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The significance of places: the Christianization of Scandinavia from a spatial point of view

Anders Andrén

Abstract

The question of cult continuity from pagan ‘temples’ to Christian churches in Scandinavia is a classic issue in archaeology and history. In this paper the discussion is surveyed and new perspectives are outlined, based on the ritual differences between the two religious traditions. Churches were located in relation not so much to pagan ritual buildings as to different elements in multi-focused pagan ritual landscapes, for instance burial grounds. This means that the spatial patterns varied between different parts of Scandinavia.

Keywords

Burial grounds; Christianization; Christian rituals; cult continuity; location of churches; pre-Christian rituals; ritual buildings; ritual landscape; Scandinavia.

The Christian conversion of Scandinavia is a much studied and debated process, which took place from the eighth century to at least the twelfth century. The process is usually framed by texts referring to the first recorded Anglo-Saxon missionary in Denmark around AD 710, via the runestone at Jelling from the late tenth century stating that the Danish king Harald ‘made the Danes Christian’ (Fig. 1) and to the establishment of a Scandinavian archbishopric in Lund in AD 1103 (Berend 2007). However, in provincial codes from the twelfth, the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries prohibitions against ‘pagan customs’ were still reinforced.

From an archaeological point of view, the conversion can best be regarded as several regional and local processes, differing in their history, pace and visibility. It is not always easy to distinguish between pagan and Christian traits during the transition, partly because we must reckon with different forms of hybridization. The most frequently studied aspects of the conversion are religious symbols, burial customs and churchyards. The



Figure 1 Drawing of a gilded bronze plate from the high altar at Tamdrup in Jutland. The plate is dated to about 1200, and is a historical illustration of how the German missionary 'Poppo' (probably archbishop Bruno of Cologne) baptized the Danish king Harald Gormsson 'Bluetooth' in about 960 (after Gotfredsen and Frederiksen 1988: 231).

earliest Christian crosses and crucifixes can be dated to the ninth century, whereas the last pagan Thor's hammers can be dated to the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. This chronological overlap shows a long period of parallel religious traditions, including hybridization on both sides. The earliest mentioned churches were built in trading places such as Birka, Hedeby and Ribe in the ninth century. Otherwise, the earliest archaeologically attested churches and churchyards belong to the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. Only in the second half of the eleventh century and the first half of the twelfth century were most local churches built.

A classic issue in Scandinavian research on the Christian conversion is whether the Christian churches were placed on earlier pagan sites or not. It has been a recurring theme in history, history of law, and history of religion, as well as in archaeology. The issue is classic because the ideas of cult-site continuity are closely connected to the understanding of the conversion as religious change and to terms such as 'Europe' and 'Scandinavia'. Did Christianization mean the first 'Europeanization' of Scandinavia (Blomkvist 1998) or was it on the contrary much earlier incorporations of European models in Scandinavia that made the transition to Christianity possible (Andrén 2007)? The different opinions about cult-site continuity are, in other words, interwoven with issues of identity such as pagan-Christian and Scandinavian-European.

These questions have been discussed for at least 150 years (McNicol 1997), and the debate all this time has oscillated between the ideas of continuity and of discontinuity. As always, questions of continuity and change depend on the perspective, but the debate has gradually been modified by new arguments, new source material and an altered view of source criticism.

Historians and legal historians working in the mid-nineteenth century, such as the Norwegian Peter Andreas Munch, took it for granted that churches were built on older cultic sites. Some scholars went so far as to argue that Christianity in principle adopted an earlier religious and administrative system, including extensive temple property. By underlining the similarity between the religions, the Old Norse pagan past could be incorporated into Christian history, and a gradual transition to Christianity became accepted as a particular characteristic of the Germanic and Scandinavian conversion (cf. McNicol 1997: 24ff.). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries art historians, place-name scholars and archaeologists added more arguments to this idea that early churches were modelled on pagan temples, located on sites with pagan sacral place-names or located close to pagan burials (cf. McNicol 1997: 70ff., 113f., 122ff., 141ff.).

However, since the 1880s there have also been several sceptical scholars, such as the Norwegian archaeologist Nicolay Nicolaysen, who questioned the idea that churches had any connections with older ritual sites and temples. These scholars have emphasized above all the fundamental difference between Old Norse paganism as ritualized traditions and Christianity as an institutionalized religion (cf. McNicol 1997: 91ff.). The few attested examples of spatial continuity from Old Norse sites to churches have instead been explained as ‘not so much a matter of cultic continuity as a question of the continuity of power’ (Ljungberg 1938: 229).

The scholar who, more than anyone else, has changed the debate about cult-site continuity is the Danish medieval archaeologist Olaf Olsen (1966), who investigated the topic in his dissertation *‘Hov, horg og kirke’*. Olsen puts a strong emphasis on the fundamental difference between Old Norse religion and Christianity, particularly the fact that there was no professional pre-Christian priesthood (Olsen 1966: 55). Based on a strict critical scrutiny of the Old Norse sources, Olsen asserts that there were not even special temples. Like Nicolaysen, Olsen believes that the pagan cult was practised in the ordinary Viking Age long-houses, which served as both dwellings and banqueting halls (Olsen 1966: 183ff.). The only cultic buildings that might have existed, according to Olsen, were the simple buildings called ‘harg’ (Old Norse *hörgr*), which he interprets as small shelters for images of the gods. Since sacral place-names have been one of the arguments for the continuity of cultic sites, Olsen stresses that ‘the pagan cult names for Christian places reflect the continuity of both power and cult, but do not primarily demonstrate the existence of cult-site continuity’ (Olsen 1966: 238).

Olsen’s dissertation has meant that the debate about the continuity of cultic sites has changed in character. Instead of continuity being assumed, it now has to be supported by empirical evidence. Yet since Olsen’s dissertation it has in fact been possible to find archaeological evidence of churches built on or beside earlier cultic sites (cf. Hildebrandt 1985; Lidén 1969; Nielsen 1997; Stamsø Munch 1991; Zachrisson 1963). The discussion about the continuity of ritual sites has thus not ended; it has only been qualified.

Several scholars have expanded the question of cult-site continuity by looking at it in broader spatial contexts. The important thing is then not where precisely a church was located but rather the relation of the church to surrounding prehistoric settlements and pre-Christian sites such as burial grounds. From these broader spatial perspectives, several scholars also find that ritual continuity was more extensive than Olsen thinks (Brink 1992; Gräslund 1992; Sandnes 1987). In particular, the spatial association between pagan graves and churches in certain provinces has been adduced as support for more general cultic continuity (Brendalsmo 1994; Gräslund 1992; Vibe Müller 1991).

Other scholars have underlined that the church in the missionary period showed a great deal of flexibility, in that masses were presumably held in the halls of estates (Skre 1995) and the dead were given a Christian burial in the pagan grave-fields (Gräslund 2001). In other words, the church used existing places for the Christian rituals in the missionary phase. Yet another way to nuance the debate is through Charlotte Fabech's idea that the important breach in ritual continuity can actually be traced to the Migration Period (c. 400–550 AD), when pagan rituals were moved indoors (Fabech 1991). The transition from multifunctional hall to church at the conversion would then have been less dramatic than the switch from bogs to halls several hundred years earlier. Fabech is therefore open to the idea that many churches may have been built right beside older halls with partly ritual functions, as an expression of the continuity of power. Fabech's ideas have had a considerable impact in recent research, but they can be modified in certain ways, since late pagan rituals did not take place only indoors (Hedeager 1999; Lund 2009; Zachrisson 2004).

The debate about the continuity of cultic sites has thus been lively for more than 150 years, without any final solution being reached. The pendulum has oscillated between continuity and discontinuity, and, despite Olaf Olsen's radical source criticism nearly fifty years ago, the pendulum has not stopped. The old standpoints have merely returned in partly new guises and with partly new arguments, but the question of the continuity of ritual sites is still associated with the view of Old Norse religion and Christianity, or more generally with the view of identity-creating concepts like 'Scandinavia' and 'Europe'.

Given the fact that the debate has been going on so long, one may ask whether it is possible to get any further. I believe that the discussion can continue, since some essential elements are often lacking in the debate about ritual continuity. It has been concerned too much with matters of temples and large-scale sacrifices in relation to the location of churches. If the debate is to deal with more than just general spatial continuity, other types of rites and ritual functions in a possible spatial association must also be discussed. A ritual analysis of this kind can moreover provide new perspectives on the important question of the continuity of power. The starting point for such a study must in my view be the spatial patterns of Christian and Old Norse rituals.

Locations of Christian and Old Norse rituals

The fundamental differences between Christianity and Old Norse traditions have been underlined repeatedly (Blomkvist 2002; Olsen 1966). However, the differences regarding

the location of rituals have not been emphasized, although the varying spatial patterns of rituals have huge consequences for the whole debate on ritual continuity or not.

When Scandinavia was converted, Christianity had long since found its liturgical form and its architectural expressions, although there were regional variations and changes took place through time. Very briefly, the church building during the eleventh and twelfth centuries can be perceived as a spatial representation of the Christian cosmology and an architectural framework for the Christian liturgy (Andrén 1999; Bandmann 1951; Johannsen 1981; Krautheimer 1942).

The main Christian rituals that took place in the local churches and churchyards (overview in Andrén 2002: 305–7) were prayers at the canonical hours, masses on Sundays and some saints' days, special processional days and votive masses, which were services for specific purposes, held in the event of war, famine and epidemics. Alongside the fixed services of the ecclesiastical year, the Christian liturgy also comprised several rituals of the life cycle. Baptism was performed in early times on a few major feast days in cathedrals and certain other central churches. In the twelfth century, however, the baptism ritual was gradually moved to the ordinary parish churches, as is clear from the dating of many fonts. Confirmation took place in parish churches at the regular bishop's visitations, every second or third year. The end of earthly life was marked by a funeral mass in the church and the burial ritual, which in an earlier period took place almost exclusively in the churchyard, but which during the Middle Ages was gradually permitted in the church as well. Special requiem masses occurred on the seventh and thirtieth days after the death, and on each anniversary of a person's death.

Through all these rites the church exerted, or tried to exert, ritual control over the feasts of the year and the life cycle. In addition, the church could convey and explain the most important parts of its teachings through rites and church architecture. The doctrine of salvation emphasized people's hope for eternal life, and also the hierarchy of the world order in the relationship between humans and God as their maker and ruler. This hierarchical relationship was also expressed through a professional and hierarchically organized priesthood and through the saints as eternal intermediaries and intercessors with God on behalf of mortals. The church building and the centralized rituals performed in and around it were thus expressions of the Christian world order and the organization of the Christian church.

In contrast to the Christian rituals, no similar ritual centralization existed in the Old Norse traditions. Written evidence about rituals is surprisingly scarce (Clunies Ross 2002), and what exists is disputed, and often seen as Christian retrospective interpretations of how pagan rituals might have been carried out (Düwel 1985; Olsen 1966). However, archaeological results from recent years clearly show that different forms of rituals took place in many different locations at the same time. Large halls were important for ritual eating and drinking (Larsson 2004), smaller 'side buildings' (Fig. 2) seem to have had specific ritual functions (Jørgensen 2009; Nielsen 1997), platforms of stone or wood in the open air were the site of ritual slaughtering (Bäck and Hållans Stenholm 2012; Svensson 2012), fireplaces and heaps of fire-cracked stones show places for cooking and brewing (Nielsen 2005; Söderberg 2005), whereas burial grounds were places for one of the important rites of passage, the burial. Ritual deposits have also been found at mounds, by

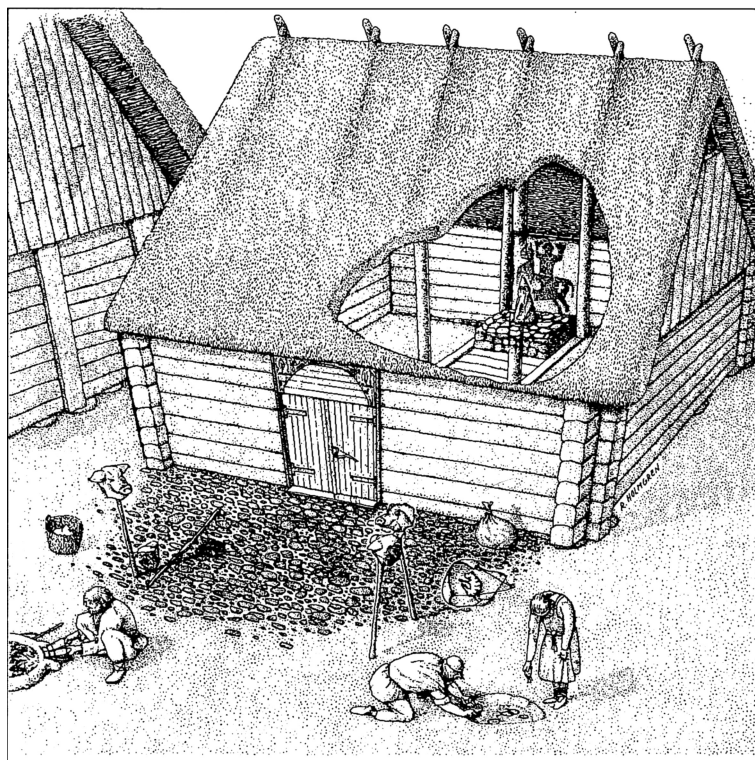


Figure 2 Reconstruction of a ritual building at Borg in Östergötland, eastern Sweden, dated to the tenth century (after Nielsen 1997: 388).

large stones, around trees and in many different forms of wetland, such as lakes, bogs, springs, rivers and fords (Lund 2009; Zachrisson 2004).

Sacral place-names show associations with a similarly dispersed ritual landscape. Often these names have been used to trace specific gods and goddesses, but it is also possible to investigate the location of rituals by studying the endings of the sacral place-names. Existing surveys show that the divinities could be combined with endings, referring to many different elements in a landscape (Brink 2004; Vikstrand 2001; de Vries 1957;). Some names refer to specific holy and sanctified areas (-vi, -harg, -hov), whereas others refer to settlement (-löv, -sal, -tuna), farmed land (-åker, -äng, -vini), woodland (-lund, -tved, -skog), water (-sjö, -fors) or hills (-hammar, -berg).

This multi-focused ritual landscape clearly corresponded to the multi-focused mythological world that is presented in the early medieval Icelandic texts about the Old Norse world. Not only were there many gods and goddesses, but also different forms of other non-human powers, such as giants, dwarfs, elves, valkyries and norns, living in different parts of the otherworld. In contrast to the Christian worldview, several different death realms formed part of the Old Norse cosmology (Andrén 2007). The dispersed ritual landscape also corresponds to the different ritual specialists that are referred to briefly in the Icelandic texts. Concepts and personal names indicate many different ritual specialists of both sexes, but without the hierarchical organization of the Christian church (Sundqvist 2007).

To sum up this comparison, I want to underline that the pre-Christian religion in the second part of the first millennium AD was highly complex. On the one hand, there seems to have been an effort to distinguish between a sacred and a profane sphere, with specific 'holy places', special ritual buildings, religious specialists and an emphasis on the world of the gods as reflected in the place-names. On the other hand, rites could in principle be performed anywhere in the landscape, presumably by a large proportion of the population, aimed at many different powers, or with little 'religious' character at all. This duality or 'cult diversification' of pre-Christian religion no doubt had a social background in that the ruling elite increasingly began to distinguish between sacred and profane spheres, marking increasing social differences (cf. McNicol 1997: 190).

Based on the multi-focused and complex character of pre-Christian Norse religion, it could be claimed in an assessment of the long debate about the continuity of cultic sites that both sides are right, each in its own way. Christianization can be viewed as both a continuous and a discontinuous process. Old Norse religion showed certain features which resembled Christianity and other ancient religions in the Mediterranean area, probably as an expression of continual cultural encounters with Mediterranean cultures in the Iron Age (Andrén 2007). At the same time, Christianization undoubtedly meant a ritual concentration, hierarchization and exclusivity (Andrén 1999; Gren 1989). When the local churches were built, the most important rites to do with the life cycle and the calendar were assembled in and around the church building. The Christian liturgy was enacted by a professional priesthood and was aimed at an omnipotent creator, who could best be reached through a large band of saints as special intercessors. Because rites associated with the life cycle and the calendar were incorporated into the church liturgy, they became exclusively 'religious' in a way that many of the Old Norse rituals can scarcely have been.

Continuity or not?

Christian rituals were religiously exclusive, they were concentrated in a specific place and a building, and they were hierarchically structured as regards both the practitioners and the targets. Old Norse rituals were much more multi-focused. They could be concentrated in a building, performed by religious specialists and directed towards a divine world. But they could also be scattered among many different places in the landscape, practised by many people of both sexes, be aimed at several different powers or have a more social meaning. In view of these differences between Old Norse and Christian rituals, I think that the classic question of the continuity of cultic sites is, in part, not correctly worded. Several of the rites performed in the church had functional counterparts in pre-Christian times, but the pagan rites were not necessarily assembled in one place or one building in the same way. The question is therefore not primarily whether a Christian church was built at a 'temple' or on a 'cult site'; the problem is rather to which element or elements in a multifaceted pagan ritual landscape a church might possibly have been related.

Several scholars in the century-long debate about the continuity of cultic sites have stressed the great differences between paganism and Christianity, but without drawing the same conclusions. This applies in particular to Olaf Olsen who, more than anyone else, rejects the idea of the continuity of cultic sites, but, since his work focuses chiefly on the

continuity of cultic buildings, his study takes him in the wrong direction. Olsen himself admits that '[i]f, however, the pagan cult was performed in an open place without buildings and perhaps even without other fixed arrangements other than the enclosure of the cultic site, the testimony of our investigations is insufficient' (Olsen 1966: 8). I therefore agree with McNicol's critique 'that Olsen's narrow interpretation of the continuity of cultic sites is no longer useful as a reference for understanding the relationship between church and pre-Christian cultic site' (McNicol 1997: 226).

A radicalization of Olsen's stance on the basic differences between paganism and Christianity leads, paradoxically, to a completely different possible result. The Old Norse rites were much more scattered in the landscape than the Christian rites, and it is therefore not sufficient to study cultic buildings or settlements. Instead the spatially dispersed pre-Christian rites mean that there were many options for a church to be located in a ritually important place. The problem with this possibility is that it is difficult to prove empirically, since we do not know the physical expressions of all the elements in the pre-Christian ritual landscape, and in addition it is difficult to trace systematically the expressions that are known. Certain aspects, however, can be illuminated to a greater or lesser extent, and they suggest that the relation of churches to a pre-Christian landscape was much more complex than Olsen supposes.

Examples of site continuity from Old Norse religion to Christianity have been considered in several previous surveys (cf. e.g. Gräslund 1992). The most frequently highlighted cases concern churches that were placed at settlements comprising traces of Old Norse rituals. However, the actual spatial association varied considerably. At Borg in Östergötland and Borg on Lofoten the churches were built on old estates, but not directly on top of the ritual building or the great hall (Nielsen 1997; Stamsø Munch 1991). In other places churches were actually erected on the exact spot of older ritual buildings. At Eskilstuna in Södermanland and Mære in Trøndelag older buildings containing gold-foil figures have been found underneath the churches (Lidén 1969; Zachrisson 1963). At Lisbjerg in Jutland excavations have revealed that the first church was erected on top of an older hall in the middle of a large fenced estate (Jeppesen and Madsen 1991). And in Old Uppsala the cathedral was built straight across a large house terrace, which probably was the site of the 'temple' that Adam of Bremen described around 1075 (Andrén 2002).

The spatial continuity can also apply to a church placed over an older tree with ritual functions. This is attested in a single instance at Frösö in Jämtland (Hildebrandt 1985; cf. Iregren 1989). In this case the church was built on the site of a birch around which animal skulls had been placed. What is particularly interesting about the Frösö find is that the altar was placed right above the root of the birch. The tree has been interpreted as a representation of the Old Norse world-tree in the middle of the cosmos, and in the same way the high altar in the church was a representation of the tomb of Christ in Jerusalem at the centre of the Christian world. Apart from ritual continuity, then, there was also a cosmological continuity in Frösö.

Other examples of places with ritual continuity include an assembly place and a site with deposited weapons. In the town of Slagelse on Sjælland, the first stone church of Sankt Mikkel was built on a hill in the late eleventh century. Zones of upraised hazel-rods have been discovered underneath the church, indicating an older hazel-enclosed assembly place

on the hill (Olsen 1972). At Estuna in Uppland a large number of spearheads and arrowheads from the Viking Age have been found in the churchyard (Rydh 1969). These finds point towards ritual deposits of weapons, perhaps in connection with male initiations, on the site of the later church.

However, the most evident spatial continuity can be documented between pre-Christian graves and churches. Besides, this is the only spatial association between pagan and Christian rites that can be investigated in any systematic way, since so many pagan graves are still preserved as visible monuments. The chronological context is not always clear, since the dating of the graves and the burial grounds is sometimes uncertain. In some cases the churches seem to have been located close to older graves or grave-fields no longer in use, a fact which has been used as an argument against ritual continuity (cf. Olsen 1966; Theliander 2003). However, these sites were still important places and rituals other than burials could have been carried out later on, since Old Norse religion was such a retrospective tradition.

The spatial links between pagan burials and churches varied, as did the connections between older buildings and churches. In extraordinary cases, churches were built directly on top of earlier graves. At Hørning in Jutland a stave church, and later a Romanesque stone church, were built on top of a mound with an inhumation from the Viking Age (Krogh and Voss 1961). At Forsby (Fig. 3) and Ås in Västergötland the churches are in similar ways located directly on large, still visible mounds (Johansen 1997: 30ff.). The spatial connections between graves and churches are more complex at some royal sites. At Avaldsnes on Karmøy in south-west Norway the stone church was built in the middle of a large three-point stone setting. A tall monolith from this monument is still preserved at the



Figure 3 The church at Forsby in Västergötland. According to an inscription, the church was inaugurated in 1135. It was built on top of a pagan mound (photo from Wikimedia).

north wall of the church (Hernæs 1999). At Jelling in Jutland, the church was built in a huge ship-formed stone setting, between two mounds that partly covered the stone setting, and surrounded by a large wooden fence (Andersen 2011 et al.).

In other cases the churches are completely surrounded by graves, and therefore seem to have been built right across burial grounds. The most common pattern, though, is that a church was built beside a single burial mound or at the edge of a grave-field of whatever size. In these cases the churches with their cemeteries seem rather like extensions of the grave-fields (overview in Andrén 2002).

Olaf Olsen tackles the question of the link between pagan graves and churches, but he largely dismisses the relationship on the basis of a brief survey of Denmark and the rest of Scandinavia (1966: 240ff.). Later investigations in Sweden, Norway and Finland, however, have shown that there may be a close or even very close connection between grave-field and church in certain regions. This applies in particular to parts of medieval Norway (Brendalsmo 1994; Vibe Müller 1991), central Norrland (Baudou 1989; Wallander 1994), and Åland (Gräslund 1992: 143). New studies by myself and others in present-day southern Sweden have revealed significant regional variations. In Halland, where many burial grounds have been ploughed out, an association between grave-field and church is relatively common. In Blekinge there are only two certain cases, in Västergötland there is only one distinct example and there are none at all in Møre, although the burial grounds in these provinces are in a better state of preservation. In Västergötland there are considerably more associations between grave-fields and churches than in Östergötland, while the examples from the provinces around Mälaren are relatively few in number (Gräslund 1992: 142; Theliander 2003, 2005; Wideen 1955: 22ff., 113–14).

In a special study of Öland it has been possible to determine the relationship between church and grave-field for twenty of the thirty-four medieval parish churches on the island. The associations vary, although the churches are normally built on the same ridges as the often well-preserved burial grounds from the Iron Age (Fig. 4.). Five churches were placed right beside cemeteries from the late Iron Age, while seven churches are less than 200 metres from a late Iron Age grave-field and three churches stand beside burial grounds from the Early Iron Age. In only five cases is it clear that the churches were not placed at grave-fields, since the burial grounds are located on different spots in relation to the church and the village (Andrén 2002: 324).

To sum up, this brief survey shows that the spatial association between paganism and Christianity varies greatly. Several of the rites performed in a church had functional counterparts in pre-Christian times. But it is just one of these rituals, namely, burial and its localization, that can be systematically compared with the placing of a church. The connection between pagan graves and churches demonstrates that churches were often placed on or beside older burial grounds, although there are regional variations in these connections, underlining the regional character of the Christianization of Scandinavia. When it comes to other rituals the localization and the physical expressions are less obvious. Through occasional finds it is nevertheless possible to demonstrate the existence of buildings, trees, votive sites and possibly a place of assembly on the site of later churches. These relations cannot be investigated systematically, however, since they can be documented only by proper archaeological excavations. Despite the fact that several associations between churches and older ritual places have been revealed only by chance finds, the overall survey shows that churches could be related to several different elements

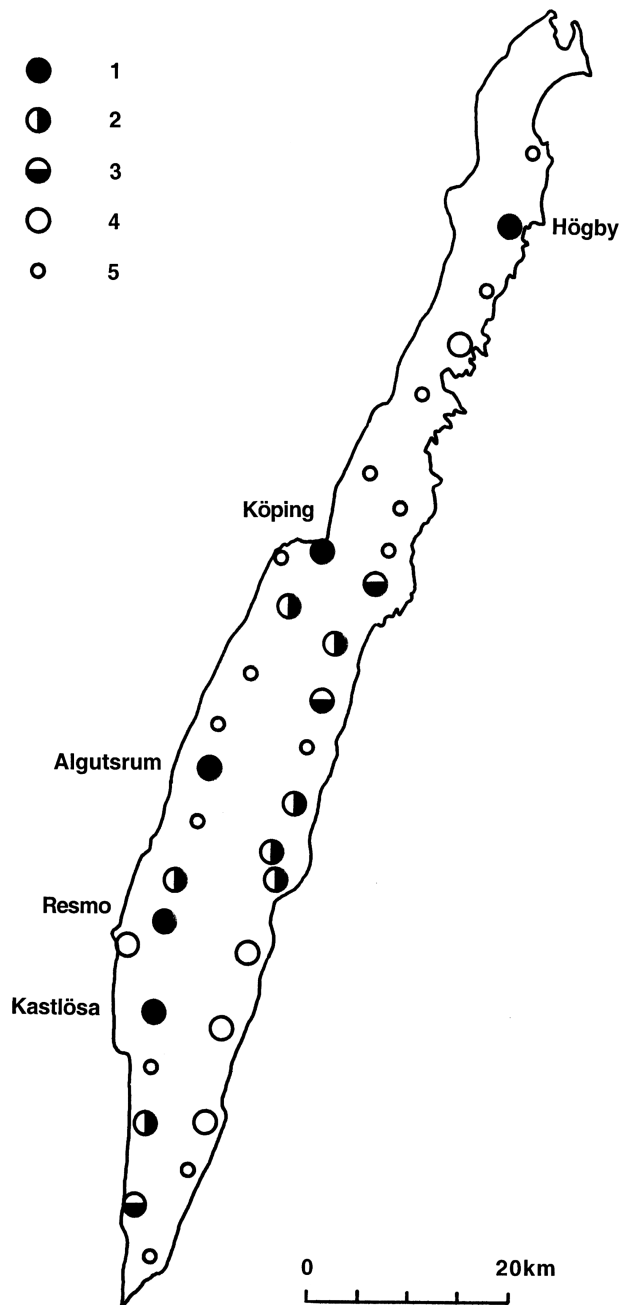


Figure 4 The relationship between churches and burial grounds on the island of Öland. 1 = church at or on a burial ground from the late Iron Age; 2 = church up to 200 metres from a burial ground from the late Iron Age; 3 = church at a burial ground from the early Iron Age; 4 = church without any spatial connections with pagan burial grounds; 5 = unclear relations. (after Andrén 2002: 235).

in a multi-faceted pre-Christian ritual landscape. The diversity of associations and the number of attested cases are surprisingly large. Like several other scholars in the discussion that followed on Olaf Olsen's study (cf. surveys by Brink 1992; Gräslund 1992),

I think his often categorical dismissals need to be qualified, but I would plead that this should be done more on grounds of principle than on the basis of individual empirical cases. In several instances the rites performed in a medieval church had functional counterparts before Christianization, but the Old Norse rituals were not exclusively assembled in a cultic building; they were much more scattered. In the future the question of the continuity of cultic sites must therefore be discussed in terms other than the continuity of ritual buildings and settlements. Many churches were no doubt located with no consideration for places with pre-Christian cult, but many were also built close to an element in a complex pre-Christian ritual landscape.

Continuity at regional centres

Although I believe that the question of the continuity of cultic sites in general must be extended from site and building to landscape, there are some special places where cultic continuity can nevertheless be discussed in more traditional terms of cultic site or even ritual building. At these places the pre-Christian spatial design was much more composite, which leads one's thoughts to central cultic sites where several different types of rituals may have been performed at the same spot. Some of these sites represented the old central places from the Iron Age, whereas others were royal and legal centres from the Viking Age or the early Middle Ages.

Among the old central places Old Uppsala is best example of a church located in a complex ritual site. The cathedral from the twelfth century was not only placed across a huge house terrace. Immediately east of the churchyard a huge terrace is still preserved, and north of the churchyard there are another two older house terraces. In addition, south and south-west of the church are a thing mound and three 'royal mounds', constituting only the eastern part of a vast burial ground (Fig. 5). According to Adam of Bremen's disputed description from around 1075 there were also a sacred tree, a holy grove, sacrificial wells and a market place at the site (Gräslund 1993; Hultgård 1997; Nordahl 1996; for a critical view see Janson 1998). The cathedral could thus be related to a whole series of important ritual features in one place.

A similar pattern on a smaller scale is present at Frösö in Jämtland (cf. Brink 1996). The church, as we have seen, was built over a votive tree, but around the churchyard there are also burial mounds, which suggests that several different types of rites were performed in the same place. Further indication of ritual complexity is the fact that the church was built on the estate of Hov (meaning 'temple'). As at Old Uppsala, a market was held at Frösö during the Middle Ages. Besides, Frösö can be associated, through the Frösö runestone, with the actual Christianization of Jämtland (Brink 1992, 1996).

Beyond these places, however, there are a number of other sites, which may have contained a similar ritual complexity (overview in Andrén 2002: 326–9). These places are above all discernible through large burial grounds and central functions in the early Middle Ages. Often one or a few of these places can be traced in each medieval province. In Blekinge the Romanesque church of Hjortsberga stands beside one of the largest Iron Age grave-fields in the province, and in the Middle Ages Hjortsberga was the site of the Blekinge general assembly. In Västergötland the oldest known wooden church, dated to c. 1110,



Figure 5 Old Uppsala, with the so-called royal mounds and the remains of the Romanesque cathedral from the twelfth century in the background (photo by the author).

has been found at Aringsås. At the church there are remains of a very large Iron Age grave-field and a runestone which has the oldest known use of the term for the inhabitants of Varend (*virda men*). Resmo on Öland is one of Sweden's oldest stone churches, dated to around 1080–1100. It is surrounded by monumental graves from the Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age. Moreover, Gyngö, just south of the church, is known as the possible site of the Öland law court in the Middle Ages.

In Västergötland the ruins of the medieval church of Dimbo are right beside the largest known Iron Age grave-field in the province. The church was one of Västergötland's few round churches. A comparable place in the vicinity may have been Gudhem. This was a royal estate belonging to the crown, and in the first half of the twelfth century a three-aisled stone church was erected here, which later became the core of a nunnery. Graves from a now vanished late Iron Age grave-field have repeatedly been found around the convent. East of Lake Vättern, the church in Heda was built beside the grave-field at Jussberg, which is one of the largest in Östergötland. The church is among the oldest stone churches in the province. Finally, we may mention Hög in Hälsingland, with an early Romanesque church located beside large burial mounds. In the Middle Ages Hög was also the site of a royal estate, and Hälsingland's general assembly was probably held at Hög from at least the ninth century.

These examples of churches built in places of complex form, suggesting several ritual functions during pre-Christian times, show that the question of the continuity of cultic sites can be further nuanced. In these places, perhaps just one or a few per province or settlement area, there was continuity of cultic sites in a more traditional sense. Even if this association should scarcely be viewed in terms of a transition from 'temple' to church, it seems as if these multifunctional places as a whole may have had certain functional similarities to the Christian church buildings. What in these cases can be called continuity of cultic sites, in other words, is a transition from a ritually concentrated pagan landscape to a Christian church.

Understanding spatial continuity

There is no general spatial continuity from pagan ritual buildings or cult sites to medieval churches. However, due to the multi-focused and complex character of Old Norse religion, connections between ritual places and churches exist nevertheless. In a few important places it is possible to detect a continuity of cultic sites in a more traditional sense. These were places where the churches seem in part to have taken over ritual functions that were assembled in a rather restricted area. Old Uppsala may serve here as a prototype for this form of continuity. On the other hand, it is possible to detect a much more widespread continuity between places with more limited ritual functions and churches, since the pagan rites were much more dispersed in the landscape than the Christian rites. These spatial associations concern trees, votive sites, burial places and perhaps assembly sites in relation to churches. The relationship between earlier graves and churches is particularly striking in certain western and northern areas of Scandinavia. There is probably not one explanation for the spatial continuity of ritual sites in Scandinavia. Different local decisions may have resulted in a similar overall pattern of cult-site continuity. However, some perspectives for understanding this pattern can be outlined.

Continuity of power has recurrently been pointed out as a decisive factor for ritual continuity. Since many churches were built as private initiatives on large estates, the location of churches followed the landowning elite, which in many cases had had ritual functions in the pre-Christian period. A good example of the continuity of power throughout the conversion is the settlements connected to place-names ending in *-lev* in southern Scandinavia. The place-names have convincingly been dated to the pre-Viking period on philological grounds (Søndergaard 1972). The ending means heritage or fief, and is often combined with a male personal name, indicating personal holdings of land. When settlements with these names appear in the Middle Ages they are among the largest villages attested. About 230 villages bore the place-name component *-lev* in medieval Denmark, and about 50 per cent of these villages also had Romanesque churches, which is the highest proportion of churches for any type of place-names. This correlation clearly underlines the continuity of large estates from the Iron Age into the Middle Ages, and gives a good historical background for the location of many churches.

However, several known cases of spatial continuity of ritual sites point towards more reflected and conscious location of churches. In some cases the older remains were even

preserved as visible traces of a pagan past. These contexts can be explained by retrospective strategies in Old Norse religion as well as in Christianity. They are above all present in the extensive spatial connections between pagan burial grounds and churches. Old Norse religion became very retrospective in the Viking Age, which is clear from the reuse of older burial monuments, from new graves being superimposed on older graves and from the reinvention of older burial rites (Hållans Stenholm 2006; Pedersen 2006; Thäte 2007). Thus very clear and conscious relations to real or reinvented ancestors' graves were maintained long before the conversion.

From a Christian point of view, a relation to older graves was part of the tradition. Christianity can be apprehended as a kind of 'grave cult', in view of the fundamental significance of sacrificial death, martyrdom and the cult of relics in Christian doctrine (cf. Meckseper 1982: 200ff.). Since Christianity has practised a unique combination of burial place and cult building ever since late antiquity (Dyggve 1952) it was natural to place churches beside older graves. This pattern is attested in the Rhineland, where early churches from the seventh and eighth centuries seem to have been localized in older pre-Christian '*Reihengräberfelder*' (Fehring 1991: 76). A similar strategy to combine inherited tradition with local retrospective traditions and flexible attitudes towards the 'old custom' can possibly explain many of the churches located at pagan burial grounds.

A decision to place a church on or close to a pagan ritual site may, however, also be explained by Christian appropriations of the important sites of the former religion. This perspective may above all apply to some of the regional centres with ritual and judicial functions. Although the aristocracy promoted Christianization in several cases, the assembly of freemen seems to have had a certain degree of formal influence in connection with the change of religion (cf. Hellström 1996). Churches built on the site of older central assemblies can thus be perceived as a concrete symbol of the Christianization of an area. It is probably this we can see at Old Uppsala, as well as at places like Hjortsberga, Resmo, Aringsås, Dimbo, Gudhem, Heda, Hög and Frösö.

Finally, Christian associations with pagan ritual remains can be regarded as attempts to reconcile the two religious traditions, in ways similar to the writings of the thirteenth-century authors Snorri Sturluson and Saxo Grammaticus. In this perspective, the placing of a church and churchyard as extensions of the cemetery can be explained as the incorporation of the ancestors and their cult into a Christian context.

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