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The Sacrificial Festival at Uppsala

A Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT: *The source value of Adam of Bremen's description of the pre-Christian sacrificial ritual at Uppsala is hotly debated. Some scholars emphasize that it rests on the account of an eye-witness, others that it is a compilation of Christian stereotypes of pagan cult in general. The aim of the present study is to find out what derives from genuine sacrificial cult among the Svear and what is drawn from Christian polemics. A critical analysis of Adam's text is presented, and the sparse information from other sources on Scandinavian ritual practices is discussed. However, the essential thing is to compare with sacrificial texts, especially inscriptions, from the religions of ancient Europe and western Asia. It is shown that some details in Adam's description may derive from oral tradition by local informants.*

SAMMANDRAG *Trovärdigheten i Adam av Bremens notiser om offerkulten i Gamla Uppsala är omdiskuterad. Omdömena varierar alltifrån ett ögonvittnes skildring till ett sammanplock av stereotyper om hednisk kult. Föreliggande studie granskar kritiskt innehållet i Adams notiser. Syftet är att skilja ut vad som bygger på autentisk tradition om svearnas offerpraxis och vad som utgör medeltida schabloner och kristen polemik. Uppgifter i andra källor om förkristen skandinavisk offerkult lyfts fram. Det väsentliga är dock jämförelsen med rituella texter från Europas och Västasiens gamla religioner, särskilt inskrifter. Det visar sig att vissa detaljer i Adams beskrivning kan bygga på muntlig tradition från tillförlitliga informanter.*

KEYWORDS: *Adam of Bremen; Old Uppsala; animal offerings; human sacrifice; ritual inscriptions; Greco-Roman cult; Iranian tradition*

In a famous section of his history of the Hamburg archbishops (*Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* IV, 26–30), Adam of Bremen describes the site of Uppsala and the cult performed there. Adam completed his work around the year 1075 at a time when the non-Christian cult seems to still have existed. In what follows, the name Uppsala

always refers to the Viking Age and early medieval site, which today is known as Old Uppsala. It is the *Ubsola* of Adam, which he regards as the name of the cult place proper (*templum*), and it is the *Uppsalir* of the Old Norse sources. In a papal letter from 1164, it appears as 'the town of Uppsala' (*Upsalia urbs*). To judge from his work, Adam never visited the Scandinavian countries, a possible exception being southern Denmark (cf. A. Lund 2000, 12).

The value of Adam's description as a source of the 11th century non-Christian cult at Uppsala has been much debated. Opinions range from full authenticity with an emphasis on the role played by eyewitnesses (de Vries 1956–57 § 290; Holtsmark 1970; F. Ström 1961; Å.V. Ström 1975, 236; Dumézil 1986, 186) to scepticism regarding its value as a reliable source for what was going on at Uppsala. In the words of Peter Sawyer:

> Adam of Bremen's account of the temple at Uppsala is, at best, based on hearsay, and cannot be relied on for detail but it should not be dismissed as pure fantasy; it may be that in the eleventh century some pagans tried to make their temples more magnificent in response to the challenge posed by the Christians and their new churches (Sawyer 1982, 134).

Similarly Raymond Page:

> How much we need to believe Adam's account is uncertain, but even the sceptical must accept there could be truth behind some of it (Page 1995, 220).

On the contrary, Henrik Janson maintains that Adam's account has no bearing whatsoever on an actual pagan cult at Uppsala (Janson 1998, 265–291). Adam depicts in contemptuous 'pagan' terms a Christian community at this place which did not accept the supremacy of the Hamburg-Bremen diocese. It has also been suggested that what Adam describes is a mythological landscape which has little relevance to the cult at Uppsala (Alkarp 1998).

Previously, I attempted to sort out the different layers in Adam's account in order to elucidate what might have been the facts of the Uppsala sacrifices (Hultgård 1997, 12–24 and 2003, 440–441). Here, I will continue this attempt by reconsidering some of Adam's statements and by adding comparative aspects taken mainly from Roman, Greek and Iranian religion. Particular attention will be paid to the sacrificial ritual itself.

Chapters 26 to 30 of Book IV (the scholia included) of Adam's *Gesta* form a coherent section which we may term the 'Uppsala passages'. They are introduced by the following remark: "I will now say a few things about the superstition of the Svear" and conclude with the words: "What has now been said about Sueonia and its ritual ceremonies may be adequate enough". Five marginal notes (*scholia*) are added to these chapters. They are found already in the Leiden manuscript (A2), dated to around 1100. Whether or not they stem from Adam himself, they have in my opinion the same source value concerning the Uppsala sacrifices as Adam's main text.

Adam's Description of the Sacrificial Ritual

The three principal deities whose images (*statuae*) are worshipped in the Uppsala 'temple' are presented according to the *interpretatio romana* pattern. Thor is modelled on the Jupiter of the Romans, and Odin, here denoted Wodan, is presented in the same way as we do with Mars, Adam says. The third deity is called Fricco, a name which Adam in all probability chose in order to avoid the positive association connected with the expected form Frō ('Lord') used for God or Christ (Wessén 1924, 186; Wagner 1989). That Fricco should be identified with Freyr/Frø is unanimously assumed. The triad of precisely these gods could be interpreted as reflecting the deities worshipped most among the Svear, or it could be a strategy of the rulers to increase their political influence by uniting the different gods of different population groups in a common central cult (cf. Sundqvist 2013, 96–100).

Having introduced the gods, Adam goes on to describe the rituals. The sacrifices are offered on behalf of the people by different groups of priests who are associated each with their own deity. The statement recalls the various categories of Roman priesthoods rather than actual reality among the Svear (Hultgård 1997, 19). The gods also have different fields of activity that guide the attribution of the sacrifices:

> If plague and famine threaten, libations are offered to the idol of Thor (*Thor ydolo lybatur*), if war, to Wodan, if weddings are to be celebrated, to Fricco (IV, 27).

Every nine years, a sacrificial festival common to all provinces of Sweden (*Sueonia*) is celebrated. Adam here adds a comment which bears the mark of authenticity. Participation in the festival is required of everyone. Kings and people without exception bring their sacrificial gifts to Uppsala and those who are Christians can buy their way out of the ceremonies, which is even crueler than punishing them. Contrary to what Adam thinks, this rule testifies to a tolerant religious policy on the part of the Svea rulers; instead of a forced participation they offered the possibility to the Christians of liberating themselves from the ceremonies in exchange for some sort of fee. Adam continues:

> *Sacrificium itaque tale est: ex omni animante, quod masculinum est, novem capita offeruntur, quorum sanguine deos [tales] placari mos est. Corpora autem suspenduntur in lucum qui proximus est templo. Is enim lucus tam sacer est gentilibus, ut singulae arbores eius ex morte vel tabo immolatorum divinae credantur. Ibi etiam canes et equi pendent cum hominibus, quorum corpora mixtim suspensa narravit mihi aliquis christianorum LXXII vidisse.*
>
> The sacrifice, then, is such: of each animal that is male, nine heads are offered; with their blood it is the custom to appease similar gods. But the bodies are hung in a grove that is close to the temple. For this grove is so sacred to the pagans that its individual trees are considered divine because of the death and decay of the victims. There also dogs and horses are hanging together with humans; one of the Christians told me that he had seen seventy-two bodies hung up mixed together.

The attached scholion (no. 141) further states:

Novem diebus commessationes et eiusmodi sacrificia celebrantur. Unaquaque die offerunt hominem unum cum ceteris animalibus, ita ut per IX dies LXXII fiant animalia, quae offeruntur.[1]

During nine days they celebrate banquets and similar sacrificial rites. On each day they offer one human together with other living beings, so that in nine days the number of living beings that is offered amounts to seventy-two.

Adam concludes his account in chapter 27 by referring to ritual songs:

Ceterum neniae, quae in eiusmodi ritu libationis fieri solent, multiplices et inhonestae, ideoque melius reticendae

Moreover the songs they use to sing in that rite of libation are diverse and shameless; therefore, we had better say nothing about them.

To the reader's disappointment, no further information about their contents is given. In addition, scholion 138 hints at another sacrificial procedure:

Ibi etiam est fons, ubi sacrificia paganorum solent exerceri et homo vivus inmergi. Qui dum non invenitur, ratum erit votum populi.

There also a well is situated, where offerings of the pagans take place and a human being is immersed alive. When the person is not found, the wish of the people will be fulfilled.

The passage seems to address two different things. On the one hand a cult at a sacred spring and, on the other, a particular rite of divination. Nothing is said of its regularity or of the kind of 'wish' that prompted the rite.

The Role of the Ruler

In a note that bears the mark of authenticity (scholion 140), the following is said:

Nuper autem cum rex Sueonum christianissimus Anunder sacrificium gentis statutum nollet demonibus offerre, depulsus a regno dicitur a conspectu concilii gaudens abisse, quoniam dignus habebatur pro nomine Iesu contumeliam pati.

When not long ago the most Christian Anund, king of the Svear, refused to offer the people's prescribed sacrifice to the demons, he was deposed from his rule. It is said that he departed from the presence of the assembly rejoicing that he had been accounted worthy to suffer insult for the name of Jesus.

This recalls the story about King Ingi in the fornaldarsaga *Hervarar saga* ch. 16 where we are told that Ingi was a convinced Christian (*vel kristinn*) who did away with the 'pagan' sacrifices. The Svear opposed this and at a legal assembly they confronted him with two options: either keep the ancient customs (*forn lǫg*) or renounce his kingdom (*láta af konungdómi*). Ingi responded that he would not abandon the true faith. The Svear then drove him away from the assembly, and chose instead Svein, his son-in-law (cf. the passage below on Blót-Svein). Whether Ingi is another name for Anund or there is a confusion of two different rulers, we cannot tell.[2]

1 One manuscript, A3 from around 1438, adds that the sacrifices took place around the spring equinox. It is doubtful whether this statement belongs to the work as it appeared before 1100.

2 Scholars usually suggest that Ingi may have been the Anund mentioned by Adam, cf. Tschan 1959, 208; Svenberg 1984, 195; Brunet-Jailly 1998, 265.

Anyway, scholion 140 clearly shows the importance of the ruler's presence at the public sacrifices. He was to play the part of the prime representative of the sacrificial community by performing some ritual act. The tradition about Hákon 'the good' and the sacrificial feasts in the Trøndelag is illuminating in this respect. Although Snorri's account in *Heimskringla* is largely fiction, it nonetheless preserves some genuine elements. The community wanted the king to preside at the sacrifice. Being a Christian, he refused although in the end he was forced to comply, but only to the extent of performing a single sacrificial act. As told in the version found in *Ágrip* ch. 5:

> It is said that he bit into the horse liver, but in such a way that he tied a cloth around in order not to bite without a covering (*beit eigi bera*). He did not sacrifice in other ways (*blótaði eigi ǫðruvís*).

Here, we have a piece of oral tradition preserved through two centuries which shows the role of the king in public animal sacrifices (cf. Hultgård 1993, 240–242).

As seen from the above passages, the ruler was expected to play an important role through officiating at the rituals. But could sacrifices be performed for the ruler or be addressed to him as the highest representative of the community? Adam does not indicate this possibility; however, later sources do. So *Óláfs saga helga* ch. 77 where the sacrifices at Uppsala are said to be performed for peace and for the king and his success (see below). In Old Norse medieval sources, the idea of *ár ok friðr* 'good crops and peace' is clearly related to kings and chieftains (see Hultgård 2003). This points to the existence of a pre-Christian tradition that connected the ruler to the welfare of his community. In what way this was ritually expressed, we do not know.[3]

Remarks on Adam's Text

Some Latin words of the text (the scholia included) need to be correctly interpreted or are in themselves ambiguous. The terms *lybatur*, *libatio* and *triclinium* refer to drink-offerings and a banquet hall, respectively (cf. Dillmann 1997). The word *animans* usually signifies 'animal' in medieval Latin and that is the meaning to be preferred here. It seems strange if the phrase *ex omni animante quod masculinum est* would also refer to human beings.[4] Scholion no. 141 uses the word *animalia* instead, which primarily denotes 'animals' but which may also include humans. The role of humans as sacrificial victims seems to be unclear. The term *capita* may denote 'heads' or 'items'. Since there appears to be a contrast to the following *corpora autem*, the sense of 'heads' would be the more natural here (cf. Page 1995, 221; A. Lund 2000, 221 and 269). The choice of 'heads' or 'items' obviously affects our understanding of the sacrificial procedure.

[3] The discussion of a 'sacral kingship' in pre-Christian Scandinavia does not, in my opinion, contribute much insight into actual conditions of the Viking period. An illuminating overview of the theory of 'sacral kingship' is found in Sundqvist 2002, 18–38.

[4] The more general sense of 'living being' cannot be excluded, however. Scholars usually opt for that meaning: Tschan (1959, 208): 'every living thing'; Svenberg (1984, 225): 'varje levande varelse'; Hultgård (1997, 31): 'allt levande'; A. Lund (2000: 221): 'alle levende hankønsvæsener'; Brunet-Jailly (1998, 217): 'chaque espèce vivante'.

In addition, Adam's report includes statements that are best interpreted as biblical influences and Christian commonplaces.

According to Adam, the aim of the sacrifices is to appease the gods. This appears to be no more than a polemical topos frequently used by Jews and Christians to describe the purpose of 'pagan' sacrifices. Some examples from medieval authors will suffice. In his *Vita Anskarii* from the 9th century, Rimbert tells us that the Svear in Birka were urged by Ansgar to renounce their superstition and to stop placating their idols with meaningless sacrifices (*inani sacrificio idola vobis placare*, ch. 19). Similarly, when Thietmar of Merseburg (early 11th century) describes the cult of the Slavic tribes at Riedegost, he emphasizes that they meet there in order to sacrifice to the idols and appease their wrath (*iram eorundem placare*). He concludes his description of the rituals with a loosely affixed remark (*Chronicon* VI, 25):

> *Hominum ac sanguine pecudumineffabilis horum furor mitigatur*
>
> Their (the gods') enormous rage is mitigated by the blood of humans and animals.

Thietmar also applies this commonplace to the cult at Lejre on Sjælland. The Danes were convinced that their blood sacrifices would reconcile them with the gods (*Chronicon* I, 17):

> *putantes hos eisdem erga inferos servituros et commissa crimina apud eosdem placaturos.*
>
> they believed that these (the sacrifices) would please the netherworld gods and would appease them (the gods) for evil deeds committed.

The assertion that the sacrificial victims are of male sex could reflect biblical prescriptions. *Leviticus* (1, 3 passim) states that if a person's sacrifice is a whole-offering from the cattle "he shall present a male without blemish" (Vulgata: *masculum immaculatum offeret*). On the other hand, explicit references to the male gender of the victims, but alongside female ones, are found in Roman and Iranian tradition (see below).

As for the grove and the victims that were hung up there, Adam relies partly on information from an eyewitness. The identity of this Christian is unknown, but to Adam and his contemporaries the reference to eyewitnesses was also a literary commonplace intended to lend credibility to things described (cf. A. Lund 2000, 13).

What is said about the well in which a human is drowned recalls the *iudicium aquae frigidae*, the 'cold water trial' of medieval ordeals. It is a judicial act performed to prove a person's guilt or innocence, but it is not a sacrifice. He or she was fettered and submerged in water (a well, a cauldron, a lake or river). When not found, his or her innocence was proven. Adam (or his scholiast) probably relied on some hearsay about a particular water cult at Uppsala and retold it in terms of the medieval water trial.

Questions Raised by Adam's Account

So far the information on the sacrifices at Uppsala. Adam's description, as detailed as it may appear, nevertheless leaves us with a number of questions. The usual procedure at the type of public sacrifices with which we are concerned is that the edible parts of the victims are consumed in a communal meal whereas the rest (except the fell) is

given over to the deity.[5] However, in Adam's version, precisely these parts are transferred to the divine sphere by hanging them in the sacred grove. What is done with the heads we are not told. The problem still remains when interpreting *capita* as 'items, individuals'. In this case, too, the entire victims would have been considered as the share of the gods. In sacrificial rituals of the Greco-Roman world and the ancient Near East, the 'altar' held center stage. Usually, a fire was lit upon the top where the parts dedicated to the deity were placed. Adam is silent on the existence of a similar construction at Uppsala. It could be that the hanging of the victims in the sacred grove actually represented the transfer of the sacrificial gifts to the divine sphere. This seems less probable, however. In Scandinavia the altar would partly correspond to the 'harg' (Old Norse *hǫrgr*, Swedish dialects *harg*, *horg* < Old Swedish **hargher*). Being primarily used to denote a natural heap of stones or a rock, it took on at an early point the additional meaning of 'cult-site' to which the signification of a 'stone construction for sacrifices' was added (cf. Olsen 1966; Rostvik 1967, 93–96). The function of the 'harg' is illuminated by stanza 10 of the eddic poem *Hyndluljóð* where Freyja speaks of her protégé Ottar:

Hǫrg hann mer gerði,	He made for me an altar,
hlaðinn steinum,	piled up with stones,
nú er grjót þat	now these stones
at gleri orðit	have turned to glass.
rauð hann í nýju	He reddened them
nauta blóði,	with fresh blood of oxen.
æ trúði Óttar	Ottar always trusted
á ásynjur	in the goddesses

The Old English and Old German corresponding terms, *hearg* and *harug* respectively, are exclusively used in the cultic sense of 'sacred place, sacred grove', also adding the meanings of 'altar' and 'idol' (cf. Andersson 1992, 83–84).

Apparently, Adam uses *templum* to describe a sacred building in accordance with medieval usage. But he mentions another space located within this 'temple':

> *In hoc templo, quod totum ex auro paratum est, statuas trium deorum veneratur populus, ita ut potentissimus eorum Thor in medio soliumtriclinio habeat…*
>
> In this temple which is wholly adorned with gold the people worship the images of three gods, in such a way that Thor, the mightiest of them, has his seat in the middle of the banquet hall…

How are we meant to conceive of this *triclinium* in relation to the 'temple' building? The 'temple' described by Adam could actually have been a large hall building, like

[5] For the sacrificial procedure (including the role of the altar, and the communal meal) in the Greco-Roman world and the Near East, see Burkert 1983, 3–7 (Greece); Ottosson 1987 (ancient Israel); Hultgård 1987 (early Judaism); Rüpke 2001, 140–146 (Roman religion); Hultgård 2017 (ancient Iran); Müller-Kessler 2017 (Mandaeans); Graf 2017 (cults of the Egyptian gods in the Hellenistic-Roman world).

those Viking Age halls excavated at several places in Scandinavia, for example at Lejre and Tissø in Sjælland, and at Borg in Lofoten.[6] If so, we must imagine the *triclinium* to be the banquet hall itself and used synonymously with *templum* by Adam. Most scholars interpret (and reconstruct) the 'temple' as a separate cult building, however. Cult houses have been found at Uppåkra in Skåne, at Borg in Östergötland, and at Hofstaðir in Iceland, but these are all of limited size.[7] In such a house, it would be difficult to find a place for a banquet hall large enough to include a multitude of worshippers, as indicated by Adam's term *populus*.

Invocations, prayers, dedication formulas and hymns were an indispensable element of the sacrificial rituals in ancient Europe and the Near East. With the exception of the 'songs' sung at the ritual banquets, such verbal utterances are not mentioned by Adam.

Further Literary Sources on Uppsala

Adam's account is supplemented by a passage in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla where the cult at Uppsala is briefly touched upon:

> In Svithjod there was the general custom in heathen times (*meðan heiðni var þar*) that the main sacrifice (*hǫfuðblót*) was to be performed at Uppsala in the month of Góa. One should then sacrifice for peace and victory to one's king (*blóta til friðar ok sigrs konungi sínum*). People from the entire Svia realm would come together in that place (*þangat søkja*). The assembly of all Sviar (*þing allra Svía*) would also be there; a market with commerce was also held there which lasted a week (*Óláfs saga helga* ch. 77).

Little is said about the sacrifices themselves. Here, their purpose is said to be peace and victory for the ruler whereas Adam reverts to a polemic topos. The passage is in all probability independent of Adam's description. The indication 'month of *góa*' implies a dating of the sacrifices to the period from mid-February to mid-March.[8] Snorri seems to believe that the sacrificial feast described was performed on a yearly basis; there is no mention of the nine years interval that Adam mentions.

The description of Blót-Svein and his reign in *Hervarar saga* conveys some information on the sacrifices at Uppsala. At a legislative assembly (*lǫgþing*), the following was decided:[9]

> *var Sveinn þá til konungs tekinn yfir alla Svíþjóð. Þá var fram leitt hross eitt á þingi ok hǫggvit í sundr ok skipt til áts, en roðit blóðinu blóttré. Kǫstuðu þá allir Svíar kristni, ok hófust blót.*

[6] Cf. Christensen 1993 (Lejre); Jørgensen 2008 (Tissø) and Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003 (Borg in Lofoten).

[7] Larsson & Lenntorp 2004 (Uppåkra); Lindeblad & Nielsen 1997 (Borg in Östergötland); Lucas 2009 (Hofstaðir). Overview in Kaliff & Mattes 2017, 139–156.

[8] This corresponds broadly with what is stated in scholion 141: *Hoc sacrificium fit circa aequinoctium vernale*, "That sacrifice was performed around the spring equinox". However, this statement is only found in the manuscript A3a dated to c. 1434 and we cannot be sure that it reflects the early Adam tradition (*i.e.* before 1100).

[9] The assembly here mentioned was no doubt held at Uppsala, cf. G. Turville-Petre 1976, 93.

> Svein was then chosen king over all of Svithiod. Thereupon a horse was led forth onto the assembly place, cut into pieces and distributed for eating, and the sacrificial tree was reddened with the blood. All Sviar then abandoned the Christian religion, and the sacrifices resumed (Hervarar saga ch. 16).

The historicity of Blót-Svein and a 'pagan rebellion' at Uppsala has been hotly debated, but there are no convincing grounds for denying that this actually happened (see Sävborg 2017). Although compiled in the late 13th century, *Hervarar saga* includes various earlier traditions, both written and oral (cf. also Kristjánsson 2007, 73, 349–352). As to the horse offering, the details are in conformity with the main actions of a public sacrifice, slaughtering of the animal, distribution of its meat in a communal meal and reddening a sacred object with the blood. The statement has no tendentious point but seems to be a piece of genuine information.

The Archaeological Evidence

The archaeology of Old Uppsala has made steady progress in the last three decades (for an overview, see *at Uppsalum – människor och landskapande*). Finds of settlements, boat burials, grave fields and various types of workshops point to the fact that Uppsala preserved its importance as a central place also in the Viking period (Ljungkvist 2013, 58–62). However, little has so far been brought to light that could be related to Adam's description of the sacrifices and the 'temple' (cf. Alkarp 1998; Ljungkvist 2013, 58–62). Traces of the well, the grove and sacrificial remains have so far not been found. The large hall from the Vendel period was not replaced by a corresponding Viking Age building. Investigations have not been able to confirm earlier hypotheses of a 'pagan' cult building below the medieval church (Nordahl 1996; A.-S. Gräslund 2013, 131).[10] It should be emphasized, however, that the large mounds, the line of impressive postholes (perhaps indicating a procession road?) could still carry cultic functions although they were erected earlier (6th and 7th centuries). The presence of non-Christian religion at Viking Age Uppsala is archaeologically confirmed by recent finds of amulet rings and Thor's hammers (see http://www.arkeologigamlauppsala.se).

Scandinavian Ritual Traditions

In search of Scandinavian parallels that can elucidate Adam's account, the Stentoften rune stone from the 7th century AD comes as a first-hand testimony. The stone commemorates, in all probability, a sacrifice of unusual significance arranged by a Blekinge chieftain. According to the most convincing interpretation, the inscription runs (in transcription):[11]

> *nīu habrumR, nīu hangestumR, HaþuwulfR gaf j(āra)*
>
> with nine he-goats, with nine stallions,

[10] This does not exclude the presence of such a building elsewhere in Viking Age Uppsala (cf. also Sundqvist 2013, 89; Kaliff & Mattes 2017, 207–208).

[11] This interpretation was proposed by Santesson 1989 and 1993.

Haþuwulf gave a 'good year'

Here, the importance of animal sacrifice is clear, as is the role played by the number nine. The purpose was to bring **jāra* (Old Norse *ár*) to the people: good crops and welfare.

Stanzas 138–145 of the eddic poem *Hávamál*, which describe the 'self-sacrifice' of Odin, mention his ritual hanging during 'nine nights' and the nine 'great songs' (*fimbulljóð*) he took from a divine ancestor.[12] The above-mentioned notice in Thietmar's *Chronicon* (I,17) presents clear correspondences with Adam's account:

> *Est unus in his partibus locus, caput istius regni, Lederun nomine, in pago, qui Selon dicitur, ubi post VIIII annos mensae Ianuario, post hoc tempus, quo nos thephaniam Domini celebramus, omnes convenerunt, et ibi diis suimet LXXXX et VIIII homines et totidem equuos, cum canibus et gallis pro acciptribus oblatis immolant.*
>
> There is a place in this country which is the centre of his kingdom (i.e. Cnut) and named Lejre in the district called Sjælland where every nine years in the month of January all come together – after that day when we celebrate the Lord's theophany. There they sacrifice to their deities ninety-nine humans and the same number of horses, dogs and cocks instead of hawks (*Chronicon* I, 17).

The number of human victims seems exaggerated, to say the least, and the same probably goes also for the animals mentioned. But ninety-nine confirms the significance of the number nine. The type of animal victims mentioned conforms with those indicated by Adam, except for the cocks.

Types of Animals Sacrificed

Looking at the types of animals that were sacrificed, Adam mentions dogs and horses, the Stentoften stone he-goats and horses, and Thietmar dogs, horses and cocks. *Hyndluljóð* speaks more generally of 'oxen'. Archaeology has revealed the predominance of horse and dog as sacrificial animals from several places, for example Borg in Östergötland (Lindeblad & Nielsen 1997, 34). In Skedemosse, the dominance of horses is striking and dogs very rare (Monikander 2010). It is noteworthy that one of the recently excavated boat burials at Old Uppsala showed a man together with dogs and a horse (see https://arkeologerna.com/en/). These animals were more closely attached to humans than other species and this may be why they were preferred as sacrificial victims.

Human Sacrifices?

Sacrifice of humans in 11th century Uppsala is not attested in other sources and archaeological evidence is so far lacking. Adam's information on that point is not clear and raises some doubt. Were the humans treated in the same way as the animal victims? If so, they would have been decapitated and the headless bodies hung up in the grove. This seems very unlikely. Taking *capita* in the sense of 'individuals' would provide a less improbable explanation: the entire bodies of the human victims were taken into the grove. In addition, Adam may be influenced by Christian polemics directed at the

[12] The passage can be interpreted as a 'prototypical initiation ritual' (cf. Sundqvist 2009).

'pagans' where human sacrifice had become a 'topos' of its own. In general, little evidence exists for human sacrifices among Viking Age Scandinavians. The literary sources cannot be taken at face value and have sometimes been misinterpreted (cf. Alkarp 1998; Hultgård 2001; Dillmann 2009).[13] Human sacrifices may have been performed in earlier periods at particular occasions, for example in Skedemosse (Monikander 2010).

Comparative Aspects

Jens Peter Schjødt's committment to the comparative approach in history of religions is well known (see for example Schjødt 2012). Here we will apply the comparative perspective to the somewhat confused account by Adam in order to assess its value as a reliable source of the Uppsala sacrifices. Some statements of his account could be confirmed and its lacunae filled out. Conversely, other statements could be doubted. On cultural and geographical grounds, the religions of ancient Europe and Western Asia offer the most appropriate materials. Sacrificial practice in this area presents many common features, and it provides the basis for a regional 'phenomenology of sacrifice' as outlined by Gladigow (1984). With respect to the comparative material, inscriptions are of primary importance since they represent direct sources, and we will rely mainly on them. But of course it should be remembered that they do not include the ritual gestures of the sacrifice, which presumably were only orally and imitatively transmitted (cf. Rudhardt 1990).

The Cult Place and its Functions

Adam describes an important cult place with a sacred grove and an adjacent 'temple' building at Uppsala where animal sacrifices and ritual banquets were performed. His information on that point cannot be doubted although the detail is less reliable. It would be sufficient to refer to the cult groves of Germanic tribes as recorded by Tacitus.[14] A broader perspective may nonetheless help to better understand the character of Uppsala as a central place of worship.

In general, a cult place was an open space set aside for religious ritual and marked out from the surroundings in different ways, by border stones or columns, by a wall or another type of enclosure.[15] This sacred area could include trees, a grove, a spring, altars and cult buildings. The Greeks used the word *temenos* to denote such a sacred

[13] The recent investigation by Klas Wikström af Edholm (2020) comes to the conclusion that human sacrifices were a real and living tradition up until the end of the Viking period. In my opinion, the literary sources are not as reliable as he thinks and can, moreover, be interpreted in different ways.

[14] *Germania* ch. 9: *lucos ac nemora consecrant*, "they consecrate groves and small woods"; further ch. 39: the sacred grove of the Semnones; ch. 40: the sacred grove (*castum nemus*) of the goddess Nerthus; 43: the grove of the Nahanarvali where an ancient cult is performed.

[15] On the concept of a 'cult place', see Hultgård 2003, 442–445, Nordberg 2014, and Zachrisson 2014.

area. To the Romans, this was a *templum*, a consecrated space approved by the augurs; it could also be a *fanum*, or a *lucus*, which were also ritually marked places although they were not consecrated in the same way. The term *templum* gradually developed the additional sense of 'cult building, temple' (cf. Scheid 2004, 276–279). The *nemeton* of the Celtic peoples corresponds to the *temenos* of the Greeks and to the *templum* or *fanum* of the Romans. It was an enclosed sacred area for sacrifices and assemblies, frequently associated with trees. The *drunemeton*, 'oak sanctuary', of the Galatians in Asia Minor functioned as their central place of worship and council (Strabon, *Geography* XII, 5,1). Thietmar's description of the Slavic sanctuary at Riedegost shows striking similarities with Adam's account of Uppsala (*Chronicon* VI, 23–25).[16] An enclosed, central place of worship (denoted *urbs* 'fortress' by Thietmar) for a particular people (the Lutitians), in Adam the Svear. It is surrounded by a sacred forest. Within the enclosed area there is a wooden sanctuary (*fanum*). This corresponds to the sacred grove and the 'temple' in Adam. Inside the building at Riedegost there are man-made deities (*dii stant manu facti).* The highest of them (*primus*) is called Svarozic ('son of Svarog'), the others are not mentioned by name. In the Uppsala 'temple', the statues of three gods are worshipped, and Adam states that Thor was the mightiest deity. To guard the sanctuary and the offerings, the Lutitians have instituted special priests (*ministri sunt specialiter ab indigenis constituti*). This recalls the statement by Adam that the gods have each their own priests who bring the people's sacrifices. When coming home from war, they honour the temple with appropriate gifts (*muneribus debitis honorant*). According to Adam, kings and people of all Sueonia had to convey their gifts to Uppsala – a sacred area with a cult building in which images of the deities were set up. Divination rites, human and animal sacrifices are mentioned by both Thietmar and Adam. The similarities may reveal a literary dependence on Adam but can also be explained as the expression of a common pattern in organizing cult places and sacrifices shared by North Germanic and Slavic tribes.[17]

The Sacred Grove

Cult places differed as to size, topography and organization. The 'sacred grove' represents a particular type of cult site that was widely distributed in ancient Europe and Western Asia. Thietmar mentions an old and much venerated grove (*lucus*) among the Slavic tribes of central Germany, which his predecessor Wigbert destroyed and transformed into a Christian place of worship by building a church (*Chronicon* VI, 37). The grove was called *Zutibure* – in Thietmar treated as a proper name – which would derive from Old Slavic *swetŭ borŭ*, 'sacred grove'. The *nemeton* of the Celts frequently included trees of various species. Pliny points out that the druids choose groves of oak (*roborum eligunt lucos*) and that they perform no rites without using their foliage (*Natural History* XVI,95). The *tasinemetum* in Kärnten got its name from the yew-tree (cf.

[16] On Riedegost, see Słupecki 2006. The place has not yet been identified.

[17] This question is discussed in Sundqvist 2017.

Latin *taxus* for the yew) and the name presupposes the presence of yew-trees within the sacred precinct.

The agrarian cults of the Romans were in the hands of the Arval priests, the *Fratres Arvales*. The rites were performed both in the city of Rome and in the countryside in a sacred grove (*lucus*) not far from the city. Within the grove, there was a temple building. The rituals included animal and vegetal offerings and aimed at securing another year of good crops and fertility (cf. Bayet 1969, 83–86). In Greece, cult groves were prominent and the word itself, *álsos*, 'grove', conveyed a sacral meaning (Gernet & Boulanger 1970, 164).

Persian rulers had their paradises (Avestan *paridaēza-*, < Old Persian **paridaiza-*), which were enclosed areas of a sacred character with trees, streams of water and a wealth of flowering plants. They were also places of worship (on the paradises, see Hultgård 2000).

The sacred grove was usually dedicated to a particular deity. The *lucus* of the *Fratres Arvales* was dedicated to a goddess called *Dea Dia*. A Gaulish inscription says that a certain Segomaros dedicated a *nemeton* to the goddess Belisama (Lambert 1997, 84–85).

Purpose of the Cult Place

The primary purpose is of course to establish a place for worship and sacrifices. In addition, the cult place has a deeper purpose which is seldom explicitly recorded in the texts, however. The bilingual inscription from Vercelli in northwestern Italy is an exception. (Lambert 1997,76–79). It reports the founding of a cult place by a Celtic aristocrat, Akisios. The limits of the sacred area which he donated were marked out by four stone pillars. The inscription states that the site (*campus*) is common to gods and humans (Latin text: *communis deis et hominibus*, the fragmentary Celtic version has the compound …*dēuo-ghdonion* 'gods and humans' (cf. the Greek *khtonios* 'earthbound' to denote a 'human being'). It is thus a place for the encounter between gods and humans.

The Number 'Nine'

The importance of the number 'nine' in the Uppsala rituals is clearly stated in Adam's account. This reflects in all probability a genuine feature since it is supported by the Stentoften rune stone and attested in ritual contexts elsewhere.[18] 'Nine' is prominent in sacrificial contexts of ancient Iran and is attested also in Rome and Greece.

In Iran, the preponderance of the number 'nine' in rituals is striking. In the great cleansing rite (Avestan *barəšnūm*) it is predominant (*Vidēvdād* ch. 9). The ritually delimited area measures 'nine ells' (*vībāzu-*) on all four sides and, inside of this, 'nine holes' (*maga-*) must be dug. The distance between the furrows to be made and the two types of sacrificial pits must be 'nine steps'. After 'nine nights' on the ritual site, the

[18] Besides the evidence cited above, the 'nine nights' of *Skírnismál* stanzas 39 and 41 mark a ritual period.

person who has stayed there has become cleansed. 'Nine nights' is also specified more generally as the purification period and the nine cleansing pits occur in other rites, too.[19] The number 'nine' characterizes the ritual disposal of hair, which is combed away, and nails, which are cut. You are to dig a hole and put the hair and nails into it; then you must make nine furrows around it and nine times say the holy prayer of 'Ahuna vairya' (*Vidēvdād* 17, 5–6). If anyone has slain an otter – which was among the worst things you could do in ancient Iran – then this person must ritually hand over a stable with nine stalls and a cowshed with nine stalls to 'truthful people' (*ašavan-*; *Vidēvdād* 14, 14). *Yašt* 4 supplies a formula and a rite, which are to help the individual person in distress: he or she is to make nine furrows in the field and recite nine names of 'truthful men' (*ašavan-*). One myth tells of the god Airyaman's prototypical ritual in order to cure diseases. The formula itself, whose repetitive structure reveals that it is intended to be recited, goes as follows:

nauuaṇąm aspaṇąm aršnąm gaonəm baraṯ Airiiama yō išiiō,
nauuaṇąm uštraṇąm aršnąm gaonəm baraṯ Airiiama yō išiiō,
nauuaṇąm gauuąm aršnąm gaonəm baraṯ Airiiama yō išiiō,
nauuaṇąm anumaiianąm aršnąm gaonəm baraṯ Airiiama yō išiiō,
nauua vaētaiiō baraṯ, nauua karšå frakāraiiaṯ

Airyaman, he whom you must seek, took hair from nine stallions,
Airyaman, he whom you must seek, took hair from nine camels,
Airyaman, he whom you must seek, took hair from nine bulls,
Airyaman, he whom you must seek, took hair from nine rams.
He took nine withes, he made nine furrows (Vidēvdād 22, 20).

Early Greek attestations are found in Homer. The *Odyssey* says that the people of Pylos presented a sacrifice of nine black bulls to Poseidon, and those who made the sacrifice were divided into nine groups with five hundred people in each (III, 4–8). A passage in the *Iliad* praises the ruler of Lycia for being most hospitable: he sacrificed nine oxen and feasted his guest for nine days (VI, 173–174; cf. Oettinger 2008). A ritually conditioned period of 'nine' – days or years – is attested early on. In the Homeric hymn to Demeter, it is said that the goddess, grieving and fasting, searched for her abducted daughter Persephone for nine days (lines 47–50). At the Thesmophoria festival in Attica, which was linked to the cult of Demeter, the women were to observe chastity for nine days (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X, 434). The poet Bacchylides (first part of the 5th century BC) reports that Heracles sacrificed nine bulls to Zeus (*Bacchylides* 15, 17).

When Rome was at the height of its power in 17 BC, the emperor Augustus staged the great century festival (*Ludi saeculares*), which lasted for three days and nights. Although he gave his festival a new guise, the sacrificial rites and prayer formulas were taken from ancient tradition. The festival proceedings were carved onto a marble pillar, which was erected at the site of the nightly sacrifices on the shore of the Tiber. Most of the inscription has been preserved and it provides detailed information about the ritual (text in Schnegg-Köhler 2002). From the description, it is clear that the number 'nine' was special. Sacrifices included 'nine female lambs' (*immolavit agnas feminas IX*)

[19] *Vidēvdād* 19, 24; for the nine ritual holes, cf. also *Vidēvdād* 5, 54 and 10, 18.

and 'nine female goats' (*et IX capris feminis*). In addition, Augustus presented a food sacrifice during the nightly worship:

> *Sacrificium fecit deis Ilithyis libeis VIIII, popanis VIIII, pthoibus VIIII.*
>
> He made a sacrifice to the Ilithyan gods with nine loaves, nine cakes, and nine waffles.

Moreover, Vedic and Hittite texts occasionally hint at the special character of 'nine' in animal sacrifices (Oettinger 2008, 408–409).

Prayers, Invocations and Ritual Songs

These are verbal elements that were of prime importance in the sacrificial procedure. As we have seen, Adam mentions ritual songs but passes over other verbal expressions. Yet prayers and invocations must have accompanied the sacrificial acts in the Uppsala cult. To get an idea of how these could have appeared within the ritual process, the comparative approach is illuminating. I will present some examples.

Pliny reports a particular sacrifice among the Celts arranged when a mistletoe is found growing on an oak-tree, which seldom occurs (*Natural History* XVI, 95). Two white bulls are sacrificed while the priest and the participants pray (*precantes*) that the deity might render the reward for the sacrifice propitious to those who offered it. A ritual meal (*epulae*) is then held beneath the oak.

In Roman rituals, verbal expression was a necessary element. After having performed the animal and vegetal offerings, the *Fratres Arvales* gathered in the temple building and chanted triple invocations to the deities. The *Ludi saeculares* of 17 BC emphasize the sacrificial prayer. It is said of Augustus that "he prayed in this manner" (*precatus est hoc modo*) and the actual invocation formula 'I beg you and beseech you' (*te quaeso et precor*) occurs repeatedly in the inscription.

The sacred law (*nómos*) regulating the cult at the sanctuary (*hieron*) of Amphiaraos in Greece states that:

> one shall pray for the victims (κατεύχεσθαι δὲ τῶν ἱερῶν) and place them on the altar. When the priest is present, he shall do that, when he is not, the sacrifier (ὁ θύων). At the feast sacrifice (ἡ θυσία) each person shall pray individually (for the victims), but the priest shall pray for the public victims. The skin of all that is sacrificed within the sanctuary goes to the priest. Each person is allowed to offer everything that he or she wants but it is not permitted to bring the meat outside the sacred area (τέμενος). Those who sacrifice shall give the priest the shoulder (ὦμος) of each victim (*Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum* no. 1004).

As can be seen, the inscription conveys detailed information on animal sacrifice, the roles of the priest and the ordinary sacrifier, and it emphasizes the importance of prayer.

Ritual texts dating from around 1000 BC have been preserved in Zoroastrian tradition. Accompanying animal sacrifices the Yasna Haptaŋhāiti (the 'Yasna of the Seven Chapters', *Yasna* 35–42) was recited by the worshippers in front of the sacred fire (cf. Hinze 2004). Most passages include the word *yazamaidē* 'we worship' and are addressed to the supreme deity, Ahura Mazdā, and his creations, both the spiritual ones

and those in nature. The prayers begin as a rule with the praise of the deity (a doxology). The first stanza of *Yasna* 37 may serve as an example:

> we thus worship (*yazamaidē*) Ahura Mazdā,
> who has created the Cow (*gauu-*) and the Truth (*aša-*),
> who has created the waters and the good plants,
> who has created the light, and the earth (*būmi-*) and all that is good.

In the Younger Avesta, the *yazamaidē* invocations are a frequent element, for example in the preamble of the main sacrificial ritual, the 'yasna' proper (e.g. *Yasna* 16–17, *Vispered* 7). Libations (*zaoθrā-*) were (and still are) a prominent sacrificial act. Public sacrifices of animals are not explicitly mentioned in Avestan texts, but there is no doubt that such sacrifices were practiced up to the end of the Sasanian period (cf. de Jong 2002; Panaino 2004, 238–239). Observations of actual ritual practice and sacrificial theology among Iranians of the 2nd and 1st centuries BC form the background of Strabo's information:

> they (the Persians) sacrifice in a purified place having placed themselves at the side of the decorated animal (τὸ ἱερεῖον) and after having prayed (κατευξάμενοι). After the priest (ὁ μάγος) who conducts the ritual (ἱερουργία) has divided out the meat they go away, each having got his or her share; the gods receive no portion. For they say that the deity only wants the soul of the animal but nothing else. However – as some say – they place a small piece of the caul of the entrails (τὸ ἐπίπλοον) on the fire (*Geography* XV,13).

Strabo's remark on the prayer can be elucidated by an Avestan passage where the sacrificial animal is addressed:[20]

> We send forth your conscious mind and your soul (baoδasca uruuānəmca),
> you bounteous bull, you beneficent bull, up to the nearest created light.
> *Pursišniha* 33.

Rulers and Sacrifice

The prominent role of the ruler in sacrificial rituals appears clearly in Rome. As we saw above, Augustus officiated at the sacrifices of the *Ludi saeculares* and the emperors after him all assumed ritual roles. In Iran, the magi and the fire priests (*āθrauuan-*) were above all ritual specialists who performed the sacrifices on behalf of the community. Although they were not considered divine, the Persian kings played a central role in the public rituals as the foremost sacrifiers and addressed themselves directly to the deity in praise and prayer. The inscription of Darius at Persepolis shows the ruler's representative role in approaching the deity:

> Says Darius the King: May Auramazdā, together with all the gods, bear me aid, and may Auramazdā protect this country from hostile armies, from bad years and crops (dušiyāra-), and from the Lie (drauga-)...this I pray Auramazdā, and all the gods, as a boon (yāna-).DPd §12–22 (Kent 1953, 135–136)

[20] For this passage, see Narten 1982, 145.

Herodotos points out that the person who offers sacrifice has to pray not only for himself but for all Persians and for the king (*Historiae* I, 132). In the Iranian paradises, sacrifices were performed for the Persian kings. In Sasanian times, a daily sacrifice was prescribed consisting of one lamb, bread and wine on behalf of the king and his family. It was performed with the purpose of granting well-being and immortality (Middle Persian: *pad amāh ruwān*, 'for our immortal soul').

Conclusion

Besides polemical commonplaces and rhetorical elaborations, Adam's description of the sacrificial feast at Uppsala also conveys genuine information. The comparative perspective supports what Adam says on a sacred grove and a building for worship, the sending of sacrificial gifts from people and provinces, the prominence of the number 'nine' in the ritual, and the importance attributed to the ruler in the public sacrifices.

Going into detail, Adam's account poses more questions than it answers, however. The existence of a sacrificial well as described by Adam cannot be confirmed, and his statement on human sacrifices at Uppsala in the middle of the 11th century seems doubtful. The handling of the victims is not clearly described and seems inconsistent with what we otherwise know of sacrificial rituals. Most of all, we lack information on the sacrificial procedure itself: the slaughtering of the animals, the distribution of the meat in a communal meal, and the reciting of prayers and invocation formulas.

The many lacunae in Adam's account can be filled out by comparisons with Roman, Greek, Celtic and Iranian traditions. A picture of how the Uppsala sacrifices could have appeared is thus created. The comparative evidence strongly suggests that there was a sacred area, a *temenos*, at Uppsala which would have been marked out in one way or another. Constructions corresponding to the 'altar' would have been used where gifts to the gods were placed or other ritual acts performed. Prayers and invocations would have accompanied the sacrifices. Ritual acts were certainly performed outdoors within the sacred area, and indoors in a larger building, most probably a hall. So long as undisputed evidence of public cult activities at Viking Age Uppsala has not been found, however, the archaeological problem will remain.

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