5 Snorri specifically mentions *höfgodar*. The evidence for these figures is overwhelmingly Icelandic in origin, though the sagas place them in other countries too, such as Norway. Outside Iceland the term is known only from two Danish runestones, with inscriptions that hint at the *göðar* having once had a purely ritual function, their political power developing over time (Brink 1996: 267; Näström 2002b: 94ff).

The *göði* also had a female equivalent, the *gyðja*, whom we will encounter again in the context of sorcery. The role of women in the officialdom of cultic practice was taken up relatively early in Viking studies, especially in relation to fertility rituals (e.g. Phillpotts 1914), and it is clear that some of the *gyðja* enjoyed a very high status in the apparatus of cult. Several factors suggest a connection to Freyja and the Vanir, and both the *göði* and the *gyðja* could have responsibility for the sacrificial *blót* (cf. Näström 2002b: 97f).

A constant element in the written descriptions of all these ‘offices’ and ‘titles’ is that they could occasionally be combined with additional roles – again, this merging of secular and ‘religious’ power. There are suggestions that the inner access to the gods and their servants was relatively restricted, but more along lines of social standing than of initiation into the mysteries. Similarly, the various ‘officials’ mentioned above do not seem to have had a priest-like monopoly on communication with otherworldly powers, and this is important when we come to consider sorcery below. It is also clear that behind the cultic rites and those responsible for them, there was another level of popular belief and unarticulated superstition.

Here we find the mythology reflected in small ways, in everyday practices corresponding to everyday beliefs – though the latter may be far from mundane. In *Gylfaginning* (51) Snorri gives us a glimpse of this, relating to two aspects of the Ragnarök story. In the account above we have seen the ‘Nail-Ship’, Naglfar, and the vital role it plays in ferrying the armies of evil to fight against the gods. Because it is made from the fingernails of the dead, Snorri explains that this is why one should be very careful to trim the nails of a dying person – there is no reason to hasten the ship’s construction by contributing the raw materials. The exact corollary of this is mentioned later in the same passage, in relation to Viðarr’s shoe. After Fenrir has swallowed Óðinn, his son Viðarr plants his foot on the wolf’s lower jaw, which he presses down while forcing its mouth wider and wider. Fenrir is torn in two, and Óðinn is avenged. The animal’s jaws are enormous, stretching from the earth to the sky, so Viðarr obviously needs some impressive footwear: Snorri tells us that his shoe is sewn from all the tiny scraps of leather left over when anything is made here in Míøgarðr. One should therefore be careful to throw these away, because every little helps.

The same process is probably visible in the archaeology of pendant ‘amulets’ and ‘charms’ of the kind that we shall consider in chapter three. Occasionally we are given a small window onto a broader scene, in which we can perceive not just objects but actions taken with them. A good example emerged at Birkå in the excavations of the early 1990s, when a number of amulets of different kinds were found built into the make-up of a road through the town. Too many of these were found within a small area for there to be any question of accidental loss, and it seems certain that an amulet ring, Þór’s hammer and a miniature weapon were deliberately laid down while the road was undergoing one of its periodic repairs (see Price 1995a: 75f).

The fabric of religious belief and practice in Viking Age Scandinavia can be seen to have been nuanced, multi-scalar and far from static, with a degree of regional variation and change over time. Seen against this pattern of semi-structured spirituality, how does sorcery fit in?

**The double world:**

*seiðr* and the problem of Old Norse ‘magic’

In 1986 when the French Viking specialist Régis Boyer published his study of Old Norse magic, he chose as his title *Le monde du double*, ‘the world of the double’. As he makes clear in his introduction, it often comes as a surprise to realise just how fundamental a role the practice of magic played in the Scandinavian mental universe. In his concept of the ‘Double’, he tries to frame this as a kind of parallel belief, a mirror held up alongside the more elevated apparatus of Viking ‘religion’ proper. To some extent I would agree with his assessment, though I feel that the two worlds are more closely
linked than he credits. The reason for this lies once again in terminology and what we understand by it.

We have already seen how our modern concepts of 'religion' are not necessarily compatible with those of the Viking Age. We can make the same observation about the social environment of sorcery at the same period. The first problems come at the level of apparently simple definition, which on closer inspection turns out to be far from straightforward. Today we speak fluidly of 'magic' and 'witchcraft', the working of 'spells' and 'charms', all performed by 'sorcerers', 'witches', 'warlocks', 'wizards' and so on. In popular parlance there is little to choose between any of these terms, but no one would link them with formal religion as it is generally perceived. In the early medieval period the situation was very different, in two ways.

Firstly, there seems to have been a very precise vocabulary of sorcery, encompassing its forms, functions, practice and practitioners. Secondly, through intimate links with deities such as Óðinn and Freyja, and also in its underlying principles which included some of the soul beliefs reviewed above, the whole structure of sorcery was interlaced with that of cult. Simek (1993: 199) has perhaps come closest to illuminating this relationship when he writes of magic as "the mentality [and] the practices with which the mechanisms of supernatural powers are set into motion".

When defined in this way, it is clear from the written sources that one concept above others lay at the core of Old Norse concepts of magic. Its name was seidr, and its closer study will be central to much of this book. Seidr would have been pronounced approximately 'sayth', rhyming with the modern English 'swathe', but with a slightly inflected 'r' sound at the end in the nominative form (similar to 'the' when spoken before a consonant, thus 'sayther'). Several scholars have noted that etymologically it seems to belong to a group of Indo-European words with connotations of 'binding', especially in a sorcerous context (e.g. Dronke 1997: 133).

It is described at length in a number of Old Norse sources, and circumstantially in a great many more. These are all reviewed in detail below, but at this point we can simply note that it seems to have been a collective term for a whole complex of practices, each serving a different function within the larger system of sorcery. There were seidr rituals for divination and clairvoyance; for seeking out the hidden, both in the secrets of the mind and in physical locations; for healing the sick; for bringing good luck; for controlling the weather; for calling game animals and fish. Importantly, it could also be used for the opposite of these things - to curse an individual or an enterprise; to blight the land and make it barren; to induce illness; to tell false futures and thus to set their recipients on a road to disaster; to injure, maim and kill, in domestic disputes and especially in battle.

More than anything else, seidr seems to have been an extension of the mind and its faculties. Even in its battlefield context, rather than outright violence it mostly involved the clouding of judgement, the freezing of the will, the fatal hesitation. It was also closely linked to the summoning of spirits and other beings of various kinds, who could be bound to the sorcerer's will and then sent off to do her or his bidding. In line with the 'invisible population' we have encountered above, an important category of these beings were also extensions of the individual in its manifestations of a multiple soul - the fylgiur, hamingjaur and so on.

The link to cultic practice comes primarily through the god Óðinn, who as we shall see is named in several sources as the supreme master of seidr, along with Freyja from whom he learnt its power. The Vanir provide a clue to another important aspect of this sorcery, in their role as deities of fertility and sexual potency. Not only do many seidr rituals seem to have been sexual in their objectives, but they may also have been so in the nature of their performance. Beyond the practices with specific carnal intentions, this emphasis on sexuality is also often found in a surprising number of seidr's other functions reviewed above. By extension, the enactment of these rites seems to have placed so great a demand on their performers as to mark them with a different form of gender identity, outside the conventional norms of Viking Age society.

It is in connection with all these elements that seidr has consistently been viewed as a Norse counterpart to what has elsewhere been called shamanism. This, together with the social context and functions of seidr, forms the subject of the following chapters. We shall look especially at seidr's employment in warfare and as part of what we might call a divinely-inspired ideology of martial
valour, backed up by the constructions of sexuality and gender with which it was underpinned. However, seiðr is far from the only form of sorcery mentioned in the Old Norse sources, and before proceeding further we first need to pose a question as to the nature of these other magics, their relationship with seiðr, and the degree to which they may be considered collectively.

The other magics: galdr, gandr and ‘Óðinnic sorcery’

Essentially there occur five categories of sorcery in the sources, besides seiðr itself. Three of them were also named complexes of ritual and technique – though apparently in a looser sense than seiðr - while the others are modern constructions which derive from an analysis of the texts:

- galdr
- gandr
- Útiseta
- a group of un-named rituals connected through the abilities of the god Óðinn, here termed ‘Óðinnic sorcery’
- a general ‘background noise’ of popular magic, often unsophisticated or indeed completely unarticulated in a practical way, occurring throughout the literature

The most distinctive of these five is undoubtedly galdr, which seems to have been a specific form of sorcery focusing on a characteristic type of high-pitched singing. The word has a relative today in the modern Swedish verb gala, used for the crowing of a rooster and for the most piercing of birdcalls (see Raudvere 2001: 90-7 and 2002 on the importance of verbalising this kind of sorcery). The saga descriptions of galdr-songs note that they were pleasing to the ear, and there is a suggestion of a special rhythm in view of the incantation metre called galdralag, as described by Snorri in Háttatal (101-2) and used occasionally in Eddic poems such as Hávamál and Sigdrífomál.

One of the first major studies of the form was made by Ivar Lindquist (1923), but he applied the term very literally to a broad range of charms from the whole of the Iron Age. Reichborn-Kjønnerud (1928: 71, 76, 81) argued that galdr was employed most often for cursing, with an emphasis on the destructive power of the tongue - he cites examples of its use to induce sicknesses of various kinds in both humans and animals, and also to kill. He claims a close connection between galdr and runic lore (ibid: 81). However, galdr in fact occurs in a variety of contexts as we shall see in the coming chapters, and it seems that its status as a distinct form of magic was probably beginning to blur by the end of the Viking period.

It performed many, if not all, of the same functions as seiðr, and in a great many instances the two are used in combination (the term seiðgaldr even occurs in a fourteenth-century source that we shall examine below). Despite this, in every case it is seiðr which sets the pattern for the ritual as a whole. Galdr can be seen rather as a particular element in a larger complex of operative magical practice, one option in the toolkit of ritual. By the Middle Ages proper, the term had become synonymous with magic in general.

Gandr forms yet another distinct category here, with origins that go back much earlier than the Viking Age. The basic sense of the word is often argued to mean simply ‘magic’, and de Vries has suggested that it can be related to the concept of Gimmungagap (1931a; his interpretation is discussed in chapter three). This is important, as it suggests gandr to be one of the primal forces from which the worlds were formed, and thus implies that this form of sorcerous power was of considerable dignity. That this type of sorcery also had an early history is shown by tantalising references from Classical writers, for example the name Gianna attributed by Dio Cassius in his Roman History (67: 5) to the prophetess of the North German Semnones, and which is also from the same root (de Vries 1957: §229; see also Closs 1936).

By the Viking Age, and as with galdr, we find combinations of ritual forms. In several instances there are references to sorceresses using gandr in conjunction with seiðr in order to prophesy, for example in Völuspá (22, 29). The term also had a special application in the sense of both spirit beings and the staff that may have been used to summon them; these are discussed in chapter three.
Another aspect of Norse sorcery was the practice of *útiseta*, ‘sitting out’, which does not seem to have been a specific ritual so much as a technique to put other rituals into effect. Clearly related to Óðinnic communications with the dead, in brief it seems to have involved sitting outside at night, in special places such as burial mounds, by running water or beneath the bodies of the hanged, in order to receive spiritual power. It is considered in greater depth in chapter three.

The rituals performed by Óðinn form a category in their own right, beyond the specific complexes of *seidr* and *galdr*, both of which the god employs. Several of them are also available to human sorcerers, but the Eddic poems make it clear that others are not, and are among the powers purchased on the god’s many quests for magical knowledge. These skills are recorded in the list of spells in poems such as *Hávamál*, in the catalogues of runes of power, and in the narratives of sagas. Again, they are reviewed in the following chapters.

Besides the magic used by Óðinn, we also find the fifth category of ‘general’ sorcery. One aspect of this has a vocabulary of terms that appear to mean simply ‘magic’ in the same vague sense as we use the word today. The most common of these was *fjolkyngi*, which seems to have been especially well-used. In the Old Norse sources we also find *frökleikr*, and slightly later, *trolldómr* (cf. Raudvere 2001: 88ff). The latter concept became increasingly common through the Middle Ages, and together with *galdr* it continued as one of the generic words for ‘witchcraft’ long into post-medieval times (see Hastrup 1987: 331-6 for Icelandic terminologies of magic during this period).

There were also other terms which were used as collectives. These include *gerningar*, *ljóð* and *taufr* - all apparently kinds of chant or charm - and the complexities of runic lore as set out in Eddic poems such as *Sigrdrífumál* and *Rígsþula*. Another group of terms refers to various forms of unspecified magical knowledge, and include affixes implying this on the part of people or supernatural beings. Thus we find *visenda-*,- *kínavat-* and similar words used for ‘those who know’, a relatively common perception of sorcerous power that occurs in many cultures.

Given these ‘other’ magics, to what extent can we discuss Old Norse sorcery in generic terms, and can we use the terminologies of *seidr* for this purpose?

The key lies in the definition of sorcery itself, both in the sense usually employed by historians of religions and also with specific reference to the Viking Age. Even without the conventions of ‘worship’ discussed above, the human relationship to the gods was not an equal one, and inevitably involved a degree of subservience that characterised all the different kinds of cult activity that we have examined. This applies to the notion of *blót*, ‘sacrifice’, in particular. In the world of sorcery this was not the case, a state of affairs that hinges on the idea of control. Magic seems to have been used by human beings as a means of *actively* steering the actions of supernatural beings for their own ends, first attracting or summoning them, and then binding them to do the sorcerer’s will (cf. Strøm 1961b: 221f).

In one form or another this concept is common to all the different magics reviewed above, but only in one of them is it made explicit – in *seidr*. This ‘binding’ sorcery is also the only one conceived as a complete type of magic in the original sources, and the only form of it that combines elements of the others into a greater whole. As we have seen, although both *galdr* and *gandr* are also categorised in the written sources, the former was more of a technique while the latter seems to have referred mainly to a general kind of sorcerous energy from which all power was drawn. Again, when each (or both) of these are performed in conjunction with *seidr*, there is never any doubt that the latter is the primary, formative element in the ritual.

In this specific sense, there are therefore grounds for discussing *seidr* as a generic for Old Norse sorcery. However, this is also warranted by the general vagueness of the descriptions of Viking magic, this lack of consistent orthodoxy which as we have seen was an integral part of the Norse attitude to the spiritual. Again and again in the sources, and in the terminologies of sorcerers that we will examine in the next chapter, we seem to find *seidr* used *simultaneously* as a precise term and also as a generalisation for ‘sorcery’ in our modern sense of the word. In using *seidr* as a primary category, in a manner that implicitly includes the other magics, we would therefore seem to be following the fashion in which the Norse themselves understood the concept.

We can now review the written sources on which our knowledge of *seidr* is based.
Seiðr in the sources

By the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when many of the heroic sagas and formaldarsögur were composed, seiðr had become incorporated into the general stock of fantastic magical phenomena with which medieval authors entertained their readers. However, there is no doubt that at least in Iceland, and very probably in Norway and the rest of Scandinavia too, at least some details of its Viking Age reality were remembered. Not least, these included the breadth of seiðr’s applications and functions, and its capacity to produce positive and negative effects. The prologue to Gongu-Hrólfss saga, one of the most outlandish of the medieval ‘Viking’ romances, gives us a brief glimpse of how seiðr was perceived in the High Middle Ages:

Er þat ok margra heimska manna náttúra, at þeir trúð því einu, er þeir sjá sínum augum eða heyrar sínum eyrum, er þeim lýkkir þjarlegt sínari náttúra, svá sem orðit þeir um vítra mannaráðagörðir eða mikit afl eða fráðeran lítileika fyrirmana, svá ok eigi síðr um konstir eða huklaraskap ok mikla fjólkyngr, þá þeir seiddu at sumum monnum avínliga ógæfu eða aldrtila, en sumum veraldar víðing, fjár ok metnaðar. Þeir æstu stundum hýfuðskèpnum, en stundum kyrðu, svá sem var Óðinn eða aðrir þeir, er af honum námu galdristir eða laukningar.

Moreover there are plenty of people so foolish that they believe nothing but what they have seen with their own eyes or heard with their own ears - never anything unfamilial to them, such as the counsels of the wise, or the strength and amazing skills of the great heroes, or the way in which seiðr, skills of the mind {huklaraskap} and powerful sorcery {fjólkyngr} may seiðr* death or a lifetime of misery for some, or bestow worldly honours, riches and rank on others. These [men] would sometimes stir up the elements, and sometimes calm them down, just like Óðinn and all those who learnt from him the skills of galdr and healing.

* seiðr is here used as a verb - see chapter three

Gongu-Hrólfss saga prologue

translation after Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1980: 27, with my amendments

Viewed as a whole, it is true to say that the corpus of Icelandic sagas, skaldic verse and Eddic poetry is saturated with references to sorcery in general, and seiðr in particular. Its practitioners are of both sexes and are given a variety of titles, but the constant prevalence of magic never subsides.

Even taking into account the wavering reliability of the sagas as sources for the Viking Age that they describe, in view of the sheer cumulative volume of references to ‘everyday’ witchcraft it is surprising that so little work has been done on its integration into our models of the Viking world. Philologists have discussed sorcery, certainly, but almost exclusively in terms of medieval literary motifs and narrative structure. They have not tried to relate it to any kind of Viking Age reality, and understandably so because this is not part of the research agenda for ancient linguistics. Historians of religions have sought patterns of behaviour, and the ‘roots’ of different aspects of cult - especially that of Óðinn - but here again there have been relatively few attempts to build up an image of sorcery as it was perceived at the time. Although there are numerous synthetic treatments of Viking religion, referenced throughout this book, these do not generally present belief in the broader context of society in general (a good exception is Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1994, but this is deliberately written at a popular level and does not go into depth). Archaeological syntheses, equally common, tend to suffer from the same problem in reverse, reducing religion to a summary of the gods and Eddic myths in so far as they can be linked to material culture. These works have largely tended to ignore magic and witchcraft due to the difficulties of accessing such phenomena through the archaeological record. There are, of course, exceptions to which we shall return below.

We can begin by briefly summarising the textual sources for seiðr (cf. Strömbäck 1935: 17-107; Almqvist 2000: 250-60). The most important of them are quoted in full here, while others are merely referenced, all of them are taken up in detail in this and subsequent chapters.
Skaldic poetry

The corpus of skaldic poetry contains two direct references to seíðr, and a number of kennings that play upon it. The earliest dated reference occurs in a lausavisa of Vitgeirr seíðmaðr, significantly a sorcerer himself. It was probably composed around 900 and is contained in chapter 35 of Snorri’s Haralds saga ins háragnar. It is quoted in full in chapter three, in the section on male practitioners of magic.

Seíðr is also mentioned in strophe 3 of the skaldic praise-poem Sigurðardrápa, composed by Kormákr Ogmundarson around 960. The poet alludes to Öðinn’s rape of Rindr, achieved by means of disguising himself through sorcery, with the words: seíð Yggr til Rindr, ‘Yggr [i.e. Óðinn] got Rindr with seíðr’.

Two verses from the thirteenth-century Fríðþjófs saga hins frækna, attributed to Fríðþjóf himself, mention rituals that are described as seíðr in the accompanying prose, but cannot be taken as direct early evidence for it (in Skjaldedigtning BI: 295).

The term also appears in four kennings, from three sources. The first is from a lausavisa of Egill Skalla-Grimsson, dated c.924 by Finnur Jónsson:

Upp skulum orun sverðum,  
ulfz tannlituð, glitra,  
eigum dóð at drýgia,  
i dalmiskun fiska;  
leiði upp til Lundar  
lýða hveir sem bráðast,  
gerum þar fyr sjót sólar  
seíð ófagran vigra.

We shall, painter of the wolf’s tooth [warrior], make our swords glitter in the air. We have to perform our deeds in the mild season of the valley-fish [snakes > summer]. Let everyone go as quickly as possible up to Lund. Let us make the harsh spear-seíðr before sunset.

Egill Skalla-Grimsson lausavisa 6 (Skjaldedigtning BI: 43), translation after Fell 1975: 184

This is a problematic poem, mainly because we know from archaeological data that the town of Lund was definitely not in existence in the early tenth century. There is thus no doubt that the text of Egill’s verse is at least partly corrupt. However, the attribution of the poem to a different battle than that for which it was written, for whatever reason, does not affect the kenning of vigra seíðr, nor its probable location in the original verse.

Two more seíðr-kennings were used by the eleventh-century skald Eiríkr víðjá, in lausavísur dated to the year 1014. Both occur in battle contexts, and seem to refer to warriors in both instances (lögðs seíðr, ‘destruction’s seíðr’ - str. 5; Fjólnis seíðr, ‘Fjólnir’s seíðr’ - str. 6). The fourth kenning, from strophe 12 of Sturla Sórarson’s Hákonarkviða, dates to the 1260s. Simpler in form, sverða seíðr means ‘sword-seíðr’ and is a clear parallel to Egill’s vigra seíðr of three centuries earlier.

The intended sense in all these examples seems to be of seíðr as a song, depicting the fighting warrior as embodying a sort of hymn to combat or to the patrons of such (a common theme in kennings).

Eddic poetry

From the corpus of Eddic poetry, we first find references to seíðr in Völuspá (22), with slight variations between the Codex Regius and Hauksbók texts (Strömbäck 1935: 17-21). The original composition of the poem is most often dated to the very late tenth century, though its preservation stems from the early 1200s when the first - now lost - versions of the Codex Regius version seem to have been composed. Our existing texts derive from the late thirteenth century (Dronke 1997: 62f). The text is given here from Dronke’s edition, with a rather free translation by Larrington; its interpretation and alternative, more exact translations are discussed below:

Heiði hana hétó  
hvars til húsa kom,  
Bright Heiðr they called her,  
wherever she came to houses,
presente

I

Th

discuss

practitioner

Seiðhón kunni, seiðhón leikin.

Æ var hón angan

illrar brúðar.

Voðuspa 22; text after Dronke 1997, translation after Larrington 1996: 7

Seiðr appears again in Lokasenna (24), the ritualistic exchange of insults which many scholars believe to be an original composition by a pagan poet of the late Viking Age, or at least a twelfth- or thirteenth-century embellishment of such (Dronke 1997: 355). In one of his series of slanders directed against the gods, and in reply to Óðinn, Lóki makes the following allegation:

En þik síða kóðo
Sámseyio í,
ok draptu á vét sem voðor.
Vitka liki
fórtu verþiði yfir,
ok hugða ek þat args aðal.

But you, they said, performed seiðr on Sáms, and tapped on a vét like the voður. Like a vitka you went over the world of men, and that I thought to be argr behaviour.

Lokasenna 24; text after Dronke 1997, with her translation and my amendments

This introduces several of the key themes in the study of Old Norse sorcery: its context, its practitioners (the voður and the vitkar, amongst others), the ritual itself and its equipment (the vét), and its social connotations (the idea of argr, or ergi). All these are taken up in detail in chapter three, where the Lokasenna passage is reviewed.

The third seiðr-reference in the Eddic corpus comes from strophe 33 of Hyndluljóð, as part of what is generally agreed to be an interpolation known as the ‘Shorter Voðuspá’ (Voðuspá í skamma) which is also quoted in Gylfaginning 5. The passage recounts the genealogical ancestry of sorcerers:

Ero voðor allar fra Viðólfr,
vitkar allir fra Vilmeiðr,
en seiðberendr fra Svarthóða,
iðtnar allir fra Ymir komnir.

All the voður are descended from Viðólfr, all the vitkar from Vilmeiðr, and the seiðberendr from Svarthóði, all the giants come from Ymir.

Text: Neckel & Kuhn 1983; translation after Larrington 1996: 257

The ‘Shorter Voðuspá’ is generally agreed to be later than the rest of Hyndluljóð, with datings ranging from the late 1100s (Klingenberg 1974: 9, 36) to a century later (Finnur Jónsson 1920: 206; de Vries 1967: 107ff; the arguments are summarised by Steinsland 1991: 247f, who suggests that the poem is in fact a unified work, including the ‘interpolation’). Here the focus is once again on specific types of practitioner, with the voður and vitkar being joined by the seiðberendi, the ‘seiðr-carrier’ which is discussed in chapter three.

The sagas of the kings

In the royal sagas of Snorri’s Heimskringla we encounter seiðr on numerous occasions, generally presented in incidental fashion embedded in the narrative. However, in one source it is presented in a more explanatory context, and this is of course the Ynglingasaga. It first appears in chapter 4, when we read of the introduction of sorcery to the Æsir gods by Freyja:
Chapter 2

Dóttir Niarðar var Freyja; hon var blóthyðja; hon kendi fyrst með Ásum seíð, sem Vönum var útí.

The daughter of Njörðr was Freyja; she was a blóthyðja ['priestess of sacrifices']; she was the first to teach seíðr to the Æsir, as it was practiced among the Vanir.

Ynglingasaga 4; my translation

The importance of this gift becomes clear in chapter seven of the Ynglingasaga, when Snorri declares how it was used by Óðinn, who came to be the supreme master of this form of magic. The reference to seíðr is contained in a longer description of the god's powers, and this context is important to preserve in its shifts of emphasis and tone, and the distinctions drawn between different categories of sorcery which are here introduced for the first time:

Óðinn skipti hónum, lá þá bákrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þar fuggi eða dýr, fískr eða ornar, ok fór á einni svipstund á fjárleg lýnd at sínum erendum eða annarra manna. Pat kunið hann enn at gera með öðrum einum at slêkva eld ok kýra sjá ok smúa vindum, hverja leið er hann vildi, ok hann átti skip þat, er Skíðblaðnir hét, er hann fó r á yfir höf stór, en þat mátti vefta samei sem dúk. Óðinn háði með sér höfuð Mímis, ok sagði þat honum töndendi ór öðrum heimunum, en stundum vokk honn upp dauða menn ór jörðu eða settisk undir hanga; fyrir því var hann kallaðr draugadröttinn eða hangadröttinn. Óðinn átti hrafnna þi, er hann háði þamit við mál; flugu þeir víða um lýnd ok schöðu honum mörg töndendi. Af þessum hlutum varð hann stórlíka fröði. Álla þessar þróttir kendi hann með rúnum ok ljóðum þeim, er galdrar heita; fyrir því eru Æsir kallaðr galdrasmðir. Óðinn kunið þá þrótt, svat þat mætti fylgði, ok framði sjálfrit, er seíðr heitir, en af því mætti hann vita stögl manna ok órðana hluti, svø ok at gera mýnum þana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svø ok at taka fá mónumni vit eða aflu ok geða öðrum. En þessi fjalkyngi, ef framði er, fylgir svø mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlumýnum skamnlauð viðat fara, ok var gyðjunum kendi sú þrótt. Óðinn vissi um alþjóð, hvor fálgir var, ok hann kunið þau ljóð, er upp laukok fyrir honum jörðin ok bjorg er steinar ok hægurinn, ok þat hann með öðrum einum þá, er fyrir bjoggu, ok gekk inn ok tók þar slikt, er hann vildi. Af þessum kloptum varð hann mjöð fragr, óvinir hans ótðuðsk hann, en vinir hans trystuskn honum ok trúðu á krappt hans ok á sjálfan hann. En hann kendi flest þróttir sínar blógoðumnum; vár þeir næst honum um allan fröðleik ok fjalkyngi. Margir aðrir námnu þó miklt af, ok hefðr þaðan af dreifizk fjalkyngin viða ok haldzkr lengi.

Óðinn could change his shape [hamr], when his body would lie there as if asleep or dead, while he himself was a bird or an animal, a fish or a snake, and would travel in an instant to far-off lands on his errands or those of other men. He was also able, using words alone, to extinguish fires and to calm the sea, and to turn the winds wherever he wished. He had a ship called Skíðblaðnir ['Built From Pieces Of Thin Wood'] with which he sailed over great seas, but which could be folded up like a cloth. Óðinn had with him Mímir's head, and it told him many tidings from other worlds [heimar]; at times he would wake up dead men out of the ground or sit beneath the hanged; from this he was called Lord of Ghosts or Lord of the Hanged. He had two ravens, which he had endowed with the power of speech; they flew far over the land and told him many tidings. In this way he became very wise. And all these skills he taught with runes and those chants [ljóð] that are called galdrar; because of this the Æsir are called galdrasmðir ['galdra-smiths']. Óðinn knew the skill from which follows the greatest power, and which he performed himself, that which is called seíðr. By means of it he could know the futures of men and that which had not yet happened, and also cause death or misfortune or sickness, as well as take men's wits or strength from them and give them to others. But this sorcery [fjalkyngi], as is known, brings with it so much ergi that manly men thought it shameful to perform, and so this skill was taught to the priestesses [gyðjur]. Óðinn knew everything about treasures hidden in the earth, where they were concealed, and he knew such chants [ljóð] that would open up for him the earth and mountains and stones and burial mounds, and with words alone he bound those who dwelled there, and went in and took what he wanted. By these powers he became very famous - his enemies feared him, but his friends trusted him, and believed in him and his power. Most of these skills he taught to those in charge of the sacrifices [blóthyði]; they were next to him in all magic knowledge [fröðleikr] and sorcery [fjalkyngi]. But many others learned much of it, and for this reason sorcery [fjalkyngi] was widespread and continued for a long time.

Ynglingasaga 7; my translation

Ynglingasaga 7 is a crucial text for the study of seíðr, as it provides both a wealth of detail and a degree of social orientation for its rituals. We can also speculate that seíðr was originally mentioned in Ægðólfr
or Hvini’s *Ynglingatal*, because the above prose seems to constitute a summary of the stanzas that Snorri does not directly cite (Tolley 1995a: 57). Óðinn’s powers are examined in the next chapter.

*Seiðr* appears occasionally in the rest of *Heimskringla*, in a series of incidents that are discussed individually below. *Völur* and other kinds of sorceresses are mentioned in *Ynglingsaga* (13f), while *seiðmenn* and male sorcerers are in chapter 22 of the same saga, together with *Haraldr saga ins háragnar* (35) and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (62). In Oddr Snorason’s version of the latter story (27 / 35), the same idea is repeated, and many of the same traditions are also recounted in the *Historia Norvegiae*.

The sagas of Icelanders (the ‘family sagas’)

By far the greater part of our information on *seiðr* comes from the corpus of family sagas, and as such must be used with very great caution in any attempt to reconstruct genuine Viking Age practices from stories written down (if not actually invented) several centuries later. The saga debate has been briefly summarised above, so here we can confine ourselves to an overview of the relevant sources themselves.

Of all the saga accounts that mention *seiðr*, one takes precedence due to the unparalleled detail of its description and its social context. This is contained in chapter 4 of *Eiriks saga rauda*, the saga of Eiríkr the Red which is one of our primary sources for the Norse explorations westwards to Greenland and the Atlantic coast of Canada. The text exists in two versions, contained in the Skálholtsbók and the Hauksbók, the former of which was published in a normalised edition by Storm in 1891 (this was the text employed by Strömbäck in 1935: 49-54). Both texts have been published in parallel by S.B.F. Jansson, and been translated a number of times. Given the central nature of the *Eiriks saga rauda* account, I reproduce it here in full in his edition of the Skålholtsbók text.

The following events take place in the very late tenth century at Herjólfsnes in Greenland, at the farm of Þorkell, the leading man in the district:

99. I þenna tima, uar hallleri mikit a grænlendi []
100. haufdu menn feingit litit, þeir sem i vedr ferd haufdu uerit enn sumir eigi aprtr konnir.
101. sv kona uar i bygd er. þorbiorg. het. hun. var spa kona. hun. var kauthlit litill volve.
102. hun. hafdi aatt ser. niv. systr. ok var hun. ein epitr. aa lifi.
103. þat var hattr. þorbiargar. a vetrvm. at hun for a uelizér ok budv menn henni heim. mest þeir er forviti var a. um forlug sin. eda. at ferdir.
104. ok med þvi at. Þorkell var þar mestr bondi þa. þotti til hannis koma. hvenær at vita letta mundi varani. þessv sem yfir stod.
105. Þorkell bydr spakon þangat ok er henni buin god wit taka. sem sidir var til þa er vit þess haattar konu skylldi taka
106. bvit var henni ha sætti ok lagt unndir hægindi. þar skylldi i vera hænsa fidri.
107. enn er. hun. kom vm kvellidit ok se madr er in moti henni uar sændr. þa var. hun. suo buin at hun. hafdi yfir sier tygla mautvbl blann. ok var setti steinum. allt i skaut ofan
108. hun. hafdi a. haalsi ser gler taulr. hun. hafdi. a haufdu lamb skinz kofra suartann ok vid innan kattar skinn huit staf hafdi hun. i henni ok var. a. knappr
109. hann uar buinn messining. ok settum steinum ofan vm knappinn
110. hun. hafdi vm sik hnisokv linda ok var þar aa skiodu punngr mikill. varduetti hun þar i taufr þau er hun þrfti til fridleiks at hafta.
111. hun hafdi kalf skinz sko lodna a. fotum ok i þveingi langa ok sterkliga. latuns knappar. mikler. a enndvnm.
112. hun hafdi a. haundvm ser katt skinz glofa. ok uoro hvitir innan ok lodner.
113. Enn er hvn kom inn. þotti avullvm mavnnum skyll at velia henni samligar kvedivr.
114. enn hun tok þui epitr sem henni uoro menn skapfelldir til.
115. Tok. þorkell, bonndi, i haunnd visennda konunni. ok leiddi hann hana til þess sætis. er henni var bvit.
116. þorkell. bad hana renna þar avgum yfir hiord ok hiv. ok hybyli.
117. h农历 var fa malvg vm allt.
118. bord voru vpp tekin um kvellidit. ok er frá því at. segia at spakonvinni var mat bvit.
119. henni var giórr grautz af kidia miolk enn til matar henni uoru buin hiortv ur allz konar kvikenndum.
120. þein sem þar. var. til.
121. Enn er bord uoru vpp tekin. gengr. þorkell bonndi firir. þorbiorvg ok spyr r hauert henni virditz
122. þar hybyli. eda. hættir manna. eda. hersv fliotliga hann mun þess vis uerda er hann hefvir spurt eptir
123. ok munn uilldv vita.
124. h农历 kvezt þat ecki mundv vpp bera fyr r enn vm morgvninn þa er hun hefði sofot þar vm nottina.
125. Enn eptir a alínvm degi var henni uettir sa vm bvningr. sem hun slyldi sein fremia.
126. bad hun fa sier konr þer. sem kynni frædi. þat er þyrfti til seidinnar fremia ok uardlokr heita. enn
127. þer knor funnduzt eigi.
128. þar aat at leitad um bæinn. ef nauckr kynni.
129. þa. svarar. Gvdrirdr. huerki er ek fiölkvnnig ne visennda kona. enn þo kenndi halldís fostra min.
130. mer a. islansd. Þat frædi er hun kalladí vard lokr.
131. þorbiorg. svaradi. þa. eru frodari enn ek ætladi.
132. Gvdrirdr. s. þetta er þesskonar frædi ok at ferli. at ek ætl a avngvm at beina at vera. þvist ek er
133. kona kristin.
134. þorbiorn, suarar. svo mætti uerda at þu yrdir mavnum at lidi. her vm enn værur kona at verri
135. enn vid. þorkel met ek at fa þa hluti her til er þarf.
136. þorkell herdir nu at gvdridi. enn hun kvezt mundv gjora sem hann villdi.
137. sloyv knor hring vm hverfis. enn. þorbiorg vppi a seid hiällinvm.
138. qvad. Gvdrirdr. þa kuédit. suo fagurt ok uel at eigi þottizt fyr r heyr t hafvaf me fegri ravst kvedit.
139. sa er þar uar.
140. spakona. þackar henni kvædit. hun hafði márgar nattvur hítag at sott ok þotti fagurt at heyra. þat
141. er kuédit var. er aðr ulldi far oss snæft ok oss avguna hylldi veita.
142. Enn mer erv nu margar þeir hluter auð synar. er aadr var baed ek ok aðrdir duld.
143. Enn ek kann þat at segia at halleri þetta mvn ecki halldazt leiingr. ok mvn batna arangr. sem uarar.
144. Sottar far þat sem leignt hefir legit mvn batna vonv bradara.
145. Enn þier. Gvdrirdr. skal ek lauina i havnd lid sinni þat sem oss hafir af stadir. þvist þin forlagv eru
146. mer n uull glaugg sæ
147. þat muntu giaf ord fa hier. aa grænlanndi. er semilígazt er til þo at þier verdi þat eigi til langændar.
148. þvist eugir þinir liggia vt til islannz. ok mvn þar konna frå þier att bogi baedí mikill ok godr ok yfir
149. þinn smt kvislvm mvn skina bairt gissi. ennða far nu uel ok heil. dottir min.
150. Sidan gengu menn at uisennad konunni. ok frettí hver eptir því sem mest forúini. var a
151. var hun ok god af fra savgnvm geck þat ok litt i tavma. s. hun.
152. þessv næst var komit eptir henni af audrivm þe ok for hun þa þannagat.
153. var. senn eptir. þorbitn þui at hann uilldi eigi heima vera medan sílik heidni var framan.
154. Vedradtta battrnadi skriott. þegar er uora tok sem þorbiorg hafði sagt.

At this time there was a great famine in Greenland. Those who had gone out hunting had caught little, and some never came back. In the Settlement there was a woman named Þorbjorg, who was a spákonan; she was called Lítli-völva [‘Little-Völva]. She had nine sisters, who had all been spákonur, and she
was the only one still alive. It was Þorbjörg’s custom to spend the winter attending feasts, invited home mostly to those who were curious to know their own future or what the coming year would bring. As Porkell was the leading farmer there, it was felt that it was up to him to find out when the bad times that had been weighing upon them would let up. Porkell invited the spákonan to visit, and a good welcome was prepared for her, as was the custom when a woman of this kind was received. A high-seat was prepared for her, and a cushion laid upon it; this was to be stuffed with hen’s feathers. When she arrived in the evening, together with the man who had been sent to escort her, she was wearing a blue [or ‘black’] cloak fitted with straps, decorated with stones right down to the hem. She wore a string of glass beads around her neck. On her head she wore a black lambskin hood lined with white catskin. She had a staff in her hand, with a knob on it; it was fitted with brass and set with stones up around the knob. Around her waist she had a belt of tinder-wood, on which was a large leather pouch. In it she kept the charms (tæufi) that she used for her sorcery [fröðleikr]. She had hairy calfskin shoes on her feet, with long, sturdy laces; they had great knobs of tin [or ‘pewter’ or ‘brass’] on the end. On her hands she wore catskin gloves, which were white inside and furry. When she came in, everyone was supposed to offer her respectful greetings, which she received according to her opinion of each person. Porkell the farmer took the vísendakona by the hand, and led her to the seat that had been prepared for her. Porkell then asked her to cast an eye over his flock, his household and his homestead; she had few words for all of it. Tables were set up in the evening, and it must now be told what food was prepared for the spákonan. A porridge of kids’ milk was made for her, and for her meat the hearts of all the animals available there. She had a brass spoon and an ivory-handled knife clasped with copper [or ‘bronze’ or ‘brass’], and with the point broken off. Then when the tables had been cleared away, Porkell the farmer walked up to Þorbjörg and asked what she thought of what she had seen there and the conduct of the household, and how soon he could expect a reply to what he had asked after and which people wanted to know. She said that she would not reveal this until the morning, after she had spent a night there. Late the next day she was provided with the tools she needed to carry out her seidr. She asked for women who knew the charms [fræði] necessary for carrying out seidr and which are called varðlokk(k)jur. But there were no such women to be found. Then they searched through the household, to see if there was anyone who knew [the charms]. Then Guðrún answered, “I am neither skilled in sorcery [fjölkynni] nor a vísendakona, but Halldís my fostermother in Iceland taught me such charms [fræði] that she called varðlokk(k)jur”. Þorbjörg answered, “Then you know more than I expected”. Guðrún said, “These are the sort of charms [fræði] and proceedings in which I feel I want no part, for I am a Christian woman”. Þorbjörg answered, “It may be that you could help the people here by so doing, and you would be no worse a woman for that; but it is to Porkell I must look to provide me with what I need”. Porkell now pressed Guðrún hard, until she said she would do as he wanted. Then the women formed a circle around the seidr-platform [seiðhjaldr] on top of which was Þorbjörg. Guðrún then chanted the chants [kveiði] so beautifully and so well, that no-one there could say that they had heard anyone recite with a more lovely voice. The spákonan thanked her for the chant and said that many spirits [náttúrur] had been drawn there who thought it beautiful to hear what had been chanted, “who before wanted to turn from us and refused to obey us; moreover many things are now clear to me which were earlier hidden both from me and from others. And I can tell you that this famine will not last longer than this winter, and that the season will mend when the spring comes. The sickness that has long troubled you will also improve sooner than expected. And you, Guðrún, I will reward on the spot for the help we have had from you, for your fate is now very clear to me. You will make a match here in Greenland, the most honourable there is, though it will not last long, because your path lies out in Iceland, and there will spring from you a progeny both great and good, and over your line will shine a bright ray. Now fare you well, and health to you, my daughter”. Then people went up to the vísendakona, and each asked after that which they were most concerned to know; she gave them good answers, and little that she had said was not fulfilled. Next she was sent for from another house, and so she went on her way. Then they sent for Þorbjörm, who did not wish to remain at home while such heathen things were going on. With the arrival of spring the weather soon improved, as Þorbjörg had said.

Eiríks saga rauða 4; text from Skálholtsbók after Jansson 1944: 39-44; my translation, generally following Kunz 2000 and Jones 1961; translation includes amendments from the Hauksbók text

Female seidr-workers are also mentioned in Laxdæla saga (76), Egills saga Skalla-Grimssonar (59), Kormáks saga (6) and Landnámabók (194). A Sámi volva performs seidr in Vatnsdæla saga (10; an episode also glossed in Landnámabók), a rather late source that must be used with particular caution (see Strömbäck 1935: 69-75). Seidmenn appear again in Gísla saga Styrssonar (18) and Laxdæla saga.
The fornaldarsögur (‘sagas of ancient times’, ‘heroic sagas’)

Among the later sagas, principally concerned with heroic or mythical stories of a kind far more removed from any Viking Age reality than the family sagas, there are also a number of references to seiðr.

Some of these are extensive, and they include one in particular which has in the past been taken together with Eiríks saga rauda as a ‘type example’ for a seiðr performance, from Hröíf s saga kraka (3); this is reproduced in full in the next chapter. A second extended passage (ibid: 32ff) also concerns seiðr, but in the context of its use on the battlefield; this is presented and discussed in chapter six. Composed in the fourteenth century and only preserved in paper manuscripts from the seventeenth century and later, Hröíf s saga kraka is a problematic source - not least because despite its late date, like Völsunga saga it concerns some of the earliest of the heroic tales. It also contains a number of parallels with Saxo’s Gesta Danorum.

Strömbäck (1935: 86f) believed that the seiðr elements in Hröíf s saga kraka were almost certainly medieval inventions, whereas the descriptions of shape-shifting and ‘totemistic’ relationships with animals were more likely to be of ancient origin. However, this can be reassessed in the light of the broader context of seiðr as battlefield magic, which I believe it possible to establish and which I discuss below. While there is no doubt that the saga is a highly problematic source, it is striking how well its descriptions of combat sorcery fit other evidence that is independent of the text. We shall explore this in subsequent chapters.

Among the later sources, references to seiðr and its practitioners also appear in Norna-Gests þátr, Friðbjófs saga frókna, Órvar-Odds saga, Orms þátr Stórólfssonar, Gongs-Hrólf s saga, Sogubrot af fornkonungum, Porsteins saga Vikingssonar, Völsunga saga, Sturlungs saga starfsama, Grims saga loðinkinna, Hálfdanar saga Bróðufóstra, Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfíls, Þóra saga sterka, Nikulás saga leikara, Ektors saga, and Bárðar saga Snæfellsás. The term seiðskrattu also appears in Hálfdanar saga Barkarsonar (8), but this is a very late source, perhaps even post-medieval.

All these episodes, together with many more that refer to different kinds of sorcery and other activities related to these practices, are discussed in chapter three.

In addition to these, seiðr is also mentioned in references to sources as late as the Reformation, and on into the early modern period. These can be seen more in terms of developing folklore and the longevity of words and concepts in the Icelandic language. These sources are mentioned in passing by Strömbäck, and many of them are collected by Almqvist (2000: 261ff).

The Bishop’s sagas (Biskupasögur)

From the contemporary sagas, that is those of similar date to the family sagas but describing the period of their composition, we also find a brief reference to something that may be a seiðr performance. In Kristni saga and the related text Þorvalds þátr vidforla appears an episode in which two Christians are disturbed by the wailing of a pagan ‘priestess’, a gyðja of the type that we have seen above. She is sitting on a raised altar, apparently to make a sacrifice (blót). Seiðr is not mentioned by name, but the implied platform is strikingly similar to those mentioned in connection with sorcery, and it may be that this passage is describing such a ritual.

The early medieval Scandinavian law codes

An important category of sources for the contemporary reality of seiðr, as opposed to its literary construction in the sagas, are the early medieval Scandinavian law codes. Strömbäck (1935: 106f) found two references to this practice. The first derives from a collection of royal and episcopal court records from 1281, preserved in a manuscript from c.1480. In one passage it is stated that,

... ef þat verðr kent korflvm eda konum at þau seide eda magne troll vpp at rida monnum eda bvfe ... þa skal flytia utt aa sio og sockua til gruna. og aa kongur og biskup hvem penning fiar peirra
... if it is discovered that a man or woman has performed seidr, or raised a great troll to ride people or animals ... then they shall be driven out beyond the parish bounds, and forfeit all their property to the king and bishop

Dipl. Isl. II: 223; my translation

There is some comparison here with the Norwegian Gulping laws cited below (NGL I: 19, 182), which also mention raising trolls by sorcery, but Strömbäck (1935: 106f) considers that the act of seidr and the act of summoning are separate events.

The second mention of seidr in the legal codes comes from an elaboration made c.1326 to the twelfth-century Skriptabod Pòrlaks biskups helga, in which Bishop Jón Halldórsson sets severe penalties for:

sit madr vitil fordleiks. eda fremr madr galldr. eda magnar madr seid. eda heidni.

a person who sits outside to make sorcery (frðkleikr), or a person who performs galdr, or a person who makes powerful seidr, or heathenism.

Dipl. Isl. I: 240ff, my translation

Neither of these notices tells us anything about the practice of sorcery itself, but its concept - and, presumably, reality - was clearly still current in the period of the sagas' composition.

Non-Scandinavian sources

Seidr is mentioned explicitly in only two non-Norse sources. The first of these is Æðriks saga af Bern, which as the name implies is an Icelandic version of a tale that derives from mainland Europe. The term is thus used to translate what was originally something different. The relevant passage is reviewed in chapter three.

The second reference comes from Upphaf Rómverja, an introduction to Rómverja sogur from the early fourteenth century (or perhaps earlier) that deals with the origins of Rome (Almqvist 2000: 252f). In the story of Romulus and Remus we find the words seidgaldr and seidmagan, both of which are unique. The former represents a new kind of magic term and the second would seem to mean 'great seidr'. They are clearly translations of Latin words, though which these might be is uncertain. The late date and context renders them largely uninformative for our purposes, but the concept of seidgaldr is intriguing.

Although it does not mention the term by name, there is also a crucial reference to something that probably was a seidr performance in a rather unusual source from Ireland. The Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, 'The Wars of the Irish with the Foreigners [i.e. the Norse]', is a series of retrospective chronicles of the Viking Age written for the great-grandson of Brian Bórama, Muirchertach Ua Briain, who died in 1119 (see Ni Mhonaigh 2001: 101). It exists in several manuscripts, in three of which we find a single brief reference to the sorcerous activities of a Scandinavian woman called Ota. She is described as the wife of a Viking chieftain named Turges - probably an Irish reading of the Norse name Ógursteir (Ó Corráin 2001: 19) - who temporarily gained control of several key centres in Connacht during a raid sometime in the period 838-45.

The oldest version of the Cogadh is contained in a single folio of the Book of Leinster (see the introduction to Todd's edition), and this fragment also contains the most complete note on the ritual. After listing the settlements occupied by Turges' Vikings, the chronicler comments:

Tuc Cluain mic nois da mnaí. Is and ra bered a freartha daltoir in tempoil móir. Otta ainm mnaí Turgesi.

Cluain mic nois [Clonmacnoise] was taken by his wife. It was on the altar of the great church she used to give her answers. Otta was the name of the wife of Turges.

Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, Leinster fragment (Ms. L): XI; translation after Todd 1867: 226

The Dublin version of the manuscript has it slightly differently:
… ocs is and dobered Ota ben Turges a hurici ar altuir Cluana mic Nois.

… and the place where Ota, the wife of Turges, used to give her audience was upon the altar of Cluain Mic Nois [Clonmacnois].

_Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallabth_, Dublin manuscript (Ms. D): XI; translation after Todd 1867: 13

The Brussels manuscript of the _Cogadh_ has a third variant of the woman’s name, where it is given as Otur. Little work has been done on this episode, though in 1960 W.E.D. Allen interpreted ‘Ota’ as being a member of a foreign embassy to the Irish Vikings. Again, the _Cogadh_ will be taken up in the next chapter.

**Seiðr in research**

Having reviewed _seiðr_ in the sources, we can now look to an overview of scholarly studies in this field. Though it means losing a little momentum in the pace of our argument, the work set out in the following chapters demands that we first make a brief survey of the ways in which Nordic sorcery has been taken up by previous researchers. The notes below are not intended as an exhaustive synthesis, and a great many more works are taken up as appropriate throughout the book. Archaeological studies which have tried to identify aspects of _seiðr_ through the material record are treated separately in chapters three and five.

Probably the earliest work to specifically discuss the role of _seiðr_ in Norse religion appeared in 1877, written by Johan Fritzner, and it is significant that even at this initial stage of tentative interpretation we find these rituals being connected both with Sámi religion and the broader framework of shamanic belief systems. Fritzner’s paper is primarily a discussion of Sámi religion in a comparative context (a subject more fully explored in chapter four below), and although he devotes some space to the possible transfer of specific divinities from one culture to another, the bulk of his detailed discussion is concerned with sorcery. As we have seen above, the problem of distinguishing between the different forms of Old Norse magic has a long research history, and we can note that even in this first account Fritzner interweaves his discussion of _seiðr_ and _gandr_ without distinction (1877: 164-83, 188-200). Nevertheless, all the key elements are present in his analysis, including the use of staffs, the _seiðhjállr_ and the metaphor of ‘riding’ - to all of which we shall return below - as well as the important relationship between human agents of sorcery and the various supernatural powers with which they communicate (the _valkyríjar_, _disir_ and so on). Most crucially of all, he addresses the use of these forms of sorcery for aggressive ends, with a discussion on magical projectiles (Fritzner 1877: 185ff, 208-10) - a subject avoided by the majority of subsequent _seiðr_-scholars, as we shall see.

Fritzner’s important essay stimulated a small but steady interest in the trance rituals of the Norse, resulting in a suite of publications over the next few years that included Bang’s 1879 study of _Voluspa_ in the context of Greco-Roman oracular traditions, and Bugge’s arguments for the Christian overtones of Óðinn on the tree (published in 1889 but written in the early 1880s).

The first specific study of _seiðr_ came in 1892 with Finnur Jónsson’s landmark paper in an Icelandic Festschrift to Páll Melsteð. As with Fritzner’s work, ‘Um galdra, seið, seiðmenn og vôlíur’ set out a number of key aspects of _seiðr_ and other forms of Old Norse magic that would come to be overlooked by the majority of twentieth-century researchers. In particular, Finnur focused on the practitioners of this sorcery, and made the first attempt to compile a terminology for them (ibid: 7ff). Crucially, he recognised that the different terms referred to different types of sorcerer - a realisation with far-reaching implications as we shall see below. He further addressed the performance and material culture of _seiðr_, reviewing the sources for _seiðr_ platforms, staffs and various forms of songs used in the rituals (ibid: 17ff). This was also the first work to attempt to carefully distinguish the dual complexes of _seiðr_ and _galdr_.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, these ideas were spreading into other areas of Old Norse studies, for example to the analysis of dreams and their significance in the sagas (e.g. Henzen 1890); these preoccupations naturally also reflected contemporary developments in psychology and the interpretation of dream symbolism. The _draumkonur_ - the strange spirit-women who appear as harbingers of ill-fortune and advice - and other inhabitants of dreams were compared to the soul-travelling agents of _seiðr_, and began to be linked to ideas about the personification of luck and the