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Otherworldly Beings in the Pre-Christian North: Tribal, Chieftdom, and Archaic Religion and the Use of Cultural Evolutionary Theory¹

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Abstract

The interplay between societal and cultural change consists of a host of different factors. Religious conceptions are just one and are this article's focus. Various conceptions of Otherworldly beings can be found in the textual sources for pre-Christian Nordic religion. To better understand these differing descriptions, one can employ various theoretical frameworks when constructing the particular model for the reconstruction of pre-Christian Nordic religion. For this article a cultural evolutionary framework inspired by the work of Robert N. Bellah is paired with a model of ontology in a case study suggesting that specific types of Otherworldly beings belong to specific types of religion. It is suggested that Otherworldly beings such as the *álfar* may represent what might be termed a tribal religion, while Otherworldly beings such as the *vanir* seem to belong to an archaic religion. The proposed intermediate category of chieftdom religion is then suggested as relevant for a different kind of Otherworldly being, which is explored by applying Phillipe Descola's work on ontology. These differing groups of Otherworldly beings further seem to fulfil similar functions while remaining rel-

1 This article has been long in the making. An earlier version was presented at the research seminar *Perspectives on the Sagas* at Aarhus University in 2015, and a preliminary manuscript was discussed at a meeting of the *Research Unit for the History of Religion* at the Dept. of the Study of Religion, Aarhus University, in 2017. I thank the participants of both events for their valuable feedback. I owe a note of thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and to Luke John Murphy, Hans J. Lundager Jensen, and Jens Peter Schjødt for valuable feedback on earlier manuscripts versions. A very special thank you is due to Simon C. Thomson for detailed comments and feedback on many aspects of this text in an earlier inception. Any errors remain my own.

evant throughout our textual corpus. This is ultimately seen as an example of Bellah's notion that 'nothing [important] is ever lost'.²

Keywords: *Otherworldly beings; pre-Christian Nordic religion; cultural evolution; cultural evolutionary theory; ontology; dispositions of being; Robert N. Bellah; Phillipe Descola; álfar; vanir; tribal religion; chieftdom religion; archaic religion.*

As a society evolves due to internal and external factors – such as agricultural innovation, warfare, or wider geopolitical circumstances – so does its religion. This happens in part to accommodate these changing societal and demographic conditions. Naturally, the entirety of a society does not change at the same time; the conditions of a farmer in rural Jylland were certainly not the same as those of a chieftain at Lejre, whose religious practices may not have corresponded entirely with those of a chieftain in Uppsala. Thinking along the lines of the cultural evolutionary typology of religion of late scholar of religion Robert N. Bellah, this means a range of different expressions of the same basic religion can be present at the same time – or 'nothing [important] is ever lost' (cf. Stausberg 2021, 105 with references; cf. note 2). This article builds on earlier work that takes Bellah at face value and employs his cultural evolutionary theories in the study of pre-Christian Nordic religion, suggesting that Bellah's cultural evolutionary typology of religion can be productively expanded with an additional category of *chieftdom religion* (Nygaard 2014, 2016).³

2 This modification of Bellah's motto with the specification that importance to the specific culture is key seems warranted, since – as Michael Stausberg (2021, 105, n3) has rightly pointed to – it has the potential to be (and has actually been, cf. de Jong 2016, 661) misunderstood. Naturally, things are lost or forgotten through the course of history. In this regard it may also be useful to think in terms of Aleida Assmann's (2008) notions of *canon* (that which is kept in remembrance by memory specialists in – predominantly – societies with writing) and *archive* (that which is not deemed relevant to the group by the religious authorities, and which is thus 'placed in storage' so to speak). In this article Bellah's expression is used to explain the continuity of function between two groups of Otherworldly beings that are conceptualized differently in accordance with the article's understanding of various types of religion. The accumulation of *important* (and thus not all) traits and functions instead of their total loss in the face of religious change – because change also happens – is (and always has been) at the heart of the understanding of Bellah's motto.

3 Bellah's evolutionary theory was first proposed in his article 'Religious Evolution' (1964) and was most fully and finally expressed in his *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (2011). However, his approach has also been criticized. The present article constitutes a constructive criticism of Bellah's theories, while Michael Stausberg (2014) has also conducted a critical review of the scholarly reception of Bellah's 2011 volume.

Working with Otherworldly beings – that is, gods, deities, or entities thought to influence the human world from their Other World – and using the Old Norse *álfar* and *vanir* as a case study, the article explores some examples of Otherworldly beings in pre-Christian Nordic religion that seem to belong to Bellah's categories of *tribal* and *archaic religion*. Bellah characterizes the Otherworldly beings in a tribal religion, that is, roughly what is found in hunter-gatherer societies without a polity, as a collective with an anonymous identity (Bellah 1964, 361–64, 2011, 117–74),⁴ and the gods of his category archaic religion, more or less as found in the early states, as marked individuals with gender, age, and personality (Bellah 1964, 364–66; 2011, 210–64). Subsequently, and inspired by French anthropologist Philippe Descola's (2013) work on ontology and the dispositions of being,⁵ the article moves on to make some suggestions of which kinds of Otherworldly beings might belong to a chiefdom religion in pre-Christian Scandinavia (see Fig. 1).

Methodology and theoretical framework

The theoretical (re)construction of past religions is vital to the work of historians of religion in general, as well as of pre-Christian Nordic religion. When working with such traditions, it is vital to acknowledge that attempts at reconstruction will never mirror reality and will always take the form of an ideal model. This model will be informed by the theories used in the reconstruction on the one hand and, of course, any available empirical data on the other; the resulting model is crucial to understanding the data. For pre-Christian Nordic religion the Old Norse textual sources are fragmented and heterogenous. They were typically written down several hundred years after the advent of Christianity in the North, and thus by Christian scribes for (at least theoretically) Christianized audiences. Furthermore, more contemporary (often Latin) sources are written by outsiders like Roman authors and thus stem from a different cultural setting. It demands

4 Bellah does characterize these beings as *fluid* rather than anonymous, which seems to fit Philippe Descola's (2013) totemistic ontology but not the animistic, in which anonymous would be the better description; unsurprisingly, as Bellah uses Aboriginal religion – the totemistic religion *par excellence* – as one of the main examples in 'Religious Evolution'. As tribal religion in the pre-Christian North resembles animism more than totemism (see p. 79 of this article), this – anonymous rather than fluid identity – will be the understanding in the following.

5 See Hans J. Lundager Jensen (2021) for a thorough introduction to the relevance of Descola's work to the study of religion in general and pp. 88–92 for considerations of the benefits of combining the theories of Bellah and Descola.

a certain methodological subtlety to distinguish possibly genuine pre-Christian traits from the influence of the Christian scribes and their religion.⁶ Danish historian of religion Jens Peter Schjødt's methodology, in which he suggests thinking of the elements of the religions as intertwining discursive spaces (Schjødt 2012, 272–5), is useful here. Additionally, it has become widely accepted that considerable diversity existed within what we describe purely by that which followed it as pre-Christian Nordic religion.⁷ This diversity consists not only of different types of religion but also of variant traditions within these types. Such diversity probably existed because of geographical, regional, temporal, social, and indeed cognitive diversity (Schjødt 2009).

The theories informing this theoretical model can take many forms, and this affords scope for innovation. New theories can be applied to old sources and thereby provide new insights into the possible workings of the religion lying behind them. This article seeks to apply the characteristics of Bellah's cultural evolutionary typology of religion to the sources of pre-Christian Nordic religion in an investigation of the possible differences in the Otherworldly beings as found in the textual sources. As noted above, Bellah's typology may benefit from an expansion with the category of chiefdom religion (Nygaard 2016) and by pairing Bellah's theories with those of Descola. Using both scholars to analyse the sources, this article opens up new ways to think about Otherworldly beings and their place in the religion of the pre-Christian North.

Bellah proposed religion as an integral part of the evolution of the human mind as a fundamental part of human culture, both being part of a biocultural co-evolution (Bellah 2011, 1–116). From this perspective evolution does not concern genes alone but entire organisms and their cultural systems, including religion.⁸ Bellah denotes his history of religion not as a history of a series of particular single temporal and geographical foci in different religions but as a general, convergent religious evolution (Lundager Jensen 2013, 11f.). This understanding of cultural evolution does *not* entertain the idea that all societies must undergo this evolution in a unilinear fashion but stresses the convergent

6 There is a longstanding discussion of whether genuine pre-Christian elements can be found in the sources. See Schjødt (2012; 2020) for an overview of the discussion. See also André (2014, 11–25), who includes an overview of the source value of the archaeological research.

7 Among many others see André (2014); Murphy (2018, 2020); Schjødt (2009, 2012, 2020). All with references.

8 Bellah's understanding of religion is not only Durkheimian at its core, but also uses Clifford Geertz's definition of religion as 'a system of symbols' (Geertz 1973, 90) and Roy A. Rappaport's systems theoretical 'adaptive structures' (Rappaport 1979, 145–47) to great effect.

nature of the term ‘evolution’ as used in Bellah’s history of religion – that is, religions may exist as distinctive types corresponding to cultural historical phases and correlating with changing economic, social, and political framework conditions. The distinctive types of religion are characterized by an accumulation rather than a dismantling: ‘Nothing [important] is ever lost’ (Bellah 2011, 267 [ed. SN]; cf. note 2), so even in very complex religions traits from less complex religions can be found. Utilizing this thought model, Bellah proposed a cultural evolutionary typology of five distinctive types of religion: tribal, archaic, axial, early modern, and modern religion.⁹ Pre-Christian Nordic religion is distinctly pre-axial (Nygaard 2016; Murphy 2018; Schjødt 2020).

Tribal religion features a cosmological universe dedicated to Otherworldly beings with an anonymous identity. As a rule, the entire tribe participates in the rituals, which, like the society, are egalitarian. The use of religious specialists is limited to people with a greater degree of access to the Other World – whether inherent or gained through training. Ultimately, the ritual benefits the entire tribe (Bellah 1964, 361–64, 2011, 117–74; Nygaard 2016, 11). The next phase, archaic religion, requires a high degree of urbanization and a polity with a marked hierarchical structure. The cosmological universe consists of a pantheon of usually anthropomorphic gods with human traits such as gender, personality, and approximate age. The distinctive rituals of this archaic religion are handled by a specialized, often full-time, priesthood, and the ruler in archaic religion is seen as divine or semi-divine (Bellah 1964, 364–66, 2011, 210–64; Nygaard 2016, 11).

However, some religions – including pre-Christian Nordic religion – do not seem to fit the typology’s categories (Nygaard 2014, 2016).¹⁰

This issue can be resolved by expanding Bellah’s typology with the category of chieftom religion. Because he was primarily a sociologist, Bellah focused on the relationship between religion and society. It seems that society in pre-Christian Scandinavia presents a problem, because this society, as far as it can be generalized, seems to have been neither tribal nor archaic (cf. Nygaard 2016, 12). Iron and Viking Age Nordic societies do not fit the model for the development of an archaic religion (see Bellah 1964, 365): while somewhat stratified, they were hardly urbanized. The largest settlement in the Viking Age was presumably Hedeby, with a population

⁹ See Bellah (2011, 365–606), as well as the essays in Bellah and Hans Joas (2012), for axial religions and Bellah (1964, 368–74) for early modern and modern religions.

¹⁰ This is also indicated by Bellah (2011, 175–209) but is not treated systematically.

of only about 1,500 or 2,000 (Skre 2012, 84). So does this indicate a tribal society? This does not seem to be the case either. The hierarchical societal structure implied by the large armies attested to by various sources makes Germanic Iron and Viking Age Scandinavia look more stratified than tribal cultures: the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle describes the conquering Viking army of 865/7 as the *'mycel hæþen here'* [Great Heathen Army]. Even though it is difficult to gauge the size of this or any army in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the name alone indicates a very large army. Conservative estimates count around a thousand persons (Sawyer 1971, 126–28), but it may have been many times larger (Jarman 2021, 27); even an army of a thousand people would have been larger than most settlements of the time (cf. Skre 2012). Furthermore, deposits of weapons from entire defeated armies from, for instance, Illerup Ådal in Denmark (early third century CE) contain about ten thousand weapons, thought to represent an army of between two and three thousand persons (Andrén 2014, 92). Even earlier (c. 50 BCE), in *De Bello Gallico*, Caesar describes the Germanic warlord Ariovistus as having an army of fifteen thousand warriors.

Late Viking Age Scandinavia may therefore have been in the early stages of an archaic society: it was not a city state with a fixed hierarchical polity but an early territorial state with a peripatetic ruler governing a large area of land through military as well as religious power (Trigger 2003, 92–119). Haraldr *blátǫnn's* kingdom in tenth-century Denmark may exemplify this, though he seems to have used Christianity in achieving it (see Bønding 2021; Sundqvist 2021 on the role of kings in the Christianization of the North). However, in earlier Scandinavia there were clearly also societies that were fundamentally based on kin and village, but in which a central ruler exerted considerable control. In such 'chiefdoms', like the Lake Mälaren area in Sweden or the areas around Lejre in Denmark in the middle and late Iron Age – and even further back – neither tribal nor archaic religion seems entirely adequate. Rather, we may anticipate a specific chiefdom religion.

Tribal and archaic Otherworldly beings in the pre-Christian North

Two examples of Otherworldly beings in pre-Christian Nordic religion, which, as will become evident, also seem to represent two different types of religion,

are the *álfar* and the *vanir*, who can be found throughout the Old Norse texts.¹¹ With some exceptions, the *álfar* are described as a collective of Otherworldly beings with a rather anonymous identity, while the *vanir* are presented as individual gods, each with a gender, approximate age, and distinct personality.¹² Earlier Latin descriptions seem to portray two such different groups of Otherworldly beings which superficially seem to belong respectively to tribal and to archaic religion, although they do not directly represent neither the *álfar* nor the *vanir*.

The álfar – an anonymous collective

In chapter 9, 3 of *Germania* the Roman historian Tacitus,¹³ writing in 98 CE about the ‘Germanic peoples’, relates that: ‘*ceterum nec [...] deos neque in ullam humani oris speciem adsimulare ex magnitudine caelestium arbitrantur*’ [they deem it incompatible with the majesty of [...] the gods [...] to mould them into any likeness of the human face] (Peterson and Hutton 1914, 276f.). Anonymous identities and a reluctance to identify the beings with any individual anthropomorphic figure are strongly characteristic of Otherworldly beings in Bellah’s tribal religion. Of course, this may not be taken to refer specifically to the *álfar*, but at least to Otherworldly beings of the same type

11 The *vanir* are probably the most well known of the two, comprising mainly Njörðr, Freyr, and Freyja (other gods have been proposed as *vanir*, but space restrictions do not allow that discussion to be included here). They are often contrasted with the other family of gods, the *æsir*, which includes well-known figures such as Óðinn, Frigg, and Þórr. The *æsir* will not feature much in this discussion of Otherworldly beings. However, fundamentally, they belong to an archaic religion. The so-called Vanir debate sparked by Rudolf Simek’s obituary for the *vanir* (2005, 2010), arguing that the term was nothing more than a rare, collective term for ‘gods’, will not be discussed here. See Tolley (2011), Frog and Roper (2011), Schjødt (2014), Lindow (2020, 1047–48) for various perspectives on the debate. See also Frog (2021) for an obituary of the term *æsir*.

12 The *álfar* are not exclusively mentioned as a collective: named individual *álfar* include Völundr and Óláfr Geirstadaálfr, and skaldic kennings for human warriors can use the element *-álfr*, hinting at a meaning denoting masculinity (Hall 2007, 28). Similarly, the *vanir* are occasionally mentioned as a collective, for example, in the eddic poem *Brymskviða* st. 15.

13 Tacitus’s account may well contain traditions significantly older than 98 CE, and accordingly, this date does not reflect the earliest possible date for a religion of a tribal type in Scandinavia (as far as *Germania* can be viewed as a trustworthy source or as relevant for more northern Germanic tribes; see Naumann 1934). All indications are that the start of the break between the tribal and chieftom religion in the pre-Christian North can be located in the Late Stone Age, c. 3900 BCE, with the transition into an agricultural society. Furthermore, if Bronze Age rock carvings (c. 1800–500 BCE, for example, from Hvitlycke, Tanum, Bohuslän, Sweden, and Ekenberg, Norrköping, Östergötland, Sweden) are any indication of religious traditions, individualized beings may have been worshipped for a very long time.

as the *álfar*. Earlier in the same chapter (9, 1f.) Tacitus describes a quite different set of Otherworldly beings: '*Deorum maxime Mercurium colunt, cui certis diebus humanis quoque hostiis litare fas habent. Herculem ac Martem concessis animalibus placant*' [Of the gods, they give a special worship to Mercury, to whom on certain days they count even the sacrifice of human life lawful. Hercules and Mars they appease with such animal life as is permissible] (Peterson and Hutton 1914, 276f.). Here we see individualized and anthropomorphic beings, worshipped in what seems to be an organized cult, although the named gods are not commonly associated with the *vanir*.¹⁴ The clear differences between these two groups seem to take us from the anonymous collective of tribal religion to the marked individuals of archaic religion seemingly existing at the time point in time.

These different sets of Otherworldly beings – exemplified by the *álfar* and *vanir* in this discussion – are not only seen in this Latin source but also frequently in several Old Norse texts, for example, in the Icelandic family saga *Kormáks saga* ch. 22 (p. 288). Here, Þorvarðr has been wounded by Kórmákr in a *hólmgangr*, and to recover, Þórdís the witch tells him:

Hóll ein er heðan skammt í brott, er álfar búa i; graðung þann, er Kormákr drap, skaltu fá ok rjóða blóð graðungsins á hólinn útan, en gera álfum veizlu af slátrinu, ok mun þér batna.

[A knoll is not far from here, in which the *álfar* live. The bull that Kormákr killed you shall get and redden the knoll with the bull's blood and make a [sacrificial] feast to the *álfar* of its meat, and then you will get better.]¹⁵

Here we see the *álfar* as an anonymous collective of beings living underground in a knoll with healing powers. The *álfar* also feature in the eddic poem *Hamðismál* st. 1:

1. Spruttu á tái
tregnar íðir,
græti álfa
in glýstomu;
ár um morgin
manna bqlva

14 The names given by Tacitus are normally seen as an interpretatio Romana for Óðinn, Þórr, and Týr respectively.

15 All translations from Old Norse are the author's own.

sútir hverjar
sorg um kveykva.¹⁶

[Sprang forth on the path grievous actions, made the *álfar* weep, the joyless;
early in the morning the wicked deeds of men, every sorrow kindles grief.]

Again, we see the *álfar* as a collective of unnamed beings, in line with the description of Otherworldly beings in tribal religion.

The vanir – individual gods

By contrast, the *vanir* are presented as three individual gods: Njörðr, Freyr, and Freyja. They are endowed with personal characteristics and a gender and defined by their family relations. Njörðr is the father of the other two gods. He is very wealthy, has beautiful feet, and loves the ocean but hates the mountains (*Gylfaginning*, 23). The siblings Freyr and Freyja are defined in relation to their father and one another. In *Gylfaginning* (p. 24) Snorri Sturluson describes the two siblings as both beautiful and mighty, but they also have individualized characteristics. The eddic poem *Skírnismál* tells us Freyr can be quite covetous, and he is a bold rider of a good family in *Lokasenna* st. 37. Freyja is ‘*ágætust af Ásynjum*’ (*Gylfaginning*, 24) [the most excellent of the female gods] and an approachable goddess of love, as Snorri states. In *Lokasenna* st. 32 she is said to be a lustful sorceress, while *Brymskvida* st. 13 tells of her as a strong-willed woman. In short, the *vanir* are presented as marked individuals, each with their own characteristics, personality, and gender, thereby resembling the gods of archaic religion.

The *álfar* and the *vanir* thus seem good representatives of the tribal and archaic types of religion respectively. In the following I will argue for continuity between the two groups of Otherworldly beings from tribal to archaic religion. It is important here to remember the previously mentioned statement, ‘nothing [important] is ever lost’ (cf. note 2), meaning that as Nordic society and thus its religion evolved, the *álfar* did not lose their place but were complemented by the *vanir*.

Continuity of function from tribal to archaic religion

As shown in some of the above examples, the area of functions of the *álfar* and the *vanir* seem to overlap. Both groups are providers of prosperity and

16 All subsequent references to eddic poetry given by title (in italics) and stanza number are to the edition by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (2014).

wellbeing. In *Gylfaginning* (23f.) Snorri writes that Njörðr is the granter of wealth in land and possessions, Freyr is the ruler of the produce of the earth, and Freyja governs love affairs and has an affinity with death, because she is said to choose half of the battle slain in both *Gylfaginning* (p. 24) and the eddic poem *Grímnismál* st. 14. Similarly, the *álfar* are providers of wellbeing and health according to *Kormáks saga* ch. 22, as well as of wealth. In *Flateyjarbók* the late king Óláfr Guðrøðarson is offered sacrifices *til árs sér* [for a good year [harvest and prosperity included] and peace] in his grave mound, and because of this he is given the byname Geirstadaálfr – a compound of his dwelling place and -álfr, the singular of *álfar*.¹⁷ To simplify, one might say that the *álfar* and the *vanir* take care of the same area of function within their respective types of religion – tribal and archaic – and this appears to point to a degree of continuity between the two groups.

This is further supported by the theory of a shared identity between the *álfar* and the *vanir*.¹⁸ While the *álfar* and *vánir* are sometimes clearly distinguished in eddic texts,¹⁹ they are often not. The seemingly formulaic and idiomatic expression *ása ok álfa* used in eddic poetry is a case in point.²⁰ Its use in the following examples conveys that the *álfar* and the *vanir* are used as two words for the same group of entities. This may be taken as an expression of a shared identity or at the very least a continuity of function allowing for this identification – a continuity that may also serve as evidence to support the theory of religion as an evolving cultural phenomenon. The most explicit occurrences of this conception can be seen in *Lokasenna* and *Grímnismál*, where it seems the term *álfar* is being used to refer directly to *vanir* gods. *Álfar*, not *vanir*, is used, even though the gods usually termed the *vanir* are mentioned by name. The examples from *Lokasenna* follow.

2. Of vápn sín dœma
ok um vígrisni sína
sigtíva synir:
ása ok álfa,
er hér inni eru
manngi er þér í orði vinr.

17 Both groups also seem to be connected to rulership, which this source indicates for the *álfar* (cf. Sundqvist 2015). The *vanir*'s connection can mainly be seen through Freyr's connection to specific families of rulers like the Ynglingar (cf. Sundqvist 2002). This shared connection could be argued to substantiate the continuity of function between the two groups.

18 See also Schjødt (1991, 306–307); Hall (2007, 35–39; Gunnell (2007, 121–123); Nygaard (2022).
19 For example, *Alvissmál*, *Sigrdrífumál* st. 18 and *Skírnismál* st. 17–18.

20 See Nygaard (2022) for an analysis of the discourses of the *álfar* in eddic poetry, pp. 293–97 on the discourse of shared identity.

[Of their weapons and of their valour, the sons of the victory gods speak: of the *æsir* and *álfar* who are in here, no one claims to be your friend.]

13. Jós ok armbauga
 mundu æ vera
 beggja vanr, Bragi;
 ása ok álfa,
 er hér inni eru,
 þú ert við víg varastr
 ok skjarrastr við skot.

[Both steeds and arm rings you will always be in want of, Bragi; of the *æsir* and *álfar* who are in here, you are the most cautious in killing and most scared by shooting.]

30. Þegi þú, Freyja!
 þik kann ek fullgerva,
 era þér vamma vant;
 ása ok álfa,
 er hér inni eru,
 hverr hefir þinn hór verit.

[Be silent, Freyja! I know you full well, you are not in want of flaws; each of the *æsir* and *álfar* who are in here has been your lover.]

Additionally, the prose introduction lists many gods before describing them as, collectively, *ása ok álfa*:

Til þeirar veizlu kom Óðinn ok Frigg kona hans. Þórr kom eigi, þvíat hann var í Austrvegi. Sif var þar, kona Þórs, Bargi ok Iðunn kona hans. Týr var þar [...] Þar var **Njörðr** ok kona hans Skaði, **Freyr ok Freyja**, Víðarr son Óðins. Loki var þar [...] Margt var þar **ása ok álfa**.²¹

[To this feast came Óðinn and his wife Frigg. Þórr did not come, because he was on eastern roads [i.e. in Jötunheimar killing giants]. Sif was there, Þórr's wife, and Bragi and his wife Iðunn. Týr was there [...]

21 Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (2014, 1: 408). My emphasis.

There was **Njörðr** and his wife Skaði, **Freyr and Freyja**, and Víðarr, Óðinn's son. Loki was there [...] Many of the *æsir* and *álfar* were there.]

The obvious term – *vanir* – is not used. This probably has some significance in a poem so deftly constructed and mythologically well informed as *Lokasenna*. It becomes especially conspicuous when Freyja is accused in st. 30 of having had sex with all the *æsir* and *álfar*. It is difficult to explain how Freyja can have engaged in sexual relations with the *álfar* as an anonymous collective of Otherworldly beings; in keeping with what Snorri writes about the incestuous relationship of the *vanir* in *Ynglinga saga* ch. 4 – mentioned later in *Lokasenna* st. 32 and 36 – the most convincing explanation is a shared identity between the *álfar* and *vanir*.²² *Grímnismál* st. 5 does not contain the expression *ása ok álfa* yet seems to display the idea of a shared identity between *álfar* and *vanir* very clearly.

5. Álfheim Frey
gáfu í árdaga
tívar at tannfé [...]

[The gods gave Álfheimr to Freyr as a tooth payment in days of yore [...]]

It presents Freyr as the ruler of Álfheimr ('world of the *álfar*'), and the indication of time given, *í árdaga*, tells us that Freyr has played this role since the earliest of times. Such indications of time are significant in eddic poetry, which prompts us to assign some meaning to its mention here; it may be taken to indicate an ancient connection between the *álfar* and *vanir*, which could further attest to the continuity between the two groups.

All in all, it seems that not only are the *álfar* and the *vanir* good representatives of tribal and archaic religion respectively; with the continuity in function between them discussed above, it also seems plausible to place them within an evolutionary framework. In short, the *vanir* described in the medieval Old Norse sources can be seen as a continuation

22 See also Hall (2007, 36). The possible function of incest in chieftdom religions is argued for in Nygaard (2016, 21–24).

of the *álfar* – who may stem from conceptions as old as the Bronze Age²³ – that have developed from anonymous, collective Otherworldly beings at home in a tribal religion to individualized gods that fit and serve the purpose of an archaic Late Viking Age religion and society.

Otherworldly beings in chiefdom religion

However, keeping the idea of chiefdom religion in mind, the Otherworldly beings of this type of religion may help clarify this model of religious evolution. How are the Otherworldly beings of chiefdom religion described, and how do we know what to look for? A discrepancy between Bellah's descriptions of the Otherworldly beings of tribal religion and the theories of French anthropologist Phillipe Descola mentioned above may assist us here. Bellah connects tribal religion with the worship of ancestors. However, using the theories of Descola suggests this may not be so. Descola's theory of the dispositions of being stresses that humans order their world through identification, which comprises a mediation between the self and the non-self, where the self compares its own appearance, behaviour, and properties with those it ascribes to others (humans and non-humans alike). This is done to discern the ways in which the self both differs from and resembles the object 'other' (Descola 2013, 112; Lundager Jensen 2021). This leads Descola to propose four ontologies or worldviews, which each have different systems for the characteristics of beings and different cosmologies and social systems. He calls them *animism*, *totemism*, *naturalism*, and *analogism*. While animism and totemism have a rich scholarly background, Descola uses the terms differently than in previous scholarship (Lundager Jensen 2021, 71–9). He uses the dichotomy of interiorities and physicalities to characterize the different ontologies (Descola 2013, 120–5, 232–44). Animism is characterized by an identification of similar interiorities but dissimilar physicalities. For example, this is seen in the myths of North and South American or Siberian hunter-gatherer cultures, in which humans and animals can both communicate and procreate – their interiorities are the same, but they have different physicalities (Descola 2013, 129–43).²⁴

23 This idea relies on the potential connection between Bronze Age cup marks on stone often connected with some form of food offering – at least in modern folklore – and the *álfar*. In Swedish folklore, these cup marks are called *älvkvärnar* ('elf mills'), while the fourteenth-century Old Norse text *Heimslýsing ok helgifræði*, ch. 9, describes the practice of consecrating food on stones to spirits of the landscape (*landvættir*) like the *álfar* (cf. Murphy 2018, 75f.; cf. Gunnell 2020, 1574ff.).

24 This was probably also the ontology of the tribal religion in the pre-Christian North.

Totemism is characterized by an identification of similar interiorities and similar physicalities. The best example is the Australian tribes used in the scholarship which originally coined the term. Within any given tribe everything goes back to the Dreamtime, to a given human/animal/plant hybrid from which everyone and everything within the given group stems. Both the interiorities and physicalities are similar (Descola 2013, 144–71). In the naturalistic ontology interiorities differ, whereas physicalities are similar. This is the ontology of modern society and scientific thought in which humans have special mental capacities, which sets them apart from non-humans, who have the same natural physicalities but lack similar interiorities (Descola 2013, 172–200). The last ontology is analogism, in which both interiorities and physicalities differ. Everything is fragmented into an infinite multitude of beings but is at the same time hierarchized and connected. The caste system in India is an example of this, as is the correlation between microcosms and macrocosms in Chinese divination or indeed the cosmology of pre-Christian Scandinavia (Descola 2013, 201–31).

Now, animism and totemism are characteristic of the types of society Bellah terms tribal, and the ontologies behind Descola's animism and totemism can be correlated with the characteristics of Bellah's tribal religion (see also Lundager Jensen 2021, 88–92). There is one exception: ancestor worship. In analogism ancestors begin to play a role as a way of organizing the multitude of small differences, in 'contrast to animism and totemism, from which these cumbersome ancestral figures are absent' (Descola 2013, 227). Thus, all indications are that analogism and its hierarchization might be characteristic of archaic religion, as well as chiefdom religion. Following Descola, I would propose that when we encounter instances of ancestor worship in pre-Christian Scandinavia, we should place this characteristic not in tribal religion but in chiefdom religion.

This influence of analogistic hierarchization may be one of the keys to an understanding of the chiefdom religion of Bronze and Iron Age Scandinavia. To make such hierarchies, one must identify the individuals or groups of beings who form the hierarchy, and it could be proposed that this analogistic hierarchization starts a process of individualization of the Otherworldly being, spanning and correlated with the cultural evolution of pre-Christian Nordic religion and society. The current theory offers tribal religion's anonymous collective of Otherworldly beings on the one hand and archaic (Late Viking Age) religion's individualized anthropomorphized gods on the other. The idea of chiefdom religion enables the identification of something in-between – that is, a type of Otherworldly being that is less

differentiated in the explanatory hierarchy than the *vanir*; that is, something slightly individualized yet not given a personality or an anthropomorphic appearance.

An example is the worship of ancestors mentioned as a point of contention above. It has been suggested that the *álfar* were in fact at some point or in some contexts believed to be ancestors. An example of the connection between ancestor worship and the *álfar* is the above-mentioned ninth-century king Óláfr Guðrøðarson, to whom sacrifices were made after his death; he was subsequently named Geirstadaálfr (see also Laidoner 2020, 121–5; cf. Sundqvist 2020 for a critical treatment). This renaming may imply his absorption into a new family unit, his becoming one among the *álfar*. The worship of ancestors or their role in the belief system may very well have originated in chieftom religion as it was found in pre-Christian Scandinavia (cf. Steinsland 2005, 344; cf. Nordberg 2013, 279–99²⁵). Another example could be the weeping *álfar* of *Hamðismál* quoted above. The context of their sadness is the tragic ending of Guðrún's line with the deaths of her sons, Hamðir, Sǫrli, and their half-brother Erpr. This may allude to the *álfar* as a collective of ancestors, due to their reaction to knowing the sorrow which is going to befall Guðrún's family; some personal connection must exist for this reaction to make sense. As previously mentioned, these ancestors are specific to Descola's analogistic ontology, which I propose informs chieftom religion.

The mysterious goddess Nerthus, named only by Tacitus in *Germania* ch. 40, may be another Otherworldly being from pre-Christian Nordic chieftom religion. Tacitus describes her as residing in a '*vehiculum, veste contactum; attingere uni sacerdoti concessum*' [consecrated chariot covered with robes] (Peterson and Hutton 1914, 320f.). After the chariot has been drawn in procession around the landscape, '*mox vehiculum et vestes et, si cedere velis, numen ipsum secreto lacu abluitur*' [the chariot and the robes, and, if you are willing to credit it, the deity in person, are washed in a sequestered lake] (Peterson and Hutton 1914, 320f.).²⁶ Tacitus seems to imply that the chariot and hangings are synonymous with the goddess, who has not been given human form or indeed any personal characteristics other than being viewed as a feminine deity. Nerthus could thus be an Otherworldly being specific to chieftom religion – a deity in the early stages of analogistic hierarchization, not part of an anonymous collective but not quite having a marked individual appearance either. Furthermore,

25 Nordberg (2013) presents a thorough and critical examination of the research into ancestor worship in pre-Christian Nordic religion (along with sun and vegetation cults) and its ideological historical roots (pp. 247–55 on the *álfar* specifically).

26 See Nygaard and Murphy (2017, 44ff.) on the Nerthus procession.

Nerthus, through her area of function, may constitute a link between the *álfar* and the *vanir*, further supporting the idea of a continuity of function between not only the two, but all three types of Otherworldly beings (*álfar*, Nerthus, *vanir*), spanning all three types of religion (tribal, chiefdom, archaic). Tacitus describes Nerthus's ceremony as bringing 'pax et quies' [peace and tranquility]. No wars are started, and weapons are forbidden when Nerthus is in the area. A parallel with the Nerthus myth is found in *Gunnars þáttur Helminga* in *Flateyjarbók*, which describes Freyr as undertaking the same kind of procession ritual recounted in *Germania* 40 (Nygaard and Murphy 2017, 46ff.), when he is transported around the landscape in a chariot as a wooden idol by a female ritual specialist, bringing prosperity to the land.

Procession rituals aside, there may be even older links between Nerthus and the *vanir*; the Proto-Germanic cognate of Nerthus is the same as Njörðr's and can be reconstructed as **nerþuz* (power) (Steinsland 2005, 147ff.; de Vries 1962, 410; Nygaard 2016, 22f.), linking Nerthus with the *vanir* both linguistically and functionally. It is also noteworthy that the gender of the reconstructed Proto-Germanic root **nerþuz* is ambivalent (Vikstrand 2001). This may indicate an ambiguously gendered, semi-anonymous Otherworldly being specific to chiefdom religion, which later took semi- and fully anthropomorphized form in Nerthus and Njörðr respectively.

The shared linguistic root of Nerthus and Njörðr has led to interpretations of the two gods as a form of divine twins, while Freyr and Freyja have been seen as a younger version of Njörðr and Nerthus, and thus also divine twins (de Vries 1970, 2: 244–55; Andrén 2020). Similarly, the pair of siblings also have a common root, though in Old Norse, meaning lord and lady.²⁷ In various Indo-European mythologies, divine twins are fertility deities who are in some way connected to horses (cf. Ward 1968, 11f.). In Scandinavia this is the case for Freyr in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in *Flateyjarbók*, where King Óláfr Tryggvason finds a stud of horses belonging or dedicated to him in the *Freyr-hof* [Freyr temple] in Prandheimr in Norway. Another common trait of divine twins throughout Indo-European mythologies is a connection to a female who is in turn herself connected to the sun (Ward 1968, 10f.). In *Vafþrúðnismál* st. 47 we hear of the daughter of the sun called *álfroðull* ('álf-wheel'), who is to take her mother's place when the mother is eaten by the monstrous wolf Fenrir. This may provide a link between the *álfar* and the divine twins of pre-Christian Nordic religion.

In pre-Christian Scandinavia divine twins seem to be male and fe-

²⁷ Elmevik (2003, 5–13) is critical of this etymology, suggesting the alternative of 'the fertile one', while Olof Sundqvist (2013, 11–35) has defended the older interpretation.

male, while they are both more usually male in other mythologies. Considering Descola's analogistic hierarchization, this may be significant; the divine twins of pre-Christian Scandinavia, Nerthus/Njörðr-Freyja/Freyr, may be representations of Otherworldly beings of the chieftom religion. In the process of hierarchization the former collective with an anonymous identity may have been slightly more individualized, while retaining some elements of their collective nature through twinning and in pre-Christian Scandinavia by being of ambivalent gender. Other examples of male/female divine pairs are Ullr and Ullin (de Vries 1970, 2: 153–63) and Fjörgyn and Fjörgynn (de Vries 1970, 2: 274f.)²⁸ – unfortunately, very little is known about any of these beings, and there is no way of knowing whether they were thought of as twins or not.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, it seems plausible to arrange the different Otherworldly beings in pre-Christian Nordic religion as gradually evolving as follows: collectives of beings with an anonymous identity belonging to something akin to tribal religion (the *álfar*); slightly individualized and hierarchized, but not personified beings that are still part of a collective and may belong to a chieftom religion (ancestors or divine twins like Nerthus/Njörðr); and highly individual, often anthropomorphic beings with personalities, age and gender (yet still often seen as a collective) belonging to an archaic religion (the *vanir*). However, and in keeping with Bellah's theories, 'nothing [important] is ever lost': although the Otherworldly beings do change and evolve, a large degree of continuity both linguistically and functionally still seems to exist (see Fig. 1). This provides interesting ideas for further research into applying the explanatory framework of cultural evolutionary theory to historical religions, which might become a valuable tool for the reconstruction of such religious traditions – especially when paired with Descola's notions of ontology and the dispositions of being.

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28 Also connected with the pair Freyr/Freyja.

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Appendix. Figure 1. Typology of Otherworldly beings in tribal, chiefdom, and archaic religion



