Social anthropologists and historians of religions have emphasized that rites often support an established social order. Important changes in society are frequently marked by rituals, especially aspects which concern political power. The rituals help to maintain balance between individuals, and they accentuate social values and develop feelings of social dependence. Some of them also emphasize social boundaries and indicate that some individuals are more important than others.1 Even if such theories have been criticized for their tendency to be ahistorical,2 some of the ideas behind them may find fruitful application in the present study of ancient Scandinavian ceremonial buildings and sanctuaries. Sources indicate that rituals sanctioned a particular social structure and that the ceremonies legitimated the social position of the rulers.

Many studies during the last two decades have been occupied with the rituals that took place in the Germanic and Scandinavian Iron Age halls and cultic houses.3 I will mainly focus on those rituals visible in the evidence from Svetjud, Trøndelag and Iceland, which were connected to rulers and their strategies for gaining legitimacy. My hypothesis is that the rulers in all three investigation areas played a central ritual role during the sacrificial feasts and ceremonial banquets in the halls and cultic houses. Some of these rituals were related to gift-giving systems, where the religious-political authorities had the opportunity to manifest their wealth and generosity. All these rituals may have been crucial for the elite when constructing power and authority.

9.1 Hákonar saga góða and the Ceremonial Feasts at Lade and Mære

One of the most extensive descriptions of pre-Christian cultic feasts in Scandinavia appears in Snorri Sturluson’s Hákonar saga góða 13–18 (see the text in ch. 4 above). According to this text, such feasts were celebrated at hof sanctuaries in Viking Age Trøndelag. Earl Sigurðr was a great sacrificer. He was responsible for the sacrificial feasts (blótveizlur) in Lade as a deputy for

King Håkon the Good and his father King Haraldr. Snorri depicts in general terms the interior of a hof, the objects and actions there, for instance, the ritual slaughter of animals and the treatment of the sacrificial blood. He also tells us that the beaker (full) was to be carried around the fire, and that the chieftain who gave the feast was to bless the beaker (signa fullit) as well as all the sacrificial food (ok allan blótmatinn). When the toasts were drunk to the gods, ritual formulae were proclaimed, such as til árs ok fríðar.

This description of ceremonial feasts in Hákonar saga góða has been much debated (see ch. 4 above). The sharp criticism of Snorri’s text has partly been justified, but in some senses it failed. Recently scholars have modified it and produced, in my opinion, a sounder view of Snorri’s account, where both possibilities and problems of source criticism are noted (see ch 4 above). In my opinion, several elements in Snorri’s text are supported by other reliable sources and may thus be genuine. In what follows I will discuss some details in this description and try to estimate what parts of it may build on more ancient traditions. I will first present those elements in Snorri’s description which I consider inauthentic as regards pre-Christian rituals. Than I will point out aspects I believe to be authentic. My purpose here is to illuminate these notions with sources from the investigation areas. These comparisons are intended to show that these elements existed in all these areas.

9.1.1 The Sacrificial Terminology

There are several elements in Snorri’s description of the pre-Christian ceremonial feasts which seem to be obscure and inauthentic. He writes, for instance, thus:

At this feast all were to take part in the drinking of ale. Also all kinds of livestock were killed in connection with it, horses also; and all the blood from them was called “hlaut”, and “hlætbuli”, the vessel holding that blood; and “hlautteinar”, the sacrificial twigs.

In his book Das Opferfest von Lade, Klaus Düwel analysed the semantic development of the words hlaut, hlautteinar and hlautbolli used in Snorri’s text. Düwel argued that in most cases Snorri either misunderstood these concepts or mixed them up with Christian ideas with no basis in pre-Christian culture.4

Düwel is no doubt right in his criticism. It is very doubtful that the term hlaut designated ‘sacrificial blood’ in pre-Christian language and that hlautteinn and hlautbolli meant ‘sacrificial twig’ and ‘sacrificial bowl’. The meanings

4 Düwel 1985, 21–38.