

# Trees as a Central Theme in Norse Mythology and Culture

## An Archaeological Perspective

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**ABSTRACT:** This article, the inaugural winner of the journal's Gurli Aagaard Woods Undergraduate Publication Award, combines the analysis of ancient literature with an archaeological approach in an effort to further interpret the presence and significance of trees in medieval Scandinavian culture. The analysis of textual references to trees such as Yggdrasill and Barnstokkr found in the Norse works *Völuspá*, *Grímnismál*, *Gylfaginning*, and *Völsunga Saga*, are combined with academic articles, juxtaposed with the examination of archaeological sites at Fröso, Herresta, Bjarsgård, Österfärnebo, and Karmøy, and integrated with modern Scandinavian attitudes to explore an interest in tree-human relationships, literature, and archaeology in medieval Scandinavia.

**RÉSUMÉ :** Cet article, premier lauréat du prix de la revue Gurli Aagaard Woods de publication pour étudiant de premier cycle, combine l'analyse d'une littérature ancienne avec une approche archéologique, dans un effort pour interpréter davantage la présence et l'importance des arbres dans la culture scandinave médiévale. Les analyses des références textuelles à des arbres tels que Yggdrasill et Barnstokkr trouvées dans les travaux Norse *Völuspá*, *Grímnismál*, *Gylfaginning* et la saga *Völsunga*, sont combinées à des articles académiques, juxtaposées à l'examen de sites archéologiques à Frösö, Herresta, Bjarsgård, Österfärnebo et Karmøy, et intégrées à des attitudes scandinaves modernes afin d'explorer un intérêt envers les relations arbre-humain, la littérature et l'archéologie en Scandinavie médiévale.

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## Introduction



he continual theme of trees in Norse Mythology is important to our understanding of the cosmology of Norse Mythology. In the texts *Völuspá*, *Grímnismál*, *Gylfaginning*, and *Völsunga Saga*, the tree is used to symbolize and explain important aspects central to Norse culture.

Through an examination of this textual evidence, alongside archaeological evidence, including most notably a church in Frösö, Jämtland, a stone structure in Bjärsgård, a rune stone at Österfärnebo, and an examination of the concept of *vårdträd*, this essay explores the idea of trees as guardians, and ultimately as a significant theme in the understanding of Norse Mythology and its connection to Scandinavian material culture. Comparing the literary sources we have in these Icelandic texts with past and present archaeological findings throughout the Scandinavian landscape demonstrates the significance of the tree as fulfilling a protective, beneficial role in Norse literature and culture—both past and present. This article ultimately seeks to explore the benefits of comparing the study of ancient literature with archaeology in seeking a comprehensive understanding of the importance of trees in medieval Scandinavian culture and how this importance is understood in modern Scandinavian discourse between the fields of archaeology and literature study.

## The Importance of Trees in Old Norse Literature

In Old Icelandic texts, the presence of trees often symbolizes wisdom, justice, creation, and protection (Kvilhaug 2013). In *Völuspá*, the concept of a “world tree, or world ash,” is mentioned in stanza 19.1, linking the kenning, *Yggdrasill*,<sup>1</sup> to the concept of a tree as the centre of the Norse cosmos.

Ask veit ek standa,  
heitir Yggdrasill,  
hár baðmr, ausinn  
hvíta auri;  
þaðan koma doggvar  
þærs í dala falla,  
stendr æ yfir grœnn  
Urðarbrunni.  
(Kristjánsson and Ólason 295)

An ash I know that stands, Yggdrasill it's called,  
a tall tree, drenched with shining loam;  
from there come the dews which fall in the valley,

green, it stands always over Urd's well.  
(Larrington 6)

In this stanza Yggdrasill is said to be the centre of the nine worlds in Norse Mythology from its placement over Urd's Well, where the Æsir gain their wisdom, and, as stated in *Gylfaginning*, is the "central, holy place of the Gods" (Sturluson 2005, Ch. 15). The fifteenth chapter of *Gylfaginning* is dedicated to describing the world ash, Yggdrasill, as central to the Æsir's lives:

Askurinn er allra trjáa mestur og bestur. Limar hans dreifast um heim allan og standa yfir himmi. Þrjár rætur trésins halda því upp og standa afar breitt. Ein er með ásum, önnur með hrímþussum, þar sem forðum var Gimmungagap. Þriðja stendur yfir Niflheim og undir þeirri rót er Hvergelmir. En Niðhöggur gnagar neðan rötina. En undir þeirri rót er til hrímþussa horfir er Mímisbrunnur, er spekt og manvit er í fólgið, og heitir sá Mímir er á brunninn. Hann er fuller af vísendum fyrir því að hann drekkur úr brunnum úr Gjallarhorni. Þá kom Alfoður og beiddist eins drykkjar af brunnum. En hann lagði auga sitt í veð.  
(Sturluson 2013, 165)

[The ash is the largest and the best of all trees. Its branches spread themselves over all the world, and it stands over the sky. Three roots support the tree and they are spread very far apart. One is among the Æsir. A second is among the frost giants... The third reaches down to Niflheim... Under the root that goes to the frost giants is the Well of Mimir. Wisdom and intelligence are hidden here... The third root of the ash is in heaven, and under that root is the very holy well called the Well of Urd. There the gods have their place of judgement.]  
(Sturluson 2013, 165)

From this excerpt it is clear that the tree, specifically the idea of a world tree, is crucial to understanding the cosmological geography of the Æsir, and therefore it is important to our understanding of Norse Mythology as a whole. The crucial role of Yggdrasill as supporting the Æsir, serving as a setting of the holy courts, supplying wisdom beneath its roots, and connecting three main worlds of Norse Mythology, as stated in *Gylfaginning*, demonstrates the significance of the tree throughout Norse mythology. As Lotte Hedeager states in her work *Iron Age Myth & Materiality*, "Ásgarðr [is] the home of the gods, at the top of Yggdrasill, the undisputed centre of the universe" (150-1). Hedeager's statement is further supported by evidence found in *Grímnismál*, in which Yggdrasill is said to be the most important of all trees:

Askr Yggdrasil,  
hann er cœtr víða  
en Skíðblaðnir skipa,

Óðinn ása  
 en jóa Sleipnir,  
 Bilrost brúa  
 en Bragi skálda,  
 Hábrók hauka  
 en hunda Garmr.  
 (Kristjánsson and Ólason 376–77)

Yggdrasill's ash is the most pre-eminent of trees,  
 as is Skidbladnir of ships,  
 Odin of the Æsir, Sleipnir of horses,  
 Bifrost of bridges, Bragi of poets,  
 Habrok of hawks, and Garm of Dogs.  
 (Larrington 54)

Once again, the importance of Yggdrasill is reiterated. In comparison to other important characters of Norse Mythology, such as Skíðblaðnir, Bragi, and even Óðinn the All-father (Larrington 55), the figure of Yggdrasill is clearly stated as a fundamental aspect of Norse Mythology, without which the gods would have no centre in the nine worlds, and to which Norse concepts of time, place, destiny, and death are all linked (Andrén 2005, 105–38).

Trees in Norse Mythology can be viewed through a more legendary, possibly even a more historical, lens in *Völsunga Saga*, and especially in the story of Barnstokkr. At the wedding of King Siggeirr and Signý Völsungsdóttir, Óðinn, disguised as an old man dressed in tatters, plunges a sword into Barnstokkr, a tree that stands in the hall of King Völsung (Byock 38).

Sá maðr er mönnum ókunnr at sýn. Sjá maðr hefir þess háttar búning, at hann hefir heflu flekkótta yfir sér. Sá maðr var berfætrr ok hafði knýtt línbrókum at beini. Sá maðr hafði sverð i hendi ok gengr at barnstokkinum ok hött síðan á höfði. Hann var hárr mjök ok eldiligr ok einsýnn. Hann bregðr sverðinu ok stingr því í stokkinn, svá at sverðit sökkr at hjöltum upp.  
 (Jónsson 114)

A stranger to all, he was wearing a cloak of many colours; he was barefoot, and his linen breeches are bound around his legs. This man had a sword in his hand and a hood pulled down low over his head. He was hoary with age and one-eyed. He strides over to [Barnstokkr], aims the sword and plunges it up to the hilt into the trunk.  
 (Grimstad 83)

The presence of trees in halls and buildings in general is a somewhat rare occurrence in Norse mythological texts,<sup>2</sup> yet some examples exist in historical and archaeological evidence (see Ellis Davidson.)

In H. R. Ellis Davidson's work, "The Sword at the Wedding," the concept of Barnstokkr as a *vårdträd* is examined. Ellis Davidson recalls the wedding of Signý and King Siggeirr, noting the significant placement of Barnstokkr in King Völsung's hall as important to the "luck and prosperity" of the family:

There seems little doubt that here we have an example of the 'guardian tree', such as used to stand beside many a house in Sweden and Denmark, and which was associated with the 'luck' of the family. The guardian tree usually stood beside the house, but there are some cases from the British Isles where the tree was inside and even formed part of the house itself.

(4)

Although the idea of guardian trees having a presence in and around homes is a much more recent phenomenon in comparison to ancient textual examples of the centrality of world trees (Andrén 2014, 37), Ellis Davidson states that Barnstokkr would have served as a guardian tree for the Völsungar and that Barnstokkr, in translation, refers to "child-trunk," stating that this tree likely would have been clutched by women for good luck as they gave birth (4). Ellis Davidson also states that the presence of Barnstokkr in the family's hall would have guaranteed them prosperity in the form of male offspring, and in the case of the guardian tree being destroyed, the family would cease to be protected (4-5). Although the story of Barnstokkr is different than that of Yggdrasil, there are clear connections between the two trees. Barnstokkr's role in *Völsunga Saga* bridges the gap between the supernatural and the tangible in the Norse universe. When Barnstokkr is examined alongside Yggdrasil, they both contribute significant evidence for the theme of trees as central to Scandinavian history.

## The Relationship Between Trees in Norse Literature and Archaeology

Now that the importance of trees in Norse mythology and legend has been established, the archaeological evidence of trees in a Norse context can be examined. Although little archaeological evidence of ancient trees and timber remain outside of arid environments, and therefore even less in Scandinavia, there are instances of surviving trees, tree trunks, stone structures, and runes that have been preserved that support the idea of trees as vital to understanding medieval Norse culture. One particularly interesting archaeological example can be found at the Romanesque church at Frösö, in Jämtland, Sweden (See figure 8 in Andrén 2014, 37). Archaeological excavation found that the root from a Viking-age birch tree rests beneath this Christian Church, supporting the common theory of cosmological continuity (Andrén 2014, 37), which upholds the idea that important aspects of Norse myth and legend were carried over and applied to

belief systems during the transition to Christianity in the medieval period (Cusack 137; see parallels between Yggdrasill and the Crucified Cross on page 142 and trees according to “judgement, law, and fate” on pages 147-70). It is logical, therefore, that the tree and what it symbolizes would have been included instead of removed in the construction of this Christian church.

Another collection of archaeological examples that can be used in understanding the importance of trees in Norse myth and culture are the instances of three-pointed stone settings at Bjärsgård in Skåne, the island of Öland, and at Herresta, Odensala, and Uppland in Sweden (Andrén 2014, 37-52). At these locations there are collections of large stones arranged in a “tricorn” shape. This distinct shape represents the three roots of the world ash, Yggdrasill (Andrén 2014, 37-52). At sites similar to Bjärsgård and Öland, there is archaeological evidence of post hole remains at the centre of each site, where a tall piece of timber would have stood upright to symbolize the trunk of Yggdrasill, with its stone roots spreading out below it (Andrén 2014, 37-52). These posts represent the idea of a “world support, functioning as a centre for judgement, rulership, and as a water source” (Cusack 147-70). As Carole M. Cusack examines in her work, *The Sacred Tree*, Adam of Bremen, in his description of the temple at Uppsala (208), stated the sacred grove had an accompanying water source alongside it (Cusack 137). The post holes found at sites like those at Bjärsgård can be conjectured to embody representations of larger sacred gathering sites, like at the temple in Uppsala.

At the partially destroyed Herresta site, there is a large monolith that would have stood in the centre of the stone setting to represent Yggdrasill’s trunk instead of a wooden post (Andrén 2014, 37-52). There are many examples of these three pointed stone settings throughout Scandinavia, with an exceptional site found on Karmøy, Norway, where a Christian church was likely erected on top of a large tricorn, with two existing monolith “trunks” still standing upright in the churchyard (Andrén 2014, 37-52). The site on Karmøy can also be used to explore the idea of cosmological continuity, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, from an archaeological perspective. The construction of lone-standing tricorns like those at Bjärsgård, Öland, and Herresta by Norse people clearly indicates the communal idea of the tree was important, especially the figure of Yggdrasill. One archaeological instance that is important to mention is the runestone fragment at Österfärnebo, Sweden. This fragment, as described by Marjolein Stern in her work “Sigurðr Fáfnisbani as Commemorative Motif,” depicts the popular legend of Sigurðr, the slayer of Fáfñir (see Jónsson; Byock).<sup>3</sup> This specific stone fragment shows “Sigurðr with rings and cross/tree, and Sigrdrífa/Brynhildr with horn,” flanked by other figures with spears or sticks, and all enveloped in a tree symbol with roots, possibly symbolic of the dragon in the Sigurðr story (Stern 898-99). The cross/tree figure that Stern interprets as especially significant clearly resembles tree imagery and adds to understanding the importance of trees in

Norse mythology and legend. The example of a cross and a tree being combined on this rune stone also connects back to the theory of cosmological continuity and the important aspects of Old Norse myth being adapted by Christianity during religious transition (Stern 898-99).<sup>4</sup> As stated in Jörn Staecker's article, "Heroes, Kings, and Gods," the Sigurðr story of the *Völsunga Saga* "played an important role in the transitional phase between paganism and Christianity, a mediator between the old heritage and the new way of thinking" (Staecker 366). The gradual changeover from Norse religion to Christianity required the assimilation of features from both religions to create a comprehensible understanding of Christianity for newcomers that had been socialized in a complex Norse environment (Staecker 366). Therefore, it is possible that the symbols of trees mixed with dragons, combined with images of the cross and Christ-like representations of Sigurðr on the rune stones at Österfärnebo, embody the importance of the tree being included in the transition from Norse paganism to Christianity (Staecker 366).

Archaeological evidence of the guardian tree in Scandinavia is by no means limited to the aforementioned examples of ancient monoliths, stone carvings, and preserved tree remnants. There are instances of still-standing guardian trees maintaining a presence in modern households in current day Scandinavia:

A familiar sight in Iceland, outside the few towns, is a lone-standing farmhouse with a solitary tree growing right up against it. These trees must be a twentieth-century echo of the traditional guardian tree, object of veneration outside farmstead and shrine alike in pre-Christian Northern Europe. The first and greatest of such trees was Yggdrasil.  
(Crossley-Holland 182)

Here, in Crossley-Holland's description of modern day guardian trees existing in Iceland, the planting of single trees near homes showcases the importance of Yggdrasil's presence in a family and as a religious icon.

The concept of *vårdträd*,<sup>5</sup> as seen throughout farmsteads in Sweden and known as *trunte* in Norway, is a surviving example of the Scandinavian tradition of planting trees around a familial dwelling to invoke the cosmic power of Yggdrasil, bringing fertility, unity, and prosperity to the family. The presence of a *vårdträd* or *trunte* close to a house or barn would have served as a revered, sacred part of the homestead, providing a direct link between physical trees and the ideological ideal of Yggdrasil (Forell Hulmes 2). The guardian tree survives in Scandinavia, originating in Viking Age society and persisting into the current landscape:

A special tradition that is shared by many Scandinavians is the planting or the knowing of a special tree in Swedish called a 'Vårdträd', and in Norwegian a 'Tuntre';

a sacred tree planted in the centre of the yard on a family farm that reflects an intimacy with place. The caring for the tree demonstrates respect for ancestors' spirits that were/are believed to reside in the tree, and is a moral reminder of caring for the farm or place where one lives.

(Forell Hulmes 2)

By examining past and present examples of the presence of trees in Scandinavia, it can be determined that guardian trees have always had a central role in the home (Forell Hulmes 2). Just as in the instance of the wedding feast at King Völsung's hall, where all the guests would have gathered around Barnstokkr, the guardian tree in the non-legendary medieval Scandinavian household would have been a central element providing protection and prosperity to a family, bringing the familial unit together (Ellis Davidson 4-5). Although there is no explicit archaeological excavation evidence of settlements existing directly around the stone structures like those at Bjärsgård, Öland, Herresta, and Karmøy, they would have brought the community together through their initial construction and ritualistic importance.<sup>6</sup> The role of the tree as central to non-mythological life is represented in the Norse mythological cosmos by Yggdrasill. Parallel to this, in Scandinavian communities, the idea of the world tree maintaining a sacred presence in community and personal life is represented by the planting and care of a *vårdträd*. Placed near homesteads, for Scandinavian peoples these trees symbolize a desire to be in contact with what was represented in Norse religion through the figure of Yggdrasill. As the centre of the Norse cosmos (Hedeager 150-1), Yggdrasill represents the foundation that holds the Norse cosmos together, with its roots travelling to the land of the Frost Giants, Niflheimr, and Ásgarðr, connecting the mythological world (Lindow) just as timber posts, stone monoliths, and *vårdträd* and *trunte* would have connected Ancient Norse communities, and still do, in the case of examples that survive today.

## Conclusion

The textual evidence of trees as important symbols in Norse mythology and legend can be combined with existing archaeological evidence to explain the theme of trees as central to both Old Norse literature and culture. By textually examining the presence of Yggdrasill as the centre of the mythological Norse cosmos and the importance of trees like Barnstokkr in guardianship roles, and combining this analysis with the surviving archaeological evidence of Norse peoples using trees in the construction of churches, representing trees in ancient stone structures, depicting trees on rune stones, and planting the *vårdträd*, the significance of the tree to Old Norse life is clear. As a symbol, the tree, in its metaphorical and archaeological forms, is a recurring and longstanding theme central to the understanding of Norse mythology as a whole. The use of this



interpretation, combining the facts seen in the literary and the archaeological examples, is beneficial to our modern understanding of ancient Scandinavian peoples on the whole. Reading their stories, both mythological and legendary, can be used to better understand the way they thought, and the interpretation of the archaeological remains left behind can be used to make a connection to the physical lives Scandinavian peoples lived thousands of years ago. When studied together, a more complete and integrative interpretation of medieval Scandinavian culture is possible.

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### NOTES

1. The name Yggdrasil translates from Old Norse to mean *Yggr* (Oðin) *drasil* (horse) (Simek and Hall 375–76).
2. For more examples of tree figures in Norse mythology, see references to *Lærðr* in Rudolf Simek and Angela Hall 185; *Mimameiðr* in Rudolf Simek and Angela Hall 216; *Irmingsúl* in Andy Orchard 96; and Carole M. Cusack. Despite the many different representations of trees throughout Scandinavian literary sources, outside of the case of *Barnstokkr* in the *Völsunga Saga*, there are scarce references to these trees having a presence in family homes. The concepts of protective trees in Scandinavia will be explored later in this article, in references to *Várðträd* and *Trunte*. Also see references to trees as microcosms and macrocosms in Douglas Forell Hulmes.
3. For the *Sigurðr* story, see ch. 18 in Jesse L. Byock. For the Icelandic translation, see Guðni Jónsson.
4. Worth mentioning is the Årsunda rune stone included by Stern, which also depicts a part of the *Sigurðr* story, with *Sigurðr* stabbing *Fáfnir*, in which *Fáfnir* is portrayed as a tree branching out of a cross/sword figure.
5. Meaning “guardian tree” in Swedish. From Carole M. Cusack 137.
6. Construction would have been laborious, moving heavy stones and timber would have been a task deemed important enough by the community to justify taking time off from other responsibilities in order to complete.

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