

## Between Robbers' Cave and Place of Myth: Surtshellir and Conceptualising the Topography of Germanic Religion

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One of the lave-tubes in the western Icelandic lava-field Hallmundarhraun is connected with a remarkable interdisciplinary assembly of archaeological and historical material which includes a unique complex of building remains, a mythological toponym, and a written tradition of a Viking Age act of worship of a supernatural being: the cave of Surtshellir.

Archaeologically, this cave contains two major features. The better-known of these features is a fortified wall which closes the cave off several dozen metres behind its medieval main entrance and probably was erected by a community of outlaws that took shelter in this cave, turning it into an underground fortress. The second, and much more hidden, feature is a dry-stone construction of a stylised long house in a side-branch of the cave that seems to have served the same community; it seems that this community craved to have at least a symbol of a house, even if a house as such was not needed.

Toponymically, being called *Surtshellir* this lave-tube is the "Cave of Surtr", a giant of Old Norse mythology who figures prominently in the medieval Icelandic mythology of the end of the world.

In the written history of religions, furthermore, Surtshellir is connected with an anecdote about an early settler who at the cave's entrance recited a praise-poem to Surtr before settling down nearby. Structurally, this anecdote preserved in the medieval Icelandic *Landnámabók* or "Book of Settlements" seems to describe an act of worship, or at least an act of appeasement, of a supernatural power.

While the archaeology of Surtshellir is as secular as it is spectacular, toponymy and the written record of Norse religious history present Surtshellir as a place of myth and even worship. The tension between these different 'meanings' of Surtshellir highlights an important question for studying Germanic cult: how should one conceptualise the topography of Germanic religion? What is a religious site, a cult site, a mythological site, and what is 'secular'? The presentation will take its starting point from the interpretative challenges posed by Surtshellir and will develop some first thoughts on how to conceptualise a larger collaborative project for creating a comprehensive corpus of sites of Germanic cult and religious history.