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**MICROCOSMS AND BORDERS – ON CENTRALITY  
AND LINEARITY IN CONNECTION WITH HOLY  
OR SACRED PLACES**

**Abstract**

Two principles are discerned in open-air holy places: centrality in the sense of a particular point or ring, and linearity in the sense of borders which have to be passed to reach the site, or linearity in the sense of a liminal zone, such as the seaboard. There is no obvious way of separating entirely natural sites, seemingly uninfluenced by humans, and those which have some modest artificial structures. Holy places are in both cases a product of society. Some are more or less for common use, while others are highly restricted to segments of that society. A reasonable supposition would be that, due to the power contained in them, some were kept as secret as possible. Most of the author's experience relates to sites in Sweden, but the examples have an international scope. The aspects considered are those of archaeology and the history of religions.

**Introduction**

This text is about holy places as *central* in a cosmological and micro-spatial sense. Their centrality is conditional and only perceived in the context where they are understood. They could be *microcosms* in the sense that they form diminutive copies of a cosmology. It is surmised that they were at least used several times or that people perhaps visited them regularly, rather than going there only once to deposit an offering. To get there would then require passing one or more *borders* – natural, artificial or supernatural – which are pointed out, marked or understood in some way. Religious activity often consisted of passing these borders, going beyond the lines, and temporarily visiting the transcendent or supernatural on the other side. Borders are *linear* in a certain sense, but of course not linear as a straight line, and often occupy some wider space that is *in-between*, *in transition* or in the modal sense *ambiguous*. They may

be vertical as well as horizontal in human cognition. For these we may use the concept *liminal*, from the Latin *limen*, *liminis* ‘threshold’.

The way the concept of centrality is used here is different from that of Fabech (*Fabech*, 2006), for example, who discerns ‘a shift of sacred sites to arranged places’ – in this case mostly referring to wetland sacrificial sites with offerings discernible by archaeology – during the Iron Age of Norse societies. The arranged places are attached closely to the farms of chieftains, who control them. Here, centrality thus means purposely arranged central places of power in society, not primarily the perceived microcosm of the world, although such elements of a large mythical landscape may appear at the arranged centres as well (cf. *Stylegar*, 1998). Ritual offerings henceforth seem to reflect the need in times of crisis to leave deposits of holy artefacts having a particular biography – *temple hoards*. The sites may be liminal and special in some way or other, but they remain quite close to settlement areas, rather than far out in the woods.

The basic approach in this text relates not only to natural places: it also includes some general considerations applying to these and artificially built-up structures alike. Artificial constructions at a pagan holy place outdoors in nature are probably indicated by the common concept *hörg* or *harg* in Nordic references from the Middle Ages. What a *hörg* or *harg* looked like is rather unclear, but the word means ‘rock’, (‘skerry’ in maritime place-names) or ‘stone heap’. These sites seem always to be in the vicinity of the farm.

But the aspect of possible monumentality is deliberately played down in this text, as is any private world of religious awe and feelings for the sacred (*Otto*, 1917), since both aspects appear to be largely subjective. This does not mean, however, that either of them is unimportant.

Generally speaking, constructed monumentality in holy places is something that appears with sedentary agrarian societies, and may include standing stones, barrows, cairns, megaliths etc. Hunting and gathering societies are rather inclined to the kind of natural holy places that we treat here (*Bradley*, 1991). Even they do set up something, often rather inconspicuous, at their sites. But there are indeed always dynamic transitions and amalgamations, both in terms of economic life and spiritual conceptions. It is thus no coincidence that some of the material in the North most relevant to our purpose is offered by the Saamis, although the economy that they are mostly identified with is a kind of nomadic herding. Their cultures have simply kept a closer relationship with

nature than the surrounding societies. Not to appear too generalizing, it must also be said that none of the known cultures of the North can be labelled homogeneous: there are always elements of hunting and fishing even in the most agrarian way of life. No determinism is possible on such grounds.

### What are holy places in nature?

Since we are dealing with a largely *prehistoric* situation, i.e. without reliable historical sources, it is interesting to apply an extensive source on holy places during a period when they were still revered and received offerings. I am aware that we approach such a situation also in the area of the Balts. But such sacred places of nature were described already c. 200 BC by Pausanias in his *Periegesis*, 10 books on his journeys covering all the Greek world, i.e. present-day Greece, the west coast of Asia Minor and parts of Italy. Maybe they are a good measure of universal relevance. It seems that the *spring* was altogether the commonest kind of site, but generally speaking, other features, such as mountains, caves and trees, many of them in groves, were just as important. Some other categories include gorges, rocks, rivers, lakes and waterfalls. At the coast there were promontories, capes and small islands, and in fact offerings could be made to the sea itself (Bradley, 2000, 18ff). The sites may be grouped in a sequence starting in the mountains and ending at the seashore: *rocky places* (caves, rocks and gorges), *trees and groves*, *inland waters* (springs and rivers, waterfalls and lakes), and sites *at the sea or in the sea*. The correspondence to what we believe we have in the North is rather striking. But what is really missing is that which is possibly the most common of all in the North: *wetlands*. This is only natural in an essentially dry climate, such as that of the Mediterranean. Another important category not mentioned is that of *large stones and erratic boulders*, in our world the conspicuous products of the last Ice Age, which did not reach that southern world at all.

Place-names of the Nordic area can be used to pin-point areas of ritual significance in the past, but they hardly ever give the precise location of a holy place in nature. However, a work of Per Vikstrand (Vikstrand, 2004) on Swedish theophorous or generally pagan place-names identifies approximately the same types of pagan natural places as Bradley does in ancient Greece, but concentrating on mountains or hills, groves/copses and fields (Swed. *åker*). Vikstrand cooperates directly with archaeologists in active research.

As to caves, I once made a small but still unique survey on Swedish occurrences, but in the general framework of the place of caves in cultural history

and archaeology, including offerings or deposits, Saami cult and burial, and historical or legendary material, some of the last being migratory (*Westerdahl*, 1982). The most interesting ritual finds in a Swedish cave were presumably those of Pukeberget, Enköping, Uppland, where a Bronze Age spearhead and a horse tooth were found on a ledge in the dark.

As I see it, little can be inferred on the actual location of natural holy places by referring to the important contributions on ritual in social anthropology. Their relevance lies in their emphasis on the social aspects. But they have to be borne in mind all the same (e.g. *Turner*, 1967; *Turner*, 1969; *Turner*, 1974; *Turner*, *Turner*, 1978).

Archaeology certainly provides new material all the time. Some important new archaeological thinking and other material has been brought forward by a fairly recent cross-disciplinary project 'Norse Paganism in Long-Term Perspective', initiated in Lund, Sweden, which will be referred to here and there in the text, and is entitled *Vägar till Midgård* or 'Roads to Midgård', the term denoting the home of humans in cosmology. Most of the results are, however, are only published in the Nordic languages. An international conference has been published in English (*Andrén, Jennbert, Raudvere*, 2006), but with new material, not that which had been published earlier in the Nordic languages, most notably the anthologies, including some papers of special relevance here: *Jennbert, Andrén, Raudvere*, 2002 and *Andrén, Jennbert, Raudvere*, 2004. Only fragments of these are mentioned here, in those cases where they can further elucidate the subjects chosen by me. My own field experience, which is the basis for this text, focuses on aspects of the shores of the Nordic countries and the Saami area of the very north.

### **What is the social meaning of 'holy', 'sacred'?**

The English words 'holy' and 'sacred' (consecrated) can be translated into a number of languages with a social meaning that comes very close to the anthropological concept of taboo. The simplest way to define it is 'forbidden'. The holy is also dangerous, full of *mana*, transcendent power, if we may use this anthropological term loosely. But like the sacred and divine, even *mana* is ambiguous: it can be very bad, but also very good. Since the term 'taboo' can also mean ritually 'clean', its opposite would be ritually dirty, 'unclean'. Remarkably, however, taboo can mean that as well (cf. *Douglas*, 1996; *Douglas*, 2002). In a way, the term therefore seems to be wrought with partly contradictory

meanings (Hultkrantz, 1992; Steiner, 1967). It is difficult to grasp without actually defining its reverse. Maybe it is not even possible without this. In this case we could use the term *noa*, the 'normal' or 'permitted'.

These meanings of taboo are also found in the Arabic (*al*) *haram*, of which the plural (*al*) *ahram* is used in Egypt for the pyramids, i.e. for graves. The permitted is *halal*. In Hebrew, taboo would be *qadosh*, in Greek *haghios*, in Norse *heilagr* (in Modern Scandinavian *hel(l)ig*, the same as German *heilig*). On the last two, a pan-Germanic work has been written by Bætke (Bætke, 1942). Latin *sacer* and *sanctus* derive from the verb *sancio*, infin. *sancire*, 'to consecrate, make inviolable, forbid'.

In Saami we find *bissjie* or *passe*, while *ails* is a Nordic loan-word (from *heilagr*).

The indigenous Finnish equivalent is *pyhä*. In this case we have been provided with two important treatments on the concept, by A. Vilkuna in German (Vilkuna, 1956) and by V. Anttonen in Finnish (cf. Anttonen, 1996; Anttonen 1999; Anttonen, 2000a; Anttonen, 2000b).

All of these concepts are found in place-names, which have naturally been interpreted mostly in terms of their ritual or religious meaning. In a context where we discuss holy places in nature these place-names are of utmost importance, perhaps even obtaining a somewhat exaggerated role. Thus, the significance of other possible aspects may often be underplayed. For this reason I find the fairly recent analysis of V. Anttonen of the location of *Pyhä*- place-names in Finland particularly interesting. While A. Vilkuna emphasized the taboos for women in passing certain such localities on water, especially in connection with a boat, Anttonen provides a social idea of the whole register of topographical denotations. In the preserved place-name flora the *Pyhä*- names designate a lake or a tarn (a small lake), a bay in such waters, a river, a hill or a mountain, an isthmus or a neck of land. The concept appears to refer to a territorial border as well as the confluence of waters, and sometimes also a crossroads on land.

V. Anttonen also mentions the meaning 'demarcated, limited, forbidden, something that should be avoided, something dangerous', and at the same time something that is 'unclean', in accordance with what we said above on taboo and also its relatives in other languages. This concerns several spatial levels and also several temporal aspects. For example, the 7-numbers – 7, 14, 21, 28, etc. – are *pyhä* in the calendar of Finnish tradition. A certain enlargement of denotation is noticeable in the place-name element *hiisi*, which denotes an

area located between the living and the dead. The concept *eräpyhä* means the zone that is situated between two settlements or settlement areas and belongs to one of these, but only for extensive uses (hunting and fishing). The first element *erä* is represented in the well-known concept *erämaa*, the lands of *erä*, which has become a classical byword for the ancient Finnish inland agrarian economy with large forest lands attached. In Finnish tradition, often chosen to delimit these areas was a natural mark that was unusual and at the same time obvious and characteristic, like a large erratic boulder, a hill or mountain. Accordingly, these borders are marked out by *something that appears anomalous* in a relatively homogeneous space. In certain inland areas artificial cairns, *lapp-pinrauniot* ‘Lappish cairns’ may have delimited space (*Taavitsainen*, 2003). Thus the current analysis appears to illuminate the social aspect of *pyhä* (‘holy, sacred’). Our first example relates more to the liminal borders of society, and less to centrality in it. Similar social meanings could presumably be detected in other cultures as well. At least the significance of the Finnish spatial denotation would not appear strange in the subarctic area of Europe (cf. also *Brereton*, 1987 on other non-religious aspects of holy places). There are similarities apparent in the Saami areas of today, even though they differ in economic terms: some similar features are still to be found in the forested zones, and they also occur in the mountainous regions of the North.

The social significance of holy sites as ‘forbidden’ is important in this text. It means that not only shrines, or what is conventionally called holy, will be referred to in this text, but also those places which are forbidden in some other sense and, like shrines, are conceptually set apart from social life in general.

Furthermore, the study of centrality and liminality should never be limited to separate scrutiny of each concept. Rather, they should also be examined as *two components in the same spatial/mental structure* (*Harrison*, 1998, 47).

### **Linearity**

By linearity is meant a border expressed as a line, a delimitation. We will also see the implications of the Nordic word *heilagr* (‘holy, sacred’) used in place-names for delimiting areas as extraterritorial space, trading areas, areas under special jurisdiction etc. It could denote market sites, possibly under the king’s direct protection, as well as the area where particular laws were valid. In the high medieval North the law of trading places was known in Norse as *bjarkeyjarrétt*, Modern Swedish *bjärköarätt*. The complex of the derived names

of the islands *Helgö* and *Björkö* and their connection with this or other (levy) laws will be pursued no further here (*Calissendorff*, 1965; cf. *Westerdahl*, 2003).

Rituals of trade or seafaring were conspicuous in Classical Antiquity. It may be that their holy sites are easier to discern there than those in the North at the transition to medieval times, where little existed in the way of constructions marking them. The temples found in the Mediterranean would often serve this purpose. Where different peoples and cultures met to trade with each other they presumably invoked their respective gods and divinities to guarantee market peace. An obvious reference must be made to the Etruscan harbour *Pyrgi*, the port town of the city-state *Caere/Cerveteri*. In 1964 two gold plaquettes were excavated between the foundations of two large stone temples where the principal goddesses of two different societies were invoked, the Etruscan *Uni* (Latin *Juno*) and the Phoenician *Astarte* (*Finley*, 1977). Similar procedures and religious acts appear to have been universal in the Mediterranean, in particular among groups with different languages:

...between unequal or colonial societies, the only security offered lies in the recognized sovereignty of a god in his temple or sacred precinct. A supernatural or divine presence automatically converted any act of fraud or violence into sacrilege... The Greeks called this guarantee asyle. The first condition of any market or trading colony set up on a frontier or in a distant land was to ensure that its visitors were not molested or robbed. And, as a general rule, that security was offered by a god, under whose auspices and protection deals were verified. The name of the god was invoked in oaths sanctioning contracts (*Aubet*, 1993, 234ff).

It is tempting to see the development of similar sites as a universal phenomenon in human cognition. The special protection accorded markets as places for trade and exchange on diverse levels is well attested in ethnographic sources on preliterate, preindustrial societies (*Numelin*, undated, 56ff; *Numelin*, 1939, 15ff). Through their protection by a local chieftain or king, sites are considered as neutralized, delimited space. Another stage would be their more or less formal recognition as 'holy' or 'taboo' – where the terms imply tangible, forbidden acts. A concomitant feature was logically a divine or transcendent guarantee. Breaking the code meant sacrilege as well. Those who committed offences against the order thus not only had to count with social sanction, but could also expect a divine punishment. The borders of the validity of neutral space were delimited carefully. Most often it was surrounded with an enclosure.





Fig. 1. The runic inscription of a *Vi* in Oklunda, Östra Husby, Östergötland, Sweden (photo: Ch. Westerdahl).

There is another important Northern term for holy or sacred that has not yet been mentioned. This is *vé*, present in the place-names *vi* or *vä*, which apparently carries a more directed or specific meaning of an area that has been *consecrated*, i.e. made holy by an intentional act.

The foremost illustration of a former prehistoric *vi* is found in the environment of a runic inscription on a rock at Oklunda, a farm in the parish of Östra Husby in Östergötland, east Sweden (Fig. 1). The inscription says: *Gunnarr faði*



*runaR þessaR. En sa flok sakR. Sótti vi þetta... “(Gunnar carved (made) these runes. And he fled guilty (of a crime). Sought (protection) in this vi...”*

The runic carving at Oklunda displays an ancient type of runes, the *kortkvist* type, similar to that on the stone of Rök in the same province. Most scholars have dated the carving to the first half of the 9th century. The farm name *Ok-lunda* implies precisely this *vi*. Another settlement in the neighbourhood is called *Lundby* (Nordén, 1931; Salberger, 1980; Strid, 1993, 100). Both evidently denote *lund*, a (sacred) grove.

Even if the remainder of the text is still the subject of discussion, it implies some kind of settlement. It is in fact impossible not to be reminded of another Gunnar, called Helming, who had been falsely accused of murder in Norway and fled to East Sweden, where he travelled with a priestess in procession to holy sites, personifying the god Freyr. According to this story, found in the Saga of Olaf Tryggvasson in *Flateyjarbok*, this is supposed to have happened c. 990 AD.

This means that the right of a *sanctuarium*, asylum or sanctuary, was also recognized in pagan times in the North. The medieval churches were in principle all *sanctuaria*. But in practice this worked only with some of the most important ones. In Gotland only three of about 100 medieval churches were official asylum churches according to the Guta Law of the late 13th century, one in each third of the island: Atlingbo, Fardhem and Tingstäde (the name of the last of these indicating the site of a *thing*, a local assize, cf. Nilsson, 1991).

In the Mediterranean area neutrality and peace regulations are characteristics of crossroads, harbours/havens and other centres or nodes of mobile life in Classical Antiquity. These places were divinely sanctioned ('the religion of economic neutrality', Horden & Purcell, 2000, 452ff). Their borders were delimited by cairns or statues identified as gods, Latin *terminus*, plural *termini*, Greek *hermos*, plural *hermoi*. The principal roads were lined with *hermolphoi*, votive cairns (cf. Rudebeck, 2002 on the road as a ritual arena). We know the same feature as *offerkast*, or just *kast* in Scandinavia, which means heaps either of stones or of twigs and branches. As to Northern Europe, there is, however, little mention of such aspects in medieval times (cf. Ellmers, 1972). But the denotation of imperial protection for merchants in the form of a cross on the ship's mast (e.g. found on coins) is inferred by H. Horstmann (Horstmann, 1971).

But the sacred appears in innumerable forms. Among the Saami the border stones or natural border markers (stones, rocks) of family lands were *saivo(k)*, i.e. *holy*, despite of the fact that these border markers could not only be inherited,

they could also be sold (*Bergsland*, 1985). I have guessed that the so-called 'lying hens' (*liggande hönor*), larger stones on three or more stones, mark borders of *lappskatteland*, Saami land use and taxation areas, and so could take on a more or less sacred aspect (cf. *Westerdahl*, 1986, 83ff; *Westerdahl*, 2008, 82ff; *Johansson*, 1999). One of the implied meanings of *saivo* would appear to be 'liminal' (*Bäckman*, 1975). Some lakes were *saivo(k)*, and these were all considered bottomless and as gateways to the underworld. Apart from this the words *basse*, *bissjie* or *ailles* were, as mentioned above, used in Saami languages for sacred natural places.

As a general reflection one might say that the concept 'holy' in its diverse manifestations expresses the need for humans to make order in their existential dimensions and to classify its components. Another suitable word for it would be 'taxonomy', classification in words. Making up borders, both cognitive/denotational and tangible ones, is a basic factor in this process.

### Centrality as a ring

Holy places can be found almost everywhere in everyday life (*Eliade*, 1957, introduction). The *axis mundi*, the axis of the world, runs through them. The hearth was normally the mark of the sanctity of the social unit, the *familia*. In Classical Antiquity, especially Ancient Rome and Greece – and even in Brahmin India – everything social was centred on the domestic hearth. The more distant from it, the less holy. Important transition lines to greater or lesser holiness were the threshold (Latin *limen*, gen. *liminis*; thus 'liminal') of the house. This is why a newly-wed bride still has to be carried across the threshold to her new, patrilocal residence. She is entering sacred space and must not touch, i.e. violate, the space in between and the borders with the termini of the family lands. This was duplicated in macroscale by the Roman Republic, which also had its communal hearth (*Fustel de Coulanges*, 1864). But we cannot discuss spatial centres without taking into account the border zone (*Harrison*, 1998, 47).

The border of the city, which was sacred like the termini of the family lands, was called *pomerium*. In Rome the centrality of the state was marked by *lapis niger*, the black stone below the Palatine hill. There was also the pit called *mundus* ('the earth', 'the world'). From this centre the *urbs Romae* was theoretically thought of as a huge square with four gates and four roads meeting at the centre. This was the main model of Roman gromatics, land measuring, applied in the founding of new cities in conquered territory, as well as in military camps. In a similar way, the Navel of the World, *omphalos*, in Delphi of Greece

described absolute centrality (Müller, 1961). A similar scheme was applied in India, with the symbol of the world mountain, *Meru*, in the middle. In the medieval cities of Europe, and in fact in most villages in the countryside, centrality was marked by a stone, a statue (often called Roland, the character of the medieval epic or song of Roland), a market cross or similar monument (Müller, 1961). It seems to be a universal idea that this centre had a particular power and was sanctified, both in the social and in the religious sense.

In Germanic cosmology the world tree was placed in the middle of the world and carried its different levels. It was normally called *Yggdrasill* ('The Horse of Odinn'), but had other names as well. In the *Edda* it is described as having three roots piercing into the underworld. It seems to have been recreated as part of a microcosm at cemeteries of the Iron Age in the whole of the North, particularly in Sweden and Norway. In prominent positions in these cemeteries a triangular curbstone structure was built, often with inward-curving sides, and with a fill of smaller stones. There are one or just a few at these cemeteries, and they seldom contain burials, but have possible indications of a formerly existing marker, for example, a post-hole where a wooden pole may have stood (Andrén, 2004).

As to the very North, the everyday hearth of the Saami hut expressed the same notion of social and sacred centrality. Offerings of drink and food were made at it and into it. Behind it was the *possjo*, the holy place. It was thought that in this space the shaman, *noaite*, started his journey to the realm of the spirits.

Rising up to the sky through the smoke hole of every hut (*goatte*, *gamme*) was the World Tree or the World Pillar, *mailman stytty*. Thus the macrocosm of the world was represented by the microcosm of the Saami hut. But it could be extended to the constituent parts of the hut as well. In many cases the interior of the Arctic huts of the circumpolar North can be described as a mid-passage, with the hearth in the middle (cf. *Westerdahl*, 2002). This was a metaphoric passageway in the world, sometimes thought of as a river, the clan-river, in connection with the shaman. The circumpolar traditions are strikingly similar to records of the field of action of the shamans among the Evenks at the River Yenisei in Siberia (*Anisimov*, 1968a; *Anisimov*, 1968b) (Fig. 2).

A striking variety of places are called holy, sacred, sanctified or consecrated, where the social meaning is most apparent. It is just a narrow, delicate jump to religious awe of them.



Fig. 2. Domestic cosmology: an ancient Saami hearth marked on the ground (photo: Ch. Westerdahl).

The place-name *Helgestad* in Västergötland, Sweden denotes a small hill in a predominantly agrarian countryside. It is not very conspicuous in any way. The name could mean ‘holy place’ as well as ‘holy city’. Looking at the map, we see that the borders of no less than four parishes converge here. Moreover, these are the borders between the four quarters of the administrative county (*härads*) of Vartofta. There may be prehistoric cemeteries in this area, but this is not quite clear so far. In any case, the hill is known as a (primarily open air) market site, a *thing* and execution site. Evidently there has also been a church

or a chapel here. Interestingly, the association with a city may have been influenced by the lintel *tympanon* of the nearby Romanesque church of Valstad, which seems to depict the holy city of Jerusalem (cf. Müller, 1961 on the celestial Jerusalem). I do not believe that this combination of functions is unusual.

A *thing* (assembly) site is normally connected with the form of a ring, as attested by the ancient expressions in some Swedish medieval provincial laws, *a thing oc a ring* (the Västmanna Law, and possibly its derivate, the non-extant Dala Law, cf. Schlyter, 1841). In the pre-Christian setting the part where the judges were sitting was delimited by holy bands, *vēbond*. The fence and the poles that seem to have surrounded the holy *vi* may be mentioned in the runic text of the Forsa iron ring, probably dating from the ninth century (Ruthström, 1990). A part of it is in this case called *staf* ('pole'). Metaphorically and factually the ring form seems to be implied in many social and sacral contexts. There is the ring of oaths. The ring oath was called *baugeið*, and the central compound where they were made was the *stallahring(r)*. Danish Vikings swore an oath in 876 AD to King Alfred of Wessex, *on þæm hālgan béage* ('on the sacred ring') (cf. Garmonsway, 1972; cf. the mysterious expression in the Guta Saga: *alt ir baugum bundit* ('all is bound in rings'), Peel, 1999). The Forsa iron ring of Hälsingland, indicated by its runic inscription as dating from the 9th century AD, may have been such a ring of oaths (Liestøl, 1979; Brink, 1997).

The so-called 'hill-forts with a ring-shaped enclosure' around a cairn may duplicate the miniature rings or their meaning (Olausson, 1995; cf. Andrén, 2006 on centrality marked in the Öland fort of Ismantorp), and the same goes for round burial cairns, and possibly also for a ring of 7–9 standing stones, popularly known as *domarring/ar* ('ring(s) of judges'), normally also used as burial sites. Perhaps this is the meaning of the enigmatic *Stavgard* place-names in Gotland (but see Mähl, 1990; and cf. 'the doors to other worlds' as a border metaphor for the picture stones in cemeteries: Andrén, 1993). The *thing* site is thus saturated with sacred aspects and is a place out in nature.

A similar attitude appears to have existed among people in historical times in relation to places of execution, and places taboo for the distasteful activities carried out there, such as the place where horses were killed and skinned. The aversion to killing horses is of old standing in the agrarian culture of Scandinavia (Egardt, 1962). This was performed by sociocultural outsiders in society, such as hangmen and some Saamis (in the North), of which the latter lacked the aversion anyway. In a certain sense this abhorrence could be likened to

the denotation of ‘socially and ritually dirty’ that we find with the common words for taboo (sacred), etc. (cf. *Douglas*, 1966, 2002). Such places were often intentionally placed at the borders of parishes and other regional units, and often in forested, out-of-the-way areas.

In pagan times it appears that a mythological landscape was created around the farm of an important chieftain. If he was supposed to descend from a god, then the place-names known from the myths of this god (and others) were affixed to these localities. This may even imply a more elaborate cosmology. One of these centres is Tune in Østfold, east Norway (*Stylegar*, 1998). The theophorous pagan place-names, often those of present-day parishes or churches, of the administrative county of Vadsbo in Västergötland are particularly striking (*Brink*, 1999, 427). It is hard to ignore the social meaning of such points in space, marked as holy. But in no way are they to be understood as natural holy places in our sense.

It is possible that roads and paths should – at least sometimes – be considered as common or extraterritorial space, and thereby acquire some kind of sanctified status. They are certainly often ritual arenas (*Rudebeck*, 2002). Their border function may belong to the establishment of private proprietary rights only during the last part of the Iron Age or the Viking Age, but pagan communal cemeteries are often dotted along the courses of roads.

### Churches and farms in the Middle Ages

Churches are not natural holy places. But their social function as holy is obvious. Their principal significance here lies rather in the documentation in legal texts of the *graded sanctity* of the building and the churchyard in the ecclesiastical peace (Swed. *kyrkofrid*) regulations. The large area around a principal pagan holy site, such as that of *Gudme*, formerly *Goðheimr* (‘Home of the Gods’), on Funen in Denmark, may have had similar graded zones around its centre (cf. *Thrane*, 1998). The same goes for domestic peace (Swed. *hemfrid*) on the farm and the farmland. It should be remembered that the church and the churchyard present a picture of society in very plain language, starting with the consecrated ground of the church building. The chieftains and the wealthy farmer aristocracy were buried inside the church or quite close to the exterior, the ordinary peasants were buried in accordance with social and geographical groupings, followed by the liberated former slaves (thralls), and finally the slaves at the periphery. Criminals of any socially recognized kind (including

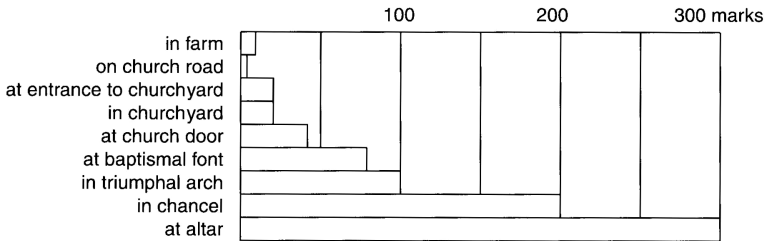


Fig. 3. The gradation of fines for crimes committed in or at the church, according to the Hälsinge provincial law, c. 1300 AD (after *Andrén*, 1999).

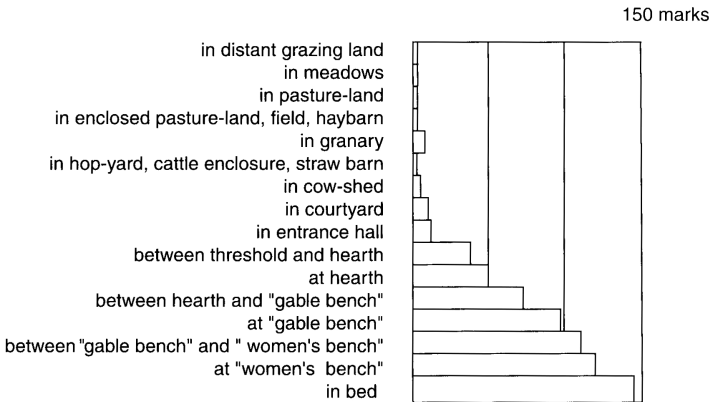


Fig. 4. The gradation of fines in domestic space, in or at the homes, also according to the Hälsinge provincial law, c. 1300 AD (after *Andrén*, 1999).

suicides) were even placed (if at all) outside of the churchyard. Some people were evidently holier than others (Fig. 3).

The details of extra fines for assault if it is connected with a visit to the church (Fig. 3) are found in the provincial code of Hälsingland, c. 1320 AD: they grow steadily, starting with the fine for assault committed on the farm, 10 marks, to assault at the high altar, with a fine of 300 marks. As can be seen in Fig. 3, there is a cognitive aggravation in the crimes from the farm, to the



wayside of the road to the church, to the entrance of the churchyard, in the churchyard, at the church door, at the baptismal font inside the chancel arch (100 marks), in the chancel where there is a conspicuous increase to 200 marks, and at the most sacred place, the altar, where the maximum sum is attained – 300 marks.

The rules for breaches of the domestic peace (*hemfrid*) in the same provincial code are just as detailed (Fig. 4). Extra fines (*bot* or *böter*) are stipulated for the place where an assault was committed. These were paid mostly in money, namely in marks. It is to be noted, however, that assaults inside the house, where the value of the fine rises abruptly, are to be paid in rings (*bogar* or *baugar*). This seems to indicate the antiquity of the rules for this part. As can be seen in Fig. 4, the variation in fines starts from the distant grazing lands, the meadows, proceeding to the pasture-land or enclosed pasture-land fields with the haysheds, the granary, the hopyard, the cattle enclosure or straw barn, then via the cowshed to the courtyard and into the entrance hall of the house without significant rise. But at the space between the threshold and the hearth there is an abrupt rise, continuing to the area at the hearth, between the hearth and the gable bench, at the gable bench, between the gable bench and the women's bench, at the women's bench and finally in bed, with 150 marks (Fig. 4).

There is indeed no great difference to the victim between being murdered in one's own bed or at the high altar of the church, but the perpetrator would certainly be able to feel a difference.

The murder of the archbishop Thomas of Canterbury in 1170 AD at one of the side altars of the cathedral brought enormous attention in the Catholic world. The fact that it had taken place at the central location, the holiest of holies, within the holy site itself, contributed significantly to the indignation and outrage. Perhaps the indignation was due to a unique combination of circumstances. A priest, turbulent for sure ('turbulent' being the very word supposedly used by King Henry, cf. *Barlow*, 1986), but non-violent, a prominent figure in the fight for ecclesiastical freedom from worldly authority, was murdered by armed knights acting (or thinking that they were) in the name of the king. This was immediately followed by the excommunication of both, including an interdict against the lands of the king, and Thomas was canonized as a saint of the first degree. But in England class and identity feeling ran high as well: Thomas was of indigenous Anglo-Saxon descent, while the aristocracy were French-speaking Normans. The traces of this dramatic event were

reflected in Sweden, for example, by numerous popular migratory stories of the murder of priests at the altar, possibly fed by depictions, especially on baptismal fonts (Hellman, 1974; Palménfelt, 1975; Palménfelt, 1985).

The only reason why churches, farms and other such inhabited spaces are considered here is that they may reveal aspects which are common to them and genuine natural holy places. I think that graded space is one of these aspects.

### The cosmological liminality of the shore

The analysis of this *cosmology* is partly applied ethnoarchaeology. Its main meaning in this context is that of the pure linearity of a border or liminal zone. It is interesting that in a fundamentally maritime civilization such as the Greek the Latin word *limen*, *liminis* ('threshold') corresponds to ὁ λιμήν ('harbour') or ἡ λιμνὴ ('lake, mere or marsh'). I suggest that the last word encompasses the original meaning. Thus, the water table seems to have determined the significance. Possibly this is an indication of *hydroliminality* (see below). As an analogy to prehistoric beliefs I have used the so-called 'superstition' of fishermen and sailors. In my view this 'superstition' is more than anything else a coherent system of beliefs. I met it first at Lake Vänern in the 1960s, when I was very young (and naïve) and during my inventories of oral tradition along the Norrland coast of Sweden in 1975–1982 (Westerdahl, 1989). But the discovery of structure and its concomitant analysis belongs to a much later stage. According to my belief, the hunting, fishing and gathering life in maritime environments was originally a primary prerequisite for it (Westerdahl, 2005; Westerdahl, 2007).

There appears to be a fundamental opposition between sea and land. This dichotomy is expressed by taboos and a great wealth of ritual rules and initiation ceremonies. At sea another terminology and other place-names had to be used than on land (Solheim, 1940; Hovda, 1941a; Hovda, 1941b). These others are *noa* words and names, and they amount in fact to a particular 'sea language'. All the senses are implied: there are not only taboos on naming, but also on seeing, hearing and feeling, perhaps even smelling or tasting (!). In seeing, colours were implied. Black is the colour of the land and could not be used on a boat, white being that of the sea, and gray, the colour thought to be in between, was *noa*, but still in a way transcendent – liminal, if you like. And of course, the phenomena which the senses are forbidden to absorb or name are forbidden onboard. The boat thus appears as a liminal, dangerous space. On the other hand, the passage down from the dwelling to the boat-house

and the boat is transitory, in-between, ambiguous. Anything could happen there, and if this was thought unfavourable by traditional criteria, then the fisherman might as well go home for that day.

But it is important to note that some, or most, of the forbidden things may be used for really strong magic. The things of the land may be used intentionally, but only by way of some ritual, initiation or passage rites for novices in fishing, or baptism at sea for young sailors. Passage rites were of course the theme of the classical work by A. van Gennep (*van Gennep*, 1960). Although it comes close to the idea of a kind of structuralism, this analysis was made without any preconception. The analysis of the sea-land relationship is based on independent observations.

Thus the taboo was supposed to be broken but made good. The most prominent symbols of land, its very incarnations, were the most tabooed of all. These entities I have called *liminal agents*, in the sense that they belong to one of these two natural elements. But they are mobile. They could be transferred to the other element with great advantage, either metaphorically, by way of place-names, or concretely, for example by *pars pro toto*, a part of them (a horn, horse-hair, etc.). They are strong at sea. This goes for *all females*. The Mermaid is the Mistress of the Sea. They include *land animals*, especially the horse, but also other domesticates, like the ox and the boar, and wild animals, like the bear and the wolf.

The liminal space is thus the boat *and* the shore. The passage of the liminal agents will take place across it. Thereby, they acquire this new power.

I have suggested that this idea worked even in prehistory. It appears to me to be the reasonable ultimate explanation for the location of profoundly ritual monuments at the shores: *rock carvings* during the Stone and Bronze Ages, *burial cairns* during the Bronze and Iron Ages. These are all major phenomena in Nordic prehistory. The same goes for *stone mazes* during medieval and early modern times. Among the dominant figurative motives of rock carvings from the Stone Age and Bronze Age we find the great land animals, elks and horses, and sea-related phenomena, such as ships and also the great sea mammals, namely dolphins, other whales and, much more in later times – seals. The elk heads on the ship carvings are an important sign. The fundamental function of these would be the reinforcement of magic. Land could have been thought of as working strong magic at sea, the sea as working strong magic on land. When these figures metaphorically pass the border, if only by naming or depiction

on rocks at the liminal zone of the shore, they were thus transformed into *liminal agents*. I suppose that they were considered extremely dangerous as such *a priori*, but, as in recent times, they could be rendered helpful and advantageous by way of an intentional act, a ritual.

It appears to me that after the transition from hunting and fishing societies to agrarian societies, the magic was reserved mainly for maritime culture. Thus, the ritual significance of the sea animals on land was made less obvious, but I believe it still worked, at times subconsciously. Ships continued to be liminal agents, however, as testified by ship settings and boats for burial. Since the ship may already have been thought of as liminal space, this space could be re-created by erecting stones or poles in the form of a vessel or by dragging an actual boat to land. This means that the resulting new site on land was sanctified.

The *cosmology* in question was not immobile or unchanging. But the duality of the basic categories remained. Gender was made an ambiguous criterion of either element: it could be female as well as male. The former elk or stag was replaced by the horse, not only on the stems of ships. I do not think that necessarily only maritime cultures were aware of these transcendent aspects of the dualism of land and sea. On the contrary, it appears to have been a vibrant factor in replacing several other structural categories appearing as dual opposites in cognition, such as life and death. The realm of death is often imagined in the sea in the west, for example, the *Tír na nÓg* of Gaelic myths. Land would be life in this case. But the same mechanism works, as we can see, in gender and in colours, black and white. This may in fact involve a whole range of structural opposites. I have suggested that the opposition between any water and the land (rock, stone) has influenced the ritual significance of wetlands, not only in prehistoric offerings and sacrifices, and this I have accordingly called *hydroliminality*.

This would make the shore, and the coast in general, as a liminal space, and in particular its most prominent and dangerous manifestations, one of the natural zones where to expect sanctity, holiness. However, even if it could be called linear in a certain sense, that of a border line, it appears rather as a very dynamic sphere. There is no way of knowing why this *line* or *zone* was punctuated at a particular site by burials or other manifestations of holiness. This goes for the shore of the sea as well as that of a lake. But the borders of the implied area are illustrated by oral tradition, often in unexpected kinds of source material. A Faroese woman who had recently borne a child was in a

transitional, liminal stage. In the late 19th century, before being received into the bosom of the church, she was forbidden to leave her home, *except when she could see either the sea or the church*. The burial cairns of the Finnish and Scandinavian archipelagoes were themselves certainly supposed to look inward or outward from land, but still always be visible in some way from the sea. This is often overlooked at coasts that have now been elevated and left far inland by the rise of the land (Westerdahl, 2005; Westerdahl, 2007).

### **The transition of borders**

The mere feeling of awe at a passage across a border to the holy could be enough. It was an important step to take. But it is not possible to look into the cognition of individual people of the past, let alone those of the present. On the other hand, there are 'more (medieval) stories about people who experience something curious in connection with entering a church or a town than in connection with standing at the altar or in the square' (Harrison, 1998, 46 (translation by the author)). It is important to note generally that it is 'above all at the borders of the past that we meet superstition, taboos and ideas of invisible walls with enraged saints' (Harrison, 1998, 47 (translation by the author)). On the other hand, it seems to be a reasonable supposition that some of the borders to be passed may be marked by human hands, not least as a warning. In the case of the church and the farm mentioned above, the borders are marked by fences, buildings or parts of buildings.

However, in this case I am referring particularly to figures or pictures out in nature, to rock paintings and carvings, and not only those of prehistory. A very interesting site in Saami lands is the recently discovered rock carving of Padjelanta, Saami *Badjelánnda*, in Norrbotten, Sweden, probably of Viking Age or medieval date (an excellent discussion in Mulk, Bayliss-Smith, 2006). This also includes incised crosses and other marks on boulders, which, of course, are only those that have survived. In the past most of these markings could have been made in less durable materials, for example, on trees (and some do exist today). Remains of any ritual, such as burial cairns, barrows, stone rings etc., could serve the same purpose. Insofar as the holy or the holy of holies is a very small place, any kind of fencing at the border or around the area may work like a marker. I believe very strongly that this aspect has to be emphasized in the search for natural holy places. *Thus, a holy place itself may not be marked in any way, only its borders*. Maybe this is one of several characteristics

of such sites. The site itself was supposed to be secret, either to most people or to certain groups in society. It was a place of power not to be misused by irrelevant people. The sacred sites may thus even be an illustration of conflicts, repression, quiet resistance and anti-structure within society (for the concept *anti-structure* cf. Turner, 1969).

### Summary

Thus, place-names are excellent sources on natural holy places of the past. At least they are guides to the location, but can never be used indiscriminately. There are many problems of denotation and language (e.g. Strid, 1993). Besides, the very spot itself was not supposed to be known in detail, only the *area* is pointed out by names.

The social and the sacred are parallel meanings for holy places in nature. They cannot be separated. This view could also be formulated as saying that natural holy places express sanctity in both aspects. Neither can natural and other, more artificial sites easily be separated. They are both *taboo*, protected. They may serve as borders in themselves, but the borders between the profane and sacred seem to spread in more or less *concentric* rings around the centre. In fact the ring could be used as a metaphor and a symbol for them. The holiness of these spheres is often graded. Nature itself provides the simplest means of making borders to secluded space. Islands, or rather islets, are ideal in this sense. There is a certainly a cosmological quality in the meeting of land and sea on all sides. Another perfect border is provided by the coastline. But here the holy spots have to punctuate space at certain points along the line. If we had no burials or rock carvings, then these spots would be *a priori* unidentifiable. But we will never understand why precisely these spots were chosen. This is a secret, and was presumably a secret even in the past.

Another observation, which may or may not be premature, is that the holy place itself may not be marked by a place-name or a sign, for example, a rock or tree carving or painting. It might be that these marks sometimes *only point to the approach to a holy place*. Any spatial centre must be discussed as just one component in a structure, the border zone being of utmost cognitive significance. Marking out the border to the surrounding area of the holy of holies, the centre of the denotation is a suitable alternative, comparable to the wider denotation of place-names.

The very point of holiness (stone, tree etc.) could be considered as in-between, a transitory place, ambiguous and a border between temporal space and the transcendent. It is reasonable, due to its specific function and its social context, that it was often kept as secret and inconspicuous as possible.

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