II Feasting and sacrifice

The big ram... I sacrificed on the beach, burning slices from his thighs as an offering to Zeus of the Black Clouds, the Son of Cronos, who is lord of us all. But Zeus took no notice of my sacrifice; his mind must already have been full of plans for the destruction of all my gallant ships and of my trusty band. So the whole day long till sundown we sat and feasted on our rich supply of meat washed down by mellow wine.

Odyssey, IX (Rieu’s translation)

In the holy places of Celts, Germans and Scandinavians regular rituals were organised to renew and strengthen communication with the supernatural world. The communal feast which included the hallowing of ale or mead to the gods was of major importance, and the sacrifice of living creatures was linked with this. Animals had to be slain, and meat and drink shared with the powers in whose honour men came together. There might also be offerings of booty taken in war, sacred animals, part of the harvest, or perhaps food and drink set aside as a token gift to the supernatural beings from whom help was awaited. Such sacrifices, as well as the killing of victims, might take place on private occasions or at special times of crisis and danger, but always sacrifice formed an essential part of the communal feast held regularly in honour of the gods.

To some extent sacrifice may be seen as a contract between god and worshipper. The Scandinavian merchants on the Volga, according to Ibn Fadlan (p. 18 above) made offerings of food and cattle to wooden figures set up outside their houses, and hoped in return to receive the luck which would bring good trading. When other Rus traders went down the Dnieper to Byzantium, always a dangerous enterprise, we are told in a tenth century Greek account that when they reached St Gregory’s Island in the lower river, they would sacrifice cocks as a thank-offering. The poultry had presumably been taken with them for food, and they drew lots to decide which to offer in sacrifice, which to eat themselves, and which to keep alive. The idea of consulting the gods themselves when choosing a victim for them is frequently encountered in reviewing the evidence for sacrificial practices. There were no figures of gods on St Gregory’s Island, since this was foreign territory, but the offerings were placed round an enormous oak, a famous tree which survived into the nineteenth century. In this case the main deity may well have been Thor, god of the sky and said to assist travellers, who was associated with the oak. Later in the mid tenth century a Spanish Jew from Cordova left an account of what is thought to be the market town of Hedeby in Denmark, where few of the inhabitants were Christian.2 He described their way of life with fastidious distaste, noting that they ate much fish, threw unwanted infants into the sea, and sang in gruff voices like growling dogs. He observed that among them sacrifice and feasting went together: ‘They hold a feast where all meet to honour their god and to eat and drink. Each man who slaughters an animal for sacrifice – ox, ram, goat or pig – fastens it to a pole outside the door of his house, to show that he had made his sacrifice in honour of the god.’

1 The fixed festivals

While sacrifices might be made on special occasions, such as the arrival at a holy place, the setting up of a new house, victory in battle, the opening of the Assembly, or the death of a king, and might also be carried out by private individuals, there were regular feasts in which all the community took part. The fixing of these must have come about long before any formal calendar was in use, although by the first century AD the Celts in Gaul seem to have possessed an elaborate one. The Coligny Calendar, on fragments of bronze plate found at Ain in France in 1897, covered roughly five solar years of twelve months each, with two additional months to adapt the lunar year to the solar one.3 Months and certain days are classified as either auspicious or inauspicious. This calendar was probably for the use of the learned men of the community, enabling them to work out dates of feasts. Before such calendars existed, the feasts were presumably at the points of the seasonal round important for farmers, herdsmen, hunters, fishers and warriors, and could be roughly reckoned by observation of the moon or the planets.

The Celts and Germans used the half-year as the basic unit of time. In Iceland the missari (from miss, alternation) were summer and winter, each season twenty-six weeks in length, and the beginning of each was marked by feasting and religious ritual. The passage of time was by counting winters and nights. Julius Caesar (Gallic War VI, 18) noted that the Gauls held that night came before day, and kept to this when celebrating birthdays and the beginning of a month or a year, just as for us Christmas begins on Christmas Eve. Tacitus reported similarly of the
Germans in *Germania* 11: ‘They do not reckon time by days, as we do, but by nights. All their engagements and appointments are made on this system.’ This way of reckoning seems to have been common among agricultural and hunting peoples without exact calendars over a large part of the world. The two half-years of the Icelanders made up a year of 364 days, and this meant that there would gradually be a shift of seasons as time passed. The long winter darkness made this very noticeable, and Ari tells how men realised ‘by the course of the sun that the summer was moving backwards into the spring’. This caused consternation, as he tells us in *Isolendingabok* (4), and one night Thorstein Surt, the grandson of Thorolf of Helgafell (p. 13 above), had a dream. He thought that he was at the Law Assembly during the annual summer meeting at Thingvellir, and was the only one there awake; then he fell asleep when all the rest stayed awake. Ari interprets this as signifying that when Thorstein addressed the Thing, everyone would be silent, and when he stopped they would applaud. It might, however, have an additional meaning: by reckoning seasons wrongly, they had come to be active when they should be inactive and vice versa, but Thorstein alone knew a way to remedy this. He suggested that an extra week be added to the year every seventh summer, thus setting the calendar to rights, and the idea was enthusiastically received and became part of Icelandic law. It is interesting to note that the determination of time and dates was part of the responsibility of the Althing, and that the Lawspeaker proclaimed the *missiristal* (reckoning of the seasons/calendar) for the coming year at the close of the Assembly. Thus the reckoning of time was originally seen as under the control of the gods.

In the course of the solar year, the Celtic peoples had three main feasts. *Samain* on 1 November marked the beginning of winter and opening of the new year, and the word is usually taken to mean ‘end of summer’. At this time animals which could not be kept through the winter were slaughtered, so that it was a convenient time for feasting. Samain was regarded as a period of danger, since it was the boundary between the seasons, when the way to the Other World lay open and the dead had encounters with the living. It is said in the opening of *The Adventures of Nera*: ‘The fairy mounds of Erin are always opened about Samain’. Various rites were practised to discover what the year would bring to the community and to individuals, and echoes of this are still found in the observance of Hallow’en in the British Isles. The other main festival was *Beltene* on 1 May, at the beginning of summer, which in Christian times continued to be marked by the lighting of bonfires and various rites to ensure fertility among the herds and bring a good harvest. There were also two quarterly festivals on 1 February and 1 August. *Imbolc* in February was associated with the goddess Brigantia and later with St Brigit. The name indicates a connection with milking, but may also have had ancient associations with purification. Cormac in his *Glossary* explained it as meaning ‘Sheep’s milk’, thus alluding to the beginning of the lambing season, but this can hardly be correct. The date was an important one in the year, for as well as lambing there were preparations for spring sowing, while farm workers were hired for the coming season, fishermen took out their boats after the winter, and on the coast seaweed was gathered to fertilise the crops and people gathered shellfish. St Brigit was said to travel about the countryside on the eve of her festival to bestow her blessing on the people and their animals. This could well have been a festival in which women played an important part. At the festival of *Lughnasad* in August, the emphasis was on the beginning of harvest, and in pre-Christian times this was associated with the god Lug. Maire MacNeill in her detailed investigation of this festival has shown how it continued to be observed into recent times in Ireland by expeditions to wells and hilltops, by the holding of fairs and general rejoicing. All these festivals included various ceremonies and rites to bring luck, protection and blessing in the coming season, and there were various methods of foretelling what the future was to bring.

The Germanic winter started in autumn with the ‘winter nights’, three or more days in late October; in Iceland this was the period between 11 and 18 October. The plural expression implies some vagueness about the exact date, and it was probably kept as a period of feasting rather than as a single festival. The equivalent summer period began in April, in Iceland as *sumarmál* (summer time) between 9 and 15 April. In the Viking Age this was the time to seek for good luck in raids and expeditions, after men had been at home for the winter. There was also the midwinter feast known as Yule, which came to be identified with the festival for Christ’s birth in Christian times. This was the time of the winter solstice, when little could be done out of doors. Tacitus in the first century AD declared in *Germania* (6) that the Germans had only three main seasons, winter, spring and summer, since they had no fruit harvest in the autumn like the Mediterranean peoples. Similarly in the thirteenth century, Snorri in *Ynglinga Saga* (8) mentions three main feasts in Scandinavia before the conversion: one at the beginning of winter, when men sacrificed for plenty, one at mid-winter for the growth of crops, and one in summer for victory. There might be other times when regular feasts took place, depending on local conditions, but the three main ones seem to have made up the established pattern over a large part of north-western Europe. Grimm in *Teutonic Mythology* wisely observed that the further north men lived, the more important
the distinction between light and darkness, with emphasis on the shortest day in mid-winter, and Procopius noted that the men of Thule, in the far north, held their main feast when the sun was first seen from a mountain top after the long period of winter darkness.\textsuperscript{11}

The holding of a feast was always a matter of pride and reputation among kings and leaders. In the first century BC Posidonius wrote of a certain Celtic chief, Louernius, that he made generous gifts of gold and silver to his followers,\textsuperscript{12} and built a square enclosure for feasting one and a half miles each way. He had filled '... vats with expensive liquor, and prepared so great a quantity of food that for many days all who wished could enter and enjoy the feast prepared, being served without a break by the attendants.' This implies a period set apart for feasting by the whole community rather than a particular entertainment when guests were invited to the king's hall, and some of the enclosures found in sacred places may have been used in this way. The heroic poetry of north-western Europe is full of praise for generous rulers who provided rich hospitality in the mead hall, but the sacrificial feast can be distinguished from banquets in general because at this men partook of animals sacrificed to the gods, and drank mead and ale in the god's honour. They met to renew their contract with the supernatural world, and to ensure good luck for the coming season, and this was something for the whole community to share in and not for selected guests. Games and contests might form part of the feast, which could last for several days. The essential element, however, was eating and drinking together, and there may have been occasions when strangers were not admitted. This seems implied in an account of the poet Sigvat's journey through Sweden in the early eleventh century, when the Norwegian king sent him on a mission concerning marriage with the king of Sweden's daughter.\textsuperscript{13} By this time Norway was officially Christian, but the Swedes retained their old religion, and Sigvat had a difficult journey. It was late in the autumn, and many householders, including one man renowned for hospitality, refused to allow him inside their houses. We have Sigvat's own verses describing this, and it is on these that Snorri has based his story. At one farm called Hof, the poet declared that he was unable to thrust his nose inside, and could get scarcely a word out of the people but was turned away because they declared that the hall was 'hallowed'. At the next farm the housewife forbade him to enter, because they were holding a lítálbót (sacrifice to the elves), and feared the anger of Odin if he were allowed in: 'She thrust me away as if I were a wolf,' he complained. It is true that St Olaf's poet was a Christian, which might account for the hostility, but the implication is that the doors were barred to strangers once the feast had begun.\textsuperscript{14}

2 Ceremonial drinking

The drinking of wine, ale or mead was of ceremonial importance at all feasts, and it seems to have been this which 'hallowed' the hall when men met for sacrifice. Among the Celts, splendid drinking vessels, jugs, flagons and horns are frequent in rich graves from the Hallstatt period onwards, and it has been said with truth that we owe much of our knowledge of Celtic art to Celtic thirst.\textsuperscript{15} Traces of liquid were sometimes left in these which on analysis proved to be beer or mead, and since a number of vessels were often included in one grave, the symbolic meaning appears to be that of a feast in the Other World rather than a supply of nourishment for the single occupant. While some vessels were of foreign workmanship, like the enormous bronze crater in the grave of the 'Princess of Vix' from the sixth century BC,\textsuperscript{16} many magnificent examples were made by Celtic craftsmen. Superb flagons like one from Dürrenberg in Austria (early fifth century BC)\textsuperscript{17} or the matching pair from Basse-Yutz in Lorraine (late fifth/early fourth century BC)\textsuperscript{18} may well have been made for religious feasts, in which kings and nobles would certainly take part. Their ornamentation has been inspired by the Celtic view of the world of gods and monsters, and fantastic creatures creep up the handle, adorn the lid, or perch on the shoulder. In a chieftain's grave from Hochdorf in Austria (sixth century BC)\textsuperscript{19} there was a set of nine drinking horns on the wall of the burial chamber, and a cauldron from Greece which had held mead. The use of horns in the heroic past was remembered in Irish literature. In the 'Colloquy of the Ancients', St Patrick asks whether men used horns, cups or goblets in the old days, and Cailte replies that Finn had three hundred and twelve gold drinking-horns, which held an enormous amount of liquor, and gives a list of some of their names.\textsuperscript{20}

The Germans also drank from horns on ceremonial occasions, according to Julius Caesar, setting particular value on the great horns of the aurochs, which could only be obtained by hunters of great skill and courage (Gallic War VI, 28). These they adorned with rams of silver and used at their most splendid feasts. Horns were still in use at the Norwegian court until the end of the Viking Age. According to Snorri Sturluson, it was Olaf the Quiet in the eleventh century, an enthusiast for modern innovations, who replaced them by cups which could be filled at table: 'King Harald [Hardrada] and former kings had been accustomed to drink from animal horns and have the ale taken round the fire from the highseat.'\textsuperscript{21} A magnificent pair of gold drinking horns of Germanic workmanship, one bearing runes which indicate a date about the early fifth century AD, was discovered near Gallehus in North
Schleswig in the eighteenth century, then part of Denmark. They were treasured for a while after the discovery of the second horn in 1734 and even used at the king’s court, but in 1802 they were stolen and melted down before the thief was caught. A series of decorated rings fitted over the horns, and on these human and animal figures were depicted, engaged in various activities such as dancing, riding, shooting with a bow, ball-playing and acrobatics; there were also men with animal heads, warriors in huge horned helmets, and a three-headed giant. It is not possible to interpret the scenes with certainty, but they suggest seasonal rites and might represent sports and ritual actions at a feast. Horses are shown on both horns, and one has been pierced by an arrow while next to it a woman is shown carrying a horn, so one possibility is that the horns were intended to be used at the horse sacrifice (Fig. 4).

Another pair of large ceremonial drinking horns formed part of the royal treasure from the ship-grave at Sutton Hoo, and the rims and tips of silver-gilt have survived. These are of seventh century date, and were evidently intended for communal drinking. In the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf (612–14) the drinking ceremony in a Danish king’s hall is described: the Danish queen first carried the cup to the king and then bore it round to the chief warriors in the hall. She uttered a formal speech as she handed it to the king, and again when she gave it to Beowulf, the visiting champion, and as he received it from her he solemnly pledged himself to do battle against the monster Grendel on the king’s behalf. However in spite of many references to feasting and drinking, there is no mention of drinking horns in the poem, and in the Christian period they were presumably replaced by cups and glass drinking vessels.

The hallowing of wine drunk to the gods, an essential part of the sacrificial feast, continued in the form of a toast or mimini which was drunk at the meetings of the medieval guilds held in Scandinavia in Christian times. The expression ‘to drink a feast’ was used when referring to the holding of a guild meeting, and it may be noted similarly that the word for feast (symbol) is used in Beowulf (619) of a drinking cup. It was customary to drink three main toasts at a guild feast. The Gothland Karin’s Guild, for instance, drank to Christ, St Catharine and Our Lady, while the Swedish Eric’s Guild to St Eric, Our Saviour and Our Lady. Snorri tells us that three toasts were drunk at the funeral of Harald of Denmark, who had been converted to Christianity, and these were to Christ, to St Michael and to the memory of the dead king. He also mentions three toasts drunk in pre-Christian times: at Lade, Jarl Sigurd drank to Odin for power and victory, and to Njord and Freyr for peace and good seasons, while a third toast was to the memory of dead ancestors.

On such occasions the Jarl presided at the feast, and hallowed the drink with appropriate words before the horns were carried round the hall.

There are many Icelandic tales of the mystery and magic of drinking horns, which like the Irish ones were often given names. Olaf Tryggvason was said to possess a pair called the Hyrnings, and another called the Grims. The latter came to him as a gift from the legendary

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4 Panels from two gold horns from Gallehus, Denmark (later destroyed), from drawing of 1734.
Gudmund of Glasisvellir (p. 185 below), ruler of a supernatural realm who was hostile to Christianity. When the horns were blessed in Christian fashion before Olaf drank from them the men who brought the horns were furious.28 A late legendary saga describes an enormous horn called Grim the Good, and this had a man’s head on the tip which was said to speak and foretell the future.29 A well-known tale of the god Thor in the Prose Edda describes how he struggled to empty a huge drinking horn in the hall of the giants, but failed because the tip went down into the ocean. The name Grim given to horns emphasises their link with Odin, since it is one of his many names. The brewing of ale was also associated with him, and the mother of Starkad, one of Odin’s heroes long remembered for his bravery and evil deeds, vowed her unborn child to Odin in return for the god’s help in a brewing contest with other women.30 In Ynglinga Saga all the gods helped with the brewing of the mead drunk in the Other World. When the warring companies of the gods, the Æsir and the Vanir, made a truce, they prepared mead in a huge vessel as a pledge of their agreement, each spitting into the bowl to ensure the fermentation of the liquid.31 The fact that in the late days of the old religion toasts were drunk to both the Æsir and the Vanir may partly account for this myth, but the importance of the brewing by both parties as a symbol of their agreement – which was never broken – remains significant. The giants tried to steal the mead, but Odin recovered it and brought it back to Valhalla (p. 175 below). The tradition of his escape with it in eagle form was used frequently in the imagery of the early poets, and this may be an ancient tradition, going back to Indo-European times.32 Celtic and Germanic tales both emphasise the importance of the great cauldron holding the drink for the feast, and dwell on the unending supply of life-giving mead or ale in the Other World. Large cauldrons have been found in Celtic graves from the Hallstatt period onwards and also in Germanic graves. In the Latin Life of St Columbanus, written in the seventh century, there is a tale of how when the saint was in the region of the Alamanni in Switzerland, he came upon a group of men clustered around a huge vessel which they called cupa, holding about twenty measures of beer. They told him that they were offering it to Wodan, but the saint approached the vat and blew on it, causing it to shatter with a loud noise so that the beer was lost.33 A similar episode in a different setting is found in a tale of St Vedrastus, who once accompanied the Frankish king Chlothar to a banquet. This was in the early days of Christianity, and the festival ale had been tactfully divided into two portions, one hallowed according to the heathen custom and the other set apart for Christians. Vedrastus would not accept this, and he made the sign of the cross over the hallowed vessel, whereupon it burst, and the heathen who were about to drink from it were converted by the saint’s display of power.34 These stories can be recognised as Christian propaganda, but they indicate how feasts were conducted.

There are references in early Irish literature to the inexhaustible cauldron of mead in the Other World. Such a vessel is said to be inside the sid or fairy mound:

A vat of intoxicating mead was being distributed to the household.

It is there yet, its state unchanging – it is always full.35

Such vats were said to stand in a crystal bower in the otherworld island in the tale of ‘The Adventure of Art’: ‘Fair was the site of that bower, with its doors of crystal and its inexhaustible vats, for though everything be emptied out of them, they were ever full again.’36 The image passed into Christian poetry, and a poet of the tenth or eleventh century declares: ‘I should like to have a great ale feast for the King of Kings; I should like the heavenly host to be drinking it for all eternity.’37

Such a picture may be compared with that of the unceasing supply of mead in the hall of the god Odin, who feasted his heroes in Valhalla each evening when the day’s fighting was over. In one poem, Grimmismál (25), it is said that the mead comes from the udders of the goat Heidrun who fed the World Tree. The importance of the drinking in Odin’s hall is emphasised by the popularity of the symbol of a woman offering a horn.38 She is shown on a number of stones of the Viking Age set up as memorials in Gotland, and there she is greeting a warrior who is arriving at Valhalla. A similar figure was used as an amulet in Sweden, for an example was found in the cemetery at Birka, and she appears again on carved stones of the tenth century in northern England. Poems of about the same date mention the valkyries bearing mead to kings entering Valhalla (p. 92 below). The image may go back earlier than the Viking Age, since a woman carrying a horn appears on one of the gold drinking-horns from Gallehus, dated to the fifth century AD (p. 43 above).

3 The sacrificial meal

The second cauldron at the feast was that in which the meat was cooked, and as with the mead, supplies of this in the Other World feasts would never run out. The Irish Dagda possessed a cauldron of plenty, and it was said in ‘The Second Battle of Mag Tuired’ that none went away from it unsatisfied. In such a cauldron, a pig might be cooked for the
feast, or a bull or an ox boiled, although sometimes the meat was roasted over the fire:39 'A pig perpetually alive and a roasted swine and a vessel with marvellous liquor, and never do they all decrease.' The god Manannán who ruled in the Land of Youth had a supply of pigs which could be devoured and then restored to life to be cooked anew on the morrow.48 Again there is a parallel in the account of the hospitality in the hall of Odin, where the boar Sæthrimirir provided the warriors with an unending supply of pork; it was said in Gylfaginning (37) that it was 'boiled every day and comes to life each evening'.

Food was placed in both Celtic and Germanic graves from an early period, and tough cauldrons suitable for cooking over a fire as well as more fragile ones to hold liquor have frequently been found; one from Sutton Hoo, for instance was big enough to hold a sheep. The heating and cooking of meat on the hearth was in itself an image of the link between man and the Other World. Fire and cooking are constantly emphasised in the Fenian tales, while 'fire-dogs' to hold the logs in place, with horned heads of bulls, found in chieftains' graves of the La Tène period, are likely to have possessed ritual significance.41 In individual graves of the earlier Hallstatt period there were sets of plates and dishes, if for a dinner party, and this practice is continued in the so-called 'pottery graves' of Jutland in the early centuries AD.42 The Other World cauldron is associated with the idea of resurrection, for not only the unfortunate boar, doomed to be slaughtered and cooked daily, but other animals also might enter the cauldron and yet be restored to life. It was said of pigs in the Irish tales that 'if their bones were kept without breaking or gawning, they would survive alive every day'.43 A popular legend about St Patrick tells how he brought back a bull to life when its bones were collected and placed on the hide,44 while the Scandinavian Thor did precisely the same with his goats, cooking them for supper and then resuscitating them when the bones were placed on the skin by raising his hammer over them.45

There is a tradition that warriors plunged into a magical cauldron might return to life in the same way. This happens in the Welsh tale of 'Branwen Daughter of Llyr' in the Mabinogion, which shows signs of Irish influence; here a dead man thrown into a cauldron which was brought from beneath a lake rises next day as good a fighting man as before, 'save that he will not have the power of speech'.46 An Irish tale with a strong Christian element, 'The Death of Muircertach mac Erca', contains an episode in which an enchanted feast of pig's flesh and wine was provided for warriors who had fallen in battle but who were recalled to life; and this is represented as the evil deception of an enchantress. The raising of dead warriors to fight anew is a familiar theme also in Norse literature, and is not confined to accounts of Odin's realm of Valhalla, but may take place also within a burial mound. It was a familiar motif in the Viking Age, and possibly one of considerable antiquity; among the many different interpretations of the panel showing marching and riding warriors on the Gundestrup Cauldron, one is that a man is being placed in a cauldron in order to restore him to life to fight anew (Fig. 5).

It appears that the leaving of food and drink in the graves of Celtic and Germanic dead was based on something more than a crude notion that they needed nourishment after death. The cost and effort involved in providing splendid vessels for food and drink reached vast proportions in certain periods, and the custom continued in varying degrees throughout the pre-Christian period. In the elaborate arrangements for a feast for the rich and powerful dead, we seem justified in seeing the symbolism of the Other World banquet with its implication of renewal of life. The more pathetic provision made for poorer folk in the form of an egg or two or a small piece of meat, along with a vessel of beer, might also be viewed as a hopeful offering, implying in a vague way some kind of continuing life in the next world. This must at least be counted as a possibility among peoples to whom the feast and the hallowing of food and drink represented one of the most important means of communicating with the gods.

The chief cult animals whose meat was used for the sacrificial feast were the boar, the bull and the horse. Pork was popular among the Celts from early times, and the herding of swine played an important part in farming both on the Continent and in the British Isles.47 The use of the

5 Panel from interior of Gundestrup Cauldron, showing ritual scene and lines of warriors.
pig as a religious symbol may account for the prominence of swineherds in the Irish tales, and their association with Other World wisdom. Posidonius described the fierce competition between warriors in the second century BC for the best cuts from the carcase of the boar provided for the feast. As with the seats for the guests, there were strict rules of precedence when the boar was carved, and the finest or 'champion's portion' of the roast meat was much coveted as an honour: 'In former times when the hindquarters were served up, the bravest hero took the thigh piece, and if another man claimed it they stood up and fought in single combat to the death.' Competition for the champion’s portion and also the right to carve the boar, claimed by the foremost warrior present, was still remembered in the Irish tales, particularly in 'Bricriu's Feast' and 'Mac Da Tho's Pig'. Bricriu inflames the warriors with his challenge: 'Yonder you see the champion's portion ... let it be given to the best warrior in Ulaid', whereupon the names of three outstanding heroes present are shouted out, and in a moment they are contending in furious combat: 'The three heroes rose out into the middle of the house with their spears and swords and shields: and they so slashed at each other that half the house was a fire of swords and glittering spear edges, while the other half was a pure-white bird flock of shield enamel.' In Mac Da Tho's hall, Cet son of Magu takes it on himself to do the carving, and though various warriors challenge him he silences them all with references to his superiority in the past, until at last Conall Cernach arrives with the head of Cet's brother in his wallet and drives him away from the pig: 'Cet left the pig then, and Conall sat down to it, saying “On with the contest!” The Connacht could not find a warrior to equal him ... Conall then began to carve the pig.' Lists have survived telling how the joints were allotted, and there is general agreement that the most distinguished guest received cuts from the leg, while the head was reserved for the charioteer.

Bones and heads of pigs are found in graves in the Celtic areas, and many boar figures in stone or metal. Some of these might be accounted for by the fact that the boar was the symbol of the Twentieth Legion in the Roman army and so was frequently found on Roman sites, but the typically Celtic beasts are recognisable as spirited and vigorous fighting animals, appropriate symbols for warriors. Boars might be placed on swords and shields (Plate 2c), and warriors wore them as crests on helmets, as can be seen from the Gundestrup Cauldron; they appear on the same panel where marching warriors are shown carrying the carynx or war-trumpet, which ended in a boar’s head.

A boar for the feast had first to be caught and killed, and this might prove a somewhat perilous enterprise, since according to Strabo (Geo-
graphy IV, 4, 3) even the ordinary pig bred by the Celts was noted for its height, ferocity and swiftness, sometimes proving a match for a wolf (Plate 2a). There are accounts of boar hunts in both Welsh and Irish literature in which the strength and fury of the quarry reach mythological proportions, as in the description of the Twrth Trwyth in the Mabinogion, and the wild boar of Benn Gulbán in 'The Death of Diarmait'. Evidently many such tales were known, since on one occasion Finn recites to his hound a list of great boars killed on expeditions in the past. In the Welsh Triads there is mention of a gigantic sow called Henwvyn (Ancient White One), one of seven pursued by Arthur. She brought forth wheat, barley grain and bees on her journeyings, and seems to symbolise the other aspect of the pig, that of fertility, while the grain and honey suggest the drink brewed for the feast. On the other hand, she also gives birth to dangerous creatures associated with slaughter, a wolf, a fierce eagle and a cat. In Spain, large figures of boars in stone were set up by the Celto-Iberians beside their hilltop settlements, perhaps intended to bring prosperity to their herds of pigs. One strong indication of the association of the boar with a Celtic deity is the small figure in sandstone from Eufligneix in France. This is a male figure wearing a neckring, with a fine crested boar carved on his chest, and a large staring eye on one side of the body. It stands 30 cm in height and seems to have been set up with the lower part of the stone in the earth. The estimated date is the first century AD.

Joints of pork and the heads of pigs have been found in Germanic graves of the pre-Christian period. One early cremation urn from Saxony had a boar on the lid, and the boar seems to have had some association with the dead in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. It was also a favourite symbol for kings and warriors, and two magnificent shoulder-clasps from the Sutton Hoo treasure are decorated with two crested boars which form an intricate and effective pattern. There are boars on the eyebrows of the helmet from the same grave, thought to have been of Swedish craftsmanship, and boars were certainly popular in Sweden in the Vendel period, from about AD 600 to 800. Helmet plates from the ship graves at Vendel show warriors with immense boar crests on their helmets, and one man wearing what is almost a boar mask, with huge protruding tusks. The early kings of Uppsala are said to have had great boar helmets as treasures, with names like Hildisvin (Battle-Swine). One complete small boar crest on a helmet has survived from a seventh century grave at Benty Grange in Derbyshire; the boar is about 9 cm long, elaborately made with gold spots for bristles and tiny garnet eyes. In the poem Beowulf the boar is said to protect warriors who wear it on their helmets, and to keep guard over their lives (305–6),
while Beowulf himself wore a boar helmet which it was said no sword could pierce (1453–4). There is an Anglo-Saxon sword with three boar figures stamped on the blade, a parallel to the Celtic example. Another instance of the link between the boar and warfare is the name given to the wedge formation in battle, the Roman *cuneus*, known to Germans and Scandinavians as *caput porci* (boar's head) or *stinfylking* (swine formation).

A man receiving the horn at a feast might make a solemn vow before drinking from it, and in one of the legendary Icelandic Sagas, *Hervarar Saga* (10), as well as in a prose note added to the Helgi poems in the *Edda*, a vow of a similar kind is made with a hand placed on the sacrificial boar. If this was based on actual practice, it was presumably made on the carcass of the boar brought into the hall for the feast. The word used of the boar in the saga is *sónarglotr*, literally 'boar (golg) of the herd', and the boar sacrifice had the name *sónarböltn*, and was said to be associated with divination. The boar on which men made vows was said to be offered to Freyr, and a golden boar is known as a symbol of the Vanir deities, Freyr and Freyja. Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál* (33) describes this as one of the treasures of the gods, forged in precious metal by the dwarves and adorned with bristles of shining gold: 'He could run through air and sea by day or night, outdoing any horse, and however dark the night or the realms of blackness, there was ample light in his path from the shining of his bristles'. The little boar on the Anglo-Saxon helmet from Benty Grange has its bristles picked out in gold, and as Miranda Green points out, it is the dorsal bristles, rather than the tusks, that are emphasised in Celtic iconography when the boar is represented. She suggests that this might be to stress the ferocity of the beast, but it might also be based on the link between the boar and the sun. The realm of blackness was the underworld, and the boar could carry the goddess Freya there when she wanted to gain special knowledge, as we learn from the poem *Hyndluljóð* in the *Poetic Edda*; here her human lover Ottar takes on the form of her boar so that she can take him down with her to learn the names of his ancestors. After discovering his genealogy, Ottar drank the ale of remembrance, which may imply a link between the boar and the *mimmi* drunk at the feast in honour of dead ancestors, and thus with the Vanir deities also. In his rapid journey through the sky into the lower world, the boar shining so brilliantly must surely be a symbol of the travelling sun.

The boar has remained a traditional dish at Christmas in parts of Sweden and Denmark up to recent times, and in Scania a salted pig's head with trotters and tail used to be placed on a flat loaf, and kept until the first ploughing after Christmas, when it was shared between the ploughman and his horses. John Aubrey mentioned the boar's head as a popular Christmas dish in England until the early seventeenth century, and it continued to be introduced in a special ceremony at Queen's College, Oxford, a custom going back at least as far as the fourteenth century. At a more popular level, a boar's head was wrestled for and afterwards eaten in a public house at Hornchurch in Essex in the nineteenth century. Thus the tradition of a link between the boar and the midwinter feast continued in folklore and popular tradition over a long period, even if it might be difficult to prove continuity for such customs from pre-Christian times.

The bull was an important cult animal in northern Europe, and also in Mediterranean countries from a very early period. Its head was a favourite symbol on metal cauldrons of the Roman period in Denmark and Britain. There is a vigorous scene on the base of the Gundestrup Cauldron which shows a man with dogs attacking a bull, and this corresponds with the description by Julius Caesar (*Gallic War* VI, 2) of the hunting of the great bull, the aurochs, by young Germans, who used to trap the animal in a pit and then go down to kill it as a test of valour. It may also be noted that the great 'standard' from the Sutton Hoo ship grave has four bulls' heads on the corners, presumably chosen because of symbolic significance. Celtic figures of bulls, particularly those from Gaul, are often depicted with three horns, presumably to emphasise the horned head as a power symbol, while knobs placed on the ends of the horns may be another expression of this, or to emphasise a link with the Other World. It seems that the bull, like the boar, might be associated with the sun, and a metal mount in the form of a bull's head from the grave of the Frankish king Childeric had a sun-symbol on the forehead, the place where a third horn could be set.

The slaying of the sacrificial bull, like the boar, could provide an opportunity for divination. The Irish *taoirfeis* (bull feast) was said to include the eating of the bull's flesh and drinking of the blood, after which the man who had partaken would sleep on the bull's hide in order to dream of the future king (p. 143 below). As there were mighty boars from the Other World, so too there were legendary bulls of enormous strength and power. The celebrated Brown Bull of Cúailnge died after conquering his rival, Findbennach (White-Horned), and these two splendid and terrible beasts are said to be swineherds from the *Sid*, reborn in animal form. There are a number of Welsh and Irish tales in which Otherworld cattle emerge from a lake or come out of a fairy mound; they are usually white with red ears, a type of early British cattle still preserved in a few places in Britain. A similar tradition is preserved in Scandinavian folktales; one from Denmark tells of a merwoman
whose cattle used to come out of the sea to graze, and these were corralled by the local people, who demanded a ransom for them. The merwoman paid this, but she took her revenge by telling her bull to churn up the sand and ruin the fields, while she paid the people in fairy gold which did not last.69 There are also examples of cattle in Norwegian folktales who come out of the mountains, and in *Eyrbyggja Saga* (63) we have the tale of a sinister grey bull whose offspring caused the death of the farmer Thorodd. This is an interesting example, since the bull was born to a cow which had licked the ashes of the fire which burned the body of the evil character Thorolf, who had been active after death; it is possible that we have Irish influence here. In another major saga, *Laxdæla Saga* (31), a supernatural woman refers to a sagacious bull which was able to find grazing for the other cattle in winter as her son (p. 138 below). This bull had two extra horns, one of which is said to have grown out of his forehead and then curled down below his eyes, and this he used for breaking the ice in winter, so that here we have an independent piece of evidence for the link between the extra horn and the powers of fertility.

Cattle formed a major source of food for the Germanic peoples. When Bishop Mellitus came to England in 601, Bede tells us that he was directed by Pope Gregory to replace the pagan feasts at which men sacrificed to devils by some kind of ‘devout feasting’ suitable for Christians to take part in. This was to take place outside the new churches, and those who came to the feast could put up temporary wooden shelters, according to the *Ecclesiastical History* (I, 36). Stow in the sixteenth century reported a find of a heap of ox-skulls on the south side of St Paul’s in London, and assumed that a Roman temple had stood there, but these might have been relics of Anglo-Saxon feasts of the kind mentioned by Gregory. A huge heap of such skulls was found at Yeavering, in the building thought to be a temple (p. 31 above), and another collection is recorded from Harrow Hill.70 Such piles of skulls could represent cattle killed at a series of feasts over the years, a grisly record like the great turtle shells kept as records of Victorian banquets. Occasional ox-skulls are reported from Anglo-Saxon graves, and there are examples of ox-skulls or whole cattle buried in Celtic areas, both in burial sites and as ritual deposits.71

When a traveller in Denmark in the Viking Age saw cattle hanging up outside the house in which sacrifices had taken place, this probably means that the meat was eaten at a feast, while the hide, perhaps with the head, horns and hooves attached, was set up as a record (p. 37 above). This was a practice which can be traced back to very early times in northern Europe, and it has been kept up by some of the peoples of the Steppe within recent memory. As late as 1805 the hides of horned creatures killed were presented to the church in one remote district in Sweden until the bishop objected to what appeared to him to be a heathen custom, while the Lapps used to offer the hides of reindeer to the churches in the early days of their conversion to Christianity.72

The bull sacrifice in Viking times appears to have been associated both with Thor and with the Vanir deities of fertility. A bull was reputed to have been sacrificed at the annual Assembly at Thingvallir, over which Thor presided as guardian of law, and the sacred ring on which oaths were sworn was immersed in the blood of the sacrificed animal.73 In *Viga-Glumis Saga* an ox was offered to Freyr in an attempt to gain his support, and Freyr gave a sign that he accepted the sacrifice, with disastrous results for the fortunes of the hero (p. 138 below). According to *Egils Saga* (65) the winner of an official duel sacrificed an ox to the gods as a thank-offering for victory. However in Scandinavia in general the stallion seems generally to have replaced the bull as a symbol of power and virility.

The horse in its turn was an animal which could be associated with the journeying sun, and it was an important religious symbol in the North from the Bronze Age onwards. A horse could carry a departed hero to the realm of the dead, and is shown doing this on many of the memorial stones set up in Gotland in the Viking Age. Like Freyr’s boar, Odin’s horse travelled swiftly through the sky and down into the realm of death. In the first century AD, the sacred horses of the Germans were held to understand the will of the gods more clearly than their priests could do, according to Tacitus, so that they were used for divination (p. 150 below). The Celts seem to have associated horses with the gods in the pre-Roman period, since they were shown along with birds of prey in the great sanctuaries of southern France (p. 28 above). The cult of a goddess Epona (Divine Horse) flourished in eastern Gaul and on the German frontier, and was known in Britain; the goddess is shown with horses and foals, sitting astride or riding side-saddle or seated with a horse on either side of her. She has been identified with Macha in the Irish tales, a woman from the Other World able to outrun the king’s fastest horses, and also with the Welsh Rhiannon.74 Like the boar and the bull, the horse was a powerful symbol both for fertility and for warfare.

The impressive White Horse cut in the chalk hillsides at Uffington in Oxfordshire has been claimed as a Celtic monument, because its curved shape resembles the fantastic horses on Celtic coins. However there is no proof that this figure existed before the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, and its present shape can scarcely be deliberate, since the original outline is distorted by water draining down the slope. It has been claimed that
earlier traces of a more realistic horse can be made out below the present one. A white horse outlined on the chalk hill might be expected in either an Iron Age or an Anglo-Saxon setting, since the horse served as a powerful religious symbol for both peoples.

It seems that horse sacrifice was more developed among the Germanic peoples than the Celts. Horses were not included in the wagon burials of the Hallstatt period, although the harness might be left in the grave. They could be sacrificed with their riders after a victory (p. 62 below) but do not seem to have regularly formed part of the sacrificial feast. Only one horse tooth was identified at Llyn Cerrig Bach, the lake in Anglesey into which offerings were thrown, although admittedly this collection of bones was not thoroughly examined. References to horses on stakes are found occasionally in the Irish tales, which might be a memory of horse sacrifice, and there is one late account of the killing of a white horse in the writings of Giraldus Cambrensis. He declares that he heard of a tribe in Ulster which celebrated the inauguration of a new king by a strange and shocking ceremony. The king entered on all fours in the presence of the people, approached a white mare and acted the part of a mating stallion. The mare was then killed, and the flesh cooked in a cauldron; the king bathed in the broth, drank from it, and ate some of the flesh. There are some grounds for taking this account seriously, although it seems improbable that such a ritual could take place in Christian Ireland in the twelfth century. There are noteworthy parallels: the bull sacrifice, when a man drank or bathed in the broth, the horse sacrifice in Norway in the Viking Age, when the king was required to partake of the broth in which the horse was cooked (see below), and the Hindu rite of the astamedha in India. This is the subject of a hymn in the Rigveda, for which we possess a Brahmanical liturgical commentary; the queen is said to approach a stallion which has been sacrificed, representing the universe, and simulate the act of copulation with it. It is possible that Giraldus was here using some oral tradition, remembered vaguely from the past, and it is even conceivable that this was influenced by memories of the horse sacrifice performed by Vikings in Ireland.

In German and Scandinavian countries horses were killed on many occasions as part of the funeral ceremony, for there are a number of horse skeletons at the great ship-burials of Norway and Sweden, and horses were buried in many pre-Christian cemeteries on Germanic territory. Ibn Fadlan's account of a ship-funeral on the Volga in the tenth century (p. 18 above) includes the killing of two horses, which were first made to gallop and then cut to pieces with swords and thrown into the ship which was to serve as a pyre for the dead chief. A horse might be buried with the dead either in the same grave or separately, and could be seen as a necessary part of a warrior's equipment. However a detailed survey of horse-burial during the first millennium AD in Prussia and Sudovia made by Jaskanis in 1966 shows the danger of generalisation in such matters, since among horse-breeding peoples who lived in the same area it was possible to sacrifice horses in a variety of ways at the funeral. They are found in both cremation and inhumation graves, and in a number of cases those buried with horses were neither warriors nor people of wealth and importance. The horses might be buried in separate graves, sometimes in one section of the cemetery, and some were killed before burial, others apparently buried alive. Sometimes only heads or teeth were found, or part of a horse harness without the animal. Jaskanis emphasises close similarities between German, Scandinavian and Baltic material, and parallels among the nomad peoples of the Steppes, but it is clearly impossible to draw neat conclusions from the wide variety of practices. The increased popularity of horse sacrifice in the Viking Age may be due to influences from eastern Europe.

Horses certainly formed part of ritual feasts held at Skedemosse on the island of Öland in the Baltic in the third and fourth centuries AD. This site was once a lake, and a vast number of objects had been thrown into the water. It seemed from traces of scorched earth, charcoal and burnt bones that fires were lit on the shore of the lake and feasts held there, after which the remains were tipped into the water. The largest number of bones, about thirty-five per cent, were those of horses, with smaller numbers from cattle, sheep and goats, and a small number from pigs, deer and dogs. Animal remains from contemporary settlements on the island, however, give a different picture; here the animals most used for food were sheep and cattle, and horses were comparatively rare. At Skedemosse hides, heads, legs and tails of horses and cattle were sometimes found together, as if set up for cult ceremonies (p. 52 above). The name Skedemosse is thought to be formed from svid, which could be used either for a fight between stallions or a horse-race, and it has been suggested that races took place on the long ridge near the lake, or that horse-fights were held there, to decide which animals should be killed and which kept for breeding. No signs of blows were found on the bones, and the animals may have been stabbed to death.

The Heimskringla of Snorri Sturluson has a description of a horse sacrifice at Trondheim in the saga of Hákon the Good (14), in which the Christian king was forced to take part against his will. The source of Snorri's information is not known, but the account is a fairly detailed one. The king had been brought up in England as a Christian, and his usual practice at feasts was to eat privately with a few companions, but on this occasion the people insisted that he take a full part. They wanted
him to sacrifice for good seasons and peace as his fathers had done, and he was forced to comply. Sigurd, the Jarl of Halogaland, presided, and hallowed the first bowl in the name of Odin. The king made the sign of the cross over it, but the Jarl tactfully explained that he was making the hammer sign in honour of Thor. On the second day the horse sacrifice was prepared, and when the king refused to eat the meat or drink the broth, Sigurd urged him to touch the greasy handle of the cauldron with his lips, but the king put a linen cloth over it before doing so, and the people were not satisfied. Later the midwinter feast took place, and again a horse was sacrificed; this time the king agreed to eat a little of the liver and to drink from the mini bowls. It was evidently important that he should consume some of the blood of the slain horse, since on this the wellbeing of the land depended. In spite of his Christian scruples, Hakon was a popular king, for the land was prosperous during his reign; in the poem composed at his death in 961 he was warmly praised for the respect he had shown to the holy places, and was represented as being welcomed as a hero into Odin’s hall after his last battle.  

4 Varieties of sacrifice  

Other animals were certainly sacrificed, but were not of the same importance in the sacrificial feasts. Rams and goats were said to be offered to the gods at Hedeby (p. 37 above); goats, whose bones cannot always be distinguished from those of sheep, were no doubt popular as an inexpensive form of sacrifice, and the tale of Thor’s goats eaten for supper and then restored to life by the hammer of the god (p. 46 above) suggests an established tradition of goat sacrifice. A goat’s skull was found in a special grave at Yeavering, at the entrance to hall A, and it may be noted that the British name Yeavering would mean ‘Hill of the Goats’. The ram was a significant figure in Celtic art for a long period, and some deities are shown with rams’ horns, while ram-headed serpents are a favourite motif, an example of the linking of symbols for fertility, healing and the underworld.  

The stag may have served as a sacrificial victim in forest areas, and its importance in early times is indicated by the small bronze wagon from a grave mound at Stretteweg in Austria, depicting what could be a ritual hunt, with a central figure of a goddess towering above riders, and escorting two stags. Cunliffe suggests that such processions on small wagons were symbols of the death journey, and certainly the hunt is used in funeral symbolism both in Mediterranean areas and in northern Europe up to the Viking Age. In the later Middle Ages kings and nobles delighted to hunt the stag, and there was an elaborate ceremonial connected with its slaying, but little is known of its importance as a cult animal in pre-Christian times. The tradition of the king’s hall, Heorot (hart) in Beowulf, decorated with antlers, and the little stag on the royal whetstone sceptre from Sutton Hoo, possibly of Celtic origin (p. 128 below) point to the stag as a possible royal symbol.  

Dogs appear to have had much significance for the Celtic people, so much so that Miranda Green places them together with horses and bulls as one of the three most important domestic animals with a sacred significance. The dog is associated in Mediterranean areas with healing, hunting and death, and these rules seem to have been recognised by the Celts, and also to a lesser degree by the Germans and Scandinavians. Dogs were linked with the Mother goddesses, and in particular with Nehalennia; in the many representations found at her two shrines in Holland, she invariably appears with a dog as her companion. Dog figurines have been found at various Celtic shrines, as at Lydney, and votive figures of children with dogs, perhaps for sacrifice, come from healing shrines. There are dog skeletons in ritual shafts and deposits, and similar evidence for sacrifice from Germanic territory, the most elaborate example being from Mannhagen in Holstein, where the skulls of twelve dogs were found with the skull of a horse and that of a man. Dog skeletons, sometimes several at a time, are found along with those of horses and cattle in the great Scandinavian ship-burials of the Viking Age, and both large hunting dogs and smaller breeds in individual graves. In Irish tradition there was a close link between the guarding or hunting dog and the wolf, both being used as symbols for young warriors. In Scandinavian myth and legend the dog is the guardian of the underworld, and one reason for putting a dog into a grave might be to provide a guide for the dead. The baying of the dog Garm provides a kind of chorus for the events leading to Ragnarok in the poem Völuspá (p. 190 below), and again it is hard to distinguish between Garm and the wolf Fenrir, who breaks loose at the time of destruction; it may also be noted that a dog or a wolf appears on a number of Gotland memorial stones of the Viking Age depicting the arrival of a dead hero in Valhalla.  

Birds offered a cheap and convenient form of sacrifice, as when cocks were offered by Scandinavian merchants on their way to Byzantium (p. 36 above). Remains of birds have been found in cremation urns and inhumation graves from the Bronze Age, and bird skeletons were included in the great ship-burials of the Viking Age. The symbol of water-birds such as ducks and swans, and of wading marsh-birds was important for early Celts, and they play a prominent part in the art from the Hallstatt period, and in the Bronze Age preceding it. The symbol of the bird of prey was also one of significance for the Continental Celts.
emphasised in the pre-Roman sanctuaries of southern France (p. 28 above). The raven and crow in particular were associated with Lug and the war goddesses in art and later literature; in one Irish tale Cú Chulainn kills one black bird out of every flock when seeking to avenge himself on Cú Roi. 90 The war goddesses themselves could appear in the form of crows or ravens, and here we have a parallel with the Norse valkyries (p. 96 below). Ravens and hawks were closely associated with Odin, and cocks sacrificed at Lejre, according to Thietmar of Merseburg, were substituted for hawks. Birds, like the main cult animals, were linked both with battle ritual and with fertility rites, and observation of their cries and movements was one method of learning the future (p. 86 below).

The shedding of the blood of the victim formed an important part of the sacrificial rite, and the term rjódæ (redden) occurs frequently in Icelandic poetry in connection with sacrifice. In Hýndluljóð (10) a sacrificial place called a högr was set up by a worshipper of Freyja out of doors, and this was said to have been reddened with blood until it shone like glass. The word used for the blood of the sacrifice was hlaut, and this in the account of the horse sacrifice at Trondheim (p. 55 above) was sprinkled on walls and altars, splashing those that at the feast. In Eyja- hryggja Saga (p. 32 above) Thorolf kept a bowl of hlaut in 'Thor's shrine by Helgafell, and blood from this was sprinkled on the walls. It has been suggested that this was based on the use of holy water in Christian churches, but an instructive parallel may be seen in the customs of heathen hunters in southern Scandinavia and Finland. As late as the nineteenth century the hunter would sprinkle himself and his family with the blood of the slain bear, and put some of it on his house and the trees around, while the hunters also drank some of the warm blood; Ström notes that the blood of slain oxen was put into coffee in more recent times. 91 These appear to have been protective measures, to avert the ill-luck which might otherwise be brought on those responsible for the slaying. In an early Life of King Olaf Tryggvason, the heathen Swedes are mocked at because they lick their offering bowls, suggesting that it was felt important to consume the blood of the sacrifice. 92 Such blood was frequently said to have been used to redden runes in order to discover the will of the gods (p. 148 below).

5 Human sacrifice

Besides the regular feasts which marked the course of the year, there were gatherings held at longer intervals, when a more impressive sacrifice took place and human victims as well as animals were sacrificed. These might be on special occasions such as times of danger, and as thanksgiving after victory, or at the funeral of a king. In the eleventh century Adam of Bremen in his history (IV, 27) refers to a sacrifice of animals and men held every ninth year at Uppsala in Sweden, when the bodies of the victims were afterwards hung on trees by the temple:

It is the custom moreover every nine years for a common festival of all the provinces of Sweden to be held at Uppsala. Kings and commoners one and all send their gifts to Uppsala, and what is more cruel than any punishment, even those who have accepted Christianity have to buy immunity from these ceremonies. The sacrifice is as follows: of every living creature they offer nine head, and with the blood of those it is the custom to placate the gods, but the bodies are hanged in a grove which is near the temple; so holy is that grove to the heathens that each tree in it is presumed to be divine by reason of the victim's death and putrefaction. There also dogs and horses hang along with men. One of the Christians told me that he had seen seventy-two bodies of various kinds hanging there, but the incantations which are usually sung at this kind of sacrifice are various and disgraceful, and so we had better say nothing about them.

This festival was said to last for nine days, with one human victim offered daily along with one of each species of animal or bird. It might be expected that the total of victims would be nine times nine, or eighty-one, but perhaps Adam's informant was counting only the animal victims when he gave a total of eight times nine. The sacrifice was made at the beginning of summer, the time traditionally associated with offerings made to Odin in return for victory in the coming season. Thietmar of Merseburg, unfortunately not a very reliable informant, wrote later of a similar sacrifice held at Lejre in Denmark every ninth year, and gives a figure of ninety men offered along with horses, dogs and cocks 'to the power of the Underworld'. 93 Thietmar may simply have been echoing Adam of Bremen, but evidently knew of some tradition of multiple sacrifice connected with Odin and the underworld. Occasional glimpses of gruesome sacrificial places in which much killing had taken place are afforded by the Greek and Latin historians. Tacitus describes the visit of Germanicus to the Teutoburgian Wood where Varus and three Roman divisions had been wiped out by the Germans some years earlier (Annals I, 61):

The scene lived up to its horrible associations ... A half-ruined breastwork and shallow ditch showed where the last pathetic remnant had gathered. On the open ground were whitening bones ... Fragments of spears and of horses' limbs lay there — also human heads, fastened to tree-trunks. In groves nearby were the outlandish altars at which the Germans had massacred the Roman colonels and senior company-commanders.
Survivors of the catastrophe told ... of all the gibbets and pits for the prisoners. (Michael Grant's translation)

Among the Celts also we hear of mass sacrifices organised by the druids, and Diodorus (V, 61) refers to special sacrificial ceremonies held every five years. Posidonius mentioned the slaughter of human victims, and how those who presided over the ritual observed the last convulsions of the dying, an important method of divination (p. 63 below). It seems likely that Germans and Scandinavians relied on information learned from their strangled victims in the same way, since in a verse of the poem Hávamál Odin claims that by his skill in runes and magic spells he could cause a hanged man to walk and talk with him. Valuable knowledge, it appears, could be acquired from a man who died a violent death.

Accounts by Strabo and Julius Caesar also mention large figures of wickerwork into which victims were placed to be burned. Strabo (IV, 4) describes such a construction as 'a colossus of straw and wood', into which cattle, wild animals of various kinds and human victims were thrown, adding that the ashes helped the growth of crops. Caesar (Gallic War VI, 16) refers to 'figures of immense size (immane magnitudine simulacra) with limbs woven out of twigs, filled with living men and set on fire so that the victims perished in a sheet of flame'. Strabo probably got his information from Posidonius, and he does not make it clear whether the victims were burned alive, but Caesar has no doubts about this. It is difficult to know how to interpret these horrific accounts. It would not be easy to make a great upright wickerwork figure such as seventeenth century antiquaries pictured, and keep it upright while it burned. It was suggested by scholars studying the origins of the Wilmington Giant in the last century that this or some similar hill figure was known to Caesar and that he had heard reports of the burning of victims associated with it. No signs of burning in or near the figure have been discovered, however, in recent investigations, and there would be practical difficulties in its use as an enclosure for victims. Some kind of upright wickerwork construction, on the other hand, might have been used if the sides were covered with incendiary material, as was done in the French Pyrenees at the midsummer ceremonies at the end of the last century. One is described as about 6 m high, 'shaped like a mummy or perhaps a cigar set on end', and an Englishman who watched the ceremony of the Brandon in Basque country in 1890 was told that in the past snakes, toads and even apes had been put into it, and thrown back into the flames when they tried to escape. Frazer gives similar examples from this area and other parts of France, and mentions cases of cats burnt in wicker cages in the same horrible manner, in the midsummer bonfires. Sometimes the carcase of an animal was burnt after killing it, as was done sometimes with an ox or bull at the summer festival in Ireland.

Burnt sacrifices of some kind certainly seem to have taken place among both Celts and Germans. Julius Caesar (Gallic War I, 47) left a circumstantial account of a narrow escape from death by a young man well known to him, Valerius Procilius, who was captured by the Germans after being sent as an envoy to Ariovistus, and treated as a prisoner of war. Lots were cast three times to decide whether he should be burned to death immediately or reserved for a later sacrifice, but luckily for him the result was against instant death, and later during a Roman attack he escaped in the confusion and was able to rejoin his own men.

Both Celts and Germans are represented as taking men found guilty of crimes to be offered as sacrifices, together with captives taken in war and slaves. According to Strabo (IV, 4) the druids acted as judges in cases of murder, and if many men were found guilty of death, this was thought to ensure a good season, since it meant there would be plenty of victims for sacrifice. Julius Caesar (VI, 16) confirms this: 'They believe that the execution of those who have been caught in the act of theft or robbery or some crime is more pleasing to the immortal gods; but when the supply of such fails they resort to the execution even of the innocent.' (Loeb translation) The practice of using wrongdoers for sacrifice is recognised also in Norse literature. According to Snorri, King Olaf Tryggvason threatened to introduce new sacrifices if the people refused to give up the old religion, and his victims, he declared, would not be slaves or criminals, as was customary: 'I shall not choose thralls or evildoers, but those selected as a gift for the gods will have to be the most distinguished men.' In Kristni Saga (12) it is again stated as a recognised fact that 'the heathen sacrifice their worst men'. Although these are late Christian sources, they show how heathen sacrifice was remembered in Scandinavia.

It is not easy to determine from the archaeological evidence whether men have been deliberately sacrificed, or condemned to death by their fellows without any appeal to the gods, and Ström and others have doubted whether criminals were ever sacrificed in Germany. Isolated bodies of men and women have been found in the peatbogs of Denmark and northern Germany, and in some cases the victims have been bound, mutilated or blindfolded, or have nooses round their necks, but Ström has argued that these could be victims of vengeance or summary justice rather than offerings vowed to the gods. Amira, on the other hand, argued that later penalties imposed on criminals, such as hanging, were
sacrificial in origin. A survey of the bodies from the peat bogs shows us that it is dangerous to select and generalise, for it is highly unlikely that the reasons for the killings were the same in every case. Struve sensibly argued that the dead should not be assumed to be sacrificial victims unless they were accompanied by animal bones, signs of burning, and other indications that the killing may have been a ritual one, in a spot dedicated to supernatural powers. It is obviously difficult to draw a firm line between executions and sacrifices, since certain crimes, such as sacrilege, were held to provoke the anger of the gods. Accounts of Christian missionaries on the Continent being put to death for cutting down holy trees or baptising in sacred water, and other indications that the regions for the killings were the same in every case, Struve has begun to distinguish between executions and sacrifices, in some cases the victims were chosen by lot so that the gods could decide which of the Christians should die (p. 64 below).

When captives were taken in war, a proportion of them might be offered as a thanksgiving for victory, sometimes in fulfilment of an earlier vow. In extreme cases a considerable number of men seem to have been put to death. Tacitus (Annals XIII, 57) gives an outstanding example in an account of fighting between two Germanic tribes, the Hermundari and the Chatti, over possession of a tract of land beside the river which divided their territories, regarded as a holy place (p. 25 above). They vowed to sacrifice their enemies to Mars and Mercury, the Germanic equivalent of which would probably be Tiwaz and Wodan. When the Hermundari were victorious, they felt bound by their vow to sacrifice 'the entire beaten side with their horses and all their possessions'. This was early in the first century AD, and in the fifth century Orosius (V, 16) ascribes similar behaviour to the Cimbri, a tribe from Jutland who may have been either Celts or Germans, in 105 BC: 'In accordance with a strange and unusual vow, they set about destroying everything which they had taken. Clothing was cut to pieces and cast away, gold and silver were thrown into the river, the brastplates of the men were hacked to pieces, the trappings of the horses were broken up, the horses themselves drowned in whirlpools, and men with nooses round their necks were hanged from trees.'

In spite of such vivid descriptions, such accounts might not carry conviction were it not for convincing evidence from the deposits in the Danish peat-bogs, where objects have been well preserved in votive deposits of the Roman and Migration periods. Piles of valuable booty, including weapons and armour, were found arranged in some kind of order, and human as well as animal bones indicate that living victims were sometimes offered in the way early writers describe. Weapons and other objects were deliberately damaged by being bent or burned before being laid down in the marsh or thrown into pools. At the major offering places such as Nydam and Skedemosse on Öland repeated offerings seem to have been made, representing the spoils of several battles. These might be mixed, as at Skedemosse, with offerings of food or a share of the communal feast. Sometimes, as at Illerup in Denmark, we seem to have a single deposit of the arms of about seventy warriors, presumably from one battle. At Ejsbaal one area seemed to represent the equipment of a whole warrior band, as at Illerup, while another had objects suggesting a date of about a century later, and there were also some non-military offerings. Sometimes, as at Nydam and Ejsbaal, remains of swords of outstanding quality seem to have been set apart from the rest. Evidently there was considerable variety in the way in which the offerings were made, and the length of time for which a special area was in use. The main period for such votive offerings was from the third to the sixth century AD, and in some cases we do not know whether those who made them were Celts or Germans. Julius Caesar in his Gallic War (VI, 17) describes offerings of a similar kind made by Celts in Gaul:

To Mars, when they have determined on a decisive battle, they dedicate as a rule whatever spoil they may take. After a victory they sacrifice such living things as they have taken, and all the other effects they gather into one place. In many states heaps of such objects are to be seen piled up in hallowed spots, and it has not often happened that a man, in defiance of religious scruple, has dared to conceal such spoils in his house or to remove them from their place, and the most grievous punishment, with torture, is ordained for such an offence. (Loeb translation).

It is doubted now whether the finds from La Tène (p. 5 above) were an offering of this kind, as the objects may have been lost in a flood. A number of weapons and belongings of fighting men, however, were recovered from Llyn Cerrig Bach in Anglesey in 1943, and seem to have been thrown into the water about the first century AD. Other weapon finds were made in the nineteenth century, but unfortunately only the valuable objects were kept and there is no record of how they were deposited. More recent work on such finds is of great value in telling us more about these sacrifices, and how they may have been linked, as at Skedemosse, with communal feasting.

The proportion of captives sacrificed after a battle evidently varied, and some attempt was made to discover the will of the gods as to how many should die, as in the case of Valerius Proculus (p. 61 above). Part of the value set on sacrifices of men and animals depended on their use in divination rites, since men attempted to discover what the future would be by observation of the death of the victim or by examination of the
corpse after death. Procopius in the sixth century (VI, 15, 24) stated that
in Thule, which is presumably Scandinavia, the most valuable sacrifice
was judged to be that of the first captive taken in battle, who would be
put to death by hanging, impaling on thorns, or some other unpleasant
method. The significance of this rite must have been to discover what
the result of the battle would be by the manner in which the victim died.
Hanging was one way of disposing of the victim, particularly among the
Germans, and in the Viking Age it was a method of sacrifice associated
with the cult of Odin. Strabo (IV, 4) refers to the impaling of victims by
the Celts, and Dio Cassius (62) mentions the cruel treatment of Roman
ladies by Boudicca, who had them impaled in the temple as offerings to
a goddess. The Cimbri, generally thought to be a Celtic tribe, staged a
grotesque divination ritual when prisoners of war were brought into the
camp, according to Strabo (VII, 2, 3). They were met by priestesses,
grey-haired women in white robes, who consecrated them for sacrifice,
and then were hung up above an enormous bronze bowl. One of the
women climbed a ladder and cut the throats of the victims with a sword,
so that the blood flowed into the bowl and she could judge from
observing it what the result of the fighting would be. Other prisoners
were disemboweled, presumably for the same reason. Tacitus, describing
Boudicca's revolt of AD 61 (Annals XXX, 30) remarks that it was a part
of the native religion 'to drench their altars in the blood of prisoners
and consult their god by means of human sacrifice'.

Lots were sometimes taken to decide which prisoners should die, as
with the cocks which Scandinavian merchant-adventurers took with
them on their journey down the Dnieper to Constantinople (p. 36
above). Such a practice was described by Julius Caesar by one of the
victims who escaped (p. 61 above), and there are other examples to be
found in literary sources. In the eighth century Life of St Willibrord, the
Christian missionaries in Heligoland were threatened with death after
the saint committed sacrilege by baptising men in a holy spring and
killing sacred cattle. Lots were cast three times a day for three days to
decide the victims, but the saint himself escaped with his life (III, 47).
A letter of Sidonius deplorcs the cruel custom of Saxon pirates, who would
offer one prisoner in ten to the god of the sea as a thank-offering for a
successful voyage. He admits however that they feel pledged to make
their offering in fulfilment of a vow: "These men are bound by vows
which have to be paid in victims. They regard it as a religious act to
perpetrate their horrible slaughter. This polluting sacrifice is in their
eyes an absolving sacrifice. It is evidently necessary to take into
account the fulfilment of a solemn vow among the other reasons which
prompted human sacrifice.

When criminals or prisoners were not available, slaves might be used
as victims, and archaeological evidence gives the impression that they
were occasionally killed at funerals in the Viking Age and buried along
with a master or mistress. Ibn Fadlan's well-known account of the
sacrifice of a slave girl on the Volga in 921 tells how one of the slaves
volunteered to die, and for the period before the funeral she was treated
with great honour, as if she had been the wife of the dead man. The
Scandinavians on the Volga whom he encountered may have been
influenced by Turkic-Tatar or Slavonic customs, and it seems unlikely
that the old woman called the Angel of Death, who presided at the
killing of the girl, could have been a Scandinavian, brought into Russia
by the merchants. The victim on this occasion, however, was killed by
strangling and stabbing at the same time, a form of death associated with
Odin, while the account of the burning of the ship at the cremation
funeral and the ceremonial which Ibn Fadlan describes is in agreement
with what we know from archaeological records of ship-funerals in the
North. The great ship-burials from Norway and Sweden give indication
of elaborate rites in which various animals were killed, while the
Oseberg ship contained the bodies of two women, one of whom is
assumed to have been an attendant on a lady of rank and importance.
Sometimes in Viking Age graves and also in graves of the early Anglo-
Saxon period in England a second body has been found lying in a grave
as though thrown in with little ceremony, and there are occasional
references to slaves killed at funerals in Iceland in Landnmaaboek.

Although children's graves are sometimes found in enclosures marking
holy places, there is little evidence in the literature of either Celts or
Germans sacrificing children to the gods. The exposure of unwanted
infants at birth, or the throwing of them into the sea (p. 37 above) has no
clear connection with sacrifice; it was a recognised form of keeping down
the population and probably of disposing of the offspring of slaves.
There are references to the sacrifice of children to a pagan idol in
Ireland. The idol is called Crom Cruach and the sacrificial rites are
referred to in the Dindsenchas (IV, 18–23):

For him ingloriously they slew their wretched firstborn with much
weeping and distress, to pour out their blood round the Bent One of the
Hill.

Milk and corn they used to ask of him speedily in return for a third of
their whole progeny; great was the horror and outcry about him.

This seems, however, to be little more than an antiquarian fantasy,
and the picture of child sacrifices could have been based on Biblical
traditions about the god Moloch. Old Norse literature also has
references to kings and leaders sacrificing their sons in order to win a favourable response from the gods. The extreme example is that of Aun of Uppsala, said to have reigned for a long period in Sweden as a result of the policy of sacrificing a son to Odin every ten years. Snorri tells the story in *Ynglinga Saga* (25), but the poem about Aun which he quotes has no reference to sacrifice, only to Aun’s extreme old age when he died.

It is implied in both Irish and Norse sources that kings were offered to the gods before the coming of Christianity. A number of legendary kings in Scandinavia are said to have been put to death because the harvests were bad, and some of these were burned in their halls. Others are described as perishing by strange and violent deaths. An Irish king, Muircertach, was said to have been drowned in a cask of wine while his enemies set fire to the hall.\(^{110}\) Similarly the Swedish Fjolnir, a descendant of Freyr ruling in Uppsala, is said to have drowned in a great vat of mead; his death is briefly mentioned in a poem, and Snorri seems to have elaborated this into a circumstantial tale of how after heavy drinking the king got up in the night to relieve himself and fell through the floor into a vat below.\(^{110}\) Dumézil claimed that the three forms of sacrifice by hanging, stabbing and drowning were associated with three types of gods, but the evidence for this is not very convincing.\(^{111}\) Complicated deaths from more than one cause may be introduced as the unexpected fulfilment of a prophecy, a well-known folk tale motif; the extreme example of this being the slaying of Lleu in the tale of Math in the Welsh *Mabinogion*. Since he could not be slain either in a house or out of doors, either on horseback or on foot, he met his death with one foot on a cauldron with a roof above it and the other on the back of a goat. Such traditions however may be viewed as puzzle tales, some of which have a didactic Christian meaning and tell how a ruler who had broken the Church laws is finally punished,\(^{112}\) and they can hardly be relied on as echoes of pagan practice. There is however a well-established record of victims sacrificed to Odin being strangled and stabbed at the same time. There seems also a possibility that death by drowning, a sacrifice to the waters, was once a form of sacrifice linked with the gods of fertility.

It is necessary to remember that in dealing with this kind of evidence we are concerned with confused material from poetry and legend which may also have been worked on afterwards by learned writers or romancers. This also applies to accounts in later writings of a king being put to death by the carving of a ‘blood eagle’ on his back as a sacrifice to Odin.\(^{113}\) Each separate source must be examined on its own merits before reaching a general conclusion, and we must be cautious in accepting such material as reliable evidence for pre-Christian practices. There are episodes in Irish tales of a king being killed by a spear at the assembly at Tara, but this gives us no reason to assume that the king was therefore ritually killed there at regular intervals. Kings were frequently murdered by their enemies or rivals, and it might sometimes be felt expedient to sacrifice a king in return for victory or to end a series of bad harvests. In *Ynglinga Saga* (15) Snorri tells us that this is what happened to the Swedish king Domaldi:

> The first year [of the famine] they sacrificed oxen, and there was no improvement in the harvest. The next autumn they sacrificed men, but the harvest was as before or even worse. And the third autumn many Swedes came to Uppsala when the sacrifice was to take place. The chiefs took counsel then, and decided unanimously that the famine must be due to their king Domaldi, and that they must sacrifice him for a good season and redden the altars with his blood, and this they did.

Snorri’s evidence for this is apparently a poem by Thjodolf, and the verse which he quotes states that all this happened ‘long ago’. The poem, composed in the ninth century, confirms Snorri’s presentation of the killing of the king as an unusual act, brought about by desperation at a series of crop failures:

> Eager for harvest
> the Swedish people
> offered up their king . . .

One story long remembered in both Iceland and Denmark is that of the sacrifice of King Vikar, who was singled out by the casting of lots when he had decided to offer a human sacrifice in return for a favourable wind.\(^{114}\) When he was selected, he decided to make it a mock sacrifice, in which he arranged a simulated hanging from a tree and stabbing with a spear. However through the prompting of Odin, a dedicated follower of the god, Starkad, made sure that the killing was a genuine one, and that the king was hanged and stabbed at the same time. Again, however, the event is singled out as an exceptional occurrence, and it was indeed regarded as one of Starkad’s great crimes that he slew his king and leader. There is no indication in this or other tales that a regular ritual sacrifice took place after the king had reigned for a certain number of years.

Indeed from the rich field of evidence available, the pattern which emerges is that sacrifice at a feast was a regular feature in every community, and the killing of animals and human victims also a possible expedient in times of danger, when there was urgent need for help and protection from the gods. In the Norse poem *Hávamál*, which gives
counsel to the man who wishes to prosper on earth, he is urged to visit the friend whom he trusts regularly, to share his thoughts and plans with him, and to exchange gifts with him as a token of their friendship. This might also summarise the relationship of men with their gods; if they trusted them, they needed to frequent the holy places, seek help and guidance, eat and drink in their honour and make regular offerings in return for luck and protection. Success against one’s enemies and the gaining of sufficient food to maintain oneself and one’s family were the two essential requirements in the precarious lives of the warrior peoples of north-western Europe, and it was these basic needs which prompted their sacrificial rituals. In return for victory and good harvests they must be prepared if necessary to make costly offerings, and promises made to the gods must be kept when their prayers were granted. The gods were honoured and perhaps held to be strengthened by the brewing and drinking 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.

The organisation of sacrifices must have depended largely on the power of the priesthood, since it might include elaborate ceremonial and impressive ritual. The account of a ship-funeral in the tenth century which has survived by chance through the presence of Ibn Fadlan on the Middle Volga gives some indication of how elaborate and moving such rituals may have been (p. 65 above). It is noticeable that women often play an important part in the actual slaying of the victims and in the interpretation of omens, both in accounts of ceremonies among the Celtic peoples and in the Viking Age. There is not much evidence for a strong organised priesthood in Scandinavia by the tenth century, and little indication of much human sacrifice in the Viking Age, although in certain centres such as Uppsala sacrifices continued until the end of the pagan period. Out of the established ritual of the offering of living creatures in sacrifice arose a series of powerful and varied religious symbols, which enriched Celtic and Germanic art. Sacrificial rituals held the community together, gave men certain fixed points in the year to which to look forward, and enabled them to meet in time of need and to unite in thanksgivings for benefits received. Complex and scattered although the evidence may be, there is no doubt of the significant part which sacrifice played in the early religion of north-western Europe up to the acceptance of Christianity.

III The rites of battle

When I stand in the midst of the battle,
I am the heart of the battle,
the arm of the warriors,
when I begin moving at the end of the battle,
I am an evilly rising flood,
when I follow in the wake of the battle,
I am the woman (exhorting the stragglers);
‘Get going! Close (with the enemy)!’

Hymn of the goddess Inann
(Jacobsen, The Treasures of Darkness, p. 13)

Clearly the elaborate sacrificial ritual of the Celts and Germans was prompted solely by a desire for fruitful crops and prosperity at home. A large proportion of their rites appear to have been used to obtain luck and victory over their neighbours. This is hardly surprising peoples famed for their achievements in war and successes in raiding and plundering, in times when competition for land and rivalry between tribes posed constant threats and problems. The feast held regularly at the beginning of summer seems to have been associated consistently with sacrifices for victory in coming campaigns, at the time of year when raiding parties set out, invasions were planned, and viking fleets took to sea. Part of the offerings laid out in holy places or thrown into sacred lakes was made up of booty taken in battle, which was voluntarily handed over to the powers held to govern victory in war. In the Viking Age, men put great trust in battle ritual and consultation of omens to tell them when to fight and what the results of an encounter would be. There were many spells available for warriors in tight places, like those mentioned in the poem Hāvamál in words attributed to Odin:

I know a third: if I should have great need of shackles to put on my adversaries, I can blunt the edges of hostile weapons, and their blades and staves will do me no harm. (148)

I know an eleventh: if I lead my old friends to battle, I will cha...