. 27, translation by Svenberg 1984; *Egils saga Skallagrímsonar* Ch. 66, in Jóhannesson et al. (eds.) 2014a; *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar, Eddukvæði II, Hetjukvæði* in Kristjánsson & Ólason (eds.) 2014b; *Hervar saga ok Heidreks* Ch. 8 and 11, translation by Tolkien 1960; *Kormáks*

- saga* Ch. 22, in Jóhannesson et al. (eds.) 2014a; Stentofte runestone, translation by Santesson 1989:221–229; Thietmar of Merseburg, *Cronicon* I:17, translation by Trillmich 1957; *Víga-Glúms saga* Ch. 9, in Jóhannesson et al. (eds.) 2014b; *Völsa þáttr*, *Flateyjarbók*, in Vigfússon & Unger (eds.) 1860–1868; *Ynglingatál* Ch. 15 & 26, *Heimskringla*, translation by Johansson 1994.
46. *Vatnsdæla saga*, in Jóhannesson et al. 2014c.
47. Hultgård 1997:37.
48. Wigh 2001; Magnell 2017.
49. Wigh 2001; Magnell 2017.
50. Dillmann 1997:61–62; Näsström 2002:182–185.
51. Lindeblad & Nielsen 1997; Magnell 2011; Magnell et al. 2013.
52. Dillmann 1997; Sundqvist 2000:170–173; Hultgård 2011:215–216; Sundqvist 2016:344–351.
53. Gotfredsen et al. 2015.
54. Seiler & Magnell 2017
55. *Hyndluljóð* ch. 10, *Eddukvæði I*, *Godakvæði* in Kristjánsson & Ólason (eds.) 2014a; *Hervar saga ok Heidreks* Ch.20, translation by Tolkien 1960; *Hákonar saga góða* Ch. 14, *Heimskringla*, translation by Johansson 1994; *Kormáks saga* Ch. 22, in Jóhannesson et al. (eds.) 2014a
56. Aðalsteinsson 1997:233–236.
57. Svensson 2010:72.
58. Sundqvist 2016:341–343.
59. Birkeland 1954:103–104; Ibn Fadlan, translation by Wikander 1978:65.
60. Hultgård 1997:32.
61. Wikborg & Magnell 2017.
62. Lucas & McGovern 2007.
63. Lindkvist 2005; Frölund *et al.* 2017.

64. Magnell 2011; Magnell et al. 2013.  
 65. Magnell & Iregren 2011; Seiler & Magnell 2017.  
 66. Seiler & Magnell 2017.

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# Response

*Kristin Armstrong Oma*

University of Stavanger

## **Bare Bones and Slippery Myths – Questions that Arise from the Place where Myth Meets the Material**

Ola Magnell's contribution raises several interesting issues that bring to the fore new questions, many of them rhetorical and they cannot be expected to be answered in a straightforward manner. My questions are mostly related to the nature of materialisation and are meant as starting points for further reflection. Magnell's chapter, a meeting between zooarchaeology and Norse mythology, is very important, considering the question: what does the materialisation of myths entail? This, again, raises further questions, such as: how should we expect to see the living out of a myth in a material record? What does the materiality mean? How do we identify importance? For example, the zooarchaeologist identifies bone remains according to species, sex, age, skeletal elements, butchery methods and so on. But how do these lists translate into a lived religion and past world views? How does it correspond to the archaeological record? As Magnell demonstrates, there is some overlap; cattle and horses are two of the main animals found in both the written sources and also mostly in the archaeological record. But what do the faunal remains, one by one – bone by bone, represent? As opposed to the different species outweighing one another when all the bones are identified? So what I am getting at: is materiality as mass – sheer numbers – equivalent to mythological significance? The more the merrier? Or is mythological significance much stronger in those infrequent occurrences when we find the rare and the exotic?

Another important question is how we understand *blót* as a category in relation to the categories normally used in archaeology: on the one hand settlement sites considered as mundane and everyday, and on the other hand ritual deposition thought to reflect the sphere of myths and religion? When trying to bridge this gap, we can wonder if we got the categories right.

One common assumption is that faunal remains from settlements mostly equal the remains of meals, understood as being within the realm of mundane household activities, where eating and sharing food was a daily occurrence, and maybe occasionally also the remains of feasting. But, in essence, food and eating in relation to animal flesh is understood as sustenance and not of mythological significance. But is this a valid separation? Today's meat consumption, in which meat is consumed by many at almost every meal of the day, is unprecedented in historical terms, as is the lack of knowledge in the general public of where the food stems from and the processes involved in bringing it from the soil or from the womb of an animal into the supermarket. In the Iron Age, porridge was the everyday norm, whereas meat was presumably eaten only rarely, at specific times of the year, presumably mostly in late autumn and winter, when feeding the animals would have been a stretch throughout winter. This leads me to the suggestion: could not every meal of animal flesh, (or even every meal regardless of its contents) have been a sacred action, in which the procurement of the food was honoured? In a life world where – that is, if we accept the mythological significance of animals as a structuring principle – animals were sacred, was every meal not an embodiment of the sacred?

Magnell states that, regarding the contribution of archaeology to such questions, the “most important aim must be to consider and reveal new aspects of the Old Norse religion we do not find in the written sources”. Thus, archaeology is not a handmaiden to history, and should not be seen merely as a supplement to what the written sources can say. Rather, archaeology reveals the kinds of stories, narratives, even mundane things little and big about life that no medieval monk, bard or jester considered sufficiently important to write down, or sing and dance about. The true nature of the everyday consumption of food could be one such mundane action in which the consumption of animal flesh held some sacred significance.

### **The Muddy Nature of Materialisations**

Magnell's contribution can be read as an unmasking of the difficulties of working interdisciplinary inbetween myth and materiality.

Partly this springs from the slipperiness of interdisciplinarity, and the necessity of appreciating the full picture of the data as well as its contextual situation prior to drawing conclusions based on data from disciplines outside of one's own. Magnell presents the whole of his dataset and it does not show a clear and straightforward pattern. The animal bones appear in a variety of contexts and in a variety of ways. There are regional variations, there are variations through the cycle of the year, and although there is a predominance of skulls there are also other skeletal elements. This muddled image is in contrast to how archaeology is normally used by scholars from other disciplines, historians, linguists, historians of religion, folklore and so on. Very often, archaeology is used for cherry-picking the neatest sites, the ones that fit with our conclusions, the most spectacular, the ones that are easiest to understand within the context we want them to explain. Or, we want them to "prove" that the written sources were correct. As Magnell correctly suggests, sometimes there is "a desperate and almost futile search for written sources". We all do it from time to time. But of course, archaeologists also cherry-pick from, for example, the written sources, which can be problematic in its own ways.

One interesting result from Magnell's research is that the archaeological record varies across regions – which gives us a more finely-grained image of how myths became materially manifested in different ways in different parts of Scandinavia. Why is this? Is the "core symbol" and its meaning the same across regions? Or are there regional variations concerning religious beliefs and adherence to myths? This could be compared for example with place names, as has been done in the Nordic countries, which indicates that there are regional variations in the way names of deities are used in place names in different regions.

Another question that arises is, in the myths, what do the animals signify? The faunal remains that Magnell identified are almost only farm animals, horses, pigs, sheep/goat – this goes for both settlement contexts and ritual depositions. All of them are somewhat present in myths or in references to sacrifice, some more so than others. At the end of the day, the animals butchered for sustenance and those butchered for ritual deposition came from the same place – the farm. What about those animals? Was

a pig a pig a pig? Did every pig represent the idea of pig-ness in a mythological sense? Or was there something special about the pig that came to be deposited in what we understand as a ritual deposition?

What then, of the importance of Nidhoggr, Ratatosk, Fenrir, Hugin and Munin? We find them only very rarely in the faunal remains – and if so, mostly in graves, like the princely graves from the Merovingian Period with several unusual species of animals<sup>1</sup> and not in scatterings left over from meals. We know they were mythologically significant, not just from their role in the written sources, but also because they are found in the iconography, on jewellery, rune stones, carved wood, etc.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most interesting finds in Magnell's study is the depositional patterns of the faunal remains from horses. In Magnell's data set the horses are frequently found in wetland sacrifices, and seldom on settlement sites and even not frequently in buildings associated with cult and sacrifice. The conclusion that Magnell draws from this is that horses are less important in *blót* than is often made out. However, horses were clearly exceptionally important in materialisations of myths, regarding their frequent occurrence in graves, on iconography and the way they are portrayed in the Eddas and the Icelandic sagas. Magnell mentions the *níðstong* as one practice in which horses were slaughtered to use the head to cast a curse. For example, during the conference Carolyne Larrington pointed out that horses were “slaughterhorses” – *Valglaumr* – and guides that were leading the dead. I have argued similarly on many occasions, also because horses and horse equipment are frequently found in graves, especially in the Viking Period.<sup>3</sup> In the following, I want to expand upon the symbolic role of horses in the *blót* and how this came to play an important role in the troubled time that ended up as the conversion to Christianity.

### ***Blót* at the Cusp of a New Time – Materialisation between Old and New Myths**

A common criticism against using written sources is that it must be acknowledged that they do not give a one-to-one representation

of the societies they describe, rather, they are riddled with ulterior motives. One example of this is the famous *blót* described in *Hákonar saga*. What is this event meant to portray? It is a clash of the old, the traditions, with the new, Christianity and a more “civilised” world that would not practice heathen customs. It is meant to describe a political situation, and is as such a forerunner for events to come. Does this mean that we should disregard it entirely as a framework of knowledge that can be used to contextualise archaeological situations? Preben Meulengracht Sørensen<sup>4</sup> suggested that the written sources can be read at three different levels. The most obvious level being the narrative itself, then follows the ulterior motives, or intentions that underlie the angle given to the text, and finally, as an underlying current that runs through those aspects of society, belief systems and world view that the maker of the story is so embedded in that s/he cannot escape them. This level is referred to as the structural level,<sup>5</sup> although it also relates to the ontological aspects of the writer as locked in a certain situation. With this in mind, let us take a closer look at the story of the *blót* at *Hlade*:

The English king Aethelstan fostered Håkon the Good. Håkon’s foster father converted him to Christianity and taught him how to be a good Christian. When Håkon returned to Norway, he found himself in a religious minefield. His saga relates how Håkon was frustrated by the practice of *blót* and its frequency, and he wanted no part in it. Rather, he observed the Christian customs, such as keeping the Sunday and fasting on Fridays. At the same time, he attempted to keep his head down so as to not get involved with the battle between the pagan religion and Christianity. But he did not always succeed in staying out of trouble. One of the earls, Sigurd Ladejarl, held great *blóts*, gathering all of the farmers from wide and far. Horses and cattle were butchered and the blood was gathered up in large cauldrons. A sort of wisp was used to sprinkle the blood on the walls of the shrine, and also of the stables, leaving the walls red with blood. One winter Håkon the Good arrived during such a *blót*. Håkon would normally try to sneak off and eat in another house, but the men refused him this – eating together was an act of social recognition. The men made Håkon sit in the high seat and demanded that he join the party. The first

day the king was bound to drink to Óðinn, but got away with it by marking his cup with a cross. The following day was trickier:

The next day, when the people sat down to table, the farmers pressed the king strongly to eat of horseflesh; and as he would on no account do so, they wanted him to drink of the soup; and as he would not do this, they insisted he should at least taste the gravy; and on his refusal they were going to lay hands on him. Earl Sigurd came and made peace among them, by asking the king to hold his mouth over the handle of the kettle, upon which the fat smoke of the boiled horse-flesh had settled itself; and the king first laid a linen cloth over the handle, and then gaped over it, and returned to the high seat; but neither party was satisfied with this.

This conflict between Håkon the Good and the farmers escalated until Håkon was bound to desert his mission of Christianisation. The text recounts the great resistance to Christianity amongst the Norwegians. Yet in the long run, Christianity was victorious. This story about Håkon the Good serves as an example of how horses and horseflesh came to represent and embody the pagan practices in this conflict between religions.<sup>6</sup> To Håkon, horseflesh was the pinnacle of everything pagan, and he did not want to contaminate his body by allowing horseflesh to pass his lips.

After the conversion to Christianity, any kind of *blót* was forbidden. As mentioned above, this prohibition is set down in the Gulathing Law. This law is the oldest that is known from Norway, it dates back to the Viking Age and is thus originally a pagan law (the final part of the Iron Age, approx. 800–1030 AD), but the version we know dates from the early Middle Ages, from the fledgling Christian state. It clearly has a Christian orientation, and refers to deeply embedded Christian institutions. It acts as a counter-weight to the pagan religion, as to how paganism is narrated in the saga of Håkon the Good.

### ***Blót* and Feasting as Political Manoeuvres in Troubled Times**

This reading adds an extra layer to the zooarchaeology of feasting that Magnell lays out in his article. The story from the saga

demonstrates how the consumption of meat was perceived as a deeply political act. Though the prohibition of consumption of certain types of flesh at certain times is referred to as a ban given by the new religion, it seems like politics in disguise. It might have been deeply felt, but the ulterior motive of the kings who banned these types of consumption were doing so to break the hold of the pagan, fragmented powers (“one king on each hill”), in their quest to forge larger political units and ultimately a kingdom. Thus, an attempt at “mythocide” was part of the ulterior motive, the local kings on the hills lost their justification for the material manifestation of the myths – bound as they were to particular historical situations and locales.

Did they succeed in their attempt at “mythocide”? The rewriting of festivals – yule to the birth of Christ, midsummer to St. John’s feast, acted as a two-egged sword. On the one hand it assured a continuity between old and new traditions, thus taking away potential mourning of, and later reinstatement of, the old pagan traditions, and on the other hand it allowed remnants of the pagan tradition to go under ground and live on in disguise. Thus, laws had to be made to ensure that the people did not use these new feasts as a “carte blanche” to carry on as per usual. Therefore, the Norwegian Gulathing law strictly forbade the custom of *blót* and consumption of horse meat. But does this mean that the people obeyed? According to osteoarchaeologist Marianna Betti, one archaeological find supports the practice of horse cults post the conversion. Faunal remains from Kaupang dating to the early Medieval Period have cut marks consistent with butchering, these bones are clearly the remains of meals.<sup>7</sup>

## Onwards – Concluding Remarks

As I hope to have demonstrated in my comment, many interesting questions spring from Magnell’s work, and several avenues of new projects are gleaned. For me, one of the most interesting one is the slippery gap between sacrificial *blót* and everyday consumption. Magnell states that: “Most of these kinds of depositions consist of food remains and to a certain extent it can be discussed to which degree the bones represent remains from ritual meals or ordinary

consumption at the settlements.” As I mentioned earlier, it is hard to separate the ordinary from the sacred, and possibly these events were not as categorically defined as we tend to imagine.

This leads me to the question of scale. Surely *blót* and ritual consumption played important roles both in small-scale and large-scale events, but how would they look, and how would they differ, archaeologically? Probable levels of scale that could all facilitate *blót* and be identified as an archaeological context are: the local – the household of the farm, the regional level – larger regional gatherings like the thing, and the superregional level like described in the gathering at Uppsala. Is it plausible to think of *blót* as a category that fit these different levels? What would these differences mean in terms of archaeological context and character of deposition? Is this really what Magnell is identifying, with his different contexts?

A further avenue for understanding *blót* and consumption in ritual contexts would be to compare the occurrence of animal bones in graves and look for correlations and discrepancies compared with faunal remains from ritual meals. This might substantiate or refute claims frequently made about faunal remains in graves as remains of meals for the dead. What does the presence of animal bones in graves signify – the remains of a funeral feast for the mourners, or food for the afterlife? Or does the presence of animals reflect a desire to harness their powers – or simply the animals as themselves, as companions?

## Notes

1. E.g. Jennbert 2011.
2. E.g. Hedeager 2011; Jennbert 2011.
3. Oma 2001; 2004; 2005; Armstrong Oma 2011; 2015; 2016.
4. Meulengracht Sørensen 1991.
5. Meulengracht Sørensen 1991; Herschend 1997.
6. Armstrong Oma 2016.
7. Betti 2007.

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