

Sacrifice and Sacrificial Ideology in Old Norse Religion

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The practice of sacrifice is often treated as ‘the dark side’ of Old Norse heathenism, by both medieval Christian commentators and modern scholars alike. However, within Norse religious practice, sacrificial ritual (*blót*) was one of the most central acts of religious observance. This paper will seek to examine aspects of the significance of *blót* within Old Norse religion, the ideology of sacrifice as it operated within this tradition and its relation to other Indo-European traditions, and the reactions to the issue of sacrifice by medieval contemporaries and modern scholarship.

An examination of Old Norse literature relating to religious practice demonstrates the importance of *blót* within the religious life of the heathens of Scandinavia. Well over one hundred and fifty references to *blót* can be found in different sources, including *Eddic* and skaldic poetry, early historical works and annals, legal material, and saga literature. There are no extant scriptures or religious manuals from the heathen Norse that give a detailed explanation of the theory and operation of sacrifice. However, the accounts of sacrificial practice, taken altogether, provide a wealth of knowledge about how it was performed, by whom and to whom, as well as where, when and under what circumstances it was performed. The Old Norse verb *blóta*, which means ‘to sacrifice’, also has the extended meaning ‘to worship’, particularly by means of sacrifice, which testifies to the importance of sacrifice as a form of worship. In a language that had no proper word for its indigenous religion, the word *blót* had become a by-word for all things heathen, evidenced by terms such as *blótdómr*, *blótskapr*, or *blótmaðr* ‘heathen worship’, *blóthús* ‘temple’, *blótmaðr* ‘heathen worshipper’ and even *blótgúð* ‘heathen god’.¹

A survey of the literature reveals a number of essential features of sacrificial ritual in Old Norse heathenism. There are accounts of both

¹ R. Cleasby and G. Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, [1874] (Oxford, 1982) pp70ff.

human and animal sacrifice, as well as the sacrifice of inanimate valuables. Of these, animal sacrifice is by far the most common form of *blót*, and it is typically associated with a sacrificial feast, (*blótveizla*). One of the most detailed accounts of heathen sacrifice is given in *Snorri Sturluson's* thirteenth century text, *Heimskringla*, describing a *blót* held by Jarl Sigurð of Hlaðir in *Hákonar saga góða*:

Sigurðr, jarl of Hlaðir, was the greatest sacrificer, and so was his father Hákon. Jarl Sigurðr upheld all the sacrificial feasts on behalf of the king there in the Prándlaw. It was ancient custom, then when there should be a sacrifice, that all the farmers should come there, where the temple was, and bring thither their provisions, those which they should use, while the feast lasted. At the feast, all men should have ale. There also were killed all kinds of cattle and also horses, and all the blood, which came therefrom, then was called *hlaut* (sacrificial blood), and *hlaut*-bowls those, in which the blood stood, and *hlaut*-twigs, that were made like sprinklers¹, with this they should redden the entire altar and also the walls of the temple inside and out and also sprinkle upon the men, and the flesh should be cooked for food for the feast. There should be fires in the middle of the floor of the temple and cauldrons over them. A full horn should be carried around the fire and he, who arranged the feast and was leader, then he should bless the drink and all the sacrificial food. First he should make Óðin's toast – it should be drunk to the victory and strength of their king – and afterwards Njörð's toast and Frey's toast to abundance and peace. Then it was customary for many men to drink the king's toast thereafter. Men drank also a toast to their kinsmen, those who had been buried in mounds, and that was called *minni*. Jarl Sigurðr was the most liberal of men. He did that work, which was very famous, that he made a great sacrificial feast at Hlaðir and alone bore the whole cost. ²

¹ Specifically, the comparison is to the aspergillum used in Catholic ceremony.

² Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I, Íslensk Fornrit*, vol. 26, Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, Reykjavík, 1941, pp167-168, author's translation is given for all quotes: '*Sigurðr Hlaðajarl var inn mesti blótmaðr, ok svá var Hákon, faðir hans. Helt Sigurðr jarl upp blótveizlum öllum af hendi konungs þar í Prændalögum. Þat var forn siðr, þá er blót skyldi vera, at allir bændr skyldu þar koma, sem hof var, ok flytja þannug föng sín, þau*

This form of sacrifice shows little difference from other forms of animal sacrifice and feasting found the world over. The consumption of sacrificed meat was an especially important religious act. Reflexes in the Indo-European traditions of this significance are found in the Vedic proscription against Brahmin priests touching unsacrificed meat, as well as to a lesser extent in the Roman prohibition against Flamen Dialis touching raw meat.¹

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this account is the role played by the sacrificial blood (*hlaut*). This term seems to be related to the verb *hljóta* 'to win or be allotted', so it seems that the hlaut in particular was the portion allotted to the gods. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson makes a case that the sprinkling of sacrificial blood (*stökkva fórnarblóði*) was such an essential element of the sacrificial ceremony that it may have been the original meaning of the word *blót*, rather than the sacrifice itself.² This idea is supported by cognates in Old English: *blótan* 'to sacrifice' and *bletsian* 'to bless', the origin of Modern English 'bless'.³

The *hlaut* may therefore have carried something of the power of the gods, since in an extract from *Úlfjótsslög*, the earliest law-code of Iceland, it is stated that

er þeir skyldu hafa, meðan veizlan stóð. At veizlu þeirri skyldu allir menn öl eiga. Þar var ok drepinn alls konar smali ok svá hross, en blóð þat allt, er þar kom af, þá var kallat hlaut, ok hlautbollar þat, er blóð þat stóð í, ok hlauteinar, þat var svá gört sem stökklar, með því skyldi rjóða stallana öllu saman ok svá veggi hofsins útan ok innan ok svá stökkva á mennina, en slátr skyldi sjóða til mannfagnaðar. Eldar skyldu vera á miðju gólfu í hofinu ok þar kailar yfir. Skyldi full um eld bera en sá, er gerði veizluna ok höfðingi var, þá skyldi hann signa fullit ok allan blótmatinn. Skyldi fyrst Óðins full - skyldi þat drekka til sigs ok ríkis konungi sínum - en síðan Njarðar full ok Freys full til árs ok friðar. Þá var mörgum mönnum títt at drekka þar næst bragafull. Menn drukku ok full frænda sinna, þeirra er heygðir höfðu verit, ok váru þat minni kölluð. Sigurðr jarl var manna örvastr. Hann gerði þat verk, er frægt var mjök, at hann gerði mikla blótveizlu á Hlöðum ok helt einn upp öllum kostnaði.'

¹ J. P. Mallory and D. Q. Adams, *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, (Chicago, 1997) p453.

² J.H.Aðalsteinsson, *Blót í Norrænum Sið*, Háskólaútgáfan Félagsvísindastofnun, (Reykjavík, 1997) p236.

³ Cleasby and Vigfusson, *loc cit*.

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A ring of two ounces or more should lie on the stall in each chief temple; that ring should each *goði* wear on his arm at all legal assemblies, which he himself should conduct, and redden it beforehand in blood from the bull¹ which he sacrificed there himself. Every man, who needed to perform legal duties there at court, should swear an oath on that ring beforehand and nominate two or more witnesses for himself.²

It would seem that reddening the arm-ring in *hlaut* not only makes oaths sworn upon it legally binding, but also invokes the power of the gods to oversee the keeping of those oaths.

The communion achieved through sacrifice is also reflected in various accounts of divinatory practices. Sometimes, the sacrifice itself is considered a way to gain knowledge about the future, or in some cases, questions are answered through sacrifice. One specific tradition involved the casting of sacrificial chips closely connected with the sacrificial ceremony called *blótspánn*. Another, which may have originally been closely connected to the *blótspánn*, the casting of lots, was known as *hlutan*, *hlutkesti* or *hlutfall*. Although not necessarily performed in connection with a *blót*, the *hlutfall* also involved a form of communion with the gods, divining their will and in some cases, carrying out their will.³

Blót were not always public ceremonies, and many of the specific details and circumstances of the ritual vary. Of the accounts given of *blót* performed in Scandinavia proper, most typically involve performance of the ritual by a king or local jarl for their assembled subjects. However, in Iceland, they might be performed by a *goði* (chieftain/priest), the head of a household or farmstead, an individual *blótmaðr*, or even, on occasion, witches or sorcerers. The ritual was usually intended to achieve a specific aim, from divining the future

¹ *Naut* typically refers to cattle or oxen Cleasby and Vigfusson, *op cit*, pp446ff.

² Extract from *Úlfjótsslög* in *Hauksbók* p268, *Íslenzk Fornrit*, vol. 1, Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, (Reykjavík) 1968, pp313-15. *Baugr tvíeyringr eða meiri skyldi liggja í hverju höfuðhofi á stalla; þann baug skyldi hverr goði hafa á hendi sér til lögþinga allra, þeira er hann skyldi sjálfir heyja, ok rjóða hann þar áðr í roðru nautsblóðs þess, er hann blótaði þar sjálfir. Hverr sá maðr, er þar þurfti lögskil af hendi at leysa at dómi, skyldi áðr eið vinna at þeim baugi ok nefna sér vátta tvá eða fleiri.*

³ Aðalsteinsson, *op cit*, pp234-5.

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(*ganga til fréttar*), as was mentioned previously, to a good harvest (*til árs*), growth (*til gróðrar*), peace (*til friðar*), prosperity (*til farsældar*), victory in battle (*til sigrs*), long life (*til langlífis*), power (*til ríkis*), revenge (*til föðurhefnda*), aid (*til fulltings*) or to bring about someone's death (*til bana mönnum*). The ritual could be performed nearly anywhere, but usually in some sort of sacred place, whether indoors in a temple (*hof*), hall (*salr*), or dedicated house (*blóthús*), or outdoors at a cairn or altar (*hörgr*), burial mound (*haugr*), grove (*lund*), waterfall (*fors*), mountain (*fjall*), or a sanctuary (*vé*).

In Snorri's *Ynglingasaga*, he outlines the three main annual times for sacrifice, as set out by Óðinn himself: 'Þá skyldi blóta í móti vetri til árs, en at miðjum vetri blóta til gróðrar, it þriðja at sumri, þat var sigrblót.'¹ – 'Then [they] should sacrifice towards winter for abundance, and in the middle of winter sacrifice for growth, the third in summer, that was a victory-sacrifice.' These correspond to prominent festivals in the Norse calendar: Winternights (*vetrnætr*), celebrating the beginning of winter; Yule (*Jól*) in the middle of winter; and the beginning of summer, corresponding to the heathen Easter (OE *Eostre*, OHG *Ostara*). In addition to these, there is brief mention by Snorri of sacrifices held at mid-summer, but in Iceland, this festival would seem to have been overshadowed by the national assembly, called the Althing, held around the same time of year. These seasonal festivals would seem to be the usual times for large public sacrifices, although they (and smaller-scale *blót*) could also be held at just about any time of year. It is important to note that of all the accounts of *blót*, only two occurred near an assembly (*þing*), so that it appears that assemblies were not normally occasions for sacrifice. Only the passage from *Úlfjótsslög* suggests otherwise, but even in that case, the sacrifice is part of the preparation for the assembly, not a feature of the assembly itself.²

The recipients of sacrifice are as varied as the goals of sacrifice. Sacrifices were given to spiritual beings such as the heathen gods (*goði*); elves (*álfar*); female guardian spirits (*dísir*), and other spirits

¹ Snorri Sturluson, *op cit*, pp20ff.

² J. H. Aðalsteinsson, 'Blót and Þing. The function of the Tenth-Century *Goði*, reprinted in T. Gunnell and J. Turville-Petre (trans.), *A Piece of Horse Liver*, Háskólaútgáfan Félagsvísindastofnun, (Reykjavík, 1985, 1998) p49.

(*vættir*); dead ancestors; animals (who were often representative of particular gods – for example, ravens for Óðin, goats for Þórr, horses or boars for Freyr, and so on); and even to groves or waterfalls. This provides a context in which *blóta* extends its meaning from ‘sacrifice’ to ‘worship’, since the act of making a sacrifice to these recipients is also understood as identical to worship. Thus, in the case of a particular grove, for example, not only does its role as a location for sacrificial ritual enhance its status as a holy place, but its status as a holy place also requires that sacrifice be brought to it, that is, that it should be ‘worshipped’. This dual meaning is exemplified in a passage from *Landnámabók*:

Flóki Vilgerðarson was the name of a great Viking... He prepared a great sacrifice and sacrificed to (worshipped) three ravens, those that should show him the way, for at that time, sea-sailors in the Northern Lands had no lodestone... From there he sailed out into the sea with those three ravens, which he had sacrificed to (worshipped) in Norway. And when he let the first loose, it flew back over the stern. The other flew up into the air and back to the ship. The third flew forwards over the prow in that direction, in which they found the land.¹

In this case, although it is stated that it is the ravens that are the object of Flóki’s worship, it can be understood that the ravens are merely the receptacles for the holy power that allows them to lead him to his destination. That is, the power for Flóki to achieve his goal is derived from his act of sacrifice, not from the ravens themselves.

With this brief survey of heathen Norse sacrificial practice in mind, attention will now be given to the more intriguing question of the ideology of sacrifice in Norse heathenism. Early Christian

¹ *Hauksbók 5, Íslenzk Fornrit, vol. 1, op cit, 37-39. Flóki Vilgerðarson hét víkingr mikill... Hann fekk at blóti miklu ok blótaði hrafna þrjá, þá er honum skyldu leið vísa, því at þá höfðu hafsiglingarmenn engir leiðarstein í þann tíma í Norðrlöndum... Þaðan sigldi hann út í haf með hrafna þá þrjá, er hann hafði blótat í Nóregi. Ok er hann lét lausan hinn fyrsta, fló sá aprt um stafn; annarr fló í lopt upp ok aprt til skips; þriði fló fram um stafn í þá átt, er þeir fundu landit.*

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commentators, such as the twelfth century German chronicler Adam of Bremen, in addition to recording accounts of heathen Norse sacrifice, were usually overtly hostile towards them, and they often seek to emphasise the barbarity and savagery of such practices, particularly by focusing on human sacrifice. According to Adam,

It is the practice, every nine years, to hold a communal festival in Ubsola [Uppsala] for all the provinces of Sueonia [Sweden]. No exemption from this festival is allowed. The kings and the people, communally and separately, send gifts and, most cruel of all, those who have embraced Christianity buy themselves off from these festivities. The sacrifice is performed thus: nine head of every living male creature are offered, and it is the custom to placate the gods with the blood of these. The bodies are hung in a grove which stands beside the temple. This grove is so holy for the heathens that each of the separate trees is believed to be divine because of the death and gore of the objects sacrificed; there dogs and horses hang together with men. One of the Christians told me that he had seen seventy-two bodies hanging together. For the rest, the incantations which they are accustomed to sing at this kind of sacrificial rite are manifold and disgraceful, and therefore it is better to be silent about them.¹

Adam demonstrates an understanding of sacrificial ritual common to most medieval Christian commentators; that it is primarily an activity designed to placate continually angry, fickle and hungry gods that demanded an endless supply of blood. Sacrifice, especially human sacrifice, was typically seen as an occupation of the uncivilised, from the Roman world to the New World. As myopic and dismissive as this interpretation may seem to us now, there were few better attempts to understand the phenomenon until the late nineteenth century.

Up to that time, the popular theory on sacrifice was that it was a ritualised gift-exchange, epitomised by the Latin phrase *do-ut-des* 'I give so that you may give'. This idea is exemplified by an account from *Landnámabók*:

¹ Adam of Bremen, cited in E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, (London, 1964) p244.

Hallsteinn, son of Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, took Þorskafjörð and dwelt at Hallsteinsness; he sacrificed there for this purpose, that Þórr should send him high-seat pillars and he gave his son in return. After that, a tree washed ashore on his land, which was sixty-three ells long and two fathoms thick; it was used for high-seat pillars, and the high-seat pillars of nearly every farmhouse there around the side-fjord are made from it.¹

Although a rather simplistic understanding of the nature of sacrifice, many accounts in Norse literature conform to this idea, at least in their most literal reading. The terminology of gift-giving is prominent in many accounts, so that the verb *gefa* 'to give' is frequently used to describe the act of sacrifice. A famous passage from the *Hávamál*, an Eddic poem, describes the god Óðin's self-sacrifice, hanging on the 'windy tree' (*vindga meiði*), identified with Yggdrasil, the Axis Mundi of the Norse mythic world, in which he is 'given to Óðinn (*gefinn Óðni*) myself to myself'.² In this case, Óðinn is both the victim and the recipient of the sacrifice, he is given to himself, and through this ordeal he acquires the secret of the runes.

In 1894, W. Robertson Smith published his *The Religion of the Semites* in which he proposed that the origin of sacrifice lay in totemism, that the sacrifice of a 'theanthropic animal', which was both god and kinsman, brought about a form of communion with the divine through the consumption of its flesh.³ A few years later, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss rejected Smith's idea of a single, simple origin of the practice, but elaborated on the idea of sacrifice as communion, stressing that the victim became an intermediary between the sacred and profane worlds, and that the act of sacrifice was what conferred

¹ *Hauksbók 95, Íslenzk Fornrit*, vol. 1, *op cit.*, pp163-164. 'Hallsteinn son Þórólfs Mostrarskeggs nam Þorskafjörð ok bjó á Hallsteinsnesi; hann blótaði þar til þess, at Þórr sendi honum öndvegissúlur ok gaf þar til son sinn. Eptir þat kom tré á land hans, þat er var sextigi ok þriggja álna ok tveggja faðma digrt; þat var haft til öndvegissúlna, ok eru þar af görvar öndvegissúlur nær á hverjum bæ um þverfjörðuna. Þar heitir nú Grenitrésnes, er tréit kom á land.'

² *Hávamál*, strophe 138, from C. Larrington, (trans) *The Poetic Edda*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p34.

³ N. Davies, *Human Sacrifice*, Macmillan (London, 1981) p23.

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sacrality to the victim.¹ This idea of communion has already been demonstrated by the accounts of the *blótveizla*, such as that of Jarl Sigurð of Hlaðir, achieved through the consumption of sacrificial meat and the sprinkling of sacrificial blood.

In *The Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazer developed the idea of gift-giving into that of nourishment, that animal sacrifice was intended to nourish the gods, who in turn would provide for a bountiful harvest. Frazer also developed the idea of the myth of the dying god, who died and was reborn, mirroring the cycle of the agricultural year, as life died off in the winter and renewed in the spring. The king, as representative of the god, or a stand-in, would be sacrificed for the renewal of the crops, which was the basis for human sacrifice. Although Frazer drew his primary Norse example in the myth of the death of Baldr, this idea is also represented in the story of King Dómaldi from *Ynglingasaga*:

Dómaldi took his inheritance from his father Vísbur and ruled the lands. In his days, famine and starvation arose in Sweden. Then the Swedes held a great sacrifice in Uppsala. The first harvest-season they sacrificed oxen but the season did not improve at all. And the second harvest-season they had a human sacrifice, but the season was the same or worse. And the third harvest-season a multitude of the Swedes came to Uppsala, then when the sacrifice should be held. Then the chieftains made their plan, and came to agreement, that the bad season must be caused by Dómaldi, their king, and along with that, that they should sacrifice him for their abundance and attack him and kill him and redden the altar with his blood, and so they did.²

¹ H. Hubert and M. Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*, trans. W. D. Halls (Chicago 1898, 1982) p97.

² Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I, Íslensk Fornrit*, vol. 26, op. cit., pp31-2. *Dómaldi tók arf eptir föður sinn, Vísbur, ok réð löndum. Á hans dögum gerðisk í Svíþjóð sultur ok seyra. Þá efldu Svíar blót stór at Uppsölum. It fyrsta haust blótuðu þeir yxnum ok batnaði ekki árferð at heldr. En annat haust hófu þeir mannblót, en árferð var söm eða verri. En it þriðja haust kómu Svíar fjölmenn til Uppsala, þá er blót skyldu vera. Þá áttu höfðingjar ráðagørð sína, ok kom þat ásamt með þeim, at hallærit myndi standa af Dómalda, konungi þeirra, ok þat með, at þeir skyldi honum blóta til árs sér ok veita honum atgöngu ok drepa hann ok rjóða stalla með blóði hans, ok svá gerðu þeir.*

The Dark Side

In 1906, Edward Westermarck advanced the idea that sacrifice, especially human sacrifice, was not so much about gift-giving, which he considered tantamount to ‘celestial bribery’, as about atonement or expiation. He envisaged human sacrifice as a sort of life-insurance policy, wherein one person could save the whole community from scarcity or catastrophe; or in some cases, a person of lower or no status, such as a criminal, slave, or prisoner of war, could preserve someone of higher status.¹ The latter situation is captured in another story from *Ynglingasaga*, in which King Aun the Old sacrificed his sons to Óðinn in return for health and longevity. The first son earned him another sixty years of life, and each son sacrificed afterwards gained him another ten years, until eventually his men refused to sacrifice his tenth and last son, and Aun died of his decrepitude.²

In more recent times, René Girard took up the idea of expiation and developed his own theory of the ‘sacrificial crisis’. His theory relates to sacrifice as a mechanism for releasing social tensions, in which a victim or ‘scapegoat’ is needed to stop escalating cycles of violence. When the ‘scapegoat’ is sacrificed, the crisis is averted, and the social and cosmic order is restored.³ This principle can be seen in the previously mentioned sacrifice of King Dómaldi, but it must be noted that the sacrifice of kings was quite unusual, and typically lower status victims were chosen. As it is said in *Kristni Saga*, ‘The heathens sacrifice the worst men and throw them off rocks and cliffs’.⁴

Maurice Bloch, among others, is critical of these earlier theories, noting that from Robertson Smith’s time onward, the primary focus of such theorists was on Judeo-Christian traditions, and that they saw Christian notions of sacrifice as the culmination of more ‘primitive’ forms. Bloch points out that the ‘communion’ model of Hubert and Mauss breaks down in the case of Vedic sacrifice, for example, which did not have as clear a distinction between the sacred and the profane. He further argues that most anthropologists, when dealing with the

¹ E. Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, (London, 1906) p466.

² Snorri Sturluson, *op cit*, pp47-9.

³ R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, P. Gregory (trans.), (Baltimore, 1972, 1977) p314.

⁴ *Kristnisaga*, B. Kahle (ed.), *Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek*, vol. 11, (Halle, 1905) p40.

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issue of sacrifice, tend to take a specific example from a particular tradition and extrapolate universal principles from it, despite the fact that the phenomena labelled as sacrifice by them are extremely varied and really display no essential unity.¹

However, Bloch still advances a theoretical schema for sacrifice, that of 'rebounding violence'. The stage is set for a sacrifice when there is a perceived dichotomy between a chaotic vitality and the permanent, transcendental order at the foundation of social institutions. That chaotic vitality, or violence, is perceived as an attack on the self or community, and this aspect is first abandoned and then consumed, so that it has been mastered and the violence can be redirected outwards.² This schema can be seen in a passage from *Landnámabók* in which a man named Hrolleifr had started a feud with a neighbouring family. Hrolleifr was on the run after an encounter with his enemies, so his mother Ljót, who was a witch, performed a sacrifice to lengthen his life.³ According to Bloch's theory, the violence directed at Hrolleifr by his enemies causes him to flee, but the sacrifice turns this around, so that Hrolleifr can once again face his enemies. Unfortunately for Hrolleifr, he is unsuccessful in this encounter, and is later killed by his enemies.

One of the essential problems all of this raises for this current study is that none of these theorists has taken the evidence of heathen Norse sacrifice into account, save for Frazer, and his examination was rather cursory. Furthermore, few of them have analysed the relation of myth to sacrificial ritual. Rather than draw universal principles from specific cultural traditions of sacrifice, it would be preferable to understand each instance of ritual sacrifice within the context of the culture in which it appears, and seek general principles of sacrificial ideology at least within related cultures.

In 1973, Bruce Lincoln and Jaan Puhvel simultaneously struck upon such a sacrificial ideology within the context of comparative Indo-European religion. The central feature was the reconstruction of an Indo-European myth of creation, which entailed, in essence, the creation of the cosmos from the body of a primordial sacrificial victim,

¹ M. Bloch, *Prey into Hunter*, (Cambridge 1992) pp28-9.

² *Ibid*, p43.

³ *Hauksbók* 147, *Íslenzk Fornrit*, vol. 1, *op cit*, pp221-2.

who was sacrificed and dismembered by a figure representing the primordial priest. Thus, as the cosmogonic act was one of sacrifice, so the ritual of sacrifice was understood to be a repetition of the initial act of creation.¹ A Norse reflex of this myth can be found in Snorri Sturluson's Edda:

Bor's sons [Óðinn, Vili and Vé] killed the giant Ymir... took Ymir and transported him to the middle of Ginnungagap, and out of him made the world, out of his blood the sea and the lakes. The earth was made of the flesh and the rocks of the bones, stone and scree they made out of the teeth and molars and of the bones that had been broken.... They also took his skull and made out of it the sky and set it up over the earth with four points, and under each corner they set a dwarf.... From Ymir's flesh was earth created, and from blood, sea; rocks of bones, trees of hair, and from his skull, the sky. And from his eyelashes the joyous gods made Miðgarð for men's sons, and from his brains were those cruel clouds created.²

This cosmogonic myth bears close comparison to the 'Puruṣa Sūkta' of the *R̥g Veda* and many other similar myths from various Indo-European mythologies, and helps to explain the significance of sacrificial ritual, which was ubiquitous to Indo-European religions. Sacrifice, especially human sacrifice, was seen as a repetition of the cosmogonic act, with all the power of the original action to reshape and restore the cosmos. The material form of the sacrificial victim was understood to restore the cosmos of the depletion caused by human activity, transforming from its microcosmic to its macrocosmic manifestation, and providing the raw material for renewed prosperity, for example, restoring the earth to ensure a good harvest.

Lincoln also observes that many of these myths include a parallel creation of the mesocosm of human society and social hierarchy from the cosmogonic sacrifice. This serves to explain something of the significance of animal sacrifice, which in a similar way to human sacrifice repairs the social fabric and restores the social order.³ The

¹ B. Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice*, (Chicago, 1991) pp167-70.

² Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. A. Faulkes, (London, 1987) pp11-13.

³ Lincoln, *op cit*, pp173-174.

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hlaut can therefore be understood as the physical medium through which both the cosmos and society are renewed, and so it is necessary to sprinkle it over both the temple and the assembled people.

So, after this examination, what can be said about the theory and practice of sacrifice among the heathen Norse? As has been demonstrated, Old Norse literature can provide examples that fit all of the 'universal' theories of sacrifice advanced by various scholars. Apart from Lincoln, none of these scholars have taken Norse material into account during the development of their theories, although some have afterwards applied their theories to the Norse data. Most claim that their theory is the essential principle behind sacrificial ritual, usually to the exclusion of other theories, but if this is so, how is it that Norse sacrificial ritual can encompass all of these various definitions?

Perhaps there is something fundamentally flawed in trying to find a single, universally applicable ideology operating within such a varied and extensive complex of ritual action as sacrifice. Typically, such theorists are forced to be extremely selective with the information they use, and to gloss over differences and contradictions which might upset their so-called 'universal' theories. Such theorists also all too often fail to consider the cultural context of the traditions they are examining to the detriment of their appreciation of the uniqueness and diversity of each individual culture, and their understanding of the phenomenon on its own terms.

With such a brief examination, it is impossible to draw any but the most general and preliminary of conclusions about Norse sacrifice. Clearly, there is a great diversity in the circumstances, operation and intended effects of sacrificial ritual in Old Norse heathenism. Perhaps, though, this diversity is the key to understanding Norse sacrifice, that is, that it was a very flexible system of religious thinking and action that could adapt itself to a changeable world. It could be tailored to fit nearly every occasion in which a singularity of purpose could be summoned to effect a desired result which may not have been possible through more direct means. Thus, sacrifice to the heathen Norse was not so much about the purpose of the ritual, as it was about a ritual to crystallise the operant's purpose and to make that purpose effectual in the world.