

”The hall in the imagery of the Norse literature”

English summary of the main ideas from the original manuscript
“La *hall* nell’immaginario della letteratura norrena” by *Silvia Tomasoni*, Bergamo University, Italy

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The reader will find here a short summary on the concepts analysed by Silvia Tomasoni in her work. She has got a degree in foreign Languages and Literature with final mark 107/110 at the Bergamo University, Italy. For more information, it is kindly suggested referring to the original text written in Italian.

Tomasoni’s thesis focuses on the analysis of a peculiar place defining/characterizing the all ancient Scandinavian society: the *hall*. She has carefully evaluated texts such as poems, sagas and works from the VIII to the XI century AD and has found out that the *hall* is a recurrent concept.

- It is well known that the so-called *goði* or chieftain had political,

social and religious power in the Viking Age: the *goði* or chieftain used to meet its subjects during feasts, religious ceremonies, assemblies and banquets, which were organized inside these *halls*.

- Etymology: Falk believes that the old word used for translating terms such as banqueting hall and court was the Old Norse word *salr*. As a consequence, the term *Hall* is probably a loan word/borrowing from Old English or from other West Germanic languages. Anglo-Saxon culture had a strong influence and evidence on the Norse one, and this can be easily understood considering that there are lots of words originating from Old English. One of these words, according to Falk's theory, is the term *Hall*. *Beowulf*, which is an Old English epic poem of unknown authorship, evidences the use of a corresponding Old English word, that is *heall*, commonly used for indicating the king's hall, the chieftain's hall or the banqueting hall.

Considering the etymology of the term *Hall*, we can plainly comprehend that the concepts of room, dwelling and temple (a cultural centre linked to religious rituals) match together in one single word. From the Indo-European and proto-Germanic root, we can infer its meaning: "to discover" and "to hide, to protect". For this reason, the substantive *Hall* defines a closed, protected place and if we would like sacred and secret, too:

Hall : [...] from Old English *heall* place covered by a roof, spacious roofed residence, temple, etc. [...] cognate with Old Saxon *halla* place covered by a roof, Middle Low German and Middle Dutch *halle* [...] Old High German *halla* [...] and Old Icelandic *höll*, all derived from Proto-Germanic **Hallō-* to cover, hide [...] from Indo-European **kel-* to hide, conceal¹

- In the Edda, both in the poetic Edda and in the Edda written by Snorri Starluson, we can find a different meaning for *Hall*: the Old English term *heall* corresponds to the Old Norse one *höll*, which refers to the court of Óðinn, the so-called *Valhöll*; to the dwelling of Ægir, the Gods' brewer who would organise a funeral banquet commemorating Baldr, the death son of Óðinn (cfr. *Lokasenna*), to all other Gods' court and Giants' halls: to a certain extent all these terms are connected to an elitist vision and they may be used as synonyms. We have one example of the term *hall* in the poem *Skírnismál*, concerning Gerðr' dwelling, a giant's daughter loved by Freyr, in

1 *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology.*

which the term is translated with different words: *rönnom* (*rann*), *sal* and *salkynni*.

If in the previous passages the two terms *salr* and *höll* are synonyms, in *Rígsþula* we can find a differentiation as regards the rank, the social status: a slave (*þræl*) lives in a simple “house” (*hús*); a free man (*karl*) lives in a *höll*; a nobleman or noblewoman (*jarl*) lives in a *salr*.

- Pre-Christians used to believe that the *hall* symbolized the exact centre of their vital life, a safe, protected place, where violence and danger coming from the world outside were excluded.
This Norse cosmological vision is consequently built on the opposition between what stays "inside" and what stays "outside": between a world created and protected by gods, and an insidious, more and more adverse world outside.
The "world" inside the *Hall* was ruled by moral and civil laws, by family relationships and agreements with allies. Peace and prosperity played a main role there, contrary to the outside, influenced by chaos, wintry weather and inhabited by deceptive, monstrous living beings.
Inside the *Hall* there is the "civilization", the human being's hand in mutual opposition to the "savage", living outside.
- Similarly, the *Hall*, place of peace and civilization par excellence, stops being a sacred and protected place, just when the dangerous world outside manages to penetrate into the inner world: consequently, morality and values and family relationships stop existing. Symbolically, the *Hall* disintegrates and peril and insecurity can have access to each human being's life until the society gets completely destroyed. The complete destruction of the Viking society is symbolized by the fire of the *Hall* itself.
- It is very interesting to notice how literature witnesses scenes of the *Hall*'s destruction, instead of its building: but this may be interpreted as a sense of linear continuity among generations. Symbolically, the construction of a dwelling represents the construction of civilization; therefore, there is the tendency, also from an archaeological point of view, to reconstruct dwellings right where previous dwellings had been built.
- In the Scaldic Poetry *Halls* exist only in their symbolic meaning. In the Scaldic poetry *Halls* are metaphors for sky and evil, sea and fire,

and for human body (specifically for mouths and chests).

- The Nordic Sagas, which tell about the Viking Age, are a form of realistic literature, a kind of historical reports based on oral tradition, where the author's aim is to give real and true descriptions on past Viking life and society.

In Old Norse Sagas *halls* are considerably mentioned and we have direct evidence of their construction. A report contained in the last chapter of the Saga entitled "*Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*" is very interesting: it tells us about the building of several *halls* on behalf on King Hákon:

[...] hann let gera **trehallina** i konungsgardi i Nidarosi, hann let gera **veizlahall** á Steig, hann let gera bu á Hofi i Breidinn ok **veizsluhall** [...], hann let gera **veizlahall** i Husabæ i Skaun a Heidmork ok adra a Ringisakri.

[...] he made the **wooden hall** at the royal estate in Nidaros, he made a **banqueting-hall** in Steig, he made a farm and a **banqueting-hall** at Hof in Breidinn [...], he made a **banqueting-hall** in Husaby in Skaun in Heidmork and another one in Ringisaker.

In the Nordic Sagas *halls* are a very important parts of the setting, as generally most events take place right in this place. But here the interest focuses on the customs connected to the use of the *hall*: we have interesting descriptions of some items of furniture, or of the placement of the high seats, where the chieftain and her lady used to seat. The Sagas describe the organization and the development of banquets, celebrated for a king's visit, or rituals and celebrations. They witness all the values connected to a civil system of pacific conviviality, to the safeguard of strong friendship relations and to complicated alliances, and they tell us about chieftains' honour and fame. Reading through the Sagas, it is likely to find several events of social life: gatherings, legal disputes, feasts and banquets. These last ones took place in the hall and had a very central role in the delicate issue concerning the system of civil relations.

- Around 1000 A. D the *hall* gradually starts losing its importance as gathering centre: the complicated systems of alliances, which hold up the political Viking structure, decays; the cultural peak of the society, represented by poetic composition inevitably connected to oral tradition, is replaced with writing; festivities, marriages, funeral commemorations and celebrations in honour of gods finds in the Christian church a new place: they are performed, but above all replaced with recurrences linked to Saints and to the unique Christian

God.