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Processions and Ritual Movement in Viking Age Scandinavia

Luke John Murphy & Simon Nygaard

Introduction

In this chapter we survey and analyse evidence for processions and their possible functions in Viking Age Scandinavia. We propose two forms of processional movement, and examine forms of ritual transport and their likely venues. Although older studies of ‘procession’ as part of human ritual activity defined it as purely linear – that is, a ritual movement from Point A to Point B (and occasionally back again)¹ – we also incorporate evidence for circulatory movements around a particular place, which seems to have played a significant role in pre-Christian Nordic culture. Indeed, what we term *circulatory processions* are arguably more numerous in our written source material than their *linear* counterparts, although the ever-growing archaeological record may nuance this picture in years to come. Linear processions are mostly found in funerary contexts, and consist of ritual movement from one place to another, potentially also including a non-ritual return to the starting point via the same route. Circulatory processions, on the other hand, seem to have typically begun and ended at a particularly sacred place (such as a sacral building, grove, or lake), and to have been conducted by one or more representations of a deity and their ritual specialist(s), who progressed around local or regional landscapes. In at least some cases there is evidence to suggest that ritual activities were conducted at stops along the way, and it is possible that linear processions formed subsidiary parts of a larger circulatory procession at the latter’s stopping points.

In order to analyse which features these processions may have had, we employ Bernhard Lang’s typology of processions.² Lang describes four main types of processions:

- *Functional* processions are probably the most common in human society generally, and consist of the ritualisation of a movement that would happen

regardless, such as the transportation of a coffin from the church to the grave.

- *Hierophoric* processions are those where an icon or other symbol of the sacred is transported from one place to another, as in archaic Near Eastern processions.³
- *Mimetic* processions are re-enactments of sacred, mythical, or historical events, such as the performance of mythic narratives by human actors in so-called ‘mythological drama’,⁴ for instance, medieval European passion plays.
- *Demonstrative* processions are displays of the ritual’s participants themselves, as when groups with a particular identity (be that political, religious, ethnic, or some combination thereof) express their association through public displays of affiliation, such as the Orange Order marches in Northern Ireland.

These types can also be combined, producing hybrid forms.

Processions in pre-Christian Nordic religions have received very little scholarly attention, particularly when compared to other ritual categories like ‘sacrifice’ or ‘initiation’. Some of this neglect is due to the way processions have often only been examined as parts of wider ritual performances, compounded by difficulties in identifying processions in our source material. Studies like ours must therefore rely on interpretation, looking for evidence of processions implicit in the terse wording of medieval texts and the ambiguous remains of material corpora. Anders Hultgård’s study of ‘cultic circumnavigations’ offered the first systematic overview of some textual accounts describing religious processions.⁵ However, this work contains no discussion of funerary processions, pays very little attention to archaeological material (and none to iconographic evidence), and examines only travel via vehicle, omitting any



Figure 11.1 Map of sites mentioned in this subchapter. Key: ○ Pre-Viking Age sites mentioned in 'Forms of Ritual Transport'. □ Pre-Viking Age sites mentioned in 'Linear Monuments...'. ● Viking Age sites mentioned in 'Forms of Ritual Transport'. ■ Viking Age sites mentioned in 'Linear Monuments...'. ▲ Viking Age sites mentioned in both sections.

ambulatory journeys that may have constituted processions. The next dedicated examination of pre-Christian processions came in 2017, when the present authors published a lengthy Danish-language article, the results of which we expand upon and refine here, *inter alia* through paying greater attention to archaeological evidence (Fig. 11.1).⁶ Our work was the first to consider the functions that processions may have played in pre-Christian Nordic cult, which has since been taken up in scholarship more widely.⁷

Circulatory Processions

The category of circulatory processions contains a number of relatively clear examples, most of which can be related to either prosperity cults or so-called ritual drama. Here we examine the Nerthus cult in Chapter 40 of Tacitus' *Germania*, Gunnars þátr helmings, and Book 5 of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, before turning to ritual performances of eddic poetry.

Prosperity Cults

In AD 98 the Roman historian Cornelius Publius Tacitus wrote a more-or-less ethnographic account of the Germanic peoples and their customs titled *Germania*. While a useful font of information on early Iron Age Germanic culture and

religion, readers of Tacitus' work must carefully consider its value as a source. There are good reasons for scepticism, particularly Tacitus' lack of first-hand knowledge, but *Germania* does include useful information that can be supported and supplemented by archaeological findings from the period and further illuminated by episodes in later medieval textual sources.⁸ One such example is Chapter 40, which contains a description of the goddess Nerthus, whose cult Tacitus places among the Germanic tribes likely based somewhere in the western Baltic region – probably present-day Denmark or Northern Germany. He writes:

(...) in commune Nerthum, id est Terram matrem, colunt eamque intervenire rebus hominum, invehi populis arbitrantur. est in insula oceani castum nemus, dicatumque in eo vehiculum, veste contectum; attingere uni sacerdoti concessum. is adesce penetrali deam intellegit vectamque bubus feminis multa cum veneratione prosequitur. laeti tunc dies, festa loca, quaecumque adventu hospitioque dignatur. non bella ineunt, non arma sumunt; clausum omne ferrum; pax et quies tunc tantum nota, tunc tantum amata, donec idem sacerdos satiatam conversatione mortalium deam temple reddat.

(...) they worship in common Nerthus, or Mother Earth, and conceive her as intervening in human affairs, and riding in procession through the cities of men. In an island of the ocean is a holy grove, and in it a consecrated chariot, covered with robes: a single priest is permitted to touch it: he feels the presence of the goddess in her shrine, and follows with deep reverence as she rides away drawn by cows: then come days of rejoicing, and all places keep holiday, as many as she thinks worthy to receive and entertain her. They make no war, take no arms: every weapon is put away; peace and quiet are then, and then alone, known and loved, until the same priest returns the goddess to her sacred precinct, when she has had her fill of the society of mortals.⁹

This is the clearest example of a circulatory procession in our source material. Tacitus's description is, of course, an attempt by a cultural outsider to describe events in Roman cultural terms, employing a form of *Interpretatio Romana* for which the Roman Magna Mater-cult likely served as an exemplar.¹⁰

Additionally, the ritual movements of the Nerthus cult are also clearly a hierophoric procession,¹¹ where the deity is transported through the landscape on a wagon by a ritual specialist of the opposite gender. Sadly, we are not informed about the rituals that we may assume took place during the festivities mentioned in general terms when the procession made stops along its route – or whether these may have involved linear processions to local sacral sites. Nonetheless, the function and overall purpose of the procession remains relatively clear. Nerthus can essentially be regarded as a prosperity goddess, and her oft-positied connection – both functionally and linguistically – to the Vanir gods of medieval Old Norse sources supports this supposition.¹² The common Proto-Germanic root of both

Nerthus and the Vanir god Njörðr can be reconstructed as **nerþuz* ('power'),¹³ which has given rise to the interpretation of Nerthus and Njörðr as divine twins, as is often seen with fertility deities (such as the Nāsatyas recorded in *Rigveda* from c. 1900 BC).¹⁴ The Vanir prosperity gods Freyr and Freyja also have a common Old Norse root – their names are generally thought to mean 'lord' and 'lady'¹⁵ – and the siblings have been interpreted as a younger variant of Njörðr and Nerthus.¹⁶ In summation, Nerthus can be seen as a prosperity goddess, and the function of the procession described in *Germania* 40 seems to have been to bring fertility, primarily in the form of peace and prosperity, to the areas visited by the procession. We are therefore dealing with a hierophoric fertility procession.

Another source of great relevance is *Gunnars þáttr helmings*, an Icelandic *þáttr* – a short narrative that forms part of a longer text – written around 1375 and preserved in the collection *Flateyjarbok*.¹⁷ As with most saga literature, the story is somewhere between fictional history and historical fiction: this conversion *þáttr* is a clearly polemical narrative set in conversion-era Sweden, where the pagan Swedes are portrayed as naive for worshipping something that the Christian author identifies as *þjandinn* ('the devil').¹⁸

Gunnars þáttr is often used to reinforce the connection between Nerthus and Vanir gods, because the narrative structure in the two texts is largely the same. The Norwegian Gunnarr *helmingr* (lit. halved, two-coloured) has been wrongly accused of murder in Norway and has to flee to Uppland in Sweden. There he becomes involved in a Freyr cult, where the god, in the form of a wooden idol, resides at a temple with a female ritual specialist. Freyr and the ritual specialist's sexual relationship is deemed necessary by the Swedes. The narrative continuously plays with the – often sexual – tension between Gunnarr, the ritual specialist, and Freyr. The climax of the conflict comes during the annual autumnal procession around the local landscape, where the Freyr idol, his ritual specialist 'wife', and their following are received with *veizlur* ('ritual feasts') in order for Freyr to provide the people with *árbót* ('a prosperous year').¹⁹ During a storm in a mountain pass, the wagon with Freyr and the ritual specialist and Gunnarr are separated from the rest of the procession, and Gunnarr and Freyr end up in a wrestling match when Gunnarr, exhausted from leading the wagon, dares to sit in the holy vehicle. Gunnarr ultimately wins, dons the remains of the wooden idol, and convinces the ritual specialist to act as if he is Freyr during the procession and its many feasts, where he eats and drinks as normal men. This delights the pagan Swedes – and even more so when the female ritual specialist becomes pregnant, apparently by Gunnarr. The Swedes go on to attribute the exceedingly mild weather and prosperous crops of the following year to Freyr's apparent virility.

Between the lines of this clearly polemic, Christian text may be remnants of older oral traditions concerning Freyr's role in a prosperity cult²⁰ – strongly reminiscent of the

Nerthus cult of *Germania*. Nonetheless, in *Gunnars þáttr helmings* we encounter a circulatory procession going from a primary sacral place (the start- and presumed endpoint) making stops around the landscape in order to promote the prosperity of the region. Additionally, there is the motif of a holy wedding (*hieros gamos*) between the god and ritual specialist, which is traditionally thought to further secure the fertility of the land.²¹ The ritual feast described at the stop the procession makes after the struggle in the mountains probably served a similar function, presumably consisting of a communal meal of sacrificed animals – as we see, for instance, in *Hákonar saga goða*, a thirteenth-century *konungasaga* set in early tenth-century Norway or *Kjalnesinga saga*, a fourteenth-century *islendingasaga* set in ninth-to-eleventh century Iceland and Norway.²² The procession is hierophoric, centering on prosperity through the fertility of the land (and its people), and features a deity drawn in procession from feast to feast aboard a wagon accompanied by a ritual specialist of the opposite gender.

An additional example of circulatory processions in Viking Age Scandinavia, albeit one less explicitly linked to pagan religious praxis, is found in *Gesta Danorum* (book 5, 16.3) written around 1200 by the Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus.²³ This narrative of King Frotho seems to draw on both the Freyr tradition of *Gunnars þáttr* and on the euhemerised myth of the deity's death in Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga* from the 1230s, which lacks any explicit processional movement. After Frotho's death, Saxo writes that the chieftains want to keep his demise a secret from the king's subjects in order to maintain the tax regime and geographic integrity of Frotho's large kingdom. They keep the secret for three years by preserving the king's body and transporting his corpse in his royal wagon as if he were an old frail man. Such processions seem to have been a common royal activity in both Viking Age Sweden (notably via the Eriksgatan route) and elsewhere in early medieval Europe, so the ruse would likely have been believable.²⁴ No ritual specialist is mentioned, and the motivation behind the procession seems to be primarily economic and political. We still argue that the procession's function is fundamentally hierophoric, since the king in this context may be seen as a sacral figure.²⁵

Ritual Drama

A somewhat different form of circulatory procession may be detected in so-called 'ritual drama' during the Viking Age.²⁶ The performance of eddic poetry – an anonymous genre of Old Norse poetry concerned with pre-Christian gods and heroes – created what Lars Lönnröth called a 'double scene' as human actors temporarily 'became' deities.²⁷ Some such performances, for instance *Lokasenna*, which is set within a single hall, would have required no particular movements, and thus no procession.²⁸ Other poems, however, have been argued to have been staged at various locations that would have required both performers and audiences to move

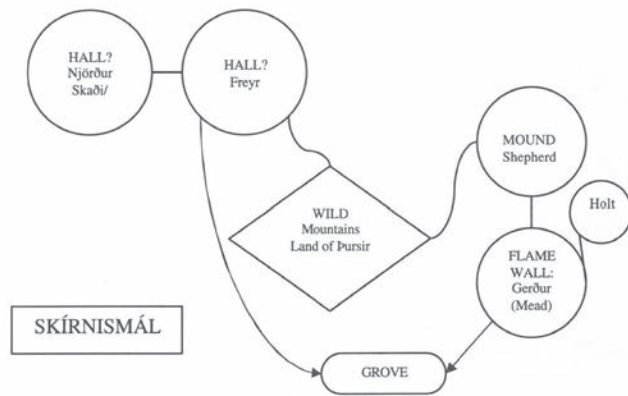


Figure 11.2 Diagram of *Skírnir*'s movements during a performance of *Skírnismál*. After Gunnell 2006: 240. Reproduced with permission.

between locales. *Skírnismál*, for example, describes the travels of Freyr's servant Skírnir to Jötunheimr in order to fulfil his master's sexual desire for the *jötunn*-woman called Gerður, and is a clear example of this: Terry Gunnell has proposed it would have been performed outdoors at several (improvised) stages on a typical Viking Age farmstead (Fig. 11.2).²⁹ The movement of performers and audience between such locations during a performance of the poem would have constituted a ritual, mimetic procession as the 'gods' re-enacted a mythic journey. However, the need for the audience (and actors) to also be at each location requires any such movements to also have been functional processions. That *Skírnismál* should be seen as a circulatory ritual procession is clear, as both the initial and final strophes of the poem are set in the same location, the home of the gods from where Freyr first glimpsed Gerður and from where Skírnir set out on his journey.

Conclusions on Circulatory Processions

In sum, the circulatory processions we have examined thus far have all been linked with prosperity and power – especially if we view rulers as being in some way sacral figures (*Skírnismál* may be something of an exception to this, although the poem's text is, at its core, about sexual dominance and thus power). Many of the examples were seemingly part of a Vanir-centred cult, something that has been suggested to have played an integral role in Viking Age rulership.³⁰ The dominant form of circulatory processions in Viking Age Scandinavia is clearly one in which hierophoric representations of sacral powers were transported around a region (typically in a wagon and accompanied by a ritual specialist of the opposite gender), although *Skírnismál* demonstrates a hybrid mimetic-functional function.

Linear Processions

In the pre-Christian Nordic region we mostly find linear processions in connection with funerary rituals. In addition

to descriptions of linear burial processions in written sources, there are also a number of archaeological and iconographic finds that can be interpreted as evidence of linear processions – some with clear funerary connotations, some without.

Funerary Processions

Three medieval texts preserve clear accounts of processions occurring as part of funerary rituals in pre-Christian Scandinavian contexts. Unfortunately, two of these describe a mythological event – the funeral of the deity Baldr – and the third outlines a funeral that took place on the banks of the Volga in modern Russia, likely conducted by people whose culture hybridised practices from a wider region, and is thus not straightforwardly Nordic.³¹

To begin with the latter, the *Risāla* ('Account, Description') was written by the Arabic-speaking traveller Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān during the tenth century, but is preserved only piecemeal in other manuscripts, the oldest of which dates to the thirteenth century. Ibn Faḍlān witnessed the funeral of a Rus' chieftain (indeed, he seems to have gone out of his way to be in attendance),³² and describes how the chieftain was first buried in a temporary grave for ten days before being moved to a ship that had been pulled ashore to serve as the focus of the funeral itself. This translation of the corpse is only one of a series of movements to the beached ship, focused on provisioning the pyre in appropriate style. Such movements were undoubtedly linear, in the sense that the corpse and other supplies moved only in one direction, but the terse style of Ibn Faḍlān's account makes it difficult to say how ritualised they may have been. He does note that some ritual movements occurred before the chieftain's exhumation, saying that the mourners 'advanced, going to and fro [around the boat] uttering words which I did not understand'.³³ Whether this may have amounted to a group performing a circulatory procession around the boat, or whether it reflects a ring of people around the boat moving back and forth, is ambiguous.

That the *Risāla* might reflect more widespread Nordic funerary practices is supported by two descriptions of Baldr's funeral.³⁴ Chapter 49 of Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*,³⁵ part of his *Edda* (a handbook of poetics composed by the Christian magnate in the 1220s) is at least partially based on *Húsdrápa* ('House Poem'). Originally composed by Úlfr Uggason in c. 983–5, this skaldic verse is one of only three ekphrastic poems in Old Norse,³⁶ and describes mythological scenes carved into the wooden panels of an Icelandic house. Stanzas 7–10 of *Húsdrápa* outline the arrival of various mythological figures at Baldr's pyre: Freyr rides his boar, Heimdalr comes on horseback, as does Óðinn, who arrives with *valkyrjur* and ravens in train.³⁷ Snorri's account adds a number of mythological figures to this cortège, noting that many of them travel by their characteristic divine modes: Freyr's boar and Heimdalr's horse are named, and it is clarified that Freyja arrived 'køttum sínum' ('[by means of]

her cats³⁸). Such is the attention paid to the scene that it may well have been intended to be understood as a (linear) hierophoric procession, part of the funerary ritual aiming to ensure Baldr's safe delivery to his afterlife.

A similar intention may lie behind the other clearly linear movements in Snorri's account: first the gods move Baldr's body to the coast, where he is to be burned on his ship Hringhorni.³⁹ Only once the mourners are in attendance and the ship has been ignited and pushed out to sea are the bodies of Baldr, his wife Nanna, and his horse carried from their temporary resting places to the pyre:

Pá var borit út á skipit lík Baldrs, ok er þat sá kona hans Nanna Nepsdóttir þá sprakk hon af harmi ok dó. Var hon borin á bálit ok slegit í eldi (...) hestr Baldrs var leiddr á bálit með ǫllu reiði.

Then Baldr's corpse was carried out onto the ship, and when his wife Nanna Nepsdóttir saw that she died of grief. She was carried onto the pyre (...) Baldr's horse, with its harness and gear, was led onto the fire.⁴⁰

While the movement to the general location of the funeral should probably not be understood as ritual movement, the carrying of the bodies to the pyre itself is clearly part of the funerary proceedings. Given this movement relocates the bodies of deities, the corpses naturally held sacral value – all the more so given the special import accorded to Baldr's invulnerable body immediately prior to his death⁴¹ – which makes the procession not merely functional, but also hierophoric in nature.

A key site for Scandinavian archaeology of funerary rituals is the ninth-century burial at Oseberg, Norway, containing the bodies of two women and a large amount of

high-status grave goods: a 21 m ship, a wagon, a sled, several beheaded horses, and a number of tapestry fragments.⁴² The most elaborate of these tapestries is poorly preserved, but seems to depict a crowd of humans, animals, and vehicles moving in the same direction (Fig. 11.3), although there is no consensus on what the tapestry fragments portray more generally.⁴³ The presence of feline iconography in the various grave goods has been used to suggest that one of the buried women was a cult specialist dedicated to the deity Freyja, and that the tapestries thus depict a Freyja-focused ritual.⁴⁴ We believe a far simpler and more likely explanation is that the tapestry fragments portray a funerary procession, conducted for the benefit of a high-status member of the Viking Age elite. Such high-status funerary rituals seem to have sometimes included the death of retainers (Nanna, and the enslaved girl in the *Risāla*),⁴⁵ which could potentially explain the second body in the Oseberg grave and the hanged bodies depicted on the Oseberg tapestry. While any ritual movement conducted as part of the Oseberg funeral would have been functional according to Lang's typology, the highly elite nature of the burial makes it likely that the bodies inhumed were invested with some form of sacral value, suggesting any potential procession would likely have been a functional-hierophoric hybrid.

One corpus of evidence that might suggest processions formed part of pre-Christian funerary traditions are the Gotlandic picture stones.⁴⁶ These memorial stones were erected in several stylistic phases between c. 400–1100, and stones from the third and final pre-Christian phase (c. 800–1000) also depict anthropomorphic figures engaged in a range of activities. Some of these, like the Oseberg tapestry fragments,



Figure 11.3 Reconstruction of detail from one of the Oseberg tapestry fragments 1–2. Stig Saxegaard, Storm Studios. All colours are illustrative. After Vedeler 2019. Reproduced with permission.

include groups seemingly moving in the same direction, and might thus represent ritual movement. The Lärbo Tängelgårda I stone (Fig. 11.4),⁴⁷ for example, has three panels showing human figures: the uppermost appears to show a battle, while the lower two seem to show warriors walking in procession, leading a dead body on a horse, and following a mounted figure. The warriors hold their swords upside-down and brandish rings (possibly so-called Scandinavian ‘temple rings’ known from both textual and archaeological sources),⁴⁸ which would suggest a ritual, not merely practical, purpose to their procession. The mounted figure is apparently being greeted by a female being, and is surrounded by so-called **valknútar*,⁴⁹ which might have been intended to depict a dead warrior’s accession to Valhøll. The Lärbo Tängelgårda I stone would thus seem to portray a hybrid functional-hierophoric procession that not only featured the practical relocation of a corpse, but also sacrally charged symbols (inverted swords, rings, **valknútar*, and possibly even a *valkyrja*).



Figure 11.4 Reconstruction of the upper panels of the Lärbo Tängelgårda I stone. Photo by JC Merriman. CC BY-2.0, Wikimedia Commons.

The Sanda I stone (Fig. 11.5), however, has a far less clearly funerary context. This stone has three figures apparently walking from right to left, the first holding a spear, the second a club (or hammer?), and the third a sickle. The usual interpretation of these figures is that they are intended to represent the deities Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyr (or possibly Óðinn, Hœnir, and Lóðurr, or Óðinn, Vili, and Vé), although the runic inscription on the stone seems to memorialise three (human?) names, ‘: roþuisl : aug : farborn : auk : kunborn :’ (‘Hróðvísl ok Farbjörn ok Gunnbjörn’).⁵⁰ If these names refer to historical humans, the lines between the depiction of a purely mythological journey or procession (of the type known from other Gotlandic picture stones)⁵¹ and a human performance of the same narrative becomes blurred, perhaps suggesting the procession on Sanda I – if procession it is – was mimetic in function. Whether or not the scene depicted on Sanda I has anything to do with the stone’s presumed memorial purpose is similarly unclear.

More generally, archaeological evidence for funerary rituals in the pre-Christian Nordic region is an area of lively debate.⁵² Tantalisingly, the linear processional movement of a dead body expressed in texts like *Gylfaginning* might be witnessed archaeologically in some linear monuments found at grave fields. However, the makeup of sites with these features is complex, and it is possible at least some of these formalised routes were used outside of funerary contexts or as part of larger ritual movements beyond the immediate site. Similarly, evidence for various forms of transport in and from funerary contexts – not least the wagon from Oseberg – is at least partially paralleled by the textual accounts of wagon-usage in circulatory processions considered above. We will therefore consider both topics separately below.

Linear Processions in Non-Funerary Contexts

In addition to the clear evidence for linear processions in funerary contexts, there is a small body of evidence that suggests linear processions might also have appeared in



Figure 11.5 The Sanda I stone. Photo by Swedish History Museum. CC BY-4.0.

other ritual contexts during the late Iron Age. In *Hákonar saga goða*, Snorri recounts that it was common pre-Christian practice that ‘þá er blót skyldi vera (...) allir bændr skyldu þar koma, sem hof var, ok flytja þannug fong sín, þau er þeir skyld hafa, meða veizlan stóð’ (‘when a sacrifice was to be held (...) all farmers should come to where the cult house stood, and bring [with them] all the provisions that they would need, while the sacrificial feast was conducted’).⁵³ Many of the participants in such a *blót* would have undertaken such travel, which necessarily included a return home, in an entirely practical manner, with ritual activity restricted to the main event itself. Yet it is possible that some stages of the journey, such as the final approach to the *hof* when many parties would have coalesced, were conducted in a sacrally charged manner. These journeys may have been what Lang terms ‘demonstrative’, with a ritual congregation displaying their religious unity as a group. This seems particularly likely in the case of the Norwegian *blót* Snorri describes, as Norway was undergoing a series of politicised (and sometimes violent) attempts to establish Christianity during the Viking Age. If the farmers were also expected to provide their own offerings to be sacrificed, any such animal would have been imbued with hierophoric value, something marked out for the gods, which would add a more explicitly religious element to their arrival at the ritual site. That such animals were sometimes paraded before their sacrifice is indicated in some redactions of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, when a holy boar marked out for Freyr is presented before the king,⁵⁴ although details of exactly how animal sacrifice was conducted in the Viking Age are extremely sparse due to the Christian milieu in which medieval texts were produced.⁵⁵

Another case of a linear procession divorced from funerary contexts can be found in *Hauks þáttur hárbrokar*, preserved in *Flateyjarbók*. Like *Gunnars þáttur* examined above, this text purports to depict Swedish paganism to a West-Nordic Christian audience, casting some doubt on the authenticity of events it describes. In the *þáttur*, a king holds a *veizla* to secure otherworldly knowledge from a deity called Lýtir, potentially a byname of Freyr.⁵⁶ The procedure involves the driving of two wagons to a location where the king customarily sacrificed to Lýtir, although whether this should be understood as a nearby building or distant ‘natural’ feature such as a lake or grove is unclear.⁵⁷ There, the wagons are left overnight until sufficient sacrifices have been made to convince the deity to board one – highly reminiscent of Freyr in *Gunnars þáttur*. Once the god is aboard, the wagon is pulled into the king’s hall by draft animals, at which point the ruler is able to ‘ganga til fréttu’ (‘go get [the] news’, i.e. conduct a divinatory ritual).⁵⁸ The movements here are partially functional (the wagons must be in place before Lýtir can be coaxed aboard), partially hierophoric (Lýtir is said to be physically present in the wagon), and partially demonstrative (the king very

publicly requests Lýtir’s knowledge in front of an audience, as opposed to in the relative privacy implied at the place where he sacrificed to the deity). Whether any procession here is circulatory or linear is similarly complex: Lýtir is entreated to accompany two men on a journey north before returning ‘home’, a circular journey that was likely ritualised to some extent due to the perceived presence of the god. However, given the distances involved (to say nothing of the possibility that the deity would refuse the king’s request), it seems unlikely the whole journey should be viewed as a procession. Rather, given the ritual nature of the divination and the lack of any intermediate stops between the king’s hall and Lýtir’s dwelling, it seems more likely that only Lýtir’s travel to the hall – and possibly only his entrance to the royal building itself – was ritualised to the point of procession,⁵⁹ which would suggest a linear format and a hybrid functional-hierophoric-demonstrative function.

Conclusions on Linear Processions

Linear processions in Viking Age Scandinavia appear to have primarily been performed in funerary contexts, particularly in the transport of the body to the site of the funeral, be that a burial pit, mound, ship, or pyre. Such ritual movement would therefore have constituted at least functional processions, with high-status burials such as those of the martial elite (as witnessed by the Oseberg grave and described in the *Risāla*) also featuring hierophoric elements – not only the corpse itself, but also potentially rings, inverted swords, or mythologically significant implements. The Sanda I stone upon which such implements are depicted may portray a mimetic procession (of dubious connection to funerary rituals) assuming it does in fact depict a dramatic re-enactment of mythological figures, and not those figures themselves. While funerary rituals for non-elite members of society seem less likely to have featured some of the extravagant hierophoric elements preserved in our elite-focused textual and archaeological corpora, that does not mean they were fundamentally functional, or even purely practical, non-ritualised affairs (although some of them doubtless were).⁶⁰ On the basis of the evidence available to us, however, we can say that linear processions in the Viking Age were most common in elite funerary processions, where they functioned as hybrid functional-hierophoric ritual movements. In other contexts, both *Hákonar saga* and *Hauks þáttur* suggest that linear processions sometimes formed part of larger ritual complexes, where they could fulfil complicated hybrid functional-hierophoric-demonstrative roles.

Other Evidence for Processions in Viking Age Scandinavia

While the evidence considered thus far generally falls more-or-less straightforwardly into the two categories of procession proposed in our earlier work,⁶¹ some archaeological

data is less easy to categorise. Rather than making insecure claims and overstating the usefulness of the proposed categorisation, such evidence is examined separately here in the hope of providing an appropriately nuanced discussion.

Forms of Ritual Transport

The prominence of wagons in the majority of sources for circulatory processions examined above is remarkable, particularly when it comes to prosperity cults. However, there are numerous instances of the use of wagons that are not tied to circulatory procession at all, but which are also not clearly connected with linear processions. The presence of a wagon (among other means of transportation) in the Oseberg grave (Fig. 11.6), as well as the depiction of several wheeled vehicles in the Oseberg tapestry fragments, is noteworthy in this regard. Not only is procession in a funerary context fundamentally a linear ritual that culminates at the burial site, the Oseberg wagon itself was clearly designed for ritual, not practical, purposes: it was both collapsible and unsteerable – the front wheels could not be turned to either side, and thus the wagon could only travel in a straight line. While light and unsteerable wagons like that excavated at Oseberg or the much older Trundholm ‘sun chariot’ – a 54 cm long bronze artefact from c. 1400 BC excavated in western Denmark⁶² – could potentially have been transported along longer, circulatory routes, their ritual use was clearly restricted to short, linear processions, perhaps along so-called ‘ritual roads’, as discussed below.

We might also consider the possibility that the wagon in general was intended to serve as transport to an afterlife. Some Gotlandic picture stones depict wheeled vehicles, as on the Ekeby and Alskog stones,⁶³ although none of these can be clearly linked to processions. While the Gotlandic stones were clearly intended to serve a memorial purpose and some were erected in connection with graves, not all of them were *funerary* monuments: like many mainland Scandinavian runestones, some Gotlandic picture stones were erected along key transport routes entirely separate from any known inhumation or cremation sites, quite possibly some time later, accompanied by ritual procedures of their own.⁶⁴ The closest association between funerary ritual and

a wagon is found on the Levide stone, where the damaged runic inscription appears to invoke the Christian God to protect the souls of a deceased couple (Fig. 11.7).⁶⁵ That this wagon was intended to serve the dead as a vehicle to their afterlife is certainly possible, but far from clear.

There are some possible iconographic forerunners to the Viking Age Gotlandic picture stones. The so-called ‘King’s Grave’ at Kivik in Skåne, Sweden is a very high-status burial monument from c. 1300 BC, and is decorated with carved stone panels. One of these shows eight identically clad figures following a dancer or acrobat, a number of other human and animal figures, and a chariot (Fig. 11.8).



Figure 11.7 The Levide stone. Photo by Riksantikvarieämbetet. Public domain.



Figure 11.8 Stone 7 of the Kivik grave. Photo by Lennart Larsen, National Museum of Denmark. CC BY-SA 2.5.



Figure 11.6 The Oseberg wagon. Photo by Eirik Irgens Johnsen, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Despite the clearly funerary context of the stone panel, it is far from clear that the procession depicted was connected to a burial ritual. Indeed, both processions and wheeled vehicles are known from Bronze Age (c. 1750–500 BC) petroglyphs carved into cliffs and rock formations with no funerary contexts (e.g. Fig. 11.9). Our limited knowledge of Bronze Age cosmology and religion in fact suggests that processions were more likely related to the worship of the sun, forming hybrid hierophoric-mimetic processions echoing celestial movements in the sky.⁶⁶

There are also written sources from the early Middle Ages that indicate the afterlife could be reached on foot⁶⁷ or on horseback,⁶⁸ and ships, shoes, horses, horseshoes, carriages, sledges, and skates have all been found in Iron Age burials.⁶⁹ What's more, boat and ship burials like the Oseberg grave and numerous others known from the entire Nordic region (such as the Ladby grave in Denmark or Valsgärde grave field in Sweden), not to mention the long-standing tradition of ship-shaped stone settings known from Southern Scandinavia (for instance, at Glavendrup, Denmark) are generally thought to represent the need to travel to the afterlife by ship.⁷⁰ Perhaps comparably, a small number of inhumations using parts of or entire wagons as makeshift 'coffins' are also known from the Viking Age, such as grave 4, the so-called 'völva grave' at Fyrkat, Denmark,⁷¹ which might have represented similar ideas (→ **Chapters 23–25**).⁷² Granted, the strong variation in Nordic burial cultures during the Iron Age further complicates any attempts to make blanket claims regarding transport to afterlives on the basis of grave goods, which might, after all, 'merely' be the personal possessions of the deceased or ritual deposits made by mourners on either personal or symbolic grounds.⁷³ Of course, it is entirely possible that vehicles served more than one of these roles, perhaps being used during the deceased's lifetime, serving

a ritual role during their funeral, and finally buried or burnt in order to secure the deceased's transport to an afterlife.

The use of many modes of transportation connected with processions surveyed here is noteworthy, especially considering Lang's proposition that participants in processions often took part on foot.⁷⁴ Indeed, it is remarkable that in Old Norse sources for processions, the verb *at ganga* ('to walk') seemingly does not feature when it concerns the sacral participants (a deity or their representation, ritual specialists, and so on) and only occasionally concerning more profane participants. Instead, neutral verbs which can describe movement both on foot and by other means are used, for instance *fara* ('travel'), *fylgja* ('follow'), *koma* ('come'), and *leiða* ('lead').⁷⁵ The words that can be tied to specific forms of transportation also suggest that walking was not frequent:⁷⁶ *áka* ('drive') is used to describe both Freyr's wagon at Baldr's funeral in *Gylfaginning* and the wagons of Lýtir's divination; *riða* ('ride') is used to describe transportation on various animals in both *Gylfaginning* and *Húsdrápa*, and so on.

This, however, does not mean that riding in a wagon or on a horse should necessarily be taken as evidence of processions or ritual movement more generally in Viking Age Scandinavia, just as the presence of vehicles in a grave does not constitute evidence of transport to the afterlife. Good, practical reasons for using such modes of transportation are ample – from weather to travel distance (Fig. 11.10) – especially for members of the societal elite, for whom horses (and likely wagons) also functioned as status symbols. Such modes of transport could also have been used in specific processions to physically elevate sacral symbols or figures, either to set them apart from, or to make them more visible to, the remaining participants, or both (the sensory aspects of Viking Age rituals are a badly overlooked field of inquiry).⁷⁷ In fact, it is not clear which forms of transport – if any – participants of lower social status used in such processions. In *Gunnars þáttr*, it is indicated that the ritual specialist and the idol of Freyr are to ride in the wagon while Gunnarr and the retainers are to *ganga fyrir* ('walk in front'; to our knowledge the only instance of the verb *ganga* in sources for procession), while the neutral terms noted above are used for less singular mythological figures, like the *jotnar* and *valkyrjur*, in Baldr's funeral. If these groups should be seen as mythological representatives of human participants in processions set in this world, perhaps they did walk, as *Gunnars þáttr* suggests. The use of wagons and other forms of transportation could thus correlate with ascribed sacrality and social status in the Old Norse written, material, and iconographic sources, something that seems to be corroborated by the inclusion of a wagon among the high-status Oseberg grave goods, the depiction of a chariot in a processional context in the 'King's grave' at Kivik, and the use of wheeled vehicles in circulatory contexts related to prosperity cults and linear funerary contexts.



Figure 11.9 A potential procession between two boats on the Bronze Age stone carving at Ekenberg in Norrköping, Sweden. Photo by Planx. CC BY-3.0, Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 11.10 Reconstruction of Viking Age transport equipment by the 'Vikinger på rejse' project, Vikingemarked Fyrkat, 04.07.2018. Photo by Maria Nørgaard and Stig L. Petersen. Reproduced with permission.

Linear Monuments and Ritual Roads

New information on Viking Age ritual architecture comes constantly to light as new archaeological investigations are undertaken and old data are interpreted in the light of new finds and ideas. Some of this information, particularly concerning so-called 'linear monuments' and 'ritual roads', may help shed light on processions and ritual movement in Viking Age Scandinavia. Such structures are often poorly preserved and (by necessity) outside the main areas of activity of the sites to which they are connected, and their functions are not well understood. To further complicate matters, there seem to have been two main forms of comparable architecture: rows of freestanding posts with no evidence they formed part of other structures (such as buildings, tents, or even temporary structures), and notable roads. Both tend to run in straight lines, and some sites may feature combinations of them, with 'linear monuments' of freestanding posts marking out particular routes. Many sites featuring one or both forms of this architecture seem to have been used for ritual purposes, and we understand both linear monuments and comparable roads as means by which movement to or around sacral space was controlled.⁷⁸

Perhaps the most straightforward connection between these structures and the evidence for ritual processions we have considered thus far are the presence of noteworthy roads connected to some grave fields. Roads within or leading to grave fields need not necessarily imply ritual movement. Such sites are often on the edge of settlement areas, and roads can provide practical transport links for corpses, mourners, and workers and material for the preparation of

graves, pyres, or memorials. As we noted above, neither the funerals of the Rus' chieftain or Baldr make it explicit that travel to the site of their funerary rites were ritualised, although at least some movement around the site certainly seems to have been. The network of roads connecting the large grave field at Møllegårdsmarken to the rest of the wider Gudme settlement area in eastern Fyn in Denmark, for example, may have been used for such practical purposes: in use c. 100 BC–AD 425, the roads run to the edge of the grave field, sometimes ending close to one of four small fourth-century buildings.⁷⁹ These constructions, none with dimensions exceeding 5.5 m, have been interpreted as 'mortuary houses', used as temporary storage and preparation spaces for corpses while more permanent graves and ritual activities were readied.⁸⁰ The roads' unusually fine gravel surfaces have clearly preserved the imprints of wheel ruts c. 1.2 m in width, suggesting that wheeled vehicles were regularly used to transport material – likely both corpses and building supplies – to the grave field.

At other sites, however, there is no practical explanation for the road remains excavated. At Rösaring near Sigtuna in Uppland, Sweden, for example, a ninth-century road runs c. 540 m almost exactly north–south atop a prominent 60 m-tall ridge.⁸¹ This road runs from a small building (also interpreted as a mortuary house)⁸² in the north, to the site's largest mound, flat-topped and 21 m in diameter, which is surrounded by other burials, cairns, and a Bronze Age labyrinth.⁸³ It is edged on one side by a low dyke and on the other by a row of around a hundred pits (likely post-holes), each c. 1 m in diameter and set 4–5 m apart.⁸⁴ The area

seems to have been a chieftain's seat from around the sixth century, and the burial complex includes four large burial mounds from just before the Viking Age. As the mounds were built from local resources, it seems unlikely that the road was constructed to transport building material, which would have needed to be moved up the ridge, not along its crest. The best explanation of the road's function thus seems to have been to ensure easy movement of the corpse from the 'mortuary house' to the grave field at the site's southern edge, perhaps by wheeled vehicle, and likely accompanied by ritual specialists, mourners, and workers responsible for the closing of the grave (assuming the mourners themselves did not fulfil this role). Such ritual movement is easily seen as a linear procession, with hybrid functional-demonstrative functions, and possibly additional hierophoric functions if sacrally charged symbols – such as a corpse or the rings and weapons depicted on the Gotlandic picture stones – were involved.

Smaller-scale but fundamentally comparable arrangements have also been excavated at both Gulli in Vestfold, Norway and Fyrkat in Jylland, Denmark. The latter is one of the ring forts constructed across the then-Danish kingdom at the end of the tenth century, likely part of a long-standing tradition of royally sponsored monumental building projects.⁸⁵ Situated at the head of Mariager Fjord, the fortress would also have controlled the main land-route between Aarhus and Aalborg on the Jutlandic peninsula. While the fortress only saw brief usage, there is a small grave field to its north-east, atop a low ridge. The grave field contains only 29 burials (famously including the so-called 'vølva' of grave 4, who was buried in a wagon-body) but is neatly split by a series of small post-holes that likely once contained supports for an elevated wooden platform (Fig. 11.11).⁸⁶ This sort of platform is known to have been built as elevated walkways at other Nordic settlements (for instance, between the houses on muddy ground at Viking Dublin),⁸⁷ and the Fyrkat example seems likely to have served as the culmination of a road leading into the grave field from the fortress: c. 38 m long by at most 5 m wide, no graves were found under the presumed surface, and it sits at the very highest point of the ridge, and is exactly aligned with the east–west internal structures of the ring fortress. The high-status milieu of the fortress is confirmed by the relatively rich furnishings of the graves, which implies an elevated degree of ritualisation during any funerary proceedings – and that this short 'ritual road' was likely regarded as sacrally charged space, the site of functional-hierophoric processions.

Gulli, a site under cultivation since the Mesolithic up until the present, features a Viking Age grave field in use c. AD 700–1050.⁸⁸ This grave field was partially destroyed by ploughing, allowing only the 20 surviving inhumation graves to be examined archaeologically: there are a number of ring-ditches suggesting many of the graves were once marked by mounds, three extant burials contained chamber

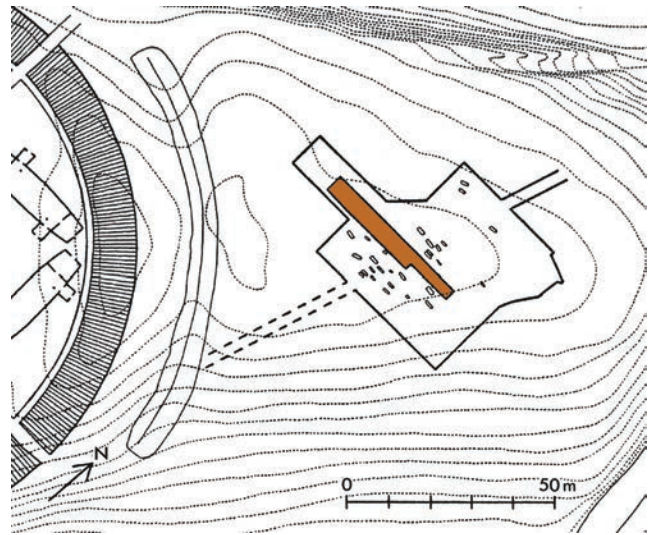


Figure 11.11 Plan of the north-eastern corner of the ring fort at Fyrkat in Jylland, Denmark, showing the excavation of the grave field on the nearby ridge. The section marked in brown (colour added by present authors) is the area where post-holes seem to represent a wooden roadway that likely stemmed from the fort's northern gate. Original drawing after Roesdahl 1977: fig. II.80. Reproduced with permission.

graves, at least four included (partial) horse remains, and as many as eight graves saw boats used as coffins.⁸⁹ As can be seen from a plan of the site (Fig. 11.12), the graves were organised into two rows running roughly east–west, with preserved skeletal remains oriented at 90° to the gap between the graves with their heads to the north. This gap appears to have been a road that predated the Viking Age graves (but not three earlier cooking pits dated to c. AD 100–540), which seem to have been arranged around it.⁹⁰ A small structure (9.4 m × 4.5 m internally) towards the eastern end of the road is witnessed by four post-holes and the remains of ditches around three of its sides, perhaps suggesting its western gable was open to the grave field,⁹¹ and it has been dated to the late eighth century or before on the basis of deposited material recovered from its post-holes.

As with the comparable small buildings at Møllegaardsmarken or Rösaring, this structure could be understood as a straightforward mortuary house, the sort of building used for temporary storage of cadavers, and likely the point at which practical movement stopped and ritual processions began. However, while the excavation team at Gulli acknowledge this possibility, they also suggest the structure could have served other, or even multiple, purposes: grave fields could also be the sites of rituals directed to ancestral figures for all manner of ends, including prosperity,⁹² and small buildings (like roads) could serve many functions. Acknowledging Jens Peter Schjødt's critique of our earlier study, we therefore accept that the roads at Rösaring, Fyrkat, and Gulli need not have been used only for funerary processions.⁹³ Nonetheless, the dead-straight nature of these roads, the



Figure 11.12 Overview of the excavations at Gulli in Vestfold, Norway. Plan after Gjerpe 2005, created by Mange Samdal. Ring-ditches are marked in orange, graves in red, and the small structure in green. Reproduced with permission.

clearly demarcated endings of the examples at Rösaring and Fyrkat, and their obvious connection to burial grounds strongly suggests these monuments were primarily used for small-scale linear procession in the Viking Age.

That said, some sites feature linear structures better linked to processional arrival at a site than to ritual movement within it. The site at Ranheim in Sør-Trøndelag, Norway, for instance, seems to have been used for ritual purposes over several centuries.⁹⁴ It lies close to the southern coast of Trondheim Fjord, and includes a small ‘cult house’ (dated after c. 895–990) comparable to the well-known finds at Uppåkra in Skåne, Sweden and Tissø on Fyn, Denmark, as well as a flat-topped stone platform, c. 15 m across and c. 1 m tall, atop which significant traces of burnt bone were excavated, suggesting it was used for significant outdoor feasting, dated to the fifth century (Fig. 11.13).⁹⁵ What is more, the site also features two parallel rows of large stones (in place by c. AD 390–440, according to the dating of a charcoal deposit beneath one of the stones) which seem to point from the site to the nearby waterline. It is possible that these stones – which serve no discernible practical purpose – were a form of linear monument intended to

mark a route from an undocumented landing place on the fjord up to the ritual site (this may also have been the case at Rösaring, where the northern end of the road approaches the likely Viking Age waterline). Given the restricted size of the excavated area, however, it is uncertain how far west any stone rows might have extended, and it is also possible they formed so-called ‘soft’ boundaries of the type known to have been enforced by comparable stone platforms, wetland, and roped stakes – so-called *vébønd* – at other *vé* sites in the late Iron Age.⁹⁶

Perhaps more securely, Anundshög in Västmanland, Sweden was in use from at least the early Iron Age until the Middle Ages, and features a series of monuments and rich burials from the Migration and Viking Ages: there are two large ship settings and a runestone,⁹⁷ and was the location of a *þing* (‘assembly’) during at least the Viking Age,⁹⁸ which made use of the site’s pre-existing mounds to organise ritualised socio-political gatherings. The monuments were situated between an area of wetland to the west, and a small river to the north and south (Figs 11.14 and 11.15). This river was crossed by two fords (one each to the north and east), which may have formed part of the ‘Erikskata’,

a route between several regional assembly sites known from medieval textual sources, and which was followed by newly appointed kings during the early Middle Ages.⁹⁹ These fords, and the roads leading across them, would thus have been vital links between Anundshög and other ritual sites. While they may have been purely functional routes, the Eirksgata was a large-scale ritual movement – a demonstrative political procession, likely with hierophoric overtones due to the sacral nature of rulers in both pagan and Christian



Figure 11.13 Aerial photographs of the excavations at Ranheim in Sør-Trøndelag, Norway: a) shows the excavations at the site, with the excavation area to the bottom containing the parallel rows of stows running E–W in the bottom left, the stone platform in the bottom centre, and the ‘cult house’ in the centre; b) shows the site’s local context, including the location of the current E–W coastline and river, to a landing site on which the parallel rows of stones may have led during the Iron Age when sea levels were higher. Photos by Erling Skjervold. Reproduced with permission.

Sweden¹⁰⁰ – and even local assemblies could feature ritual activities, particularly the communal consumption of special meals, likely connected to community-building.¹⁰¹ What is more, the line of the eastern road is extended south of the monuments by a line of post-holes every c. 5 m, tentatively dated to the Vendel or Viking Ages, the purpose of which is unclear: there is no evidence they were connected to one another or any other structures. Their location to the south of the site’s other monuments, however, has lead Alexandra Sanmark to suggest they were a form of *vēbōnd* that enclosed Anundshög, turning the site into a ‘symbolic island’.¹⁰² Rather than serving as a platform for ritual movement like the ‘ritual roads’ of Rösaring, Fyrkat, and Gulli (and potentially Ranheim and Anundshög itself), this linear monument seems therefore to limit movement at the ritual site, exercising a demonstrative control over where people could *not* move, rather than where they could.

Comparable linear monuments of wooden posts have also been excavated at Gamla Uppsala in Uppland, Sweden, around 75 km to the north-east of Anundshög. This site, also partially bounded by wetland, famously features a series of large mounds, significant grave fields, and was a major assembly site from the Vendel Age on – as well as serving a major religious site, if the eleventh-century chronicler Adam of Bremen is to be believed (→ **Chapter 6**).¹⁰³ The two lines of post-holes run at nearly 90° to one another, and are both dated to the late Vendel period, with no evidence they existed in multiple phases.¹⁰⁴ The post-holes themselves are very large (c. 1.5 m in diameter) with significant stone footings, which would seem to suggest the posts were tall

constructions.¹⁰⁵ It is unclear if they were border markers, or if they were used to display the remains of sacrificial offerings as Sanmark has suggested,¹⁰⁶ and which is witnessed on a smaller scale by Ibrāhīm ibn Ya‘qūb al-Isrā’īlī al-Turtūshī’s description of Hedeby (a port-of-trade in Viking Age Denmark) in the early 960s.¹⁰⁷ Unlike Anundshög, however, at least the northern row of post-holes at Gamla Uppsala may have been directly collocated with a known prehistoric road route, which led north from the site to a ford across the River Samnan (Fig. 11.16).¹⁰⁸ Thus the monuments’ potential relation to ritual movement and procession at Gamla Uppsala is complex: it seems unlikely



Figure 11.14 Map of Anundshög, showing the wetland, roads, and wooden monument imposed on a map from 1689. After Sanmark 2015: fig. 1. Reproduced with permission.

that the individual posts were used as ‘ritual axes mundi’,¹⁰⁹ and we regard it as more probable that the southern row of posts was – like its counterpart at Anundshög – intended to serve as a highly visible boundary marker, delimiting the southern edge of the site’s ritual space. The northern row, however, seems to have monumentalised the Samnan road, a major route to the site, increasing its long-distance visibility, perhaps comparable with the ridge-top ritual roads of Rösaring and Fyrkat. It could therefore tentatively be suggested that this route was used for processional arrivals to (and possibly departures from) Gamla Uppsala, with such ritual movements potentially demonstrating the full range of hybrid functions according to Lang’s typology depending on the intended activity at the site itself, which seems to have spanned religious, political, social, and economic purposes.¹¹⁰

While both Gamla Uppsala and Anundshög can be regarded as belonging to the very highest levels of Svea society – indeed, it has been suggested that the two sites competed with each other, driving their increasing monumentality throughout the Vendel and Viking Ages¹¹¹ – four other Swedish sites demonstrate that similar ideas were explored at more local levels. Indeed, Degeberga (Skåne), Önsvala (Skåne), Färlöv (Skåne), and Tomteboda (Stockholm) have already been productively compared to Gamla Uppsala and Anundshög: all four sites had some regional importance, featured burials from as early as the Roman Iron Age (Degeberga, Önsvala, and Färlöv) or the Vendel Age (Tomteboda), and expressed some level of



Figure 11.15 Aerial photograph of Anundshög seen from the south-east. Photo by Daniel Löwenborg. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 11.16 The linear monuments at Gamla Uppsala region overlaid on a 1952 map of the region. Adapted from Wikborg 2017: fig. 1. Reproduced with permission.

monumentality, up to two large ship settings and a runestone at Färlöv.¹¹² All four also had some form of linear monument, road, or both connected to the site: Degeberga featured a line of regularly paced Migration Period pit hearths, later replaced by a parallel row of post-holes, both parallel to the remains of a lane leading to a river valley and a presumed ford.¹¹³ Önsvala, around 5 km from the major cult site at Uppåkra, also featured a row of pit hearths C-14 dated to the early fourth century, a trench of unknown purpose c. 25 m east of the hearths and parallel to them, as well as a partially filled depression interpreted as the remains of a road c. 15 m east of the trench and parallel to both it and the hearths.¹¹⁴ Färlöv is a large grave field abutting several hundred metres of prehistoric road (perhaps reminiscent of Gulli, if the road there did not terminate at the grave field) running directly north–south atop a ridge (reminiscent of Rösaring and Fyrkat), and was clearly high status, with two large ship settings from the Vendel or early Viking Age and a ninth-century runestone.¹¹⁵ The linear monument on the site – a row of post-holes – ran parallel to the road, just inside the grave field, and would have greatly increased the site’s visibility in the local landscape. The site at Tomtebodå is a grave field on a south-facing slope overlooking Lake

Ulsundasjön, an upper branch of Lake Mälaren, with a range of grave markers and monuments dated to c. 400–800. The linear monument here runs 53 m downhill to the west–southwest, possibly marking a now-lost route to the nearby high water level,¹¹⁶ perhaps connecting the site to an undocumented landing place as may also have been the case at Ranheim.

Synthesising their findings at Degeberga with results from the other sites, Tony Björk and Ylva Wickberg suggest that a general paradigm of changing monumentality can be abstracted: earlier lines of pit hearths, stemming mostly from the Migration Period, were replaced in the early-to-mid Vendel Period with a parallel row of post-holes, representing ‘evidence for a radical transformation of the ritual landscape during the mid-1st millennium AD’, perhaps in parallel to the erection of peripheral hill forts in Norway.¹¹⁷ We would observe that this seems in line with observations regarding the increased portability of religious praxis as it became increasingly decoupled from specific landscape features during the Migration Period,¹¹⁸ and that the short windows during which each of these linear monuments seem to have been constructed might suggest they represented monumental expressions of so-called ‘crisis rituals’,¹¹⁹ perhaps – as Schjødt has suggested¹²⁰ – conducted in connection with the large-scale violence that demarcated the Migration Period from the preceding Roman Iron Age.

Adding the evidence from Rösaring, Fyrkat, Gulli, and Ranheim to Björk and Wickberg’s examination of the Swedish sites, no single pattern emerges (Table 11.1), nor does there seem to have been obvious geographic distribution beyond the southern Swedish model identified by Björk and Wickberg (indeed, the majority of our archaeological evidence remains markedly southern Scandinavian; Fig. 11.1). That said, it does seem that all of these locations employed comparable monumental architecture to express a small range of similar ideas during the Migration (c. AD 400–550), Vendel (c. AD 550–800), and Viking Ages (c. AD 800–1100): linear monuments constructed of rows of wooden posts (and potentially stones at Ranheim, as well as hearths earlier in the Iron Age) were used to enclose ritual spaces (Anundshög, the southern row at Gamla Uppsala), or to demarcate routes to (the northern row at Gamla Uppsala, Degeberga, Färlöv, Tomtebodå) or within them (Fyrkat, Gulli). These routes were not necessarily solely ritual in purpose: some appear to have been pre-existing parts of larger regional transport networks (the northern row at Gamla Uppsala, Färlöv), which likely fulfilled everyday practical ends more often than they did ritual processions. Other routes seem more restricted to ritual spaces, such as the wooden platform that culminated the short route from the Fyrkat fortress to the ridgetop grave field. It is perhaps notable that where these roads fully entered a ritual space – not merely running to the site (Møllegårdsmarken) or alongside it (Färlöv) – they generally appear to be ‘dead ends’, with only one entrance

Table 11.1 Comparison of features at the sites discussed in this subchapter. Sites with linear monuments and/or ritual roads that likely saw use during the Viking Age are marked in green.

	Location	Notable Geographic Features	Related Graves	Road	Linear Monuments	Other Features
Møllemarken	Fyn (DK)	none	Large grave field, many elite graves, 100 BC–AD 425	External, various routes to other parts of the Gudme settlement area (a central place complex c. AD 200–600)	none	Four ‘mortuary houses’ around the perimeter
Rösaring	Uppland (SW)	Ridgetop, coastal slope	Small grave field containing at least four Bronze-Age cairns and two mounds thought to be Iron Age	Internal (north–south), from ‘mortuary house’ to grave field (c. 580 m); potential external link to lost landing site	1) at least 540 m of post holes, c. 3.75 m apart from the ‘mortuary house’ to the grave field (dating unclear, thought to be Iron Age)	‘Mortuary house’ at the northern end of the road
Fyrkat	Jylland (DK)	Ridgetop, slope to waterline, nearby wetland,	Small grave field, 29 graves, some elite, c. AD 980–1000	Internal (east–west), probably from the fortress’ northern gate to the centre of the grave field	1) post holes suggesting a wooden walkway, c. 38 m long by 5 m wide in the centre of the grave field, aligned with the fortress’ geometry (c. AD 980–1000)	Large fortress, c. AD 980–1000
Gulli	Vestfold (NR)	none	Mid-sized grave field, 60 graves, c. AD 700–1050	Internal (east–west), between two rows of graves, ends of the route uncertain	none	none
Ranheim	Sør-Trøndelag (NR)	Slope to waterline	Three graves, c. 760–415 BC	Internal (east–west); potential external link to lost landing site	1–2) two sequential and parallel lines of large stones, covering at least 60 m, constructed c. AD 390–440	Viking-Age ‘cult house’; fifth-century stone platform
Anundshög	Västmanland (SW)	Nearby wetland	Large grave field, many elite graves, many monuments, c. AD 400–1100	External, two routes to other centres in the Uppland region (both via fords)	1) at least 156 m of post-holes, c. 2 m apart, constructed after c. AD 400	Assembly site (at least Iron and Middle Ages); 12 burial mounds (Anundshög itself c. AD 210–540); five ship settings (Iron Age); runestone (c. AD 1050–1100)
Gamla Uppsala	Uppland (SW)	Nearby wetland	Large grave field, many elite graves, c. AD 1–1100	External, various routes to other centres in the Uppland region (in one case via a ford)	1) a row of post holes (roughly north–south), c. 6 m apart, 862 m long alongside a road; 2) a line of wooden posts (roughly east–west), c. 6 m apart, at least 725 m across a flat area	Assembly site (at least Iron and Middle Ages); many burial mounds (Iron Age); several hall buildings (Iron Age)

(Continued)

Table 11.1 (Continued)

	Location	Notable Geographic Features	Related Graves	Road	Linear Monuments	Other Features
Degeberga	Skåne (SW)	Ridgetop, nearby wetland	Small grave field partially surveyed, c. AD 1–400	Internal (north–south), parallel to the linear monuments; external, the site is a natural crossroads in the local landscape	1) a curved row of hearths (roughly north–south), c. 120 m long, c. AD 200–400; 2) a row of pit hearths (roughly north–south), c. 150 m long, c. AD 400–650; 3) a row of post-holes (roughly north–south) at least 190 m long, c. AD 400–650	Nearby late Bronze and early Iron Age settlement; nearby high-status grave fields (Iron Age)
Önsvala	Skåne (SW)	<i>none</i>	Mid-sized grave field, some elite graves, c. AD 200–1000	Potential road remains in a partially filled depression, c. 60 m long and 7 m wide	1) a row of pit hearths, c. 4.2 m apart, c. AD 370–480; 2) a parallel trench; 3) a parallel depression interpreted as remains of a road, containing seven hearths	Nearby Iron Age settlement
Färlöv	Skåne (SW)	Ridgetop, nearby wetland	Large grave field, some elite, some monumental	External (north–south), at least 20 m long	1) a row of post-holes at least 20 m long, c. 3 m apart, c. AD 530–670	Two Vendel or Viking Age ship settings; ninth-century runestone
Tomteboda	Stockholm (SW)	Slope to waterline	Mid-sized grave field, 24 graves, some monumental, some elite, c. AD 400–800	<i>none</i>	1) a row of post holes at least 53 m long, c. 4.6 m apart, c. AD 400–550; later covered by Vendel Era graves	Fragments of Migration Age picture stone bearing runes
Jarlebankes bro	Stockholm (SW)	Nearby wetland	<i>none</i>	External (north–south), c. 110 m long, 6 m wide, crossing an area of wetland on the edge of Jarlebanke's land, c. AD 1025–1075	1) the road is flanked on each side by rows of standing stones, some bearing runic inscriptions, with various spacings, c. AD 1025–1075	<i>none</i>

and exit (the twin fords allowing access to and from the ‘symbolic island’ of the Anundshög assembly site are a clear exception to this). While such routes would necessarily be traversed in both directions, we would argue ritual activity was likely primarily restricted to the entrance to the site and some form of action at the route’s culmination – likely a funerary, assembly, or ancestor-focused ritual. This would imply that any ritual entrances would most likely have been functional-hierophoric hybrids, potentially adding a further demonstrative element in socio-political rituals conducted at assembly sites. Movements away from ritual sites seem less likely to have included hierophoric elements, with corpses and offerings to ancestors or deities left behind in the sacral space, and were thus primarily functional processions, or even non-ritual practical movement. Overall, therefore, we believe the evidence of most linear monuments and ritual roads are best connected with linear processions on level of the local site, with the clear exception of circulatory processions between ritual sites, as seems to have been the case at Anundshög.

Notably, many of these sites examined here preserve structures that predate the Viking Age, hinting at long-standing traditions regarding access to sacral spaces in the Nordic region. Similar ideas can even be detected in Christian societies during the Viking Age: in Sweden, local magnates undertook monumentalisation projects that included not only church building, but also the construction of new routes and the rededication of old ones that would enable larger populations to access the sacral spaces of the new religion. The Viking Age elevated road known as Jarlebanke’s Bro in Täby in Stockholm, Sweden is perhaps the most famous example. Over 110 m long and 6 m wide, it is flanked by a linear monument of its own: two parallel rows of standing stones, several bearing Christian iconography and runic inscriptions explaining that the local magnate constructed the road ‘for his soul’



Figure 11.17 Jarlebanke’s Bro, Täby (Stockholm, Sweden). Photo CC-BY-SA-3.0-migrated, Wikimedia Commons.

during his own lifetime (Fig. 11.17), probably in the mid-eleventh century.¹²¹

Conclusion

This investigation suggests that two kinds of procession were dominant in the pre-Christian Nordic region. Circulatory processions, which seem to have moved from place to place, were apparently linked to material prosperity, generally through the mediation of sacral rulers or ritual specialists. These processions are often found in the context of Vanir-worship, and in Lang’s processional typology seem to have served a hierophoric function. Linear processions, on the other hand, seem to have been less homogeneous. Many of them appear to have taken place as part of funerary rituals in which the body was transported to a grave or pyre. These can be easily understood as functional processions. However, the display of sacred symbols, the possibility of mimetic elements, and the potential sacral value of the body itself all suggest that such linear processions could also have had a hierophoric function. Hierophoric-functional hybrid processions can also be found outside funerary contexts in, for example, *Flateyjarbók*’s account of the Swedish Lýtir cult. Of course, many processions, and ritual movements in general, also have practical ends, but it is clear that in Viking Age Scandinavia such functional processions often also exhibited hybridised hierophoric functions. Such hybridisation does not occur to the same degree in, for example, the few examples of possible mimetic processions we have examined. Our distinction between circulatory and linear processions is, of course, arbitrary, as the individual stops on a larger circulating journey could easily have included linear motion, as can be seen in accounts of the circulation of dead kings like King Frotho in Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*. It seems overwhelmingly likely that the archaeological finds of linear monuments and ritual roads (as well as high-status wagons) played a role in such journeys. While this distinction is subjective, we nevertheless believe that it is a useful distinction, and that the sources support our interpretation that processions in Viking Age Scandinavia largely took one of two forms: a group of circulatory, predominantly hierophoric processions associated with material prosperity on the one hand; and another group of linear, predominantly hiero-functional processions often associated with burial rituals on the other.¹²²

Notes

1. For instance, Grimes 1987: 7416.
2. Lang 2011.
3. Cf. Lundager Jensen 2017 who suggests the term *hierophoric* (of or related to the appearance of supranatural power) rather than Lang’s original *theophoric* (of or related to the appearance of deities) in order to include the transportation of sacred objects as well as divine figures.

4. Gunnell 1995.
5. Hultgård 2001.
6. Nygaard & Murphy 2017.
7. For example, Sundqvist 2018; Lindow 2020b: 1314–15; Schjødt 2020.
8. Bruun & Lund 1974: 20–3.
9. Text and translation after Hutton & Peterson 1970: 197.
10. Cf. Janson 2018
11. Throughout this text we generally refer to ‘ritual movement’ or ‘ritual activity’, but we acknowledge that ‘ritual’ is not an either/or binary category: some actions can be ‘more ritual’ than others, which has led scholars of religion to develop complex systems for analysing ‘ritualisation’. See, for instance, Bell 1997; Grimes 2011; Steward & Strathern 2014.
12. For the Vanir-debate, see Simek 2010; Lindow 2020a: 1047–9; Frog 2021.
13. Lindow 2020c: 1332.
14. Arya & Joshi 2001.
15. Cf. Elmevik 2003.
16. Näsström 1995: 54.
17. Nordal 1944–1945: I.375–376
18. Ármann Jakobsson 2013.
19. Hultgård 2003.
20. Sundqvist 2020: 1228–9.
21. Steinsland 1997.
22. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 167; Jóhannes Halldórson 1959: 7.
23. Friis-Jensen & Fisher 2015: 354–5.
24. Nygaard & Murphy 2017: 48–9.
25. On sacral kings, see Sundqvist 2002.
26. Gunnell 2006.
27. Lönnroth 1978. Although they are only preserved in a handful of medieval manuscripts, these poems are thought to stem in part from a prehistoric, Scandinavian oral tradition.
28. Gunnell 2016; Nygaard 2018.
29. Gunnell 2006.
30. Sundqvist 2002.
31. Montgomery 2000: 1–5.
32. Montgomery 2000: 13.
33. Montgomery 2000: 15.
34. The likely connection of the *Risāla* to Nordic culture might also be supported by the scarcity of boat and ship burials in most of the Slavic world and many of the nomadic peoples that lived along the Volga (Kajkowski 2016). There is, however, notable evidence that East-Slavic peoples employed sleighs in their funerary practices during the Middle Ages (Vasil’ev 2007; Kollinger 2016; 2020).
35. Faulkes 2005: 46–7.
36. Shortt Butler 2015.
37. Marold *et al.* 2017: 402.
38. Faulkes 2005: 47.
39. Faulkes 2005: 46.
40. Text after Faulkes 2005: 46–7; translation by the authors.
41. Faulkes 2005: 45–6.
42. Christensen *et al.* 1992.
43. Vedeler 2019; Price 2022.
44. Ingstad 1993: 254.
45. Cf. Shetelig 1910.
46. Lindqvist 1941–1942; Andrén 1993; Oehrl 2019.
47. Lindqvist 1941–1942: II.92–93.
48. Mattsson McGinnis 2016; Nygaard & Murphy 2017: 61.
49. Hellers 2012.
50. Runic Inscription G 181.
51. Lindqvist 1941–1942: I.95–101, II.22–25.
52. Price 2014.
53. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 167.
54. Rafn 1829: I.531–532.
55. Cf. Stolle 2020.
56. Elmevik 1990; Sundqvist 2002: 233–5; Lindow & Schjødt 2020: 1431–3.
57. Cf. Murphy 2016.
58. Nordal 1944–1945: II.67.
59. Whether or not there was even a non-ritualised, practical return journey is unclear: the wagons are implied to have been kept at the king’s home, and if there was no physical manifestation of Lýtir comparable to the Freyr idol in *Gunnars þáttr*, the deity might have been understood to return home without the need of human transport.
60. Svanberg 2003.
61. Nygaard & Murphy 2017: 41–2.
62. Schovsbo 1987; 2009; cf. Kaul 2004; Wold 2005.
63. Lindqvist 1941–1942: II.13, II.43.
64. Oehrl 2020: 71; Nygaard forthcoming.
65. Runic Inscription G 77.
66. Randsborg 1993; Bengtsson 2004; Kaul 2004: 173–80.
67. e.g. *Gisla saga*, ch. 14 (Björn K. Þórolfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943: 45); Strömbäck 1961.
68. Faulkes 2005: 49; Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, II: 349.
69. Müller-Wille 1969; Price 2008; Bagge & Pedersen 2021.
70. Andrén 1993; Aannestad & Glørstad 2017.
71. Roesdahl 1977: 83–104; Pentz *et al.* 2009; Gardela 2016a; Price 2019.
72. Mitchell 2020: 667.
73. Svanberg 2003; Williams 2007; Härke 2014; Murphy 2017.
74. Lang 2011.
75. Nygaard & Murphy 2017: 49.
76. Cf. Hultgård 2001: 438.
77. Murphy forthcoming.
78. Björk & Wickberg 2015. Cf. Murphy 2016.
79. Madsen & Thrane 1995.
80. Madsen & Thrane 1995.
81. Damell 1985; Bratt & Andersson 2000.
82. Damell 1985: 184. Cf. Gardela 2016b: 188–90.
83. On labyrinths, see Kraft 2022.
84. Damell 1985: 171.
85. Sindbæk 2020; Christensen *et al.* 2021.
86. Roesdahl 1977: 129.
87. Wallace 2000: 72.
88. Gjerpe 2005: 11.
89. Gjerpe 2005.
90. Gjerpe 2005: 17–18.
91. Gjerpe 2005: 147–51.
92. Gardela 2016b; Laidoner 2020.
93. Schjødt 2019.
94. Rønne 2011.
95. The excavators have linked this structure to medieval textual accounts of *horgar* (‘stone shrines’), suggesting the site was

a whole served as a *vé* ('holy site'). Given the difficulties connecting textual accounts of pre-Christian religious praxis and archaeological evidence, the former conclusion is somewhat tenuous, although the latter seems more sensible. See Kaliff 2001; Price 2006; Murphy 2018a.

96. Murphy 2018a.
97. Runic Inscription Vs 13.
98. Sanmark & Semple 2011.
99. Sundqvist 2022.
100. Sundqvist 2002; 2016; Bønding 2021.
101. Sanmark 2015: 106–9; Murphy 2018a. Whether Viking Age assemblies were ever opened with processions, as Sanmark (2015: 102–3) has suggested, is unclear. There are medieval Old Norse terms that denote movement to attend an assembly (such as *þingferð*, *þingför*, and *þinggang*, all meaning something like 'assembly journey'), although these likely represent terms for practical, rather than ritual, journeys. The *Konungsbók* redaction of the medieval Icelandic law code *Grágás* (GKS 1157 fol, produced c. 1260) lays out that participants at the Alþing are to proceed to Lögborg in a particular order – the lawspeaker followed by each chieftain and his appointed judges – and that a bell is used to signal the start of business (Finsen 1852: 45–6, K 24; Dennis *et al.* 1980: 59), which certainly suggests an element of ritual to proceedings. It is likely that these rituals are based on long-standing traditions, potentially stemming from the Viking Age, but the Christian influence denoted by the use of a bell complicates matters.
102. Sanmark 2015: 99–103. Cf. Sanmark & Semple 2011.
103. Alkarp & Price 2005; Sundqvist *et al.* 2013; Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015.
104. Wikborg 2017.
105. Beronius Jörpeland *et al.* 2013.
106. Sanmark 2015: 98; Beronius Jörpeland *et al.* 2018.
107. Murphy 2018b: 63.
108. Beronius Jörpeland *et al.* 2018.
109. Sundqvist 2018.
110. Sundqvist *et al.* 2013.
111. Sanmark 2015: 96.
112. Björk & Wickberg 2015.
113. Björk & Wickberg 2015.
114. Larsson 1982; 2013.
115. Runic Inscription DR NOR1998;21; Vestergaard 2007: 149–50.
116. Björk & Wickberg 2015: 248–51.
117. Björk & Wickberg 2015: 242.
118. Fabech 1994; Gunnell 2017.
119. Björk & Wickberg 2015: 245.
120. Schjødt 2019: 110–11.
121. Runic Inscription U 164; U 165.
122. Authorship statement: we, the authors, share overall responsibility for the 'Introduction' and 'Conclusion', as well as the final state of the text. Simon Nygaard claims primary responsibility for the subchapters 'Circulatory Processions' and 'Forms of Ritual Transport', Luke John Murphy claims primary responsibility for the subchapters 'Linear Processions' and 'Linear Monuments and Ritual Roads'.

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