

Patterns of Marriage among the Old Scandinavian Peoples

IT IS USUALLY HELD that in early Norse times marriage was founded on a union between two kindreds (*attir*)¹ entered upon in the shape of a contract to which the man and the woman were parties as members of their respective kindreds both at the engagement and at the wedding. The woman was represented during these negotiations by her father or closest male kinsman, her guardian. The agreement was ratified by the payment of *mundr* (a sum paid by the groom to the bride) and by joining hands (*handsal*).

We find this legal pattern already fully developed in the oldest Norse laws, which began to be recorded in writing at the close of the 12th and beginning of the 13th centuries. The laws, at least as far as those regarding marriage are concerned, can be taken to represent a legal tradition going back at least two or three centuries. Marriage as a union between kindreds was an ancient institution not merely among Scandinavians but among the Germanic peoples in general. Everything points to its having had its roots in prehistoric times. We have no reason to doubt the findings of comparative legal research on this point. But the study of comparative law also showed long ago that the ancient Indo-European peoples possessed more than one mode of creating matrimonial alliances. The best known are those current among the Romans: *confarreatio*, *coemptio* and *usus*: three ways, all consistent with prevailing custom and law, of entering into marriage, the first religious, the second contractual, the third based on existing cohabitation of the parties. This raises the question of whether the Norse peoples too in early times practised other modes of entering into marriage besides the contractual *mundr*-marriage, which is the only one represented in the early medieval laws.

The facts on which our conception of early Scandinavian marriage rests are drawn from sources at least as old as the 13th century, the great epoch of the Old Norse sagas and laws. Long before this, however, the Roman Catholic Church's great influence on the laws and customs of marriage had started to make itself felt, first in Iceland, then in Norway and Denmark, and last of all in Sweden. It is significant for the history of Scandinavian marriage that all the sections of the laws concerned with this topic have been formulated under the control of the Church. Apart from the *Festaþáttir* in *Grágás* they are confined, too, to the small part of secular legal tradition which Canon Law and ecclesiastical usage found fitting^{1a}. They make, therefore, at first sight a bewildering impression. This is also true when we try to examine the distinction between East and West Norse legal tradition. Their details, however, reveal clearly that they were formulated at a period when the Canon Law of marriage was in the process of being accepted all over Scandinavia.

1. Bertha Surtees Phillpotts, *Kindred and Clan in the Middle Ages and After. A Study in the Sociology of the Teutonic Races*, Cambridge 1913.

1a. Cf. Stig Iuul & Erik Kroman, *Danmarks gamle love III*, København 1948, XXVIII.

The Church asserted two basic principles: *consent*, which it had inherited from Late Roman Law and which required the reciprocal agreement of the man and the woman (*consensus mutuus*), and *publicity*, the centuries-old device of the Church to ensure the participation of priest and congregation and thus prevent marriage being entered into without priestly blessing. *Clandestina et absque sacerdotali benedictione non debere contrahi coniugia* Pope Alexander III says in a letter to the Archbishop of Uppsala in the latter half of the 12th century². The wedding must be a *solemnitas* (note the German rendering of this: *hochzeit*). The secular engagement and wedding ceremony had already by this time in the North been clothed in the ritual forms of the Church, as a thirteenth century Norwegian formulary clearly shows. (This even includes, in its engagement section, the *reciprocal* declaration of consent: *ego te accipio*)³.

In this way two legal traditions, the native secular and the foreign ecclesiastical, were fused together at an early date, giving rise to a network of customs and attitudes which I have called the „parental-authority marriage-system“. This becomes dominant in popular tradition not later than the fourteenth century. By this time the old system of kindred marriage can be regarded as little more than an empty shell.

The social basis of marriage is henceforth the family (*fjölskylda*) or, more comprehensively, the parish⁴ with its subordinate units (village, neighbourhood) and convivial institutions (festal guild etc.) of primary origin. The different age-groups also play a part here. The influence of the primary groups on customs and legal norms is of indisputably great, though uncertain, age among all the Germanic peoples. It is also beyond dispute that the young have especially influenced the customs in the direction of considerable freedom in social intercourse before marriage and in the choice of marriage partner⁵.

The old marriage pattern where the woman was transferred through her guardian's agency from her own kindred to that of the man, who thus, being a member of his own kindred, acquired authority over her and her property, is only imperfectly reflected in West Norse literary tradition. What actually happened in fact, at any rate as far as our knowledge of Iceland in early times goes, is that the girl's own wishes were often directly realised, or else that she was even able to choose her future husband of her own free will. This is possibly due to an advancing disintegration of the kindred-society and the marriage-pattern which went with it in the period covered by the old legal tradition. In these cases the Church was ready to follow prevailing customs. But it seems to me not improbable that the relative freedom enjoyed by women in this regard (at any rate in the higher social classes) has its roots in an earlier epoch and dates from at least the late

2. *Diplomatarium Suecanum*, ed. Joh. Gust. Liljegren, Vol. I, Holmiae MDCCCXXIX, p. 85.

3. A. Taranger, *Norsk familierett*, Oslo 1926, 24 f.; G. F. Grath, *Den svenska kyrkans brudvigsel*, Uppsala 1904, p. 52.

4. Cf. the Latin word *parochia*, 'neighbourhood'.

5. Viz. H. Meyer, *Ehe und Eheauffassung der Germanen*, Weimar 1940, S. 19 ff.

Viking age and the last centuries of paganism, in other words, from about the ninth or eighth centuries.

That some form of marriage consequent on cohabitation existed in Old Scandinavian times is more than likely. As early as 1879 the Danish legal historian J. NELLEMAN drew attention to the often-cited provision of the Jutish Laws: *Hwasum hauær slækæfrith i garth mæth sic oc gangær opænbarlich mæth at souæ, och hauær laas oc lykeki, oc sökær atæ oc dryk mæth openbarlich i thre winter, hvn skal wære athalkunæ oc ræt hwsfrø*. This was valid right through the Middle Ages as the *usus* form of entering marriage⁶. This interpretation is in my opinion strengthened by the fact that Guillaume de Jumièges tells us in his *Gesta normannorum ducum* that such marriages *more danico* were contracted by the Norman invaders in the tenth century. Perhaps we have a reminiscence of the custom in Saxo's *Historia Danica*, where we read that, before the days of King Frode, the woman could herself choose to whom she gave herself in marriage.

This kind of marriage without *mundr* does not seem to have been especially rare in early Scandinavian times. But one must bear in mind that we are here dealing with women of high, often princely, birth. In this regard there were traditions which appear to go back to an extremely ancient period. We find a corresponding arrangement in the ancient Indian *gandharva* marriage, contracted in the warrior caste and based on free choice. (According to the Mahabharata, what happened was that a group of youths assembled and the girl crowned with a wreath the one she chose⁷.) By adducing this analogy I only wish to indicate that this pattern of marriage has its natural social background in a warrior or knightly caste⁸, where, as in India, it was far from unknown for the woman to be carried off by force. European medieval literature contains innumerable tales of such knightly escapades⁹. The ballad about the girl seized from the nunnery at Vreta is a well-known Swedish example¹⁰.

Snorri's account¹¹ of Ólafr Tryggvason's marriage to the Irish queen Gyða shows close similarity to the Indian procedure. Gyða had her men called together and chose the stranger with the words, "If you will have me, I shall choose you." The tale suits the period well. Even if a royal marriage to a foreign princess fell outside the normal bounds of the law, marriage without *mundr* occurred in other instances in early times too. Even Alfred Schultze, a scholar who kept so rigorously to the legal tradition of kindred-marriage, concedes that freer forms of entering marriage can have existed both among Scandinavians and among

6. [Dansk] *Historisk Tidsskrift* 5. R. 1. 1879, p. 370 ff.; Erik Arup, *Danmarks historie I*, København 1925, p. 156 (about *slegtfred*); Johs. Brøndum-Nielsen and P. Johs. Jørgensen, *Danmarks gamle Landskabslove II*, København 1920 —, p. 68 f.

7. Richard Schmidt, *Liebe und Ehe im alten und modernen Indien*, Berlin 1904, S. 308.

8. Cf. K. Rob. V. Wikman, *Die Einleitung der Ehe*, Åbo 1937, S. 334 ff.

9. Karl Weinhold, *Die deutschen Frauen im Mittelalter*, II, Wien 1882, S. 282 f.

10. Sverker Ek, *Den svenska folkvisan*, Stockholm 1924, p. 124 ff.

11. *Heimskringla*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, København 1911, p. 312.

Anglo-Saxons¹². Herbert Mayer has rightly adduced the man's removal to the woman's homestead as a basis of such marriages (*Fylgju-lag*), especially where the woman was an only daughter (*ein berni*) and had authority over her own inheritance and person, which at a later date seems to have been the rule (see the Frostatings Law 11, 8). A similar "matrilocal" state of affairs could arise when the man carried out services in the woman's homestead ("marriage by service" in Westermarck's terminology. See also *Eyrbyggja saga* c. 38).

In so far as marital unions without *mundr* or other formalities were regarded by custom as genuine marriages, this was due to the practice of cohabitation and the consequent social acceptance of the union. This not only meant that the woman was regarded as the mistress of the house but also that she was looked on as a married woman in the guild festivities (*at öldr ok at ate* N. Borgat. Kr. k. 32). Even when marriage had been entered in the conventional way, it was thought, at a late period, that it had to be sanctioned by the passing of a portion of time — not infrequently "a year and a day" — before the newly-married couple was received into the village community¹³.

Marriages without *mundr* were entered, especially in Iceland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as a pure matter of contract without even a wedding ceremony. Rudolf Keyser argues that the reason for this was a wish to evade the Church's sacramental view of the indissolubility of marriage or — when a cleric contracted such a union — the rule of clerical celibacy¹⁴. But this can hardly be the whole explanation. We must remember that in early Scandinavian times monogamy was much more a consequence of economic circumstances than of prevalent legal attitudes. The result was that in the upper classes a certain measure of polygamy was often to be found, whereby a man according to the law might have, in addition to his wife, one or more concubines of varying — though as a rule lower — social standing.

Among legal scholars Herbert Meyer has especially emphasized that marital unions of this kind (*Friedelehen*) had occurred among the Germanic peoples since antiquity. But, so far as I can tell, medieval legal conditions do not permit any inferences beyond those which have already been drawn. Yet it ought not to be denied that the old contractual system made it easy, if the circumstances did not otherwise present obstacles, to dissolve a marriage¹⁵ or to combine it with pseudo-marital unions of various sorts.

The society we find mirrored in the medieval Norwegian laws of the Gulating and the Frostating is by no means a society of a uniform, homogeneous structure. The old social distinctions between chieftains, yeomen farmers and serfs had by

12. Alfred Schultze, Das Ehe-recht in den älteren angelsächsischen Königsgesetzen. *Ber. d. Verhandlung d. sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Kl.* 93, Leipzig 1941, 39, note 147.

13. Wikman, Einleitung (s. footnote 8), S. 318 f.; Cf. the Danish term *igangsgilde*, H. F. Feilberg, *Dansk Bondeliv II*, København 1913, p. 5 ff.

14. Rudolf Keyser, Nordmændens private liv i Oldtiden, Christiania 1967, p. 25 ff.

15. Keyser, Nordmændens (s. footnote 14), p. 35 ff.; Taranger, Norsk (s. footnote 3), p. 162 ff.

this time been subjected to multiple differentiation¹⁶. Above all there was a large proletariat of freed men and serfs, serving folk and living-in farmhands, who, for quite other reasons than applied to the upper class, entered marital unions without observing all the law's formalities. The social extremes met.

THE LEGAL TRADITION PRESERVED IN THE LAWS extends from (at the earliest) the latter part of the twelfth century to the period of the national law codes between (at the earliest) the latter part of the thirteenth century and the middle of the fourteenth. What the secular law of marriage was like *before* this we are driven to infer mainly from the general antiquity of the legal and cultural tradition, especially in so far as it can be directly documented from contemporary Norse sources or its probable character indirectly inferred from legal and cultural conditions among other Germanic, or to some extent other Indo-European, peoples.

In expounding my view of these matters I have tried as far as possible to avoid reconstructions based solely on the evidence of the legal sources. Folk customs too, in so far as we know them from the literary tradition of the period, can be used as evidence of conditions lying a couple of centuries or more back in time only with caution and due qualification. For even if the tradition of folk custom may be highly archaic in character, this is far from implying that it escaped substantial modifications, which only in very general terms can we date by relating them to cultural and social conditions.

The standpoints adopted here I intend to apply to the tradition which points back to the pagan centuries of the North, and in particular to the Eddaic poems *Rígsþula* and *Þrymskviða*. The former of these is well known as an important source of direct knowledge of ancient times. As is usual with poems in the Edda, scholars have assigned it to very different dates. While Finnur Jónsson favoured the tenth century, others — reacting against the tendency to make the Eddaic poems as early as possible — have preferred a much later date¹⁷. We would probably be wise to follow Jón Helgason when he says, "the scaldic poetry which was still remembered in Iceland in 1200 cannot be carried further back than to the ninth century at most, so that it is not very probable that they had Eddaic poems which were much older¹⁸". P. Hallberg and J. de Vries have argued that *Þrymskviða* was composed in the latter half of the 13th century, though the account of the wedding reproduces ancient tradition¹⁹.

In *Rígsþula* Rígr, who in the prose introduction has been identified with Heimdallr, wanders about the world and visits three families, a serf's, a farmer's,

16. O. A. Johnsen, Norges folk i middelalderen, *Nordisk Kultur* II, Oslo 1938, p. 58 ff.; for Sweden, A. Schück, Ur Sveriges medeltida befolkningshistoria, *Nordisk Kultur* II, Oslo 1938, p. 135.

17. Karl Lehmann, Die *Rígsþula*, *Festschrift J. v. Amsberg*, Rostock 1904, S. 22 ff.

18. Jón Helgason, Norges og Islands digtning, *Nordisk Kultur* VIII B, Uppsala 1953, p. 89 f.

19. P. Hallberg, Om Þrymskviða, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 69, Lund 1954, p. 51 ff.; Jan de Vries, Over de dateering der Þrymskviða, *Tijdschrift voor nederlandse taal- en letterkunde* 47, 1928, p. 251 ff.

and an earl's, whose respective social standing and mode of life are described. Finally, in the original text, the king's household is portrayed, but this last part of the poem has been preserved only in mutilated form. It has been conjectured that the name *Rígr* is a loan from Irish *ri* (*rig* in oblique cases) "king". Its contents, though, furnish inadequate support for the view that the poem has any connection with the British Isles. The social picture at any rate reflects West Norse conditions. In what follows I shall be principally concerned with the ways in which the three social classes described enter marriage. I use G. Neckel's edition of the Edda²⁰ and provide a literal translation.

Of the marriage among the serfs it is related that a vagabond lass came to the farmstead:

11. Miðra fletia meirr settiz hon;
sat hiá henni sonr húss:
ræddo ok rýndo, rekkio gørðo,
þræll ok þír, þrungrin dægr.
12. Børn ólo þau — biuggo ok undo.

(In the middle of the benches then she sat down; there sat by her the son of the house; they prattled and whispered, they prepared a bed, serf and bond-woman, laborious days. Children they begat, lived and were content.)

Thus it is characteristic of the marriage arrangements of serfs that marriage was entered into entirely without formalities. For all the disdain with which the poet speaks of the serfs, it yet emerges plainly from the words *børn ólo þau — biuggo ok undo* that the marriages of, at any rate, native serfs bound to the soil were regarded as real marriages. The same formula is repeated in describing marriage among the farmers and among the earls. The common task and the children were the factors that created this usage-relationship. *Rígsþula* gives us the earliest record we have of early Norse *usus* marriage and at the same time shows that this goes back to pre-Christian times. The poem also reveals that the legal pattern of kindred marriage did not enjoy a monopoly in all social layers.

We pass on to marriage in the farmer-class. Here a good many important facts are provided:

23. Heim óko þá hanginluklo,
geitakyrtlo: gipto Karli;
Snør heitir sú; settiz und rípti;
biuggo hión, bauga deildo,
breiddo blæior ok bú gørðo.

(They brought her home with her bunch of keys hanging at her waist and her goatskin kirtle, they married her to the man. Daughter-in-law she is called, she seated herself beneath the bridal linen (veil); they established a marriage, shared precious gifts, spread out the bedding, set up a home). In short, the bride was

20. Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern, herausg. von Gustav Neckel, Heidelberg 1914.

conveyed to the homestead, clad in goatskin kirtle with a hanging bunch of keys. She was introduced into the household as a daughter-in-law (*snør*) and placed (on the bridal bench) attired in the bridal veil. The bridal pair went to bed together, shared precious objects and set up house. (Sophus Bugge thought that the line *biuggo hión, banga deildo* really belonged to the lost description of the royal wedding in the final part of the poem. This conjecture seems not improbable²¹.)

The essential stages in the procedure of entering marriage are in other words there: the bride is brought in procession, she is given to the man, is received into his kin and is clad in the bridal veil. Then the marriage is consummated. The role of the woman is a passive one: it is the family, the class, who have charge of the whole affair. The details of the wedding are described fairly closely.

The poem describes the marriage customs of earls in a parallel fashion:

39. Óko ærir²² — — —
 kómo at hóllo, þar er Hersir bió;
 mey átti hann, — — —
40. Báðo hennar ok heim óko;
 gipto Iarli, gekk hon und líni;
 saman biuggo þau ok sér undó,
 ættir jóko ok aldrs nuto

(Messengers journeyed . . . they reached the hall where the lord (*hersir*) lived; he had a maiden daughter . . . they wooed her and conveyed her home, gave her in marriage to the Earl; she donned the bridal veil; they lived together and were content; they increased their family and enjoyed life.)

In other words, the young man's messengers betook themselves to the homestead of the maiden's father (the *hersir*) to ask for her hand. Then the bridal procession took place, then the wedding in the bridegroom's home. The bride was adorned in the linen veil and then the wedding ceremony was performed. Just as in the two preceding cases it is stated only that the marriage existed *de facto*. In this case it is only added that the couple had children and lived happily together.

The most important difference between the case of the Earl and that of the farmer lies in the significant words of stanza 40 *báðo hennar* 'they bade for her'. The emphatic placing of the phrase at the head of the stanza suggests in itself their factual importance. The most likely interpretation, I think, is that the wooer sent his agents to the girl's home to lay his suit (*bónorð*) before her father or guardian. The wooer himself does not seem to have been present, given that the engagement and hand-pledging did not immediately follow. The patrician wedding-procedure among the chieftain class (i. e. among *hóldar*, *hersar* and

21. Sophus Bugge, *Bemærkningar til norrøne Digte. II. Rígsþula*, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 1, Christiania 1883, p. 309 f.; Cf. B. Simons, *Die Lieder der Edda*, Halle 1906, S. 170; Lehmann, *Die Rígsþula* (s. footnote 17), S. 9; Erik Brate, *Sämunds Edda*, Stockholm 1913, p. 324.

22. From Old Norse *ærr*, pl. *ærir*, 'messenger/s'.

jarlar according to the Gulating and Frostating laws) thus appears to have already involved a special official act, the public wooing, at the time of *Rígsþula*. During the saga age it was customary in Iceland, at any rate among the wealthy farmer class, for the wooing and the engagement to take place on one and the same occasion, at which the wooer was present²³.

Rígsþula does not specifically mention the engagement as a separate item. The poem presents us with the prevailing customs and only indirectly mirrors the legal arrangements behind the customs. One should bear in mind that, however factual the poem's description may be, the successive acts in the wedding are not necessarily a copy of the pattern of custom or the law. Yet the similarity in the depiction of the principal acts in the weddings of the farmer and the Earl are so striking that it is hard not to believe that the prevailing legal pattern governs the account not only as regards the principal acts of the marriage but also as to the order they came in. The pattern of the wedding in *Rígsþula* is as follows:

1. the bride is brought to the man's home
2. the bride is given to the man
3. the putting-on of the bridal veil

To this are subjoined

4. the consummation of the marriage
5. the joint possession of property which the marriage has established.

I take these in order.

1. The words *heim óku* 'they conveyed home' indicate the most important public act in both the Earl's and the farmer's wedding, since it was witnessed by non-participants as well as participants. It is furthermore very probable that the bride's dowry (*heimanfylgja*) normally accompanied her on this journey. This seems to be what is implied by the fact that the farmer's bride made this journey in a kirtle of goatskin with the keys of the accompanying chests and boxes at her side. The goatskin kirtle differentiated the farmer's bride from the Earl's. The keys demonstrated her title to what she was contributing to the household and the common stock which she would control as housewife after the marriage.

2. The next stage, both for the farmer and the Earl, was the second principal act of the kindred-marriage: the bride was given to the man, i. e. the wedding ceremony proper. In *Rígsþula* the handing-over of the bride by her guardian takes place at the wedding homestead, which in the circumstances of kindred-marriage was the bridegroom's home or at any rate the place where the newly-married couple would live. This rule was already eroded in Iceland however in the saga age, in that the wedding festivities were very often transferred to the bride's home. To judge from *Rígsþula*, the scheme proper to kindred-marriage was not observed in the wedding ceremony either, since this was conducted in the bride's homestead, along with other acts necessitated by law and custom for the fulfilment of marriage. This seems to have been the case in other parts of the North,

23. Cf. A. U. Bååth (transl.), *Nials saga*, Stockholm 1879, p. 2.

too. In both cases the presumption is that the marriage ceremony was entirely conducted in one and the same place and was not divided between two distinct localities and occasions, as a regular wedding in the kindred-marriage system properly required. In that system the groom and his kin had to present themselves in the bride's home, where her guardian would then hand her over to him. Then the occasion was taken to confirm the "bride-purchase" with an ale feast lasting till the following day. Only then could the bridal procession set off and the wedding ceremony be continued in the groom's home. This arrangement, known to us from medieval Swedish law and custom²⁴, seems to have been less common in the West Norse area, where the bride was conducted to the wedding in procession by her own kinsfolk²⁵.

Since the break-up of the old kindred-type of social structure appears to have commenced earlier in Iceland and Norway than in Sweden, the disappearance of the practice of conducting the bride from her home by the groom's envoys can be seen as a consequence of this. This view receives confirmation when we compare the provisions of the Götaland Law in regard to the entering of marriage with the younger Swedish law-codes (apart from that of Södermanland); the former (and this is true not only of the specific matter of the bridal procession but of other points as well) reflect an older social structure than the latter, whose provisions are more indefinite; the silence on this point of the older West Norse law-codes is particularly noteworthy. It is characteristic of the trend that in the Law of Gotland we find a prohibition, of 14th century date, directed against *magaraiþ* and *vagníela ferþir*. (The former of these terms refers to the groom's escort of male kinsmen (*magar*) and close friends, who came on horseback to fetch the bride to the wedding homestead — *utridningen* in more recent Gotland speech. The latter expression, "waggon journey", refers to the conveyance (which, doubtless took place from the beginning at the same time) of the bride's dowry and bridal chest to her new home. With some modifications, the custom survived to a late date.) By the time of this prohibition the disintegration of the old kindred-institutions and their transformation into a structure based on the patriarchal family were far advanced. Early traces of this change can be seen in the West Norse area. As for *Rígsþula*, the fact adduced should inhibit us from dating the conditions it portrays more than a century, at most, before the introduction of Christianity to Iceland in 1000.

3. With the giving of the bride to the man the marriage transaction could be looked upon, by the kindred, as completed. The woman had been *mundi keypt*, i. e. handed over by her guardian to her husband with all the legal and financial consequences thereby implied. The contractual marriage transaction was thus, strictly speaking, concluded. In fact, however, this was far from being the case: the marriage union between man and woman involved a large and various pattern

24. R. Hemmer, Äktenskapets fullbordan enligt äldre svensk rätt, *Tidskrift utg. av Juridiska föreningen i Finland* 1955, p. 421 ff.

25. Keyser, Nordmændens (s. footnote 14), p. 21 ff.

of customs, rites and legal prescriptions aimed at confirming the marital union and its consequences. That this wedding ritual had a long ancestry admits of no doubt.

Let us follow *Rígsþula*'s account and begin with the bridal veil. The poet employs two expressions for this. Of the farmer's bride he writes *settiz und ripti*, and of the Earl's bride *gekk und líni*. The phrase *ganga und líni*, 'to put on the veil' was the usual one in referring to a woman getting married. The repetition of these two expressions so similar in meaning shows that this must have been an important part of the wedding ceremony. It is possible that the poet is making a distinction of quality between *ripti* and *lín*. *Ript(i)* was a kind of linen cloth that could be woven on a farm²⁶.

According to early Norse tradition the bride was adorned with the veil when, after the bridal procession, she was brought to the bridal bench. The ceremony was doubtless a *rite de passage*, indicating the reception of the bride into the group of married women. An unmarried woman went with her head uncovered. In later days a headscarf was a not uncommon engagement present²⁷. The headgear of the housewife is described in stanza 29 of the poem in the words *keisti fald* 'she bore her headdress high'. Normally a married woman in Iceland wore a *hofuðdúker*, which could be arranged in several different ways. 'An erect head-dress bore the general name *Faldr*' says Rudolf Keyser. To judge from *Þrymskviða* (str. 16, 19), the bridal veil was worn together with a high conical hat. The medieval conical hat has long been preserved, especially in Iceland, as the type of female headgear.

Þrymskviða's description of the god Thor's wedding adventure in Jotunheimn is interesting in this connection. When Thor, disguised as Freyja and accompanied by Loki, disguised as a female bridal attendant, arrives at the dwelling of the giant Thrym, in the evening as was customary, the supposed bride was wearing the bridal veil and the bunch of keys with which he had been adorned at home in Ásgarðr.

19. Bundo þeir þór þá brúðar líni

léto und hánom hrynia lukla

(Then they bound the bridal veil on Thor, and let keys rattle around him.) The poem implies that the bride, on arriving at the wedding homestead, was placed on the bridal bench. This appears too from the order which Thrym gives to the giants after the bride's arrival

22. Standid' upp, iotnar, ok stráid bekkil!

Nú færið mér Freyio at kván,

Niardar dóttur ór Nóatúnom!

(Stand up, giants, and lay straw on the benches. Now bring me Freyja for wife, daughter of Njörðr from Nóatún.) After this, feasting and drinking begin on

26. Brate, Sámunds (s. footnote 21), commentary to stanza 23, p. 324.

27. Wikman, Einleitung (s. footnote 8), p. 289.

a scale truly appropriate to giants. The thunder-god is, of course not far from being a giant, and the matter of the poem shows marked influence from giant-motifs in folktales. After the feasting comes a dialogue between the bridegroom (Thrym) and the female attendant (Loki). In accordance with custom she sat beside the bride (*sat fyrir*) on the bridal bench. During this dialogue Thrym stooped beneath the veil (*laust und líno*) to kiss the bride. This seems to show that the veil totally covered the bride's countenance.

Þrymskíða, then, follows the same marriage-pattern as *Rígsþula*, except that the bride is already adorned in her veil in the wedding-procession. That, of course, belongs to the disguise, and in any case does not necessarily diverge from prevailing custom. The same applies to the next episode in the poem, where the groom's sister Hlóríða appears and asks for a bracelet as a bridal gift (*brúðfé*) to ensure good relations between herself and the bride. Here too the poem clearly diverges little from actual custom. It is true that the word *brúðfé* in this particular sense is unrecorded elsewhere, but presents from the bride to her kinsfolk are quite often met with in the history of marriage customs.

The considerable factual likenesses between *Rígsþula* and *Þrymskíða* are deeply significant and can by no means be dismissed as coincidences.

Now the disguised Thor receives as a wedding-present from the giant the hammer Mjöllnir, which the giants had stolen from Thor.

30. Þá kvad þat Þrymr, þursa dróttinn:
 'Berid inn hamar brúði at vígia,
 leggid Mjöllni í meyar kné,
 vígid okkr saman Várar hendi!'

(Then Thrym, lord of the giants, pronounced "Bring in the hammer to hallow the bride, place Mjöllnir in the maiden's lap, consecrate us together with the hand of Vár.) The linguistic understanding of the verse is as simple as its content is obscure. The situation is this: the bride is sitting on the bridal bench, wearing her bridal dress, adorned, and with her keys hanging by her side. Her female attendant sits beside her on the bench. The situation can be compared to the description of the bride sitting on the bridal bench in *Laxdöla* (ch. 65, 6): *En Guðrún sat innar á þverpalli ok þar konur hjá henni ok höfdu lín á höfði*. (But Gudrun, the bride, was sitting in the room on the bench and the women were sitting beside her there wearing the linen). (That the bride's *líkonur* (female attendants) wore veils agrees with the common marriage custom that attendant women should be dressed similarly to the bride.)

At this point the groom lifts the bride's veil and delivers his gift to the bride. What formal content one is to see in these acts is unclear. But one may assume that the gift to the bride corresponds to the bench-gift (*bekkjargjöf*) or linen gift (*lingjöf*) of the Norwegian laws. The usual view is that *línfé* denoted a present given to the bride attired in her linen veil²⁸.

28. Taranger, Norsk (s. footnote 3), p. 77, footnote 2 under the reference to N. Hertzberg, Glossar, *línfé* and K. Maurer, Vorlesungen II, p. 525.

In the same way, the bench-gift was a present she received while seated on the bridal bench. We find confirmation of this in later Norwegian and Icelandic traditions from the 17th century²⁹. After the wedding feast and drinking of toasts were concluded, says J. Wille, the groom gave the bride his wedding gifts: benchgift or linen gift. Only in about 1700 did the bench gift give way in Iceland to the custom of presenting a "morning gift"³⁰. The Older Västergötland Law calls the morning gift a "next day's gift" (*hindrædax gæf*; cp. *giðf of morgon*, Gulating Law 51). This indicates that the actual word *morgongáva* does not go back to Scandinavian antiquity.

WITHOUT ENTERING FURTHER into the age and historical development of these gift-customs, we may feel certain that linen-gift, bench-gift and morning-gift are all indissolubly associated with the consummation of the marriage and as such have from the beginning been of the same nature. In themselves they are gifts, sanctioned by law and custom, in return for a favour shown, whether as regards bridal veil, bridal bench or bridal bed. *prymskevida* gives us grounds for supposing that the bride's refusal to let the groom see her countenance and kiss her beneath the veil provides an etymological explanation of the term "linen-gift".

In the poem we read

27. en hann útan stökk endlangan sal:
'Hví ero öndótt augo Freyja?'

(But he sprang away the length of the hall. 'Why are Freyja's eyes evil?') The giant shrinks back from Freyja's malignant glance. Why? The bride was a person who could both be harmed and harm others with her glance³¹.

4—5. Unlike *prymskevida*, it is not fictitious but factual conditions that *Rígsþula* describes. In two pregnant clauses the poet says *biuggo hión*, *bauga deildo* (str. 23). After the bride had been seated on the bridal bench, had been adorned in the veil and the associated acts had been performed, there next followed the consummation of the marital union as prescribed by custom and law (*byggva hión*, *varða hión* 'connubio jungi'). The word *hiónalagh* properly denotes, in conformity with this, the sexual union established between a man and a woman. (Of the heathens it is therefore said *hedne hafdo ey fasta hjonelags festa*, not, that is, in a form recognised by the Church for the establishment of a marital union.)

That the physical consummation of the marriage was a central feature of wedding rites in the pagan period in Scandinavia, just as among the ancient Indo-European peoples in general, need not be doubted. But this does not in itself show that consummation was always a rite of legal significance with which certain financial consequences of the marriage were bound up. On this point the author

29. H. J. Wille, *Beskrivelse over Sillejords Præstergield*, København 1768, p. 266.

30. Jónas Jónasson, *Íslenzkir Þjóðhættir*, 3 útg. Reykjavík 1961, p. 286 ff.

31. Edvard Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage*, 2. ed., London & New York 1894, p. 527 ff.

of *Rígsþula* provides us with no information beyond what is implied in the words *bauga deildo* 'they shared rings'. This of course refers to property definable in cash terms, which, by Icelandic and Norwegian law, could be made the subject of a *félag*, whether at the engagement, the wedding or by means of a separate agreement later on. The *félag* system falls outside the scope of this paper³². But if Sophus Bugge was right in supposing that the line containing these words really belonged to the lost description of a royal wedding, the creation of a *félag* between the couple would seem more natural. The fragmentary nature of the last part of *Rígsþula* prevents us from being certain on this point, but we can at least see that it is a marriage with a foreign woman, a princess of Danish origin, that the poet is speaking of³³. One might perhaps suppose that we are faced here with a free marriage, entered *more Danico* as with the Norman ravagers, and that this has been excluded from the late edition of the poem that we possess.

The Finnish legal historian Ragnar Hemmer has studied the legal implications of the consummation of marriage in medieval Swedish law. He showed that the Swedish marriage law was dependent on canonical enactments and in particular that the principle of consent began to make its effect felt early on the attitude of the secular legal system to the consequences of the consummation of marriage.

Hemmer's conclusions are confirmed by what we know of the customs associated with the bridal-bed and the morning-gift in that period. The Scandinavian languages do not have any legal terms of their own for these concepts: *biläger* and *morgongåva* are both borrowed from German. The periphrasis *hindradags gäv*, which appears particularly often in medieval Swedish laws, refers only to the act of going to bed the evening before. This name for the morning-gift may have some connection with the Church's attempt to compress the wedding ceremony into a space of two successive days.

The blessing of the bridal bed inaugurated married life and was aimed at warding off the supernatural perils associated with sexual tabu. This was connected with the ecclesiastical tradition of Tobias nights, thought to stem from the Council of Carthage in 398, which in accord with the Capitularies of Benedict decreed that the newly-married couple "should for two or three days give themselves to prayer and to watching over their chastity, so that they might beget worthy descendants"³⁴. The tradition of Tobias nights survived on a popular level to a late date in Iceland and Norway³⁵. See, for the Swedish Middle Ages, Olaus Magnus (XIV:10).

That the rituals centred on the marriage-bed have roots in the tradition of the Church by no means obliges us to deny that the prescriptions about sexual continence in the marriage-bed at, or for a period after, the wedding could also

32. Taranger, Norsk (s. footnote 3), p. 82 f.

33. Brate, Sämunds (s. footnote 21) p. 323 ff.

34. Westermarck, The History (s. footnote 31), p. 550, footnote 6; Wikman, Einleitung (s. footnote 8), S. 30 ff.

35. Jónasson, Íslenzkir (s. footnote 30), p. 296 f.; Wikman, Einleitung, (s. footnote 8), p. 30 ff.

have existed in the pagan Norse wedding ritual. Numerous parallels could be adduced from ethnography to support such a presumption³⁶. Unfortunately we are completely without historical links which would enable us to trace usages and conceptions of this kind back to Norse or Indo-European antiquity. What looks like an ancient piece of evidence occurs in *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*, where the newly married Kráka says to her husband Ragnar

þrjár vit skulum þessar ok þó saman byggja,
hvárt ser nætr i hǫllu áðr heilug goð blótím.

(These three nights we shall dwell in the hall separately and yet together, before we sacrifice to the holy gods.) If they did not do this, their son would be born without legs. But Ragnar did not follow his wife's advice, and their son was duly born without legs. He was later called Ívarr the Legless.

Ragnars saga Loðbrókar belongs to the older group of *Fornaldarsögur*, which Sigurður Nordal³⁷ has dated after 1250, and the *lausavísa* just quoted may well be older than the date when the saga was committed to writing. It seems unlikely, however, that the episode can be carried back to pagan tradition. The half-verse quoted must be understood in relation to the tradition of Tobias nights, as a legendary explanation of the name *Ívarr beinlaus*. This is confirmed by the last words *áðr heilug goð blótím*, which manifestly relate to the Church's rule that the newly married couple should, after the wedding, be received at the Church to purify themselves and should make an offering at the altar³⁸. To draw conclusions about pagan belief and cult from the ritual symbolism of the Christian Church is a methodological error.

Early Norse marriage customs are historically known to us from the earliest Christian period — roughly 1000—1200 — even where they may be thought to exemplify traditions going back one or more centuries earlier. This period is characterised by the disintegration of the religious clan-community and its transformation into a conceited legalistic self-assertion so typical of the men "whose faith was in their own might and main" as we see them in family and legal tradition, especially during the great age of the Icelandic republic. So it is not surprising that, against this background, we find our sources so meagre and scattered in the information they give us on the religious aspects of entering marriage.

For the earliest period we have only Adam of Bremen's statement that the Swedes sacrificed to Fricco (*Fricconi lybatur*) when they were to celebrate a wedding³⁹. Early Norse sources provide no direct information about sacrifice in connection with weddings apart from Adam's assertion.

36. Treated in detail by Westermarck in *The History* (s. footnote 31), p. 556—565.

37. Sigurður Nordal, *Sagalitteraturen, Nordisk Kultur VIII B*, Uppsala 1953, p. 230.

38. Grath, *Den svenska* (s. footnote 3), p. 59 ff.

39. Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum IV*. Codex Havniensis. Publ. in photolithography with preface by C. A. Christensen, Copenhagen 1948, p. 27; about *Fricco*, see E. Wessén, *Studier till Sveriges hedna mytologi och fornhistoria*, Uppsala 1924, p. 183 ff.

Þrymskevida shows that marriage was entered into by an engagement pledge made in the name of *Vár*, goddess of vows. The hands of bride and groom were laid together: *vígð okkr saman Várar hendi* (str. 30). This ceremony took place after the bride had been brought to the wedding homestead and seated on the bridal bench. According to early Norse conceptions a vow had a significance near that of an oath. Some scholars have thought that *Vár* was only a mythological abstraction created by the learned Snorri. But Folke Ström's discussion of the significance of vows in pagan Norse religion gives us good grounds for supposing that *Vár* is a — perhaps late — hypostasis of Frigg⁴⁰.

The joining of hands (Sanskrit *panigrahana*, Latin *dextrarum junctio*) was an ancient Indo-European magico-religious act, which was combined on entering into marriage with sacrifices and ceremonies aimed at binding the housewife to hearth and home. The ceremony of joining hands has been part of the wedding usages of all the Indo-European peoples, as well as of most of those peoples who have come under Indo-European influence, and must be considered as of extreme antiquity in the North as elsewhere⁴¹.

We also find ourselves moving among conceptions of great antiquity when we contemplate wedding customs associated with the hearth. As was already noticed by Finn Magnussen⁴², we seem to have a reminiscence of a cultic usage of this kind in *Guðrúnarhvøt*.

10. Þríá víska ek elda, þríá víska ek arna,
var ek þrimr verom vegin at húsi.

(Three fires I knew, three hearth I knew, by three husbands was I brought home.) This poem treats, in early Norse dress, a theme from the early Migration Period and is thought to have been originally composed in the ninth century⁴³. The strophe just quoted is probably an old rhyme (*þula*).

We have a great deal of comparative matter in this connection, a mass of familiar material relating to ancestor worship and the cult of the hearth in association with wedding rites among the ancient Indians, Greeks, Romans, Teutons, Lithuanians, Letts and Estonians⁴⁴. Even though we have almost no records from more recent dates, our material from Norse antiquity seems convincing enough and is most important in establishing the continuity of the tradition.

IT HAS BEEN CLAIMED EVER SINCE THE DAYS OF JACOB GRIMM, and especially by E. H. Meyer, that the Giant's order in *Þrymskevida* to bring in *Mjöllnir* to hallow the bride (*brúði at vígia*) and then to lay the hammer in the bride's lap

40. Folke Ström, *Gudarnas vrede, Saga och Sed* 1952, Uppsala 1953, p. 5 ff.

41. M. Winternitz, *Das altindische Hochzeitsrituell*, *Denkschr. d. Kaiserl. Akademie d. Wiss. Hist.-phil. Cl.*, Wien 1892, S. 48 ff.; Westermarck, *The History* (s. footnote 31), p. 439 ff.

42. Finn Magnussen, *Eddalæren og dens Oprindelse I*, København 1824, p. 370 ff.

43. Helgason, *Norges* (s. footnote 18), pp. 48; 70 ff.

44. Weinhold, *Frauen* (s. footnote 9) I, S. 380 ff. Cf. also J. Balys, *Litauische Hochzeitsbräuche*, *Contributions of Baltic University*, Hamburg 1946, S. 47, 48.

(*leggid Miðlǫni í meylar kné*) constitutes a ritual-mystical element in the poem. Hallowing with Thor's hammer in its quality of cult-object or symbol for protective or propitious (especially fertility-inducing) ends is a plausible undertaking in itself. The words "place the hammer in the maiden's lap" have a motivation in the poem's plot, where Thor seizes his hammer and beats to death Thrym and all his family. But if we put this fictitious element on one side, the purely ritual aspect remains. In Norse mythology Thor hallows with his hammer (1) the bride in this poem (2) the goats on his journey to Útgardr, (3) Balder's pyre. If we suppose that we have to do here with a ritual element, then we at any rate obtain a common denominator to help interpret these instances. Thor's hammer can be thought to point to a wedding ritual whose purpose was to awaken the spirits of the ancestors in a later generation. In this connection we may perhaps be allowed to refer to the Lappish custom, known from the Middle Ages, of hallowing the bridal pair *igne et silice*⁴⁵. The worship of the Norse thunder-god was, both in its mystical and its cultic aspects, early incorporated in Lappish paganism⁴⁶, and this fact lends support to our suggestion. It should be remarked, however, that interpretations of the myths and cults underlying poetic matter only preserved in relatively late tradition are necessarily very speculative. Certainly we can hope to attain surer results in seeing what information the poem has to give us on more material, tangible matters.

WE FIND OURSELVES ON FIRMER GROUND as regards the sacral drinking at the wedding. Even in the early Norse period wedding celebrations were characterized by the drinking customs which went with them: hence the expression *dricke bröllop*, which from the start epitomized at once the sacral and the profane elements in the wedding ceremonial. The expression has survived in popular speech to the present day. Collective drinking, we can be certain, goes back to pre-Christian, at least late pagan, times. Even in the early Christian period it was brought under the wing of the Church in the form of communal ecclesiastical feasts. A subsequent influence is reflected in the replacement of the old word *fullr* to denote the collective drinking by the word *minni*. At a wedding one drank the *minni* (the "health") of Óðinn, Thor, Njórdr, Frey and "all the gods", and in the Christian period the *minni* of Christ, Mary and the saints. The last toast was, in the one case, to Freyja, in the other to Mary (*Freyju minni, Maríu minni*). This drinking of toasts lasted all through the Middle Ages and down to the sixteenth century at least. It implied that participants, assembled in a hallowed gathering, joined with the bridal pair in wishing and vowing for amity and success. One can draw a parallel between drinking together and eating together as wedding customs. M. Winternitz, however, takes the view that these wedding

45. J. Ziegler, in Olaus Magnus IV:7 with commentaries by J. Granlund, Uppsala & Stockholm 1909—51.

46. U. Harva, Lappalaisten uskonto, Porvoo 1915; U. Harva, Suomalaisten muinaisusko, Helsinki 1948, p. 88, 8; Nils Lid, Gudar og gudedyrkning, *Nordisk Kultur* XXVI, Oslo 1942, p. 127.

customs can hardly be traced back to Indo-European antiquity⁴⁷. But that does not disprove that they sprang, both in Ancient Rome and in various parts of the North, from prehistoric usages among agricultural peoples of consuming in a hallowed gathering the fruits of the harvest, bread and ale.

The religious and magical usages which, so far as we can judge, go back to heathen times are far from giving us a complete picture of the act of entering marriage in sacral forms. But they include all the essential elements we know from the marriage rites of other Indo-European peoples. They are bound up partly with the initiation of the marriage, the joining of hands, and partly with its consummation, the marital union. In these rites not only the bridal pair take part but also, in a general way, their friends and kinsfolk on both sides. The rites represent not only magical practices but also the invocation of higher powers, particularly Frey, who were thought to promote the general ends of marriage: fertility, increase and prosperity. As a divinity presiding specifically over marriage we find, at any rate in the late pagan period, only Frigg-Freyja. The connection of the wedding ritual with the divinities overseeing the growth of the crops can scarcely have had at any time the same essential significance as the worship of the deities of the hearth and the spirits of ancestors. The social basis for that worship was the kindred. When this disintegrated as a unifying religious factor, the act of entering marriage lost its original sacral basis. Its religious aspect merged into a larger context, the cult of the *blótgod*, who were connected with prosperity and welfare in general.

47. The International Folk-lore Congress 1891, London 1892, p. 280 ff.