

# Horg, hov and ve – a pre-Christian cult place at Ranheim in Trøndelag, Norway, in the 4rd – 10th centuries AD

## Abstract

*In the summer of 2010 a well-preserved cult place was excavated at Ranheim on Trondheim Fjord, in the county of Sør-Trøndelag, Norway. The site consisted of a horg in the form of a flat, roughly circular stone cairn c.15 m in diameter and just under 1 m high, a hov in the form of an almost rectangular building with strong foundations, and a processional avenue marked by two stone rows. The horg is presumed to be later than c. AD 400. The dating of the hov is AD 895–990 or later, during a period when several Norwegian kings reigned, including Harald Hårfager (AD 872–933), and when large numbers of Norwegians emigrated and colonized Iceland and other North Atlantic islands between AD 874 and AD 930 in response to his ruthless regime. The posts belonging to the hov at Ranheim had been pulled out and all of the wood removed, and the horg had been carefully covered with stones and clay. Thereafter, the cult place had been entirely covered with earth, presumably during the time of transition to Christianity, and was thus effectively concealed and forgotten until it was excavated in 2010.*

## Introduction

Since the mid-1960s until about 2000 there has been relatively little research in Scandinavia focusing on concrete evidence for Norse religion from religious sites, with the exception of Olaf Olsen's highly important doctoral thesis titled *Hørg, hov og kirke* (Olsen 1966). Prior to Olsen's seminal work interpretations of such sites had relied to a great extent on written Norse sources and the results of a few excavations, none of which could be used as reliable evidence. While Olsen's thesis is a comprehensive study of material and interpretations relating to Norse cult and religious sites, it is difficult to find parallels for the site at Ranheim. In the last decade, however, this situation has changed quite dramatically. More recent excavations of larger areas have provided perspectives on sites which, on the basis of the Norse sources, can be interpreted as pre-Christian cult sites, particularly those with an 'aristocratic' character. Some of the most important locations

have been briefly mentioned by Lars Larsson in *Antiquity* in connection with his report on a ritual building at Uppåkra in Skåne (Larsson 2007: 11–25). In 2009 Lars Jørgensen published the results of his examination of all of the available material relating to pre-Christian cult sites, and evidently there are very limited numbers of Swedish and Danish sites which can be reliably interpreted as pre-Christian cult places (Jørgensen 2009). The known sites are located in Central Sweden, the southern Swedish province of Scania, and eastern Denmark. Norway is not represented in the distribution sites mentioned either by Larsson (2007: 13, Fig. 1) or by Jørgensen (2009: 332, Fig. 3). There is a good reason for this, as no sites have been found in Norway to date which are comparable to the cult sites described by Larsson and Jørgensen. They describe large complex dwelling or occupation sites with a large central hall, most often with a smaller



1. Landscape at Ranheim in the vicinity of the sacred site, viewed from the south. The pale grey patch in the plough-soil approximately in the middle of the photo indicates the position of the horg. Behind Trondheim Fjord the mountains on Fosen are visible. Beyond them are the Norwegian Sea and Atlantic Ocean. Photo: Preben Ronne 2010.

building connected to it by a palisade or otherwise enclosed area. Spectacular finds have been recovered from within and around these smaller buildings. A purely ritual landscape with various cult places located around a central hall is known at Tissø on Zealand. The whole complex is interpreted as presumably belonging to a king who travelled around his kingdom and stayed temporarily at selected royal manors which had cult places. Such sites lead to one of the current research problems, namely that archaeological remains tend to fit poorly with accounts in the written source material from Iceland in the 12th 13th and 14th centuries. Both Larsson (2007) and Jørgensen (2009) have comprehensive sections covering more recent research, and hence this will not be discussed here.

### The cult place at Ranheim

In 2010, members of staff at Vitenskapsmuseet (The NTNU, Museum of Natural History and Archaeology) investigated a 'pagan' cult site at Ranheim in the county of Sør-Trøndelag (Figure 1). Compared to published sites from Sweden and Denmark, the site was almost humble, and lacking any spectacular finds of the type characteristic of the aforementioned sites. No examples of small gold foil

figures (*guldgubber*) or other finds indicative of high status were recovered. Further, the site is relatively easy to interpret, given that there appears to have been only one long phase of occupation. The site comprised the remains of three large structures: a *horg*, a *hov*, and a processional avenue (Figure 2, 3 and 13). The complex as a whole is interpreted as a cult place, or *ve*, is of interest not only because of its simple composition but more importantly because it can be interpreted from Norse sources without any difficulty. Among the first Norwegians who left to settle in Iceland during the period of colonization – *landnám* – between c. AD 870 and c. AD 930, a significant number came from Central Norway, and it was their descendants approximately 200–300 years later who wrote the Norse sources which our interpretation relates to.

### Horg

*For me a shrine of stones he made,  
And now to glass the rock has grown;  
Oft with the blood of beasts was it red;  
In the goddesses ever did Ottar trust.  
Translated by Henry Adams Bellows*

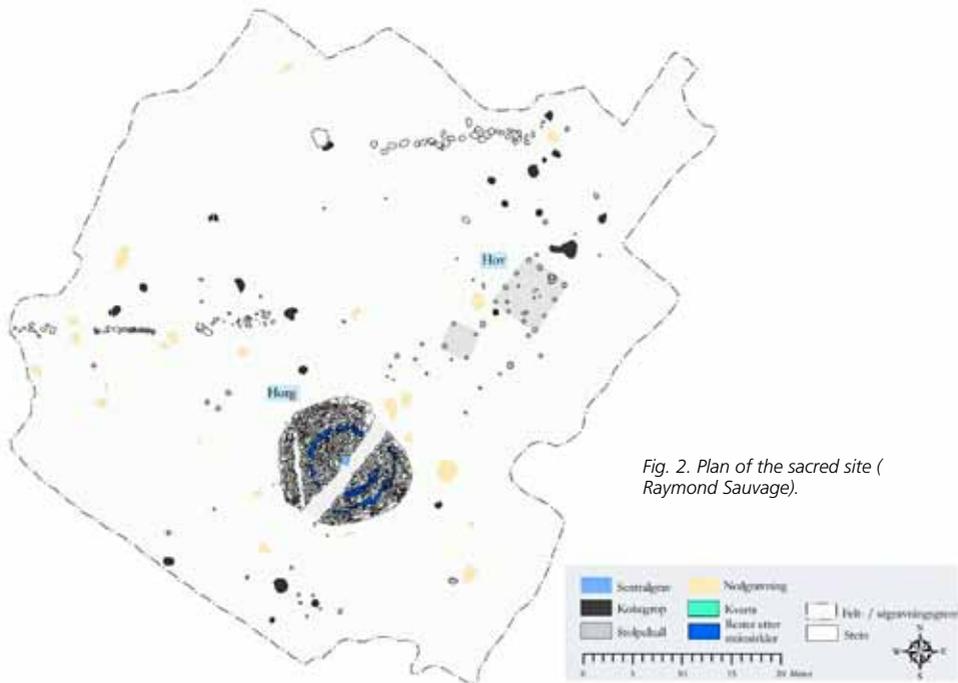


Fig. 2. Plan of the sacred site ( Raymond Sauvage).

Fig. 3. The excavation site with the stone rows visible, the post holes excavated, and prior to the removal all of the stones from the horg. Photo: Erling Skjervold 2010.



The above verse comes from the Old Norse poem *Hyndluljóð* (The Song of Hyndla), which appears in full in *Flateyjarbók* (Flat island book), one of the most important Icelandic manuscripts dating from the late 13th century (Steinsland 2005: 62). The contents of the manuscript are of special importance for the early history of Norway. In this regard the above description – in which the goddess Freyja speaks of the sacrifices which her favourite Ottar offered to her – is very interesting because the site excavated at Ranheim can partly be interpreted from this verse. Freyja describes a pagan altar or a shrine built of stone. The line *'to glass the rock has grown'* probably alludes to the inclusion of white quartz in the construction of the *horg*, a place where animal blood had been offered and coloured the stones red. The Norse word *horgr* (modern Norwegian, Bokmål: *horg*) indicates of a place of sacrifice, dating from pre-Christian times in the Nordic region, and means a group of stones, either a mound or a cairn.

Ranheim lies close to the coast of Trondheim Fjord and c.9 km east of Trondheim,

which was an established city in the medieval period. From late written sources we know that this area was also important in prehistoric times as there were many mounds and cairns along the fjord. The majority of these have since been removed and are no longer visible today. The stone cairn at Ranheim was unknown until it was found during an inspection survey prior to the start of a building project. At that time it was completely covered by a thick layer of earth (topsoil). This layer was removed during the survey, and what appeared to be a common type of cairn was revealed, but almost flat. What we expected to excavate at Ranheim was therefore a quite normal cairn with a central grave and possible one or two secondary graves. However, as the excavation progressed the 'cairn' became increasingly more remarkable. Gradually we realized that the stone mound was not a typical cairn. All evidence indicated that we had found a structure of the type described as a *horg* in the Norse sources – a pagan place of sacrifice built of stone.

Fig. 4. A small amount of quartz from the surface of the *Horg*. Photo: Preben Rønne 2010.





Fig. 5a and b. Glass beads from just under the surface layer of the *horg*. They are dated to be between AD 400 and 1000. Photo: Ole Bjørn.



5a. Close up of the bead with 'eye' ornament. It is 20 mm in diameter. Photo Åge Højem.

5b. Close up of the small bead. It is 6 mm in diameter. Photo Åge Højem.

Fig. 6. Glass bead from the area with burned bones found just under the surface of the *horg*. It is 7 mm in diameter. The bones are 14 C dated to 400 – 380 BC. The bead is later than year 1, but difficult to date more precisely. Photo Åge Højem



The *horg* at Ranheim was a flat, almost circular stone mound, c.15 m in diameter and just under 1 m high. The excavation revealed that topsoil and a layer of plough-soil were so thick that evidently later ploughing had not removed any of the stones. The removal of the plough-soil layer revealed a layer of cobbles. These were packed in a compact layer of blue clay, c.15 cm thick, that almost entirely covered the surface of the mound. Including the cobbles, this uppermost layer was c.30cm thick. Below this layer was a layer with similar stones and also stones which had been placed on their flat surface to form concentric rings around the centre. The latter stones had apparently been hewn from bedrock and had been partly shaped. Stones of this type are

not found naturally on the site where the *horg* was built, but can be found in a locality c.1 km from the site. While only part of the outermost ring remained on the south-east side, the innermost ring of stones was especially distinct. Of particular interest is that on the surface of the *horg* at this level there were larger and smaller lumps of white quartz, especially concentrated outside the outermost circle (Figure 4).

Two glass beads were found in the profile near the top layer, one with circle and band ornamentation, which had a blue bead from the top of a glass rod pushed into the hollow (Figure 5a-b). The bead with circles and 'eye' has been dated to c. AD 400–1000.



7. Burnt stones or cooking stones from the wooden box in the centre of the *horg*. Photo: Preben Rønne 2010.

Immediately below the surface of the *horg* there was a concentration of burnt bones together with a single yellow bead (Figure 6). The bones have been C14 dated to 400–380 BC but the bead is probably much later in date. The bones were covered only by a single layer of stones.

In the centre of the *horg* were found traces of a wooden box, 1.3 m in length and c.1 m wide. The box was visible in the form of small red-brown stripes, each of which was almost two centimetres wide, and similarly the only remains of the original wood were coloured traces. The infilling consisted of burnt red sand and gravel mixed with many clean fire-cracked stones – heating stones of the type also known as ‘cooking stones’ (Figure 7). The stones were small and would not have been especially effective in a cooking pit or hollow but would have been exceptionally good as a source of heat for warming a pot or when used on a flat hearth. A considerable amount of fragmented burnt bone was found between the stones: c.1.5 kg of burnt bone was found in the lowest c.35 cm of the 55 cm high box. At the bottom of the box, where the concentration of bone remains was greatest, there was a c.5 cm layer consisting of small fragments of charcoal and ‘charcoal dust’. Among the bones was a piece of a cranium and several human teeth. The remains were from two persons an adult and a child. The bones are dated to 395-375 BC.

The only artefact found in the box was a needle with spade-shaped head and a small bend just under the eye – *Gekröppte Spatenkopfnadel* (Figure 8). This type of needle has been mainly found in northern Germany, none in present Denmark, but two have been found in southern Norway. The type is dated to very early Pre-Roman Iron Age, c.5th century BC (Nybruget & Martens 1997: 75, 79 Fig. 3. b, Bemman 1998: 324, 325).

Below the central part of the *horg* there was a thin black layer which also contained charcoal, and an amount of burnt bone including a human tooth. This suggests that a cremation had been placed directly on the prehistoric ground surface and covered with a small flat cairn with the stones in one layer. The grave has been 14C dated 760–415 BC and thus might have marked the beginning of the sacred site.

The construction history of the *horg*, which is very briefly presented here, is clear. A cremation on an earlier prehistoric ground level had left a thin layer containing charcoal and burnt bone remains. Upon this was later placed a wooden box with heating stones, burnt bones and a fragment of an iron needle. A stone *horg* was built around the wooden box, and many lumps of quartz carefully distributed over the surface. Roughly hewn stones were placed in circles around the box. The two glass beads, and also the glass bead with burnt bones were found close to the surface of the *horg*, all indicate that this was the original surface upon which later cult offerings were made. The whole *horg* was later covered with a layer of cobbles and sealed with a compact layer of clay. Finally, a large amount of earth was placed on and around the *horg*, which completely covered and concealed it for 1000 years.

The word *horg* is mentioned in *The Poetic Edda*, a poetry collection written in Iceland in the 13th century. The collection also includes, for example, the poem *Völuspá* (Prophecy of the Völva, verse 7 in Codex Regius), in which a sibyl describes how the gods in Norse mythology gathered together and made *horg* and *hov*. This leads us to the second religious site found at Ranheim, a *hov* (Figures 9, 10, 11, and 12).



Fig. 8a - b. Fragment of a needle from the wooden box in the centre of the *horg*. The fragment is 32 mm long. Photo a. Åge Højem, b. Ole Bjørn.

## Hov

*At Ithavoll met the mighty gods;  
Shrines and temples they timbered high*  
Henry Adams Bellows translation

The *hov* (temple) at Ranheim was a single-room building, rectangular in plan and measuring 5.3 m x 4.5 m. The posts were placed precisely 1.8 m apart. The four walls were placed symmetrically between four corner posts, and a further two posts were placed mid-way on each side, i.e. the building had 12 posts in total. All of the construction posts had strong stone packing (Figure 10, 12). A building this size with strong foundations would not have needed additional roof-bearing posts. The posts would have provided a frame for walls constructed of staves, which would have made the building very stable, and the walls alone could certainly have supported the weight of the roof. Hence, it was very remarkable to find that within a building of stave construction there were four post holes arranged in a square with its sides parallel to the outer walls of the building. The holes were offset towards the west corner in relation to the centre of the building. The inner four 'post holes' had smaller diameters than those used in the outer walls and had not been dug to the same depth, which rules out the likelihood that they contained posts which played any part in supporting the roof.

Since the four post holes in the *hov* at Ranheim have no constructional function, it is tempting to imagine that images of the gods had been placed on the posts in that part of the building, just as described in the Norse sagas (discussed in more detail in the section headed 'Norse sources').

The same explanation has been presented concerning the four inner posts of the build-

ing at Uppåkra (Ödman 2003: 95). 'The inner posts of the house sequence at Uppåkra might not have supported the roof. The holes could instead have supported four wooden figures of gods.' (Larsson & Lenntorp 2004: 38).

For many years there have been ongoing discussions about the background of the stave churches. This question might have been solved by the find of the *hov* at Ranheim?

*'Whether the early Norwegian stave churches originate from a regional, prehistoric building tradition or are a structure of continental origin, based on the specific requirements and ideal of Christianity, is a question studied by several scholars.'* 'The arguments seem to be in favour of the latter interpretation mainly because of the lack of prehistoric parallels from Scandinavia.' (Larsson & Lenntorp 2004: 42).

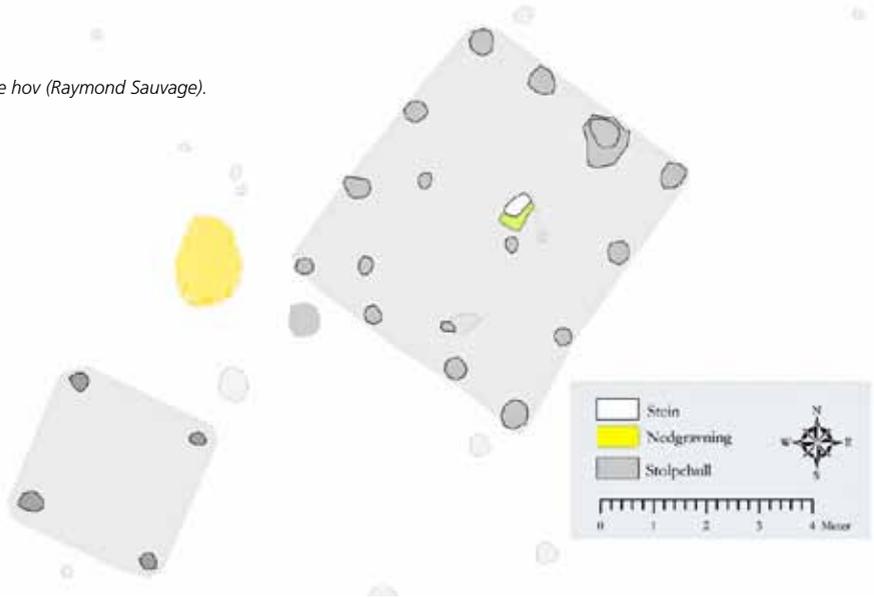
Now we got a building – earlier than Christianity. It is within a few centimetres just like the oldest stave church in central Norway – the church from Haltdalen, dated to the late 11th century (Alsvik 2000).

The building differs from the stave-building at Uppåkra in many ways. It is interesting that at Ranheim there were only one phase, while at Uppåkra and on the few known other sacred places the buildings have been rebuilt several times.

Externally, and close to the south-west corner of the *hov* was a smaller building or foundation for a platform, measuring 2.5 x 2.5 m and supported only by four corner posts with stone packing in the foundation holes (Figure 9). The structure probably had a function connected to the *hov*.

Almost in the centre of the *horg* was a stone left by the ice. Some of the soil around it had been dug up and moved (figure 11).

9. Plan of the hov (Raymond Sauvage).



### Two stone rows: a processional avenue

To the west of the *hov*, two parallel rows of stones extended between a lower lying area and the *hov* itself. The rows were c. 15 m apart and aligned east–west. The southern row was preserved for a minimum of 25 m, down to a lower area that may have been linked to the mouth of the nearby River Vik in the early Iron Age. The area has clearly been deeper in the past than it is today, indicating that it was not far from the original shore in the Iron Age. The area may have even have been

connected to the sea or have been a large waterlogged area fed by tidal water and the river. The northern row of stones was shorter in length, at c. 15 m, and extended between a large earthbound stone and the *hov*, stopping short of an open area to the west of the building. The stones making up the two rows were generally larger than an adult person could lift, and hence a considerable amount of labour must have been invested in collecting them and placing them in rows (Fig. 2, 3, 13).

The stone rows appear to have had no practical purpose. They were not sufficiently

Fig. 10. The *hov* before excavation of the post holes. The two stone piles in front to the left and right are not a part of the house. Photo: Raymond Sauvage 2010.





Fig. 11. Stone from the centre in the *horg*. Some of the original soil had been removed around it. Photo: Raymond Sauvage 2010



Fig.12. The *hov*. The post holes have been partly excavated. Some stones from the original packing still remain around the edges of the post holes. Photo: Raymond Sauvage 2010.

high to fence off a track along which cattle could have been driven from their stalls to the fields; the animals could simply have walked over them. In addition, they were too close to one another to be the remains of earlier farm boundaries. It is thus difficult to find any explanation other than that they were significant for people who participated in rituals including sacrifices. The stone rows are therefore interpreted as a part of a processional avenue between the *hov* and the low lying area. In common with the *horg*, the stone rows had been covered with a large amount of earth, which had hidden them and, with the exception of a few displaced stones, had left them more or less undisturbed by later ploughing, although they had been disturbed in several places by modern drainage systems.

The latest dating of charcoal from under the stone rows is AD 390-440. The date marks that they have been built between or *later* than that period, not before.

## Ve

A third concept that can be linked to the cult of the Norse gods is a *ve*. Compared to *horg* and *hov*, the term *ve* is more difficult to interpret concretely as it is quite diffuse in meaning, but generally refers to a form of holy area designated to the Norse gods. In the 1940s to early 1960s the term was used

specifically for stone rows which led up to the earliest churches, believed to have been built on original pagan cult sites (Olsen 1966: 244-267). Rather than interpreting the two rows of stones at Ranheim as the remains of a processional avenue alone, it is more appropriate to use the term *ve* as an indication of a larger sacred area. The term may also indicate a sacred grove or a bog. It is probable the whole area excavated at Ranheim was a *ve* – a sacred place dedicated to and used for worshipping the Norse gods.

## Concealment of the *ve*

The last construction phase of the *horg* was the addition of a layer of cobbles, placed over the surface with quartz. I thus believe that this surface was the original surface of the *horg*/alter. As a consequence, the *horg* was transformed in appearance to look like a cairn that did not stand out from other Iron Age cairns in any way.

Nevertheless, the decision taken to cover the cairn with large amounts of soil was not so that it would be visible like other traditional earth mounds containing burials but so that it would appear to a natural landscape form (figure 14). The *hov* as well was covered with soil even after the posts had already been removed, for reasons which can be found in written sources.



Fig. 13. The *horg* and the stone rows. The post holes of the *hov* are yet not excavated. In the profile behind the *horg* it is clear that the layer of earth is unnatural thick. Photo: Ruth Iren Øien.

## Dating

The wooden box with burnt bones and fire-cracked stones should be regarded as a central part of the *horg*. The C14 dates and the fragment from the needle place it early in Pre-Roman Iron Age. It was build on an earlier grave witch must have been of special significance. But the *horg* does not have to be that early. There are reasons to believe that the bones in the box and the bones on the top layer of the *horg* are replaced earlier graves.

The dating of the large glass bead with the circle and band ornamentation is very important. It can be dated to the migration period after c. AD 400 and latest date is late Viking Age. The bead is thus indicative of a building time of the *horg* later than AD 400.

The dating of the *hov* is based on the charcoal from the post holes. The youngest date is AD 895–995 which is important as it can be assumed to mark the end of the period in which the *hov* was used. It is not a precisely date. The date just marks that it is pullet down between or *later* than AD 895 – 995, not before. It is dated from charcoal that probably has fallen down in the posthole when the post was pulled out. That means that it could have been build c. 2-300 years earlier. Or even earlier if it was build of the same type of wood that later was used in the stave churches - pine heartwood or “*malmfuru*” in Norwegian, if coated with tar it becomes

even more resistible. Much of the timber in some stave churches in Norway is more than 800 years old.

The date of the stone rows is AD 390 – 440 or later.

## Continuity

It is interesting that the foundation of the *horg* is a grave from very early in Pre-Roman Iron Age. The two other graves are almost just as early. They must have been from graves wherefrom the bones have been removed and placed in the *horg*. They must have been important when the *horg* were constructed. I believe it is an expression of ancestor worship. That means that there might have been a religious continuity from at least 500 BC to c. AD 1000. That means presumably a ritual praxis have found place from paganism to the later pre-Christian religion as we know it from the Nordic literature. We know that the area has been used since the Bronze Age. In fact most of the C14 date are Bronze Age. But if Bronze Age religion have been practiced here is not possible to document.

At Uppåkra there seems likewise to have been continuity from the late part of the Pre-Roman Iron Age until late Viking Age.

In recent years the discovery and excavation of several sites led to considerably extend the framework of knowledge on the population of the territory between prehistoric and Roman



14. The *horg* before excavation. It is under the small green spot. The terrace looks just a glacial deposit of gravel, but it is topsoil of best quality carried from the fields around. Photo: Preben Rønne 2010.

times. Among the most interesting situations lie some places of worship, which reveal an extraordinary continuity of attendance that, in some cases, goes so far as to the modern age. It is very rare to document religious continuity over such long time in prehistoric times. But recently two articles have been published dealing with the subject in Italy (Troletti 2010, Solano 2010).

### Norse sources

The earliest manuscripts are thought to have been written in the 12 - 13th century in Iceland, and consequently it can be difficult to rely on them for interpretation purposes without careful consideration. Nevertheless, they contain much concrete information which can clearly be related to the cult place at Ranheim. It is thus a great advantage that the ve appeared to have survived largely intact after 1000 years without any significant disturbance.

In addition to the above-mentioned two verses there are several other important sources of relevance for cult sites, such as *Øyrbyggernes saga* (The Saga of the Ere-Dwellers, which includes a description of Torolf Mosterskjegg's *hov* in Iceland. Particularly under Harald Hårfager, who ruled c. 872–933, many Norwegians left Norway to seek a better quality of life and probably later under Olav Tryggvason who ruled 995-1000 specially the freedom to practise their pagan forms of wor-

ship. Among those who were discontent was the chieftain Torolf Mosterskjegg, who before deciding to emigrate had made a sacrifice to the god Tor and sought his advice. Torolf was advised that he should either remain faithful to the king or leave the country. He chose to settle in Iceland and acquired a large ship to transport both him and other farmers, together with all that they owned. Many of his friends followed him too. Torolf pulled down the *hov* on his land and took with him most of the timber together with some soil from the hallowed ground beneath the altar.

Upon reaching Iceland, Torolf again consulted the god Tor for advice as to where he and his fellow travellers should settle: '*Torolf then cast overboard the timber posts that had stood in the hov*'. The one which had been carved with an image of Tor floated inland to an area which is today known as Reykjavik, and he called the place *Hovsvåg* and built a large farm there called *Hovstad*. He also built a *hov*, which was a large building with a door in one of the long walls, near one of the end walls. The timber posts representing the gods carried from Norway were erected inside the *hov* and the area within became hallowed ground.

Hakon Jarl's *hov* at Hlaðir, present-day Lade, is of particular interest, given that it was only 7 km north-west of Ranheim, and also that the carved images from his *hov* are mentioned in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* (Olav Tryggvason's

saga) in *Flateyjarbók*. They included a portrayal of Tor in a carriage with his goat. However, it was not just images of known gods that were displayed and worshipped: two of the images represented important family goddesses so called 'fylgjer' (Steinsland 2005: 251). Hakon Jarl's *hov* and the goddesses are also mentioned in *Færeyinga saga* (Faroe Islands saga, Chapter 23), which contains a description of Sigurd Brestesson's dedication to the 'image' of the goddess Torgerd Holgebrud (*Thorgerd Shinebride*) before he won control as chieftain of the Faroe Islands, an image depicted on one of the carved posts in the *hov*.

No large carved posts dating to the Late Iron Age and Viking Age have been preserved to date, but that is not entirely unexpected. When Norway converted to Christianity such images of Norse gods were forbidden and ruthlessly destroyed and the punishment for possessing images of gods was severe. The highlight in the early Christian missionaries' accounts is the smashing and burning of pagan images of gods and pagan symbols. The destruction of the carved images thus symbolized the destruction of the Norse gods' power.

Olav Tryggvason was one of the kings who tried to Christianise Norway. And it was often with very roughness methods. Olaf routinely used violence, torture or death to attempt to force conversions. He was king of most of Norway from 995 – 1000.

There is a curious description of destruction of god pictures in Olav Tryggvason's Saga. King Olav had been in Denmark to king Svend and was on his way back to Trøndelag. On the way back king Olav found, that 'Trønderne' still had much confidence in the heathen gods especially Freja. The king blamed them much of their faith but they did not accept his arguments. They had two ships and they rowed as fast as they could. The king came first ashore and went down to the temple and he destroyed the idols, but he took the picture of Freja with him and destroyed in front of 'Trønderne'. Then they left their superstition.

## Interpretation

When Torolf Mosterskjegg pulled down a *hov* and took most of the timbers with him to Iceland, he was not the only Norwegian

emigrant to take what was most important to them when leaving the homeland. Torhadd the Old, the chieftain of the cult place at Mære in Nord-Trøndelag, about 100 km north-east of Ranheim, had also been keen to travel to Iceland and before leaving he too pulled down a *hov* and took the posts and some soil with him (*Landnámabók* Chapter 258, Titlestad 2002).

The *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlement), a medieval Icelandic manuscript describing the Norse settlement of Iceland in the 9th and 10th centuries AD, contains several mentions of how posts with carved images of gods were cast into the sea off the coast of Iceland so that the gods could indicate where settlement should take place. We also know from this source that many of those who colonized Iceland came from Trøndelag: 40 persons from Trøndelag are mentioned by name in particular. Bearing in mind how thoroughly all traces of the horg, hov, and stone rows were removed or hidden, it seems likely that the carved images on the posts in the hov at Ranheim were among those which ended up in Iceland. However, it would not have been possible for the sacred place as a whole to have been taken; it could only have been concealed.

The 14C dating of the hov to AD 895–990 fits with a number of different Norwegian kings, but predominantly with Harald Hårfager's long period of rule, c. 872–933 and hence with the period of settlement – *landnám* - in Iceland, 874–930. There are thus strong indications that those living in Ranheim marked the end of their occupation and cult practices before beginning a new life in Iceland or another of the North Atlantic islands, in common with many other Norwegian in those years. The dates does not rule out that they had left Ranheim while, King Håkon den gode (reign 934-961), King Olav Tryggvason (reign 995-1000), King Olav Haraldsson (St. Olav, reign 1015-1028, died in a battle in Trøndelag in 1030). All tree Christian kings were fighting for the Christianization of the Norwegian population.

## Conclusions

Although the cult place – the *ve* – at Ranheim, consisting of a *horg*, a *hov*, and a processional



Fig. 15. The sacred site in autumn – a moment in time interpreted by artist and archaeologist Kari Støren Binns 2010.

avenue, is an exceptional site, there will undoubtedly be further discoveries of similar sites in Norway in the future, now that we know what we are looking for. The ve has provided a unique opportunity for an interpretation based on Norse written sources. Further, the archaeological site and the written sources are in accordance. Some of the sources must therefore be regarded as more reliable and precise for pagan cult places than many researchers have found them to be to date (Jørgensen 2009: 249-50). The site at Ranheim is the first known ve in Norway and for the present should help to clarify a number of problems, particularly concerning the interpretation of the terms *horg* and *hov*.

The ve might have provided a picture of moment in the fight for royal power and a ruthless regime. Torolf Mosterskjegg left because of the conflict with Harald Hårfager.

And maybe the ve also has provided a glimpse of the negative side of the Christianizing of Norway, as it was not possible for paganism to be practised side by side with the new religion, and some of those who were followers of pagan practices felt a need

to abandon Norway. Concealing the sacred place must have been very important.

Moreover, it was not only the most humble Norwegians who migrated. This must have been a great loss for the country as well as a personal tragedy for those who felt they had been forced to leave. The extensive and thorough camouflaging of the sacred place at Ranheim – which could have been in use for some 600 years – reflects the significance of the site. Moreover, while the sagas describe the settlement and early period of colonization in Iceland, the ve at Ranheim has revealed one aspect of the final preparations before departure.

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