

Building Offerings

An Ambiguous Ritual

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Abstract

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This article focuses on building offerings from the Iron Age in southern Scandinavia. In Scania and Denmark there are examples of such finds from all kinds of buildings. The deposited artefacts are just as varied as the functions and structures of the houses hosting the depositions. Among more ordinary sacrifices such as animal bones, ceramics and tools, we also find more remarkable finds like silver bracelets and gold-foil figures (*guldgubbar*).

The main issue is whether we can say anything about the rituals performed or the religious beliefs behind the archaeological record. Comparing the archaeological remains with the written sources about the cult of the Æsir, it becomes quite clear that the depositions in question represent something other than what is described by, for example, Snorri Sturluson.

The article also stresses the possibility that building offerings should be viewed as a kind of folk belief already in the Late Iron Age.

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Introduction

Ever since the Stone Age and right up to the present time, building offerings have been found all around the world. As a specific group of archaeological finds, this tradition should be viewed as both global and eternal. This tells us that these building offerings are almost as vital to mankind as life and death. How are we to explain such a basic phenomenon? Looking at the offerings from a period of two thousand years, they do not seem to have changed at all. The question is, does this mean that the religious beliefs behind it have been the same?

This article deals with the findings from the first millennium in southern Scandinavia and explores different elements necessary for understanding the rituals performed.

I am going to begin with the folk belief records, which tell us about the intentions behind the depositions in the 19th and early 20th century. The next step is an analysis of the archaeological material from the Late Iron Age, and an evaluation of the resemblances and differences *vis-à-vis* the finds from present times and the records of folk belief. Finally, I am going to look into what is known about ritual practice in the first millennium AD, both archaeologically and from the written sources.

The results of the study raise some very interesting questions. Building offering is a concept used in everyday archaeology, charged with preconceived i.e. the written sources and archaeological knowledge of ritual practice, shows some crucial incoherence. I am not arguing against earlier research, but trying to widen the implications of

the phenomenon in the Late Iron Age. I argue that building offerings are to be seen as an expression of folk belief already in the Late Iron Age. This implies that there was some kind of official or public religion, not necessarily in opposition to the folk belief practice.

The folk belief records

Everyday life in Scandinavia in pre-industrial times has a lot more in common with Iron Age society than life today. Most people lived in small villages surrounded by fields and meadows. The farmers were caught up in everyday life and were dependent on nature, which basically controlled their life for better or worse. Without the technical support that we have in today's farming, they put their faith and fortune in everyday magic, such as building offerings, to ensure their well-being.

Everyday magic is part of the folk belief systems in pre-industrial agrarian societies. In my opinion folk belief should not be viewed as a well-defined world of ideas, but as a dynamic tradition, which is influenced by, and partly integrated with, the dominating ideology.

There has been some research, showing that folk belief records have been very useful in the study of pre-Christian periods (e.g., Raudvere 1993; Roymans 1995; Rathje 2000). Tove Paulsson's essay on Iron Age building offerings also deals with evidence from the 19th and 20th century concerning this phenomenon. The records that she presents are from southern Sweden. The informants briefly describe what was to be done and why. They also tell what kind of animal or material was used as an offering, and where it was to be put and why. The information on how it was done is scarce. Either this is a reflection of the straightforward way it was done – the action itself is the ritual – or it is testimony to a kind of denial among the informants. It has also been pointed out by Tove Paulsson that there seems to be a disbelief in these actions, which is shown through the way they express them, for example: "it was known

to happen" and "it's been said that" (Paulsson 1993, p. 14).

This denial takes an interesting turn on Jutland in Denmark. Some informants from Jutland explain that the reason for the deposition, in this case horse skulls and typical Danish everyday ware, was to improve the resonance of the floor (Jensen 1962). I think that this way of explaining why things were put under the floor is an attempt to rationalize a form of superstitious behaviour not only *vis-à-vis* the other world but also in everyday life.

The actual deposition is characterized as an offering gift, that is, it is given to somebody or something with a promise or an expectation to be given something in return by the receiver. It is said that people used to sacrifice artefacts or animals, dead or alive, under the floor or in the foundation. The position of the sacrifice varied some, but the most common thing was to put it in or under the threshold or in the middle of the room in the main building.

Vipers were to be put in the fireplace or in the threshold alive. Other animals mentioned are horses, sheep and dogs. The whole animal or just parts of it, preferably the head, were sacrificed.

Building offerings were also made in stables and barns, in order to bring good fortune to the animals on the farm. Apart from the animals mentioned before, kittens and chickens are said to have been buried under the floor alive. The fact that these tiny animals were of minor importance did not matter; the main thing was that they sacrificed their lives. It was preferable to choose a really young animal since they were to protect the house during its expected lifetime. Under thresholds and in post-holes it was common to put metals or animal bones. Among the metals, arsenic, steel, lead, mercury and gunpowder are mentioned (Paulsson 1993, pp. 15 ff.).

To protect the houses from being struck by lightning it was advisable to put a prehistoric thunderbolt close to the fireplace or the entrance. It was believed that the axe was shaped by the thunderbolt and that lightning never strikes twice

in the same place. Axes also protected milk from going sour and prevented the trolls from replacing the baby with one of their own (Munksgaard 1963, pp. 27 ff.; Carelli 1997, pp. 399 ff.).

There are finds from the 19th and 20th century proving that the actions recorded in folk belief actually took place. The majority of the recorded finds are from Denmark, where more research has been done, but there are also some scattered examples from Scania.

Iron Age building offerings

The archaeological finds that I am going to present are from the first millennium AD, mainly

from the south of Scandinavia, with some extensions (Fig. 1). I have concentrated my search for material in Denmark and Scania, but there are some other finds that are impossible to ignore in this context.

I have mostly used published material. This is partly due to the fact that Iron Age building offerings have been studied before. The other reason is that this article is a result of a larger work on building offerings in the Middle Ages. This study is carried out with reference to the material from medieval time, and my search for material has not been as intense for this period. There are, however, some new finds included in

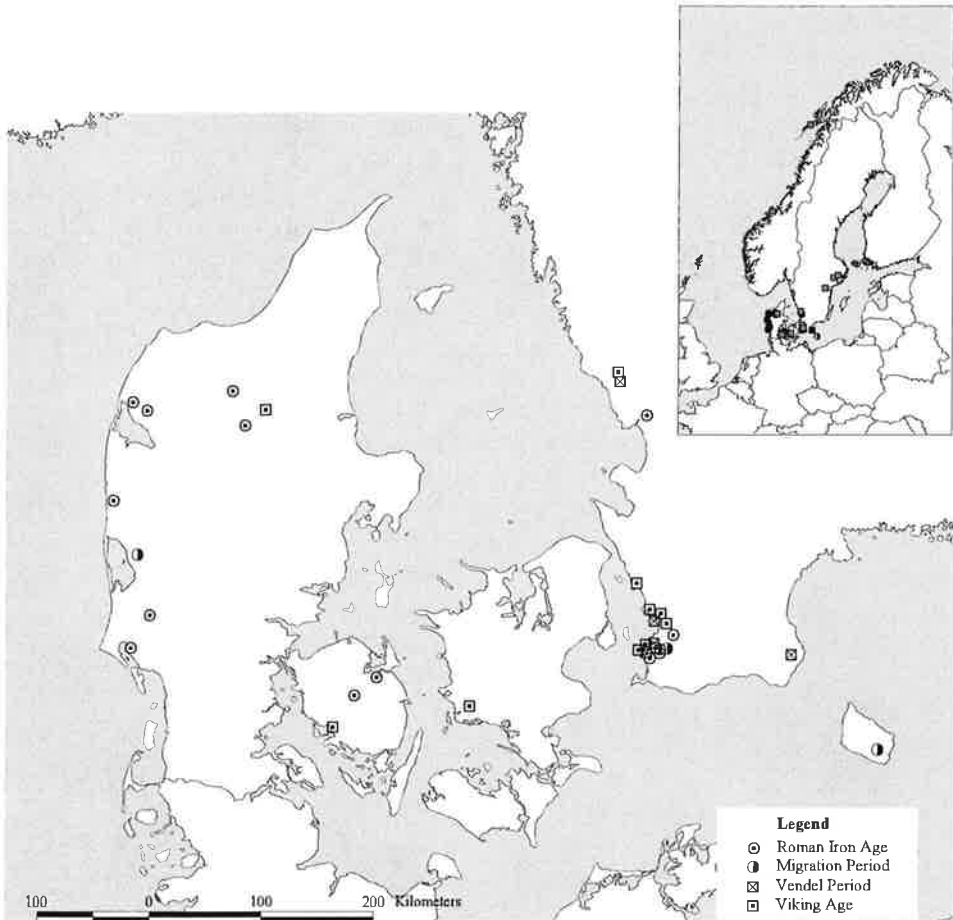


Fig. 1. Find places with building offerings in southern Scandinavia. Circles = Roman Iron Age, Half filled circle = Migration period, Triangles = Vendel period, Squares = Viking Age.

this study that have not been considered before.

Archaeologically I would define a building offering as an artefact deposited in or under a building, where the deposition is sealed with the continuing construction. I have deliberately not specified the type of artefact in the definition in order to collect all the sealed artefacts and not to be caught in traditional thinking. A judgement has to be made in each case. Prior definitions have excluded bones which could be remains of meals (Paulsson, 1993, p. 51; Siech & Berggren 2002, p. 134). Considering the ritual practices known from the written sources, and the possibility that the deposition is the remains of a ritual performed somewhere else, I think this is an unwanted restriction.

The features concerned are mainly post-holes and remains of hearths. This is due to a natural selection exercised by the building technology used during the period. Occasionally, there are deposits under floor remains, especially in sunken-floor houses.

The amount of finds varies a great deal between the different periods (Fig. 2). From the

Roman Iron Age there are 38 finds, from the Migration Period there are two, five from the Vendel Period and 19 from the Viking Age.

I am fairly convinced that the small amount of finds from the Migration Period and Vendel Period does not reflect the numbers of sacrifices performed, but is due to the fact that there are fewer excavated sites from these periods. There are also a number of settlements from the Roman Iron Age containing numerous finds. The number of places excavated displays less variety than the actual amount of houses (Fig. 2).

Building offerings are mainly found in long-houses, but there are also finds from outbuildings, sunken-floor houses and other workshops. Due to the varying numbers of finds from the different periods it is hard to compare them in actual numbers, but there are no obvious changes through time. The majority of the houses are situated on traditional farmsteads, with some exceptions.

During the Viking Age a new type of construction appeared: the forts. There are finds from the Garrison at Birka near Stockholm,

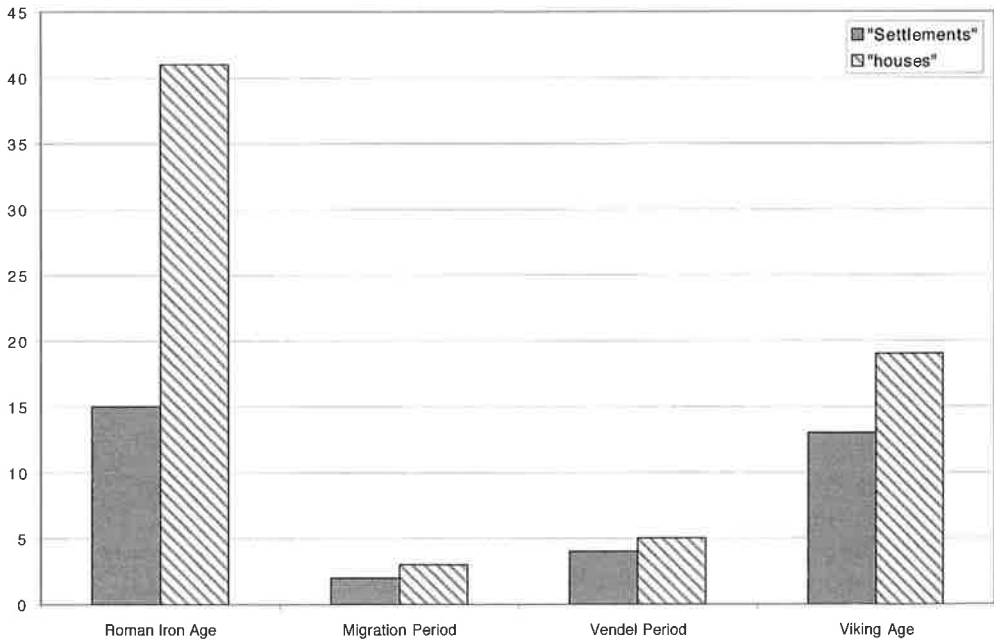


Fig. 2. Diagram showing the number of houses, and the number of settlements from different periods consisting building offerings.

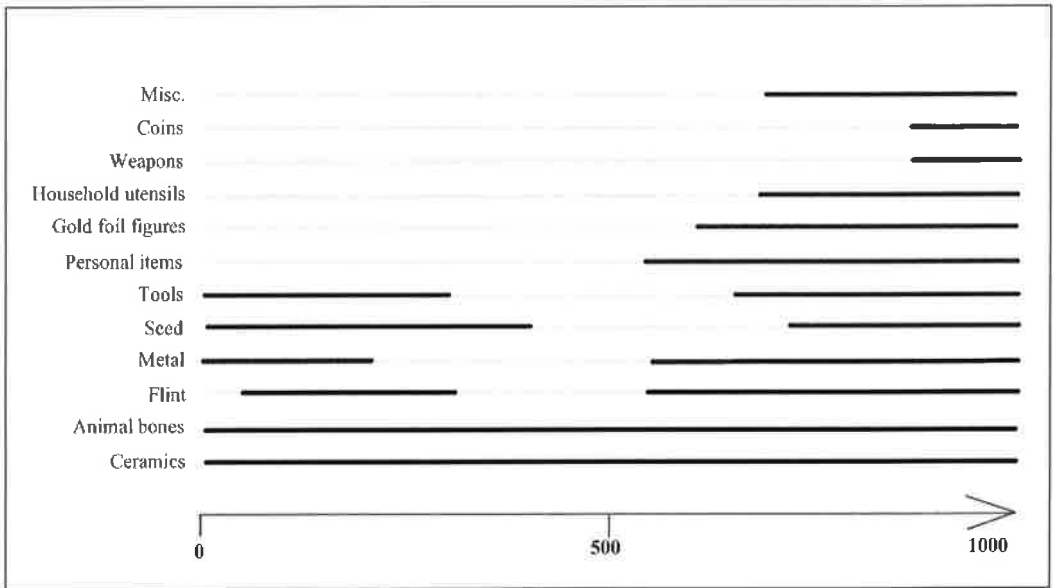


Fig. 3. Different artefacts present as building offerings through time.

Fyrkat in Jutland and Trelleborg on Zealand (Nørlund 1948; Roesdahl 1977; Kitzler 2000). What is particularly interesting is that there are not only depositions connected to the houses, but also two foundation sacrifices at Birka, and a deposition in a gateway at Fyrkat. These finds indicate that the offerings are connected not only to the buildings as such, but also to the fortification as an institution.

The sacrificed artefacts display a great variety. To make it possible to analyse them I have been forced to some classification. My purpose has been to classify them according to character and function. I have divided them into 18 groups (Fig. 3 and Table I). The pottery is placed in a single group. Animal bones are subdivided into species, in cases where there is a more or less complete individual. Complete skulls are also subdivided into species. Other labels are flints, fossils, household utensils (such as grindstones, loom weights and spindle whorls), metal (undefined), coins, gold-foil figures (*guldgubbar*), personal items (such as small knives, metalwork, brooches, jewellery), seeds, weapons, tools and of course “miscellaneous”, that is, artefacts impossible to squeeze into any other category.

Ceramics totally predominate during Roman Iron Age, but decrease during the later periods. There are some regional differences during the Roman Iron Age in the chosen artefact. Ceramics predominate in Jutland while in Scania the proportions between ceramics, tools, metals and flint/fossils are more equal.

As we have seen before, there is much less material from the later periods, and a couple of new finds could change the picture. Therefore it is more appropriate to talk about the presence of certain artefacts than their absence, especially when comparing with later periods. The regional differences in the Roman Iron Age mentioned above underline this. Though the finds from the Vendel Period and Viking Age mostly originate from Sweden, there is an obvious possibility that new finds from Denmark would display another picture. By talking about the maximum present number of artefacts/labels, some criticism might be avoided.

I am still going to point out some turning points in the material.

Animal bones make up almost 10% of the material in the Roman Iron Age, which is notable, because there is only one example that I know of

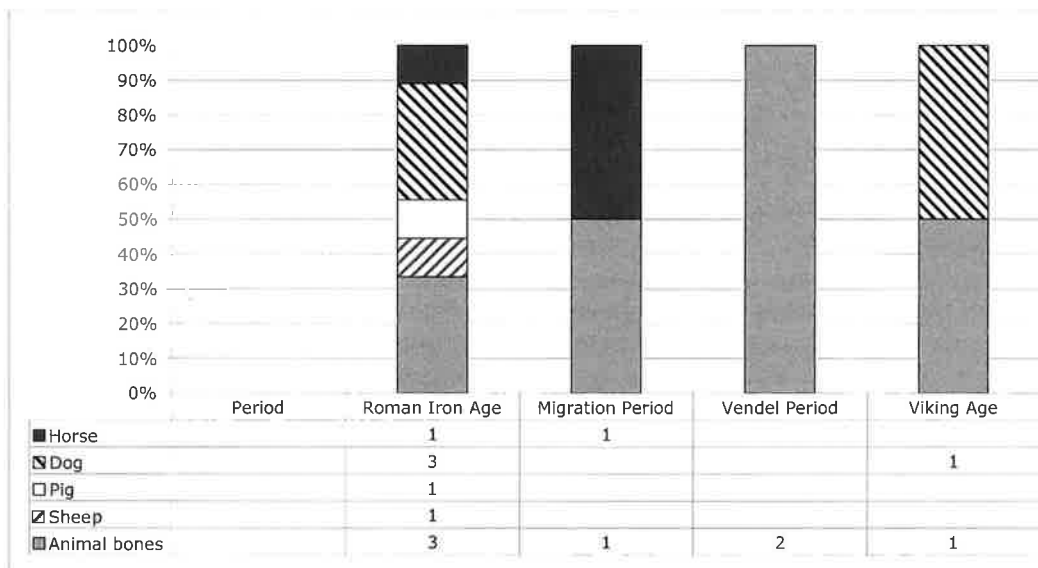


Table I. Animal species present as building offerings, distributed through time.

from the earlier period. Tove Paulsson has pointed this out before. In her opinion this is an adaptation of the phenomenon due to socio-economic changes, “the new agrarian economy”, when the animals were taken indoors at winter, and the fields were manured (Paulsson 1993, p. 33). It has been stated by H el ene Bornha-Ahlkvist that this adaptation might have happened already in the Late Bronze Age, when ceramics became more customary as building offerings (Bornha-Ahlkvist 2002, p. 89). Earlier depositions that are from Neolithic time were mainly weapons (Karsten 1994, pp. 145 ff.).

The metal finds, like animal bones, are not normally used in a building offering context before the birth of Christ. I see this as an indication of a dynamic tradition: the increasing amount of artefacts indicates a continuing reconsideration and adaptation of the ritual to the contemporary society.

Horses, which are said to be a frequently used animal in folk belief records, are represented in only one case, in the first millennium. This is a lot more common during the Middle Ages and almost totally predominant in the period after the Reformation.

Other animals represented are sheep, pig and dog as complete individuals, and animals present as parts are cattle, horse, sheep and pig. The “small” animals like kitten and chicken mentioned in the folk belief records are absent (Table 1).

From the Viking Age there are deposits of weapons. They are always situated in fortifications. This is not unexpected but noteworthy, though there is no other group of finds that is only connected to one type of building.

The most exceptional thing in this table is the appearances of gold-foil figures from the Vendel Period. It is not where they appear that is the interesting point, but the fact that they appear in this context. The gold-foil figures are known from almost 40 places in Scandinavia. They are said to be related to marketplaces and places with cultic overtones. Their form and function have been discussed intensively in the last few decades (Holmqvist 1960; Steinsland 1990; Watt 1992, 1999; Back-Danielsson 1999). My personal opinion is that these tiny figures are to be related to an aristocracy and their practice of a “public religion”.

The most important result of the analysis of

the artefacts sacrificed, all criticism of the sources considered, is the tendency towards an increasing number of different artefacts through time. In the later periods there is not only a greater variety in the chosen artefacts but also a number of more exclusive objects deposited, such as gold-foil figures, glass, coins and silver bracelets.

I have tried to estimate the value of the houses, to find out what kind of people practised the custom. I have been extremely careful in doing this. First I have compared the building with others at the same settlement. When that was not possible I have only discerned the buildings where it is quite obvious that the farm is larger than the average. Even though the analysis has been carefully carried out, it is most evident that this kind of depositions were made among both poor and rich (Fig. 4).

The finds from the houses belonging to the “upper class” display a greater variety than the others. From the Vendel Period there are also examples of buildings representing something other than the traditional farm. Besides the fortifications, which are hard to evaluate, because their distinctive character is due to their function, there are five places that clearly have close bonds to the aristocracy. Mære and Borg, in Norway both had impressive constructions in Viking Age, but are also connected to early churches (Lidén 1969; Stamsø-Munch 1990). Both are fine places for gold-foil figures.

Slöinge, Järrestad and Uppåkra in southern Sweden are interpreted as central places. The establishment in Järrestad, in south-east Scania, consists of an “ordinary” settlement and its cult site. A big hall and a palisade, enclosing an area south-west of the main hall, constitute the cult site. Inside the enclosure there is a small building with tools deposited in a post-hole (Söderberg 2002). Uppåkra in south-west Scania is also the site of a “cult house”, while Slöinge, on the west coast of Sweden, is the site of a “ruler’s seat”. Both places have yielded incredibly rich finds, and also have gold-foil figures deposited in the house (Larsson 2001, p. 26; Lundqvist 2000, pp. 51 ff.). The fact that building offerings were deposited in this kind of buildings and especially in the form of gold-foil figures clearly shows us that the custom also involved the aristocracy.

I have also studied the relation between the different artefacts and their positions inside the building. The task was almost impossible to carry out, due to very different states of preservation and interpretation. The number of buildings where it is possible to tell the function of the room and its relation to the rest of the house, and its entrances, was far too small to be representative. The only thing that one can point out is that the majority of the depositions were made in post-holes from roof-bearing posts or in the entrance area. The position in the inner post-holes is, in a sense, in the middle of the

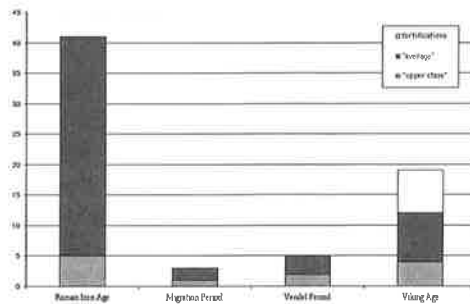


Fig. 4. Evaluation of houses consisting building offerings, distributed through time.

Roman Iron Age	Fyn	Lundsgaard	6
		Radby	1
	Halland	Brogård	9
	Jylland	Ginderup	2
		Malle Degnegaard	1
		Myrthue	3
		Nørre Fjand	2
		Snorup	1
		Vestervig	2
		Österbölle	2
	Skåne	Bageritomten	8
		Fosie 11B	1
		Lockarp 7a	1
		Lockarp 7B	1
		Uppåkra	1
Migration Period	Bornholm	Sorte Muld	1
	Jylland	Dejbjerg	1
	Skåne	Lockarp 7a	1
Vendel Period	Halland	Slöinge	1
	Skåne	Bjärred 9:5	1
		Fosie IV	1
		Järrestad	1
		Petersborg	1
Viking Age	Fyn	Helnæs bugt	1
	Halland	Slöinge	1
	Jylland	Fyrkat	3
	Norge	Borg	1
		Mære	1
	Själland	Trelleborg	1
	Skåne	Bjärred 9:5	1
		Lockarp 7a	1
		Löddeköpinge	1
		Säby	1
		Ängdala	2
		Önnerup 4:3	1
	Södermanland	Lunda	1
	Uppland	Birka Garnision	3
Total			68

Table II. Houses with building offerings.

house. Both positions indicate free access to the areas. The sacrifice could in that sense be described as public. Anyone entering the house is forced to pass over or close by the area. The find from the gateway in Fyrkat, mentioned above, underlines this.

To summarize the archaeological material, one can point out some crucial facts.

Building offerings appear in different environments, in houses with various functions. From the Vendel period onwards there are some extraordinary finds in building offering contexts, found in buildings connected to an aristocracy. The context in which the artefacts are deposited is the same independent of the function or status of the building.

There are some striking similarities between the Iron Age finds and the folk belief records, such as the location of the artefact in the middle of the room or under the threshold. The types of artefacts deposited are the same: animals, tools and everyday ware. The material from the houses belonging to the upper class shows some diversity from the folk belief records. The sacrificed material is handled in the same way but the objects are more varied and more exclusive. I would like to illustrate this by taking a closer look at one of the finds mentioned above.

At the settlement in Slöinge, on the west coast of Sweden, there are two houses with gold-foil figures in an offering context. The settlement is situated on a ridge close by the valley of the Suseån. At a central position on the ridge two large halls have been excavated. The oldest house (no. 3) has been dendrochronologically dated to 710 AD. The other one (no. 2) is slightly younger and has been dated to the Viking Age. The houses are oriented east–west and overlap each other. They are both 30 m long and about 8.5 m wide. In the north-west corner of the hall (living room) in house 3, a large hoard was found in a post-hole. The hoard consisted gold-foil figures, other gold foils, garnets, loom weights, glass, ceramics, pearls, iron items, flint and animal bones. The artefacts are all collected from the top layer in the post-hole. This is probably the

remains of a floor, and the artefacts were not buried, but mixed up in the floor layer.

In house two there was likewise a hoard in the north-west corner of the hall. In both houses there were also offerings in the south-west and the south-east corners. The north-east was completely empty, however. It has been pointed out that the finds from the south-east corner in this building were of a typical female kind, such as grindstones, loom weights and spindle whorls (Lundqvist 2000, pp. 51 ff.).

The finds from house no. 3 all come from the upper layer; it has been suggested that this is a floor layer. In that case these finds would have been placed on or in the floor. The other finds, however, were deeper down in the post-holes. This example shows us some different strategies within the same house. Without going too far, I think it is possible to say that the two big deposits with exclusive artefacts were consciously placed in specific corners. These post-holes are in both cases situated in the north-west corner while the north-east was empty. On the south side there are finds of a more modest character. The fact that the finds from the north-west corner in house no. 3 were not buried probably shows us a change in the ritual preceding the deposition.

The exclusive artefacts that are deposited in building offering contexts should most likely be seen as an elitist move in an otherwise traditional and universal ritual.

What is known of religion and rituals in the Scandinavian Iron Age

To outline a religious background to the rituals that might have preceded the depositions that I have presented, we will have to take a look into other archaeological remains of sacrifices. The first 500 years AD in southern Scandinavia are characterized by wetland sacrifices. This tradition is known from the Stone Age (Fabech 1991; Karsten 1994).

From the year 1 booty sacrifices became more and more common. Contemporary with this was a type of offerings of a more private character: tools, personal items, animal bones and pots with food. The sacrifices were probably performed both collectively and individually, in connection with family events, childbirth, death, and marriage, but also in accordance with annual occurrences such as sowing and harvest. These sacrifices have been characterized as fertility rites.

During the Migration Period there are traces of a beginning of a changing process in the ritual deposits. Depositions are continuously made in wetlands but there are also finds of a more exclusive character deposited in the vicinity of the settlement.

It has been said that these changes in the religious practice are due to a change of ideology in relation to social and political transformations. The struggle for power during the Iron Age results in minor kingdoms, as a change from the former tribal communities. By constructing a demarcated sacral arena the aristocracy monopolized ritual practice to strengthen its power (Fabech 1991; Näsman 1994; Hedeager 1997; 1999; Andrén 2002; on the duality in Iron Age religion see for example Andrén 2002; Jennbert 2002).

The archaeological material shows us artefacts deposited in wetlands and buried in the vicinity of the settlement. As we shall see below, the written sources give a different picture of religious practice.

The written sources

The written sources from the 13th and 14th century describe a number of sacrifices and rituals, but nothing that can be directly connected to building offerings. The written sources from this time must be handled critically. Features to be considered are what they really describe, the period in which the actions took place, or more likely, a common picture of what was thought to have happened. They have to be handled with

care; the most important thing is to look upon them as truths in the time they were written.

Another problem with the Old Norse sagas is that they describe the myths related to the cult of the *Æsir*, but not the rituals performed when the cult was practised. This is probably due to the circumstance that the actual rituals were forgotten by the time the sagas were written. Ritual practice that is not performed any more becomes forgotten and erased from the collective knowledge quicker than the myths. One also has to remember that ritual today among scholars is often looked upon in a broad way, as an action comprising symbolic meaning, guided by concepts in society not necessarily of a religious nature. The rituals described in the Old Norse sagas are those that are seen as religious rituals by the authors (Clunies Ross 2002, pp. 16 ff.).

The most common religious act described is the *blót*. This sacrificial feast was held both annually and on special occasions. The feasts are said to be held to the honour of Odin, 'Thor and Frey, the *dísir* and *álfar* (Hultgård 1997, pp. 30 ff.; Näsström 1997, pp. 87 ff.; 2002, pp. 43 f.).

François-Xavier Dillman is of the opinion that *blót* in general included the slaughter of sacrificed animals, ritual handling of the blood and presentation of the gifts to the receiver. In association with this, sacred meals with libation sacrifices and consumption of the sacrificed animal were held (Dillman 1997, pp. 51 ff.).

It has also been said by Britt-Marie Näsström that it is these kinds of communal sacrifices that dominate the cult of the *Æsir*. The communion sacrifice is characterized by a collective idea, expressed by a sacrificial meal (feast) where everybody attends, the divinity included. The libation sacrifice, on the other hand, is a form of offering gift, when the drink is poured out on a sacred place (Näsström 2002, pp. 43 f.).

Besides the libation sacrifice there are some other examples of offering gifts in the written sources about Old Norse religion. One of these is the story of how the *Rúðs* honoured their gods on the shore of Volga, as told by Ibn Fadlan in

the 10th century.

By the shore of Volga the *Rús* constructed a temporary cult site, with the trees in the grove symbolized by erected posts. Some of them representing the divinities have carvings of faces. The heads of the sacrificed animals are hung up in the posts; meat and other gifts are placed by the posts symbolizing the divinities. Ibn Fadlan states in astonishment that the *Rús* believe that the meat is taken by the goods at night, when actually the wild dogs guzzle upon the gifts (Wikander 1978, pp. xx ff.).

Apart from the feast arranged in honour of the renowned *Æsir*, there are some other famous passages in the Icelandic sagas mentioning *álfablót* and *disablót*. Not much is known about these beings. The *disir* are collective, faceless beings, living in family-like circumstances in the vicinity of the farms, and the same is said about the *vettir* (Raudvere 2003, p. 161). Britt-Marie Näsström is of the opinion that it is possible to make a connection between the *disir* and the *Vanir*, and especially Frey as the king of *álfar* and Freya as the queen of *disir* (Näsström 2002, p. 168).

One verse in *Kormáks saga* is of particular interest in this case. It describes how the cure for a bad wound is a sacrifice to the *álfar*. It is said that the blood from a bull is to be spread on the hill were the *álfar* live, and the meat is to be offered to them (Näsström 2002, p. 167). The interesting part is that the receiver of the gift is not one of the renowned *Æsir*, and that it is a bull used as a gift. In this story too, the deposition of the gift takes place in the open air.

Turning back to archaeology, there are also some rune stones telling us about offering gifts. The gifts are stated in the words of “he gave to the gods”, but we have no other information about how or where it was done (Hultgård 1993, pp. 249 f.).

To summarize what we know about the cult in the Iron Age, the written sources tells us of a cult involving communion and libation sacrifices. The features of these rituals are not congruent with the type of offerings that I have presented

archaeologically.

The folk belief records that I have exemplified above have many more traits in common with Iron Age building offerings. In particular, however, they describe a form of offerings where the gifts are deposited in a similar way. The offerings mentioned in the written sources have a different form of deposition. In the sagas the gifts are consumed or left in open air to vanish. This kind of deposition is of course impossible to detect archaeologically. On the other hand, in this case the archaeological material leaves us traces of rituals not mentioned in the written sources.

Conclusions

Finally I would like to summarize my view of the Iron Age building offerings.

As we have seen, these ritual depositions do not match the examples of religious practices known from the written sources.

It has been stated that there was a change of ritual practice in the Migration Period. After that point there are some more exclusive artefacts present among building offerings, but there is no obvious break; the form of the deposition is invariable. It seems as if the tradition continued untouched by change in the “public” ritual practice. This indicates that we can discern a form of folk belief already in the Late Iron Age.

As mentioned before, there are more exclusive artefacts present from the Vendel Period onwards. This is probably a reflection of the status of the people performing the action, and there are offerings present in buildings belonging to people from different classes. Finds of gold-foil figures in particular indicate that some of the people making the offering had close bonds to the aristocracy and the ritual practice performed by them. In my opinion the aristocracy monopolized ritual practice in the Late Iron Age and developed a cult expressed by means of gold-foil figures, gold bracteates and animal ornaments. To what extent the Old Norse sagas describe the reality, we do not know. But if they describe a cult that

actually took place, it would be the one practised by the aristocracy, and in that sense a public cult. My belief is that building offerings are not related to the cult of Æsir that we know of from the Old Norse sagas, but they do not necessarily have to be in opposition to it. In the Old Norse sagas there are also vague traits of a more private cult. The building offerings that I have presented are probably related to this family domain.

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