1. Introduction: Comparative Paradigms

For all the richly-detailed texts that preserve (or claim to preserve) pre-Christian mythology and beliefs, details of Germanic Nordic religious praxis in the Late Iron Age are few and far between. Perhaps understandably, scholarship on rituals, ceremonies, and festivals has tended to follow the elite bias of extant medieval sources and focus on the large-scale, public cults of ‘big gods’ – particularly Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyr – conducted at central places like Gamla Uppsala and Hlaðir. Nonetheless, it seems unlikely that pre-Christian religion was something practised only at infrequent, well-attended festivals, as Anders Kaliff has observed:

… it is likely to presume that most of the cult actions took place in private or at a lower collective level. Such a cult would have been more incorporated in everyday life and would have a larger importance for the daily life of individuals. (Kaliff 2001: 443)

After all, there is some explicit evidence that certain forms of pre-Christian religion were not practised in public, notably Kristni saga’s assertion that

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Icelanders were permitted to practise á laun, ‘in secret’ after the adoption of Christianity in 999/1000 AD (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Hall-dórsson & Foote 2003: II, 36). In this article, I will attempt to combat the relative scarcity of source material outlining such praxis by drawing on a range of textual and archaeological evidence – largely but not exclusively West Norse in origin – to propose an abstracted heuristic model of more private religious praxis in the pre-Christian Late Iron Age of the Nordic region (Murphy forthcoming b). I will propose that such praxis can be identified by a number of characteristics, some definitive and some secondary. Such a model cannot claim to reflect the literal historical truth of any of the instances on which they are based, but will serve instead as a ‘close enough’ abstraction (Schjødt 2012: 270–271).

I will focus in this text on religious praxis located at the non-elite end of the social spectrum, the sort of religion conducted at home as part of daily life by the bulk of the populace. My model will therefore form what can be termed an ‘articulation’ of the larger system of pre-Christian religion, thereby contributing to the ongoing debate surrounding diversity in pre-Christian culture and religion. In order to achieve this, I will draw on a range of medieval accounts of pre-historic religious practice, contextualised by comparative archaeological and philological evidence. The medieval texts that form the basis of my arguments are generally prose narratives produced in a Christian cultural setting, and reflect what is assumed to be a living oral tradition regarding pre-historic paganism in the Nordic region. As such, our sources suffer source-critical issues stemming from their transmission through generations of manuscripts, as well as the pervasive influence of Christian values and authorial agendas, all of which must be accounted for when judging their respective reliabilities.

I base my model on a comparative paradigm of private religiosity drawn from the comparative Study of Religion, where scholars of the Mediterranean and Near-Eastern religions of antiquity have, in the last decade, entered into a debate about the extent of and role played by what

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2 All translations into English are my own.
3 My model thus includes non-Germanic members of the broadly-understood Germanic culture of the Nordic region (primarily slaves and similarly low-status individuals from Celtic regions, although these are not thought to have been particularly numerous), but excludes members of other cultural units that occupied overlapping settlement areas, such as Sámi society on the Scandinavian Peninsula.
4 See further McKinnell 1994; Lindberg 2009; Schjødt 2009; 2012; Nordberg 2012; Murphy 2017; Taggart 2017. For a methodological discussion of such diversity and the distinctions between ‘religion’, ‘religion(s)’, and ‘religion\s’, see further Murphy forthcoming b.
is variously termed ‘household religion’, ‘familial religion’, and ‘domestic religion’, reflecting a range of cultural settings (Bodel & Olyan 2008b; Albertz et al. 2014). As the various scholars of different cultures have each adopted the term they feel best reflects the situation in their empirical data without reference to a single set of mutually agreed upon definitions of ‘household’, ‘familial’, and ‘domestic’ religion, I will use the terms ‘private religion’ and ‘private religiosity’ to designate a collective paradigm based upon these scholars’ work. (I outline what I see as the limitations of these terms below.) I have chosen to omit certain potentially-private articulations of pre-Christian Nordic paganism from my model, notably i-Religion, the internal religion found in a single human brain (which is deserving of its own dedicated study, see further Murphy 2017: 142), and the enigmatic warrior cults associated with magnate’s halls and the elite military aristocracy of the period.\textsuperscript{5} In this way I hope to approach non-elite religious praxis as directly as possible, although it is far from impossible – rather, it is likely – that elite segments of the population took in their own forms of ‘household’, ‘familial’, or ‘domestic’ religion in parallel to their prominent roles in larger-scale public cult. Indeed, the mandate recorded in the Gulatingsslova that Olgerð hafum ver enn heitít at gera boande oc hufpreyja iamvæge fitt. oc l siga þat nott hína helgu til krið þacca. oc fæucta marið til árð. oc friðar (‘[each] farmer and his housewife, according to their means, should hold an ale-feast on Holy Night, and dedicate it in thanks to Christ and [St.] Mary for a [good] year and peace’; Eithun, Rindal & Ulset 1994: 36) is highly suggestive of domestically-based rituals conducted across all segments of society (cf. Sanmark 2004: 212–216).\textsuperscript{6} Nonetheless, the complications of referring to any such activity in the semi-public spaces of elite halls and settlements as ‘private’ has led me to omit the topic from this study, particularly in light of Hákonar saga góða’s description of the public ritual surrounding the consumption of what would appear to have been the same ale (Snorri Sturluson 1941–51: I, 171–172).

The paradigm I employ in this article is formed on the basis of private religiosity in opposition to officially-recognised state or public religion: pre-Imperial Roman religion, for example, featured a sharp divide

\textsuperscript{5} Key works on this social formation and its religion's include Weiser 1927; Höfler 1934; Lindow 1976; Price 1994; Enright 1996; Kershaw 2000; Nordberg 2004; Schjødt 2008; Kuusela 2017.

\textsuperscript{6} The cult of Porgérðr Hólgabríðr in Norway may have been one such elite household cult, a topic which I hope to examine in more detail in future.
between the deities worshipped in public cult and the household gods and ancestors worshipped in the home, which were more often invoked at household shrines and as part of rites de passage. Pre-Christian Nordic culture does not, of course, evidence such an obvious emic division between public and private religion, but I believe that the Mediterranean and Near-Eastern paradigm can be constructively applied, albeit as an etic model, to Nordic paganism. Indeed, it may be argued that the composite nature of this paradigm – based, as it is, on a range of cultures from Mesopotamia to Classical Greece – enables its use in other Indo-European cultures. Even disregarding the somewhat distant ‘genetic’ relationship between Nordic paganism on the one hand and the more-closely related religions of the Mediterranean and Near-Eastern paradigm on the other, these two groups may be regarded typologically similar – I would argue that both may meaningfully be regarded as ‘pre-Archaic’ according to Robert Bellah’s cultural-evolutionary paradigm.

As such, on the basis of synthetic comparisons and emic models produced by scholars of domestic, familial, and/or household religions in the Antique Mediterranean and Near-Eastern world, I understand such private religiosity to have:

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8 This model of cultural development takes the form of a progression, where each stage represents distinct phases in an evolutionary model of culture (Bellah 1964; 2011). These different stages are understood to feature characteristic religious, social, political, and economic structures, which – it is argued – appear to have arisen independently around the world at different times throughout history in a sort of convergent evolution. Each successive stage is understood to build on the stages before it, with cultures retaining characteristics of their earlier forms as they develop from one stage to another. Thus the early Archaic phase still features aspects of the earlier Tribal phase, while the subsequent Axial phase evidences characteristics of both the Archaic and Tribal phases – in Bellah’s own words, ‘[n]othing is ever lost […] the face-to-face rituals of tribal society continue in disguised form among us’ (2011: 267). (For an argument that Bellah’s paradigm should be expanded to include ‘Chiefdom religion’ – of which pre-Christian Nordic religion is an exemplar – see Nygaard 2016.)
9 Mesopotamian and Israelite private religions are called ‘familial’ (van der Toorn 2008; Albertz 2008; Olyan 2008); Syrian, Israelite, Egyptian, and Greek religions are called ‘household’ (Fleming 2008; Ackerman 2008; Ritner 2008; Faraone 2008); and Philistine, Greek, and Roman religions are called ‘domestic’ (Schmitt 2008; Boedecker 2008; Bodel 2008). Other scholars mix and match these terms as they deem appropriate, as with Barbara S. Lesko’s ‘Household and Domestic Religion in Ancient Egypt’ (2008) and Susan Ackerman’s ‘Household Religion, Family Religion, and Women’s Religion in Ancient Israel’ (2008). For conscious discussion of this variation, see Bodel & Olyan 2008a.
been located primarily in the domicile, although nearby “local sanctuaries” also featured in some cultures;
been the expression of a culturally-relevant household, family, or equivalent emic congregation;
typically been concerned with interaction with specific household or familial deities (sometimes including ancestor worship), although these figures were sometimes also present in public or state religion;
often featured iconographic representations of the deities or ancestors on whom the cult was predicated, although these were not always anthropomorphic in nature;
often been expressed through food-based rituals, although meat was largely eschewed;
often been expressed through rites de passage;
often featured significant roles for women, particularly when the public or state religion offered no such roles.

This characterisation obviously generalises a great deal of variation both between and within the individual cultural models upon which it is based, but a broad picture of private religiosity does emerge. I believe the first two characteristics – a location in the domicile and being the product of a culturally-relevant household or familial unit – should be regarded as the most definitive aspects of private religion’s, and that private religion should feature a clear domestic setting or familial congregation, but not necessarily both. The other characteristics may be regarded as secondary identifiers: not every rite de passage was conducted as part of a private religion, nor was every religion to offer important roles to women a domestic or familial one. We should not expect to find all of these characteristics in every individual case of pre-Christian private religion’s, and some appear more relevant for the Nordic articulation of private religion than others.

Confirming the extent to which private pre-Christian Nordic religion can be described as ‘domestic’, ‘familial’, and/or ‘household’ should thus be our first step, after which the presence (or absence) of secondary characteristics will be investigated. The resultant model of private cult in the pre-Christian Nordic region will hopefully also show where Nordic primary material diverges from the Antique data, thereby offering insight into what might be uniquely Nordic about pre-Christian religion’s in Scandinavia and its environs.
2. Definitive Characteristics: Domestic Settings, Familial Congregations, or Something Else?

2.1 Domestic Settings

Stanley K. Stowers, building on the work of Jonathan Z. Smith, has argued that the domestic location of religious praxis is more definitive than any other aspect of such cult: ‘[t]he religion of household and family, located primarily in the home and at the family tomb, is the ultimate religion of place [... it] is ‘here’ because it is not ‘there’” (Stowers 2008: 11). Let us therefore start by considering evidence for pre-Christian Nordic cult praxis conducted in a domestic spatial setting – that is, religion practised in the dwelling place. What we know about Iron-Age dwellings comes primarily from two sources: archaeological excavations and medieval textual descriptions. The latter appear to have been greatly influenced by the buildings of their writers’ period (Vidal 2013), and it is not unlikely that the dominant influence of the social elite in the later-transcribed
poetic oral discourse also had a lasting effect on medieval understandings of earlier buildings. I thus believe archaeological evidence to be a better point of departure for the pre-historic house than textual sources. Such archaeological evidence – which admittedly tends to come from larger and/or higher-status sites – suggests that most people in the Nordic Late Iron Age lived in three-aisled longhouses with internal load-bearing beams and minimal room separation (cf. Figure 1; Schmidt 1994; Fallgren 2008; Vidal 2013: 75–119). Settlements in the milder climate of southern Scandinavia tended towards villages with multiple longhouses, while the harsher weather of Iceland and more northerly parts of Norway tended to produce hamlets and lone farmsteads (Fallgren 2008: 67).

Unlike the many rooms of the medieval Icelandic farmhouse, each with their specific purpose (Vidal 2013: 133–148), the main room of the Late Iron Age longhouse was truly a multifunctional living space, used for just about every aspect of daily life: food preparation, sleep (and thus sex), handicraft, recreation, and so on. As such we should not be surprised that these spaces were also employed for religious praxis, however contradictory invoking the supranatural or sacred in the mundanity of an everyday living space might appear. (I have argued elsewhere that sufficiently unusual behaviour, dress, and food could establish a sense of temporal liminality that enabled kratophany, the appearance of the sacred, even in the least sacral-seeming place; Murphy 2016.) The observation that domestic space could be the site of cultic activity is not new: the sacral significance of domestic architecture in Viking-Age houses has been linked to pre-Christian cosmology (Gunnell 2001; cf. Murphy 2016), and the ritual significance of doors and doorways has likewise attracted attention. 

Some medieval texts also describe what appears to have been pre-Christian ritual carried out in the dwelling, as in the B tradition of Þorvalds þáttir víðförla I description of how the housewife Friðgerðr blótar inni (‘sacrificed indoors’; Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 73) at her late tenth century home in Hvammr (Iceland); the extraordinary Flateyjarbók account of the Völösi cult in the

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10 See further Andrén 1993; Beck 2010; 2014; Sundqvist 2016: 412–424
11 Two versions of Þorvalds þáttir víðförla survive as semi-independent texts: the A–C manuscript tradition is typically numbered I, and the D tradition (which cleaves very closely to Flateyjarbók) is designated II. The Kristni saga account of events at Hvammr locate Friðgerðr’s blót in a hof apparently located on the farmstead – it is not clear whether this refers to a dedicated sacrificial building or the multifunctional room of the house (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 9).
stoфа (‘main room’) of an early eleventh century Norwegian farm (Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: II, 441–446); and the many accounts of divinatory rituals conducted in (or nearby) longhouses. Even so, few such accounts highlight the dwelling itself as an important aspect of the proceedings they outline.

Two sources that do appear to indicate the importance of a domestic setting are Þiðranda þáttr ok Þórhalls and the Austrfararvísur. Þiðranda þáttr is preserved in the fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript Flateyjarbók as part of the sprawling Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta, a text that shows a great deal of concern with mission and conversion (Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: I, 465–468). Set immediately prior to the missionary Þangbrandr’s arrival in Iceland in the wider saga, the þáttr serves as a literal and figurative forewarning of the religious change to come in the imagined Iceland constructed by Flateyjarbók (Ármann Jakobsson 2013). In the narrative, the farmer Síðu-Hallr (who plays an important role in many accounts of the Icelandic conversion) hosts a haustboði (‘autumn feast’) as part of the seasonal pre-Christian calendar: Veizlan var búin at vetrnáttum (‘the [sacral] feast was held during the Winter Nights’; Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: I, 466; cf. Gunnell 2000). To this feast he invites a number of guests, although poor weather prevents many from attending. Among the few guests present is Hallr’s long-standing friend Þórhallr spámaðr (‘magician, seer’, lit. ‘prophet’), who had been staying at Hallr’s farm, Hof (‘temple’), all summer. On the evening of the feast, Þórhallr advises at engi maðr kæmi út á þessi nótt (‘that no-one should venture outside tonight’; Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: I, 467), an augury which Hallr readily endorses. Yet once the festivities have been con-

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12 Divinatory rituals in particular are noted as having taken place in the home, most famously in Eiríks saga Rauða’s account of Þorbjǫrg lítil-vǫlva, set in late tenth-century Greenland but preserved in Icelandic manuscripts – the fourteenth-century Hauksbók and the fifteenth-century Skálholtsbók (Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórdarson 1935: 206–209). Related accounts occur in Chapter 2 of Órvar-Odds saga (Guðni Jónsson & Bjarni Vilhjálmssson 1943–44: I, 286–289), Norna-Gests þáttr in Flateyjarbók (Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: I, 397), Chapter 10 of Vatnsdeila saga (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939: 29–31), and chapter VI, 4.12 of Saxo’s Gesta Danorum (Saxo Grammaticus 2015: I, 374–377); although the use of the term útisetumáðr (‘man who sits out[side]’) to designate practitioners of forbidden pre-Christian ritual in the thirteenth-century Frostating’s Law suggests that a domestic setting was not required (Keyser & Munch 1846: 182; see also Price 2002: 65–66, 125–27; Dillmann 2006; Gardela 2008).
cluded, Hallr’s son Þiðrandi – notably absent from Síðu-Hallr’s factual genealogy that precedes the þáttur\textsuperscript{13} – responds in a typically courteous (and markedly medieval) manner, springing up to answer a knock at the door. Stepping outside to greet what he assumes are guests delayed by the weather, Þiðrandi sees two sets of nine women, one clad in black, the other in white, riding into the in-field. He is then killed by the black-wearing group. This event is later interpreted by Þórhallr as the last act of the pagan (black) spirits whom Hallr’s family would shortly abandon for the new Christian religion, represented by the women in white.

Piðranda þáttur demonstrates a clear concern with architectural boundaries. While human space normally encompassed an entire settlement, running out as settled lands gave way to the wilderness between farms, in the þáttur it is clear that the space permissible for humans to occupy contracted during the vettnætr. Piðrandi’s transgression was not therefore conversion to Christianity, for all his courtesy reflects medieval Christian values such a convert might be expected to show. Instead, it is only because he invaded the space beyond the walls of the house that he fell prey to the inhabitants of that Other world – as Þórhallr made clear, remaining inside would have protected him as it did everyone else present. A similar theme emerges in the þáttur’s short epilogue when Þórhallr, once again staying with Hallr, uses a window that allows safe observation of the pre-Christian Other without Þórhallr leaving the safety of the house and its human space.

Similar concerns appear to be reflected in the Austrfararvísur, an early tenth-century poem skaldic poem by Sigvatr Þórðarson, a follower of the Norwegian King Óláfr inn helgi (‘the holy’, later St. Óláfr) who was sent on a diplomatic mission through what is today south-western Sweden in 1017–1018AD. The tight metrical constraints of such poetry is generally assumed to offer a great deal of protection against the sort of distortions suffered by prose texts preserved in medieval manuscript traditions, although many details about the poem’s composition and Sigvatr’s journey remain controversial. The individual verses assigned to this title are scattered throughout different chapters of both the Heimskringla and separate versions of Óláfs saga helga. Both redactions of the saga text are believed to have been composed by Snorri Sturluson, probably sometime between 1220 and 1230 AD, but the prose framework to Sigvatr’s verse

\textsuperscript{13} Þiðrandi is, however, mentioned in Brennu-Njáls saga as \textit{pamm er sagt er, at disir vægi} (‘he who is said to have been killed by disir’; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 239).
places the events that apparently inspired the skald between 1017 and 1018 AD. The *sögur* describe two journeys Sigvatr undertook from Öláfr’s court in Norway to Sweden, although the routes he followed – and even his destinations – are not completely clear (Sigvatr Þórðarson 2012: 581–582). Snorri certainly seems to have known little more than the poem itself describes, and his distribution of the individual strophes has led to much discussion of which verses may be part of the poem, and in which order they should be read (Sigvatr Þórðarson 2012: 578–581). It is not even clear whether the poem genuinely describes two journeys to Sweden, as Snorri suggests. Some scholars have been willing to accept the presentation of the poetry in the *sögur*, with W. van Eeden arguing that we are dealing with two poems describing two separate journeys, and demanding ‘Waarom zouden wij niet geloof schenken óók aan de door Snorri zelf gemaakte splitsing?’ (‘Why should we not put faith in the division Snorri himself presents?’; 1943: 230). Others have argued that it is possible to explain the stylistic differences that the various extant strophes exhibit if some verses were composed en route during a single journey with others appended later (Schier 1965). However Snorri came by the impression that there had been two journeys, the title of poem itself – Austrfararvísur (‘Verses of a Journey East’) – suggests to me that we are indeed dealing with a single poem most likely describing a single journey.

The verses of particular interest to us in a study of domestic religion therefore describe Sigvatr’s attempts to find lodgings somewhere in or east of Eiðaskógr in western Svíþjóð, likely in 1018 AD. Travelling first til Hofs – presumably a settlement named for its hof – Sigvatr finds the door barred, and is forced to converse with the inhabitants from outside:

Réðk til Hofs at hœfa;  
hurð vas aprt, en spurðumk  
– inn settak nef nenninn  
niðrlutt – fyrir útan.  
Orð gatk fæst af fyrðum,  
(flögð baðk) en þau sogðu  
– hnekkðumk heiðnir rekkar –  
heilagt (við þau deila).  

(Sigvatr Þórðarson 2012: 589)

I decided to aim for Hof, the door was barred, but I inquired from outside, I stuck my hooked nose in. I got few words from men, but they said [it was] holy, heathen men drove me away. I bade the ogresses deal with them.
That the inhabitants of Hof refuse to even open the door – let alone come outside – to talk with Sigvatr is highly reminiscent of Þórhall’s insistence that no-one present at the sacral feast venture out in Þiðranda þáttr. That Sigvatr and his companions are told something is heilagt (‘holy’) supports the comparison of the two events, which both take place on farms named for their sacral space. If we understand the settlement itself as holy, as Robert D. Fulk has suggested, it might be that the inhabitants of Hof are unwilling to have a Christian enter their sacral space (Sigvatr Þórðarson 2012: 589). Yet the long and complex Christianisation of the Nordic region entailed a good deal of interreligious coexistence – not least in Sweden, with its tradition of runic monuments marking out adjacent Christian and pagan settlements – which makes me sceptical of this interpretation, despite the evidence of Þiðranda þáttr.14 The Icelandic narrative gives us an account of what might conceivably have happened inside the Swedish Hof: a ritual specialist declared that the doors were not to be opened for a particular period of time. I would therefore propose that we are dealing with a sacrally charged event rather than a holy place.

This interpretation is borne out in Sigvatr’s next strophe, when a woman declares that an álfablót is being celebrated:

‘Gakkat inn,’ kvað ekkja,
‘armi dregr, en lengra;
hraeðumk ek við Óðins
– erum heiðin vér – reiði.’
Rýgr kvazk inni eiga
ôpekk, sús mér hnekkði,
alfablót, sem ulfi
ôtvín, i bœ sínum.

(Sigvatr Þórðarson 2012: 590–591)

‘Come no further in,’ said a woman, ‘wicked man; I fear Óðinn’s wrath, we are heathen.’ The unpleasant woman said she/their had álfablót inside, in her/their farm;15 she drove me away like a wolf, without hesitation.

That Sigvatr is turned away due to the performance of a blót – one explic-
itly performed inside the house – implies the import of spatial boundaries during particular events, which even the significant responsibilities of a (potential) host could not overcome.

Strophes 6–8 of the poem go on to detail the group’s further rejection by three men, all called Ǫlvir. This has been derided by Fulk as fictional, on the grounds that it is unlikely three nearby farmers would all share a name that could be read as ‘an ironic allusion to the nearly homonymous Ǫlværr “hospitable”’ (Sigvatr Þórdarson 2012: 593). As Strophe 8 has Sigvatr insisting that he was turned away four times in total, I believe it is perfectly possible that the skald assigned an unflattering, pagan-sounding epithet to the Swedes who refused him hospitality, particularly if – as Lee Hollander has suggested – the name may have been connected to vé (‘sanctuary’), a form of pre-Christian sacral site (1945: 155; cf. Murphy 2018). (It is also plausible that Sigvatr simply never learnt the names of the men who chased him and his companions away, assigning them an unflattering epithet instead.) That the álfbólót appears to have been practised at the same time across a wider area reinforces the idea that Sigvatr had arrived during a holy period when the Other was abroad, and the boundary between human and supranatural spaces – quite literally inside and outside – should not be breeched. (Similar traditions are known from elsewhere, including the Celtic Samhain, now known as Halloween, and the Christian All Souls’ festivals.) Designating at least some instances of pre-Christian Nordic cult as ‘domestic religion’ thus seems promising.

There remain, however, some problems with such a description. The restriction of access to the sacred, so clearly expressed in both Þiðranda þátr and the Austrfararvísur, also appears to be a feature of more public cult, particularly in Gotlandic evidence (Murphy 2018). We might therefore regard the control of space as a feature of pre-Christian Nordic religion’s generally, but not of a putative ‘domestic’ religion specifically. What’s more, further complications are brought up by accounts of other small-scale, locally-focused cults not centred directly on (or in) houses. A Nordic reflex of the “local sanctuaries” noted in the comparative paradigm might be witnessed by texts such as the Kristni saga and Þorvalds þátr víðförla I accounts of the rock-dwelling ármaðr (‘steward’) at Giljá (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 7; II, 63),16 and in

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16 Such traditions are themselves paralleled by modern folklore regarding figures such as the álfróða at Bustarfell (Ágústa Þorkelsdóttir 2008). For discussion of the parallel complex of medieval texts and modern folklore concerning supranatural beings (the human dead) inhabiting grave mounds, see Gunnell 2014b: 27–36; for discussion of the modern
the archaeological evidence from sites like Abbetorp (Sweden) – what I have elsewhere termed ‘natural’ sacral places (Murphy 2016: 145–152).

While rituals associated with a house need not have taken place inside it, if we are to stretch our understanding of a ‘domestic setting’ to include not simply the buildings, but also the in-fields and still more-distant locations comprising a farmstead’s land-claim, we ought question the usefulness of employing such a characteristic as a definitive aspect of pre-Christian private religiosity. Simply put, locally-focused cults in the pre-Christian Nordic region do not appear to have been bound so closely to the dwellings of their congregations that they can be said to have an uncomplicatedly domestic setting. It is thus worth examining the congregations of such cults more closely, to establish whether their congregation’s familial nature might be a more appropriate definitive characteristic.

2.2 Familial Congregations

The idea that highly localised, small-scale cult could have a familial focus in the pre-Christian Nordic region is supported by a number of written accounts from medieval Iceland. The thirteenth-century Kristni saga description of pre-Christian Giljá stresses that the cult is linked to the family of the landowner Koðrán:

\[\text{At Giljá stóð steinn sá er þeir frændr hǫfðu blótat} \]

(‘At Giljá stood that stone, which those kinsmen had worshipped’; Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 7).

The importance of family as the basis of a congregation can be traced in Landnámabók, which records the activities and genealogies of ninth-
and tenth-century settlers in Iceland. While the genealogical concerns of the text make it difficult to pick out familial congregations from long lists of descendants covering multiple generations, some cases are nonetheless notable. A minority of early settlers were Christian, including Auðr *djúpúðga* Ketilsdóttir, who erected prominent crosses on a hill near her farm where she would pray (later called *Krosshöll*, literally ‘Cross-Knoll’). Auðr’s family are said to have regressed to paganism after her death – *spílltisk trúa frænda hennar* (‘her kinsmen became devoid of faith’; Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 147) – and used the site of her Christian prayers for *blótt*, believing *at þeir dœi í hólana* (‘that they would die into the knoll’; Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 140). A similar phenomenon is recorded in both Landnámabók and the thirteenth-century Eyrbyggja saga descriptions of the settlement at Helgafell (lit. ‘Holy fell’) established in the late ninth century by the *blótnmaðr mikill* (‘great sacrificer’; Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 124) Þórólfr *Mostrarskegg*, who had overseen of a *hof* in Norway before emigrating to Snaefellsness in western Iceland (Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 6–7). The saga recounts an episode in the middle of the tenth century where a fishing boat is lost at sea, and a witness sees Helgafell open to reveal a feast hosted by the deceased Þórólfr, who welcomes his son and the rest of the crew of the lost boat: *þar var heilsat Þorsteini þorskabít ok fǫru nautum hans ok mælt, at hann skal sitja í ǫndvegi gegnt feðr sínum* (‘Þorsteinn Cod-Biter was being welcomed there, and his crew too, and it was said that he should sit on the high-seat opposite his father’; Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 19). I have argued elsewhere that this episode is a particularly Icelandic expression of a discourse of hall-based afterlives most famously expressed in the mythological Valhöll (Murphy 2016: 147–148), but the familial aspect of this cult – like that of Auðr’s descendants – should not be overlooked.

More generally, recognising small-scale, localised expressions of religious praxis by the genetically-related makeup of their congregation might prove a useful approach. Such a focus allow us to sidestep the difficulties noted above when attempting to classify comparable cults – such as those practised at Giljá and Abbetorp – on the basis of their spatial context. After all, a family might live together in one building and serve as a single (more-or-less unified) religious congregation, but still practise their cult at some remove from their dwelling in both literal objective terms and more subjective spatial ones. Giljá, Abbetorp, and Helgafell all appear to be examples of this, as is the Landnámabók account of
another blótmáðr mikill Þorsteinn rauðnefr, who threw offerings into the waterfall for which his farm – Fors – was named (Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 358; cf. Murphy 2016). Freeing ourselves from a strictly spatial focus and considering the membership of a congregation rather than just its emplacement may also help to explain the pointed display of ritual activity in Ibrāhīm ibn Ya‘qūb al-Isrā‘īlī al-Turtushi’s description of Hedeby (Denmark), which sets the pre-Christian Danes’ religious activities outside their homes:

They hold a celebration at which they all come together to honour their god, and to eat and drink. Anyone who slaughters a sacrificial animal puts up poles at the door to his home, and impales the animal on them, be it a piece of cattle, a ram, billygoat or a pig, so that his neighbours know that he is sacrificing to honour his god.20

The display of sacrifices is a well-documented feature of religious praxis in the pre-Christian Nordic region,21 and the Spaniard understood the town’s residents to be sacrificing not primarily to gain the favour or a deity or a particular supranatural change in the world (economic prosperity, a successful childbirth, or the safe arrival of a shipment) but rather ‘so that his neighbours know that he is sacrificing’, suggesting an allo-communative concern with people over place (Rappaport 1979: 178).

There remain, however, some instances of small-scale, localised religion that could call the more widespread adoption of a familial congregation as a definitive characteristic of private cult in the pre-Christian

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20 Ibrāhīm ibn Ya‘qūb – also known as Abraham ben Jacob – was a Jewish citizen of the Moorish caliphate in what is now Spain. His work, narrating his travels through much of Europe in 961–962 AD, does not survive in independent form. This extract is preserved in the writings of the thirteenth-century Arab writer Abu Yahya Zakariya’ ibn Muhammad al-Qazwini, who further notes that the inhabitants of Schleswig worshipped “Sirius”. The only transliteration of al-Qazwini’s work to a Latin alphabet of which I am aware is Georg Jacob’s 1927 translation into German: Sie feiern ein Fest, an dem sie alle zusammenkommen, um den Gott zu ehren und um zu essen und zu trinken. Wer ein Opfertier schlachtet, errichtet an der Tür seines Gehöftes (dar) Pfähle (chaschab) und tut das Opfertier darauf, sei es ein Rind oder ein Widder oder ein Ziegenbock oder ein Schwein, damit die Leute wissen, daß er es seinem Gotte zu Ehren opfert (1927: 29).

21 The 23 cattle skulls excavated at Hofstaðir (Iceland) are argued to once have decorated the outside of the building (Lucas 2009; Lucas & McGovern 2009), and the description of sacrifices hanging from the branches of a tree near the temple at Uppsala in scholia 138 of the Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum is paralleled by archaeological finds at Frösön (Sweden) interpreted as the remains of animals hung or hanged from a tree at the centre of a grove (Adam of Bremen 1917: 257–258; Näsström 1996).
Nordic region into question. Parallel traditions regarding the Giljá cult, for example, do not refer to Koðrán’s family as the defining feature of the congregation: the Þorvalds þátr víðfǫrla I account makes no mention of exactly who worshipped at the stone, but describes Koðrán’s religious authority as extending over everyone who lived on his farm, blood-related or not, when he converts to Christianity: *Pví næst var skírðr Koðrán bóndi ok kona hans, Járngerðr, ok aðrir heimamenn, útan Ormr son hans …* (‘then Koðrán the farmer, his wife Járngerðr, and other members of their household were baptised, except for his son Ormr …’; Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 68). *Flateyjarbók* uses very similar words: *Var þá Koðrán skírðr, faðir Þorvalds, með hús-freyju sinni ok heimamönnum, útan Ormr, son hans …* (then Koðrán, Þorvaldr’s father, was baptised along with his wife and the members of his household, except for his son Ormr …’; Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: I, 297). Kristni saga also uses a broad term for those who convert to Christianity alongside Koðrán, calling them *hjú hans ǫll* (‘his entire household’; Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 8). These descriptions make it particularly clear that the Giljá congregation was not limited to Koðrán’s family, and that not all of Koðrán’s family were necessarily members of the congregation he appears to have led. As such, it would appear that these small-scale, locally-focused expression of pre-Christian religion cannot be defined simply by either their domestic settings or their familial congregations. A third option is required.

2.3 Something Else?

Kristni saga’s use of the term *hjú* is potentially a useful stimulus: in some instances the word appears to designate something approximating a modern nuclear family, or even a married couple, as in the mid-thirteenth century AM 334 fol manuscript of *Grágás*: *Ef hiu sciliaz* (‘if a couple divorces’; ONP 2016). In instances like Kristni saga, Koðrán and his wife are distinguished from the other members of what can best be described as their household: the extended family, servants, slaves, and workers who live with them and run their farm. Such figures would presumably have included *hjónustufólk*, ‘free servants’ (lit. ‘servant-folk’); *frelsingar*, ‘freedmen’; and *þrælar*, ‘slaves’. While the latter are not thought to have been particularly common in the Late Iron Age (Brink 2008), they frequently play key roles in the medieval Icelandic narrative tradition – not
least the infamous account of rebellious slaves in chapter 8 of Landnáma- bók for whom the Vestmannaeyjar are named (Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 42–44).

There are a number of terms extant in Old West Norse textual corpus for concepts similar to hjú: heimamaðr, ‘member of a household’; heimkynni, lit. ‘home-relationship’, thus ‘household’; and heimoll, ‘relating to a household’ (see further Murphy forthcoming b). Looking beyond the purely philological, distinctions do seem to have been drawn between full-blooded and unrelated members of a family, but the Íslendingasögur feature many narratives where a slave or affiliated freeman is definitely regarded as a member of the social unit. The thirteenth-century Brennu-Njáls saga, for instance, describes a conflict between two women (Hallgerðr and Bergþóra) of different households in tenth-century Iceland that escalates from insults to the killing first of slaves, then free men, then affiliate family members (an in-law on one side, and a foster-father on the other), and finally a full-blooded family member (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 92–118). Although fictionalised (or wholly fictional), this narrative would suggest that while there were degrees of belonging to what was broadly understood as familial unit, even slaves were seen as members of a household.

Just as unrelated members of a household-based social unit may have shared the same dwelling as full-blooded familial members, blood-relations – even within the immediate family – were sometimes detached, living elsewhere for short periods, such as on the summer-time use of highland shielings. Such detachment may, in some instances, have been longer term, as when Chapter 28 of Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar explicitly records Skalla-Grímr breaking up the group of people who immigrated to Iceland with him, forming subsidiary settlements around his main farm (presumably to make use of the new land’s abundant natural resources; Sigurður Nordal 1933: 73–75; see discussion in Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2008: 50–58). I believe we ought therefore to pay heed to Stowers when he argues that:

The sum and intensity of actual social relations is what counts. Families in which those who make up the supposed nuclear essence have relations and even lifelong emotional attachments to resident slaves, for example, are different from the nuclear family. Families in households in which slaves and nurses rather than the nuclear mother do most of the child-rearing are different. A household in which there is no distinction between work and home, and in which public and private, outsiders and insiders blur is different from the
Examining evidence for small-scale, locally-focused cult in terms of households rather than familial congregations (or domestic settings) may also elucidate distinctions in our data that seem, at first glance, to be purely spatial: Sigvatr and his Norwegian companions may have been turned away from four Swedish dwellings not only because the álfablót mandated a strict division between inside and outside of the houses where it was conducted, but also because they were not members of the household congregation.

This raises the somewhat more complicated question of how we are to recognise what – and who – constitutes a household. For all that Sigvatr was turned away in Svíþjóð, the presence of guests during the conduct of such household religion does not always seem to have been problematic: Þórhallr spends the summer with his friend Síðu-Hallr, and appears to have been an active participant in the latter’s veizla (Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: I, 465–467). It is conceivable that some guests were granted honorary membership of the household social unit, with any benefits (and duties) that entailed – including participation in the household’s religious praxis – and that different households had different requirements for such membership. Perhaps Þórhallr’s status as an old friend of the head of the family (and his having shared the living space of Síðu-Hallr’s household for up to three months) explains his acceptance, while the religionists of the Austrfaravísur were less receptive to the inclusion of uninvited travellers – presumably here one day and gone the next – in their household.

Another textual account nonetheless features wholly-unknown guests who are invited to participate in their hosts’ cult, which might support the understanding of ‘household’ as a small-scale, locally-focused social unit with flexible membership requirements. Völsa þátr, another of the conversion þættir preserved in Flateyjarbók, may well be so heavily fictionalised that it can no longer be said to have any historical basis (see discussion in Tolley 2009). I would argue, however, that the text undoubtedly reflects Christian discourse about late forms of paganism, with the late-fourteenth century Icelanders who transcribed what was presumably once an oral tale accepting its (doubtless idealised) events as
possible in their ancestors’ worldview. That the þáttir evidences several of the potential secondary characteristics of private cult outlined below – its domestic setting, the use of a theriomorphic iconographic representation of the divine, and a prominent role for women – speaks in favour of its reliability, as does the apparent ritual significance of lifting a woman over a doorway, also witnessed in ibn Fadlān’s Risāla (2000: 12–21). 22

The narrative describes how Óláfr helgi fled Knútr inn ríki (thus dating events to 1029 AD), hearing of and then visiting in disguise a remote household of pagans, where he bears witness to and participates in the ritual of a phallus cult. Prior to the exiled king’s arrival, the elderly farmer’s horse had died and been butchered for its meat. Following some crude antics on behalf of her son, the kerling (‘old woman’) of the farm preserves the horse’s phallus – not necessarily an act with religious significance in and of itself, given that animal penises were employed as switches in timber-poor Iceland until the twentieth century (Gunnell 2011, personal communication). Following this, a sacral-utility charged ritual is carried out at the isolated farm, where the old woman produces the phallus (now dubbed Vǫlsi) every evening, and circulates it between the members of the sometimes reluctant congregation to the accompaniment of verse. The prose of Flateyjarbók explicitly refers to this activity as híbýlaháttum (nom. híbýlahættir ‘household-custom’; Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: II, 444). On his arrival, Óláfr and his companions secure accommodation and, without consultation, are expected to participate in the ritual, with the woman demanding en þu Grimr gestr ourr | grip þu vid Volsa (‘and you, Grimr our guest, take Volsi’). Events are brought to an abrupt conclusion when Óláfr throws the phallus to the farmer’s dog. 23 The apparent importance

22 On the ritual use of doors, doorways, and lintels in pre-Christian Nordic religion’s, see Andrén 1993; Beck 2010; 2014; Eriksen 2013; Sundqvisit 2016: 412–424.
23 A very similar tradition, known as at senda drunn (‘to send drunnur’), appears to have survived into the twentieth century in the Faroe Islands: at meals connected to weddings (sometimes at or near the wedding itself, sometimes on anniversaries), the tail of a slaughtered animal would be presented to a diner, who was expected to pronounce an amusing verse ending with the name of the next speaker, who was then presented with the tail. Failure to compose a verse was met with ridicule, and the tail was sometimes decorated with ribbons, flowers, or flags (Joensen 2004: 31–37). While such looping participation in games are far from uncommon – as in the Anglophone children’s game ‘Who Stole the Cookie from the Cookie Jar?’ – the shared motif of the long, thin, rearmost part of an animal is notable. Yet there does not appear to be any obvious connection to weddings in Vǫlsa þáttir: we might imagine that the virginal daughter of the house would play the role of bride, but the hagiographic saga declines to explicitly cast Óláfr as her groom, despite
of the congregation’s participation in this ritual, particularly compared
to the seeming lack of stress put on its location, suggests that the Vǫlsi
cult should not be regarded as strongly domestic in character. Indeed, the
participation of not only slaves but guests makes me prefer the descriptor
‘household’ to both ‘familial’ and ‘domestic’ religion, and implies to my
mind that identification with a household – or congregation – was highly
contextual, even negotiable.

As such, rather than attempting to recognise the articulation of pre-
Christian religious praxis under study in this article by either its domestic
setting or familial congregation, I propose that we regard this form of
cult as the religious output of the household as a small-scale, locally-
focused social unit. While some evidence we have considered could also
be described as ‘domestic’ (Þiðranda þátttr, for instance, evidences strong
spatial boundaries and a clear domestic setting) and others would appear
to be focused on a particular bloodline (the Eyþýggja saga account of the
Helgafell-based afterlife, for example) others feature both characteristics,
or are not sufficiently explicit to allow nuanced judgement, as in the
Austrfararvísur. In most cases, however, I believe that ‘household’ will
prove a useful and recognisable designation, and posit that a discourse of
small-scale, locally focused household religion does emerge from texts
like Vólsa þátttr, the Austrfararvísur, and accounts of the Giljá cult.

3. Secondary Characteristics

I proposed above that the comparative paradigm of familial, household,
and domestic religion had two definitive aspects: a domestic setting and
a familial congregation. Synthesising scholarship on the private religions
of the Antique Near East and Mediterranean allows for the identification
of a number of other phenomena, themes, and characteristics associated
with such private praxis, which I believe can be useful in further refining
our understanding of the Nordic articulation of household religion. These are: the interaction with localised deities distinct from public
cult, potentially including ancestor worship; the use of iconographic
representations of those deities; the performance of food-based rituals

the sexual overtones of the text. That the poetic ritual was apparently conducted repeatedly
throughout autumn might be indicative of a more general link with prosperity.
that frequently eschewed meat; *rites de passage*; and a prominent role for women, particularly when public or state religion lacked such roles. We should not expect to find all of these characteristics in every instance of pre-Christian household religion’s, and some appear more relevant for the Nordic articulation of household religion than others.

3.1 Localised Deities and Ancestor Worship

Pre-Christian Nordic culture certainly appears to have had a rich and varied cast of mythological figures. High-status, well-known deities like Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyr are attested alongside apparently local deities like Prændalög’s Þorgerðr Holgabrúðr and multiple collectives of (usually unnamed) supranatural beings not easily described as gods: disir, valkyrjur, dvergar, álfr, and so on. While there was no official public or state cult in much of the pre-Christian Nordic region, it is clear that the population of some large areas did come together to practise a shared articulation of their religion’s: the cult at Gamla Uppsala as described in the texts of both Adam of Bremen and Snorri Sturluson was clearly one such. Generally speaking, these cults seem to have been dedicated to one or more of the ‘big gods’ who are well attested in our extant medieval accounts of pre-Christian myth. By contrast, the accounts we have examined in this article thus far seem to feature supranatural beings with much greater links to the region in which the account is set, or to a specific group of humans.

The cult at Giljá, for example, is dedicated to a being described in Kristni saga as the family’s ármadr (‘steward’, lit. ‘[good] year man’) and in Þorvalds þáttir víðfǫrla I as Koðrán’s spámaðr (‘prophet’) who *segir mér fyrir marga óorðna hluti; hann varðveitir kvikfé mitt* (‘tells me in advance of many things that have not yet happened; he protects my livestock’; Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 7; II, 73). This figure clearly represents some form of prosperity spirit.

We should, however, remain sceptical of claims of geographic or temporal conformity in pre-Christian religion’s. Even comparing such textual sources – the majority of them Icelandic – with toponymic records reveals a number of obvious discrepancies, with some figures well attested in topographic data (e.g. Ullr/Ullinn) barely mentioned in narrative sources, and vice versa (e.g. Loki; see further Brink 2007; Gunnell 2015; Molin 2015).

I prefer to the term “prosperity” to “fertility” when discussing the goal of certain pre-Christian religion’s, as biological fertility – in animals or humans – seems to have been only a part of the picture of material success designated by formulae such as the toast *til árs ok friðar* (‘to a [good] year and peace’).
– or possibly spirits, given its complaints of the effects of Bishop Frið-rekr’s blessings on the being’s children in Þorvalds þáttr I (Sigurgeir Steingrimsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 65). Other locally-relevant spirit collectives occur in Hauksbók, where sacrifices are made to land vettir (‘land-beings’; Finnur Jónsson 1892–1896: 167) and Þiðranda þáttr ok Þórhalls, where the mysterious riders are called not only konur (‘women’), but also dísir and fylgjur (Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: I, 467). While I have argued elsewhere that dís can designate either a particular collective of prosperity spirits or a non-specific supranatural female (Murphy 2013: 43–97), fylgjur appear to have been protective spirits associated with a specific family, just as Þórhallr describes in the þáttir (Mundal 1974; Stankovitsova 2015).

A connection between a group of supranatural beings and a particular (human) family can also be traced in what may be evidence of ancestor worship. While there have been a number of understandings of such praxis in the history of our field (Nordberg 2013), I take a general approach and would include a range of evidence for the worship or sacrally-charged veneration of ancestral figures. This was not unknown in the Nordic region, with worship rituals at grave mounds best evidenced for kings and rulers (Gardeła 2016; Laidoner 2015). Such cult offers a genetic link between the familiar world of the present and the Othered worlds of the past and the dead, and may be witnessed in the álfablót of the Austr-faravísur. At least one deceased monarch is elsewhere recorded as both the recipient of cult and an álfr following his interment: the Þáttr Ólafs Geirstaðaálfs preserved in Flateyjarbók notes that [v]ær þá þat ráð tekit, at þeir blótuðu Ólaf konung til árs sér ok kölluðu hann Geirstaðaálf (‘that course was then followed, they they would sacrifice to King Óláfr and called him Geirstaðaálf [the álfr of Geirstaðir’]; Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: II, 7). These events apparently took place in a region of south-eastern Sweden dubbed Álfheimar (lit. ‘álfr-home/world/mansion’) in Ynglinga saga and a number of later fornaldarsögur, an area it is entirely possible that Sigvatr and his companions passed through on his journey to Svíþjóð.

‘Álfr’ appears to have been a somewhat lose category, comprising a

26 Óláfr is also named Geirstaðaálf in Af Upplinga konungum, a short synoptic of the Ynglingar dynasty preserved in the fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript Hauksbók (Finnur Jónsson 1892–1896: 457).

27 Fornaldarsögur to mention Álfheimar include the Sögubrot af fornkonungum and
range of supranatural beings (Gunnell 2007; Hall 2007: 21–53). This includes the localised chthonic spirits of texts like Kormáks saga, where medical assistance can be acquired from knoll-dwelling álfar, who have been understood by at least some scholars as ancestral spirits: Jan de Vries arguing that ‘Die in Hügel hausenden Wesen, die in Lebensgefahr Hilfe bringen können, sind sicherlich als Totengeister zu verstanden’ (‘the hill-dwelling beings, who could offer help in life-threatening situations, should surely be understood as spirits of the dead’; 1970: I, 258; cf. Einar Öl. Sveinsson 1939: 288). However, more widely-known deities could apparently also be álfar: the eddic poem Grímnismál refers to Freyr’s cosmological mansion as Álheimr (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014: I, 369), and his burial mound is likewise said to have been the site of worship rituals in Ynglinga saga (Snorri Sturluson 1941–51: I, 24–25). If this complex of álf-related phenomena and graveside worship is truly reflective of how things were in the Late Iron Age, we might thus speculate that the álfablót during which Sigvatr arrived was an ancestral cult ritual, which would reinforce the dichotomy between the household congregation inside the dwellings, with its familial link to the past, and the newly-arrived foreigners outside both the architectural boundary and the social unit.

Whether we understand the álfar of the Austrfararvísur as chthonic beings with links to prosperity or as ancestral spirits (Gunnell 2007; Nordberg 2013; Nygaard forthcoming), they appear to exhibit a local focus. Despite this, the female speaker of Strophe 5 declares that hraðum ek við Óðins […] reiði (‘I fear Óðinn’s wrath’; Sigvatr Þórðarson 2012: 590). Given the Christian Sigvatr’s general avoidance of poetic diction based on pre-Christian mythology in his poetry, I find it unlikely that he includes Óðinn here as a general indication of paganism, although it remains possible that he substituted Óðinn for the name of another deity on metrical grounds. That Óðinn would apparently become wrathful if Sigvatr and his companions were offered shelter does not, to my mind, imply that the álfar whose blót the Norwegians were disturbing and Óðinn were one and the same, but does indicate that the woman believed Óðinn perhaps had some sort of stake in proceedings. This could be that the álfar in question were somehow subsidiary to Óðinn (not impossible, given the broad use of the term to designate a range of supernatural beings), or that

Óðinn would have been offended by the breaking of the household seal during a sacral period of time.

However we understand the reference to Óðinn, it is a reminder that we should be careful not to impose overly stark divisions on our source material: for all that the evidence examined here suggests that pre-Christian household religion appears to have largely been concerned with localised deities and supranatural beings, there are also suggestions that other deities were sometimes also worshipped in domestic settings (Gunnell 2015). Even Vǫlsa þátrr, with its unique object of worship bearing what appears to be a personal name, has been interpreted as belonging to a Feryr-based religious discourse: Folke Ström, for example, links the horse penis to various other equine motifs in Freyr cult, such as Freyfaxi, the sacral horse of Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða (1954: 22–31). Considering that the housewife heldr hann fyrir guð sinn (‘regarded it as her god’; Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: II, 442), it is not impossible that we are expected to understand that she regards Vǫlsi as an incarnation of another, presumably greater, supranatural being. I would thus argue that overstressing a putative division between more widely recognised and more locally-focused supranatural beings risks returning scholarly discourse to the bad old days of ‘high’ and ‘low’ mythology, with all the biases, indifference to and disdain for popular religion such terminology entails (Raudvere 2008; cf. Long 2005). I believe it is likely that both pan-Nordic and regional ‘big gods’ could have been venerated alongside more localised figures as part of the articulation of private religiosity under study in this text (particularly in elite or semi-elite settings like the Þórr-worship of Þórólfr Mostrarskegg), although whether or not it can be taken as further proof of the contextual henotheism proposed by Terry Gunnell remains to be seen (2015). Nonetheless, pre-Christian household religion does appear to have featured a clear predilection for less widely known, more locally focused deities and supranatural beings usually associated with the family and/or local landscape.

3.2 Iconography

There is a surprisingly rich corpus of iconography interpreted as representing pre-Christian deities in the Nordic region. The beaten-foil offerings known as gullgubber, mostly dated from around 500 AD until the start of the Viking Age, are difficult to interpret but often regarded as
representing supranatural beings (Watt 1999; 2002; Simek 2000). Their deposition in domestic contexts – particularly beneath the post-holes and walls of buildings – is suggestive of a role in foundational rituals and the establishment of the domestic space (Hamerow 2006), although it must be noted that they are more typically found under the remains of halls and other high-status buildings. Several large monuments such as the Altuna runestone (Rundata 2014: U1161) also appear to invoke mythological subjects, although these are difficult to locate in the context of household religion – the two-dimensional figures on such monuments were clearly for public consumption. Some three-dimensional figures have been argued to portray pre-Christian deities, although many of these are also difficult to definitively link to a domestic or household setting, and Neil Price has called for caution, raising valid concerns about the over-willingness of analysts to see mythological figures in iconography (2006).

However justifiable such scepticism, there are extant textual accounts describing images of deities including Þórr, Óðinn, and Freyr from across the Nordic cultural area. Adam describes *statuas trium deorum* (‘statues of three gods’; 1917: 258) in eleventh-century Gamla Uppsala; Brennu-Njáls saga claims that Jarl Hákon had statues of both Þorgerðr and Þórr in his *goðahús* (‘god-house, temple’; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 216); and both Landnámabók and Eyrbyggja saga describe Þórolfr *Mostrarskegg*’s high-seat pillars as bearing images of Þórr (Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 124), to which the *saga* adds that when leaving Norway Þórolfr took earth from *undan stallanum, þar er Þórr hafði á setit* (‘under the pedestal, on which Þórr had sat’), clearly implying some three-dimensional representation of the god (Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 7). While few of these narratives unequivocally represent household religion, the word used for some form of pedestal – or pre-Christian altar? – in Eyrbyggja saga, Snorri Sturluson’s thirteenth-century Hákonar saga góða (Snorri

28 Iron-Age figures believed to represent Óðinn include the one-eyed statuette found at Lindby (Sweden; Gräslund 2008: 254), the hanged gold figure from Lunda (Sweden; Andersson et al. 2004), and the seated Lejre figurine (Denmark; Christensen 2013). The infamous ‘Freyr’ – complete with erect phallus – was found at Rällinge (Sweden; Price 2006), and potential Þórr-figures have been identified in Iceland (at Eyrarland), Sweden (at Lund), and Denmark (at Feddet; see further Perkins 2001). A range of figures, both two- and three-dimensional, usually silver, have been interpreted as *valkyrjur* – notably at Tissø (Denmark) and Hårby (Denmark; cf. Murphy 2013: 131–138).

29 Þórolfr’s Þórr-worship may come close, but Þórolfr was such an influential figure in settlement-age Iceland that I hesitate to identify religion conducted at his home as a purely private matter.
Sturluson 1941–51: I, 167), and the fourteenth-century Kjalnesinga saga (Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959: 7–8) also appears in the second part of a verse credited to the missionary Þorvaldr in Kristni saga, Þorvalds þáttr víðförla I, and Þorvalds þáttr víðförla II:

En með enga svinnu
algin rýgr við skaldi
þá greypí Guð gyðju
gall of heiðnum stalli.

(Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 10; II, 74; II, 95)

But the old wife shrieked against the skald over the heathen altar. Let God be harsh on the gyðja!

Þorvaldr speaks this verse in response to Friðgerðr’s performance of a sacrifice, itself a reaction to his Christian preaching at Hvammr. This sacrifice may have occurred in the dwelling – as in both traditions of Þorvalds þáttr víðförla (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 73; II, 95) – or in a separate building, depending upon our interpretation of Kristni saga’s description of the setting as í hofinu (‘in the hof’; Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 9). Whether or not Friðgerðr ever had anything standing on or carved into her stalli is never resolved, but the episode is certainly suggestive. We might also argue that less elite forms of household religion are more likely to have employed iconography in less durable substances like wood or bone, and that the absence of clear evidence for such popular idols is not evidence of their absence in Iron-Age praxis.

Significantly more overt is Vǫlsa þáttr, where the Vǫlsi cult is clearly centred on a non-anthropomorphic representation of divine power. The horse penis at the centre of events is in one verse explicitly identified as a blæti (‘idol, fetish, sacral object’), and it is said the old woman heldr hann fyrir guð sinn (‘regarded it as her god’; Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: II, 442). I therefore believe there is cause to regard iconographic elements as a characteristic of household cult in the Late Iron Age, although the apparently widespread use of different images in other pre-Christian Nordic religions should caution against its adoption as definitive of this form of cult.
3.3 Food

The notion that household cult in the pre-Christian Nordic region might be identified via the presence of food-based rituals as found in the comparative paradigm – where many such customs eschew meat – does not stand up to much scrutiny. While many domestic and household religions around the world, particularly in Asia, employ food-based rituals when interacting with kitchen and stove gods (Knapp 1999: 84–91; Rabuzzi 2005: 4106), pre-Christian Nordic religion’s appear to have utilised sacral meals at almost every conceivable level. Blót (‘sacrifice’) and veizla (‘[sacral] feast’) are arguably the two most important aspects of pre-Christian ritual (Jón Hnefill Ádalsteinsson 1998), although sadly our extant narrative sources provide few details as to their conduct. The details we do have stem from rituals with larger congregations, such as the horse-based meal and ritualised consumption of alcohol accompanied by toasts that the Christian Hákon inn góði tries so strenuously to avoid in Hákonar saga góða (Snorri Sturluson 1941–51: I, 171–172). The Gotlandic institution of supnautar (‘boiling companions’), a religiously-charged social relationship created through shared ritual meals, is also worth considering in this context, but it is poorly witnessed and presented as the result of activity at the local þing-level, so I do not believe it to be evidence of household religion (Peel 1999: 4; cf. Murphy forthcoming a).

There was presumably some variation in what was eaten and drunk as part of such events, if only for economic reasons. The high cost of sacrificing even an older, less useful horse or similar animal makes it entirely possible that some deities were offered vegetarian options at particular times and/or in particular regions. The continuous use of so-called älvkvarn (‘elf mills’, also called cup-marks) from the Bronze Age into the Modern Era in some parts of Sweden might reflect this, given the modern folk tradition of making dairy-based offerings in such carvings.30 Chapter 9 of Heimslýsing ok helgfræði, a Christian theological tract preserved in the fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript Hauksbók,31

31 Hauksbók (today AM 371 4to, AM 544 4to, and AM 675 4to) has traditionally been regarded as the output of a single fourteenth-century Icelander, Haukr Erlandsson. More recently, Karl G. Johansson has argued that some sections have a significantly distinct provenance, with the text today referred to as Heimslýsing ok helgfræði (‘Description of the World and Theology’) dated to a c. 1200 Norwegian context (2017: 135–137).
preserves a small account of food-based offerings by women to explicitly local supranatural beings called land vettir (‘land-beings’; Finnur Jónsson 1892–1896: 167) in a list of forbidden magical and prophetic practices that may reflect a Norwegian articulation of the Swedish älvkvarn:

Sumar konor ero sua vitlausar ocblindar vm þurft sína at þer taka mat sin oc færa a ræsar vt eða vndir hella. oc signa land vettum oc eta síðan, til þess at land vettir skili þeim þa hollar vera. oc til þess at þer skili þa eiga betra bu en aðr. (Finnur Jónsson 1892–1896: 167)

Some women are so witless and blind with regards to their needs that they take their food and go out on piles of stones or under slabs of rock, and consecrate [it] to the land vettir and then eat [it], in order that they should have better farms than before.

This account should definitely be considered further evidence of localised food offerings in Norway, and the blót at Giljá – dedicated to a chthonic, local being with links to prosperity – could very well have been the pre-Christian ancestor of the medieval practice against which Heimslýsing ok helgifræði’s author railed. Given the similarities of the two accounts, I believe it would be sensible to overlook the lack of explicit evidence for either a household congregation or a domestic setting in Hauksbók, and, considering also its description of female-led practice, food offerings, localised supranatural beings, and the prosperity of the local farmstead, regard it as highly suggestive of exactly the sort of household cult under study in this article.

Yet not every instance of pre-Christian ritual appears to have been focused on food: Völsla þátrr describes a meal as well as a poetic ritual, but the narrative is clear that the ritual takes place only after the meal – referred to simply as matr (‘food’) – is over (Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: II, 443). As accounts of pre-Christian ritual that explicitly exclude food are few and far between, and that the communal consumption of food appears to have played a significant role in cult at all social levels, I would argue that relatively little utility can be attained from the use of food-based ritual in attempting to define or identify pre-Christian Nordic household religion's.

3.4 Rites de passage

So little evidence of rites de passage – by which I understand rituals following van Gennep’s tripartite structure of separation, liminality, and
incorporation (1960) – survives from pre-Christian Nordic culture that Jens Peter Schjødt cautions that ‘we cannot attribute importance to the *argumenta ex silencio*’ when searching for them (2008: 328). The obvious life passage events likely to be accompanied by rituals in a household context are those that marked separation from and incorporation into the social unit: births, weddings, divorces, and funerals. Little evidence of pre-Christian childbirth ritual has survived into the texts recorded during the medieval period: Oddrúnargrátr invokes Frigg and Freyja to reward the singing of *galdrar* (‘spell, magical chant’) during childbirth (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014: II, 366); and Strophes 7, 19 and 32 of the eddic poem *Rígsþula* witness the use of water in a naming ceremony (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014: I, 450–445), but much more than that cannot be said. The telling of prophecy for a newborn is witnessed in texts like the fantastic Norna-Gests þátttr, but details are hard to establish (Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: I, 397); and Snorri’s thirteenth-century Heimskringla account of Haraldr hárfagrí’s revenge on the English King Æthelstan in the early tenth century suggests that to place a child up one’s lap was to claim fosterage of that child (Snorri Sturluson 1941–51: I, 144–145), perhaps in imitation of a ritual where a father acknowledged his child. Given the practice of exposing unwanted children to the elements as a form of population control – in both pre-Christian and Christian times – it is perhaps unsurprising that Nordic culture appears to have placed relatively little emphasis on explicitly religious childbirth rituals.

32 Unlike our extant medieval sources, modern Nordic folklore does exhibit a concern with childbirth, with enough recorded narratives of human women acting as midwives to supranatural beings that they have been categorised as an independent subcategory of ‘fairy’ tales: ML 5070, ‘Midwife to the Fairies’ (Christiansen 1958: 91–99). Jacqueline Simpson notes a number of variants collected in Iceland, and includes an episode in the fourteenth-century *fornaldarsaga* Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga (1972: 17–22). A tradition of prayers to the Virgin Mary, to be repeated by the mother as she gives birth, may be linked to the *galdr* of Oddrúnargrátr; and key-related symbolism – including the use of flowers from the orchid family, which are connected with Mary in Nordic folklore and are sometimes named for her (e.g. *marifamilien* for the orchidaceae in Norsk bokmål) – is linked with successful birth (Kvideland & Sehmsdorf 1988: 147–148). While this material only reinforces the likelihood of Iron-Age Nordic culture having had childbirth traditions, I am reluctant to speculate here on what form these might have taken.

33 Pre-Christian exposure is recorded in Kristni saga (Sigurgeir Steingrimsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 36); Christian exposure is mandated to occur post-baptism inside the local church by the Gulatingslova (Eithun, Rindal & Ulset 1994: 44–45).
rituals, although we should not overlook the elite, male bias of our written medieval sources.

Weddings (and divorces) are, unfortunately, similarly under-recorded, with Schjødt noting ‘[w]e have no actual descriptions of wedding rituals that could give us an insight into their symbolism and structure’ (2008: 333). The thirteenth-century Gunnlaugs saga ormtstungu does note that an Icelandic betrothal (set in the early eleventh century) required the holding of hands and some form of speech act performed before witnesses (Sigurður Nordal & Guðni Jónsson 1938: 60), but offers no details of wedding rituals. Mythological texts like Þrymskviða and Skírnismál may imply that Þórr or Freyr played a role at weddings, and the performance of the skaldic poem Húsdrapa at an Icelandic wedding feast held at the end of the tenth century (recorded in chapter 29 of Laxdœla saga) suggests that the performance of poetry was one form of entertainment permissible at a wedding. Yet poetry appears to have been a common form of entertainment in a huge variety of settings, particularly in the imagined past created in medieval Íslendingasögur narratives, which suggests to me that Húsdrápa’s mythological content is incidental to the event at which it was first performed – an event which was, incidentally, a wedding between members of the social elite and attended by a large number of short-term guests, calling into question any potential household context (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934: 77–80).

Funerals are better attested, although most narrative accounts clearly refer to high-status individuals and appear to have included large congregations: ibn Fadlān’s Risāla, accounts of Baldr’s funeral in Úlfr Uggason’s Húsdrapa and Snorra Edda, and Hákonar saga góða all suggest some sort of performance including both speech and ritualised movements around an outdoor site. Smaller rituals such as the gift of helskór (‘hell-shoes’) are recorded in Íslendingasögur and also appear to have occurred at the graveside itself (Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943: 45, 56). The use of grave goods is attested archaeologically (see, for example, Kristján Eldjárn 2000), sometimes seemingly accompanied by elaborate ritual, up to and including animal and human sacrifice (Nordeide 2011a; Price 2010). Yet none of this can be convincingly linked to a household setting.

3.5 Roles for Women

The role of women in pre-Christian Nordic religion in general is a topic easily worthy of an article all its own. Generally speaking, our medieval Christian texts are keen to stress the role of women in what today would be termed 'magical' rituals, particularly prophecy, many accounts of which take place in domestic settings. Even if we separate magic and religion – which should be recognised as a matter of expediency, not a claim that the two were unrelated in the Late Iron Age (cf. Sørensen 2013) – and discard the former, there is still evidence of women involved in traffic with the supranatural. The mere existence of the term gyðja, the female equivalent of the male priest-chieftain goði, implies that at least some women fulfilled roles in public religion. Only a handful are known by name, with the Hauksbók and Sturlubók redactions of Landnámabók recording Þorlaug gyðja Hrólfsdóttir (Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 79–80, 168–169) and Þuríðr gyðja Sölmundardóttir (Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 223). Hauksbók alone also witnesses Þuríðr hofgyðja Véþormsdóttir – who was both the half-sister and cousin of Þórðr Freysgoði – (Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 321). Little is known about the duties of gyðjur, although the poorly preserved Íslendingasaga Vápnfirðinga saga clearly understands them to have been the equivalent to any male goði:

Kona hét Steinvör og var hofgyðja og varðveitti höfuðhofið. Skyldu þangað allir bændur gjalda hoftoll. (Jón Jóhannesson 1950: 33)

A woman was called Steinvør, and she was a hof-gyðja, and maintained the main hof [in the district]. All farmers were supposed to pay the hof-tax there [i.e. to the main hof].

Whether pre-Christian cult leaders really did demand a tax that sounds

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37 As the daughter of Koðrán’s older brother Sölmundr, Þorlaug is Porvaldr víðförli’s cousin, linking her to several of the accounts under consideration in this article. She marries a man called Porsteinn who lived at Hofslund (lit. ‘temple’s land’), the same man who was involved in the death of the apparent magician Ljótt (whose son Hrolleifr had terrorised the district), who was beheaded mid-‘moonning’ ritual (Gunnell 2014a).

While these accounts would all appear to reflect religious roles for women in the public realm, there is also clear evidence of female involvement in household cult: the second time Sigvatr and his companions are refused accommodation in the Austrfararvísur, they are turned away by a woman who appears to have some authority. Indeed, Sigvatr refers to the settlement as bea sínum (‘her/their farm’; Sigvatr Þórðarson 2012: 590), which may indicate that he regarded it as her property, for all that it is impossible to distinguish between singular and plural forms of the reflexive pronoun in the dative case. It is also Friðgerðr who sacrifices in all three accounts of the Hvammr cult. What is more, as noted above, Þorvaldr derides Friðgerðr as a gyðja in his verse – although it is noteworthy that her husband Þórarinn, also called a goði in Þorvaldr’s verse, is away at the þing when Þorvaldr arrives, which might call Friðgerðr’s wider cultic authority into some question (Sigurgeir Steingrimsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 9; II, 73; II, 95).

The Hauksbók account of women making food-based offerings to land vettir is also noteworthy, although Vǫlsa þáttir is perhaps the clearest example of household religion under female leadership: it is the housewife who preserves Vǫlsi, and it is also she who presents the penis every evening and speaks the first verse of the poetic ritual (Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: II, 442–443). The þáttir moreover notes that she is the only member of the household for whom the penis would stand erect: Ok með fjandans krafti vex hann hann svá ok styrknar, at hann má standa hjá húsfrøyju, ef hon vill (‘And with the devil’s power he [Vǫlsi] grew so high and strong, that he could stand up for the housewife, if she wished it’; Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: II, 442). The gender roles of Vǫlsa þáttir are admittedly not uncomplicated, for although the housewife and the female slave are the first and final speakers of the regular ritual, the family’s intelligent young daughter is the most reluctant participant and the most eager to convert to Christianity when Óláfr destroys the penis. This also complicates Siân Grønlie’s reading of the text, which she
sets in a category of conversion narratives that pit masculine Christianity against feminine paganism (2006: 297–298).

Grønlie does, however, make a valid observation about the apparently female-led household cults described in Flateyjarbók, suggesting that they present something of a binary divide between ‘the public and legal sphere, perceived as male and secular, within which Christianity is adopted first, and the domestic sphere, perceived as female and the focus of pagan cult’ (2006: 298). This medieval, Christian depiction is almost certainly an exaggeration – if only an unintentional one – of the possibilities pre-Christian Nordic women had to take on religious roles in society. While the evidence seems to support this idea, the picture is not clear-cut, even within the sources discussed here: as noted above, Þórarinn is as much a goði as his wife Friðgerðr a gyðja in Þorvaldr’s eyes, and Sigvatr is also denied accommodation by three men – whom he may have given a name suggestive of pre-Christian cult leadership, as outlined above – in addition to the woman of Strophe 5. Nonetheless, women could certainly be highly influential figures in Late Iron Age culture, albeit within strictly defined bounds (Enright 1996; Jochens 1996; Gräslund 2001), and it is thus not unreasonable to posit that household cult allowed both women and men to take on prominent roles – as opposed to more public cult, which has traditionally been regarded as male-dominated. Admittedly, the account of Ægmunðar þáttr describes a female-led cult that encompassed several settlements (Jónas Kristjánsson 1956: 99–115), which might suggest that a greater role for women was more acceptable in Sweden.39

4. A Nordic Characteristic?
Autumnal or Winter Timing

In addition to the various characteristics of the comparative model of private religion examined above, one further aspect of pre-Christian household religion emerges from the data presented here: the timing of ritual activity. The general paradigm on which this study is based reflects

38 Anne-Sofie Gräslund has proposed something quite different occurred in Sweden, with women driving the adoption of Christianity in ‘den private sfären’ (‘the private sphere’: 2001: 65–69).
39 For further discussion of evidence that women may have had a greater role in more public cult that has previously been accepted, see Sundqvist 2007: 58–71.
such a range of cultures – occupying such a range of climates – that it is understandable that there was a certain flexibility with regard to when some rituals, particularly crisis or occasional rituals like *rites de passage*, were performed. The Nordic region in the Late Iron Age, on the other hand, can be said to have a more contiguous set of localised cultures that suffered under a much harsher set of climactic conditions. This resulted in a stark division between summer – when outdoor work was possible – and winter – when society moved indoors, occupying their dwellings for longer and longer each day as the daylight lessened and the weather worsened (Gunnell 2000; 2006a).\(^4\) Gunnell has proposed that this two-fold division of the year was explicitly gendered, stating that ‘for many the winter period was seen as being under the control of female spirits that held life and death in the balance’ (2000: 138). While the accounts of localised spirits examined above do not appear to reflect a particular concern with deities of one gender or another (with the obvious exception of *Þiðranda þáttr*), female-led household cult, which took place in the domestic setting occupied to a greater extent during the winter, does appear to be better attested in the winter than in the summer.

*Vǫlsa þáttr*, for example, describes how *Liðr nú svá á hausti, at kerling tekr hann upp hvert kveld* (‘It happened from then in the autumn, that the old woman took him [Vǫlsi] out each evening’; Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finn-bogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: II, 442), and the *veizla* of *Þiðranda þáttr* is also called a *haustboði* (‘autumn feast’) that took place during the *vetrnáttum* (‘Winter Nights’; Vilhjámur Bjarnar, Finn-bogi Guðmundsson & Sigurður Nordal 1944–45: I, 446; *cf.* Gunnell 2000; 2006a; Nordberg 2006). The Austrfararvísur are also explicitly set during the winter, with the first strophe including Sigvatr’s complaints, as he sets out, that *svafk fátt í hausti […] síðan* (‘I slept little in the autumn after that’; Sigvatr Þórðarson 2012: 583). While this might at a stretch be read to mean that Sigvatr slept poorly through the winter after learning that he would be departing for Sweden in the spring, Strophe 10 explicitly has him riding in the autumn: *Enn í haust […] hlýrk at ríða* (‘But in autumn, I was required to ride’; Sigvatr Þórðarson 2012: 597).

Nonetheless, it cannot be claimed that we have a clear-cut picture of autumnal and winter timing for all household cult. Some of the accounts

\(^4\) Regional diversity in climatic conditions across the Germanic Nordic region must, of course, be acknowledged: the frozen waterways of much of Sweden made travel during the winter perfectly possible, suggesting that a binary division between summer/outside and winter/inside is not as sustainable in east-Norse culture.
that may describe such religion, including Ibrāhīm ibn Ya’qūb’s writings and Norna-Gests þátrr, do not specify the period they describe. Similarly, while events at Giljá are said to have occurred during the winter which Þorvaldr and Friðrekr spent staying with Koðrán, we cannot say with any certainty when Koðrán conducted cult directed at his rock-dwelling spirit. Given its apparent connections to prosperity – watching over Koðrán’s livestock in Þorvalds þátrr víðfǫrla I (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 62) and being called an ármaðr in the Kristni saga tradition (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 7) – we might suspect that the spirit’s usefulness was actually greater during the spring and summer. What is more, the Kristni saga and Þorvalds þátrr víðfǫrla I descriptions we have of the Hvammr cult explicitly take place while the farmer Þórarinn is away at the Alþing, placing events at the height of summer (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 9; II, 72), a reading not ruled out by the Þorvalds þátrr víðfǫrla II explanation that he was simply eigi heima (‘not home’; Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Foote 2003: II, 95). Other evidence certainly backs up the practice of religion during the summer, notably Snorri Sturluson’s record of an widely-celebrated summer religious festival in his Ynglinga saga (1941–51: I, 20). However, he states explicitly that this was connected with military success, which to my mind suggests that this festival was likely celebrated by large gatherings of people in the public sphere, likely under the direction of a male priest-chieftain, rather than by household congregations in their own domestic spaces. It is admittedly not impossible that these festivals fell somewhere between household-focused cults and large-scale (even proto-national) þing gatherings, perhaps as a form of elite household cult.

Regardless, I believe there is significant evidence for the existence of household cult performed during the long months of the Nordic winter, particularly in late autumn or early winter as the seasons changed. Indeed, there would appear to be sufficient cause to add another secondary characteristic to our putative model of pre-Christian household religion, one that sets our Nordic case apart from the various Antique articulations that formed the comparative paradigm: that such religion was more likely to

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41 This is likely the same summer festival mentioned twice elsewhere in the text, although that is not completely clear (1941–51: I, 166; II, 194). In this context it might be worth noting that other forms of less public cult may have been practised during the winter, as Otto Höfler has argued for certain elite forms of warrior cult praxis linked to ancestor worship (1934: 16–33).
occur in the late autumn or winter than the spring or summer, at times when the household and dwelling were the centre of activity.

5. Conclusions on a Nordic Articulation of Household Religion

I believe we now have enough information to propose a working model of pre-Christian household religion in the Nordic Late Iron Age: on the basis of the evidence examined in this article, such cult is best regarded as expressing the religiosity of a particular small-scale, localised social unit – the household. It was typically, but not always, performed in or near the dwelling of this household; appears to have been dedicated more often to localised supranatural beings (including ancestral spirits) than to more widely-known deities; seems to have offered more significant roles for women as cult specialists and leaders than other pre-Christian Nordic religion's; and seems to have been more common in the autumn and winter than during the spring and summer. This latter would appear to be a notably Nordic feature of private religion. Food-based rituals undoubtedly played an important part of this Nordic articulation of household religion, as did the use of iconographic representations of the supranatural, although neither of these aspects allows useful differentiations from more publically accessible religion's to be drawn. There is little evidence for *rites de passage* being explicitly linked to a household-based congregation or domestic setting. This model cannot, of course, cover every eventually, and the cases I have employed in this article are obviously not exhaustive. It is also possible that my findings overlook a great deal of temporal and regional variation, as the majority of the sources I have employed here stem from Iceland and most likely describe the very latest forms of pre-Christian religiosity prior to the arrival of Christianity. (Christianity, as an Historical/Axial Religion, does not appear to have had an obviously equivalent private cult; Bellah 1964; 2011; cf. Nedkvitne 2009.) I nonetheless hope that my findings here will prove both an effective basis from which to study pre-Christian religion's more generally, and a useful contribution to scholarship on non-elite private religions in a wider comparative context.42

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The understanding of pre-Christian Nordic religion as a complicated network of overlapping and interrelated religious systems has achieved a growing acceptance in recent years, allowing for an increase in studies of a number of localised and phenomenologically-distinct articulations of historical Scandinavian paganism. However, while large-scale public cults of high-status sites like Gamla Uppsala,
Lejre, and Hlaðir have received considerable attention, little work has yet been done on more private forms of religiosity in the Late Iron Age. This article utilises a paradigm of typologically-relevant domestic, familial, and household religion's developed in the Antique Near East and Mediterranean to analyse textual and archaeological evidence for household cult in the Nordic Late Iron Age. Based on descriptions of religious praxis in a number of medieval Icelandic narratives and skaldic verse contextualised by philological and archaeological evidence, a model of pre-Christian household religion is proposed to feature characteristics such as a predominance of localised deities, significant roles for women, and a temporal link to specific times of the year, particularly late autumn and winter. This model not only contributes to an emerging comparative model of historical private religiosity, but also offers insight into what might be uniquely Nordic about pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia and its environs.

**Keywords**: Pre-Christian religion, household religion, popular religion, comparative religion, religious praxis, domestic life

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