

# **Myths and symbols in pagan Europe**

Early Scandinavian  
and Celtic religions

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Hilda Ellis Davidson  
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## Introduction

They were in reduced circumstances, yes; and the world (they thought) had grown hard and old and desperately ordinary; but they were descended from a race of bards and heroes, and there had once been an age of gold, and the earth around them was all alive and densely populated, though the present times were too coarse to see it. They had all gone to sleep, as children, to those old stories; and later they courted with them; and told them to their own children.

John Crowley, *Little Big*, VI, 3

Many people, if only through an acquaintance with the works of Wagner, have heard of Wotan or his northern counterpart Odin, and of the valkyries in the hall of Valhalla. Some have come upon the legend of Balder the Beautiful, slain by a shaft of mistletoe, which inspired a long poem by Matthew Arnold and provided the title of one of the volumes of Frazer's *Golden Bough*. Others have heard of the great hammer of Thor, the northern thunder-god, and of the mischievous practices of Loki, the arch-trickster. They may have assumed such tales to be pure entertainment, or the simple legends of a credulous people, not to be taken seriously. Those however who have encountered the conception of the northern Ragnarok, when the gods go down fighting against the giants, and the world of living beings is engulfed by fire and covered by the advancing sea, may appreciate the strength and power of the Scandinavian myths and want to know more of the religious beliefs which inspired them. Are there, for instance, any links between the mythical world of Odin and Thor and that pictured in another rich collection of tales, the doings of the *Túatha Dé Danann* of Ireland, the figures of Lug and the Dagda and their dealings with kings and heroes? Is it possible, as Dumézil believed, to fit these Norse and Irish legends into a general pattern of Indo-European religious beliefs, extending back far into prehistory? The answers to such questions depends on how much evidence can be found for religious practices and the conception of a supernatural world existing as a background to the old tales.

The Celts, Germans and Vikings, names given to various peoples of north-western Europe by those who suffered from their attacks, seem each in turn to have been possessed by boundless energy and vigour, bringing them out of their homelands to cause trouble in many parts of Europe. There are links between the cultures of these peoples, and striking resemblances between the religious symbols which they used and their pictures of a supernatural world. Although there are enormous gaps in our knowledge, traces of their beliefs survive in their art and in later literature, while glimpses of their religious ritual have been revealed by archaeology and the descriptions left by foreign observers. The Scandinavian Vikings were not converted to Christianity until about AD 1000, and so it is from their records that most of our information about gods and sacred places and supernatural realms is derived; the last flowering of Germanic religion can be found in the Viking Age. When in the late ninth century men from western Norway and other areas of Scandinavia moved out to Iceland, an island empty of inhabitants except for a few Irish hermits, they built up a religious system there of much the same pattern as that of Germans and Celts centuries earlier. They appealed to Thor and Freyr, powerful deities of the sky and of fertility, to guide their little wooden ships to land and show them where their new homes should be built. They sought out holy places in the new country, rocks and hills to replace the ancestral burial mounds, a volcanic cleft to mark the place of their law assembly under the protection of the gods, and fields, waterfalls and strangely-shaped stones for new cult places. They made shrines to house the figures of their gods, uprooting carved pillars associated with them from buildings in Scandinavia to set up again in Iceland, and held regular feasts in honour of their deities. Records of the doings of the early settlers, as remembered and set down in the *Book of the Settlement* (*Landnámabók*) in the twelfth century, show us a religion closely linked to the land itself, and adapted to the life of the men and women who established themselves in the inhospitable northern island.

The landscape of much of Scandinavia and certainly of Iceland is majestic, bleak and powerful. Men were threatened by storms, treacherous seas, cold and long winter darkness, and it was a precarious business keeping animals alive through the long winter months and building up a secure livelihood. The myths which have come down to us in early Icelandic literature match this natural background in their vigour and power. They reflect an awareness that the little sheltered areas of habitation slowly built up by men were overshadowed by beings and forces far stronger than they. There is a spirit of resolution in the myths, a determination to fight on whatever the odds might be, to stand upright

to meet approaching fate, and if necessary to go down fighting. If we begin from the standpoint of these northern myths and legends, where the bright gods of Asgard are continually threatened by giants and monsters from a world of cold and darkness, we can perhaps work back to discover something of the religious pattern in the beliefs of Germans and Celts at an earlier period.

Clearly the emphasis must have varied according to the background against which warrior bands, hard-working farmers and adventurous seamen lived out their lives. A working religion develops out of men's needs and ways of life, and the natural world in which they find themselves determines the images which they use for supernatural powers and their picture of the Other World. A Celtic chief in a Scottish hill-fort would have a different world-view from one settled in Galatia in Asia Minor, and a Viking captain in the cold northern seas might not share the outlook of a Germanic leader confronting Roman legions in the mountains and forests of central Europe. But on the whole it seems probable that a man from Iceland or Sweden in the tenth century AD who was still worshipping the gods of his forefathers would not have felt in unfamiliar surroundings had he been transported into a religious ceremony of the Germanic or Celtic peoples some ten or more centuries earlier. Details of ritual and imagery and the names of gods and goddesses might vary according to locality and date, but the sense of the powers governing man and the natural world remain recognisably the same.

The origin and movements of the people whom we think of as the Celts remain elusive. Few of the ancient Celts are likely to have thought of themselves as such; it was the Greeks and Romans who called them Keltoi and Celtae, Galatai and Galli. The Greek form *Keltoi* goes back as early as 500 BC, and may have been a corruption of the name *Galatai*, the Galatians. *Galli* also may be a shortened form of this.<sup>1</sup> We know that these peoples were bands of nomadic warriors of various ethnic traditions causing considerable problems to the Roman Empire in the last centuries before Christ. The term *Celtic* came into modern use when interest in the early Welsh and Irish languages developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was discovered that there were two groups of 'Celtic' languages in the British Isles, known as Q Celtic or Goidelic and P Celtic or Brythonic. Those spoken in Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man belong to the first group, in which the sound 'q' in Indo-European survived as 'k'. In Wales and Cornwall and Celtic areas on the Continent, however, the sound 'q' was replaced by 'p': Thus in Irish the word for head is *cenn* and in Welsh it is *penn*. The Q form of Celtic is the earlier, and Celts from Ireland evidently carried this into

Scotland and Man, while the change from *q* to *p* in Wales and Cornwall must have taken place after the Celts arrived there from the Continent in the fifth century BC. The date when the Celts first became a recognisable people with their own language is not known. About the sixth century BC there are references in written sources to roving warrior bands in the region round Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Austria, Switzerland and southern Germany. From here they expanded in various directions, so that for a time the Celtic language was spoken in Gaul, the Iberian peninsula, and as far as the Black Sea and Asia Minor, as well as in the British Isles. But these early people left no written literature behind them, and except in the British Isles and Brittany our knowledge of Celtic is limited to personal and tribal names, placenames, and occasional words quoted by ancient writers.

The word *Celtic* also came to be applied to a certain type of art. Sir Augustus Franks of the British Museum was the first to use it of the culture of the early Iron Age in western Europe. Outstanding discoveries at Hallstatt in Austria and La Tène in Switzerland led to the recognition of this culture,<sup>2</sup> which seems to have flourished from about the eighth century BC to the second century AD in Europe, and continued later than this in the British Isles. In 1846 the director of the salt mines at Hallstatt discovered an enormous cemetery beside Lake Hallstatt, where the mountains rise steeply from the shores. The earliest graves are thought to go back to about 700 BC, and traces were found of the people who had worked in the mines there, since fragments of their clothes, food, iron tools and simple possessions were preserved in the salt. A flourishing local industry had existed there, and the rich folk who prospered from it were buried in elaborate graves in the cemetery nearby. Both men and women were laid in wooden chamber graves, with wagons, riding gear, ornaments, drinking vessels and food, as though they were intended to enjoy an existence of luxury and feasting in the Other World. In the same 'Hallstatt' period, impressive carved figures of stone were set up in Celtic territory, which might represent gods or ancestors. The craftsmen of this period were skilled in metal working, and used a decorative style which shows the influence of foreign art. Some objects appear to possess religious significance; there is for instance the so-called cult wagon of Strettweg, from a burial mound near Graz in Austria, which consists of a small wheeled platform on which a group of human figures and a stag are set. There is a large female figure in the centre who has the appearance of a goddess, while the stag could be a sacred and possibly a sacrificial animal.

The second major discovery of a Celtic site was made at La Tène, at the point where the Canal de la Thièle enters Lake Neuchâtel in north-

east Switzerland, and this is believed to date from about 100 BC.<sup>3</sup> In 1858 the water levels were lowered and the remains of ancient timbers revealed. Around these were many objects, either thrown into the water as votive offerings or possibly overwhelmed in a flood (p. 63 below). What is now known as the La Tène period began about 500 BC with a change in funeral customs. Instead of the wagons of the Hallstatt period, two-wheeled chariots were provided for dead chieftains, who wore long swords in ornamented scabbards. In this period the art of the Celtic peoples developed into a new style of striking originality and power. It became freer and more fluid, with winding, sinuous patterns, although the discipline of the earlier geometric style was retained. Foliage patterns, spirals and tendrils were interwoven with popular motifs from Mediterranean art like crescentic and trumpet shapes. Human faces and heads were introduced into the designs, sometimes peering out of the patterns, sometimes distorted into monstrous shapes. Birds and animals might be realistically or fantastically treated, particularly bulls, boars and ducks. There were carved stone heads which suggest divinities, and recurring symbols on pillars and stones. This brilliant art declined in Italy and Gaul when heavier, naturalistic Roman styles came into fashion, but flowered anew in the British Isles, where some of the finest Celtic masterpieces were produced. Even after the coming of Christianity, the traditions of Celtic art continued to influence metalwork, carved stone crosses and illuminated manuscripts.

The Germans first came into prominence in Europe in the first century AD, although the term *Germani* was in use about a hundred years earlier and appears originally to have been a Celtic tribal name. Tacitus in *Germania* claimed that it was the name of one tribe which gradually came into general use, and it was generally held to be linked with the Latin *germanus* (brother). Because of the ambiguity of this term 'Germanic', many English scholars have preferred to use 'Teutonic' for this group of peoples. The adjective *Teutonicus* was a latinised form of OE *þeodisc* from *þeod* (people/nation), a term applied by the Goths to themselves and their language; the earlier form *\*teuta* may originally have had the meaning 'power' or 'strength'.<sup>4</sup> What the Romans knew as Germania was the area between the Rhine and the Danube, extending possibly as far as the Vistula, and including in the north Denmark and the southern parts of Norway and Sweden. As was the case with the Celts, people living in this wide and sparsely populated area were unlikely to have thought of themselves as Germans; it was the collective name used by the Romans for the barbarians beyond the Rhine. Julius Caesar came into contact with these tribes, and the Romans paid heavily for their attempts to bring them under control. He wrote his brilliant

account of his campaigns in Gaul in the mid first century, equating the Germans with the peoples living to the east of the Rhine, while the Celts were to the west of it. This seems to have been an oversimplification of a complex situation, perhaps due to his ignorance of the languages spoken by many of the tribes, or to a desire to justify his military advances for political reasons. Certainly some of the tribes which he called German are now thought to have been Celtic-speaking peoples. It seems that there was no fundamental difference between the two except that of language, and as Powell pointed out,<sup>5</sup> the many resemblances between them in religious practices, social organisation and vocabulary may have been derived from a common ancestral source. But in spite of this, and the fact that they were in contact with each other for considerable periods, the difference in language must reflect a distinct separation between the two sets of peoples.<sup>6</sup>

It is not clear at what period the original Germanic language from which modern German, Anglo-Saxon and consequently English, Dutch, Frisian and the Scandinavian languages are derived came into general use; it was probably at some time in the course of the first five centuries BC, although some would say earlier. Nor do we know in what region it was first developed. It seems to have originated east of the Elbe and then spread westwards as tribes from that area conquered and settled land beyond the river. By the fifth century AD it was spoken over most of the Elbe basin. Further east Teutonic languages of the Gothic type were spoken, but most of this region was later overrun by Slav peoples. Considerable dialectal differences (High and Low German, Dutch, Old Saxon, etc.) developed by the eighth century AD, while the Scandinavian languages became a separate group. Typical 'Germanic' objects can be traced back into the period before Christ, and 'Germanic' culture seems to extend back into the early Iron Age. The term 'Germanic' came once more into general use in the nineteenth century as a comprehensive term for the whole group of peoples and languages, replacing 'Teutonic', or sometimes used as a sub-division of it.

What is known of the Germanic tribes is that they moved out of the area between the Rhine and the Vistula in various directions in the fifth and sixth centuries AD, just as earlier the Celts had spread out from their original homeland. Finally the Germanic peoples overran and destroyed the Roman Empire. The best known of these tribes are the Franks, who settled in Gaul; the Visigoths, who invaded Italy, captured Rome and later moved into Spain; the Ostrogoths, who settled in Italy; the Alamanni, in south Germany and Switzerland; the Langobards, who took over northern Italy; the Burgundians in eastern Gaul; and the Vandals who finally crossed to north Africa. In the fifth century a

mixture of tribes generally known as Angles and Saxons came to England and settled in the south and east, driving much of the Celtic population westwards into Wales and Cornwall. Our knowledge of tribal groupings however is limited; the precise movements of many known tribes are far from clear, and there are a number who could be either Celts or Germans, since we do not know what language they spoke. There is no other simple way to distinguish them.

In spite of the threats which they posed, the Mediterranean peoples were fascinated by the Celts and tended to idealise them as noble barbarians, led by druids possessing the secrets of ancient wisdom. In the same way the Romans regarded the troublesome Germans with both fear and admiration. An invaluable account of their way of life, 'On the origin and geography of Germania', now generally known as the *Germania*, was written by the historian Tacitus in 98 AD. This was partly based on information from the twenty lost books of the Elder Pliny on the German campaigns, a most regrettable loss, since Pliny had served on the both the Upper and Lower Rhine and knew the Germans well. Although doubts have been cast on the reliability of Tacitus, evidence from archaeology has increasingly confirmed the picture which he gave of Germanic life and culture. Admittedly his work is slanted in order to show up the greed and corruption of Roman society in his time, since he contrasts it deliberately with the simple, healthy existence of the barbarian peoples. Yet it can be claimed with some justice that his book remains 'the best of its kind in antiquity, perhaps in any age'.<sup>7</sup>

Tacitus found much to admire in the courage, loyalty, toughness and simple family life of the Germanic warriors, and yet he was by no means blind to their shortcomings. He admitted their ignorance, their excessive love of drinking, and a fatal tendency to quarrel among themselves, and this picture is very similar to that which an earlier historian left of the Celts about a century before. Posidonius was a Stoic philosopher writing in Greek, and his history is now lost, but several later writers quoted from his material, so that much of it can be reconstructed.<sup>8</sup> He left an account of the Celts, stressing their passion for feasting and for elaborate ornaments, the vanity and boastfulness of their champions, and their extreme touchiness, continually leading to conflict. But he made it clear that these weaknesses were linked with more praiseworthy qualities, those of endurance, courage and considerable fighting skill. The Celts and Germans had clearly much in common in their way of life, and in both their strengths and their weaknesses.

The third set of barbarians from northern Europe who raided and robbed the richer and more settled lands to the south were Scandinavians, generally known as Vikings, of the same stock as the northern

Germans. They were called Northmen by contemporaries, but the term Viking (*vikings* in Old Norse) used by monkish chroniclers came to denote pirates and raiding bands who attacked monasteries and had no respect for churches. The term probably comes from *vik* (bay/ fiord), and 'to go a-viking' meant to sail out from home to seek fame and wealth by fighting, trade or piracy or a mixture of the three. Consequently the period when the Scandinavians were most active outside their homelands, from the mid eighth to the mid eleventh centuries, is generally known as the Viking Age. By the eighth century the men who inhabited Norway, Sweden and Denmark were building seagoing ships of unrivalled excellence, and forging fine, reliable weapons. In their vigour and ruthlessness they were in no way inferior to the Germans and Celts who preceded them. In the Viking Age, Scandinavian pirates, adventurers, traders and warrior bands, fighting either independently or as mercenaries, penetrated from one end of Europe to the other. They attacked and terrorised the very peoples who had behaved in the same way centuries earlier, such as the Anglo-Saxons, the Franks, and the Celtic inhabitants of Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The Vikings found a few areas in which to settle permanently, such as Iceland, Orkney, Shetland and the Faroes, as well as parts of northern and eastern England and Normandy, but over most of Europe their dominion proved no lasting one.

These Scandinavians were superb seamen and good fighters, loyal to their chosen leaders and ready to die in their defence. At the same time they are described as touchy and quarrelsome, overfond of drinking, and too independent in spirit to build up large, well-disciplined armies. They operated mainly in small bands, continually forming loose alliances which soon broke up again. They were able to endure appalling conditions of cold and hardship, and were shrewd and knowledgeable traders, ready to go far into inhospitable regions if there seemed a chance of gaining silver and winning valuable booty. There were gifted poets and story-tellers among them, and they had a gift for communicating with those of other languages and cultures. They much enjoyed legal arguments and the complexities of word-games and genealogies. What we know of their character and mode of life is similar to that of the Celts and Germans before them, and indeed they were of the same stock as the Germanic tribes of northern Europe. But while the continental Germans and Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity fairly early, the Vikings continued to hold on to their old religion for some centuries after the Christian church was well established in neighbouring kingdoms.

Like their Celtic predecessors, the Germans and Scandinavians

produced smiths and craftsmen of distinction, and were excellent workers in wood and metal. Much surviving material comes from pre-Christian graves, for at certain periods splendid possessions were left in graves of both men and women of the ruling class. Rich burials from what is known as the Migration Period, from about the third to the sixth century AD when the Germans were on the borders of the Roman Empire and settling in new territories, have been excavated. It was a prosperous period in Sweden, where elaborate cremation ceremonies were held for the kings of Uppsala, and other leaders were buried with fine weapons, shields and helmets. Extensive cemeteries of the continental Germans have been discovered, some holding hundreds of cremation urns and others made up of inhumation graves, and burial mounds of kings and local leaders have yielded up splendid treasures and given indication of impressive funeral ritual. From the seventh century onwards there were rich ship burials in East Anglia, Norway and Sweden, and the possibilities of an undisturbed ship-grave of a rich leader became apparent when one of the mounds at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk was opened in 1939. This is now known to have formed part of a cemetery of considerable size, and more discoveries are expected there. Another outstanding grave was that of King Childeric of the Franks, but the treasures taken from it were unfortunately stolen from a museum in Paris after their discovery in the late seventeenth century.

Wood seldom survives in the earth except in unusual soil conditions, as in the Alamannic cemetery of Oberflacht in West Germany, and the ship-grave at Oseberg in south Norway. In both these cases the rich variety, skilled craftsmanship and elaborate symbolism of the carving on the wooden objects found indicate how much may have been lost in other rich burials. Elaborate ritual objects were sometimes abandoned along with vessels, ornaments and weapons in the northern peat bogs or lakes, as happened in the case of the Gundestrup cauldron in the Iron Age, and the pair of gold drinking horns from Gallehus in Denmark. The decoration on such objects may tell us something of the mythology of the people who used them. So too may amulets once worn for luck and protection, such as the golden bracteates popular in the Migration Period, while carved stones raised in memory of the dead may give some indication of beliefs. A fine series of picture stones on the island of Gotland set up in the Viking Age and earlier are covered with scenes and symbols. Some figures apparently representing the gods have survived in Northern Europe, roughly carved in wood or in the form of small metal amulets. In spite of a delight in abstract art and complex patterns, the Scandinavians occasionally produced vigorous narrative scenes carved in wood or stone. There is reason to think that this form of art

found wide expression not only in wood-carving but also in weaving and tapestry; a roll of embroidered wall-hangings found in the Oseberg ship revealed after years of patient restoration supernatural figures and processions of what appear to be gods and heroes.

The influence of other art styles and religious symbolism from Christian art can be seen in the work of the Celtic and Germanic peoples. Celtic sculptors in Gaul and Britain produced native figures of their local deities in imitation of the Roman manner, often with titles and inscriptions in Latin which are a source of information about the types of god they worshipped. At the close of the Viking Age, myths and symbols from the pre-Christian past were employed to decorate monuments raised over the Christian dead, so that Thor and Odin and the ancient World-Serpent are found in association with the cross of Christ. New evidence of this kind is still being discovered in northern England, where Scandinavians settled in the tenth century and were soon absorbed into the Christian church, in the form of carved stones set up to commemorate the newly converted.

Neither Celts, Germans nor Scandinavians appear to have built elaborate temples and sanctuaries, except in Celtic areas where classical fashions were adopted, such as in the south of France, or in Romanised towns like Colchester and Bath. Such religious art as we possess is mainly restricted to graves and monuments, figures representing supernatural beings, religious or lucky symbols on ornaments, weapons and objects of daily use. There are runic inscriptions from Germanic or Scandinavian territory which belong to the pre-Christian period, but these are not easy to interpret. In discussing the religion of these early peoples of north-western Europe, it has been customary to turn to legends of gods and heroes in the early literature of Ireland and Iceland to fill the gaps in our knowledge. These were written down in Christian times, although a few surviving poems in Old Icelandic on mythological subjects were composed before the conversion to Christianity. Most of the written sources, however, were put together or edited by Christian monks and scholars at various times, in some cases long after the old faith had been abandoned by the people. In Iceland, from which most Old Norse literature is derived, our earliest sources are poems, some attributed to the 'skaldic' poets attached to the courts of Norwegian kings in the period before the establishment of Christianity. The mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda* come from a thirteenth-century manuscript book, the *Codex Regius*, although some may be considerably earlier than this. Prose records of early Iceland, such as Ari the Learned's 'Book of the Icelanders' (*Íslendingabók*) and the elaborate 'Book of the Settlements' (*Landnámabók*), giving information about the

first families settled in Iceland, do not go back beyond the twelfth century, although they may record older traditions. As for the rich body of prose sagas, most of these belong to the thirteenth or fourteenth century. There is little early material from the other Scandinavian countries, apart from a few Latin works and the late twelfth-century history of Denmark in Latin by Saxo Grammaticus. The invaluable account of Norse mythology derived from early poetry and oral tradition by the gifted Icelandic Snorri Sturluson is roughly contemporary with the work of Saxo. In Ireland the Christian church was established much earlier, by the fifth century, although from about the seventh century onwards Irish monks were absorbing and recording pre-Christian traditions in the tales making up the great manuscript collections of various dates, and the poems included in the tales. However, this wonderful material has been mixed with later speculation, Christian learning and antiquarianism, and many supernatural beings transformed into human heroes and heroines.

This is why the art of the pre-Christian period, shaped and handled by those who accepted the old beliefs, is in some ways a more direct link with the religious past than the recorded literature. But indeed we have to seek out whatever clues are available, and not limit ourselves to any one type of source material. It is no easy task to build up a convincing picture of beliefs and practices from scattered hints, echoes and chance survivals. Only by critical evaluation of evidence from a wide field and by bringing different types of material together is it possible to find a perceptible pattern in the religion of these early peoples.

Much of their religion was concerned with battle ritual, which is hardly surprising, since Celts, Germans and Vikings were all warrior peoples in a period of expansion. It was also closely associated with the natural world, of which they were very much aware. They did not regard this as something inanimate or wholly separate from themselves; as Henri Frankfort pointed out: 'For modern scientific man the phenomenal world is primarily an It; for ancient - and also for primitive - man it is a Thou'.<sup>9</sup> They revered their dead ancestors beneath the earth, and particularly their kings and founders of families. They practised various means of divination, observing movements of birds and animals, fire and water. They relied on supernatural powers ruling sky, earth and sea to bring them strength and luck and to protect them from hostile forces, which they pictured as giants, monsters or destructive goddesses. Certain symbols had particular meaning, remaining potent through the centuries. The heads of warriors possessed special power, as did the remains of the noble dead within their mounds. The sacred drink of the gods giving immortality and inspiration was a favourite motif, and

the axe-hammer of the sky-god, warding off cold and chaos, another effective symbol. Vigorous male animals such as horse, stag, bull and bear, together with ruthless birds of prey like the eagle and raven were seen as special manifestations of supernatural power. The centre of their universe was pictured as a great tree or pillar, and they laid emphasis on the creation of the worlds surrounding this and foresaw their ultimate destruction.

Such symbols and motifs were absorbed into religious ritual. Feasts in honour of the gods marked out the course of the year and were held to promote success in war and good harvests. Men and animals were offered as sacrifices, and objects thrown into water or hung on trees as gifts for supernatural powers. Such practices established a mysterious yet familiar background of contact with the Other World. All this inspired their art and left an imprint on their legends. Long after the Christian church had been firmly established, story-tellers and artists turned back to the old ways of thought for inspiration and imagery.

We shall be concerned with the exploration of this rich world of tradition and belief, tracing the main outline of man's relationship with the natural world and with supernatural powers. It extends back into a time long before the northern myths were recorded in writing in the Middle Ages. An underlying pattern can be made out in spite of local variations and changes due to altering modes of life and the fragmentary nature of the evidence. The basic religious traditions of our ancestors in north-western Europe were accepted over a long period of time, and we should surely approach their world picture with respect as well as curiosity and make some attempt to understand it. It may be that by following the working of men's minds in the past we may learn more of our complex reactions to our own world, while gaining insight into the realms of imagination, imagery and spiritual perception once open to the barbarian peoples who inhabited north-western Europe.

## I Holy places

Jacob woke from his sleep and said 'Truly the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it . . . How fearsome is this place! This is no other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven.'

Genesis 28, 16-17 (NEB)

Every religion must have its holy places, affording a means of communication between man and the Other World. Sometimes as in ancient Egypt and Jerusalem this was essentially the great temple, where kings and priests could conduct ceremonies, make offerings, learn the will of the god, or enquire into hidden things, with or without a congregation. Among the Celts and Germans there seem originally to have been few permanent and elaborate temples used as meeting places for worship and sacrifice. In spite of the rigours of the climate, the place where men sought contact with the supernatural powers was for the most part in the open air. The resorting to holy places was something which could be witnessed by outside observers, often arousing interest and curiosity. Thus in the works of Greek and Latin writers we hear repeatedly of sacred woods and groves, sanctuaries in forest clearings and on hilltops, beside springs and lakes and on islands, and of places set apart for the burial of the noble dead.

### 1 Sacred landmarks

When the Scandinavians came to settle in Iceland in the late ninth century, certain natural sites were chosen by them as areas of sacred space. It may be noted that these were not marked by permanent buildings, or even enclosed by walls or obvious boundaries. An impressive example of the simplest type of holy place is Helgafell, on the peninsula of Snæfellsness in western Iceland (Plate 1a). This is described in one of the Icelandic sagas as a place of great sanctity, venerated by one of the early settlers from Norway, Thorolf of Mostur. It remains today as a landmark, visible from many miles away, as at the time of the Settlement. Helgafell is a small natural outcrop of rock, resembling in



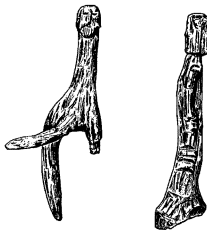
shape a long burial mound, with the little church close beside it. From its top there is a superb view over islands, mountains, glaciers and the winding coastline, and on a clear day it is as if one stood upon a stage or sat in the famous seat of the god Odin overlooking the whole rich world of land and water. The saga in which Helgafell is mentioned is *Eyrbyggja Saga* (4), one of the finest of the family sagas, the story of the outstanding men who lived on Snæfellsnes in the early period of the Settlement. It was composed in the mid thirteenth century, and may have been written at the Augustinian house at Helgafell, which moved there from Flatey in 1134.<sup>1</sup> From early Christian times Helgafell was one of the intellectual centres of western Iceland; it was here that the famous historian, Ari Thorgilsson the Learned, was born in 1067/8, and there was a considerable library there in the early twelfth century before the arrival of the monks.

In view of this, there seems little reason to doubt the local tradition preserved in the saga of the importance of Helgafell as a holy place which had to be kept free from pollution, and on which men and beasts were safe from injury, because no violence could be committed on the hill. It was said that no man should look on it unwashed; this would be impossible to avoid when the hill was visible over so wide an area, but MacCulloch is no doubt right in interpreting the verb used, *lita*, as meaning to turn towards it in prayer and supplication.<sup>2</sup> It was said also that Thorolf believed that he and his family would pass into Helgafell when they died, so that the rocky hill was seen as a possible entrance into the Other World, and also as a dwelling for the dead. From one side the hill resembles a house with a door, strengthening the parallel with a burial mound where the dead is brought to join his ancestors (p. 115 below).

Of a different nature is the meeting place of the Althing, the Law Assembly for the men of Iceland, deliberately selected in the tenth century by Ulfrjot's brother Grim, after Ulfrjot returned from Norway with a code of laws for Iceland.<sup>3</sup> According to Ari the Learned, he chose this site after exploring all Iceland, and once more it is not difficult to see why he felt that this particular place was suitable. It is formed by a natural volcanic rift in a large sunken valley, where the swift-flowing river (*Öxará*) runs into a large lake. A line of sinister twisted rocks provides an impressive background and natural sounding board, which would have been effective when a section of the laws was recited every year at the 'Law Rock' by the Speaker or Lawman who presided over the Assembly. In front stretches an open plain, providing ample room for representatives from all over Iceland to set up their 'booths', small shelters of turf and stone tented over, when they came at Midsummer to

attend the Althing. Two weeks were spent there each year by the landowners who made up the assembly, together with friends, kinsmen, followers, traders and hangers-on who accompanied them. The site was reasonably accessible, within easy reach of the popular inhabited areas in the south and west and with possible routes to the more distant parts of the island, the furthest of which could be reached within two weeks' journey on ponies. There were suitable sites where the various courts could meet, and wood was available for fires together with pasturage for horses. It was said that the Icelanders even went to the trouble of diverting the Axe River into a new channel in order to provide a good water supply.<sup>4</sup> There is no reference to temples of any kind at Thingvellir, and no archaeological evidence for such buildings has been found. The Althing continued to be held here throughout the period of the Commonwealth and after Iceland came under the rule of Norway in 1271 and of Denmark in 1380. In 1798, when its importance and power had declined, it was finally moved to Reykjavik.

When the meeting at Thingvellir was the most important event of the year for the Icelandic state, the *Lögretta*, the administrative and judicial



1 Phallic figure from Broddenbjerg, Jutland, and female figure from Rødbild, Himmerland, both in wood and about 63 cm in height.

assembly, would assemble in the space in front of the Law Rock, the point where part of the Law was regularly recited. Buildings were set up there in later times, but in the Viking Age the various courts seem to have had no permanent location. The purpose of the Althing was the recital of the laws, the making of changes in the law system, the hearing of cases and judging of disputes brought from the four quarters of Iceland, each of which had its own small Thing place. It was at Thingvellir that the decision was taken to accept Christianity as the religion of Iceland in the year 1000. Everything concerned with the law was under the rule of the gods, making the place of assembly a hallowed one. The Althing opened on Thursday, the day sacred to Thor, the sky god. Sacrificial feasts were held there, and in the early days there was a ban on the carrying of arms when the Thing was in progress, even if this was not always enforced.

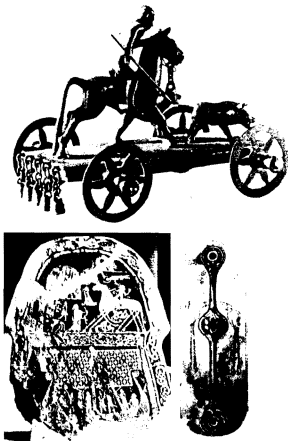
Thingvellir still remains a place of pilgrimage for Icelanders, and visitors are always taken there. It is no sheltered site, but lies open to strong winds and blizzards and even sandstorms at all times in the year. The sense of wide distances and far views of lakes and mountains give it something of the same numinous quality as is possessed by Helgafell. These two sacred places of the Viking Age have no need of monuments or permanent buildings to render them memorable. Undoubtedly holy sites of this kind have been used by men from very early times, and many well-known Celtic and Germanic ones had been in existence as burial or cult places in the Bronze Age or earlier still. Bronze Age burials were found on the Hill of Tara in Ireland, and beneath the artificial hill raised by Norse settlers as a place of assembly on the Isle of Man. There are similar examples in Gaul, such as a cult place at the spring of Grisy, important in Roman times and apparently in use since the neolithic period.<sup>1</sup> In Iceland however there were no previous settlers whose graves might mark sites as holy ones, and we have the rare opportunity of learning something of the process of hallowing a place in a new territory, with the whole of the island from which to choose.

## 2 Images of the gods

Tacitus wrote of the Germanic peoples in the first century AD in *Germania* (9): 'The Germans do not think it in keeping with the divine majesty to confine gods within walls or portray them in the likeness of any human countenance. Their holy places are woods and groves, and they apply the names of deities to that hidden presence which is seen only by the eye of reverence' (Mattingly's translation). According to this, images of the gods were not common among the Germans, the inference being that in this they differed from the superstitious Romans



1 Symbols of the sacred. Top Holy hill of Helgafell in Iceland; left Turoe Stone, Co. Galloway, Ireland, symbol of the centre, Third to first century BC; right Sanda Stone, Gotland, showing whirling disc, central tree and ship of the dead, fifth century AD.



2 *Animal symbols.* Top Small cult wagon from Mérida, Spain, depicting a boar hunt, second to first century BC; left Panel from memorial stone, Alskog, Gotland, showing eight-legged horse of Odin and welcoming valkyrie, eighth century AD; right Shield from River Witham, showing outline of boar from lost mount, second to third century BC.

with a multiplicity of temples and statues of countless deities. Tacitus had in mind the sacred groves mentioned by other writers, and these, like Helgafell, were apparently free of buildings and images. In any case he would probably have discounted rough wooden figures such as are mentioned by the poet Lucan in his description of a Celtic sanctuary near Massalia in southern France, in *Pharsalia* (111). This was destroyed by Julius Caesar in the first century BC, and Lucan mentions 'dark springs' and 'grim-faced figures of gods, uncouthly hewn by the axe from the untrimmed tree-trunk, rotted to whiteness'. Wooden figures which would answer well enough to Lucan's description have survived from northern Europe and the British Isles. One from Broddenbjerg in north Jutland is roughly shaped from a forked piece of oak, with little carving except to provide it with a mask-like face and to turn a projecting branch into an enormous phallus. This figure was mounted on a heap of stones and found in association with pots of the early Iron Age, in a place not far away from finds dated to the Bronze Age, which suggested that it was used as a cult site over a long period.<sup>6</sup> A more realistic figure comes from a peat bog at Rude Eskilstrup in Sjælland (Plate 4b). This is about 41 cm high and carved with some skill. It depicts a seated male figure with an arresting bearded face and large eyes, wearing a cloak and a threefold neck-ring in the style of the post-Roman period, who holds some unidentified square object in his lap. Such a figure could represent either a Celtic or a Germanic deity, and it has been suggested that the seated figure in the cloak is Wodan, but there is no clear indication of this.<sup>7</sup>

Without related finds it is impossible to date such figures from their style, and they may have been set up in remote places as late as the Viking Age. Particularly impressive are two roughly carved in wood, slightly taller than human, found in a peat bog at Braak, Schleswig.<sup>8</sup> They represent a man and woman with sockets for arms, although the arms are lost, and pebbles were probably used for their eyes. They could be either deities or ancestors, but recent pollen analysis suggests a much later date in the Viking Age, and they might have been erected by Slavs living in this area. Close to these wooden figures was a hearth with carved stones and fragments of pottery, indicating that this was a cult place, one perhaps used by different peoples in turn over the centuries. A considerable number of carved wooden figures, skilfully worked, come from Celtic territory,<sup>9</sup> although these must represent only a small portion of those which once existed. Some, like a series of human figures found at the source of the River Seine, were apparently left as votive offerings by pilgrims who came there for healing. Others, like what seems to be the figure of a woman from Ralaghan, County Cavan, in

Ireland, made from bog oak, may originally have stood in cult places or small shrines (Fig. 1).<sup>10</sup>

There is a detailed account from the tenth century of ceremonies connected with such wooden figures. An Arab diplomat and scholar, Ibn Fadlan, who had a lively interest in strange peoples and their religious customs, was sent on a mission from Baghdad to Bulgar on the Middle Volga in 921. His task was to instruct the king of the Bulgars in the Islamic religion, and while he was in the town he became interested in the Rus, Swedish merchants who had come to the Bulgar capital to trade and who lived in the merchants' quarters on the other side of the river. He was curious to know about their practices, and described a group of crude wooden figures they had set up;<sup>11</sup> these consisted of '... a long upright piece of wood that has a face like a man's and is surrounded by little figures behind which are long stakes in the ground'. A Rus trader who arrived at the station would make offerings of bread, meat, leeks, silk and beer to the main figure, praying that his Lord would send rich merchants in his way who would pay a good price for the wares which he had brought. If his prayer was granted, he would kill sheep and cattle as an offering, leaving some of the flesh beside the wooden figures and setting up the heads of the slaughtered beasts on the wooden stakes. If things did not go as he wished, he would then turn to the smaller figures and ask their help; Ibn Fadlan was told that these were the sons and daughters of the god. Possibly they were lesser deities recognised by the Rus, who were Scandinavians, probably from Sweden, coming to trade in eastern Europe.

Since most images were of wood, few have survived in the earth. There are a few impressive ones in stone from the early Celtic period, carved with restraint and power. One of these stood in a burial ground containing several graves at Hirschlanden near Stuttgart, and probably goes back to the late sixth century BC.<sup>12</sup> It represents a naked warrior with a neck-ring, belt and dagger, wearing a pointed hat on his head; this is in agreement with statements by classical writers that the Celts were accustomed to fight naked (p. 89 below). The figure is almost life size, standing 1.5 m high, and might represent either the hero buried in the tumulus or some supernatural guardian. Certainly this erect, menacing form must have evoked a feeling of awe and memories of the famous dead. A second and larger figure comes from Holzgerlingen in the same area,<sup>13</sup> and could be of about the same date, although the style is different (Plate 4a). This stands 2.3 m high, and has two faces like the Roman Janus; it depicts the upper half of a human figure rising from a square pillar, perhaps a stone version of wooden figures carved in this way. The strange curving crown above the face possibly represents

horns, and this seems more likely to be a cult image than a memorial to the dead man in the grave; the stern remote features would be fitting for the image of a god.

### 3 Mounds and standing stones

There were more abstract monuments set up at times in sacred places. The great burial mounds of kings were themselves important symbols and a possible means of communication with the Other World. Those of Old Uppsala in Sweden consist of three huge mounds, with a large number of lesser ones clustered round them, and these were raised over cremation burials of the Migration Period preceding the Viking Age. Some Swedish mounds had flattened tops with a slight slope, suggesting a stage on which action would be visible to those standing below. According to Norse literary tradition, the burial mound was a place on which kings and seers might sit in order to obtain wisdom and inspiration (p. 130 below). The mound also served as a centre from which the king could make announcements to the people, from which new laws could be proclaimed, and on which a new ruler could be installed. An example of this is Tynwald Hill on the Isle of Man, where the Manx Parliament still assembles at Midsummer. It is a stepped mound, with a place on top for the reigning monarch, usually represented by the Lieutenant-General, accompanied by Bishops and Deemsters, while the three lower tiers are for members of the House of Keys, representatives of local authorities, ministers of the churches, and so forth. The mound was raised by Norse settlers who arrived in the ninth century, and it is an artificial hill set up on the site of an earlier burial mound of the Bronze Age.

In Irish tradition also mounds form part of the assembly place, and in the tales there are instances of visions or strange adventures befalling those who sit on mounds near the courts of kings. There was a close link between man and the supernatural world by way of the burial mound, since it was into such mounds that the gods of pre-Christian Ireland, the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, were said to retreat after the coming of Christianity. The dwelling of the *Dagda* was at New Grange, a great prehistoric burial mound near the river Boyne (p. 127 below). At the festival of Samain on 1 November, the beginning of winter, it was believed that the way to the Other World lay open, and there are many tales of living men entering the mounds or of visits by the dead to the living on that night.

The stone figure of Hirschlanden stood upon a burial mound, and in Scandinavia carved stones were sometimes placed on them. Flat, rounded stones, difficult to date with any accuracy, survive in Sweden,

and one of these, from Inglinge Howe near Växjö, is elaborately decorated. This formerly stood on a tumulus, and was known as 'The King of Varend's Throne'.<sup>14</sup> It is not known whether such stones were intended for seats or whether they were rolled down the mound on some ritual occasion, as wheels were rolled down hills at midsummer.

Another type of decorated stone associated with holy places is the domed or pyramid-shaped stone, of which an outstanding example is that outside Turro House, County Meath, in Ireland (Plate 1b). This was brought from its original position on the north side of a circular 'rath' or earthwork dating back to the first century BC, and may have been set up as early as this. It is decorated with asymmetrical curving patterns in the La Tène style, and other examples, less well-preserved, have been found in Ireland. It has been claimed that these show a complex division into four parts, comparable to the patterns on an earlier stone from Kermaria, Finistère, of roughly pyramid shape.<sup>15</sup> The Turro stone bears a striking resemblance to the Omphalos at the shrine of Apollo at Delphi, and these northern stones may have served a similar purpose, symbolising the navel or centre of the earth. At Uisnech, a sacred place roughly in the centre of Ireland, where the druids were said to meet, there was the stone known as the 'Stone of Division', which according to Geraldus Cambrensis was 'the navel of Ireland, as it were, placed right in the middle of the land'.<sup>16</sup> Uisnech as well as Tara could be regarded as a traditional centre, and the two are described in one Middle Irish source as being like two kidneys in one animal.<sup>17</sup>

Yet another famous stone was Fál, called the Lia Fáil or 'Stone of Knowledge', which was on the Hill of Tara. This is called a 'stone penis', and is usually assumed to be the pillar with the rounded top which is still on the hill, although Keating thought that the original stone had been taken to Scotland.<sup>18</sup> The tradition preserved in twelfth century literature was that this was a stone of inauguration, which roared under the feet of the man destined to be king, or, in an earlier account,<sup>19</sup> gave a screech when the king drove past it in his chariot, while two flagstones opened to allow the king to pass between them: 'And there were two flag-stones in Tara: 'Bloc' and 'Bluigne'; when they accepted a man they would open before him until the chariot went through. And Fál was there, the 'stone penis' at the head of the chariot course; when a man should have the kingship of Tara, it screeched against his chariot-axle so that all might hear'.<sup>19</sup> While there appears to be some confusion in the traditions between the standing stone and a flagstone on which the new king stood, it is clear that ancient stones formed an important part of the holy place and that they were associated

with the choice and recognition of a king. The stone from Scone taken by Edward I from Scotland to Westminster Abbey is another example, and there are others from various tribal centres.<sup>20</sup> Similar stones existed also in Scandinavia. A Danish chronicle refers to the Danærigh near Viborg, used by the men of Jutland when they proclaimed a new king, while Olaus Magnus mentions the Morasten near Uppsala, said to be a 'huge and rounded stone' on which the Swedes raised their chosen ruler.<sup>21</sup>

The association of the holy place with the choosing of a king is in accordance with the importance of Thingvellir in Iceland as the site of the main assembly where the law was proclaimed, although there was no king to be inaugurated there. Men from the four quarters met at Thingvellir, and there was a plan of the places they were entitled to occupy in front of the Law Rock. Thingvellir was not the geographical centre of the island, for a true centre would be in the lava desert, but it was the symbolic one, with roads leading to it from every direction. Like Thingvellir, Tara in Ireland is superbly situated, with wide views on every side over the central plains: 'It is this feature of the Hill of Tara', O'Riordain wrote in his description of the site, 'which never fails to impress'. One medieval poem described Tara as the central square of a gaming board: 'Tara's castle, delightful hill, out in the exact centre of the plain'.<sup>22</sup> However it is far from being the true centre of Ireland, and once more what we have is a symbolic centre, surrounded by the four kingdoms of Ulster, Connacht, Leinster and Munster. Plans for the seating of the hall at Tara are given in two manuscripts, the twelfth century Book of Leinster and the fifteenth century Yellow Book of Lecan; late though these are, they preserve memories of a careful plan, and it seems possible that the whole country was reproduced in the layout of a central hall with four provincial halls ranged around.<sup>23</sup> The pattern of four divisions round a central point is found in both Iceland and Ireland, and Müller claims that this is a fundamental pattern in both Germanic and Celtic tradition.<sup>24</sup> Another centre was the place where the Druids met in Gaul, described as 'the centre of all Gaul' by Julius Caesar, but in fact somewhere near Chartres (p. 26 below). Here, as at Thingvellir, disputes from the regions round were said to have been brought for settlement.

#### 4 The pillar and the tree

A pillar was an important feature of some of the holy places of the Germanic peoples. The Saxons had a high wooden pillar called Irminsul at Eresburg, thought to have been Marsberg on the Diemel, although

other suggestions have been made, and this was cut down by Charlemagne in 772.<sup>25</sup> The historian Widukind associated such pillars with Mars and stated that their position was chosen to represent the sun. Irmin is thought to be the name or title of a god who could be identified with Tiwaz, as an early Germanic deity associated with the sky. Another medieval writer, Rudolf of Fulda, described Irminsul as *universalis columna quasi sustinens omnia*, a universal pillar supporting the whole. There is some indication of pillars raised by the Anglo-Saxons in pre-Christian times. At Yeavinger in Northumbria a wooden building which may have been a pre-Christian temple was set up close to what had been a holy place of the Celtic people of Bernicia.<sup>26</sup> It was clearly a site of ancient sanctity, since a Bronze Age tumulus had stood there earlier, as well as a stone circle of early date. A tall wooden post was set up on the mound, and near the temple building there were indications that a huge shaft had been sunk into the ground. While it cannot be assumed that all wooden pillars and isolated shafts were erected for the same purpose, they appear to have been frequent features of holy places (p. 27 below).

There may be a link with so-called Jupiter Pillars or Columns form Gaul, erected in the Roman period, which are found especially around the Moselle and the Middle Rhine and in the Vosges.<sup>27</sup> One of these, at Cussy, still stands in its original position near the source of the river Arroux, and the figure of Jupiter on this faces the rising sun. The pillars are carved in the classical style, and sometimes have figures on the base representing the four seasons and the days of the week, apparently associated with the sun's journey throughout the year. They are also connected with water; Jupiter, sometimes standing and sometimes on horseback, is often shown dominating a water-monster, and the pillars seem usually to have been near a spring or river. In spite of their sophisticated style of decoration, they appear to have been erected in continuation of the Celtic tradition of raising monuments in a sacred spot, beside a burial place or a spring, associated with the sun, water, and healing. The Jupiter pillars were in honour of the god of the sky, evidently set up to invoke his blessing and protection for the local community, and the representation of him as a rider must be Celtic in origin. The columns which survive are sometimes in sites which appear to have been small native hamlets, although it must have needed someone of wealth and cosmopolitan tastes to erect such great monuments carved in elaborate classical style. We know that a few were erected in towns at public expense, but others were in remote districts where there must already have been sacred places.

A particularly interesting example is that of the restored pillar from Hausen-an-der-Zaber, now erected in the museum at Stuttgart. This

was set up by Caius Vettrius Connougas about 200 AD in fulfilment of a vow, presumably on his estate. The shaft of the pillar is covered with oak leaves and acorns, and there are four female heads representing the seasons on top, while it is surmounted by the figure of Jupiter as a rider overcoming a giant. This emphasises the link between the sky god and the oak, and his influence over the course of the year; Maximus of Tyre in the second century AD (*Logoi* 8, 8) stated that the Celtic image of Zeus was a high oak tree. A second, even larger pillar, unfortunately incomplete, shows the battle between gods and giants, with Jupiter, Mars, Vulcan and Hercules taking part. This is of some interest in view of the traditional battle between the gods and a giant race in both Celtic and Germanic sources of a later date (p. 192 below).

The description of Irminsul as *universalis columna* is paralleled by the image of the World Tree, Yggdrasil, one of most powerful symbols in Norse mythology, said to stand at the centre of the worlds of gods and men (p. 170 below). Among Scandinavians of the Viking Age a tree appears to be the main symbol of the central pivot of the universe, but the so-called 'high-seat pillars' of wood which formed the main support in the centre of halls and sanctuaries might be viewed as a northern version of the Germanic pillars raised in holy places. In the literary sources such pillars are associated with the god Thor, and were said to have been taken by early settlers to Iceland from their homes in Norway, so that they could be set up in the new environment. There are also legendary tales of royal halls with a living tree in the centre of the building, and trees may have been sometimes used in this way, as in the Old Manor House at Knaresborough in North Yorkshire and the hall of Huntingfield in Suffolk.<sup>28</sup> In the late saga of the hero Sigurd the Volsung, a tree is said to have formed the central support of the royal



a Upper part of Jupiter pillar from Hausen-an-der-Zaber, now erected at Stuttgart Museum.

hall of his grandfather, King Volsung. It was from its trunk that Sigurd's father Sigmund pulled out the sword which Odin had driven into it and which no one else could remove; this was kept as a family treasure and after it had been shattered in the battle in which Sigmund fell, it was reforged and used by his son Sigurd to slay a dragon.<sup>29</sup> A parallel may be found in the tale of young Arthur drawing out the sword Excalibur from a stone in the churchyard and so proving himself the lawful king.

According to the picture of the ash Yggdrasil in the poems of the *Edda*, its great trunk marked the centre of the cosmos and its branches stretched over all lands. Beneath it was the assembly place of the gods, and the nine worlds of gods and men and other beings were ranged around it, as the kingdoms of Ireland were ranged around Tara and the four quarters of Iceland around Thingvellir. In Iceland there were no large trees, so that the concept could hardly have originated there, but in the great oak-forests of Germany, Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England the symbol of a mighty tree marking the centre and forming a link between man and the gods was a natural one to use. A sacred grove was often a feature of the holy place, as at Uppsala in Sweden. Adam of Bremen (IV, 28) in the eleventh century describes sacrifices there and claims that bodies of men and animals offered to the gods could be seen hanging from trees. A thousand years earlier Tacitus in *Germania* (39) describes the sacred grove of the people of the Semnones, 'hallowed by the auguries of their ancestors and by immemorial awe', where the offering of a human victim marked the beginning of the assembly of the tribes from this area. They believed the grove to be the 'cradle of the race and the dwelling-place of the supreme god', so that it evidently represented for them the place of creation. Here the god worshipped seems to have been Tiwaz, the sky god, but the goddesses might also be worshipped in such sacred groves. Traces of a wood survive near the sanctuary of the goddess Nehalennia at Domburg in Holland,<sup>30</sup> and Tacitus knew of a grove on an island in Denmark sacred to the goddess Nerthus (*Germania* 40).

Many Celtic names for sanctuaries incorporate *nemeton*, which meant a clearing open to the sky;<sup>31</sup> examples are *Druonemeton* in Asia Minor, the oak grove where the Galatians met, according to Strabo, and *Aquae Arnemetiae*, now Buxton in Derbyshire, with its thermal springs. It was in a sacred grove on the island of Anglesey that the druids defied the Romans, according to Tacitus (*Annals* XIV, 30), and had their sacred trees destroyed. Anglo-Saxon placenames based on the name *Thunor*, the sky god, incorporate in some cases the word for a wood or a clearing, *leah*, as in Thunderley and Thundersley in Essex.<sup>32</sup> There were sacred

trees in continental sanctuaries, since we hear of Christian missionaries cutting them down, while in the Viking Age the Irish king Brian Boru is said to have spent a month wreaking destruction on the sacred wood of Thor near Dublin.<sup>33</sup> Memories of sacred trees at holy places can also be found in Irish literature, and the ancient tree known as the *bile* was apparently a usual feature of the site where the inauguration of the king took place, the sacred centre<sup>34</sup> (p. 179 below).

As the centre of the cosmos, the sacred place was linked with creation legends; it was also a spot where communication with the powers of the Other World might take place. In the *Annals* of Tacitus (XIII, 8) there is a reference to two tribes battling for possession of a sacred place beside a river, which they believed was especially close to heaven, 'so that men's prayers received ready access'. This was a place where salt could be obtained, and therefore presumably of economic value, and indeed this may have led to its reputation as a sacred area because of this inexplicable gift from the gods who could grant wealth and prosperity. The two opposing tribes who lived on either side of the river were prepared to offer huge and extravagant sacrifices if they could gain possession of it (p. 62 below). It was appropriate that the sacred centre should be the place where kings were chosen and proclaimed, and where the law was recited. It was a ritual and symbolic centre, not to be taken in a literal sense; men would be well aware that there were many other sacred places besides their own for which similar claims were made. But the place where there was communication with the gods, kept alive by ritual and sacrifice, served for the community as a model of the original centre, set up at creation when order emerged from chaos.

Communication with the Other World in such a place extended both upwards and downwards. The lightning which can strike and even fell a mighty oak was taken by Germans and Scandinavians as a powerful symbol of divine power descending in fire. This developed into the many-sided symbol of the axe-hammer of their god Thor,<sup>35</sup> which could shatter rocks, leave dents in mountains and control the monsters of chaos. The link between the pillar and the rising sun might be another aspect of this link, since it connected earth and heaven. The journey of the sun signified the sequence of the year, with its recurring renewal of life and bringing of harvest. It is not surprising to find the symbols of seasons and months on the Jupiter columns.

There was also a link with the depths of earth and of water. This can be seen in the importance of the spring or well, continually found in or beside holy places. Some of these possessed medicinal qualities, but others are only sources of pure water. In Scandinavian tradition the gods had their own holy spring by the World Tree, the place of assembly, and

its waters brought inspiration and knowledge to those who drank from it. It was known as the Well of Mimir, and it was said that Odin cast his eye into its waters as an offering in return for a drink which would reveal the future. Irish tradition also preserves the memory of a spring, known as the Well of Segais, or Conna's Well, which also was seen as a source of knowledge and inspiration. Bubbles formed on the streams which flowed from it, while nuts dropped into the water from the hazel tree above, and the salmon eating them could pass on special gifts if they in turn were eaten by men when they swam down the rivers originating from the well.<sup>36</sup> There were many Celtic sanctuaries at the sources of rivers or beside lakes, and offerings were regularly thrown into water.

Among Germans and Scandinavians offering places also included the shores of lakes and waterfalls (p. 131 below); one early settler in Iceland was said to worship a waterfall and to have flung offerings of food into it (p. 104 below). Clefts going down into the earth were also seen as a means of communication with the underworld, and caves might serve the same purpose. The famous St Patrick's Purgatory on an island in Lough Derg in Ireland still attracts many pilgrims, and was clearly viewed in earlier times as an entrance to the underworld. Those undergoing the demanding discipline of the pilgrimage now gather in a chapel, but in former times they were shut up for hours in the cave, where they had to go without sleep or food through the night and so endure something of the torments of purgatory for their souls' welfare. 'With the fall of night', wrote a twentieth century pilgrim, 'the world slipped away. We seemed to stand in a dim place where two worlds meet.'<sup>37</sup>

If a natural feature did not exist, it was possible to provide an artificial link with the supernatural world. A number of Celtic enclosures believed to have been sacred places had deep shafts like wells dug down into the earth, in which offerings were placed. Human and animal bones have been found, and in some shafts human beings have been buried with dogs. Groups of pits of this kind have been found both in Britain and on the Continent, for example at Newstead and Maryport and over a large area round Chartres, which may have been the centre where druids once met, mentioned by Julius Caesar.<sup>38</sup> Carved wooden figures have also been recovered from such shafts, and at St Bernard in La Vendée a cypress sapling 4 m in length; this has led to the suggestion that the panel on the Gundestrup Cauldron showing a line of men carrying a tree represents an offering of this kind. A shaft recently excavated at Deal in Kent went down about 2.50 m to finish in an oval chamber, in which a figurine of chalk was found, consisting of a block ending in a long slender neck and well-carved face of typical Celtic type. Footholds

in the chalk indicate that access to the chamber was possible, and it may have served some ritual purpose.<sup>39</sup>

The Gundestrup Cauldron itself seems to have been an offering to the powers of the underworld, since it had been dismantled and set on the ground in an area of bog; other ritual objects found in Denmark appear to have been deposited in this way. The Scandinavians also threw offerings into lakes, and vast numbers of objects have been recovered from a dried-up lake at Skedemosse on the island of Öland in the Baltic, as well as from famous sites in the peat like Nydam and Vimose (p. 62 below). There are close parallels in the sacred pools of the Celtic peoples, such as the Iron Age site at Llyn Cerrig Bach in Anglesey.

### 5 The enclosed sanctuary

While unfenced areas and natural features of the landscape might be regarded as holy places, the need to provide an enclosed space, a *temenos* or sacred precinct, was often felt. It might enclose figures of the gods or sacred objects, or provide an obvious boundary around holy ground, separating it either temporarily or permanently from the normal world. Examples of this from the Viking Age suggested by Jacqueline Simpson are the ropes enclosing a court of law, the careful marking out of the area in which an official duel was fought, the squares on the floor used by a wizard calling up the dead (p. 149 below), and the stone settings placed round graves. The earliest enclosures for sacred places appear to have consisted of an earthwork or ditch to mark off the area in which worship or special rites took place. Such enclosures might be square, rectangular or circular in shape, and might contain such features as ritual shafts, springs, hearths, pillars, standing stones or monoliths.

The Golering near Coblenz is an example of a huge circular enclosure as much as 190 m in diameter, possibly dating back to the sixth century BC. It had a large posthole in the centre which could have held a post 12 m high.<sup>40</sup> At Libernice near Kolin in Czechoslovakia there was a large rectangular enclosure 80 m by 20 m, marked out by a ditch. Inside remains of children and animals were found, as well as a skull, and there were traces of an artificial platform and pits holding bones and pottery fragments. In the area where offerings seem to have been made, a stone in the shape of a rough pyramid about 200 cm high had stood with its base deep in the earth, until at some time it was deliberately overturned and moved out of position. In the centre of the enclosure was the grave of a middle-aged woman, who it was suggested may have been a priestess. She wore jewellery of the La Tène period, and there were also two huge neck-rings of bronze which could have been used for figures of



gods or heroes. The date of the grave was estimated at about the third century BC.<sup>41</sup> Many enclosed sites are known in Britain and on the Continent, and some were used over a long period. At Uley Bury in Gloucestershire there was a sacred place close to the great hill fort which was in use for as much as eight centuries. It was first enclosed by a ditch, then by a palisade, and it contained votive deposits, infant and adult burials, and isolated postholes. Buildings were set up there in the Roman period, and a recognisable shrine dedicated to Mercury built in the fourth century AD.<sup>42</sup> It is possible that the so-called Banqueting Hall at Tara was in fact a ritual enclosure, a parallelogram about 220 m long, of the type known as a *curtus* found on other sites of the Celtic Iron Age.

Small shrines or temples were set up in many existing enclosures during the Roman occupation. The earliest of these were of wood, and some seem to be pre-Roman in date, but later more permanent buildings of masonry were erected, to meet the needs of more sophisticated worshippers.<sup>43</sup> The enclosing wall with gates became an important feature. At Lhuis in Gaul, where a temple was set up with inscriptions to Jupiter and the goddesses, votive plaques were discovered which showed that portions of the wall round the temple had been built by grateful donors who had found healing there.

In southern France, elaborate shrines with stone carvings existed before the advent of the Romans, due to the influence of Greek and Italian merchants and settlers.<sup>44</sup> Carved figures in stone show Mediterranean influence, but have been produced by native craftsmen. At Roquepertuse, north of Marseilles, there was a great stone portico supported on three stone pillars, with niches to hold skulls or severed human heads, and a carving of what is thought to have been a great bird of prey was set on the stone lintel. Another piece of carved stone depicted a pair of human heads facing opposite ways, and between them was what seems to be the beak of a great bird. Some of the stones were painted, and there were red, white and black horses on the lintel, with traces of fishes and foliage. In front were five stone figures which also showed signs of paint, and these were represented sitting cross-legged in Celtic fashion. At Entremont, an important sanctuary of the Salluvii, dating from the third century BC and finally destroyed by the Romans in 124 BC, there was a sacred way leading to the sanctuary which had been lined with lifesize figures of men and women carved in stone, some cross-legged as at Roquepertuse. A reused pillar in the sanctuary had carvings of human heads and niches for holding skulls, and a number of skulls were recovered beside it. Another carved stone showed a mouthless head in an oval frame, with two sockets for skulls, one on either side. The Celtic Salluvii had made use of an earlier sanctuary which already

had carved pillars, and they set up another building beside the sacred way which held a number of skulls nailed to stakes set on a wooden platform.

The statues and stone carvings in these temples give some idea of the artistic skills of these people, particularly now that they can be compared with wooden figures found more recently in Gaul. The carving shows both vigour and variety, and gives some idea of how elaborate these sanctuaries could have been before the arrival of the Romans. It includes realistic human figures and fantastic powerful creations like the 'Tarasque' of Noves, another holy place in Provence overrun by the Romans. This is a sinister wolf-like monster, with a scaly back like a dragon; it may be a symbol of devouring death, since it is crunching a human arm in its mouth and holding a human head under each of its front paws. The emphasis on the severed head in these sacred places is a recurring feature in Celtic religious symbolism and ritual (p. 71 below).

Elaborate temples erected after the Roman conquest in Gaul and Britain are less barbarous and more sophisticated in design. Considerable efforts were to cater for the needs of visitors and to attract distinguished pilgrims. In AD 310 the Emperor Constantine visited a temple in Gaul, described as 'the most beautiful in the world', and there had a vision of himself as Apollo, receiving a wreath of victory and the promise of a reign of thirty years.<sup>45</sup> The wide views from some of these temple complexes, a marked feature of Celtic holy places, made them attractive places to visit. Some were used for healing, and attracted many seeking cures, as is clear from the inscriptions and votive offerings found there. One form of offering was that of models of various parts of the body where healing had taken place, and another of human figures which show the nature of the disease which afflicted the patient. The most valuable find of this kind was a collection of about two hundred wooden figures from the temple of Sequana, the goddess of the source of the Seine, which were discovered in 1963.<sup>46</sup> They were made about the first century AD, and in some cases earlier, before the erection of Roman temples on the site; they are carved with skill and artistry and are very varied in character. They were dredged out of what is thought to have been a ritual bathing pool within the sanctuary, where they had been carefully laid out in rows, perhaps at the dedication of the Gallo-Roman shrine. The methods of healing practised in such sanctuaries included drinking and bathing in the water, as at spas in later times, and also incubation, healing by means of dreams received by the patient sleeping in the temple. Inscriptions left by grateful pilgrims shows that this was practised in Gaul, and Miranda Green suggests that it may have been used at the temple of Sequana and also at Lydney on the Severn.<sup>47</sup>

The use made of striking natural features which formed part of the landscape is illustrated by the temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath.<sup>48</sup> Here the natural hot springs which led to the choice of the site as a holy place were enclosed in a temple in the Roman period, and even roofed in by a considerable feat of engineering. Pilgrims were able to enter the temple and approach the place where water gushed out from a stone arch, and could then drink from it and throw in offerings. The mist and steam rising from the stone cavern from which the hot flood poured must have made it a memorable place, and many rich gifts were left by the visitors. When the site was excavated in the nineteenth century, treasures found included jewellery, a set of thirty-four inscribed gems, rich metal vessels and large numbers of coins. The finds included a piece of lead with a vindictive prayer: 'May he who carried off Viblia from me become liquid as water'. This was written backwards, with a list of possible names of the guilty party, and there are other examples of curses of this kind being found among votive offerings. As well as the temple buildings, a set of luxurious baths was added in the first century AD; they were in use until about the fifth century, and probably inspired the poem known as 'The Ruin' in the Exeter Book, composed by an Anglo-Saxon poet. Another example of the use of a natural feature in a Romano-Celtic temple is at Triguères (Loiret) in Gaul, where the *cella* or central sanctuary was almost filled by a menhir, an enormous stone which projected over the rear wall into the ambulatory beyond.<sup>49</sup>

A typical temple of the Romano-Celtic type, however, would not be on such a grand scale as that at Bath. It would consist basically of two concentric units; the inner sanctuary or *cella* where a cult object or figures of deities might be placed, and an ambulatory outside this, encircling most of the building, which could be used for processions. The *cella* might be of considerable height, in the form of a tower, and could be square, rectangular or circular in shape. The roof of the ambulatory would be lower than that of the *cella*, and it might be left open at the side, enclosed only by a low wall with pillars to support the roof. Although it used to be assumed that such temples belonged to the period of Roman occupation, it is now known that a number existed before this both in Gaul and Britain.<sup>50</sup> There was a pre-conquest temple at Heathrow in southern England, now under the airport; this was a massive timber building 6 × 5 m, with a colonnade surrounding it. Another example of an early temple is at Tremblois in Gaul, where a series of buildings succeeded one another on the same site.<sup>51</sup> Since the earliest temples were of wood, many may have been missed by excavators, for it is difficult to be sure whether a small structure of this kind was built for secular or religious purposes. Some of the shrines of

the Romano-Celtic period were little more than sheds set up on private estates, or chapels forming part of private houses.

The Germanic peoples were less affected by Mediterranean fashions or by the demands of foreign worshippers, and they do not seem to have progressed beyond the erection of wooden buildings. In Bede's story of the conversion of Northumbria (*History* II, 13), he refers to 'altars and shrines' of the idols, and to enclosures surrounding them. The High Priest is said to ride over to the idols and profane the temple by throwing a spear into it, but it is not clear whether Bede pictures the idols inside the temple or not. The inference is that these structures were wood, since they burned easily. A seventh century building near the royal hall of Yeavering in Northumberland is a possible example of a wooden temple of considerable size in the Anglo-Saxon pre-Christian period.<sup>52</sup> Its measurements were 11 × 5.5 m and it had inner walls of wattle and daub strengthened on the outside by timber. It was rectangular in plan, with doors in the centre of the two long walls. A second building in line with this may have served as a kitchen where the sacrificial meals were cooked, and there was an area where the cattle may have been killed, as there were animal bones there but no skulls. Inside the possible temple, there was a pit beside the east wall filled with bones, together with many skulls of oxen, sufficient to overflow the pit and form a pile against the wall. There were three post-holes within the building, but the posts had been removed from them and the holes filled with stones; this might mark alterations made to the building after the acceptance of Christianity.

There are descriptions of fairly elaborate temples in Scandinavia in saga literature, but these were written relatively late, and may have been influenced by accounts of pagan temples in the Old Testament or Virgil, or by familiarity with large medieval churches of stone. Up to now archaeological research has failed to establish the existence of any large building used as a temple, or outlines of such buildings under churches.<sup>53</sup> The most convincing evidence for a pre-Christian sacred site is at Mære on Trondheim Fjord, where an important sanctuary is known to have existed in the Viking Age.<sup>54</sup> The medieval church there originally stood on an island, and traces of earlier buildings were discovered beneath it. The earliest appeared to date back to about AD 500, and was marked by post-holes which held the main pillars of the building. These had signs of burning at the bottom, and a number of tiny pieces of thin gold foil of the type known as *goldgubber* in Denmark were found.<sup>55</sup> Such tiny pieces of gold usually depict two figures, a man and a woman, who face each other and are sometimes embracing, or may have a leafy branch between them (p. 121 below). They are usually found in sets, on

house-sites and not in graves, and are believed to be associated with the deities of fertility, the Vanir of Scandinavian mythology. It has been thought that they symbolise the marriage of god and goddess, and that they may have been used at weddings, or to bless a new home; in this case, it appears, they were used in the rite of hallowing a temple building.

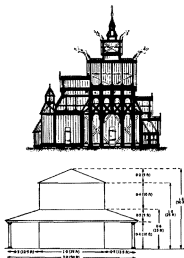
The temple at Mære was presumably of wood, and the same is true of the famous temple at Uppsala, described in Adam of Bremen's eleventh century history as a splendid building with a roof of shining gold. No clear plan of a pre-Christian shrine has been found under the church there, although Sune Lindqvist discovered traces of an earlier building and a few post-holes which could have belonged to a temple. The reconstructed Uppsala temple model to be seen in Scandinavian museums was based largely on the ground plan of a Wendish temple at Arcona, destroyed by the Danes in the twelfth century and described in detail by Saxo Grammaticus, which was reconstructed by Schuchardt in 1921.<sup>56</sup> It was once thought that the term *hof* which occurs in many Icelandic placenames indicated the existence of a former temple, but it has been shown by Olsen that many of these names were based on the assumptions of local antiquarians in later times. In 1908 a building was excavated at Hofstaðir in north-eastern Iceland; the ground plan was thought to be an example of a large temple, and is shown as such in many books on the Viking Age. It seems however more probable that this was the hall of a farmhouse used for communal religious feasts, perhaps that of the *goði* or leading man of the district who would preside over such gatherings, and there was no indication that it was erected purely for religious purposes.

Individuals in Scandinavia evidently set up small shrines for their own use, as Thorolf of Helgafell is said to have erected a 'temple' for Thor near his own house in Iceland, where the sacred ring of the god and a bowl used for sacrifices were kept. However such temples appear to correspond to the small shrines of Celtic areas rather than large temple buildings of the Roman type or halls where a number of worshippers or pilgrims could collect. A farm called *Hof* may have been a place where ritual celebrations were held at regular times when the annual feasts took place, cattle were killed, and men met to do honour to the gods.

There is not much indication that healing was associated with holy places and shrines among Germans and Scandinavians. Something of the kind, however, appears to have been linked with cult places out of doors and with burial places. Those in tales who sleep on burial mounds sometimes have dreams which bring inspiration or healing, and the implication appears to be that it is the dead within the mound who

communicates with the sleeper (p. 130 below). It was claimed that Freyr, the god associated with the earth and burial mounds, could send dreams and visions to men. There are tales also of men consulting both Freyr and the sky god Thor when an important decision had to be reached, such as whether to leave Norway for Iceland; such consultations might take place in the shrine of the god, in the hall of a house, or perhaps out of doors beside a mound, a sacred tree, or a great stone. As preserved in the literature such traditions are fragmentary and confused, and there is less emphasis on healing than on urgent warnings, the revelation of future events, or good luck in hunting and fishing, but there are hints that indicate it was not wholly forgotten.

Even if temples were usually small impermanent structures, this does not rule out the possibility that rich carvings in wood, fine hangings and great treasures in the form of splendid vessels or ornaments for the figures of the gods might be preserved in them. When Charlemagne



3 above Section drawing of stave church of early thirteenth century from Gol, Hallingdal, Norway, now in Bygdøy Museum. below Typical Romano-Celtic temple with suggested proportions.

destroyed the Irminsul in the eighth century, he is said to have removed much gold and silver from the sacred place. A superb treasure was found at Petrossa in Romania in 1837, which included gold vessels, a great jewelled collar, and some splendid brooches, one an enormous one in the shape of an eagle. These are thought to have been the work of Gothic craftsmen and to have come from a sanctuary, perhaps hidden for safety during the approach of the Huns. Objects like the Gundestrup Cauldron were carefully dismantled and deposited in the Danish peat-bogs, and these seem likely to have been the property of some sanctuary of the gods, which might be stored there and brought out for special festivals.

While so far there is little definite evidence for early shrines among the Germanic peoples, the wooden stave churches built in Norway between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries may provide a possible clue as to what kind of sacred buildings were set up there in pre-Christian times. As many as thirty-one stave churches survive, some in remote parts of Norway and others now in open-air museums, and they are strikingly different in appearance and construction from early churches of brick or stone in England and Germany. The earliest Norwegian churches had their pillars and walls set in the ground and packed round with stones, and consequently they could not survive for long. Those built in the twelfth century, however, rest on 'groundsills', formed of four massive lengths of timber set to form a square. From these a series of 'masts' or wooden pillars rise to support the walls and roof, rounded at the foot like the masts of a ship.<sup>37</sup> In a small 'one-mast' church, two pieces of timber are laid crosswise over the sill, and a single central pillar rises from the crossing. In larger churches, masts are placed at the four corners of the sill, while in a 'many-masted' church like that of Borgund the 'sleepers' forming the sill are arranged to form a square inside a rectangle, and the masts are set round the square. At Borgund there are as many as six different levels from the ground to the central tower, and a series of roofs of different heights are grouped around the central sanctuary. As in the case of the Romano-Celtic temple, an ambulatory (*stalgang*) runs round the outside of the building. This is usually enclosed by a low wooden wall topped by an arcade, so that it is open to light and air. It was used for processions moving clockwise round the church, as well as for depositing weapons during the service, and for transacting business and making formal agreements.

The earliest stave churches have rich and often fantastic carvings on doors and walls, and grim, sinister heads set at the points where the pillars touch the roof, recalling ancient gods and monsters rather than Christian symbols and markedly different from fantastic heads of Anglo-Norman churches.<sup>38</sup> Outside dragon shapes protrude from the gables

like figure-heads from a ship. Indeed there is an obvious link between the construction of the stave churches and the techniques of ship-building, as was pointed out by Lorenz Dietrichson: 'A row of arches, upside down, is placed between different rafters, just as it was between the ribs of a Viking ship. In the ship these ribs were not attached to the keel, and similarly the rafter arches and the beams are separate from the ridge beams in the church ... The entire church is strengthened throughout by elbow joints and brackets, just as the Viking ships are.'<sup>39</sup> Inside the churches it is dark and mysterious, and the fact that the roof rises in the centre gives an impression of narrowness and height, drawing the gaze upwards. A building of this kind would emphasise the centrality of the sacred place, while the series of different levels would be in accordance with the picture of the world of gods and men and supernatural beings grouped vertically and horizontally around the World Tree (p. 171 below).

It is clear that sacred buildings in various parts of Celtic and Germanic territory developed in different ways according to outside influences and the building materials and skills available. They were raised to house figures of the gods and cult objects, for the making of private offerings and consultation of the supernatural powers, not for congregational services and large assemblies. They would be visited by the faithful, and the processional way round the building would make it possible for visitors to view sacred objects without entering the sanctuary. The treasures stored in the temple sometimes necessitated a wall or fence to enclose it, and this also served to mark off sacred space. Communal feasts and rituals in which the neighbourhood took part, however, would normally be out of doors or in suitably large buildings where feasts could be prepared, as in the hall of a king or local landowner. In spite of occasional encircling walls, it is essential to see the sacred place as something not set apart from the ordinary secular world, but rather as providing a vital centre for the needs of the community and for the maintenance of a kingdom. It offered a means of communication with the Other World, and was regarded as a source of power, inspiration, healing and hidden knowledge. One or more deities might be revered in the shrine or cult place, and through them men might get in touch with the underworld or with the world of the sky. Law and order essential for the established community was centred in the holy place, and sanctuaries like Tara, Uppsala and Thingvellir might serve as microcosm and map of the entire kingdom.