Ceremonial Buildings and Sanctuaries

Both written and archaeological sources, as well as place-names, provide information about ceremonial buildings and sanctuaries in the three investigation areas, i.e., the Mälaren Valley, Trøndelag and Iceland. In this chapter these sources will be critically evaluated and discussed. The presentation is regional, and it will be noted whether different types of ceremonial buildings seem to have existed in each region, such as banqueting halls and more specific cultic houses. Some general contexts of these buildings will be noted, and some comparisons between the three regions will also be made. Great ceremonial buildings can be detected in all the investigation areas, but their monumentalization is much more emphasized in Sveitjød and Trøndelag. These features harmonize well with the ruler strategies discussed in the last chapter (ch. 3).

Before we go into the question of evidence, sources, and appearance, I will survey the research history of pre-Christian ceremonial buildings and sanctuaries, as well as the problems of terminology.

4.1 The State of Research

4.1.1 The Existence of pre-Christian “Cultic Buildings”

The question whether the ancient Scandinavians had specific cultic buildings or not has occupied scholars for more than 150 years. As early as 1835, Jacob Grimm argued, with support from classical sources, that pre-Christian cultic actions among the Germanic people were mostly performed outdoors, at sacred groves.\(^1\) Eventually, other scholars stated that “temples” were also visible in the Old Norse sources and place-names referring to pre-Christian Scandinavia.\(^2\)

According to these sources, the ancient Scandinavians had buildings called *hof*, *hǫrgr*, *godahús* and *blóthús*. Images and sacred objects were kept in these houses, and it was also there that the Scandinavians made sacrifices to their gods and celebrated their religious feasts. Following an excavation at Hofstadir, Mývatnssveit, in northern Iceland in 1908, it was confirmed that the descriptions of the “temples” in the Sagas of Icelanders were reliable, and could be

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\(^1\) J. Grimm 1835.

\(^2\) E.g., Keyser 1847; Thümmel 1909.
supported with archaeological evidence.\textsuperscript{3} For almost sixty years there was close consensus among scholars that the ancient Scandinavians had “temples” for their cultic activities.\textsuperscript{4}

However, Olaf Olsen’s source-critical investigation, \textit{Hørg, hov og kirke} (1966), constituted a radical reconsideration. Olsen argued that the descriptions of the “temples” (\textit{hof} sg.) in the Old Norse traditions could not be supported by the archaeological evidence discovered at so-called \textit{hof}-lands (\textit{hovtomter}) in Iceland. He believed that the written descriptions were projections of the medieval authors’ and saga scribes’ experiences of Christian churches. Olsen proposed that the “temples” excavated in Iceland, such as the one at \textit{Hofstaðir}, were in fact the dwelling-houses or halls of the chieftains, and as such multifunctional: ceremonial feasts would probably have taken place there, but also many non-religious activities. In other parts of Scandinavia too, cultic feasts were celebrated in the multifunctional halls situated on the magnates’ farms. According to Olsen, we have no reliable evidence of specific pre-Christian “temples” in ancient Scandinavia, except in (Old) Uppsala. The pre-Christian cultic activities were in general performed outdoors, at “natural sanctuaries” (\textit{naturhelligdomme}), such as trees, wells, stones and cairns. Occasionally a type of simple building was erected at such sites, called \textit{ON hǫrgr}. Olsen argued that these structures may have been some kind of precursors to the earliest Norwegian stave-churches. He also concluded his thesis with the statement that we have no evidence for cultic place continuity in ancient Scandinavia, i.e., that the earliest churches were situated at pre-Christian cultic sites: “vi…må hævde, at teorien om, at de ældste kirker fortrinsvis er pleceret på hedenske kultsteder, ikke hviler på et forsvarligt grundlag.”\textsuperscript{5} According to him, (Old) Uppsala cathedral was the only certain example in Scandinavia where we have such cultic place continuity.\textsuperscript{6}

Olsen’s conclusions have been contradicted by several scholars. It has been argued, for instance that Olsen generalized too much when he stated that cultic place continuity did not exist in ancient Scandinavia.\textsuperscript{7} His results regarding this specific issue were actually only based on materials from Denmark, i.e., sources which need not be valid for other areas in Scandinavia. Both in the

\begin{itemize}
\item Daniel Bruun & Finnur Jónsson 1909.
\item E.g., M. Olsen 1926; Ohlmarks 1936; Gehl 1941; de Vries 1956–57.
\item O. Olsen 1966, 275.
\item O. Olsen 1966, 236ff. Sune Lindqvist’s theory that the post-holes under the present church in Old Uppsala reflect Adam of Bremen’s “temple” is today considered obsolete. See Nordahl 1996.
\item See e.g., Sandnes 1987, 145.
\end{itemize}