Chapter 14

(Inter-)Regional Chief Sanctuaries as a Religious Strategy for Rulership

As we saw in chapter 5, there were sanctuaries on different levels in Svetjud and Norway. Beside the local public sanctuaries there were also regional or inter-regional sanctuaries in these areas, which were important for all Svear and Prendir. Examples of such chief sanctuaries could be seen in Uppsala, Lade and Mære. Most likely they were controlled by the kings, earls or a cooperative of chieftains and farmers (as in the case of Mære, which may have had a more communal character). Such (inter-)regional sanctuaries are not attested in the Icelandic context. In what follows I will discuss the cultic organization of the inter-regional and regional sanctuaries in Svetjud and Trøndelag. I will suggest that they were not only used for religious purposes, but also for political reasons. During the Viking Age pagan kings and earls endeavoured to be the supreme cultic leaders of their realms. In my opinion the (inter-)regional sanctuaries could therefore be seen as a ruler strategy. By practising a cult of many gods in one and the same sanctuary, the kings and the earls managed to gather many individuals and cultic groups, for instance in Uppsala and Lade. In the wide circle of gods at the sanctuary, the close relation between the ruler and the mythical world was emphasized.

14.1 Cultic Organization

14.1.1 Trøndelag and Svetjud

Previous research has discussed the pre-Christian cultic organization in ancient Scandinavia. Based on cultic place-names, Magnus Olsen suggested that religious activities in Norway (including Trøndelag) appeared on different social levels. On the lowest level we may find a private cult, which took place at individual farms. This type of cultic site was often designated by “marknavn” (e.g. ḥǫrng), and the cult there rarely had a public character. On a higher level there was a public cult which took place at sanctuaries designated with names such Hof (-hof) and Vangr. These cultic sites were connected to a type of pagan cultic parishes (“hedenske kultsogn”), which resembled the medieval

1 M. Olsen 1926, 257ff.
church parishes. There was thus a public sanctuary centrally located in every “pagan parish”, where people regularly gathered to celebrate pagan feasts and perform sacrifices. There was also a type of chief sanctuaries above this level, which concerned many people living in a wider area, such as the fylki ‘shire’. At these places not only cultic activities took place; administrative-political matters were also dealt with there. In Trøndelag these cultic-political central places were identical to the sites where the shire churches (fylkiskirkjur) were later erected (see ch. 12).

Olsen’s theory about the pre-Christian religious organization in Norway and Trøndelag is quite obviously influenced by the medieval and clerical cultic organization. The terminology, for instance “hedenske kultsogn”, bears a clear Christian impression. In a more general sense, however, Olsen’s theory is quite sound. Most likely there was both a private and public cult in pre-Christian Norway and Trøndelag. The public cult was probably also hierarchical in some sense; there were sanctuaries for more local settlement districts and there were chief shrines which were important for an entire shire (fylki). The “fylki sanctuaries” were situated at the central farms (No sentralgårder), while some of the “local sanctuaries” appeared at the hof sites, particularly in Ut-Trøndelag. Most likely there were also regional sanctuaries, which were important for all people living in Trøndelag, e.g. Mære. Some public central sanctuaries may have even been of great significance for all of Norway, for instance Lade.

Specialists in place-names, such as Lars Hellberg, have argued that Svetjud also had a similar hierarchical cultic organization to that in Norway. On the lowest level there were local sanctuaries, which were important either for a district equal to the medieval “hundred” (Sw hund, hundare, skeppslag) or for the “parish” (Sw socken). There were also regional or inter-regional sanctuaries, which were important for all the Svear, such as Old Uppsala. As noted above, few scholars accept today that the Mälaren area had prehistoric districts equal to medieval parishes. Hellberg’s suggested that pre-Christian cultic organization nevertheless harmonizes quite well with Stefan Brink’s more recent proposal of spatial or horizontal division of society in prehistoric Svetjud. People lived in settlement districts (OSw byghþ sg.) of various sizes.

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2 On the criticism of “pagan parishes”, see Brink 1990a; 1996a.
3 See e.g. Ström 1985, 76–93; Steinsland 2005, 265, 274ff., 327ff. See however the discussion of the concepts “private” and “public” in ch. 4 above.
6 Hellberg 1986a, 66.
7 See e.g. Brink 1990a; Strid 1999, 92ff.