

## HOLY ISLANDS AND THE OTHERWORLD: PLACES BEYOND WATER

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### *Introduction*

In this article I attempt to demonstrate that there is a connection between holy islands and notions of an Otherworld beyond water. I believe that the essence of holy islands is their location on the other side of water. One has to cross water to get there and in this respect holy islands are parallel to the Otherworld, which often is placed beyond water, horizontally or vertically. The liminality of certain islands seems to be related to this; they resemble the Otherworld but are located in this world. Thus, they have an intermediate position and are ideal as points of contact with the Otherworld. I also suggest that some islands are “super-liminal,” those that are either reachable on foot and thus belong to the mainland in a way, although they are islands, and those that are sometimes submerged or surface only occasionally. I support Holmberg’s [Harva’s] theory<sup>1</sup> that the main source of the idea that there is an Otherworld underneath us is derived from the experience of seeing an inverted reflection of this world in calm water. To this explanation I add the specification that dry ground is included in the reflection image, which may explain why one (in most accounts) reaches the same dry kind of land no matter if one accesses the Otherworld through gaps in the ground or by jumping into water. I also discuss islands that seem to have their liminality mostly from being off-shore; that is, far away from society, and the relationship between this and Otherworld entrances in the midst of society. My article is an attempt to understand some of the logic behind the major interfaces between this world and the Otherworld, in particular that behind watery interfaces. This does not, however, imply a claim that the whole worldview was a coherent logical system. The evidence gathered for this discussion indicates that going across water – horizontally or vertically – was a more common passage to the Scandinavian gods, especially Óðinn, than has hitherto been realized.

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<sup>1</sup> Uno Holmberg [Harva], “Vänster hand och motsols,” *Rig* 1925: 23-36. Uno Holmberg changed his name to Harva in 1927-28 and he is more widely known under the name Harva.

My focus is on Old Norse sources, but I also make use of material from other Scandinavian cultures and neighbouring cultures in Northwestern Europe. I consider this justifiable because most ethnic groups in Northern Europe have been here for at least the last two millennia (and probably far longer) although not in the same area and not with the same population proportionally – and there has been substantial contact between them through the ages. Therefore, we should expect to find many of the same notions among the different peoples like those discussed here, especially the more basic or general ones.<sup>2</sup> The notion of a watery barrier between this world and the Otherworld seems to be more or less universal. I use information from legendary sagas, although they are late, because the motifs in question about going to the Otherworld are so widespread and, therefore, probably ancient. In addition, it is not natural to assume that the motif of going through water to the gods is derived from Christian ideas. Although it is controversial, I also make use of folklore and other late material because it seems that it contains ancient ideas about the topics I discuss. The Icelandic motif of jumping into water in order to go to the land of the fairies is a good illustration of this; motifs found in thirteenth-century sagas and nineteenth-century folklore are close to each other.<sup>3</sup>

I do not intend to discuss water symbolism in general, just the motif of water as a barrier between this world and the Otherworld and questions that derive directly from this. Nor do I intend to discuss holiness or holy places in general, just the essence of holy islands. I will use the term “holy island” in the broad meaning of “island with a special status.” The references will refer to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tradition unless “medieval,” “ancient” or the like is stated.

#### *Otherworlds beyond water*

What is an island? The obvious answer is: “a piece of land surrounded by water.” Our idea of islands is heavily influenced by maps, however, we have a from-above perspective that in pre-modern times was an exception, restricted to mountainous areas. In a cultural context, the concept of islands should be understood from the horizontal perspective of a person standing on a beach looking over to an island. From this perspective an island is a place on the *other side* of water. Most people see it from somewhere else and to them it is basically a place that has to be reached across water. Of course, not only islands are on the other side of water; so is the mainland in many cases.

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<sup>2</sup> Eldar Heide, “Gand, seid og åndevind,” Dr. art. thesis (University of Bergen, 2006), 8; pdf-version available at <http://eldar-heide.net/>.

<sup>3</sup> I address the question of late evidence specifically in “More inroads to pre-Christian notions, after all? The potential of late evidence,” in *Preprint Papers of The 14<sup>th</sup> International Saga Conference, Uppsala, 9<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> August, 2009*; online at <http://www.saga.nordiska.uu.se/>.

But an island can *only* be reached by crossing water. Therefore I will argue that an island in a cultural context first and foremost is a place on the *other side* of water.

This perspective may be significant for the understanding of holy islands because the *Otherworld* is often placed on the other side of water. In pre-Christian Scandinavia, it appears that most deceased were believed to go to Hel, a cheerless but not painful place which was situated to the north, underground, and beyond the river Gjöll.<sup>4</sup> The idea that the (or a) realm of the dead is situated beyond a river (often underground) which the dead have to cross is also found throughout Northwestern Europe and in most other parts of the world. It was also common to believe that the departed went to a land beyond the sea (or other large body of water). From Northwestern Europe this idea is attested from the Low Countries (Celtic or Frankish areas) as early as the early sixth century AD. The Byzantine historian Procopius tells that people of this area ferry the souls of the dead to an island off the coast.<sup>5</sup> In *Beowulf*, the body of King Scyld (Beowulf's father) is laid in a ship that carries him away over the sea.<sup>6</sup> In Scandinavia it seems that one could also go to Hel across the sea. When the god Baldr was dead, his body was placed in his ship, which was set afloat and then set afire, and later we hear of him in Hel.<sup>7</sup> "[I]t is impossible to avoid the impression that Baldr is supposed to go by ship to Hel," Schjødt remarks.<sup>8</sup> A similar boat funeral is described by the tenth-century Arab traveller Ahmad ibn Fadlan, who witnessed it when he visited the Scandinavian Vikings on the Volga.<sup>9</sup> The boat burials that are known archaeologically from Iron Age Northern Europe<sup>10</sup> probably also reflect the idea that the deceased could go to the realm of the dead by boat.

<sup>4</sup> *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1931), 11, 66; Rudolf Simek (ed.), *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. Angela Hall [Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993; revised and expanded edition of *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1984)], 137; Birgisson Bergsveinn, "Hel. Heimildagildi dróttkvæðra kenninga um fornt hugarfar," cand. philol.-verkefni í norrænum fræðum (University of Bergen, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> [Procopius of Caesarea], *History of the Wars. Books V and VI*, The Loeb classical library 107 (London: Heinemann and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 266-8.

<sup>6</sup> R.D. Fulk, et. al. (ed.), *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, edition with introduction, commentary, appendices, glossary, and bibliography. Based on the third edition with first and second supplements of *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Fr. Klaeber, Lexington, MA, 1950 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), line 26-52.

<sup>7</sup> *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 65-66.

<sup>8</sup> Jens Peter Schjødt, "The Ship in Old Norse Mythology and Religion," in *The Ship as Symbol in Prehistoric and Medieval Scandinavia. Papers from an International Research Seminar at the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen, 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> May 1994*, ed. Ole Crumlin-Pedersen and Birgitte Munch Thye (Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark, Department of Archaeology and Early History, 1995), 23.

<sup>9</sup> H.M. Smyser, "Ibn Fadlan's Account of the Rus with Some Commentary and Some Allusions to *Beowulf*," in *Francis Peabody Magoun, ed. Jess B. Bessinger jr. and Robert P. Creed* (New York: New York Press, 1965), 92-119.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., H.R. Ellis Davidson, *The Road to Hel. A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1943), 16-8 and 39-41; Crumlin-Pedersen and Munch Thye (ed.), *The*

Such ideas probably also lie behind grave islets and grave fields beyond water. In northern Norway there are strikingly many Iron Age graves on uninhabitable islets<sup>11</sup> and it is quite common that grave fields from the Iron Age and Viking Age are separated from the settlements by streams.<sup>12</sup> Grave mounds with ditches around them from the same era may be a parallel. This was quite common; the mounds at Borre in Vestfold, Southeastern Norway, are a good example.<sup>13</sup> For at least some periods of the year, such ditches would fill with water and turn the grave-mound into an island, making an island realm of the dead. In some cases archaeological pollen analyses have shown that water plants grew in the ditches.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the water filling would not be permanent in most cases does not count against this reasoning. The ditch could have been there simply to make the mound look higher and bigger and, of course, the dirt in the ditch represented the nearest building material. But if this was the motivation for the ditch, why did the builders not take the rest of this building material and remove the outer edge of the ditch instead of carrying the rest of what they needed from elsewhere? This would even have concealed their trick, but if the ditch was only the casual result of laziness why did the builders in some cases leave four “bridges,” path-ways, across the ditch, roughly corresponding to the four cardinal directions?<sup>15</sup> It is hard to escape the conclusion that a ditch proper was intended. This seems to be the point of view of archaeologists, too.<sup>16</sup> The explanation of “grave islands” (of different kinds) has been most clearly pointed out by Nordberg;<sup>17</sup> Old Norse sources and archaeological evidence indicate that there was a blurred distinction between the realm of the dead and the grave. In a way, the grave represented the realm of the dead. If so, the grave beyond water could represent the realm of the dead beyond water.

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*Ship as Symbol in Prehistoric and Medieval Scandinavia*; Anna-Leena Siikala, *Mythic Images and Shamanism. A Perspective on Kalevala Poetry*, FF communications 280 (Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 2002), 139-41.

<sup>11</sup> Børge Evensen, “Gravholmer. Gravlokalisering og samfunn i jernalder i Vesterålen,” Hovedfagsavhandling i arkeologi, Institutt for arkeologi (University of Tromsø, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Julie Lund, “Thresholds and Passages: The Meanings of Bridges in the Viking Age and Early Middle Ages,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (2005), 118-9; eadem, “Åsted og vadested. Deponeringer, genstandsbiografier og rumlig strukturering som kilde til vikingetidens kognitive landskaber,” *Acta humaniora* 389, Doktoravhandling i arkeologi (University of Oslo, 2009), 127-9, 256-8.

<sup>13</sup> Bjørn Myhre, “Undersøkelser av storhauger på Borre i Vestfold,” in *Halvdanshaugen. Arkeologi, historie og naturvitenskap*, ed. Jan Henning Larsen and Perry Rolfsen, Universitetets kulturhistoriske museer, Skrifter 3 (Oslo: Universitetets kulturhistoriske museer, 2004), 203-26; Lund, “Åsted og vadested. Deponeringer,” 256-8.

<sup>14</sup> Helge Irgens Høeg, “Pollenanalytiske undersøkelser av prøver fra Borre,” in *Halvdanshaugen. Arkeologi, historie og naturvitenskap*, ed. Jan Henning Larsen and Perry Rolfsen, Universitetets kulturhistoriske museer, Skrifter 3 (Oslo: Universitetets kulturhistoriske museer, 2004), 235.

<sup>15</sup> Myhre, “Undersøkelser av storhauger,” 203-26.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 203; Lund, “Åsted og vadested. 2009,” 257.

<sup>17</sup> Andreas Nordberg, “Krigarna i Odins sal. Dödsföreställningar och krigarkult i fornnordisk religion,” Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen (University of Stockholm, 2003), 73-5.

We also have many examples and indications that the land of the gods – and the realm of the dead connected to it – is located on the other side of the sea. According to Old Norse sources, most men fallen in battle, especially heroes and kings, went to Óðinn’s residence, Valhøll or to Freyja’s residence, Folkvangr, of which little is known.<sup>18</sup> Old Norse sources proper do not give explicit information about the journey to Valhøll,<sup>19</sup> but according to the Danish *Gesta Danorum*, written in Latin by the historian Saxo Grammaticus around 1200, one could ride through the air across the sea to reach Óðinn’s residence from the world of humans.<sup>20</sup> This is supported by ibn Fadlan’s account. The dead person probably went to Valhøll because it is referred to as “paradise” and because he was a chieftain – and he apparently went there by boat. The location of Óðinn’s residence beyond the sea is also supported by the prose introduction to the Eddic poem *Grímnismál*,<sup>21</sup> which tells of two young brothers who get lost on a fishing trip and are eventually stranded on a shore where they are taken care of by Óðinn and his wife, Frigg, disguised as a smallholder couple. Saxo’s account also corresponds to the Eddic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* (stanza 49),<sup>22</sup> which tells that the dead hero Helgi, in order to reach Valhøll, has to ride the “bridges of the sky” (*vindhjalms brúar*, probably a variant of the rainbow bridge Bifröst in other sources); Valhøll is situated a very long way to the west of this bridge. Given that Scandinavia is the starting-point, this would place Valhøll in the western ocean. The motif of crossing the sea to reach Valhøll also seems to be found in the prose passage *Frá dauða Sinfjötla* in the Poetic Edda: The corpse of the hero Sinfjötli is ferried across a fjord – and out of the story – by a mysterious ferryman.<sup>23</sup> The end of this journey was probably Valhøll because Sinfjötli was a great hero and therefore should be expected to go there, and the tenth-century poem *Eiríksmál* mentions Sinfjötli among the residents of Valhøll.<sup>24</sup> Schjødt looks upon the ferryman as “a manifestation of Odin, and the incident as such as Odin taking one of his favourites ‘home’ to Valhalla.”<sup>25</sup> An indication that the gods live beyond the sea can also be found in the late legendary *Gautreks saga*.<sup>26</sup> Starkaðr meets Óðinn and the

<sup>18</sup> *Grímnismál*, 7, 14; Sophus Bugge (ed. and comm.), *Sæmundar Edda hins fróða*. (Norræn Fornkvæði) (Christiania: Malling, 1867), 77-8.

<sup>19</sup> *Grímnismál*, 21 hints that the journey to Valhøll could involve the crossing of a river (Bugge, *Sæmundar Edda*, 79), but the stanza is hard to interpret. It is discussed by Nordberg, “Krigarna,” 223-5.

<sup>20</sup> *The History of the Danes 2* [Saxo Grammaticus: *Gesta Danorum*], trans. Peter Fisher, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson (Cambridge: Brewer, 1979-80), book 1, 67-9).

<sup>21</sup> Bugge, *Sæmundar Edda*, 75-6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, 200.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, 202-3.

<sup>24</sup> Jónsson Finnur, *Den Norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, 4 vols. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1912-15; reprint Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1967-73), vol. B I, 165.

<sup>25</sup> Schjødt, “The Ship,” 23.

<sup>26</sup> *Gautreks saga*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda IV*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 28-30.

rest of the gods on an island somewhere in Hordaland, western Norway. It is peculiar that Starkaðr is already on an island when this happens – he has to leave the island where he has been waiting for a favorable wind and row to *another* island to meet the gods – because crossing the sea was a common way of going to the gods? This recalls the account in the *Jómsvíkinga saga* where Earl Hákon goes to an island (*Prímsígnð* or *Prímsígnð*) in order to get in contact with and sacrifice to his patron goddesses Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr and Irpa.<sup>27</sup>

There also are a couple of examples where a watery barrier separates the giants from the gods and where the humans are placed with the gods; in the Eddic poem *Hárbarðsljóð* the land of giants is separated from the world of humans and gods by a sound that in one place is narrow enough to be crossed by a footbridge.<sup>28</sup> This barrier is a river in the Eddic poem *Vafþrúðnismál* (15-16)<sup>29</sup> and probably in the myth of Þórr's journey to the giant Geirröðr.<sup>30</sup> The Old Norse myth of the ship Naglfar also implies that one could go by ship from the world of the giants to the world of the gods (and humans?).<sup>31</sup>

Some accounts connect the legendary island of the dead with real islands. The island that Procopius tells of is called Brittia, apparently the island of Great Britain. This tradition has been preserved on the continent to recent times or the island of the dead is one of the islands off Finistère or other real islands in the area.<sup>32</sup> In Welsh tradition there is a connection between the ruler of the island of the blessed (where the chosen go after death) and the Isle of Man.<sup>33</sup> In Old Norse tradition the sea giant (sea god) Ægir/Hlér (both names were used) is associated with the island Læsø, from Hlésey, in the sea of Kattegat,<sup>34</sup> and his wife Rán was the ruler of the realm of the drowned.<sup>35</sup> Gods could also be believed to live on real islands. Tacitus' famous Nerthus passage from the early Roman Age of northern Germany or southern Scandinavia is an example

<sup>27</sup> See John Megaard, "Hvor sto 'Slaget i Hjørungavágr'? Jomsvikingeberetningens stedsnavn og Sæmundr fróði," *alvissmál* 9 (1999), 29-54. Þorgerðr was probably Hákon's ancestress; Gro Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi. En analyse av hierogami-myten i Skírnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygjalat og Hynsljóð*, Doktoravhandling (University of Oslo, 1989; Oslo: Solum, 1991), 24, 122, 220-6, 238.

<sup>28</sup> Bugge, *Sæmundar Edda*, 97-9, especially stanza 56.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, 67.

<sup>30</sup> *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 106-8.

<sup>31</sup> *Gylfaginning*, 37 and *Völuspá* 50 (Bugge, *Sæmundar Edda*, 9), *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 71-3; cf. Schjødt, "The Ship," 23.

<sup>32</sup> Theo Brown, *The Fate of the Dead. A Study in Folk-eschatology in the West Country after the Reformation* (Ipswich: Brewer for The Folklore Society, 1979), 63-5.

<sup>33</sup> Jan de Vries, *Keltische Religion*, Die Religionen der Menschheit 18 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1961), 87.

<sup>34</sup> Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 151; *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 78. Hlé's in Hlésey is the genitive of the name Hlér.

<sup>35</sup> Helge Rosén, *Om dödsrike och dödsbruk i fornordisk religion*. Doktorsavhandling, University of Lund (Lund: Gleerup, 1918), 16-8; Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 260.

of this; the goddess lives (in a grove) on a real and apparently inhabited island “in the ocean” (*in insula Oceani*).<sup>36</sup>

The ideas of Valhöll as the dwelling-place of the chosen dead are closely related to ideas of a pleasant or paradise-like Otherworld beyond the sea, inhabited by fairies or gods. This is well known from classical literature, and Irish literature from the early Middle Ages onwards has many stories of such a land far off in the western ocean, called *Tír na n-Óg*, *Tír fo Thuinn*, *Mag Mell*, and so on.<sup>37</sup> In medieval England the stories of Avalon resemble this.<sup>38</sup> Medieval Scandinavia has indications of the same idea, partly discussed above: There are many indications that Óðinn’s residence could be beyond the sea (or a river) and so could the gathering places of the gods and the land of the giants. In Scandinavian late medieval ballads a common motif is the hero obtaining his unique bride from an island or a land beyond the sea, sometimes inhabited by giants (*jötnar*) or elves. Probably the first attestation of this is in the sixteenth-century manuscript of the Danish ballad *Ungen Svejdal* (stanza 17-18),<sup>39</sup> which is known in many variants from later times (also *Ungen Svendal*; Swedish: *Hertig Silverdal*, *Unge Svedendal*). It is not unlikely that this motif goes back to a pre-Christian tradition because *Ungen Svejdal* is based upon the Old Norse Eddic poems *Grógaldr* (the first part of the ballad) and *Fjölsvinnsmál* (the last part), of which at least the latter in all probability is as old as most other Eddic poems.<sup>40</sup> The ocean-crossing bridal quest is also found in the Saami mythological poem *The Son of the Sun*, which probably has medieval and pre-Christian roots.<sup>41</sup> Saami and Norwegian folklore share a strong tradition where the land of the fairies (Norwegian *hulderfolket* “the hidden people;” North Saami *mearrabáldit* “the sea fairies”)

<sup>36</sup> Tacitus, *Dialogus. Agricola. Germania*, The Loeb classical library 35, edition with translation, *Dialogus de oratoribus* trans. by Sir William Peterson, *Agricola and Germania* by Maurice Hutton (London: Heinemann, 1914), ch. 40.

<sup>37</sup> de Vries, *Keltische Religión*, 87, 257-9; Jan E. Byberg, “‘Dei lukkelege oyane’ i norsk folketradisjon. Ei motivgranskning,” 2 vols., Hovudfagsoppgåve i nordisk (University of Bergen, 1970), 176-8, 200-2; James MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 405-6; John Carey, “The Location of the Otherworld in Irish Tradition,” in *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature. An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. Jonathan M. Wooding (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 113-9.

<sup>38</sup> MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, 29.

<sup>39</sup> Svend Grundtvig, *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser II. Naturmytiske Viser. Lægenderiser* (Copenhagen: Selskabet til den Danske Literaturs Fremme, 1856), 238-40.

<sup>40</sup> The widespread idea that *Grógaldr* and *Fjölsvinnsmál* are merely corrupted fragments of a lost *\*Snipdagsmál* corresponding to the later ballad must be rejected, however; they clearly are independent poems functioning on their own premises [Eldar Heide, “Fjölsvinnsmál. Ei oversett nøkkelkjelde til nordisk mytolog,” unpublished master thesis in Old Norse philology (University of Oslo, 1997); pdf-version available at <http://eldar-heide.net/>. But it is possible that they formed part of a longer, immanent story; cf. Carol J. Clover’s theory [“The Long Prose Form,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 101 (1986): 10-39] about independent *þattir* [short stories] together forming an immanent saga.

<sup>41</sup> Eldar Heide, “Menneskesjela som vind i den samiske folkevisa Solsonen / *Biejjen baernie* / *Beainvi bárdni*,” *Svenska landsmål och svenskt folkliv* 2007: 67-103; pdf-version available at <http://eldar-heide.net/>. Cf. Harald Gaski, *Biejjen baernie. Beainvi bárdni. Sámi Son of the Sun* (Karášjohka: Davvi Girji, 2003).

among other things is a prosperous and happy land beyond the sea, only found through fog or gales.<sup>42</sup> Icelandic and Danish lore have traditions of similar islands found through fog.<sup>43</sup> This fog element is also found in the Irish tradition of *Tír na n-Óg*.<sup>44</sup>

I am trying to show that the question is not island or mainland. The question is: On the other side of water or not. In this perspective the holy island may be seen as a variant of the larger category “supernatural place on the other side of water.” Holy islands, however, are still in this world and may be freely visited by mortals; thus they have an intermediate position, are liminal places, ideal as points of contact with the Otherworld. I will return to this point.

#### *Otherworlds under water*

First I will address this question: Why is the Otherworld beyond water? One important reason is undoubtedly that death is conceived of as a major barrier and so are rivers, lakes, and the sea. Moreover, death is conceived of as going somewhere else, to a place that we do not know (very well). Accordingly, death implies a journey to a new residence and because of the uncertainty involved it is natural that this journey represents hardships and obstacles, for instance, crossing rivers or the sea. In more general terms one may define the Otherworld as “somewhere beyond our usual range” and this implies obstacles. But some forms of the traditions require an additional explanation: The Otherworld may be *under* water as well.

In Icelandic folklore the world of *álfar* “elves, fairies” is often accessed by jumping into ponds, rivers or the sea.<sup>45</sup> This motif is first attested in the thirteenth-century legendary saga *Dorsteins þáttur bójarmagns*, which apparently borrowed it from a medieval version of the later tales.<sup>46</sup> Similar motifs are also found in folklore elsewhere

<sup>42</sup> E. g., O. Nicolaisen, *Sagn og eventyr fra Nordland*, 2 vols. (Kristiania: Mallings, 1879-87), I, 19; Reidar Th. Christiansen, “Litt om nordlandsk folketræditiøn,” *Håløyminne* 1 (1920): 12-26; Just Qvigstad, *Lappiske eventyr og sagn*. 4 vols., Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning. Serie B: Skrifter. 3, 10, 12, 15, vol. I: *Lappiske eventyr og sagn fra Varanger*, vol. II: *Lappiske eventyr og sagn fra Troms og Finnmark*, vol. III: *Lappiske eventyr og sagn fra Lyngen I*; vol. IV: *Lappiske eventyr og sagn fra Lyngen II og fra Nordland* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1927-29), II, 433, 439-41, IV, 170-5; Finn Myrvang, *Hub-tetta. Folkeminne ifrå Andøya*, Norsk folkeminnelags skrifter 91 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1964), 42-4; Byberg, “‘Dei lukkelege oyane’ i norsk folketrædisjøn,” 38-40, 149, 161-3; Olav Bø, *Trollmakter og godvette. Overnaturlige vesen i norsk folketræ* (Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1987), 57.

<sup>43</sup> Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri. Nýtt safn*, 6 vols. Árni Böðvarsson og Bjarni Vilhjálmsson önnuðust útgáfuna [Reykjavík: Bókauútgáfan þjóðsaga, 1958-61 (1862-64)], II, 300, 318-9, 321, 333, 339, 371, 419; IV, 484, 494, 512, 538, 575, 594, 614, 622.

<sup>44</sup> Howard Rollin Patch, *The Other World According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 45; Byberg, “‘Dei lukkelege oyane’ i norsk folketrædisjøn,” 179-81, 193.

<sup>45</sup> Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur*, I, 101-3; III: 162-4.

<sup>46</sup> *Saga af Dorsteini Bæarmagni*, in *Fornmanna sögur* 3. Útgefnar ad tilhlutun hins Norræna Fornfræða Félags (Kaupmannahöfn, 1827), 176; Heide, “Gand, seid og ándevind,” 32, 222-4.

in Northwestern Europe.<sup>47</sup> In Celtic medieval sources and later folklore the land of the dead or the fairies may be under the western ocean and/or under lakes and/or under islands in lakes or the sea.<sup>48</sup> The same is found in Slavic folklore: The realm of the dead is beyond the sea and/or in a wet underworld accessed through a lake.<sup>49</sup> In *Beowulf* the monster Grendel and his mother live in a moor and when *Beowulf* intends to kill the mother after he has killed Grendel he dives down into a marsh which is very deep and described as an ocean.<sup>50</sup> In the Icelandic *Grettis saga*<sup>51</sup> a giant lives in a cave which is situated behind a waterfall and can only be accessed through the pool under the waterfall. In the legendary saga *Ketils saga bangs*<sup>52</sup> an ogress wades into the ocean to a *trollaping*, that is, “thing of trolls.”<sup>53</sup>

It also seems that the residences of some Old Norse gods were under the sea or in a marsh: The goddess Sága and Óðinn feast together in *Søkkvabekker*, that is, “sunken bench,” with the waves rippling above them,<sup>54</sup> and Óðinn’s wife Frigg resides at *Fensalir*, that is, “bog halls.”<sup>55</sup> According to Eddic poems and Snorri, the gods under

<sup>47</sup> Hans Siuts, *Jenseitsmotive im deutschen Volksmärchen*, Teutonia. Arbeiten zur germanischen Philologie 19 (Leipzig: Eduard Avenarius, 1911), 50-2, 243-5 (German); R. Hünnerkopf, “Brunnen,” in *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, ed. E. Hoffmann-Krayer and Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1927), col. 1677 (German); Theo Brown, “West Country Entrances to the Underworld,” in *The Journey to the Other World* Mistletoe series, Folklore Society publications 2 (Totowa, N.J.: D. S. Brewer, 1975), 90-103 (English and Welsh); I. Reichborn-Kjennerud, *Vår gamle trolldomsmedisin*, 5 vols., Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo II, Hist.-filos. klasse, 1927:6, 1933:2, 1940:1, 1943:2, 1947:1 (Oslo: Dybwad, 1928-1947), 1927:6, 56 (Norwegian); Karlis Straubergs, “Zur Jenseitstopographie,” *Ann. Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 13 (1957): 84 (Estonian). A hole in the ice is the entrance; Saami: Just Qvigstad “Lappischer Aberglaube,” in *Zur Sprach- und Volkskunde der Norwegischen Lappen*, ed. idem, Oslo etnografiske museums skrifter 1 (Oslo: Oslo etnografiske museum, 1920), 41; Norwegian: Reichborn-Kjennerud, *Vår gamle trolldomsmedisin*. 1927:6, 50.

<sup>48</sup> T. Gwynn Jones, *Welsh Folklore and Folk-custom* (London: Methuen, 1930), 52; John Arnott Macculloch, “Celtic Mythology,” in *Celtic. Slavic*, ed. Louis Herbert Gray, *The Mythology of all Races* 3 (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1964), 128; MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, 359-60, 406. Cf. Byberg, “‘Dei lukkelege oyane’ i norsk folketradisjon,” 181, 198; Carey, “The Location of the Otherworld in Irish Tradition,” 116.

<sup>49</sup> W.R.S Ralston, *The Songs of the Russian People as Illustrative of Slavonic Mythology and Russian Social Life* (London: Ellis & Green, 1872), 107-9; Jan Máchal, “Slavic Mythology,” in *Celtic. Slavic*, *The Mythology of all Races* 3, ed. Louis Herbert Gray (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1964), 230.

<sup>50</sup> Fulk, et. al., *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, especially line 1492-4.

<sup>51</sup> *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit 7, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936), 214-6.

<sup>52</sup> *Ketils saga bangs*, ed. Edition Guðni Jónsson, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda II* (Reykjavík: Íslendinga-sagnaútgáfan, 1954), 172-3.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Heide, “Gand, seid og ándevind,” 211-3, 226-7.

<sup>54</sup> *Grímnismál* 7 (Bugge, *Sæmundar Edda*, 77).

<sup>55</sup> *Völuspá*, 33; *Gylfaginning*, 35 and 49; *Skaldskaparmál* 27, *ibidem*, 6; *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 38, 64, 110.

the leadership of Óðinn gather for drinking parties at the residence of the giant Ægir, who is the husband of Rán, the ruler of the realm of the drowned.<sup>56</sup>

The south Saami used to believe that the ancestors lived in holy mountains called *saajve* (*aaïmoe*). In the north Saami area this word – in the form *sáiva* – refers to sacrificial sites and to holy lakes, often round, with no rivers flowing into them, believed to be paired with a vertical shaft leading down to a lower one.<sup>57</sup> Probably this is the original meaning because there is broad agreement that *saajve/sáiva* is borrowed from proto-Scandinavian *\*saiwa-s*, “sea.”<sup>58</sup> This interpretation corresponds to the fact that the Saami shaman, the *noaidi*, predominantly used a fish as the vehicle of his soul when he went to the land of the dead<sup>59</sup> and to the fact that going there was referred to as “diving”.<sup>60</sup> The *saajve/sáiva* complex suggests that during the time of the proto-Scandinavian language (i.e., the Roman Iron Age) the Scandinavians believed that the ancestors lived in a mountain under water or that this mountain could be reached through water. This could correspond to information from the much later Icelandic *Laxdæla saga*<sup>61</sup> and *Eyrbyggja saga*.<sup>62</sup> Men who drown (Svanr and Þorsteinn) are seen walking into ancestor mountains, which is a realm of the dead that is known from medieval Iceland, similar to

<sup>56</sup> *Grimmismál* 45, *Lokasenna* (Bugge, *Samundar Edda* 85, 113 ff.); Ellis Davidson, *The Road to hel*, 76-7.

<sup>57</sup> See K. B. Wiklund, “Saivo. Till frågan om de nordiska beståndsdelarna i lapparnas religion,” *Le monde oriental* 1916: 45-74; Louise Bäckman, *Sájva. Föreställningar om hjälp- och skyddsväsen i beliga fjäll bland samerna*. Stockholm studies in comparative religion 13 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1975); Hans Mebius, *Bissie. Studier i samisk religionshistoria* (Östersund: Jengel, 2003), 82.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Josef Weisweiler, “Seele und See. Ein etymologischer Versuch,” *Indo-Germanische Forschungen* 57 (1940): 25-55.

<sup>59</sup> Hans Skanke, “Epitomes Historiæ Missionis Lapponicæ. Pars Prima Anlangende de Nordske Lappers Hedendom og Superstitioner” (1728-1731), in *Nordlands og Troms finner i eldre håndskrifter*, ed. O. Solberg (Oslo: Etnografisk museum, 1945), 191-2, 195. Cf. Carl Solander, Carl, “Kort relation, om den danske Missions tilstand uti Norrige [...]” (1726), in *Källskrifter till lapparnas mytologi*, ed. Edgar Reuterskiöld (Stockholm: Ivar Hæggströms boktryckeri, 1910), 26; Heide, “Gand, seid og åndevind,” 136, and Skanke, “Epitomes Historiæ Missionis Lapponicæ,” 195; Jens Kildal, “Afguderiets Dempelse og den Sande Lærdoms Fremgang [...]” (1730 and later, in *Nordlands og Troms finner i eldre håndskrifter*, ed. Marie Krekling, Nordnorske samlinger 5, 2 (Oslo: Brøgger, 1945), 140; Sigvard Kildal, “Nogle Observationer om Trommen eller Runebommen [...]” (1730 and later?), in *Det skandinaviske Litteraturselskabs Skrifter* 2, ed. Jan Werner Abrahamson (Copenhagen: Det skandinaviske Literaturselska, 1807), 456 (Abrahamson’s title: “Efterretning om Finners og Lappers hedenske Religion”). In Grønvik’s reading of the late seventeenth-century Eggjum rune stone from western Norway (1985) there is (also) “fish transport” to the realm of the dead in the sea: Ottar Grønvik, *Rune på Eggjasteinen. En hedensk gravinskift fra slutten av 600-tallet* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1985).

<sup>60</sup> Isaac Olsen, *Om lappernes vildfarelser og overtro. Kildeskrifter til den lappiske mytologi* II (after 1715), ed. Just Qvigstad, Det Kgl. norske Videnskabers Selskabs skrifter 4 (Trondhjem: Det Kgl. norske Videnskabers Selskab, 1910), 45, cf. 46; Heide, “Gand, seid og åndevind,” 232-3.

<sup>61</sup> *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit 5 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934), 46 (chapter 14).

<sup>62</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Matthías Þórdarson and Einar Ól. Sveinsson, íslenzk fornrit 4 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1935), 19 (ch. 11); cf. Rosén, *Om dædsrike och dædsbruk*, 18.

the *saajve(aajmoe)*.<sup>63</sup> This may seem confusing to us but there are many examples that the same (place in the) Otherworld can be reached through different passages and that one comes to the same dry kind of land even when the passage is watery.

The examples from the *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdóla saga* also indicate that drowned men did not necessarily come to Rán or that the stay with her was only temporary. The latter seems to be the case in the tenth-century poem *Sonatorrek*, composed by Egill Skallagrímsson in grief for his son, Bǫðvarr, who drowned.<sup>64</sup> Egill says that Rán has taken Bǫðvarr (st. 7-8) but he also blames Óðinn for the drowning (st. 22) and he appears to believe that Bǫðvarr is dwelling with the gods.<sup>65</sup> If so, one could come to the gods by crossing water vertically. Such a motif is also found in two sagas. The clearest example is the fourteenth-century legendary *Egils saga einhenda*.<sup>66</sup> When the hero Ásmundr has lost a sea battle, he jumps overboard and is then stabbed with a spear by Óðinn himself. Ásmundr's ship sinks and it is stressed that no cargo and no wreckage from it ever was found. The stabbing probably means that Ásmundr was chosen by Óðinn to come to his residence to join his warriors<sup>67</sup> and this motif combined with the jumping overboard and the sinking and disappearance of the ship indicates that Ásmundr reached the Otherworld (Óðinn's residence) vertically through water. It fits that this happened near Læsø. Possibly a similar motif appears in *Sǫgubrot af fornkonungum*<sup>68</sup> which is a fragment of the now lost *Skejöldunga saga* from around 1200. It tells of the Swedish legendary King Ívarr Víðfaðmi, who allegedly conquered much of Northern Europe and who may have died around 700. He was fostered by Hǫrðr, who seems to have been a manifestation of Óðinn.<sup>69</sup> When Ívarr had become an old man, one day before a battle, Hǫrðr insults Ívarr and provokes him to attack him, and Ívarr becomes so furious that he falls overboard. Hǫrðr jumps after him and neither of them surface again. This, too, may be seen as an example of Óðinn taking one of his favourites home to Valhöll, through water. Perhaps similar notions lie behind lake Odensjön in Scania, southern Sweden, which probably is named after the god Óðinn – if the name is genu-

<sup>63</sup> For more about ancestor mountains, see: *Eyrbyggja saga*, 9, note 4; Ellis Davidson, *The Road to hel*, 88; Emil Birkeli, *Huskult og binsidigbetstro. Nye studier over fedrekult i Norge*, Skrifter utgitt av Det norske videnskapsakademi i Oslo II, Hist.-filos. klasse 1943:1 (Oslo: I kommisjon hos Dybwad, 1944), 208.

<sup>64</sup> *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), 246-8.ff.

<sup>65</sup> Nordberg, "Krigarna," 274-5.

<sup>66</sup> *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda III*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 365.

<sup>67</sup> There are many parallels to this, cf. Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 242.

<sup>68</sup> *Sǫgubrot af fornkonungum*, in *Danakonunga sögur*, ed. Bjarni Guðnason, Íslenzk fornrit 35 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1982), 53-5.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Nordberg, "Krigarna," 135. There are many parallels to this, e.g., the above-mentioned Starkaðr, fostered by Hrosshársgrani = Óðinn.

ine.<sup>70</sup> The lake is situated deep in a crater-like depression in the flat landscape, it has no river flowing into it, and it is believed to be bottomless.<sup>71</sup> This means that it is of the same type as the north Saami *sáiva*, and actually it looks very much like one of them: Lake Pakasaivo in northern Finland. Accordingly, it makes good sense if Odensjön was conceived of as an entrance to Óðinn's residence.

Probably ritual activity connected to springs, wells, ponds, marshes, and so on, too, is evidence of a belief that the Otherworld could be reached through water. The clearest example is sacrifices at such sites, which have been common for thousands of years.<sup>72</sup> Sacrifices were probably deposited in such sites because they were seen as passages to gods/spirits/powers. Rock carvings, too, at least in Northwestern Europe, are connected with the sea, water, springs, marshes, etc.<sup>73</sup> This may be because of the same notion of a watery passage to the Otherworld.

It seems that horizontal and vertical water crossings were conceived of as variants. They often appear in variants of the same or similar stories and usually lead to the same kind of land. In a Saami legend, the sub-sea fairy world is in fact reached by a horizontal boat voyage: A boy goes by boat through fog to the fairy world, and there he can see fish lines with hooks hanging through a fog "ceiling," from human fishermen above. The fish that they catch are sheep in the fairy world, which is a dry one like our

<sup>70</sup> Stig Isaksson (p. 29; 1958: *Skånes ortnamn. Serie A, bebyggelsenamn. Del 14, Onsjo Härad*. Utgivna av Dialekt- och ortnamnsarkivet i Lund. Lund: Gleerupska universitetsbokhandeln) mentions indices that the name is a late invention, but on the other hand, no other name of it is known.

<sup>71</sup> *Nordisk familjebok. Konversationslexikon och realencyklopedi* 12 (Stockholm: Gernandts boktryckeri-aktiebolag, 1888), 101.

<sup>72</sup> Berta Stjernquist, "Spring-cults in Scandinavian Prehistory," in *Gifts to the Gods. Proceedings of the Uppsala Symposium 1985*, ed. Tullia Linders and Gullög Nordquist, Boreas 15 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 149-57; eadem, "The Basic Perception of the Religious Activities at Cult-Sites such as Springs, Lakes and Rivers," in *The World-View of Prehistoric Man. Papers presented at a symposium in Lund, 5-7 May 1997, arranged by the Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities along with The Foundation Natur och kultur, publishers*, ed. Lars Larsson and Berta Stjernquist, Kungl. Vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademien, Konferenser 40 (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademien, 1998), 157-78; Charlotte Fabech, "Samfundsorganisation, religiøse ceremonier og regional variation," in *Samfundsorganisation og Regional Variation. Norden i romerske jernalder og folkevandringstid. Beretning fra 1. nordiske jernaldersymposium på Sandbjerg Slot 11.-15. april 1989*, ed. Charlotte Fabech and Jytte Ringtved, Jysk Arkæologisk Selskabs skrifter 27 (Århus: Jysk Arkæologisk Selskab), 283-303; Torsten Capelle, "Quell- und Brunnenopfer," in *Opferplatz und Heiligtum. Kult der Vorzeit in Norddeutschland*, ed. Ralf Busch, Veröffentlichung des Helms-Museums 86 (Neumünster: Wachholtz, 2000), 101-5; idem, "Mooropfer," in *ibidem*, 123-7; Stefan Brink, "Mythologizing Landscape. Place and Space of Cult and Myth," in *Kontinuitäten und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte. Festschrift für Anders Hultgård zu seinem 65. Geburtstag am 23.12.2001*, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 31 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), 96-8.

<sup>73</sup> Knut Helskog, "The Shore Connection. Cognitive Landscape and Communication with Rock Carvings in Northernmost Europe," *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 32 (1999), 73-94; Lasse Bengtsson, *Bilder vid ratten. Kring hällristningar i Askum sn, Bobuslän*, GOTARC. Serie C, Arkeologiska skrifter 51 (Stockholm: Göteborgs universitet. Institutionen för arkeologi, ANL, 2004).

own.<sup>74</sup> The fact that fog is quite common in connection with vertical water crossings also indicates that the horizontal water crossings and the vertical ones are variants. Saxo Grammaticus (around 1200) tells that the hero, Haddingus, was once led to an underground Otherworld that resembles several of the Old Norse forms of Otherworld. On his way down, he passed through fog (and then crossed a river).<sup>75</sup> A similar motif is attested in the thirteenth-century *Dorsteins þáttur bójarmagns*: In order to go to the land of the *álfar* the hero jumps into a river and then, on the way down, passes through fog.<sup>76</sup> The same motif is found in a rich early nineteenth-century Icelandic tradition about going to the *álfar*.<sup>77</sup> In the horizontal water crossings to the Otherworld, fog is a necessary element because it hides the location of the Otherworld (is)land. This hiding function of fog is sometimes found in connection with journeys on land as well.<sup>78</sup> In the vertical variant, however, the motif has no apparent function. The only possible explanation of it seems to be that it is transferred from the horizontal variant – which means that the vertical and horizontal water crossings were conceived of as variants.

#### *The different Otherworlds*

At this point one might object that I oversimplify the notions of the Otherworld, that I ignore the differences between the various forms, but my claim is not that all forms are the same. There are many major differences. For instance, the lands of the fairies, elves, gods, etc., in folk traditions are not usually conceived of as realms of the dead, or at least not first and foremost. But for my purpose this does not matter because I simply discuss the watery barrier between this world and Otherworlds, no matter what Otherworlds we are talking about. Most traditions do not make a sharp distinction between the realm of the dead and the other Otherworlds. This perhaps applies most clearly to Irish tradition.<sup>79</sup> There, the land of the fairies, the *Tír na n-Óg* and so forth, and the realm of the dead are frequently located in the same places and described in the same ways. Moreover, after death the chosen may reappear among the fairies or in the blessed land beyond the sea. The latter also applies partly to Old Norse tradition, as we have seen; the realm of the gods is not primarily a realm of the dead, but after

<sup>74</sup> Christiansen, “Litt om nordlandsk folketradition,” 19.

<sup>75</sup> Fisher and Ellis Davidson, *The History of the Danes* 2, book 1, 8, 14.

<sup>76</sup> *Saga af Dorsteini Baarmagns*, 176.

<sup>77</sup> Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur* I, 101-3; III, 162-4.

<sup>78</sup> Icelandic tradition: Einarsson Bjarni, *Munnmalasögur 17. aldar*, Íslenzk rit síðari alda 6 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fræðafélag, 1955); Irish tradition: Patch, *The Other World*, 45; Macculloch 1964, “Celtic Mythology,” 118.

<sup>79</sup> Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Dublin: The Folklore of Ireland Society, 1942), 450; Arthur C.L. Brown, *The Origin of the Grail Legend* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1943), 23; MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, 359-60.

death heroes and men killed in battle come to Óðinn's or Freyja's residence. Among the (south) Saami the people of the *saajve(aajmoe)* were believed to be ancestors, but the description of them and their residence makes it hard to distinguish them from elves or fairies.<sup>80</sup> The same applies to the ancestor mountains in medieval Iceland. Holmberg [Harva] points out that the fairies (*de underjordiska*, that is, "the 'subterraneans'") in Finnish tradition are "very closely related to the spirits of the dead" and that in many cases these groups are identical in the traditions of the Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia.<sup>81</sup>

*Reflection in water and interfaces with the (inverted) Otherworld*

How can one explain the vertical water crossing to the Otherworld? This question is part of the bigger question of why the most common notion of Otherworld places is *underneath* us. The underneath part is often explained by the fact that most cultures bury their dead in the ground, which easily leads to a notion that there is an Otherworld in the ground, but it does not explain the vertical crossing of *water* to get there. Nor does it, as Holmberg [Harva] points out,<sup>82</sup> explain why even peoples who do not bury their dead believe in an Otherworld below us – such as the Siberian Evenks, who place their dead high in the air on platforms and consider it a sin to bury them in the ground. Holmberg [Harva] also remarks that the underground Otherworld of folklore and myth is not usually situated at the depth of a grave. He launches another explanation of the Otherworld beneath us.<sup>83</sup> He points out that in many cultures the Otherworld is conceived of as *inverted* from this world; it is upside-down, the rivers flow backwards, the people walk backwards, are left-handed, wear their clothes inside-out, etc. Holmberg has information of such notions from most of northern Eurasia. From some areas he even has information that the sun was believed to move from right to left, and in some accounts, from Sweden (Gotland), Saami land and Nenets land (northwest Russia), it is even said that the "Otherworlders" walk with their feet against ours. Holmberg points out that a world like this seems to be derived from the reflection in lakes and ponds on calm days. Not only is it upside-down; it is also inverted left/right.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Skanke, "Epitomes Historiæ Missionis Lapponicæ," 190-2; Wiklund, "Saivo," 55; Bäckman, *Såjva*, 67-9; and Mebius, *Bissie*, 81-3.

<sup>81</sup> Holmberg [Harva], "Vänster hand och motsols," 25-6.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, 33.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*, 33-5; idem, *Finno-ugric, Siberian [Mythology]*, The Mythology of all Races IV, ed. John Arnott et al. (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1927), 73.

<sup>84</sup> A variant is the notion that there are night and winter in the otherworld when there are day and summer in this world, although this cannot be directly derived from the reflection in the water, just from the general inversion of the mirror image. Saxo's account of the underworld visited by Haddingus is an early

Holmberg [Harva] based his work on theories of mental evolution that are now rejected, but the experience of an inverted world that can be seen in a reflection in water is shared by all seeing humans through all ages, regardless of cultures and theories. Accordingly, the explanation in question is not dependent upon evolutionist theories and it was put forward by Carl von Linné in 1745 (as mentioned by Holmberg), long before the invention of evolutionism.<sup>85</sup> To me it seems hard to escape the opinion that Holmberg [Harva] was right: The main source for the notion of an Otherworld underneath us is the reflection in water. This notion can be as old as mankind and yet renewed again and again as new generations have seen reflections.

In particular, the reflection can explain the notion of an Otherworld underneath us beyond water. It may also explain much of the general idea of an Otherworld beyond water, even in a horizontal direction, because vertical and horizontal water crossings seem to be variants in the traditions. The experience of (horizontal) crossings of rivers, lakes, and seas on journeys is part of the background, too, connected to the notion of death as a (horizontal) journey to a distant land.

If one accepts the reflection-in-the-water explanation, one would expect water to be the most common interface with the Otherworld. Whether this is so or not is hard to find out, but at least it is common throughout the world (as has been noted by many scholars<sup>86</sup>); the Otherworld is accessed by jumping into a well, pond, lake or the sea, or a hole in the ice, or the spirits or beings from the Otherworld come up to this world through the same kinds of watery passages. Equally common entrances to the Otherworld, however, are gaps in the ground, caves, holes in the ground, clefts, volcanoes<sup>87</sup> and door-like formations in rocks,<sup>88</sup> or grave entrances.<sup>89</sup> These types usually exist side by side with no apparent distinction, which may seem contradictory but in my opinion is not. A well is a gap in the ground, too, just filled with water. A large lake or the sea are different but they, too, are potential gaps. They form a gap as soon as one jumps

Scandinavian attestation of this; it has summer and fresh plants when there is winter above the ground (Fisher and Ellis Davidson, *The History of the Danes* 2, book I, 30-1).

<sup>85</sup> Carl von Linné, Carl Linnæi öländska och gothländska resa på rikens höglovliga ständers befallning förrättad åhr 1741. Med anmärkningar uti oecnomien, naturalhistorien, antiquiteter & c. med åtskilliga figurer (Stockholm: Gottfried Kiesewetter, 1745), 312-3.

<sup>86</sup> E.g., Brink, "Mythologizing Landscape," 96.

<sup>87</sup> For instance: Jones, *Welsh Folklore*, 52 (Wales); MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, 359 (Ireland); Brown, "West Country Entrances to the Underworld;" (England and Wales); Árnason, *Íslenskar þjóðsögur*, I, 101-3; III, 162-4 (Iceland); Feilberg 1910: 59-60, Myrvang, *Hub-tetta*, 29-30, 35, 38 (mainland Scandinavia); Bäckman, *Sáiva*, 126 (Saami land); Straubergs, "Zur Jenseitstopographie," 83-4 (Estonia).

<sup>88</sup> Ernst Manker, *Lapparnas heliga ställen. Kultplatser och offerkult i bevisning av Nordiska museets och Landsantikvariernas fältundersökningar*, Acta Lapponica XIII (Stockholm: Gebers, 1957), 195-7, image 172-4 (Saami land).

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*, 162. Cf. Straubergs, "Zur Jenseitstopographie," 84 (Estonia); Nordberg, "Krigarna," 74-6, 273-5 (medieval Scandinavia).

into them and sometimes the passage to the Otherworld through water is formed by a whirlpool,<sup>90</sup> which is a gap, even a shaft, in the water. More important, in a small calm puddle surrounded by high trees or mountains one can “literally” see through a gap and deep into the Otherworld (even if the puddle is no more than a centimetre deep). If one looks into a lake the gap part is not there but still one can get the impression of looking into the Otherworld; it appears that one usually comes to the same kind of land no matter if the entrance is watery or not. In most accounts the sub-water Otherworld is the same dry kind of land that we live on; it is not a land of fish, seaweed and mermaids, which is why I often use unusual expressions like “Otherworld vertically beyond water” instead of simply “under water.” The latter gives the impression of a watery world. If one looks at the reflection in a pond this is natural: In the water one sees dry land, exactly like the land that we walk on. The Otherworld accessed through water is just that: Accessed through water. It is not necessarily a watery world; even when the Otherworld rises from the sea as an island a dry type of land is revealed. This reduces the difference between the two probable (main) starting-points of the notion of the underworld: The reflection in water and graves in the ground. The reflection in water includes the ground, so to speak.

It is worth noting that there was an Otherworld for the gods, too, not only for humans, and that the gods accessed the Otherworld through the same kinds of entrances as humans. When the Old Norse god Baldr was killed he went to the same realm of the dead as most humans, Hel, by boat. When the god Hermóðr went to Hel to rescue Baldr he experienced the same kind of journey as humans, downwards and across a river. Þórr met giantesses on the island Læsø, which seems to be a place where humans can get in contact with the Otherworld (see below). Óðinn seeks contact with supernatural powers in a well,<sup>91</sup> and so on. I see no contradiction in this.

#### *“Super-liminal” islands*

One may in any way accept or reject the reflection-in-water explanation of the Otherworld below us, but it does not seem to matter if the Otherworld is beyond water horizontally or vertically. It seems that the barrier or border aspect of the water is the same in both cases and that this aspect is what matters. This can throw light upon some special cases of islands. As already noted, islands in general are natural as places of contact with the Otherworld because in a way they are situated “on the other side,” al-

<sup>90</sup> Holmberg [Harva], *Finno-ugric, Siberian [Mythology]*, 78-9; Veikko Anttonen, “The Concept of *pyhä* (Sacred) in Pre-Christian Finnish Religion,” In *Northern Religions and Shamanism*, ed. Mihály Hoppál and Juha Pentikäinen, *Ethnologica uralica* 3 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1992) 36; Nordberg, “Krigarna,” 39. Cf. “sucked down” in some German accounts: Siuts, *Jenseitsmotive im deutschen Volksmärchen*, 54-5.

<sup>91</sup> *Völuspá* 27-8 (Bugge, *Sæmundar Edda*, 9).

though they are in this world. But some islands seem to have an increased island liminality.

In some cases this seems to be due to a combination with other principles. Some islands have entrances to the Otherworld on them, in caves, clefts or the like. An example from south Saami land is the island of *Tjåebkere* (South Saami) or *Gudfjelloya* (Norwegian) in Lake Tunnsjøen in Trøndelag (central Norway).<sup>92</sup> The island is a mountain and on top of it there is a narrow deep cleft that splits the mountain in two and has been believed to reach all the way down to the lake, 400 metres below.<sup>93</sup> The island is sacred in the tradition of the Saami, who used to sacrifice reindeer to the island's god in the cleft. Another example is the small island of *Äjijib* (Inari Saami)/*Ukonsaari* (Finnish) in Lake Inari, Finnish Lapland,<sup>94</sup> which has a sacrificial cave.<sup>95</sup> In these cases I do not know of traditions that the cleft/cave was an entrance to the Otherworld, but this seems a reasonable assumption because of the sacrifices deposited there. There are other such traditions in Estonia<sup>96</sup> and Ireland:<sup>97</sup> In the sea/lake/marsh there is an island; on the island there is a cave/hole, and this is an/the entrance to the Otherworld. The same motif may be seen in the fourteenth-century Icelandic *Bárðar saga*,<sup>98</sup> although in this case the Otherworld is only the dwelling place of a deceased evil king and his men. Similar notions may have been connected to the islands in Salten, northern Norway, that were called *Goðeyjar* ("islands of the gods") in Old Norse. There are several large grave mounds on them and the place was one of northern Norway's major heathen strongholds in the age of conversion.<sup>99</sup> The name *Goðeyjar* is probably related to Saltstraumen, the world's strongest tidal current, which flows between the islands. But why exactly were these tidal-current islands dedicated to the gods and such a powerful site of pagan worship? It may have been because they were associated with the whirlpools that gave access to the Otherworld. The island part may also be significant, how-

<sup>92</sup> The Norwegian name means "the island of the god mountain" and the Saami name probably refers to the thunder god.

<sup>93</sup> Agnar Nordback, "Tunnsjø og Tunnsjøguden," *Årbok for Nord-Trøndelag Historielag* 1933: 63-66; Martin Bjerken, *Grong bygdebok. For Grong, Harran, Namskogan og Røyrvik* (Trondheim: [s.n.], 1950).

<sup>94</sup> The names of this island, too, refer to the thunder god. Thanks to Håkan Rydving, University of Bergen, for help with the names *Tjåebkere* and *Äjijib*.

<sup>95</sup> Manker, *Lapparnas heliga ställen*, 292, image 338-40.

<sup>96</sup> Straubergs, "Zur Jenseitstopographie," 84.

<sup>97</sup> MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, 406.

<sup>98</sup> *Bárðar saga* [*Snafellssás*], in *Harðar saga*, ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson and Þórhallur Vilmundarson, Íslenzk fornrit 13 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1991), 165-7.

<sup>99</sup> *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, in *Heimskringla* I by Snorri Sturluson, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1941), 324-6, *Rögnvalds þáttur ok Rauðs*, Richard Perkins, *Thor the Wind-Raiser and the Eyrarland Image*, Viking Society for Northern Research text series XV (London: Viking Society for Northern research, 2001).

ever, in this case as well as in other cases. An entrance to the Otherworld makes a liminal place and if it is associated with an island the liminality may be doubled.

Another type of island seems to have a special status derived from a highlighting of the island liminality. There are two types of such “super-liminal” islands; one can be reached on foot and one is sometimes under water, sometimes over. The first type is commented on by Mankers in his book on the holy (sacrificial) places of the Saami.<sup>100</sup> He remarks that surprisingly many of the holy islets are separated from the mainland by sounds so shallow that they can be forded. I would like to add that some of them have a sub-water ridge leading to the islet. One might think that such islets were chosen because access was easier if a boat was not required, but it would have been even easier to choose some site on the mainland and there is explicit information (from 1727 and later) that difficult-of-access places were preferred.<sup>101</sup> An explanation may be that islets/islands that can be reached on foot are “exceptionally in-between.” Being surrounded by water they are islands, but being reachable on foot they belong to the mainland; therefore they may have been seen as being situated on the very border between worlds and therefore especially suitable as points of contact with the Otherworld. – All of Mankers’s examples are from lakes. On the coasts of Scandinavia the shoreline has changed a great deal since pre-Christian times because of the post-glacial rebound and therefore islands like this are hard to identify in most areas. Heligön, “the holy island” on the southeastern coast of Gotland, is a possible example, however, because there post-glacial rebound has been virtually nil. The sound that separates Heligön from the mainland is “bridged” by a shallow sub-water sand ridge (a *val* in Norwegian, from Old Norse *vaðill*, m.). Possibly such a sub-water ridge also connected Helgö “the holy island” and the mainland in Lake Helgasjön in Småland, southern Sweden. Hyltén-Cavallius refers to it as “a stone bridge or a ford” called “the Holy Bridge.”<sup>102</sup> The words are confusing; either it is a bridge or it is a ford. Possibly the name made Hyltén-Cavallius use the term bridge although it was a ford, a sub-water ridge. There may be another example at Helgøya, “the holy island” (Old Norse *Eyin Helgá*), in Lake Mjøsa, eastern Norway, the country’s largest lake. The pre-Christian cultic centre of the island was probably the farm *Hofvin* (Old Norwegian; now *Hovinsholm*); the name means “the field by the temple.” This farm is situated on the southern tip of the island, facing an islet (called Holmen, “the islet”) which seems to have enjoyed a special status in pre-Christian times; it has at least one large grave mound (35 m in diameter, 6 metres high) and some rampart construction. It is separated from Helgøya by a sound that is often fordable in spring.

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<sup>100</sup> Mankers, *Lapparnas heliga ställen*, 24.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*, 28.

<sup>102</sup> Gunnar Olof, Hyltén-Cavallius, *Wärend och Wirdarne. Ett försök i Svensk Ethnologi* 2 (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1863-68), I, 130: “en stenbro eller ett vad.”

Many of these shallow-sound islands may be grouped in a sub-type: Islands that can *sometimes* be reached on foot – in certain seasons (Holmen near Helgøya, Helgö in Småland?), or during anticyclones (Heligön near Gotland?), or at low tide. (The Baltic Sea does not have tides but fluctuates a great deal according to the air pressure and winds.) An example of an island that can be reached at low tide occurs in *Bárðar saga*.<sup>103</sup> The passage tells how the hero, Gestr, and his men are sent from Trondheim, Norway, to kill a monster ghost that lives in a grave mound in Helluland, which is probably Baffin Land in arctic Canada. When they finally get there it turns out that the grave mound is situated on an islet that is connected to the mainland by a ridge (*rið*) which is submerged except at low tide. Gestr and his men dig the mound open and Gestr is lowered into the mound on a rope through a shaft that is revealed. There he kills the monster ghost. When Gestr and his men have completed their mission they cannot go back to the mainland because the ridge is submerged by the raging sea – until the priest separates the sea and rescues the men, like many times before in the story. It seems that the location of this entrance to the Otherworld is liminal in two ways: It is situated in the remotest possible place in the known world and it is situated on a “semi-islet” that only belongs to the mainland part of the time. The fact that the raging sea that blocks contact with the mainland apparently represents the Otherworld powers seems to confirm this understanding: The islet is on the very border between the worlds, shifting back and forth between this side and the other side – not only topographically but also in terms of who has the power. One might object that the source value of this saga is low because it is late, fantastic, and heavily influenced by Christianity – the priest and the holy King Óláfr play important roles. The motif in question, however, is not Christian, so it is probably pre-Christian although it is used in a Christian understanding.<sup>104</sup> It is possible that the grave mounds with ditches around them should also be understood as being “exceptionally in-between” in this way (see above). Many of the ditches would probably fill with water during heavy rain and/or the snow-melt in spring, but few would do so permanently. Thus, they may have been seen as symbolically shifting back and forth between worlds.

The other main type of “super-liminal” islands is the one that is completely submerged for periods of time. This is the case with many Saami inland holy “islets” (sacrificial sites) that are just boulders; they are so low that they are submerged during flooding. The special status of these places also seems to derive from a highlighting of the island liminality, but in a different way. All islands are in a way “on the other side,” but these islands are even more so because they are sometimes submerged and then belong to the Otherworld completely. They are still accessible, however, in the periods when they are not submerged. This may be compared to the fact that rock carvings

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<sup>103</sup> *Bárðar saga*, 165-7.

<sup>104</sup> Heide, “More inroads to pre-Christian notions, after all?”

often are placed where running water, waves or the high tide cover them.<sup>105</sup> In the case of the sea this has been established by analogy with lakes, Onega in particular, where the shores have no post-glacial rebound. The Saami boulder islets were often believed to be dwelling-places of the *báldit*, “fairies, elves” (North Saami), who lived on such “islets.”<sup>106</sup> Accordingly, they are related to the sea islands inhabited by fairies – *bulderfolket*, *mearra-báldit* – in Norwegian and Saami folklore. In Norwegian tradition the most famous are Utrøst and Sandflesa.<sup>107</sup> Most, like these two, are offshore, but some are situated among the coastal islands and some even in fjords.<sup>108</sup> They are usually submerged but occasionally surface and may then be seen or may be found by fishermen in fog or gales; a few of them are actual rocks but most of them only exist in popular lore. Some forms of the Irish traditions of *Tír na n-Óg*, and so on, are similar to the Norwegian traditions. In these traditions we again see that this world and the Otherworld meet on islands whose liminality is highlighted by the water surface shifting between this side and the other side. The introduction to the thirteenth-century *Guta saga* seems to be an early example of this.<sup>109</sup>

#### *Remote islands*

The Utrøst-type of island is related to a type which is not periodically submerged but which has a similar location, that is, remote in the geography of this world. The islands of Læsø (Old Norse Hlésey) between Jutland and Sweden and Samsø (Old Norse Sámsey) between Jutland and Zealand are good examples of this. They have been moderately important economically, but have a prominent position in Old Norse poetry<sup>110</sup> and the legendary sagas.<sup>111</sup> (Samsø was important strategically, however.) According to the Eddic poems *Lokasenna* and *Hárbarðsljóð*, these islands received visits from the gods Þórr and Óðinn<sup>112</sup> and the giant Ægir/Hlér was associated with the island. This is special because the mythological world had its own geography; gods and giants did not

<sup>105</sup> Helskog, “The Shore Connection;” Bengtsson, *Bilder vid vatten*.

<sup>106</sup> Wiklund, “Saivo,” 50.

<sup>107</sup> Byberg, “‘Dei lukkelege øyane’ i norsk folketradisjon.”

<sup>108</sup> *Ibidem*, 86-88.

<sup>109</sup> *Guta saga. The History of the Gotlanders*, ed. Christine Peel, Viking Society for Northern Research, text series XII (London: Viking Society, University College, 1999), 2.

<sup>110</sup> Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon poeticum* (Copenhagen: S. L. Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1913-16), 261, 484.

<sup>111</sup> *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda II* (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 1-71; *Órnar-Odds saga*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda II* (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 199-363; *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda III* (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 167; *Egils saga einbenda*, 365; *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda I* (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 284-5.

<sup>112</sup> *Lokasenna*, 24, *Hárbarðsljóð*, 37 (Bugge, *Samundar Edda*, 117, 101).

normally wander around in this world, but apparently on Læsø and Samsø they did. This indicates that these islands were places where this world and the mythological world could meet. It seems that Snorri conceived of Læsø in this way when he wrote the framing story for *Skaldskaparmál*, part of his *Younger Edda*. There he lets gods, giants, and elves meet for a party on Læsø.<sup>113</sup> Two legendary sagas also give the impression that Læsø was a point where the different worlds could meet. In *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* there is a fantastic account of the berserk Grímr, who grew up on Læsø;<sup>114</sup> his mother was believed to be a sea ogress (*sjógýgr*) and he was found (as a baby) floating in the sea by the high-water mark – which is the boundary between the worlds? The sea-battle mentioned in *Egils saga einbenda* is another example that Óðinn could enter this world on Læsø.<sup>115</sup> In the legendary saga *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (1954:13) a different kind of Otherworld contact takes place on Samsø:<sup>116</sup> A *haugbrot*, “grave-mound robbery.” There are many accounts of *haugbrots* in the Old Norse sources, especially in the legendary sagas,<sup>117</sup> but the one in the *Hervarar saga* is unique because the hero – a heroine – cooperates with the dead in the mound, who are her ancestors, and because of this the mound opens willingly without her digging it open. Thus, this motif is reminiscent of the Helgafell motif in the *Eyrbyggja saga*. According to the legendary *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* there was a cult site with a wooden idol on Samsø in pagan times.<sup>118</sup> The motif that a remote island is a place of contact with the Otherworld is also found in the legendary *Ketils saga bongs*.<sup>119</sup> The hero is alone, fishing off-season on the island of Skrova in northern Norway, which has a location similar to Læsø and Samsø, isolated, between the mainland and the Lofoten archipelago, but quite far from both. Here he meets an ogress who tells about events in the world of trolls. Essentially the same motif is common in Norwegian and Saami folklore: The hero meets the fairies when visiting out-of-season an isolated island used for seasonal fishing.<sup>120</sup> The motif is found in Icelandic folklore as well, attributed to the island Seley off the eastern coast of Iceland, near Reyðarfjörður.<sup>121</sup> These examples resemble those given above, where contact with gods and the like is sought on

<sup>113</sup> *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 78; cf. *Grimmismál*, 45 and *Lokasenna* (Bugge, *Samundar Edda*, 85, 113-5).

<sup>114</sup> *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, 167.

<sup>115</sup> *Egils saga einbenda*, 365.

<sup>116</sup> *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, 13.

<sup>117</sup> A.W. Brøgger, “Oseberggraven – Haugbrottet,” *Viking* 1944: 1-45; Heinrich Beck, “Haugbrot im Altnordischen,” in *Zum Grabfrel in vor- und frühgeschichtlicher Zeit. Untersuchungen zu Grabraub und "haugbrot" in Mittel- und Nordeuropa*, ed. Herbert Jankuhn et. al., Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, philologisch-historische Klasse, 3. Folge (Göttingen: Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1978), 211-28; Jonas Wellendorf, “Haugbrot i norrøn litteratur og omegn,” hovedoppgave i nordisk (University of Bergen, 2002).

<sup>118</sup> *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, 284-5.

<sup>119</sup> *Ketils saga bongs*, 172-73; cf. Heide, “Gand, seid og ándevind,” 211-3, 226-8.

<sup>120</sup> Byberg, “‘Dei lukkelege oyane’ i norsk folketradisjon,” 58-60.

<sup>121</sup> Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur* I, 86-8.

islands, although in those cases it is not always a point that the island or the place of contact on it is remote.

This type of island seems to have its liminality highlighted by a combination of the island motif and a different liminality motif: Remoteness. Læsø is an island far off-shore and so is the Irish *Tír na n-Óg* in most accounts. Most of the Norwegian fairy islands are off shore as well and many of them have names with the prefixes *Ut-*, *Ytter-* or *Aud-* “Outer” and “Deserted” (Ut-Røst, Ytter-Sklinna, Audvær, etc.).<sup>122</sup> Samsø is not strictly off-shore, but relatively seen it is, being a small island quite far away from all the surrounding larger islands and Jutland.

The motif of a man meeting the fairies (or other Otherworld beings) when visiting a remote island off season also applies to summer farms in the mountains (at least in Scandinavia).<sup>123</sup> How can one understand this parallelism? This question is part of the larger question of how we can understand the liminality that derives from remoteness. We have seen repeatedly that the Otherworld can be reached by going a long way horizontally or downwards through a nearby entrance.<sup>124</sup> These may seem like completely different ways, but this is not necessarily so. The Otherworld is beyond the areas that we usually (can) access. Our horizontal range is long so therefore we have to go a long way horizontally to reach the Otherworld, especially if the distance alone separates us from the Otherworld. Downwards, however, our range is very limited. Therefore, even when the downward entrances to the Otherworld are next to where we live, for instance, in the middle of the farmyard (a well or a grave mound), the Otherworld is very far away. In both cases, however, the essence is going beyond what we usually (can) access. Both the seasonal fishing islands and the summer farms are outposts; they represent the outer edges of the society. Because the Otherworld can be defined as “the world beyond (known) human society” such outposts have a liminal location; they are on the border. The Finnish places designated as *pyhä* “sacred” in pre-Christian times were always boundary markers, among other things.<sup>125</sup> They even change sides through the year when they are abandoned by the humans and occupied by the fairies or other Otherworld powers at the end of the season and then reoccupied by the humans next year. They are periodically “submerged,” so to speak, like one of the types of “super-liminal” islands.

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<sup>122</sup> Byberg, “‘Dei lukkelege øyane’ i norsk folketradisjon,” 86-8.

<sup>123</sup> E.g., P. Chr. Asbjørnsen, *Norske Huldre-Eventyr og Folkesagn*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Christiania: Steensballe, 1870); Svale Solheim, *Norske sætertradisjon*, Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning, Serie B, Skrifter 47 (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1952), 371-3, 376-8.

<sup>124</sup> In addition, the otherworld can be reached upwards, by going to the top of a high mountain or going to the sky or stars. This is a motif I have not discussed in this article but will return to in the concluding remarks.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. Anttonen, “The Concept of *pyhä*,” 13.

Islands like Læsø, Skrova and other seasonal fishing islands are liminal both as islands and as far-away places. On top of this, these islands are only seasonally inhabited, shifting sides through the year. This logic probably lies behind islands like Helgö(n) “the holy island” (now mostly called Storzjungfrun) off the coast of Hälsingland in northern Sweden. Brink points out that the island is far from the coast and suggests that it was a place of contact with the gods and/or a home of dead relatives.<sup>126</sup> This seems plausible to me, and I would like to add that Helgö(n) in older times was inhabited only seasonally, by fishermen. As far as the ancestor part is concerned, Brink’s explanation would make the island parallel to islands like those off Finistère, the Isle of Man, the island of Great Britain, and Læsø, which have been conceived of as (or associated with) dwelling-places of the dead. Probably other off-shore islands, too, have been conceived of as homes of the ancestors, although evidence of this has not survived down to us. Candidates for this would be islands that are conceived of in popular lore as dwellings of fairies or Otherworld powers in general – like Blå Jungfrun in Kalmarsund, South-eastern Sweden, and Seley off eastern Iceland.

#### *Concluding remarks*

I am not claiming that being beyond water is the only source for liminality nor that it is sufficient. *Differentness* is the quality that takes to make a holy place.<sup>127</sup> Being beyond water is not the only one way of being different and in a landscape with many islands it is not enough. Then, being different from other islands is required.

In this article I have gathered examples and indications that one may cross water – horizontally or vertically – to go to the Scandinavian gods, especially Óðinn. This has not been pointed out clearly before, especially not the vertical version. It probably has to do with the fact that there is no hint of such water crossing in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*<sup>128</sup> and the fact that it contradicts Snorri’s version of Old Norse cosmology.<sup>129</sup> This is not a strong objection, though, because Snorri’s account as well as the rest of the Old Norse corpus are full of contradictions about world view, as has been

<sup>126</sup> Brink, “Mythologizing Landscape,” 95.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Nathan Söderblom, “Holiness,” in *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* 6, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), 731-41; C.W. von Sydow, “Det ovanligas betydelse i tro och sed,” *Folkminnen och folkätanor* 1926: 53-70; Veikko Anttonen, “Does the Sacred Make a Difference? Category Formation in Comparative Religion,” in *Approaching Religion. Part I. Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Methodology in the Study of Religions Held at Åbo, Finland, on the 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> August 1997*, Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis 17 (Åbo: Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1999), 12.

<sup>128</sup> *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 8-77.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibidem*, 15-6.

pointed out by Brink, Wellendorf and others.<sup>130</sup> Moreover, there is reason to believe that Snorri's presentation was influenced by Christian notions because he mostly places the gods in the sky. Still, some of our information clearly indicates that the idea of gods in the sky was a pre-Christian notion to some extent, too. However, it is thinkable that the contradiction is only seemingly between the accounts that seem to place the gods and the Otherworld underground, beyond or under water, in the sky, etc. In countless accounts, both from Scandinavia and other parts of the world, one comes to the same kind of Otherworld no matter what passage one passes through. If the passages are passages, not the Otherworld itself, the contradiction may be avoided. I intend to discuss this in a later article.

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<sup>130</sup> Stefan Brink, 2004, "Mytologiska rum och eskatologiska föreställningar i det vikingatida Norden," in *Ordning mot kaos. Studier av nordisk förkristen kosmologi*, ed. Anders Andrén et al., *Vägar till Midgård* 4 (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2004), 291-316; Jonas Wellendorf, "Homogeneity and Heterogeneity in Old Norse Cosmology," in *Old Norse religion in long-term perspectives. Origins, changes, and interactions. An international conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, ed. Anders Andrén et al., *Vägar till Midgård* 8 (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 50-3.