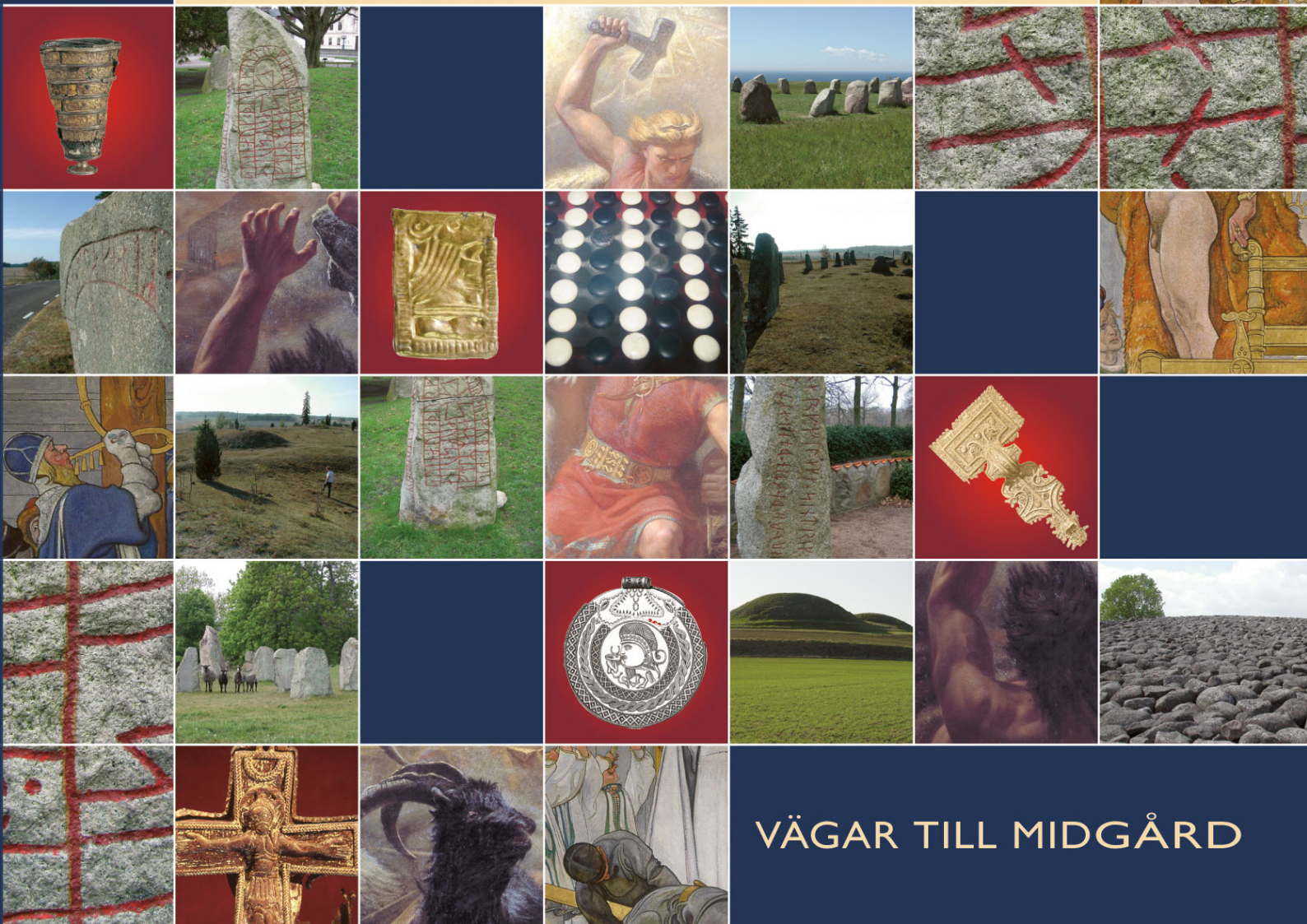




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Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives

ORIGINS, CHANGES, AND INTERACTIONS



VÄGAR TILL MIDGÅRD

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in long-term perspectives
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*Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert
& Catharina Raudvere (eds)*



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Thor's hammer in Norway

A symbol of reaction against the Christian cross?

Sabjörg Walaker Nordeide

In my main project, I will try to trace the chronology of the conversion to Christianity of people in southern Norway on the basis of different types of archaeological material. The Thor's hammer is an interesting type of object in this context, because it has normally been interpreted as a reaction against the Christian cross (e.g. Grieg 1929; Skjølsvold 1951; Staecker 1999; Wamers 1999; Gräslund 2002). Hence, occurrences of Thor's hammers are likely to say something about where and when Christianity was established to an extent that it could provoke this type of reaction, but at the same time show that the non-Christian religion was still alive.

However, there has been some disagreement as to whether or not the Thor's hammer was a reaction against the cross. Sigurd Grieg, for instance, discovered that finds of Thor's hammer were older than those of Christian crosses, which led him to the conclusion that the hammer is not a symbol of the conversion phase (Grieg 1929). However, recent studies of Swedish and Danish material by, for instance, Jörn Staecker (1999) and Anne-Sofie Gräslund (2002) have concluded that there are two different traditions in the use of the Thor's hammer: an older one with *several hammers*

Object	Location	Context	Burial custom	Date
Thor's hammer, silver, decorated	Verdal, Nord-Trøndelag	Stray find		
Ring with 9 iron Thor's hammers, undecorated	Hilde, Innvik, near Stryn	Female burial	Grave, cremation, in a mound with a boat	10th century
Thor's hammer, iron, undecorated	Kaupang, Tjølling	Urban site		c. 800–960
Thor's hammer, iron, undecorated	Kaupang, Tjølling	Female burial	Grave, inhumation, oriented NNE–SSW, in a mound with a boat	c. 850–900
Thor's hammer inscribed on two Arabic coins	Kaupang, Tjølling	Urban site		Post 844–869 Post 951–955
Thor's hammer on a silver arm ring, undecorated	Gjulem, Rakkestad	Hoard		Viking Period
Thor's hammer, silver, decorated, filigree	Tråen, Rollag	Hoard (746.8 g)		Post-991, coin dated
Mould for Thor's hammer, ?bronze, undecorated	Mysen, Eidsberg	(Male?) burial	Grave, cremation, in a mound	Viking Period
Thor's hammer, silver, decorated with circles	Sondre Vik, Fitjar	Male burial	Flat grave, inhumation, oriented N–S, with a boat	Viking Period
Ring with Thor's hammer, silver, with two undecorated hammers	Vela, Sand, Ryfylke	Hoard		First half of 10th century, coin dated
Thor's hammer, silver, undecorated	Bråtveit, Suldal	Hoard?		Post 978–1016, coin dated

Figure 2. Finds of Thor's hammers in Norway. Sex is only interpreted on the basis of objects, not anatomical analysis. The age is that suggested by the context of the find, or the period when an accompanying coin was struck.

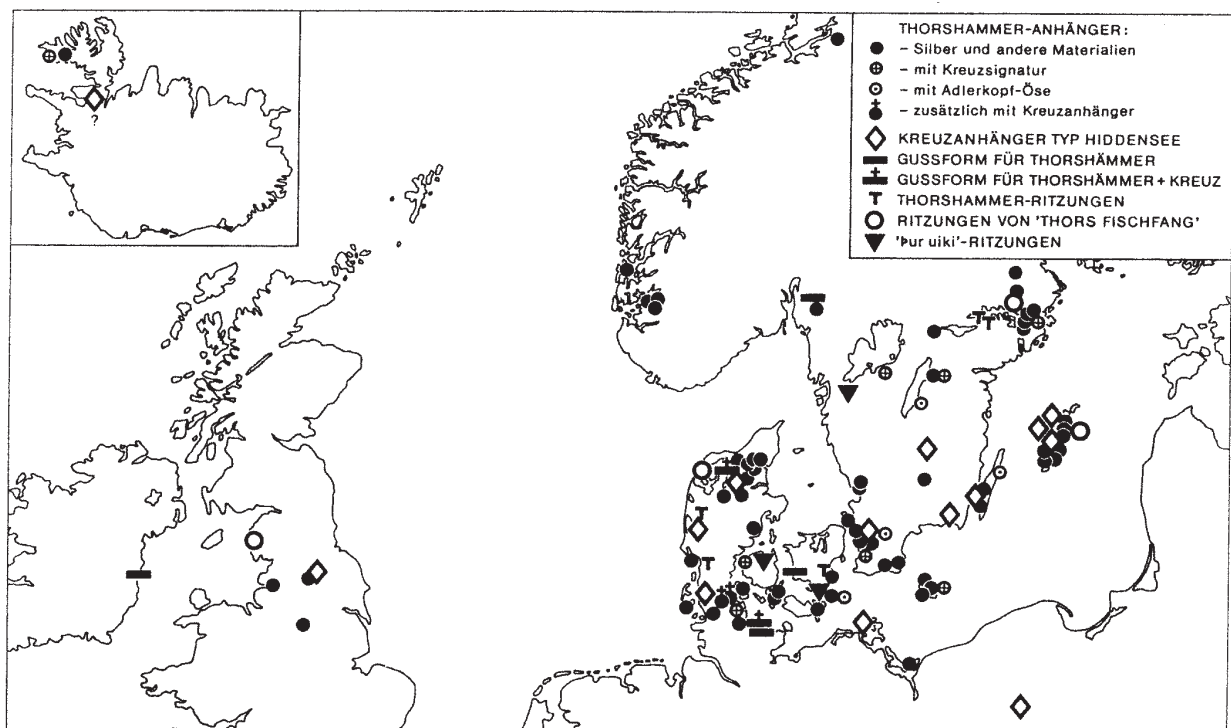


Figure 1. General distribution of Thor's hammers (Wamers 1999).



Figure 3. Thor's hammer, possibly found in Verdal, Nord-Trøndelag. © Fotoarkivet, Bergen Museum.

attached to a ring and a younger one with a single hammer used as a pendant. These two traditions may have developed more or less independently, and the later one, the pendant, provides the best comparison with the use of the Christian cross as a pendant. In any particular district, the Christian cross is always more recent than the Thor's hammer pendant. The hammer pendant is thought to indicate that Christianity was just becoming established, whereas the cross pendant indicates that it has reached a consolidation phase (Staecker 1999:236ff).

According to Egon Wamers (1999), Thor's hammer pendants and moulds for Thor's hammers have mostly been found in southern Sweden, Denmark and the part of Germany closest to Denmark; a few in Norway and near the south and east coasts of the Baltic, and very few in the British Isles, Poland, Iceland and Russia (figure 1). Only 10% have been found in graves. In addition, many Thor's hammer rings, mostly of iron, have been found in graves from the eighth to tenth centuries in Åland, Swedish-speaking parts of Russia, and especially the Mälaren district of Sweden, where 450 rings have been found, including 58 in the Birka graves (Wamers 1999; Gräslund 2002:57). Almost all the graves containing Thor's hammer rings are cremations. In this paper, I will concentrate on the Thor's hammers found in Norway.

The finds of Thor's hammers in Norway

Only 12 finds considered to be Thor's hammers are known from Norway, including two inscriptions and a mould (figure 2). The information about age and context of the hammers is of varying quality because most of them were found 50–100 years ago or more, often accidentally, and not in modern, professional excavations. For instance, the first find shown in figure 2 was handed in to Bergen Museum by a teacher; his grandfather, a minister, had given it to him, and he had taken it with him from Verdal in Nord-Trøndelag. However, we know nothing about the circumstances of the find and cannot even rely on it having come from the Verdal district. The hammer is decorated with circles. Jörn Staecker (1999), who has dated the various types of Thor's hammers, attributed this one to between the late ninth century and the eleventh century (figure 3).¹



Figure 4. Object from Tråen, Rollag, Buskerud, interpreted as a Thor's hammer, but it may equally well be a cross. © University Museum of Cultural Heritage, Åse Kari Hammer.

We know more about the find from Hilde, near Stryn in Sogn & Fjordane. A farmer began removing gravel from a NE–SW oriented, boat-shaped mound. Finds were made the same year and were donated to Bergen Museum. The following year, archaeologists excavated the rest of the mound and found, among other things, a sepulchral urn with burnt bones and an iron ring with nine plain Thor's hammers of iron. This burial was a richly furnished female grave. Besides her dress and jewels, the dead woman was accompanied by a boat, and various tools and equipment of silver, bronze, glass, stone and iron (Shetelig 1912:183). Jan Petersen dated the grave to the tenth century, based on the typology of various objects (Petersen 1951). The type of hammer found has been dated to the tenth century.² This type of iron ring with hammers in combination with a sepulchral urn in a cremation burial has its closest parallels in the Mälaren district of Sweden and further east, as mentioned above.³ With a diameter of around 2.5 cm, the size of the ring is similar too (Gräslund 2002:55ff).

The two hammer pendants from Kaupang in Vestfold are of the same, plain, undecorated type of iron. One was found in 1902 in a secondary burial in a mound containing two burials, first a man in a boat and later, above that, a woman in another boat, both oriented NNE–SSW.⁴ The woman had the Thor's hammer and a firesteel beside her elbow, but they had probably originally been attached to her belt. She was wearing a dress with buckles and pearls, and also had a casket. Even though the deceased was not cremated, charcoal and 629 burnt animal bones were found. Her grave was covered with stones. On the basis of the typology of various objects, it was dated to AD 850–900 (Blindheim et al. 1981:181). This type of hammer is dated to the ninth or tenth centuries.⁵ The other hammer was found in the settlement area during the excavation in 2001 (The Kaupang Excavations Project, Annual Report 2001).

Two inscriptions of a Thor's hammer on Arabic dirhams have also been found in the settlement area at Kaupang; one was struck in 844–869 and the other as late as 951–955. They

are older than the inscriptions, but how long it took the coins to reach Kaupang is difficult to estimate. Where and when the inscriptions were made is open to conjecture, but considering the other finds of Thor's hammers at Kaupang it is not unlikely they were made there.⁶

The Thor's hammer found at Gjulem in Østfold is made of silver, and is attached to an arm ring of silver. The hammer is undecorated, and was found in a hoard with other silver objects in 1906. The find is dated to the Viking Period, and this type of hammer is dated from the late tenth century to the eleventh century.⁷

The find from Tråen, Buskerud, also belongs to a hoard found in 1906 on a path on a slope beside the River Numedalslågen. It had probably been wrapped in cloth. The object interpreted as a Thor's hammer was decorated with double spirals in filigree technique (figure 4). The hoard also contained coins and silver objects weighing a total of 746.8 g. However, the interpretation of the find as a hammer is very doubtful. Staecker argued that it is a cross pendant, because there is "keine Thorshämmer aus Skandinavien bekannt, wo der untere Längbalken über den Querbalken ragt" (Staecker 1999:98). However, since this is also the case, for instance, with a Thor's hammer from Läby in Uppland (see Gräslund 2002:57), the interpretation is doubtful. Coins from the hoard date the find to post-991 (Skaare 1976).

The remains of a disturbed grave mound were excavated at Mysen, Østfold, in 1950. This was a cremation, and a soapstone vessel which was probably a sepulchral urn. There was also equipment for a smithy, for instance a mould for seven ingots, and a Thor's hammer. A crucible containing remains of bronze indicates that the mould was intended for manufacturing bronze objects. The hammer was a plain type, dated from the eighth to tenth centuries.⁸

The hammer from Fitjar, Hordaland, was also found in a grave, a flat grave seriously damaged by ploughing in the 1930s. The archaeologist could only excavate the remains, but was able to reconstruct the burial as an inhumation in a N–S oriented grave with the head to the north. The hammer was decorated with stamped circles. This type is dated from the late ninth century to the eleventh century.⁹ The deceased was also equipped with weapons, a boat, a casket and a balance, which shows that he probably held an important position in the local community.

There are two finds from the Suldal area in Rogaland. At Vela, a ring with two plain silver Thor's hammers was found with other silver objects under a hollow stone on uncultivated land not far from the sea, and with no traces of structures around the objects. The hoard included coins struck at the beginning of the tenth century. This type of hammer is also dated to the tenth century.¹⁰ The other find is from Bråtveit, and is a plain silver hammer which also belonged to a silver hoard. The hoard included coins struck in 978–1016 (Skaare 1976). This type of hammer is dated from the late ninth century to the eleventh century.¹¹

General pattern of the finds

Even though most of the find circumstances are, at best, poorly documented, a general pattern is noticeable. Firstly, there is a *striking geographical asymmetry* in Norway. The

place of origin for the find supposedly originating in Verdal is very doubtful, and this location cannot be relied upon. Apart from this and the Innvik find, all the Thor's hammers in Norway have been found south of a line linking Bergen to Oslo. When the area east of Norway is compared, this pattern is even more evident, as we can see from Wamers' map (figure 1). This means that the Thor's hammer is a symbol we can expect only in the furthest south of Norway, both in the west and east, and on the coast as well as inland.

Secondly, Thor's hammers are mostly found in burials and hoards, with an equal number in both contexts. The dates of the Norwegian hammers do not give any basis for claiming that the Thor's hammer rings are older than the pendants. Nor are there any grounds for claiming that the hammers from the hoards tend to be older than the rest of the find, as Staecker (1999:236) found in his, admittedly, considerably larger sample, mostly from Sweden and Denmark.

Thirdly, equal numbers of Thor's hammers in graves are found in association with cremations and inhumation burials. The early-Christian burial custom was generally inhumation, whereas both cremations and inhumations figure in the non-Christian, Norwegian burial custom. Even though their numbers vary from one region to another, it might be expected that if the Thor's hammer was used as a reaction against Christianity, it would have been mostly linked with cremation to make the contrast to Christianity clearer, but this is not the case.

Despite the few finds in Norway, they are likely to be representative of the burials and the towns. Firstly, Iron Age archaeology in Norway has traditionally focused on burials, which are also the most evident monuments from this period. Yet no more hammers have been found. Secondly, extensive excavations of urban occupation layers from the ninth and early tenth centuries have taken place at Kaupang, giving two finds of Thor's hammers, and in towns established in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, like Tønsberg, Trondheim and Oslo, where no finds of Thor's hammers have been made. In Sweden and Denmark, the majority of finds are in hoards, only a quarter being in burials. The silver hammers mostly come from tenth- and eleventh-century silver hoards (Gräslund 2002:56). Hence, hoards may be underrepresented in Norway as regards finds of Thor's hammers, if the hammers were used in the same way everywhere.

Thor's hammer meets the Christian cross

The 11 or 12 finds (12 if the find from Tråen is interpreted as a hammer) do not present a solid foundation for studying the arrival of Christianity by reactions against it. Despite their asymmetrical geographical distribution, the number and distribution of Thor's hammers is representative, with the possible exception of the tenth and eleventh century silver hoards. Hence, I would claim that the *Thor's hammer has not been extensively used in Norway and cannot represent a substantial reaction against Christianity*. This does not mean that the finds we have do not represent part of a reaction against the new religion, but any such reaction is manifested in other parts of the material culture more than in the use of a Thor's hammer.

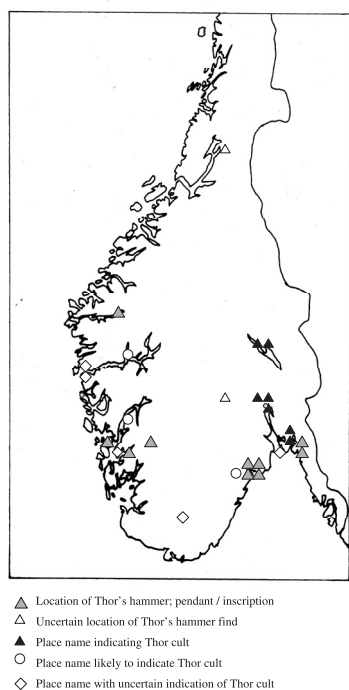


Figure 5. The distribution of Thor's hammer finds and place-names associated with cult of Thor in Norway.

This is almost the opposite of some of Staecker's conclusions from his thorough studies (Staecker 1999). He claims that the hammer pendants are a reaction against the Christian cross (as a pendant). In his view, the non-Christians were forced to invent the hammer as a symbol of their own religion, and he sees this invention as a sign of crisis in their local religion because it shows that it was difficult for them to find adequate means to combat the powerful Christianity.

I cannot disagree with Staecker's thorough observations, but I disagree with some of his interpretations of them. If the Thor's hammer really was a personal symbol, the small number of finds does not fit the interpretation of crisis. This is a great overstatement based on a few finds, at least in the case of Norway. As grave goods are usually interpreted as personal, the number of Thor's hammers would be expected to be higher. I also disagree in the basic idea that the invention of such a symbol should be interpreted as a sign of crisis. Religious symbols are often seen to flourish in societies with a strong and flourishing religious consciousness and religious leadership, as in modern Afghanistan and Iran.

Place names

It is interesting that the finds, however few and scattered, are concentrated in the late ninth century and the beginning of the eleventh century, the supposed period of the main attempt to establish Christianity in Norway. Moreover, it is striking that not a single Thor's hammer has been found in the Norwegian towns established around the year 1000. This indicates that the hammer as a symbol was no longer in use when these towns were being established, or rather, this symbol was not favoured by the people in these towns. This may further indicate that the towns are linked to a special social group of people who were Christians. However, the most interesting observation is the almost complete lack of

Thor's hammers on the European continent roughly north of a line from Bergen to Stockholm, the find from Innvik, Sogn & Fjordane, being the only definite exception. How can this be explained?

Wamers (1999) pointed out that finds of Thor's hammers are linked to (1) the former Danish area, (2) areas under Danish influence, and (3) the area where Christianity was introduced first (figure). This distribution is the same whether or not he included moulds, pictures and runic inscriptions. According to Wamers, this proves that the myths about Thor were flourishing in this area when Christianity was established.

I agree with Wamers' main theories. However, he does not discuss the intriguing implications for the area outside what I will call the "Thor's hammer area". Does his theory imply that people did not know Thor outside that area? Or that Christian missioning took place later outside that area? According to Steinsland and Sørensen (1994), the god Thor was very popular in the whole of Scandinavia in the Viking Period. However, Christian graves in Møre & Romsdal are earlier than the latest date of Thor's hammers further south in Norway, and Christian graves seem to occur as far north as Trøndelag equally early as further south (see Farbrege 1986; Solli 1996). Non-Christian graves seem to be as recent in the "Thor's hammer area" as outside it. This pattern does not quite fit with Wamers' theories.

To further investigate this, I will compare these data with Norwegian place-names linked with the god Thor to see if there are other indications of the Thor cult outside the "Thor's hammer area". According to Håkan Rydving (1990), place-names linked with the god Thor are mostly in the genitive form, and the cultic names are the most interesting. I found 95 names listed by Oluf Rygh with combinations of *Tōrs* (Tor is the modern Norwegian form of Thor), but many of these places have obviously not been given their name because of any relationship with a Thor cult. According to Rygh, only seven can be interpreted as places where the Thor cult was practised, all in combination with *hov* – Torshov. Rygh considered these to be definite Thor cult sites. As Rygh's register is old and mainly focused on farm names, he may have missed some places. However, when I searched the modern electronic register of place-names (The National Place-Name Register at the Norwegian Mapping Authority), I found only one more, Torshov in Østfold.

In addition to his seven definite cult-based place-names, Rygh noted several more that he considered were probably associated with the Thor cult: Torstvet in Vestfold, Torsnes in Sogn & Fjordane and Torsnes in Hordaland. Some places were more uncertain, because they may also derive from the man's name Tor: Torsvik in Hordaland, Torsnes in Rogaland, Torsnes in Østfold, Torsæter in Sogn & Fjordane, and Torsland in Vest-Agder. All these names, with both certain and uncertain associations to the Thor cult, are concentrated in southern Norway, no further north than Sogn & Fjordane.

If all these place-names are added to a map showing the distribution of Thor's hammer finds, central and northern Norway are still not represented (figure 1).

According to some sagas, there should be a Thor cult in central region of Norway too, especially in Trøndelag. However, the sagas are in fact the only sources of information

about a Thor cult as far north as Trøndelag, and Steinsland and Sørensen's (1994) assumptions are mostly based on these sources. How reliable are the sagas in these matters?

Magnus Olsen (1978:270ff) found that cultic ceremonies for Freyr were held at Mære in Nord-Trøndelag, and that there were several cultic sites for Njord, Freyr and Freyja north of Dovre, but he found only a few uncertain instances in the toponymic material of Thor being worshipped north of Dovre. The same seems to be the case with for instance the worship of the older god Ullr/Ullin, whose name we find in place-names in the south of Norway (Olsen 1915:66ff). The sagas are inconsistent concerning Thor's role in Trøndelag. Else Mundal (1990) noted that Snorri Sturluson did not mention a Thor cult in Trøndelag in *Heimskringla*, *Hákonar saga*, describing a sacrifice to heathen gods in Trøndelag, even though Oddr munkr in *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar* did mention Thor being worshipped in the pagan temple at Mære. Unlike Oddr, Snorri visited Trøndelag and probably knew the area first hand. Hence, Snorri may well have had a good reason for not mentioning Thor. Even if it is older, Oddr's saga may not be right in these aspects. According to Mundal (1990:298), Oddr's description is based on a general conception of Thor as a very important god.

Conclusions

Although I should be careful in drawing conclusions on the basis of missing evidence, archaeological sources and place-names define quite a small area where a Thor cult was practised in Norway, and this fits the bigger picture of an area crossing southern Scandinavia and the nearest areas to the east and west. Some sagas paint a different picture, but we have seen that this may be explained.

Studies based on the sagas have normally presented a relatively homogeneous picture of the religion in southern Norway in Viking times. Attempts have been made to understand the religion as a whole, including a pantheon of gods. This picture is supported by terminology such as "Christians" on the one hand and "pagans" on the other, which has further stigmatised the groups of people living here and their beliefs before the arrival of Christianity. But belief is only part of a culture, although it is not always more or less separable from daily life. "Christians" is probably an appropriate name for some groups in Viking Age Norway, even if "Christianity" was heterogeneous then, as now. But "pagans" is not appropriate for the rest of the people, neither Norwegians nor Saami (e.g. Kilbride 2000; Saler 2000).

To search for the regional reaction against Christianity, it is necessary to focus more on regional differences. During the Viking Period, there were probably major differences in culture and belief in the area we today call Norway, and these are partly indicated by the remarkable differences in burial traditions. Norwegian topography, means of communication and the number of people living here in the Viking Age make it difficult to believe that it could be otherwise. I believe one of these differences was that the god Thor was not worshipped north of Sogn & Fjordane in Norway, or such worship was practised so differently that we are now unable to recognise it. Consequently, the Thor's hammer cannot mirror the reception of Christianity all over the country. Moreover, the few

Thor's hammers found show that they cannot represent a significant protest in the area where they occur. The Christian religion was probably met with different challenges around the country, depending on local beliefs.

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Notes

- 1 Staecker's Type 2.1.1.
- 2 Staecker's Type 3.
- 3 We do not, however, know whether this was placed on top, inside the urn, near its neck, like many of the Swedish parallels.
- 4 Because various finds in the museum have become confused over the years, the find circumstances are not quite sure.
- 5 Staecker's Type 1.1.
- 6 This information has been kindly given by Svein Gullbekk and Christoph Kilger, University of Oslo.
- 7 Staecker's Type 1.5.
- 8 Staecker's Type 1.3.
- 9 Staecker's Type 2.1.1.
- 10 Staecker's Type 3.
- 11 Staecker's Type 1.5.

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