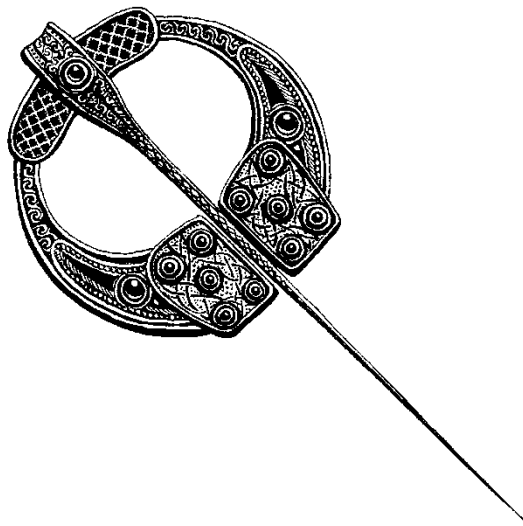


The Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic is a yearly spring conference organized by postgraduate students of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at the University of Cambridge. Information on the next Colloquium, including details of registration and submission of abstracts, may be found on the Colloquium's official website: <http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/ccasnc/>.

Selected proceedings of the Colloquium are published annually in *Quaestio Insularis*. All enquiries and subscription requests should be directed either to the address found on the official website, or by email to: quaestioinsularis@gmail.com





VINESTIO INSULARIS

*Selected Proceedings of
the Cambridge
Colloquium in
Anglo-Saxon,
Norse and Celtic*

Volume 18 · 2017

Articles Copyright © 2018 Individual Contributors
Editorial Copyright © 2018 Cambridge Colloquium
in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic

Printed in the United Kingdom
in Cardo
by Victoire Press, Bar Hill

ISSN 1745-8676
ISBN 978-1-909106-17-8

CONTENTS

<i>Abbreviations</i>	vi
<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Colloquium Report</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
Imagining English Origins	1
<i>Alex Woolf</i>	
Ideology in the Landscape: Reassessing Benedictine Approaches to History and Identity in the Tenth Century	21
<i>Thomas Kearns</i>	
Labour Pains: Scenes of Birth and Becoming in Old Norse Legendary Literature	46
<i>Katherine Marie Olley</i>	
The Construction and Reconstruction of Regional Collective Identity in Viking Age Norway	78
<i>Ben Allport</i>	

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ASE</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i>
Bosworth- Toller	<i>An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth</i> , ed. and enlarged by T. Northcote Toller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898)
<i>EME</i>	<i>Early Medieval Europe</i>
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>MScand</i>	<i>Medieval Scandinavia</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Modern Philology</i>
PASE	Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England < www.pase.ac.uk >
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Languages Association</i>
<i>SBVS</i>	<i>Saga-Book of the Viking Society</i>
<i>SJH</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal of History</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Scandinavian Studies</i>

PREFACE

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the eighteenth number of *Quaestio Insularis*, the journal of the annual Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic (CCASNC). Both the journal and the Colloquium, established in 1999 on the initiative of the postgraduate community of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, have maintained an impressively high standard, driven by the enthusiasm and commitment of successive cohorts of students. The 2017 conference, on the theme of Identity and Ideology, was very lively and saw a stimulating array of papers given by postgraduate students from a wide range of institutions. The centrepiece of the day was the keynote lecture by Dr Alex Woolf, who explored ideas about English origins before the Viking Age. The Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic is delighted to continue its association with CCASNC and its published proceedings. *Quaestio Insularis* 18 and all back numbers of the journal can be ordered directly from the Department's website (www.asnc.cam.ac.uk).

Dr Rosalind Love
Head of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic
University of Cambridge

COLLOQUIUM REPORT

The 2017 Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic took place in Room GR06/07 of the Faculty of English on Saturday 11 February. The audience enjoyed a day of fascinating and indeed topical discussion on the theme of ‘Identity and Ideology’, followed by a dinner hosted at Wolfson College. We welcomed nine postgraduate speakers from across the country and from further afield, along with our plenary speaker, Dr Alex Woolf. The thematic, geographic and temporal scope of the papers roamed widely and gave rise to much thought-provoking discussion; as the day drew to a close we gave thanks to our speakers, the organizing committee and, in particular, our tireless undergraduate helpers — James Miller and Liam Waters — for their time and effort in making the 2017 Colloquium a worthy successor to its forebears.

Session I (*Chair: James McIntosh*)

Rebecca Thomas, ‘Scholar, Courtier, Welshman: Asser and his *Life of King Alfred*’

Thomas Kearns, ‘Ideology in the Landscape: Reassessing Benedictine approaches to History and Identity at Tenth-Century Worcester’

Katherine Olley, ‘Labour Pains: Scenes of Birth and Becoming in Old Norse Legendary Literature’

Session II (*Chair: Emma Knowles*)

Danica Ramsey-Brimberg, 'Nothing is More Deceptive than an Obvious Fact: Vikings' Manipulation of Christianity in Burials in the Irish Sea Area'

Ben Allport, 'The Construction and Reconstruction of Regional Identity in Medieval Norway'

Samantha Leggett, 'Identity, Ideology and Diet in the Anglo-Saxon Conversion Period'

Plenary Speaker (*Chair: Alice Taylor*)

Dr Alex Woolf, 'Imagining English Origins before the Viking Age'

Session III (*Chair: Sven Rossel*)

Rachel Fletcher, 'William Somner's *Dictionarium Saxonico-Latino-Anglicum*: Defining the Identity of Early Anglo-Saxon Studies'

Steve Walker, 'Who Do We Think They Were? Problems of Identity in Early Medieval Britain'

Kathryn Haley-Halinski, 'Burning Boats, Not Bridges: Modern Ideologies and the Expression of Identity Amongst Ibn Fadlan's Rus'

The members of the colloquium committee for 2016–17 were Sarah Christensen, Tom Grant, Emma Knowles, James McIntosh, Sven Rossel, Alice Taylor and Jon Wright.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Quaestio Insularis 18 was edited by Sarah Christensen, Tom Grant, Emma Knowles, James McIntosh, Sven Rossel, Alice Taylor and Jon Wright. The editors wish to acknowledge the assistance of Ben Guy, Katherine Olley, Dr Rosalind Love and our anonymous peer reviewers. Editorial design is by Alistair Vining and the *Quaestio Insularis* logo was drawn by Katharine Scarfe Beckett. The production of this volume and the successful running of the conference have been made possible through the generosity of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic and the support of the Faculty of English.

Imagining English Origins

Alex Woolf

University of St Andrews

When we think of English origins we are drawn, inevitably, to the legendary history presented to us by Bede in Book One of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, the story of Hengist and Horsa that was repeated in *Historia Brittonum*, and by Geoffrey of Monmouth and by every respectable historian right up until H. E. Marshall.¹ At the same moment, however, we are aware that the narrative he gives us is legendary and problematic in many ways. The alternative that presents itself is to focus on archaeology and to imagine the ‘pagan period’ as an alternative unstructured prehistoric past. Doing this, it is likely that iconic images drawn from Sutton Hoo and the other princely burials of eastern England come to mind, inevitably interpreted through the heroic lens of *Beowulf* and the Finnsburh fragment, which, once read, cannot be unread. This England, however, was also new in the early seventh century. Princely burials and feasting halls have so far proved elusive for the period before about 590 and they do

¹ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), hereafter *HE*, I.15; *Geoffrey of Monmouth: The History of the Kings of Britain* ed. and trans. by Michael D. Reeve and Neil Wright (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007); H. E. Marshall, *Our Island Story: A Child's History of England* (London: T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1905).

not represent the culture brought from the Continent by early Germanic-speaking invaders in the fifth century, for they were equally unknown there at that early date.² Childeric's burial from the 480s seems to be the earliest of these wealthy burials amongst Continental Germanic-speaking rulers, and combined features that seem to have been of Hunnic and Roman origin. This burial, at Tournai, was located within late Roman Gaul where its occupant had been born and had served the Roman administration, perhaps as a *dux*, for many years before his death.³ Beyond the *limes* such funerary rights emerged slowly and appeared in Scandinavia, if we accept the second- and third-century cemetery from Himlingøje as something of a false start,⁴ from only a generation or two before the first English examples

² Martin Welch, 'The Mid Saxon "Final Phase"', in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, ed. by Helena Hamerow, David A. Hinton and Sally Crawford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 266–87 esp. pp. 269–275.

³ Edward James, 'Royal Burials among the Franks', in *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, ed. by M. O. H. Carver (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992) pp. 243–54; Guy Halsall, 'Childeric's Grave, Clovis' Succession, and the Origins of the Merovingian Kingdom', in *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: Revisiting the Sources*, ed. by Ralph W. Mathiesen and Danuta Schanzer (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 116–33, reprinted in Guy Halsall, *Cemeteries and Society in Merovingian Gaul* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 169–187.

⁴ Ulla Lund Hansen, *Himlingøje - Seeland - Europa. Ein Gräberfeld der jüngeren römischen Kaiserzeit auf Seeland, seine Bedeutung und internationalen Beziehungen* (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Nordiske oldskriftselskap, 1995).

of c. 600.⁵ The same can be said of the feasting halls such as Yeavinger, in Northumberland, which seem to be a phenomenon of the same transformation, appearing in Scandinavia only from the mid sixth century and in England from the turn of the century.⁶ The heroic age of feasting halls and princely burials had thus only been in its early stages when Bede's grandparents had been children and was not a part of some primitive Germanic *Urkultur*. The parallels with Scandinavian developments reflect continued or renewed contact and interaction in the course of the sixth and seventh centuries rather than shared ancestral inheritance dating back to before the *adventus Saxonum*. What I would like to try to do in this paper is to explore some of the evidence which might shed light on how the Germanic-speaking peoples of Britain thought about their identity and origins before these North Sea links emerged c. 600 and to explore why this new trajectory was adopted then.

As someone who has dabbled in the history and culture of all of the various peoples of the early Insular world, one of the things that has long struck me as odd about the English is their lack of common ancestry. The Irish famously produced complex genealogical schemes which linked all the various ethnic and dynastic groups to common ancestors with a series of apical figures producing a ranking of status for the actually existing

⁵ Birgit Arrhenius, 'The Chronology of the Vendel Graves', in *Vendel Period Studies*, ed. by Jan Peder Lamm and Hans-Åke Nordström (Stockholm: Statens historiska museum, 1983), pp. 39–70.

⁶ Frands Herschend, 'The Origin of the Hall in Southern Scandinavia', *Tor* 25 (1995), 175–199; Katharina Ulmschneider, 'Settlement Hierarchy', in *Oxford Handbook*, ed. by Hamerow et al., pp. 156–71 esp. pp. 159–60.

peoples of the historical present.⁷ Whilst the British material is less complete, *Historia Brittonum* records traditions going back to a single ancestor, either Brutus or Britto.⁸ Beyond these islands, texts like *Hversu Noregr byggðist* fulfilled a similar function. In that specific case, interestingly, an Irish-style agnatic descent network links the inhabitants of each of the provinces of Norway into a single tree to which the contemporary kings, allegedly of Swedish origin, are then attached only through a series of maternal connections.⁹ Admittedly these schemata mostly survive in extant forms that are somewhat later than the English material but the distinction is one still worth making. The English, however, had no such ancestral pedigree. Even if we confine ourselves to the so-called Anglian Collection of pedigrees, which, at least, have gone through the hands of a single editor, we find the common ancestors belong to the mythical rather than the legendary sections.¹⁰ They are not connected with Britain. We might have expected Offa of Angeln or his grandson Eomer, perhaps, to have been the proto-Englishman. Instead the latest

⁷ There is a vast literature but see for example John Carey, *The Irish National Origin Legend: Synthetic Pseudohistory* (Cambridge: Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, 1994); the earliest surviving account would seem to be that in *Historia Brittonum* 13–15 (see next note for reference).

⁸ *Historia Brittonum* 10–11, in *Nennius: British History and the Welsh Annals*, ed. and trans. by John Morris (Chichester: Phillimore, 1980), hereafter *HB*.

⁹ *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Guðni Jonsson (Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), vol. II., pp. 136–58.

¹⁰ David N. Dumville, ‘The Anglian Collection of Royal Genealogies and Regnal Lists’, *ASE* 5 (1976), 23–50.

common ancestor in each case (save that of the West Saxons who seem to have borrowed the upper portion of the Bernician pedigree) is Woden Frealafing, upon whom the English had no special claim. This evidence might even tempt us to imagine that this schema pre-supposed the existence of a pan-Germanic sense of identity of the sort that is viewed with extreme scepticism by many scholars today.

Bede and *Historia Brittonum*, of course, supply us with the figure of Hengest. Curiously Bede describes him, together with his brother Horsa, as the first leaders of the *Anglorum sive Saxonum gens* while at the same time making him the ancestor of the rulers of Kent, whose people he describes as Jutes.¹¹ One might have imagined Hengest, or his hypothetical brothers, to have been the ancestors of all English kings, after the fashion of the sons of Míl in Ireland, but no trace of such a structure survives. It remains unclear how significant he was to the English as a whole. J. R. R. Tolkien, in the stimulating series of lectures edited by Alan Bliss under the title *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode*, attempted to reconstruct an English origin legend that followed Hengest in his exile from a Danish *imperium* in Jutland to Frisia and then, after a tragic conflict of loyalties, driven from there, a *wærglice wræcce*, to Britain, where he found himself once more drawn into a terrible conflict.¹² This was Hengest as

¹¹ *HE* I.15. The apparent contradiction might be avoided if one were to assume that the Jutes in Britain were ruled by Angles.

¹² J. R. R. Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode*, ed. by Alan Bliss (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982).

the English Aeneas, perhaps? The Vergilian parallels have been further explored by Nicholas Howe.¹³

The late Patrick Wormald once told me that Tolkien had actually written a novel on this theme which circulated in *samizdat* form amongst Oxford Anglo-Saxonists but I know of no other evidence for such a text, and find it hard to believe that Christopher Tolkien could have resisted the temptation to publish it, had it existed. More recently, in a survey of the material relating to the legend of the *adventus Saxonum*, Rick Sowerby, without making any claims to the historicity of the brothers, raised the possibility that Horsa, rather than Hengest, may have been the original Kentish hero on the grounds that Bede cites archaeological evidence for his existence. Hengest, he suggested, was a ghost figure created as a pair for Horsa.¹⁴

The idea of Hengest, and Horsa, for that matter, as ghost figures is not new. Bede himself tells us that the Kentish royal dynasty took its name from Oisc, the son or grandson of Hengest according to the pedigrees, and this has long suggested to scholars that the latter was added to the pedigree at a late stage.¹⁵ Personally I have long worried over, or at, the question of whether Hengest was originally the first Englishman, appropriated by Kentish genealogists, or, alternatively, the first

¹³ Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), at pp. 62–3.

¹⁴ Richard Sowerby, 'Hengest and Horsa: The Manipulation of History and Myth from the *Adventus Saxonum* to *Historia Brittonum*', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 51 (2007), 1–19.

¹⁵ *HE* II.5. Scepticism goes back at least as far as Joan Turville-Petre, 'Hengest and Horsa', *SBVS* 14 (1953–57), 273–90.

man of Kent whose claims to have pan-English significance reflect the ambitions of either the Oiscing kings or the Church of Canterbury. In both *Historia Ecclesiastica* and *Historia Brittonum* Hengest's story is intimately connected with that of Vortigern. This, in itself, suggests some level of construction since neither name seems to have been garbled as much in transmission as one might have expected had there been an oral stage, favouring either Welsh or English, in the process. We might contrast this with the Taliesin poems, for example, which do not provide us with English names for Urien and Owain's opponents.¹⁶

The name Hengest itself has long been recognized as a likely construct of the legendary process since, despite superficially resembling the dithematic names common amongst Germanic peoples, particularly those in *-gast*, like *Arbogast* or *Frithugast*, it never appears as a personal name outside the heroic corpus. It is in fact not dithematic but a simplex noun meaning, in West Germanic, 'gelding' (the Scandinavian cognate has come to mean 'stallion'). Not only does this seem an unlikely name to give to a boy, since it might be taken to reflect poorly on his virility, but there is also some evidence that this name may have been constructed in a bilingual literate context. If one investigates the use of *hengest* as a common noun, rather than as a name, one also encounters the Latin used to gloss it. One of the Latin words used to gloss *hengest*, in both Old English and Old High German examples, immediately draws one's eye: this Latin word for

¹⁶ *The Poems of Taliesin*, ed. by Ifor Williams, trans. by J. E. Caerwyn Williams (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968).

gelding is *canterius* or *cantarius*.¹⁷ It seems to me beyond coincidence to imagine that the man claimed as the ancestor of the kings of the Cantware should bear a name glossed in Latin as *canterius*. The conclusion I feel obliged to draw from this observation is that the name Hengest was invented in Kent in a bilingual, and probably literate, context, to anglicize a Latin eponym for Kent or its people.

The suggestion here is that an eponym of Kent itself was developed in Latin, or just possibly adapted from a British name identical to, or similar to, the Cantiorix/Cantiorius attested in the Penmachno inscription,¹⁸ and that at some subsequent point this term was, perhaps jokingly (given the aspersions it casts on its bearer's virility), rendered as Old English *hengest*. The date at which the Old English form was coined must, of course, have been prior to Bede's composition of Book One of *Historia Ecclesiastica*, presumably in the year or two leading up to 731, but it need not have been very much earlier. It is extremely tempting to imagine this as having taken place in Canterbury at the school of Theodore (d. 690) and Hadrian (d. 710).¹⁹ A further, less secure suggestion, might be that the name was also designed

¹⁷ Bosworth-Toller cites both Old English and, significantly, Old High German glosses to this effect. *S.v.* 'Hengest'.

¹⁸ Ffestiniog 1, in *A Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales*, ed. by Nancy Edwards, vol. III (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 385–89. Were this British origin the case then it might mark greater continuity in Kentish government than has previously been seen and mark a tradition originating in the *ciuitas* of the Cantiaci.

¹⁹ For the school of Theodore and Hadrian see Michael Lapidge, 'The School of Theodore and Hadrian', *ASE* 15 (1986), 45–72.

to echo that of the Mercian ancestor Eomer, the ‘famous horse’, father of their dynastic eponym Icel, since the age of Theodore and Hadrian also coincides with the beginning of the Mercian hegemony under the sons of Penda. Here we might note that in the Anglian Collection of pedigrees the first Mercian chain begins with Æthelred Pending whose *floruit* (675–704) overlapped almost precisely with that of Theodore and Hadrian. If we accept a learned origin for Hengest the similarity of his story, as reconstructed by Tolkien, to that of Aeneas may owe more to direct literary influence than to common folk motif, cleverly interwoven into Gildas’s narrative of the *adventus* by the scholars of Canterbury.²⁰ Whether or not ‘Cantarius’ had a prior existence as the eponymous ancestor of the Romano-British Cantiaci remains, I fear, a matter of speculation only. Bede then presumably discovered Hengest in the portfolio of material provided by Abbot Albinus, Hadrian’s successor at Canterbury.²¹

Having disposed of Hengest, are there any further clues as to how the English thought about their earlier history in the period before his creation? Staying with the pedigrees I would like to draw your attention to what might be termed the Gothic horizon in the royal pedigrees.²² The historicity of individuals named in the pedigrees between those whose existence is confirmed by contemporary sources and those who are clearly mythological, such as Woden Frealafing and his sons, will always

²⁰ Alex Woolf, ‘An Interpolation in the Text of Gildas’ *De excidio Britanniae*, *Peritia* 16 (2002), 161–167.

²¹ *HE*, Preface.

²² Dumville, ‘Anglian Collection’.

be a matter for debate. The group I want to focus on here, however, form the generation which are purported to have flourished immediately prior to the Augustinian mission of 597 and who thus have, perhaps, the best claim to historicity. They include Æthelberht of Kent's father, Eormanric, Rædwald of East Anglia's father, Tyttla, and Æthelfrith of Bernicia's father and uncle, Æthelric and Theodric (made famous in *Historia Brittonum's* account of the siege of Lindisfarne).²³ There is a further possible example in the Mercian pedigree but this is less clear cut so I shall set it to one side for now.²⁴ These men, if they lived at all, must have flourished in the last third of the sixth century having been born perhaps in the middle third. Their names are extremely rare in the surviving Anglo-Saxon corpus and correspond precisely to names found in the Amal dynasty of Ostrogothic Italy. Eormanric is the English form of Ermanaric, the ruler of the Greutungi encountered in the pages of Ammianus Marcellinus who was transformed into a Gothic Alexander and ancestor of the Amals in the pages of Jordanes, presumably following Cassiodorus.²⁵ Tyttla is, of course, Totila, the valiant leader of resistance to Justinian's armies who died in 552,²⁶ while

²³ *HB* 63.

²⁴ This is Cnebba Iceling whose name might just possibly be cognate with Gothic Cniva but this seems unlikely.

²⁵ Ammianus Marcellinus XXX 3.1; *Getica* XXIII and XXIV. *Ammianus Marcellinus: History*, trans. by John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935–39).

²⁶ Procopius, *Wars* VII passim. *Procopius: History of the Wars*, vol. 3, trans. by H. B. Dewing (London: Heinemann, 1919). The standard transliteration of the first vowel in 'Totila' leaves some doubt as to its

Theodric is clearly the Gothic Theodoric and Æthelric is cognate with Athalaric, the son of Amalasantha, Theodoric's heir in Italy. This Gothic horizon is striking, and we might perhaps add to it Eadwine of Deira whose name echoes that of the Langobard ruler Audoin who belonged to the same generation as Totila and Athalaric and ruled from 546 to about 560. Eadwine is of a slightly younger generation than the others.

Two possible explanations for the Gothic horizon suggest themselves. One might be that it is, like the creation of Hengest, a learned construct of a later generation. It is hard to see, however, how this would benefit anyone. Neither English churchmen nor Italian missionaries are likely to have wanted to link the current royal dynasties to Arian rulers of a defunct line. The second possible explanation is that these men really bore these names and that they were born during, or shortly after, the struggle between the East Roman forces and the Ostrogoths in Italy and Illyricum between 535 and 554. Although Audoin the Langobard had been allied to the Romans during this war, his son and successor Alboin invaded Italy in 568 and wrested much of it from imperial control. Eadwine of Deira we know to have been born in the 580s when the Romans were at war with the Langobards.²⁷ If we accept this second option, that these names

phonological equivalence with Tyttla but Procopius' original *Τοντίλας* should leave us in no doubt. See Moritz Schönfeld, *Wörterbuch der altgermanischen Personen- und Völkernamen* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1911) s.v. 'Totila' for a full range of original forms.

²⁷ For a survey of these wars see John Moorhead, 'Ostrogothic Italy and the Lombard Invasions', in *The New Cambridge Medieval History Vol.1, c.*

belonged to real men and were not merely learned constructs, as the more plausible, it raises interesting questions about what was going on in Britain in the 540s and 550s when Italy was a battleground between Roman and Goth and when these royal ancestors were born and named. What were Oisc, Wuffa and Ida thinking when they named their sons?

If these links are real, a number of issues can be investigated. As noted above, none of these Gothic names became widely used in the Old English name-hoard and the later popularity of the name Eadwine may result from its popularization via the medium of the Old English translation of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* in the ninth century and Eadweard the Elder's choice of it for one of his own sons.²⁸ The chronological synchronism with the Gothic War is too close to be coincidence. We seem to be seeing rulers along the east coast from Canterbury to Bamburgh simultaneously making some sort of identification with the opponents of Roman imperial power. This should lead us to question at least two major tenets about the English in the sixth century. Firstly, that before the emergence of princely burials and feasting halls in the archaeological record, in the closing decades of the sixth century and opening decades of the seventh, English society was small-scale and local in character. Secondly, that early English society was closed in and insular and

500–700, ed. by Paul Fouracre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 140–162.

²⁸ Of the nearly two hundred bearers of this name in PASE only one, in addition to the seventh-century king of Deira, is noted before the tenth century.

that links between Britain and the Mediterranean in this period were confined to west coast princely sites such as Tintagel, Cadbury-Congresbury, Whithorn and so forth, safely in the hands of the Britons.²⁹

What this evidence suggests instead is that in the middle of the sixth century eastern England was still part of the Late Antique world, in touch with developments and trends in its Mediterranean heartland. This should not surprise us too much. Theodoric the Great's daughter married a king of the Thuringi,³⁰ and we know from Cassiodorus' *Variae* that Theodoric was in diplomatic contact with Clovis, whom he envisioned boating on the Scheldt,³¹ and even with a king of the Varni, a group living somewhere in the north of modern Germany.³² We have no such correspondence surviving from the period after Cassiodorus left the court in the 530s, but had we correspondence from later Gothic kings might we find letters directed to rulers in Britain? Procopius tells us that Belisarius offered to exchange Sicily for Britain, an offer usually dismissed as facetious, but perhaps it was not such an outlandish suggestion.³³ While it is probably not credible to imagine Britain becoming part of the Ostrogothic

²⁹ For the west see, for example, Anthea Harris, *Byzantium, Britain and the West: The Archaeology of Cultural Identity* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003) and Ewan Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports to Atlantic Britain and Ireland, AD 400–800* (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2007).

³⁰ *Variae*, IV.1. Cassiodorus: *Variae*, ed. and trans. by S. J. B. Barnish (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1992).

³¹ *Variae*, II.41, III.4.

³² *Ibid.*, III.3.

³³ *Wars*, VI.6.

realm as we have grown accustomed to picture it, it is not implausible that Justinian's government might have thought in terms of what today would be called spheres of influence, analogous to the division of Africa between Britain and France in 1899 along the largely as-yet-unexplored watershed between the Nile and the Congo. Theodoric — whose *imperium*, if not his *regnum*, extended to the shores of the Baltic and the North Sea — might credibly have imagined his authority to extend across the narrow sea. But how would it have looked from Britain? In all three cases the fathers of our Gothic-named dynasts are themselves dynastic eponyms: Oisc of the Oiscingas, Wuffa of the Wuffingas and Ida of the Idingas. Might English kingship owe its origins to Ostrogothic patronage? Might clientage of the Gothic kings, the receipt of prestigious gifts and letters, have propelled a small number of barbarian officers or chieftains into the ranks of kings?

Alternatively we might see this development as entirely internally generated. News from the South may have helped ambitious rulers struggling to find an ideology to underpin their ambition. The situation in Italy had been one in which peaceful cohabitation between Gothic soldiers and Roman civilians had allowed a status quo to emerge that was only overthrown by Roman perfidy. By the 540s the Goths were facing an existential crisis and fighting for their very survival as a *gens*. Did the early English commanders begin to view their British neighbours with anxiety verging on paranoia or, more knowingly, encourage their soldiery to do so? The mid-sixth century may well have been the period when across what had been the Western Empire

people were compelled to make choices about identity and allegiance that had not been necessary in the fifth century. Whatever the practical realities on the ground, most fifth- and early sixth-century Germanic kings had notionally accepted the superiority of the Emperor and claimed to be ruling, in some sense, as his agents or subordinates. Justinian's decision to 'reconquer' the devolved provinces gave the lie to this understanding of the world. English identification with the Goths and with the Germanic, indeed Scandinavian, ancestry that Cassiodorus and Jordanes had cultivated for them may well have been a reflex of a more hostile attitude to Britons, both inside English-controlled polities and beyond.

It would be interesting to know whether a similar identification with Justinian's Romans occurred in British communities at the same time. We have become used to identifying the finds of B-ware and other high-quality eastern Mediterranean ceramics with the Justinianic project but the refined dating produced by Ewan Campbell, Maria Duggan and others now seems to suggest that this material mostly arrived in Britain during the period c. 470-540, which coincides closely with the sustained peace between the Eastern Empire and the Vandals.³⁴ This *pax Vandalicum* in the western Mediterranean seems to have provided the context for Aegean and Cilician material to pass out into the Atlantic. My discussion of the

³⁴ Campbell, *Continental Imports*. Maria Duggan, 'Network and Nexus: Re-approaching the Ceramic Evidence for Atlantic Connections', unpublished paper presented to the Emerging Governance Symposium held at UCD on 17th September 2016.

Imagining English Origins

English dynasties began with naming practices and it might be worth looking into Welsh pedigrees for sixth-century influences. It is well known that British personal names in the Middle Ages, and indeed today, contained, and contain, stock of both Celtic and Latin origin. Names of Roman origin, like Tegid and Iestyn, are still current in Wales today. The tendency has been to keep the analysis of such names to this primary binary division, Celtic or Latin, but it might be worth seeing if layers can be identified within the name-stock. Certain Roman names like Justin and Romanus, for example, do seem to be late names, only becoming widespread across the Empire after the traditional date for the ending of Roman Britain at the beginning of the fifth century. The existence of *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* would make such a project relatively easy, perhaps within the scope of a master's dissertation. But enough of that for now, when my concerns lie with English identities.

I would like to close by returning to the cultural identity of the English in the conversion period, in the 590s and the early seventh century. As was noted earlier the most striking and best known developments in the material record seem to follow developments in Scandinavia. Germanic-style metalwork, princely burials and large halls designed for feasting retinues all spring to mind. The question I would like to pose is why we seem to see a late sixth-century replacement of a discourse focused on Mediterranean identities with one focused instead upon the North Sea. The disappearance of the Goths from Italy and their replacement by the less dynamic and politically ambitious Langobards is of course a major factor. In the former Roman

West both Italy and Spain became more concerned with internal strife and continued squabbles between Roman enclaves and local Germanic kings, and the hegemony which Theodoric and his immediate successors had aspired to was gradually usurped by the Franks of the Meroving dynasty. We owe our enduring impressions of this dynasty and its origins to Gregory, bishop of Tours, who was born shortly after the Roman reconquest of Italy began and who wrote his *Ten Books of History* in the 590s. Like all historians of medieval dynasties, he presents the founder, in his case Clovis (though presumably the use elsewhere of the dynastic name Meroving suggests an alternative tradition which saw Merowech as the significant figure), as a greater man than his descendants.³⁵ It is notable, however, that it is the sons of Clovis who take advantage of the collapse of Gothic hegemony and annex the Burgundian kingdom and extend their power beyond the Rhine, destroying Thuringia and entering into conflict with the Saxons. Clovis's eldest son, Theoderic, and his son Theudebert are particularly significant in the *Drang nach Osten* and may be given credit for creating the characteristically hybrid nature of the Frankish *imperium*, straddling Germany and Gaul, which was to survive into the tenth century.³⁶

This eastward expansion had, as I see it, two major outcomes. One was to reinforce the Germanic character of Frankish identity and probably contribute to the preservation of

³⁵ Halsall, 'Childeric', cited above, makes a good case that Clovis' father had already achieved much of what his son would go on to be credited for.

³⁶ For much of this political narrative see now Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 284–319.

Frankish language (in contrast to relatively rapid linguistic assimilation of Langobards, Goths and Sueves in Italy and Spain). The other was the impact it had on Germanic *gentes* beyond the confines of the former Roman Empire. The early sixth century sees a new group appearing in this region: the Danes. No pre-sixth-century sources mention these people, who first appear in the pages of Procopius and Jordanes.³⁷ Those who seek historicity in the narrative of *Beowulf* would be wise to note that if the internal chronology of the poem is to be respected much of the action might seem to take place before there were any Danes. The emergence of this people as a major power in the course of the sixth century may explain why Gregory of Tours ascribes Danish ethnicity to Chlochilaicus, the Scandinavian king who died in an attack on the kingdom of Theoderic son of Clovis in around 520.³⁸ Although later sources seem to agree that this king was not Danish but a king of the Gautar, rightly or wrongly, Gregory — writing seventy years after the event — seems to have believed that the Danes were the most likely perpetrators of such an audacious seaborne attack. The ongoing archaeological campaigns at Lejre³⁹ and Uppåkra⁴⁰ also indicate that Zealand and Skåne had become the most dynamic region in Transrhenic Germania in the course of the sixth century.

³⁷ *Wars* VI.15 and *Getica* III.

³⁸ Gregory of Tours, *History* III.3.

³⁹ Tom Christensen, 'Ældste Lejre?', *Skalk* 6 (2008), 18–24.

⁴⁰ *Continuity for Centuries: A Ceremonial Building and its Context at Uppåkra, Southern Sweden*, ed. by Lars Larsson (Lund: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2004).

What I have suggested elsewhere and would like to restate here is that during the course of the sixth and seventh centuries Denmark emerged as a counter to Frankish hegemony in the contracting Germanic-speaking world.⁴¹ Increasingly, as much of the area between the Vistula and the Elbe ceased to play a part in the cultural and political nexus that maintained Germanic identity, it seems the Germanic-speaking world developed a bipolar structure with competing centres on the lower Rhine and in Southern Scandinavia. This polarization was not without its impact on the Germanic-speaking communities in Britain. In his important 1983 work *The Merovingian North Sea*, Ian Wood argued for Frankish hegemony in Britain for much of the sixth century. The smoking gun for this hypothesis was of course Æthelbert's marriage to a Frankish princess and the presence of a Frankish bishop, Liudhard, at the Kentish court. Further evidence could be deduced from Venantius Fortunatus' apparent reference to Chilperic's seaborne victory over the Eudoses, tentatively identified with Insular Jutes, and from the garnet-studded gold-work from Kent which closely resembles contemporary Frankish work.⁴²

The evidence, however, is largely confined to Kent and it is worth noting that, to date, Kent also lacks evidence for the kind of Scandinavian-style princely burials and feasting halls that we see in the regions north of the Thames. Indeed the richest such

⁴¹ Alex Woolf, 'Sutton Hoo and Sweden Revisited', in *The Long Seventh Century: Continuity and Discontinuity in an Age of Transition*, ed. by Alessandro Gnasso and others (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015).

⁴² Ian N. Wood, *The Merovingian North Sea* (Ålingsås: Viktoria, 1983).

Imagining English Origins

burials found to date, at Sutton Hoo, Prittlewell and Taplow are all immediately north of the Thames or what might be considered its outer estuary. I would like to conclude by suggesting that what we are seeing here is another discourse of resistance, not this time aimed at a perceived Roman threat, as the Gothic horizon suggested, but now countering Frankish aspirations for hegemony which had been made real in some parts of southern Britain. The natural language for such a discourse was that of the Franks' major rivals with Germania: the Danes. It may well be to this late sixth- and seventh-century series of interactions that the adoption and development of much of what has been identified as the Anglo-Saxons' Germanic heritage can be attributed.

Ideology in the Landscape: Reassessing Benedictine Approaches to History and Identity in the Tenth Century

Thomas Kearns
University of Durham

History can be a powerful ideological weapon at times of revolution and reform. England in the late tenth century was a hotbed for reform, in this case monastic reform, which generated a considerable number of texts with one eye fixed firmly on the past. These sources have become associated with a trend in scholarship since the late 1980s to see the Benedictines as forming a cohesive intellectual body within the English Church unified by what I shall refer to as an ‘ideology’ rooted in strict adherence to the Rule of Benedict and defended by a particular attitude to the past.¹ However, closer examination of the sources suggests that a homogenous Benedictinism is illusory. The main issue with this understanding of Benedictine ‘ideology’, most influentially articulated by Patrick Wormald, is that it focuses almost entirely on sources emanating from a single point, namely St Æthelwold’s Winchester and the communities associated with

¹ Antonia Gransden, ‘Traditionalism and Continuity during the Last Century of Anglo-Saxon Monasticism’, *JEH*, 40 (1989), 159–207 (pp. 161–63); Simon Coates, ‘Perceptions of the Anglo-Saxon Past in the Tenth-Century Monastic Reform Movement’, *Studies in Church History*, 33 (1997), 61–74 (p. 62); James Clark, *The Benedictines in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011), pp. 43–47.

it. Certainly, this reflects the fact that Æthelwold's communities produced the bulk of Benedictine texts, but by prioritizing these sources over others we run the risk of retrospectively extending Æthelwold's particular perspective to the other reformers, thus making them part of what Wormald terms 'Æthelwold's Circle'.² In this article I will demonstrate that the retrospective view obscures real areas of divergence between the leading reformers, areas that should lead us to pause when arguing for a cohesive Benedictine ideology.

Since Æthelwold is so important to how we define this 'ideology', if we find evidence from one of the other reformers that seems to contradict the image presented by Æthelwold, then our whole understanding of Benedictine 'ideology' can be shaken. The use made of English church history is an ideal example of an area in which reassessment could have serious consequences for how we understand the English Benedictines. Æthelwold placed a high value on associating his communities with England's spiritual past as suggested, for example, by his now incomplete *Old English Account of King Edgar's Foundation of Monasteries* in which a narrative of the English conversion that seems heavily indebted to Bede is interrupted by a lacuna.³ However, as I shall argue, Æthelwold's fellow reformer Oswald

² Patrick Wormald, 'Æthelwold and his Continental Counterparts: Contact, Comparison, Contrast', in *Bishop Æthelwold: His Career and Influence*, ed. by Barbara Yorke (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1988), pp. 13–42 (pp. 37–42).

³ *Councils and Synods with Other Documents Relating to the English Church: pt. 1. 871–1066*, ed. by Dorothy Whitelock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), no. 33, pp. 142–154; Wormald, p. 40.

of Worcester seems to have had comparatively little interest in such associations. This contrast forces us to question the place of history in our traditional understanding of Benedictine reform. If the idea of a Benedictine ‘ideology’ reflects the reality of the situation, we would expect Oswald to broadly agree with Æthelwold on a point that was so central to Æthelwold’s thinking. I suggest that it points to the need for a more nuanced approach to the Benedictine Reform that emphasizes the different qualities of the individual reformers.

I shall focus here on tenorial documents as a meeting point between ‘ideology’ and the realities of English society. Using this evidence I shall demonstrate that Æthelwold’s use of history to promote an association between Benedictine reform and an idealized English past was indeed ideological. Oswald’s use of history also served an ideological end but it was entirely different from that pursued by Æthelwold; rather than taking Worcester back to its origins, Oswald promoted an image of a more institutional and urbanized bishopric that necessitated the suppression of older episcopal identity. Thus Oswald appears as Æthelwold’s opposite in his attitude; for both men history was an accepted form of ideological expression by either inclusion or omission but its use was dictated more by individual preference than general principle.

I shall begin by examining Æthelwold’s use of history in his refoundation charters. I will demonstrate that these texts purposefully use historical narrative to place an awareness of sacred history at the heart of his communities’ Benedictine identity. This emphasis on history is used to set the tenor for reformed monastic life and provide examples of the ideals towards

which monks living by the Rule are to strive. After this, I shall contrast the key role played by history in Æthelwold's charters with the almost total absence of history in Oswald's 74 leases. By examining the titles used by Oswald and his predecessors when leasing Worcester's episcopal lands, I shall demonstrate that Oswald purposefully distanced himself from Worcester's historic identity. My third section will further suggest the peculiarity of Oswald's lack of interest in Worcester's history by demonstrating that in the community during his episcopate there was a living historical tradition that rooted Worcester firmly in the West Midlands' distant past. This evidence suggests that Oswald's lack of interest in using history as an ideological tool was in itself an ideological act since he chose not to use a resource freely available to him.

The dichotomy between Æthelwold and Oswald runs throughout this article. By using the example of their divergent attitudes towards history I shall demonstrate that there was no singular 'Benedictine ideology'. When taken as two individual churchmen who happened both to be reformers, rather than two members of a national Benedictine movement, we begin to see differences of opinion and attitude that force us to reassess our traditional approaches to history and identity in the tenth-century English Church.

ÆTHELWOLD'S CHARTERS

Before arguing that Oswald's use of history in his leases was distinct from other uses of history in tenurial documents, we must first look beyond Worcester to establish what these 'other uses'

were. The individual who was by far the most committed to the incorporation of history into land-grants was Bishop Æthelwold. It has been suggested that the output of his communities of Winchester, Abingdon, Thorney, and Ely all imply the existence of an ‘active historiographical tradition’.⁴ Most important to my consideration of the role history played in Benedictine ideological discourse, however, is the key place of historical narrative in Æthelwold’s various refoundation charters. Such charters suggest an abiding interest in associating Benedictine reform with sacred history, both as recorded in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* and in less documented local traditions. I argue that this interest in the golden example of Bede and others is not merely historical but can be associated with a ‘refoundational act’ that transcends earthly time by the invocation of saints and which provides the spiritual foundation for Æthelwold’s reforming activity.

Two foundation charters, S 792⁵ and S 779,⁶ serve to give us examples of sacred history being incorporated into foundational documents of Æthelwold’s communities. S 792 is the foundation charter for Thorney Abbey granted by King Edgar in 973 but is only preserved in a thirteenth-century copy.

⁴ Alan Thacker, ‘Æthelwold and Abingdon’, in *Bishop Æthelwold*, ed. by Yorke, pp. 43–64 (pp. 53–54).

⁵ *Charters of Peterborough Abbey*, Anglo-Saxon Charters 14, ed. by Susan Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Appendix 4.

⁶ John Pope, ‘Ælfric and the Old English Version of the Ely Privilege’, in *England Before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. by Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 85–113 (pp. 88–92).

As it stands this document is not entirely genuine since much of the text is copied from S 782,⁷ a grant of land at Barrow-upon-Humber, Lincolnshire, made by King Edgar to Peterborough in 971.⁸ The copy was not done with particular care since Barrow-upon-Humber is included among the lands given in S 792, a claim that is clearly spurious given that the land would be far outside Thorney's orbit of influence.⁹ What is interesting for my purpose, however, is the long historical digression added to S 792 with no parallel in S 782. This digression recounts the early history of Thorney abbey – in the text called 'Ancarig' – as a retreat for three holy hermits, Tancred, Torhtred, and Tova, and how the site was purchased and refounded by Æthelwold after being abandoned.¹⁰ This historical interpolation flows into a third digression that mandates the community to elect its abbot in line with the Benedictine Rule. I suggest that these two interruptions in fact serve a single purpose: by moving from an account of the community's early history as a hermitage and its rediscovery to a section ensuring Benedictine observance, it would appear that the text is making an association between the way of life practiced by the hermits and that instituted by Æthelwold in his reform, an association that seems to have been firmly established by the mid-eleventh century.

⁷ *Charters of Peterborough*, no. 15.

⁸ Cyril Hart, *The Early Charters of Eastern England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1966), pp. 174–75.

⁹ Peter Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Lincolnshire*, *History of Lincolnshire* 3 (Lincoln: History of Lincolnshire Committee for the Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology, 1998), p. 244.

¹⁰ Hart, *Early Charters*, pp. 175–76.

In her article on Folcard's late-eleventh century 'hagiographical dossier' for Thorney, Rosalind Love observes that Folcard repeatedly stresses Æthelwold's affection for the abbey; Love suggests that this may be a result of the sources at Folcard's disposal.¹¹ In both his *Life of St Botwulf* and his homily for Tancred, Torhtred, and Tova, Folcard bemoans a lack of hagiography for these saints. However, in the case of the three hermits, he does mention an account written by Æthelwold and when the biographical information of Folcard's homily is compared with that in S 792 it becomes apparent that the two accounts appear to share a common source. Excluding Folcard's tentative dating of Tancred's death to the reign of Edmund, King and Martyr, all of the information given in his homily is also found in S 792, while this one notable exclusion would suggest that the forger of S 792 is not drawing on Folcard since firmly anchoring the historical digression in time would have benefited the charter's slightly amorphous historical narrative.¹² Since the putative common source is lost, we cannot know how closely it was associated with Æthelwold. What is clear is that, by the late eleventh century, we have evidence for an already existing tradition at Thorney associating the community's earliest history and Æthelwold's reform. The intensity with which the reformer

¹¹ Rosalind Love, 'The Anglo-Saxon Saints of Thorney Abbey and their Hagiographer', in *Hagiography in Anglo-Saxon England: Adopting and Adapting Saints' Lives into Old English Prose (c. 950–1150)*, *Textes et études du moyen âge* 73, ed. by Loredana Lazzari, Patrizia Lendinara, and Claudia Di Sciacca (Barcelona: Fédération internationale des instituts d'études médiévales, 2014), pp. 499–534 (p. 507).

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 508–10.

is linked to the community's early history and the association in S 792 of this eremitic life with Benedictinism — an association possibly deriving from the first chapter of Benedict's Rule in which he praises hermits as the highest and most disciplined form of ascetic — may suggest an environment in which an otherwise obscure local history not recorded by Bede was adopted by the Benedictines as a means of securing their spiritual authority. While it is hard to say how much this environment derived from Æthelwold personally, it seems that he left an indelible mark on Thorney's sense of self and may have even been in some way responsible for the codification of an otherwise uncoded history.

A similar use of history to confirm the sanctity of Benedictine life can be found in our second foundation charter, that given by King Edgar to Ely Abbey in 970 (S 779) and now extant in the *Liber Eliensis*.¹³ The preamble to the text serves to praise the founder of Ely, St Æthelthryth, due to her miracle-working relics and with allusion to Bede's account of her in his *Ecclesiastical History*.¹⁴ Much like in S 792, the historical narrative of S 779 creates an implicit association between the saintly origins of the community and the life promoted there by Æthelwold. The difference between these two charters is that S 779 draws on a well-known history while S 792 suggests the popularizing of a more local tradition; both suggest a desire in Æthelwold's

¹³ *Liber Eliensis*, ed. by E. O. Blake (London: Royal Historical Society, 1962), pp. 76–78.

¹⁴ Thacker, p. 54.

communities to make a firm association between the past and reform.

Foundation charters would seem to be an obvious place to include grand, ideological assertions about the past and the present: we just have to look at S 745,¹⁵ the refoundation charter for the New Minster at Winchester, to see how extravagant charters could become in their attempts to justify reform.¹⁶ S 745 also provides an interesting contrast with S 792 and 779. It does not draw on the history of the seventh and eighth centuries, but rather uses the account of Lucifer and the rebel angels as a means to defend reform. This is also an historical defence, albeit one that looks back to a time before time was created, and the sheer audacity of the claim being made for overtly ideological reasons underlines Æthelwold's fascination with the 'refoundational act' as embodied in the refoundation charter.

The acts recorded in Æthelwold's refoundation charters root their communities in a sacred history. By invoking the blessed memory of the past in refoundation charters the community and its actions were rooted in the blessings of their saintly founders, and with this came an implication that it was under saintly protection.¹⁷ This claim is both an historical and a

¹⁵ Sean Miller, *Charters of the New Minster, Winchester*, Anglo-Saxon Charters 9 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), no. 23.

¹⁶ Julia Barrow, 'The Ideology of the Tenth-Century English Benedictine "Reform"', in *Challenging the Boundaries of Medieval History: The Legacy of Timothy Reuter*, ed. by Patricia Skinner (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), pp. 141–54 (pp. 148–50).

¹⁷ Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints: The Diocese of Orleans 800–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 137–38.

non-historical factor in considering Æthelwold's use of the refoundation charter, since saints exist on three planes of time at once: outside time in Heaven, within the earthly present as relics, and in the earthly past. A saint is in a sense eternally present and thus it would be a mistake to read saintly invocations in refoundation charters as 'simply' historical. This would leave saints as passive figures in a community's past; if hagiography and miracle stories tell us anything, it is that saints are far from passive. A saint provides a means through which the past and present blur together, as he or she is a figure who still has the means to intervene in current events despite being outside earthly time. If his desire to link his reform to the sacred past is any indication, it seems that this blurring held a particular fascination for Æthelwold. This fascination motivated him to make his communities' sense of themselves as inheritors of a sacred past an essential part of their reformed identity. History was an ideological weapon wielded with devastating effect, yet this does not make it a part of Benedictine 'ideology'. When we look to Oswald it becomes clear that he did not share Æthelwold's desire to cement sacred history at the heart of his reform.

OSWALD'S LEASES

Æthelwold's interest in the sacred past and his desire to make it a focal point for ideological discourse contrasts with the attitude towards the past found in Oswald's leases. Æthelwold used sacred history as the bedrock for his communities and their activity. In contrast, on the comparatively rare occasions when Oswald uses history it is with reference to a decidedly secular past that served

no such clear pragmatic purpose for his reform at Worcester. While Æthelwold sought to court royal support in Wessex with his visions of a spiritually revitalized *gens Anglorum*, Oswald instead attempted to remake Worcester in line with the centralized and urban episcopal sees he had encountered while training in Frankia. His desire for innovation can be seen in the titles he used while leasing land and it is these titles, particularly the six occasions he is given a variation on the geographic titles ‘bishop of Hwicce/Worcester’, which will form the basis of my argument.

First, however, I must discuss our evidence and the sheer number of leases associated with Oswald. During the eleventh century, Worcester produced no fewer than three cartularies. The first, the *Liber Wigorniensis*, was produced — or at least completed — in the episcopacy of Wulfstan I (1002–1016) during a ‘stock-taking’ of episcopal lands.¹⁸ The second, the Nero-Middleton Cartulary, was produced in the episcopacy of Wulfstan II (1062–1095) during a second stock-taking that also inspired the sub-prior Hemming to produce his own, third, cartulary independently of Bishop Wulfstan’s.¹⁹ From the dawn of the eleventh century the community at Worcester appears to have been deeply interested in recording and securing its landed holdings. The *Liber Wigorniensis* provides our clearest evidence

¹⁸ Stephen Baxter, ‘Archbishop Wulfstan and the Administration of God’s Property’, in *Wulfstan, Archbishop of York: The Proceedings of the Second Alcuin Conference*, ed. by Matthew Townend (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), pp. 161–206.

¹⁹ Francesca Tinti, *Sustaining Belief: The Church of Worcester from c. 870 to c. 1100* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 75–76.

for such interest in the form of updates added to the document's leases listing the inheritors of the estates leased out by Worcester.²⁰

This early evidence for concern in managing land holdings at Worcester is potentially interesting if we look at the numbers of leases issued by respective Worcester bishops before the compilation of the *Liber Wigorniensis*. Taking the cartularies as our evidence, Oswald appears to have overseen an extraordinary drive in land leasing, with 74 texts being issued during his episcopacy (961–992).²¹ This contrasts with the number of leases granted by his predecessors, most of whom have none extant and some only a few. Christopher Dyer has used this evidence to present Oswald as a bishop keenly interested in the management of his landed assets at a time when growing urbanization was increasing the amount of surplus resources at Worcester's disposal.²² Dyer's interpretation raises the possibility that Oswald was forced to oversee a reform of Worcester during a time when its resources were expanding. To meet the demands of his position, he had to innovate by formalizing the use of the written word for leases, thus accounting for the sheer number of his

²⁰ Tinti, p. 87.

²¹ Vanessa King, 'St Oswald's Tenants', in *St Oswald of Worcester: Life and Influence*, ed. by Nicholas Brooks and Catherine Cubitt (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1996), pp. 100–16 (pp. 100–02).

²² Christopher Dyer, 'St Oswald and 10,000 West Midland Peasants', in *St Oswald of Worcester*, ed. by Brooks and Cubitt, pp. 174–93 (pp. 176–77).

leases.²³ However, since the *Liber Wigorniensis* was clearly a working document compiled not long after Oswald's death most of his leases were still in effect.²⁴ It is natural that he should be disproportionately represented in a cartulary recording the state of Worcester's land holdings in the early eleventh century.

Having noted that the many surviving Oswald leases may just reflect the state of leasing in the early eleventh century, it is worth looking at the few single-sheet originals of Worcester leases to see if they can shed any light on the question of Oswald's innovation. The earliest of these (S 1281²⁵) is a lease by Bishop Wærferth made in 904 to his reeve Wulfsige; this text is one of the earliest surviving English chirographs. The document is clearly quite rough since it has no clear separation between the principal parts of its diplomatic — as later leases do — and its witnesses are listed horizontally rather than in columns.²⁶ Despite this early stage of diplomatic development, however, I suggest that it is significant that this text is a chirograph.²⁷ That the grant

²³ Christopher Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society: The Estates of the Bishopric of Worcester, 680-1540* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 17.

²⁴ Baxter, pp. 175–76.

²⁵ Henry Sweet and Dorothy Whitelock, *A Second Anglo-Saxon Reader, Archaic and Dialectical*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 220–21 (no. 30).

²⁶ Tinti, p. 77.

²⁷ Katherine Lowe, 'Lay Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and the Development of the Chirograph', in *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts and their Heritage*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine M. Treharne (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 161–205.

is made to a layman and that he would have likely kept the other half of the chirograph suggests an appreciation for the written word and official documentation at Worcester as early as the reign of King Edward the Elder. It seems unlikely that this would be the first written lease made at Worcester and thus Oswald's large number of written leases, while perhaps innovative in their quantity, may not have been innovative in their formalization of the written word as a means of regulating leases.

As Wærferth's lease demonstrates, these documents provide a direct link between the bishop and the elite laity. Since we have already suggested that diplomas could use history as a means of conveying ideological aims it seems worth considering whether these much more local and individual documents used history in a similar way. They often lack the grand proems of diplomas; instead, leases tend to be more functional. However, an area ripe for ideological exploitation is the titles used to describe the bishop. Since leases were seemingly internally produced documents, I suggest that how a bishop was titled in his leases can reflect the image he sought to convey to the community and the laity.

I shall begin by looking at the leases of Oswald's predecessors to establish a sense of how titles were used prior to 961. Milred titles himself *Huicciorum episcopus* in his only surviving lease S 1255.²⁸ In his two leases (S 1262²⁹ and 1261³⁰)

²⁸ Hubert Pierquin, *Recueil général des chartes anglo-saxonnes: Les saxons en Angleterre, 604–1061* (Paris: A. Picard & fils, 1912), pt. 1, no. 61.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pt. 1, no. 94.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pt. 1, no. 95.

Deneberht is titled only *episcopus* and leases explicitly with the consent *mea familia on Uuigerna ceastre*. In his eight leases Wærferth is titled simply *episcopus* or *biscop* in six (S 1415,³¹ 1416,³² 1283,³³ 1280,³⁴ 1281, 1282³⁵) and as *Huicciorum episcopus* in two (S 1278,³⁶ 1279³⁷). Before Oswald, the titles used by Worcester bishops when leasing are consistent, always being a variant of either *episcopus* or *Huicciorum episcopus*. While it is always hard to say when we have so few texts, if we suppose that these titles are relatively representative then it would seem that the Worcester bishops had a fairly consistent sense of their identity. The term *Huicciorum* is particularly interesting given that it associates the episcopacy of Worcester with the historical kingdom of the Hwicce or (more likely given the use of the genitive plural) with the people of the Hwicce; the term relates to the ethnic rather than the institutional.

Under Oswald the regularity of his predecessors largely breaks down. He is given an ‘ethnic/institutional’ title only six times in his 74 leases; three of these identify him as *Huicciorum*

³¹ Pierquin, pt. 2, no. 45.

³² Ibid., pt. 3, no. 62.

³³ Walter de Grey Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 3 vols (London: Whiting and Company, 1885–1899), 560.

³⁴ Ibid., 608.

³⁵ John Earle, *A Hand-Book of the Land-Charters and other Saxon Documents* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), p. 319.

³⁶ Pierquin, pt. 2, no. 37.

³⁷ Ibid., pt. 2, no. 48.

episcopus (S 1297,³⁸ 1316,³⁹ 1318⁴⁰) and the other three use the innovative title of *Uuigornensis episcopus* (S 1368,⁴¹ 1315,⁴² 1370⁴³). The earliest of these leases (1297) was issued in 963, early in Oswald's time as bishop, while the latest (1318) was issued in 969; the dating of 1370 is uncertain and could reasonably be dated from any time between 961 and 972. The choice between Hwicce or Worcester does not impact on the dating of a lease in the 960s. However, it is striking that on none of the occasions in which he is titled 'bishop of Worcester' is the same formulation of the title used; in S 1368 he is *Uuigorniensis æcclesiæ episcopus*, S 1315 he is *Wiogurnæ urbis antistes*, and in S 1370 he is *Weogernensium parrochia prelatus*. This variety contrasts with the consistency of his Hwicce titles; apart from S 1297 in which he is titled *antistes Huicciorum* the formulation of the title in S 1316 and 1318 is identical. The variety in the three Worcester titles compared to the consistency of the three Hwicce titles suggests that the idea of a 'bishopric of Worcester' had not fully formed in the 960s, but that Oswald's episcopacy saw some of the first tentative steps in the process of constructing a new sense of episcopal identity separate from the Hwicce. We cannot forget, however, that these six leases are only a small fraction of Oswald's 74 known leases and their specificity in naming a place is unusual.

³⁸ Birch, 1108.

³⁹ Pierquin, pt. 4, no. 7.

⁴⁰ Birch, 1232.

⁴¹ Pierquin, pt. 5, no. 36.

⁴² Birch, 1204.

⁴³ Pierquin, pt. 2, no. 129.

After 972, Oswald's status as archbishop of York comes to supersede his previous titles. While future bishops would identify as 'bishops of Worcester', 972 marks the end date of their identifying as 'bishops of the Hwicce'. Despite Oswald's use of the same, long-established form of Hwicce title as that used by his predecessors, the more 'flexible' Worcester title survived where the traditional title did not. His opting to associate himself with 'Worcester' just as frequently as with the Hwicce suggests an institutionalization of his power and a shift away from historical ethnic identity. Yet the terms used in the Worcester titles — *ecclesiæ*, *urbis*, and *parrochiaie* — suggest a lack of definition in the nature of the institution with which Oswald was associating himself; this uncertainty is consistent with the identity 'bishop of Worcester' being relatively new during Oswald's episcopacy. This variation suggests to me that these titles reflect an episcopal identity in transition between the ethnic and the institutional. Given its consistency, identity based on the Hwicce seems to have been fairly embedded at Worcester. Thus, I suggest that the motivation to form a Worcester identity came from Oswald himself rather than the community.

This line of reasoning is based on an understanding that if the inclusion of history can be ideological then so can its exclusion. I will demonstrate in my next section that a case can be made for a relatively assertive antiquarian interest existing at Worcester before Oswald's episcopacy that then appears to vanish during his reign. If this is the case, Oswald appears to have had little interest in associating his reforming work with history, sacred or secular, despite being more than able to do so. The attitudes to history and its use as a method of ideological discourse

found at Oswald's Worcester could not be further from the attitude found in Æthelwold's communities. This observation would appear to undermine an argument for a Benedictine 'ideology' in anything but the broadest sense. Before we conclude, however, there is one last issue that must be addressed: whether Oswald lacked the resources available at Worcester, and thus could not use history in a comparable way to Æthelwold, or whether he did have the means but chose not to.

EDGAR'S 'MERCIAN CHARTERS'

My argument that the exclusion of history can be an ideological act requires that history be included in other texts produced at Worcester; only if this is the case can its exclusion be significant. I would argue that the title 'bishop of the Hwicce' fills this requirement but I shall now demonstrate that there is other evidence in support of the use of history for ideological purposes at Worcester and thus that Oswald's move away from Worcester's history was itself an ideological act. The three texts in question are three of Edgar's land grants: two from 958 (S 667⁴⁴ and S 677⁴⁵) and one from 963 (S 723⁴⁶). The 958 grants were made following the division of the kingdom along the line of the Thames agreed between Edgar and his brother King Eadwig in 957; from 957 to 959 Edgar reigned north of the Thames as *rex*

⁴⁴ James Tait, *The Chartulary or Register of the Abbey of St. Werburgh, Chester* (Manchester: The Chetham Society, 1920–23), pp. 810.

⁴⁵ Birch, 1040.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1119.

Merciorum while Eadwig continued to reign in the south as *rex Anglorum*. The 963 grant was made after the reunification of the kingdom following Eadwig's death in 959, after which point Edgar reigned as *rex Anglorum*. However, despite Edgar having regained control of the royal chancery, S 723 attests to the delegation of charter production during his reign, since the text is clearly not a product of the royal scribe. These three texts include references to local secular history, not dissimilar to the bishops' memories of the Hwicce. Stylistic features link these texts to Worcester and their dates suggest that the scribe or scribes responsible for drafting them and including the references to local history would have still been present at Worcester during Oswald's episcopacy. With this evidence in mind, we can appreciate the full implications of Oswald's break with the past given that the Worcester community — and possibly the surrounding laity — remained interested in the local history of which the Hwicce were an important part.

Edgar's nine known Mercian charters, issued mostly in 958 but with one issued in 959, are fascinating documents.⁴⁷ Given that they are remarkably diverse in their style it is suggested that Eadwig had retained control over the royal chancery in Wessex and that as a result Edgar was forced to rely on local scribes in Mercia or scribes brought with him from Wessex in the production of his charters in these years.⁴⁸ This deviation from

⁴⁷ Simon Keynes, 'Edgar, *rex admirabilis*', in *Edgar, King of the English, 959–975: New Interpretations*, ed. by Donald Scragg (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), pp. 3–60 (p. 13).

⁴⁸ Cyril Hart, *The Danelaw* (London: Hambleton, 1992), p. 451.

standard practice results in some documents that contain peculiarities. For my present purpose S 667, S 677, and S 723 are the most interesting since they contain curious historical allusions concerning the local landscape. I am including S 723 as a ‘Mercian charter’ despite its falling outside the 958–959 timeframe because it contains features which suggest its production was delegated to the same scribe or scriptorium responsible for S 667 and S 677.

S 667, a grant to the *familia* of St Werburgh in Chester, claims to have been granted *in loco famoso qui dicitur Pencric*. S 677, a grant to the minister Ealhstan of land at Staunton-on-Arrow in Herefordshire, identifies that the hides being given are located *in pago Magesætna*. Finally, S 723, a grant to the minister Wulfric of land at Church Aston in Shropshire, locates the gifted land *in provincia Wrocensetna*. These three texts clearly use history in a markedly different way from Æthelwold. They do not invoke the names of local saints, instead they refer to local history in an attempt to root the grants in their respective region. S 667 names a ‘famous place’ while S 677 and S 723 both name Anglian tribes recorded in the Tribal Hidage as having lived in the West Midlands, the Magosætan and Wreocensætan.⁴⁹ These features have led Simon Keynes to identify S 667 and 677 as the most ‘overtly Mercian’ of Edgar’s 958–959 charters.⁵⁰

The act of rooting a grant in the local area is an unusual practice. Before Edgar’s Mercian charters it was associated mainly

⁴⁹ C. P. Lewis, ‘Edgar, Chester, and the Kingdom of the Mercians’, in *Edgar*, ed. by Scragg, pp. 104–24 (pp. 118–20).

⁵⁰ Keynes, p. 13.

with the extravagantly complex diplomas written by the scribe known as 'Æthelstan A' for King Æthelstan in what appears to have been the first clearly identifiable incarnation of the royal chancery. These charters routinely identify where a grant was made; only S 667 follows this exact practice but by locating their hides in historic areas S 677 and 723 seem to draw on a similar concept, albeit inverted from the location of the ritual of transference to the land being transferred. The practice established by Æthelstan A fell out of favour as charter diplomatic became less complex after King Æthelstan's reign. Not all of Edgar's Mercian charters revive the custom: S 667 and S 677 are the only two 958-959 texts to do so; that S 723 revives the altered form of the practice suggests that the same scribe or scriptorium as the other two produced it.

Cyril Hart suggests that the community linking these three texts was Worcester. All three share formulas found in the Worcester cartularies without being recorded in those cartularies themselves.⁵¹ If this is the case, then these charters suggest that at Worcester in 958-959 a scribe, or possibly the community as a whole, was interested in secular local history. Given that this interest is only found in these three texts I suggest that this was a choice made by the scribe rather than Edgar.

By 958 the West Midlands had been shired. The old tribal names do not seem to have been part of royally sanctioned administration in the region; this is why they can be obscure to us now.⁵² However, it is possible that these names and their

⁵¹ Hart, *Danelaw*, p. 451.

⁵² *Ibid.*

significance were remembered, even if they were not part of official administration. If this was the case, then a wilful attempt to break with the legacy of ancestral groups could have proven unpopular. At any rate the scribe of these three charters clearly felt that recording these names to identify the location of a grant was important or at least interesting.

This use of history in charters is not on the same scale as Æthelwold's, yet it provides an interesting contrast. Where Æthelwold used history to make ideological claims about the present the scribe of these three charters used it for less obvious, seemingly less grand, reasons. They clearly suggest more commitment to history at Worcester than is seen in Oswald's texts and this contrast suggests that Oswald would have been able to match Æthelwold's ideological use of history if he had been so inclined. That he did not would seem to support what I have already suggested from Oswald's leases: that he did not share Æthelwold's interest in history as an ideological tool. The Edgar charters also raise the question of whether Oswald risked rousing ire in the Worcester community by moving away from the Hwicce. We cannot know the answer to that, but it does seem apparent that Worcester remained interested in its past during the period of Oswald's episcopacy and that this was a continuation of trends seen prior to his becoming bishop.

CONCLUSIONS

In the area of history, it would appear that there was no such thing as Benedictine 'ideology'. My main goal in this paper was to demonstrate the difference between Æthelwold and Oswald

that emerges when we place their primary sources side by side. By examining them as two reformers in their own right, rather than relegating Oswald to Æthelwold's circle, we begin to appreciate the real complexity of our evidence. The image that emerges is a nuanced one. Æthelwold was fascinated with the 'refoundational act' as both a temporal and a spiritual event. By invoking sacred history his communities gained powerful otherworldly patrons, but by stressing his communities' descent from or emulation of these patrons in their foundational documents he was also able to establish a sense of reform as a sacred vocation at the very heart of his monks' worldview. This is a blurred perspective: sacred history is not the same as secular history, since it invokes forces which are outside earthly time and yet fully capable of making themselves felt.

This desire to use history as a means of empowering communities and enhancing the status of reform was central to Æthelwold's charters but is totally absent from Oswald's leases. This may partly stem from the fact that a foundation charter and a lease are fundamentally different types of documents; one is the product of a grand ceremony of transference while the other is the product of normal land tenure. However, in some ways the lease is an even more ideal context for ideological expression than the refoundation charter since it provides space for the lessee to assert their position over the recipient. From the titles used by Oswald in his leases, he most often chose to use non-descript language. Nevertheless, on six occasions he opted for a more specific title. The titles he used mark a break with those of his predecessors. Where they had often favoured either simply the title *episcopus* or *Huuicciorum episcopus*, Oswald began to

experiment with new formulations all translating roughly as ‘bishop of Worcester’. There is no reference in any of this to Worcester’s sacred history; any references to history in Worcester’s cartulary are strictly secular. Yet not only does Oswald not invoke the saints, he also appears to be uncomfortable invoking the Hwicce as his predecessors did. Oswald’s titles suggest an episcopacy in transition from a traditional ethnic identifier to a more institutional one. This move appears to have been an innovation of Oswald’s episcopacy, possibly an attempt to remake Worcester along similar lines to those he had encountered in Frankia. What seems to be clear is that Oswald’s choice not to invoke history appears to be just as ideological as Æthelwold’s choice to use it.

I claim that it was ideological given the evidence of King Edgar’s Mercian charters. Not only do these three texts include odd references to local Mercian history, but they also appear to have been linked to the Worcester scriptorium. Their dates, 958 and 963, fall on either side of Oswald’s becoming bishop of Worcester in 961, suggesting that the community which produced these texts and which seems to have had some local antiquarian knowledge would have been largely unchanged in the early years of Oswald’s episcopate. Thus, the resources were available at Worcester for Oswald to use history for ideological ends, yet he did not.

When contrasted with Æthelwold’s use of history this would suggest two distinct ideological attitudes to the past, one at Winchester and one at Worcester. One longed to use the past to strengthen the reform and cast it as a return to something that the English had lost. The other was largely uninterested in the past

and instead desired to innovate even at the expense of obliterating the legacy of his community's past. Of course, Æthelwold's ideology won out. His texts and communities became the founts from which the reform spread while Oswald's Worcester bowed to the tide. This helps explain why Æthelwold is now so central to our understanding of the Benedictines in England, yet I suggest that his importance is largely retrospective. At Worcester, if the evidence for how Oswald regarded history is any indication, a strikingly different ideal of reform was being pursued. This recognition suggests that the Benedictine Reform was a complex event in which individual reformers were motivated by different visions of religious purity; these diverse ideals reacted with the English past in equally diverse ways.

Labour Pains: Scenes of Birth and Becoming in Old Norse Legendary Literature

Katherine Marie Olley
University of Cambridge

THE MATERNAL BODY

In its ability to produce sons, the maternal body offered one of the few means for women to attain power and influence in the medieval world. However, it is constantly depicted as being broken down in Old Norse legendary literature, a loose generic distinction taken here to encompass principally the poems of the *Poetic Edda* and the prosimetric narratives of the *fornaldarsögur*. Sometimes, as with Atli's shape-shifting mother, who takes on the form of a snake in the snake-pit, or Siggeirr's mother, who inhabits the body of a monstrous she-wolf, the maternal body can be reconstituted after this disintegration of human form. At other times, the damage is permanent and fatal. Svanhildr, Sigurðr's daughter, is trampled by horses. The unnamed mother of Hildir in *Sörla þáttur* is bodily crushed under the prow of a ship. Particularly brutal is the fate of Sifka in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, who is deliberately pushed from her lover's shoulder as he carries her across a river, so that her back is broken and her body is left to float unceremoniously downstream. In the more fantastical narratives the maternal body may simply disappear, neither destroyed nor changed but definitely not present, as with the elf-

woman in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, who deposits her daughter, Skuld, with her father, Helgi, and is never seen again. The maternal body is thus continually characterized as fragile, breakable and above all vulnerable: vulnerable to change and vulnerable to corruption. As such, weak though it is, the maternal body constitutes a threat to the smooth progression of lineage, which is so important to legendary literature. The sorcerous and often deadly power of mothers like Grímhildr or the unnamed mothers of Atli and Siggeirr are evidence of the danger and fear associated with maternity. Such fear partially explains the violence often meted out to the maternal body, confirming that body's reassuring conquerability at the same time as the continued assaults reinforce anxieties around its ultimate indefensibility and potential to admit of corruption.

The fragmentation of the maternal body, and of the royal maternal body in particular, has been much discussed in medieval scholarship. Finn E. Sinclair talks of the 'conflict and fragmentation [...] in the figuring of the mother and the maternal body' found in the Old French *chansons de geste*.¹ Peggy McCracken writes that the 'maternal body is figured as a disturbing spectacle in its ability to cross borders of state, religion and paternity'.² It is precisely this transgression of boundaries which has been used to link maternity to Julia Kristeva's discussion of the Abject, that which 'does not respect borders,

¹ Finn E. Sinclair, *Milk and Blood: Gender and Genealogy in the 'Chansons de Geste'* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), p. 19.

² Peggy McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 69.

positions, rules'.³ The body of the mother seems inherently changeable and vulnerable to transformation, perhaps because of the literal expansion and contraction which the maternal body undergoes during gestation and birth. The literary depiction of maternity is inextricably tied to the maternal body's biological ability to change so drastically and yet it is rare for the maternal body to be depicted at the moment of its transformative apotheosis, in the act of labour and birth.⁴ Paradoxically, though it is during late pregnancy that the changeable nature of the maternal body is most obvious, it is also when that body is most concealed. Not only does the mother disappear into the traditionally female enclosure of the birthing room but the euphemisms used to describe the experience, such as *eigi heil* (not well), *sótt* (sickness) or even that a woman *gengr eigi einsama* (does not walk alone), may further obscure the physical realities of childbirth.⁵

³ See Paul Acker, 'Horror and the Maternal in "Beowulf"', *PMLA*, 121 (2006), 702–16 (p. 703); Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

⁴ For the fullest survey of birth in Old Norse literature to date see Gert Kreutzer, *Kindheit und Jugend in der Altnordischen Literatur: Teil I, Schwangerschaft, Geburt und Früheste Kindheit* (Münster: Kleinheinrich, 1987), pp. 108–45, though Kreutzer's analysis is necessarily brief given the scope of his work.

⁵ For a full discussion of the terminology used to describe pregnancy in Old Norse literature see Grethe Jacobsen, 'Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Medieval North: A Topology of Sources and a Preliminary Study', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 9 (1984), 91–111 (pp. 96–97).

It is unsurprising, then, that scenes of giving birth are not frequently found in Old Norse legendary literature, the more so, given the presumably male authorship of our sources and the gendered nature of childbirth as an experience. More interesting is that, even though birth was presumably fraught with danger for both mother and child,⁶ there are comparatively few incidents in the literature detailing mothers who actually die in childbed. The nature of our sources may once again be to blame here; the genealogically driven narratives of the *fornaldarsögur* encourage an emphasis on successful lineages, successful births and successful mothers. Other genres, however, present a different picture. Jenny Jochens notes that ‘although the sagas of Icelanders report surprisingly few cases of death in childbirth and no difficult births, the miracles performed by Icelandic saints narrate many realistic stories of prolonged and difficult births, dismemberment

⁶ Elisabeth Iregren and Ulf Högberg, in separate studies, have estimated the number of deaths per thousand childbirths as eight to nine in medieval Sweden and ten in prehistoric Sweden, respectively, but Anders Fröjmark (p. 298) maintains that ‘many maternal deaths are not visible in archaeological data and that the real mortality rate would have been higher,’ citing Ulf Högberg, Elisabeth Iregren, Claes-Henric Siven, and Lennart Diener, ‘Maternal Deaths in Medieval Sweden: An Osteological and Life Table Analysis’, *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 19 (1987), 495–503. See Elisabeth Iregren, ‘Kvinnor och barn under medeltid: ett antropologisk perspektiv på några skeletmaterial’, in *Kvinnospår i medeltiden*, ed. by Inger Lövkrona (Lund: Lund University Press, 1992), pp. 55–92; Ulf Högberg, ‘Mödradöd i förhistorisk tid’, in *Sydsvenska medicinhistoriska sällskapets årsskrift* (Lund: Sydsvenska medicinhistoriska sällskapet, 1983), pp. 103–14; Anders Fröjmark, ‘Childbirth Miracles in Swedish Miracle Collections’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 21 (2012), 297–312.

of infants, and problems with lactation'.⁷ Even in what might be termed 'successful' childbirth miracles, the child may be spared only long enough to be baptized before dying, or the delivery of a dead foetus may prepare the way for the miraculous recovery of the mother, demonstrating that, even with the aid of a saint, birth was a dangerous and difficult experience.⁸ Grethe Jacobsen focuses instead on the Scandinavian ballad tradition, finding that 'ballads seem to have been one outlet for women to express their experience. The dominant impression is that [childbirth] was dramatic, painful and, more often than not, fatal'.⁹ Here, where the genre does not so easily allow for any kind of miraculous rescue or recovery, the picture is more pessimistic and the dangers of childbirth are even more heavily stressed. Archaeological evidence, though slight, adds further support to Jacobsen's analysis, since 'the skeleton material, even in a limited sample, demonstrates that fatal pregnancy and delivery had several causes, ranging from congenital disease to malnutrition, which made pregnancy and delivery a hazardous venture'.¹⁰

⁷ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 80.

⁸ Fröjmark, pp. 302, 309–10.

⁹ Jacobsen, p. 97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102. Jacobsen draws on a sample of 209 female skeletons interred in the cemeteries at the Augustinian monastery of Æbelholt, of which five were found to be pregnant at time of death.

SCENES OF BIRTH: BIRTH AS A CRISIS EVENT

While maternal bodies are certainly vulnerable in Old Norse legendary literature, it is frequently not the act of birth which breaks them down, in spite of the manifold dangers it presents. Indeed, the maternal body and the maternal perspective is hardly central to the three scenes of childbirth which are depicted in any detail in Old Norse legendary literature and which will form the heart of my analysis: Borgný's labour in the eddic poem *Oddrúnargrátr*, transcribed in the thirteenth century but probably composed considerably earlier;¹¹ Rerir's wife's six-year pregnancy in the thirteenth-century *Völsunga saga*, chapter 2, which culminates in the heroic Völsungr being cut from her womb at the cost of her own life; and finally, the nineteen-day labour of an elf-woman in the fourteenth-century *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, chapter 15, to which Hrólfr is mysteriously led while hunting a stag in the forest. In *Oddrúnargrátr*, Borgný gives birth to twins, a boy and a girl, after the intervention of her midwife, Oddrún, who is the lover of Gunnarr, the brother of Högni whom Borgný's lover Vilmundr had killed. Though the *bitrir galdrar* (powerful spells)¹² Oddrún sings enable Borgný to deliver

¹¹ On the complexities of dating eddic poetry see Bernt Ø. Thorvaldsen, 'The Dating of Eddic Poetry', in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, ed. by Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn and Brittany Schorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹² *Oddrúnargrátr*, 7:7, in *Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. by Gustav Neckel, 4th edn, rev. by Hans Kuhn, 2 vols (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962–68), I (1962), 235. All translations are my own;

her babies successfully, she emerges *fiðrsiúcr* (deathly sick)¹³ from her ordeal. As the title of the poem would suggest, it is not Borgný's but Oddrún's experience of the birth that is foregrounded by the poet, as her lament contrasts her tragic kinship relations with the dynastic success of her friend. In *Völsunga saga*, Rerir's wife's conception has a magical origin, prompted by the consumption of a special apple delivered to the childless couple by one of Óðinn's valkyries. In the six years which it takes for the queen to come to term, Rerir himself grows sick and dies, and thus Völsungr emerges in the shadow of both his parents' deaths. No mention is made of birth attendants, though someone must have performed the caesarean procedure, and the queen appears as an isolated figure, unable to find a helper who might hasten the birth and thus save her life. The important thing from a narrative perspective is that Völsungr's exceptional nature should be demonstrated from the first by the unusual circumstances of his conception and birth, which distracts from the horrific mutilation his mother must undergo in order to deliver him. Finally, the labour of the elf-woman in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* is presented entirely from a human and a male point of view and it is Hrólfr himself who functions as midwife, laying his hands upon the pregnant elf-woman at her mother's request, since her daughter is fated to remain undelivered of her child until a human being should touch her. The episode's chief purpose is to gain for Hrólfr a magical ally, who will offer him support in

eddic translations are informed by Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹³ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 8:6, p. 235.

the trials to come. Though the child is safely delivered, we do not even discover the sex of the baby nor anything about its ancestry, since in the entire episode only Hrólfr is mentioned by name, while the elf-women are continually defined either by kinship or racial signifiers. The bodies of both women disappear as soon as the episode is concluded and nothing further is heard of them.

There is no set pattern to these episodes. Two are embedded in prose sagas, brief scenes providing little opportunity for introspection. The poem *Oddrúnargrátr*, however, presents a longer and more vocal response to the moment of birth, as we might expect from an artistic medium which engages to a greater extent than prose with the value and power of language. Nevertheless, the poem is still in dialogue with the larger legendary narrative of the Fall of the Gjúkungs, just as the prose episodes each serve a purpose within their broader saga narratives. Crucially, all three are drawn from consciously fantastical, legendary narratives, giving them a broad tonal or generic similarity. They bear little resemblance to the likely historical facts of childbirth, difficult as those facts are to ascertain. Historical sources pertaining to childbirth in Old Norse society are extremely limited, forcing previous studies to rely mainly on evidence from literary depictions of childbirth. Thus, Jochens cites *Ála flekks saga* and *Flateyjarbók* to support her description of the birth process:

Only women were present. The normal birth position was for the woman to kneel on the floor, with helpers ready at her knees or supporting her arms. As the birth progressed,

she would shift to a knee-elbow position, and the child would be received from behind.¹⁴

Jochens accords with the traditional consensus that men were excluded from the birthing space in the Middle Ages, except in the case of royal births for which male witnesses were required.¹⁵ More recent scholarship, however, has begun to reassess the role of men in the birthing process.¹⁶ From an examination of men's

¹⁴ Jochens, p. 80. See also Kreutzer, pp. 134–37.

¹⁵ Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski writes that 'medieval birth was entirely in the hands of women'. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 11. Louis Haas describes the process of birth in pre-modern Florence as 'female-centered, female oriented, and female controlled'. Louis Haas, 'Women and Childbearing in Medieval Florence', in *Medieval Family Roles: A Book of Essays*, ed. by Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), pp. 87–99 (p. 97). Gail McMurray Gibson concurs, saying 'medieval childbearing took place in emphatically closed female space'. Gail McMurray Gibson, 'Scene and Obscene: Seeing and Performing Late Medieval Childbirth', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 29 (1999), 7–24 (p. 9).

¹⁶ Although writing on the early modern period rather than the medieval, Ulinka Rublack argues that 'in ways which historians have scarcely recognized, husbands played key participatory roles at times of childbirth'. Ulinka Rublack, 'Pregnancy, Childbirth and the Female Body in Early Modern Germany', *Past & Present*, 150 (1996), 84–110 (p. 85). Miracle records, R. C. Finucane notes, 'reveal that often men were emotionally and physically involved in even the very first stages of childhood, but, although probably expected to be nearby, normally men do not seem to have witnessed their children's births'. He goes on to discuss the remarkable exception of Bertrand of Marseilles in the late thirteenth century. R. C.

recollections of childbirth submitted to proof-of-age inquests in medieval England, Becky R. Lee concludes that ‘even though men rarely entered the birthing chamber, they were not excluded from the events that took place there’.¹⁷ In her study of medieval midwifery, Fiona Harris Stoertz likewise suggests that ‘while birth was an event attended mostly by women, men actively intervened with considerable regularity during the High Middle Ages, ideals of women’s shame notwithstanding’.¹⁸ It is fair to say that the details of the birthing process in Old Norse society remain speculative at best, most especially as regards the use of magic in the pre-Christian period.

Magic contributes to all three of the legendary scenes of childbirth and it has long been treated as childbirth’s natural partner in critical scholarship. Jochens writes that ‘runes and songs were offered as age-old remedies for difficult births’, while Katherine Morris makes repeated claims for a perceived link in medieval Iceland between midwifery and witchcraft in her book

Finucane, *The Rescue of Innocents: Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 33. For a discussion of men’s occasional medical role in childbirth see Monica Green, ‘Women’s Medical Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14 (1989), 434–73 and Monica H. Green, *Making Women’s Medicine Masculine: The Rise of Male Authority in Pre-Modern Gynaecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Becky R. Lee, ‘A Company of Women and Men: Men’s Recollections of Childbirth in Medieval England’, *Journal of Family History*, 27 (2002), 92–100 (p. 93).

¹⁸ Fiona Harris Stoertz, ‘Midwives in the Middle Ages? Birth Attendants, 600–1300’, in *Medicine and Law in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Sarah M. Butler and Wendy J. Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 58–87 (p. 73).

Sorceress or Witch?, pointing to *Sigrdrífumál* stanza 9, *Fáfnismál* stanza 12 and *Oddrúnargrátr* stanza 7 to argue for ‘the association of childbirth and magic in the pagan culture of Iceland’.¹⁹ We should be wary of Morris’s glib association, however. It would be a mistake to let the mere presence of magic in scenes of birth blind us to the way in which magic is utilized in such accounts. The association is clearly a complex one. Both the curse laid upon the labouring elf-woman to be unable to deliver unless touched by a human and the magical apple which leads to Völsungr’s conception suggest that magic is just as often a danger to mothers as it is a remedy for the difficulties of childbirth. Much like the religious power depicted in miracle accounts, magic is far from a neat solution, and it is only in *Göngu-Hrólf’s saga* that both mother and child survive the hazards of birth. Though magic features prominently in all the above examples, it does not define the way the texts’ authors understood and described childbirth, but is instead symptomatic of how they did so. Magic, under which heading I embrace both pagan runes and Christian miracle, particularly in the way it both responds to and reinforces the dangers of childbirth, is only a response to the characterization of birth itself as a crisis event.

Such a term is borrowed from Margarita Artschwager Kay’s *Anthropology of Human Birth* where she suggests that most

¹⁹ Jochens, p. 80; Katherine Morris, *Sorceress or Witch? The Image of Gender in Medieval Iceland and Northern Europe* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991), pp. 72, 81, 158. See also James V. McMahan, ‘Valkyries, Midwives, Weavers, and Shape-Change: Atli’s Mother the Snake’, *SS*, 66 (1994), 475–87; L. M. C. Weston, ‘Women’s Medicine, Women’s Magic: The Old English Metrical Childbirth Charms’, *MP*, 92 (1995), 279–93.

societies present birth as a crisis event ‘but may differ regarding who is in danger and who may view and participate in the event’.²⁰ She draws attention to the way in which ‘the childbearing system relates to the social organization of each society’.²¹ More specifically, she argues that ‘the locus of societal power may be found in the dynamics and definition of childbirth’.²² More recent anthropological studies have reinforced her conclusions. Birth is utterly central to Marshall Sahlins’ 2013 investigation of what constitutes kinship, *What Kinship Is — And Is Not*, in which his declaration that ‘the larger structures and values of society are realized in the microcosm of human reproduction’ echoes Kay’s ‘locus of societal power’.²³ Sahlins is adamant that birth cannot be considered in a social vacuum, warning in particular against taking ‘the parents of the child out of their social contexts and [presuming] they are abstract beings, without any identity except a genital one, who produce an equally abstract child out of the union of their bodily substances’.²⁴ ‘As parents,’ he goes on to say, ‘they already have kinship identities and relationships, the specific logics and attributes of which are transmitted even in the substances they

²⁰ Margarita Artschwager Kay, ‘Writing an Ethnography of Birth’, in *Anthropology of Human Birth*, ed. by Margarita Artschwager Kay (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1982), pp. 1–24 (p. 4).

²¹ Kay, p. 2.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²³ Marshall Sahlins, *What Kinship Is — And Is Not* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 84.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

convey to their offspring'.²⁵ The moment of birth is one embedded in wider structures of kinship and power. It is, in Sahlins' analysis, 'a semiotic function of a kinship order' rather than an *a priori* phenomenon and as a product of such structures it cannot be considered in isolation from them.²⁶ Similarly, Maurice Godelier, although he understands kinship somewhat differently to Sahlins, is no less convinced of the centrality of birth to social organization. In his 2004 monograph *Métamorphoses de la parenté*, he states unequivocally that 'the child is at the heart of kinship, at the heart of the stakes involved', elaborating that 'a family is founded not on the union between the sexes but on the *birth and care of the children the women will bear over their lifetime*'.²⁷

Thus, while it is obvious that birth represents the quintessential moment of becoming for the unborn child, in which the previously ambiguous and concealed foetus finally manifests itself as a self, it should be emphasized that the child is not the only figure whose identity is shaped by the birthing process, the effects of which extend to all who are brought into contact with the moment of crisis. The child created by its parents creates them in turn, entering them into new kinship roles as mothers and fathers in the genealogical matrix. Even birth attendants are not unaffected, using these same moments, in which they are empowered by their role as midwives, to renegotiate their own social identities. By centring my analysis

²⁵ Sahlins, p. 74.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁷ Maurice Godelier, *The Metamorphoses of Kinship*, trans. by Nora Scott (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 479, 455 (emphasis in original).

around birth as a crisis event, rather than approaching it as an aspect of the female experience or as evidence to mine for information on magical beliefs, the communal nature of birth emerges, with scenes of giving birth forming important narrative nexuses where systems of gender, power and kinship all meet and coincide. Rather than considering the principal participants in isolation, like set roles in a drama, the midwife or the mother, these scenes should be examined as whole entities, revealing how the birthing space affects everyone brought into its narrative orbit and opens such roles and systems up to questioning. As such, this remains a literary analysis; although informed by the anthropological perspective, it is not an anthropological investigation into the rituals of Old Norse childbirth. It should be emphasized that these legendary scenes of birth are narrative rather than ritual events, being neither dramatized accounts of historically rooted childbirth rituals, nor themselves having any possible ritual function as texts, unlike, for example, the Old English metrical childbirth charms. Rather, the consciously fictional nature of these accounts makes them ideal for a literary anthropological analysis which seeks to determine not the details of birth but prevailing attitudes toward it and an understanding of its significance by analysing its use in a literary setting.

All three episodes differ according to their narrative purposes and form. The sensationalist account of Völsungr's birth speaks to his prominent position as apical ancestor of the Völsung dynasty, while the mysterious and unexpected intrusion of childbirth into *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* is fitting for a narrative whose hero wanders from one adventure to the next. Meanwhile, *Oddrúnargrátr's* pairing of Borgný's physical birth with the

literary creation of Oddrún's lament more explicitly explores the creative possibilities of the birth event, on which more later. However, it is immediately striking that all three scenes demonstrate a clear association between a prolonged pregnancy or labour and danger for both mother and child, an association surely rooted in medical reality.²⁸ Völsungr is born after a full six years' gestation, while the elf-woman struggles for nineteen days, both transparently fatal delays in any realistic setting only to be entertained in this world of legendary fantasy. Borgný's case is not quite as dramatic, but her labour obviously extends long enough to cause concern and provoke the summoning of Oddrún to save her. There is a particularity, too, about how to alleviate such a delay. For the elf-woman, only a human can hasten her birth, perhaps on the understanding that it will be difficult to persuade one to help. For Borgný, it is stressed that:

engi mátti fyr iqrð ofan
Heiðrecs dóttur hiálpir vinna.²⁹

²⁸ Speeding a prolonged birth was evidently a widespread concern. Fiona Harris Stoertz, examining medieval English childbirth, notes that 'according to an Anglo-Saxon explanation of the formation of the fetus, a child not born in the tenth month would become a "life destroyer" in the belly and the mother could not be expected to survive. Guy de Chauliac, in the fourteenth century, was of the opinion that should the child not be brought out in due time, the woman would be endangered by the bones of the child exiting through her navel'. See Fiona Harris Stoertz, 'Suffering and Survival in Medieval English Childbirth', in *Medieval Family Roles*, ed. by Itnyre, pp. 101–20 (p. 107).

²⁹ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 1:5–8, p. 234.

No one on earth could
help Heiðrekr's daughter.

It is unclear what makes Oddrún special in this regard, but she is greeted on arrival with the words 'vittu, ef þú hiálpir!' (see if you can help), both a plea and a command.³⁰ As Judy Quinn has noted, 'elliptical as the style is, it spans the possibilities of torn friendship and of power unique to Oddrún'.³¹ The prose compiler is less ambiguous, however, asserting that Borgný 'mátti eigi fœða born, áðr til kom Oddrún, Atla systir' (could not give birth to her children until Oddrún came, Atli's sister).³² Only Oddrún is apparently capable of relieving Borgný's pains. These delays deliberately provoke a very precise set of circumstances which must prevail if a birth is to reach a satisfactory and safe conclusion and thus work to bring further people into the birth's sphere, extending its effects. Both Oddrún and Hrólfur are only present *because* the birth has been delayed and in Völsungur's case it is his extended gestation that brings his father's death within the same narrative space, a juxtaposition to which I shall shortly return.

Equally important, all three scenes emphasize the liminality typically associated with birth. In her seminal work *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas uses the unborn child as a classic example

³⁰ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 4:8, p. 234.

³¹ Judy Quinn, 'The Endless Triangles of Eddic Tragedy: Reading *Oddrúnargrátr* (*The Lament of Oddrún*)', in *Studi anglo-norreni in onore di John S. McKinnell*, ed. by Maria Elena Ruggerini (Cagliari: CUEC, 2009), pp. 304–26 (p. 312).

³² *Oddrúnargrátr*, prose, p. 234.

of the dangers associated with ambiguity and liminality the world over:

Take, for example, the unborn child. Its present position is ambiguous, its future equally. For no one can say what sex it will have or whether it will survive the hazards of infancy. It is often treated as both vulnerable and dangerous.³³

More recently, L. M. C. Weston has emphasized the pregnant woman as a site of liminality in her analysis of the Old English metrical childbirth charms, the first of which includes the instruction to step over the grave of a dead man, followed by the body of a living man, while reciting the words of the spell.³⁴ In Weston's analysis, 'the grave marks a boundary between the living and non-living, this human world and the other: the woman bearing a not-yet-living child embodies a similar boundary within herself'.³⁵ Similarly, in stepping over a living man 'the woman and the child within her womb cross another boundary; indeed, the woman herself becomes the boundary her child will pass through by moving from nonlife to life'.³⁶ In the

³³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966; repr. 2002), p. 118.

³⁴ Weston, p. 288.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 288–89.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 289. Weston (p. 292) compares a Latin childbirth charm which evokes the figure of Lazarus, suggesting that 'the as yet unborn child is poised, liminally like the figure of Lazarus, between life and death; the woman has become more a vessel than a participant. Indeed birth here

womb the unborn child is ambiguous, neither alive nor dead. Birth provokes a moment of crisis which will resolve the ambiguity one way or another and until it is completed, the lives of both mother and child hang in the balance.

All three of the aforementioned scenes of birth share an understanding of birth as a liminal moment. Hrólfr, in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, has ventured *á skóginn* (into the forest), a wild place on the edge of civilization in almost all medieval literature, before following a stag to a hidden *rjóðr* (clearing) where he finds the elf-women dwelling under a hill, which opens up at his approach.³⁷ His encounter with the elf-woman and her daughter occurs on the threshold between the human and the supernatural in the liminal space the forest represents. The hill's enclosure echoes the enclosure of the gestating womb itself, opening only for Hrólfr as only Hrólfr's touch implicitly opens up the elf-woman's body for delivery, releasing whatever obstruction had previously prevented her labour. Moreover, the enclosed setting parallels Hreggviðr's burial mound, which Hrólfr proceeds to visit in chapter 16, immediately following the birth episode. Strikingly, it is the gold ring granted him by the elf-mother, which enables him to do so. Despite the dangers which usually accompany interaction with the undead, equipped with the ring Hrólfr succeeds in reaching the mound and speaking with the ghost of Hreggviðr unscathed. The undead Hreggviðr's liminal

partakes of the miraculous, not the natural, and if the child is to come forth like Lazarus, the woman must be his tomb.'

³⁷ *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, ch. 15, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan forni, 1950), III, 199.

position in the mound parallels that of the unborn child in the womb and under the hill. The juxtaposition of the two episodes draws an explicit connection between birth and death in the narrative, with Hrólfr in the privileged position of being able to mediate between the living and the non-living in both scenes.

In *Völsunga saga* and *Oddrúnargrátr* liminality is likewise expressed not in terms of space or place but by the proximity of birth and death, which go hand in hand in both episodes. For Völsungr, his birth is bought at the cost of his parents' lives. His mother's death is directly and causally linked to Völsungr's survival since it is expressly at her own instigation that the child is cut from her body — 'bað nú, at hana skyldi særa til barnsins' (she now bade that the child be cut from her)³⁸ — but Rerir's death may also be related to his son's birth. Rerir does not die in battle, although he is on a campaign to pacify his land; in a rather less heroic turn of events, it is related how 'í þessi ferð var þat til tíðenda, at Rerir tók sótt ok því næst bana' (on this journey it happened that Rerir took sick and soon died).³⁹ The manner of Rerir's death invites parallels with his wife's pregnancy, which is itself frequently described as a sickness in Old Norse literature.⁴⁰ The same word, *sótt*, is used almost immediately (barely four lines

³⁸ *Völsunga saga*, ch. 2, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan forni, 1950), I, 112.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 2, p. 112.

⁴⁰ Among the negative terms for pregnancy listed by Jacobsen (p. 96) are 'eigi heil (not well), óhraust (weak) or vanheilsa (not well). The onset of labour can be described as *kenna sér sóttar* (feel an illness coming on). It is as if the labour the queen so desperately desires has been displaced onto the body of her husband, for whom it proves equally fatal.

later in Guðni Jónsson's edition) to refer to the queen's pregnancy: 'ok þessu ferr fram sex vetr, at hún hefir þessa sótt' (this went on for six years that she had this sickness).⁴¹ Though not causally linked, a thematic association is established between the father's death and the son's birth, which is only strengthened by the structural interweaving of birth and death in the narrative. Rerir's death is enveloped in the text by the account of Völsungr's conception and the account of his birth, a birth which is itself enveloped by the death of Völsungr's father and the death of his mother, whom the boy is able to kiss before she dies.⁴² Quinn

⁴¹ *Völsunga saga*, ch. 2, p. 112.

⁴² *Ibid.*, ch. 2, p. 111–2 (emphasis mine): 'Þat er nú at segja, at **drottning finnr þat brátt, at hún mundi vera með barni, ok ferr þessu fram langar stundir, at hún má eigi ala barnit.**

Þá kemr at því, at Rerir skal fara í leiðangr, sem siðvenja er til konunga, at friða land sitt. Í þessi ferð var þat til tíðenda, at *Rerir tók sótt ok því næst bana ok ætlaði at sækja heim Óðin, ok þótti þat mörgum fýsiligt í þann tíma.*

Nú ferr inu sama fram um vanheilsu drottningar, at hún fær eigi alit barnit, ok þessu ferr fram sex vetr, at hún hefir þessa sótt. Nú finnr hún þat, at hún mun eigi lengi lifa, ok **bað nú, at hana skyldi særa til barnsins, ok svá var gert sem hún bað. Þat var sveinbarn, ok sá sveinn var mikill vexti, þá er hann kom til,** sem ván var at. *Svá er sagt, at sjá sveinn kyssti móður sína, áðr hún dæi.*

Þessum er nú nafn gefit ok er kallaðr Völsungr. Hann var konungr yfir Húnalandi eftir föður sinn.'

(This is now to be told, that **the queen quickly discovered that she was with child, and this [pregnancy] went on for a long time, so that she could not give birth to the child.**

Then it happened that Rerir had to go on a campaign, as is the custom of kings, to pacify his land. On this journey, it happened that *Rerir*

considers that the kiss demonstrates Völsungr ‘is already socially responsible’ in spite of his isolation as an orphan, presumably a side-effect of his six-year gestation, which allows him to emerge from the womb already mature.⁴³ Structurally, however, the kiss also confirms that Völsungr’s mother does not die in childbirth but shortly afterwards, thus completing the envelopment of Völsungr’s birth between two deaths. It also means that, in a rather gruesome twist, she is still alive when her son is cut from her body.⁴⁴

took sick and soon died and intended to go to Óðinn, and that seemed desirable to many at that time.

Now the queen’s illness continued in the same way, that she could not deliver the child, and this went on for six years, that she had this sickness. Now she found that she could not live long and **bade now that child be cut from her and so it was done as she bade. It was a male child, and that boy was well grown when he came out**, as was to be expected. *It is said that that boy kissed his mother before she died.*

That one was now given a name and was called Völsungr. He was king of Hunland after his father.)

⁴³ Judy Quinn, ‘The Realisation of Mythological Design: The Early Generations of the Völsung Dynasty’, in *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed*, ed. by Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson and Annette Lassen, Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, Københavns Universitet, 2009), pp. 123–42 (p. 133).

⁴⁴ The historical evidence suggests that such a scenario is pure fantasy. In reality ‘Caesarean section was always an act of desperation’, carried out only on a dead mother in an attempt to save a still living child. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, p. 2.

Oddrúnargrátr tells a similar story; the birth itself is done with very quickly. Between stanzas seven and eight, a pair of twins are born and without any further explanation:

Knátti mæR oc mōgr moldveg sporna,
born þau in blíðo við bana Hōgna;
þat nam at mæla mæR fiḡrsiúca.⁴⁵

A girl and a boy were able to tread the earth-way,
cheerful children for Hōgni's slayer.
Then the deathly sick girl [Borgný] began to speak.

Once again, the juxtaposition between birth and death could not be more pronounced. No sooner are the children born than the shadow of their father's sin, the slaying of Hōgni, lies over them, closely followed by the admission of their mother's mortal sickness.

What we have in these three cases, then, are three scenes of birth, all exploring a prolonged moment on the threshold between the living and the non-living (that is both those who have died and those who are yet to live) which must be navigated by all those present in the scene, whether parent, child or attendant. Not just the unborn child but the entire scene occupies this liminal space and all within it become infected with its ambiguity, provoking an opportunity to renegotiate previously established positions of power and kinship.

⁴⁵ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 8:1–6, p. 235.

SCENES OF BECOMING: BIRTH AS A NARRATIVE INTERSECTION

As has already been noted, until recently, analyses of birth tended to emphasize it as a female space, into which men intruded at their peril, but its narrative influence is felt far more widely. Far from being denied access, men are everywhere in these accounts. Not only does Hrólfr actively assist in the elf-woman's childbirth, the queen remains unnamed in *Völsunga saga*, in contrast to Rerir, Völsungr and even Óðinn, who is both Völsungr's paternal great-grandfather and the more direct instigator of Völsungr's conception; this, combined with the utter lack of any female attendants, makes the birth a thoroughly male affair. In *Oddrúnargrátr*, the paternity of Borgný's twins is vital to the interpersonal dynamics between the poem's two leading women. As Quinn explains, 'the paradox of Oddrún's lament is that the expression of her grief over her lover's death is triggered by her act of fostering life for the family that murdered him'.⁴⁶ It is the fact that Vilmundr, Borgný's lover, was the slayer of Hogni, Gunnarr's brother, that underpins Oddrún and Borgný's relationship, explaining some of Oddrún's hostility toward her supposed *vina* (friend).⁴⁷ Men are very much present in these narratives of childbirth; far from being a closed female enclave, birth is an intersection which embraces both male and female

⁴⁶ Quinn, 'Endless Triangles', p. 306.

⁴⁷ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 4:7, p. 234. Oddrún is open about the fact that her motives for helping Borgný have nothing to do with affection, as she admits: 'Hnécað ec af því til hiálpár þér, | at þú værir þess verð aldregi' (I didn't kneel down to help you because of this, | that you in any way deserved it), *Oddrúnargrátr* 10:1–4, p. 235.

figures, implicating both genders in the crisis event's exploration of wider social, political and kinship structures.

Societal power structures are shown to be vulnerable in all three episodes. *Oddrúnargrátr* follows on the heels of the political upheaval caused by the slaughter of the Gjúkungs, a calamity Oddrún is explicitly attempting to come to terms with in the lament she pours out to Borgný once the birth is completed, a figurative delivery of her own, precipitated by Borgný's physical labour. The fact that Rerir is on a mission to subdue his territories when he dies suggests that Völsungr's birth, too, is a time of political crisis in *Völsunga saga*, a crisis solved by Völsungr's delivery and his swift move then to stabilize his father's legacy. No sooner is Völsungr given a name than the saga tells us that 'hann var konungr yfir Húnalandi *eftir föður sinn*' (he was king over Hunland *after his father*),⁴⁸ which emphasizes dynastic continuity rather than the six-year interregnum which divided his own rule from his father's. In *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, the situation is more personal than political but still highlights the vulnerability of the social and political hierarchy. Hrólfr finds himself hunting the stag because he is bound to the wicked, low-born Vilhjálmr in servitude unfitting to his true station. His unfortunate circumstances are foregrounded in the childbirth episode as the elf-woman initially greets him with a stark reminder of his position as a slave: 'Illt hefir þú at verki, Hrólfr, er þú ert þræll þrælsins ok þó til þess at stela annarra manna fé, því at ek á dýr þetta, er þú vilt taka' (You're faring badly when it comes to work, Hrólfr, when you're the slave of a slave, even to the point of

⁴⁸ *Völsunga saga*, ch. 2, p. 112 (emphasis mine).

having to steal another man's livestock, because I own this deer which you want to take).⁴⁹ The elf-woman's subsequent gift of a gold ring and some advice in thanks for helping her daughter marks a step on the road that sees Hrólfr rise from his humble position. His ultimate transformation into a highly respected ruler and a successful husband and father remains rooted at least in part in the scene of giving birth in which the crisis of his social status is underlined and addressed.

Finally, systems of kinship are, of course, heavily implicated in these scenes of childbirth. The roles played by each of the characters in the genealogical matrix suddenly become uncertain in this moment of ambiguity and transition, where daughters may become mothers, sons become fathers, and identities are being (re)negotiated. *Oddrúnargrátr's* exploration of what it takes to become a mother and who is able to become so embraces a complex multiplicity of images of maternity. Mothers are made but also unmade in the poem, as Borgný's maternal transformation is balanced by Oddrún's denial of her own mother. Oddrún describes her mother impersonally as *móðir Atla* (Atli's mother)⁵⁰ and bitterly curses her for her part in Gunnarr's death, exclaiming 'hon scyli morna' (may she wither away).⁵¹ Taken together with Oddrún's previous allusion to Gunnarr as *sonr Grímildar* (Grímhildr's son), her words suggest a binary

⁴⁹ *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, ch. 15, pp. 199–200.

⁵⁰ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 32:3, p. 239.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 32:4, p. 239.

contrast between the two conflicting dynasties which is conveyed in explicitly maternal terms.⁵²

The ambiguous and transitory nature of the maternal role is emphasized throughout. New mother Borgný is referred to first and foremost as *Heiðreks dóttir* (Heiðrekr's daughter).⁵³ Her subjection to paternal authority is further emphasized by the way in which she is said to have attempted to hide her love-affair from her father:

Vilmundr heitir vinr haucstalda;
hann varði mey varmri blæio,
fimm vetr alla, svá hon sinn fõður leyndi.⁵⁴

(Vilmundr he's called, the hawk-bearer's friend,
he wrapped the girl in a warm bed-cover
for five whole winters, so that she hid it from her father.)

Borgný invokes the feminine deities Frigg and Freyja, both mothers themselves, not on her own behalf but on that of Oddrún, who will never become a mother, saying:

Svá hiálpi þér hollar vættir,
Frigg oc Freyia oc fleiri goð,
sem þú feldir mér fár af hõndom.⁵⁵

⁵² *Oddrúnargrátr*, 15:8, p. 236.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1:7, p. 234.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 6, p. 235.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9, p. 235.

Labour Pains

(May the gracious [female] beings help you,
Frigg and Freyja and more of the gods,
as you freed me from that danger.)

To further complicate matters, she evokes an image of close paternal rather than maternal kinship in her nostalgic appeal to her friend:

enn ec fylgðac þér á fiörgynio,
sem við brœðrom tveim of bornar værim.⁵⁶

(And I used to accompany you on Fiörgyn [mother earth]
as if we had been born of two brothers!)

Maternal imagery here is confined to the static earth, referred to as Fiörgyn, an alternative name for Jörð, the mother of Þórr, and replaced in the allusion to birth itself by a remarkable vision of male reproduction. In this maze of maternal references, Oddrún's implicit declaration of her own emancipation from genealogically determined kinship roles, neither daughter to her birth family nor wife and mother in Gunnarr's, places her in an ambiguous position not unlike the unborn child's. She hovers quite consciously on a threshold between life and death, as she pronounces herself bemused by her own vitality:

⁵⁶ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 11:5–8, p. 236.

Opt undromc þat, hví ec eptir mác,
línvengis Bil, lífi halda,
er ec ógnhvotom unna þóttomz,
sverða deili, sem síálfri mér.⁵⁷

(Often I wonder this, goddess of the linen-pillow
How I can hold onto my life thereafter,
When I thought that I loved the fearfully bold man,
The sword-sharer, as I did myself!)

Ultimately, Oddrún is reborn through the labour of her lament, both the child and the mother of her literary delivery. She is isolated from her kin but extremely purposeful and still deeply embedded in wider society through her function as a midwife. Quinn has previously drawn attention to Oddrún's impressive independence in the poem, pointing out how 'she initiates the mission and acts as the agent of a series of verbs in action in stanzas 2–3 — *bregða, leggja, láta fara, koma, ganga, svipta*'.⁵⁸ Oddrún is clearly empowered by her act of magical midwifery. Adrian Wilson observes that 'power [...] was a defining feature of the midwife's office',⁵⁹ and Oddrún uses hers to announce and thereby perform her own transformation into the kind of woman she wishes to be, in the absence of her lover and any marital or

⁵⁷ *Oddrúnargrátr*, 33, p. 239.

⁵⁸ Quinn, 'Endless Triangles', p. 311.

⁵⁹ Adrian Wilson, *Ritual and Conflict: The Social Relations of Childbirth in Early Modern England* (Farham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), p. 156.

dynastic future for herself. Genealogical creativity is replaced by literary reproduction.

A similar ambiguity around the inhabitation and characterization of the maternal role is found in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*. The labouring elf-woman is introduced as a daughter, emphasizing her mother's maternity, and there is not a father in sight: 'Ek á dóttur eina, ok er henni þat skapat at komast eigi frá eldi sínu, því hún ætti, nema mennskr maðr hefði hendr á henni. Hefir hún nú legit níttján dægr á gólfi ok má eigi léttari verða' ('I have a *daughter*, and for her it is fated that she cannot be delivered of the child which she has, unless a human being lays his hands on her. She has now lain on the floor for nineteen days and cannot give birth [lit.: get any lighter].)⁶⁰

Hrólfr himself, much like Oddrún, is engaged in a process of becoming, negotiating his underserving social status as discussed above, but in the scene of birth these efforts entwine social hierarchy with systems of kinship. For, in exchange for helping her daughter, the elf-woman gives him a gold ring which will aid him later, much as giantesses elsewhere in the *fornaldarsögur* help their fosterlings. The gift suggests a maternal aspect to her relationship with Hrólfr that further contrasts with her daughter's enactment of a more straightforwardly biological maternity.⁶¹

Nor is this ambiguity as to the meaning and nature of kinship bonds confined to the roles of mother and daughter.

⁶⁰ *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, ch. 15, p. 200 (emphasis mine).

⁶¹ Compare, for example, the experience of Hálfðan in *Hálfðanar saga Brönnufóstra*, who is both Brana's fosterling and also the father of her child.

Paternal ambiguity is similarly explored. The death of Rerir between the conception and birth of his son extends the ambiguity of the unborn child and the crisis of birth to his status as a father. Rerir dies a potential father but that status cannot be confirmed until his son is born, alive or dead. The kiss Völsungr bestows on his mother before she dies confirms their relationship as mother and son, brief though it is. No personal closure can be offered to Rerir and Völsungr's father-son relationship and their kinship must be confirmed through the political declaration that is Völsungr's inheritance of his father's kingdom, demonstrating once again how inextricably intertwined systems of kinship are with more political structures of social organization. Vilmundr's paternal role in *Oddrúnargrátr* is similarly troubled. The question of whether Vilmundr acknowledges his children casts doubt on his acceptance of his new kinship role and he features in the poem more prominently as an illicit lover than as a father.

THE COMMUNITY OF BIRTH

There is no guarantee of resolution for such ambiguities, only the opportunity for negotiation in the liminal and dangerous moment that is the birth event. Indeed, the moment of birth serves as a reminder that all societal structures are by their nature transitory and open to change, kinship most of all. As Maurice Godelier reminds us, 'through their choices and through the choices of their relatives, individuals pass in the course of their lifetime from one kin position to others, occupying simultaneously with regard to several other relatives several

positions at once'.⁶² The dynamics explored in these three scenes embrace and negotiate systems of societal power, based on status, politics, gender and kinship, all of which meet in the moment of crisis enacted by birth, transforming the singular moment of birth into multiple acts of becoming for all involved. Though the maternal body remains fragile in Old Norse legendary narratives, birth emerges ultimately as a constructive rather than a destructive event, stressing creativity, both genealogical and artistic, and the transformation of identities more so than the breaking of the maternal body.

What is most striking is the contrast between this extremely open narrative nexus and the closed female enclave that certain historians suggest defined the true experience of birth in the medieval period. Such scenes position the locus for societal power in the event's very multiplicity, in the links between different social structures and people. In doing so they demonstrate beyond doubt the truth of Kay's analysis that 'the locus of societal power may be found in the dynamics and definition of childbirth'.⁶³ The communal nature of the birth event in literature suggests that what Old Norse society most highly valued was investment in society itself. The willingness of both Oddrún and Hrólfr to engage in the birth event in spite of their individual deprivations, whether of kin or power, contrasts with the social isolation of Völsungr's delivery and it is surely no coincidence that it is Völsungr's mother who consequently suffers and fragments the most dramatically. In line with scholarship's recent

⁶² Godelier, p. 480.

⁶³ Kay, p. 4.

reappraisal of men's engagement with childbirth in the medieval period, perhaps it is time to question the practicality of utterly excluding men from the birthing area in the cramped conditions of an Old Icelandic farmstead, where the sounds if not the sights of childbirth must have carried. While men may not have been privy to the most intimate details, these narratives suggest that Old Norse society's understanding of childbirth as an open event embraced both the male and the female experience and that we should consider men as well as women an integral part of the vital community of birth.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ This work was supported by an AHRC-Trinity studentship (2015–2018) from the Arts and Humanities Research Council Doctoral Training Partnership (AHRC DTP) together with Trinity College, Cambridge (grant number AH/L503897/1). I am further indebted to Trinity College, Cambridge for the Research Scholarship which has assisted my research. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Judy Quinn, for her guidance and support and my anonymous peer reviewer for their helpful comments.

The Construction and Reconstruction of Regional Collective Identity in Viking Age Norway

Ben Allport
University of Cambridge

The definition, identification and reconstruction of collective identity is, perhaps, one of the hardest challenges facing the medievalist; the pitfalls proceed from the disparate nature of contemporary sources, but quickly grow to encompass various idiosyncrasies of modern discourse, including disparities between disciplines, sociological preconceptions and political agendas. Consequently, general consensus in the scholarly community rapidly diverges beyond the broad agreement that collective identity of some form or another must have existed for the diverse communities of the medieval world.

In considerations of collective identity, the Viking Age (800–1050) makes for a particularly fruitful, and yet typically fraught, case-study, as it reflects a meeting point of ideologies, both medieval and modern. During this period, the area now encompassed by Norway progressed from a collection of petty kingdoms, whose existence is only fleetingly attested in material and written sources, to a sometimes-unified proto-kingdom. It is also a meeting point of disciplines; the transition from the near exclusive realm of archaeologists to one that unifies archaeology with textual history. While most modern scholars would associate the ‘state formation’ stage of Norwegian history with the early

medieval period (1050–1200, according to Norwegian periodization), the Viking Age was nevertheless an important era of social change which created the conditions for the development of the medieval Norwegian kingdom.¹ Whereas the development of vertical social bonds, such as the relationship between farmers and tenants, can, to a certain extent, be reconstructed on the basis of archaeological evidence, we must also attempt to understand the ‘regional’ collective identities that existed in pre-unification Norway if we are to understand how that process of unification took place. Due to the paucity of the available evidence, however, there are a number of pitfalls that must be navigated in attempting to reconstruct these collective units.

Two intertwined questions demand particular attention. First is the question of how one should define ‘collective identity’. The second is how to identify groups of collective identity using the limited resources available. This article will consider the theoretical approaches commonly used to propose answers to these questions, and outline a methodology with which to reconstruct the regional landscape of pre-unification Viking Age Norway, which will then be tested through two detailed case studies based on the modern Norwegian ‘landsdeler’ of Vestland, Sørland and Nord-Norge.² Finally, this article will propose that

¹ See Knut Helle, ‘Norway 800–1200’, in *Viking Revaluations: Viking Society Centenary Symposium 14–15 May 1992*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1993).

² While most commonly translated as ‘region’, for the purposes of this article this is a somewhat unhelpful rendering of Norwegian ‘landsdel’.

regional elites are likely to have played the primary role in the creation and maintenance of regional collective identity.

In this article, the term ‘regional’ is used to refer to geographical areas of a scope that may be said to go beyond the local. It must be acknowledged, however, that this term often connotes a subdivision of a national entity, which, within the context of this article, might imply certain teleological assumptions about the inevitability of the unification process in Viking Age Norway. In the interests of avoiding these connotations, ‘region’ should be understood in the sense preferred by Ingvild Øye et al., as an area ‘that differs from another area in some way according to physical geography, culture, politics or economy’ and, more specifically, ‘a social construction that is created in the minds of the period’.³ Furthermore, ‘region’ is preferred over terms such as ‘petty

The ‘landsdeler’, of which there are five, are traditional super-regional units which encompass the administrative units known as the ‘fylker’ (counties), whose size better reflects the regions assessed in the following discussion.

³ Ingvild Øye, Randi Barndon and Asbjørn Engevik, ‘Technology and Regions in a Long-Term Perspective’, in *The Archaeology of Regional Technologies: Case Studies from the Paleolithic to the Age of the Vikings*, ed. by Randi Barndon, Asbjørn Engevik and Ingvild Øye (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), pp. 1–13 (p. 5). See also Anssi Paasi, ‘Re-visiting the Region and Regional Identity: Theoretical Reflections with Empirical Illustrations’, in *Archaeology of Regional Technologies*, ed. by Barndon, Engevik and Øye, pp. 15–33.

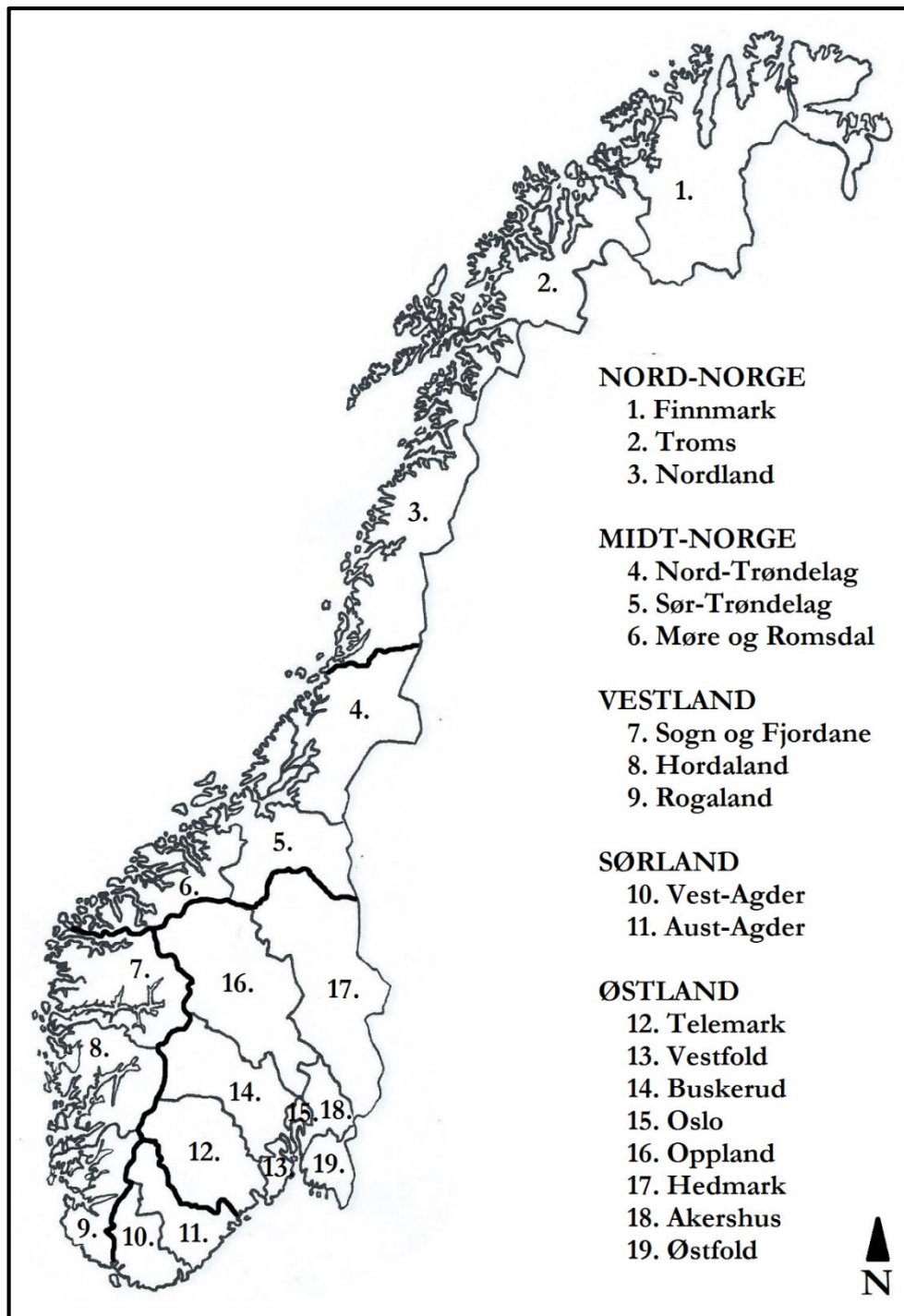


Figure 1: The 'fylker' (counties) and 'landsdeler' (regions) of modern Norway. Map credit: Ben Allport, 2017.

kingdom' or 'polity', which imbue assumptions about political autonomy that this article does not wish to make; as 'regions', we may safely describe entities whose political dependence or independence were not fixed throughout the period in question.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO VIKING AGE IDENTITY

Rather than assuming the task of defining identity from scratch, the following discussion restricts itself to the conceptualizations of identity which form part of the common discourse of scholarship dealing with Viking Age Scandinavia. Within this context identity is understood to encompass the self-definition of individuals and social groups and the practices by which they achieved it. In modern discourse, it is common to perceive identity, as Judith Jesch puts it, as 'shifting, indeed malleable, constructed and situated rather than essential', although Jesch herself suggests that this view may impose modern interpretations onto the past.⁴ Despite this, it is not controversial to suggest that identity is to some degree multi-layered, and that among these layers are included levels of affiliation to collective concepts, uniting groups of individuals as communities with shared beliefs, practices and outlooks. It is this concept which is expressed in the following discussion with the term 'collective identity'.

Current archaeological discourse on the Viking Age commonly uses a terminology for addressing identity which derives in large part from the 'theory of practice' developed by

⁴ Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 182.

the influential sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, although such is its ubiquity that his name is decreasingly explicitly attached to it.⁵ Scholarly orthodoxy maintains that collective identity is expressed through certain communal practices and symbolisms which, in line with Bourdieu's theories, are understood to be both a product of the structure of that identity and a means of shaping it. These practices can be broadly ascribed three intertwined functions: to reinforce to individuals within the collective the commonality of its members, to define members of the collective against members of other collectives with which they are in

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). For examples of studies acknowledging the debt to Bourdieu, see Liv Nilsson Stutz, 'Escaping the Allure of Meaning: Toward New Paradigms in the Study of Ritual in Prehistory', in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes and Interactions, an International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3–7, 2004*, ed. by Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere, *Vägar til Midgård*, 8 (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 95–98; Frida Espolin Norstein, 'Migration and the Creation of Identity in the Viking Diaspora: A Comparative Study of Viking Age Funerary Rites from Northern Scotland and Møre og Romsdal' (unpublished master's thesis, Universitetet i Oslo, 2014), pp. 5–6; Marianne Hem Eriksen, 'Portals to the Past: An Archaeology of Doorways, Dwellings and Ritual Practice in Late Iron Age Scandinavia' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Universitetet i Oslo, 2015), pp 32–3. I am deeply indebted to Marianne Hem Eriksen for granting me access to her PhD research, and giving kind permission for me to include her findings below. For numerous examples of articles adapting Bourdieu's terminology without acknowledgement, see *Archaeology of Regional Technologies*, ed. by Barndon, Engevik and Øye.

contact, and to display overt symbols of their unity to these other collectives.

To apply these ideas to ‘regional’ collective identity, however, demands a justification of the use of this term in the context of Viking Age society, and, in particular, the sense of scale it implies. Viking Age north-western Scandinavia was composed of small scattered communities strung out along an often inhospitable terrain which hindered overland communication. Beyond the local, therefore, collective identities must, to a varying degree, be assumed to comprise members who might never meet one another, and yet were still united by a sense of community. Within the context of modern nationalism, the political scientist Benedict Anderson coined the term ‘imagined communities’ to describe this phenomenon, observing that the nation ‘is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’.⁶

While Anderson was addressing the rise of nationalism, this concept is applicable to almost all levels of society; as he himself puts it, ‘all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact [...] are imagined’.⁷ He is, however, adamant that, on a national level, the medium to create the bonds required to reinforce this sense of community could not have existed before the explosion in the use of the printed word, ultimately

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2006; repr. 2016), p. 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*

designating the imagined community as a modern phenomenon.⁸ The question of how applicable the concept of nationalism is to a medieval context has since been hotly debated within scholarship. More recently, Susan Reynolds has highlighted the importance of large collective bodies of governance, described in their own time as *gentes*, *nationes* or *populi*, which need not correspond to the boundaries of kingdoms (Reynolds uses the examples of Saxons, Bavarians and Swabians within the East Frankish kingdom).⁹ These communities were ‘established in custom’ and thus perceived to be ‘ancient and natural units’; Reynolds argues that membership of these communities may have played a more significant role in sustaining societal power structures than the interpersonal relationships which are often held to be the foundation of feudalism.¹⁰

The search for medieval collective identity can be taken too far, however. In Norwegian discourse, the desire to reconstruct a Norwegian national identity drove the historian Kåre Lunden to seek a medieval analogy for modern mass culture; the highly problematic solution he settled upon was the corpus of *konungasögur*, which he claimed were an ‘overwhelming testimony’ to the existence of ‘a common Norwegian subjective identity’, despite the fact that they were composed by and for

⁸ Anderson, pp. 37–46.

⁹ Susan Reynolds, ‘Government and Community’, in *The New Cambridge Medieval History Vol. 4, part 1, c. 1024–c. 1198*, ed. by David Luscombe and Jonathan Riley-Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 86–112 (pp. 87–8).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Icelanders and were undoubtedly accessible to only a limited and elite audience within the kingdom of Norway itself.¹¹ While Lunden sought to translate the concept of shared media to a Norwegian context, it is more fruitful to turn away from the slippery concept of national identity towards the known mechanisms of creating community cohesion in medieval Scandinavia as an alternative.

Archaeology points to the existence of sites known as central places; arenas in which social bonds — whether familial, communal, political, economic or religious — were forged and renewed. As described by the archaeologist Dagfinn Skre, ‘the functions of a central place have a scope beyond the needs of the inhabitants of that place, reaching out to surrounding communities. In order to participate in certain activities or to satisfy some of their public needs [...] the inhabitants of a certain area go to the central place’.¹² Within the context of Late Iron Age Scandinavian society, sites typically designated as central places often combined multiple functions. The quintessential example is the chieftain’s hall, which is assumed to have been the locus for the forging or renewal of political bonds, religious

¹¹ Kåre Lunden, ‘Was There a Norwegian National Identity in the Middle Ages?’, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 20 (1995), 19–33 (p. 26). Cf. Sverre Bagge, ‘Nationalism in Norway in the Middle Ages’, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 20 (1995), 1–18 for an immediate and blistering response to Lunden’s arguments.

¹² Dagfinn Skre, ‘Centrality, Landholding and Trade in Scandinavia c. AD 700–900’, in *Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Bjørn Poulsen and Søren Michael Sindbæk (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), pp. 197–212 (p. 199).

rituals and trading; the Viking Age hall at Borg in Lofoten is one such site in which all of these functions can be identified (or, at least, strongly conjectured) in the material record.¹³

With regard to Anderson's 'imagined communities', these occasions of social renewal might, to a certain extent, compensate for the lack of a uniform mass culture. Certainly, it might mean that a greater proportion of an extended collective community had met each other than is supposed by Anderson or is even the case in the present day. The extent to which this was possible is dependent on the scale of the communities involved; logically, the smaller the community, the more opportunities there would be for individuals within that community to congregate and reaffirm their bonds to one another. Again, this much is apparent in archaeological discourse; Skre identifies multiple tiers of central places in accordance with their function, suggesting that those with the greatest number of functions extended over a greater area, which might include further central places of a lower order.¹⁴

On this basis, central places of the highest order can be assumed to have had a broad regional function. There are no sites, on the other hand, for which a national function can be convincingly proposed, even centuries after Norway's unification was completed; the central places which served the largest areas in post-unification Norway were the assembly

¹³ See *Borg in Lofoten: A Chieftain's Farm in North Norway*, ed. by Gerd Stamsø Munch, Olav Sverre Johansen and Else Roesdahl, Arkeologisk skriftserie, 1 (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Skre, 'Centrality, Landholding and Trade', p. 199.

locations of the four regional þings — the Gulapþing, Frostupþing, Eiðsivapþing and Borgarþing — which are unlikely to have reached their full extent before the eleventh century and, even then, have left little trace in the archaeological record.¹⁵ The social bonds that governed the ‘national’ community, once it has become appropriate to use this term, are likely to have been enacted on a regional level, through the royal feasts and other visits to the local elite which are widely attested in the written record.

This implies that, within the known structure of medieval Scandinavian society, regional affiliations are likely to have occupied a larger role within everyday life than national ones. The same logic suggests, of course, that more small-scale local affiliations are likely to have played an even greater role, and it is not the intention of this research to deny this possibility; the point has already been made that individuals are likely to have many layers of affiliation. These conclusions do, on the other hand, provide a justification for the necessity of examining regional affiliation given that the field has so frequently focused on the national. Furthermore, the aforementioned fact that the largest identifiable central places in the period under discussion have a regional function indicates the importance of analysing this level of collective identity.

¹⁵ See Knut Helle, *Gulating og Gulatingsslova* (Leikanger: [n. pub.], 2001).

Material culture and its drawbacks as a source for collective identity

While it is one thing to establish a working definition of regional collective identity that is practical within the social context of Viking Age Norway, it is quite another to try and locate these units of identity in the material and literary record. In archaeological discourse, one established method for trying to repopulate a landscape with collective identities is to analyse the distribution of varying types or styles of categories of material evidence, on the understanding that differing practices are likely to reflect different conscious or unconscious displays of identity.

This method is particularly apparent in a recent collection of archaeological essays entitled *The Archaeology of Regional Technologies: Case Studies from the Paleolithic to the Age of the Vikings*. For example, Asbjørn Engevik (one of the volume's editors) argues that 'style [...] is a means of communication, which can be used to express both social and group identity', and that the distribution of asbestos and soapstone bucket pots in the Late Roman and Migration periods consequently indicates the boundaries of two regional communities.¹⁶ Randi Barndon (another editor) argues for the existence of an (admittedly fluctuating) marginal identity in modern Sunnmøre, indicated by

¹⁶ Asbjørn Engevik, 'Technological Style, Regional Diversity and Identity: Asbestos Regions and Soapstone Regions in Norway in the Late Roman and Migration Periods', in *Archaeology of Regional Technologies*, ed. by Barndon, Engevik and Øye, pp. 225–241.

varying styles in disparate categories of material evidence from the Neolithic to the Early Middle Ages.¹⁷

The importance attached to the symbolic value of material evidence can be traced to the interpretation of practice theory popularized in the archaeological community, which is part of a broader school of thought known as cognitive archaeology. As Neil Price states, cognitive archaeology is the ‘archaeology of the intangible as inferred from the material — the archaeology of religious belief, identity, ideology, perception, power relations, and so on’. This is clear in the language used by Engevik, who states that ‘regional identity is socially constructed by various actors who draw upon a group’s repertoire of symbolisms’.¹⁸ There are, however, numerous problems with this method for reconstructing a regional landscape.

Firstly, even without calling this methodological basis into question, it should be apparent that if groups are identifiable by a whole ‘repertoire of symbolisms’, then the use of merely one or two categories of material evidence to draw regional boundaries is not sufficient to make a convincing argument. This seems to be the trap that Engevik falls into; he relates choice of pot style to cultural and social factors, stating that ‘when regional patterns can

¹⁷ Furthermore, Barndon seems to take the existence of a regional collective in Sunnmøre as her starting point, rather than her conclusion, attempting to fit successive distributions spanning (and separated by) many centuries to this concept; Randi Barndon, ‘Regional Approaches to Technology Cluster and Local Variation in a Long Term Perspective: Sunnmøre in Western Norway’, in *Archaeology of Regional Technologies*, ed. by Barndon, Engevik and Øye, pp. 243–262.

¹⁸ Engevik, p. 227.

be observed for stylistic variation, this variation must be significant'; in other words, it is not a preponderance of different categories of evidence that leads Engevik to deduce the existence of regional collectives, it is merely the existence of variation of any form.¹⁹ By construing regional boundaries from these limited data samples, practicalities such as the availability of raw material, trade, the movement of craftsmen and the status value of artefacts (among other factors), while they may be acknowledged, are not attributed sufficient value.²⁰

Yet adding further distribution maps of varying practices to the picture does not necessarily improve matters; ideally one might hope for a series of distribution maps for different categories of material culture that all delineated the same broad areas. Reality is, sadly, disinclined to proffer this view. Quite aside from the selection biases associated with the categories of material culture that are preferred, the regions which receive the most attention, and the general lack of synthesizing material (a particular problem for Norwegian archaeology), distribution maps showing stylistic variations rarely demonstrate any clear regional boundaries. On this basis, the archaeologist Søren Sindbæk suggests that differing cultural patterns should instead be taken as evidence of communication networks.²¹

¹⁹ Engevik, pp. 236–237.

²⁰ Incidentally, there seems to be an increasing countermovement in Scandinavian archaeology, born of materialist theory, which opposes the reduction of material culture to merely a vehicle for various symbolisms. See e.g. Hem Eriksen, pp. 37, 40–42.

²¹ Søren Michael Sindbæk, 'Reassembling Regions: The Social Occasions of Technological Exchange in Viking Age Scandinavia', in *Archaeology of*

It is questionable whether a more populated distribution map could be used to confidently identify regional groups. As the archaeologist Liv Nilsson Stutz explores in her application of practice theory to the material remains of ritual, the value of using material evidence lies primarily in revealing ‘what people did’ — what the practices were rather than the meaning that lay behind them.²² Although Nilsson Stutz addresses religious ritual specifically, it has long been accepted in anthropological circles that the concept of ritual can be extended to the practices which define identity.²³ Just as material remains merely reveal ‘what people did’, but cannot approach the meaning that they attached to these actions, the symbolisms of identity can reveal the practices through which the Norse defined identity within and between communities, but it cannot define exactly what those communities were perceived to be.

As Nilsson Stutz proposes with regard to ritual, accepting this reality does not diminish the inherent value of exploring the means by which communal identity was expressed in the medieval period.²⁴ For example, analysis of the nature and spread of social practices is of crucial importance for understanding the dynamics of the Viking diaspora.²⁵ Given, however, that a

Regional Technologies, ed. by Barndon, Engevik and Øye, pp. 263–287 (pp. 265–266).

²² Nilsson Stutz, p. 95.

²³ See Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspective and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 39.

²⁴ Nilsson Stutz, p. 96.

²⁵ See Lesley Abrams, ‘Diaspora and Identity in the Viking Age’, *EME*, 20 (2012), 17–33; Jesch, p. 69; Espolin Norstein.

fundamental principle of practice theory holds that practices define the meaning underlying them as much as they are defined by it — and are therefore responsible for changing meaning — it cannot be claimed that the widespread distribution of certain practices (whether they coincide or not) is definitive evidence for the existence of a homogenous collective identity that is attached to that area. This can be illustrated, once again, with reference to the Viking diaspora. While the transmission of practices is regularly used to attest to the existence of diasporic communities with previous and/or ongoing links to their original homelands, it is never suggested that practices shared with the homeland are indicative of a shared regional collective identity. This is because, according to established diaspora theory, members of diasporic communities forge new identities for themselves based upon, among other things, their perceived relationship with their homelands and their new host societies.²⁶ If shared practices are not taken as evidence of shared identity between diasporic communities and their homelands, there is no reason why they should be treated as such with regard to different regions within the homeland, especially when the relationships within and between them are, if anything, even more obscure; this creates a misleading impression of homogeneity in the Norse homelands. The use of this material evidence for differing practices therefore comes down to the intent of the researcher; it might be argued that understanding practices is of greater importance for understanding Norse society than trying to divine their meaning. The case has been made so far in this article that the study of

²⁶ Jesch, p. 70.

regional collective identities is a justifiable pursuit given their likely importance as a social unit in Viking Age Norway. In this context, the material symbolisms of identity, while valuable, must be considered secondary to a methodology which can better populate that landscape with identifiable regional groups.

Literary culture and its drawbacks as a source for collective identity

The difficulties associated with construing collective identities from narrative sources are, perhaps, somewhat easier to understand. In archaeology, as discussed, issues arise from the attempts to perceive the meaning behind the practices of numerous individuals, but the traces that their practices leave behind at least provide a connection to those individuals. In literary accounts, we are reliant purely on one individual's conception of multiple units of collective identity, which they themselves may or may not profess to belong to. In many cases there is the additional factor of spatial and temporal distance to be accounted for, particularly as the most comprehensive corpus of Scandinavian literature, the sagas, was composed mainly in the thirteenth century, long after the period under consideration. The act of literary expression is in itself one of the practices associated with the construction of identity, with the intended task of reaffirming personal identity and defining it against those of others. Consequently, we cannot be certain of anything beyond the author's perception of their own identity, when it is discernible — and in many cases, even this is up for debate.

Take, for example, the Old English text known as *Ohthere's Voyage*. Incorporated into the *Old English Orosius*, this text claims

to relate the account of a north Norwegian merchant, named in the text as Ohthere, at the court of Alfred the Great at an unspecified point during his reign (871–899). The text has received attention for its use of the terms ‘norðmenn’ (northmen), ‘norðmanna land’ (land of the northmen) and ‘Norðweg’ (the North Way), which successive generations of scholars have taken as evidence for the existence of a Norwegian collective identity in the late ninth century.²⁷ This conclusion is problematic, however, in view of the context in which the text survives. While it claims to report the words of a native Norwegian, it is nonetheless mediated through an Anglo-Saxon context that is likely to have had its own preconceptions of the north, and of the term ‘norðmenn’; Clare Downham, among others, notes that this term is merely one of a number used to refer generically to

²⁷ ‘Text and Translation: Three Parts of the Known World and the Geography of Europe North of the Danube According to Orosius’ *Historiae* and its Old English Version’, in *Ohthere’s Voyages: A Late 9th-Century Account of Voyages along the Coasts of Norway and Denmark and its Cultural Context*, ed. by Janet Bately and Anton Englert, *Maritime Culture of the North*, 1 (Roskilde: The Viking Ship Museum, 2007). For examples of this assumption, see Lunden, p. 27; Knut Helle, ‘The History of the Early Viking Age in Norway’, in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, ed. by H. B. Clarke, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Ragnall Ó Floinn (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998); Claus Krag, ‘The Early Unification of Norway’, in *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia Volume 1: Prehistory to 1520*, ed. by Knut Helle (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 184–201 (pp. 188–189); Torgrim Titlestad, *Viking Norway* (Stavanger: Saga Publishers International, 2008), p. 69.

Scandinavians up until the late tenth century at the earliest.²⁸ Within the terminology of the theoretical framework discussed above, this aspect of *Ohthere's Voyage* should be viewed primarily as a strategy for defining a tangible Anglo-Saxon identity, rather than a hypothetical Norwegian one; it is in his use of terminology with which the Anglo-Saxons would not have been familiar that Ohthere proves his value. The same criticism can be extended to those, such as Kåre Lunden, who have sought evidence for national collective identity in the sagas; as noted above, the sagas reflect the viewpoints of, at best, the uppermost echelons of high medieval Norwegian society, but more realistically the views of the Icelanders who moved in these circles. Their authorship, intended audience and the late date of their composition renders them, on their own, highly problematic for reconstructing Viking Age or even early medieval collective identity.

Outline of a methodology of triangulation

The shortcomings of the methodologies outlined above demand an approach to the reconstruction of regional collective identities which is able to account for the flaws in the data available to us; in other words, both archaeological and literary evidence should be utilized. In 2001 Neil Price commented on the tendency for scholars attempting to step beyond their disciplines to be

²⁸ Clare Downham, “Hiberno-Norwegians” and “Anglo-Danes”: Anachronistic Ethnicities and Viking-Age England’, *MScand*, 19 (2009), 139–169 (pp. 141–152).

upbraided by their colleagues.²⁹ This is undoubtedly due to the understandable imbalance when a scholar with expertise in one field attempts to use less familiar material. Without claiming to be impervious to this imbalance, the present research demands a methodology which attributes equal importance to certain types of data drawn from archaeological and literary material, which will then be compared in the hope of painting the most nuanced picture of Norway's regional landscape possible; in sociological discourse, this might be referred to as 'triangulation', an approach which utilizes multiple methodologies or data sets with the aim of counteracting 'biases or deficiencies caused by using only one method of inquiry'.³⁰

In the interests of avoiding giving undue weight to one category of evidence over another, statistical data has been made primary; this has the advantage of drawing out broad trends within the material. For the archaeological material, the focus will be on the distribution of categories of sites which indicate the presence of regional power centres in the landscape. These include longhouses (the most widely attested form of elite dwelling in Viking Age Norway), large boathouses (an indicator of military organization), as well as sites that have been

²⁹ Neil Price, 'Cognition, Culture and Context: Observations on the 'New' Viking Archaeology', in *Viking and Norse in the North Atlantic: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Fourteenth Viking Congress, Torshavn, 19-30 July 2001*, ed. by A. Mortensen and Símun V. Arge (Torshavn: Føroya Fróðskaparfelag, 2003), pp. 375–382 (p. 378).

³⁰ Paulette M. Rothbauer, 'Triangulation', in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. by Lisa M. Given, 2. vols. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 1, pp. 892–894 (p. 892).

traditionally considered important central places; as stated below, these sites are the loci for practices designed to reaffirm social bonds and foster community cohesion, and cannot be demonstrated to have a function broader than the regional. Furthermore, to a greater extent than any other part of Scandinavia, the central places that have been revealed in the archaeological record in Norway are linked with secular power, centring in particular (although not exclusively) around chieftains' longhouses which are held to have had religious, economic and broader social functions often found in conjunction with the political. As noted previously, Borg in Lofoten is one such location, but other sites identified as central places which also feature longhouses include Aure in Møre og Romsdal, Åker in Hedmark, Hove-Sørbø in Rogaland, Sande in Vest-Agder, Huseby in Vestfold and Bjørnstad Søndre in Østfold.³¹

The data that will be prioritized in the literary record are references to terms that describe units of regional identity. Luckily for our purposes, Norwegian sources had an established lexicon of terms for the inhabitants of a certain region; thus, the residents of Sogn were called the Sygnir, the residents of Þrændalǫg (modern Trøndelag) were called the Þrændir, and so forth. These terms frequently appear in the sagas to identify both groups and individuals and contribute to a sense of the importance of regional identity at the time they were composed; overall, there are 230 uses of terms of regional identity in *Heimskringla*, compared to 126 (occasionally ambiguous) uses of

³¹ Hem Eriksen, p. 50, fig. 3.2.

terms for Norwegian collective identity. As a source for the Viking Age, the sagas are subject to all the reservations about these sources heretofore expressed, yet many of these terms are attested much earlier in skaldic poetry. A small number may even be traceable to a description of Scandinavian tribes that appears in the *Getica* of the sixth-century scholar Jordanes. These will be addressed below where appropriate, although it must be noted that in most cases their interpretation is problematic. Terms such as these can be considered a feature of the symbolic acts of expression that define collective identity: they identify groups based on their connection to a geographical concept. Although the terms are applied externally in the sagas, in order for their use to make sense to an audience familiar with this political landscape, they must have been understood as part of a system whose members would be aware of these distinctions; their appearance in alternative media, such as skaldic poetry, confirms this suggestion.

Evidence which can add details or nuance to these statistical viewpoints — such as the evidence of varying practices addressed above, or the narratives of the *konungasögur* — will not be disregarded, but will be treated as supplemental; on their own, they are not sufficient to build a convincing reconstruction of the basic units of regional collective identity, and must instead be applied to the framework established through triangulation. The general (although by no means universal) trend established by this methodology is a correlation between the terms of regional identity featured in the literary record and power centres clustered around the coastal entrances to water systems such as rivers and fjords. The implication of this is that powerful elites

located at fjord exteriors and river mouths were able to exercise control of resource exchange between regional networks extending inland and the coastal trunk trade route. They were therefore able to impose themselves politically and culturally over these inland, water-based networks.

No model is perfect, and it must be acknowledged that the ‘triangulation’ proposed will grant a very specific view of collective identity, mediated through a specific section of society, namely the elites at whose political centres the practices of communal cohesion were enacted and who are the most prominent social class in the literary record (no doubt due to their role in its creation). While the theoreticians who prioritize the meaning and practice of the individual might balk at this approach, it can be justified by the argument that the predominance of this class in our sources attests to its central role in the construction and perpetuation of regional collective identity; this possibility will be explored in greater depth later on in this article.

CASE STUDY 1: VESTLAND AND SØRLAND

The choice of Vestland for the first case study is logical. The topographical layout of this ‘landsdel’ is conducive to the formation of distinct regions, and the geopolitical factors involved in local political development have been more widely discussed and understood. Vestland is a mountainous landscape riven with deep fjords and waterways. Its most fertile regions are found on the flatter coast and islands of the waterway exteriors, whereas their interiors are less suited to agriculture but abundant

in opportunities for hunting, logging, ore extraction and so on. The mountains, which further inland become increasingly impassable, form natural barriers between the different water systems. For much of the Iron Age a primary power dynamic in the region appears to have been based on exchange between the farmers of the exterior and the raw-material gatherers of the interior.

Vestland has historically received a disproportionate share of attention from archaeologists, for reasons which range from the practical or circumstantial to the political. It features predominantly in the sagas, in part due to its role in the narrative of Norwegian history; it is generally considered to have been the power base of Haraldr hárfagri (Fairhair), the king attributed with the initial unification of Norway.³² It has also received significant attention from archaeologists (especially those seeking to connect finds there with the narrative described above). One such archaeologist was Bjørn Myhre, whose groundwork on centres of political power in this region has been widely accepted in the scholarly community for the last thirty years and forms the basis for the application of my methodology to the Vestlandic landscape.³³

³² Helle, p. 254.

³³ Bjørn Myhre, 'Boathouses as Indicators of Political Organization', *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 18 (1985), 36–60; 'Chieftains' Graves and Chieftain Territories in South Norway in the Migration Period', *Studien zur Sachsenforschung*, 6 (1987), 169–187; 'Boathouses and Naval Organization', in *Military Aspects of Scandinavian Society in a European Perspective AD 1–1300: Papers from an International Research Seminar at the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen, 2–4 May 1996*, ed. by Anne

Myhre combined distribution maps for differing categories of finds associated with the elite such as precious metals, rich burials, central places and hillforts, coming to the conclusion that the landscape of Iron Age Vestland and Sørland was divided into a series of coastal regional centres with their hinterlands stretching inwards along waterways. Regional units were, by his reasoning, largely contained within these individual waterway systems: his findings directly corroborate the archaeological aspects of the model outlined above. Although his primary focus was on the Migration Age, his analyses of military boathouses extended his model up to the Viking Age and beyond. Subsequent developments in the field, such as the excellent synthesis of Viking Age Norwegian longhouses recently provided by Marianne Hem Eriksen, continue to confirm the trend that Myhre identified, even while she adds a cautionary note regarding the selection bias underlying the current data.³⁴ The current study has followed Myhre in presenting data for Sørland as well as Vestland; figure 2 plots rough power centres and regional ‘boundaries’ based on those provided by Myhre, combined with the data he provides elsewhere for military boathouses whose date ranges fall within the period 700–1050 and, finally, the distribution of longhouses provided by Hem Eriksen.³⁵

Nørgård Jørgensen and Birthe L. Clausen, *Publications from the National Museum: Studies in archaeology and history*, 2 (Copenhagen: The National Museum, 1997), pp. 169–183.

³⁴ Hem Eriksen, pp. 49–50, fig. 3.2.

³⁵ Myhre, ‘Chieftains’ Graves’, p. 178, fig. 7; ‘Boathouses and Naval Organisation’, p. 177, fig. 11, p. 179, fig. 13; Hem Eriksen, p. 50, fig. 3.2.

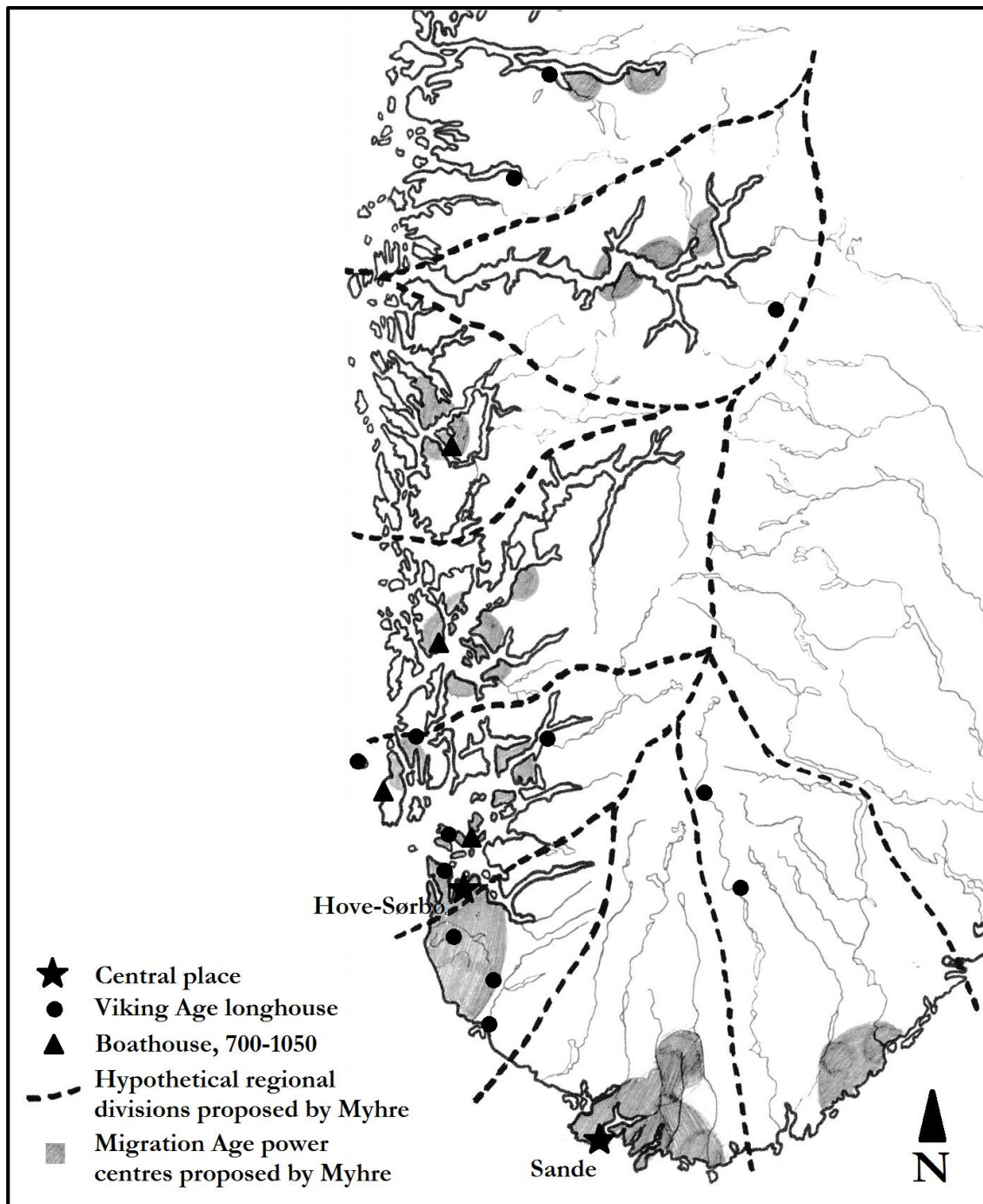


Figure 2: Map depicting archaeological evidence in Vestland and Sørland for the clustering of regional power centres along key points granting control over waterway networks. Map credit: Ben Allport, 2017.

The terms of regional identity that apply to Vestland are among the most well-attested of any throughout Norway, due in part to the ideological projects of rulers of Vestland who oversaw the production of a large amount of skaldic poetry. In decreasing order of the frequency of their occurrence in *Heimskringla*, the regional identities of Vestland comprise the Hǫrðar (with fifteen references), the Egðir, Rygir/Hólmrygir and Sygnir (each with eight), the Firðir and the Jaðarbyggjar (both with two). Of these, attestations of Hǫrðar and Hólmrygir can be found as early as the skaldic verses of Þorbjörn hornklofi's *Haraldskvæði*, which may date from c. 900, the term Egðir is attested from the late tenth-century poem *Háleygjatal*, and Sygnir appears in *Austrfararvísur*, a poem by the skald Sigvatr Þórðarson dated to c. 1019.³⁶ There is even evidence that some of these collective units may be much older. Jordanes' *Getica* makes reference to a number of tribes located in modern Norway, among whose number is listed the Rugi tribe, which can be unproblematically connected to the Rygir on linguistic grounds. Somewhat less clear are the Augandzi and Arochi tribes, which may correspond to the Egðir and the Hǫrðar, respectively.³⁷ This, of course, does not indicate

³⁶ *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, ed. by Diana Whaley, 2 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), I, pp. 91, 108, 195, 211; II, pp. 578, 601.

³⁷ Inger Storli, 'Ohthere and His World: A Contemporary Perspective', in *Ohthere's Voyages* ed. by Bately and Englert, pp. 76–99 (p. 82); Stefan Brink, 'People and Land in Early Scandinavia', in *Franks, Northmen, and Slavs: Identities and State Formation in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. by Ildar Garipzanov, Patrick Geary, Przemysław Urbańczyk (Turnhout: Brepols,

that these tribes would have occupied the same position in the landscape that their Viking Age successors did; it merely attests to the longevity of these collective concepts in this part of Scandinavia.

Further secondary detail can be added in the form of the currently accepted view among Norwegian historians and archaeologists alike — most recently stated by Dagfinn Skre — that of all the royal estates named in *Heimskringla*, five are likely to have been genuine seats of regional and then royal power from the late ninth century onwards.³⁸ These ‘royal’ estates — Utstein and Avaldsnes in Rogaland; Fitjar, Alrekstad and Seim in Hordaland — conform to the expected pattern, located on the coast at the entrance to major water networks. The correspondence between these two landscapes is striking, but not wholly perfect. What are we to make, for example, of the apparent power centre in the north of modern Hordaland, which seems to have no collective identity attached to it; were the residents of this region considered to be Hǫrðar, or some other collective group whose name was not preserved? Similarly, were the Egðir viewed as a single collective, or was there a distinction between the east Egðir and west Egðir, given that a distinction between the territorial names Austr-Agðir and Vestr-Agðir was common in the sagas? In all, however, these gaps are relatively minor discrepancies given the overall correlation of the two data sets. It is also interesting to note the case of Sognefjord and

2008), pp. 87–112 (p. 92); Dagfinn Skre, ‘Norðvegr — Norway’, *European Review*, 22 (2015), 34–44 (p. 35).

³⁸ Skre, ‘Norðvegr — Norway’, p. 37.

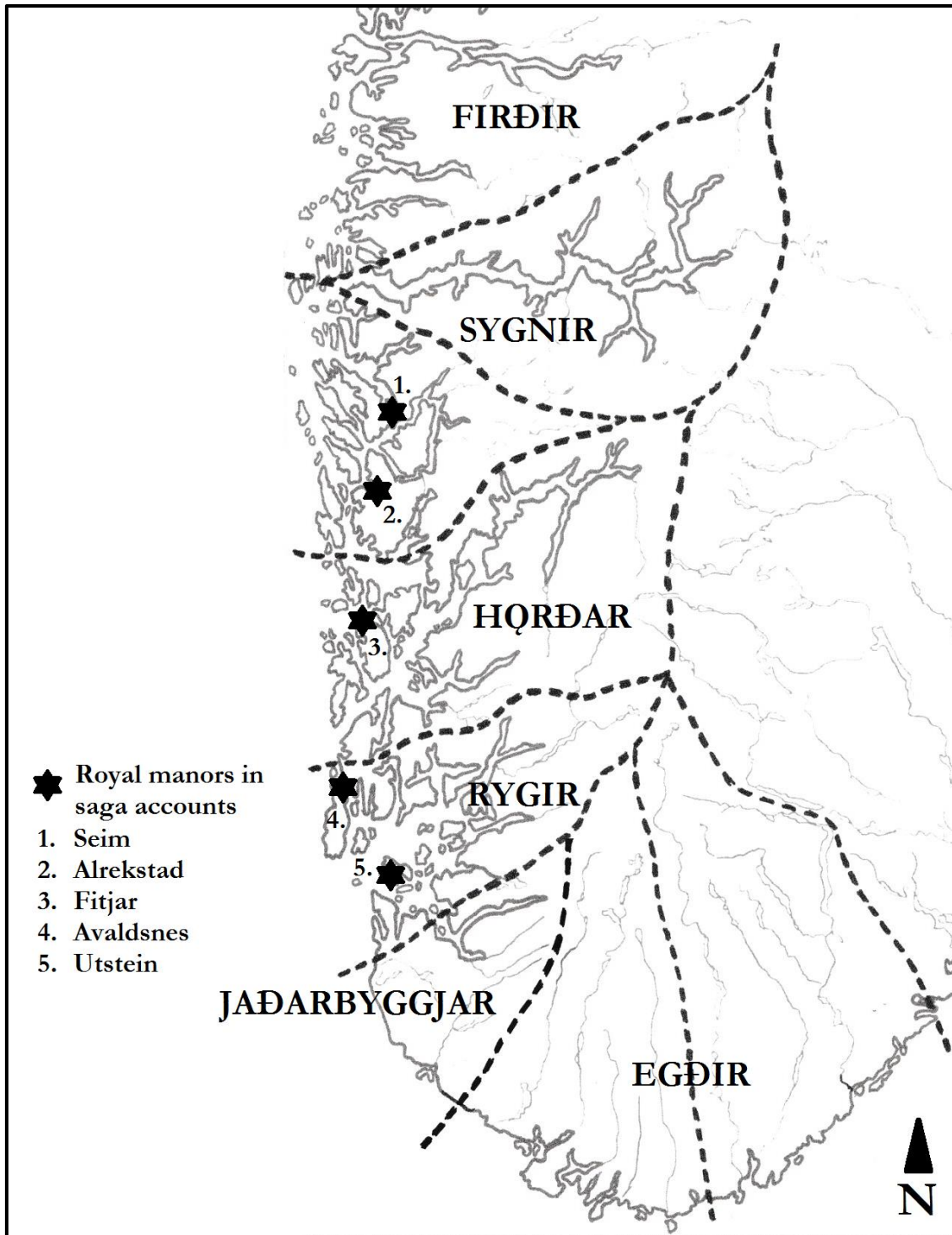


Figure 3: Map of terms of regional identity and royal manors located in Vestland and Sørland in *Heimskringla*, transposed over the rough regional divisions specified in Figure 2. Map credit: Ben Allport, 2017.

Nordfjord (the home of the Sygnir and the Firðir), where it seems that, although the correlation between waterways and collective identities holds true, the evidence points to the regional power centre being located much further inland, a probable consequence of the size of these fjords or more limited fertile land on the coast than further south. By the logic of the model, this would suggest that these regional groups may not have played a large role in power dynamics along the coast of Vestland; this impression is not disabused by the saga narrative.

CASE STUDY 2: NORD-NORGE — HÅLOGALAND

While the regional landscape of Vestland neatly conforms to the expectations of our model, the ‘landsdel’ of Nord-Norge — traditionally known as Hålogaland — is a different story; it is thus an appropriate test for the model’s efficacy. Geographically, this vast area, which makes up a third of modern Norway’s landmass and straddles the Arctic Circle, presents different circumstances to the coast of Vestland; while similarly pitted with fjords, waterways and archipelagos, the interior of Hålogaland is far less suited to agricultural exploitation. Norse settlement in the Viking Age and beyond therefore congregated around the more fertile coastal areas, and did not extend far north of the limit for cereal cultivations. There is also the additional factor of the Sámi to consider; while in the Viking Age Sámi populations are likely to have extended throughout almost the entirety of Norway, it is possible that, though trade and tributary relationships, the residents of Hålogaland enjoyed a greater level of contact with various Sámi groups, which may ultimately have governed

aspects of their identity; this is definitely the impression conveyed by the sagas, which often explicitly connects this northern landscape and its Norse inhabitants, the Háleygir, with the ‘Finns’ — the Old Norse term for the Sámi.

In a corroboration of the decision to prioritize data over narrative, the saga treatment of Hålogaland is strikingly sparse compared to that of Vestland. The first reigning king to visit the area, according to the saga narrative, is Óláfr Tryggvason in the 990s, who ventures there with the intention to convert it. He encounters a hostile supernatural land populated by sorcerers and magical storms. Uncharacteristically for *Heimskringla*, few locations or characters are named. It is not until the reign of Óláfr Haraldsson that named residents of the region start to play a key role in events, as individuals such as Þorir hundr and Ásbjörn Sigurðarson are drawn into the power struggles between royal and aristocratic factions. Furthermore, the landscape is often imbued with supernatural qualities, as indicated by the inhabitants encountered by Óláfr Tryggvason on his missions to the north.³⁹ This paucity of narrative detail is at odds with the density of references to the Háleygir in *Heimskringla*; indeed, it is one of the most frequently mentioned identities in the collection, with twelve attestations. The term is also attested in the skaldic poem *Hákonarmal*, composed by the poet Eyvindr skáldaspillir in the second half of the tenth century.⁴⁰ The majority of the

³⁹ Lionel Perabo, ‘Here Be Heathens: The Supernatural Image of Northern Fenno-Scandinavia in Pre-Modern Literature’ (unpublished master’s thesis, Universitetet i Tromsø, 2016).

⁴⁰ *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1*, I, p. 177.

characters to whom this term is attached in the saga narrative are fighters within the retinues of kings or are otherwise acting outside of their homeland. This disparity seems to indicate that Hålogaland was considered remote in the elite circles within which the saga authors operated, while at the same time members of its own elite were not an uncommon sight beyond its boundaries.

This in turn raises questions as to how accurate the identity landscape of Hålogaland portrayed in the sagas truly is. It is notable that every other regional collective identity of a similar geographical extent that is mentioned in *Heimskringla* — the Þróendir (Nord- and Sør-Trøndelag), Upplendingar (Oppland and Hedmark) and Víkverjar (Vestfold, Oslo, Akershus, Østfold) — is also implied to comprise a number of smaller collectives; the Strindir, Eynir and Skeynir are sub-units of the Þróendir, for example. Hålogaland seems devoid of these subdivisions; the only sub-Háleygir identity group mentioned are the Bjarkeyingar, which is mentioned only once, in association with the significant saga character Þorir hundr, and does not appear to have any application beyond the small island from which he hailed. It is not clear whether this lack of regional subdivisions is owing to a lack of knowledge on the part of the saga authors, or whether the residents of Hålogaland did in fact primarily identify themselves by means of an unusually large regional collective, the Háleygir. It is with this in mind that we must turn to the archaeological record.

There are three main categories of sites in Hålogaland which are indicative of local political organization; these are chieftains' halls, military boathouses and a series of sites known

commonly in English as courtyard sites, but in Norwegian discourse as ‘ringformede tunanlegg’. The latter category has attracted particular interest in recent years. These sites are composed of compounds of houses arranged in a circle or oval shape. Following the work of archaeologist Inger Storli, among others, they are now generally accepted to be assembly sites.⁴¹ Although prior to the Viking Age sites of this kind were to be found dotted along the coast as far south as Rogaland, by the period under discussion only three sites remained (all in Hålogaland), at Tjøtta, Steigen and Bjarkøy; these are also the largest of the sites. This has led archaeologist Frode Iversen to conclude that their existence attests to the division of Hålogaland into three distinct legal districts based around these assembly sites.⁴² This interpretation would imply that three distinct sub-identities existed in Hålogaland, the northernmost of which might have encompassed the term Bjarkeyingr, but which otherwise are unattested by terms of identity. There are, however, difficulties with Iversen’s interpretation, as it hinges upon administrative material from the 1500s to propose suspiciously monolithic legal districts lasting from the Late Iron Age to the sixteenth century.⁴³

⁴¹ See Inger Storli, *Hålogaland før Rikssamlingen: Politiske prosesser i perioden 200–900 e. Kr.* (Oslo: Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning, 2006).

⁴² Frode Iversen, ‘Community and Society: The *Thing* at the Edge of Europe’, *Journal of the North Atlantic Special Volume*, 8 (2015), 1–17.

⁴³ *Ibid*, pp. 7–14.

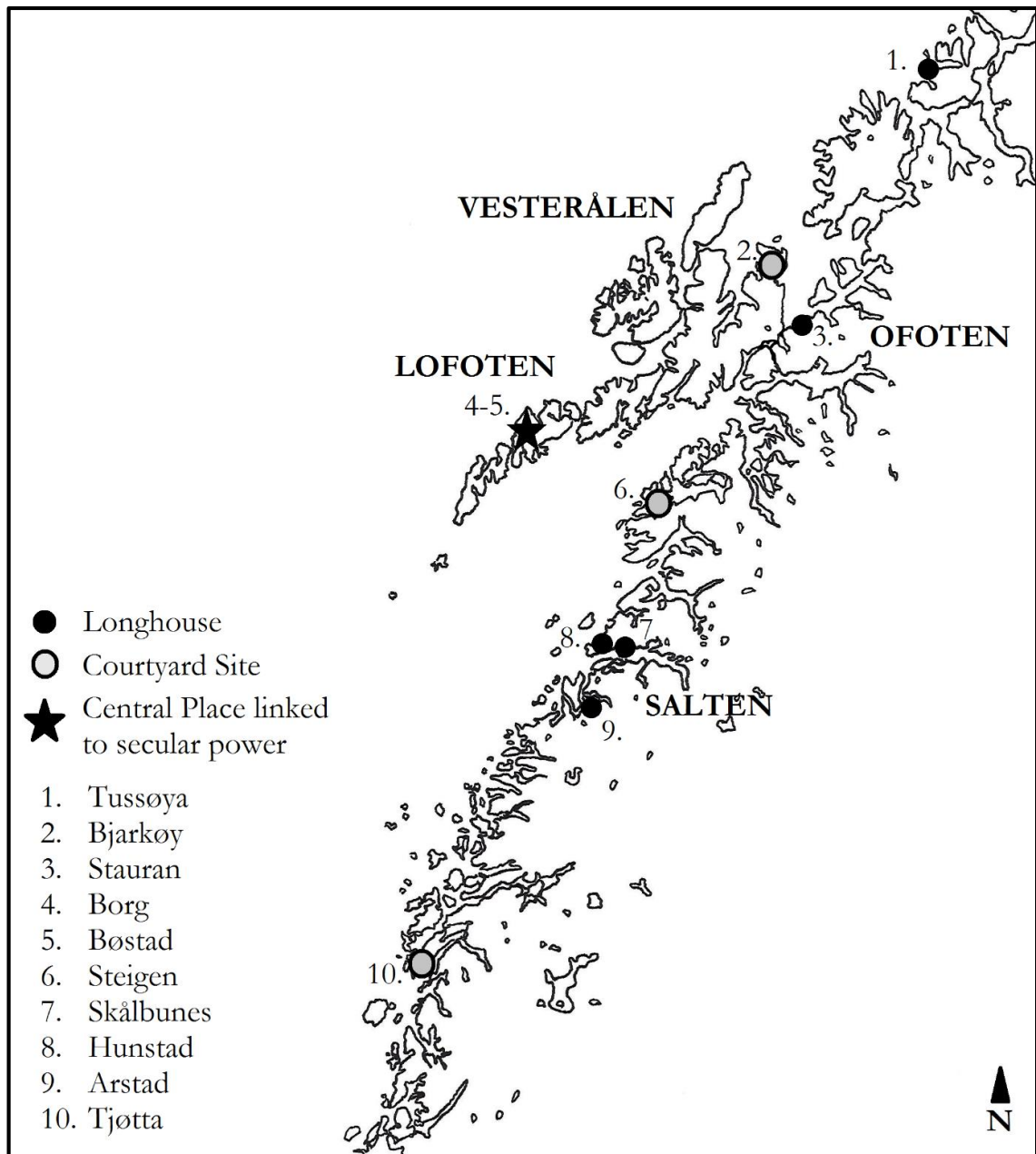


Figure 4: Archaeological evidence for a Viking Age power centre located around the strait between Lofoten and Salten. Map credit: Ben Allport, 2016.

This picture is also complicated by the consideration of other sites indicative of political organization, which overwhelmingly cluster around the strait separating the Lofoten and Vesterålen archipelagos from the modern districts of Ofoten and northern Salten. Lofoten is the location of Borg, at 83m the largest longhouse in Scandinavia and, as previously noted, the quintessential central place, combining multiple social functions.⁴⁴ The courtyard sites, on the other hand, seem to have been more limited in function, and may therefore be considered central places of a lower tier. Besides Borg, there are the Viking Age longhouses at Bøstad, in the vicinity of Borg, and Skålbunes, Hunstad and Arstad, all three of which lie along the opposite coastline, in Salten.⁴⁵ Military boathouses also cluster around this strait, including some which are the largest in Scandinavia, able to accommodate ships nearly twice the size of the 22m long Oseberg ship that was uncovered at the mouth of the Oslofjord.⁴⁶ This area therefore gives the impression of being politically dominant in the Viking Age; this can be seen in figure 4, which combines Storli's data on Viking Age courtyard sites with Hem Eriksen's longhouse data.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Frands Herschend and Dorthe Kaldal Mikkelsen, 'The Main Building at Borg (I:1)', in *Borg in Lofoten*, ed. by Munch, Johansen and Roesdahl, pp. 41–76 (p. 15).

⁴⁵ Hem Eriksen, p. 50, fig. 3.2.

⁴⁶ See Roy Anders Nilsen, 'Nausttuffer i Nord-Norge: Distribusjon og kronologi relatert til samtidige båttyper og havningå' (unpublished dissertation, Universitetet i Tromsø, 1996).

⁴⁷ Storli, p. 73, fig. 21; Hem Eriksen, p. 50, fig. 3.2.

In light of the importance of maintaining control of key waterways as a means of extending political power elsewhere along the Norwegian coast, it is clear from the evidence of long-distance trade found in Borg, and the subsequent development of the trading site at nearby Vågan, that elites in control of this strait would gain dominance over local exchange. Tjøtta, located further to the south, is likely to have been dependent on the trunk route passing by to this crucial area, and therefore have been politically subordinated to this northern power centre. The Bjarkeyingr identity, on the other hand, could be regarded as anomalous, due to its single attestation and the narrowness of its applicability, but it may also belong broadly to the power cluster surrounding this strait, as the nearby late Viking Age longhouse at Stauran — which overlooks the strait at its narrowest point — might suggest; it is merely in Frode Iversen's model that it becomes the political centre of the area stretching north of Vesterålen.⁴⁸ To this may be added the supplementary evidence of Ohthere's account of the north, in which he states 'þæt sio scir hatte Halgoland þe he on bude' (he lived in the *scir* (lit. 'shire') which is called *Halgoland* (Hålogaland)); this was, apparently, the regional identity that mattered to him, as opposed to anything of a smaller scale.⁴⁹

We must therefore consider the possibility that perhaps our view of Háleygir identity is not as incomplete as at first we might suppose; on the basis of the method of triangulation outlined in this study, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the residents of

⁴⁸ Iversen, pp. 7–14.

⁴⁹ *Ohthere's Voyages*, p. 47.

this entire area identified with the collective entity known as the Háleygir, although future finds may alter this view. It is possible that smaller identities may have existed that ultimately became subsumed by this overarching identity. While in Vestland the picture is one of small regional networks located along a larger coastal network, the disparate, sparsely populated and coastally-based community of Hålogaland, while the end-point of coastal trade, should itself be viewed as a regional network, wherein control of exchange was exercised over the key strait separating the Lofoten archipelago from the mainland.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: THE ROLE OF ELITES

As noted above, the nature of the evidence which forms the basis of this model ensures that we approach the idea of collective identity from a certain perspective. Our archaeological data is restricted to the evidence for concentrations of elite power, whereas the terms of identity found in skaldic poetry and the *konungasögur* derive from literature that was composed on behalf of the highest echelons of society. While on one level this might raise concerns about the accuracy of our received view of collective identity, these concerns may be allayed if it can be demonstrated that these sections of society were the prime movers in the construction and reinforcement of regional collective identity; as Bill McSweeney observes for a more modern context, ‘collective identity is not out there waiting to be discovered. What is “out there” is identity discourse on the part of political leaders, intellectuals and countless others, who engage

in the process of constructing, negotiating, manipulating or affirming a response to the demand [...] for a collective image'.⁵⁰

In a recent analysis of identity in the Viking diaspora, the historian Lesley Abrams proposed the existence of a network of Norse elites linking royal or lordly courts both within and beyond Scandinavia, characterized by ongoing contact, alliances and constant movement of various members of this elite.⁵¹ While this is just one of the mechanisms by which differing practices spread across the Norse-populated world, the fact that the surviving archaeological evidence disproportionately favours the elites — who wielded the power necessary to have monumental graves and rune-stones erected, and sustained their status with prestige craft items — makes this network the most approachable mechanism of diaspora in the archaeological record.

This 'international' network need not imply, however, that elite identity was in some way separated or aloof from the collective identities of the regions in which they exercised their power and control of exchange; as Abrams points out, individuals within this network could identify themselves differently in different contexts based on overlapping affiliations.⁵² There is no reason that regional collective identity could not have been foremost among these affiliations, regardless of ties with other, more far-flung members of the network — particularly if elites were intimately involved in shaping the construction of regional

⁵⁰ Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interest: A Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 77–78.

⁵¹ Abrams, p. 21.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

identity and the practices which perpetuated it. This seems to be the implicit assumption of the sagas, late though their perspective is. In one telling passage in *Heimskringla*, Ásbjörn Sigurðarson, the northern aristocrat resisting the southern king's encroachment upon his traditional rights, complains to his uncle, the semi-autonomous regional ruler of Vestland, Erlingr Skjálgsson, that Erlingr is no longer free to do what he likes. In response, 'Erlingr sá til hans ok glotti við tǫnn ok mælti: "Minna vitið þér af konungs ríki, Háleygir, en vér Rygir"' (Erlingr looked at him and grinned and said: "You know less of the king's power, you Háleygir, than we Rýgir").⁵³

This is only one of several instances in the sagas that indicate the role of the regional aristocracy in defining collective identity. Erlingr Skjálgsson embodies the concept of the regional elite, tracing his descent from the illusive figure Hǫrða-Kári, whose moniker is indelibly associated with the Hǫrðar collective identity. The jarls of Lade, one of two dominant Norwegian ruling dynasties in the tenth century, are also explicitly connected with the Háleygir identity in the name that the saga authors gave to the skaldic poem describing their ancestry, *Háleygjatal*. This is in contrast to *Ynglingatal*, the equivalent poem for the rulers of Vestland upon which *Háleygjatal* may have been based, which instead preserves the name of the dynasty.⁵⁴

⁵³ *Óláfs saga ins helga*, in *Heimskringla II*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit, 27 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritfelag, 1945, repr. 2002), p. 197.

⁵⁴ *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1*, I, pp. 171, 195.

Beyond this, the methodology pursued in this study indicates that a connection between elite power and the construction of identity is a logical conclusion, as it suggests that collective identity congregated around regional power centres and their associated networks. As noted above, the frequent association of central places with secular power centres in the Norwegian landscape suggests that ruling elites would dominate practices intended to preserve social cohesion. Furthermore, there is every chance that regional identity would be strengthened by its incorporation into a broader elite network, due to the increased need to define one's own community in relation to other communities with which there would have been greater contact. The mobility of the elite suggests that its members would play a key role in the definition of regional identity both within the collective — due to their increased knowledge and experience of other communities — and beyond it, when interacting with others.

Perhaps the clearest example of the elite control of regional identity can be found in *Ohthere's Voyage*. As previously noted, the circumstances in which Ohthere's account was recorded makes it difficult to separate the Anglo-Saxon understanding of terms they were already familiar with, such as 'norðmenn', from Ohthere's intended meaning. The term Halgoland (an Old English rendition of Hålogaland) on the other hand, is unlikely to have been familiar to his audience; they were dependent upon Ohthere to define this term for them; the text therefore perfectly illustrates the mutual definition of identity discussed above, presumably a common occurrence in the arenas to which the Norse spread in the Viking Age. Ohthere was, by his own

account, ‘mid þæm fyrstum mannum on þæm land’ (among the foremost men in the land), thus reflecting the mobility of the Viking Age Norse elite.⁵⁵ He located his homeland within a trading network stretching from Bjarmia in the far north to southern Scandinavia, Ireland and the British Isles, and positioned these destinations within his own perception of the world. Most importantly, he identifies himself by his home region and the identity associated with it. Not merely is he a ‘norðmann’, he lives ‘ealra norðmonna norðmest’ (northernmost of all northmen), in Halgoland — the only region that he names along the North Way.⁵⁶ Consequently, the text provides a rare and precious glimpse of the elite construction of Norwegian regional identity in action.

The methodology outlined above in this article is, perhaps, the most effective way of reconstructing a landscape of regional collective identities throughout Viking Age Norway; the equal treatment of archaeological and literary data produces a basic framework which seems to hold true in both of the case studies analysed. This view may then be nuanced by the addition of further categories of evidence, such as stylistic variation in material culture or literary narrative. While this model may not give an accurate impression of the everyday reality of an individual of mid to low social status, or pinpoint the full extent of their collective affiliations, this reality is probably inaccessible in any systematic way. Instead, the model approaches the view of regional collective identities that was broadcast by the members

⁵⁵ *Ohthere's Voyages*, p. 47.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 46.

of society that constructed and perpetuated it. Within the context of Viking Age political developments in Norway, it forms the basis for understanding the regional dimension of the ongoing, dramatic processes of conflict and social change which characterized the period.

