

# The *Guta Lag*'s injunctions against pagan worship

## The term *stafgarþr* from the perspectives of taxonomy, legalese, and poetic diction

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### Abstract

The term *stafgarþr* (pl. *stafgarþar*), as it figures in the Laws of the Gotlanders, refers to earlier farmsteads at which natural topographical features could be combined with buildings, earlier house foundations, and the erection of stretches of palisade so as to form a sacralized enclosure and thereby move ontologically from real everyday houses, barns, byres, and fences to a sacred, inwardly focused site, on the model of other natural and earlier favored cult sites such as hills, woods, and marshes.

Keywords: Pre-Christian Scandinavian religion, Gotland, cult sites, place names, farm names.

The medieval Gotlandic law treatise known as the *Guta lag* (reflected in a section of the literary work *Guta saga*) proscribes heathen religious practices in a chapter that has been the focus of scholarly inquiry for more than a century and a half, in large part because of terminology that continues to resist explanation. The relevant passage reads:

Þet ier nu þy nest er blotir iru mannum mier firj buþni oc fyrnsca all þaun sum haiþnu fylgir. Engin ma haita a huathci a hult eþa hauga eþa haþin guþ, huatki a vi eþa stafgarþa. Þa en nequar verþr at þi sandr oc laiþas hanum so vitni a hand et hann hafi haizl nequara þa miþ mati eþa miþ dryckiu senni sum ai fylgir cristnum siþi þa ir hann sacra at þrim marcum viþr kirchiu menn en þair syct vinna. (*Gotlands-Lagen*, 1852, p. 14.)

Now the next thing is that sacrifice is strictly forbidden to all men, together with all those old customs that belong to paganism. No one may appeal to either groves or howes or to heathen gods, nor to holy places or *stafgarþar*. If someone is found guilty of this, and it is proved against him and confirmed with witnesses that he has invoked something of this sort with his food and drink, contrary to

Christian practice, then he is to be fined three marks to the parishioners, if they win their case. (Adapted from *Guta lag: The Law of the Gotlanders*, 2009, p. 9.)

Among terms in this unique testimony (Måhl 1990, p. 24) referring to sites of sacrifice, *stafgarþar* has been the object of the most intense scrutiny (Olsson 1976, pp. 10–18, 110, Olsson 1984, p. 121, Andersson 1992, Blomkvist 2002, pp. 148–151, Brink 1992, Olsson 1992, Vikstrand 2001, p. 293, note 218 (*‘stafgarþer som en hägnadsterm’*), Carlsson 2015, Vikstrand 2016, pp. 301–302, Andrén 2020, pp. 110, 118). Two explanations have dominated the discussion: 1) the term designates a ritual place enclosed by palisades or featuring one or several staves/pillars, or 2) staves are located centrally, or otherwise direct attention toward the center of some structure. Most commentators recognize that the staves must have had religious significance. Gaining less credence is the hypothesis that such sites may have been used for the production and assembly of wooden staves or that the element *staf* refers to stone pillars or picture stones, while the *garþr* element designates ancient stone foundations (Måhl 1990, p. 24, and Holm 1976, respectively). Common to all explanations is the working hypothesis that the proscribed sacrificial rites, here involving food and drink, were part of the cult of ancestors, who were symbolically provided with sustenance for their ongoing half-life, and participation in, and support of, the community. The food and drink was then communally consumed by the worshippers. In historical counterpoint to the injunction of the *Guta lag*, numerous Gotlandic sites bore the name *Stafgarþr* (in later sources written *Stavgard*, *Staurgard*, *Stavgård*, *Stabbgård* etc.). More than 50 names have been recorded but most of them are now field names. It has been observed that 25 of these earlier farmsteads incorporate remains of building foundations, called *kämpgravar* ‘graves of (giant) warriors’ in the local folklore, that date from the Middle Iron Age (200–600 AD) or Late Roman/early Migration Period (Olsson 1992, p. 92). This evidence and the consequent multiple hypotheses (many originating in the mid-nineteenth century) have recently been re-evaluated and summarized by Anders Andrén (2020). First, we turn to some fundamental considerations.

The debate on the relationship of what is conventionally labeled the sacred and the profane has a long and rich history. One initially widely supported vantage point for analysis is represented by Mircea Eliade’s conception of hierophany, or the sacred made manifest in such spheres as the numinous, spiritual and divine. From the perspective of religious thought, Eliade argues, hierophanies give structure and orientation to the world, establishing a “sacred order” (Eliade 1959, pp. 20–22). Profane space can only have geometrical reality, empty of inherent quality. Sacred space, on the other hand, is a site for determining appropriate human behavior. William Paden, in the aptly titled

*New Patterns for Comparative Religion: Passages to an evolutionary perspective* and other studies, denies inherent sacrality in natural space and, iconoclastically (with reference to both Eliade's thought and the ontological nature of geographical space) promotes a diachronic perspective in preference to Eliade's synchronism, in which sacredness is a human invention or elaboration on a given reality.

Rather than accept that the sacred and profane represent a dichotomy, the present essay prefers to view them as poles on a spectrum or scale. Clearly, whatever numinous spirit may be thought to inform a ritual site, it also has a material reality. This material reality would have been incorporated in the everyday world of farm life. Assumed or assigned sacredness and human awareness of it could be amplified and enhanced by cultic staging and ritual at specific times and in specific ways. Site selection – entailing a recognition of the potential for sacralization – could range from the designation of a prominent topographical feature that was then awarded exclusive status by such human decisions and performative utterances as declaring a hilltop 'sacred', making it the location of family burials, proclaiming it a sanctuary where blood might not be spilled, maintaining a high level of cleanliness and decorum, and employing it as the stage for seasonally determined rituals and other religious events. Þórólfur Mostrarskegg's establishment of Helgafell and its temple to Þórr as recounted in the Icelandic *Eyrbyggja saga* is a good example. Reiteration over time created a kind of feed-back loop by which the site became even more sacred through use, the accumulation of event and attitude, as the worshipper's experience of the site and rite was amplified by the venerability of the location. This process is well captured in the title of the essay collection in which Andrén's study appears: *Making the Profane Sacred in the Viking Age*. In the early medieval North, cultural memory was heavily dependent on an awareness of physical space organized by geographical coordinates, names, ownership, and history (Zachrisson 2018). Cult sites would have figured importantly on mental maps of topography and settlement.

It should be noted that the study of the term *staðgarðr* has largely been led by place name experts and other philologists, and by archaeologists. There has been little research from the perspectives of conversion history, literary studies and poetics, legal formulations and rhetoric, the rhetoric of list making, and, not least, taxonomy. We begin with the last-named. Because the law code is not an analytical document but only codifies prior cultural assumptions of what is right and just for a given society, the conscious ordering of sacrificial sites that are proscribed qualifies as a 'folk taxonomy'. The key passage, we recall, is 'Engin ma haita a huathci a hult eða hauga eða háðin guð, huarki a vi eða staðgarða'. The 'neither/nor' construction results in two units, of three and two items, respectively. The first group is marked by alliteration on the

phoneme /h/, with the qualifier *hapin* ‘heathen’ used of the gods, which are here to be understood as wooden effigies, not ethereal supernatural beings. After the ‘spacer’ *huatki* ‘nor’, the concluding pair displays not a similarity in initial phonetics but a contrast between monosyllabic and trisyllabic form. Archaic law at the oral stage is generally assumed to have been marked by various poetic devices such as these in order to create emphasis, impact, and memorability, with the objective of partaking of the assumed order of the cosmos and thereby gain authority and even acquire some magical power, provided this order were maintained (inversely, magic as a source for law in Davy 2021). The same applies *mutatis mutandis* to charms and curses. Legal language is also noteworthy for its redundancy. But what to the layman appears as repetitive synonymy is intended to cover all contingencies expressible in language, leave no loopholes. Thus, we find five words for cultic localities, when one synthesizing term might theoretically have replaced the entire listing. The groves, howes, and effigies can all be seen to have a vertical axis and thereby reference both earth and sky. The term *vé/vi*, often rendered simply as ‘holy place’ in English, is thought to have encompassed wetlands, fens, ponds, and riverine pools, which adds the complementary third cosmic dimension, on a horizontal coordinate, of sea and underearth. Such cosmic encompassing is a feature of legal texts and charms in many cultures (Sayers 1996). The sequence gains in validity and power as a consequence. The five terms examined here seem semantically discrete, although *vi*, the only term indicative of cultic significance in its base form (as distinct from other terms such as *hult*), may have a wider application than the others. The term is judged to have originated in the concept of separation, even of enclosure (etymological discussion in de Vries 1977, s.v. *vé* 1). The evidence of place names with the *-vi* element also suggests some institutional structure as well as settlement near the sacralized natural site. The listing in the law text would then represent a chronological sequence from natural sites, perhaps at some distance from settlements, to enclosed and even roofed structures. Since we do not know the historical depth of the term *stafgarþr*, we cannot exclude the possibility that the original *staf* was a central pole in a structure, the rests of which are the ruined ‘foundations’ (Olsson 1992, p. 94). One thinks of the Irminsûl, ‘great pillar’, of the early Saxons. As such structures (‘temples’ on stone foundations, pillars) were supplanted by other cultic configurations, the term *stafgarþr* retained its form but may have shifted reference to palisades on the periphery of the farmstead and yard.

Yet a third taxonomic feature is related to the degrees of both supposedly inherent and enhanced sacrality. Groves may be considered to have been in a natural state; howes may have been engineered or entirely human-made hills; the idols have a residual natural state in being fashioned in wood. Yet the human contribution, the creation of a simulacrum, is primary. After ‘nor’, the sequence

seems, in this specific respect, to begin again with purely natural sites such as wetlands and then the mysterious *stafgarþar*, in which both elements of the compound word are suggestive of human activity, although the natural material wood is implied in the first of these. There is also a scalar dimension to the two sequences, firstly from larger to smaller (groves to statues, natural to worked wood), then possibly the reverse, from topographical features to something at least nominally identified as stave- and farmstead-related. None of the familiar rhetorical devices underlying the text should be considered remarkable in the medieval passage from orality to literacy and we should not presume any loss of judicial effectiveness as a result of their deployment or any other imagined compromise with verbal artistry.

It has also been recently noted by archaeologists and settlement historians that religious practice moved from natural sites to enclosed areas of farmsteads and even designated rooms – outfield to infield to house – most plausibly under the aegis of local magnates, who thereby enhanced their political and economic power by hosting ritual activity (Fabech 2006, Parker Pearson 2009, Sundqvist 2016). This development may be reflected in the legal text as a linear chronological listing from groves to *stafgarþar*. If *vé/vi* retained some of its etymological meaning of ‘enclosure’, this term might have been applied to the Iron Age house foundations that were assigned religious significance in a cult of ancestors, while not necessarily having had this status among their original builders. Parenthetically, one may wonder not only why the building grounds were permitted to continue to occupy space but also what were the circumstances of their dereliction. Archaeologists seem to assume changes in institutional and residential architectural styles but what if the ruins of ‘warriors’ graves’ reflect a collective decision to abandon a certain conception of the past and are the result of ritual destruction (as is assumed the case in other occasional structures), after which the sites might have been both (re)consecrated and rebuilt?

In sum, several taxonomies are evident in the list of forbidden pagan sites: scalar (as concerns both physical size and imagined inherent sacrality vs human enhancement); cosmic (a tripartite cosmos with vertical and horizontal coordinates in individual instances); temporal (if we judge the *stafgarþar* a late development); and poetic (alliterative groupings, etc.). The list is also marked by its exclusiveness. For Christian clerics and law-givers, heathen ritual was more threatening than personal faith in heathen gods, since it was a public spectacle and might encourage the retention of outmoded belief, even apostasy. Interestingly, the law text assumes that something like prayer, here represented by *haita* ‘to call on’, was also a feature of pre-Christian religion. In this connection, the preposition *a* may be doing double service as both ‘at’ (howes) and ‘to’ (gods). No specific actions are detailed; instead we have the noun *blót* ‘sacrifice’, and food and drink stand in for such further details as vestments,

gestures and acts, litanies or pronouncements, public as distinct from priestly participation, and the like. As might be expected, the law tract makes no allusion to the transactional nature of religious worship, the assumption that divine favor would follow devout worship. Since the heathen gods were false, any perceived benefits from them could only be demonic in nature. In the present context, the principal value of this exercise in identifying taxonomies that underlie the law text is greater insight into early thirteenth century Scandinavian thought processes and greater clarity in examining the scant evidence.

From the above analysis, one might conclude that *stafgarþar* were domestic altars, smallest on the scale of sites for cultic activity as listed in the law text. One can envisage a miniature palisade marking the boundary between profane and sacred areas of the domestic interior. Attractive as is this solution to the enigmatic term, domestic altars intended for family devotions directed to deceased ancestors are unlikely to have generated individual farm names, because of the certain ubiquity of such domestic arrangements, if they were, indeed, part of the cultural heritage. As a counter-proposal, let us imagine at the lower end of the scale in terms of size (Andersson 1992) but high on that of attendant human intervention, *stafgarþar* were farmsteads and perhaps home fields with a configuration of natural features, buildings, earlier foundations, and possibly picture stones (Olsson 1976, p. 20, 1992, p. 96, Måhl 1990, p. 24–25) that could occasionally (in the literal sense of the word) be complemented by the erection of stretches of palisade so as to form an enclosure – a ‘staved yard’, perhaps roughly circular – and, I would contend, thereby move ontologically and temporarily from real everyday houses, barns, byres, water holes, paved roadways, and fences to a sacred, inwardly focused site, on the model of other, ‘sacralizable’ natural sites. The foundations of houses from generations earlier, a cairn, a stone setting, or a picture stone may have been at the real or imagined focal point of the construct, the elaboration of which was perhaps a communal undertaking also charged with cultic significance. Naming a farmstead and adjoining fields *Stafgarþr* would assure continuity in signification, even at times when cultic activity was at a low level. Given its everyday utilization, a farmyard would have had a relatively low level of potential for sacralization unless human intervention, seen here in the erection of staves, were introduced. This limitation, in addition to overall size and importance, may account for the final placement of *stafgarþar* in the listing of the law text (Andersson 1992). At any event, the involvement of what the Irish call ‘strong farmers’ would surely have been critical to the establishment of such a communal site. Of the many *Stafgard* farms identified on Gotland it would be interesting to determine whether these were located on jurisdictional boundaries, and might thereby serve two communities when at peace. Plotted on a map of present-day parishes (Måhl 1990, p. 14), however, most *stafgarþar* appear centrally

located, significantly at nodal points on networks of roads (Måhl 1990, p. 26), at times associated with assembly points (cf. the name *Tingstäde*; Olsson 1984, p. 124, Måhl 1990, p. 26). Of comparable interest is the question of the possible relations between a *stafgarþr* and larger cult centers (see Måhl 1990, p. 26, Brink 1992, p. 116, Carlsson 2015, p. 200, Andrén 2020, p. 114). Stavgård, close to Götala in Östergötland, is now, however, discredited as relevant to this question, written *ii stakagardhe* 1362 as it is.

Which gods might have been worshipped at the Gotlandic *stafgarþar*? Anders Hultgård has categorized the ways in which syntheses were realized between Roman and Germanic deities and their names, one of the most common of which was to add an epithet of local significance to a more widely known theonym. Other names are more discrete, with exclusively local representation. Hultgård, with this increasingly narrow focus, also reviews putative examples of what he terms *genii loci* (Hultgård 2014, p. 24). If we substitute Swedes and Gotlanders for Romans and Germans, we might imagine pan-Scandinavian gods being worshipped on Gotland, in the guise of, or complementarily to, more geographically circumscribed divine beings. *Guta saga* makes no mention of early kings on the island, so that there is no royal dynasty claiming descent from a paramount god, as is the case with their future overlords, the Svear and Ingvi-Freyr. Rather, the saga states that Pielvar exorcised the island that rose by night and sank by day, and introduced the use of fire (*Guta Lag and Guta Saga*, 2015, p. 277). Although Hultgård does not discuss *stafgarþar* (despite the stimulating discussion of pp. 24, 27–28, 32–34), we might well imagine Pielvar or some reflex of this culture bearer as also being venerated at or near the hearths of (strategically located?) early Gotlandic farmsteads on the island he divided among his three sons. Given the Gotlanders' apparent sense of a unique ethnic and cultural identity, the veneration of a local legendary figure may have been of greater importance than elsewhere in eastern Scandinavia, a phenomenon perhaps also reflected in the unique term *stafgarþr*. Support for this interpretation is found in *Guta saga*, in connection with a paraphrase of the law text's proscription of heathen rites:

land alt. hafþi hoystu blotan miþ fulki. ellar hafþi huer þriþiun gr. sir. En smeri þing hafþu mindri blotan meþ fileþi. mat. Oc mungati. sum haita supnautar (*Guta lag och Guta saga*, 1905–1907, pp. 63–64).

The whole island held the highest sacrifice on its own account, with human victims, otherwise each third held its own. But smaller assemblies held a lesser sacrifice with cattle, food and ale. Those involved were called 'boiling companions', because they all cooked their sacrificial meals together (*Guta Lag and Guta Saga*, 2015, ch. 1, p. 278).

In conclusion, the hypotheses underlying this exploratory note can be summarized as follows. As well as possibly being unique to the island Gotland, the phenomenon of *stafgarpar*, their problematic configuration, and a non-monarchic legendary past traced to a culture hero may be mutually illuminating. The enumeration of typical pagan cultic sites as found in the *Guta Lag* in conjunction with a prohibition against heathen rites provides incidental information on the organization of pre-Christian religious practice. The reformulation of the sacred-profane dichotomy as a continuum or scale on which topography and other material reality could be enhanced by human intervention and over time, plus recognition of a variety of simple taxonomies, provide heuristic tools to reach tentative conclusions well in accord with the archaeological evidence. Awareness of these taxonomies, the rhetorical dimension of legal writing, and poetic effects drawn from earlier oral tradition reveals that these enhance the proscriptive text but in no way obscure its central meaning in law, just as an encompassing palisade could raise the status of everyday reality toward the sacred.

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## Summary

The *Guta Lag*'s injunctions against pagan worship  
The term *stafgarþr* from the perspectives of taxonomy, legalese, and  
poetic diction

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The exploration of a number of simple taxonomies in the Law of the Gotlanders supports the conclusion that, at the lower end of the dimensional scale of cultic sites but high on that of human intervention, the *stafgarþar* of Gotland were farms with a configuration of natural features suitable for the assignment of religious significance, buildings, and earlier house foundations, which could be complemented on religious occasions by the erection of stretches of palisade so as to form an enclosure – a ‘staved yard’ – and thereby move ontologically from real everyday houses, barns, byres, and fences to a sacred, internally focused site, on the model of other earlier natural cult sites subject to a lesser degree to the enhancement of originally assigned, but incrementally augmented and internalized, sacrality.