

## Norwegian Stave Churches and their Pagan Antecedents

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### Article abstract

En Norvège, au Moyen Âge, les relations entre les traditions païennes et chrétiennes apparaissent clairement dans la conception et la décoration d'églises en bois, construites entre 1030 et 1350. Ces curieux bâtiments ont longtemps déconcerté les historiens en architecture qui, depuis une trentaine d'années, ne les ont guère étudiés. Le manque d'intérêt pour ce genre d'édifices pourrait aussi s'expliquer par leur nombre restreint (il n'en reste plus que vingt-neuf sur quelque six cents) et par leur isolement relatif. En outre, les études antérieures s'intéressaient surtout à l'ornementation architecturale et elles les présentaient invariablement dans le contexte de la dernière floraison du paganisme en Europe du Nord. L'un des éléments fondamentaux du développement historique de ces églises, aspect qui n'a pas encore été analysé de manière satisfaisante, demeure l'importance des temples païens germaniques comme modèles de la conception, de l'emplacement et de la construction des églises norvégiennes. De nombreux chercheurs ont abandonné cette hypothèse en arguant que les éléments de preuve demeuraient trop minces. Cependant une analyse archéologique et stylistique de ces édifices, en relation avec un examen des croyances cosmologiques des peuples germaniques païens, permet d'affirmer que leurs temples ont certainement servi de modèle à ces églises norvégiennes primitives.

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# Norwegian Stave Churches and their Pagan Antecedents

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## Résumé

En Norvège, au Moyen Âge, les relations entre les traditions païennes et chrétiennes apparaissent clairement dans la conception et la décoration d'églises en bois, construites entre 1030 et 1350. Ces curieux bâtiments ont longtemps déconcerté les historiens en architecture qui, depuis une trentaine d'années, ne les ont guère étudiés. Le manque d'intérêt pour ce genre d'édifices pourrait aussi s'expliquer par leur nombre restreint (il n'en reste plus que vingt-neuf sur quelque six cents) et par leur isolement relatif. En outre, les études antérieures s'intéressaient surtout à l'ornementation architecturale et elles les présentaient invariablement dans le contexte de la dernière floraison du paganisme en Europe du Nord.

L'un des éléments fondamentaux du développement historique de ces églises, aspect qui n'a pas encore été analysé de manière satisfaisante, demeure l'importance des temples païens germaniques comme modèles de la conception, de l'emplacement et de la construction des églises norvégiennes. De nombreux chercheurs ont abandonné cette hypothèse en arguant que les éléments de preuve demeuraient trop minces. Cependant une analyse archéologique et stylistique de ces édifices, en relation avec un examen des croyances cosmologiques des peuples germaniques païens, permet d'affirmer que leurs temples ont certainement servi de modèle à ces églises norvégiennes primitives.

On the way we visited the old stave church at Borgund; it was the most fantastic sight you could imagine, like the whim of some brilliant child, a cockchafer's shell carved by a simple giant with his sheath-knife, with simple crosses and arrogant dragonheads, all twists and twirls, louver on louver. The inside is like a smokehouse dedicated to some mystic cult, where the darkness of the Saga overwhelms the flickering candles of Catholicism, whose shadows fall on the axes of mail-clad peasants and flowing beards of Viking kings – a sinister experience quite honestly.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the Danish poet Holger Drachmann described Borgund stave church when he visited it in 1886 (fig. 1). Though this quotation is a romantic description of Borgund stave church, it accurately depicts a key tension that characterizes much of medieval Norwegian art, a tension latent in the interplay between native and Christian traditions, especially during the height of stave church construction in Norway (ca. 1030–1350). Historian Roar Hauglid describes this phenomenon as “the struggle between the Dragon and the Cross, a struggle in which two worlds, two ways of life, clash.”<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between pagan and Christian traditions in medieval Norway is readily apparent in the design and decoration of its stave churches. These unique buildings have long baffled architectural historians and since the 1970s have rarely been the subject of study. The paucity of literature on this building type can perhaps be attributed to the small number of surviving examples: only twenty-nine churches are still extant, although these may once have numbered as many as 600.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the surviving examples are found in relatively isolated locations throughout Norway. None the less, of the studies of Norwegian stave churches which do

exist, virtually all analyse architectural ornament; and, invariably, these analyses present the ornament in the context of a last florescence of pagan design in Northern Europe.<sup>4</sup> An important factor in the history of Norway's stave churches which has not been explored satisfactorily to date, however, is the role of Germanic pagan temples as *models* for stave church construction and design.<sup>5</sup> Many scholars have dismissed this association, arguing that evidence to support such a claim is tenuous at best.<sup>6</sup> However, through an analysis of the existing archaeological and art-historical evidence and a brief discussion of Germanic paganism, this paper will illustrate that the Germanic temple likely influenced stave church construction in Norway. This paper will address two crucial areas of study that played a decisive role in the genesis of the Norwegian stave church: pagan cosmology and the importance of holy places.

Our knowledge of pagan Germanic cosmology is based, principally, on two medieval Icelandic texts: an anonymous collection of poems known as the *Elder Edda*, of which the oldest manuscript is datable to ca. 1300, and Snorri Sturluson's treatise on poetry, the *Younger Edda*, written in the late twelfth century. Although these texts provide detailed accounts of pre-Christian *Scandinavian* beliefs *vis à vis* creation, the deities and humanity's relationship to them, no comparable textual evidence survives which records the cosmological beliefs of *other* Germanic peoples.<sup>7</sup> However, considering the vast corpus of interdisciplinary scholarship which suggests that other pre-Christian Germanic peoples, particularly the Anglo-Saxons, worshipped deities that were either similar to, or the same as, those of their later Scandinavian cousins,<sup>8</sup> it is reasonable to assume that the fundamental principles of pagan Scandinavian cosmology, illustrating the order and nature of the universe, were also

accepted by pre-Christian Germanic peoples in general, including the Norwegians.<sup>9</sup>

According to the extant literary sources, the pagan Germanic universe consists of multiple planes which exist, concurrently, in both vertical and horizontal arrangements. These planes are connected by an *axis mundi*, a conduit which unites the universe and permits communication between its various realms. This complex structure of the universe, as recorded in the literary accounts, is contrasted by its relatively simple appearance. The *Eddas* describe the universe as a round island, with the *axis mundi* at its centre, surrounded by an endless sea. This vision of the universe is also repeated in the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* where, in a song of creation sung in Herot, the universe is characterized as “beautiful plains marked off by oceans.”<sup>10</sup> While this conception of the universe may appear quite serene, according to the *Eddas*, a great serpent lay submerged in these seas, coiled round the circular disk of the world, undermining the stability of the universe by repeatedly biting the *axis mundi*.<sup>11</sup> Based on descriptions in the *Eddas*, this axis was envisioned as a giant ash tree; however, other species, such as the oak, yew and apple also held symbolic importance among pre-Christian Germanic peoples, suggesting that the *axis mundi*'s association with the ash may not have been exclusive.<sup>12</sup>

The *axis mundi*, or “World Tree,” was the principal component of the pagan Germanic universe. According to the *Elder Edda*, the roots of the World Tree extended into, and thereby united, the four cosmic realms.<sup>13</sup> One root penetrated the abode of the dead, and a second the land of the giants, implying that these realms “lay side by side,”<sup>14</sup> while humans occupied the surface of the world disk, and the gods inhabited the sky. Thus, the *axis mundi*, or “World Tree,” united the Germanic universe and was the conduit between the living, the dead and the gods.

Among early Germanic peoples (ca. first century B.C.–A.D. sixth century), there seem to have been few structures used for worship and/or sacrifice. Ritual events and communion with supernatural powers occurred primarily outdoors, near prominent features in the natural landscape. Thus, when classical writers describe the religious practices of Germanic peoples, “we hear repeatedly of sacred woods and groves, sanctuaries in forest clearings and on hilltops, beside springs and lakes and on islands, and of places set apart for the burial of the noble dead.”<sup>15</sup>

While sacredness in the Germanic world manifested itself in prominent features of the natural landscape, such holy places often received artistic embellishment also, thereby further emphasizing their sanctity. Hill-figures, cairns and labyrinths, for example, were either constructed at, or in the immediate vicinity of, most sacred sites.<sup>16</sup> Of particular importance for our purposes, however, was the Germanic practice of erecting monu-

mental wooden *pillars* at holy sites. The Saxons erected such a pillar (called “Irmisul”) at Eresburg, which Charlemagne destroyed in 772.<sup>17</sup> Rudolf of Fulda described this shaft as “*universalis columna quasi sustinens omnia*,” a universal column supporting the whole.<sup>18</sup> This description links Irmisul (and, by association, we can reasonably assume all such shafts) with the *axis mundi*, suggesting that such wooden pillars manifested the cosmic “centre” at holy sites.<sup>19</sup>

The earliest archaeological evidence indicating that pillars existed at such sites is found at Yeavinger in Northumberland. From the reign of Æthelfrith in the first years of the seventh century, Bernician kings maintained residences at Yeavinger.<sup>20</sup> A religious precinct was also maintained at the site; however, whether the royal presence at Yeavinger determined its construction there is unclear.<sup>21</sup> None the less, a massive pillar was erected at Yeavinger, and judging by its size and positioning, undoubtedly played an important role in religious practice.

Judging by the evidence of the posthole, the Yeavinger pillar was 56–57 cm square; it was probably of considerable height also, as the posthole measures 1.2 m in depth.<sup>22</sup> And the presence of small stakeholes indicates that makeshift structures were erected close to the pillar,<sup>23</sup> suggesting that it may have been the object of intermittent ceremonies.

While Yeavinger is an important site for the archaeological evidence of pillar-erection by pagan Germanic peoples, it is perhaps *more* important for what it reveals of Germanic temple design. In the late 1960s, archaeologists uncovered the remains of an Anglo-Saxon temple at the site dating from the sixth to early seventh century. The temple was rectangular in plan, measuring approximately 10.5 m by 5.1 m, constructed of wood, and oriented north-south. Gale Owen describes this structure as follows:

It had doors in both the long sides, which became double entrances when the original building was elaborated by being enclosed by a massive outer shell of heavy vertical timbers with similar doorways. The outer walls were rendered and supported by buttresses. The inner walls were lined with wattle and daub. Posts at the middle of each end wall supported the roof. At the southern end of the building ... there was a fenced enclosure ... , presumably with some ritual function ... Outside the temple ... to the north-west [stood the massive pillar]. ... Possibly a [pagan] altar occupied the southern end of the temple and was demolished when the building became a church.<sup>24</sup>

Although excavations have revealed evidence of an additional *three* Anglo-Saxon ritual structures in Britain,<sup>25</sup> it is impossible to assess whether the Yeavinger evidence reflects a standard temple design among the pagan Anglo-Saxons. How-

ever, if one refers to Bede's *History of the English Church and People*, assuming his accounts are accurate, three features or *probable* features of the Yeavinger temple likely constitute the standard components of such structures: their wooden construction, the placement of altars within them, and the presence of enclosures nearby. For example, in his account of the temple at Goodmanham near York, Bede describes how its chief priest destroyed his own pagan altars. He states:

Then, full of joy at his knowledge of the worship of the true God, he told his companions to set fire to the temple and its enclosures [italics mine] and destroy them. ... The Chief Priest, inspired by the true God, desecrated and destroyed the altars that he had himself dedicated.<sup>26</sup>

We can assume that the Goodmanham temple and its enclosures were of wooden construction, as Bede's account implies that they burned easily.

While evidence of Germanic temple design in Britain is limited to literary descriptions such as Bede's and data from excavating the principal site at Yeavinger, the Scandinavian finds yield slightly more physical evidence. For example, excavations at Mære on Trondheim Fjord in Norway (known to have been a sacred site in the Viking Age)<sup>27</sup> have revealed evidence of pagan temples beneath its medieval church. The earliest of these structures probably dates to ca. 500 and can be identified by postholes which held its main pillars.<sup>28</sup>

Further evidence of Germanic temples in Scandinavia is found in Sweden. At Uppsala, royal seat of the Svear,<sup>29</sup> an immense religious precinct was constructed during the fifth or sixth century consisting of a temple, a sacred grove and royal burial mounds. Of the Uppsala temple, Adam of Bremen mentions a "golden chain hanging on the pinnacles of the building," a "great tree" which grew beside the structure, and the presence of idols within it.<sup>30</sup> Based on archaeological evidence, we know that the temple was rectangular in shape (measuring, approximately, 23 m by 29.5 m) and was of wooden construction, including its columnar supports.<sup>31</sup> Its design incorporated low outer walls with a tower-like central compartment (presumably the sanctuary) which was supported at its corners by columns greater than one-half metre in diameter.<sup>32</sup> A temple of this importance was undoubtedly lavishly decorated;<sup>33</sup> however, no examples of architectural ornament or temple furnishings have survived.

Further evidence of Germanic temples in Scandinavia is found at the royal necropolis at Jelling, Denmark. Presumably a holy place of great antiquity, owing to the presence of Bronze Age *tumuli*, the site received further elaboration ca. 940 when Gorm the Old initiated a building campaign following his victory over Denmark's Swedish overlords.<sup>34</sup> Of particular im-

portance at this precinct is evidence of a temple, probably dating from the initial building phase, located near the precinct's central axial line, beneath the foundation of the present medieval church. The temple was undoubtedly a wooden structure, the posts having been removed when it was abandoned after approximately thirty years of use.<sup>35</sup> A large granite block was also found, which was believed to have functioned as the temple's altar.<sup>36</sup> Like the Uppsala example, we can assume that a temple at such an important site was richly decorated.

While no evidence survives of the decoration and furnishings of the Jelling and Uppsala temples, a description in the *Eyrbyggja Saga* (ca. thirteenth century) of Thórólf Mostrarskegg's Icelandic temple to Thor might suggest what may have been included in such structures.<sup>37</sup> This description also constitutes probably the most *complete* account of Germanic temple design. As stated in the *Eyrbyggja Saga*:

[Thórólf] established a great farm at Hofsvag ... and had a large temple built there with its door in one of the side-walls near the gable. Just inside the door stood the [main] pillars ... and beyond that point the whole building was considered a sanctuary. Inside the main temple was a structure built much like the choir in churches nowadays, and in the middle a raised platform like an altar. Inside the choir-like part of the building the figures of the gods were arranged in a circle right round the platform.<sup>38</sup>

Christianity was slower to reach Norway than the rest of western Europe. The earliest attempt to establish the new faith in Norwegian territory was the result of a collaboration between the Anglo-Saxon King Athelstan and Norway's King Håkon Aðalsteinsfostri, who had been raised at Athelstan's court. When Håkon became king of his native pagan country ca. 935, he did not destroy sanctuaries; instead, he summoned Anglo-Saxon priests to Norway and built three stone churches in the Mære district of Trøndelag.<sup>39</sup> These were soon destroyed, however, and the priests Håkon had summoned from England were murdered. Following this rampage, Håkon himself was compelled to "participate in [pagan] rites among the peasantry of Maere."<sup>40</sup> And according to King Håkon's *saga*, when he was killed ca. 960, "he was interred in a mound in traditional [pagan] fashion."<sup>41</sup> The missionary efforts of two later kings, Olav Tryggvason (995–1000) and Olav Haraldsson (1015–1030), were also fiercely resisted. Considering that no church organization existed in Norway at the time, and the conversion of the country was fraught with violence, it is unlikely that many churches were built during their reigns.<sup>42</sup>

It was not until the reign of Olav Kyrre (1066–1093) that an official Norwegian church was established. Olav created episcopal sees at Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim, and he probably

Figure 1. Borgund Stave Church, Sogn, Norway, ca. 1150. Exterior view after unknown photographer in Anders Bugge, *Norwegian Stave Churches*, trans. Ragnar Christophersen, Oslo, Dreyers Forlag, 1953 (drawing by Daniel Amato, 1999 © Michael F. Reed).



instituted the first programme of church construction in these towns, including Norway's first stone cathedrals: the Great Church of Christ in Bergen and Christchurch in Trondheim.<sup>43</sup>

In general, church construction in urban centres was the product of royal patronage and was executed in *stone*, thereby fulfilling canonical law and resulting, principally, in the advent of the Romanesque basilica in Norway.<sup>44</sup> Rural churches, however, commissioned by newly Christianized Viking families, were constructed of wood, Norway's traditional building material. And it should be reiterated that the likely model for these early stave churches was the Germanic temple which, at the time, was undoubtedly still present, utilized and *esteemed* in rural Norway.<sup>45</sup>

Among the most fundamental similarities between stave churches and Germanic temples are the places they occupy, or

are believed to have occupied, in the natural environment. It has been noted that pagan Germanic peoples revered certain prominent features in the natural world including woods, groves, hilltops and bodies of water. The siting of stave churches suggests that acknowledgement of the sanctity of such features continued in Early Christian Norway, especially since the sites at which many stave churches were built were quite remote even at the time of construction (figs. 1–2).

The proximity of stave churches to features traditionally revered in Germanic culture also suggests that the churches may have been erected on former temple sites. The excavation of Kaupanger church (built ca. 1200) has revealed evidence of two earlier wooden structures beneath it. The latter of the two was clearly a church. However, the archaeologists were uncertain of the earlier building's function; while they were not completely convinced that this structure was a temple, neither could they positively identify it as a church.<sup>46</sup> While excavations at other stave churches have not revealed evidence of earlier *pagan* structures,<sup>47</sup> it should be noted that there is textual evidence to suggest that temples were sometimes moved from their original locations. For example, when Þórólf Mostrarskegg decided to leave his native Norway and sail for Iceland, "he dismantled ... [Thor's] temple, and, along with most of its timbers, put aside some of the earth from under Thor's pedestal, [and set sail]."<sup>48</sup> Thus, even if future excavations

reveal no evidence of pagan structures beneath extant *in situ* stave churches, it will not constitute definitive evidence that such churches are not erected on former temple sites, especially since later building campaigns often damage the remnants of the postholes.

While a relationship clearly exists between the siting of stave churches and the *presumed* siting of Germanic temples *vis à vis* their proximity to specific natural features, their design and construction (assuming, of course, that literary accounts are accurate) indicate an even closer relationship. Based on archaeological and literary evidence, Germanic temples were of wooden construction and employed pillars as supports. While Norwegian stave churches employ similar support systems and are also constructed of wood, this does not constitute the extent of their relationship with respect to design and construction. To further

Figure 2. Lomen Stave Church, Valdres, Norway, ca. 1175. Exterior view after unknown photographer in Anders Bugge, *Norwegian Stave Churches*, trans. Ragnar Christophersen, Oslo, Dreyers Forlag, 1953 (drawing by Daniel Amato, 1999 © Michael F. Reed).

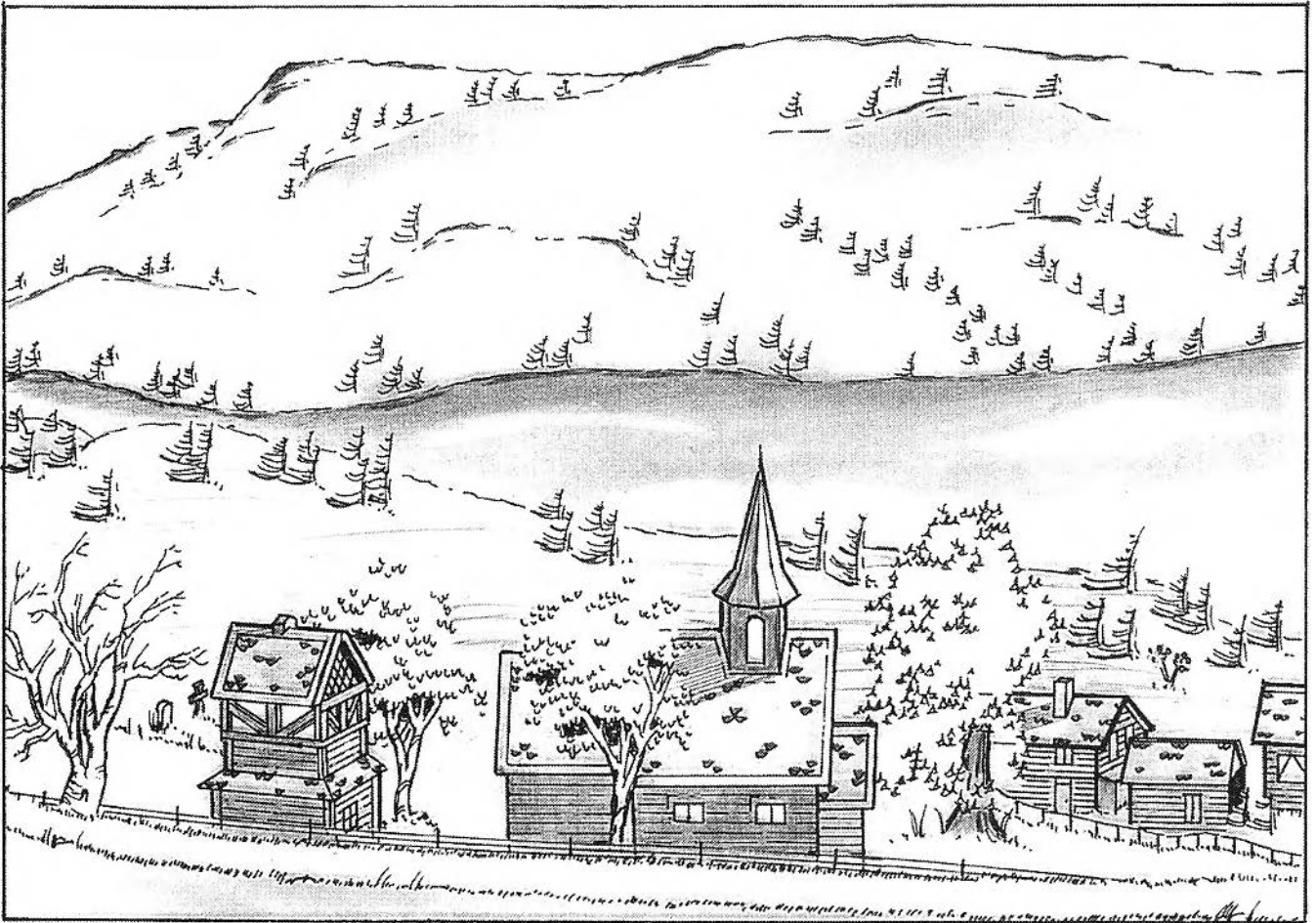
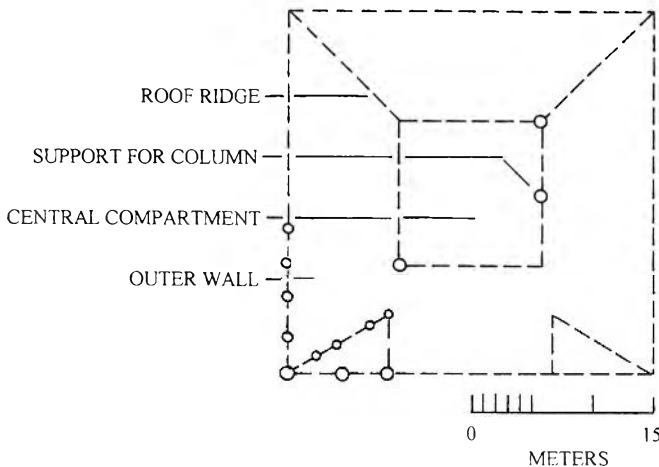


Figure 3. Uppsala Temple, Uppsala, Sweden, ca. fifth-sixth century. Probable plan after J. Dyck Fledderus in Petter Aune, Ronald L. Sack and Arne Selberg, "The Stave Churches of Norway," *Scientific American*, CCIL (1983), 96–105 (drawing by Daniel Amato, 1999 © Michael F. Reed).



illustrate such similarities, the Uppsala evidence must be analysed in greater detail.

According to Fledderus's reconstruction of the Uppsala temple (fig. 3), this building comprised a tower-like pillared cella, featuring massive corner supports, surrounded by what might be termed an "ambulatory." This description could easily refer to the principal components of a Norwegian stave church: typically, the building has a high, tower-like central compartment which is often surrounded by a low, covered aisle – essentially an ambulatory – and like the Uppsala temple, the corner pillars of this central compartment are frequently much larger than the other supports (fig. 4).

An early form of the Norwegian stave church also exhibits a unique connection to Germanic temples and paganism through its design. "Single-mast" churches (fig. 5) were common in rural Norway from 1150–1200 – a period coinciding, roughly, with the end of Viking expansionism and the permanent return of innumerable sea-faring warriors. The "single-mast" church ex-

Figure 4. Hoprekstad Stave Church, Sogn, Norway, ca. 1150. Interior view showing main supporting column in southwest corner after unknown photographer in Anders Bugge, *Norwegian Stave Churches*, trans. Ragnar Christophersen, Oslo, Dreyers Forlag, 1953 (drawing by Daniel Amato, 1999 © Michael F. Reed).

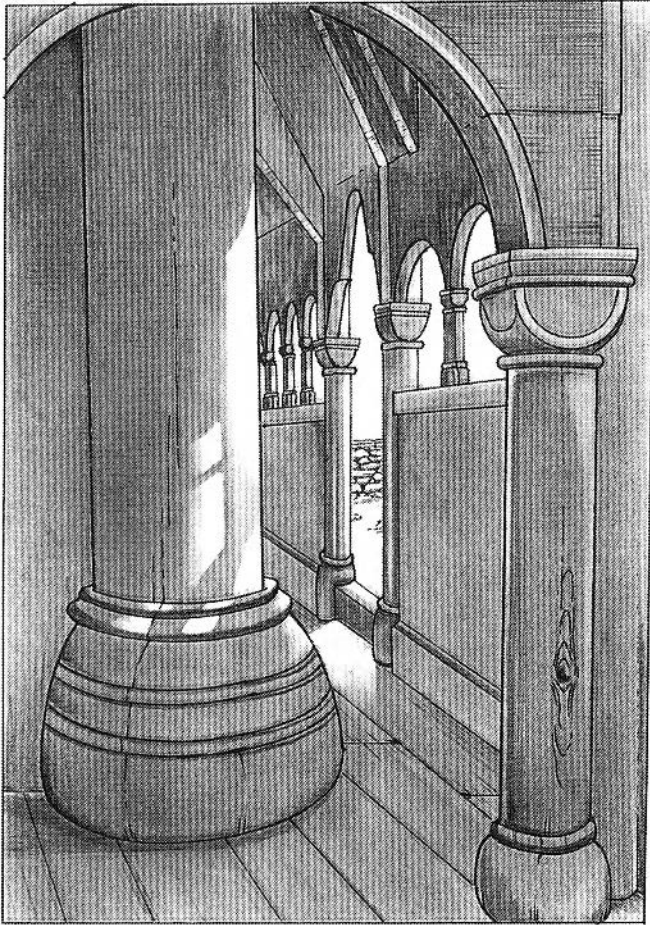
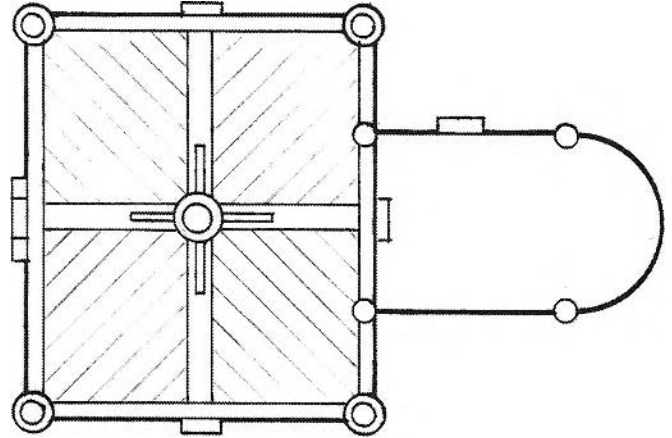


Figure 5. "Single-mast" stave church, Valdres, Norway, ca. eleventh century. Plan after Uli Winkler in Dan Lindholm and Walther Roggenkamp, *Stave Churches in Norway: Dragon Myth and Christianity in Old Norwegian Architecture*, trans. Stella Bittleston and Adam Bittleston, London, Rudolf Steiner, 1969 (drawing by Daniel Amato, 1999 © Michael F. Reed).



hibits a unique combination of four corner pillars with, most importantly, a *central* one, perhaps alluding to the pre-Christian practice of raising *sacred* pillars and thereby demarcating/manifesting the *axis mundi*, especially since such pillars were associated with holy places, particularly temples. Like the siting of stave churches near prominent natural features, this possible allusion to the *axis mundi* suggests the persistence of native cultural traditions from the pagan past in Christian Norway.

A final element which links the design and construction of Norway's stave churches to its earlier cultural traditions is the relationship of their "trussed roof" design to the interior of Viking ships. In his thesis on Norwegian stave churches, Lorentz Dietrichson says of their "trussed roof:"

[It] resembles a ship placed upside down over the church. The ridge-beam corresponds to the keel, the rafters to the ship's ribs ... A row of arches, upside down, is placed between adjacent rafters, just as it was between the ribs of a Viking ship. In the ship these ribs were not attached to the keel, and similarly the rafter arches and the tie beams are separated from the ridge-beam in the church. This proves not only how closely related the churches are to Viking ships, but also that the methods and style of building reaches back into heathen times – even the dragon heads sprouting from the gables are the same as those on the prows of the ships.<sup>49</sup> (fig. 6)

Figure 6. Construction of a stave church roof and a Viking ship. Cross-section after Uli Winkler in Dan Lindholm and Walther Roggenkamp, *Stave Churches in Norway: Dragon Myth and Christianity in Old Norwegian Architecture*, trans. Stella Bittleston and Adam Bittleston, London, Rudolf Steiner, 1969 (drawing by Daniel Amato, 1999 © Michael F. Reed).

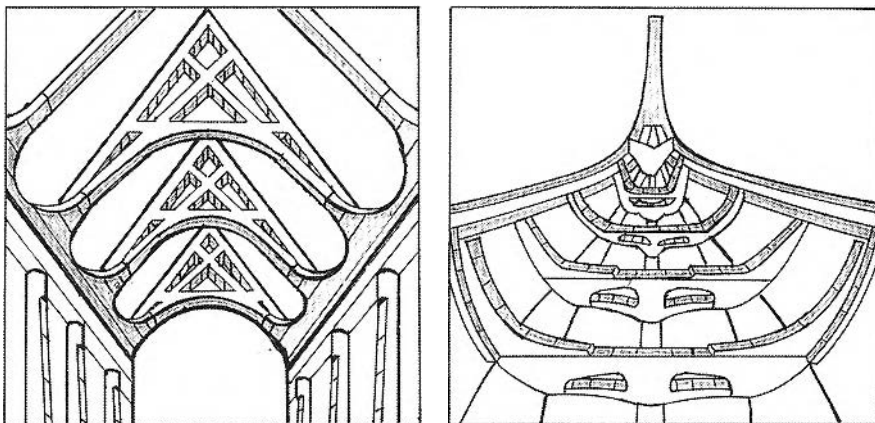


Figure 7. Hylestad Stave Church – Sigurd Killing Fafnir, Seterdal, Norway, ca. second half of tenth century. Exterior view after unknown photographer in Anders Bugge, *Norwegian Stave Churches*, trans. Ragnar Christophersen, Oslo, Dreyers Forlag, 1953 (drawing by Daniel Amato, 1999 © Michael F. Reed).



While it can be said with a reasonable degree of assuredness that the methods and style of building employed in the construction of Norwegian stave churches were based on those used in the erection of pagan temples, it is unknown if decorative elements such as the dragon finials or panels of exterior carving (frequently depicting scenes from the legend of Sigurd and the Dragon) bore any relationship to the decoration of Germanic temples; in all likelihood, they did not (fig. 7). The dragon finials and Sigurd scenes, together with candle-holders in the

Figure 8. Borgund Stave Church – Anthropomorphic Capital, Sogn, Norway, ca. 1150. Interior view after unknown photographer in Anders Bugge, *Norwegian Stave Churches*, trans. Ragnar Christophersen, Oslo, Dreyers Forlag, 1953 (drawing by Daniel Amato, 1999 © Michael F. Reed).

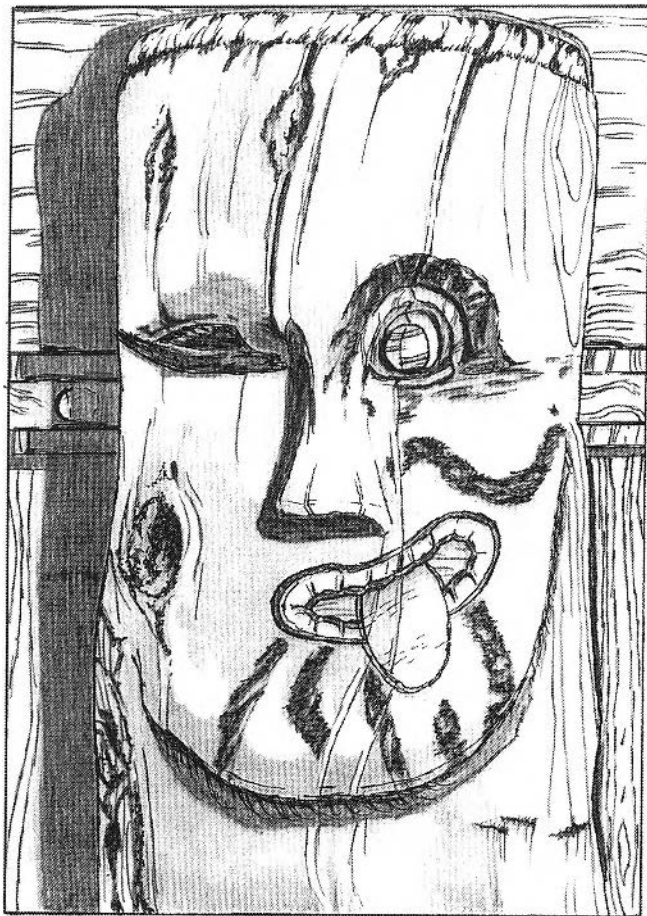


form of Viking ships and various sculpted zoomorphic interlace panels perhaps illustrate Norwegian pride in an older, more heroic age. Thus, decoration of this sort, described by some art historians as a “last florescence of pagan design,”<sup>50</sup> should perhaps be interpreted as a manifestation of national pride rather than a symptom of a dying culture.

Before this discussion can be concluded, a final piece of evidence suggesting that Norwegian stave churches evolved from earlier Germanic temple architecture must be addressed. Based on literary accounts, including that of Þórólf’s temple in the *Erybyggja Saga*, carved pillars decorated with images of pagan gods were erected in temples. Exactly how these objects functioned in that society is unclear; what is important, however, are references to their *existence*, and it is interesting that similar pillars with carved anthropomorphic heads are common elements in stave church interiors. Based on extant evidence, such anthropomorphic heads, or “capitals,” rarely exhibit naturalism; they are often simplistically carved, have stylized features, and are generally “mask-like” in appearance, seemingly evoking otherworldly beings and/or principles (fig. 8). On rare occasions, such anthropomorphic capitals likely represent *specific* entities. For example, based on its iconography of a single eye,



Figure 9. Hegge Stave Church — Anthropomorphic Capital (Odin?), Valdres, Norway, ca. thirteenth century. Interior view after unknown photographer in Anders Bugge, *Norwegian Stave Churches*, trans. Ragnar Christophersen, Oslo, Dreyers Forlag, 1953 (drawing by Daniel Amato, 1999 © Michael F. Reed).



a capital in Hegge stave church may represent the god Odin (fig. 9).<sup>51</sup>

Based on this succinct account of Germanic cosmology, as well as the existing archaeological and literary evidence of Germanic temples, it is proposed here that these structures were the likely antecedents of Norway's early stave churches — particularly those of the "single-mast" form. Not only are the stave churches constructed of the same material and in generally the same manner and design as the temples, but they also occupy similar (if not the same) locations in the landscape, underscoring the persistence of a Norwegian understanding of sacredness in the natural world. They also possibly reflect a continued belief in the ritual importance of a cosmic "centre" and the *axis mundi*. They illustrate the continued production of what were probably votive images (i.e. carved pillars — although their function and/or meaning may have altered). And they clearly suggest that in medieval rural Norway, pre-Christian conceptions of sanctity and the cosmos continued into the Christian period. This fact is articulated most clearly by an anonymous

quotation from the Middle Ages:

It is said of a remote church in Roldal that when it was first built the Christian Mass was only celebrated every second week, so that the heathen gods could be worshipped in between. At the beginning, the differences between the Christian and heathen faiths were not so strongly marked.<sup>52</sup>

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#### Notes

- 1 Quoted in Roar Hauglid, *Norwegian Stave Churches* (Oslo, 1970), 5.
- 2 Hauglid, *Norwegian Stave Churches*, 5.
- 3 Elisabeth Seip, "Architecture in Norway," n.d., [http://reisenett.no/facts/culture-science/architecture\\_in\\_norway.html](http://reisenett.no/facts/culture-science/architecture_in_norway.html), updated: ?; visited: 26 Oct. 1998. Other authors have proposed that many more stave churches were constructed. Jerri Holan, *Norwegian Wood: A Tradition of Building* (New York, 1990), 52, for instance, suggests that more than 1,000 stave churches existed in medieval Norway.
- 4 See Anders Bugge, *Norwegian Stave Churches*, trans. Ragnar Christophersen (Oslo, 1953); Hauglid, *Norwegian Stave Churches*; Hakon Christie, "The Stave Churches of Norway," 1996, <http://odin.dep.no/ud.nornytt/uda-383.html>, updated: 9 July 1996; visited: 26 Oct. 1998; and Erla Bergendahl-Hohler, "Norwegian Stave Church Carving: An Introduction," *Arte medievale*, III (1989), 77–115.
- 5 Dan Lindholm and Walther Roggenkamp discuss this association somewhat in *Stave Churches in Norway: Dragon Myth and Christianity in Old Norwegian Architecture*, trans. Stella Bittleson and Adam Bittleson (1968; London, 1969), 9–72. At this stage it will be useful to define several key terms which will figure prominently in this discussion. (1) "Germanic:" referring to those peoples, united by language and custom, who originated in the territory between the Rhine River and what is now Lithuania. Scandinavians, Jutes, Angles, Saxons, Franks, Frisians and so on are all "Germanic" peoples. (2) "Scandinavia:" referring to those northwestern European countries whose native inhabitants are of Germanic descent (i.e. Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland). (3) "Anglo-Saxon:" collective term referring to the *non-Scandinavian* Germanic settlers of England (i.e. Jutes, Saxons, Angles, Frisians and so on).

- 6 For example, see Kristian Bjerckness and Hans-Emil Lidén, *The Stave Churches of Kaupanger: The Present Church and Its Predecessors*, trans. Elisabet Tschudi-Madsen (Oslo, 1975), 1–18; and Holan, *Norwegian Wood*, 52.
- 7 Treatises do exist which contain descriptions of the religious practices of pagan Germanic peoples outside Scandinavia (for example, those by Bede and Ibn Fadlan); but none (perhaps with the exception of *Beowulf*; see note 9) provide information, as do the *Eddas*, on pagan cosmology. It is also important to note that, although the *Eddas* were compiled and written in Iceland, they are of particular importance to the study of Norwegian paganism: Iceland's first inhabitants were Norsemen, mostly Norwegian Vikings, who settled the island from 874–930.
- 8 Innumerable scholars have discussed this phenomenon in great detail. For example, see H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (New York, 1988), 102–207; William Alexander Craigie, *The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (1906; New York 1969), 1–24; and Gale R. Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1981), 5–40.
- 9 It must be emphasized that the only extant accounts of pagan Germanic cosmology are Scandinavian (with the exception of *Beowulf*, see below). Based on cultural and religious similarities between Scandinavians and other Germanic peoples in the pre-Christian era, it has been hypothesized that the Scandinavian conception of the pagan cosmos (at least its fundamental components) was likely shared by other peoples of Germanic origin. It must be noted that this remains hypothesis but is accepted as *probable* (although not definite) fact.
- 10 *Beowulf*, trans. Burton Raffel (New York, 1963), 26. Part I, line 93.
- 11 H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (1964; Harmondsworth, 1972), 27; because this great serpent (sometimes referred to as the “World Serpent”) is not mentioned in *Beowulf* or other non-Scandinavian texts, it is difficult to determine if this detail was a standard element in Germanic cosmology.
- 12 Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 170.
- 13 We know from the evidence of the *Eddas* that in pagan Scandinavia, four distinct cosmic realms existed: the abodes of humanity, the dead, the giants and the gods. It is reasonable to assume that other Germanic peoples acknowledged the existence of at least three of these: the abodes of humanity, the dead and the gods. It is unknown if giants existed in the cosmologies of Germanic peoples outside Scandinavia or, if they did, what space they occupied in the universe.
- 14 Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 171.
- 15 Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 171; through archaeological and literary evidence, scholars have identified numerous “types” of Germanic outdoor ritual spaces: the Anglo-Saxon *Wih* (a relatively undefined outdoor precinct with an unsheltered cult image); the Scandinavian *Vé*, or sacred enclosure (a triangular, lenticular or rectangular space demarcated by standing stones or a consecrated fence of hazel poles (and ropes) known as the *Vébond*); and the Anglo-Saxon *Hearg* and the Scandinavian *Högr* or *Hörgr* (tented shrines housing an altar and/or cult image associated with naturally rocky areas and/or hills). See Audrey Meaney, “Pagan English Sanctuaries, Place-Names and Hundred Meeting-Places,” *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, VIII (1995), 29–42; and Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe* (1995; London 1997), 119–120.
- 16 Jones and Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, 119.
- 17 Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 171.
- 18 Quoted in Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 22.
- 19 Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 23; I propose that in pagan Germanic belief, these pillars actually *were* the *axis mundi*, functioning as the conduits which permitted communication between humans, the gods and the dead at holy sites. Although it is known that such communication was thought to occur at these sites – see, for example, H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia* (London, 1967), 138–148; and Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 13 – more research is required to prove this hypothesis.
- 20 Owen, *Rites and Religions*, 43.
- 21 It is known that Yeavinger was a holy site to Celtic peoples prior to the Anglo-Saxon invasions. The palace at Yeavinger was built on the site of a Bronze Age barrow, which was retained, *intact*, at the eastern end of the Anglo-Saxon enclosure. Thus, it is possible that pre-existing sacredness determined later royal presence and religious construction at the site. See Owen, *Rites and Religions*, 43.
- 22 Owen, *Rites and Religions*, 43–44.
- 23 Owen, *Rites and Religions*, 44.
- 24 Owen, *Rites and Religions*, 43, 45; see also Brian Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria* (London, 1977). The exact date when the Yeavinger temple became a church is unknown. This conversion would certainly have occurred around the time of Paulinus's mission to the northern kingdoms (ca. 625).
- 25 Other ritual structures have been discovered at Slonk Hill, Shoreham (Sussex), Cowdery's Down (Hampshire), and New Wintles, Eynsham. See John Blair, “Anglo-Saxon Pagan Shrines and their Prototypes,” *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, VIII (1995), 1–28.
- 26 Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth, 1955), 128.
- 27 See H. Linden, “From Pagan Sanctuary to Christian Church: The Excavation of Maere Church in Trondelag,” *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, II (1969), 3–32, esp. 3.
- 28 Linden, “From Pagan Sanctuary to Christian Church,” 3.
- 29 The tribe which ruled eastern Sweden.
- 30 Quoted in Craigie, *The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, 39; and in Davidson, *Gods and Myths*, 191.
- 31 Petter Aune, Ronald L. Sack and Arne Selberg, “The Stave Churches of Norway,” *Scientific American*, CCIL (1983), 96–105, esp. 99.
- 32 Aune, Sack and Selberg, “The Stave Churches of Norway,” 99.
- 33 Literary evidence confirms that important Germanic temples and holy sites were often associated with considerable wealth. For example, texts record how Charlemagne removed vast quantities of gold and silver from Eresburg after destroying Irminsul in the eighth century. See Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 33–34.

- 34 Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia*, 144; and Johannes Brøndsted, *The Vikings*, trans. Kalle Skov (1960; Harmondsworth, 1971), 73–74.
- 35 Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia*, 146.
- 36 Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia*, 146.
- 37 It should be noted that both the Jelling and Uppsala temples were royal foundations; Þórólf's temple to Thor was not.
- 38 *Erybyggja Saga*, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Harmondsworth, 1989), 29; the *Saga* also mentions that images of Thor were carved on the main pillars of the temple.
- 39 Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, trans. Susan M. Margeson and Kirsten Williams (London, 1987), 165; most pagan sanctuaries were not destroyed in Scandinavia following the imposition of Christianity. In many instances, they were simply "sanctified" through the construction of ecclesiastical foundations. A church was erected in the royal necropolis, or *Vé*, at Jelling, Denmark, ca. 960 by Denmark's first Christian king, Harald Bluetooth; and, similarly, at Uppsala, Sweden, a cathedral was erected on the site of the famous temple sometime after 1100. Jones and Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, 121.
- 40 Hauglid, *Norwegian Stave Churches*, 6.
- 41 Quoted in Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, 165; following King Håkon's death, his official poet, or *skald*, Eyvind Scaldaspiller, composed a pagan eulogy for the monarch, praising him for "[saving] the temples from all ill" and describing how he was triumphantly received in Valhalla by "the whole council of the gods." Quoted in Snorri Sturluson, "Saga of Hakon the Good," *Heimskringla: Sagas of the Norse Kings*, trans. Samuel Laing (1951; London, 1961), 111.
- 42 Hauglid, *Norwegian Stave Churches*, 6; the attempted Christianization of Norway by kings Tryggvason and Haraldsson was characterized by extraordinary cruelty. Their *sagas* record the atrocities committed during their reigns, succinctly summarized by Jones and Pennick as follows: "It was only in 998 that King Olaf Tryggvason, followed by Olaf Haraldsson, ... made Norway Christian by armed force, looting and burning [pagan] temples and compelling community after community to be baptised or die, taking hostages to enforce continued Christian observance. Nevertheless, many [pagans] were willing to be tortured and to die a martyr's death rather than give up their beliefs. Olaf Tryggvason ordered that the Pagan seer, Thorleif the Wise, was to be blinded ... [and] Eyvind Kelde (drowned along with his comrades), Iron Skegge (killed defending the temple at Mæri), Eyvind Kinnrifi (tortured to death with hot coals), and Raud the Strong (tortured with a poisonous snake and red-hot iron), among others, died for the old faith. Also the Viking leader Ragnar Lodbrok, killed by Christians in Northumbria, was seen as a martyr." Jones and Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, 135; see also *The Sagas of Olaf Tryggvason and of Harald the Tyrant (Harald Haardraade)* (London, 1911), 68 ff.
- 43 Holan, *Norwegian Wood*, 104.
- 44 Referring to the canons which recommended the use of stone for houses of worship. See "Code of Canon Law," [1983], <http://www.prairienet.org/nrpcatholic/clcmenu.html>, updated: ?; visited: 30 Aug. 1999, canons 1214–1239.
- 45 Numerous scholars have noted how pagan traditions in Norway, especially in rural areas, survived long into the Christian period. For example, see Lindholm and Roggenkamp, *Stave Churches in Norway*, 9–72.
- 46 Bjerkness and Liden, *The Stave Churches of Kaupanger*, 21–22.
- 47 To date, not all stave churches have been excavated.
- 48 *Erybyggja Saga*, 28.
- 49 Quoted in Lindholm and Roggenkamp, *Stave Churches in Norway*, 18–19; Dietrichson implies that the Viking ship was a pagan phenomenon. This is misleading. Literary accounts describe how William the Conqueror's invasion fleet of 1066 was an armada of Viking ships. This is given visual expression in the *Bayeux Tapestry*.
- 50 As in note 4 above.
- 51 Odin consented to lose an eye in exchange for a draught from the Well of Wisdom (guarded by Mimir the Wise). Furthermore, considering the association between pillars and the *axis mundi*, those with anthropomorphic capitals assume added significance. They seemingly reinforce fundamental principles of pagan Germanic cosmology concerning the order and nature of the universe (i.e. the conduit that unites the universe is the *axis mundi*, represented by the pillars. The axis extends into the celestial realm, inhabited by the deities, represented by the anthropomorphic capitals. It passes through the terrestrial plane and also penetrates the underworld, as the pillars *literally* do, implanted to great depth in the ground).
- 52 Quoted in Lindholm and Roggenkamp, *Stave Churches in Norway*, 29; while scholars accept that the early period of Norway's evangelization was characterized by religious dualism (a phenomenon common throughout northwestern Europe in the early medieval period), evidence suggests that this practice could have continued in Norway throughout the height of stave church construction (ca. eleventh-fourteenth century). It should be noted that references to dual faith (pagan/Christian) religious observance in northwestern Europe first appear in large numbers in the eighth century, especially among the Franks, whose aristocracy had become fanatical Christians by the mid-seventh century. For example, in a letter to Pope Zacharias, Boniface mentions "dual faith presbyters who [offer] sacrifices to the heathen gods as well as the Christian." Many eighth-century Frisians and citizens of the German territories of Hessa and Thuringia are described in similar terms: the Frisian chieftains Detic and Dierolf, "[though] professing Christianity, were worshippers of idols," and in Hessa and Thuringia in the 730s, "the belief and practice of the converts [to Christianity] were still largely mixed with [paganism]." Dual faith practices are also recorded among the Normans in the tenth century. Though officially Christian, a resurgence of Thor worship during this period turned Christians into a minority in Norman territories, and later, William the Conqueror's father became known as "Robert the Devil" because of his adherence to paganism. Sweden remained a largely pagan country until the 1120s, when King Sigurd of Norway initiated a crusade against the pagans in Småland, south Sweden, and laid the country waste. Snorri Sturluson records in the *Gylfaginning* that the worship of the goddess Freya continued in his own day; and two twelfth-century mural paintings depicting

Freya and the goddess Frigga are extant in Schleswig Cathedral, seemingly confirming Snorri's record. Other artistic evidence of religious dualism includes a fifteenth-century wall-painting of the Goddess in the Labyrinth in the church at Sibbo, Nyland, Finland; statues of King Olaf the Saint, displayed in numerous Norwegian stave churches, which, we are told, were often worshipped as images of Thor; and wooden pillars, termed *Rolandseulen*, were erected in northern Germany ca. fourteenth-fifteenth century, often in close proximity to ecclesiastical foundations. It is also sig-

nificant to note that one of Norway's close geographic neighbours, Lithuania, maintained official state paganism throughout the fourteenth century. In fact, Samogytia, lowland Lithuania, did not officially accept Christianity until 1414. Thus, in light of such evidence, it is not unreasonable to assume that Norwegian stave churches could have functioned as dual-faith meeting places – especially those in remote areas – as late as the eleventh-fourteenth century. Quoted in Jones and Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, 131, 134, 137, 161, 171–173.