

**THE PLACE OF THE SPIRITS:
INTERACTIONS WITH THE SPIRIT WORLD THROUGH
THE LAND IN NORSE AND CELTIC PAGAN RELIGIONS**

Daniel Bray

For the pre-Christian Norse and Celtic peoples, the realm of the spirits was not only contiguous with, but also integral to, the more familiar material world. Apart from a very few large temple sites, most places for contact with the spiritual were to be found in the local landscape – in groves, rivers, valleys, waterfalls, wells, rocks, trees, ring forts and burial mounds. For the Norse especially, a great variety of beings could be worshipped and/or encountered in these places, from gods and goddesses to elves, dwarves, fairies, giants, land-spirits, guardian-spirits, ancestors and the restless dead. Mythology, literature and folklore provide a glimpse of these realms, as they were perceived by the pagan Norse and Celts, from antiquity until well after their conversion to Christianity.

In the first century CE, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote of the Germans that:

They do not, however, deem it consistent with the divine majesty to imprison their gods within walls or represent them with anything like human features. Their holy places are the woods and groves, and they call by the name of god that hidden presence which is seen only by the eye of reverence.¹

A similar attitude is recorded by Diodorus Siculus of the Celtic Galatae who laid siege to Delphi in the third century BCE. Their leader, Brennus, "when he came only upon images of stone and wood he laughed at them, to think that men, believing that gods had human form, should set up their images in wood and stone".² The Roman poet Lucan described in lurid detail a sacred grove of the Celts of southern Gaul, spattered with the blood and gore of sacrificial victims, in a dark, brooding wood which Julius Caesar was to chop down for siege works. Sanctuaries of this kind, known to the Celts as a *nemeton*, are evidenced in place-names such as *Nemetobriga* in

Spanish Galicia, Nemetacum and Nemetodurum in Gaul, Vernemeton and Medionemeton in Britain, and Drunemeton (lit. "oak sanctuary") in Galatian Anatolia.³ As well, rectangular walled enclosures of the type known as Viereckschanzen, often with shafts or ditches for the ritual deposition of votive offerings and the remains of sacrificial victims, can be found from Britain to the Czech Republic.

Later, likely due to classical influences, more elaborate ritual sites are found, including temple buildings loosely patterned on Roman designs, from the colossal Temple of Janus at Augustodunum (modern Autun), to many smaller temples and shrines. Temple buildings, called a *hof* by the Norse, are also known from the Germanic world, particularly towards the end of the heathen period, and many of these seem to be modelled on contemporary western European churches. These were typically of timber construction, rather than stone, and in many ways prefigured the forms of stave churches of the later Middle Ages.⁴ In Iceland about 963, the country was divided into Quarters, each of which was further divided into three parishes, to be served by three public temples in each parish. One possible candidate for such a temple, from Hofstaðir in the north of Iceland, was excavated in 1908, and is closer in design to the more mundane longhouses of the period, but with room enough to seat about 150 people and with a smaller separate *songhús*, or chancel, at one end. Often these temples were also locations for other sorts of public gatherings, including lawsuits, swearing oaths, conducting business and holding *pings*, or regional assemblies.

The word *horgr* was also used to designate a temple, at least in the later heathen period, but in other contexts it seems to refer to a pile of stones set up in the open as an altar. In the poem *Hyndluljóð*, a man named Ottar set up a *horgr* of piled stones for Freyja, and reddened it with the blood of sacrificed oxen, which seems to have caused it to turn to glass.⁵ Similarly, in *Heiðreks Saga*, Alfhildr, the daughter of a legendary King Alf of Alfheimar, reddened a *horgr* during a *dísablót*, or sacrifice (*blót*) to the guardian spirits (*dísir*).⁶ Related terms can be found in other Germanic languages, including Old High German *harug* and Old English *hearg*, which are both used for

"temple" as well as "grove". Similarly, OE *bearu* alternates in meaning between "forest, holy grove, temple", and the Gothic word for temple, *alhs*, is related to others which mean "holy grove".⁷

In later Anglo-Saxon law, penalties were prescribed for anyone who set up a *fridgeard* around a tree, stone, well or other object of superstition. In this context, *fridgeard* implies an enclosure, probably with a fence or hedge, within which divine peace (*frid*) was maintained. The ancient laws and history of Gotland also mention a type of sanctified enclosure, called a *stafgarðr*. Another word used for sanctuaries of this kind is ON *vé* (cf. OE *weoh*), related to the verb *vígja* "to consecrate", which occurs as an element in many place-names, particularly in Denmark and Sweden, including Visby, Viborg and Odense (from older *Óðinsvé*). In the Eddas, it is used in the phrases *vé goda* and *vé valtíva*, both applied to dwellings of the gods, indicating a traditional belief that divine beings actually dwelled in these sacred places, or at least were present for ceremonial occasions.⁸

Tacitus supports this view with his account of the rites carried out by the Semnonnes in a "wood hallowed by the auguries of their ancestors and the awe of ages", which "reflects the belief that in that grove the nation had its birth, and that there dwells the god who rules over all..."⁹ As well, he mentions a sacred grove on an island in the sea, where a cart was kept, covered with a cloth. The attending priest could feel the presence of the goddess Nerthus in this grove, and she was drawn in her cart in procession around the countryside, followed by celebrations and merry-making, and a period when the divine peace was maintained, and weapons were locked away. She was then returned to her grove, after being washed clean in a secluded lake by slaves who were drowned immediately afterwards.¹⁰ The numerous bodies dated to the first few centuries CE and found deposited in Danish peat bogs may well be the remains of these victims, but forensic evidence shows that very few of them were actually drowned.

Njordr, a god of the Vanir whose name corresponds to that of Nerthus, is similarly associated with ships, lakes and the sea, as well as peace, wealth and fertility, traits also shared by his children, Freyr and Freyja, and it is mentioned in the story of Gunnar Helming, for instance, that

Freyr's image was similarly drawn in ceremonial procession. The Vanir are closely associated with many minor spirits of the land, including the *álfar*, or elves, *landvættir*, or land-spirits, and *dísir*, or guardian-spirits. The chief festival of the *dísir* was the *dísablót*, held at the beginning of winter, also known as "winter-nights", when sacrifice was made to them, and in the case of Thorgrim Freyrgoði in Gísla Saga, to Freyr as well. Freyja herself was also called *Vanadís*, or *dís* of the Vanir, and in skaldic kennings, *dís* is generally used as a word for "goddess". There seems to be a strong association of the *dísir* with women and fertility, as well as protective functions focussed on particular communities or families, and one of their functions may well have been to support the community by promoting the fertility of its women.¹¹

The *dísir* figure prominently in an episode from *Piðrandi Páttr*, set in Iceland shortly before its adoption of Christianity in the year 1000, on the night of a feast held on "winter-nights". Thorhall the Prophet warned everyone not to open the door that night, even if someone knocked, but Thiðrandi, when he heard a knock on the door late at night after everyone had gone to sleep, opened it anyway, but saw no one, so he went out to look around. He heard horses and saw nine women dressed in black with swords drawn riding towards him. He saw another group of nine women in bright dress with white horses. Thiðrandi turned back to the house, but the women in black caught up to him and left him mortally wounded. He told his tale before he died, and Thorhall offered his explanation: "It is my belief," he said,

that these were not women, but the attendant spirits (*fylgjur*) of your family. After this, as I believe, there will be a change of religion, and a better one will come to this land. I think that those *dísir* of yours, who have adhered to the old religion, knew of the change beforehand, and they took Thiðrandi as their portion. The better *dísir* wished to help him, but they could not do so as things stood...¹²

This story was obviously written from a Christian viewpoint, but rather than depicting the *dísir* as devils, at least some of them are considered beneficent and perhaps are comparable to "guardian angels", and even the malevolent ones are merely taking their due for services rendered. These *dísir* are once called *fylgjur*, related to a verb meaning "to follow, to

accompany", and there seems to be some confusion, or perhaps a merging, of the two figures in a number of texts. As with the *dísir*, the *fylgjur* are attached to individuals or families, and often protect those under their care from harm, as in *Vatnsdæla Saga*, when a man named Thorsteinn was planning to go to a feast held by a sorceress who was plotting his death. For three nights, "the woman who had always been attendant on his kinsmen" appeared to him in sleep to warn him, eventually causing an illness which prevented him from attending, and so saving his life.¹³

In poetry, valkyries are identified as *Herjans dísir*, Herjan being one of the by-names of Óðinn, and Snorri Sturluson states that half the battle-dead go to the Vanadís Freyja's hall *Folkvangr*. Some poets also associate the *dísir* with the *Nornir*, fate-goddesses who attend the birth of every child and determine the time and manner of their death.¹⁴ The *Nornir* also guarded the holy well at the base of Yggdrasil, *Urðarbrunnr*, a name still used for a well at the chief temple site of the Swedes at Uppsala, grandly described by Adam of Bremen in 1070. Holy wells and springs are plentiful in both Celtic and Germanic folklore down to the present day, often as sources of healing and associated with goddesses, the hot springs dedicated to Sulis Minerva at Bath being one notable example.¹⁵ Parallel to the offerings found in Scandinavian peat bogs are the numerous votive deposits containing weapons, tools and other bits of equipment, as well as skeletal remains, both human and animal, found in lakes and rivers throughout the Celtic world at sites like La Tene and Port in Switzerland, and Llyn Cerrig Bach in Wales.¹⁶

Votive stones bearing carved images of women called *Matres* or *Matrones* were widespread throughout England, Gaul and the Rhineland during the period of Roman rule. These figures, appearing singly or sometimes in groups of three, depicted holding fruit, eggs, baskets, cornucopias or nursing babies, were frequently found near rivers, healing springs or temple sites.¹⁷ In Celtic myth, women are often presented as Otherworld messengers, and sometimes in triplicate, as are the eponymous goddesses of Ireland, Eriu, Fodla and Banba, who appear to the sons of Míl to

confirm their sovereignty over the land before their conquest of the Tuatha Dé Danann.

Sometimes there seems to be an identification between the *dísir* and *landvættir*: for example, the tradition recorded by a nineteenth century Icelandic clergyman that certain rocks were known as *Landdísasteinar*, or stones of the land-*dísir*, and that it was forbidden to mow around them, make a loud noise near them, or for children to play around them, lest bad luck result.¹⁸ The *landvættir* were easily frightened, and one of the first clauses of *Úlfjós*'s Laws, introduced to Iceland around 930, stated that no one may approach the country in ships with dragon-heads, or that they should be removed before sighting land, lest the *landvættir* be frightened off. In *Egil's Saga*, Egill raises a *níðstong*, or curse-pole, carved with runes and topped with a gaping horse's head, against King Eirik Bloodaxe and Queen Gunnhild, and directs it to the *landvættir* of his land, "so that every one of them shall go astray, neither to figure nor find their dwelling places until they have driven King Eirik and Queen Gunnhild from this country."¹⁹

Not all *landvættir* are so easily frightened, however. Some seem to have been protectors of the land, as is the case in a tale from Snorri, in which the Danish King Harald Gormsson sent a wizard against the Icelanders in the form of a whale. The wizard found the land full of *landvættir*; in the first fjord he saw a dragon with other crawling monsters that spewed venom on him; in the next fjord he saw a giant bird whose wings brushed the mountains on each side, followed by many other birds, large and small; in the next fjord he saw a bull which waded out to sea, bellowing terribly, and finally he saw a rock-giant taller than the hills, with an iron pole, followed by many other giants, after which the wizard made off.²⁰

The *landvættir* seem to have a direct influence on the fertility of the land as well, as demonstrated by a tale from *Landnámabók*:

One night Bjorn dreamed that a cliff-giant came and offered him partnership, and that he accepted the offer. Afterwards a strange billy-goat came to join his herd of goats, and his livestock began to multiply so fast

that soon he was a wealthy man. After that he was called Hafur-Bjorn (lit. "Billy-goat Bjorn"). People with second sight could see that all the *landvættir* accompanied Hafur-Bjorn when he attended the Althing, and (his brothers) Thorstein and Thord when they went out fishing.²¹

From the same text there is mention of a man who made offerings to a wood, as well as another who made sacrifices of food to a waterfall near his house; his sheep increased greatly because of good decisions as to which sheep should be slaughtered in autumn and which should be kept. Another tale tells of a spirit dwelling in a large stone, who is described alternatively as *ármaðr*, or "harvestman", and *spámaðr*, or "prophet". The farmer who lived nearby and received advice through dreams says of him, "He tells me beforehand many things which will happen in the future; he guards my cattle and gives me warnings of what I must do and what I must avoid, and therefore I have faith in him and I have worshipped him for a long time."²²

Faith in the *landvættir* persisted long after the Conversion, as attested by a thirteenth century Norwegian law which forbade the belief that *landvættir* lived in groves, mounds and waterfalls. In the fourteenth century *Hauksbok*, a Christian commentator states that some women are so stupid as to take food to stone-piles or caves, consecrate the food to the *landvættir* and eat it, believing that the *landvættir* will be friendly and help them prosper.²³ Furthermore, there is an account from 1645, when two Swedish warships attempted a landing on the island of Bornholm. A solitary soldier on sentry saw the ships, but had no troops nearby; however, whispered voices told him to shoot, and when he did, a horde of little men in red caps appeared, shooting at the ships and driving them off.²⁴

As sacrifice was made to Freyr and the *dísir* on the "winter-nights", so sacrifice was made then to the elves for a fruitful harvest, and in the *Grímnismál* it is said that the gods gave Alfheim to Freyr when he cut his first tooth. An account of such an *álfablót* is given by the poet Sigvat, who had been travelling in south-western Sweden in 1019. He records how when he came to a certain farm, the housewife told him to go away, as they were a heathen household and she was holding a sacrifice to the elves.²⁵

Alfheim in one story is said to be in the extreme east of Norway, but

in *Volundarkviða*, Volund, who is a son of the King of the Finns, is also called a lord of the *álfar*, indicating some identification of the Finns with the *álfar*. Similarly, Jotunheim, the land of the giants, is always referred to as "in the east", although sometimes it is located in the mountains of Norway. These supernatural realms are quite plainly described as earthly locations, but sometimes they are merely gateways to these realms, as in some tales where journeys to Hel, the cold, misty land of the dead, were made through certain valleys in the far north of Scandinavia. In Celtic mythology, fairy-mounds, usually identified with megalithic tombs and hill-forts, are also considered gateways to the Otherworld, and this is where the Tuatha Dé Danann retreat to after their defeat by the sons of Míl. Furthermore, the popular immrama, or voyage tales, place supernatural realms such as Tír na nÓg, the Land of the Young, and Tír na mBan, the Land of Women, across the sea to the west. Sometimes they are even located under the sea, as is the case of the City of Ker-Ys in Breton legend.²⁶

Snorri distinguishes two types of *álfar*: light-elves, who were more beautiful than the sun, and dark-elves, who were black as pitch and lived underground. This dual nature can be found in Old English texts as well, with the adjective *ælfsciene*, meaning "beautiful as an elf", and *Ylfagescot* (lit. "elf-shot") applied to certain diseases.²⁷ The dark-elves are sometimes identified with the *dvergar*, or dwarves, who also lived in rocks or underground. The *dvergar* are renowned for their superior craftsmanship, and they are credited with the creation of many of the treasures of the gods, including Óðinn's magical spear Gungnir, Freyr's ship *Skíðbláðnir*, which could be folded to fit in his pocket, and Thor's mighty hammer, *Mjöllnir*. The gold that Sigurð won from Fáfñir was originally taken from a dwarf named Andvari who lived in a waterfall, and his curse on it was to thereafter plague everyone who possessed it.

The spirits of the dead were sometimes known to look after certain families, as is the case in a story from Orkney, where a hogboy (from ON *haugbúi* "mound-dweller") lived in a mound and was given offerings of milk or wine, but when his mound was disturbed by a farmer, he killed six of the farmer's cows.²⁸ In both Celtic and Germanic myth, there are examples

of heroes being buried in the ramparts of fortresses to continue their protection after death. In *Eyrbyggja Saga*, when Thorstein Codbiter died with his crew at sea, a shepherd going past Helgafell saw one end of the hill open, with firelight inside, and heard great merriment and a voice welcoming Thorstein and his men and bidding him to sit in the high-seat opposite his father Thorolf.²⁹

Sometimes the dead can be not only restless, but malevolent as well, as was Thorolf Club-foot, who caused much trouble during his life, and even more after his death. It is said that every animal that came near his grave went mad and died, and that he terrorised the local farmers mercilessly at night, even killing a few people, including a shepherd, whose coal-black corpse was found with every single bone broken, as well as his entire flock. That winter, people were so terrified of Thorolf's ghost that they feared to travel anywhere, no matter how urgent their business. In the spring Thorolf's body, uncorrupted but ugly, swollen to great size and almost too heavy to move, was dug up and reburied on a headland. He lay quietly for some time, but later began to once more terrorise the area and kill more people and animals, so that he had to be dug up again and cremated on a beach, and even then he was reborn as a bull that gored its master to death and then disappeared in a marsh.³⁰

The *dísir* are sometimes referred to as "dead women", and in one instance a dead king named Ólaf was called "the elf of Geirstaðir", and sacrifice was made to him for fruitful harvest. Saxo Grammaticus, in his history of the early kings of Denmark, mentions a number of kings named Frothi, some of whose remains were carried in procession to continue to bring peace and good harvest to their people, again as was Freyr, who was also the ultimate ancestor of the Swedish royal dynasty. Thus, there is the implication that dead ancestors, especially those known for their benevolence, would join the ranks of the spirits and enjoy the cultic reverence that was their due.

From dead ancestors to elves, gods and goddesses, and the native spirits of the land, the landscape was never uninhabited to the pagan Norse and Celts. It was littered with holy places; rocks, mounds, hills, waterfalls,

wells, lakes, trees, groves, even the land itself, were all dwelling places for a myriad of supernatural beings with whom communion could be sought. If they were respected and given the proper gifts, they would respond in kind, granting peace, prosperity and good fortune, but if they were run afoul of, they could wreak terrible suffering. They shared the land with humanity, and for good or ill, they had to be reckoned with. Those who could but see them often recognised them as kin, and trusted them, and those who knew their stories knew that even death was but a gateway to their realm.

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