

Háskóli Íslands

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Norrænt meistaranám í víkinga- og miðaldafræðum

ÓÐINN AND HIS COSMIC CROSS

Sacrifice and Inception of a God

at the

Axis of the Universe

Lokaverkefni til MA-gráðu í Norrænt meistaranám í víkinga- og miðaldafræðum

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Abstract:

Stanzas 138 through 141 of the eddic poem *Hávamál* illustrate a scene of Óðinn's self-sacrifice or *sjálfsfórn*, by hanging himself from a tree to obtain the runes. These four stanzas, which mark the beginning of the section *Rúnatal's þátr*, constitute some of the most controversial and important eddic poetry. Concerning the passage, Jens Peter Schjødt says it is one of the most interesting scenes in the entire Old Norse Corpus from the perspective of Religious History. One of the largest discussions surrounding this self-hanging myth, is whether it is wholly invented from Christian ideals about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ or if it comes from a pre-Christian Scandinavian oral tradition. This work argues *sjálfsfórn* is not simply a borrowing from Christianity, because all the attributes of the myth can be explained through the larger context of the Norse textual and pictorial tradition associated with pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion. Furthermore, *sjálfsfórn* contains metaphysical concepts found in religions across the globe, some are older than the crucifixion, namely the axis mundi as a sacred space for sacrifice and initiation.

This work will broaden the discussion surrounding *sjálfsfórn* by comparing it with various Indo-European myths and rituals. The oldest of these Indo-European traditions is the Rudra initiation, where the center pole of the initiation hut represents the center of the universe as well as the personification of Rudra. Shamanic initiations also display parallels to Óðinn's self-hanging and this thesis will compare these rituals as well. Finnish shaman initiates must undergo torment to gain power, like Óðinn does in *sjálfsfórn*, and they must climb a tree, which represents the cosmic tree. The Sun Dance of the Plains Native Americans is a distant but similar ritual. Like Óðinn, the Sun Dance initiate is tethered to a tree, which represents the axis mundi, and sometimes they even hang from the tree. All of these myths and traditions convey the concept of the cosmic pillar as the ultimate liminal space, as well as the ideal location for sacrifice and initiation.

To carry out these comparisons, this thesis is based upon Schjødt's four levels of comparison. It compares *sjálfsfórn* with the rest of the Old Norse Corpus, with cultures neighboring Scandinavia, with other Indo-European cultures, and with typologically similar rituals such as the Sun Dance. This methodology will serve to reveal the self-hanging's relationships to other myths and rituals, and it will highlight *sjálfsfórn*'s place in mythic tradition.

Útdráttur:

Í 138.-141 vísu Hávamála er sagt frá *sjálfsfórn* Óðins sem hékk á tré til að öðlast þekkingu á rúnum. Þessar fjórar vísur, sem marka upphaf hins svokallaða Rúnatala í Hávamálum, eru með þeim umdeildustu og mikilvægustu í eddukvæðum. Fræðimaðurinn Jens Peter Schjødt gengur jafnvel svo langt að telja vísurnar þær áhugverðustu frá sjónarhorni trúarbragðasögu. Stór hluti umræðunnar um goðsögnina um sjálfsfórn Óðins hefur snúist um hvort hún sé eingöngu mótuð með krossfestingu Krists að fyrirmynd eða hvort sögnin eigi sér dýpri rætur í munnlegri hefð frá því fyrir kristnitöku á Norðurlöndum. Í þessari ritgerð eru færð rök fyrir því að sjálfsfórnin sé ekki einfaldlega mótuð að kristinni fyrirmynd heldur verði goðsögnin og umgjörð hennar betur skýrð í samhengi við aðra norræna texta og myndefni sem speglar norrænar trúarhugmyndir frá því fyrir kristni. Að auk má greina í sjálfsfórninni frumspekilegar hugmyndir sem eiga sér hliðstæður í trúarbrögðum um allan heim, sumum hverjum eldri en krossfestingin, svo sem um heimstré sem helgistað fyrir fórnar- og innvígsluathafnir, eins konar möndul sem tengi miðju jarðar við himinskautið.

Í þessari ritgerð verður reynt að víkka út umræðuna um sjálfsfórnina með því að bera hana saman við ýmsar indóevrópskar goðsagnir og helgisiði. Elstu hefðirnar af indóevrópsku tagi eru Rudra-innvígsluathöfnin þar sem miðstólpinn í innvígslukofanum táknað miðju heimsins og um leið persónugervingu Rudra. Einnig má finna hliðstæður í sjamanískum innvígsluathöfnum við sjálfsfórn Óðins og eru þær teknar til samanburðar hér. Finniskir sjamanar þurfa við vígslu að gangast undir píslir til að öðlast kraft, líkt og Óðinn gerir, og klifra upp tré sem táknað heimstréð. Sólardansinn hjá Sléttuindjánum Norður Ameríku er fjarlægur en þó svipaður helgisiður. Líkt og í sögninni um Óðin er sá sem á að vígjast í Sólardansinum bundinn við tré, sem táknað möndulás heimsins, og stundum er hann jafnvel látinn hanga í tré. Allar þessar goðsagnir og hefðir benda á hugmyndina um möndulás heimsins sem helstu mæri þessa heims og annars. Um leið er hann kjörstaður fórna og innvígsluathafna.

Við samanburðinn er stuðst við ferns konar samanburð að hætti Schjødt: Sjálfsfórnin er borin saman við a) aðra norræna texta, b) nálæg menningarsvæði, c) önnur indóevrópsk menningarsvæði og d) formlega líkar athafnir eins og Sólardansinn. Með þessari aðferð er reynt að draga fram tengsl sjálfsfórnar Óðins við aðrar goðsagnir og helgisiði og benda þannig á stöðu sjálfsfórnarinnar innan goðsagnahefðarinnar.

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Introduction:

Stanzas 138 through 141 of the eddic poem *Hávamál* illustrate a scene of Óðinn hanging himself from a tree to obtain the runes. These four stanzas are the beginning of the *Rúnatal* section of *Hávamál*, but I will refer to these four stanzas as *sjálfsfórn* throughout this work. This scene constitutes some of the most controversial and important eddic poetry. Concerning the passage, Jens Peter Schjødt says “From a religio-historical viewpoint, these stanzas are among the most interesting in the entire corpus of eddic poetry”.¹ One of the largest discussions surrounding this self-hanging myth, is whether it is wholly invented from Christian ideals about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ or if it comes from a pre-Christian Scandinavian oral tradition. Some scholars, who have argued for Christian influence include Sophus Bugge, E.H. Meyer, Golther, Ohrt, Reichhardt, Näsström, von See, and Lassen.² A few examples of scholars, who argue for a pre-Christian Scandinavian origin of *sjálfsfórn*, include Pipping, van Hamel, Höfler, de Vries, Hunke, Schjødt, and Dutton.³ This work seeks to uncover, whether *sjálfsfórn* really is a borrowing from Christianity. In order to weigh the amount of Christian influence within the myth, this work will compare all the attributes of the self-hanging with the larger context of the Norse textual and pictorial tradition associated with pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion. Furthermore, this work will broaden the discussion, moving past the duality of Christianity and pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion,

¹ Schjødt, Jens Peter. *Initiation Between Two Worlds*. Translated by Victor Hansen. N.p.: The University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008. p. 174.

² See Bugge, Sophus. *Studier over de nordiske Gude- og Heltesagns Oprindelse*. Vol. 1. Christiania: Forlagt Af Universitetsboghandler G. E. C. Gad, 1881-89. pp. 291-297; Meyer, Elard Hugo. *Germanische Mythologie*. Berlin: Mayer & Müller, 1891. pp. 250-251; Golther, Wolfgang. *Handbuch der germanischen Mythologie*. Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1895. pp. 280-282; Ohrt, Ferdinand. "Odin paa træet." *Acta philologica Scandinavica* 4 (1930): 273-86. pp. 273-286; Reichhardt, Konstantin. "Odin am Galgen." In *Wächter und Hüter: Festschrift für Hermann J. Weigand, zum 17*, edited by Curt von Faber, 15-28. New Haven, CT: Yale University Department of Germanic Languages, 1957. pp. 26-28; Näsström, Britt-Mari. *Blot: Tro og offer i det førkristne Norden*. Oslo: Pax, 2001. pp. 166-168; See, Klaus von. "Snorri Sturluson and the Creation of A Norse Cultural Ideology." In *Saga-Book*, 367-92. Vol. 25. Translated by Bill McCann. London: Viking Society For Northern Research, 2001. pp. 384-389; Lassen, Annette. "The God On The Tree." In *Greppaminni: Ritgerðir til heiðurs Vésteini Ólasyni sjötugum*, edited by Margrét Eggertsdóttir, Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, Árni Sigurjónsson, Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson, and Guðrún Nordal, 231-44. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2009. pp. 231-246.

³ See Pipping, Rolf. "Oden i galgen." *Studier i nordisk filologi* 18, no. 2 (1927): 1-13. pp. 1-13; Hamel, A.G. van. "Óðinn Hanging on the Tree." *Acta philologica Scandinavica: tidsskrift for nordisk* 7 (1934): 260-88. pp. 260-280; Höfler, Otto. *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen*. Vol. 1. Frankfurt Am Main: M. Diesterweg, 1934. pp. 231-246; Vries, Jan de. "Odin am Baume." *Studia Germanica tillägnade Ernst Albin Kock den 6. december 1934*, 392-96. Lund: Lunder germanistische Forschungen, 1934. pp. 392-395; Hunke, Waltraud. "Odins Geburt." In *Edda, Skalden, Saga: Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Felix Genzmer*, edited by Hermann Schneider, 68-71. Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1952. pp. 68-71; Schjødt, 2008. pp. 176-206; Dutton, Douglas R. *An Encapsulation of Óðinn: Religious belief and ritual practice among the Viking Age elite with particular focus upon the practice of ritual hanging 500 -1050 AD*. Aberdeen: Centre for Scandinavian Studies, 2015. pp. 1-270.

by comparing Óðinn's hanging with myths and rituals from other religions. This investigation should reveal if *sjálfsfórn* contains metaphysical concepts older than Christianity.

The method this work uses to argue this thesis reflects the ideas presented by Schjødt in his chapter "Reflections on Aims and Methods in the Study of Old Norse Religion". In this chapter, Schjødt confronts the problematic nature of studying pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion. The contemporary sources, like the archaeological record, are open to very broad interpretation, while the medieval written sources were mostly written in Iceland from the 13th to 14th Century, two to three hundred years after conversion to Christianity. Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion was also certainly not a uniform religion with a single world view and dogma, rather it varied widely between different parts of Scandinavia, therefore it should really be regarded as group of related religions. Schjødt discusses three key concepts to studying Old Nordic Religion, model, discourse, and comparativism. He suggests one cannot ever reconstruct Old Nordic Religion the way it 'truly' was before conversion, rather one can only construct a model of how it most likely was. From a model, one can create a discursive space to use as a perimeter for academic discussion. Comparativism helps constitute a discursive space and probable models, because it is a necessary condition for talking about abstract notions and conceptions.⁴ These three key methods, especially comparativism, will aid in supporting this work's argument.

Schjødt discusses a couple of different types of comparisons. Typological comparisons are between cultures, which are not necessarily historically connected. Genetic comparisons are between cultures with a historical connection and through interaction borrowed concepts from one another, or they share a common heritage. With these two types of comparison in mind, Schjødt goes on to describe four levels of comparativism in the study of Old Nordic Religion.

The first level is comparison within the Old Norse area. For example, when one analyzes a poem about Þórr, it is necessary to compare it with other stories about Þórr to note differences and similarities in narrative motif.⁵ In this same way, Chapter One of this work will compare *sjálfsfórn* with other narratives from the Old Norse corpus, which exhibit similar attributes and themes.

⁴ Schjødt, Jens Peter. "Reflections on Aims and Methods in the Study of Old Norse Religion." In *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices, and Regional Distribution in pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion*, edited by Catharina Raudvere and Jens Peter Schjødt, 263-87. Vol. 1. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012. pp. 263-281.

⁵ Ibid. pp. 275-276.

It is important to note, Schjødt says one should never attempt to find the “original” version of a myth, because there is no such thing. Mythology is never stagnant, it is constantly in flux and changing. Even within Scandinavian culture there are various versions of a myth, such as Þórr’s fight with the world serpent. Schjødt argues these variations do not reveal anything about the development of the myth, rather just different ideas belonging to certain individuals and groups. He concludes, asking which is the original version of a myth is an absurd question and the answers are more absurd.⁶ This idea is very relevant for this work’s purposes. This paper’s aim is not to find an “original” version of *sjálfsfórn*, rather it seeks to uncover possibly related myths, some of which are considerably older than the self-hanging myth.

The second level begins to broaden the scope of the context by comparing Scandinavia with neighboring cultures, such as the Sámi to the north and the Germanic peoples to the south. These two groups influenced different geographical parts of Scandinavia to different degrees, but there is a marked difference between Scandinavian religious beliefs and those of their neighbors. However, these cultures certainly interacted with one another and one can make comparisons between them.⁷ Chapter Two of this thesis, on the crucifixion, uses this same kind of comparison, because Christendom certainly was a neighbor to Viking Age Scandinavia. The first few sections of Chapter Three also deal with neighboring cultures, such as the Germanic Tribes, and how their religious practices compare to *Sjálfsfórn*. Parts of Chapter Four, on the Finns, can also fit within this level of comparison.

Level three of Schjødt’s system is comparing Indo-European religions, which share many similar traits with one another. These various cultures are related linguistically, so it seems reasonable to expect related religious ideas, although there are also immense differences between these cultures and religions as well.⁸ Chapter Three, on Indo-European myths with similarities to *sjálfsfórn*, easily exemplifies this third level of comparison.

The fourth, and final, level is parallels from the comparative study of religious phenomena. This level deals mainly with typological comparisons, comparing cultures separated by great distances and time periods.⁹ Chapter Five, comparing the self-hanging with Native American rituals, fits within this final level. While Native Americans do not

⁶ Ibid. pp. 276-277.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 277-278.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 278-279.

⁹ Ibid. pp. 279-280.

necessarily share a historical connection with Scandinavians, some of their religious practices parallel *sjálfsfórn*.

Chapter Six of this work will discuss the concept of the axis mundi, which is a cosmic tree or pillar that supports the cosmos at the center of the universe. The axis mundi appears in many myths and rituals, which bear similarities to the self-hanging. This chapter relates to all four of Schjødtt's levels and will discuss the central idea that connects various myths and rituals to *sjálfsfórn*, namely the axis mundi as a hallowed place fit for sacrifice and initiation.

Chapter One: *Sjálfsfórn*

138.

Veit ek at ek hekk
vindga meiði á
nætr allar níu
geiri undaðr
ok gefinn Óðni,
sjálfur sjálfum mér,
á þeim meiði,
er manngi veit,
hvers hann af rótum renn.

139.

Við hleifi mik sældu
né við hornigi;
nýsta ek niðr,
nam ek upp rúnar,
œpandi nam,
fell ek apr þaðan.

140.

Fimbulljóð níu
nam ek af inum frægja syni
Bólþórs, Bestlu föður,
ok ek drykk of gat
ins dýra mjaðar,
ausinn Óðrerir.

141.

Þá nam ek frævask
ok fróðr vera
ok vaxa ok vel hafask;
orð mér af orði
orðs leitaði,
verk mér af verki
verks leitaði.¹⁰

138.

Know I, that I hung
on a windy tree
all nine nights,
wounded with a spear
and given Óðinn,
self to myself,
on that tree
which no man knows
from what roots it arose.

139.

No bread did they offer me
nor drink from the horn,
I peered down,
I took up the runes,
screaming I took them,
I fell back from there.

140.

Nine mighty songs
learned I from the famous son of
Bólþorr, Bestla's father,
and I got a drink
of the glorious mead,
sprinkled from Óðrerir.

141.

Then I began to thrive
and be wise
and grow and abide well,
one word sought another word for me,
one deed sought another deed for me.¹¹

¹⁰ Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, ed. *Íslensk Fornrit: Eddukvæði I Goðakvæði*. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1957. pp. 250-251.

¹¹ My own translation.

To better understand the historical context of these four stanzas, one must examine the written source they come from. *Hávamál* is found within the Codex Regius, written circa 1270 A.D. Schjødt suggests most scholars agree *Hávamál*, as it is found in the Codex Regius, does not constitute an “original text”, meaning some parts of the poem may have existed independently in the oral tradition. Subsequently, some of the stanza-sequences and motifs, including the self-hanging scene, may not share the same age. The break between sections of the poem is most pronounced after stanza 141, when *Rúnatala þáttr* transitions into the section *Loddfáfnismál*. While, it is important to remember these sections and their names are scholarly inventions to segment *Hávamál*, the break is even marked in the Codex Regius and the content is noticeably different. Schjødt maintains, that the stanzas after 142 must be regarded as a set of magical instructions, while 138-141 convey actual mythic material. He concludes the four stanzas should be discussed as a separate mythical unit.¹² This seems to be a sound method of analyzing the self-hanging myth. As Schjødt notes, the contents of the poem are disjointed and clearly so around these four stanzas. Dating the myth itself is problematic, but deciphering the events presented in *sjálfsfórn* is another challenge.

Ursula Dronke, in her book *The Poetic Edda*, translates *Hávamál* and gives some commentary on the poem, including stanzas 138-141. She says stanza 138 is reminiscent of Eyvindr Finnson’s *Háleygjatal*, which also mentions a corpse-swaying windswept tree. Dronke also notes the poet of *Fjölvinnsmál* 20 uses the last few lines of stanza 138 of *Hávamál* for his poem. Regarding stanza 139, Dronke says there is no alliteration and *þatan* is meaningless. She translates line 6 of stanza 139 as “I fell, going backwards...”. Dronke suggests, that Óðinn is making a circular motion like a backwards somersault, reminiscent of some Scandinavian rock carving figures from the Bronze Age, who appear to be doing a backflip. This part of the poem, Dronke proposes, is subtly revealing Óðinn’s solar nature. Óðinn is high up on a tree, he curves down to peer, he takes the runes from the depths, and then he curves back to his original position. Dronke compares the sequence of Óðinn’s actions to an acrobat somersaulting backwards. She states Óðinn’s shout, in line 5 of stanza 139, is one of triumph. In stanza 140, Dronke says, Óðinn promptly states his other great deeds. He learns spells of jötun power from his jötun ancestors and he wins from other jötnar the mead of poetry for his own. Dronke suggests, that Óðinn’s jötun ancestry goes back to trees. To support this claim, Dronke translates Óðinn’s mother’s name *Bestla* as “Little Tree-Bark” and she translates *Bolþorn* (Dronke states *bolþors* is a later misreading) as “Tree-

¹² Schjødt, 2008. pp. 174-176.

Trunk-Thorn”. Dronke says Óðinn’s tree ancestry fits well in the context of his new growth in this poem. In stanza 140, she translates *ausinn* as nominative and plays upon the Christian idea of baptism by the sprinkling of water. Dronke proposes there are even further Biblical parallels in stanza 141. She compares the lines in stanza 141 to Luke 2:40 “And as the child grew to maturity, he was filled with wisdom; and God’s favor was with him”.¹³ This translation and interpretation by Dronke is widely accepted and more or less the standard view of *sjálfsfórn*. However, Dronke is very quick to compare the events in the poem to Biblical passages and motifs. One should really start with what is concretely stated in *sjálfsfórn* and go from there.

The four stanzas from *Hávamál* relate the self-hanging scene in a cryptic poetic style, but the basic elements of the narrative are fairly easy to grasp. Óðinn hangs himself from a tree after being wounded with a spear. He is sacrificing himself to himself. He is denied food and drink while hanging. He looks down while hanging and through this ordeal, he is able to take up and/or learn (the meaning of *nema upp*, will be further discussed below in “The Runes” section) the runes. Óðinn then falls from the tree and he learns nine mighty spells from Bøljorr’s famous son. He drinks mead out of Óðrerir and then the poem concludes by describing Óðinn becoming powerful through accomplishing great works and acquiring mighty knowledge. These concepts are quite easy to grasp from a quick look at the four stanzas. However, some themes within the poem are more esoteric and exploring the details of the allusions made in the scene gives a deeper understanding of the myth’s implications as well as its place within narratives reflecting notions about pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion.

The Tree:

The tree is a central part of this myth and as one can clearly see from the last few lines of Stanza 138 this is no ordinary tree. E.O.G. Turville-Petre identifies this tree as Yggdrasill.¹⁴ *Gylfaginning*, a section of the *Prose Edda* written by Snorri Sturluson circa 1220 A.D., describes Yggdrasill as the biggest and best of all trees. It is the holy meeting place of the gods. Its branches spread all over the world and extend all over the sky.¹⁵

To support his claim that the tree is Yggdrasill, Turville-Petre examines the etymology of the tree’s name. *Yggr* means “the terrifier” or “awe-inspirer” and it is one of Óðinn’s *heiti*. *Drasill* poetically means “horse”, so the compound *Yggdrasill* means “Óðinn’s

¹³ *The Poetic Edda*. Translated by Ursula Dronke. Vol. III. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. pp. 61-63.

¹⁴ Turville-Petre, E.O.G. *Myth and Religion of the North*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1964. p. 48.

¹⁵ Snorri Sturluson. "Edda." edited by Anthony Faulkes, 3-55. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982. p. 17.

horse”. Turville-Petre goes on to explain how “horse” frequently means “gallows” in skaldic poetry.¹⁶ Schjødt agrees with this interpretation and states that most scholars come to the same conclusion.¹⁷ A notable exception is Henning Kure’s translation of *Yggdrasill*, which he argues means “the terrifying walker” and advocates the name is another *heiti* for Óðinn. Kure’s argument solves the problem of a lack of the genitive form of *Yggr* in *Yggdrasill* and poetic references to *Yggdrasils Ask* “the ash of Yggdrasill”, because he translates *Yggdrasils Ask* as “Óðinn’s ash”. However, Kure also concludes the tree in *sjálfsfórn* is Yggdrasill.¹⁸ Schjødt says the world tree is an appropriate place for Óðinn’s self-hanging to take place, because Yggdrasill is the axis mundi, a crossroads between the upper and underworld.¹⁹ As stated in *Gylfaginning*, there are three roots, which support Yggdrasill. One root is among the Æsir, another is with the hrímþursir, and the last root runs to Niflheimr or the Old Nordic conception of the underworld.²⁰ Óðinn is almost certainly hanging from Yggdrasill, not only is this the holy place of the gods, but it is also the axis mundi and gateway to other worlds.

The Number Nine:

Óðinn hangs from Yggdrasill for nine nights. This detail is very important in recognizing the pagan elements within the myth, because the number nine appears constantly throughout Nordic Mythology. Olof Sundqvist says the number nine is a holy number within Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion. He argues the number represents a liminal phase in a transition ritual.²¹ In this myth, Óðinn hangs for nine nights, gains the power of the runes, and goes on to become a mightier god. In *Skírnismál*, Freyr must wait nine nights before he can make love to Gerðr in the grove Barri.²² In *Prymskviða*, female Loki says Freyja (or rather Þórr disguised as Freyja) yearned for eight nights before she could join Þrymr on the ninth.²³ The *Prose Edda* states Njörðr and Skaði decide to alternate between their two homes, spending nine nights at Þrymsheimr (Skaði’s home) and alternating three nights at Nóatún (Njörðr’s home).²⁴ In *Grímnismál*, King Geirröðr tortures Óðinn for eight nights between two fires. On the ninth night, Óðinn reveals his identity. Geirröðr tries to pull him from the fires,

¹⁶ Turville-Petre, 1964. p. 48.

¹⁷ Schjødt, 2008. p. 178.

¹⁸ Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes & Interactions. Lund, US: Nordic Academic Press, 2006. Accessed November 14, 2016. ProQuest ebrary. p. 70.

¹⁹ Schjødt, 2008. P. 178.

²⁰ Snorri Sturluson, 1982. p. 17.

²¹ Sundqvist, Olof. "The Hanging, The Nine Nights and the “Precious Knowledge”." In *Analecta Septentrionalia*, edited by Wilhelm Heizmann, Klaus Bödl, and Heinrich Beck, 649-68. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009. pp. 655- 657.

²² *The Poetic Edda*. Translated by Ursula Dronke. Vol. II. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. pp. 384-385.

²³ *The Poetic Edda*. Translated by Lee M. Hollander. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962. p. 104.

²⁴ Snorri Sturluson, 1982. pp. 23-24.

but Geirröðr trips and falls on his own sword.²⁵ In *Völuspá*, Þórr takes nine steps after defeating Jormungandr, but then dies of poison from the beast's fangs.²⁶ In the *Prose Edda*, Hermóðr rides for nine nights to the river Gjöll and then on to the gates of Hel.²⁷ These are just a few examples of the number nine's appearance in the Old Norse corpus. Sundqvist's argument has merit and aids in understanding the transitional theme present in the self-hanging scene, but the most important point for this work is that the number nine appears frequently throughout motifs in poems and narratives about pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion and attests to this myth fitting within this context.

The Spear:

The appearance of a spear also attests to how well the self-hanging myth fits within the context of literature conveying notions about pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion. In chapter 9 of *Ynglinga saga*, Óðinn has himself marked with the point of a spear on his deathbed and says all brave warriors should be dedicated to him. Njorðr becomes king of the Swedes after Óðinn and before his death Njorðr also marks himself with a spear to dedicate himself to Óðinn.²⁸ In stanza 24 of *Völuspá*, Óðinn hurls his spear over the enemy Vanir host to dedicate them to him.²⁹ In *Gautreks saga*, King Víkarr and his men require a fair wind for their raiding journey. In order to gain a fair wind, they must make a sacrifice to Óðinn. They cast lots to select the victim and by chance King Víkarr is chosen. The King plots a sham sacrifice in order to appease Óðinn and survive the ordeal. During the mock-sacrifice the fake noose turns into a real one and the reed, which Starkaðr stabs the King with, becomes a spear or a *geirr*. Just before the killing blow, Starkaðr utters the words *nú gef ek þik Óðni* "now I give you to Óðinn".³⁰ It is important to note there is a variation on this story found in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, which Saxo wrote circa 1200.³¹ In this version, Starkatherus stabs the king with a *ferrei* or "a sword".³² Dutton argues it is possible Saxo wanted to dissociate Óðinn from Danish History, so he purposefully replaced the spear with a

²⁵ *The Poetic Edda*, 2011. pp. 113-124.

²⁶ *The Poetic Edda*, 1997. p. 22.

²⁷ Snorri Sturluson, 1982. pp. 49-50.

²⁸ Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla*. Translated by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes. Vol. 1. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011. p. 13.

²⁹ *The Poetic Edda*, 1997. p. 13.

³⁰ Guðni Jónsson, and Bjarni Vilhjálmsón, eds. *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Vol. III. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Forni, 1944. pp. 24-29.

³¹ Grammaticus, Saxo. "Gesta Danorum." In *Saxo Grammaticus Gesta Danorum Danmarkshisorien*, 6-7. translated by Peter Zeeberg. København: Gads Forlag, 2005. p. 6.

³² Grammaticus, Saxo. "History of the Danes: Text 1." Edited by Hilda Ellis Davidson, 11-297. Translated by Peter Fisher. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979. pp. 171-172.

non-specific weapon, in order to downplay the story's Óðinnic elements.³³ Saxo does tend to demonize some of the Norse gods and highlight some of their baser behavior. It would not be out of character, and certainly not impossible, for Saxo to try to confuse elements of an Óðinnic ritual to illustrate his view of heathendom as savage and nonsensical. However, it is also entirely possible that Saxo was ignorant of the spear's significance in the ritual.

There are a few more examples of the spear as an Óðinnic consecration device. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, Dagr sacrifices to Óðinn for his help to avenge his father on his brother-in-law. Óðinn lends Dagr his spear and Dagr runs his brother-in-law through with it.³⁴ In *Eyrbyggja saga* chapter 44, a chief hurls a spear over the enemy host, which is an ancient custom to dedicate them to the battle-god.³⁵ This same action occurs in *Styrbjarnar þátttr*, Eiríkr King of the Swedes goes to the temple on the eve of battle and offers himself to the Victory-god. Then a man in a broad-brimmed hat appears and gives Eiríkr a reed to throw over his enemies, while saying “you all belong to Óðinn”. Eiríkr does this and the reed flies through the air like a javelin, then the enemy host is struck blind and a mountain falls on them.³⁶ Sundqvist presents a Gotlandic picture stone, which features a man hanging in a tree, another man stabbed with a spear on a platform, above him is a “valknut” a symbol composed of three intertwined tri-angles with nine points, all of these images relate to the cult of Óðinn.³⁷



These examples clearly show the spear's connection to Óðinnic sacrifice, even though an effigy of Óðinn himself is not present on the stone. The spear's presence in *sjálfsfórn* gives

³³ Dutton, 2015. pp. 110, 183.

³⁴ Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, ed. *Íslensk Fornrit: Eddukvæði II Goðakvæði*. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 2014. pp. 270-283.

³⁵ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, and Matthías Þórðarson, eds. *Íslensk Fornrit: Eyrbyggja Saga*. Vol. IV. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 2014. pp. 120-125.

³⁶ Sigurður Nordal, ed. *Flateyjarbók*. Vol. II. Akraness: Prentverk Akraness H.F., 1945. pp. 146-149.

³⁷ Sundqvist, 2009. p. 655.

creedence to the myth's place within the Old Norse Corpus of texts associated with pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion, but in Óðinn's case it is not clear if he is strictly sacrificing himself or is undergoing some sort of initiation. However, it is hard to label Óðinn or his activities within strict definitions, he constantly blurs concepts and roles.

Sacrifice vs. Initiation:

There is some dispute over whether this is a sacrifice or an initiation. If designated as a sacrifice, that may mean this myth is an archetype for Óðinnic sacrifice, while labeling it an initiation may imply *sjálfsfórn* is a genuine cult-myth and ritual initiations may have occurred using the same schema. The divide comes from the meaning of the word *gefinn*, in the lines *gefinn Óðni, sjálfur sjálfum mér*, and whether it should be translated as “consecrated” or “sacrificed”. Schjødt lists the predominant scholars in both camps of thought and delves into a detailed discussion of which term fits the scene better.³⁸

Margeret Clunies Ross argues, from the point of view of the initiand, initiation is a form of sacrifice. She also considers sacrifice to be paramount in the stanzas. However, she recognizes Bǫlþorr's son to be Óðinn's maternal uncle and initiator.³⁹ Turville-Petre also agrees with the conclusion that Bǫlþorr's son is Óðinn's maternal uncle, because the poem calls him Bestla's brother and Bestla was the name of Óðinn's jötun mother.⁴⁰ Dutton is skeptical as to why the jötnar would be willing to help Óðinn, especially after his slaying of Ymir, which Clunies Ross argues can be seen as nothing else but kin-slaying.⁴¹ However, Dutton admits that the special relationship between maternal uncle and nephew present in Germanic society could be enough reason for Bǫlþorr's son to help Óðinn.⁴²

While Clunies-Ross argues Óðinn's uncle is his initiator and the scene is therefore an initiation. James L. Sauv  argues the self-hanging should be considered a sacrifice, because of its parallels with pre-Christian Scandinavian sacrificial practice at Uppsala as described by Adam of Bremen and with Óðinnic human sacrifice as illustrated in *Gautreks saga*, as discussed above. In *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* written circa 1073 A.D., Adam of Bremen describes pagan practices at the Uppsala temple. The sacrificers offer nine heads of every male living thing. They use the blood of these sacrifices to placate the gods and then they hang the bodies (dogs, horses, and men) from trees in the sacred grove. Sauv 

³⁸ Schjødt, 2008. p. 184.

³⁹ Clunies Ross, Margaret. Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern society. Vol. 1. Odense: Odense University Press, 1994. pp. 225-227.

⁴⁰ Turville-Petre, 1964. p. 49.

⁴¹ Clunies Ross, 1994. p. 158.

⁴² Dutton, 2015. pp. 121-122.

argues the victims at Uppsala, like Óðinn, were first wounded or killed to drain them of blood and then hanged.⁴³ While Adam is a contemporary source, he never actually went to Uppsala himself, instead his account is based on descriptions from others, who had been there. Recent archaeology at Uppsala has revealed a better understanding of this cult site. The article “Gamla Uppsala- The Emergence of a Centre and a Magnate Complex” describes a change in the layout of Gamla Uppsala during the early Iron Age, 4th-7th Centuries A.D. During this time, numerous farm units gather around where a great hall once stood, the same place where a 12th Century Cathedral will later stand. Graves, which are located very near the settlement areas but on higher ground, occur along the road which leads into the centre. In this area, there is evidence of possibly sacrificial meals. The presence of pig bones suggests the consumption of pork, which in turn implies this was a high rank settlement in Scandinavia. There is also evidence of buildings on top of artificial terraces on elevated positions. The size of the great hall area during the 6th-8th centuries was of impressive size and it sat on the highest ground in the area.⁴⁴ These findings certainly demonstrate Gamla Uppsala was a cult site, one that may have survived or even flourished by the time of Adam’s writings. Gamla Uppsala may very well have been a place to conduct sacrificial hangings, as Adam describes, which would lend further credence to *sjálfsfórn* fitting within the context of sources about pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion. The parallels between *sjálfsfórn* and the sacrifices at Uppsala also support Sauvé’s argument, that the myth depicts a sacrifice and not an initiation.

Turville-Petre translates *gefinn* as “sacrificed”. Therefore, he argues Óðinn is sacrificing himself to himself. He states every sacrifice expects a reward and a weighty sacrifice, such as a god, anticipates a mighty gift, like runic knowledge.⁴⁵

Schjødt concludes that sacrifice and initiation are not mutually exclusive. He asserts sacrifice and initiation are based on the same mental figure, which makes it difficult to label the myth. However, a sacrificial rite can be included in an initiation and since Óðinn plays the role of sender, object, and receiver, the term initiation fits this scene best.⁴⁶ I agree with Schjødt’s conclusion, sacrifice can certainly be part of an initiation, and Óðinn seems to be sacrificing himself to himself within the context of an initiation, which grants Óðinn runic knowledge.

⁴³ Sauvé, James L. "The Divine Victim: Aspects of Human Sacrifice in Viking Scandinavia and Vedic India." In *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*, edited by J. Puhvel, 173-91. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Studies in Indo-European Comparative Mythology, 1970. pp. 176-177.

⁴⁴ Ljungkvist, John, and Per Frölund. "Gamla Uppsala- The Emergence of a Centre and a Magnate Complex." *Journal of Archaeology and Ancient History* (December 22, 2015): 3-30. pp. 7-11.

⁴⁵ Turville-Petre, 1964. p. 48.

⁴⁶ Schjødt, 2008. pp. 184-202.

Exposure to the Elements:

Through the course of his sacrifice and ultimate initiation, Óðinn endures dire torment. Stanza 138 says Óðinn hung on *vindga meiði* “windy or wind-swept tree”, some scholars such as A.G. van Hamel use this small detail to reveal another torment for Óðinn, exposure to the elements. It is important to remember this scene takes place in the mythical landscape, which may not have the same elemental activities as the physical Scandinavian terrain. The poem clearly describes the tree as windy, whether this wind is cold or warm, refreshing or painful is not clear. Although, a warm refreshing wind would be considerably out of place in this narrative of Óðinn’s agony. However, even this elemental exposure illustrates how this myth fits within the context of narratives about pre-Christian Scandinavian religion. Van Hamel argues Óðinn's exposure to the wind and elements while hanging on the tree is a way for Óðinn to build up his *Ásmegin* or “godly power” and that this concept is found in other scenes from Old Norse texts. He cites a scene described by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál*, where Þórr crosses the river Vimur and it makes his godly powers or *Ásmegin* swell so that he can successfully reach the other side.⁴⁷ Another scene taken from Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum*, features Starkaðr preparing to fight nine berserker by sitting naked in the snow until he is nearly buried in snow. Upon their arrival, Starkaðr fights them all at once and vanquishes them.⁴⁸ I agree with Van Hamel, that the exposure to the elements is helping Óðinn prepare to take up the runes.

Denial of Food and Drink:

While possibly being battered by the elements, Óðinn is also denied food and drink, which we learn from the first two lines in stanza 139 *Við hleifi mik sældu né við hornigi*. These lines are interesting, because they imply that Óðinn is not alone; there are entities there denying him sustenance during this trial. Clunies Ross believes these others to be *jötnar*, who are the initiators of Óðinn along with his uncle.⁴⁹ The denial of food and drink to Óðinn can be found in other Old Norse Texts. Such as the eddic poem *Grímnismál*, where Óðinn is tortured by King Geirröðr between two fires for nine days. Geirröðr denies Óðinn food and drink for the first eight days, but on the ninth night Geirröðr's son Agnarr takes pity on Óðinn and offers him a full horn to drink.⁵⁰ Van Hamel sees Óðinn’s fasting as a way to conjure up his godly power before performing a miraculous deed. In *sjálfsfórn*, Óðinn fasts before

⁴⁷ Snorri Sturluson. "Edda." 1-164. translated by Anthony Faulkes. London: Everyman's Library, 1987. pp. 74, 81-82.

⁴⁸ Hamel, (1934). pp. 278-279; Grammaticus, 1979. pp. 180-181.

⁴⁹ Clunies Ross, 1994. p. 227.

⁵⁰ *The Poetic Edda*, 1962. p. 54.

claiming the runes. While in *Grímnismál*, Óðinn fasts before making King Geirröðr fall on his own sword.⁵¹ These examples show that denial of sustenance is found within the Nordic narratives depicting impressions of heathen beliefs. I agree with Van Hamel's argument, that these torments may be a way for Óðinn to build up his *Ásmegin* for what he is about to do next in the poem, or rather where he is about to go.

The Underworld:

In the middle of Stanza 139, Óðinn peers down *nýsta ek niðr*. These three words could be interpreted as Óðinn gazing down into the underworld or even going there. As discussed above, one of Yggdrasill's roots runs to Niflheimr, the underworld of Old Nordic cosmology. Schjødt argues the underworld is below Óðinn while he hangs from Yggdrasill. Óðinn's near-death state, the mythic roots of the tree alluded to at the end of stanza 138, and the fact that Yggdrasill is the connection between the upper and underworld help illustrate this point.⁵² Although Clunies Ross promotes the idea of the runes being in concrete physical form, she also states that Óðinn bends down and takes the runes from the underworld.⁵³ Jere Fleck, in "Óðinn's Self-sacrifice: A New Interpretation", argues Óðinn is actually hanging upside down from the tree, his argument will be discussed further in the next section. However, Fleck believes his idea of Óðinn hanging in inverted position reinforces the concept of the runes coming from the underworld, because the world of death is thought to be the inverse of the world of the living and hanging upside down may be a way to make contact with the underworld.⁵⁴ Although, it is not explicitly stated in the poem that Óðinn takes the runes from the underworld, these arguments sustain the likelihood that this is where Óðinn peers down to and possibly travels to.

The Runes:

Óðinn's torment on the wind-swept tree and his contact with the underworld are trials, which he undergoes to acquire the runes. There is some contention among scholars about this part of the poem over whether Óðinn physically picks up the runes or gains knowledge of them in a more metaphysical sense. Schjødt points out there are no other instances where *nema upp* means "to acquire knowledge", but nearly always means to physically pick up something.⁵⁵ Fleck argues it is physically impossible for a person hanging by the neck to pick

⁵¹ Hamel, (1934). pp. 285-286.

⁵² Schjødt, 2008. pp. 202-203.

⁵³ Clunies Ross, 1994. p. 226.

⁵⁴ Fleck, Jere. "Óðinn's Self-sacrifice: A New Interpretation." *Scandinavian Studies* 43, no. 4 (1971). ProQuest. p. 125.

⁵⁵ Schjødt, 2008. p. 200.

up something below them. His solution is Óðinn may actually be hanging from the tree upside down, which would make it physically possible to pick something up from below. He then takes this argument and runs with it (figuratively, not literally) by comparing it with instances in other Indo-European mythology of inverted hangings.⁵⁶ Clunies Ross argues the poem implies the runes existed in concrete graspable form, most likely in the form of wooden staves. However, the ability to manipulate and apply these runes is otherworldly.⁵⁷ Schjødt points out that *rún* can mean secret lore. He also states in the mythical world, pre-Christian Scandinavians understood wisdom as physical as well as abstract at the same time. For example, the mixing of the blood of Kvasir with honey, which are respectively knowledge and poetic ability. Schjødt uses examples to support his point such as in *Vafþrúðnismál* when Óðinn wishes to debate *fornom stqfom* “in ancient staves” with the jötun Vafþrúðnir.⁵⁸ Schjødt concludes it comes within the semantic space, that Óðinn obtains *numinous knowledge*.⁵⁹ The runes as both concrete and abstract, as Schjødt argues, seems to be the most likely explanation of their nature, based on the way the poem describes them.

Taking Up the Runes:

The last couple of lines of stanza 139 are very climactic, Óðinn screams as he rips the runes from the underworld, then he is violently launched back and falls from there, presumably down from Yggdrasill. Fleck says it is possible Óðinn is no longer hanging from the tree at this point, which would explain how he could physically pick up the runes, but this view would be unable to explain his fall.⁶⁰ However, it is important to entertain the possibility that the four stanzas refer to more than one mythical event at various places and times. One could interpret the self-hanging as a separate event from Óðinn learning nine-songs from his uncle and his drinking of the mead. Óðinn learning nine songs from his uncle could refer to a myth now lost to us. Some scholars, such as Schjødt and Clunies Ross, have entertained the possibility of Mímir being Óðinn’s uncle. If this is the case, then this passage could refer to one of Óðinn’s conversations with Mímir’s head. However, both Schjødt and Clunies Ross conclude identifying Óðinn's uncle is not very important.⁶¹ The reference to Óðinn drinking mead could simply refer to the myth about him stealing the mead from the jötun Suttungr.⁶² Schjødt agrees with this idea of the self-hanging being a pre-requisite to the

⁵⁶ Fleck, (1971). pp. 120-122.

⁵⁷ Clunies Ross, 1994. pp. 223-224.

⁵⁸ Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, 2014. p. 356.

⁵⁹ Schjødt, 2008. pp. 201-202.

⁶⁰ Fleck, (1971). p. 125.

⁶¹ Schjødt, 2008. pp. 182-183; Clunies Ross, 1994. p. 227.

⁶² Snorri Sturluson, 1987. pp. 62-64.

other two scenes in stanza 140. He proposes, that Óðinn uses his new found runic power as a tool to acquire more knowledge and power.⁶³ This idea is very characteristic of Óðinn, because throughout the mythological record he is constantly seeking more knowledge.

Óðinn's Pursuit of Knowledge:

Stanza 141 embodies Óðinn's drive for knowledge perfectly. The first few lines tell how his power grew and he became wise and prosperous. The last two lines specifically illustrate Óðinn's quest for wisdom, as one word leads him to another, so too is he propelled from deed to greater deed. One example of Óðinn seeking knowledge is *Baldrs draumr*, where he goes to Hel in disguise to speak with a dead seeress and asks her questions about the future.⁶⁴ The myth of Óðinn stealing the mead of poetry as well as the story of him giving up his eye to drink from Mímir's well to acquire wisdom are both found in the *Prose Edda*, and both are good examples of his pursuit of knowledge.⁶⁵

Kennings for Óðinn:

While these four stanzas are the only source we have for this myth, references to it come from various names for Óðinn like Yggr, which I discussed earlier. In skaldic poetry, Helgi trausti Ólafsson calls Óðinn *gálga valdr* "lord of the gallows".⁶⁶ Snorri calls him *hangatýr* in *Skáldskaparmál* and *hangagoð* in *Gylfaginning*, both mean "god of the hanged".⁶⁷ In *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri calls Óðinn *Hangadróttin* "lord of the hanged".⁶⁸ Turville-Petre notes these names do not only denote Óðinn's association with the gallows, but names like *Hangi* "the hanged" illustrate he was also the victim of the gallows.⁶⁹ Dutton also points out, *Alda gaufr/aldinn gaufr* means "ancient one/sacrifice" and may allude to Óðinn's hanging (the exact meaning of *gaufr* is contested, but Dutton gives this *heiti* as a possibility).⁷⁰ *Geiguðr* "swaying one", *Fjallgeiguðr* "mountain dangler", and *Vingnir* "swinger" are all found in *Óðins nöfn*.⁷¹ The name *Galga farmr* "burden of the gallows" also alludes to Óðinn's hanging.⁷² *Váfuðr/Váföðr* "dangler" can be found in both *Grímnismál* and

⁶³ Schjødt, 2008. pp. 204-206.

⁶⁴ Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, 2014. p. 448.

⁶⁵ Snorri Sturluson, 1987. pp. 17, 62-64.

⁶⁶ Finnur Jónsson. *Skjaldedigtning*. Vol. BI. Copenhagen: Nordisk Forlag, 1912. p. 94.

⁶⁷ Ibid. pp. 21, 64.

⁶⁸ Snorri Sturluson. "Heimskringla." edited by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 9-83. Vol. I. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1962. p. 18.

⁶⁹ Turville-Petre, 1964. pp. 43-44; Tindr Hallkelsson. "Hákonardrápa." In *Poetry From The Kings' Sagas I*, edited by Diana Whaley, 336-358. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012. p. 338.

⁷⁰ Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, 2014. p. 448; Dutton, 2015. p. 113.

⁷¹ Finnur Jónsson, 1912. pp. 672-673.

⁷² Eyvindur Skáldspillir. "Háleygjatal." In *Poetry From The Kings' Sagas I*, edited by Diana Whaley, 195-212. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012. p. 197.

Gylfaginning.⁷³ All these *heiti* for Óðinn display a deep connection between literature about pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion and Óðinn's hanging myth.

Conclusion:

These parallels and similarities illustrate that *sjálfsfórn* fits very well within the context of narratives about perceptions of pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion. The scene could relate to an event fairly early in Óðinn's life, because it ends with him going on to achieve miraculous deeds and to pursue powerful knowledge. However, one should remember the nature of the lifespan of the Æsir is very obscure. They certainly are born and die, but they do not age as long as they have Iðunn's apples.⁷⁴ In any case, this myth probably occurs at an early point in the mythical timeline, because it seems to be Óðinn's initiation into a more powerful god. It seems this myth is a sort of origin story for Óðinn's great power. It can also function as the inception for the runes, or at least how they came into the possession of the gods and maybe subsequently to man. This interpretation demonstrates how well *sjálfsfórn* fits in the greater context of the Norse textual and pictorial tradition associated with the mythology.

Chapter Two: The Crucifixion

The self-hanging scene bears a striking resemblance to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, accounts of which can be found within the Four Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This chapter will go over arguments, which propose that *sjálfsfórn* is a myth born out of heavy Christian influence and reveals little to nothing of actual beliefs from pre-Christian Scandinavia. This work will also compare the accounts of the crucifixion with stanzas 138-141 of *Hávamál*. This discussion will aid in understanding just how similar the two narratives are and will shed some light on the influences surrounding the self-hanging myth as it is written in *Hávamál*.

The Book of Matthew:

The accounts of Jesus Christ's crucifixion are found in each of the Four Gospels. The book of Matthew 27:27-56 says the Romans, after sentencing Jesus to crucifixion, strip him of his clothes in front of the whole battalion. They clothe him in a scarlet robe, put a crown of thorns on his head, a reed in his right hand, and hail him mockingly as the king of the Jews. They spit on him and hit him over the head with the reed, then they put his clothes back on

⁷³ Snorri Sturluson, 1987. p. 22; *The Poetic Edda*, 2011. p. 124.

⁷⁴ Snorri Sturluson, 1987. pp. 59-60.

him and lead him away to be crucified. Matthew states the Roman guards compel a man named Simon to carry Jesus' cross for him to Golgotha, which means "place of the skull". The Romans offer Jesus wine mixed with gall to drink, but when he tastes it, he refuses to drink it. After crucifying him, the Romans cast lots to divide up Jesus' clothes amongst themselves. They put a sign over Jesus' head, which reads "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews". The Romans crucify two robbers along with Jesus, one on either side of him. People passing by and the robbers hanging next to Jesus mock him asking why he cannot save himself or why God will not save him. A darkness falls over the land in the sixth hour of the crucifixion until the ninth hour. Around the ninth hour, Jesus cries out "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani", which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?". Then a bystander soaks a sponge in sour wine, sticks it on the end of a reed and offers it to Jesus. Jesus then cries out and yields up his spirit. At that moment, the temple curtain tears in two, the earth shakes, many tombs open up and dead saints rise from the dead.

Differences Between Matthew, Mark, and Luke:

The account in Mark 15:21-41 is nearly identical to the account in Matthew. There are only small details mentioned at various points in the narrative, which are not present in Matthew. The biggest difference is Mark says nothing of an earthquake, the temple curtain splitting, or resurrected saints. The book of Luke 23:26-43 also tells of Simon carrying Jesus' cross, but it mentions a multitude of mourners following Jesus. In this account, Jesus asks his father to forgive his persecutors for they know not what they do. As the crowd mocks Jesus, the Roman guards are the ones, who offer him sour wine. Here only one of the criminals being crucified next to Jesus rails against him, the other criminal defends Jesus and his innocence. This account states again in the ninth hour Jesus cries out, but here he says "Father into your hands I commit my spirit". Just before Jesus' death, Luke mentions the temple curtain splits, but he makes no mention of the earthquake or the dead rising.

The Book of John:

In the book of John 19:1-37, Jesus carries his own cross. In this version, Jesus says "I thirst" and the Romans offer him a sponge soaked in sour wine on a hyssop branch. After drinking the sour wine, Jesus says "it is finished" bows his head and gives up his spirit. Here there is no mention of his death happening in the ninth hour, the splitting of the temple curtain, the earthquake, or the rising of dead saints. This is the only version where a spear pierces Jesus' side. The Romans are taking the crucified men down, because the Jews did not want them to hang on the crosses during the Sabbath. The two criminals were alive, so the

Romans break their legs and take them down from their crosses. Jesus is already dead, so the Romans stab his side with a spear, then blood and water pour out of the wound.

E.H. Meyer's Arguments for Christian Influence:

E.H. Meyer in his book *Germanische Mythologie* argues the self-hanging scene is a transformation of Óðinn into Christ. He points out all the similarities the two narratives share, the spear, the tree or cross, etc. Although, Meyer points out that both Óðinn and Jesus scream before they die. Meyer also calls attention to other parallels between Christianity and Óðinn in other Eddic poems, such as *Völuspá*. He argues the war between the Æsir and the Vanir, mentioned in *Völuspá*, is similar to the war between God and the fallen angels. Óðinn walking around in a group of three, with Hönir and Lóður or Víli and Vé, the same way God is made up of the trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is another parallel Meyer points out. He goes on in this fashion illustrating similarities between myths about Óðinn and Bible stories about God or Jesus. His main argument for Christian influence in *sjálfssfórn* is all the characteristics it shares with the crucifixion.⁷⁵

Klaus von See's Arguments for Christian Influence:

In “Snorri Sturluson and the Creation of A Norse Cultural Ideology”, Klaus von See argues the 164 stanzas of *Hávamál*, especially the first 79 stanzas, could not have been preserved unchanged in pre-Christian oral tradition. This 'Gnomic Poem', as he calls it, would have been altered, because it is characteristic of gnomic poetry for each stanza to contain a self-contained unit of thought. Therefore, each stanza would be unable to achieve a fixed position within the context of the whole of the poem.

Von See points out *Hávamál*, at the time it was put onto parchment, was loosely bound together to form a complex. He also states the only unifying feature of the poem is the name *Hávi*, which appears in stanzas 109, 111, and 169. According to von See, the name *Hávi* itself shows Christian influence in the poem, because associating the attribute “high” with the divine is a Christian concept.

He believes the author of *Hávamál* was trying to make an Old Norse counterpart to *Hugsvinnsmál*, which is a paraphrasing translation of *Disticha Catonis*. The author compiled older gnomic material and added stanzas, which were influenced by *Hugsvinnsmál* and possibly by *Disticha Catonis* itself. Von See argues the author intended to put Óðinn on the same level as the Biblical King Solomon and the Roman Cato as a teacher of morality and wisdom.

⁷⁵ Meyer, 1891. pp. 250-251.

In his conclusion, von See argues *Hávamál* is indirectly connected with Snorri's intention to solidify a Norse cultural ideology. Von See says *Hávamál* provides in the realm of rules for the sphere of human behavior, what *Gylfaginning* provides for the mythical sphere. *Gylfaginning* also features supernatural characters with names referring to the attribute "high" (*Hár*, *Jafnhár*, and *Priði*), these characters are also guises of Óðinn.⁷⁶

Annette Lassen's Arguments for Christian Influence:

Annette Lassen, in her article "The God On The Tree", argues the self-hanging myth is an inverted version of the crucifixion. She says the two stories have the following commonalities:

- 1) hung on wood or a tree; 2) wounded by a spear; 3) sacrificed to themselves, since Christ and God are one (John. 10,30); 4) they get no food or drink; 5) Óðinn hung for nine nights, while Christ died in the ninth hour; and 6) they both look down at the end of their hanging (John. 19,30).⁷⁷

She also points out there are a lot of differences between the two scenes. One major difference is Óðinn does not save anyone with his sacrifice, but gains runic wisdom. Jesus saves humanity from sin with his crucifixion.

Lassen rejects the idea from Sophus Bugge, that *meiðr* means "a pole" or a "longitudinal beam" and cannot refer to a living tree. Bugge used this argument to illustrate that *sjálfsfórn* was molded upon the crucifixion and had little to do with Germanic concepts of sacred trees. Lassen points to stanza 34 of *Grímnismál* and 24 of *Fjolsvinnsímál* to prove, that *meiðr* can indeed mean "a living tree". However, she states the self-hanging could still be based upon the crucifixion, because Medieval European Christians sometimes depicted the cross as a tree.

Since early Christianity, Christians associated the cross with the tree of life. The two are linked, because Jesus' death pays for the original sin, which occurs in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Lassen also gives some theological quotes about the cross being the center of the world, towering between heaven and earth, and the four rivers of paradise flowing from its base. She discusses an early Christian legend,

⁷⁶ See, 2001. pp. 384-389.

⁷⁷ Lassen, 2009. p. 232.

which tells of how the tree of knowledge supplied the wood to make Jesus' cross. Therefore, the instrument of man's fall becomes the instrument of man's redemption. Medieval Christian art depicts the cross-tree and the tree of life in diverse ways. The tree of life is often depicted with the four rivers of paradise flowing from its roots, with two animals (lions, deer, and dragons are commonly used) on either side of the tree. Sometimes, the animals are eating of the tree, and sometimes there is even a well. Identifying the cross with the tree of life can be done through the foliage on the cross, four rivers flowing from its base, or animals flanking it.

Lassen submits that Northern Europeans, Scandinavians, and Icelanders were aware of the connection between the cross and the tree of life. She says Icelanders may have been aware of this association as early as the conversion. Traveling Icelanders may have seen depictions of the cross-tree in manuscripts and churches. Learned Icelanders must have been aware of the cross-tree through sermons and legends. An illumination from a calendar in a medieval Icelandic manuscript (AM 249 d fol), dating to around 1300, depicts Christ hanging on a cross with foliage. Due to this evidence, Lassen argues the concept of a god hung on a cosmic tree must have originally been Christian.

Lassen argues *sjálfsfórn* was written by a Christian Icelander, who wanted to show the pre-Christian Scandinavians possessed knowledge of a god sacrificed on a tree, although this knowledge was perverted with pagan tradition in their ignorance of the true faith. She says this concept is very similar to the ideas presented by Snorri in the *Prologue* of the *Prose Edda*. Snorri believed the pagan gods were warped understandings of the true God. Lassen believes the medieval reader or listener would see *sjálfsfórn* as a pagan misunderstanding of the crucifixion and lacking the spiritual significance of Christ's sacrifice.⁷⁸

Comparing and Contrasting *Sjálfsfórn* with The Crucifixion:

The two stories definitely share common elements, but it is important to examine these elements within their individual contexts. As Lassen pointed out above, there are six similarities between the self-hanging and the crucifixion. Óðinn hangs from a tree, while Jesus hangs from a cross. Dutton argues it is not completely clear either if Jesus hangs from a cross, a tree, or a pole, because the Greek words σταυρός and ξύλον can mean any of these.⁷⁹ However, it would be hard to believe the Gospels are stating Jesus or Simon are carrying a tree to Golgotha. As shown above in Lassen's argument, both the tree and the cross are

⁷⁸ Lassen, 2009. pp. 232-244.

⁷⁹ Dutton, 2015. p. 111.

considered the center of the world, an axis mundi. However, the means by which each deity hangs are different. Óðinn hangs by a noose, while Jesus is nailed to the cross. The noose is completely consistent with material describing sacrifices to Óðinn. Although Lassen has shown connections between the cross and the tree of life, a cross is still a man-made construct, while trees occur naturally. Lassen also fails to discuss the possibility of the concept of a world tree or something similar stemming from older religions than Christianity. It is possible that both Christianity and Norse mythology borrow this idea from older religions.

One of the most striking common elements is the spear wound both deities share. Jesus is already dead and a Roman guard stabs him, while Óðinn stabs himself (hence he is still alive) in order to sacrifice himself to himself. Perhaps he stabs himself before hanging himself, which may also be the case in Adam's account of sacrifices at Uppsala. As Sauvé pointed out above, the victims were likely drained of blood before being hung. It is entirely possible this sacrificial draining was done with a spear. Lassen again overlooks the significance of the spear within the cult of Óðinn. The passage concerning Jesus' spear wound is more concerned with the significance of none of his bones ever breaking, because this fulfills the scripture that "not one of his bones will be broken" (John 19:36). Although, it also fulfills another scripture, which says "they shall look upon him whom they have pierced" (John 19:37). The fact that it is a spear and not some other weapon, which pierces Jesus, is inconsequential to the narrative of the crucifixion. The scripture emphasizes his bones are not broken and that he is pierced, it does not emphasize the spear itself. However, in Óðinn's case, it is most significant that a spear pierces him, because sacrifices to Óðinn are marked specifically with a spear.

Lassen points to the verse where Jesus states "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). However, throughout this passage (John 10:22-42) Jesus constantly refers to the Father as another entity. Within Christian belief, God is made up of the Trinity, which consists of three parts: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In one sense Jesus is God, but in another sense he is only part of God. Óðinn is Óðinn, although he does appear under many different names and guises throughout the Old Norse corpus. While Óðinn sacrifices himself directly to himself, Jesus sacrifices himself to his greater self, namely God the Father.

Óðinn is clearly denied food and drink while hanging. It is not until after he falls back from the tree, that he gets a drink of mead in stanza 140. Jesus is offered a drink of sour wine in every single gospel. Matthew and Mark say he is also offered wine mixed with gall (Matthew 27:34) or myrrh (Mark 15:23) before he is crucified. Matthew says he tastes the

wine, but then refuses to drink it. Mark says he refuses it. In John, Jesus drinks the sour wine after stating he is thirsty (John 19:28-30), but this is also to fulfill the scripture. So Jesus is offered undesirable wine and sometimes takes it, but Óðinn is denied any sustenance.

The self-hanging lasts nine nights, while Jesus hangs on the cross nine hours before dying. Although the ninth hour is significant as the time of Jesus' death, the sixth hour is also significant because at this time a darkness falls over the land (Matthew 27:45, Mark 15:33, and Luke 23:44). Interestingly, Mark marks the third hour as the hour of crucifixion (Mark 15:25). The number nine is very important in pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion as discussed above, but in the Christian tradition it is only significant as the hour of Jesus' death. The number nine here may be only significant as a multiple of three, because the number three is more relevant to Christian lore. The Trinity consists of three parts, Jesus is crucified in the third hour, Jesus rises from the dead on the third day, darkness falls in the sixth hour, and he dies in the ninth hour. There were also twelve disciples and twelve tribes of Israel.

Lassen says both gods look down at the end of their hanging and uses the verse "... he bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (John 19:30) to prove this point. However, Jesus bowing his head here only denotes that he is dying. The concept of looking down is much more significant in *sjálfsfórn*, because it alludes to Óðinn taking the runes from the underworld as discussed above. Lassen's greatest failure is the lack of discussion about the links between *sjálfsfórn* and pre-Christian Scandinavian sacrificial practices. She also does not entertain the idea of both religions borrowing from preceding religions. She simply assumes that a motif, which appears in Christianity and Norse mythology, must originally be Christian.

None of the similarities listed here connect the two myths in a deeply meaningful way. Some of the common elements are superficial. I admit at first glance, the two stories seem to have a lot of commonalities, but upon a deeper inspection these similarities seem arbitrary and it is inescapable that both myths exist within two very different contexts. However, both myths mark the deity's ascension into a more powerful type of godhood. Óðinn claims the runes from the underworld and becomes a mightier god, while Jesus harrows hell and becomes the savior of mankind. After his sacrifice, Óðinn goes on to be a very powerful god ruling Valhøll, while Jesus rises from the dead as the savior of humanity and ascends into heaven. Therefore, both the self-hanging and the crucifixion appear to function as an initiation.

Conclusion:

While the seeming commonalities between the crucifixion and the self-hanging do not completely add up, there are two main themes here that are very important, both can be considered an initiation and both take place at the axis mundi. Although Lassen argues the idea of a god hanging from a cosmic tree must have originated in Christianity, parallel stories and rituals from other religions, to be discussed in the following chapters, suggest this idea of an initiation occurring at the axis mundi may stem from older religions than Christianity. In order to decipher the origins of the self-hanging myth, one must take these other parallels into account and not just focus on Christianity as the only parallel, even though European medievalists have a strong tendency to do so.

Chapter Three: Indo-European Myths Similar to the Self-Hanging

On the question of the self-hanging myth being a purely Christian borrowing, van Hamel argues it would be more likely to assume these commonalities illustrate a fundamental affinity rather than a borrowing. He claims these notions may have seeped into Christianity and pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion independently.⁸⁰ Sundqvist points out that the death of a deity or a ritual hanging are not necessarily Christian or pre-Christian Scandinavian ideas, but appear in other religions such as Euro-Asiatic religions.⁸¹ However, it is not only the death of a god or the ritual hanging, which are paralleled in other religions. The axis mundi is an idea which manifests itself in different forms in various religions, but it usually takes the form of a pole or a tree. Fleck says the distribution of a cosmic tree is so widespread from Germania to India and further afield, it is likely it is a genetically related Indo-European (if not Proto-Indo-European) concept. He explains the world tree (or pillar, or spire, etc.) connects the center of the earth to the center of the heavens, which is usually the North Star, because the cosmos revolves around the tree.⁸² This chapter will look for these themes throughout the Indo-European world and compare the various myths as well as rituals with *sjálfsfórn*.

Germanic Tribes:

Charlemagne underwent a campaign in Germania in 772 and destroyed a Saxon Sanctuary, this information is recorded in a few chronicles, but the *Annales Fuldenses* is typically used. Part of the Sanctuary, which was destroyed, was an idol called Irminsul. Information about the veneration of Irminsul comes from two sources Rudolf of Fulda and

⁸⁰ Hamel, (1934). p. 262.

⁸¹ Sundqvist, 2009. p. 651.

⁸² Fleck, 1971. pp. 388-390.

Widukind. Circa 863-5, Rudulf writes, in *Translatio sancti Alexandri* chapter three, that the Saxons worshiped a giant wooden pillar formed from a tree trunk raised up high. They called this trunk Irminsul and Rudolf translated this name into “universalis columna” or “world pillar”, because the Saxons believed it to support everything. Widukind writes, in *Res gestae Saxonicae* around 968, that the Saxons raise a column for victory and the name of the column is related to Hirmin, however the text also states it is related to Mars in its name as well. Clive Tolley discusses these primary sources in his book *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*. He says a few things can be confirmed from these passages. The pillar is called Irminsul. In at least one of the sources Irminsul was made from a wooden trunk. Tolley suggests Mars would be equivalent with the actual battle god of the Saxons, which would most likely be Wodan or Tiu, which means Irminsul probably was a veneration to either of them. Tolley also points out in Old Norse one of Óðinn’s names is Jǫrmunr, which is the Old Norse form of Irmin. Tolley argues the name *Irminsul* can be interpreted in three different ways. The first is simply “great column”, because in other Latin texts this is what the noun is used to denote. For example, in the 12th Century *Kaiserchronik* line 602, Julius Caesar’s ashes are placed on top of an Irminsul. Tolley also points out the word *irmin* can be used as a prefix to reinforce and magnify, for example, *irminsuwel* can denote a great person and the word *irmingot* means “highest god”. He also argues Irminsul could be translated as “column of Irmin”. Irmin was a demi-god and ancestor of the Germanic peoples, which is inferred in Tacitus’ *Germania* chapter two when Irmin is said to be one of the three sons of “Man” (Mannus), who is the founder of the Germanic peoples. It is also interesting to note, that Jordanes wrote the Goths (another Germanic Tribe) also worshiped their ancestors and referred to them as *Ansis*, which is a cognate with the Old Norse *Æsir*. Tolley argues it is possible the Saxons saw Irminsul as the embodiment of the god Irmin.⁸³ The accounts of Irminsul sound very similar to the Scandinavian idea of Yggdrasill. Both are either a tree or a tree trunk, both support the cosmos as an axis mundi, and both of their names are associated with a major deity. However, the idea of an axis mundi is not the only parallel between *sjálfsförn* and the religions of the Germanic Tribes, they also had a concept of runes.

One should remember, Tacitus never went to Germania and his accounts come from narratives of people, who did go to Germania. Thus, one should consider the facts presented in *Germania*, which Tacitus wrote circa 100 A.D., with caution. In *Germania*, Tacitus says

⁸³ Tolley, Clive. *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*. Vol. 1. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2009. pp. 276-278.

the Germans have a simple kind of oracle, which is used on behalf of both state and household, to ask the gods about everything. The Germans would cut a branch from a fruit bearing tree and then would cut up this branch into smaller pieces, which were marked with “certain signs”. These marked pieces were strewn at random across a white sheet and then the priest or pater familias would raise his eyes up to heaven and the gods, then he would pick up three of the lots. Those three lots would give a yes or no answer. Kris Kershaw says, in her book *The One-eyed God*, it cannot be ascertained from the passage for sure whether the Germans marked the lots with runic letters. Even if they did already have runic writing, it would have most likely been very simple marks. However, Kershaw argues the word “rune” simply denotes secret knowledge, therefore runes would have existed long before runic writing and one would be correct in calling these lots runes.⁸⁴ It is entirely possible these lots are related to the later Scandinavian concept of runes, especially the runes mentioned in *sjálfsfórn*. One crucial parallel between Germanic Tribal religions and the self-hanging myth remains to be discussed, the sacrificial hanging.

Orosius writes, in *Historiarum adversum paganos* around the 5th Century A.D., about a Germanic Tribe called the Cimbri and their victory sacrifices. He says after the Cimbri took two Roman camps, they destroyed the booty. They ripped apart armor and clothing, they threw gold and silver into the river, they scattered the horse harnesses and drowned the horses themselves in the river. They took the captured men, tied nooses around their necks and hung them from trees. Dutton discusses this passage and points out there is no explicit statement in the text, which says these sacrifices had any divine association. However, Dutton does state it seems the Cimbri are certainly making sacrifices, at the very least, to the elements. Sinking things into the river displays a veneration for the water and hanging men could illustrate a sacrifice to the sky due to their suspension. Dutton concludes it is most likely the Cimbri were sacrificing to a war god, he bases this conclusion on the context of other contemporary writers’ descriptions of Germanic victory sacrifices. Especially with *The Annals of Tacitus* in mind, in this text the Hermunduri’s (a Germanic Tribe) victory sacrifices are described. Tacitus says they sacrifice to both Mars and Mercury in thanks of their victory, they destroy men, horses, and everything on the side of the vanquished. There is also another passage in *Gothic War*, which states the Goths would take the first captive of war, which they deemed to be the highest sacrifice, and sacrifice them to Ares. Not only would they sacrifice them on an

⁸⁴ Kershaw, Kris. *The One-eyed God: Odin and the (Indo-)Germanic Männerbünde*. Vol. 1. Washington D.C.: Journal of Indo-European Studies, 2000. pp. 78-79.

altar, but they would also hang them from a tree.⁸⁵ The Greek historian Procopius wrote around the 6th Century A.D. some very similar information about the men of Thule, another Germanic people. He says the Thulites consider the first captive of war to be the highest form of sacrifice. They would sacrifice the captive to Ares by hanging him from a tree or by throwing him among thorns. Jordanes, around the 6th Century A.D., wrote about the sacrificial practices of the Goths. He says they sacrificed their prisoners to Mars, because they believed the war god to be placated by human blood. They also hung the captured war-trappings from the trees.⁸⁶ These passages show the Germanic Tribes had a concept of sacrificial hanging, which was heavily associated with a war deity. It is not hard to imagine, that this sacrificial hanging would come to be associated with a Scandinavian war god such as Óðinn.

A tree trunk as an axis mundi associated with a major deity, runes and their divine nature, and a sacrificial hanging dedicated to a war deity are all common concepts between the religions of the Germanic Tribes and the Scandinavian self-hanging scene from *Hávamál*. With Germania being just south of Scandinavia, there was most likely a lot of communication and exchange between the two groups. It is not surprising they would share many of the same religious concepts. It is more interesting to see how these similarities hold up as the discussion considers people groups living geographically further away from Scandinavia.

Gaulic Sacrifices:

An anonymous writer from the 10th Century, wrote in *Commenta Bernesia* about the sacrificial practices of the Gauls. The author states the Gauls appease their god Mars Esus by hanging a man from a tree until he rots and his limbs fall off in bloody sacrifice. Dutton says the Gaulish Esus must be a war deity, because the author identified them with Mars. Dutton concludes this passage at least illustrates a Gaulic connection between human sacrifice by hanging in a tree to appease a war god.⁸⁷ This passage again illustrates a sacrifice by hanging from a tree, just like the Germanic sacrifices did. These similar rituals, suggest a common concept of sacrificial hanging, which *sjálfsfórn* could have possibly stemmed from. Although, there are elements from the self-hanging that are not present here such as the spear, denial of food, or exposure to the elements.

Irish Connections to *Sjálfsfórn*:

⁸⁵ Dutton, 2015. pp. 158-159.

⁸⁶ Turville-Petre, 1964. p. 46.

⁸⁷ Dutton, 2015. pp. 162-163.

Dutton points out that the Irish Celtic god Lugh has some similarities to Óðinn himself, both wield a spear, both have an affinity for poetry, and both have a set of magical abilities.⁸⁸ However, this similar character is not the only mutual concept Irish Celtic religion shares with *sjálfsfórn*, both also hold the idea of the supernatural powers attached to fasting. Van Hamel relates an Irish pagan story about three sons of the Irish King Lugaid Mend, who refuses to grant lands to his son and insists they procure lands on their own. The three sons go to the palace of the Tuathe Dé Danann (celtic deities, who hold lands) and sit outside fasting against them. They eventually invite the three sons into their palace and offer them a feast, but the three sons still refuse food. The Tuathe Dé Danann give in and offer them gifts, including lands and beautiful dwelling places.⁸⁹ This story illustrates both the Irish Celts and narratives associated with pre-Christian Scandinavians recognize the divine power of fasting. Just as the three sons acquire lands from refusing food, so too does Óðinn acquire the runes from going without food. Although, a difference to note is the three sons refuse food, while Óðinn is denied food. However, another element of the self-hanging myth is present within the Irish Celtic context, the concept of exposure to the elements providing a connection to the spirit world.

In the epic tale of the Conception of Cuchulainn, there's a scene where the Other World of the dead is revealed to the men of Ulster after they endure a heavy snow storm. This resembles Óðinn's exposure to the elements on the wind-swept tree, just before he takes the runes from the underworld. Both cases share the belief, that enduring the torment of exposure to the elements provides a way to contact the world of the dead.⁹⁰ These examples convey common religious conceptions between Irish Celtic religion and those conveyed in *sjálfsfórn*. The common attributes between Lugh and Óðinn, the idea of fasting holding divine power, and the concept of harsh elements as a precursor to contact with the underworld, all suggest common religious ideas between the two religions. However, both of these are Northern European religions and it is not hard to imagine that these religions would share common beliefs. This work will now look to Southern Europe, to see if those cultures also share common religious ideals with *sjálfsfórn*.

Roman Religion and Hangings:

Dutton states trees were heavily linked to the divine in pre-Christian Roman Religion. The Romans believed certain types of trees to carry either good or bad omens. They

⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 163.

⁸⁹ Hamel, 1934. p. 270.

⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 276.

differentiated between *felices arborus* “beneficial trees” and *arbores infelices* “inauspicious trees”. The *felices arborus* included oak, forest oak, holm oak, cork, beech, and hazel. The Romans dedicated the *arbores infelices* to the *Di inferi* “the gods below” and believed these trees should be avoided. Some examples from Roman law prescribe hanging from these *arbores infelices* as the proper death penalty. They believed hanging a criminal from these trees would appease the gods of the underworld.⁹¹ Here again in Roman pre-Christian Religion we find the idea of a sacrificial hanging from a tree to appease a deity. Although, there certainly are differences between these Roman examples and the self-hanging myth, such as the person being hung is a criminal and not a deity. However, there are still commonalities between the two examples. Both instances are a sacrifice by hanging from a tree to a deity, and both trees represent a link to the underworld. After looking at the Romans it will be interesting to see how a comparison between pre-Christian Greek Religion and *sjálfsfórn* will look.

Greek Religion and *Sjálfsfórn*:

Sarah Peirce in her article “Visual Language and Concepts of Cult on the ‘Lenaia Vases’” analyzes the Lenaia Vases, a group of some seventy Attic vases from 5th Century B.C. Greece with images of female followers attending a cult image of the god Dionysus. The vases depict a feast scene, at the center of which is a depiction of a column with a Dionysus mask or two hanging from the column on either side. This idol is surrounded by female attendees and copious amounts of food and drink.⁹² These scenes of a bacchic ritual are especially interesting when taking in Kershaw’s comparison of Óðinn with Dionysus and Ares.

Kershaw points out Greek uses the same words to describe bacchic frenzy and martial possession, such as: *μαίνομαι*, *ένθεος*, *βακχάω*, and *θυιάς*. The Greek warrior is possessed by Ares the same way the maenad is by Dionysus. However, Dionysus himself also has martial qualities. He has an army of women followers, to which he can bestow supernatural powers. His bacchantes become so strong they can rip apart animals and tear trees up by their roots with their bare hands. These women in their frenzy become impervious to weapons. Spears cannot pierce them, yet the wands they throw inflict wounds. Kershaw compares the bacchantes with Óðinn’s berserkir and points out both possess supernatural strength,

⁹¹ Dutton, 2015. pp. 276-277.

⁹² Peirce, Sarah. "Visual Language and Concepts of Cult on the "Lenaia Vases"." *Classical Antiquity* 17, no. 1 (1998). ProQuest. pp. 59, 63, 67, 72.

impenetrable skin, and both draw their power from a deity.⁹³ Dionysus' similarities to Óðinn suggest the figure depicted on the Lenaia Vases could have some kind of connection to a ritual related to the self-hanging. The Dionysus masks hang from a column, just as Óðinn hangs from Yggdrassil. Although Óðinn is denied food and drink, while Dionysus appears to be offered a banquet. However, these similarities between Dionysus and Óðinn are notable Greek parallels, and could suggest a further parallel between the Lenaia ritual and *sjálfsfórn*. Looking further East, one can see Eastern European pre-Christian religions also convey some of the same conceptions as *sjálfsfórn*.

Eastern European Reflections of *Sjálfsfórn*:

Lotte Motz in her book *The King, The Champion and The Sorcerer* discusses some Eastern European counterparts to Óðinn. The Hungarian *táltos* is a human magician, who is heavily associated with riding horses, so much so that *táltos* and his horse are designated by one name. Like Óðinn and the runes, the *táltos* must endure death before gaining his shamanic powers. The *táltos* also can communicate with the dead while in his tree.⁹⁴ This Hungarian spiritual figure certainly contains echoes of Óðinn and even the self-hanging. However, Motz gives other examples of Eastern European Óðinnic parallels.

The Vogul people are from around the northern Ural mountains. Their deity Mir-susne-chum also displays similar characteristics to Óðinn. He rides his black stallion through the air armed with bow and arrow followed by lizards, ravens, and grey wolves. He is a god of healing, music, and poetry. Vogul singers use him as their muse for composing songs. His chosen followers are possessed ecstatic priests. Mir-susne-chum turns into a wolf when hunting reindeer, but takes the form of a swan when visiting his beloved. Every woman he holds in his arms contracts madness, he inspires terror. Although it is not clear if this deity bore a similar myth to the self-hanging, it is interesting to consider a genetic relation between this deity and Óðinn.⁹⁵ These examples illustrate a connection between Eastern Europe and late Iron Age Scandinavian religious concepts. The *táltos* enduring death to gain his powers and communicating with the dead in a tree is reminiscent of the self-hanging. Moving even farther East, the Rus in Eastern Europe also bear evidence for concepts of sacrificial hanging and possibly *sjálfsfórn*.

Rus Religious Hangings:

⁹³ Kershaw, 2000. pp. 79-80.

⁹⁴ Motz, Lotte. *The King, The Champion and The Sorcerer: A Study in Germanic Myth*. Vienna: Fassbaender, 1996. p. 95.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Ibn Rustah was a Persian explorer and geographer, who traveled with the Rus to Novgorod. In *Kitāb al-A'lāk an-Nafīsa* circa 900 A.D., he writes about Rus medicine men. These men have power comparable to the gods, anything ordered by them must be faithfully carried out. They can order the sacrifice of any man, woman, or horse. The medicine man can seize any man or animal put a noose around their neck and hang them as a sacrifice to God. Dutton discusses this passage and the assertion from Lunde and Stone that Ibn Rustah is describing the Rus of Garðariki and the town Holmgarðr, which are the Old Norse terms for the Khazar-dominated area of Russia surrounding lake Ilmen and modern day Novgorod. However, Ibn Rustah is not implying he witnessed these practices, only that he heard of them from Rus native to those lands. Dutton says it is important to consider the possibility of aggrandisement of the Rus religious leader, either by Ibn Rustah or by the Rus. Dutton concedes this description of the Rus medicine man sounds reminiscent of Óðinn.⁹⁶ This passage certainly shows the Rus had a concept of sacrificial hanging and the sacral value of the horse is reminiscent to the Scandinavian practices at Uppsala as described by Adam of Bremen. However, as Dutton points out the Rus did not only use hanging as a means of sacrifice, but also punishment.

Dutton analyzes Ibn Fadlan's *Risala*, written circa 920 A.D., and discusses its passages about hanging, strangulation, and the surrounding rituals. One part of the text discusses how the Rus deal with thieves and bandits. The Rus bring the criminal to a large tree, tie a noose around his neck, and hang him from the tree. The criminal hangs there until the rope rots away from exposure to the wind and rain. Dutton admits this passage mentions no sacred value of the hanging, but he does point out the parallel between hanging and exposure to the elements, found within this account and the self-hanging.⁹⁷ Eastern Europe's relatively close proximity to Scandinavia along with these striking parallels with deities and sacrificial hangings makes a compelling case for a relation between the religions. Further East and farther away from Scandinavia, the Persian world also contains a myth of learning numinous knowledge from hanging like in *sjálfsfórn*.

Persian Tradition and Sacred Hanging:

Fleck discusses a *hadith* attributed to Persian scholar Al-Tabari (circa 838-923 A.D.) in his Qur'anic commentary called *Tafsir al-Tabari*. This text contains a scene of two men hanging upside down by their feet approached by a man, who wishes to learn magic.⁹⁸ The

⁹⁶ Dutton, 2015. p. 166.

⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 167.

⁹⁸ Fleck, (1971). pp. 136-137.

fact that these men are suspended in inverted position lends credence to Fleck's argument for Óðinn's inverted suspension in the self-hanging myth. However, the theme of acquiring magical knowledge by being suspended is important to note here. This shared concept presents the possibility of this Persian story and the acquisition of the runes in *Hávamál* stemming from a shared cultural idea or being related in some capacity. There are more striking parallels farther east between the self-hanging narrative and Indian rituals.

Indian Beliefs and *Sjálfsofn*:

The Indian concept of the *yūpa* brings us back to the widespread idea of the axis mundi. Sauv  explains the *yūpa* is a sacrificial stake. An animal is tied to the *yūpa* before it is sacrificed. The *yūpa* can appear as a simple pole or a leafy tree. The Āpri hymns in the *Rig-Veda*, which are also connected with animal sacrifice, refer to the *yūpa* as the *vanaspati*. The *vanaspati* is the *aśvattha* or the terrestrial avatar of the cosmic tree.⁹⁹ Sauv  concludes the *yūpa* is the necessary locus for human and animal sacrifice to occur, because it functions as the axis mundi.¹⁰⁰ These ideas are reminiscent to Óðinn's sacrifice at the cosmic tree, but there are other Hindu rituals reminiscent of Óðinn's initiation at the axis mundi.

The *Rig-Veda* is an ancient Indian collection of ten books of 1,028 hymns composed of verses dedicated to various deities. It was composed over several centuries from as early as 1200 B.C.¹⁰¹ Three hymns in the *Rig-Veda* are dedicated to the god Rudra, overall, he is mentioned seventy-five times in the *Rig-Veda*.¹⁰² Kershaw compares him with Óðinn pointing to his war deity qualities and his image as a wild hunter. Rudra also functions as an initiation demon. Kershaw discusses J.G. Held's assertions that Rudra embodies the central post of the initiation hut. Kershaw connects this statement with the idea of the central stake of the hut representing the center and support of the cosmos. This post and subsequently Rudra are the axis mundi during initiation.¹⁰³ This information is presented in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* a prose text describing rules and elaborate symbolic explanations of vedic rituals, it is therefore an interpretation of earlier texts.¹⁰⁴ The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* describes the prayerful digging for the central post of the initiation hut, this is a sacred affair because the Rudra venerated believe the post runs from the heavens down to the world of the dead. The

⁹⁹ "Sacred Books of the East." Edited by Max F. Müller, 1-12. Vol. 46. Translated by Hermann Oldenberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1897. p. 12.

¹⁰⁰ Sauv , 1970. p. 183.

¹⁰¹ Flood, Gavin. "Sacred Writings." In *Themes and Issues in Hinduism*, edited by Paul Bowen, 132-60. London: Cassell, 1998. p. 134.

¹⁰² "The Rig Veda." 11-297. Translated by Wendy O'Flaherty. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981. pp. 219-227.

¹⁰³ Kershaw, 2000. pp. 210-238.

¹⁰⁴ Flood, 1998. p. 135.

text also describes the door of the initiation tent as the mouth of Rudra, who swallows the initiate.¹⁰⁵ This portrayal of Rudra representing the axis mundi and an initiator bears similarities with the self-hanging myth. The cosmic pillar is the personification of Rudra, while Óðinn hangs from it. Óðinn is both initiated and initiator, while Rudra presides over initiation. At the very least, the Rudra ritual and the Óðinn myth both share an idea of the axis mundi as the liminal space for initiation.

Conclusion:

From Germania to India religious rituals and myths can be found dating from the 1200 B.C. to the late Iron Age, which demonstrate parallel thinking or ideas to those found in the self-hanging myth in *Hávamál*. Some of these examples, such as the vedic rituals, pre-date the conception of Jesus' crucifixion by as much as 1,200 years.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, it is reasonable to pose the possibility, that it is more likely that religious concepts older than Christianity influenced *sjálfsfórn*. The crucifixion accounts themselves may well have been influenced by these older concepts of sacrifice and initiation taking place at the axis mundi. This idea of a cosmic center repeatedly appears throughout the various religions discussed so far in this work. Yggdrasill, the cross, Irminsul, the *yūpa*, the central post of the Rudra initiation hut, all embody the axis mundi and each are holy places suitable for sacrifice or initiation. Each of the religions discussed in this chapter are Indo-European religions and come from linguistically related people groups. However, parallels to the self-hanging can be found outside of this linguistic sphere, specifically with various shamanistic religions.

Chapter Four: Shamanism and the Self-Hanging Myth

Fleck argues Germanic religions' parallels with shamanism are due to both inherited tradition as well as Central and North Asiatic borrowings. Examples of these borrowings are illustrated by the mythical cosmology, specifically in regards to the cosmic tree. He compares their relationship to the presence of Iranian materials in Judaism. Judaism contains cosmological borrowings from Iran and concepts like paradise, angels, the war between good and evil, eschatology, etc. These ideas can subsequently also be found in Christianity and Islam, because of their dependence on Judaism.¹⁰⁷ However, while considering these exchanges between cultures, it is important to remember there are no hard lines between cultures. Cultural exchange happens constantly and there is no such thing as a "pure" culture with no

¹⁰⁵ "Śatapatha Brāhmana." 1-477. translated by Julius Eggeling. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885. pp. 140-148.

¹⁰⁶ Flood, 1998. p. 134.

¹⁰⁷ Fleck, (1970). pp. 388-389.

external influences. One should regard religious ideas as fluid and constantly changing concepts passing from one group to another. With this perspective in mind, Germanic religions are dependent on shamanism the same way Judaism is reliant on Iranian materials. Obviously, shamanism is a very broad term describing religious practices from Central and North Asia to North America. However, Fleck's point explains the relationship between shamanism and Germanic religions. Borrowings and independent influences determine religious perceptions. Due to the scope of this work, this chapter will mainly be concerned with shamanistic rituals and beliefs, which parallel *sjálfsfórn*.

Finnish Shaman Initiation:

R. Pipping's argument, from his 1927 work *Oden i galgen*, suggests a connection between *sjálfsfórn* and Finnish shaman rituals. Finnish shamans must climb a birch on the day of their initiation and in some cases, they climb seven to nine trees, one to represent each world their metaphysical view includes. Pipping used this argument to reject the notion of a Christian interpretation of stanza 138 in *Hávamál*.¹⁰⁸ Van Hamel criticizes Pipping's argument, saying the Finnish shaman initiation and the self-hanging have little in common, because the shaman initiation does not contain hanging and fasting like Óðinn's self-hanging does, which Van Hamel considers the most prominent characteristics of the myth.¹⁰⁹ The Finnish shamanic ritual and the self-hanging myth, both function as an initiation. The young Finn has proven themselves worthy to wield all the powers a shaman is equipped with, while Óðinn proves himself worthy to wield the runes. The shaman initiation and the self-hanging both take place at the cosmic tree, between heaven and the underworld. Van Hamel's criticisms do not hold up when considering the core idea of both the shamanic rite and *sjálfsfórn*, which is an initiation occurring at the axis mundi.

The Shaman's 'Wandering Soul':

Motz describes the general concept of a shaman. She explains the responsibility of a shaman is to shed their human rationality in order to traverse the heavens and the underworld. She stresses the emphasis of salvation being attained through a journey in shamanistic thought. The shaman possesses the ability to send his 'wandering soul' into the spirit world to fight the shaman's battles, while his physical body lays motionless. Motz compares a description of Óðinn from *Heimskringla* to the idea of the shamanic 'wandering soul'. The passage says Óðinn can change his shape, his body lies as if dead or sleeping, while he

¹⁰⁸ Pipping, (1927). p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ Hamel, 1934. pp. 260-261.

becomes an animal (bird, mammal, fish, or worm). In an instant Óðinn can transport himself to distant lands to do his errands or those of others.¹¹⁰ This shared concept of a ‘wandering soul’ between Óðinn and the shaman is crucial in understanding the reason for the self-hanging taking place at Yggdrasill. It is the axis mundi and the cosmic connection to other worlds. Óðinn and the shaman both undertake spiritual journeys to attain power. The spiritual importance of suffering is another parallel between shamanic thought and the self-hanging.

Suffering of the Shaman:

In order to attain his powers a shaman must undergo brutal trials such as hunger, cold, or torture. Motz finds this idea present within Eskimo shamanic thought and compares it to *sjálfsfórn*. She points out the Eskimo associated suffering and mutilation especially with creative value. Motz calls attention to portrayals of Óðinn as a figure of suffering, such as his torture between two fires in *Grímnismál*. She uses Óðinn’s missing eye, which he sacrificed at Mímir’s well in *Völuspá* 20, to illustrate the concept of Óðinn as a mutilated figure. Among the Buryats, an indigenous people of Siberia, there is a shamanic practice of the shaman’s sons fasting for nine days during their father’s initiation. Motz compares this with Óðinn’s nine nights of hanging from the tree with no food or drink. She also points out nine is the number of spheres of heaven in both belief systems.¹¹¹ The concept, of suffering conjuring spiritual power, is present in the fundamental beliefs of both shamanic religions and the self-hanging myth. This point paired with the idea, that this suffering should take place at the axis mundi, in order to undertake a spiritual journey and complete an initiation, sheds some light on the reasoning for the cosmic tree to be a suitable location for sacrifice and initiation.

The Shaman’s Tree:

According to Motz, the shamans of northern Eurasia are intimately linked to their tree, which may be a representation of the tree of life. The tree could be close to the shaman’s dwelling and he may have to climb it during his initiation. In some traditions, the soul of the shaman is nurtured within the branches of his tree. In other stories, the shaman dies if his tree is destroyed. Motz suggests Óðinn is linked to Yggdrasill in a similar fashion. She uses the name Yggdrasill to emphasize Óðinn’s ownership of it.¹¹² Tolley also explores the significance of a cosmic tree in shamanism. He says the tree is important as the shaman’s gateway to other worlds. Journeys via the cosmic tree usually go upwards towards heaven,

¹¹⁰ Motz, 1996. p. 81.

¹¹¹ Ibid. pp. 82, 88.

¹¹² Ibid. p. 87.

notches on the tree represent the layers of heaven the shaman must climb through. However, some journeys go down to the underworld via the tree roots. Tolley uses the Siberian Ewenki shaman traveling to the underworld to ask the clan mother to release the animals for the hunt as an example of shamanic journeys to the underworld. Tolley also points out the shaman sends his animal double (*khargi*) through the tree to the underworld to ask ancestral shaman spirits about future events. The Dolgan people of Siberia also exhibit the idea of a cosmic tree as a place of ritual. The pillar is called *tüspät turū* and the Dolgans believe its prototype stands before the dwelling of their High God. Sometimes four lesser poles would be attached to the Dolgan pillar to represent the four directions. Like Yggdrasill, an eagle also sits atop the Dolgan pillar.¹¹³ Neil Price, in his book *The Viking Way*, points out, the Dolgan's neighbors, the Yakut people tether their animal sacrifices to a linked series of nine poles. Each pole represents a world the animal must pass through.¹¹⁴ Tolley also describes religious rituals of the Buryats and Altaians, another Siberian people. They would raise a tent around a birch tree and conduct shamanic ceremonies within. The canopy of the tent represents the cosmos and the tree its center.¹¹⁵ This last ritual space sounds especially reminiscent of the Rudra initiation hut discussed in Chapter Three. However, the most important point in this section is the shared concept of a sacred tree as a gateway to other worlds, found within both the self-hanging narrative and shamanic thought. Although there are some striking similarities between *sjálfsfórn* and shamanic concepts, some scholars, such as Dutton and Stephan Grundy, object to comparing Óðinn with general notions of shamanism.

Criticisms of Comparing Shamans with Óðinn:

Dutton rejects the idea that Óðinn and his hanging have anything to do with shamanism.¹¹⁶ Stephan Grundy concludes after analyzing various shamanistic rituals in his book *The Cult of Óðinn: God of Death?*, that shamans are not hanged.¹¹⁷ Dutton says the biggest problem is the definition of shamanism. He states the traditional definition of shamanism, as Siberian and Native American religious practices, cannot include our understanding of Óðinn from extant sources. Dutton also points out, that Siberian and Native American peoples have denounced equating shamanic names and practices with other religions, which they consider to be unrelated. These people have suggested scholars should

¹¹³ Tolley, 2009. pp. 272-273, 274.

¹¹⁴ Price, Neil S. *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. Uppsala: Department of Archaeology and History, Uppsala, 2002. p. 291.

¹¹⁵ Tolley, 2009. p. 274.

¹¹⁶ Dutton, 2015. pp. 123-124.

¹¹⁷ Grundy, Stephan. *The Cult of Óðinn: God of Death?* New Haven, CT: The Troth, 2014. p. 195.

look at their own respective cultures for the origins of these magical practices. However, Dutton recognizes the validity of Grundy's argument, that Germanic tribes had their own form of magical practice, shamanistic or otherwise, which later encountered non-related societies and their ritual practices.¹¹⁸ François-Xavier Dillman, in his book *Les magiciens dans l'Islande ancienne*, concludes Scandinavian magical practices as recorded in Icelandic sagas are certainly not the same as Shamanism.¹¹⁹ However, Tom Dubois argues that the Scandinavian practice of seiðr strongly replicated shamanic rituals from the Sámi and Finns. Dubois states, that Scandinavians incorporated seiðr into their pre-existing religious beliefs and practices, and this incorporation demonstrates a dynamic process of religious exchange during the Viking Age.¹²⁰ This chapter's aim is not to equate Old Nordic religions with shamanism, rather it aims to highlight the similarities between the self-hanging and shamanic rituals in order to argue for a possible relation or borrowing of ideas. While the concerns of Siberian and Native American peoples about scholars generalizing and trivializing shamanism are warranted, one cannot help but notice the parallels between the *sjálfsfórn* and some shamanic practices.

Conclusion:

Most of the above examples come from Eastern European and Siberian peoples, some farther from Scandinavia geographically than others. Despite their distance and their different linguistic group, these cultures display some of the same concepts found in *sjálfsfórn*. Both revere a cosmic tree as the axis of the universe, both illustrate an initiation through suffering, and both exhibit the significance of traveling through other worlds to attain something supernatural. The next chapter will move even farther away from Scandinavia to examine Native American religious beliefs and their commonalities with the self-hanging myth.

Chapter Five: Native American Religions and *Sjálfsfórn*

With shamanic constructions of the axis mundi in mind, such as the Yakut tethered poles for animal sacrifice, it is interesting to note how the Yupic Alaskan Eskimos see the big dipper as a series of poles with skin ropes tied to them.¹²¹ One must remember the big dipper points to the North star, which may further attest to this constellation's association with the axis

¹¹⁸ Dutton, 2015. pp. 123-124.

¹¹⁹ Dillman, François-Xavier. *Les magiciens dans l'Islande ancienne*. Uppsala: Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur, 2006. p. 308.

¹²⁰ Dubois, Tom. *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. pp. 122-138.

¹²¹ Berezkin, Yuri. "Cosmic Hunt: Variants of Siberian-North American Myth." *Electronic Journal of Folklore* 31 (January 1, 2005): 79-100. p. 81.

mundi. However, this Eskimo constellation is most interesting, for this chapter's purposes, as a possible link between the shamanic similarities to the self-hanging and the Native American commonalities to *sjálfsfórn*.

Yuri Berezkin, in his article "Seven Brothers and the Cosmic Hunt" demonstrates that lore, specifically star lore, can travel vast distances. He uses Ursa Major as an example. The most widespread Eurasian and North American interpretation of this constellation is seven men with Alkor as a dog, a pot (carried by one of the men) or as a younger/weaker person, such as a youth or young woman. This interpretation was present across Eurasia since at least the Terminal Paleolithic. Later, this view of Ursa Major was brought from Southern Siberia across the Bering Strait to the Plains region of North America.¹²² Berezkin's findings demonstrate how cosmological interpretations can travel with migrational movements over vast distances. If an interpretation of Ursa Major can move from Eurasia to the North American plains, perhaps the idea of the axis mundi as an initiation or sacrificial site could also travel great distances. Although extremely distant from Scandinavia, the Native American Sun Dance ritual exhibits some stark parallels with *sjálfsfórn*. This chapter will examine the practice, compare it with the self-hanging myth, and consider the possibility of a relation between the ritual and the myth.

The Sun Dance:

Joseph Jorgensen discusses the history of the Sun Dance in his book *The Sun Dance Religion*. He says it is mainly a post reservation phenomenon, except in the case of the Wind River Shoshones in Wyoming. According to the evidence, the dance was most likely created by Plains Algonquians, possibly the Cheyenne, as early as 1700.¹²³ However, Paul Steinmetz, in his book *Pipe, Bible, and Peyote Among the Oglala Lakota*, says the actual age of the Sun Dance is unknown, but the earliest accounts of it come from the early 18th Century.¹²⁴ After 1750, the ritual spread through nomadic plainsmen and alliance networks to other tribes. It was common for allied tribes to partake in each other's ceremonies and from the late 18th Century to the mid-19th Century, the Sun Dance was one of the grandest rituals of the Plains tribes. The dance was not necessarily an annual affair, but was conducted after voluntary dancers made vows to undergo the dance. Dancers only participated in the dance to gain something, such as the healing of sick relatives, to bring happiness to mourners, to pacify the

¹²² Ibid. pp. 88-92.

¹²³ Jorgensen, Joseph G. *The Sun Dance Religion: Power for the Powerless*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972. p. 17.

¹²⁴ Steinmetz, Paul B. *Pipe, Bible, and Peyote Among the Oglala Lakota: A Study in Religious Identity*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990. p. 27.

spirits of the dead (who sometimes act in a hostile manner), to bring about the well-being of the entire Sun dance community, and in some cases to obtain the powers of a shaman.

The dance itself is a grueling process. It lasts for three days during which the dancers endure ritual fasting, thirsting, and mutilations. There are numerous variations of the dance depending on time and place. Some instances have the dancers dancing in place around a tree or pole. Near the close of the 19th Century, dancers began to charge the pole during dancing, dancing up to the pole and away to about ten feet, then back to the pole again.¹²⁵ In some cases, the dancer's chest is pierced and cords tie their body to the center pole, the dancer will pull at the pole while dancing until their flesh tears and they are freed.¹²⁶ Sometimes, the tethered dancer is even hoisted up and hanged by their chest from the tree.¹²⁷

Before moving into the brutal process of the dance, it is first important to understand the ritual space. In his work *The Lakota Sundance Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Arthur Amiotte describes the general process of preparing a Sun Dance camp. Four Lakota priests go to establish the area where the sacred tree will be planted, this tree will become the center of the world or axis mundi. Over the spot for this tree, the priests cut lines in a cross shape to denote the four directions. Within these cuts, they place sacred tobacco and paints. Scouts go into the forest to search for the sacred tree, which will be used in the dance. Once a tree is chosen, the Lakota gather around it to conduct the ritual act of felling the tree. Before this right can begin, the intercessor must first shoo away the protector spirit of the tree, which is usually represented by a coiled snake at the base of the tree. Men and women fell the tree with great care not to let it touch the ground, because the sacred tree cannot touch the ground before it is planted in the sacred space. Men carry the tree on their shoulders to the Sun Dance camp and bring it into the sacred circle through the east side. A shaman digs the post hole and the tree is planted. The people hang offerings from the tree, as well as a rawhide effigy of a buffalo and one of a man.¹²⁸

All of the rituals and practices surrounding the three-day Sun dance vary and due to the scope of this work, this chapter cannot discuss all of them. Instead, the parallels with *sjálfsfórn* will be given priority. The dancing itself most closely resembles the self-hanging, especially when the dancer is pierced and tied to the axis mundi. The dancer does not view

¹²⁵ Jorgensen, 1972. pp. 17-19, 244.

¹²⁶ Amiotte, Arthur. "The Lakota Sun Dance Historical and Contemporary Perspectives." In *Sioux Indian Religion*, edited by Raymond J. DeMallie and Douglas R. Parks, 79-89. Norman And London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987. pp. 88-89.

¹²⁷ Steinmetz, 1990. p. 33.

¹²⁸ Amiotte, 1987. pp. 79-83.

this as torture, rather as a union of his four souls (which the Lakota believe a person has) joined in the sacred power of the sun. Amiotte notes the dancers must break free from their piercing as quickly as possible, because it is dangerous to stay in the spirit world too long.¹²⁹ Steinmetz notes the occurrence of female dancers and even young teenagers participating in dancing. He highlights one example from the 1978 Black Crow Sun Dance, where teenage twins, a boy and a girl, were pierced and danced. They both had a dream of hanging from a tree when they were eight years old, so they took this as a sign to be pierced at the Sun Dance. The boy was pierced on the right side of his chest and the girl was pierced on her left arm. Together, they danced and tore free from the tree. Dancers usually pull themselves free by charging the post and then pulling on the skin as they dance away from it to the rhythm of drums and the melody of singers. Steinmetz gives an account of a dancer suspended from the center tree at the 1978 Porcupine Sun Dance. As the man hung, the religious leaders asked the people to stand up, remain silent, and pray for his success.¹³⁰

Conclusion:

It is interesting to note the parallels between the Sun Dance and the self-hanging. Like Óðinn, the dancers are undergoing a painful rite in order to retrieve something from the spirit world. Óðinn takes up the runes, while the dancers take up healing for the sick, happiness for mourners, or well-being for the community. The dance can even serve as the initiation of a shaman, the way the self-hanging serves as an initiation for Óðinn. The sacred tree certainly shares attributes with Yggdrasill, for one, both represent the axis mundi. The coiled snake at the base of the sacred tree also bears a striking resemblance to the serpent Níðhoggr, who gnaws at the roots of Yggdrasill.¹³¹ Of course, the dancers pierced and tied to the tree parallel Óðinn, who is pierced by a spear and hanging from a noose on Yggdrasill. Even in cases where dancers are not pierced and simply dance to and from the tree, this still seems to almost mimic the way a hanging corpse swings away from and back to the gallows. The dancers also parallel Óðinn in their denial of food and drink as they dance for three days and nights. As the pierced dancers rip their flesh and pull away from the tree, especially in the case of a dancer hanging from the tree, one can imagine a dancer would fall back from the tree similar to the way Óðinn falls back from Yggdrasill. Dutton disagrees that this Native American ritual has anything to do with Óðinnic cult practices, but at the same time he

¹²⁹ Ibid. pp. 83-89.

¹³⁰ Steinmetz, 1990. pp. 33-34.

¹³¹ Snorri Sturluson, 1982. p. 17.

admits the parallels are undeniable.¹³² This work does not argue for a direct relation between the Sun Dance and the self-hanging. However, it is not impossible that both this ritual and the Norse myth come from ancient ideas about the axis mundi as a place of sacrifice or initiation.

Chapter Six: The Axis Mundi

This work so far has discussed a handful of myths and rituals describing a sacrifice and/or an initiation taking place at the axis mundi. Most notably Óðinn's self-hanging from Scandinavia, Jesus' crucifixion from the Middle East, the Rudra cult initiation from India, Shamanic initiations from Northern Eurasia, and the Sun Dance from the plains region of North America. The axis mundi is a very widespread idea and it is possible there are more sacrifice/initiation myths and rituals surrounding the axis mundi, which are now lost. To illustrate the scope of this idea of the axis mundi, this chapter will give a general overview of examples of the axis mundi from around the world and contemplate its significance in *sjálfsfórn*.

Various Concepts of the World Pillar:

The Egyptians had a god named Shu, who held heaven and earth apart. In early depictions, Shu is represented by a pillar. The Sumerian "The mooring pillar" separated heaven and earth. The Vedic North Star was "the pillar of sacrifice in the sky", which supported the cosmos. Aery cords tied the heavenly bodies to the North Star.¹³³ In the Indian *Rig-Veda*, a pillar holds heaven and earth apart, heaven and earth are conceptualized as fastened on either end of an axle, like two wheels.¹³⁴

The axis mundi notion is also found in circumpolar cultures. Tolley notes the house pillar among the Eskimos represented the world post. Like the post holds up the roof, so too does the world post hold up the sky. The Sámi, Finns, and Estonians believed the world pillar was topped with an iron nail, which fixed the pillar to the firmament. They identified the North Star as this nail. Tolley lists a few accounts of Sámi ideas of the axis mundi. One account, from Jens Kildal, describes a reindeer sacrifice to the high god Maylmenradien, so that he will keep the world from collapsing. A cleft stick is planted at the center of the sacrificial sight, to represent the god's support of the world, and then the stick is smeared with blood. Tolley also remarks the North Star was called the "golden pillar" by Mongols, Buryats, Kalmyks, Altai-Tatars, and Uigurs. The Orochi called it "the golden post". The

¹³² Dutton, 2015. p. 123.

¹³³ Viennot, Odette. *Le culte de l'arbre dans l'Inde ancienne*. Paris: Annales du Musée Guimet, 1954. p. 76.

¹³⁴ "The Rig Veda.", 1981. pp. 203-207.

North star was referred to as “iron pillar” by the Kirgiz, Bashkirs, and some Tartars. The Teleuts called it “unique pillar”.¹³⁵ These similar ideas of the axis mundi are far too alike to be mere coincidence and too widespread to not be related. The concepts of the axis mundi are always illustrated as some kind of shaft, which divides as well as links heaven and earth. All of the cosmos revolves around its tip, the North Star. Not only does it support the various worlds, it acts as a gateway to them, a stairway to heaven.

Significance of The Axis Mundi in *Sjálfsförn*:

The cosmic pillar is a very old cosmological feature, the idea certainly predates late Iron Age Scandinavian religion. However, it is not clear exactly how old this idea of sacrifice/initiation at the axis mundi is. The earliest example is probably the vedic Rudra Initiation and animal sacrifice at the *yūpa*, which date as early as 1200 B.C.¹³⁶ Although it is certainly possible, that there are earlier examples without documentation.

In *sjálfsförn*, Óðinn is hanging between heaven and earth by a noose. In a sense, he is mimicking the axis mundi, but at the same time he is tied to it. In this same way, Christ hangs between heaven and earth nailed to the cross, which also represents the center of the world. The Finnish shaman initiate climbs the axis mundi, although he is not technically bound to it, he hangs from it just like Christ and Óðinn. Óðinn is becoming the axis mundi and therefore the link between the nine worlds, similar to the way the center pole/axis mundi in the initiation tent is Rudra; this not only allows Óðinn to take the runes from the underworld, but he also becomes the union between the nine worlds, similar to the joining of the four souls of the Lakota during the Sun Dance. Óðinn’s sacrifice is the focal point of the universe, he is between worlds, and between life and death. The cosmic tree is the ultimate liminal space, that is why it is important in so many sacrifices and initiations. Both sacrifice and initiation imply a change, a sacrifice leaves the world of the living and enters the world of the dead, while an initiand becomes a more powerful person. Hanging from the branches of Yggdrasill, Óðinn becomes both the sacrifice and the initiand.

Conclusion:

The concept of the axis mundi is cross-cultural and possibly one of the oldest cosmological figures. The various examples above illustrate the breadth of this idea as well as the similarities between the numerous visualizations of the cosmic pillar. The cosmic axis is a fitting place for Óðinn’s self-hanging, because it is the universal liminal space. By sacrificing

¹³⁵ Tolley, 2009. pp. 273-276.

¹³⁶ Flood, 1998. p. 134.

himself on Yggdrasill, Óðinn can move through the worlds to obtain the runes, but this liminal space also allows him to rise again as a more powerful god wielding the runes. Sacrifice/initiation in this cosmic liminal space is an ancient idea, which dates as early as 1200 B.C. like the vedic Rudra Initiation hut and animal sacrifice at the *yūpa*.¹³⁷

Conclusion:

Stanzas 138-141 of *Hávamál* depict Óðinn's self-hanging on Yggdrasill, and in this thesis, I have argued, that this scene is not directly borrowed from Christianity, because every aspect of the myth can be explained through the context of narratives about pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion. Rather, based on the evidence this work has examined, I believe *sjálfsfórn* comes from a concept older than Christianity. *Sjálfsfórn* exhibits parallels with other myths and rituals from around the world, which date as early as 1200 B.C., like the Vedic concepts of the *yūpa* and the Rudra Initiation hut.¹³⁸ Following the comparativist methods proposed by Schjødtt, this work has run through a gamut of religious sacrifices and rituals, all displaying notable parallels to the self-hanging.

As discussed in chapter one, *sjálfsfórn* fits firmly within the motifs of stories associated with Old Norse mythology and religious practices. This surrounding context attests to the likelihood, that the myth is not a Christian author's invention. It most likely stems from an oral tradition and this is the form of the myth, which was present at the time of its commitment to parchment. Still, the crucifixion does bear a striking resemblance to the self-hanging. However, after a detailed comparison some of the starker common attributes of the two myths seem fairly arbitrary and certainly lack the capacity to argue for plagiarism of the crucifixion by the composers of the Old Norse Corpus. Although *sjálfsfórn* is not a paganized copy of the crucifixion, it is entirely possible the two share some kind of relation. In any case, both narratives relate the sacrifice and ultimate initiation of a figure (in these two cases dieties) bound to the axis mundi, which is a reoccurring theme found in religions as far away as North America. This theme is present in Indo-European religions, particularly with the instance of the Rudra initiation. Shamanic religions exemplify this concept through the shaman initiate climbing a sacred tree, which represents the axis mundi. The Sun Dance, of the Plains Native Americans, presents an example of a shaman initiate tethered to a tree, which represents the axis mundi, by cords attached to the dancer by piercings. In this ritual, the dancer may even hang from the axis mundi, like Óðinn does.

¹³⁷ Flood, 1998. p. 134.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

While some of these religious practices carry genetic relations to *sjálfsfórn*, such as the sacrificial hanging practices of the Germanic Tribes, some can only be concretely argued for as a typological comparison, like the Sun Dance from North America. However, a typological relationship does not necessarily negate the chance of the two sharing common religions as predecessors and therefore being related in some capacity, no matter how distant. Religions do not evolve in a vacuum, concepts grow and change over time. However, it is possible to notice and study common abstractions between religions as well as analyze the degree of their relationship through comparativism.

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