

UNDERSTANDING A FORGOTTEN GOD: THE ROLE OF ULLR

COMPRENDRE UN DIEU OUBLIÉ : LE RÔLE D'ULLR

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Abstract: Our understanding of the roles of the gods and goddess of Norse mythology varies greatly depending on the deity in question; some are only mentioned briefly in the written sources and other types of evidence need to be explored to examine their roles. One of the most enigmatic gods is Ullr, for whom onomastic and theophoric toponymic evidence illustrates a substantial cult was focused on in parts of Sweden and southern Norway, but completely absent in Denmark. Literary evidence gives an impression of a role in the enforcement of oaths, which when combined with toponymic evidence indicates a potentially significant socio-legal and protective societal role. The evidence seems to support a role for Ullr that was more important in pre-Viking society, with the god's role declining following the seventh century.

Keywords: Old Norse mythology, onomastics, toponymic, Ullr

Résumé : Notre conception des rôles des dieux et déesses de la mythologie nordique varie considérablement en fonction de la déité en question ; certains ne sont évoqués que brièvement dans les sources écrites et d'autres types de témoignages doivent être étudiés afin d'examiner leurs rôles. Un de ces dieux énigmatiques est Ullr qui, comme illustré par des témoignages onomastiques et toponymiques, fut au centre d'un culte important dans certaines régions de la Suède et de la Norvège du sud, mais inexistant au Danemark. Les sources littéraires donnent l'impression que son rôle ait été celui de renforcer le respect des serments ce qui, combiné avec les sources toponymiques, indique un rôle socio-légal et de protection sociétale potentiellement considérable. Les témoignages semblent corroborer un rôle d'Ullr d'une importance majeure dans la société pré-Viking et en déclin à partir du 7^{ème} siècle.

Mots-clés: Vieille mythologie nordique, onomastique, toponymie, Ullr

Understanding the gods and goddesses of Norse myth is intrinsically linked to the role or function that the specific deity in question played within Scandinavian and wider Norse society, and it is this concept of 'understanding' that will be explored in this paper: the role

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and function of the god, Ullr (also referenced as Ull and Ullinn)². The level of understanding of the Norse gods and goddesses varies considerably between deities: some are well known and often referenced, while, for others, little more is known than the name. Ullr, an “enigmatic god” (Lindow, 2001, p.299), falls much closer to this latter category than the former. However, exploring the literary material that is available and combining this with assessment of the onomastic evidence can provide some insight into the role and function of the god.

This paper will be structured as follows: first, the primary Old Norse and associated literary sources will be introduced along with some of the challenges in using them, followed by a summary of the etymological root and references to Ullr; second will be a summarisation of the toponymic and associated onomastic evidence; third, relevant material from other sources, including artifacts and contemporary non-Old Norse literature will be covered; and then, in the fourth section, these will be drawn together in an assessment to see what can be determined and the level of certainty with which this can be judged.

Literary and onomastic evidence

In Old Norse and associated literature Ullr receives considerably fewer mentions than many of the other gods and goddesses. There are almost no myths about Ullr or tales in which he plays a major role; he is certainly not found in any ‘popular’ modern recounting of the Norse myths. Yet there are references to him in the Old Norse and associated literature. These come mainly through the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson and several of the *Poetic Edda*, notably *Grímnismál* and *Atlakviða*. Other references are made in *Clemens saga* and Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*.

² The question as to whether ‘Ullinn’ was the same deity as ‘Ullr’ is not completely resolved. The widespread consensus is that ‘Ullinn’ is either an alternative or obsolete name for ‘Ullr’ or that, if it is not, it is the name of a deific sibling, twin, or counterpart with whom Ullr is so closely associated that it is not possible to separate the interpretation of meaning. Therefore, for this paper, references to ‘Ullinn’ will be taken as referring to ‘Ullr’. Some studies refer to the deity as ‘Ull’ but for simplicity ‘Ullr’ will be used in this paper unless directly the study is directly quoted.



While the etymological root and meaning of Ullr is disputed, there is a general suggestion that *Ullr* has the same root as Goth. *wulpus* (DE ‘Herrlichkeit’, EN ‘glory, brilliance’), OE *wuldor* (‘glory’), *wlite* (‘appearance, splendour’) (Turville-Petre, 1975, p.184). There are suggestions this may imply that Ullr was viewed a ‘sky god’, “a god of solar light” (Zavaroni, 2006, 287–304), and that associations with him were linked to seasonal worship. Meillet argued this meaning could be traced furte back to GRC *δόξα* and LA *vultus*, suggesting reason and head of the body politic (Meillet, 1912, p.323–324, cited in Taylor, 1994, p.130).

In the *Edda*, Snorri Sturluson relates (very) basic biographical details: ON “‘*Ullr heitir einn, sonr Sifjar, stjúpsonr Þórs. Hann er bogmaðr svá góðr ok skíðfærr svá at engi má við hann keppask. Hann er ok fagr álitum ok hefir hermanns atgeroi. Á hann er ok gott at heita í einvógi*” (Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning* 31); “Ull is the name of one. The son of Sif, he is the stepson of Thor. He is so skilful a Bowman and skier that no one can compete with him. He is beautiful to look at, and is an accomplished warrior. He is also a good person to pray to when in single combat” (Byock, p.38.)

A few more details can be gleaned through *The Poetic Edda. Grímnismál* (str.5) states ON “‘*Ydalir heita, þar er Ullr hefir / sér um gǫrva sali*” (“Ullr has made a hall for himself in *Ydalir*” (‘Yewdale’, alt. ‘yew dales’)), while later (str.42), Odin promises the protection (alt. help, favours) of Ullr to whoever relieves him from his place between the fires (ON “‘*Ullar hylli hefr ok allra goða, hværr er tkr fyrstr á funa; þvíat opnir heimar verða of ása sonom, þá er hefia af hvera*” (Larrington, pp.52, 58; Turville-Petre, 1975, p.182; Crawford, 2015, p.42). In *Atlakviða* (str.30), Guðrún, cursing her perjurious husband, Atli, reminds him the oaths he had broken:

ON “‘*Svá gangi þér, Atli! Sem þú við Gunnar áttir / eiða opt um soarða ok ár of nefnda, / at sól inni suðrhóllo ok at Sigtýs bergi, / hǫlkvi hvílbeðiar ok at hringi Ullar!*” (“You swore by the sun to be faithful, / and by Odin’s hill, / you swore by the ring of Ull, / on the day we were wed”) (Crawford, 2015, p. 301).



There is a further brief reference to Ullr in *Clemens saga* where Clemens is accused of blaspheming against various of the Norse gods, including saying ON “*illan segir hann Ullr*” (“he says that Ullr is evil”) (Carron, 2005, p.44).

Ullr is given various bynames (ON *heiti*) including the ski-god/god with skis (ON *ønduráss*), bow-god/god with a bow (ON *bogaáss*), and shield-god/god with a shield (ON *skjaldar áss*) (Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál* s.2; Turville-Petre, 1975, p.182; Krasskova, 2005, p.81). Other kennings in *Skáldskaparmál* that reference Ullr include one for warriors: ON *Ullar askþollar* (Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál* s.2) “the trees of Ullr’s ship” i.e. of the shield” (Faulkes, p.236), and one for men’s arms: ON *fjöll Ullar kjóls*; “the resting-places of Ullr’s boat (i. e. a shield)” (Faulkes, p.273). Further skaldic references to Ullr focus on a number of themes linked to prowess in battle or his weapons, such as his sword (ON *Ullr brands*, *Ullar branda*, *Ullr benloga*) or bowstring (ON *Ullr álmsíma*). The deity apparently used his shield (ON *Skjöldr*) as a ship or mode of transport, as any ship could be called ‘Ullr’s shield’ (ON *Ullar kjóll*) (Lincoln, 2012, p.25). Other skaldic references include Ullr being referred to as “the mountain’s shield” (Egilsson, 1854, p.831).

A problematic and uncertain reference may be found in the *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (30, str.26), where a warrior-kennung of ON *ísungs Ullr* is a possible alternative reading due to uncertain stanza syntax: ON “*Hingat skalt, hvað hringa / Hildir at óðar gildi, / fleina þollr, með Fullu / fallheyjaðar deyja; / þá munt, Ullr, ok öllu, / ísungs, féi þvása, / þat hagar okkr til auðar / ormláðs, ok mér ráða*”. This is translated as “god of the helmet” (Langeslag, 2009, p.63).

The one story that survives about Ullr comes via Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum* where, for ten years, an Ollerus (believed to be a Latinisation of Ullr) replaces Othinus (a Latinisation of Odin), who is in exile: Ollerus in turn is exiled upon Othinus’ return “and retired into Sweden. Here, while he was trying, as if in a new world, to repair the records of his glory, the Danes slew him”; Saxo Grammaticus further relates a rumour (LA *fama est*) that Ollerus was also a cunning wizard who could travel over the sea on a bone, having marked it with awful spells (LA *diris carminibus*) (Saxo Grammaticus. *Gesta Danorum*. 3.4.12; Elton, 1905).



The challenge with the literary sources is that most of the substantive detail (such as it is) that has survived comes through the lens of Christian interpretation and comes from a period often well-removed from the period when the Norse myths and beliefs in them were 'active': substantial detail was lost in the interim. For instance, Snorri's *Edda* (including his recording of many skaldic poems) was written down around A.D. 1220. A convincing argument has been made his recounting of the Norse deities has been undertaken in a manner that is different to how they would have been understood at the time that the myths were believed, and the deities worshipped. Snorri, in essence, was writing down everything he knew about the Norse religion and to do so in cohesive a manner as he was able. Part of this linked to his religious Christian understanding, notably his familiarity with the gospels and canonical texts. The result was that "Snorri is approaching the beliefs of his forefathers as if it has [a Christian-style] canon... he wants it to be coherent" (Tetzner, 2018). Gods and goddesses were placed in a single pantheon and hierarchy, despite many of the Norse gods and goddesses coming from different traditions, times, and, indeed, locations (Lincoln, 2012, p.23).

Clemens saga - 'The Life of St. Clement of Rome' - forms part of the saints' lives genre of literature (known in Icelandic as *Heilagra manna sögur*), which were then translated into the local vernaculars. There are multiple sources for the life of St. Clement, the earliest of which had its origins in the fourth century, and there are differences between them. The oldest manuscript of what emerged as *Clemens saga* dates to c.1220-1250. (Carron, 2005, pp.xi-xxiii). This problem with chronological recording seen with Snorri's *Edda* is also reflected in the 'shoe-horning' of the Norse deities into a Christianised understanding - indeed, in *Clemens saga*, it is really a translation of a Christianised understanding of the Roman pantheon into Icelandic. In the *Martyrium S. Clementis*, nine (Roman) pagan gods against whom Clement is said to have blasphemed are named: these are translated into 14 Norse / Icelandic equivalents, including Ullr. However, not all the Latin counterparts to the Icelandic names can be established: this is the case for Ullr (Carron, 2005, p.xxi). This clearly raises an issue regarding the level of understanding of any role that can be imparted.



Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* was begun around 1185 and intended as a heroic history of the Danes (Faulkes, 2005, pp.xiv-xv; Carron, 2005, p.xxv; Elton, 1905). It deals with mythical elements that are often given as history, with the tale of Othinus and Ollerus presenting a good example. The caveat of chronological remoteness and Christianised reference similar applies here.

Therefore, while some details regarding deities in general and Ullr in particular are presented in the literary sources, what we can infer from this needs to be taken with caution given that the literary sources are often incomplete, partial, and placed in a somewhat distorted context, having been recorded centuries later and by individuals who had a different frame of understanding.

Onomastic and toponymic evidence

The utility of the examination of the names of places and landscapes has been the subject of a lively, at times rather charged, debate, in particular in terms of whether a name may or may not be theophoric (Brink, 2014, pp.157-72). Working on the premise that the names of places and/or the landscape may be theophoric in nature, examining them for aspects linked to a deity can provide indications as to where that deity was revered or held in esteem: once the collective body of names has been examined and locations extracted, mapping of the selected locations enables regional comparison between the different deities (Brink, 2007, p.106).

Initial mapping of the toponymic material linked to Ullr (*Ul-*, *Ull-*, *Ullar-*, *Ullin-*) was undertaken by de Vries (Vries, 1970). However, this work was heavily criticised for omitting some places and including others whose theophoric derivation was unreliable (Brink, 2007, p.107). More recent work, notably from Brink and Vikstrand, has re-examined this, with the results showing that in Sweden places names linked to Ullr are focused around Lake Mälaren and Uppsala (to the west and north of present-day Stockholm), and central parts of Östergötland (in the southeast of Sweden). In Norway, confirmed theophoric names are concentrated around Oslo, Vestfold, and Østfold, with potential other locations for instance

on Norway's southern west coast in Aust-Agder, Vest-Agder, Rogaland, Hordaland, Telemark, and Buskerud (see Figure 1) (Brink, 2007, p.108, 117).

In total, some 48 *Ullr*-names can be counted in Sweden, with some 27 in Norway, rising to 35 when *Ullinn* is included (Jesch, 2015, p.124). Examples of names include Ullensaker and Ullensvang, linked to ON *akr* ('arable land') and ON *vangr* ('garden', 'meadow', 'field'). There are 23 instances of Ullevi and five Ullunda in Sweden, linked to the ON *vi / vé* ('pagan cult site') and ON *lundr* ('grove') (Jesch, 2015, p.123; Brink, 2007, pp.116-118).

There are no *Ullr*-associated theophoric placenames that have been identified in Denmark or Iceland.

There are issues with toponymic evidence, however, which can be summarised as stating that while we can draw possible interpretations from a name, it is problematic. Names do not necessarily survive; dating is challenging; and the proper names used within them may alter over time, obscuring the original form (Murphy, 2016, p.139). The result is that any conclusions must be recognised as drawing on a body of evidence that is very likely incomplete and the composition of may well have changed over time.

Artifacts and runic inscriptions

There are runic carvings that have been argued to be linked to *Ullr* – such as the Sparlösa runic inscription (Rundata catalog ID Vg 119), located in Västergötland in southwest Sweden, and the well-known image of an archer on skis on the Böksta rune stone (Rundata catalog ID U 855), located in modern Uppsala county, Sweden. However, these are not accepted as conclusive: for instance, in the case of the Böksta stone (believed to be from c.1050) nothing in the accompanying text identifies the figure as *Ullr* (Lindow, 2001, p.301; Lincoln, 2012, p.26; Nielsen, 2000).

One potential piece of archaeological evidence is the Thorsbjærg chape, dating from the third century, part of which carries a disputed reference to *Ullr* in Elder Futhark: *(o)wlpupewaz*, ON **Ullþér* ("the servant of *Ullr*, the renowned", alt. "Wolthuthewaz is well-renowned", amongst other possibilities) (Williams, 2000, pp.156–157; MacLeod, 2002, p.51 n.17; Dewey &

Frog, 2009, p.7). While found in Thorsberg moor, through archaeological research the chape has been localised to the area between the Rhine and the Elbe in Germany. If confirmed it would be the only reference to Ullr south of Scandinavia (Williams, 2000, pp.156–158).

Discussion

Immediate problems emerge when trying to understand Ullr, and the role and function that he played within Scandinavian society. The literary evidence is thin and there are problems with the route of transmission via Christian writers, while the toponymic evidence needs treating with care.

Geographic presence

Toponymic evidence shows that of the 371 surviving placenames in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark recorded as having or possibly having theophoric attributes, places with names associated with Ullr account for 22 percent of the total, only two percent (or six placenames) behind the most popular, Thor, and with fully 12 names more than Odin (see Table 1).

Table 1. Theophoric placenames in Scandinavia

Deity	DMK	%	NOR	%	SWE	%
	in DMK		in NOR		in SWE	
Thor (Þórr) (inc. <i>Totland</i>)	5	9	27	25	57	27
Ullr / Ullinn	0	0	35	32	48	23
Odin (Óðinn)	11	21	11	10	49	23
Freyr	1	2	22	20	38	18
Týr	33	62	1	1	0	0
Njērðr / *Niæper	3	6	13	12	17	8



TOTAL	53	100	109	100	209	100
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(Placename data: Brink, 2007, pp.126–135. Calculations: own.)

Working on the assumption that when a place is giving a theophoric name it is because those giving it that name wish to designate a connection to the deity in question, and assuming that there is no reason why a certain deity-originating theophoric placename was more or less likely to survive than those of the other deities, it is clear that the naming pattern shown through the toponymical data does not match the popular image of the Snorri-derived Norse pantheon that places Odin as the most important god, with Thor a close second (irrespective of the question as to whether Snorri's pantheon-like representation is accurate). The conclusion drawn from the toponymical data is that Ullr, at some point, is highly likely to have played a more important role in Norse religion and Norse society than the limited recollection in the literary sources give him: "Zahlreiche Ortsnamen, ganz besonders in Schweden, zeigen, dass in nordergermanischen Kult Ullr eine viel grössere Bedeutung gehabt hat, als aus den wenigen Zeugnissen, die wir von diesem Gotte haben, hervorgeht" ("The number of placenames, especially in Sweden, show that in the North Germanic cult, Ullr had a greater importance than the few testimonies that we have of this god would indicate") (Hoops, 1918-19, p.372, trans.: own).

Based on place-name evidence, therefore, Ullr was the subject of cult worship. The geographical dispersal of this cult-worship was certainly not uniform across Scandinavia: Brink's analysis demonstrates that a "distinct regional cult" operated in the Svea-dominated area of Sweden, around Viken in Norway, while a regional cult of Ullinn was also in evidence in central and western areas of southern Norway (Brink, 2007, p.125).

There are no Ullr-theophoric sites in northern Scandinavia: however, given what is known about population distribution in the Viking period and the Norse exploration of the coast of northern Scandinavia, this is not surprising. Only one expedition into the "Northern Ocean" (Barents Sea and White Sea) is recorded prior to the twelfth century, that of Harald



Hardrada, who, according to Adam of Bremen, “barely escape in safety the vast pit of the abyss” (Hofstra & Samplonius, 1995, p.238).

There are no Ullr-related sites in Denmark, the theophoric placenames of which are heavily dominated by Týr-related names. Interestingly, when compared to Ullr-names in Sweden, this is almost an exact inverse: there are no Týr names in Sweden. In both, however, there are a number of Thor and Odin related names (Brink, 2007). This could indicate that there was cross-over between similar cults, with those Tyr and Ullr occupying the same metaphysical territory, indicating that there was no need for the other in the other’s territory. If so, this may indicate an element of a martial role for Ullr, which would be supported by some of the skaldic references. This potential Týr-Ullr cross-over may be reinforced as Týr is also believed to have evolved from an older deity, PGmc *Tīwaz.

It should be noted that at least in the literary record there are hints of an appreciation that there were geographical differences in cult-worship. In *Hallfreðar saga*, for instance, vows are offered to different gods depending on the location to which a group of Icelanders finally return. While these gods did not include Ullr, but it does offer support for the idea of geographically distinct cult worship that the toponymic evidence indicates (Mundal, 1990, p.299).

Role

Ullr-placenames include many of the same associated elements (*-lund, -land, -bro, -akr, -øy* etc.) as those of other deities. This therefore cannot be taken as indicating a special role for Ullr. Dual-name forms of places face a similar problem: for example, Ullvi-Härnvi in Bro, Uppland, might represent belief in a cultic wedding between the god and a fertility goddess, such as Njārð or Horn (ON *Hærn*), but Ullr is not the only god to have such dual placenames – Thor does, for instance – so no non-site specific or wider deific-unique understanding can be developed (Näsström, 1996, p.73; Brink, 2012, p.63).



It is the same with links to administrative hundreds, such as *Ulleråkers hundare* (Blomkvist, Brink, & Lindkvist, 2007, p.175). The difference, however, appears to be with the volume and proportion of Ullr-placenames that take a *-vi*, associated with the ON *vi* / *vé* indicating a pagan cult site: some 23 instances in Sweden (Brink, 2007, pp.118, 124–125). It is from this that the cult worship of Ullr played in late Iron Age society may potentially start to be constructed, with a hypothesis that Ullr's prominence at *-vi* sites indicates that the role of the god was viewed as being important enough to be appropriate for a societal-level act, likely involved with the reinforcing of the social order.

Drawing from the literary evidence, in *Atlakviða*, there is the reference to an oath on a ring in Ullr's name. The taking of ring-oaths is believed to have been an important part of late Iron Age and Norse culture, an act to enable or cement societal harmony, with rings often appearing to have been used as votive offerings. At least 65 Vendel-period amulet rings have been discovered at Lilla Ullevi (< OSw *Ullar-vi*, 'the cult site dedicated to Ullr'), with a link being proposed to Ullr's ring of saga (Riisøy, 2016, p.142–145). The taking of an oath was an act designed to reinforce social bonds, both at an individual and societal level, vital to the functioning of society as "the farmstead community depended on the cohesion of the family, lineage, local district and region" (Nordberg, 2019, p.351). The main literary references to Ullr give indications of a having a function in acting within this concept – as the oath-ring god in *Atlakviða* and, via the *Edda*, that of being a god good "to pray to in single combat", an act within the legal framework of Iceland at the time (noteworthy due to the phrasing of "in single combat", not 'in combat', 'in a fight', 'in battle', or similar, placing the focus on the legal rather than the martial aspect) (Riisøy, 2013, p.33).

There is an alternative (but contested) explanation of the oath-ring. Arboe Sonne proposes that "Ull's ring" was not an oath ring but simply an item that had importance for the composer of *Atlakviða*. However, this does not contradict the idea of the deific prominence, given that the hypothesized alternative item is given import due to its association with Ullr (Arboe Sonne, 2013, p.236; Brink, 2012, p.63).



These literary references to a socio-legal function that reinforced stability within Iron Age and Norse society links to the *-vi* element in much of the toponymic evidence. While the *-vi* / *-vé* denotes a pagan cult site, it may also denote a legal assembly location, a *thing*. These locations were intended to ensure the smooth running of society, and were places where disputes could be aired, debated, and resolved. Lilla Ullevi is one such location (Price, 2014, p.180). Thus, the literary references and Ullr's over-representation at places that were intended to enable societal harmony – reinforced by the archaeological discovery of Vendal-era rings – may therefore indicate that the god may have had a role one who aided, represented, enforced or in some way supported the proto-legal societal order. The use of Ullr in this way is interesting as, in a manner of speaking, it is in the most important role for the enabling of a coherent and functioning communitarian society: one that is intended to reinforce or keep societal order and, potentially, the social order.

Going wider than this is challenging. Ullr's positioning in Clemens' curses within *Clemens saga* means that a direct parallel to a known Roman deity cannot be drawn, and wider studies across various Icelandic and Latin texts have not been able to create an equivalence (Tveitane, 1985). Ullr's presence in the list does give an indication of a degree of relevance to the contemporary Icelandic society at the time that the saga was written down (c.1220–1250), even if it was just as a frame of reference. However, that it is not possible to say that there was an aspect of personal religion with him, as a ON *fulltrúi* ('trustworthy friend'), a position that can be established with Thor and Odin (Hultgård, 2018, p.31). It is not known what Snorri's assertion that Ullr was strongly associated with skiing meant for the meaning and understanding of the god as far as any worship or cult focus.

Chronology

In terms of understanding the chronology of Ullr's role, the pattern of toponymic and literary evidence indicates that Ullr's importance was greater prior to the Viking age than during. The lack of theophoric settlements taking Ullr's name in Iceland or any of the other Viking-era colonial settlements, for instance, strongly indicates that by the ninth century the god was no longer viewed as relevant enough to name a settlement after, and the limited



material that was able to be gathered to be recorded by Snorri or other literary sources by the 1200s is likely to indicate that societal memory of the god had dimmed substantially.

Dating this decline in importance may be aided by the fate of one of the major Ullr-name sites, Lake Ullevi. Archaeological evidence indicates that Lilla Ullevi is believed to have been ritually 'closed' around A.D. 750 (Riisøy, 2016, p.145). While there may be alternative reasons behind the closure – for instance, a change in local settlement patterns – a highly likely explanation can be argued to be that the site was closed due to a reduction in the importance of the site itself and a decline of the importance of the god behind it: or put inversely, why would a major site to an active god be closed if it was still in use or viewed as important? We therefore have likely evidence that Ullr's importance had declined substantially by the mid-eighth century. However, a single event in the mid-eighth century is unlikely to have affected all of southern Sweden and Norway in such a manner to cause an instantaneous shift in deific patterns, and therefore it is reasonable to hypothesise that such a decline may have been a gradual process given the widespread settlement pattern across southern Scandinavia.

However, this raises the question of when Ullr's 'peak importance' may have been. While accepting that the data points are limited, it can be proposed that Ullr's importance was higher between the third and seventh centuries. This would be supported by the toponymic evidence, both in terms of the naming of theophoric settlements in southern Norway and Sweden and also in the lack of Ullr-associated theophoric naming in Denmark, if the hypothesis that Týr/*Tinwaz and Ullr crossed in terms of their functions. As *Tinwaz is believed to have been an 'earlier' deity, the strong presence of Týr-associated settlements in Denmark and lack of the same in Sweden could possibly indicate that Ullr-associated settlements were already present at a comparatively early stage, possibly by the first or secondary centuries.

Potential support is added through the Thorsbjærg chape inscription, dating from the third century and which is believed to have been a votive offering. If the reference is read as being related to Ullr, the dating to around A.D. 200 would fit with the proposed earlier emergence and importance of Ullr. While the geographical location would make this an outlier



in terms of references to Ullr, a range of possibilities – such as belonging to a trader – could easily account for the location.

This idea of early importance could also be supported by other literary and onomastic evidence. As mentioned previously, the onomastic meaning of Ullr is disputed, but is a general suggestion that Ullr has the same root as Goth. *wulpus* OE *wuldor* ('glory'), *wlite* ('appearance, splendour') (Turville-Petre, 1975, p.184), reinforced by one potential meaning of the Thorsbjærg chape inscription. A dated paper hypothesises that this OE *wuldor* root may mean that a reference within *Beowulf* (lines 665–668) to OE *Hæfde kyning-wuldor* could potentially be a reference to Ullr: OE "*Hæfde kyning-wuldor / Grendle tōgēanes, swā guman gefrungon / sele-weard āseted; sundor-nytte behēold / ymb aldor Dena, eoton-weard' ābēad.*" ("The king of glory / (as people learned) had posted a lookout who was a match for Grendel, a guard against monsters / special protection to the Danish prince") (Heaney, 1999, p.22). While Heaney (1999) and Tolkien (2014) both translate OE *kyning wuldor* as 'King of Glory' – other translations include 'glorious leader' (McNamara, 2005) and 'warlike leader' (Crossley-Holland, 1999) – Bachlechner argues *Wuldor* (DE: *Vuldor*) is a noun (i.e. a name/person) rather than an adjective and links the name to the linguistic origins of the word (Bachlechner, 1851, pp.201–208, also argued in Hill, 1995, p.69), arguing that it is a reference to Ullr. If this is the case, it would provide support to the idea of Ullr acting as a protection against an element (Grendel) that was disrupting the normal functioning of society.

However, the potential reference in *Beowulf* also supports the idea of an earlier timeframe for the importance of Ullr. The recent argument by Gräslund that *Beowulf* was actually composed in Gotland and around 550, earlier than previously thought, opens the possibility that Bachlechner's speculation might have some basis (Gräslund, 2018, reviewed in Schousboe, 2018). Given the toponymic location of Ullr-associated names in south east Sweden, it is certainly plausible that knowledge of an Ullr-cult would have been familiar to those living in Gotland, notably given Ullr-name associated settlements on the nearby island of Öland and on the Swedish mainland directly opposite from Gotland.



Conclusion

Many of the ideas proposed above remains tentative, as with much relating to Ullr. However, it is reasonable to propose that Ullr had a role that was linked to the keeping of the social order; that the societal observance of this role likely involved a pseudo-legal, potentially ritualised element; and that, based on the toponymic evidence, the god was more relevant in parts of south east Sweden and south east Norway in a chronologically earlier timeframe prior to that of the Viking Age.

These limited conclusions are, in part, a reflection of the sparse Old Norse literature with which there is to work. It is apparent, however, that the picture that the literary evidence presents only represent a small part of understanding of Ullr. Toponymic and likely onomastic evidence both shine a light into the early Iron Age that indicate a greater and more prominent position and importance. It is just frustrating that any certainty of the role that the god played within Iron Age and Viking society remains so opaque.

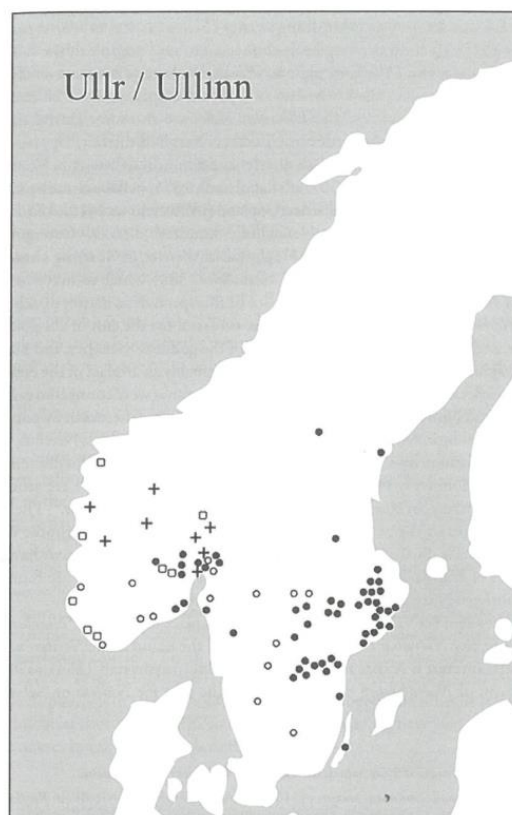


Figure 1. Mapping of Ullr associated theophoric placenames according to Brink, 2007, p.117.

Key: Ullr (black dot), *Ullinn (cross), open circles are uncertain; open squares are the problematic Norwegian *Ull(e)land* names.

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