

Freyja's Cats: Perspectives on Recent Viking Age Finds in Þegjandadalur North Iceland

by

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### **Front Page Illustration:**

Detailed drawing of a crying cat from the Oseberg cart's backboard. (After Ingstad 1993)

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## I. INTRODUCTION

*Hvernig skal Freyju kenna? Svá, at kalla hana dóttur Njarðar, systur Freys, konu Óðs, móður Hnossar, eigandi valfalls ok Sessrúmnis ok fressa, Brisingamens, Vanagoð, Vanadís, it grátfagra goð, ástaguð. - Svá má kenna allar ásynjur at nefna annarrar nafni ok kenna við eign eða verk sín eða ættir.*

*How should one paraphrase Freyja? Thus: by calling her Daughter of Njordr, Sister of Freyr, Wife of Odr, Mother of Hnoss, Possessor of the Slain, of Sessrumnir, of the Gib-Cats, and of Brisinga-men; Goddess of the Vanir, Lady of the Vanir, Goddess Beautiful in Tears, Goddess of Love. All the goddesses may be paraphrased thus: by calling them by the name of another, and naming in terms of their possessions or their works or their kindred. (Prose Edda, Skaldskaparmal, XXVIII. Freyjukenningar, transl. Brodeur 1916:129)*

Despite its modern popularity, the domestic cat has been overlooked as a valuable tool in symbolic and interpretive understandings of the Viking Age. The cat's importance in some cultures, such as Ancient Egypt, is abundantly clear, but since they rarely appear in the Norse archaeological record, they are overlooked. This project proposes that the scarcity of the cat in the Norse archaeological record is in fact quite telling of its significance, and it can be an effective tool in recognizing Norse beliefs and cultic practices. Although somewhat hidden, cats are there and quite prominent. One just needs to know how to find them and distinguish their meaning.

What we know of the Norse religion is that it was a part of everyday life. (Gräslund 2000:56; Lindow 2001:34; Price 2007:26) It centered on the intertwining of man and nature, where everything from rocks to groves and animals were sacred. (Lindow 2001:33; Williams 1920:363) In Germanic cultures, such as the Norse, animals were foundational in the worldviews, "...not strictly for one part of a society, but more widespread." (Bond 2006:89) Animals are seen all throughout the Norse material and literary culture. From jewelry to sacrificial rituals, animals are everywhere.

Horses and dogs are by far the most abundant symbolic finds in the Norse archaeological record, especially in the burial record, and as such, they have dominated the focus of research. Cats are mostly ignored in Viking Age “textbooks” and are only mentioned briefly if at all. More attention should be paid to the rarer animals, because they could indicate important aspects of the Norse worldview such as status, Christian influence on female portrayal, and even magic. Although they are status symbols as well, dogs and horses are so common in burials, especially in the Icelandic context, (Eldjarn 2000; Maher 2009) and sacrificial activity that they could be for the middle class and not just elites. However, having a cat is a statement. Cats were rare, especially in Iceland, (McGovern 2009:221) expensive, and connected with the most powerful Norse goddess, Freyja, as well as her magic.

In the Prose Edda, Snorri Sturluson tells us that Freyja is driven in a cart drawn by cats. In multiple instances he tells us that Freyja’s special animal is the cat, particularly males. Since Freyja is a fertility goddess as well as a sorceress, it is interesting to find that an important sorceress in *Erik the Red’s Saga* has gloves made of white cat fur. From this, this project proposes that cats play a part in fertility and/or female magic associated with the goddess Freyja. “The link between cats and the goddess [Freyja] has not been satisfactorily explained, but the gloves made of cat-skin, white and furry inside, mentioned in the Greenland account, suggests that cats were among the animal spirits which would aid the *volva* (sorceress) on her supernatural journey.” (Davidson 1964:120)

This fertility/female magical association may have something to do with the lack of Freyja and her cats in the Icelandic literature, as Christianity disapproved of promoting female sexuality and pagan ritual. (Jochens 1995:6) Freyja’s cats seem to be the only heavenly steeds not named. Why are only Freyja’s cats missing names when so many other important gods’ steeds are not? (Price 2007:56)

In Iceland, cats are not a common find in any archaeological contexts. Therefore, when a partial cat skeleton was found with human skull fragments in a pit in the midst of the Norse Pagan

grave field of Ingiríðarstaðir, Iceland, during Summer 2010, curiosities were ignited. This find may hold tantalizing clues to the importance of the cat in the Norse worldview. Cats were more significant in the Norse world than generally assumed, for they are found in art, myths, burials, magic, and in some cases sacrificial activity. The cat of Ingiríðarstaðir potentially holds clues to a local, perhaps elite, fertility cult of Freyja in Iceland.

## **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **A. SYMBOLISM AND MATERIAL CULTURE**

People put pieces of themselves into their possessions. Material culture represents groups as well as individuals and becomes an extension of humanity. Faunal remains can act as artifacts in a material culture, as they can represent more than just economy. (Bond 2006; Nilsson 2003) This research transferred the symbolic significance of artifacts onto animal remains.

Ian Hodder explains that material culture manifests out of social necessity, as seen in competition over resources, in periods of instability, and in wider group reliance. (Hodder 1982:26) Over time, these social materials come to represent more than just group alliance, also symbolizing belief systems that create group solidarity. Symbols are used in material culture to refer “...to an object or situation in which a direct, primary or literal meaning also designates another indirect, secondary and figurative meaning.” (Hodder 1982:11) Much of the time, scholars have to decode abstract symbols, which requires an attempt at interpreting belief systems. Lastly, Hodder elucidates that principles of conceptual framework are found in all types of archaeological evidence, spanning all cultures. (Hodder 1982:288) This is what allows us to use other cultures as comparisons.

Alex Bauer argues that, “...the manner in which people understand and interact with material objects such as artifacts in the present may be considered similar to the way people engaged with those same artifacts in the past.” (Bauer 2002:38) As members of material cultures, archaeologists’ personal interpretations of the meanings behind artifacts are valid. Archaeologists

are people who experience objects just as other past and present people do, but with hints from the archaeological record. (Bauer 2002:41) Thus, our understandings of past worldviews represented in material culture may not be far from the actual beliefs behind the artifacts we find, including faunal remains.

### B. RITUAL

Since the use of cats in the Norse world had mostly ritualistic connotations, as shown in this thesis, even where it seems unlikely in cases of skinning, it is imperative to understand what ritual is and what it looks like in the archaeological record. Renfrew (2000) argues that ritual occurs at the boundary between this world and the supernatural to ensure the attention of a particular deity or transcendental force. (Renfrew 2000:51) In archaeology, ritual is usually the go-to explanation when no other reasonable explanations can be found. Ritual, however, is more than an absence of function. Fortunately, Renfrew and Bahn have made a convenient comparable list of archaeological indicators of ritual activity inherent within most or all religions to encourage proactive searches (See Appendix A: List of Archaeological Indicators of Ritual). Jordan also provides some indicators of ritual activity, related to shamanism, (Jordan 2001:102-103) which will be discussed in section VII.D.1.

Animals as artifacts found at cult sites can act as what Schiffer refers to as ‘emitrons’. “...an *emitron* is an artifact that enables or enhances an emitter’s performances.” (Schiffer 1999:83) As emitrons, animals can enhance ritual activity, so their occurrence in the archaeological record can sometimes go beyond the superficial use as food and companions.

## III. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

### A. ICELANDIC LITERATURE

#### I. *A Valid Resource*

Modern North Atlantic archaeologists, for the most part, tend to stay away from interpreting the beliefs of the Norse. It was common in the antiquarian days to use the Icelandic

corpus to understand archaeological finds, but this has since been deemed unreliable as scholars have found that its past use was uncritical. (Friðriksson 1994; Loumand 2006:130) It is the aim of this research to apply critical thinking to the Icelandic corpus to gain new understandings of past thought as more recent scholars have put forward. Þóra Petursdóttir expresses frustration with the current analyses of Icelandic archaeology, “...and hence *the lack*, I argue, is not in the material, but in its interpretation...” (Petursdóttir 2009:38) Similarly, Hodder states more generally that, “...there is a need for archaeologists to integrate theories and ideas from a wide range of studies concerned with structure, meaning and social action,” (Hodder 1982:299) as well as Alex Bauer who calls for new ways of understanding artifact-signs in archaeology. (Bauer 2002:48) Some scholars, such as Einarsson (2008) and Nilsson (2003), rekindled the antiquarian flame and have started to use Icelandic literature to interpret the otherwise un-interpretable. Following in their footsteps, this project intends to do the same.

There has been much debate about the validity of Snorri Sturluson’s Christian era Eddas and the Sagas. Although there may have been some information lost in the 200 years after the Viking Age when Snorri and others first wrote the stories, there is reason to believe that, at least, Snorri’s aim was to preserve the traditional stories of Iceland. His aim was effective as modern Icelanders are named after the old gods (Lindow 2001:37) and the folklore has yet to fade from the land, as magical places are still known.

Iceland’s peaceful conversion to Christianity also allowed for paganism and its stories to remain in Iceland for quite some time after the conversion, (Davidson 1988:3; Williams 1920:333-334) although possibly altered to some degree by Christianity. (Davidson 1993:144-145) Lastly, there are many examples of Norse mythology found in the archaeological record, (Davidson 1993:50) as will be seen in III.B, and in other outside sources (see below).

## 2. *Outside Sources*

There are a few outside accounts that corroborate some of the mythology and religious practices found in the Icelandic literature. Contemporary outside accounts from Adam of Bremen, Thietmar of Merseburg, and Ibn Fadlan and non-contemporary outside sources such as Saxo Grammaticus and Tacitus all describe Norse ritual activity.

Adam of Bremen was a German Church administrator and ecclesiastical historian in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. He spent some time with the Danish king, Svend Estridson (AD 1047-1076), from whom he obtained most of his information about the heathen practices of Northern Europe. (Olson 1906:67) In the appendix *Description of the Northern Islands (Descriptio Insularum Aquilonis)* in his *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen (Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum)*, Adam of Bremen describes a great temple to Thor, Odin, and Freyr in Uppsala, Sweden. He explains that Thor is the god of thunder, Odin is the god of war, and Freyr is a fertility god, all of which are found in the Icelandic literature. At the Uppsala temple, large numbers of sacrifices of both humans and animals were made and hung on a large tree every nine years. (Tschan 1911:1-2) From the Icelandic literature, we know that first, Odin hung himself on Yggdrasil, the World Tree; and second, that nine was an important magical number. The 11<sup>th</sup> century German bishop Thietmar of Merseburg reported seeing a very similar temple in Lejre, Denmark, where every nine years, the pagans would burn offerings of 99 humans, along with other animals. (Warner 2001:80)

Ibn Fadlan was a 10<sup>th</sup> century Arab ambassador who encountered the Rus, whom most scholars believe were Norsemen, on the Volga River on his way to visit the Bulgars. In his account of the Rus, he describes several Norse customs found in the Icelandic literature, including cremation funerary rites where animals and human slaves are sacrificed to accompany a dead chieftain. Although some aspects, such as hygiene, may have been skewed by Ibn Fadlan's Muslim viewpoint, it seems he had no reason to misrepresent the Rus other than some slight exaggerations for dramatic emphasis. (Frye 2005:13)

Saxo Grammaticus, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Danish writer (Powell 1894:xi), was a contemporary of Snorri. In his *Deeds of the Danes (Gesta Danorum)*, Saxo writes of the political institutions, laws, war, social life, gods, magic, mythology, and folktales of pagan Denmark. (Powell 1894:xxiii) Much of his mythology mirrors Snorri's accounts, including the gods and their magic, although some names have changed.

Lastly, Tacitus was a 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman historian who wrote about the cult practices of Germanic tribes in his *Germania*. (Gordon 1910) Tacitus describes the Germanic religious fertility rites of Nerthus, who was probably an earlier version of Freyja. He explains how the Germans worshiped fertility deities in a sacred grove where sacrificed men were hanged in trees, (Ingstad 1993:245) which is exactly what we see in Adam of Bremen's account of the temple of Uppsala and Odin's sacrifice on Yggdrasil.

#### **B. MARRIAGE OF LITERATURE AND ARCHAEOLOGY:**

The dictionary defines myth<sup>1</sup> as “a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation, especially one that is concerned with deities or demigods and explains some practice, rite, or phenomenon of nature.” (Random House 2011) Picture stones, (Price 2007:373) rune stones, tapestries, (Gräslund 2000:56, 61; Price 2007:50-51) and figurines all reference myths found in the Sagas and Eddas. Pictured in Appendix C is the famous memorial stone from Gotland, Sweden (see fig. 1). It is thought that it depicts Odin riding his eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, while greeted by Valkyries. Underneath are warriors in a ship, thought to be mighty fallen warriors, on their way to Valhalla. (Fuglesang 1980:170) Thor’s fishing expedition is also depicted on a picture stone, complete with details found in the literature. (Sørensen 1986:257)

Board games are found in Eddaic poetry and in graves. (Nerman 1931:Ch. 4) Jewelry and metal, particularly gold and silver, are found in Eddaic poetry and archaeology. (Nerman 1931:Ch. 3 and 4) Persons and places found in the literature are also found to have been real.

(Nerman 1931:Ch. 2) References to gods have been found in amulets, such as Thor's hammers, (Fuglesang 1989:16-18) and figurines, such as the phallic Freyr, (Johansen 1986:68) as well as on other art, such as Odin's one eye, his ravens, (Sørensen 1986:262) and his eight-legged horse. (Fuglesang 1980:170; Sørensen 1986:262)

## 1. *Sagas*

The saga authors are unknown, and may have differed from Snorri in that the hand of Christianity (Davidson 1993:144-145) might have been a little heavier in some of them. Cats make a few cameos in the sagas, but in all of their roles as living beings, they are negative forces as all-black monsters, which could be explained by a heavier influence of Christianity. It seems likely that the relationship between black cats and the Medieval Christian “evil witch” came from the close bond cats shared with pagan “witches.”

In *Fornmannasogur*, a pitch-black she-cat was the mother of “a giant, called Brusi, who lived in one of the islands off the west coast of Norway; ...fire issued from her mouth and nostrils, and her eyes were terrible. This cat once killed twenty men in a few minutes.” (Hjaltalin 1871:17) Although Brusi’s mother was a demonic mother of a giant, we still see the cat as a protective mother in this story, which is a characteristic of fertility goddesses.

In the *Vatnsdæla Saga*, “a man, called Thorolfr, who lived in Vatnsdalr, in the north of Iceland...was a great terror to his neighbors, because he had twenty cats; ‘they were all pitch-black, of an immense size, and Thorolfr had made them very powerful by sorcery.’ Even after the death of Thorolfr few ventured to come near the place for fear of the cats.” (Hjaltalin:17; Wawn 2001:231-232) Thorolf’s cats are called ‘cats from Hel,’ and Hel is sometimes interpreted as a manifestation of Freyja. (Howey 1989:59) Hel was a goddess who ruled the Norse Underworld, and not the “hell” of modern monotheism. As the daughter of the mischief god, Loki, she was half monster, half goddess and held dominion over the dead. In this case, cats are not only used in protective magic, but could also have ties to the Underworld.

In the epilogue to *Laxadæla Saga, Stuſs Patr*, the king “Haraldr asks Stuſr whether his father was ‘the hard or the soft cat’... the person who is soft (blaudr) could not be a father...blaudr suggests female suppleness, while hvatr (hard, used to designate male animals) means sharp and evokes the image of penis (Jochens 1995:76),” hinting at the cat’s sexual symbolism. Thord the Cat is also a prominent character in the actual saga, although how he came by this name is unknown. (Kunz 2001:273-397)

In *Orkneyinga Saga*, “cat” is used as an emasculating insult. “Earl Þorfinn urges Kalf Arnason to attack by saying: ‘You do not mean to lie her[e] sem kottr i hreysi [as a cat in prowess] while I fight for both of us?’ ” (Holtsmark 1962-65:149) The use of “cat” as an emasculating insult is discussed in section V.B.3 below.

By far the most important occurrence of cats in all of the sagas is in *Erik the Red’s Saga*. Here, a very influential and powerful Greenlandic sorceress named Thorbjorg<sup>2</sup>, called “the Little Prophetess,” wears a cat skin hat and cat skin gloves lined with white cat fur. Thorbjorg is imperative to connecting cats further with Freyja, as Thorbjorg practiced sorcery and likely used her cat skin and fur in her shamanic trances. Freyja was the goddess of sorcery whose cart was driven by cats, seemingly on shamanic journeys. This is the seeress of which Davidson expresses need for explanation. (Davidson 1964:120)

Cats were not very common in Iceland even in medieval times, (McGovern 2009:221) therefore it is doubtful that Snorri would have inserted the rare mentions of cats on his own. Rather, it may be their conspicuous absence from the literature that is the hand of Christianity.

## 2. *Prose (Younger) Edda:*

In the *Prose Edda*, we mostly find cats mentioned in *The Biguiling of Gylfi* (*Gylfaginning*), but brief mentions are also found in *The Poesy of the Skalds* (*Skaldskaparmal*), and in the list of synonyms (*the Pular*).

In *Death of Baldr the Good* (*Dauði Baldrs ins góða* found in *Gylfaginning XLI-LIV, IL*), we see the most important occurrence of cats: as the steeds of the fertility goddess, Freyja. “First is to be told of Odin, how Frigg and the Valkyrs went with him, and his ravens; but Freyr drove in his chariot with the boar called Gold-Mane, or Fearful-Tusk, and Heimdallr rode the horse called Gold-Top, and Freyja drove her cats.” (Brodeur 1916:73) It is important to note that the cats were significant enough to be mentioned as Freyja’s steeds, but are oddly unnamed, unlike the steeds of the other gods.

In *Of Freyr and Freyja* (*Frá Frey ok Freyju*, found in *Gylfaginning XXIV*), Snorri gives us a description of Freyja. “Her [Freyja’s] hall Sessrúmnir (“Seat-roomy”) is great and fair. When she goes forth, she drives her cats and sits in a chariot; she is most conformable to man’s prayers, and from her name comes the name of honor, Frú, by which noblewomen are called. Songs of love are well-pleasing to her; it is good to call on her for furtherance in love.” (Brodeur 1916:38) Cats had a significant connection to Freyja, as they were important enough to be mentioned in her description.

Cats also had roles in magic, as seen in *The Children of Loki and the Binding of Fenris Wolf* (*Frá börnum Loka ok bundinn Fenrisúlf*, found in *Gylfaginning XXXIV*). To bind the monster child of Loki, Fenris Wolf<sup>3</sup>, the gods had a magical dwarf-made fetter to bind Fenris. This fetter was comprised of six things, one of which was “the noise a cat makes in foot-fall.” (Brodeur 1916:43-44)

*Gylfaginning’s* (XLVI) last mention of cats is in *Of Thor’s Sports and His Companions* (*Frá íþróttum Þórs ok félaga hans*). In this tale, Thor and Loki visit the hall of the giant, Útgarda-Loki<sup>4</sup>. Here, Thor and Loki are tested on what they think are trials of strength and agility, but are actually games of wit. Thor loses a fight to a giant gray cat whose paw he barely lifts from the floor. In reality, Thor achieved an enormous feat because the cat is actually the World Serpent, Jormugund, in disguise. (Brodeur 1916:65-67) The use of the cat as a disguise is

another example of cats used in magic, in particular the shamanic practice of shape-shifting known to Odin and Freyja.

In *Names for Wolves, Bears, and Harts* (*Úlfs heiti, bjarnar ok hjartar*, in *Skaldskaparmal LXXI*), the cat is seen as a kenning for *bear*, “The bear is called Wide-Stepper, Cub, Winterling, Ourse, *Gib-Cat*, Tusker, Youngling, Roarer, Jölfudr (?), Wilful-Sharp, She-Bear, Horse-Chaser, Scratcher, Hungry One, Blómr, Bustler.” (Brodeur 1916:210) For a discussion on the bear’s correlation with the cat, see section V.A.3 below.

In the *Pulur*, the word for *cat* is used as a kenning for *giant*. (Holtsmark 1962-65:148-149) Here we have cats associated with giants, which are magical creatures, and also possibly shape-shifting again.

### 3. *Poetic (Elder) Edda:*

This project only found one mention of a cat in the *Poetic Edda*, which is in the *First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbane*. “My father has pledged his daughter fair as bride to Granmar’s son so grim; but Helgi, I once Hothbrodd called as fine a king as the son of a cat.” (Bellows 1936:297) It is not clear to the researcher if this is a compliment or an insult, but the lack of cats in the Eddaic poetry is interesting. It seems strange that cats would be lacking so much in the older *Poetic Edda*, when Snorri collected all of the stories for the younger *Prose Edda* on which the poems are based. If anything, he would have ignored or completely demonized them. Thus, there must have been some other reason for their absence in the poetry. Time constraints did not permit further investigation of this discrepancy, but it may simply have been a case of the process of writing style wherein it was too difficult to find words to rhyme with *köttur* or its variances, or *köttur* and its variances were hard to fit into the allotted poetic schema. It could also have to do with Freyja and Christianity.

## **IV. CATS IN PREHISTORY**

### **A. CAT HISTORY**

#### ***1. Background***

To understand the cat's place in Norse culture, its domestication must be discussed first. When cats were first domesticated is unclear, but cats with human association have been found as early as c. 7000 BC in Neolithic Jericho. (Clutton-Brock 1993:26) Malek (1977) believes it would make sense for the cat to have been first domesticated in Ancient Egypt<sup>5</sup> considering the culture's relationship with cats throughout its history. Unfortunately, there are no finds that predate c. 4000 BC, but this may only be due to lack of preservation. (Malek 1977:45) The cat was highly regarded in other regions in the pagan world; such include the Celts and in Anatolia<sup>6</sup>.

#### ***2. Introduction of Cats to Scandinavia***

It is highly likely that Scandinavians did not pick up on the wide popularity of the domestic cat until they began coming into contact with many more cultures during Viking Age exploration, such as the British Isles where cats were used as pest control. It is quite possible that the word 'katt' came to the Scandinavians from the Latin 'catus,' although some say it may have its origin in Scandinavia. (Colling 1986:193) Other cultural traditions made their way to the Norse world, such as ship burials, placing money in the mouths of the dead (Major 1924:143) and caves as entrances to the Underworld. (Zachrisson 2000:162) As these practices traveled, so did the cat as a fertility symbol, especially in relation to fertility goddesses.

In Sweden, the European sub-species of wildcat subsisted in the post-glacial thermal period. The earliest finds of domesticated cat come from the migration period of the Iron Age (Lepiksaar 1986:22) on the Swedish islands of Oland and Gotland (6<sup>th</sup> century). (Colling 1986:193) But it was not until after the eleventh century that the cat became a common animal in Sweden. The cat was used to hunt rats and mice, as well as for its skin. (Colling 1986:195)

Looking to the archaeological record, the oldest documented domestic Swedish cats come from an early Roman Iron Age double inhumation grave in Västergötland dated to c. AD 200. (Boessneck 1979:176) Even before the domestic cat was introduced to the North, Neolithic Scandinavians venerated felines, as seen in the Scania settlement where wild cats were found buried in a pit, covered with red ochre. (During 1986:151)

The Celts could have been an influence on the cat's position in the Norse religion. It is known that the Celts were not only from the same area as the Germanic tribes who moved up into Scandinavia, but that the Celts and the Norse had close contact with each other as seen in Celtic influence in Norse art. (Davidson 1993:155-159) Viking expansion sites in the Celtic lands also led to Nordic men marrying and/or having offspring with Celtic women. The Icelandic population was largely made up of this Norse-Celt mixture, as Norse men picked up Celtic wives on the way to Iceland. (Batey 2000; Helgason and Hickey et al. 2001) This Celtic influence in Iceland may have had a direct relation to the cat found in the skull pit at Ingiríðarstaðir (fully discussed in Section VII, below), as cats were not needed as pest management in Iceland or in homeland Scandinavia until much later. (Andersson 1993:31)

The Celtic goddess, Cerridwen, shares important similarities with Freyja. Cerridwen was a cat goddess as well as a sow and wolf goddess. (Graves 1948:221) Freyja is associated with sows, which are also symbols of fertility, since she and her brother Freyr own their own boars. It might also be said that Freyja has a connection to wolves because of her connection to Odin, whose companions include two wolves. Cerridwen, like Freyja, was also a shape-changer as well as a dual deity of savagery and fertility. There was also a cat cult in Ireland before the coming of St. Patrick in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. (Graves 1948:221-222)

## B. CAT SYMBOLISM

### 1. *Freyja and Her Cats*

Freyja, sister of Freyr and wife to Odr, was a central goddess in Norse mythology. She was the only named goddess from the fertility tribe, the Vanir, (Lindow 2001:126) making her *the* fertility goddess. Freyja is thought to be the equivalent to the Germanic goddess Nerthus. Both had fertility celebrations that involved carts, which seemed to play a large role in fertility symbolism. (Gunnell 1995:53-65; Lindow 2001:237) Freyja/Nerthus, as Mother Earth, would drive her cart bringing life to the land. “To those mortals who, with thoughtful kindness, place a pan of milk in the cornfields for her cats’ refreshment, she was specially gracious, and protected their crops from foul weather or other mishap.” (Howey 1989:59)

Freyja’s importance was especially exemplified during the Christian conversion in Iceland, for she was a rallying point for paganism. In *The Book of Icelanders* (*Islendingabok* Ch. 7) and *Njals Saga* (Ch. 12), it is recorded that “One of the supporters of the conversion was outlawed for blasphemy at the althingi [National Assembly] because [he called] Freyja a bitch,” (Lindow 2001:128) meaning she was a whore. The outlawed Christian most certainly saw Freyja as a whore because of her strong sexuality. But for the pagans, this trait meant she was good to call on for matters of the heart. (Brodeur 1916:38) Freyja was such a powerful force in the pagan world, that Christianity had a hard time getting rid of her even after the final Conversion<sup>7</sup> in Iceland. (Davidson 1988:133) Freyja’s name was used as a base word in woman kennings and it can be found as many place-names, indicating her worship there. (Foote and Wilson 1970:393-395; Lindow 2001:128)

It is thought that Freyja was an elite goddess, most accessible to the nobility. Freyja’s name literally means ‘Lady,’ which can be read as a title, (Davidson 1993:108) enduring in modern Scandinavian female titles. A kenning for ‘Lady’ is ‘she who is richest,’ (Brodeur 1916:236) indicating Freyja’s noble ties. Price suggests the domestic cat, along with the dog, were animals of the elite. (Price 2007:148) It could be argued that because of her power as an

elite goddess, Freyja and her elite pets were ostracized when the kings of Scandinavia consolidated their power, eliminating the competition of smaller kings and nobility, and their patron goddess with them.

Freyja was not only associated with domesticity, womanhood, and female sexuality, but with magic and sorcery as well. Freyja gave the gods *seiðr*, a special shamanic magic, (Lindow 2001:127) thus turning it into a woman's trade, with the occasional exception of Odin. (Hayeur-Smith 2004:84) She was a shape-changer and was linked with the dead, like the seeresses in the Eddas. She and Odin shared fallen warriors. Half would go with Odin to Valhalla, and the other would go with Freyja to Folkvang. (Lindow 2001:126) Like Odin, Freyja presided over a never-ending battle where warriors killed each other each day only to be brought back to life to do it all over again. Oddly enough, a Christian servant of a great king ended this battle, (Lindow 2001:174-175) just as Christianity sought to end her.

"There is some indication that women were welcomed by Freyja after death, possibly after a sacrificial death; in *Egil's Saga* a woman who was proposing to commit suicide declared that she would eat nothing more until she came to sup with Freyja... in Freyja we rather see a goddess as queen of the Underworld, at home in the land of the dead." (Davidson 1993:109) She was a goddess of dualities: both of life and death, of love and magic, of peace and war. "The goddesses are figures of tremendous vitality both in generous giving and destruction..." (Davidson 1988:226) The Oseberg ship burial tapestries depict Freyja conjuring both her death and love magic. (Ingstad 1993:232, 249)

It is quite possible that Freyja's duality had opposing sacred and sacrificial animals as well. Battle goddesses, such as Freyja, were depicted on rune-stones with birds, thought to be ravens. (Davidson 1988:99) Perhaps the ravens were for battle magic. Cats and pigs, the latter also sacred to Freyja, could have been used in fertility magic. Cats and pigs, as fertility animals, could also indicate rebirth as Freyja's dead warriors were brought back to life. Since cats were much more rare and elitist than pigs, the magnitude of the cat is all the more emphasized when

they show up in sacrificial/magical contexts. The pig was known for its fertility symbolism, but it could also have more to do with war, since Freyja's boar's name was Hildisvini, or Battle-Pig. (Lindow 2001:173)

Throughout history, cats have been associated with fertility, femininity and sexuality, and magic. The cat's proliferation most certainly has to do with this association. Its ties to the home and women, as mousers and companions, are also prevalent in their symbolic use. Thus, it is not surprising that the steeds that pull Freyja's cart are male cats. What comes to mind when trying to understand the male cats driving a female fertility goddess is perhaps some manifestation of *Hieros Gamos*, which has also been associated with animal disguise in the Viking Age, (Gunnell 1995:76) hence Freyja and her male cats could be interpreted as male and female sexuality combined. There are plenty of examples of *Hieros Gamos* in Norse material culture, particularly the gold foils that depict heterosexual couples, often interpreted as Freyr and Freyja. (Thrane 1993:54-55) These gold foils are found at cult houses such as Uppåkra, Sweden, (Larsson 2004:24-25) and are believed to have had a ritualistic function, (Andren 2004:214) perhaps even a magical one. Thus the image of Freyja being pulled by male cats could suggest the movement of a *Hieros Gamos* magic ritual.

A very intriguing connection has been made to cats and the Oseberg ship burial. Ingstad believes the burial belongs to a sorceress, an earthly representative and incarnation of Freyja. (Ingstad 1993:254) There are several reasons she gives for this, but one of the main arguments is that cats are depicted on many of the artifacts found in the burial, most particularly the carts, which will be discussed in VII.D.3, below. Similar to Davidson, Ingstad also makes the shamanic correlation with Thorbjorg, the sorceress with the cat-skin gloves and hat. (Ingstad 1993:254-255)

Due to Freyja's powers over life, death, and rebirth, along with her noble status, cat representations as art or real animals in burials and sacrifices then seem to be attached to Freyja. As such a powerful deity, surely Freyja's special animal, the cat, must have held an exclusive place in the Norse mythical and everyday worlds.

## V. MAGIC IN PREHISTORY

### A. SHAMANISM

#### I. *Seiðr – Women’s magic:*

Odin is the god most associated with magic and shamanism because most of the information is given about him. However, as noted above, Freyja gave Odin and the other gods the magic of *seiðr*. (Lindow 2001:265; Price 2007:108) Consequently, it would make sense that she was a sorceress, and as the provider of *seiðr*, she should be considered an important shamanic deity.

*Seiðr* “is the ancient form of divination and magic in general,” (Lindow 2001:52) and was regenerative in nature, thought to have the power to resurrect the dead. (Reaves 2008:2) The sagas make it abundantly clear that *seiðr* was women’s magic, with the exception of Odin. (Price 2007:109) *Seiðr* was ‘spun’ as forces in the world were connected, changing aspects of life. The Three Norns were female deities that spun the life threads of every human being. This spinning was associated with women’s work of spinning yarn, enhancing *seiðr* as a woman’s trade. (Heide 2006:168) The sagas even explicitly say that it was shameful for men to perform *seiðr*. (Price 2007:108) Furthermore, the woman of the house presided over the elf blot, a local farm sacrificial feast, (Nilsson 2003:301) indicating a female role as magical leader.

Freyja is known to change into a bird (Price 2007:108) in the sagas and perhaps like the battle goddesses discussed earlier, there is reference to her shamanic bird form helping in battle magic, as the stories involving it usually have conflict, especially with giants. It is possible that we do not see Freyja as a cat either because they are used for other types of magic, such as transport or fertility rites, or because they are associated with her sexual side. A form of shape-shifting was called “night-riding,” which was performed by “witches.” “Night-riding” was seen as negative magic and was associated with troll hags. It was a banned magic and punishable if found guilty of its use. (Raudvere 2002:42-43)

“In one of Egill's *lausavisur* we find the name Simul, ‘fainter’, applied to Freyja, which Gudmundur Finnbogason has interpreted as referring to the performance of a shamanic trance.” (Price 2007:108) Hayeur-Smith calls attention to the prophetess Thorbjorg in *Erik the Red's Saga* as a direct link to Freyja. (Hayeur-Smith 2004:90) The saga describes Thorbjorg's special attire, particularly her hood and gloves made of white cat fur. “The seeress here claims to have received help from spirits, as in practice of shamanism, where the shaman is thought to be assisted by friendly spirits when his body lies in a trance so that his spirit can journey to the Other World.” (Davidson 1988:161) It seems unlikely, then, that Thorbjorg and her hood and gloves made of Freyja's special animal were coincidental.

## 2. *The Saami*

Many scholars believe that Freyja and Odin's *seiðr* magic is a form of shamanism (Lindow 2001:25) picked up from circumpolar religions, particularly that of the Saami who were in known contact with the Norse. (Price 2008:247-248) Neil Price argues that there are several similarities between *seiðr* found in the myths and Saami shamanism, such as the concept of spinning magic, as if yarn. (Heide 2006:164) Spinning the yarn fate is a common theme throughout Germanic mythology, such as the Norse Norns, as well as in Classic Roman and Greek mythology.

The most obvious similarity is Odin's and the sorceresses' trances where their bodies lay as if dead while their spirits change shape to travel through different worlds. To assist the traveling of the shamans of both the Norse and the Saami, helping animal spirits would be used as guides and as steeds. Most notable of these animals is Odin's eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, which occurs in several circumpolar shamanic religions. (Price 2000:70-71) Animals in Norse mythology were used as personal guardians. (Jordan 2001:101) “The term *fylgja* found in Scandinavian tradition relates the concept could be the fetches or ‘souls’ of individuals, equivalent to animal guardians.” (Williams 2001:204) Jon Hjaltalin tells us that in 19<sup>th</sup> century

Iceland, the concept of the personal animal spirit, ‘the follower’, was still in use and was visible to seerers. (Hjaltalin 1871:15)

The Saami also used trances to shape-shift (Ellis 1968:124-127) similar to Odin and Freyja. Interestingly, the Saami’s animal form is called *sueje*, meaning shadow. (Ellis 1968:126) The Saami ‘shadow’ sounds the same as the Norse *fylgja*, ‘follower.’ The word *sueje* could also be phonetically linked to *seiðr*.

The world tree, Yggdrasil, that Odin hangs himself on to gain the power of the runes also has a home in Saami shamanism. The hanging of Odin on Yggdrasil is a form of trance and interestingly, the roots of this magical tree, “are surrounded by animals’ each with its own special place in the cosmological scheme: cockerels, snakes and deer, goats, cats, hawks and ravens, wolves and dogs.” (Price 2007:50, 109) The cat has its own place among the foundations of the cosmological world tree, emphasizing its importance in the Norse worldview.

### 3. *Berserkers*

The most well-known characters of Norse mythology are probably the Berserkers, seeing as how their name has made its way into the English language. The Berserkers are mostly understood to the layperson as frenzied warriors who wore only bearskins to battle, and are depicted on Norse picture stones, tapestries, and figurines. (Price 2007:373) While such examples of warrior cult practices do exist, it is the shamanistic attributes of the Berserker that are most telling. “Thus the bear heroes of Scandinavian tradition not only have the attributes of bears, but in some stories can go into a trance in order to emerge in their bear form to fight in battle.” (Williams 2001:204) Hjaltalin says that warriors who sent their spirits in the form of bears were much more efficient in winning battles than in their own human forms. (Hjaltalin 1871:14)

The Berserkers are worth mentioning because they were potentially related to cats in their magical abilities: “The bear is called Wide-Stepper, Cub, Winterling, Ourse, *Gib-Cat*, Tusker,

Youngling, Roarer, Jölfudr (?), Wilful-Sharp, She-Bear, Horse-Chaser, Scratcher, Hungry One, Blómr, Bustler.” The bear is also called the “Witch-beast.” (Brodeur 1916:210) Why would bears be called gib-cats (male) and witch-beasts unless they are associated with Freyja’s gib-cats and magic? Perhaps using cat skin and fur had a similar function as bear and wolf skin in shamanic magic. (Price 2007:368-369) It is possible that sorceresses, such as Thorbjorg, were “priestesses” of Freyja. It is logical to conclude that these “priestesses” used the spirits of cats when performing *seiðr*. Bears and wolves, then, can be interpreted as male shamanic helpers, just as cats were for females, as men are recorded as the Berserker and Ulfheðnar warriors. (Lindow 2001:75)

#### 4. *Animal Sacrifice*

Since it has been established that animals played a significant role in the Norse worldview and shamanic magic, the logical conclusion about finding animal remains, both as food and not as food, in conjunction with ritualistic situations at archaeological sites is that these animal remains must have had an important, perhaps shamanic, role in the ritual contexts in which they were found.

Williams (2001) explains animal sacrifice as a transformative process. With animal sacrifice in relation to burials, “...individuals could shape-shift into an animal form that represents an extension of the social person.” (Williams 2001:204)

The problem is that most sacrificial animal finds are found in cremation contexts. In the cremation process, bodies are physically transformed, and with the bodies of sacrificed animals, a new physical and spiritual entity is created. (Williams 2001:199) If cremation, interpreted as transformation, is the most common form of animal sacrifice, (Williams 2001:195-198) then what does it mean when we find unburnt bone, especially in further removed burial contexts?

It seems that if cremation is transformative, infusing the deceased with animal characteristics, then unburnt animal sacrifices in burial contexts could mean shamanic

transportation. (Williams 2001:202) In non-burial, or semi-burial contexts (*i.e.*, sacrifice in a grave field), animal sacrifices could be intermediaries with supernatural powers. It is widely known that shamans sometimes evoke animal spirits by imitating animals and/or sacrificing them. (Williams 2001:203) The variety of animal sacrifice suggests that unburnt animal sacrifice not found in burial contexts, but with human sacrifice, could go either way, as steeds *or* intermediaries, or as a combination. It is tempting to say that both the animal and human act as intermediaries, while the animal also acts as a steed to get the human in the right place to speak with the right god(s).

Horse and sheep/goats are by far the most common animals cremated, (Williams 2001:197) so what does it mean when we find more rare animals? Discussed earlier in IV.B.1., rare animals found in sacrificial contexts could mean ritual activities of nobility, but it could also mean desperation. (Williams 1920:389-390) Exotic and expensive animals would not be used lightly, especially if they were not being used as food.

## 5. *Implications of the Cat in Shamanism*

If the eight-legged horse was Odin's shamanic transport, perhaps cats were Freyja's, as suggested by Davidson, (Davidson 1964:120) since they are depicted pulling her cart. Following this, it is possible to conclude that animal sacrifices were used by the Norse to facilitate contact with the world of the gods. The sacrificial animals were selected according to the god they wished to placate. (Nilsson 2003:299)

*Sitja uti*, or “sitting out”, is a type of shamanic divination mentioned by Snorri in *Heimskringla*. (Morris and Magnusson 1905:494-495) *Sitja uti* meant “to spend a night out on cross-ways amidst invocations to the powers of darkness to reveal secrets or tender counsel.” (Morris and Magnusson 1905:451) Not much is said about *sitja uti*, but its equivalent, *uti-seta*, is recorded in later Icelandic folklore. (Arnason 1880:436) In *uti-seta*, “The intending sitter-out must take with him a grey cat (Freyja's attribute), a grey sheepskin, the hide of a walrus or an old

ox, and an axe... Here the axe, in an unaccountable way, drives the cat out of the ceremony, and is made to serve a purpose it cannot serve, for no eye can see the edge of it in the dark, while the eyes of the cat are visible enough." (Morris and Magnusson 1905:495) If the cat was still preserved in the relatively modern shamanic/ritualistic practice of *uti-seta*, it is logical that the tradition of the cat must have been passed down from the Norse shamanic practice of *sitja uti*.

## B. MAGIC

### 1. *Cats in Norse Magic:*

Cats are found extensively throughout medieval to modern magic, but are strangely lacking in the Norse magic recorded in the Icelandic literature. The few uses of cats in Norse magic mentioned in the Icelandic literature are as Freyja's steeds; the sound of a cat to bind Fenris the Wolf; disguising the Midgard-serpent as a cat to trick Thor; (Brodeur 1916:65-67) as magically enhanced and controlled black cats used for protection by Thorolf Sledgehammer; (Wawn 2001:231-232) and as a monster mother of a giant, (Hjaltalin 1871:17) whom is presumably protective of her son. Although rarely present in the Icelandic literary corpus, cats were used in Norse magic as seen in their tradition in later magical practices, such as *uti-seta*.

Likely occurrences of cats in Norse magic would be in a type of *Hieros Gamos*, as seen in Freyja and the cat's sexual natures; *seiðr* shape-shifting or night-riding, (Palsson and Edwards 1989:20) seen in disguising the Midgard-serpent and driving Freyja's cart; *sitja uti* divination; protective magic, seen in binding the Fenris Wolf, and protecting Thorolf and the giant Brusi; and communicating with Freyja to intercede in land, livestock, or human fertility. (Davidson 1988:119, 121) In the Icelandic literature, it is common to find horse heads as weapons in battle magic. The recurrent theme of cats and protection further emphasizes the theory of their strong usage in defensive magic. In *Egil's Saga*, a horse head is used to create infertility in the land of an enemy (Scudder 2001:106). It is reasonable to conclude that the cat heads found in medieval

to modern magical literature were used for the opposite, to incite fertility, as will be seen in V.B.2, below.

## 2. *Cats in Medieval to Modern Magic:*

There are many examples of cats used in medieval through modern Scandinavian magic. It seems as though the tradition of cats in magic was passed down through the generations, turning into the versions we see in the relatively recent past. Simpson explains that in Icelandic tradition, magical books are surprisingly not received from the Devil, but rather from dead ancestors, whom were guardians of pagan tradition. (Simpson 1975:103) It is plausible that cats were popularly used in Norse magic, as they were in relatively recent magic. Although they were omitted in the medieval literature, they were kept in practice.

On display at the Holmavik Museum of Sorcery in Iceland are cat skins that were utilized in 17<sup>th</sup> century spells. One that is most prominent is the skin of a black tomcat used as a canvas for magic signs inscribed with virginal menstrual blood. It is interesting to note that the spell specifically says, “tomcat,” indicating a possible association with Freyja’s gib-cats that was passed down through the centuries.

A 17<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic spell requires a cat hair to find a thief. (Flowers 1989:97) Freyja was associated with rectifying theft in mythology. In *Gylfaginning XXXV*, her signature items, the famous necklace Brisingamen (Brodeur 1916:49) and her shape-shifting falcon cloak, were stolen. She also played a role in recovering Idunn’s stolen apples in *Skaldskaparmal VIII*. (Brodeur 1916:110) A 20<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic spell required a cat paw to “bring forth deceptions of the eye and to know how to do them.” (Flowers 1989:103) This spell sounds shamanic in nature, as it pertains to disguise, and perhaps shape-shifting.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century to present day story of Rev. Eirikur of Vogsosar tells of the use of what sounds like a cat *fylgja*. Here, a “sending” in the form of a cat was sent to attack Eirikur<sup>8</sup>. Upon

killing the cat “sending,” Eirikur weakened his enemy and was able to kill him. (Simpson 1975:67)

The magician with the cat “sending,” or *fylgja*, in Eirikur’s story is from the extreme northwest of Iceland, which was an area infamous for its black magicians, (Simpson 1975:106) and the very same area as the Holmavik Sorcery Museum. Another *fylgja* similarity found in Scandinavian folklore is the Norwegian *smørkatt*, meaning, “butter cat” (Icelandic *tilberi* or *snakkur* and Swedish *bjara*). The magical *smørkatt* would steal milk from neighbors’ cows and bring it home to their owner. The *smørkatt* was depicted as a ball of yarn, (Heide 2006:165) which brings us back to *seiðr*.

The most significant reference to Freyja, is the occurrence of cats in love spells. In Scandinavian magic from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, “...connection with desire, begarilse, may be supposed to be behind the use of feline body parts in charms where desire plays such a significant role.” (Mitchell 1998:25) Cat heads were used in many of these love charms. (Mitchell 1998:23-25) The use of cat heads could be interpreted as a means of communing with Freyja, as heads are understood to be where the soul resides. (Carlie 2004:136)

### **3.      *Magic, Women and Cats***

As all children know, black cats are the pets of witches. The demonization of cats is so ingrained in the modern subconscious, emphasizing its entanglement with the magic Christianity sought to destroy. The cat’s association with female pagan magic played a part in its unfortunate mistreatment after the conversion to Christianity all over Europe. In the Middle Ages, cats were demonized alongside the “witches” that used them in their “spells.” Due to Christianity’s lust for complete control, cats must have been an integral part of pagan religion; otherwise, why would they have been so entwined with demonization, witches and even the Devil (Darnton 1939:92) himself?

Reaves suggests that Freyja's sheer popularity contributed to her relatively infrequent cameos in Icelandic literature. (Reaves 2008:1) Reaves continues to explain that Christians found Freyja and her sexuality offensive, as the celibacy of Christian priests directly conflicted with the sexual nature of Freyja (Reaves 2008:3) and possibly her cult members and leaders. Most importantly, "Freyja's sexual appetites are well known, and cats, one of the most lascivious of animals known in the north, drew her cart. In this respect she was the very anti-thesis of the goddess of the new religion, the Virgin Mary." (Reaves 2008:2)

The conversation between the Norwegian King Haraldr Hardradi and Stufr, the son of Thordr, nicknamed Köttr (cat) in *Laxadæla Saga*, accentuates the sexual importance of the cat understood by the Norse. "Haraldr asks Stufr whether his father was 'the hard or the soft cat'... the person who is soft (blaudr) could not be a father... blaudr suggests female suppleness, while hvatr (hard, used to designate male animals) means sharp and evokes the image of penis." (Jochens 1995:76) The vast amount of power Freyja held, as well as what she stood for, unfortunately condemned her and her cats.

In pagan religions, such as that of the Norse, women held important positions in ritual practices. They actively participated in the killing of victims, both human and animal, and in divination, (Davidson 1988:68) as seen with the *Angel of Death* in Ibn Fadlan's account of the Rus. Women are thought to have been heavily involved in sacrificing to fertility deities, and some fertility priests and priestesses, "...may have been of high or even royal birth." (Davidson 1988:131) As discussed earlier, Freyja was associated with nobility. The high positions of women as sacrificial and ritual leaders would later turn out to be their downfall.

The relatively independent and "masculine" Norse women were different from others of their time period. The Norse woman's position in society improved in the Viking Age, but as Christianity crept in, the Norse woman's power was choked. (Williams 1920:110-112; 121) As a result, the most powerful women, such as sorceresses, (Williams 1920:120) were branded witches

so that the new Christian kings of Scandinavia could oust the competition of local nobility, as well as their patron goddess, Freyja, and her cats.

By the Icelandic Christian conversion in AD 1000, cats were so enmeshed with women that we see “cat” as insults to men in some of the sagas. As offensive as it is today, *kausi*, or “pussy,” was used to emasculate men in *Heidarviga Saga*. In *Orkneyinga Saga*, the phrase, “You do not mean to lie here like some cat while I fight for both of us,” was used to urge a man into attacking an enemy. (Holtsmark 1962-65:149-150)

In French folklore, cats symbolized sex: “*Le chat, la chatte, le minet* mean the same thing in French slang as “pussy” does in English, and they have served as obscenities for centuries... French folklore attaches special importance to the cat as a sexual metaphor or metonym... Cats connoted fertility and female sexuality everywhere.” (Darnton 1939:95) French folklore loaded cats with more symbolism than any other animal and dictated that caution must be exercised because to encounter a cat ran the risk of encountering the devil or a witch in disguise. “Witches transformed themselves into cats in order to cast spells on their victims... To protect yourself from sorcery by cats there was one, classic remedy: maim it.” (Darnton 1939:92) The French tradition of witches taking the form of cats sounds considerably similar to shamanic shape-shifting.

Cats and witches go hand in hand (see fig. 2). Witches rode cats, held their Sabbat on Fridays (Norse Freyr or Freyja’s day), which was especially evil as Friday was the day Christ died, (Howey 1989:60) and made love charms out of cat parts. In *Eyrbyggja Saga*, a particularly notorious Icelandic witch, named Katla, was stoned to death for night-riding. (Palsson and Edwards 1989:20; Williams 1920:408)

Even today, cats are still associated negatively with women. Along with “pussy,” meaning “scared” or “weak,” there are husbandless, spinster “cat ladies,” and petty, “catty” women who like to argue over nothing. In fact, cats are more closely entwined with women than previously imagined. A recent study published in the journal, *Behavioural Processes*, found that,

“Cats attach to humans, and particularly women, as social partners, and it's not just for the sake of obtaining food.” (Viegas 2011:1) This study reveals that, “cat-human relationships are nearly identical to human-only bonds, with cats sometimes even becoming a furry ‘child’ in nurturing homes...” (Viegas 2011:1) and that “female owners have more intense relationships with their cats than do male owners.” (Wedl 2011 as quoted in Viegas 2011:1)

### C. SKINNING

The most common occurrence of cat finds in the Viking and Middle Ages are those with evidence of skinning. Skinned cats are the most common finds of cats during this time period because they are usually found in large numbers and in the larger towns, hence they are more likely to be found in excavations.

This research project proposes the vast amount of cat skinning was due to the value of the fur itself as ritual material. (Crabtree 2002:65) In 12<sup>th</sup> century Iceland, cat skins were worth as much as three fox skins or three yards of homespun. (Hårding 1990:107) Cat fur was highly valued, and hence very expensive, because like the live animal, it had magical and symbolic properties. Even a live cat held great worth, as seen in the Welsh Law Book, written in AD 948, where the prince’s cat was worth its length in corn, (Clutton-Brock 1993:41; Hatting 1990:192) about 200 kilograms of corn. (Andersson 1993:30) (see fig. 3) Intriguingly, Freyja and her Celtic equivalent, Cerridwen, (Graves 1948:221) were called corn spirits. (Howey 1989:59; Price 2007:214) Because it was so expensive, this special fur was probably mostly used by powerful people who could afford it, such as sorceresses who used it in their magic, and the nobility who used it as talismans of their patron goddess, Freyja.

The shamaness, Thorbjorg, in *Erik the Red’s Saga*, wore a white cat fur lined hood and gloves. In the Middle Ages, white ermine fur was reserved only for royalty, (Colling 1986:196) and as we know, Freyja was of noble blood. Perhaps the importance of the sorceress, such as Thorbjorg, was passed down to later royalty and can be seen in the white fur that is reserved for

them. In Viking and Medieval Ireland, faunal and literary evidence of deliberate breeding of cats for their pelts reveals white cats and white-breasted black cats were selectively bred. (McCormick 1988:221, 227) In Scandinavia, selective breeding of white-coated cats was known to occur fairly early, and in Sweden, it was documented as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. (Colling 1986:196) “The demands of the fur industry lay behind this trend, furriers paying substantially more for white pelts.” (Wigh 2001:120) Iceland was supposedly known for its white fur. (Andersson 1993:30)

When one thinks of witches, only pitch-black cats come to mind. In France, and probably elsewhere in Europe, “White cats could be as satanic as the black, in the daytime as well as at night...” (Darnton 1939:92) It can hardly be pure coincidence that the white cat and its fur were associated with royalty and the elite, magic, and later, witches. White cat fur must have held magical properties in the pagan world. Freyja’s Celtic cousin, Cerridwen, was known as the ‘White Goddess.’ (Graves 1948:221) Hel, a possible version of Freyja, was half black and half white, (Andersson 1993:255) displaying Freyja’s duality. White bears are also present in Norse shamanism as seen in the *Greenland Lay of Atli* (Thorpe et. al.:235) and *The Flat Island Book (Flateyjarbok): Olaf's Saga Tryggvassonar.* (Ellis 1968:127)

It is possible that cat skin was used in magic the way Berserkers used bearskin in combat. It was established earlier that bears were magically related to cats, and evidence of bearskins placed on Scandinavian Iron Age funeral pyres supports this magic skin relationship. (Bond 2006:95-96) Ingstad believes the leather found in the Oseberg ship burial was likely cat skin, (Ingstad 1993:254-255) which was used in the same fashion as Thorbjorg’s sorceress attire. Cat skin and fur could have been used as religious pieces of clothing or worn like an amulet, such as Thor’s hammer. Since Thor’s hammers were thought to have been introduced in opposition of Christianity, (Nordeide 2007:1) perhaps cat skin and fur was an earlier form of pre-Christian ‘natural’ amulets.

In Scandinavia, the towns of Old Lodore, Sweden (12<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century), (Colling 1986:196) Sigtuna, Sweden (late 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century), (Hårding 1990:107; Wigh 2001:119) and Odense, Denmark, have examples of skinned cats. In the medieval town of Odense, a pit next to the house foundations contained the remains of at least 68 cats that were dated to AD 1070 ± 100 in the Viking Age, which is remarkable since large amounts of cat bones are not normally found until medieval deposits. Osteological analysis suggests the "...cats were kept in captivity. Cut marks on the skulls and the lower jaw show that the purpose of this was fur production." (Hatting 1990:179, 192) The pit also contained cattle, pigs, sheep, poultry, a field mouse, two whole foxes, a fragment of an upper jaw of a fox cub, and loose bones of raven. The presence of the ravens could indicate ritualistic contexts considering Odense is reminiscent of Odin and ravens were one of his sacred animals. The ravens had no cut marks to indicate skinning, and could have been pets. (Hatting 1990:181)

Most of the skinned cat finds seem to come from the Viking expansion sites outside of Scandinavia, mostly in England and Ireland. In Exeter, England, cats were mostly found in the post-medieval period, although they were the most common of the more rare species in earlier phases and are somewhat associated with burials. In the post-medieval levels, large numbers of skinned cats were present. (Maltby 1979:12) At Thetford, England, the remains of some 18 skinned cats and kittens were found in one pit. (Richards 1991:74) In Waterford, Ireland, the cats were bred for their fur from the late 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. "What sets Waterford from other urban centers is the scale on which cat breeding for this purpose was undertaken." (McCormick 1997:835) In York (c. 930 - mid 11th century), England, the cat skinning was probably small-scale and opportunistic and occurred earlier than the Waterford cats. (Hall 2003:3233-3234) Large amounts of skinned cats were found in Viking and Medieval Ireland. (McCormick 1988:221, 227) Although some of these are Medieval and not Viking period sites, Christianity did not immediately eradicate all pagan practices. Cats also proliferated rapidly in the growing

medieval towns, so it seems natural that the inhabitants found ways to get rid of the growing cat population.

Since cats were seemingly sacred in Scandinavia, it is possible that large amounts of cats were only permitted to be killed for fur outside of the Scandinavian homelands, and then sent back for magical and/or elite use. Birka, for example, had a relatively large cat population and none of the cats were used for fur. (Wigh 2001:119-120) These expansion sites also had easier access to exotic animals, which perhaps provides a more realistic explanation.

## VI. THE NORSE WORLD

### A. BORRE STYLE ART

#### I. *Cats in the Borre Style*

Animal art can provide a lot of insight into ancient belief systems. When a theme is found repeatedly, it indicates integration into everyday lifestyles as well as religion. (Renfrew 2000:52) “Thus, material culture depicting and/or associated with animals provides clues about ideology, religious practices and the role of animals within spiritual systems.” (O’Day et al. 2002:xii)

Cats are frequently and easily recognizable in Ancient Egyptian art, but most do not realize that cats are also very prevalent in Viking Age art. The most frequent occurrence of the cat is found in the Borre style, which flourished from AD 830/850 to c. 975, during the time of the greatest Viking era expansion. (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006:312) “The Borre style takes its name from the objects found in the ship burial in a great barrow at Borre in Vestfold, Norway, a few miles north of Oseberg.” (Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1980:87) It is known as “one of the most vigorous Viking Period styles,” (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006:312) being the most widely spread.

Borre style is characterized by its gripping-beasts, many of which are clearly cats (see figs. 4-9, which represent a tiny fraction of cats in Borre art). “Frequently depicted animals are cats and bat-like creatures with rounded ears. The gripping-beast is one of the older and most

fascinating features of Viking Period art.” (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006:313) The gripping-beast, or cat in our case, is an old art style, culminating in the heart of the Viking Age, indicating a long time accumulation of cat significance. The evolution of the gripping-beast style led to the characteristic Borre look where, “The animal now has a triangular cat-like face with distinct eyebrows, ears and neck tendrils.” (Gräslund 2000:64) The cat is also found in the other styles as well, such as the later Mammen, and earlier pre-Borre styles such as the types found at the famous Oseberg ship burial.

## 2. *Shamanism in the Borre Style*

The Borre<sup>9</sup> style is also special in that it has been associated with shamanistic magic. It is no coincidence then that the steeds of Freyja, goddess of *seiðr* magic, would be featured in a shamanic, trance-inducing art style. The staring eyes, dismembered bodies, and split faces seem to represent the transformative stages of shamanic shape-shifting. The animals in the art are also thought to have transferred their power to the object and the owner, (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006:320) much like wearing a skin would transfer an animal’s power to a Berserker.

Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson concludes that the Borre style was used as a defensive type of magic because it appeals to the shape-shifting aspects of shamanism and is not found on blade weapons. As such, it can be associated with Odin, (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006:320-321) and more importantly, Freyja. The cats of the Borre style could further be interpreted as helpers in *seiðr* magic. If the cats found in art are helpers in magic, perhaps the sacrifice of cats at ritual places could hold the same or a similar purpose. To further this connection, the mixing of human and animal forms found in artwork (Williams 1920:359) (see fig. 10) could go hand in hand with the mixing of humans and animals in sacrifice, like that of Ingiríðarstaðir. It seems that the skull pit at Ingiríðarstaðir (AD 870– before 1300) is from roughly the same time period of the Borre style, but more work needs to be done to get more precise dates.

“Animal art among Migration Period societies...may have related to an ‘ideology of transformation’ in early Anglo-Saxon society,” (Williams 2001:206) and hence its cousin, Norse society. The cats of the Borre style Norse art may have had transformative shamanic functions such as shape-shifting in defensive magic, (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006:321) especially when mixed with humanoid figures. The Borre cats, by themselves, could represent shape-shifting, and other shamanic functions, such as the proper trance to allow one to commune with Freyja for whatever purpose.

## B. NORSE BURIALS

As with all cultures, the funerary rites of the Norse evolved over time. As the Viking Age emerged, a tendency towards simpler, than the previous Vendel era, rites grew. Like the rest of the Norse religion, funerary practices varied by location, as the visible patterns in the Scandinavian homelands show a higher tendency towards cremation over inhumation (Bond 2006:90; Sigvallius 1994:5; Williams 2001:194), although both are widely used, and burial in mounds at sacred locations over flat and stone graves. (Ellis 1968:10; Foote and Wilson 1970:407) The Norse also provisioned their dead with grave gifts of items they would continue to use in the afterlife. The importance of the ship found in burials, as either real ships or stone outlines, is seen on Viking Age picture stones, which depict the ship’s role in Norse mythology and in commemoration of someone deceased. (Skoglund 2008:396) Ship symbolism varied in manifestation based on regionalized cultural and social values, such as celebrating the prestige of warfare and hence status. (Skoglund 2008:399-400)

Grave goods were placed in burials “as metaphors for aspects of daily life.” (Clarke and Heald 2002:81) These artifactual metaphors reveal worldviews and social relationships that would otherwise be undeterminable. For example, Clarke and Heald (2008) suggest that “fish-tailed” combs represent more than just provisioning the dead with functional toilet articles. Rather, they represent the importance of the Viking Age fish economy and thus uncover the

source of the owner's high social status. (Clarke and Heald 2008:86-88) Grave goods were used as more than just metaphors of daily life as well. They also reflect worldviews, as worldviews and daily life reflect each other. Ships and horses are common finds in Norse burials and were more than just status indicators and transportation mechanisms in life. They were also transportation means in death, guiding and steering the deceased to the Underworld. (Maher 2009:213,225; Skoglund 2008:399; Williams 1920:417-419)

Animal sacrifices were commonly found in pagan graves. (Ellis 1968:13-14; Foote and Wilson 1970:409) The most common of these animal sacrifices were horse and dog, (Bond 2006:90-91; Maher 2009:235-236) and are mostly interpreted as travel companions. (Bond 2006:89; Hemmendorff 1984:7; Williams 1920:417) Some scholars, such as Gräslund and Maher, argue that these animal sacrifices were more than simple companions in death, but were also magical mediums between life and death. (Gräslund 2002:173) In some instances, we find that even humans, interpreted as slaves, were sacrificed with nobility. (Frye 2005:67; Hemmendorff 1984:7)

Iceland is quite different from the burial tendency noted above as there is only one cremation burial of note. (Byock and Walker, et al. 2005:196) Horse inclusions are more common here than any other Norse burials, and certainly outweigh ships. (Eldjarn 1984; Maher 2009:226) The higher ratio of horses to ships may be due to the Icelandic landscape as, on a local level, it was easier to travel by land in Iceland than by ship as it would be in the Scandinavian homelands. (Maher 2009:225)

### ***1. Widow Burning:***

A tantalizing aspect of Norse funerary practices is the hypothesis of widow burning/sacrifice. It was thought that it was not good to be buried alone, (Major 1924:29) so widows threw themselves on their deceased husbands' pyres. To determine instances of widow

burning, Haakon Schetelig discerned that the amount of female and male grave goods would be roughly equivalent, suggesting a spousal relationship. (Hemmendorff 1984:8)

Widow burning/sacrifice occurred in the Norse mythology. (Ellis 1968:15) In *The Beguiling of Gylfi*, Nanna, Baldr's wife, throws herself onto his funeral pyre. Is it a coincidence that Freyja makes a cameo at Baldr's funeral, driving her cat cart? The woman who wishes to commit suicide to be with Freyja is brought to mind, (Davidson 1993:109) and it appears that Freyja, and perhaps her cats, were associated with sacrificed females.

Andersson's research on cats in Sweden revealed 50 cats as grave gifts, which began as a common grave gift during the Vendel period and increased with more frequency during the Viking Age (see fig. 11). Although the cat occurs more frequently as grave gifts from the Vendel to the Viking Age, it was by no means a comparatively common grave gift. For example, in the Lund grave field, cats as grave offerings represent only 1.8% of the burial material, whereas dogs represent 53.7%. "The cat is accordingly an unusual and possibly highly valued gift grave at a burial," (Andersson 1993:13-14, my own translation from the Swedish) as seen in North Spånga where there was only one cat per cremation (Sigvallius 1994:69) (data on cats and inhumations not given) and in Andersson's catalog where the graves with cats are usually artifact rich. (Andersson 1993:18-19)

### C. NORSE SACRIFICE

Sacred places in Norse society were associated with sacrifice, as blood and ale were used as mediums for sanctifying areas and for obtaining hidden godly knowledge<sup>10</sup>. (Davidson 1988:68) At these sacred places, people would be able to access their gods and honor them with gifts and ask for help. (Gunnell 2001:6) Animal sacrifice was by far the most common kind of sacrifice. The majority of these were everyday domestic animals, but occasionally, humans and rarer animals, such as cats, were used. This research suggests sacrifices of human and cats were

infrequent and only reserved for severe and special occasions involving contact with the gods. (Davidson 1988:68; Hemmendorff 1984:4)

It is known that human sacrifice, usually limited to criminals and slaves, in the Viking era was used mostly in crises and large national festivals. A doom-ring and sacrificial stone are thought to have been utilized, at least in Iceland, where the victims' fates were decided and then carried out. (Williams 1920:389-390) The gods were called on in times of extreme need, and even kings were sacrificed if all else failed. (Davidson 1988:66)

The gods of the Norse did not cater to the lazy, but they were no tyrants either. As long as the proper respect and sacrifices were made, the gods could be called upon as helping hands when human means were exhausted. (Williams 1920:368) The gods were also placated after requests were granted in order to preserve the luck and protection gifted from them. Some of these were on a very large, even national, scale, and occurred every few years in order to ensure the land's fertility.

Adam of Bremen tells us that grandiose sacrifices of both man and animal took place at a great Norse temple in Uppsala, Sweden, every ninth year. Animals and humans would be hung from a large sacrificial tree in veneration of fertility deities. (Davidson 1989:59) Unburnt human bone and seven different species of animal bones, including the cat, were found at Uppsala. (Henriksson 2003:2) Odin's Howe at Uppsala also probably had cats, so it makes sense that her sacred animal would be found at a cult site associated with her in Iceland. One cat was also found at the Norse cult site of Lejre, Denmark; however, the details were not available for this project. (Christensen 1991:184)

Mostly, though, cults were usually small and varied by location. "There is not much evidence for a strong organized priesthood in Scandinavia by the tenth century..." (Davidson 1988:68) Place names are typically the first indicator of cult sites. Places with the words *hof*, *horg*, *lundr*, *ve*, *vangr*, or *vin* all denote different types of sacred places. (Gunnell 2001:3) It can be hard, though, to determine which places were dedicated to specific deities unless their names

are also found in place names. Looking to the archaeofaunal record can help identify more cult places associated with individual deities.

The sacrifice of certain animals found at sites can be viewed as indicators of which gods the local people wished to placate, (Nilsson 2003:299) “The Northmen sacrificed various kinds of animals to win the favor of the gods, the one used being determined by the part of the country as well as by the deity to be honored.” (Williams 1920:388) Nilsson made the case for horse bones as indicators of sacrificial sites dedicated to Odin and pigs to Freyr. She also made the connection with the little known god, Ull, and possible bone skates and hunting luck, the few known things about him. (Nilsson 2003:302) If horses and dogs (Davidson 1988:59) were sacrificed to Odin and pigs to Freyr, then cats were most certainly dedicated to Freyja and indicate places of her worship.

At the sacrificial bog site of Skedemosse, Sweden, the remains of sacrificed cats, as well as humans, other animals, and gold artifacts, were found. (Andersson 1993:27) These offerings are interpreted as domestic fertility offerings, and female place names around Skedemosse are thought to be named for Freyja. (Davidson 1988:131-132) The gold artifacts were also associated with Freyja, as she wept golden tears lamenting her missing husband, Odr. (Davidson 1964:23)

Freyja was associated with *horgs*, which were probably originally outdoor cult sites with altars that later were relegated to houses. (Davidson 1988:58; Davidson 1993:55, Einarsson 2008:148) *Hyndluljod* “suggests that the *harg* was a cairn-like structure in the open air, coloured red from the blood of slaughtered sacrificial animals,” (Zachrisson 2000:166) where sacrifices to Freyja were made. (Reaves 2008:1) *Horg* sites, at least the later ones at houses, were probably private and local. (Einarsson 2008:148) Cats are found at later *horg* cult houses, but human sacrifice at these sites is rare.

At the 6<sup>th</sup> century cult house site of Uppåkra, Sweden, (Andren 2004:229) evidence of only one cat was found. The only part of the cat identified was the jaw. (Nilsson 1998:92) Cats were also found at a Viking Age cult house at Borg, Sweden. (Einarsson 2008:155) It is not

certain that the remains of the cats were only jaws, but there was an usually high proportion of skulls and jawbones of all the fauna found, (Nielsen 1996:100) making it possible for cat jaws to have been prominent. Lastly, a possible cat skull was found in a foundation pit of a Viking age house at Bunkeflo, Sweden. (Carlie 2004:136) The jaw, as the voice of the soul, could be related to the breath of *seiðr* magic, (Heide 2006:165) as it was called a “weird kind of magic chant” by Morris and Magnusson. (1905:491-492) Although not the case at Ingiríðarstaðir, perhaps the cat jaws at these other locations performed a *seiðr* chant in death.

## VII. INGIRÍÐARSTAÐIR

### A. ÞEGJANDADALUR VALLEY HISTORY

Iceland: land of fire and ice; where volcanoes erupt amidst glaciers. It is no surprise the Norse found this island to be magical. In the Norse creation myth, the world forms at the meeting of Muspellheim (land of fire) and Niflheim (land of ice). Perhaps the Norse saw Iceland as a magical place for this very story, or was perhaps the very inspiration for the story. Although much of Scandinavia and Norse outposts will be explored, the contexts of a mysterious Icelandic Norse grave field, Ingiríðarstaðir in the Valley of Silence, will be the focal point in searching for connections of the cat and its possible ritualistic role in the Viking Age.

Ingiríðarstaðir is one of the largest grave fields found in Iceland (see region map, Map 1), with an estimated 15-20 burials. (Roberts 2009:6) It is located in Þegjandadalur, which translated means, “Valley of Silence,” in Northeastern Iceland (see Map 2). Þegjandadalur is situated between the eastern mountain of Thorgerdsfjall and Mulaheiði to the west. The valley runs roughly from north to south and is about 7 kilometers long.

Þegjandadalur is mentioned in the Book of Settlements and suggests the area was settled sometime in the c. 10th century, as the archaeology reveals, but more credible historical texts from the c. 13th century provide more useful data about the population of the Valley (Roberts 2011). It is not known why the valley was deserted (Roberts 2009:1-2).

## B. FINDINGS

In the summer of 2010, Howell Roberts and his team excavated the pagan grave field of Ingiríðarstaðir. Within the grave field, they uncovered an L-shaped turf wall, about 10 meters North-South and 3 meters East-West. The Landnám Tephra, volcanic tephra dated to about AD 870, was found inside this wall. There were no support holes or floor installations, indicating this wall had no roof, and therefore could not have been a farm site or outhouse. Roberts believes this turf wall may represent a kind of elevation as a memorial to the surrounding burials. Most intriguingly, a few holes or pits with exciting finds were discovered within the turf wall itself (see figs. 12, 13). (Roberts 2010:6-7)

One of the pits, located in the corner of the turf wall, was empty. The other large pit contained human skull fragments and an unburnt partial skeleton of a cat, along with unburnt (Brewington 2010:3) partial remains of cattle, sheep/goats (majority), and a pig. (Brewington 2010:5) Next to the turf wall, another very small pit was discovered to contain undisturbed bones of newborns. The newborns' grave was covered with turf containing the Landnám Tephra, and had not been moved since the grave was made. It appears that the grave is equal to the turf wall itself. (Roberts 2010:6-7)

Although weathered and eroded, the cat is easily the most remarkable aspect of the entire assemblage. Of the bones found (see fig. 14), it can be determined that they belonged to a single cat. Even more remarkable is the lack of cut marks on any of the cat bones, (Brewington 2010:5) indicating it was not skinned.

Normally, a faunal assemblage of this nature would be considered food waste scraps. The presence of the human skull fragments could be interpreted as contamination from a waste pit being dug into the grave field, but that does not work on multiple levels. (Roberts 2010:6-7) Cats were not eaten and so would not make sense being in a food waste pit. This cat also had no cut marks from skinning, which might account for it being in a midden. Most importantly, though, Roberts believes that it does not make sense to dig a waste pit for simple food scraps in a

turf wall within a pagan burial field, where other locations would better suit the purpose of simple household disposal since there are no known dwellings nearby.

Perhaps the most exciting reason not to consider the skull and cat pit as used for waste disposal is the human skull fragments themselves. The skull fragments, a temporal bone and a mostly complete cranial vault, represent two adult individuals. The individual with the mostly complete cranial vault has “clear peri-mortem blunt instrument trauma.” (Gestsdóttir 2011) This hints at unexplained rituals taking place at the turf wall within the grave field.

Roberts believes that the skull and cat pit does not represent a burial, but is rather enigmatic with ritualistic flavors. The findings at Ingiríðarstaðir are very unclear and Roberts is reluctant to interpret anything with confidence as there are still too many unknowns, such as when before AD 1300, why, and how the structure was built. Currently, there is no functional interpretation for the structure and Roberts believes the grave field location indicates ritual activity. Other Icelandic sites are yielding strange results as well, and suggest new interpretations of pagan mortuary practices, at least in Iceland. (Roberts 2010b)

Knowledge of places of religious traditions and sacrificial ritual is extremely limited in Viking Age Iceland. (Roberts 2010:6-7) What is most intriguing to me is that cats are pretty much unknown in any Icelandic context in the Viking Age. (McGovern 2009:221; Roberts 2010b) This extremely rare cat find associated with a rare example of likely ritual activity suggests there is more substance to cat symbolism in the Norse world than is currently acknowledged.

### C. BURIAL AT INGIRÍÐARSTAÐIR?

In Iceland, pagan graves are dated from c. 874 until 1100. The graves occurred as single or group burials and were arranged harmoniously. Many of the graves were located along straight roads, emphasizing the importance of death as a voyage. “A small cemetery may be that of a family with powerful members, whose political and economic position allowed them to

extend their occupation in the surrounding area, establishing new farms and new cemeteries at the turn of each generation.” (Friðriksson 2009:18) There were possible indications of ancestor worship in Norse grave fields (Williams 1920:365) that the skull pit at Ingiríðarstaðir seems to support. Judging by the wounds on the skull fragments, we know the people at Ingiríðarstaðir were probably killed on the spot, indicating that the humans, at least, were sacrificed. If the pending analysis of the skull pit should come back as a burial, then one interpretation is that it was a form of sacrificial ancestor worship, asking ancestors for fertility (Price 2007:227) with human and cat offerings.

### **I.      *Burial of a Shamaness?***

Normally, animals found in burials are understood as sacrificial offerings serving the purpose of provisioning the dead, such as food or companions in death. (Bond 2006:92, 89) Cats were not used for food, so the Ingiríðarstaðir cat could have been the companion of the sacrificed human victims, perhaps as a comfort or as a guide/transportation mechanism, as horses (Maher 2009:225) and dogs (Williams 1920:417) are interpreted. It is possible that since horses and dogs are the most common grave animals, especially in Iceland, (Maher 2009:235-236) then the occurrence of a cat in a grave signals a burial of a shamaness and/or her victim. (Ingstad 1993:254) We know there were skull fragments from two individuals in the skull pit; perhaps we have an Icelandic equivalent to the Oseberg burial, which is thought to be of a Freyja priestess and her slave? (Hemmendorff 1984:7) The cat could also have been a performance artifact in the death ritual (Williams 2004:270-273) if the skulls are those of a shamaness’ victims, as seen in Ibn Fadlan’s account of the *Angel of Death* and Adam of Bremen’s account of sacrifice at Uppsala.

The question still remains: What about all the cats in the Birka burials and at other sites with children? Cats occur too frequently in burials at Birka for them all to be sorcerers/esses and/or victims, and children were not known to be victims of sacrifice. Birka was a very wealthy

trading town, (Ericson et al. 1988:1) so their relative abundance there could simply mean luxury transportation to Freyja's Folkvang, especially for women. (Davidson 1993:109) It could also mean a lot of human sacrifice took place at Birka: "The possibility of human sacrifice [at Birka] must not be completely discounted. In five of the nine graves concerned, however, only odd skeletal parts were found, a toe bone, a thigh bone, a leg bone, teeth, a jaw (in two graves) and a skull; in [two of the graves] there is a more general mention of unburnt human bones." (Gräslund 1981:60)

It may be that widow burning (Hemmendorff 1984:8) was a popular Norse Birka custom. The cat bones were found in the cremated Birka graves (Gräslund 1981:50), and the frequency of cats occurs on settlement sites and in graves from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards. (Wigh 2001:119-120) The cremated cats could represent Freyja's cart at Baldr's funeral where his wife sacrificed herself on his pyre, as cremated animals might have symbolised journeys and movement. (Williams 2004:277) On the other hand, the earliest documented occurrence of domestic cats in Sweden comes from a double inhumation grave. (Boessneck 1979:176) An interesting grave find at Birka is a silver and niello ringheaded brooch found in chamber grave 561, which has biting beasts that resemble cats (see fig. 15).

## 2. *Transformation of the Dead*

If indeed the Ingiríðarstaðir skull pit represents a burial, then the mixing of human and animal bones, which was common in the Viking Age, (Bond 2006:90) could also suggest a shamanic transformation of the dead in the afterlife, infusing the deceased with the characteristics of the animals: "It is almost as if the new body of the deceased consisted of the personalities of both humans and animals." (Williams 2004:281) Similar to how bears infused Berserkers with bear qualities, (Hjaltalin 1871:14) it is possible that cats in cremation worked similarly, infusing the humans with feline properties. Perhaps this allowed a husband and wife to be together in the afterlife in a new way, if they were to go to separate halls of the dead. On the Isle of Man, a

Viking era expansion site in the Middle of the Irish Sea, a cat was found in a cremation grave in Balladoole. This was a mass grave of about four people of mixed sex. (Bersu and Wilson 1966:4-8, 88)

### **3.      *Problems with Burial at Ingiríðarstaðir***

There are several problems with the skull pit at Ingiríðarstaðir as being a burial. The first is that all of the Ingiríðarstaðir skull pit bones are unburnt. This indicates the Ingiríðarstaðir cat had a function other than widow burning or transformation, especially since there is no evidence of cremation in Iceland (Williams 1920:414) As other aspects of Norse religion varied by location, the function of cats in burial rituals probably varied as well, as cats are rarely found in cremations in the entire parish of North Spånga, and only 2 of the 26 cremated cats were found in double burials (Sigvallius 1994:69) (note: Birka is located in Halsingtuna parish). The other problem with widow burning at Ingiríðarstaðir is that we do not know the sex of the human victims.

If we cannot say widow burning or cremation transformation at Ingiríðarstaðir, let us go back to the burial of a sacrificial victim of Freyja hypothesis. It seems logical to accept that human sacrifices to Freyja would be female, performed by a female. (Davidson 1988:68; Frye 2005:67) First, the skull pit does not work as a burial at all given that there are no artifacts in the skull pit and the only human remains are skull fragments. Second, even if we knew the human skulls to be female, Andersson's data says that 53.6% of cats in Swedish burials occur in male burials, 32.1% in female, and 14.3% in juvenile graves.

However, cats in female burials do increase from the Migration Period onwards, (Andersson 1993:14) making Freyja victims still plausible in other contexts. Cats in female burials could also represent the women's *fylgjas*, as one dies with the other. (Ellis 1968:128) It is possible that these cat *fylgjas* in female graves represent burials of sorceresses. In fact, the rarity of cats in female graves supports this assumption, as sorceresses were of high status, making their

numbers small. On the Holy Island of Helgö, Sweden, there is a burial of a cat made to look like a woman's grave, complete with known female artifacts. This cat burial is interpreted as representing a woman who died abroad. (Zachrisson 2000:165) Helgö is thought to have been home to magic healers (shamans) up until Christianity. Perhaps this woman was a Freyja priestess who died abroad and as a result, her cat *fylgja* died either naturally or was killed and placed in her grave as a means of burying her soul in her holy home. Otherwise, they could not locate the woman's body, and replaced it with the cat.

Rather than a sacrificial burial to Freyja at Ingiríðarstaðir, perhaps the skull pit represents another kind of symbolic sacrifice. If more cats are buried with men, wealthy women could have sacrificed their cats, as representatives of their *fylgjas*, instead of themselves to accompany their husbands in death. By sacrificing a cat, women could have also attempted to give their husbands fertility in the afterlife. Andersson concludes that cats in burials were status symbols. (Andersson 1993:20, 31-32)

The Gokstad ship burial in Norway (c. AD 900) was the burial of an important chieftain. (Kulturhistorisk Museum 2011) Cats were possibly found with this chieftain (Schetelig 1904:332), along with some other animals. Borre style art was found on his treasures, including brooches featuring felines (Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1980:88, 91) (see fig. 16). This chieftain was probably in his 60s (Nicolaysen 1882:75) and most likely had a wife. Since he was of obvious nobility, it is possible his wife sacrificed her cat to be with him in her stead. The Odin's Howe ship burial (c. 500 AD) at Uppsala, Sweden, probably had cats as well. (Major 1924:119)

Lastly, there is the problem of cats occurring in juvenile graves. Andersson found two juvenile graves at Bjurhovda (graves 39 and 44, both dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century) where the only grave inclusions were cats. Andersson argues that these graves do not lack in wealth just because they only contain cats. In fact, she proposes the opposite; that the cats represent a comfort item to children afraid of death. (Andersson 1993:16) However, this project argues that since the skull pit at Ingiríðarstaðir was in close proximity to the grave containing newborns, cats associated

with juvenile graves represent fertility offerings either to the dead children or on their behalf, as children were not able to reproduce in life. The cat could have also been used as a regenerator, bringing the children a speedy rebirth either in the Underworld or as a descendant through a *hamingja* (family guardian) in the living world. (Ellis 1968:138-139, 141, 146)

In any case, there are no known cat burials in Iceland to date, including the skull pit at Ingiríðarstaðir, which is not a burial. In Iceland, cats must have had a different ritual function outside of burials or, due to their extreme rarity, been saved for desperate times. (Williams 1920:389-390)

#### D. SACRIFICIAL RITUAL, NOT BURIAL, AT INGIRÍÐARSTAÐIR?

##### I. *Finding Ritual*

It seems more likely that the skull pit at Ingiríðarstaðir represents ritual activity, and not a burial, as burial deposits are considered to be on the personal level, relating to a family. (Crawford 2004:87-88) Perhaps, instead, the skull pit has similar burial connotations, considering the skull pit is in a grave field, but on the group level. As graves are also pits, they can be interpreted as openings to the unseen worlds. (Crawford 2004:88) Going back to Renfrew's List (see Appendix A), the Ingiríðarstaðir skull pit has several characteristics indicating ritual activity. Ingiríðarstaðir is located in Þegjandadalur, the Valley of Silence, and in a grave field, suggesting the landscape was sacred. The skull pit was found *hidden* in a wall, which could have acted as an altar. The wall/altar was conspicuous to public display, as it would have stood out in the flat grave field. A goddess, Freyja, is represented with the presence of the cat. Cats were present as grave gifts in Scandinavian homeland funerary rituals. Both animals, including the cat and humans, were sacrificed before being placed in the skull pit. The animal and human victims were symbolically broken by death. Lastly, cats were rare, luxury animals of the elite, so the cat in the skull pit suggests a great investment of wealth. The skull pit can then

perhaps be interpreted as a votive deposit, representing a group effort to communicate with the gods. (Crawford 2004:87)

Continuing on this note, the Ingiríðarstaðir skull pit can further be understood in terms of shamanic ritual as well, with reference to Jordan (2001). At Ingiríðarstaðir, animal body parts were used, and the “land was transformed through the deposition of material culture.” The animal bones, as objects, can be interpreted as “charged with life forces, demanding special attention,” and held “symbolic value in the relationships of communication and exchange, which link human spirit domains.” (Jordan 2001:102-103) The potential shamanic context of Ingiríðarstaðir allows the cat found in the skull pit to be a, “reproducer of the broader cosmological concepts” of the Norse worldview and as such, it can be construed as a shamanic tool. (Price 2007:127)

## 2. *Ingiríðarstaðir as a “New Uppsala”?*

There are a number of possibilities as to the purpose of the Ingiríðarstaðir skull pit and wall. Price provides the following suggested functions of domestic Nordic sorcery: fortune-telling (divination); imparting good and bad fortune; influencing the weather; providing for good hunting; healing; harming people, animals and assets; communing with the dead; conversing with hidden worlds; and speaking with the gods. (Price 2007:227)

Ingiríðarstaðir could represent one or some of Price’s examples of domestic magic, but since it has a cat, which is rare and prestigious; has human sacrifice; and was in a public sacred place, it is logical to conclude that a ritual(s) of higher magnitude took place. It is not likely, then, that Ingiríðarstaðir was a small cult *horg* because of the human sacrifice and its outdoor public nature, unless it was an older, outdoor *horg*, which might have been more public than later indoor ones and/or was built in an emergency. *Hofs* were supposedly on a larger scale than

*horgs*, (Einarsson 2008:148) but human sacrifice was not even found at Hofstadir\* (AD 950–1150), a very large house used in sacrificial rituals, even though skinned cats were. (McGovern 2009:221, 249) Although atypical, human sacrifice is present as foundation deposits in some Norse houses, such as Eketorp, Sweden, (Carlie 2004:144) but since Ingiríðarstaðir was not a house, this is ruled out.

Ingiríðarstaðir was used either as an emergency ritual space, or as an Icelandic equivalent to Old Uppsala which held national and/or regional festivals. It is possible that the “doom-ring” and “sacrificial stone” will be found during later excavations at Ingiríðarstaðir, but if the site was used in a time of crisis, then perhaps only a hasty wall will be the extent of the finds. Only more excavations will tell us how significant a cult site Ingiríðarstaðir was.

If the areas around Ingiríðarstaðir fell on hard times, ancestors might have thought to have been at unrest (Ellis 1968:148-150) and the people’s wish to placate the uneasy dead would explain the presence of ritual within a grave field. Perhaps the people asked their ancestors for fertility of the land, people, and/or livestock (Ellis 1968:100-101) with the sacrifice of Freyja’s special animal and humans.

Since there is not much archaeological evidence of human sacrifice in the Viking Age, this makes the human sacrifice found at Ingiríðarstaðir all the more telling. This research project indicates human sacrifice would have been especially significant in Iceland, considering the small amount of pioneers who populated it, where even thralls (slaves) would have been spared.

Possibly Ingiríðarstaðir represents a smaller version of Uppsala in Iceland where many gods, including Freyja, were venerated. (Davidson 1993:113) It is also quite possible that this ‘new Uppsala’ was in fact the location of a cult dedicated just to Freyja, seeing as how she was the longest lived pagan deity, surpassing even Freyr at the great cult site of Old Uppsala. (Davidson 1988:133) There is literary evidence of a large Freyja cult in Iceland that held strong

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\* Note: the Hofstadir cats are so far the only cat finds in Myvatnsveit, indicating their use in only large, important cult practices. (McGovern 2009:221, 249)

up until and even after the conversion to Christianity. It was noted as even being a major source of contention between the conflicting religious groups<sup>11</sup>. (Reaves 2008:1)

Goddesses, such as Freyja, are interpreted as worshipped more at “small local cults rather than at large established public rituals like those of Thor or Odin.” (Davidson 1993:107) Cat sacrifice might not be well known in the archaeological record because not many are found at the larger, male gods’ cult sites, but rather at the smaller, local female goddess sites in the Scandinavian homelands. While that is probably true, arguments can be made that some Freyja cults in Norway, such as possibly Oseberg, and in Iceland, possibly Ingiríðarstaðir, were actually rather large, and the cat’s role might have been used only in magnificent occasions at these locations.

A major problem with this cult site of Freyja at Ingiríðarstaðir is that the cult place name is missing. Ingiríðarstaðir is not a cult site name, as it does not contain any of Gunnell’s words associated with sacred places. (Gunnell 2001:3) All there is to suggest holiness in the area of Ingiríðarstaðir is its location in the Valley of Silence. Cult places, however, have been difficult to locate in Iceland, (Einarsson 2008:145) as even Hofstadir was debated for quite some time. (McGovern 2009:249) Perhaps in Iceland, place names are not as telling as archaeological evidence. Sacrificial animals might be more helpful in identifying cult sites or even distinguishing specific deities, such as cats and Freyja.

### **3.      *Freyja Cult at Oseberg?***

Since Freyja was a goddess of the dead, perhaps those who were permitted into her hall had to die a fabulous death, just as only the warriors who fell in battle were permitted into Odin’s hall, Valhalla. Or, maybe sacrificial death in the name of Freyja allowed slaves to elevate their social status in the afterlife. A fabulous, and famous, example of a slave sacrifice is the Oseberg ship burial in Norway. According to Ingstad, the women of the Oseberg ship burial represent a Freyja cult. Since mostly Norwegians pioneered Iceland, it is likely that this earlier Norwegian

Freyja cult indicated at the Oseberg ship burial (AD 834) (Kulturhistorisk Museum 2011) traveled to Iceland and may have found its way to Ingiríðarstaðir.

The Oseberg ship burial was originally thought to belong to a powerful Nordic queen because of its elaborate and rich finds, including a sacrificed slave woman. Ingstad has a new interpretation, which argues that the Oseberg queen was also a powerful sorceress associated with Freyja, possibly even a “priestess” as an earthly incarnation of Freyja herself. (Ingstad 1993:254) This is a very likely conclusion considering Freyja’s brother, Freyr, was thought to be a human god who was a real king of Sweden, (Gunnell 2001:8) connecting the fertility gods with human manifestations. Since sorceresses, as Freyja’s incarnation would have been powerful at sorcery, were of very high status in the Viking Age, (Davidson 1988:68, 131) and Freyja was the patron goddess of the nobility and maybe even royalty because of Freyr, (Davidson 1988:133; Lindow 2001:124) the elaborateness of the Oseberg ship burial fits in nicely with belonging to a powerful sorceress.

Ingstad lists several items as basis for her conclusion, but one of her main arguments is that depictions of cats are everywhere in the burial. Ingstad does suggest that the leather found in the burial might be cat skin, used similarly to Thorbjorg’s cat skin gloves and hood. (Ingstad 1993:254-255)

The most important of these cat depictions are on the carved cart (see fig. 17). The cart, as we know, was used in Norse fertility cult practices involving the veneration of Freyja, amongst other fertility gods. (Gunnell 1995:53-65; Howey 1989:59; Lindow 2001:237) The cart was especially associated with Freyja because in the mythology, she travels via a cat-drawn cart. Nine cats were carved into the backboard of the cart, and they appear to be crying, wiping their tears with their paws (see fig.18). The crying cats most likely weep for their dead priestess.

The number nine was magical and sacred to the Norse. Thorbjorg had nine sisters, Odin hung from Yggdrasil for nine days, and there were nine realms of the Underworld. Freyja, more particularly, is related to the number nine. Freyja might have even been a contributor to the myth

of a cat's nine lives. If Hel was a true manifestation of Freyja, then Freyja, as Hel, had dominion over the nine realms of the Underworld, which took nine nights to reach. (Howey 1989:237) Ingstad believes this cult cart was used in the priestess' funeral procession. The priestess' cult cart is seen leading her funeral procession in a textile fragment from the burial (see fig. 19) and was probably the cart in which she was transported to her final resting place. (Ingstad 1993:248-249)

Also found at Oseberg were three carved sleighs. All three sleighs have animal heads carved into the front two posts. (Sjøvold 1966:36-38) It is hard to determine what animals all of the sleighs' animal-head posts represent, but all of them have cat characteristics. One of the sleighs in particular does have what look more clearly like cat heads carved into the posts (see fig. 20-21). If the Oseberg priestess were an incarnation of Freyja, then her cat-drawn sleighs – symbolized with the carved cat head posts – could have been a mechanism for shamanic traveling during her life. The other famous animal head posts also look like they could be cats (see figs. 22-23), which were possibly used in ritual processions. (Sjøvold 1966:40)

## **VIII. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

### **A. THE INGIRÍÐARSTAÐIR CAT INTERPRETATION**

If the Oseberg ship burial tells us there was a prominent Norwegian Freyja cult, it is possible that this cult moved to Iceland with the original Norwegian pioneers, possibly making its way to Ingiríðarstaðir. The scale of this transported cult will only be determined with future excavations.

If the Ingiríðarstaðir cat indicates a Freyja cult site, how was the body of the cat intended to interact with the goddess and her followers? The most likely explanations for the intended function of the cat at Ingiríðarstaðir were either as an intermediary with Freyja, asking for fertility; or as a steed or guide to help the human victims find their way to Freyja in order to ask for help with crops or herds. (Davidson 1988:121; Williams 2001:203; Williams 1920:417) It could have also served both of these purposes.

Since an entire cat was found with the human skull fragments in the Ingiríðarstaðir skull pit, it seems most likely that the cat was a steed or guide for the human victims to find their way to Freyja. Skulls and skull fragments, such as jaws, found in sacrificial contexts indicate speech with the supernatural and represent the home of the soul. (Carlie 2004:136; Nilsson 2003:289-290, 301-304) The whole cat suggests a steed/guide to Freyja because cats pulled Freyja's cart, and the human skull fragments along with the jaws of other sacrificial fertility animals such as cows and sheep were present to do the talking. It seems that it was the cat's job to ensure that all of these voices got to Freyja. If the sacrificial victims willingly gave their lives, perhaps the sorceress wished to give them a quick journey via the cat. Freyja could have been appeased even more by sending her favorite companion for her to keep, as opposed to sending just a shamaness' cat *fylgja*.

Cat and human sacrifice could have been used to bring peace and fertility to the Þegjandadalur Valley, as Ingstad believes the Oseberg priestess did to Oseberg. Ingstad expects that the local people were afraid of the powerful Freyja priestess and gave her an elaborate burial to keep her from coming back to haunt them. She also believes it possible that the priestess was so valuable during her life that the people wanted to keep her spirit appeased in order for it to continue to work for peace and fertility of the land. (Ingstad 1993:253) In *Ynglinga Saga*, “the ‘human’ god Freyr continued to receive gifts after he had been placed in his grave mound, in order to ensure good luck and fertility.” (Gunnell 2001:8) The cat and human sacrifice at Ingiríðarstaðir could have worked for peace and fertility in the same way, as placatory presents to powerful forces.

## B. CONCLUSIONS

The importance of the cat in Norse society has been grossly overlooked because of its rarity in both the literature and the archaeological record, and because of its negative magical connotations. As such, most mentions of cats at sites are glossed over with very brief references,

as most scholars are reluctant to give them symbolic interpretations. It has been shown here that this rarity actually makes the cat much more significant when found at archaeological sites, especially in ritual contexts such as at Ingiríðarstaðir.

Cats seem to turn up in important and remarkable locations. Everyday domestic animals, such as cows and sheep/goats, were the most commonly sacrificed animals, which makes the cat a rarely used and significant sacrificial animal. Even dogs and horses are far more present in the archaeological record. It has been put forth here that the cat's rarity is not solely due to its late introduction to Scandinavia, but that the cat held more significance to the Norse people other than just as worker and companion, especially in the Viking Age, and its use in ritual was only for special occasions and special people.

Similar to dogs and horses, cats played an important symbolic and mythological role in Norse culture, especially in terms of death and journeying. Andersson explains that black rats did not arrive in Scandinavia until much later than the arrival of cats. Therefore, the cat's main task, in Sweden and Iceland at least, could not have been to catch mice. Rather, the cat must have had another role. (Andersson 1993:31)

As animal worship was a large part of the Norse religion and was especially associated with Norse gods, it is possible that particular animals can be interpreted as indications of cult sites dedicated to the gods they are associated with in the literature. Freyja's close ties to cats and shamanism suggest that when cats are found in strange contexts such as at Ingiríðarstaðir, cult practices should be investigated as a viable option instead of as a last resort. Cats were not only the exotic pets of the elite, but were associated with the home, fertility, and the female magic of Freyja.

With the onset of the Middle Ages, cats became much more common Nordic animals (Andersson 1993:33) and as such, their value and association with elitism dissipated. Most importantly, though, the cat's entanglement in the fertility magic of a powerful pagan goddess, who was a threat to the new Christian goddess and kings, doomed the cat to the same fate as

Freyja. As Christian writers demonized both fertility magic and goddesses, (Davidson 1993:107) perhaps cats would have had a larger and more positive role in the Icelandic literature, such as dogs and horses, if they were not connected with female magic, sexuality, and the most powerful foe against Christianity, Freyja.

The negative connotations of night-riding (Raudvere 2002:42-43) and *sitja uti*, then, make sense in light of their association with Freyja. Many of the cat's occurrences in Norse literature were also negative: Thorolf and his hellish, magical cats; Brusi the giant and his monster cat mother; and even the World-Serpent, the monster child of Loki, was disguised as a cat. As Freyja was called a bitch, so too did her shamanic cats become demonized. As such, the cat must have been the most important link to the goddess, as pigs and ravens were not subjected to the later horrific treatment that befell the cat for centuries afterwards.

As all the world's wisdom was written on the paws of a bear and wolf and on the beaks of an eagle and an owl, (Hjaltalin 1871:13) so too is it written in the bones of a cat. Much more research needs to be done to have any definitive answers; as Renfrew says, repetition is needed to confirm the occurrence of ritual, (Renfrew 2000:52) but this project hopes to have at least raised some interesting possibilities.

### C. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

#### 1. *Restrictions of being an American student*

As an American student researching a Scandinavian subject, I found it quite difficult to locate many resources. Unfortunately, many sources are inaccessible in the States, even via Interlibrary Loan. For instance, the known cult sites of Gudme and Tissø in Denmark could not be researched.

Surprisingly, from the sources I was able to obtain, I found that much of the literature mentioned the presence of cats at sites, but there were no contexts, which is the case at the site of Svendborg.

## **2. Future Objectives**

There is still much more to be done on various subjects covered during this project and due to time, location and project constraints, access to certain resources was limited. Future research will more than likely take place in Scandinavia where more contextual information regarding specific sites will be obtained. For example, such questions as were any cat remains definitively found at Oseberg, Gokstad or other ship or shaman burials? Are cats a prominent find at any excavations at locations of Freyja place names? Is the name of Katla, the night-riding witch, just a coincidence that it starts with “kat,” or is there an etymological connection?

There are several topics that I would like to cover with future doctoral research. The most important information will hopefully be revealed in the near future, and that is more data about the Ingiríðarstaðir cat. How was the cat killed? Was it killed differently than the other animals in the skull pit? The manner of death could give us more information on its function in the ritual. How old was the cat, especially in relation to the other animals and the humans in the skull pit? The cat’s age could further indicate a fertility rite if, for example, the cat were young. (Davidson 1988:109) What was the sex of the cat? What were the sexes of the humans in the skull pit? The sex determinations of both the cat and the humans could indicate a *Hieros Gamos* rite, such as if the cat was male, like Freyja’s gib-cats, and the humans were both female or male and female. What kind of cat was it, and where were its origins?

At Ingiríðarstaðir, more data about the pig bone found in the skull pit and the association of the boar and Freyja would be interesting. When cats are found, are pigs often found with them? It would be most helpful to have ecological data and more precise dates on the Ingiríðarstaðir area. Environmental depression around the time of the skull pit deposit might indicate a case of emergency, and the sacrifice of the cat and humans could be interpreted more as an act of desperation. Also, the time of year the skull pit was deposited may further indicate a ritual place for Freyja, as sacrifices made to Freyja are believed to have been carried out in the

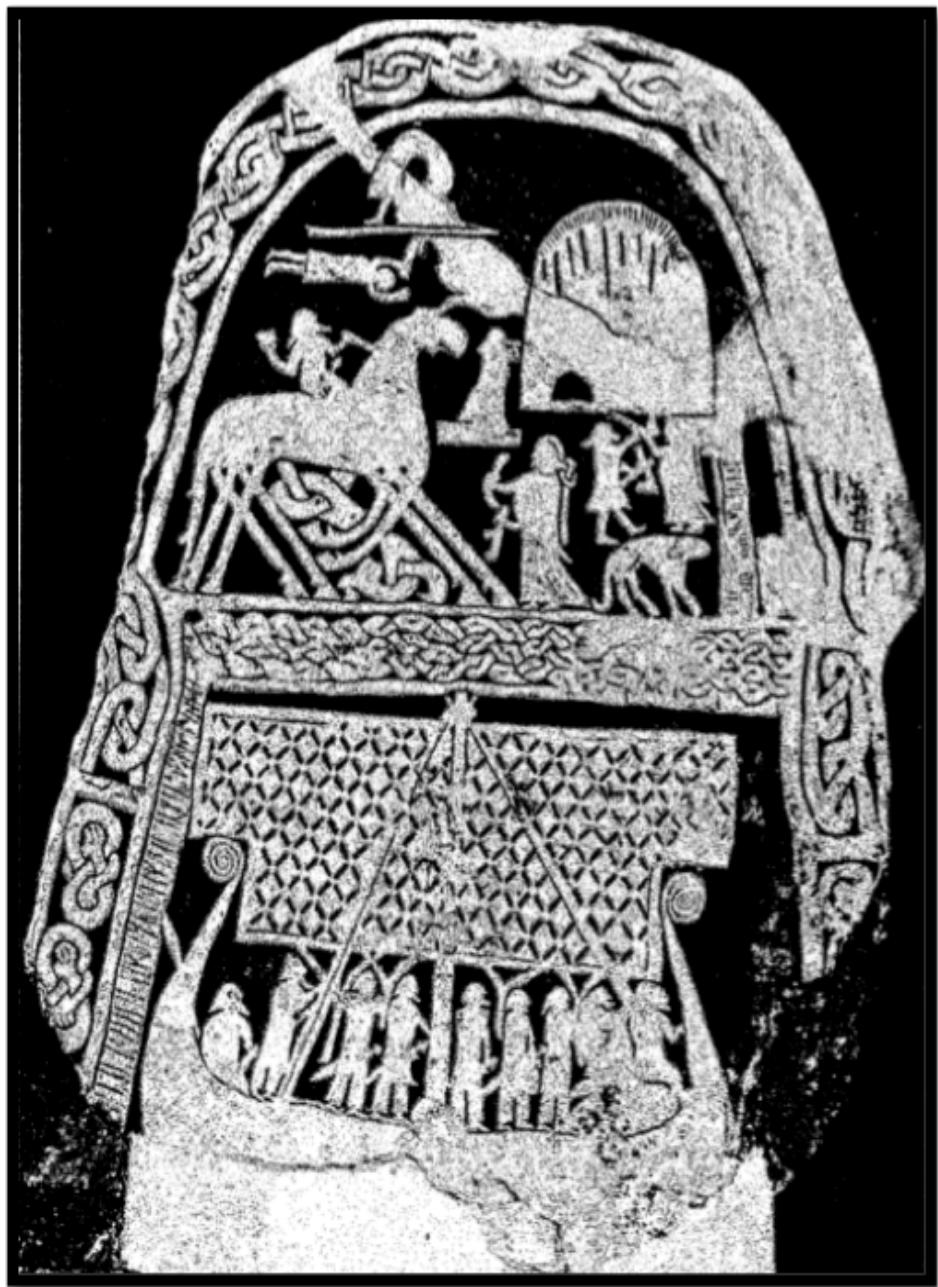
autumn. (Davidson 1993:113) The young animals (like the pig and cattle) at Ingiríðarstaðir possibly suggest autumnal sacrifice. (Nilsson 2003:301)

More broadly, are there any mentions of cats in pits elsewhere in Scandinavia, similar to contexts found at Ingiríðarstaðir? Where is the most common occurrence of cats in ritual/sacrificial contexts and how were they used? What was the sex of the humans and cats found in both inhumations and cremations?

The number nine has known significance to the Norse world, especially with Freyja and cats. But is 20 also a magic number, related to cats and Freyja? Thorolf had 20 cats, Brusi the giant's cat mother killed 20 men in a minute, and Freyja condemned 20 lesser kings to fight in the never-ending battle of Hjadningavig. (Lindow 2001:174-176)

The most intriguing question for this researcher, though, is the possible link of a Freyja cult in Oseberg to Ingiríðarstaðir. Is it feasible to trace the migration of a Freyja cult in Oseberg, as seen in the Oseberg ship burial, to Ingiríðarstaðir? The possibilities are endless, and I predict with more research on these relatively ignored topics we will begin to see some fascinating results.

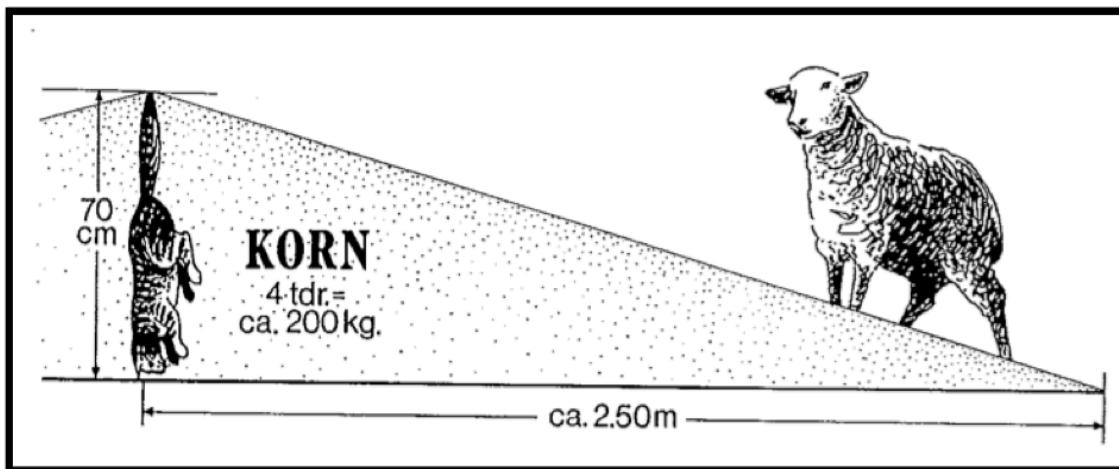
## **FIGURES**



**Figure 1.** Gotlandic picture stone depicting Odin on Sleipnir. (After Fuglesang 1980:169)



**Figure 2.** Cat and witch on wall of the Late Medieval Marie Magdalene Church on Jutland, Denmark. (Courtesy of Stephen Mitchell)



**Figure 3.** Price of the Welsh Prince's Cat in Corn and Sheep (After Andersson 1993:30, After Hatting 1990:192)



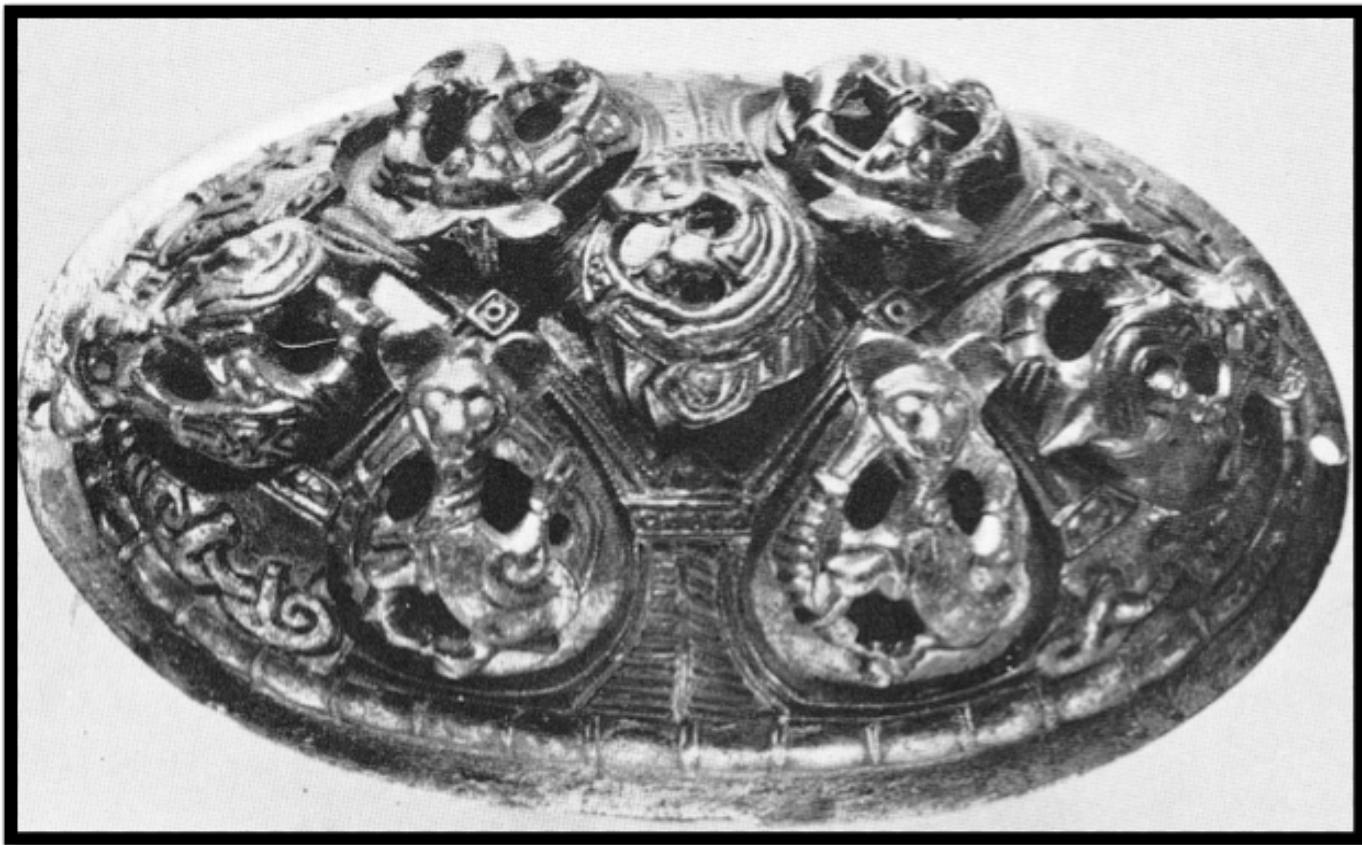
**Figure 4.** Bronze oval brooch from Lisbjerg, Jutland, Denmark; National Museum, Copenhagen (After Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1980:PL. XXIV a)



**Figure 5.** Borre Style Bronze Ring-pin from  
Grave 1, Kaupang Norway. (After Blindheim et al. 1981:PL. 62 f)



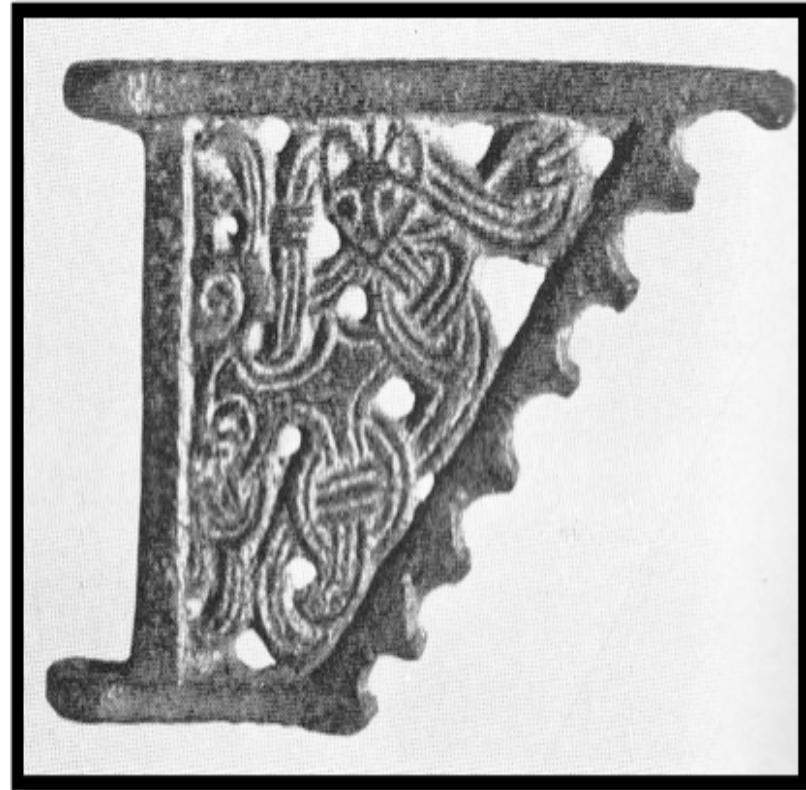
**Figure 6.** Gilt-bronze pendant from Ostborg, Frol, Levanger,  
Norway; Trondheim Museum. (After Wilson and Klindt-  
Jensen 1980:PL. XXVIII g)



**Figure 7.** Bronze oval brooch from Norway (no provenance). (After Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1980:PL. XXIV b)



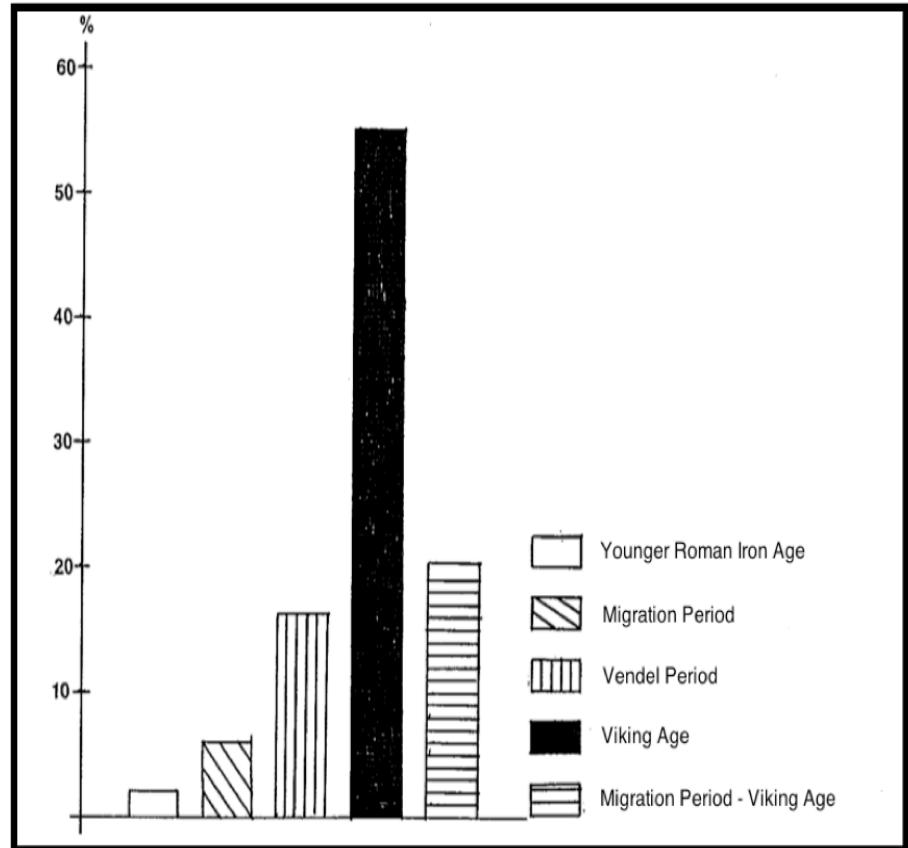
**Figure 8.** Gilt-silver pendant from a hoard from Varby, Huddinge, Södermanland, Sweden; Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm.  
(After Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1980: PL. XXXII a)



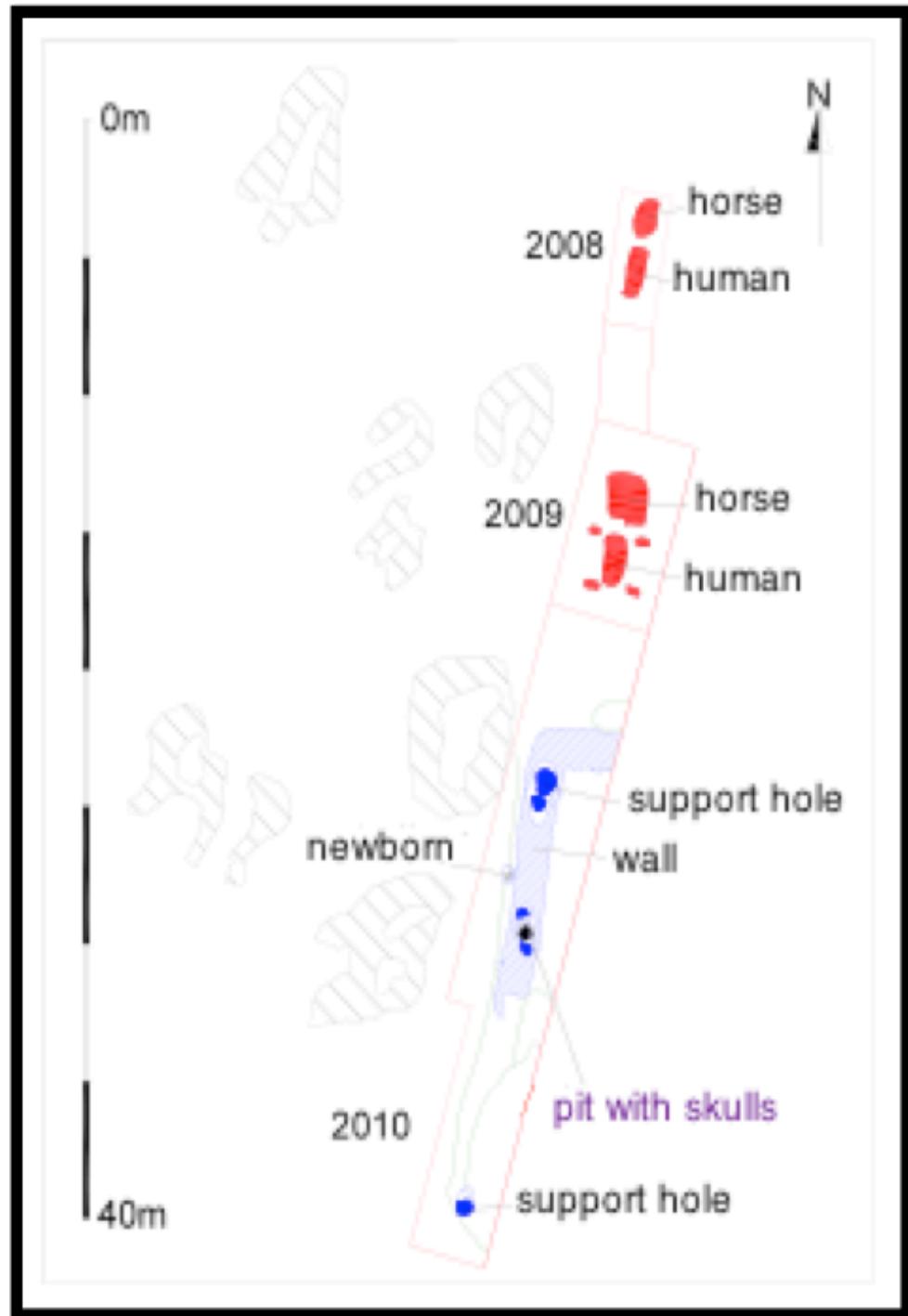
**Figure 9.** Gilt-bronze mount (possible weather-vane) from Rangsby, Saltvik, Åland, Finland; National Museum, Helsinki.(After Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1980:PL. XXXII e)



**Figure 10.** Humans and cats. Silver Brooch, possibly from Gotland, Sweden; British Museum.(After Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1980:PL. XXXIa)



**Figure 11.** The relative proportion of **50 Swedish** graves with cats as grave gifts. (After Andersson 1993:13, my own translation from the Swedish)



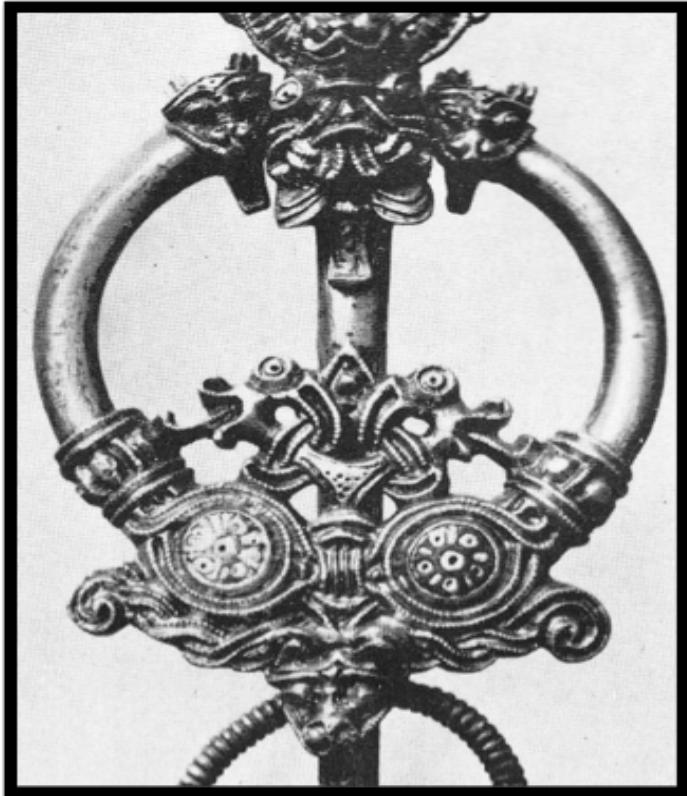
**Figure 12.** Overview of Ingiríðarstaðir burial field (After Roberts 2010:6, my own translation from the Icelandic)



**Figure 13.** Excavation area at Ingiríðarstaðir, looking south (After Roberts 2010:7)



**Figure 14.** Partial cat skeleton from Ingiríðarstaðir. (Courtesy of Runar Leifsson) Identified bones: distal ends of both sides of the mandible, a portion of the distal maxilla, the proximal end of an ulna, a fragment of the proximal end of a scapula, the axis and atlas, and fragments of two other vertebrae (Brewington 2010: 5)



**Figure 15.** Silver and niello ringheaded brooch; Birka, Uppland, **Sweden**, grave 561. (After Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1980:PL. XXXI b)



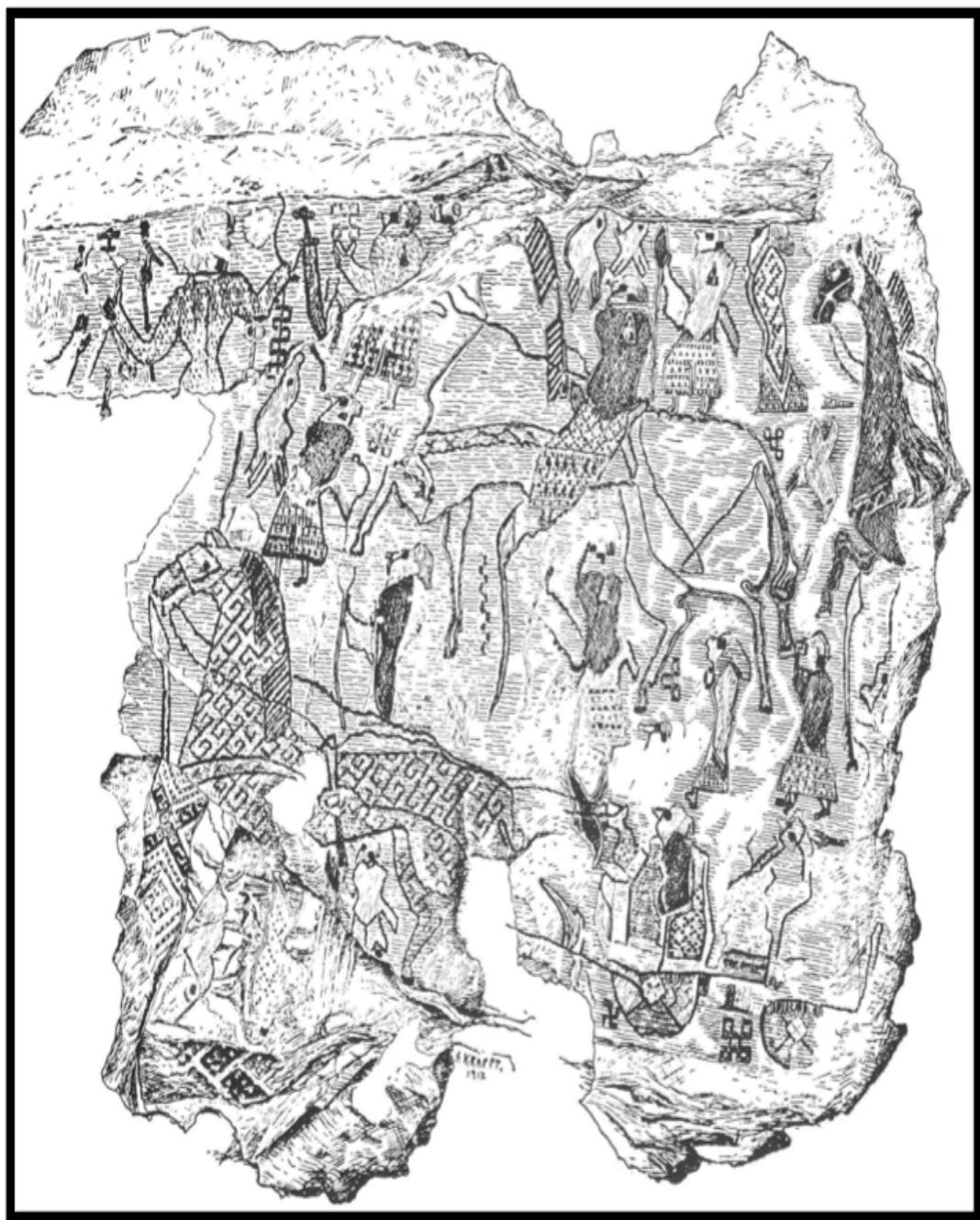
**Figure 16.** Mount from Gokstad ship-burial; Universitetets Oldsaksamling (Viking Ship Hall, Bygdøy), Oslo. (After Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1980:PL. XXX a)



**Figure 17.** Cats on the Oseberg Cart backboard (After Ingstad 1993:249)



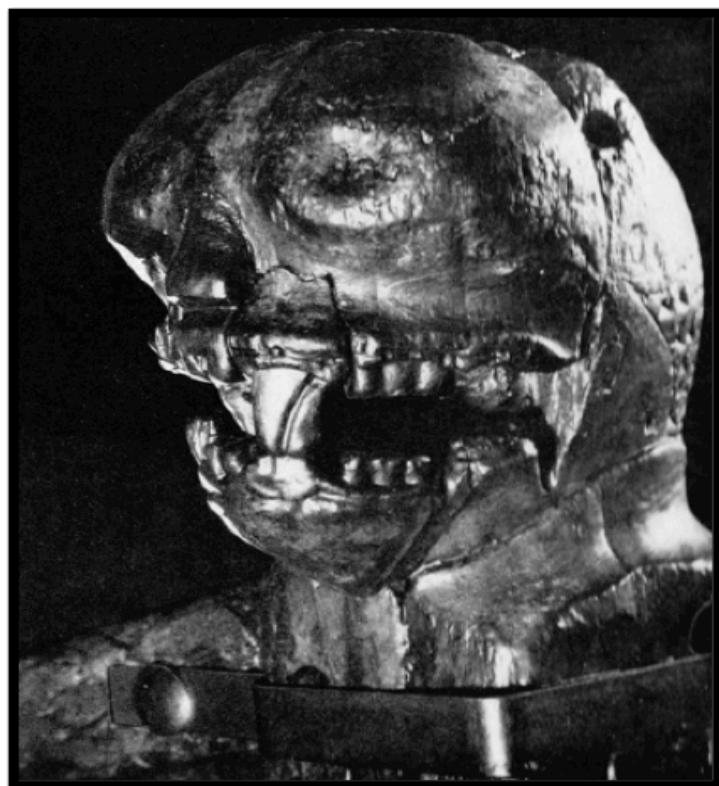
**Figure 18.** Detailed drawing of a crying cat from the Oseberg cart backboard. (After Ingstad 1993:224)



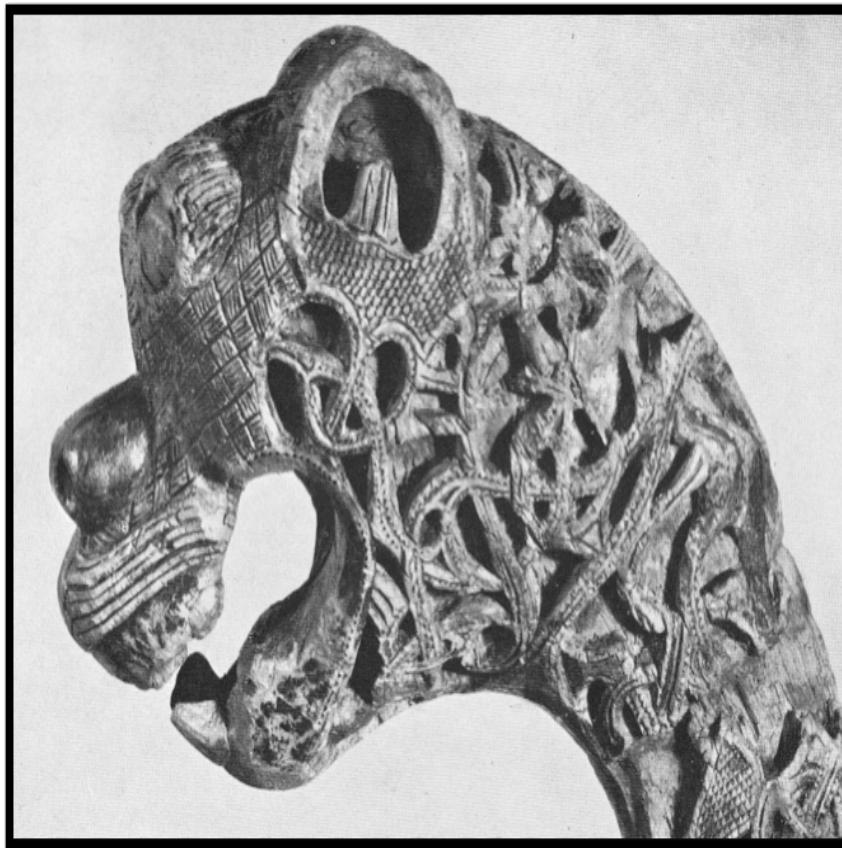
**Figure 19.** Oseberg textile depicting funeral procession (After Ingstad 1993:232)



**Figure 20.** Cat-drawn sleigh from Oseberg (After Sjøvold 1966:39)



**Figure 21.** Cat head post from Oseberg sleigh (After Sjøvold 1966:37)



**Figure 22.** Animal-head post 174 from the Oseberg ship-burial.  
(After Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1980:PL. XII)



**Figure 23.** The 'Academician's' animal-head post from the Oseberg ship-burial (After Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1980:PL. XI)

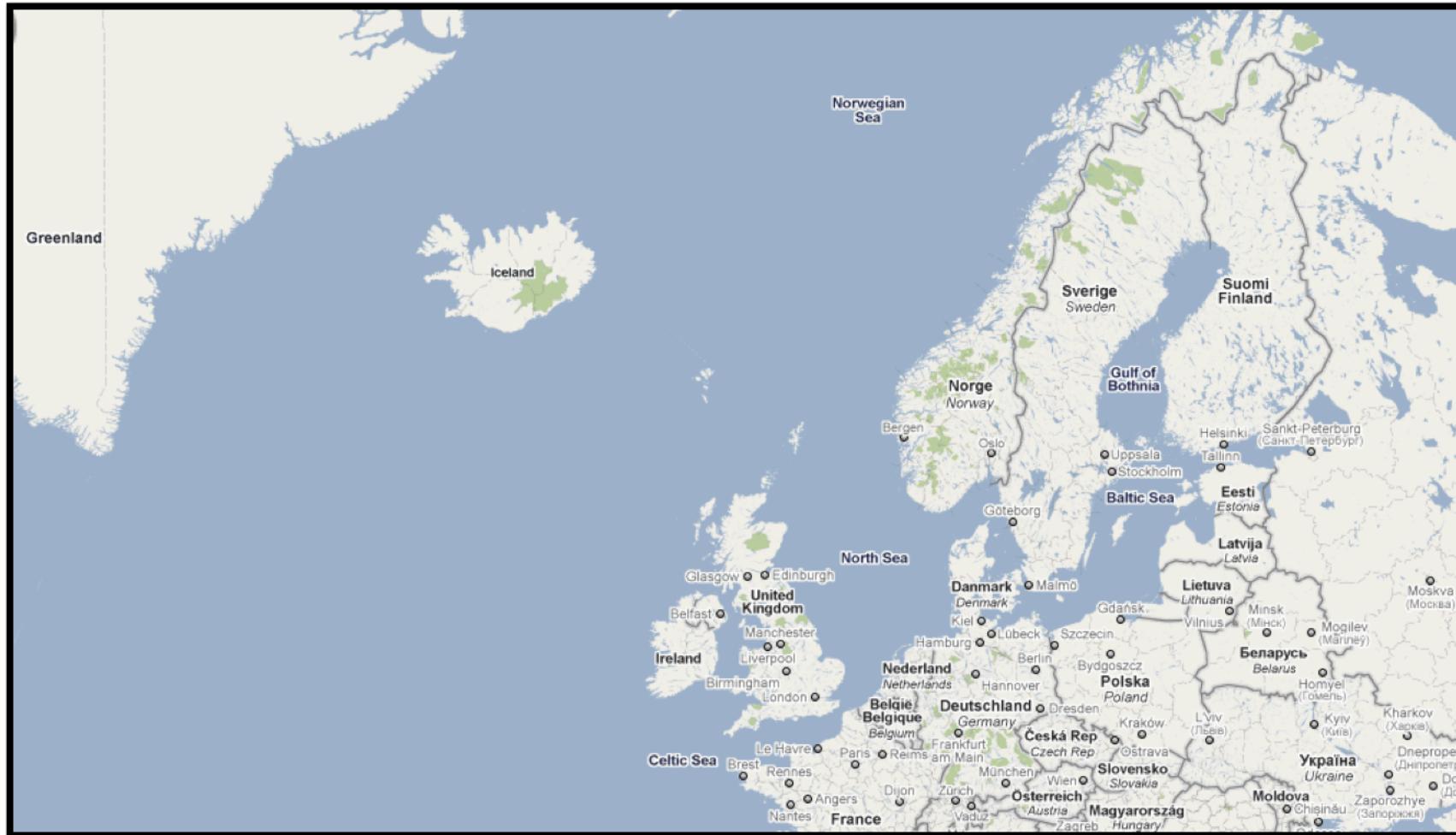


**Figure 24.** Wall-painting in a tomb depicting a kitten on a man's lap and the mother-cat under the chair of his wife c. 1250 BC. (After Malek 1977:57)

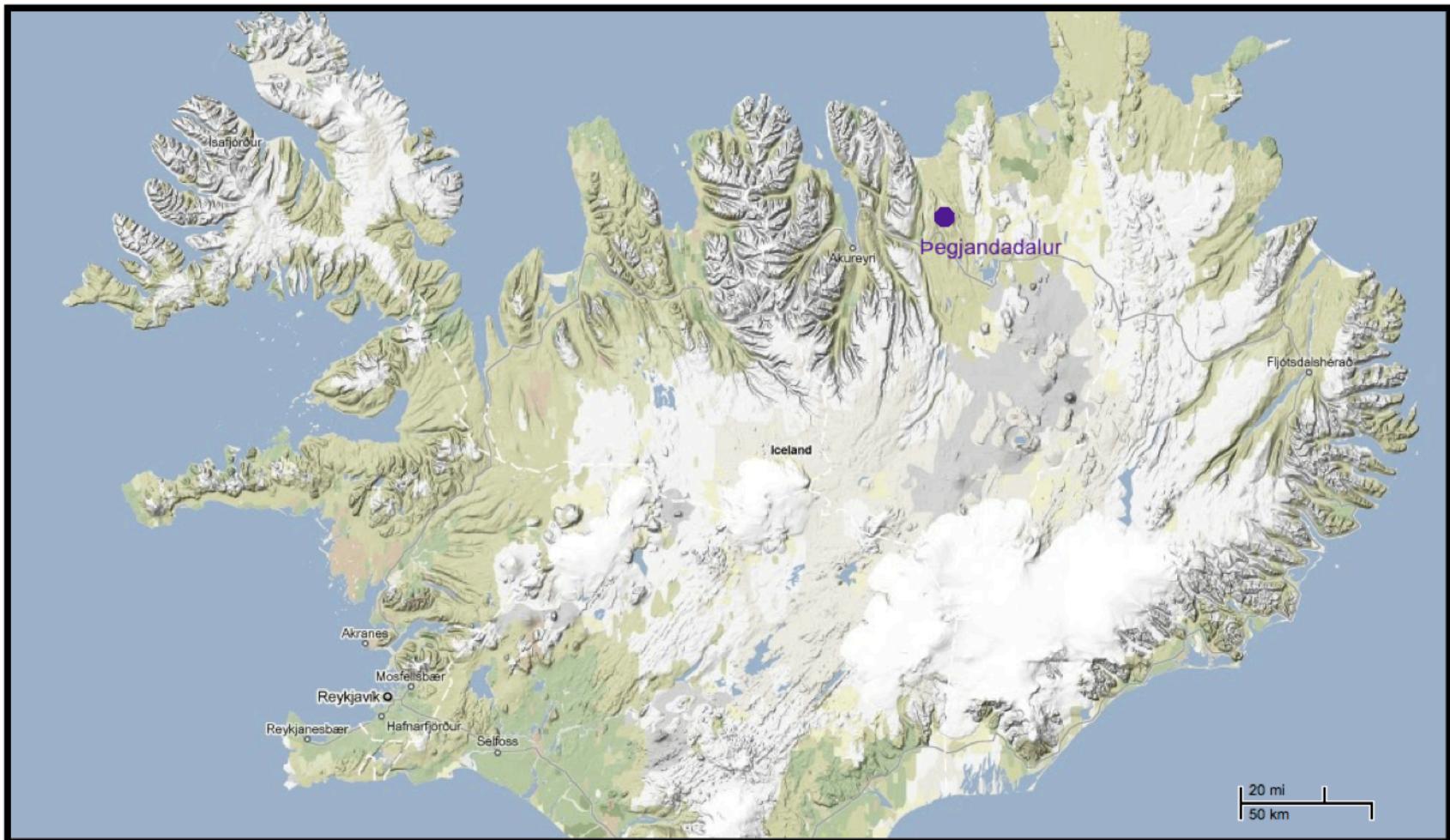


**Figure 25.** Clay sculpture of Cybele enthroned between panthers from Catal Huyuk. (After Motz 1997:104)

## **MAPS**



**Map 1.** Region Map of Scandinavia. Photo: Google Maps



**Map. 2** Iceland, Þegjandadalur marked in the North East. Photo: Google Maps.

## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix A: Renfrew's Archaeological Indicators of Ritual**

### Focusing of Attention

- 1 Ritual may take place in a spot with special, natural associations (e.g. a cave, a grove of trees, a spring or a mountain-top).
- 2 Alternatively, ritual may take place in a special building set apart for sacred functions (e.g. a temple or church).
- 3 The structure and equipment used for the ritual may employ attention-focusing devices, reflected in the architecture, special fixtures (e.g. altars, benches, hearths) and in moveable equipment (e.g. lamps, gongs and bells, ritual vessels, censers, alter clothes, and all the paraphernalia of ritual).
- 4 The sacred zone is likely to be rich in repeated symbols (i.e. 'redundancy').

### Boundary zone between this world and the next

- 5 Ritual may involve both conspicuous public display (and expenditure) and hidden exclusive mysteries, whose practice will be reflected in the architecture.
- 6 Concepts of cleanliness and pollution may be reflected in the facilities (e.g. pools or basins of water) and maintenance of the sacred area.

### Presence of the deity

- 7 The association with a deity or deities may be reflected in the use of a cult image or representation of the deity in abstract form (e.g. the Christian Chi-Rho symbol)
- 8 The ritualistic symbols will often relate iconographically to the deities worshipped and to their associated myth. Animal symbolism (of real or mythical animal) may often be used, with particular animals relating to specific deities or powers.
- 9 The ritualistic symbols may relate to those seen also in funerary ritual and in other rites of passage.

### Participation and offering

- 10 Worship will involve prayer and special movements – gestures of adoration – and these may be reflected in the art of iconography or decoration of images
- 11 The ritual may employ various devices for inducing religious experience (e.g. dance, music, drugs and the infliction of pain).
- 12 The sacrifice of animals or humans may be practiced.
- 13 Food and drink may be brought and possibly consumed as offerings or burned/poured away.
- 14 Other material objects may be brought and offered (votives). The act of offering may entail breaking and hiding or discarding.
- 15 Great investment of wealth may be reflected both in the equipment used and in the offerings made.
- 16 Great investment of wealth and resources may be reflected in the structure itself and its facilities.

(From *Renfrew and Bahn 1991: 359-60* quoted in Renfrew 2000: 51-52)

## Appendix B: Archaeological Sites with Cats

<b>Appendix B: Archaeological Sites with Cats</b>						
<b>ID</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Site Name</b>	<b>Type of Site</b>	<b>Dated To (AD)</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>Description</b>
1	Sweden	Birka	Grave	800-975	Viking Age	Cats in cremation graves
2	Sweden	Gardslosa	Grave	n.d.	Viking Age	Cat in Grave 67
3	Sweden	Berga	Grave	n.d.	Viking Age	
4	Sweden	Injaldhogen	Grave	n.d.	Viking Age	
5	Sweden	Karleby	Grave	700s-800s	Viking Age	
6	Sweden	Helgö	Grave	n.d.	Migration-Viking Age	Sacred ritual island; Cats substantial in cemetery; Cat buried as a woman; large gold hoard and cats could indicate Freyja cult
7	Sweden	Viby	Grave	900s	Viking Age	
8	Sweden	Lunda	Grave	n.d.	Viking Age	Cats only found in 3 out of the 162 graves; cats occur as grave gifts in 1.8% of burial material compared to the dog (53.7%); Andersson 1993 says valuable grave gift
9	Sweden	Brista	Grave	600s-1000s	Migration-Viking Age	
10	Sweden	Lundby/Hedvigsdal	Grave	n.d.	Viking Age	
11	Sweden	Beckomberga/Båtmanstorp	Grave	n.d.	Migration-Viking Age	

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12	Sweden	Granby	Grave	n.d.	n/a	
13	Sweden	Rinkeby	Grave	600s	Migration Period	
14	Sweden	Tensta	Grave	n.d.	Migration-Viking Age	
15	Sweden	Årvige	Grave	n.d.	Migration-Viking Age	
16	Sweden	Arninge	Grave	800s-900s	Viking Age	
17	Sweden	Gribbylunda	Grave	900s	Viking Age	
18	Sweden	Ottarshögen	Grave	400s	Migration Period	
19	Sweden	Overbo	Grave	200s	Roman Period	
20	Sweden	Bjurhovda	Grave	1000s	Viking Age	Two juvenile graves, 39 and 44, where the only grave inclusions are cats
21	Sweden	Tuna	Grave	n.d.	Viking Age	
22	Sweden	Högbygård	Grave	n.d.	Viking Age	
23	Sweden	Händelö	Grave	n.d.	Viking Age	
24	Sweden	Fiskeby	Grave	n.d.	Migration-Viking Age	

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25	Sweden	Bollstanäs	Grave	765 ± 100	Viking Age	Claw phalanx of a lynx found in inhumation burial of two decapitated sacrificial victims buried with an intact man
26	Sweden	Odin's Howe/Uppsala	Grave	n.d.	Viking Age	Ship burial that Major 1924 says probably had cats
27	Sweden	Hassle Bösarp	Sacrifice/Bog	330-750	Migration-Viking Age	One cat found with other animals and two humans
28	Sweden	Skedemosse	Sacrifice/Bog	200-450/500	Roman-Migration Period	Two cats found with 38 humans, 100 horses, fertility objects; several female place-names nearby indicate ritual and/or is named for Freyja
29	Sweden	Häffind	Settlement	n.d.	Viking Age	
30	Sweden	Kv. Novisen	Settlement	n.d.	Medieval Period	

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31	Sweden	Vallhagar	Settlement	400s	Migration Period	One whole cat found partially burnt in a house's wall foundation; Paulsson 1993 interprets the cat as a magical protective foundation deposit
32	Sweden	Apotekaren	Settlement	n.d.	Medieval Period	
33	Sweden	Färgaren	Settlement	1020-1400	Medieval Period	
34	Sweden	Stortorget	Settlement	1020-1400	Medieval Period	
35	Sweden	Birka	Settlement	800-975	Viking Age	21 Domestic Cats in all stratigraphic phases; whole cats found buried in pits; suggests cat population
36	Sweden	Kv. Balder	Settlement	1200s	Medieval Period	
37	Sweden	Eketorp II	Settlement	400s-700s	Migration-Viking Age	Five young cats; not skinned
38	Sweden	Eketorp III	Settlement	1000s-1300s	Viking-Medieval Period	At least 18 young cats; not skinned

Appendix B: Archaeological Sites with Cats						
ID	Country	Site Name	Type of Site	Dated To (AD)	Period	Description
39	Sweden	Alvastra	Settlement	3000 BC	Neolithic	Min. 2 Wild Cats, possibly used in ritual
40	Sweden	Scania	Settlement	n.d.	Atlantic Period	Juvenile wild cat found buried in a pit, covered with red ochre
41	Sweden	Bunkeflo	Settlement	n.d.	Viking Age	Cat skull found in a post hole of oldest phase of house; Carlie 2004 says probably represents a foundation deposit
42	Sweden	St. Vickleby	Settlement	n.d.	Vendel Period	Cat found as possible foundation deposit in a shallow pit w/limestone chips under the floor of a pit house
43	Sweden	Borg	Cult House	n.d.	Viking Age	75 kg of unburned animal bones, not food waste; high proportion of jaw and skull bones; cats found (no data on them); amulet rings, pig bones and cats possibly indicate Freyja cult

Appendix B: Archaeological Sites with Cats						
ID	Country	Site Name	Type of Site	Dated To (AD)	Period	Description
44	Sweden	Uppåkra	Cult House	500s	Migration Period	One cat mandible; <i>Hieros Gamos</i> gold foil plates, possibly related to Freyja
45	Sweden	Uppsala	Possible Temple Site	1000s	Viking Age	Fertility deity temple site; On a mound where the holy sacrificial tree may have stood, unburned human and bones of seven different domestic animal species found, including cats
46	Iceland	Hofstaðir	Cult House	950-1150	Viking Age	Several concentrations of cat bones with evidence of skinning
47	Iceland	Ingiriðarstaðir	Grave Field	n.d.	Viking Age	Partial cat skeleton found in a pit with human skull fragments, under a turf wall in a grave field

**Appendix B: Archaeological Sites with Cats**

<b>ID</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Site Name</b>	<b>Type of Site</b>	<b>Dated To (AD)</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>Description</b>
48	Norway	Gokstad	Grave	890-900	Viking Age	Ship burial of a older chieftain; Borre style art found in the burial, such as felines on brooches (see fig. 15); Schetelig 1904 mentions possibly cats present
49	Norway	Oseberg	Grave	815-834	Viking Age	Ship burial of two women; one woman interpreted as an important Freyja priestess by Ingstad 1993; cats found in important art; possible cat skin
50	Denmark	Lejre	Possible Temple Site	1000s	Viking Age	One cat with unknown contexts

**Appendix B: Archaeological Sites with Cats**

<b>ID</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Site Name</b>	<b>Type of Site</b>	<b>Dated To (AD)</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>Description</b>
51	Denmark	Hedeby	Settlement	1000s	Viking Age	Possible ritual activity; less than 181 cats found (2.4% of all bones); cats mainly the regulation of grain storage pests; occasionally cats skinned; possible ritual killing of cats due suggested by 60% of cats found died before reaching one year; felt animal mask that looks like a cat, although Gunnell 1995 says a sheep
52	England	Exeter	Settlement	1100s-1200s	Medieval Period	Min. two cats (7% of all mammals present)
53	England	Exeter	Grave	1100s-1200s	Medieval Period	Cat bone fragments in Grave GS III F. 289
54	Isle of Man	Balladoole	Grave	n.d.	Viking Age	Cats found in a layer of cremated bone (with horse, ox, pig, sheep/goat and dog) on top of a burial found in a burial mound of a man and possibly a woman

Appendix B: Archaeological Sites with Cats						
ID	Country	Site Name	Type of Site	Dated To (AD)	Period	Description
55	Poland	Jezioro Zarańskie	Settlement	800s-1100s	Viking Age	Cat found along with goat skulls; Borre style art found here; pagan ritual activity associated with women (spinning and weaving tools) found

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## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “Mythology is an expression of the general – the origin, the situation and potential of magic - while the finds express the localized and the concretely executed. And the localized, in contrast to the general, will necessarily express the particular, the momentary and the locally confined, as we for example see when mention is made of the use of runes and verses.... The disparity between mythology and archaeological finds thus corresponds to the boundary which magic expresses and to a complementarity in which mythology reveals a knowledge of an existence that perhaps comes into view in the archaeological finds. And this too is where the religio-historical myth research and archaeology meet.” (Poulsen 1986:77-78)

<sup>2</sup> “When she arrived one evening along with the man who had been sent to fetch her, she was wearing a black mantle with a strap, which was adorned with precious stones right down to the hem. About her neck she wore a string of glass beads and on her head a hood of black lambskin lined with white catskin. She bore a staff with a knob at the top, adorned with brass set with stones on top. About her waist she had a linked charm belt with a large purse. In it she kept the charms which she needed for her predictions. She wore calfskin boots lined with fur, with long, sturdy laces and large pewter knobs on the ends. On her hands she wore gloves of catskin, white and lined with fur.” (Kunz 2001b:658)

<sup>3</sup> “After that the Æsir feared that they should never be able to get the Wolf bound. Then Allfather sent him who is called Skírnir, Freyr's messenger, down into the region of the Black Elves, to certain dwarves, and caused to be made the fetter named Gleipnir. It was made of six things: the noise a cat makes in foot-fall, the beard of a woman, the roots of a rock, the sinews of a bear, the breath of a fish, and the spittle of a bird. And though thou understand not these matters already, yet now thou mayest speedily find certain proof herein, that no lie is told thee: thou must have seen that a woman has no beard, and no sound comes from the leap of a cat, and there are no roots under a rock; and by my troth, all that I have told thee is equally true, though there be some things which thou canst not put to the test.” (Brodeur 1916:43-44)

<sup>4</sup> “Then said Útgarda-Loki: ‘Young lads here are wont to do this (which is thought of small consequence): lift my cat up from the earth; but I should not have been able to speak of such a thing to Ása-Thor if I had not seen that thou hast far less in thee than I had thought.’ Thereupon there leaped forth on the hall-floor a gray cat, and a very big one; and Thor went to it and took it with his hand down under the middle of the belly and lifted up. But the cat bent into an arch just as Thor stretched up his hands; and when Thor reached up as high as he could at the very utmost, then the cat lifted up one foot, and Thor got this game no further advanced. Then said Útgarda-Loki: ‘This game went even as I had foreseen; the cat is very great, whereas Thor is low and little beside the

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huge men who are here with us'...And again he said: 'It seemed to me not less noteworthy when thou didst lift up the cat; and to tell thee truly, then all were afraid who saw how thou didst lift one foot clear of the earth. That cat was not as it appeared to thee: it was the Midgard Serpent, which lies about all the land, and scarcely does its length suffice to encompass the earth with head and tail. So high didst thou stretch up thine arms that it was then but a little way more to heaven.'" (Brodeur 1916:65-67)

<sup>5</sup> Although far removed from time and space, Ancient Egypt's treatment of cats holds similarities to the Norse culture. Ancient Egypt is the most famous culture for cat veneration, as they were seen as symbols of fertility as well as high-status. Lions were representations of power and war, and hence royalty. It can be said that cats, in this regard, were seen as miniature lions. Cats were often depicted under a woman's chair as a sign of sexuality and fertility (Malek 1997:59) (see fig. 24).

In Ancient Egypt, cats were associated with at least three goddesses, the most obvious being Bastet and Sekhmet, the other Hathor. By c. 1000 BC – AD 350, cats "were regarded as manifestations of certain deities, in particular the goddess Bastet, [and as such were] also bred in large numbers in temple catteries." (Malek 1977:57) Bastet and Hathor were fertility goddesses, and Sekhmet was a goddess of war. Bastet was known for her child-bearing and nurturing instincts and sometimes referred to as the mother of kings. These characteristics were "combined with the cat's fertility, apparently boundless nocturnal love-life, and its old protective function, and so indicate the areas in which the goddess Bastet was popularly supplicated for help with human problems." (Malek 1977:96) Bastet was depicted as a domestic cat or as a woman with either the head of a lioness or a domestic cat. (Malek 1977:96) Hathor was a goddess of regeneration, fertility, and high-status. She was depicted as a cow-headed woman and often with cats around. (Malek 1977:93-94)

Sekhmet, on the other hand, was a lioness-headed goddess of war. Most intriguing is Bastet and Sekhmet are thought to be dual representations of one goddess, Hathor whom is both nurturing and dangerous. (Malek 1977:95) Representations of this duality are seen in many depictions where a lion-headed goddess is accompanied by cats. (Malek 1977:96) This duality of the same goddess is almost identical to that of Freyja who was not only a fertility goddess, but also a goddess of war and death, and most importantly, was associated with cats.

<sup>6</sup> Similar to Ancient Egypt, Anatolia also a goddess in likeness to Freyja, including an association with cats. In the last millennium preceding Christianity in Asia Minor, Italy, Greece, the Balkans, Danube, Rhine and Africa, Cybele was the Great Mother goddess. In the face of Christianity, Cybele, as a Great Mother, was a last rallying point for paganism, both protective and powerful. (Motz 1977:99) Intriguingly, Freyja was also the last bastion of the Norse pagan faith in Iceland (Reaves 2008: 1). This is not the only resemblance to Freyja Cybele possesses. Like Freyja, Cybele was worshipped in sacred groves, (Motz 1997:111-112) was a local protective deity, (Motz 1997:114) her sacred animal was the lion, (Motz 1997:113) and she was associated with shamanistic powers.

Cybele was "a Lady of the Wilderness, deeply allied with the craft and techniques of the magician," (Motz 1997:120) and her priests are credited with the shamanistic powers of healing and divination. (Motz 1997:111-112) These priests were

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said to have the truth of Cybele on their lips, (Motz 1997:114) which sounds like Freyja's oral magic of *seiðr*.

The most important connection Cybele has to Freyja is her association with felines. Cybele was usually depicted with large felines, such as panthers (see fig. 25), and as driving a lion-drawn carriage. (Motz 1997:103) Cybele's lion-drawn carriage is eerily similar to Freyja's cat-drawn cart.

<sup>7</sup> "When in Ynglinga Saga Snorri stated that Freyja alone of the pagan deities still lived on his own time, we may sense the meaning behind the statement. Freyja, goddess of the Vanir, stands for the cult of fertility in later times more clearly than the god Freyr, whose association with the king had waned with the establishment of the Christian Church. She was a survival from the world of land-spirits and giving goddesses, which were once part of the everyday life of the people, and many of her more shadowy sisters continued to influence folk and fairy beliefs for centuries after the conversion. The land-spirits were not so much renounced as adapted to the new faith, and they were never completely banished from the countryside." (Davidson 1988:133)

<sup>8</sup> "The men from Sida realized now that Eirikur had made them a laughing-stock, and they wanted to get their revenge. They got a man from the Western Fjords to do it, and he sent Eirikur a Sending in the form of a cat. Eirikur was standing at his door when this cat came and tried to leap at his throat and kill him. But the man who had once opened Eirikur's magic book was standing beside him, and he helped Eirikur to kill the cat. It is said that Eirikur himself then sent a ghost against the man from the Western Fjords, which was the death of him." (Simpson 1975: 67)

<sup>9</sup> "In earlier material, the staring eyes in combination with dismembered bodies and ambiguous compositions have been interpreted as symbols of Odin in his capacity as sorcerer or shaman... The dismembered bodies of animals and the split representation of faces have been interpreted as symbolising ecstatic states and Odin's ability to transform into animals... She [Kristoffersson] suggests that the animals' strength and ability to watch over the individual was transferred through the decorative designs to the decorated object and thus to the possessor. In the apotropaic symbol resided the ability to frighten off evil and to protect the holder of the apotropaion." (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006:320)

<sup>10</sup> "The gods were honoured and perhaps held to be strengthened by the brewing of the festival ale, and by the slaughter of victims whose blood would bring new potency to the holy places. Also the means of communication with the Other World which sacrifice provided enabled men to obtain some of the hidden knowledge the gods possessed. The killing of sacrificial victims was associated with omens and divination, and one purpose of the sacrificial feast was to learn what was in store for the community in the coming season. (Davidson 1988:68)

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<sup>11</sup> “At the end of the heathen era in Iceland, Freyja retained a powerful following. Icelandic documents inform us that her worship continued until the time of Christian conversion. Since heathen practices were allowed to continue, so long as they occurred outside of public view, there is no reason to doubt that her cult actively continued afterwards. During the conversion period itself, her worship became a source of contention between the heathens and Christians.” (Reaves 2008:1)