

Communicating Power:

The Chieftain's Hall as Archaeological Material and Mythological Idea in Iron Age Scandinavia

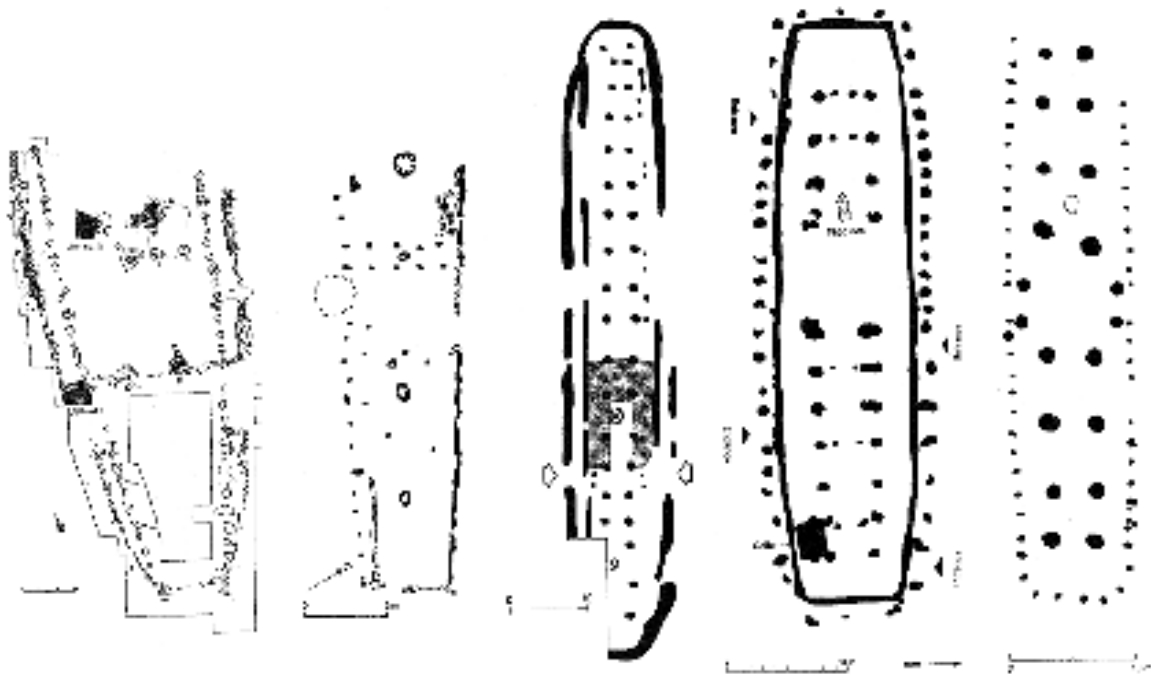


Illustration from Brink (1996). Left to right: Gamla Uppsala, Högom, Borg, Lejre and Gudme.

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1. Introduction

Control over space can be used to keep people on the inside or the outside, to include or exclude, create boundaries and legitimise hierarchy. Pierre Bourdieu states that the social room manifests itself in the physical room, e.g. that social structures and social strata materialise in the organising of space (Bourdieu 1996:150; see also Tilley 1994:10-11). Similarly, symbolic systems like mythology or language may also contain power perspectives, legitimising certain groups' roles and positions in society (Bourdieu 1996:44-45).

The Iron Age halls of Scandinavia have been a focal point of research in the last 15 – 20 years (Fabech 1994; Brink 1996; Callmer & Rosengren 1997; Herschend 1997, 1998, 1999, 2001; Hedeager 2002; Steinsland 2002; Munch 2003; Niles 2007; Gansum 2008). The halls have long been associated with power and aristocracy; however, no comprehensive analysis of the hall as a symbol of or instrument for power has been done. In the thesis I intend to analyse the *hall buildings* and the *ideas of the hall* from a perspective of power. The structure will be twofold. The first analysis will be on the organising of social space in the halls. The theoretical framework will be Bourdieu's theories on symbolic power, and contributions from other socio-spatial theories (Bender 1993; Bourdieu 1977, 1996; Lefebvre 1991; Knott 2005; Tilley 1994; Zieleniec 2007). My archaeological material will be a selection of Scandinavian halls, where two of the halls will be in-depth analysed; Tissø and Borg in Lofoten.

Secondly, I wish to examine the connection between the idealized halls found in sources to Old Norse mythology and the real life Iron Age halls. The aim is to demonstrate how the idea of the hall became a focal point of both the cosmology and mental landscapes of the Late Iron Age. The material will be a selection of medieval texts concerning pre-Christian mythology, and possibly iconographic material. The aim of the thesis is to analyse how a particular stratum of society may have used the hall and its mythology as an element for legitimising power and control, through continual negotiation and communication of power.

2. Problem statement

The main problem will be *how the hall, both as building, social space and mythological idea, has been used to differentiate people in space, place and in the mythological-religious (symbolic) realm*. Relevant research questions will be: How was the social space of the hall buildings and hall rooms organised? Is it possible to extract the inherent meaning of the social space?

What was the connection between the wide-spread idea of the mythological and idealized hall (*Oðinn* and *Valhøll*), and the socio-religious *praxis* of the aristocracy?

3. *State of Art*

Before presenting the material, I wish to place the hall buildings in a cultural, political and religious context. ‘Hall’, ON *høll* f., is most likely a loanword from Old English or Germanic, and was not used in Old Norse before after 1000 CE (Brink 1996:240-242). Swedish philologist Stefan Brink has suggested that ON *salr* m. was used for the hall in the Iron Age; i.e. *Gamla Uppsala*, *Skiringssal*. The halls are monumental buildings of great size, often placed high in the landscape, and date from c.250 CE (Gudme) up to 900-1000 CE (Borg, Lejre, Tissø). The building tradition evolved over the centuries from being an unusual feature on larger farms, to represent the residence of the chieftain or king (Herschend 1998:16). Finds from excavations of hall buildings are related to the upper strata of society; imported drinking vessels and other imported goods are common. Golden foil figures (*gullgubber*) are closely associated with the halls as well as with Old Norse mythology, as they are interpreted to represent *Freyr* and *Gerðr* (Steinsland 1990).

As an Iron Age symbol the hall held several connotations. The halls were the feasting place for the chieftain and his retainers, and were thus a social, political and sacral arena. Olaf Olsen (1966) demonstrated that the expression *hov*, traditionally thought to mean “religious building”, likely referred to a special area inside or a certain aspect of the hall. The *undvegi* or *hásæti* – the high seat – was most likely a very important spatial and material element in the ordering of both the physical and social room.

Danish archaeologist Charlotte Fabech (1994:175) argues that around 500 CE, the cult shifts from more egalitarian rituals nearby wetlands, to the ruler’s arena – the halls. At the same time it has been suggested that a new ruling class is introduced in Scandinavian society (Herschend 1999:331). Fabech argues that the aristocracy seizes control over the cult. Certain aspects of Fabech’s hypothesis have been criticised (Hedeager 1999b; Zachrisson 1998; Lund 2004; Sundqvist 1996), and the criticism is most often concerned with her model excluding the possibility of competing cultic traditions continuing throughout the Iron Age. However, the main point of the halls being both political and sacral buildings, controlled by the élite from c. 500 CE, remains largely unchallenged (Hedeager 1999b:232,241; Solberg 2003:172-175; Sundqvist 1996:82). My point of view will be that Fabech’s model is applicable, while

remembering that several competing and sometimes counterintuitive religious beliefs continued to live side by side in Iron Age society also after 500 CE.

4. Research material

4.1. Archaeological material

The archaeological material to be analysed will first be a short collection of excavated hall buildings from different parts of Scandinavia.

Hall	Country	Dating (approx.) CE	No. of hall buildings/ phases	Size (maximum)	Publications
Borg in Lofoten	Norway	400/500-1000	1-2	83 x 9 m	(Munch 2003)
Huseby	Norway	700-900/950	1	35 x 12 m	(Skre 2007)
Gamla Uppsala	Sweden	500-800	1-2	40 x 10 m	(Duczko 1993, 1996, 1997)
Slöinge	Sweden	700 – 800	2	30 x 8,5 m	(Lundqvist 1997; Lundqvist & Arcini 2003)
Helgö	Sweden				(Herschend 1995; Holmkvist et al 1970)
Högom	Denmark	400-500	1	50 x 7,5	(Ramqvist 1992)
Gudme	Denmark	300- 400		47 x 10 m	(Henriksen & Michaelsen 1995; Nielsen, Randsborg & Thrane 1994)
Lejre	Denmark	650-900	3	48,5 x 11,5 m	(Christensen 1994, 1997; Larsen 1994; Niles 2007)
Tissø	Denmark	600-1000	4	48 x 12,5	(Jørgensen 1998, 2002)

Table 1: Archaeological material: Scandinavian halls.

These are mostly well documented and well publicised excavations, and the publications (and if necessary; excavation reports) will be the basis of the brief analysis. Halls outside of Scandinavia have not been included, as a means to limit the scope of the inquiry. Furthermore, I have only included halls that are generally acknowledged, and thoroughly excavated.

A closer, more in-depth analysis will be done of two of the hall buildings. As it looks now, this will be the Tissø hall and the hall at Borg in Lofoten (see table 1). These two halls are chosen because they are found in each end of Scandinavia; they are well published, and represent two slightly different ‘hall types’. Tissø is interpreted to be the home of absolute aristocracy (Jørgensen 1998), while the Borg hall, though the largest Late Iron Age building in all of Scandinavia, is interpreted to be a hybrid between the traditional long house and the more aristocratic house type emerging from south Scandinavia (Herschend & Mikkelsen 2003:69-70).

4.2 Mythological material

The mythological material will be mainly literary. Certain Eddic poems such as *Rigstula* are of special interest, also Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* and the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*. The *Edda* is a collection of poetry found in Icelandic documents from the 13th and 14th century (Holm-Olsen 1985:7; Steinsland 2005:47-8). *Snorre-Edda* is traditionally attributed to Icelandic clergyman and chieftain Snorri Sturluson and is basically a text book on bard ship; however the text gives us extensive information on pre-Christian mythology (Jørgensen 2008:8-14). *Beowulf* is an Anglo-Saxon epic poem which uses motifs and metaphors from a pre-Christian Scandinavia, although it is certainly written down after the Anglo-Saxons were Christianized, probably c. 700-1000 CE (Lönnroth 1997:31). I will possibly include iconographic material in this section, particularly gold foil figures and hogbacks (grave markers from Great Britain, carved to look like halls).

5. Theoretical framework

The principal theoretical framework will be Pierre Bourdieu's theories on *symbolic power* (Bourdieu 1977, 1996). The basis of this work is the notion of symbolic systems like language, art, and religion being both structured and structuring elements in the world; e.g. they are both cause and effect of different social processes, and can be used as an instrument of power by specialists who want sole control over the legitimate, cultural production (Bourdieu 1996:40-41). The social space is a decisive factor for social agents, who are both limited and enabled by it. Each individual has a position in an abstract social space, defined by the amounts and types of capital they possess. Physical space (in this context: the hall building) will act as an immediate symbolisation of the social space (social organising) and will express, for instance, stratification and social distance, but often in a euphemised form. Bourdieu argues that in cultures without literacy, the inhabited space and particularly the *house* will be the principal objectification of cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977:89-90, 1996:150), interestingly enough in this context. In other words, examining the spatial organisation of the halls may give a new perspective to the mentality of the agents in the hall environment; how they ordered and divided the physical space, reflecting social differences (gender, class, rank, occupation). As mentioned, religion is also classified as a symbolic system and a structuring and structured structure in Bourdieu's theory. A leading class or specialist corps may transform a mythology to an ideology serving their own purpose

(Bourdieu 1996:44). This hypothesis will be applied to the aristocratic mythology and religion of the late Iron Age as we know it from written sources.

6. Method

The methods chosen are socio-spatial analysis of the archaeological material and textual analysis of the written material.

6.1. Socio-spatial analysis

There is no generally acknowledged method to analyse spatial organisation and perception. Rather, there is a required dialectic between theory and empirical data, argues Christopher Tilley (1994:11). In the thesis, the socio-spatial analysis will be executed on the basis of room division, post positions, finds distribution, and placement of entrances and other constructional elements of the halls. First a shorter, more general analysis will consist of a comparison of several hall buildings (see chapter 4.1) in order to find any parallels or contrasts in size, cardinal direction, placement of hall room, position in the landscape, and find categories. It is expected that this analysis can shed light over how the social space was ordered inside and around the hall buildings, and therefore convey something on how the hall space was controlled, organised and perceived.

A closer analysis will be based on the publication of the Tissø and Borg hall buildings and the plan of the hall will be an important element in the in-depth analysis. I will attempt to trace what specific symbolic content the different spatial elements contained (i.e. Price 1996).

Focus areas in the socio-spatial analysis with preliminary ideas of interpretation

Placement in the landscape	Monumentality, symbolism, communicating power, connection with settlements, water, roads, bridges, grave mounds = interplay with other material/mental structural elements.
Placement of entrances	Access, control, the building perceived from the outside
Location of the high seat	Social boundaries, communicating power through position, metaphor for social strata, sacral space?, cosmology
Benches, hearths	Activity areas, room division
Sleeping areas	Room division, activity regulations, focus on retainers and/or chieftain/lady
Cooking areas	Labour division, access, division of space
Distribution of finds	Production, activity areas, division of space, sacral spaces?, wealth, social stratum, trade, gender?

Table 2: Focus areas in the socio-spatial analysis

Buildings, and especially houses, are meaning-carriers (Benjamin 1996; Tilley 1994:17). Theories of the hall being a micro-cosmological model reflecting the Iron Age cosmology will be discussed (Eliade 1994:26-27, 103-105; Nordberg 2004:171-5). I also intend to touch upon Frands Herschend's theory of ship burials as a metaphor of the hall space (Herschend 1997:51-59).

Iron Age peoples constructed hall buildings over several centuries. An interesting aspect of the analysis will be to observe any temporal and/or geographical differences, perhaps reflecting a dynamic socio-spatial organisation changing from generation to generation and between geographical areas.

6.2. Textual analysis

The mythological analysis will be a textual analysis of some of the most relevant sources to Old Norse mythology in general, and to the hall building in particular (see chapter 6.2). I intend to execute a qualitative analysis of the texts, through source criticism and hermeneutics. The qualitative textual analysis of the content will be done by an in depth-reading, paying special notice to repeated key words, contrasts, positive or negative associations and metaphors (Kjeldstadli 1999:186-8). I will mainly have to use translations of the texts, but key words will be identified in the original language.

There are clearly source critical problems when using written sources from a different time and different cultural context than the past we wish to examine. All of the textual sources to be used are preserved from centuries after the end of the Iron Age. They are written in societies which have changed both religion and state form since the late Iron Age; transitions which represent major breaks and discontinuity. The texts are also written outside of Scandinavia. These aspects imply that we cannot read the texts as factual, neutral statements but have to take the text's cultural and social *environs*, the author's horizon and agenda, and philological problems into consideration (Kjeldstadli 1999:175-181). Does this mean we cannot use the texts as sources to Old Norse mythology at all? Philologist Preben Meulengracht Sørensen argued in favour of the use of eddic poetry as a source to Viking Age religion and mentality. His argument was that it is not the poem in its 13th century form that constitutes his source, but its content. In example, *Skírnismál* may well be a poem from the Middle Ages, but this does not automatically mean the myth of Freyr and Gerðr is too (Sørensen 1995:218-222; see also Lönnroth 1997:32,37 and Hedeager 1999a:11).

7. *Expected results*

It is expected that Bourdieu's theory on symbolic power and other spatial theories will be of use to place the hall's spatial elements in a context of power and symbolism, where symbolic systems are used to legitimise a certain group of users' control over the social and physical space. The expected results of the mythological analysis, is that the hall played a much larger role than usually acknowledged in the mythological universe. A great number of story lines play out inside different hall buildings. Furthermore, every god or goddess in the mythological realm has a hall of their own. Special notice will be given to the Valhøll idea, and it is expected that the analysis will indicate that this motif is a reflection of the aristocratic socio-political and religious behaviour inside the hall buildings (Nordberg 2004:171, Rydving 1996:155-9). The fact that the god of warriors, aristocracy and eddic poetry gained precedence in the same period as a profound cultic shift made the halls an important religious and socio-political arena (Hedeager 1999a:85), is not perceived as a coincidence. It will be suggested that the aristocracy consciously or unconsciously mirrored their control over religion and space to the mythological realm (where the chieftain represent Óðinn, his retainers represent the *einherjingar*, and the hall becomes an earthly metaphor for Valhøll); thus placing the hall as a centre of the mental landscape of the late Iron Age.

8. *Disposition – Outline of thesis*

1. Introduction (2 p.)
 - 1.1. Presentation of problem (1 p.)
 - 1.2. Structure of Thesis (1/2 p.)
2. Presentation of Material
 - 2.1. Archaeological Material (3 p.)
 - 2.2. Mythological Material (1 p.)
3. Theoretical framework
 - 3.1. Pierre Bourdieu and symbolic power (2 p.)
 - 3.2. Theories of social space (2 p.)
4. Methodological approach
 - 4.1. Socio-spatial analysis (1 p.)
 - 4.2. Textual analysis (1 p.)
5. State of Art
 - 5.1. The Late Iron Age Halls as area of research (3 p.)

- 5.2. 500 CE: A century of structural change? (3 p.)
- 5.3. The halls and central places (3 p.)
- 6. Analysis of material
 - 6.1. The archaeological halls – an overview (8 p.)
 - 6.2. Case study: A socio-spatial analysis of the Tissø and Borg halls (?) (13 p.)
 - 6.3. The role of the hall in Old Norse Religion (7 p.)
- 7. Communicating power: the building, the rituals, the idea (7 p.)
- 8. Conclusion and summary (2)
(59 1/2 p.)

9. Time frame

Late August – mid October 2009: Write chapters on theory and method (Ch. 2 and 3).

Mid October - November 2009: Describe the state of art (Ch. 4).

December 2009: Begin the archaeological analysis (Ch. 4 and 5.1).

January – March 2010: Complete the archaeological and mythological analyses (Ch. 5 & 6)

April 2010: Write introduction and conclusion (Ch. 1 and 7), revision.

May 2010: Submit thesis

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Abbreviations:

CE = Common Era

ON = Old Norse

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